# INTERVIEW WITH MAJLINDA SINANI LULAJ

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Present:

1. Majlinda Sinani Lulaj (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Ana Morina (Camera)

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

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

**Part One**

**Anita Susuri**: Ms. Majlinda, can you introduce yourself and tell us something about your origins, your earliest memories?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: I am Majlinda Sinani Lulaj, I mean, Sinani is my maiden surname, and Lulaj is the one I added to that maiden name at the time I got married. I was actually born in Pristina, but at that time the documents were registered in the municipalities where the families were originally from, which is where I actually grew up. I was raised and shaped as a person in what was then called Gllogovc, known today as Drenas. I grew up in a family with both of my parents, and me as the oldest child, and then five other children after me.

**Anita Susuri**: How did it happen that you were born in Pristina?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: In the hospital (laughs). At that time, births were not performed in Drenas, and the first two children were born in Pristina, then later such services became available. The other children, some were born in the hospital, some perhaps even at home. Because a more difficult period came later. But this was, so to say, the beginning, life itself.

**Anita Susuri**: What was the environment like where you grew up? Your parents, for example? The place? In what kind of setting did you grow up?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: Both my parents had, so to say, not very easy lives in their childhood. My father grew up as a child without a father, so to say. He was four months old when his father died, and on both sides, on his father's and mother's sides, it was the women who played the central role, so to say, in keeping the family together and raising the children. So my father, together with an older brother three years older than him, were the two children of that marriage.

Later, the [customs] of the time forced a second marriage on my grandmother, the one I called *loke*,[1] my father's mother. Then she built a life with another family. But since it was nearby, in the same area, they, my father and his brother grew up together anyway, so to speak. It's not that he suffered during

[1] *Loke* is a term used affectionately to refer to one's grandmother.

that period in the sense of missing his father. Nevertheless, his mother played a key role in their upbringing. On the other hand, from my mother's side, it was my grandmother who played a major role, not just in raising her own children but, perhaps, even in my upbringing, since I was the eldest child in the family.

Since she lived with us, my mother's mother. Because she had no son, only four daughters, two of whom she fought to educate, my mother and my youngest aunt. Maybe that's a story for another time, but it's an extraordinary story of a woman who spoke among men in order to secure schooling for her daughters. And then my mother's education unfolded with its own difficulties, both my mother and her younger sister finished the *Shkolla Normale*,[2] became teachers, and later, as a teacher, my mother met my father. He had gone to give vaccinations at that time, because my father worked in the health sector, he was a medical laboratory technician, while my mother was a teacher.

He went to that school to give vaccines, and there they met, and that's where the first acquaintance happened. Later, through my mother's half-brothers from her father's side, because even there there's a detail worth mentioning, my grandmother was originally married into that family, but two weeks after her wedding her husband was killed, I believe in a blood feud. Then they sent her back to the same family to marry another man. That's how life, so to say, went on. During her life, she had six children. Both sons died. In fact, about the eldest son, she didn't even know where his grave was. He died in a hospital somewhere in Peja. By the time she managed to visit, he had already died and been buried. So, it's a painful family story that, as you might say, was told and retold within the family.

Then later, when my mother and her sister finished elementary school, they wanted to marry them off, and that's when my grandmother intervened and insisted they continue school. My mother went on, despite family disagreements, to continue her education, and became a teacher first in her own village, and then, after marriage, continued teaching in Drenas throughout her whole life, I'd say until the period of the war.

**Anita Susuri**: I wanted to ask you also about your childhood memories. What do you remember from that time?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Listen, there are very big families, but mine, so to say, wasn't quite typical, I can't call it completely typical. There was my mother, father, and the children. But the fact that my grandmother, my mother's mother, lived with us, that wasn't very common at the time. Usually, it was the father's mother who lived in the household, not the mother's. Still, there was a kind of harmony and such a good atmosphere that when the two grandmothers were together, people around us used to say, "She's taken your son!" And my grandmother would reply, "We share both the son and the daughter."

I mean, there was a certain kind of upbringing that, I'd say, has followed me my whole life and still does. On the other hand, my grandmother at home, my mother's mother, was an extraordinary storyteller. She not only remembered a lot, but also the way she told stories left an unforgettable mark

[2] Teachers training school. The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo. During the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

on me. On her father's side, her family had been quite advanced in education and in courage as well. She remembered stories, one after the others, even from the time when they fought during Azem Bejta's time and after.

Those stories left their mark, they did. She was the oldest child of her father and was highly respected, since her father had been a kind of *pleqnar*[3] at that time, visiting *oda*[4] and similar places, enjoying the respect of the community where they lived. And all those visits made to pay respect to both him and my grandmother, as part of that kinship, continued into our family.

As a child, I remember sitting, not as a typical girl serving coffee, but sitting cross-legged in front of them, offering a cigarette or something like that. I would listen to the old men with mustaches talking with my grandmother, telling stories from the past. I believe that part left an indelible trace in my life. Perhaps that's why today, when I work with small art projects or writing, I find ways to express myself, in the way I tell stories or write, in the same storytelling manner. That was one period.

Then, as I mentioned, both my parents worked at that time. For a period, it wasn't too bad economically, because with two salaries, they could provide good conditions for the children. But later, after 1981 and onward, things started getting more difficult, until the time came when, as you might say, it was hard for everyone in Kosovo, and for my family too. Still, within the family, we continued functioning in our small circle, where I think our parents gave us those principles, human rights, preserving dignity, having a kind of moral uprightness in life, which I believe I've carried with me always.

**Anita Susuri**: And in your family, how many children were you?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: Six.

**Anita Susuri:** Six.

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: Six. Girl, boy, girl, boy, girl, boy.

**Anita Susuri**: You were the oldest?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj**: I was the oldest, yes. In fact, even among my uncles' children, I was the oldest. I mean, all the others came after me.

**Anita Susuri:** So, a big family…how was it to grow up with all of them?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Listen, maybe because my parents were educated, as much as they could be… my mother, for example, after marriage, while having me and being pregnant with my brother, finished the academy for the lower cycle,[5] which at that time lasted three years, if I'm not mistaken. It was a school in Mitrovica. So, having two educated parents who had seen a little more than perhaps the others around them or than earlier generations, I had my parents as my friends my whole life. Maybe

[3] Literally elder, arbitrator in all sorts of disputes, in particular blood feuds.
[4] Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.
[5] Training of elementary school teachers.

this helped me have quite an advantage in how I functioned in life, maybe many times being headstrong. Often, when decisions were made around me, I had the courage not to stay inside the frames. I think that influenced my formation.

But on the other hand, we also saw… so to say, you take the model of your parents. A father who worked… I can mention that he was a medical laboratory technician, and at that time, our apartment, the house where we lived, was right by the road. Often, people, in the absence of medical services, late at night, when they needed help for small children or the elderly, even at moments close to death, wouldn't come to knock at the door, they would knock at the window to call him to go give infusions or injections. We grew up our whole lives with that spirit, that you must help others, that you must reach out to others. That was from my father's side.

On the other hand, my mother, as a *normaliste*,[6] like many teachers in this country, had a certain kind of strange work discipline, but also a motivation within herself and encouragement for her work. I remember my mother in quite an early period of her career, when she went to teach children, since she taught the lower cycle, meaning from first to fourth grade at that time, she never left without making the necessary preparations, whether it was taking out musical notes for the music class with a small mandolin they had back then, or sitting to prepare poems she would recite at school, or the lessons she would explain there.

All this, maybe, influenced that part of me too, the part of work discipline and discipline in life. That you must form yourself and create yourself as a person. But also that part I mentioned, not just the humane one. Sometimes I think she was very brave. I remember certain periods in life, for example, during the time of the poisoning of the children in Kosovo,[7] my father was among the first who went, first to Podujeva, where the poisoning cases appeared in schools. From Gllogovc, from today's Drenas, he was among the first to go there. Or his long-term activism in the *Nëna Tereze*[8] association. So, naturally, when you see your parents, what direction they take, what they offer, of course, you're shaped by that, and you take them as models and keep them as models in your life.

**Anita Susuri:** You finished primary school in…

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Both primary and high school. I finished primary school nearby, Gllogovc, Drenas today, it's a small place. Then I continued in Drenas Gymnasium, which still exists today, Gjergj Kastrioti - Skënderbeu Gymnasium, that's the name they gave it during the years we were there. I belonged to those generations, there were one or two generations they used to call, so to say, a

[6] Student of *Shkolla Normale.*

[7] In March 1990, after Kosovo schools were segregated along ethnic lines, thousands of Albanian students fell ill with symptoms of gas poisoning. No reliable investigation was conducted by the authorities, who always maintained no gas was used in Kosovo and the phenomenon must have been caused by mass hysteria. The authorities also impeded independent investigations by foreign doctors, and to this day, with the exception of a publication in The Lancet that excludes poisoning, there are only contradictory conclusions on the nature and the cause of the phenomenon. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War,* Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999.

[8] Nëna Tereze / Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was a humanitarian organization that, during the 1990s at the height of Milošević's repression, supported the parallel society of Albanians who were expelled from all state institutions and services. The organization played a crucial role in supporting the population by offering healthcare, distributing aid, and assisting with births amidst the conflict.

"special gymnasium," because they increased the number of subjects for us. I was in the mathematics, natural sciences track. A good student (laughs) all the time but not always focused only on studying.

I was a very curious child. I say "child" because that whole period, which was quite intense in terms of my activity, began in primary school and continued in high school. It was a very special period, the first year was during the miners' strike,[9] when we, as students, organized ourselves as we knew.. Drenas had its own characteristics. We were, so to say, an ethnically pure municipality, all of us were Albanians. It's not that we felt direct pressure from someone else at that moment, but you could feel the general atmosphere.

Then, after that period, came another moment, around the third year of high school, or the second and third. WHen they began… When the former political prisoners were released, I mean, the political prisoners, and they began coming and offering to teach as professors within our school. It was Jakup Krasniqi who came at that time, more or less, I might not recall the exact years. Ismail Syla, those were among them. And then Professor Smajl, as I called him.

We continued for two or three years in a row to keep in touch with the professor and prepare various programs. He prepared those recitals, those poetry selections, the line, that spirit that needed to be conveyed. We were a group of four or five students who faithfully followed what was being offered, maybe because we wanted to continue in that direction. You see, the fact that there was a lack of cultural life, a lack of television, a lack of media, those few programs that were held in schools often served to be presented in other places too, on certain dates.

The photos we saw together, you could see moments, for example, when November 28th[10] was celebrated, which year? 1996. We went from Drenas to Komoran. A small hall… actually, it wasn't even a cultural hall; it was a school. From there, then, in a small gathering, we went to raise a glass, so to speak, to toast and celebrate November 28th. I remember the moment when it was almost over, there was a moment when they noticed the lights. [The police] came with those *kompanjolla* [jeep] or whatever their vehicles were. I remember three or four students were supposed to leave for Drenas, it was, so to say, a short distance, seven or eight kilometers from Komoran to Drenas… but there was no transport.

I remember that at the moment when those vehicles passed, we knocked on the door of a house near the crossroads there, the family's surname was Shala, if I'm not mistaken. They opened the door for us, they saw we were young, noticed the police cars, and let us in. I'll never forget the moment we entered and found them also celebrating November 28th inside their home. It was an emotional moment, but also a moment of hope, even though we were young, you could see that this wasn't happening only in public spaces but also within the small cells of families. That small moment when you realize that you are something different from the others.

**Anita Susuri:** I'd like to go back a bit, because you mentioned 1989, the miners' strike. But also 1990, when Albanians were expelled from institutions, your parents must have lost their jobs around that time…

[9] 1989 strike of the miners in the industrial complex of Trepça against changes in the 1974 Constitution that revoked Kosovo's autonomy as a province of Serbia. It ended with mass arrests and martial law.
[10] November 28th is Albania's Independence Day.

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** No, because, as I said before, Gllogovc at that time had another characteristic. They remained at work, in schools, of course, yes, schools, like everywhere else, but in other sectors they continued working because there was no one else to replace them. So they kept working until much later, when the "violent measures" were imposed. But even then, they improvised among the same people. Those violent measures were meant to divide and cause friction, but still, it wasn't just about losing jobs. There was also financial devaluation, inflation, all those things that made life difficult.

Those few people who worked, wherever they worked, since not everyone worked in the public sector, even they, when they came home from work, that salary that was supposed to sustain life, or provide food for a month, could only buy, let's say, a pair of shoes or a loaf of bread. That's how it was. Sometimes when we talk about it in the family, with my mother, my father, or others of that generation, you pause and think: "How did we survive? How did we manage?" Today, as a parent myself, I often think, "How did they do it?"

Six children, that's not a few. We had no other financial source. We had no relatives abroad. So you had to survive with what little you had. It wasn't an easy life for anyone, not for us either, of course.

**Anita Susuri:** I want to talk a bit more about those cultural events, the ones you were active in, the performances you organized. How did it all happen? Who organized them? How did you manage under those conditions?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Listen, the fact that there was a kind of repression, not just at higher levels, but in general in all aspects of life connected to Albanian identity in Kosovo, pushed people to self-organize, to find ways to preserve something essential, if not for anything else, for the human spirit. In such circumstances, we organized ourselves, small groups of people who had a bit more willpower. And indeed, since we were closer to the center, we could more easily get there, even if it was just to rehearse…Because there might have been people who wanted to do that kind of work, but perhaps due to lack of means, or the impossibility of reaching the places where there was a hall or something similar, couldn't participate.

Many times our rehearsals or our meetings had to be adjusted to the schedules of those who came from the villages. Around the year '90, maybe '91, '92, we organized ourselves as a small amateur theater. Through it we then organized various performances. But that was one side. This theater part was something organized within the framework of the theater. But at the same time I was continuously…I mentioned Professor Ismail, continuously with the group, so to speak, with those few students as there were, because some were afraid, they weren't always the same ones since someone would move from there, someone had other obligations. Indeed, some of them started studying. I was constant, but the others moved.

Throughout all this time then also on my own, not only as a group, but I, wherever they called me for something they needed… often even walking for whole hours to reach a village where a bit of school opened or a class or something like that, or there was a school day, or there was a moment when they wanted to mark something. This continued for four–five years. You must keep in mind that I was rather young in that period. That recitation activity had perhaps started in eighth grade. But it intensified at the age of 17–18 and then continued also in the period of studies, when I split my time between Drenas and Pristina.

I was active all the time in Drenas, I was active in Pristina. I just… so to say, I balanced it so I could make the time. But it was a very intensive time. Sometimes when I remember how one of my days passed, maybe I slept four hours, but the rest was from one job to the other. Not to forget mentioning another detail: when I turned 20, 21, around '95, '94, I had started to work, to teach. Meaning at 20 years old, I hadn't even turned 21.

I was still without a diploma, but it was the time when education wasn't paid, my mother wasn't paid either. They would get a salary somewhere after six months, a mini-salary with that three percent[11] that was collected and teachers were paid. In the absence of teachers and also because of the financial need, financial need for engagement, simply, then… not that I got a salary. I got it after I had already left, so to speak, from that job. This was the period that truly was intensive, but also the period when I weighed my value as a person and perhaps professionally as someone who can give, can offer.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm focusing on these events…

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Where did you hold them, for example? Did you have specific places where you could do rehearsals or where you could talk, decide what you wanted to do, to work?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Again, that was one of Drenas's characteristics, the fact that the schools continued to operate. For example, I myself held the fourth year in an improvised classroom. But as for the rest we worked within schools, both during my time in high school and in primary school. We mostly held the rehearsals at the primary school in Drenas. But when it came to performing the shows, then we had… the period when we had *Toka e Ndezur* [The Burning Land], a show we performed over the course of two–three years, that period was quite difficult. It was around '90–'91, '92 somewhere there, maybe even '93. No, '90, '91, '92, '93, something like that.

In that period it was more difficult to go… also because of the nature of the show. It's not that we performed it in the cultural hall because it was a show that, in a way, was unacceptable for the regime of that time. But we performed it in, like, halls, in schools that were improvised, in the physical education hall, if there was one. These were somewhat larger halls, if I can say so, or, say, when we were invited in villages all around Kosovo, not only in Drenas.

It happened that we performed even on those tractor trailers they had set up, improvising them in school yards for their shows, and which we used. Or in school corridors where they were longer, benches were placed and on the benches, so to speak, our acting took place, while on the other side they set up seats or chairs or benches, or even standing. Children, teachers, and indeed villagers would often come from the surrounding homes to see a show in Albanian.

There was a period…now that I'm telling this, I'm remembering an earlier period of my childhood. When my father, again due to the lack, even though there was Radio Television of Prishtina, the television didn't offer much. I remember on Sundays, usually in the AM… because in Drenas we couldn't watch Albanian TV. But Sunday forenoon, when one of the Belgrade channels at that time

[11] The three percent fund was created by the Kosovo government in exile during the 1990s. All Albanians in the Diaspora and Kosovo were duty-bound to pay three per cent of their salary into this fund to finance Kosovo's parallel institutions.

didn't broadcast in the morning, with some small tricks they did with chocolate wrappers or aluminum foil or something like that, wrapping the antennas, that's what I remember my father doing.

He would do something like that and on the roof of the house put an antenna so that in the AM the children could watch a film from Kinostudio New Albania or a puppet show also from Radio Television of Albania until Belgrade television started broadcasting. Then it was interrupted. It was interrupted there, but we would wait for Sunday as if it were something extraordinary for that time, perhaps like going to some comedy theater, I mean, to see something in Albanian. Then this continued further. The blocking… then they removed it completely, the work of Television of Prishtina was made impossible. There was nothing else anymore.

These shows we put on, from today's perspective they seem small things, but at that time it was everything we could do. You had no other alternative. You had no other path. All these small things made that collective common resistance to which we refer today as such. If these hadn't existed, I think it would have been very difficult, very difficult. We weren't the only ones. We were a group… Gllogovc, Drenas then was a small place, and it's not like you could do much. But as much as there was, I think that perhaps even today there isn't as active a cultural life as we organized back then.

**Part Two**

**Anita Susuri:** You said that you travelled  both to Pristina and Drenas at that time. How difficult was movement? Did you perhaps see anything from the scene or…

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** They were two, two quite separate lives, so to speak. Now again, when you pose the question, I'm going back once more. My generation… that is, the time I started school was the period '80–'81. I started school with the '81 demonstrations. That is, I finished primary school in '88, and  started high school in '89, in a period which was quite, not quite, but extremely difficult for Kosovo. I finished high school in '92, in a period again both difficult, but also with some elements which, in a certain way, encouraged later movements.

In '92, in October, I started school with a protest. I remember myself… I found myself… I had come for the period, I mean, we had come some days for registration and those initial parts. The faculties no longer functioned in buildings. I started and finished my studies in private premises. My foot never stepped in the Faculty of Philology even though I finished the Faculty of Philology. In that period, that day…Was it the 12th or something like that of October? I don't recall the exact date, but it was October when the school year began.

I find myself in the middle of a demonstration at the Faculty of Philology, which then spreads to the main street. I don't know who called it, I don't know who organized it. I had just arrived in Pristina; I didn't know the city. I remember that when the police intervened… I was also alone; I had no one on my side. There was a friend who had enrolled in English and another guy, Fatmir, who was in Albanian language and literature, who later interrupted his studies. Later, when they dispersed us, they entered the crowd, dispersed us, we started to run away, each of us [started] to get away.

I remember myself at one moment, somewhere here it must have been near the dorms, the moment when three or four policemen attacked me, chasing me. I don't know how I crossed a wire, like a fence, and I came out on the other side, in a pit of mud. One foot in the mud, the other saved, and I avoided, so to speak, their capture. Because they were dressed with their heavier equipment and couldn't catch me at my speed.

I headed toward the bus station. I didn't even know the city; I only had an idea, I only knew roughly on which side the bus station was, but I had no idea which way I should go; I had been left alone. And I was anyway practically alone from my side; I knew no one in Pristina. I had no relatives in Pristina. I didn't have an address where I could go and, so to speak, find shelter. I remember, maybe it's interesting to mention, I somehow reached the bus station, circling around like that.

After I got on the bus, I remember a kind of panic developed among the people saying that police patrols had come and were looking for those who had muddy feet, knowing that they [the police) had continued [searching for us]. Fortunately, the bus left before those checks reached the bus I was on. But that was a delicate moment that stays in my memory. Then the period of studies, you asked about cultural activity; I'll continue this thread.

The first year was more or less like that. It's not that I knew many people. I would come very early to Pristina. At first I traveled by bus, but then there was a period when the then-Yugoslavia, Serbia, had such measures that they were left without fuel. That is, sanctions were imposed so that there was no fuel, and the buses and the means of transport couldn't function.

The only way to come for studies to Pristina, on those days when we held lectures, was by train, by train to Fushë Kosovë. The train from Peja or from Prizren came through Drenas. I had it close to home. Very early, around 05:30 in the morning, or at 05:00, I don't recall the exact timetable. I even remember, my father would come out to accompany me because it was very early, it was still night. I was 18 when I came [to Pristina] as a student. I would come to Fushë Kosovë. If I could catch an urban bus, when there was one, because there were times we would walk from Fushë Kosovë all the way to where we came in Pristina, on foot.

With that bus, but often my lectures would start at 10:00. It happened that I would get off in Ulpiana, in Lakrishte, so as to spend time walking to where we held lectures, at that time some were held at Nazmi Gafurri, the area near Kodra e Trimave, Xhemail Ibish, Xhemail Ibish Street at that time. So the first year was, more or less, like this, with many difficulties, both of the road and of financial conditions. We didn't have [any money]. The money I had was simply for that train or bus ticket, whatever I came with. But not for food, not even for water, for anything.

If I left at 05:30 in the morning and returned around… if I caught the train at 03:00–04:00, whatever it was, I would arrive at 05:00 in the afternoon at home. Or if not, then I would arrive, what would it be, 07:30, or whenever the other train arrived. So the whole day, if I found somewhere a fountain to drink water. Otherwise, forget food for the whole day, because I didn't have [money], simply I didn't. That period when I arrived early at the school where we held the lectures was a very interesting period, which perhaps made it possible, those two–three hours while they finished the lectures, made it possible for me to make contact with those few students who were there.

The radiators were cold because there was no heating. Winters were cold, winters weren't like now. I remember that often those leggings I wore, or the pants I wore, would thaw on my body during that period that I stayed for two–three hours, that I sat in those school corridors. There I met Nait Hasani for the first time, in those periods, in those two–three hours. Not that we talked about anything specific at that time, but at least we identified each other as persons with whom perhaps later we maintained some contacts and had talks that perhaps helped us, especially me, since he had experience and a life, so to speak, he had things to teach others and to tell me.

The first year went like that. I became friends with my friend, one friend, because later I had two close friends here. My friend Hyrije Veliu, at whose house I later often found a bed to sleep, a table to eat at, when I had been left [stranded] or there was no transport to return home, or when I didn't live in Pristina. I often stayed there, at Uncle Sheqe's and at Mother Sabile's, often. Those were the first moments also with her when we approached each other around poetry, those things that interested us.

Then, in the second year, I decided, actually we discussed it at home, and my other sister would also be coming, not as a student but as a pupil in Pristina in the high school of music, and we decided to live together. We lived in a very small apartment, tiny like that. That was the period when more possibilities were created for me to make contacts in Pristina. I spent less time in Drenas. I would go simply for some theater rehearsal. Usually the theater rehearsals were not held every day, so I had the possibility to maintain activity on both sides, so to speak.

I would go for performances if it was Saturday or Sunday, whenever I had the possibility also economically, or I would make use of someone who came by car and could take me along there. In this period, just as I had settled in Pristina, one of the colleagues from the faculty told us that there is a… in fact, this is the second year, this is the period, yes, exactly, since I'm recalling the dates. In this period this colleague told us that there is a group of political prisoners who are organized and want, so to speak, to hold a literary hour with which, symbolically, in a certain way, to express their revolt over the arrests of '93.

In '93 it was the period when activists of the LPK[12] and the LKÇK[13] of that time had been arrested, and that their trial was being held then or something like that. Together with this friend and with Hyrije, my friend, we go to Dragodan at that time, today's Arbëria as the neighborhood is called. We find a circle of people with whom we then began to be very close friends and with whom to this day we keep contacts and are friends, good friends. There we found ourselves perhaps also because of the spirit that was conveyed and because of those materials that were read and because of the idea and the way in which their aim was explained and clarified to us.

As a result of this, at first a literary hour was held at the Albanological Institute, at that time still without being organized, simply as an initiative of theirs, of the former political prisoners. There was Gani Fetaj, there was Zyrafete Lajçi, Zyrafete Muriqi in fact the maiden surname, then Lajçi, Sali Lajçi, and Selim Lulaj. Selim Lulaj then became my husband in the following years. These were the people

[12] Alb. *Lëvizja Popullore e Kosovës* - People's Movement for Kosovo, originally founded as a political movement by Albanian nationalists in 1982. The LPK's ideology was left-wing nationalism.
[13] Alb. *Lëvizja Kombëtare për Çlirimin e Kosovës, LKÇK* - People's Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo, founded in 1993, Albanian radical-left nationalist party.

who in a certain way were at the core of that initial mini-organization. The hour was held at the Albanological Institute. There were also intellectuals, students and professors.

It was… People still remember it to this day, they remind me of it. There was a different spirit. Usually, so to speak, the more, let's say, visible patriotic side was noticed in the periphery. And it is not… so to speak, it was often modified in Pristina and was said in a more diplomatic language in Pristina. But that literary hour, I can't call it otherwise, displayed a somewhat more direct language. This made an impression on people. That literary hour was presented somewhere in November '93.

After that, it was discussed whether we could organize together, and in January '94, somewhere from the 16th to the 20th of January, I cannot know the exact date, but that period, the second or third week of January '94, the General Council of the Establishment of the Cultural Club of Students was held, even though we discussed for a long time whether to decide the naming simply "Students' Club" or "Cultural Students' Club." We decided to be "cultural," always by majority of opinions. I was, personally, I was a fervent supporter of removing that word "cultural," because I wanted the essence of what we were gathering for.

However, the friends who were former political prisoners, and knowing the risk of being caught and followed and the consequences that could come through the work, insisted on keeping the word "cultural" in the name. It was decided to remain so. That General Council was held. A leadership came out of that club, which in fact…this club was also a kind of counter-response to a kind of student drowsiness in a certain period at the University of Prishtina. It was a period when, as if it became very difficult and as if a withdrawal began, a kind of anxiety, a kind of quiet, a kind of stagnation, which was unacceptable for a part of us.

This moment, so to speak, reignited, if I may say so, that student energy also around the club, even though the longevity, so to speak, of the club's activity was not very long, also because of subsequent developments. January '94 it was founded as a club; it continued until close to '97, that is, until the end of '96, more or less. In this period, that leadership, that leadership that came out of the General Council… I don't know if it's necessary to mention by names? If you…

That is, who were in the leadership who were selected: there was Naim Krasniqi, there was Bekim Dobraj, there was Hyrie Emini, who was killed together with Tahir Sinani later. I was there, Alban Neziri, Bujar Dugolli, and Artan Demaj. It seems I didn't forget anyone else. Seven of us, that is, who, in agreement also with the others who had been the initiators but also with that General Council, decided not to have a chairman, not to have someone above the others. This also because, again thinking of the consequences that could come because of the activism, and we functioned as a group. We functioned well, and we functioned, so to speak, in such a way that there were never disagreements, nor splits in the way we acted.

A characteristic that perhaps should be mentioned in the club is that, and if I may say, the main aim in the club was to absorb, to offer to the liberation of the country the different currents of different convictions and different means, to know one another, where we are, to know who we are. Because in such circumstances when there was no information, and when we didn't know each other, it was very necessary to have a contact to whom you could turn at a given moment, to whom you could offer yourself at a given moment.

Trust had begun to be lost among people. Everyone had begun to wrap themselves, so to speak, in their own shell. It was a struggle for existence. You couldn't hold it against anyone. Besides the names I mentioned, and also there were, the Hyrije whom I mentioned, and others: Sali, Selim, Zyrafete, Gani, Selim Gashi, the brother of Sabit Gashi, at whose house then were continued to be held… in the *oda* in which music rehearsals continued to be held. We used it at the same time, held meetings and rehearsals were held to maintain that part of cultural life.

At the beginning of the club, right at the start, two or three times at the beginning, and after it was founded but also a bit before it was founded, two or three times, Ukshin Hoti[14] came to those rooms where we met in Dragodan. He was, so to speak, a special honor first of all to know him but also to hear his words. In March '94 the club organized a political forum at which we had as the main speaker Ukshin Hoti. It was approximately two months before he was arrested and sentenced. It was the commemoration of the demonstrations. We wanted to mark the demonstrations of '81, and we invited him as the main speaker, as someone who had a political opinion, as someone who could transmit something political to the students, something that was necessary for the time.

On this side and then on the other, that's when I started to say, the club had gathered people around itself… even though we didn't really know each other's organization or who was where. For example, in that club, in the music section, there was Rexhep Selimi. On this side, where we were, it was me, and during that period, a bit later, I became organized, or more precisely, I was active in the LKÇK. There was also Alban Neziri, who was part of the groups connected with the KLA. And there was Bujar Dugolli, who later took over the leadership of the Student Union, he moved there from the club and, so to speak, took the initiative to push things further.

That is, there were… There was Hyri Emini who was an extraordinary activist. In the end, a person has nothing else more than life to give for a national cause such as Albanians have always done. Then there was Arianit Dema whom I mentioned, Artan Demaj in fact, but there was also Arianit, the friend who had accompanied us, both from a family… Artan was the son of Isa Demaj, an early activist and patriot. In a certain way, different spirits were gathered or brought together within the same organization. This perhaps was a characteristic that makes the club's activity in that period stand out.

We continuously held meetings in those halls where classes were held, in those halls mainly in Dragodan, until in March, since we also saw it in the photographs somewhere, in March of '96, if I'm not mistaken, something a bit bigger was the holding of an activity together with the rectorate. Until then there had been a kind of rejection of the club. Because we were seen as more extremist, seen more on the edge, and the political currents of that time did not exactly accept us with arms wide open. Naturally we always had, not to say a background, but in support, former political prisoners, former political prisoners: Bajram Kosumi,[15] Selatin Novosella, Nait Hasani, Hydajet Hyseni for a time, who came and followed the club's activities.

In this anniversary that I'm speaking of…of marking the demonstrations of '81, again but now in '96, we were enabled, we were allowed to hold an activity in those premises of the then rectorate. In

[14] Ukshin Hoti (1943–1999) was a prominent Albanian politician, intellectual, and professor from Kosovo. Known for his advocacy of human rights and national self-determination for Albanians, he was imprisoned multiple times by Yugoslav authorities for his political activities. Hoti disappeared in 1999 after being released from prison, and his fate remains unknown, making him a symbol of resistance and sacrifice for many Albanians.
[15] Bajram Kosumi (1960), student leader, the third prime minister of Kosovo after the war (2005-2206).

Velania somewhere was that space where this thing was made possible for us. There was a somewhat different spirit there from that everyday spirit in Kosovo, the spirit of the majority. But for us it was something that the time had come to do. I think that in this sense the club had… had its effect.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you under surveillance? Did the authorities of that time, for example, know about the existence of this club? About the work?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** No. I don't know whether they knew or didn't know. At the time when I was later arrested, I was questioned also about the part of the club. Based on what I was asked, I think they didn't know much. Maybe this again, that, so to speak, that foresight that this group should also have the word "cultural" on its name, that's what saved the club from being seen as something that could get someone in trouble. We were arrested, two–three people, so to speak, from the club, our names came up. I was arrested, Alban was arrested, Rexhep, Rexhep Selimi later. But not as… each for activities they had done elsewhere, but not as members of the club.

That is, we were not sentenced as the club. It's not that they knew much about the club. Perhaps also because, I don't know, there was a different atmosphere in those last years. People began…People started to change… maybe even the people we targeted, the ones we worked with, were more trustworthy. The people we invited were those we felt shared our spirit. Maybe the way we expressed ourselves through poetry was a bit more public than others. Maybe that's why we weren't seen as very dangerous, even though we were always careful. I believe that's what saved us, at least to some extent.

**Anita Susuri:** And these activities, gatherings, the talks that were held, where did you usually do them?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** In apartments.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have…

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** No, no, no. In students' apartments. Mostly in Dragodan. There was the apartment, if I'm not mistaken Gani lived there, Gani Fetaj, he too a former political prisoner since he was 16 years old, very young. Today he lives in Switzerland because he too had his life story. But more or less there, mostly in the apartment where he was, but also other students, since they lived as a group. They were…most of them were boys from Dukagjin, that is from the Peja, Deçan side. But there were also others from other sides who then joined there.

We weren't a big group. That is, I often meet people who mention the club and feel part of the club because they came to our activities when we did them. But the core of the club… we weren't many, we weren't many. At most, if we gathered in that general council where we were, we could gather 40 people. Add another ten who were this other wing who didn't consider themselves members of the council but simply supported us. Around 50 people. Then the work was continued by these seven of us who were in the leadership and eventually another ten, fifteen people. At most twenty, if someone had finished studies in the meantime and someone else had come.

That's how much was the core of people, so to speak, who kept both the spirit and so that it wouldn't, wouldn't slip out of hand, that way for which the club had been conceived and thought. I think that a special part of both my energy and my life went there, and not only mine. I think we were… in this way we represented, so to speak, maybe we were the symbol of a generation, truly. Also because of that

different organization that we had. But when we gathered there we didn't notice the difference. We learned about each other and who was where only if we were arrested or now after the war when we sat and chatted.

That is, we went, we functioned, we worked without telling one another who and what other work one was doing on the side. This period lasted until I started working in education. I mentioned it earlier. Then I started to be less, speaking personally, less active in Pristina. Because it would have been impossible. That is, I would come perhaps to lectures in the morning until midday. I'd return at midday and go teach. Or the opposite, depending on how I had the schedules. Then there was the schedule of rehearsals, if we had theater or recitation or any meeting. We also held some meetings.

We were sometimes called, let's say, at that time, as everywhere in Kosovo, the Democratic League (LDK),[16] so to speak, was organized, and the youth forums also developed activity and gathered. Personally, it's not that… even if I went, I said, "Do you have something concrete? If you don't…" I was like this, more extreme in my stances. I've said, I have this stubbornness and the refusal to fit inside frames. But this was my way of acting, and often it maybe saved me from some moments… acting like an ascetic is sometimes strange how it singles you out and how… either protects you or places you in a not very enviable position, but I often acted like that.

**Part Three**

**Anita Susuri:** Now I'm interested in the circumstances of the imprisonment. Where were you? What was the indictment?

**Majlinda Sinani Lulaj:** Maybe before this…during this intensive period that I'm talking about, both of the club and of the work and of the activity in Pristina and of the studies…also in '93, I believe it was June perhaps, or I can't know exactly, but, that is, after the first leaflet of the LKÇK came out. There was a fellow townsman of mine, an Ilir Tahiri whom I mentioned in the photographs, a boy who had served prison for a period. He was organized [in the underground movement] and sentenced. Not that I knew much about his activity, but because I knew him in Drenas. As young people we knew each other. He brings me a leaflet.

Because I always said, "What is to be done? Something must be done, we need to do something, we need to make something." With him I felt free to speak, knowing also we were closer in age, but also knowing his past. I remember he brought it to me, folded up, it was one of those larger-format papers. He handed it to me folded. He tells me, "I'm giving you something," he says, "but don't open it here." I opened that material later, I read it, and that was my first contact with the liberation and with the LKÇK, as something illegal, let's say, for that time.

Because we did these other things more publicly at that time. At least we didn't call ourselves illegal. We did them. If you got caught you were punished, but as long as you were not caught, the activity developed. That was the first moment. But then meanwhile, during the period when we were getting

[16] Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). The first political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

closer to the club, I had met Hyri Emini. Hyri Emini also had an affinity with the LKÇK. For a short period we lived together with her, and she, in a way, stirred my path, in the sense of what she said to me about the aim, but not as a direct request. We simply talked about convictions, ideas, spirit, and path.

"Is this what needs to be done? Where should we find ourselves? What can we do?" I mean, they were conversations, sometimes I say ordinary ones, but perhaps not everyone had them. We did. We had them quite intensely. Then this period, and also that General Council of the club, in which among others was also Nazmie Klinaku, made it possible for me to meet Nazmie. Later on, over some days, she put me in contact, she told me, "Someone has asked to meet you." She didn't tell me the name, she didn't tell me who. But the tone with which she said it made me understand that it wasn't something ordinary, it was something more special.

Today, if you asked me where and how that first meeting happened, I wouldn't remember. With a person whose name I only understood when we were imprisoned, when we were brought into the courtroom, I mean. I believed that the same person and the name were connected, so to speak. It must have been, I believe, the autumn, perhaps the autumn of '95, more or less. That's when I got into my first contact with *Ilegalja*.[17] I received materials, mainly issues of *Çlirimi* [Liberation], which I was asked to take to Drenas. Then, in Drenas, I was asked to contact a young man, and at first they didn't know that I already knew him. But when they asked me, I said, "Yes, he was my classmate." It was Sami Hyseni.

"Can you meet him and simply give him *Çlirimi*? He knows what to do with them." I met with him. I had received prior confirmation from him that he accepted. In fact, after the war I learned that he had been organized even earlier, but I only knew as much as I was told. I wasn't one to ask too many questions. I remember the first moment when I had to go deliver the first copies of *Çlirimi* to him so that he could distribute them in the field. The purpose of *Çlirim* was to create such a mass and such an awareness that we would be ready, at any moment, to respond, not simply with calm, to that regime that continued, so to speak, to erase everything that was ours.

At that time, before going out that night, before stepping out… Now, you can imagine, it was a period when I was the eldest in the family, and a daughter. Not that I was a child who was kept strictly under control, where I was going, where I was entering, or where I was leaving, but still, going out at midnight, or at one or two in the morning, was unusual. Because there were patrols, it wasn't safe. There were police patrols. Often there was a curfew, so it wasn't normal to tell your parents, "I'm just going out."

I gathered my mother and father, both of them, in the room and said, "I've decided." I said, "I've entered a path where I'll need to go out and come in at any hour, to act, to move around," without telling them anything more, just in general terms. "And I have only one request from you: can you pretend that you only have five children, and that I'm not one of them, and simply not ask me where I'm going, where I'm entering, or where I'm coming from? because I can't tell you."

I remember my father didn't say a word. He looked me in the eyes, he recognized my stubbornness. He knew that even if he started to argue with me, it wouldn't work. I remember my mother simply said,

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

"Have you thought this through?" And I told her, "Yes. I've thought it through." They didn't ask me what or how. That night I dressed in my brother's coat, a bit big on me. I hid my hair, it was very long, I tucked it inside, and went out to meet this friend of mine, the one I had spoken with earlier, and we had agreed where we would meet. When I handed him the *Çlirim* leaflets, he said, "Go back now." In fact, no one had told me to go out. They had only told me, "Deliver the *Çlirimi*, these, whatever's wrapped up there, hand them over."

We met by the railway in Drenas. I said, "Where should I go back to?" He said, "Go home now, I'll handle the rest." I said, "No, I can't leave you alone." It felt wrong to me. It felt unfair, I was giving something and then withdrawing home, leaving him at risk. So I continued with him. I went out with him, as many times as we distributed them. Until one moment, when I would come to Pristina to collect these materials, whatever I was taking, in those few minutes, literally minutes, that I exchanged words with the person I met, who clearly lived illegally. With a wrinkled shirt, smelling of tobacco, and the materials I took from him… and from the closeness of our brief conversation, you could just feel the kind of life he was living…

I said a word that made him understand, something like, "We went out," meaning, "We went out to distribute them." He said, "Wait, wait, wait, you're going out too?" I said, "Yes, because I can't leave you alone." He said, "Alright," he said, "we didn't tell you to go out, but since you've done it, fine, go ahead." And so we continued like that. In the meantime, Enver [Dugolli] was also contacted. I was asked to get in touch with Enver, Enver Dugolli, we were together in this. He later made his own contacts with… I didn't know with whom, but I simply carried the message that, "Someone, a friend of yours from prison, wants to meet you." How would I know what that meant?

That's how my involvement continued, so to speak, until around 1996, when we reactivated, or rather, activated, Shqipe Ahmeti as well. She lived nearby, a friend, a neighbor. And on the other hand, that was the last distribution of *Çlirimi* that we did. Somewhere toward the end of '96, I can't say exactly, wintertime, we distributed *Çlirimi* in a larger area than usual, because there were three of us, and we had the courage to move around a bit more. Nevertheless, in January, during that period, as you can see from the photographs, it was the time when *Flaka e Janarit*[18] was held, marking, so to speak, the anniversaries of the deaths of Jusuf Gërvalla,[19] Kadri Zeka, and Bardhosh Gërvalla.

We were caught up in that movement too, so to say. At the same time, I was studying; at the same time, I was teaching; at the same time, I was distributing illegal materials at night. It wasn't because there were programs telling you where you had to be active, I simply was. I was preparing my diploma thesis; I had finished my exams by around November 1996 and was just working on my thesis. Then, maybe around mid-January, on January 26, the first arrests happened.

[18] *Flaka e Janarit* (The Flame of January) is an annual cultural and commemorative festival held across Albanian-inhabited regions to honor national martyrs and promote Albanian art and culture. Originating in the early 1990s as a remembrance of activists killed in January, it has grown into a month-long event featuring literature, theater, music, and visual arts that celebrate collective memory and national identity.

[19] Jusuf Gërvalla (1945- 1982) was a poet and also nationalist activist killed in Germany together with his brother Bardhosh and Kadri Zeka. These killings have been widely attributed to Yugoslav agents, though no investigation has come to a conclusive identification of the killers.

I was at home that evening when I heard the news. The name Avni Klinaku[20] was mentioned, if I'm not mistaken. But the thing is, I didn't know him by name like that, I had no idea who he was, what he looked like, nothing at all. I remember that, the moment his name was mentioned, I said to myself, "How is it even possible that they caught him?" Because I had information that this man was in deep illegality, and I believed, like, we all believed, that when someone was underground, they were protected.

It was the 26th. On the 27th… at that time I was working in an elementary school, in a village called Çikatovë e Re, very close to Drenas. I had been teaching for about two years. I could walk there; it wasn't far, I didn't need transport. On the morning of the 27th, I set out for work. I had heard the news as information, but it hadn't alarmed me, people were being arrested every day, taken in for "informative conversations" every day. So it didn't signal anything particularly specific. Just another arrest, just another name mentioned.

On the 27th, I went to work and came back around midday. My mother met me at the door and said, "Enver's brother, Ilir, came by and said that 'they arrested Enver, and the only words he managed to say before they stopped him from speaking were: Tell Majlinda they've arrested me.'" The moment I received that information, my only thought was how to inform the two other people I was in contact with. The closest one to me was Shqipe. I left immediately, literally, I just had to cross the road; it was very close.

But when I got near, I saw people from the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, talking loudly and such. From my past experience, I knew not to stop and talk, because I still believed there were two sides to it: one, to find out what was happening, and the other, not to get exposed. Because if the network hadn't been broken, there was no need for me to reveal anything further. I overheard them saying there had already been a house search, that they had been looking for something, or something like that. I didn't know exactly what had happened, but what I understood as I walked by was that they hadn't found Shqipe at home, which was a good sign for me.

Still, it pushed me to think that maybe both Enver and Shqipe had been targeted, not because of the underground work, but perhaps because, around that time, the Parliamentary Party had just been founded, about a week or ten days earlier. Its branches had started forming, and if I'm not mistaken, it was led then by Bajram Kosumi, another former political prisoner. So at that moment, I thought maybe they were arrested for that reason because that party was seen as something different from the typical pacifist line of the LDK.

I continued on toward my aunt's house, where I often went to use the telephone, since I didn't have one at home. When I got close to her door, because I intended to make a phone call from there, I suddenly thought to myself that maybe something had happened, and I didn't want to put anyone else at risk, so I turned back. I went to the post office instead. It was close to my house, a small town center, the post office on one side. I went there and called Nazmie Klinaku, the one who had first put me in contact with the person I used to meet, though I never knew who he really was. It had been two or three years, continuously.

[20] Avni Klinaku (1965). A member of LPK, he was arrested in 1984 and released in 1989. Founder of the LKÇK, was arrested again in 1997 and released in 2001. Since 2007, he is the leader of *Lëvizja për Bashkim* (Movement for Unification).

We agreed to meet the next day, because there were no buses left that evening for me to go or come back. So we agreed to meet the next day, which would be January 28. On the 27th, nothing happened to me personally, I didn't notice any unusual movement. I tried to call Sami, who was in Pristina, to warn him not to come home, but I couldn't reach him. On the 28th, I went to Pristina. I met Nazmie in the area we used to call, *te ora e kurrizit.*[21] I got off there and met her.

We talked, and I told her what had happened. She said, "Yes," she said, "they've searched our house too. They took us in," I'm not sure whether she meant they'd searched them or just brought them in, "they took us in as a family. They questioned us, and then released us. They say they've arrested one of my brothers, the one who's been in hiding," she said. But she didn't tell me that this was the same person I had been meeting, she didn't say anything like that. "But," she said, "we don't believe it's true." That was exactly what I thought too, because I couldn't process the situation clearly. Still, that day when I arrived, the newspaper *Bujku*,[22] which sometimes published this kind of information, had reported that Shukrie Rexha had been arrested.

I asked her, curious now, "Do you know her?" Even though the paper said she was an LDK activist, it didn't mention if she belonged to anything else. Nazmie didn't give me any clear sign either way. We were always careful not to give each other too much information. Just like we didn't ask more questions than necessary, because the circumstances were such that often, the less you knew, the safer it was. You understood or asked only as much as needed to function, nothing more. And the other person would also only tell you as much as you *needed* to know at that moment.

Then Nazmie asked me, "Do you feel at risk?" I said, "I have the impression that maybe this is just because of their involvement with the Parliamentary Party,[23] and I believe they'll just be questioned and released." At that point, Shqipe hadn't been arrested, only Enver had. But I said, "We absolutely need to find Sami." So we went together, Nazmie and I, to the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, where he had his classes. Nazmie knew where they held lectures because she was a student there too. It was somewhere near Kodra e Trimave, though I don't remember exactly where. But we didn't find him. So the message was left with Nazmie, "Naza," as I called her, to let Sami know if she managed to reach him.

During this time, around then, we got close to the poplar trees where we were about to take the city bus and go our separate ways. I was going home, and Nazmie was heading to her place. There, I ran into Bujar Dugolli by chance, Enver's brother. He was surprised to see us together. Bujar had no idea about my activity with his brother, nor about my involvement in the underground. Even though we knew each other and worked in the same direction, we didn't know about the other parts of each other's lives. Nazmie and I separated, and I sat down with Bujar. There was a small pastry shop there, right on the corner, I'll never forget it. I don't even know if it still exists; honestly, I've never thought about checking.

I told him, "Please don't go home, Enver has been arrested." He didn't know either; there were no phones back then, communication only happened when you managed to meet in person. I remember that difficult moment for both of us, neither of us knew what was really happening. It was harder

[21] "The clock at the *Kurriz* (spine)," the central area known by that nickname then.

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

[23] The Parliamentary Party of Kosovo was a social-liberal political party founded in 1990 out of the Kosovo Youth Parliament by Veton Surroi. In 2004, it became part of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK).

because Enver had already been imprisoned once before, and we knew that for someone like him, every day spent under arrest was worse than for someone detained for the first time. That night, I went back home again. I remember my mother staying awake for two nights straight, we didn't know what was going on, we just waited.

On the 29th, I was supposed to start at the high school as a substitute teacher. I was near graduation then, covering for a language and literature teacher who was on maternity leave. Early that morning, my little brother, my mother, and my father were all home. I told them, "If anyone comes asking for me,"because people often came to call you in for 'informative talks,' "just tell them I've gone to work, or to the university." I didn't specify which. Those were the two usual routes. University wasn't something they liked hearing, because if they caught you on the way, with your student booklet, you could get into trouble anyway. But still, those were the two alternatives I left them.

My little brother, who must have been seven or eight years old then, heard that, and that's all he remembered. I left and went out, not to the elementary school where I'd been teaching, but to the high school, since that was the day I was supposed to begin. It was meant to be a nine-month or one-year position, substituting a maternity leave, a way to start teaching in the high school. So I went to work at the high school. Meanwhile, the State Security came to our house asking for me. They rang the doorbell. We had recently extended the house, so the rooms were quite far from the entrance, and there was a narrow alleyway leading to the yard, not a straight path to the door.

My little brother went out. The first question they asked him was, "What is Majlinda to you?" He said, "My sister." "Where is she?" And he, remembering what I'd told my parents, replied exactly as instructed: "Either at work or at the university." They asked, "Is your father here?" He said, "Dad came home from work to have breakfast." It was around 10:00 a.m., they used to get about half an hour off for breakfast. My father worked nearby. He went out to meet them. "Where's your daughter?" they asked. He said the same thing, because that was the only message I had left them: "Either at work or at the university." They said, "She needs to report for an informative interview." Then my father left work and came to see me at the high school. He said, "They came looking for you. If you know where you stand, measure your steps." He didn't know what I had done, or where I was involved, or anything.

I looked at the clock, it was around 10:30 or 11:00. I thought, "An informative interview…they usually last two, three, maybe four hours, and then they let you go." Sometimes they would call you back later, that's how these things worked. There wasn't yet any clear signal that arrests were happening; at least, there wasn't public information about it. Arrests were happening, but without information, how could we know? So I thought, "It's just an informative talk, as long as they don't send me to Pristina, they'll handle it here, and that's it." I went back home, left my bag, took only my ID card, and went to report for the so-called informative conversation.

Then comes the next part. At first, they didn't believe that I was really me. Because during that period, when I had first gotten my ID card, it had once been stolen, so I had to get a second one. The photos on the first and the second ID were very different. Apparently, they had been looking for me the whole time using the photo from the first ID, the one I had issued in Drenas. In that one I looked fuller, it was taken in summer, I think, and I didn't resemble the second photo at all. Until finally, luckily, I happened to have the ID with me; otherwise, the officer kept insisting, "You're not Majlinda."

When they finally confirmed it was me, they radioed through their Motorolas. That's when I learned that at the same time they came to my house, they had also sent an armored vehicle to the elementary school where they thought I was working. They had also set up a checkpoint in Komoran, thinking I might have gone toward Pristina or Fushë Kosovë. The posts were being updated by radio. "She's here; stop looking for her elsewhere."

I mean, I was held for about four to five hours, until around 4:00 p.m., when their working hours in Drenas ended. Then they transferred me to Pristina, to the State Security building. I remember it, it was a tall building, maybe seven or eight stories, located behind the Pristina Prison. I think it was later bombed by NATO during the war. They took me to the top floor. That's where the interrogation continued, led by a Kosovar Albanian inspector, the same one who had taken me in Drenas, Isa Bunjaku from Gjilan.

Later, in Pristina, two other inspectors took over, one named Branko and another named Zharko — I don't know their surnames, that's just what they called each other. Other inspectors came and went from the room but didn't question me directly, except for one who introduced himself as their chief, and he asked me a few questions. The rest was all intimidation, standing too close to my face, threats, insults, the usual methods of psychological pressure they used.

Around midnight, or maybe a bit later, they sent me to Lipjan. It must have been right between the 29th and 30th, just after midnight. I didn't have a clear sense of time; I had my watch, but I couldn't check it. During that whole time in the UDB[24] building, they had me sitting with my back to the door, and I could see their movements reflected in the window glass in front of me. In Lipjan, the interrogations didn't stop. Even after two days, when they finally brought me before the investigating judge, the infamous Danica Marinković, the questioning continued for about two more months.

It wasn't directly about the Liberation Movement or the LKÇK at first, it was part of the ongoing pressure. It seemed that my name had been mentioned quite a lot during other people's interrogations and activities, so they kept pressing me about everything and everyone. They questioned me about everything, as if they were trying to connect me to anything at all. Their main suspicion was that I was the link between the KLA and the LKÇK, which wasn't true.

I really did know people, I knew more people from the KLA circles than from LKÇK but I wasn't any kind of "contact point." I simply knew them and had been close to them. I can say, maybe this is the right moment to express gratitude to many of the men who knew about my activities but never spoke, and who in a way helped me get through that period a little more easily. Of course, in the end, we were tried and sentenced as a group.

Maybe it's important to mention that while I was imprisoned, there were two moments that helped me psychologically, I mean, to process the situation. Because when you have no information from outside, and you're under constant pressure from interrogations, you're caught in a kind of chaos]of information, fear, and uncertainty. But those two moments helped me endure and make sense of it all.

[24] *Uprava državne bezbednosti* [Directorate for State Security] was the secret police organization of Communist Yugoslavia. It was at all times best known as UDBA (pronounced as a single word and not an acronym), and was the most common colloquial name for the organization throughout its history. Also known by the Serbian acronym SDB.

One…how to say it, normally, the prison rule was that when they received detainees, since technically we were still under investigation, they were supposed to send them for a medical checkup. But I hadn't been sent for ten days, maybe two weeks. When they finally took me there, it seems the doctor realized that I was completely sleep-deprived from continuous interrogations for hours and hours through the night. I hadn't slept at all, and the areas under my eyes had gone dark. Others later told me how I looked, because I had no mirror, nothing to see myself in.

When I returned to the cell, there was an Albanian female guard who told me, "Lie down, rest." Prisoners weren't allowed to lie on their beds during the day. Thinking she was provoking me, I refused. We argued for a while. Then she made it clear, "You're in very bad shape, you're on the verge of collapse." I hadn't realized it, but apparently my blood pressure was extremely low, and maybe the doctor had warned them or something like that, I couldn't tell. At that time, I wasn't allowed to have magazines, books, or anything. For the first two months, I had nothing to read. I remember that same Albanian guard went to the cell of Shukrie and said, "Give me something for her to read." Shukrie was the only one who had been permitted reading material.

She… Later, I understood that it wasn't entirely by chance, Shukrie gave me one or two pages from something. I thought it was *Kosovarja*,[25] but I'm not sure. In it, there was information about arrests outside, about groups forming, about a person being held somewhere, things like that. In a way, that gave me some orientation within the chaos of all the questions they were asking me. There was another girl who was brought in, Hava Lokaj, if I remember the name correctly. She had been arrested and brought there as part of the KLA group. I didn't know that at first, but the fact that they kept her alone in a cell made me suspect she was there for political reasons.

One Sunday, when there were Albanian guards on duty, fewer guards in general, so surveillance was looser, we had to pass through three checkpoints from the floor to the cells where we were held. Shukrie and I were held separately, and Hava was the third one. I took a risk and approached the small peephole in the door, what we called *shpihun*,[26] that's the word used in prisons. I opened it and saw her. Until then, she hadn't responded to any of the other women; they said, "She doesn't talk to anyone." But when she saw me, maybe because I looked younger, she came closer.

I asked her, "Why are you here?" She said, "For politics, they brought me for politics." I asked, "Do you have a paper, an indictment, anything?" She slipped it under the door. I took it and read it. In that indictment, I saw the names of my friends. people I knew, listed there, and that's how I realized that they too were being held. That was the second turning point for me, the thing that helped me understand how to behave during the rest of the interrogations, how to process what was happening. These two moments were delicate, but they somehow helped me make sense of what was going on outside, in the middle of all the confusion.

Later, maybe in February or March, we had visits from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). That gave us some reassurance, knowing that at least someone outside knew we were alive, detained, and how we were being treated. Another important moment was when I was brought before

[25] *Kosovarja* is one of the longest-running magazines in Kosovo, first published in 1971. Originally focused on women's issues, family life, and culture, it became a significant platform for women's voices during the socialist Yugoslav period and continues to cover social and cultural topics today.
[26] *Shpihun* (from *spiun*, "spy") was slang for the peephole on a prison door.

the investigating judge and asked if I wanted a defense lawyer, which was standard procedure. I requested Lirije Osmani, whom I should really thank even now for all her dedication during that time.

I was aware that lawyers then had very limited power, if any at all. They were there just to fulfill a procedural requirement. But her humanity, her understanding of my character, meant a lot. When she first came, I told her, "I called you only so you can tell my family I'm alive." For the first three days, they hadn't known whether I was alive or where I was. "After that," I said, "please don't try to get me released or save me, because I know there's nothing you can do. You and I can talk about anything else, but not about the prison or why I'm here." And that's how it ended.

I mean, even the way Lirie would come, covering her own expenses, without pay, was extraordinary. Not every lawyer worked without compensation in those days. But Lirie was special in that regard. I really want to take the opportunity to thank her, because from what I later heard, from other women in prison, she had also defended another former political prisoner before me, also free of charge, during that same period. And it wasn't easy for her either, not even financially, aside from the personal risks it might have brought her and her family.

**Part Four**

**Anita Susuri:** How was the prison? I imagine the conditions were terrible, but how did you live inside?

**Majlinda Sinani-Lulaj:** Listen… the types of prisons, they've changed from one period to another. During the time when we were arrested, Lipjan, the facility where women were held, actually had, if I can call it that, a kind of advantage. It was a newer building, built later than the others. That meant it was a newer structure, a more recent construction. And the fact that it was newer, at least, meant it didn't have the same dampness and other poor conditions that the older prison blocks, where the men were held, usually had.

Another thing is that later…listen, life in prison, you eventually adapt. You get used to it, because it's not like Kosovo outside was free and you were missing freedom. The whole country was a kind of larger prison. So, in a way, this was just a smaller one. Of course, it wasn't easy because of the pressure…for example, a small detail: every time they conducted cell inspections, they searched for anything that could be considered dangerous—metal objects, tools, anything. Even on the day you were admitted, they'd take away your shoelaces, earrings, anything metallic. Now, with the work I do today, I understand that it was supposedly for "safety."

However the entire time … I slept on the lower bed because they were bunk beds. Constantly, on the upper bed, and it's not that they didn't do inspections, they still carried out inspections, they could find things. Once, there was a knife and a razor blade hidden on the upper bunk. Those were, let's say, the easiest ways out for someone who was being interrogated every night, or even daily. There was a rule that allowed you to walk in the yard about one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. But in my case, I was rarely allowed out, and only for a few minutes on certain days. Often, they would take me for interrogation during that time instead.

Dinner often was, if it can even be called dinner, was often just water with a bit of chicken skin floating in it. There wasn't even real soup. And sometimes they wouldn't let me eat in the evening at all. That constant pressure, the exhaustion, then coming back to the cell after interrogation, you had to mentally process everything you'd said, to remember it exactly, so that the next day you'd stay consistent with your statement. Not to contradict yourself. That was the only way to survive. We had discussed these methods even before, when we were still outside, how interrogations worked, how to handle them.

There had even been a book published back then, if I'm not mistaken, about torture in the Gjilan Prison. We had read parts of it secretly, just to know what could happen, to prepare ourselves mentally. Sometimes, that psychological pressure alone was enough to make life unbearable, to break you without needing physical violence. Still, that period eventually led to the trial, which was a whole different experience in the way we were treated.

We weren't brought in one by one. They transported us as a group in a bus, with our hands tied behind our backs. Even at the doctor's office, when they took you for examination, you had two guards beside you and your hands tied behind your back again. They said it was based on the "severity" of your charges, or something like that. And when they brought us to court, the way they paraded us was clearly meant to instill fear and panic among people. It wasn't accidental, they could have taken us quietly, but instead, they made it spectacular, on purpose, to spread fear.

I think there came a moment when that fear began to fade. I remember once, back in 1993, when the trials against members of the LPK and LKÇK were held, and during that period, we, Hyrë Emini, Hyrie Veliu, and I, used to stand outside the court with the families. Even Nait Hasani would come occasionally at that time. I remember that back then, no one else stood outside the court, not one beyond the family members. When the detainees were brought in or taken out, only one family member per prisoner was allowed there.

Whereas at the time when we came, at the time when we were being tried, I remember that the area in front of the court was full. Not just family members, I believe. There were friends, there were people. Meaning, as if something had started to change in people's reaction. I think that this was then a signal that maybe the time had come to mobilize the masses and to change, so to speak, the collective approach as a response against a regime that had…

**Anita Susuri:** How long were you sentenced for?

**Majlinda Sinani-Lulaj:** We were sentenced one by one. I was sentenced to two years, under Article 116, if I remember correctly, paragraph one, connected to another article, or something like that. Out of our group, because we were tried as a group of twenty people, nine of us were sentenced to less than five years. Two people were sentenced in absentia. But when we were released, it wasn't really a release. We weren't freed in the full sense. We were released pending the final decision of the second-instance court, that's how the law defined it, and that's how they applied it.

So that was the moment, I mean, we, the nine of us who were sentenced for the first time, were released because those under five years could be freed until the final verdict became effective. We were released at the end of May, on May 30, when the trial ended. At first, they took us back to our prison cells, and later that same day, they came and released us.

That's when the period began, the time when I returned home. And even here, you could feel how different it was compared with the past. My husband had also been a former political prisoner, but he described how it had been back when he was released, in 1989. Back then, people were afraid to even greet you on the street, they wouldn't dare say, "How are you?" or "Thank God you're out." But when I was released, more than three thousand people had already gone through prison, in and out. There was a different atmosphere, a different public reaction. People were no longer as afraid. There was a sense of solidarity that hadn't existed before, a kind of collective awakening.

That period ended, and then came October 1st, the student protest. I went to the protest because I couldn't help myself (laughs). Even though some of my friends advised me not to go, saying that if I got caught, I'd go straight back to serve the rest of my sentence, but who could stop us then? On October 6th, I defended my diploma thesis. I had already been preparing it back in January, but I finally completed it then. There was another small protest around that time. We called it the "white papers" protest because we held up sheets of white paper. I was there too. I don't remember all the details, it was an intense period.

Actually, I remember exactly where, somewhere here, near this intersection, close to where your offices are now, I remember that we split into pairs, one girl, one boy, so that in case the police tried to arrest us, at least one of us could pull the other away or help them escape.

That protest…it felt like I had started my university life with protests and I ended it with protests. And that's how that part of my life closed. After that, we waited for the final verdict from the higher court. Of course, when signals started coming that new decisions were being issued, I began looking for a way out. In the meantime, I got married, and I was already thinking: "I won't let them catch me alive a second time."

See, in the beginning, our attitude had been that we should stay here, not flee, that we should face the reality, confront it, because it was our duty, as people and as a nation. But later, despite everything, I knew one thing: alive, I would never let myself fall into their hands again. In January 1998, an opportunity came up. No one wanted to transport me illegally, no bus drivers dared take me. Flying was out of the question.

I left… In fact, through Sali Lajçi I was put in contact with Ali Dakaj, he's still around today. He became our point of contact when we set off from Peja toward Montenegro. We went across the border and reached Bar [Tivari]. There, a man named Muhamet Kurti met us, a man to whom I probably owe my life. He picked us up in his car, took us to his home, and sheltered us overnight. I remember when we were that night, that evening, in his house… We were on our way to Albania, planning to cross through Montenegro using whatever underground routes still functioned, to get out through any channel possible and get to Albania.

I remember it was right after the events of 1997 in Albania, though at the time, we didn't know what happened in Albania… we'd been cut off from the world for years and we didn't know the details. There was one… I remembered during interrogations, the security officers used to be very excited mentioning something about chaos in Albania, and from the way they spoke, I could tell something big was happening there. But we couldn't tell what it was. When we met that man, Muhamet Kurti, he told me, "Don't insist on going to Albania," he said. "The situation there is terrible. Find another way, maybe go to Croatia and from there to Europe."

I remember answering him… he said "Because it's bad." I said, "But I close my eyes wherever I see hardship." And still, I insisted on going. The next morning, we set out at dawn, crossing the river, a rough, swollen stream, in a half-sunken boat, half in water, half out. It took about forty minutes to reach Muriqan. From Muriqan, we went to Shkodër, and from there to Tirana. That man, Muhamet Kurti, never asked for any payment, not a single thing. He just helped us, asking for nothing in return. And really, where could we have found money in those days anyway?

It's interesting to mention that when we arrived in Tirana, I went straight to my friend Hyrë Emini's place. She was living there at the time because her family had been forced to flee, her brothers were being persecuted for their political activities. They had sold their house in Ferizaj and moved to Tirana. I had her address, it was the only place I could go, since I had nowhere else. I was with my husband. In Tirana, the first people we met before we even met *bac*[27] Dan, Hyrë's late brother. We met with Ramiz Lladrovci and another young man who was with him.

We kept talking. He said, "I'm glad you've made it out of where you were," since he'd heard that we'd been in prison. Then he asked, "Where are you headed?" I told him, he knew the family. When we were about to part ways, I turned to the young man who was with him. They hadn't told me his name, so I didn't know who he was. I said, "I don't know who you are or where you're going," because he was traveling with Ramiz, "but while I was being interrogated, they showed me a photograph of someone who looks exactly like you, only a little older. Please, if you're going to Kosovo," I told him, "don't go. You look identical to that man they were asking about."

Later, I found out that he was Lulëzim, the son of Adem Jashari.[28] During the interrogations, they had shown us photos, I had never met him or seen him before, but the resemblance was unmistakable. His hair, his build , everything. When I described him to some friends later, they asked me, "Did they maybe mean Fehmi?" because I was from Drenas, they thought maybe they'd asked about **F**ehmi Lladrovci.[29] But Fehmi had a longer face, while Adem Jashari's was rounder, this young man looked exactly like Adem, just younger. He smiled, he knew his family's history, their destiny, but I didn't.

I told him, "Please, if you're going to Kosovo, don't go back." That's where we parted ways. I met Ramiz [Ladrovci] a couple more times later. And that's where another chapter of my life began, in Albania. At first, we joined protests and demonstrations there too, because of what was happening back home in March. But just as we started thinking about returning as the signs of war were becoming clearer, I fell ill with kidney problems, and I was pregnant. So I stayed in Albania until March 1999, when NATO's bombings began. After a few failed attempts to leave, I finally managed to go through Italy, and then to Switzerland. From there, I returned to Kosovo in the summer of 2000, together with my husband and our daughter.

**Anita Susuri:** During the war, were you in contact with your family? Was it difficult?

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[27] *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

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

[29] Fehmi Ladrovci (1950-1998) was a political prisoner and early KLA fighter who was killed during a shootout with Serbian forces together with his wife Xheva Krasniqi Lladrovci (1955-1998), a political activist in the Ilegalja nationalist movement and KLA fighter.

**Majlinda Sinani-Lulaj:** Very little. During the final part, from the NATO bombings to the phase when people were being pushed into Macedonia, contact was almost impossible. Both my husband and I had our entire families still in Kosovo. To be honest, we managed to speak maybe four or five times in total. My family didn't even have a telephone at home, and they weren't always in one place. During part of the war, my mother and the two younger children were hiding in the Berisha Mountains. They were caught in some of the offensives of that time. Everyone was scattered, my sister in one place, my brother somewhere else.

Then, around January 1999, they decided to go back to Drenas, thinking things had calmed down. But soon after, their apartment was burned down. Luckily, they survived and went to stay with my aunt, but even from there they were forced out again, beaten, harassed. At that time, my brother was working as an interpreter for the OSCE,[30] which made him even more of a target. In the end, they were loaded onto the buses when people were being expelled,around May 1999, they were pushed across the border into Macedonia.

I know they stayed in a refugee camp, and from there they were taken to England, which accepted around 200 Albanian families at that time. That's where they stayed. After the war, including that whole period when I had already left, I didn't see them for eight years. Neither side could travel: they didn't have documents to return, and I couldn't go there. I finally saw them again when I was already a mother of two children in 2006, after not seeing them since 1998.

**Anita Susuri:** How was it, returning to Kosovo after so many years?

**Majlinda Sinani-Lulaj:** I actually came back in the summer of 2000. I came back and found Kosovo covered in the ashes of war, with people facing unbelievable hardship. I lived through that post-war period firsthand. It wasn't easy. We had been "burned and scarred," as we say, on both sides. My parents' family and my husband's family, both had lost their homes. We had nowhere to stay. For a while, I lived in Peja, in a house that belonged to my husband's cousins who lived abroad. I stayed there for four years.

Then I moved to Pristina, started renting, and slowly began to rebuild my life, personally and professionally. It wasn't easy. There were moments of disappointment, moments of doubt. Some of us, those of us who had stayed idealists since those years, believed that so much could be built the way we had dreamed it. But life, and the way things develop is always more complicated than our dreams.

When you stop and think, there's no comparison between that time and now. You can't compare them, but still, you wonder: Could we have done better? Could each of us have given more? Could we have done something differently so that today's problems might have been solved back then? There's still work to do, maybe even for us, those of us whose mission isn't over yet.

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you very much, Ms. Majlinda. It was a pleasure.

**Majlinda Sinani-Lulaj:** Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

[30] OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) is an intergovernmental organization focused on security, human rights, and democratization, with member states from Europe, North America, and Central Asia.