

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH ZYRAFETE MURIQI LAJÇI

Vitomiricë | Date: January 22, 2024

Duration: 192 minutes

Present:

1. Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi (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:** Mrs. Zyrafete, if you could introduce yourself and tell us something about your earliest memories, about your family?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I'm Zyrafete Lajçi, maiden name Muriqi. I was born in the village of Koshutan in Rugova, a very beautiful neighborhood. My family was a simple farming family that lived off their work. The entire history of the family can be described by the fact that they survived through their own labor. We belong to a wide *vllazni*<sup>1</sup> and are part of a family of patriots from the League of Prizren,<sup>2</sup> Kadri Bajri and Hysen Bajri.<sup>3</sup> That legacy continued until the Second World War and even beyond. During the Second World War, my father, although very young, participated in the battle in *Livadh i Gjakut* [Blood Meadow] in Smilovica.

Later, right after the Second World War, there's an event tied to my father's story: the murder of Hasan Riza, the son of Riza Zymeri, who was a close friend of my father.<sup>4</sup> These are two major events from that period that I associate with him. Later in our family's broader history, we also have a martyr, Qerim Muriqi, who was from our close family.<sup>5</sup> In our immediate household, we lived simply through work, we were a generous, hospitable family, known in Rugova for our hospitality and size. When we eventually split apart, there were more than 54 of us (laughs)...

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask about your father, did he ever tell you how his participation happened? Was he called upon or did he join voluntarily?

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<sup>1</sup> While it could be translated as "brotherhood," *vllazni* refers to deep seated loyalty which starts with the immediate family, but can extend to the wider fis or clan, and the *farefis*, related families. Emphasis on communal ties and loyalty is a defining characteristic of traditional Albanian culture.

<sup>2</sup> The 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Commanders from Koshutan.

<sup>4</sup> Riza Zymeri (died in 1947) was an Albanian political commander and resistance fighter from the village of Koshutan who fought Montenegrin forces during the Second World War. Zymeri was executed, along with his son Hasan Riza, in 1947 by Montenegrin communist forces.

<sup>5</sup> Killed by police in Peja in March 1998 during a rally.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, when my father passed away, I was still a child, I was in fourth grade, ten years old. But other family members told us stories, my mother, paternal uncles, and the older boys who spent more time in the *oda*<sup>6</sup> and knew the family history. Yes, he voluntarily joined the Rugova volunteers to defend the border with Montenegro.

The attack came from the so-called partisan brigades, and the organization was led by Isa Fazlia in our village, a known patriot who is mentioned in historical records. It was a voluntary participation in the war. Because they were armed and ready, they were always prepared to defend the border. There weren't attacks or battles inside the villages, but only along the border between Rugova and Montenegro.

**Anita Susuri:** Was your father persecuted after the war?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, he wasn't directly persecuted until the weapon confiscation campaign<sup>7</sup> led by Ranković.<sup>8</sup> Like everywhere in Rugova, they also came to our village and our close family to collect all weapons. My father was young at the time and had some health problems, but my grandfather, who was still alive, and my uncles had to buy weapons to hand them over. Because that's how it was, there was tremendous pressure from the authorities during Ranković's time.

**Anita Susuri:** What year was your father born?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** My father was born in '29.

**Anita Susuri:** You also mentioned a story from your mother's side of the family...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, my mother's family history is quite rich. My mother comes from the Bralaj family. They originate from Rugova but now live in what is today Montenegro, in a small village in the municipality of Rožaje. My great-grandfather and grandfather were *kaçak*.<sup>9</sup> For 30 years they were forced to leave their home and went to Albania.

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<sup>6</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

<sup>7</sup> In 1956, as Minister of the Interior, Ranković launched a Weapons Collection Action in Kosovo to collect illegal weapons he argued were a grave risk to the security of the state. This campaign was characterized by widespread abuses of the Albanian population, and was criticized for that reason after the fall of Ranković in 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

<sup>9</sup> The *Kaçak* Movement refers to the armed resistance of Albanians in the early 20th century against the oppressive regimes of the Kingdom of Serbia and later the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). The term *kaçak*, meaning "outlaw," was used to describe the guerrilla fighters who opposed the forced assimilation, land confiscations, and suppression of Albanian cultural and political identity. Active from the aftermath of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and continuing into the 1920s, the movement was particularly strong in regions like Kaçanik, Drenica, and Rugova. The *Kaçak* fighters are remembered as symbols of resistance and struggle for Albanian autonomy and self-determination.

They stayed for a long time in Tropoja and later moved to Murac, where at that time Ahmet Zogu, the King of Albania, was in power. He offered land to Kosovars, uncultivated, barren lands that they themselves later worked and turned into farmland. They built a house there and lived for several years until the Italian invasion of Albania. My mother used to say, “The day Italian planes flew over Albania, that very day they decided to return to Kosovo.”

My uncle even finished primary school there. My mother was little, and my aunt was a baby, five or six months old when they were born there. Then they returned to Kosovo. Those 30 years they spent there, my grandfather lived as a *kaçak*, coming occasionally to Rugova with other fighters whenever needed. He was also involved with Bajram Curri’s band.<sup>10</sup> But the rest of the family stayed behind. For years and years, my grandmother didn’t see her relatives.

My mother used to tell me, “When I came for the first time...”, her uncles lived in Pështirë, “when we went there, grandmother Gala,” my mother’s mother, “came out to meet us, opened her arms and said, ‘How blessed I am to see who has come to see me!’ We were so happy because we thought that here in Kosovo no one spoke Albanian anymore. We thought language belonged only there, and now that we were coming to Kosovo, we would lose it.” That’s how it was. And later my uncle became a partisan.

It’s an interesting fact, my uncle was a partisan, my mother’s uncle was a gendarme, and my grandfather was a *kaçak*. So, from one family... They had taken my uncle and recruited him; he couldn’t resist since he was young and had no choice. My grandfather stayed to take care of the family, when the so-called partisans attacked, those Chetnik<sup>11</sup> brigades hiding behind the partisan front.

My mother said, “We didn’t even have the chance to take anything.” She said about my grandfather, “My father went and poured out the tins of cheese, cream, and whatever food we had, saying, ‘At least let the Serbs not take them. Wherever we go, we’ll go empty-handed.’” That’s when they came to Kosovo. My mother had an aunt in Buqan, at the Gashanët, at Sefa Beqa’s place. They stayed there for quite some time until they were relocated again somewhere else and eventually returned home.

Throughout the Second World War, my mother’s family, the Bralajs, were constantly moving from place to place. They couldn’t settle anywhere because they were under particular persecution by the authorities. The Bralajs are known for having had conflicts with nearby Serbs, nine of them ended up in prison. Some died there, others were sentenced to long terms. So, they truly have a unique family history.

**Anita Susuri:** And you said you were ten children?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

<sup>10</sup> Bajram Curri (1862-1925) was an Albanian chieftain, politician and activist who struggled for the independence of Albania, later fighting for Kosovo's unification with Albania, following the 1913 Treaty of London.

<sup>11</sup> Serbian movement born in the beginning of the Second World War, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. Its name derives from *četa*, anti-Ottoman guerrilla bands. This movement adopted a Greater Serbia program and was for a limited period an anti-occupation guerrilla, but mostly engaged in collaboration with Nazi Germany, its major goal remaining the unification of all Serbs. It was responsible for a strategy of terror against non-Serbs during the Second World War and was banned after 1945. Mihailović was captured, tried and executed in 1946.

**Anita Susuri:** From the same mother and father...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, we were ten children.

**Anita Susuri:** How was life for you as a child? How do you remember that time?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** My childhood, even though my parents surely had a hard time raising us, I remember it as the greatest happiness. Because we were a big household and many children. My father had three brothers, the aunts [sisters] died young. Back then, in Rugova, they used to say, “the time of the water.” My grandmother tried as much as she could to survive that illness that was spreading then. Now I think it must have been some kind of flu, maybe the Spanish flu, or whatever it was then...

**Anita Susuri:** Maybe measles or something.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Measles, yes. But all four sisters died. And then, to save the boys who were still little, they went to live for a while in Nabërgjan, near our relatives, the family of Kadri Bajri, you know, near them, since they surely had some property there. Then they returned to Rugova. In Rugova, they started everything from zero. My grandmother worked on the loom, my grandfather, of course, with cows and sheep and whatever he could, and then the sons grew up. From the four brothers there were, we all, some had ten children, one of my uncles had thirteen, all of us around ten. So it was a big family.

So when we were little, there were many of us, and our days, whether snow, rain, summer, or winter, were always spent outside, playing, having fun. When we started going to school, there were many of us, and it was an event just walking to school. It felt like a celebration to go to school and then come back. It was a happy family, even though the conditions we grew up in were, of course, very difficult for our parents. It was hard to raise so many children, such a large family like ours...

**Anita Susuri:** What was the area like where you grew up? What was the village like? The house you grew up in?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I remember, when I was very little, when we moved into the new house, a stone house, and it was among the first stone houses built there in the village. A big stone house with eight rooms, it looked like a castle. But the old house where I was born was made of wood, and I remember when we were moving into the new house, it was such an emotional moment. I still remember it today, with my brother and sisters, carrying the last things from the old house.

In the stone house, my sister who was born after me, Ajshe, was born the first to be born there, and it was, let's say, very good. In that neighborhood where we lived, Vunishta, there weren't many families, maybe five or six large households, because back then big families started to divide into smaller ones. Later, those grew into more than thirty houses from those few. But the atmosphere was nice, and the relationships between people were very good.

In the highlands, there was never fanaticism like there might have been in some other regions. Among us, both women and men were somehow equal in their work. Of course, men had heavier work, but

women took care of the home and the children. But the relationship between men and women was very open. Men even took advice from women on household matters. That's how it worked. Life was organized like a kind of small state within the family.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you living in a joint household too...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, we lived in a joint household until my father passed away. When we separated... I finished seven grades of elementary school in Rugova. My sister was actually my teacher. In the eighth grade, when we moved from Rugova, because we bought land, it had become impossible to continue living in Rugova due to school, other conditions, and the lack of health centers. That's when we separated, when we moved down to the plains, here in Graboc. So, when it comes to childhood, everything I remember from that time seems good to me, except when my father died, it was a bit different after that, of course.

**Anita Susuri:** What child are you in order?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I'm the sixth. I have three older sisters and two brothers. I'm six years younger than my brother. It was like this, as the older sisters and brothers told me, and my mother used to mention it, there was great joy when I was born, because I was born six years after my brother. A week before I was born, my grandmother had passed away. My birth, in a way, was a kind of renewal of the family, a special kind of joy.

**Anita Susuri:** Did the older siblings also have an education?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi: Yes. My oldest sister, the third one in line, because the two oldest sisters weren't sent to school at the time, since back then no one in the village sent girls to school, and my father couldn't be the first to decide to send them. The third sister was the first educated girl in our village, of those who lived in Rugova. Because many families from Rugova had already moved to Peja and to the villages in the Dukagjini Plain, but among those who stayed in Rugova, my sister was the first to finish the *Shkolla Normale*<sup>12</sup> and became a teacher. She returned to the village and worked there until the school was closed, because there were no more children. She worked there in the village. And my brothers before me attended the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, in fact, the Higher Technical School in Mitrovica, and my uncle's son studied at the Faculty of Economics. Then me, and the other sisters, and so on.

**Anita Susuri:** And when you were in elementary school, I mean during the time you still lived in the joint household, did you as children have specific chores at home?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, yes, we did too. We each had our own tasks. For myself, I can say I was very close to my father. My oldest sister, since two of my sisters were married to two brothers, they got married on the same day. A few years after their marriage, about three years later, my father passed away. But what I mean is that after they got married, the third sister was in the *Shkolla Normale*. In a

<sup>12</sup> 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.

way, it was my duty to bring my father fresh water from the spring. Among the main chores I remember as a child was carrying water.

We also helped when there was harvesting or hay gathering. At that time, they grew barley in Rugova, and the women would harvest the barley, while we girls carried the sheaves. And when hay was being gathered, the stalks that were left behind by the adults, we children had to collect them. Rarely, we went to pick blueberries or wild berries a bit, since they were far away. That's how it was. But mostly the boys, the boys had more tasks. They had to take care of the livestock and such. We girls less so. And I even less (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** And how do you remember school? Was the school...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. The school in Koshutan was a small school, it was a branch of the Përparimi School in Drelaj, it was called Përparimi back then. It had four grades, and when it became five, it was considered a big success, because the system back then was four plus four. From the fifth grade on, they went to Drelaj. For example, my brother went to Drelaj, and many times they had to travel in very difficult conditions, in harsh winter weather, with rain, wind, and sometimes snow.

The friends he had from the other part of the village lived far away, and many times they were even afraid because of wild animals and such. I was lucky because I managed to finish up to seventh grade there in Koshutan. The school was very old. I still remember those blackboards that moved and the wooden desks, those classic wooden benches. But the classes were combined, first with the third, and second with the fourth. Because there weren't enough students for a full class, or I don't know why. It seems there were enough children then, it's not like today when there aren't many, but that's how combined classes were.

Students also came from another village, Shkrel, to attend fifth, sixth, and seventh grades if they didn't want to go to Drelaj, because it was too far. Or, for example, to avoid going to Haxhaj. Some even came from Pepaj, the village where I live now, they came to our school because Drelaj was far for them too. And so, students came from other schools, the class filled up, and it functioned. But if not, they would have had to go to Drelaj, which was very far, more than an hour on foot.

**Anita Susuri:** I also wanted to ask, in your family, did you have any traditions or special holidays that you celebrated? How did you celebrate them?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, the holidays were celebrated regularly. For example, on Saint George's Day, with the traditions of taking the rugs outside, cleaning, preparing *pshesh*<sup>13</sup> and milk for breakfast, and putting cheese out for the ladybugs. Many, I think, pagan customs. My mother was a *baqic*,<sup>14</sup> and she mainly respected these, Eid and Ramadan. Although when I was a child, Ramadan wasn't really observed much, but Eid was.

Because Bajram, as a holiday, had its own liveliness. One day the men went visiting, the next day the women, and we, the children. Dressing in nice clothes, walking to the last house in the village up there, it was a special celebration. I remember these as special events, these village holidays, because the

<sup>13</sup> A traditional cornbread.

<sup>14</sup> Woman of the house, responsible for the main household duties, including cooking.

villagers also had the chance to see each other and rest a bit from hard work. So, they awaited them eagerly, to meet one another, with songs and dances. Maybe not much dancing during holidays, but songs, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** And did this *Darka e Lamës* (Harvest Dinner) exist? Because it seems to me that in the area of...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, exactly, the Harvest Dinner was only within families, because in our family, for example, these cousins who lived in the lowlands had their pasture higher up than our village. A week on the way up and a week on the way down, they would always stay about a week with us. There, for example, the atmosphere was very nice. Because the men used to gather with their caps, chatting, sitting together, singing. As I said at the beginning of the interview, my father was a *lahuta*<sup>15</sup> player, but I don't remember him playing the *lahuta*. Because by the time I was old enough to remember, my father was already sick and could no longer play either the *lahuta* or the *fyell*,<sup>16</sup> which he played very well.

I remember the *fyell* a little because it didn't require as much effort, he just had to blow into it, maybe it was easier than playing the *lahuta*. And I remember him singing a little, you know, just with his voice, for pleasure sometimes. But not singing in the men's room, as used to happen in men's gatherings, because his health didn't allow it anymore. In the family, almost every member knew how to play the *çifteli*<sup>17</sup> and the *fyell* and to sing. And to this day, the boys in our family, when they gather for New Year or holidays, continue that tradition.

**Anita Susuri:** And about clothing, I wanted to ask, did your mother wear traditional clothes?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. My mother only stopped wearing traditional clothes during the war, you could say that as long as she was alive, she never took them off. She always wore the *pshtjellak*.<sup>18</sup> They made the clothing themselves, though not every part of it. Because the traditional Rugova dress has characteristic pieces that not every woman can make. When I was a student, I made the Rugova costume, I made the bride's dress.

My sister, Ajshe, who is a *lahuta* player, has also made some parts of the dress, and since she's a *lahuta* player, she gives great importance to the traditional costume. She keeps it with great pride, and she wears it at gatherings, whenever she has the opportunity to perform with the *lahuta* and the *çifteli*, wherever she is, even at festivals. From Gjirokastrë to Ohrid to Paris, wherever she has been in festivals, she presents the traditional costume with extraordinary pride.

**Anita Susuri:** And what you're saying, that not every woman can make it, does it involve a special kind of embroidery or what?

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<sup>15</sup> The *lahuta* is a traditional single-stringed instrument played with a bow, commonly used in the oral epic tradition of northern Albania and Kosovo.

<sup>16</sup> The *fyell* is a traditional Albanian woodwind instrument, similar to a shepherd's pipe, typically made of wood and played by blowing into one end.

<sup>17</sup> A two-string instrument with a long neck, played in Northern Albania and Kosovo, used to play folk songs and epics.

<sup>18</sup> Wrap skirt.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, there's special embroidery, and *spik*<sup>19</sup> is one of those elements used to make the sleeves of the Rugova costume. For example, the final *llak*,<sup>20</sup> not everyone can make that. It's done with a particular technique. I once interviewed, just for pleasure, a woman from the village who made traditional clothing, she passed away after the war. But all my writings were burned before the war, including the interview with her. It's a special technique that's done with *kalema*<sup>21</sup> in a *buri*.<sup>22</sup> But now, to tell you the truth, I don't know who in Rugova still makes it... There are many women who make *spik*, but I haven't seen anyone doing it specifically..

**Anita Susuri:** And what are these, for example...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The *buri* is a kind of wooden tool shaped like a small spool, smaller than a thread winder. Like the old water horn they used to have. The *kalema* are small wooden pieces around which the thread is wrapped, and they are thrown toward one another while intertwining, creating a *bistek*.<sup>23</sup> It becomes a very strong *bistek* so that when it's sewn into the garment, that part stays durable and also looks more aesthetic. It's a very unique technique, and I would really like someone to film it being made and preserve it as a traditional method, because even though there are modern techniques today, that traditional one should be preserved.

**Anita Susuri:** Are there still many women who do that work?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I don't know who still does that particular technique, and I don't think there are many. But there are plenty of women in Rugova who still make traditional clothing. Only now they're modernizing the way they make it, and it's becoming more of an imitation of the traditional costume. It's no longer the original, the authentic one that used to be made.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask, you mentioned your father was sick, what illness did he have?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** A heart condition. It was congenital.

**Anita Susuri:** So that means... he wasn't very old when he...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** 54 years old.

**Anita Susuri:** 54.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. He died young.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember the change in your way of life after your father passed away? Because you said you also moved houses.

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<sup>19</sup> A decorative woven or embroidered detail found on traditional Rugova clothing, especially on the sleeves.

<sup>20</sup> The final upper part or trim of the sleeve, made with a specific hand-weaving technique.

<sup>21</sup> Small wooden rods used for winding and interlacing threads in weaving.

<sup>22</sup> A tightly braided or woven thread pattern used to strengthen and decorate parts of the garment.

<sup>23</sup> A tightly braided or woven thread pattern used to strengthen and decorate parts of the garment.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I remember it well. After my father died, my sister started working, and that's when the extended family split. Even after my father's death, misfortune seemed to follow us. We had several deaths in the family, my uncle's wife, my sister, some of my uncle's children. You know, for about two or three years we were surrounded by that sadness, by death. But in a way, my sister started working, my older brother was in the army, and my younger brother was a student. We somehow gathered around our mother.

And the first reason we had to move was my schooling. We had already bought land down in the lowlands, and along with it came the old house that was part of the property. But my mother was very reluctant to leave Rugova, she used to say, "How are we going to live in the lowlands when we're used to living with livestock," and so on. But my brother and my older sister, since the eldest brother was in the army, and the married sisters too, they all insisted, but especially those who were at home. They said, "We can't let the girl lose her education."

To go to school in Drelaj was very far, especially for a girl. It took an hour on foot, and sometimes there was someone to walk with you, but you couldn't know for sure if every day someone would accompany you to school. Also, my cousins, the sons of my uncles, who were in the same class as me, had already moved to Peja, so I would have had no one to go to school with. We had to change where we lived because of schooling. That was the first reason.

Then, when we moved down to the lowlands, life was completely different. We went from living off livestock to living from my sister's salary. Still, I can say we lived better than the rest of our extended family we had separated from, because a teacher's salary at that time was quite high. But we had to learn to live off the land through farming. We adapted, we adapted very easily. We worked the land, and then my brother returned from the army.

The other brother gave up, he had dreamed of finishing the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering but settled with the Higher Technical School he had completed in Mitrovica and started working at Zastava. He had a good salary, an engineer's salary back then was very good. We somehow recovered economically and began taking the first steps toward a new life, modest, but without much hardship.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Zyrafete, you told me that in the meantime you changed schools, you went to a bigger school to continue your education. What was that change like?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The change was quite big, going from a village school where everyone was cousins and family, in fact, three of us in the class were practically from the same household, to a large school with, for example, students from different villages and also different communities. For example, my first encounter with seeing, you know, a school with teaching in two languages was really interesting. In a way, that competitive atmosphere between students of both communities was very noticeable.

Now, as a student, I had already stood out in my previous school. But I had, maybe at first, a bit of that nervousness, would I still stand out here, in this big school? The classes had more than 30 students. But I truly settled in right away there too, because the teachers somehow noticed my dedication to learning. What was special was toward the end of eighth grade, because at that time we finished

school after eighth grade, when they had to issue the report cards, and that competition between students, from both communities as I said, over who would receive the title of the best student.

For a while I had a bit of a complex about the fact that I had been given a kind of diploma that, I think, was issued across all of Yugoslavia at the time. Receiving a diploma that wasn't from a Kosovo institution, for example, but the history behind that diploma was really significant, the certificate that it used to be. Why should a Serbian student not receive it, when they were also a good student, and I should be the one to receive it?

But the Albanian teachers were extremely determined, and they did everything they could to make sure that since I had earned it, because back then the grading was *shembullor*,<sup>24</sup> exemplary, meaning excellent or outstanding, and with straight fives in my report card since first grade, why shouldn't I receive it? I found all of this out much later, maybe even after I was released from prison, that it had become a whole story at the school, about who would receive that evaluation as the best student. It was a big school with many students. I'm forgetting the exact number, but honestly, there were a lot.

**Anita Susuri:** That's what I wanted to ask, was it half and half?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, about half and half. I mean half and half because we Albanian students who went there came from many different villages, and in the Serbian language instruction, Serbo-Croatian, as we called it then, there were also Bosniak students. There were Bosniaks, Serbs, and Montenegrins. I don't know if there was really any distinction between Serbs and Montenegrins at the time, for us they were all the same. But yes, I think it was about half and half. Maybe that was a kind of criterion, I don't know.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the school called?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** It was called Janko Jovičević in Grozhdevc. At that time Grozhdevc, as a community, was a village with a large Serbian population, and we went there. Meaning, students came from Graboc and from other villages, Poqestë, Kërstovc, Llozhan, and many more. Many Albanian villages that were much farther away. Their schools were within their own village, where their community felt comfortable having the school nearby.

But what's interesting is that when I was in eighth grade, that's when the '81 demonstrations<sup>25</sup> broke out. And I had classmates whose siblings were university students. My cousin was a student in Pristina, and my brother was a student in Mitrovica. But that major wave of demonstrations was happening in

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<sup>24</sup> The highest possible overall grade in the former Yugoslav school system, indicating that a student had received a "Five" (equivalent to an A) in every subject.

<sup>25</sup> The 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo were a series of mass protests led by Albanian students demanding greater rights and autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia. Beginning in March at the University of Prishtina, the protests soon escalated into widespread demonstrations involving large segments of the Albanian population. Key demands included recognition of Kosovo as a republic within Yugoslavia, equal treatment for Albanians, and improved living and educational conditions. The Yugoslav government responded with harsh repression, including mass arrests, police brutality, and purges of Albanians from political and educational institutions. The events marked a turning point in Kosovo's struggle for political rights and are considered a precursor to later movements for independence.

Pristina. The first information we received came from those Pristina students. That's why I'm somehow more connected to that class I finished in Grozhdevc, it always reminds me of '81 and of the friendships with classmates who had relatives involved in the '81 events...

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember more precisely how those days of the '81 demonstrations were?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I remember, because in our family the television was watched regularly. Even though the program followed the working hours, the daily schedule, we always watched Albanian television. At my uncle's, where the house was positioned in a slightly more favorable spot where the signal caught better, it was never changed from TVSH. Those Albanian dramas and films, we watched them like in a theater.

The TV was in the corner of the room, in the *oda*, and our whole family, the big family, until the drama or the film ended, you couldn't hear a sound. Those were the beautiful evenings when we watched them, and the music programs, the news, everything. But when Enver Hoxha's<sup>26</sup> speeches about the '81 demonstrations started airing, it was like an obligation for us to go watch the news. And we got the main information about this that way, from Albanian television and the news, but also from Enver Hoxha's speeches.

The other information came from those students who came from Pristina. Because my cousin who was an economics student, Shaban, for a few days couldn't go to Pristina because there was a curfew, the road was blocked. He even missed his exams, for example, but during the demonstration he happened to be home, he hadn't managed to be at the demonstration. But afterwards, when he started going again, he would tell about friends and classmates he knew. And also about those who were imprisoned.

Then the imprisonment of Ali Lajçi was like the main point to which we connected afterwards. Because he was from Rugova, and known to us, and then Riza Dema, and Sylë Mujaj, and the others imprisoned from Rugova. And the conversations, mainly with relatives and with the extended family circle, were mostly about those imprisonments, about those demonstrations.

**Anita Susuri:** And did you take part? Did any demonstration happen there?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I was little then, in eighth grade, no, but on the anniversary of the demonstrations, as a gymnasium<sup>27</sup> student, yes. Then we would organize things with friends in the gymnasium, back then, yes. But as for eighth grade, no. Except we had those conversations with friends, "What's happening? Do you know anyone? Who ended up in prison? Who got arrested? Have they been sentenced or not?" That stuff.

And with my sister who was a teacher, she was very careful about following the information, you know, everyone knowing what was going on. Especially the news when there were the trials of the political

<sup>26</sup> Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) was the leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death.

<sup>27</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

prisoners, we even used to cut out the newspaper pages and keep them. It was really like an archive of the newspapers of political sentences.

**Anita Susuri:** So this was also, let's say, the moment when you realized that these groups existed?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, yes, let's say, from the stories of family members in general, my uncles and my mother, about the *kaçak* groups, it's not that we didn't know there were organized groups, imprisoned with long sentences. We knew about the imprisoned people from Rugova in Goli Otok,<sup>28</sup> Sylë Mehmeti and the others, and the *kaçak* of Rugova who were mentioned and sung about.

Because my cousins on my father's side, who were rhapsodes, they only sang those songs. So, the information wasn't lacking in that sense. But regarding the developments of '81 and the demonstrations, it was that. But in general, I always had information because this was talked about constantly in the family.

**Anita Susuri:** Right, and you grew up in that atmosphere.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I grew up in that atmosphere.

## Part two

**Anita Susuri:** As for high school, I think you continued in Peja?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I continued high school in Peja, in the gymnasium. At that time the gymnasium was divided into two plus two. Two years general gymnasium and two years specialized. The first two years, I finished like that, in the general gymnasium. And now, the main characteristic of the gymnasium that I remember and want to mention is the Albanian language teacher, Shëga Kelmendi. She was both an inspiration to me and a special Albanian language teacher who always taught us between the lines.

For example, we had the reading *Kunora e Maleve*<sup>29</sup> but beyond that she managed to show us that besides *Kunora e Maleve* there is also *Lahuta e Malësisë*.<sup>30</sup> And the class tutor, Fuad Miftari, who is from the family of Emrush Miftari,<sup>31</sup> who was a patriot of the Second World War. And the other teachers too, but these two I would single out, because they were very careful with us, so that we wouldn't end up in situations where we might be followed by people who watched us as members of certain families, and

<sup>28</sup> Island in the north of the Adriatic sea, from 1949 through 1956 a maximum security penal colony for Yugoslav political prisoners, where individuals accused of sympathizing with the Soviet Union, or other dissenters, among them many Albanians, were detained. It is known as a veritable gulag.

<sup>29</sup> The Mountain Wreath, *Gorski vijenac* in Serbian, a modern epic written in verse as a play by Prince-Bishop Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, considered a classic of Serbian-Montenegrin literature. First Published in 1847.

<sup>30</sup> *Lahuta e Malësisë* (The Highland Lute) is an epic poem by Albanian writer Gjergj Fishta, first published in 1937. Considered one of the most important works of Albanian literature, it celebrates the history, resistance, and cultural identity of the northern Albanian highlands.

<sup>31</sup> Emrush Myftari (1907-1944) was a Kosovo Albanian anti-fascist fighter and volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. After the Second World War, due to his pro-national Albanian views that conflicted with Yugoslav policy, he was arrested in 1944 and executed on charges of being a British agent.

not end up in prison for almost nothing. If we did something, to do a bit more and not fall into trouble for two letters, “*Kosova Republikë*,” (“Kosovo Republic”) and such small things. They were very polite and very careful with us.

**Anita Susuri:** And did you travel during high school or how?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I traveled by bus. Many times, really, because the bus was full of students, and sometimes I even stood on my feet from Graboc to the gymnasium. The first class sometimes was missed. And we, because also with my friend from the Ideali group, Safete Krasniqi, I was in the same class with her in the first and second year.

She, coming from Leshan, sometimes arrived late, and some teachers weren’t understanding, but she was the rebellious type all the time. She always reacted. She would say, “How should I come, if the Serbs wanted, they would organize it better for us.” She always reacted in these situations when they wouldn’t excuse absences, for example, when it wasn’t our fault that we were late to class or missed the first classes.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me, meaning, that this was just the first step where you started becoming part of groups...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did all of this develop and who first organized you?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I became organized in a group later, in the third year. But in the first and second year we only did symbolic actions. I had a classmate, a boy named Enver Saliaj, whose brother, Naser Saliaj, was a political prisoner, and, so to say, I was well-informed about the situation of families who had someone in prison. For us, on... on November 28, on the anniversary of the demonstrations, if we didn’t manage to do anything else, at least we dressed in red and black and walked around the schoolyard.

We sang patriotic songs and we tried to buy books that we thought were more banned. But you couldn’t really find banned books to buy, so at least some books by an author who was more sensitive, and we exchanged them. Back then I had heard about the book *Gjarpërinjtë e Gjakut*<sup>32</sup> (The Snakes of Blood), even though I hadn’t been able to read it then because I couldn’t find a copy. But books like

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<sup>32</sup> *Gjarpërinjtë e gjakut* (The Snakes of Blood) is a 1958 novel by Adem Demaçi, considered the first modern Albanian novel from Kosovo. It explores blood feuds, oppression, and social conflict through symbolic and allegorical storytelling. Originally published in *Jeta e Re*, it circulated clandestinely in Kosovo for decades due to Yugoslav censorship.

*Shote Galica*,<sup>33</sup> *Mic Sokoli*,<sup>34</sup> things like that, students would take from one another or from relatives and exchange them.

This was, until the third year, the only possibility for... oh, and cassettes, I forgot those too. Radio cassettes, cassettes with songs by Fatime Sokoli,<sup>35</sup> the song of the demonstrations, exchanging them, singing them, writing them down, copying them into our notebooks. Writing down quotes like that, aphorisms of a patriotic character. So these were, let's say, symbolic actions until the third year, when I then met [Hava Shala](#) and we began an activity that was much more intense and more structured.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me that in the third year your engagement became more serious...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did it develop to that point?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, in gymnasium there were always groups of students organized in underground activities. Before us, several groups had already been imprisoned, then our group, and after us again others. So it was continuous, and even earlier, many individuals who came out of the gymnasium had contributed to the national movement continually. But I'm talking about those I experienced closer in time.

Meaning the group that was sentenced before us, the group of Shkelzen Muriqi and Gjemë Lajçi. Shkelzen, who is also my close cousin. And his brother, who had earlier been a political prisoner, Ali Muriqi, a university professor. I also worked with them later, after I was released from prison. But they were an inspiration for us back then, Albanians were being imprisoned and no one was raising their voice. So Hava and I decided, we came together mostly because of these patriotic leanings.

Hava had joined our class once this specialized part of the gymnasium started. We were in the mathematics track. And at the beginning, we bonded first simply because we were both good students, with Hava and the others, including Zoge. I kept my friendships later also with Safete, who wasn't in my class, and with Hidajete. But with Hava more closely.

She always sang, she would sing patriotic songs. She would open the window, we had our classroom on the third floor, and during the long break she wouldn't go outside but would open the window, sit on the sill, and sing Fatime Sokoli's demonstration songs. That's how we built that trust between us,

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<sup>33</sup> Shote Galica, born as Qerime Halil Radisheva, was an Albanian insurgent fighter and the wife of Azem Bejta, the leader of the *Kaçak* (outlaws) movement. Galica participated in dozens of attacks against Royal Yugoslav forces in the beginning of the 20th century and the *Kaçak* movement succeeded in putting under their control temporary free zones.

<sup>34</sup> Mic Sokoli (1839-1881) was an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter from the Tropoja district in today's Northern Albania. He was a noted guerrilla leader, remembered in particular for an act that has entered the chronicles of Albanian legend as an example of heroism: at the battle of Slivova against Ottoman forces in April 1881, he died when he pressed his body against the mouth of a Turkish cannon.

<sup>35</sup> Fatime Sokoli (1948-1987) was a renowned Albanian folk singer from Kosovo, celebrated for her mountain songs (*këngë malësie*) and considered one of the leading voices of Albanian folk music in the former Yugoslavia. Her work is documented in the archives of Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK) and the Institute of Albanian Folklore in Pristina, as well as in published studies on Albanian ethnomusicology.

given everything that was happening, and with her prior upbringing from her family, it became, “It’s good to do something.” “What can we do?” “We can write.”

We would write pamphlets and try to influence the students around us by saying that what was happening was not right, that students were being imprisoned and no one was reacting. Not even the professors, for example. We thought they were the grown-ups and should react more. So we decided to write. At first we wrote short pamphlets, or slogans, and distributed them around the gymnasium.

The idea was for students to be informed that something was happening, that the arrests of young men and women shouldn’t pass in silence and without anyone knowing. At least some reaction within the school where they were students. We would write the texts, combine them together. Then we decided, this was toward the end of the third year. When we wrote essays at school they forced us to include a sentence about Yugoslavia, about Tito,<sup>36</sup> about self-management. Which bothered us for other reasons as well...

For example, in history class we learned, and this was required, at least in the second year, that we had to memorize, literally as a script distributed to us, the biography of Tito. You couldn’t get the highest grade without knowing it. If you were a good student and expected good grades, you had to recite Tito’s biography like a nightingale before you were asked about any other units of the curriculum.

And the history books had very poor information about the history of the Albanian people. Today we can find those books and read them. And I regret not mentioning earlier, in the first year my teacher was Rexhep Podrima, since we’re talking about history. He was an older professor and a great patriot. He always explained Illyrian history to us. He would cover history all the way to the League of Prizren and then a bit of the part that he was obliged, by the curriculum, to teach.

In the second year, as I was saying, we had that required history again, including general gymnasium history. And in the third year, when we reached the school’s anniversary, the 70th anniversary, it was something like that. The school administration had decided, the principal was Serbian then, I’ve forgotten his name, to prepare a program with students to mark the 70th anniversary. When we read the school history, nowhere did it mention the roles of well-known Albanian figures who had graduated from the gymnasium. So we decided to react.

Hava was class president and took part with the other class representatives in the school committee. She would always speak up there. Occasionally even our homeroom teacher would warn her, “With that stubbornness of yours, you’ll soon end up somewhere, because you’re too headstrong.” But she had decided to raise her voice publicly whenever she could. We decided to create an organization. But the school year was ending and we couldn’t form a group yet, only sort of a small trio. The two of us, plus one of her close friends, and one of mine, girls we trusted.

At the beginning of the fourth year, we decided to create a proper organization. We held regular meetings, we took an oath, we created a kind of statute, modest, as much as we knew, some general

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<sup>36</sup> Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) was the leader of Yugoslavia from 1943 until his death. He was a key figure in the Yugoslav Partisans during the Second World War and later became the president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

rules that members should follow. We created a small fund with what little money we could, whatever was left from what our families gave us for school.

We appointed a treasurer, and with those funds bought a typewriter, paper, and other necessary materials for the group. We adopted pseudonyms, everything we read in the literature that an underground organization should have. A name, and all the rest. And to bring all this to culmination, to give our group the shape of an underground organization, we managed that right before we were arrested. Maybe a month, I'm not sure.

We finally gave it the full form of an organized underground group. And we carried out actions quite often. We wrote slogans, wrote pamphlets, posted them around the gymnasium and around the town. We met, exchanged the texts we wrote. We sat together and discussed what to remove from a text, what to add, on which date we should react, when to push the reaction a bit further. And whom to accept in the group, whom not to accept.

At that point it made no sense to remain a trio, we already knew each other. So should we expand the group to others or keep it more conspiratorial? Those were our considerations. This was during the first months of the fourth year, until December 19, when we were arrested...

**Anita Susuri:** And you told me that the rules you created, you had read them from...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** From the literature, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Where did you find this literature?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, to tell the truth, yes, illegal literature. But I personally didn't have a direct source from which I got illegal literature, except through these friends. From Hava, [Myrvete](#), and Hidajete. Meaning, I didn't receive the materials as newspapers to read, but they would interpret them for us when we met. For example, "I read it in *Zëri*, in *Iliria*," and they told us that according to the rules of underground organization, this is how things should be, and we agreed with that.

And the members, the two boys we had in the group, Robert and Avni, also contributed in this aspect. But mainly it was Hava who informed us with illegal literature, and we didn't know where she herself had obtained it. Because it wouldn't have been logical, given the conditions of conspiracy, to know the source of the material.

**Anita Susuri:** And what kind of rules were there, for example?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Not to expand beyond a trio, you know, to keep the organization in groups of three, for example, in my trio, I would know only the two members of my trio. But they would have their own trio members whom I wouldn't know. And the contributions we had, for example, money, or paper, or a typewriter, or whatever we could provide for the group, we had to offer them to the group and be ready to take on any assignment we were given. Not to refuse a task, except for health reasons or if there was a risk of compromising the conspiracy.

**Anita Susuri:** And, for example, the activities, did you have a set schedule for when you carried them out, or specific places...?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, the schedule was imposed on us by the school schedule itself. Because, for example, sometimes I had to leave the house at 11:00 to manage to arrive at the gymnasium by 1:00 p.m. Sometimes, when the regular bus was at 12:00, you could make it in time by bus. Before school hours there was no chance. After school hours, we took the opportunity right away, or during physical education or Serbian language, sometimes we wouldn't attend those classes, so we could go out.

We used that time sometimes to meet, but we would meet near the gymnasium just so we wouldn't lose too much time and could still catch the last bus home. Sometimes on the way, for example from the gymnasium to the station, it's quite far, while walking, two or three of us would join up and then we would pass the information on to the others. That's how it was. Or sometimes we would step a bit off the road.

Near the House of Culture, where it is today, there was a small park-like space. We would step aside there long enough to all meet, exchange materials, make the decisions we needed to make, and then rush to catch the 7:00 p.m. bus. Because if you missed the bus, then at home they'd ask, "Where were you? Why are you late?" And so on.

**Anita Susuri:** And the activities were the distribution of these tracts,<sup>37</sup> or did you also write slogans?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, we wrote slogans too, but mostly we were inclined to write longer texts, explaining the situation more. Because slogans felt symbolic but somewhat overused. They could be done even by people who weren't organized, by unorganized students. And we had set ourselves a goal for the future to even publish a small magazine, but that never happened because we were arrested early.

But at least we wanted to write longer texts, to put the organization's name at the end so people would know who was writing them, you know, to make it clear that there was an underground organization behind them, and to give slightly longer explanations for the actions undertaken...

**Anita Susuri:** For example, what kind of content did the texts have? Do you remember now?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I remember. And I already showed you the tract that survived, luckily. There are two pamphlets there. For November 28th.<sup>38</sup> It was a call to the gymnasium students to celebrate November 28th and to boycott the celebration of the gymnasium's 70th anniversary. To reject certain things we considered negative at that time. For example, they organized a disco at the school. We said, "A disco belongs somewhere else, in a venue made for discos, not in a school." Things like that.

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<sup>37</sup> In Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo, tracts were underground pamphlets distributed by Albanian activists to protest against political repression and cultural suppression. These documents contained critiques of the Yugoslav government and called for greater rights and autonomy, playing a crucial role in mobilizing resistance and fostering Albanian national identity.

<sup>38</sup> November 28, known as *Dita e Flamurit* (Flag Day), marks Albania's Independence Day. On this date in 1912, Ismail Qemali declared Albania's independence in Vlorë, ending Ottoman rule. It is also commemorated by Albanians in Kosovo and throughout the diaspora.

And a bit of Albanian historical context, because since we weren't learning our own history in the history class, we had to react, we had to demand that the history subject and the Albanian language subject include a curriculum that teaches our history. More or less, that was the nature of the pamphlets.

**Anita Susuri:** And approximately how...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** And the release of political prisoners, which was a constant call. Meaning all the leaflets and pamphlets we distributed had that.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you distribute a large number of pamphlets?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, in the gymnasium, in every corridor we managed to reach, if we managed, so that each class, when they came out into the corridor, would find, so to say, a pamphlet, at least for every class to have one. But sometimes we failed, we didn't manage to... because there were very strict class supervisors. Back then the monitoring was quite heavy, because at that time groups were constantly being sentenced from the gymnasium. And then the supervision was very strict. But we used any chance. Since there were many students, you know, we used that crowd of students going out during the long break, and we would use that moment to stick them up. Then whoever had the chance took them and read them; someone, I believe, even took them home, read them, studied them a bit in more detail once they got home...

**Anita Susuri:** I'm curious, did the police come afterwards, once they found them?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, they came to the principal, but not the uniformed police. Inspectors came. Because later, when I was arrested, I saw those same faces, faces I had seen in the gymnasium several times in a row. They came often, and they even took Hava in, since she was class president. I don't know now, I don't remember if she also had a position in the school leadership, I don't remember. They took her to the principal for, let's say, informational conversations several times. She would tell us, she'd say, like this, you know, "They're asking me questions." But of course she managed to avoid, you know, she avoided extremely well the possibility of giving any detail that could incriminate us.

But we think that, as young people with a lot of enthusiasm, we held meetings often in the city. When we distributed on November 28 throughout the whole city, it was impossible that someone didn't see them. That's what we think. And later we discussed often, after we got out of prison, what the chances were that we were identified after about two or three months of activity. When you put, for example, "Patriotic Organization Ideali," they probably thought these were professors, doctors, who knows who. Who would have thought it was a handful of kids writing such pamphlets.

**Anita Susuri:** Your group was called Ideali, right?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, our group was called Ideali."

**Anita Susuri:** And was it just you girls in that group, or did the group expand so that you didn't know the other groups of three?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Of course we didn't know the other groups of three. Of course not. Because even in the indictment there were names mentioned, threes belonging to someone, but they weren't arrested, naturally. The one who had them in his three protected them, protected them during the investigation. But we also had those two boys. Meaning we were seven girls and those two boys. But all the names mentioned in the indictment, none of them were arrested with us. And surely there were others who knew, more or less, about our activity, but thanks to the resistance we managed within the investigation, they didn't end up arresting them.

**Anita Susuri:** You mean in the third year you said the underground activity had already begun...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** And then it continued, so that means you stayed one more year in high school?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, we were arrested on December 19, meaning halfway through the school year. We were arrested even before the first semester had fully finished. Then the fourth year... and after we were released from prison, like that.

**Anita Susuri:** The arrest happened in '84?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Can you tell me now how the arrest happened? Your family surely didn't know you were active?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** No. I think my second brother and my two sisters, my sister who's a teacher and the sister I mentioned who's closer to me, the one who plays the *lahuta*, more or less they knew. Because when they found... since it was impossible to hide things so well at home. In my family we had two rooms and when my brother got married, he took one room. So those materials circulated around the house. But they didn't say anything, you know, so they wouldn't put me in an uncomfortable position by asking me what that was... and talking about Albania, about the homeland, about Albanian history, mentioning Enver Hoxha and singing patriotic songs, that wasn't at all surprising or unusual for my family.

Actually, now that I mentioned this, they told me later, after I got out of prison, that when they came to search our house, every cassette they tried to play in the cassette player, every single one was "Albania, Enver, Albania, Enver." And the way they reacted in Serbian was, "We have a little Albania here." Meaning all that was completely normal for my family. But forming an underground organization for which you get arrested and end up in prison, I don't think they imagined that at the time.

You asked how we were arrested, for me, Hava, and Zoge from our class, because the other girls, each one in her own way, were taken from school too, but they'll probably tell their own stories. They came into the classroom and took us in the second period. I was waiting to be called in astronomy and since my last name starts with "Z," my turn never came (laughs). The semester was almost over and we were about 42 or 43 students in the fourth year.

I had studied astronomy with joy, I really liked the subject, and I was excited to be asked so I could get a five (an A). A math teacher came in, and I don't know if there were two of them, I've forgotten. I'm sorry that I've forgotten that detail. And he said, "Hava Shala, Zoge Shala, and you, Muriqi," and he looked at me with a kind of surprise. He said, "The school inspector is here," and throughout my schooling, whenever inspectors came, I'd often been considered one of the quiet, polite, good students.

The big surprise was how I, because okay, those two, the rebel one who always spoke up in meetings, but me? He said, "Go to the principal's office, you've been called." I got up to leave just like I was. I think there were two of them, again, I'm sorry I forgot that detail. Then he said, "Take your bag and your coat." So I went to the back of the class to get my coat, and my desk mate, Bleona Shatri, happened to be walking in. She gestured to me, like, "Where?" I just gestured back that I didn't know. They said, "Don't talk, come out the door immediately."

They took us to the principal's office. The principal was Serbian. In the office was that *udbash* (UDB agent),<sup>39</sup> the SUP<sup>40</sup> officer I mentioned earlier, someone named Zoran. Later I realized from documents who he was, but back then I only remembered the name Zoran. There were two or three others there, all in civilian clothes, no uniforms. Three men in total. They told me, "You have no right to speak, you have no right to say anything," and we sat there waiting, waiting, waiting until the bell rang for break.

Then one of them asked, "When do you want to take them?" and the other said, "After the students enter from the break so we don't cause commotion." When the second bell rang, they stood up, "Come with us, you are under arrest." One man on each side, down the stairs, into the car. It was a white Zastava, if I'm not mistaken. And when we entered the SUP building, I tried to look around, to see if I recognized anyone who could know that they were taking us.

I didn't see Hava or Zoge, they were apparently taken to another hall or room. They took only me from the principal's office. They took us to the UDB. First they left me alone in a room. No one came in. The door would open, different doors would open, I could hear a lot of movement in different directions. I realized they had taken the other two girls into other rooms. But for the moment, until they brought in Hidajete and Safete too, nothing started, no questioning or anything.

Then another *udbash* came in. Because we got used to calling them that, *udbash*. Another security officer. He introduced himself as Malush Korhasani. At the time I never remembered his last name, only his first name, but now from documents I know who he was. He said, "I'm the security officer who will handle your case. These are your rights, you are under arrest, you have carried out illegal activities," and I don't remember what else he said because I've forgotten some of the wording, "you have the right to a lawyer."

You know, we didn't know what our rights were or what it meant to get a lawyer. We were just waiting for the beating to begin. But I still had this kind of hope, thinking, "Maybe they'll keep us for two months and then release us," because our organization... it was clear they were going to sentence us

<sup>39</sup> Members of the UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional "a" for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

<sup>40</sup> SUP - Acronym for *Sekretariat unutrašnjih poslova*, which translates to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, of the Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic.

severely. But still, since we were minors, I didn't imagine at first that what we had done would be considered such a serious threat that all of Peja would be up in arms.

Later I saw when they brought in Safete. As for the others, the boys, I couldn't know. I didn't see Emin, or the others, they arrested another girl named Shkurta too, and Hava's cousin, since the three of them were from the same family. Then the investigation procedures began. That was in the afternoon until evening.

I think that while they were going to our homes to search them and bring back materials, the security officers kept moving around, coming and going. They didn't ask me anything specific nor did they torture me. They were probably waiting for the results of the house searches, or whatever else they were doing.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you in Peja or...?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Us, the family?

**Anita Susuri:** No, no, in the investigation unit.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, yes, in the investigation unit in Peja. That night in Peja. The next day, after 24 hours, actually a bit more than 24 hours, they transferred us to Mitrovica.

### Part three

**Anita Susuri:** So you had to stay those first 24 hours alone in an office...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What were those 24 hours like?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Laiçi:** Those 24 hours, I think, were the hardest for me, also because the psychological torture was very intense. At times they would say that the group members were telling everything about us: "Robert has told them everything about you, and he's not even ashamed, as a man, to talk about you girls. He tricked you, now he's thrown you under the bus. He's told us everything." Other times that guy, Xheladin, would come and say, "He won't confess anything unless you really beat him." Just to put you in a position where you'd doubt others, accept the charges, and turn against your own group.

There's one moment that's stayed with me... Safete was my friend, Safete Krasniqi. But in the beginning, when she joined the group, I didn't know she had joined. She came in either through Hidajete or Hava, I don't know through which. Later, when I saw her in the group, it made sense, her sister was a political prisoner, Hidajete Krasniqi, so it made sense that she was involved. But she was younger than us, and I somehow felt protective of her. I'd think, "She's young, poor thing."

Then they asked her, "Do you know Zyrafete Muriqi?" And she said, "No." They brought me in to confront her. This guy, can't remember which one, they kept coming in and out, Jakup Llonqari... he

asked me, “Do you know Safete Krasniqi?” I said, “Yes.” “How do you know her?” “We were in the same class for two years.” Then he said, “Well, she says she doesn’t know you.” I said, “Well, maybe she forgot that we were in class together for two years.” He said, “Come, let’s confront you two.”

When they brought me in, she motioned with her head, like, telling me not to say I knew her. But it made no sense to deny it, we’d been two years in the same class. He asked me, “Do you know her?” I said “Yes.” “How do you know her?” “We were in the same class.” Before they even pushed me into the room, Demë Muja slapped her so hard it rang in my ears, more than anything they’d done to me. It broke me. Because they still hadn’t laid a hand on me. And suddenly I felt like I was the reason she got hit, like I had caused trouble for her. It hit me hard.

That’s what made me say to myself: whatever I’ve done, I’ll say I’ve done it, and I’ll keep doing it for as long as I live, and I’ll never step away from this activity. I was so upset, because it felt like I had caused her harm. And it wasn’t something you could deny. They would shove documents at you, the pamphlets they had seized. Then from the house search they had taken notebooks with poems. I wasn’t worried about the poems. They were poems about Ali Lajçi, about the demonstrations of ‘81, those were normal, you know.

But those pamphlets: “Who wrote this pamphlet?” At first I tried to say I didn’t, but after a while I had this push inside me to say yes, I wrote it, so what? Let them kill me. Eventually I admitted the activity and even the pseudonym and all those details of our group: the oath, the actions, everything. They wrote the statements themselves, honestly, we only signed them. But still, when I later read the indictment and decisions they gave us, it wasn’t like they added anything to the statements. It was our activity, the actions we took, the details that were ours. It’s not like they added anything to make our sentences longer.

**Anita Susuri:** So you didn’t have the chance to read what they wrote before signing, right?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Honestly, to tell you the truth, I was so exhausted and in such a state that I just weighed the situation. We’d been exposed as an organization and it was impossible for us to pull back. Since there was no way to withdraw, then at least stand your ground, stand by the goal you truly had, and let the consequences be whatever they are.

**Anita Susuri:** Then you said they sent you to Mitrovica...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, sometime late in the evening of the next day. They took us out of the offices and into a corridor by the back exit of the UDB. They left us waiting there for a while, maybe 20 minutes, maybe half an hour, I really can’t tell the time exactly. We could see each other but couldn’t communicate. Just little looks, you know, like asking with your eyes if they had beaten you badly or things like that. Only gestures like that, but no actual communication.

They tied me with a handcuff, those plastic ones, not the metal ones with chains, and they tied all of us two by two. They loaded us into a van and the inspectors were with us. I might be forgetting, but I think it was Demë, Demë Muja, and Jakup Llonqari. Maybe I’m wrong, the other girls might remember it better. They drove us to Mitrovica. The van had an open space in the back with benches all around.

We could see each other, but we had no way to give one another any information about how the interrogations had gone up to that point. Except for Hava, once, she gestured with her hands that they

had beaten her on her arms, and asked me with a sign whether they had hit me with a rod. Just so we could understand a bit how each of us had been treated. And you could hear everything, because they would deliberately leave doors open so we could hear each other screaming. The whole situation was clear from that. You could catch bits of what the inspectors were saying to each other, deliberately, so we'd understand that the torture had been...

**Anita Susuri:** Was there any physical violence against you during those 24 hours?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. During those 24 hours they didn't torture me physically. For me, the physical torture started only once I arrived in Mitrovica... There had been heavy snowfall, and for about five weeks they couldn't interrogate us at all. During those five weeks, the four girls who were minors, well, I don't know exactly by birthdate how it was counted, but they released them. During that period they didn't call us in for questioning either, except once when the lawyer came and once when the investigating judge came. Actually, the investigating judge had questioned us in Peja too, I shouldn't mix things up, but he also came once to Mitrovica and questioned us briefly in the prison facility.

But when it came time to finalize the investigation, they took us to the security organs in Mitrovica, and there they beat us simply for the sake of beating us. Speaking for myself, I had already admitted the act. They beat me just to beat me, to demoralize me, to break my morale, to make me feel hopeless, to force me to regret what I'd done, you know? For no other reason. Reading the indictment now, I've read it several times, and later in prison too, I saw that there wasn't any purpose for them to ask for more information. The acts were already admitted, the documents were seized, everything was there. There was nothing new to take out of us.

That physical violence in Mitrovica was really severe. They beat my arms and legs with rubber batons. I could handle the hits on my arms somewhat, but the ones on my legs were very hard to endure. But at least I was relieved that the investigation was already concluded and no further details could come out. The pressure on me was incredibly high regarding Shega Kelmendi, Professor Shega, whom I mentioned earlier. Even in Peja, through psychological pressure, and later in Mitrovica, and even through the prison authorities, sometimes Sherafedini [Ajeti] would call us in for "informative" talks.

Shega had been imprisoned before us. Her sentence had already been pronounced by the time we, the seven girls from Peja, arrived, plus another girl who wasn't part of our group but had been sentenced together with her brother or someone else. There were eight girls from Peja. There was no more space. Four rooms, each with two of us, plus Shega. And since she was a teacher, the fear was that she'd create some kind of organization inside the prison. They had released her for a time under "protective freedom" when we were arrested. So the pressure they put on me was meant to connect her to our case.

Even though they asked each of us about certain teachers, with me specifically they insisted a lot on Shega, and also about one Albanian language teacher. But mostly about Shega. I remember reading later in my statement that I had said something like, "We will act the way Professor Shega educated us, the way Abdyl Frashëri<sup>41</sup> said..." "What did Abdyl Frashëri say?" "To unite the Albanian lands." And that would make them furious.

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<sup>41</sup> Abdyl Frashëri (1839-1892), an Albanian politician, diplomat, and one of the leading figures of the Albanian National Awakening, known for his efforts to promote Albanian autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.

Because by nature I was quiet and calm, and he'd say, "So you want to teach me about uniting Albanian lands? No one can defeat Yugoslavia. You think only you are patriots?" And then, "Stand up!" Meaning, he'd just unleash physical violence. Not because they could extract information, there was nothing left to extract, but simply to break morale and endurance.

**Anita Susuri:** And how long did the whole investigation process last?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The investigation, well, like I said, for us it was the 24 hours in Peja, and... I can't say 24 hours in Mitrovica, because it wasn't exactly one day. But they came occasionally to the prison cells, sometimes with the lawyer, sometimes without, those state-appointed lawyers. My family hired a lawyer for me, actually against my wishes, because I even have a written statement saying I didn't want a lawyer. But you know how families are, they thought it would help somehow. I remember at least once being questioned in the security offices in the presence of the lawyer. That was more or less the extent of it.

**Anita Susuri:** And when did you first have contact with your family?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The first visit was, I think, after a week or ten days, I truly don't know. My mother came, my eldest brother, and my sister, the one who's a teacher. You know the whole procedure back then, how you had to get permission for a visit from the District Court in Peja. The first visit must not have lasted even a minute. Just enough for me to see them as shapes, and for them to see me. There were bars, very tight bars, in the visiting area. There were double bars: the first set where the family stood, then a gap, and then another set of bars where we would stand.

There was a dark corridor there. Maybe we could see them a little because some light came from a small window in the corridor, but I have no idea how they could see us. With the double bars and the darkness, really they only heard our voices and saw that we were there. After that, visits were every two weeks. My family always came. My mother came every single time until I was released, never once missed a visit, both in Mitrovica and in Lipjan. Other family members sometimes came too, depending on who could manage to travel.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it difficult for your family to travel like that?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** It was difficult, of course. Back then, for example, to get by bus from home to Mitrovica, I don't even know how they handled the permits, maybe a day in advance. But they had to leave early. First to leave the village for Peja, then from Peja to Mitrovica. And from the bus station, the prison was quite far. They had to wait there for the visit, who knows how long, because they often kept the families waiting on purpose. That was a method of theirs. And then they had to travel back. Of course it was difficult, they suffered a lot.

**Anita Susuri:** And when was your trial? After how long?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The trial took place after seven months. They brought us from Mitrovica to Peja. Again, I was with Myrvete, but that time we had metal handcuffs. That period in Mitrovica prison was... very particular. The first day I arrived at the Mitrovica Prison, even though they hadn't beaten me yet, I was exhausted, drained, but somehow I still had a lot of energy, a sort of inner drive. There we weren't allowed to sit on the beds. There were just some thin mats on the floor, and the floor was stone tiles, very cold.

During the day we had to sit on those mats, but on the first night, I sat on the bed and started singing a song by Fatime Sokoli. Suddenly the door opened. A guard came in, she was rough, a harsh woman. She was Albanian, but extremely cruel. She said, “Do you know you’re not allowed to sing here?” All the imprisoned women got up immediately. Well, we were two in the cell. She scolded us and handed us the house rules, a large sheet, almost a meter long, written in Serbian and Albanian. “Read this carefully. Next time I hear a sound from you...” Well, that was enough to scare me. Then she left.

There was a woman named Ajshe Gjonbalaj, she had been imprisoned for terrorism, sentenced to 15 or 20 years, I can’t remember. She told me, “Look, good girl, where are you from?” “From Rugova,” I said. “You were arrested yesterday?” “Yes,” I answered, and we briefly told her what happened. “What did they arrest you for?” She said, “One guy was a wreck, practically two minutes from dying.” Then she told me, “Did they tell you where you’re going? They tell everyone: you enter with your head held high and you leave with your head lowered. You have to know how to behave here. Singing won’t help, patriotism isn’t just singing. You have to keep your mind sharp, keep your head down, watch what you do.”

I understood what she meant. It wasn’t that she didn’t want me to sing, she just wanted me to be careful, not to cause problems that could bring punishment on all the imprisoned women. Because if one person caused trouble, they would beat them all or send them to solitary. I was young, enthusiastic... but once imprisoned for political reasons, I had to be more measured, more serious.

**Anita Susuri:** So only at the trial, and after that you didn’t see the other girls from the prison anymore?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Right. No, inside the prison we kind of built our own sort of prison life too. Since Myrvete and I were charged in the same case, we talked through every detail and prepared for the trial, and during those five weeks for us... there was snow, I don’t know if it was the snow. There was this huge snowfall that winter in ‘85, I don’t know if the snow was the reason they didn’t come to get us, or if they were checking in case someone more experienced was backing us. They followed the professors and the family members for sure. And the girls who had been released, of course they followed them too, because they were members of the group. They had their names and pseudonyms there.

For those five weeks, in a way we had time to somewhat recover, within our own circle, I mean. To understand what was happening and what would come next. Because there we were, but from that point forward, how would it go? With Myrvete, yes, we talked through everything constantly. But sometimes we also had the chance to talk to the other rooms. Because the guards, some were very harsh, but some were a bit more understanding. Sometimes, when they took one cell out to the yard for a walk, or when they took us to the bathroom, for example, when we had to wash or something, there would be some chance for room-to-room communication, even if just a little, whispering. We would knock on the wall, making that specific tapping sound that political prisoners used...

**Anita Susuri:** “Republic, Constitution.”

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, “Republic, Constitution, either willingly or by force.” The windows and the door of the cell didn’t have any glass. There were only the metal bars on the door left open, and then the corridor windows, which allowed some fresh air to come in. We would climb onto the bunk that was closest to that window, and even if it was small, at least we had that bit of air in our room. There

were six of us: Zoge was there, Hidajete made five, and then for a while Hava and Emine were there, now it slipped my mind, and then [Teuta Bekteshi](#), so we were four at one point.

And the cell 3 was very far away. The bathrooms were there, the director's office, and cell 3. We could almost never communicate with cell 3. You simply couldn't hear voices from that far; the guards would come immediately. We could occasionally manage to send a message, to check on each other's health, to coordinate if we planned a hunger strike, to react to something. Like that...

**Anita Susuri:** What would you usually go on strike for?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** We went on strike because we subscribed to newspapers, one or two of them. We subscribed to *Rilindja*.<sup>42</sup> And sometimes, when possible, we would have access to two newspapers: *Rilindja* and another one, just so we could have a bit more information. There was also a prisoner from the Bosniak community, sentenced for another offense, and she subscribed to her own community's newspaper. In that way, from different cells we could gather information about what was happening outside.

When the groups of boys were sentenced, and they were usually given long sentences, the Mitrovica prisoners always reacted with some symbolic action or a strike. Especially the knocking. We would coordinate cell by cell, cell by cell, and with the boys upstairs, depending on who was above or below us. With those knocks, the whole prison would sometimes do it at once: "Republic, Constitution, either willingly or by force." And that would drive them mad.

Then, depending on someone's luck or whether Sherafedin had planned it, he would isolate them, send them to solitary cells. And if someone was tortured, we would go on hunger strike. There was even one case, I don't remember if it was connected to our group, it slips my mind now. Downstairs was the police office. So, to react and tell them, we would communicate through those knocks how many years someone got. I think it was when our group was sentenced, to let them know how many years I got: first one, for example, eight years.

Then suddenly the door opened. The guards came with a supervisor, he was Montenegrin. They opened the door: "Who is knocking downstairs?" Of course, we wouldn't respond. Sometimes they would give us a slap on the face, and sometimes they would just issue a warning. And sometimes they took someone away, but not from our room. Sherafedin didn't take us for questioning, no.

**Anita Susuri:** And how were the other conditions in the prison? The food, the bathrooms you mentioned...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The bathrooms, that was the real misery of the prison, and of all investigative prisons. It was a huge problem everywhere. For example, we had those *kibla*, you've probably heard from other former prisoners, those metal buckets we used to relieve ourselves in the room. Once a day in the morning they'd take us to the bathroom, and once a week they'd take us to shower. There were six of us, and just one shower, a big one. When they turned on the water, the shower would splash all of us. But as soon as we'd put shampoo on, they'd switch the water to cold. You either rinsed with cold

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<sup>42</sup> *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

water or stayed covered in shampoo. They wouldn't even wait for us to get dressed; they'd just take us back to the cell like that.

The cells were very cold. We arrived in December, and that winter was harsh. Believe me, sometimes Myrvete, the others, and I, we also had Rexhie Mala in the room, Hasan Mala's wife, we'd wrap ourselves like this {gestures} with those awful blankets, but at least there were blankets. We'd walk around that tiny room all day just to keep our blood moving, because we were freezing. It was extremely, extremely, extremely cold. To sit down, we had to sit on those cushions on the floor, and the draft would come from underneath the beds. Honestly, it's no surprise that today each of us has rheumatism or bone problems. The cold there cut through you as if the place were open to the wind.

**Anita Susuri:** How big was that cell, the room?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The Mitrovica prison is circular. The narrow part of the cell, the back, was just wide enough to fit one bed. So that must have been around two meters. And the part near the door might have been four meters, I think. Maybe not even four. Basically, the space by the door was as wide as the door itself times three. And the length of the room was about the length of two beds.

**Anita Susuri:** And what was the maximum number of people you had in one cell?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I think nine of us ended up there once, when they brought in some women who were imprisoned for other offenses, though we always suspected otherwise. They'd come in for all sorts of charges, but we suspected they were placed there to listen in on what we were saying. Because there was me, there was Rexhie, a political prisoner, Ajshe, and Myrvete. Four political prisoners in one room, so of course it made sense for them to bring someone to keep an ear on us. Those two other women they added, the ones supposedly imprisoned for other crimes, they were polite at least. Inside the cell we never had any issues with them.

**Anita Susuri:** How many years were you sentenced to?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I was sentenced to five and a half years.

**Anita Susuri:** And you served them in Mitrovica?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I stayed in Mitrovica for another five weeks after the trial. In total, I spent seven months in Mitrovica, and the rest of my sentence in Lipjan.

**Anita Susuri:** And did they tell you in advance that they were going to transfer you somewhere else?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, they told us, and we already knew from the other prisoners as well. There were also women serving shorter sentences who had joined our cell in the meantime, Ilmaze Grainca from Ferizaj and then [Teuta Hadri](#). It just happened that when the girls in Teuta's room were released and she was left alone, they moved her to our room. Teuta had more experience and was more mature, so she would tell us things we didn't know as the younger ones. She guided us, taught us, and honestly she advised us really well for the trial too.

And even though, I don't know if your conversations with my friends touched on this, for the trial we had decided to do a symbolic action. We agreed that all of us girls would dress in black and white. We couldn't get the message to the boys, of course, there was no way to communicate with them, not even through family members. But that's what we did for our trial. The trial lasted three days. From the first defendant onward, we could hear each other's statements. And the trial was really interesting because of the sense of unity and solidarity we showed, that feeling of speaking with one voice as a group.

**Anita Susuri:** And when did they reduce your sentences?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** About a year later, I think, I can't say for sure unless I check the document from the Supreme Court session. They probably notified us at the time, I've forgotten, but they used to send us a letter. We didn't attend, only the parents were called. Much later my brother told me how it went, he had gone with Hava's father and the other parents. They made a decision to reduce our sentences. We had been very stubborn, we never wrote any request for sentence reduction. But considering that we were legally minors, our sentences had been extremely high, as if we were adults. Eventually the Supreme Court of Kosovo reduced them.

**Anita Susuri:** Two and a half years then.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. From three and a half, five and a half, three, and then the six months in the correctional home, I ended up serving two and a half.

**Anita Susuri:** When they transferred you to Lipjan, how was it there?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Lipjan was very different from Mitrovica. The conditions were more normal, you could live some kind of prison life with at least a bit of dignity, if it can be called that. Even though we protested there too because they forced us to work. We refused, we wanted to read. But work was mandatory. We went on a hunger strike, there was no other way to resist it.

As for the conditions, since you're comparing it to Mitrovica, the food, the hygiene, the beds, the chance to see other inmates, everything in Lipjan was better. Compared to Mitrovica, Lipjan was like a normal, organized prison, for that time in Kosovo. I don't know who was in charge of the prisons back then, but Lipjan was definitely more organized.

**Anita Susuri:** And was there, for example, any option to continue part of your schooling inside the prison?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** We didn't accept. There were options, but we political prisoners... maybe someone did, I'm not sure, but I didn't. I finished the school year I'd missed, that year of gymnasium, after I was released. We did it through the system of class exams.

**Anita Susuri:** And did you have the chance to spend a bit more time with your family during visits?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, yes. In Lipjan visits were once a month, and everyone knew it was once a month, but even there only close family members could come. My close family came, but what was

different was that minors, like my younger sisters, who never came to Mitrovica visits, were allowed in Lipjan. So at least my sisters, who were underage, could come. Not nieces or nephews, only immediate family.

And of course the visits were monitored, very strictly monitored, even in Lipjan. But at least you could ask how they were doing, how life was going outside, and they could see how we were with our health, what we were reading, and so on. They brought us books from home. Lipjan had a prison library as well, same as Mitrovica. The literature was selected in a way that there wasn't much worth reading, only rarely you could find something classical where you could actually lose yourself a bit.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Zyrafete, could you talk a bit more about the strikes you organized?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. The big strike we organized in Lipjan happened about a month or five weeks after we were moved from Mitrovica to Lipjan. It had to do with defending Ajshe Gjonbalaj, who had refused to work. Through supporting her, we wanted all of us to refuse work. But the excuse they used to transfer Ajshe from Lipjan to a prison in Serbia, Požarevac, I think, was that by refusing work, she also refused to iron the Yugoslav flag.

That became the trigger for all of us girls to go on strike. But because of the strike, they transferred the prisoners with longer or earlier sentences, Nazie, Kadrije, Trëndelina, Hava, back to Mitrovica. [Afide](#) too. I might be forgetting someone, and I feel bad if I am. And for those of us who remained in Lipjan, they put us in the solitary cells of the men's ward, because the women's unit didn't have solitary confinement cells.

But even there, the solitary cells weren't enough for all of us. So they were forced to place us two by two. I ended up with Hidajete Kelmendi. We're somewhat related, and that one month with her is a special memory in my life. Even though we were in the same activist group before prison, we had never actually spent time together like that. Maybe in meetings, but not really getting to know each other well.

That month, with everything we shared, created impressions and memories that are lifelong. They can't be replaced by anything else in life. Before they dispersed us again, there's a detail I think is important. The day we went on strike, we had a scheduled visit. Hava's family had come, and mine too. They immediately cut the visit short and told them they couldn't see us because we had "broken prison rules," or however they phrased it.

They took Hava's father and my brother to the director's office and then called us in. When we entered, they sat on one side, we sat on the other. They had pressured them to tell us to end the strike. Of course neither of them accepted to pressure us. My brother later told me, "The pressure they put on us was as if we absolutely had to convince you to stop the strike." And Seferi, Hava's father, said, "She's an adult now, she's 18. She didn't ask me when she got arrested, or what she should do. I can't influence her now. And even if I told her to stop the strike, how would she stop when all the girls are in it?"

The visit ended just like that. My mother, Hava's mother, and the others waited and waited, and eventually went home. That day ended there. After that, I didn't see Hava again until she was released, a long time later. Then for a short while during the [Blood Feud Reconciliation Movement](#), she left for

Switzerland. That separation from her inside the prison was one of the hardest separations I experienced with the political prisoners, especially because she's someone I started activism with from the beginning, but I didn't have the chance to stay with her inside.

**Anita Susuri:** That day when you were released from prison, was it the exact date you were supposed to get out?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** No, they reduced my sentence by six months through what they called the "punitive house." It was a kind of early release they issued. So I was released six months earlier than the date set by the Supreme Court.

**Anita Susuri:** And your family must have come to pick you up?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. My family came. They found out, I'm starting to forget, I don't know if they found out earlier or if I had the right to send them a letter. Maybe I sent them a letter and told them, I've forgotten now, I don't know exactly how it was. But my brother came, my brother-in-law, and a cousin of mine who is also my *tezak*.<sup>43</sup> They came, picked me up, and I went home. The emotion when I arrived home... the first emotion was actually the last night spent with the political prisoners. And somehow Myrvete and I had been in Mitrovica together for seven uninterrupted months.

There in Lipjan, it wasn't like a closed pavilion where we couldn't meet, we would see each other. In the common room, at work, when they sent us to the kitchen, so you could see each other every day, even for several hours. For example, even if you couldn't communicate much during work hours besides seeing each other physically. But at least during those two daily hours of recreation we had, we could see each other. But somehow, even so, you feel more emotional parting from a member of your own group.

Of course, there were others too, Akile Dedinca, some of the other girls who stayed longer. That night we would always do a kind of send-off for whoever was being released, and we'd jokingly call it the *kanagjegj*<sup>44</sup> (laughs). And then the next wave of emotion was when I got home. The kids had grown. And you see them, even though it wasn't a long time, two and a half years isn't much, but with children, you notice it, you see they've grown, they're not as little as they were. I felt a stronger emotion there.

My brother, that same day, had to leave for military service. He just came to pick me up in Lipjan and that very night he had to leave for the army. Back then, when boys went to serve, we would give them a send-off like, "He's going, who knows how he'll come back," you know; it was quite sad.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of the joy my family felt because I returned, there was also this sadness because we were sending my

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<sup>43</sup> *Tezak* is an Albanian kinship term referring to the son of one's maternal aunt. In English, this corresponds to a first cousin on the mother's side.

<sup>44</sup> *Kanagjegj* is a traditional Albanian pre-wedding celebration held for the bride, usually the night before the wedding. It involves gathering with female relatives and friends, singing, dancing, and symbolic rituals meant to prepare and bless the bride for marriage.

<sup>45</sup> At the time, many Albanian families feared for their sons' safety during compulsory military service in Yugoslavia, as numerous Albanian conscripts had died in service under unclear or suspicious circumstances.

brother off. And of course, it was known that anyone who had something “in their file” suffered more in the army.

And honestly, as if it were a premonition, my brother did suffer terribly during his service. Another emotional moment when I was released was when my younger uncle came to hug me. Now I’m tearing up remembering it (cries). We hadn’t seen each other in a long time, and he said, “Instead of us men having to carry out what you went through, it fell on you.” He said, “This burden came to you.” But everyone has their own share in life, you know.

## Part four

**Anita Susuri:** And after prison you continued with school, with...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. I was released in June, on June 20. And for that year it was impossible to continue even with class exams because there was no time left, the school year had finished. Then I went to the gymnasium and asked, “What are my options?” And they told me, “If the security organs allow it, you need to come and register the class exams and then continue with the class exams.” Sometime around January, I think, were the class exams. I prepared.

If I remember correctly, I took the diploma thesis topic beforehand, no, actually I didn’t take the thesis topic beforehand. I went first to the class exams, even though each one of us had been an excellent student. But in the class exams I barely managed to pass with a “very good.” And the math track, well, it’s not something you learn easily. I studied, but I couldn’t manage to cover everything. To catch up with all the units the regular students had learned. And after a while, not even to understand them fully.

But I decided to continue. Back then I thought I would continue with technical studies or mathematics, and I tried as much as I could to study math. But I finished it later. I took my thesis topic in programming from my homeroom teacher. But there was a kind of coldness. A big coldness when I went to the class exams. The well-meaning ones would look at us with sympathy, with understanding, but it’s not like they openly welcomed us, like, “Good you came, we hope you succeed now on your education path, at least from here onwards.” You know, they themselves were being monitored.

Others looked at us from the corner of their eye, like, “How come they didn’t keep you even longer in prison?” I heard all kinds of things they said about us, that we had distributed leaflets. “Girls,” and you know, using derogatory terms. Prejudices, but who would bother with that. Then in July I enrolled in the Technical Faculty, the electronics department. But I didn’t pass the entrance exam to get accepted immediately, I ended up on the reserve list. When I went to pick up my documents I said, “Seems like I wasn’t accepted.” I thought of going to the Faculty of Philology, because literature, I’ve loved literature since I was a child, always.

My sister used to bring me books from her school to read, since I went to a separate school. I always had many books and always read. But then I wondered where I would work; you had to think about that too. Regardless of what you study or what you like, you have to think about how you’ll find your place in life later. So I said, “Let me enroll in the Technical Faculty.” And as I told you, I wasn’t accepted,

I stayed on the reserve list. When I went to pick up the documents, the clerk said, “Why are you taking them?” I said, “Well, I wasn’t accepted.” He said, “Come on, don’t take them.” Then it crossed my mind that maybe we had some restriction, because he didn’t say, “Leave them because you’re accepted.” He said, “Leave them, you’ll be accepted for correspondence studies.”

I thought, why not, and since he said so, I got accepted for correspondence. I attended two years at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. I started the third year, but after I met Salih, he insisted, “Why don’t you study literature, since you have a talent for it? You’ll finish it much more easily. You’re falling behind with exams over there.” And truly, I couldn’t achieve the needed success. In the Technical Faculty you have to dedicate a lot of time and effort. We also spent time on various activities, and I couldn’t reach the level of success the profession demanded.

So I enrolled in the Faculty of Philology, the literature department. But then it became impossible to continue both. In my youthful mind I thought I could manage both, but once I started literature, well, the movement intensified, the political activity became more frequent, and there was no chance I could continue two faculties. With more focused studying here, I passed exams much more easily. So I abandoned electronics completely and dedicated myself entirely to literature. I continued like that until the brink of the war, until ‘97. When I got married I still hadn’t passed World Literature, and I only graduated after I got married, after the war.

**Anita Susuri:** And how did you meet your husband, as two former prisoners, or through the activity, or how?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. We met through the activity. I met him for the first time at the first public gathering of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds in Shtupeq i Madh, in March 1990. He and his brother Selman, who is now a Hero of Kosovo, were among the main organizers of that gathering. Even though the gatherings were held in oda and semi-open spaces, these early gatherings of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, the large, all-people gathering, the more prepared cases by Hava’s group, Myrvete’s group, and these early activists...

But to come out and pardon blood feuds publicly, in a place where many people could participate, Rugova was the most suitable. The preparatory gathering had been held about a week earlier in the school of Drelaj. But it was seen as more reasonable to hold it in a village, somewhere a bit farther from the possibility of police arriving to disrupt the gathering. They chose Shtupeq i Madh, now it’s the Meadow of Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, that meadow where it was held.

There, I went out with my brother and sisters, and we had a case in the family, my uncle’s son had passed away, and it was, let’s say, a bit early to leave the family mourning and go to the gathering. But the importance of the gathering was great, so we decided to go, not to withdraw. I had a friend there, Hasime Shkreli. While talking to her, she said to me, “Do you know him, that one there? That’s my cousin, Sali Lajçi, a political prisoner.” I had already heard about him earlier, because I was in class with the brother of Nasir Salih, and these two had been imprisoned together, Nasir and Salih.

She asked, “Do you want to meet him?” I said, “Yes,” a political prisoner, you know, I could hardly wait to meet them, and I didn’t really know those from Rugova. I hadn’t had much chance to meet political prisoners. We met there. Besides the part of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, where these activists were, the founding group of reconciliation, including Salih, after the gathering there was another part:

the Democratic League,<sup>46</sup> which at that time was a nationwide movement, also had a program to organize itself.

Then Salih said to me... I was writing a speech, and I said, "If I'm given the chance to read at the gathering, I will read it," and include both the reconciliation of blood feuds and, in general, the nationwide movement of the '90s. And I thought, it would be my first time, and whatever chance I get to speak, to express that feeling after prison. I hadn't had a public place to give myself that chance, if the organizers allowed it.

He said, "I saw you writing something and I knew you were getting involved," and said, "Don't enter the organization of the Democratic League like that." I said, "Why?" He said, "There are plenty of people dealing with the Democratic League. We have more important duties." I said, "Why?" kind of, "Why are you telling me this, who are you to tell me?" (laughs). He said, "Look, with Nasir and the others, we've decided to help as much as we can with the legal organization, with all the legal movements, but to stay a bit more aside. Because when the time comes for something more difficult, a more essential organization for uprising, we need to be a bit more inclined toward that."

I stayed with Ali Muriqi, a cousin of mine whom I mentioned earlier, and with a few others until the end of the gathering. I didn't see him anymore there. Later I started meeting him after the Rugova organizational council formed, [Zymer Neziri](#), Selman Lajçi, and others, Isa Nikçi and Mujë Rugova, members of the movement for reconciliation. And of course, it was understandable, even necessary, that every group, every small council of reconciliation of blood feuds, should have women.

Salih said, "It would be good for you to come into our group of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds." I said, "But I wanted to be with Hava, I wanted to be with their group." He said, "Come on, Hava and the others have plenty of girls now. Their group has grown. Here in Rugova, we don't have someone who could represent a group of Rugova's girls and women, to have the possibility to enter *oda*, go into Rugova households, into families, to ask for reconciliation." There, with sister Ajshe, with my own sister, to seek reconciliation of blood feuds. With Sahadete Kelmendi, a friend I later never separated from, with them in other actions too.

With Hava Nikçi and some other girls we went to almost every action, in every case. Wherever there was a need, we did not separate from the Reconciliation Council until the last blood feud was reconciled. Until, so to say, the Reconciliation Movement was closed. But mostly I was present in the cases of that area, Rugova and the surrounding villages.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember any specific case?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, the most specific case where I was present was the reconciliation of the blood feud of Deli Muriqi, which was forgiven by Qerim Muriqi. He is now a fallen hero of Kosovo, killed

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<sup>46</sup> 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.

in the early demonstrations in Peja after the Jashari family was killed.<sup>47</sup> That was the most delicate case. It was difficult because it was hard for them to forgive the blood, and it was difficult because their family hesitated a lot to forgive. And this case, in fact, Zymer Neziri recorded it in his books on the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, there were many efforts until it was finally crowned with forgiveness. But there were other cases too, cases, you know, interesting and painful.

**Anita Susuri:** And the one you mentioned earlier, was he killed young or... why was it difficult to forgive?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, he was young, but for their family it was difficult to forgive. He was young, but it was a case connected to one killing, then another killing. Two deaths were linked to that case, you know? It all went on like a chain, and he was thought of as the cause of those deaths. The side who was the first to lose someone, they considered him responsible, even though all of us as cousins and relatives believed he wasn't at fault. But it's hard to judge. For that case it was really difficult to judge, but the good thing is that it was reconciled, you know? Their case is like a story of its own.

**Anita Susuri:** For example, what kind of connection was it?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Family ties, an engagement of that sort.

**Anita Susuri:** Cases for example, when this happened, this in the field of Reconciliation, what was the atmosphere like back then?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The atmosphere was very grand. There were people from all parts of Kosovo. There were foreign media and the Kosovo press as well. There was a kind of inspiration, it felt like something necessary was happening, something that had to happen. Beyond the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, everyone knew that behind it stood the greater purpose of preparing for a war that would bring us freedom. There were university professors, influential people, people who had old blood feuds, and political prisoners. So it was a majestic atmosphere, one that I think is unrepeatable.

I was at the Verat e Llukës, then I was also in those large public gatherings all over Kosovo. But maybe because that one was the first big gathering, where people could openly say in a public place, "May this blood be forgiven for the sake of the youth of Kosovo and the others of Kosovo, and the blood of the demonstrators," those who were being killed in the demonstrations, it was incredibly grand.

**Anita Susuri:** There must have been a lot of people?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, there were a lot of people. Fewer, much, much fewer than at the later mass gatherings that were held throughout Kosovo. But this one is a characteristic gathering because it's the first one, and it's the first open one, and the first that in a way gave a model to those families who had difficulty forgiving blood, showing them how to overcome themselves and do something for the sake of the common good.

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<sup>47</sup> The reference is to the killing of members of the Jashari family in Prekaz in March 1998, when Serbian police forces carried out a large-scale attack that resulted in the deaths of Adem Jashari, his brother Hamëz, and dozens of family members. The event became a defining moment in the Kosovo conflict and is widely regarded as a turning point that galvanized public resistance.

**Anita Susuri:** During this time, meaning after prison, in the '90s, you said you continued with some activities and with university. But were you also involved in anything else, in work or...?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** No. In terms of work, aside from doing handicrafts when I needed money, sewing Rugova-style clothing, traditional garments, and other clothing when I needed to, I didn't do any kind of paid work like that. But with the activities, yes. Meaning that even before the '90s I took part in all the activities that were organized in Pristina, at the Student Center, on the Pristina Square. In the big student strike that was held in the 1 Tetori hall, in all of these. These were before the Blood Feuds Reconciliation. The big demonstration in Pristina caught me as a student. And actually it's interesting because it was a very big demonstration...

**Anita Susuri:** In '89, right?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** In '89, yes, sometime in January. Right away in January. The big demonstration, if I'm not mistaken, was on January 14.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm not sure. Was it before or after the [miners' strike](#)?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** No, the demonstrations were after the miners' strike.

**Anita Susuri:** And so after...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Because the strike was in December or February?

**Anita Susuri:** The strike was in February.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Then maybe I've mixed up the dates. It's possible that I mixed up the dates. Those two, these two were the most important ones, more than any activity that was held inside the Student Center, and then the demonstrations in support of Adem Demaçi's<sup>48</sup> release. That demonstration, because it first started as a student gathering to, let's say, welcome Adem Demaçi after his release, but it turned into a demonstration.

All the others, many of them, took place in the Student Center at that time. They would start as a student gathering, and then the police would surround us, throw tear gas, disperse us. That was the demonstration. But about that demonstration, I remember one case to tell. We went out with my sister and our friends that we lived with, back then we lived in a rented apartment, our friend Sahadete Kelmendi. We decided to hold hands because there were so many people and we didn't want to lose each other. If the crowd pushed us, we didn't want to get separated.

When they attacked... I also had a *tezak*, the brother of Adrian Krasniqi,<sup>49</sup> Ilir Krasniqi, but they were a bit further from us, closer to the water cannons. When they shot the water, the water cannons, and the crowd moved from that side toward us where we were standing. There was this sudden movement of

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<sup>48</sup> Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Adrian Krasniqi (1972-1997) was one of the founding members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and widely recognized as the organization's first soldier to die in uniform. He was killed during a KLA attack on a Serbian police station in Kliqina near Peja.

the crowd, and there was a small wall near the square. When we tried to climb over that wall, the crowd wouldn't allow it. They caught that girl, Sadete, pushed her against the wall, and there was a real danger that the crowd could trample her.

We were trying desperately to keep them from stepping on her; anyway, many boys helped, somehow they pulled her out and left. But I was separated from them. The demonstration ended, it dispersed. Only the red-and-black scarves and the white caps remained hanging on the trees in Pristina, this image has always stayed with me. But I was separated from them. They had gone somewhere, my sister with that friend. We went into a nearby shop with the demonstrators because it was the closest place we had.

As soon as we went inside, the tear gas we had inhaled hit us hard. There was no air in there, and so many people. What to do? If we went outside, the square was full of police. If we stayed inside, we felt like we were going to suffocate. It was a shop with random goods, not even a bakery where we might have found water, just solid items. We were practically collapsing from the tear gas we had taken in. And then some boys said, "We're going out. If they arrest us, they arrest us, better that than suffocating." So we went out.

Then some boys, very mindful, because there were so many girls, many boys, and more mature people too, but mostly youth, one of them said, "If someone lives near the Muhaxher neighborhood, I'm going that way, if any girl is afraid to go alone and has no one to go with, let's go together." I said, "If it's okay for me to come too, that's where my apartment is. I got separated from my friend and sister and I'm scared to go alone." He said, "Come," and added, "Hold onto me, as if we're a couple, and don't look around."

So we walked like that, not looking back to see whether the other demonstrators were coming out or not. Some were going, some police too, you wouldn't believe it, they were stepping on the *plis*<sup>50</sup> on purpose. We walked like that together, he accompanied me all the way to the apartment, and I never learned who he was again. I had remembered his last name for a while, but now I don't. If I had the chance today, I would thank him, his gesture meant so much to me. Because a demonstration wasn't just going, shouting slogans, and leaving. The consequences after the demonstration were very serious, always, as is known.

**Anita Susuri:** And your sister and your friend?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** My sister and my friend had managed to get to Dragodan and then toward the Llapi Mosque and the neighborhoods around there, and only with difficulty to reach the Muhaxher neighborhood. At some point when I arrived, the landlord and his wife had already become worried. They were very, very worried and said, "Should I go out and look for them?" I said, "No, because they'll catch you. They know Pristina, they won't come home without arriving." They eventually came later. And the homeowners were so polite and so thoughtful, they immediately took care to have us change our clothes because they said, "What if they come and notice you, your shoes are muddy. Change these clothes so they don't recognize you."

But even the people in their homes had no way of knowing, there was no way they could arrest all of Pristina, because otherwise they would have had to arrest everyone, there was no other option. And

<sup>50</sup> Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

about the Miners' Strike, the students' strike that we held after the Miners' Strike, the one we held in the 1 Tetori hall, I also have a very interesting case, interesting to me now, because you know... we used to go there, we stayed for a week, and we would only go to the apartment to eat or sometimes honestly just buy bread and eat there, and to change clothes, and then come back and stay there nonstop. And we stayed even at night, we took shifts.

There we also got to meet other students and other people because there were many people, you know. Nearby there were some boys from Suhareka, whom I got to know later. In fact with a small group of them I later became active. Now those boys, you know, when it was said that the strike was ending and we had to leave, you know, everyone had to leave, to empty the hall. We knew that at the main entrance the police were checking. Those boys had a gun with them. Now they asked my sister, "Could you help us with something?" They were near us but we didn't really talk with them except shouting the slogans that everyone called out together.

As you do during a strike. She said, "Okay, let's see," she said, "Since you're girls, maybe they won't check you. We have something with us, can you take it out?" She thought it was propaganda material, maybe a newspaper or something. She said, "Sure, no problem," she didn't know, my sister isn't exactly the cautious type, she didn't realize or think to tell them that we weren't necessarily safe either. They said, "No actually, it's a bit heavier, it's something... a bit more serious. Only if you can, and if you can't, we won't put you at risk. But you go first; if you're willing to help, we'll stay close. If anything happens, we take responsibility."

She told me, "This is what the boys are asking me," I said, "Where are they from?" She said, "From Suhareka," I said, "Alright then." We had gotten somewhat close with them, the way you do with some people, and them with me. She told them eventually, "She's a former political prisoner, what if they catch her?" They said, "No, don't risk it, don't risk it," I said, "No, it's fine, it's not the end of the world. If they check us, we'll slip away through the crowd somehow and we'll manage this..."

**Anita Susuri:** You said that afterward you continued with the People's Movement of Kosovo<sup>51</sup>?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I got involved with the People's Movement through Salih. Because he knew the political prisoners who were part of the movement, he knew the people. And later, after I met Salih, we started our activism in blood reconciliation, in writing about the Republic of Kosovo, and in activities within the Mother Teresa Association<sup>52</sup> whenever there were events, of course I was engaged in those too. Naturally, I would come here to his family very often, even before I was engaged to Salih.

Through the Association of Intellectuals, where Selman was, through the Green Movement, every activity that was connected to this family I was involved in. It's not that the Sanjak of Kosovars

<sup>51</sup> A clandestine Albanian nationalist and political organization established in 1982 by several diaspora-based groups opposed to Yugoslav rule. The LPK played a key role in coordinating underground political activity in Kosovo throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It advocated for the unification of Albanian-inhabited territories and later became one of the main organizational predecessors of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), providing ideological direction, fundraising networks, and political coordination during the armed resistance.

<sup>52</sup> *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.

Association had a clear program to send Albanian students to study in selected places, they had Austria, Turkey, to build ties with the Sanjak.<sup>53</sup> Connections, so to say, somewhat indirect. I was familiar with these activities from early on; whenever I could participate I did, and when I couldn't, I didn't. But either I or Salih or Selman, one of us had to be at the activity, it was impossible otherwise.

I actually entered the first meeting of the movement like that, it was in '91, after Sylë Muja was released from prison. The movement members had sent an invitation to Salih for a meeting. It was the preparatory meeting of the movement's General Council. They had said, "If someone from Rugova can come to represent the area in the meeting, but our preference would be for Sylë Muja to come since he was just released from prison," and also because he was familiar with the political prisoners from Niš, with [Hydajet Hyseni](#) and the others who were imprisoned there.

But communication between Pristina and Peja was very difficult then, or it had to go through a trusted friend. Or through someone's landline phone, with coded numbers. Because you couldn't speak openly. And then Salih had sent one of his cousins, and we in the family have Mustafë Lajçi. In the dorm he called me and said, "Salih sent word that you need to go somewhere," I said, "Where?" He said, "You need to go to Shaban Muja," to Shaip's place, I knew Shaip, because of the student union activities we used to organize.

He said, "At Shaip's house is his brother Shaban, '*Magjup*'<sup>54</sup> [nickname]," you know, honestly he didn't even say Shaban at first, he said, "Go to *Magjup*, Shaip's brother. You'll stay there and wait until someone comes to pick you up," he said, "because originally they wanted Sylë Muja to go, but you'll tell them that the people from Peja told you to come instead of Sylë." I went there, waiting and waiting. It was winter, cold. I think it was January or February. The dates are somewhere, I even found them online once, but now they slip my mind.

Then came Fadil Fazliu, Tahir Gjonbalaj, I already knew them. I had been to Fadil's family several times for the anniversaries of the boys, Fahri and Afrim. I knew Tahir because we had organized, within the framework of the Democratic League, a gathering even there in Plav, and they had been guests in Rugova too, and we held gatherings in Rugova for November 28th. We knew each other, I wasn't afraid that if they found me there they would wonder who I was or what I was doing there.

They came and Fadil said, "Where is Sylë?" I said, "Well, the people from Peja sent word for me to represent Sylë." He said, "Alright, no problem, you're coming with us and we'll go." Fadil, Tahir, Shaban, with the pseudonym *Magjup*, and of course Shaip who already knew I was there. We went to Keqekollë, a village, no, not Keqekollë, Prapashticë. At that meeting, as far as I remember, I was the only woman. You know, I always thought about that, I'd say to myself, if we get caught, I'm the only woman here, you know, that thing you said, all these men, and then me, maybe they'll think I'm the one who exposed everyone. That worried me.

Not the idea of being arrested, I already had experience, and I wasn't worried about that at all. But I would think, if they catch us here, how many documents, how many papers, how many people... So

<sup>53</sup> A historical region in the western Balkans, today divided between Serbia and Montenegro. Its name comes from the Ottoman administrative unit "sanjak." The area has a mixed population, including Bosniaks, Albanians, and Serbs, and was part of the Ottoman Empire until the early 20th century.

<sup>54</sup> *Magjup* is a derogatory term used across various Balkan languages to refer to Roma, Ashkali, or Egyptian communities.

many had just been released from prison, and everything depended on resisting. But the meeting was held. There I saw people I didn't know were in the movement, [Ibish Neziri](#). I knew he had been a political prisoner and had served two political sentences. I knew things about his family too, but I didn't know he was a member. Feriz Hoti too, he was my colleague at the Technical Faculty, I didn't know he was part of the movement.

I knew he was friends with a guy who had offered me the chance to join the movement. But since I was connected through Salih, I had joined through another network. And this Isa Krasniqi who kept asking me to join, I couldn't tell him yes or no. If I said I was already in the movement, I'd expose the network; if I said yes I'd join, I'd be pretending even though I had already joined through a different branch...

**Anita Susuri:** What were your concrete activities now, your work within the People's Movement of Kosovo?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** So to say, our concrete duty was to organize the movement for Peja, the Peja district council. Within that council we would take on tasks based on the flow and dynamics determined by the movement in Pristina. Or by the branch of the movement for Kosovo, or "inside the country" as it was called then. This included establishing the cells, securing the cells, assigning the material. Not only propagandistic material, because propaganda at that time was not completely unavoidable, but you could say that it was not as important as securing, so to speak, the materials that would prepare us for an uprising.

Meaning some bullets, a weapon, at least a revolver, small arms like that. Some dynamite, whatever it might be. Other materials that we, as we planned back then, medical supplies. In case someone was wounded during an action, so that we could give them first aid without having to take them to the hospital and risk exposure. To research people, to identify people who were loyal and ready to act in more serious operations. Because once the Democratic League appeared and all these legal movements that were public came onto the scene, then there was no longer a need to spend time dealing with a movement that the whole of Kosovo was already joining. That work no longer made sense.

For that, we had then organized... Hidajete Krasniqi, who was the main responsible person, and Ibish Neziri, Hidajete was the main one, had organized the meeting of the Peja District Council. We held it in the house of Agim Elshani in Zgjim. There we divided, so to say, the tasks according to the smaller areas. For us specifically, it was me, Salih, and Nezir Nikçi who took responsibility, and also Shkelzen Muriqi, I forgot him. Mustafë Lajçi wasn't at that meeting, but he also had responsibilities for organizing the Rugova District Council.

But beforehand we had talked as former political prisoners and as comrades who were ready to act, to establish a Rugova District Council. Since Rugova is a place with particular geographical characteristics, it borders Montenegro, it is possible to go to Albania through Rugova, it is possible to connect more easily with Montenegro. Through Plavë and Guci also to create connections to Albania, and we had comrades there who were organized. To create those cells, those bases, and to bring in as much as possible some weapons, whatever was possible.

We had established the Rugova District Council, but it wasn't the official district council of the movement for Rugova, you know. Because in that Rugova District Council there were also other

members, these I mentioned were not the only members of the movement. But since it was us, there was Selman, there was Professor Sali Muriqi, whom I mentioned. There were a few of us who had been organized earlier with Salih but who hadn't been imprisoned with the *Pavarësia* [Independence] group.

So it was a bit easier for us. Because we told our members who gave us the main support, and through them we considered that it wasn't very important whether someone said "Are you in the movement or not?" What mattered was whether you intended to carry out this action, whether you could, for example, go to this or that place and carry out this duty. That was the strategy we had planned to implement. Plus we had those comrades outside. Salih, for example, had Ujkan Nikçi, Naser Salihi, and Ibrahim Nikçi, who is now also a martyr of Kosovo. He was actually killed after the war under unclear circumstances. Right after the liberation of Kosovo. But he was a KLA soldier and also a former political prisoner.

So we had connections with them too, and in cooperation with them, and Ujkan, who was organized for the movement abroad, the key organs abroad were very clear with us about the direction they wanted to go. Plus Ali Lajçi had been released from prison, and so had Riza Dema and Sylë Muja. In a way, we had very good opportunities to organize ourselves so that in a certain historical moment we would be ready and know how to take the reins in our hands.

With those of the movement in the Peja district, with Ibish and with Ganimete and with Skender Krasniqi and the others, since I can't remember all the names, we kept constant contact. Meaning the preparation for the war, the war, and after the war, always. While for Pristina, the contact we maintained with the Movement for the Republic of Kosovo was through Ramadan Avdiu. Meaning constantly with them, but through him of course we got to know other people as well. And naturally, once you know someone, you cannot appear under a pseudonym in front of a person who knows you. Regardless of whether they know or don't know that they belong to the inner structure of the movement, you are who you are.

**Anita Susuri:** I had read that your house later served as a base for the formation of the KLA...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. Our house...

**Anita Susuri:** For the Rugova Region.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, our house, Selman's house, since he was older than Salih, so we say Selman's house. It served as a base from the '90s and earlier, when the *Pavarësia* group was formed. But for that part it's up to Salih and Naser and Ujkan and the others to talk. But it was always a base. And since I've known them and since I came here for the first time, like I said, after the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds in Rugova, I always found the house full of people.

Meaning people organized for all kinds of movements. For the Association of Intellectuals, for the Green Movement, for the signatures for the Republic of Kosovo which began in Selman Lajçi's *oda*, for the traditional Rugova games, for this Association of Kosovar Sanjaks. Although that one was mostly my sister and brother, since they were involved in music. They had the possibility to organize those meetings they held with people from Sanjak. Meaning everything, you could say, started in this *oda*.

Now, sometimes people stayed here, sometimes they stayed at Naser Salih's house or at Halil Arifi's, at his father's, who was a great patriot. The other brother too, who died from cancer, who had also been imprisoned in the *Pavarësia* group. Sometimes at Ujkan's family, sometimes at Mustafë Lajçi's family, and the other Mustafë Lajçi. Meaning at Shkelzen Muriqi's family, who was a political prisoner, and so on. But the center of everything, of all centers, was this family.

Actually, sometimes I say that we, Salih and I, really do an injustice to Selman's figure because being afraid that due to closeness, if we talk from that position of being close, we might end up mentioning only Selman, only Selman, so I tried to avoid that and said, "Let others talk." But sometimes you shouldn't be modest, things must be said as they are. And then the Regional Staff of Rugova, the first conversations about the Rugova Regional Staff were held in Selman's house. I was a bride then but I knew the people.

The first meetings with Sylë Muriqi and with the others and with Avdi Halilaj and with this Enver Salih, the brother of Naser, the one who was imprisoned with Salih, were held here in Selman's *oda*. People, in their interviews, have said it too, but it's good to say it even more and explain it. I said it in the book *Leksikoni i Grave*<sup>55</sup> [The Lexicon of Women], maybe modestly, but I was part of this family and I saw these things with my own eyes. So, truly, this house, Selman's house, deserves to be a museum, because in it began many movements, legal and illegal, and the earliest beginnings of the organization of the Kosovo Liberation Army for Rugova.

## Part five

**Anita Susuri:** Then in '97 you said you got married, in '98 the Jashari family was already killed...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** We got married in '96, and in '97 our daughter Uridije was born.

**Anita Susuri:** And in '98 this event had already happened...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did this then affect your movement?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Well, I wasn't a member of the regional staff, that first staff, the first cell of the Rugova organization, even though I knew about it. Because I had Adrian Krasniqi as *tezak*. With Adrian, besides the fact that my sister was a member of the underground group Besa, my sister Begije was organized with them, the group Besa, we met in Pristina. Whenever he went to Albania, back then as an organizer for weapons and whatever else he went for, we would meet after he returned.

But the first serious conversation I ever had with Adrian was when Armend Daci was killed, when his group held a meeting to mark Armend Daci's killing with a demonstration. In the evening they had gathered, Adrian's group with Gëzim Sejdiu, Nysrete Haxhiaj, Alban Neziri, and all of them, we all knew

<sup>55</sup> *Leksikoni i grave i Lëvizjes ilegale për Çlirim (Women's Lexicon of the Illegal Liberation Movement)* is a biographical reference work by Teuta Hadri, documenting women activists involved in the clandestine Albanian liberation movement in Yugoslavia/Kosovo, based on archival research and testimonies.

each other. He came to our apartment and called for me. Someone opened the door and said, “It’s Adrian,” and my sister jumped to go out because they were the same age, same class, and in the same group.

He said, “No, I need Zyrafete,” and called me, “*Tezake*, can you come to the door?” I said, “Alright,” since it was just us. He said, “No, I need to talk to you,” and asked, “Can you connect us with Ali Lajçi?” I said, “Why?” He said something like, “It’s serious now, they killed a student, maybe you heard,” I don’t remember if I had heard or not, I can’t recall. “We intend to make a more radical demonstration. We’re not planning to stand the way we’ve stood until now, but I want the opinion of someone a bit more mature, because I don’t want to take the responsibility. If someone gets killed in the demonstration, they’ll say ‘look what they’re doing’. One person has already been killed, we don’t want another one to die.”

I said, “Tonight, how can we go from Pristina to Peja?” It was impossible. “I can make the connection for you, but not tonight.” He said, “Come with me then, come to the meeting, we have a meeting, and you’ll hear everything we discuss. Tomorrow you can go to Peja and talk to Ali.” I said, “Yes, I’ll come,” and I went. Everyone had their own proposals, but the goal was that Armend Daci’s killing should be marked with a large demonstration and a more radical one, resisting the police forces, to show that enough is enough.

They agreed that the next day each of us would meet different people. I think they mentioned Hydajet Hyseni and someone else, I can’t fully recall. But my task was to go to Peja and meet Ali Lajçi. I don’t know how or why I didn’t go to Peja. I told him, “No, you should go to Peja yourself,” maybe because I felt I wouldn’t present the message clearly enough, I don’t know exactly, I’ve forgotten. I told him, “You should go to Peja yourself, but I don’t think you’ll be able to find Ali,” because he lived in Treboviq and the place was confusing to find, and without a car, with buses, you’d lose the whole day.

I told him, “Go to Salih, to Selman, they live in Vitimiricë near the road and that’s easier.” But even that would have been a waste of time. He wanted to come, talk to someone, take advice, and return. So I said, “I’ll call Salih.” I called on their home phone and said, “My *tezak* needs to talk to you,” and he understood immediately who I meant. He said, “I can’t go out, but Selman will go and meet him.”

Selman went, waited for him at the bus station, took him to Ali Lajçi in Treboviq. They talked and discussed, whatever they talked about is probably written somewhere in Adrian’s books. And that demonstration was held. After that, Adrian and Salih became even more connected, much more than with me. They met more often. Once Adrian had openly told him, “Let us use the house in Rugova.” Salih asked, jokingly, “Why, what do you need it for?” Adrian said, “I need it, don’t ask, just give me the keys.” He came and took the keys.

He thought of our uncles as his uncles too, he considered both sides’ uncles as his own. He said, “I’m going to stay at the uncles’ in Bralaj, they’re not resting, something’s going on.” Salih understood and said, “Of course, no problem,” and gave him the keys. Adrian went with a friend into the mountains, to Bralaj where our uncles lived, and supplied himself exactly with whatever he intended to take. Then he brought it back and left it in our house. This ties back to what you asked earlier about the UÇK in 1998. What I wanted to say is that my beginnings were slightly before 1998, through Adrian.

And of course Adrian's killing, it affected us deeply. He was the first soldier killed in uniform. The grief we experienced was immense, both because of the family bond (cries) and because of the friendship we had with him. It struck Salih very deeply. And we also had ties with the Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo,<sup>56</sup> with Bahri Fazliu. When Adrian was killed, Bahri passed through the Dukagjini zone in an organized manner.

Our help was essential for him to pass through that zone connected to Albania. We had the connection with Tahir Gjonbalaj. I had been once in Albania with Tahir and one of his relatives from Tropoja, Rexhë Dollapi. I knew the route. But going twice in a row to a border zone was difficult, and I was married with a small child by then. It was impossible for a woman with a small child to cross the border through the mountains again. But it was possible to create the connection.

Through Bahri, through Salih, through Tahir. We heard from a boy from the LKÇK that Bahri was in the Dukagjini zone, specifically in Broliq, hosted by the Lulaj family. And here I'll mention an incident related to the LKÇK. As I was going to meet Bahri, since I was part of Bahri's three-person cell... I knew some of his comrades but with pseudonyms, I didn't know who they were. But I was at his family's home several times, and I knew his sister who stayed in illegality with him. But in person, face-to-face, I only had the right to meet Bahri.

While I was on my way, Ragip Lulaj, also organized in LKÇK, happened to be there. When we passed through Taslixhe, at the end of Velania, the road that leads toward the park, I usually went up a small path to meet Bahri. I don't know if Ragip had met Bahri before or someone else from the movement. He was coming back along that road. He saw me, and I saw him. It wasn't a place where it made sense for either of us to be. It wasn't a residential area, nor a place where we held lectures in houses.

He was looking at me from afar and thinking, he later told me this, whether to greet me or not. He was coming back from an underground meeting, I was on my way to another underground meeting... should he greet me or not, even though we knew each other. I thought, of course I'll greet him, it would've been worse not to. "What's up, Ragip? You good?" "And you?" "Where are you coming from?" "Oh, just over to a friend's place," "Same, I was just heading to see a friend." At some point he went his way, and Salih would wait for me farther down because it was dangerous, I could get arrested or something, at least to know what was happening.

Now he went further up and meets Salih, and they laugh. He says, "How did we become strangers to people we know? We spend all day together," and we would go out to those student gatherings in Kodër i Trimave, in Kodër i Diellit. I don't know if anyone explained it to you. There were meetings every night. The main promenade was closed, the promenade downtown, so the students' walk took place in Bregu i Diellit. We'd start at Qerimi's Bakery and walk all the way around to the buildings where Bahri and Fahri lived. Then we'd turn back the same way until Qerimi's again, a whole walking route. But really it was meant for meeting. It was about movement. Simply, that was the character of the student movement, to keep moving, not to stand still.

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<sup>56</sup> Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo: Albanian *Lëvizja Kombëtare për Çlirimin e Kosovës* (LKÇK), a clandestine nationalist organization that emerged in the early 1990s as a radical offshoot of the People's Movement of Kosovo. It advocated armed struggle for Kosovo's independence and later continued as a small extra-parliamentary party, associated with figures such as Bahri Fazliu and Fatmir Humolli.

Now he would say, “We go out together every night to these evening meetings, and now you act like you don’t know me,” and we’d laugh like that with Ragip Luli. So, since I mentioned it now, when it came time to go out for the KLA, this is where it connects, when Ragip had sent word to Salih, “Come, I have that friend here.” We knew who it was, it was Bahri. Salih went and met Bahri there. This part really belongs to Salih to explain, but since it came up, I’ll mention it. They talked about how to get across the border.

Salih said, “I’ve never crossed the border on this side,” the part we called ‘the wolf’s crossing,’ the way out toward Plav and Gusinje. He said, “Zyrafete used to do it, but now he has a young daughter, it’s out of the question for him. But I can send word to Tahir, and I can organize it.” So the organizing continued. The part about how it continued through these boys, I don’t know well. Not long after, Bahri was killed.

Now, with those two losses, Adrian and Bahri... for both of them, in Adrian’s case, he was my cousin, so of course it hurt, even from the family side. But for Salih, it hit him very hard as a friend and as a young man. Adrian was the first killed in a KLA uniform, that alone was heartbreaking. And when Bahri was killed, there was no stopping him anymore. He said, “I’m going to go openly, that’s it...” only the uniforms hadn’t arrived yet and all that. “But everyone I trust and know, I’m going to tell them that the day we meet in Rugova, we’ll set up the organization openly.”

So we went out in ’98, toward the end of May, you know, the way they contacted people with Selman and found who to reach... they had set up some bases here in Fushë e Pejës with some people they knew, the family of Ibrahim Nikçi that I mentioned earlier, and some others. That part belongs more to Salih to explain, since I wasn’t there and didn’t know them well, it’s not for me to detail. But we had decided to go to Rugova. So me, Salih, and one of his nephews, I don’t know if he was a student then or still in school, and someone else from his group who used to move around... you know, sometimes up in Rugova, sometimes in the lowlands.

We had decided to go to Rugova to “open the door,” to say: here is the house of so-and-so who is taking on this work. Salih had also contacted Ramush, you know, and we had, so to say, the exact and reliable guidelines for how to begin. We settled in the house there. Then Besnik Lajçi and the first early organizers began working openly. In Rugova, if you had a gun and walked out into the meadow, even though the uniforms hadn’t arrived yet, you were considered part of it.

So the door was open every day for anyone who wanted to join under the emblem of the KLA. If you even had a hat with the emblem, or simply the emblem itself on civilian clothes, even without a uniform, you counted as organized in the KLA. That’s how it went at the end of May, and early June Selman came up with his family. He had an elderly mother, 82 years old, so he couldn’t leave until he got her out safely, she had trouble walking. It had to be arranged carefully, with police checkpoints and everything, to get out by car.

When Selman came up, Ujkan also arrived from Germany, Ujkan Nikçi, and then the KLA became openly active in Rugova. But it still didn’t have a brigade name at that point. It was organized as the Rugova Regional Staff. Then they went for the first weapons, the second weapons, that’s how we called them: the first batch, second batch, third batch. Later, when the brigade was formed in November, Salih had already been wounded. He spent a month and something in the Military Hospital in Albania. After that he returned wounded.

Then came the reorganization after the Holbrooke peace<sup>57</sup>, the so-called Holbrooke peace, and that's when Brigade 136 Rugova was formed. From there the military structure continued with battalions and units, as an army should be organized. In that part of the organization I wasn't structurally involved. Of course, I helped, Selman was the brigade spokesperson, and Salih, even though he was commander, would sometimes come to the house since we were in the free zone. The army stayed in the barracks, but there were units posted at all the points to defend the area.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Anita Susuri:** You were telling us about the beginnings of the war in '93...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes. As for the organization of the war by the Gjakova regional headquarters, apart from the help that every woman gave, just like I did, I wasn't directly involved in the structures of the KLA, nor did I go out, for example, to the front like some women did. But I helped as much as I could from home. Because, as I said before, our house was pretty much a kind of headquarters.

During the periods when there were many refugees passing through Rugova from dangerous areas, from Dukagjini and other regions, and from Peja, all the women of our village and all of Rugova tried day and night to provide them with at least the basic conditions while they were in Rugova. From Rugova they would move on to other areas in Albania or Montenegro, wherever they were headed. My daughter, Uridije, was still very young. My son, Driton, wasn't born yet, he was born later, on October 6, in the fall.

I helped as much as I could at that level, just like my sister-in-law helped, for example, my sisters-in-law, actually, and my mother-in-law. It's not that I was specifically engaged in anything beyond that. It's true that I took care of every document that either Selman or Salih or their friends brought. For every written note they had, for the registers they kept of the soldiers, I took care of them until the offensive. During the offensive, when we managed to get out and take the children, all the documents were left behind and were either burned or taken when the Serbian army entered, we don't know what happened to them.

**Anita Susuri:** The offensive was in April?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The offensive was in April. In Rugova it began at the beginning of April, first with shelling in several villages. But the heavy fighting took place on April 18 in Qafa e Hajlës. That was the first attempt by Serbian army forces to come through Qafa e Hajlës, and the first time they were pushed back by the KLA. And on April 19, when fierce battles were fought and Selman was killed, as well as Besnik Lajçi, Ramush Lajçi, Xhavit Lajçi, and the other martyrs of that battle. They entered through the Rugova Gorge, and they also entered through Qafa e Qyqes.

From all sides, from every point where it was geographically possible to enter. Since it's a mountainous area, it's difficult for enemy infantry to enter on foot, but they managed to get into Rugova. The

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<sup>57</sup> Holbrooke's "peace" refers to the temporary ceasefire agreement negotiated in October 1998 between U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. The deal required Serbian forces to reduce their presence in Kosovo and allowed for limited OSCE verification missions. Although it briefly slowed the escalation of violence, the agreement ultimately failed to prevent further repression and did not stop the conflict from intensifying, leading to NATO's intervention in 1999.

resistance was quite strong, but the balance of forces was very unequal, and it was impossible to hold the front without it breaking. Another factor that influenced how the resistance in Rugova unfolded were the wounded fighters from the Dukagjini zone who had been brought to Rugova.

Inside the free territory, “free” in the sense that it was protected by the Kosovo Liberation Army, and with the responsibility to protect the wounded KLA soldiers, the decision had to be made to send the wounded fighters to Albania. There were few soldiers, some of them had to take care of the civilian population, others had to escort the wounded. Because of this, the territory as a free zone fell. Not the entire territory, only part of it, but we, the civilians who were there, were forced to leave.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you leave?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** On the day of April 18.

**Anita Susuri:** ‘99.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** ‘99, when the assault began toward Qafa e Hajlës and Xhavit Lajçi was wounded. In our family we found out that Xhavit had been wounded, and later, when the soldiers came out of the headquarters to take him and send him for further medical treatment somewhere in Montenegro, because reaching Albania was impossible through the mountains and snow, there were also some doctors from Peja who happened to be there. They confirmed that his wound, under those wartime conditions, couldn’t be treated there, and they sent Xhavit that night.

We were at home, and we had other relatives from the extended family who had arrived in the last days, after Peja began to empty out following the NATO attacks. The next day there were battles all day long at Qafa e Hajlës. Selman was at home that night, after they escorted Xhavit. In the morning, he went out with Adnan and some other friends to the front. Because the front line from where we were staying... we were staying in a house, not even our own house, because the area up there was very wild and mountainous, and it was impossible to stay there in winter conditions. We had moved down into a valley, to the house of Dritan Lajçi’s brother, this Dritan Lajçi who is a lawyer.

We stayed there, and that night after escorting Xhavit, Selman had been there. Early in the morning they went to the unit of the village of Pepaj to see how the fighting had gone the day before. Meanwhile, Salih also went out with Besnik and the other soldiers. The fighting that took place there was more than an hour’s walk, in summer, on foot, far from the houses where we were. We could hear everything and knew clearly there had been fighting all day.

But Besnik was killed very early in the morning, and Ramush was killed a bit later. We learned the news, word reached the village that the two of them had been killed. But until the evening we didn’t know how the battle had unfolded, no other news came. The others, our cousins and all of us relatives who were there, were mostly women with children because all the men were on the front line. In the evening, Salih came with a friend of his, Avdi Lajçi, and said that he hadn’t seen what happened because he had been separated from Selman during the fighting

He hadn’t seen Selman being killed, but after returning from a point where he had been watching to see whether Serbian forces were entering from a place we call Hajla e Vranovcit, someone told him that the group trying to pull Ramush back had included Selman. They had all returned, except Selman. At that moment we understood that he might have been killed. Salih, you know, was upset and

exhausted from the fighting, from walking through snow all day, and from the enormous responsibility of not letting enemy forces break through.

He came inside, and he told his mother... first we expressed condolences for Besnik and Ramush and the others we already knew were killed. Then he said, "According to what the soldiers told me when they arrived, Selman is also killed." But he warned us not to cry. It was a very, very difficult moment (cries). His mother told him, "Death is for men," I've forgotten her exact words, but he, as exhausted as he was, leaning against something like this {leans back}, upset but holding himself together, he lifted his head slightly, and fell asleep.

Maybe a minute passed, and they came calling for him: "They're calling you up at Sylë's house," at the house of Besnik Lajçi, "because people from the headquarters have arrived and you need to see what to do, since Serbian forces have moved toward another village and we need to know how to act with the civilian population." He left. I walked him to the door. I asked, "What should we do?" You know, "What should we do now, what's the fate of the family?" Somehow, trusting him... because his sister, his wife, the children, the elderly mother, they were all there. And his mother was such a strong woman, she didn't show any sign of breaking down, she held herself together completely. But from holding everything in like that, she did fall ill and passed away shortly after the war.

I asked him again, "What should we do?" He said, "Do what the whole village is doing, stay in the house." But "stay in the house" was nearly impossible because the situation kept changing, not how you planned or wished. We spent the whole night baking bread, saying, "The soldiers will come and they'll have nothing to eat." We were distraught, may that night never be forgotten. We also had our nieces there, the daughters of the fallen soldier Sokol Nikçi. We would go out two by two up to the hill to look and see if Selman was coming (cries).

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

Now, we cried the whole day for Besnik because we were also close to his family. His immediate family wasn't actually in Rugova, but he had some uncles and their wives there. We went to offer our condolences to them, then we returned. When we came back home, my mother couldn't go out, because as I told you, she had some difficulty walking. We sat down next to her, she always liked when we came back from somewhere to sit close to her and tell her everything.

She said, "Were they upset about Besnik?" She was upset too because she felt for them, like they were her own sons. We were telling her this and that, and then the daughters-in-law of Drita Lajçi, the ones I mentioned, came. They came to offer condolences to us now, for Selman. But they saw that we didn't know. Because we hadn't heard anything about Selman. They stayed a little while, stood up. Drank a coffee, then left. We were like, "Why were they looking at us so strangely?" They all knew, and felt uncomfortable seeing that we didn't. And we spent the whole conversation talking about how Besnik was killed, how Ramush was killed.

Right when it was found out that Besnik was killed, somehow your sense of where family was, whether in Pristina or somewhere else, got lost. We didn't know because maybe he knew. We just couldn't accept it. Personally, I couldn't accept that Besnik had really been killed. Now the day passed, night fell, and we waited for the boys to come, the younger ones. The younger ones from the village or our

nephews, no one was coming. Only when the night had really fallen did Salih arrive with that Avdi who told us. Then all night until morning, after Salih left, we kept hoping that Selman would return.

Selman's sister, who was also my sister-in-law, his wife, they had baked two big round loaves of bread. She baked the bread and set it there. They were saying, "Even if we leave," because as Salih said, "If the village leaves, you leave too," they were saying, "The soldiers will come and at least there will be bread for them." The children eventually fell asleep. That boy, the oldest one was in Albania, Selman's second son, Arbër, no one could comfort him. He just couldn't be comforted.

He had put on the KLA clothes and now he kept saying, "I'm not taking them off." He was 14 years old, but we had plenty of weapons for women and children and... he had an automatic rifle, and he held it like this in his hands. And before Salih went up there, Selman's wife, Nexhmije, said to him, "Talk to Arbër, because he doesn't want to take off the uniform." Salih maybe couldn't tell him anything... he didn't say anything. The whole next day, until we left for Albania, he didn't take off that uniform. He was 14. But he felt like he was the one responsible for us.

Now, like I was saying earlier, the whole night we went out two by two up to the hill to check if Selman was coming back. Because we got word from a soldier who said, "They've started pulling back toward Drelaj." We kept saying, "If he's alive, he won't leave us, either he'll send word or he'll find a way to come." And we'd say, "Maybe we'll hear him somewhere on the hills calling. Let's at least be outside to hear so we can go help him." Morning came like that, none of us having had a second of sleep, all of us devastated. We felt especially bad for Grandma, for his mother. But it was impossible to hide that pain inside ourselves.

When morning came, some men from the village arrived, Shaban Balia and, I'm forgetting now who else, and said, "The village has decided to move to the cave." There's a cave at the edge of the village on the way toward Hajla, in that place... it's not really much of a cave, but a rock formation where you can shelter. And they said, "You should come with us." Now how were we supposed to leave? We had our elderly mother, and we couldn't leave her behind. So we decided not to go. It was a kind of family stance, that we wouldn't abandon the house.

The Jashari family was an example, a very big example for us, to stay in place until the very last child and not abandon our home. But they came two or three times, those men from the village, and said, "Everyone is leaving, don't be the reason the village stays behind and ends up trapped because you didn't go." Then one of our nephews, Rafet, came. He had gone to evacuate his own family from a very distant place. When he heard the offensive had begun, he hadn't gone to get his own parents yet, but when he heard that now the whole village needed to retreat and so on.

She said, "The whole village is saying we have to leave, so you have to leave as well." Selman's wife and Selman's sister were saying, "No, we don't want to leave. We won't leave until Selman comes back." He said, "No, you have to leave." Then we started worrying about what to do with grandmother, how we could take her. He said, "Either we find a horse, or I'll carry her on my back." Someone from the village brought a horse, and he took grandmother. I had my two small children, those nieces, all the kids. The oldest among us must have been maybe 17-18 years old, boy or girl. The boys were young, those two boys who stayed with us were around 14. The girls were a bit older.

We went to the cave, and then I said goodbye to Nexhmije and she told me, “Go on, we’ll bring you bread. I’m not leaving the house until I hear what happened to Selman.” We went and stayed the whole day in that cave. I was having such a hard time because in a way it was already known that Selman wasn’t alive anymore, but I found it so difficult because of my mother-in-law (cries), so hard to present myself as if everything was going fine. She would ask me sometimes, because my son was small, you know, wrapped in diapers. The girls had taken my daughter with them.

She would say, “How is that boy? He’s going to freeze.” I would say, “He’s fine,” and turn my head away. “Did you hear anything else? Where are they, where is Selman? Where is Salih?” I had no way of telling her, you know, it was hard for me to hide it. It was harder for me in front of her than in front of anyone else, harder than all the other difficulties we had, and everything was difficult. We stayed there in the cave the whole day. In the evening some men from the village went again and told those two, “Either you leave or you’ll put us all in danger.” In some way, they convinced them.

They even told them, “We’ll take the satellite phone, call Salih, and if Salih says to leave, then leave.” What was said after that, I don’t know exactly. My sister-in-law tells this part much better. Whether Salih told them, “Leave, don’t endanger the whole village, you can’t let something happen to someone because of you,” I don’t know exactly how it went, but they did end up leaving too. They went to a house in another village over there, the village of Kushtan, the one I’m from. They stayed there until morning to see what would happen the next day.

That night NATO was shelling, you’d have said the cave itself was about to split open from how loud those powerful detonations were. They were, of course, shelling the positions of the Serbian forces that were in the Rugova Gorge and wherever the Serbian forces were, but it could be heard so much, the whole gorge was shaking. Now, in the evening two of my cousins came, of course armed, members of the unit there, and they said that a cousin of mine, Selez, who is now a very well-known *lahuta* player, had sent them. He had told them, “Whoever goes out and goes to get Sali Lajçi’s children and doesn’t let them freeze in the cave.”

They came, those two, Zef Shabani and that Pajazit, I’m not sure which one it was. They said, “We were told to come and take the children.” I said, “No, I can’t leave my mother, how can I leave an old woman?” “Here are the middle daughters, and here are the two boys,” fourteen years old, one was Selman’s son and the other was my nephew’s son, “they have to go there no matter what.” I said, “Mother, this is what they’re telling me.” “Oh,” she said, “go, because we’ve been waiting so long to see that boy, and at least let this one not freeze.” Because it was extremely cold there, after all, it was a cave. They would light some fires, a small bit of fire at the entrance of the cave and a small bit at the back. No one had any chance of actually feeling warm in there.

I went with them that night, and the next day it started snowing. Oh, the snow... The layer of snow would build up, and the boy I was carrying in my arms like this would get a layer of snow about this thick on him {shows with hands about 10 cm}. It seems his clothes got wet. Even though he was a healthy child, six months old, no issues... he caught a cold. The next day they told us to go toward Rozhaja. We walked the entire day through the mountains, through the snow, uphill. Walking was much harder, you know, because of the snow and who knows what else.

There were also these two women, one of them had had her son killed, and the other her husband and mother-in-law. Even so, they took great care of Salih’s mother, the grandmother, the mother-in-law.

They put their own grief aside, as they say. We stayed there only a little, just long enough to change our socks, and they offered us some bread, I don't remember exactly. They welcomed us as best as they could, but we weren't planning to stay. From there we had to go on to Rozhaja, to the mosque where everyone was, where all the refugees went. I had uncles in Bralaj, but it wasn't possible anymore to go to them, because they themselves were being monitored.

We went, you know, on foot on the road toward Rozhaja. A man from our village came and said, "These women with children and these here," meaning the ones who had someone killed, "we'll take two or three families who have the dead, to go with a vehicle, with a van, to Rozhaja." We got in there, squeezed in however we could. At the exit of the village, the Yugoslav army stopped us. Now this nephew, the one who had carried his grandmother on his back, you could say, he was holding Selman's little boy in his arms. But he also had a weapon with him. So, to avoid being caught with a weapon, while holding the child, he went into the woods, you know, to get rid of the weapons. We were waiting, thinking they would kill him. We were terrified, worried whether he and the little boy would make it out alive.

But this Yugoslav army, they weren't the kind of units that would kill you the moment they caught you. They would simply stop you, identify you, and as civilians they would let you go. So once we passed that checkpoint, he somehow made his way through the woods and came back out onto the road again, they didn't see him, and our hearts finally settled back into place. Now, as soon as we passed them, there was another police checkpoint. They had stopped a KLA soldier. He had a phone number... those satellite numbers had 15 digits, or more than 15, I don't remember exactly now, but they had many digits.

He had a satellite number, a military one, with him. They were questioning him about that satellite number, and he was trying to tell them that it belonged to someone in his family. Anyway, they had stopped him, but they let us go. They stopped a couple more people there, two or three, at that checkpoint. But they let us through. When we finally reached Rozhaja... we rested for a while at the home of a Bosniak family who offered us some temporary shelter. Then we stayed in the mosque for about four days. The rest of my family arrived later, my uncle's son who had been staying with my uncles there.

He was very upset too. He wanted to take us with him, but they were also planning to leave from there themselves, so there was no way for him to take us. I was very determined not to separate from the civilian population, wherever the majority of the people went, we would go too. Then they said the buses were ready to take us to Albania. From the mosque there, in miserable conditions, like in a mosque. You may have seen the footage somewhere of what the conditions were like in the mosque in Rozhaja. There we eventually learned that Xhavit, who had been wounded, hadn't died on the spot. We learned there that he had died in the hospital. His family was heartbroken, and all of us who knew him were too. One sorrow after another.

Then on the way, as we were going, we heard again that they had started taking the prisoners toward Albania through the mountains here, through what they call Hani i Magjupit, those high mountains on this side. Through the Accursed Mountains, that route, the weapons trail. And some soldiers were killed there as well. Now among us someone had lost a son-in-law, someone else had lost two brothers, someone had had a relative killed on the front. There was this kind of stress, this kind of

grief, but what could you do. With all these children and the elderly, just as we were, that's how we arrived in Albania.

We didn't want to settle in Shkodër where everyone else was being placed, around Hani i Hotit there. But Salih's sister, who was in Albania with one of his uncles, Shaban Shkreli, he's a pilot, came and took us from the border and brought us to Kruja. Then came that whole period in Kruja. Selman was buried in Rugova. We knew that Salih had remained in Rugova with a very small group of soldiers, but wounded, he still had untreated wounds. Great sorrow, that's all I can say. There, the people of Albania received us... there was no better way they could have received us.

Meaning, we stayed with Sahat Kacanja, a man, a family from Albania, he has passed away now. But we are always grateful to his family. We didn't have many chances to see them during the war, his son visited their family once, and we have communicated from time to time. But they welcomed us extremely, extremely well. I've often thought that if we had ever been given the chance to help them, would we have been able to welcome them the way they welcomed us? We stayed there until Kosovo was liberated. Then we returned.

Meaning, we didn't really have much possibility to follow the news, because even we in Rugova, in the family there, didn't have anything except one radio where we would sometimes listen to Kosova e Lirë,<sup>58</sup> but you had to go somewhere far away to a place where there was reception. Or when the ones from the headquarters would come and tell us things sometimes. But it's not like we were very well informed about what was happening. I didn't know a single word about my own family. That sister of mine who's in Switzerland, when her husband would sometimes speak with Salih, through the ones abroad I knew that *they* were outside, so I wasn't worried about them.

But my mother and my sister, who were here in the war zone, and my two older sisters with their families, who were also in war zones, I didn't know anything about them. Sometimes we would hear all kinds of things happening, about rapes and all those other things. The atmosphere inside yourself was so dark, and spiritually you were constantly weighed down. But once we got to Albania, it became a bit easier to get information, and eventually we learned that the agreement for the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo had been signed, and we decided to return.

## Part six

**Anita Susuri:** How did you then find your way back home? How did you reunite with your husband?

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** The day I saw Salih for the first time after the war, after we reunited, we heard that the house of his nephews, his younger sister Pemba's sons, hadn't been burned. We went there first. Salih had already heard that I'd come, so he came there too. It was very emotional when we met. First of all (cries), he just said, "Rest a bit, drink a glass of water, we need to go home." Go home where?

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<sup>58</sup> Radio Kosova e Lirë (Free Kosovo Radio) was an underground Albanian-language radio station that operated during the Kosovo War. Established in 1998, it broadcast information and statements from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and served as an alternative media source for civilians at a time when independent reporting was heavily restricted by Serbian authorities. Because of signal limitations and frequent attempts to block its transmission, listeners often had to reach specific locations to catch the broadcast.

The house was leveled to the ground. But it wasn't just that the house had burned, everything we had was gone: memories, documents, books, life in general had been turned into rubble. But the intention was for us to return to our home.

We had a walnut tree in the yard. The ruins of the house were still there, of course, the walls had remained, and part of the storage room hadn't burned. The library room we had, filled with books, all the books had burned, and the wooden floor had burned too, but only halfway through. One part of the floorboards had somehow remained. We said, "These, these are what we have left." They brought us a tent, the kind they used to bring as aid during the war. We put the tent in the yard, right there, and that's where we received people for Selman's condolence visits.<sup>59</sup> We didn't hold the condolence visit itself, but people kept coming to offer their condolences. They came for almost a year, without stopping.

In those half-burned rooms, all black from the smoke, we tried to clean them but they wouldn't come clean at all, the soot just wouldn't wash off. In that part of the storage room... someone from the family or from the community, whoever had maybe a bit more means than we did, because we had been displaced from here to Rugova, and here everything was leveled to the ground, and in Rugova everything we had was also leveled to the ground. In Albania we had only the children's clothes with us; nothing else. Someone gave us a mattress, someone gave us something else, life started again from the beginning. That's how it was.

Then the first roof that was put up in Peja, it must have been installed for someone through international aid, was the roof of our house, in honor of Selman's name. They put it on symbolically, like that. That's how life slowly began again. But then the mother got sick, for about six months she was ill with cancer. She fell sick, truly, because she had held herself together until the reburial. The reburial of the martyrs was done... meaning they were killed on April 19th, and the reburial took place on August 29th. How long is that? April, May, June, July, August, about four months, roughly.

She had told Salih, "I will go to the reburial only on one condition, only if they open Selman's coffin so I can see him," and he gave her his word, saying, "They will open it for you." When we approached there, you know, they opened it a little for her. But what is there to see... a person at a reburial. It seems she was very distressed. The next day she said (cries)... once I saw how upset she was, she said, "I'm a mother too," you know, because she had held herself together and kept holding on. Even when someone else would get upset in front of her, she would say, "Aren't you ashamed in front of me?" She had this old way of speaking, in Gheg, she would say, "You should feel ashamed in front of me, I'm a mother."

But she was distressed there, and it seems that holding everything in, keeping it inside herself, she couldn't endure it anymore. After my mother passed away, life continued somehow. We tried. Little by little, slowly. The family grew. My first child, my son Uran, was born after the war, and then my daughter. That's how it went...

**Anita Susuri:** Did you also finish university afterward?

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<sup>59</sup> A customary Albanian mourning practice in which community members visit the bereaved family to offer condolences after a death.

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Yes, I finished university afterward. During the war Selman would always bring me books. He had a brother-in-law in Shkrel who had books, and another one in Drelaj. My family had been displaced to my maternal uncle's family for a while, and my mother and sister had returned. Since they were near Kushtan, I had them close by, not far. But it wasn't like we had books. He would say, "Study, because you have an exam." I would say, "Oh Selman, who studies now, what exam?" He would say, "Study, study, the war will end; you have to finish university."

He would sometimes make me read. But I would say, when he went somewhere, I would say to Nexhmie, "What studying, what studying, let the war end first. There's time, I'll study after the war." But honestly, sometimes he was a motivation for me, even just for his sake, because during the war he cared about finding me books so I could study, you know, read and finish things. After the war, Zymer Neziri helped me a lot with literature. He brought me all the books I needed from Pristina and wherever else he had them. For my thesis, everything I needed in terms of literature, he provided.

I didn't take long to finish university. Then I got the opportunity to work immediately after the war. Salih had been a teacher before going to war. He worked as a mechanical engineering teacher at the Technical School. From there he left his gradebook and picked up a weapon. When the war ended, his colleagues urged him to return. They told him, "Come back, come back, it would be an honor for us to have you come from the front, from the mountains," that's how they expressed it then. But he said, "No, I started with the army now, I want to stay in the TMK<sup>60</sup>." He got organized through the TMK, and he stayed there for ten years until early retirement, the way they all retired back then.

Later on, after the TMK period, he continued again at the Technical School, but I want to talk about that one year after the war. At some point they had told him, "If your wife has her diploma, she can freely come, for the sake of the fact that you left this school and took up a weapon." Back then, right after the war, I'm not even sure how things worked, because there were no job postings, I don't really know. But the main thing is that I went and worked there at the Technical School for a year.

So, of course, once I entered the system, I had the opportunity to work. I worked there for only one year, and later I worked with ninth-grade classes here at the Economics School, it's close to me. And since then, I've been here, meaning, I work here with high school students in a vocational school. I teach the subject of Albanian language; maybe I mentioned it at the beginning of the interview, I'm not sure if I did.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Zyrafete, I would like to thank you! If you don't have anything else to add at the end...

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** I think I forgot a detail, not exactly a small one, but an aspect of the activism that I believe deserves to be mentioned, from the 1990s. Now, within the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds movement, I tried to summarize it briefly, but I want to say that within that Rugova branch it's not that I was some distinguished figure. I was there, so to say, to support the movement and to contribute to the fact that women, and especially former political prisoners, were also giving their contribution to this.

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<sup>60</sup> The Kosovo Protection Corps (TMK) was a civilian emergency response organization established in 1999 under UN administration, composed largely of former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. It was tasked with humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and civil protection until its disbandment in 2009, when it was succeeded by the Kosovo Security Force.

Actually, much later I read something I had written somewhere, where I had quoted what Salih said in the *oda* there: “We, together with our sisters,” not all the sisters were there because some of us had gotten married by then, but anyway (laughs), “we’ve stood together in front of tanks, in front of judges, in front of prosecutors; and with them, until the freedom of Kosovo, we will remain together like this. In the *oda*, in gatherings, wherever the work takes us.” But what I want to say here is that Zymer Neziri was there before him, and honestly, when we young ones were addressed, even me, to tell the truth, if they asked me to speak, I would feel embarrassed, I’d hesitate. Because I would think, how can I speak in front of a person who is invited there precisely for that purpose?

One aspect I didn’t mention is this one, which we might call an action for collecting signatures for the Republic of Kosovo, maybe I can call it an action. They had decided, Salih, Selman, Zymer Neziri... I found out later, or Salih came the next day to get me, I don’t remember exactly how it happened, I’ve forgotten. He said, no, we were supposed to go out; it was the commemoration of Rugova’s education anniversary on May 20th in Haxhaj. At these public gatherings we would go out. I would go with my brother and sister, with my sisters, with my cousins, we would all go.

They had their artistic segment where they were scheduled to sing and play the *fyell*, and my sister with the *çifteli*, and so on, so we would take part. Now, if an event happened in Rugova and you considered yourself an activist but didn’t show up, it wouldn’t have been normal. So on the way there, we met Salih. I think maybe I had gone home, I’m not too sure about this part, it has faded, I don’t remember it clearly. He said, “We’re going to read a request for the Republic of Kosovo, we’ve decided.” “Where?” “At the gathering.” I said, “Alright, fine, I’ll read it.”

In terms of friendship with Salih, I never talked back to him. He jokes now saying, “Now the boss is acting important.” But as activists, whatever Salih said was law to me. “Go to Switzerland for weapons,” I went. His word was law. “Go to Albania to scout the terrain to bring weapons,” I went. I didn’t even hesitate, not for a moment. Even though, with today’s mindset, I would never have gone. To go without my family knowing, through such harsh terrain, through the mountains, across borders guarded by the Yugoslav army, never would I have gone. You know, that’s what I mean in that sense.

Back then I was young, and both he and I were activists, why wouldn’t I go? I was very determined; I didn’t see why a girl shouldn’t act the same as a man. But today I don’t think that way anymore; things are a bit more divided now, you know. So when he said we should read that statement, I said, “Alright, I’ll read it.” But we didn’t really plan out who would read it or how. He said... not at the end of the gathering and not at the beginning either. So the gathering was held, the usual speeches were given about the anniversary, Rugova’s education, its importance, and so on. This event is marked every year.

Since the anniversary really was very important, it was an important anniversary. It was an area where they didn’t want to keep the schools open because of the overall conditions. And because of the pressure from the authorities, but also due to other conditions, geographical and weather-related, since the winters were difficult back then and everything else. So the gathering was held, and it seems to me, if I haven’t forgotten, that Isa Nikçi was supposed to read that letter. That circular letter, as they had called it. In fact, I think Isa himself had given it, Isa Nikçi was the chairman of the Democratic League of Rugova at that time. A former political prisoner.

The gathering finished, and now the person leading the event wanted to close it. Salih, a bit, you know, got upset inside, how could he close the gathering. But when it came to writing it down, Selman told

me, “Write it yourself because Salih has bad handwriting. At least whoever reads it should be able to read it.” I wrote it in my own handwriting, but we hadn’t discussed who would read it. Now he wanted to close the event, saying, “See you at the next gathering,” and so on.

Salih walked out of the gathering *tap, tap, tap* {onomatopoeia} and said, “Excuse me, we have one more matter,” he said, “from this gathering we will submit a request to the Assembly of Kosovo to make public the request for the Republic of Kosovo,” just like that, with those words. He said, “The request will be read by Zyrafete Muriqi.” Now, I already had it written because I was the one holding that letter. I went up. I waited a bit, checking to see if maybe Isa or someone else would read it. But when he called my name clearly, I stepped forward. I read it. There was applause because people somehow felt happy.

The demand “Kosovo Republic” was now being stated openly, there were no more barriers. Immediately they put out some blank sheets of paper, and people began signing. But then the issue was, after it was signed and made in an open gathering, what to do with that request. It was signed, so what now? Leave it in an archive? No, send it to the Assembly of Kosovo. Anyway, we addressed it to the Assembly of Kosovo. Whether to send it or have the media read it, there was the question. We decided: in the media, yes of course, but definitely to the Assembly.

We put it in an envelope, photocopied it, added the signatures at the bottom, and decided to take it to Pristina the next day. So I, Salih, and Naser Salih went and delivered it to the Assembly of Kosovo. But we wanted to know if we had someone trustworthy who could actually tell us whether they were registering it. Because you could deliver it and they could tear it up and throw it in the trash. So we needed someone inside the Assembly who was patriotic but also someone we could trust not to lie to us and not to make that request disappear.

[Adem Mikullovc](#)i was at that time one of the MPs who had a strong popular voice in parliament. We said, “We want to approach Adem Mikullovc.” But that day we couldn’t meet him. Or maybe we met him after we had already submitted it. After we submitted it and told him that we had handed it in to parliament, he told us, “Send one to parliament, send one by mail so they can’t avoid registering it, and send one to me as well.” So that’s exactly what we did, just as he said.

When we returned to Peja, the desire of people to sign had grown so much that we no longer had any forms. We hadn’t even prepared forms, just handwritten text on blank sheets signed in pencil. Then someone offered to photocopy them for us. They typed it on a typewriter, you saw it, that circular letter, and photocopied it. I think at Hetem Çeku’s place we photocopied hundreds of thousands of copies at that time. My brother, who later got involved in gathering signatures, would say that even just at the Zastava factory, around a thousand signatures were collected in a day or two.

When the signatures became numerous, we started to feel a sense of responsibility. Now you had people’s names there, what if someone got arrested and later you felt guilty, not knowing how to defend the cause? Because if someone was arrested, they’d arrest him, slap him around, those people were beaten every day for nothing. So it was about protecting the action, protecting the cause. We said, “Now we have to organize this as a proper action.” We also talked with the people from the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, Hava, Hetem Çeku, [Adem Grabovci](#), and the others, and we began forming working groups.

Now me, Salih, Avdi Shkreli, and Sahadete Kelmendi became a working group. With Avdi Shkreli's car, we didn't stop for a single moment until the end of the action. And the base was here at our house. As I said, our house served as the base. Selman was there too, both to give out the circular letter and the forms, but the main problem was what to do with the completed ones once you collected them. Meaning, he had to take them, secure them, send them to safe places, and assign people, who was going where, who would talk to whom, and so on.

The two of us managed to extend the network through the political prisoners, and we had a lot of success. We organized a meeting in Selman's apartment in Pristina. He lived in an apartment belonging to Bajram Kelmendi.<sup>61</sup> He rented it, but near the house of Bajram Kelmendi there was a small house, I don't know if it belonged to him or someone else, but it was nearby. We organized a meeting there with the political prisoners, and what I wanted to say earlier is that not all political prisoners were members of the movement. But whoever was a member, even better; and whoever wasn't, that was still fine because they had their own circles.

They had come, Ramadan Avdiu and Ismet Kryeziu, or whatever his exact name was, Kryeziu from Prizren. Halil Koliçi and Çadraku, Dervish Çadraku. I don't know if he was in that meeting, so I don't want to mix things up by mentioning names without being sure, but this is how we expanded the circle through political prisoners. At that time, also with these girls through other female political prisoners, some had been released, some hadn't, and also through their families. We had gone to the family of Nazife Xhemajli; I had stayed with Nazife in prison, and Salih knew names like Bajrush, Mustafa, Emrush, and the others. We had gone there without any of them being present.

Their mother was there, and the brothers were much younger. We had delivered those forms to them, and after a few days we went back to collect them. As I said, the Peja District Council of the movement, with Agim Elshani, we completed some of those trips with signatures together. Then with these political prisoners who had stayed, these "boys of independence," with Mustafë, Islam Mustafa, the nephew of Jusuf Gërvalla<sup>62</sup> in Glogjan. I was at Isa Dërmaku's in Kamenica, and at Afide's and Naser's in Kaçanik. I was in many places in Gjilan and elsewhere, but now I've started forgetting the names.

But we cooperated, and the action was so productive that we eventually started taking more risks. I mean, we would hide them a bit in the car when we picked them up. Because, you know, if they caught us with blank forms, we wouldn't care. But when we picked up the completed ones, we felt a certain responsibility, what if we ended up getting people arrested? So we hid them a little, and we managed like that until the action was completed. When we had gathered quite a large number of signatures, we decided to go speak with prominent figures, Rexhep Qosja,<sup>63</sup> Adem Demaçi.

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<sup>61</sup> Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

<sup>62</sup> 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.

<sup>63</sup> Rexhep Qosja (1936) is a prominent Albanian writer and literary critic from a part of Malësia in modern Montenegro (locally known as *Malesija*). He is known for his contributions to Albanian literature and his role in the political and cultural life of Albanians. Qosja has been an advocate for the rights of Albanians in the former Yugoslavia and has written extensively on issues of national identity, history, and culture.

We had also sent word to Ibrahim Rugova,<sup>64</sup> who at that time, as a leading figure of the LDK, was greatly admired by the people of Kosovo. We wanted to inform him clearly about who we were and that we were the ones who had started this action, so that he wouldn't prejudge us. We had sent the message through a journalist we knew well, who was also a friend, he was the uncle of the girl who was involved in the action with us, Sahadete Kelmendi. We told him, "Can you inform him beforehand about what's happening with this action and publicly ask him during the press conference if he is aware of what's happening with this referendum, with the open signing for the Republic of Kosovo?"

He asked him, there's even a newspaper article, it's preserved as a clipping. He said, "We, as the Democratic League of Kosovo, do not stand behind this initiative, but we support all initiatives that have the people behind them." When we went to Qosja, although I wasn't there myself, I think it was my sister and the others, Qosja told them, "Very good, you've started the action, this is very good. But when you gather 100,000 signatures, take the tables and go out to the center of Pristina and let people sign freely. Because at that point, the action has done its part and achieved the effect it needed to achieve. Then those signatures should be used as a democratic tool in diplomacy, because they are one of the most democratic means for expressing a people's demands."

We went to Adem Demaçi. I was there, along with Salih, Isa Nikçi, Agim Elshani, and Avdi Shkreli. Adem, *Bac* Adem, with much respect, said, "Look, this is very good, it's really good. But do you know who signed first on the list?" "Zymer Neziri." "Do you realize they might go and arrest Zymer Neziri? What will you say then? But since you've started it and you have the will, work as much as you can, don't stop. But you have to take into account who you have there signing; don't..." meaning, don't put people in danger, "you have to be responsible when you act with someone, to protect those you're acting with as well."

When we collected more than 400,000 signatures, we then decided to send them somewhere where they could actually be of use. Naturally, we discussed this continuously with Zymer Neziri, Ali Muriqi, and the intellectuals of the Rugova Intellectuals' Association. We decided to send them to the Migjeni Association in Slovenia and packed everything up. They were so heavy, like carrying bombs. I think I was explaining how we sent those signatures to Slovenia, and the road to Slovenia was quite risky. We sent them by train; Avdi Shkreli drove us to the train station. From there, we took that heavy package and got on the train.

The express train that went to Slovenia at that time. But it was extremely crowded. It was very difficult even to find a spot because it was also a problem to lift the package, it was so heavy, just to place it somewhere. So I sat on the package all the way to Slovenia, anxiously, because there was nowhere else to sit. Either on the floor or on the package. I even remember this moment in Belgrade: Salihi got off to buy something to drink, a glass of water or something, and the train started moving. I panicked because the train was leaving and I was alone with the signatures. Luckily, he ran and managed to get back on the train. When I saw him get on, my whole world settled. I kept thinking, where would I even go? I didn't know the places.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibrahim Rugova (1944–2006) was the founder and leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and served as the President of Kosovo during the war and after until his death. Rugova was a key figure in the non-violent resistance movement against Serbian rule and played a crucial role in Kosovo's struggle for independence.

We had planned to first rest at Salih's uncle's place, he was a pilot in Brežice. From there, we would go to Ljubljana, because it was impossible to get there otherwise; those were the only connections. And that's exactly what happened. We spent one night at his place, and then he drove us by car to Ljubljana. There, we went to the association. We found Ukshin Hoti there, and, so I don't do anyone injustice, Rexhep Hoti and Halil Koliçi were there with him. We talked with them for a long time; they welcomed us warmly and even fed us. They then took us back to the bus station so we could return to Kosovo, and we made it back safe and sound.

The risk was quite great, but that part belongs more to Salih, what he discussed with Ukshin Hoti<sup>65</sup> and how they agreed that the signatures had to be sent abroad no matter what, and what their importance was, given that they contained the names of all those people from Kosovo who had put their signatures there. That part still needs to be studied, researched, and explained more thoroughly. I just wanted to mention this bit that seemed important to me, something I might have left out earlier even though it deserves to be included.

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you very much, and once again I'd like to thank you for the interview and for taking the time!

**Zyrafete Muriqi Lajçi:** Thank you very much as well! Your work is very important in documenting the stories and the small details of the people of Kosovo who contributed to bringing freedom.

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<sup>65</sup> 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.