

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH MERIMAN BRAHA

Pristina | Date: April 21, 2022

Duration: 249 minutes

Present:

1. Meriman Braha (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Renea Begolli (Camera)

*Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:*

*() – emotional communication*

*{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.*

*Other transcription conventions:*

*[ ] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension*

*Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.*

## Part One

**Anita Susuri:** If you could introduce yourself? Your date of birth and a bit about your family history initially?

**Meriman Braha:** I am Meriman Braha, son of Jakup and Halime. I was born on September 27, 1946, in Prizren, into a family known for its patriotic traditions, but also for many long-standing traditions of hard work to foster cultural and literary connections within the family, to create... I am the twelfth member of my mother and father's family. They had twelve children. I am the last, the twelfth. I bear the name of my oldest brother who was a martyr of the National Liberation War<sup>1</sup> and a person who finished school at the Shkodër Gymnasium<sup>2</sup> before the war in Shkodër. During the war, he was engaged in Prizren, Kukës, and other areas in the National Liberation War for liberation from fascism. He was imprisoned several times. Ultimately he became a martyr.

My sister, who was a twin with my second brother, also became a martyr. They were twins, both born in '28. However, they had different fates, one lived until much later, while the other was killed in '44. The other one, in '45, or rather, in early '44, in January '44, the Bujan Resolution<sup>3</sup> was approved, expressing the will and determination of the Albanian people to fight with arms to gain their right to self-determination, to the inalienable right to once and for all join the old dream, the common Albanian trunk in a state called Albania. This was the motive for the anti-fascist war, so for the Albanians to solve the problem of the Albanian people who had been left divided from their own trunk with the right of self-determination.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Liberation War refers to the armed struggle during the Second World War led by communist partisans in Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, to resist and expel Axis occupation forces and their collaborators. It aimed at national liberation from fascism and the establishment of a socialist federal state.

<sup>2</sup> Gymnasium is a type of secondary school in some European countries, including Kosovo, which prepares students for higher education.

<sup>3</sup> The Bujan Conference was held from December 31, 1943, to January 2, 1944, in the village of Bujan, in the Tropoja District. It was a meeting of Albanian and Yugoslav Partisan leaders where they discussed the future of Kosovo. The conference resulted in a resolution that supported the right of the people of Kosovo and other Albanian regions to self-determination and union with Albania. However, this resolution was later disregarded by the Yugoslav authorities.

However, this is a decision of the people who had weapons in their hands during the war and the promise from Serbia and others that Albanians would gain the right to self-determination if they joined the National Liberation War. The National Liberation War, with the promises made during that time, could not help but reflect on those who held leftist ideas of the time. This category of war people, whether here or there, believed that the national problem of Albanians would be solved through the anti-fascist war. But the opposite happened.

In '45, in July '45, the People's Council was held in Prizren, a meeting of the People's Council with various delegates from Kosovo, where instead of unification with Albania, Kosovo remained under Slavic, Serbian, specifically Tito's<sup>4</sup> Yugoslavia's enslavement. Was this right? Of course it was not right, of course the right was violated, trampled upon by those who were stronger than us, who had more friends than us, who knew how to make promises in difficult times that they would break in other times of freedom. And instead of freedom, in Kosovo, we came to a new enslavement. The enslavement of Tito's Yugoslavia, which was called democratic, but in fact, under the democratic guise, committed numerous violations. Not only against our people but also against other peoples within Yugoslavia. And the life of this Yugoslavia ended with its dissolution, as it was built on unjust principles.

My family was against remaining under Slavic enslavement. One of my brothers was in school, the second one, the twin, his name is Shaban, he was in the *Shkolla Normale*<sup>5</sup> in Gjakova. And in '48, when Yugoslavia broke with the Soviet Union, he and his friends fled. They tried to oppose it, to organize, were investigated, and eventually escaped imprisonment to Albania. This was, this served as a motive for the state authorities at that time, he was 20 years old, to imprison us as an entire family and intern us in Vojvodina as a family that opposed Yugoslavia.

It wasn't easy in those difficult times, in winter, with the frost, for father and mother and five children to be imprisoned, where the oldest was 16 years old and the youngest was two years old. I was two years old, and for what, having done nothing and having no chance to do anything. And to be interned in Vojvodina, which is about 400-500 kilometers from here. In an internment camp where four other Albanian families would come and join. These are the Tota family from Gjonaj, with ten members including young children. They were all children, a large number, except for the parents and other grandparents, they were all children. The Shatri family from Tomoc near Istog, the Morina family from

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<sup>4</sup> Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) was a Yugoslav communist revolutionary and political leader who served as the Prime Minister (1943-1963) and later President (1953-1980) of Yugoslavia. He was the chief architect of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a multi-ethnic state that he held together through a combination of political skill, repression, and balancing the interests of different national groups. Tito is also known for his role in the anti-fascist resistance movement during the Second World War and for his non-aligned stance during the Cold War.

<sup>5</sup> The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

Peja, which had four members. The Trasha family from Peja, which had two members, mother and daughter, because their brother had fled to Albania, the son to Albania. All of them had someone from their family who had fled to Albania.

And it wasn't... during the war, my father, mother, and others used to tell stories because the war didn't last just one day, it lasted four years. The promises during the war were, "Blessed are those who endure, because they will eat with golden spoons." This is the frequently repeated promise of social well-being. But, in this new system that was coming, it was said that a son will not answer for his father and a father will not answer for his son. The opposite happened. No one would be held accountable for anyone else, everyone would be responsible for their own actions. However, it happened that not just the father would answer for the son, but the entire family would be held accountable for the son's actions.

I, at two years old, could be held responsible for the actions of my brother who was 20 years old? And he was young, but idealistic. All the idealists of that time ended badly, they ended badly because the enemy did its work. The enemy, Serbia and Yugoslavia, came in...

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you something, was it common to send families to camps or did it happen only to your family?

**Meriman Braha:** No, there were others in camps too, and now comes the story of that journey which was a true ordeal, an extraordinary hardship for all the people involved... we traveled in the bitter cold. On January 15, they took us, first by truck to a train station somewhere in Fushë Kosovë, then they put our family in a livestock wagon and sent us there. Our family practically froze, all of us. And our condition, that is, the condition of all family members, was extremely deteriorated. Deteriorated from the intense cold, there was no heating, just the livestock wagon. And when we arrived in Belgrade, they took us immediately, they took us to prison, to the Pančevo prison to warm us up because we were frozen, half-frozen. There was hypothermia. Everyone, meaning mother, father, and children, were affected. As for me, I don't remember, I don't remember anything from that time.

But according to my parents' account, they locked us up first. We were recovering for two or three weeks, or however long it lasted. Then from the Pančevo prison, they sent us to Kovilovo, which is a village about 20 or so kilometers from Belgrade. However, Vojvodina is a flat and very fertile land. The villages in Vojvodina have a western-style construction because a significant part of the population was German, local population, German, Hungarian, and Serbian. The Germans were the largest in number, followed by the Hungarians, and then the Serbs came. And they sent us to this village.

This village was somewhat mixed and served to become a camp instead of a village. The village as a camp. We saw such internments there because when we were sent to internment, we encountered a very large number of German women, Hungarians, but mostly Germans. Their husbands or sons had

been executed by the fascists without any trials or judgments. During my research to write a work about Goli Otok, a journalistic work of about 300-400 pages, I came across reliable data that many prisoners were executed, many Germans were executed in the name of fascism. About 50-60 thousand people, maybe more, were tied up and sent to the Soviet Union.

About 50,000 or 100,000 people, I don't know exactly how many because no one has returned from there. They were sent as a gift to Stalin, sent to the Soviet Union for the losses they suffered from the Germans, as the Soviet Union had many losses in the war. They sent them there, and they were sent to the mines of Siberia from which they never returned. Where they ended up, which mines, I don't know. But there are state commissions, state commissions in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, not very active in Serbia. State commissions that deal with the investigation of mass graves of people executed without trial. And among them, they have discovered somewhere around 40-50 thousand executed Germans.

Now, the families of the executed Germans or those who had not yet been executed, women and children, were taken and sent to several centers. In the internment center where we went, where we were sent, there were thousands, one thousand, two thousand, or three thousand women, and they were in forced agricultural labor because they had set up... This internment camp had the duty to work the fields, numbering in the hundreds of hectares, which they had taken from the Germans' properties and [nationalized]... and they had assigned them. They put them in various combines, sent them to different cooperatives, and they produced various agricultural and livestock products and supplied Belgrade with them. All their work was to eat food and work the fields...

**Anita Susuri:** Like slaves.

**Meriman Braha:** Like slaves. And my father also worked like this, I mean my father and my brother Qemal, who was 16 years old at the time. He was one of the best students at the gymnasium in Prizren, and his life was completely disrupted, completely. The state confiscated the Germans' wealth, their property. The lands, fields, houses, everything was confiscated by the state, and nothing has been paid for them to this day. That is property which the state usurped in the name of the fight against German fascism and Nazism. Nearly a million Germans from Yugoslavia were forcibly relocated to Germany and Austria.

Even though the West initially opposed it, over time they sent them all, all of them. And today, there might be one or two thousand people. I don't know if there are any in the whole of Vojvodina, which spans Serbia and a part of Croatia. A region, Vojvodina is a region that stretches from the Croatian part of the north of Serbia to the border with Romania and Hungary. So, the basis of its autonomy is ethnic. The ethnic composition includes Germans, Hungarians, and then Slavs. And there is nothing historical, it has never been part of Serbia.

This large, enormously large number of German and Hungarian women and girls, a few Albanians, four or five Albanian families, were placed in barracks. And the barracks were for the internees. But besides the barracks, the abandoned houses of the Germans were also used. And these internees lived in the houses as well. However, they were not allowed to leave the cooperative of their combine, which had thousands of hectares of land they worked on. They produced agricultural goods, wheat, meaning grains, sunflower oil, and sugar beets in large quantities, thousands, hundreds of hectares. They plowed and had a large combine.

There were dozens of stables, and those stables had cows, various calves for meat, chickens, ducks, geese, you name it. All of these were under the organized care of the state, but the physical work was done by the interned people. So, in addition to the Germans and the four or five Albanian families I mentioned earlier.

**Anita Susuri:** But did they get any percentage or anything at all?

**Meriman Braha:** They didn't receive anything...

**Anita Susuri:** How did they feed themselves, for example?

**Meriman Braha:** The food was collective. Our families were fed there, at first with collective food, which was provided in a canteen. They built it, because is it a problem for a state to build a canteen? You would go in, take your meal, eat, and go out to work. That was it. Outside of that [labor camp], you could only go out with permission, someone in charge had to grant you permission. And my father had to get permission to go to Belgrade to complain because the internment and placement... the family was interned without judicial decisions. No one had any documents. Neither my father nor the other families.

This was a kind of kidnapping, a form of holding families hostage and taking them wherever they wanted, tying them up and taking them wherever they wanted. And in the first year, I mean when they placed us, they put us in a cow stable. They removed two cows, I don't know where they took them. They adapted their place for the Braha family to sleep, the Tota family, no, the Tota family was in another barrack, also with cows. In another barrack, the Shatri family, the Braha family, the Morina and Trasha families lived in 25 square meters.

**Anita Susuri:** All together?

**Meriman Braha:** All together. They slept there, they lived their lives there. In the first winter, they were not allowed to light a fire, to warm up, to heat the children, both young and old. And when they complained, "You put us here, we are freezing, it's cold, it's winter," the camp authorities said, "If the cows don't freeze, neither will you. If you freeze, it's no big deal. One less enemy." And that's how the

winter passed. They were fed there in the canteen, but for sleeping and daily living, they were among the cows, in the steam of the cows. They warmed themselves with the steam of the cows. From the cold, everyone's hands and feet were swollen and frostbite appeared, a kind of disease of the skin or some kind of scabies, all of these. The place was unsanitary.

With cows, cows, I mean in several cow stables, the German women took care of them, they milked them, and collected the milk cans, and took them to Belgrade to provide for the citizens, to sell or whatever... and the Germans were the ones who, in a way, these families with many troubles, because they lived not in animal stables but in barracks when they were all crowded. The barracks were very crowded. They had two beds, one on top of the other, and lived there. They improvised the barracks and built them quickly, with makeshift work, with the work of the internees themselves.

Then, now they are no longer like that... but back then it was like this. Among other things, the Germans told my mother, "Take your son's hands to...because our hands are freezing from the cold, and when we go to milk the cows, we warm them, warm our hands with the cows' udders to loosen our fingers a bit so we can milk them. So take advantage of the moments to do the same for your little boy," because I was the youngest boy there, but I am not the youngest. Because during that time, at the end of that winter, a child was born in that place. The child of the Morina family from Peja was born, the daughter-in-law... who was actually a bride, came pregnant. They brought her pregnant through that winter, through that *kijamet*<sup>6</sup>... and she gave birth to a girl in the cow stable.

That girl is now over 70 years old. She is alive. She worked in the Assembly of Kosovo, her name is Advj, Advije Morina. And, I mean, my mother was the midwife at her birth, she was the midwife. Well, a midwife out of necessity, given her experience with the births of her own children, but also due to the moment when she had to assist that young bride who... at the time of birth, when the girl's father, Shani, Shani Morina, complained and requested to take his wife to the hospital to give birth there, they said, "We can't, the phone doesn't work, this doesn't work... let her give birth just as our mothers did." And so, she gave birth to the girl.

After a day or two, the other cow gave birth, but it didn't give birth alone. Veterinarians came from Belgrade to assist with the cow's birth, but not for the woman, not for the woman. This highlights a series of absurd things that are beyond human comprehension in a normal way. They do this intentionally because you are labeled an enemy, which, in fact, is not untrue. It is true that I am an enemy of the one who occupies you, keeps you in slavery, and imposes a life of heavy captivity on you. I have published three works. One is about this issue, titled *Vorbullat* [Alb.: The Whirlpools], which deals with life in such conditions and would be of interest for you to read, and it describes real events

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<sup>6</sup> *Kijamet* is an Albanian word derived from the Arabic word "Qiyamah," which refers to the Day of Judgment or the apocalypse in Islamic eschatology. In Albanian colloquial usage, it is often used metaphorically to describe a situation of great chaos, disaster, or extreme difficulty.

that happened. The names are changed, but the truth is there. Nothing is added except for the writing that gives it an artistic meaning.

Nothing is fabricated, everything is verified. And in those conditions, with the harsh living conditions in Vojvodina, my family spent three years. After three years, a decision came for us to return to Kosovo, but they didn't return us to Prizren, to our home. They kept us near a village, near a village called Miradi, known in Serbian as Dobrevia. In Albanian, Miradi. We spent another year there, my family. This is a separate part distinct from these other families, because they returned to their homes in Peja, Prizren, and wherever else, in that Tomoc of Istog.

Meanwhile, we spent a year in that [Miradi]... and after a year of living in the agricultural cooperative as the only interned family now in the cooperative, which was a different circumstance. About three years after the internment in Vojvodina, the internment of my family continued, but now alone. In the middle of... in an agricultural cooperative, the interned family, but in an agricultural cooperative. And they worked physically, working the land until our return to Prizren.

## Part Two

**Meriman Braha:** During the time we were interned, our properties were confiscated, including my father's wealth, the house, and the land... we were practically living as prisoners. We worked to live. The only reward was your ability to live, to survive, and to keep your spirit alive. The children's education was interrupted. My eldest brother, Qemal, stopped his education at the gymnasium. Seradin, the second brother, also stopped his eight-year schooling, Alije stopped her eight-year schooling, she was in the third or fourth grade, and Limane, who now lives and works in Gjakova, stopped in the first grade. The first grade of elementary school, half a year into the first grade.

Only after three years did we start to breathe again, because here they allowed us and the children to go to school. The parents did physical work like the other members of the cooperative until our return. Upon our return, we went back to the land. They returned a portion of the land to us, but a part was permanently confiscated, and the house we found empty was left full. But we didn't find any wheat, corn, or anything. We started life from scratch... life from scratch in our old house. This is one part.

This continued until '53 when the internment ended. But the family's problems didn't end, and the issues facing our occupier didn't end, because the others grew up, and the children who grew up couldn't be those who forget the past, hearing it from their mother, father, brother, sister, each other. Seeing the real situation and opposing the ongoing part of the Slavic captivity. Meanwhile, my father was imprisoned again just as we returned to Prizren...

**Anita Susuri:** Was there any reason or...



**Meriman Braha:** They imprisoned him without reason. The reason was my brother who stayed in, who fled to Albania. They imprisoned my father, but they also imprisoned my brother, Qemal. They kept them for almost a year without documentation, without judicial decisions. Continuous investigations and various pressures to break them, to make them servants of the state against their will, against the love they had for their country. Then, they confiscated our house, threw the family out of the house, but they left the land, they left the land. And my father was a good worker, he participated in the war, in the Second World War along with his son. He didn't... But the idea was that we should unite with Albania and continue life in a normal way, but there was no normality.

There was no normality in those years, I mean our return to Prizren, nor later in the years... we grew up when I finished school, I graduated from the gymnasium, when I finished the Higher Pedagogical School in Prizren, when I completed my university studies in Pristina, and so on. And my other brothers and sisters also got involved in teaching. Meanwhile, my eldest brother studied economics and completed his secondary education in economics through private schooling, up until '68. In fact, '68 is a notable year due to the demonstrations<sup>7</sup> and the massive student movement. But before '68, there was the fall of Ranković.<sup>8</sup>

The fall of Ranković was a clash between two currents in Yugoslavia. A clash between the hegemonic, Serb-centric unitary current, meaning everything centralized, and the somewhat decentralizing, Western-leaning current, which was supported in Croatia and Slovenia. And the fall of... the clash between these two groups was marked by the fall of Ranković. Ranković is synonymous with Serbian unitarism, significant state centralism, and the idea of a Greater Serbia wrapped in the guise of Yugoslavia. In fact, the military, police, judiciary, which are the main levers of the state, and the economy, were in the hands of the Serbs. This meant that the other nations were just a facade.

In this facade, our part is that of the Albanians, which continued with many imprisonments, continued its resistance with many imprisonments. Every year, hundreds of Albanians were imprisoned, rightly so, with the demand of all, of all underground anti-Yugoslav political groups. All in essence were against Yugoslavia and for unification with Albania, for the right of self-determination of the Albanian people. But nothing was achieved. Until '68, when I, as a student, I was a student of the Higher Pedagogical School, and then of the faculty in Prishtina. In Prizren, first at the Higher Pedagogical School, and there we had a broad, large society of students, of the school youth of that time.

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<sup>7</sup> During October and November 1968, many demonstrations were organized by the Albanian population across Kosovo. The main demand was to recognize Kosovo's right to self-determination. The first and most massive demonstration was organized in Prizren on October 6, 1968. This demonstration ended in front of the League of Prizren, where for the first time the demand for the Kosovo Republic was publicly articulated.

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

The political climate had changed. The Fourth Plenum was being judged, and the UDB (Yugoslav State Security Service) was being judged for using a lot of violence, for many injustices, for numerous violations. Among other things, also against Albanians and particularly against Albanians. I remember at that time when Albanians were tortured for a handful of flour, when state executors would enter houses to sweep away the flour from the bins. It was the time of what was called *otkup*,<sup>9</sup> which is *ujem*,<sup>10</sup> which is a state planning system where you have so much land, so much flour, you are expected to produce a certain amount of wheat and give this much *ujem* to the state. You were required to give your share of the material goods. The share of material goods included all agricultural products, even livestock products. Meaning, even in butter and oil, everything, you had to give your share to strengthen the state.

The state had crises at that time because it didn't have enough of its own production, it didn't have enough. And the cooperatives failed, collectivization failed, many things failed, forcing the state to return again to the privatization of things, which now private, had to compensate for what the state needed. So, at that time, two major problems arose for Albanians. Both this issue of the percentage of *otkup*, and the great political, economic, and physical pressure for the migration of Albanians to Turkey. Not to Albania, but for the migration of Albanians to Turkey. Everywhere it was asked, "Why to Turkey? Why Albanians to Turkey?" Because if these Albanians were to migrate to Albania, Albania would be strengthened. So, they migrated these Albanians to Turkey, to a place far from Serbia, to erase their identity.

There was an old deceit here, along with Yugoslavia, that Turkey was involved, and there was the 1937 agreement for the migration of Albanians to Turkey. Albanians in Turkey were migrated under state pressure with the motivation that they are Muslims, and as such, their place is there in Turkey because this place is Christian and belongs to Serbia. In fact, it is not like that, Albanians are Albanians, whether Muslim or Christian. But they do not alienate their nationality in the name of religion and do not identify the nation with religion.

But the years '56-'57 are filled with widespread tortures among the population. I remember very well the year '56, I think I was a third-grade elementary student, and when men were taken for questioning by the UDB, they were brutally tortured to hand over their rifles, to surrender their weapons. Perhaps they didn't have any. A large number of them didn't have any. To be able to hand over a weapon, a special channel for the so-called sale of weapons was created, and people were forced to buy weapons and hand them over, saying, "Here, I found it and I'm handing it over." And the same weapon would be recorded and returned to another person, and then another.

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<sup>9</sup> Serbian: *otkup*, the compulsory delivery of agricultural products to the state according to administrative procedures regulated by law.

<sup>10</sup> The flour or grain that was given to the miller as payment for milling; the produce that was given as payment for work done in agriculture.

This great pressure caused a large number of people to change their identity and register as Turks, to be able to pass more easily and migrate more easily. In 1953, Turkey renewed the 1937 agreement. This '37 agreement planned for about ten thousand families to migrate to Turkey each year. I remember, the houses in Prizren, a large number of houses, back then we were living, they had placed us in a house belonging to a Hysen Kodra. And I don't know whether they paid rent or not. And I remember the families that migrated to Turkey and had no one to sell their houses to. They had no buyers for their houses.

They would mark the houses with two boards nailed in a cross {makes a cross with fingers}, a cross nailed outside the door of the house, *bam-bam* {onomatopoeia} up and down, two boards across the middle. And it was a sign that the house was abandoned, the owner had gone to Turkey, the whole family had gone, and no one had bought it. You had no one to sell it to. In 1953, this was reinforced, and in '56 there was a major crackdown, a general mass torture against Albanians. An unprecedented pressure of all kinds, mainly political but also economic. And they were conditioned, "Do you want to work in a state job?" "Yes," "Register as a Turk," "But neither my father nor my grandfather was Turkish," "Who asked you about your father or grandfather? Are you Muslim?" "Yes," "Register as a Turk."

There were many political prisoners, many whom I knew in Prizren, whose families spoke Turkish at home but were imprisoned in Yugoslav prisons for the cause of Kosovo to unite with Albania. And, "What are you seeking? You speak Turkish at home. Why are you seeking to unite with Albania? Your place is in Turkey," "No, my place is in Kosovo, and Kosovo's place is in Albania." They were sentenced to 20, 30 years in prison. Many were executed with... many were executed. Let's not even talk about the execution groups that were against them, but there was no strength to confront Yugoslavia. In comparison to the Albanian uprising, they were much more prepared for war than we were.

We didn't have any allies, which was a big disadvantage. We had no external allies, while Yugoslavia at that time had both Western and Eastern allies. We had neither Eastern nor Western allies. This was our misfortune until '99. For the first time in '99, someone came to help us. In fact...

**Anita Susuri:** The years you mentioned, what was the whole atmosphere of life like when you were a child? From your perspective, how did you see the whole situation?

**Meriman Braha:** It was very difficult. We lived a hard life where people barely managed to make ends meet, to survive month by month. There was a period known as the time of hunger. You would go work as a laborer, selling your body somewhere, working in the fields just for a meal, just to have lunch. It was that hard. To show how things were, I was a senior in high school in 1964-65, and do you know how many seniors there were in the high school at that time? Albanians? There were two classes. My class was the natural sciences class, as it was called, and it had 18 students. 18 senior students in one

gymnasium. The other class was the linguistic class, with eleven students. The gymnasium had 29 students. Now there are 29 parallel classes of seniors in gymnasiums.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you at “Gjon Buzuku?”

**Meriman Braha:** At that time, it was “Jovanka Radivojević - Kica,” which later became “Gjon Buzuku.” In the ‘90s, the names were changed with the parallel system and the independence of the Albanian school under Serbian occupation. And later, after liberation, it continued. When we visited the gymnasium for its 50th anniversary, there were over 30 parallel classes of seniors. Back then, Prizren had only 29 senior students in the entire gymnasium. It’s extraordinary, extraordinary. So, it was a totalitarian development that left nothing undone in favor of the destruction of the Albanian essence, totalitarian. And Noel Malcolm states in his work, “Kosovo: A Short History,” about Albanians, “1945 was not liberation until ‘66, it was a totalitarianism par excellence, more totalitarian than in the Soviet Union.”

Yugoslavia, even though it had the Democratic Federal Republic, had no democracy at all. Only the state plan existed. It was a very difficult time, a very difficult time. And as for the schools that were open, I finished four grades in a school that was in a house.<sup>11</sup> The house of Emrush Aga, it was the house of Emrush Aga. I don’t know who he was. Now I know that a street in Prizren has been named after him, Emrush Aga. Emrush. It was a two-story house, confiscated and turned into a school by the state. Until the eighth grade, I attended a school that was in a house confiscated from the Mësërliu family, that’s what the family was called, Mësërliu, and it was made into a school. This shows that there was no proper care for the education of the Albanian people.

**Anita Susuri:** And these families were perhaps among the wealthiest whose properties were confiscated...

**Meriman Braha:** Yes. They were among the wealthiest, and those houses were confiscated. There was also the Alishani family, Njazi Alishani. Where the “Emin Duraku” school is today, a little further from there, was their house. Three members were executed, Njazi Alishani and his brothers, in ‘45, ‘46, ‘47, ‘48, executed for their opposition to Yugoslavia, and their house, their family, was also interned in Zemun Polje near Belgrade. Another family, this is the Alishani family, 22 members of the Alishani family in Zemun Polje, Vojvodina.

The family of Axhi Maloku, I had a classmate from that family, and he is in Surčin near Belgrade. Their family was interned in Surčin. Someone named Avni was born there. Many other families were interned within Kosovo, they were sent to different families. You were called interned, they kicked you

<sup>11</sup> In the context of this interview, house-schools refer to private homes that were confiscated by the state and repurposed as schools due to a lack of proper educational facilities for the Albanian population during the Yugoslav era. These makeshift schools often lacked adequate resources and infrastructure, reflecting the broader neglect of Albanian education in the region.

out of your house, sent you to someone else's house, and restricted your movement. At that time, there was a massive crackdown on everything. A million people who thought in Albanian, they did everything to physically eliminate the Albanian population. That's how it was.

First, there was the wave of 1878, 1912, 1918, 1945, 1996, 1998 when a large number of Albanians were expelled to Albania. Half of our nation was expelled there because they couldn't kill them all. But they killed people, women, old women, children, and whoever they found to create such tensions that people would flee and abandon their lands. If the last one is remembered, the '99 exodus, the massacres, and mass burials, the previous ones are not well known. In 1912, when the Slavic, Serbian forces entered Prizren, General Janković, that General Janković was a butcher of Albanians, a murderer, a general. Do you know that the border town with Macedonia is called General Janković? No, you don't know, because the Serb nationalists gave it that name. The one that is now the border. The border with Macedonia is the town of Hani i Elezit, which was called General Janković. Elez Han, Hani i Elezit, General Janković.

When General Janković entered Prizren with his soldiers, he killed 500 people within an hour. He went into courtyards, houses, it didn't matter if it was a woman, man, child, or whatever, killed as many Albanians as possible, in 1912. The Turkish army was not there, there was no resistance, they retreated and fled without defending Prizren. They abandoned their positions, and the Serbian forces entered and occupied Prizren. In just the first hours, 500 people were killed without knowing why they were being killed. They were killed just because they were Albanians. There have been six waves of attempts at genocide against Albanians. We have resisted them. I feel it is my duty to tell you, don't wait for the seventh wave to happen. You are young and haven't experienced it. With these demons as our neighbors, they still haven't given up on reaching the Adriatic Sea again, in Durrës.

In '68, the climate changed, and I was a student then. There wasn't a single local community in Prizren that didn't hold meetings to vent their anger at the crimes committed by the UDB in that area, every local community, who knows how many times. And we, as young people, would go to listen to the stories, just like you now, wanting to hear from me the stories of that time. We would go to listen to the accounts of the tortures that the UDB had inflicted on people in the local communities.

Those who had the courage now, it wasn't known if the UDB might come back, but if they did and you said that you had suffered because of the UDB, that they had done this and that, then you could be held accountable again. However, among the people, there was a sort of release, a freer atmosphere, and people gained a certain courage to tell the truth about what they had endured. We even heard from shepherds, "My sheep went missing because of the tortures inflicted on me and my family. I lost this many sheep, this many died. There was no one to take care of the sheep." Even the shepherds had these stories.

We would go to hear their stories of UDB tortures and the various pressures that were unimaginable. We might not have known, for example, that someone who seemed calm and collected had been taken by the UDB, beaten, and plunged into cold water. That Bistrica River, which looks a bit dry with little water today, had a lot of water back then. There was so much water that not a summer passed without a child drowning in the Bistrica River while swimming. In the Bistrica River, there were many mills for grinding grain. The mill areas, with their deep waters near the mills, were used by the UDB to plunge people into during freezing weather, with -20 degrees outside. People were thrown into the water fully clothed in such conditions.

**Anita Susuri:** And you say, were these like meetings, or what were they like?

**Meriman Braha:** These were meetings, and this was a, they were meetings and this was a...

**Anita Susuri:** Public or...?

**Meriman Braha:** Public, public meetings. They were public meetings called to inform people if they had complaints, to report the damages done to them, and discuss possible compensations. But no one was compensated for anything. Just like a wolf doesn't pay for the lamb it kills, it eats it and goes away. If you can kill the wolf, otherwise it comes back. Now... those years, '67-'68, were years of venting, and the people were venting. And in those years, among other things, a political belief spread among the people that we, being connected to Serbia, had nothing, and shouldn't have anything connected, we needed to separate from Serbia.

At this time, there was a widespread desire to separate from Serbia. Serbia was not an autonomous province of Kosovo, but it was called an oblast, meaning province. Vojvodina was an autonomous province, whereas Kosovo was just a province. Autonomous province and that's it. Now there was a rise, and a call for separation from Serbia was widely demanded. That's why, among us youth, and to be fair, even in the political corridors of Kosovo, the solution to Kosovo's problem began to be discussed with the advancement of Kosovo's status within the Yugoslav federation. Advancement of status, as it was a province. Province was the third level of autonomy. So, almost like suppression, almost as if it were a municipality, a community of municipalities, in terms of rights.

### Part Three

**Meriman Braha:** As I mentioned, during those years, even among politicians, there was a demand to change Kosovo's constitutional status in Yugoslavia. And it was the first time that the idea was heard that Kosovo should become a republic like the other republics. This was innovative for that time. It was an idea that came in various forms, and later, from reading about it, I saw that there was a tendency even before the Second World War to solve the Kosovo issue by forming a state of Kosovo. Its

statehood or its unification with Albania was a position held by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Comintern.<sup>12</sup> Communist parties across Europe held the view that Yugoslavia was an artificial state and should be dissolved, allowing all peoples to form their own statehood, with Albanians uniting with Albania, and Kosovo belonging to Albania as per the Comintern.

Meanwhile, this form of unifying the Albanian force and adopting a political stance to elevate the level of autonomy within Yugoslavia spread widely. And in '68, among other things, we as youth organized a kind of demonstration in Prizren on October 6, '68, demanding the Republic of Kosovo. I was one of the first to chant at that gathering, which had about two thousand to three thousand people in front of the Albanian League of Prizren,<sup>13</sup> where the Albanian flag was displayed, and among other things, this demand was made.

But the political climate was favorable, and no one yet knew if it would really happen or not. Would Kosovo become a republic, would we separate from Serbia, did we have the strength to separate from Serbia, was there a risk of confronting Serbia again? And from the Yugoslav central level, this hope that Kosovo would become a republic was later cut off, but it was elevated to the level of a province, autonomy like Vojvodina. For the first time, we were equated with Vojvodina with the '74 Constitution,<sup>14</sup> and it was the first time that Kosovo gained the right to have its own constitution. Before that, there was a statute, a statute of the autonomy of Kosovo. And this was like a municipality, meaning a status of autonomy within Serbia. The Assembly of Serbia had to approve your statute. Now, the Assembly of Kosovo could approve the Constitution of Kosovo, which was one of our demands. Among other things, we also demanded the university and the right to self-determination without mentioning Albania.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested, during that time, did you have any kind of organization or how was it? Or did you just discuss it in society?

**Meriman Braha:** We had an informal, underground organization, not just a social group. This organization, mainly composed of students, organized this event which later became known as a demonstration, where we demanded the Republic of Kosovo, the Constitution of Kosovo, and the

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<sup>12</sup> The Comintern (Communist International), or the Third International, was the continuation of earlier Internationals that aimed to establish a communist organization. Before the formation of the Comintern, there were two Internationals, created at sessions in Basel and Copenhagen.

<sup>13</sup> The Albanian League of Prizren, formed in 1878, was a political organization that aimed to defend the rights of Albanians within the Ottoman Empire and to achieve autonomy. It played a crucial role in the national awakening and efforts to establish a unified Albanian state.

<sup>14</sup> The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, the fourth and final constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, came into effect on 21 February 1974. It granted significant autonomy to Kosovo and Vojvodina, elevating Kosovo to a province with rights similar to those of the republics. This included de facto veto power in the Serbian parliament and allowed Kosovo to have its own constitution, marking a substantial shift from its previous status of direct control by Serbia.



University of Kosovo. Patriotic songs were sung at that time about the red and black flag,<sup>15</sup> but no Yugoslav leader was insulted, nor was any Albanian leader praised. Leaders were not mentioned at all.

All of us, it lasted about four to five hours, we didn't break, we didn't... we didn't burn or knock down anything. But, this was then repeated in Suhareka, a couple of days later. Then in Peja on November 19, similar to in Prizren. I had friends from that area who went and did the same there, like Isa Dema, [Zymer Neziri](#), and others. In Suhareka, it was Haxhi Bajraktari with his friends, and... here the punishments were for minor offenses. We gathered, we assembled without permission from the authorities, without permission from the government bodies, and that's how it developed.

In fact, we once tried to organize something on June 10, which is the day of the League of Prizren, but we failed. We couldn't organize properly because they scattered us quickly, I don't even know how, how so fast, we didn't manage. But the wreath we had bought to place at the League of Prizren was kept by a man named Rema, Hasan Rema, who was a seller of *Rilindja*.<sup>16</sup> On October 6, we took the wreath we had bought and placed it at the League of Prizren. Four of us were sentenced to 15 days for minor offenses...

**Anita Susuri:** The police took you and like that...

**Meriman Braha:** The police issued a report for a criminal offense because we gathered, we did this, we did that... and the court was still in doubt about what to do with it, they had big questions, there were many uncertainties. And they didn't... the police submitted two criminal charges against us to the court, but the court had new judges who had just arrived there, Albanians like Nik Lumezi, Pirana, and others. They didn't classify our action as a criminal offense but as a minor offense and gave us 15 days each. Off we went!

After the protests in Pristina and in three or four other places that made the same demands as us, they were then sentenced for criminal and political offenses. Because within a month, a lot changed in the political climate in Kosovo. They were sentenced, among other things, for the constitution, for self-determination, for the right, and for the university. Meaning, all the attributes that we demanded at that time were also demanded by them. They were sentenced for the things that we also demanded. But we did it a month earlier, and that saved us from penalties. We could have been sentenced too, but not too harshly, because in the end, it was for the good of the people. And they couldn't be too harshly punished. They could be sentenced to one or two years, but in different terms as imposed by the state, one or two years weren't much for what was being demanded.

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<sup>15</sup> The red and black flag refers to the national flag of Albania, featuring a black double-headed eagle on a red background. It symbolizes Albanian identity and pride.

<sup>16</sup> *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.



It was only then, in the '70s, that the constitution was approved, and the university was opened. In '70, the University of Kosovo was established, on January 15, 1970. It was a significant innovation. A large movement, an influx of students and education, created an extraordinary educational environment, which later accelerated the forms of resistance against Serbia and the Serbian utilitarian, Greater Serbia policies. Until '81, which saw the explosion of demonstrations.<sup>17</sup> I was a teacher at the technical high school just five meters from here, which was the largest school with 2700 students, both Serbs and Albanians. But there were about two thousand Albanian students. That's a very large number.

Students also participated in the demonstration, in the Pristina demonstration, and I participated with my students. I didn't separate from them. Then, on April 1, April 2, and April 3, a state of emergency was declared, and another procedure began. There was a massive arrest of people, with many groups and individuals being sentenced to long-term imprisonment, the prisons were so filled with youth and the large number of Albanian prisoners that they overflowed. Among those imprisoned was me. I was sentenced in February 1983 to seven years...

**Anita Susuri:** Before continuing with the '80s, '81, and other significant years, I want to go back to your education, the continuation of your schooling in Pristina. How did it happen? Was it difficult for you, considering your background as a persecuted family, and how did your life continue in Pristina?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes. I completed the Higher Pedagogical School in Prizren, and then I enrolled in university to continue my third and fourth years, however, the events of '68, the arrests, created obstacles and delays, causing some problems at the university. Professors also had to be careful, you couldn't just ask them to pass you or enroll you without complications... and generally up until those years, the early '70s, I had to resort to enrolling and continuing my education privately, meaning through correspondence.

Meanwhile, I had to leave twice, once, I left because I started working at an eight-year school in Korisha. Then, they removed me from there. Later, I applied to Kamenica. Do you know where Kamenica is? At the end. And there, they accepted me, but they didn't know who I was. Later, I was also accepted in Gjilan, at the Gjilan gymnasium. They didn't know me well until they found out, and then I changed and left the Gjilan gymnasium to work at the agricultural high school in Pristina. After that, I moved to the technical high school. Throughout all that time I was working, I was under surveillance, and my arrest was expected at any moment. With this group, or that group, with one group or another.

In fact, back then, it was spoken openly that we were dissatisfied. But until '81, it was like this, in a constant state of waiting for the arrest. My brother was a teacher and was dismissed from teaching. My

<sup>17</sup> On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

sisters, both of them were teachers, and both were dismissed from teaching. One of them lived in Korisha and wasn't given any work at all. The other worked in Gjakova and Rahovec and was reassigned to physical labor, administrative work in a mill, in the Xërxa mill. There was... My brother was dismissed from teaching but found a job in administration at the *Komuna* shoe production factory, the shoe factory called *Komuna* in Prizren.

So, we were always like a rabbit among dogs. Clinging to one... that's how it was. And during those years, it was very difficult to ensure our existence, but we lived nonetheless. And they were good years because many of the youth at that time were inspired by the idea of national liberation, of breaking free from Serbia's clutches. The demonstrations of '81 were exclusively for the Republic of Kosovo. In the first demonstration on the first day in Prishtina, it was called forward by the Executive Council...

**Anita Susuri:** The Assembly.

**Meriman Braha:** The Assembly. Up to, up to the Grand Hotel it was filled with people. I don't know how all those people managed to get there without phones. We didn't have mobile phones, nor did we have home phones. Here and there, someone might have had a home phone. But how they gathered, I don't know. A very large number of people came, and the main demand on the first day was, "Kosovo Republic." A large number of students were there, and I was with them, I didn't want to leave them alone. I didn't leave them alone for a single moment...

**Anita Susuri:** Were there other colleagues who came with you?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes. There were also two others who were imprisoned, Shyqri Zeneli and another whose name escapes me at the moment. Then, two of us were sentenced. They were sentenced with another group, and I was sentenced with a different group. They were sentenced with... Nezir Myrtaj. One of them, Nezir, is from the physics department, while Shyqri Zeneli is from the Albanian language department. Nezir was sentenced to, I think, eleven years, Shyqri to four years, and I to seven years. And the students, there were hundreds. I say students, many students, hundreds. Perhaps a thousand students from the technical school. There was the economics school, the school, all the students of Pristina. All of them. And they all demanded en masse, chanting for, they didn't break anything, no one committed any act that would implicate them in a criminal offense. But the demand was, "Kosovo Republic."

On the second day, the [slogan] "Kosovo Republic" changed to, "Kosovo Republic! Constitution! Either willingly or by force!" On the third day, the entire population was in the demonstrations all day. They brought bread, salami, sausages, and water by truckloads, unloading and distributing them. I have never seen such great solidarity. Only again in the '90s, the solidarity of '81 was carried into the '90s. Then, in the creation of the multi-party system and the completely independent educational system for Albanians in Kosovo. I am one of the founders of the League of Albanian Educators of Kosovo. I am

a member of its leadership, one of its founders. It took the initiative to organize Albanian education in Kosovo in the '90s.

**Anita Susuri:** You were telling us about the events of the '81 demonstrations in which you participated with your student pupils. What did you see during those days? How did the whole demonstration unfold?

**Meriman Braha:** It was an extraordinarily massive demonstration. A very large number of people, incredibly large. I haven't seen larger gatherings. Except in the '90s. Everyone was united in their demands, all asking for the same thing, "Kosovo Republic," within the framework of Yugoslavia, equal with the other Yugoslav republics. That was the essence. Whether there were underlying motives for future developments, we're not delving into that because the ideals were for national unification. But as long as Yugoslavia existed as it was, we wanted to be equal with everyone else and to separate from Serbia.

We were essentially under two burdens, two forms of oppression. We had the oppression of Serbia, as we were part of Serbia, and the oppression of Yugoslavia. Two layers of repression. What Serbia lacked, Yugoslavia made up for, and what Yugoslavia lacked, Serbia made up for. Nevertheless, the people survived and had a rightful political demand for their equal rights, equal to those of others who were part of Yugoslavia. This demand was not heard, it was not taken into account. On the second day, the slogan emerged, "Republic! Constitution! Either willingly or by force!" It became clear that the republic wouldn't come on its own, it wouldn't come served on a plate... but rather it would come through our comprehensive struggle in all spheres.

Now, did they break anything? No, no one committed any action that could be considered a political criminal offense. The demand for a republic is your right to express, and it was not said illegally but legally. It was said openly, and what is your leadership role? To take the people's demands and consider them. You could have told the people to get ready about ten people, five people, seven people, representatives of the demonstrators, and come to talk with us. Instead, they responded with tear gas, brutal police intervention, and clashes between the police and the demonstrators. Did we have anything in our hands? Nothing. None of the demonstrators was equipped with anything that could harm anyone. Just two hands and a voice. What was spoken was heard. This irritated some, especially the leadership of that time, the Serbian leadership of that time.

There was no one to properly listen to us. Perhaps the lack of an authoritative figure like Tito at that time made the situation... more tense. Nevertheless, they could have easily formed an ad hoc delegation from among the demonstrators and seen what the response would be. But there was none. The response was the baton, the policeman's stick, tear gas, and later on, brutal interventions, kicks, arrests, and violent dispersals. The first dispersal on the first day was mainly due to police violence, uncontrolled police violence, one could say, unrestrained. It was unprecedented violence.

On the second day, an exceptionally large number of people gathered again, even more than on the first day. From here to the Grand Hotel, it was full. Whether people felt like there could be clashes, no one asked, but it was still crowded. The entire area was filled, the entire space was packed...

**Anita Susuri:** Are you referring to April 2, 1981?

**Meriman Braha:** On April 2, everything was complete. Tens of thousands of people participated. The slogan changed to “Kosovo Republic!” “Republic! Constitution! Either willingly or by force!” Again, there were interventions, and again tear gas. There was a strong clash between the participants and the state authorities. On the second day, there were also killings. I didn’t see the killings, but I saw the aftermath. One of my students, completely covered in blood, came crying, “Professor, they killed two of our friends.” My hair stood on end, you could hear the gunshots everywhere, but you didn’t know who was firing or where it was coming from. Near the Gërmia department store, the new one by Zahir Pajaziti [square], and the new one is now where the ATK (Tax Administration of Kosovo) is located...

**Anita Susuri:** At Skanderbeg Square.

**Meriman Braha:** At Skanderbeg Square, there were steps opposite the [National] Bank. This used to be a bank, the building that now houses the [government]... and further down there was an old post office, called the old post office. Among other things, I saw this student I mentioned earlier, who passed away last year. He was crying and... said, “An ambulance came to take them, and I loaded them myself,” he had loaded them into the ambulance. They were Asllan Pireva and Naser Hajrizi, students of the *Shkolla Normale*, in their third or fourth year, I think the fourth year, at the time. They joined the students of the technical school, a large group, and participated in the demonstrations and were killed there. I didn’t know initially that it was those two, I found out much later. Much later, because I was the executive director there for quite some time.

Someone who had come to inquire about his needs, at the end of our conversation, asked me, “Who did I speak with?” I said, “You spoke with Meriman Braha.” When I said that, he stood up, it was summer, with his wife. He opened his arms and said, “Look at my arms, look at my arms,” and they were all goosebumps. “Why, what’s the matter?” I was concerned. What had my name done to him? “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” “I joined you with my group of friends, we participated in the demonstration, we were together, and my classmates, my desk mates, Naser Hajrizi and Asllan Pireva, were killed.” And my hair stood on end. After 20-some years, this was three or four years ago, this story. It brought me back to ‘81, when I was with my students. I couldn’t leave them alone, they were young, inexperienced. Plus, I had an obligation to explain to them why these things happened, how they happened, and that’s how it was.

## Part Four

**Meriman Braha:** On April 2, they told us, we were in school, and in the first class, we were to send the students home. Before that, to talk to them and ensure that they wouldn't...

**Anita Susuri:** To prevent them.

**Meriman Braha:** To prevent them from going out, and now we had... even on the first day, we had this duty, but who could stop them? A student came to me late and said, "Professor, they've locked the doors, all the doors are locked. I barely got into the school. The school is filled with police and UDB agents." "What?!" I said, "Don't worry, when doors close, windows open." That's how it happened. And many of them went out through the windows, jumping from the first-floor windows, and went to the demonstration.

At that time, I was working, and two people from the madrasa<sup>18</sup> came to me and said, "We heard that you are a good teacher. Would you be able to come and teach at our madrasa?" Those two were teachers at the madrasa, they were imams but were dressed as civilians, without turbans, teaching at the madrasa. I said, "At the madrasa? I will come to work without pay," because they told me, "Even if you come to work with us, keep in mind that the madrasa has no money." "I will come to work at the madrasa without pay." Why? Because I felt it was my mission to educate imams to love their own country and people. Their work is for their faith, their belief, but not to serve foreign interests. Not the nearby foreigner, nor the distant one, not the Arab, nor the Serb, but to serve their own people.

That's why, the imams to whom I taught now sometimes send me regards, I have forgotten them, who can remember everyone. But I taught them... all the madrasa students of that time in '81 participated in the [demonstrations]... One of them came to ask me, "Professor, what should we do?" "Where are your friends?" "They are... what do you need?" "Where your friends are, you should be too. You are part of this country. If a republic is established tomorrow, it will be for you too." We told them, and often it came up even during interrogations. The investigators would ask, "Why are you so agitated? Are you trying to stir things up because if the republic is established, you'll become a republic inspector instead of a provincial inspector? Instead of being a provincial investigator, you'll become a republic investigator. I will still remain where I am."

So, it's about the concept, do you have a clear concept? And can you explain your concept to others? To make them understand it. We told them until '90, "We are right, come to us, join us. With or without a party, come to our ideas." It doesn't matter which party you belong to. What matters is the idea. And

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<sup>18</sup> A madrasa is an educational institution in the Islamic world, typically focused on teaching Islamic theology, law, and other religious subjects. In addition to religious education, madrasas often provide instruction in various secular subjects.

the idea was... they adopted it in the '90s, in the establishment of the Democratic League,<sup>19</sup> political pluralism, turning in their Communist Party membership cards, saying that they were no longer part of this. Why? Because they returned to the idea we had. We had nothing for ourselves, not a single thing. Even today, I am very satisfied, very pleased that I don't see Serbian police, I don't see the Serbian boot, I don't see the Serbian soldier. It's a dream come true.

**Anita Susuri:** I also wanted to ask you precisely about your role as a professor, because in other interviews, other people I've interviewed mentioned that they were cautious about what they said to which professor, for example, but what did you tell them specifically? What did you discuss? Did you perhaps provide them with books that were banned?

**Meriman Braha:** Books were, of course, banned, but a large number of books entered illegally and were widely read. At that time, there were no students who didn't read. It was astonishing, there were students... during the time I was here, I had many students in my family circle and surroundings, many students would come, go, come in and out. They would listen to the concepts, viewpoints, and they would compete to see who could read more. Besides in medicine, for example, they had a book this thick {shows the book's thickness with hands}, and they never slept more than four hours. They memorized poems, various poems that had penetrated through. They would compete with their friends to see who could learn faster. So, there was a great spirit of extraordinary solidarity, an identification of people with our idea, with the general idea which was popular, but also the idea of living equally with others.

We never had a demand at any time or place that we should live and others should be under our feet. We should be equal with others, like others. Did you know that for a long time there were no factories, no workers? The entire administration, the early administration of banks, accounting, state administration, municipalities, was mainly conducted in the Serbian language. We never demanded to remove the Serbian language, let it be there, but let my language be there too. There were no Albanians in the banks, and it was only much later that Albanians entered the banks and various police departments.

The police were synonymous with evil, and they didn't know how to speak Albanian. Seeing a police officer speak Albanian was astonishing. Later, in the '70s, there were many Albanian police officers. This was demanded at that time, and part of the demands of the youth of my time was for changing the policy of school and university admissions. That's when the university was established. But the pedagogical school was mainly filled with Serbs and Montenegrins. When Ranković fell, the climate changed, and we, as youth, demanded that admissions respect the demographic composition. At that time, 70 percent of the population were Albanians. So, the schools should have 70 percent Albanian

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<sup>19</sup> Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. The first political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

students, not 80 percent Serbs and 20 percent Albanians. This changed. These changes didn't happen overnight with a magic wand. They happened with difficulty and great resistance from the Serbian state.

We never received proper support from Serbia, it was always resistance, always using force to oppress the people and keep them in darkness. In the old Yugoslavia, the first one from November 1, 1918, until June 1941, when the Germans and Italians arrived, there were no Albanian schools. They were absolutely banned. People were not allowed to be educated in their own language. This was done to us by the Serbs. The National Liberation War promised that everyone would be educated in their own language. Later, they tried to close Albanian schools, initially, they opened them, but it had to be said that fascism opened Albanian schools. Fascism, harsh and dark, with the whole world against it. With the arrival of fascism, Albanian schools and Albanian administration were opened, and the beginning of breathing freely in school came with fascism. This is the reality.

In one of my novels, I have described this. I have described this in detail, how it appears, what it looks like, because they always came supposedly to liberate us. From whom were they liberating us? From whom? [They aimed] to erase us. To completely wipe us out physically and biologically. This is genocide. Additionally, it's also culturicide because they trampled, with both feet and tanks, whatever they could of Albanian culture. That's why, it was absolutely necessary to explain all these concepts for everything, for all aspects of life. And not everyone was supportive, there were people who thought differently. They had their ideals in Serbia, their minds were set on Belgrade. Our focus was on our people.

**Anita Susuri:** After the demonstrations of '81, the arrests began, as you mentioned, but also the differentiation<sup>20</sup> and removal of people from institutions, especially professors. You participated, meaning you supported your students. You said that in '83 you were imprisoned, but how did the events leading up to that...

**Meriman Braha:** No, I was imprisoned in '81, but I was sentenced in '83, and the investigation process took a long time.

**Anita Susuri:** That's why, I thought it was '83.

**Meriman Braha:** It lasted a long time, a very long time. A time... It's a unique story, and it's not the subject of this account, but it requires special treatment and for me, it lasted close to 20 months, practically six months of investigation. In exceptional cases, it can be nine months, but for me, it lasted around 20 months.

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<sup>20</sup> In the context of Yugoslavia, "differentiation" referred to a form of political and social ostracism. It involved isolating and marginalizing individuals who were deemed politically unreliable or dissenting against the ruling Communist regime. This could include demotions at work, social exclusion, surveillance, and other forms of repression to discourage opposition and maintain control.



**Anita Susuri:** How did this whole arrest procedure start? Where were you? Surely you were expecting it.

**Meriman Braha:** I expected this, and others did too... The arrest took place in Prizren, and I spent a long time in the Prizren prison, about ten months in complete isolation without the right to visits or communication with family, not even letters or visits. But I didn't... I kept everything within my own boundaries, inside. Later on, it became known through certain contacts made with Person X or Person Y. Those things that came from that side harmed me inside, they harmed me a lot.

Initially, I absolutely had nothing to admit to, but when I saw that things were solid and well-established, I said, "Yes, I am for that. I have been with a large number of people, I have been in demonstrations, I saw the demonstrations, I supported the demands, I agree with the demands of the demonstrators. I said it then, and I say it now. My people have the right to be who they are, and Kosovo has the right to seek its right to be equal with the other republics." This had consequences in other... in the form of punishment, and of course, I couldn't say now, "Well, I made a mistake," because I hadn't made a mistake. It's different if you didn't hold your ground, if you didn't, now everything has blown up, and here we are. I stand by this. As a result, I was sentenced to seven years...

**Anita Susuri:** During this time, was there any violence against you?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, there was a lot. Violence is part of prison life. Anyone who says there was no violence might be an exception, one or two cases... but it's part of prison. Especially when they wanted to break someone, they used a lot of violence. If they couldn't break that person, they would break someone else, and that person would implicate you. Our sentences were made based on each other's statements, "He told me this, I told him that." It was done, you would bear it and it was done.

It's very important to enter prison, but even more important is how you come out of it. To come out clean without tarnishing anyone else or yourself. That's a big deal. It's an extraordinarily significant achievement. You can look everyone in the eye directly, regardless of whether someone lowers their gaze when looking at you, let them lower it or not. I've given these years to my country (laughs), it's done. I've given them freely without any resentment. There's no discovery of groups of people without making mistakes. Someone might catch you red-handed, point-blank.

So, mistakes are part of life. In life, a person makes many mistakes, there is no one who has lived without making mistakes. Various kinds of mistakes. Among them, these ones, which are paid for with punishment and could even be life sentences. Like, for example, the boys who were killed in the demonstrations. They were killed, often thrown from a floor during interrogations, supposedly attempting to escape, and they fell. From the third or fourth floor, they were thrown. They were beaten up and then thrown to close the case. The state can commit a hundred thousand wrongs, but you



must have your own integrity and hold onto it, and your integrity is part of the integrity of my nation, it can't be otherwise. You can't exist outside your nation. You are your nation, my integrity is my nation's integrity, period. If I have done well, I have done it for the sake of my nation, and if I have made mistakes, it is still for the sake of my nation (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested in why this investigation period lasted so long until...

**Meriman Braha:** Because they couldn't figure it out.

**Anita Susuri:** And they couldn't release you...

**Meriman Braha:** They didn't want to. And later, they couldn't figure [it out] for a long time. It's very important how you know to hold on (laughs). How you know to hold on, whether it's through responses or enduring violence. If they see that you don't... they can kill you without a problem. If they can't [break you], they won't kill you, they need to bring you to a state of submission to humiliate you, to make you lick their boots, "No, I won't lick it." That was the motto of that time, and generally, a person is bound by their own words.

**Anita Susuri:** Did the family background influence it as well?

**Meriman Braha:** Of course. Very much so.

**Anita Susuri:** So, they also used it as one more reason...

**Meriman Braha:** This is, among others, I don't know if there are other cases that lasted so long, but I haven't seen any that long. It's a big deal. Once, one of them said to me, he was an investigator in Belgrade because it was mostly with them, they were the ones, our own were just helpers, "Our job is to catch you, our job is to break you down, your job is to endure. Period." What more than that can you say? He's telling you straight.

**Anita Susuri:** And these 20 months, it seems you told me you were in isolation?

**Meriman Braha:** I was in isolation for 13 months.

**Anita Susuri:** How were those months?

**Meriman Braha:** Hard. Isolation is a unique punishment. Isolation causes great trauma. Isolation causes significant forgetfulness. A person forgets things that, in normal life, would be unimaginable.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have the right to read anything or...?

**Meriman Braha:** From time to time. There were times, in certain periods, with no reading at all, no newspapers, no magazines, no books, nothing. Sometimes they allowed books. But mostly, mostly not. And it was isolation with yourself. You now have to, I've seen people in prisons making a lot of noise due to loneliness, losing their minds. For me, it became so normal that I couldn't conceive how I could be in an environment that wasn't solitary. I got used to isolation because it seemed normal to me. The abnormal state in my psyche became normal.

I would say, when they put me together with others, how will I be? Will I be able to adapt to the people around me? Thirteen months. It was very hard, and the days didn't pass, they were very long. And I could only know where I was through the conversations they had with me or what was directed and you could see where you were. I had a lot to say, and yet, there's still so much left unsaid (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested, during this time, did you have any visits? Did you have the right to visits?

**Meriman Braha:** No, no, there weren't any. Here, when they brought me to the prison in Pristina, I had the right to visits, but in the prison in Prizren, I didn't have that right.

**Anita Susuri:** The group you were judged with, did you know them?

**Meriman Braha:** A little, a little. They added people to make it seem like a large group, and the contacts I had with the group were few but sufficient.

**Anita Susuri:** What did you expect? How long did you think the sentence would be, or what did you think before being sentenced?

**Meriman Braha:** Well, what else could I think except that they were going to sentence me. How to endure the sentence and how to come out of it, how to keep my dignity. How to keep my dignity so that no one could point a finger at me and say, "I suffered because of him." No one suffered because of me. It's not important how much I might have suffered because of someone else. No, for... no one can point a finger and say that they suffered because of me, no.

Once, many years later, when the remains of Jusuf Gërvalla<sup>21</sup> and Kadri Zeka were being exhumed. At Kadri Zeka's funeral, while we were returning, I heard one guy say to his friend, just within earshot as I had an umbrella, "I'm not leaving here without hugging my professor." To myself... as we were descending after the funeral, I thought, who is this professor that the student wants to hug (laughs).

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<sup>21</sup> Jusuf Gërvalla (1943–1982) and Kadri Zeka (1953–1982) were prominent Kosovo Albanian activists and writers who were instrumental in the struggle for Kosovo's independence. Both were assassinated by Yugoslav secret police in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1982, and their deaths are considered significant losses in the fight against Yugoslav oppression.

He quickened his pace a bit and came up to me and hugged me. He said, “Professor, wait, I’m so-and-so...” but who can remember all those students?

He hugged me, and I told him that I heard those words but didn’t think it was about me. “No,” he said, “professor, how could we forget about you? 19 of us went through the hands of the UDB for you,” 19 students. “19 of us went through the hands of the UDB for you.” “So you did suffer because of me.” “No,” he said, “we had the honor” (laughs). “No, he said, “no.” “Did anyone get sentenced?” “No,” he said, “no one got sentenced. But they asked us about you. 19 of us went through it.” Now just imagine that.

**Anita Susuri:** After you received the seven-year sentence, where did they take you to prison? Which prison?

**Meriman Braha:** Well, they sentenced me here in the District Court of Pristina, and I felt that within the sentencing, I was fine with myself, my conscience was clear, they could send me wherever they wanted. That year, they sent me to Sarajevo. There... the conditions in Pristina prison were catastrophic, very bad, extremely. The food was very bad, sleeping conditions were bad, everything was bad. There, the prison had a table, there were ten of us in the cell. I was the only one who was an irredentist. When they found out that I was an irredentist, everyone started looking at each other, “Oh, there’s one here...” Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, from the Sarajevo area were there. The others were for ordinary crimes, they had stolen. There were a couple of directors sentenced to 20 years for stealing a lot from their factories. Others for forgery, some for murder, a lot of thieves. But nine were others, and I was the only one.

They were curious. After a few days, one of them said, “Are irredentists like you? Are they like you?” “No,” I said, “they’re not.” “What are they like?” “Better than me.” “What? Wow,” (laughs) “I,” he said, “am the son of a Chetnik<sup>22</sup> commander,” from the Second World War, “and we had the belief from the propaganda here that you eat people. Irredentists are monsters. They’re not humans, they’re beasts. But you, you’re not just normal, you’re more than normal, more normal than all of us. You are a person of culture.” I didn’t get involved in many conversations. I kept to myself, there I could read, I had my chair, I wouldn’t give up my spot to anyone. I would sit there all day, the cell was a bit bigger than this [room], five bunk beds, ten beds in total, and one walk outside during the day.

The floor of the prison where I was, was the eighth floor, eight floors, I mean it was that big. And I didn’t talk to them, I would read and mind my own business. They would bring in newspapers. I would read all their newspapers. Then during this time, he noticed me and said, “Are you irredentists like

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<sup>22</sup> Chetnik: A member of a nationalist and royalist Serbian guerrilla force known as the Chetniks, which operated during the Second World War primarily in the territories of Yugoslavia. The Chetniks initially aimed to resist Axis occupation but were also known for their anti-communist stance and involvement in ethnic cleansing and war crimes, particularly against non-Serbian populations.

this?” “No,” I said, “they are better than me, I am the worst among them.” “No,” he said, “you can't imagine what kind of propaganda there is about you.”

There was a director as well, he said, “I was in Kosovo for three months.” “What were you doing in Kosovo, you director for three months?” “Well,” he said, “I was a reservist police officer. A kind of police commander,” he said, “they sent us to Kosovo. When they sent us to Kosovo,” he said, “they told us we were going to war, ‘Keep in mind you are going to war.’ I earned three ranks in three months.” That was a reflection of us there. Through propaganda and living observation, you imposed yourself just by being there. I had a certain kind of respect from everyone, even those who were enemies, sons of enemies, they were Serbs. But to the extent that they would ask, “Are irredentists like you?” “No, they’re not.” “Why?” “Because they are better than me” (laughs).

## Part Five

**Anita Susuri:** You were telling us about the prison in Sarajevo and...

**Meriman Braha:** From the prison in Sarajevo, I stayed for one year in the Sarajevo prison. There, the physical condition of a person locked up for a long time inside did not allow you to go outside for a walk, and we only had ten minutes of walking. But you had to go down eight floors and then climb up eight floors again, and we didn’t have enough physical stamina. Most of the prisoners would say, “We’re not going out at all, we’re not going out at all.” For about two months, we wouldn’t go out because eight floors were too many stairs, we would get out of breath a lot, the body would rot. Rot. You could put your hand while reading, and the marks would stay on your face, or if you left your finger there all day, it would really rot. You looked fine, but in fact, you were worn out. Worn out in terms of...

Later, they sent us to Zenica prison, where the work was hard, very hard. The air was polluted, filled with smoke, burnt gas, and particles of hot iron. When you worked, the hot iron, sometimes twice the size of this table, was placed in a press that shaped it into the required object. It released iron particles that then damaged the lungs and health. The eyes were also greatly affected because you often had to look at this hot iron, you couldn’t touch it with your hands but had to use tongs.

The tongs were long, and if the iron piece was heavy, two people would handle it from either side, placing it into the press to shape it. This process affected our vision due to the intense heat and sweat. The furnace had to reach a high temperature to heat 50 pieces of iron without melting them, and the furnace was lined with fire bricks and when opened, the heat and glow from the iron and the fire bricks would hit you. You could see the iron pieces and the glowing red bricks inside. Each piece had to be taken out one by one, with two people handling it with tongs, passing it to the other to shape it. It was hard.

There, you could buy from the prison canteen. You could purchase milk and you had to drink it. They wouldn't provide it. They also didn't provide protective clothing against the fire. We wore ordinary shoes. The shoes would burn if the hot iron fell on them. Not only was it heavy but also hot, the heat would melt the shoes immediately. It was catastrophic. The work was extremely hard, very hard. One section produced iron containers that needed to be carved and shaped. The iron had to be carved with fast-moving machinery. We had to push the iron with our bodies, and hold it to smooth it out. The machine created a lot of dust that would stick to your clothes, your body, and your face.

Those people who worked mainly in the grinding section, which they called *brusalice* [Srb.: grinder], they came out of work with only the whites of their eyes visible, their whole faces were black from the iron [dust], that residue was ingrained [into their skin]. The cleaning, those large collective baths, were the only way to live there because otherwise, it would smell. Every day, we had to clean off that swear, it was a catastrophe. However, in terms of health, we slimmed down and melted away immediately, both me and my friends. But soon enough, we returned to normal, and our muscles started to function again, as they had atrophied.

**Anita Susuri:** How many hours a day did you work?

**Meriman Braha:** Eight hours. Eight hours a day. And the food wasn't good. In Sarajevo, it was good. But in Zenica prison, it wasn't good. Mostly beans, cabbage, pickled cabbage. They would put it in pickling, but then cook it. They would boil it. It had a terrible smell. But almost every day, cabbage, every day. It was impossible not to have it at least once a day, sometimes for both lunch and dinner. But that physical activity and returning to normal with muscles and such... it strengthened the body, made it more resistant. And we were better, I felt better. Otherwise, I was decayed, completely decayed. You could see it, the flesh falling off the body.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have visits from your family during this time since you were married and a father? Did you have visits?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, my wife, children, mother, brothers, and sisters came, depending on the situation. They would take turns visiting.

**Anita Susuri:** You had 15 minutes, I believe?

**Meriman Braha:** 15-20 [minutes], sometimes they would put pressure. There was a time, not just once but for a period, when families came, especially in Sarajevo and Zenica, they insisted we speak Serbian. "No, send them back immediately. I won't speak Serbian. Period. I'll speak Serbian with you, you're Serbian, I'll speak Serbian with you. But how am I supposed to speak to my mother? To my wife? To my child? I won't speak Serbian." "But there's no one to translate," Shut it, no. You don't have the right, period, that's it." Then we would file complaints, but who would take our complaints

seriously? But we still said we would complain. We wrote complaints, especially about prisoners' rights. It was supposed to be ten minutes of outdoor time, but it was never ten minutes, five minutes, "No, not ten minutes, five minutes, come one, time's up, go inside." That was tough. But there's no problem in life that a person can't overcome.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm also interested in the consequences your family faced. I'd like to know about those as well. Your brothers, sisters, and other family members.

**Meriman Braha:** Well, they all... first of all, my wife wasn't working, they didn't allow her to get a job anywhere. Then, those who were employed were fired from their jobs. Those who were fired but were put somewhere else in administration were lucky because most of them were teachers, nearly the whole family were teachers, and they ended up in administration. They were in administration, but they lost their education jobs, although they got some other job. Some were left without jobs. My sister worked in administration. Another sister was left without a job. Her husband was also a political prisoner. They found him an administrative job, sent him to work in a factory administration, "Here, you will work here," and that was it. He was also a teacher, he also suffered in Goli Otok [prison], but from teaching, he was moved to administration in a factory just to earn a salary.

My mother had her own pension, a family pension for martyrs, and that served in a way. Not just in one way, but in many ways. And our family was very close-knit, completely, very devoted to each other. What you didn't have, I would bring to you. What I didn't have, I would take from you. So, it was an excellent relationship within the family with extraordinary harmony, extraordinary. With brothers, with sisters, with relatives, with everyone. There was a great deal of care also from the community.

**Anita Susuri:** How difficult was it for them to come and visit you?

**Meriman Braha:** It was very difficult, but I told my mother, for example, not to come, but curiosity got the better of her. A mother. She would come, stay for about half an hour, and see me. When I saw her, over 80 years old, coming to see me, 80 years old, hey, traveling by bus all night to see you for 15 minutes, ten minutes, half an hour... it depended on the temperament, the situation, the mood at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** The mood.

**Meriman Braha:** Yes. I mean... the travels were hard, and I was very worried, especially about my elderly mother and the children. My wife with the children.

**Anita Susuri:** How old were your children?

**Meriman Braha:** The children were around ten years old, seven, eight years old, ten years old, because I had three. Especially the youngest daughter, who is now grown up... and she didn't see me for a long time. When she finally saw me, she didn't recognize me. She said, "The girl started crying," my wife said, "she started crying, 'Why did you bring me to a stranger and not to my father?'"

**Anita Susuri:** But you didn't have the right to have contact?

**Meriman Braha:** No, not at all, only from a distance. If visits were allowed, especially in the prison here in Pristina, there were those bars, the meeting bars. These bars were divided into squares. You could see one eye, but not the nose, you couldn't see the mouth, or if you saw the mouth, you couldn't see the eye or the nose. You couldn't. Always just one part of the body, you could only fixate on one square. That was very... and if the child wasn't grown up, how could they recognize you in such situations, they couldn't.

**Anita Susuri:** How long did you stay in Zenica?

**Meriman Braha:** Three years.

**Anita Susuri:** Then you moved to?

**Meriman Braha:** Then I was released because my sentence was reduced from seven to six years. I was working when he came, "Leave the work," I said, "I'm leaving the work." "Come with me," I followed him. When he took me to the administration office, the policeman turned back. I stayed with the administration staff. He said, "Did you expect to go home?" "No, I didn't expect it." "Well, you are going home." I told him, "I still have one more year," exactly one more year. "No, you are going home today." "Alright." It was a surprise for me, I hadn't made any requests or complaints, nothing that they would need to keep me within my limits. "No," he said, "today you are going home." Then the procedures, here and there.

In Zenica prison, besides the prison administration, the administration and the prison director and everything else, within the prison there were the offices of the UDB, the secret political police. The police and the UDB are not the same. The UDB is the political police. It had five or six, maybe more of its own members, workers who dealt with the political groups that were punished and were in the Zenica group. There were three large political groups, the Albanians, the Croats, and the Muslims. There were many Croats and many Muslims. And all of them were strong people, people who didn't break down over small things. The UDB worked there.

They told me, "No," he said, "you are leaving. But what about the others who stay here?" those who are still there, "your friends, so-and-so, so-and-so..." "They made their lives before me, and now they will continue without me too." So, in the end, that day came for me to leave, and I left. It was

unexpected and very emotional, very. I couldn't comprehend it, and it was very hard for me, how to leave and how to leave my friends inside? How I met with those I said goodbye to, what I said, what I spoke, I don't even know. It was very hard for me. Nonetheless, I left. Two of us were released then together, and we came to Pristina together. After that, I was unemployed, and I stayed at home.

**Anita Susuri:** When you were released, how did you get to Pristina? Did you have any money with you? Did you inform your family? How was it?

**Meriman Braha:** No, nothing at all. The family didn't know, I didn't know, no one knew, even my friend Islam, Islam Morina. He didn't know. And when they released us, Islam and me together, we didn't know we were being released that day, it just happened unexpectedly. I didn't know that my friend had an uncle somewhere in Bosnia, near Zenica, in some village or maybe a town, perhaps Zhupçe. And his uncle had some sort of shop or something, I'm not sure.

He said, "No," he said, "this one is telling me..." I was trying to catch a bus in Zenica, Sarajevo, and from Sarajevo then wait for a bus that might go to Belgrade and maybe to... but he said, "We're going to my uncle's place." "Where is your uncle?" "I have one in such-and-such place..." And he informed him, no, we went to his uncle, unannounced, unexpectedly. We didn't have any money with us, nothing at all, we didn't even know. We thought about going by train, showing the release [document] that we had been released, and then when we arrived, we would find a way to pay, but we didn't have any money. How could we... they just wanted to get rid of us.

When we went to his uncle, he paid for it, I don't know how much it was or what exactly it was. We stayed there for a while, and he had a phone. "Can we make a call?" "Sure." We called to inform them that we were... I could barely remember, I had forgotten my own phone numbers. My wife wasn't there, she was at her brother's place, and who would remember the phone number there? I had forgotten my own phone number since I hadn't used it, and it had completely slipped my mind. Perhaps it was also a bit surprising that things turned out this way. After some time, I still couldn't get through.

I remembered a number, now whether it was mine or not, after about an hour. Sitting there, I had no way to inform anyone. My brothers' houses didn't have phones, I had forgotten all the numbers and then I remembered one number. I called it once more, and it was my wife's brother who answered, at her brother's house. I explained that it was me. "What? Who? What?" (laughs). They were all shocked. "It's really me, I'm so-and-so, and I barely remembered this number and wasn't even sure whose it was." Then this uncle, Islam's uncle, drove us from that place, Zhupçe, to my home, to my apartment in Pristina. We were lucky he found us because we would have had quite an odyssey to get here. We barely made it. I vomited on the way, making a mess. It was a big ordeal, barely. The journey, I felt like I was dying from the trip. Then there was general joy there, and we had a meal together. That's it.



## Part Six

**Anita Susuri:** How were you received by your family and society after being released from prison? Because there have been cases where people hesitated to be in touch.

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, there was a lot of fear. The family had absolutely no reservations, they came and went and stuff... whether brothers, cousins, or others. But for others, I sent messages, I told them, and then word spread, "I consider that you have come to see me even if you don't come. Therefore, don't feel pressured to come and see me necessarily. If you do come, consider the consequences and bear them yourself, I'm not to blame. It's up to your own judgment. As you decide, so it will be. You are welcome with me, but remember that the authorities will do their job." That was it.

No, I was under surveillance for a long time, a very long time. Constantly, without interruption. And, within the family, things were very good. Outside the family, I was met with a lot of respect, a lot of love. Some couldn't come because they were far away, some who were closer did come, some came at night, some during the day. It depended on the circumstances (laughs). I didn't blame anyone, and even if they hadn't come, it wouldn't have been a big deal. No big deal! But just because someone doesn't come doesn't mean you're better to them. A good Albanian is a dead Albanian.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested to know if, while in prison, you were aware of the political events happening in Kosovo and Yugoslavia in general?

**Meriman Braha:** In Yugoslavia, yes, in Kosovo, less so, unless the family who visited managed to convey a few words, they had built that understanding. Newspapers... inside the prison, many newspapers were gathered by the Croats, Bosniaks, and Albanians... So, I was very well informed about all the events happening in Yugoslavia and beyond, and also about the situation in Kosovo. Within the family, they would say, "This is good, this is happening...". But I always had the support of my family throughout, I had a lot of support from them the whole time.

Of course, they also had a hard time, and I can tell you about my mother, weary, tired, traveling all night without sleep. When she came to visit me, she was lost, exhausted, and worn out. But when she saw me in good spirits, with an open face, able to look at her and speak to her, her face would immediately brighten, right there and then. She would fill up with joy, it was like she was seeing me anew. She realized her son was fine. All her tiredness, all her worries would vanish. It was an extraordinary emotion. But it is very important to have your loved one, even if they are inside, for you to see that they are not broken inside because there's nothing you can do. And also for the others because there's nothing you can do from the inside position.

In those years, many problems erupted. Many murders of soldiers, and in the prisons. Then, the dismissals started, the [miners' strikes](#), the movement for the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy, and

the influx of people from all over Kosovo to Pristina. To tell the world not to reduce Kosovo's autonomy, [Azem Vllasi](#), [Kaqusha Jashari](#), and others. Those were bloody years, years of struggle. I saw the situation as it was during those years. A friend of mine had started a small business and said, "I've left teaching." He was a teacher. "I've left teaching and turned to trade. Will you come and help me a bit?" "What should I do?" "Just help me." He paid me, and I worked with him in his business for about five or six months.

Then came the large demonstrations of '88-'89<sup>23</sup> in defense of the Constitution of Kosovo and Kosovo's autonomy. Afterwards, Kosovo's autonomy was abolished. I participated in those demonstrations in '88 and '89. I couldn't remain indifferent. Whatever happens, I paid the price, I couldn't, I wasn't able to, and I was active. As a result of that, on March 28 of '89, I was imprisoned again. This time I was imprisoned with a decision from the Provincial Executive Council for isolation.

Then, they took a large number of Kosovo's intellectuals, about 300-400 people, I'm not sure exactly how many, and they isolated us, locked us up. First here, all day on March 28, then they sent us to Leskovac. There, we were transported by buses, all those people tied up. One seat yes, one no. And tied with handcuffs, they took us to Leskovac. There, a massacre took place that when the people of that area saw the buses, they stopped for a moment, completely surrounded. With police, they saw the stains on the road to Merdare and airplanes, with helicopters flying low overhead.

There, the Serbs were all out, they wanted to lynch us, to take us down in the middle of the road. It was very difficult and very dangerous. In '89, after our arrest, they sent us to Leskovac. It was as if they knew, as if they were expecting, expecting a crowd to come, like our heads there during the Ottoman times with Turkish emperors. They stopped the whole convoy, very long, mostly buses full of police trucks, many police. It was as if they were sending us as a gift for someone's feast. They were ordinary people, threatening us, "We will kill you, we will cut you. Get down!" They wanted to get into the buses, they wanted to break the windows by force. A catastrophe! Someone barely managed to stop them and after a while, late at night, we entered the yard of a prison, the district prison. Then, part of the group was unloaded there.

I remember that I was dropped off there. After that, some of the other people, as there wasn't enough space, were sent to other places, to other prisons. But there, there... there was a large space, some kind of hall about three or four times this size, and about 30-40 people all lined up to be interrogated and beaten without even asking who you are or why you are there. "Are you Albanian?" "Yes." "Beat him!" Naked, completely naked as your mother gave birth to you. Until they stopped when you passed out, when you fainted. I don't know how anyone survived without dying there, I don't know. But...

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<sup>23</sup> The 1988 and 1989 demonstrations in Kosovo were mass protests by ethnic Albanians against the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy by the Yugoslav government, which culminated in the suppression of Kosovo's autonomous status within Yugoslavia. These protests were significant as they represented the widespread resistance against the political and constitutional changes imposed by the Yugoslav authorities that aimed to reduce Kosovo's autonomy and were marked by violent clashes and a harsh crackdown on demonstrators.

**Anita Susuri:** Did they beat you with cold weapons or...?

**Meriman Braha:** With everything... whatever they had in their hands. They were prepared. In fact, I heard one of them, "Were you a guard?" They were civilians, not dressed in uniforms. There were some in uniforms but very few. Evening came, they brought us dinner. We were having dinner there and once again waiting in the corridor in line, then from the corridor in line, those two lines were very narrow, the corridor was very narrow. And in two rows, people close to each other. There was a door over there, and that was the door where they would take you from here and put you in there. There the beating would happen, here you would wait for the beating, there it would happen. 30-40 people, only God knows, it was full. Like beasts, like beasts.

None of those people, I don't know how any of them survived, not a single one. It was completely out of control, with them competing with each other. "Let me do it because I can hit harder." Jumping with their feet, with their hands, kicking, stomping, hitting with rods, with anything that came to their mind. Whether they had them ready or found them there, only God knows. But you didn't know what was happening to you. And like the others, I came to my senses the next day. When they came in... actually, I woke up once from a daze, woke up from the hitting by someone, a hit that came, that woke me up with a *bum, bum, bum*{onomatopoeia}. When I opened my eyes, I saw myself half lying down, half asleep on the bed. Half of my body on the floor, half, with my shoulders somewhat frozen. That's how I came out of the daze.

There was one of them, one of the cellmates, banging his head against the wall, *bum, bum, bum* {onomatopoeia}. That woke me up from the daze. I didn't know who it was. I had... during the time we were in the corridor, waiting inside, you could hear thuds and someone screaming. When it went silent, we didn't know if they had died or were still alive. Just that someone's turn had come. Then one of the policemen came in and called out for someone, saying, "*Ko je Vlasi ovde, Vlasi?*" [Srb.: Who is Vllasi here, Vllasi?]. It was Agim Vllasi. "*Ko je Vlasi?*" [Srb.: Who is Vllasi?] He said, "*Ja*" [Srb.: Me]. "*Izadi!*" [Srb.: Come out!]. He went out of line, and they took him out of order. This Agim Vllasi is the nephew of Azem Vllasi. Azem at that time was imprisoned. Imprisoned for opposing the revolution...

**Anita Susuri:** The miners' strike.

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, the miners' strike, as if he was the cause of it. I saw them beating him, "Stop, stop!" I don't know if I was shouting loudly or if it just seemed loud to me, I don't know. But I know that I approached him, put him over my body, and lifted him up, it felt like I was lifting a mountain. I put him on the bed a little and then fainted. The next day, I came out of the daze when the police entered, the Serbs seemed mad. No one had gotten up. There were four of us in the room, all naked. Clothes thrown around the room, those were our clothes, thrown all over the floor. They had thrown us, slammed us, four of us. And then later, "Get up, come on..." They took us again during that time. While

we were dressing, putting on our shoes, only God knows. I don't know how we got dressed, or how we put on our shoes, or how... I just know that the beatings never stopped.

When they took me, in order, they took me in front, *bum, bum, bum* {onomatopoeia}, when I got there, the UDB agents were waiting, "Here," they said, "Meriman Braha is coming. Young but with a lot of experience. Now he's going to talk, now he's going to talk." They started asking me about Azem Vllasi. I had no connection with Azem Vllasi. But the way they brought it up, as if I was one of the main people in the organization of the population, and that I had called the people to an uprising, that I had the insurgent headquarters. In the headquarters were Azem Vllasi, me, and I don't know who else. They mentioned names I didn't recognize. I thought to myself, they have decided to frame me with this trial. There's no other explanation, this is how it's framed, you're it, and that's it.

Later, after about two or three weeks, it was understood that Azem Vllasi and I were very far apart and they couldn't put us together. Then they sent us from here, from Leskovac to Zaječar. We were really cold. There in Leskovac, we were really cold. I had a coat, but it didn't help, no coat or shoes, nothing, we shivered like sticks. Did we shiver? Not just me, but everyone, everyone. We couldn't even eat, our jaws wouldn't work to chew anything, bread, a bite of bread, we couldn't chew it. What had happened to us, I don't know. Had we lost too many fluids or something, I don't know. Something, we shivered like sticks. And whenever I thought about it, seeing myself, I would say stop for a moment, and we would shiver. Was it from fear? Was it because it was cold? I don't know. But since it wasn't just me shivering, but other friends too, they were also freezing, then it wasn't just fear. It means it was more than that. We had lost something.

Every day, there were loudspeakers in the room, both in Leskovac and in Zaječar. Every day they played Chetnik songs, from morning till evening. "We will kill, we will go, we will go to Kosovo, we will kill, we will wipe out the Albanians, we will cut them," *kuku*,<sup>24</sup> I don't remember any of the songs. Just one sentence from all those songs got stuck in my head, "*Za ideale ginu budale*," "Fools die for ideals." Did they think we were crazy? We had ideals. But the circumstances were as dark as they could get, just killing people, just killing. 30 people in Pristina that day, 28-30, how many were killed in the Pristina demonstrations? How many were killed across Kosovo just that day? I left Pristina in a state of emergency, with tanks, with everything, with airplanes. They passed overhead above the buses, just not landing. The situation was very dire.

They gave us food... there were no visits, no contact with the family. We were very distressed, burning up with anxiety. I remember, I forgot to mention. On the bus where I was, they brought a group from Prizren, including my brother, Sarejdin, the second one, and since they separated us, they put my brother in the back of the bus. But he didn't know if they had taken our other brother or not, he didn't know if they had taken the others, our other cousins, relatives, who was left. "I don't know anything, I don't know anything, they just took me."

<sup>24</sup> Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

When it happened, at the moment they were about to put me into the Leskovac prison, to hand me over, usually, not usually but every time, an Albanian policeman who was there would take the prisoner to hand them over from the bus to them. Until they put you inside, you wouldn't see them anymore. But this time, one of the policemen, there were two Albanian policemen, one of them came after handing someone over and threw his Kalashnikov on the ground, "What can I do?" He shouted, as if he were mad. He went mad. My brother, with one of the other guys in the back, one of them said, "Commander, commander, give me that automatic rifle. Kill me, may my blood be forgiven, just don't let me fall into the hands of those beasts."

After that first wave passed, the policeman whose turn it was to hand me over approached me and asked, "Do you have someone to inform at home?" "Yes, I do." "Do you have a phone?" "Yes." I gave him the phone number, writing it down in his hand, and he handed me over. I never saw him again, I don't know his name. However, he had gone back and taken the phone number, and he called and said, not identifying himself, just saying, "You have someone in Leskovac and we left him in a bad condition." That's all he told my wife when she answered the phone.

## Part Seven

**Meriman Braha:** So, in Zaječar for a while, it was two months. We didn't have the right to visits or anything, just the songs of Serbia. One day, we were three in a cell, they took one and said, "You have a visit," and sent him to the visit. He came back. The second one went, "Visit." And now I was thinking, my wife had just given birth to our youngest daughter, not even two months old, she couldn't come. In the family, everyone had their own problems, no one could come. I was feeling down, burning up with anxiety. When they told me, "Visit," I thought to myself, visit, they are taking me for interrogation. It's not for a visit, it's for interrogation. When I got there, I saw my sister. She had brought two bags. Two UDB agents were on her side, the bars in between us, a bit farther apart, but still bars. Two UDB agents on my side inside. And she asked, "How is Hydaja?" "He is fine." "Where is he?" "At home," *uhh* {onomatopoeia} I felt so relieved.

My other brother-in-law, also a political prisoner, was at home as well. Qemal was at home. "What about Sarejdin?" "Sarejdin is in Prokuplje." There was no space to keep him, and I was worried about him. He is a bit older than me, but he didn't have much direct experience or many clashes with the police. He had some, but not directly with police interrogations... I thought he had suffered worse than me. In fact, the prison in Leskovac was full, and there was no room. They had sent him to Prokuplje, and there he had a slightly easier time as he was in isolation, but he didn't suffer as much as we did, although it was still very dangerous, very much so.

He said, “Forget about me!” He had told the family. His wife had gone to see him, “Don’t worry about me. Look after Meriman, he is in danger. What can they do to me?” And when I heard that, I felt relieved. I... I started to feel less anxious, my eyes opened. She now, “I brought you this, I brought you that.” “*Ne može*, it’s not allowed, not allowed, not allowed.” She had brought two bags full, but they didn’t allow everything. Left with three lemons in her hand {raises hand as if holding something in the air}, “These?” “Those can go through.” And they gave me the three lemons. When I got back to the cell, I threw them on the bed and said, “Here, eat lemons” (laughs). I told them that my sister had relieved me of that anxiety I had.

It was very tough, but eventually, the President of Yugoslavia was [Janez] Drnovšek<sup>25</sup> from Slovenia. Our situation in Leskovac became a big issue, it was heard, state and republican commissions came to see us, to measure our injuries, where we were hit, how much we were hit. Some kind of *kallafat*.<sup>26</sup> But nevertheless, it was good because it became a big issue, it was exposed like a genie out of a bottle, and the violence stopped. After about two months, they told us, “You are going back.” One person left, another left, and I was waiting. When they came and suddenly tied my hands, we were on the Marica of Serbia, and there was also someone from Peja, Ahmet Zeka, with me. They brought us here to Pristina. They sent him to Peja, and they kept me in Pristina for almost, I don’t know, another month or so.

During that time... one night before, no, one night after, it was June 28. June 28 is Vidovdan. Vidovdan is the day of the Battle of 1389, Vidovdan. And they said, at that time, they put me in a cell with three or four other people. I wasn’t alone anymore, I stayed with three or four other friends. We could hear them circulating here, people singing Serbia, Serbia around the Pristina prison. They wanted to break in, on June 28. They wanted to break in and kill the Albanian prisoners.

They said that on that day, they were going to arrest the president of the Writers’ Association of Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova.<sup>27</sup> There was talk about whether he would be brought in or not. It seems he wasn’t brought in. He didn’t... But the UDB agents from Belgrade were there. Our own people, the servants, were there to take us, interrogate us, and so on. I was among those, they told me at least, “You are being released, going home. You are the last to be released from the isolated political prisoners,” and so on. This was a very painful story.

**Anita Susuri:** How long were you imprisoned this time?

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<sup>25</sup> Janez Drnovšek (1950-2008) was a Slovenian politician who served as the President of Yugoslavia from 1989 to 1990, and later as the Prime Minister and President of Slovenia. His tenure in Yugoslavia coincided with significant political turmoil and the eventual dissolution of the country.

<sup>26</sup> When a job is done carelessly, haphazardly, just to say it’s done; I give it a shine just to make it look finished, I give it a coating.

<sup>27</sup> Ibrahim Rugova (1944–2006) was a prominent Kosovar Albanian politician, writer, and journalist. He was the founder and leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and served as the President of Kosovo during the war and after until his death. Rugova was a key figure in the non-violent resistance movement against Serbian rule and played a crucial role in Kosovo’s struggle for independence.

**Meriman Braha:** This was three and a half months, almost four. There was an order from the President of Yugoslavia at that time that people should not be kept in isolation, but that investigations should be opened and completed, or they should be released to their homes. Since they couldn't prove that I was a member of Azem Vllasi's staff, they released me to go home. "We are releasing you. Go home, but know that we are still watching you."

**Anita Susuri:** How did the '90s continue for you? That's when the dismissal from work also happened.

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, the year '89. Towards the end of '89, they told me, "Come, do you want to join because a party is being formed," the Democratic League. I said, "It's not good to involve political prisoners right away. Let us catch our breath first. Secondly, those who participate in the founding should not be immediately accused of irredentism. If we go right away, they'll label us as nationalist, chauvinist Albanians. Then we can contribute." So, I didn't go. I was aware, but I didn't go, and I advised those I could to not go, to avoid compromising the work a party could do. Later on, I got involved.

In the '90s, I was somewhat active for a time in the founding of branches of the Democratic League. I participated in the founding in '90, in the establishment of the group of the Association of Albanian Teachers of Secondary Schools. Later, I took part in the founding of the Albanian Teachers' League "Naim Frashëri" at the end of that year. And then I mainly dealt with educational issues, with the problems of education. With education within Kosovo and with education in the diaspora.

But in '91, I had a three-four day imprisonment. With severe physical maltreatment, I was in very poor physical condition, and there were threats to my life to the point that it seemed reasonable not to fall into their hands again. So, in the '90s, I was forced to leave Kosovo and mainly contributed to education in the diaspora, in European countries, and also in Albania.

**Anita Susuri:** Was that the first time in the '90s that you went to Albania?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How was that experience for you?

**Meriman Braha:** Very difficult, very difficult, unbelievable, very difficult, extremely difficult. But you have to accept it as it is. Our country, there's nothing we can do, just as much as they could at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** Why was it difficult? Maybe your expectations were different?

**Meriman Braha:** Everything, everything. I went at a time when everything was lacking there, water, food, electricity, and people. There was nothing. People had changed, they were out of their own skin.



I don't know how it was before, but it was thought that people could be good. But at the time I went, I went during the worst possible time. When the ships for escaping from Albania were filled to the brim, looking like bunches of grapes, when you couldn't say anything positive or thankful about anything. You saw the police who didn't look or feel like police, and the soldiers who didn't look or feel like soldiers. It was a catastrophe!

So, just like you're asking me, someone at a big dinner asked, "How does Albania seem to you?" "It seems dark, bleak, as bad as it can be," we were many, "but my love for Albania has not diminished even this much {gestures with fingers to show a tiny amount}, the love remains the same, regardless of all the bad things for which you are responsible. If there is no electricity, you are responsible, if there is no water, you are responsible, if there is no bread, you are responsible." They were delayed in democratizing, not just a little but a lot. Therefore, they were dragging behind, a lot.

**Anita Susuri:** I want to ask you about the war years when it actually started in '98 with the killing of the Jashari family,<sup>28</sup> then the massacres that happened in Qirez.<sup>29</sup> Were you abroad during that time?

**Meriman Braha:** I was mainly in Tirana during that time.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you view all these events? How did you experience them?

**Meriman Braha:** Well, the war was expected. We were not prepared for war. We weren't prepared in any way. Except for the aspect of solidarity in the '90s, there was a kind of solidarity that cannot be described. The war, they often asked me both abroad and in many meetings, I traveled all over Europe, I didn't sleep two nights in one place and usually didn't sleep in hotels, I didn't have money. I slept in homes and I told those who gave me food and shelter, "Thank you for the shelter and the food, but my debt is to Kosovo, not to you. I owe you my gratitude. But I repay my debt to Kosovo with what I have."

They often asked me, "Do you think this can be resolved without war?" I didn't think so. I said, "Do you want my personal opinion or the official opinion?" I was an educational functionary, part of the Ministry of Education in exile. "If you ask me personally, in my opinion, I don't think it can be done without war. I don't long for war at all, not at all. If anyone knows what war is, it's me and my family. I don't long for war. But there is no solution without war because the Serbs won't give up, they won't

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<sup>28</sup> The killing of the Jashari family occurred in March 1998 in Prekaz, Kosovo, when Serbian forces attacked the home of Adem Jashari, a prominent leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The attack resulted in the deaths of 58 members of the Jashari family, including women and children, and is considered a pivotal event that galvanized the Albanian population and intensified the Kosovo conflict.

<sup>29</sup> The massacre in Qirez, also known as the Likoshan-Qirez massacre, occurred on February 28, 1998, when Serbian police and military forces attacked the villages of Likoshan and Qirez in the Drenica region of Kosovo. The assault resulted in the deaths of 24 ethnic Albanians, including civilians, and is considered one of the early atrocities that escalated the conflict between Serbian forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).



give up without a war. Be a hundred percent sure they won't give up. Even if Albanians fill all of Kosovo, they won't give up."

They won't give up even on Albania. They want Albania weak, destroyed, fragmented, and not united, that's how they want it. Because [the Serbs] dream of a day when they reach the Adriatic Sea, and the Albanians are an obstacle to that. That's why they say, "*Dobar Albanac samo mrtav Albanac*," the good Albanian is only the dead Albanian, and preferably without a grave, so there's no place to honor them. I believe this wouldn't have been resolved without war. This was also the thinking of the circles that made decisions about Kosovo. The problem of intervention was to provide humanitarian aid to save the people from genocide. The Albanian people from genocide. This is what NATO saved. Therefore, we had to fight, we had to complain, to speak, to act. But the practical act of expelling the Serbs from this area was accomplished only by NATO.

**Anita Susuri:** In the year, I mean in '99, NATO intervened here on March 24. You were outside Kosovo, but was any of your family here at that time?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, they were here. They were all here except for my immediate family. My sons, I have two sons, both were in the war. They had interrupted their studies to join the war. Now, they have finished the war and are doing their own things (laughs), they completed the war with honor. My other family members, my older brother died while being forced out of the house, at the gate of the yard. My other brother died a few months earlier from the previous tortures he endured in prisons and such, and he suffered severe torture from the UDB agents. That caused him heart problems, and he died a bit earlier, but during the war period. One in '98, the other in '99.

**Anita Susuri:** How, I mean, were you in touch? Or how, in what way were you able to have contact with your sons who were in the war, or did you not have contact?

**Meriman Braha:** No, they were in the war, and I was in touch because I had many connections with many people involved in the war. They kept me informed about everything. Only when one of them got wounded in the leg, they didn't inform me even though I was near the border. When I came here, I found out. That day, I was right at the border and didn't know. They knew but didn't tell me. They wanted to wait, thinking I would find out later, which might be better. Since he didn't have serious consequences, it's all good. I am happy they survived, but even if they had fallen, there was nothing I could do. It was their decision.

**Anita Susuri:** When did you return?

**Meriman Braha:** They, they decided themselves. They told me they wanted to go fight in '98-'99. They spent almost two full years, not completely two years, but from '98 and the next one until the liberation in '99. They said, "We are going to fight." They were in their studies, one in electrical

engineering, the other in law. And, “Is it okay to go?” “One of you should stay,” my wife said, so at least both sons wouldn’t go, because the day you go...

**Anita Susuri:** It’s dangerous.

**Meriman Braha:** It’s dangerous, you have to consider that you might...

**Anita Susuri:** That you might not be able to return.

**Meriman Braha:** That you might not be able to return. And they said, “No, each of us for himself.” One of them asked me, “Dad, what would you have done if you were our age?” “Are you asking your dad?” “Yes,” “I wouldn’t have asked at all, you would only find out later” (laughs), “I wouldn’t have asked at all.”

**Anita Susuri:** And you said you came to the border of Kosovo, when was this that you returned?

**Meriman Braha:** We returned afterwards, immediately after the war ended.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you receive the news that the war had ended?

**Meriman Braha:** We were watching... At 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, someone called me. My sons were in Koshare, in that harsh war zone with the Serbs. Someone called me at 3:00 in the morning. I thought, at 3:00 in the morning, only a big trouble, the war was ending, around June 10, 11, 12. And it happened, it had happened. “Hello!” A friend of mine answered, “How are you? Did I wake you up?” “Yes, yes, I woke up from sleep.” “How are you? Good?” That friend was Mustaf Sopi.

Mustaf Sopi was one of them, we worked together in education. He had one son and five daughters, and that only son was killed in the war, and I found out about it shortly before the war ended. I said, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t reach you earlier,” “No, you couldn’t have reached me, because I was in the mountains. But there’s nothing you can do. I just called to inform you that we’re entering tomorrow morning. This morning we will be in Pristina.” It was such great news, “Thank you so much for thinking of informing me. Congratulations and well done!” That’s it.

**Anita Susuri:** And when you returned, what condition did you find Kosovo in?

**Meriman Braha:** In a bad condition. First of all, some family members were missing, my mother had passed away during that time, just before the war. Within the family, I had three of such losses... here it was a real chaos, definitely. But since the Serbs were retreating, and this retreat lasted, it wasn’t immediate. I was in Prizren when those two Serbs were killed in Prizren, it was recorded, filmed, and

the Germans were there. He turned around and *bam, bam, bam* {onomatopoeia}. Left two dead on the spot. The others gathered and continued walking.

It was hard, it wasn't easy. But the destruction, the characteristic burning of neighborhoods, of villages was terrible, the smell. Together with my wife, we went to Gjakova, then we passed through there. When we passed by Krusha, you could smell the burning of people who had been killed and burned, various rotting bodies. So many people were mutilated. These are... but freedom doesn't come on its own, it has to be called for, and often it comes bloodily. It doesn't come on its own. No one would bring it to you. I wouldn't have wanted to experience war, but it came. There was no other way. It was the first time that forces, a great force along with others, came to help to save you because they saw it.

In Tirana, in April '98, an exhibition was opened with photographs of the victims in Prekaz. One of my former students, Ilaz Bylykbashi. He had taken the photographs at the scene, having gone there during those days. He brought the film, we developed the photographs, and opened the exhibition in the center of Tirana, right in the center. The entire center was open for two weeks, I don't know exactly how long. There were 150 photographs. Of Hamëz, Adem Jashari, Shaban Jashari, the mother, the wife, Zade Jashari, Kushtrim who was 14 years old. With various mutilations, catastrophic. But the people are above all, above all.

We have a duty to protect, and you have a duty to remember what happened, to record it and spread it, and if possible, to the younger generation, younger than you. You are there, not me, because I am disgusted by these evils. Even if I had another life, I wouldn't choose another life but this one again. Even living it a second time, it would still be like this.

**Anita Susuri:** After the war, I believe you finally came back to live in Kosovo?

**Meriman Braha:** Yes, permanently. After the war, I was the director of a department, there were about ten or twelve departments. I was the director of the Department of Non-Resident Affairs. Later, it became part of the Ministry of Culture, the Department of Culture, and for about five or six years, I worked there. Then I worked as the deputy director of the Museum of Kosovo and then retired. I haven't been involved in party politics. I haven't taken sides with anyone, everyone has their own beliefs, and I have mine.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Meriman, if you have anything to add at the end, please go ahead.

**Meriman Braha:** Thank you, I thank you for your time and patience in listening to a, this is a very short version, very brief. Eighty years condensed into a few minutes, but it is our duty to tell you, the younger generation, that nothing in this place has come easily, nothing has been achieved easily. In this place, everything has been accomplished with great sacrifices. Among these many sacrifices, there have been numerous burnings, countless killings, many imprisonments by the Serbs of Serbia. May

you never have to see it, may you only have to hear about it, but may you never have to see their face again.

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you very much for your contribution and your time.

**Meriman Braha:** Thank you, thank you.

**Anita Susuri:** It was a pleasure.