

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH GANI OSMANI

Stari Trg | Date: October 26, 2020

Duration: 93 minutes

Present:

1. Gani Osmani (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Korab Krasniqi (Interviewer)
4. Renea Begolli (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

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

Part One

Anita Susuri: Mister Gani, if you could introduce yourself and tell us about your family?

Gani Osmani: Greetings to you, I am Gani Osmani, born on 17. 4. 1962, I was born in the village Dedi, a village on the outskirts of Stari Trg of Trepça, about ten kilometers from Stan Trg. My father and my [paternal] uncles worked in the mine of Stari Trg since around the '60s. Our family was poor like all other families, we were all dependent on Trepça, the mine. In '64-'65 we moved from Dedi to Mitrovica's outskirts, in the village Shipol, a neighborhood of Mitrovica. There we built a house and we've lived there since 1965.

We were five children, so my father had five children, two sons and three daughters. I was the second son, my sister was the oldest, me, my brother and then my two other sisters. I finished school in Shipol, primary school. I finished high school at the technical school in Mitrovica, so a mining technician. Even though our family and people around Mitrovica were dependent on Trepça, we went in the direction of... our partners headed us in that direction. I finished school in 1981, fourth year, I finished in May 1981, so in October 1981 I got involved. So, I was 19 years old.

I had an advantage, I got accepted because my father was injured in the mines in the '60s and because of that, I had an advantage. So, over the age of... I mean as a mining technician, back then technicians... there were only a few supervisors and technicians in '81, they were mostly Serbs. So, Serbs were in key structures. While there were more Albanians as simple workers. In '81, 24 mining technicians were accepted into the mine, we were school colleagues. Some were older generations, but three or four were my friends, so we were 19 years old. They also had an advantage to get accepted, their fathers were either injured or dead, or... and they got accepted without conditions.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back to your father who worked at Trepça...

Gani Osmani: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And he got injured, do you remember as a child when he came back from work, did he talk about work?

Gani Osmani: Look, I remember, I don't remember from work... I was very little, I had just started... around five, six years old, I'm not sure, he got injured around '69. So I remember when he got injured, I remember because he stayed in the hospital in Skopje for around six months. He also stayed at home, I know the conditions were hard, he bought the land in Shipol, built the house, educated us with just his salary, so the conditions were... the salaries might have been good, but I'm telling you how hard the conditions were.

I remember that he was injured and had his leg in a cast and then he got better, he worked as a handicap, after he got better he worked as a work handicap. Back then, the salary was good. He had the same salary as the worker there, there was also insurance, the pension as we called it, Trepça paid him, so with that salary, he bought the land, built the house, and educated us. And as I said in '81, I got hired, in '84, my brother also got hired, he was like, like, like... engraving machines that engraved metals, it was a unit in Trepça, he also worked at the equipment processing plant. So we had some kind of advantage.

Anita Susuri: I'm interrupting you once again because I'm interested to know how your father got injured?

Gani Osmani: My father was a miner, not a miner but assistant miner. So the miner is the main worker, drills with the machine, and my father was his assistant. But, a period... but he didn't work for 5-6 years because he got injured. But it's also about luck, there are people who have worked there for 40 years and never got injured. There are people who got fatally injured within a year or... so it's about luck. He got injured at work, blocks {looks up} fell on him, we call the rocks in the ceiling blocks, we crack them with explosives, then it might be left hanging and fall over someone.

So, his back was injured and his leg was broken and he was in the hospital. Skopje's hospital, they sent him to Ljubljana, Belgrade, Skopje, so medicine wasn't a problem then, they took care of everyone for free. That was the advantage. Now after... As I said, when I was little, I don't remember when he came from work, when he went, I don't remember. So, I was around three-four years old, I don't remember. I just remember when he came back from the hospital, when people came to visit him, so I remember those things.

When I started working in '81, the economical conditions got a little bit better, I started wrong young and as a mining technician. But, when I started working, there was a rule from the directors that as a mining technician, as a supervisor, so mining technicians were supervisors, being in charge of the whole level, writing the salaries. But, we were interns for a year, we worked with machines, for a year

we worked like that. After a year of internship, we entered an exam and had to pass it, an exam by the engineer and directors.

Anita Susuri: Did you have a scholarship in high school?

Gani Osmani: I didn't have a scholarship, others did, others might have. But, I didn't have a scholarship. People who had a scholarship had an advantage, because the people who had a scholarship... I know my friends who had scholarships didn't have good financial conditions, so when you had a scholarship, you had an advantage to get a job. But, I didn't have a scholarship, I don't know why, maybe because my father worked, we had better conditions, and... But when my father got injured, after a while, after ten-fifteen years, I started working because I was very little. So, I had that advantage.

As I was saying, I did the internship, we worked enough to know how the work in the mine goes, we took the exam, and then from '82, I worked as a mining technician. I worked in different levels, first on the fifth level and then I was active in ten levels, there were nine when I started working. All levels had workers, from the first to the tenth level. So, the number of workers was big, I remember there were also older workers. But, at that time, at that time, workers who had a lot of experience had benefits. So, the police had benefits, so a strong state, aviation and mines had it the same.

The miners who were working in the mines for twelve months were paid for eighteen months. So, they worked for twelve months, and they counted as eighteen. Back then, people retired after 40 years of work. I retired before turning 50, I started working at 19 years old, so I retired at 47-48 years old. You know, that's how it was. Now, you retire at 65.

Anita Susuri: When you started working in '81...

Gani Osmani: '81.

Anita Susuri: It was an awkward situation...

Gani Osmani: Very. I...

Anita Susuri: The demonstrations also happened, did you participate...

Gani Osmani: Yes, I remember very well, I was in the fourth year in high school, we were young, of course. Back then the demonstrations were organised in Mitrovica, Prishtina and everywhere. We left school, I remember very well, I was in the technical school, and joined the protest. But, the police stopped us there at the technical school, at the crossroad, they didn't let us go by the gymnasium, but... they scattered us with guns and so.

At that time one of my cousins died, he drowned in Sitnica in '81. His name was Sinan Bajrami, so he was on the fifth year, we were on the fourth. When we went out, they followed us, we headed toward Dudikrsh, there's a bridge there, there was a narrow bridge to get to Dudikrsh {points left} because they followed us. And he tried, he couldn't get onto the bridge, he tried to run away from them and drowned in the water. Today is the anniversary of his death in '81 demonstrations, he left school.

Back then the political situation was very complicated, very dangerous. We had to work, we couldn't get involved in politics. They even interrogated me. There were slogans written in the mine, "Kosovo Republic", this was the slogan at the time, they interrogated however they thought I did it. They mostly asked young men, "Who wrote this, why did they write this?" Now in '81, in '82, in January '83 I went into the military because I hadn't finished my military service. I went to Croatia, in the suburbs of Zagreb, where we were mistreated, interrogated, so the state wanted to know everything then. It was very hard, very hard to work. And...

Anita Susuri: Were you scared when you knew you were going to the military because then there were many... who were killed in the military.

Gani Osmani: Yes, I know that...

Anita Susuri: Were you scared, what did you think?

Gani Osmani: Of course. When we went, even our families cried. You went, now it all depended on which place you were. What kind of people they were, sometimes they would accuse you even if you didn't do anything. I, I remember, I am thankful to a friend of mine, a friend from Podujeva, he was older than us, some were younger, some were even younger than me. There was a friend from Podujeva, he was older than us, he held some... he would say, "You have to be careful, not to talk much because you can be a victim." And we had to be careful, there were some people who didn't know how to be careful and they would interrogate them, "You said this, you did this, you were in the protest." Took them to prison for five-six years, some never came back, there are many that never came back, so, it was a very hard time.

Anita Susuri: What were you not allowed to speak of, anything about Kosovo Republic or what?

Gani Osmani: Whatever you spoke about your own state, you were against Serbia. So, your rights were... maybe miners wanted to ask for better working conditions but they couldn't because they were political issues. So, you couldn't mention the republic, your rights... for example, Albanians' rights... it was about safety. I was a supervisor and there was a malfunction in the mine and they asked, "Who did this, who broke the machine, did someone do it purposefully? Why did it break down,

at what time, was it okay?" They interrogated the worker also. So, it was a hard regime, we had to be careful because there were consequences.

Anita Susuri: Did they often take you for informative conversations?

Gani Osmani: Here?

Anita Susuri: While you were in the military?

Gani Osmani: In the military, yes. They took us one by one. They would take whoever they wanted. Where I was they took all the Albanians. But, back then if you were educated, they hated you even more. Those who had finished university, who were intellectuals, stood out more and punished them more. Simple people weren't as targeted. They were bothered by educated Albanians and the progress of Albanians. Those who were educated were more threatening to them. I finished the military and went back to work. Then...

Anita Susuri: Which year?

Gani Osmani: I started in January '84 and came back in the fourth or fifth months in '85. So, from '81 to '84, I worked for three years then went into the military. Then I continued working. So, those years, our generation, our generation... I was born in '62, graduated in '81, our generation is the worst... not a bad generation, that period was the worst. So, we didn't even have a prom night. We were all... demonstrations, protests, then the protests until '89. So, we were never free, we were never happy, just suffering, scared, unemployed, poor. So, our generation was the generation that didn't experience anything good.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you, after '81, I know it was a problem when they saw a group of young people hanging out.

Gani Osmani: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Did the police ever come while you were with your friends or...

Gani Osmani: After '81 there was almost always a curfew. So, when we came to work... I worked in different shifts at that time, the special units stopped us two or three times until we got to the bus. We had movement permits. But, the moment there is a curfew, you can't move. Then there were a lot of policemen, even backup police. So there was no place where there weren't any police, day and night.

It happened that he [the policeman] was drunk and beat you up for no reason as you were going to work. We know... for example they beat up my friend, they didn't even ask him, he was out during the

curfew and didn't ask for the document. So, there was a curfew from '81 and on, in '81 at some point there was a constant curfew. You could have lost your life just because someone felt like it. Just because you were Albanian.

Anita Susuri: Were there any social organizations to go out to, or was that also prohibited?

Gani Osmani: What do you mean, about...?

Anita Susuri: To go with friends?

Gani Osmani: I, when we finished high school, we didn't have a prom. I have a picture with some of my friends, but not many... we weren't allowed. Went to Shala, in Preten, we celebrated finishing high school there, like a prom. We stayed there for a bit, just some friends, even if you wanted to organize something, it was impossible.

Korab Krasniqi: Are you married, Mister Gani?

Gani Osmani: Yes. I am married, I have five daughters and a son, I didn't mention it before. Three of my daughters and my son are married. One of my daughters and my son are in Germany, they also have children, my son has three children, and all my daughters have children. Two of my daughters live at home, they're in school, they finished it. One of them is in school, the other in university. So, I have five children, five children, now the conditions are better than when I was a child. When I was a child, our parents weren't all, all like this, but they also said that, if you give children money, it ruins them. You know, they go out and... now since I suffered and tried to never leave my children, especially my daughters, without money. Maybe... when we were younger, we were unemployed but we always tried to make conditions better for them.

Korab Krasniqi: How old were you when you got married?

Gani Osmani: I was 26 years old

Korab Krasniqi: Can you tell us how you met your wife?

Gani Osmani: Well, back then it was different, but Imer... anyway, I saw her, talked to her and back then it was by *msit*¹. Of course...

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you because I'm interested to know, we know the miner's job is very hard...

¹ Arranged marriage.

Gani Osmani: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Did you have... were families or women hesitant to marry miners?

Gani Osmani: Look, my wife's father worked in Trepça, and she was the niece of another worker there. But, back then, if you were working and had a better work position, they didn't hesitate, because as I said, it was a problem to be working, to have money, to be in a more leading position... there weren't many Albanians, that's why they didn't hesitate. So, I mean I always agreed with my wife, because of course, even if everyone agreed, if the two people getting married don't agree, no one does. But we were good, my family, my children, we had a good time, with my parents. Most importantly it was a good life, without problems with my family... We ate and drank as much as we had. The most important thing is to have a happy life, to have children.

Anita Susuri: Did your wife very much complain about this, that she is worried? Was she worried, has she ever told you?

Gani Osmani: Of course. Not just my wife, my father, my mother, my sisters when they weren't married. Back then, when we were a little late, there were no phones then, they would go to the neighbors who were in the same shift as us, "Why is he late, why didn't he come?" So, even my wife because when we worked on shifts, we were on the first, second, third shift. Now they knew that the third shift finished at seven, at seven thirty the latest we would be home. If I had to go somewhere with friends or something I would tell them, "I will be late tomorrow." But working in the mine is like that, you always think the worst, they might have injured, gotten hurt.

I had an uncle, he never asked us if we got tired, he would just say, "Did you all come out uninjured?" "Yes." "That's what matters." We would ask him "Why won't you ask us if we're tired?" He would say, "It's important to be healthy, if you're tired, you rest." So, working in a mine has some specifics and it's more unique and the risk is higher. So, even the flag {looks right} has the color black, black has a meaning, so it's 50/50. Green and black, this is bread that is won... a small number works underground. Everyone works normally, we work underground. So, it's more unique, harder. But, someone has to do it and we chose this profession.

Anita Susuri: So, since your father worked there you knew and you decided...?

Gani Osmani: To tell you the truth, I didn't even dream of it. When you finish elementary school, you're a child. Now it's different, now in elementary school kids choose their profession by fifth grade. Back then it was different, back then, parents tried to get you to work as soon as possible as I said. Industry and mining was developed in Mitrovica, back then you either had to be a miner, or a chemist, or technologist, or geologist to get a job. My father set me on this path. I have four or five cousins who work as mining technicians today. So, even my [paternal] uncles sent their sons to this path. The one

who was older than me was a miner, “Now you have to go work as a mining technician also.” Our parents enrolled us in school with that goal. I didn’t choose my profession, if I had I might have chosen better, but now... people adapt.

When I started working it seemed hard to me. When I went in I said, “If I leave once, I’m never coming back.” Slowly. First I started working on the third shift. Without getting into the mine, without practice, directly on the third shift, I didn’t even know where I was going. My uncle worked there, he was on the same shift as me, we lived near him, he took me and told the supervisor of the level, “Look after him, he is young.” He took me, I didn’t even know where I was going, I didn’t know what my job was. But I slowly adapted, the friendship and connection between miners is very strong. After a while I couldn’t wait to go to work. But in the beginning, it was very hard, but adapting makes everything easier. Adapting, you get the salary, you spend time with friends.

Anita Susuri: What was it like the first time you went inside?

Gani Osmani: We also did an internship when we were in school, maybe once a month.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: You were telling us about the first time you came to the mine?

Gani Osmani: Yes, when we first came to the mine, it was very hard for me, I even said, “If I ever get out of here, I’m never going back in.” It seemed so bad and so hard. As I said, we had an internship, we came once a month with the teachers, but they took us to better places, in halls. But when we went to the working spaces, stairs, the stairs were dangerous, it seemed so bad. But, after a while we adapted, with friends, with... so, I couldn’t wait to come to work even though it was hard work.

And then, I didn’t mention that when we went to the internship we started as supervisors, mining technicians and supervisors, 90 percent of the books were in Serbian. The schedule was also in Serbian, working schedule, the defects were read in Serbian. There were... around 80 percent of the workers were Albanian, around 20 percent Albanians. But, even those Albanians who were there were convinced to give the schedule in Serbian so the others would understand. When our generation started... It seems like I’m bragging, but when we started working there, we started to write books in Albanian.

Because the books are written, there’s the supervisor’s book where you write from the first shift, I don’t even see the supervisor of the second shift, I write the defects on the book, how the work is going, where I worked, I write everything I worked on in the book. We started writing them in Albanian, the schedule also. And we said, “If the Serbs don’t understand, we can explain to them after in Serbian,

but the schedule and official work should be in Albanian.” And from then and on everything was written in Albanian.

Anita Susuri: Was there a problem with it?

Gani Osmani: No, no problems, because most of us were Albanian. As I said, Albanian miners were in the hardest, most dangerous positions, there were also Roma, Bosnians, Serbians, I also had Serbian workers who were miners. But they were in a smaller number. Serbs were electricians, machinists, the easier jobs, they were in main positions. But, it was obvious that most of the workers were Albanian and we had to talk in Albanian and we didn’t have... then Albanian engineers, there... some became directors, some... Albanians, because most were Serbian.

Anita Susuri: Before the strike, there were the marches.

Gani Osmani: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell how they were organized, do you remember those days, did you know what was happening or...?

Gani Osmani: Look, here, most of the people didn’t know, to tell you the truth, I didn’t either. We found out later, it was all organized, the organizing was really good. We saw the dissatisfaction, our rights, the retirement of our professors, intellectuals, so the violation, changing the constitution. So, everything that was happening in the state, not the social rights of workers, but those dissatisfactions accumulated, so it was for the state, the violation of the state’s rights. Now the leaders but also the miners noticed that nothing is happening through dialogue. They thought, we thought that with matches and protests we can express our dissatisfaction.

I remember when they finished the first shift, when they came out, the third shift came out and joined the first shift, they gathered. I remember Burhan [Kavaja] as if it were today, he came out, “Where are you going?” “To Pristina” “You’re going to Pristina, I will come to Pristina with you.” I know, I remember his words. And we walked on foot, there were attempts from here, by the security, there were people here that were from the security, civilians, police came and tried to stop us. But, when they saw they wouldn’t stop, they left on foot. As we were going downhill, I know people started joining here in Tuneli i Parë and Stari Tg. People joined from Mitrovica and on.

I know when we went... I don’t know if it was Novosella or when we headed to Prishtina, Remzi Golgeci and others, I don’t remember who, tried to stop us. They said, “Go back!” Someone sent them from there. And there were two cordons of police, we went through the fields and continued [marching]. So, the police didn’t intervene then, they didn’t intervene, they tried to stop us. But at that point, people started joining us, we became greater in numbers. Back then, the system was such that

you had to take Tito's photograph with you, and we took the Yugoslav flag and our flags. So, in that way, in a way, we tried to show that we aren't against anyone. Because back then, if you protested, they would say, "They want to take down the country, they want to take down Yugoslavia." With those signs we tried to say that we're not against the state or anyone, we just wanted to protect our rights.

Then we went, we went on foot, at some point, buses came, people who were injured went on the buses. We went there with work tools, with boots, for some, they didn't fit while walking. I've seen workers taking them off, the boots hurt their feet, because when the boots are bigger, they hurt if you walk for a long period of time, they would take them off. I saw them walking barefoot. They went there, guided us to a hall. I know they asked for Azem Vllasi, Kaqusha Jashari, those who... these... we heard then that they wanted to discharge them and we asked for their protection, our officials, and we asked for the resignation of Rrahman Morina, Hysamedin Azemi, and those who were in power. So we kind of hated them.

I know there was a huge number of people because youth and students and the population also joined us. We went into the hall, and we heard our colleagues speak. I told you back then there was Tahir Salihi, he is... I forgot his name, we called him Tahir, Tahir Salihu, but that's not his name, his last name is Salihu, he... I don't remember. When he talked about Ramiz Osmani, he was my uncle's son...

Korab Krasniqi: Rasim Salihu?

Gani Osmani: Rasim, yes, but there was another one... I don't remember right now, maybe later. There... Ramiz Kelmendi talked, Esat Isufi, a lot of people talked, they said, "We protect miners' rights, miners protect their rights, officials' rights, so we don't accept officials who don't represent us." I just know that people were never more united as at that time, and I don't think they ever will be.

So, all the people of Kosovo were on the street, also the means of information, and all were united, so we all had one goal. I don't think there will ever be... that kind of organizing. So, no one can organize a strike, a protest and say, "Come to the strike by force," we self-organized. So, the discontent and anger made us self-organize. When it's self-organized, you risk your life and don't give up, so they were all self-organized, but it was a good organization.

Anita Susuri: How did it continue, I think it ended at Boro Ramiz...

Gani Osmani: Yes, the hall in Boro Ramiz, it still is there. Until around 11:00 o'clock, if I'm not mistaken, it's been a long time, I haven't taken notes... until 10:00, 11:00 o'clock, now they came up with an agreement and we started to scatter. They put them on buses where they scattered, they put them on buses and came here. Then it started, the police interrogated us, secretly, I know they just took people, the call came here {gestures left} when they left work and they interrogated them, and

they didn't know they were being taken, so we wouldn't tell one another. They interrogated them and said, "You can't tell anyone you were here."

They mistreated them, some talked, some didn't. But it was a very, very hard time. Then after the march, the strike began. So, when the miners noticed that the march didn't have an effect, they decided to strike. So, on February 20, the strike that made history began on February 20, the biggest and longest strike. And now if you tell youngsters, or later generations, they don't believe it, they don't. After the war it happened that we had strikes, they never lasted more than five-six hours, the new generation couldn't take it, "I can't stay." Now it started, as I said, the strike, the strike was organized by the miners.

Anita Susuri: Which shift were you working when the strike began?

Gani Osmani: When the strike began I was on the third shift, so when the first shift came, they didn't leave the mine. The second shift joined them, I came on the third shift, that's how it was. I came on the third shift, but there were people who didn't wait for their shift and came immediately when they found out. The number of people grew and they showed their dissatisfaction, you know, it was... because every protest to be announced... the miners started the strike... because I have some experience in this, maybe they would stay for five-six hours, have requests, the director or something. You don't form a strike council because you think you can solve the problem quickly. They first had some requests, they noticed there was no outcome, now the number grew and they announced it as a hunger strike and the strike council was formed.

So, every level had a representative. The representatives, for example, level nine had three or four, as older people, supervisors or older, trustworthy workers, who were more experienced, because it was risky because at that time there was also ammunition. They had to check the ammunition storage and there were dangerous places in the mine, they had to be careful so no one falls down there and dies, to lose the effect of the strike. So, everything was under control, everything. They made their requests. But, as the strike went on the miners' requests grew. There were around two-three requests, they became twelve-thirteen. As the time went on and the number of miners grew, so did the requests.

Anita Susuri: Did the strike council compile these requests?

Gani Osmani: Yes, they're compiled by the strike council in every strike.

Anita Susuri: On which day was the council formed?

Gani Osmani: I don't remember but if I'm not mistaken that day in the morning, or in the evening, or the next day, I'm not sure. But the strike council was formed within 24 hours. Anyway, we know what those requests were, as I said, every miner protests for their conditions, for their wages, for working

tools. This was more specific, this was the only strike to protect the state, the constitution... back then, they put professors and intellectuals in retirement before their time, we know the requests. Then when they saw that the officials who were in power didn't want... there was Rrahman Morina, Hysamedin Azemi, and Ali Shkurija, when they noticed that they didn't consider their requests, then their resignation was added to the requests.

Now the requests were added one by one, so the purpose was these requests. There were also... the strike council also decided who could go into the mine and who couldn't. There were Serbian journalists who were forbidden because they would spread propaganda after. There was a group from that council, maybe two people, who stayed at the door and watched. The other stayed at the mine's door, the other took care of food. So, these were, the strike council took care of these things, and helped people down there who were more trustworthy, they kept the order, the discipline. Some were better at speaking so they spoke, some are born like that, some are very patriotic but not good at talking.

So, that also played a role, Avdi Uka was a simple worker, also Asllan, Esat... Esat, they were very good orators and talked in front of the journalists... And it was some kind of braveness because not everyone had the courage to talk. So, they had a will. Asllan Salilu was a supervisor and was... actually, I remember when Nadire Vllasi came, Azem Vllasi's wife, she was a journalist in Bosnian newspapers, I don't know, I remember she said, "They don't want to resign, those requests. And..." She said, "They don't want to." The situation escalated a little then. When I remember Asllan, Asllan Dedia, he said, "If our requests aren't realized," he said, "We won't come out of here. We will fall into the well." That's what they called the well we came out from.

Things got messier, some started crying, some... there was dissatisfaction, a mess. But I still say that we have to thank the other units, they supported us. First, KEK [Kosovo Energy Corporation] at that time, there was Llazër Krasniqi, head of KEK. If they had stopped the electricity, we couldn't have stayed in the mine. Because the electricity produces air... the compressor, electricity. If there's no air, you can't stay in the mine for more than five-six hours. Air currents enter through a compressor, there were a lot of people. But it was in coordination with KEK, the ministry, medicine and the people. Very thankful to the people, they helped a lot because we announced a hunger strike, but we saw that with a hunger strike, we couldn't... then we used food.

When the journalists came in the beginning we said, "We're on a hunger strike." And maybe no one saw us. But, we had to eat to get medicine and so on. So, the people supported us, there was a special unit who got the food in the warehouse and spread it in the mine. So, if it wasn't for the people, everyone's solidarity, we couldn't have held the strike for eight hours, let alone eight days. So, we have to thank all of them.

Anita Susuri: In which level were you during the strike?

Gani Osmani: I was in the ninth level. I was working there, but sometimes I went to the eighth level, because I was... I wasn't on the organizing council but they were my friends and I worked with them because I was younger. But, when officials came, they went to the eighth level because it was wider. It was wider and the position was better, we were always informed who was coming, we always knew and waited for them. So, I moved along the levels. But the rule was to stay on whichever level you worked. There were nine levels, the ninth level was the last. So, the tenth worked shortly, but the ninth and eighth levels were the main ones.

Anita Susuri: Was it dangerous for all those people to be on all the levels at the same time?

Gani Osmani: It was dangerous if the situation escalated and acted catastrophically as I said. People talked there, I heard them, they said everything, "If our requests aren't taken into account, we'll kill ourselves, we will mine the mine." So, the situation had to be controlled, because the moment the situation would get out of control, no one knew what could happen. We were also in danger of diseases, infections, there was a big number of people, they only disinfected with lime plaster. I know, they took it from upstairs, now excuse me but we urinated there, they took lime plaster and put them in the ground and stayed there. Lime plaster is some kind of disinfectant, so we could have gotten some kind of disease. Fortunately no one died, people got sick, a hospital was improvised there, it was upstairs, if someone got sick, we took them there, the medics took care of them.

But, they didn't accept going home or to the hospital. So, they said, "I will stay here, if I get better, I will come back to the strike, if I don't, I will stay here until it's over." I know there were a lot of visits. There were journalists from everywhere. There were... they were interested, I remember Slovenians and Croats supported us a lot at that time because they knew what was happening, you know, there is a saying, we had a common enemy and we supported each other. There were also foreign journalists and newspapers. But we didn't have contact with our family. There were no phones back then, no connection... so, our family only knew what was happening to us though information means, the miners are fine, no one has died, hunger strike, they're asking for this, so that's what the miners knew, our families didn't know anything.

There were people who were sick, as I said, I know they didn't leave. They went out and we forced them, "I don't want to leave, I want to stay." There were also elderly people. Back then we were young, but there were also 50 year olds, now even 25 year olds can't handle it like 50 year olds did then. But, here on the surface there were ambulances, I know. We put sick people there, and we came back. There were beds, doctors who came from Prishtina, nurses from Mitrovica and so on. So, everything was improvised, everything was... I said before that I don't think a strike that big, an organization like that, a solidarity of all people can ever happen, this will never happen again!

Anita Susuri: The moments when you were inside, what did you think would happen, what did you expect from that?

Gani Osmani: Look, someone would tell us good news, motivate us, “This person will resign, this, that...” An hour later someone would give us bad news. And at some point we lost hope, we didn’t know what... but we went in there and we decided. I remember when a Croatian doctor came and asked someone, “How can they stay there for this long?” It was the fifth, sixth day. He said, “This is some kind of sickness, a sickness,” he said, “Collective ego calls. Collective ego.” He said, “When someone dies there and doesn’t leave.” So, that sickness befell the society, they don’t know if they have a family, or children... so, that sickness befell them and they will all die there together and not separate. So, you know, he explained in some way.

And I said that at some point we didn’t know what was happening, we decided we would either succeed or stay there. Someone would give you good news, someone would say something else. To tell you the truth, when we asked for their resignation, they said, “They brought it,” and those three officials are resigning. We said, “Bring it in writing.” And they brought a fake. Some didn’t know, but we knew what kind of stamp the presidency of Kosovo uses, and what kind of stamp the committee uses. So, the committee had another stamp, and... back then it was the committee, Central Committee. They brought a fake, they said, “This is fake, we have to return it.” They brought the one with the original stamp, signatures. When they went there, the others said, “They didn’t accept.” At first they did, then they didn’t, you know, some kind of deceit.

They deceived us, they brought the original, we went outside, it was the original, the signatures of the resignation. But, they went back again. We achieved our goal, the requests were real, as I said the requests multiplied. We knew there would be consequences when we left the mine, police and what people will say, one of the requests was that there were no organizers. “We are all organizers.” Now the request for blood feuds reconciliations was added, it came from the mine. I remember them proposing the blood feuds reconciliations in the mine. So, as long as we stayed there requests were added. So, all the requests were real, they were for the state and Albanians, there were no individual requests.

But, force deceives you, force... we didn’t leave, we might have known it wasn’t going to happen, but they deceived us and we left the mine. Then the police took us one by one, every person who was in the strike was sentenced to 60 days. At first it was 60 days, then it depended on what you got. They took 14 people who were accused in key positions. So, they began from the director, not the director, but they started from Azem Vllasi, then in KEK, as I said, was Llazër Krasniqi, the director, his deputy, the mechanics director, the engineers here. Everyone who supported it, because there were people who weren’t inside the mine, they were outside, for example, the secretary was outside, organizer of the strike. Now, they took all the miners who talked, the cameras, televisions, the ones who talked most were taken.

I had friends who I have to mention, Jetish Bajrami, who in the group of people who were imprisoned, he has passed away. He told me, "Two or three times they announced the death sentence." So, they received a ruling in writing for a death sentence to those 14 people. The charges were so grave, death sentence, they mistreated them, beat them... So, then they interrogated the workers, witnesses, the workers to be their witnesses. Witnesses who were alive. They stayed in the prison for 14 months, then they let them go, the situation was like that. We didn't think they would ever let them go. We thought they would kill them, the system was tough.

Part Three

Gani Osmani: When we came after the strike, they took them to prison, they started to call for division. I remember as if it was today {points left} the doors were closed. For example, Gani Osmani can't work, this other person can work. And during the strike we always said, "One of all..." There was also that request, "One for all, all for one." And we said, "Either all of us will work, or none of us." We all stopped working. So, even those who could continue working didn't, they boycotted work. They called a small number to work.

Then there was formed a... after we were fired, a syndicate was formed, an independent syndicate was formed where the workers could go to, because back then, the directors, some of them were imprisoned, some went abroad, most left, because they were fleeing from the police, from... and some on the workers were at no one's mercy, unemployed, no salaries, families needed food, you couldn't find a job in private firms. And the independent syndicate was formed, Xhafer Peci, Xhafer Nuli was the head of the syndicate, with a group of engineers and technicians. And the syndicate started working, aids were sent from all over Kosova and from abroad.

Anita Susuri: Before we continue, I wanna ask you something about the strike. When you got out of the strike, you were there for eight days, what was it like when you went outside, can you tell us about that experience and when you went to your family...

Gani Osmani: Look, I, I remember when we left the strike... because when you get into that cage of people, when the last one goes in, at the door, comes first. I know I went in last, and I can guarantee there were around a hundred or two hundred cameras. There was interest... the opinion was interesting because it was huge. But I know the moment I went out, they covered my eyes because doctors said, "They've stayed in the dark too long, they could get blinded by the light." The moment we got out, they covered our eyes and held us because there was also the change of the air. There were doctors who asked, "Do you want to go to the hospital or home?" If you were sick, many didn't go home. There was an improvised hospital, so they went there.

But I know that I saw around ten or fifteen ambulances there. And I said, "I want to go home." They took us home, I went home. Now, when I went home, I was welcomed more (smiles)... Some stayed here, some went home. They didn't let us come to work anymore, or... The next day, to tell you the truth, the next morning I came here, to Trepça, but they didn't let me in, because we wanted to see them... and after, now after a day or two, the police got in... because a neighbor of ours was there in the hospital and special units got in, took them out. They said, "Go home." And they removed everything, the beds, the supplies, cleaned everything out.

They didn't let them stay there even for two days and the police got rid of the traces so no one wouldn't see anything. So, it ended like that, then unemployment. I told you since the strike ended until the war ended... my village Dedi is here {points left} we went there and we didn't dare get on the bus. They got people on buses, we were all convicted. Never, I had to walk because the police checkpoint was here at Tuneli i Pare or at the graveyard in the entrance of the city. So in some more important places, they went onto the bus with the register. If they saw your name, they would take you and not ask any questions because you were convicted. So, every one of us was sentenced to 60 days in prison and arrested, in some way, arrested like...

Anita Susuri: Each person who was in the strike was sentenced to 60 days?

Gani Osmani: Every one of us. I know our friends who went to prison after four, five years. They didn't get me, I didn't go to jail. When I had to go to my village I went by car or something up to the river, I went behind the buildings, I went through Tuneli so they wouldn't get me. So, every striker had 60 days. Now, they interrogated them, they might have gone there for 60 days, and stayed two or three years. But all of us were convicted for 60 days.

Unemployment was huge, we didn't have... we have to thank the diaspora because they helped us a lot, I had a brother and he... I told you, he worked in the factory of equipment processing in Trepça, he left, because someone had to go, someone had to stay here with the parents, with... he went, and I am thankful to him, he helped us as much as he could. In the beginning, they didn't work, we have to be thankful to the people of Kosova, Dukagjini also helped us a lot at that time, I'm thankful.

When the syndicate opened, I was monitoring the syndicate in Shipol. I had the list of mines, around 107 or 108 miners lived in Shipol. I had their names and the aid that came to Kosova, which came from miners of Trepça, each neighborhood has its number. For example, I had a hundred miners, some had, for example Shutkovci or smaller villages, 50, as many miners that you had, that's how much aid you got, you had to distribute them without falling into the hands of the enemy.

Nënë Tereza was in Shipol, I was in the headship of Nënë Tereza, I was a supervisor. So, they collaborated, the syndicate and Nënë Tereza collaborated. We left the aid that we distributed to the miners in a warehouse. So, I had the list, sometimes they even gave money, a big sum, and out of a

hundred miners, ten were in worse conditions, they gave each of them one hundred marks. Yes, work clothes, food, the “Family helps family” campaign, every person who came with “Family helps family” came to me, and then I went to the person who accepted the aid.

There was, I had contact with people... after the war, there was a person who took care of 20 miners. He is from Deçan, he took care of 20 miners, he gave 2,000 marks each month at that time. The most dangerous part was bringing the money here, the one who gave the money, he was abroad, he is the richest Albanian, he was in America... he had a friend here who arranged these, “You will go there, you will distribute them.” So, every month he gave two thousand marks. Maybe it’s good to mention his name, Muharrem Gecaj, we have pictures with him, I was at his mother’s funeral. Muherrm Gecaj came and distributed the money to 20 miners. He gave me a, a book, he took care of someone in Shipol, some in Shala, some in Drenica, because there were miners, so he took care of 20 miners. We shouldn’t forget this, because it wasn’t for that...

He brought food, he even butchered a sheep or lamb, he kept half for his children, and gave them half. It even happened that I was in a financially bad place. There was a guy from Istog, Shaqa, I only remember his name, Shaqa, to take care of another family in Shipol. But when he came to Shipol he said, his brother was in Switzerland, the one from Shipol, he said, “I will help you.” Because he wanted to take care of a family, he said go tell them, “When the guy comes to bring the money, you said, ‘Take another family, thank you very much, but help someone else because my brother helps me.’”

And he came, he said, “No, I came to bring you one hundred marks, take them.” He came and told me, the one who refused them, not refused them, but didn’t need them, he was a policeman. We also worked in Nënë Tereza. It’s not about the miners, I just wanted to take an example. And he came and said, “Can you come with me Gani?” A person from Nënë Tereza in Shipol, “We’ll explain it to him, we tell him,” he said, “what’s happening” he said that, “my brother wants to help me.” We went there, took two people from the headship, we went to their *oda*,² they welcomed us.

We told them, “This is what’s happening, thank you for taking care of them, but his brother told him, “I will help you’, you can help someone else.” He said, “I swear to God, I might be financially worse off than you, but when the campaign started they gathered us, I was the oldest.” He said, “Financially... I don’t have any income, but I had to not separate from my friends,” and said, “and I took part in that, thank you.” So, there were cases when they weren’t financially well off and still wanted to help the miners. They helped... I said I went over to miners, there were professors from Prizren, Dukagjin, so all of Kosova stood in solidarity with us, and helped, maybe they shared their bite of food with us. That helped us, because to live and take care of our families without salaries was hard.

Anita Susuri: Were you here before the war?

² Men’s chamber in traditional Albanian society.

Gani Osmani: Yes. During the war, I wasn't involved in the war. But, the neighborhood where we were, was near Vakanica and.... The army barracks that were in Banja had a clear view of us. Anyway, some of my uncle's sons were involved, but I wasn't because someone had to stay with the family, the children, my parents were sick. On April 15, they surrounded us, they came from Banja and surrounded Shipol, they took us through a alley, a very narrow alley and took us on the road to Peja. They told us, "Just continue this road." We didn't know where we were going.

At that time I had a small tractor, like a motocultivator. I had four kids and my parents, they got in there. Also my wife and my sister, and four guests. So my aunt, actually my father's niece who came from the city with her daughters and son, I took them too, so when the police surrounded us, I went with them for 36 hours, I have written that... it took us that long to go to Albania with a tractor. So, in that time of war, it happened on that line of cars with us, who and how met with police and paramilitary. In Vaganica, a village near us, the family was with us, when we went to Gjurakovc they said, "Around 50 tractors have to go through Gjurakovc." They separated them, the others went to Peja, it was very bad for people who went to Peja.

Today, there are three or four people missing from that village, who were in line with us, they're missing, they killed them, they didn't even find their bodies. They were behind us, we went the other way, fate. So no one in my family was killed. But, miners were killed. I have the list of syndicalists who... there are also missing, around 38-9 were killed, and 15-6 are missing. There are some who were killed in uniform, but there are also some who were killed in war as citizens.

Anita Susuri: In which part of Albania did you go?

Gani Osmani: I was in... First we went to Kukës and stayed around five days, but then, then they took us mostly to the south of Albania, in warehouses and so on. But, my children were very little, the youngest was nine months and the oldest around six-seven years old. My parents were also very sick, they also had high blood pressure, and we stayed in Durrës. So, we went to a mosque in Durrës and stayed for five days, from there, we went to a camp called Porto Romano, five kilometers outside of Durrës. There were Spanish, Italian and German camps. So, I went to that camp. There were a lot of people. So, I stayed there until June when Kosova was liberated, when NATO forces came in, and then we came back.

Anita Susuri: How did you find out Kosova was liberated?

Gani Osmani: A? Well we... I have never felt bigger joy. So, not just me, it was the dream of all of us. It seemed unbelievable to me that the NATO forces intervened. The world's biggest power, Kosova was like a drop in the ocean, a point in the world map, there are bigger problems, this is my opinion. There were bigger problems in Europe, in the Balkans and everywhere, but NATO focus-bombed and

intervened in Kosova, we knew that we would get liberated. But, we didn't think there would be massacres after the forces intervened, I didn't think so.

We were happy when first Prishtina was bombed, we were here also when they bombed Bajr, there was an underground barrack, the windows broke in our house here. We were happy, but we didn't know the consequences. I didn't know, I didn't even think that a power this big would intervene for Kosova. We have to be thankful to America. America got others to join. We have to be thankful to America, and maybe every house of Albanians should have an American flag inside. If it weren't for America, we would disappear from this earth, we weren't powerful. So, America saved us, thanks to the Army, also the Liberation Army [KLA], but we have to know that the Army didn't have power without America, but big states don't intervene unless there is big torment.

Anita Susuri: When did you first come to Trepça after the war?

Gani Osmani: Look, I have different expectations for Trepça. Some came later, I came the moment NATO forces came in, after a week, four-five days. I thought, "I have to start working. I have a job," I thought, "In Trepça, if we all go, it will be okay," I said, "I will start working and Trepça will develop." I said, "We will work for ourselves." But when I came here I saw it differently, I saw the destruction. Destruction, like in Albanian, they took us to some factories, some... I said, "How did you do this to your factories?" They had destroyed them. He said, "It's the same for us and you," he said, "we're brothers." He said, "You will see, you will do worse." And I thought we would start... I came here from 2000... I started working in 2004.

In 2000 some preparations started but not everything went in order in Trepça, they called some people here and there, there were people who contributed, who deserved it and knew who to do the job, but they went with nepotism. They picked them, "Call this guy." In the beginning there was UNMIK, they gave them some money, not at first, but later. The important thing was to engage in the job. The zinc electrolysis battery factory. The zinc compound was all in order, the board, everything was in order, just to start. Everything was destroyed... Serbs didn't destroy it, we did.

In 2004 they called us, a group of technicians came, supervisors, we created a committee and we came and said, "We want to work, either we will also work, or no one will." Nazmi Mikullovcu was the director at that time, and in 2004, they hired one hundred of us. But they also retired some people before their time. I said, I was in the government and said, "We thought something else would happen to miners, not this. We thought the government would care about us, since we were the first people who risked our lives to protect the state, the whole Kosova supported us. We thought that the government will give a dignified pension to miners who are old and sick, and says, 'Go home, there are the young generations here, you have contributed enough.'"

And it wasn't a big number, not all 2,300 miners who took part in the strike, I can guarantee around 500 of them died. Some were very sick, also it was 20 years after. It isn't a big number, I said that I wasn't against the army, or veterans, but you can find a solution for 60 thousand people, but not for one thousand. They could have made a solution about the pension, incorporate people, new workers and invest in Trepça, develop it. But trust me, in Mitrovica there are pensioners who were part of the strike, who look for cans in trash bins. They don't have premature pensions, they take 70-80 euros as pension. They suffered and went through so much, and today they look in trash bins and work with carts. The state should have taken care of this... I said, I thought it would be different...

20 years after the war they should have invested in Trepça, to get new workers. So, nothing in Trepça... in Trepça you work and get a salary, there's no investment, just debt, there's no development in Trepça. Trepça could have helped Kosova develop, not just itself, but today it can't even produce enough for the salaries from the concentrate it sells. It could finalize the metals it sells like lead, zinc, there are 30 valuable minerals. Create a mini foundry... but private companies do that, five or six gas stations, they... create a mini foundry, melt these... the richest metals that are here are taken by Bulgaria, Switzerland, Sweden. We sell the concentrate, it has happened that the price went from 2,000 dollars to 300 hundred dollars. They were sold for 300 dollars, there is gold, silver, everything.

The government should have created the foundry, hired people and developed the state. But they're not interested in Trepça. There are members of the parliament who have no information about Trepça. I went there, made requests, the requests are here {point right} that after the war we work in these conditions in the mine, and no days of work experience are acknowledged, they said, "How is it possible for days of work experience not to be acknowledged?" They acknowledge the work experience of private firms, but not us. Some aren't even informed because they're not interested.

Anita Susuri: Now you are head of the syndicate.

Gani Osmani: Yes. In 2016 the leadership changed, there are elections every four years. So, in 2016 we ran in the election, it's just like the municipal elections, for every ten workers, there's a delegate from the mine, the assembly is created. Now from the assembly eleven members as headship. In 2016 we were elected by the workers and we made the assembly, and from the assembly I was in the leadership of the syndicate, not the head, just in the headship. Shyqri Sadiku was head of the syndicate, but Shyqa is a production expert in the mine, and he had to go back to the mine as head of production because the production wasn't developing. Being the head of the syndicate and the head of production is some kind of conflict of interest. And Shyqa said, "I will go and try to increase production. If it works, I will leave the syndicate and you continue here."

I was the secretary of the syndicate. Shyqa left, production increased around 28 percent in the first nine months, Shyqa was head of production. I was acting as head of the syndicate for those two-three months, then we held a meeting, and Shyqa proposed that I be head until the next elections. They

agreed, the proces-verbal is there, they agreed and I continued. We were supposed to have the election in April of this year. But, we couldn't even hold a meeting because of the pandemic and everything. We held a meeting now, we have to run in the election and whoever wins, wins. So, we continued in the same way.

We are there to protect the rights of the workers, the workers come when their directors don't treat them fairly, we take written complaints every week. We had a rule to hold a presidency and invite the general director and the director here. We show them the workers' requests, this and this and this, these have to be discussed, because we aren't executives to push to remove a ruling, but to push the process forward. We also were in the government and the Ministry of Economic Development, I have it in writing that Trepça will make a comeback, to acknowledge our work experience, to have a dignified pension, which is possible.

We have around 40-50 workers who are sick and can't work in the mine, just on the surface. We can't fire them, they got sick here. And in the end, to get their child here to work... the work puts them directly in production and they contribute. We also made that request, they said, "Wait." A temporary board was formed now, because we are a victim of the governing change. Trepça is a victim, the workers, of governments changing. A government promised they will work for Trepça, bring an expert, then five-six months go by and the next governing is changed, we have to start from zero. So we are victims of this.

[The interview cuts here]

Anita Susuri: You were telling us about the workers and the requests you made...

Gani Osmani: Yes. So, since we started working after the war, we've had the same requests. For example, those requests. We asked to acknowledge our pension, 70 percent of the salary, as is the right of everyone. We asked to acknowledge our work experience when they fired us, so during '89-'99. And after the war, from 2018 onwards our work experience isn't acknowledged. Every one of us... I have worked there for 39 years, if I were to retire tomorrow, I would get the pension of an unemployed person because you have to have at least 15 years of experience. Because it was a very long time, we asked for a family pension. Family pensions had always existed in dangerous workplaces in mines.

After the war, there were four tragic cases in Trepça, two in Kishnica and two in Trepça. So, a tragic case is when a worker dies in the workplace. In the past, there was a family pension his family inherited his pension, 70 percent, and when the child turned 18, or the wife inherited the pension, this doesn't exist anymore. We asked for state insurance. In the past, if someone got hurt, we took them to Ljubljana, Skopje or Belgrade, they... a worker of mine broke his foot, I took him to the hospital, they said, "If you have 20 euros, you can get a cast, if not, you can go." In his work clothes, so he got hurt in the mine, and... they see you as unemployed.

Now we have health insurance, it is included in the collective contract. You can make a collective contract and cover all of these. The syndicate has the same requests since after the war. It isn't very hard, the government can do this. We asked for... we are more unique than the other units, they can't compare us to... maybe even KEK are miners, they also bring out coal, but there the excavator does the job, they just watch. So, we are... we work underground, we can't compare with those who work on the ground. The government could have made a law about miners. But, I am not happy with the government's work on Trepça. Not just the current government, but every government.

But we hope we can move forward. Trepça was the third pillar in Yugoslavia with 22 million citizens, one of the biggest economical pillars. The state took loans in Trepça's name, it... the slogan then was, "Trepça works, Belgrade builds." While today in our hands, we can't even cover the salaries of the miners... My opinion is that the government should pay more attention to Trepça, to make capital investments, work tools, and they can develop not only Trepça, but also Kosova. And not... the miners are worried if... they are worried about that, trust me they call me on the phone, "Is there enough money for our salaries?" They don't worry about the hard work there. They do their job, but they're worried if they will get paid this month or not. So, worries that the state can take care of.

Anita Susuri: Do you have anything to add, something you forgot to mention?

Gani Osmani: I would add anything, just an appeal for the government, for the people who are in charge to focus on Trepça, on economic development, because Trepça will develop Kosova, Mitrovica, it will develop the whole Albanian people. They should take new workers, make capital investments, move forward. Let's not be pitiful. Let them make... they could make the finalization of the ore here, not take it abroad, that is the biggest capital. I have nothing else to add, but God willing things will get better and someone will focus on Trepça.

Anita Susuri: We hope so, too. Thanks a lot, Mister Gani!

Gani Osmani: Thank you for your interest!

