

INTERVIEW WITH ZYRAFETE BERISHA - LUSHAJ

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Duration: 75 minutes

Present:

1. Zyrafete Berisha - Lushaj (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: Mrs. Zyrafete, if you could introduce yourself, and tell us about your biography a bit. And then, your place of birth, date of birth.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Thank you. Firstly, I want to thank you for inviting me. Thank you for choosing my name among many other special names. Different stories, different biographies. I happily came today and I will try [to say] everything I thought about on my way here, to not lose them.

I am Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj. My maiden name is Berisha. I was born in the Pozharë village, a village of the Deçan Municipality. It's not that far away. [I was born] into a big family, a family that had a tradition of higher education. And myself, as a village girl, had the luck to get an education, it was the '70s. And everything I set my mind to is thanks to my parents who chose for me to get an education among the very few girls at that time who achieved a higher education.

[I finished] elementary school in the village for then to continue on to the Medical High School, in the Department of Pharmacy in the beautiful city of Prizren. I was there for four years. After four years in Prizren there were no [option to continue] pharmaceutical studies at that time in Kosovo, it was only the high school in Prizren. All Albanians and those who liked pharmacy came together there. But, the Pharmacy High School stopped there.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Zyrafete, if you could talk to us about your childhood, your earliest memories.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Thank you. I mentioned earlier that I was the youngest girl in the family and maybe that meant that I got an education at that time. I don't know! A small village.

Anita Susuri: How many children were in the family?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: There were four boys, three girls. I was the youngest child and I had three brothers who studied at that time and thanks to them and my parents for supporting me and who did everything they could for me to continue my education. After elementary school, eight years, my

parents decided for me to continue [studying] pharmacy in the beautiful city of Prizren. I thank them for choosing the most beautiful city for me to finish pharmacy [studies].

Anita Susuri: I wanted to talk about your parents since you mention them; how do you remember them? Your father? Your mother?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: My two parents knew its value at the time, the value of education, they did everything they could. They were hard workers, my mother did more handiwork, besides her engagement with the children and family engagements. My father, as well, worked in the village, with agriculture, in construction in order to gather the means to educate us. It was three boys and me, we were four children for whom he had to pay...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember your house as a child and did you live collectively at the time?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We lived collectively, a big family. I remember since then me and my [paternal] uncle, my uncles were educated and that was an advantage for me. There were people in the family who even had a PhD, from my family. So, it was a, a family who loved higher education, it wasn't enough [to] only [finish] elementary school, high school, but also higher education.

Anita Susuri: Did they get an education somewhere, I mean, for some time in Yugoslavia, were they educated somewhere abroad, outside...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, there were ones [who studied] abroad too. Yes, there were ones abroad too. Of course everyone helped each other financially. My uncle finished his PhD in the Soviet Union, there were...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember any of the stories about how he got there?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: In... of course with great effort and great sacrifice because he needed a lot of money, but he managed to do it. And we are very proud of my brothers too, because as I said, I was born after three boys and each of them got an education at that time. Each of them, starting law, economics, chemistry, biology. So, it wasn't that difficult to me, it wasn't, for me to continue in their footsteps.

Anita Susuri: I know that later on you got engaged in some, related to the National Liberation issue, but I am interested to know if that happened beforehand in your family?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Of course, because I, of course I was inspired by somebody as a young girl. I was inspired by my family. That was the time when we didn't agree with the Serbian regime and seeing my family, it was a big family, seeing and reading and I decided that in '82, '81 [when] I was in Prizren, '82 when it was the anniversary of the demonstrations, the Students' Movement, and that's when I started being an activist and do maybe smaller things. There was effort and great desire to become part of the Students' Movement. Back then...

Anita Susuri: Before continuing there I want to go back for a bit to your decision...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Of course.

Anita Susuri: If you could tell us a bit more in relation to your family and who specifically was engaged, in what matters and did they have issues with the powers back then, because there were people who were persecuted at that time. So, to talk about that.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Of course they had problems with the power, not only my family, but every family who disobeyed and violated the system back then had problems. They were fired from their jobs, they were politically persecuted and lived a difficult life, an underground life.

Anita Susuri: Did they have...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: There were prisoners, bloody, tortured, not only my family but just like the others at that time. There were tortures in my family as well, there were many of them.

Anita Susuri: Who was, for example, or do you remember any stories?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I don't remember the stories because I was a little younger in the family. I don't remember many stories, but I know that they ripped the Serbian flag, they demanded the Kosovo Republic, they came up with different slogans at the time. They basically wanted a republic, they made a revolution, they attempted a revolution. And that, of course, was seen by the government, which punished the whole family, in a chain way. If one member of the family was brought to their attention, the whole family experienced consequences because it was a chain.

Anita Susuri: You told us about your mother and that she worked and had a desire to do handiwork, but did that kind of work bring profit or was it only a hobby for her?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: It was work for profit, work for profit because like all mothers at the time the clothing had to be insured through handiwork. Maybe it was until the '70s. So, as a sign of thank you for my mother and all mothers at that time, I decided and wrote a book which you will also get. In order to respect all Albanian mothers at the time, I tried [to ensure] that the tradition and customs of the time would not be forgotten, [but to be] enliven. Taking into consideration that the youth now [engage] more through social media. Let the customs of that time be documented, there's traditions and stories, interesting stories. I did that for my love of mothers and women of that time.

Anita Susuri: You told me that, the place you lived, where you were born, you went to Prizren to continue high school. Where did the desire to continue pharmacy come from? Did somebody advise you, did you have a desire, or?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Thank you for the question. I was young when I finished elementary school. It was my father, and brothers who decided for me to go to Prizren. If you wanted to get an education, Prizren is a beautiful city and I liked pharmacy as a profession. I finished four years there, so I lived in Prizren for four years. However, after I finished high school I decided to study, high school wasn't enough. Since there was no pharmacy, I chose Literature and Language in the capital city, in Pristina.

Anita Susuri: When you went to Prizren, was it the first time you went outside of your hometown, or?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: It was the first time, as a village girl it was the first time (smiles). It's the memory of how big the city was to me at the time...

Anita Susuri: What was Prizren like at that time?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Prizren at the time was a beautiful city, but the language, I couldn't understand it more or less because in Prizren there are many people who...

Anita Susuri: Who speak foreign languages.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Who speak foreign languages, there are people from villages, the language was a little difficult. But, I learned it and started to like it. Then I was there as a young girl for four years there, I had friends, it was a beautiful part of my life I will never forget.

Anita Susuri: Did you rent, or?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: In the dormitory. It was the dormitory at the Farmakos [Company], it was Farmakos at the time, a small dormitory there. We became friendly with many girls there and we lived beautifully. My brother was a student in Prizren at the time. He studied physics, so it was easier for me to travel with my brother, and then come back, to go back to my parents and family every two weeks. But, that was a beautiful part, it was a good life.

Anita Susuri: Did it happen, I mean, as a young girl to go out with friends, there was *çarshia*¹ or somewhere to walk around?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We didn't go out. I don't know! There was the prejudice that in order to be a good student, a good girl, to wear the uniform, the school uniform even when you go out in the city. Those were our beliefs that we had to.

Anita Susuri: What else could you set apart or any experience of that time? For example, what were the professors like? Did they advise you? Did they have...

¹ A covered market; street with shops on both sides.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: The professors were really good. We studied a lot because there was the belief that if you fail the year you have to quit school and we studied hard, out of fear that if we fail the year we wouldn't be able to continue. We were advised like that by our parents. So, high school was done too, it was a good experience, good memories, as a youngster, like all high school graduates. Like everyone, that generation left good memories.

Anita Susuri: I'm sure you mostly traveled to the village by bus. Did you go home often? Or?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We went home every two weeks, I walked from Pozharë village to Deçan, and took the bus from Deçan. Deça, Gjakova, Prizren.

Anita Susuri: How long did you have to walk?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: It was maybe a one hour walk.

Anita Susuri: Did you always have company?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, I had my brother. I had my big brother for the first two years while he was studying physics. When he finished his studies, my other brother came along for two years because he got hired in Prizren at a school, a village in the Prizren district, as a biology [teacher]. So, I got to travel with my brothers for four years, I didn't travel alone. And that was good for me, I was safer, I was recognized better.

Anita Susuri: I also wanted to ask, I'm gathering that your family was educated and more elevated regarding that aspect. But, was there any sort of irritation towards girls who got an education from the villagers, from the neighbors at the time?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I don't know, it was the '70s then, maybe not that much compared to the '50s, the ones who got an education before me could be counted on your fingers. But, in the '70s maybe there wasn't that much prejudice, there was a little prejudice but it was more the economy. The low financial conditions [were the reason] girls couldn't go and they were stuck with the dream of not getting an education their whole life.

Anita Susuri: What about when you finished school in Prizren, did you return to the village?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And then, you told me that there weren't, I mean, in your district to continue...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: There were no pharmacy studies.

Anita Susuri: How did it come down to [studying] Albanian Language?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: It came down to [studying] Albanian Language because from early on, I, even during high school I would do writings, poems. And I didn't really like continuing with general medicine because I couldn't handle needles, injections, blood. I didn't want that. I got away from medicine then, because pharmacy and medicine are not the same. Pharmacy heals with medication, medicine with needles. So, I got away from that. And my parents, in order to fulfill my wish so that I wouldn't remain with only a high school [diploma], I thank them even now when they aren't here, for fulfilling a big dream of mine. And I chose Literature and Language, I happily chose it although it was difficult to switch from Medicine to Literature, but I did it through will and desire. However, during my studies, I had a, an interesting drama started for me. I was...

Anita Susuri: Before going there I wanted to, so you went to Prizren from your village, which is a big city and that is to say more developed. But Pristina was under development in the '70s. How did you see it? Where did you live? I'm sure you lived in the dorms. What was that part like? The city? The downtown?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I came to Pristina in '82, so it was '82 in Pristina. Of course Pristina was different, but it was full of life, it was alive. The bars where we go to drink coffee now weren't here. All of us who met and what we could do, there was a promenade as we called it. Promenade where we would wander. A promenade. Students would go out there, workers, people [would go] to freshen up in the evening, more than to bars.

Anita Susuri: Did you go there too?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We did. When I went to Pristina for my studies, my youngest brother happened to be a student at the Faculty of Economics and I was there with my brother again. Yes. We enjoyed it, we enjoyed the studying part, especially the first years when I was a freshman and we enjoyed it well. As far as I remember, as a youngster, we were satisfied with a bit, something that we could buy was enough for us. Maybe we bought a beautiful thing once a year and we were very happy with what we had. We live simply, but well.

Anita Susuri: Now I am interested to know your whole story about how you joined the underground movement?² How did that go? How did you find out and tell your family, so that was the movement to do something different and go against the system. But how did it come down to that idea?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Of course that didn't happen by chance because during the whole time I was fed with patriotic feelings, starting from readings, different works, friends, from colleagues and that didn't happen by chance. So, there was the call then, in '82 there was a call, "Our nation in danger" and we as students wanted to do something. We made a revolution then when resistance was almost frozen. We began with secretive underground connections...

² Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

Anita Susuri: Did you hear about it through your friends or how? Was it talked about?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Initially that was talked about in the village. The gatherings happened in the village, the gatherings. Some would curse the Serbian government for torturing and killing the students, some would curse the students for disrupting the order and peace at the time. Some without knowing, some out of fear, some from ignorance, some out of fear. And it was chaotic, it was hazy until it became clear to them. Because at first people, that uprising happened really quickly and the Students Movement that became history for bringing the Kosovo Liberation Army after.

Anita Susuri: So, you started with this from the village and here you already started to hear that there was a movement...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, from the village, yes. There were gatherings in every village, there were consultations with the men of the village, "Why is that happening, where is this coming from..." So, that already took on great proportions, each of the people became aware. And I was, and I threw a small stone.

Anita Susuri: How did it occur that you joined the underground movement?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes it was the anniversary of the '81 demonstrations,³ at the time I was living in the dorms, at the Students Center, in the dorms and of course nothing passed without me finding out about it, without knowing. And I was prepared that something was going to happen, I was prepared because my brother was in the movement and I was prepared that something was going to happen, I know what I am saying, I knew where I was and I knew the intentions very well. I am not making myself a heroine because we were very young back then, we were students. But with as much as our heart beat back then we had the will and we had the vision for our country. We were very strong and very well informed. We knew our intention and we knew the end as well because...

Anita Susuri: So in the protests, you said you were part of the *Fortuna* Movement that...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, yes. It was a small group, secretive at the time, I managed to keep it thanks to... and my daughter's name is Fortuna, a name that I kept a secret because my entire life I wanted to bring this name to life. So, we would agree through secretive meetings in Pristina and then in Deçan, in the village. It was our group which... we would make decisions there, we would discuss what the next step was. So, there was a lot of fear and the movements of the Serbian government were big at the time, we were all under investigation. But our will, desire and the strategy we played was important.

³ 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.

Anita Susuri: What were your activities? What did you do? I know you wrote some “Kosovo Republic” slogans, if you could tell us more about that?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I am sure you are informed since you also have the book published by [Teuta Hadri](#). There are some interviews there, all of us are there because there were many of us in the underground. And Teuta tried to include them in the book and you found my name there. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to be among special people. Because at the time it wasn’t easy for a girl, it wasn’t easy for a girl to be imprisoned, it was, I’m sure it was a very hard blow for our mothers because they didn’t know how we would come out and how it would all go.

Anita Susuri: If you could talk about how you joined the underground movement? How did you find out about that movement?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Well, since you found my name in the book about the activity of underground women for the liberation of the nation, I will talk more about that. We named it *ilegale* after the liberation, so that’s when there was the Students Movement whereas we named it *ilegale* after the liberation because we were illegal. Which means, we were underground. Everything was done underground because that was the format and that was... there were discreet meetings, we were all aware of the risk posed to us. We were young and maybe we didn’t feel at risk at that time because we were young.

So, more during the demonstrations, we joined the demonstrations, all of the students, especially in front of the dorms. We were very well organized, we all protected each other, that is important to mention. We protected each other a lot. “Kosovo Republic!”, “We want freedom!” These slogans which everyone is familiar with. The slogans we chanted are also part of history. I went out with my friends in the yard of the student dorms. I also met with my brother, I met with many friends, and many colleagues. I wasn’t aware that we were being photographed, in every position because the police measures were very harsh. They were incredibly harsh. So, they tracked us down and they imprisoned me, my brother and a friend of mine. They arrested three of us at once. And that’s when the torture began, for some time under investigation until they decided our prison sentences.

It was a very, very terrible time period. because you had to be aware of what you were saying. My problem was protecting others, it wasn’t about myself. Where I was. I knew I fell into their hands but the thing was about how I could protect the others. That was very important. That was my concern. And during a harsh fight, in a bloody fight, we were arrested. And I remember a part because my brother was three years older than me, he had more experience. Of course I’ve learned from him more and during the investigations I met with my brother and he was in handcuffs, and I was in handcuffs and one of his hands were cuffed to his friend and I only remember he said, he gestured for me not to speak {describes with hand}.

That was a moment I will never forget because I was young, maybe I could’ve even talked, maybe I would’ve revealed information because a beating could do anything. But, I remember that my brother who was three years older than me was braver, he was and he said, “Don’t talk!” I only remember that

part. And that was a, that was a great gift to me in life which made me who I am today and that moment made me very strong for me not to reveal names, for me to be strong. Because maybe I could've talked because I was young and didn't... so, as a result...

Anita Susuri: He said that to you when you were arrested?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: None of my collaborators were arrested, none of them were because we *blocked* [in English] those names even though we were tortured a lot, our goal was to not mention names. And that was the best thing in the world, in life, which happened to me.

Anita Susuri: He said that to you when you were arrested, right? Your brother?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: They arrested us, we were under investigation and they were interrogating us. They separated the girls in one place, boys in another one, we weren't together anymore. We weren't together anymore, we weren't together anymore. They took my brother with the boys, I was taken with the girls. There was a group, I was there with many friends... I had more in Gjilan, I had [friends] in Suhareka. All of them were bloody. All of them looked like they did when they took them from the street, when they took them from their houses. I don't know, it was a new experience, it was something interesting. And during the time while we were under investigation there I passed through my brother from afar, and under a very narrow opportunity he managed to say to me, "Don't talk!" That was the best thing in the world that's happened to me.

Anita Susuri: You were arrested...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: On March 11.

Anita Susuri: So it was in '82...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: '83, March 11 of '83. March 11 was the anniversary of the demonstrations of 1981.

Anita Susuri: What happened beforehand? There was an organization which you...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: It was the demonstration's anniversary. It was a massive demonstration, it was a really big demonstration, there were a lot [of people] there and the other part during the investigations was terrible. It's terrible under investigation because there are great provocations. There were great provocations. There were cases when they recorded people screaming, torturing people. They recorded them and told me, "This is your father," and, "there is a wall separating you from your father and this is your father's voice." And in those moments you couldn't know if it was your father's voice or somebody else's. [They did this] so we would reveal names out of fear. Their goal was for [us] to reveal names. I wasn't interesting [to them] as Zyrafete, as a person. I was already captured, but for there to be many after me, for me to uncover names. And I could reveal these names only out of fear, out of fear from being played recordings, telling me, "We killed your entire family. We

killed your brother who was with you , we killed him. And your brother told everything about you, you're not telling about him." So, these were the most provocative questions.

Anita Susuri: So there was mental and physical torture?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: There was, both of them. But I heard the voice... I didn't know it wasn't my father until later. Until later I thought that my father was there and my family was there. And there were different kinds of torture, "When you get released even if you ever walk out of here alive, nobody will talk to you. You will be a miserable girl." I was engaged a month earlier maybe and I experienced other tortures. They would tell me, "Your fiancé will never marry you and you have stained your family," and stuff like that which were really terrible.

I thought nobody from my family was alive, I didn't know. There were other occasions when they told me, "If you talk, I can save your family," there were cases like that too. We were a group, but the good thing about it was that we were interrogated, our group of friends, whom I love a lot and I send regards to, they are my best friends and I know that they have the proper capacity to do good things. I wish them and their families well after all these years. We supported each other a lot. Even when they tortured us, they... and we didn't tell what the police and special unit did to us behind walls, we didn't tell.

And we asked, "Why do you have these bruises? Why is your hair like this?" "No, it's nothing," we didn't scare each other. That was the best thing we did. We protected each-other a lot, that is a beautiful part which I remember because we didn't think only about ourselves anymore but we also thought about our friends there. The friends I was with helped me a lot, they helped me a lot. I was a little younger than them, but I learned a lot from them. I wish them well with their families today because they... I learned a lot from them and they gave me strength. I know them by names, maybe there is a book about them, I thank them a lot.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: The Mitrovica Prison where you were was infamous, I mean it had a director who was Shemsedin [Sherafedin], he was infamous too. I am interested to know, I'm sure the conditions were difficult. What did you see? How did you experience that cell? Those cells? Their offices?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, I will talk about that. Since you have taken my name exactly from that book and that is the reason why I, why you chose me to come here. I will be very clear and I will attempt to be full of stories. Because a person lives to tell, so people live to leave footprints. And there is an expression I often say, "Live to leave footprints." And today I am very happy that you invited me to leave footprints, to be part of history. So, after many years these things are important to you. The District Prison, [of] former Tito's Mitrovica, I always call it former Tito's Mitrovica because since then they named it Tito's Mitrovica with a goal, so the intention is to know that.

Why is Mitrovica so bad today? Why is Mitrovica divided today? Mitrovica wasn't divided by accident, because back then it was called Tito's Mitrovica. It has to do with something. And that infamous prison was round shaped, that's what they told us. And when I went there I thought there would only be young women, but I saw older women there too. But, with the help of my friends who I found there when I went, with their help we got through the most difficult moments, we got through them. Not only pass, but survive them. Always helping each other, always advising each other, always giving strength and courage to each other, because otherwise you couldn't be strong because you can't do it alone within four walls.

There were cases when they left you alone, but I learned a lot there, I got a whole education. During those days I got a whole education and I saw many powerful girls who impressed me. There are interesting cases which happened during those days which I will never forget. There are interesting moments, there... I decided to publish a book in 2021, after many years I got the courage to publish a book. Because publishing a book is a little difficult, because you're afraid of how it will come out, how the readers will receive it and my colleagues and family helped me to overcome that fear.

And there is a part written in the book, a day in prison, a very special day in prison and it's important to know. Because I will maybe turn it into a kind of drama because the events in that book are very sincere, I mean they are... there is a very interesting part that I published on Facebook, it's a very interesting part when one day, the title is, *Vajzat, këpucë me taka* (Girls, shoes with heels), it's a part in the book which I titled like that myself and I will never forget. Some people forgot. I talked to my friends on Facebook after, we met after many years thanks to social media and we created our network and I found out where they were and we unpacked many memories.

That network still functions today, if you look for it you can find it. The ones of us who are still alive I mean, what we managed to do in our families and where we live. Most of them live abroad. And when I asked them they said, "Thank you so much for reminding me of that day." So, about why I titled it *Girls, shoes with heels*, not that there are heels in prison, not that we went into prison wearing heels. They took us in whatever state we were at home, on the street, at university, at the library, or with our families. But, one day a friend from Gjilan, a little bit older than me, she was a hard worker, very good, [from] Përlepnica of Gjilan. She's included in that book. She said, "Today," she said, "we will walk differently." When I talk about walking I will explain it to you as a young girl who had the right to go out for a walk and breathe some air once a day, it was a prison rule.

And with our hands tied of course, we could walk around in an improvised promenade. There were the guards, the guards up there {describes with hands} they would watch us and we were in order one after the other. She [one of the cell mates] said, "Today you will wear shoes with heels." "Why?" We asked her, "Why? What do you want to achieve? She said, "I know why." Some of us had shoes with heels, some of us. I actually remember she had really beautiful shoes. I would ask her, "Where did you buy them?" They were red with a bow on them. She said, "I bought them," she said, "with my savings." I said, "These shoes are beautiful." I don't know, I liked them. She had just bought them. They were new, she told me how she bought them with her savings because on that side, they grow tobacco a lot

in Gjilan's area there and [she bought them] with that money. "Alright," we said and we decided to each wear heels.

They brought us food before leaving, breakfast, a little bread, a little cheese, a little salt, a little sugar, a little tea. So, breakfast food was not much but we were young and it didn't bother us much and we didn't have much of an appetite because we were young. And we went for a walk, but we found out her intentions about the heels when she said, "Everyone, walk with the same rhythm." I said, "What is the rhythm?" She said, "We'll walk with a military rhythm," which means military walk, she said, "Because heels make noise, and we all walk in the same rhythm." "Okay," we said, and we went out.

We began our walk, it was a military rhythm and it was *boom* {onomatopoeia}, it was something unexpected for the guards up there. But, we got that momentum to walk and there was nobody in this world that could stop us, not that we were that brave, but we got strength and [I am talking about] that youthful strength. We weren't afraid that day and we walked with that military rhythm {describes with hands}. It seems to me like those clacks overtook the whole prison that day. Those clacks echoed very high. The guards didn't intervene until we finished. I don't know. And that was an improved round promenade, upstairs on the second floor we found out that there are men, boy prisoners. We were downstairs, girls, we found out upstairs there were men because inside four walls you had no information. But we found out there were men.

And surprisingly, we heard a voice upstairs, they said, "You are Kosovo's army. You are the Albanian people's army." Because it sounded like an army and for us that was very [significant]. I mean, imagine it was '83 and the army was mentioned, that was very early. And then somebody surprisingly dropped a letter. It was May, maybe the end of April, or May and the sun had started, the sun rays were shining like in the early spring. And they dropped a letter from upstairs, of course that was the paper from a cigarette pack because [other types of] paper weren't allowed there, maybe pencils but no paper. And they took the cigarette pack and wrote something, we didn't know what they wrote on the packaging, we only saw that the letter was dropped and it was reflecting [light] a lot.

But, what would we do? It was the second challenge where we went out and we each signaled the other when we walked around to step on the letter so the guards wouldn't see it reflecting. So we could protect whoever threw it, we had to protect him. Because we were aware that somebody threw the letter, that they threw it and they would find it and who knows how that would end up. We were thinking what we could do, how would we manage to protect him and ourselves. Each one of us walking stepped on it so it wouldn't reflect [the sun], it wouldn't shine, so it wouldn't be noticed. One of us who was shorter had the opportunity to sit and take it. One of us was shorter so she wouldn't be noticed by the guards.

So the one who took the letter would be at risk, but how would she overcome that risk? We all communicated only through our eyes and she quickly grabbed the letter and placed her hand like this {puts her hands behind} and she gave it to the one behind. So, that was our strategy. I will stop a bit at this point because it's very interesting. Nobody taught us how to behave there, I don't know, life itself and the moment taught us. Life there taught us. We didn't know how to manage there. Life there

taught us itself and we passed that letter to the other and that letter went around to the other. The guard saw it.

And when that walk ended, the round we did, the one we did every day, which was a prison rule, they stopped the one who took the letter, the guard stopped her. She said, "I don't have it." He frisked her, there was nothing. He didn't, logically [he didn't] think she gave the letter to somebody else and so we got away with that. We hid the letter by passing it to the other person and we were the happiest girls in the world when we managed to hide it. And we went back in with pale faces out of fear. We didn't fear for ourselves anymore. I don't know, we didn't have fear that day, maybe it was the walk too, but we wanted to hide the person the letter belonged to.

And we took it and read the letter and out of fear - because there was a hole in the door where they spied from, we didn't see them outside but we were scared they would see us through the hole - we took the letter and ripped it into tiny pieces and wanted to throw it, to throw it in the trash. There wasn't a trash can but there was a can where we would urinate and... that's what prison is like. She said, "If we throw it here," one of the friends said, "If we throw it here, they will notice it and they will torture all of us."

The paper wasn't that large {describes with hands}, what would we do next? "Shall each of us eat a small piece of the paper?" And we all chewed a piece of the paper so there would be no evidence. Because there was the first and last name of somebody, surprisingly he had [written] his first and last name. And we covered that paper's tracks, we covered the tracks. So, that was the story of *Girl, shoes with heels* which I will never forget. Their names are in the book more or less because in '83, the military steps happened earlier. So, which later brought the Kosovo Liberation Army. We took the courage, a youthful courage that maybe everyone had.

Anita Susuri: Were there any consequences after?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Not that day. That began and ended there that day, we didn't have consequences because we covered its tracks. Other consequences were... we were there every day, there were stories every day there. So, there was a story there, it was when, when we took a plate and there was a name and last name on the plate and we were each tortured. "Who is this name?" We knew who she was, but we wouldn't tell. "Where were you, when she wrote her name?" "I don't know who wrote it." But we were tortured. We all wanted to leave footprints in that cell, to leave a little history behind.

Somebody with something else, somebody through engravings, somebody... I remember when I entered the prison they said, "This was Shote Galica's room," Drita Kuqi's, a woman they called Shote Galica. I got in touch with her now after many years. So, they left footprints, each of them left footprints in that cell. So we left footprints there. It was an interesting part. And then, things changed when we were released from prison, things changed, we were persecuted...

Anita Susuri: How did the trial happen and how long did you stay in prison?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We were persecuted. After being released from prison we didn't have the right to work, we didn't have the right of movement, we didn't have the right to contact other people, our entire families were persecuted. I remember a pharmacy there in Deçan, a pharmacy, a drug store, better to call it a drug store. And I didn't have the right to work there because I wasn't allowed to, I was unemployed. And there was a job opening for a pharmacy technician, I didn't have the right to work. I went to Mitrovica to work [because] I was accepted there, I worked for two months until they received my info. When I say info, I will stop here because at that time, the Municipality, the place where you lived, gathered your information. If you were imprisoned or persecuted, they went to the other Municipality and you were fired. So, I continued my studies because... and life wasn't easy back then, because even the people were different [to] me as a woman. I don't know!

There was prejudice [since I dealt] with policemen, I was in prison, there was a bit of prejudice. Some people liked me, some people liked us, but others, "She's different." I mean, we were known, "But she is different," I don't know why. They would say to us, "She is different." So, life for us wasn't easy, it wasn't easy. It was... so, life continued with all of this. Our activity continued of course, we continued even stronger, we were even stronger and more organized. That made us become even stronger and I say with full responsibility that we entered prison with less awareness, we came out much more patriotic. We witnessed injustice there. Why am I saying this? Because there I saw the truth. I witnessed injustice even more than when I was younger, before going to prison.

We became stronger there, we came out of there much stronger. Trying to harm us, to make us disappear, to make us weaker, but we... they didn't know we came out stronger. They only strengthened... the people they took, and tortured, they only made the people they took to prison stronger. And our group of friends continued our activity. Of course in harder circumstances, because we had already grabbed our enemy's attention, they knew us by name. So, the activity didn't stop even when I became a mother. Not that I'm boasting but because many of my friends and I became [mothers] and we held each other's hands. I mean, I even remember when I left my little son, that's a very interesting part.

Anita Susuri: How long did you stay in prison and what was the trial like? How did you get released? And how did you experience the news of being released?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I don't know, we were there from time to time. We were released. When I was released, I remember that my father came to take me, my old father. And I remember they told me, "You will come back again," so they made these provocations. And I was a young woman with braided hair and I remember they insulted my hair. I don't know if they took it as a symbol, I was a young woman. It was a different life. We were afraid of... they watched our every move. I came back to myself for some time, I rested and came back to myself. And then I continued studies like all my friends, attempting to overcome it, to overcome it because you already had their attention.

So, we did well, thanks to, thanks to my parents' help, my friends' [help]. And then life continued and there came the family's part, I mean the balance, because family is a balance, that part of the family.

But I always had the will to do something again. I remember when, when... because then I got married in another village, I became a bride in that village and it was a little difficult even when you became a bride, you were a different bride. But, it was a bother [going to] Deçan, I remember having two challenges. The first challenge was to tell my parents-in-law I was going to Deçan, because they were really old and didn't understand why. The second challenge was walking there and the challenge of how things would go in the protest.

And I left my little son. I walked to Deçan from the village. It was the most dangerous protest, it was. We were very surrounded. I didn't know if I would come back or not. There I realized I had left a little baby and I'm not the woman I was during my studies anymore, but I left a life, a breath that I brought to life. And that was a distressing moment because I was responsible for my son. Nothing happened that day, they told us we'd all disappear that day, "We will eliminate all of you," "You are surrounded by many tanks." It was fate that nothing bad happened and I came back.

But, on my entire way back I was asking, "How will I tell my parents-in-law where I was?" how would I justify it? And a friend whom I thank a lot, said, "I," she said, "will help you. I will come with you," she said, "I will explain it to them and won't let you go alone." And she separated from all the friends and came with me. I found my father-in-law with my son waiting for me at the door. And he said, "Where were you, what took you so long?" She intervened, she tried to justify me a little. That was an uncomfortable moment, because I didn't know what to say, because it was a taboo to tell your father-in-law you participated in demonstrations. He said, "I know that you are like this, but leaving the baby," it's a little difficult because I was young, a young mother. I was a young mother and maybe they had to advise me a little because I had left my little son.

So I got away with it that day. My friend saved me and that was a very uncomfortable moment that day, when I went [to the protest] because I knew the risks. Not only me, but each of my friends was like that. And the one who took me there did extraordinary work, because I will never forget that she tried to justify me. My parents-in-law were really good, a good family. But for a bride to do that back then was a taboo. And that was an interesting part of the story which I will never forget.

Anita Susuri: How did you meet your husband?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: During my second year in university, I met him a little before going to prison, we got engaged. Of course he was a student of the Faculty of Medicine as well, I was a student too and we met in university, in the dorms.

Anita Susuri: Was he in the underground too?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: He was too. That's where we met, we got engaged after some time and then things went by, they flowed and we became a family. We created a family.

Anita Susuri: We heard that the people who were in the underground married each other?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, it happened. They call them friends who share ideals. Back then we were friends who shared ideals, which means we had the same ideal. There was an ideal back then and yes it was true that the ideal got people together, the ideal got them together. There was an ideal back then. So, after the war that ideal dampened, now it's a party. I mean, it's political parties, it divided people into parties. Back then, there was no party, there was one ideal. And of course we were friends, maybe that's where love was born, people met with each other...

Anita Susuri: So, your husband understood that...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes. They received me very well. I want to thank my husband's family as well and my parents-in-law because when somebody asked them, "Are you thinking of accepting this bride even though she was in prison?" They said, "If we loved her once, we will love her ten times more." And that made me feel really good, it made me really strong. I thank them today for receiving me so well back then, because there were cases when people were scared and... but, I left a really good family and I found a family that welcomed me well. And then...

Anita Susuri: While you were in prison, you weren't allowed visitations, right?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We did have visits, yes, there were [visits]. They came to visit, my mother, my father, my fiancé, they came to visit me. Of course we were restricted, you couldn't talk a lot, only, "Are you doing well?" I mean, only a little. But, I don't know, as a young woman, I became strong, I don't remember crying in front of them. They didn't either, my mother either, I don't know. Maybe I am weaker now, I don't know. But, good...

Anita Susuri: How long did you stay in prison?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: The visits went well. We all taught each other, "Talk like this, do this, because they immediately react." Anyway, I once slipped and said, "Mother, I am very well, I have friends, I have this," and I was punished with one less visit. Because I wanted to say I have a very good friend, that I had good friends there, stop there, I mean. That wasn't allowed. But, they got away with it. There were ones who got sick from the tortures there, there was... but thanks to God, thanks to God we got out, we overcame it and life changed afterwards, life changed because things went on, things... After prison it was a different life, that was a little more difficult too.

And then the many challenges for women, which is the family, the family's balance and you start facing other things. And then the war, and then after the war the political parties, the multiple parties system. It wasn't explained well after the war, it wasn't received well. We thought we would all be together, we thought that the multiple parties system wouldn't cause divisions, it wouldn't serve, "Divide and rule," it wouldn't serve this saying. But it would be, not a wall but a bridge. We thought it would be a connecting bridge, I mean the multiple parties system. But each chose their path, I mean now after the war, now, 20, 15, 20 years later. Now I live in Deçan, I have five children. I live with my husband and five children. Of course my family grew, I have nephews and nieces.

Anita Susuri: I want to go back a little to when you finished university.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: The university's story. Of course I didn't have the right to go to university. With the help of some good professors I managed to get to senior year, so as to finish my exams. And when I got married, I got married during that time and of course a few exams were unfinished, which I attempted [to finish] and traveled from the village from time to time. It was a great desire to graduate and I came from the village, maybe I even came with my baby. After a long time, not immediately, I managed to graduate. Because there were only a few exams left, but my professors helped me a lot, with the help of good professors I managed to graduate.

And then the other part which I, I don't know why, I don't know why luck wasn't on my side after the war. Even nowadays, maybe because of employment, if you touch upon that part and ask me what regret I have in life? I regret that because of [political] party affiliations I was fired from my job in Deçan twice. However, I made an effort to graduate because it wasn't easy to graduate, time after time, I would pass an exam and then... I managed to graduate. However, it's a painful story that because of party affiliations I was fired twice from my job in Deçan.

Anita Susuri: Recently, right?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, yes, I am unemployed. Currently I mean, I am unemployed. Although I graduated, I am an Albanian language professor, I finished it and I was certified for a leading position in education, I mean to become a principal. Although I attended trainings and got certified for the library, because it [the position] was related to the Literature and Language profession, although I completed training for health education, I connected it to pharmacy, I don't know, Deçan didn't... because of party affiliations or I don't know the reason why they... and that is my biggest regret in life that I didn't manage to utilize my studies. But, my family is healthy, that is a side where I'm fulfilled.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to talk about the '90s as well, which were quite difficult years when most people were fired from their jobs because of the system, they were...

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes.

Anita Susuri: What was that like for you?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I was a mother with children in the '90s. It was the time period when I was a mother, I had many big family responsibilities. Of course in conditions that weren't that good. And then the war happened and like all mothers, like all citizens of the Republic of Kosovo who faced many challenges, many...

Anita Susuri: Did you flee the country at the time? What happened?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: We were in the village for some time. For some time. Then I took my children and I left, I mean, I took them, how would I save them? I had four children. So, there were

clashes, tortures, the sufferings of everyone which is a specific subject I wouldn't like to talk about that much because it was a terror, terrible, an unequal war, terrible, the population flowing from village to village. But, that is part of history. There were the biggest population influxes from village to village. The big population influx, the poisonings in school. You didn't know where to go, you didn't know where your children would be safer, where your family would be safer. I am talking about mothers, I am talking about mothers having the responsibility for children.

Anita Susuri: If you could tell us about the recovery after the war? The continuation of life?

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: Yes, yes. After the war things changed and the multiparty system arrived which I think wasn't received that well, because instead of creating bridges, it created walls, more or less. I was in Deçan with five children, I was an Albanian language professor. I worked, I worked for five years at an elementary school in a village of the Municipality of Deçan. My husband was working. So... my children had already grown up. My oldest son studies stomatology, Arbër. My second one studies stomatology too. The conditions were a little more difficult because it was about educating our children. I am talking about my children, I mean the family I have now. My older sons both studied stomatology, Arbër and Milot.

And then I had three daughters, after two sons, I had three daughters. Fortuna, who is a doctor, a radiologist. And then there is Fatbardha, she studies physiotherapy and stomatology as well. She's at the end of her stomatology studies, because she finished physiotherapy. So, it's four. Meanwhile my youngest daughter studies music at the Academy of Arts. This is my family.

I always try to do something. Although it's my biggest regret that they fired me from my job due to reasons I don't even know. I worked, after five years I worked on a contract at the city's library. I worked for two years on a contract. Eight months I worked without a contract, voluntary work for the students and the readers, they fired me from there too. After many attempts, after many calls for teachers and principals, I didn't manage to get employed.

However, currently I'm with the Association of Writers in Peja, I am part of the Former Political Prisoners Association, I write. I published my first book in October of 2021, *Çast për t'u rrëfyer* (Time to tell my story). This is the first book I published, so I can leave it as a memory or as a gift, so, I wrote this book as a gift. The most beautiful gift you can give your children, family, and friends. It's a book that was published and I am very happy that there are good things there, and I would call this book, *Jeto për t'lanë gjurmë* (Live to leave footprints) [after my mother advice].

And it was my sole dream to leave footprints. After many attempts and being fired from my job, after many attempts I made to help others, I mean help them in education, in culture. I didn't get the job so I could see 50 students every day, to go in front of them every day and talk about this. I didn't get the opportunity. So, I decided to publish that book and leave footprints, to contribute more or less for the younger generations as well and respect all my close ones and... so, I have to stop again because I have to think about other things, to create something besides that book.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Zyrafete, if you have something else to add in the end or something you forgot to tell us.

Zyrafete Berisha-Lushaj: I thank you a lot. It was a very warm conversation, a family-like conversation. I thank you as young women, maybe I didn't get to share something because of my emotions, and experiences, because when you tell stories, of course, in that moment you relive those days and you're overcome by those emotions, maybe I didn't mention something. You understand me. However, everything I wanted to say, it was an honest interview, an interview with emotions, a direct interview with no sugar coating, without the things that turn me into, I don't know what, a simple interview.

I thank you for choosing me, that you found my name among all of those names and I hope I contributed a little, to help you as young women, as a young generation and for this to serve someone after many years. It's a contribution of mine, but it's also your contribution because you will become like us one day too and somebody will read this because your name is here too. You did this interview and it's a great contribution from your side.

Anita Susuri: Thank you for your contribution and the interview!