

INTERVIEW WITH XHAVIT GASHI

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Duration: 120 minutes

Present:

1. Xhavit Gashi (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Besarta Breznica (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication.

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension.

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Anita Susuri: Mr. Xhavit, if you could introduce yourself, and tell us anything about yourself? About your origin? Your family?

Xhavit Gashi: Alright, thanks a lot, yes. I am Xhavit Gashi, born on June 29, 1973 in Studenica. Studenica is a small village in the municipality of Istog. So, when I say I was born in Studenica, I was actually born at home in Studenica. I come from a family that didn't have the opportunity to, for example, my parents [didn't have the opportunity] to get treatment in the hospital or deliver babies in the hospital, but all the children, there are eight of us, we were all born at home in Studenica. So, I have four brothers and four sisters. My parent, my father, died in '91, while my mother fortunately still lives.

As a child, I spent my childhood in the village of Studenica. I finished elementary school in Vrella which is around two kilometers away from my village. Of course, as all children of that time we [went there] by walking on foot. The conditions in which I was raised were closer to poverty. Of course, we were a big family and also because of the fact that like many other Kosovo families, were part of all those movements or other initiatives, attempts to achieve freedom, independence or other ambitions to have means of living. To have [a decent] level of treatment, back then in former Yugoslavia, but of course our freedom was restricted. Sometimes even the language and the flag and education.

And my father was a fighter in the *Kaçake*¹ unit in 1945-'46, so by the end of the war. And I found out about this, from my father too of course, but also from my father's friends. Before my father died, when they came to visit, and they would tell us that Niman, which was my father's name, so my father managed to get away from them several times. One of them told us about how he actually got wounded in Novi Pazar, so back then when they fought against *chetnik*² units, as the *kaçake* unit. So

¹ Outlaws, bandits, also known in other regions of the Balkans as *hajduk* or *uskok*, considered by the state as simple criminals, but often proponents of a political agenda of national liberation.

² Serbian movement born in the beginning of the Second World War, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. Its name derives from *četa*, anti-Ottoman guerrilla bands. This movement adopted a Greater Serbia program and was for a limited period an anti-occupation guerrilla, but mostly engaged in collaboration with Nazi Germany, its

they would evoke memories from that time. I mean, we probably knew more about my father's participation in that war during his last year, than during our entire life prior, because I was 16 years old at that time.

So, as children we were brought up with that national education, the family education and the values which make a person with dignity, with of course national values, but also with, with humane values. And maybe that is the most important thing which helped me to be able to serve with honor in all these years which are now more than 22 years. So, I retired from my state job last year. But, during these 22 years, always in every moment when I achieved something which I did for my country, of course, given the opportunity from my country, I always dedicated my success to my father and mother's education, the family education.

So, although we didn't have the [financial] conditions, as I said, we were more categorized at the level of poor families. This was until 1987-'88, when our big brother who was also part of the demonstrations in '81 and after finishing tourism school, Higher School of Tourism in Peja, was allowed to be employed only for one day. But after they found out who he was because he had led the demonstrations in Istog at the time, the demonstrations [demanding for] a republic, he was fired from his job in '81. Only after one day of working. At that point, he was forced to flee Kosovo and one, the only thing we were in possession of was a cow and we were forced to sell that too in order to provide the means for him to flee the country for a better future for himself and for the family.

Anita Susuri: Mister Xhavit...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Before continuing to that part we were going to talk about your father...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that he was part of movements...

Xhavit Gashi: Kaçake,³ yes.

Anita Susuri: Was he then persecuted during the time of communism? Because I know that they were persecuted.

major goal remaining the unification of all Serbs. It was responsible for a strategy of terror against non-Serbs during the Second World War and was banned after 1945. Mihailović was captured, tried and executed in 1946.

³ Kachaks is a term used for the Albanian rebels active in the late 19th and early 20th century in northern Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia, and later as a term for the militias of Albanian revolutionary organizations against the Kingdom of Serbia (1910–18) Kingdom of Yugoslavia(1918–24), called the "Kaçak movement."

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, yes. It was... the persecution happened in different ways. Of course, earlier because I did not... maybe it's bad that I didn't explore, but in specific periods he was also in prison. Not a lot, but he was in prison. However, [a form of] persecution was also not allowing, for example, no one from my family was able to get a job somewhere, for example... or the other thing, for example, I had an interest ever since I was in middle school in eighth grade I think, I am mentioning it only as an example, there was a recruiting campaign where they recruited children in classes, in senior year of middle school, the ones who had an interest for military service at the time.

I mean, that could've been maybe around '80, to not get the year wrong. However, I met all of the criteria. I only had a four⁴ in chemistry and I put the effort in and improved that too. But, in the end I wasn't accepted because I was the son of Niman and there was no way. However, they were, I mean, he was still under watch. There were other struggles, for example from the Communist Party back then. It was spread across villages that my father and my family should be excluded. Back then in villages they were referred to as "disowned" or "excluded." There were such initiatives as well.

I fortunately came from a village, so we lived in a village where the community or the villagers, although there were some communists from our village too, I mean we weren't only not excluded from the village but we had a lot of support. And my father, Niman, was known as a leader. The virtues that made him preserve those values, I believe it played a role, apart from his will and commitment to preserve those patriotic values also from the lots of reading he did during his life.

For example, he had only four years of school but continuously read a lot. Not only novels, but he read, for example, all of the magazines that were in former Yugoslavia. He ordered them, he paid for them and they were delivered to the Local Community, for example, in Vrella and we went to get them as kids or he went himself. It means, he continued to read and be informed about the events not only in former Yugoslavia, but about what happened in the world too. So, he was always interested to know more and to read more. But when we talk about reading, for example he wanted to pass down that habit of reading to us as well.

For example, we didn't have, whether when I was taking care of the livestock or let's not mention homework which he always made sure that we were up to date with, the homework. But, apart from that, apart from the novels we were assigned to read as homework at school, he had a list of novels, of works that he wanted to make sure we would read. For example, we were kind of conditioned by our father to read the works of *Rilindas*,⁵ but not only read them but also discuss them with him. To tell him what we got out of it, about life, about national values and so on.

⁴ Grade B on an A-F scale (Five-0).

⁵ Figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian political and cultural movement for national liberation.

And then, hygiene was another aspect, fastidious. For example, in those difficult conditions, he always dressed neatly, well, and the food was, the food... he paid a lot of attention to food, for us to be fed well with what we could afford. But with food, for example it happened that he lined us up before we went to school, because we were eight children and most of us went to school at the same time and he lined us up and inspected us. For example, he said, "Let me see." He looked at our collar {explains with hands} he made us take off, we didn't have shoes at the time but *opinga*,⁶ and the socks to see if we were clean in between the toes. So, he... we had, he took care of that.

And then, hospitality was another value which for example, in our family, although I'm sure you heard that back then, families lived collectively in large family communities up to 50-60 members. My father was an initiator for him to separate from the family earlier. However, although he was separated from his brothers, always the nieces, our uncle's daughters or our aunts, whoever came [to visit]... regardless who they came to visit, they first came to us, because he always welcomed them, he took care of that.

But, for the topic of, sorry that I expanded maybe beyond the specific topic you asked me about. I mean, the persecution by the regime due to his activity in the *kaçake* movement continued. I'm just thinking if I can say they were out or, or maybe I could better say that was another aspect of his skills as a person with communication values, which I think I got from him. He was very good at communicating. For example, there were people like I mentioned in that case in the village, although they were forced to in a way follow the rules of the Party. For example, if they said this family has to be excluded, they had to be excluded. They actually excluded us anyway, you understand, from the village.

I think that's what also happened in the case when I was 16 years old in school, although the company was state-owned back then, it was made possible for the first time that we... although it wasn't directly connected as a state instrument, the company was state-owned nevertheless, called Korenik, and for the first time it was made possible for us to open a store in the village. So, with the money our brother sent from Switzerland, we had the possibility, we built a small object and opened a store.

And I was 16 years old, in the third year of high school and I had the opportunity to be both a student and a leader of the store or back then as a main salesperson. From that moment we started to get back on our feet as a family. So, the income from the store and our eldest brother was in Switzerland. In the meantime, my sisters had the opportunity to start working at a local textile company which processed carpets and covers and was in Vrella, so close to our house, and we started to get back on our feet as a family.

And then, my father's main goal was for us all to get an education. He made sure that we took the direction towards education. At first the older two children, for example my first sister got married

⁶ Similar to moccasins, made out of rubber or bovine leather, mainly used by the villagers.

early and didn't have the opportunity to get an education. While in the case of my first brother, he went to Switzerland to work, to survive. While my second brother, he started studying architecture. He is an architect now, of course he graduated a long time ago. And then my other sister, I don't know she didn't want school, because my father, my father was very focused on the girls getting an education too.

Another aspect was, under those difficult conditions, we worked a little bit with agriculture, trees, vegetables and different fruits and we would sell them. For example, we had some cherry trees, around... we were the only ones who had a small farm. And then we used 50-60 acres of land three-four times a year with different yields. And we worked based on agronomy books, because he made sure that we would take care of the yields to be successful in the work we did back then.

And I remember a case, for example, there was a, one of the girls in the village who was studying and her family wasn't doing good financially and then although that income was a source of survival for us, the one coming from selling the fruits or vegetables, and he said, "Okay, I want to send them a certain amount," for example, to a certain family, "because she's at school and they can't handle it." So he was careful and also said, "Without the education of women our country will never develop." So, that mindset was not common at that time, for example by my [paternal] uncles or the other people in the community.

Anita Susuri: Mister Xhavit, I wanted to ask you a bit about the place where you grew up as a child, was it a place where people worked with agriculture more? What kind of place was it? How do you remember it?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, it's a place like most villages in Kosovo, people mainly lived by farming. And I mentioned it once, for example, from time to time I also had a cow, a few sheep or, for example, we also had to cut trees for the winter, we provided it [wood] for ourselves. We had a donkey, that was the most sophisticated vehicle we possessed (laughs) for transportation and for, for example, whatever we needed to carry from the field, from the field but we also had it for wood. But, the village mainly made a living by the field, by working with agriculture, livestock, agriculture. And of course there was a large number of boys who lived abroad, in a foreign country, who went there, not only for a better life for themselves, but like generally in Kosovo that they helped their families.

Anita Susuri: What kind of childhood did you have? Were you engaged more in work or how did you spend your time? What memories do you have?

Xhavit Gashi: In childhood, in early childhood, of course besieged school we also worked, we also did the tasks for the land. We were engaged at an earlier age all together, for example when it was harvesting time, for example, we had corn or beans which we planted or gardens. I told you, we also worked with greenhouses, with small fruits, trees, and vegetables. The whole family was always

engaged, we worked. My childhood wasn't different from the other children in the village, we worked like that in general.

But growing up, I mean, at some point the interest in acting was born towards the end of my elementary school years. I had an affinity, how do I put it, for humor and I can say I inherited this from one of my [paternal] uncles. He had a lot of livestock, he had many cows, sheep, donkeys, he had many cats. But they didn't have children, I mean, they took care of them together with his wife. They had everything for them. This was the livestock, the cows, the sheep.

However, although we were separated as I explained earlier, we were compelled during the summer to take care [of them], to help them because they didn't have children. During other days too, but usually during summer break. It wasn't about whether we wanted to or not, but we were compelled to go and help them on the mountains. Even though we had no reason to go out on the mountains. I mean, we did, to enjoy the beauty. But, back then it was not expressed as it is today as an element of attraction. But it was more like a need to utilize it during the summer for animal farming, for agriculture.

Anita Susuri: Did you stay in those **stana** or where did you stay?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, yes, we did and unfortunately it's the part where shepherds went out on the mountains there as they're called, the dry mountains there in Korenik, Paja. They are mountains with no water and during the time, for example, now it's February, in March when shepherds should go out and cover the snow. They were called snow reservoirs, back then they were called *smet*, *smetije*. They had to be covered with leaves and plastic, with a plastic cover so the snow would be reserved and when they went with the livestock, to use it for the livestock, but also for drinking. So, they used water from the snow because we didn't have the possibility of taking water from the village, but we always used it. We drank water that whole summer too, but also the livestock or whatever we had with us, we used it from the snow.

It wasn't easy because sometimes those reservoirs weren't very close to the *stan*, we called them *stan* or somebody called them *bana*, the ones we used for living. They were in the shape of {describes with hands} cone-like, maybe you have seen them somewhere. There were ones in different shapes too, but usually the ones where they lived when he helped our [paternal] uncle were like that. Very classic, interesting life, not easy, difficult. It wasn't, I could say, it wasn't something we particularly liked, but we took it as an obligation that we had to help. But when I mentioned, in all these challenges and difficulties, for example, my uncle's sense of humor wasn't absent.

They had a difficult life, but my uncle and his wife really loved each other, Zizë, aunt Zizë, they have both passed away. But they got along really well. But, uncle Lul also knew that region, all the people, and he had a sense of humor. And I think I inherited it from him. And I started, for example, in the events we had back then in the family or the wider village circle where we were invited a guy or a girl

as part of the ceremony, sometimes one, two, three day long weddings or whatever type of ceremony we had. I never hesitated to do some show, not theatrical, but in the form of humor or some sketch with somebody. I had an affinity for it.

And then, around when I was in eighth grade I started to work on some writings as well, some poetry. As a student back then in high school, we had some lectures with memories and I wanted to contribute with some poem, some interesting writing. But, after finishing high school back then, now Nazmi Muslijaj has passed away, he was, he took care of serving as a coordinator of youth in some villages, to organize and play some shows. To prepare us as amateur actors, and we did some shows in villages.

And it was very interesting for us to also learn new skills and express those skills, that there were many young people who wished to be actors but at the same time we would entertain people in villages who didn't have any other way of entertainment. So, we did shows. I remember we did [shows] in our village Studenica, in Vrella, in some other villages, in Jubllanica e Madhe, and as I said, mainly in some houses which were used for the services of the Local Community or in case they weren't available for us, in some mosque or someone's *oda* which was large and suitable for this use.

Anita Susuri: Mister Xhavit, was this village mixed or Albanian by ethnicity?

Xhavit Gashi: Only Albanian. We actually had two-three Roma families, but only Albanian. Those families were in between Vrella and Studenica, but they were also well integrated, respected, like that.

Anita Susuri: You stayed in the village until eighth grade or did you continue...

Xhavit Gashi: No, I continued until the moment when I enrolled in the Faculty of English Language, in '91. So, I lived in the village. And after that time I lived in Pristina renting, but every weekend or holiday I went back to the village, in Studenica.

Anita Susuri: You started high school in the year of...

Xhavit Gashi: '86-'87, I think that was it.

Anita Susuri: So from the year '81 there is a different political wave that started in Kosovo because of the dissatisfaction, the state of the demonstrations in '81 and the year '86 were a little more difficult. What were they like for you? You continued high school in Pristina, right?

Xhavit Gashi: No, I continued high school in Istog. So, in Istog until '90. So, '90-'91 was the year when I graduated and that was the last year when we could still be in school facilities.

Anita Susuri: So I know that for some time after the demonstrations the youth were very supervised and they weren't allowed to gather. What was that like for you? How did you experience that time, high school [I mean]?

Xhavit Gashi: For example, we now mentioned the community or the village which was mixed or inhabited only by Albanians. My village was like that, but Istog was known as a community that had many Serbs. At school we had Serbian classes and Albanian classes. At school we saw the privileges that Serbian students had for example, and that we were lacking and couldn't cherish those privileges that, for example, Serbian children had.

Anita Susuri: What did they, for example, have as privilege?

Xhavit Gashi: Maybe their classes were better, maybe... I don't remember everything, but of course they were free, they had security because it was the system, [they were] part of the system. For example, we, I mentioned the fact that I liked acting. But two-three times I was, for example, a candidate to partake in the local competitions back then in Kosovo and because I sent two poems which I really liked back then, they were patriotic, it wasn't allowed. Only if I changed the poem, otherwise it wouldn't work.

I remember a professor and he cried, he said, "I feel bad because you're reciting it very well. And I know that you would get first place, but we don't dare to because we would also get in trouble with this poem." Because it was one of the poems which would surely cause trouble, mentioning Albania or Albanianess or something like that. They didn't have any obstacles, I mean Serbs. But, it's interesting because cases of conflict between Albanian and Serbian students, at least I don't remember any, I don't remember.

It's known that at the time we still had the Serbian language as a language that had to be learned, one of the foreign languages, it was obligatory in all classes. I think we had two classes in high school. I don't see it, I didn't see it as a negative thing, because it gives you the opportunity to learn another language. I was in a department where I also learned Latin and English, and it was a department of collaborating for natural sciences and we had Latin as well, I remember back then.

However, in '89 as you know the demonstrations and the protests, we, from Istog, for example, became active. Most classes walked on foot to join the demonstrations. As they did from all over Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: Did you go too?

Xhavit Gashi: And now I had, we had a professor who was in the leadership of the Communist Party and he locked us in the class so we wouldn't leave. So, he locked our class and it was possible for him

because he used the local Serbian authorities there as well, but there were [students] from our school who went. So, it was us, I don't know if there was some other class who didn't go.

At first they allowed us, they said, "Yes, we are coming," we went several kilometers [on the way]. But then we didn't go all the way and we returned. They said, "Yes, we will go in an organized manner." The purpose was only to locate us and to not allow us to go. However, we took part, for example on a local level because then the protests in villages began. We did protests, demonstrations in villages, we were part of all those activities and organizations, but also the participation. We did that.

And then in '91 when those first groups of the defense organization organized, like territorial defense, I immediately engaged in that as well, in order to be... back then the village guards would be organized, identifying the young people who could potentially serve in defending the people. There together with some young people from the village we served as guards too or at least gathering information, the movement of the vehicles, the police or Serbian military at the time.

Anita Susuri: And when these happened, for example, the organizations, were they somewhere secretly at somebody's house or how did you find out the organization was happening?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, good question. Many times, for example, back then it was a fact because there was only one movement in the beginning. There was only the Democratic League of Kosovo movement and they mainly came from, every village had the village leadership because they all came from the village. And in the village leadership, for example whoever the two-three most trustworthy people were or the most active, and then the information of common goals was spread through them, how to organize, how to act. Like that. But there was a really decent organization for other issues as well, but especially for issues of a national nature.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, for example, that time, [when] all these events happened, what did you hear? How did you experience it? For example, you mentioned that your father was part of it, did he advise you as well or?

Xhavit Gashi: Very good question. I told you, he spoke about war but he talked more about the future. He wanted us to look ahead to the future. However, he always wanted to make sure that the patriotic feelings were planted, to be there for our country. And I told [you], our house was really small but one of the rooms in the house had some space, across from the house there was a national flag. And as children, we always for example asked once about the eagle, "Father, what is this?" Me and my younger brother you saw in the picture [addresses the interviewer]. We were maybe one year apart, age wise, but they referred to us as the twins of Niman and Ryva, of my mother and father. And he said, "Son, with these claws, these claws will one day remove the enemy away from us and our day will come, [our] freedom." So he always took care of that.

And then, of course he talked a lot about Albania, unfortunately because at first we didn't have accurate information about what was happening in Albania. We saw Albania and their leadership as a hope for the future perhaps, because we didn't know, for example, that exactly that leadership was dictatorial to its own people. But, at the time it's not a secret like most people who had a patriotic direction who loved their country saw Albania and back then the dictator. But we didn't know he was a dictator, maybe because of the hope he would have our back one day. We maybe didn't see what we watched on television, maybe some congress or some activity. We thought, it gave us hope that Albania would take care of us, you know. And we didn't know that they weren't even capable [of taking care of] themselves or that unfortunately he oppressed and was dictatorial to his own people.

But, for the advice regarding the war it's interesting because I think it was some four or five months before his death when my father talked to me and my other younger brother. But, it was my brother as well who, although he wasn't here for the war, he was an architect and he talked to him too, he said, "I think..." because you could tell that violence and repression began to increase. He said, "My sons, I want to talk to you about something." He said, "I," he said, "am sick," because he had cancer and he knew what it was, lung cancer. "It seems," he said, "that there is no other option but to direct the gun towards the enemy." Exactly like that and he mentioned a few of the cases of his experience, for example in Novi Pazar where he fought himself.

And at that time it was difficult. He would tell how Albanians and Bosnians would protect, it means they as *kaçake* forces fought against the regime, but they protected the civilians. They protected the members, women, children, elders who were Albanian and Bosnian. But he would say, "There were cases when we protected even Serbian civilians," and he would tell us that the time was coming, it seemed like there would be a need to aim the gun at the enemy, "Back then," he would say, "you should first evaluate yourself, whether you want to because nobody can force you to be there for your country." Of course, his advice always was for us to show up for our country. But he used to say, "First you should ask yourselves, do you want to, or not? If you want to, then," he used to say, "you should make sure to fight an honest war." He said, "If you fight an honest war you will always be a winner. It can take longer, but you will win."

And the other thing that he used to say was, "Let's think about what it takes to fight in a war," our question was where are the guns, we had a shortage of guns. We had somewhere... and up to that moment, he didn't tell us that he had a gun somewhere or to go out and buy another gun, the guns were lacking. "Yes, the guns," he said, "don't worry about it because war brings the guns. When war happens the guns will come, that's not an issue. But of course we won't have guns like the other side, but the guns will come." But his other advice was that we should know, "If you fight, if you fight an honest war you should know that Serbs will still be in Kosovo, Serbs will live here and you should still live together with them." He used to say, "Even if there will be no Serbs left in Kosovo," he said, "you should be aware that Serbia is a neighbor. You have to trade, you have to do business, you should develop the country. All of that," he said, "it helps to know at the time when if you do an honest war

then the opportunities for collaboration after the war are better if you fought under these kinds of conditions.”

Which was interesting [coming] from a villager who only finished four years of school, but he had read a lot. That helped me in life as well, for example, with my service in the war and my younger brother’s. But also to be more open around the post war concepts, what now? It was interesting. And the other thing is, for example, he foresaw based on his own experience in wars, the crisis brings other negative phenomena in society. What are those? Looting, robberies. And he would say, “You should be careful because you could be tricked, you can end up with nothing after the war is over.”

Because at the time when we had talked to our father we managed to build a... working gradually, my sisters, brothers, everyone together, we had a house. Maybe it was among the best four-five [houses] in the village. A big three story house, somewhere in the pictures, you could see it in the pictures, I will show you the other photographs [addresses the interviewer]. And, for example I was immediately at the time, I mean a year, two, we immediately had a car and the status kept changing, from a poor family, gradually working, the boys, the girls, everyone together and building.

And he would say, “The way they were built with honor, with honor,” he would say, “that way you will cherish them! But if you are dependent, for example, that everything was destroyed and you,” he would say, “take something thinking you’ll improve your status,” he would say, “you will be deceived because even a needle that you didn’t earn with sweat, that is not yours. And that,” he would say, “will cause trouble in further achieving stuff, because you always” he would say, “take the direction towards getting something you didn’t earn, and not seek out to create something new.

So, and that was a very important part and the part when he mentioned only the needle, because normally when you’re all destroyed and the possibilities to be more fragile after the war because your many needs are extreme, they’re very great. But I think that even that education from my father helped us to protect [ourselves], to take care. Because maybe it would be better, or maybe like it was for almost a year being almost with no shelter under very bad conditions after the war, to not confuse honor and contribution with things that don’t serve you in life.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you about something else before continuing in the ‘90s, about the period of high school. So, you got an education in that period of time, you partook in cultural activities and participated in various organizations. You told me that your brother organized demonstrations...

Xhavit Gashi: In ‘81, yes, one of the organizers.

Anita Susuri: Were there other activities for example, what was your life like as a young person or were you more preoccupied with working at that time?

Xhavit Gashi: No, I was, for example, I told you, agriculture, they were all work but [there was] also sports. Sports, for example, wasn't done in [sports] fields, in halls. Apart from the sports in school, we did sports in villages, in meadows, in fields, in yards and not in good conditions. You didn't... for example, I told you until eighth grade, or maybe the first year, second year when I started working more. For example, sportswear was [considered] a luxury, we didn't have them. But, we did [sports].

I liked boxing and at the time we didn't have a club and we tried to impose and improvise some conditions, for example, bags of sand or something, [hang it on] a tree in our yard and practice a bit like that. Whereas when it came to football nobody wanted to have me as an opponent, because I was a defender like a static pillar, not a player. I wasn't, I wasn't some kind of athlete of... and we had other games, for example other games which were played in different regions.

In our region, for example, a children's game was hide and seek which was played by anybody. Back then you had more places to hide like in the yard, or in the fields. Tag, as it's called, depends on different areas. And then, we had some other games, *klut* or *klinc* as we called them, one with two sticks, one longer, one shorter. Whoever throws it further, then to measure in meters who threw it further. Another game in the village where there were many rocks or we called it *rrasa*, for example, whoever can throw them to hit the target, those three, four, five rocks that we put as a target to hit them. There were different games, so there were sports activities as well.

But, to mention it here, for example, our father because of the discipline that he always had, he took care of our sports activities to keep going, but for us to not go somewhere where he could not see us. And, for example, to not miss out on reading time and homework that we had at home. Half an hour, 40 minutes and when we heard the whistle, we had to go back because it was [time for us] to go home.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: Did you come to Pristina in '91?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: How did that all happen?

Xhavit Gashi: Well first I, I mean within that year there were several interesting events. In '90, we... actually in '90 I was invited to that recruiting center in Niš because of my age. Because it was still the generation when people from my generation went and served in military service. Unfortunately, we heard about the return of dozens of young boys in coffins at the time. And I got the invitation. All of our generation went for the recruitment. The recruitment lasted two-three days. They, it was more an analysis, evaluation, what military capacities they could recruit, and then to go to service.

And at the time there I was appointed, back then it was called the gender of what kind of service. I was appointed to serve in the units, back then in Serbian [it was called] PVO,⁷ it was an anti-aircraft unit. And we came back. After a few months we received the invitation for service. So it was in '91. Back then we had, how to put it, it was a collective decision of the entire Kosovo, but also instruction from those earlier instructions I mentioned like LDK, for us not to go. [For] Kosovo's boys to not go into [military] service, because at that point the war in Slovenia already began, and then in Croatia, I think. And we decided to run away from our homes, to not respond to the invitation.

There was a very small number of boys who responded. Usually it happened with the ones whose families weren't well informed or I don't know what other reasons or somebody believed they wouldn't be killed or, it depends on people's beliefs. I don't blame them. However, I was with the majority, because we didn't go. At first, for example, for some weeks we went away from home because we feared the [military] forces would come and forcibly take us from our homes. I think I stayed in the mountains for several weeks. And then I stayed in Nabergjan for over three-four months, my [maternal] uncles' village and there you had easier opportunities to run away if the police showed up.

But, we were never in a state to sleep properly, somebody should've, we always had to watch out if there was a vehicle coming at night, if a police vehicle would come or something. But, until they declared that they would no longer ask Kosovars, Albanian Kosovars to mandatory service, that's when we came out. But, it's very interesting at that time when I stayed illegally to not go to military service. You saw from some pictures as well that I had long hair, a different style. First, the first initiative to grow my hair out was when I was asked... I started in high school a bit with some style, but I didn't have the idea for my hair to be that long.

And [I got the idea] to grow it a little longer, the moment when my brother, my big brother who then also became our guardian, took care of our entire family and he was interested to find a passport somewhere from his friend and our friend. A person's passport so I, the idea was for me to take that passport and use it to run away. Because I didn't have a passport. Where would I go? Switzerland to my brother or somewhere else. Meanwhile I didn't have the will, I never wanted to leave Kosovo. But two initiators or how to put it, decisive factors why I didn't flee at the time were my mother and my [maternal] aunt. Those two were aware of those attempts, my brother's initiative and [him] trying to find a solution so that I could go abroad. Both of them pleaded to me at the time, "Please son don't leave because all our young people have run away."

⁷ *Protivvazduhoplovna odbrana* - Air defense is a maneuverable branch of the Armed Forces of Serbia, intended for the control and protection of airspace sovereignty, prevention of aggression, air defense of the territory, important facilities, centers and administrative and industrial forces.

It was true because there was a big flux of young people and I decided to not flee although I had that passport. And the person in that passport had curly, longer hair and I thought that I could use that passport, without changing the photograph or anything and to go with his passport. That's when I started growing my hair out, but I started to like it. And with the direction I wanted, as an actor, they fit well. Music, I always loved music. I was an amateur dancer again. I danced at weddings or events, for different events. Sometimes maybe I even danced all night at home alone. My mom came to check on me two-three times, "Go sleep *more*⁸ because it's late," like that.

And then in '91, with my brother's initiative, who is an architect, I had, so my primary goal before his initiative was to enroll for acting. So, that's what I wanted to do. Back then there was the generation that was accepted, if I'm not mistaken only two Kosovar students. I think it was Blerim Gjoci⁹ and Lirak Çelaj¹⁰ at the time, if I'm not mistaken. And the school for acting was led by Enver Petrovci,¹¹ Faruk Begolli¹² and so on. I had interest, but my brother then said, "Xhavit, until the school becomes better because with a staff of only two, I don't believe it will be some kind of prestigious Academy of Art or something." He said, "So, I would recommend since you have an affinity, you speak a little English and you like literature, enroll in [the] English Language [department]. And I liked the idea, so I enrolled there.

And I came in the first year, I had to keep my ID card hidden, while traveling I had an ID card which was false. There was the name, surname of course, the info details of another person which I never knew, but a cousin of mine found it at the bus station in Peja. And photographs back then weren't digitally taken. We replaced the picture and put my picture, while the info was about a person who was born in '65 from Zajmova of Klina, so he was much older than me. And that's how I traveled. So, through the person whose ID card we found, without knowing who that person was.

He fortunately didn't happen to be somebody with some criminal past... even though it's not fortunate. But, fortunately during the time when I used his ID card, he wasn't politically persecuted or [committed] some patriotic act or something. Because I didn't have, it happened that the police stopped us and I used that ID card which was false. And only in my appearance I looked a bit [like the photo], with long hair at the beginning when I started to grow my hair out and based on the fact that I was, for example, from Klina and each time they would happen to stop me I said, "I came here to visit my [maternal] uncle in Pristina." I didn't tell them I was a student and they believed me.

Meanwhile it happened that [some people] had their own ID documents and the police beat them up. For example, I am talking about that time. I didn't get away with it either, but I will tell you later. But, I

⁸ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion.

⁹ Blerim Gjoci (1972) is an Kosovo Albanian actor, screenwriter, director and producer.

¹⁰ Lirak Çelaj (1973) is a Kosovo Albanian actor and politician.

¹¹ Enver Petrovci (1954) is a Kosovo Albanian actor, writer and director.

¹² Faruk Begolli (1944 - 2007) was a well-known Albanian actor from Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia and with pan-Balkan fame.

mean as a consequence of using that ID card, I didn't have any problems. And I started like that, I mean studying English Language. It's not like I was maybe among the best students, I was average or even lower than average in my studies. Because my focus was always acting. That's what I wanted.

And then, in '94, actually exactly in '94, together with my brothers and with another cousin we opened a coffee bar in Pristina, [it was called] Blue Jeans. And so that was a coffee bar where people from all communities would come. Of course, mostly Albanians, but Turks, Bosnians, Gorans, Serbs. All the communities would come there. It was right where Bill Clinton is today, across from the Bill Clinton Statue, his bust. There were some coffee bars like barracks there and that's where our coffee bar was. The music we listened to was alternative, hard rock, metal, that was it, that's what I liked. But [when it came to] music we listened to other stuff too, I mean it wasn't only that.

It was a characteristic that at the time, although it was a difficult time, we could still find, how to put it, opportunity for a little fun, but for example, when we worked until 11:00-12:00 at night, we would close down the bar in the end and listen to Albanian folk music just for ourselves. For example, Dervish Shaqa,¹³ or Bijtë e Sefës,¹⁴ or something from folk music that we listened to in villages. It happened that we listened to music like that.

And one case I can mention now, for example, close by there was a Serbian police station, it was Station number 4, I think the one in Dardania. And oftentimes the police would come and we, and during those late hours when we played that music and we stopped it because we were scared, you know. There were times when they said, "Leave it, leave it," you know, and we, "You are cutting Serbs with this music," because those songs were patriotic, of course based on real stories, painful things for Albanians. But, patriotic songs which reacted or acted against the regime.

But one of the policemen came often and he asked for coffee, sugar I mean because they had coffee there. Apart from never daring to ask them for money for the service, whether it was coffee or tea or some beer. Sometimes they would come holding a cup and ask us, they said, "Can you give us some sugar because we need it to make coffee there," and of course we never let them go back empty handed. And we didn't dare to, but even if we did, it's our tradition that when somebody asks something, you give it to them. And then later, let me tell you, because based on this case and another case, back then there was a small film, like a documentary created which is now on Amazon too and it's called *With a cup of sugar*. There is a *filmmaker* [speaks in English] from Iowa who made it based on my story. Maybe you heard of it or not, but I can share it with you later.

But, during the years of studying, that was the time when it was difficult to study at home. On the other side because there was... we had to go secretly from the police forces. We had to snake our way through narrow alleys of Pristina so we wouldn't run into the police on the way. It happened that many

¹³ Dervish Shaqa (1912 - 1985) was a popular rhapsody vocalist.

¹⁴ Bijtë e Sefës were a folk music group.

students were beaten up on the way. Later on it happened to me twice, my brother was beaten up by the police forces. But it was difficult for everybody back then.

Anita Susuri: Where was your faculty located? I mean, the English Language department?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, the department of English Language and Literature back then was located in two-three places. At first, the Faculty of Philology as a decanate, as it was called back then in homes, was located in Durmitor. Durmitor is a neighborhood. I think it's right at the former house of Bajram Kelmendi¹⁵ somewhere there. And then later it was, I forgot what the name of the neighborhood was Te Sharra, the road that takes you to the neighborhood, after the May 1st school, after the May 1st school there. At the May 1st school, sometimes we took advantage of the opportunity, and I can share an interesting story from there as well.

It was sometimes Sundays and Saturdays when there were no children and we could use the elementary schools. Because elementary schools were still being used in several locations by the students, they didn't obstruct it, the regime back then didn't obstruct the elementary schools. Usually, what they did in those schools was they often times sent violent Serbian principals, but they didn't really mind the children's education, when it comes to high schools, we know, as well as university. They were all forced to be held at home.

There is an interesting case there, I was a student of English Language. Of course, with a totally different look, but it was two or three of us who had long hair. But I was more characteristic because mine were really long. And I think it was a Saturday, they had called the children for some supplementary classes in a classroom and we were waiting for consultations regarding a grammar exam of English language. I remember very well, with Ismail Mehmeti, he was from Tetova.

And we were waiting for consultations and from one classroom, some children opened the door, they would come out ten at a time and they would point {describes with hands} at me and they would go back laughing. And I looked interesting to them. In the meantime there came a tall person, I guessed he was a teacher. And he turned to me and said, "You," I didn't know what it could be about. He said, "You," I asked, "Me?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Go ahead!" He said, "You should be ashamed!" I said, "Okay, what do you mean ashamed?" But I listened to him, I didn't feel good of course I knew I didn't do anything [wrong].

He said, "You should be ashamed," he said, "how are you not ashamed," he said, "you look like the enemy." With my appearance, my long hair and my outfits I always had, for example my pants or shoes or, whatever I was wearing I liked different colors, multicolored and my shoes were in colors and I

¹⁵ Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

seemed more unique to them. And he said, “Shameful to look like the enemy” (smiles) I said, “What do you mean to look like them?” “With how you’re looking. The children are thinking it’s good to learn from you.” You know, in the education aspect.

I said, “Excuse me, I didn’t come like that, this is who I am.” In the meantime he talked to my professor when we went there. And the next time, but there were no children, but he was there again and he came and apologized to me. He said, “Forgive me but we are not used to seeing students or people like this,” or for example he said, “But after I talked to professor Ismail, he told me you are, everything is alright, you are a good student.” He apologized to me, we made up. I wasn’t even thinking of doing something.

But, it happened that even while on my way for example going there, people said to me, “Hey, will you cut your hair, or will we?” Because I seemed different, not the same with the other part of the community. Different and they said, “What is his deal?” But they were difficult years, however, but also good years.

Anita Susuri: What were the other difficulties studying inside a room? How do you remember that? Were there desks? What was it like?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, it was interesting in the classrooms. There were some construction bricks with some wooden boards on top, that's what it was like. But, for us as students but also for me coming from the village, it wasn’t extremely difficult, because I was raised in difficult conditions. It was more difficult for the teachers. I value [their] work, their contribution that they lectured and taught in those conditions. And honestly they had a commitment that I don’t even see today, the commitment to really share knowledge and carry out a quality education.

I mentioned the case when I went to my professor Ismail Mehmeti for consultations, for example, they don’t call [students] for consultations at all today or they don’t accept them. They tell them, “It’s all right.” I don’t have all the information. But, I know for example that one time when he [failed me], so my name was among the students that failed the exam, but I was very convinced that I did well in the exam. I was convinced that I didn’t work for a 10 or a 9, you know, not even for a 9, but by all means for a 7, or a 6, I was sure. And I went for consultations and the reason he failed my exam was only by one point. And he noted it there.

He showed me the exam, and as soon as I saw *punctuations* [speaks in English], he had noted *punctuations* [speaks in English]. As soon as I saw a full stop, not sure if it was at the end of a sentence, or a comma, I don’t remember exactly. But I know that he failed me over one full stop and he made you more careful. For the next time to pay attention more to *punctuations* [speaks in English], not only *content* [speaks in English], the content and the structure of an essay, but to not forget even a full stop that is sometimes a small technical matter. But, it was, I value them for their work under those difficult

conditions. And of course it wasn't easy for some other students as well, because most of the children there were children of doctors, of professors, who had better conditions than I did. It's difficult because during the last years, maybe four-five years before starting my studies, the conditions changed for me as well. However, I remembered the time when I went through very difficult times as well, and of course I didn't expect to begin my studies in private homes, under those conditions. But, it was manageable, it was manageable.

Anita Susuri: What was Pristina like in the '90s? Was it noticeable that the city was occupied? Was there freedom? How did you see it?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes. You did notice the occupation, for example, the movement restrictions, the curfews. For example, when you went out to a specific neighborhood or when you wanted to go drinking together, hang out together with friends. For example, at a specific neighborhood they said, "Run because the people in black are coming." So, we had to interrupt our conversation or our drink or our hangout and run away because the people in black were coming. So, the people in black was a phrase used for policemen. There were a lot of restrictions, freedom restrictions, [and] of rights. The very fact that we were studying in [private] homes with the fear that the police could come in and discover us at any moment, to beat you or the professor up, was, it was difficult.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that they even beat you up a few times.

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: How did that happen? Why did it happen?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, that happened, it's interesting. There were two cases of beatings, beatings from the police, one happened much later. Both of them happened in '98. One happened right on March 5 of '98, when we had actually talked with my brother one month prior, because he was in Kosovo, two of my other brothers were in Switzerland at that time. We had talked because really, after the fall of Ardian Krasniqi which happened in '97 and that we knew of through some of our family members, we knew Ardian personally. I wasn't friends with him, but I knew him through a connection like that.

His fall made it known that the Liberation Army exists. So, there is a live movement that opposes the Serbian forces by force and to do something about the liberation of our country. That was a *turning point* [speaks in English], that kind of moment when we, me and my little brother said, "Okay, we want to be part of this movement too and fight against, against that regime." But, it was exactly February, in February of '98 when we discussed it, we were actually interested at first to join a group close by with my brother.

There were talks about some groups in Podujeva, about some groups in Bellaqevc or near here, not far from Fushë Kosova and Obilić. But we didn't know anybody personally. I secured a gun from a [maternal] uncle in Pristina and I started to carry it with me or to tell you the truth, I was planning for if it would actually come down to a confrontation, I was ready, I mean for a confrontation. I had a gun. It wasn't like it was some kind of gun, but you estimate that you can do who knows what because you had no military experience, nothing to do with security.

But, in March, March 1 or 2 [1998] my brother was in Peja and he called me, "Xhavit, now you have to come because I think we are organizing here," "Eh," I said, "all right." On March 5, I had my car at the time, I left it. A friend suggested, he said, "It's better to leave the car and go by bus, because the chances they stop you are lower on the bus." At the time the checkpoints had already been established, for example, in Komoran, in Peja. Before arriving in Istog there were two-three checkpoints. If you drove your car there was no escape from being stopped by the Serbian forces.

But, with the bus they said they usually didn't stop the buses and I would arrive easier. Okay, I took off from Pristina, in Komoran they stopped me and another person, and two other people. I think they were, and it was March 5, I didn't have an idea or the information about what was happening in Prekaz¹⁶ at all. On March 5 the case of the Jashari family occurred. We could tell that the Serbian forces there were terrified, we could hear gunshots, you understand. But we didn't have information because back then we didn't have phones or something. When you got on the bus you didn't have information anymore, [you had nowhere] to take information from.

When we went to Komoran, we saw them and they were getting on the bus. For example, to me, they said, "These three out of the bus," he said, "you go." And they took us out and took us inside the checkpoint and I was sure that all of those gunshots we could hear around, at that point I didn't know what would happen but I was sure we all thought that they were going to kill us because we didn't think of anything else. And we didn't have any kind of power, nothing on us. They immediately started to punch us, to beat us up really badly.

And in the meantime, one of them was punching and kicking me and his mask fell off, because they were wearing some masks on their faces {describes the mask shape with hands}. Not like these now with covid. But face masks. And I was more than 90 percent sure that it was one of those policemen who would come to get sugar in my coffee bar a few years prior. And I told him, "You are Dragan," in Serbian. He said, "No, I'm not" and he started to punch me again.

However, they beat us up for a bit longer and at some point they stopped. He had, he had told the bus to pull over somewhere and I was bloody, you know. My hair was messy, I had long hair. I had a yellow

¹⁶ In March 1998 Serbian troops surrounded the compound of the Jashari family, whose men were among the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and killed all of them, including the women and the children. This event energized the Albanian resistance and marked the beginning of the war.

jacket, *sari* [Tur.: yellow] as they called it, it was yellow, and that was stained a bit here {touches his chest}, so I was bloody. And he told me, “Come,” he said, “here. The bus is waiting for you at the exit.” He took all three of us there and he took me to wash my eyes. He said, “Remove the blood so it won’t be noticed,” and I was confused. But he didn’t admit he was [him], but I always thought it was him and still... although he was part of the regime, it was a human aspect that he came there to get sugar, and he sometimes got a coffee.

And I thought that he was a key factor in why they didn’t kill us that day. Because they would have killed us, that’s what I thought and I wanted to believe that, because I still want to believe in human values. You can be part of a regime but even if I myself was part of who knows what kind of orders, I won’t completely carry out everything I’m ordered if it’s not within ethical values, moral or what I believe is right to do. That’s how I wanted to think about them. They weren’t like that at all, but for that moment that’s what I thought.

And, “All right, get on the bus.” We went and I stayed in Studenica for about a month. On that evening we heard about what happened and we got together, those two-three people who were like a group of the local community for organizing with KLA. I met with them, “What are we going to do?” You understand, they said, “We have orders,” because we were part of Dukagjin. The Dukagjin operational area from the general base that area should be defended because of the supply with weapons from Albania and Montenegro, because we were at that tripoint, the tripoint area where Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro connect.

And they said, “It’s in our interest for it to be open because of the supplies and we can’t take any action even if Serbs come to our side.” So, in a way it was said that we can’t organize openly, to identify and to not take any action even against Serbian forces if they come there. Although there weren’t many of us, and then we bought some guns, they were some kalashnikovs, some hunting rifles, some revolvers, some bombs, some hand grenades. We didn’t have a lot of weapons. But our will to do something against the enemy was big, for freedom, for our country.

Then, we talked with my brother again, he said, “Maybe it’s better Xhavit,” he said, “if you go to Pristina, because you can be discovered here now,” because we had talked with the local people. He said, “You could be discovered, it could cause us trouble and bring it home. We can’t stay without firing at them. And we will cause trouble for everyone.” And I came to Pristina by bus, so after one month. The situation there, it was known that it wasn’t the same anymore in Prekaz or other stuff. There were some other cases.

I came to Pristina, [where] I stayed for several months. In June, I mean, after my birthday on June 29 I had some sort of oath with some friends here in Pristina, that at that point I ultimately wanted to go there. The war zone expanded, they expanded, and I said, “From today I will officially be wherever I

can join.” Whether, back then we knew little of Glllogjan at [the place where] Ramush¹⁷ [was born] or in closer areas there were some villages in the riverbed, we referred to some groups as we knew them.

But, we identified some more people in our villages as well, I said, “I will be part of them.” And I talked to them a bit. I made my oath with the flag and at the time they were all students, very good friends of mine. One of them, I won’t ever forget because he was an only son, said, “I want to come with you,” I said, “If you tell your dad, your mom,” because he was a city boy with a dad and a mom, not a mother like me (laughs). And I told him, “No problem. Come, but I want to meet your parents first so they know you’re coming with me.” He said, “No, they won’t let me, you know, they won’t let me,” “Then,” I said, “no, don’t come.”

And then I decided to go near Mitrovica, near Rozhaja there to return to my village. So I wouldn’t go that way, because this way I had experienced a beating, I wasn’t sure to go that way. I would rather go towards Mitrovica, they told me I would pass through easier. And the police really didn’t stop us on the bus in Mitrovica. When I went to Podgorica, for example there I met a few citizens as well who had come to buy goods for their homes, because supply became difficult. For example, on our side in Istog there we traded with Montenegro as well, it wasn’t far away from us.

Some of those purchases or transports were done through the mountains. I know that a guy from my village said, “Xhavit don’t go there because here,” he said, “they know that you are part of that organization and the police could stop you and it could cause you trouble.” Unfortunately for me there was the Head of a company, Kollçaku, a tourist company in Peja and he said, “You don’t have to go on foot,” he said, “I know our police, I pass every day,” he said, “I have to buy them cigarettes, I have to buy them lunches, dinners always. I buy stuff for them every day,” he said, “and I will tell them you’re my friend and that I know you.” He knew me because we bought tickets for my sister, my brother, them, everyone who had gone abroad. He knew me. And he told me, “Don’t worry.”

And I wasn’t very prepared physically, for example like I became later, to go in the mountains, because from being a student for several years in Pristina, in the coffee bar, I wasn’t prepared physically how to put it, ready to go in the mountains. And I wanted to go by bus, especially since that person sort of guaranteed me as he said. But it didn’t go like that. When we arrived in Savina Voda, that’s what the place is called after you enter Kosovo from Rozhaja, two people stopped us there again. Another beating from one, he really was a criminal, later killed by a friend of mine during the war. But, he was there. But, that day that happened and I had two-three broken ribs. But, interestingly they didn’t have any information either, for example about me but they only took us outside [the bus] *randomly* [speaks in English] you know, “Bring out one, two, three people from the bus. You, you, you.”

¹⁷ Ramush Haradinaj (1968), leader of the KLA from the region of Dukagjin, founder of the political party AAK (*Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës*) and twice Prime Minister. In 2005 he was indicted at the ICTY for war crimes and crimes against humanity and acquitted of all charges. He was retried and again acquitted in 2010.

Anita Susuri: On the bus, did they only take young men or whoever they wanted?

Xhavit Gashi: I think that, well, young men and anyone they wanted, you understand. I, how to put it, I was thinking a little that maybe my style wouldn't let them because they would think to themselves, he has nothing to do with the army. I really took care, for example, always from the moment I started to grow my hair out and I took care with, what do I know, with good shampoos and my wardrobe was a little more different. A more special style.

And I thought I wouldn't make them think [I was in the army] and oftentimes cars, for example in Pristina when they stopped [people] and they stopped most people without knowing them at all, they let me go because they said, "Leave it because he's not some kind of person who contributes to the country. I'm sure they..." that what I thought that as soon as they saw me with long hair, sometimes unshaved and with a diversity in clothes, I wouldn't seem like somebody who shows up for their country. And I thought that they wouldn't even think about it, you know. But, they pick you randomly and they take you out and beat you up. There's nothing you could do.

Anita Susuri: You were injured after the beatings and stuff, your ribs were broken and...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Where did they send you? Were there people who worked privately, right?

Xhavit Gashi: There were, for example, physicians who were, for example, from the neighborhood and they took care but there weren't any X-rays, you understand. I knew some doctors based on physical examinations, they verified that, "Two or three ribs are broken," or of course, seeing that my teeth were broken or something. Those were obvious, visible. But, they didn't, we had nowhere to go. Because if you went to Peja, for example, you could've been arrested immediately. Again there is the case of compatriot Myrvete Maksutaj who was killed in Peja, she's a martyr who went to take one of her friends who went there for treatment. For example, at the hospital.

Anita Susuri: You were telling us about the hospitals here...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes. So, the possibilities were limited for us to use the hospitals, because especially when you were identified as part of those first groups of KLA, so at the time they were treated like terrorists from the regime. So, we didn't have possibilities and it's interesting that only two days after that decision my ribs were broken and I had to go, I had, of course, I expressed my interest voluntarily to go to Albania, for how many hours by foot, for weapons.

So, only two days after the last beating which left me with broken ribs and all those injuries, we got on the way to go for supplies in Albania. The whole journey was on foot. It took around two days to get

there and under difficult conditions. For example, in Albania we had to sleep in school yards, some kind of sheds, it was an open environment. Only for a few days I think we were able to sleep somewhere inside a house who sheltered us, an Albanian local, a *kryeplak*.¹⁸

Otherwise, we had to do everything in conditions like that. And for me besides all these difficulties, of course, we had problems with the food, our worry that we didn't have weapons to get supplies and return to war in Kosovo. And at the time I was always worried about my hair as well, uncleanness, you understand. And of course, I had to take care. I didn't want to cut it even though at the time it was very difficult because when I came back from Albania, my sister and a cousin helped me to clean my hair again, because my hair got dirty at the time without cleaning, when I got back home.

But I never wanted... I loved the hair. It's not only having it, but I loved it as well. And then when we came back from Albania, we had to wait for two weeks or more in Albania for the weapons in those difficult conditions which maybe were more difficult than when we were here in war. Those days lacked conditions and everything. We spend about 24 hours with the weapons, to say nothing of, I can't know exactly the weight, but two or three weapons in our backs, a pack of munition, or something that could amount to 30-40 kilograms of weight.

From that, I mean you feel sleepy and you're walking on damp [ground] with sleepless nights, always at risk because you could be killed. Unfortunately, like many of our friends who were killed. And the one who was a director or a filmmaker or what would you call him, the one who organized the amateur dramas and amateur shows was killed only one day before I went to get weapons. Nazmi Muslija was killed and now he's a martyr.

So, many people were killed on that journey that we did. It happened to me in Albania once, so on that kind of journey and two times in Montenegro, that kind of journey. So, in the snow, in the rain, in windy weather, in... these, the challenges we faced whatever it was. And then, I was part of the brigade 133 Ardian Krasniqi, so in the first recruitment I did in Glogjan, when we went there for weapons which was the beginning of July I think, something like that.

Whereas, our brigade didn't exist at that point. Our brigade was founded later and we became part of brigade 133 Ardian Krasniqi with the base in my village Studenica. At first the first administrative groups about organizing the brigade were at my home and my [paternal] uncle's home. And then we expanded to another house of an old man, Ramë Sokoli, there in the village. And ultimately although we existed formally, Brigade 133 Ardian Krasniqi was founded on January 10, '99, so it was founded later.

And there I had the chance [to hold the meetings] in my house, I mean the planning for the operations, activities and military activities, but also for defending the civilian population, organizing of... because

¹⁸ The *kryeplak* is the leader of societies among people in villages and tribes.

there was a big number of dislocated people, not refugees, but people who were dislocated from one area to another. During that time it was mainly people from Istog and Peja being dislocated and they came to villages near us.

We were closer to the mountains which made it easier in case they would attack us in the villages, the Serbian police or military, then we could escape through the mountain and go to Montenegro, where we would find shelter... and I, and my family too when we had the attacks in April, when many of our friends were killed who are now martyrs, at that point families were compelled to run away through the mountains to Montenegro in difficult snowy weather.

So my family too, my mother and sister and a niece and my [paternal] uncle's wife who I mentioned were still alive after my uncle died, they went to Montenegro.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: What were these actions like? Can you describe your experience a bit?

Xhavit Gashi: Well, for example, my direct activities in the war were probably on the frontline in Vrella. That's where the activities were. While I'm not known for special actions like some other young guys were. I mentioned, for example, Avni Elezi with a group of guys, they managed to break down not only the main criminal but also the main groups of his band who committed crimes throughout Dukagjin, Shaip Uka had another group.

So, I knew those guys on the frontline as well, but I was one of those guys who were really proud to belong to that generation who I know, I had the chance [to get to know them]. It's unfortunate that they no longer live. But, I, yes, [I was] on the frontline in Vrella in those two-three critical days. And then, there were cases after a while when we withdrew from our area, the villages, Studenica, Vrella after the big Serbian offensive. After a while I took care of wounded people too, for example in the mountains of Kaliqan, Jabllanica, near Peja, Istog-Peja.

We were attacked again by 3000 to 4000 forces. They didn't know the number of us. We were only 110 people, but they came... a large number of forces were informed that they're around 3000-4000 forces, we were 110. Those forces were from Serbia and Montenegro, they came from the mountains and their intention was whatever they could find. The Serbian forces were already in the lower parts, but from the mountains they thought there were more of us and we would come from up there.

Then we were forced, when we were notified, to move from there. First to make sure that we saved the wounded and then we dispersed. Some of us, for example from our brigade, moved to some villages near Istog and the riverbed of Drin. While me and another group went and sent the wounded, but we

were also notified at the base back then in the Dukagjin area in Maznik, where commander Ramush Haradinaj was.

But, me and my group were told that we had to wait for a moment when I would take an order and go back to the border with Montenegro. Back to the villages, above our villages. And it was a task that I didn't know what I was supposed to do. But I was told only the day when I got the order to begin, there at a specific point I would meet with a person I knew, an officer, an official of KLA, who was organized and engaged, assigned the duty of supplying weapons.

So, we had to take care and get the weapons from them and follow them back to Maznik where he was. And of course we went through many ambushes, through many dangerous areas. But, to mention it, maybe it's something worth mentioning, the moment right on the day when we got happy we got the supply of ammunition and weapons, plus an amount of uniforms. We got ready to follow it, because it was in limited supply but there was a large load of ammunition and we were really happy.

And above the Kaliqan village, there was a guy from the Kaliqan village, a soldier, he is fortunately alive. He knew those paths, because he had been a shepherd and took care of the livestock before in those mountains. And he said, "I know the way, I will lead until we cross to the road which connects to the other village." To continue, for example, towards the villages of Peja and then the villages which connect to other villages where the groups were, other groups waiting for us to deliver the ammunition, weapons, and then come back to get the next supply.

He was, for example, walking, leading when one moment he saw, it was a little before it got dark in the evening and he saw some leaves and some tins. Freshly cut leaves which were a little damp and tins, beers there. That was like a sign to us that the Serbian forces could be near, because we didn't have tins nor beers. Although we looked to see if there were any forces during the day, we didn't see in that perimeter.

But from the moment when we looked and started off to go there, there were already some Serbian forces who had come near there. And right after that there was the trailer of a tractor, because there were many tractors, trailers in the mountains from when people tried to run away, until they could run up there and they left them there. And that's where we saw them as soon as we passed by that trailer, for example, I stopped that guy, his name is Sadri. I told him, silently, I just signaled him to be silent.

My brother Sadri was there with me too, two other soldiers, Xhevdet and I don't know who, I forgot his name. I just told them to wait there. I got in front of that trailer and I immediately faced four-five people. It's fortunate that I had a weapon which was, we called it a hand cannon and that saved me. It's very interesting because it was the first time I fired that kind of gun, it worked and we survived that day.

On the same day again, although there was reinforcement, we had to find a different way and to make sure that the weapons went to the right destination. Maybe I don't have many stories of actions or something like...

Anita Susuri: I want to ask you...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: What kind of feeling was it to see someone getting killed? I mean, constantly at risk that you could be killed or... what kind of feeling is that?

Xhavit Gashi: The only luck was that I was 24 years old. For example, when you're... because when you don't have a lack of, when you lack military knowledge, security, defending, I mean we weren't prepared to be soldiers. For the fact that I told you my whole life was organized around, a different *lifestyle* [speaks in English], a different life. So, I didn't do anything although those patriotic feelings were always there, to do something for the country, we didn't have the possibility of doing anything without some training or preparation for war, neither physical but also not exactly...

I wasn't a problematic guy either, for example, getting into fights with people or, you understand, because someone was more like that by nature. But, fortunately I was 24 years old, I was more prepared, I mean, more mature in the general aspect and I am always thankful to the education I received from my father. And then, you understand the mission, the mission of war and I mean, you don't relate your actions in war to murder, you relate them to defense. For example, I mentioned that I went to the frontlines, we defended and we knew that behind us there were thousands of civilians who were happy we were there, for example, there on the frontline and not even them [nor] us were aware that we didn't have great powers to do the defending.

Unfortunately, it was obvious that we didn't have the power to protect thousands [of people from] massacres, rapes. We had great will to do something about the country, but we weren't prepared for that. It wasn't easy. Now the other unfortunate thing is that after the war there were no state institutions to deal with people who went through war, especially those young people who were 16-17 years old. For example, it's difficult for me too, but I was 24 years old. In a way, my father, or my mother didn't force me to go to war, nor did I go because I was young, and I didn't go to war for an adventure.

I don't know if I can explain well [why I am saying] adventure, very young, for example, we saw cases of people who went and joined ISIS. Some of them, there was research done globally, that young people only wanted to feel like *they are doing something cool* [speaks in English], doing something, you know, interesting, fighting, killing, they played with toy [guns]. We didn't have those kinds of toys for example. But we did something due to patriotism, to reach the light, to get out of the darkness, to not say centuries long, but for decades in a row.

We talked about the case, for example, I talked about my father, my father or my brother. But even the generations before them who, for example, suffered many challenges and sacrifices, they did it to get to this day. So, you don't focus on that moment, how to put it, directly leading up to the murder. You are on the defensive, so the goal wasn't to... and we didn't go to war, for example, I am talking about myself, I wasn't part of the operations just to go and kill somebody or to go and attack a unit. But, I was part of those... I value those who went, because that was a mission of our war, to neutralize the enemy forces.

But I, for example, was more on the frontline and managing situations when you fall into a puddle, in an ambush, and you have to find a solution. So we were ready to go anywhere together. I am, how to put it, happy that I belong to that history, but I know that that is history. The word history itself tells you it's something in the past and I never focused, for example, on that. For example, until last year I didn't even have a veteran's card nor did I care about it. Now I am retired, but you understand. But after the war I always focused on, what do we do to achieve more? It was known that time belongs to history.

Anita Susuri: You told me about some operations you, I mean operations you had...

Xhavit Gashi: Activities, yes.

Anita Susuri: Activities. But when the liberation happened, how did you find out about that? Where were you?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes. The last activities I mentioned were those supplying weapons, so I mainly got to deal with logistics as well for a time in the brigade and with recruitment. But, again, during the last days of war they put me back to supplying. I returned there from Manzik and it was the end of May, beginning of June. And then it was the beginning of June when the second or third supply came if I haven't forgotten, along with the supply there were two journalists from Newsweek, the Newsweek magazine, it's globally known, and Sunday Telegraph if I'm not mistaken. There were three journalists from these two media outlets.

They also had, they had satellite phones, they had possibilities of connecting to the internet at that time and we got... and before they came, we had the possibility of sometimes getting information and communicating through some transistors, we had satellite phones or radio connections. We had them. Information would be spread about the discussions, the efforts to reach an agreement for stopping the war, you understand. But exactly during that time we had that mission of supplying weapons because we didn't know exactly although there were talks that the war would stop, an agreement could be reached, the NATO forces could enter.

So, it found us right at the villages above Iston and Peja there, waiting for the other part of the supply. So, one of those supplies came through right on the day when the NATO forces entered [Kosovo]. So, how did we see them? We saw them, we were waiting, and then we heard about the agreement, but we saw the first helicopters, we knew that they weren't Serbian, because Serbs didn't dare to although they had helicopters, they didn't dare [to fly] over those mountainous areas because they feared we would shoot them. They didn't know where we were, they were afraid. And there were helicopters which maybe crashed because of our soldiers' shots, and we know there were.

But when we saw a high number of helicopters around that area at Peja's bath, which was about five-six kilometers in air space, you understand, where the troops arrived. And then, we tried to get closer, to talk to them, to tell them we were there. And those journalists were present with us. Then it was a very interesting feeling, you know, to have the feeling that the war ended. But it was a dangerous time because there were still Serbian forces here and there until they were evacuated.

And the people came back in a very big euphoria and the return was immediate. And then unfortunately, from what was perpetrated by the Serbian regime, then when the people came back they had nothing, they lacked everything. And people differ in character, for example, maybe someone didn't know a device or piece of machinery wasn't theirs, they thought it was theirs and took it home because it looked similar. When the other came they asked, "Why did you take this from me?" There were these aspects.

The first difficult part was heavy on me right after the war, it was digging and identifying our martyr friends. Whom we didn't manage to take from the places they were killed unfortunately, and the Serbian forces managed to take their bodies to bury or throw somewhere. And then there was that request, our research [about] where those bodies could be, where they could find them and we explored, for example in graves of the villages around but we were also immediately informed that some graves in Peja, where they didn't have names and it could've been the soldiers, some of our soldiers. A very interesting feeling, or... (cries)

So it was the identification, finding the bodies of those soldiers first, our friends. There were other international organizations who explored there, Doctors Without Borders and other organizations. But, for example, from our brigade it was me and Ramadan Dreshaj, he's another soldier, he was there, he is maybe 20 years older than me, much more mature and we explored graves. But when I said we felt joy when we found the bodies of soldiers ourselves, but the joy their family members expressed when they were found is more interesting, they identified one body part of their family members (cries).

Anita Susuri: In connection to this, during the time you were in the war...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: In your operations, you were engaged in them for almost a year. Did your family know anything? Where you were? How you were?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes. At first I mentioned that in our home there was some kind of group about the brigade I had at the time, for example, my mother, sister, a niece and two of us brothers who participated in the war. So, we were at home. They were at home when we began our military activities, they knew. And of course it's the feelings of a mother, those of fear, of care, but also pride because her sons wanted to be part of that movement. But, of course the advice always was, "Beware, be careful!" You understand.

But they knew every day even when I went to the frontline, my mother was home when we went to the frontline until the moment the big attack happened. At that point they left the house. Only for a few days, how to put it, we had to stay without my mother in the area of Istog, while the other days we were somewhere else. But, from that moment when they left, we didn't have communication anymore. So, they never knew. They didn't have news, because as you know there are many names in Kosovo Xhavit Gashi, Avni Gashi and when they heard that a Xhavit Gashi was killed somewhere, "This might be Xhavit." You understand, they didn't know.

And then after they returned to Kosovo after the war, we had the brigade in Vrella, in the village of Vrella. And I came back after an organization we did there, we came back home because they told me, "Your sister and mother and niece came back." Our house was burnt. We had a part of the old house where you could still go, but we mainly stayed in the yard. And I can share some pictures that I brought of the burnt house there [addresses the interviewer].

And then they saw me, but they didn't see my brother who was with me because he was in Vrella with the brigade and had other duties. Now they couldn't even be happy for me saying, "They have killed Avni" (cries). It's a feeling like that. But they always knew where we were. They didn't know exactly where we were, but they knew we were at war.

Anita Susuri: After that, you continued that recovery, how to put it, you, like everybody else after the war...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: We tried to get together and continue forward, how did that go? I know that you continued your military career, despite having studied English...

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, that's right. Yes, yes. A very interesting question, there are a lot of interesting moments to share here. When the war ended, of course I immediately thought of what I could do in the private sector. I thought for some time that it was too late for me to go into acting. But, maybe what I

thought, I thought of, I maybe didn't have a problem, I thought sometimes of a television show where I could do ads, announcements or, I thought of it for a bit. I mean, during that time, right after the war. Communication wasn't a problem for me, for example, I thought I could do something with communication and... but my main goal was, I had two or three exams in the Faculty of English, to finish those first, but nothing related to the state yet.

There were some initiatives immediately after the war for me to become a deputy mayor, as it was called, after the war, when the municipality mayors were picked immediately by those KLA organizations before, I didn't want to be in Istog. I immediately wanted to leave, I mean go abroad. The overseas sector because I didn't see myself in the army, to tell you the truth. And it was around August, we had the organizational work again to take care of people who were coming back and stuff. But it was August when the commander of the area, Ramush Haradinaj, came to our brigade and gave a speech, he thanked the soldiers who stayed there during the war the whole time for our contribution, for everything.

He told us how NATO entered [Kosovo], how it was, how the United Nations work, how Kosovo was going to be administered temporarily. He didn't know for how many years, but he knew that it was going to be administered for some years by the United Nations, the international organization. He talked about [how] they were going to help us build the country, the institutions. Kosovo's Army would be one of these institutions. And he said to me, he said, "Kosovo's Army, since we didn't have an army before, it will be established from these groups, people like you." He said, "And you have proved that you were there for your country," this and that, "But now what's needed from you, [is] to create the core of the army. Of course, this is a voluntary army and whoever wants to will have the opportunity of military development, in a military career." He said, "I want to know which of you want to be a part [of it]? Who wants to be an officer of Kosovo's Army?" And they, "Whoever wants to, step forward."

At that time I was on duty [as a] company commander, I had organized the brigade alignment and everything and I didn't step forward. And he came, I was surprised he knew my name, because for me, for example, during the whole war I had only seen Ramush twice, you understand. But maybe he remembered my name because of my appearance. And I will never forget, "Why," he asked, "don't you want to, Xhavit?" I said, "Commander, the war is over and I have some other intentions." You understand, I really had some other dreams, I didn't want to. He said, "Well, can you [become part of it]," he said, and I mentioned this to him as well, "I have two or three more exams in English. I want to finish university, and work with something else."

Of course, I didn't know what, but it would be something. "Okay," he said, "well can you, can I ask something of you?" "What?" "Can you help us only for one more year?" And immediately, "Yes," I said, "one more year. Yes," I said [that] and we didn't have anything and our house was burnt like most people. And I thought that maybe at first I could find a job at KFOR, or at an international organization since I knew English, I had some computer skills [as well].

But then he said, “Is there a need to help us with something?” It’s not like I would help him personally, but I would help the country, “Yes, for one year, I can,” you know. It was a transitional time, we had to take care of it, in English it’s called DDR,¹⁹ demilitarization, you know, reintegration, disarmament. And we worked together with IOM,²⁰ with the international organization IOM. But, I was responsible for the brigade, a series of activities to make sure that this process goes well, so I was immediately engaged in that.

When I moved to that process, there I was given the opportunity to work for OSCE, I don’t know exactly [the amount] but they mentioned 1800 *marka*,²¹ so I would have an income. I didn’t have any income, because there was no payment. But then I took it as a mission to contribute for one more year. I said it and I was going to say, you understand, to help like that. And I was immediately appointed as Personnel Officer in the brigade, but I had told them that I wouldn’t cut my hair, “I will stay, but I won’t cut my hair.” They said, “Okay, keep it like that.”

They decided that I would stay in the army as I was. And I will never forget when we took the first oath in September of ‘99, in September, as a mid-level officer, there it was decided who would be captain. And back then it was, because Ramush moved to the General Headquarters in Pristina, while Daut Haradinaj²² advanced to commander of the area at the time, Ramush’s brother. And he had a reaction, he actually said, “You can’t with that hair,” I said, “If I can’t,” I said, “then I will go home.” In the meantime Ramush passed by, he said, “I, I,” he said, “allowed him.” It was exactly like that. I remained like that, an officer.

I will share some pictures from the first training sessions with NATO which I took and with other international organizations, about the basic and advanced course for officers in Peja, I completed them with Italians and Spanish people. But I had long hair like that, because I thought I would be there for a year and go. But what happened after, after, not even a year passed, I thought that maybe it’s best to stay longer.

There were two aspects, one was communicating with the families of my martyr friends and with many of them, when I told them...they were happy that they saw me there, still in uniform. And when I told them, “Only for one more year,” they told me, “No you will be here because when we see you we feel

¹⁹ DDR - Demilitarization, Demobilization, Reintegration, an international program which had three pillars: Demilitarization, Demobilization and Reintegration, and is the first step of the transition from war to peace.

²⁰ IOM - International Organization for Migration, an organization which was part of the United Nations.

²¹ Albanian: *Marka*; German: *Deutsche Mark* was the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslav republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the *dinar*.

²² Daut Haradinaj (1978) is a Kosovo Albanian politician, the brother of Ramush Haradinaj, and former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) member during the Kosovo War (1998–99). He was part of the leadership in the Kosovo Protection Corps.

like we're looking at our son." They made me feel like I owed them and of course, I saw the need, at that time it's no secret that only a few boys and girls maybe knew [English], maybe because of my studies in English, [there were few] who knew English on that level.

Right after, I focused on taking computer courses. I registered myself in a, there, it was like an internet cafe, like classes that were held in areas, but I also attended courses with KFOR. But that was an aspect and the other was my relationship with Valentina. I met Valentina and we decided to get engaged, to get married and that's when I decided, okay, [I decided] to stay. To stay in the army and create a family. And then I had to change my style as well, I cut my hair too. And then, there was a question, "Who cut Xhavit's hair? Valentina? Or the army?" Like that, anyway (smiles).

And I decided to continue my career in the army. Without knowing for how long, but first there were needs for the personnel department and I researched that, for example, regulations or directives of different armies on what they do for the personnel, *human resources* [speaks in English]. And then, after a year or so I was called to go and open, to establish the English Language Cabinet in Pristina for the Defense Academy and I was the first lecturer of FSK²³ where I taught, I mean, the English language to the army officers, back then it was TMK.²⁴

But what continuously happened with my career development, which is very good and what kept me interested, because besides the service I continuously had training, education. Every level where I went, for example, from Istog once I followed all the training sessions with KFOR, and then before going to Pristina I went to a training for IP of Indiana Bloomington in the United States of America but the intensive program, for the highest level of English language.

And then immediately after I went to TRADOK²⁵ I went to another program in Bloomington again, like, for *method of teaching* [speaks in English], about the methods of teaching. Parallel to this, I also completed further training which was about the security sector, whether with KFOR, with UNDP, with IOM, with embassies. I was immediately part of the training with all the institutions.

And then in 2003 I was called by General Çeku,²⁶ at the time a commander of Kosovo Protection Corps, to serve as his military assistant. And he, to tell you the truth, I wasn't going to there either, it was another moment when I told him, "Okay, we will only establish this English Language Cabinet, we will

²³ *Forcat e Sigurisë së Kosovës*. The Kosovo Security Force is the military of Kosovo.

²⁴ *Trupat Mbrojtëse të Kosovës (TMK)* were part of the Provisional Government of Kosovo under the protectorate of the UN Mission in Kosovo, *TMK* was a civil organization for emergent intervention and service. It was active from 1999 to 2009. In 2009 it was officially scattered, to become *Forca e Sigurisë e Kosovës*, Kosovo Security Force.

²⁵ Doctrine and Training Command.

²⁶ Agim Çeku (1960) is a Kosovo Albanian politician, the former minister of Security Forces in Kosovo and formerly the prime minister. Of military background, he was a commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) that fought against Serbian rule in 1998–1999, earlier being a commander in the Croatian War of Independence in the Croatian Army.

make it *fully operational* [speaks in English], operational and I want to withdraw, I want to be in the private sector.” Because back then I lived in Pristina with Valentina, under difficult conditions again, we only had 30 square meters. For around eight years I lived with Valentina and two children, Vala and Drin, first with one and then the other was born, but we lived in [a] 30 square meters [space] for more than eight years, a small apartment.

Again with the possibility that you could always find a better job everywhere, but we wanted to serve. Let’s create this one too, we will create with capacity too and we’re going, for example, those three years as a military assistant for General Çeku. Because of the needs the general headquarters had, I was appointed to five, six other duties. For example, besides the military assistant, I was a liaison officer with KFOR, liaison officer with the Kosovo Police and UNMIK’s [police], officer with all the international offices, liaison officer for training and education abroad although there was the Training Department, I had to deal with that as well.

All of these offered opportunities for my development too, but [I had] too little time for my family and of course, very difficult conditions at home. Sometimes we didn’t have power for several weeks, because we didn’t have money to pay for the electricity bill and everything. But, in the general aspect we had the opportunity to feel good because we were part of the contribution and I never had, not only didn’t I have problems, but I had the continuous support of Valentina, “It doesn’t matter that we’re doing bad, you continue doing what’s good for the country.”

In 2006 when General Çeku, at the time, became the Prime Minister of Kosovo, that was the other moment when I said, “All right, now I will leave.” There were some initiatives for me to lead the National Council of Security in the Government of Kosovo, but with the requests of both General Çeku and General Selimi at the time, they asked for me to remain head of the Cabinet in the General Headquarters of TMK for three more years. Parallel to that, I still covered international collaborations whether it was institutions, various governments, not only the Kosovo Government but also in training-education where I had the chance to benefit from the training, education.

And then with the disbandment of TMK and the formation of FSK I was like a leader of the group for the formation of FSK from the officers of FSK, which was a joint team with NATO. So, I worked on that and then after the transformation I was appointed the first director of the international collaboration, the Department for International Collaboration, where for three years we did around eleven agreements of collaboration with different countries, while I was the director of international collaboration.

In the very end as part of the military service, in 2011 it was decided for me to be appointed military attaché of Kosovo in the United States of America. And that again, not because I was, it was my request but it was a request from the institution for us to begin with the state military attache. And we were in a meeting at the Defense Department in the Pentagon together with Minister Çeku, back then Çeku was a minister.

Among the few requests that were made to the American government and to the Deputy Chief of Defense, he was called Miller, was for us to begin sending the military attaché and to have it. He said, “Well, if you have a prepared personnel, and ready, you can immediately begin with the procedures.” In that meeting the Minister or General Çeku addressed me, “Yes,” he said, “we have Colonel Gashi.”

Because of the prior communication I had in the department, I was known to the Secretary of Defense’s staff and to the Deputy Secretary and in a way they confirmed that I could go further with that job. But maybe it wasn’t my goal, but it is an honor to me that I was the first attaché and I tried to do my best as the first attaché of Kosovo to be appointed in a country. And of course, it’s an honor to be the first and start [collaborating] with the United States of America.

Anita Susuri: Was there, for example, anything interesting that happened at that time, during those diplomatic trips that you went on? I mean, it’s a country that is much, much more developed than us, I mean, a much more developed army.

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, it is, for example, for me, for example, sometimes it seemed like a dream. Of course, I am thankful to our [older] generations who with their effort and sacrifice, but also my generation but also the ones before who made it possible to get here, where I could be considered for being of service to my country but also to have the privileges of being, for example, the first one in that job. Not because of all my skills, but it was the first generation that had to start new institutions or jobs.

But to me it seemed very much like a dream, because I was a boy, a boy from the village of Studenica where I of course was raised in the spirit of patriotism and love of one’s country, but I couldn’t even dream... my dream for the army returned to me in eighth grade, I knew that there were no chances. But, my dream for serving was rekindled with the act of war to serve the country. But I thought that was only a mission for liberation, but I didn’t think I would become an officer. Even less so that one day I would be the person who would have full access in the Pentagon, full access to the State Department, to the American Senate, to the American Congress that I would go... these are some of the moments that maybe seemed like a dream.

And I tried to not take them as things given to me, but as a big responsibility that I have to do a lot of work to preserve them and use them in the most appropriate and best way possible to serve our collaboration with strategic partners, but also to build new connecting bridges that will serve the country longer. For example, that access was given, for example in the Pentagon for me it was like a dream, for example, to have access like at my [country’s] Ministry of Defense.

And then, the relations we built with the collaboration with the partnership with the International Guard of Iowa where I was treated like I was really a general of the American army, not a general from Kosovo. Where I had the chance, for example, besides being a partner to play a role as a leader of the

National Guard of Kosovo as well, where I was asked for recommendations about how it should go, for example, the strategic plan for the development of the guard in certain aspects.

For example, I went for two weeks, I was like a *Shadow Commander* [speaks in English], like a shadow commander of General Orr in the army with the military, in preparation, in planning, in execution, in analysis of the training with three countries where there were almost 20 thousand troops. For example, for me to be asked which tools or which vehicles the transport should be done with, which helicopter. That was something that I can't describe. And then, the last mission when I decided to retire from the army... the decision for retirement was taken when there was an opportunity about opening the Consulate in Iowa.

And after its opening, the approval from the two countries, the states of America and Kosovo about opening the mission, for three or four months there was nobody from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs interested to settle for the mission in Iowa. At that point I got a call from General Orr, I was in Washington and I got a call because, it was interesting because how do I put it, it affected me in that... what I wanted to do for the next two-three years, he changed the plan I had envisioned as a goal on what to do for the next two-three years a bit.

Of course, as I was one of the initiators that [made sure] the collaboration with Iowa to be developed to the level it is now and the opening of the Consulate, I made the efforts that belong to me in order for the Consulate to be opened. Of course, they have the support of the two governments and the other generals of the Kosovo Army and Iowa's, of the ministers, of the presidents, of the prime ministers et cetera. But I played my role there. However, when there was nobody there for three or four months in the mission, that's when the General called me.

He told me, "Xhavit, *this is supposed to work two ways* [speaks in English]," you know, "It has to work on both sides, not only one side. We have supported you, we found a good location for the Consulate." They actually also secured the devices, the furniture for the offices, the local military and civil people which they placed there without us. I would go sometimes because of my official visits, three to five, seven times a year, I went there from 2011 but I never thought that I would be a general consul in a civil capacity in Iowa. But that was the moment when nobody went and I was, I told General Orr, "Okay, we will find a solution." And it immediately crossed my mind, "Okay if they have nobody in Kosovo, then I will take them and establish the Consulate."

And then I did the communications and, back then he was Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi,²⁷ with the commander of FSK, minister of FSK, I talked to all of them first if anybody was... and [Petrit Selimi](#) I think was a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. "Do you have anybody who is appointed or who was expected to go there?" "No, no, no, we don't have anybody,"

²⁷ Hashim Thaçi (1968-), KLA leader at the 1999 Conference of Rambouillet, founder and leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), served as Prime Minister several times and in 2016 was elected President of Kosovo.

“Why?” “We can’t find someone. Nobody is interested.” And then I asked them, “What if I go? Can I go and open the Consulate, but I can’t stay more than two years. Two years until I make it operational and open the Consulate?”

My goal was because I thought that after my work as an attaché, at that same time I was graduating from the College of War where I did Strategic Studies Masters and my goal was more about coming and contributing after getting that education in building the vision and the army of Kosovo for three more years. So, I wasn’t thinking of retirement. I requested to be allowed to work for two years in transition, [I mean] transfer excuse me, from the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, until the Consulate became operational.

In principle it was approved for me that I would really do both of the jobs from May to August. And I have the decision that was given to me, to do the job both as a military attaché in Washington, but at the same time to serve as General Consul on duty in Iowa. So, I did those two jobs parallel from Washington and in Iowa. While, unfortunately or fortunately, I got back information from the Ministry of Defense of Commanders, the General Secretary said, if I wanted to go to the consulate in Iowa, then I had to resign, to retire voluntarily from the army.

At that point, the procedures of my accreditation had started, the American government was notified in Washington, but also the authorities in Iowa that was I working on that duty and we had activities, we were doing a series of activities for that job. But it wasn’t approved for me to continue in the army if I took that. And I had to decide whether I wanted this, or that. So I could go back to FSK and continue my career for years longer, but there was nobody there. So, the duty was open.

Then of course I talked to Valentina again and she said to me, “I don’t want you to quit your uniform since you decided and have all this experience and education. It’s better if you go and contribute there.” And then after I explained what I could achieve with the mission in Kosovo, the collaboration, I was especially focused on education. I know that education in Kosovo still isn’t where it should be and we had built relations in the military aspect as well with all the colleges and universities in Iowa. They also had one of the five biggest Economic Chambers in America, it’s in Iowa, Greater Des Moines Partnership. We had built personal relations with them as well, friendship, not only institutional. And there I saw it as a potential that they could help even in the economic aspect in Kosovo.

And then it was sports, sports alliances, twinning of cities. We had already connected, we started doing the twinning of cities and we sparked interest for more cities to twin. We saw potential even in developing start-ups, innovation, these innovative initiatives. And I explained it to Valentina and I still thought, “Okay, I will finish two years and I will come back here in the army,” you understand. But, for example, with the opportunities we had to complete [tasks] for the state of Iowa I wouldn’t change it, I would never change it and do something else. So, I am very happy that we have these relations, these

communications and I was only one instrument, one tool of creating these relations. Of course, [for] our country Kosovo with the American country but especially the state of Iowa.

Anita Susuri: And you have been retired for 17 years now, concerning...

Xhavit Gashi: In the army, yes.

Anita Susuri: And then you continued...

Xhavit Gashi: For three more years as a General Consul in Iowa.

Anita Susuri: What do you do today? Tell us a bit about that.

Xhavit Gashi: Yes. Today I work, firstly, I have registered a *consulting company* [speaks in English], so, it's a consulting company for which I thought of working together with General Orr, who is retired. However, after COVID but also before COVID, they called him although he was retired to start working again in the Civil Sector in the Pentagon. And then I was given some opportunities to work with Cactus. I was given an opportunity with Cactus for a strategic development of businesses. So, [that's] where I am now. And in the American Economic Chamber, as an external advisor.

So recently, a month ago I started after an offer I was made from the American University Kosovo RIT as well for me to lecture a military subject which is *Four or two army leadership in a complex world* [speaks in English], so army leadership in a complex world which connects to all of the experience I had from the beginning because in one way or another the world in which I worked and developed, where I developed, was complex. And the education I had, for example, especially my masters in the College of War, so it mainly focuses on strategic leadership preparation in the complex unpredictable environment with two meanings.

Anita Susuri: So besides your engagement, you mentioned your wife but I wanted to ask you how you met your wife? How did you meet her?

Xhavit Gashi: Yes, very interesting. It's interesting with Valentina. Even Valentina knows, for example, I dated women before the war. I wasn't adventurous, but for example I liked a girl, and we dated. It happened that it was decided, for a relationship, one of us decided to not be together anymore and like that. But as young people back then and like that. But, after the war, one of my other goals that I didn't have was that I didn't want to get married immediately. I didn't want to get married, it wasn't my goal.

A close family member of mine recommended Valentina, who in some way knew Valentina really well. And through her parents she was close to Valentina indirectly. It happened that maybe for two-three

months I tried to tell that friend or relative of ours that I was not interested, nor did I want to meet her, you understand, I didn't want to meet her, because I had no interest. First of all I didn't even have, so I was in that phase when I had decided to stay with TMK for one year or that transformation. The other thing was my house as well, we didn't have a house, for example. The other thing was, my goal was to not focus on marriage or relationships without finishing university. And I didn't know what would happen to me after a year. What I would do.

But, after three months it happened to us that we met with Valentina and I liked her at first sight. But then even with discussions and dates with Valentina and then I was the initiator, when I saw Valentina, to hurry and get into a relationship and create a family quicker. Like that, yes. And I really am blessed with my family, with Valentina mainly, because she was a pillar. We always say in the army, "Regardless of what rank you have, your wife has a higher rank than you." But we really saw it and heard it, but it's not just a rhetoric in my case at least, to say that, for example, if I was successful or could do good work for the country it's of course for my duties that were given to me, but without Valentina's support I could never do all the things I did.

We live happily together currently, I am retired and I joke around sometimes, "I am not old," but Valentina continues to support me in whatever I do, now in the private sector as well. Of course, her wish was for me to continue for a few more years in the army back then, but the circumstances were like that. But she is happy with my other decisions in life as well. I have three children, Vala is my daughter and my first joy, she now studies in the United States of America, [she studies] Psychology in Iowa. So, in the state that is dear to my entire family. Drin is a senior in high school, so in 12th grade. As a young person he changes his mind about his professional direction. He maybe wants to take the military direction, but who knows. While we also have our little one, Lis, who is six years old, he keeps us more active.

Anita Susuri: Very well. I wanted to ask you to finish, we are in 2021 and it is still a pandemic. How are you dealing with it and what was quarantining like for you in the beginning, and then the whole pandemic that is continuing? Do you have any difficulties? Did you have someone who was sick, or?

Xhavit Gashi: Fortunately we didn't have anybody in our close family, but unfortunately like everybody else, we are surrounded by people who suffered from COVID. I know people in different ways, maybe not close friends, but I know people who were maybe even younger than me who died, who had the misfortune. It hurts [with] every case I hear that people are suffering a lot, whom COVID affects more.

At this time, for example, in the time of quarantine, we had the luck that we had an apartment there in Istog, where we spent most of the time and we couldn't even move, at least the air was clean. But as soon as the measures started being lifted a little although there were restrictions, with the request of the Ministry of Health I was a small part of the contribution from a Council, [as] a counselor, the

Counseling Board, where there were mainly doctors, professors, but it was only two of us who weren't from the health sector.

So I, we, did research, analysis for the management of the security aspect more, of the emergencies and a professor, who was also Deputy Minister of Education who dealt more with the issues of education. But even though we weren't directly hit, of course, what happens in society affects us and we hope that it passes as soon as possible and as few people as possible are infected or the ones who get infected get through it easily.

Anita Susuri: If you have something to add in the end or something you forgot to mention, you can.

Xhavit Gashi: Thanks a lot for the opportunity, there is a lot to say, but I believe that it's enough for this. Thanks a lot.

Anita Susuri: All right. Thank you.