

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH AVDI UKA

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Duration: 127 minutes

Present:

1. Avdi Uka (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Korab Krasniqi (Interviewer)
4. Besarta Breznica (Camera)

*Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:*

*() – emotional communication.*

*{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.*

*Other transcription conventions:*

*[ ] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension.*

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

## Part One

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Avdi, could you introduce yourself, your year of birth, your place of birth? Anything about your family, your origin?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, my name is Avdi Demë Uka, born on December 2 in '43, Tërstena village, Municipality of Mitrovica, at that time, I was [born]. Our school was also in the village, where I started my elementary school at the time. Now they send them [to school] younger, back then we started school a little later, we went to school when we became seven-eight years old. I finished elementary school, but very well, but the conditions were very, very, very weak. Very weak.

My father was, he lived long, he was almost a hundred years old when he died, he died in '57, in '57. So, he never worked anywhere, he didn't work anywhere at all. He just worked the land, the livestock, with the village life. He kept [livestock] at the time, at the time, he had cows, sheep, goats, buffalo, bees. Everything, his whole life was in the village. He had his land, he had quite enough land to get income, he won his bread from his land. He had his own mill to grind the flour, in his own land there and that's how he managed.

Later on we, his sons, took it over, we were five brothers and we started [to work] when it was time, none of us was able to get an education, then we got hired in Trepça, I started working in Trepça around '67, in '67 I was hired in Trepça. With no qualification, later on I received my qualification then and there at the enterprise, back then they granted us with qualifications. I worked as a miner, until '89. In '89 the situation became like that, the situation changed, the system changed and they fired us, Serbia fired us.

We went on strike for eight days, I am sure that strike is known to the international opinion. I am one of the participants, I am not saying organizers, like some people claim to, but they lie, it's not good to lie, God doesn't like lies. The people don't like lies, it's a sin to lie to the people. There were and weren't organizers because we were all organizers, we were all organizers. But very well, as Avdi Uka on

October 17, '88, we went to Pristina by foot. We had our demands, we couldn't achieve any of our goals, we absolutely couldn't do anything. Then on February 20 of '89, we went on strike for eight days. We stayed there...

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Avdi, before getting into that, I would like to ask you about your family...

**Avdi Uka:** Go on...

**Anita Susuri:** About when you were younger.

**Avdi Uka:** Go on, yes?

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that your father was very old when he died...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Did your father have a lot of children, or how was your father so old?

**Avdi Uka:** My father was old because he had two wives. With his first wife, he didn't have a brother, he didn't have a [paternal] uncle, he was like a plant, a plant. But at some point later, with his first wife, God gave him one son and six daughters. And when his son turned one years old, his wife died. And then he gave up (laughs) from, from life, but his friends at the time pushed him to get married again. Despite him having had a wife, he married my mother, he had seven sons and one daughter with my mother.

Now we, the brothers, one brother of ours died at seven years old, five of us were left and all of us worked in Trepça, my big brother, the second and the third, and me, and the fourth, all of us worked in Trepça, at the mine. One in flotation, one just in Trepça, one worked in Fafos. All of Trepça was an enterprise. While three of us were at the mine in Stari Trg. And life was like that, we had income, we lived well, the wages weren't bad at the time.

Life wasn't... life was bad, I say it was bad because going to the mine from my village, we had to walk for about 1 hour and a half, in summer and in winter. There were no vehicles, there were no buses, there were no roads and we had to walk. Half an hour to go, half an hour to come back, all three shifts, I mean in winter and summer, raining and snowing, it was a great adversity. But very well, back then we lived from our wages, as we could. We lived in a big family, there were 27 members, at some point later we [the brothers] separated and each of us lived their own life, with what they could.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember, do you remember anything your father told you... because it means he was born in 1900, 1900 and something, now I don't know...

**Avdi Uka:** No, not 1900 but...

**Anita Susuri:** 1800...

**Avdi Uka:** 1800 and something, yes, that's when he was born, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Did he tell you anything from that time or...

**Avdi Uka:** At that time, my father told me when Serbia entered, I am saying it as the elders used to say back then. Or when the partisans entered, alright, there was comfort for some time, something like that. The worst they went through was in '65, '66, when there was the weapons' action,<sup>1</sup> Ranković<sup>2</sup> did the action and at that time after the Second World War there was Sherif Asllan Tërstena who went as they said back then in the mountains, he fled and went to Albania.

Then each and every elder who was in the village, UDB,<sup>3</sup> they called it UDB at the time, they tortured and beat them. My father would tell me, "In the winter they put me in the mill race of the mill in a shirt and underpants", the wheel turns the water {describes with hands}, he said, "The ice would become four inches thick. 'Tell us where Sherif is or who is sheltering Sherif?'" So they suffered a lot, they suffered a lot, they suffered a lot. And I'll say one more thing, I asked my father, because I was young but very well, and I asked my father's sisters, because they lived longer than my father.

And I asked them, I said, "Did you know where Sherif was, and where this person and that person were, the ones who fled?" They said, "We knew and we sent food to bunkers, they built the bunker in the mountains, we knew and we didn't rat them out." So Albanians had *besa*,<sup>4</sup> they didn't reveal anything so they would be caught. Later he ran and went to Albania, that was done. Ranković climbed to power and had it out for them, I remember that like it was today.

**Anita Susuri:** You remember it?

<sup>1</sup> Known widely as Aksioni i Armëve, this was a state-ordered action to allegedly collect the hidden/illegal weapons of Kosovo/Albanians that took place in 1955-1956 all around Kosovo. The so-called action was used as a way to imprison and torture Kosovo Albanians.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

<sup>3</sup> The State Security Service - *Služba državne sigurnosti*, also known by its original name as the State Security Administration, was the secret police organization of Communist Yugoslavia. It was at all times best known as UDBA (pronounced as a single word and not an acronym), and was the most common colloquial name for the organization throughout its history.

<sup>4</sup> In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

**Avdi Uka:** I remember it. About the weapons, the weapons' action, that they beat them up, they beat them up badly in [police] stations, they brought them to the village, in yards in front of their families, they beat them up in front of their families, "Bring out your weapon!" Where could they have gotten a weapon, they didn't even have a hatchet to cut wood, let alone a weapon or what do I know what they asked at that time, pistols, yes. And there was always *zullum*<sup>5</sup> for us, listening to the elders and stuff, I said that I remember the action myself as well because during the Second World War, Draž Mihailović,<sup>6</sup> whoever heard of him knows him, Ranković, and the third one was Slobodan Milošević,<sup>7</sup> I mean they had the same system. Anti Albanian, anti Kosovar, anti the entire nation, they all did *zullum* to Albanians.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there people from your place who ran away, for example during Ranković's time, who were forced to flee Kosovo, [I mean] Albanians?

**Avdi Uka:** There were many, many fled, they went and prepared their documents to go to Turkey. To Turkey, there are many who went there, they went to Turkey and to this day they remain there and don't know who they even are, or what happened to them, or what went on. But very well, our, our... I remember that too a little as a child, I remember it a little as a child, I don't know what year it was, when they wrote themselves in to leave, to flee Kosovo, to flee our village and go to Turkey, the news came, the *haber*<sup>8</sup> came, back then the elders would say the *haber* came, "You shouldn't move, stop, don't move, you shouldn't move!"

And that stopped and the people stopped, they didn't leave, because everyone was going to leave. I know that my village and my father prepared the documents to leave for Turkey at the time. But very well, they came, I don't know who became *sebe*<sup>9</sup>, some people say it was Fadil Hoxha, some say this, some say that, I don't know {raises his hands}. I don't speak about the things I don't know for sure, but what I heard from my father and what was really true.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you know about the documents they prepared, I think they were more particular, those documents, do you know anything?

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<sup>5</sup> From Turkish, *zulüm* translates to oppression or injustice in English. It refers to the act of treating people unfairly, using power or authority to harm or control others, or engaging in acts of cruelty and wrongdoing.

<sup>6</sup> Dragoljub "Draža" Mihailović (1893 – 1946) was a Serbian general during the Second World War. He was the leader of the Chetnik Detachments of the Yugoslav Army (Chetniks), a royalist and nationalist movement and guerrilla force created after the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Slobodan Milošević (1941 – 2006), Yugoslav leader whose ascension to power began in 1987, when at the Communist League of Yugoslavia's Plenum he embraced the cause of Kosovo Serbian nationalists and immediately afterwards became President of Serbia and revoked Kosovo's autonomy.

<sup>8</sup> From Turkish, *haber* translates to news in English. It is commonly used to refer to information or updates about current events, developments, or any kind of noteworthy information.

<sup>9</sup> From Turkish, *sebe* translates to reason or cause in English. It is used to refer to the factor or explanation behind an action or an event.

**Avdi Uka:** I will be honest, I don't know about the documents, I don't know. Someone told me that they had to go to Skopje to fill in those documents, those requests, I don't what they called them at the time. I heard that there were people who even went to Skopje, I don't know how they prepared those documents, where they prepared the, who prepared it for them, I don't know, I don't know, I don't {places his hand to his heart} want to talk about it since I don't know.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember the time when... you told me that you, your family, your father had a lot of livestock and land that he worked, do you remember that time when communists took [stuff] from people in the form of extortion?

**Avdi Uka:** I remember because, I remember because in our house, in my father's house, the partisans had prepared food. The house was big, back then they called it a big house *maxhak*. Later when the partisans entered, they called it *višak* [excess], the *višak*, and they swepted the granaries, the granaries, the baskets. My father said, "I had two baskets of corn and they took them grain by grain. And I had some hidden in soil, I hid them in soil and I took them to the mill to grind them a little just for a day, or two. Not to produce more flour, only a little." And I know that when they swepted it and took it, I remember when they came and imagine, they came and cut down the thicket. "We will build," what do I know, "at this place, we will build buildings, we will build this, that." And I remember when they cut down the trees. The oak my father preserved, 50 years, a hundred years he preserved them and they came and cut them down *fak-fak-fak* {onomatopoeia}. The *zullum*, I said that the *zullum* never stopped for us.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to also ask, you mentioned that you started school at seven-eight years old, what was the time like back then, even back then the situation wasn't exactly stable, did you have problems at that time?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, back then when I was in school as I said earlier, there was poverty regarding books, regarding pens, bags. Think about it, I know it myself, I remember and I know that we didn't have bags for [carrying] books, a book, a notebook, a wooden pencil as they called it back then, and there are still pencils today but they don't use them that much. And we would put them on our chest, because we didn't have bags. But very well, the teachers were ours, Albanians, and the lessons they taught back then, whether it was mathematics, a little bit of history, everything, the lessons were, anyone can say anything, but the lessons were good. It was more valuable to have four years of school back then than maybe twelve-thirteen years today, as far as I can follow the youth and our children to be honest. The schools were good, I am saying the schools were [good], the lessons, a student's culture, everything was [good].

And what we hear about the students today, or about pupils, back then you didn't hear [about such things], you didn't, let me not mention the bad things we hear today, back then you didn't. There were

youngsters back then too, they were grown back then too, there were boys and girls back then too, but there weren't the bad things that people do now. Back then you didn't hear [about such things] anywhere, you didn't. I often say this, I am 77 years old as I said, very well, in the entire Kosovo I didn't see a student wearing glasses, a student. Now you see children who are tiny wearing glasses, which is an obstacle here. Because back then the food was natural, the food was natural, the bread, the milk, the cheese, the whey, the yogurt, they were all natural, the food was healthy.

Slapping [someone], they would say back then, slapping someone (laughs) they would burst on the other side like a tomato. Health was optimal, poverty was terrible, but the [people's] health was well {raises his arm like he's showing his muscles} because of the food. And I will say one more thing, look, there was poverty, but there was *sevda*,<sup>10</sup> why there was *sevda*, because there was, there was respect, an elder for another elder, a youngster for their parents. Whoever it was, there was will, there was more value to boil a pot of beans and for 12-13 or 15 people to sit down in one *sofra*<sup>11</sup> than putting everything [on a table] today, because there is no will today.

**Anita Susuri:** And here I wanted to ask you about your house, were you [living in ] a collective, or only with your father and your family? How did you live, what was the house like?

**Avdi Uka:** We, I told you that [we lived] with my father's sisters, my aunts, my father, then it was us, the sons, and my sisters, because my father had daughters with his previous wife too.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Uka:** Eh. We were, we lived together, until around '75 [when] we separated, until '75. We reached almost 30, we were 27 members, because the women would go to their husbands, they would get married, they would come [visit] you know, yes. But very well, they started going to their husbands, we started getting married and the number [of family members] increased (laughs) and it was around 27-28. And it came down to us, the brothers, separating, I mean we all went to our own houses, our elders died and that was it. We lived together, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** That house where you lived with your brothers, sisters, was it a big house, did you have a big yard? What was it like?

**Avdi Uka:** Our yard was about 15 square meters, our house back then was, it had a chimney and [a place] to cook, to hang out, it didn't have a slab like today, it was on the ground, the chimney was big, we stayed there. The ones who were married had their own rooms, their rooms were in a row. We had

<sup>10</sup> From Turkish, the word *sevda* translates to love in English. In this context, the speaker is conveying a feeling of satisfaction.

<sup>11</sup> Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

the *oda*<sup>12</sup> for guests, while my father was alive he didn't go in the house, he didn't go in the *oda*, I mean the room or nowhere, he always stayed in the *oda*.

And then we would go, we would stay with our father in the *oda*, the *oda* was large, somewhat five by five meters, it had a chimney, it had a stove [for heating], depends what the weather was like, so he stayed there sitting cross legged, he smoked tobacco [puts his fingers to his lips], until he died. And we stayed there, we hung out, with friends and brothers and neighbors and everybody, we stayed there and then everybody went to their rooms, the ones who were married, the ones of us who were unmarried slept there, there were mattresses on both sides, we lied down there, we slept there.

**Anita Susuri:** Your mother was like the head of the house back then?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes my mother was head of the house, she was younger than my father and she died in '73, my father died in '57, my mother in '73. I lived with my mother longer than I did with my father, I didn't get to live much with my father, I remember I was around eleven-twelve years old. But I lived with my mother for a long time. And between earth and sky, since you mentioned, I have ten children and I have my wife and I have everything, my mother, even if I'm given the earth where the Sun warms and moon shines I wouldn't trade it with my mother (his voice shakes), not back then, not day.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of woman was she?

**Avdi Uka:** My mother was a woman that only Allah knew how to make. She was a hard worker, she was quiet, she had a pleasant way of speaking, she never knew how to make someone mad, she always spoke about good things, about honor, every single thing of hers was good. And she struggled, she struggled a lot with us, she struggled a lot with the old man [my father], the old man was dangerous. A lot of work, a lot of cows, a lot of stuff, she struggled with them a lot, but Allah gave her health, she was well, more recently she developed asthma. She got asthma and died and the poor woman passed away, she left for the other world in '73.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me about your brothers who went to work in Trepça, now, you were a family who worked with agriculture...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** With farming and stuff, why did he make the decision to go in Trepça, was he influenced by the *rreth*?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

<sup>13</sup> *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one's reputation.



**Avdi Uka:** I will tell you, I will tell you, because as I said in the beginning we couldn't finish school, what we had to do, what we had to do was to take hold [of the opportunity] in Trepça. The wealth [we had] didn't cover [for the needs of] all the members, it didn't cover it. Trepça wasn't, as I said it took an hour and a half to go. The mine had its thing, it had its power and all of us, the entire Shala, not only my village, but the entire Shala, young and old, had two or three [family members working] in Trepça. And that was, how to put it, the magic of Shala and the barn of Kosov, [I mean] Trepça.

And back then if you started working in Trepça, you were guaranteed for life. You were kinda guaranteed for life, why, because the system was totally different. When I worked in Trepça I had ten children and my wife, I had twelve cards, and in the entire Yugoslavia, wherever you went in Yugoslavia you never needed to pay a cent for anything. All through the cards, your health was guaranteed, medicine was guaranteed. The salaries were sometimes good, sometimes not good but enough to make a living. You can't achieve that system again, because there is no logic to achieve it, today there is no health insurance, the state of this nation is a pity.

And they come out and lie, they beat their own chest, "I am this, I am that," and they're nobody, they're nobody because none of them have the people's interest [in mind], they all have their personal interest, groups, party this and that, they don't have the people's interest [in mind]. It's a pity if a worker dies at their workplace today, there is no insurance. It's a pity, I have 34 years, one month and six days of work, with benefits, today [I get 50 euros] from a specialist in Pristina, I have stents places, I pay for my monthly medicine, while I get 170 euros. There is nowhere else in the world like this. It's not enough, one [month's] pension doesn't reach the other.

**Anita Susuri:** The work in Trepça was difficult too...

**Avdi Uka:** Above everything, above everything there were families who didn't have somebody employed in Trepça, they came to me and other people, not only to me but to whoever they trusted. They took the cards of my children and my wife, and with my card and my children's card, they sent their children to the doctor and they didn't ask who they were or whose card it was. And they knew, they knew that that card is somebody else's but it was confirmed {pretends he stamps something} they looked at it, they gave them the medicine, "Have a good day!" Today you have nothing.

**Anita Susuri:** When your older brothers started to work, did they complain about work, did they tell you anything? How, how did they describe it, because it was more difficult during those years?

**Avdi Uka:** Two of my brothers worked in Trepça before me, I was third and then the fourth started working, the fifth one worked in Betonerska in Mitrovica, but very well. When my older brother started working in Trepça, the work was very difficult, very difficult because he worked with a scoop, a shovel, I don't know what they call it, a shovel. He loaded the wagon and pushed it with his arm to go and

unload it and then go on a break. Come, come, come... when I started working, the technology arrived. They had excavators, graders, so there was no more work with a scoop, with a shovel.

The work was a little easier, a little easier, but very well, when you get used to a workplace, when I would take a month off, never in my life did I finish the time off without going to the Trepça mine one day to see my friends. I never finished my time off, because at some point our workload increased, and we would earn more time off, we never used [all of] it. And when you are used to a place it feels like you're working at your own home, the risk is there of course, going a thousand meters underground, up to three thousand meters, to go three kilometers down the mine's shaft underground, only Allah protected us.

For my generation while I worked in the mine, I worked until '90, nine people lost their lives, nine people. We took Sejdi Muliqi out wrapped in a sugar bag, he fell down, he fell in a maintenance hole like when you spill wheat {opens his arm like he's throwing wheat} from the bag, that's the state he was in. There was a day when we extricated the whole day to remove the rubbles and the ore in order to remove his body which was under the rubbles, it was a difficult life, but as I said you get used to it and it feels like you are working at home. God protected us.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me you didn't continue high school, right?

**Avdi Uka:** Nope, nope, nope, nope {shakes his head}.

**Anita Susuri:** So it means as soon as you finished elementary school, you started working, is that right?

**Avdi Uka:** I worked before going to military service. Because back then you couldn't work at the time without completing military service, in former Yugoslavia, the military service. But you could work in other enterprises. I worked for about two-three years before military service. I started working when I was around 15 years old, I worked in Fafos for almost two years before I went to military service. We would paint some grates, some pipes, with paint and stuff, we would get, they would pay us a little. Because according to the law they couldn't hire you without finishing military service at the time.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** You told me that you didn't immediately finish high school but you continued, you started working in the mine although the mine was far away, so you walked for an hour and a half. And it was the '70s, '74 when Kosovo's position improved a little.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** I mean, the Constitution...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes of '74.<sup>14</sup>

**Anita Susuri:** What was the situation like at the mine at that time?

**Avdi Uka:** Back then it was really good. You traveled, the bus, they launched some lines at certain places, I mean down south around Mitrovica they already had them, but not us there in Shala, they suddenly launched *vit-vit-vit* {onomatopoeia}. They laid asphalt in our area, from my village to there, and then after the bus [line] launched we would walk about one kilometer by foot, we would go to the shore, [walking] on asphalt, it felt like we weren't working. The salary was really good, it was really good, life was good.

And with those amendments of the Constitution of '74 we had many rights, many rights. What we didn't have, we didn't have our own army and police separated and we didn't have the title Republic, but with those amendments of the Constitution we were whatever we wanted. Now imagine that an Albanian should've been the president of Yugoslavia. And there was, and there should've been according to the Constitution of '74, and it was. Come on, come on, come on, come on, it was good.

Veli Deva, whoever heard of him, when he came to Trepça, he was a mine doctor. Imagine in the time of Veli Deva, we received our salaries with two lists, with two lists. Because he couldn't put the salary in one list because it was too high, so he divided it in two. He would give you one portion here, one there, so you had enough money, I am talking about Veli Deva's time, yes. Later there came Aziz [Abrashi]<sup>15</sup> and [Burhan \[Kavaja\]](#) and these directors, it all depends, even the directors played their role.

The union would help with children's books, they gave me a bag full of children's books and notebooks, the union. So, the situation was improving, it was repairing and stuff. They started building buildings, Veli Deva built the buildings in Tuneli i Parë and had promised to build buildings from the mine to Shala. The Trepça workers who wanted an apartment would be given the keys {pretends he's giving something}, the ones who didn't want apartments would take credit, they would call it, long term, 30 years, 40 years, to give them the credit, to make it possible for miners. But that didn't last, they smashed it, removed it, ruined it, and what happened, happened.

**Anita Susuri:** What type of work did you do during the time at the mine? What was your work like?

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<sup>14</sup> The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution was the fourth and final constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It came into effect on 21 February 1974. Kosovo and Vojvodina, the two constituent provinces of Serbia, received substantially increased autonomy, including *de facto* veto power in the Serbian parliament.

<sup>15</sup> Aziz Abrashi (1938-2014) was an economist, who led many important socially-owned enterprises. He was the general director of the Trepça Enterprise and led the enterprise during the most difficult period of the Miners' Strike 1989, where he was fired and sent to prison for 14 months together with other miners.

**Avdi Uka:** There is no work... my work was, there is no type of work in the mine that I didn't do and I extracted ore and I excavated the ore and I fixed the railroad for the wagons to move on and I drove the locomotive to transport the ore. There is no work in the mine that I didn't do. I worked with pipes too, with water pipes, the water supply or what do they call it because there everything is with water, the machines have the water and the air and everything. There was no work during those years that I didn't... work there. My last position for about thirteen-fourteen years was that of a miner. The salary was good, the work was more difficult, riskier, but very well, the salary was really good. A crowd of children, ten children and my wife, twelve members of the family lived on that salary. And we had to ask for a bit of extra money.

**Anita Susuri:** What year was it when you went to military service, I mean you mentioned you started working, and then you went?

**Avdi Uka:** '64, I completed military service in '65.

**Anita Susuri:** Where were you for the military service?

**Avdi Uka:** Where was I for military service?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Uka:** I was in Paraćin first, in Paraćin. In Ćuprija, in Banja, in Kremna, I was in five, six places for a bit. They sent me to [give] commands, I don't know what they called it. But first in Paraćin, for about six months.

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

**Avdi Uka:** Look, I said it in the beginning and I will say it again, back then there was no bigotry between nations, Albanian, or *shka*,<sup>16</sup> or Bosniak or Turkish or what do I know, there wasn't. Actually, actually, actually at the time when I was [working there] we had great advantages because the officers themselves told me when I went to Banja, it had seven guards, guard places {moves his hand in a circular motion}, guard places.

The officer would tell me, he would say, "When you're under my guardianship, I," he would say, "sleep comfortably" {rests his head on his hand}. They had full trust in us, because there was no Albanian that didn't go there and catch the asleep, or to take their gun (laughs) or something. They had trust and we had advantages, there was no, there weren't these grudges and bigotries between each other, at the time when I was there.

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<sup>16</sup> *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have visits, did you go to visit your family? What was that like?

**Avdi Uka:** I was once, for a month, not an entire month, I was on a break once. My brother came to visit me once, for like a day, twice, once one of the brothers and then the other, they came to visit me, there were no obstacles. We went out and strolled around the city, they went back home, we went back there.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it the first time you traveled in Serbia when you went in military service, or other places of Yugoslavia? What did traveling seem like? I think [you traveled] by train?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes we went by train, we went by train. But very well, even before I went to military service, before going to military service, I was young, I went to Belgrade by train. I was in Zagreb too, I was also in Ljubljana, I mean before going to military service as a young man.

**Anita Susuri:** What was traveling by train like back then, what was the place like?

**Avdi Uka:** Honestly I will tell you the truth, maybe someone sees it as a big deal, to me it was some kind of joy. You were free, you went into the cabin, you got your ticket, you sat down, nobody bothered you, you arrived and went out. Whatever you went there for, I mostly went for visits, to visit some nephews and [maternal] *sebe*<sup>17</sup> like that, I went on some military visits, I didn't have any problems anywhere. We went, I did my business, I returned, there were absolutely no type of problems.

**Anita Susuri:** Back then it was normal, I mean, to visit other places...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes, yes, wherever you wanted.

**Anita Susuri:** You had no problems.

**Avdi Uka:** No, that's right, you had no problems back then at all. Just like sleeping in the middle of Belgrade, or in the middle of Mitrovica, it was the same.

**Anita Susuri:** No, I wanted to ask you about when you created your family, when you got married, how did the marriage come about? Did it happen after military service, or?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, after military service, I was at work, my brother, back then we didn't find our wives by ourselves. My brother found my [now] brother-in-law, found the bride, sent the *msit*,<sup>18</sup> when it was my

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<sup>17</sup> From Turkish, *sebe* translates to reason or cause in English. It is used to refer to the factor or explanation behind an action, event, or situation.

<sup>18</sup>

turn [to get married] among my brothers, it [the tradition of *msit*] was still current. A village there above ours in Bajgora, in Shala of Bajgora, my wife is from the village Bajgora. It was like that for about six or seven months, working on some stuff here and there. At that time I was working in Trepça and had my salary. I will never forget it, [it was] 800 *dinars*.<sup>19</sup> When I went to Turkey, in Istanbul I got eight *lira* {touches his neck} with my salary, today a *lira*<sup>20</sup> costs 350 euros or how much, I am not sure...

**Anita Susuri:** More.

**Avdi Uka:** Back then it was a hundrder *dinars*, my salary was 800 *dinars* with no qualification, no qualification. And I went, I went to Turkey, I bought working tools. Despite everything I never said I did anything but my brother, because back then when we received our salary, they gave it to us in an envelope, in an envelope, the ration stamps and the salary, as soon as we got home we gave them to our big brother, head of the house, he took out the ration stamps, gave them to us, and a little money, have a nice day, have a nice trip. He led with it, we weren't concerned with that.

**Anita Susuri:** What about your wife's family, were they perhaps miners too?

**Avdi Uka:** Her father, my wife's father was a miner too, he was a miner too.

**Anita Susuri:** So, there were many families who formed relationships like that.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, exactly like that. I said that Shala, Shala, Shala has 36 villages as we're referred to as up there, so there is no person that didn't have from one to five [family members working] in Trepça. They were all working in the mine, and they all traveled by foot. There were people from Llap, from Drenica, from everywhere. But the ones who were from around the neighborhood slept in *ban haus* [Ger.: residential building] they were *ban haus* as they called them in German.

They slept there, when there were a couple of days off, they went from home. The ones of us who were in the surrounding area traveled, all of us went back to our houses. My father-in-law worked in Trepça too, he died sometime around '82. He was a miner, he died, he got ill, he passed away. And my wife is from that village. I mentioned that my brother found my [now] brother-in-law and until the night they brought her here and she got out of the car, I did not see her at all. When she got out of the car, it seemed like I didn't see the Sun anywhere else but in her (laughs). She wasn't here because my wife is very good. (laughs) Say something because I am joking a little.

**Anita Susuri:** No problem. I wanted to ask you about your family while you worked, you're saying that your father-in-law was a miner, but were your wife and children worried when you went to work, that they weren't sure what might happen?

<sup>19</sup> *Dinar* was the Yugoslav currency. Now it is the basic monetary unit of Serbia.

<sup>20</sup>

**Avdi Uka:** Honestly not only my family but every member, every family, each and every one of them were in fear until they [the miners] went back home. If something might happen to them, as I mentioned [there were] nine cases, I was in the village where exactly a person from my village lost their life in the mine there. And at 12:00 PM we were notified, they said, “An unfortunate...” in the transistors, there were no televisions back then, nor was there electricity in my village, and they said, “This person lost their life.” All felt pain, all felt sadness, all felt fear, the entire family. While we, I said we got used to it, we weren’t bothered at all, [but] the family were loaded [with stress].

Imagine there was a case, my father had his *oda* on the second floor {describes with hands}, there was a window with a street view where [they] would come back by and when the winters were windy, back then the winters were harsh, I wasn’t working [yet]. “Look father because the miners are coming” as he said. Because they would come back walking down that street, 15, 16, 20 workers would leave work. “Father they are walking down” “Oh thank God!” {puts his hand above his heart}. And without even having a family member [of his own] working in Trepça, but for the fellow villagers, not for family members, that’s exactly what it was like. Everyone had the fear that something might happen [to them] at work or what do I know.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you ever at risk? Were you at a high risk?

**Avdi Uka:** I was at risk a hundred times, the ore fell down in front of me, in front of me {moves his hand near his face}, tonnes [of ore] fell down. The wagon ran me over, at the grizë where the ore is unloaded, it’s unloaded and it crosses through a bridge and the wagon unloads, my foot was there, two of my toes are broken. My toes were in a cast for over a month, God protected me, and those two toes are broken to this day. They remained the same way they were put in a cast, my toes.

We had a bit of injuries, nothing big, some had big injuries, there are people who have lost their legs, there are people who lost their hands, there are people who lost their eyes. I mean everything happened there, everything happened. I had that injury back then, my brother had the same system, his hand {touches his finger}, my big brother broke his finger, the others [had] no [injuries]. We didn’t turn them into big deals at all, you know those small injuries, minor injuries, there was no risk.

**Anita Susuri:** You had your insurance, did they immediately send you to the hospital?

**Avdi Uka:** Immediately, immediately, immediately, immediately, and nobody asked for a *dinar*, nor [did I have to] give it to them, all the doctors looked after you, you had every single thing in the hospital. They healed you, they let you go, they gave you medical time off, to rest a bit afterwards, to heal and stuff, it was paid time off. Now they say [medical leave] is up to 20 days, 15 days, I don’t know what it’s like now. But back then if the doctor and the commission of doctors gave you two years, you

had two years *bolovanje* [Srb.: medical leave] and it was all paid {pretends he's writing something}. There was no problem, absolutely not, it depends what kind of illness or injury you had.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you, I don't know if you remember the first time you went to the mine, what was it like?

**Avdi Uka:** I will honestly tell you the truth, it seemed very interesting to me, I worked in Fafos for two years, in fertilizer production. Trepça took Fafos, took it under its management and made a request, "Can I not go to Mitrovica for the sake of not traveling," since Trepça was closer to me and they immediately transferred me there. When I got inside on August 15 in '67, I would look and it seemed like I was in a different world. Those corridors made of stone, the workshops made of stones, the offices, the supervisor office all made of stone, so I would look (laughs) weird.

What they did, back then the supervisor sent you along with an older worker, they said, "Take him as a helper." First they sent you to do some easier tasks, for a week, for a month, just as an example, that surely happened. Now with the amount of months increasing, your job position increased too and you went straight into production. They don't immediately send you to the dangerous sites, slowly learning, while observing, observing and... but very interesting, very interesting, just like seeing a movie or like something you've never seen before, it was like that. You have seen a hundred movies, but you stumble upon one you have never seen and it seems so interesting. That's how that was, it was very interesting.

**Anita Susuri:** Did it ever happen to you for the lamp, that [helmet] light to stop working?

**Avdi Uka:** It happened, it happened for a very short time, or you had to go to the side until a friend, a coworker comes. Or you had to go up against the wall while touching it, to not go onto the railroad because if the locomotive or something came it would grind you, so [you had to walk] very slowly. It happened for very short periods of time and the thing is that in the mine it happens very rarely that you are alone. You're always with another person, or two other people, or another person, if my [helmet] light stopped working, yours didn't, with that lamp you got out, yes. Those things happened, they happened. But when my brother worked, they worked with a carbide [lamp] as they called it, carbide lamp, they put the carbide on, the water lit it up *frzh* {onomatopoeia}, that wasn't safe/reliable at all, but they had it on, there. When I started working there was {puts a fist near his forehead} the battery ones, you hung it on your waist, the other one on your forehead {touches his forehead} and it was, it was well, yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did you communicate there...

**Avdi Uka:** {Gets closer to hear better}



**Korab Krasniqi:** Did you communicate only with the friends you were there together with, or you could communicate with others from different sites too?

**Avdi Uka:** No, on that level, on that level, one level, for example I worked on the eight level, I'm taking it as an example, because I worked on many levels, one level had at least 13-14 workshops. They call it a workshop {describes with hands the room where it's located}, you and your helper drilled [for ore] here, I drilled there by the doors, the other one drilled somewhere else. And when you received the work timetable we were 40 people sitting in one place like this on *klupa* [Srb.: desks]. The supervisor got up, "You will go to this workshop, you, you to that workshop."

When some days passed, a day, two-three days, he would just say, "You [go] to your place, you [go] to your place" and everybody knew their place. If something changed or if a workshop got removed and another new one opened, they gave you the timetable together with another person or two people. Because the miners had their helper, the one who loaded the ore was someone else, many times, many times he had a helper too. So, four people came to a workshop here, my helper and I drilled here {points to the right} you and your helper there {points to the left} you took the ore and loaded it. So, we were always in contact with friends.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did the condition differ from one level to another, for example?

**Avdi Uka:** Hm?

**Korab Krasniqi:** The conditions, the work conditions...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did they differ from one level to the other?

**Avdi Uka:** Nope.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Is the air, does it differ...

**Avdi Uka:** The air, the air differs a little, the higher levels or the south, I'll take the south as an example where the air is heavier, the air [feels] closed [in], heavier. The north is clearer, there are levels with different air, there are levels with different [air], but they differ only a little, the air differs a little, they differ a little, they differ a little.

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did you fear the most when you went down there? Was it the earthquakes, or the landslides or what risk did you fear the most?

**Avdi Uka:** The most, the riskiest, every one of them, they are all, whatever happens there, whatever happens is a risk. But very well, we feared the most and the riskiest were landslides, because we had these workshops, there are workshops almost one hectare, do you know the size of one hectare? Very large. And you don't know {points up with his hands} what's happening up there, you extract ore up to four meters, five meters, and that's left, the ceiling is left like this, all stone, what do you know, it can happen once.

In my workshop, where I worked during the first shift, the second shift, back then there was no third shift at all when I started working, only two shifts. The first and the second. Then when we went from the second shift, we would go to the first shift, when we arrived the entire ceiling fell down on the ground, the entire ceiling. Around two meters thick, we drilled that for five-six months straight, we loaded the ore, we extracted the ore from that. In case it pinned us, maybe it would take a month to get us out of there, breaking [down the rubble] and then getting us out, yes. That's the greatest risk there, but they are all risky, they are all risky.

Now, seven meters, seven meters, seven flights of stairs, each four meters, have to be climbed to the workshop, the machine in your hand, the munition on your back, I am taking them as an example, sometimes the machine, sometimes the munition. God forbid if one of them broke, you would go down, so the risk was everywhere. But very well, as I said one gets used to it and you practice and stuff, but the greatest risk from which you couldn't be cautious about were landslides. You're cautious about everything, you are careful, but you can't [be careful] against that, because you don't know {points up} what's there.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Avdi, Avdi, I wanted to ask you about the '80s, the student demonstrations<sup>21</sup> began in '81...

**Avdi Uka:** I know it very well.

**Anita Susuri:** And the situation started becoming worse...

**Avdi Uka:** It got worse, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like there in Trepça at that time, during those years, how did you see it?

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<sup>21</sup> On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

**Avdi Uka:** In '81, the demonstrations of '81, it began on March 11 of '81 in Pristina. Personally, as Avdi, I am not saying I am somebody, but as Avdi I said that if it is, it is good. Why is it good? There are rumors that they were organized by somebody else, rumors, I don't trust them much. I had discussions with some former leaders of that time, ours [as in Albanians], "This and that, they were organized by this and that," I said, "Sir I absolutely do not care who they were organized by, I am interested in a Kosovo Republic, who is against? I am not against that."

Do you understand, to put it briefly, Kosovo Republic, okay, I support it. But very well, as we all know how it happened, how it was organized and stuff, they started come on, come on, come on and they brought the police special unit, they cornered Kosovo. The Mayor of the Municipality of Mitrovica and the director of Trepça: Shahin Bajgora, Shahin Bajgora [was] Mayor of the Municipality of Mitrovica, Shyqyri Kelmendi [was] director of Trepça, we were working in '81, *vërc* {onomatopoeia} this *vërc* {onomatopoeia} that to bring the police, for the police to watch us there.

**Anita Susuri:** In '81?

**Avdi Uka:** I am talking about '81, about '81.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Uka:** They said, "No," those two. "Policemen can't come here," besides the small [police] station that was there, it was in Trepça, a small [police] station for Shala and for Trepça. "He saw it himself. You shouldn't bring foreign police here, because we have our people, our workers for National Security" or what were they called, I honestly don't know, they put two hundred of us, miners dressed in military uniforms. And we did rounds in Trepça, I mean to make sure nothing happened, [to make sure] nobody came. A rule is a rule, law is law, our leadership agreed to do it like that, we had the guns there at the enterprise. Every enterprise had its guns and every person who was part of the defense had their gun, and they put us [in uniforms].

**Anita Susuri:** How did they choose who will work on defense, or just like that, whoever was more trustworthy?

**Avdi Uka:** Absolutely, the Trepça leadership, the union, the director, the Trepça leadership should've been, I'm taking it as an example, 200 people, 1300 miners, 200 of them should be for defense. They appointed this person, this person, that person and it didn't matter who, they were all the same, but very well someone was picked. And they put us [in uniforms], I myself was wearing [the uniform] there in '81. I would be surprised, I would wonder why they were paying us, what they were paying us, what we were doing, we didn't do anything, but very well, you would go there.

There was the enterprise guard, even today there is a guard, they would send a guard and a soldier at the office where the offices were, they called them a porter or what [were they called], they were just a guard there, they sent a soldier too. And that's how they doubled it, where there was one they made it two, where there were two they made it three and they made rounds, nothing at all, absolutely. Anyway it was well, Trepça at that time wasn't affected, at the time, in '81, let whoever say whatever, Trepça remained, how to put it, like, like it was sleeping, I don't know how to put it, maybe it should've woke up. But very well, Trepça didn't wake up and that passed, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** There were those slogans "Trepça works, Belgrade builds..."

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes, yes, yes "*Trepča radi, Beograd se izgradi*" [Srb.: Trepça works, Belgrade builds], that's right, that was it and it was exactly like that. Why, what was melted... the flotation [mine] was in Zvečan, it came out of Trepça and it was grinded, it went here and there, it was melted there, they made gold, whatever was gold was packaged and all went to Belgrade. At the time it all went to Belgrade. Eh, there's rumors, there's rumors, there are rumors that up to four thousand kilograms of gold were extracted each month.

400 always, but [there were rumors it was] up to four thousand, now it depends. And it all went to Belgrade, and all the lead and zinc, Belgrade sold all of it, wherever they wanted, however they wanted. Eh, they sold it and some of the money went for your salary, to buy some tools or something, the other they used for themselves, have a nice day. And that slogan was exactly like that, that Belgrade "*Trepča radi, Beograd se izgradi*" [Srb. Trepça works, Belgrade builds], that's right.

**Anita Susuri:** Did that bother you, was this something that pushed you more towards expressing your dissatisfaction?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes it was, of course it was, since then, look from '81 it almost got that... {moves his hands to the left}

**Anita Susuri:** Direction.

**Avdi Uka:** The other direction, the complaints, the demands, someone more loudly, someone less loudly. And God brought it, when it came to '88, '81, in '88 trouble broke out, Trepça stood up, old and young, the entire Kosovo, not only Trepça, the entire Kosovo on their way to Pristina, in the Boro Ramizi hall, and at the center and the stadium and what do I know. And like that, on February 20 of '89 we went into strike that day for the first time, God brought it...

**Anita Susuri:** When you got on your way to Pristina by foot, what was that day like, how do you remember that day, how did it all go?

**Avdi Uka:** That day went, because these... look even those Serbian gatherings, they gathered in Kosovo.

**Anita Susuri:** The meetings.

**Avdi Uka:** They said all sorts of negative things about Albanians. Belgrade would send letters, all sorts of negative things about Albanians. To take away the right of language, the right of education, for the education workers to retire prematurely, prematurely {raises his index finger}. For the leadership of Kosovo to not be elected by us, but for Belgrade to elect it, whoever they wanted. That was the breaking point and we went to Pristina, we discussed, I myself spoke at the Boro Ramizi hall, *bam-bum-bam-bum* {onomatopoeia}, we couldn't do anything, nobody took that into account.

**Anita Susuri:** I think when you got ready to go there you had a photograph of Tito, Yugoslavia's flag...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes, yes...

**Anita Susuri:** How, why like that?

**Avdi Uka:** I will tell you why Tito, I swear to you, I don't want to complain either, just reality, I don't even know why, what, who took it, you understand? But there was talk and we took it, I am saying that I agreed to take it too, I am saying it wasn't my decision but very well, we took it. Why we took it, Tito was dead, there was nothing of him, for what, there were checkpoints, police checkpoints and you didn't believe that you could manage to walk to Pristina, that they would allow you to go. As a justification, look we are showing Tito in the front {pretends he's holding something with his hands}, he was dead there was nothing of him anymore (laughs).

But very well, they took it, they didn't do anything bad (laughs), let anyone say whatever. They took it, you can take a dead person anywhere, a dead one, don't take a live one (laughs). People lived for 50 more years, we lived in that system, honestly yes. They took it, it wasn't a big deal, just for the sake of police checkpoints, in case they attack you, if the police attack you, to say, "Look at what they're doing, we have Tito's photograph and they are attacking us" to blame it on them, not just us who took it.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did you believe, excuse me, did you believe in Yugoslavia back then?

**Avdi Uka:** Absolutely not, we didn't believe in it.

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did...

**Avdi Uka:** Back then neither... hm?

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did Yugoslavia mean to you? How did you understand Yugoslavia?

**Avdi Uka:** We understood it, I said that since Tito's death, since Tito's death, Slloba [Slobodan Milošević] and Slloba made his people do every bad thing in the world to Albanians. As I said, instead of somebody else retiring early, for example miners, he made the education staff go to early retirement. To get rid of them so children don't learn Albanian. The Albanian leadership, [Kaqusha \[Jashari\]](#), [Azem \[Vllasi\]](#), and everyone, whoever was [in the leadership] back then, I don't know who it was, I mean to fire them and send whoever they wanted, Serbia. And then we stood up against them.

The amendments of the Constitution of '74, I mentioned earlier that you had everything, you didn't have the title of republic, you didn't have a separate army, but you had many rights with that, they revoked it. They revoked the amendments and they wanted to take us a hundred years back, backwards, take us a hundred years backwards. And we went on strike and the demands were this, this, this, nine demands. So, they were all known prior to it because we held a hundred gatherings. They came to the Committee, we spoke in front of them, we spoke in the Boro Ramizi hall, we spoke in Trepça's hall, they absolutely didn't care.

To look at and review the demands, this, this, that, they put them in a drawer and didn't share them anywhere. And the people reached a boiling point and we said it first, "We don't give Serbia one shovel of ore, we won't anymore until our demands are met." The United Nations to look out for Albanian people's fate, they mention the United Nations today, God sent it, before 35 years we mentioned it and I served exactly 14 months in prison for that work, because I said it, that the United Nations [should] look out for Albanian people's fate. And many, many others I mean.

**Anita Susuri:** What about that day when you got on your way [to Pristina] by foot, what was the journey like? I think the police stopped you?

**Avdi Uka:** At many points yes, they stopped us at many points, they asked...

**Anita Susuri:** What was that...

**Avdi Uka:** And there was nobody who could hinder the power because there were many workers, a lot, *au, au* {onomatopoeia} stop there, step aside, they had no way but to clear the way. And *kërk* {onomatopoeia} [people] came into the hall from all sides, the entire Kosovo, whoever heard about it, whoever could, whoever... the hall filled with people. When I entered there were millions of people there, standing room only. I asked for the floor and I got up and spoke. And when they judged us [in the courtroom] they put out my photograph, I am telling the truth, if I had that photograph exactly as it was, I wouldn't have given it away even if you paid me five thousand euros.

**Anita Susuri:** But you didn't find it?

**Avdi Uka:** Nope, UDB took that. But that photograph, that talk, in Trepça when Stipe Šuvar<sup>22</sup> was there, I talked to him in Albanian, Remzi Kolgeci translated it although I could've said it in Serbian, I didn't want to, on the eighth level I spoke in Albanian, just out of spite, I talked in Albanian out of spite, eh. I could've said everything I said in Albanian, I could've said it in Serbian but I didn't want to.

**Anita Susuri:** What about when you entered there, how did you think about speaking among all those people? They gave you the right to speak or you asked for it yourself?

**Avdi Uka:** I asked to speak because in Trepça it's bad to say I...

**Anita Susuri:** I am talking about when you went to the *1 Tetori* hall.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes, among the miners of Trepça I enjoyed full trust and nobody said a word when I spoke, nobody breathed and they always gave me the floor, I had privilege, always. And it's not that I only spoke at the strike and in Pristina, I always spoke, always, always, always, always. Always, always, always, always, eh. They took me to the police station and held me there for five, six hours a hundred times, a hundred times. They called me and asked, "Look, what are you lacking? What do you want? Do you want an apartment? Do you want credit?" As I said [I was] 40 years old, "Why? What do you want?" {places his hand to his heart} "No, I don't need an apartment, nor credit. The gathering was called, I can speak about my rights. I have the right to speak. Don't call the gathering and I won't speak."

**Korab Krasniqi:** Do you remember what you said at the hall? Who did you talk to and what was the topic of the discussion when you went to the *1 Tetori* hall here in Pristina?

**Anita Susuri:** What did you talk about?

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did you talk about, do you remember?

**Avdi Uka:** About all of these, about our rights, about our rights.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Avdi Uka:** I said in the beginning that those, those things that Serbia did, that Serbia did, directly, anyone can say anything, they can sell spurious patriotism, we weren't against Serbians, against

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<sup>22</sup> Stipe Šuvar (1936 – 2004) was a Croatian politician and sociologist who was regarded to have been one of the most influential communist politicians in the League of Communists of Croatia in SR Croatia in the 1980s during Yugoslavia.

Serbian, we were against the politics of Serbia, against the politics of Serbia. Three members of the Committee, 200 miners were in the hall when in '87, in '87 I asked, I said, "I entreat the Central Committee..." I was never a communist, I never joined a party. I am a miner, I am Avdi Uka, I am a retiree, but very well, I asked and said, "To take Slobodan Milošević and send him to a doctor, if he is sick to give him medical help. If he is not sick and he is doing these mistakes or these intentionally, or these, or this oppression of Albanian people, he should be hanged at the Ibri bridge."

Three members of the Committee were sitting there, the entire Trepça leadership and there were 200 and more miners sitting there when I said that in '97 ['87], '98 ['88]. I mean always, we always spoke, we always spoke seeing that he was causing trouble among Albanian people, and removing our rights. And now the discussions, it depends what he said there, we answered here, with gatherings, and going to Pristina, it was all these demands, why would the Albanian education staff retire, why go to early retirement? For what? That you were lacking, and they wanted to send their own. Why should Serbia elect Kosovo's leadership when we could elect them ourselves. We should choose ourselves, this person, this person, that person, this should be a minister, this person here, that person there.

So, they didn't want that. They would go to Serbian gatherings, "Albanian women are whores, Albanian women give birth to ten children each," they insulted my wife and my mother, "You made ten irredentists." I didn't know what an irredentist meant, I am telling the truth I didn't know, I didn't know what irredentist meant. I knew my people's rights, society's rights, to demand my rights. Never for myself personally, because I told you that if I wanted, if I wanted I would've gotten an apartment wherever I wanted, only if I closed my mouth {puts his hand over his mouth}. I didn't want to get one, why, what do I need an apartment, why do I need credit?

A bite of food, I managed through my own sweat {wipes his forehead}, with my work and I want to be honorable to God first and to society. One who is a [decent] person, they know, they know that you can never be honorable. All the trouble by Serbians, they started killing the army. They killed Aziz Zhazha in the middle of Paraćin, I was in that *kasarne* [Srb.: barrack] before him. They killed {pretends he's holding a gun} the soldier. What kind of person is that who kills their own soldier in uniform. They took him there to serve and they killed him at night while he was asleep, and many, many others. And it reached a breaking point and there was no way but to stand up, there was no other way. And that's how it reached a breaking point *dub dub dub dub* {onomatopoeia}.

### Part Three

**Korab Krasniqi:** Can we go back to the march of '88 once more, when you came to Pristina?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.



**Korab Krasniqi:** How did you organize? How did you get on your way here?

**Avdi Uka:** The [work] shifts, I mentioned the shifts, we would have gatherings, we had gatherings, four different shifts, A, B, C, D and you were, for example your group and the workers had a demand, I was in group A. Group A was called, I made a demand or two, the demands were put together. We were vocal, as I mentioned that I spoke, I spoke like that about Slobodan at the hall in front of the Committee, in front of them. Talking and yelling, talking and yelling, nothing came out of it. They wanted to fire the leadership of Kosovo in order to revoke the amendments.

Some Albanians went and voted in the Serbian parliament without being MPs in Serbia, to revoke the amendment of the Constitution of '74 {raises two fingers up}, 27, 27 amendments, I am not sure, I don't know how they were called back then. But very well, we asked law experts, "What happens if that amendment gets revoked?" A law expert told me himself, "If that amendment gets revoked, yes, what happens if someone cuts your hands off?" "I'll be constricted for 700 years." So, it reached a breaking point, I don't know how to put it. And we rushed, there were no results here, so we went to Pristina. We went to Pristina, people showed up, I don't know who was there, who came there, who entered there.

We talked, we did things, here, there, "We will reach an agreement, go back, don't do this. Don't make this a big deal. It will be fixed, everything will fall into place" come *buuuu* {onomatopoeia}. You can't stay in the hall, the entire Kosovo was there. We dispersed, we came here, we had no idea what was going on, only worse, only worse, every day became worse. We protested, we protested 800 times in Pristina, in Mitrovica, in Vushtrria and everywhere.

The entire Kosovo protesting, *shkijet* there protesting, us Albanians here protesting *vërc* {onomatopoeia} it reached a breaking point, it became too much. There was no other solution, only to go on strike. They didn't allow us to do it overground, so we decided to go in, [we agreed] with each other, I told you, you told her, she told him, *buu* {onomatopoeia} inside. Have a nice day, have a nice trip! The first shift didn't leave, neither did the second, the third and fourth arrived, all 1300 miners gathered, eight days and eight nights. You become like a blob, you melt {rubs his hand}.

**Korab Krasniqi:** In what level did you stay?

**Avdi Uka:** On the eighth.

**Korab Krasniqi:** On the eighth.

**Avdi Uka:** On the eighth level.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did you stay the whole time, for eight days or did you stay for some time and then go out?

**Avdi Uka:** Nope, nope, nope never, absolutely never! There is a poem in the book, that they called me in betrayal and that they heard my youngest daughter, “Come because she is dying.” I told her on the phone {pretends he’s holding a phone}, she wasn’t there, Preteni went there, Xhafer Preteni, he wrote a poem, it’s somewhere in the book, I told him, “Sir you know where the village graveyard is, *halal* to my daughter, I won’t leave [the mine].” Imagine where we were, and how we stayed, with that kind of conviction we stayed there, we didn’t leave.

Until they betrayed us, because the demand was that Ali Shukrija,<sup>23</sup> [Hysamedin Azemi](#), Rahman Morina<sup>24</sup> to resign, to resign, they brought a letter, “They resigned.” We went overground, and when we went overground, some of us went to the hospital. I stayed in the hospital in Mitrovica from the [February] 28 when the strike ended until March 6. I was like these pants {grabs his pants} dark like a rave, swollen, my eyes, broken. *Ryryry* {onomatopoeia} the news {pretends he is stamping something}, the doctor came and said, “Uka,” he said, “you have to go home.”

I said, “Doctor what are you saying? How do I go home?” He shrugged, the Committee had given him the order. I went [home] in the evening, in the morning there came a Niva,<sup>25</sup> they handcuffed me {puts his hands behind his back} 14 months in prison. With Azem and Aziz and Burhan and these friends. Actually I have something {takes something out of his blouse} here, I don’t know if you ever got to see this letter {opens the documents and gives it to the interviewers}. Look, those of us who served 14 months.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Can we go back to the strike once more, we will get to the prison and everything, I just want to go back to the strike once more.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** And I want to go back to the demands, there were nine to ten demands?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Were the demands made while you were on strike or earlier?

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<sup>23</sup> Ali Shukrija (1919-2005) held important positions in the Yugoslav state.

<sup>24</sup> Rahman Morina (1943-1990) had a career as an agent of the Ministry of Interior of SFR Yugoslavia, and later on as a party official in the League of Communists of Kosovo. He rose through the ranks and was in 1981 appointed as Kosovo's interior minister, and thereby held the top law enforcement office in the province.

<sup>25</sup> Lada Niva formerly called Lada 4x4, is a vehicle designed and manufactured by the Russian (former Soviet) manufacturer AvtoVAZ specifically for the rural market, although models made are also sold for urban use.

**Avdi Uka:** Earlier...

**Korab Krasniqi:** When did you start? Earlier...

**Avdi Uka:** I said it, I said it a hundred times and I will say it today too, nobody can convince me, the demands were mentioned six months prior, six months prior to the strike. But nobody considered them, do you understand? When we went on strike we put the demands on a letter, they were known, there was no miner that didn't know the demands. I mean for the United Nations I put it [in writing], on the eighth level [I put it] on a letter, I went there and many told me, "This is difficult, you shouldn't and *dam-ram* {onomatopoeia}." I said, "This can't be revoked, if everything else gets revoked, without getting rid of me, this won't be revoked! Because I am bringing it, I expressed myself. I am bringing this problem of Kosovo on our laps, on our laps."

And I knew it, although I am a miner and I don't have an education, I have brains. Because I knew that we are not members of the United Nations, in the United Nations. But that request goes through, but it would stay in the corner or in a drawer, nobody would consider it because you are not a member, you understand? Like it's talked about today, you go there for nothing when you are not a member, they won't consider you, eh. So, I knew it, but there was a great intention.

When Stipe Šuvar came and some people talked in front of him, "We will do this like that, we will do that like this, we didn't know this, this, and that." He would lie about these, he said, "Not the United Nations," he said, "you shouldn't," he said, "there are no chances," he said, "for them to do something for us. We should," he said, "get these jobs done ourselves." "Why didn't you get them done sir? Why are you causing this trouble? Are you there..."

**Korab Krasniqi:** Do you remember what you told Stipe Šuvar?

**Avdi Uka:** Hm?

**Korab Krasniqi:** Do you remember what you told Stipe Šuvar that day?

**Avdi Uka:** All these demands I am saying now, I said them *dam-dam-dam-dam* {onomatopoeia}, these injustices Serbia did to us. And they are doing this to us, I told him, "You are doing this too, you are complicit." We requested for Slobodan to come down, but he didn't buy it to come down. He sent Stipe, he went to Obilić. He would tell Serbs, he told them, "Not even a hair on your head will be harmed."

**Anita Susuri:** Would you act the same if Milošević came too, or what was the plan? Only to tell him... or did you have any plan?

**Avdi Uka:** If Sloba came to the eighth level, he would be obliged to sign it there and send his deputy to get the stamp outside and bring it back to meet those nine demands, or he wouldn't have left from there, neither him, nor us. But he didn't buy it, he didn't buy it. There were people back then and there are people today who work with them, even today you have people who work with them, can you see it, did you... You are young, I am 77 years old, let anyone get into power as far as I am concerned.

But it's not looking good, because today people are working for Serbia and for Russia, they are working today, their plan is working. Do you have logic, do you see what is happening with us? Is there any other nation known who make fun of each other, besides Albanians, without having real arguments. What do you know about who I am? What do you know about what I did, what do I know about what you did? But fragmented, divisions between each other, they don't mention *shkijet* at all.

"This person did that, that person did this," here are *shkijet* across the Iber bridge and they don't mention them at all. There you have Vučina, he shot 127 people in Studime, imagine a hundred year old women, tiny children *vrurr* {onomatopoeia} in Studime {pretends he is holding a pistol}. Vučina, people have sworn to God [that] he said, "We killed 90 people" "Continue to kill more." And nobody mentions it or talks about that, so many here, there, here, you see the statues, you see the graves, you see how many families are left [without their loved ones], yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Can we go back to the strike once more, because we always want to find out more about that part because we are interested in it. Can you tell me what the mood was like, how did you feed, how did you maintain yourselves? What was it like?

**Avdi Uka:** Look, there, us friends, us friends had a problem, we noticed there was a problem, we had to solve that problem, we had to make that request. When we arrived at the mine, at the roundabout, at the mine's yard, the hall was on the second floor, "How is it going?" "Not bad" "At the top." When you told someone at the top in Trepça, they knew that there was a gathering at the hall, we had those [gatherings]. There was a request between us, we said it between us, "Look, we have to take a step, either to go on strike, or give up the former communist Yugoslavia cards?"

My best friend whom I worked with for many years, I can't say that we extracted ore [together] but we worked these things, "I swear to God," he said, "you could hurt me and I'd still not dare to make that step." Because I said that when we would leave, the office was small here {describes with hands}, there was the counter, you got your work number, mine was 523, you got your allowance with that number. While getting the number, throwing the card in the chest. "No we shouldn't," I said, "We are on strike." We got in, that dispersed, *buuu* {onomatopoeia}, we went to strike.

I said that the demands were known, they were known, now how could I remember them for 32-3 years, honestly. I said that the resignation of those three members was the main one for us to go overground and then we would stay overground until the other demands were met. "We won't give

Serbia one ton of ore to Serbia without the demands being met. No Albanian education staff should go to early retirement. No foreign person should join us in the mine, not this, not that.”

There were nine demands, now I will be honest [I don’t know them] by heart, I have them written down somewhere but how can I remember them by heart, it’s been more than 30 years, but also burdens. And those demands were transmitted to the mine, were transmitted throughout Kosovo and in Kishnica, and Hajvalia and everywhere. I said it a hundred times, if there was one good thing, if there was one good thing, or two, remember it because you are young, every time, every time these sirs [politicians], did you notice how they jump through the work of miners, in ‘81, ‘68, where were we? Where were we in ‘81? Where were we in ‘68? We were here. As soon as it’s about ‘88, ‘89, they jump through it.

The miners one, the Liberation Army two, in Kosovo these two should be written with, with golden pens. These two things, because they came out openly, they didn’t come out in groups of seven-eight, but they all came out. “We shouldn’t give Serbia one ton of ore anymore. Serbia can’t choose our leadership, we choose it ourselves, not his, not that, not his” and I mean it came down to the war breaking out. After that, the war, ‘81, ‘88, ‘98 and even before the Liberation Army came out in ‘98 we went there.

**Anita Susuri:** When the strike began that day, did you receive calls from the leadership to go out and stop the strike? How was it received?

**Avdi Uka:** Look, I will be honest with you, I will be honest with you. On February 20, February 20 of ‘89 we went on strike, our leadership came down, the general director, the mine director, the director there, all the heads came, sometimes they came in groups of two or three, sometimes they came together, the first day. And we said, “Why men, you can’t, the production would stop. It’s more about the matter of health than production, it’s not about production but about health. You should go outside, you should go overground”, “Nope {raises his hand} we can’t! Sir, support us if you want, if you don’t go wherever you want because we won’t leave.” They saw it, they saw it and they recognized that we wouldn’t leave, that’s when they joined too.

And so we had supporters, they were steady, both them and us. They called them outside, “If you wanted to you could bring them out,” they came and tried. That was absolutely for nothing because nobody could convince us otherwise. They convinced us when those three betrayed us [saying] that they resigned and they brought the letter and when we got out... he came to Fushë Kosova and he said it on TV in Belgrade, I was admitted in the hospital, he said, “I give you my *besa*”<sup>26</sup> he said, “the ones who are down there, who went on strike,” he said, “I will put them in prison.” They put us

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<sup>26</sup> In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

together, from March 2 to March 7, I got in on March 7, I was in the hospital, they took me out of the hospital and directly to prison for 14 months.

**Anita Susuri:** What did you think while you were there, did you think the strike would be successful? How was your mental state, you said that your physical state was very bad, very heavy...

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How were you mentally? Did you think about your future, did you think about your family? What did you think?

**Avdi Uka:** Absolutely, look I said that I had ten children, I am mentioning it a hundred times, look ma'am, it absolutely wasn't about my body, or my family's bodies, it was the conviction to give up on Serbia. And for Serbia to set us free, that was the stance. Whether I die, or they kill me, or they imprison me for 40 years or a hundred years absolutely [didn't matter to me]. Whether they kill all my children, it was absolutely not about that, it wasn't about anything [else]. It was about achieving the goal we were in there for. That is what kept us going, the will. The courage, the will, the knowledge, why should the Serbs oppress us, for what, in our land, in our share, in our bed? And we decided on that.

We were aware that there was a risk for us, there was a risk for us, we knew it. Because if you wrote one letter, or if they found Kosovo Republic [written] on your doors, you would get ten years in prison, let alone to stand up and speak {pretends like he is holding a microphone near his mouth} in front of a camera. There were dilemmas there, "Watch about because this person came, this person came and he is not reliable." I spoke openly, "Sir are you speaking in front of cameras, do I have the *zvučnik* [Srb. speaker] near my mouth, yes? There is nobody to come here, who comes and who goes." And I had to ease their fear, ease the fear of the workers. "A person came, he is a communist, he might report us too," if you speak in front of a camera let anyone report it, you have no reason to hide, openly *bam-bum-bam-bum-bam-bum* {onomatopoeia}. This person speaks, that person speaks, this person speaks, I am not saying only I spoke, we all did. But very well, I was there on the eighth level as he said, absolutely nobody bothered me.

I swear to God, I swear on my ten children, there is no person who wears pants and walks this earth who told me, "Avdi Uka, say this," I said everything from my own mind, from my own pain or my own love, I don't know how to express it. So, why cause trouble, what are they doing, what are they doing? Do this bad thing, do that bad thing, do this bad thing, go to villages, go into houses, police beating people without a single care. "Who wrote this? Who did this? Why did you do that?" So, trouble, trouble. On top of everything else they were trying to revoke those amendments, those I don't know

what, those state amendments that Tito and Bakarić<sup>27</sup> and Kardelj,<sup>28</sup> gave you, Fadil [Hoxha] and this and that, people tried to do something, and they wanted to revoke them all, for us to not have any rights, eh.

**Anita Susuri:** When you went on strike, what was on your mind, how long could the strike last and when the days passed, did it cross you that you could endure more than eight days?

**Avdi Uka:** Honestly it was very difficult, it was very difficult, I will tell you one thing, there were people who got sick, they didn't go out although we pleaded, there are people we took outside unconscious. We took them upstairs and we set up some sort of hospital there in the mine. The doctors thanked all the volunteers, they took care of them with medicine and stuff, they came down to the levels too, they gave us tablets, they gave us stuff, they tried to save us because it was dangerous. I said that a person melts like copper.

First there was a person who came from abroad, the Minister of Health in Yugoslavia came, I knew his name until recently but I have forgotten it. He urged us *dam-ram* {onomatopoeia} and this, and that, for the sake of health. I said, "Sir don't make us late, don't leave us hanging. If you can send some help, or do something to fulfill our first condition for them to resign, we will go outside, otherwise it's for nothing. There is no person who can take us outside alive, dead, they can somehow kill us as they want {pretends he is holding a gun}.

There are 400 [people] on the eighth level, 400 there, otherwise we won't go out." He went outside and called the union, the union leadership, he said, "[Bring] Soaps as quickly as possible, send soda down there." When we started washing our hands, it was ujët e jamit, {rubs his hand} can you believe it, it becomes like a blob, you don't remember blobs, a person becomes like mud. I swear to God we were about to break and people broke. It's a problem to stay for eight days and eight nights even at Hotel Adriatik, let alone in the mine. But I said there was will, there was will.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Anita Susuri:** When you... before going outside you were told that one of the demands was met.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you receive that news?

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<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Bakarić (1912 - 1983) was a revolutionary and Yugoslav communist politician. He was of Croatian origin.

<sup>28</sup> Edvard Kardelj (1910-1979), was a Slovenian politician and socio-political worker of the RSFJ. Kardelj became known to the Albanian public on the occasion of his decoration by the communists in Albania, with the "Order of the Flag".

**Avdi Uka:** Very well, I will be honest with you, we received it very well. It didn't have a lot of weight whether they will resign or not, but it was good news being able to go overground because people got sick. Then when the doctors would come to check on us, they would say, "When you go outside you could lose your sight because down there it's dark with those lamps and when you go outside the issue of eyes is dangerous."

We could barely wait when we saw that letter, I will be honest with you, we could barely wait to go overground but not disperse. But anyway when we went outside we dispersed to hospitals, some of us who were really sick, they sent me to the hospital of Mitrovica, I didn't know. And that's how they brought the decision, the doctors told us to put on those {covers his eyes} handkerchiefs...

**Anita Susuri:** The bandages.

**Avdi Uka:** The bandages, yes, to put them over the eyes until you get used to the outside a bit, a little here {describes with hands} on the forehead to see a little light. That's how it came about and we got out on the 28th [of February].

**Anita Susuri:** You went to the hospital...

**Avdi Uka:** I went to the hospital, 28, February had 28 days, on the first and the second they started taking Azem, Burhan and Aziz and so on *dam-ram* {onomatopoeia} and... taking them, taking them, taking them, they took me in as I said on March 7, because on March 6 they let me out of the hospital and on March 7 they took me in. I stayed at home for one night out of 16 days. eight in the hospital, eight on strike, 16 days, one night I went home and they took me in on March 7 in the morning.

**Anita Susuri:** You were still sick right, you were doing bad?

**Avdi Uka:** I was still sick, I was very sick, yes, yes. I was sick.

**Anita Susuri:** And they came to your house...

**Avdi Uka:** And they came to my house and took me to Mitrovica, at SUP as they called it back then, they kept me in their office asking me questions from 11:00 AM to 11:00 PM, your tongue dries out, (laughs) it gets swollen, my tongue became this big {shows the size with hands}. I am grateful, I am grateful, I want to mention I don't know him, I haven't seen him anymore, there was an Albanian inspector Selim Çitaku, Selim Çitaku interrogated me. And he gave me some words of men, he gave me some words of men.

He said, "Uka, the indictment is very heavy, protect yourself, protect your friends." For me it was a great gift, "Protect yourself, protect your friends" meaning that we... at 11:00 PM Shera's son, the



prison's commander came, he worked as an inspector, Nexhmedin Ajeti or I don't know what his name was. He brought a yellow letter and said, "Uka," he said, "you have to go to prison," I said, "I am in prison, there's no problem." The police handcuffed me and sent me to the cell.

I spent 40 days with just God, and two to three times a day they came and handcuffed me at the door and sent me to a room, they unfastened the handcuffs, called the police, "Come take him," handcuffed me and sent me to prison. All alone. For 14 months nobody from Trepça who worked with me at the enterprise wasn't in prison. They started bringing them in at some point later, they said some of them were there because of drugs, some for murder, sometimes one, sometimes two. They never mixed me with others from Trepça, 14 months, I never had someone from Trepça in my cell. If I had a friend among them it would feel like I was at home.

**Anita Susuri:** Did they divide all of them alone, or just you?

**Avdi Uka:** No there were, I found out later, that there were two to three people [from Trepça] in one room, yes. They said, I didn't ask them directly, they said that Burhan didn't have [anyone else] either, while Aziz was with Ibush or someone, there were two or three. I was all alone from the enterprise, from Trepça. They caused me quite a lot of trouble.

**Anita Susuri:** Did they beat you up, did they...

**Avdi Uka:** They beat me up, from my toe to the top of my head, there was no area they didn't hit me. Imagine I was sitting in the office and they hit me with a coat hanger at the top of my head {touches his head}, when the weather changed I never pay attention to the meteorologists, because I feel it here {touches his head} that the weather is changing, exactly [as it is]. When I went to present my defense the hits, they hit me on my legs {touches his legs} underneath and on my head and stuff. It took a toll on me, when I said in the beginning that they insulted my mother and wife, that I made ten irredentists, nationalists, separatists, what do I know, these were their words.

When I went to present my defense, I will tell it shortly, everybody who was there knows, their families and my family, I told Ismet Emra, head of the court, [he asked] "Are you ready to present your defense?" "I am ready if you guarantee that they won't hit me in the head and won't insult my mother and wife." He took a break, went outside and consulted and said, "Nobody here will dare yo youch you, or insult you, just speak." A day and a half until I presented my defense. And it was decided like that for 14 months [in prison], they released us...

**Anita Susuri:** When they interrogated you, what did they ask you, what... did you say anything?

**Avdi Uka:** "Who did you hang out with? Where? Who did you talk to? Where did you have your gatherings?" Imagine that they beat me up a lot, "You had gatherings with Azem Vllasi, and Aziz

Abrashi. Aziz Abrashi is your sister-in-law's husband." His wife is from Bajgora, I told him, "I am hearing from you that his wife is from Bajgora," in Batina, I didn't know. I said, "I don't know where the general director's wife is from" "No, they're cousins with your wife, you had your gatherings somewhere, to prepare a lot for the strike."

## Part Four

**Anita Susuri:** While you were in, did you know, did you have any information about what was happening outside, what was happening with Trepça? There was also Milošević who came, there was a meeting...

**Avdi Uka:** In Fushë Kosova, yes...

**Korab Krasniqi:** In Gazimestan.

**Anita Susuri:** Gazimestan. And then they went on strike for you, were you aware of those?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, to some extent, yes. The newspapers [while] we were on strike, on strike, we knew because the head of the union, Smajl Nimani, brought us the press every day, down at the [eighth] level, the newspaper. In prison, what they wrote about us, if somebody did then they cut them out with scissors and got that article out, nothing came for us, they cut out the articles and left something else entirely, something irrelevant we were not interested in, when we were there in prison we didn't know anything. I didn't know anything about what was happening outside and... I had no visits for three months.

After three months they allowed my brother's wife and my son to visit, they didn't allow the rest of my children to come because they didn't have ID documents at the time. Peter Shefer, doctor Peter Shefer, Sheferi from Slovenia came as a voluntary lawyer, and asked me, "How many children do you have?" "Ten" "Were they here to visit?" "No" "Why?" "This and that." He said, "I am giving you my word," he said, "they will come." When two weeks passed my wife and two younger sons came. He filed a complaint, he said, "There is now law, no constitution, there is nowhere in the world that doesn't allow children to go for a visit." So, that's how it was in prison...

**Anita Susuri:** How did you feel when you met them?

**Avdi Uka:** Look, blood [relations] make a person different, I am not the Avdi I was, and when my wife and son came, with my two younger sons, when they came, my youngest son, I don't know how old he was but he was little, he said, "You," he said, "why aren't you coming home?" Two commanders there, one Albanian, one *shka*, I said, "Look, as soon as you finish school, I will come (laughs)." I swear to God

I didn't shed one tear, absolutely, because God sends you strength. The children went back, I mean my wife and children. Thankful to the Albanian people who didn't let them struggle at the time. Because there was no personal income, the children were little, again I am thankful to God and Albanian people.

There are people I don't know at all who sent aid to my children, clothes and flour and oil and money and everything. They sent everything, maybe I could say they were doing better than when I was there myself. But it's just that I wasn't there with them and they weren't with me. They didn't let them struggle for survival, absolutely not. I had five lawyers, all five were volunteers, I didn't get a lawyer [by myself] at all, they just told my brother, "Authorize us." The Slovenian lawyer came by himself, he took me. He said, "I have taken you," he said, "I heard you have ten children, you don't have an education, you don't have anything," he defended me.

**Anita Susuri:** What about the day it was decided to release you, did you expect, did you expect to be sentenced more? What did you think?

**Avdi Uka:** I didn't think they would release us without sentencing us, because that's how it was done at the time. But very well the Slovenians stood up, we benefited from their goodness, they stood up in protests, chanting, and all of Kosovo and all of this and all of that. And anyway we were as we were, sending a worker from a strike to political prison, it doesn't happen anywhere in the world, that only happened here. But then when we presented our defense, I absolutely didn't speak for myself, I asked, "Why Aziz, why Burhan, why Azem? What is Azem doing among us? What does Azem have to do with us? What connects Aziz to it, a general director coming here to prison?"

Aziz came out and said, "How can you imprison the miners who have extracted two hundred, five hundred tonnes of ore?" So, we all gave (laughs), we defended each other, not ourselves. Absolutely yes, let them sentence me. Eleven decisions, I swear to God, because we are used to swearing, I swear to God, I signed 11 decisions at the door, they would say, "Article 139/114 can't be softened, only with death." When I presented my defense I told the head of the court, "Remove this death part because somebody might be scared of it, whereas when I read the 139 one it's extending my life."

He asked, "Why?" I said, "Because my workshop number was 139." While this Article 139 it's about the death sentence, yes (laughs), and the workshop really was 139. It was the workshop which was called 139. I said, "Leave this because this one is okay, but remove this one about the death sentence man." We had a difficult indictment, against Serbia, against Yugoslavia, against this, against that, but when you are just, God saves you, 14 months aren't a short time to be separated from your children, me and that person and that person. Aziz was general director, back then the general director [of Trepça] had more authority, like the prime minister of Kosovo has today. He had 27 *pogone* under his leadership.

**Anita Susuri:** What does *pogone* mean?

**Avdi Uka:** Enterprises.

**Anita Susuri:** Aha.

**Avdi Uka:** Enterprises, Trepça, Fafo, in Kishnica, Hajvalia, all these companies. 27 thousand and some workers under his leadership {pretends he is stamping something}, yes. They sent Aziz to prison, a good man, generous, brave, it was his fate that he was a director, *kërrk* {onomatopoeia} him too.

**Anita Susuri:** When you went back home how did the situation continue, did you find out that the workers were fired?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, no, the workers were fired after we were released from prison, because on April 14 in '90, they released us, and on August 15 in '90 they closed the gate of Trepça. Then, for four months straight, two inspectors from UDB, as they called them back then, visited me. Both Albanian, Albanian names, Albanian names. They came to my house and said, "Look Uka, you can't enter the mine, if you go we will immediately handcuff you" {crosses his arms}. "But in writing I don't lose 20 years of work." They said, "We are policemen, we don't give out written decisions, we are telling you clearly to not go."

I took two leaves, Burhan gave them to us, annual leaves. One from the year we entered, one from the year we left. We completed two leaves, two months straight, for two months we went to the doctor and got a medical leave. I submitted those documents and I didn't step on the mine's yard anymore, neither in the mine, until after the war. After the war I went there, I entered after the war, I worked for about three years after the war, after we were totally liberated. But then we saw that nothing happened even with the strike and the Liberation Army was formed, 52 miners of Stari Trg were killed in the war, 52 in the war.

I was in uniform, I receive the veteran's pension for two years now, they removed the Trepça one I received for ten years. I receive twelve euros less because I am a veteran, "Why did you put this here?" "Honestly there were twelve euros more" now it's twelve euros less, I would have to go find where the offices in Pristina were to remove that decision, and put those [twelve euros]. I said, "Honestly I would rather cut thorns than run after my documents." So, absolutely oppressed like this. 2015 to 2021 170 euros, it didn't cross anybody's mind to give us a cent, one cent. To ask, "Are you alive man? You are alive, we will give you ten euros."

Nobody grabbed the gun and said, "I will retire as a veteran," nobody even knew if they will survive, nor their families, nor themselves, nobody, they brought the law, okay. I have 34 years and a month and six days [of work] in my decision, I swear on my eyes I have the benefits, I received that pension, I received this. Why are they giving this [pension] for veterans, are you giving it for low-income people,

are you giving it to raise them, why remove that? Now I can't be bothered to remove this decision and get the other one *dam-ram* {onomatopoeia}, I received the other one for ten years.

But very well, they won't give you both. How come, I [worked for] 34 years, two years as a soldier, you don't have 30 years of work as a soldier, so now we are equal, equal, that's not all right. Not for myself, I never spoke on my behalf, they can never give me those, they can even stop the ones I'm getting, absolutely. I have God, I have my children, have a good day! I am not in need of apartments, nor luxury, nor this, nor that, a bite of food.

But very well, it's a pity to take away a person's rights. I asked for this in a gathering of Trepça from the union, from the Municipality of Mitrovica, from all, I said, "To take a tile and write the name and last name, 'This certain miner was killed, on this date in this place,' *tak-tak-tak* {onomatopoeia} to put the names and it would remain for generations" *auuuu* {onomatopoeia} {claps}. I swear to God and to my father, nobody mentioned it anymore. It's a shame what they are doing, a pity what they are doing in this nation. I swear to God, I swear to him, God sent this disease, this virus, this will be nothing, this will be forgotten compared to what God will send.

Because you don't feel pain for me and me for you, we are not humans. Leave Serbia, don't nod along to Serbia, don't nod along to Russians, don't nod along to China. Friend, God is one, the Albanian nation is two, America is three, [and thanks to them] we are here talking to each other. Because if it wasn't for these three things, blood would shed and you wouldn't be sitting here, nor me. Edhe mu çue, kjo osht' gazi alem, gazi alem. Okay my wife receives a hundred euros, I receive 170, she [receives] a hundred euros. She prepared things for me, some food, some tea, some coffee, some clothes, some footwear, some news, some this and that, *hallall*, let them give her five thousand [euros], let them give her ten thousand, okay it's very well.

How to compare you, does this parliament and this government of ours even have logic? Do they have brains in their heads, do they have brains in their heads? How can they compare you to that? 70 years, 60 years, 90 euros, 100 euros, where do your 65 years of life go? How much are you giving me for working, how much for being old? I don't know if I'm receiving [the pension] for being old, or for working, or what am I receiving? This, this is gazi alem. I am talking generally, I am not talking about myself.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, yes.

**Avdi Uka:** Thanks to God my son has been in Switzerland for 30 years now. This wealth and this and that were done by him, he bought the land, we did more or less. If I start looking at what other people have and get upset I would lose my mind. But, I am saying be thankful to God, I am not afraid if someone knocks on my door tomorrow and asks, "Friend what have you done?" He paid for it through his sweat {wipes his forehead}, but it's not alright.

**Anita Susuri:** You are saying that you went to war, you joined the war, how did you make that decision? And where were you?

**Avdi Uka:** I made [that decision], I was in the Brigade 141 Mehë Uka, I swear to God from day one until March 7 when it [the service] started getting paid. I had TMK's<sup>29</sup> uniform too. When they made the register to receive a wage, the ones of us who weren't in a party, we weren't from their side, we weren't their supporters, "Move along and go home. Apply for a job." Some friends [asked], "What are you doing Uka?" "What I am doing, I am going home. I swear to God I won't ever apply in my life. I didn't apply when I got out with a gun." I went out with my own gun, I wore the uniform, I was under commands. I wasn't fake like there are so many fake ones now, we have many fakes. But I really was [a fighter], you can ask anyone in Shala and they will tell you that I was a soldier here, here, there, I was around here, God protected me.

**Anita Susuri:** Was your family here, or did they flee?

**Avdi Uka:** My family was here, they stayed here for some time {shows to the left}, at my brother's here. Because my brother was here, I didn't have a house. The structure of my house was completed before the war. But I hadn't done a refit or anything. They stayed here at my brother's, my daughter's house is at the cemetery in Vushtrria and they stayed there. From there they stayed in Skromne, a village up here, at my daughter's. From there they ran away and moved in a queue, in Studime where I mentioned they killed [people], my wife and children were in queue. When they talk about this I say, "Stop, don't go there."

They stepped on dead bodies, people were getting killed, taking their money, killing them, they took their money and gold. I said, "Serves you right" because I said, "Buy me a pack of cigarettes" "Where to buy a pack of cigarettes for two hundred, one hundred euros" she would say. *Shkijet* took it from her, they told her, "Go under the bridge, remove this {touches his head} white scarf." With children *kërrk* {onomatopoeia} there they met some other families, they went to Upper Dumnica, they walked the entire night, they went and settled there, they went around Kosovo in that area. Two of my sons were there, they were outside, two of my sons, three or four of my daughters, three of them were with their mother, my wife. Like this, wherever they could go.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you at risk there, or what was it like?

**Avdi Uka:** Honestly a hundred times...

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<sup>29</sup> *Trupat Mbrojtëse të Kosovës* (TMK) were part of the Provisional Government of Kosovo under the protectorate of the UN Mission in Kosovo, TMK was a civil organization for emergent intervention and service. It was active from 1999 to 2009. In 2009 it was officially scattered, to become *Forca e Sigurisë së Kosovës*, Kosovo Security Force.

**Anita Susuri:** What did you go through?

**Avdi Uka:** A hundred times. Thankful to God, God is one {raises hands like he is praying}, I was in Ibush's village, at the school of Ibush Jonuzi, in Skromna, in Tërstena, in Rashan. Nobody got killed near me, near me, why, somebody might say that [it was] war, in war our location was Pasoma, that's where we stayed. People were killed in Melenica, Melenica near Trepça, I don't know how many people got killed. They fought, we heard them from here, but we didn't have the courage to move from there and go there. We stayed in our location. I mean, God protected us that where I was nobody got killed, where I was.

Because that was our luck, there was no attack there, we passed it moving here, moving there. Going from one location to another location, that's how we got here in Shala, the second battalion, brigade 41, that's where we moved until it finished. Many people went away, many were killed, civilians were killed, innocent people, without doing anything. We ran into all kinds of families. Some people came here {shows to the right}, my sister-in-law lives there, my wife, there was a woman who was at school with her, my wife, she was from Kovaçica, she [my wife] is from Bajgora. And I accompanied them from Shilovica to Gumnistha, I swear to God I didn't know who she was, about 15-16 women and children, some clothes, some bags.

I told a neighbor there, he was from Gumnishta, I told him, "Bring out the horses, bring out the clothes and I will take them on this side of the trough" because it was risky, I said, "I will take them to Gumnishta." On our way near the water stream I ran out of cigarettes, I was squeezing my lighter out of discomfort {clenches his fist} out of discomfort. The oldest woman there said, "Can I ask you something?" Without knowing who I am. She asked, "Are you this person?" I said, "Yes, it's me." She said, "Is Qamile your wife?" I said, "Honestly she was, I don't know anything about her" (laughs). She asked, "Why?" She said, "We went to school together." She said, "I was thinking, I was thinking, if Avdi Uka is alive, it's him." The uniform swallowed me {touches his face} without having shaved, without... Then a girl said, "Do you smoke?" I said, "Of course I do. Why do you care?"

And then she opened her small bag *fërc* {onomatopoeia} {pretends he's unzipping a bag}, a [pack of] Opatija. I swear to God, you could give me this German car of yours or what is it {shows to the right}, when she gave me that pack [of cigarettes] I was on top of the world. I accompanied them there. We suffered a lot, the people suffered more than us, we suffered too. Look, I swear to God, I swear too often, I slept on the ground in the field for three days and three nights with my friends, we slept outside. God protected us, [people] passed away, a lot of people passed away, they closed the door on some people, closed the door on them. The state could give them 800 thousand and they wouldn't need it.

They killed my brother's brother-in-law together with his son, he had finished university, he was two meters tall and recently married, that's when the war broke out, in Zhabar there near Mitrovica. They

took them, they captured them, they took them, they killed them both. Millions and millions of people, it couldn't be worse for us.

**Anita Susuri:** What about when the place was liberated, where were you when you found out, how did you find out that Kosovo was liberated?

**Avdi Uka:** When NATO struck, March 24 *vam-vum-vam-vum-vam-vum* {onomatopoeia} we knew that something was happening (laughs), come on, come on. They withdrew, they didn't withdraw, this and that connecting, moving there. They said, "Come on, loosen up," they said, "because they're gone." We were at a village here {points in front of him}, my commander said, "Uka you are staying here with two other people tonight," he said, "because we are going. We will come get you tomorrow." "Okay." "In case something happens." They came to get us the next day and we went back to Vushtrria, from here we went to Vushtrria.

So, Vushtrria was liberated on June 17. As I said, God first, then NATO, because we couldn't have done anything by ourselves, God sent them as *sebe*. God works with people even today, he instilled it in their minds *dam-ram-dam-ram* {onomatopoeia}. We were in risk of vanishing, of vanishing. In Tërstena [there were] 66 houses, in my village from start to end there was no house left, they burned it all, they turned it to dust. We were five brothers, we had five houses, they burned all five houses down.

When they came to the mountains where our houses were, a neighbor said, "Did they demolish Raif's house?" My older brother's, someone said, "Yes they turned it to ash." "I swear I thought it was Avdi's" (laughs). Poor her because she was a bit challenged {moves his hands around his head}, but they didn't ask if it was Avdi's or Raif's or Hasan's, they turned the whole village into ash to the last one. And someone from the village was killed, one was killed there {shows to the left}, someone was killed here {shows behind}, he was a fighter in Pantina, but his house was in Vushtrria for a long time, he was born and raised in Vushtrria, but [originated] from our village.

We survived, we survived, it was Allah's will so we survived. Someone from Prekaz said, he said, I had contact with him, he asked, "Did your family survive?" I said, "Yes, with some suffering," I said, "but..." he said, "Don't mention it," I said, "The village was..." "Don't mention the village, damn that," he said. "Why?" He said, "If you say that your house got burned down, and you sweat in Trepça, and you built a house there and stuff," he said, "When another person says that seven of his family members got killed, that his children got killed, what will you say?" He said, "Don't mention it" (laughs). I never mention it, only when it comes down to something like this [interview], but he was right, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you continue work after the war, did you go back to Trepça, how did your life go on?



**Avdi Uka:** After the war we came here, in Vushtrria. I settled here with my family, my family came from Upper Dumnica to my daughter's [place] first, they came from my daughter's here to Vushtrria {shows behind} in my brother's *oda*, my brother's *oda* survived. Mine was built {looks up}, but it wasn't finished, no nails, only the walls and the concrete and we settled here until March 7.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Avdi Uka:** For some time we stayed at the police station in Vushtrria, when there was Vushtrria's police, from there we went to Trepça, a group, our battalion, they sent us to Trepça, there were 30 of us. We guarded the crystal hall, we guarded Trepça, the mine, guarded this, guarded that. Sometimes, sometimes I would go with Trepça's union, we had worked together for years before the war. *Darm-ram-dam-ram* {onomatopoeia}, we went to Pristina to [Bernard] Kouchner<sup>30</sup> and talked about this and that, they conversed in a formal manner, my engineers with him [Kouchner].

I was itching to talk, they said, "Speak," they said, "because you've been ready to talk for a while now." I said, "I only want to ask a question. I," I said, "am a miner, I don't know how to write my own name." He asked, "Hm?" I said, "What do I tell my children?" I said, "There are 600 Serbian tanks at the mine, my children told me, 'Father don't go around Trepça because they will imprison you, take another way to the city to buy a kilogram of salt,'" I said. But very well, they were there for six months, what to say, our children are telling us, "Father, why aren't you going to work? Now NATO is there." I said, "What do I tell my children?"

Then he puts his hands {puts his hands up} I swear on my {touches his eyes}, like this {puts his hands up}. "Yes Trepça [is a] country, Trepça [is a] republic, Trepça [is a] *držav* [Srb.: country], Trepça..." he put his hands up {puts his hands up}, it was a habit of his. He said, "The whole *ciliji* [Srb.: intention]" he said, "is," he said, "in Trepça. Stay put," he said, "Go make the registry with two hundred people," he said, "you will put them in Trepça." But very well, he said, "There are some Serbs, don't pick on them," "No, of course not." We received the news, "Make the registry." Let's go, when we went, it was three of us, we rushed to see who was Serbian there.

God have mercy, you couldn't find one. Now people tell us, when they saw that we went there, they got them from wherever they were working and put them inside KFOR cars, there were many KFOR cars there. We didn't dare to look at who was inside KFOR cars. They left, in the evening they sent them home and they never came back, our [Albanian] people came in.

**Anita Susuri:** In what state did you find Trepça? I know that it was at risk of collapsing.

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard Kouchner (1939) is a physician and politician, the founder of Médecins sans Frontières. While he was France's Health Minister, Kouchner had made a statement recognizing that Albanian students in Kosovo had been poisoned. After the war, in 1999, Kouchner was appointed the UN Special Representative in Kosovo.

**Avdi Uka:** It was at risk because of the water, it was a bit risky because of the mines, but very well. I didn't go to the tour of the first group, in the first group. We sent two hundred people, sometime later, after six or seven months they called me. I went with the second group and that's how we started. There was this matter of the army, I had to apply and stuff, no way I'd apply. We went there, I worked for three years, imagine our wage was 150 *marka*,<sup>31</sup> we had to spend 70 *marka* for food and transportation, to go from here to Trepça and come back. Because there was no transportation [covered] or anything, we had to pay for it ourselves.

My son in Switzerland would tell me, "Don't go. Don't go man." "Friend, as long as I get a hundred kilograms of flour, I will keep going." I worked for three years. Then there was a group, our own fired again, at first *shkijet* fired us, this time around it was our own. 120 were sent to the doctor and evaluated as incapable of working. They sent us to early retirement, we went to early retirement more or less. And when I became 65 years old, I applied for Kosovo's pension, they gave it to me. And then, rushing to apply as a veteran and lose that right, why lose it? I applied and they made it as a wage, they deducted it, Trepça's pension was 158 euros, this was 170. From that day in 2015 and on I remained there, so I remained there, life is like this.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Can I just take you back once again to the time when you were released from prison? You said you spent 14 months in prison.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** During the time you were in prison, different people took care of your family, your wife and children, with money, clothes, food.

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, yes, I mentioned it, yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** It means you were released in the beginning of '90?

**Avdi Uka:** Yes, on April 24 of '90. On that day, April 24 of '90, I was released.

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did you do because at the time everybody was fired?

**Avdi Uka:** I told you...

**Korab Krasniqi:** What did you work?

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<sup>31</sup> Albanian: *Marka*; German: *Deutsche Mark* was the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslav republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the *dinar*.

**Avdi Uka:** I didn't work on anything, because I said that on April 24 we were released from prison, for two months I used Trepça's leave. Trepça paid us two wages, Trepça gave us two wages for the leaves. And then I got a wage for the medical leave and UDB came and told me that I couldn't step foot on Trepça's yard and I didn't go to Trepça anymore.

**Korab Krasniqi:** You didn't work at all.

**Avdi Uka:** At all.

**Korab Krasniqi:** How did you provide for your family, that's what I want to ask you? How did you provide for your family?

**Avdi Uka:** I mentioned being thankful to the people, people who helped me, the people. During that time, before that time, before that time, because we were fired from Trepça, the army hadn't formed yet, my son was in Switzerland, do you understand, in '92 my son went to Switzerland. And when I was released from prison, as I mentioned the people helped me a lot, but very well I didn't struggle much because my son was in Switzerland, he was working. And my son sent me money for me and my family to survive, yes. My son, specifically my oldest son, has been in Switzerland for 30 years now, it will be 29 years now, it will be 30 years in November since he went. And he ran away from the army, from former Yugoslavia. He was in Duboj, he ran away and went to Switzerland.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Avdi if you want to add anything else...

**Avdi Uka:** Absolutely, only if you are interested in asking me about something. Because look, honestly I am saying my sister, my head is loaded. I told you in the beginning without hurting you because I consider you like you were a family member. I absolutely do not care about these, don't feel offended, absolutely [not] because there were Slovenians, people from Kosovo, Germans, from all over, there is nobody who didn't come here, I am tired of interviews {touches his chin} I have given 800 thousand [interviews].

I will be honest with you, you relaxed me a bit, maybe while talking and stuff, because I swear to God... but I can't tell someone not to come [for an interview], only if I was on my deathbed. But we have our house, you have come here to get your job done. But there was an American with a girl from Dubovc as a translator. "Who are your parents, where are you from?" "From Dubovc" "Who are your parents?" "Januz is my father." "Are you serious?" She said, "Yes, I am Januz's daughter." Anyway, her father was an engineer in Trepça, and like that we finished our conversation, she was young, younger than you [addresses the interviewer].

I said, "Come on," I said, "be honest with me," she said, "Go on?" I said, "What do you do with these notes?" She said, "I will be honest," she said, "I'll tell you like you were my father," she said, "I

document stuff everywhere, I am from America,” she said, “I moved there,” she moved abroad, she moved to America, she moved to another country, I don’t know where she said. She said, “I document, document, document and prepare newspapers” or what do I know, and she said, “I call people from the televisions” and she said, “I tell them ‘Do you want it?’” she said, “I sell them.” I don’t know if that is right or not. I said, “Hopefully you make millions, because I don’t need them” (laughs) do you understand, yes. Eh, we tried but I could never send someone back, they could tell me they were Slovenian, maybe they were a *shka*, I don’t know who came here, but I could never say [no] to anyone.

**Anita Susuri:** Mister Avdi I wanted to thank you for accepting [to be interviewed], thank you once again for sharing your story, for your patience, for everything!

**Avdi Uka:** Thanks a lot, I am thankful to you for remembering there are miners out there and retirees from Trepça. The honor is yours, mine is just a little bit, yes. But through this I would like to, I would beg from the ground to the sky wherever there are Albanians and Albanian blood, come together, Albanians, come together! When we’re together nobody could do anything to us, divided, separated, we will never see our day. Thank you a lot for remembering there are retirees somewhere and there are miners somewhere. Thanks a lot! {puts his hand on his chest}

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you!

**Korab Krasniqi:** Thank you too!