INTERVIEW WITH XHAFER ISMAILI

Pristina | Date: September 23, 2024
Duration: 119 minutes

Present:

1. Xhafer Ismaili (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Ana Morina (Camera)

Symbols for comments in the transcript of non-verbal communication:
() - emotional communication
{} - the interviewee explains with gestures

Other symbols in the transcript:
[ ] - addition to the text to facilitate understanding
Footnotes are editorial additions that provide information about places, names, or expressions.

Part One

Anita Susuri: Mr. Xhafer, can you introduce yourself, tell us your date of birth, place, [tell us] something about your family?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes. I am Xhafer Ismaili, my father's name was Enver, my mother's Mehdije. I was born in Upper Kopiliq in the year 1949, on September 7. I finished elementary school there. My father was a comrade-in-arms of Shaban Polluzha.[1] I was also the nephew of Zukë Xani, Vehbi's father, who was even more closely connected to Shaban or [he was] the right-hand man of Shaban Polluzha.So, our family was always a target of the UDB,[2] always, something that followed me too.

My childhood was not good. Because I lost a 15-year-old brother, and my mother would cry a lot and mourn deeply. It felt like every day we had a death, because she would go to his grave, mourn until I went there and mourned too. So my parents tried to make me grow up faster than I was. They tried to make me replace the brother who had died, Zymer. And that's what they did. They married me at a very young age, I was very young. I had just started high school when I had to get married and take on very big responsibilities.

Anita Susuri: Were you many children?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, we were two brothers and one sister besides the brother who died. My mother had lost many young children, many children died before. Later, I finished the Shkolla Normale.[3] I was a student there, an average student, I wasn't very distinguished. However, in some subjects I was

[1] Shaban Polluzha (1871-1945) was a regional Albanian leader of volunteer forces in Drenica. Shaban Polluzha joined the partisans, but in late 1944 disobeyed orders to go north to fight Germans in Serbia, having received news that nationalist Serbs and Montenegrins were attacking civilians in Drenica. He fought against partisan forces until early 1945, when he was killed.
[2] *Uprava državne bezbednosti* [Directorate for State Security] 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. Also known by the Serbian acronym SDB.
[3] Teachers training school. The Shkolla Normale opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the Shkolla Normale moved to Pristina.

distinguished, especially in literature. I started to write, I wrote poetry. I wrote things that were against the ruling power of the time.

In fact, maybe I'm not exaggerating if I tell you about an incident. We used to have poetry hours that we held in all major cities. Once, on one occasion, there was someone from the city literature group named Jakup Ceraja. Jakup Ceraja was a very good poet, now deceased. He accompanied us. I had a poem about Skanderbeg. That poem was very emotional and very…one had to have a lot of courage to recite that poem because it was the time of Ranković.[4] It was the year '86, '87, actually '67, '68.

I remember that in Peja my shoe broke, I stepped on something like that, and the bottom part fell off. Jakup played Rizah. At that time he was called Rizah Hadja because they didn't dare call him Rizah Grajçevci because of the issue with Fazli Grajçevci.[5] He played as if he was a cashier. "Give me some money to fix the shoe," but he didn't give it to me. We had to go also to Gjakova, to Prizren, and then return to the Shkolla Normale in Prishtina. When we returned, Jakup complained to the principal, the late Ahmet Maloku was the principal. It was from him that I first heard of Shtjefën Gjeçovi,[6] I had never heard of him before.

He says, "Xhafer made the *shkaun*[7] slap themselves for Skanderbeg with that poem, with those quotes he was reciting." He gives me a letter, I didn't know why the principal gave me that letter. He said, "Go to a bookstore." He gave me ten thousand dinars, that's what it was back then. They used to call it *a red horse*. I returned that money. "Here, I gave you this to buy shoes," said the principal. I bought a pair of shoes and I even had 30 left over, like saying 30 euros today. "No no," he said, "keep that." With that, you could live for a while.

I remember that as a very heavy moment given our difficult economic conditions. It seemed to me like he gave me a fortune. Then, after I finished the Shkolla Normale, surely I was already targeted because of those poems I had written. There was Fahredin Gunga, who was a big motivator for poetry. I stopped writing poetry, I stopped because another teacher came, whose name I don't even want to mention, who insulted me for writing it. So I stopped. When I went to work, they didn't want to hire me where I wanted. They told me to go to some other village, not in the same local community where I had finished school. I insisted and stayed there.

Then came the demonstrations of '68. We teachers got caught up in the '68 demonstrations. They came to evaluate the demonstrations. Some friends of mine, who had been my teachers before, said, "Do you want to raise your hand to condemn the demonstrations?" I said, "Let's go into the meeting first, we'll see, maybe they won't force us to raise our hands." But exactly those who had said that, when the moment came to raise their hands, went out, left the room. I didn't raise my hand. They

[4] 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.

[5] Fazli Grajqevci (1935-1964), member of *Ilegalja*, the underground Albanian nationalist movement, killed in detention.

[6] Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874-1929) was an Albanian Franciscan, an ethnologist and folklorist. He is mostly known because he gathered the oral tradition of the customary law in the book, *The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*. He was assassinated by a Serb nationalist.

[7] From *shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

pretended they loved my father, for the sake of *mixha*[8] Enver, they wanted to try one more time so Enver's son might raise his hand.

Meanwhile, those who had said they wouldn't raise their hands went back in. And they did raise their hands {he laughs and raises his hand}. I didn't raise mine. What's interesting is, the Communist Council or whatever it was, I don't know what it was called because I never cared about communism, they organized and came to our *oda*[9] to persuade my father to make me raise my hand. I was afraid that my father would tell me to raise it. I've fixed my father's grave so nicely because he stood so firm.

He said, "Tonight, Uncle Enver, we didn't come here for fun. We were brought here, because today your son was the only one, out of more than 60 of us, who didn't raise his finger. You know, Uncle Enver, that other son of yours is very spoiled, for the sake of his brother, Zukë Xani's grandson. Let your son raise his finger, otherwise the devil will take him." My father, who was smoking a cigarette, tapped his cigarette holder a few times against the glass ashtray, *ting, ting, ting*, as if to draw everyone's attention. He said, "Look, I won't mention his name because it's not proper. But Xhaferaxh," he called me Xhaferaxh, "he did wrong. When sixty others raised their fingers, why shouldn't he? But let me tell you this: as long as I'm here, no one will force my son to raise his finger in my house, even if you cut me into pieces like tobacco.

They had only come to humiliate me. As I was going down the stairs, someone put his hand on me and said {he grabs his own hand}, "You're lucky to have such a father," he said, "because these people came to take you." They had come, the car they used to take people, they called it *maricë*,[10] they had come to take me away. What still burdens me is that they didn't give me a chance to say thank you to my father. They [came] to make me bow my head and keep me down. To not go on for too long…

Anita Susuri: Did they take you with them?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, yes, they took me. But my uncle and some others took care of the matter so that I didn't have to stay too long in prison or suffer badly. They didn't let that happen. Why? What for? There was a certain Abaz, he was… he didn't…he saved a lot of people, not just me. However, that file remained with me.

Anita Susuri: So they only held you in custody, right? Did they torture you?

Xhafer Ismaili: The torture, now I'll tell you, they started later. After '81, the torture began. I was spared, but my file remained. Whenever Tito[11] came to visit Kosovo, they would take me supposedly for "informative talks." I knew why they were taking me, but who was I to do anything to Tito? A mere fist of a man [just a little guy]. But that's how they operated.

---

[8] Uncle, father's brother; in villages used also to respectfully address an older man.

[9] Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

[10] *Maricë* was the colloquial term in Kosovo for the police van used by the Yugoslav authorities to transport detainees. The word comes from Serbian slang (*Marica*) and carried a negative connotation, as it was associated with arrests and intimidation.

[11] Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the leader of Yugoslavia from 1943 until his death. He was a key figure in the Yugoslav Partisans during the Second World War and later became the president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Anita Susuri: But Mr. Xhafer, I'd like to ask you something else before we move on to that part, since you mentioned your father… Do you remember anything he told you about the battles fought with Shaban Polluzha?

Xhafer Ismaili: How could I not remember…

Anita Susuri: Because there aren't many studies about that.

Xhafer Ismaili: When a neighbor of mine would come to sit with my father, he'd say, "You, Enver, are a fool." That term fool meant you're not right in the head, dumb. He'd say, "How could you want to kill us in the middle of Novi Pazar?" And my father would reply, "Well, I truly did want to kill you." Because they, those of Shaban Polluzha, had been in Novi Pazar, fighting. Now, they had gone there with a group including some from Bosnia, and some Bosnian women had given them bread, freshly made bread. They said it was a type of *kaçamak*.[12] He said, "They made us something because we hadn't eaten bread for days, even weeks, they made it quickly," he said. "And then the others began to harass the women. So my father pointed his rifle at them and said, 'If anyone lays a hand on them, I'll kill you all.'"

That was true, that's why he used to say it. There were even conflicts among our own fighters. For example, about the distribution of bullets. There was someone called Zgjaha Kosova, and my father would tell me that Zgjaha and Shaban had a dispute. "You're giving your fighters more ammunition than my fighters." And my uncle [Zukë Xani] got in between them and said, "Stop, we didn't come here to fight each other, we have another enemy." There were such interesting events! Then my father would tell how they were called to *tallkin*. I don't know if you know, *tallkin* is a prayer said when someone dies, after they die. "O son of so-and-so, may God…"

Anita Susuri: Like an announcement.

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes. Now you might die at the front and there's no imam to do the *tallkin* for you, so, they did it while they were still alive. Just imagine how much of a psychologist Shaban was, he said, "Enough," to that imam, "never do that again," because he saw it was psychologically affecting his fighters very negatively. That's very interesting. There were so many events. They tried to execute my father three times. I too was almost executed three times in this war, and I survived, and my father survived. So, the things my father lived through, I lived through in this war as well.

I mean, there were so many things… I was here in Prishtna, I'll never forget, and I'm writing a book about it, about the family of Azem Lajçi, his father Pajazit Lajçi. Here, he hosted 20 families from Drenica. Pajazit Lajçi. But that's a story in itself. But what I want to return to now is that after '81, they had those notes, those files they kept, and new forms of mistreatment started.
So, in the year '70–'71,[13] I had to leave my job. They were giving everyone salaries, not everyone, their people. But for us, nothing. No credit, no scholarships, nothing. I finished my studies at our own expenses, my father's personal expenses.

After finishing university, anyway, I worked one year in Lipjan while studying and working. I was very young. My students hadn't even shaved yet, and I hadn't even touched a razor to my face. They were…

[12] Cornbread.
[13] Perhaps a mixup with the dates, it sounds like he is talking about 1980-1981, since the context is post- 1981

I completed a year there, then I went to the army and returned. When I came back, I started working at the gymnasium[14]...

Anita Susuri: I'm just curious, you also came to Pristina for the Shkolla Normale?

Xhafer Ismaili: The Shkolla Normale was in Mitrovica.

Anita Susuri: In Mitrovica.

Xhafer Ismaili: The five-year school was in Mitrovica.

Anita Susuri: Was it hard for you to travel? Did you travel?

Xhafer Ismaili: That was a challenge on its own, a challenge on its own. Tell someone that I came from Upper Kopiliq on foot and still made it in time for the physical education class. I mean, you might think skipping gym class wouldn't be a big deal, but from Upper Kopiliq to Mitrovica it's 15 kilometers to Skenderaj, then another 22 kilometers to Mitrovica. But we found alternative routes that shortened it a bit, let's say around 30–35 kilometers total. And I still made it to gym class. Maybe you've heard of Lah Nimani, he was a boxing coach. He used to teach physical education at the time.

When we had class, we'd run around the yard a bit, then do exercises, and he'd see me all flushed and sweaty. He'd say, "You?" I'd say, "I just got here today…" "You're done with class," he'd say (laughs), "take a rest." But those were very big challenges. Some people don't like to mention it because they want to say they were rich, they had it easy. Not me. My father was rich. He was. But at that time, when I came along, he had no wealth left, we all had a hard time.
We were at the Shkolla Normale for five years, it lasted five years.

Anita Susuri: And was the school mixed? Did you have classes with Serbs too?

Xhafer Ismaili: When we started school, the first and second year of high school, the Shkolla Normale, we had more than half of the subjects in Serbian, and we didn't know Serbian. It was very difficult. Even English, if I never learned English, and still don't know it today, it's because of that time. Because the teacher who taught us English was Serbian. She used to translate from English to Serbian, and we didn't know Serbian, not at all. So, we ended up developing a sort of aversion to foreign languages,that's how difficult it was.

In the natural sciences, it wasn't as bad, since they were more practical, more about formulas and diagrams. But in the social sciences, [the lack of languages] really affected us, we had a lot of problems. From the third year onward, they split us: Albanians in one class, Serbs in another, no more mixed classes after the third year.

Anita Susuri: I'm also curious about Mitrovica at that time. I don't know how much time you had to participate in cultural events. You mentioned writing poetry, was there…?

Xhafer Ismaili: Maybe…

[14] A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

Anita Susuri: Any film screenings or…?

Xhafer Ismaili: Maybe you'll say the professor is exaggerating, but I'll tell you the truth. There was more life—more culture, art, film, theater—in Mitrovica than in Pristina at that time. And look now at what Mitrovica has become, something to mourn. Mitrovica… it was an industrial city, major investments were made there, culture developed there, art, music developed there.
There were poets there, there was Latif Berisha, there was Fredin Gunga, there was Jakup Ceraja. There were many, many people who gave so much and contributed a lot in that time.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us, if you remember, any of those events you attended? Any films? Did you have any organized activities with friends or with the school?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, we had activities, but we were limited. We were very limited. I forgot to tell you, not that I forgot, but I am afraid that I might be going on too long...

Anita Susuri: No, no, you tell me as much as you want.

Xhafer Ismaili: We were inspired at the Shkolla Normale and we expressed that inspiration through our work with our students. Especially when the two brothers from Qirez were killed, I was deeply saddened, because I thought, "We have equipped them with ammunition," figuratively speaking, with emotions, with the sense of how to love the homeland, and they took up arms and went and died. I mean, we had inspired them. When Faredin Gunga quoted poetry, you couldn't help but shed tears, especially when he explained Migjeni,[15] Ndre Mjeda, Filip Shiroka. And we too began to draw inspiration from them.

One event I remember was just before I left my job in Truiçec. Because, as they say, I "grew horns," meaning, they didn't like me. I wanted to continue university. It was during that time when we weren't allowed to express our emotions, but they burst out on their own. That principal, who didn't like me at all, didn't like me because I had recited that poem about Skanderbeg, and you had to use gestures and tone of voice: "Skanderbeg, you are not dead, you live on through the blood of the Albanians. You have no grave, you live with us." He said to the others, "Didn't I tell you this guy is crazy? Why doesn't anyone shout at him? He's insane!"

I mean, he created, even among the people, a bad image of the patriots. He created a bad image of intellectuals, of brave people, of those who resisted the regime at the time. There were moments, whether I was present or not, when they surrounded our house looking for Vehbi's father, for Zukë.

Anita Susuri: Where was this?

Xhafer Ismaili: Zukë… in '45, '46, '47. Because Zukë had two sisters there. My uncle and father had married Zukë's sisters. They assumed Zukë was staying there. They came very often, not a week would pass without our house being surrounded. At one point they kicked out all the guests, even family members, so that if anything happened, if something went off, they could execute everyone. One guy climbed into the attic to search…these villages had haystacks and wooden rafters. The torch of the Serb went out, and he said, "Zuk, you devil, don't blow out my light!" "Zuk, you devil!" His mother

[15] Millosh Gjergj Nikolla (1911-1938), known as Migjeni, a well-known poet and writer born in Shkodra.

said, "May the devil take your head! You know Zukë's not here, he wouldn't dare even enter the village."

[The police] told my uncle that he had a mother… "You had a very tough mother." But I want to make a comparison here. My father insulted them, a lot. My uncle said, "Don't take him, take me. He has papers that aren't in order." My uncle sacrificed himself a lot for others. They took him to Skenderaj and told him, "When they ask you anything, if we've mistreated anyone, tell them. If they ask if we searched, say, 'Even if a needle was there, they would have found it.'"

I mean, I want to make a comparison. Back then they weren't as brutal as they were in the recent war. They didn't torture the family, they searched, yes, but not like now. Here, in the recent war, they came and massacred Ymer Elshani[16] and his entire family.

Anita Susuri: Was Zukë a fighter?

Xhafer Ismaili: Zukë was a fighter, a great fighter. In fact, he was Shaban Polluzha's right-hand man, his number one. The Serbs wrote about [Polluzha] in Serbian. They didn't call him "Polluzha," they demeaned him by saying "Llopuzha." *(Speaks in Serbian)* "Shaban gives the order, Zukë executes it." I mean, even they admitted that Zukë was the greatest fighter among them.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask, you reminded me…

Xhafer Ismaili: Vehbi's father.

Anita Susuri: For example, were there people from your region who were taken to Tivari[17] at that time?

Xhafer Ismaili: From my village, no, there weren't. But from Vehbi's village, yes. Azem Xani even wrote a book, *Lufta e Tivarit* [*The War of Tivari*]. He survived that massacre. But from my own village, no one told me of anyone.

Anita Susuri: And during Ranković's time, when they were collecting weapons, did that happen in your area?

Xhafer Ismaili: During Ranković's time, not only were weapons collected, but people were also killed, slaughtered, and massacred. Some managed to escape, others couldn't. People were hiding in apple orchards, among pear trees. They didn't ask my father for a weapon, but for a wooden case for a weapon. He found an old friend of his, someone who had once been saved by Mehmet Gradica.[18] Mehmet Gradica was a friend of my father's and the uncle of my uncle. Because my father and uncle were not brothers by the same mother and father. So this friend owed my father and saved him from…

[16] Ymer Elshani (1948-1999), a children's book author, killed on April 17, 1999, in the Poklek massacre by Serbian Security Forces alongside his wife, four sons, mother, sister-in-law, and nearly sixty fellow villagers.

[17] The massacre of Tivari, currently Bar, Montenegro,, was a mass killing of Albanian recruits from Kosovo by Yugoslav partisan forces in March 1945.

[18] Mehmet Gradica (1913-1945) was the sub-prefect of Skenderaj during the Italian occupation of Kosovo, and continued to be a military leader against the Yugoslav partisan forces until he joined Shaban Polluzha at the end of 1994. He was killed with Polluzha in February 1945 in the war of Drenica.

I mean, there were many, many challenges during Ranković's era. My brother, Haxhi, was heavily persecuted. He was even forced to change his last name. He was a lawyer, he changed his name to Haxhi Gashi, not Haxhi Ismaili, because he was so heavily targeted by the UDB.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: I'd like to talk a bit more about the work you mentioned… so, you said you finished university around '73–'74. How was your experience at university?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes…

Anita Susuri: That was the time when the university was opened…

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, in 1970 the University of Pristina was founded, and it was the beginning. At the university, more than half of the subjects were in Serbo-Croatian. But by then we knew it, we weren't embarrassed anymore, we knew Serbian.

Anita Susuri: You were in Pristina now?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, in Pristina. We had a very distinguished faculty, a very good one. There was Sali Nushi, Pajazit Nushi, Nik Juniku, and Jashar Rexhepagiqi. He [Rexhepagiqi] contributed a lot, even though he was Muslim, not Albanian, but he contributed a lot to Albanians. Because I'll tell you the truth, people often ask, "Why should we study Sterjo Spasse?[19] He was Macedonian." He was Macedonian, yes, but aside from Ismail Kadare,[20] who contributed more to Albanian literature?

There's even a character in *Zgjimi* or *Pishtarët,* [21]a very interesting one, a certain Aristotle. That Aristotle is Greek, but he's a teacher who sympathizes with the Albanian struggle. He tells his Albanian students, "What fault is it of yours that you speak your mother's tongue? What fault is it that your mother gave birth to you Albanian?" I mean, others have contributed a lot. And Jashar [Rexhepagiqi] also contributed, especially to Albanian national pedagogy. They were strong educators. Pajazit is the most unforgettable. I've written about all his works, nearly all his books. He was the organizer of the anniversaries of the League of Prizren, always. Pajazit Nushi organized all the League of Prizren's anniversary events, he knew that field very well.

It was the beginning, there were challenges. Challenges even with literature. No one to guide us. For example, I used to go to the provincial library, as it was called then. Not like today's library, it was a ruin of a place. We could barely find books. One time someone found me reading Marx's *Das Capital*. He asked, "Are you studying economics?" "No." "Then what do you need *Das Capita*l for?" We were just trying to find anything to read, any book, we'd take and read it. And now, when I see how books are stepped on, no one reads, it's pitiful, really pitiful.

[19] Sterjo Spasse (1914-1989), writer of the Albanian minority in Macedonia.
[20] Ismail Kadare (1936-2024) was an Albanian novelist, poet, essayist, screenwriter, and playwright. He was a leading international literary figure and intellectual. He focused on poetry until the publication of his first novel, *The General of the Dead Army,* which made him famous internationally.
[21] Novels by Sterjo Spasse, the first published in 1973, the second in 1975.

Anita Susuri: And that was also the time of cultural cooperation with Albania. Did you notice it? How did you experience it?

Xhafer Ismaili: To tell you the truth, that was the time when professors from Albania began to come, especially in the department of language and literature. We, from pedagogy, would finish our lectures and then go there to listen, to hear lectures from Albanian professors. That was the greatest joy, to hear them speak. I remember now, these events in '81[22] were inspired by them. They came in '78–'79 and gave concerts. I remember in Mitrovica, a concert was held near the Ibar Bridge, that bridge that today is like a "sacred" bridge, mentioned so much.

There was a song performed in that concert: "Roll the cigarette from the box the host gives you." I think it was Bik Ndoja who sang it, I don't know how he sang it. Everyone in the audience threw their cigarettes onto the stage, all of them. Our women even took off their gold necklaces, their rings, and gave them to the Albanian singers. There was this huge enthusiasm, a great will, it preceded what happened in '81. We were very inspired by them.

Anita Susuri: I'm also curious, did you ever participate in those events like folk dances, here in Prishtina? At the National Theater?

Xhafer Ismaili: While we were here as students, we were very active. We attended theater, we participated. There was the Cultural Artistic Society Shota, it was very well known. There was Esat Bicurri, the late singer. He had even formed a folk singing group here. He once engaged me to play the *çifteli*,[23] but it was too time-consuming. The *çifteli* took too much of my time, so I stopped. Esat was very…there was a lot of energy in those activities. But even then, there was a kind of rivalry with the Serbs.

There was a *korzo*[24] here, it was divided. There was the Albanian *korzo*, and the Serbian one. We didn't have any kind of real connection with them, except for a few who "deviated." So I have a lot to say about my professors, a lot to say about my colleagues. They endured the hardest times. They stood firm, often facing serious risks. Especially during the demonstrations. We were grateful to those who were activists, who came to Skenderaj in '81. Because they could have gotten all of us into serious trouble.

Let me tell you just one case. I was a school pedagogue. One day they came to talk about Jakup Krasniqi,[25] they had just arrested him. Fazli Kajtazi was the activist who came. He saved us, because if

[22] The 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo were a series of mass protests led by Albanian students demanding greater rights and autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia. Beginning in March at the University of Prishtina, the protests soon escalated into widespread demonstrations involving large segments of the Albanian population. Key demands included recognition of Kosovo as a republic within Yugoslavia, equal treatment for Albanians, and improved living and educational conditions. The Yugoslav government responded with harsh repression, including mass arrests, police brutality, and purges of Albanians from political and educational institutions. The events marked a turning point in Kosovo's struggle for political rights and are considered a precursor to later movements for independence.

[23] Two-string instrument with a long neck, played in Northern Albania and Kosovo, used to play folk songs and epics.

[24] Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

[25] Jakup Krasniqi (1951) is a Kosovo-Albanian politician and former acting President of Kosovo. He is former Chairman of the Assembly of Kosovo.

another activist had come instead, really, we'd have been doomed. He [Fazli] put his arm around me as I walked out. He said, "I've never had a better professor than Jakup Krasniqi." From a pedagogical point of view, he [Jakup] never came unprepared. Never. Always came to class with written preparation. He never wasted a lesson.

As we left, Fazli put his arm around my neck and said, "If someone else comes, don't talk like this. We didn't come to praise Jakup, we came to condemn him. You're making it sound like you came to promote him." But they saved us, there were very strong Albanians who helped people a lot. Those who stayed and worked,[26] and those who said they were still working, those who wanted to help, helped Albanians. These were heavy moments, moments that can't be forgotten.

To tell you the truth, maybe when I go over to the schoolhouse, I'll open up more about our time at the gymnasium, because that's where the worst things happened. We had to expel students just because someone had written KR somewhere, "Kosova Republikë." Unrelated stuff, and yet we expelled them. What fault did I have for what someone wrote? We expelled those we found near the graffiti. We, I say "we" in a general sense, not me. I used to protect them.

For example, Hashim Thaçi[27] had crossed a poem about Tito., he crossed it out. The girl who brought that magazine, she was the daughter of the Committee Chairman. She showed the magazine. "Who underlined this?" "So-and-so student." They came to expel Hashim. A cousin of mine, who worked with Hashim's father, told me—I was on my way to Skopje for a leg scan—I felt sorry. They said, "They want to expel and imprison Haxhi's son." My brother's name is Haxhi. I thought they meant my brother. I said, "Besnik?" "No, Haxhi Thaçi's son from Buroja." I turned back. There were hardline communists there.

The boy had written a statement and confessed. I told that communist, "No, the statement must be written in front of me." Some said, "You weren't here." I said, "Well, now I am." But Hashim didn't want to write another statement, he had done it once, he was very stubborn. So me and Shaban Zhyrani said, "We'll write a statement for him." They said, "Professor, they'll recognize the handwriting." We said, "We'll have it typed."

We went to a secretary. We wrote: "It's true I underlined the poem, but not with the intention you think, only as a literary critique. The poem wasn't up to standard." He [the secretary] even said, under his breath, "Not even the devil knows how to respond like that." We had to do everything to save him, to save him.

Anita Susuri: Mr. Xhafer, where were you working in '81? You told me earlier, but just to confirm.

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, I was in Skenderaj. They said everyone fled Prishtina, but Haxhi refused to leave, my brother. I took a car and in the middle of all that chaos, I left to go get my brother…

Anita Susuri: Was he a student or was he working?

[26] The reference is to the mass layoffs of Albanians during the Milošević regime in the 1990s.
[27] Hashim Thaçi (1968), KLA leader at the 1999 Conference of Rambouillet, founder and leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), served as Prime Minister several times and in 2016 was elected President of Kosovo.

Xhafer Ismaili: No, [he was] a lawyer. But he was on disability pension because he'd had a car accident. I went through all that fire. In Drenas, the demonstrators stopped my car to turn it back. One of them raised a stick, but another said, "No, stop. That's the professor's car. He's a patriot. Do you know what kind of patriot he showed himself to be in Gjakova?" He remembered a grape harvest trip I'd taken with students once. And he saved me.

I somehow reached my brother. My brother scolded me. "Why did you come?" I said, "I came to get you." "Where do you want to take me?" I said, "I want to take you, everyone has left Pristina, I want to take you to the village." He said, "Why? Is Pristina Serbian now? Prishtina is ours. I'm staying here."

I want to go, but where can I go when all the roads are closed? Everything was closed. The sidewalks were destroyed by those tanks. But still, I somehow got out and I wanted to go. When I got near the Faculty of Philosophy, I was in my car, and the late Murat Bejta came out in front of me. Murat Bejta, when I was in the Shkolla Normale, was the principal of the gymnasium in Mitrovica. Then he became a university professor, and in the end, he taught French in France, Doctor Murat Bejta.

He recognized me from the Shkolla Normale. He said, "Xhafer, open the door, open the door," he said, "let me in the car." I said, "I'm headed to Skenderaj." "Wherever you go, I'll go too. Wherever you go, I'll go too." We tried to go toward Fushë Kosovë, but they stopped us. We tried to head toward Mitrovica, bullets were flying in front of the car as we drove. Someone came and recognized Professor Murat. He said, "Professor, are you crazy?" "We wanted to…"
"What did you want? Go back where you stayed last night and stay there again tonight, because it's not safe." I turned him back to the faculty. I never found out where he went after that. I returned to my brother.

Then the next day, after a hundred thousand perils, I arrived in Skenderaj. My brother didn't come. He said, "No, Pristina doesn't belong to the Serbs, it belongs to the Albanians. I'm not leaving here." And he really didn't leave. That's how he proved himself even in this last war.
He was truly a man like uncle Zukë. He took after our uncle, not me (laughs). And so. And this matter of…

Anita Susuri: Then was there any arrest or anything?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, there were arrests, but not in our family. No arrests, but there were mistreatments. To tell you the truth, and I'm not exaggerating, maybe not every two weeks, but not a month would go by without them taking me in. They'd take me to Mitrovica, they'd pick me up on the street, they'd take me… In fact, since we're talking and you're being so sincere, I'm trying to be sincere too. Those moments when they beat me and left bruises on my face, I would go to Avdyl Miftari in Runik and sleep there, so my children wouldn't see the bruises. That Avdyl has passed away, he was a very good man, with a very generous wife. They were a very kind family. Both of them worked in education.

Once, in Turiçec, I was building a small house, out in the village. I went to pick something up, then a police officer came with a car to take me in, because the SUP[28] was looking for me.

[28] SUP - Acronym for *Sekretarijat unutrašnjih poslova*, which translates to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, of the Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic.

He told me, I'll never forget this, his name was Islam, Islam Lushtaku. He said, "Professor, do you know why I came to get you? Make up an excuse, escape somewhere, because I feel bad." I said, "Islam, I have nowhere to go." And I went with him to Skenderaj; those people had already arrived. Can you believe it? When I got upstairs, the commander cried for me. Commander Azem Gashi. He was the commander but he couldn't do anything. He knew about the torture I was going through, he couldn't do anything. He said, "Go. May God help you." And I saw tears running down his face.

I went upstairs, and the mistreatment began. They started with slaps, it's worse to be slapped than to be beaten with batons. That was humiliation. A slap was a deep humiliation. I still feel that slap, it was a very deep humiliation. Meanwhile, he'd leave me there, and someone else would go off to attend some party or escort a Serbian soldier's son, I don't know. He'd go, drink there, drink, and then come back drunk. When he came back drunk, he was even more aggressive. He made the decision to send me to isolation.

While I was sitting there, he ran into a Macedonian who worked at the pharmacy in Skenderaj, he knew me, and a certain Bronk Reredić. They told him, "He's not the professor," and he said in Serbian: *(speaks Serbian)* "He is sharp, he is wise. He's not the way they claim he is." That man came, stood in front of me, and tore up the decision to stop them from sending me to isolation. Then they called that Islam again to return me where he had picked me up. I had left my car in Turiçec and left the keys there as well. I had an apartment in Skenderaj, but I didn't have the keys. A police officer, he was Albanian, but a dog, said, "He has an apartment here, there's no need to take him back there." I said, "I have an apartment here, you idiot, but I don't have the keys because they took me like that."

Then this guy - "Why are you calling the police an idiot?" -, his name was Zoran, we used to call him UDB, from the SUP. He kicked me. I fell against a pole that was there, and it gave me a bruise, then I set off on foot to the village. I washed my blood in a shady place, as we say, there I washed my blood. I cleaned myself so the children wouldn't notice. When I got home, I found my wife with all the kids sleeping outside because none of the neighbors had said, "Come on, come inside." Why is he building a house here? What does he need a house for? He has an apartment. That's when I said, "Oh God, if they had taken me to isolation that night, what would've happened to my children?"

This daughter who's now a psychologist, she was a baby then. The other three were sleeping around her. No one had told them, "Come inside." That struck me deeply, it affected me so, so, so much. It's a moment I'll never forget. I said, "God, thank you I wasn't taken to isolation. I don't know what would've happened to my kids otherwise." There are many moments like that. But you know what the late Professor Pajazit [Nushi] used to tell me? He always called me "My Xhafer." He would say, "When you begin to tell something, it sounds very painful, but when someone else tells their story, it turns out even more painful than yours, and yours seems like nothing." That's why sometimes, maybe, it's better not to say these things at all.

This one here with Azem that I mentioned, three times they took me out, but a Serb woman saved me. She died of cancer. That woman was from the mountains, and she saved me. She was a relative of

Pajazit Lajçi, in Tauk Bashqe. They thought that was my house and came asking for money with masks on. These were *magjup*[29] from Pristina who looted us, I'm telling you honestly.

Anita Susuri: This [happened] during the war?

Xhafer Ismaili: During the war. These… It was like wall to wall. But someone else was pulling the strings, not the one holding the barrel. I used to say, "How are they about to shoot you and they don't even flinch?" (laughs) Because I thought this is it, they're about to fire. The third time that woman came, that Serb woman. She said, "They've decided to kill only you." Luckily they didn't ask for my documents, because if someone had figured out who I was, and where I was, I would've been executed on the spot. She took me, hid me in a van, a kind of small bus, that had only women and children. She dropped me off at the Technical School. I got out and said, "No more. I'm not staying here. I want to die differently, not like this, among children." I left.

Islam Krasniqi, one of my former professors, and later we worked together—saw me from his window, he had an apartment near the Grand Hotel. He said, "I've never seen a more horrifying scene." Because when they were demanding money from me—money, money—they slashed my black sweater with a knife, cut it all the way to the belt, but didn't touch my skin. That piece fell off completely, and Islam saw me half-naked, half my body exposed. He said, "I've never seen a more miserable sight. And they kept insulting you." They cursed NATO and cursed us too up to the train station. When they sent us to the train station, one thing that was really painful, that still stirs emotions in me when I talk about it, [there was] a woman who was about to give birth. We had to form a circle, facing outward, to give her a chance to deliver (cries). That was extremely heartbreaking. And so on.

Anita Susuri: Mr. Xhafer, now I'm interested, we talked about '81, and you told me about the time they tried to take you into isolation. But how did things continue afterward? The differentiations[30] happened, and the situation became even harder. How was it for you, working with students during that time?

Xhafer Ismaili: For us, the peak of revolt among students and teachers came when the miners went underground and refused to come out.[31] We took to the streets in protest. To the point where we walked all the way from Skenderaj, shouting, "Azem [Vllasi]![32] Kaqusha [Jashari]!"[33] We were shouting. We could have taken transport, but my uncle, uncle Vehbi, said, "It doesn't count if you go by car. If you don't walk, you've done nothing." Would you believe, in '81, they could watch us through sniper

[29] *Magjup* is a racial slur. The term usually denotes racial inferiority, uneducation and "backwardness" and is very commonly used by many cultures in the Balkans, including Albanians, against members of the Romani community.

[30] In the context of Yugoslavia, "differentiation" referred to a form of political and social ostracism. It involved isolating and marginalizing individuals who were deemed politically unreliable or dissenting against the ruling Communist regime. This could include demotions at work, social exclusion, surveillance, and other forms of repression to discourage opposition and maintain control.

[31] This happened in February 1989.

[32] Azem Vllasi (1948) served as the President of the Presidency of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Kosovo from 1986 to 1988. In 1989, he was removed from that position during Slobodan Milošević's grab for power in Kosovo and across Yugoslavia.

[33] Kaqusha Jashari (1946-2025) was an engineer and a Yugoslav communist leader ousted by Milošević in 1989. After the 1998-1999 war, she founded the Social Democratic party of Kosovo and was a Member of Parliament.

scopes from the police station, as we, the teachers, explained things on the blackboard? Because that's how it was, the gymnasium and the higher school were right near the police station.

They followed our every move, every single one. Kids wrote slogans, and of course, we had to hide them however much we could so they wouldn't be seen. Sometimes maybe others would write them to provoke us. Until one day when they pulled one of their classic political tricks. They stopped sending Serbian kids to school. "The school isn't safe, we can't send our children because they're endangered by the Albanians." Since their students weren't coming, neither were their teachers. But as you just rightly said, then came an Albanian, a "black"[34] Albanian and the students were out protesting, because this guy didn't say a single word in Albanian, only in Serbian.

He said (in Serbian): "Every class supervisor, come out!" I said, "There's no Serb here, neither in the staff nor among the students. We are all Albanians." He said again (in Serbian): "I repeat." He kept repeating the same Serbian sentence. Even today, they call him one of the biggest patriots, some of them. That really upsets me. Truly. That was the incident when Hamëz Jashari[35] asked to address the students and give a speech. But I didn't know that even though Ivan, some Serb deputy director, wasn't physically there, he had his loyalists there. He had his Albanian informants. Supposedly, they told him that Xhafer let Hamëz speak to the students, that I let them out at Hamëz's request.

Anita Susuri: Just to clarify, was this in '81 or '89?

Xhafer Ismaili: This was when the miners entered the shafts.

Anita Susuri: In '89.

Xhafer Ismaili: Because Hamëz was also working at the ammunition factory at the time, and that factory was still part of Trepça. Let me tell you something a bit lighter, we had some humorous moments too. One miner had said that his wife had died and he didn't come out of the shaft to attend the burial. Two of my female colleagues surrounded me and said, "Did you hear, professor? Did you hear? His wife died and he didn't come out to bury her. What would you have done?" One of them was a very respected teacher from Bujanoc who worked with us, Qezibane Qazimi. A very good woman, a real lady, a good teacher.

She asked, "So what would you have done?" I said, "I would have come out." "Some patriot you are!" she said. I replied, "But you didn't ask me why I would have come out." "Why?" I said, "Because I wouldn't believe she was dead unless I saw her with my own eyes" (laughs). She said, "You're not even worth it for that woman," implying I wasn't worthy of such a woman. We had these kinds of moments, we couldn't avoid them because we were tired of all those slogans. There was a time we were even guarding the schools, afraid someone would come and write slogans or do something. There were people who took all this with heavy hearts, very seriously, as if something terrible might happen. I, on the other hand, would sleep. Let them write, there was nothing we could do. You couldn't stop those things. They'd write them anyway.

[34] Pejorative, a traitor.

[35] Hamëz Jashari (1950-1998) was a KLA fighter who was killed in his home with his extended family by Serbian Security Forces in 1998 in what is considered a foundational event in Kosovo history.

There were people who took it so seriously that just one slogan would shake them completely. But honestly, there was a bit of humor sometimes. When they came to check the slogans, there was this linguist, Sadik Ahmeti. When they read "Kosova Republike," he would say, "They forgot to put a diacritical mark here." And the others would say, "We didn't come to correct spelling mistakes" (laughs). So yeah, there were moments like that...

Anita Susuri: You were working at the Ramiz Sadiku Gymnasium at that time?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: So what type of gymnasium was it?

Xhafer Ismaili: It was a natural sciences and social sciences gymnasium. But there was also something they called "oriented education" at one point. For two years, it was a general gymnasium, and after two years you would specialize, that's why they called it "oriented." You'd specialize into professions. They aimed to guide you into professions. But it wasn't very successful.

Anita Susuri: And the Faculty of Education, where you taught psychology, that was in the 1990s?

Xhafer Ismaili: At the faculty, after '96. I joined the faculty late, very late.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: I'm interested now, when you were at the gymnasium, how did it happen that you were removed? What was that day like? How do you remember it? How did it come to that day?

Xhafer Ismaili: I'll focus more on another aspect than the ones usually explained, like how we worked in house-schools, in private homes in the villages. We worked in Turiçec, in Likovc, in Rezallë, in the two Klinas, in Vorinik, we worked there. But the generosity shown by the villagers, those who gave up their homes, is unforgettable. Honestly, I would have written on their homes: House of resistance, House of endurance. Because they passed the test. Being the school's pedagogue, I wasn't that focused on where exactly lessons were being held, aside from the ones I was personally involved with.

I had another preoccupation. I was concerned with how we should organize the teaching process in the occupied schools. In fact, I wrote an article at that time, the daily *Bujku*[36] was still being published, titled: "How to Rationalize the Teaching Work in Occupied Schools." That was the title, it was a long article. Because that was the real problem, not just for my school. The article was a message to all schools: how we should rationalize our work, because we didn't have the facilities we once had. We didn't have the same schools anymore, or the same teaching hours. Everything was reduced, and we had to reduce the curriculum, reduce the lessons, and reduce our overall work.

We had to ask for help. First, from the Pedagogical Department, which was the main hub of educational staff. Then from other institutions, from the Pedagogical Institute, we had to seek help. We also had to ask for help from the parents. There had to be greater cooperation with parents. We had to

[36] The Farmer, a daily newspaper which replaced *Rilindja* after Serbian authority banned it, in August 1990.

tell the parents: “Whatever your children can’t achieve in school, continue at home. What’s left half-done, complete it at home.” We had to reduce lesson units, teaching activities, and even the school hours. That was my main concern. My primary concern was: how to rationalize our teaching with students in occupied schools.

My voice was being heard. They also made changes to the curriculum. They removed a lot of lesson units. They removed almost all of the literature. The ones from Albania, you weren’t allowed to even look at them anymore. I remember we held a meeting about what they called core subjects, shared curriculum cores. This was held at the Sami Frashëri school. All of us, together. I stood up and said, “You planned everything, music and all, but not a single Albanian song or dance. We are Albanians.” One person stood up, I don’t want to mention names because I don’t want to hurt anyone. But if it ever comes to it, really comes to it, then names can be mentioned.

He said, “The Albanian language is good enough. We have plenty in Albanian. Serbian is in bad shape.” “Why is Serbian in bad shape?” He said, “Because anyone can teach Serbian now, just go to a bookstore, buy an index, register for Serbo-Croatian, and start teaching Serbo-Croatian.”
Then he expressed himself in Serbian, he said: *(speaks Serbian)* “The time has come to mourn for the Serbo-Croatian language.” A Serbian woman replied: *(speaks Serbian)* “You mourn your own road.” She really told him off well. There were many such moments...

Later, we fell into many kinds of ambushes trying to supply the school with materials. For example, I remember one time I went to pick up the first class registers and report cards that had come out with the Albanian flag, with the eagle. I filled two sacks with registers, sacks of paper. I didn’t dare get on the bus because someone might check us. I waited there at the underpass on the road to Fushë Kosovë. Then someone shows up, everyone called him spy,
“Spy, spy, that's him,” people would say. He came with a Lada, with a car, and saw me with the sacks. “Hey professor, what do you have there?” “Newspapers,” I said. “A boy is working in a store and doesn’t have paper to wrap items, I got some newspapers.” “Come on, throw them in the trunk.”

I put them in the trunk, and when we got to Skenderaj, instead of taking me to the apartment, he took me straight to the school. He said, “Come on—I'm not stupid. I know what you have there, but I wanted to do you this favor.” And yet, everyone called him a spy. I owe him thanks for that (laughs). He took me there with those sacks full of registers. Took me to the gymnasium. There were moments like that...

Anita Susuri: I’m curious, about the day you were removed from the schools, how was it? Did the police come or did you leave on your own?

Xhafer Ismaili: We left the job, we left, and then worked in the black. We worked outside of the official buildings. No, they didn’t allow us into the facilities, they blocked the premises. No one was allowed into the school buildings.

Anita Susuri: Was the police in the schools?

Xhafer Ismaili: The police, yes, the police. We weren’t even allowed in the school yard anymore. That was strictly forbidden by them. We tried several times, we made attempts to enter, many times. Not just once, dozens of times we tried to go in, but we failed because they wouldn’t let us.

Anita Susuri: Did you then take part in any meeting where it was decided which house to go to or how to continue working?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, there, Lashi made a very big contribution. They had their units in all the municipalities, and each municipality organized itself. We even had a man named Xhafer Murtezi, he was a very good organizer of the work. We would make plans about where to go, into the villages, into people's houses. The homes, the families, not only did they give us their spaces, but they also gave us moral support, and even food, because they knew we had nowhere to eat out in the villages. They brought us food, different kinds of food.

They were very supportive, very supportive, especially the two Klinas, I will never forget them. This Klina near Skenderaj… all of them, even Likoc, Zallë, they were very hospitable, they helped us a lot, really helped us a lot. But I ask, "Why aren't we still that supportive today? Why didn't we continue to be like that?" We forgot everything, I don't know why we forgot so quickly. This is one of our incurable syndromes.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the names or the families, surnames?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, unfortunately I don't remember the names of those families. Honestly, I don't remember. But they're in the books, all those names that I can't recall are written in books.

Anita Susuri: In how many houses did you work, as you mentioned, in villages?

Xhafer Ismaili: Well, we worked in Likoc, in Rezallë, in Polac, in both Klinas, Upper Klina and Lower Klina, in Çubrel, in Runik of course, in Turiçec. Basically in all the local communities, but often not in the very center of the local communities, because we were blocked there too, but in the villages around the local communities. So, almost all of them. We also used primary schools, because in some places they didn't block the primary schools. We used the facilities of primary schools where we weren't blocked.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember which places had the primary schools?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, there were Turiçec, Leqinë, Orinikë, Runik, Likovc, Rrezallë.

Anita Susuri: How difficult was it for you to travel during the week through all these schools to make it on time?

Xhafer Ismaili: I said it earlier, the solidarity was very strong, solidarity was on a high level, it helped us a lot. For me, it started when I came from Pristina to go to Turiçec. They used to drive us with private cars. The nephew of the principal, the principal we had at the gymnasium, took us to Turiçec. He brought us back, and right after that, they killed him. Just because he had transported us to Turiçec to teach. They killed a young guy, it was very painful.

Anita Susuri: Has it ever happened to you, surely it did, that the police stopped you somewhere?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, they stopped us often, and many times they even tried to strip us of our clothes, to make us naked. But we insisted, saying, "No, take us to the police station. If you want to do something, do it there, not here on the street. You might kill us." Because they were trying to strip us completely,

to take off our clothes. The excuse was they were looking for something on us, in that sense. But we never accepted something like that. We never accepted it.

There were even cases, yes, cases where also Vehbi was beaten badly on the road while returning from school. Word got around, and then there was this Sejdi Koca, a very prominent activist. He came to see Vehbi, who had been beaten by the police. He tried to console him and said, "Vehbi, don't take it to heart." Vehbi replied, "It's my ear that hurts!" (laughs). There were moments like that too, you had to, what could you do?

One time they caught us in Deçan celebrating Republic Day, the 7th of September. They wanted to take us all, to send us to the police. Luckily, I had an ID that said I was born on the 7th of September. I handed them the ID and said, "We're celebrating my birthday, not Republic Day." There were cases like that, we had plenty.

Anita Susuri: I'm interested to know about the houses where classes were held. What was their condition? Were they even slightly suitable?

Xhafer Ismaili: Where we had the primary schools, the conditions weren't that bad, they weren't. But in the houses, oh yes, the children mostly sat on blocks, construction blocks. The villagers helped us, they made some chairs, some other things. They helped us a lot. They helped us a lot, without hesitation. The conditions were difficult, very difficult, but the willpower was great.

Actually, what I see, some so-called pedagogues {he makes air quotes} say, "Why do people say back then the work was better than now?" It wasn't better than now, but the enthusiasm was greater, the will was stronger. Even if we wanted to work better than now, we couldn't, because we didn't have the conditions. Although even now, many of the conditions we have are fake. Fake because we're trying to imitate others, and we don't know how, because we don't have the means to imitate others.

Now they're calling it full-day school. There's no such thing as full-day teaching, it's full-day presence in school. Presence, yes, but not full-day teaching. We will not have favorable conditions for such work. But maybe, since it has started, something will develop.

Anita Susuri: Were there many classes scattered across different homes?

Xhafer Ismaili: We did have that. The gymnasium had, at the time, 2,000 students, more than 2,000 students, there were a lot. I even remember one case where our students were beaten. There was a case where our director fell from a cherry tree, he was pruning it, and had to go to the hospital. We were left as his deputies, and sometimes even the deputy director wasn't there, so the pedagogues had to take care of things.

They brought me a student who had been beaten by the police. He had been beaten in Ribizla. Ribizla is where we used to send the students. He had come out as a striker, and the other students were singing his praises. A policeman came over and beat him, some guy named Zoran, a policeman from Istog. Then a school employee came, because the students had come just as they were, with the tools they had been working with, and stood in front of the door. A Bosniak employee came and said, "Demonstration, demonstration," he addressed me. I said, "No, there's no demonstration." "Look, the students have come."

I went out. “What happened?” They told me what happened. Just two or three days earlier, they had also beaten another student. But the student they beat then was from Vojnik, a cousin of the Committee Chairman, Musa Draga, a very strong and good man. He was the Chairman of the Committee at that time, and a very good man. He stood up for us and we were saved from many bad things at the municipal level. I called the Chairman of the Committee.

Since I was close to him, and since they had beaten his cousin, I thought he would support us a bit. So bravely I said, “Comrade Chairman,” back then it was comrade, “they’ve beaten another student. If you don’t do something about this, tomorrow I’ll take 2,000 students to the streets in protest.” He didn’t say a word, just hung up the phone. But not even 15 minutes passed and the chief of police arrived. He had sent the chief of police. Some guy named Avdi Behrami. I’m grateful to him for that. He came and said, “Where are those students?” I was fired up, talking a lot, but he was very calm.

He said, “Alright, let that student who was beaten come to the office, and the rest can go home.” So we went to the office, and he took the student’s statement. When the student said, “I came out as a striker,” he replied, “What striker? When he hit you, you should’ve hit him back.” I thought, “This guy is trying to provoke us, surely he wants to provoke something,” but no. He said, “Alright, you go.” Then he turned to me and said, “What kind of language did you use with the Committee Chairman?” I said, “I’ll tell you the same thing, I told him, and I’m telling you, if you don’t do something, on Monday,” it was Saturday, “I’ll take 2,000 students to the street.”

He slammed the table and said, “Vallahi,[37] you’re not going.” I said, “I am going.” Just me and him in the office. Then he said, “You’re not going because that policeman will be suspended tonight,” and that’s exactly what happened. That night, they punished the policeman, and it cost him a lot. He was suspended. But that’s unforgettable. That policeman from Istog was really bad, he had tortured a lot of people in Skenderaj.

Anita Susuri: Did it ever happen that a police patrol passed by there on purpose or even entered?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, I don’t remember any patrol entering, but passing by, yes, they passed by there. They passed by, and they were often very insulting. Often they even threw insults at us. When we held a lesson that didn’t last long, they would say, (speaks in Serbian at 18:51) “What kind of lesson is that? You must’ve held a meeting, lessons last longer, not this short.”

Xhafer Ismaili: That’s why I often asked the teachers to try to hold the lessons the same way we held them in the school buildings, but it was impossible without reducing them a bit. Honestly, we also didn’t dare to stay too late there during the afternoon shift, we couldn’t keep the students out too long because they were afraid to return home…

Anita Susuri: How long did one class period last?

Xhafer Ismaili: Well, not more than 30 minutes. We didn’t have the possibility, not 35, not 40 minutes. It wasn’t possible.

[37] *Vallahi* comes from Arabic, literally meaning: “By God,” “I swear to God.”

Anita Susuri: And how was, for example, the condition of the students? How did you see it as a teacher? Were they prepared for learning? How did they experience it, for example? What was your perspective?

Xhafer Ismaili: Well, the teachers, the teaching staff, had never been more vigilant, because they had to be. Because besides teaching, we had to be careful with the children, the students, with what might happen to them on the road. The son of Adem Jashari[38] was a student of ours at that time. Back then, he would come armed, and we had to be careful with his weapon, Fitim. There was no one like that boy, they killed him. There was no one like that boy. Brave, handsome, and a good student. They killed him too. We had to be careful with them. Especially careful with the Jashari family's children because they were targeted. So…

Anita Susuri: Did they have, for example, enough books? Notebooks?

Xhafer Ismaili: They weren't without books, they were provided with textbooks. We weren't lacking textbooks. The textbooks, only those who didn't want to get them didn't have them. There was a bookstore; they had textbooks. Only in rare cases did we have subjects without textbooks. For example, psychology, I was both the school's pedagogue and taught psychology. The teacher had to take the initiative to find textbooks.

I came to Pristina and asked Professor Neki. Neki Juniku was the author of that psychology book, and Professor Pajazit. They gave us several copies free of charge, without compensation, and I photocopied them and gave them to the students. The teacher had to take care of supplying the textbooks, and they did. They did it with pleasure, without hesitation. Because it was that time, we didn't just do it for the students; we also did it to defy them. To show them that even under occupation, we know how to live, how to learn, how to work.

Anita Susuri: Was there ever a problem that came up, either from the students or from the teachers? How did you manage to resolve it?

Xhafer Ismaili: You're asking the questions as if we've talked before (laughs). There's one case I'll tell you about now. Serbian students fought with Albanian students in Runik. That class in Runik had Serbs. They sent Vahide Hoxha, Fadil Hoxha's[39] wife, as an activist [to take care of] the incident that had happened there. That woman was a lady, an incomparable woman. A woman like [Madeleine] Albright.[40] She came, and then they started. There were communists there who, when something like

[38] Adem Jashari (1955-1998), also known as "legendary commander," was a founder of the KLA, celebrated as its foremost leader and symbol of Kosovo independence. He died in March 1998, together with his family of twenty - half of them underage girls and boys - in a shootout with Serb troops during a three-day siege of his home in Prekaz.

[39] Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001), Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.

[40] Madeleine Albright (1937-2022), political scientist and American diplomat, she served as the first woman US Secretary of State in President Bill Clinton administration and was instrumental in NATO decision to intervene in the Kosovo war, dubbed a "humanitarian emergency," in 1999.

that happened, liked to act holier than the Pope, acting like they cared so much about Serbs, showing how much they cared.

They would get up and talk. “What happened? This doesn’t happen anywhere else! How could they beat Serbs? How could they do that? We can’t even beat a Serbian dog, we need to behave, we need to act like this.” We were stuck there for almost half the night. Then I spoke. I said, “What happened here often happens even among Albanians; they fight. It didn’t happen with any kind of agenda. It didn’t happen because they were Serbs and we were Albanians. It happened purely by chance. We can try to give it whatever meaning we want, but it has no political color, no ethnic hatred, nothing.”

The meeting ended, and then we went out with Vahide and two professors; one, the physics teacher Rrustem Sejdiu, may he rest in peace, and the other was Avdyl Miftari, both of them have passed away now. We took Vahide. There was still a café open, we went in for coffee and talked with Vahide. She said, “You got us out of a crisis. Morning would’ve caught us there if you hadn’t spoken.” I said, “Yes, I got us out of the crisis.” So we kept talking. I wanted to continue. Avdyl Miftari, the history teacher, said, “Comrade Vahide,” he said, "This Xhafer wants to stay here all night because he has nowhere else to go, no apartment, no nothing.” She looked at me and said, “You don’t have an apartment?” I said, “No, I don’t.” She said, “You’ll have one.” Her intervention went to Musli Draga and he gave me an apartment. She was very, very capable. She was glad that I managed to wrap that up. It had to be closed like that.

We had other cases, sometimes students, due to the teacher’s negligence, would get upset and leave the class. Well, in Runik something like that happened. There was a female teacher, and she had unintentionally said, “Today we don’t have anything on Naim [Frashëri].[41]” Maybe what she meant was, “Not today,” but as the students put it: “There’s no more Naim, no more Migjeni,” and they walked out.

She had a brother who was a physics teacher, and he came and said, “They walked out on my sister’s class.” I went out, gathered the students and said, “No one is allowed to remove Filip Shiroka, Ndre Mjeda, Migjeni, or any other Albanian author from our curriculum. But your teacher, your professor, said, ‘Today we don’t have them. Today’s lesson is something else, not about them.’ And you understood it as if we never have anything on them again.” The students went back inside; things settled down.

As the school’s pedagogue, I had many such incidents. Once, the son of a teacher who worked there came into the hallway holding a knife. He told his homeroom teacher, “You go in front since you're the homeroom teacher.” He replied, “No, *more*.[42] His father is here, let his father go in front.” He said, “I don’t dare. He’s used to slaughtering sheep, he’ll cut my throat too.” I walked straight up to him and said, “Will you give me that knife?”

[41] Naim Frashëri was an Albanian poet and writer (1846-1900). 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.

[42] Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. More adds emphasis, like bre, similar to the English bro, brother.

He, in a very loud voice, said, “Yes.” And I thought, he must really want to hand it to me. So he turned the blade away from himself, the handle toward me, and handed me the knife. There were many interesting incidents, very interesting. As a pedagogue, I had…

A friend of my brother's came once with an iron rod, he was known, a certain Imer, known as a former boxer and very dangerous. He came, upset because he thought my brother had beaten up his son. He came with that iron rod and they told me, “Imer has come, and also this teacher. He says he won’t leave without drawing blood because they beat up his son.”

I went out and said, “Hey Imer!” He said, “Go ahead!” I told him, “You should carry a wooden stick instead, because if someone takes it from you and beats you with it, it’ll hurt less. But with this thing…” He started laughing. “By God,” he said, “you calmed me down, I came here raging, but your words calmed me.” He turned and went back home. There were plenty of cases like that.

Anita Susuri: I’m also interested, and this is a heavy topic, about the poisoning of students. Did that happen? What did you witness?

Xhafer Ismaili: Not only was it a serious matter, but what hurt us the most was that there were still people who didn’t believe it. I had an employee there who used to say, “No, they’re just faking it, they’re acting.” “No,” I said, “they’re not acting.” But not long after, his own daughter got sick. I said, “Is your daughter acting now?” It wasn’t acting, it was poisoning, serious poisoning. Teachers’ cars were constantly being used to transport students to the hospital. My own car never stopped, it was always taking kids to the hospital. That was terrible. It was really terrible. It happened, in our case, I think it happened the most in Skenderaj. Skenderaj had the highest number of poisoning cases.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the first time you saw a case?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, the first time… the first time we thought maybe it was some kind of chemical poisoning. We even asked if that girl had maybe been in a lab somewhere, maybe in the chemistry cabinet? But no, no. By the second or third time, the cases started increasing rapidly, there were so many!

Anita Susuri: What symptoms did they have?

Xhafer Ismaili: The main symptom was breathing difficulty, they had suffocation. They... they couldn’t breathe. Those movements they would make with their legs and arms were horrible to watch. You couldn’t restrain them, you couldn’t calm them down, you couldn’t stop those movements of the arms and legs. It was truly, truly terrible. [We give] thanks to the teaching staff, who were very careful. No one spared anything, cars, effort, everyone was ready. As soon as a poisoning case occurred, we immediately took them to the hospital.

But even the hospital didn’t know what diagnosis to give, they had their own problems. However, just getting them to the hospital would somewhat calm the students, because they felt, “I’m in the hospital, I’m with the doctor.” That, to some extent, helped calm them. That’s how it was, really. These were very distressing events...

Anita Susuri: Were there many cases? Were there more girls or boys?

Xhafer Ismaili: More girls, interestingly, more girls. But also, the number of girls was higher in the gymnasium compared to boys. But mainly, girls were more sensitive to this poisoning.

Anita Susuri: Did you personally see anything suspicious, or someone suspicious passing by who might've done it?

Xhafer Ismaili: No. That's exactly it. The biggest problem was that you had no one to turn to, no one to say anything to, no one to bring to justice for what had happened. That was the biggest issue. Because, if somehow... There had been a lot of prior preparation, before this happened, there were many preparations made. It was all very mysterious, it remains mysterious even today, but there was poisoning.

Anita Susuri: Do you know if, for example, the hospital made any samples or sent anything for testing?

Xhafer Ismaili: I don't have, I don't have any information that the doctors or the hospitals undertook anything like that. No.

Anita Susuri: How long did that period last, meaning the one where they were getting sick frequently?

Xhafer Ismaili: Fortunately, it didn't last long. Fortunately, it didn't last long. Maybe a month, maybe less, maybe more, but it didn't last. Because...

Anita Susuri: How did you feel, for example, as a pedagogue, as their teacher?

Xhafer Ismaili: It's indescribable how we felt. They were our children. They were more than our children, they were ours and yet not ours. There was an even greater responsibility because they weren't just our own. You felt a greater responsibility toward their parents. There were parents who only had that one child, an only daughter or an only son. When you saw them in that condition, it was truly horrifying.

Anita Susuri: How much could the lessons even go on normally in those conditions?

Xhafer Ismaili: The teaching process was disrupted, it was completely disrupted. Because even those children who weren't directly affected by the poisoning couldn't concentrate on learning anymore. They were preoccupied with the fear of being poisoned; they were worried about their classmates and friends who they saw in that condition. There was no longer a learning environment, neither for the teachers nor for the students. That was the enemy's goal, to cause this, and they succeeded.

Anita Susuri: Did you visit them afterwards? How long did it take for them to stabilize?

Xhafer Ismaili: They would come on their own, inform us that they were feeling better. The students were very good. They would come themselves to let us know they were doing better.

Anita Susuri: Did they return quickly to school or did they need more time?

Xhafer Ismaili: They returned to class, they didn't take long, they came back quickly. And the parents thanked us for the care we gave them.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that in ‘96 you also started at the Faculty of Education…

Xhafer Ismaili: In ‘96 I was working both there and there, since ‘96.

Anita Susuri: You told me it was a bit difficult for you, but did you often have to come during the week to Pristina and return to Skenderaj?

Xhafer Ismaili: But we had the schedule, we had the schedule. I felt bad about leaving there, I felt bad. And I also felt bad writing the title there "doctor." What would I write there? I felt bad telling them I was leaving, because I felt nostalgia. I had spent two years in Turiçec and nearly 27 years there. So that day when I told them, “I’m taking the salary,” it was about that secondary and primary salary if you worked in one place. It was better to take the primary one because it was a better wage. But I was receiving the secondary one. At one point I was overwhelmed with work here, I was burdened with some programs…

Anita Susuri: In Pristina?

Xhafer Ismaili: In Pristina. And I had to go tell them, “I’m no longer working here.” It was a very emotional case. Truly emotional, because already in ‘76, ‘77, ‘78 they [from the university] had come to get me as an assistant and I didn’t go. Because my father was still alive and he was sick. I didn’t want to leave. Only by ‘96 was it very late. But I went, and I did well. At the faculty I did well. I got along well with colleagues, both at the faculty and at the gymnasium. I did well in Turiçec…

Anita Susuri: And in the gymnasium, you stopped working in ‘96 or later?

Xhafer Ismaili: Not in ‘96.

Anita Susuri: ‘96.

Xhafer Ismaili: No, later. So from ‘96 I was working there and then after two or three years there I stopped.

Anita Susuri: Around the time of the war, just before the war.

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, yes.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: I’m curious, did you settle in Pristina at that time when you started working here, or were you already living here earlier? How did that go?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, I settled in Pristina very late, after the war. I was commuting from Skenderaj. I was commuting. I don’t know, maybe if… in Skenderaj, if that accident hadn’t happened—I'll call it an accident—I wouldn’t have left. I had a lot of books, and I had a big front room in Skenderaj, a front room full of books. At one moment, some careless person living above me dumped different waste,

even diapers, into the water drain pipes and the water came back down the stairs, through the walls, and into my books.

I went downstairs to a cafe, Dibra is the name of that cafe, I was very upset. Someone says, "Professor, will you sell me your apartment?" "Yes." "For how much?" "For as much as you want." Because I was furious. Really, I told him, for as much as you want. "Come on, come on, give me a price!" I gave him a price. I told him congratulations right then. When I saw my books in that condition, I was about to go mad, and then I moved to Pristina. My brother was already here. He had been in Pristina for over 50 years.

Anita Susuri: You told me that you earned your doctorate in psychology in the '90s…

Xhafer Ismaili: Not in the '90s, I earned it later. In '81, '82 I was expelled from the Faculty in Sarajevo, where I was studying psychology.

Anita Susuri: In Sarajevo?

Xhafer Ismaili: In Sarajevo I completed the third level, the lectures and everything. But the professors were from Zagreb, from Novi Sad, from Belgrade, and some from Pristina. Professor Njazi Zylfiu from Pristina used to go there to teach. When the incident with Tahir Meha[43] happened, they, my professors, expelled us from Sarajevo when they saw what was happening.

Dem Hoti was also there, Januz Dervodeli, Aferdita Mulla. They took those two, Januz and Dema, the professors registered them in Macedonia, in Skopje. We stayed in Sarajevo. I was with the late Riza Kotorri. When we went for consultation, instead of consulting with us, they started talking about Tahir Meha. They were saying, "Tahir Meha killed four young men, four young policemen," speaking in Serbian. Then Rizah stood up and said, "We didn't come here to discuss politics, we came to study, to define our master's thesis topics." We were supposed to do our master's and then doctoral studies.

Then he, some guy named Herceg, Vladimir Herceg, apologized and said, "I'm not…I'm not Serbian," he said, "I'm from Herzegovina." *Tybe*,[44] I still don't know what a Herzegovinian is, or what a Serb is, or what the difference is. He said, "Come another day." I called them. Imagine, this very Vladimir Herceg said, "It wasn't me." He was the head there, the Dean of the faculty. I called another professor too, some Ismet Dizdarević, a psychologist, he wouldn't do anything either. I called someone in Zagreb, a professor from Zagreb. He responded, but said, "I'm not the one, I only gave lectures there, I have no administrative ties."

Then Professor Pajazit [Nushi], who had taught me during my undergraduate studies here, heard, [and also] Professor Neki, Professor Islam, and Professor Hajrullahu. They heard and said, "Come here!" Then here I completed both my master's and doctoral studies in Pristina.

Anita Susuri: And were you in Skenderaj when the events at the Jashari family happened?

[43] Having refused to go back to jail to complete his sentence, Tahir Meha was killed by the police together with his father during a siege of his home in 1982.
[44] *Tybe* = "By God" (an oath, from Arabic via Turkish, meaning "I swear by God")

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes. We were in Skenderaj during both instances when it happened. Even the first time when they were surrounded, and when we went to visit later. I had an apartment across from the Jashari family. That ammunition factory was visible from my apartment. And in this case, when it all happened, we were in the apartment. Interestingly, we felt better when we gathered together. Many families from the upper floors came down to my third-floor apartment and we stayed together. There was this doctor, Ali Thaçi, from a very, very good family. His wife Zyla was a strong woman. Ali has passed away; Zyla is still alive. They came over and we comforted them, and they comforted us. They were more scared upstairs because they were shooting, shooting.

When it happened, a woman [who was a] neighbor of the Jashari family came with some of the Jashari children that she had saved. She had taken them with her. She brought them to Gani Deliu's apartment, the family of that Member of Parliament, Deliu.[45] That was a very difficult moment. The children were frightened, traumatized. That old woman who had saved them brought them. She wasn't from their family, she lived further down. She had saved them and brought them to Skenderaj. It was such a moment… we still couldn't believe it, we didn't believe that they had been killed. We kept saying Serbia is just making propaganda, claiming they killed "terrorists." We still didn't believe that Adem [Jashari] was dead, we didn't believe it. But that's how it was.

Those men, those heroes died singing. Hamëz [Jashari] was also a great intellectual. Hamëz was involved in art, in music, in preparing various stage performances. He was multitalented. Adem had a very fiery temperament, but he was a great hero.

Anita Susuri: Did you go to the funeral or before the funeral?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, yes. But it was interesting because when they sent the bodies to… they told someone there, a man who dealt with construction materials, some Lah Tushila, they took the bodies there. The media hadn't reported it yet. Television hadn't yet shown those miserable bodies. I didn't even know that my son was interpreting on the frontlines for an American and a German woman. They eventually took my son to America. Now he lives in America. He had told them, "If you don't record and broadcast this, I won't translate for you anymore." My son never told me this. Some Abaz, Abaz Tërrnova, told me.

He said, "We were shocked," he said, "we told your son, 'Man, what internet are you talking about, we don't even have internet here, what are you saying?' But," he said, "that journalist opened the car trunk, touched something there, and told us, 'From this moment, the whole world is watching these corpses.'" Then they told my son, "Run, because if the paramilitaries come, they'll butcher you." A Serb told him, "Run." "Are you the son of Professor Xhafer?" "Yes," "Run, because if they come now, they'll cut you to pieces." When he told that to the journalists, they took him. There were moments like this, and even more painful ones.

Another very heavy and painful moment was when we were in Turiçec holding classes. I mentioned this Qezibane, the teacher from Bujanoc. We were together. That same day they killed the driver who brought us there, the nephew of Avdi, the school principal. She said… It was a Friday. She asked, "Should we go back or stay?" I said, "Whatever you want." She said, "Let's stay, because Adem's father

[45] Blerta Deliu, elected in the list of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK.

is coming," her husband Adem, her father-in-law. "I want to meet him." Luckily, I didn't stay. I don't know why, but I suddenly wanted to go to Pristina, because my kids were in Tauk Bahçe.

I took the bus. When we arrived in Komoran, what they called the worst checkpoint, where no one was allowed through, they stopped us, but one of the conductors had bought those soldiers some things. Drinks, stuff. He gave them and they let us go. They let us go, but not long after, near Kroni i Mbretit, where there was a poultry factory, others came out. As soon as they entered the bus, they said, "Who here is from Skenderaj?" (speaks in Serbian, min 10:54). The way they stared at me. They were staring (laughs). Luckily, a pregnant woman got really scared. I thought, if some chaos starts here, I'll speak up immediately.

As I was getting up, two UNMIK[46] vehicles arrived. One stopped in front of the bus, one behind. That night, UNMIK was pulling out. The police came out right away. That saved me. When I got here, I met Qezibala's husband. He asked, "What's happening there?" I told him everything. "Did Qezi stay there?" He called her Qezi. I said, "Yes, she stayed." They were separated for the entire war. During the war, they couldn't reunite until after it ended. Very difficult moments.

Anita Susuri: And teaching continued, I believe, until the NATO bombings, right? Or earlier?

Xhafer Ismaili: Teaching didn't stop until the day NATO began bombing,[47] it didn't stop. In those conditions, we continued, we worked.

Anita Susuri: Did it get even harder afterward?

Xhafer Ismaili: Of course, it got more difficult. They became much more brutal, they became very harsh. There were all kinds of police here, some even used drugs, you had to be really careful around them. This was… especially, now, not just because I'm from Drenica, but their main focus was Drenica. It was… and then it spread everywhere. All of Kosovo became Drenica. During protests they would say, "Drenica, we are with you." And really, they became one with them, and thank you for that, because every corner of Kosovo became Drenica. Everyone took up arms, everyone stood up.

Anita Susuri: You told me that you were in Pristina the whole time until the army removed you from your apartment? The Yugoslav army?

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes.

Anita Susuri: The Yugoslav army.

Xhafer Ismaili: Yes, we were living there at Pajazit's [Laiçi], and there were many other families from Drenica there. The late Pajazit would go and argue with his neighbors who had three- or four-story houses and wouldn't take in anyone. He would fight with them, "Why won't you take them in?" He had laid out the kitchen with sponge mattresses to make room not just to sleep, but also brought them food, even brought them medicine. Honestly, I don't know any family that contributed more than the

[46] The speaker means KVM, the Kosovo Verification Mission which was under the aegis of the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). UNMIK, or the UN Mission in Kosovo, was established after the war, in 1999.
[47] On March 24, 1999

family of Azem Lajçi and Pajazit Lajçi during the war. Later, a paramilitary was killed in Tauk Bahçe, and things got really tense.

I left. I took my son and daughter to my cousin's son, who was living more in the center, because they said the city center was safer, and over in Tauk Bahçe it had become unbearable. I brought my children there, but two nights after I brought them, four or five young men came and lay down in the corridor to sleep. I said, "You're not sleeping in the corridor, you'll sleep in the room with me and my wife. You're like our own children." One of them said, "Professor, we know you," he said, "Are you Professor Xhafer?" He said, "We finished high school in Skenderaj and now we're in university," he said, "We used to live with so-and-so" - I won't mention names -, "but he kicked us out. He said, 'I can't keep you here, you're from Drenica, leave.'"

I said, "Tonight, you're not sleeping in the corridor, you'll sleep with us." My wife said, "You sent your own children away from here, and now you want to keep these boys?" Right then, the door slammed, paramilitaries had arrived. I told the boys, "You go out the windows and run to Tauk Bahçe, go that way until I figure things out with them." That's where they cut my sweater. They were demanding money. "Where is the money you've collected for the KLA to kill our children?" And he cut it.

Then my wife came out holding a small bag. They forced us out like that. They took five dinars from her, she had them in her hand. She said, "He told me in Albanian, 'You must give me the money.'" I swear to God. They took my shoe off. How they knew I don't know, but they took 800 marks I had hidden in my shoe. And they were going to kill me. "Give us the rest of the money, or we'll shoot you." Three times they said that, until this one Serbian woman, a very good woman, intervened. She later died of cancer after the war. Even in Bllacë,[48] she gave me ten marks so I could call my children, to know what had happened.

Anita Susuri: And you didn't have any of your children with you at that point?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, my two children stayed here, my daughter and my son stayed here, at my cousin's son's place. He only had one son. Now he was at risk, it's one thing to hide your own son, but these others? Why did they come there? My son and a friend of Vehbi's son decided to go somewhere else. They shot a young man in front of them, killed him right there. A woman, the wife of a friend of mine, the wife of Dr. Nexhmedin Hoti, took them in, sheltered them for a bit at her house, then sent them back to Rifat. After two days, they were also taken and brought to Bllacë, we met up with them later. My eldest daughter is in education now, she works in education. During the war, she was sheltered in Turiçec, constantly with children.

We would hear rumors—"she's been killed," "no, she hasn't." But she wasn't killed. Our house had been burned down. The KLA[49] had stayed in our house. They burned it down, leveled it. And that's how it was…

[48] Bllacë is the border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia where thousands of refugees were stuck for a few days in March 1999, at the beginning of the NATO intervention, unable to either move into Macedonia or re-enter Kosovo.

[49] The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (ALB: *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës, UÇK*), was an armed ethnic Albanian guerrilla organization that emerged in the 1990s to fight for Kosovo's independence from Serbia and engaged in armed resistance against Serbian forces during the Kosovo War (1998–1999). It was demobilized in the summer of 1999 after the end of the war.

Anita Susuri: And after Bllacë, did you stay there? Did you return later? Did you travel?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, we stayed in Bllacë. I saw people digging their own graves. Saying, "If I die, just throw some dirt over me." Others would reply, "No, come on, don't say that." I saw people go insane. A woman came to me about her husband and said, "Please, professor, give him a sedative because he wasn't well even before, and now with the war…" I had to take a pill myself just to convince him to take one. I said, "Look, I'm taking it too." After that, he started talking normally. We slept there, or at least tried to say we slept. It was cold. It was April, but it was very cold. It even snowed.

They wouldn't let us cross the border, we would try to get close to the crossing point, and they'd send us back. They'd send the first group back, and then the second, and so on. But the people there received us well. They brought food. They brought bread, flatbreads, not from the bakery, canned food, cheese, everything. They were very, very caring. Not to mention blankets and such. But people… Believe it or not, when we left, we couldn't even walk because of all the blankets, diapers, and food on the ground. People were hoarding food even when they didn't need it. Out of fear that they'd starve, they were stocking up on 20 loaves of bread.

I pretended to be sick, otherwise they wouldn't let us leave. I had a heart arrhythmia, well, not exactly a condition, but something where my heartbeat would speed up when I swallowed. I said, "I'm sick." So they checked me again to verify, and they found the arrhythmia. My little daughter screamed, "Dad's dying!" She pushed through the fences and came to me. I held her hand and said, "Buqe, don't be afraid, I'm not sick." No one could calm her down. Then my wife somehow got out too, saying her husband was dying, and the younger son came along too, and that's how they let us go to Tetovo.

We stayed for a while in Tetovo. The people there were good, but they were poor. My eldest son was in Germany, he sent us money. I fixed up a room for us there, put in a window, a door, the flooring, and we stayed there. Whatever aid we received, I gave it to our hosts. I didn't take anything for myself because they were so poor. Later, my son connected with some journalists, and he told me, "I won't go to America. I feel bad for them [the hosts]. I'll just go to the airport and pretend to back out at the last minute." But he didn't back out,he called us from Washington.

"Where are you, Ariton?" He said, "In Washington." We were heartbroken. When we went to the camp in Čegran, where he had stayed, we found his tent, and inside, he had written down the verses of Latif Berisha's "*Tri gotat*" (Three Glasses). Those are such painful verses. It goes:

> "In the long meadow of life,
> I found three glasses.
> Two were full, the third was empty.
> I took the first,
> I sipped.
> It burned me instantly.
> I let it go.
> I took the second,
> Brought it to my lips.
> It burned even more,
> From its sweetness.
> I let it go.

I poured the first and second into the third,
It became bitter,
As bitter as this world itself."

He had written those lines in the tent, and it made us very emotional. And then he had already left.

Anita Susuri: So when the war ended, I suppose you learned about it through the media, radio or TV?

Xhafer Ismaili: We found out through television and also through radio. The media in Macedonia covered almost everything, we were informed. We found out that they were withdrawing, but they told us, "Don't rush to go immediately because it's not good to go right away." But each of us was in a hurry. "The roads are mined," they said. Even the way I came with my daughter and my wife, there were lots of holes in the asphalt where there had been mines that had been dismantled. There were a lot of holes. All the way to Ferizaj there were many such holes.

We came, we came here. Interestingly, in the apartment, there had been a woman from Llausha staying there. We asked her, "Why haven't they touched the books here?"...

Anita Susuri: A Serb?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, no. Interesting. They said, "No, they haven't touched your books." Just the picture I had of Skanderbeg there, she said, "They removed it." They hadn't broken it, "They just dropped it," she said, "they turned it face to the wall," yes, I swear to God. "The television," she said, "they took it." Yes, they had taken the television. But that woman had wrecked the apartment, it was worse than ever. We had to start from scratch then.

Anita Susuri: And then of course you worked a bit more and then you retired, right? When did you retire?

Xhafer Ismaili: No, I worked until… I retired in 2017. Because we at the faculty had the right to work until 70 years old.

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes, yes. And how was that recovery? Returning back? Reorganizing again? A different country, different…

Xhafer Ismaili: What kept us going was that… that joy. What kept us going was the joy that we were liberated. So that offset the material things that we didn't have, that we lacked. Solidarity was at its peak immediately after the war. Later we became disoriented. Because we helped each other, we helped the one who had nothing, we helped the one who had nowhere to go, we sheltered them. Look, my brother's son stayed in my apartment until he built his house. Until he built the house. And many others were helped the same way. But later, later this didn't continue. Strangely, it didn't continue. Some kind of egoism started, a kind of appetite to have, to become richer, I don't know why. I don't know why. People were traumatized, they were stressed. That had an effect.

I wrote two books about post-war stress. I wrote, *Stress among elementary school students,* and *Stress among teachers,* because teachers were also stressed. So I saw it, my own experience showed me how stressed teachers can be in addition to students. How much empathy the teacher has for the student. This war showed us that.

Anita Susuri: Mr. Xhafer, if you want to add something at the end, if we've forgotten to mention anything.

Xhafer Ismaili: No, this is a vast history for everyone, each individual has their own story. I know I've probably left out many things, many more important than what I mentioned, but still these are enough. As an appeal, as a message, I always say we should be as close as possible to one another. Not just physically close but in attitudes, in motives, in emotions, in work. We should be, because emotions are what connect the ends of the world. This material world of ours is very small compared to that emotional world.

I said it one day in a post, some probably took it too seriously, I said, "Many intellectuals didn't take up arms, but they loaded them, earlier they loaded them." They loaded them because we… many were sent away because of me… When I used to teach in elementary school, they would take my students and ask them, "What did the teacher explain?" The students were so good that they would say, "He explained exactly what you see in daily planning." I would write one thing in daily planning and explain something else. I would explain about Skanderbeg as much as I could.

So I would love to return to those times, to be more loving, closer to one another, with more solidarity with one another. I don't know what else might need to happen besides what already did, for us to come to our senses. The message was intellectual. I mentioned earlier, is there any greater poetry, any greater fulfillment than the verses of Ali Podrimja,[50] "Kosovo, I am your blood that cannot be forgiven"? This inspired the youth to take up arms and come out, because truly the blood of Kosovo is not forgiven.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much!

Xhafer Ismaili: It was an honor. Thank you!

[50] Ali Podrimja (1942 – 2012) was an Albanian poet. He was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. In the early '80s, he published the masterful collection Lum Lumi (1982), which marked a turning point not only in his own work but also in contemporary Kosovo verse as a whole.