

Zenun Çelaj

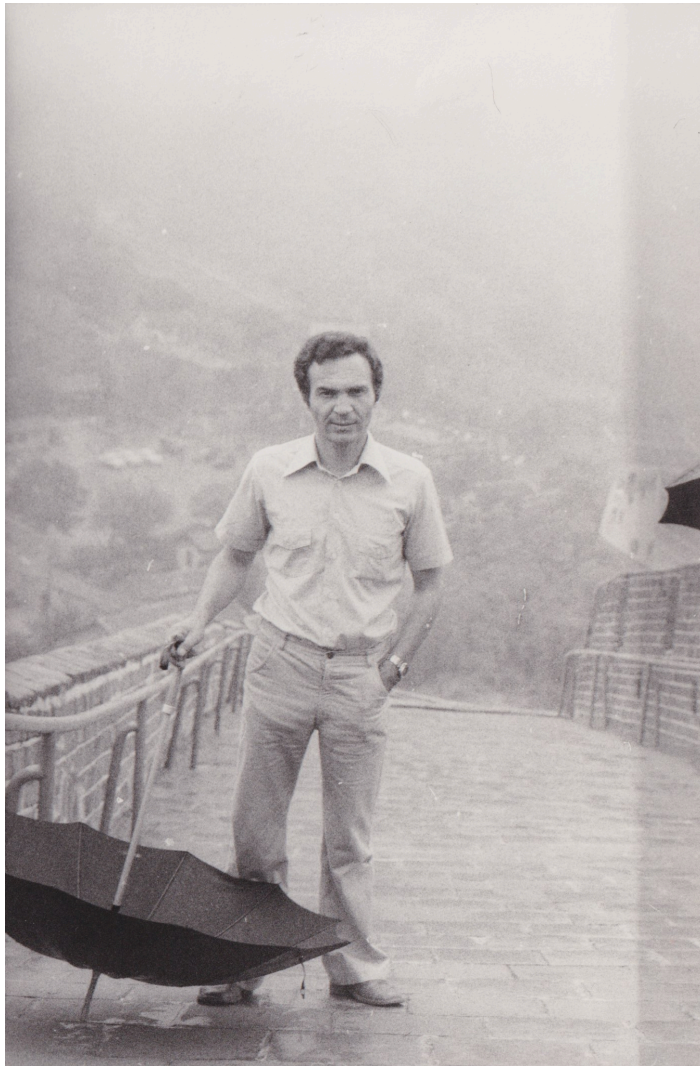
Journalist and editor

I am Zenun Çelaj, born in the village of Vuthaj, in Montenegro, in the Valley of Plava and Gusia, a historically well-known region. Unfortunately, it was separated from the main body of Albania and Kosovo and has remained quite isolated. People have mostly migrated to America and Kosovo. A large pastoral family, divided, with a part, the majority, remaining in Albania when Yugoslavia and Albania were separated. This refers to '48. Some came to Kosovo, but there are also those who fled to Albania.

I, along with a few friends, continued schooling, there was an Albanian school functioning but with... the elementary school was complete with about two hundred students in the village, while the eight-year school was in Gusia, about five kilometers away from Vuthaj, where residents, students from other Albanian-populated villages also attended: Martinaj, Kukaj, Vishnjevë, Hot, Gërnqarë. However, we were a very limited number in the eight-year school, and in the end, we were only eight, two girls and the rest of us, six boys. We completed the eight-year school there in Gusia and mostly continued in Kosovo. I continued in Peja, as the ideal of each of us was to become a teacher, since there was no other opportunity for prosperity except to become a teacher. And I started, the *normale*¹ school was in Peja, but then the Serbian regime closed the *Normale* School in Peja and said, "You can go to Gjakova, Prizren, or Prishtina," so we who were in Peja continued in Gjakova. Then again, they closed it in Gjakova, as they were afraid we were becoming too Albanianized, as only Albanian was spoken and sung there, with songs from Radio Tirana, so they closed the *normale* school there too. They said, "You can go to Prizren or Prishtina." I continued, of course, in Prizren with a majority of friends, but there I had a conflict with a Serbian language teacher. It was mostly my fault because I spoke badly about Serbs, of course, and they lowered my conduct grade, at that time, there were no ones, only twos. At midterm, I went from being an excellent student to having five or six twos, meaning the conditions were created for me to repeat the class. Then I found connections in Prishtina, at the *Normale* School in Prishtina, there was Rexhep Qosja, you must have heard of him, a fellow villager, and... Professor Hasan Mekuli was there, and I asked him to talk to Hasan so that I could be accepted in Prishtina. I came, and I finished the *Normale* School, then immediately, a bit before graduating, *Rilindja*, which until then had operated with a limited number of journalists, around fifteen or sixteen, *Rilindja*, from a newspaper with ten or twelve pages, eight pages, was published two or three times a week. At some point, it began to be a daily paper, except on Sundays. The competition came up, I... felt like applying because I didn't think I had any talent for journalism, although I did well with essays and such, but I applied anyway, and I was accepted. After a month, I got the news, "You are accepted." I wasn't familiar with the people at *Rilindja*, with the journalists, except for one colleague... he wasn't a journalist, he was a gymnasium student, Nehat Islami, but we were like a generation, he in gymnasium, I

¹ *Shkolla Normale* was a teacher training school in Kosovo that played a crucial role in educating Albanian-speaking teachers, contributing significantly to the development of the education system in the region.

in *normale* school, we socialized, and he insisted, “You should definitely go for journalism, let’s go together.” He knew a couple of the editors well since he edited the children’s page. And I went, I stayed, there was a three-month trial period at the time, I passed the trial successfully, and I stayed [*laughs*].



While reporting in North Korea

In the photo: Zenun Çelaj

From the personal archive of Zenun Çelaj

But it was the beginning, the first year, because *Rilindja* had the practice of not publishing anything at all for three months, after three months, they would allow a small event, a small news item. Now, it seems I stood out with my writing, and in those early days, they told me, “Go cover this meeting of the union,” well, the cooperative union or whatever it was, yes. I went and covered it, but I didn’t understand anything. They were talking about “cooperation,” what do I know, “agrotechnics, agro-measures,” and I was just taking notes, filling up a notebook completely. I returned to the newsroom. There was a Hasan Myrtezai, a very good editor and

teacher, who said, "Hey, kid," because that's how he used to talk, he said, "Did you start writing?" I said, "Unfortunately, I didn't understand anything." "How come?" he asked. I said, "I couldn't understand what they were saying." He called a Serbian radio journalist at the time, Stoianović, and asked, "Can you send me the article?" because he asked me, "Who else was there from other newsrooms?" I said, "Radio Prishtina, *Jedinstvo*, and us," and he sent it over, saying, "Take it, read it," I knew Serbian, of course. It turned out to be so simple that I sat down and wrote it, naturally [*laughs*]. After that, I was always careful not to go anywhere unprepared.

We were an editorial team, journalists in those years and later on, and *Rilindja* was known for working with great dedication. We journalists, I myself, in those early days, even for a seven- or eight-line news piece, it happened that I had to write it fifteen times. Back then, there were no computers, only typewriters. I would write it, read it, make corrections, edit it, once, twice, three times, four times, and when sent like that with handwritten notes, the printing press couldn't decipher it. I mean, this was the initial experience that continued continuously, always with dedication, with great efforts, with care, and not just me, but also other colleagues. Near the Kosovo Museum, there used to be a prison, at the time I arrived, it was *Rilindja*, and there I was assigned to work in what we called the Internal Affairs Section, and until the newspaper was shut down, it was called the Internal Affairs Section, because it dealt with internal issues, not foreign policy. I stood out there, it seems, for three or four years, and then I was promoted to editor. Then, I led a group of young journalists and, of course, continued writing. By that time, three or four years had passed, and I had practically begun to familiarize myself with the profession, with the journalists, with other colleagues. I started, not to lie, to love the profession blindly. I was already writing, mostly free writing. For a while, I covered the Youth Organization because I was very young, I started working at nineteen. I continued to deal with this, how to put it, with both youth and journalism issues, and to love it wholeheartedly, and I stayed practically until I was forty.



*In the photo, from left to right: Zenun Çelaj, Ali Sutaj, Rexhai Surroi
From the personal archive of Zenun Çelaj*

Now, at *Rilindja*, at that time, there weren't enough typewriters, the whole Internal Affairs Section, about fifteen or sixteen of us, had only two Olivetti typewriters, which were Italian machines. And I was assigned to cover an event, but let me get back to it, journalism is daily, time presses, you have to finish quickly, because the newspaper closes, and there's no waiting. Now, I was looking for a typewriter, but couldn't find one, so I entered one of the offices where Albert Dushi was. But back then, not just for Albert but almost as a rule, wherever you entered an office in Prishtina, in Kosovo, you would speak Serbian first, since, naturally, the heads or the staff working there were mostly Serbian. So, with this mindset, with this habit, even at *Rilindja* when I started, I entered and asked them, there was a man sitting at a work desk, with a mustache, a handsome man, and I asked him in Serbian, "*Ima pisaće mašine ovde?*"² He said, "Nema" - "No, there isn't. But why do you need one?" I said, "To write," still speaking in Serbian. Then he said, "In which language?" "Albanian." "Well, then, why don't you speak Albanian?" And [sighs then laughs] I felt embarrassed. He was a sports journalist, but later, he would become my wife's uncle [laughs] later on [laughs].

Back then, especially during summer, there was a news crisis, and the newspaper pages needed to be filled, so they assigned me, "See if any accident or something is happening..." And I looked around, tried over there, nothing, nothing was happening, I went at that time to check with the police, but there was nothing, all quiet, so I thought I'd go for a swim. The pool

² Translation in English: "Is there a typewriter here?"

was near the new Madrasa now, in that valley, I don't know if you know where it is. I went there, and on one side, Abdyl Bunjaku, a cartoonist, was there; he worked for the newspaper *Zëri*. After a while, he came over, "What are you doing here, Zenun?" I said, "I'm looking for news, but there's nothing, maybe someone will drown, so I can have the story." It became a joke, we laughed. On Sundays, the humor page came out in *Rilindja*. He drew a man by the pool and asked, "Zenun," using my name [laughs], the same words, "What are you doing?" - "Just waiting, maybe someone will drown, because I don't have any news." Humor was created, we were few people, and we got along extremely well, very good colleagues. It happened to me, I don't know if I have it here or not,³ as the editor of the section, of politics, in other words. This Nehat Islami, for the first time, got the opportunity to cover an event in Israel. He flew to Italy, and we announced the event a day before, "We will now have daily reports from Nehat Islami." And he goes to Rome, but the plane doesn't take off, and we had announced the news, "What should we do?" So, I looked at other agencies to see what they had written about Israel that day, what had happened, what developments there were, and I wrote it in Nehat Islami's name [laughs]. We knew each other well, we even knew each other's style and expressions, so people didn't even notice that he hadn't written it.

It became known that a person in Peja had changed their gender, and openly, they didn't feel ashamed or anything. I went and had a long conversation with them, which I did in installments, in several parts, published in *Rilindja*, and they admitted it, but of course, I neither insulted nor cursed them, I simply described them. Sometimes it came across as praise for them, like a call for others to do what they want [laughs]. This was the one case where my colleagues insulted me and criticized me, as it was the first time someone wrote or was written about in the newspaper about a person of this nature, of this kind. I wrote it, it was read a lot, they even called me on the phone, some insulted me, some praised me, and that's how it went.

We in Kosovo started in '68, a project for the standard language had emerged, to be debated by experts in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia, although there it was more restricted. It was held at the Faculty of Philosophy, in a hall where a consultation took place, called the 'Consultation of the Albanian Language' in '68, and it was decided to immediately start using the standard language. It was the same as in '72 since there were no major changes, it was the same. And it wasn't mainly difficult for us, one category, since even in university studies, we were used to following both the standard language and this language, naturally, it wasn't entirely classic Gheg, the one we wrote until then, but it was much closer to the standard. It lacked this silent "ë", which became much more frequent with the standard later on, otherwise, practically it was the same.

We had a practice in the newspaper; we held meetings every Monday, and the analyst always had to detect these language mistakes, the deviations in the language when the standard language started like this. In the standard language, measures and penalties were taken, there were fines back then, now there aren't, in money. Back then, we had it in points, as we called them, points in journalism, records would come in some forms, whatever, and there it would

³ It refers to his autobiographical book *Journeys into the Past (Memoirs)*, on which part of the interview is based.

deduct 10%, 6%, 5, which were amounts, maybe 10 dinars, 20, but back then, the dinar was worth much more.

The old building near the museum, it used to be an old building, a former prison, of course adapted, with only a few offices. We worked ten, fifteen, or eventually twenty people when we grew, because in '87, [*thinks*] that's right, we moved to the new building. You couldn't even find a place to sit, there were no chairs, as I mentioned, there were no typewriters, there were only two or three, and you had to wait your turn to get one, to have a place to write, so to speak, how to write. And then [*confuses the date*], was it in '87, or '77, I got mixed up, earlier, the construction of the Press Palace began, investments started for culture, for Albanian information, among which was the Press Palace. In '77, spaces were created where part of the editorial team could move, and soon, everyone else joined. In that old building, we were many people, of course, so we had to be disciplined, not make noise, and not disturb one another. It also had its advantages because we could consult each other, "How should this word be written, how should this thought be expressed, how to approach the issue?" Meanwhile, we moved to the Press Palace. Over there, we had separate sections. Practically, there were two or three people per sector, with separate desks, of course, and partitions. You had to speak quietly because the sound was heard everywhere, echoing throughout the building, as the ceiling was high, and inside, the rooms were divided, for example, we had the fifth floor, which was about 150 meters on one side and 250 on the other. Anyway, the elevators and the restrooms were in the middle, and what do I know. In one corner, there was a small café, where we got to know each other well, there were plenty of jokes, even crude ones, with people either not knowing or knowing that everyone could hear them.

Even now, though many have passed away and people have become fewer, they would say, "We especially remember the five or six packs of cigarettes on the table," and, of course, the ashtray full, piled with cigarette butts, which makes me want to vomit today [*laughs*].

<<<Smoking in the typewriter offices>>>

Work was number one, without completing your tasks, you couldn't go to the café or sit down, as some even started playing cards in a corner there. It bothered me as an editor, so I told Maksut Shehu, who was the editor-in-chief, "It's bothering me," I said, "how they're playing cards there until midnight and after midnight." He said, "Shush, it's actually very good, because when we need people, you just say, 'Beqir, go on this assignment, you go over there,' and he has no choice but to immediately drop the game and go" [*laughs*]. I mean to say, work was above everything, work above all. The atmosphere was very humane, to be honest. And then, you didn't have time to deal with unimportant things in life, but rather with important things. Today we say, "Albin did this, someone else did that, this one isn't getting it right, this one is lying, this one is stealing, this one is cheating." Back then, there was no time for such things, you had to be focused on work.

You miss this, even the debates as we used to have them, often sometimes even now, but there was no resentment among each other. It's interesting, you could criticize someone, "You wrote

this poorly, this sentence should have been like this,” and this was practically a kind of school for journalists, especially for the young ones, to learn, to become more careful.

If I'm not mistaken, it was in '93 when Serbia practically started suppressing Kosovo's autonomy. It took away rights in many areas, including for newspapers like *Rilindja*, *Jedinstvo*, *Fjala* [thinks]... there weren't many, but they were independent, and *Rilindja*, of course, by name, was an enterprise with about two or three thousand employees. Now, once autonomy was taken, they also started changing and appointing new superiors, directors of enterprises. Among these enterprises, they even changed the name, including *Rilindja*... *Rilindja* as a company had its name changed to *Panorama*. We at *Rilindja* did not accept this change. That resistance began, which practically ended with the KLA war. But we made this resistance through actions. In this way, as we might say, we opposed it, but they still appointed a Serbian director, a director who was supposed to command us; we ignored him, and we started the hunger strike with Adem Demaçi at the forefront.

<<<From the hunger strike of *Rilindja* journalists, May 20, 1993;

Behlul Jashari speaks:

*“...but none of the *Rilindja* workers have gone home for Eid. They don't feel the festive atmosphere. We are all waiting, wondering, 'What will happen today, what will happen tomorrow?'. There is a great danger that these might be the last hours, the last days of Albanians remaining in their own tower, in the tower of *Rilindja*.*

The hunger strikers, who have been confined here for eight days in the Press Palace, have the only contact with the outside world through these windows.

They have been confined here for eight days and have barricaded themselves in defense of the free Albanian speech.”>>>

Adem was in charge of *Fjala*, there was a newspaper called *Fjala*, and he was leading it, and he said, “I am going on a hunger strike, you do whatever you want,” and we ended up being maybe twenty to thirty people, as not everyone joined the strike. At *Rilindja*, we brought blankets, a few mattresses, and continued for eight or nine days like that. But there were some who cheated and ate, even though we were on a hunger strike, but to be honest, I didn't eat. I really endured the hunger. Adem, as visitors came from the Democratic League at the time and the Council for Human Rights, I was the secretary in the council, they started coming to visit us. It became a big issue, ‘The Hunger Strike of Journalists,’ and eventually Adem said, “Let's end it, because this is going nowhere, but we won't change the name of *Rilindja*.” We continued with *Rilindja*, but they still stopped us, banned us, and the police entered the printing press at *Rilindja*. They stopped the newspaper, and after a few days, we resumed, but they stopped it again. There were some other newspapers, *Bujku* among them, a newspaper for farmers [laughs], it was permitted as there was no Serbian government decision to ban it. So, we said, “We'll publish under the name *Bujku*, but the content will be *Rilindja*.” And that's how we continued until the end, practically until April, no, it was March of '99, when the bombings started, around April 23, as it turned out. We kept publishing, but they evicted us from the Press Palace and *Rilindja*. We moved from house to house, sometimes at someone's place, and a few issues were prepared here,⁴ published under *Bujku*, and then we started as *Rilindja* again just in the house of Zenun Çelaj

⁴ In the house of Zenun Çelaj

before the bombings began. Then, the bombings started, and the newspaper practically stopped until after the war.