

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH HIDAJETE OSMANI BYTYQI

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Duration: 73 minutes

Present:

1. Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Renea Begolli (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: Ms. Hidajete, if you could please introduce yourself, your year of birth, place of birth, and something about your background and your immediate family?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I am Hidajete Osmani, born in the village of Lower Makresh. Back then, it was part of the Municipality of Gjilan, as far as I know, but now it belongs to the Municipality of Novobërdë. My parents are Kadri Osmani and Shukrie Bunjaku. We stayed there for a year after I was born, and then we moved to Gjilan. In 1963, we moved to Prishtina. That's where I started school, from first grade all the way through to graduating from the Faculty of Albanian Language and Literature.

But this whole journey up to graduating from university includes various events, starting with my father's first imprisonment. In 1969, he wanted to organize a commemoration for the events of the 1968 demonstration,¹ in which he had also participated, through a written leaflet,² which he entrusted to someone. According to what they said, that person handed it over to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, and my father was imprisoned.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember... First I'd like to ask...back in '68 you were a child. Do you remember, for example, your father's involvement in organizing the demonstrations? Was he a participant, or just...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In '68, I don't clearly remember what role he had in organizing, but I do know that he participated in the demonstration. He was more active during the anniversary, he was

¹ The 1968 demonstrations were a series of student-led protests that took place in Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, demanding greater rights for Albanians. In Kosovo, protesters called for the recognition of Albanian as an official language, the establishment of a university in Prishtina, and equal development opportunities. These demonstrations marked a significant moment in the political awakening of Kosovo Albanians and were met with harsh repression by Yugoslav authorities.

² Leaflets were underground publications used by Albanian activists in Yugoslavia to spread political messages, raise national awareness, and call for action or resistance. Often produced secretly and distributed discreetly, these leaflets were a key tool of communication for dissidents, and possession or circulation of them was considered a serious offense by the Yugoslav authorities.

involved with his friends, and they wrote that leaflet together. As far as I know, he was imprisoned for a month at that time. Then in 1971, he was imprisoned again, and once more in 1974... In 1971, he was arrested because he was considered a threat, since Tito³ was visiting Kosovo.

In 1974, I remember it more clearly, I can recall it...That's when I had also started being active, and I had formed the first trio, the first cell of three, with my classmate Sevdije Grajčevci, the cousin of Fazli Grajčevci.⁴ That's why we... I'm sure you know and have heard of Fazli Grajčevci, and with Haxhere Syla, the sister of Gani Syla, who was also a political prisoner and has since passed away. In '74, my father was sentenced to nine years in prison.

The hardships our family went through are well known. We didn't have the means to live, but my father's friends who remained outside, such as Gani Syla, Mehmet Hajrizi,⁵ helped us with the visits, food, education, everything. They supported us financially. We bought our house near the Student Dormitories...

Anita Susuri: What was your life like in Prishtina as a child? How do you remember it, with everything that was going on with your father? How did your family's dynamics continue?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Our relatives stood by us, especially our uncles and aunts. But one uncle in particular, to single him out from the others, was Mustafë Bunjaku. They had also interrogated and even physically tortured him, but he helped us a lot financially. Then there was also support from our social circle. I remember once we didn't visit my father for about two years, because he was in Slovenia. My brother had grown so much that when we finally went to visit, my father didn't recognize him. He asked, "Who is this?" We were stunned, we never imagined he wouldn't recognize his own son. But two years is a long time for a child's development.

Anita Susuri: So then, that means...

³ Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the president of socialist Yugoslavia and its authoritarian leader from the end of the Second World War until his death. While celebrated by some as a symbol of unity, many Albanians in Kosovo viewed his regime as repressive, particularly due to its suppression of Albanian national identity, political expression, and cultural rights. Tito's visits to Kosovo were often accompanied by heightened surveillance and arrests of those considered politically "dangerous."

⁴ Fazli Grajčevci (1945–1969) was a prominent Albanian political activist from Kosovo and a member of the underground nationalist movement opposing Yugoslav rule. He was known for his involvement in the resistance for greater Albanian rights and was arrested multiple times. In 1969, he was killed under suspicious circumstances while in Yugoslav police custody, and is widely regarded by Albanians as a martyr of the national cause.

⁵ Mehmet Hajrizi is a former political activist and public figure from Kosovo who was involved in the underground Albanian nationalist movement during the socialist Yugoslavia period. He was part of the so-called *llëgalja* and contributed to the production and distribution of political materials advocating for Albanian rights and the demand for Kosovo to become a republic within Yugoslavia.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: So then, for that visit, the money was provided by a friend and her husband, Vahide Braha and [Meriman Braha](#). I don't know if you've heard of them...

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Life was difficult, but the desire for education was never lacking despite all those hardships. What worked in our favor was that we lived in Prishtina. Had we stayed in Gjilan, where we owned a house, I probably wouldn't have been able to finish university. That was a big advantage for us, having the university close by.

Anita Susuri: And the financial means were limited...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: And we had plenty of books. There were books in bookstores too, I mean, in libraries, but our house was also full of books. My father never went into town without bringing back a book. I even have his entire library here with me now.

Anita Susuri: I'm curious, when your father was imprisoned in '74, was he sent to prisons in Slovenia?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, for example, the first visit, how was it organized? Did you go by train, or how did you travel?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: We went by train. Once by train. I went with my mother and my brother. He was also held in the central prison in Belgrade, back then they called it Ceza, the central prison. We went to Belgrade a couple of times, to Maribor, to Ljubljana, we traveled by train. And once we went by car to Maribor, an in-law of ours took us, the husband of my cousin on my father's side of the family. There were people in solidarity who were financially well-off and stood by us. I take this opportunity to thank them.

[The following paragraph was added at the speaker's request.]

On the occasion of my father's arrest, on May 5, 1974, my three uncles (my mother's brothers), Mustafë, Sylejman, and Rrahman Bunjaku, were also physically mistreated, because people and illegal materials sent by our father had been sheltered in their homes. Uncle Mustafë even took part in transporting and hiding printing machines from our house all the way to Taukbahçe. For this reason, the UDB⁶ severely beat them. Political fugitive Lulëzim Osmani, our cousin Begzad's son (also a

⁶ UDB (short for *Uprava državne bezbednosti*, or *State Security Administration*) was the secret police of socialist Yugoslavia, tasked with suppressing political dissent and maintaining internal control. In Kosovo, the UDB was notorious among Albanians for its use of surveillance, intimidation, arrests, and torture against those involved in nationalist or anti-state activities.

political prisoner), was also sheltered in their homes when he deserted the army of the former SFRY.⁷ So, both the families and family members were involved in political activity.

Anita Susuri: And what were those trips like, for example? Did you maybe bring food, books, or anything else, how were the inspections in the prisons? What was the whole experience like, how do you remember it?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The food was limited, just enough to send some packages, but I don't remember exactly, it varied from place to place. But the inspections were down to the smallest details. They opened everything that was packaged, they...

Anita Susuri: They checked for things...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: They inspected everything. Often, we couldn't go for visits, but sometimes we sent the packages by mail.

Anita Susuri: Did it ever happen that they sent you back without seeing your father, for example? That you were turned away without getting to meet him at all?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: It did happen, in Mitrovica as far as I remember. In Mitrovica. My father had a more fiery temperament, they told him to speak Serbian, he refused, so they ended the visit, and we had to return without seeing him.

Anita Susuri: And when your father was released from prison, around what year would that have been? You said he was imprisoned in '74.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In '83, because even the photo we had there was from 1983.

Anita Susuri: Did things continue again after that...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In '83. He stayed out for eight months. Only eight months, and then he was imprisoned again. That time he was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Anita Susuri: Before we continue with that part, I want to ask, after he was released from prison, did they still come to the house for inspections, or call him in for questioning, for example?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In '74, there wasn't even time for questioning, because he spent eight months being interrogated and was then imprisoned. He was continuously in prison. But in '74, when

⁷ SFRY stands for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

he was arrested, our house was in complete disarray from the searches. My mother stood her ground, she insisted, and even forced them, because they would enter with their shoes on. She stood at the door and wouldn't let them in until they were forced to... "Where do you think you're going, walking in here with shoes, after everywhere you've been? You're not entering my house with shoes on, ever," she said. And she made them take them off. Some of them were Albanians, and when they heard her, they did take their shoes off.

In our house, together with Mehmet Hajrizi, they had built a bunker. They had opened up a room, dug into it, and built a two-by-two-meter space underneath the room. It had a cover, and inside there were two mimeograph machines for reproducing leaflets and a typewriter. When my father, Kadri Osmani, was writing, we would dictate to him. He would write it by hand first, and then type it with dictation. My mother, even though she didn't have formal schooling, was self-taught, she had learned on her own...

Anita Susuri: She helped as well.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: She helped too, she would dictate. She was supportive. She never opposed him, despite everything she went through and all that she endured. She always stood by him.

Anita Susuri: And your father's leaflets, what kind of content did they have, for example? Were they meant to raise awareness...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: To raise awareness among the people, to call on them, to awaken national consciousness for freedom. At that time, the demand was for Kosovo to become a republic, to be equal within Yugoslavia. The magazine *Zëri i Kosovës* (The Voice of Kosovo) was first published in our house.

Anita Susuri: It was printed...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The first six issues were printed in our house. The name was chosen... our father asked us for suggestions, and I remember my mother and I said, *Zëri i Kosovës* to raise the voice for all the people, for freedom. It was supported by others too, and that's how it was named *Zëri i Kosovës*. Later, it continued abroad with others, at times it was renamed *Liria* (Freedom) or something else, with Jusuf Gërvalla⁸ and others. But *Zëri i Kosovës* was born in our house.

Anita Susuri: Was it a large magazine? Did it have many pages, or what was it like?

⁸ Jusuf Gërvalla (1945–1982) was a prominent Albanian writer, journalist, and political activist from Kosovo. He was a leading figure in the Albanian nationalist underground movement against Yugoslav rule and one of the founders of the *Lëvizja për Republikën Socialiste Shqiptare në Jugosllavi* (Movement for an Albanian Republic in Yugoslavia). He was assassinated by Yugoslav secret services in 1982 in West Germany, along with Kadri Zeka and his brother Bardhosh Gërvalla.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: A magazine in the full sense of the word. But they took them from us. Maybe they're somewhere in the archives, we don't have them anymore. It had poems, stories, pamphlets, leaflets, various writings, but it was truly a magazine.

Anita Susuri: Roughly how many copies of that magazine were printed, for example?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The quantity of each issue? There were six issues, one, two, three, four, five, six. The sixth fell into someone's hands, and that led to the arrest on May 4th and 5th, 1974.

Anita Susuri: A large print run? the number...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I don't know, I don't know. I was in, what grade would that have been for me back then...

Anita Susuri: Very young, in second or third grade at that moment you mentioned, when they came to search the house, did they find that bunker?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The first time, they didn't find them. Then, the second time, after the provocations that happened, and how they happened, we removed those machines because we knew they were there, to avoid them being discovered. With my uncles, as I mentioned, they also arrested my uncles, we took them — put them in those handcarts used for carrying construction materials — and took them to my uncles. We brought them to Taukbahçe, there's a stream down there, and we left them there.

But in the meantime, they came again, as there were many ongoing inspections. They came and discovered the place. One of the mimeograph machines was larger, and we couldn't remove it. Not that we didn't know, we were aware the house was under surveillance, we just didn't have the opportunity. When they came and found it, they found the large mimeograph. Then they sealed the place. They went, took my father, and brought him there. Now, my father didn't know what was still there and what wasn't. He thought everything was still there and admitted to it. Then they turned on us.

They took our mother in for questioning and kept her for hours, until one of them, Metush Sadiku, a security officer whose son was in the same class as our youngest brother, Ylber, swore on his son's life, "Just admit it, we're not coming after you. Find where you took them and bring them here, because Kadri has confessed that they exist." We were forced to, we went, retrieved them, and handed them over.

Anita Susuri: So, as a family, you were aware of the existence of the underground movement? Because many kept it hidden even from their families.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, no, we, I...

Anita Susuri: What was your view, for example, your stance on it?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Ever since then, we've had the fight for Kosovo's liberation in our minds, even as children. Always, and we still have the eagle⁹ here today, and we've always had it, even when it wasn't allowed, let alone after it was. The flag has never come down from the wall.

Anita Susuri: You're saying, in '74, or actually in '71, when Tito was supposed to visit, was he held in prison for long, or was it just that month, or how was it?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: At that time, my father was sentenced to ten months, as far as I remember, but he was released under supervision. When he was imprisoned over the issue of the visit, it was to prevent him from going out, he had argued with the prison director, and even before the final decision for the remaining months was made, they took him and sent him to Niš. We visited him in Niš.

Anita Susuri: Were these trips there distressing for you? How did you feel, for example, as a child?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: We were always proud, and we supported our father, and so did the rest of the family. It was our uncle who took us to visit. Later, he too was imprisoned, Begzad Osmani. Together with his brother Avdi Osmani, he brought books through the Embassy in Belgrade. I'm not sure from where, probably the Albanian Embassy. They worked in Austria. How they transported the books from Albania to Austria, I don't know, but they brought the books here to Kosovo. That's why my uncle was also imprisoned and sentenced to twelve years, he served three of them, Begzad Osmani.

Anita Susuri: In the environment you lived in, for example, with more distant relatives, was there any prejudice from their side toward your family?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, there was. Others, I even remember once a cousin came to see my father and said, "Kadri, it's over now, pull yourself together and focus on your home. Get a job, take care of your family. Let it go, you can't go against the state." And my father replied, "Why? Where exactly should I pull myself together? Should I take a basket and go collect my thoughts, are they strawberries or what? I don't know where to gather them," he said, sarcastically.

Anita Susuri: At school, did you experience, for example, from teachers, classmates, any kind of distance or coldness toward you?

⁹ The eagle refers to the black double-headed eagle featured on the Albanian national flag, a symbol of Albanian identity and resistance.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: My close friends, my inner circle, were supportive, we were always together. I never had a friend who ignored me, and I had a very carefully chosen circle of friends. Everyone knew, even those who had just heard, who I was, whose daughter I was. We grew closer, and by '81, when the demonstrations¹⁰ erupted, we were all united. But I was the one, among all the girls in that close circle, I was the only one who ended up imprisoned.

Because the issue of silence, not admitting, not revealing, not mentioning the names of friends, was the main principle I tried to uphold. I did my best, and I didn't reveal the names of my friends. In prison, I had already met [Hatmone](#) and [Zyrafete](#) beforehand, but we hadn't been connected in the same cell or group before. But in prison we met, continued our friendship, and supported each other as much as we could.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that in high school you formed your first cell...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, in high school, with Sevdije Grajčevci and Haxhere Sylja.

Anita Susuri: You had just known them, perhaps? Their families, their backgrounds, you trusted them...?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: And how did all that activity continue, for example? The meetings?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: That happened after my father's imprisonment, around '71-'72, '73. After his arrest, we no longer had contact with those girls.

Anita Susuri: And up until that point...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Because we were always under surveillance, our family was constantly followed, and the house was always watched by the UDB. So, we distanced ourselves to protect them. Later, Haxhere's brother, Gani Sylja, along with Mehmet Hajrizi, continued the work. They were imprisoned years later, once they came under suspicion on their own, because my father never mentioned their names during his arrest.

Anita Susuri: Was your father in a group with Mehmet Hajrizi?

¹⁰ The 1981 demonstrations refer to a series of student-led protests that began at the University of Prishtina in March and April 1981 and quickly spread across Kosovo. Initially sparked by poor living conditions in student dormitories, the protests escalated into broader demands for political and national rights, including the call for Kosovo to become a republic within Yugoslavia. The demonstrations were met with violent repression by Yugoslav authorities and marked a turning point in the political history of Kosovo.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: I think they didn't end up in prison for many years...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Mehmet Hajrizi was the one who worked on building that bunker there together with my father. So they continued their activity for years and years. Their names were never mentioned by my father.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask about the activities you were involved in, did you distribute these leaflets, or did you also write slogans? What was your role?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In the year marking the 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren,¹¹ I don't know who wrote the leaflet, my cousin gave it to me. We then shared it among everyone. We copied it by hand and... back then there weren't duplicating machines like today. We distributed it as much as we could. It was the 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren, it was a huge motivation, a moment of great awareness for all the students and families. The 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, roughly, what kind of content it had? I understand it was about raising awareness, but something more specific, for example? Did it also include historical context...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: It included the history of the League of Prizren and, at the same time, a call for...

Anita Susuri: Unity...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: For national unity, yes, but the first part, as far as I remember, was about the League of Prizren and the call for Kosovo as a republic.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: And you mentioned that after your father's imprisonment, you cut ties with those girls, how did things continue after that? Did you continue with others, or...?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I wasn't really involved with any organization after that. It was just through friendships, the conversations we had alongside our studies. Our concern was always freedom,

¹¹ The League of Prizren was an Albanian political organization established in 1878 in the city of Prizren, in response to the decisions of the Congress of Berlin. Its aim was to defend the territorial integrity of Albanian-inhabited lands within the Ottoman Empire and to promote Albanian national unity. It is considered a foundational moment in the Albanian national awakening.

liberation from Serbia, the Republic. A way to achieve greater freedom. We even thought about war, but when the war actually came, we had small children, my son was only one year old. We had to flee to Albania because they forced us out of our homes here.

Anita Susuri: And in '81...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The year...

Anita Susuri: March 11, when the first demonstration happened in '81, did you know beforehand that something was being organized?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: No. On March 11, I was at work, I was working in Sllatina at the time as a university senior. I had managed to get the job thanks to a friend of my father's, who gave up his own position, Binak Ulaj, who had also been imprisoned with my father. He called me, and I started the job in January. On March 11, my older brother, Rabit, he's just younger than me, was very late getting home. I only have two brothers, no sisters. He was out all night, and when he came home in the morning, I asked, "What happened?" Then he told us what had gone on. They had gathered at the Student Cafeteria, were surrounded by police all night, and how the demonstration had been dispersed.

I felt bad for not having been informed, but from what it seems, it wasn't something highly organized, it was more spontaneous, in the moment. Even though I lived nearby, I didn't go to the cafeteria to eat, so I didn't happen to be there. But afterward, I took part in all the demonstrations, from April 1st, April 2nd. I would go to work in the morning, I had the early shift, and then from work, I would head straight to the demonstrations. Up until...

Anita Susuri: What did you witness in those demonstrations? How was the confrontation between the people and the law enforcement back then? Was there physical violence?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The demonstration on April 1st was very massive, as is known from history and from the photos you've seen. At one point, they chased us with tear gas to disperse us along the road above the Assembly, behind the theater. Then we gathered again and came out behind where Skanderbeg Square is now, and we stayed there for hours, chanting, shouting. At some point, they fired tear gas again and dispersed us. On April 2nd, it continued above the Student Cafeteria. There was singing, chanting, and the road was still under construction at the time.

The large sewage pipes, the male students... the police were down by the Student Cafeteria, and we were rolling the pipes downhill toward them. That's where someone was killed, but I don't remember the name, what I recall is that they said it was someone from a Serbian family, killed across from the Student Cafeteria...

Anita Susuri: Was a Serb killed? By the police?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: No, an Albanian. A student, but I can't remember his name.

Anita Susuri: It doesn't matter.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: That's how things continued. On April 11, we went to visit my father in Mitrovica, he was there at the time. On May 1, 1981, they came to arrest me. I didn't want to, since I wasn't at home when they came, I got word that the house had been searched, so I stayed at my uncles'. Then I went into hiding and stayed in illegality until August 4. I tried, made some attempts, to leave the country. The goal was to get a fake passport, but I couldn't manage to get one. On August 3, I decided, I said, I'll go to prison, let them sentence me however they will, I'll serve my time, because you can't live in hiding.

Anita Susuri: And what was it like living in hiding? Did you stay somewhere specific...?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In several houses, but I mostly stayed with my uncles, and for about a week at a friend's place, Besa Halimi, may she rest in peace. I returned home, said goodbye to my mother, and took a suitcase with some clothes and went. When I got there, the person, Faik Nura, and Lutfi Ajazi, the main officer who interrogated me, wasn't there. He said, "Go out for a bit, take a walk, come back later." I was with my younger brother, Ylber. We left and spent some time...

"Come on," I said, "let's take a photo, who knows when we'll see each other again." So we took that photo. I had long hair at the time. I said, "Who knows what they'll do to me, maybe they'll pull my hair out. Let me go get it cut." I went from there... they even gave me a chance to cut my hair (laughs). I cut it, then went back there and went inside. I spent one night there...

Anita Susuri: In Prishtina, right?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In Prishtina, at the Secretariat. During the interrogation, there was this one offer, Ibush Kllokoqi, a distant relative, like a great-uncle of my grandfather, came and said, "Come on, let's go have a coffee, you tell me everything you have to say, and then you can go home. Just say who pushed you, who told you what." I said, "I have nothing to discuss with you." He said, "We're close, family-wise," not very close, but still, his father was my grandfather's uncle. I said, "I didn't come here to talk to you like this." From that moment on, he stepped away. The next day, they placed me in pre-trial detention and sent me to Mitrovica.

In Mitrovica, the interrogations only took place at night. We weren't allowed to have watches, but we knew that we had to go to bed by 9:00 PM, even though we couldn't sleep... then late at night, after

midnight, they would come, take us out of the prison, and bring us to the Secretariat. It was nearby, close to the prison in Mitrovica. Interrogations happened at night. There were all kinds of provocations, “he said this,” “he said that,” but always...

Anita Susuri: There was physical violence, surely?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Not as much as my friends (*smiles*), less. Compared to what they did to Hatmone Haradinaj and Mihrije Krasniqi, the beatings they endured, what I went through isn’t even worth mentioning.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you actually went to prison voluntarily. How were those investigations? How long did the initial investigation phase last?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The investigation lasted nine months. For five and a half months, I wasn’t allowed any visits, I didn’t see my family at all. They only came every two weeks to bring food packages and take the clothes to wash, because we didn’t have the conditions to wash them there. So, no visits for five and a half months. Then the visits started, twice a month, on the 1st and the 15th, provided those days were working days.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that during that time, you were also held together with your father...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: At the same time, they had brought my father back, they transferred him from Slovenia to the Mitrovica Prison. My father was allowed visits only on Saturdays or Sundays, on the weekends. So, for those four months, my mother had to travel to Mitrovica four times a month. Winter was especially difficult. We didn’t have a car back then, so it was by bus. And from the bus station, the prison was quite far. My mother had it the hardest during that period.

Anita Susuri: And what were the charges against you when you were tried? What were you accused of?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The charge was for participation, {picks up a document}, here I have them... for participating in the demonstration and acting against the state.

Anita Susuri: Counter-revolution.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Counter-revolution. In the verdict, it states: “She is guilty because, with the intent to overthrow the power of the working class and laborers, to undermine the socio-economic order defined in the constitution, and to break the unconstitutional brotherhood and unity of the federal structure of the SFRY, on April 1, 1981, she actively participated in hostile demonstrations that were organized and took place on the streets of ‘Ramiz Sadiku’ and ‘Marshal Tito’ in Prishtina, from 13:30 until 19:00,” I said, they lasted a long time. “During which, together with others, she chanted

slogans of a hostile nature such as ‘Kosova Republic, ‘Free our comrades from prison’, ‘We want our comrades’, and others.” That was the main accusation.

Anita Susuri: And how do you think they got to you, how did they find out about you?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I was identified through a photograph, because of my participation in the demonstration. They had those photos, and they showed me mine. There were others in the photo too, but since I was identified as the daughter of Kadri Osmani, I was the one who got imprisoned.

Anita Susuri: And how was the trial? Were you tried individually?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I was tried alone, I didn’t... they tried to link me with others, but I said that the ones I knew had nothing to do with anyone else, and I never mentioned their names. They didn’t manage to tie me to anyone. I stood trial alone. They sentenced me to two years. After the trial, they sent me to Lipjan Prison. It was a bit more relaxed there. That’s where I later met Gjyle Krasniqi.

After prison, I got to know Lumnie Azemi. I had heard about her even while we were both imprisoned in Mitrovica, we were detained at the same time, and we would sometimes communicate from room to room when we knew the guards weren’t around. Sometimes they tried to trick us, they’d walk out wearing socks, taking off their heels so we couldn’t hear them. One of the hardest incidents was for Kadrije, Kadrije Gashi. The guard, Fevzie, I can’t recall her last name, left the room in heels, so we could hear her leave and thought it was safe. But she had taken off her heels and returned silently to the office.

We didn’t notice. We started singing, talking, and just as we got caught up in the songs and conversation, the doors opened one after the other. Someone had seen us... because the guard had come back and watched us, they said she spied through a peephole in the door. She saw everything. We were too caught up in the singing and talking to notice that she had quietly returned. Then they took Kadrije Gashi, a girl from our room, Fatime Seniku, and Gjyle from the other room. Kadrije Gashi was beaten very badly. They said her eye was injured, she was in a really bad state. Her eye stayed damaged for a long time. That was one of the more serious incidents we experienced, and it affected us deeply.

Anita Susuri: And how did this communication between the girls inside the prison happen?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: As I said, when we thought they had stepped out for a break, especially at night, we would use that time to communicate. We had a rhythm for knocking on the wall {knocks on the table three times}, “Republic, Constitution, either by will or by war!” That was our rhythm. We’d knock two or three times from room to room. When there was no sound or reaction from the guards, we would then go on to have different conversations.

Anita Susuri: Were there, for example...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: To know who came in, who left, who was transferred, who...

Anita Susuri: Information from the outside...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: The information would come when someone arrived. In '81, from April 1 onward, they said there were even over 20 women held in a single room. There were only four rooms designated for women, and there were many who were imprisoned for minor offenses, some for a month, two months. When I arrived later, there weren't that many anymore, by August 4, most had already been released. But those who had been there earlier would say the rooms had been overcrowded.

Anita Susuri: Inside the prison, were you also made to do activities? Work or anything like that? How did you spend the day, for example?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Not in Mitrovica. There, we had walks twice a day, 15 minutes each, in a circular yard. Because the Mitrovica Prison is round. They didn't make us work in the Mitrovica Prison. But the walks, we had them twice a day. I don't know if you've heard, Mitrovica Prison is circular, and they say the architect who designed it, I think they said he later committed suicide. That's how the story went.

It's circular, the prison itself is round, then the walking area inside is also divided into four sections. In the center, there was the guard post, always under surveillance. When we went out for walks, we had to walk in a circle, hands behind our backs {places hands behind her back}. And we tried, with a cough or a little noise, just to make some sound, to show we were alive in there and unafraid. We tried to keep our heads high. With small gestures like that, we tried to show pride, to let them know we weren't regretful for what we had done, and that we didn't feel ashamed for being in prison, because we had been there for a national cause.

Anita Susuri: And what about Lipjan Prison?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: That one... at Lipjan Prison, they made us work. I remember once I felt really bad, and I don't know, it often comes back to me, why I didn't react, why I went to clean the office and the home, the office of the prison director. A woman named Shpresa Kuqi was the director. I was made to clean the windows, clean her office. But that happened only once, I never went back there again. Later, they enrolled us, the political prisoners, in a tailoring course. I took that tailoring course, they gave us a certificate. So now I even have a diploma from prison (laughs).

We once sewed diapers for hospitals, they brought them to us. It was in '82, they said the hospital had run out of diapers. We sewed them with pleasure, knowing they were going to the Prishtina Hospital. Life there was a bit freer. We had a television, but we rarely watched it. We, the girls, would gather during the day. There were even some kind guards, I remember one named Bedria, who didn't bother us, even when we gathered behind the pavilion in the yard, in the walking area, and sang different songs.

Anita Susuri: Patriotic songs...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Definitely patriotic. "*Po i bjen era retë e zeza*," that one I remember the most. With Gjyle Krasniqi, with Dinore Curri. She had also been sentenced to 13 years, she was from Vushtrri.

Anita Susuri: I think it was eleven.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I don't know if you've interviewed her? If you talked to her?

Anita Susuri: Not yet but I know about her.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Also with Dinore Curri, Drita, Shkurte Kuqi, she was from Deçan. The others were also political prisoners. I don't recall meeting Gjyle Krasniqi there. There were some women imprisoned for murder, but the reasons behind it were their own. Still, they were good women, we never had any problems or conflicts. In fact, they liked us.

Anita Susuri: Did you ever go on a hunger strike at any point, in protest of a decision or something else...?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Once, we held a hunger strike for Gjyle Krasniqi. They had placed her in solitary confinement, I don't know why exactly. So we went on strike, and afterward, they released her from isolation. The day I was released, November 18, was the hardest day. Gjyla had an emotional breakdown, she felt terrible that I was getting out. She had a strong reaction, and they gave her a sedative. I honestly don't even remember how I walked out of that prison. I would have preferred to stay one more day and part ways with Gjyla differently than the way we did.

Later, they took her and transferred her to Pozharevac. She endured a lot of suffering. As a minor, she was mistreated, she spoke of an operative, some security officer from Banja, named Mehmet Luma. He did everything he could to force her to reveal her comrades... she can tell you better herself, if you ever get the chance to speak with her, she lives in Switzerland now.

Anita Susuri: How long was she sentenced to?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: How long was she sentenced to? I don't know.

Anita Susuri: Maybe more than you?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, more, definitely more. She continued serving her sentence there in Pozharevac.

Anita Susuri: Did you serve the full two years?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: No, I served 15 and a half months because the three and a half months before the trial, during the investigation phase, weren't counted at all. Then the Supreme Court reduced my sentence by one year. So in total, I served 15 and a half months in prison.

Anita Susuri: The day you were released from prison, you mentioned it earlier, but was anyone there to meet you? Did they know exactly when you'd be getting out?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes. Yes, yes. That day... actually, my mother even prepared the lunch a day early, because from the exact date I was imprisoned, she had counted the days, and it turned out they released me the next day, just as she had calculated.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: And those meetings with your mother, with your family, how were they? How did they seem to you? Did they seem very worried, or like they were taking it hard?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: My mother always, and my brothers too, tried to give me courage, not to let me feel down, and I never noticed any sadness from them, I never saw it. We weren't allowed to be sad back then. Now, we feel sadness for back then.

Anita Susuri: Earlier, I also wanted to ask you about... I saw in that book that you met Kadri Zeka,¹² but at the time you didn't know that he was...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: I didn't know that it was Kadri Zeka.

Anita Susuri: Was this before the imprisonment?

¹² Kadri Zeka (1953–1982) was an Albanian political activist from Kosovo and a key figure in the underground nationalist movement opposing Yugoslav rule. He was one of the founders of the *Movement for an Albanian Republic in Yugoslavia for the Unification with Albania*. Alongside Jusuf and Bardhosh Gërvalla, he was assassinated by Yugoslav secret services in West Germany in 1982.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Before the imprisonment, yes.

Anita Susuri: What were those like...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Mehmet Hajrizi had arranged the connection for us... every month we had a meeting above the Student Cafeteria, somewhere there, I don't remember exactly. Once a month, they would give a kind of allowance, I don't know where they collected the money from, but they knew; the people, the diaspora, handed it over. On one occasion, I don't know why, Mehmet Hajrizi stopped coming and instead described someone else to me, a man with glasses... "You'll meet somewhere nearby," under our house, near the dorms. I had met with Kadri Zeka and didn't even know it was him.

Anita Susuri: And after prison, did you continue your activism, or how did your life continue? Because for many, even getting a job or taking part in social life was forbidden.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: After prison, I was still not yet graduated. I returned to my studies, and the faculty had sentenced me to one year without the right to study. But the faculty itself fulfilled that punishment, they never mentioned it to me. I only saw it on the official list. During the time I served in prison, that ban on studying also expired. I continued and completed my studies. But then I had no right to work. I didn't work for eight years.

I even applied to be a bus conductor. That was when the city buses first started operating with conductors. But they didn't allow me to work there either, they didn't accept me. Not even at the reinforcement factory, nor as a translator, even though I had a certificate as a second-level translator, written translation, Albanian-Serbo-Croatian, Serbo-Croatian-Albanian. Nowhere, for eight years.

In the end, shortly before I met Nuhi, my husband, [Nuhi Bytyqi](#), who was also a political prisoner. He was sentenced to seven years in prison in '81, served five, and had two years reduced by the Supreme Court. We were introduced by friends, since it was a bit harder for a former female political prisoner and a former male political prisoner to marry others. We found a common language. At the time we met, I was working at the Committee for Agriculture and Forestry as a translator. For about eight months.

She had been appointed principal of the "Fadil Hisari" school in Prizren. She called me to take her place and work as an Albanian language teacher. From then on, I've worked continuously. There had been some changes, homes had been turned into schools, so there was an opportunity for her to be appointed principal. We didn't know each other personally; she just knew that her late brother's friend had married an Albanian language professor. Nuhi had been imprisoned, he was still in prison at that time...

Anita Susuri: How long were you married while he was in prison?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Yes, during his second imprisonment.

Anita Susuri: How many years did you wait for him?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Two years. He was imprisoned after we got married. At the time I was hired, Nuhi was in prison, when Nexhmije Bytyqi called me. I continued working. I'm still grateful today, grateful that she was the first to think of me and that she used that opportunity to help me get employed.

Anita Susuri: And how were those years for you, '88, '89, when the miners' marches began, then the factory workers, and later the strikes?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: As a married woman, my participation was limited. During the [Miners' Strike](#), I was pregnant with Fitore, my second daughter. In fact, when she was born, hoping that we were finally achieving something, we said, let's name her Fitore (Victory). There are quite a few girls named Fitore from that time. Those were also difficult years. Nuhi was imprisoned again, they kept him for ten months. He was sentenced to two years.

Until that second imprisonment, I had tried, made some efforts, some pressure, to convince him to leave the country, to escape. But he didn't go through with it. There was nothing left, no job, and the risk of being imprisoned again was high. All he had to do was wait for the decision and go serve the remaining 14 months. He didn't give in, and we went through all those hardships again. He served another 14 months in prison, and then the war broke out. In the end, we all decided to stay in Kosovo.

But unfortunately, our decision to stay in Kosovo didn't make it possible for the younger generation to avoid hardship. It has come to the point where our son is now planning to go abroad. We're waiting a bit, he's entered the process of taking the German language test. His wife is already abroad, and he'll be joining her. It's not that they got married for him to leave, he had this intention even before meeting her, when he was younger. He would say, "How can you raise children here? Can kids grow up on these low wages? Respect to you for how you raised us, but I don't want to raise my children like this." That was his stance.

Anita Susuri: And in the '90s, when you mentioned that houses were turned into schools, did it happen to you as well, I mean, did you end up working outside the school building?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: No, we worked in the school building. Our school didn't have any students in Serbo-Croatian. Fadil Hisari didn't have any, so we were allowed to work in the original building. But we weren't allowed to go to the House of Culture. I remember one time, we celebrated the school's

anniversary in a mosque. We had turned it into a cultural space. It was very... I don't know if there are any documents or recordings, but we had organized a really beautiful school day celebration in the mosque, in Tusuz.

Anita Susuri: And during the war, I mean, within Prizren, as far as I know, it was somewhat calmer, considering that there were many massacres in the surrounding areas, like in Suhareka. But how were those months, those years, for you personally?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: In June, my son was three months old when we came to this house. Before that, we lived in another part of the neighborhood. We had a small space downstairs here, like a little shop or café. Men would come by, have beer or juice. And Nuhi, on that critical day, the day of Eid, he was downstairs in that place. When the gunfire started on April 28, right?

Anita Susuri: Right.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: On April 28...

Anita Susuri: Or March.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: March. We saw people out on the streets starting to leave, they were coming from Krusha. They had been there. And we had no idea... from Krusha and all the surrounding villages. "Where are you going, where are you heading?" We leaned out the window, "Where are you all going? Where are you heading?" No one said a word. In fact, the day before, on the 27th and then the 28th, the gunfire had already started in the neighborhood, and people were in columns. In the distance, we could see houses burning. Nuhi didn't dare step out the door anymore, not even to go from the café into the house.

We disguised him with a hat. He took the baby in his arms and was forced to go out, to head into the street with no clear direction, we didn't know where we were going. When we stepped outside, by the gate, there was a small ditch, right where you stopped the car, before the railway. A police officer... we passed, me and my sister-in-law with seven children. My father-in-law, my husband's uncle, and Nuhi followed behind us. The officer stopped them and said, "Hand over your money." All the money our brother-in-law had sent us from Switzerland, we had turned into supplies, thinking the war would last and that we needed food to survive. We didn't know we'd end up in the street, like you said, we also thought the city would stay relatively calm.

We had very little money, I don't even know how much we had. "We don't have any," we said. "You don't? Turn back!" He stopped the three men behind us. When I turned my head, I saw them held back. "What are you doing?" I asked. He said, "Give me money." Around 1,000 euros per person, or maybe it was 1,000 marks, I'm not sure. I told my sister-in-law, "Mihrije, turn back, they've stopped us." Her

husband was in the KLA, so we felt responsible to look after her and the children since he wasn't there. Mihrije turned back, and I went back with her and the seven children. A large crowd gathered, the three men and my husband's uncle's wife were also there.

A police officer from across the road shouted at the one holding us back, in Serbian, "What's that? What are you doing gathering people like that? Let them join the column!" Apparently, he had acted without orders. He ended up getting scolded, for our good fortune. He let us go, and we joined the column. All along the road, on both sides, there were police. They kept yelling, "Here's your KLA, you want the KLA? Go now, go to your KLA!" All in Serbian, I won't repeat the exact words, it's hard for me to even say them. They marched us all the way to what they used to call the "Albanian Market," you surely know where that is.

There was a local bus there. I feel sorry that we never saw that person again. I personally never got the chance to thank him. Even though I asked around, Nuhi once said he ran into someone from that group. But those people took us without asking for anything, no money, no cost, he only had his own family members, about 17 people, and the whole bus filled up with others. He drove us all the way to the border in Zhur. In Zhur, they had placed large concrete barriers, pyramids.

The police officer said, "You can't go. Get the people off the bus. Has a..." he mentioned some kind of truck by name, "has that type passed through?" I was sitting in the front seat, so I heard the conversation. The driver said, "Yes," and the officer replied, "If that type of truck got through, then you can try with the bus." He said, "Go on, give it a try." We passed through those barricades by bus, all the way to the border. At the border, the driver told us, "Those of you who aren't my family members, get off. They might think I'm smuggling people for money. I'm only crossing with my family. But once I'm through, if you're able, get back on."

We crossed that border zone on foot, with the children, seven of them, and the rest of us. But somehow, call it God's will or whatever you want, the children were completely calm, not a single sound came out of their mouths. It's as if they felt it. Even though we had a one-year-old, the other was two and a half, and the oldest, Rilinda, was in fourth grade. When we got across, the same bus came again, he had crossed the border with his family, and picked us up again and took us to Kukës. In Kukës, we stayed in what looked like a stable, a cooperative building. We spent the night there. The next day, we got into a van.

The good thing in all of that was that I had taken, it just came to mind, the notebook with phone numbers. There were no cell phones back then, but I had taken that notebook and put it in my pocket. Later, we used one of those numbers to contact my brother-in-law who was abroad. While we were there, he sent us money for an apartment. We were a lot of people, two families and my father-in-law. There wasn't enough space. We didn't want to split up. The houses there were small, and we couldn't

just separate into groups of four and go to different homes. So we rented a house and stayed there until the war ended.

Anita Susuri: How did you receive the news that the war had ended? How did you react to it?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: We had a transistor radio, and we listened to it all night, we listened to the news more than we slept. It was through that transistor that we found out the war had ended. My father-in-law, along with the first group, my sister-in-law and her children, since her husband, Muhamet Bytyqi, was with them, they were the first to return. As soon as NATO entered Prizren, he was, I believe, the second person to return. They were among the very first to come back home.

Fortunately, our house wasn't touched. We found everything just as we had left it. Nuhi has another brother who lives just across from here, he had stayed behind during the war. He told us the police had been here. There was a bench in front of the house, like a park bench, they sat there, they came inside, drank water up to the corridor, but didn't go upstairs. Why, I don't know, maybe they planned to come back later, thinking the war would last longer, but it ended quickly. What miracle spared our house, I can't say. But we returned and found our home intact. We went back to work right away.

We had seven classes left when the school year was interrupted, and we managed to finish all of that within a month. We issued the report cards and then started the new school year in October. I worked one more year at "Fadil Hisari," then we arranged a swap with a colleague. He lived in Tusuz, Arif Krasniqi, maybe you know him, and for me, "Abdyl Frashëri" was closer. We made the exchange, and ever since then, I've been working there, now called "Hysen Rexhepi" since we renamed the school. I'll be retiring on December 22.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you about the day of independence as well, how did you receive it? Did you celebrate it? What was it like in your family?

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Independence Day was the fulfillment of both our family's and our nation's dream. We experienced it with great joy. In fact, when independence was declared, the city of Prizren had organized a long flag march, and it was an extremely cold day. My son and I were part of the procession. He climbed up and grabbed hold of the flag and wouldn't let go, no one could pull him down. We marched all the way to the League of Prizren, carrying the flag. The joy was boundless. But after the war, after independence, despite everything, this youth migration I mentioned, seeing the day come when my own son has to leave the country, makes it hard for me to truly enjoy this independence.

Anita Susuri: Ms. Hidajete...

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: We're happy that there are no Serbs here anymore, but seeing our youth leave like this... according to a report from about a month ago, maybe the number has gone up since, "65 doctors have left Kosovo." And for 65 doctors to leave and go to Germany... Germany needs our doctors. Meanwhile, we're being blamed, schools are being blamed, for our PISA results, for where we stand. But it's our educated youth who are going abroad. That's the concern. I hope that the politicians of Kosovo come to their senses, that they work for the national cause, that they work for Kosovo, for our youth, and not allow this migration to continue. I hope the day comes when the youth who have left will return.

Anita Susuri: We hope so.

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Thank you for the interview, I was emotional (cries). Especially this migration, it weighs very heavily on me.

Anita Susuri: It's completely understandable. Thank you so much as well, for your contribution, for the interview, and for your time! Truly, thank you!

Hidajete Osmani Bytyqi: Anything I may have forgotten to say is already written down, in books by Sabile Keçmezi, Mehmet Hajrizi, [Teuta Hadri](#). It's all documented there, with more precise dates.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much once again!