

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH AHMET QERIQI

Pristina | Date: July 23, 2024

Present:

1. Ahmet Qeriqi (Interviewee)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)

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.

[This interview was not filmed due to the speaker's health condition. The Oral History Initiative, considering it necessary to document the memory of activist and former political prisoner Ahmet Qeriqi, decided to conduct the interview anyway, allowing the speaker to respond to questions in writing.]

Anita Susuri: Please introduce yourself, tell us your date of birth, your place of birth, and something about your family background.

Ahmet Qeriqi: I was born on December 24, 1946, in Krojmir. I am married and have four daughters, all married, and two sons, also married. So far, I have become a grandfather eleven times; I have four granddaughters and seven grandsons. I completed elementary school in Krojmir, Drenica. I attended middle school and high school, while at the same time also the Madrasa,¹ in Prishtina. In the third year of the Madrasa, I was sentenced to prison for political offenses and was permanently expelled from religious schools. I graduated on time and with merit from the Faculty of Albanian Language and Literature in 1973, and in the meantime I also completed postgraduate studies.

I was convicted for anti-Yugoslav activities several times. For the first time, while still a minor, in November 1965, I was sentenced to two months in prison and one year probation; the second time, in 1975, two months. The third time, in 1980, I was sentenced to 18 months, and the last time in 1982, to eight years in prison, for nationalist and irredentist activities. I was part of the patriotic underground and of the KLA war. During and after the war, I was director of Radio-Kosova e Lirë, a duty I continue to carry out to this day. In 1971 I married Zymryte Vehbi Shamolli from Shala, formerly Sedllar.

From 1973 to 1978, I worked as a professor of Albanian and Latin language at the Gymnasium of Ferizaj and Vitia. From 1978 until March 1981, I worked at the Pedagogical Academy and the Technical School of Pristina. I also completed the third cycle of studies in Albanian Language and Literature in Pristina.

On May 1–2, 1975, I was in Bulgaria together with Sytki Selmani from Skopje and Muharrem Bajraktari from Ferizaj. There, at the Albanian Embassy in Sofia, I obtained “banned literature.” On the evening of May 3rd, while trying to deliver the clandestine literature to Krojmir, at the exit of Shtime, in the evening hours, the local police stopped me. I did not stop, and after three hours of being chased by the

¹ *Madresa* or *Medrese* - Muslim religious school, the only school where teaching could be conducted in Albanian until 1945.

police cars in Shtime and Theranda (now Suhareka), I hid the banned literature in the village cemetery of Bllacë.

On the way back, I fell into a police ambush and was brutally beaten by Hasim Milici, a police officer in Shtime, two police officers from Theranda-Suhareka, and the Serbian commander of the police station in Shtime, Gjorka. I was sentenced to two months in prison for illegal possession of weapons, and an investigation was opened for the criminal offense of “Obstruction in duty of an official person.” With legal assistance from a former Madrasa classmate, at that time the president of the Municipal Court of Ferizaj, Rifat Abdullahu, I was released from the criminal charge of “Obstruction in duty of an official person.” I served the prison sentence for the misdemeanor in Ferizaj, in October–November 1975. In 1977, I registered for the third cycle of studies in Albanian Literature and completed the exams in 1979.

In October 1979, following a raid carried out at my house in Shtime, the UDB² inspector Adem Goga [Ibrahimi], Muharrem Gagica, commander of Ferizaj police, and police officers from the Shtime station, discovered two notebooks with writings and poems. Due to the national content of the writings, labeled as anti-Yugoslav, in November of that same year proceedings were opened against me for “Hostile Propaganda,” sanctioned by Article 133 of the Yugoslav Penal Code. Initially, I was sentenced to six months in prison. After an appeal by the prosecutor Reshat Millaku, the final sentence was set at one year and six months.

I have been engaged in illegal activities since 1964, together with Feti Mehdiu, through whom I came into contact with Sabri Nososella, a member of the LRBSH (Revolutionary Movement for the Unification of Albanians). I maintained clandestine contacts with madrasa students: Riza Gjoka, Shemadin Akti, Hasan Ballovci, and Mehmet Gashi. I also collaborated with Imer Hysiqi and Jakup Nuhi Hysiqi from Shtime, and Bajram Sadiku from Reçak. In November 1965, Imer and Bajram fled from Kosovo to Albania.

In 1976, I formed the Organization for National Liberation and Unification in Skopje, together with Muhamet Ademi, Beqë Derveni, and Sytki Selmani, all three from Skopje and the Derven region. I also collaborated clandestinely with Zenun Gjoci from Rashiq, Imer Halili from Prekaz i Epërm, Bajram Qerimi from Tërpeza of Vitia, a professor in Ferizaj, who was killed under mysterious circumstances in 1978, Agim Olluri, a pedagogue in Ferizaj, Agim Fejzullahu, also a pedagogue, brutally murdered in Shtime in 1976, Shaban Krasniqi from Karaçica, Sheqir Zeneli, a professor from Prishtina, my cousin Sylë Qeriqi, and Elez Durmishi from Krojmir, among others.

In 1981, I took an active part in the student demonstrations together with the students of the Technical School where I worked. I maintained clandestine activity with the students of the Pedagogical Academy and the Technical School in Prishtina: Fatmir Graiçevci from Hadja, Lutfi Maqedoni from Prishtina, and Naser Hajrizi and Asllan Pireva, also from Prishtina, both martyred by the RSFJ³ militia on April 2, 1981. I also maintained clandestine contacts with students Ilaz Zhitia, Naim Mahmudi, Rrahim Rama, and others, all of whom were later sentenced to heavy prison terms for organizing and participating in the demonstrations of March and April 1981.

² The State Security Service -*Uprava državne bezbednosti*, Directorate for State Security, was the secret police organization of Communist Yugoslavia. It was at all times best known as UDBA (pronounced as a single word and not an acronym), and was the most common colloquial name for the organization throughout its history. Also known by the Serbian acronym SDB.

³ RSFJ, Serbian acronym for Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, SFRY.

Together with 24 other people arrested, in February 1983, at the District Court in Prishtina, I was sentenced to eight years in prison for the criminal offense of “hostile propaganda” under Articles 133 and 134 of the LPJ, and five years of prohibition from exercising the duty of teacher after being released from prison. I served my sentence in Prishtina, Gjurakoc, Smrekonica, Subotica, and Novi Sad. During the investigations and in prison, I was tortured by UDB inspectors Mehmet Maliqi, Lutfi Ajazi, Bashkim Kursani, Ibush Kllokoqi, an interrogator who presented himself as Ramçe from Prizren, the Serbian policeman Miča, and a Russian policeman nicknamed “Grozni” in Novi Sad. From 1988 until October 1997, in order to support my family, I worked in carpentry, agriculture, and construction.

From 1990, I maintained clandestine contacts with Azem Sylja, Sheqir Zeneli, Kadrie Gashi, Reshat Gashi, Ismet Shamolli, Imer Halili, Zenun Gjoci, Sylë Qeriqi, Elez Durmishi, Nezir Myrtaj, Ruzhdi Jashari, Jetë Hasani, Muhamet Malësori — the last two being martyrs of the KLA — and many others. I actively participated in organizing the KLA war from 1997, initially at the Krojmir point, together with Sylë Qeriqi, Elez Durmishi, Heset Olluri, Halil Olluri, Sejdi Elezi, Vehbi Qeriqi, Naim Rizani, Mehdi Qeriqi, and others. From November 1998 until June 1999, I was responsible for and worked as a journalist at Radio-Kosova e Lirë, which broadcast its program in the Berisha Mountains, in Drenica. From July 1999 until today, I have directed Radio-Kosova e Lirë in Pristina.

Anita Susuri: Where did you complete your basic education and what memory do you have of it?

Ahmet Qeriqi: Before I was enrolled in school, and before I learned the letters of the Albanian language from the primer, the cover and contents of which remain etched in my memory and which I will never forget, I had learned to read and write Arabic from my grandfather, a *hoxha*,⁴ who had been punished by the communist regime of the time. With his help the first time, and then on my own, I read the entire Qur’an twice before I ever learned the letters of my native language. My grandfather, Emin Miftari, was a banned *hoxha*, prohibited from practicing his profession because of his religious and political convictions, as an open opponent of the Yugoslav communist regime. He was repeatedly mistreated and sentenced to prison for his beliefs, and as a result, he was stripped of the right to exercise his profession as an imam.

Among the memories from elementary school, I recall when I once made a blunder, a slip of the tongue without intent, but which became the object of jokes and humor in class. After our teacher, Isak Zabeli, had explained what we mean by *hapësirë* [space], at the end he asked if we had understood the lesson. I raised my hand and said: “Everything we see with our eyes, from all four directions of the horizon, is called *hapsane*, prison in Turkish.” Everyone burst into laughter, while I, blushing from surprise, corrected myself and apologized. But it did not end there. My classmates gave me the nickname “hapsanja,” the prison, which, unfortunately, followed me throughout my life.

Anita Susuri: What memories do you have of your childhood?

Ahmet Qeriqi: From my childhood I mainly have bitter memories, as we were a well-known family for our stance against Tito’s regime of the time. There were sudden police searches, monitoring my grandfather’s movements, and my own childhood anxiety when I would see my grandmother and my mother crying secretly but not telling me the reason. They would excuse themselves by saying they had been cutting onions and had touched their eyes by mistake. Later, I came to understand that my

⁴ *Hoxha*; *haxhi* - Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.

grandmother, Esma, was crying for her father, who had been killed by the Serbs when she was only 12 years old, while her only brother, Ismail, was just 4. My mother, Xhevahire Kadri Beba, was crying for her father, who had been executed by the Yugoslav regime in 1948, and who had also killed three other members of her family, who were fighters of the NDSH⁵...

I remember one day from my childhood, when the tax collectors, the *poreznikët*, entered our house and took the carpets, the *janin* (floor coverings), and all the bedding and blankets of the household. That day neither my grandfather, my father, nor my uncle were at home. Later, when my grandfather returned, he went after the *poreznikët* in the village and physically attacked one of them. They arrested him and held him in prison for two months. Because he had been accompanied to the place where the tax collectors were, the militia also arrested two of our cousins, uncle Musa and uncle Tafil, as well as my uncle Mehdi. They kept them in custody for three days, tortured them, and then released them. Later it was discovered that my father, Ali, had already paid the tax two months earlier, but the militia had made this decision deliberately in order to provoke my grandfather, who openly opposed the government that was pressuring him to emigrate to Turkey.

In September of the 1954–1955 school year, I was enrolled in the first grade of the village's four-year elementary school. My first encounter with the *abetare* was the most significant, most beloved, and most unforgettable event of my childhood. My first teacher was Isak Zabeli. I was in the same class with Agim Olluri, Heset Hamdiu, Qamil Olluri, Milaim Rexha, Hysri Juti, Idriz Musa Qeriqi, Remzije Ahmeti, and others. In the first grade there were also older students, some even three or four years older, such as my cousins Jakup, Imer, Mustafa, and Rrahim, who had not been enrolled in school on time.

Anita Susuri: Under what conditions did you grow up, and how were the circumstances of your schooling?

Ahmet Qeriqi: In the 1959–1960 school year, at my grandfather's insistence, my father enrolled me in the Albanian Lower Madrasa Alauddin in Prishtina. There, in addition to the Islamic religious subjects, together with my classmates we also followed the regular curriculum of the eight-year elementary school. Even though we were still young, all generations of madrasa students of that time attended two schools at the same time. My fifth-year report card had 23 subjects, 10 religious and the rest social and scientific. To implement such a plan, classes started at 7:00 in the morning and finished at 14:00, continuing even into the afternoon hours. At the madrasa, I found it much easier than some of my peers, who had just begun learning how to read and write in Arabic, because I already knew how to read and write Arabic without any difficulty.

Sometime in the spring of 1963, while we were playing ball in the Madrasa courtyard, the ball flew over the wall into the yard of Adem Demaçi's⁶ house, which was right next to us. Since I was small in stature, my friends lifted me over the wall, and I jumped down to retrieve the ball, without noticing that a student was sitting under a peach tree, reading. When I saw him, I froze, afraid of being punished. But

⁵ NDSH, Albanian National Democratic Movement, an anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist resistance movement in Kosovo active from 1945 through 1947. The full name would be *Lëvizja Nacional-Demokratike Shqiptare* LNDSh but NDSH is a short version.

⁶ Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

instead, he stood up, found the ball, and said to me, “Next time, don’t jump over the wall, because you could break your leg or arm. Come around from the other side instead. Tell your friends the same.” He looked at me with kindness. His calm demeanor and the way I was spared from possible punishment left an extraordinary impression on me. He was known simply as “the student,” but it was Adem Demaçi. I have never forgotten that first, chance meeting with him.

At that time, through an older madrasa student, Feti Mehdiu from Zajas in Macedonia, I made contact with Sabri Novosella, a member of LRBSH [Revolutionary Movement for the Unification of Albanians], led by Adem Demaçi. There were three or four of us who visited Sabri. He openly spoke to us about the difficult situation of Albanians, and even in our presence he would listen to Radio Tirana and comment on the news. Our visits to Sabri were disguised by the fact that he was a tailor, so whenever we went, we always brought a piece of clothing, supposedly to be sewn.

At the madrasa there also was an organized group preparing to distribute national flags and political slogans. The movement had especially penetrated the *Shkolla Normale*,⁷ but also other schools. At our madrasa we had formed a group as well, which was joined by my cousin from Shtime, Imer Hysiqi, along with his friend, a student of the Economic School in Prishtina. In November 1965, Imer and his friend Bajram Sadiku, without informing us, crossed the border somewhere near Struga and settled in Albania.

A week later, UDB police entered the madrasa and arrested me along with six other classmates. Through a swift procedure, since we were minors, I, together with Riza Gjoka from Montenegro and Shemadin Akiti from Zajas, was sentenced to prison. The two of them got one month, while I received two months of effective prison and one year on probation, because of my age. The other four, after being mistreated, were released. We were accused of having formed an illegal, irredentist group, based on the program of Adem Demaçi, and of sending two members to Albania to establish contact with the regime. The sentence was enough for the madrasa administration to expel us from school, without the right to enroll in any religious school in the former Yugoslavia.

Anita Susuri: Do you have any memories of historical events that took place when you were a child or a young man? For example, during the time of Aleksandar Ranković.⁸

Ahmet Qeriqi: In the winter of 1955–1956, during December, January, and February, the school in Krojmir was closed to pupils for three months because of the Action for the Collection of Weapons.⁹ The school itself was turned into a place of torture for all the villagers of Krojmir who did not hand over

⁷ *Shkolla Normale* =Teachers training school. The Shkolla Normale opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the Shkolla Normale moved to Pristina.

⁸ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia’s Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

⁹ In 1956, as Minister of the Interior, Ranković launched a Weapons Collection Action in Kosovo to collect illegal weapons he argued were a grave risk to the security of the state. This campaign was characterized by widespread abuses of the Albanian population, and was criticized for that reason after the fall of Ranković in 1966.

weapons, even though most of them did not own any. I still remember the rows of villagers being brought to the school, even from the nearby villages of Dukë and Karaçicë, since they had no schools of their own. The militiamen, together with the Serbian inspector Sava Shurbatović ... as well as the village party officials, who did not participate directly in the torture but supported and served the authorities in this action, were Imer Xhema, Veli Kaçamaku, Selman Banushi, Milaim Hamiti, and others.

The police mercilessly beat the villagers in order to force them to hand over weapons they did not have. They tortured them by keeping them barefoot in the snow until they lost consciousness, among them my grandfather Emin Miftari, a *hoxha*, then his cousin Hamit Brahimi, my father Ali, Hafir Azem Olluri with his sons Azem and Shefqet, Adem and Muharrem Çollaku, and many others. The elementary school teacher, who was also responsible for the class, Isak Zabeli, had informed the students that no lessons would be held for two or three months, since the school had been placed at the service of the UDB in carrying out the Weapon Collection Action.

The school messenger, along with some villagers, was ordered to notify others of the village about who should report to the school on which day to hand in weapons demanded by the authorities. The list of names was prepared by the UDB in Lipjan, and then expanded and refined by the regime's *poverenikët*.¹⁰ To begin with, the Albanian-killer officer, Sava Shurbatović, summoned some of the most prominent men of the village: Mulla Emin, Hafir Rama, Rafe Mana, Xhemë Draga, Haxhë Lila, Xhelë Riza, and others. He forced them to stand for an hour in the schoolyard, in the freezing cold and wind.

The notorious inspector and Albanian-killer, Sava Shurbatović, appeared before the victims with the typical arrogance of his race and a particular sadism, having "warmed himself" with several glasses of rakija. In the early years after the war, he had operated in those same villages of Drenica. In fact, in Krojmir itself, he had killed Ali Kajtazi from the village of Godanc, a fighter of the NDSH, who had been sheltered for some time in Pjetërshicë. He had also organized the ambush that killed Rrahim Rexha, also from Krojmir, and had uncovered many families who were providing bread and shelter to Albanian fighters that refused to accept Tito's communist regime and Kosovo's continued subjugation under Yugoslavia.

He was one of the most infamous inspectors precisely because he had managed to recruit several Albanian mercenaries, who escorted and protected him, ready even to give their lives for him. He was among the first to propose a concentrated Action for the collection of illegal arms, targeting areas where it was thought, or simply assumed, that there were illegal weapons, and places where the population was suspected of opposing the regime. The concentrated Action was directed toward Kosovo, where it was believed that tens of thousands of weapons were in the hands of a population hostile to Yugoslavia.

This Action, at the provincial level, had been authorized and supported by: Ali Shukria, Xhavit Nimani, Xhevdet Hamza, Fadil Hoxha, Mehmet Cikuli-Maliqi, Spasoje Gjaković, Dušan Mugosha, Sava Shurbatović, Zhivko Mitrović, Shaban Kajtazi, and others. Shurbatović himself took on the role of operative leader of the Action in Ulpiana and surrounding areas, especially in the Drenica region, where it was said and propagated that "there was no house without a weapon." There were many

¹⁰ Commissioners, delegates.

homes that did not even have bread and risked starving to death, yet they would not sell their rifles, not even to survive.

The harsh and defiant stance of my grandfather, Emin Miftar Shema, infuriated the inspectors. A few minutes later they dragged out, barefoot in the snow, Hafir Rama, Mulla Beha, Xhelë Riza, Rafe Mana, and others. They lined them all up in a column and forced them to march barefoot around the school building. Meanwhile, inspectors Nikolla Pantić and Ranko Odalović took a rope and bound my grandfather's hands. They dragged him to the school's well, lowered him into it, and kept him in the water for several minutes, pulling him up occasionally so he would not drown.

They submerged him three times, then pulled him out of the well unconscious. He was barely breathing from the water and the freezing cold, when some villagers dragged him inside the school hallway. His body trembled like a reed in the wind from the cold, and his face was drained of all color. Even his long, gray beard had frozen stiff. The fact that he shivered showed he was alive. His mouth was shut tight, and he uttered not a sound. From time to time he was seized by violent chills, shaking his entire body.

Anita Susuri: You were sentenced three times during Tito's times by the Titoist regime. Why were you sentenced?

Ahmet Qeriqi: The first time I was sentenced was in November 1965, while I was in the third year of high school at the Albanian Madrasa of Pristina. The municipal court sentenced me to two months of actual imprisonment and one year on probation, for activities that were qualified as nationalist and irredentist, aiming at uniting Kosovo and other Albanian lands with Albania. I served this sentence in November–December 1966, in the prison of Pristina.

The second time I was sentenced was in May 1975, at that time I was a professor of Albanian language and literature at the Ferizaj Gymnasium. The sentence was because I had not stopped my car when ordered by the police in Shtime, since in the car I had banned books, which the day before, with a friend of mine (M.B.), I had obtained at the Albanian Embassy in Bulgaria, through a truck driver from Korça. The police couldn't catch me because my car was faster.

When I stopped at the cemetery of the village of Bllacë in Theranda, formerly Suhareka. I wrapped the books and placed them under a tombstone. Afterwards, during my return to Shtime, in the early morning hours of May 4, 1975, the police of Theranda stopped me and arrested me. They beat me brutally because I had not stopped when ordered. A case was opened for the criminal offense of obstructing an official in carrying out his duty. Since at that time a friend from the madrasa (Rifat Abdullahu, now deceased) worked at the municipal court, he modified the case as an attempted obstruction, and I was sentenced to two months in prison, for a misdemeanor. After some time, the investigation procedure was terminated.

During a surprise search of my home in Shtime, in April 1979, the Ferizaj branch of the UDB, led by inspector Adem Ibrahim (Goga), in search of banned literature, took from me two notebooks containing prose and poetry creations. I kept all the banned books hidden underground in a strong wooden box. Because of the content of those writings, the Municipal Court of Ferizaj sentenced me to six months in prison. After prosecutor Reshat Millaku's appeal, the Second Instance Court increased

the sentence to 18 months, branding me a recidivist. Since I also appealed, citing the doubling of the sentence, the Ferizaj court released me until the final decision was reached.

At that time, I was working at the Pedagogical Academy of Pristina. The sentence was confirmed in March 1981, during the outbreak of protests and demonstrations, in which I actively participated. From April 3, 1981, I went into hiding until May 10, 1982, when I was arrested and taken to the Pristina prison. On February 15, 1983, I was sentenced to eight years in prison along with a group of 24 defendants (branded as nationalists and irredentists), accused of two criminal acts of hostile propaganda, under articles 133 and 134 of the Yugoslav Penal Code. The prosecutors were Reshat Millaku and Ruzhdi Kozmaqi, the investigating was judge Isak Nishevci and the trial judges Mentor Çoku and Veroslava Dimiq.

Before the court, I defended the demand for upgrading Kosovo's constitutional status from Autonomy to Republic, a demand of the youth, workers, and Albanian peasantry of that time. The heavy sentence was based on the fact that I was considered a recidivist, a repeat offender, and that I had not responded to the call to serve my previous sentence. I served time in the prisons of Prishtina, Gjurakoc (now Dubrava), and the last four years in Subotica and Novi Sad of Vojvodina. My memories and experiences from prison I collected in the documentary-artistic novel *Burgu* (The Prison).

Anita Susuri: In which Yugoslav prisons did you serve during those years?

Ahmet Qeriqi: On a late November afternoon in 1966, I appeared before the gates of the District Prison in Pristina, where a year earlier I had stayed only three days. Since the sentence had now become fully valid, I had to serve two months of the one-year suspended sentence, in case I was accused of a similar offense within two years. At the time of the first sentence, I was a minor, and the sentence for minors, according to the laws of that time, carried more mitigating circumstances.

The prison of Pristina had been designed by Italians, who also carried out most of its construction during their three-year stay in Kosovo in World War II. The building was semi-circular in structure. The corridor was on the outer side, while the cells were on the inner side. The small barred windows were also on the outside. Sunlight could not enter because the tall building of the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, built in the early post-war years, stood on the eastern side.

The prison had a ground floor and a first floor. In each half of the semi-circle there was a triangular yard and a primitive bathroom, where prisoners were allowed to wash twice a month. They put me in the same cell I had been in a year earlier. Nothing had changed. In the corner near the window was the same filthy mattress, left there who knows how many years before. Someone had also left a quilt, hardened with filth. There were no blankets or sheets. A deep sadness overwhelmed me, as I thought I had to spend sixty days in that room.

But what were sixty days compared to the days, months, and years of those sentenced to 10 or 15 years. The prisoners of Adem Demaçi's Revolutionary Movement, arrested in June 1964, had been dispersed across Yugoslav prisons. In Pristina prison there were only common criminals and those sentenced for various misdemeanors. The filthy mattress was the only place to sleep. Either on it, or on the cold concrete floor. The quilt was disgusting to even look at.

I wrapped myself in my thin jacket, but from the cold I could not sleep. After a while, with my eyes closed, I pulled the filthy quilt over me and covered myself up to the waist. As soon as I warmed up a little, I fell asleep... I was startled by the loud bang of iron. Since there was no electric bell in the prison at that time, the guard on duty struck the metal bars of the corridor door with an iron rod. It was perhaps a special kind of torture, devised to make prisoners' lives darker and more unbearable, every day from 5:00 in the morning.

The prison day began early. After waking up, food distribution began. For "breakfast," prisoners got a cup of barley coffee without a gram of sugar, because the sugar intended for the coffee was said to be smuggled out by the head cook and the guards. The 400 grams of bread were given at lunchtime, to last 24 hours. At midday, usually a thin bean broth, and rarely a bean or two in the pot. In the evening, porridge or cornmeal mush, prepared from leftovers of the lunch meal. Inside the cell, in a ceramic bucket, was the corner for relieving oneself. Only when it was completely full did the guard allow the prisoner to empty it into the toilet. It was a fortune to be alone in the cell, because one feels less disgusted by oneself.

In the evening hours the cell door opened. By rule, when the guard opened the door, the prisoner had to stand upright, head bowed, and hands clasped behind. Soon the guard shoved a man in his thirties in. He slammed the door shut. "I am Toma, from Janjeva," said the newcomer, reaching out his hand. I told him my name, and that I was sentenced to two months. Toma was tall and slim. He wore a white skullcap, had twisted black mustaches, and was dressed in new black trousers with a woolen overcoat. He looked like a highlander dressed in traditional clothing of fading times.

"I got into trouble suddenly, brother," he said, sighing and sitting cross-legged. "Two Serbs attacked my 22-year-old sister Tona. In the evening, as night fell, they broke into the house and tried to abduct her. Luckily for her, and unluckily for them, as they were dragging her out, I happened to arrive at the door. Two days earlier I had gone to visit a friend, while my sister had been left only with our old father, who was dying, and our mother, who could barely walk with a crutch. Even with her crutch she tried to help Tona. I grabbed the axe from the shed and lay in wait at the yard exit. The first one, Bozha from Radiq, I struck dead on the spot, with a blow to the head. The other, Ivica, a Croat bastard, started running. I chased him down, and within 100 meters I caught him and threw him to the ground. I could have spared him, since he surrendered and swore on Christ, but when I remembered how those filthy hands had dragged my sister by the hair and thrown my mother to the ground, I closed my eyes and struck him. I split his head like a melon."

Toma's story shocked me, but it also gave me courage. I felt proud to see an Albanian who had killed two abusive Serbs and cared nothing for the consequences. His family's honor had been violated, and he had acted by the law of defending family honor. Prison memories are many. I chose to recount Toma's case, though I never heard of him again, and I do not know what happened to his life.

As I said earlier, my two-month prison sentence in May 1975, by the Ferizaj municipal court, was because I had not stopped my car when ordered by the police in Shtime, since I had banned books obtained the day before with a friend (M.B.) from the Albanian embassy in Bulgaria, through a truck driver from Korça. The police couldn't catch me because my car was faster. Later I stopped at the cemetery of Bllacë village in Theranda, wrapped the books, and hid them under a grave stone. Then, on May 4, 1975, in the early hours, the police of Theranda arrested me. I served that sentence in October–November of that year.

From that prison I have no particular memories, violence, or anything special. However, I would single out the inhumane and vile behavior of a local Albanian policeman named Shyqe, who beat, insulted, and abused prisoners without any reason. One day, after the daily half-hour yard walk, while escorting us back to the cells, he stopped me near his duty office and ordered me to wait until he returned. Since until then he hadn't beaten me, I thought he would do it in his office, and I felt relieved it wouldn't be in front of other prisoners, where even two of my students, convicted for fighting, were being held.

He soon returned with a baton in his hand and asked me: "Do you know why I stopped you?" "No," I replied, shrugging. "I'm not going to beat you, you're a professor, but I don't understand this thing the newspaper writes," and he began reading with some difficulty: "A great frost has gripped all of Kosovo.' What is this 'frost'? I've never heard of it." Since I had already guessed he was almost completely uneducated, I explained: "'Frost' means extreme cold." "Damn them, why don't they just say cold? Where did they find this word 'frost'?" he said, and as he escorted me back to the cell he added, "Don't tell the others why I stopped you, or they'll mock me, and then I'll beat them harder." I joked back, "They'll think I'm a spy if I don't tell them the reason." He said nothing, but as usual, when I entered, he slammed the door shut with all his strength.

Anita Susuri: What was your presence and activity in the demonstrations of 1981? Could you tell us more about that in detail?

Ahmet Qeriqi: The patriotic clandestine movement in Kosovo never interrupted its activity, not even after the Second World War, since Kosovo and other Albanian regions had remained under the occupation of the SFRY. My road toward the clandestine was entirely natural, since I belong to a politically persecuted family. My grandfather, mullah Emin Miftari, was sentenced to prison several times because of opposition and non-acceptance of the Yugoslav communist regime. The other grandfather, my mother's father, Kadri Beba, from Ribari i Madh, was sentenced as an enemy of the Yugoslav people's power and in February 1948 they executed him by shooting. Later, during the attempts to break through the encirclement, his brother Salihu together with his son Rexhep was also killed.

Earlier I have explained how many times I was sentenced, so now I will limit myself only to my activity from 1979 until 1982. In 1978, together with Zenun Gjoci, Sheqir Zeneli, Imer Halili from Prekaz, Muhamet Ademi and Beqë Derveni from Skopje, we acted on the platform of the program of the Albanian National Movement, by distributing prohibited literature and by propagating the idea of uniting the Albanian lands with Albania. We also distributed slogans and leaflets with national content, in Skopje, Pristina, Ferizaj and elsewhere.

During my work as professor in the Ferizaj Gymnasium, in the Pedagogical Academy and in the Technical High School in Pristina, I cooperated also with some students, who anyway were organized and acted illegally. In 1981, I took active part in the demonstrations of April 1 and 2, which were held in Pristina together with many students and work colleagues. On April 2, in the center of Pristina, the forces of the Special Militia of Yugoslavia killed two fourth-year students of the technical school, to whom I had given lessons and with whom I had connections of illegal activity. They were Naser Hajrizi and Asllan Pireva. Illegal connections in the direction of propagating the idea of creating the Republic of Kosovo I also kept with Fatmir Graiçevci, Lutfi Maqedoni, Naim Mahmud, Ilaz Zhitia and other students, all sentenced by the Yugoslav regime from 3 to 12 years in prison.

On April 3, 1981, since in Prishtina and in all Kosovo the Yugoslav regime had declared the state of emergency, I escaped illegally from the city and settled in my native village, in Krojmir of Drenica, where I lived in hiding until May 11, 1982. During the time of escape and deep illegality I kept contacts with some of the activists of the clandestine movement, with the aim of creating conditions for armed resistance. During all the time I was armed with a French rifle and a revolver of the Steyr type. For a time, I penetrated illegally into Preshevo, to a fellow of my studies, and from there into Skopje, where there was a group, which thanks to deep conspiracy and steadfastness during interrogations, was not discovered.

During 14 months of escape, the police forces tracked me step by step, but they did not manage to capture me, since I usually stayed in the mountains and they lost my tracks. At that time, I kept contacts with my father, Ali, with my brothers, who lived in Shtime, Osman, Jusuf, Hasan, then with my uncle Mehdi who lived in Krojmir, with Imer Halili from Prekaz, later sentenced on political charges, with Zenun Gjoci, who likewise later was sentenced on political charges, as well as with Muhamet Ademi, Fatmir Graiçevci and others.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us about your experience in prison, prison comrades, maltreatment, prison conditions?

Ahmet Qeriqi: The District Prison, or as it was also called the Investigative Prison in Prishtina, now a Museum, is not a prison only of political prisoners, and by no means a prison-museum of the Association of Political Prisoners, but it was a prison like all other prisons in the former SFRY (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Leaving aside the period from 1945 until 1951, when the Prishtina Prison was filled with fighters of the NDSH, and when this prison had its own property also the place called Strelishte, in Tauk-Bahqe, where hundreds of officers and fighters of the NDSH were executed, the treatment of prisoners was not worse and more cruel in terms of persecution of prisoners than the prison of Niš, Požarevac, Idrizova, Goli Otok and other prisons throughout Tito's former Yugoslavia. They did not have a better history than the prison of Pristina, the prison of Mitrovica, of Gjilan, especially in the 1980s, the prison of Prizren, and other prisons throughout Kosovo. Likewise in these prisons, there were not only political prisoners, but also other prisoners held for various criminal acts, whether they were Albanians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Roma, etc.

From 1970, when in the prisons of Kosovo many Albanian guards were also hired, the treatment of prisoners was better than in all other prisons of former Yugoslavia and this fact can be testified with so many facts and arguments. Even some of the investigators did not show themselves as cruel as some prisoners tend to present them, prisoners who did not receive even a single slap of punishment. We prisoners know this, among ourselves and comrades, although some, when they speak of the level at which they were tortured, one thinks how could they have survived. Some did not survive and this is known. But the District Prison of Prishtina was not a prison which, for cruel treatment against prisoners, could be compared with other prisons of the republics of Yugoslavia. It was only an investigative prison, a District Prison, like hundreds of other prisons.

One autumn day of 1982, when I was in cell number 27 of the Prishtina Prison, suddenly strong knocks began on the walls, which was an alarm, which political prisoners practiced in special cases. In such cases the prisoners grabbed the window grills to learn what was happening. A voice had given the news that two guards had brutally tortured the doctor of history, Muhamet Tërnavë. It was also requested that in sign of solidarity, according to the maxim, "One for all, all for one," the dinner food

should not be taken, as a sign of revolt. At first we knew no more, but later it became known that the guard Shyqë or also one Tara, known for punishing political prisoners, had smashed his head against the radiator, in the prison cell. Later, after prison, Muhamet told me the truth of that event.

He said that one day earlier, they had brought into the room a Serbian truck driver, for allegedly a traffic accident with consequences. Being physically much stronger, he had provoked him about the request, “Kosovo Republic” and had insulted him on a national basis. “In the moment I had hit him but he was physically stronger, he suspended me and pressed the back part of my head against the radiator of the cell. Feeling very bad, I shouted and at that moment two guards came, they removed the Serbian prisoner from the room, while they hit me because I had been the first to attack the ‘driver,’ about whom I thought he was instructed by the regime, and whom they had brought into the cell to punish me. The blow against the radiator left consequences for his whole life. In winter 1983, I met Muhamet Tërnavë in the Gjurakoc Prison....

Anita Susuri: In the Gjurakoc Prison?

Ahmet Qeriqi: On February 15, 1983, in the District Court of Prishtina, I was sentenced among 24 defendants to eight years in prison. Two days later they transferred me to the Gjurakoc Prison, among about 50 political prisoners and many other prisoners for various criminal acts, murder, robbery, trafficking with Roma children, theft, beating, rape, etc. In the summer of that year, because we held lessons for some prisoners, they punished us with one month isolation in cell, me and the prisoner Sheqir Zeneli, whom after serving the punishment in cell, with some other prisoners they sent for further serving of sentence in Novi Sad of Vojvodina...

In 1984, on April 11, in the teahouse premises, a mass beating organized by the SPB of Peja occurred. They had organized a group of 10 prisoners sentenced for murder, violence, theft, robbery, trafficking of Roma children. Their attack was carried out from behind when we were staying in the hall where tea was served. Even though attacked treacherously and from behind by Mujë Loshi, Feriz Kukiqi, Ramë Morina, Kamer... the comrades nicknamed him “Kamer Gjaja,” Salih Gorani, Pren Ndoni and some others, we went through it without serious consequences except Ali Thaçi who had received blows to the head and was covered in blood.

The counterattack by Idriz Isufi, former guard, political prisoner, then Nezir Fejza, Njazi Azemi, Vahedin Azemi and others, had made six of the attackers fall to the ground, until a group of guards intervened, led by Jahja Çetta who had known about the plan for the attack, and with the aim to prevent the worst. He had not left the pavilion even though his working hours had expired. He, with the guards Naim, Agim, Çaushe and some others, almost openly standing in defense of the political prisoners, saved us from the worst, because two murderers, during the beating, had entered into the kitchen where they had taken knives to attack us, while we were bare-handed. Precisely at that moment they were stopped by Jahja Çetta with some Albanian guards, who defended and supported us.

Because of the consequences of the mass beating, the Directorate of the Prison in Gjurakoc punished me with one month of solitary confinement. Even though we were among the attacked and not attackers, the SPB had declared us guilty by accusing us of organized attack against non-political prisoners. Besides me with one month prison in cell were punished also Idriz Isuf Maqedonci, Nezir Fejza, Ali Thaçi, Ragip Reçica, Vahedin Azemi, Shyqri Gjinolli, Njazi Azemi and others. Four of the rapists and thieves had received bodily injuries and were sent to Peja. Me and Idriz Isuf, former guard and

sentenced political prisoner, were sent to the Smrekovnica Prison, near Vushtrri, to serve the punishment of one month in a cell, in miserable conditions, in a room 8 by 3 meters, in the basement, with wooden bed on the wall without light, a inhuman treatment.

Anita Susuri: In the Subotica prison, in Vojvodina?

Ahmet Qeriqi: On July 3, 1984, early in the morning, in the Smrekovnica Prison, in the room where I was with my prison mate Idriz Isuf, they woke me up and after I quickly prepared the clothes, they tied my hands with handcuffs and took me to the Prishtina Prison by car. After they had picked up from prison Bajram Dërmaku, Isa Dërmaku, Fatmir Graiçevci, Rrahim Sadiku, all of us they tied hands, two by two, and with a security chain also to the inner rings of the van, they interned us to Vojvodina. We arrived at the Investigative Prison of Subotica after a ten hour journey, in the militia's closed van, tired, thirsty, dehydrated and crushed from the long road of 600 km.

In the room where he had escorted us, with an expression of pain and pity, the prison director, the Hungarian Hegyi Bella, asked a guard to bring us water, since we were dehydrated. In the collective room where they had confined me and Isa Dërmaku, we met the prisoner Ruzhdi Hajdini, who was sentenced to 14 years prison for organizing the uprising in Besi where with the demonstrators, on April 2 and 3, he had disarmed three units of reservists that were coming from Serbia, since state of emergency was declared, and had taken their armament.

Since I had still four years of prison, and was in an environment where the majority population was Hungarian, I began to be interested in learning this language, of course the hardest of those I have learned. In prison I translated the novel *Ararat* by Lajos Zilahy, but on the day of release from prison they confiscated my notebooks of translation, with the reasoning that they were written in Albanian and they did not understand them. They thought I had camouflaged something else. In 1985, in the Subotica prison, [I was] with Agim Leci, Hungarian, Bosniak, Serb, Bunjevac, Russian prisoners. One month in prison with Adem Prapashtica, at the time when he had been on a hunger strike for one month for the third time. At that time in the Subotica Prison were also serving sentences Sali Lajçi, Sami Leci, Agim Selmani, Ibush Kelmendi, Eshref Spahiu, Isa Dërmaku, Ruzhdi Hajdini. Earlier Hajrullah Dragusha, a teacher, had completed his sentence.

In the year 1986, in the Subotica prison, [I was] with a Serb from Vareshi of Bosnia, Slavko Miletić, a friend, well-wisher of Albanians, a supporter of Kosovo Republic. His father had been military attaché in Tirana, in the time of the Informbiro,¹¹ then was sentenced to prison as soon as he returned to Zagreb and died serving the sentence in Goli Otok. In prison, I also met some Serbs who had understanding toward Albanians, among them also Petar Franović, student of Theology, his mother was from the family of Ollga Gjergji, sister of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, a boy who so much resembled Migjeni to me.

Then for a time I stayed with the ill-intentioned Hungarian, Llaslo Shimonjy, and with many Hungarians, Russians, Bosniaks, Bunjevci and other members of the nationalities of Vojvodina. I also met the Serb, Millan Shibaliq, whose mother had been a deputy in the Assembly of Vojvodina and had

¹¹ *Informbiro* (short for the *Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties*) was founded in 1947 as a coordinating body for communist parties. In Yugoslavia, the term usually refers to the 1948 Tito–Stalin split, when the Yugoslav Communist Party was expelled from the Cominform. Afterward, many suspected of being “pro-Soviet” were arrested and sent to prisons and camps, most notoriously Goli Otok.

supported the Albanian protests of the year 1981. She openly demanded that Kosovo and Vojvodina be declared Republics independent from Serbia.

Anita Susuri: In the Prison of Novi Sad...?

Ahmet Qeriqi: In the year 1987, from Subotica they transferred me to the prison of Novi Sad, together with Sali Lajçi, from Rugova, with residence in Peja, a political prisoner of the group *Pavarësia*. In Novi Sad, in the spring of that year, they united all the political prisoners in two rooms, on two floors of the new prison. Sometimes during the afternoon walks they allowed us to walk together and communicate among ourselves. On the ground floor were the prisoners: Hilmi Ramadani, Jakup Krasniqi, Shaban Shala, Zijadin Hoxha, Bejtullah Tahiri, Fatmir Graiçevci, Jashar Aliu. On the first floor I was with the prisoners: Mehmet Hajrizi, Xhevat Haziri, Isa Dërmaku, Bajram Dërmaku, Vehbi Leci, Kadri Cakiqi, Jahir Hajrizi and Serbian, Romanian and Hungarian prisoners etc.

On the occasion of the holiday of the former SFRY of 29 November, since Yugoslavia had removed the penal article of Propaganda with a sudden decision, I was released from further serving my sentence four months before the ending of the term of the prison. The decision had surprised me for the bad, since I had not requested amnesty and this surprise, to some comrades of the prison, was misinterpreted. Seeing the bad mood of some of them, that night I invited them into the room and I made them know that I had not requested any kind of pardon of the punishment, but the law for propaganda was abrogated.

Anita Susuri: On December 1, 1987, you were released from prison and returned to the bosom of the family in Shtime.

Ahmet Qeriqi: On December 1, 1987, I was released from prison and returned to the bosom of the family in Shtime. During the first three months, after the release from prison, many acquaintances and fellow prisoners who had been released before me came to visit me. A considerable part of them came in the evening or at night, with the purpose of not being noticed by the authorities. I started to work in my father's carpentry shop, in order to support the family. The police of Shtime observed me and followed every movement. They had kept me several hours under arrest because I did not have an identity card, which the SUP of Ferizaj delayed for a year, with the purpose of preventing movement, because by the law of that time the lack of an identity card was a misdemeanor and was foreseen punishment with a fine, or one month in prison.

After returning from prison, I worked with my father, Ali, and my brothers for the repair of the house, since the children lived in a basement of the old house which was damp. In the winter, since the weather was good, we repaired the roof of the house. I started working in my father's carpentry shop in Shtime. At that time my brother Osmani with Haki Hysiqi had begun the installation of a large mill in the yard of Haki Hysiqi. From time to time I worked in the mill but also in the common stable as well as in agricultural work. Meanwhile, I established contacts with friends who came to see me, but also with the old friends of the underground. They came from Skopje, Muhamet Ademi, Beqë Derveni, and others.

I continued the work in carpentry, I contacted the former prisoners, Imer Halili, Sheqir Zeneli, Kadrie Gashi, Azem Sylja, Ismet Shamolli, Zenun Gjoci, and many others. At that time I kept notes and began to write *Kujtime nga burgu* (Memories from Prison). I also wrote the work: *Meditime ne arrati*,

(Meditations in Hiding), which I published after the liberation of Kosovo from Serbian bondage. Alongside the daily physical work, in the evenings I usually read and dealt with various writings and studies. I collaborated with *Rilindja*, later with *Bujku*, the newspaper *Bashkimi* and other magazines and newspapers, but mainly with *Bujku*, which was the editorial staff of the former *Rilindja*.¹²

On the occasion of the Yugoslav-level events for the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, on June 28, 1989, the SUP¹³ of Ferizaj had summoned me for an informative conversation. The inspectors, Adem Ibrahim and Nezir Sherifi, had made me aware that for three days I should not leave the house. It was a kind of house arrest, with threat of arrest, in case I did not comply. This was a unique practice of the UDB, for all those who were under the target of the authorities. I was under such measures also in 1979, when Tito had for the last time visited Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: What were your activities after prison?

Ahmet Qeriqi: I took part in the social activities that were being developed at that time, but I did not accept to join the LDK,¹⁴ which, at the time of its founding, had taken the stance that political prisoners released from prison should not be incorporated into that party. At that time I maintained social contacts with Ruzhdi Jashari, Avdyll Hajredini, Ibrahim Sylja, Xhevat Salihu, Isa Haxhiu, Jakup Beqa, Sherif Beqa, Banush Imeri, and other activists.

Usually I worked in carpentry. My brother Osmani worked without interruption and together with some friends and comrades had set up the electric mill and the paper factory Letplast in Shtime. During 1990, many of the political prisoners were released, among them also Nezir Myrtaj, with whom they had become acquainted in the prison of Smrekovnica. I visited some of them on the occasion of their release. At that time I maintained more frequent contacts with Kadrie Gashi, Imer Halili, Hilmi Ramadani, Shaqir Zeneli, Nezir Myrtaj, and others.

Anita Susuri: Where were you employed, did you have problems at work?

Ahmet Qeriqi: After returning from prison the punishment continued for five years without the right to work in education. I did manual work in carpentry and construction to support the family. My brother Osmani worked without interruption and together with some friends and comrades had set up the electric mill and the paper factory Letplast in Shtime.

The situation in Kosovo after the suspension of autonomy and the beginning of the war in Croatia had worsened. The pacifist movement with Ibrahim Rugova at the head had begun the pacification of the militant movement and had won the trust of the majority of Albanians who had cooperated and coexisted during the years of autonomy. My brother Osmani had expanded the work in the installation of mills. I took part, together with Osmani, my father Ali, my brother Hasan, the former political

¹² *Rilindja* [The Awakening] the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper. *Bujku* [The Farmer], daily newspaper which replaced *Rilindja* after Serbian authorities banned it, in August 1990.

¹³ Acronym for *Sekretarijat unutrašnjih poslova*, which translates to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, of the Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic.

¹⁴ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. The first political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

prisoner Isuf Dragaçina, and other workers in the installation of a mill in the village of Jashanica, near Klina, then in another mill in Buzez of Dragash, and later also in Prekaz i Epërm of Drenica and in the village of Semetisht, near Theranda, formerly Suhareka.

I did not interrupt the work in Carpentry, where I also engaged in work Isuf Dragaçina from Bujan, a former political prisoner, with whom I had become acquainted in the Prison of Gjyrakoc. Later I engaged in work also the pedagogue, Agim Olluri, who, like all the education workers, had been removed from teaching by the Milošević regime, since they had not accepted to work with the programs of Serbia and did not recognize the regime that had removed Kosovo's autonomy. Later I accepted in work also Nehat Imeri, a cousin from Glllogoc of Lypjan, brother of the political prisoner Refik Imeri.

With the insistence of some political prisoners, such as Bashkim Mazreku, Kadri Kryeziu and others, I accepted to become a member of the Parliamentary Party of Kosovo, at the head of which was the political prisoner Bajram Kosumi and some other prisoners. The Party was initially led by Veton Surroi and a *Titist*¹⁵ [Titoites] clan, but it had come to clashes with the former prisoners. Surroi had left the party, but behind him he had left some remnants.

Anita Susuri: What were the activities in your engagement, in education and in social life?

Ahmet Qeriqi: With the proposal of some professors and intellectuals of Shtime I accepted to lead the sector of education (without pay), and without interrupting the work in the carpentry shop, through which I managed to support the family and help some of the prison comrades who had a difficult economic situation, likewise I paid also the percentage for education.¹⁶ In time, I understood that the chairman of the shadow government (which was improvised and kept secret), who was also the chairman of the LDK, Ali Sadriu, had accepted that I direct the Education sector. He had opened two parallels of medicine in Shtime, without respecting the official competition, only to employ his own people from the LDK, even though there were not elementary conditions for the parallels of medicine.

My distancing from his actions in the LDK was commented as ill-intentioned because I belonged to another party. All those who supported me from the LDK, such as Ruzhdi Jashari, Abdyl Hajredini, Fehmi Mujota, Ramadan Veliu, Xhevat Salii, Isa Haxhiu, Sherif Beqa and others, were blackmailed and sidelined. The disagreements had deepened with the improvised chairman of the municipality, Ali Sadriu, who pretended that he exercised the duty of chairman, even though in front of the violent Serbian organs, he never accepted the existence of such 'executive.' The clash with the parallel structures had been overly aggravated.

I had contacted the chairman of LASH in Prishtina, Rexhep Osmani, whom I had informed also in writing regarding all the shortcomings that I had evidenced during my work in the capacity of Secretary of Education. He not only received me coldly, but did not show readiness to accept my

¹⁵ The term is taken from the book *Titist* published by Enver Hoxha in 1981-82. In this book the Albanian communist dictator, who in 1948 had taken the side of Stalin against Tito, excoriates Tito's leadership in Yugoslavia also for oppressing the Albanian population of Kosovo. Among Albanian members of the illegal national movement, "titist" referred to people who were considered part of the Yugoslav establishment.

¹⁶ After all Albanians were fired from their jobs at the beginning of the 1990s, and a parallel Albanian society was created in Kosovo, Albanians in the diaspora contributed a percentage of their salary (usually 3%) to fund schools, hospitals, and all other services.

official note. Seeing that he ignored me and could not hide it, I looked at him with cynicism, put the report before him, and left without saying goodbye. On June 23, 1995, the majority of the Parliamentary Commission for Education (Kosovo did not even have a provisional Parliament) voted for my dismissal from the position, without publishing a single sentence of reasoning from my side.

The people who voted for my dismissal are: Xhavit Ahmeti, Rexhep Osmani, Avdyl Rama, Fadil Hysaj. Abstained: Ramë Buja of the LDK, and Aziz Pacolli of the PPK. Voted against dismissal: the representative of the PPK, Jonuz Salihaj of the PPK, and the chairman of the Peasant Party, Hivzi Islami. (Archived document, as all other personal documents of this autobiographical interview). Before the dismissal, Fehmi Agani together with Ali Sadriu contacted Bajram Kosumi, chairman of the PPK, and presented him their version, asking from him that he not make my dismissal a problem. Bajram, together with Osman Dumoshi, took as true the depositions of Ali Sadriu, even though I had presented to them the facts in writing, with witnesses and with a completely real stance that it did not matter to me at all what the leaders of the LDK had fabricated. The request of Fehmi Agani and Ali Sadriu that I be expelled from the Parliamentary Party was not taken very seriously in the PPK, but it did not interest me at all, since I was in contact with some of the leaders of the KLA.

In 1996, after the problems with the LDK of Shtime, the blackmails of the local militia increased. The financial police had made a control in the carpentry workshop and found that I had not declared the real state of the work. They had punished me with a fine of several million dinars, which in German Marks reached the value of about 1000 DM. I did not pay the fine on the reasoning that the doors and windows that I kept in the workshop were prepared for the market, but had not been sold. Since I did not pay the fine within the set deadline, the police in Shtime closed my workshop. At that time, together with professor Avdyl Hajredini, we worked in the carpentry shop of Musë Maçiteva in the village of Lutogllavë, near Prizren. There I worked five days a week for almost one year.

One winter night, while I was returning with the evening bus which circulated on the line Prizren–Shtime–Prishtina, the snow blocked the road in Duhle, where we had to wait for many hours. Meanwhile I met Jetë Hasani, who had remained on the road with his car. Jetë was an activist from Godanc, who had been mistreated many times by the Serbian militia. I had known him earlier also, since his father had family ties with my mother's uncles, in Great Ribar. Jetë told me that he had met with Muhamet Malësori, a close friend of Ukshin Hoti, whom I knew and he knew me. They were making plans to take Ukshin illegally out of prison and kill the inspector who had arrested and tortured him two years earlier. Jetë Hasani maintained illegal contacts with my cousin, Sylë Qeriqi, with the teacher Elez Durmishi and with a group whom he had trained in Tirana two years earlier. Sylë and Elezi maintained contacts with the armed units of Adem Jashari in Prekaz and beyond.

Anita Susuri: When did the organization of the KLA begin, and what role did you have in it?

Ahmet Qeriqi: The organization of the KLA was preceded, in one part, by the People's Movement of Kosovo, which came out of the leadership of the illegal Movement, especially after 1981. All the illegal groups in Kosovo, which acted in the direction of organizing the active Movement of resistance, acted on the platform of the Albanian national program for the liberation and the unification of the territories with Mother Albania. The secret patriotic organizations that acted after the Second World

War, such as LNDSh, LRBSH, LPK, OMLK, PKMLSHJ,¹⁷ and others, kept alive the idea for armed struggle in the second half of the twentieth century. This brought the heroic resistance of Adem Jashari and the Jasharis in Prekaz, on March 5, 6, and 7, the war of the Kosovo Liberation Army and the military intervention of NATO against the Albanian-killer Serbian regime.

The general situation in 1997 erupted with daily police violence and terror against the Albanians who did not obey the regime. The systematic violence had passed the limits of any patience, which the LDK of Ibrahim Rugova insisted upon. At the same time, the attacks of the groups of the Kosovo Liberation Army against the Serbian police and the Albanian-speaking collaborators had intensified. Since I maintained illegal links with some of the groups, I had reduced all movements in public. I would not go to the bus station on the road to Prishtina; instead, I would start walking along the road until some car stopped. Even during the return, I would ask the driver to stop the bus without entering Shtime. Often I would get off in the village of Davidoc and then continue on foot. I would walk on the road to Krojmir, through the villages of Godanc, Zborc, and Pjetërshicë.

At that time I had resigned from the Parliamentary Party of Kosovo, since I did not agree with the exclusion from the party of Kadri Kryeziu and Merxhan Avdyli, who, without the permission of Adem Demaçi, then chairman of the PPK, had gone to Albania and met with the leaders of the Socialist Party. Also Nezir Myrtaj, a political prisoner, the husband of Kadrie Gashi, left the PPK. We continuously found a common language with Nezir and acted in all later engagements. From the continuous contacts I maintained with my fellow student, Sheqir Zeneli, I was aware of the illegal activities of Azem Sylja and of some of the other activists.

The social situation in the family had worsened. There was no work, and I could not move freely for fear of a sudden arrest. My cousin, Haki Qeriqi, sent me money for the renovation of his house, which he had bought in Ferizaj. I engaged in this work also my brother, Hasan, who also was unemployed and could not support his family of nine members. Mother was sick. My father, Ali, had problems with kidney stones and had undergone surgery. The family of the late Isuf barely survived. I had to take care of them as well. When they had time, his sons Gazmend and Shpend helped me in the workshop. My son, Epiri, 16 years old, also helped me, even though he had undergone two surgeries for a hernia. Even though at a tender age, he took care of many jobs in the house and was an exemplary student.

I maintained illegal contacts also with Kadrie Gashi, Reshat Gashi, and Faruk Gashi, who was rumored to have companionship with the police. Sheqir Zeneli had explained to me that Faruk was in connection with Azem Sylja, and he knew about his every action and was under his orders. During that year I also maintained illegal contacts with Ruzhdi Jashari, an engineer, who had continuously supported me and was a person of influence in Shtime, even though in the target of the regime, since he was engaged in the KMDLNJ,¹⁸ where he also reported the systematic violence that the Serbian regime exercised against Albanians. For the principled stance he maintained towards me, the LDK branch in Shtime had long removed him from its ranks.

The student demonstration of October 1 of that year, in Pristina, and the public appearance of the KLA in Llausha of Skenderaj, during the funeral of the martyred teacher, Halit Geci, marked the most

¹⁷ Albanian underground organizations fighting at different times for Kosovo autonomy, independence, and reunification with Albania.

¹⁸ The full name of this organization is Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom. KMDLNJ is the Albanian acronym.

important events of the year. During 1997 I intensified the meetings with Sylë Qeriqi and Elez Durmishi, the early fighters of Adem Jashari.

1998 was the year that would make the decisive turning point in the most recent history of Kosovo, a turn which had begun in 1981, with the demand for liberation from Serbian slavery, the creation of the Republic of Kosovo, and the national unification of Albanians. From the beginning of the year I intensified the meetings and cooperation with Jetë Hasani, Sylë Qeriqi, Elez Durmishi, Sheqir Zeneli, Nezir Myrtaj, Kadrie Gashi, Hilmi Ramadani, Imer Halili, then the members of the Association of Political Prisoners, Hydajet Hyseni, Jakup Krasniqi, Mehmet Hajrizi, Sokol Dobruna, and others. I often went also to Krojmir, to my uncle Mehdi Qeriqi and aunt Ajshe Beba-Qeriqi. Since the house was on the mountain, I proposed to Sylë and Elez that the meetings of the KLA group in Krojmir be held there.

The titanic and heroic resistance of the first commander of the KLA, Adem Jashari, and of his close and extended family, on March 5, 6, and 7, 1998, in Prekaz i Ulët of Drenica, had definitively shaken off the eight-year lethargy of pacifist politics, which, even though it was there, after those days lost all credibility, since it had not been able to take part in the real solution of the Kosovo issue. At that time, I sent to the newspaper *Bujku* a writing against the insults and anti-national statements of the journalist and party-member Jusuf Buxhovi, who had requested from Ibrahim Rugova to pacify Drenica drenched in blood by the criminals of Milošević, and not to allow that what happened, according to him, in the time of Shaban Palluzha,¹⁹ would happen again. The writing was not published. Some of my writings I published in a trade-union newspaper, in Pristina.

I took an active part in the organization of the KLA war from 1997, initially at the Krojmir point, together with Sylë Qeriqi, Elez Durmishi, Heset Olluri, Halil Olluri, Vehbi Qeriqi, Naim Rizani, Mehdi Qeriqi, and many others. From November 1998 until June 1999, I was director and journalist of Radio-Kosova e Lirë, which broadcast its program in the Berisha Mountains. [The time period from May 1998 until June 24, 1999, is described day by day, in 400 days, in the notes I kept during the war, in the manuscript work, *Kronikë lufte I dhe II* (Chronicle of War I and II).]

Anita Susuri: When did Radio-Kosova e Lirë begin its work, and who founded it?

Ahmet Qeriqi: Radio-Kosova e Lirë began broadcasting on January 4, 1999. The transmission was done from the mountains of the village of Berisha, in the Drenica Plateau, a zone which from the beginning of the war was under the control of the Kosovo Liberation Army. It was the region that was never overrun during the entire KLA War. The Radio was founded on November 13, 1998, by decision of the KLA General Staff. The Radio's staff consisted of: Director, Ahmet Qeriqi; News Editor, Nezir Myrtaj; Field Reporter, Martin Çuni; announcer and music selector, Nusret Pllana; journalists and correspondents in the field: Sheqir Zeneli, Fitnete Ramosaj, Murat Musliu, Muharrem Mahmutaj, Ruzhdi Jashari, Sabit Gashi, Habib Zogaj, Nuhi Paçarizi, and others. Technicians and sound operators: Valdet Hoti, Fatmir Dugolli; driver, Razah Berisha.

The Radio and the Operational Zones of the war were equipped with satellite phones. Information at the Radio was sent by the responsible journalists of the zones, who prepared reports from the field

¹⁹ Shaban Palluzha or Polluzha (1871-1945) was a regional Albanian leader of volunteer forces in Drenica. Shaban Polluzha joined the partisans, but in late 1944 disobeyed orders to go north to fight Germans in Serbia, having received news that nationalist Serbs and Montenegrins were attacking civilians in Drenica. He fought against partisan forces until early 1945, when he was killed.

and transmitted them to the Radio by telephone. Part of the information we also received from the commanders of the zones, or of the operative units, during the battles. For diplomatic developments we used data from TVSH, BBC, DW, CNN, and various international agencies. In addition to the news edition, where on average we broadcast 20 to 35 items of information daily, we also transmitted interviews, commentaries on diplomatic and political developments, talks with soldiers and officers, conversations from the front lines, war reports about the lives of displaced villagers in mountain gorges, and various announcements for the population.

On certain occasions, journalists and reporters Martin Çuni and Nusret Pllana also made video recordings, sometimes even during the fighting. They took numerous photographs in most of the battle zones. After the intensification of NATO's bombings, when all foreign journalists had left Kosovo, Radio-Kosova e Lirë and the KosovaPress Agency had remained the only sources of information in Kosovo. At that time, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, and other media informed their audiences that the news from Kosovo relied exclusively on the media of the KLA. [In 2009 RKL published in three volumes the entire archive of the wartime period.]

Anita Susuri: Did Serbian troops attack the Radio's headquarters?

Ahmet Qeriqi: From the very beginning of broadcasting until the end of the war, Radio-Kosova e Lirë and the KosovaPress news agency were a constant target of long-distance strikes, but also of direct attacks from two bomber planes. On March 27, 1999, at 8 a.m., two Yugoslav military aircraft bombed the neighborhood with eight cluster bombs, where we were sheltered, as a result of which a 16-year-old youth was martyred, and eight others were wounded.

That same day, at 12:00, Serbian media announced the destruction of the Radio-Kosova e Lirë transmission base, whereas we broadcast the program at 16:00, at the exact time when broadcasting had begun during the entire course of the war. At that time, the Serbian criminal Šešelj and several commanders of the Yugoslav army declared in the media that soon they would drink their morning coffee in Berisha, where they would also build a football stadium.

In order to survive under conditions and circumstances of continuous attacks, in early April 1999 we built a well-fortified bunker, on a mountain peak, and from the bunker we broadcast the daily program, up to 1 hour and 30 minutes a day, during the last three months of the war. The place near the bunker was struck countless times by enemy weapons, but it was not destroyed. On June 8, 1999, two days before the end of the war, Serbian forces struck the shelter base of the staff, in the place called Rrezja e Baliqit.

They struck with 16 ground-to-ground rockets, which exploded in a radius of 50 to 100 meters near the bunker. At the critical moment of the strikes, we entered the bunker and were all spared. During and after the war, we collected the overwhelming majority of the pieces and skeletons of the rockets, with the aim of preserving them in a museum, but these were taken by KFOR soldiers in the first month after the end of the war, perhaps with the aim of erasing even the physical traces of the war.

Anita Susuri: Which was the most difficult day of the war?

Ahmet Qeriqi: The most difficult day for me, for the Radio, and for the staff during the war was March 27, 1999, the day of the bombardment of the headquarters by Serbian airplanes. We were faced with

the dilemma of what to do. Since the Serbs had announced the destruction of the Radio, we, as a counter-response, had to necessarily broadcast the daily program at the appointed time, by previously changing the place of transmission. There was the danger that they could easily identify the place of broadcasting and strike us with a guided missile. Regardless of the dangers, we prepared the news edition, writing the information with pencil in a notebook, from which the announcer had to read live, since the pre-recording equipment was not working.

At the beginning of the news edition, we informed the public that the program was reduced because of the reasons and circumstances of uninterrupted fighting in the zone where we were transmitting, while at the same time we also gave the news of the bombing of the headquarters and the casualties of the civilian population. We made it known to the listeners that we would not stop the Radio program and that we would continue broadcasting from the zones held under the control of the KLA. During that entire day the whole staff of the Radio and the Agency stayed in a forest with large oaks, near the village cemetery, constantly under the target of uninterrupted shelling. We continually changed our location, and under such conditions and circumstances we prepared the day's information.

After the bombing of the headquarters by the enemy airplanes, the news of the Radio being hit spread in the surrounding villages. To see and to be convinced of what happened, my daughter Arbana and my son Epiri, with one of his fellow fighters, walked on foot for five straight hours from Krojmir to Berisha. They were overjoyed when they saw all of us safe and sound. After the transmission of the program, with several members of the staff, we went to offer condolences to the family of Mehmet Berisha, since their nephew, Elbasan Berisha, the only brother of four sisters, had been killed, and eight family members had been wounded, among them also Elbasan's parents...

No one knew what the morning would bring, even though the fortifications of the KLA war in the Plateau stood unshaken until the end of the war. In defense of the voice of freedom, 13 martyrs fell, three of them members of the staff.

Anita Susuri: Which was the day of victory?

Ahmet Qeriqi: On June 21,²⁰ 1999, we gave the announcement of victory, after the news of the final withdrawal of the Serbian army and police from Kosovo. Together with the criminal army, many Serbs were also leaving, especially those who had stained their hands with the blood of Albanians. This time the Serbs fulfilled every point of the Agreement for withdrawal, which had been concluded two days earlier, but was made official on that day. French forces took Mitrovica, while a large part of the Serbs stopped in the northern part of the city. Russian forces also stationed themselves in Fushë Kosovë and at the Prishtina Airport. It was being said that the Russian forces would be incorporated into the ranks of KFOR. Into Kosovo had already entered American, German, Austrian, and other forces.

Exactly as we were celebrating, we received bitter news. In an attempt to clear mines in the yard of the school, in the Bytyçi neighborhood, two freedom fighters, two English soldiers, and a school guard fell. During the removal of the mines, one of the foreign soldiers dropped a cluster bomb from his hand and from the explosion all of them were killed. The barbarians had left, but behind they had left the traces of their criminal savagery. Among the fallen soldiers were Sami Gashi and another fighter from Arllat.

²⁰ Unclear whether this is June 12, when the Kumanovo Agreement that ended the war was signed.

On June 21, 1999, we announced the last day of broadcasting of the program from the peak of Pallanik. Through a note that I prepared, I made known the names and surnames of the staff members and the work they had carried out during this nearly six-month period. The interruption of the program precisely on the day of the official and definitive departure of the Serbs from Kosovo had its meaningful symbolism. The announcement of victory already on January 4 had been an extremely bold step, but now it had become reality.

Radio-Kosova e Lirë had fulfilled the mission it had set for itself, and on that day the hardest but also the most glorious chapter of its existence closed. It was the only wartime radio in Kosovo which, together with the KosovaPress agency, became the true echo of the liberation war. With our radio, hundreds of freedom-lovers from all over the territories involved in the fighting cooperated. Xhavit Bajraktari, a member of the staff in the field fell on the field of honor. Eleven martyrs of freedom fell in defense of the Plateau and of our positions, from where we had transmitted from April 1 until May 2, 1999.

Anita Susuri: How many martyrs did the Kumanovo Brigade give, and who are the martyrs who fell in defense of the positions where Radio-Kosova e Lirë broadcast the program?

Ahmet Qeriqi: In the 121st Brigade, of the Pashtrik Operational Zone, where Radio-Kosova e Lirë and the KosovaPress agency carried out their broadcasting activity, 65 martyrs fell, among them also Ismet Jashari, Commander Kumanova. In defense of the Plateau positions, of the KLA General Staff, of the war information institutions, and of the displaced population around the broadcasting site of the Radio and the Agency, from April 1 until June 11, 1999, the following martyrs fell:

Elbasan Jakup Berisha, 16 years old, was killed by cluster bomb shells on March 27, 1999, during the attack of two MIG-21 bomber planes of the Yugoslav occupying army, near the Radio headquarters.

Xhavit Kelmendi, from Karaçica, fell as a martyr on April 1, 1999, in battle against Serbian military forces in defense of KLA positions in Tërpezë. He was a member of the special units of the KLA General Staff.

Vezir Kolshi, from the village of Baicë e Kolshit, fell as a martyr on April 1, 1999, in battle against Serbian forces, in defense of KLA positions in Tërpezë. He was a member of the special units of the KLA General Staff.

Mehdi Bytyçi, from Arllat, platoon commander, fell as a martyr on April 16, 1999, at the Bytyçi neighborhood, in Arllat, in defense of positions, during the attempts of Serbian forces to penetrate the Plateau.

Sylejman Bytyçi, from Arllat, received mortal wounds from enemy fire on April 16, 1999, at the Bytyçi neighborhood. From the wounds he died five days later.

Islam Kastrati from Kizhareka, Mentor Morina from Arllat, Ramadan Bytyçi from Gjergjica, Mentor Gashi from Llapushnik, and Halim Bajraktari from Çikatova, fell as martyrs on April 18, 1999, in the face-to-face battle against Serbian infantry at the strategic positions of the KLA at Gradina, above the Llapushnik Gorge.

Xhavit Bajraktari, from the village of Studençan in Theranda, fell as a martyr on May 2, 1999, together with Fetah Gega, in the village of Shirokë, in direct clashes with enemy forces. Xhavit had been a reporter of the Radio and the Agency since February 1999. Shaqir Hoxha, from the village of Shalë, former Sedllar, fell as a martyr at the entrance to the Gashi Gorge in Nekoc, on April 24, 1999.

Anita Susuri: How did life continue after the war, how did you recover?

Ahmet Qeriqi: On July 8, 1999, Radio-Kosova e Lirë resumed broadcasting at Kodra e Diellit in Pristina. The efforts to place Radio-Kosova e Lirë under institutional protection failed. The Provisional Government at first had allocated 200,000 DM for the Radio and for Kosovapress. Later, a decision was made that only 25,000 DM would go to the Radio, while another 175,000 DM would go to Kosovapress. The Government did not allocate funds for the purchase of new technical equipment. The money initially allocated for the Radio was given to Kosovapress. Because of the financial crisis at the Radio, 15 journalists, who had been hired after the war without any criteria but only on orders from “above,” were forced to leave. The old technical equipment broke down two or three times a month.

A financial aid of 5,000 DM was given by the Municipality of Peja, by Ethem Çeku, Ahmet Mahmutaj, etc. The LPK allocated 10,000 DM for technical tools and equipment. Without delay I bought a 500-watt transmitter, antennas, and new equipment. Because of the severe lack of electricity, we bought generators. My cousin, Haki Qeriqi, donated to the Radio an old Mercedes in good working condition. My daughter Arbana graduated in Pedagogy and resumed work at the Radio.

In February 2001, with Valdet Hoti and Hilmi Ramadani, we penetrated into the war zones of the UÇPMB²¹ and installed the equipment of *Radio – Zëri i Lirisë* [Radio - Voice of Freedom] in the mountains near Konçul. I had previously reached an agreement with Nexhat Behluli. We sent the first transmitter of Radio-Kosova e Lirë. There, Selim Zeqiri, former journalist of Radio-Kosova e Lirë and fighter of the UCPMB, worked there. The Radio functioned for nearly two months.

Radio-Kosova e Lirë no longer had any financial support, except from revenues from advertisements, which had been intensified in the field by the Radio journalists Jeton Sylja and Shefqet Zeka, with a 25 percent commission. Xhevat Mehmeti from Sllatina donated a Jetta type car to the Radio in good working condition. In May 2001 we founded the Editorial Office Dëshmorët e UÇK-së [Martyrs of the KLA], the monograph *Feniksët e lirisë* [The Phoenixes of Freedom], and published the first volume with the names of KLA martyrs.

In early March 2009, together with my son Epiri, I went to Albania, where at first I stayed in the apartment of my friend Ismet Shamolli, at Shkëmbi i Kavajës, in Durrës. On March 13, I was hospitalized in the Military Hospital, now the American Hospital in Tirana. On March 16, I was operated on by the cardiac surgeon Edvin Prifti. The operation was successful. Despite some complications after the surgery, I eventually recovered. “I escaped once again,” as they say in Albania. After 40 days in Albania, I returned to my home in Shtime.

Anita Susuri: What is your journalistic, literary, and artistic creativity, the translations, what have you published and what remains in manuscript?

²¹ *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Preshevës, Medvegjës dhe Bujanocit* [Liberation Army of Preshevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac], an armed group that fought for the separation of the three cities from Serbia from 1999 to 2001.

Ahmet Qeriqi: I have been engaged in writing since my student days in the 1970s, and I have never interrupted my literary, journalistic, and scholarly activity. I have collaborated with many newspapers, magazines, and media outlets. I have mainly published and still publish in Radio-Kosova e Lirë. I thank you for enabling me to give this broad and comprehensive presentation, without limitations.