

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH SHERAFEDIN BERISHA

Pristina | Date: May 5, 2022

Duration: 115 minutes

Present:

1. Sherafedin Berisha (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:** Mr. Sherafedin, if you could tell us your name, last name, date and place of birth, anything about your family.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** My name is Sherafedin Berisha, I was born on November 9, 1954, in Pristina, into a poor working-class family. My father worked at the city flower shop and provided for five members of our family with his income...

**Anita Susuri:** Where was it, the flower shop, where was it in Pristina?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The flower shop was on the street that takes you, on the way to Isa Mustafa's roundabout, as they call it, there, before arriving at the gas station, across from it. At the Croatian Embassy, near the Croatian Embassy, there was the city's flower shop. They planted seedlings too and they maintained the whole city. The trees which were planted at the Economics School were planted by that generation and almost all the city trees, they removed a large number of them, that generation planted them after the war. Sometime around the '50s.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me about a family history about how they came to Pristina.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, the first from my family who came here was Hajrullah Fetah Berisha. He came here between 1820-1825, I don't know exactly, he came with only his mother. I don't know the reason why it was only him and his mother because I didn't manage to find out. He came to the city, he lived here. He got married when he grew up, Hajrullah got married to a girl from the city, she was from the Toperlaku family. Actually, during the time, after my grandfather grew up, they called him Fejzë Toperlaku because he was raised by his [maternal] uncles. He came here at four years old, the first one, Hajrullah, but my grandfather Fejzullah also lost his father at the age of six. So, he was raised by his uncles.

Hajrullah had four children, yes, he had Fetah, Fehmi, Fejzullah, and Fetije. The youngest one was a girl. He, one of them, Fetah, was a soldier in the Turkish [Ottoman] army back when this area was under the Turkish [Ottoman] Empire. He died but we don't know where, my grandfather didn't know when his brother died either. His other brother died in Pristina of an illness. Right when the time to get married had come, he got engaged and everything, [that's when] he died. My grandfather lived... my father's [paternal] aunt too, my grandfather's sister, she lived until '72, she died in 1972. While my grandfather died in 1977.

My grandfather also had five children, three sons and two daughters. They were Nazmi, Ismajl, Fetah, Xhevrije and Fahrije. Out of all of them, only Xhevrije is now alive at the age of 86, all the others have died. My father then got married and he also had five children. I am the oldest, and then there's my brother Xheladin, Fehmi, Sheriban and Nerxhivan, and Bastri. The last one, Bastri, is the youngest. We are all alive...

**Anita Susuri:** You told me another story which sounded interesting, how to put it, your older [paternal] uncle, who was in the army there and he ran away from the army...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** It was my grandfather.

**Anita Susuri:** It was your grandfather?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** He was a soldier eight times, they mobilized him eight times. Because he was a parentless child, an orphan, and they put the army clothes on him, let's send someone who has no one to care about them. The big shots of the city registered him instead of sending their sons, without his knowledge. He was in many Arabian cities, he even learned Arabic really well and he also knew Turkish. He would tell me that, one time, he tried to run away from the Turkish army and he walked around, he wandered around, and he didn't know where to go.

He told me one time, he said, "I was tired," he said, "I went inside a home, one stable, and I saw a cow manger and I slept there. But," he said, "I had a dream that my sister brought me food, I was hungry, and I got up and left crying. On my way, I saw an Arabian woman and she asked me, 'Why are you crying?' I told her and said, 'I am crying because this happened and I had a dream where my sister brought me food,' she brought out," he said, "two pitas," because back then they held those pitas on top of their heads, "and she gave me two pitas."

"I ate them," he said, "I sated my hunger a little. On my way," he said, "I saw some women who had taken their small child in front of the door and they said, 'Will you sing something to this child because he won't stay put, he's got the evil eye on him,'" those superstitions. He said, "I said some *dua*,"<sup>1</sup> he

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<sup>1</sup> *Dua* in Arabic refers to a supplication or prayer, usually directed towards a deity or a higher power. It's a heartfelt expression of one's desires, hopes, and needs.

said, “that I knew. They gave me,” he said, “some money and with that money,” he said, “I survived two days. I had enough to eat. I wandered around, I wandered, and I went back to the barracks where I was a soldier again because I didn’t know where to go.”

**Anita Susuri:** He didn’t know where to go.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** And he told me, “We got a disease too,” I think it was typhus, he said, “there were doctors who came from England and cured us.” It’s interesting, he sang a song of the War of Çanakkale,<sup>2</sup> it’s in Turkey. But he sang it in two versions, Albanian and Serbian, I mean Turkish, excuse me. I would ask him, “Why?” He would say, “I learned it as a soldier there, I learned it in Turkish but then I also heard it in Albanian and I sang it in Albanian.”

**Anita Susuri:** Did he translate it or did it already exist [in Albanian]?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I don’t know, I don’t know. It exists because people sing about the War of Çanakkale. And I was here in the gymnasium,<sup>3</sup> a gymnasium student, it’s on the main street and then there is an alley to go to my house. I would hear him singing it from the end of the street. It’s interesting because he died in his own room, he never ate his bread without toasting it. I would hear him chewing when I was in the yard, the [crusty] bread would go *krrup, krrup* {onomatopoeia}. He was very strong until the last year of his life.

**Anita Susuri:** How long did he live?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** According to the records, 105 years. But according to some historical events that he would talk about, we would calculate around 115. Now I don’t know which one... but even 105... I was small and I would tell him because I’d call him old man, I would say, “You live for as long as you want, I will live two years longer than you” (laughs). And I joke around now too, I say that I made a contract with my grandfather [to live for] 117 years but it’s not sealed, it’s only between me and my grandfather (laughs). Now, I don’t know.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know, how did he come back?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** He came back because those Arab contingents went back. When he came back, he went... and he married a little late. He had a friend and he was my grandmother’s brother. She was much younger. Actually, I would often joke around because I called her old mother, I would ask her,

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<sup>2</sup> The War of Çanakkale or the Battle of Gallipoli took place from April 25, 1915 to January 9, 1916 in Turkey. It was among the largest battles in the First World War. On one side, the English and French armies fought, and on the other, the Ottoman army fought with the help of Austria-Hungary and Germany. The Ottoman Empire emerged victorious in this battle.

<sup>3</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

“How do you know grandfather?” She would say, “Always like this, with a beard.” Because he was a little older when they got married, and they had many children, the ones who lived, because three of them died. One of them was a little challenged, he didn’t know what fear or hurt were. My grandmother would tell me, she said, “He would come,” she said, “the dogs had bitten him but he wouldn’t even wash it off.” But then she raised the children, my father, my two uncles, and her two daughters.

**Anita Susuri:** What did he do after...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** He was a shepherd because he was raised poor, he was raised without a father, he looked after the sheep of a man here in Pristina.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember any stories about what Pristina was like back then? The *rreth*?<sup>4</sup> Kosovo in general? I mean, based on his stories.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, he would tell me about some places that were in the field, for example, the part going towards Podujeva, Kodra e Trimave [neighborhood] as they call it, that was all fields. And then, the road that takes you... and to, yes, there was a store there at Kodra e Trimave, I don’t remember, there was a cemetery. They removed everything and they sold land, they built houses there later. The part of the road to Kolovica, about 300-400 meters beyond the Technical School, it was a hill, it was all a graveyard. The city cemetery. And then, there was, in Pristina there were a lot of *çeshme*,<sup>5</sup> which were built with soil pipes, they were supplied with water.

There was a *çeshme* which they called *Çeshmja e Hynilerëve*. There was the old folks home, there is still an old house built with adobe. Actually when I told a worker at the Kosovo Archives, I said, “Look at the House of Hyniler,” he said, “What do you mean [the house] of Hyniler?” I said, “They called them Hyniler,” the old-time residents. And there was a *çeshme* until recently. And then, where my house is, it’s Haxi Zeka street, and then Enver Berisha street which takes you to the new *Medrese*, and we called that area *Kajnak*. There was a *çeshme* there, the water was sparkly. But when the river Pishtevka was covered, that *çeshme* stopped working.

**Anita Susuri:** The water was sparkly?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes. But not as much as, for example, bottled sparkly water, but it was naturally sparkly. And then there was the mill, at Llapi street. Oftentimes, when it rained a lot, the water came down from the villages of Gollak there, there were cases, the haystacks were brought down by the flood as they were placed because of the heavy rain. And there was a bridge near the

<sup>4</sup> *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact.

<sup>5</sup> *Çeşme* means spring, fountain in Persian.

mosque, it would often flood and the water would go above its normal levels. What else can I say? But, I don't know if I told you, I think here, behind the theater, Vellusha was covered, the river. Because it was covered [there at first], and then it was covered up to Taukbahçe [neighborhood] there. As a child I would go under it, behind the theater I would go to the river and I would go where the *Shota* Assembly offices are, at the Pristina Stadium, that's where we went. But there wasn't much...

**Anita Susuri:** Did you swim, or?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, there wasn't a lot of water. It was below the knee, there wasn't much water. But it became less and less every day. It's interesting, maybe I'm jumping from topic to topic, the Prishtevka river used to flow from the village of Gollak. My [maternal] uncles live in a village nearby, Makoc. When I went to visit them I had to walk on the bridge, it only fit one person, there was a plank because I couldn't walk in the river because the level of water was above the knee. Now there isn't even one drop of water, the water disappeared. These are some of the things which I remember in a kind of telegraphic way, how to put it.

**Anita Susuri:** You said that your father worked in a...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Flower shop.

**Anita Susuri:** What about your mother? Was she a homemaker?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** A homemaker, a homemaker. My father finished school where the gymnasium is, back then it was an elementary school. He was the best student in class, it wasn't just something that he said, but there was a Bankos<sup>6</sup> director who said so, and there was Izjadin Osmani, a children's doctor, they were classmates. And that bank director told me, "We were nothing compared to your father." But they were wealthy families, they went on and studied in *medrese* in Skopje. One of them continued... because there were two *medrese* in Skopje. One of them was called *Kral Aleksandër*, the other one *Isa Beg*.

**Anita Susuri:** Maybe one of them was for muslims, one for...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** It was mixed, but one of them was public, *Kral Aleksandër*, and *Isa Beg* I am sure was owned by some man who funded it. And he couldn't go there anymore because he had to pay.

**Anita Susuri:** And he finished the gymnasium...

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<sup>6</sup> Bankos, short for *Banka Osiguranja i Štednje* [Insurance and Savings Bank], was a financial institution in the former Yugoslavia.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** He finished it here, he was the best student, with the best grades.

**Anita Susuri:** *Sami Frashëri.*

**Sherafedin Berisha:** *Sami Frashëri*, but back then it was like an elementary school, it lasted four years or what was it. And it's interesting because my father told me when he defended his graduation thesis, he said, "The people of the commission told me, 'If you agree to marry a Serbian girl, we will educate you.'" My father said, "No." He grabbed the hoe and worked the garden. We also had a garden and we sold products in the market.

**Anita Susuri:** You didn't tell me about what kind of family your mother came from?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** My mother's family was based in Makoc village, their last name is Krasniqi. Her father, my grandfather was named Martir, he later went on to become an imam. She had four other sisters and two brothers. My mother was a calm person, very kind-hearted. My father was a little strict because he was fair, he never accepted injustice and spoke his mind no matter who it was to. He didn't allow, for example, to be misused although that flower shop was state-owned, he never even had one flower seed in his pocket. He was very just.

Actually sometimes I would tell him, "Too much. You did too much!" In one case, the organization offered him some land where the Pejton neighborhood is. Without charge, plus they would give him credit to build a house. And he didn't take it. I asked, "Why didn't you accept it?" He said, "I didn't accept it because we would be indebted to the people who the state confiscated it from." "But you didn't confiscate it, you weren't the cause of the confiscation." "No," he said, "I didn't want to." He didn't accept it.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you about the customs, for example, in your house, or your mother, what kind of rules did you have at home? How were you organized as a family?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** My mother was the oldest bride because our family lived in a collective. I was the oldest child among my uncles' [children] and so on. I helped my mother a lot because I had to, with everything, to prepare the food, to send it to the workers in the field and in the garden. And I helped her, I baked the bread, I cleaned the yard. I always helped my mother, now I help my wife too. I have the right to, I'm saying, because I helped my mother too (laughs). My mother was a villager but after some time she adapted to the customs of the city. The only thing is that she never learned to speak Turkish. My grandmother knew it, and my mother didn't. She never learned Serbian nor Turkish.

I had Serbian neighbors, but I didn't learn Serbian. In the fifth grade of elementary school, because we had, I had six [school] subjects in Serbo-Croatian language. There were no Albanian teachers, there

was that subject Basics of Technical Education, the professor was about to fail me because he was Serbian. But with the whole class insisting, he gave me a two<sup>7</sup> and I passed. During the summer, out of spite, I took a, there was a sports newspaper called *Tempo*, that's what it was called. At first I didn't understand, I only understood shoot, goal, out, nothing else. I understood those terms because I watched football. I read and I read, I read the whole summer. When I started the next school year, everyone was surprised. The professor would say, "You knew it, you didn't want to speak it but you knew the Serbian language." And then I spoke it fluently. I learned it from the newspaper.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember how your house looked at the time you were a child, your neighborhood?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The houses were, most of them with wattle and daub, the ones with mud. Our house was, we had a, it was a bit more sophisticated, I mean, there was also a basement because the yard was kind of steep and the main street was kinda higher. There, on the first floor there were four rooms, we had some kind of *hayat*<sup>8</sup>, as they call it, now it's a terrace, and below we had a place where we kept our animals. The other area of the yard we had the sheepfold because we had sheep too.

And then, when the change happened here in the city, Nazmi Mustafa was the mayor, he did it, he contributed the most in developing the infrastructure of Pristina. The Agim Ramadani Street and the UÇK Street were built by him. The Pirshtevka and Vellusha rivers were covered by him. He was a hard worker. The only mayor who has always had a municipality deficit, never a surplus, because he has completely spent the funds. He worked a lot for Pristina. Of course, it was the system of that time, but he cared about this place. That's how I see it now. Anyway, I jumped to another topic.

**Anita Susuri:** [We were talking about] Pristina, when you were a child.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Your neighborhood, for example.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** It was a street cobbled in stone, not in cubes, but stone. Actually, my father would tell me during the time of former Yugoslavia, "We each had," he said, "the obligation to go out in front of the house and clean the street because they punished you if we didn't." The neighbors, most of them were Albanian, there were two or three Serbian families.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there neighborly friendships, for example, visiting each other...

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<sup>7</sup> Grade two is a D on a 1-5 scale.

<sup>8</sup> *Hayat*, from Turkish, refers to an open-air space or courtyard, often found in traditional Turkish or Middle Eastern architecture. It's a type of communal area within a house or building complex, typically located outdoors.



**Sherafedin Berisha:** We all knew each other because there were very few newcomers, but we knew everyone, we had comings and goings. In fact, I don't know, there's an interesting fact because that street, *Haxhi Zeka*, they refer to it as "near Mursel Shumari's house," but before it was called Gjymrykhane. Gjymrykhane...

**Anita Susuri:** Some kind of *han*?<sup>9</sup>

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Excuse me?

**Anita Susuri:** Some kind of *han*?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, it was some kind of customs point. When the people came from the village, they had to pay a fee to the customs for the products they brought to sell at the market. There was one customs point there, one was where the cathedral is now. On both sides of the city, they couldn't come into the city and sell products [without paying that fee]. That's what it was like at the market until recently, I don't know if they pay anything now, you had to pay for using the market to sell your products. And back then, in order to get into the city there were those two points where people were checked.

**Anita Susuri:** So, that means the location where the cathedral is was the entry point to the city?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, before that school which was there was built, *Xhevdet Doda*. First there was the police station there, then later on the gymnasium was built.

**Anita Susuri:** How do you remember the infrastructural development of Pristina? So, you were grown when that began.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, Lakrishte [neighborhood] for example, that land was a garden where different citizens planted stuff, there were no buildings. Those buildings began being built in the '70s maybe. But they were built following a plan, not like today where you can give a cup of coffee to your neighbor from your balcony. Construction was regulated. For example, the *soliter*<sup>10</sup> buildings are the last buildings where Pristina extended to as a city before arriving at the hospital, there were no other buildings in that area. And then later on the dormitories were built and the more aggressive, so to say, development began. They overlooked some stuff back then too.

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<sup>9</sup> Buildings near the road or in cities that serve as hostels for travelers and that also had rooms where they could leave their animals.

<sup>10</sup> A *soliter* building is a standalone structure that does not share walls or significant structural elements with neighboring buildings. It is independent and distinct in design, often serving as a landmark or focal point within an urban landscape.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you personally experience that change in the city? From a town, how to put it, it turned into a big city.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I was surprised by some stuff. Actually, when the retail store was opened, the new one, it seemed very interesting to me that it had an escalator, there were different kinds of products there separated by floor, there was furniture, clothes, and food items. The food items were in the basement, it was something new. Maybe... because later on the TVs arrived too, in black and white back then.

When we saw some other countries it seemed interesting to us. Even when I went abroad in the '90s, some things seemed interesting to us because we didn't have them. Every vehicle, these [popular] brands, they were only commercial vehicles here, there were no other ones here back then. Here, there was only *Ramiz Sadiku* and *Eurgens* which maintained buildings and there was nothing else here. And after there were some construction companies like the one from Peja and some others, when they built the south area of the city.

**Anita Susuri:** What elementary school did you attend?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The school, back then, now it's *Pjetër Bogdani*, back then it was *Miladin Popović*, the school's name. It's the road when you pass beyond the Technical School a bit, you turn to the left. That's where I finished elementary school, and then I enrolled in gymnasium.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there Albanians too?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There were both Serbs and Albanians.

**Anita Susuri:** Parallel...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, and then there were Roma people too. There were two Roma girls and a boy in my class.

**Anita Susuri:** They learned Albanian?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, they learned Albanian. And sometimes we would argue with the Serbs, and they would mix with us. There was one girl, her name was Xhevrije, if I'm not mistaken, she was physically big, she would fight them (laughs). I was the smallest in class physically. But then I quickly grew bigger during gymnasium.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know if back then there were trips or visits which were organized by the school?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, we went on trips, for example, to Taukbahçe, and then we went to the theater. Here, the street across from the gymnasium, do you know where the Ethnographic Museum is? There was a zoo near the museum there, there were animals...

**Anita Susuri:** The [House of Emincik](#)?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, the House of Emincik.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you have an idea what it was like there? Did you go?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** You mean the museum or the zoo?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, the zoo?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The zoo, there were several animals, not a lot though. I think there were lions, wolves, foxes... and I don't know if there were any pets there. See, I don't remember because I've started to forget because it was a long time ago, around '65 I think, I don't know what year to say.

**Anita Susuri:** I think I also heard a story that a wolf escaped from there and attacked someone?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I don't remember, no, I don't know about that.

**Anita Susuri:** I think I heard about it.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** It's possible, it's possible. Because it wasn't that secure there although there were bars but everything is possible. My father really wanted me to enroll in medical school. I would say, "No, because I couldn't cut a person to perform surgery." "Well, alright," he said, "go become a dentist." "No, I don't think I want to be a dentist." And I sent my documents to apply for the gymnasium.

**Anita Susuri:** At *Ivo Lola Ribar*.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** *Ivo Lola Ribar*, that's what it was back then. And I took the entry exam, I passed it and then my father came from work and asked, "So," he said, "what did you do? Were you accepted?" I said, "No, I failed just by a bit." He asked, "Why are you lying?" He said, "You were second in the list" (laughs). He was a big fan. Every time I told him [to buy me books], he went out to different publishing [houses], novels and stuff, at that time books would come in from Albania, he never told me no. He gave me the last of his money so I could buy books.

Actually there was a *Xha Limani* [Alb.: Uncle Limani] near the theater, where they sold books. He would wave at me, “Come because there are new books” (laughs). Now his niece or daughter has one here, *Xha Limani*, there is a bookstore here. And it became... there were occasions when my father gave me money to buy shoes, and he waved at me that there were new books, I bought books and left the shoes.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there other bookstores?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there were, there were.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you drop by them?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There weren’t many... it’s interesting because *Xha Limani* had many books, publications from Tirana that came there for the first time. There were other publications [at the other bookstores] but I am not aware that there were books available from Tirana because there was *Rilindja*,<sup>11</sup> and I don’t know, I don’t remember. There was, where it is now, there was a bookstore *Skënderbeu* there and that coffee bar where *Union* is, there was a hotel there, a restaurant. And then there was a jewelry store, one of them sold electricity products, lamps and stuff, across from them there were those film ads near and then there were the bookstores too.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned the films and said that you visited those cinemas with the school too...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The cinema, the theater, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Which ones, I mean, there was Kino Rinia back then, I think?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, Kino Rinia. It was named in Serbian, they called it Omladina...

**Anita Susuri:** Also [Kino] Armata...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Where Armata is now...

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, it’s still there.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** At the same place, at the same place.

**Anita Susuri:** At the Zahir Pajaziti [Square].

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<sup>11</sup> *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** And there is that... for example, where the old shopping center, behind it, behind the Zahir Pajaziti statue, that's where the church's well was. There was the catholic church at [Hotel] Grand. There was a mosque where the theater is...

**Anita Susuri:** Llokaç.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The Mosque of Llokaç, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you, at the cinemas, what kind of movies were there?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There were various movies. There were regular movies, of course, of the system back then with partisans and the ones against Germans. There were Hollywood movies too, the ones with warships, with sword fights and stuff. There was, *Anijet e Gjata* [Alb.: The Long Ships], in Serbian translated as *Dugi Brodovi*. There were various movies. Then there were also Indian movies where people went to cry because they were sad (laughs). There were also some kind of horror movies. I went once and watched a movie three times, I was scared the same three times, I jumped from my seat.

**Anita Susuri:** Which movie was it, do you remember?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There was a mummy in Egypt. He hits the wall and it falls down and makes a big noise. I jumped from my seat three times. I went there intentionally, just to see if I could [go without being scared] because I knew that scene was going to happen. It's interesting, I reacted instinctively.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you have a memory from the other cinemas and the cultural life?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I don't know what to tell you. We visited the theater often, every show. Actually my class was very active in that. Even when we went to the movies, we went organized, only our class, for example. We agreed in that way so that us, the boys, would see the girls to their homes, we always saw them home. Whoever lived in a certain area... I had four [girl] classmates who lived in that area.

One of them was my neighbor, actually that girl's father told me, "Even if I had a hundred daughters, with this kind of student, I would send them [to school] with no fear." We took care of them like they were family. They didn't dare to speak to another guy although they were of age back then in gymnasium, maybe they had a crush, but without asking for our permission they didn't dare to talk to them.

**Anita Susuri:** They were like your sisters.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Totally.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned something else as well that I have heard about the families who lived here in Pristina, they had a tradition to go for picnics in Taukbahçe, Gërmia...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** They also went to Sultan Murat's Tomb there. On 1 May at Gërmia, always. Even the buses that were there at the time didn't dare to make you pay for a ticket, nor the taxis or someone who worked privately didn't dare to charge for sending you to Gërmia. There was music there, there were different bands. They would grill meat, make *flia*<sup>12</sup> and stuff. Those were organized there at Sultan Murat's Tomb, for Saint George's day as well, various picnics.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it, for example, for Saint George's day, was there a special custom, or just a picnic?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, for Saint George's day as well...

**Anita Susuri:** There was some kind of [ritual], bathing in flowers.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Those were at home, they didn't do them there. Before breakfast they washed them, they put flowers in that water container, they put nettle and willows. They said, "The one who is asleep in the morning, will be asleep the entire year," that was some kind of superstition. There were these customs, but they slowly disappeared.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, you also mentioned, so, you were born in '54...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** '54.

**Anita Susuri:** And you were a child in '64, '65, 11 years old. There was a difficult period of time for our people because it was Ranković's<sup>13</sup> time...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Ranković's time, the guns.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember something you have seen, the families who went into exile?

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<sup>12</sup> A traditional dish in Albanian cuisine consisting of crepe-like layers cooked with cinders under a lid.

<sup>13</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.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Not directly because I didn't... in the area where I lived there was nobody. It happened the most in some villages in the area of Peja, maybe some in Llap too, I am not sure but we didn't notice it here in the city. So, I don't know what to say. I only know when the demonstrations of '68<sup>14</sup> happened, I wasn't at home, I was at my [maternal] uncle's. When I returned home the next day, I got out in the city and saw that the city was destroyed, the shop windows and stuff. I remember that.

**Anita Susuri:** You said you continued in the gymnasium, where *Sami Frashëri* is now...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What were those years like for you?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** That generation of teachers was the best generation, they really loved education, they taught us well. It was a very good generation and most of those teachers moved on either to faculties or different institutions. In the Institutes of Albanology and History. It was a very skilled generation of professors. Some of them are still active, for example, Jahja Koka, he taught us physics. Actually I remember one case, there was a classmate, he knew physics better than the rest of us, he was being noisy. He said, "Jakup," he said, "look" he said, "if you weigh 75 kilograms," he said, "I will take you out of the window with one arm." He asked, "How much do you weigh?" He replied, "75 and a half. You can't take me out for half a kilogram." He started laughing himself, he got him (laughs). Me and a friend, Agron Manxhuka, were a little better at math.

It was a quite voluminous book from a Croatian professor, its title, most of literature back then was in Serbo-Croatian, *Zbirka zadataka iz algebre*, Solving algebra problems. We solved all of the problems during the summer with that one friend. We only couldn't solve one problem. Trying and trying, we wouldn't get the result. And I told him, "Agron, do we start from the end?" He asked, "Why?" I said, "There is a mistake somewhere." Going from end to start we found the mistake, there was a mistake, a printing one I'm sure, they added another number. For example, instead of four, they printed two and we couldn't solve it.

When we went to school, the professor asked, "What did you work on?" He asked us. I said, "Professor, we solved all the problems with Agron, but there was only one we couldn't solve." He asked, "Which one?" I said, "This one." He said, "This one is the easiest." He started solving it, but he couldn't solve it. We had two math classes one after the other, he didn't even let us go on break. He tried, and tried, and tried. He said, "No," he said, "there is no solution," I said, "There is," "And why are you torturing me?" I said, "Change this number," he changed it. He said, "You wasted two of our hours," I said, "Me and

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<sup>14</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.

Agron wasted a week and solved it starting from the end” (laughs). “How did you think of it,” he asked, “to start from the end?”

We were a really good generation. Most of them are now doctors and directors. There was Hazbi Dervisholli at the post office. I left it a bit behind, I started studying economics and then I engaged in the *Ilegale*<sup>15</sup> and things changed a bit. Although it’s not the movement’s fault that I... but I neglected it a bit, and then I got imprisoned, I got married and I missed the boat. And I didn’t finish university.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you decide to study economics, after you graduated high school?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, some of my classmates went and it seemed interesting to me, and since math was more of a requirement there, I went to economics. Because some of them went into law, some went to medicine.

**Anita Susuri:** I forgot, I skipped over this question, did you have a prom night?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Where was it held?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** At Hotel Božur<sup>16</sup> at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** It was really good. The first time I wore a suit... and they were sewn by a tailor because I didn’t buy them ready-made. I’m saying, my father was ready to do anything when it came to stuff related to education.

**Anita Susuri:** Did people usually have them [formal wear] sewn or they bought them, what was it?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There were clothes to buy, but my father said, “No, I wanted them tailored for you.” And at that time a tailor had returned, he worked in France for several years and he came back. He was one of the most popular ones. He took me there to tailor my suit. We were a very decent class. And then we joked around even with our professors, we would sing to our professors, we would make up songs about them. We would sing to them both at prom and there at the gymnasium.

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<sup>15</sup> Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito’s Yugoslavia.

<sup>16</sup> Hotel Božur, a Pristina landmark, was the first hotel in the city. Today, it has been turned into the Swiss Diamond Hotel on Mother Teresa Boulevard.



Actually, there was a professor of Albanian language and I would tease some other professors, I asked, “Do you know where,” because we called him Buf, I won’t mention his name, we would ask, “do you know how we know that Buf is coming to class?” they asked, “How?” “Because his belly enters first, then him after,” because he was very big (laughs). Eh, there was that professor of geography, Rifat Blakaj. He had a habit, when he came into class he would say some gibberish things. That’s how he addressed us. We were like friends, not like professors and students, but we were very close.

**Anita Susuri:** What about these prom nights, but overall as well, what kind of music was played? What kind of music did you listen to?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, mostly folk music. There was modern music too, back then there was TRIX<sup>17</sup>, I think. But I listened more to folk music. I don’t know, even now I love it although I listened to other kinds of music as well. And then we organized trips after prom night. We went to visit different places in Yugoslavia, we went to Croatia, Slovenia, and we visited Postojna.

When we went there, here’s an interesting detail because there were four buses with Albanian students, one was with Serbian students, and another with Turkish students I think. When we went to Zadar we, the Albanian students got off the bus, but none of the Serbian ones did. We met an old man, he heard us speaking in Albanian, “So,” he asked, “you are Albanian?” We said, “Yes.” He began talking, an *arbëresh*<sup>18</sup> from Zadar. And his wife told him, that day was very sunny if I’m not mistaken, she was going to mass, she said, “Come, will you come to mass?” He said, “No,” he said, “I will stay with these boys and girls.” She asked, “Why?” He replied, “They’re our blood.”

We talked to that elder, we really enjoyed our conversation. And then he told me, he said he had some students from Zadar who are *arbëresh* and study in Zagreb and have contact with Albanian students, “They know,” he said, “the language better than us because they know standard language.” And we met some of those students as well. They impressed me a lot. But that stuck in my mind, that only Albanians got off the bus, not the others (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** So, it means that during your first year of university studies you already joined *Ilegale*?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, around that time.

**Anita Susuri:** I’m interested to know how this all happened? The beginning? How did you find out about it? How did you approach it?

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<sup>17</sup> A Kosovo rock band.

<sup>18</sup> *Arbëresh* refers to the ethnic Albanian community in southern Italy, descended from Albanians who migrated there during the 15th and 16th centuries to escape Ottoman rule.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I approached it through a neighbor of mine there, Mustafë Ademi. We were related to him as well as a family. A [maternal] aunt of mine was married to his brother. I got into contact with him at first. And then, Gani Sylaj lived at his house with his two sisters. They were students. Through Mustafë, I met Gani and that's where the engagement with *Ilegale* began.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like, I mean, the rules to join it?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, the rules were set by the person who wanted to accept someone. They studied a person, if they were right to join, if they were trustworthy, and they considered that it was right. And we started at first with reading a book and then discussions until joining and taking the oath. I was in a group with Gani and another one, but later Gani went to military service. He was connected to the leadership of the group, the Marxist-Leninist Group of Kosovo. Back then, I replaced him very well.

And we were in the group leadership, it was me, Mehmet Hajrizi, [Hydajet Hyseni](#), Kadri Zeka<sup>19</sup> and... but at that time Gani was in military service, at the time we were in the group leadership. We were assigned different work sectors. For example, somebody had agitation and propaganda, somebody for different things and that's how we divided different sectors of our work. We had meetings once a week, once every two weeks, but it was never longer than two weeks without meeting.

**Anita Susuri:** Where did you have these meetings?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In homes or there were times when the weather was nice and we had the meetings outside in nature. We also had some bases where we hid our materials.

**Anita Susuri:** The books you mentioned that you read, were they, I am sure they were banned?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Most of them were banned.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the books, for example?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there was that *Shota Azem Galica*, it was banned at the time although it didn't have anything specific, but it wasn't allowed. *Gjarpërinjtë e Gjakut* [Alb.: Snakes of Blood], it was prohibited because of its author maybe, not because the content had anything against the state back then. And many other books. Then we also had pictures where we only saw cities in Albania, historical moments, different museums. And then, we wrote different things and disseminated the underground press. Like that.

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<sup>19</sup> Kadri Zeka (1953-1982) was a Kosovo Albanian activist who fought for the rights and autonomy of Kosovo Albanians. After exile in Switzerland due to Yugoslavian repression, he collaborated with other activists to strengthen the resistance movement. In January 1982, he was assassinated in Germany, a pivotal event in Kosovo's struggle for independence, making him a symbol of resistance and martyrdom.

**Anita Susuri:** So, they prepared you in advance first...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Of course.

**Anita Susuri:** They gave you materials to read...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, of course, of course.

**Anita Susuri:** To maybe grow the feelings of...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, and the families who were known to have ties to national causes were usually chosen.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the other activities? You mentioned you had materials you distributed.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, different treatises<sup>20</sup> were distributed for different cases. For example, when there was the anniversary of the League of Prizren,<sup>21</sup> material was distributed. During the visit when Tito<sup>22</sup> came to Kosovo, materials against the system were distributed. Like that, different ones.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of content did these materials have, for example?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There was more, the raise of national awareness for the people was stressed more. We tried to infiltrate the people, but we didn't dare to do it openly, but there were cases when we did, depending on the place, we spoke a little openly. But more through treatises, through books, distributing it to the youth or even to teachers.

**Anita Susuri:** Did these treatises contain anything about our history as well? Or anything about, how to put it, our position here in Yugoslavia?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there was, there was. For example, there was a text I wrote back then, it was, *Open door policy, policy of capitulation to capitalism, signature*. Because back then Yugoslavia, for example, had better relations with the West, as well as with the East, because it was playing both

<sup>20</sup> In Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo, treatises were underground pamphlets distributed by Albanian activists to protest against political repression and cultural suppression. These documents contained critiques of the Yugoslav government and called for greater rights and autonomy, playing a crucial role in mobilizing resistance and fostering Albanian national identity.

<sup>21</sup> The 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Josip Broz Tito (1892 -1980), former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

sides. And then, there were different poems as well, Enver Hoxha's figure was elevated as well. Actually, people often say, "How Enver Hoxha?" "Well," I would say, "I liked him. It's better to say *shoku Enver* [Alb.: comrade Enver] than to say *Druže Tito* [Srb.: comrade Tito], he seemed closer.

At that time if you said, for example, how people present themselves as very strong democrats, if you spoke at that time and praised America, the punishment was even greater because the system of Yugoslavia was a communist one. Albania was there too, but to a different degree. Because Yugoslavia then avoided some things, it went on to revisionism. And we couldn't say we loved America at the time because we were punished even more (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** Yes because at the time there was also the Cold War.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there was the Cold War too.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, America was against the state... Russia.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Although that continues even today.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Although communism has been almost defeated, it hasn't been extinguished because it's still alive.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you about your family too, was any member of your family aware that you were on that journey?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** At first nobody knew, because in the meantime I also got married, not even my wife knew. There were occasions when I went to meetings all night, my wife didn't know where I was. She was a young girl, 18 years old, she wasn't even 18 when we got married. She probably suspected I had an affair or something else (laughs) although my behavior let her and other people know that I am not in that category of people. Actually, a friend of mine, Gani Sylja, would say, "Shera [Sherafedin], even if you're walking on the street, the police will know you're part of *Ilegale*." "Why?" I would ask. He said, "You're walking kind of hunched and you don't look to the sides, you don't make much noise," he would say, "don't, change the way you move a bit."

So, my family didn't know until late. Later on my mother and father, and one of my sisters found out. But I didn't have any problems. Later, much later, some people related to our family discovered it. I told my friends, "I am going away somewhere," because I was, there was the problem that I didn't want to damage my group because of my mistake of being discovered.

**Anita Susuri:** This discovery, how did it happen? You may have said something somewhere, or?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, they discovered a mimeograph of mine and some people found out who shouldn't have. At that point I was compelled to destroy the mimeograph. It turned into a metal, I wanted to sell it. And I destroyed the mimeograph, I demolished it and threw it away, in order to be able to cover my tracks a bit, but I didn't believe I managed to do so.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you back off then? Did you leave your house?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I became passive...

**Anita Susuri:** Or you just became passive?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I became passive. And then I went to military service in the '80s...

**Anita Susuri:** In, I think '81?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** '80, in '81...

**Anita Susuri:** Yes because you were in the military for one year.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I had one year [of service] because I was the provider in my family, married, I had one year because it was 15 months. In the navy I think it was 18 months if I'm not mistaken, it was longer for whoever was in...

**Anita Susuri:** Where were you?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I was in Croatia, a place called Knin. That place is like, how to say, the cradle of chetniks<sup>23</sup> in Croatia because there were many Serbs there. Actually, we had a general, he was the commander of the barracks, I grew a mustache, kinda long, so to say, he said, "Go shave off your mustache," he said, "because you look like the people I fought against in the Second [World] War." He was a partisan, but a minor, I think he was 17 years old when he fought in the Second [World] War. He would tell us, "In this bar, in that bar," he would name them, "you can't go because they are chetniks."

**Anita Susuri:** Was he Croatian?

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<sup>23</sup> Serbian movement born in the beginning of the Second World War, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. Its name derives from *četa*, anti-Ottoman guerrilla bands. This movement adopted a Greater Serbia program and was for a limited period an anti-occupation guerrilla, but mostly engaged in collaboration with Nazi Germany, its major goal remaining the unification of all Serbs. It was responsible for a strategy of terror against non-Serbs during the Second World War and was banned after 1945. Mihailović was captured, tried, and executed in 1946.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Croatian. At first, I was older than most of my friends who were in military service. A Croatian from Bosnia came and said, “Will you come,” he said, “to work in a working group,” he said, “we are having fun. We’re working a little and we don’t have military exercises or different obligations. We wear normal shoes, very relaxed.” And I applied there as a bricklayer supposedly, I had no idea how to do that. I learned there for the first time, a guy there taught me how to put on the mortar and plaster it on the wall.

He was closer to the working group. That officer, he was the commander of the barracks, he would say, “You are worth more than all the soldiers there,” because we had built a [miniature] city inside the barracks, a city to simulate a war in the city. Railroad, streets, buildings, we did everything. He liked us more, because there was a rule in the military that the guard, the ones who guard to go and eat first, and we would go before them. He would say, “They are first, then come the others.” And for that reason he had some advantages. And when he saw me there, he said, “Go shave [your mustache],” he said, “because you look like the people I fought against,” (laughs). Chetniks. I don’t know why I grew one because I never liked a mustache, nor to grow a beard, nor longer hair.

**Anita Susuri:** I think you got to go back, in ‘81, at the end of ‘81, or?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, I came back about one month after the demonstrations.<sup>24</sup> I was here and got that civilian uniform, how to put it, because I had three more weeks to complete military service. I went to Croatia, and the demonstrations broke out here. A state security major took me in for questioning and he asked me some kind of provocative questions. I said, “No,” I said, “that must’ve been some kind of revolt by the students because the people wouldn’t join those demonstrations.” “Fortunately,” he said, “the people didn’t join,” but actually the people joined en masse (laughs). I had the information because I would speak to people on the phone. But, he said, “No,” he said, “fortunately the people didn’t join,” he said, “because it would’ve been bad.”

**Anita Susuri:** How was the demonstration received in your circle?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Where, in the military?

**Anita Susuri:** In the military.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Actually we didn’t talk about that a lot because you weren’t sure who you were talking to. There were some, there was a case with two young men, I felt bad for them because they would hang out with some Serbian soldiers and they would learn curse words. I would tell them, “Don’t learn these words because you will run into problems,” they learned them. They started to

<sup>24</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.

curse and then they were caught and beaten and punished, for example they were detained for a week there. I told them, “It’s not smart to do that, stay put, keep your distance, it’s better.” Because I had a principle, I never insulted anyone, but I also didn’t tolerate anyone insulting me.

Even when I was at work, a Serb once used a bad word, he insulted me and I grabbed him by the collar. Because I worked in prison, I worked at the bar at first, I made coffee. I grabbed him by the collar and told him, “I’ll chop your head off,” because I had a knife in my hands cutting some lemons. “No,” he said, “I was talking to someone else.” “Say whatever you want to the others, but not to me.” When I changed my workplace and I went to [Hotel] Grand, most of the workers gave me a handshake. “Bravo, you never insulted anyone, and you never tolerated someone insulting you.” I said, “If I insult you once, you insult me ten times in return, it’s not a problem.”

**Anita Susuri:** Did you work in Božur or in Grand after prison?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I worked in Božur before prison, then I moved there as a warehouse worker. I had the social canteens, at the Carpet Factory, it was the furniture one, *Napredaku*, and the other factory, *Kosovatrans*, which maintained buses. Now where it is across the School of Economics. I supplied them, and I kept a record. And there was a cafe bar close-by when you went to the Carpet Factory... I was arrested from there.

In fact, I moved to Grand as the main warehouse worker of the whole organization. Because that hotel in Pristina, *Sloga*, was divided into four sectors. I was a warehouse worker of a sector *Fushë Kosova*, [that dealt with] student canteens, worker canteens, there was a cafe bar *Tre Sheshirat* and a restaurant *Beogradi*. I supplied them as the main warehouse worker. I went to military service, when I came back from the military, I worked for about four months, or five, and then I was imprisoned.

After I was released from prison, I made a request to go back to work, the majority were in favor of accepting me, but a Serb said, “How can you want to hire him back? He is an enemy of the people, how can you want to hire him?” And then none of the Albanians dared to raise their hand and accept me, so they didn’t. After the war I worked at Grand again until it was privatized and they fired us (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** At that time before the prison, what was it like to work at Hotel Božur and Hotel Grand? Because they were kind of more popular places to hang out in Pristina.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there was some kind of joy because there were a lot of Albanian workers. At first my [paternal] uncle worked as a director at Božur. When he returned from the Second [World] War, he worked at some small places here in the city, in Belgrade, and there was Hotel Yugoslavia where the

administration building is now, near the Skënderbeu<sup>25</sup> statue, that's where the new shopping center was and there was Hotel Yugoslavia. Some of the buildings were older.

Then he worked as a technical director in Božur. He and some other friends of his worked there and they lowered the number of Serbs. It was around, he would tell us, that when he started, 80 percent of the workers were Serbian. Regardless of what level, only some manual workers were Albanian. He joined, then 90 percent of them were Albanian when he retired. And then after he retired I started working there. So, there were various kinds of people because the system was of that kind and they infiltrated it with people who observed you and...

**Anita Susuri:** Was New Year's celebrated [there] for example?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, New Year's was celebrated but the Serbian New Year's was also celebrated. There was a song sung there, the drunk Serbs asked for an Albanian head [in the song] to be sent to the canteen. Radio London reported on that incident that happened in Pristina at the time.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it a big problem?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, no, it wasn't a big problem, but that was mentioned in international media too.

**Anita Susuri:** Weren't they arrested?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Of course not, "We were drunk." That was their excuse whenever they caused an incident, "We were drunk."

**Anita Susuri:** During the time you worked there, did you carry out your activity? Did you continue it?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In the underground movement?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes, yes, yes. Nobody in the organization knew that I was engaged in *llegale*. Some friends told me afterward, there was a driver of the Factory of Peja, he would bring beer, "How," he would say, "didn't Shera [Sherafedin] tell me he is engaged in that, I would join too," (laughs).

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<sup>25</sup> Gjergj Kastriot – Skënderbeu (1405-1468) was an Albanian nobleman and leader. Taken hostage as a boy by the Ottomans, he served the Empire until 1443 when he became the Chief of the League of Albanian People in the League of Lezhë. He led the resistance to the Ottoman Empire for the next 25 years until his death, and is considered a model of Christian resistance against Ottoman Islam throughout Europe. He is the greatest Albanian national hero.



**Anita Susuri:** You couldn't trust him?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, no, because you had to verify them. He seemed like a nice guy, but I don't know. When it came to my time in prison, there is an interesting detail. I was in the Prison of Pristina and there were two brothers who were imprisoned, from the Kopalla family, that was their last name. The older brother, his name was Halil. He came one day, one night, when they came for questioning some more distant people would come... (laughs). He told me, "When I gave," he said, "my statement," he said, "they found a notebook of mine that I gave to a friend, there were some treatises there." She [the friend] was from Peja. Her name was, I will never forget it, Sanije Maznikolli.

He said, "No," he said, "they scared me because Sanija had said she was pregnant by me, that I am her lover." "What did you tell them?" "No," he said, "she is my friend, I have no other relations with her." I said, "Halil, if I stood up, I would beat you more than they did." He asked, "Why?" I said, "I am a married man, but if that girl said, 'I am pregnant with Sherafedin,' I would've said, 'Yes, that's why she has my notebook. We didn't collaborate on underground activity.'"

Then they interrogated him again and an inspector took him, only one Albanian inspector and he said, "Sign the statements you have given so far." He [Halil] said, "No, I won't sign it." He [the inspector] asked, "Why?" He said, "Because I said this here and they scared me, and I have to change it because I won't sign this statement." He [Halil] said, "He turned to me, 'Young man, I am Albanian too.' He switched," he said, "my statement." After some time they would bring *Rilindja* to us in prison, sometimes not. Depends on what was published.

Reading the newspaper, I had never seen that girl in my life, he didn't even describe her to me. I asked, "Halil, is this girl Sanija?" I don't know, maybe that sixth sense or what is that. She lived in the students' dorm near *Shkolla Normale*, that girl. The journalists had gone to interview the people who lived in the dorm regarding the conditions and stuff. He came close and said, "Yes." We checked out the date when the interview was conducted and found out that she was released from prison. Trust me, we were six people in the room, we stood up and jumped from joy, we hugged each other, we jumped from joy that she was released from prison.

**Anita Susuri:** So, he saved her with that statement?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, that he retracted [his previous statement], that [he said] she's his lover and that's why the notebook was with Sanija.

**Anita Susuri:** Not that she was a collaborator.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, that they weren't together in the underground activities. But then I heard from some other people that Sanija was imprisoned again, she didn't stay put (laughs). A small detail, maybe I jumped from the topic.

### Part Three

**Anita Susuri:** First of all, I am interested to know when the arrest happened?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** When I was arrested I wasn't at home, I was at my [paternal] uncle's, near the Mosque of Perinaz, as it's called, in Taukbahçe. My uncle went to Germany with his wife and son and I remained there. There was the husband of aunt Fetije, my uncle lived with him, looked after him. And the police had gone to my house, I don't know how they discovered me. And I don't want to know how I was discovered, I don't want to know. Of course, someone couldn't stay silent and talked.

They went to my house and I wasn't here. Actually, one of my sisters got the phone to call me and let me know, "Come home." The policeman stopped her, told her, "No." They took my younger brother in their car and came to my uncle's house. They rang the bell, I got out. It was time for me to wake up and go to work. When I got out, as soon as I opened the door they put me in handcuffs. I asked, "Can I at least dress? Why are you taking me?" "Don't worry," they said, "we'll tell you when we get there." That's where they took me.

But they didn't have up to date information on me. "Where do you work?" I told them, "I work at Hotel Grand." And they had the information that I was working at Božur. Maybe [they got it] from someone who knew me from earlier. Until they proved that I was the person they were looking for, they didn't interrogate me. Actually, when they sent me to a room, what's more interesting, Mehmet Hajrizi was in the room too. None of us let them know we know each other, just like total strangers. After a couple of minutes they took Mehmet away from there, we were in the same group. One of them said, "He is a teacher," he said, "they tortured him quite a lot," he asked, "did you know him?" "No," I said, "I have never seen him in my life."

**Anita Susuri:** About Mehmet?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** About Mehmet. Then the investigations began. Even some inspectors from Belgrade interrogated me, but the Albanian ones treated me harsher. Although they were clever, they made them hit me and they just watched. They came by the end, to verify once again. Actually one of them was a bit older, I could tell that he was very sneaky. He asked me, "Can we talk," he asked, "in Serbian or Albanian?" I said, "We can talk in Serbian, but I will maybe have to think to find the right word because I don't know it fluently," "Eh," he said, "we won't get a translator, think about it, it's not a problem."

And I did that intentionally so when he asked me questions, I would have time to think of a suitable answer. Maybe I couldn't get it right every time. He would ask me questions, I would analyze what works best for me, what doesn't, and I would start talking. And a friend told me, Mustafë Ademi, because he has an interesting personality. He was engaged by the group with working at the Provincial Secretariat, with the police. He went and finished school in Belgrade, to be inside the system and get information.

He told me, that older inspector, he would tell them, "What are you doing? You're attacking him? He has two schools, he has a faculty which we have given him, and he has the faculty of *llegale*. You're no match for him." He was the one who interrogated the people from the Information Bureau, the ones from Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia. He was a very hated inspector. I noticed what he was up to, he was really sneaky. But he was correct, he didn't threaten or anything. But when he asked a question, it was very tricky, it could get you into trouble. You had to be very careful. Maybe I slipped too, I couldn't find... because he had a lot more experience than me.

**Anita Susuri:** You were in the Prison of Pristina?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In the Prison of Pristina and the Prison of Mitrovica.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the Prison of Pristina like?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The Prison of Pristina has an arched shape. It has two floors. There were the cells, honestly, much smaller than this room, the size of the windows there was the same as this one {points to the window}. I don't even know if it [properly] fit two beds. A bed like this, one meter and 80 centimeters, two by five or something like that. The window was covered with galvanized iron, it had circular holes in it. Some of the windows had bars too. We didn't have a toilet inside, they sent us to the toilet twice a day. We got to shower once a week. It was in the middle of the yard, actually on the corners of the yard. In the yard where we would go for a walk, there was the toilet.

**Anita Susuri:** Outdoors?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In the yard. We had to take off our clothes outside, winter, summer, regardless. To shower and put our clothes back on outside. There were some guards...

**Anita Susuri:** I'm assuming the water was cold?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, the water was lukewarm. But there were some really vile guards. When we would leave the toilet, we would be wet, it would be cold outside, and sometimes there happened to be an elder in our cell, until they got dressed, maybe it would take 15 minutes, and they wouldn't let us

go inside. Some guards who were a bit more decent, “Take your clothes,” they would say, “go get dressed in your cell.” And they would take us to the cell to get dressed. And some of them were really vile.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the food like? Did they bring it to your cells?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** They brought the food to our cells. For example, they brought you one quarter of the food in the morning. You had to calculate eating that for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We were allowed visits once a week. They would bring us clothes, clean ones from home.

**Anita Susuri:** How long were the visits?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** 15 minutes, surely. And then they transferred me to the Prison of Mitrovica. After I got my sentence.

**Anita Susuri:** You were imprisoned in ‘81, which month?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** December.

**Anita Susuri:** December.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** After how long did you go to trial?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Trial, around seven months. I knew most of the group members, but a large part I also didn’t know because the way it worked was in groups of three. Three of us knew each other, but if one of us knew someone from the other group of three, the others didn’t. They didn’t know, so it worked that even if someone got caught, the whole group wouldn’t fall apart.

**Anita Susuri:** So, for example, why did they sentence people in groups? Why didn’t they sentence you as individuals...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There were rare cases when people worked as individuals, but we were an organized group.

**Anita Susuri:** And always as a group?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Our activity was as a group and the sentencing was as a group, to sentence us for the same act we did together. Because an individual is less harmful to a system than a group.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there something they accused you of that you didn't do?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No. They attempted to make us admit to some things, but you didn't admit to it because if... the more you admit, the longer you're sentenced (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of indictment did you have? Were you classified as an irredentist?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Nationalists, irredentists, destroyers of Brotherhood-Unity.

**Anita Susuri:** You were telling me about the trial.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** You were in a group and they sentenced you...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** We were sentenced as a group.

**Anita Susuri:** To how many years?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Our group was, I think, from three years to 15 years sentences. Actually it's interesting because when the trial was over, the driver who was sending us back asked me, the police driver, he asked, "How much time did you get?" I said, "Two and a half years." He said, "Are you kidding me?" I said, "No," he said, "How," he said, "two and a half years, there was no sentence lower than three years?" I said, "Yes, yes," I said, "only I got two years and a half."

That policeman who accompanied me asked me, "Are you a good guy?" I said, "Well, I try to be." When we went to the court, we had to wait in a different room. He said, "I will uncuff your hand but only if you don't cause problems." I said, "No, what would I do?" And he uncuffed me. "Ah," he said, "we will share your prison time together." And then I joked around and said, "He will serve two and a half years, I will serve two and a half years" (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** You were actually sentenced to five years.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Five years but the Supreme Court reduced it to three years.

**Anita Susuri:** Immediately?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, after almost two years.

**Anita Susuri:** And first you were... in Mitrovica the entire time?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In Mitrovica the entire time, yes. They only sent me back [to Pristina] for four or five days until the trial was over. Because they sent me to Mitrovica before the trial, when the investigations ended. And then, they sent me back to Pristina only for the trial.

**Anita Susuri:** Based on what I heard from the others, the Prison of Mitrovica was notorious. I mean, every prison is bad, but it also had that director...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Sherafedin Ajeti.

**Anita Susuri:** You share the same name (laughs).

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The same name [speaks in an accent] (laughs) he had an accent like this.

**Anita Susuri:** (laughs) What was that prison like?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** The Prison of Mitrovica was in a circular shape. It has two floors and a basement. It had the bathrooms and about three more cells there. It's almost like, kind of only half of the basement is a prison. The other two floors were prisons. I moved quite a lot there, from one cell to another. I had the chance to stay with different people by the end of it. Actually, I stayed with a group friend, Nezir Myzhda, there on the ground floor. It didn't seem that big of a deal to me as some others describe it. They would say, "If they let me out, I wouldn't know how to find a way out." I knew the cells maybe since I moved a lot. I even knew the solitary confinement cells.

**Anita Susuri:** Why did they move you?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, sometimes I wouldn't like the company and would tell them, "Change my cell." They wouldn't want to change it, "I won't take the food." Hunger strike. One day, two days, "Come one," they would say (laughs) and they would change my cell. At other times they would move me as they wanted. So, I got to change a lot of cells.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you about the physical violence, did it only occur during the investigations in the beginning or did it continue...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There was violence as long as there were investigations.

**Anita Susuri:** Seven months.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Around that.

**Anita Susuri:** Did it stop in the Prison of Mitrovica?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** In the prison, only if you did something with your friends or attacked the guard or something, but they did use violence. Although, it's interesting, there were many guards who were good guys. They defended us, not directly, but from a distance, they defended us. Even the ones who were really nasty Serbs didn't dare to abuse us if not for the Albanian ones. They were really good guys. I am grateful to them, I am thankful to them because they helped us.

It's interesting because even the information there spread through them. We would go on strike, for example, in the Prison of Mitrovica for a specific reason... because there was Gjyle Krasniqi from Podujeva in the prison, she was a little more rebellious. And once I don't know what altercation she had with a guard there, she hit the food plate, the guard, while the worker was giving her the plate, she kicked it and spilled all the food on her body. They beat her up, the other guards came and beat Gjyle up. And we went on a hunger strike, because they beat Gjyle up. The entire prison.

The information would spread very quickly through the walls or you found out through letters at specific places. But what's more interesting, within two days, all the prisons in Kosovo went on strike for the same reason. They would go mad over how the information spread. The information spread through the guards because we couldn't spread it. We didn't have phones. So, there were good people there who helped us.

**Anita Susuri:** The strike you had, did you go on strike for some other reason that you might remember?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Usually to demand a right we were entitled to. Because there were regulations, they would curtail our rights or sometimes even due to the use of violence. Although, I am saying, thanks to those guards, the political prisoners weren't tortured a lot. But the political prisoners were also some kind of educators for the other prisoners. So, the guards too, they didn't want to stir up anything between us because they knew that we had more power to organize something than, for example, a random prisoner who was there for stealing or killing.

When the political prisoners decided on something, it would happen. Because for some time, for example, when we went outside for a walk we had to keep our hands cuffed behind and we decided not to. We agreed, the entire prison. Take them out, we would hear them, "Put the handcuffs on!" They would yell at them. Because in the middle of the prison yard, on the floor upstairs there was a watchtower. There were two prison yards. "Put your hands together," "No." *Bream* {onomatopoeia} the door would open, we heard the noise because they were made of metal. They would take us inside. The second day the same again, the third day, they didn't say anything. And our hands remained free.

I mentioned it, those people lacked logic. Instead of the director coming or sending someone to say, “There was a misunderstanding, you don’t need to put handcuffs on, from today you are free to keep your hands untied,” so they would retain some honor for themselves, but we took it from them by force. So, that was our merit, nobody else’s. There were different cases like this, but usually for stuff like that. More due to the use of violence. Because we weren’t like the prisons, for example, Dubrava<sup>26</sup> or the prisons in Serbia and across former Yugoslavia. They used violence there even for the fun of it. There were rare cases when there were Albanian guards and they didn’t dare to even speak.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you also have, I am sure you did, visits in the Prison of Mitrovica.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Your family members came...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes, we had visits with bars [between us].

**Anita Susuri:** You couldn’t get too close?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** We could get close because there were some very small wires. About five visits by the end, a little before being released, we had them in the prison yard because the other ones were...

**Anita Susuri:** Were the visits in groups where others came too?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Usually three people. For example, three of my family members came for me but my wife and children had an extra visit. Then Sherafedin [Ajeti] put a stop to it, he stopped visits from my children, he said, “No, you can’t...” I argued with him. I asked, “Why?” He said, “Because the children,” he said, “will be traumatized,” he said, “when they see their father in prison.” I said, “Well, they were traumatized when you imprisoned me,” I said, “they have nothing else to be traumatized about,” I said, “don’t worry about my children.” But, no. We argued, I even used some curse words. Actually, I was waiting to beat him up because he got a friend of ours beat up, Kadri Osmani. He ordered the guards to beat him up because Shera [Sherafedin Ajeti] said something bad, and he punched Shera, and the guards beat him up really badly.

**Anita Susuri:** So, they put a stop to it?

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<sup>26</sup> Dubrava prison, located in Kosovo, was one of the largest high-security prisons in the former Yugoslavia. Prior to the Kosovo War in 1999, it housed various inmates, including political prisoners, and conditions were often harsh, with reports of overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and instances of mistreatment. Ethnic tensions, especially between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, contributed to discrimination and stricter treatment for minority prisoners. The prison gained notoriety during the Kosovo War when, in May 1999, Serbian forces allegedly massacred over 90 Kosovo Albanian inmates during NATO’s bombing campaign. This event highlighted the extreme violence and human rights abuses during that period.



**Sherafedin Berisha:** They put a stop to the visits from my children.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have any other consequences because of your argument with him?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, no. He would just laugh. Interesting. *Imenjače* [Srb.: namesake] that's an expression he used. The guards would just look, I was waiting for them to attack me and beat me up. But I lost control of myself at that moment.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know about your family's state as well, for example financial state, when you were imprisoned?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Not all bad, but not good either. My wife at the time had two children, she lived with my parents. My father was a retiree, one of my brothers, actually both of my brothers were working. One of them was married, one of them wasn't.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you live collectively?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** We lived in a collective, as a family. We weren't doing that bad. My [paternal] uncle and my wife's father helped us as well several times. So, we weren't lacking in anything regarding clothes or food. Family members would bring extra food.

**Anita Susuri:** How did your wife and your parents receive [the news of] your imprisonment?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** My grandmother felt it the heaviest, and then my mother too. My father was okay, he was okay. And my wife, [compared to] what I thought, she took it well. Actually when they sentenced me to five years, she said, "I was relieved when they said you got a five year sentence." I asked, "Why?" She said, "I thought they would release you," she said, "and classify you as a traitor." I felt good.

**Anita Susuri:** I've heard a lot about the visits, I will mention what I heard earlier, that when they brought you something they wouldn't allow you to take them...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Most of the things, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** There were confiscations.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, there were, but you could take most of the things with you. They didn't allow you, for example, to take tea in a bag.

**Anita Susuri:** Why?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Because then they would have to bring you hot water (laughs), there was nowhere to boil it. But food in packages and stuff, yes. Cooked chicken, our family members would bring them, they also brought *pite*.<sup>27</sup> Actually one time, they brought, they had taken goat milk from someone and made some sort of dip, in a quite big container, we didn't eat the prison stew for like a week, only the bread. We would tell them, "Give us the bread, we don't want the stew." We only ate it with the dip. Because we had missed eating it (laughs). Something easier. Although the food in the Prison of Mitrovica was much better than the one in the Prison of Pristina, the quality was much better.

That Sherafedin Ajeti was quite vile, but the food... because they changed. Before him there was another guy, Sokol, I don't remember his last name, the food was much poorer in quality. He improved the food. There was more discipline, and another thing that was interesting, because at the time of Skol, the guards would act freely. They would beat someone up, and they would cause trouble without consulting the director at all. When he came, they didn't dare to assault someone without the director being present. He had some rules. He was very vile, but he had his rules.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of food was it, for example? Stewes?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, in the morning there was usually some small amount of marmalade and butter or some boiled eggs or even sausages. For lunch, there were different foods and most of the time they had meat, if I'm not mistaken. Now I am not sure, either on Saturday or Sunday there was no meat, the other days, yes. And the dinner was light, they didn't contain a lot of calories, since we weren't very physically active, that was enough too. I can't say that it was very bad even though the other prisons might have had it worse than what I experienced.

## Part Four

**Anita Susuri:** How did your time continue? What did you do, did you have anything to do there? Did you read?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I was in the investigative prison the whole time. We had stuff to read, there was a small library there, but they also allowed in some cases, in some cases not always, to receive books from outside. Actually I was surprised by one case, a prisoner from Ferizaj was allowed a suitcase full of books. Around 80 percent of them were publications from Tirana. I was surprised at how the suitcase was allowed, who let it happen. We had a great time reading.

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<sup>27</sup> Albanian *pite* is a pastry made of a thin flaky dough such as phyllo or similar.

We actually made a rule because we were there, there were prisoners who stole and killed, and we made a law. We agreed, all of us sat in a room. It was a big room, there were nine or ten people. “Will we make a rule?” “We will.” “But no one shall break it.” We read from breakfast time to lunchtime, nobody could say a word. From lunchtime to dinnertime, do whatever you want, read if you want, play something if you want.

We could play dominos, chess. Actually, at some point we started playing that game *kapuqs*.<sup>28</sup> There was one of them, he was, he would sing to the opponent who lost the game with offensive words, a little, nothing too much. But he was really nice. We played games, but we also read.

**Anita Susuri:** Was the communication, for example, to discuss the cause, politics, the system, or you were careful?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Depends on the circle of people you were with. After some time, you more or less knew who was what. We talked, but didn’t mention names, for example, to certain people, but we spoke generally.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned it, after how long was your sentence reduced?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** After around two and a half years.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you get this news?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Through a decision from the Supreme Court of Kosovo that my sentence was reduced. It was reduced to four-five other people there in our group. But there were cases when the sentence of the Supreme Court was increased. I remember one case, one guy was prepared to be released that day based on the verdict of the court of the first instance and the door opened, he had his luggage with him and wanted to leave. The guard told him, “Wait a minute, sign this,” he asked, “What?” He said, “Your sentence was extended for six months.” But it was very bad news and he was young. I felt bad for him, but there’s nothing we could do. There were cases like that too.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you happy when your sentence was reduced? It was reduced to two years, right?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, two years. Of course, you feel some kind of joy although you felt bad expressing it in front of the others. But of course, you feel a little relieved because I can’t say that it would be the same for me. Although before being sentenced, I had prepared myself to be sentenced to up to ten years. I had prepared myself to not have a problem with up to a ten year sentence, if it was over ten years maybe it would be a little more difficult. When they told me five, it really felt like they

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<sup>28</sup> *Kapuq*, Albanian for hat. *Kapuqs* is a version of the shell game played with hats.

told me I was being released. Because it didn't seem like a long sentence compared to my other friends.

**Anita Susuri:** You knew the exact date when you would be released? Did you know it?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes. No, because they released me before I was supposed to. I was supposed to be released on December 20th, and I was released on December 2nd.

**Anita Susuri:** What was that day like, do you remember?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I was surprised, I didn't expect that day.

**Anita Susuri:** They probably came to your cell...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** They came to my cell and told me, "Collect your things and go out." Actually I wanted to leave some stuff behind, leave them to my friends. An old man said, "No, don't leave anything here." I asked, "Why?" He said, "Don't even turn your head back when you leave," he said, "because [then] you will come back here again" (laughs). I will mention a time when my grandmother was in bed because she was sick, and she had said, my family members told me, "I won't die before Sherafedin comes back. It's enough for him to pass by the window, I can pass away." Fortunately, I got to spend two weeks with her and then she died.

She loved me a lot, she loved me a lot because I was the oldest child in the family. My father had a child before me, they died young and my [paternal] aunts would tell me, "It seemed to us like even the birds were singing out of joy [when you were born]." My two aunts, "We wouldn't let your mother wash you properly, we would stick our hands and wash you. And we would measure how big you got every day," with a string, "every day," she said, "you would grow by the size of a grain of wheat." There are some things that I get emotional about when I...

**Anita Susuri:** What about when you were released from prison that day, did you let anyone know? How did you return home?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I had some money. Because they would send us money to buy tobacco and some other things there in the prison. I got on the bus there in Mitrovica and I came to Pristina to the bus station. From the bus station to the gymnasium here, I only recognized one Romani person who worked at the water company, he was a coworker of my uncle's, he was a colleague there. He was the only person I recognized on my way back. When I arrived at my street there, I met a neighbor there, "Sherafedin, you came back?" "Yes." His name is Halil.

I got inside, I rang the bell *ding-dong, ding-dong* {onomatopoeia} I rang it without stopping. My mother said, “Who has gone mad ringing the bell like this, they’re going to break it.” Before I rang the bell, she [my wife] had washed some clothes and stopped by the bathroom, and there was a window there across from the entrance and she was looking. And my mother had told her, “Don’t look at the window because it’s still not his time to come back. My wife said, “Maybe he will come back,” you know. And they had just sat down to eat when I rang the bell. I think one of my brothers opened the door, then their meal was interrupted.

Halil went in, because one of my aunts was married [into a family living] close-by. He said, “Aunt Fahrie,” he said, “Sherafedin came back,” “Stop it,” she said, “there is no way,” he said, “I swear he came back,” he said, “he gave me this money.” Because I put my hand in my pocket, I gave him all the money I had (cries). Excuse me. Some of this stuff [is emotional] because of my family. No, no, it’s not a problem, we’ll continue. But when I remember my grandmother...

**Anita Susuri:**

I wanted to move on to talk about the time period when you were released from prison, most people received visits, they had guests, it was some kind of hang out...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it like that for you too?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Those people were welcomed like heroes. But after some time they started being belittled too. But in the beginning they were welcomed like heroes. Various kinds of people came, there were even people on duty who came to see what we were talking about, there were cases like that too. I mentioned Ron Govori, he was the son of my grandmother’s sister. After my grandmother died, he came to express condolences. As soon as he saw me at the door, “What’s up you irredentist, you vile person, you ruined our Brotherhood-Unity,” he would say all this ironically. And then he hugged me. There were interesting things at that time although there was kind of an economic crisis as well. There were cases when I didn’t even have enough money for tobacco but we would still manage.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that they didn’t accept you at work after prison?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No.

**Anita Susuri:** How did your life go on then? I am sure that continued for a while?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, of course. I am sure because I would notice some signs. But they didn’t accept me at work. Then there was a secretary at the Building Maintenance Enterprise. I was able to

work as a manual worker at *Eurgens* through a friend. He was the only one who knew I was in prison, nobody else at the organization knew. I worked as a manual worker for about eight months, and then a painter there asked, “Why don’t you go get a certification,” he said, “and you’ll come,” he said, “work as a painter, you get paid better, the work is easier.” I went, it was a night school as it was called. I went and passed the exam as a painter. I worked as a painter for some time. Then I was fired again because I am sure the information was spread and they fired me. I would work privately, wherever I could find work as a painter.

**Anita Susuri:** I think you mentioned that you noticed they were following you, how did you notice that?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Well, there are some people that it’s not common to run into everywhere you are. It’s the experience too, you gain it in prison because prison is a kind of school. And when I felt compelled to go abroad, I was with my [maternal] uncle’s son and we wanted to go to Presheva because we couldn’t find sugar at the time, here in Kosovo, if I’m not mistaken. We decided to go get it there. The police stopped us in Gjilan and checked us. He worked at the Islamic Community, he had to send some magazines in Presheva. They took them, they took our names, last names and stuff. And then an inspector started asking me questions. He knew Albanian, he was Serbian, but he knew Albanian very well. Because he would read [the content of the magazines] and he would translate it to the others.

Although the magazine was religious, there was some political content as well, he asked me, “Have you ever been in prison?” I said, “No.” He asked, “Why are you lying?” I said, “No, I wasn’t, I was never in this prison, in the Prison of Gjilan,” “Do you know,” he asked, “Hydajet Hyseni?” I said, “Yes.” And he attempted to ask me some things.” He said, “Very well,” he said, “you are free, but,” he said, “tomorrow,” he said, “as soon as you come back,” he said, “check in at the Secretariat of Internal Affairs in Pristina,” “Okay,” I said, “all right.” Since you released me, I thought to myself, you’ll never see me again. I felt compelled to go abroad. And then I went to Austria for some time...

**Anita Susuri:** You went there by yourself at first?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** By myself. And then I came back from Austria and went to Germany. After some time I told my wife, “Take the children and come because being all alone, the house will get nothing out of me, and I’ll get nothing out of the house. So, together we can create some capital,” because they would give aid and I would work, so I could help my family too.

**Anita Susuri:** In what year did you go there with your family?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** ‘93, in 1993, my wife came too.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you in contact with your group there?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I communicated with Mustafë Ademi more in Switzerland, and with some prisoners, but nobody from my group, in Germany. I tried to contribute as much as I could.

**Anita Susuri:** Through what kind of activities for example?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** For example, there was the Three percent.<sup>29</sup> In the city where I went, there was one of my uncle's sons and he convinced me to go there because I still had a dilemma whether to go or not, to go to Germany after Austria. I asked them, out of all the Albanians who were there, only one of them paid into the Three percent. But in about two weeks, with the help of someone else who was in a different city, we convinced everybody to pay. There were two Romani people too, one of them was working, the other wasn't. One of them didn't pay because we convinced everyone to pay to the Three Percent.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there an organization or a group, or how did you function?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** There were those Albanian Clubs, there were different groups working as part of those clubs. And the parties which were here, LDK<sup>30</sup> and the others, the National Movement. People would become members depending on preferences.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you participate in the demonstrations they organized abroad as well?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, in Austria, in Graz, there were about 50 Albanians who were a little younger. We organized a demonstration there in support of Kosovo. We got permission from the police. We prepared all the banners in the apartment where I lived and we went out. What was more interesting, we would go on demonstrations and there were cases where people traveled back to Kosovo by bus after three-four days. But I don't know, we didn't have fear. And then in Germany as well, I participated in the demonstrations in Bonn and Düsseldorf.

**Anita Susuri:** What did you write on the banners? Kosovo Republic?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes, yes. Those things. Kosovo Republic, Freedom for the Albanian nation, the usual things.

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<sup>29</sup> The three percent fund was created by the Kosovo government in exile during the 1990s. All Albanians in the Diaspora and Kosovo were duty-bound to pay three per cent of their salary into this fund to finance Kosovo's parallel institutions.

<sup>30</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.

**Anita Susuri:** What about the years when the situation got even worse in '97, '98, '99...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I was in Germany.

**Anita Susuri:** What about your family? Were your parents alive?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Were they in Kosovo?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you in touch? How did they experience it?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Through the phone more. I don't know, it's interesting, they adapted to those conditions.

**Anita Susuri:** Did they stay here in Pristina?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** They stayed in Pristina during the war too. My mother became paralyzed, she had a stroke and she couldn't move one part of her body, my father remained. A brother of mine who was here left for Macedonia too, and then he came to Austria. Because I had a brother who was working in Austria and he went there. While I was in Germany. And then I visited them in Austria from Germany, although I wasn't allowed to go to Austria, but I went there illegally.

**Anita Susuri:** What about when the bombings began here, how did you take that?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** We took it with joy although with a dose of fear. Because we knew that the Serbs wouldn't let up easily. There is a saying, "The donkey makes you mad, you hit the saddle. The saddle makes you mad, you hit the donkey." There, they got mad they were being bombed, and they let it out on the poor unprotected people.

**Anita Susuri:** Did your parents stay there during the bombings too?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** They didn't kick them out of the house?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** No, no. My mother was paralyzed, they had two elders. I thought they would kill them, leave them there, but fortunately not. And the police had gone there about three times, as my



father told me, they asked, "Are you sheltering refugees?" "No." Because there were some family members there, some relatives who stayed there for several days. But when the police went, nobody was there.

**Anita Susuri:** What about the liberation, I am sure you found out through the TV? Or?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, I saw the different stories. Actually it's interesting, I had contact with many Germans. I told one of them, I said, "Look," I said, "a neighbor of mine was a soldier of Hitler's. He had," I said, "his stamp here" {touches his arm} it's true. And I said, "When the Germans lost the war, and began to withdraw, they said, 'Will you come with us to Germany?' to my neighbor, he said, 'No,' 'Well,' he said, 'remember that there will come a time again when the foot of German soldiers will step on Kosovo.'"

When the war ended then, the first soldiers to enter Prizren were German. That German called me on the phone and said, "Hey, Berisha," he said, "you told me," he said, "the truth." I asked, "Why?" He said, "Did you see the German soldiers in Prizren?" I said, "Didn't I tell you German soldiers will return," I said, "that German officer was smart." So, there are sometimes interesting cases like this. Because it happened to me, maybe I'm going off topic, two very interesting things happened to me which I would never believe could happen.

Once I was in Germany waiting for the bus to go to a different city. An elder came close to me and said, "Good day!" "Good day!" "Do you have," he asked, "a cigarette?" I said, "Yes." I gave one to him. He took out 50 fening to pay for the cigarette. I asked him, "What do you want?" He said, "I'm giving them to you for the cigarette." I said, "I didn't sell it to you, I gave it to you." He asked, "Are you Albanian?" Only based on that gesture. I said, "Yes." I talked to him and I sometimes would tease the Germans, I asked, "Were you by chance a soldier of the uncle?" He asked, "Which uncle?" I said, "Uncle Hitler," because our elders called Hitler uncle, because the time of German occupation was freedom for Albanians. Because they removed the system of Yugoslavia's king, an administration in Albanian was opened. Actually it was some kind of freedom.

He said, "No, I wasn't, I was in Croatia a bit," he said, "but I was an intendant." I said, "I'm not asking what you worked as," I said, "but were you a soldier?" He said, "Yes," he said, "the Serbs," he said, "are very disloyal. Just like a sneaky dog," he said, "they don't attack you from the front, but from the back," he said, "they bite you in the calf." The bus came and I went. He asked, "Where are you going? Stay and we'll chat." I said, "No," I said, "do you want me to break up with my wife?" (laughs) And I went.

And another case, an entirely different place, entirely different situation. I was with my wife in Tirana, there is a market near the center and I was on my way, the street was full of people. An old man came by, he passed me by wearing a nice hat. He passed me by and stopped in front of me. And he said hello

with a fist on his head {puts his fist on his head}. I stopped and I did the same {puts his fist on his head}, I said hello too. He just smiled, turned back and walked. He didn't even speak a word. Everyone around started to laugh. I can't explain how [I felt] during these two cases. Actually the one in Albania, I was surprised.

And my wife said, "What?" I said, "He knew I liked Enver Hoxha back then and..." (laughs). Maybe I spoke inappropriately, remove this if you don't like it. And it's interesting because stuff like this happened to me.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know after the war, when did you come back? When did you return to Kosovo?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I returned, so, five-six months after the [NATO] troops entered. I would actually go there at the office they called *Auslander*, the office which deals with foreigners. I would tell them, "Take me back faster." They would say, "Not until we get the papers in order." On the other hand, there was a doctor because I had a heart attack there, I had a stent inserted. They said, "You can't go before getting checked first." I would go there, a German woman working there would tell me, "Everyone," she said, "is coming here crying, 'Don't take us back!' You've made me tired, 'Take me back faster!'" But they sent me back then, and I got back. I came back because my parents were left alone. My two brothers were abroad.

I made a promise to myself that if one of my parents or both of them die, I wouldn't hold visitation hours, and tell people to come there and console me. Out of four sons, I thought, for none of us to be there, I will go back at all costs. I came back. Actually, my wife worked at a house, she cleaned, he was a French man married to a German woman. "Leave your son to me," he said, "I will give him an education, give him an apartment and everything." He had four advertisement companies. He had divided them, he had partialized them, I asked, "Why did you divide them? Why didn't you turn them into one company?" "No," he said, "because if I turned them into one company," he said, "they will make a union. So, up to ten workers, they can't make a union. And I," he said, "control them, not the opposite." And he would say, "Leave your son to me, I will take care of his employment and everything." "No, I can't."

**Anita Susuri:** What were the ages of your children at the time?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** My son was 19 years old. My oldest daughter was married and the other two were younger. One of them was born in '84, the other in 2006.

**Anita Susuri:** Big difference.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, a child of old age. Only that one is at home, the other ones are abroad.

**Anita Susuri:** After the war, what state was Kosovo in? How did you adapt to life here again?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Honestly, there was chaos in the beginning. You didn't know who was doing what, there were no rules even in traffic. But people would get along, there weren't big problems. Actually at that time someone from that city in Germany called me, he said, "Berisha," he said, "can I come to Kosovo?" I said, "Feel free to," I said, "I guarantee [your safety]." And he stayed here for two weeks. And when we would go out in the city he would say, "Look at the chaos, they won't even indicate when turning their cars, they're just driving fast, they don't even honk." I said, "Can you imagine," I said, "Germany without police, rules and a state for two days?" "Oh," he said, "there would be chaos."

"Here," I said, "here," I said, "there's no police, no regular army. If someone wasn't scared I would kill them with a gun, they would even kick me out of my house. There's," I said, "all kinds of people." He said, "You are right." Actually in another case he told me, "Berisha, look," he said, "everybody is speaking in German," and many people really spoke in German in the streets at the time. He said, "Europe is bringing in a lot of help," I said, "Yes," I said, "thanks a lot, but you have made a mistake." He asked, "What mistake?" I said, "Where did you find these ripped bags," I said, "by the time Europe's money comes here, they are spilling on the street somewhere," I said, "and when they arrive," I said, "some thieves you brought, and our own thieves are jumping on it," I said, "nothing is left for the poor people." He looked at me, he said, "You," he said, "are right."

**Anita Susuri:** I think you said that you continued working at Hotel Grand.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, I did. They rejected me the first time. And then a person told the director of Grand, "Do you know who Sherafedin is?" He said, "No," and then he told him my story. They accepted me. But they didn't accept me as a warehouse worker, but as a subordinate warehouse worker. Then they appointed me as an inventory warehouse worker, but very well, I got employed. The salary wasn't bad until it was privatized. Once it was privatized it became great [ironically] (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** Until what year did you work there?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** 2006, if I'm not mistaken.

**Anita Susuri:** How did your life go on after? Did you work anywhere else?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** For some time I didn't do anything, I worked as a painter every now and then.

**Anita Susuri:** The craft.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** A little.

**Anita Susuri:** I am interested to know, I will go back a bit but I think this is important too. When you were in the Faculty of Economics, it was interrupted...

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** And you didn't have the right to education anymore, is that right?

**Sherafedin Berisha:** I didn't even try, no, I didn't go. Actually after the war I met someone, he is dead now, Rifat Blaka, he is dead now, but he was a professor of Political Economics. I ran into him in Gërmia, I was taking a walk with my wife, he asked, "Why aren't you coming," he said, "to continue university?" I said, "Are you kidding me?" He asked, "Why?" I said, "I passed first year," I said, "I passed Mathematics 1, I want to pass 2," I said, "I have been on a break for so long," I said, "my brain has withered," "Come because you will pass it," "No," I said, "because I lost my documents," "Come," he said, "at the Faculty, I will find them." I didn't go.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Sherafedin, if there is anything you would like to add for the end or something you want to mention.

**Sherafedin Berisha:** Yes, I would because at the time when we were organized with *Illegale*, our ideal and our goal was national unity. And that is far from being realized although many people said that it will happen or it won't. Actually, I often say, national unity won't happen from the people who want it or don't want it. It will happen from the people who don't know what national unity is, a few generations after us, but not soon. But will it happen? There's no way it won't happen because it's impossible for a body to separate and live separately because it won't be able to stand. United we are stronger, better. We are a wonderful nation but we are even more problematic.

Actually, I was joking one day with an imam, I said, "Imam," I said, "my mind is set on something," I said, "maybe I am not sinning," he asked, "What?" I said, "I am convinced that us, Albanians, are descendants of the Devil," *Istighfar*,<sup>31</sup> how can you say that?" I said, "Well, I said that I may be mistaken," I said, "because the Devil was the first angel in heaven," I said, "but he made a mistake and God kicked him out of heaven. And told him, 'Go outside and do whatever you want.' He left us outside too and we never settled down" (laughs).

Because a friend from my group, a very good friend, Mehmet Hajrizi said, "If you think you're at fault for something, analyze it better because it's maybe all your fault." And I think it's all our fault for

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<sup>31</sup> *Istighfar* is an Arabic term commonly used in Islamic culture to express seeking forgiveness from God or asking for pardon for sins or wrongdoings. It's a form of repentance and spiritual purification, often recited as a supplication during challenging times.

remaining in the margins of history, because we didn't react adequately in many situations. Although our intelligence was diminished twice. The smartest people were executed twice during the time of the Ottoman Empire, in Janina and in Shkodra, and we were left without a head. The body doesn't stand without a head. And we were left without a head, unfortunately, but I believe people will get it together, things will fall into place.

**Anita Susuri:** Thanks a lot!

**Sherafedin Berisha:** You are welcome!