

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH SKENDER VARDARI

Pristina | Date: March 2, 2022

Duration: 145 minutes

Present:

1. Skender Vardari (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Renea Begolli (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

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

Part One

Anita Susuri: Mr. Skender, could you please introduce yourself? Tell us your date and place of birth, something about your family, your background?

Skender Vardari: Yes, my name is Skender Vardari. I was born on August 15, 1961, in Istanbul. I am the son of a family that relocated in 1956, during the massive migration from Albanian territories to Turkey. At that time, my parents only had two daughters, my older sisters. They moved to Istanbul with their two daughters.

Anita Susuri: From which place did they move?

Skender Vardari: From Pristina. Our roots, however, are from a village called Bakshi, near Pristina. Initially, they moved from Bakshi to Pristina and then from Pristina to Turkey. In Turkey, I was the third child, born in Istanbul. After me, my three sisters were born, making us five sisters and me, along with our parents. I...

Anita Susuri: Do you perhaps remember, I'm interrupting you, any stories from your parents about how this migration happened? Were they forced or did they decide of their own accord? How did it happen?

Skender Vardari: I learned later on about how my parents, along with other families, migrated during the massive displacements of Ranković's¹ era. While we lived in Turkey, as a family, I didn't know the Albanian language. I started speaking only Turkish until the '70s. In '72, we returned from Turkey to Kosovo. I completed five years of primary school there because at that time, primary school in Turkey was five years long and taught in Turkish. I began learning Albanian here after we returned to Kosovo. Meanwhile, we continued our life in Kosovo. I enrolled in primary school here again, continuing from the seventh grade in Albanian. I also completed high school here in Kosovo.

¹ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask, where in Turkey were you, and what was your childhood like there? What were the conditions like for you? What did your parents do?

Skender Vardari: The conditions were somewhat average as far as I remember, except for the later years, meaning the last years we lived in Turkey. My father did manual labor, working various jobs. He did manual labor for some time. Since he was also unemployed [for a period of time], our family's economic situation deteriorated, and an uncle of mine from Kosovo came to Istanbul and suggested that we temporarily return to Kosovo.

During the time my uncle was going to oversee us, my father planned to go to Germany through my [maternal] uncle's connections and acquaintances to work there. [The idea was] for my father to work in Germany while we continued living in Kosovo. It wasn't necessarily with the intention of returning permanently to Kosovo. However, in the meantime, we children enrolled in school. My father started working in Germany, and I began learning the Albanian language. Meanwhile, my father would come and go.

Over the years, after some time, my father went to visit Istanbul, but in Istanbul I had... actually when we returned from Istanbul, I had two sisters who stayed there. When my father went to visit my sisters, he also got in touch with other Albanians, relatives, neighbors, and friends. Among them, we also had an association there, the Turkish-Albanian Brotherhood Association in Istanbul. My father had gone to visit the association. This visit I'm talking about happened around the time I was in third year of high school.

There, my father met a representative from the Albanian Consulate at the time. This person could have been an ambassador or a consul, or another representative from Albania who had come to visit the association and my father talked to them at the association. During their conversation, my father told the representative, "I," he said, "have returned to Kosovo, I brought my family back to Kosovo, and I'm interested," he said, "in educating my only son in Kosovo." When the representative saw that my father was keen on educating his son, as our family were considered emigrants at that time, which we actually were. He offered him some books. He said, "Since you are interested in educating your son in Kosovo, I will give you," he said, "some books to send to him there," he replied, "Yes, with great pleasure." And he gave him the books.

Now, I don't remember the exact number of books because I was young at the time. But there were quite a few, a considerable amount of literature, all of which was banned at that time. The literature given to my father was banned by Yugoslavia. My father brought these books from Istanbul to Kosovo. So, I believe the starting point of my national inspiration began with a solid foundation from the literature provided by the representatives of Albania there. This is how my interest in the national cause started at a young age. Then...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember what kind of books they were? Surely Gjergj Fishta?² Naim Frashëri?³

Skender Vardari: We didn't have anything by Gjergj Fishta because at that time, even in Albania, [the work of] Gjergj Fishta was not available. Except for Gjergj Fishta, we had many other books. Books about Mic Sokoli,⁴ so many books, I'd say more than 30-40. It could be that my father brought even more books. Those books, not only did I read them, but when I learned that these books were banned, considering their content, I became aware that they were prohibited while living under the circumstances we had in Kosovo as young people.

I also started distributing them illegally, but on my own initiative, not in an organized manner. Based on those books, I created a circle of people who were genuinely interested in our unresolved national issue during the time of Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, this circle naturally, but still illegally, formed. Eventually, I made contact with people who were organized in various groups.

Then we exchanged literature, as I gave out banned literature of that time and received literature, documents, and different writings from various organizations of that era. This is how I got involved in underground activities and various organizations, though not very clearly defined. It was like how every young person takes their first steps in organizing their individual activities.

Anita Susuri: Before continuing with the activities, I want to go back to earlier parts because I think your return from Turkey is important. How did you experience it, and what did you expect from this place? What were your thoughts at that time as a child?

Skender Vardari: As a child, I didn't have clear expectations. Not only did I not have clear expectations, but I also didn't know the Albanian language. When I came here, I started learning Albanian. So, I had no idea why my family moved from Kosovo to Turkey, why we lived in Turkey, and how it was possible that I didn't know Albanian. These terms were unfamiliar to me. You could consider me a child almost completely without national feelings, like... with an alien identity. I didn't even consider myself Albanian as a child, I always thought I was Turkish. All these major changes in me happened after I returned from Turkey. Specifically, after our family returned from Turkey.

² Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) was an Albanian Franciscan brother, a poet, an educator, a politician, and a national hero. Notably, he was the Chairman of the Commission of the Congress of Monastir, which sanctioned the Albanian alphabet. In 1921 he became the Vice President of the Albanian parliament, and in 1937 he completed and published his epic masterpiece *Lahuta e Malësisë*, an epic poem written in the Gheg dialect of Albanian.

³ Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) was an Albanian poet and writer. He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian national movement, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

⁴ Mic Sokoli (1839-1881) was an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter from the Tropoja district in today's Northern Albania. He was a noted guerrilla leader, remembered in particular for an act that has entered the chronicles of Albanian legend as an example of heroism: he died at the battle of Slivova against Ottoman forces in April 1881 when he pressed his body against the mouth of a Turkish cannon.

Anita Susuri: And in the place where you lived in Turkey, were there other Albanians? Was there a community?

Skender Vardari: Yes, certainly, when I became aware, after 18 years of living in Kosovo, I returned to Istanbul several times for various visits. That's when I realized that there are Albanians in Istanbul, and generally in Turkey, who had mostly migrated from Albanian territories. But at the time we are talking about, when my family returned, I was a child and didn't know anything about these facts.

Anita Susuri: And when you returned to Pristina, did you go back to the place where you lived before you left, or how did that come about?

Skender Vardari: No. From conversations with my parents, I understood that my father left Bashkia without taking anything, no property, no... because at that time, looking back now and even from a few years ago, I understand that my parents didn't leave with the intention of returning. The migration and the pressure were such that they gave up on living in Yugoslavia at that time.

Therefore, when we returned, we had no property here. We started from scratch, living in various rented houses, later, we bought land, built a house in Pristina, and continued our life until I was deported from Kosovo again after many years. This is how the situation was, and how our family's life began when we returned from Turkey.

Anita Susuri: What do you remember, for example, when you came here? How was it for you? Did you continue in another language? Your native language, I mean, but how was this experience for you?

Skender Vardari: Yes. As a child, I believe it wasn't easy. However, the circumstances were in my favor to change languages and return to my native tongue. The environment where I lived now was among my relatives, not just my immediate family, but also extended family. Everyone was... they had the right approach to ensure I didn't experience this big change [too harshly] as a child. So, I naturally adapted to life in Kosovo. Because even to this day, I believe that people... as a child who has been assimilated... an arrow, when directed towards its base, towards its human core, is easier than taking an arrow on a different path outside your core, outside your identity. Even today, we still have migration from Kosovo to different countries, mainly for economic reasons. But I believe those are more painful and harder than what I experienced when we returned from Turkey.

Anita Susuri: Which school did you continue your education at in Pristina?

Skender Vardari: For elementary school, I attended *Zenel Hajdini* in a neighborhood now called Kodra e Trimave. That's where I continued my elementary education. Then, for high school, it was *19 Nëntori*, I believe, where I completed my studies. During high school, we made some changes, the first two

years were at *19 Nëntori*, and then the last two years were at Taukbahçe. It was the same school, but our generation was considered experimental. Before us, previous generations had a specific orientation from the first year of high school. Our generation had the opportunity to experience changes. We were part of the generational changes of that time.

Anita Susuri: How was the atmosphere in Pristina? Because in '74, the constitution for Kosovo was established,⁵ and politically, the situation was somewhat better than during the Ranković period, especially in the '60s. How did you perceive it in society, for example, in the neighborhood where you lived? What was that period like?

Skender Vardari: Since I didn't experience the time before '74, as we moved here two years prior when I was a child, as a student and a child, I couldn't perceive what those changes were. Later on, I gathered information through reading and other means and understood those changes. However, I didn't witness the change because I was too young then. My national consciousness began to develop during high school, particularly after the second, third, and fourth years. So, I couldn't perceive the changes that the Albanian people experienced with the constitutional changes of '74.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you first started reading the literature your father brought you during high school. How did all this activity begin? Did you have friends or...?

Skender Vardari: It began gradually in a way that's hard to explain at this distance in time. Because we were, I believe, an extraordinary generation for many reasons. We lived under such circumstances that it was almost impossible to document our feelings or the chronology. That's why I find it difficult to speak in the first person about this. We had a life full of challenges, perhaps even suffering, but also change, a time of great changes. Being one of the protagonists during this time, even if just a small one, was a special feeling but also something hard to explain. It's difficult to revisit those times, I mean, I often believe one needs to look back at oneself and see the details one by one to understand something because time and forgetfulness play their roles.

Anita Susuri: How did it all happen? What kind of activity was it, and do you remember the beginning?

Skender Vardari: The beginning is usually a bit vague in my memory, but I'll try to explain that it started mainly with friends from my generation, discussing various topics. We exchanged thoughts from the books we read among ourselves, our friends. That's where the discussion of different topics began, leading to a clearer understanding and orientation, both politically and nationally, as well as in other areas. So, we talked about culture, sports, and everything else, as is normal for young people... I believe a person's character is shaped by the education they receive, the books they read, and the

⁵ The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution was the fourth and final constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It came into effect on February 21, 1974. Kosovo and Vojvodina, the two constituent provinces of Serbia, received substantially increased autonomy, including *de facto* veto power in the Serbian parliament.

conversations they have, as well as the lifestyle we had at that time. So, the start of my activities was mainly based on various discussions with friends.

Anita Susuri: How was it, for example, to take the initiative to do something?

Skender Vardari: And I think the initiative to do something came later. At first, we mainly discussed topics as they were, not what they would become, but how they were at the moment. However, whenever we discussed topics, especially those concerning the Albanian cause in Yugoslavia and the position of Albanians in Yugoslavia, it more or less raised the question of what would happen later, what should be done next. So, it was another period of research, discussions, and various treatises we had among friends about what would happen and what should be done, this understanding about what should be done always came later.

But, before this, there was a long period of assessing the current situation of that time. Not the current situation of today, but of that time. That took quite a long period, and then came the next period. The next period seemed easier, regarding what should be done. Because as young people, we felt the readiness to do something, to act, to contribute something, especially since we were part of that society ourselves.

Anita Susuri: In what year did you join the underground movement?

Skender Vardari: In the years '78, I believe it could be more or less '77, but mainly '78 is clearer, it's '78. However, it didn't last long because we didn't have the proper organization, not just me but everyone, I have that impression. Now we talk with other comrades even at this late time, and it seems like most of the comrades went through that period in a similar way. It means it's a time when you act, even though underground, but not in a very organized way, and given the conditions and circumstances of the time we lived through, it was a difficult time.

From today's perspective, if someone were to ask me now, "Would you start that underground activity as you did back then?" I don't think I would dare. But back then, the courage of youth was different. Not just the courage of youth, which was different then and is different now. I mean, young people are more inclined, more courageous. But also because we had a, I personally had the impression that you were dealing with an occupier, but not to the extent it actually was. Especially the surveillance, especially the spying, the network of surveillance by the UDB⁶ at that time was in every aspect of life, something we didn't perceive as such.

⁶ The State Security Service - *Služba državne sigurnosti*, also known by its original name as the State Security Administration, was the secret police organization of Communist Yugoslavia. It was at all times best known as UDBA (pronounced as a single word and not an acronym), and was the most common colloquial name for the organization throughout its history.

Therefore, we had a greater readiness to do something without being seen or, in other words, to perform many actions without facing consequences. So, I will pause a bit here to talk about the earlier period of conversations with friends. As for the inspiration during these conversations with friends, we have been constantly inspired by the different circumstances we lived through.

Now, in the years '78 and '79, we were not only inspired by the books we read but also by some teachers and professors we had. Then we were inspired by many sources. We started following the news, the songs that were sung on Albanian Radio Television, Radio Tirana, Radio Kukës, especially Radio Tirana. We tried to visit some distant villages that were far from Pristina but which avoided the obstacles that existed.

During the time of Yugoslav rule, there were obstacles related to antennas that disrupted the signals we could use to listen to Radio Tirana. And we were also inspired by them, we followed the songs that were sung there. Through the songs, we learned a lot about the history of the Albanian people, from the songs broadcast in Albania at that time. Meanwhile, there were various visits from cultural and artistic societies from Albania, and they played different concerts. We attended their concerts with emotions and followed them closely.

Everything in life, in our daily life, we had sources of inspiration. Imagine even their different, modest clothing, but which belonged to a society that was more cultured in our eyes, we saw everyone who came from Albania in this way. We would rush to visit them here because sometimes they would come to Hotel Grand here in the center of Pristina, and we would go to visit them there. They gave us pins that we wore, different pins, usually with flags. Everything was, I mean, there were many factors that at the moment I might not remember them all, but we had many sources of inspiration. Almost all were illegal, but we were nurtured with national feelings.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: You were telling us about different social, cultural, artistic organizations that came from Albania and how you received them and interacted with them.

Skender Vardari: Yes, this, I wanted to mention here with the purpose of justifying our sources of inspiration and those of our generations. These have made us, have inspired us, and have prepared us and... have influenced us to change both in our behavior and in our actions, for example, not everything, with a sign of the flag that you place on your chest means you are nationally correct. We saw during meetings that we were no longer satisfied only with symbols, only with behavior, only with national identity orientations.

But, the deeper you went into conversations with friends who had orientations and readiness to act, to push processes forward, we saw our shortcomings and realized that we needed to act in an underground manner, as secretly as possible and more organized because we were hearing about imprisonments, arrests, interrogations, and so on. So, we slowly noticed that we would have serious consequences. This is how the beginnings of *ilegale*⁷ started, approximately in this way.

Anita Susuri: What was the organization on the inside like?

Skender Vardari: The organization, I did not manage to be part of a specific group of friends who truly belonged to a proper organization. Even though I had friends who were organized, for various reasons I refused to be part of an organization, for various reasons, not always. Not because of my unwillingness to act, but for security reasons. For example, I had a very close friend who was engaged in an organization, but I had my personal dilemmas about whether to be part of that organization or not.

However, my readiness was greater than those dilemmas I had at that time. So, even though I was not a member of that organization, I started to contribute to that organization that I was not a member of. For example, since I was a student at the High School of Construction, I was good at technical drawing. And I remember that the emblem, an emblem we had, I made it myself for that organization. It was an emblem with aspirations that would, in the future, be of the Republic of Kosovo.

I took materials from that organization, their program, status, and some magazines which I don't quite remember now, meaning documents from that organization. I got to know the activities of that organization through that friend and gave my modest contribution related to the activities of that organization. But, without being a member. Then, on another occasion, as an example, I might be disrupting the chronology, but I remembered that we took a treatise⁸ from a completely different organization that had nothing to do with the first one. A treatise that called for the repetition of the demonstrations of '81,⁹ for example.

We took it with some friends together in a more primitive way. We used the copying of that treatise, we copied it ourselves, distributed it ourselves, and in the end, I got caught in the act. I was caught in the

⁷ Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

⁸ In Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo, treatises were underground pamphlets distributed by Albanian activists to protest against political repression and cultural suppression. These documents contained critiques of the Yugoslav government and called for greater rights and autonomy, playing a crucial role in mobilizing resistance and fostering Albanian national identity.

⁹ On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

act of distributing treatises for the [potential] demonstrations of '82, I mean. It called for going out in demonstrations again in '82, in March '82.

Anita Susuri: That was the year when you were imprisoned, right?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes. That was the year when I was imprisoned.

Anita Susuri: But first, I want to talk a bit about these, for example, the activities and the dangers that threatened you before the imprisonment?

Skender Vardari: Before the imprisonment, I, we had activities also during the years '78-'79. For example, with some other friends as well, I mean, somewhat selected in that system of that time, I remember that there was an organization of selecting the best students of that time. Those students went to what is now the Youth Palace, back then it was called Boro Ramiz. There, there were some research groups of young people.

The students who made up those research groups were mainly selected as the best students, almost the best of Pristina. There were groups for history, language and literature, astronomy, mathematics, and some others I don't remember. But I don't remember all the branches because a long time has passed, but those groups were actually legal and they used legal facilities, meaning the facilities of culture like the youth and sports center.

But, we went to those groups and held discussions. We turned the discussions into secret meetings and aimed to eventually, as soon as possible, turn all those research working groups into history branches. For example, there was an educational program held there like in any school but it was limited, meaning the history of the Albanian people. And the most interesting, most delicate part was explained more, for example, the years of the League of Prizren¹⁰ and others.

Always with the aim that those good students would become, in the near future, genuine activists who contribute to the national cause. That was our goal. The UDB caught us there, they investigated us for our activities, even though we were not very organized, as I said. But they started to interrogate us. Among others, I was interrogated many times. I remember one UDB agent, actually back then they were not called UDB agents, they were called people who worked in State Security. But later, the name changed to UDB agents, and then they were called State Security Inspectors.

One of them, I remember, when I was a student, he would come to school an hour or two early. I would see him, but he wouldn't see me because I was among the students and he couldn't distinguish me. He

¹⁰ The 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

would go into the office of the school's clerk to hide so he wouldn't be exposed, so the students wouldn't notice that an UDB agent was there. He would wait for the math class, specifically my math class, and during the class, he would take me out, take me to the Secretariat, to the internal affairs office, and there he would conduct investigations with me.

That was a bit difficult for me because I was young, a high school student. Now, imagine a high school student. A representative from internal affairs, from State Security, came, opened the door, briefly apologized during the lesson, and without addressing the professor who was there, would see where I was sitting and signal with his finger, "Get out!" I experienced that very harshly.

I thought at the time that the professor also found it difficult to have one of her students taken by the State Security Inspector during class, but that wasn't the case. Later, I found out that she was a close relative, apparently, by the last name I understood that she was from the Kol Shiroka family, a professor who didn't care whether someone took her student out of class or not.

Anyway, this is a story in itself, but nonetheless my emotional experiences were like that. That's why I emphasized this case. Not as a name, because names don't matter to me. Someone else could have been in that professor's place, as there were others like her, she wasn't the only one. Even though we had among our professors some who made extraordinary contributions to education in general and to the national aspect who inspired us. But this case was the opposite, I mean, a professor who had a background more inclined towards, and who nevertheless loved, the Yugoslav system of that time, even though it was an oppressor.

Anita Susuri: Did it often happen that they took you for questioning like that?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes, several times. I don't know the exact number, but at least six or seven times, I believe. But what seemed interesting to me and I confirmed it myself, was that the person who came to take me for questioning, the one who came to the school, came specifically for me. He could have taken me during another class, but he waited for up to two hours just to catch the class I had with the same professor. Otherwise he wouldn't enter the classes of other professors. He chose the staff, specifically the professors, who were aware of the situation and were on his side.

Anita Susuri: And what were these interviews like? Was there any physical or psychological violence?

Skender Vardari: Well, at that time violence wasn't very prominent, since this was in '79. In '79, my impression, based on the fact that I didn't experience a lot of severe violence, with the exception of a few slaps and some hits with rubber canes they had, but not much compared to after '82 and beyond. Those were, now when you compare bad with bad, even bad things differ among themselves, they have a scale just like good things do.

From today's perspective, I believe that '79 was somewhat more liberal and even the behavior of the UDB agents and the police in general was a bit more liberal. They trusted themselves more, I mean, perhaps there were many factors, maybe they underestimated us, thinking we weren't much of a threat and couldn't do much. The reasons could be varied. But what's important for us is that we didn't experience a lot of severe violence, not on a large scale. Fortunately, I managed to get through '79 without being sentenced.

However, this only lasted until '82. And until '82, we also had some other experiences. For instance, with this friend with whom I was involved in underground activities, among others, I had other friends too but now I'm specifically talking about a friend who was connected to an organization. I want to move on to the time of the '81 demonstrations, March 11. With this friend, who was a very close friend, he often came to my place, stayed overnight, and I stayed at his place as well.

Accompanying each other, even though we lived in different parts of the city, we would accompany each other until we reached one another's home, and vice versa. We couldn't separate, we couldn't manage to part because of the conversations and topics we discussed between ourselves and we continued our discussions while accompanying each other, and when we realized we had reached the other's home, we kept going. One of these occasions of accompanying each other was March 11. When we went out in the city, near today's cathedral, at that time there was a high school where the cathedral is now.

Anita Susuri: *Xhevdet Doda* [name of the high school].

Skender Vardari: *Xhevdet Doda*, yes. We heard a noise, I don't remember now which slogans we heard with the noise. But we were convinced that it was a demonstration of many people who had gathered somewhere, and the slogans gave us goosebumps because we were pleasantly surprised. Even though we were active in underground activities ourselves, the demonstrations that happened on March 11, 1981, took us by surprise, we were surprised by the demonstrations...

Anita Susuri: You didn't know that there was an organization.

Skender Vardari: We didn't know there was such an organization. At that time, I was a first-year student at the Higher Pedagogical School in the BAT¹¹ group. But since I was a resident of Pristina, I wasn't in contact with or living in the dormitories to come into contact with other students who lived there. Later, after many years, I found out that a large section of the organizers of that night, March 11, 1981, were also residents of the student dormitories.

So, it took us by surprise, but with very strong emotions. I might be repeating myself, but it's not too much because those emotions that accompanied us and gave us goosebumps, I still experience to this

¹¹ BAT is an acronym for *Bazat e Arsimit Teknik* (Foundations of Technical Education).

day. Because the demonstrations of '81 brought about very significant changes. What we had been trying to achieve in the underground for years, what the educational workers had dedicated decades of work and effort to, was realized through those demonstrations.

With the good will to raise the population to an appropriate level, with a level of culture and knowledge and many other factors that influenced the rise of national awareness, the demonstrations of '81 surpassed all of this. They accelerated the process significantly. All of this filled us with emotions that night, my friend and me. We went and joined the demonstrations. We confronted the police that night and continued until just before dawn. Around 3:00 in the morning, we were dispersed.

Anita Susuri: How was it? What happened? Was there violence from the police? Were there any shootings? What happened? Were there any beatings?

Skender Vardari: Yes, there was, there was violence from the police. Because of the police violence and the tear gas, we retreated to the dormitory courtyard. We stayed in the dormitory courtyard until around 3:00 in the morning. They didn't come in until larger reinforcements arrived. When they deemed it necessary, once they were significantly reinforced and we were tired after 3:00 in the morning, then they intervened in the courtyards too. We fled to the outskirts of the dormitories, to a neighborhood nearby.

And I remember that near the martyrs' monument, I believe it was near the martyrs' monument, in a private house that had an open and unfinished ground floor, we slept there for about two or three hours until we recovered in the morning, and in the morning, we dispersed and went to our homes. This was our first experience of the demonstrations of '81. After that, I participated in all the other demonstrations, meaning on [March] 26, and on April 2, we participated in all of them and were here. But those were, I mean, the beginning, the origin, and an initiative that we will never forget for the rest of our lives.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: We were talking about the year '81, the demonstrations. You mentioned that you spent the night in a house...

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: How did the following days go after that?

Skender Vardari: After that, the circumstances of that time, the atmosphere of determination and the growing resentment against the occupier increased every day in large proportions among the people

in general, but also among us who were part of the Albanian population under Yugoslav rule. And every day, even in our homes, in our families and in our community, and in schools, this was the only topic of conversation, what would happen next. So, we continued with the momentum of doing something to bring to light the dissatisfaction of the population under Yugoslavia... other demonstration events on different dates also took place, I mean.

We participated in all of them, but then we continued even deeper into the underground. Although we were not organized, the demonstrations of '81 gave us a lot of courage. After that, we continued with more intensive activities by distributing these banned books we had. Some people received sentences of several years just for being caught with a single book, regardless of whether they were active in an organization or not, or a member of an organization or not. They were punished for a single book. Actually, actually not just for a book, but also for a slogan that someone put in their yard, which they took, read, and were caught with, and if they hid it and kept it, they were punished for it.

The punishments were draconian, but our activity took on faster, more frequent, and more intense proportions every day. In that electrified situation, a situation that the demonstrations elevated to a higher level, we worked even more with that will. Until a few days before the demonstrations of '82, we had the tendency to mark the anniversary in order to show the occupier that we would continue with demonstrations and other peaceful means. Just to show the world and everyone that the position of Albanians in Yugoslavia was not resolved.

In this sense, a treatise prepared by someone else, probably by another organization, fell into our hands, within my circle of friends. But we weren't interested in the organization, it was the content of the treatise that organized us. The content of the treatise was to mark the demonstrations of '81 once again, to hold them again in '82, and to call the people to demonstrate. From the content, we saw that this was the goal, and that was enough for us to organize ourselves, a close circle of friends, three or four of us, to take responsibility for that treatise and its duplication.

We didn't have technical knowledge, we didn't know how we could reprint a treatise, a paper, we didn't have the means, and we didn't even know the technical method of copying paper. A friend who had more technical knowledge taught us. He had constructed a mimeograph in a simple, mechanical way, by hand, without any automation. We copied them in a simple way, and prepared them until the day before. We had planned to go out on March 10, I and another friend, to distribute the treatises, and we encountered the police. Trying to avoid and escape from the police on a steep slope of a street in Pristina, I slipped and fell. They caught up with me, while the other friend was waiting to see what to do. I told him, "You run!" And he managed to escape. I was caught distributing the treatises and was arrested.

Anita Susuri: Did you have the treatises with you? In your hand?

Skender Vardari: Yes, we had them. I had some with me, and some had already been distributed.

Anita Susuri: How many copies, for example?

Skender Vardari: I don't know. I don't remember the exact number because later I went through various tortures, so I lost track of the quantity of what I had, how much I had, or how I had them as the investigations began. The investigations, I mean, my connections with the organization in question, whether they would be revealed or not, and so on. Regarding the quantity, I just know that we had a considerable amount of treatises hidden under our clothes. We would take them out one by one, two by two, like that. Depending on the positioning of the houses where we distributed them in those neighborhoods. And as for what was left, they caught some of them. I know that in the end, the smallest part of the treatises was caught with me. The rest I had already distributed, but it was fate that I got caught in the act. Then, the investigations and imprisonment began, and so on.

Anita Susuri: Where did they take you initially?

Skender Vardari: To the Prison of Pristina, they kept me for 48 hours, 72 hours actually, three days. Among other physical tortures they used, they also used sleep deprivation on me, for example... later, during my imprisonment with friends, when we stayed together in different cells and different prisons, I saw that they didn't use, for example, the method of sleep deprivation on some others, but they used it on me...

Anita Susuri: And what is this method like? They didn't let you sleep?

Skender Vardari: Yes, they didn't let me sleep. Even when they weren't interrogating me, after they finished questioning and torturing me physically, they paused or went to someone else or had other duties. We didn't know where they went. For me, it was a break of several hours. During those hours, instead of using the time to sleep or something, I didn't sleep a single minute for 72 hours. They didn't let me sleep a single minute after 72 hours of physical torture, and they had additional guards. I mean, they left, but they assigned another police officer to watch me and make sure I didn't sleep. They told me that I was not allowed to sleep, and they left a guard to prevent me from sleeping. Sometimes I would start to fall asleep at the table, but the guard wouldn't let me sleep.

Anita Susuri: Did they hit you to wake you up, or what?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes. Several times. Whenever my eyes closed, due to sleep deprivation, sometimes you endure it, and no matter what, even if they hit you, you fall asleep.

Anita Susuri: What kind of questions were they, for example, who are you collaborating with?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Mainly related to the action, “Where did you get it? Who did you reprint it with? Who are you connected to?” And so on, questions of that nature. There were, in fact, 11 months of investigations, the investigations lasted 11 months. They put us on trial. In the meantime, they discovered that I had connections with another organization that I was not a member of but had read various materials from, and that part was also uncovered, and it was linked to me and two other friends who were involved in the action we had undertaken. They connected us to the organization in question because, in the meantime, the organization had also been discovered [and imprisoned]. They put us on trial together with them...

Anita Susuri: This organization that you mentioned, something Marxist...

Skender Vardari: Yes, the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist of the Albanians in Yugoslavia. I was sentenced together with them. My indictment was separate from the organization. The organization had its own separate indictment. The three of us, I mean, we who were involved in reprinting and distributing the treatise. We had a separate indictment, but the verdict was joint because we were sentenced together. There were two prosecutors, our prosecutor for the three of us and the prosecutor for those 20 or so members of the organization. There were two prosecutors, two indictments, and one verdict. So, among others, I was sentenced to eight years in prison at that time.

Anita Susuri: And those 11 months you mentioned, where were you?

Skender Vardari: In the investigative prison of Pristina.

Anita Susuri: In Pristina.

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes, in Pristina.

Anita Susuri: And what were the conditions like in this prison?

Skender Vardari: In the investigative prison of Pristina, like many prisons in Kosovo, the conditions were miserable, meaning the cells were small. That prison is almost in the shape of a bridge, nearly circular in form.

Anita Susuri: Crescent-shaped.

Skender Vardari: Like a crescent. The cells were inside the curve. The corridor was on the outer side of the curve, which is important because the cells, when inside, take on a conical shape, making them small and conical. One side was about a meter or so wide, approximately. On the other side, it could be about two meters or so due to the position of the room being conical. In these small cells, mainly four

to five, up to six or seven people were accommodated in one cell. We were packed like sardines. There was no space to turn over while sleeping. Even the cleaning tools for our needs were inside the cell.

Everything was designed to degrade you, everything possible to break a person's character was premeditated by them. If someone ended up in prison, their aim was to break the person's character using various means. Besides using violent means, different tools of violence, the environment itself was set up to contribute to the suffering of the inmates. This is how we...

Anita Susuri: What was the food like? Did they bring it to you there?

Skender Vardari: Yes. The food was extremely poor. During the investigation, during the investigation phase which we referred to until the sentencing in court because the investigation phase lasted several months. After we were sentenced, we were still in the same prisons for a while, for several months. After a few months, they transferred us to a different prison, for example, we went to another prison.

For example, I specifically went to Mitrovica, but the prison conditions there were the same. The prison was also in a complete circular shape, exactly round, and the cells were just as small. However, that was also an investigative prison. Even though we had completed the investigation, we were sentenced prisoners who were supposed to be transferred somewhere to serve our sentences. But we continued, they kept us in investigative prisons for years.

Anita Susuri: And why did this happen?

Skender Vardari: This happened, we're not entirely sure why, but we know that wherever we went, the prisons were overcrowded. I believe one of the factors was that there was simply no space. They kept the prisons full.

Anita Susuri: During the time you were in prison in Pristina, were there any visits, or what was a typical day like?

Skender Vardari: Yes. Except for the first few days, in the first few days, they usually avoided it. During the first days, there were intensive interrogations, excessive violence, violence with visible results on the body, and they avoided giving the prisoner the right to have family visits. Then, gradually, we started to have family visits every 15 days while we were here in Kosovo.

Then in other prisons, it changed, we had visits once a month. But here, it was every 15 days. I don't remember a visit that lasted five minutes, most of my visits lasted less than five minutes. Even though we didn't have the right to wear a watch, we estimated that the visits lasted no more than two or three minutes. Just enough for the family to see us and for us to see them.

With the bars that, as part of these interviews, I would suggest you visit the Prison of Pristina and see the visitor area. The family could see their relatives only as much as they could through those bars. The holes in the bars are so small that you could only identify that it's your relative, your son, sister, brother, or whoever it was. You could just see that it was him or her. But other details were impossible to see through those tiny holes. They were very small.

Anita Susuri: Who visited you?

Skender Vardari: At that time, my parents were still alive, and my sisters who were here because there remains an unexplained small story about my family. When we returned to Kosovo, I had two sisters who were married and stayed in Istanbul. In the meantime, another younger sister of mine got married there in Istanbul. So, I had three sisters there. Those two sisters, while I was serving my sentence, didn't know for many years that I was in prison. My parents and the rest of my family kept it a secret to avoid worrying my sisters in Turkey.

So here, my parents and my two sisters who lived here visited me, and the three sisters who lived here initially. Later, one sister got married there. After that, I was transferred to the Prison of Mitrovica. The conditions in Mitrovica were the same. After Mitrovica, I was transferred to the Prison of Prokuplje. In the Prison of Prokuplje, we faced significant challenges. There, under the difficult conditions of the prison environment, cells, hygiene, and so on. We had very big problems, I mean, the possibilities were very limited under tough conditions.

There, the suffering of the sentence became more difficult in other aspects as well. Here, under these circumstances, at least our families were allowed to bring us books and various literature. There, we were prohibited from reading literature in the Albanian language, imagine that, in the same country. In Prokuplje, we couldn't read literature in Albanian, they didn't allow it. They refused several times, and we didn't receive any. Then we started to read in Serbian.

So, when I returned to Kosovo as a child, I didn't know Albanian, it turned out that I learned my mother tongue in Kosovo. Then, in prison I started learning Serbo-Croatian, specifically Serbian. We used to call it Serbo-Croatian, but it was Serbian. I learned the Serbian language in Prokuplje by reading whatever literature we could find in the prison library. The prison had its own library, and we utilized that. Due to the inability to read in Albanian.

Anita Susuri: And the people you were with, for example, in the cell or in prison, were they also Albanians? Were they there for the same charges? I mean, the same sentence.

Skender Vardari: Due to the large number of Albanian political prisoners in all the prisons of Yugoslavia, we had contact with each other at different times. We had contact with Albanian political prisoners we didn't know before. Some were sentenced with one organization, others with another.

Then, the prison brought us together, even though we didn't know each other before. However, alongside them, we always served our sentences with ordinary prisoners.

With ordinary prisoners, not only Albanians but also Serbs and Montenegrins. They were also in prison together with us, I mean, in the same environments. Where we were, they were too. They made it a point for us to be together with them. Deliberately, they made it a point for us to be together with them because from time to time, various conflicts would arise, and they used them for spying during the serving of sentences...

Anita Susuri: And ordinary prisoners, meaning thieves, murderers?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes, all of them. Murderers, rapists, thieves, everything. And usually, they were Serbian and Montenegrin prisoners, but we had them here too, though fewer. Here, the concentration was more on political prisoners in Pristina and Mitrovica. Specifically, in the prisons of Kosovo, there were mostly political prisoners.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you, when these transfers from one prison to another happened, were you warned in advance? Did you have any kind of...

Skender Vardari: No, not a single warning, never once. Only at the last moment, they opened the cell door and told you to get ready in five minutes because you had nothing to prepare, you had everything in a small bag since you couldn't keep many clothes with you. You had to change clothes during family visits because we didn't have the space or the environment in the cells to keep many spare clothes, just a few, as much as we were able to. We were always transferred without warning, every time we were transferred from one prison to another.

Under very high security measures, bound by those, by chains, and imprisoned with other prisoners. Besides having your own hands tied, you were also tied to another prisoner, which further restricted your movement and other possibilities. They used these methods constantly. It became a routine for us, it seemed like it was normal. When you spend all those years in prisons, such a transfer seems like it's normal.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested in the violence that occurred, you said at the beginning that it was much more intense, but did it continue throughout the entire imprisonment? For example, there in Prokuplje.

Skender Vardari: Yes, it continued sporadically because wherever we went, there were regulations within the prison environment that prisoners had to comply with. When the door opened and the supervisor came, you were required to stand in line in a certain prison. In another prison, here in

Pristina for example, when you were sitting, you had to stand up and stay at attention. In another prison, you stood in line one by one, like soldiers, also in the attention position.

In another prison, when you heard the cell door keys turning, you were required to turn your back, be at attention, and completely turn your back, so you didn't see who was coming in, and to be prepared. They saw your back, you had to be ready and answer any questions they asked, like who you are, presenting yourself in any way necessary. Not directly looking them in the eye, but with your back turned. These similar regulations varied from prison to prison.

Then, to make prison life harder, they also took different actions with solitary confinement, punishments with solitary confinement, I mean. They punished people for nothing by sending them to solitary confinement. Besides those in cells where we were three or four people, sometimes they also punished [inmates] with solitary confinement. I don't know exactly, but I might have spent around three months or so in solitary. But I don't know exactly because it happened sporadically, and we didn't keep records. Because when we entered prison, I personally believed it was unlikely that one could come out of prison alive. The chances were higher that we would die in prison. It's as if you don't know, it's indescribable!

But to come out after six years, to endure that suffering in prison and after six years I come out, I never imagined it, I never imagined it. With this mindset, we didn't count how long we stayed in solitary, how long we stayed with others. There are many things that I don't [remember]... I meet now, after the war, for example, with some friends with whom we suffered the sentence together. One of them tells me about an experience we shared, something we both went through, and it seems to me as if it didn't happen to me, as if I didn't experience it but he did with someone else. I had forgotten that story, that experience we shared, I had forgotten. Another story that I was explaining to him seemed like he hadn't experienced it. So, we haven't memorized everything we went through very well.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: Did you have visits while you were in Prokuplje?

Skender Vardari: Yes, we had visits there...

Anita Susuri: Once a month, you said.

Skender Vardari: Most likely, it was once a month in Prokuplje, once a month I think. Yes, yes, once a month. I'm not very sure if it was [every] 15 days or once a month in Prokuplje. In Niš, it was once a month. So, that was the final period of serving my sentence, in Niš. And it has stayed in my memory

that it should've been once a month. And here, I am sure that in Pristina and in Mitrovica it was once every 15 days.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember how many years you spent in Niš?

Skender Vardari: In Niš, I was there, personally, the last few months, eight or nine months, I'm not very sure. Approximately, around eight or nine months. Here, for a few months until I had six months left, they kept me in isolation. It was a special isolation unit. There also... at that time we went to Niš until they took our records, gathered information about us. Each prisoner who was transferred from one prison to another was monitored, along with the documents. Later, we found out that the documents were also being sent with the transferred prisoners. So, those procedures we went through took about two or three months.

In the last six months, they also placed me in another unit, I mean, outside of isolation for the last six months of serving my sentence. But first, I need to go back to Prokuplje. In Prokuplje, we had other challenges. In... given the circumstances we had there, during the serving of our sentence, it became unbearable at some point, because we were making requests from time to time to the competent and responsible people of that prison to allow us literature, to grant us other conditions. We requested longer walks, I mean, for health reasons, we needed longer walks and more movement to maintain our health.

Anita Susuri: How long were your walks?

Skender Vardari: Even the walks depended entirely on those guards. From five minutes to ten minutes. The movements during the walks were very limited. After many of our requests, regarding literature which was denied and other conditions, we went on a hunger strike. All the political prisoners in Prokuplje prison agreed, although we were separated in different cells, we found ways and methods to communicate with each other. We used hidden letters through chimneys and wherever we could. We organized ourselves within the prison to start the strike. We went on a hunger strike.

After a few days, I don't know exactly which day it was when the hunger strike started, and the sound logic of life is starting to fade, the thinking isn't very clear. I experienced it myself, some others even more, but for 11 days we didn't eat anything at all.

Anita Susuri: 11 days!

Skender Vardari: Yes. Probably on the tenth or ninth day, I don't remember, but a day before we were temporarily transferred from Prokuplje, they took us for a medical check-up. The disorders started after the third or fourth day for everyone, depending on their body's condition. The disorders began as

a result of the hunger strike. They checked us. They laid me down on a table and tied my hands and feet to give me artificial nutrition due to my poor health condition. The doctor started looking for veins in my arms but couldn't find them. The veins were not visible, very thin. He saw and gestured to the guard that he couldn't find my veins to give the artificial nutrition. I understood without him speaking... from his gestures.

We were so convinced that either they would provide the conditions we had demanded from the prison directorate or we would die. I told the doctor, with a guard present, together, "As Albanians, when we don't want to take food, even our veins don't accept it," I said this with full conviction. I said that, whether I would be saved, I wasn't very sure I could control my body not to take the artificial nutrition. However, I was so convinced that when I don't want to, you won't be able to give me food, even artificially. Anyway, they just returned me to the cell.

The next day probably, they removed me and three or four other people, putting us together. They took us from the Prison of Prokuplje and sent us to the Prison of Niš. However, the rest of our comrades who had started the strike with us were left there. They continued the strike. They moved a section of us, a number of comrades, with the aim of breaking us. Because we had agreed among ourselves that wherever they sent us, whatever conditions were there, we would not know what conditions other prisons had. We knew about the prisons where we had served our sentences up to that point, but we had no information about other places because we were very isolated.

We agreed that when they moved us from here, transferring us from the Prison of Prokuplje to wherever they sent us, we would start taking food. And we took food there, but we also faced challenges in Niš. I won't go back to that for now, only to Prokuplje because those we left there continued the strike. They moved us to Niš.

In Niš, after 11 days of the strike, they beat us as part of their welcoming method for prisoners. It was a type of hazing. I hadn't heard the term "hazing" at that time. Hazing was a method of applying violence that had been named "hazing" early on, right after the Second World War when Yugoslavia was formed and had used this method. But I didn't know this. I learned about it (laughs) when I had to undergo hazing, that's when I learned what hazing was...

Anita Susuri: So, that welcome with beatings is hazing.

Skender Vardari: Yes, the welcome with beatings in a corridor possibly, with a line of guards on both sides, where you have to pass through the middle, and they beat you with sticks, whatever they have in their hands, and with kicks until you make it through. If you fall, they wait until you get up. If you're fine, they keep beating you until you pass through. This was...

Anita Susuri: And those who continued the strike in Prokuplje, do you know what happened to them?

Skender Vardari: Yes, after the thirteenth day, we got the information once they brought us back. They returned us after three days from Niš. When we took the bread, we stayed there for three days, got beaten, and then they returned us to the Prison of Prokuplje again. When we went back to the Prison of Prokuplje, the comrades who had stayed there had decided to start taking food. Because after the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth days, there is no longer any life assurance, the assurance of life drops to a minimum. Deaths can start occurring one after another after the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth days.

Some people have managed to go without food for around 20-27 days, it's known. But at the moment, I can't remember some international revolutionaries by name, but we knew that around 27-28 days they hadn't taken food and survived. Some have died after 30 days. When we returned, they had started taking food, and we were glad that they had taken the food. Because we felt sorry for them, as they were our comrades, fellow sufferers, and shared the same ideals.

But it didn't take long, meaning that hunger strike made it possible for us to be completely transferred from the Prison of Prokuplje to the Prison of Niš. And in the Prison of Niš, I had better conditions for the last six months. Out of six years in prison, they saw it reasonable that for the last six months, I wouldn't escape, wouldn't pose any problem, and could be released, probably. I suppose, because I don't have exact information, but I assume it was so that I wouldn't be among those still serving long sentences.

Those last six months I spent in better physical conditions. Because that pavilion, that sector where we were, included everyone, meaning both Serbian and Albanian prisoners. But those with shorter sentences. While the others, who had longer sentences, were in more restricted conditions, where I was before. So, I would conclude by saying that I have many experiences, but perhaps I can't recount them all, maybe it would take days, maybe even months to tell everything. That's how my suffering in prison ended.

I was released from the Prison of Niš, and as *bac*¹² Adem said, "Into the larger prison of Kosovo." We continued living, and throughout this period, my family lived as foreign citizens. I forgot to emphasize at the beginning, during all this time, we lived in Yugoslavia as Turkish citizens. Even though we had applied for Yugoslav citizenship, it was not granted to us, it was denied, but they didn't expel us either, they kept us in that status.

When I was released from prison... I was released from prison in '88. In '93, because after prison I had started working in the market, specifically in the fruit and vegetable market in Pristina, since my father

¹² In Albanian culture, *bac* is an informal term used to affectionately address an older man, akin to "uncle" or "old man" in English, conveying respect and familiarity. It can also be used for individuals who are respected or looked up to, often in a mentorship or advisory role, regardless of age, to convey a sense of reverence or admiration.

worked there and I went to help him. They took me from the market in '93, at that time, the so-called informative conversations were well known. Different activists for various issues, for reasons known only to them, would be taken for these informative conversations. This was similar to the investigations we had before sentencing. They started the investigations there, "What are you doing? What are you working on? Who are you in contact with? Who are your friends? Are you involved in any activities? If so, with whom?" and so on, with questions of various kinds.

I defended myself by saying, "I am a person who has been against Yugoslavia, I served my sentence. Now I am not involved in any activities, I am just focusing on my work. I am working, making a living for my family, nothing else." But this went on for several months, as they said, "Okay, go home today. Come next Monday." When they questioned me the following Monday, they kept me for an hour or two and then said, "Come back in ten days on this date." I would go again, and again they would say, "Come next week, come in ten days, come in 12 days." So, I started to take it as psychological pressure, and my fear grew because their aim was to deport me, to expel me from Kosovo as a foreign citizen. However, they didn't say this in the beginning.

At some point, they started asking for cooperation, for me to be their collaborator, saying, "Since you are not involved in any activities," meaning you're not against the state, "you're not involved, you're not against the state. Then come with us, don't stay there." But I tried to play a 'push and pull' strategy, not wanting it to come to the conclusion I feared, that they would expel me from here. When I saw it was impossible, I decided and said, "Look, this is the last time you are calling me. You can call me again, but I will not come anymore. You can take me by force, but I will no longer come to you willingly." "Why? What bothers you about talking to us?" "Well, it bothers me because you are offering cooperation with you. You should know that until now I have declared that I am not doing anything against Yugoslavia since I got out of prison, but this doesn't mean that I am your collaborator. You should know that we are on opposite sides, regardless of whether I am actively doing anything or not. I am not actively involved, but we are on opposite sides."

When I said this, he responded, "You shouldn't have wasted our time until now," he said, "it's very good that you are so honest. Now," he said, "wait here." He left me in the office for about five minutes. He went outside. Two policemen came, handcuffed me, and took me to a woman judge, also Albanian. This was in '93. She sentenced me to ten days in prison, with the reasoning that I was a foreign citizen living in Yugoslavia without informing the relevant authorities. A trivial reason. They took me back to the Prison of Pristina, to the section for misdemeanors because at that time, the Prison of Pristina... It had a separate section for misdemeanors and another for those under investigation.

I stayed there for ten days. When the time came for my release, they didn't release me in the morning, and I knew that if it reached noon, they would take some other measure. The next measure, which I had always seen as the "sword of Damocles" hanging over my head, was that, being a foreign citizen,

one day they would deport me. And that day came. After ten days in prison, they handcuffed me again. They had informed my family, specifically my father, that they would deport me to Turkey.

My father, afraid that they might kill me on the way, turned to my wife. Meanwhile, my wife and I had a son and a daughter. He said, “Fetije,” which is her name. “Fetije, would you dare, my daughter, to take the children and join Skender and go together to Turkey, make the journey together?” She said, “Yes, yes, I will go. Whatever happens to us, let it happen together.” So, they were afraid they would eliminate me somewhere along the way. But my wife and the two children joined me.

On the way, two Serbian UDB agents, talking among themselves and with me, said, “How do you like these mountains?” The route was from Pristina to Niš, and then they were to take me towards Bulgaria, to the border at Dimitrovgrad, I think. “Take a good look at these mountains,” they said, “it’s not very far, and we have a more suitable place that no one knows about. And it’s good that you brought your wife and children with you,” they didn’t understand Serbian, “so we can liquidate you together.” Under this pressure, under these threats, they took me to the border.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that they might liquidate me there with my whole family. But I was very scared because I was... I was unprepared for my wife and children to join me. I kept wondering how it happened that my wife came with me, why? I couldn’t ask in front of them, because who knows what answer I might get, which I perhaps wouldn’t want the UDB agents to hear. They transferred me there to Turkey. Well, not all the way to Turkey, but to the border.

With these dilemmas, this pressure, and this fear, I openly admit it without hesitation because I was truly afraid. And a person is afraid when they are responsible for the lives of their children and spouse. They expelled me in these circumstances. Then, on the Bulgarian side, we waited for several hours for a passenger bus heading to Istanbul, and the bus driver took us. We didn’t even have money for the ticket. He took us without charge and brought us to Istanbul. There, I went to my sisters and continued living in Turkey from ‘93 until after the war.

Also, I can freely say that I was in total isolation there too because, even in Turkey before the war, we didn’t have the proper support from the Turkish state. Only later, when the war in Kosovo began, did the Turkish state take a liberal stance. Then they took a position on our side, first liberal and then supportive. After that, they helped us. During that time, I was again a foreigner in Turkey. I was a foreigner in the place where I was born because, as a child, I grew up here, I formed my identity here. From being a Turkish child, I had developed a character with an Albanian national identity, making the Turkish identity foreign to me. With such a stance, I went to Turkey, having been expelled.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask how you felt at that moment when you crossed the border and realized you were safe?

Skender Vardari: I experienced the border crossing very harshly, the deportation was very hard for me. It was very hard because I had this fear even before. We were so made, so formed, at least for myself, that I couldn't imagine a life outside Kosovo. I was connected by my activities and the conviction of my Albanian identity that I could assert, regardless of the circumstances we lived under here. I couldn't imagine life abroad.

And when they expelled me, I experienced it even harder than prison, psychologically, it was much worse. I didn't feel it as a sense of my own salvation, of being saved from death or something like that. It's true that I felt joy for my children and my wife that they were safe. But I didn't consider myself saved because they expelled me, on the contrary, I considered myself more punished than [by] the sentences I served in prison, and I say this with complete sincerity.

Part Five

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back, because at the beginning when you talked about the prison, you said that you were sentenced to eight years but served six.

Skender Vardari: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Did they reduce your sentence or what happened?

Skender Vardari: Yes, the first instance court sentenced me to eight years with the right to appeal, meaning everyone who was sentenced had the right to make an appeal. However, I did not use the right to appeal, I didn't make any appeal, neither in writing nor orally, never. Later on, I understood that it is a legal right, despite the great injustices. Nonetheless, it is a right that a person can use. But this doesn't mean it would necessarily work.

But at that time, as a young man, I neither considered it a right nor thought that an appeal could be a valid option. That's why I never made an appeal. However, my sentence was reduced without me knowing the reason or why they lowered it. But it wasn't because I made an appeal or was subjected to any amnesty or anything like that. It wasn't an amnesty. I served my sentence. The higher court decided to sentence me to six years, and I served all six of them.

In fact, two days more than six years. Because I was arrested on March 10 when they caught me in action, and my prison term was counted from March 12, when the investigations began. So, I served those two extra days. We often joked with friends and family, and I would say, "I won't forgive them for those extra days they kept me." Actually, I don't forgive them for those six years either (laughs), but that's how it was, from eight years to six years.

Anita Susuri: I also wanted to ask, what was the day when you were released from prison like? And how did you, let's say, how did you get back home?

Skender Vardari: Yes, they came with two cars. They didn't wait. Most of my family members and relatives came there to pick me up, experiencing the joy that my family felt, they came with two full cars. They came there, waited for me, and I returned home with them. In the family, I knew it was a great joy for them and the circle of people I had. However, I was released from prison at a very difficult time that is deeply ingrained in my memory. Truly, there is a strong basis for *bac* Adem's saying, "I'm coming out from the small prison into the big prison." At that time, in 1988, you understand how Kosovo was? How old were you?

Anita Susuri: We weren't yet...

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: I was born in '91.

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes. It truly was a prison with many regulations, Kosovo itself, the Albanian lands. And we had a tradition that when someone was released from prison, they would visit their family and relatives. I had relatives who didn't dare to come visit me at that time. Secretly, a daughter from our family, who was married elsewhere, sent word and greetings through her brother. She said, "Send my greetings to Skender, I don't dare to come see him." A married woman didn't dare to come see me, a relative of ours. The only reason was that her husband was a policeman in uniform at that time. I gave just one example, but there are many others I know of. However, I'm sure there are many more that I don't know, who didn't come to visit me for the same reason of fear, afraid that there would be consequences even for visiting me.

Anita Susuri: I also wanted to ask how you met your wife? Was it a problem that you were a former prisoner?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes. When I... The meeting with my wife started very early. While I was still in high school. We met as teenagers. We continued to be fond of one another. Later, we got to know each other better, started a period of our lives as partners, and when I was imprisoned, we were just partners. Now, here I want to open a special chapter, not just because she is my wife, but because it is a characteristic worth highlighting, in my opinion.

I'll go back to when I was imprisoned, we were separated as partners. During the time I served my sentence, many years passed without us seeing each other. We corresponded occasionally through letters. For a long time, even though I loved her very much, it kept going around in my mind to give up.

Not for my sake, but for hers, so that she wouldn't have consequences [from this] in her life. I saw it as a solution, an alternative, to separate so that she wouldn't suffer any consequences.

I tried to maintain this stance even in the letters I wrote to her. But she persistently refused to give up. Not only did she not give up. Through her letters, she showed me that she wouldn't give up. Then, we got engaged while I was in prison and she was outside. My family arranged an engagement for me with her, creating a festive atmosphere with music at home and a party...

Anita Susuri: A celebration.

Skender Vardari: A celebration for our engagement, just within the family circle. Later, even that was not enough. For my wife, it wasn't enough to just be my fiancée. She insisted that we get married...

Anita Susuri: While you were in prison?

Skender Vardari: We couldn't get married during my imprisonment. Neither she could arrange it, nor could I from prison. I considered it as one of the ways the authorities tried to put more pressure on us, to make both me and my wife suffer more. I dismissed it just to show the authorities that it didn't matter, and even if we weren't officially married, we were still spouses. That's how we behaved, and that's how we corresponded through letters.

This meant that for my wife, the situation was not satisfactory because if you weren't officially married, you didn't have the right to visit. We didn't see each other during my imprisonment, whether as partners or later as fiancés. In the end, she took another step further, not because she was forced, but because she chose to. Meanwhile, my sisters got married, leaving only my mother, father, and a younger sister at home. My wife left her own family and continued to live as if she were my wife...

Anita Susuri: As the daughter-in-law of the house.

Skender Vardari: As the daughter-in-law of the house, but without me being there. I was serving my sentence. When I was released from prison, I found my wife at home.

Anita Susuri: Was there another celebration or something on the day you were released from prison? A party?

Skender Vardari: Yes, yes, like a celebration. But a modest celebration, a limited celebration, given the circumstances. We, my wife and I, got married and engaged without having a wedding. I didn't have a wedding. We had a gathering under the very difficult circumstances of 1988, and it was an extremely modest celebration. With a very limited number of family members.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that when you went to Turkey, you faced difficulties there as well. How was life for you there? What did you do? How did you manage?

Skender Vardari: When I was expelled from Yugoslavia, we arrived before dawn, in front of the doors of the building where one of my sisters lived. In that darkness, from the dark of night until dawn, when the call to prayer began from all the mosques in Istanbul, in the absolute quiet of the morning, it felt to me as if I had been thrown into a bottomless well with no way back. That's the feeling I had. That's how I started my life in Istanbul.

I had forgotten the Turkish language in the meantime, I didn't know it well. And life began, I stayed with my sisters continuously. We had our house here, my parents were here. Meanwhile, my parents, who were old and had many health problems, were here. I changed several jobs, most of them physical [labor]. Except for this last one, I found a way to get a license there, a driving license to become a truck driver. With the truck, as a transporter, I started living in Turkey, in Istanbul until after the war.

Meanwhile, in the '90s, when you were born, the circumstances here were very difficult, mostly economically. Then the economic crisis in Kosovo began to worsen significantly. During the time when many people left the country, even Albanians who were citizens of Yugoslavia also left. In other words, life in Kosovo had no prospects at all. In those circumstances, my parents had to sell the house we had in Pristina.

We sold it for a very low price and my parents came to Istanbul until after the war. At the first moment, right after the war, I left everything there and was one of the first to come to Kosovo, and to get goosebumps seeing Kosovo, I sat down to kiss the ground of Kosovo (cries).

Anita Susuri: After the war, when you returned to Kosovo, how did you find Kosovo and how did you start your life?

Skender Vardari: After the war, at the first opportunity that was given to me, I immediately returned, being very impatient. Leaving behind some obligations and opportunities there where I had created some initial stability, I would say. Because even there, settling down and starting a life with a family has its difficulties. It's not like those who went to the West because the West has provided social support from the countries that accepted them, and they started without having many social problems. I didn't have these in Turkey. In Turkey, I experienced these myself, along with my sisters who were there, and I was a burden on them as well, among other things.

However, this ended, and we took the road back to Kosovo. We came with the impatience that both I and my wife and children had. We also raised our children in that way, which I forgot to mention, as this part might be important. During the time I lived in Turkey, I spent six years in Istanbul before the

war. During those six years, the children grew up, the first two, and the third was born there in Istanbul. The first two were enrolled in school, also in the Turkish language. Just as I had experienced, with the difference that they knew Albanian because we only spoke Albanian at home. However, the children spoke Turkish at school.

The children completed three grades of primary school in Turkish there. After the war, then we were returning here with the children. With very strong emotions. At the border entry, getting out of the car because we came by car, kissing the ground of Kosovo. My wife was trying to calm me down, telling me to hold on, from then on we were in Kosovo, and so on. We entered. An indescribable joy. But everywhere we went, from the beginning to the end, entire villages were burned down.

On one hand, you had an indescribable feeling of all that damage that was done. On the other hand, even though everything was so burned, it didn't affect you much because it was yours. I can't explain that feeling, both the good and the bad together, even if I talked about it all day. You see the terrible burned areas, entire villages, all the way from Hani i Elezit to Pristina, heading towards Pristina. On the other hand, you feel joy. Along the way, armored vehicles were moving, people were coming and going.

We came to Kosovo. We first visited our relatives, as we had many relatives in Kosovo, in Pristina, friends, acquaintances, everyone I had. And we started thinking about how we would start our life. Before the war, throughout my life, I had that profession inherited from my father as a fruit and vegetable trader in the Pristina market. I decided to start from there. I considered politics a finished matter for myself. When I came to Kosovo, I thought I would only engage in trade in my country. From now on, the remaining part should be continued by volunteers who deal with politics, while I almost entirely stopped engaging in politics myself.

As I said, I decided not to get involved in politics, and in fact, my way of life after the war has been like that. I can freely say that more than 90 percent of the time, I didn't care. I had full confidence that after the war, the right people would be those who remained, those who continued our ideal even during the war. Because I felt an emptiness in myself for not having participated in the war. The fact is, I didn't take part in the war. And I saw that there were many people who had participated in the war and were active in politics, and I gave credit to all of them, especially this wing of the war participants. I believed that they, together with others, with other politicians, would make the right politics even in a free Kosovo.

Therefore, it was time for me not to get involved in politics, but to return to the everyday life of trading that I had inherited from my father. With this mindset, this logic, this mentality, I started my life in Kosovo. With many difficulties, of course. Power outages, lack of food, distribution of aid, rebuilding the houses of those whose homes were burned down. Meanwhile, I started again as a tenant in other

people's houses. That's how I began my life. For about ten years, I practiced my profession as a fruit and vegetable trader.

After ten years, I left my job and was unemployed for several years. Not just a few years, but more than ten years. In this... for the past year and a half or so, I have been here in the association. The friends in the association's board saw it fit to call me and a colleague of mine. To take on the construction of this archive of Kosovo, the archive of the Association of Political Prisoners of Kosovo, with a minimal salary. I am satisfied with the work I do, even with that minimal salary, I am satisfied. And often, when various propaganda spreads about leaving Kosovo due to the lack of prospects, I jokingly tell my family, "Go ahead, everyone! I'll be the last one to keep the light on, the last one!" (cries).

Anita Susuri: Mr. Skender, if you don't have anything else to add, I would like to thank you very much for the interview and for your time.

Skender Vardari: I thank you for several reasons. The first reason is that you gave me the opportunity for the first time in my life to express myself in the first person, this is the main reason, as I have never spoken in the first person in my life before. I also thank you for your patience and for being part of the younger generation, taking on the commitment to document a period of the life of a generation that tried to achieve something in very difficult times. In a time when the younger generation thinks about themselves and has many problems of their own, you have the time and interest for a glorious period for the Albanian people in Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: Thank you once again.

Skender Vardari: Thank you very much.