Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH SAKIBE DOLI

Gjakova | Date: July 20, 2023
Duration: 111 minutes

Present:

1. Sakibe Doli (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Ana Morina (Camera)

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

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

Part One

Anita Susuri: Ms. Sakibe, if you could introduce yourself and tell us something about your earliest childhood memories?

Sakibe Doli: My name is Sakibe Doli, I was born on December 1, 1953, in Gjakova, where I was raised.. My family of origin is a very large family in Gjakova, we are many family members. Naturally, over time, the family divided into smaller households. My grandfather was the fifth of his brothers, then my father was also the fifth, and each of them had sons, so today we have a large number of family members living in the city of Gjakova.

I remember my father's stories about how, since our family had many sons, they were always invited by Beg and Curri, meaning Bajram Curri[1] and the Beg,[2] who fought and called on them to take part in the defense of Albanian lands. Then, as the years went by, I was just a child at the time and didn't pay much attention to it, but over the years, Gjakova has always been known for its resistance against the enemy.

Growing up in such an environment, and in a family where conversations about the freedom of the homeland always dominated, it was inevitable that you'd be drawn in that direction. At a very young age, while still in primary school, I remember my father, his friends, and my uncles, gathering in a room. I could read well as a child, so they would take me into the room and have me read Fishta's[3] verses aloud. We know that Fishta was banned, and if someone was caught with that text, with that book in hand, they would certainly face serious consequences.

[1] Bajram Curri (1862–1925) was an Albanian nationalist and guerrilla leader who fought for the rights and independence of Albanians during the late Ottoman and early Yugoslav periods. He played a key role in the armed resistance for the protection of Albanian territories.
[2] Hysen Bej Kryeziu or Cena Begi (1895-1927), from Gjakova, was a popular leader, deputy prefect of Kruma, Albanian Minister of Interior, and diplomat. In Kruma, he served as commander of the border troops, and in 1915 he was arrested and imprisoned by the Austrians. He clashed with the forces of Bajram Curri, whom he pursued until March 1925, in the Highlands of Gjakova.
[3] Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940) was an Albanian Franciscan friar, poet, and national activist, best known for his epic poem *Lahuta e Malcís* (The Highland Lute), which celebrates Albanian resistance and identity.

I used to read those verses, and even as a child they stirred a lot of emotion in me and a deep love for the homeland. Fishta was, so to speak, that first light, the first spark. Later on, Radio Tirana and Albanian Television further nurtured that sense of love for the homeland. Kosovo and Gjakova were always under occupation by Serbian rule for as long as I can remember.

This regime, with each passing day, kept increasing the massacres, increasing the killings, increasing the imprisonments, meaning there was a deep gloom, a deep resentment present in the city of Gjakova. I came to understand this much later, after the war, when I moved into an apartment to live in, since my house had been burned, and I found a testament written by a high-ranking Serbian commander who had spoken extensively about our city. He had served in the border zone.

I came to understand later what kind of hostility they held. It was because we were ethnically pure, with only two percent of Serbs living here, and even they spoke Albanian. We had never accepted to coexist or intermarry with them, to mix blood with them. Then, we had been given access to education a bit earlier, and being a border area also bothered the Serbs a lot. They had harbored all that hostility and unleashed it during the war, but also continuously throughout our city's history.

As the years went by, we would often listen to Radio Tirana… like most people in Kosovo, we loved Enver Hoxha[4] because he was identified with Albania. For us, Albania was our homeland. Naturally, we felt a longing because of the barbed wire that separated us, meaning, until the 1990s, we didn't dare to go there freely. That deep longing… It was like the love one has for a mother, that's how we felt about Albania. Later on, television further strengthened our national feeling.

Later on, we came to understand who Enver Hoxha really was, but for that time, he served us greatly. Because by identifying Albania with him, we loved Albania even more. I, for example, I heard him at a congress - I don't remember which one - when he said, "Until Kosovo unites with Albania, just like the two Germanies and the two Koreas, the world will not have peace." In my eyes, he seemed like a great visionary. I mean, for someone to speak of such unification, he must have had a great vision and been very confident to present that at a congress.

So these were moments that inspired us even more, that fueled our love for the homeland. Then, after primary school, I started reading a few illegal books. They would circulate hand to hand. Most of them came to me from my uncle, and then I would pass them on to my classmates. We were organized in small groups. Because there was always a layer of society that served the regime, and the wider masses who opposed it. I believe this was the case in every city in Kosovo. We had to be careful around those who held decision-making positions during the regime.

[4] Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) was the communist leader of Albania from the end of the First World War until his death in 1985. He established a strict Stalinist regime, marked by political repression and international isolation. Despite the authoritarian nature of his rule, many Albanians in Kosovo viewed him positively during the Yugoslav era because he represented a symbol of Albanian national unity and independence.

Whereas we had our own circle, a circle that differed greatly, both in terms of economic status and in the priorities they [those allied with the regime] had. Whether in education or elsewhere, they always had the upper hand. Even if something was being organized, they were always given priority. Although there were many excellent and capable students on our side, there were always differences, I hope they will begin to fade from now on. We used to talk and started writing poems about love for the homeland, for Albania, for Kosovo, for national unification.

When I mentioned that Odhise Paskali[5] came to our city, this was before the 1990s, it was a major event for us. Our group went out to meet him, and we immediately caught the attention of the police. At that time, it was the UDB,[6] even though there were also Albanians serving in the UDB. Out of fear, because it was my first year of gymnasium, we got rid of those notebooks with our poems, and in that moment, a part of my inspiration was cut off.

We began thinking not only about ourselves but also about our families. We were always extra careful to make sure that our families or our wider circle of relatives and friends wouldn't suffer consequences. From that time on, in the gymnasium, by the end of it, we started organizing ourselves into threes, into underground groups. It was very early on, but… My aunt's husband was a political prisoner, and I would often spend time with their children, and that's where the first underground activities began, writing pamphlets on the occasion of visits from Yugoslav leaders who came to Kosovo. We opposed those visits and always demanded freedom and independence for our Kosovo.

In 1974, when Kosovo's autonomy was established, we considered it an achievement. Because this was the result of the leadership of that time, but also of the people who were constantly working in illegality. For example, my brother-in-law was imprisoned for raising the flag. His daughter, on November 28th,[7] raised I don't know how many flags, along with two or three classmates, she raised flags all over Gjakova, which was seen as the greatest absurdity of that time. This was due to the consequences imposed by the harsh Serbo-Slav, Serbo-Yugoslav regime.

On the occasion of the pamphlets, one of our friends was imprisoned, and naturally, fear grew deeply among us, also because of my father and my uncles, we were afraid they might be taken to prison too.

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[5] Odhise Paskali (1903–1985) was a renowned Albanian sculptor, often considered the father of Albanian sculpture. He is best known for creating several major national monuments in Albania, including the iconic Skanderbeg monument in Tirana. His work played a significant role in shaping Albanian national visual identity during the 20th century.

[6] UDB (short for *Uprava državne bezbednosti*, meaning State Security Administration) was the secret police organization of the former Yugoslavia. It operated as an intelligence and surveillance agency, tasked with suppressing political dissent and monitoring opposition. In Kosovo, UDB often targeted Albanian nationalists and activists, and included both Serbian and Albanian agents.

[7] November 28th, also known as Flag Day, marks the day in 1912 when Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire. It is a national holiday celebrated by Albanians around the world as a symbol of national pride and unity. In Kosovo, public displays of the Albanian flag during the Yugoslav period were prohibited and could result in severe punishment.

Even though they didn't spare anyone, not even children or youth. They arrested my maternal aunt's son, who used to come to our house, and we would go to his too, we collaborated. They even asked him about me. So I always lived with the fear of what might happen, whether they would ban me from school, whether I wouldn't be able to move forward in life, and thousands of thoughts would run through my head. Should I continue or should I pull back?

To pull back felt like a betrayal of my friends, even though we were young, it felt like a betrayal. But to continue, I was afraid for my brothers, for my father, and so on. In our family, we were six children and our parents, eight members in total. My father was a laborer. He raised us through the sweat of his brow and made sure we all got an education. He worked hard so that we wouldn't lack anything, working both public and private jobs, because the only way he could educate us all was by doing both. Otherwise, he wouldn't have managed.

Many times at home I would see some papers and ask, "What are these?" "These are voluntary contribution slips," he would tell me, payments made for the construction of roads, bridges, and the rebuilding of Skopje. In other words, all of Kosovo contributed through the voluntary labor and payments of its workers. Because the Yugoslav state didn't invest in Kosovo, it only took from Kosovo and didn't invest anything in return. I remember reading in an article that, out of all the different wage levels across Yugoslavia, Kosovo ranked at the very bottom, there was a clear disparity.

Even though they proclaimed to the world that the provinces were equal to the republics, this was absurd. Because we were very different, not just economically, but also in terms of development. It's well known, and I remember it as a child, *Trepça works, Belgrade builds.* That didn't come out of nowhere. It came from reality. They exploited Trepça[8] and used it for needs outside of Kosovo. Every time I traveled outside and returned to Kosovo, I cried. Because I saw the huge difference between Kosovo and the other republics. The gap was enormous. Yet they kept proclaiming equality, brotherhood and unity.

It was only to deceive international opinion into thinking that Yugoslavia was a state that respected human rights. Nowhere were human rights more violated than in Kosovo. My father told me that he had formed an underground group with some friends from Gjilan to overthrow Ranković.[9] It was a group of friends he had served with in the military. But one of the members in Gjilan ended up in

[8] Trepça is a large industrial mining complex located near Mitrovica, Kosovo. During the Yugoslav period, Trepça was one of the most important economic assets in the region, rich in lead, zinc, and silver. Although heavily exploited, the wealth generated from Trepça was primarily used to develop other parts of Yugoslavia, while Kosovo itself remained underdeveloped and marginalized.

[9] Aleksandar Ranković (1909–1983) was a high-ranking Yugoslav communist official and close associate of Josip Broz Tito. As head of the State Security Administration (UDB), he was known for his hardline policies and repressive measures, especially against Albanians in Kosovo. Ranković promoted centralized control and surveillance, and his tenure was marked by widespread human rights abuses in the province. He was removed from power in 1966, partly due to allegations of illegal wiretapping and overreach.

prison, and the group was dismantled. Communication back then was also much more difficult than it is today, between Gjilan and Gjakova, for example.

There were two or three of them from Gjakova and four from Gjilan. They formed the group, but with the first arrest, the group was dismantled and they were left without any further organization. I always used to say to him, "Where did I get this from?" (laughs). "No," he would say, "you came to it on your own. I have six others [children], but they don't take initiative the way you do. You do it on your own, that's why you're involved." That's how our days passed under oppression, with very dark news.

Boys were coming back from the army in coffins.[10] They would tell stories of how people were taken from their homes at night and thrown from trains, under made-up excuses. The UDB would kill and then justify it somehow. But the people knew what was happening, and the need for freedom and independence kept growing. By then, our groups had grown in number, and one member of a group would communicate with another for various organizing efforts, distributing pamphlets, books, and propaganda material that came from the Western world, especially from Switzerland.

I think *Lajmëtari i Lirisë* (The Messenger of Freedom) was one of the pamphlets, and there was another one whose name I can't recall at the moment. We used to go to Pristina to get them and bring them back, they were a few issues, and although it was very risky, we managed without any problems. We brought them by bus and distributed them among our groups. People from both the city and the villages were involved.

The leader of our group was from a village. His brother was killed while serving in the army, his body was returned with no explanation whatsoever. And when we went to visit, that boy had already left the house. Because the UDB immediately went to search the house, and there were suspicions distributing the pamphlets, because he worked in a factory, and every morning the place would be filled with pamphlets, especially after his brother's killing, pamphlets which accused the regime and so on. They suspected that he was one of the people distributing them. He was forced to flee and couldn't even stay for his brother's burial. We, as a group, went [to the burial], even though we hadn't communicated with each other. Only his mother recognized us, because we had held some meetings there.

But most of the meetings were held at my house. I had my own room, and that's where they would come. It was with my father's permission and support. My mother was always afraid and would tell me, "You're a girl, be careful, be careful. What's life worth to us if something happens to you? Do you know who the Serbs are? Do you know what they're capable of? Do you know what they can do to you in prison?" She was always afraid, while my father always kept the door open for me. That gave me the

[10] Refers to cases when soldiers killed or deceased under suspicious circumstances during military service were brought back in coffins. Authorities often provided official explanations that did not match the families' testimonies or the known facts of the incident.

strength to keep going and not stop. After independence,[11] a sort of atmosphere began, talks about a university and so on, but it was a momentum in a very weak sense, let's say…

Anita Susuri: You mean after '74, right?

Sakibe Doli: Yes. Because things did not change much. I remember one event, let's say, a very proud and significant one, the establishment of the university. It's well known that there were sacrifices made for this university as well. The organization of the 1968 demonstrations,[12] in which even my cousins took part, and the organization of other demonstrations. Kosovo has always been bubbling with these kinds of events in order to reach the days we live in today. There were people imprisoned because of those demonstrations. But a result was achieved, in the end.

The opening of the university had an impact on the education of generations, especially the education of girls. In my generation, not a single girl was left without a university degree. But we studied a lot. If I compare that time to now, school seems easier nowadays (laughs). We studied hard and were educated in a patriotic spirit. I studied language and literature because that's what resonated with me the most. The National Renaissance[13] is the part I liked the most. It's well known that the writers of that period were among the greatest patriots, who contributed not only to our culture and literature but also to national liberation.

With great passion, whenever I held the journal in my hands, I explained the *Rilindja Kombëtare*[14] (National Renaissance) with the most enthusiasm, more than anything else in literature. Being constantly connected with the *Rilindas*[15] figures and with people who fought through great hardships every day, you naturally grow stronger and more determined, and you're no longer afraid of anything.

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[11] When the speaker refers to "independence" in this context, she is referring to the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, which granted Kosovo a higher degree of autonomy within the Yugoslav federation. Although not full independence, this constitutional change gave Kosovo its own constitution, assembly, and representation in federal institutions, and was perceived at the time as a significant step toward self-governance.

[12] The 1968 demonstrations in Kosovo were a series of student-led protests demanding greater rights for Albanians within Yugoslavia. Protesters called for the recognition of Kosovo as a republic, the establishment of the University of Prishtina, and the use of the Albanian national flag. The demonstrations were met with repression by Yugoslav authorities, including arrests and expulsions, but they marked a significant moment in the political mobilization of Albanians in Kosovo and contributed to later constitutional changes, including the autonomy granted in 1974.

[13] *Rilindja Kombëtare* (the Albanian National Renaissance) was a cultural and political movement during the 19th and early 20th centuries that aimed to promote Albanian national identity, language, and independence from the Ottoman Empire. It played a key role in the development of Albanian literature, education, and political thought. Prominent figures of the movement, such as Naim Frashëri, Sami Frashëri, and Pashko Vasa, are celebrated as national heroes for their contributions to Albanian cultural and national awakening.

[14] *Rilindja Kombëtare* ("National Renaissance") refers to the Albanian national awakening movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to promote Albanian language, culture, and political autonomy, culminating in the declaration of independence in 1912.

[15] *Rilindas* (meaning "renaissance figure") refers to the intellectuals, writers, educators, and activists of the Albanian National Renaissance.

It's interesting because fear is human, there were times when I didn't just feel fear, but deep fear, but when it came to stopping my activities, there was never any doubt in me. Whether to stop or continue, that question never came up again. That was, so to speak, the permanent permission I gave myself, along with the support from my family that I had throughout my life.

After that, more or less, came graduation and employment. But I wasn't given ideological-political approval, so they sent me to work in a village near the border with Albania. A remote village, one that had just opened its primary school. I was… the school had recently added four more grades to the initial four, meaning it had just become a full primary school. Being a border area, half the people were with the regime, and the other half were patriots. That's where I built my circle, so to speak. Because the people who had relatives in Albania, those relatives would come across the border illegally.

There were cases, and it truly pains me to say this, but there were people like that, members of the Communist Party, who left their own guest, their own uncle, behind and went to report him out of fear. That's a betrayal, and when I heard about it, I couldn't even look that person in the eye afterward. Working in such an environment, where half were patriots and the other half, or even less than half, were collaborating with the regime, was not easy at all.

It happened to me that, on three occasions, they came to the school and took me out of class for so-called "informative conversations." It was about organizing demonstrations, about the students, for example, if someone had written a slogan like "Kosova Republic" on the school walls. I was always the one held responsible. The first time they took me, I saw it in the eyes of the students, seventh grade, and even though they were young, I saw their eyes filled with tears, and they came toward me to give me a hug. The police officer stopped them.

I didn't know what was going to happen to me, whether I'd come back or not. It was an indescribable feeling, something I had never experienced before. A kind of spiritual breaking point, because I had heard about the prisons, I had heard stories… I thought, this is the end, with them everything ends. But in these situations, it also comes down to luck and who you're dealing with. At that time, the officers were still Albanian. Instead of pushing the case further, they would call me in and try to get me to cooperate. They wanted me to report who was coming from Albania, who was bringing materials to the school, what was going on there. But I would never do that.

They would say, "Stay here, you're fine, you can't come and teach in the city." I got used to it. I worked to awaken that same feeling in my students. The Albanian language also carries that responsibility. For example, when teaching grammar, I would use examples that related to the National Renaissance, to Albania, to love for the homeland. Most of the students truly embraced that feeling, and when we read their essays, I can't even describe the emotions I felt, I was so happy. Because even the children of those families I suspected were supporters of the regime had been inspired and were expressing themselves completely differently from their parents.

That was a result of my work. In that village, as I said, the history teacher, the language teachers, and other educators formed a kind of group. Because we were connected by the same cause… So there in the village, I began forming another underground group. A language teacher joined, a physical education teacher, and a history professor. Another group was formed there in the village because it was important to expand the network. Not just in the city, and not just with the people from Reka e Keqe,[16] we now also had collaborators from the Has region, since it was a border area. It was very important for us to have collaborators there too.

We started. There was a former political prisoner there who also provided propaganda material from the West, and we began distributing it as well. You could see that the situation was changing every day. In places where the Communist Party and another kind of regime used to dominate, people, students, began to awaken and change their behavior toward the country, toward Kosovo, and toward Gjakova. After three "informative conversations," when they couldn't break me, that's when the [Kosovo] Communist Party began to collapse.

In 1981, when the demonstrations[17] erupted across all of Kosovo, I had two brothers who were students, and they were in very bad conditions because the police had beaten them severely. I couldn't leave my teaching job and go, because that would draw attention. You had to be extremely careful. But during the week we had one day off, and I used that opportunity to go to Prishtina. I met with them. One of my brothers was in very bad shape, but after some time, with the help of doctors who worked illegally, he recovered.

My heart ached because the demonstrations hadn't started in Gjakova yet. Teuta Hadri had her own group, and one of our group's members was connected with Teuta's group. She told our friend that the next day, on this date and at this time, the demonstrations in Gjakova would begin. That was a moment of great joy because I had been feeling bad. I felt bad toward my friends from university. I felt bad toward the other groups. But the moment came, and only five of us showed up.

I called many female friends, but they didn't join because they were afraid. There were plenty of men present. We were there, and they placed us in the middle so we wouldn't stand out too much, because five people would definitely draw attention. But they put us in the center, and it was our neighborhood, almost the entire neighborhood was out protesting. There were people we recognized

[16] Reka e Keqe is an ethnographic and geographic region that includes the cluster of villages from the slopes of the Junik and Kosharë mountains, along the Erenik River down to the city of Gjakova.

[17] The 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo were a series of large-scale student-led protests that began at the University of Prishtina and quickly spread across the region. Initially sparked by demands for better living conditions, the protests escalated into calls for the recognition of Kosovo as a republic within the Yugoslav federation. The Yugoslav authorities responded with violent repression, mass arrests, and a widespread crackdown on Albanian activists. The events marked a turning point in Kosovo's political history and intensified ethnic tensions in the years that followed.

as being from Gjakova, but also some from nearby villages. That's when the demonstration began, a young man tore down film posters, which caused a stir, drawing even more people in, and then the flag was raised.

We stayed there, shouting, "Kosova Republic," "We want independence," "National unification," many demands, until the police showed up. With every demonstration, the list of demands kept growing. Then we were told, "You are just five women, you'll stand out too much," and all that police presence… From the Palace of Culture, they had climbed up to the top floor and were taking photographs. I thought, there's no way out of this. I felt sorry for the school. But still, life no longer had the same value, there was no more fear. Even if I lost my job, I thought, it's worth it for these reasons.

A man, a driver, said, "Get in my car," and we knew him. He took us away before the police intervened with tear gas and started chasing people. The protest grew larger because students who lived in the dormitories joined as well, students from the higher pedagogical school. I believe it achieved its purpose, and I felt at peace because Gjakova didn't fall behind Prishtina and the other cities that had organized similar protests, similar demonstrations. After the demonstrations...

Anita Susuri: I also want to ask you something, you mentioned your brothers and that doctors worked illegally. Can you tell me why it was difficult for them to go to the hospital and seek help?

Sakibe Doli: Maybe they were just afraid. Because it's well known that the police were everywhere. Based on all the violence the police had used on my brother, they said he had lost consciousness, he was unresponsive for several hours and completely covered in blood. He was the second of my brothers. Now, going to the hospital in that condition, he was also afraid, they could've easily arrested him. The only way to avoid prison was to hide somewhere and call for help from doctors working illegally. In fact, it was a medical student who helped him, treated his wounds, helped him regain consciousness, and even brought food and insulin. He got back on his feet.

The same brother, this happened on March 11, came to Gjakova on April 2 to take part in the demonstrations. At that point, my father had gone out, kind of as a bystander, I guess, you could call it that. He went out both to stay close to us and, if needed, to act. I saw that in his pocket he had a kind of slingshot, a pair of slingshot bands, and a screwdriver. He even said, "At least I could do something to one of the police." These were our weapons, we had no other means.

After that, they recovered quickly. Following this, it seems the Committee [of the League of Communists] fell, that's when people started handing in their party membership cards. Once the Committee collapsed, they came and called me to work at the gymnasium.[18] The principal himself

[18] Gymnasium is a type of secondary school in many European countries, including Kosovo, that prepares students for university. It typically covers grades 10–12 and offers a more academically rigorous curriculum compared to vocational schools.

came and invited me. Then, after inviting me, he announced the job opening to make it official. He had already decided to hire me. From then on, things were a bit easier for me, because I had already given a lot in the village, I had helped change the village's mindset.

I also helped change the culture, had some influence on it. Because girls weren't being sent to school. I went from family to family, spoke with their parents, and in my second year of work, five girls were sent to school, today they're teachers. That might not seem like a big deal, but for me it was a huge source of satisfaction, because it meant that girls were getting an education and going on to serve as teachers themselves, instead of teachers coming in from the city.

Today I still keep in touch with them, and I'm very proud that they never took advantage of the trust or the permission their parents gave them, even though, of course, their parents had every right to educate their daughters, but the mentality at the time was different. In that village, for as long as the school had existed, not a single girl from the village had attended. Later on, I would also help them with meeting various needs.

If they had a doctor's visit and needed medication, the doctor would come to the village clinic, they needed someone to buy the medicine in the city because there was no pharmacy. The women would line up, and I would tell them jokingly, "You're mixing up the order." These are small things, but they're things I can never forget. Even today, when I meet them, they greet me with deep respect, and I do the same. I love them, and they love me, and they've never forgotten me.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: Ms. Sakibe, I'd like to ask you a bit about the cultural life in Gjakova. How much did you follow it? What was it like here?

Sakibe Doli: Gjakova had a professional theater. Only three cities had a professional theater, and many great plays were staged. Due to the regime, comedies were performed more often, but dramas weren't lacking either. I followed it regularly, as much as I could. It was part of my field, so I didn't miss a single performance or event, I either watched them or took part in them.

The theater was a source of inspiration for the younger generations. Because it spread a certain spirit, especially through plays with patriotic content. It was a spirit that spread throughout the city. Around that time, groups from Albania also began to visit. I remember once the State Ensemble came. As usual, all of us from the various groups were the first ones there. It was difficult to get tickets because, as we know, tickets were mostly taken by those in power.

We would stand there as if in protest. Either we were going in, or it wasn't going to happen without us getting in. There was a huge crowd of people, everyone pushing to get closer… the police would react. Once, we had climbed up to a balcony, and when we threw something, they pushed us, they pushed us down. But still, we managed to get in. I remember following those groups not only in Gjakova but also in Prishtina, because those events were usually held in the evenings, and I had already finished school by then.

I also remember going to Prishtina, Radio Shkodra was there, with singers, it was a mixed group, but they had come under the name of Radio Shkodra. We went backstage to the dressing rooms. I used to write to people from Albania, to singers… One time I even called Radio Tirana, it was the first phone call made directly from Gjakova, the first direct connection. I was amazed that I managed to connect to one of the shows and actually spoke with the host. After that, I kept writing letters to them for a long time.

When I went to Albania for the first time, I said, "All that propaganda you fed us…" I was shocked, shocked by the misery I saw there. I said, "How could you…" I couldn't bring myself to say, "You lied to us," but I said, "This is deception," though we didn't even know it ourselves. I told them, "You had access to Italian television, but the state would tell us it was all propaganda, that everything was propaganda, and we had that idea drilled into our heads." So when those groups from Albania came, it felt like a huge celebration, truly a big celebration in Gjakova.

At the city stadium, the one they've now destroyed by building apartment blocks, they've ruined a part of our cultural heritage and taken away a piece of our youth. That place should have remained as it was, a symbol of culture. I remember when the State Ensemble came there, Fitnete Rexha was among them, people were filled with enthusiasm, expressing deep emotion, and releasing all that pent-up anger toward the oppressor during that concert.

The whole city was on its feet, the stadium was full, there wasn't a single spot left, and even outside the stadium people were following along, because it was the first time that brothers and sisters from Albania had come to give a concert in Gjakova. Then there were the theater groups that would visit. It was impossible for me not to go in, not to see them, not to follow them. Now, whenever we went to another city, they were there, the agents from Kosovo who followed these groups throughout all of Kosovo.

He [one of the agents] said to me, "You came here too, huh?" In Prishtina, he scolded me a bit. And in Gjakova, I had gone backstage and was chatting with the artists, with the singers. He said, "So you made it here too?" I replied, "This is my city, I could have you thrown out of here" (laughs). So this was an achievement, the groups that came from Albania, the theater on the other hand, the Albanian films, even the few that there were, all of that had a strong impact in raising the level of patriotic feeling among the citizens.

There are some events you never forget, that leave a mark on you for life. Now, Albanian films are shown every night, but who has the time to engage with them? By now, you've understood their significance. But back then, they were, truly, beyond excellent...

Anita Susuri: And in the dressing room you mentioned, what kinds of conversations did you have with them, for example? What did they share with you?

Sakibe Doli: For example, during the first meeting, when we didn't even know what to say, someone said, "Long live Enver Hoxha" (laughs). A guy from our neighborhood said that, you know, words would just get lost in that first encounter. But then the conversation would open up. They were much more reserved, coming from a harsh system. Understandably so. One singer, as soon as she crossed into Albania, said, "We've returned to our hell." She had seen Montenegro and she thought even Kosovo seemed better than Albania. They had seen Turkey, they had seen… and when she said that, the agents were with her, and immediately arrested her, abused her in prison, and she lost her life.

They were more reserved, while we would speak openly. We would say, "We love Albania, we want to unite with you." They were much more guarded. They didn't express much. I only remember one director from Radio Shkodra who said, "They've ruined us, they've divided us." Because he could see the enthusiasm and the warm welcome they received, the way people treated them. He said, "How did this happen, that brothers and sisters ended up separated from one another?" We all know, it was the regime that Enver Hoxha, as much as he presented himself as a patriot, in reality, acted quite differently. We understood that more clearly later on.

So, even under that regime, cultural life wasn't poor, it was well organized. Culture and the university both played an important role in the development and progress of the Albanian people. They helped open minds and eyes to the realization that something here wasn't right. The violation of human rights happened most severely in Kosovo. Serbia's prisons were *ding* [packed] {onomatopoeia} with Albanian prisoners. And Gjakova, too, had many who were imprisoned.

The city valued political prisoners. They were respected, and people were inspired by their actions. I, for example, was inspired by the work of political prisoners. We respected them as people of ideals, as individuals who stood apart from other layers of society. It's well known what kind of support those in power had, maybe we even resented them, but these individuals, we held in the highest regard. They served as an example for us, helping us build a sense of pure and unwavering idealism.

In the 1990s, I believe, the *Lidhja Demokratike* (Democratic League)[19] was formed, yes, around that time. Before that, there was something called For Democracy Against Violence, some sort of survey or initiative, I'm not sure exactly what it was, launched by Veton Surroi[20] and distributed across various cities. I took that and distributed many copies to be filled out by people. This was meant to pave the way for registering people with the democratic movement.

I remember being with a friend of mine in Has, the area near Prizren. As we were going house to house, night fell on us. At that point, we had no way to return to the city. A car from the village gave us a ride, but the driver had a small axe in the vehicle. The leftover materials we had, we hid them under the car seat because we knew there was a police checkpoint on the route we had to pass. Now, the axe, we had no way of hiding it, and they spotted it immediately.

It was risky, they could've taken us in, but they only detained the car owner, whom they released after 24 hours because he justified himself by saying, "I use that axe for chopping wood," or something like that, however he managed to explain it. They let him go. He had just wanted to do us a favor, and I kept thinking, "He's become a victim because of us." I remember they kept us there for questioning until dawn. It was me, my friend, and the car owner. When they took him, they didn't put him in their own police car, they took him along with his own car. They left the car parked outside the police station.

We were watching the lights, if the lights went off at the police station, it meant they had stopped the questioning or the torture. At some point, the lights did go off, and we left. We spent the whole night monitoring the situation. Back home, the alarm had already gone off, my family was used to it, but my friend's family wasn't. I told her, "You'll sleep at my place tonight, and tomorrow we'll tell them you spent the night at my house," so it would be a bit easier for her. After that, we continued going house to house, registering people into the democratic movement.

We always started with For Democracy Against Violence. Maybe you've heard of those keys we used to hang on balconies, that was also part of this campaign. There was that initiative too. People began registering in the democratic movement in large numbers. The day it was established in Gjakova, I was teaching. It happened in the morning, and I was in class, it really weighed on me that I couldn't be there. But later I got involved. I registered right away and was elected a member of the Women's Forum presidency of the democratic movement in Gjakova. I was assigned to the cultural section.

[19] The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was the first political party established in Kosovo in 1989, during the final years of Yugoslavia. Led by Ibrahim Rugova, it promoted a peaceful, non-violent resistance movement against Serbian repression and advocated for Kosovo's independence. The LDK played a central role in organizing parallel political, educational, and social institutions during the 1990s.

[20] Veton Surroi is a prominent Kosovar Albanian journalist, writer, and politician. He was a leading figure in Kosovo's civil society during the 1990s and played a key role in promoting democratic values and non-violent resistance. He founded the independent newspaper *Koha Ditore* and was involved in initiatives such as *For Democracy Against Violence*, which aimed to mobilize public support for democratic reforms. Surroi later served as a member of the Kosovo Assembly and remains an influential public intellectual.

It's well known that during those years everything had come to a halt, culture and all kinds of activities. That's why, through the forum, we tried to organize various events and discussions related to culture. When I was in Albania, I had taken some books that were smuggled in by two of my students, who were from the border area. I had left two sacks of books in Kukës, and they brought them illegally, through the mountains, to their home, and then little by little, I would take them and bring them to mine. Among those books were materials and notes we had been missing. For example, the history of the first Albanian school, we had only limited information, but that book had everything.

We had a lot, we gathered a lot of material that later helped me in the culture committee. In the meantime, we would also visit the families of political prisoners, or families whose sons had been killed in the army or in prison. We also visited single mothers to offer support. We helped financially with money collected around the city, and we also provided food and hygiene packages. I remember we went to Suhareka and Drenica as part of the Women's Forum and delivered aid. Suhareka had experienced floods and was badly affected. Maybe it was symbolic help, but still, we did our best to contribute.

At that time, I was assigned to go to Albania because the group of political prisoners from Gjakova were being held unjustly, as is well known, for a slogan, for a simple act. I was directed to Pjetër Arbnori, who was then the Speaker of the Assembly [of Albania]. When I went to Tirana, they received me without any problems. I told them that… Albania used to have a program, Radio Tirana, for compatriots abroad. We used to listen to it, it was broadcast in multiple languages and could be heard in other countries as well. We submitted a request for the release of the political prisoners.

Right after that, once the broadcast aired and through Pjetër Arbnori's connections, several political prisoners from Gjakova were released. I had made the request in general terms, but perhaps others were released too, I had received information specifically about these individuals. That's how it continued for several years with the women from the Forum. These were political prisoners, usually sentenced after the 1981 demonstrations, people who had received sentences of 15, 14, or 11 years.

One of them was also my husband, he had been sentenced to 15 years. His sister was a member of the Women's Forum as well, she was an activist too. She helped me a lot in providing aid to people. After that, a new chapter began, a period that was perhaps the most difficult of my entire life: the preparation for national liberation.

Anita Susuri: First, I'd like to, before we move on to the later years. You mentioned your husband, and that he was a former political prisoner. How did the two of you come together? You talked about his sister, but how did you decide to be together?

Sakibe Doli: At the time when he was in prison, I had students of mine who had been soldiers and ended up imprisoned. Maybe you remember the Paraćin case,[21] where a young man was killed. They arrested them, they killed those soldiers without any cause. One of my students was imprisoned there as well. He was in prison together with Mislim. That student was released earlier because he had received a shorter sentence. He had sent me a sign, so to speak. That's how communication with his sister started becoming more frequent. She had two brothers, both of them. All of them had been political prisoners, five in total, but later on, it was mainly Mislim and Sokol.

He was the head of the general staff, that is, of the military court during the war. Before organizing for national liberation began, Sokol and others had formed a group with the aim of creating an army. At that point… that's when I got involved specifically with preparing the emblems for the army. I would send them out. I called many friends to help me, but most made excuses. I worked with another friend, doing what we could to help make the army uniforms. Then there was a crackdown, and Sokol was arrested, so now both Sokol and Mislim were in prison.

Then, later on, Mislim was released from prison in 1994. Before that, within the democratic movement, different activities had already begun. I took part in the population registration, I worked a lot on that. I was also involved in forming branches of the democratic movement [league] in every neighborhood of Gjakova and its surrounding villages. I took part in forming branches two, four, and seven, the biggest branches in the city. In some I was the lead, in others… but overall, the organization, especially among women, was very strong. It felt like a celebration, really. I experienced it as a celebration, seeing how much they were organizing and how actively they participated in the meetings.

What left the biggest impression on me was the organization of the Women's Forum branches in the villages. I mean… you know those big village gathering rooms, the *oda*[22], at least you've heard of them. There were times when around 200 village women, who maybe until the day before had only gone as far as their neighbor's house, would gather in those *oda* and talk about their personal struggles, often related to their children, but also about their everyday needs. For example, if a mother had six sons, she worried because she had to find money to secure six daughters-in-law.

Through these meetings, the women decided that this practice should no longer continue, paying money to secure brides for their sons should no longer exist. In other words, alongside the struggle for freedom, there was also a social awakening taking place, an effort to make life easier for themselves.

[21] The Paraćin case refers to the tragic incident that occurred on September 3, 1987, at the Paraćin barracks, where the Albanian soldier Aziz Kelmendi killed four soldiers and wounded five before being executed by the Yugoslav military authorities, an incident deliberately used to justify repression against Albanian conscripts and accompanied by a staged political trial.

[22] *Oda* is a traditional guest room found in Albanian homes, especially in rural areas, historically used for gatherings of men to discuss community matters, host guests, or hold important conversations. In more recent times, especially during the 1990s in Kosovo, *oda* were also used as spaces for organizing community meetings, including gatherings of women for social, educational, and political purposes.

Because if you had six sons, just think how much money you'd need to find brides for all of them. On top of that, all the gold and other things expected afterward. This is what united the women. Not to mention the powerful slogans they used to shout.

I remember once I was walking back because the bus from the village only ran twice a day… if you missed it, you had to wait until the evening. I was walking 12 kilometers. The police checkpoint was right where you reached the main road. I had written down everything the women had said, the slogans like "Kosova Republic," "Independence." Everything they said, I wrote down to send it to Radio Gjakova. Radio Gjakova would broadcast them, until they shut it down completely.

He said, "Open your bag," it was the Serbian police. I opened it, and he couldn't really understand what was written, though he understood the word republic. I told him, "It's a student essay." He pushed my bag with the butt of his rifle and threw the papers to the ground, then said, "Pick these up and get out of here." I picked them up slowly, and honestly, that was nothing compared to what could have happened. The enthusiasm of the village women gave me hope that these people would soon gain their freedom. Later, when the whole democratic movement [league] was organized in Gjakova, the focus shifted to education. Because the schools were shut down, we were thrown out into the streets, and we began organizing classes in private homes.

This required work, organization. Some mosques were turned into schools. Then, the gymnasium… the primary school Mustafa Bakija hadn't been shut down, only the high schools were removed from their buildings, and we taught there for a while. But eventually, we were kicked out of there too. We continued teaching in that space while we could. I remember I had even organized knowledge competitions under those very conditions. Maybe the police were watching us, monitoring us, but we didn't stop. There was no reason to stop, we had to keep working hard.

So after the population registration, aid began arriving for teachers, about 40 euros per teacher, and we had to go house to house to collect the money. I remember a young man who didn't have children of his own, and he told his mother, "Mom, quickly, give the money." She asked, "What for?" He said, "Mom, for the kids, to get an education, to pay the teachers." She replied, "But you don't have any kids." He said, "Even if I don't, others do." They were in a very difficult economic situation. His mother… I could tell she was struggling, and I didn't want to press the issue. But he insisted that I wait and take the money once she gave it to him.

There are some moments, small events, that leave a lasting impression, and even after all these years, I haven't forgotten them. Because you could see that the people had truly reflected and understood what a brutal regime meant and what the need for freedom, education, and culture really was. That part was completed too, once we registered the families and collected the money, we would then gather funds each month... Not all teachers received payment. My brother and I were both working in education, but we didn't take any money because, in the meantime, we had opened a small family

business at my father's place, and that sustained us. We made a declaration saying we didn't need payment from the education fund.

School continued as normal. We would go house to house. Interestingly, if there were ever absences in regular school, when classes were held in private homes, all the students were present. That sense of resistance had grown, because we knew that education is a powerful weapon against oppression. Both students and teachers became aware of this, there were no absences, and we had no room to slack off with classes being held in people's homes. And the families welcomed us warmly. I believe the learning process went on properly. Maybe we lacked teaching materials, but we gave our all. The students were in the right mindset to absorb that knowledge.

Time passed, and by 1992–1993, a new phase had begun. In 1994, Mislim was released from prison, and we got married immediately. I used to think that his journey ended there, that he had done enough, I'd tell myself, that's enough. He was very weak, he had lost a lot of weight in prison. His friends used to tell me, because he never spoke much himself, that he mostly stayed in solitary confinement. Not by choice, but because they forced him. He spent more time in solitary than with other inmates. He was a person of incredible strength of character, the kind I've rarely found in others.

At that time, I thought he should rest now and let others take over. But as soon as he came back, he started gathering money to buy weapons. My family was doing better financially at that time, and they helped us often. The first automatic weapon was bought, that was a celebration. We couldn't sleep peacefully anymore because friends were constantly coming by, and Sokol would come too.

We always had to be cautious… because being a family of political prisoners meant we were constantly under surveillance. They were all being watched by the regime. One person would come, another would leave. I even remember once, when one of my brothers-in-law was released, the oldest one said, "What are we even supposed to do now? We're so used to going in and out of prison. What do we do with ourselves now?" (laughs).

Anita Susuri: And your husband, where was he imprisoned? Which prison was he held in?

Sakibe Doli: At first, he was taken to Prishtina, then transferred to Prizren. His trial was held in Peja. From Peja, they sent him to Niš, and from there to Përkuple and a few other places in that area, they moved him around, but he spent most of his time in Niš. The torture was severe, and it was only thanks to the International Red Cross, through Vjosa Dobruna, a human rights activist whose uncle was involved, that visits to the prisons were made possible. She managed to convince the international representatives to go.

"After that visit," he said, "prison started to feel a little different. The guards began behaving a bit better." Because until then, when there had been no external oversight, the prisoners had been severely abused. Only then did a different kind of atmosphere begin to take hold…

Anita Susuri: And did you ever have the chance to visit or go there?

Sakibe Doli: No, only family members were allowed. I once went with my friend to visit her father in the Niš prison. I wasn't allowed to go in because they only asked for the last name. But I saw it from the outside, I accompanied her to the Niš prison a few times. She had her father there. We were friends at work, childhood friends, and part of the same group. I couldn't let her go alone sometimes. Her mother worked shifts, she had been removed from her teaching job and placed in a factory. So when her mother had shifts and couldn't go, I would accompany her.

Anita Susuri: So you only saw your husband from a distance, is that right?

Sakibe Doli: No, it was her father I saw from a distance. I never saw my husband, not at all, because they had strict visiting schedules.

Part Three

Sakibe Doli: Then the preparations for war began. In '97, when the KLA[23] appeared on the scene, it was '97, right?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Sakibe Doli: We had heard about it, but we still weren't fully convinced that it was real. After that, we went to Drenica, the Women's Forum went to Drenica to see for ourselves that the army really existed. But on the way, we were stopped. The police stopped us, we were a group of ten. "Where are you going?" they asked. We said, "We're going to Prishtina," trying to come up with excuses. They held us for several hours. We eventually made it. After that, when the killings happened in Qirez,[24] the first murders, I had collected some money to help the mothers who had suffered, whose loved ones were killed by the Serbs.

[23] The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës – UÇK*) was an ethnic Albanian paramilitary organization that emerged in the 1990s with the goal of achieving Kosovo's independence from Serbia. The KLA became publicly active around 1997 and played a central role in the armed resistance against Serbian forces during the Kosovo War (1998–1999). It was later disbanded following the end of the war and the arrival of NATO-led peacekeeping forces.

[24] Between February 28 and March 1, 1998, Serbian security forces launched a series of attacks in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez, in the region of Drenica, in response to a KLA ambush of police officers. These attacks resulted in the killing of 24 non combatants, as documented by Human Rights Watch among others in the report, *A Week of Terror in Drenica: Humanitarian Law Violations in Drenica*.

We visited those families, but this time, we didn't take the main road. A friend of my husband's, a former political prisoner from Malishevo, guided us through the mountains. We went without any problems. We visited the families and also met Jakup Krasniqi.[25] That's when we became convinced that the army really existed. We returned late that evening, but again through that same route, because the army had created a pathway to move more freely. One of our friends told us that she had even sent a bread oven there to the army. That's when we truly believed the army was real.

We came back, and right after that, the incident in Gllogjan broke out. My husband, our house, when I returned from Drenica… let me tell you, let me tell you. My brother-in-law's son was a high school senior, they had just finished school with his group of friends. They were my students, a good group of friends. A group that had been into music, fashion, ads, and so on… and I used to think those boys would never even consider war. But there they were, listening to me, Lekë was listening to me so he could later explain everything to his friends.

Every night, I saw them gathering in the garage. I kept wondering, why are they always up there, what are they doing in the garage now? Turns out, they were making plans, planning activities in the city. Only when they went to war did I realize they had something entirely different going on, it wasn't what I had thought. After the incident in Gllogjan,[26] Mislim went with some friends in a car and immediately registered with the KLA. They were the first four to go, they were accepted, and then they returned.

In the first months, they worked in logistics, delivering aid, food, clothing. My brothers got involved too. Because there was a need to prepare beds for the soldiers, and so much other work had to be done, everything had to be organized. They would deliver food every night and wouldn't return until late. I spent many nights awake at the window, waiting for them to come back. It was very dangerous. After the incident where those first fighters were killed in Gllogjan, the army began to organize on a much larger scale.

There wasn't a single young person in the city who didn't come to our house asking, "Will uncle Mislim take us to war?" It was a huge responsibility. There were those who were the only sons on the family who wanted to go. Because of all the violence, they had nowhere to turn. Young people were constantly subjected to abuse, taken in for questioning, or imprisoned without reason. Eventually, it

[25] Jakup Krasniqi is a Kosovar politician and former spokesperson of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). During and after the war, he played a prominent role in Kosovo's political life, serving as a member of the Assembly of Kosovo, its speaker, and acting president on two occasions. He was also involved in the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). In later years, he was among several former KLA leaders indicted by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers for alleged war crimes. *As of the time of this transcript's publication, legal proceedings were still ongoing.*

[26] On March 24, 1998, in the village of Gllogjan, municipality of Deçan, Serbian forces surrounded the area and clashed with KLA units led by Ramush Haradinaj. During the fighting, several KLA members and Albanian civilians were killed, and the event became one of the first open battles of the war in Dukagjin, spurring further mobilization of the local population.

became unbearable. Life no longer held any value. That's why they wanted to get organized, because this brutal police violence was no longer tolerable. I haven't even seen in films what we, the Albanians of Kosovo, lived through.

For those we were closer to, we could try to guide them a little, but to most we'd say, "Whoever truly wants it will find the way, just gather with two or three friends and organize yourselves." That's how the city's youth, both young men and women, started heading to Gllogjan and Jabllanica. There were fewer young women, but many still went. We know that 1998 saw the uprising spread through the villages. People from the villages came to seek shelter. The villages were being burned, and they fled to the city. I got involved in helping shelter some of the villagers here in town. The city opened its doors to them because they had been left without a roof over their heads. Some had lost loved ones. They had no means of survival.

So most of the people from the villages who had no roof over their heads were sheltered and accommodated. At the same time, the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Prishtina had identified several mothers whose husbands had been killed in the war. They established a shelter in Gjakova. They took over a large house and gave it to a family who was living in Prishtina. In that house, five or six mothers with 21 children were sheltered. Their husbands had been killed, their homes burned down, and they had been left out on the streets.

Together with a friend of mine, Kutlije Maloku, we took care of those mothers in 1998. But we were supported by Mother Teresa's organization, which helped us provide them with food. We also offered support through psycho-social counseling, because it wasn't easy for them. They had been left alone with all those children. One of them had ten kids, another four, and so on. Alongside this, we also opened a small underground office to gather weapons in order to form a military headquarters in Gjakova. Because, as I mentioned, being a border area, sometimes when I counted the tanks, I would say, "It feels like all of Yugoslavia has come to Gjakova."

It was necessary for the city to get organized as well. There were five of us in that group, and I was one of them. But after Mislim was put at risk traveling back and forth between Gllogjan and Gjakova, delivering aid and moving around, he stayed there and took up arms to join the army. Meanwhile, in Gjakova, we started asking around if anyone had weapons they could voluntarily give to the headquarters, well, I can't really call it a headquarters, it was just that little office. The goal was to have some weapons ready, so that when things erupted in the city, we'd be at least somewhat prepared. We gathered money and weapons.

There were very few weapons, almost none. It was extremely dangerous. We were operating in complete secrecy. Meanwhile, Mislim would call me, since the army's field telephone was working, and say, "Send this doctor, someone's been wounded." I wouldn't sleep for entire nights. I'd wonder how to tell them, it was dangerous, they could get killed, you know? But when I was given a task, I felt I had to

complete it, there was no other way. So I started sending doctors, medical technicians, and soldiers, it became part of my daily routine.

Most of my movements were on Saturdays and Sundays, when there was no school. Once school was shut down, I could be more involved. But while I was still teaching, I had to be careful, if I was absent even for one day, they would immediately get suspicious, question me, figure it out. I remember one time during class, a student told me, "Teacher, yesterday we burned one of the enemy's tanks," he was in the tenth grade. I said, "Why are you telling me this?" He replied, "Because you're a patriot," (laughs). "Who told you that?" I asked. "I figured it out myself," he said, "from the examples you always use in class."

At that point, I couldn't quite believe a tank had been burned, and the next morning I skipped class and left with a woman from that region who was sheltered in our neighborhood. We went. The taxi drivers were afraid to go all the way to the KLA, so they'd stop at a bridge on the way from Prishtina, near Kramovik, that's the bridge. From there, we continued on foot. We arrived, and I really did see the burned tank, and it made me happy. I thought, I wish more of them would get destroyed like that.

Gllogjan was burned down twice, completely, twice. The offensives were extremely harsh. There were killings. My brother-in-law's daughter, Vjosa [Dobruna], whom I mentioned earlier, went, she came to Gjakova, picked up some medical aid that had been gathered, and loaded it onto a truck along with food supplies. She went to the village, either Gllogjan or Jabllanica, I'm not entirely sure. She delivered the aid, but that evening, when she returned, she called me and said, "Sakibe, Ilir Soba has been killed." He was a teacher from Gjakova, a musician, a very well-known guitarist. "Uncle," she said, "was wounded."

The wound didn't seem as serious to me as the moment she gave me the news about Ilir Soba. Many others had been killed too, but she mentioned him specifically, and it hit me hard. From that moment on, I couldn't stay still anymore, I couldn't stay calm. I started going regularly. When I could return, I did; when I couldn't, I stayed there with the army. I felt the need to go, to call someone, to deliver something. Any task I was given, I had to fulfill it, no matter what. By then, Mislim had helped establish a makeshift hospital with a few others, because after the offensives, there were many wounded. There was a need for blood, for medical supplies.

We contributed a little bit from here too, especially with aid like food and clothing, because I had a friend at ADRA International. ADRA was an international organization, and I used to tell this foreign worker, "The aid for the village is for the village," but of course, the KLA was there too. They helped me in the beginning, up until it became impossible to move around anymore, because after the two offensives, the police had become extremely aggressive and you couldn't get through. You couldn't cross that bridge to reach Jabllanica and Gllogjan anymore.

Anita Susuri: I want to ask you, at the beginning, in March, there was the incident with the Jashari family.[27] I know that the Women's Forum group went there, that they were present. Did you go as well?

Sakibe Doli: No, I wasn't there. We had visited the Jashari family earlier. Their neighbors, also patriots, though their name escapes me at the moment, had two daughters whose house was destroyed by the police. The men were killed, and the girls needed help to continue their education. Gjakova provided them with scholarships. Since we didn't have anywhere else to stay at the time, we stayed with the Jashari family while discussing how Gjakova could fund scholarships for those two girls to study in Prishtina. So I wasn't there during that event, Vjosa was. She was part of that bread-distribution activity the women were doing. Later, the Forum went too, they were closer to Prishtina, while we didn't have the means to go at that time.

Anita Susuri: Did you organize yourselves to go?

Sakibe Doli: We did organize as Forum, but we couldn't go. There was a lack of transportation at that time, I'm not sure why. I don't know why we weren't able to join. I remember feeling very weak that day, part of the Reka e Keqe region had been burned. The police had killed people and set the village on fire, and now the villagers were fleeing and arriving in a neighborhood of Gjakova, on the road toward Peja.

That day, I was accompanying Mislim, who had come illegally from the front to Gjakova to deliver weapons. He had tied three automatic rifles to a bicycle and brought them to my family's house. He delivered the weapons, and since it was too dangerous to return that night, we stayed there. The next day, he was supposed to head back to the front, to Jabllanica. So the day when the villagers were arriving in the neighborhood in Gjakova was also the day Mislim had to leave for the front.

We didn't know what was going on, all the police were out on the streets, and a high-ranking Yugoslav general had come to Gjakova for a visit to the municipal assembly. Every road, every alley had a checkpoint. Mislim was on that blacklist—the one with 100 names from Gjakova, and I kept thinking, what if they stop him and check his ID? They were carrying that list at every checkpoint. That's when I truly felt my strength leave me.

I brought my brother and two of my cousins, girls, to walk ahead of us and clear the way, while we followed in the car. Mislim was lying down in the back. He had bombs and ammunition strapped around his waist. We were on our way when the police stopped us just before entering the neighborhood. The two girls got out and talked to the officers, and we managed to pass through. When

[27] The Jashari family, led by KLA commander Adem Jashari, was targeted in a Serbian attack in March 1998 in Prekaz, resulting in the massacre of over 50 family members. The event became a turning point in the Kosovo War and a symbol of resistance.

we arrived at the house where we were supposed to wait until nightfall, the villagers were already arriving.

The women were completely broken, they were traumatized and deeply stressed by what they had seen while fleeing from the Reka e Keqe area. They had left behind loved ones who'd been killed and were escaping with their children. That made my weakness even worse. My body gave out. They took Mislim into a room to rest, and I couldn't even speak, I don't know, I just felt completely drained that day. When it got dark, I walked with a girl from that neighborhood and accompanied him about five kilometers toward Dujaka, the closest village to that neighborhood.

We let him go, and we returned. The police had already calmed down, they didn't move much at night. We went back to that family's house. A couple of hours later, Mislim called and said he had arrived safely. There was also a small base there. Still, I needed time to regain my strength. After Dujakë, he continued on from there. The army had its own routes for moving around. One thing I've shared in other interviews too is that for me, going *to* the war zones was easy, returning to Gjakova from those areas was terrifying, incredibly difficult.

The police were always guarding. The army, the KLA, I didn't know exactly. I would return the same way I usually did, going down to the road to wait for a bus or something to get back to Gjakova. I wasn't young anymore, I was a bit older, so I didn't raise too much suspicion with the police. But still, the place itself was risky. I'd go down and wait to head back to Gjakova, and it felt a bit suspicious because they knew where the war zones were. The police knew.

I kept walking, on foot, and just as I was about to reach the main road, I saw a convoy of Serbian military vehicles coming down the same road I was supposed to take. That was the second time I really felt overwhelmed. But the KLA soldiers told me, "Don't turn your head, don't be afraid." They had set up two barricades made of tree branches and said, "Don't worry, if they stop you, we'll respond." But instinctively, I turned my head, and tears started running down my face, partly from fear, partly from emotion, and partly from the joy of seeing how capable our army was, ready to attack the convoy.

The convoy, knowing that the army was nearby, sped through with all the power it had. I passed without any problems. But when I got home, the emotions overwhelmed me and I burst into tears, I couldn't speak. They were tears of both joy and pain. That moment passed too. After that, the soldiers decided to open a base in Gjakova. By then, we had gathered just a few material supplies, and they were set up in the Çabrat neighborhood. That's when Brigade 137 of Gjakova was formed.

During that time, while I was there, I also took care of the elderly and children. We would open passages through walls so that when we were in danger on one side, we could escape through the other. Houses were being burned, it was horrific. When the brigade was formed, there were three days and three nights of fighting in Çabrat. We had casualties and wounded. I continued delivering food,

helping with logistics, but I started drawing too much attention. So I had to leave when the brigade pulled back. We relocated to Dobrosh, and I went there too.

It was the first night I had slept in three months, because I finally felt safer. I was in the mountains, with the army around me. It was completely different there compared to the city, where you were constantly waiting to be killed or have your home burned down. Even there, I got involved in helping the army, fetching water for the soldiers, extracting honey. Since the village had been abandoned, and I had experience with beekeeping, I had never seen more or purer honey in my life.

The army would clear the way for us, of course, there were still remnants of police forces, and they had planted those kinds of bombs, landmines, all along the roads. We'd spot the areas, but the soldiers would verify the terrain first, clear the path, and only then would we go. I was with my cousin, who was also a soldier, he'd actually been wounded in Çabrat. The night the agreement was made, Mislim told me, "You need to go tonight with a group of soldiers and prepare the ground for tomorrow," because the army was going to enter the city.

I wanted to return with Mislim and the army, but an order is an order, and I had to go. When we arrived in Çabrat, I didn't recognize it. The houses had been burned down. We were walking over the walls of the houses, they had burned the walls, the roofs had collapsed. Everything was ashes. They had carried out massacres, they had killed people. There had been horrific massacres in Gjakova. From Çabrat, which is a neighborhood on higher grounds, I could see the tanks moving toward Peja. I kept wondering, are those KFOR[28] tanks or are they the police's? Either way, I thought, it looks like they're retreating.

We came. The city headquarters was in the new block, so we went there. Two of my brothers were there. My father's house was in the upper part of the city, so to speak. The new block is right here where we are now. I didn't sleep that night. In the morning, they told me, "Wait until it's fully light outside," but I said, "I just want to go to my father's house." Because our house, Mislim's house, had been burned down by the Serbian police on the first night of the bombings. My father's house was spared because I had a big library of books. Many times, they had taken them and stored them in neighbors' basements, then brought them back home because they didn't know whose house was being burned, and they saved the books.

That night, or rather, early the next morning, there were still remnants of Serbian police around. The next day, when we entered, I saw a truck full of police officers. They started cursing, shouting... criminals. I hid behind a wall. They were fleeing, just running away. By noon, the army had entered the city. It was an indescribable emotion. Mothers were searching for their children who had been killed,

[28] KFOR (Kosovo Force) was a NATO-led international peacekeeping force established in June 1999, following the end of the Kosovo War. Its mandate was to ensure a safe and secure environment and to support the return of refugees and displaced persons.

so many young men. There were sisters looking for their brothers. I saw them with tears in their eyes, and I wondered how deeply they valued freedom, whether they truly valued it. The emotions were mixed, but still, I kept saying: no good ever comes without bloodshed. Especially knowing the kind of brutality we were up against.

He came… the ceremony was held, and we left. Mislim went to the headquarters, returned his uniform and weapon, and said to me, "I need pants and shoes." I said, "When I told you the house burned down, you told me to shut my mouth in case someone overheard" (laughs). So I went to my family's place, and that's where we settled because we had nowhere else to stay. In the meantime, the citizens whose homes had been burned down had occupied Serbian houses. But Mislim absolutely refused to do that. Still, even at my family's, he didn't feel free. Because as a man of war, a man who'd been in prison, he couldn't feel the freedom that had been missing his whole life, despite the respect everyone showed him.

My brother-in-law said, "Don't listen to Msilim, you have to take an apartment until we figure things out." He secured an apartment and we moved in there. I remember finding that will, by accident. I saw bombs in that apartment. We cleaned the place, handed those over, and that marked the beginning of a new chapter for me. I went back to teaching, but since Gjakova was so heavily destroyed, we founded the first women's association in Gjakova, in '99. That's when trucks started arriving with aid, and we would distribute it to single mothers, mothers whose children were imprisoned, whose children had been killed in the war. There were many, the city was full.

In fact, besides Drenica, Gjakova was the most damaged during the war. We built houses for the women I was caring for, those who had come from the villages. Then we also helped them with material goods. We tried to do something. That first crisis passed, and then foreign delegations started arriving, what we asked for was factories. They said, "No, your factories were political, now everything needs to be privatized." You know, a whole different kind of organization was needed.

At first, we were working within the Forum, but when we formed the first women's association, the Forum split, half continued with political work, and the other half joined humanitarian associations. While working as a women's association, the first cases began arriving. A girl from Klina came to us, her father had been abusive because she refused to get married. She had lived in Switzerland, and during the war, he brought her back to Kosovo to marry her off. She didn't agree, and he became violent, so she ran away. She went to the police, and the police brought her to us. "You're a women's association, deal with her," they said.

That's how it happened with a mother and her two children, and then the cases started to increase. I took that girl into my home, and then a friend of mine took in the mother with the two children. After that, the cases kept coming, so we told Vjosa, Vjosa Dobruna, about the situation. We said, "This is what's going on." She said, "I'll write the project for you, as long as you're willing to work." I was still

working at the school and didn't want to do anything else. That's how we got the project, she wrote it for us and then said, "Now go find a house." But where could we find a house when everything was burned down?

This house was found, now we've added another floor and expanded it, but we found it at a relatively affordable price and bought it. It belongs to the organization, and that's where we started with the first cases. Year by year, other organizations began opening as well, other shelters across Kosovo. I advocated for them. I was invited to Gjilan, Peja, and Prizren. I lobbied for more shelters to be opened. And once other shelters were established, the workload here started to ease a bit. But the beginning was very, very difficult.

You couldn't imagine what a relative, a father, could do to his daughter, or what a man could do to his wife. It was beyond comprehension for us. I had heard that a young man who drinks alcohol might be abusive, you know, that alcohol leads to violence, but I never would've believed violence was so widespread. Still, I used to say, "He's lost his home, lost his job," and then he takes it out on those closest to him. You know, there's no justification for violence, but that's how it all started.

Today marks 24 years since the shelter opened. I consider it a success. Many women have moved forward. Some who didn't know what they wanted have remained stuck, but others have found their path, some by forming new relationships, and others by finding employment and taking their lives into their own hands, for themselves and their children.

Anita Susuri: Ms. Sakibe, I'd like to go back to what I think was an important part of your life: your studies. As a young woman back then, you had to leave Gjakova and come to Prishtina. What was that experience like for you? Changing cities, adapting to a new place?

Sakibe Doli: My family wanted me to become a teacher. I didn't want to, I had no desire. That's why I chose the gymnasium in order to continue my studies. I loved chemistry very much, but at the last moment I decided on Albanian language, it spoke to me more. I had already been drawn in early on. I used to write a little, and I thought I could build on that. I read a lot, endlessly. There were nights when I'd start a book during the day and finish it by morning. To stay true to that passion, I enrolled in Albanian language and literature.

Before me, my cousins, my uncles' daughters, who were older, hadn't continued their education past secondary school. But my father was different from his brothers; he was the youngest and had a different mindset. He didn't hesitate and made it possible for me to go study in Pristina. In Pristina, I made new friends because there were only a few students from my town in the Albanian language program. Most of the students were from villages or other towns.

There, we formed new bonds. I have friends from almost every municipality of Kosovo. For example, Xheva Lladrovci[29] was a friend of mine. She was younger than me, but we were close friends at university, good friends, actually. Xhevë wrote powerful poetry, and it was poetry that connected us. And knowing that her father was a patriot who had found the remains of Azem Galica…

Anita Susuri: Azem…

Sakibe Doli: Azem Bejta's.[30] I heard of it and we became quite close. She was from Drenoc, and in Gjakova they used to call it Laçka Drenoc. I'd tell her, "Xheva, when you come to Gjakova, don't mention that name because it sounds Serbian to me" (laughs). So after university we didn't really stay in touch anymore because she continued her studies, while I just returned and got a job.

In Prishtina, this was basically the first opportunity to expand your social circle, and demonstrations and protests were being organized there. For example, in the student dorms… I didn't stay in a dorm, I lived in a private apartment. My brother was a student too. With my friends from the city, we used to go out once a week. The *korzo*[31] was very popular at the time. We would also go to Peja once a week. We didn't go to the theater much, because the theater was smaller and there was high demand. You couldn't really get access to it.

Life in Prishtina was a real change compared to our town, it had a different atmosphere, a certain sense of freedom, especially as a woman, as a girl. That kind of freedom, when not misused, helps you grow and makes you prouder and stronger. One difficulty I had was Yugoslav literature. We were taught by Hasan Mekuli, and many students dropped out of the faculty because of that exam. Would you believe that I read 138 works of Yugoslav literature without the slightest interest? There were Slovenian, Croatian ones that were okay, but the rest weren't worth reading.

The professor was very demanding. He wanted everything in detail. Reading the works of Ivo Andrić,[32] who had political agendas against Kosovo, was a nightmare. But if you wanted to graduate, you had to read them, no matter what. All of us resented that professor. But when we graduated, somehow we

[29] Xhevë Lladrovci (1955–1998) was a Kosovar Albanian poet and activist. She was known for her powerful and patriotic poetry. Lladrovci was also the daughter of Shaban Lladrovci, a political activist and early member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), who is remembered for his efforts in the Albanian national cause.

[30] Azem Galica (1889–1924) also known as Azem Bejta, was a prominent Albanian nationalist and guerrilla leader who fought against Serbian and later Yugoslav control in Kosovo during the early 20th century. Alongside his wife, Shote Galica, he led the *Kaçak* resistance movement, advocating for Albanian autonomy and resisting the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's authority.

[31] *Korzo* is a term used across the Balkans to refer both to the main promenade or street where people would walk and socialize, and to the tradition itself of evening strolling. It was especially popular among youth as a form of socializing and being seen, playing a key role in urban culture during the socialist period.

[32] Ivo Andrić (1892–1975) was a Yugoslav writer and diplomat of Bosnian origin, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1961. His most famous work, *The Bridge on the Drina*, has been criticized by some Albanian and Bosniak scholars for portraying Muslims and Albanians in a negative light, particularly in the context of Balkan history and ethnic relations.

changed our minds, he had actually been very good. His intention was for us to understand better who they really are, who those writers are, who the Serbs are in truth. T*he Bridge on the Drina*, for example, we read everything bad they had to say about Albanians.

So I finished it on time, meaning within the regular time frame. Except for Yugoslav literature, which took me a bit longer. I really liked syntax and grammar, I liked them a lot. I didn't have any problems. I had chosen *The Dead River* by Jakov Xoxa[33] for my thesis, specifically the time period in the novel *The Dead River* by Jakov Xoxa. So I had to analyze the whole book and identify the chronological time frame, with a breakdown of the timeline.

I worked on the thesis myself, I tried on my own because at the time there weren't any options for someone to help you. Of course, I had consultations with the professor. I loved Prishtina because it draws you in as a city. But once I graduated, it didn't seem that interesting to me anymore. Maybe your own city speaks to you more. Now it's changed a lot, I like it, but it has its own problems, like heavy traffic that gets on your nerves quickly.

Anita Susuri: In which year did you enroll?

Sakibe Doli: '75.

Anita Susuri: '75.

Sakibe Doli: Yes.

Anita Susuri: It was exactly the year '74, when the university was established…

Sakibe Doli: Yes, yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: How was that whole experience, so to speak, could you tell us a bit about the early framework? For example, were there also professors from Albania at that time?

Sakibe Doli: We had very good professors, most of them older. Besim Bokshi, who was from Gjakova, taught us historical morphology. He was also a psychologist. He could see our mood in our eyes, in our faces, he'd read us. "Today's not your day for an exam," and he'd let you go. His explanations were phenomenal. Idriz Ajeti was a professor of the highest level, an academic. All of them were academics who taught us.

[33] Jakov Xoxa (1923–1979) was an Albanian writer and literary scholar known for his contributions to modern Albanian literature. His novel *Lumi i Vdekur* (*The Dead River*), published in 1967, is considered a significant work in Albanian prose, blending realism with social and historical commentary.

They used to joke sometimes, saying, “Thirty enroll in Albanian language and literature, and thirty-one graduate” (laughs). But I would say, look at who taught us. Isa Bajçinca. Then Fehmi Agani’s brother, Suki Agani. All of our professors were elderly, respected academics from the Albanological Institute of the Academy of Sciences, and I’m very proud of them.

The beginning of university is a bit difficult, until you get to know your peers, until you understand the teachers, the professors, it’s a bit challenging. But still, it also depends on your personality, on the person and how capable you are of integrating. Because, for example, many of my friends from Gjakova had enrolled in a faculty where there were four or five of them together, while I was alone. That’s a bit hard for someone just starting out as a student, even though I had finished gymnasium and had various life experiences.

But still, little by little you build your own circle, and once you do, then… we used to go out in the evenings with friends from Gjakova, but at university, that’s where you also start finding like-minded friends, friends who share your ideals. You begin to build that trust, to start opening up and talking. For example, with Xheva, we had deep conversations, serious ones, talks about broader issues, not just school. That makes you richer as a person, helps you get to know the cultures of different parts of Kosovo, and it strengthens you, it makes you more loving, a more compassionate person.

Anita Susuri: Ms. Sakibe, if you’d like to add anything at the end…

Sakibe Doli: Thank you for finding me, I mean (laughs).

Anita Susuri: Thank you!

Sakibe Doli: I’ve forgotten many things because when they’re not repeated, they’re forgotten. I don’t know how much I’ve contributed in terms of presenting myself. When they first told me to introduce myself, I felt embarrassed. I thought, how can someone talk about themselves? But that’s how life is. Right after the war, I gave an interview at the Albanological Institute, what they call oral history…

Anita Susuri: Yes, oral history.

Sakibe Doli: Yes, oral history, I used to say no, I can’t, I can’t. It was hard for me to be convinced by that researcher, but she taught me a lot. Because I also gave interviews. I am very simple, very down-to-earth.

Anita Susuri: Thanks a lot, it was a pleasure!