

## INTERVIEW WITH SHAHADIJE NEZIRI LOHAJ

Ferizaj | Date: June 9, 2023

Duration: 84 minutes

Present:

1. Shahadije Neziri Lohaj (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Ana Morina (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:** Mrs. Shahadije, if you could introduce yourself, tell us anything about your origins?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes. I am Shahadije Neziri Lohaj, born in the beautiful city of Skopje where my parents lived. I was born on February 10 of 1965. I first started learning at the school *Dame Gruev* which was near my house. We settled, my family settled in Skopje, since my father migrated there when he was 15 years old and started school as a technology engineer. After, he finished school and got married to my mother, Sabrije, and they are both still alive. They live in Ferizaj. After I finished second grade, my parents decided to return to Ferizaj because my father got a job here. After that, we continued life in Ferizaj. Whereas I continued school at the now *Jeronim De Rada*, back then it was called *Peko Tepavčević*.

**Anita Susuri:** Can you tell us something more about your father's family? How did it come about that your father started school in Skopje?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes. My grandfather was a calm man, he was knowledgeable. He had... he was the village's imam. So, he had an education, he didn't finish some kind of *medrese*,<sup>1</sup> but at the time there was an education received in mosques. And he saw it as reasonable that his children should receive an education, because his *oda*<sup>2</sup> was an *oda* where esteemed people spent time. Especially the people that came who were the ones who had opened those first Albanian schools, if... I mean, that's what it was like during those years. And then, different patriots spent time there, like Hasan Remniku. There was teacher Mustafë, who worked in the village of Remnik. As a fan of education, my grandfather agreed that my father go to Macedonia, so, to Skopje, and to receive an education. My grandfather was a person who facilitated blood [feud] reconciliations and various disputes. He was a big fan of education. The women, our girls were almost the first ones in the village and that area to receive an education at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it a big family?

<sup>1</sup> Muslim religious school, the only school where teaching could be conducted in Albanian until 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, it was a big family, almost 50 members as far as I know. The *oda* of Ahmet Remniku was, almost like [the size of] a college today. That's what journalists say. He especially had, there is a book, which Tahir Berisha wrote about my grandfather and he tells his entire history and biography.

**Anita Susuri:** So, your father's family was from Ferizaj?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** My father's family was from the village of Remnik...

**Anita Susuri:** Ah, Remnik.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** From the village of Remnik, Municipality of Vitia. And then, my father went to school in Macedonia, in Skopje, and we came to Ferizaj from Skopje. Whereas my mother's family is from the village of Koshare, it's near Ferizaj. There, my mother originates from a patriotic family which is from the time of Sefë Kosharja.<sup>3</sup> Because Sefë Kosharja is my mother's great-grandfather, who is a hero killed by Turks, if you remember, on a tree. His body remained there for three days and then other people took it and buried him, so, from Shtime as far as I knew, some of his nephews.

We were raised in a patriotic spirit, because my mother, my grandmother continuously told us about the story of Sefë Kosharja. His name was handed down generation after generation in my mother's family. Down to the young Sefë now who is 27-28 years old. The other Sefë was a person who, when he went to military service, because back then they got them in the army where they stayed for two-three years. His body never returned. He was killed and he never came back. They only received an announcement that he died and that was it.

My other [maternal] uncle, who died in a traffic accident, his name was Sefë too and now we have a young Sefë. I mean, my mother's family continuously handed down the name of the national hero Sefë Kosharja. It was impossible for my mother and grandmother to not raise us in that spirit, I mean, national, patriotic feelings, these were the main discussions in our family. It was the same with my grandfather, I mean, on my father's side. And that's how we were inspired, me and my brother, both of us were sentenced, because we were organized and in 1983 we got arrested.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you about Sefë Kosharja, the first one, because you mentioned a few. Was he part of the *Kaçak*<sup>4</sup> Movement at the time, or which movement was it?

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<sup>3</sup> Sefë Kosharja (1825 - 1881), was an active member of the Albanian League of Prizren. He stood out in the ambush that the volunteer forces of the League of Prizren organized on April 21, 1881 near the village of Koshare against the Ottoman armies commanded by Derviş Pasha.

<sup>4</sup> Outlaws, bandits, also known in other regions of the Balkans as *hajduk* or *uskok*, considered simple criminals by the state, but were often proponents of a political agenda of national liberation.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Sefë Kosharja was, he was comrade-in-arms with Mic Sokoli.<sup>5</sup> He wasn't part of the *Kaçak* Movement. He was connected with The League of Prizren,<sup>6</sup> and it's said that he was a soldier for 12 years during the Ottoman times. Because you know well that the Turkish would take our young and send them to wars. He fought in the battle of Slivova together with Mic Sokoli. And then, the Turkish offered Sefë Kosharja because he was one of the best fighters at the time when the Turkish [Ottoman] Empire took them and sent them to different places in the world. Because you know that they ruled almost half of the Balkans and a part of Europe.

They offered for Sefë Kosharja to return and join the Turkish, but he didn't accept. And then, the Turkish brought their army at the time and surrounded the village Koshare. They captured Sefë Kosharja alive, because it wasn't that he wouldn't have turned the barrel [of the gun] to the enemy, but they started burning the village. Maybe you know the song that goes, "Derviş Pasha with chalvar [trousers] returns the cannons to Koshare, either I want Sefë here, or I will burn Koshare down." He offered for him to join them, and I mean, to grant him certain rights, to give him a place or I don't know, but he didn't accept. So, they took him there to a mountain in Koshare, and hanged him for three days. They didn't let the people... they burned his house down. But he only had his grandfather, so, it was my grandfather's father...

**Anita Susuri:** Only one son.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Only one son. He was around six months old, according to what my grandmother told me, my grandfather also. Six months old and his mother took him, I don't know if you young women know what a corn shock is? *A corn shock* is a bunch of corn stalks tied together. And she took the baby and put him in there, they burned their house down, she took him and started walking. They asked her, "Why are you taking that when your whole house is burning down?" She had her baby there and she ran away from there. And then, she continued her life, my grandfather was born, my grandfathers, the others, and so on to the current times. My mother's family is quite the big family as well.

**Anita Susuri:** How did it come about that your father met your mother? Or maybe it was arranged back then?

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<sup>5</sup> Mic Sokoli (1839 - 1881) was an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter from the Tropoja district in today's Northern Albania. He was a noted guerrilla leader, remembered in particular for an act that has entered the chronicles of Albanian legend as an example of heroism: at the battle of Slivova against Ottoman forces in April 1881, he died when he pressed his body against the mouth of a Turkish cannon.

<sup>6</sup> The 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, back then at the time, maybe you don't know, but if you talk to older people, usually patriotic families were asked if they have a nice boy or a nice girl, to make a marriage arrangement, and they got to know each other like that. So, my mother and father met each other like that. They got them engaged, they got married. However, my father lived in Skopje and they continued their life there with my mother. And then, they came back to Ferizaj, seemingly closer to my mother's family here.

**Anita Susuri:** So, this means you were born there...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** In Skopje.

**Anita Susuri:** In Skopje. For how long were you...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Until my second grade, for about ten years, something like that.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember life in Skopje?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, I think about it often. Life was, I think, very beautiful. I don't know why I still love it, maybe because it's my hometown. Because at the time, I mean, I was born in 1965, I went to preschool, I remember, I went to preschool at the time. I remember the teacher, I remember things. Then I started first grade, second grade. My teacher was Gjyle Saraçini, she is a really skilled teacher. My first teacher. She is the mother of Valentina Saraçini, she was a journalist too. A woman that prepared us really well. [I learned my] ABCs from her, different programs that she would prepare, like that. I have a really good impression of her.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember the neighborhood where you lived?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, each neighborhood had a school nearby. The neighborhood I lived in had small houses, close to each other, really close. Sometimes it felt warmer, the climate was warmer than in Ferizaj. The school was beautiful, it was in good condition. The children who lived there were really happy. Because, maybe, the internet has maybe taken over the children a bit and they don't have the time to socialize with each other, aside from when they get live [online] or how do they say it (smiles). We talked to each other, we played different games with children in our neighborhood.

**Anita Susuri:** How many children were there in your family?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Five children, [I have] two sisters and two brothers. One of my sisters is older than me, she is a nurse here in Ferizaj, I have another sister, I am the second one, the second child of my parents. My sister... and then I have my brother, Fatmir, who is a painter who lives and works in France. He was also a political prisoner together with my group and me. And then, I have my sister,

Bukurije, who is an Albanian language professor. And my brother Ziaj, he was an officer, he lives and works in France. This is my family.

**Anita Susuri:** What was your family organized like? For example, your parents?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, we were a very happy family. My father worked here at the pipe factory. Back then working at the pipe factory was like working who knows where, because the income was really good. He fulfilled our needs continuously. His main goal was for us to get an education. My mother was a homemaker. She dealt with us, she prepared us for everything. Although she was a homemaker, she always encouraged us to read, towards education. She never let us do anything else, she would tell us, “Get an education because we couldn’t, at least you do.” They created such circumstances that we weren’t missing anything. We were happy children, we were very loving to each other.

**Anita Susuri:** I mean, I am asking because the year you were born, in 1965, was also the end of Ranković’s time. Did you get to experience it? For example, do you remember some story as a child or with your family in Kosovo?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** I mentioned that my mother’s family were persecuted. My grandfather, Selman, was one of the people persecuted during Ranković’s time. They knew the families who were patriotic and they would constantly put them under pressure. They would ask for guns from my grandfather, to hand over the guns and my grandfather didn’t have any guns. He didn’t have guns so he didn’t hand anything over. They took him and tortured him for weeks, so much that they say he stayed in bed for a very long time. That time, every time I talked to my grandfather, that was the most difficult time period. They beat them up so badly, they imprisoned them so often, they undressed them and put them in ice... there is a very terrible and painful story that my grandfather told me.

**Anita Susuri:** As a child did you have contact? Did you come to Kosovo for visits for example or... I mean, before moving here?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, we did. Maybe that’s exactly the reason why our mind was over here, because we would visit our [maternal] uncle, we would visit my grandfather. And that... the place where we went to our uncle was at the train rails here, usually the train would stop there. I remember when we would get off the train and our joy was that we were going to our uncle. There, I said, the climate was warmer, there was less greenery and when we would come here to the village Koshare, it was miraculous to us that we would go out and play with the other children.

**Anita Susuri:** How did it come about that you returned here from Skopje? Was it because your father wanted to work [here]?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, according to what my father told me, he constantly feared that they started there... in Macedonia, he was concerned if we would continue school in Albanian there, because here the faculties opened, the high school opened, the schools, I mean, education in the Albanian language started. He wanted to bring us here to Kosovo for us to continue school in Albanian and to live with the *rreth*<sup>7</sup> here. Because we had our other family members and everything here.

**Anita Susuri:** You returned to Ferizaj, you decided to come...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** I mean, your parents...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, my parents, because we were little.

**Anita Susuri:** What happened after, how did life go on after?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** In Ferizaj?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Life, maybe it was like that for some time and we were young so we didn't know, we were children and we didn't know that many things were happening in Kosovo. However, when I grew old enough to be aware, we saw that it wasn't functioning the way we thought it was. Because to tell you the truth, back then, besides being under the rule of Yugoslavia which usually advanced other republics, while we were a province at that time, they didn't advance our province in any aspect. We started to realize it, various organizations started being active in Kosovo. Those patriotic feelings, national feelings that we had and things started moving, [we started] seeing things differently. Back then we organized in a group...

**Anita Susuri:** What age were you when you first found out organizations like that exist?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** I was in eighth grade. At the age when you're in eighth grade, because back then we started school at seven years old. I was maybe 15 years old, I was 15 when I found out because in '81 the demonstrations in Kosovo started. There were other groups earlier, even in 1979, when some young people were imprisoned here in Ferizaj. And that left an impression on us, about what happened, why they were imprisoned. We started researching, to see what's not working. And then the demonstrations of '81<sup>8</sup> began.

<sup>7</sup> *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact.

<sup>8</sup> On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led

I participated in the demonstrations of '81 too. We were at home, and we heard that there was a demonstration. I was young, so I had just turned around 15 years old. My mother told me, "Don't go," she said, "because you shouldn't go there, you are too young." "Yes, yes." And my brother and I ran away and joined the demonstrations. I remember this area at the railroad because that has changed now, but at the railroad there was a crowd of people who gathered and we began there and joined, we started chanting various slogans, "Kosovo Republic." Because we wanted Kosovo to be a republic like all the other republics and to have equal rights to the other republics.

We started chanting, "Trepça is ours." Which is [a factor] even today, you can see that the goal is Trepça. Then there were friends from prison because some were imprisoned. There were different kinds of slogans and I was part of it along with my brother. And then, the teargas was thrown, the police began intervening, to hit people, to push demonstrators and that's when we dispersed. To tell you the truth, the teargas was so terrible that it suffocated you. There were people who were more prepared, who were older and said, "Take some onion and place it close to your nose for it to go away." So, they had thrown poison. We ran from there and we came back home.

There was, there were terrible imprisonments, there were murders. Two of ours were killed, Sherif Frangu was killed... Riza Matoshi was killed, many young people were imprisoned. Many others were expelled from school and from then, a totally different life started in our city of Ferizaj. We saw that in Kosovo, we saw that Kosovo, in Kosovo there were many injustices being done. We then started organizing. Me, my brother, and some friends in 1982 organized and created the group *Shote Galica*. Each of our members would create their own group of three, it was like a chain thing.

**Anita Susuri:** How many people were in your group?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Our group included these people, Fatmir Neziri, me, Florie Hajrullahu, Hyzri Osmani, Naim Hajrullahu, Naim Sadiku, Nadije Ramadani. Our group had, when we created our group we also took an oath on the flag. We got together and we went behind the school, near *Qendra II*, where the Bill Clinton sports hall is today. We took the flag and we took an oath with that flag that we would continue the path towards the liberation of our country.

**Anita Susuri:** So, since you took that oath, how did you know that you had to take an oath?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** We had heard, because it was continuously being done in Kosovo, that the spirit of people working on national matters began, towards the liberation of the country. And there you had to be really secure, because you couldn't dare to take someone else and you could've been

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demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.



imprisoned within the day. So, each one of us had to take an oath that we wouldn't betray each other, but would continue to act like one should about national causes. We took that oath and began.

We had a status in which our goal was liberating from Yugoslavia of that time, forming a republic of Kosovo, we had... and then we set our assignments to raise awareness on our youth, to read different materials in which Kosovo's reality was told, how it remained part of Yugoslavia and left outside of Albanian territories, like, for example, our place which is Albania. And then, we would write different slogans that Kosovo... the people should wake up, to start and work and if it goes to the end, I mean, some other kind of organization. For example, the war for us to be liberated from the Yugoslavia occupier at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested in this, for example, the assignments, the activities you did, did you think of them yourself or did someone pass them down to you?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** No, we thought of them ourselves because our group was formed by us, it's not like we got those assignments from someone else. Because, at the time, it's said that, there are rumors that different organizations organized our group. No, our group was organized by us, the youngsters. And then, we extended it. We took those assignments upon ourselves because we saw that those assignments serve our country. Then the other groups, after the liberation, have said that the *Shote Galica* group was connected to bigger groups. We had *de facto* connections with them, but it had nothing to do with the organization. We knew them, we talked to them, but we kept the fact we had the group a secret.

**Anita Susuri:** What about the members in your group, you trusted them, of course, but were you friends or was it family as well?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Well, we were at school, we were friends, we were family. Besides my brother who is family, the others were friends from school, high school students.

**Anita Susuri:** You said you also made banners, could you describe to us, for example, a, how to put it...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** A moment.

**Anita Susuri:** An activity.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** A moment, yes. We, my brother and I, went to the *Vëllezërit Gërvalla* street and made the banners and put them up at the front doors of different houses. Of course, it was in the evening, not during the day. We put them up in the evening. At first we observed the area, of course, in case there was police, in case there were people who could report us. We put up [banners like],

“Kosovo Republic,” “We have to be liberated from the scabies of Yugoslavia,” and we went home. Fortunately nobody else saw us, but then the police found them, and they kept them. And later when they took us, of course, they asked us, “Are these yours?” But we didn’t admit to it. In the surrounding villages, Florije, Hyzri, Naim and Nadije made similar banners. In villages, I mean, villages of our municipality. And then we read different texts and passed them to each other.

**Anita Susuri:** How difficult was it to find and keep these reading materials safe?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** It was very difficult. But, as we got to know other friends, we would find those materials because they would give them to us, they would lend them to us. And it was in their interest for us to be active. But we usually kept it a secret, because we didn’t dare to say that we are in a group because if you told them, you risked being discovered. The larger the circle got, the easier it was for the information to reach the police at the time. And then, the group started expanding. Each person started organizing with someone else. I had my own group of three, my brother as well, Fatmir, and then Hyzri and the others. The group started, I mean, to expand.

However in 19[83]... in September of 1983, we were active for one year, we were imprisoned. We still don’t know where it came from. We can’t say now, when they took us in, “Which one of you reported us?” It wouldn’t make sense, because when you fell into the hands of the police, maybe somebody could’ve told something there. It doesn’t make sense to even talk about that at the time. Maybe we even thought, “Why did someone have to [report us]? Didn’t we say we wouldn’t tell on each other?” But, apparently somebody told somebody and somebody sent it to the police. They followed us, they imprisoned us...

**Anita Susuri:** Did you notice that they were following you?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** To tell you the truth, I didn’t notice it, I had suspicions about something, but until we have hard evidence, we can’t say.

## Part Two

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** The imprisonment happened on September 21 [1983]. I was in class, in the classroom when the police came and arrested me. They came and called me, I stood up. They said, “The principal is calling you.” I was even surprised, I thought, “Why is the principal asking for me during class.”

**Anita Susuri:** How old were you at the time?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** In '83, I [was born in] '65, now, to calculate it, it means around 18 years old, without turning 18, maybe I was already 18. When they called me downstairs to the principal's office, I went. There was a police inspector there and they told me, "You have to come to..." They were rude to me, the principal as well. They said, "You have to come to the inspection." "Let me," I said, "finish my classes and I'll come." "No, no, now," they said, "with us." They sent me to the office [at the Secretariat]. Then their torture began there, they started asking me, "What did you do? Who are you? What's your activity?" To be honest with you, they had a lot of information.

Maybe each one found out something, because that was the strategy of the police back then, who investigated us because it seemed to you like somebody told them. They knew, they were professional regarding that. They would say, "All of your friends' group admitted that you are the leader of the group," I would say, "No, it's not true that I was the group leader." It happened that they tortured my brother, it happened that I heard the noise happening in the other area. But, I never admitted to it. They sentenced me like that, without pleading guilty. Although they had the facts, because they knew about the group and they discovered the group names, we had a list. They imprisoned us, I mean, they imprisoned me.

They held me in Ferizaj the first day. And then they brought us all out in the corridor, they almost dispersed us. Each one in different prisons. They took us, the girls, to the Prison of Mitrovica. Then the investigations still kept going. They constantly interrogated us, asking, "What did you do? What did that friend of yours do? Were they active? Who distributed these pamphlets? Are they yours?" There were two people involved in our group who actually weren't in our group. They were sentenced and they got pretty harsh sentences. Of course, they were active too, but they weren't part of our group. They were Fatmir and Selim, who were joined to our group when the sentences were received. But, they weren't part of our group although they were accused of it. But, they weren't part of our group.

We, after about four or five months, because we were minors, I mean, I was legally an adult but my brother was a minor because he was about 16 years old. Nadire Ramadani was also almost 16 years old. The others were around my age. They, Nadire, received a sentence for minors, from one to five [years]. My brother received a sentence for adults. We were punished according to Article 136, paragraph 1 related to 114, which means they didn't have the right to sentence us because there were mainly minors in our group.

Our trial was closed, they didn't let journalists in either, they barely allowed our parents to be present when they adjudicated us and gave us the sentences. Fëllanza Kadiu was the judge, who still works in our free country. She works and adjudicates people. This sometimes worries me, because she sentenced young people at the time, and she lives and works with the same privileges she had back then. Maybe it was a duty, but I think this is heavy for the ones of us who received those sentences from her.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know about your parents, were they aware of the activities you did?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** To tell you the truth they weren't aware of it. Even now my mother often tells me, "I noticed there was something going on, but it didn't cross my mind that you were active in some group." She thought we were only talking about these patriotic matters but she wasn't aware we were organized. She recently told me, she said, "When the police raided our house," she said, "they asked me, 'Are you aware of what your children are doing?' I replied, 'Nothing, they are going to school' and," she said, "he lifted the rug and you had several banners that you wrote under there. And they took," she said, "those banners and said, 'Look at what your children wrote. They're against the state.' I got really scared." Because it was a persecuted family since her birth, my mother's.

They arrested both of us within the same day, my brother and me. My brother was in Pristina in Medical School, I was in Ferizaj. They actually waited until he came back, but they took me while I was in class. It was difficult for my parents, because they had to take care of two children. And then it already began, the open persecution of my family. There was fear that my father, who provided for us, would be fired from his job, he was the provider. And then, there was the fear that my sister, Drita, would be fired from her job, who started working, she had just started working as a nurse.

It wasn't easy for them to keep going, to live in freedom. To call it freedom in quotation marks, while we were in prison. It wasn't easy for them to visit us twice a month, sometimes my brother in Gjilan, and me in Mitrovica. Very difficult. In order to come visit, they would have to receive permission from the judge, they would have to leave work. From there, coming to visit me in Mitrovica, you know, back then the bus lines weren't like they are now, it was more difficult. And then, they had to go to Gjilan.

Afterwards, they transferred me to Lipjan. It was easier for my family because Lipjan was closer. While they transferred my brother to Gjyrakoc, near Dubrava. It took two hours to get there. Two hours only one way, not to return, and then to stay there. A very difficult life began for my family. However, when they knew, maybe this ideal kept them going, and it kept us going too. We never missed a visit back then, they came to both of us.

Actually during the first visit from my parents, I asked, "How is he?" About my brother, I asked, "How is Fatmir doing?" Because I didn't know what happened to my brother, because I knew that they tortured him a lot. They immediately interrupted our visit and... they told me, "If you ask this once again we will not allow you visits anymore." They interrupted our visit. My parents went back. They tell me the obstacles they went through to come visit now, but it was a very big matter, a great matter about the freedom of our homeland. We faced all of it, both my family and us, with dignity.

**Anita Susuri:** How long did these visits usually last? I think they were short.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** The visits in Mitrovica were through bars, not open like we are in front of each other now. Only two family members, eventually three, were allowed. Conversations about other people or about my brother who was in prison weren't allowed. The visit lasted for about ten minutes at most. Whereas in Lipjan, they transferred me to a correctional facility, as they called it, we had about an hour there, half an hour, one hour visits twice a month. We had them twice a month in Mitrovica too, but they lasted ten minutes.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me about the mental abuse, you heard beatings, but I am interested to know about the physical violence against you, was it a lot? Was it harsh?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, there was physical violence. Against me but also the others because those screams, for example, came from them being physically abused. Someone wouldn't scream unless they were beaten up. Because they usually used those [metal] rods or maybe just their hands, who knows. They tortured people.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there [violence] against you?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, there was, but not to the extent of losing consciousness or something. There was violence.

**Anita Susuri:** What about the Prison of Mitrovica that you mentioned, were you there during the investigations or...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** The Prison of Mitrovica was called a detention center. That's where the investigation happened. The inspectors came there, different inspectors interrogated us and they returned us to prison again. I am talking about myself personally. The first day they sent me there, I had no idea what prison was. And I was raised in a family with good conditions and our parents took care of us like we take care of our children today maybe. They took me and sent me there.

The guard took me, "Come." And they took me somewhere on the second floor, as far as I know, and they put me in solitary confinement. It was 1.5 to 2 meters and it had a small, maybe 40 centimeters window, and it had only two wooden planks. A ripped blanket where mice were playing. There was nothing of plastic to use as a toilet, for personal needs. And then, there were lines drawn in the walls. When they were putting me in there, I asked, "Why here?" She only gestured to me like this {makes a hand gesture telling someone to keep it moving}.

I was stuck there and I continued to analyze the wall, the window, the closed door, I was counting the lines. Halil Alidema was in that solitary confinement, for about, if I'm not mistaken, maybe 57 lines, so he was there for 57 days. That wasn't a prison cell, but where they left prisoners alone. I started to bang on the door a lot, "Open the door, why should I stay here?" I heard a knock on the wall and a

man's voice she said, "Don't bang on the door because the guard might come back and torture you." And then I stopped.

I stayed there that night, it was terrible that night. The food they brought, it was terrible. Such poor quality that I don't have the words to describe it. I didn't take the food at first, nor at dinner. But on the next day I continued. Mold had taken over the room, the mice would come in and out. What do I know, they found another area. I even have a poem where I say, "The only thing I saw there were the mice," and I say, "I disturbed their peace because they belonged there" (laughs).

And then, the next day they took me and put me in room number 3 where I found some other prisoners. They were prisoners who had committed some other acts, nothing political. One of them was there for a political act, Naxhije Hajrullahu. She was from the Municipality of Vitia, she now lives and works in France. The Prison of Mitrovica was maybe one of the most horrible prisons to ever exist and I don't think there will ever exist another one like it.

The room was, there was no way it could be worse. There was some kind of plastic bucket for us to use for our needs. The windows were very small, and you couldn't even reach them. And then, those sheets were terrible, old. The blankets were so old that a person could only see them in movies. If the guard came in, the rules were that we had to put our hands behind [our back], to lower our head and to not look her in the eyes.

They took us to the bathroom once a day, to take care of our needs. And then, they took us to the yard which was circular, we circled it around. They would leave us there, five minutes, ten minutes max. You couldn't keep your head up because they would punish you or beat you up. We had to talk to each other in a lower voice, you would wake up at 5:00 in the morning and you couldn't sit on the beds because those were the rules. The food was of very poor quality. But we had a goal and we overcame that too.

There were cases when the guards weren't there, women would come out of a pavilion, we knew that there were three other cells there. We would communicate with each other, we would make those signs, there was a knock which was a sign of the prisoners. We would knock and then begin. Each of us gave a pseudonym to each other. They gave me the pseudonym 'Besa'. When they called me in the room I would talk to them, they would talk to me. But when the guards came, we would separate because that door, the last cell that could hear that *tik tak* {onomatopoeia} of the guard, so the heel sound, would immediately let us know and we would stop.

I had a moment to share with you about how the guard caught me talking to someone, from the other cells. She pretended she got out, but she didn't. But the guard, Emine, was one of the guards who treated us the best, she was on that shift. But the other shift, there was Fevzije. She was one of the

most horrible guards somebody could describe. One of the most horrible personalities. Emine was there and she [Fevzije] came and heard me talking to my friend from the other cell.

She opened the door, she dragged me and took me to a room. She looked at her, asked, “What happened?” Emine, the guard Emine asked Fevzie. “Now,” she said, “I will mess her up,” this was her vocabulary. She took the baton to beat me up. But she [Emine] told her, “No,” she said, “you can’t dare to touch her,” she said, “because it’s my shift. You could beat her up during my shift, but I will report you for meddling in my business.” She stopped and looked at her, she dropped the baton and told me, “I will catch you” (laughs).

She actually saved me from that guard. I don’t know if they had problems with each other or she simply had a good soul and she was nice to us. What’s important is that she saved me that day and took me back to my cell. Like this, there are some obstacles that one should maybe share with others. They’re not easy.

**Anita Susuri:** You said that you were sentenced as a group...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What sentence did they give you?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** They sentenced me to three years and I served all of it with no pardon. I didn’t receive any pardon or reduction of my sentence. The judgment was confirmed and I served all of it. I served about five months in the Prison of Mitrovica, the other part I did in Lipjan. The Prison of Mitrovica, it’s probably those moments I would never want to remember, but it’s good for people to know and I will mention them. There were cases when they beat the prisoners upstairs so bad that I often heard their screams.

And then, there’s a moment that won’t leave my mind, it’s when we went on a hunger strike for three days about the shooting of Ferat Muja. Ferat Muja was a person who killed somebody among Serbs and the court made the decision to execute him. He received the punishment with execution, during those days until the decision was final. We heard a call that said, “Notice, tomorrow we will go on a hunger strike because there was a verdict that he will be shot,” and I don’t remember the date, “Ferat Muja.”

We went on a three-day hunger strike, but seemingly Ferat Muja was executed. And then another, there was another strike we did for the killing of Rexhep, Rexhep Mala and Nuhi Berisha, for a few days, they were killed too. But, our strikes were only protests because nobody listened, they didn’t care if we went on strike or not. They still did their part.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested, how did the news that they were killed, for example, Rexhep Mala, get to you?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** They would bring us the daily newspaper. We received press, they brought it and we would read it. But it was also in their interest for us to see these things and then they knew that there would be a strike immediately after. And whoever they thought was more dangerous than the others or an influencer, they would take them and take measures against them.

**Anita Susuri:** You said that they transferred you to the Prison of Lipjan to serve the whole sentence. What was it like there?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, after four months and a half they transferred me to the Prison of Lipjan. There the conditions were better than in the Prison of Mitrovica. Almost all the political prisoners were there, but also other convicted women. The conditions there were good. There was a beautiful yard, where we and the prisoners before us planted flowers. There was a reading room. We had a TV room. The rooms in which five-six prisoners slept. We had a physical education room. And then they arranged for us to work, I mean, in a workshop which was for sewing. I worked in that workshop until my release.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there any compensation, or?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, there was compensation, it was a symbolic amount. I can't remember how much it was, but it was symbolic. That workshop was led by, I think it was the Garment Factory, in Gjakova, by a leader who was Mujedin Mulliqi, if I remember correctly. Then, there they gave us the third year of high school because I hadn't finished it, in the Department of Garment Textile. Accelerated learning, the professors would come from Gjakova. We had classes there and then got our diplomas and finished it. The Prison of Lipjan was okay, the conditions weren't harsh. But you just had to abide by the rules which were in place about what we could do and not do.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember any case that you would set apart?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes. There was a case, maybe it's painful because there at the workshop there was a quota which they set and it had to be fulfilled. There was Ajshe Gjonbalaj who that day couldn't work as much as she should have. One of the supervisors there made her stand up and iron the flag of Yugoslavia, something Ajshe didn't do. Plus they told her, "You are not fulfilling the quota," Ajshe Gjonbalaj was a political prisoner. She reacted, Ajshe, and then the police came, the other guards and they took Ajshe. They took all of us and they started... we were compelled to go on a hunger strike, because they took them away somewhere. But apparently they sent her to Pozharevc. And then we went on a hunger strike for about four days, if I'm not mistaken, we ended it on the third or fourth day.



They also took away some of our friends who they thought were more influential there. They sent them to Mitrovica and the rest of us stayed in Lipjan. We received one month of solitary confinement. Then we stayed there in solitary. There are many things. There in the prison, we had a good time with our friends. We had books which we read, they brought us books from home. We had a library there, we read, we got our job done, we respected each other. The guards were nice to us, mainly nice. If you broke the rules, of course, that wasn't allowed. You had to abide by the rules, otherwise there was punishment.

**Anita Susuri:** What was that month of solitary confinement like?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** I don't know. Sometimes when I get asked this question, "What was it like?" I don't [know], when I put it into words, it sounds so simple. You stay in solitary for one month, you stay there and... but, a month is very long, it's very long. I was... there were so many prisoners that there was no space in solitary confinement for all of us. They placed me and [Hava Shala](#) in one cell. Hava would continuously recite poems, I would recite poems. They took us out to walk around the yard. And I just know they came and took Hava away, and they sent her away from Lipjan. I was left there in solitary to continue the rest of the punishment. It wasn't easy because you only had a blanket, you only had the walls. You had nowhere to lie down, you had the toilet there inside, the mice would move around. It wasn't easy, but our ideals were high and we withstood [it]. Maybe we even overcame them easily and we simply overcame them.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that you had a TV room too, what did they play there?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Usually the programs that were shown at the time, the TV channels of that time. We gathered there, and we talked to each other. We usually did, in our gatherings we read books, we would comment on them with each other. We had a good time with the other prisoners.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there some kind of uniform, or?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, we had the prison uniforms, we had to wear them when we left outside the pavilion. Inside the pavilion we could stay wearing our athletic clothes or whatever suited us. But we washed our clothes ourselves there, they didn't wash them for us. The kitchen was in a different area where they sent us. I wanted to tell you something else too, something that happened to me there. There was, I sometimes write poems. I had written some of my poems, they were good, it's a pity that they were lost, but what can I do? I remembered most of them and I wrote them down after I was released from prison.

One of the poems I wrote about Jusuf Gërvalla, a poem which I don't have, I had given it to a friend of mine to read. She read it, but she wasn't a political prisoner, she was there for something different. She had placed it in her cabinet. I was back from the workshop, I was lying down and we were hanging out

there. I just saw that everybody entered, guards and others they had called for help. They started to check everything, they would do this usually, it's not that somebody reported my writings but it happened by chance and they gathered everything they found.

If they found, for example, that material that the police found there, I mean that the guards found, you would get one to three years in prison. They considered it propaganda. That's what the sentence was like, Article 133. But they found her with my poem. We went to physical education. Then I started to worry that they would surveil me, they would send me to Lipjan, the investigation would begin, et cetera. We were playing basketball, Professor Danush came, he lives in Pristina now, the physical education[*'s professor*]. The guard who hung out with us, she was from my city's area, I knew her family.

I told her, "Guard, I want to ask you something but I don't know if you can do it?" "Yes," she said, "go on Dije," I said, "This and that, I wrote some poems and I put them in a cookie bag and I have some poems that nobody from the directorate can read," and she said, "What do I do next? Were you aware that you are in prison?" (laughs) I just looked at her, I didn't know what to say. I really was in prison, why would I write it. But it wasn't possible to not write them down when I got that inspiration. I then joined back in the game, she didn't say anything. We knew each other's families. She went and got the bag and she threw it at me and said, "Burn it." The worst part was that I burned all of it with my hands and I felt bad.

Then I asked her, "Where did you leave the poem?" She said, "Honestly Dije, they found your poem," "Oh yes?" And the director called me, she was Drita Kuqi, no, not Drita Kuqi. Shpresa Kuqi because Drita Kuqi was a political prisoner. It was Shpresa Kuqi and she called me. She sat me down, "Dije," she said, "will you tell me," she said, "whose this poem is," she said, "and I want to read it to you," she said. I said, "I don't know about a poem?" I didn't admit to it. "Come on," she said, "let's see your handwriting," and I wrote it like this, so I wrote something on the other side.

She said, "Why aren't you admitting it?" "Well," I said, "it's not my poem," she said, "You have to tell me if it's yours?" I said, "It's not mine," "If it's yours," she said, "it's a very good poem because," she said, "he was my classmate," she said, "Jusuf," and she said, "I'll keep this poem, it's with me and at any point you can ask me for it," I said, "Well it's not mine." I didn't claim that poem anymore because it was found somewhere else, not with me. I didn't claim it, "How would I know whose poem it is."

I didn't admit it, but I never went to that former director to ask for it. Now I don't know where she lives and works, [she has] the poem they found. You couldn't stay indifferent because it wasn't possible, you'd get inspired. You had to write something at any cost although you were in prison, [even though] you shouldn't have because you'd be sentenced for activism, for propaganda.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned physical education, so you finished the last year of high school, did you have all the courses?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** The courses were about clothing, those were the courses. We had other courses too. I remember there was Marxism at the time, language and the clothing subjects. We finished them through exams. They asked us about it and we finished them. All of us, not only me. It was for all the prisoners. But I was lucky because I hadn't finished high school and I got to receive a diploma. Besides losing three years of my life in prison, I had regained one, and when I was released from prison I continued higher studies.

**Anita Susuri:** How did being released from prison go? Were you released the day you were scheduled to, or did they release you earlier?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** No, exactly on the day which I was scheduled to be released from prison, I was released that day. It was usually when they released someone from prison all of us would gather and organize a party, we would sing, dance, recite. Actually, there was Sanije Kaqkini that with the last glass we would drink, she would say, "May we never return here." We would call her Mother Theresa, because she would look after us a lot. She wasn't there for political activism, but she was really close to us, the political prisoners. The day I was released my parents came to get me and I returned home. But it wasn't easy, because for some time, I was away from society for three years, I was away from friends, from family. I was used to a whole different life. However, humans are species that adapt and I picked up where we left, we continued it.

### Part Three

**Anita Susuri:** In what year were you released?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** In '86 in September, in '86. A lot had changed. The situation was quite difficult because there were people who didn't dare to speak to us political prisoners. Maybe there were cases when they saw us, they were at work, because then they would take measures against the people that would have contact with us. They would become a target. So, I wasn't surprised that they didn't speak to us. I never made it a big deal that they didn't speak to us. But there were also people whom we were still friends with. We hung out with them, we continued. And then, I continued my studies, higher education here in Ferizaj.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you allowed to?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, now I will move on to the matter of education. I enrolled for my higher studies here because the verdict by the court didn't include: "She is banned from school." I enrolled. I

had a neighbor who was a secretary there. He was Ali Buqinca who enrolled me for my higher studies, in the Department of Wood Processing. To tell you the truth, I didn't like that major, but it was better than nothing. I enrolled. After I completed two years of my studies, they received a decision to expel me. There was a decision that I was banned from school.

They had brought it to the faculty and Ali told me, the secretary, "I will register you for these two last exams. Complete them. Because there is a decision by the Provincial Committee that you are banned from school." There was my name, there was a list. We pretended we didn't know in order to complete the exams. But, a professor whose name I don't want to mention, when I sat for the exam, he told me, "You can't complete them." Two of my exams were with him and I would be done. "You can't," he said, "continue with the exam because you are expelled from school, you're banned by the Provincial Committee."

Then, I didn't know what to say to him, I just know I said this, "Why, do you work for the Provincial Committee or are you a professor?" "No," he said, "that's it, get out of here because I don't want to take the responsibility." And I left the exam. So, I couldn't complete higher education because of those two exams. Then that democratic era began in our country and through the professor, he was a professor of folk literature, Shefqet Pllana, whom I knew through other friends, who enrolled me in the Faculty of [Albanian] Language and Literature in Pristina. I continued my studies there although my name was everywhere, but he enrolled me.

I started completing exams, maybe I could say, I completed five exams within one term. But, it started again, the closing down of schools, they started teaching in homes. I was married, I gave birth to my child. My education started being interrupted, I couldn't attend classes, I couldn't tend to my studies and I paused [them] for some time. And then I started again. But the war began. When the war began I couldn't finish my exams again because I was convicted in absentia, [I was sentenced] to two years and a half. I was convicted in absentia for helping the Liberation Army. Because I fled, the trial was held, and I was convicted. I fled to Macedonia, from Macedonia to Albania. My education was interrupted again. I then continued my education after our liberation and I finished it.

**Anita Susuri:** I want to go back to what you talked about, first about your marriage, how did you meet him and how did it come about making a family?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** It was in '87, I met my husband and he was a political prisoner. He was close to me and I continued with him, at first as friends and then we got married. We had our first child, our first child died. And then, my husband and I were imprisoned again. I was investigated for a week in Mitrovica. My husband was sentenced to five years [in prison]. I was spared prison because, to tell you the truth, not that I wasn't active but my husband was the one who connected me to the other group and they didn't know. He took all of it upon himself and actually they discharged me from the sentence.

**Anita Susuri:** After this, I am sure you waited for him until '90?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, yes. He then served his time and he was released. When he was released, there was a general amnesty, as far as I know. I was in Pristina at the Palace of Press there for a literary hour with Shuki [[Shukrije Gashi](#)] and there was Vezir Ukaj, the poet. We heard the news, but they were in Serbian. You know that the last name is first and the first name is last, and it said, "These people were released from prison," and he mentioned, "Rexhep Avdullah Lohaj." I was thinking, "Who is this Rexhep," I said. Shuki was like, "Dije," she said, "Avdullah was released." It was '90, '90-'91, I can't remember the exact year.

I returned home, we waited that day, and he came back from prison. And then, we started our life together again. Me and my husband were continuously active again and we probably always will be active in national causes when there is a need. And then we had the children. I have my son, Kreshnik, he is married and has a child, he has a son. I also have Kaltrina and Yllka. Kaltrina is married and has a daughter, and Yllka isn't married.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned the '90s, so your activity continued, but at that point it had changed a bit, I mean, the army was formed at the time too. So, it was the beginning and you continued to engage.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, I was engaged in the Democratic League as well. I was in, mainly in the Leadership in the Youth Forum, in the Women's Forum [I mean]. We were active there the whole time until it began, until the first groups of armed forces came out in our territory. And then, I started to help the Liberation Army with a friend of mine, Zymrije Salihu. She, we knew some soldiers in the Liberation Army. Through [Zahrije Podrimqaku](#), I talked to Zahrije on the phone, whereas Zymrije sent the clothes to the bus station in Pristina. Zahrije was then imprisoned, but Zymrije wasn't caught that day. However, one day they surrounded my house and they came to take me. "Come, because you are a collaborator of Zahrije."

**Anita Susuri:** This was in '97?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** This was in '97, yes. We had talked to Zahrije Podrimqaku, she knew my first and last name. Whereas the clothes were sent to the bus station by my friend Zymrije. She was arrested there, after a few days Zahrije was arrested, because Zymrije wasn't arrested. Because they weren't caught there, but then they checked the cameras and they saw when she sent the clothes. The police asked for me, I mean, after Zahrije was arrested. I was interrogated and Nada interrogated me... Danica Marinković, I think she was an inspector or a prosecutor in Pristina. But I was lucky to not be arrested.

The day they were filmed sending the clothes, I traveled to Turkey and my name and both my children were there, at the Airport of Pristina. She told me, “You gave Zahrije Podrimqaku army clothes,” I said, “It’s not true that I gave her army clothes,” Yes,” she said, “and they would get me on my feet, they would take a look at me.” I was a little bigger in size than my friend. I didn’t look like the picture they had there. I said, “I can prove it to you that I didn’t send the clothes if you are interested, because I have no idea about what army clothes or what army,” I would pretend, “because,” I said, “that day I traveled to Turkey, there you have the date you are saying [I sent the clothes], I was in Turkey. Here is the passport and you can look, I traveled there with my two children.” Because I didn’t actually send them and the whole thing matched.

They, she apparently had someone at the airport and they looked for the names, you know how they register all names and last names and it proved that I wasn’t there. They released me that day. However, not even a week or two passed, it was interesting that my friend came and secretly lived at my place (laughs), and I was already being followed. But they apparently bugged my phone. I was lucky that I wasn’t home that day, I was at my mother’s. They had blocked the house, the neighborhood, to search for me and to arrest me. But, my neighbors reported me.

And then I stayed in Pristina in the underground with a family, I think it was the daughter of Shaban Shala in Pristina. And then at Kodra e Trimave [neighborhood] with another family, because I left there because I was putting the family in a lot of danger. Professor Emin Kabashi together with [Flora Brovina](#) found that place for me. But that was a family from the Jashari family who survived, not exactly close to Adem’s family, but they were extended family. They were sheltered in that family too and there was a brother and a sister from Istog and they were followed by the Serbian Army too. I didn’t know where to go, underground with two children, two small children. My children were really small.

I had published a poem one day about the massacre of the Jashari family<sup>9</sup> that took place. Professor Emin brought me the newspaper and I was reading it there. She took a [photo of a] girl from the Jashari family, she put it on the wall, on a cabinet, on a cabinet’s door. Because they would watch out for me, I would watch out for them. We were in different rooms. We didn’t dare to talk. But I left the newspaper there, she took it and went through the pages, and she asked, “Whose poem is this?” And saw my notebook where I wrote the poem. I said, “It’s mine.” “Is that right?” And she took my hand, “Come,” she said, “here,” she said, “I took this poem and put it up here,” because it [the poem] was written for the Jashari family, “you are her?” “Yes.” I asked her, she told me she is a relative, the other ones as well.

To tell you the truth, I thought I would have to go back home, because following them they would get to me because we were followed in every step. Then I went back home, then some of my husband’s

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

friends came from Trnovac and they sent me to Macedonia. In Macedonia I spoke to some of the Albanian MPs who told me, “You can’t stay in Macedonia because they will send you back as soon as you spend a certain amount of days here. You have to go somewhere else.” At that point I went to Albania, I stayed in Tirana and Durrës until the liberation days.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you manage to go without being found? Traveling to Macedonia for example?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Now, this is another story. They, my family members, sent me to Gjilan. In Gjilan, a family from Trnovac came and took me, and I don’t know, they knew the person who worked at the border and I crossed the border. But then the riskiest thing was when we got on the train to pass Tabanksa. They, the family from Trnovac, and I’m under the impression that they are very patriotic, the people from that area. They seemingly paid workers at the border there. They knew those people, they gave them something and I entered the neutral zone.

Truth be told, I was a little afraid because I had two small children, one on this side {shows to her left side} one on this side {shows to the right side}. I anticipated that they would arrest me when I got on the train at the border. But they didn’t scan the passport at all, because it would have shown red, that I was banned or known for something. They [the family from Trnovac] told me they knew them [workers at the border] and, “We did something,” a payment or I don’t know what, but I was afraid because they cried when they said goodbye. I thought to myself that they are aware that I could be imprisoned. But, they treated me like one of their family members.

Then we crossed, we passed the neutral zone. There they asked me, “Do we call your mother and let her know that we managed to leave Kosovo?” I asked, “Why? Did we cross the border?” They said, “Yes,” they said, “you are safe now, don't be afraid.” And I called my mother and told her, “This and that, we crossed the border.” She wished me well. But then, the Macedonian side wouldn’t allow me to cross on that side. I said, “I am a citizen, I was born in Macedonia, my parents are there.” That’s what saved me and I got to Macedonia. And crossing to Albania wasn’t forbidden from Macedonia.

**Anita Susuri:** What about Albania...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** It was quite dangerous.

**Anita Susuri:** [Did you stay] with a relative?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, Zymrije waited for me there, she was wanted like me, followed the same as me. She went there earlier, she came and got me, we got on a bus and went to Tirana. She had her own apartment there and there were some other family members from Gjilan that we knew. We went to their place, we stayed there. Then I got an apartment, and I stayed there. When it became too warm I went to Durrës near the sea. We got an apartment there too. I will tell you, there, the hardest part for

me was when the people who fled the war came. There were cases when even in the apartment where I lived people couldn't lie down but they were sitting like this. I would take them from the street when I ran into them, they had no place to go, I would take them inside, they would shower, I would give them food and I would send them to the area where the camps were.

I got to witness different stories there. So many stories that I took around 300 pages worth of notes. But, I gave them to someone here to read and they never returned the material to me, and it's a pity because they were stories that you couldn't find at the time. For example, mothers whose babies died, I saw a woman who was stuck in the middle of Durrës hitting her head because her husband had died in the hospital and she didn't know where she belonged. I saw the prisoners they brought from Smrekovica, they brought them there and they were skin and bones. I saw many things, raped women, stories from all kinds with many people I talked to.

**Anita Susuri:** Was your husband in Kosovo? Did you have contact with him?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** My husband was in Turkey, then he came back, he wasn't there. Yes, yes, I did have contact with him.

**Anita Susuri:** When you mentioned you went to Turkey, was it...

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** My husband was there and also my brother-in-law. We have family members [there]. Yes, yes, family members.

**Anita Susuri:** What about your family, your mother, your parents?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, during the war from Macedonia, because I was staying at my [maternal] aunt's in Macedonia, we were in touch all the time and my mother came too. In Albania too, my mother, my father, my brother came there to visit too. I talked to them on the phone all the time. The most difficult part was when they fled Kosovo too because I didn't know where they were, until they settled somewhere too. Then they let us know where they were. That was the part I was concerned with the most. And then, my grandfather died in a village during the war and I didn't believe that he died a natural death, I wondered if they massacred him. Because we'd hear all kinds of things there, it wasn't easy to hear what was happening to the people here.

**Anita Susuri:** What about when you returned to Kosovo?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** The moment the Serbian army withdrew, I returned to Kosovo that day. So, I got on my way and [during the time period] until we came here. When I got to Ferizaj, I left my children with my mother because mothers usually do this. I went around Kosovo to see how it was burned to ashes, especially Drenica.



**Anita Susuri:** What did you see?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** What did I see? I saw all those destroyed homes. That wasn't easy, when I saw Kosovo in that state. But, when you remembered you were liberated by the Serbian occupier, these things can be fixed. That, I mean, comforted us.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you experience material damage? Your house?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes, they took things from my house, everything. I didn't find anything, I only found the walls. We were lucky that they didn't burn it down. Otherwise, I didn't find anything at home. With that, all my pictures were gone too, all my materials, whatever I had, it all disappeared. I don't know who took them. We have family members who are martyrs as well, my [paternal] aunt's son who was the same age as us, Ibrahim Shabani. There was a friend who I had a really good relationship with, Astrit Bytyçi, who heroically gave his life at the border. Gursel, Bajram, they were all people we had friendships with. We have friends, friends who have fallen at the altar of freedom.

**Anita Susuri:** How did the recovery go after, and the beginning of your new life in Kosovo?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes. I said that the fact that we were liberated kept us going and we thought that we would quickly build up our own country, we would create the positive circumstances in which our people should live, our children, our brothers, our sisters. Because it wasn't, that wasn't so easy. You didn't have freedom for years, for centuries, and you are part of the people who experienced it, because people fought for the liberation from Serbia or Turkey for centuries, but they didn't experience freedom. We are lucky, we are the generation that fought and were active, we worked for it and we had the luck of seeing freedom. But, maybe we are not satisfied with everything that happened inside of Kosovo. We expected more, but we were a little disappointed. But we are free, Serbia isn't here.

**Anita Susuri:** You probably started work too after? You, your husband?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Yes we did. Then I finished what was left of my exams, I then immediately started working at the elementary school. And then, my other daughter was born and I say that she is my daughter in freedom (laughs). I worked, since then I work in the [elementary] school *Gjon Serreçi*. Many generations have gone through here. I worked at the medical high school as well, I did my writings, I did activities. Whenever there was a need, I kept doing it again.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Shahadije, if you'd like to add anything in the end, in case we forgot to ask you about something?

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** No, maybe there is a lot more, one cannot include everything in one interview, everything we've experienced before and after the war. But, I think I said some of the things that people should know about. I hope that our youth lives the life, the one we idealized, to live freely and happily and to create our country. To build up our country as it should, a decent country.

**Anita Susuri:** Thanks a lot.

**Shahadije Neziri Lohaj:** Thanks a lot to you as well.