Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH HIDAJETE SHABANI DËRMAKU

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Present:

1. Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Renea Begolli (Camera)
4. Urtesë Zeneli (Present)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:
() – emotional communication
{} – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:
[ ] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension
Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Anita Susuri: Ms. Hidajete, if you could introduce yourself, your date of birth, and something about your first family?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I am Hidajete Dërmaku, born on 18.12.1953 in the village of Përlepnica. My father is Hysen Shabani, and my mother is Eshrefe Ramadani, from the village of Malisheva near Gjilan.

Anita Susuri: And your father, what did he do for a living?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: My father worked as a cobbler. He made and repaired shoes, and he also shoed cattle and horses. He worked… he had a shop near our house. He had many customers and many friends, he enjoyed socializing, whether with the young or the old, and he got along with everyone. We were a big family, my father had six brothers and three sisters, and he was the fourth son in the family. My grandfather fought in the war, during the Battle of Kitka,[1] against the Serbian-Macedonian army.

My oldest [paternal] uncle served for seven years, he was a soldier. At first, he was a soldier for the King of Serbia, in the king's guard. Then, when Germany occupied Serbia, then-Yugoslavia, he returned home from Belgrade on foot. They deserted and returned home because the Germans, as the SS,[2] took over, so he ended up serving for seven years. My grandfather went to war, the second uncle went to study as a student in Egypt, and another uncle also went to war with the Albanian brigades, so the house was left to my father. How old was he? 14 or 16, I'm not sure.

[1] The Battle of Kitka (1909) was a conflict between Albanian insurgents and the Serbian-Macedonian forces in the region of Kitka Mountain, near the present-day border between Kosovo and North Macedonia. It was part of the Albanian resistance against Ottoman and Slavic encroachments in the area during the early 20th century.
[2] The SS (Schutzstaffel) was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Nazi Germany. Initially established as Hitler's personal bodyguard unit, it later expanded into a powerful military and police force responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during the Second World War, including the enforcement of racial policies and the operation of concentration camps.

When my grandfather returned from the war, he told him, "You managed the house well enough. You keep it." And so he became the head of the household. It was his responsibility to take care of the household's finances and to marry off and settle all his brothers and sisters, and… so, my father took on most of the burden. He was a very hardworking and capable man, but he was also passionate about education. He couldn't attend much schooling himself, as he only completed four years of school in Serbian in the village of Kmetovc, but he sent his brothers, Ibrahim and Sabit, to school. He would say, "Go, get educated!" He worked as a *nallban*.[3]

Anita Susuri: And what kind of family was yours? I mean, it doesn't seem like an ordinary family. Were they well-off? Were they wealthy?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, they were a middle-class family. Not very wealthy, but they weren't poor either. I mean, even my great-grandfather… he had some sons… actually, he only had two sons who lived to old age. Only two sons grew old, the others passed away. One of them was in a *madrasa*[4] in Dobërçan back then, which is now called Mirash. He studied there but passed away young. So, even my grandfather was called Shaban Aga.[5] He was a wise man, someone who, I mean, wasn't poor, but he was more known for his wisdom. People respected and loved him a lot.

Anita Susuri: And do you know how it happened, you mentioned this uncle of yours who went to Arabia to study...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, to Arabia.

Anita Susuri: How did that happen?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: It happened because he wanted to. He probably went to a madrasa first, and then he wanted to go study further, to continue his education. But my grandmother didn't want to let him go, she said, "No… get married. Bring a helping hand to the house" (smiles). [He] said, "No," he said, "you have Hasan and Hysen. Marry them off, I want to go to school." And he insisted on getting his mother's permission to go study. He went there with a couple of other locals, they were there too. He was very young at the time, but then he stayed there. He only came back once.

[3] *Nallban* is an Albanian term originating from the Turkish word *nalbant*, which refers to a blacksmith specializing in shoeing horses and making or repairing metal tools. This profession was essential in rural communities, ensuring that animals and equipment were well-maintained.
[4] A *madrasa* is an educational institution where students receive instruction in Islamic theology, law, and other religious sciences.
[5] Aga is an honorific title used in various cultures, including Albanian, Turkish, and Persian, to denote respect and authority. When attached to someone's name, it signifies that the person is a respected leader or elder, often with social or community influence.

As a student, he came back once during a break, then at that time, King Farouk,[6] who was of Albanian origin, the son of Mehmet Ali Pasha,[7] was in power. He welcomed them, as this uncle was an officer, not studying to become an imam, but an officer of King Farouk. He hosted the Albanians in his palace. The Albanian students who were in Egypt. There were students from Albania and from Kosovo. Later, when the Second World War broke out, the connections were cut off for a long time, and people thought, there was no way to know back then, there was no radio, television, phones like there are now. They found out that… (cries). They thought nothing was left, that the Albanians had been eradicated. For a long time, there was no contact with Kosovo or… and then, changes happened in Egypt as well. When Nasser came to power, they imprisoned this uncle. They had imprisoned him and sentenced him to…

Anita Susuri: These ones from Arabia, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: In Egypt. Yes, those in Arabia imprisoned him. I think they had sentenced him, though, anyway, I'll leave it because I'm not sure if they sentenced him to death. I don't know, he escaped and went to Syria. A Syrian man sheltered him in his home for years. Then, there was a job announcement in Saudi Arabia, they were looking for an editor for the Arabic language news, and that Syrian suggested to him, "Go and apply." Anyway, they talked with the other uncle, who said that he also worked as a teacher there. That uncle became the editor of Radio Jeddah. He stayed there.

Later, when pilgrims went in the past, he made contact. My grandfather, upon learning that someone was going on the pilgrimage, you know, they would go wherever necessary to find that person to send a message to visit the uncle. And they established contact. He eventually married an Albanian woman there. Yes, she was from Peja. Anyway, when one of our locals went, actually, the first one was from Kumanovo, they called him Haxhi Arif, he later came to visit us. He would say, "I am your eighth brother," and he would come regularly with his wife and sons to visit. They exchanged visits because of the uncle. In '68, he returned for the first time...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, or no…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, [I was] 15.

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[6] King Farouk (1920-1965) was the tenth ruler of Egypt from the Muhammad Ali dynasty and reigned as the King of Egypt and Sudan from 1936 until his abdication in 1952. Of Albanian descent, he was the son of King Fuad I and a descendant of Muhammad Ali Pasha, an Albanian commander who founded the modern Egyptian state in the early 19th century. Farouk was known for his opulent lifestyle and was overthrown in the 1952 Egyptian Revolution led by the Free Officers Movement.

[7] Mehmet Ali Pasha (1769-1849), also known as Muhammad Ali of Egypt, was an Ottoman Albanian commander who became the ruler of Egypt and is considered the founder of modern Egypt. He established a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Sudan until the mid-20th century. Through significant military and economic reforms, he modernized Egypt's infrastructure, army, and education system, laying the foundation for Egypt's autonomy from the Ottoman Empire.

Anita Susuri: Yes, 15.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I was 15 years old, still in my 15th year. Yes, I remember when he came, and the whole village went out to the end of the village to welcome him. He went straight to Gjilan, to my eldest [paternal] aunt's house. Back then, not many people had cars, he had a car, while we didn't, no phones or anything. The whole village came out to welcome him, but he said, "No, I'll stay in Gjilan," as he had traveled a long way from Arabia and wanted to rest there with my aunt. But they told him, "No, you must come because everyone is waiting for you."

I remember when he came. All his hair was white (cries). And his wife said, "Muharrem Aga," since only the oldest brother had been married, the rest were all younger, she asked, "Have you been distressed?" He said, "These tell the story" {touches his hair with his hands}. All his hair was white. He stayed for five weeks, and day and night, people came from all over Kosovo to visit him.

Anita Susuri: Initially, when he left, how did he go? Was there any transportation, like a train, or how did he travel?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I don't know, but there must have been something. Back then, there was a train from Skopje, but there wasn't any from Kosovo. I really don't know, I'm not sure. Maybe they traveled through Greece by ship, I don't know, we never talked about it. The first time now… the uncle probably knows. I spoke with him, I was in Gjilan on Saturday. My uncle is 90 years old, he's a professor of Albanian language and literature, and he's very… I even thought, perhaps, you could have a conversation with him as well.

Anita Susuri: Of course, we had it planned, and we still do.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: To go and talk, he knows these things better. I was very young at the time, and he didn't have much time to spend with us, as he was in the *oda*[8] the whole time. Men from all around would come to see him, to talk, they enjoyed spending time with him. He was an educated and wise man. It was through his initiative, he talked so much back then, that for the first time, he convinced the education authorities in Gjilan to open a school. No, just a class specifically for girls at the Gjilan *Normale*[9] School. To encourage people to allow women to attend school. To have a few more [educated girls], they set up a class. Anyway, later on, they mixed them again (laughs). Initially, it was an initiative.

[8] *Oda* is a traditional Albanian guest room, often found in larger family homes, where men gathered to socialize, discuss community matters, or entertain guests. It is a culturally significant space used for hosting important discussions, ceremonies, and hospitality.

[9] *Normale* schools, originally established during the Ottoman period and continued under Yugoslav rule in Albanian-speaking regions, were teacher training institutions aimed at preparing future educators. They played a crucial role in the education system, especially in Kosovo and Albania, providing secondary education with a focus on pedagogy to train teachers for primary and secondary schools.

I had just completed the eight-year school that year, in '68. I had finished the eight-year school, and my father had enrolled me in the *Shkolla Normale*, and I was one of them. I don't know, maybe, if the archives exist now, I have the documents there (laughs). But my mother was ill at the time, and my brothers were young, so there was no one to take care of them. I had to stay home and couldn't go to school.

Anita Susuri: And as a child, how do you remember this family dynamic? The organization within your family? What was the house like? How do you remember all of this?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I remember the house, these are good memories. We were not a very wealthy family, as you said, but we weren't poor either. We didn't lack anything, we had everything that was available at the time. We worked in agriculture, we planted tobacco, yes, tobacco. We used to plant about ten thousand tobacco plants, and from spring until the next spring, we were busy working with tobacco. First, planting the seedlings, watering them, weeding them, planting the tobacco, hoeing, watering, harvesting, stringing them up, and… and then forming *kallap*.[10] It was very hard work.

Anita Susuri: Did you prepare the tobacco properly as full tobacco, or did you sell it as what they call *refuz* [unprocessed]?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, I don't know what *refuz* is. No, we planted it. We planted it from seeds.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes. And we made *kallap*, which they called *harar*,[11] it was about a meter long, and the eldest uncle used to make it. He worked on making the *kallap* all winter. We would make the *kallap*, and he would make the *harar* and then take them. There was a tobacco factory in Gjilan where they would take them. When they brought them there, they would pull out strands to evaluate the quality. They would assess it, it was…

Anita Susuri: So, you sold it just as a plant, not as cigarettes?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, not cigarettes.

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[10] *Kallap* refers to the traditional method of bundling or pressing tobacco leaves into compact, standardized shapes or blocks for easier transportation and storage. This process is part of the preparation of tobacco before it is taken to factories for further processing and evaluation.

[11] *Harar* refers to a traditional unit or bundle of tobacco leaves, usually about a meter in length, used in the preparation and transportation of tobacco. It involves organizing and tying the leaves together in a specific manner, allowing for easier handling and assessment when taken to tobacco factories for processing.

Anita Susuri: Not rolled ones.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course not rolled cigarettes, they made those at the factory over there, we made the tobacco. From, I mean, from the root to the leaves, we would stack them. And if they weren't done evenly, my uncle would make us redo it. He'd say, "You didn't do it right." We'd separate the leaves into five groups, five *kallaps*, five rows, good ones, medium ones, sorted by size and quality, and yes. It was... my father worked a lot.

There were many of them, but I was mostly thinking that those who went to school didn't work in agriculture back then. My father worked in the shop, he had… people would come to get things, mostly on credit. And often, they paid their debts by working as laborers. They would come during the summer, harvest, hoe, and gather wheat. So, my father did most of the work (laughs).

Anita Susuri: Do you remember your mother?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: My mother.

Anita Susuri: I mean, of course, you remember her, but what was she like?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Mother was very gentle (cries). Very hardworking. She didn't walk, she ran. She didn't walk but moved quickly, always serving everyone. She was gentle and never had any disagreements with anyone, ever.

Anita Susuri: And how was it, how was the house managed back then? The household chores? What were the routines like?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The routines, the household chores, yes, the women did the household chores. I mean, cooking, washing, cleaning, washing clothes by hand, baking bread themselves, baking it. In the summer, they would bake using the *saç*,[12] and in the winter, on the wood stove. And the clothes were washed by hand. My mother washed them by hand for a long time, she would say, "I wash them better than the machine." We bought, my father bought, a washing machine, but she said, "No, the machine doesn't wash as well as I do" (laughs).

Anita Susuri: And inside the house, your family lived there, but I mean, did you have any other [paternal] uncles living with you as well, or was it just your family?

[12] *Saç* is a traditional Albanian cooking method involving a dome-shaped lid placed over food, typically bread or meat, with hot coals spread on top. This creates an oven-like environment that cooks the food evenly. It is commonly used in rural areas for baking bread and preparing traditional dishes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course, we did.

Anita Susuri: Really?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: We lived together until '68.

Anita Susuri: As a joint family.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes. This uncle, Ibrahim, the professor, had moved out of the village earlier. He lived in Gjilan. At first, he had an apartment, then he built his own house. The rest of us lived all together. The wife of the eldest uncle, she was the *bačica* [Srb.: woman who tends to livestock], they called her *bačica*, she would milk the cows, churn the milk, and take care of things like that. The other women would cook. They had to sift the flour, they used to cover the flour before with a sieve, using sacks. There were a lot of us, and bread was made all day long. From early morning, when we got up, the bread would be put in the oven, and by the time it was afternoon, it was time to go check on the children or the rooms. They worked a lot. And I was small, and I wanted to help my mother a little, to sweep the room for her (laughs).

Anita Susuri: Which child in order were you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The first.

Anita Susuri: You are the oldest?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, I am the oldest.

Anita Susuri: And how many other children came after you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Five more. There are four brothers, and then my sister is the youngest. I am the oldest. My mother even had another son, but he only lived for a month, yes. So, five. Four brothers and two sisters, six in total. And there were also the wives of the uncles. Personally, I loved my uncles' wives very much. They took turns using the cooking area, my mother, my aunt, and later, when the other uncle's wife joined, there were three of them. They took turns cooking, taking shifts in the kitchen. But they helped each other because it was impossible for one to manage everything alone. Imagine, when spring came, it was a bit easier, they plowed and planted corn, and… when the corn and tobacco grew, we had about two or three pairs of laborers working.

Two or three pairs of laborers. Laborers to hoe the corn, and they even made bricks back then to build houses, because with so many brothers, they needed to think ahead for when they might separate.

They made *qerpiç*[13] as they called them back then, not even bricks, but *qerpiç*. The *magjup*[14] would come with their wives and children and make the *qerpiç*. But you had to provide them with bread, and the women would cook for them too. And when we hired laborers to string the tobacco, to string the leaves, we formed a line. I don't know if you know, you can't imagine how it was. They would go, fill up a big cart with tobacco, and bring it to unload. Then we had to string it with needles to make rows of thread and then hang it on the walls to dry.

And we would hire the *magjup* women to help us with sorting the tobacco, the leaves, and stringing the bundles. We had to provide for them too, they would come with their children. Our women had to prepare food for them as well. Plus, my [paternal] aunts were in Gjilan, and when summer came and the kids were on vacation, they would stay in the village with us. They were there. We had to make food for them as well. Additionally, my grandfather was in the *oda*, when there are many sons and daughters-in-law, there are also more guests. Besides, after my grandfather, other relatives and his daughters would come to visit, and, of course, other guests too, and we had to prepare food for them as well. Who would prepare it? Not like today where you can buy it, the women had to cook everything themselves.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you about your house as well, because I know it's very old. Who built that house, and what did it look like, if you could describe it for us?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Our great-grandfather Shaban, the father of our grandfather, built the house. He had… anyway, they say how much he paid for that house, how many *lira*[15] he gave, and how much they worked on it. And when he divided the property with his brother, he said, "I… you choose whatever you want" [he told his brother], "I want to keep the house for myself," because he built it for his own enjoyment. I think he's the one who built it, but I'm not sure now. I have some photographs, Muhamer has renovated it now and has done a great job. It was even on television, I don't know if you've seen it?

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, he renovated it very well. He's mostly restored its original look, but he also changed it a bit, so it's not exactly like it used to be. They say that before, as I remember, they used to keep the animals on the ground floor, and they lived on the upper floor. Then, as the family

[13] *Qerpiç* refers to traditional mud bricks made from a mixture of clay, straw, and water, shaped and left to dry in the sun. These bricks were commonly used in rural areas for building houses and other structures before the widespread use of fired bricks. The method was labor-intensive but provided durable and insulating building materials suitable for the local climate.

[14] *Magjup* is a derogatory term historically used in the Balkans to refer to the Roma people.

[15] The Albanian *lira* was the official currency in Albania from 1926 to 1946, also circulating in parts of Kosovo during the Italian occupation (1941-1943) when the region was annexed to Albania. Coins ranged from 0.05 to 2 *lira*, featuring King Zog I, national symbols, or fascist emblems during Italian rule. It was replaced by the Yugoslav dinar in Kosovo after the Second World War and by the Albanian lek in Albania.

grew, they had to use the rooms. Back then, there weren't as many options to build houses like they do now. They tore down the barn and made it into a room (laughs). They reduced the space for the animals. The house was nice, with big windows, and it still has them today.

Actually, I had forgotten until my uncle reminded me. He said, "Aga Hysen changed the house back then, he had removed," you know, he had removed the old windows. He had installed windows like, not like these plastic ones now, but wooden ones that were a bit different. I had forgotten, because when Muhamer renovated it, he restored the original windows, the way they used to be. In other words, the room where we stayed, we lived in that room, the room where Shaban Aga had lived.

It had three windows in the front and one on the side, so four windows in total. Like some of the houses, the smaller ones I've seen, I mean, the older ones that were built with windows this small {explains the size with hands}. That one had large windows. The other room also had big windows, and the other two rooms as well, they were large. And then, they say there was a space, like a *fllanik*[16] or something, where they kept the dairy products downstairs. And that space had three windows, later on, they adapted it and made it into a room where we stayed, the stove room. I don't know now since things have changed, and I've changed too (laughs). I've changed because I've spent a lot of time in Switzerland.

Anita Susuri: Did it have something like a balcony, like…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, it had a kind of balcony, like a *çardak*,[17] on the second floor, and it's still like that. And downstairs, it had what we called a *hajat*.[18] But before, it used to be just dirt, no cement. Later, they covered it a bit with cement. The room where we had the stove, when you opened that *hajat*, it was open, there were no doors or anything. So, when you opened the door, all the cold air would come inside. Yes.

Anita Susuri: And for things like...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: We had it covered with wooden planks, yes. Back then, with wooden planks, because some people had dirt floors, others had part of it covered with hay. Not us, in our neighborhood, the rooms where we stayed were covered with wooden planks. Later on, they also laid some and made them like cushions, kind of...

[16] *Fllanik* refers to a traditional storage area or cellar in Albanian homes, typically used for keeping dairy products, such as milk, cheese, and yogurt, cool and preserved. This space was designed to maintain a lower temperature, taking advantage of natural insulation from the earth.
[17] *Çardak* refers to a traditional open balcony or porch, often found in Albanian and Balkan architecture, typically located on the upper floor of a house. It is used as a shaded outdoor space for relaxation and socializing, providing ventilation and a view of the surroundings.
[18] *Hajat* is a traditional Albanian architectural feature referring to an open, ground-floor porch or entrance area in a house. It serves as a transitional space between the outdoors and indoors, often used for various household activities and as a shaded area for relaxation.

Anita Susuri: Like a *minder*.[19]

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: *Minder*, yes, cushions. First, it was all cushions, and later on, Aga arranged a *minder*. We called our father Aga.

Anita Susuri: Did the house have some kind of heating system, like steam heating, or how was it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No.

Anita Susuri: The old houses had it..

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Maybe. Not ours, no, it didn't have that, it had a stove. What kind of heating are you talking about (laughs)? We were cold (laughs). We only lit a fire at the stove, and rarely in the other rooms. There was a *kube*,[20] some of them were called *kube*. I don't know, now they call them fireplaces, but back then they were *kube* made of clay or tin, or I don't know what material it was, as they were all rusty. But it would heat up quickly. When you added more wood, it would get *zhig*, do you know what *zhig* is?

Anita Susuri: No.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No? I don't know how to say it, when the iron gets so hot that it turns completely red. Yes, red. We would say it got *zhig*, but I don't know now if it's Serbian or what, I'm not sure.

Anita Susuri: No, I don't know either. I wanted to ask you now about the outside of the house, did you have any other responsibilities?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, of course. We had the *hamar*[21] where we kept the wheat, and we had the basket where the corn was stored, you know, those *tramaktë*.[22] Do you understand me?

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[19] *Minder* refers to a traditional, low, cushioned seating area commonly found in Albanian and Balkan homes. It is usually placed along the walls of a room, providing a comfortable space for sitting, lounging, or socializing, often used in living rooms or guest areas.

[20] *Kube* refers to a traditional heating device used in older Albanian homes. It was typically a makeshift stove or heater made from clay, tin, or similar materials, designed to quickly radiate heat when wood was burned inside. Unlike modern fireplaces, it was rudimentary and often prone to rust.

[21] *Hamar* refers to a traditional Albanian granary or storage shed used for storing wheat and other grains. It is typically a separate building or a designated part of a larger structure, designed to keep grains dry and safe from pests.

[22] *Tramaktë* refers to traditional drying racks or frames used in Albanian villages for hanging and drying corn after harvest. These structures allow for proper ventilation, preventing mold and helping to preserve the corn before it is shelled and stored.

Anita Susuri: Yes, just explain it, maybe someone doesn't know.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: *Tramaktë* are like those shelves you buy in the city, like that. We would take them when autumn came, after harvesting the corn or maize, and then bring it home and separate it, we would peel and shell the corn, sort it, and put it in the basket. The basket was made of wicker and was ventilated, so it prevented the corn from getting moldy. We filled the basket to avoid overloading it, and the husks were fed to the animals. The *hamar* was for wheat, we only kept wheat there. Then we had the barn, where the cows and calves were kept. We didn't have many calves. The sheep were kept in the sheepfold, as they call it. And we had just one *oda*.

Anita Susuri: And this *oda* was meant for guests, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, for guests. In fact, I'm not sure which year it was, but my grandfather told his sons, "Build me the *oda* because Muharrem is coming from Arabia." He was expecting that uncle. So, they built it to expand a bit since there were so many of us. But after the *oda* was built, the uncle didn't come. My grandfather stayed there in the *oda* and didn't stay with us anymore. I mean, with the children, because his sons would stay with him in the *oda*, eating dinner there. Then they'd go to their own rooms.

Anita Susuri: So, the men stayed separately?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku:
Yes, separately. But earlier, I remember when my grandfather used to stay in the room with the stove. That's where we all stayed. I remember it well, but after the *oda* was built, he no longer stayed with us, he stayed there.

Anita Susuri: What else was there in that house? Were there any cupboards…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes, yes, there were cupboards. None of them were removed, we didn't change them. No, the locks were there too, but I remember that earlier there was an empty space between the rooms, and at the very end was the toilet, the WC. People didn't go outside at night, when it got dark, there was a hatch at the stairs, and they closed it so no one could enter from below. That WC was at the very end and...

Anita Susuri: Inside the house?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, inside, but maybe a bit like outside. I don't know, I don't remember it myself, but they said there was a WC there. Later, they closed off that part and turned it into a *fllanik*. Do you know what a *fllanik* is?

Anita Susuri: Yes, to keep things cool.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: *Fllanik*, *xharranik*. Yes, cheese and pickles. That's where we kept them.

Anita Susuri: They surely had a *hamamxhik*[23] too?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, the *hamamxhik*. Wait, the room was here, and below was the *hamamxhik*, and then the *iklik*. We used to call them *iklik*...

Anita Susuri: *Iklik*?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, *iklik*, a cupboard where we kept the mattresses, duvets, and some clothes. Below the *iklik*, there was a space where they kept wood or kindling to light the fire. They used it to start the fire. Yes, each room had its own *hamamxhik*, like a small bathroom.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: And was the school in Përlepnica, or did you have to…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes. Yes, yes. I did, but earlier, my father had to go to another village, Kmetovc, I don't know if they still call it Kmetovc now. He completed school in Serbian. As for us, the eight-year school was like the one in the photograph, yes. It was built with stone. In '68, they started building the new school. The new facility.

Anita Susuri: What do you remember from that school period?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: How could I not remember the first day of school? I'll never forget it, never. I remember it well.

Anita Susuri: What was it like?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: My uncle's son said, 'You listen, I'm going to school, you come a bit later to the school and I'll take you to the teacher' (laughs). And my mother had to drop me off first, then left(laughs). I got up and went, I went just like my uncle's son, Faruk, told me. I went there, I got close to the school, he came out, picked me up and took me to the teacher Reshat. He was a very good

[23] *Hamamxhik* refers to a small, traditional bathroom or washroom found in older Albanian homes. It was a simpler, compact version of a *hamam* (bathhouse), used for personal hygiene, often located within the house or connected to individual rooms.

teacher. I'll never forget him. The next day I went, when I went, my mother washed me. She put on a cleaner, better dress. And when I went, I hid behind a thorn bush (laughs). I saw the teacher was in the yard and I hid behind a thorn bush, but he saw me. He educated us a lot, he loved us a lot, one of the best memories.

Anita Susuri: Did you complete the eight-year school, or did you only have four years at that school?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, the eight-year school.

Anita Susuri: The eight-year school.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes, it was an eight-year school. We had good teachers; they were very enthusiastic back then, very much so. They worked hard, had a lot of willpower, and organized events for holidays, held performances and such. Now, I don't know, they still do it, I guess. I even went this year for the school's anniversary in the village.

Anita Susuri: And did you celebrate the school's anniversary? Did you, for example, attend it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Our school's anniversary… our school didn't have a name until '68...

Anita Susuri: Really?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, it didn't have a name, so there was no school anniversary. But we did hold programs for holidays like November 29, Republic Day [of Yugoslavia]. Yes, November 29, for May 1. No one celebrated March 8 or March 7[24] back then. There weren't many holidays, but November 29 and May 1 were celebrated. In fact, they would make us go around the village with what they called *flakadan* [Alb.: torch], I'm not sure. They would make them by putting some ash in a tin can or something, adding some gasoline, and lighting it to make flames, and we'd walk around the village with it.

Anita Susuri: Was that like Youth Day or something, as they called it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, it was for May 1, it was May 1 Day. Later on, about Tito, I don't remember. I don't recall us doing anything for May 25, I don't remember that at all.

Anita Susuri: I thought maybe it was that one.

[24] March 7, known as *Teacher's Day* in Albania and Kosovo, commemorates the opening of the first Albanian-language school in Korça in 1887. It is celebrated to honor educators and their contributions to Albanian education and culture.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, it was for May 1. May 1 Day, they would go out and light fires, above the village on a hill and then on another hill. On the other hill, neighborhoods would compete with each other to see who could make the biggest fire.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask about those holidays, like Eid and Ramadan, what were they like? Were they celebrated?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course, yes, yes. When we were young, it was a bit different. Then, over time, it faded a bit. Yes, yes. During Ramadan, people would fast. Even when I was small, I tried to fast, I'd get so hungry, I was tiny, but I wanted to keep fasting (laughs). I would try to fast all day, but I'd get really hungry. I don't know, I didn't really feel the hunger, but I'd become very irritable. Even today, if I fast, I get very irritable. I don't feel hunger, like the need to eat or drink water, but I do get very irritable. But now I don't fast at all (laughs).

Anita Susuri: And what were the Eid celebrations like, for example?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The Eids, yes, the Eids. Back then, they would slaughter something. For the Big Eid,[25] they would slaughter a *quran* [Alb.: turkey], or *biban* [Alb.: turkey], how do you say it? *Gjeldet*i, as they call it in Albania. We called it *quran*. They would buy it early, feed it with corn dough to fatten it up, and then slaughter it. For the Small Eid,[26] they would sacrifice a *kurban*,[27] like a ram or something, I've forgotten. On the eve of Eid, they would dye our fingers with *kanë* [Alb.: henna]. And when my cousin, who wasn't married yet, was around, she would dye both my fingers and her sister's, her cousin's. She would dye our fingers, put *kanë* on them, and then we'd sleep with it on all night and wash our hands the next morning. But I couldn't sleep all night (laughs).

Anita Susuri: And was this *kanë* bought?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, it was bought. They brought it from Turkey, I don't know. They would get it from Turkey, buy it. We also had some relatives there in Turkey, and when someone went or they came here, they would bring us *kanë*.

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[25] Big Eid refers to E*id al-Fitr,* which marks the end of Ramadan. It is celebrated by Muslims worldwide with prayers, feasts, and the giving of charity, symbolizing joy and gratitude after a month of fasting.

[26] Small Eid refers to *Eid al-Adha*, also known as the "Festival of Sacrifice." It is one of the two major Islamic holidays, celebrated by Muslims worldwide to commemorate the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God. It involves the ritual sacrifice of an animal, such as a sheep, goat, or cow, symbolizing the spirit of giving and sharing.

[27] *Kurban* translates to "sacrificial animal" and refers to an animal, typically a ram, sheep, goat, or cow, that is ritually sacrificed during *Eid al-Adha* (Small Eid) in Islamic tradition. The sacrifice symbolizes devotion to God and is often shared among family, friends, and those in need.

Anita Susuri: Do you also remember, when you were still a child, the late '50s, early '60s? It was Ranković's[28] era, and it was a difficult time...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Very.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes…

Anita Susuri: The confiscation of weapons,[29] for example?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no. In '55 was the confiscation of weapons, but I don't remember it because I was only two years old. But I do remember when we were making *kallap* with tobacco. They would sit there making the *kallap*, and my uncle would make the *harar*, stacking them. These… I don't know how to explain *kallap*, we would arrange the leaves evenly, pass them to him, and he'd stack them, making them a meter long and pressing them to fit more. They would talk, and then the women would share their experiences, recalling what they went through and what they remembered. And I also remember my uncle telling stories.

They beat that uncle during the weapon confiscation operation because they demanded the eldest uncle's rifle. Another cousin of ours, he was the only son, was kept outside all night, in just his shirt and underwear, even in winter. There were such scenes. Then, they told the uncle's wife how her brother was killed. After '45, he was taken, tortured, and abused, who knows how, until he died. That was her only brother, she never knew her father at all, as he went to serve as a soldier and died in the military. So, they were two sisters and one brother. The grandfather and grandmother raised them. They mentioned the grandmother more than their own mother. I don't know what happened to their mother, we never spoke about her.

And then his grandfather, who was from Gjilan, Malisheva, near Gjilan, would tell how one day he sat by the spring to drink water and rest, when a villager came and said, "Uncle Metë, Uncle Metë," and he asked, "What?" The villager said, "Do you know how Hysen died?" He replied, "No." The villager said, "They placed a stone on his chest, they tortured him by placing a stone on his chest." Hysen had told

[28] Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a high-ranking Yugoslav communist official known for his hardline policies, particularly towards Kosovo's Albanian population. As the Minister of Internal Affairs and head of the State Security Administration (UDBA), he implemented repressive measures, including surveillance, arrests, and suppression of Albanian culture and language. His tenure (1944-1966) was marked by systematic discrimination against Albanians, aiming to reduce their influence in Kosovo, and is remembered as a period of intense oppression in the region.

[29] The confiscation of weapons refers to a disarmament campaign in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Kosovo, carried out under Aleksandar Ranković's directive. Framed as a security measure, it disproportionately targeted Albanians, who were often subjected to house raids, intimidation, and violence. The campaign aimed to weaken the Albanian resistance and control the region, further intensifying the repression during Ranković's era.

him, "I felt like something inside me snapped," and then he went home and died. So, it was memories like that.

Then, my mother and aunt would tell how they had their bread taken away. They collected the leftovers. They came and took the flour from the kneading trough, leaving them with nothing but scraps. Imagine that! How they lived and managed to survive. She said they had a mill, you know, and whatever was left over, whatever someone could spare them, they called it *ujem*.[30] That's what they called it. You'd take the grain to be milled, but you had to leave a little bit of flour there as payment. And with that *ujem*, 40 people in the house had to survive. They slaughtered a cow to eat the meat in place of bread. They had no bread to eat.

They would tell how, when they were evicted, a guard was posted at the door of the house to check whether they were lighting a fire or not. Whether they were cooking, in case they had hidden flour or wheat somewhere. They didn't leave any scraps. You see… My father was involved as a communist back then. He was capable, but when he saw what was happening and what was going on… my father never talked about it, but another uncle told us. He couldn't take it anymore and gave up on the party.

Anita Susuri: And did your father have any workers in the shop? Did he have any assistants, or did any of the children go to help him?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: At first, I mean, earlier, he had the youngest uncle helping him, along with a cousin. But then that cousin went and completed the *Shkolla Normale* and became a teacher, and the uncle didn't want to work there anymore. Then the sons helped him, Naser, the eldest brother, helped my father, as did Muhamer.

Anita Susuri: Did you ever go to the shop?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: To the shop, yes. My father would take us. He took us to get us out of the house, but I didn't do anything, I just sat there in the corner. There was a place to sit there, where he fixed the shoes for the cows, because he made those for the cows himself. He bought leather, cut it, punched holes, and then measured it. I remember when he shoed them, I spent a lot of time in the shop. He only took me to get me out of the house, you know, to give my mother a break. My father was very… I remember, and they say, when typhus broke out after the war, everyone got sick except for my father. He cooked, and a cousin's wife also brought them food.

Anita Susuri: Did they recover?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: She brought it and left it for them. Excuse me?

[30] *Ujem* comes from the Serbian word *ujam*, meaning "miller's share" or "milling fee." It refers to the portion of flour or grain that millers kept as payment for milling services in traditional Balkan communities.

Anita Susuri: Did they recover?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes. No, no one died. No one died, but the uncle's wife was very, very bad. Very sick. As for the others, I don't know, I don't remember how they were. But they say she was very sick. And at that time, I don't know if there was another woman in the house or not, or if it was just my father cooking, but he did the cooking.

Anita Susuri: And what kind of shop was this of your father's? What did it look like?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: (Laughs) What would it look like? A shop where they brought cows, calves, horses, and… it smelled like manure (laughs). He had a *fallak*[31] or something, for… when they had to bring down the cows to shoe them, they had to knock them down. They would put a kind of long wooden structure under their front and back legs, tying them to that *fallak*. Then, with the legs up, he would carve and trim, remove what's called...

Anita Susuri: Like the hooves.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Like hooves, since I couldn't remember. To clean them, first, he had two, I think, two tools. They were like sharp iron, with a long wooden handle to clean them first. Then, he'd take the horseshoes and fit them, if they were too big, he'd trim them down a bit. He had everything. There were many tools there. Then, with nails, *tak tak tak* {onomatopoeia} to secure them. He was a good craftsman, people came from all over, and he had many customers.

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes, I think someone from the television also came to your father. Do you remember that? Were you there?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I wasn't there, I was in Pristina as a student. But it was aired, I think last year or the year before, on the show *Arkivi*. Avdush Canaj, he's a poet, do you know him?

Anita Susuri: No.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: A children's poet, yes, from Gjilan. He worked in television. He was also my father's friend (laughs). He made that show, I have it saved on my phone somewhere, but I'd have to check.

[31] *Fallak* is a traditional Albanian device used to restrain livestock, particularly cows and horses, during hoof trimming or shoeing. It consists of a wooden frame that holds the animal's legs in place, ensuring safety for both the animal and the blacksmith during the process.

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes, we've seen it. It reminded me to ask you. I wanted to ask about the period when you finished school...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Primary school?

Anita Susuri: Primary school, how did it continue afterward?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Primary school, as I said, I finished in '68. Then my father enrolled me in the *Shkolla Normale* along with my uncle. He was the principal there at the time, I think, or maybe a teacher in Gjilan, I'm not sure. He even came to get me, saying, "Come on!" But I couldn't leave my mother.

Anita Susuri: So, you didn't continue?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I stayed at home until, honestly, even when talking with my sister, she asked, "What year did you start university?" I said, "I don't know, was it '74 or '75? I think it was '74-'75." She said, "How could you forget?" I replied, "I forgot, I don't know why, but I forgot." I stayed at home, and then in '74, I made up my mind. I realized I couldn't just stay home because I loved reading so much. In fact, my cousin still jokes with me, saying, "If you found a piece of newspaper in the manure, you'd stop to read it."

We had many books, as my father also loved reading, and my uncles, one was a professor, the other a teacher. We had *Jeta e Re*, a magazine, and *Përparimi*, which was more of a scientific magazine. *Jeta e Re* was a literary magazine. Those magazines were published once a month, I think, not sure how it worked, but we had them. I read all of them. I read these, and there were folklore collectors like Anton Qena,[32] Lorenc Antoni,[33] Anton Çetta,[34] did I mention him?

Anita Susuri: You said Anton Qena, but [you maybe meant] Anton Çetta.

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[32] Anton Qena (1929-2006) was an Albanian folklorist and ethnographer from Kosovo, known for his work in collecting, documenting, and preserving Albanian oral traditions, including folk songs, proverbs, and tales. His efforts played a significant role in maintaining Albanian cultural heritage, particularly during periods of political repression in the former Yugoslavia.

[33] Lorenc Antoni (1909-1991) was a prominent Albanian composer, conductor, and ethnomusicologist from Kosovo. He is best known for his work in documenting and preserving Albanian folk music, as well as composing classical music inspired by traditional melodies. Antoni played a crucial role in promoting Albanian cultural heritage, particularly through his contributions to music education and ethnomusicology in Yugoslavia.

[34] Anton Çetta (1920-1995) was an Albanian folklorist, academic, and prominent activist from Kosovo. He is best known for leading the reconciliation of blood feuds movement in the 1990s, which aimed to resolve long-standing feuds among Albanians in Kosovo. As a folklorist, Çetta collected and preserved Albanian oral traditions, including legends, epic poetry, and folktales, contributing significantly to the documentation of Albanian culture.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, Anton Çetta, Lorenc Antoni, I read those, and there were serials like *Gjarprinjtë e Gjakut* [Alb.: The Snakes of Blood] by Adem Demaçi.[35] And once, when I was a student, I was talking to a friend about something, and he said, "Adem Demaçi's *Gjarpërinjtë e Gjakut*" I said, "No way, it's not banned. I read it," I said, "I read it in *Jeta e Re*. How could it be banned if it was published?" Then, I even went to ask that uncle of mine in Gjilan, the professor, for *Gjarprinjtë e Gjakut*. And he told me, I'll never forget, "Finish," he said, "your studies first. Finish your studies first, then you can read these."

Anita Susuri: And when was the time that you became aware of these secret organizations, the *ilegale*[36] (underground movement), and the books that were being distributed?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The books, the books, my father always had them, yes. He wrote poetry himself first of all, and in '63 or '64, in '64, they arrested him. They came and searched our house, we were planting tobacco when we returned home. Imagine how close that field was. When we got home, we found out that the UDBA[37] had come, searched the place, and taken my father with them. He used to read, he'd get these books, like *Shotë Azem Galica*, Hasan Prishtina's books, the ones that were banned back then. Yes, he would take them to read, and I read them too (laughs). Nothing got past me.

Anita Susuri: And how long did your father stay in prison?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Back then, he stayed for about three months, I think. Three months, but they just {gestures to show he was beaten}. My mother used to tell us back then...

Anita Susuri: In Gjilan?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: In Gjilan, yes. I feel very sorry, I don't know why we never asked him why they took him, what they asked him, or what they did to him. But my mother used to say, "When he got up," she said, "he would hold onto the wall," because they had tortured him a lot back then. But now, I often think that it was during that time in '64, after '64, when Adem Demaçi was imprisoned. In '64, there was also Rexhep Elmazi, I think… In Gjilan, they likely took him because they suspected he had connections with them. He did have connections, but my father was not organized. I believe so, he

[35] Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was a prominent Albanian writer, activist, and political dissident from Kosovo. Known as the "Mandela of the Balkans," he spent 28 years in Yugoslav prisons for advocating for Albanian rights and independence. His novel *Gjarprinjtë e Gjakut* (The Snakes of Blood) is a critical exploration of the Albanian experience under Yugoslav rule. Demaçi remains a symbol of resistance and the struggle for freedom in Kosovo.

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

[37] UDBA (*Uprava državne bezbednosti*), or the State Security Administration, was the secret police of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It was responsible for internal security, political repression, and surveillance, particularly targeting those suspected of anti-state activities. In Kosovo, UDBA was known for its harsh tactics against Albanians, including surveillance, imprisonment, and torture of those involved in nationalist movements or possessing banned literature.

never said he was part of an organization. He collected books and had contacts with them all, but I don't know how it was exactly. When you're organized, you pay membership, which is a bit different. As for me, I got organized in either '78 or '80.

Anita Susuri: And around the time you mentioned earlier, around '75, when you went to Pristina...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes.

Anita Susuri: What was that time in Pristina like for you? That change, coming from the village to Pristina?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: From the village to Prishtina, yes, for me, the word "student" was… I don't know, I can't describe it to you. Being a student was something wonderful for me...

Anita Susuri: A privilege.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Privilege. It was really, it was a privilege for me. I felt very good, very proud, but also very scared because everyone would tell me, "It's hard for you, if they study once, you have to study ten times more." I had that stress, whether I would manage, whether I would succeed and finish, or do something. Maybe I would just come and not be able to do anything, you know, it felt overwhelming. It felt like… maybe I wouldn't have thought that way myself. But when they would say, "You have to study more because you don't have a secondary school education, you have to study ten times more," I would study day and night, repeating everything day and night. But I didn't really need to study day and night (laughs). A young mind is clear, fresh, it doesn't need that, it's not burdened. But it was more my own burden, thinking, "Oh my."

Anita Susuri: And how did it happen that you went?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: How did it happen (laughs)… I wrote them a letter because I was embarrassed to tell them. At first, they begged me, but I didn't want to go. Then I thought, "I'll go." I felt very bad about it, and still, I felt bad about leaving my mother. How to start, how to start, so I wrote a letter to my uncle here in Gjilan and secretly slipped it into his pocket (laughs). He never replied to me. In fact, my older cousin read it and said, "You wrote it so well" (laughs). Back then, after primary school, I might not have known how to write very well, but…

In '74 or '75, I'm not sure, anyway, I came to Prishtina because my uncles were here, along with my grandmother and grandfather. I came. My uncle came to pick me up, and at some point, I told him that I wanted to go to school. He said, "Actually…" I said, "Yes, I really want to," I said, "to study," because I just couldn't imagine staying home. He got up, went to the faculty, and came back, having talked to

them, he had some friends at the literature faculty. He came back and handed me a list, saying, "Here, these are the exams you have to take" (laughs).

He handed me a list, language, philosophy, psychology, and I don't know what else, history, geography, French. When I saw it, I said, "Oh, uncle," I said, "I'll leave it all for later, yes, but how can I do this in such a short time, in one week?" I think the academic year had already started. I said, "I can't, I'll end up turning night into day, but right now, I can't." He said, "Oh my, I've shed so much sweat over this. I'll never forgive you if you don't go." I said, "Uncle, I'm telling you," I said, "later, yes, but not right now." I actually went, and the professors helped me, because I wasn't really prepared to pass the exams.

I was very happy, extremely happy. I'm infinitely grateful to my uncle for enrolling me. I want to tell you a bit about the exams. I went to the Literature and Language exam with the professor, it was Liman Matoshi and Isa Bajçinca. Isa didn't stay there, and Liman Matoshi asked me about Albanian novels, "What have you read?" and such. I mentioned *Afërdita* by Sterjo Spasse.[38] He asked, "What is the idea of the novel?" I said, "It's the education of the Albanian people." I don't know what else he asked, and I didn't do too badly, but I can't say I knew everything either. As for the geography professor, he was the father of this Arsim Bajrami, Arsim, or whatever his name is, the one from PDK,[39] right?

Anita Susuri: Yes, Arsim.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Zeqerija Bajrami, I think. No, no, this one was young...

Anita Susuri: Ah, his father.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: His father, yes. Zeqerija Bajrami asked me, "In what year did man land on the moon?" I knew both the year and the astronaut's name, Neil Armstrong, and I also remember the relief question. Asllan Pushka came in at one point, making {demonstrates a round shape with hands}, like trying to illustrate the relief. "What is relief?" You know, he was trying to help me. I had philosophy and psychology together, with Hajrullah Koliqi as the professor. He asked me some questions like that, and I think he has passed away too.

When I went for French, I had Halit, Halit Halimi, I think. He said, "Look, I'll make it possible for you to enroll. But French," he said, "is difficult." But then everyone was telling me, "No, take Russian, because French is hard, and the professor is tough." It was Muhamet Kërveshi. I knew a bit of French, not a lot,

[38] Sterjo Spasse (1914-1989) was an Albanian writer and teacher, originally from Greece, who became a key figure in Albanian literature. He is best known for his novel *Afërdita*, which explores themes of education, social issues, and cultural awakening among Albanians. Spasse's works often addressed the struggle for Albanian identity and enlightenment during the early 20th century.

[39] The PDK (*Partia Demokratike e Kosovës*) or Democratic Party of Kosovo, is one of Kosovo's major political parties, founded in 1999 by former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

just a bit of *le, la, le* (laughs), but I didn't know any Russian at all, so I insisted and took French. I even passed the French exam.

It was difficult, it wasn't easy, back then, it was even harder, we didn't have materials. Now... back then, you had nothing. My cousin had bought a dictionary for himself by Vedat Kokona, but there was no dictionary, nothing else. Muhamet Kërveshi had told us to buy one book. We took notes. But I attended lectures regularly and took notes. I loved the French language, I loved French literature, I enjoyed it.

Anita Susuri: Which writer did you like the most?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Writers, French ones, right?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Ah, from the French writers, I don't know, there are many, Victor Hugo. I like Victor Hugo the most. Then there's also Rousseau, but honestly, I haven't read much from Rousseau yet. There's *The Social Contract*, or what is it? But the others, they're all good. But Hugo is the best, and Jules Verne is good too. Yes, I don't know, I like Victor Hugo the most. Émile Zola, and the others too. I also really liked the Russian authors, really. Leo Tolstoy and that one…

Anita Susuri: Dostoevsky?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, Dostoevsky. I read him once, and then I started again for the second time, they're good. And Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, they're… Turgenev, and Yesenin, there's also Chekhov… Russian literature.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: And these books, were there libraries, or were there places where you could buy them, or how did you get the books?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Books? As I said, we had quite a lot of books at home, and I also borrowed books from my uncle when I was a student. He had a library too. I used the library in Gjilan as well, going there to borrow books as a student. Because I had Yugoslav Literature, World Literature, and Albanian Literature… I had my maternal aunt working at the city library. She started at the Palace of Youth and then moved to the city, the Hivzi Sylejmani library. The library at the Palace of Youth was a branch of the main library, which was called Vladimir Nazor, I think. It didn't have the name it has now. What did I say?

Anita Susuri: In Gjilan?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, here. In Gjilan, I don't know, it didn't have a name at all.

Anita Susuri: The National Library? Or Hivzi Sylejmani?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Hivzi Sylejmani. It wasn't Hivzi Sylejmani back then, I think it was Vladimir Nazor, I believe, I'm not sure. Only if...

Anita Susuri: It's possible, yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Hivzi Sylejmani, I don't think it was that. She [my aunt] worked there in the library, and I would sometimes go because I wanted to work in a library. So much… with books.

Anita Susuri: Is that maternal aunt of yours still alive?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, she's alive, she's four months younger than me. My mother's sister.

Anita Susuri: She's still young then.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, she is.

Anita Susuri: Yes, I mean, a generation younger. And during this time, you lived with your [maternal] uncles, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, with my grandparents and my uncle.

Anita Susuri: Where were they in Pristina?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: In the neighborhood of Ulpiana, near the Hasan Prishtina school.

Anita Susuri: Can you describe what Pristina looked like to you at that time? How was it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Pristina, to be honest, I never really liked Pristina itself (laughs). It's all hills, just randomly placed. I loved my place, my village Përlepnica, more than Pristina. Anyway, Pristina was fine, it was that kind of center. I remember when I was working there, I'd talk to colleagues in Switzerland, in Geneva, and I'd say, "When June comes, I remember that promenade in Prishtina with the linden trees, the smell of linden… the theater," well, there was the Palace of Youth, built in those years after I arrived. I don't know which year the Palace of Youth was built, maybe '77.

We'd go to the library to study, it had a good reading room, warm, and I'd go with friends. We'd prepare for exams there. Or there was another reading room above the Student canteen. Where the student canteen is, there was a reading room, but you had to get up early to get a spot, to prepare for the exams, to study there, because although it was good at my uncles' place, I had my own room, but at some point… my grandfather had surgery, and my cousin was there, and we had more visitors, so it wasn't the best atmosphere for studying. So, I'd go there or to the library. We'd go, stay there with friends, and prepare.

Anita Susuri: Did you also go to the cinema, for example, when movies came out?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: To the cinema, yes, a bit, not too much, I don't remember much. But we did go to the theater once to watch a play, *Fisheku i Pajës* [The Dowry Bullet], with two friends. Now, one of my friends is in Ferizaj, Hyrije Bejta, and then there's Drita Kuqi, Drita Kuqi, yes. Her name was actually registered as Shkurte, but we called her Drita. I was waiting for my aunt, as she worked until seven at the library in the Palace of Youth, and I went out into the city for a bit. There was the Chamber of Commerce, I'm not sure if it's still there now, near the Mother Teresa statue, right?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, down there. I was looking at something in the display window when my friends came and said, "Come on, let's go to the theater!" I said, "But my aunt is waiting for me to go back to my grandparents," you know, to my uncles. "No, come on, come on." You know, I gave in and went. I sat down, we watched the first act, the second act, then I got up and said, "No, they don't know where I am, I didn't tell them." So, I went back. When I got there, they said, "Why didn't you stay?" I said, "No, in case they went out to look for me, wondering what happened, where I disappeared to." That's how it went. I don't remember any other time. No, we didn't go out much because I wasn't really into going out. It was a bit different back then. We'd go, for example, with my aunt, we'd say, "Let's go to the cinema to see a movie," but less often.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember if there were any films from Albania?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, not at all, no films from Albania. I've never seen any Albanian films. I remember Indian films, and I still love them, I haven't seen any since.

Anita Susuri: Cowboy movies?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, no. Indian movies, romantic (laughs), sentimental ones. No, not cowboy movies, I don't like those. The boys watched them. I remember my cousins from Gjilan, those boys in Përlepnica, let me tell you something now that you mentioned it. They would go to the cinema

to watch cowboy movies in the city, or whatever else, and when they came back, we were all kids, and the women were busy, us with the women (laughs), and the men in the *oda*. And my uncle's wife would say, "Come on, Emin, tell them a story, entertain them a bit" (laughs). He would sit on the stove corner, we had it in the corner, and he would retell the movies he'd seen, but he'd make it seem as if he were part of the story. All the kids would gather around him, sit quietly, not making a sound, to give the women some peace.

Anita Susuri: And you said that the '80s were the time when you got involved in the underground movement...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, before, I don't know, around '79…

Anita Susuri: Before the demonstrations?[40]

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes, before the demonstrations.

Anita Susuri: How were those first steps? How did you meet people? Who was the first person who…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: It was my friend Drita who introduced me. She was already involved with Ismajl Haradinaj and some people from the Deçan group, like Jashar Saliu, but I didn't know them, I only knew Drita. She brought me in, but we had already been talking before that, as I mentioned, about Adem Demaçi and his works. Some things were circulating back then, like Gjergj Fishta's[41] *Lahuta e Malësisë* [The Highland Lute]. I haven't read it myself, never read it, and there were also earlier works by Enver Hoxha,[42] like *The Titoists*, and so on.

[40] The '81 demonstrations refer to a series of protests in Kosovo that began in March 1981, primarily led by ethnic Albanian students at the University of Prishtina. Initially sparked by poor living conditions and student grievances, the protests quickly grew into broader demands for greater political and cultural rights, eventually escalating into calls for Kosovo to gain republic status within the former Yugoslavia. These demonstrations were met with a harsh response from the Yugoslav government, resulting in widespread arrests, dismissals, and increased repression, marking a significant moment in Kosovo's history and its struggle for autonomy.

[41] Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) was an Albanian Franciscan friar, poet, and prominent figure of the Albanian National Awakening. He is best known for his epic poem *Lahuta e Malcisë* (The Highland Lute) published in 1937, which celebrates Albanian history, culture, and resistance against foreign rule, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Fishta's work played a significant role in shaping Albanian national identity and is regarded as one of the cornerstones of Albanian literature.

[42] Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) was the leader of Albania from 1944 until his death in 1985, serving as the First Secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania. Under his rule, Albania became one of the most isolated and rigidly Stalinist regimes in the world. Hoxha emphasized complete state control, eliminating political dissent, and pursuing strict autarky. His works, such as *The Titoists*, were part of his extensive writings that promoted communist ideology and criticized both internal and external opponents, including Tito's Yugoslavia.

It's that one, it's in winter, I'm not sure, but we have it there, anyway, Enver Hoxha's works, Kadare's[43] works. We read Kadare back then, I remember in '68 they would publish some of Elena Kadare's[44] works as serials, for example, *Shuaje dritën Vera* [Turn Off the Light, Vera], or Kadare's works serialized in *Zëri i Rinisë* [The Voice of Youth]. We'd get those issues of *Zëri*. There were permitted works, but there were also banned ones, for instance, *The Titoists* wasn't allowed, if they caught you with it, you could be sent to prison. We had contact, we discussed, we saw each other, we went to the library. You weren't allowed to access certain literature, and they wouldn't give you the literature you needed or wanted to consult. It felt wrong, an injustice, and we would talk about it.

By the way, do you remember Ali Lajçi? [Addresses the interviewer] Ali Lajçi was in my group, we were in the same group. In the last year of our studies, it was organized, "Let's go to Albania, our language and literature group, both of them." This Ali Lajçi, you know, organized it, I think it mostly came from him. I don't know if he was the main organizer or not, but he couldn't come because he didn't have a passport, Ali. Drita, this friend from Ferizaj, and some others were there, we had a week-long excursion in Albania.

Anita Susuri: What year was it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: '79 or '78, to be honest, I'm not sure, the final year, that year, '79.

Anita Susuri: How did you all manage to go? Can you tell us how it all happened?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: We went like this: they organized it, the faculty arranged it and made the request, but I don't know who exactly did it. As I mentioned, Ali was the initiator, but whether it was him alone or someone else as well, I'm not sure because I wasn't that interested. "Are we going?" "Yes, we're going." We made the request, and there were some requirements, like good grades and having a

[43] Ismail Kadare (1936-2024) is an Albanian novelist, poet, and essayist, widely considered one of the most prominent figures in Albanian literature. His works often explore themes of history, politics, and the impact of dictatorship in Albania. Kadare gained international acclaim with novels like *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), *Chronicle in Stone* (1971), and *The Palace of Dreams* (1981), which often contain allegorical criticism of authoritarian regimes. Despite being published in communist Albania, Kadare's works were carefully crafted to avoid censorship while subtly critiquing the state.

[44] Elena Kadare (1943) is an Albanian writer and poet, known for her novels, essays, and poetry. She is also the wife of Ismail Kadare, a prominent Albanian author. Her works often focus on social themes, exploring the complexities of life in Albania, particularly during the communist era. Elena Kadare's writing, while less known internationally compared to her husband's, has been recognized in Albania for its literary merit and insight into Albanian culture and society. Notable works include *Turn Off the Light, Vera*, which explores themes of personal and social conflict.

passport. I got my passport for the first time then. Before we left, the late Fehmi Agani[45] called a meeting with the students who were going on the trip, to talk to us and advise us to behave and not to...

We traveled by bus, with one bus. Through Tetovo, past Tetovo, we crossed Qafë Thanë and then went straight to Tirana. From Tirana, we went to Saranda, passing by Ksamil. Back then, there were only two or three buildings, nothing more. They called it a new town, a workers' town. We went to Elbasan and had a coffee at Hotel Skampa. We were in Shkodra, I think we stayed there for one night. We went to Berat and had lunch there, but we didn't enter the old part of the city. In Gjirokastra, we stayed one night, it was nice, really. But there was this tension, because my husband doesn't like it, but I do (laughs).

There was this kind of tension, you know, being followed, watched and all, but there was order, there was order. The terraces, the olive groves, the fruit trees, the vegetable greenhouses, what they planted later on. It was clean, orderly. But poverty was everywhere, as much as you could imagine, poverty everywhere. I remember one moment in Tirana, we were out in the evening, and we had this person, they called him Ditë Preka, I don't know, he was from the [State] Security, he stayed with us there. Some familiar people passed by, terrified, they didn't want to be seen with us, they recognized us, afraid that they'd be… and they left. That's how it was. And then, when they came out, the women would sweep the streets with *rrëmeta*.[46] Do you know what *rrëmeta* are?

Anita Susuri: No.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I don't know how to explain it to you, with that kind of wooden broom, you know, with thin branches, yes. They swept with that because they didn't have proper brooms. In fact, when I read a novel, no, not a novel, but Elena Kadare wrote her memoirs, like a biography. She says, "The tankers would come out to wash the streets." I don't know where she saw those tankers...

Anita Susuri: (Laughs).

[45] Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a prominent Kosovo Albanian sociologist, academic, and politician. A leading figure in the non-violent resistance movement against Serbian oppression during the 1990s, he was one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), which advocated for Kosovo's autonomy and independence from Yugoslavia. Agani was also a key advisor to Ibrahim Rugova, the first President of Kosovo. He played a crucial role in diplomatic efforts during the Kosovo War, seeking peaceful solutions to the conflict. Tragically, he was killed in 1999 during the Kosovo War under circumstances widely believed to be connected to Serbian forces.

[46] *Rrëmeta* refers to a type of traditional broom made from twigs or thin branches, commonly used in Albania for sweeping streets and outdoor areas. These brooms were often handmade and characterized by their rough, rustic appearance. The term is primarily used in Albanian to describe this specific tool.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yeah, really. What tankers? They would come out and sweep with those *rrëmeta*. Anyway, there wasn't much, it was quite barren there, like it is now. But it was good, really good.

Anita Susuri: They must have had tough conditions, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, the conditions were harsh.

Anita Susuri: How did you imagine Albania to be?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Ah, wait, I want to tell you something, because sometimes, sometimes, I was little, let me tell you this: when we were making the tobacco bundles, it's interesting about that bundle. I had a dream when I was little, back then I was young, we didn't know about Albania, we had no idea, honestly. I found a book, like a reader from right after the war when they made it, and it had a picture of Enver Hoxha in it, labeled "The Best Son of the Albanian People," and as handsome as you can imagine in that photo. I didn't have much of an idea, you know, because people didn't talk, they didn't dare speak, not even in front of children.

I'll tell you, I once had a dream that I went to Albania, like a mountain, no people, nothing. Just a mountain, trees, no sky anywhere, leaves on the ground. So I was explaining, saying, "I dreamt I went to Albania but didn't see anything." My uncle said, "Ah," he said, "someone is thinking of you" (laughs). And another time, someone mentioned Tito when he visited Kosovo, I don't know what they were saying. I remember my father was performing *abdes*.[47] Do you know what *abdes* is?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: He was performing *abdes*, and to be honest, at school, they taught us Tito, Tito, Tito, and nothing else. The teachers may not have liked it, but it was their duty. I said, "Tito is coming," and I wanted to go to Gjilan to see him, I don't know if he ever came to Gjilan. And I don't know what my father was saying, but he was cursing Tito. Then my uncle said to him, "Oh, you fool, how can you talk like this in front of the children?" People were scared back then to speak out. That was during the Ranković era. If children repeated things, they were monitored, and people were spied on. So, that's how it was.

Anita Susuri: And how long did you stay in Albania?

[47] *Abdes* (also spelled *abdest* or *wudu* in Arabic) refers to the ritual purification or washing performed by Muslims before prayer. It involves washing the hands, mouth, nostrils, face, arms, head, and feet with water. This practice is intended to achieve a state of spiritual and physical cleanliness.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I said about a week, I think, a week. We spent one night in Saranda, one night in Shkodra, one night in Durrës, and one or two nights in Tirana. We visited the Ethnographic Museum, the Martyrs' Cemetery, and the Writers' Association, I don't recall what else we visited.

Anita Susuri: How were you received by them?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, very well, very warm. As I mentioned, everything was organized, not spontaneous. Drita, my friend, had a cousin, either from her aunt's side or her uncle's, living in Durrës, and the three of us visited them. It was a small apartment, simple and clean, but nothing extraordinary. People said that when they had guests, they would tidy up, but I doubt it was anything more than that.

Anita Susuri: When you returned, did the authorities question you, or was there any kind of monitoring or follow-up?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, we weren't questioned. But now I remember that they had talked with that friend in Ferizaj. She said... They had written a letter, or something, mentioning plans to go to the homes of those who went to Albania to check if they brought back any books. And they wrote to her. I told her, "Hide the books," or something like that (laughs).

Anita Susuri: And you, did you bring any books?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, we brought some books with us. I had taken some and sent them to a cousin in Istanbul after getting her address. I took my books, you know, the ones that were more significant, and also Drita's and Hyrije's, and sent them to Istanbul. The plan was to retrieve them later when things calmed down. And then, when my uncle returned from Arabia, which was in '79, he came back here again with his wife and children, after ten or eleven years.

When he returned, he had seven kids in the car, along with his wife and all their belongings. Now, it was hard for us to just leave him to drive back alone with all the children. So, we decided to do things a bit differently, organizing some vehicles, and it was difficult to let him go alone with all those kids. "Let's go together in one car," and I went too. My cousin's son, my younger uncle, and I accompanied him all the way to Damascus, Syria. On our way back, we managed to persuade them, "Let's go to aunt Rifadije's place," where I had sent the books (laughs), to retrieve them.

When we returned, we said, "Let's go," but we struggled to find the place, no address, nothing. I don't know how we eventually found it. We got there and didn't know anyone… A young Albanian man from Pristina recognized us and realized we were Albanians too. He helped us find the address, and we went

there. When I arrived, you know what? I only managed to retrieve two books. "What happened?" The cousin had torn up all the books to bake *pite*[48] for Ramadan (laughs).

Anita Susuri: How many books did you send?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, probably three, the books of three people, I don't know how many exactly, maybe over 20-30. It was around the time of the Kurdish issue, or the Kurdish Communist Party. Who knows if things were being monitored, and she was afraid. You see, my cousin's husband was killed in '45, and later, they decided to move to Turkey, fearing her sons might be killed too. So, they relocated to Istanbul. Now, she was scared that her son would get arrested there. But nothing happened, the Albanian Embassy in Turkey, when her son went there, caused no problems. But who knows... She had torn everything up. What was left was just one book, maybe two. In fact, I gave that history book by Arben Puto to my cousin's son, who is a historian in Gjilan.

Anita Susuri: And this trip of yours to Damascus, how was it? Because for that time, it's interesting, nobody traveled that far.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: *Hagj*[49] pilgrims did travel (laughs) a bit further. But it was fine, summer, hot weather, very warm. We traveled, switching cars now and then, sometimes riding in one, sometimes in the other. But my cousin was a skilled driver. They were drivers, generation after generation. His father was a bus driver who maintained the Gjilan-Belgrade line, and even made some trips to Syria. Well, slowly but surely, we traveled through the heat. We stayed a bit in Bulgaria, and I can't recall if we stayed in Istanbul. Anyway, we did stop around Adana for a night in a hotel, and then continued to Damascus. We didn't do any sightseeing.

Anita Susuri: How were those places? What were they like?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, it was interesting that when we arrived in Damascus, people looked similar to us and they seemed a bit socialist, I don't know in what way exactly. There were young women dressed in military uniforms. It was fine. But we didn't know any language, not English, not Arabic. They could speak either English, Arabic, or even French. On our way back, we stayed in Aleppo, in a hotel, let's say. It was a disaster! I didn't eat anything. I just couldn't because I'm a bit picky and I don't like dishes that I'm not familiar with. The kids, though, were happy when we got there, since they had familiar foods that they were used to. Humus is one of them. Chickpeas, you know?

Anita Susuri: I think so. Chickpeas.

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[48] A traditional Albanian layered pastry, similar to a pie, typically filled with ingredients like cheese, spinach, meat, or potatoes. It resembles the Balkan *burek* and is commonly prepared in various forms across the region.
[49] An Albanian term referring to *Hajj*, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which is one of the five pillars of Islam and is obligatory for Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it at least once in their lifetime.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Chickpeas, or chickpeas?

Anita Susuri: In Albanian, that's what they're called.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Chickpeas are also called *qiqrra*, like the smaller ones that resemble beans.

Anita Susuri: Something like that, I'm not sure.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, that's just how their family is. They take chickpeas, boil them, and then grind them to make something like a sauce. My kids now eat it there in Geneva, but I don't like it. I never ate it, not even in Arabia. They kept telling me, "Try it, just try it." The kids were so happy, they went wild, they had missed hummus. And I'd say, "No," but the cousin's son would insist, "Try it." I was so tired, I became like this {shows with finger: as thin as a finger} because I wasn't eating. I couldn't eat the food they had back then.

Anita Susuri: How long did it take you to get there?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, honestly, I don't remember, I've forgotten. No.

Anita Susuri: Quite a lot...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Quite a lot, quite a lot because, you know, we had to stop and rest, and it was a long journey. And so on.

Anita Susuri: And here, since we started talking about your activity…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Was it just distributing books and materials, or was there something else as well?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, we were just organizing. She [Drita] gave me the statute, she gave me the organization's statute, and…

Anita Susuri: What was this statute?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, it was about what needed to be done, how it should be done, who could be approached, and who could become a member. It laid out the rules for maintaining secrecy, not talking to just anyone, and not getting close to everyone. I also paid the membership fee, but I

can't remember the amount, so don't ask me. I handed over the money, and she was supposed to give me the movement's newsletter *Lajmëtari i Lirisë* [Messenger of Freedom], but she never gave it to me. I don't know what happened. She might have given it to someone else, there weren't many copies available back then. I also had contact with this cousin who had given me *Fronti i Kuq* [The Red Front], an organ by Ibrahim Kelmendi. *Fronti i Kuq* was just a leaflet, only four pages long, no more…

Anita Susuri: What kind of content did these have?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The content of these materials was against the system, highlighting injustices against our people, how Kosovo was being exploited, and the imprisonment of innocent people. I never read *Lajmëtari* as I never received a copy. We had *Liria* and *Fronti i Kuq*. I also had *Punëtorët*, or, rather, *Punëtorja* by Abdullah Prapashtica. *Liria* was from the OMLK[50] group, which included Hydajet Hyseni and Kadri Zeka.[51] We read it, and I think Muhamer brought it in '81. Later, the group was uncovered in '81.

I remember once I met with Drita in Pristina, she said something, and I thought that the demonstrations were organized. They weren't exactly spontaneous. She said, "You think they were organized, huh?" She said, "We didn't organize them, they didn't come from us," meaning our group. I said, "I don't know now, without something behind it, nothing just happens by itself." You all wouldn't have come here without me calling you, right? And then when I was caught, when they came, I was at work.

I finished university and wanted to start working in Pristina. But my uncle didn't want to let me move to Pristina. I told him... since he had some connections and such, because finding a job was always about having connections. He didn't want to intervene, you know, back then. But when I told him and he saw that I was trying to get a job in Pristina, he found me a position at "Selami Hallaqi" school. I only worked for two months...

Anita Susuri: In Gjilan as a teacher?

[50] *OMLK* stands for *Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës* (The Marxist-Leninist Organization of Kosovo), a clandestine political group formed in the late 1970s. Its goal was to promote Marxist-Leninist ideology and advocate for the rights of Albanians in Kosovo. The organization was active in distributing underground publications and organizing protests, playing a significant role during the demonstrations of 1981. Members of OMLK included prominent figures like Hydajet Hyseni and Kadri Zeka, who were key players in Kosovo's resistance movement against Yugoslav rule.

[51] Kadri Zeka (1953-1982) was a prominent Albanian activist from Kosovo and a leading figure in the Marxist-Leninist movement advocating for Kosovo's independence from Yugoslavia. He was one of the founders of the *Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës* (OMLK). Zeka was deeply involved in distributing underground political literature and coordinating protests. He was assassinated in January 1982 in Stuttgart, Germany, along with fellow activists Jusuf Gërvalla and Bardhosh Gërvalla, marking a significant moment in the Kosovo Albanian resistance movement.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes. Two months, meaning I started on March 8. On March 11, I think, were the first demonstrations, right?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: And on May 12, they arrested me. They came to the school and took me. When they took me, I knew I no longer had a place in the school. We had *Liria* at home, along with other books and newspapers, and I had to admit that I was a member of the organization and hand over the statute I had received. But they didn't convict me, they didn't sentence me to prison, you know. They didn't put me on trial at all, but they expelled me from work.

Actually, my uncle forgot, you know, the old man is 90 years old now. He says, "Why did you resign?" I said, "Oh my uncle," I said, "I resigned because I had no other choice." I didn't resign on my own, they forced me to resign because I had no position there. I was lucky they didn't imprison me. "How so?" "Well," I said, "I was part of an organization." They sentenced people for much less than that, like for a slogan that a child wrote on a wall.

I had to... I knew the others were there, and I thought when they go for the others… Luckily, they searched the house, but they didn't find anything. In fact, they had taken some books I bought here in Pristina. One of them was *Freedom or Death* by Nikos Kazantzakis, a Greek author. Maybe the way he describes things in the novel feels like some Albanian customs, you know. But anyway, Greek. I even said, "Why did you take this one?" You know. "We knew what it was, but we just took it anyway," the UDBA officers told me.

Anita Susuri: Was there any physical violence against you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no. I can't say that anyone physically harmed me, as no one ever touched me. No physical violence, but psychological violence, as much as you can imagine. There was plenty of psychological violence, but no one ever laid a hand on me. I'm not sure because others were beaten and maltreated. As for me, in '81, when they arrested me, they held me for over 24 hours, I don't remember exactly how long, I've forgotten. They took my father at that time, too, I remember, and my older brother. Then the following year, when Muhamer was imprisoned, on the day he escaped from prison, they came to take me the next day. He escaped during the night between Saturday and Sunday, and they came to me on Sunday, around noon, I believe.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: What do you remember about the '81 demonstrations beforehand?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, the ‘81 demonstrations were brewing, people were preparing, dissatisfied. There had always been discontent, even before, with more violence too. I remember it well, although I wasn’t a student anymore by ‘81, I was at home, having already finished my studies. But I had friends here, my friend’s sister from Ferizaj was staying in the dormitories. There were some girls from Ferizaj, and I’m not sure if they were organized, but they sure talked a lot (laughs).

And this Emrush, Emrush Xhemajli, not sure if you know him, Emrush was arrested back then, along with Xhabir Morina and a Topalli, I forgot his first name, Enver Topalli. They were arrested. Those girls talked as if they were part of that group, they reminded me of... I don’t know, I haven’t seen them since. Students, as I said, were dissatisfied, and the atmosphere was heated, tense. As far as the demonstrations go, now people claim, “I started them,” or “I flipped the plate,” but to me, it seems like it was those girls from Ferizaj who did it. When I would visit their room, sometimes bringing *Liria* to them, or perhaps getting it from them, I can’t remember. I’m not sure, I don’t want to lie. But they would say that one of them had slammed the plate down.

Anita Susuri: And how was the atmosphere in the city?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: What do you mean in the city?

Anita Susuri: Was there a lot of police presence?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no. Back then, it was a bit different, the atmosphere, I mean in those years around ‘75...

Anita Susuri: No, in ‘81.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Oh gosh, don’t even mention ‘81 because I was at school then, and I had the day off. So, the demonstrations took place on March 11, and in the evening of the 12th, I came to Pristina and went to my uncles’. When I arrived, Muhamer was there, and his eyes were all irritated from the tear gas they had used. He had been in the demonstrations. I went to the dormitories, or I don't remember exactly. It was a disaster, so many police, chaos, the military. I don’t know, maybe on the 11th again... they stopped us at the entrance to Pristina, where Albi Mall is now. They stopped us, the police checked everyone, and then we went back. I went to my cousin Qerim’s, who was living in Taukbahçe [neighborhood] at the time. They had taken him into custody then.

Near the dorms, oh God, there were police officers every ten steps, every ten meters they would stop you to check your ID. They had evicted all the students from the dorms, the police had brought them out, and I don’t know what they were doing with the planes. It was a city, a city under occupation. A city, I can’t even describe it, it’s like something out of movies or… I don’t know how to explain it to you. It was a dead city, a dead city. Not just dead, but a city under terror, a city under terror. On one side,

there were planes, on the other side police, and then the military. Soldiers, not just police, soldiers were doing the checks.

By the time I got to Taukbahçe, who knows how many times the police stopped you, how many times they stopped you, it was a disaster, to put it shortly. Even in Gjilan and in the village, they had brought in the army to the entrance of our village, and the army was stationed there regularly. In our village, they had built a small building to serve as a post or something, I don't know. We never had a phone, we never had a phone. They built it for something, the police did something with it, but I can't remember now.

Anita Susuri: And in your family, for example, you were involved, Muhamer was involved, did the others in your household know that you were part of it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, no one knew.

Anita Susuri: Did you know about Muhamer, or did he know about you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I knew a little, he told me when the April 2 demonstrations happened. He met Hydajet, maybe he told you?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: And he told me that he had met Hydajet, but he didn't tell me he was involved in the organization. His connection was with Mejtullah Tahiri from Malisheva, the brother of the one who was killed in the war, I think he was killed in Dubrava Prison.[52] No, no, we didn't talk about it, we didn't tell anyone. I didn't tell Muhamer, and Muhamer didn't know I was involved with Drita.

Anita Susuri: Where were you when Muhamer was arrested, and how did you receive the news?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I was in Gjilan, working at my uncle's shop. How we found out was that they had taken my cousin, Ahmet, I'm not sure if Muhamer told you. But my cousin was organized with Muhamer, and they arrested him early in the morning at his apartment. I used to visit my [paternal] aunt almost every day because I couldn't go back to the village. I worked at the shop, and it wasn't possible to return to the village during lunch breaks, there were barely any buses.

You'd go to catch the 8 o'clock bus, it wouldn't show up, wait for the 10 o'clock bus, it wouldn't come, sometimes even the 12 o'clock bus didn't come, so you'd start walking. For lunch, I'd go to my aunt's or

[52] A high-security prison in Kosovo that became notorious during the Kosovo War in 1999. It was the site of a massacre in May 1999, where Serbian forces killed dozens of Kosovar Albanian prisoners. The incident occurred during NATO's bombing campaign, making it one of the most tragic events involving civilians during the conflict. The prison is located near the village of Istog in western Kosovo.

my uncle's. I had three uncles there. And then my cousins came, or I can't remember exactly, and told me that Muhamer was taken. My aunt asked, "Where are you taking him?" They said, "We're taking him to his uncle, to his cousin," to Muhamer. So, yes. I actually went to Pristina, even to the Secretariat... no, I knew, I was aware.

He had a certain friend who used to come and go frequently. He wasn't involved in the organization, but he knew everything. And I always suspect that he was the one who did it, that he reported [to the Secretariat]. He came to our house, to my aunt's house as if it were his own, and to everyone else's. Even in the apartment where Muhamer lived with Bajrush Xhemajli, he was there too. Then… I actually went to Pristina, first to that boy's place. I thought they had arrested him too, you know, but he said, "No, I was at the faculty when they came looking for me," or something like that. They hadn't looked for him at all. He was engaged, and I think he got married to Bejtullah Tahiri's sister. I think Muhamer came into contact with him through Bejta and Bejta's sister, thinking… and then… later, when my father went to visit, it was in '83, early '83, I don't remember the exact date. They went to visit, and he says, "Wait, wait!" I had gone to do the laundry, and my mother was lying down sick…

Anita Susuri: But before that, did you go to see Muhamer?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course, I did.

Anita Susuri: How was it, for example, the first time you went? When you found out he was sentenced or…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Muhamer wasn't sentenced.

Anita Susuri: Anyway, he wasn't sentenced...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, Muhamer wasn't sentenced, Muhamer never stood trial. His friends were the ones who stood trial after he escaped in '84. But, you know, I don't know… We visited him regularly, you know, since only two or three people were allowed to visit. I went to see him, but what was there to see through those bars? Have you been there?

Anita Susuri: Yes, they say they changed those bars, and they were worse?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, they weren't worse. They are still pretty bad, I can't imagine how they could've been worse. No, we couldn't see anything. He came out there okay, he didn't break down. You had to hold yourself together, "It's okay, prison is for men" (laughs). It's not even for dogs, but there you have it. And we wrote letters. He always said, "Don't send me things, why are you spending so much," he felt, you know, he felt it was unnecessary to…

Anita Susuri: Did you send, for example, packages, food or something?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, we used to send packages, but honestly, I can't remember exactly what we sent. I know we sent honey. He used to say, "Why are you sending me honey?" I'd say, "Brother, eat honey because the bee goes from flower to flower, tree to tree, and takes from nature. It gives you everything." We sent… honestly, I'm not sure, chicken (laughs). Chicken, I don't know, baklava. Once, one of Muhamer's friends, Ramadan Veliu, had asked his mother for baklava. Their financial situation was a bit harder, so I told my mother, "Come on, let's make baklava." I personally don't know how to make baklava even today. We'd try to find better ingredients, you know, to make it better, and that's how it was. We sent it to the prisoners, to Bajrush, to Ramadan, to Muhamer, I think, yes, to Muhamer, and also to Ahmet, the cousin. But I don't remember how often visits were allowed, once a month or twice a month?

Anita Susuri: Twice a month, I think.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Twice a month. I think it was twice a month. Yes, yes, we went for visits. We took turns, you know, it wasn't very regular, but it was interesting because that cousin once expressed the desire to come visit when we sent the saw, and I don't know if anyone else was there. No, people didn't want to come, they were scared back then.

Anita Susuri: How were his parents handling the situation, for example?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: What do you mean?

Anita Susuri: Were they, I mean, worried? I'm sure they were, but did they show it, or...?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, of course, they were worried, definitely worried, but my father was surely proud, and so was my mother. But... yes, I'm feeling sad today. I remember a cousin of mine, she was knitting sweaters back then and said, "Let's make a sweater for Muhamer, it's cold there." It was tough because, I mean, people were also blaming us at the time, saying, "You've ruined our peace. We were fine, you ruined it." We had to fight, to convince our own people that they were wrong. It was a fight on two fronts. But honestly, I don't know... in our village, we did have some respect, I think. No one passed by without greeting you or saying, "Good day," never. I traveled by bus from Përlepnica to Gjilan and never had to stand, they always gave me a seat. So, in a way, it was a bit of satisfaction, you know, like…

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes, maybe a kind of support too.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Support, yes. People used to say, "You ruined our peace," but did we really ruin their peace? And now they're still coming out, talking, saying…

Anita Susuri: How do you remember this whole case when that letter arrived in the underwear?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, I remember it, I'll never forget it (laughs). I can almost see myself there, as we had what they used to call a *mutfak* [kitchen] back then, like a small house over there. It had a couple of windows, but the walls were dark, and there was only some light coming in. In winter, we'd leave clothes there so they'd stay warm without going outside. And that day, I went out to wash the clothes that had come from Muhamer, along with our own, of course. My mother was sick, because when she was well, she wouldn't let me wash the clothes, she thought I didn't wash them well (laughs).

And I went there to soak the clothes, put them in to wash, when my father came and said, "Stop, stop, stop!" "What?" "No, because Muhamer was touching something here" {gestures to waist}. I thought he meant there might be blood or something on them. I hadn't even checked them yet, you know. So I took them, put them in the water, soaked them like that, "No," I said, "there's nothing… see, there's nothing." He checked and turned away. After he said that, I thought for sure… I grabbed the waistband to pull it, and I noticed it wasn't moving, because when it's just elastic, it goes more easily. Well, when they're wet, it's harder to move too.

I found the letter. He was asking for a saw. I don't remember if he wrote anything else. But then we got rid of the letter, we couldn't keep it. Maybe until the next visit, during the next visit, we sent it to him, or I don't remember. I talked with Sami, my brother, and with that other cousin of ours, who is both a maternal and paternal cousin, and he was also imprisoned for about two months in '82. They arrested him during the anniversary of the demonstrations. So, I said, "Let's buy the saw." Going to buy a saw felt like going… you know, I was being watched, I wasn't quite comfortable. They went and bought it, but I don't know where they bought it.

At the Youth Palace, up there, they put it in a jar of mayonnaise, inserted the blade, and we packed it together with other things. On March 26, it was like… I don't know, it was an interesting date, maybe it was the beginning of March, like March 11 or something, as there was a bit more movement, you know…

Anita Susuri: For the anniversary of the demonstrations.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: For the anniversary of the demonstrations, there was a bit more surveillance. This cousin of mine and my brother went in, but I didn't know anymore, I couldn't remember. I went... yes, I was there too, just in case something happened. Better me than for them to take the boys. But they wouldn't go far either. On March 26, around the 11th hour, UDBA arrested me.

I was working in the shop, I think it was a Saturday. They came and took me away, and I went. But I didn't know what was happening. I thought they must have caught Muhamer with the saw and came to arrest me. That same day, they had also arrested Hydajet's younger sister and a cousin of Hevzije and Shemsi, it's Shemsi Syla and his wife, Mexhide. I didn't know that, they took us there, and no one spoke to us or asked us anything.

I just remember that a policeman came and said, "Here." Hydajet's sister said, "I have a headache, can you find me a pill," you know. She took advantage of the situation and stepped out into the corridor, and I was in the corridor too, so we met and saw that they were there, and so was I. And he told us, "Don't worry," because the policeman has recently died. He said, "It's nothing, it's nothing." But it turns out they had distributed flyers for March 26 in our village. Then they started asking me who was there last Friday at our place and what we did, this and that. They kept me for two days.

Imagine, as you say, on the second night, whether it was staged or they were actually beating someone, I don't know, but there were screams, sounds of beating, you know, to scare me… they were shouting, I couldn't tell what was happening, you know. Then I started thinking maybe they had played a recording or who knows if they were actually beating someone. Then they released me. I don't know if they had taken someone else from the house as well. And then about Muhamer…

Anita Susuri: And there, they just took you to isolate you for the anniversary of the demonstrations, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, no. They distributed leaflets, and they told me, "Now you will be a regular here, whenever something happens, we'll take you in. Every time there's an anniversary." They talked about someone, those UDB agents would talk among themselves, they said about someone, "Damn him, he'd pack his bag before they even came to get him," because he knew they would take him whenever Tito came to Kosovo or whenever there was an anniversary or something. He said, "He would pack his bag right away…" (laughs)

Anita Susuri: He knew they were coming.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: "They'll come and take you too," he said, "every time something happens, we'll come to take you." Well, what can you do…

Anita Susuri: How was, for example, your family's reaction, your mother's, your father's, in such cases?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, they would say, "Don't worry, my daughter," but they never came to our house to take me. The first time they took me, I was at school. I had just finished teaching, and at the bottom of the stairs was that UDB agent, or maybe the school secretary, I'm not sure. He said, "They want to talk to you about something." Then they took me from the Secretariat back to the

village, saying, “No, no,” but they claimed, “We have no connection.” My father wasn’t in good health then, he was somewhat sick, and my mother was also in poor health, physically weak. It saddens me because we caused them trouble. We caused them trouble.

Anita Susuri: At that moment when you understood and found that letter, who did you tell?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: To no one. Only to my brother and my cousin, I didn’t tell anyone else. My father never knew. No, no, he didn’t know. I didn’t tell anyone, not my father, not my mother. No way I could tell my mother. Honestly, I was a bit hesitant. To send the saw, how to send it, whether to send it or not. In the end, we decided to send it.

Anita Susuri: Did you think, for example, about what consequences it might have if they had found it or...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course.

Anita Susuri: For that reason…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: To find it, what consequences... but also if he escaped and got away. When Muhamer escaped, our little sister had... (cries) “We would go and see him.”

Anita Susuri: Do you want to take a break?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, because if I stop, I’ll just start again. “We used to visit him, why did he escape?” It was about how he would manage to leave… And when they took me, they’d say, “You know what kind of head he has, we’re going to kill him.” I kept imagining that they really might kill him.

Anita Susuri: And regarding when he escaped from prison, how did the news come, and how did the events unfold afterward within your family, with you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: The news came when they found out that Muhamer had escaped. Pristina likely informed Gjilan. Two people from the Ministry of Internal Affairs came to my father’s store. It was during the mourning for that uncle who had passed away in Arabia. Both houses were crowded with people offering condolences. We’re a very big family, I don’t know if I’ve mentioned it before, but there are 50 of us, cousins from aunts and uncles. Well, now we’ve gotten a bit fewer since some have passed away, but still 50…

Anita Susuri: First cousins, meaning 50.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: First cousins, yes, only first cousins. As for the others, I won't count them, as I don't know or remember all their names. Then, each person's friends would also come, and there would be many people. Now, the relatives of the nephews would come to visit as well. Those officials from Gjilan came to the shop, as well as my father, I think, I can't remember exactly about my father. They came to the shop… but they didn't tell me why they were taking me… we were preparing lunch for the guests, since things were different back then. We were preparing with so many people there, I don't know who came and called for me, saying, "Come."

When I arrived, it seemed like Haqif Guga was there, along with someone else, and they told me… my cousin's daughter came and whispered to me, "Don't worry," she said, "Muhamer has escaped from prison, that's why they came to take you." I thought to myself, why did you have to tell me that, you know? I wished I hadn't known the reason. They took me to Gjilan, I don't remember if they questioned me or asked me anything, I don't know! And then they took me straight to Pristina.

In Pristina, it was a Sunday that day, and the football stadium, I think where it is now, was there even back then, with Pristina [football club] playing against someone. I don't know who they were playing. And all of them, even the UDB agents, were watching the game. I remember two people there… they wouldn't tell me anything, just, "You know how he is, what kind of head he has," they said, "we tell him to stop, but he doesn't. We'll kill him," and I don't know what else. I pretended not to know anything. I acted like I didn't know why they took me, or what they were telling me, nothing. Anyway, that night they went to watch the game or who knows where, since it was Sunday, and they left me downstairs near the entrance, somewhere around there. In a sort of place like what they call *deux par deux* in Switzerland, like two by two or…

Anita Susuri: Some kind of cabin.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Like a cabin, yes. There were flies and all, and they had left a small heater there. I was in short sleeves, just as I had been at home, didn't take anything with me. Not even to say, "Take something, you might be here for a while," you know. That night and the next day, I don't know if anyone interrogated me again in Pristina or not. They put me in a car and said, "Let's go to your uncle's house, to see where it is," in Ulpiana, that's where it is.

We crossed over, and they saw that the building was surrounded from all sides, that he hadn't entered there. And straight to Mitrovica. There, they would interrogate me from time to time. One of them would hold a book and say, "Do you see this," pointing to where the book's spine was, "Do you see this?" "Yes," I'd say, "I see it," thinking maybe I had hidden it there, maybe I'd put the saw inside. One guy in Pristina told me, "We know you hide things in the pickle jars," here and there. I thought to myself, you got it right. And that's how it went. They'd ask me who his friends were, where they were, how many he had. I'd say, "I don't know his friends." I truly didn't know, how could I know how many friends Muhamer had?

He had Nuhi Berisha, Ahmet, and that Halil as friends. I'd only mention Halil, saying, "Halil." And then they released me. They let me go, but they kept monitoring me, they released me on purpose. They wanted to see if Muhamer would try to contact me at the store or something. Someone from Pristina must've said they saw the car. They had come from Pristina specifically to follow me. And that night, when Muhamer came, I didn't know he was coming, only when he entered.

My father was very worried, really anxious. We had others there as well who shouldn't have been present. It was a crowd on that day of mourning, and people were gathered there. But he said, "No one should reveal anything to anyone," and Muhamer came with Sabit Mushiqi's ID, he has passed away now. He left Sabit's ID there, took our brother Sami's ID, and left immediately. We said our goodbyes there, and he went...

Anita Susuri: Did he tell you, for example, what his plan was or where he intended to go?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, no. Of course not! How could he reveal the plan, and to whom? If you tell your mother and father, it means telling the whole world. You can't reveal plans. But anyway, my father must have gathered some money and given it to him. No, no, we didn't ask anything. After that, they would come to follow me, to inspect me, and I was very cautious. We never spoke to anyone in the shop. I remember, after they had fled and reached Italy, a cousin of mine came, Qerim's brother, and I don't know whether I knew or not. He wrote it down in the newspaper, he sat down there, and we had one of those heaters, you know, those heaters you have in shops?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: And in the corner of the *Roma* newspaper, he showed me that they were in Italy. And that's it. Then, what I wanted to say, yes, we found out. That Zija Shemsiu contacted my father, and they called him at night. They went to the fields, they didn't talk at home, only in the fields at night. My father didn't know who the person was, only that someone from abroad had informed him that Muhamer had made it out. And when my father spoke to me, he only spoke to me, my mother wasn't present. When he spoke to my mother, it was just with her, and it was the same with me, we never talked together. In a separate room, and only between two people, never three. Because, as they say, the door to the yard would open, and who knows how, "The mountain has ears, and the field has eyes." We were very cautious.

I feel sorry about this, we had an uncle who didn't have children for many years. Then he had six children, but my brothers would always take Naser and Muhamer along wherever they went, you know, they loved them very much. On Eid day, he came and started crying, saying, "We're here eating and drinking, and who knows where he is." And I really regret that we didn't tell him.

Part Five

Anita Susuri: And after how long did you speak directly with Muhamer?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I don't know, but maybe a very long time. A very long time, I'm not sure.

Anita Susuri: Maybe when you went abroad, right?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no, earlier, we spoke earlier. He sent us a phone number. I called him from the post office sometimes. I called from the post office. But, yes, we spoke while I was still here. Then he also sent contacts through people, you know. On the phone, just to talk, "How are you, are you okay?" Nothing more to say. Yes. Even with this uncle, we talked, he says, "The first time he spoke was here," you know, for the first time. He talked to them and told them he was okay. They came and told us.

We didn't go to speak or anything because the situation was... back in '82, Kadri Zeka and Jusuf Gërvalla were killed. He escaped in '83, meaning in '84, so now if you were to talk on the phone... maybe they couldn't check everyone, but as the saying goes, "You have to protect yourself a little, and I'll protect you a lot," as God said, protect yourself a little, and I'll protect you a lot. You couldn't risk it, and even when they called my uncle, those who called on the phone could be interrogated. It wasn't very appropriate or allowed to go out and speak on the phone. It was enough that they agreed to let you know that he was okay, to give the good news.

Anita Susuri: And after that day when they came to the house and took you, did the police contact you again? Did you have any…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, they never came again. But they kept following me wherever I went. Actually, they told me that in '83 when they took me, they didn't take me again. In '84, I was never called to the police, nor in '85 or '86, I was finally left alone. They never took me again, but I knew I was being followed. I noticed it, I saw them. And now, Shemsi Syla told me this year, during the anniversary of Zija Shemsiu's murder, we went to the cemetery for a memorial, you know. And he told me, "They used to come to the shop pretending to buy shoes, those guys," he said, "when they took me in '86," they arrested a group of them. And he said, "They showed me a photo of you leaving your shop. 'What were you looking for there?'"

And someone, yes, after I left the country, they took my sister or someone else, I don't know who, and they showed the photograph with me and my uncle's wife, taken by the police, by UDB. And actually, even that guy, Halil, whom I mentioned earlier, whom Sami said came to pick me up in Ljubljana, said that they showed him the photographs too. Yes, they did follow us, but they never came again. I don't

know why. Muhamer's friends must have sent them. Later, a friend came, they would come to the shop. When they saw no one was around, they would approach, talk, and...

Anita Susuri: They told you about Muhamer.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes. They told us that he was fine, they saw him. This Hilmi or Helmi, I'm not sure what his name is, Hilmi Reqica.

Anita Susuri: Hilmi Reqica.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes.

Anita Susuri: How did you feel, let's say? Were you happy, or were you worried that he had escaped from prison? How did you receive this news?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, like I mentioned, I was a bit worried until they made it out of the country because things could have gone worse, they could've been killed, captured, or sent back to prison, facing those tortures again. Just recently, I spoke with a friend of Martin who was in prison with him. He said, "They crucified Martin like Christ, they tortured him so much." I was upset about Martin too, even though I didn't know him or who he was, but I could imagine. Because, you know what they told me? "Muhamer fell and cut the rope for his friend, he didn't let him escape." And I figured that Muhamer wouldn't have done that, but I knew what awaited the poor soul left in their hands. Yes.

Anita Susuri: You maybe didn't know Martin beforehand?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, no. I never knew him, I never saw him, nor did I even know him.

Anita Susuri: But did he inform you later about the other people who were involved?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: In the cell?

Anita Susuri: Yes, maybe only during the interrogations…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Who? No, no, they didn't tell me anything. Let me explain… they didn't even say directly that he had escaped, but I pretended not to know anything, and they acted like they didn't want to tell me. It was like, "You're pretending you don't know, so we're pretending not to tell you." He would just show me a book and say, like this, "Do you see this here?" "I see it," with...

Anita Susuri: To provoke.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Such kinds of provocations. "Where could it have been?" You know, they were interested in where you might have hidden it, where you put it, you know, and then, "Where is he?" In short, they were also interested in knowing where Muhamer was so they could catch him, yes.

Anita Susuri: How did you meet your husband? He's also a former political prisoner.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: (Laughs) Well, it's like that. Anyway, I don't really like talking about these things, even my kids ask me about it.

Anita Susuri: Alright, just to explain your marriage, since it's significant, you were and still are the wife of a former political prisoner. How was this for you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, we sought each other out because we shared the same ideas, I think. But honestly, I was at the shop working, and someone must have talked to him about me, because I didn't know him. I had heard of him a bit, but I didn't know who he was. Someone must have mentioned me to him. He was single at the time, though he was married before and has a daughter, there she is in the photo with him {shows the photo}. Someone told him, and he was interested in getting married (laughs). To be honest, I wasn't interested in getting married at all. But someone said to him, "Why don't you go to her..." since he knew my father, "Why don't you go to Hysen's daughter?" And so, he came to the shop.

I was there, and the uncle had gone, as he had passed away at that time, I think. Or maybe it was another time, I'm not sure. There was another uncle there, but I was mostly alone at the shop. I worked with my uncle, but he'd often leave me there, and I'd clean when someone came in. Then he came into the shop, looking at shoes. A woman had returned a pair of shoes, you know, the kind with leather soles that leave marks when you step on the ground. She returned those shoes, saying, "I want to return these," but they weren't meant to be returned just like that.

He came into the shop, honestly, I didn't even look at him or notice him. He said, "These shoes," he said, "someone must have returned them after wearing them" (laughs). I said, "Yeah, what can you do? People take advantage." And then he left. I thought maybe it had something to do with Muhamer, you know. It crossed my mind that this man wasn't really there for shoes, but I figured he might be one of Muhamer's friends, and then he left. He apparently went to Hidajet's sister and her brother-in-law, Njazi Korça. When they ran out of options, she sent her sister-in-law to call me, like, "Come over for lunch there." So, I got up and went. When I arrived, she started talking. Sami, Vlora, you know, about the girl. He was going around it, not telling me directly, but hinting at it.

I said, "What are you talking about? What are you saying?" I said, "But he's married, why are you telling me about him?" "No," she said, "he's not married." "But what about the daughter then?" I asked. She said, "No, they're separated." "But maybe they'll get back together," I suggested. She replied, "No, he

said no." Anyway, she added, "He's strict, but he's fair," and talked more about this and that. I didn't say anything, and she didn't say anything further either. Later, he came again, but the shop was full, so he couldn't speak. He came another time when I was closing up. I locked the shop and went with my cousin to another relative's place, and that was that.

Anyway, two years passed, and we had no contact, nothing. Then he came back again. He was a former prisoner, fair, tough (laughs). It didn't matter that he was tough, as long as he was fair… so I accepted. As for his daughter, yes, I thought, since she has neither a mother nor a father, someone has to raise her. That's how we thought.

Anita Susuri: Has he been sentenced twice then, or just the first time?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Twice, twice. Twice, but I didn't know he had been sentenced twice. And that's how fate worked out.

Anita Susuri: At first, I think he went abroad, then he brought you over?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, afterward. We just got to know each other, and then he said, "Come to Pristina, and we'll meet." When I went, there were no phones back then. Some people had phones here and there, but not everyone. We didn't have a phone at home, nor at the store. So, when I arrived in Pristina, I couldn't find him anywhere, he was gone. He had gone underground in Kosovo for a while. That's when Shemsi Syla and some of his friends were arrested, as I mentioned earlier. He didn't wait for the police to come and get him, so he went underground. Later, Fazli Abdullahu, also a former prisoner and Sami's friend, came along.

He gave me a number, I think, or I'm not sure, and he told me, "Call him," or, "He will call you." I gave him my uncle's number. He called, we talked, and that's how it happened. "Come now," he said. Oh, my life here had become miserable, you know, constantly followed by the UDB and all that. Now, being invited to a wedding felt like a catastrophe, you know. One visit to the UDB, then another, it all became a bit much, too tiring for my parents, especially my mother. "Come!" But to just leave everything behind, I'd never imagined it. I never wanted to go abroad, I don't know why I made that decision. It was an extremely difficult and heavy decision, and I don't know why, why I left.

I got up and left. And poor mother, like always, they say, "She ran away!" It wasn't like that, "She ran away!" "No, I didn't run away. My father knew, my mother knew, they sent me off. My uncle sent me off." So, I got up and left. My brother, Sami, accompanied me to Ljubljana. There, he came... and I always thought I wouldn't be able to leave, I thought I couldn't make it out, you know...

Anita Susuri: They won't give you permission.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: For permission, I left without one, but I didn't have a passport, I never had a passport. When they arrested me the first time, they took my passport. No, I didn't have a passport. But when Halil came, he came with his wife's passport, and, I don't know, it's interesting. I thought I might be able to leave. It felt like a blockade, like a blank page wiped clean. I didn't think of anything at all, whether I'd leave, whether I wouldn't, or what would happen. If they caught me and sent me back, or whatever, I didn't think of anything. Only when we got to the border, over there in Switzerland, the customs officers were looking in the trunk. I thought to myself, look wherever you want, there's nothing there (laughs).

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: Which year was it when you left?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: '86, yes, '86.

Anita Susuri: And how did your life continue over there?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Our life was like a dog's life. We went there, and he said, "No, I don't want to take you to a camp." What do they call them now? [addresses the interviewer] Refugee shelters where people stay. I think they've also built them here in Kosovo now, but it's a camp. "I don't want to take you there." We stayed with a relative of Fazli Abdullahu, at Enver's place. His wife is from Malisheva, Malisheva of Gjilan, my [maternal] aunt. I never knew her, never even met her. We stayed there, she had a studio here and a bedroom. Imagine, she gave up her bedroom for us. She slept in the living room, while we stayed in her bedroom. She worked in a hospital, waking up at 3:00 AM to go to work. She had one son. We just stayed there, I don't know for how long, honestly.

We went and stayed in a basement, a refugee shelter, a small house. It had a basement, a garage, and one room there, a small kitchen, a bathroom. The bathroom didn't have a toilet. On the ground floor, there was a man from Chile, Guevara was his surname, from Latin America, I don't know exactly. On the first floor, there was someone from Deçan, an Albanian with four or five children. We stayed there for over a year, almost two. That's where our daughter was born. And this guy, "Come on, let's go look for work," you know, for jobs as an engineer, since he had finished university. We would go to these offices like the employment bureaus we have here now.

Anita Susuri: Yes, like agencies.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Like agencies, yes. Well, they sent a couple of letters for him to work as an engineer. But at that time, we were refugees, and the assistant, I mean the social worker, said, "No, you don't have the right to work as an engineer because," he said, "your diploma isn't recognized here," and he tore up the letter. "You're not allowed to work as an engineer, you can work as an

electrician." Someone found him a job as an electrician. He worked for two weeks, but then they intervened and fired him. After that, they also stopped our assistance. They wouldn't give us any aid because he wouldn't comply, I guess. And we weren't granted asylum either because he refused to speak with the Serbian interpreter.

They wouldn't give us any documents. It was terrible to be without any kind of documentation in a foreign country, without anything. We weren't used to it. Indeed, I didn't have an ID card until I got my passport, I didn't have one. No one ever asked for it, we never needed it. Over there, they wouldn't give you an apartment, wouldn't let you work, nothing… it's like being without a home, what can you do without a roof over your head? When we went to that basement, when we arrived, the assistant asked me, "How does it seem to you here, Mrs. Dërmaku?" He called me that, not knowing that we weren't married yet. I said, "It's fine," I said, "it seems fine to me."

I was happy that we had a key to lock and unlock the door, not to wait at someone else's doorstep, yes. I've been through so much in this life. I said, "Very good." He said, "You're brave for liking this place," and it was all concrete. The couches there were sunken and dirty, who knows who had slept on them before. We stayed there for almost two years.

Anita Susuri: Was this the time when you also met with Muhamer?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes, when we arrived, Muhamer came. I went on Sunday, and he came on Monday. He came right away to meet me.

Anita Susuri: After how long?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Immediately.

Anita Susuri: No, no. After...

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Oh, I see.

Anita Susuri: After about three or four years, you saw each other?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Maybe two years. Because he left in '83, no, it's exactly three years later.

Anita Susuri: How did that reunion feel to you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Emotional, emotional, emotional. I was very close to Muhamer.

Anita Susuri: Muhamer is, I think, the fourth child?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, the third. Yes, he is the third.

Part Six

Anita Susuri: How did your life continue there, in terms of your husband's activities? Did you help him as well?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course I helped him. Well, he was involved in his activities, but then he would say to me, after we had the child, "You take care of the women." Over there… it's not like here where you have an aunt, cousin, or neighbor, no one cares about you there. You're on your own. No one looks after your children. But actually, when I went that year, someone named Michel came, I don't know his last name, but he worked in a union. He had contacts with the Albanians, and there were only a few Albanian children then, still very few.

He found out that I was a teacher and one morning he came by. In fact, Sami wasn't there at all, and I let him in. He said, "Write an appeal to the Albanians to organize and ask if you agree to teach Albanian students." I said, "Of course." So, I started writing that appeal. I wrote it in Albanian, and he managed to type it, or I don't know exactly what he did. But the appeal came out with many mistakes. He sent it to the Albanians, calling a meeting about Albanian children. When the Albanians received the appeal, they saw it, and there was someone from Skopje, Ismail Hyseni. He said, "What's this kind of appeal? Who wrote it? Why is it written with mistakes?" It wasn't just him, but everyone. But it was an appeal made by that Swiss guy for Albanian schooling, for Albanian children, why make a fuss, as they say.

The meeting was held, and both Sami and I went. The meeting dragged on forever, with one person talking nonsense and another bringing up irrelevant points, and in the end, nothing was done. The Swiss man was astonished and said, "I've never seen anything like this, you can't seem to reach any agreement at all." Anyway, that meeting was canceled. Another meeting was called, and when it was announced, Sami said, "We're not going at all." I don't know what they eventually did. Later, he said, "Let's go." I had a small child, and someone came to watch over her while I was there. There was no school, no chalk, no notebooks, nothing at all. We barely managed to arrange to use the center of the Protestant social center, like a church. They also offered courses there, and that's where Sami and I also learned a bit of French.

We attended a language course before lunch for three hours, then went again at noon for an hour, and it was free of charge, you know, gratis, to keep learning the language. Eventually, they stopped the children's classes, and the Albanians were disappointed, but it suited me since I couldn't manage, we had nothing. Now when these teachers complain about low salaries, back then I couldn't even afford a bus ticket. Later, he kept trying to reconcile people, but they wouldn't agree. Can you manage to put

fleas in a sack? That's how the Albanians were (laughs). And in meetings, he'd tell me, "Come on, organize the women." So, we established the women's association there in Geneva, that organization.

We used to call for gatherings, but one day some people stood up and said, "No, you're not doing enough," even though meeting once a month was already a lot for Albanian women. At least they could meet, share their troubles, and maybe achieve something. We organized it, I don't remember which year it was, but it was the same year when two planes crashed, no, you wouldn't remember, you weren't there. Two planes crashed that year, one in March. We had planned the gathering for March 8th, but after the plane crash, people were saying, "No, how can we have music…"

Anita Susuri: Which year was it?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I might be wrong, maybe '90.

Anita Susuri: Which country's planes were they?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, with Albanians (laughs). I don't know where they were from, just that they were full of Albanians. One crashed in Ohrid, and the other, I'm not sure, maybe in Skopje or...

Anita Susuri: This one in Ohrid, I think I've heard about it.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, yes, the one in Ohrid crashed in December, and the other one, I'm not sure where it crashed. Maybe in Skopje, since there wasn't an airport in Pristina yet at that time. Anyway, about the gatherings, "Come to the association," and then he became the president of the association, though at one point he wasn't, I'm not sure how that happened. "Come and cook, come and bring food, organize the meetings," preparing the meals to host his friends. Like Kadri Osmani's wife said, "I endured his friends," I said, "I truly endured his friends because they respected me, but I endured him more," (laughs). Friends would come and go, having meetings, going here and there. Going to protests, sometimes in Zurich, sometimes in Bern, and other times in Geneva.

Anita Susuri: Did you go?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Of course we went. Oh my, not going was not an option… yes, we went. Well, it was the only way out at that time. When we went to protests, the kids would say, "We're going to Kosovo," (laughs). When they heard people shouting, "Kosovo Republic." "Where are you going? We're going to Kosovo." And I want to tell you, later in '90, I had two children. My son was not yet one year old, and my daughter was almost two and a half. This Easter event that was held in '90, Vlora came, she was in Geneva and came in the fall of '89. And they had organized a bus for Easter, for the Albanians to come for a holiday, you know.

Sami said, "Let Vlora go, let her stay for about a week in Kosovo." So now Vlora was getting ready, and Mimoza, my little daughter, went to watch her, feeling envious. He said, "Oh dear," and later he asked, "Is Mimoza feeling envious, or is it you who wants to go?" I said, "Yes, actually," and I told him, "Sadie told me to just go and see my mother, and she would give me her passport," and so did Lude, my sister-in-law and Muhamer's wife. I said, "Even Lude told me she'd give me her passport if I wanted to go to Kosovo," and so he went, Geneva is 150 kilometers away from Biel. He went and brought me Muhamer's wife's passport, and we decided to come and stay here for about a week.

When we got on the bus, he said, "No, return with this bus," within two days. I said, "Alright." So we got up and came with someone else's passport. My mother didn't know at all. I went. When we entered the village, we arrived at 11:00 PM, on a Friday, I think, at 11:00 PM. I covered my head with a blanket so people wouldn't recognize me (laughs). So that people wouldn't recognize me, and I went home. Vlora entered first and said to my mother, "Hida is behind," you know. My mother ran over, and my sister-in-law said, "Oh God, mother's gone crazy, she's gone crazy, what's making her run like this" (laughs).

Anita Susuri: She didn't know.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Well, of course, she didn't know. That's how it was. I stayed that night, and I think one more night, then I returned on Monday. I stayed Saturday and Sunday, and I think I returned on Monday, yes. That's how it was. Exile was very, very tough. Sometimes I'd say, "My head is spinning." I'd think, how, why does the day feel so long, time so endless, like a century. I'd wonder if anything would change, if there was any sign that something would happen.

Anita Susuri: When the war broke out, did you still have contact with your family, or how…

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: When the war broke out in Gjilan, we still managed to communicate with Gjilan. In the village, they were driven out of the house, they had been kicked out, but I didn't know anything about it. Before heading to work from the apartment, when I stopped, I would take the bus and, at one of the stops, I would get off the bus again and go into a phone booth, trying to get a connection because it was difficult to establish one.

Honestly, I was terrified to make a call because right across in Ulpiana, they had stationed police in the buildings, where Rexhep Qosja, Sadri Fetiu, and others lived... I kept thinking, just across the street, if the phone rings, they'll hear it, and the *shkije*,[53] the police, might come in. But if I didn't call, I wouldn't know what was happening. When I managed to get a connection, we exchanged just two or three words, no more, but I'd feel a bit relieved, knowing they were still alive. Then, eventually, even my relatives' phones got disconnected.

[53] *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkije,* is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

My uncle once called me, oh God, it felt like a call from the grave, like from the grave. He had some Montenegrin neighbors living below him, on the lower side. They were good people, really. He called Marian, Steva's wife, once, and I said, as best as I could manage in Serbian, I've forgotten most of it, "How are they?" She said, "They're fine, they're fine. I saw Nazim in front of the house. They're okay, but I can't visit them." Because the police had taken over their home, staying with them.

Then, at some point, I don't know where, my cousin called me once more from someone else's phone. Sami's family would go and take turns to speak with their relatives abroad on the phone. Just to say a few words to their own. It was very difficult. Once, I was talking to one of my husband's acquaintances one day, and he said, "It was really hard." I said, "I'm not saying we had it as hard as you did because there's no comparison. I don't allow myself to compare, but it was very tough for us too. It was very tough." Because you didn't know what was happening, you didn't know what was happening. When your people, your land, your home are involved… And when I found out that my father was forced out of his house, I was devastated (cries), I was very devastated.

Anita Susuri: And when the war ended, how long did it take for you to get in contact with your family to make sure everyone was okay?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: No, later, when they went to Skopje, over there in Stankovec. My sister had gone to Tetovo earlier, before them. She had left from Pristina, I don't know how, truly, I never asked, I don't know how. She left with our cousin's daughter and they went to Tetovo. My sister called me, and we kept in regular contact. I even still have the phone number of the Tetovars somewhere. They were very welcoming. And then I found out that they were initially in Stankovec. I think I told my sister, or maybe someone else did, and she went to see them in the camp.

We had, my mother had two sons of her uncle and aunt, cousins, in Skopje. But their houses were full, one was in an apartment and didn't have a house. The other had people from his own family, meaning uncles. They had nowhere to take them. To get them out of Stankovec, they needed a place to take them from the camp. I called the sons of the cousin, the cousin's wife from the eldest aunt. They were in Switzerland but in Kumanovo in Lupat, a village there. I called them, "Will you take them in?" Because there were many of us. At first, they said, "No, we're waiting for our uncles," their own uncles. But then they eventually took them.

My sister went and got them out. I don't know how she managed it, how she went through all that trouble, because it was bad there, with poor conditions in the camps, with tents, mud. They went and stayed in Kumanovo, in Lupat. Later, the brother who was in the Netherlands managed to get them there, brought them to the Netherlands. I went there to the Netherlands to visit them in the camp, well, not a camp, it seemed more like those army barracks. They had them there, and they were all Albanians...

Anita Susuri: They had turned them into camps, or something like that?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Yes, exactly. They were large dormitories, you know, with lots of beds and such. I guess it was like shared cabins, more or less. But it was a military facility. They were fed there, they had a restaurant, so the food was ready, and they slept there comfortably, it wasn't too bad for them, honestly. I went there and stayed with them for two weeks with the kids. I took the kids and went by train, just like that. Later, my father couldn't stay there because the daughters-in-law of the cousins still wanted to stay, but he didn't allow it.

Anita Susuri: To stay where?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: In the Netherlands, in the Netherlands.

Anita Susuri: They all returned after the war?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: They all returned.

Anita Susuri: How did you receive the news that the war was over?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: I really don't know. But when we found out that NATO was bombing, we were so happy. My cousin even took it badly because they were scared, you know. They were in Gjilan at the time. When I called them, I must have said something, I don't even remember. I was happy, I didn't mean any harm. He said, "We were shaking, and you…" (laughs). I can't really explain it, but we were just glad that the bombings had started so that they [the Serbs] could also feel what it was like.

Anita Susuri: And then, after the war, when did you return to Kosovo?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: 2000, in 2000.

Anita Susuri: How did the place seem to you?

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: How did it seem to me? Don't remind me (cries). You know how it was, right? Were you there? How old were you?

Anita Susuri: I was about eight years old.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Eight years old. We came to Skopje by plane, me and the children. They came to pick us up at the border. I don't know, I think I came by taxi to the Kosovo-Macedonia border, and then we came here. We walked around, we even went to the Jashari Towers and everywhere else. It felt like I was just seeing the houses, only the chimneys.

My kids would say, “The garbage here, the trash,” along the road, “Don’t they know...” (laughs), where to throw the trash, you know, now (laughs). “Oh, mother, don’t worry.” The big trash was gone and... that’s how I thought, I said what matters is that they are gone. Now, whatever they want to do, let them do it, because we’ve struggled enough, we’ve worn ourselves out going to demonstrations, attending meetings, waiting, enduring, and putting up with everything.

Anita Susuri: If there’s anything you’d like to add at the end, something you might have forgotten.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: Maybe I’ve forgotten (laughs). Oh, there’s so much, there’s a lot (laughs), there’s a lot that never… it’s been 36 years, and then, 36 years. The kids grew up there, and coming here, with power outages, terrible conditions, a disaster. For me, just being here was enough, because when I came back then, with a blanket over my head for two nights, it was very good. But what can you do? I don’t know what else to say.

Anita Susuri: Well, thank you very much for the interview and your time.

Hidajete Shabani Dërmaku: You're welcome.