

INTERVIEW WITH BERAT LUZHA

Pristina | Date: June 9 and 14, 2022
Duration: 130 minutes

Present:

1. Berat Luzha (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: Could you please introduce yourself? Tell us about your birth year, place of birth, and something about your background and family?

Berat Luzha: I am Berat Luzha. I come from the village of Begracë, municipality of Kaçanik. I was born on January 8, 1953. I completed our grades of my primary education in my village, the higher four grades in Kaçanik i Vjetër, a nearby village. Then attended the gymnasium¹ in Kaçanik and then university in Pristina, studying Albanian Language and Literature. My childhood was like everyone else's, quite difficult due to the economic situation of our families. My family was average, perhaps, we could say, for that time. However, everyone was poor and the children were extremely... neglected. They did not have enough care and, how can I say, I did not live a completely normal life.

Anita Susuri: What did your father do, for example?

Berat Luzha: Well, both my father and mother were uneducated, of course, they were illiterate. My father only knew how to write his own name, nothing more, and he learned that in the army. However, my father was a very respected person, well-known in our area, and he was also involved in [blood feuds reconciliation](#). We also had an old *oda*,² a traditional Albanian *oda*. He was a host to many guests who came and went in that *oda* at that time.

The *oda* was almost always filled with guests, and my father was a well-known host. He was known for his wisdom and prudence. My mother was like all other mothers, a housemaker of course. She endured great hardships, and worked a lot. She was distinguished for her wisdom, her care for the children, and her boundless suffering.

¹ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

² Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested in these conversations you mentioned in the *oda*, were they also discussions about, how to say, the position of Albanians, the suffering of Albanians in the system, or was it too early to discuss such things? Or were they cautious?

Berat Luzha: Albanians never considered state institutions as their own and focused all their activities in the *oda*, whether it was blood feuds reconciliation, weddings, or engagements, and then the death rituals, everything took place in the *oda* and in this way, they developed. Folk melodies were also created there, for example. Different anecdotes were created as well. There were various games that were played. Then, when guests gathered, when guests arrived, many people would gather, and the *oda* would be full.

There were various conversations there, including political ones from time to time, but also about the way of life back then and plans for what to do next, how to manage work, and other problems. The *oda*, in a way, replaced the state institutions. In fact, my *oda* sometimes even served as a religious site because people, to avoid traveling far to the mosque, would stop there and perform their rituals. Especially when there was a guest imam in the *oda*, the rituals were performed there, including the call to prayer and others.

Anita Susuri: Did you live with your family in a joint household at that time? For example, with your [paternal] uncles?

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes. Until around the age of 12-13, we lived in a joint household with my uncle and cousin. However, later on, we separated and the separations happened sequentially. So now, we are not a family with much land or wealth because the property has been divided and subdivided many times.

Anita Susuri: Did your family engage in agriculture or livestock farming?

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes, agriculture and livestock farming. Mainly livestock with cows, oxen, and sheep, and agriculture primarily with wheat and corn.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned and talked about your father and the army. What generation was your father from?

Berat Luzha: My father was born in 1915 and lived exactly 80 years.

Anita Susuri: Was he then in the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia?

Berat Luzha: Yes, in the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and not just once, but three times. Once for regular military service and twice for what they called exercises back then, *vežba* [Srb.: exercises].

They took them to prepare for war. But he was lucky because when the Second World War started and Yugoslavia began to fall apart, he was released from the army and came home, so he didn't participate in the war. My uncle and cousin were mobilized. One went to Banat as a conscript, the other went to Tivari, you know the case of Tivari.³ Fortunately, they did not experience any misfortune...

Anita Susuri: Was it during the time of the massacres when the case of Tivari occurred?

Berat Luzha: Yes, my cousin was there. But this group went a bit later after the massacre had already taken place, so they were not massacred.

Anita Susuri: But do you remember any of his stories? How did they find out or what...

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes. They saw them cleaning the area, cleaning the blood. They saw the scattered clothes, but not the bodies. Later, they found out that the bodies were thrown, most of them, into the sea because Tivari is a coastal city.

Anita Susuri: Yes. So, what does your father say about his time in the army? What was it like back then?

Berat Luzha: Back then the army was very harsh. Officers had the right to beat soldiers at any moment, and the Albanians were especially treated badly. From 1912, it continued until the last war of the KLA.⁴ Some of those soldiers never returned home, but that's how it was. It was like this because the Serbs never trusted the Albanians and considered them as foreign flesh in their body.

Anita Susuri: And in your family, your parents, how many children... How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Berat Luzha: Yes, I had two sisters who are no longer alive and one older brother who is still alive. I also had a sister who died from measles at the age of three or four. These were my siblings.

Anita Susuri: So, around the 1960s when you continued high school, roughly, I'm not sure, was it around 1968?

³ The Tivari massacre, also known as the Bar massacre, occurred in April 1945 during the final stages of the Second World War. Thousands of Kosovo Albanian conscripts and civilians, who were being transferred by the Yugoslav Partisan forces to fight against the retreating German army, were killed in the town of Tivari (now Bar, Montenegro). These Albanians were suspected of being collaborators or potential threats due to their ethnic background. The massacre is considered one of the tragic events highlighting the ethnic tensions and atrocities that occurred during and after the war in the region.

⁴ Kosovo Liberation Army, was an Albanian guerrilla paramilitary organization that sought the separation of Kosovo from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia during the 1990s.

Berat Luzha: Yes, in 1968 I enrolled in high school, the gymnasium.

Anita Susuri: Were there also the demonstrations of '68⁵ then?

Berat Luzha: '68.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember them?

Berat Luzha: We heard about them, but we were very young then. We couldn't participate or didn't have enough clarity about everything. I was about 14-15 years old, I don't remember exactly. But they definitely resonated with the students. From then on, in a way, there was a rise in national sentiments.

Anita Susuri: And you said that you continued high school in Kaçanik, but then you went on to Pristina...

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: How was this transition, coming from a smaller place to Pristina in those years?

Berat Luzha: Firstly, back then not everyone pursued education like they do today, especially girls, almost none of them did. And even with the boys, only a few pursued education. From my village, there were only three of us in our generation at the gymnasium, because education was not given much importance back then. Children were engaged in agricultural work, livestock farming, and other tasks. So, most students who completed the eighth grade did not continue to high school. But later, after high school, those who completed high school were highly likely to go on to university.

At that time, the university also had fewer students, not like today where there are many. Initially, I enrolled in technology as my field. I managed to pass the entrance exam, registered, and attended for two years, but I had problems because I was not well-prepared for the exact sciences, for the technical subjects, especially mathematics. I got it into my head that I would never be able to pass the mathematics exam. So, I changed my faculty and transferred to Albanian Language and Literature, the Faculty of Philosophy.

Anita Susuri: What was Pristina like at that time? Where did you live, for example? How did you find your way in Pristina?

⁵ During October and November 1968, many demonstrations were organized by the Albanian population across Kosovo. The main demand was to recognize Kosovo's right to self-determination. The first and most massive demonstration was organized in Prizren on November 27, 1968. This demonstration ended in front of the League of Prizren, where for the first time the demand for the Kosovo Republic was publicly articulated.

Berat Luzha: We managed as best as we could, mostly in private apartments. Even back then there was a problem because there wasn't much space in the dormitories. I think there were only two or three dormitories at most, not many. I couldn't get a place in the dormitory.

Anita Susuri: Were there also some kind of barracks or something?

Berat Luzha: There were also some barracks in the dormitory yard, but with a small capacity as well. So, I couldn't stay in the dormitories.

Anita Susuri: What was Pristina like, for example? How do you remember Pristina from that time?

Berat Luzha: It has changed a lot, it was very different. Starting from the center over there, it was the main street, and in the evenings, there was a *korzo*,⁶ which is interesting because it doesn't happen today. Every evening there was a *korzo*, an evening walk, meaning in a line. On one side of the street were the Albanians walking, and on the other side were the Serbs. That's how it was.

Anita Susuri: The streets, it seems to me, only the main street was paved with cobblestones, the others were muddy.

Berat Luzha: Maybe not muddy, but they were either cobblestone or, there were also some with asphalt, but they were narrow, not like they are today.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, for example, what kind of constructions were made at that time when you arrived?

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes, I do. For example, the Grand Hotel wasn't there at the time. I remember there was a bookstore where we used to go buy books. The center hasn't changed much, now it is called Mother Teresa Boulevard, but back then it was a narrow street. Otherwise, the Dardania neighborhood didn't exist at all at that time, the only urbanized neighborhood was Ulpiana. Ulpiana and the neighborhood that was being built at that time, Aktash. It was mainly built by people who held high positions and they built it with loans. They would take out loans and pay them off with loans. At that time, those houses were considered very luxurious. Today, the appearance of those neighborhoods has almost completely changed, or the Pejton neighborhood that was built at that time, which had very low, uniform houses. Today, everything is completely different.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested because, at that time, we often come across stories about how cultural life was developed, the theater, the cinemas, the cinemas Kino Vllaznimi, Kino Rinia. Did you visit them?

⁶ Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

Berat Luzha: Yes, two cinemas. There were two cinemas. From time to time we visited them, yes. The theater, yes. I visited it more then, than I do now. Back then, they covered important topics, and the theater especially, especially the theater, was very popular. Students, a good number of them, visited the theater regularly. The cinemas were also visited, but only when a good film came. Especially when films from Albania came, the halls couldn't accommodate everyone because the interest was very high. Albania had a significant influence on the youth of Kosovo at that time.

Then, especially in the '70s, folklore ensembles, music ensembles, and art exhibitions started to come, and the interest was at its peak, very high, very high. I also remember, there was a basketball championship, I mean a volleyball championship held in the 1 Tetori Hall that is there now. It was the Balkan Volleyball Championship. There was also a team from Tirana. As we say, the atmosphere was on fire. They cheered and supported Albania so much as a team. Not because of the game, but because they were from Albania.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, for example, any special experience when the films came or when you organized to go watch these films or these ensembles that performed?

Berat Luzha: I'll tell you, there was a delegation of education veterans from Albania in Kosovo. At that time, I was a correspondent for the *Rilindja*⁷ newspaper in Ferizaj. I went to cover it as an activity, simply to report for the newspaper. I followed everything when they went to Ferizaj and Kaçanik. In Kaçanik, I spoke with an artist, she was elderly, an artist who had served in Kosovo as a teacher in '45-'46. I did an interview with her.

After a short time, they questioned me, asking, "What did you talk about with her, why did you talk, who was near you, from there?" and so on. They brought up this fact again when I was in prison three or four years later, saying, "You had a connection with her." So, it was a bit dangerous to communicate with the ensembles from Albania that came to Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: And regarding the faculty, did you have professors from Albania?

Berat Luzha: No, I didn't have any. They were mostly in the exact sciences, the subjects...

Anita Susuri: They didn't teach Language and Literature?

Berat Luzha: No.

Anita Susuri: Was it intentional or just coincidental?

⁷ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

Berat Luzha: No, no, because there were qualified staff here, there was no need. They mostly took those areas where there were no qualified staff, as instructors also came from Belgrade. But also, a group of professors came from Tirana to teach exact sciences, physics, mathematics, technical subjects, and so on.

Anita Susuri: What year did you complete your studies? When did you graduate?

Berat Luzha: Well, I completed my graduation after the war...

Anita Susuri: I mean...

Berat Luzha: Because of interruptions, problems since I went to prison, and so on.

Anita Susuri: So, in '76 you had already started working at *Rilindja*?

Berat Luzha: I started working in '76.

Anita Susuri: And how did all this happen? How did you get interested?

Berat Luzha: *Rilindja* had announced a call for the recruitment of journalists. I saw it, and at that time I was very young and never imagined that I would become a journalist. Being a journalist then was a big deal because there weren't many media outlets. There was a daily newspaper, some magazines, television, and radio. But journalists were very limited. However, I decided to apply. Then I later received a notification that I needed to report to *Rilindja*. I went there, and they said, "You are accepted for a two-month probation period..."

Anita Susuri: As an intern.

Berat Luzha: As an intern, yes. And after two months, you might not have been accepted. But I completed it, it was like a course, and I stayed. In my generation, there was also [Hydajet \[Hyseni\]](#) in my generation. There were other journalists too.

Anita Susuri: And what kind of articles, for example, did you write? What events did you cover?

Berat Luzha: At that time, as a new, beginner journalist, they mainly focused on the agricultural sector. Primarily, there was a large enterprise called *Agro-Kosova* back then, a big enterprise that encompassed all the food and agricultural enterprises in Kosovo. And mostly those, there were also public bakeries, not private ones then. The entire food industry and everything related to the agricultural and livestock sector were public sector.

Anita Susuri: And how did the newspaper operate at that time? I don't know how it was for agriculture, but was there any censorship or control for an article to be published?

Berat Luzha: Of course, of course there was. Certainly. But we mostly self-censored because we knew what was acceptable and what was not. However, sometimes an article would not be published or it would be criticized in an editorial meeting, or someone might have gotten a warning or something, but not much. There was generally some tolerance in that regard, not excessively. But we were careful ourselves not to release words which... that could have consequences.

Anita Susuri: For example, what were some words or topics that you knew could have consequences?

Berat Luzha: Mainly about the then politics of the Communist League. If something was written about Tito,⁸ Brotherhood and Unity, certain topics that were not to be touched, or it had to be written as dictated. But I didn't have much contact with politics, mostly I was in the economy.

Anita Susuri: But even the economy was a very important topic because at that time, it was being criticized for failures, even in Kosovo.

Berat Luzha: Yes, there were problems because most of the enterprises back then were operating at a loss.

Anita Susuri: Yes. Now I'm interested in how all this involvement in the activity started for you? How did it come about? Was it before '81?

Berat Luzha: My life changed when I joined *Rilindja*. There, I made a significant turn in my life because until then I was unemployed, and then I started working. But immediately after I started working, I was in daily contact with Hydajet Hyseni. He was organized in an underground group and began talking to me about various political matters. At first, he considered me a sympathizer, not a member. Until he was convinced that I could carry out underground tasks. Then he proposed to me, and I became a member of the *Ilegalja*.⁹

At that time, it was called the Revolutionary Group of Kosovo, then it changed its name to the Marxist-Leninist Group, and later to the Marxist-Leninist Organization. We adopted the Marxist-Leninist or ideological attribute mainly because of Albania, so that we could be more recognized by Albania. Because it was Albania that inspired us and helped us walk the patriotic path.

⁸ Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the leader of Yugoslavia from 1943 until his death. He was a key figure in the Yugoslav Partisans during the Second World War and later became the president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

⁹ Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

Anita Susuri: How was the initial entry into that organization? Was there any kind of, how to say, any kind of, now I can't call it a questionnaire because he himself evaluated you before inviting you?

Berat Luzha: No, no, not a questionnaire.

Anita Susuri: But was there any kind of criteria or something to fulfill?

Berat Luzha: No, no. There weren't any specific criteria like that, but during our daily conversations, we discussed various topics, and in that way, it was concluded that I was suitable and capable of carrying out the tasks.

Anita Susuri: Yes. Did the organization have any headquarters somewhere, or were the meetings secret?

Berat Luzha: No, the meetings were secret, very secret. Our group was very conspiratorial, very secretive. We were convinced at that time that due to our activity, as secret as it was, we couldn't be discovered. However, an incident happened, and we were discovered as a group, which led to our imprisonment as a group.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: I am interested in the activities as well and how they were organized.

Berat Luzha: The activities included... an underground newspaper called *Liria*. We wrote articles there, that newspaper had a wide distribution and an extraordinarily large impact on the youth of that time...

Anita Susuri: This started in '80 with...

Berat Luzha: Yes, in '80. Then, we created slogans, and carried out various activities, mainly. Primarily, writing slogans, and reading, not openly, but it was a very successful activity.

Anita Susuri: And these slogans, what were they like and how was it decided where to write them?

Berat Luzha: They were certainly against the regime, against certain activities that took place at that time, like a visit, for example, by President Tito to Kosovo, against the slogans that were displayed then for Brotherhood and Unity, against those labeled as enemies at that time. Especially after '81, we wrote "Kosovo Republic," or simply "KR," everywhere. It was something they were closely monitoring,

and we would write it even more out of defiance. There was a lot of activity. We operated very secretly, with many activities, and we were quite successful.

Anita Susuri: Was there, I'm sure yes, a specific period for how long it took to write or in how many hours it had to be written?

Berat Luzha: Yes, there was. If it was organized with many people or in many places, then yes. It was organized to be distributed at the same time in those places. There were instances when we also distributed in cities in today's Macedonia, in Tetovo, Skopje, or in Preševo and others.

Anita Susuri: For example, were these written in the late hours?

Berat Luzha: In the late hours of course, at midnight, after midnight. In conditions that are hard for you to understand because they were extremely, extremely difficult.

Anita Susuri: Could you share, for example, an experience you had while writing something? Did anything happen where you almost got caught or felt scared or...

Berat Luzha: No, but one instance, for example, we were walking with Hydajet, and a person was following us. He was coming after us, about ten meters behind. It was late at night, just before dawn. We would turn onto one street, and he would come onto the same street, we would turn onto another street to avoid him, and he would still follow us. At some point, Hydajet said, "Let's catch him," and we grabbed him by the chest and asked, "Who are you? Why are you following us?" He had a bag and we took it. Hydajet told me, "Take it and see what's inside," but there wasn't any weapon or anything like that. But it was too dark to see what was inside. He got scared at first, thinking we might kill him or something. But when he realized we weren't going to kill him, he got brave and said, "Just wait, you'll see when daylight comes." So, there were instances like that.

There was one instance, for example, when I was going to an underground activity in the mountains, a big mountain. I came across the forester, known as *shumar* in Albanian. He was coming up with his horse, and I was coming down. I saw him approaching because the moon was shining, so I moved aside so he wouldn't see me since he was a known person and I didn't want him to recognize me at that time while I was walking somewhere. He thought I was some kind of wild animal since he saw me as a silhouette and shot at me. They were armed with rifles. He shot at me. I yelled, "What are you shooting at?" He asked, "Who are you?" I said, "It's none of your business who I am, why are you shooting?" I told him a few words and then left so he wouldn't recognize me. He said, "I almost killed you because I thought you were a wild animal."

Anita Susuri: The texts you wrote and prepared were against the regime, but specifically, what were they about? About the position of Albanians?

Berat Luzha: Especially about the position of Albanians, particularly in Kosovo, and Albanians in other regions of Yugoslavia. There were also texts on social aspects, for example, the condition of workers, the economic enterprises at the time that were continuously operating at a loss. We were against individuals considered to be harmful, anti-national in the patriotic sense. There were...

Anita Susuri: And in your group, you mentioned you were with Hydajet. Did you have anyone else in the group?

Berat Luzha: Yes, we had many members.

Anita Susuri: In different cells or groups?

Berat Luzha: Yes, we primarily operated in cells, but I had the opportunity to work with several comrades. We had a cell in Kaçanik, where I was also a member of the Leading Committee of the group or organization. I worked with Jakup Krasniqi,¹⁰ Mehmet Hajrizi,¹¹ and many other comrades.

Anita Susuri: I am interested, did you... it seems that you also had some leaflets with rules or instructions on how to operate...

Berat Luzha: Yes, there were, there were.

Anita Susuri: Do you know who made those, or did they just come into your hands like that?

Berat Luzha: No, we mainly made them ourselves as a group. Hydajet or Mehmet mostly created them. These two were the most prepared, from a preparation standpoint...

Anita Susuri: For writing the materials.

Berat Luzha: For writing the materials.

Anita Susuri: For example, what kind of instructions were they?

¹⁰ Jakup Krasniqi (1951) is a Kosovar politician and former political prisoner. He was a key member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during the Kosovo War and later served as the Speaker of the Kosovo Assembly. He has been an influential figure in Kosovo's political landscape and has held various significant positions within the government and political parties.

¹¹ Mehmet Hajrizi (1948) is a prominent Kosovar activist and politician. He was a key figure in the 1981 demonstrations against the Yugoslav regime and was involved in various underground movements advocating for Kosovo's independence. Hajrizi served ten years in prison for his political activities and later held significant positions in Kosovo's provisional government.

Berat Luzha: In general, there were rules on how to behave, how to conduct oneself, how to act with sympathizers, with the people, how to approach the youth, what to say, and what to offer them. There was a lot of guidance.

Anita Susuri: And these, for example, did you distribute them somewhere? At universities where there were young people, or how?

Berat Luzha: No, these were internal materials, only for the group.

Anita Susuri: Yes, but I'm asking about the external ones, the tracts?

Berat Luzha: Yes, we distributed the tracts wherever we could. Not too many, I can't say we distributed a lot, but wherever we could, from time to time. We designated the places in advance, made the plans, and they were carried out.

Anita Susuri: You said that a mistake happened, that you fell into the hands of the authorities. How did that happen? How did it come to the day of your arrest?

Berat Luzha: Yes. Now, the group mainly needed equipment for writing, typewriters. But typewriters were not enough, we needed a mimeograph, I don't know if you understand what those are {addressing the interviewer}, but they're for duplicating materials. In some cases, these were taken from then economic enterprises or schools, they were taken illegally at night. They would break in, take them, and leave. They broke the door or something and took them, they supplied themselves. But in one case when we needed to have a good mimeograph, we had to buy it from a store called *Salloni i Librit*, which is now where the Rilindja Palace is.

It was a very good bookstore but also sold writing equipment. So we decided to buy it. However, either the seller or someone there in the bookstore was connected to the UDB¹² and got suspicious about who was buying it and why. They then tracked it. They took it from there to the car, but they had parked the car far away. Then he followed it, and the car was tracked to Gjilan, somewhere there, and this led to the discovery of the group.

Anita Susuri: You were arrested in '81, I think?

Berat Luzha: '81.

Anita Susuri: In which month?

¹² The State Security Service - *Služba državne sigurnosti*, also known by its original name as the State Security Administration, 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.

Berat Luzha: In December. It was around December 19, at the end of the year.

Anita Susuri: But earlier in March, there were the famous demonstrations, I mean the student demonstrations.¹³

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us all about your experience with the demonstrations, meaning from March 11 and even earlier if you knew about the organization?

Berat Luzha: We didn't know about the organization, although we talked about how there should be demonstrations and that there would be in the future, but we didn't specifically discuss that they would be held on a certain date. March 11 happened, and it was mainly organized by students of course, but it was organized more for issues regarding food and conditions, without knowing that it would extend and then be repeated, for example, on March 26 and April 2. On April 1, I didn't have any activity.

On March 26, I went to Ferizaj, where I wrote an article. I went to Ferizaj and met with fellow journalists, and one of them said, "The demonstrations in Pristina have erupted." "What? How? Where?" He said, "The students have come out again, they are demonstrating." I told those colleagues, "I'm heading to Pristina," because I couldn't tell them I was going to the demonstration, but, "I'm heading to Pristina for this and that..." I explained a reason and constructed an excuse and then headed straight to Pristina.

When I arrived in Pristina, I entered the Press Palace at *Rilindja*, but there wasn't much happening. When I came out, one of the journalists, a colleague, started following me, and it was suspicious that he wanted to know where I was going and what I was doing. He accompanied me. It was the Day of the Relay,¹⁴ and the relay was arriving. At that time, when the relay arrived, a big gathering was organized in Pristina. It was organized at the theater steps, and I went there to lose track of him, pretending I was going to Tito's relay gathering. When I got there, I mingled with the crowd and lost him. I didn't see him anymore and continued on my way to the student center.

¹³ On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

¹⁴ The Day of the Relay (also known as the Youth Relay or Relay of Youth) was a significant event in Yugoslavia held annually on May 25 to celebrate the birthday of Josip Broz Tito, the President of Yugoslavia. This event involved a relay race in which a baton was carried across the country by young people, symbolizing unity and youth's connection to Tito. The relay ended with a large celebration where the baton was presented to Tito, marking a major patriotic and festive occasion.

On my way, I saw those vans, they called them *kompanjolla*¹⁵ back then. They were filled with students, and there were dozens of them transporting students to prison. I turned back from there. On April 1, I participated in the demonstrations. It was a very large demonstration. A big gathering was held there, in front of what is now the Ministry of Culture. Hydajet climbed a linden tree and gave a speech. I was at the base of that linden tree... in fact, I was armed with a revolver. They dispersed us after about an hour or so. They hit us with everything they had and dispersed us.

Anita Susuri: With weapons or...

Berat Luzha: No, like this.

Anita Susuri: With tear gas?

Berat Luzha: With tear gas, and the police chased us. Then we met with Hydajet that night. We had a designated place where we could meet somewhere outside the city. We spent the night there, and the next day we went again. I went to the demonstration alone because we got separated, we couldn't, there wasn't an organization like on April 1, but it was scattered in different places. Then the police caught me on the street. They caught me with a revolver and beat me very severely. They took me to jail, detained me for two months. Interrogations, torture, and all that, but they didn't discover anything from me. And those two months they kept me in interrogation were counted as time served for illegal possession of a revolver. I was released from jail.

Anita Susuri: You were here in Pristina?

Berat Luzha: In Pristina, yes. Then, when the group was discovered in December '81, I ended up in prison again.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested, during the time you were detained for two months, did you face any consequences at work? Did you continue working?

Berat Luzha: Yes, while I was in jail, a meeting was held with workers and journalists. Members from the Communist League Committee also participated, and I was mentioned there as an example. They said that I was caught, even with a weapon, or something like that. That's how it was.

Anita Susuri: Did they differentiate¹⁶ you, as they used to say back then?

¹⁵ *Kompajolla*: type of van used to transport prisoners.

¹⁶ In the context of Yugoslavia, "differentiation" referred to a form of political and social ostracism. It involved isolating and marginalizing individuals who were deemed politically unreliable or dissenting against the ruling Communist regime. This could include demotions at work, social exclusion, surveillance, and other forms of repression to discourage opposition and maintain control.

Berat Luzha: Yes, they differentiated me, for sure. First (laughs), they fired me from my job. For a while, I justified myself by saying that I was caught only for having a revolver, nothing else, and that I wasn't involved in the demonstrations at all. They eventually reinstated me... but only formally, they didn't let me work, because they said they needed to clarify my situation. That state of limbo lasted about six months, neither working nor not working. They gave me half a salary. When I got caught the second time and was sentenced, I was sentenced to twelve years.

Anita Susuri: Did they arrest you at home, or how did the arrest happen?

Berat Luzha: The arrest in December, it happened at home, yes.

Anita Susuri: Did you expect it?

Berat Luzha: I didn't expect it because I still didn't know that my other friends had been arrested. That's why I didn't take it too seriously, thinking that maybe only I was taken, and who knows, something had changed, and they took me in for questioning and stuff. Since I had the two-month experience of being detained before, I thought they were just suspicious in some way. But when I got there, it was clear that the whole group had been arrested.

Anita Susuri: Surely you were in Pristina again while they conducted the investigations. How long did the investigations last? How long did they continue?

Berat Luzha: The investigations lasted from around December until April, about four months or so.

Anita Susuri: Was there constant physical violence against you?

Berat Luzha: The first time I was detained, those two months for the demonstrations or for the illegal possession of a weapon, they did beat me. But the second time, no, because the whole group had been arrested, and as the situation developed, they didn't need to extract anything from me...

Anita Susuri: Informata.

Berat Luzha: Information, because that information was already quite processed. I don't know, there were only two people connected to me that I was involved with.

Anita Susuri: And when you went to court, how large was your group? And how did the verdict affect you?

Berat Luzha: The group was sentenced in two parts. In Pristina, there were 19 people, and 16 in Gjilan, but we were all one group.

Anita Susuri: Who, for example, received the longest sentence?

Berat Luzha: The one who received the longest sentence was Hydajet. Hydajet also endured severe torture and had a very deteriorated health condition. They moved him from Pristina, taking him to different places for interrogations, in various locations.

Anita Susuri: How long were you sentenced for?

Berat Luzha: I was sentenced to twelve years, and I served nine years.

Anita Susuri: You were in prison, in which prison were you first?

Berat Luzha: Initially in the District Prison here in Pristina. After we were sentenced and received the decision, they sent me to Mitrovica to serve the prison term, in the District Prison in Mitrovica. But there, we then went on a hunger strike, and we had quite a bit of trouble, making noise with doors and various things, and then they sent me back to Pristina. In Pristina, they kept me for a few more months and then sent me to Niš. I served my prison term in Niš.

Anita Susuri: And here, the prison in Pristina or Mitrovica, what kind of prisons were they, for example? What kind of cells did you have? How were the conditions? I mean, they must have been terrible but...

Berat Luzha: Compared to now, they were very difficult. First of all, there were no toilets, you had to wait your turn to go to the toilet because it was shared by many cells. Then, there were no beds, no hygiene. There were many problems, with many people in one cell, and no conditions at all.

Anita Susuri: You were there at a time when it seems there were mostly political prisoners...

Berat Luzha: Yes, there were many.

Anita Susuri: Because of the demonstrations. How many people, for example, were in a cell?

Berat Luzha: In a cell that could normally accommodate two people, there were seven or eight, five, six, seven, or eight people.

Anita Susuri: What kind of rules were there, for example, inside the prison?

Berat Luzha: First of all, the conditions were very difficult, and the food was very inadequate. Initially, there was bread, half a loaf of bread, which wasn't a kilogram but about 600 grams. They gave half a

loaf for 24 hours, and there were people who ate the 600 grams all at once and then had nothing left. So, people endured hunger because the food wasn't enough. And that food was very inadequate.

Anita Susuri: Were you in a cell with other former prisoners or were you separated?

Berat Luzha: Also with others, because mostly there were political prisoners at that time, as there were many political prisoners, but there were also some for other offenses. While we were in Pristina, we got along well with those who were in the cells. But when we went to Niš, where I mainly served my prison term, we had a lot of problems. Because they provoked us, they put people who were instructed against us, to act against us. But even though we had many problems, we still had some organization among the prisoners, a kind of internal unity. We sacrificed for each other and so on.

Anita Susuri: And when you were initially sentenced, how did the decision come about? Did they give you any document stating that you would be transferred, or did they just take you and send you? How did you know about this?

Berat Luzha: They just took us, saying, "Get ready, take your things," and put us in those transport vehicles they used to call *marisa*. They took us to Niš, to prisons in Serbia and Yugoslavia. Not just Serbia, but throughout Yugoslavia, even to Slovenia.

Anita Susuri: Did you know, for example, that they were deporting you...

Berat Luzha: No, no. We didn't know anything at all. First, they sent me to Požarevac. They sent me there by mistake, and after staying for about two hours in Požarevac, they came, took me, and brought me back to Niš. In Niš, I then served my prison term almost until the end.

Anita Susuri: Nine years, right?

Berat Luzha: Yes, nine years, including the time I was in Pristina.

Anita Susuri: I'm also interested in the part about your family. At that time, you of course had a family, a wife, children.

Berat Luzha: Yes, indeed.

Anita Susuri: How was their situation? How did they cope with this?

Berat Luzha: First of all, I have six children. At that time, I had four children at home, and my wife was pregnant with our fifth child. The situation was already difficult, just like for all other families. But

when I was imprisoned, they had nothing. My wife and I had been married for just a few years, but in those seven or eight years, we had four children, and the fifth one was on the way (smiles)...

[The following parts of the interview were conducted on June 14, 2022]

Part Three

Anita Susuri: Mr. Berat, last time we were talking about your life and we reached the point of your imprisonment. We also spoke a bit about the prison and stopped at your family. You told me that your wife was pregnant when you were imprisoned and you wanted to continue with this period and a memory you have related to it.

Berat Luzha: Yes. My fifth child was born after my imprisonment and was brought to visit me at the District Prison of Pristina, where visits were conducted through bars. The bars were so close together that it was difficult to see the person's face on the other side. I asked the guards to allow me to hug my newborn child, but they said no, there was no way. There was someone from the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, which we call UDB for short, and he did not allow it. So, I wasn't able to hug my child. Only after a long time, in the prison of Niš, was I able to see my child.

Anita Susuri: Has that child grown up? Because that child grew up while you were in prison, meaning nine years. Did they recognize you? Did you have frequent contact?

Berat Luzha: No, we didn't because in Niš, visits were very rare, and parents usually didn't bring young children with them. I don't know, maybe once or twice they visited me in Niš. When I was released, he was about eight years old.

Anita Susuri: I am also interested in discussing, I believe, the family's economy. How did the family manage after you were no longer working? There was no income from you, did you leave the children with your parents?

Berat Luzha: I left the family in a very difficult economic situation, without a breadwinner. My parents were old, over 70 years old, around 75, both with illnesses that elderly people usually have. My wife was a young bride, but she had five children. So, my wife was forced to work both at home as well as in the fields and to take care of all the children. Once, I told her in prison, and now I regret saying it because she was offended. I said, "Fate was such, but you are free to choose another path." However, she was offended and said, "In no way, I don't even want to hear you say that." And so it was.

Anita Susuri: And surely it was hard for you too...

Berat Luzha: Sure, yes, extremely hard.

Anita Susuri: What was the situation like with your family and relatives, for example? Were there judgments or fear from them about meeting or helping your family?

Berat Luzha: There were some who helped, some friends of the family and my wife, and some neighbors, but only a few, not everyone. There were also friends of my father from the village who would send their children, saying, “Go plow Uncle Selman’s field.” So, little by little, they helped. However, help [alone] doesn’t solve problems.

Anita Susuri: I’m interested in knowing, while you were in prison, there’s a saying that there’s no good prison, but there’s one that stands out as the worst. What was the most difficult period for you? In which prison and why?

Berat Luzha: First of all, a person who is imprisoned in a way accepts their fate and doesn’t worry too much about where they are or why they are there, they just go in and endure it as it is. The prison that was certainly the most difficult was the one in Niš, which has a notorious reputation. There, especially towards Albanians, there was inhumane and discriminatory treatment. Because Niš is closer to Kosovo, contact with Albanians was more frequent. So, the hatred towards Albanians was greater, and this was reflected in our treatment as political prisoners.

We remained proud and did not submit. We stood firm, often opposing the prison authorities, and we went on hunger strikes. These hunger strikes were like protests, more intense for them because they showed our dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction then spread to various state authorities and beyond.

Anita Susuri: For example, what did you go on strike for? Was it to stop the violence? Did you have any specific demands?

Berat Luzha: One of our demands was to be transferred to prisons in Kosovo, not to be released from prison, but to be transferred to prisons in Kosovo. At that time, it was said that the Dubrava prison was being built, and we wished to come to Kosovo to escape from Niš, where we were treated poorly. There were also instances when, in response to the injustices committed against political prisoners, even if it was only directed towards one of us, we would all show solidarity and refuse food altogether.

This then caused a reaction from the prison authorities, either through torture or by taking away the few rights we had. For instance, they would stop our visits, which were once a month, and canceling a visit meant a lot. However, we didn’t care about the consequences, we had our demands and pursued them at any cost, without hesitation.

Anita Susuri: And the hunger strike you held, do you remember which was the longest and when it was?

Berat Luzha: It was in 1984, on March 11. March 11 was the day when the demonstrations of 1981 in Kosovo erupted, it was the third anniversary. In Kosovo, this day was marked in some way with protests, with demonstrations, however small they were, but it was marked. We also wanted to mark it. How would we mark it? By refusing food. And we collectively refused food. There were around 30 of us who refused food as a sign of solidarity with the demonstrations of '81.

Anita Susuri: Do you know approximately, just asking, it's not a problem if you don't know, during the time you were in Niš, how many other Albanians were political prisoners?

Berat Luzha: They came and went, but there were around 50 political prisoners. Plus, there were those with other criminal offenses who joined the group of political prisoners. They stayed with us, showed solidarity with us. They stayed, and we shared both the good and the bad with them.

Anita Susuri: How was the daily routine organized in Niš Prison? What was a typical day like for you, for example?

Berat Luzha: Even though we were in prison, we still organized our lives, for instance by reading. There was a prison library where we could borrow books, although they were selected and not the ones we would have preferred. However, we also received some books from home. There was... We received *Rilindja*, although it was delayed by two or three days, but it came. We would read it, comment on it, and follow the events happening in Kosovo, we kept track of the arrests in Kosovo. On one hand, we felt bad that people were being imprisoned, but on the other hand, we were glad that the resistance continued, that the national movement was not dying out.

Then, we would hold gatherings together. We would meet... because there were several pavilions. It wasn't just one, and we weren't allowed to meet with friends from other pavilions. But we made efforts to meet others, exchange a few words, give each other courage, and so on. In this way, it was an organization, you could say, spontaneous but very valuable, very valuable. We even held hunger strikes together, and we made efforts and sacrifices together.

Anita Susuri: And these newspapers you mentioned, *Rilindja*, did they ever come censored, for example, with some news removed or something like that?

Berat Luzha: There were some instances. Sometimes it either didn't come at all or it was cut.

Anita Susuri: I'm sure that when there was some [significant] event?

Berat Luzha: I'm sure. Something important happened here in Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: And these meetings with other groups you mentioned, was this something underground that you did within the prison, or how did you manage to do it?

Berat Luzha: It was underground because we were not allowed to contact friends from other pavilions. The pavilions were separated by a wall, a divider. They were divided by a wall, and we had no right [to interact]. However, we would take advantage of times when we went to lunch, in the canteen, or when we were occasionally taken to the cinema. Then, when we went to work, in the industrial section where we worked, or when we were locked up, as there was a prison within the prison. When locked up in our cells, we would communicate through the window, through the wall, by knocking from wall to wall. We even have a very interesting song with lyrics by Hydajet Hyseni about this.

Anita Susuri: Did he write it while he was in prison?

Berat Luzha: Yes, he wrote it while he was in prison, and we also sang it in prison.

Anita Susuri: Were there any consequences when you sang or anything like that?

Berat Luzha: Usually not, because we sang when we were a bit freer, in the yard, when there were no [guards] nearby. However, sometimes there were consequences, because when we were in the cells, we would sing together, and it happened that a guard would come, open the door, and punish us.

Anita Susuri: And what kind of songs were these? Surely patriotic?

Berat Luzha: Yes, of course patriotic. But mainly they were prison songs that described our lives and also our pride.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned the cinema, was it inside the prison?

Berat Luzha: Yes, inside the prison, yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: Was it in a hall?

Berat Luzha: It was a hall where different movies were shown. Sometimes completely boring movies, but, well... they were mandated by law to provide some sort of cultural life, supposedly.

Anita Susuri: Were they Yugoslav films, or?

Berat Luzha: Yugoslav films, but also foreign ones sometimes that didn't interest us at all, however, we took the opportunity to meet with our friends, talk, spend time together, and exchange ideas.

Anita Susuri: And how was the food, for example?

Berat Luzha: Prison food was very inadequate. We were not used to the food, which often contained pork fat and was poorly prepared. The quantity was limited, but very well. Here in Pristina, there was a case, not a case, but when I was imprisoned in the District Prison, they gave us half a loaf of bread for 24 hours. But they gave it in the morning, and you had to make that half loaf last for both breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So, breakfast, lunch, and dinner were all covered by half a loaf, which was about 300 or 400 grams. Some people would eat that bread all at once and then have nothing for the rest of the day. It was truly a state of hunger. People were always hungry.

We held a hunger strike. I was called in by the deputy, who was the Deputy Secretary of Jurisprudence at the time, named Enver Nimani. He called me to report, "Why did you go on strike?" Among other things, I told him about the bread, explaining that people were suffering from hunger. It was like a state of famine in the prison. He said, "No," he said, "that's not possible." [I replied], "It is possible," and explained that we were given half a loaf of bread for 24 hours. He said, "Okay, I will look into this matter." The next day, they came with carts full of bread, and the prisoners could take as much as they wanted. They took bread three times a day, as much as they needed.

Anita Susuri: And did your family have the right to bring you food? Or were they not allowed?

Berat Luzha: Yes, they had the right, but the food was inspected. Sometimes, if there was something they didn't like, they would return it and not give it to us. But mostly, yes. However, it was limited. I don't know exactly how much, maybe two kilograms or so.

Anita Susuri: And, for example, the books that they brought you, were they also inspected?

Berat Luzha: Yes, the books were also inspected, but we could take them, read them, and then return them during the next visit.

Anita Susuri: Now I'm interested, you said that initially, they gave you twelve years in prison, right?

Berat Luzha: Yes, I was sentenced to twelve years.

Anita Susuri: In which year were these years reduced, so to nine years?

Berat Luzha: In 1990, when these democratic winds started blowing in Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Union in Poland... and then it spread to the Balkans and Yugoslavia. Article 133 on

hostile propaganda was abolished because you would get five years for just one word, for example. That article was abolished, but they also started granting amnesty to political prisoners because of the international pressure for their release at the time. Almost all of them were released.

By 1991, all those who had been detained until then were released. Then there were new prisoners again later, but those who had been detained were released. I happened to have a year removed from my sentence on May 1, for the May Day celebration. When November 29 came, which was celebrated as the Republic Day of Yugoslavia, they removed another two years. So, I benefited from three years of amnesty and was released.

Anita Susuri: How did you receive it... did you expect these years to be removed?

Berat Luzha: No (laughs), in fact, none of us expected it. Not because we were treated rigorously as if we were dangerous to the state at that time. But it was due to international pressure, not just in Yugoslavia but everywhere, for the release of political prisoners.

Anita Susuri: Were there, for example, visits from these international people or something?

Berat Luzha: Yes, there were. At least one delegation from the International Red Cross visited us. They questioned us, asked about the conditions and the situation we were in, and so on. It wasn't something significant but more of an informational visit.

Anita Susuri: And how much could their influence have affected the change in these conditions?

Berat Luzha: Maybe it had some impact, but no, it wasn't very noticeable.

Anita Susuri: Did you know the exact date when you were going to be released from prison or not?

Berat Luzha: I knew [I would be released] after twelve years.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Berat Luzha: Yes, but it happened after nine years. It was amnesty, I heard it on the radio because they used to set up loudspeakers and announce it. However, the prison authorities hadn't recorded my amnesty at all, and I waited and waited, but no one came. I went to an educator, as they were called, and I told him, "But I have amnesty," I said, "How come you?" I showed him, he confirmed it, and they released me.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember how you traveled from Niš to home? Did your family know, or what was that day like?

Berat Luzha: No, my family didn't know. That journey was interesting. From Niš, I chose to travel by train, but there was no train to Pristina at that time, so I chose to go via Skopje, Niš-Skopje. And from Skopje to Ferizaj, because that train, called Akropolis, didn't stop everywhere. I arrived in Ferizaj around midnight and went to my [paternal] uncle's son there and stayed the night. Then the next day, he found a car, and we went to the village. Then, my uncle's son informed my family that I was in Ferizaj and on my way. They didn't know before that day.

Anita Susuri: How was the reception then?

Berat Luzha: The reception was very good. Some friends and well-wishers from a neighboring village, Komogllavë, had come out to the road, they had organized a roadside reception with speeches and many other things. Then, at home, they had gathered in the *oda*, we have an old *oda* that we've now turned into a museum *oda*. That *oda* was filled. Then, with my father and the others, my mother was very happy.

Anita Susuri: And how did it feel for you, I mean, to have freedom after nine years?

Berat Luzha: (Laughs) Well, certainly good, although we weren't completely satisfied because the situation outside was very difficult. We had left friends in prison. We were broken-hearted. Not satisfied because it's different when you are truly free. Even after prison, I had many arrests, around ten arrests over seven or eight years. They didn't last long, but they were accompanied by torture, house searches, confiscation of materials, and so on.

Anita Susuri: And did this happen for any particular reason, or was it just a form of repression?

Berat Luzha: No, because I continued my political activities, continuing through the LDK,¹⁷ but they suspected that I had more connections than just with the LDK. They always saw the greatest threat in political prisoners. So, they kept me under surveillance and treated me a certain way even when I was "free," so to speak.

Anita Susuri: The year 1990 was also, how to say, different from the time when you were imprisoned, at that time, the demonstrations had ended, and the situation was a bit more alarming. But in '90, in '89, there were some events that happened, like the demonstrations and the [miners' strike](#)...

Berat Luzha: Yes.

¹⁷ Alb. *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.

Anita Susuri: Then the dismissal of people from their jobs, and then the [Reconciliation of Blood Feuds](#) campaign began. How was this whole period? How did you cope with and experience all these events?

Berat Luzha: Well, I was an active participant in everything. The Reconciliation of Blood Feuds campaign took place while I was in prison, but then other events unfolded. I was always involved because I immediately engaged in political activities. I was involved in the village, in the municipality there, and then here in the center. I was also an MP in the '92 legislature when we held some elections, an assembly that nobody recognized and didn't do much. But it had its own symbolism.

Anita Susuri: How did the organization for that assembly happen? Was it risky to organize?

Berat Luzha: It was, of course, yes. There was always surveillance of the activists. As I said, I was a political activist, involved in the LDK at the time, and I was part of a joint municipal body, I don't recall its name. We had also formed a municipal government there. Then, here in Pristina, we held elections, and MPs were elected, and for the state authorities, I was considered dangerous at the time. So, I was always their target for almost everything.

They arrested us during activities, they came to our homes to arrest us, and maltreated us. They summoned us for interrogations, even though sometimes I didn't respond to those summons. Life was like that, even though I wasn't in prison, it was very difficult. I can even say that during those years in the '90s, I was perhaps one of the most persecuted, maybe even at the state-level of Kosovo, during that period from '90 to '97-'98.

Anita Susuri: When these detentions in prison happened, how long did they keep you, for example?

Berat Luzha: They didn't keep me for long, up to four days. But those four days were very harsh, with threats, even of liquidation, because "You are dangerous, either we send you to Albania or we kill you because we don't need you. You are like this, you are like that..." They always suspected that I had connections with the LPK and with friends in Switzerland.

Anita Susuri: Did you go abroad? Because most, after being persecuted like this, left the country.

Berat Luzha: I didn't leave. Even though I was heavily persecuted, I didn't leave. It never crossed my mind to flee because I wasn't alone. Until '95, I had the elderly, I had children, and I also didn't want to leave the country. Despite everything we had, it was still better for me to stay here than to go abroad.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: You continued your activities, you said in politics. But what were some of the more concrete activities you did?

Berat Luzha: In '96 we formed the Association of Political Prisoners. I was the main founder and president. At that time it was very risky because the gathering of political prisoners was something that pissed them off. But, nevertheless, we did it and developed very intense activity. We were also in support of the KLA. Almost the entire staff of the association, the leadership of the association, went to war, serving the KLA. On one occasion, they wanted to arrest me. They came to the headquarters and stationed themselves about a hundred meters away, waiting for me to pass. In fact, I had passed earlier and had already gone there.

One of my friends who worked in the association told me, "The police are stationed and following us." Then I realized they wanted to arrest me. I went out through another alley, along with someone who was acting as my escort because they had been following me all day, and I managed to escape. After that, I stayed in Pristina underground for about ten days. No one knew where I was except maybe two or three friends. I stayed with different families, moving from one to another. Eventually, some people involved with the KLA for logistics came to me and asked, "Do you want to go to Drenica?" "Yes," I said, "that's what I'm waiting for." So, we arranged everything and secretly traveled all night to reach Drenica.

Anita Susuri: Was this in '97?

Berat Luzha: '98, it was '98, July, the end of July.

Anita Susuri: How many members did the association initially have?

Berat Luzha: It's never possible to know the exact number, but it is estimated now to be around ten thousand to eleven thousand imprisoned members who went through Serbian prisons from '45 until now, until '90, '98, '99. However, most of them were in severe prisons. Some were imprisoned for minor offenses in lighter prisons, but this does not mean they had it easy as they faced torture. But only that their imprisonment was lighter and shorter. Nevertheless, to this day, I am part of the commission for the compensation of political prisoners. This compensation process has been ongoing since around 2014 or 2015 and continues to this day. Thousands of people are now considered to have gone through imprisonment.

Anita Susuri: And you said that you had activities, so to say, to support the KLA, the KLA specifically...

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: What other engagements did the organization have at that time?

Berat Luzha: There was support for the families of political prisoners and those who were in prisons at that time, as well as for families in difficult situations. Because political prisoners were mostly in difficult economic situations. Imprisonment caused them to fall behind, and to this day, many families of political prisoners are in a difficult, perhaps even critical, condition.

Anita Susuri: I think because they also had problems at that time with education and employment.

Berat Luzha: They lost their perspective, they lost the opportunity for economic advancement.

Anita Susuri: After you moved to Drenica in '98, how did things continue from there?

Berat Luzha: In Drenica, a machine had arrived that was used for printing newspapers, and the KLA at that time intended to publish a newspaper there in Drenica. The day I was transferred from Pristina to Drenica in a van, that van also carried paper rolls for printing newspapers to Drenica. I immediately got involved to help set up an editorial office or a print shop to prepare for the newspaper. We secured the machine, set it up, and took it to its place, but in the meantime, a Serbian forces offensive occurred and we were forced to move to another part of Drenica, where it was no longer possible to operationalize it.

On the other side of Drenica, there was news that radio equipment was arriving to set up a wartime radio station there. I got involved in that, and I led the establishment of the radio station and a news agency. *Kosova Press* is what it is called, and both still exist today. Although nowadays they're... with the end of the war, they completed their wartime mission and are now more private.

Anita Susuri: Was it *Radio Kosova e Lirë* [Free Kosovo Radio]?

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: This was in the Berisha Mountains, right?

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And can you tell me, for example, what memories you have related to this period? And did anything happen to you, there must have been difficulties in accomplishing that?

Berat Luzha: There were difficulties because, first of all, there was no local media, and we organized the entire activity and made media functional in a village *oda*. Imagine, in a village *oda*. Without electricity, with limited equipment, we managed to set up both the radio and the agency with very little. The agency provided news via the internet, and the radio broadcast programs. However, this

became a problem because the Yugoslav press, then Serbian, wrote very harshly about the opening of these media, and even Vučić,¹⁸ who is now the President of Serbia, declared that “They will be eliminated very soon.”

In fact, two Serbian planes flew over our heads and dropped bombs, cluster bombs they call them. Bombs that scatter around, one bomb releases about 60 smaller bombs that spread over a large area and destroy everything they hit. However, fortunately for us, we were very lucky because the planes flew very low and were not precise. So, the two planes, one dropped bombs in the neighborhood where we were, and the other dropped them in a neighborhood a bit further away because they didn’t know exactly which neighborhood we were in, and they bombed both neighborhoods. In our neighborhood, everyone survived even though there were also displaced people from other villages sheltered there, but they survived. In the other neighborhood, one family suffered heavily. A 15 year old boy was killed, about seven were injured, it was a very severe situation.

Anita Susuri: Did you then find these bombs? The location?

Berat Luzha: Yes, because those bombs, some of them landed in soft soil and got stuck in the ground. Those cluster ones, the boxes of the bombs, they all fell down. We could see them all and we went and saw them.

Anita Susuri: And how was it when, I mean, in ‘99 when NATO began its offensive to bomb Yugoslavia? It was a period when the Yugoslav regime became even harsher.

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: How was this period for you? And what changes did you notice?

Berat Luzha: The bombing by the planes happened precisely when the situation became extremely severe, very extreme. Another incident was when they fired at us from a distance with those kinds of rockets that go high up, shooting from below at the hill to kill whatever they could. They made it impossible for these two media outlets to function, and we were forced to hide the radio equipment like a grave, burying it to make it look like a person’s grave. It stayed like that for about a week. Meanwhile, *Kosova Press* had to change its location, moving to another *oda*, and continued to operate, gathering news and everything.

On another occasion, they fired at us again after a considerable amount of time, they hit the house instead of the *oda* where we were. They struck the house of the hosts of the *oda*. However, they only hit the upper floor of the house, piercing it from both sides. Fortunately, the family members were on

¹⁸ Aleksandar Vučić (1970), currently the President of Serbia, was a prominent Serbian politician during the Yugoslav Wars. He served as Minister of Information during the late 1990s.

the ground floor and all survived. Meanwhile, we ran to see what had happened to them, and they ran to us to see if something had happened to us, the family.

Anita Susuri: I am interested if there was any offensive, I mean, you mentioned there was an offensive, but was there any offensive with casualties where you were present? Casualties in people.

Berat Luzha: No, because we were not directly in...

Anita Susuri: You weren't in direct contact with people much.

Berat Luzha: In contact with the fronts or to follow those events. We were always in contact through the phone. We had people with whom we were in contact in every structure of the KLA...

Anita Susuri: To get information, of course?

Berat Luzha: To get firsthand information, yes.

Anita Susuri: Did you also have contacts with foreign media that you followed?

Berat Luzha: We did, we did.

Anita Susuri: Which ones, for example?

Berat Luzha: For example, there was an Austrian radio station that conducted an interview with me, translating it simultaneously into English, German, and Albanian, while I spoke in Serbian as well. I had contact with a Turkish television station, TNT or TRT, I'm not sure what it was called, there was a journalist, Burbuqe Rushiti, who was ours but worked there. She often received news from us, and we connected with her for news broadcasts, which she then directly translated in Turkish. Other media outlets also usually received information. But what's important is that they got their information from the website of *Kosova Press*, the news agency.

Anita Susuri: *Kosova Press* had a website at that time?

Berat Luzha: Yes, it was founded then, *Kosova Press*, the news agency *Kosova Press*. I led it. They also had a journalist from *Kosova Press* who was stationed in Brussels. He informed us directly about the situation there with NATO and the European institutions that were functioning at the time.

Anita Susuri: How did you secure the equipment and such? From Europe, or how did it come to you?

Berat Luzha: No, the radio equipment came from a local radio station that operated in Kumanovo, called *Radio Kumanova*, *Radio Zëri i Kumanovës* [Radio Voice of Kumanovo]. Activists in Kumanovo got in contact with a singer named Ismet Bexheti, have you heard of him?

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes.

Berat Luzha: He owned the radio. He decided to close the radio station there and agreed to bring the equipment for the needs of the KLA. Over a long period, it was moved from village to village, from place to place, and eventually arrived there. Then experts from Pristina were called, some who knew how to install it, and we made it operational, and it started broadcasting. It was January 4, 1999, when we started, with both the radio and the agency.

Anita Susuri: I'm sure you conducted interviews with KLA participants as well...

Berat Luzha: Yes, indeed.

Anita Susuri: I'm sure it must have been difficult to reach them or to have communication with them?

Berat Luzha: Sometimes, because they moved around that area. For example, the KLA headquarters was nearby, close to the radio and the agency. But interviews were also conducted by our correspondent collaborators in the field. Our collaborators in Brussels, New York, Tirana, and here in Pristina also conducted interviews.

Anita Susuri: How difficult was it to communicate with all these people under wartime conditions?

Berat Luzha: It was difficult of course. Among other things, we had the problem of electricity, we didn't have power. We had to work with a satellite phone. But those worked with batteries, and charging the batteries was a problem. We were forced to use a car, we had a car at our disposal that one of our members had brought. We would start the car and use it to charge the satellite phone battery.

Anita Susuri: Now, I don't know much about technology, but those waves that the radio had and all the other waves, wasn't it risky, for example, for planes to target you or to intercept those signals?

Berat Luzha: Yes, it was because they intercepted them and targeted us.

Anita Susuri: When did this happen, when they targeted you?

Berat Luzha: It happened on March 27, 1999, three days after NATO's bombings began. After NATO started bombing, they prepared two planes, loaded them with bombs, and dropped them on the headquarters or the *oda* where we were staying and working.

Anita Susuri: Was anyone present there?

Berat Luzha: We were all there, quite a few of us, but the staff was about seven or eight people in total, and we were all there. Our luck was that they were not accurate, which saved us. Otherwise, we wouldn't be alive today.

Anita Susuri: So, they fired a bit farther away? They didn't hit the target accurately?

Berat Luzha: They knew the location, but perhaps they were delayed by a second, and the bombs went a bit farther away.

Anita Susuri: They weren't precise.

Berat Luzha: Exactly. These things come down to seconds.

Anita Susuri: How did the news reach you that Kosovo was being liberated and that the war was over?

Berat Luzha: We were informed because we followed the events, from... starting from Brussels and everything. We knew what was happening. Around June 17, as far as I know, we left the work there and came to Pristina, it was June 17, about four or five days after Kosovo was liberated.

Anita Susuri: I'm also interested in where your family was during the war?

Berat Luzha: The family stayed in the village. They didn't have the opportunity to go to Macedonia. It just happened that they didn't move at all, but they were fortunate that the police and Serbian forces didn't enter the village at all. Almost the entire village was displaced, though not entirely, a part didn't move. But the majority of the village was displaced out of fear that they would come in and massacre us. Even at Hani i Elezit, at the border checkpoint, when the police were checking the villagers' IDs, they asked about my family, "Where is so-and-so's family?" And they said, "We don't know." So, if they had moved, there was a possibility that they could have been caught there and...

Anita Susuri: The village Begracë, right? In which part of Kosovo is it exactly? Is it near Macedonia?

Berat Luzha: It's not near Macedonia, it's between Kaçanik, Ferizaj, and Vitia, in the middle of these three municipalities. However, Macedonia is not far from there.

Anita Susuri: After you came to Pristina from the Berisha Mountains, how was the entire journey? What was the condition of Kosovo? What did you see?

Berat Luzha: First, I came with some friends who were not from the agency or the radio, but were from the KLA. We arrived by car, got off in Ferizaj. In Ferizaj, we saw the Serbs who were leaving in masses, fleeing. There were also many Albanians who had come out, the road was filled, it was like a demonstration, a great joy. Then we continued to my village to see if my family was alive because...

Anita Susuri: You hadn't had any contact?

Berat Luzha: I had neither contact nor any news. I couldn't get any news from my family for months. I went there and found them healthy, [though] very worried. Then we came to Pristina from the village. In Pristina the streets were filled with people who were returning from Macedonia and Albania, it was very crowded. It was also filled with NATO tanks and motor vehicles entering Kosovo. But at the same time, it was filled with Serbs who...

Anita Susuri: Were fleeing.

Berat Luzha: Were fleeing, who had filled the road. Even here in Çagllavicë, there was a large column of tractors, cars, and various vehicles along the road, standing there. It seems that they then regretted it and returned to their homes, they didn't move any further. When we came to Pristina, Pristina was completely filled with broken shop windows and businesses, mostly broken and looted. Not burned, but damaged by wrongdoers, who knows... but everything was broken.

Anita Susuri: Then how did your life continue? It seems to me it might have been easier, as your house wasn't damaged, as I understand?

Berat Luzha: No, no, no. It was an old house, and even if it had been damaged, it wouldn't have cost us much because it was old anyway. But I was more pleased that an *oda* was preserved because it is a 200 year old traditional Albanian *oda*, which I have now turned into a museum.

Anita Susuri: And then you continued your political activity? Were you an MP?

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes. I continued. First, I went to *Rilindja*, because *Rilindja* had been closed, it had been closed for ten years. It was being published as a newspaper under the name *Bujku*...

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Berat Luzha: Then immediately after the war, we changed the newspaper's name back and published it as *Rilindja*, and I was at the head of *Rilindja*. Later, when the elections for the Assembly of Kosovo were held, I was a candidate and became an MP. I served as an MP for three terms.

Anita Susuri: Which years?

Berat Luzha: From 2001 to 2010. Three terms. And one term that was before the war as well, yes.

Anita Susuri: During your term, Kosovo's Independence was also declared.

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: How do you remember that day?

Berat Luzha: I was a signatory of the declaration, certainly one of the greatest joys of my life. Yes, well, well. It was a part of the realization of our dreams, but not entirely because we have always aspired and still aspire today that the Albanian lands should be united as they were, as nature created them... because now Albanians are divided into six states. A tragic nation. But over time, I believe things will fall into place.

Anita Susuri: I also want to talk about an important part, after the war, some commissions were formed, I'm not sure what to call them, for the release of prisoners who were still in Serbian prisons.

Berat Luzha: Yes, those who were imprisoned during the '90s and also during the war were mostly taken hostage, captured from the streets, from their homes without any specific fault, but they were taken. They were transferred from the Prison of Dubrava, where a very severe massacre took place, 120 prisoners were killed, bound.¹⁹ Then those who survived were sent all over Serbia, everywhere, and one case was... we organized, because I was also the president of the Association of Political Prisoners, and Shukrije Rexha,²⁰ if you have heard of her, was the secretary of the Association of Political Prisoners.

They were probably the largest protests or demonstrations known in history. Very large. People came from all regions, some even came on foot. But we were fortunate to have intervened directly with

¹⁹ The Dubrava prison massacre occurred in May 1999, during the Kosovo War. Serbian forces killed approximately 120 Albanian prisoners over several days in one of the most brutal incidents of the conflict.

²⁰ Shukrie Rexha (1960) is a prominent Kosovar political activist known for her involvement in the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign and her role as the secretary of the Association of Political Prisoners. Active throughout the 1990s, she contributed significantly to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the National Movement for Kosovo Liberation. Rexha now resides in Lyon, France, where she continues to engage in discussions on Kosovo and Balkan issues.

Kouchner.²¹ In our presence, Kouchner contacted the UN Secretary-General, who I believe was Kofi Annan²² at the time, and the situation gradually calmed down. After about ten days, it became clear that there would be no casualties among the Albanian prisoners and the protests stopped.

Anita Susuri: So, how long did this activity continue?

Berat Luzha: It continued from immediately after the liberation until around the year 2000, probably for two years.

Anita Susuri: Since you were forced to stop your education at that time, you completed your studies after the war...

Berat Luzha: Yes, yes, yes, after the war.

Anita Susuri: You graduated.

Berat Luzha: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And besides this political engagement, did you get involved in anything else?

Berat Luzha: Yes (laughs), I write a bit. I published a collection of poetry, a poetry book. I also published a monograph about Afrim Zhitia's grandfather, who was an important figure in the Second World War. I prepared or, well, I prepared materials for *Kosova Press*, the *Kosova Press* agency. During the war, I compiled all the information that was disseminated during the war through the news agency and *Radio Kosova e Lirë* into books, resulting in four volumes of a book.

Anita Susuri: You told me that now you are retired and living between Pristina and the village, but I also want to know a bit about your children, how are they? Have they completed their education? What are they focused on?

Berat Luzha: Yes, I can say that out of the six, five have completed university. They're well-settled, to an extent. One of the children, the eldest son, lives in the village. He works in the Municipality of Kaçanik with a very low salary. The second one is a pharmacist, he has opened a pharmacy, in a way. The third one is also involved with the second. The second daughter, as I have three daughters and

²¹ Bernard Kouchner (1939) is a French politician and co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). He served as the United Nations Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) from 1999 to 2001.

²² Kofi Annan (1938–2018) was a Ghanaian diplomat who served as the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1997 to 2006. During his tenure, he played a significant role in addressing the Kosovo crisis, supporting international efforts to stabilize the region and ensure the protection of human rights following the Kosovo War.

three sons, works in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in the civil sector. The other daughter works in the Ministry of Education, in the pre-school education sector.

Anita Susuri: Mr. Berat, if you have anything else to add at the end, if there is something you think is valuable to mention...

Berat Luzha: I don't know, thank you for this conversation.

Anita Susuri: Thank you.

Berat Luzha: For me, it has been exceptionally welcomed..

Anita Susuri: I am glad we had this conversation.

Berat Luzha: Because very few people are interested in our past nowadays.

Anita Susuri: It is very important.

Berat Luzha: Because we write very little about our past as well.

Anita Susuri: That's why I'm very glad we had this conversation. Thank you for your time.

Berat Luzha: Thank you.