INTERVIEW WITH BAHRIE KASTRATI BESIMI

Pristina | Date: March 22, 2024
Duration: 113 minutes

Present:

1. Bahrie Kastrati Besimi (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. Bahrie, if you could introduce yourself, and tell us something about your origin, your family?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Thank you, I am Bahrie Kastrati Besimi. I was born on March 5, 1960, in the village of Turjaka, Municipality of Malisheva. Then, we moved from Turjaka to Prizren in the '60s. Regarding my family, I can say that my father, Rexhep Demir Kastrati, was born in 1917. My mother, Zymryte Kastrati Paqarizi, was born in 1934. We are a family like any other family, my parents were illiterate, uneducated. With ten children, my mother, and, we are ten children. Six brothers and four sisters. The first brother, that is, Kadri, passed away, while nine of us are alive. I am the third child in line.

My siblings were, Fatime, Bahrie, Shkurta, Elmi, Haxhi, Baki, Kadri, we gave his name to another, Hysa at the end, and Naim. So we all live in Prizren. We are all educated intellectuals thanks to our father, and of course to our mother, who sacrificed immensely…

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Bahrie, you told me about your father, if you could tell us a bit more in detail about his story?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Yes, my father, as I said, was born in 1917, the only child with no brothers or sisters. Born from a mother who had previously been married three times, and her husbands had died. And this, the fourth birth, I mean, in the fourth marriage, she gave birth to my father. After that she didn't marry again, she raised him with a lot of sacrifice, with a lot of suffering, with a lot of poverty. However, after he grew up and got married, they saw that he was very intelligent, so they gave him a bride from the village of Dragobil. They were called "Agallar" at that time. She was said to be extremely beautiful, and my father was also handsome.

After one year, after my father's marriage, the bride, I mean, my mother's sister Zade, died. My father lived very poorly. Extreme poverty. No brothers, no sisters, no close relatives. He had his uncles, that is, in the village of Karavansari. He sent one uncle and said, "I want another bride. Go to Qazim Paqarizi." He went. He said, "We don't have a bride, we don't have a daughter." He said, "You have one," "But the

child is four years old," "Alright, I'll wait." They discussed it and thought about it. Imagine, my father waited ten years for my mother. After she turned 14, he married her. So, they got married.

I consider my mother a very strong woman, a true woman, not *burrneshë*,[1] but *gruneshë*.[2] Gentle, with extraordinary calmness and wisdom. She says, and even now she's still alive, on July 7 she turns 90 years old. She says, "I never contradicted your father, always did as he said, because I saw that he was… not just that I noticed and could analyze it, but even those who knew him…" both her side of the family and his were very pleased with the intellect and intelligence she had.

I told you that we are four sisters and nine brothers. All alive. We were educated thanks to our father and mother and our father's persistence. At the time we went to school, it was very difficult. It was very hard because the whole community, whether in the village or when we moved to the city, criticized it, and what's worse, they excluded him, they shunned him. That's the local expression we use. Today you'd call it "he was lynched" in modern terms. For sending his daughters to school. It was very difficult for him, but he was very determined that both the girls and the boys had to be educated.

When he saw me sometimes just sitting or doing needlework, which we used to do, he would say, with those needles, "It's like you're stabbing them into my eyes. Take a newspaper, read it." He always wanted only reading, only to see you with a book in your hand or reading something, not doing needlework, which he said, "These have no value." Considering this, my father's role was very special and very visionary, so today, when I think about his words, I always take them as an example, I'm amazed. I say, how was he able to think that way about the future, about what would happen in the future, how he prepared us ahead of time for how we should live life and how life confronts you with all kinds of challenges.

On my father's side, our family, our ancestors, were laborers or servants of the former regimes. I want to tell you just one detail that we have, the nickname of our family is "Kastrati Delibash." *Delibash* means "crazy-headed one" in Turkish. Why were they called that? At the time when a member of my father's family, of his bloodline, was in service, a murder happened in a village near Turjaka. And they went. The representatives of the monarchy at that time decided to hang the person. Back then, punishments were carried out by hanging.

So, they went and pleaded with this servant who had served for 30 years in that pashalik. They said, "Could you go and beg him? Prison is okay, but to spare his life, not to hang him." This one, the first in my father's family, goes and pleads. He said, "Can you spare his life?" The official replied, "Are you okay? Are you normal? Not a chance." He said, "Come on, I've served you here for 30 years and never has anyone dared say a bad word about me. I'm begging you to spare his life. Is it possible? If it's not

[1] *Burrneshë* (literally "man-like woman") originally refers to a traditional practice in some northern Albanian communities where a woman takes a vow of celibacy and lives as a man, socially and often legally, in order to take on male roles in the family or society. Over time, however, the term has also come to be used more broadly and metaphorically to describe women who are seen as particularly brave, strong, and capable, often embodying qualities culturally associated with men.

[2] *Gruneshë* is a regional or colloquial term that highlights a woman's strength expressed through traditionally feminine traits such as gentleness, patience, and wisdom.

possible, then hang me instead, not him." The man said, "What?" He was shocked. He said, "No." "I'm saying, hang me."

He pleaded several times, but this one firmly said no. Back then, people used to wear these loose trousers called *shallvare*.[3] So, what did he do? In front of this man's face, he took them off, undressed, forgive me, remained completely naked. When he saw that, he said, "Hey, *Delibash*." That's where the word comes from, it means "madman, crazy-headed one." And he spared the man's life. They said, "Go get him another pair of *shallvare*," now with a higher status, better ones. They gave them to him, and he spared the life.

Until this first ancestor of my father died, every year, because back then there was no machinery, no technology, they worked the land with oxen, every year they sent him a pair of the best oxen. That tradition remained. On my mother's side, they were *Agallar* (landowners). They always had wealth, they had all the good things. But still, the families were united because of intellect, because of the cleverness of my father. And they gave him not one but two brides. My father waited, and so on. Then the births began, and we were born one after another. The sacrifices never stopped.

My father's philosophy resulted in educating both girls and boys because of an event that happened after the Second World War. He received a call in Serbian titled *Poziv za streljanje*, which translates to Call for Execution. My father at the time could not read it and wondered why he had been summoned. He went to an imam to have it read. When they read it, they said, "*Aiii*, whom did it go to?" "It went to Hasan, to Hysen," listing the neighbors. "Did it come to you?" "Yes." "Did it come to you?" "Yes." Everyone. Then he read it again at another imam in a different village. When the imam read it, he said, "You have a call for execution."

What did my father do? By midnight, he had informed the whole village, "Let's flee because something is going to happen." Half the village went and hid in a cave in Zatriq and survived. The other half was executed. From that moment on, my father said, "If I'm lucky enough to have children, whether girls or boys, I will educate them all without hesitation." And indeed, he kept his word and educated us, and I'm extremely thankful. Every morning when I wake up, I thank him, and I simply have him as my idol as long as I live. Because he suffered so much, sacrificed so much for all of us, and educated us, thank you, to all of them.

As I mentioned, I finished the first three years of primary school in the village of Lubizhdë, now part of the Malisheva municipality. Then, in the '70s, we moved to Prizren. In Prizren, I completed my elementary education at the "17 Nëntori" (November 17) school, where I was somewhat marginalized by the city kids. Because, interestingly, in Prizren, even today perhaps, this still happens. Poverty was

[3] *Shallvare* (from Turkish *şalvar*) are traditional loose-fitting trousers, typically wide at the hips and tapered at the ankles, worn in various Balkan, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian cultures. In Albanian-speaking regions, they were commonly worn by both men and women in rural and Ottoman-influenced areas, especially in the past.

extreme. I didn't have shoes, I wore *opingas*.[4] I didn't have trousers, I wore a kind of skirt-pants called *kule*, like *dimija*.[5] I didn't have the clothing city kids had.

They always called me *qyli*[6] and didn't let me play with them. They constantly excluded me. Every day I went home crying. "What's wrong?" "They won't let me play, they call me names." Just speaking. I was asleep once, and my father said to my mother, "Oh, Bahrie, I feel so sorry for her, she's so lively and comes home crying, and she is not reacting." Somehow, I realized I wasn't reacting because I was alone, just me, only one. The next day, again during recess, the children called me, said, said, "*Qyli*." "I want to play too," "No, go away."

Honestly, this is a moment from childhood. I started fighting, grabbed their hair. They started crying, and I cried even more than them. When I went to the teacher, "What happened?" I was the first, "I hit them." "Why did you hit them?" "Because they won't let me play and they call me *qyli*, and I don't have shoes." I started crying, honestly, it was very hard at that time. She said, "Come on, let's reconcile everyone, and from now on, I never want to see any more disagreements or fights."

I'll never forget, those girls [who had been the ones bullying me] ended up becoming my best friends. Some of them are still alive today and I appreciate them. They're the ones who helped me strengthen myself, maybe even pushed me to study, to be active in class… They would always ask, as kids do, "Can you tell me what's going to be asked today?" So, life back then was interesting. I finished elementary school with excellent grades. I went on to high school. I enrolled in what had originally been the *Shkolla Normale*[7] but had since become the pedagogical academy "Dimitrije Tucović" in Prizren. Two classes were from the city, and the rest were from villages.

Usually, people from villages went into education, to become teachers. I was one of the best students and most active participants there. I took part in recitations, I sang in the school choir, I participated in shooting competitions. I won second place twice and third place once in target shooting. In recitation, I was very emotional, and I performed poems extremely well. I remember asking my father, "Will you come to the House of Culture?" today it's called "Xhemajl Berisha," back then it had a Serbian name. He said, "Yes, I'll come with you." With his cane, because he was old.

When I recited the poem *Liria* (Freedom), I'll never forget it, he cried the whole time. When we left, he said, "Even if I die now, I have no regrets." He was overjoyed, it felt amazing to him. Then, about the

[4] *Opinga* (plural *opingas*) are traditional handmade shoes worn throughout the Balkans, typically crafted from leather and tied around the feet with straps. In rural Albanian communities, they were a common form of footwear well into the 20th century, especially among those who could not afford manufactured shoes.

[5] *Dimija* are wide, billowy trousers gathered at the ankles, traditionally worn by women in Ottoman-influenced regions, including Albania. Often made from light or patterned fabric, they allow ease of movement and were commonly worn in rural and domestic settings.

[6] In slang: peasant. Derived from the Turkish word *köylü*.

[7] *Shkolla Normale* (Normal School) refers to a type of teacher training school established during the Ottoman and later Yugoslav periods in Albanian-speaking regions. These schools were designed to prepare students to become primary school teachers and played an important role in expanding education, especially in rural areas.

school choir, there was a conductor who led us in singing. All the high schools across Yugoslavia participated in competitions to win awards. These competitions were always held in Novi Pazar, in the Republic of Serbia. But before going, we always had to sing Serbian songs. At one point, considering my passion and always remembering my father's words, how he taught us to love our country and our language.

I said, "Why don't we sing something in Albanian?" The conductor, who spoke Albanian well, said, "Why?" I said, "It would be better if we sang something in Albanian, we're Albanian." It seems that after I said that, he brought it up with the school principal and the rest of the staff. They ended up adding one Albanian song, I don't remember the title now, but we sang it and won second place at the federal-level competitions. That means, at the level of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Our school, "Dimitrije Tucović," which was a very reputable institution, represented us well. I remember when we returned, the school staff, the principal and our class monitor, personally thanked us.

Anita Susuri: I'd like to ask you a bit about your school days, during high school…

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And about your cultural life. Was it only within the school, or did you also visit cinemas or attend any plays?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Yes, of course. It's interesting, in addition to school activities, in Prizren they would show films in cinemas. But due to financial hardship and extreme poverty, I couldn't afford to go see a film. Honestly, I didn't see a movie until the third year of high school. That was the first time. It was an Indian movie, *Bidaai*, mostly with music. I remember it like it was today. I asked my father, "Can you give me money for a ticket?" I don't remember how many dinars it cost. He said, "Of course, where do you want to go?" I said, "The whole class wants to go see a movie." It played at 3:00 p.m., in the afternoon. Yes.

He [my father] idolized me immensely. Out of all the children, there were nine of us, somehow, he treated me differently. Because I also tried, with the abilities I had, to act, to respond, and I always listened to him. Not to mention the household shopping, which I always did. My mother never went to town to buy even the most basic things, not even salt, let alone anything else. So, I finished high school. But something interesting happened when we finished, there was a class trip planned, and students were to pay out of pocket.

At that time, we were extremely poor. Just imagine: nine children, nine textbooks, nine pencils. We were a big family. My father only worked seasonally, the seasonal jobs that existed at the time. Otherwise, there was no regular employment or income. My mother, and not just her but we as well, started making fabrics for weddings, for young brides. We would make silk fabrics from a thread so fine it was like hair, called *përyngjyk*. My mother taught us.

Then, once my mother taught us to do that, my father said, “You all open your eyes, you’re young too, and you have to show your abilities, you have to learn.” But how… we started learning. We analyzed, worked, we had three looms set up in three corners of the room, only the corner where the door was had none. My three sisters, my mom, and I worked non-stop. After that, we had no issue affording education because we worked all summer and started our studies in September. We began to build a living standard through our own work and engagement, which ties into this story about the school trip.

My mother began working, and I said to my father, “Everyone’s going on this trip, only I can’t go.” He asked, “Why not?” I said, “We don’t have money. I don’t have the money to pay.” “How much is it?” It was about what today would be 100–200 euros. I asked, “Can we find the money somehow? Or can I tell my teacher that I’ll work during the summer and pay it back by weaving?” He said, “Of course. If not, your father will find a way.” Unlike the other children, he always fulfilled my wishes, too much, even. I’ll never forget it, he accompanied me to the bus. We traveled for eight days across all of Yugoslavia.

Two days in Herceg Novi, Sarajevo, Skopje, Vojvodina, Novi Sad, everywhere. We toured in a bus with all the students. An incredible experience, a special joy for a child. But when the conditions are poor, and you know your family’s financial state is weak, I felt a certain emptiness inside. I went, but for example, my older sister hadn’t been allowed to go because, “We don’t have money, daughter,” so she didn’t go. The others had gone on trips two years before me, but my older sister couldn’t go.

I was the only one of all the children who went on the school trip. Maybe because my father saw the energy in me, the ability, not to say courage. This courage I had was extraordinary. Maybe it even came to me genetically. I was never afraid, never of anything. Often when we talked with my father… since when he took us to school, the little brothers and the older sister, especially when we reached puberty, the neighbors would say, “It’s not right to send girls to school.”

The neighbors would say, “You shouldn’t send girls to school.” Every time one of my father’s cousins came to our house, he would simply raise his voice at me and even… maybe even raise his hand against me, asking why I was going to school. “You should be staying home and doing the housework.” But I never listened to him. My older sister didn’t go to school for a whole week, she only went three days. Because she listened. “You shouldn’t go to school,” and she stopped. Uncle Metë said that, his name was Ahmet.

I’ll never forget the moments when my father felt so proud because I stood up and answered firmly, saying, “I have a father, Rexhep, you are not my father. I will go to school. I won’t listen to you. I want to be educated. That is my wish, and the wish of my father and mother.” I finished high school. Then came the time to pursue university. My father said, “How should we manage this? I’ve decided to educate you, and I’ve also decided to let you choose your own husband. Bahrie, tell me, do you have someone in mind, some boy?” that was his philosophy during high school, “someone you think you could live with?”

I said, “No, I have friends.” At that time, the ideology was to finish school and start working. He said, “But how can I send you all the way to Pristina?” Because universities weren’t available in Prizren. Before I enrolled, a maternal uncle, the son of a maternal uncle, Agim Paqarizi, now living in Switzerland, came to visit. I told him, “Uncle Agim, dad says I can’t go to university unless I find someone [to go with me], because he’s old and can’t accompany me, can’t help me find housing, or know where I’ll stay or where I’ll go.”

Seeing my determination, because I had told them, “I’m going to get educated,” but with just high school, it wasn’t enough, I wanted to finish university, my uncle said, “I’ll take responsibility and try to help.” My older sister registered because she was engaged, and my father didn’t have a problem with that. “Let her fiancé take care of it,” he said. Then my uncle says… even one of our cousins, an economist, was the director at the student canteen for dormitories, it was called the Student Center, Sadri Kastrati, an economist. I went to him and said, “*Bac*[8] Sadri, my dad says this and that, what should I do?” He said, “I’ll go talk to *Bac* Rexhë.” His name was Rexhep, but they called him *Bac* Rexhë.

Bac Sadri came and said, “Look, *Bac* Rexhë, I’ll secure her a dorm room. Her only job is to study.” “Oh Sadri, you’ve saved me,” he said. “What matters is having a place to sleep, the rest I trust my daughter with. But whenever the time comes about marriage, I won’t be choosing their husbands.” That was always his line. “The sooner,” he’d say. “I don’t want to find anyone until I finish school. Let me finish school, get a job, marriage can wait.” That was his philosophy, he never stopped us. Today, it’s like with drugs, people think something is more valuable when it’s forbidden, and they try it. Our father gave us all the possibilities, and I, speaking for myself, held back, and I succeeded. I graduated in four years.

Part Two

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Now I’d like to begin with the student years. I enrolled. In the first year, I completed all the exams within the year. Extremely happy, overjoyed. Always… we didn’t have a phone at home, we used the neighbor’s. Whenever I passed an exam, I’d call and ask, “Can someone go tell my dad I passed the exam?” It was a special joy. A celebration for the whole family. In the second year of studies, I was… we read literature constantly. I always read books, novels, studied, I don’t even need to mention it, and also the newspapers that came from abroad.

Usually through my uncle, Agim Paqarizi, Avdyl Krasniqi, Xhevë Lladrovci’s father, and other activists, who always supplied us, but in the most secretive way possible. We read in secret, we distributed them, and we acted. My older sister, who wasn’t at university with me, would see us reading books and say, “Read your schoolbooks, leave those.” Because she’d see the newspapers that talked about the future, how things should function, how Kosovo should develop. Like *Zëri i Popullit*, *Gazeta Liria*, and books like *Titistët* (The Titists), *Gjarpërinjtë e Gjakut* (The Blood Serpents).

[8] *Bac* is an Albanian term of respect used to address or refer to an older man, often an uncle, elder, or father figure. It can denote both a familial relation and a respectful form of address for older men in the community.

There were novels I couldn't help but read because of my curiosity, and simply because of my father's advice: you must read, read a lot, always read. He used to say, "The one who reads, advances." That was his philosophy, the more you read, the better. And it's true. Correct. I had the opportunity, as a student, to live and act together with Xhevë Lladrovci, Xhevë Krasniqi, really, Lladrovci was her husband's surname. We worked together, lived in the same room, slept in the same room.

I was very impulsive, very lively, very, I don't even know the word, like… I was full of energy. She was very calm, quiet, polite, wise. I have no words to define her personality. During the time before 1981, before March '81, I was reading the book *Do të jetojmë ndryshe* (We Will Live Differently) by Dhimitër Xhuvani.[9] The entire book was about how protests are organized, how demonstrations are initiated, who starts them, how to shout slogans, what to do, how to write pamphlets. It was very interesting.

Also, a month before the protests, before the protests happened, we read a lot of Constitutional Rights. In fact, I still have the notebook from that time, because books were hard to buy. In this notebook, I wrote down all the political freedoms, what political freedom means, what freedom of the press means, what the right to self-determination means, freedom of public assembly, freedom of expression for the nation, freedom of belief, personal freedom, and so many more.

On February 9, 1981, I had studied all these in Constitutional Rights, plus that book by Dhimitër Xhuvani, *We Will Live Differently*. So, I was overloaded with knowledge, with things that could help us. At that time, of course, I had a lot of understanding from my father too, and from the regime that was the regime it was for the entire Albanian population.

My father always used to say, "If you study and become strong individuals and finish university, we won't need to resist the Serbs. The Serbs will leave on their own, just as they came to Kosovo, they will go. But you study, and you take their place. Become independent. Study as much as you can. Once you finish university and take a job, you remove a Serb." And that was true, his words were true.

So, I'm talking about the time before the March 11 demonstrations,[10] we read a lot, we had a lot of meetings, we had so many ideas. Why, for example, don't students from the other republics and the two autonomous provinces, the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo and the Socialist Province of Vojvodina, have the same rights as Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia? It was so strange. When the moment came, on March 11, a football match had been scheduled and in the evening, we usually went to the student canteen to eat. I remember it like today, my sister and I used to go together.

[9] *Dhimitër Xhuvani* (1934–2009) was a prominent Albanian writer known for his short stories and novels that often depicted rural life, social issues, and the struggles of ordinary people in socialist Albania. His works were widely read during the communist period and are considered part of the Albanian literary canon.

[10] The March 11, 1981 demonstrations in Prishtina were student-led protests initially sparked by poor living conditions in university dormitories. They quickly evolved into larger political demands, including calls for the recognition of Kosovo as a republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The protests marked the beginning of a broader wave of unrest and were met with a heavy police and military crackdown.

There were these tokens used to get food. One token would get you one plate of food. Due to our financial situation at home, with one token we would both eat from one plate, me and my sister. We'd wait in line for hours. The line… there were over 30,000 students at the University of Prishtina. We would wait in line to get our food. My sister, at that time, in 1981, wasn't there, we did not have the means for her to be there in 1981, and she was in Prizren, working at the loom. I was there, in that chaos beyond measure, waiting in line.

When we got close to getting the food, I overheard some male voices behind me, among them were Bajram Kosumi, Kadri Kryeziu, Jonuz Jonuzi from Drenas, and Ramadan Dobra, who now goes by Gashi, he was the leader. They were saying, "Today we must begin the protest." I heard what they said and was surprised by those words. The second I got close to take my food plate, I threw it,[11] there was one Serbian and one Albanian woman handing out food. I don't know, I just left the line, that group of Bajram Kosumi and Jonuz and Kadri were already waiting, we started flipping over all the tables in the canteen.

Kadri knows, I remember Bajram telling me, "Leave, go to the dormitory." All the girls got scared and ran out from the door below, because we were on the second floor, where we ate. I was the only [girl] , all the way to the last table that was there to be turned, we turned them. Both the men and women were surprised: How did I dare? Why? In a way, it's very strange that I didn't feel fear. Literature influenced me a lot to act in that form and that way, and also the advice of my father, and also of Xhevë's father.

Avdyl Krasniqi was one of the main actors who always advised us, guided us that it doesn't have to go like this. Youth, students can make big revolutions. I always remembered his words as well as those of my father. But he always with this philosophy that one must be educated and with education everything is achieved, with education, not with power, not with violence. When I went on March 11 I started… After all the chaos in the canteen was over, we went down to the Committee, the Provincial Committee [of the League of Communists]. At first, we were saying we want better conditions, not to wait two hours, three hours to get a plate of food.

When we got to the Committee, the police surrounded us. They didn't accept to see us, and no representative of the institutions came out to talk. They pushed us away, we returned to the dormitory. In the courtyard of the dormitories, we lit a big fire with tires, with… The dormitory number 5 was under construction, and we were the girls of dormitory number 4. We stayed until the morning in the courtyard of the dormitories. Then I went to Prizren by bus. We returned to the dormitory initially, because I'm forgetting, we gathered in the room, we said, "What will we do next?"

It was decided that on March 26 to gather again, and again to make another demonstration. That night I went to get warmer clothes in Prizren and I told my father, I explained dad this and that, "We started, I started it first," "*Aiii*," he said, "my child, didn't I tell you it should be through education? Because you

[11] The throwing of the plate by the speaker on March 11, 1981, is remembered as the act that sparked the student protest that marked the beginning of the 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo.

don't know who Serbia is. Listen, my child, to what I'm telling you, because I don't want to criticize you for what you did even if you started it but Serbia will not leave Kosovo for 30 years." I [said], "No, all the students are up." Youth, enthusiasm, enthusiastic. He said, "Hopefully, my child, it turns out as you think but it's not possible to turn out like you think." I said, "On the 26th, we will gather again and ask for what belongs to us, we're not asking for anything more."

On the 26th, in the early morning, thousands of students, the whole courtyard of the dormitories was full of students. There then came our representatives, that is, professors, and also those of the Provincial Council, all the political structures. They tried to convince us not to continue, to disperse. But there was no chance to stop that enthusiasm of ours. I even remember today Ali Lajçi, he was the mayor of Peja, had a beard, was very thin. They lifted him up on some sort of, I don't know what it was, like a bin. He spoke so nicely, so well that he gave us strength, he gave us some sort of force. I don't know, really, absolutely none of us had fear. Again, we started to go out to the city's center to protest.

We had police all around us on all sides. I myself don't know what kind of feeling and what kind of situation it was, with those chants and the posters we wrote, the pamphlets we threw on the streets, it's strange how we managed from the 11th to the 26th, we prepared and distributed hundreds of them. *Bac* Agim, now I'm connecting it here, on March 11, I informed him that this and this happened. He had graduated, is a historian, had finished the Faculty of History, was working in Rahovec in the high school. He was a history teacher in the Gymnasium[12] of Rahovec.

I said, "On the 26th we will gather." He said, "On the 26th I will also be there." He came. We were surrounded the whole day. Then, in the evening, they started with smoke to us… the smoke was very heavy, tear gas and they dispersed us. Then, from March 26 to April 1 and 2 ,when the protests happened, imagine, Xhevë and I distributed the pamphlets in the dark, when it got dark, all over Prishtina and all over, after midnight until 03:00-04:00 in the morning. But I always wore my father's white cap, my father's clothes and I took them secretly. And Xhevë was in Prizren. I'm talking about Prizren, because in Prishtina it wasn't a problem, we were in the dormitory.

Absolutely we weren't afraid like they say, neither of animals, nor of dogs, nor of people. Nothing, nothing, nothing, absolutely. As if we were grown men who are not afraid. Often my father would say to me, "You should be afraid." "No," I would say, "I'm not scared. Why should I be scared?" "Why should you be scared?" he would say, "because you are a woman. You don't have the strength, you don't have the ability to face someone if someone comes at you." He meant the male gender. What happened after… and on April 1 and 2, then it started in all of Kosovo, in all corners. Because you are young you don't know you can't even imagine what happened [Addressing the interlocutors].

Why did people from all cities start to arrive in Pristina and come to protest and go out in front of tanks and go out in front of people who were armed to the teeth with those helmets, with shields and yet they don't know how to be afraid? Absolutely this only happened among Albanians. Truly the demonstrations of 1981 were a turning point, not only for us in Kosovo that from then on, and also the

[12] Gymnasium refers to a type of secondary school in many European countries, including Kosovo, that prepares students for university. It typically offers an academically focused curriculum over a period of three to four years and is equivalent to high school in the United States or sixth form/college in the UK.

demonstration of 1968,[13] historically people suffered and acted and paid a very high price. But simply it opened the way also to the other republics of former Yugoslavia to disperse, simply to become independent states and to function and to act. What after the protests…

Anita Susuri: I just want to ask you one more thing…

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Go ahead, maybe I'll forget something. Please, ask me freely.

Anita Susuri: On March 26, the relay[14] also arrived…

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Yes, very good that you reminded me.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested when you were in the dorm room, who was there with you and more specifically what did you discuss and how did you decide to act on March 26?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: On March 11, we decided that night around the fire that we would do the protest on March 26. On March 26, we said that if the people don't rise up too, it's in vain, but we won't stop. Now, the strategy was that everyone should act in their own city. Organize everyone in their own city to have protests. I went once with Xheva to distribute the pamphlets. I said, "I'll take Prizren." Xhevë came with me to Prizren. We went by bus. It was easy for me to leave the house because my father in a way didn't watch over me, since he didn't know that I would go out at night to distribute letters.

On the 26th, the relay was supposed to arrive. We did it [chose that day] intentionally to have more people, to have a crowd. Because students, not just students, but also high school and elementary school students went out to the streets. It was all a kind of symbolism to receive the relay at that time and to have as many people as possible. So that was very interesting, the arrival of the relay in Pristina. There was a woman, I forget the names now, who is said to have accompanied the relay, who brought it. Sanije, Sanije was her name. I can't remember the last name. Sanije. I seem to recognize her face, meaning I know who she was.

[13] The 1968 demonstrations in Kosovo were part of a broader wave of student protests across Yugoslavia, but in Kosovo they took on a distinctly national character. Albanian students and citizens demanded greater rights, including the use of the Albanian flag, improved university conditions, and the recognition of Kosovo as a republic within the Yugoslav federation. The protests were met with police violence and marked a significant moment in the political awakening of Albanians in Kosovo.

[14] Referring to the Relay of Youth, a symbolic baton passed through various towns and republics of Yugoslavia each spring, culminating in a large celebration on May 25 to mark President Josip Broz Tito's official birthday. The event was meant to promote unity, youth solidarity, and loyalty to the state. In 1981, its arrival in Kosovo came just weeks after the outbreak of student protests, adding to the tension and visibility of the political climate.

That's why when the relay came, there was indeed turmoil. Then, there was mistreatment. Because when we entered the dorms after we returned, they also threw tear gas inside, and everyone… now I'm connecting it, because it's very good you reminded me. When they started with the gas, we couldn't jump from the third and fourth floors. When we started to go out the door, the police were there and as much as they could, they used violence on our bodies until we exited the dorm. In fact, sometimes… I gave birth to four children, I haven't spoken about my children.

Anita Susuri: We will get there.

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: We will get there. They beat me and my back was marked in stripes. With those batons, when they hit you once, it stretches and is simply a kind of rubber that is very heavy. Ideology is important. When you have a pure ideology and especially after reading, after the advice, after everything we had previously, you don't feel the pain, it doesn't hurt, how should I say. You are so strong that no matter what happens, you can't say that it hurts. Not at all. The ideal is stronger than the pain. The ideal is very, very… ideology, that is, ingrained in the head, is stronger than spiritual and physical pain in the body. So…

Anita Susuri: These leaflets you distributed, where did you write them? How did you write them?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: They were brought to me written. That means… and I know that the main initiator who had connections abroad, they were written in Switzerland, in Germany, that means they were passed hand to hand. But all of them were brought to me by my uncle, uncle Agim with his friends whose names I don't remember now. Avdyl Krasniqi, Xhevë's father, and Kadri. It also happened that Kadri brought them to me, and we returned them.

We just read them. For example, he said, "Read them." Because the magazines were a few pages, not big. *Liria* for example, *Zëri i Popullit*, *Kushtrimi*. They didn't have many pages. He said, "You have 24 or 48 hours to read them because they must be returned." We stayed up, reading them until morning, until morning, we brought them close to bed and read them.

It's interesting, because earlier I didn't say, Xhevë was there [in the dorm room], my sister for a while but then she didn't meet the criteria, and [she was replaced by] a friend of mine, the name doesn't matter. People who had benefits from the regime and good conditions listened to Serbian language and songs. It always bothered me and Xhevë. It often happened that when our friend left the room, because we were together, Xheva changed the station and put on Radio Tirana. Naturally, sometimes we had tensions. But life, as they say, is a matter of "interest" in quotation marks logically.

This friend of mine always… I was very attached to my father. If I didn't see him for a month or two, I would go crazy. We didn't have much money. We planned it for food, for a book, for basic things. It happened that she often paid my ticket from Prizren, from Pristina to Prizren. I'm grateful that she paid for the ticket because she had the means. Her father was a director, they had much better conditions under the old system. She did not care and I never dared to give her the literature to read.

Ideologically we weren't on the same line. I was ideologically aligned with Xhevë, she was completely differently, she had an ideology… because she had everything. Ideology is very strange and maybe material goods and economic situation affect the mind to think differently. Simply those who were employed under the old regime naturally weren't bothered and lived well. But we, for example, my father and mother were illiterate, not employed, many children, a lot of poverty, we had an ideology, always trying to achieve something, to do something in all possible ways.

Truly we succeeded, because if there hadn't been people with ideology, changes wouldn't happen, revolutions wouldn't happen. Without sacrifice, good things don't come. You must sacrifice to destroy something, to fix it. So, I absolutely do not regret anything I did. Just that I simply feel sorry for my parent, that maybe I caused him emotional pain because he maybe, not maybe but really, was afraid, saying, "Oh daughter, you won't finish university. Bad things will happen now." Truly, after the protests, sanctions began, bad things started happening to me.

In July, on July 11, 1981, they surrounded the house, and the police came to arrest me. We were there, my sister and I, the time was 07:00 in the morning, maybe even earlier. We had just finished. We had started at 06:00 and by 07:00, they had arrived early. Starting that fabric they say, taking it through lakes and slopes, those threads. One this way, one that way. *Bam, bam* {onomatopoeia} knocking at the door. A neighbor came in first, my father opened the door. "Oh Bac Rexhë, the police have come." "Ok, fine. What's up?" "Where do you have the students?" He said, "Here are the students, working."

They came up to the balcony. It was summer, July, the window was open. My father, I remember as if it were today, said, "Oh Bahrie, come with daddy, the police are calling you," "Okay, dad." I got up from there. I was wearing a short-sleeved blouse and pants, jeans, I remember clearly. Mom said, "Oh for God's sake, put on a sweater." She had grabbed a sweater in her hand and offered it to me. In the heat of summer, a winter sweater. "Why should I wear it, mom?" "Just wear it, dear." Her purpose was to protect me. If the beat me, it would hurt less. She said, "Put some pajama under your jeans." "No mom, I can't wear that, it is hot." I listened to her. I had a feeling and put those on. They took me away.

I was leaving… they tied my hands. Leaving the yard gate, there was also an Albanian among the Serbs. "Oh mixhë," my father was walking with a cane, not saying a word, lit a cigarette. "Oh mixhë, we just want to ask her something," you know, like, it's not a big deal. "Oh good boy," my father said, "listen here. Do you see Sfileni?" Sfileni is the highest peak, the mountain above Prizren. "Hopefully, my daughter has done something as great as Sfileni for her state, for her country. It's not a problem, good boy, go." I went in the car. Those jeeps were black.

I said, "Dad, don't worry, freedom to the people, death to fascism." That was our expression, that's how we greeted each other. The policeman lowered my hand. I had both hands tied like this {shows raised tied hands}. He said, "Sit down." He spoke in Serbian, "Don't move." They took me and brought me to a small room, very small. A small table, a pencil, a paper. "Take it," he said, "write what you did on March 11." I pushed the pencil and the paper and said, "I didn't do anything. What did I do?" "What did you do on March 11 and with whom were you and who organized the protests?" Demonstrations then, they did not call them protests, demonstrations.

I said, “I am a student,” “Write.” “No, no,” I said, “I have nothing to write. I am a student and of course I ate at that cafeteria where all the students ate. I happened to be there…” because now you had to… Avdyli, dad, advise us, “You have to know how to defend yourself even when in unpleasant situations, you shouldn’t say, ‘Oh yes, I did this and that.’” We knew, both Kadri and I and everyone, we met and talked so that it wouldn't happen that we give each other up. No matter the torture or whatever happened to us, don’t talk that there is this and this and this. Truly, I did not make a mark on that notebook, I did not write one word.

They tied me to the radiator. “We’ll kill you, better write what you did and who was there,” “You can kill me, do whatever you want but you can’t scare me. I was at the cafeteria, I happened to be there that day.” “Write it.” “Here, I’ll tell you orally.” I was very determined and really didn’t write anything. Truly didn’t want to write a single word… “Kadri says, Bajram says,” this one says, “that you started it.” “No, that’s not true.” Because you had to say it that way to avoid triggering other thing. They kept me there for 48 hours.

The same day they arrested everyone. In the morning, they took Kadri at 11:00. You know, they surrounded all their places too, where they were because it was vacation time. Usually during holidays there are no lectures at the university, exams are in June, July. During the time I was in detention, a distant cousin of my father, Azem Kastrati, worked, he had a higher education. He had studied together with the former police commander of the Prizren Region, some Krasniqi. What was his first name, I can’t remember.

He said, “Your cousin is talking.” He added, “No, man, she’s from poor parents, they barely sent her to school, she can’t be saying anything.” He said, “Listen, I’m telling you to release her.” Sadri told him, “There’s nothing from them, they have no connection.” He tried, for the sake of my father who was truly capable and understood even as an educated man. What happened? After 48 hours… Neither Kadri nor Bajram nor any of them mentioned my name to say she was involved, she did this, no. “There were thousands of students, we do not know who the woman was who threw the plate.” I just want to thank the entire group behind me, those I heard saying we were about to start the demonstration.

I was lucky… if I hadn’t read the book We Will Live Differently, which was all about how to start demonstrations, how to shout slogans, what to do, maybe I wouldn’t have known how to carry out those actions I did on March 11. In fact, after 48 hours they released me. They monitored me, of course, whom I contacted, what I was doing, because that’s how the regime’s tactics were. Kadri was sentenced to ten years, Bajram, Jonuz, Ramadan, all of them were sentenced. Ali Lajçi too, even more. All were sentenced, I was spared and I must thank that distant cousin of my father and just that commander’s readiness who gave order to release me or continue [holding me].

I was released but even after release it started then… I was a scholarship holder of a synthetic fiber organization in Prizren due to the conditions… at the same time I had registered in two faculties, now I remember, Law and Pedagogy. The goal was to receive… back then students were given loans,

scholarships without distinction. It was interesting. Education was very favorable. Not much, but at least minimal. Since both of us were studying, also my sisters at the same time. The accusation began at the faculty.

They sent me a letter at home to answer some questions. This organization where I had won the scholarship said I had to respond. Many questions. Not good questions, logical but provocative questions in the sense of, who are you, how are you. Now I don't remember exactly. What did I do? I took it and wrote, here you can even see the proposed accusation, Law Faculty. I kept it, it's pure chance that it was preserved from the war. Disciplinary trial for a student based on Article 45, paragraph two, point three, can I read it?

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: And {reads} "According to Article 431 of the Criminal Procedure Code and in relation to Article 112 of the Statute of the Faculty of Law in Pristina, I submit this indictment against Bahrie Kastrati, born on 05.03.1960 in the village of Turjaka, municipality of Rahovec, with permanent residence in Prizren, Brahim Rexha Street, number six, third-year law student at the Faculty of Law, on the grounds that… in the letter, this letter from Progress, the synthetic filament industry in Prizren, number 21/81 dated April 27, 1981, from which she also received a scholarship, and in which letter this company, after the outbreak of the March and April 1981 demonstrations, requested some information from the accused, she expressed nationalistic viewpoints by responding in the letter as follows…"

I will now say how I responded. It doesn't matter where I lived. Because there they asked where I had lived during… I answered, it doesn't matter where I lived, nor do I want to be a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia! My declaration regarding national identity during registration is and will always remain Albanian!!! Just as I had written by hand, they wrote it the same way. As for the scholarship, you have no right to stop it even if we don't send the information you requested. Meaning now I'm also answering, you don't have the right to stop my scholarship.

{Continues to read} "With which she committed the disciplinary offense under Article 101, paragraph one, point three of the Statute of the Faculty of Law in Pristina. For this, I propose that the main hearing session be scheduled at this court, during which the disciplinary prosecutor for students and the accused Bahrie Kastrati shall be summoned, and that an examination be conducted of the letter…" that letter I wrote, "containing nationalistic content, dated 17.04.1981, which the enterprise had sent to the accused. An examination shall also be conducted of document number four, 218, from the self-management body of the said enterprise, in which a decision was made to terminate the scholarship."

So, they terminated my scholarship. "Against the accused, and according to an examination of the letter from the commission to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) and the social self-management of this enterprise, dated April 27, 1981, as well as the related letter and photo, after the completion of the main hearing and the presentation of proposed and necessary additional evidence, the defendant shall be declared guilty and shall be sentenced with the disciplinary measure foreseen under Article 98, paragraph two, points one and two of the statute of this faculty." The disciplinary prosecutor for

students of the Faculty of Law, Rexhep Murati, he was an assistant professor. He brought the accusation.

"The disciplinary court, by verdict based on the provisions of the statute, declares the accused Bahrie Kastrati," can't read it, "born on March 5, 1960, in the village of Turjaka, Municipality of Rahovec, with permanent residence in Prizren, Brahim Rexha Street, is guilty because in the letter to Progres…" what I just read, I said I didn't want to become a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. I won't read it all so I don't waste your time. They expelled me, didn't let me register for the semester for three years, and denied me my right. I can give you these documents in written form if you need them.

Now, when they removed me, during this disciplinary process in the faculty, one of the commission members was the late Bardhyl Çaushi, professor of Roman Law in Gjakova. I spoke even harsher than what I had written in the letter because I was in the faculty. He was looking at me since there were also those tied to the regime. There was no chance. He was opening his eyes wide, looking at me. A sort of signal to understand: this can't go on. I never had any shame but always had that courage I had since I was a child and grown up as a student. They really decided to expel me and not allow me to sit exams.

When it ended, a student came and said, "Go outside, Professor Bardhyl is calling you," he said, "come to the sixth floor." I remember as if it were today, in the faculty, in the office. I asked why he was calling me. When I went, he said, "Listen," he said, "Bahrie. What do your parents do for work?" "Nothing, they're illiterate." "How many children are you?" "Nine alive, one brother passed away." "Do you know how important your education is?" "Yes, I know," I said, "my father allowed us, no other girl from our neighborhood or village has been to school except my sister and me." He said, "You," he said, "even though I've observed you several times, attend every exam. Study more than you've studied until now. If, eventually, a professor says you don't have the right to take the exam, just leave and come tell me."

He simply wanted to protect my interests. Because if I hadn't gone to university for three years, what would have happened? I would have gotten married somewhere and I would've been stopped. I passed every single exam. We had sociology; the sociology exam was given by an old professor. He took the register, looked at it with glasses and said, "You," he said… in front of the students, the hall was full. Before, we would enter the hall and take the questions, three questions, you'd draw a ticket, and you had the questions, not oral questioning. What did the sociology professor do? He saw my name there. He said, "You didn't have the right," he said, "to sit the exam."

I didn't say a word, I knew, who knows what would happen to me, because I was young. If it were today, I'd know how to react but back then… just tears were streaming down my face. He said, "Step outside but wait a bit. Then he turned to the students," he said, "listen here. This girl," he said, "steals from the state, she ruins the state, she destroys the state," he said, "she didn't have the right to sit the exam, but she signed up. She," he said, "is the one who wanted to destroy Yugoslavia." That hit me even harder. When he said, "Get out," I was trembling. I went straight to Professor Bardhyl. He wasn't there, I waited at the door, he came.

I said, “The sociology professor took my index and said I should be expelled entirely, not just not allowed to take the exam but removed from the faculty altogether. That’s what he said.” He said, “Listen,” he said, “is there still time for the exam?” “Yes,” I said, “three or four more days, there are many students.” He said, “Not tomorrow, but the day after, in the morning before the professor arrives, wait at the door. When he enters, say ‘Good morning, I apologize professor,’ just say that.” Back then we didn’t have that closeness between professors and students.

He told me that, so I went. He said, “Don’t ask for the index, don’t react at all. Enter and stay there even if you just listen. Next time, take this subject voluntarily but when the assistant is asking, not this professor.” The assistant was someone else. His assistant. He was even a rector. What was his name again? Now I can’t remember. I just can’t remember…

Anita Susuri: Ibrahim?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: No, no. It was Sadiku, his last name was Sadiku, he was also a rector in the law faculty.

Anita Susuri: Ah, in the law faculty.

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: In the law faculty, yes. The next time, in the next exam term, he said, “I will take your index.” He had taken the index, and after a student brought it to me during the lecture. Because we used to attend third- and fourth-year lectures together, and he gave it to me. Then I voluntarily took the exam with the assistant and got a grade of seven. I was very happy. I told my father what had happened, because I couldn’t not tell him. He said, “Didn’t I tell you, it’s not good, daughter?” I said, “Yes, dad, you were right, and I agree with you, but I can’t separate from all of them. We are united.” He said, “Yes, daughter, but you don’t know who Serbia is.” He often repeated, “You don’t know who Serbia is.”

And the role of *Bac* Sadri too… I was also expelled from the dormitory, I forgot that. They expelled me from the dorm, expelled from the faculty, I was left with nothing. *Bac* Agim and *Bac* Sadri found me an apartment near the faculty and even said, “This has influenced…” because we had nothing. Two students, younger children, father unemployed. How could we manage? They stopped my scholarship, I had no way. They paid my rent for a while. Then after all that happened, I passed my exams on time, I even passed that subject.

Other professors didn’t register me as someone without the right to take the exam, because even our professors were in trouble. Naturally, they had procedures, who respected the former regime and who didn’t. There were professors who continued working even after the protests. Some were removed

later in the '90s, others remained and worked. Some worked in home-schools,[15] homes turned into schools

Part Three

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: After I finished my studies, a few months, six or seven months before I graduated, I met the man who is now my husband, Naim Besimi. It's interesting, if there's still time, how I met him. Everything was by chance, totally ad hoc. You could say it was love at first sight, and it turned out successful, we are still together today. But the one who really influenced my decision to marry and to meet someone was my father.

Every night my father would say, "Once you start working, you won't find anyone to marry. Please, now is the time." I would say, "Not until I start working, until I help you," because my sister still hadn't finished her studies, she graduated after me. Her husband had been imprisoned, so naturally she lagged behind with exams, she would go visit him in prison, she had many other troubles. I had the will, I finished university on time, and I met Naim completely by chance. We were sending money to Kadri Kryeziu in prison. At the post office, he approached me like this and said, "Can I say a few words?" When I saw him, it felt like an electric current hit me. I said, "No," thinking he was going to ask for something or say something inappropriate..

He said, "I am interested in having you as my wife." I remember it like today. I was shocked, like a jolt of electricity, and I said nothing. My sister and I went home. When I got home, I told my mother, "Mom, a guy approached me," I was with my sister, we had sent money at the post office, as people used to do. I said, "If he means it sincerely, I will marry him. If he's lying, I won't rest until I find him and confront him wherever he is." My mother was shocked. "Why are you saying this? Until now, you always said, 'No, no, no.'" I said, "Because every day dad nags me to find someone, says once I start working, I'll never marry, 'Now choose, find someone.'"

When my father came home in the evening from work, he used to work in the fields of Progres, privately, my mother told him, "Hey man," like that, they didn't use names back then, "Bahrie said this." "And where is he from?" "From Lower Serbicë," near Pirama, a village. My father took his walking stick and went to the bus station and to the village. He asked three people, at the beginning of the village, in the middle, and at the end. "Do you know the Besimi family? The family of Ramadan Besimi?" (Ramadan was Naim's father.) All three said, "Yes, we know them. They're educated, doctors, good people, their ancestors were imams, but now they all have university degrees."

[15] Home schools refer to clandestine education organized in private homes during the 1990s in Kosovo, after Serbian authorities shut down Albanian-language schools and dismissed Albanian teachers as part of a broader campaign of repression. To preserve education in the Albanian language, teachers, students, and families organized parallel schooling systems in homes, garages, and other improvised spaces.

My father was very happy. He said, “I thought if two people said something bad, I’d feel sorry for Bahrie if she ended up there. But if two good and one bad, maybe one was just envious.” But since all three said good things, he was happy. When he got home, he said to my mom, “Wife,” “Yes?” “Bahrie made a very good choice. I hope that boy’s not lying.” Now Naim said to me, “Can we meet again, same place, not tomorrow but the day after?” My now husband said, “Can we meet the day after tomorrow?” I told my mom, “He said let’s meet the day after, not tomorrow.” Mom said, “What? Oh dear, what has he done to you? You always used to say no, no,” I said, “Now, dad says I need to find someone, and I’ve found him.”

After two days I went with my father. This may sound strange to you young girls, taking your father with you. We went to meet him at the post office in the middle of Prizren. Near [the hotel] Theranda, you know it if you have ever been to Prizren. He said, “Look, with your father…” he was nervous, because he loved me a lot and knew my courage and intellect. He said, “Look, if he’s a liar, you’ll see. If he’s not serious, he won’t show up. But if he is, he’ll come with your dad. Remember what I say, if you have even a little respect for me, you must listen to your father while he’s alive. He knows best.”

We walked straight ahead. I saw him a few meters away. I said, “That’s him, dad.” “Alright,” he said, “don’t look, just keep walking…” Naim came straight to us. “Good afternoon, mixhë.” “Good afternoon,” he spoke with my father. My father asked him how he was, and Naim asked back. “Let’s go get a drink,” Naim said, there was a bakery nearby. “No,” my dad said, “we’re not going anywhere. My daughter told me you’re interested in her. Listen to what I’m saying: if you’re sincere, even if you go blind or lame, my daughter will support you, serve you for life. But if you’re not, go your way and leave her alone. Don’t start trouble.”

Naim laughed and said, “I’m serious. I graduated, I’m working.” He was working as an expert. “I finished university in Belgrade,” he said. I got nervous. “In Belgrade?” A chill ran through me. “A student from Belgrade? Who knows…” because we had very tense relations with Belgrade. “Alright,” said my father. “Congratulations. From this moment, she’s yours. Keep her or marry her right away, just let us know. Don’t make any moves before marriage.” That was the mentality back then. “Goodbye,” he said, shaking hands. I was going to leave with my dad. “No, my daughter, don’t come with me,” I said. “Go, walk with him.” Of course, he was pleased, and so was I.

We were engaged for six months. Immediately we got engaged, but for those six months, I couldn’t finish even a single drink in front of him because I was so shy. I was truly and deeply in love with Naim. Meanwhile, I was gathering information, asking what kind of family they were. Naturally, they were educated and all, but I kept thinking, “He graduated in Belgrade.” Later I heard from a neighbor that he had been the head of the student society Përpjekje at the time. Then his sister told me he was also dealing with issues related to the student protests at work. Just one sentence he said… “Well, someday Kosovo will become a Republic. It’s not just today that people are still talking, all those hardships and all those things that were done by the students." They sentenced him to two months in prison.

[The interview is interrupted for technical reasons]

Anita Susuri: We left off when he was sentenced to two months in prison.

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Yes. My husband was sentenced to two months. It was very stressful, especially for my father. "Ah," he said, "now Serbia, the Serbs won't leave you alone, they won't let you work, they'll cause damage. But never mind them, even you, my daughter, won't get a job." I asked, "Why? How?" He said, "Because it's a problem. You don't know who Serbia is." He always said, "You don't know what Serbs are." But thanks to my husband Naim's brothers, one was a pediatrician, the other a sociologist, two cousins were cardiologists, another a veterinarian, the entire Besimi family was in medicine…

As a pediatrician, he had treated the children of all those former government officials. That helped, of course, and so did his job, he worked at the Center for Social Work as a court expert for minors, alcoholics, and prostitution cases at the time. Then they appealed to the Prishtina Appellate Court, but it didn't proceed. The sentence was turned into a fine, and he was spared. That was his luck. And mine too. Initially, after I finished my degree, I applied to a company called Univerzal, a construction firm in Prizren at the time. I was accepted as an intern for a year.

After that, a job opening was announced at the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund in Prizren for a position as a reference officer for all types of pensions. There were Serbs, but no Albanians in such positions, only one. And the majority of the population was Albanian. I was accepted there with a decision as a legal officer. The salary was extremely high, about the same as the current mayor's salary, just for a reference officer in the pension department. Ten days before our wedding, I was called for this new job. I got married on June 28, 1986. And when I received my first paycheck, it's important to tell what happened.

Considering my will, my sacrifices, not to mention those of my parents, and everything we went through, like every other girl, and considering my father's advice… Back then, salaries were handed out in envelopes at the office. The manager would bring it to you at the end of the month. I completed my first month and received my paycheck. Naim came to pick me up, he had a car at that time. I got in the car, and we drove off.

I took the paycheck from my bag and said, "Here, Naim, they gave me my salary." "No," he said, "why are you giving it to me?" I said, "Because you are the head of the household." "No," he said, "put it in your bag, let's go give it to your father." I will never forget that joy, that happiness. That moment, often I say, if I had today's wisdom, I would have hugged him and thanked him, but I just trembled and was overwhelmed with joy. I said, "Thank you," with my mouth, but I didn't know how. We went, it was summer. Dad was outside, sitting under an apple tree in the yard, as he always did when there was no work. We entered the house, and I didn't wait.

I just said, "Dad, I got my paycheck," the first one he had helped me earn through education. "No," he said, "put it in your bag. You are married now. You must give your paycheck to your husband. I didn't raise you like this." He thought I hadn't given it to Naim. I said, "I swear, Naim told me to. How could you think I didn't give it to him?" "Well," he said, "that's what I thought." I said, "No, I gave it to him. He

told me to give it to you, 'I didn't marry you for your salary.'" I was so happy. He said, "No, no. Keep the money, you have your life ahead of you. Tomorrow children will come. I will sit with the boys slowly. I don't want your money. You have already rewarded me by graduating. That's my reward and my joy, not money. Not money for me, money for your husband. What did I tell you? Whatever your husband says, let it be so."

I'll never forget. When Naim was leaving, my father said, "Look, Naim, I'm giving you one wish, while I'm alive and when I'm dead. If my daughter, this Bahrie, whom I love so much and whom I consider both a daughter and a son, doesn't listen to you or doesn't do as you wish, immediately," he said, "take another wife." He told this to Naim. I stopped. "Yes, yes," he said, "even when I die, I leave you this wish, take another one." Naim started laughing because it pleased him. I said, "There will never be another woman, because I will always listen to you. Whatever you say, like you said before, write it down, and I'll follow it to the letter." He laughed.

My father didn't want to accept the salary at all. He said, "Not today or ever while your daughter loves you should her salary come here," and now Naim said, "Give it to your mother." My mother said, "No, God forbid. No, no. I can't and I won't take it." In short, that was the end. We left the money in the yard and went home. Before the next month came, Naim's sister, here I even have the photos of Naim's sisters, his mother and two sisters {she shows a photo}. The eldest has died, and this is the second. She said, "You know what?" Because we were poor, we didn't have armchairs or couches, no furniture. We used to call them 'shilte', those foam mattresses that went around the room.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: She said, "Bahrie, you're good because you have a good salary. You should apply for credit at the furniture stores and buy a full living room set. A cabinet, a TV." At that time, color TVs had just come out. I said, "Maybe I'm not eligible." She said, "Yes, you are. I'll go to our boss," we had a Serbian boss named Zoran Ogarević, "I'll talk to him, we'll fill out the paperwork and send it." I said, "Okay, I'll ask Naim." She said, "No, Naim won't mind." "Please ask Naim." She called her brother. He said, "Of course, go ahead."

We filled out the paperwork and sent it. I really wanted it, but I couldn't insist because I also remembered my father's words that once you're married, you have to think only about your husband and your new family. She went and bought a full room set, loaded it in a truck, and sent it to the house. Our house was near Naim's sister's. She had seen me grow up, but I didn't know that her brother was interested in me. When the furniture arrived and they knocked on the door, my father answered. They said, "These are the items…" "No," he said, "you've made a mistake." Because they hadn't told my father, neither had I. He said, "Mistake." They said, "No, Miss Sabria, your neighbor, said so. Your daughter works at the pension office?" "Yes." "She bought them on credit." "Oh dear, this is going to be a scandal," he thought. It seemed outrageous to him.

He didn't let them unload the furniture in the yard, he stopped them in the street. When we came back from work at 3:00 PM, my father said, "Oh Naim, why do you listen to what Bahrie says?" "No, I'm not really listening to her," he replied. "No, no, no," my father said. "You know what? Bahrie has other

values, she respects her mother, the family, me. These things are nothing. Her salary covers it all. She will pay off this credit over 18 months, and you won't even notice what's been bought." Then they unloaded everything and brought it inside.

That period, Naim's dedication to my family, was truly, truly, truly remarkable. I will never forget it. I return to the moment when I was worried because he had studied in Belgrade, but then when I came to understand his activism and commitment, I was beyond happy. Truly, I am very happy that I lived with him.

Part Four

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: I worked, that is, from the time I started working after finishing university until the war started, as a referent for invalid pension insurance. After the war, I was elected head of the pension administration. In fact, it was written as director, but the funds had been stolen, taken by Serbia. Our citizens had no pensions. I worked until 2003. In 2003, I was promoted in the Ministry, within the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare in Pristina, for foreign world pensions...

I completed my tasks very successfully and with great willingness to secure the rights of our citizens who had lived abroad and returned. But in 2005, toward the end of the year, the contracts of the employees, ten employees I managed, ended. I had some sources who informed me that the clerks handling the work were asking for, like, a lawyer's commission, ten percent of the pension amount, as a fee. They took contributions worth thousands of marks at the time. They took them.

Simply, I gathered the evidence, and at the end of the year I didn't extend the contracts of the two employees who had done this kind of thing. I didn't renew their contracts. But then I see, they were brought back. Their contracts hadn't been terminated. When something is meant to happen, everything happens for a reason. When I saw that their contracts hadn't been terminated, and yet the same employees, the same division were reinstated... I didn't even type it up on a computer. I took a blank sheet of paper and wrote my resignation from the position of head of the division for foreign pensions.

I told the postman, "Take it to the ministry. Give it to the permanent secretary and the minister, and starting tomorrow I will no longer be part of this workplace staff." Within half an hour, the minister, Ahmet Isufi at the time, called me. He said, "Come to a meeting urgently." I went. He said, "What's going on? Why did you act this way?" I brought everything with me. I said, "You have it too. Here are the contracts. The reason I wrote this letter, this irrevocable resignation, is this." He said, "We'll try to move them to another department." I said, "No, no, they're in the same building. They'll still be doing the same work. As of today, I can't…" And I've never regretted it in my life, and I don't regret it now.

I said, “Go ahead, choose whoever you want, but our citizens who worked the hardest jobs in the West shouldn’t be taken advantage of by a clerk who’s on salary…” A lawyer has the right to negotiate and take whatever they agree on. But a clerk who is obligated to carry out an official decision, I said, “I can’t accept that. Thank you for your willingness, but you haven’t treated the letter and the assessments I gave you with seriousness and precision.” As people say, it was simply fate.

Since that day, I was no longer the division head. When I went home, to be honest, I felt a bit down, thinking, tomorrow I won’t be going to work. Anyone who takes such an action has doubts or regrets… but I didn’t regret it. My husband came home and I said, “Look, I’m a bit upset because I did this myself,” I said, “but I didn’t expect it to turn out like this.” He said, “You did the right thing. You passed the bar exam. I’ll rent you an office, buy you furniture, you can read newspapers, watch TV.” Somehow, he lifted my spirits because I really was a bit down. “Thank you,” I said.

He had actually found an office for rent. I opened my law office, and since 2006 I’ve been working as a lawyer and I’m extremely happy. And now my daughter has bought a property, but I’ll have access to both spaces, this one and the other. Simply… it all happened after marriage and just as I was nearing the end of my career. But it’s worth telling the story of my husband and the children I gave birth to, for the sacrifices and the bad things that happened, even after the birth of my first son.

I gave birth to four children: boy, girl, boy, girl. I named my first son Durim, because we truly endured a lot due to the political ideology, and so I named him *Durim* (meaning patience). I delivered him by C-section, Nada Todorović, a Serbian woman, was my doctor, and her husband, Duško Todorović, was a surgeon too. The boy I gave birth to weighed four kilograms and lived for ten days. Until the ninth day… based on information I received from the nurses who worked in the nursery ward, he was poisoned, and my son died, my first. I’ll never forget walking out with empty arms, as they say, without my baby.

I developed an abscess, what they call in medicine, a very bad and severe one. My son died in Prishtina, and I spent a month in the hospital. After Prishtina, I lost several kilos. Naim took me to Ljubljana, back then we still had the right to travel by plane. In Ljubljana, they found I had a very serious infection and told me that if I hadn’t gone there to heal, I would never have been able to have another child. From that moment on, I had regular checkups, and I gave birth to three more children: Altina, Getoar (my son), and Linda, my youngest daughter.

I wouldn’t have been able to give birth again, I would’ve remained childless, and they really would’ve succeeded in their goal, both what they thought and what they wanted, indirectly. And also directly, but this was indirect, through people who operated within institutions. The other children, Altina and Getoar, I always went to Ljubljana for checkups, gave birth to them, and I’m very happy because they are the most fulfilling part of my soul. Beyond the fact that I’ve given all I could throughout my life to

help them succeed as students and now as professionals, they are outstanding professionals and also wonderful family people. Both are married, Altina and my son Getoar.

I simply fulfilled that closure and my father's final wish, that children must be well educated, treated well, and given the best possible. They have rewarded me with their success, their work, and everything. What more can I say? Now, in the work I do as a lawyer, I'm very satisfied and happy because the legal field is an ocean, not just a sea.

We get all kinds of cases imaginable, and with calmness, dedication, and love for the work, I manage to succeed every day. I achieve success, and both my clients and I are satisfied. So, up to now, I feel extremely happy. Ask me questions because I might forget and won't be able to answer. I've probably left out many other things that...

Anita Susuri: I also wanted to ask you about a very important topic, the last war in Kosovo. How did you experience it?

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Oh, how well, very well. Look, this is very important, a very good and important question to be expressed. Back when we were students, when Xhevë and I used to sleep in the same room, she would say, "Bahri, we should get married, like any woman who gets married. But don't forget, if we don't liberate ourselves from the occupier, we can't have children and then be massacred and killed." She said those words before the war even started. "We can't and we shouldn't. We shouldn't because we must first think about getting liberated."

When the war began in Drenica, I still had contact with Xheva through certain people. I was very… angry every day because I was already married and had two children, both a daughter and a son. Altina was in the second grade, and my son was in the first. They were still little. I wanted to go to Drenica. I spoke with my husband and said, "You have two brothers, and two sisters-in-law. If I die, they'll take care of the kids. Women die in childbirth, anything can happen, and it's not the end of the world. They know how to ask for water, they know how to ask for water."

He said, "Listen…" I didn't know my husband was involved in the KLA, in the operations unit. He wasn't on the front line, but he worked in logistics, food, clothing, everything needed for the war. I was also involved. We made uniform emblems. I worked on everything until it all started. But when the war began, I couldn't find peace. Xheva was fighting, and I was at home with the kids, remembering her words that she always said: "We shouldn't have children just to be massacred." Especially when the bombings started.

When the bombings began, and I remember it like it was today, Naim's oldest sister said, "We shouldn't let any light show, cover the windows with blankets," she said, "Cover them or the Serbs will come and kill us." My son couldn't speak properly yet. He spoke with errors. I said, "I want to go," and

Naim said, “How?” I said, “I want to go. I won’t stay another minute because I can’t. I can’t find peace.” He said, “Alright. I’ll put on a dress and stay with the kids. You go. The KLA needs me more than they need you. You could go to the front and be killed within a day. But I’m more valuable.”

I stopped and said, “Why didn’t you ever tell me?” He said, “These things aren’t talked about, you’re a woman,” and he laughed. I said, “So what if I’m a woman? Shota Galica was a woman too,” I said. “Come on, let’s go together.” He said, “I can’t. I’m in operations.” He explained it to me. I froze, I felt terrible. Then I couldn’t stop thinking about what to do. One day, I left the kids at my mother’s and took my sister, the one right after me. Her husband was in the war, in the Pashtrik zone. Sahit Morina is my sister Shkurta’s husband.

I said, “Please, let’s go to the headquarters.” It was in Bërshanc. She said, “No, sister, what are you talking about? What do you want?” I said, “Let’s take them something, some socks or something,” trying to trick her. I was planning to take her to Prizren and join [the war effort] myself. I didn’t want to tell her directly because I knew she wouldn’t listen. I had a Yugo, a small, beat-up car. It was good for the time, but still small. We left. It was a Wednesday, market day. I went and bought 20 pairs of wool socks, put them in the trunk. I bought two crates of apples and some other little things, put them in the trunk, and we were off.

When we got to Reshtan, a village in Suhareka, and then headed toward Peqan and from there to Breshan, the Serbian police stopped us. They said, “*Izađi napolje* [Serbian: Get out].” I got out. They had rifles. “Put your hands up,” they said, and I did. They opened the trunk. “Where are you going?” I said, “We… our house is…” My sister had a house in Peqan i Vogël, “Our house is there.” Luckily, they just wanted to harass us.

A bit farther away, there was another police car with a policeman who was a neighbor of my mother’s. He recognized me. “Stoj, stop,” he said. “Pusti ga, let her go.” He cursed at me in Serbian and said, “*Uđite unutra, idite* [Serbian: Get in, go],” angrily, with frustration. We drove off. My sister was shaking. “Why, my sister? Didn’t I tell you not to come?” I said, “You told me it’d be fine, that nothing would happen.” We kept going. It started to rain. The small car had a full trunk. When we arrived by car, I unloaded everything. They welcomed us. A certain Nehat Basha was the commander of the zone. He brought me into a room. We met Sahit. They were at the headquarters.

He said, “Why are you here?” I said, “I want to join, Sahit. Please send Shkurta back to Prizren somehow. I,” I said, “I don’t want to ask anyone’s permission. I didn’t ask anyone during the ‘81 protests, and I won’t now. We’ve waited for this day for so long. There’s no discussion—I want to join.” “Alright, Bahri, I’ll ask the commander. Come on.” “Do you have your ID with you?” “Yes.” He took down my information, name, surname, my readiness. He said, “But,” he said, “we don’t have space for women.” You know, for sleeping. He said, “Listen, you need to go back. You’re a lawyer.” He asked me everything in chronological order, took notes on what I do, where I work, everything.

He said, “We’ll need you soon, tomorrow or the day after. We need someone for the military court to prosecute deserters, traitors, and others.” Somehow he convinced me, and said, “But in case more women step forward, we’ll create a group and find a way to bring you in through certain connections.” I agreed. I said, “I bought some things.” And now, what’s most important to mention, since everything is coming back to me, is that from the day I started working until today, my husband, Naim Ramadan Besimi, has never once asked me how much I earned, where the money went, how, what, anything. He always let me manage it myself. He never said, “Let’s do this or that with my contribution.”

I want to tie this to the fact that I bought everything myself—both what I needed and what I wanted. I didn’t have to report to anyone in that way. Of course, I never misused anything. Even today, I try to do everything within reason. So I went back. I took my sister, we unloaded everything, left it there, and returned. When we came back, they started raiding homes and expelling people from the entire Arbana neighborhood. It used to be called Dushanovë; now it’s Lagjja Arbana. My youngest sister, the fourth in line, her husband was in the war. Bekim, who today is recognized as a martyr. Bekim Lutfi Thaçi. He brought my sister Hysa with two children, a girl and a boy, along with my mother and father, to stay with us in the city. My mother’s house was more centrally located.

She said, “They kicked us out.” My son was scared. The bombings had started. Naim was constantly on the move, helping the KLA. He had spoken with a friend through certain channels, via what they used to call walkie-talkies. They were figuring out a way: could we reach the border in Macedonia, in Kërçovë? That friend from Kërçovë used to work at Feronikeli and had family in Kërçovë. One evening, Naim came home and said, “Tomorrow we’re heading to Kërçovë, Macedonia.” I said, “No, I’m not going.” He said, “You have to go, because this is war. Look, they’ve already expelled these people, they could do the same to us. We must get the children to safety.”

So, for a few days, it was me with my two kids and two sisters-in-law, eight children in total, three of theirs and my two. The three of us, three wives, with the children went to Kërçovë for three months. I lost 20 kilos in those three months. I didn’t know where my brothers were, where my husband was, where my mother was, or where any of my close family members were. I’ll never forget when the agreement was signed in June, and we were finally allowed to return—that joy we felt.

It was a moment, a very happy event for all Albanians, but also for me and my children. Still, it was extremely difficult, very, very hard, to stay in a place you’d never been before, knowing a war was happening everywhere, and seeing the constant horrifying scenes on TV. But as they say, a person is stronger than stone, and it’s true, they really are. We don’t break, we have to endure it all and keep going, keep living.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much! If there’s anything else you’d like to add at the end.

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: I want to thank you deeply for taking the initiative to write history, especially the history of girls and women who have sacrificed, taken action, and done what they could, as much as they were able. I thank you very much because many years have passed since the day I was born until today. I just turned 64 on March 5. Honestly, it feels like I've lived 640 years, not 64. So I thank you and hope that our country, and no country in the world, ever has to face war. I hope the war in Ukraine ends. I hope we never hear of war again, anywhere. I wish for peace everywhere in the world, including here and across the globe. I have nothing else to add. Thank you very much!

Anita Susuri: Thank you once again!

Bahrie Kastrati Besimi: Thank you! It's important to mention the moments and events from when I worked as a clerk in the disability pension department, where our boss was a Serb named Zoran Ogarević. He always had a kind of hatred, naturally, toward us. I was the only one of all the employees who joined the protests every day. There were protests even after the '81 demonstrations, in the '90s, and so on.

When I returned from protests, he would say, "This won't do. You don't have the right to go out." I'd say, "I'm exercising my right. There's no place in the world where you can deny me the right to go out and support my people and my country. You say I don't have the right, well, I go during the time I'm legally entitled to take my lunch break." Luckily, the protests were happening right at that time. "And no work is left undone, I do my job. Just remember what I'm telling you. You're the director today, but I believe I'll be here tomorrow. The future belongs to us."

It was like slapping him in the face, he felt ashamed, and even tried to intervene by pressuring my husband, saying, "Not only is she going out, but she's also speaking in ways that aren't appropriate for a lawyer." And truthfully, after the war, I ended up taking his place, I became the director. And I sent my regards, meaning, I made sure he found out, since there were people who had worked with him… he had gone to Belgrade. They told him, "Tell Zoran that Bahrie is now the director, just like she said back then." And I used to say in meetings, "Today it's you, but tomorrow it'll be us. I will be the director here because I deserve it and I have the academic background to manage this institution."

I'm truly happy that I contributed and gave my best. When we returned after the war, we started with 28 marks per person, distributed equally. I worked with the greatest willingness possible. The courtyard of the building where I worked would be packed with pensioners because we had to collect their data, they weren't recorded. All night long, even Naim Besimi helped me with ID cards… I collected them and said, "Come tomorrow and I'll issue your verification letters." Meaning, I had to document and register them so they could get paid… all done equally, and it stayed that way. That's how it's remained to this day, years, not just days.

Pensioners still aren't being paid as they should be, based on their contributions. They're simply being paid unfairly and improperly, both those who worked before the war and those who worked after. The legal regulations were not done properly. I was a member of the disability pension commission working to draft the law. We prepared a draft law and sent it to the Assembly, it was never passed. Why? Because the Pension Trust was founded to benefit a small group of individuals who are overly favored and overpaid. Meanwhile, the general population and our pensioners are being paid an amount that doesn't even qualify as alms.

Truly, it's unacceptable, what has happened and how things are still being done today. It's very wrong and outrageous that the condition for receiving a pension is having 15 years of contributions before the war. That's an anomaly, it's unjust. Still, I don't know what the future holds. I have a lot of hope in the youth, that things will improve and be set right, the way they function in every democratic state and every country in the world. Not for a small group of people to dominate, because we've suffered enough. Enough. Thank you once again, very much!