

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH RAMADAN AVDI

Lipjan | Date: October 16, 2025

Duration: 46 minutes

Present:

1. Ramadan Avdi (Speaker)
2. Elvis Avdi (Interviewer / 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.

Elvis Avdi: *Can you tell us something about your childhood?*

Ramadan Avdi: My name is Ramadan Avdi from Lipjan. I was born in 1958, I am 67 years old now. I'm retired now, for two years already. I take a small pension, that's it. That is my biography at the moment. Some things a person forgets, some things they don't forget, but I can talk about what I know. I know for myself that I exist from the age of five or six. Something like that.

I know how we lived before, we lived in a community, in a crowd, there were a lot of people. We were with my uncles, then with my uncle's children, and then with some other neighbors, children of my mother's brother and aunt. We were like that in one yard, a shared yard, a shared place. There were maybe forty, fifty people there.

We come from a blacksmith family. My father was a blacksmith, my grandfather was a blacksmith, maybe even his father, my great-grandfather, was a blacksmith. Most likely, though we don't know for sure, but they were blacksmiths too.

We lived in the center of Lipjan. Back then, the center mostly had some Roma, Serbs, and there were a few Albanians. Mostly Roma and Serbs. My late father, who passed away around forty years ago, was a blacksmith. His two brothers helped him, his mother helped him too.

Back then, there were those old things, there were no cars with tires, only carts with wheels made from metal. They made those things to survive. They had little land, but not as much as others had. Roma had no land almost everywhere. They had the most basic things in those places, it was rare for someone to have land. And so they worked in that craft to feed their family. They lived modestly. They didn't stretch their hands to beg. They had [things] for themselves, and they had [them] for others to share, so people wouldn't go hungry. All that work later continued with cars, with rubber tires, everything was blacksmith work, forging plowshares, axes, hammers, and similar things.

The time came when they got jobs in the state sector. There was a big factory called Lepenka. Mostly all the Roma who were in Lipjan, then Serbs and Albanians from the villages, all got jobs in that factory and earned their living there. That system was such that a person could live with one salary, feed their

family, and even make something. That's how it was. Maybe the money was little, but it was valuable. That was the system of Yugoslavia back then.

I remember when my father bought a metal welding machine with his brothers. I was almost six, seven years old, and they took it to try it, they bought a big machine then. When we saw it, it looked strange to us — how it worked and what it did, how it joined two things.

Before, they used to join things with blacksmith welding. Later, slowly, slowly we started welding too. I started welding with my brother later. We were maybe ten years old. We took up welding slowly, slowly. But that was, how can I say, rare, few people had done that before. By the age of twelve we started working seriously. We also went to school, school was close by. And all our family, no one was left without school. That was the obligation: school, back then primary and secondary, some went to higher school, but primary and secondary were mandatory.

We worked in those jobs from the time we were twelve years old, and my younger brother, two years younger, worked together with me, with my father, with my uncles, and so on. But I tell you, we started like that, we started like that, but how can I tell you, we understood it had to be that way, because work, work, and only work is what makes a person go forward in life. Because work makes a person. Because a person becomes a person from work. And so we worked in those jobs until, well, I tell you, until we were fourteen, fifteen years old. We worked in blacksmithing, metalwork, wheels, tires, plowshares, different jobs, locksmith and blacksmith jobs, everything.

From 1974 we started making doors and windows, aluminum, aluminum and metal pipes, and so on. We worked day and night, from morning to what they call black darkness, and in the morning, really, we got up early, around five o'clock, back then the time didn't change. We were in the workshop, working all day, finishing those jobs. We worked those jobs until 1979, and from 1979... and school of course, primary school and then we enrolled in secondary school, and so on, from 1979 we started working with cars. How can I tell you, that job was rare... not many people did it with cars. We started, it was very profitable. One small welding on an exhaust, this and that, a person could make one exhaust in one day, and food and drink for the whole family. And we all took that work, we left other jobs, and now, even today, 2025, we are still doing that work. We paint and weld, and so on. Children work too, while in school and everything.

Elvis Avdi: Do you remember anything from your childhood, a game, or a happening, something that stuck in your mind?

Ramada Avdi: Now, I tell you, we were raised this way, disciplined, us, our father especially, he only wanted work, and he was like that, and we only knew work, work, work, and work. That's it. But I tell you, we also played, we would gather children, play football, go swim... there was a little river, clean water, but rarely, we didn't have time, we were busy with work, day and night, and because of that we had little free time to go for walks, gatherings, weddings. There were a lot of Roma, almost every week there was some music. Weddings, banquets... we didn't have time, we went rarely, we couldn't go. We

would go out in the yard, listen to music, as the wind blew, the sound came. We were so eager to hear it, but we couldn't go because work awaited us. That's how it was. I tell you, we had free time, but not like other children had, that's how it was.

Elvis Avdi: Were parents more strict back then?

Ramadan Avdi: Now I will tell you about this. Back then, when you sat before your father, well, mothers were softer, if you said a word, you had to sit still, listen, you couldn't look him in the eyes, you had to bow your head,, you couldn't oppose what heard, you could not say anything, you only said, "Amen," and that's it. Now it is democracy, children have the right to speak, to do... There are some who are like us, who learned before, but mostly, mostly they existed, but now, there is none, gone. Now children speak like that.

Elvis Avdi: Was that because there was respect or fear?

Ramadan Avdi: It wasn't because of that, maybe there was fear, but there was also respect. Time was like that, there was fear, and respect. And now freedom is a little bigger. I don't know... maybe not because they aren't afraid, but I don't know. And now we too, with our children, I am grateful for my children, one is 45, another 40, 41, my daughter too, and so on. Even today, I don't force them, maybe they would fear me, when we talk it's like friends, that's what I say. Some families argue, work, this, that... me, how I am, how I worked for my father, that's how my children are to me.

Elvis Avdi: Where did your family come from, and why did blacksmith work become popular?

Ramadan Avdi: What do I know, we... again... I am 67 years old, I know some things, I don't know some things, maybe even older people who came before me didn't know.

Elvis Avdi: How was your childhood?

Ramadan Avdi: Now, I will tell you, since you ask about our childhood. We, as children, I talk for myself and my younger brother, then another late Gani, he also started working early, but me and Arif, a little... not a little, much earlier, and so. What can I tell you? We worked like that, as people say, day and night, from morning to black darkness. We never had rest or holidays, even New Year, one day rest, then back to work. And I tell you... it was hard, not easy, a person had constant obligations, but we learned, we learned that life, work went into our blood, and after that everything else didn't matter.

It was important to help our father, so he could work, maintain the family, and for us, we got experience, you learn a craft, a strength for life. We made locksmith and blacksmith jobs and things like that. Everything metallic, we worked with. And it wasn't hard because, how can I say, when a person works, it's interesting, maybe others are disturbed by the noise, grinding, machines, hammering, but it was interesting for us.

Elvis Avdi: In the past, how was life living with family and neighbors?

Ramada Gashi: With the family, we were a big family, many of us, uncles, cousins, mother's brothers, father's brothers... we had harmony among us, we went well. One cannot exist without the other, and for good and bad, all were as one. That is what a person misses from the past. That is what remains in memory, we had a beautiful life. Maybe not wealth like now, but there was something else that cannot be measured with money. That harmony among us, such great respect, that is it.

Elvis Avdi: How did it look on a normal day back then? Would people come to visit often?

Ramadan Avdi: I am telling you, people were coming, however, when someone would come to us, a guest, then the whole family would come in one place and stay all together, and not like a guest goes to someones place and only they would stay with the guest, but for example, if a guest came to my place, everyone else would join in my place to be with the guest, that is how it was in the past.

Elvis Avdi: How did the festivities look back then?

Ramadan Avdi: There were a lot of those holiday, how to say, we used to celebrate Erdelezi¹ and that for many days, we would go to each other's house. It was not just to go to eat and drink, but the thing is that we stick with each other, and to say there were more, non stop, we use to celebrate Vasi,² and that as well was celebrated for two-three days, we also were celebrating the third day, the second night going through the third.

Elvis Avdi: Do you know why Herdelezi and Vasi were celebrated by Roma?

Ramadan Gashi: My late father would sing the bread,³ and then we would gather all together, the whole family would, and we had a lot of expenses. It is not that there were many expenses, but we would get together, so many of us, how to say, like having people over for a wedding. My father would

¹ Erderlezi (Herdeljez) is the combination of the names of two Muslim prophets, Hizir and Ilyas, who met every May 5 (Saint George's day), to welcome the end of winter. It is an important holiday across the Balkans for different communities.

² Vasi refers to Bango Vassilii (also known as Vasilyovden), a major holiday celebrated around New Year's, typically on January 13-14, which honors a limping or "crooked" figure named Bango Vassil, a mythical protector of the Roma people in legends. The celebration involves special feasts and rituals, with the central theme being the sacrifice and kindness that led to his injuries while saving the Romani people.

³ The tradition of "singing the bread" was an important ritual practiced by many Roma families during Vasi, celebrated in early January as the Roma New Year. In this custom, a special loaf of bread was prepared at home, and as it was baked or served, a family elder—often the father—would sing blessings over it. The song would wish the household health, prosperity, protection, and good fortune for the year ahead. This ritual symbolized the deep connection between food, family, and spiritual well-being. The bread was not only a meal, but a sacred offering, representing hope and gratitude. By singing over the bread, the family expressed their wishes that the coming year would bring happiness, unity, and abundance to everyone in the home. It remains one of the most meaningful and heartfelt traditional practices associated with this holiday among Roma communities.

sing the bread, and he would sing to everyone that would come, for every male, or kid, from every family, all, until it would end, to all the people who were present and to all the people who were not present there. And all, because then people used to feel the impact of the singing, and for example, this year these many came, and the message would spread for the following year, and then the next year there would be even more people. And then, let's say, there were weddings, and then there were diverse festivities.

Herdelezi used to be celebrated, and on that day everyone would say that we were getting close to the summer, and that is the main reason. Where on Vasi they say, in the past they used to say "Sonald Vasi" but what now? We are celebrating it, however, also Serbs celebrate it and Albanian Catholics celebrate it. And in recent years we no longer celebrate it.

Talking about the weddings in the past, they were all the same, there wasn't only one. But mostly they were big events, at that time there were no cameras, barely any kind of picture. But if there were cameras to record these weddings, how they started, how they ended, that was something that is indescribable, that is a richness that a person can have, putting that on TV and watching it. There was... all the family from different places, from here, our family, from different other cities, from Urosevac [Ferizaj], Pristina, from Macedonia, from different places people used to come. It used to be so crowded, those people were all happy with a smile on their face, that is how it was.

Now you end up in a hotel for one night. But then there used to be big weddings, even though they were exhausting, it was too much, that's how it was back then, people used to endure all that. However, now they cannot endure that much. One week before the wedding and one week after the wedding, and the day of the wedding is really hard. Those traditions that we had, maybe others had them too, but I am talking about us now, those were big events, so big. That is what I wanted to say: that is not anymore. Now a person can only speak about it, and remember how it was.

Elvis Avdi: Can you tell us about one wedding that you remember, how it started and how it ended?

Ramadan Avdi: As I said before, I can share, for example, I will share my wedding with you. My wedding was in 1979. First we had the engagement, which was two weeks before the wedding, and there we gathered, let's say, we were only more than 150 people at the engagement party. Then buses, cars, back then the bus was obligatory, because there were not many cars, the buss, and the whole family would go to the engagement. We used to celebrate one day before that, and then one day after the engagement, maybe even more. Let's say that living, how to say it... it was like we were living only for that, and that no other day was going to exist, only that and to finish with that.

After two weeks, we had the wedding as well. When people gathered for the wedding, how to say it, it was a beauty for a person to see, how many people, how many traditions. There are many traditions as well, and it is really hard to respect all the traditions, because you need the whole family, without

sleeping, during hot or cold weather, with snow, it depends, but weddings were mostly happening around hot times. But how to say, a person needs so much just to describe a wedding, he would need at least one hour to talk only about that.

I don't know how to say: everything was important in life. You see, now, you say what was important to achieve, what is important, what is not important, back then everything was important. As I said, we were blacksmith, we used to work for many years as blacksmith, we used to go to school as well, I finished high school and then college. My other brother also has finished high school. He also needed to register for university, but my father didn't have anyone with whom to work, and he said no. One went to Urosevac and registered there. I was living there, and if you go, with whom are you going to work? And the youngest brother was really young back then, he was going to school, we all went, also the girls.

Elvis Avdi: You said that you changed the professions, from blacksmiths to car body and paint service?

Ramadan Avdi: And let me tell you that we used to work as blacksmiths, then we started to work with doors, windows, fences, and all those things. But then my father bought an autogenous welding machine, for welding, he took it from his friend, and it was with fuel gas and oxygen, that is a little dangerous, you need to light it with a lighter, and the fire comes out. But you can weld with it, thin metals and things like that, where you need to warm things up. Now my father took it, and he was working in the public sector, and he closed it in a working room, and didn't want us to work with it.

But we would steal the key, me and my brother would secretly weld with it. We would light it up and would weld thin metals and many other things. When the time came, my father was asking, "Who took the key?" At first we would deny. But he was suspicious that we were going to that working space and welding with it. And one day a Serbian man came to us to do a job, and we worked for him before, and he was saying, "Put the children to work," he was saying that to my father. My father used to say, "No, they don't know how to work with it." Then he told him, "How come they don't know? They know really well, give them work." My father told him again that they don't know. And then I told my father, "Yes father, we know," and then he asked how. We were stealing the key and we were welding. When my father heard that, he was yelling at us, he was yelling, but he was happy inside, because we had learned to weld. And after that my father started to weld thin metals.

Back then there was this Fica,⁴ and Lada,⁵ he did the thresholds [lower part of the door], a little to paint, and then we started with him, and then we left the other work completely, because we could not manage. Because when people heard about our work, and now I don't know whether my father used to do a really good job, he was fixing the thresholds. And when people saw that, then we no longer

⁴ Zastava 750 type of car, a version of the Fiat 600.

⁵ A Russian brand of cars created in partnership with Fiat.

worked as blacksmith, or locksmith, but my uncles did that work, and we were working only with cars. And little by little, we were getting bigger jobs, and we would do better and better, a person can learn. After all these years that we worked, now I am retired, and now my children and grandchildren are working.

Elvis Avdi: How many people used to work this job?

Ramadan Avdi: We used to work, my father and us three brothers, we were working, my father used to work in the public sector as well, he was going to his job and we continued the work. We had work not only for us four, but there was enough work for 14. The question was only, can you work? We would start many cars sometimes in the winter, and we could not finish all, because there were big jobs, the cars would get destroyed from the roads. In the past, the roads were not like they're now. People used to drive in different fields, and the cars would break, and we would fix different parts of the car. There was so much work, that we would work the whole year and then the next year we would finish all the scheduled cars. The whole yard was filled with cars. Now there are not those kinds of patchings, now there are others. Now, after an accident there is patching, then painting, and those kinds of things.

Elvis Avdi: For the past 25 years, what does life look like and how many employees work now?

Ramadan Avdi: Personally, I wasn't in good health, but I was working, but my children started, and they are working really well. How to say, the craft will never leave you. If today you don't have it, tomorrow you will have money, the work will never leave you hungry, and you will honestly create something better. Those who work in the public sector have their salaries, but you cannot cope with that only. This is something else. Yes, you work more, and if you work more, you will have more. It is really hard, and not easy at all.

Now there are a lot of us working, we are more than ten, there are the children, the grandchildren, and we hope that we are going to do something bigger, like a hall. Inshallah, God will give us health, and not only to us but to everyone, but we hope that we are going to do something more, where the grandchildren will work, and maybe their children if God wills. How it will be, we don't know.

Elvis Avdi: Is there a difference at the place that you live, from the past till now? How was in the past and how is it now, the city and the people? Is there a big difference?

Ramadan Avdi: There is a big difference, now the time has come that many people, we had a war and many people ran away, went to find a better life [abroad]. And all of those who went there work less and have better salaries, they can create a better life for themselves, for their children, and they will not return. Not only Roma but also Albanians, Serbs, when they go somewhere, and see how they are living there, normally, will not return here. And we are still far from the West.

People learn, how to say... for me, personally, Lipjan for me is mine. I say it's mine, now, how much God destined me to live here, I would never leave Lipjan this way, just to leave everything and to go somewhere else. I got used to living here, I was born here, even though we were not always in this place, we were in the center. In the past we used to live at the main center, but now the center is also here. Me, personally, I love it. This small land that we have, there is a big place around, but this part where we are and that we have, to me it looks like who knows what.

Now you can see that there are fewer people, fewer houses. But what a person has in their heart, for me, maybe not everyone is the same, but for me today, I would never leave Lipjan ever. We have been neighbors for a long time. It is not like it was in the past, we used to have a great family, but the people left, what to do now.

Now it is a different situation, our situation here, us who stayed here, we are way fewer people. But around us we had neighbors, no matter if they were Albanians or whatever, they used to talk, us with them would talk, how are you, how did you wake up. But little by little a lot of buildings are being created, and now no one knows anyone. That is a really big problem, we have neighbors, just behind there are at least 50 families, but we don't know them. However, in the past, they were maybe two or three but we knew each other all well, we knew them, they knew us, but now the times are different, they're building only tall buildings, there are way fewer houses. The world is changing, here as well as in other places.

Even if a person would want to bring something back, things that are gone will be gone and will continue to be gone, and nothing can be brought back to how it was. If it were possible to bring that kind of respect back, why not? That is wealth: going to each other's house, having someone to share with. That is wealth. Wealth is not only for you to have money, a good car, clothes, that is needed as well, but there is something more important than that.

Elvis Avdi: Is there anything from your experience that the people should know?

Ramadan Avdi: From my experience, or to give my thoughts, I think, no matter what there is, how this life moves in such a way, a person should not be passive and wait, and say whatever happened. They need to be interested, for their children to learn, go to schools, and as well work. Because work created the people, and that is why I am saying to all, they need to make an effort, to be active as much as possible, as much as they can. Not everyone can be the same, but up to some point we can. That is because people need to be interested, because if people wait [to get something] from above, nothing will fall. That just works.

Elvis Avdi: Do you have any message for a non-Roma?

Ramadan Avdi: To me personally, a nation does not exist, but who they are, what they are, will you be good with one or the other? With Albanians or Serbs, what is most important is that they are good human beings. Not to see the nation or faith, the most important is to be a good human. Of course if the other person likes you, if they don't like you, you cannot make them like you by force, that is what I want to say, no matter who they are, they just need to be good humans. No matter where you go, to Germany with Germans, to America with Americans, to Austria with Austrians, with everyone, there is not only one nation.