INTERVIEW WITH ZELIJE KRYEZIU RAMADANI

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Duration: 177 minutes

Present:

1. Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani (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: Ms. Zelije, if you could introduce yourself, your date of birth, place of birth, and something about your background?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: First of all, thank you for choosing me to share something about my life. Through my life story, I can also testify to many things that have happened from my youth up to today. My name is Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani, and I was born on August 10, 1966, in Suhareka. I am the eighth child of my parents, Rrahman and Zelfije Kryeziu. My parents had nine children, five daughters and four sons. My mother's wish had always been, as she constantly reminded us, to have as many sons and daughters as possible because they were needed for the family, but also because… Kosovo has always been occupied, and we needed them for war as well, she foresaw that.

Why do I say this? Because my mother experienced the same pain that mothers with missing children feel today. She had a brother who was a martyr in the National Liberation War; he fell in 1944 in Sandžak, and his grave was never found. Maybe that's why she always used to say, "Having many children is never a loss, but having too few can be." So, we grew up in a family of nine children. Our economic conditions were average, we couldn't say we were poor because my father owned a lot of land, and we worked the land. In our family, there was no distinction between sons and daughters, we all worked, and we all received an education, except for the three eldest, my oldest brother and two sisters, who didn't have the opportunity.

They managed to complete four or five years of primary school, as my eldest brother was born in 1946, then my sister in 1948, and the other in 1950. These three had only minimal schooling. However, starting from my second brother, who was the fourth child of my father and was born in 1956, he was the first in our family to receive a full education. He has since passed away. He was a professor of the Albanian language, meaning he managed to achieve that… Then came my other sister, who broke the taboos of the time. She was the first girl in the municipality of Suhareka to study physical education, the very first.

Then comes my brother Ramadan, who is still alive today and is a music professor. After him was a sister, who has since passed away. She was repeatedly deprived of opportunities by the state, was a political prisoner, and was expelled from school multiple times. Then comes me, I was also targeted multiple times for expulsion, but I managed to graduate from secondary school with a diploma. I will explain those attempts later. And finally, my youngest brother, who has also passed away. He was a student, but due to political reasons, we were unable to complete everything.

I grew up in a family for which I am very grateful to my mother and father. Why? Because I experienced what it means to grow up in a large family, but one filled with harmony and equal rights. We worked in the fields, in the vineyards, and everywhere else just so we wouldn't have to depend on the government or be reliant on the authorities. Even though we were expelled and deprived of the right to state employment, we were never afraid of the state. We worked and had a fairly good life. In other words, we lived an average life for that time.

I grew up in my father's *oda*,[1] I can say. My father, Rrahman Dan Kryeziu, had an *oda* where people from all over Kosovo and beyond would find shelter. Why do I say this? Because my father participated in the raising of the flag in 1968, which was initially raised by the patriot Haxhi Bajraktari, but my father was the one who raised it again. Why do I say it was raised again? Because after the flag was put up on the pole, the police at the time came, took it down, and placed it in the town's library, right in the center of Suhareka.

Then my father, along with a group of his friends, forcibly broke down that door. The police and investigators, the UDB[2] agents of that time, were inside. They managed to take the flag and raise it once again on the pole. This event was carefully preserved, and I have it engraved in my memory because I heard it dozens of times in my father's *oda* when people from all over Kosovo would visit. One thing I can testify about my father, which I heard for the first and last time in 1992 from a professor from Pristina, whose name I have since forgotten, is that my father was a living witness to the Tivar Massacre. But he never spoke to us about the Tivar Massacre,[3] never, never! Nor did my mother.

And when we started to suspect, I'm speaking about my own impressions, when I began to suspect that something was not right with my father, it was because he didn't like seeing dolls. The dolls that children play with. He didn't like them. One time, I asked my mother, not him, because he wouldn't answer. I said, "Why doesn't father like to see dolls?" She said, "My dear, your father doesn't want to

[1] *Oda* (men's chamber) was a traditional gathering space in Albanian households, primarily used for hosting guests and discussing social, political, and cultural matters.

[2] UDB *(Uprava državne bezbednosti)* was the State Security Administration of Yugoslavia, a secret police agency active from 1946 to 1991, known for suppressing political dissent through surveillance, imprisonment, and persecution.

[3] The Tivari Massacre refers to the mass killing of thousands of Albanian recruits from Kosovo by Yugoslav Partisan forces in April 1945 in Bar (Tivar), Montenegro. The victims, mostly young men, were forcibly mobilized and then executed under the pretext of being sent to the frontlines, making it one of the most tragic events in Albanian history during the Second World War.

see dolls because when he was there in Montenegro, in Tivar, he survived…" I can't say thanks to luck because those poor souls were executed. But when that burst of gunfire was shot, my father was the first to fall, and the bodies of others fell over him, many others, not just him. They were covered with corpses, stayed there all night, and that's how they survived.

Since that time, I don't know, he never explained why he didn't want to see dolls. I heard him describe the Tivar Massacre in detail. By chance, at that time, I was already married, and I went to visit my father when a professor from Pristina arrived, along with a student. The professor was elderly by then, and unfortunately, I have forgotten his name and surname. He had been a participant in the Tivar Massacre, but he didn't introduce himself to my father that way, he didn't say, "I heard that you were there." Instead, he said, "I've heard that you are a living witness. Could you describe the journey up to…?" That was the first time I ever heard about the Tivar Massacre.

When I asked my father, "Why did you never tell us?" It was difficult in our time. Today, for you, it is very easy to mention the Tivar Massacre. Just mentioning the name "Tivar Massacre" could get you imprisoned for 10 to 15 years. Because of what the Yugoslav communists did back then, in collaboration with the communists of Albania… I know very well the journey of the Tivar Massacre. My father was 17 or 18 years old at the time, and he said, "They simply gathered us in Suhareka and told us to come to the *zadruga*," I don't know what they called it back then; now I translate it as the cooperative. "We didn't know anything. When they gathered us there, they told us we were going to fight the remaining German forces somewhere near Bosnia, somewhere over there."

They gathered them and set off on foot from Suhareka, passing through Prizren, then reaching Kukës and continuing their journey. From there, they went to Milot and then turned back toward Shkodër. In Shkodër, they boarded those boats, the ships. When they reached the other side in Tivar, he said, "There was a sloped area, and we didn't know that there were both Yugoslav and Albanian partisans and communists leading us along the way." He continued, "As we were approaching to disembark, the first ones started to step off, and that's when those cannons, those machine guns, hidden under trees to camouflage them, began firing." And that was perhaps the greatest massacre after Enver Hoxha's[4] time, the largest massacre of Albanian youth, Kosovar boys, meaning young men from Kosovo.

Then he described in great detail how they were treated along the way and how many people died during the journey. He used to say, "I survived thanks to…" My father didn't have a mother, he had a stepmother who took care of him when they took him that day. He said, "She gave me a piece of bread and tucked it deep into my pockets," describing the pants he was wearing. He continued, "And along the way, when we got tired, I would reach deep into those pockets and pull out a small bite of bread.

[4] Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) was the communist leader of Albania from 1944 until his death in 1985. He established a Stalinist dictatorship, isolating Albania from the rest of the world and enforcing strict state control over all aspects of life, including agriculture, education, and cultural expression.

That tiny bite, as small as what a bird would eat, was our salvation." Everyone who couldn't keep walking along the way was executed on the spot.

The journey lasted four or five days, I'm not sure exactly, but roughly. That's why the Tivar Massacre was so horrifying. I was fortunate to hear about that event directly from my father. When the time came for recording on cameras, we insisted on documenting his story, but he never agreed to speak.

Anita Susuri: And what happened next? Did he return home?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: Then my father, Rrahman Kryeziu, along with Miftar Bajraktari, Musli Elshani, and Qazim—no, not Qazim, because he was captured by the Germans and taken to Germany, where he stayed for four years. I don't want to get too caught up in names, though I'd like to mention some, but I don't want to make mistakes… There were about 12 or 13 from Suhareka that I know of who survived that day along with my father. From that day until his death on May 30, 1996, they remained friends and never separated. Later, they even became close like family, exchanging visits and support.

He said, "We," meaning himself, "I was covered by the corpses, and I thought… I stayed there the whole night under that pile. Sometime before dawn, we started to move, those of us who were still alive," and he said that with some of the ones I mentioned earlier, "we met there and then found shelter in different villages around that area." He also recounted an incident, saying, "Near a sort of barn, a house, a Montenegrin woman came out and gave us water and a piece of bread." As for how he made it back home, I don't know, he never described it, and the professor didn't insist on asking.

The professor was mainly interested in the journey up to that point. What would have been best, though I've forgotten the name of the brigade, is that when my father finished the interview, the professor said, "Rrahman Dan Kryeziu, thank you for being so honest and precise. I was also in this brigade. I've had cases where I interviewed people, but either they exaggerated or they weren't able to speak." That's what he told him. Unfortunately, I've forgotten his name. He wrote things down, but where those writings ended up, I don't know. At that time, it was difficult to even keep books because we were politically persecuted. That's why I can't prove many things with photographs or other evidence, every year, we were raided multiple times. I don't know.

He said, "I was also in this brigade," and added, "You truly described the event exactly as it happened." Some people from Suhareka returned, and then my father got married. If I'm not mistaken, he got married at 16, though I'm not sure, both my mother and father married at 16 because they were both born in 1926. They then built their life here. My father was truly a great patriot. I am always grateful to him, and I don't separate my father from my mother because they were… My father had four years of schooling, while my mother was illiterate.

But deep down, I've always said that even though my mother was uneducated, she was an encyclopedia. She carried a wealth of knowledge in her mind, like someone with a university degree. She was very advanced for her time because she loved learning, she truly loved it… And maybe today, thanks to my mother, though also my father, but especially my mother, because she always said, "Books are everything, books." She passed away with the longing… I can even prove it with a photograph of when my sister published her first book and we gave it to her, whether it was the first or the second one, how lovingly she flipped through its pages. It was as if she was absorbing the letters, even though she didn't know how to read a single one.

Our mother always pushed us, saying, "A daughter must be educated because it makes her more capable and independent." And our father supported us, especially the daughters, even more than the sons. As I said, growing up in a family of nine children with a mother and father who never, not even for a moment, made distinctions, never saying, "He's a boy, so he can go out, but you stay because you're a girl," gave us a strong foundation. Even today, among the five of us who are still alive, as four have passed away, we have an extraordinary harmony.

I remember when we used to take the tractor, I even drove a tractor when I was 16 or 17. We would all get on that famous tractor, in the trailer, both girls and boys. Then, my two cousins from Prizren would come and stay with us for a long time, helping us during the summer harvest. My cousin from Samadraxha, Fadilete Shala, and these two, Florije Ejupaj and Miradije Ejupaj. The trailer would be full of young people, and we would go through the fields singing. But in the evening or the next day, they would call us in for questioning, "Why are you riding a tractor like in Enver Hoxha's system, all together, boys and girls, singing songs?" That system was truly strange (laughs).

Kështu që, unë pastaj regjistrohna në shkollën fillore. Shkollën fillore unë e kom pasë në Suharekë; që nga klasa e katërt e kom dashtë shumë artin, artin në përgjithësi. Edhe në atë kohë unë kom shkrujtë, shkruj unë herë mas here, por akoma s'i publikoj gjanat. Kam shkru poezi, kam pasë pasion recitimin. Domethanë që nga klasa e katërt fillore jam marrë me recitime, shkolla çka na ka angazhu. Pastaj, e përfundoj shkollën fillore dhe regjistrohem në gjimnazin, "Jeta e Re", në Suharekë.

So, then I enrolled in primary school. I attended primary school in Suhareka, and from the fourth grade, I developed a strong love for art, art in general. At that time, I started writing, I still write from time to time, but I haven't published anything yet. I wrote poetry and had a passion for recitation. From the fourth grade onward, I was involved in recitations, participating in activities organized by the school. Then, I completed primary school and enrolled in the *Jeta e Re* gymnasium[5] in Suhareka.

[5] Gymnasium refers to a type of secondary school in Kosovo and other European countries that provides a general education with an academic focus, preparing students for university studies.

I had many dreams, I loved school and, in general, the pursuit of knowledge. In 1982… but let me go back once more to '81, when the first demonstrations[6] began in Prishtina. At that time, my brother Vesel and Zyrafete had completed their studies. Zyrafete had already started teaching as a physical education teacher in primary school. My brother, Vesel Kryeziu, who was a professor of the Albanian language, was serving in the military at the time. The demonstrations started, and Zyrafete participated in the Prishtina demonstration on April 1, 1981. Why do I connect this?

And my sister Myrvete, who has since passed away, she died in a traffic accident in Sweden in 1997, was a gymnasium student in her third year when she participated in the March 26, 1981, demonstration in Prizren. I was in my first year at the time. The police managed to catch my sister, but not Zyrafete, only Myrvete. At that time, Myrvete was attending the gymnasium in Suhareka, while my other brother, Ramadan, was a student at the music high school in Prizren. Both Myrvete and Ramadan participated in the Prizren demonstration that day. Ramadan was already there, while Myrvete had gone as part of an organized group with her class and some friends who had been informed that a demonstration was planned in Prizren.

They went to Prizren and took part in the demonstration. Myrvete was arrested, and we received the news at home that she had been detained. But fortunately, thanks to her quick thinking, she managed to escape through one of Prizren's alleyways, I can describe exactly where, near the hamam.[7] I remember that event very well. It happened near the hamam, though I'm speaking about how it was back then, I don't know Prizren today. If you remember, there used to be a round barbershop across from the hamam…

Anita Susuri: It is still there.

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: Is it still there?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: There is a small alley there, now just an alley. The police set up their first cordon at *Qafa e Pazarit*[8] because the students and pupils were coming from the Higher School toward the city center. When they reached this part, trying to move up from the hamam toward Bazhdarane [neighborhood], there was a large police cordon blocking the way. The police used tear gas and

[6] The 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo were a series of student-led protests that began on March 11, 1981, at the University of Prishtina, initially demanding better living conditions but quickly escalating into widespread unrest calling for greater political and national rights for Albanians in Yugoslavia. The protests were met with violent repression by Yugoslav authorities, leading to arrests, imprisonment, and a tightening of political control in Kosovo.

[7] Hamam refers to a traditional Ottoman public bathhouse, historically used for communal bathing and social gatherings. Many hamams remain as cultural or historical landmarks in Kosovo and other Balkan regions.

[8] *Qafa e Pazarit* (Bazaar Pass) is a well-known intersection in Prizren, historically a key gathering point near the old bazaar, featuring shops, bars, and cultural landmarks.

physical force, and that's where they arrested my sister, Myrvete. My brother saw it happen, as did one of Myrvete's friends who was with her. When Myrvete entered the alley I'm describing, it seems the police officer there was a good man and wanted to give her a chance to escape. Her friend said, "He just took two or three steps back," and added, "I turned my head, and Myrvete had also stepped back two or three steps." The officer had moved forward, giving Myrvete the opportunity to run.

Somewhere in that neighborhood, Myrvete entered a house where she was welcomed by a wonderful woman, whose name I won't mention. Myrvete stayed there around midday and remained until six in the evening. Meanwhile, we received news at home that Myrvete had been arrested. At that time, we had a lot of underground materials. My father, since 1974, had been involved in bringing in underground magazines and literature with the help of his comrades. We, as children, also read and distributed them. In my father's famous *oda*, which I mentioned earlier, men from all over Kosovo and beyond would gather, and the discussions always revolved around Kosovo's situation, its occupation, how liberation could be achieved, and how young people needed to be made aware that we were oppressed, that Yugoslavia was a lie.

He used to say that Kosovo was equal to the federation, but in reality, Kosovo was oppressed, discriminated against, and exploited, its wealth taken and used by Belgrade. When we received the news that Myrvete had been arrested, we immediately started taking action. That day, Zyrafete had returned from Pristina and was in Suhareka, so we began organizing certain things, hiding them in the ground. At that time, we would wrap materials in plastic buckets, bury them, and cover them with soil. I will never forget that moment, we were not only worried but also deeply distressed, wondering what would happen to Myrvete.

We were waiting for my brother, Ramadan, to arrive… The last bus from Prizren to Suhareka was at seven o'clock. So, we waited with my father, my mother, my other brothers, and sisters for Ramadan to come and tell us what had happened in Prizren. The news at the time reported it as a minimal demonstration because they never revealed the actual number of participants. Now, I can clearly picture that room where we were sitting. Myrvete was the first to enter, she knocked on the door. When she opened it, we all stood up, overjoyed, because we had believed she was in prison. Then my brother Ramadan also walked in. We all got up and embraced each other. For us, it was a great victory.

She told us how she had escaped, the story I just shared. That kind woman had changed all her clothes, including her jacket, and had accompanied her all the way to the police station. Since the curfew had started, and the police were conducting checks, she took Myrvete by the hand and said, "If the police stop us, I am your aunt. You came to visit your aunt in Prizren, and now you're heading back to Suhareka." So, that night, when Myrvete and Ramadan arrived home, it was a moment of great joy for us.

Then, about a week later, based on photographs, they had pictures and other evidence, the authorities tracked down Myrvete as a participant in the demonstrations. They also identified Rrahime Hoxha, Myrvete's friend who had participated, along with Bajram Berisha. A group of Myrvete's classmates, those she trusted, were also involved. At that time, you couldn't trust just anyone with your identity, you had to be very careful in choosing your friends. The ones I remember were Bajram Berisha, Ymer Bala, and Ismajl Morina, these were Myrvete's friends who took part in that demonstration.

A week later, all of them were taken in for interrogation in Suhareka, where they were questioned, "You participated in the demonstrations." At that time, the Committee ordered the school administration to expel Myrvete from school, about a month or a month and a half before the end of the academic year, since we finished school in June, and the demonstration took place in March, it must have been around two or three months before the school year ended. That was the first time Myrvete was expelled, she was expelled three times, for three consecutive years.

In 1982, as the years went on, we had already begun expanding our underground activities. Zyrafete was connected in Pristina with the underground group of the time. She was involved with Nuhi Berisha, who is now remembered as a martyr. At that time, the movement operated in groups of three. I would know you and this other person, but not the others. I only knew Zyrafete, we weren't aware of the rest. That's how the trio system functioned. Around that time, preparations began for 1982, marking the anniversary of the demonstrations.

Zyrafete was arrested on February 28 or 29—28, since February only has 29 days once every four years. I won't mention the exact date, but it was at the end of February. When Myrvete was expelled from school the previous year and we were taken in for interrogation, our family was marked as irredentist, nationalist, and problematic. The authorities renewed their repression, what my father had done in 1968 and 1974 came back to haunt us. My father was taken in for interrogation again because of the underground materials from that time, and several of his comrades were sentenced. Essentially, the state had already identified us, "Aha… this is the troublemaker. And now, here come his descendants."

We were marked as a targeted family. In 1982, for the first time, our house was raided. At that time, we were preparing the pamphlet *Popull Shqiptar*, I only remember the title, as it was part of the movement of that period. This pamphlet, with the same title and identical text, was reproduced and distributed across all of Kosovo. It was spread around March 9 or 10, maybe even earlier in some cities. Its purpose was to mobilize the people and the youth for the first anniversary of the demonstrations on March 11, 1982.

Since January, Zyrafete had already brought us in and engaged us in the movement. At that time, we were handwriting pamphlets, dozens, hundreds, even thousands, I can say. We were actively preparing these materials, but how the police decided to raid our house, I don't know. It happened around February 23 or 24, based on Zyrafete's arrest. Early in the freezing morning, around five o'clock, the

police arrived and surrounded our house. My father's house was located in the center of Suhareka, near the small street by the bridge. It was either the fifth or sixth house in line, right in the center of town.

We, the girls, were in our bedroom in an older house, while the rest of the family was in the other house, we had two houses. I just remember that when the police arrived, they entered without warning, surrounding the house and going straight inside. I only remember my mother coming in and saying, "Get up quickly, the police have surrounded us." Naturally, we got dressed as fast as we could, and they gathered the whole family in the living room where we usually stayed. Then the raid began, a massive search.

There, they seized materials from us. Not underground materials, but still, because even having an eagle symbol could get you accused [of nationalism]. They took anything they found, my brother, the Albanian language professor, had his own library. They confiscated anything with an eagle on it, any books from Albania. My brother had all the works of the *Rilindja* writers,[9] all the authors. They also found a torn piece of a slogan, part of a pamphlet, there had been a mistake, so it was ripped up, shredded, and thrown into the attic.

The police came and took the materials. They found a notebook of poems belonging to my sister, Zyrafete, she used to write. They also found one of my notebooks, at that time, I was in my second year, in 1982, and I had written poetry. They took everything. Naturally, we had written about Albania as well, various poems. They took those two notebooks. They also found that torn pamphlet and seized it. Then they took Zyrafete in for interrogation. They had come with specific intentions. Now, I'm speaking based on what I know. They took Zyrafete in for interrogation at the end of February.

Then, in the meantime, Myrvete, my sister, fell ill with appendicitis. She went to the hospital in Prizren and had surgery. The authorities came to arrest her, and as soon as she was discharged, I think it was the next day, though I'm not entirely sure. Zyrafete said she was arrested directly from the hospital, but either way, whether from the hospital or immediately after being discharged, they arrested Myrvete and took her in for interrogation. At first, they held them for 24 hours in Suhareka, then transferred them to Prizren, and finally sent them to the prison in Mitrovica.

These two showed incredible resilience. For us, it was somewhat easier because Myrvete and I had been involved in activism alongside our sister. Zyrafete, however, was the key connection to the broader movement. When they took Myrvete in for interrogation, they tortured her both physically and psychologically, just a week after her surgery. She described it in detail. In the Prizren interrogation center, during the night, they used the central heating pipes, like these ones here, to which they

[9] The *Rilindja* writers were part of the Albanian National Awakening (*Rilindja Kombëtare*), a 19th and early 20th-century movement advocating for Albanian national identity, cultural revival, and independence from the Ottoman Empire. Their works focused on history, language, and patriotism, with key figures including Naim Frashëri, Sami Frashëri, and Pashko Vasa.

handcuffed her. They locked Myrvete's hand to the pipe high above her head, forcing her to stand all night in that position {she explains while holding her hand up}, just a young girl.

At that time, Myrvete was 21 or 22 years old, as she was five years older than me. Besides the physical torture, being brutally beaten, she was forced to stand all night. Every time she started to drift off from exhaustion, the handcuffs would tighten. As soon as her hand dropped, they would constrict even more. By morning, the handcuffs had dug deep into her skin. Then, they transferred her to Mitrovica Prison. On March 10, 1982, still within the same events, after the interrogators failed to extract any testimony from Myrvete and Zyrafete, they came and arrested me, a 16-year-old girl.

Part Two

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: I knew, I was fully aware that I had helped with those pamphlets, my friends and I. I'm speaking about my group. Fërdane, Fërdane Gashi, Florie Gashi, Florie Jupaj. We were the youngest. In writing the pamphlets, everyone participated alongside their siblings, sisters, sisters-in-law, and nieces, we tried to do as much as possible. Once the pamphlets were written in Suhareka, Zyrafete would take them to Pristina, where they were distributed. Those that arrived in Suhareka from other cities were also spread across Kosovo that same day, that same night. This was a massive *boom* {onomatopoeia} to the regime.

Then, on that March 10, they took me in for interrogation, it was around six in the evening, I will never forget it. My mother dressed me a bit warmer. My younger brother, the late Naim, was also involved in this, as was my brother Ramadan. I will never forget when I said, "I'm going now, but you might be next." My father and mother gave me their advice… My father had been through interrogation before, he knew what it was. He told me, "Try to speak as little as possible, remember exactly what you say, and don't contradict your initial statements," and then added, "Come on, I swear on your father, this is what we owe to our homeland."

When I got in, there was that small police vehicle, they called it *fiqa*,[10] *fiqa*, or *auto*. Two police officers had come to take me, and as I stepped into the car, my mother was furious. But she was also very brave, and she told the two officers, "Send a message to your commander: You imprisoned two of my daughters, two girls," I'm repeating exactly how my mother said it, "You took two of my daughters, and now you're taking the third, but I will keep having daughters as long as I can. Go ahead and take them, but you won't be able to wipe them out." And then I was taken to interrogation.

They kept pressuring me, insisting that I admit that Zyra [Zyrafete] had given me the pamphlets, that she had brought them from Pristina. They had already built their own version of events, Zyra brought

[10] *Fiqa* was a colloquial term used in Kosovo to refer to the Volkswagen Beetle, a small, rounded car commonly used by the police during the Yugoslav era.

them from Pristina, and Myrvete and I distributed them. But that wasn't true. That's why I was certain that Zyra and Myrvete hadn't revealed anything, that nothing had come out. So now they had come to take me, a 16-year-old, to intimidate me and construct the scenario they wanted. I endured torture, something unimaginable for a 16-year-old.

I want to mention names here. That night, it wasn't just me, though I was the only girl. There was also a group of young men from that time, Nexhat Kuqi, Ahmet Goxhaj, Florim Kuqi, and Luan Kuqi. That night, we were all in interrogation for the same pamphlet. The pamphlet had been distributed in Suhareka. Whether it was this group of boys who distributed it, to this day, I don't know… because at that time, having information wasn't useful, it was better not to know than to know. But that night, in different interrogation rooms where they took us, I was certain that I had nothing to do with that group, I was involved with my sisters.

I focused and said, "I haven't seen any pamphlets. I'm not interested in this issue of Kosovo." I had to say, "I only care about my education. I want to go to school, I want to study." They kept beating me. They had this type of rubber baton filled with sand, and while they were hitting me, one of them was pulling my hair, yanking out as much as he could. Another one was holding my hands, while the third kept hitting me with the baton. The interrogators were Daut Morina from Prizren, Ilaz Vranovci from a village in Suhareka, he is no longer alive, Astrit Koshi, Idriz Gegaj. At the moment, I can't recall… and later on, Sahit Zogaj.

I was taken in for interrogation every year from 1982 to 1987. Anything that happened in Suhareka, whether I was involved or not, I was called in for questioning. They never sentenced me, but they kept bringing me in for interrogation. That night, they tortured me so brutally, but they still couldn't get what they wanted from me, they wanted me to accuse Myrvete and Zyrafete. They released me on March 11. Early in the morning, at 6:30, I walked out of the Suhareka police station. My legs had swollen this much {gestures with hands to show extreme swelling} overnight. They would beat me all over and then pour cold water on me to numb the pain at first.

From the police station to my father's house was about 500–600 meters, but it must have taken me 40 minutes to get there because every step I took, every time I moved my feet, I felt pain, pain, pain. I entered the house just before seven. When my mother saw the state I was in, she, having already been through it all with my father and previous mistreatment, had prepared salt, onions, and alcohol. She had filled a basin, and as soon as I walked in, she took off my socks and filled them with onions. But I insisted at all costs that I had to go to school. I wanted to go to school. Classes started at eight.

The school was about ten minutes from our house, and just before eight, my friend Ferdane Gashi arrived. We had grown up together, she had been my classmate for ten years and was my closest neighbor. I said, "I want to go to school too," but she told me to wait and said, "Don't bring your bag." That day, while I was in interrogation, the news had already spread that there would be

demonstrations at the school on March 11. A group of young people had organized it. I'm talking about the first anniversary of the demonstrations [1982].

I went to school. As soon as I entered the schoolyard, a large number of students, many of whom were patriots, were already informed about the demonstration, and we climbed up the hillside near the school. The demonstration began. From interrogation straight to the protest. I felt like I had forgotten the beatings, the wounds, everything. I felt like I was flying. The chants began, "Kosovo Republic!" "Republic! Constitution! Either willingly or through war!" "We demand equality!" Kosovo in that Yugoslav federation, "Unite with us!" And the song *"Ejani shokë, mblidhuni këtu këtu"* [Alb.: "Come, friends, gather here, here.] rang out among many others.

The schoolyard of the *Jeta e Re* gymnasium in Suhareka was surrounded, it had a large open space and was enclosed with wire fencing. The police formed a cordon all around it, but inside the school, for some reason, the administration hadn't allowed them in. Why they didn't enter immediately, I don't know. I can only speak about what I saw. We protested there, and after about an hour, my class supervisor, Hysni Osmani from Ferizaj, who taught BAT,[11] approached me. He had learned that I had been in interrogation the night before.

He came, I remember it like it was today, he walked into the middle of the demonstrators. There were two types of teachers there, informants who blended into the crowd to identify students and report them, and patriotic teachers who encouraged and supported us. The professor approached me and said, "Zelije, Zelije," and I got nervous, responding, "Professor, professor." He grabbed me and said, "You have to leave the crowd, you must get out of the crowd." I asked, "Why should I leave?" At that moment, a group of my friends was there, including my now-husband, Asllan Ramadani, and Xhavit Elshani. My friends Merishah Elshani and Firdane Gashi were also with us.

They surrounded me, knowing that I had come straight from interrogation, and told me, "You need to leave, you must leave before the demonstration is dispersed because you are a well-known figure." I managed to slip out from the back of the schoolyard, making my way through some alleyways, and reached home. From our house, which was in the center, I could still see the demonstration. Then, on March 11 and again on March 12, they took me back into interrogation. This time, they told me, "You were a participant in the demonstration."

But I was lucky because a teacher, a collaborator of the authorities at the time, had taken many photos. He must have taken them after I had already left the crowd since his house was nearby. When I was in interrogation and they kept insisting, "You participated in the demonstration," I demanded proof and said, "Show me the evidence. How could I, beaten and barely able to walk, go to school and take part in the protest?" I had some kind of argument in my defense. Fortunately, they didn't have any

[11] *Bazat e Arsimit Teknik* – Fundamentals of Technical Education

photos of me. Many students were imprisoned, expelled, and sentenced based on photographic evidence.

They didn't have any photos, so they released me again, as in Suhareka they were only allowed to detain someone for 24 hours. After interrogation, if the process continued, they had to transfer the person to Prizren and then to prison. That was the arrest procedure at the time. They released me again. I returned to school, but the situation there was extremely tense, with a heavy atmosphere. The local Committee was pressuring the teachers to go class by class, calling students one by one and forcing them to say, "We condemn this demonstration." It was a psychological war. The Yugoslav authorities had realized that their time was coming to an end.

Through these mobilizations and their collaborators, both teachers and students, though fortunately only a small number, the authorities tried to keep Yugoslavia alive by claiming, "Look, these students have regretted it, only a small number participated, and they now condemn it." The school administration began going into every class, making each student say, "I condemn this demonstration." I was in my second year of gymnasium, and our class was very united. However, within our class, there was a spy, we all knew it. One of our classmates was an informant. He later became a police officer and was killed during the war because he was a collaborator.

We knew he was a collaborator. But we were so strongly connected with our class supervisor that we kept saying, "We won't condemn them." As we discussed with our supervisor, he told us, "It's just a formality, you need to continue your education." So, as an entire class, when the school administration came, we stood up and said, "We condemn them," meaning the demonstrations. At that point, they tried to expel me from school since it was now my second time in interrogation. Thanks to this professor, Hysni Osmani, and the highly patriotic professors Shefki Muqaj, Shefqet Zeqiraj, Mursel Plakiqi, and Islam Morina, I want to mention them, when it came to expelling me, they stood firm and opposed it.

In most of the classes where these supervisors taught, they stood their ground, saying, "All the students participated in the demonstration. Either everyone gets expelled, or no one does." So, in our class, I'm not speaking for other classes, we were placed under pre-expulsion, and I was spared from being expelled. I managed to avoid expulsion, we were only given a warning. Meanwhile, Myrvete and Zyrafete were already in prison. Myrvete was sentenced to 60 days, two months in prison, because of that torn pamphlet they had found. She took responsibility for it, saying, "I found it somewhere on the street, I don't know." The investigations continued with Zyrafete.

So, Zyrafete underwent four months of interrogation before being sentenced, I don't know the exact details of how long the procedures lasted. She was sentenced to a year and a half in prison. We moved forward. In 1983, my brother, a professor of Albanian language, was serving in the military at the time. Before going to the army, he worked as an English teacher in a village school in Suhareka while also

studying Albanian language. He was close to finishing his studies since, at that time, there was also a correspondence study option. When he returned, we already had two imprisoned sisters and two brothers who had been interrogated. Vesel, too, was now considered unsuitable[12] by the authorities, and they didn't allow him to work.

He eventually graduated. For ten years, until 1999, Vesel Kryeziu, a graduate and professor of Albanian language, who also had a higher education degree in English, was not allowed to work due to his activism, he was part of the movement just like the rest of us. Myrvete was expelled from school for three consecutive years, and Zyrafete was imprisoned. This continued into 1984. By then, I was in my final year of gymnasium, but our activities had never stopped, not mine, not my friends', nor my family's.

At that time, this may seem strange to you, but our main activity was raising awareness, distributing literature, reading, making people see that we were oppressed, informing others by word of mouth, and persuading those in positions of power who had sided with the regime to turn to our cause. For those who were neutral, we tried to open their eyes, to show them that justice was on this side, not on Belgrade's side, but here. This was our daily work. By then, for the Kryeziu family of Ramadan and Zylfije Kryeziu and their children, the only things left were the *shati*. *Shati* is a farming tool used for working the fields, and reading.

So, in 1984, I managed to complete high school with excellent success. My passion was biology, I had studied it, and I loved nature. I applied and enrolled in the Faculty of Agriculture, where admission was based on an entrance exam. I took the exam and scored the highest marks, securing a place on the list of accepted students. During that year, during the three-month break, our family was engaged in tobacco cultivation.

Tobacco farming is the most exhausting work in agriculture, you have to wake up at three or four in the morning to pick the tobacco leaves, bring them home, and thread them one by one with a needle. They had to be strung on that famous thread, hung on the wall, and left to dry. Then, in winter, we would sell it and survive on that money. We had no other income, only my eldest brother, Musli, worked as a driver. The rest of us were barred from state employment. Even though by then Ramadan had also finished school, completing music high school and enrolling in university, I had also enrolled.

We were barred from state employment, so we turned to working the land and the fields, managing to secure a decent livelihood. Back then, agriculture had real value. During that break, out of excitement for enrolling in university, please forgive me if I get a bit emotional, I was so eager that I had already started preparing before the lectures even began. With my admission based on my grade point

[12] Unsuitable in this context refers to individuals deemed politically unreliable or oppositional by the Yugoslav authorities, often resulting in job dismissals, restrictions on employment, or exclusion from public institutions due to their nationalist or activist affiliations.

average, methodology assessment, and another exam, which I can't recall at the moment, I had spent the summer studying. I had gathered literature from relatives who were also studying agriculture.

October 1, 1984 came, the first day of my studies. My mother prepared (cries) that famous bag of clothes for me (cries), and together with Ramadan, my brother, who was three years ahead of me, he was in his final year of studies and attending the music school in Pristina, I left for the first time as a university student. It was (cries) my first time being separated from my family (cries). I went to the faculty, of course, with my brother's help. I had secured a private apartment. The apartment was near post office no. 3, in the center, if I remember correctly. Back then, in 1984, nearby was the Rugova Restaurant. Behind it, in that neighborhood, I don't know what it's like now, I had my apartment.

We shared the apartment with Lumnie Azemi, a former political prisoner. We had known Lumnie, she's like a sister to me even today, through Myrvete and Zyrafete, who had been in prison with her. Lumnie was older than me, but due to her imprisonment, she was only able to enroll in university after her release. If I remember correctly, she studied construction engineering. We were two *brucoshe*,[13] as my brother used to call us when he visited us, and so we began our lectures.

I walked every day from my apartment in the city center to the Faculty of Agriculture near Fushë Kosova, by the main road. I never felt the distance, it felt like I was flying. It was a Monday, the third week of lectures. For the first two weeks, my brother and I hadn't returned to Suhareka. The usual practice, even for my other brother, Zyrafete, and anyone who had studied before, was to go home once every two weeks since travel was expensive. We were many students, and we always managed to organize things well. My brother Ramadan and I took enough money to last for two weeks in Pristina. When we returned, the third week of studies began.

It was around nine in the morning, in the amphitheater of the Faculty of Agriculture, during Professor Mujë Rugova's lecture. A faculty maintenance worker approached Mujë Rugova and whispered something in his ear. I was sitting somewhere in the third or fourth row of the amphitheater. At that time, we had general subjects in the amphitheater, attended by all students, while professional subjects were held in specific departments. In the amphitheater, we had subjects like Marxism, defense studies, and others that were essentially useless but still mandatory.

Mujë Rugova taught a subject related to chemistry, something technological, I don't remember exactly. Most students had to take that course, though I'm not sure why it was mandatory for everyone since it wasn't a general subject. Mujë Rugova taught professional courses, not political ones. He was a very respected and kind professor, at least in my experience. At that time, I had only heard good things about him. Now, I'll tell you about a coincidence. In the amphitheater, lectures were conducted using a

[13] *Brucosh/e* is a colloquial Albanian term referring to first-year university students, derived from the word *brucosi*, which was commonly used in Yugoslav-era educational institutions to denote freshmen.

microphone. Professor Mujë Rugova called out the names of some male students and then said, “Zelije Kryeziu,” along with a few others, instructing us to report to the dean’s office.

I stood up and looked around, the amphitheater was full. Four or five young men had also been called, and I was the only girl. Why were we called to the dean’s office? I had no idea. The office was on the second or third floor, I don’t remember exactly. But I do remember climbing those stairs, and the walk felt like kilometers. Why was I being called to the dean’s office? Was I the smartest or the most foolish? I entered the office, and inside were the faculty dean, Agron Dedushi from Gjakova, and an assistant or deputy, I don’t remember who he was, but I clearly remember Agron Dedushi.

We sat down, and they told me that an order had come from the Suhareka Committee. They had sent information to the faculty, everything, from my father’s history that I had mentioned earlier to my brother Vesel being repeatedly interrogated in the army because of our sisters’ activism, even though he had no idea what was happening while he was serving. All the gathered information had reached the faculty, and there was strong pressure to have me expelled. I walked in, but I could see the patriotic spirit in Agron Dedushi.

Those who were collaborators, the way they started talking was always the same, *aaa* {onomatopoeia}, “So, you want to overthrow Yugoslavia, huh? Is there anywhere better than Yugoslavia?” But the demeanor of Professor Agron, his patriotism, I recognized it immediately. He told me, “Speak for yourself, who are you?” I told him, “I come from a family with two uneducated parents.” Then he asked, “Why did you apply to this faculty? I don’t want to get into politics right away.” He was probably feeling uneasy about the situation too. I assume they had seen my academic results, that’s just my guess.

I told him that we were a family of nine and had a lot of land. “I want,” I said, “to take the opportunities my family has given me for education and one day become a capable engineer who can contribute to my family, to the state, and to everything.” He then asked me, “Have you or your family ever been interrogated?” The moment he mentioned interrogation, I knew. I said, “Yes.” I told him that I had two sisters who had been imprisoned, everything. Then he said, “Honored student, with regret, for the moment, you must be suspended from your studies,” but he added, “I am giving you an opportunity within a week.” It was a Monday, the third week since we had started classes.

“I am giving you a chance within a week to go to the Suhareka Committee and obtain the famous characteristic,” he said. At that time, this characteristic was an official document that stated: “Zelije Rrahman Kryeziu, a student of the secondary school, daughter of so-and-so. Due to non-hostile activities,” this was the key distinction, “she is allowed to pursue her studies,” or alternatively, “Due to hostile activities, she is not allowed to pursue her studies.” That was the infamous characteristic document.

From the Faculty of Agriculture to my apartment in the city center… when I reached the area, now I'm trying to recall Pristina back then and compare it to today, I think it was around where the statue of Mother Teresa is now. I sat down on a bench, and for a moment, I lost consciousness. I swear to you, I am not exaggerating or adding anything. I sat down for a moment… at the time, I used to smoke occasionally. I lit a cigarette, and suddenly, I lost awareness, I didn't know who I was, where I was, or where I was going. But it only lasted for a few seconds before I regained consciousness.

I went to the apartment and left a note for my friend, Luma, explaining everything. Back then, there were no phones to call my brother, so I wrote in the note that I was leaving for Suhareka. My brother used to come every night to pick us *brucoshe* up, and we would go for a walk on Pristina's famous *korzo*,[14] it felt like we were traveling the world. I arrived in Suhareka. The next day, I went with my father, first to the Local Community Office in Suhareka, because they told me that's where the characteristic document would be issued.

I don't want to mention names out of respect for that person's children. He told me, "No, we can't issue you the characteristic; you need to go directly to the Committee. The order has come from the Committee, they have evaluated your family for hostile activities, and I swear there's no school for you." That's what he told me. The next day, I went to the Committee with my father. They had already received information that I had come from Pristina, so the groundwork had been prepared. I don't know why they were so afraid of our family, I still don't understand it, even today.

I went with my father, and when the porter saw us… The Committee building was past the Suhareka park, that building right there. The entrance door to the Committee was locked. My father had been a participant in the National Liberation War, as I mentioned, and he even had a veteran's booklet. Without me knowing, he had brought it with him. When I pushed the glass door, it was locked. My father was a bit impulsive, and I take after him. Without hesitation, he hit the door, shattering the glass.

The porter came. He had already seen us and had received orders that we were trying to enter the Committee. When my father shattered the glass, the porter arrived, and my father told him, "Open the door." So, he opened it. At that moment, we went inside. The head of the Suhareka Committee at the time was Sokol Basha. Two years earlier, he had been the school director, while his deputy was Musli Kabashi. Now, for their loyalty and service to the regime, they had been promoted, one to Committee Chairman and the other to Vice Chairman.

I stepped into the corridor, and my father pulled out his veteran's booklet. He started shouting, my father had a naturally loud voice. "How dare you? Shame on you! A National Liberation War veteran is

[14] *Korzo* refers to a popular pedestrian promenade or main walking street in many Balkan cities, where people, especially youth, would gather in the evenings to socialize and stroll. In Prishtina, it was a well-known cultural and social space during the Yugoslav era.

being denied entry! Why? Because he's here to demand his child's right to education?" With these words, we approached the office door of the Committee Chairman, Sokol Basha. He responded, "Calm down, uncle, calm down. We are here for the people," trying to steer the conversation into politics.

We sat down, and my father said, "I'm here to ask why you have banned my daughter from school. How do you not feel ashamed?" The high school in Suhareka, where I had graduated, was built on land that his father had donated for the school. The technical school in Suhareka today also stands on land that belonged to my father, which was taken for the school. He said, "I donated land for schools to educate children, and now you're denying my own child an education? How do you not feel ashamed?"

When he saw my father raising his voice, he quickly said, "No, no, we haven't banned your daughter from school." Then he added, "Let her go tomorrow to another Local Community Chairman," since Suhareka was divided into Suhareka One and Suhareka Two. "She can get the characteristic there." And with that, the Committee dismissed us. The next day, which was Wednesday, I went to the Local Community Chairman of Suhareka, who happened to be our neighbor, living just a few houses away. I walked in, but I immediately disliked his attitude… I know I'm jumping from one topic to another.

I can forgive a person when they are simply doing their duty because they are getting paid for it, I can let that go. But I cannot forgive someone who says things they are not obligated to say. If I had walked in and he had told me, "Listen, my dear, with regret, here is your document," I would have forgiven him, and I would have been fine with it. But I can't forgive this, not that I have the power to fight, but at the very least, morally, I can't forgive it. Because when I walked in, the first thing he said to me was, "Oh, so you daughters of Rrahman have stirred things up? Poor your father, you have brought shame upon him." I just looked at him. "Listen, my dear, go prepare a dowry, you'll be getting married soon. Stop getting involved in these matters, you've brought shame not only to your family but to the whole neighborhood." That's what he said. And he was my neighbor, living just a few houses away.

He handed me the characteristic. I glanced at it, it was just a matter of whether I was allowed or not. I saw that it said, "Not allowed." Feeling extremely frustrated, I told him, "You, so-and-so, if anyone has brought shame, it's what you just said to my father. You should be ashamed of yourself for what you're saying. We're not doing this for personal gain—we're doing it so that tomorrow even you might benefit. The time will come. But you will feel ashamed, and maybe that shame will even carry over to your children for the words you just spoke." I took the characteristic, set off for Pristina, submitted it there, and was officially expelled from the faculty, denied the right to education for as long as Yugoslavia existed.

I took the characteristic and went to Pristina, where it was officially communicated to me that the Committee at the time had banned me from continuing my education for as long as Yugoslavia existed. I returned home feeling very upset, very frustrated, very… At that time, there were many political

prisoners, many participants in the demonstrations who had been taken in for interrogation, and many of my peers who had enrolled in university that year. I was the only girl from Suhareka and the only student, speaking about 1984, who was denied the right to education.

But thanks to my parents, thanks to this big family where we always supported one another, my father and mother told me, "Daughter, this is life." "Life is like this. But you should be proud, you are fighting against Yugoslavia." When that person told me, "You can do whatever you want, but will you be able to stop me from reading?" I gave him my answer. I returned to Suhareka and dedicated myself to agricultural work, helping my parents, my brothers, and my sisters.

Now there were three of us at home. Vesel, Zyra, and Myrvete had already been denied access to university and were staying home. I was the fourth person to be removed from the education system. My brother Ramadan was preparing for his final exam before graduation, and he faced the same fate, he completed his studies but was left without a job. So, we turned to agricultural work and declared our own fight against the committees and Yugoslavia. We resisted every moment, both through underground activism and direct confrontation.

I remember it was either 1985 or 1986 when that famous Relay of Youth[15] in honor of Tito[16] was being carried through town. That day, the local Communist officials and the police had gathered in the center of Suhareka, building a grand stage, setting up the spectacle, and bringing in students to participate. The relay was passing through in May, as it was traditionally delivered to Belgrade on May 25. I don't remember exactly when it paraded through Suhareka. My brother Vesel told us, "Everyone, get on the tractor trailer," right there in the center of Suhareka. He said, "When we hear the noise," because that year, the relay was coming from Prizren and heading toward Pristina, "when we hear the police announcing its arrival like it's some great event, we'll go out into the city center and ruin the spectacle. We'll go out with the tractor as if we're heading to work. You've denied us jobs in the state sector, so now we'll go to the fields."

We were all sitting on the tractor trailer, brothers and sisters together. And as soon as we heard the signal, we moved out right at the Suhareka bridge. The relay was coming from the direction where you arrived now, from the Balkan Factory, where Viva Fresh [store] is today. As we approached from that

[15] The Relay of Youth (*Štafeta mladosti*) was an annual event in socialist Yugoslavia, where a symbolic baton was carried across the country by young people, culminating in a grand ceremony in Belgrade on May 25, Tito's official birthday. It was a major propaganda event meant to showcase unity, loyalty to the socialist state, and devotion to Tito's legacy.

[16] Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the leader of Yugoslavia from the Second World War until his death in 1980, serving as both Prime Minister and later President for Life. He established a centralized communist regime and promoted the idea of "Brotherhood and Unity" to maintain control over Yugoslavia's diverse ethnic groups. While his rule granted some cultural and educational rights to Albanians in Kosovo, they remained politically and economically marginalized. Albanian activism for greater autonomy was met with harsh repression, including imprisonment, surveillance, and violent crackdowns, particularly following the 1968 and 1981 protests for national rights.

side, it looked as if we were heading to our fields, taking the road that led there. The police cordon was ahead, with Idriz Gegaj, the police commander, and several officers walking in front of the relay. When they saw us, they lost it, shouting at my brother, “Stop! Stop!” You were supposed to show respect for the relay, to stand still like a statue. Another police cordon came in front of us.

My brother stopped the tractor, and full of anger, they shouted at him, “Idiot, idiot! Do you even know who’s coming?” Of course, we knew, but my brother replied, “No, I don’t. Why?” They yelled, “Idiot, the relay is coming, and you’ve stepped onto the road!” He answered, “Well, in the evening, I have nothing to eat, I can’t eat the relay. I’m going to the fields.” That caused an uproar. They took us into interrogation, beat us as usual, just like always, and that day passed too. Which means that ever since Myrvete and Zyrafete were imprisoned, because I won’t go year by year listing every instance, we were taken in for questioning every single year until 1989. My brothers and sisters from this family, all of us, were interrogated, our house was raided dozens of times, we were tortured dozens of times.

I just want to mention one more case during the torture, this must be remembered. In 1983, Shemsije Elshani and Teuta Bekteshi from Kumanovo organized an action for a large political slogan. They didn’t manage to fully execute it because of a wire that had fallen on the old post office, which disrupted their plan. With the arrest of Teuta Bekteshi and Shemsije Elshani, we, the three daughters of our family, were immediately arrested as well: Zyrafete, Myrvete, and myself, Zelije. I was 17 years old at the time. Valbona Elshani, the daughter of Shemsije Elshani’s uncle, was also arrested, she was just 13 years old.

All three of my sisters, along with Teuta and Shemsije, had already been sent to prison. My three sisters were held the entire day, meaning we were arrested around noon and kept in a room inside the police station. But during questioning, they only took me and Valbona. I was in one interrogation room {touches right arm}, while 13-year-old Valbona was in the other {touches left arm}. They beat us so brutally that even the strongest men who had been in that room had screamed. Our cries echoed through the entire police station, and in the room where Myrvete and Zyrafete were, they could hear our suffering. They managed to break down the door and rush into the corridor, confronting the police and attempting to force their way into the room where we were being held.

Then the order came for those UDB agents who were interrogating us, the same ones as always, Sala, I can’t remember his last name, Daut Morina, and the others, always the same UDB agents from Prizren. They heard Myrvete and Zyrafete shouting, “Don’t mess with children, they’re just kids, let them go, they’re innocent! Deal with us instead, you’re just keeping us locked up all day.” After that, they took them in for questioning as well. In the morning… we often joke with Zyrafete, “They took us in, you got beaten, and yet you were always rewarded,” because I was the youngest. They released us again. This ordeal continued for years. Until 1989, when my husband had finished serving his five-year prison sentence, he was released, and I got married.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: I want to talk now about a part, the way you reacted when he was sentenced to five years. Maybe you were engaged at the time?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: No. I had the good fortune of growing up in a family, as I said, with complete freedom. My husband and I hadn't even held hands. It was that first love, pure love. He was passionate about performing, just like I was, and we were both dedicated to education and activism. As soon as he expressed his love in 1983, he was the leader of the youth group at the time, I think it was called the Marxist-Leninist Movement, they organized the 1984 demonstration in Suhareka. That same group. Just as we had confessed our love without even holding hands, he was arrested and imprisoned. I went through everything I just mentioned, enrolled in university, and continued on.

In 1986, I received a letter illegally through the family, meaning from my in-laws now. A letter arrived, and at the time, I didn't really know where things stood between us. We had confessed our feelings, but I wasn't sure what the situation was. I was connected to this group as well, but I knew they hadn't exposed me. I had escaped without being sentenced, thanks to them. In short, that letter reignited the spark, confirming that we were still in love. He had officially registered me as his fiancée at the Valeva prison. I received the information, and both he and I insisted on meeting in Valeva. The prison was in Valeva, Serbia.

I took my cousin, Jashar Bala, who is more than a brother to me. Today, he's in Switzerland, and I'm… but we love each other very much. The beautiful part of our love story is that our children now live, some in Germany, some in Switzerland, with Jashar's family. We love each other, we visit, we stay connected. I told my cousin, "This is the situation, I want to visit Asllan in prison." He said, "Okay, I want to come with you." We got in touch with Asllan's family. His father already knew, my family knew… it was understood that he had been sentenced, but in a way, it was still unclear, uncertain.

I decided to go to Valeva and told my sisters and my younger brother, the one after me, as well as my brother Vesel, the professor. I said, "I want to go to Valeva, but let's not tell our parents." I didn't want to worry them, and I wanted to do this somewhat secretly. We went to the prison in Valeva, and the emotions shook my soul, my heart. When we arrived, they told Asllan's father, "You can go in for the visit," but I wasn't allowed because I had no proof that I was engaged to him. My cousin and I stayed at the prison gate while Asllan's father went inside for the visit. The visit lasted an hour. I had lost hope, but my cousin remained optimistic, telling me, "You will get in here."

I don't know if it was because all eleven political prisoners in that prison stood up and protested, but since I wasn't allowed to visit, they went on a hunger strike. We saw a police car arrive at the gate, and inside was the prison director. The Albanians in Valeva had stirred things up. When the director arrived,

Asllan, now my husband, stood up and said, “My fiancée has come. I want to meet her.” With the director’s order, I was allowed to visit. I entered the prison, and to make himself seem kind, the director granted us a three-hour visit. It was the first and last meeting we had in five years. There were other prisoners and other families there, but at least we held hands and reconnected. That was until 1989.

Anita Susuri: Was there any exception? Because we usually hear that visits were very short.

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: Visits, look, visits depended on the prison. Visits in investigative prisons like Mitrovica, because now I also want to describe how it was in Mitrovica Prison when we went there while Myrvete and Zyrafete were imprisoned. At that time, my parents and we were all worried about Zyrafete being arrested, but at least she was healthy. Myrvete, on the other hand, had suffered, with that surgery. The most interesting part, as Myrvete and Zyrafete told me, since I was never in prison, was that Zyrafete said, “When Myrvete arrived in prison,” they weren’t placed in the same room because the authorities knew they were sisters. But she said, “We had prepared our communication so well behind the scenes that when the guards left and the corridor was empty, and those cell doors were there,” she said, “we would stand on a chair by the door and talk from cell to cell.” Like if there was a small window here and another small window over there. They called each other by their underground names.

Myrvete went and informed the cell where Zyrafete was, though I don’t know the cell numbers like they do. Zyrafete said, “A piece of information came in, a girl from Suhareka has arrived. She has been mistreated, but she’s also had surgery.” Zyrafete, whom we call Zyra, immediately thought, “That must be my sister.” In prison, Myrvete took the pseudonym *Lule*, while Zyrafete’s pseudonym, I won’t say it because I’m not entirely sure and don’t want to mix it up. They communicated using these pseudonyms. Meanwhile, we anxiously awaited our first visit to Mitrovica to see both of them. During the first visit, five family members were allowed, and I was among them. That means I traveled all the way to Mitrovica, but I wasn’t allowed to enter. Instead, my mother, sister, brother, and, I think, my father went inside.

The visit in Mitrovica took place in a room divided by metal mesh, then, there was a pillar like this {gestures with hands to indicate a straight shape}, and the prisoner could only be seen through the mesh. The detainees would enter through one door, this is how the door was {describes the shape of the door}, while the family would enter from another side and stand in front of the mesh. I’m recounting this based on what the family members described since I wasn’t allowed inside for the visit. I don’t know why, I don’t know the reasons. I waited outside. Zyrafete was the first to come in. The rule was that they had to keep their hands behind their back {places hands behind her back}. They were not allowed to place them in front while speaking with the family. They talked as best they could.

We were fortunate because our mother was very optimistic. She never knew how to be sad, never, never, never! She gave you strength, courage, everything. While Zyrafete was being guarded by two police officers on one side, the rest of the family stood on the other. Mother said, “How are you, my daughter?” Zyrafete replied, “I’m fine, mother, I’m fine.” And mother, always hopeful, said, “Don’t worry, my dear, we’ll soon fix the situation in Kosovo” (laughs). The visits lasted only two to three minutes, and then they would take them away… I remember this well because Myrvete told me about it later. After she was released from prison, I shared a room with my sister, and she told me many stories.

Now, Myrvete had thought that when the family came for a visit, both sisters would be brought out together, and they would see each other. That’s what they had expected. But instead, they took Zyrafete away and brought in Myrvete. Both had been mistreated, Myrvete even more so. She later recalled, “Thankfully, we weren’t allowed to put our hands in front of us because I was covered in bruises, swollen.” Myrvete arrived extremely weakened, still suffering from wounds that were oozing, exhausted, pale, and frail. When our mother saw her, even for a moment, it crushed her spirit. She had seen Zyrafete in better health, but Myrvete looked much worse, so pale. When we stepped outside, where I was waiting, my mother seemed a little broken. She said, “Oh, I just hope that wound heals.” She had asked Myrvete, “How are you, my daughter? Has your wound healed?” And Myrvete replied, “Not yet.”

Visits lasted only two or three minutes, and then they would take you away, saying, “That’s it, it's over.” But in prisons where the interrogation process was completed, when you were transferred to a so-called regular prison, the visitation rules changed. For instance, when Zyrafete was moved from Mitrovica Prison to Lipjan Prison, visits became more open. There was a designated hall where five or six family members could enter at once. Each prisoner would go to their respective family, and the visits happened collectively in the same space, lasting about an hour. This was the difference between interrogation prisons and so-called regular prisons. Myrvete served two months in prison and was released in May 1982, while Zyrafete continued her sentence in other prisons.

Anita Susuri: I’m curious to know more about these activities you carried out. How did they take place? How did you coordinate with each other? What kind of rules did you have?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: At that time, everything was carried out in complete secrecy. There was a famous saying, “It’s better not to know than to know” and “Don’t ask too many questions.” This was the way things operated. Everything was done covertly. The main goal was to prepare the people, to raise awareness among the population, the working class, and the youth, helping them understand that: Oh people, we are occupied; Oh my good people, we are oppressed and deprived of every right, and we must raise our voices, because if we don’t, freedom will never come to us.

These efforts began with the generations before us and continued without interruption. This movement for the liberation of Kosovo never stopped. Adem Demaçi[17] played a key role, and many activists carried on his work. Activists in both the diaspora and Kosovo were involved, including the clandestine groups of the time, such as the Marxist-Leninist group. Every city had its own organized groups, which coordinated with each other through a system of threes. In Suhareka, I personally only knew Zyrafete as the one who brought us materials and guided us on what needed to be done.

That is, always before the anniversaries of the demonstrations, when March 11, March 26, April 1, and April 2 approached, the main goal was to organize these demonstrations in every city, to raise the people's voice. Gradually, the people became more aware and embraced our cause. What made it even more difficult at that time, starting from my own family, was that when most people saw me, not everyone, but a part of them, they avoided me. I'm not saying the majority, because we had friends who cared for us and weren't afraid, but there were also people who wouldn't stop to talk to me in the city.

When I was deprived... I worked in agriculture, and I loved it. Since the age of five or six, I was involved in trade. I sold peppers, eggplants, melons, and vegetables, even after I was expelled from university, I had no prejudices about it. I was a person without complexes. I didn't care how old I was because I had done nothing wrong. I was never ashamed to sell at the market, I was never ashamed. I drove the tractor, I went plowing, I did all kinds of work. I rode a bicycle at that time. I broke taboos, in other words.

I never cared what others said, what mattered to me was whether something was useful for me and my family. At that time, people looked at you with a critical eye, saying, "Look at Rrahman's daughters or so-and-so's daughters getting involved in politics." In the beginning, it was seen as something shameful to engage in politics, something inappropriate. But over time, people became more aware. So, the main goal for all of us, the youth of that time, our predecessors, and those who came after us, was to raise awareness among the people. To distribute pamphlets, to write them, and to paint slogans.

For example, we would wake up early in the morning, go to work in the fields, and in the middle of the asphalt road, we would take black paint in a small bowl and write "KR." Just that "KR" [Kosovo Republic] would shake the whole Committee. That's how it was. We didn't fight with weapons, we fought with these means, writing slogans, distributing pamphlets, spreading literature, and organizing demonstrations. This was our activity until 1990.

[17] Adem Demaçi (1936–2018) was a Kosovar Albanian writer, activist, and political dissident known as the "Mandela of the Balkans" for spending 28 years as a political prisoner under Yugoslav rule. He was a key figure in the Albanian national movement, advocating for Kosovo's independence and human rights.

Now, I'll talk about 1990. I was pregnant. From the second week of January, the demonstrations started again. There had been a pause, '84… there was about a two-year break. Then, the LDK[18] emerged, it was formed here, and demonstrations began again, "Freedom, Democracy, Independence!" In Suhareka, demonstrations took place every day for two or three weeks straight. By then, I was already seven to eight months pregnant, with my eldest son, Demokrat.

In my father Rrahman's *oda*, which we had right by the doors, it was not just his space. It was a gathering place for everyone, men, women, and girls from all over Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. This was confirmed even at the recent public discussion three days ago, where those same women, girls, and boys who had once come to our *oda*, both legally and illegally, some even staying in our home in secrecy, returned to that famous *oda* of Suhareka after 41 years.

In that *oda*, which was open to daughters-in-law and girls as well, not just men, the ideas of patriotism and activism were nurtured. Then came the year 1990, by that time, my brother Vesel was leading the LDK. Zyrafete was married and a mother. We were informed that there would be demonstrations. Zyrafete, who lived in a village in Klina, Gllareva, came. Myrvete, my other sister, also came. I was living here [in Suhareka], and we all went to await the first demonstration.

The order was given not to have just one demonstration but to hold them at multiple points. On the first day, we started the demonstration in the city center, right by the bridge, that was the central area. The first chants began there, and the crowd started to grow, coming from the direction of Hotel Ballkan. Near Hotel Ballkan, a police cordon was set up with those military vehicles, not tanks, but what they called Pinzgauer vehicles. The Pinzgauers were positioned there, and when the police stepped out on foot, they tried to prevent the demonstrators from advancing further.

When we arrived there, they started throwing tear gas grenades and water bombs, there was a specific type of bomb they used. On the first day, we protested in the city center and then dispersed. Interestingly… of course, the youth of that time played a key role in that demonstration. Now I'm talking about them, my late brother, Naim Kryeziu, Bexhet Kuqi, Dashnor Elshani, Isuf Kuqi. A younger generation than us. They had taken the lead, of course, following the orders of the older ones. At that point, both the LDK and the underground groups had coordinated efforts to launch mass demonstrations across Kosovo. I am speaking specifically about Suhareka in 1990.

They would go around the villages and simply say, for example, "On Monday, there will be a demonstration." The people were exhausted, they were eagerly waiting to take to the streets, their patience had run out. On the first day, we protested in the city center. I don't know how the

[18] LDK (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo) was the first political party formed in Kosovo after the fall of communism in Yugoslavia. Established in December 1989 by intellectuals and political activists, including its leader Ibrahim Rugova, LDK advocated for Kosovo's independence from Yugoslavia through peaceful resistance. The party played a significant role in organizing parallel institutions during the 1990s and leading the nonviolent movement for Kosovo's self-determination.

information spread, but by the second day… in the evening, in my father's *oda*, the leaders gathered and set the rules. They said, "Now, we won't go to the center," because by the next day, additional police forces had arrived from Serbia. When it was just the local Albanian police, things were slightly different, but now Serbian police were there too. Instead of gathering in one place, the plan was to protest in every neighborhood to confuse the police.

Then, in my father's neighborhood, where my parents' house was, our entire family was gathered. In the evening, tasks started being divided. Present were families with the surnames Kuqi, Gashi, Kryeziu, Hajdari, and Gegaj. I'm referring to families by their surnames. Right in front of my parents' house and Mustafë Kuqi's house, there was an open space where the demonstrators gathered. I'm talking about the second day of the demonstrations in January 1990, I don't remember the exact dates, but I'm trying to describe it as best as I can.

The police had positioned themselves at the bridge because from there, they had a clear view of this area. A crowd of people gathered, including members of our family and all the families I previously mentioned by surname. All family members participated, and people had also come from the surrounding villages. Protests were happening in our neighborhood, in the Bylykbashi neighborhood, in the Berisha neighborhood, and in the area where you came from. That entire section was full. At that time, protests were taking place in every square, wherever there was an open space.

In our house, there were also children, even babies, many of them. So, we assigned tasks, a group of young women took the famous buckets with yogurt, others carried water, and some distributed onions. When tear gas was dispersed, only onions could help. You would rub your eyes with a bit of onion or hold it in your mouth, and it would ease the breathing difficulties caused by the gas.

It's very interesting, on the second day… I have read many, many history books. I idolized Shote Galica,[19] truly idolized her. I admired Mic Sokoli[20] as well, along with many others. But what truly surprised me was my mother Zelfie's resilience. She had not attended a single day of school, yet she gave herself, her flesh, her heart, and her soul, for the cause of Kosovo. That's when I saw my brave mother, just like many other courageous mothers of Kosovo, rise up. My mother wore a headscarf, she was covered when she went outside into the streets.

[19] Shote Galica (1895–1927) was an Albanian nationalist and freedom fighter known for her role in resisting Serbian and Yugoslav forces in Kosovo during the early 20th century. She was a key figure in the *Kaçak* Movement, fighting alongside her husband, Azem Galica, and later leading guerrilla forces after his death. She is regarded as a symbol of Albanian resistance and women's participation in the national liberation struggle.

[20] Mic Sokoli (1839–1881) was an Albanian nationalist fighter and a key figure in the resistance against Ottoman rule during the League of Prizren (1878–1881). He is best known for his act of bravery during the Battle of Slivova, where he pressed his chest against the enemy's cannon to prevent it from firing, sacrificing himself for the cause. He is celebrated as a symbol of Albanian heroism and resistance.

I don't know, but for me, it was a surprise. When she got up and started getting ready, she tied that scarf around her mouth {describes with hands how she tied it} and filled it with onions. She tied the scarf with onions. Now, we all went outside. I was there in the front rows. There were many other women, as well as many others. We started demonstrating, "Independence, Democracy, Republic!" The slogans of the time, "Freedom!" The first tear gas bomb was thrown at that neighborhood. You have no idea.

The film *Gunat mbi tela* [Alb.: Cloaks over Barbed Wire] from that time depicted how, during the struggle of the *Kaçak* movement[21] against the Ottomans, people tried to cover bombs with woolen cloaks. We were greatly influenced by the films of that era. And when I saw my mother that day, it reminded me of *Gunat mbi tela*. My mother, when the first tear gas bomb was thrown in front of the demonstrators, was wearing pleated *dimija*.[22] She spread the pleats wide and sat over the tear gas bomb. We were all terrified, shouting, "Don't, don't, don't!" She managed to grab the tear gas canister before it exploded. It was still making that *zzzz* {onomatopoeia} sound before releasing its smoke.

She tossed it back with both hands at the police officers who had now entered. The machinery remained on the bridge, while the foot forces had advanced almost to the doorstep where we were protesting. And my mother threw the tear gas canister back again. The entire crowd began mobilizing, returning every canister that was thrown at us. This was the peak moment that infuriated the police, how were these people organizing themselves so well? It was all spontaneous. Then injuries began… there were many people physically harmed because if a tear gas canister hit you anywhere on the body, it would cause wounds.

The demonstration lasted the entire day. Water was distributed, bread was shared… these remarkable women, these heroines of the time, these good mothers, daughters-in-law, and organized young women played a key role. Protesters came from all over. We would cut pieces of bread and cheese, place them in baskets, and hand them out to the demonstrators, along with water. This happened every single day. These demonstrations continued daily until January 29, 1990.

I was pregnant, exhausted, and had been protesting for several consecutive days. I decided to come here, to this house where we are now, in the Shiroka neighborhood. We were given orders to take a short break, so we came. The next day, another demonstration took place, I'm describing March 29. After several days, there was a request from the residents of our neighborhood to move to a more

[21] The *Kaçak* Movement was a resistance movement of Albanian guerrilla fighters (*kaçakë*) who opposed Ottoman, Serbian, and later Yugoslav rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The movement aimed to defend Albanian territories and promote national self-determination, often engaging in armed skirmishes against occupying forces.

[22] *Dimija* are traditional Albanian wide-legged, pleated trousers worn by women, particularly in rural areas. They are typically made of lightweight fabric and paired with a long tunic or blouse, reflecting the cultural heritage and historical dress of Albanian women.

open area, as children, the little ones, were picking up the tear gas canisters. The police even started throwing tear gas inside the rooms of our houses.

The decision was made that protests should no longer take place within the neighborhoods but should instead be held in the area you came through. At that time, there weren't as many houses there. The plan was to protest in that open area. Now, I'll describe the events of January 29, 1990, during that demonstration. That day, I wasn't present at the protest, I was here [inside the house]. I wasn't feeling well, as I was nearing the end of my pregnancy. My first son was born on February 24, and I had been participating in the demonstrations while pregnant.

I could hear the protests happening, the police arriving, and the chaos unfolding. These houses weren't here back then, our house was right by the main road, while now my in-laws' homes are in a row. A part of the population, people from the village of Sopi over there, had come to the main road and set up barricades to prevent movement. The strategy was that if a city like Suhareka had a large number of demonstrators, additional police forces would be sent from Prizren, or vice versa. During the night, people mobilized, setting up barricades by placing tires, logs, and stones on the roads to slow down the police vehicles.

During the night, many barricades had been set up by the people along this main road. Our house was right by the road, and I started noticing the noise coming from Suhareka, sounds of commotion, unrest. I turned to my husband and asked, "Are the protests happening again? Didn't they say to pause?" The protests had continued throughout the entire day in Suhareka. Later in the afternoon, around four or five, though I hesitate to give an exact time since I'm not completely sure, I suddenly heard bursts of automatic gunfire, *tër, tër, tër* {onomatopoeia}. I'm recounting what I heard firsthand.

At that moment, I had a terrible feeling, a premonition, and I immediately told my husband, "Someone from our family has been killed." The next morning, we found out that my cousin had been killed that night. His father and my father were sons of brothers, meaning we were first cousins. He was 29 years old, or maybe 30, I can't quite remember, but he was young. Every night, he was at the protests, and every night, he would come to that famous *oda* where we would sit and talk after dark. He was strong, healthy, and brave, Milit Kryeziu. My brother Ramadan later recounted what had happened, as I heard it from him…

The next morning, I told my husband, "We need to get into Suhareka. My heart is telling me that the person who was killed is one of ours." We got up, took a small television just as a pretense, and set out on foot toward Suhareka. As we climbed up this steep part, we encountered the first police checkpoint. We told them, "I'm not feeling well. I'm pregnant, and I need to see a doctor. Also, this television is broken, and we want to take it for repairs." They checked our ID cards but let us through without any issues.

The killing of my cousin on the 29th, now I'm talking about January 30. In Suhareka, there were only police and those black birds, what do they call them, crows or ravens. It was an early morning, around seven o'clock. A kind of silence that filled you with dread. I entered slowly, crossed the bridge, and walked into the town's main street, heading toward my family's house. All the younger members of the family had already gone to my cousin's house since he had been killed.

Now I'll tell it as my brother Ramadan told me. He said, "We were at the protest," my brother Ramadan, my eldest brother Musli, who was there, I'll share another event about him as well, and many others were in that crowd. "This cousin of ours," he said, "was shot from the town's post office by a sniper." He was the tallest one and had that red scarf tied around his forehead like this {describes the thin scarf tied around the forehead}, and they targeted him from the post office and killed him.

My brother said, "We were all protesting, there were gunshots," and he said, "we just saw him fall to the ground." In that incident, two or three others were also wounded, I don't want to mention names or villages because I'm not entirely sure. People started organizing, figuring out how to transport him. Then, a fellow villager of ours, Aziz, the son of Islam, said, "I have a truck, take our truck." They laid down some blankets, but then they realized, "We don't have a driver."

My eldest brother, Musli Kryeziu, said, "I'm the driver." So they loaded them into the truck, and my brother, along with some fellow villagers, took them to the Suhareka police station, then to the town's health center. The wounded were kept there, while Milit, I believe, was left behind, and the others were sent to Prizren, later picked up by an ambulance. But my brother said, "We were there when he fell, when he was killed."

I came home, and he was already gone… Now, returning to January 30th, I saw my brother Ramadan, he was the only one at home. His wife was there too, while the others had gone to prepare things at the family's house. For today's younger generation, I don't know, maybe they think, "So what, he died, he was killed." But back then, it took immense courage to get up and go pay respects to someone killed by the police because you risked suffering the same fate, along with your entire family. In Suhareka, most people showed solidarity, but of course, there were also cowards, there were informants, I won't exclude them. I'm speaking from my own perspective, as I saw things.

My brother tells me when I walked in, I asked, "Who was killed last night in Suhareka?" He replied, "Milit." It hit me hard because Milit was like a brother to me, a man who left behind a young wife and three children. He was the only provider for his family. Then we went to Milit's house with my husband, as we were from the same neighborhood, as they say. Preparations were underway, and by then, my brother, along with LDK in Suhareka, had already taken steps to organize the funeral.

The number of participants could easily be said to have reached up to ten thousand people. Despite all the violence, terror, and imprisonments, the people had lost their fear. As I mentioned before, the

continuous sensitization through generations had done its job. By then, fear had vanished from the people. Only a small number still stood apart, those who did not embrace our cause, something that, perhaps twenty years earlier, might have seemed utopian. After every demonstration, when we sat down to analyze, we dreamed of a free Kosovo, of a life lived in freedom.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: Your husband, when he was released from prison, how did the marriage happen afterward?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: Yes, yes. My husband was released from prison on January 19, 1989. His father and a cousin, who was a close friend of both my husband and me in high school, traveled to Valeva to pick him up. He returned by train. That night, I couldn't sleep at all, I didn't sleep the entire night. There wasn't much going on, but I had my close friends around me, Myrvete, my brother Ramadan, and my brother Naim. They all knew that Asllan was being released from prison.

He arrived from Valeva sometime… some of the journey was by train to Ferizaj, and then he took a bus. He arrived early in the morning. I left around nine o'clock from Suhareka, from my house, to come here {gestures toward the house where they are now}. But it wasn't easy to come here, not at that time. Because from my father's house to here, there were four notorious checkpoints, and it was very rare for those of us who were marked to pass through without getting beaten at least once at one of the checkpoints, just for being Albanian. Because by then, the repressive measures were in full force. Just for being Albanian. There's no way to explain it.

I say, just like all the youth at the time, you had no security, no certainty. You would go out, but you never knew if you would return. Life was extremely uncertain. I came here, these houses weren't here then, there was only an old house. My husband had three brothers, and he was the fourth. His father was dismissed from his job. At that time, he lived only with his father, his two younger brothers, and his mother. So, they were a family of four. I arrived here, to that old house, and saw him for the first time again, the first embrace.

We spent the first night talking the entire time, that was the first and only time my husband ever spoke about it. Just like my father, who only spoke once, he did the same. That night, we talked about the past. He needed to tell his story, to unburden himself, to share the suffering he had endured. In the prison of Valeva, the longest hunger strike took place, three weeks without food, without water… Today, it seems unimaginable. They protested just to be allowed to receive books in Albanian, as they had no Albanian books or newspapers.

We announced our engagement without an actual engagement, even back then. Today, when I look back, I feel proud that we were among the first to make these changes, not saying we were the very first, but definitely among the first. And I am extremely grateful to my parents because it wasn't easy for them, given the societal norms at the time. I'm talking about 34 years ago, when there were still many prejudices from the neighbors. Whenever he would visit, I had no other men coming to see me, only him, yet they would attack my father, saying, "Aren't you ashamed? That boy comes into your house just like that."

Although Zyrafete was eight years older than me, her husband had been her longtime boyfriend. He would come to visit, but he would take her out to town. I was the one who broke the taboo. My husband would come and stay over, we lived together in that sense. We didn't have the means to fully live together because the conditions were very difficult, but we still shared our lives. Part of the time here, part of the time at my parents' house. Eventually, we drew attention because two irredentists, two nationalists, had come together.

The two of us, after years of me denying this relationship. They would say it, but I had denied it to the state, "No, I don't know him, we were just classmates, I don't talk to him, I've never had any communication with him." Now, this was coming back to haunt us, and new measures began. The activity with the LDK started, the interrogations resumed, and I was pregnant. I became pregnant in 1990. The demonstrations began again, and then came the moment of my eldest son's birth, Demokrat. There are certain events that have left deep marks on my soul.

February 23, 1990, curfew. After all the waves of demonstrations, after all those killings, others were killed too, though I can't recall all the names now, I think one was from Peqan and others as well. The demonstrations had ended, the curfew was imposed, violent measures were in place. The night of February 23, endless pain accompanying a birth. A birth awaited under curfew. Extraordinary, dire conditions, without any income, not a single source of income. Two young people had just married. We had a simple wedding with a few friends and both families, just to formalize it for legal reasons. But we had no income. In our home, there was nothing coming in.

With the help of my family, always. They were financially better off and managed to provide me with some necessities for the birth. That night, February 23, it was freezing cold, curfew was in place, and the labor pains started, but we had no car. My husband was forced to go out through back roads, moving in secret. There was a deputy police commander here in Shiroka, Ramadan, his last name escapes me at the moment. He was the only one in the area who had a home telephone. Ndrecaj, Ramadan Ndrecaj. My husband went to him and explained, saying, "Uncle Ramadan, my wife is about to give birth." He told him, "I have no car, I have nothing, what can you do to help me?"

He called the Suhareka police station and told them, "Prepare a travel permit so that the person in question has the right to travel." Because if you went out on the street without a permit, without

anything, they would kill you without asking questions. By the time you explained who you were and what you were doing, the Serbian officer would have already done his job. In short, thanks to Ramadan Ndrecaj, my husband then went to the Suhareka health center, got hold of an ambulance, and they came to pick me up here. We headed to Prizren. From Suhareka to Prizren, there were 15 or more checkpoints, and we barely made it. Somewhere around three in the morning, my son, Demokrat, was born.

All my worry was that, after those two final weeks following the demonstrations and all that tear gas, considering how much gas I had inhaled into my body, I kept imagining that my child would be born either without a head, without legs, or something else… but he was born a healthy boy. Life went on. In 1991, I became pregnant again right away. On March 31, 1991, on the very day of Albania's first free elections, when democracy began there, Atdhe was born. We have this thing… we're friends with our children. I have two sons and a daughter, and we endlessly discuss the history of my life, they know everything.

I tell endless stories because, by sharing them, they learn who we were, who we are, and what we've been through. They get to know me better, and at the same time, I unburden myself and enjoy telling these stories. On March 31, Atdhe was born, and he always had this kind of fate, because, just two months after Demokrat was born, a week after I came home from the hospital, my husband and I got our first opportunity to work. We had a house by the roadside, and there, we opened a business selling construction materials. At that point, the restrictions had eased a little. Privatization began, and you no longer needed state approval to get a job.

A kind of reform came, and both of us got jobs as salespeople in that house, in that grocery store. It opened, and we secured an income. So we always tell Atdhe, "You're the child of comfort, while Demokrat is the child of chaos" (laughs). Atdhe was born, and we continued our activism, now with the LDK. Then the Blood Feud Reconciliation [campaign] began, and the whole population rose to its feet. The activities continued, and the police still didn't leave us alone. On October 15, 1995, my husband and I decided to leave Kosovo.

Our employment was halted again. I was now waiting, staying semi-illegally, illegally. Some people knew I was in hiding, while others thought I was just staying with my mother or my aunt. With two children, Demokrat, five years old, and Atdhe, four, I left Kosovo on November 15, 1995, setting out for Switzerland. This was my second wound, after being forced out by the police. I was only 28 years old, embarking on a journey that I have written down, almost like a novel, a story, whatever you want to call it. An unfamiliar road with two children, not knowing exactly where I was going. I knew I was heading for Switzerland, but how, through where, by what means, I didn't know.

We ended up settling in the town of Schloss Holte-Stukenbrock, located between three larger cities, Bielefeld, Gütersloh, and Paderborn. It was a small town with around 23,000 to 24,000 inhabitants. In

Stukenbrock, specifically in the village of Sennelager, Senne, as they call it there, since in Germany, the city name comes first, followed by the village name. It's like saying Gjinovc, Suhareka, or Pristina and then naming a village near it, that's how they are connected. Stukenbrock, Senne, had been a concentration camp during Hitler's time, where prisoners were held. The German state, thankfully, had later repurposed it into asylum housing. That's where they sent us.

After six months, we faced our first deportation. Over 20,000 marks[23] in debt, a five-week journey, and all the hardships I had described with the children, only to return once again to the country that had persecuted us and forced us to leave. Even as I recount these events today, I don't know where I found the strength, where I drew that energy from. Now, I can hardly believe myself. Fate had it that, at the time, I spoke English. After being expelled from Pristina, I had enrolled in Prizren. When they expelled me from Prizren, I enrolled in Gjilan. And in the end, I only have a secondary school education, I never got my diploma.

At that time, I spoke English, I only communicated in English, a little, not much, but enough to be understood. The social worker assigned to us came and explained something to us. We always had a translator, a young guy who translated for us voluntarily, without asking for any payment. Our fate always seemed to be intertwined with both luck and misfortune. In that *heim* [German: residence] where we were placed, we found the brother of my husband's prison mate from the Valeva Prison. His brother was there. He was a young guy at the time, around 18-20 years old, and he spoke German fluently.

We got a translator for free because Germany was very slow and lacking in translators. Asylum seekers struggled a lot due to the lack of translators. With the help of this young guy, our translator, the social worker showed me the way and said, "Since you have been imprisoned and persecuted, you should write to Amnesty International, and they might be able to send you some information." We submitted this information to the court to initiate a new hearing and restart the asylum application process for the second time.

This Melanie Anderson, who was a representative of Amnesty International, I'm talking about the year '96, "She even knows Albanian," she told us. We wrote to them by hand, she gave us the address, and I'll never forget that famous address: Kingdown, London. We wrote, "We are a couple…" describing our journey and everything, and we sent it. A week later, we received a famous letter. At that time, since we were under social assistance, our mail was delivered to us by social services.

We received a large envelope {gestures with hands, showing a square shape}. We opened it. It contained 20 pages, I don't know exactly how many, just information about our activism. It started

[23] The mark refers to the Deutsche Mark (DM), the official currency of Germany from 1948 until the introduction of the euro in 2002. In Kosovo and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, the German mark was widely used as a stable alternative to the local currency, especially during the 1990s, due to economic instability and hyperinflation. It remained in common use in Kosovo until the euro was officially adopted in 2002.

from my father, Amnesty was so well-informed, thanks to the people who had worked on this. From my father's activities in '68, in '74. From the activism of my sisters, my brothers, and so on. From my husband's activism, mine, everything documented, with dates, with times, with everything. We submitted it to the court, I don't remember what it was called exactly, I can't recall now.

When they saw it, because when you have additional documentation, they can't just reject you outright, they have no choice but to reopen your case, you would file another petition. We went. It was March 21st, or maybe April, April '97, when we had our court hearing in Minden. When we saw the judges, they had read everything, because it had been translated into German by then. When they read about our activism and who we were, it was the first case in that district, as far as I know. Because in the Gütersloh district, we became known for having our status granted in court.

After receiving our residency through the court, there was a regulation, we had to wait, and then they would issue you, for example, an asylum passport from Germany. This automatically granted the right to work and seek employment. You also gained the right to move into your own apartment. Until then, we had been living in a single room. We had spent a year and a half in that one room. Now, at this point, this has always been a theme in my life, in my 56 years, where there's something good, there's also something bad, like twins. Then came '97. We got our residency, our hearts felt lighter. We started to breathe a little easier.

I became pregnant. They confirmed that I was expecting a girl. It was an indescribable joy. It was also a relief for us because they used to say that when a child is born in Germany, they automatically qualify for citizenship. Germany was particularly interested in youth at the time. This daughter of ours, our little blessing, was bringing us luck. I remained in good health up until the eighth month of pregnancy. Then my condition worsened, my health and the pregnancy itself. My blood pressure was extremely low, and the doctors were concerned that I might lose the baby.

Then I became pregnant, and the weight change caused me a health problem. After all those hardships, I had dropped to 52 kilograms, despite already having given birth to two children. The Albanian women we met there, as well as many others from different communities, couldn't believe that these two were my children because I was just 52 kilograms, skin and bones. When I became pregnant with my daughter, my weight increased to 86 kilograms. In the eighth month, problems started, low blood pressure, weight issues, and other complications. I ended up in the hospital three or four times. There was a great fear that I might lose the baby.

On March 21, 1997, my sister Myrvete, my friend, my half soul (cries), had a car accident and died on the spot (cries). The news was confirmed to my husband. My family already knew that I had health issues. My husband, through interpreters, explained my condition to the doctors, and they told him, "Under no circumstances can she be told about her sister's death, because she is on the verge of losing the baby, but she could also lose her own life." That night, when my sister died, I saw her in a dream.

I kept telling her, “You will never have to work again because I have worked for you.” I had a big stack of money, I don’t know what kind, and I would show it to her, saying, “This money is for you. I have worked for you. You won’t have to work anymore.” But in reality, my sister had died on the spot. The family had been informed. Efforts were being made to arrange her burial. My sister had citizenship, but the Yugoslav state did not allow her to be buried in Kosovo. Then, my brother Vesel tried, through the Embassy in Belgrade, to send our elderly parents to Sweden for the burial.

All this preparation lasted three weeks. My sister passed away on March 21, so now I’m going chronologically to explain how long it all took. It’s very interesting because, as I said, my feelings told me something was wrong. When I woke up the next morning, it was a Saturday, March 21, 1997. My sister had been in an accident while going to visit Zyrafete, and she died. On the morning of March 22, I was asleep. I had a small room, two by five meters, I had nothing else, just cleaning that space. All the women would sit in the yard outside.

I had two close friends, and I still do, but now we’ve been separated, living in different cities, Kimete and Nazlije. I told them, “Today I feel really bad. I have a strong feeling that something has happened to my family. But I don’t know what.” But definitely, my gut feeling was telling me that something big had happened. That day was Sunday. My husband was informed that my sister had died. He explained my health condition and consulted with the doctor. My mother told my husband, “Please, Asllan, do everything you can so that Zela [Zelije] doesn’t find out until she gives birth to Dona.” Dona, my daughter’s name is now Liridona. “I have already buried one, and I don’t want to bury another.” Meaning, of course, she didn’t literally bury me, but she feared for my life too.

Only I noticed the change in my husband’s face. I could see that something had changed in him. When I asked him, he would say, “No, nothing.” But he had already told my two friends and their husbands. No one else in that *heim*, and we were 150 families, knew what had happened to me except for those two and my husband. It was interesting, my sister passed away on March 21, and Liridona was born on April 6. My sister was buried on April 2, more than two weeks later.

They told me on April 12, five weeks and a few days later. For over five weeks, I didn’t mention any other name except my sister’s. When these women, who knew, finally told me, I don’t even know… I spent 925 marks on phone calls. Deep down, I felt something had happened. They had coordinated everything so well. The mourning for my sister lasted five weeks, until my parents left to attend the burial, and then another five weeks after she was buried. In total, it lasted about two months at my family’s home in Suhareka.

My family had coordinated everything so well to protect me (cries). They had arranged for only my mother, who was strong, and my sister-in-law, my second mother, to answer the phone during the mourning period. No one else. I learned all of this later from my siblings. Whenever I talked on the

phone, I would ask how they were, and they seemed fine, I tried to convince myself of that. But every time I walked back to the *heim*, a five-minute walk from the phone booth, something inside me, that subconscious worry, kept telling me, "Something is wrong. Go check the phone."

It was a code phrase because we operated in secrecy. When we wanted to carry out an action, we used phrases like the great river, the deep sea, something like that. My husband's code phrase with my family in Sweden and in Kosovo was, whenever they called, I never said my phone number. Every time they went out, he would say, "We're going out for a walk with Aunt Zela." That was the code phrase meaning that Aunt Zela still didn't know anything. Later, when I recalled those moments, it all made sense.

The moment the phone rang, my family in Kosovo would say that sometimes 50-60 women would gather all at once, freezing in place because Zela is calling, *pip* {onomatopoeia}. My mother would pick up the phone and give me strength (cries), holding me up with her positivity. Then the moment came, I went to the hospital for the third or fourth time to give birth to my daughter, oh, my soul, my other half (cries). She was born on April 6th at 11:02 PM. I had been waiting for that moment. She was born under good conditions in Germany.

The next morning, this [inner voice] was telling me {gestures toward herself}, "No one cares about you because no one is calling you," my inner self was saying. It was telling me that something had happened to me and that everyone was hiding it from me. My husband was at the *Heim* with our two sons, my two hearts, and then he came to see me. I told him, "I urgently need to leave the hospital. Something has happened to me, but I don't know what." I broke the hospital rules, and after five days, I was discharged. Dona was born on a Sunday, and by Friday, five or six days later, I left the hospital.

On Saturday, we went to visit some of my relatives, and they had organized something there as well. They had called my mother… By then, my mother and father had traveled to Sweden, my sister had been buried, and they were still in Sweden because they had stayed for a month. I had gone to my relatives, and they had called my mother and father on the phone, leaving the line open in the house. Then, my cousin, my aunt's son, started talking about my mother, about her heroism, about the demonstrations, talking endlessly about my mother.

I found it very strange and told him, "But I know who my mother is." Then he replied, "Of course," and called her *inxhe*,[24] saying, "She is very brave, very strong. But you haven't heard *inxhe's* composure right now, how she has endured." I kept looking at him. Then he said, "Because we were in Sweden." I kept looking at him again. Then he continued, "We were in Sweden because you need to be strong, very strong, because Aunt Ete has left us." Aunt Ete was what we called my sister Myrveti.

[24] *Inxhe* is a term of endearment used in some Albanian dialects to refer to an older sister or a respected older woman, often conveying a sense of warmth and familiarity.

I never raise my voice in moments of misfortune, it's just not in my nature. I looked at him once more and said, "What?" My husband and the others had been planning for five weeks. They had been telling me, "Your mother is going to Sweden, your father is going to Sweden," pretending that they were going for my sister's son's wedding, he was engaged. My sister in Kosovo hadn't been granted a visa, but my mother and father had. I had spoken three or four times, maybe five or six times, with my mother and father while they were in Sweden.

I kept asking for my sister, and they told me she had gone to work in Denmark and couldn't return for a month because of her contract. I kept looking for my sister, wondering, "You've all come back, but she still hasn't come to see you?" I wanted to talk to her on the phone, but they told me she didn't have one, luckily for them, phones weren't as common back then, so they managed to deceive me. When that person finally told me, and I realized that my sister had passed away, my vision went completely dark (cries). I was, as they say, a new mother, still in recovery, or whatever they call it, I don't even know.

I remember that everything went dark, I couldn't see anymore. I just held my head like this {places hands on head} and kept sitting like that because it felt like something had happened right here {above head}, like something had hit me. I didn't even realize that my mother and father were listening to me, along with Zyrafete, because by then, the elders were staying with her. Darkness, I couldn't see. They were explaining to me how she died, how they went and buried her, how my mother stood strong, how my father endured it all. I was hearing everything, but I couldn't see, nothing, absolutely nothing.

They told me, "Come on, your mother and father are waiting to talk to you" (cries). That's why my mother is my role model in life, because she taught me how to face life, how to fight through misfortune, but also how not to break down mentally, and what the word "mother" truly means. Mother, mother, our other half. Even though I had lost my sight, I didn't tell anyone that I couldn't see. I went to the phone. I was experiencing a tragedy, but I wasn't worried about myself. I was worried about my mother and father. I was thinking that they had just found out, but in my mind, it felt like right at that moment, they were about to learn the truth, and I kept wondering what they would do. My concern was for them.

I picked up the phone and said, "Hello, Mom," and she, with that gentleness, that love, that strength, said to me, "Oh, my daughter, have you been discharged from the hospital? How are you?" I still couldn't see, I still couldn't see. But the calmness in my mother's voice, I don't know, it created a positive feeling in me, and I asked her, "Mom, has *Dada*[25] Eta [Myrvete] passed away?" She said, "Yes, my love." I asked, "And what are you and Dad doing?" My father was weaker, according to Zyrafete, "He just cried silently and listened."

[25] Dada is a term used in Albanian to refer to an older sister, often expressing respect and affection.

My mother told me, “Yes, my heart, my daughter. I have been a mother to many children, and I believe in God deeply. Whatever comes from God, I respect it. I had nine very dear children, very dear to each other, very hardworking, very close-knit. You never brought us any trouble. Now, the time has come for me to be like the other mothers who lost their children earlier.” I asked her, “Aren’t you sad at all, mother?” She told me, “No, my dear.” The moment my mother told me, “No, my dear,” I started to see the corner of that room.

I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain this. I don’t know if you will understand me, but I started to see the corner of the room. I started telling myself, something good is happening to me. I told her, “Mother, if you are not grieving, then I won’t grieve either.” I spoke with my mother. My mother’s strength, her calmness, brought back my sight. Then I took the phone to speak with my father, but he only managed to say a couple of words before he couldn’t speak anymore. That’s when another battle began for me, because I had seen nothing, I had heard nothing.

People would come to see me. We, Albanians, are always there for each other, no matter where we are. But I wouldn’t accept condolences, I wouldn’t accept them until fate had it that Zyrafete had recorded the entire funeral. And when I told her that I wasn’t feeling well, that I couldn’t process anything, she sent me the tape. And I know what it means to hide things from people, I have made an appeal never to hide grief because only the one who experiences it truly understands what it means. The other source of strength was my mother. She returned from Sweden, and within a week, she got a visa for Germany and came to be with me. And then, I was able to come to terms with it.

So, my daughter was born, my sister was gone, or my sister was gone, and my daughter was born, fate and misfortune intertwined. Then, right away, in April or March, I can’t quite remember, we received our residence permit, our right to stay was recognized, and we found a 90-square-meter apartment and moved in. Then we applied for jobs. We worked, my husband still works at that company today, maintaining the machinery there. The debts, 20,000 marks, debts upon debts. My husband’s starting salary was 600 marks, while our rent alone was 585 euros.

We worked all kinds of jobs, gardens, walls. And as a woman, I never looked at what kind of job it was, whether it was legal or on the low, we just kept going. We educated our children, they went to school, got their education, found jobs, integrated. Now, I want to share an emotional moment connected to this journey. The children grew up, got their education, found jobs, integrated into society. The war found us in our apartment, this very apartment here. It began, we participated in demonstrations with Liridona, and that’s exactly why she bears the name Liridona,[26] to raise awareness about the war.

[26] Liridona is a common Albanian name derived from the words *liri* (freedom) and *dona* (to want, to desire), meaning “the one who desires freedom” or “freedom-loving.” Given in the context of the family’s struggle and activism, the name symbolizes the parents’ hope and dedication to Kosovo’s liberation and their continuous efforts to raise awareness for freedom and national identity.

We fully dedicated ourselves to activism as much as we could, collecting aid for refugees, gathering the "Three Percent"[27] fund, and staying active throughout the entire time. The war found us in our apartment, but we started building our lives. However, I still couldn't even dream, not in reality, let alone in my sleep, of whether I would ever be able to pay off our debts and live a normal life where we could afford to eat without worrying about money. Having a car or other things never even crossed my mind as a possibility. This is how things were until the war.

Part Five

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: My family in Kosovo also faced hardships during the war. My mother, our sacred mother, was caught in the Berisha massacre, which happened, I can't recall the exact date at the moment as I am emotional. They executed, yes, executed, or rather, carried out executions in that well-known shop. Early in the morning, the expulsion of Albanians began, and my family was in the middle of the city. The entire neighborhood I mentioned, Kuqi, Gashi, and Kryeziu, gathered in the city center, at a square near the bridge. An order was given to separate the men from the women.

In the column were my father, my eldest brother Musli, my brother Vesel, and two of my other brothers, one of whom had a son, as my eldest brother didn't have children, along with the son of another brother. The order was given to separate the men from the women, men to be executed, women to be spared. As I said, four members of my family were in that column. My mother, who was a deeply religious person, but a progressive one, when she returned from Albania to Kosovo, I immediately came as well. As soon as they returned, I came from Germany. I was deeply interested in both the psychological and spiritual state of those people who had lived through the war. I spoke to each of them individually, asking them about their perspective and how they had experienced it.

Now I will share my mother's testimony. She said, "When they separated the men from the women, a voice came to my ear, 'Pray, ask God.'" With her white headscarf, she said, "I took off my scarf and placed it on the ground. The guns were ready to execute all those men, over a hundred from our neighborhood. The women, the girls, all of us stood watching from the other side." She continued, "I stretched out my headscarf on the ground and began to pray, speaking to God out loud." At that moment, among the police officers in the cordon, there was a Bosniak named Ramiz, a police officer. When he saw my mother praying, he turned his weapon on the other officers.

He said, "Don't shoot, because if you kill them, I will kill as many of you as I can." According to the testimonies of the people there, including my brothers, the commander gave an order and turned to

[27] The Three Percent Fund was a financial contribution system established by the Kosovo Albanian diaspora in the 1990s to support the parallel institutions of Kosovo under Serbian rule. The fund required Kosovo Albanians living abroad to donate three percent of their income to help finance education, healthcare, and political activities aimed at achieving Kosovo's independence.

the Bosniak officer, saying, “Do you want to end up like these irredentists?” The officer replied, “I don’t pity them at all, but I fear God. The old woman is directly connected to God.” Then came the order: “You have three minutes, whoever leaves survives, whoever stays will be executed.” Thanks to the city park, the crowd scattered in those three minutes, and no one was killed. When I heard this story, it took me a long time to get it out of my mind.

The family’s hardships were similar to those of many others, they fled to Albania, but my second sister, who has also passed away from cancer, remained behind with her son and husband. Zyrafete and Myrvete were in Sweden, Zela was in Germany, and the rest were in Albania. For weeks, we searched for my sister through the missing persons lists scrolling across the screen of the well-known TVSH broadcasts.

My sister remained behind with the army in the mountains of Suhareka, cooking for the soldiers. About two or three weeks before returning, we found out that she was alive. The rest of the family returned from Albania in June 1999, while I came back to Kosovo in September 1999 after three and a half years away. This was my journey until 1999.

Anita Susuri: How did you find the place when you arrived?

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: How did we find the place? When I entered Macedonia, we had traveled by bus through Romania, it took us three days and three nights on the road. When we crossed the border into Macedonia, and then all the way to Suhareka, we saw burned houses, chimneys still standing, destruction, and the smell of devastation. We were returning after three and a half years from a well-developed country, with cleanliness and order everywhere. Even today, without meaning to offend anyone, neither the public, nor you, nor anyone else, but when you live even just a month in a place with strict order, where everything functions smoothly, and then you return to see disorder, your brain struggles to process it.

And for me, it had been three and a half years. Three and a half years of longing, the first time I was back in Kosovo. From Macedonia to Suhareka, I can say that I saw 80 percent destruction and burning, while 20 percent... the nature was green, it was September, but I don't know, I didn’t see it. I don't remember noticing the trees because my mind was overwhelmed, not just mine, but also the children’s. By then, it was 1999, one child was ten years old, another nine, the youngest three and a half, and the fourth, my daughter, was four, I’m trying to recall. It was very interesting because, without me or my husband saying anything to the children, we had traveled by bus.

When we returned to Germany, since there they ask children in school about their impressions, something characteristic stood out in how my kids described the war. What struck them the most was why not a single burned house had a collapsed chimney, all the chimneys were still standing (laughs). That was the victory, the signal that we don’t fall completely to the ground. We saw a Kosovo in ruins.

Our relatives didn't know we were coming because there were no phones, nothing was working. When they were still in Albania, I had told them, "I want to come." They pleaded with me not to, saying there were bombs, no place to sleep, and the houses were burned down.

My husband and I couldn't wait any longer, so we came without telling anyone. When we arrived in Suhareka, another chapter began. We stayed for two weeks. I was interested in asking everyone individually. I even asked the children of my brothers, the girls who were ten and twelve years old, "How did you feel when you saw your grandfather, father, and uncle being taken to be killed?" I was deeply interested in the psychological aspect as well. But here, I want to say that when you are on the brink of a catastrophe, you become numb, you don't know how to think, at least according to them.

I asked my mother, I asked my sisters-in-law, I asked everyone. For two weeks, I never heard a conversation filled with laughter, only talk of war, war, and killings. At that point, for me, the war became even closer as I was experiencing the stories they told me. Two days before returning to Germany, I hadn't even noticed myself, but in just two weeks, I had lost weight and my face had changed completely. My mother, seeing how overwhelmed I was, told everyone, "Enough now, you'll drive the girl mad. Let's laugh a little, let's talk about other things." Thanks to those two days, I managed to tuck away the worst thoughts in my mind, take in some laughter, and regain some energy. And then, I left. I left for Germany.

I come every year, two or three times, sometimes four or five times a year. When we returned from exile, not just the neighborhood but all of Suhareka admired us. We were nine siblings, all married, all living in harmony. But, as I said, in '97, we faced the tragedy of my sister, and then other misfortunes followed. In 2014, my younger brother passed away from cancer, and in 2015, my second sister also died from cancer. My brother was 42 years old, my sister 62. In 2006, my father passed away, and I couldn't come for his burial. That is something that still weighs on me because I had applied for citizenship.

Then, in 2018, my mother passed away. That emotion, that bond, the strength she gave me—she was someone who never showed sadness, not even once. No matter what happened to us, good or bad, she never let it show. She was our strength, our inspiration, the pillar for all of us, and especially for me. Then, my brother passed away, my soul. There was a big age difference between me and him, the professor of Albanian language. In 2020, during the pandemic, he was gone. We had never spent our vacations apart. He was the one who always organized the famous spring excursions, and we would all go together. I would come from Germany just for that; all the brothers, sisters-in-law, and sisters would gather, and we would go on those trips together.

In 2020, specifically on September 8, my brother died. In September 2021, my 36-year-old brother's daughter died from cancer, leaving behind her child. Also in September 2021, my eldest brother fell gravely ill from the pandemic, on the brink of death. I came from Germany and said, "I want to go and

die with my brother. Either he recovers, or if they say he is going to die, I will go and die with him." Because my brother had a son, whose wife had cancer, the one who died, and one brother succumbed to the pandemic while another brother died on us. And I found it unbelievable how much my brother still needs me.

I boarded the plane and came. I accompanied him for ten days in the hospital. I witnessed his death twice, twice. Strength, care, everything, his son's, mine, and everyone's. Today, my brother is still alive, and we are friends, my eldest brother and I, whom I see as a father. That's life. As for integration, now I will talk about integration. Our main goal was to achieve something in Germany. My personal goal, I am a feminist, I am a feminist, and even today, I work in this spirit, to bring women out of household work, out of the daily routine of chores. To help them relax, to do something more.

So, we started gathering aid during the war, and we became known. I have some newspapers somewhere to prove it, but I can't remember now. We started reaching out to the city newspapers to ask for help for the war. Our family, the Ramadani family, in that small town of 22,000 people, became recognized through the newspapers; they knew the Ramadani family. Donations would arrive at the collection point where we were gathering them. Not just me and my husband, but all the Albanians. It became popular among the Germans. That connection began.

Then we worked a lot. We worked in a company. I worked in a company assembling various parts, while my husband worked in maintenance at that company. But in my job, I was lucky because I had the right to take work home as well. The tasks were small, stamping tickets, assembling different screws, so I would bring them home and, with some creativity, involve the children in the work. In the evenings, in the living room, we would arrange those packages, and in a way, we turned it into a game, like playing with toys, except we were working. Slowly, through work and as the children grew, we managed to pay off our debts.

For the first time, we could breathe without having any debt. The children started growing up. My eldest son, this is an emotional moment for me, when he went to school for the first time, he had spent five or six years without attending kindergarten before starting school. That day was very difficult for Demokrat because when I took him to school, we were still in the *Heim*, and he had to travel seven kilometers by bus to get there.

He was scared, and I told him, "Demokrat, even when Mommy went to school, I didn't know anything, but I learned." And here, I get emotional. He told me, "But, Mommy, at least you could understand your teacher. I don't understand mine." That moment left a mark on me. With a lot of fear, with a lot of debt, with a lot of struggles, the first semester ended, and we had our first parent-teacher meeting. Those meetings were held regularly, but we didn't know the language, we didn't know anything, to put it simply.

The first meeting with the teacher. Full of fear, worried about what the teacher might say about Demokrat. When we went, the teacher surprised us and said, “Demokrat is an intelligent child.” Demokrat already knew how to read and write before starting school. That meant we had worked together. She said, “Demokrat has managed to grasp the German language almost as well as the German children” (smiles). Then, our second goal was to ensure that, besides school and helping us with work in the evenings, our children also engaged in activities so they wouldn’t feel bored.

We lived there with activities; we used to get beaten just to be able to participate in a play, we used to get beaten just to go sing a song. Over there, no one beat you; the state supported you. We enrolled them in football. Both boys got involved in football, in the city’s team. Then, in the fourth grade, Demokrat got involved with the school’s theater group for the first time, with a teacher. Demokrat was, how old would that be, ten or eleven years old. Dona, Liridona, was three and a half, four. For the first time, Demokrat and Liridona were assigned their first roles.

It was a play, an hour and a half long. I don’t know, the theme was respect, nature, generations, respect. They prepared, the play was set to be performed at school. A big school. In every school, there's a theater inside the corridor. The stage and everything are properly arranged. We go there. My son, Demokrat, and Liridona had told their teachers… I had acted in theater, and so had my husband. Luckily, we each had a photograph as proof. They had told their teachers that our mother and father had acted in theater in Kosovo. Now, they started looking at us a little differently.

When we went to the play that day, and these two stepped onto the stage (cries), I spent the whole time crying because now I’ve become more emotional. The teacher came over and told me, “Don’t cry, they’re going to become even greater artists than you” (laughs). So, besides football, the kids also got involved in theater. In seventh grade, Atdhe also joined the theater. But Atdhe has football in his soul even today. He has it, he loves it, it’s his passion. But now, he can’t tell the difference between his girlfriend, his wife, football, and theater (laughs). So, the kids are involved in theater, in everything.

In seventh grade, Dona, who was in second grade at the time, with a five-year age gap between them, participated in a project, a short film at their school, which they called *Real Schule*. The topic was about the Holocaust. We were in that very city where it had happened. They screened the film, and it turned out so well, of course, it was made with Germans and people of different nationalities, but in this case, I’m talking about my children. This film was nominated at the Berlin Biennale in the amateur short film category and won second place.

So, to tie it all together, they continued their education. Today, they have all completed their studies and are working. All of them are involved in theater. In our home, besides Demokrati, who has completed his master’s in political science and is on the verge of finishing law school, he has also completed his studies in theater and is a theater pedagogue. Atdheu has studied in the field of tourism,

I'm not sure if I'm mixing it up, but something related to transportation. He has also completed theater pedagogy. Dona is pursuing education and is in her final year of theater pedagogy.

Dorentina, our eldest daughter-in-law, though to me, she is my daughter, as I don't distinguish between them, is a professor of German language and history and has also completed her studies in pedagogy. We now have four pedagogues in our home. Albulena, our other daughter, is in the medical field. She has been working for over twelve years, is highly advanced in her career, and has received more than 30 professional advancements. She is the only one in the family not involved in theater (laughs). Then there's our son-in-law, who is a wonderful young man. He is currently in his third or fourth year of studies and has recently started taking an interest in theater (laughs).

So, alongside their education and integration, my children are also involved in theater. This connection to theater has brought me back into it as well. With my children's encouragement, they told me, "The debts are paid off, we've grown up, we've gotten married, we have jobs." Demokrat and Dorentina have their own home. Atdhe and Albulena have their own home. We live in Demokrat and Dorentina's house. They live in Düsseldorf because they work there.

So, I turned back to myself, started focusing on my own activities, even though, alongside everything I mentioned, the period of collecting aid and everything else, I was involved for a while, but then worries about debts and all that took over. From 2010, when I had the opportunity to complete my German language course, I was given the chance to work first with women and their children. Then, until 2014, I worked as an assistant pedagogue.

After my brother's death, I fell a bit morally and wanted to let my mind rest while strengthening myself physically, so I returned to this company again. Now, I work at a bakery shop, it includes pastries, coffee, and everything. I only work four hours a day, and I dedicate the rest of my time to activities. I work with three women's organizations in the city, both international and the Albanian women's association. For several years, three or four, I voluntarily taught Albanian to students, just to help them learn the language through activities, without any financial support. I have worked on two plays, I write the scripts myself and direct them with the help of the children. These were in Albanian, performed by Albanian children.

I work with women; we gather together. I am working on bringing *Vllezëri e Interes* (*Brotherhood and Interest*) to the stage. You are young, but it is a play by Kristo Floqi, written in 1936, a playwright from Korça and an emigrant of the '30s. I performed it in 1982 in front of the emigrants of that time. Later, the Committee banned me from theater activities. Now, I have formed a group, and I am trying to stage it with the women, I have made it my primary goal. So, my life, after all those ups and downs, setbacks, doubts, and fears, has now reached a state of normalcy. Today, we live in a democratic country. I'm not saying it's better, but we live just like the Germans.

Now, the last emotional moment, just three weeks ago. Atdhe, along with an actor friend, an actor who performs on ZDF, a state-run program where films are broadcast, took on a project and developed a two-hour play about refugees. They built a production… because over there, a play is developed differently; now I have learned this. It's not as rigid as it is here. You don't just take *Vllezëri e Interes*, assign roles, and read it. There, it is played out properly, worked through with books, reworked, I don't know if you'll fully understand what I mean.

The theme of the play was a dialogue between the famous Albert Camus, Atdhe Ramadani, a Kosovar Albanian, and Ahmet, I can't recall his last name, a renowned pianist from Zurich. They constructed a script inspired by Albert Camus and the struggle of rolling that boulder uphill. They developed it, wrote the text, and refined it. A professional actor, a future director, and another actor, all three of them performed exceptionally well. They built it up, and the play was staged about a month ago.

Atdhe never tells us anything, but two days before the play, since you have to reserve tickets a month in advance there, we all go as a family. Two close friends of ours, three others from Nasim's side, and we all attend the premiere together. I just heard Atdhe saying, "You're going to see a play like you've never seen before, and Asllan will be mentioned." Asllan is my husband. I didn't really pay attention to it. He said Asllani would be mentioned, that something about him would be told—okay.

We go to the play and sit in the front row. Albert Camus comes out, I'll keep it short, Albert Camus, Atdhe Ramadani from Kosovo, and Ahmet, whose last name I sadly forgot, from Zurich. Albert Camus starts telling the story of his life, how at the age of 27, he won the Nobel Prize. Here lies the philosophy of the play, there's a lot of philosophy, many life lessons woven into it. Albert Camus begins explaining to Atdheu and Ahmet, saying, "At 27, I won the Nobel Prize, but I was never truly satisfied in life because I never had time to spend with my daughters and my wife. Injustice in life troubled me, class differences, poverty, injustice itself," he tells them everything.

These two asylum seekers who had come to Germany were astonished, Albert Camus, a Nobel Prize winner, was not satisfied with his life, and what about us? Now, I was focused, I'm speaking for myself, I was focused on the story and trying to understand the German, trying to grasp its meaning. Atdheu begins his dialogue. He starts telling Albert Camus, saying, "I am also an Albanian from Kosovo. My mother and father took the illegal route and came to Germany. Only those who have taken the illegal route can truly understand what it means," and he continues, "My father left Kosovo before my mother. My mother traveled illegally with two children, and the journey took five weeks."

When Atdhe started talking about my life, I began to cry and relive my story once again. By God's will, I didn't make a sound, only tears were streaming down my face. A part of the audience started looking at me. When Atdhe saw that I was crying, his chest began to rise and fall noticeably in the middle of his performance. He continued describing how we arrived in Germany, everything I had just recounted. Then he mentioned something that moved me deeply, he said, "My mother and father didn't want to

burden our minds. When it came to discussing the debts, they spoke in code." At that time, we spoke in Serbian.

"We didn't know how much debt they had, but I could read it in my mother's eyes, on my father's face, I could see that these people had burdens," he told Albert Camus. Then he said, "With their spontaneity, the way they involved us in work… We grew up, we paid off the debts, first 20,000, then 10,000, until there was no more debt. We got an education, today we are all educated. I live with a brother," referring to Demokrat, "I live with a sister whom I love very much, but we argue a lot," we used to argue a lot, "and I am very happy with my life. Since 2008, I have been a citizen."

That story he told, how he had woven it into the role, because the play continues, it's still very, very… and now it's expected to enter competitions and such. It left me speechless. The whole time, then the story shifted to Ahmet's life, which is even, even, even more difficult. Then came this song about Sisyphus and all of that. I was speechless the entire time, and I said, "Tomorrow," because it was the second night, "I'm coming again. Yesterday I didn't see anything, yesterday I just cried." So, this is my life.

Anita Susuri: Ms. Zelije, if you don't have anything else to add… I got emotional too, even my voice started shaking. If there's nothing more, we can conclude here. I would like to thank you very much!

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: No, the gratitude should come from me to you. I will be grateful to you for as long as I live. There are two things I have always had in mind. I don't like to show off, I hate it. But I do love to tell stories. By telling them, people get to know you, and thanks to you, thank you, someone will listen to these events. The youth, people my age, the younger ones, and the older ones. This is how history is written.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much once again!

Zelije Kryeziu Ramadani: Thank you so, so, so much!