INTERVIEW WITH LIRIJE OSMANI

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Duration: 166 minutes

Present:

1. Lirije Osmani (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. Lirije, if you could introduce yourself, tell us where you were born, the year, your background, your earliest memories.

Lirije Osmani: My name is Lirije Osmani, I was born in Gjakova on June 28, 1944. I come from a patriotic family. We were eight children. Our father was born in 1906 and in 1918 he finished what at that time was called the *idadiye* school[1] in Skopje. After finishing school, of course, the schooling was in Turkish, since there were no schools in Albanian, he became the deputy, the secretary of the *kaymakan* - at that time, the person who governed the town was called *kaymakan*, since the school had been in Turkish, because there were no Albanian schools. When the war of Kaçanik and Cërnaleva began, meaning, he was inspired by well-known patriots. He sympathized with them and began to nurture a sense of belonging to the nation and to his own language.

Especially after the Congress of Manastir[2] took place, that's when he started learning the Albanian language and inspiring the youth to learn it too, because he believed that only through language could national feelings awaken, and the desire to live independently. So after that time, when the systems changed, when Serbia took power, he went to…

Anita Susuri: Alexandria?

Lirije Osmani: No, first he went to Sarajevo. From Sarajevo, together with some other young men, he went to Egypt, to Alexandria. Because the [King of Egypt] had invited all the young people who wanted to… when the Albanian state was created, when it separated from Turkey, then my father completed his schooling there as well. Later, he returned and worked again in Gjakova, but because the situation was very difficult, he left again. He came back only when Serbia had fully established its rule. Since he knew the old alphabet, he started working as a cashier, and that's where he retired. But his strongest desire was to educate his children.

[1] A type of secondary school in the Ottoman Empire, roughly equivalent to middle school or lower high school today.
[2] The Congress of Manastir was a national conference held in the city of Manastir (now Bitola) from November 14 to 22, 1908, with the goal of standardizing the Albanian alphabet.

I mean, he sent my eldest sister, born around 1925 or '26, to school. School was in Serbian. But there were no other girls. She was one of the best students, but she didn't manage to finish, she completed only three grades of primary school. Then the other sisters all went… first there were teacher-training courses. They finished those, became teachers, of course in primary schools, then further coursework. Later he educated his son. He educated all of us. All the eight youngest of us completed university.

Anita Susuri: Which child are you in the family?

Lirije Osmani: I am the seventh child in the family.

Anita Susuri: And the oldest, what generation was she?

Lirije Osmani: The oldest, my eldest sister, was from the generation of 1925 or '26. She passed away three years ago at over 90 years old. Interestingly, she was very inclined toward reading. She read a lot of books. She educated her four children as well, even though the financial situation wasn't very good. She went to Sarajevo and all four of her children graduated. In our extended family, education was always our first priority.

Anita Susuri: And what was your mother like?

Lirije Osmani: My mother was… my father met my mother when she was much younger, while he was in Turkey. There is a city called Izmir. My mother was born there and lived there because her father had been displaced to Turkey due to the very difficult political situation at the time. So Albanians had been forced to leave even in earlier times. She got married and then they lived together in Gjakova.

We had one house, a very… It was a big house. My father lived there with his children, and also the wife of my uncle lived there with her son. Since he didn't have his father, my father took care of him. But my father also awakened in him that national feeling, that one must fight for the country, and he [my cousin] joined the partisans. My brother and sister were also involved in the National Liberation War, so that we could gain independence. He was killed. He was killed in the war. In fact, our street in Gjakova, where we had our house, is called Ferat Binishi. He was the son of our paternal uncle.

Anita Susuri: Your father's uncle's son?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, my father's uncle's son. Meanwhile, my father's uncle's son lived on the other side of the house. It was a large house with two separate entrances. He had five children. He also managed to educate some of them, because his financial situation wasn't very good, but even they were educated and worked later on as professors, teachers. Then, what I experienced as a child in the house where we lived, and what I remember, is that we had a dog, a very loyal dog. This was in 1946, when Yugoslavia… or rather Serbia, since after the war was won, Yugoslavia imposed military administration in 1964 [1946].

Its goal was to eliminate the Albanian cadres who had cooperated with them and fought together with them, but who had supported the Bujan Conference,[3] where Albanians had decided that they wanted to unite with Albania. They did not want to give up that position. So, I believe the purpose of the military administration was to eliminate those cadres who did not want to change their mind and become part of Serbia. That was always their tendency. Then sometime, it must have been '47, I'm not sure exactly which year, '46 or '47, they put this military administration into function.

They locked us in one room, we had one larger room and one smaller room. They locked us in the smaller room and we watched through the window. Near the window was the kitchen. Suddenly the doors burst open with a loud noise. Two trucks full of soldiers entered. Immediately they took up firing positions in case someone resisted. The first thing they did was kill our dog. We were deeply affected. I never forget that moment, because we loved him so much, I never forget what we lived through, how it happened. Then they immediately forced us out of the house and we went to live with a family in the neighborhood called Tahir Lilaj, in Gjakova. It was about 200–300 meters from our house. We stayed there for a while.

Then we had to move to the street in the Hadum neighborhood. It was a *waqf*[4] house, belonging to the Islamic Community. We lived there for some time. I don't know exactly how long, but I know that until I finished the second grade of primary school, meaning when I turned eight, we lived there. So that means around four years. After four years, it seems the 'cleansing' that they wanted to do, whoever they wanted to eliminate, and to drive people out of Kosovo, had ended. Then I continued school in the neighborhood where our house had originally been, third and fourth grade, and then the gymnasium, and after that I went to Mitrovica. I had a sister there, and I attended seventh and eighth grade in Mitrovica.

I remember, I mean, in the seventh grade, in the seventh grade, after the expulsion of Albanians to Turkey began, there was the action of the collection of weapons, I mean, they tortured people. There were ways to frighten the Albanian people so they would leave… to escape to Albania, and they had made an agreement with Turkey. The well-known agreement that was made between Yugoslavia and Turkey for accepting Albanians. I had a deskmate, Nazmije, I mean, I don't remember her last name. When the letter came that she absolutely had to go to Turkey, it was an extremely heavy event which left me with such an impression that I will never forget. Every time I remember it, somehow I get very emotional.

All the people of Mitrovica would go out to the train station. It was the Belgrade–Skopje train. Because there had also been an agreement with Skopje, that they should go to Skopje where they were given some kind of papers, permits that were called *vesika*.[5] Then Turkey accepted them and… that atmosphere was so heavy that all the people cried. Those who were leaving cried, their relatives cried, the people cried. No one knew what kind of fate was awaiting them. No one was spared from that

[3] The Bujan Conference was held from December 31, 1943, to January 2, 1944, in the village of Bujan, in the Tropoja District. It was a meeting of Albanian and Yugoslav Partisan leaders where they discussed the future of Kosovo. The conference resulted in a resolution that supported the right of the people of Kosovo and other Albanian regions to self-determination and union with Albania. However, this resolution was later disregarded by the Yugoslav authorities.

[4] An inalienable charitable endowment under Islamic law. It typically involves donating a building, plot of land or other assets for Muslim religious or charitable purposes with no intention of reclaiming the assets.

[5] From Arabic waṯīqa (وثيقة) via Ottoman Turkish vesika, meaning a bond, certificate, or document.

campaign which was to remove the Albanian population from Kosovo. I remember when I went to Turkey, I talked to my husband's paternal aunt, who had worked in the court in Skopje. Because even the Albanians of Skopje at the same time were expelled to Turkey. I said, "When you came, what did you do?" "Nothing," she said, "they gave us some place," she said, "but the first thing," she said, "what name do you want to take? We were shocked."

His name was Alisahit. "What to do?" she said, "nobody had told us that we must also lose our identity there." So, even Turkey was one of the collaborators in carrying out this plan. So she said, "What do I remember? I was spared the violence, *kurtullush*.' *Kurtullush*, the Turkish word, was salvation. So, all these events that happened had big consequences and at the same time inspired us to love our country, to love the people, to work for them as much as we can. Each to give his own contribution to get out of that situation. So my father always used to say, "Without school there is nothing, without school there is no Kosovo. If we want to achieve something, education."

He never separated himself from papers. When the municipality of Gjakova was created, you know, he became a treasurer. At that time it was very problematic because there were… there were still forces, there was a trend to imprison, mistreat people. Then he no longer dealt with politics, but as a treasurer. But he knew the language, he had learned the language a lot once the alphabet of the Albanian language was made. He wrote beautifully but usually he wrote… all the events in life that happened to him he would write in that old Turkish alphabet. I mean, as…

Anita Susuri: *Osmanishte*.

Lirije Osmani: Yes, *osmanishte* as it is called. He had a very large library. But by chance when we were preparing, I mean the library, those writings of his that he had made about everything that had happened, and we didn't know how to read what he had written, he always wrote, he always read. He read novels too. In fact, I had a niece, she studied Albanology. She would read the novels to him because in order to graduate, students of the Albanian language needed to read literature, to know the events. He was very diligent and he would read and explain many things; she couldn't keep up. Meaning, he was a great admirer both of reading and of writing.

We prepared those documents that we had decided, he had decided to donate them to the state archive. Because all these professors, some professors who graduated in history, translated those Turkish documents. Without those, history cannot be made. Meaning our history is entirely written in that alphabet. They translated them. There was a historian from Gjilan, there was one from Podujeva, two historians. So, always, he was always engaged with work. At that time, my niece and I found one decision. The decision that discriminated against him was from 1924. One said that Ramiz Binishi had been, I mean, a supporter of the Albanian cause. He had been an opponent and influenced people not to leave, meaning, not go to Turkey, which was also part of the campaign.

Then it was about the education of the cadres. So, unfortunately they removed him from that fund he had from his work. And the same thing later happened here. Meaning after some decades, the same thing again, with the people they wanted to remove from work, for the same reasons. So then, seeing all these things, seeing our situation, somehow the desire was born in me to enroll in the Faculty of Law. Even though it was a bit of a problem for me as a girl to go to Sarajevo. [Law school] hadn't opened yet there; a branch of the Belgrade Faculty had opened but there were many Albanian students who studied in Sarajevo and in Belgrade and in Zagreb.

I oriented myself toward Sarajevo and enrolled in the first year in 1963. But conditions… My father had a small pension, you know. We were all educated; it even happened that we all wore the same coat, all the children. We didn't have demands then because we knew the conditions in which we lived…

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Lirije, I want to stop again a bit at the childhood part, to ask you: you said they removed you from your house. Did the confiscation of your property happen…

Lirije Osmani: No, the army settled there, the army settled in our house because the house was big. Meaning until they finished their work, the program that they had for eliminating all the people who … and to create the conditions so that they would escape from there. It was not easy to go into a foreign house where there were people who lived there. Then to go and always remain without a house with eight children. That truly was a…

Anita Susuri: That house, can you describe how it looked for example?"

Lirije Osmani: Our house, yes? Our house was a very old house like this. It had, meaning, two rooms downstairs and two rooms upstairs. One room there upstairs was of the uncle's wife with her son. Because her husband had died from TB, back then, the conditions. The rooms, the rooms downstairs and upstairs were big. There was a sort of corridor, like a path we called it. Each room had that, it was called *hamamxhik*,[6] for washing oneself. Meaning the four rooms had those kinds of silver cauldrons …

Anita Susuri: Copper.

Lirije Osmani: Copper I wanted to say. There was one, how to say, one fireplace in that corridor downstairs and that's where the water was heated for the whole family, meaning the water to wash, to clean themselves. It was all made with such… it was made with wood. The ceiling also had those *gjamllykat* [old-style shelves] like in the past, where bowls and dishes were kept. They were… now those dishes are in the Museum of Kosovo. But that house of ours is completely burned. All the old houses. Meaning, I didn't understand until I saw so much destruction in the villages when I went there as a member of the Council for Human Rights.

I would say, 'Why are they burning the old ones and the new ones?' Meaning, everything that was, so that no trace of Albanian remained here, that was the goal. Even some French people had come and photographed and now the neighbors came near. They said, 'It burned in two hours,' because it was all made with wood, a very beautiful house.

Anita Susuri: Was it a house that your father inherited or did he build it?

Lirije Osmani: No, my father wrote that the house was built in 1930. Whether it had been an old house before that or something else, we unfortunately don't know. And this is something we used to suggest to everyone: that people should ask their parents about their lives, to know, to pass it on through generations, what we as a people have gone through. The good and the bad. And even now, for example, when someone has made a contribution, it is good for the children to know, so that they can reflect on it and continue the tradition.

[6] Tur.: *hamamicik*, or the small baths, which were inside the homes for the hygiene of the family members.

Anita Susuri: And your father, in what kind of family, I mean, in what kind of family was he raised that he had the chance to be educated? Because they were very rare.

Lirije Osmani: My father, unfortunately I say this is our oversight that we didn't, didn't…

Anita Susuri: You didn't research it?

Lirije Osmani: We didn't research the… origin. But it must have been an old urban family, meaning Gjakovar, since he had the possibility to educate himself, to go to that school in Skopje. We don't even know about my mother, you know, about my mother we know a little more, because they said that her father had managed to become a major. That my mother didn't know how they went there. She used to say, "I remember that we traveled for a month on a ship, we didn't see anything. For a month we stayed, we didn't see anything, only water, only the water and the sky." At this point we stopped, instead of sitting and asking her in more detail. Always running and busy and I don't know. It is a big omission. Therefore I say, I suggest to everyone that it is good in researching the history of…"

Anita Susuri: Maybe it was the year of the Balkan Wars?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, yes. My father was born in 1909.

Anita Susuri: I want to ask you also about the time when you were a child. It was the time, it seems to me, of the Second World War. How was your family organized? How was it then? How difficult was life? I know that ration stamps for food existed then, or something?

Lirije Osmani: Well, I remember for example when butter or margarine came, I don't know, but I only know when it came from America. Families who had nothing used to come to us like that. We were in a situation… It was something like an extraordinary experience. That's how it was seen. My mother, for example, had people from a village who would regularly come and leave their carts at our place, because Monday was market day, and we had large doors at the house. Even Yugoslav army trucks would come in back then. They would stay there, and those people would bring us chestnuts like that, because we didn't have any. Maybe they also brought us flour, I believe. Something like that.

We lived very… back then you know they ate on *sofra*,[7] big *sofra*, crowded. They would tell you how much you should eat. My father nevertheless had a salary because he was the treasurer in the municipality there. He was a man with authority, knowledgeable. But there was no other possibility at all. Therefore, when I went to study, I, I felt bad taking from his pension. My younger sister also had to be educated. The conditions were… this brother of mine who was a student in Sarajevo had won some kind of lottery, 500,000 euros, no, dinar. Half a million.

My mother had her cousins in Sarajevo, she got up and went. Then there was one train for Sarajevo. It was a very bad train. I experienced that because I went with it when I went to study. He managed to buy a red carpet like that, you know how the carpet is, and a set of dishes. With all his friends he had… he was very much a cavalier. He had been a student in Belgrade, but they began to pursue him there, everyone was being scrutinized through their biographies. He left for Sarajevo, believing that there, at least, among Bosniaks and Muslims, he might be safer. They hoped there would be no problems. But

[7] Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

even there, difficulties followed. And then, later on, he was sent to Goli Otok.[8] That is something he never forgot. It was a life of immense hardship.

Anita Susuri: How did all this happen with your brother?

Lirije Osmani: Well, my brother, they were all activists with the partisans, and my sister also was involved. These, the women of Gjakova, my aunts, my father's sisters, they were also very active. There were women. Surely you had the chance to see. So he was sentenced, he was sentenced. He stayed there in prison but after that he was always under surveillance. Meaning, Tito came twice to Kosovo, and twice they isolated him. Unfortunately, meaning, fortunately he did not suffer something like those in our time when we were isolated. Because they were isolated.

Anita Susuri: Did you or your family visit him?

Lirije Osmani: No. What? No, no one had the right to visit him.

Anita Susuri: After how long did he return?

Lirije Osmani: A short time. What, there?

Anita Susuri: In Goli Otok?

Lirije Osmani: What, there were no visits there to Goli Otok. There they had to work with stones and with such… his luck was that there was also our aunt's son with him. He was also very brave. I know that when problems arose, they would say he opened his coat, he himself would recount it, opened it and said, "Shoot me." He was very brave. Somehow… because he was young, 17-18 years old. But they took people like that without any, without any, no one was guilty of anything there. Because of their political stances, because they did not like it. They saw what Serbia was planning to do. So people who had a perspective and especially people from families who were educated.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember maybe the time when the removal of the *peçe* [veil] began?"

Lirije Osmani: I remember the women with *peçe*, I mean, my aunts when they came, and my mother of course. You know, this was somewhere… I was in the fourth grade of primary school, I believe. Ten years old, fifteen years old, perhaps in 1954. I don't remember exactly the date, I can't specify it.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember when they didn't wear it anymore?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, back then they didn't wear them. Before…I don't remember those *peçe* before like that.

Anita Susuri: They were completely black.

Lirije Osmani: Yes. That was…when I was a child, the *peçe* immediately, I mean, were removed immediately after the war. My mother wore it because she went to the Monday market and she put a

[8] 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.

black one on her head. They called that *syre*, not *peçe*. But she dressed like that with clothes, not with *kule*,[9] but with a dress. She looked beautiful because she was tall. She had blue eyes. It suited her. The sons insisted she remove it but she couldn't stand out in her surroundings. The campaigns to remove those things, you know, must be done more as a group, because individually it is a bit more… She very much loved school, extremely.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you also about your *rrethi*[10] and the neighbors you had. How was it then to live in your neighborhood?

Lirije Osmani: Well, we had very… for example, we were in one yard with my uncles' children. Our yard was about six ares. It was a big house, meaning the yard was big. The house was a house with two entrances for two big families. My paternal uncle had five children. He educated his children. His daughters were teachers, the sons professors. As much as he had the possibility. We had a lot of harmony. We had exceptionally good relations. The mothers loved each other, the mothers kept that family relation by educating us not to do such, not to talk, not to… mainly to learn, to read, like that.

Back then reading was very difficult. For example, as a high school student… because I was in the gymnasium after I finished the eight-year school. We read then. They liked us, meaning the language professors, they encouraged us a lot to read, but the problem was that there were no books in Albanian. There was a Lila family in Gjakova and we took books from them. There was *Bija e Mallkuar*,[11] books of such writers, then *Afërdita* by Sterjo Spasse.[12] Then books by foreign writers but only because they were in Albanian, [it was difficult even] to find the books, besides that, then the persecution of professors and teachers began.

The language professors taught us, I mean, through literature we also learned history. And because of history all of them were targeted by the government. I mean, they were, like, persecuted, because they would plant or they would find a person to slip a book there and the book would be found and immediately… they imprisoned them in the first year, they were heavy experiences for us. They imprisoned Avni Lama, from a very well-known family of Gjakova, then they imprisoned Kadri Kusari, he also was a professor of Albanian language.

There was a wedding, a former political prisoner from the Dobruna family. Members of the Hajdar Dushi [association] went there, among them also my sister's son, then there were also two women, two other women. Because the Hajdar Dushi association was created. The Hajdar Dushi association played an extraordinarily big role in Gjakova for the emancipation of women because they began to sing, they began to go, like, to the Hajdar Dushi association. Besides school, I mean. Few women

[9] Kule is a regional term used to refer to *dimija*, billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.

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

[11] Novel by Francesco Antonio Santori (in arbëreshë Françesk Anton Santori o Ndon Santori; Santa Caterina Albanese, 16 settembre 1819, Cerzeto, 7 settembre 1894), Italian priest, poet and playwright, culturally and linguistically arbëreshë/albanese.

[12] The novel *Afërdita* by Sterjo Spasse was published in 1944. Afërdita is a city girl, who upon finishing her studies is sent to teach in a mountain village, where she struggles to emancipate the local "backward" population. Spasse wrote a sequel, *Afërdita përsëri në fshat* (Afërdita returns to the village) in 1955. Both books were a huge success.

experienced some kind of metamorphosis like this, education. They went and sang Albanian songs at that wedding. The three of them stayed three months in prison. They were sentenced to prison. They sent them to the Peja Prison because Gjakova didn't have a prison, but to the Peja Prison. I mean, because they sang Albanian songs. It was… always we had that kind of pressure from them, [it was impossible] to read freely, to sing freely.

My brother bought a tape recorder, when he graduated as a student of Belgrade. He said that they went out walking and sang. There was an Albanian song, "*A i shihni këto pallate*" [Do you see these buildings], Albania's buildings, those old ones. Because we didn't have them. There were people following these [youths] and they sentenced him because they sang songs. When he came out, he bought an old three-speed gramophone out of nostalgia. We sang all the songs from Albania of all the Albanian composers, we sang those. Then someone warned him, "Enough Isa, because they're following you." After that a kind of pressure began from the Committee [of the Communist League].

They tried to protect the youth from fear that some problem would happen, you know. Then he decided, like that, to leave Gjakova - He worked for a time as a surgeon, he was the first surgeon -, because he spoke out and besides that he had two very serious events. They called him to the Court of Niš during the demonstrations of '68, because I'm jumping from topic to topic, but… They had… that girl who had climbed on the tank, maybe you heard? On this street, this street is called Agim Ramadani. She had been wounded, she had a bullet in her back. When she came at first she told only the name of the family and the telephone number. He called the parents and said, "Send her immediately to Slovenia because if they remove it here she might end up disabled."

One [event] happened exactly like that. They had shot a boy from a helicopter; they had wounded him in Gjakova. I was then a judge. I don't know how I let him go alone to Niš when he went. He didn't want to hear, you know? But if I had insisted more… We didn't know what would happen to him. They interrogated him because he was treating the wounded. And that was forbidden. Because they wanted to have as many victims as possible, to have… I mean, all of us were somehow… we, each one of us, tried as much as we could to perform our duty.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you a bit more about this cultural life. Were you a participant? How much were you engaged?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, I, as a student of the eight-year school, was motivated. That means I must have been in the sixth grade, because in the seventh I was no longer here, I had gone to Mitrovica... they performed "The 14-year-old Groom," or something like that, which shows, I mean, how women are treated. They had to... we had to go to give that play in Bretkoc, it's some kind of village there. My cousin's son worked there, he was a teacher. Now, my mother was a bit more fanatic. She said, "Send the girl to the village?" My mother always took care about… She said, "She's not going to go because she'll have to wash the floors." My father said, "Come on, it's fine." But she had more authority when it came to the care of the girls. Because she had six daughters. It wasn't easy.

Now, my father had authority. He was an educated man. All my friends…if the daughter of Ramiz Efendi[13] went, because that's what they called them, Efendi Ramiz, you know? As an urban person because of the respect they had. So if they went [without me], I would cry because [they made me] leave the play. We had gone to give the performance in some places and we encouraged the girls to get involved in the villages. Then I was in the *Shkolla Normale*,[14] I went because they said it was better for girls to go to the *Shkolla Normale*. I wanted to… I was oriented toward somewhere else but I went to the *Shkolla Normale*. Then we started with such programs. We had… "Kthimi prej Parisit" [*Return from Paris]*, by the writer Nazmi Rexha,[15] was published in *Jeta e Re*. We played that piece.

I had a friend, Flaka Jaha. We played the performance and gave it before students, then we also gave it in some other places. Besides that, when it was school day, I knew all those songs from Albania. We had learned them. We knew them by heart. There was one Ismajl, a classmate, who played the guitar, I sang. We would play it on the loudspeaker, the whole school could hear these: "Do you see these buildings?" "*Sa ta marojmë maturën"* [How we graduate from high school], "*A të kujtohen ditë e maji?*" [Do you remember those May days?]. These were Albanian songs that I know even today. Even today when I drive, I have these hundred songs of the century. I travel very happily. They are really beautiful songs, unforgettable songs.

I was always [involved] in some activities. Then as a student, that's when the Ramiz Sadiku Society was created. First we started with music, then Kris Berisha was a director, an artist of the People's Theatre. He took and chose Skanderbeg, *Trimi i mirë me shokë shumë*, [The good hero with many comrades]. There was Ali Gojani, a young man, a friend of ours. He was very active in casting people. He then played the role of Skanderbeg. Hasan Sala was wonderful, then there was Moisi Golemi who betrays for a while then again… I even found by chance that kind of critique that was made. I played the sister, a princess, because she was from the family of princes. I played the sister of Moisi Golemi, I mean, I encouraged him to… I supported him in his betrayal. I saw the review that the critic had written by chance now, because I hadn't had the chance to read it then.

Then what did we do? We went to Ferizaj, this was the Kosovo Amateur Theatre. We won first place there. Whoever won first place had to go represent Kosovo in (unclear 4:43). There was Safete Rogova. She truly is a born artist. She played her role so beautifully, something fantastic. Once we performed it all over Kosovo. Then we went to (unclear 5:08). After that, we went to perform in Ulqin because I knew the mayor of Ulqin, because my brother-in-law was from Ulqin. I went to ask them to give us a hall but at that time the situation of Albanians in Ulqin was such that you couldn't create any kind of problem with the Montenegrins.

They suggested that I go to Vladimir. I went to Vladimir, secured the hall, and there we gave the performance several times in Ulqin. That was an extraordinary experience for those people. Then we went to Dibra; we performed it in all the cities. Then I remember Mitrovica. There it was a bit of a problem, you know, they would mix you up like that, but we had a really good time. In all the cities, meaning… that was, how to say, a transformation for us as students, to be performing, but also for the

[13] A title of nobility meaning sir, lord or master, especially in the Ottoman Empire and the Caucasus.

[14] 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.

[15] No information available about this book.

youth to get organized. Then after us they started with Nita, with Nora. I mean, my sister's daughter played the role of Nora. She received some awards. The whole family, we were all… they were all active like that.

Anita Susuri: You told me about Mitrovica, that you were there. Mitrovica was more like an industrial city. How did it seem to you, different from Gjakova?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, it was, it was a somewhat bigger city. My sister had a state apartment, her husband was the director of the gymnasium for a time, and I lived in the northern part. There were two buildings there. There were also houses of the residents of Mitrovica. I mean, I would go in the morning to school from that side and I was at the Meto Bajraktari School. But we Gjakovars didn't know even one word of Serbian. There I learned Serbian, and in two years I learned it very well. My grades were always Fives.[16] My brother-in-law always helped me, especially in chemistry and physics, when I came home from school. I had to be prepared not only in school. He was very interested. It was different since I had…

Social life was very good, but that experience with that classmate was very hard, very. I will never forget it. We went to the train to see them off, the crying and screaming went on. It was very sad. I don't have any nostalgia for Turkey because our people suffered. They never opened schools, they didn't let them speak the language…

Anita Susuri: You didn't have any contact with that classmate?

Lirije Osmani: Never. I went two or three times, I could never find out where, in which direction, where it ended up.

Anita Susuri: How did you first decide to go to Sarajevo to study?

Lirije Osmani: Well, Sarajevo, I mean, I had a great desire to study. I mean, after I finished the *Normale*, the *Shkolla Normale*, we were about twelve girls in the first class. From my generation, only I finished. That's how high the standards were. We had extremely good professors. I'm very grateful because they taught us, I mean, there wasn't any of that [favoritism]. At first, the *Shkolla Normale* was a four year school. Then they made it five years; they added another year. Then they reduced it by half a year. So when I graduated, I graduated after four and a half years. In the fourth year, I had four classmates. I mean, four had reached the fourth year.

There was so much need for teachers that, I'm not saying they released them, but when they reached the fourth year, with just half a year left, three students, three future teachers, had to repeat the year. They had to do, I mean, the fourth year and another half year to, I mean, repeat the year and they couldn't graduate. I finished it, and I had gotten a scholarship from the municipality. I tried, because honestly my father had just a pension. They had given me funds, like giving you 300 euros today. That was the value then. They assigned me to work in Graçanica, to teach Albanian to Serbs. Because there was some law passed about the use of Albanian and Serbian as languages… it had, like, some status, as a not-obligatory language.

Anita Susuri: Elective subject.

[16] Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0).

Lirije Osmani: No, it was mandatory, I mean, also in school. The school that was in Serbian in Graçanica had to include the Albanian language. So, they had to learn it, the students.

Anita Susuri: And in Sarajevo, you weren't there for a year? How long did you study?

Lirije Osmani: Yes. Then I went to Sarajevo. When I [worked] in Graçanica, I had to wake up at five in the morning to go to work because there was no bus. The only bus was the one from Kishnica. Then we waited until seven o'clock when the school opened. I mean, that made me lose my will for teaching, or for taking up such a thing. Then I decided… it was, in fact, called elective back then, it wasn't obligatory. We didn't even have a manual for teaching the language, and I tell you, I said to the children, "Buy the primer," and I would give them, whoever learned a bit, I'd give them a Five. The children liked it, they loved me; they hadn't yet started to be indoctrinated.

Now, if someone didn't buy it, I said, "Why didn't you buy the book?" "My father said, 'The [Albanian] primer cannot enter my house.'" So, their indoctrination against the language and against coexistence starts from childhood. Anyway, that ended. Then I lost my motivation, I stopped, I didn't have any more desire for education. My desire for teaching passed. I decided to go there [Sarajevo], and it was late. Here, the entrance exams had already been held. I went to Sarajevo. I had a friend. I went, but because of the conditions… There were Albanian students there. There was one, Evine Doramari was her name. She finished medicine. The first female lawyer who graduated in Sarajevo was Shadane Agani. She was there, another Albanian woman. Those two were there. I can't remember the third.

Because of the conditions, I returned to Pristina and continued there. I mean, I prepared for the exams, and there we were, two or three girls, I think, very few. But even there, in the end, I was the only woman, all the others were men. We had professors from Belgrade, from Skopje, and in the first year, we had this Rifat Osmani. He used to lecture, he was an assistant. Then there was Hajredin Hoxha, in sociology, and in the final year we had Professor [unclear, min 13:38] Popovci. He taught us Inheritance Law. We learned from Serbian books. We had a problem because professors gave a lot of importance not only to the content itself, I mean, to test how well we had learned, but also to how we expressed ourselves. And we had difficulty responding in Albanian because the books were in Serbian. But that finished too. I mean, I finished the faculty. Now, the matter of work came up. I finished around March, I graduated on March 15th.

Anita Susuri: Which year?

Lirije Osmani: 1967. Then I applied as an intern in the District Prosecutor's Office. There was Rezak Shala, the state prosecutor. He said, "If you're not a party member…" He wanted to take me because he knew my family was an educated family, but I said, "No, really, I won't join the party." I stayed until June. On June 15th, somehow they accepted me. Usually, in those moments, things happened when people went on vacation and things weren't checked too closely. I was hired in the District Prosecutor's Office. The district prosecutor was a certain Branko Kijačić. There was one from Prizren, a very distinguished man, and a very old man. He was a very good professional. There was Njaziburgi Deva, there was Isa Omeragixhi, and there was Mentor Jakupi. These three.

I told you that I was very free to do something in those days. In the afternoons I used to go to the Regional Library here and take *Drejtësia Popullore* ("People's Law"). I extracted the words from there, I would take penal cases, extract certain terms. I made a kind of terminological dictionary like that, it

was only typed. I really regret that I kept it somewhere but could never find it again. I could never find it; maybe I lost it, probably because of moving, I changed several apartments over the years. We began to gradually work in Albanian. Then, I mean, on June 15th, in August, I went to Gjilan. They sent me to represent a double murder. All the prosecutors had gone on vacation, there was no one to go. The trial was scheduled; someone had to go.

So, the prosecutor says to me, "You have to go." I was afraid. It was my first time going. Anyway, I had seen trials because I used to go with colleagues. Somehow the trial lasted two days. I got a sort of, how to say, a kind of strength, some courage, that I could take part. But, truly, they always called me to the collegium.[17] Every Saturday they discussed cases, exchanged opinions, and interpreted laws. I was very lucky because, you know, I learned a lot. I mean, as a woman, everyone liked me and they knew me, also family-wise. Then, in the Municipal Prosecutor's Office, there were two prosecutors, the deputy prosecutor was a Serb. Three in total.

They had worked longer, but they wanted to leave Kosovo, so then they chose me, there was a need for someone. They surely recommended me; they asked the chief, "Can she?" There were cases especially with minors, there were around 200 cases coming up. Then also Bademe Sutjani, she too finished the faculty, and they chose her as well. The two of us worked because we were unmarried, we didn't have obligations, and we worked with great diligence. Then, later, in the District Court they needed an Albanian woman, there still wasn't one, and a woman who could work. At first, they gave us criminal cases, those with minors. Since I had already worked there, I had many minor cases that I had completed. I worked there in the District Court for a while, criminal cases, then they gave me civil ones.

Then also Nekibe [Kelmendi][18] became a judge at that time, so we were two people. I moved up to the second instance. I worked, I judged, and I worked in the second instance in the collegium that decided cases from all the courts of the Pristina Region. There was Lipjan, Podujeva, then the Municipal Court of Pristina, and another court. So four courts, in the second instance. You gained experience because I worked with two colleagues, one was a Serb who was near retirement, and the other was a Croat from Croatia. He was truly a gentleman. I learned from people who knew the work, who knew it well, I mean.

Then, after they left, I continued being a member of the second-instance collegium. When I went, Faruk Presheva was one of the best judges of the Supreme Court. They were all very good, but he left; they sent him to Belgrade as the representative of the Kosovo Court. Then the position became free, and after the District Court, they elected me to the Supreme Court until 1986. There, I was in a collegium with [unclear, min 20:13], a person who was truly professionally very, exceptionally advanced. I was in the office with him, and then also a colleague of mine from the District Court, a certain Besanka. Later came another judge, Dragica Marcenović. So, we also had a Serbian colleague. We worked on cases, we reported them. Each worked on their own cases. It was very good and very interesting work.

Anita Susuri: You told me that twice it happened that in the courtroom you survived…

[17] The three member committee she refers to below.

[18] Nekibe Kelmendi (1944-2011), lawyer and human right activist, after the war she was a member of Parliament for the LDK and served as Minister of Justice from 2008 through 2010.

Lirije Osmani: Yes, at that time… I had just gone… I forgot to mention that meanwhile, the State Prosecutor's Office had opened, the State Prosecutor's Office that dealt with requests for protection of legality. If the decisions had passed through two instances, if the party had the right to file a request, a petition for… the party had the right to request that the prosecutor file a request for protection of legality against the second-instance decision, which was a final decision. They needed a civil-law specialist. Nekibe went, she was a lawyer, and they appointed me there. I worked there for about a year. From the District Court, I worked one year. We had civil cases.

Among them there were people who were sentenced heavily for a single word. I mean, one person had been sentenced, by coincidence he was from Gjakova, because the collegium decided that it was a misdemeanor. He was sentenced to 60 days, he was in prison. "What's the issue, the motive?" "Because he called someone a *shka*."[19] I said, "I'm from Gjakova," — when we were discussing, I said, "I'm from Gjakova. In Gjakova there is a place called the street of the Serbs, it was actually called the street of the *shkjas*, but it's the same thing. I don't use it, but I mean in the sense that I've lived abroad for a long time. The street of the *shkjas.* So when you ask people what it's called, they say *shka.*"

Meaning, it's not… but since the political situation was worsening every day, then, I told him, "I guarantee you, go to Gjakova, ask anyone if what I'm saying is true, and believe me it's so. Ask where the street of the *shkjas* is, and they'll tell you: there." They themselves called it that way. There's also their church there, where that problem arose. Then we filed the request, and the man was acquitted. I mean, always, not because of bias, but because the duty obligated me to file some [appeals]. That was his fate. And always, I had the desire to protect people, to work fairly as much as I could. So then…

Anita Susuri: And those cases with guns that happened in the courtroom?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, yes. That was… it was in '74. Right after I went from the Prosecutor's Office to the Court, no, I was in the District Court. This happened while I was in the District Court. There were two cases. One case was when a girl pulled out a revolver to take revenge for her brother who had been killed. The other case was a 22-year-old boy who wanted to avenge his uncle. Then the whole judicial panel was there, there was an older judge. I was representing the case. I was…there was that heavy chair. I couldn't push the chair, I just had to… because the bullet, the accused was here, I was here, and the panel of judges, they all went under…

Anita Susuri: Under the table.

Lirije Osmani: There was no other way, because with all those bullets, they didn't choose whom to hit. Then when… he survived, barely survived, couldn't kill him. When he came to trial the second time, they told him, "Do you know that you were about to kill the prosecutor?" There have been incidents. My husband used to say, "You're not going to work there, you're not!" I'd say, "I won't leave the court because of this." Luckily, nothing happened afterward.

Anita Susuri: And that girl who fired, did she kill him or just injure him?

Lirije Osmani: That girl? I think she didn't kill him. The boy, I think, was shot in the '90s, I don't remember the case, I must've forgotten it.

[19] *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet,* is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

Anita Susuri: Were there other such revenge cases, killings? Did you prosecute them?

Lirije Osmani: Revenge cases?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Lirije Osmani: Yes, there were killings, there were. But not so many, I mean, later they decreased, but mostly, always, always the motive was either that, or jealousy, or something similar.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: When did you start dealing with cases and becoming a lawyer?

Lirije Osmani: While I was in the Supreme Court, we had gone with some friends, Edi Shukriu and another friend from an organization that was associated with my husband, Public Advocacy. We were going to go to Russia to see… to see Russia. My husband told me, "I'm hesitant to go." "It's free, go." We agreed and went. It was my first time on a plane. Edi was telling me, "Tell them it is about archaeology," she said, "It doesn't interest you," and "this one is scared of the plane." Anyway, we went. We saw Kyiv. Unfortunately, when I look at it now, Kyiv was truly western. Then to Moscow and Leningrad. These three places.

When I returned, the government of Kosovo had been established, in '86. In '86, they had arranged for a woman to be there and a woman who had some kind of background, someone from the court and who knew how to talk. To tell the truth, I never even thought about it, I was simply appointed that way. Back then all my appointments happened that way. They had prepared materials and my entire curriculum. I was appointed a member of the government, but as a minister without a portfolio. I didn't have a portfolio, but because I had worked in the courts, I was assigned to the Council for Political System.

There was the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Legislation, then there was the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and there was the Directorate for Legal Property Issues. Then there was the Ministry of Defense, and I think those were the ministries. I was not politically suitable since the chair was Refik Agaj. He was a politician, he was a fighter, an old man. He was the chair while I worked on the materials that were needed there. The situation was getting harder every day; there were problems, and immediately after I went, the situation started to deteriorate. Violence began, accusations began against the intelligentsia.

Then the complaints from Serbs about land issues began. Not just the case of Brezovica and the case of their displacement. The director of this Directorate for Legal Property Issues was heavily burdened. I didn't know what information he sent because he prepared those. A delegation came from Belgrade to see what the Albanians were doing. I said, "Let me follow this," and we went to Brezovica. I always pushed back when they came before the commission, insisting that things were not as they claimed. The municipality of Ferizaj had converted it—the land that had not been in use. It was open land in Brezovica, by the river. They declared it an urban development zone, intended for the construction of vacation homes. Both Albanians and Serbs were able to acquire property there.

But according to his reports, they claimed that [Albanians] had taken their lands. However, for those that had been taken by force, they paid 1800. I knew this privately and not because I had a vacation home. A colleague would say to me, “Do you have a vacation home? Why are you having such a hard time?” Just joking, because she was very…all the Albanians were high ranking, the ministers were each better than the other, each superior to the other. Now, I went and saw. I said, “Are you seeing?” He was the son of Milan Zeqari. He was connected to some kind of factory, he must have been from Ferizaj. I didn’t know his full background, only that he was a deputy minister in the Ministry of Justice. He had come to see what was going on, to observe what we Albanians were doing with the land.

I told him, “Look, this is all a construction site here, but they have paid.” Then we inspected other places too. I said, “You are the son of Milan Zeqiri,” who must have been a martyr or hero of Kosovo; I said, “We will bring you back here as part of the team.” He never came again, but I think about that time. There were also some laws that needed to be changed. I constantly opposed things in that Council. Since I worked in the court, I wasn't accustomed to politics. I had never engaged in politics before. In art, I did what I could with shows and such…

I didn’t have it in me otherwise, and I believed one must be fair regardless, because in the end, even if they remove you, it amounts to nothing. And that is exactly how things turned out. They removed me from there and put me in the Council for Social Activities. There in Social Activities was the BVI[20]CBI for social protection; there were schools, film, and all the cinematography, all social activities. With all these laws, they needed to be changed. The law for cinematography. What was that law that needed changing? Or the laws for schools or... always… anyway. In the meantime, there was a case, when they brought the request for, I mean, the initiative for changing the Constitution of Kosovo from Belgrade. Naturally, we disagreed. We were organizing a meeting where someone from Bosnia was coming by plane to attend.

We were active in politics. All the judges from the district courts were involved in that political activity and needed to declare their positions there. Naturally, Kosovo was against the changes because it was clear where they were going, that is, to suppress Kosovo's autonomy. The Vice President of the Serbian Government came from Belgrade. Among other things, he said, in Serbian, “*Vi necete nista da gubite*" [You don’t lose anything with the constitutional changes]. I said straight away, without any hesitation, “*Kako neko može da dobije, a da drugi ne gubi*?” [How can one gain and the other not lose?]

The next day, Belgrade’s *Politika*[21] featured an article with the headline “*Lirije Osmani, član izvršnog veća izjavila: Kako može neko da dobije, a da drugi ne gubi?*” [Lirije Osmani, a member of the executive council, said: How can someone gain and others not lose?] You know, there were many other issues discussed in the sessions, decisions were made regarding… They wanted to change the law. I personally went as a government member and said, "Look, submit your comments,” I said, “as I was not in a position to draft legislation on such a matter.”... then Ali Podrimja[22] came to discuss the

[20] BVI (*Bashkësia Vetëqeverisëse e Interesit*) refers to the Yugoslav *samoupravna interesna zajednica* (“self-managing community of interest”), a self-management organizational structure used under socialist Yugoslavia to coordinate public sectors such as social protection, education, culture and film within the framework of workers’ self-management.

[21] Politika is a daily newspaper published in Belgrade, Serbia, since 1904.

[22] Ali Podrimja (1942 – 2012) was an Albanian poet. He was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. In the early ‘80s, he published the masterful collection Lum Lumi (1982), which marked a turning point not only in his own work but also in contemporary Kosovo verse as a whole.

diferencimi[23] of university professors. There was an extraordinary campaign against the Albanian intelligentsia.

Always, in my opinion, I believed we should have a stance. Meanwhile, Nazmi Mustafa was the chairman, he was the prime minister, I think they sent him to Belgrade, I don't know. I only know that a delegation came from Belgrade, I can't remember the name of the person, but he was the Deputy Prime Minister of the Serbian government, and one of our members was there. They called me in; I wondered why they were calling me. I told my colleagues, "I'm going because there's an infection," just joking.

When I arrived, they said, "From now on, you are no longer a member of the Government of Kosovo." I asked, "Why?" They said, "There's no reason." I replied, "No, I was a judge of the Supreme Court. I had worked in courts for 20 years," I said, "I need to know what to tell my children, why? To my children, my husband, family, 'Why were you removed?' I just want to know the reason." I thought to myself, the situation was extremely serious. It had been... and it was difficult to stay until the end because they intended to destroy everything.

It's hard when you are part of such an organ; you can't just step out and say something in front of everyone, but I think about when we were in meetings. There was a moment when it felt like I might break free. No, that was the Yugoslav program they brought, it couldn't have been a worse program as every segment was under attack. But it was necessary to go, to verify, to prepare materials for what was not as it was claimed or had happened; it was indeed a very difficult period. "There's no reason," no reason, I stood up and left. Later, they called in Hajrullah Zaitin. I don't know if it happened before or after, but he was also the Minister of Economy.

He sat across from Tomas Jegulić, he was a government member, dealing with economic issues. He was a very good expert in those matters. Otherwise, he also founded the Economic Bank of Kosovo back then, and I was very pleased that an Economic Bank of Kosovo was opened. Having a bank that served our needs was important because the foreigners had inundated us, for example, and nothing was staying in Kosovo. So then I spent about two years at home after I was dismissed. After that, I went to the Self-governance association for social protection. A colleague of mine was an attorney and was the director there. I went, I said, "Let me get out." I went to see what was happening regarding pensions or whatever.

The pension wasn't a significant thing, but it was motivating. When I went there, we spoke as friends, and at that moment, the commission came in. Rade Zvicer was the chair of the commission. I knew they had come to remove me. Then he told me, "In the decision, it says that when we were in, when we went to the office of the chairman, Lirije Osmani, a nationalist, was there." I didn't ask because I often go to Gjilan but never get to see it; I would have liked to. I decided then to register with the Kosovo Bar Association. I opened an office here; I rented a small space to work.

Anita Susuri: Before we continue where we left off, I wanted to go back a bit to the year '81 when the protests happened. What is your experience? What did you see? What was the environment like where you lived?

[23] In the context of Yugoslavia, *diferencimi,* "differentiation" referred to a form of political and social ostracism. It involved isolating and marginalizing individuals who were deemed politically unreliable or dissenting against the ruling Communist regime. This could include demotions at work, social exclusion, surveillance, and other forms of repression to discourage opposition and maintain control.

Lirije Osmani: In '81, I was in the Supreme Court. I know what kind of situation it was, a very difficult situation. There were protests, criminal prosecutions, murders, violence. A deeply impactful experience. The situation worsened day by day. It was very indescribable what was happening to our people. There were numerous persecutions, many cases. The criminal courts were excessively burdened with cases; there were remands and other matters being processed. Then also in '89, I was in the government, and that situation was also very serious. There were violent measures, various measures that...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the miners' strike?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, I remember the miners' strike very well because we were quite preoccupied with what was happening every day. I heard about it from my colleagues; at that time, Azem Vllasi was involved. It was an extraordinarily difficult situation and an impactful experience. I know those who had the opportunity to be there to provide support... It was a heavy experience for the entire population. Although I didn't have a role where I could help much except for moral support, I know that the people who were involved had difficulties expressing their experiences when I had the chance to sit with those who had the opportunity to be there.

Very much... These people have always gained every right with an extraordinarily large sacrifice. Their march was something magnificent but also very painful, very hard. For those who truly were, they had sacrificed a lot. But, that was it.

Anita Susuri: Did you know, of course you knew, about the existence of these illegal groups that were active back then?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, indeed we were aware. We had discussions among colleagues who dealt with criminal matters; we were very much preoccupied with it. When they were arrested, meaning when they understood who was crucial, how they were treated, what they were experiencing in prisons, there were informative discussions. We were all informed about the issues of whether or not to be involved... But I know that my colleagues were always very concerned. They tried to be as fair as possible and to contribute in a way that would prevent others from suffering. Then some lawyers who were engaged wrote various petitions during that time.

Anita Susuri: How did the system function back then? Is it similar to today? For instance, the prosecution? Did they have any role there?

Lirije Osmani: No, lawyers certainly had a role. But I don't know, the prosecution was never conducted in the presence of a lawyer, which I assume I know from those who I worked with. I didn't have access then, as I primarily worked on civil matters. However, of course, everything that happened, we exchanged experiences and knew the hardships they faced. There were lawyers who worked without any hesitation. No one showed, for example, any weakness or fear… because in the end, it was our duty. It was a very difficult situation as the youth was being imprisoned.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that in 1991 you got involved with the Bar Association; could you talk about that part?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, I registered with the Bar Association back in '91. After a year, some colleagues and friends of mine, Zenun Çelaj, Nehat Islami, and then Bajram Kelmendi, all of them proposed that I join the Council for Human Rights. "Would you like to get involved?" "Of course, why wouldn't I?" I went to a meeting they were having back then, discussions took place, and I was accepted. From that point, I

began activities related to human rights violations. We had specific focuses, such as evictions, violence, and then violence against children.

It was a problem that parliament deputies had housing, as did the police. I got involved. The students are very grateful that I saved their apartments. It was a problem for them. Then there was violence against women. They would take apartments from them, making them appeal to the Council afterward. For every type of violence they committed, we wrote reports. Each had specific issues. The Council was an organization that knew who was coming forth, showing interest regarding what was happening. At that time, the Council had a large number of external collaborators, up to two thousand, depending on how the situation deteriorated, up until the year 2000.

Those members of the Council would inform the Council every day about what was happening. Then we decided to establish a lawyers' duty service. A few of us lawyers — myself, Fazli Balaj, Destani, and some others. Some were exempt because they had criminal cases, and we were on duty every day from 05:00 to 07:00. People came from all cities and villages, bringing cases, and they informed us. We would then record those cases. In the meantime, we had a kind of meeting in Paris with Serbian intellectuals. I was there, Fehmi Agani[24] was there, Mahmut Bakalli[25] was there, I was there, Zenun was there. I had the members there. Let me check the year, it was July 12, 1996.

There it was decided to establish an organization that would deal with documenting human rights violations and to have a hotline as part of it. A French non-governmental organization wanted to finance the Council so that there would be a duty phone where cases could be reported. I wrote the first report when we started, the first report was about people being expelled from their apartments, Serbs entering and taking over apartments. There was violence being carried out against citizens. That functioned within the Council at that time, in addition to everything else. Then the information started coming in from the field; we prepared reports and informed all non-governmental organizations, both local and international, all the way to the United Nations.

Then the interest grew because people came to the Council. Adem Demaçi was once the chairman, later Pajazit Nushi. We recorded the cases, and various delegations came. Louise Arbour came, among many others who were well known worldwide, to learn what was happening in Kosovo. Then Nekibe worked on discriminatory laws; everyone had their own branch. All the lawyers were engaged in working with the Council. Later, when the issue of schools arose and schools were closed, we prepared a report. I even went, I believe, to the Federal Assembly to present that report, to show that it was not untrue, this had happened, schools had been closed by a government decision.

Part Four

[24] Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a philosopher, sociologist and politician, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. He was assassinated by Serbian troops as he attempted to flee Pristina disguised as a woman to avoid detection.

[25] Mahmut Bakalli (1936-2006) was a Kosovar Albanian politician. Bakalli began his political career in the youth organization of the League of Communists of Kosovo, eventually becoming its leader in 1961. As he rose through the ranks, he was elected to the Central Committee of the party's Serbian chapter, and to the Presidium of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia's Central Committee.

Lirije Osmani: There were many activities. Then I started dealing with these cases, when arrests began, especially of women. I focused on their defense. I even found the indictment against Fatime. Then there were problems meeting them; we had no information about their activities because we were not allowed to talk to them, they were not allowed to say anything. Even if they had spoken, they would have been monitored. When I read the documents that day, when they brought them to me, honestly, I hesitated. Such brave acts, such enormous work they had done. I am very happy that I was able to contribute as much as I could.

We addressed the president of the court in writing, stating that we were not being allowed to make contact, that they were being mistreated, that they were being interrogated after hours. I found all those letters we had submitted. The responses we received claimed that this was not true, that we could visit them whenever we wanted. But for example, when I went, I saw Fatime's hands, I saw that… she did not dare speak because they were standing right there. And we tried to defend them in court as much as the court system functioned at all.

Anita Susuri: For example, did you volunteer yourself as a lawyer, or were you appointed? By the family?

Lirije Osmani: No, whoever came to me and asked, "Will you defend her?" I took the case immediately, without any hesitation.

Anita Susuri: Were you yourself at risk afterward?

Lirije Osmani: At risk? Whoever thought about that, we didn't think about risk. We were lawyers; that was our job. Naturally, it's normal to have some degree of fear. For example, one of the last times I went, I took my husband with me because they told us, "You are defending revolutionaries." I also had the case of Ramize Abdullahu; she was in that group, the group of 19, the ones who were brought in handcuffs to trial.[26] I even went to the second instance in Belgrade, to the Supreme Court. When I went there, the other lawyers did not come, Fazli Bala had a criminal case as well.

They asked me, "Where are the lawyers?" They had prepared the library for the session. I said, "There is a serious trial there, and they were held back." It was pointless to go; it was known that the verdict would be confirmed anyway. In the end, they reduced her sentence by one year. Ramize had been sentenced to two years; they reduced it by one year. There was also a group that believed the struggle in Kosovo could not be won through war. They all said, "Through peace." I would say, "Say 'through peace'." They wouldn't listen. They were so determined — so brave. "Through war," they would say. I would say, "Oh Ramize, listen to your lawyer." But I want to say that they were very brave women.

Anita Susuri: What was the charge against the Group of 19?

Lirije Osmani: The charge was association for enemy activity, something like that.

Anita Susuri: What had they done?

[26] The 1993 trial is discussed in an Amnesty International report: https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur700011994en.pdf

Lirije Osmani: Well, they had formed a group with the aim of destroying the Yugoslav system, that independence should be achieved by creating a republic, and so on. They were severely mistreated.

Anita Susuri: And with you as their lawyer, how often did you have meetings with them? Were the meetings scheduled?

Lirije Osmani: We went whenever they asked us to go. Whenever there was a need, for example, to write something, we had to go, to help them with that. But as for visits, unfortunately we couldn't really know what was happening, because they themselves were not allowed to speak. They didn't dare, because guards were standing right there. As for the mistreatment, we knew how things worked there. It showed in their faces and in their gestures.

Anita Susuri: For example, what kinds of cases did you have, I'm not asking you to name names?

Lirije Osmani: For example, the case of Majlinda was very serious, because she was part of a very large group that had entered the organization. Then there was Ramize, then Fatime. There were activities like that, you've seen them yourselves. Then there was Mevlyde. Each of them was at risk. They worked incredibly hard, extraordinarily hard. They truly deserve to be called heroines. They genuinely helped the people in the most difficult conditions, with food, with supplies, with support.

Then there was also Podrimçaku, I couldn't remember her name at first, but I later found Zarije's file. I even found her report and the materials. They were many… Zarije especially.

Anita Susuri: Under which legal articles were they sentenced? Were these articles for acts of…?

Lirije Osmani: Just a moment now…

Anita Susuri: It doesn't have to be exact.

Lirije Osmani: No, I have them all here. These were the cases. This was Ramize Avdullahu, Sanije Aliu, Shukrie Rexha. Majlinda, she was charged under Article 136, hostile activity. She had been sentenced up to four years. Then Hatixhe was also under Article 136. "Association for hostile activity," all of them. Then there were two others, Jehona Krasniqi and Leonora, they were not my clients. Mevlyde Saraçi was charged under Article 136 and Article 125, terrorism, the most serious offense that exists. Zahrije Podrimçaku also under Articles 136 and 125, association for hostile activity, and so on. Fatime, who had sent aid and materials, was also charged with providing assistance and other political criminal acts.

Who else? These are the letters we wrote to the courts, stating that visits were not being allowed, that they were not permitted to speak with their lawyer, that guards were present so they could not speak freely or explain what was happening to them. But of course, the judge would say, "There's no problem, you can go whenever you want. When visits are scheduled, you can speak freely," and all of that, even though they were former colleagues, you know.

I even went to the office of Ziriçi, who was an investigating judge. I said, "Do you know how these political cases work? Someone has to be present so that they can see what is being said." So they wouldn't reveal what violence was being exercised against them outside. We were not…

Anita Susuri: For example, what was a typical day like when you visited them? Were you searched as well?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, of course. We were searched, absolutely, in case we had anything on us. We would wait for hours until they allowed us to see them. It was a way of showing pressure, basically saying, "Don't come as often as you like." They preferred that we come briefly, just to see them a little, to get a sense of the situation. They communicated through gestures, quiet words, signs.

Anita Susuri: What did you usually talk about?

Lirije Osmani: Regarding the charges, yes, they spoke freely about the offense itself. Some would say they had no connection. Others, like one of them, I would say, "Say 'peace' for now, and continue the struggle when you're free, instead of sitting here and serving prison time unnecessarily."

Anita Susuri: From interviews, for example with Zahrije Podrimçaku, I remember that she was very persistent and didn't try to hide anything.

Lirije Osmani: Very much so. Not only persistent, she went in knowing exactly what was happening. She truly impressed me when I saw her, though I had never met her before. She couldn't tell me those things in prison because she was being monitored. Conversations were monitored, everything. Carrying weapons while knowing what… that's also how she was arrested, at the Council. And we, too, were closely monitored at the Council.

One day, just before I was supposed to leave for Paris, after Fatime Boshnjaku's trial ended, I was leaving the next day because there was going to be a meeting of representatives from 100 countries, to provide aid to places at risk…a delegation arrived, and people from *Koha Ditore* called me: "Lirije, can you take them to the Council?" I said yes. I called Fazli Bala and asked him to come with me, I thought maybe it would take time, they'd need to be accompanied, offered coffee when we went to the Council, they had come from France. As they came, they were briefed at the Council, and we informed them about the situation. When we went outside, I saw a police car and said, "Fazli, now we're finished, I won't be able to go." The director called me and said, "Come." I said, "I'm not coming, it smells like war." He said, "There will be no war in Kosovo."

Whenever I traveled officially, or even to bar association meetings, they would always assign my seat as Serbia. Not Serbia and Kosovo, but Serbia, or sometimes Vojvodina. I always had to make an issue of it. I would say, "I will not sit there." They didn't understand. "Where do you want to sit then?" "Anywhere but there, because it implies we are part of them." We always had to object. They told me, "We have Kosovo written everywhere on the panels in Paris, don't worry." They knew. I had worked with them a lot over the phone.

During that time, many cases that came to the council were referred to lawyers. They took the cases and worked on them, saved people's apartments, and if arrests happened, they went and defended them. That's how the cases came through the Council.

Anita Susuri: If you have nothing more to add, I wanted to ask you something…

Lirije Osmani: Well, I said to Fazli, "That's it for us now, we're done." But they had come specifically for that. They went to that man's apartment, Ymer Jaka, near the *Shkolla Normale*, in Sofalia. They had

taken him and mistreated him. Later, when they came to Paris, they told me and made an issue of it, they made it public. That was why they had come to investigate at the Council. Imagine, foreigners were treated that way. Those were the circumstances.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back and ask you about the imprisoned women. Did you also have meetings with their families?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, families always asked, naturally. They came, asked, and I informed them as much as I could based on what I had seen. But regarding the activities themselves, I couldn't know exactly what their condition was, because they didn't speak. Only when we received the indictments did we learn what they had done. Even then, thank God, the indictments didn't include everything they had done. When I read the documents they brought me, I was truly impressed by what kind of women we had. Honestly, I keep saying it, they should be declared heroines.

They helped the war directly, with uniforms, weapons, supplies. Beyond all that, I knew about Fatime, that she had delivered aid to Ramush's [Haradinaj] group there. She worked with everyone, with the wounded, many things. It was not easy to catch those women.

Anita Susuri: Did you notice, for example, during the 1990s, that you were being followed?

Lirije Osmani: They took me to the police twice, around the time of the Assembly, when the Assembly was held… the Kaçanik Assembly, because I was involved in the whole process. Since Iliaz [Kurteshi] and I were together in the government, I knew everything that was going on. Then, on the day it was supposed to happen… there was still uncertainty about whether it should be done, whether the Constitution should be proclaimed or whether they should wait. Iliaz asked me, he asked [Rexhep] Qosja[27] too, and Qosja said, "It's not the time yet."

I called Bajram Kelmendi[28] and said, "Can you talk to Mahmut?" Mahmut [Bakalli] had given him a letter with five points. The only one I remember was: "In any case, proclaim the Constitution, bring out the Constitution one day before Serbia makes its move." He was a man with political experience, he knew. I don't remember the other four. A lot of time has passed. I really wanted to, but I didn't have time. When I met them, I gave it to Bajram. Bajram gave it to me and I gave it to Iliaz. I don't know whether he kept it or not.

Anita Susuri: And who wrote it? Mahmut Bakalli?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, Mahmut Bakalli. Then they were going to gather; they needed to summon the Prime Minister of Kosovo. It was Jusuf Zejnullahu. We were going to meet Iliaz Kurteshi, Halit… What was his name… Muharremi, Halit Muharremi was the secretary of the Assembly. He was the main one preparing this, preparing their meetings. Then someone had to call them by phone, because we

[27] 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.

[28] 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.

couldn't communicate normally, they were being monitored. All of us were. I had been monitored too, because later they arrested me twice, two days, two times. Even Lira [my daughter] was… because I once, anyway, I'll tell you later.

Now we had to call Jusuf Zejnullahu for a meeting. I sent my daughter to go to him, because I knew they couldn't arrange it otherwise, I assumed. She went and called him and they met. They decided. Then on the day they were going to decide, I was naturally in the meetings. And when the session began, I was there in the Assembly building downstairs. I was calling the members who had remained upstairs and hadn't come down yet, because my sister's daughter Luljeta was also there with her collaborator from America, the one who was blind. She insisted at all costs that it be done as soon as possible. She was categorical. She is a woman with a lot of reputation there, very well informed, and she knows the system.

Then I also knew that thing, what they call it, the signal, what you have to say, the code-word for those who were going. Because I wanted to go too. Since I was following everything, what was happening, how the procedure was going, all of it. The others who were going, in case someone stopped them and asked, "Where are you going?" they would say, "We're going to a circumcision," like that. That's how they gathered. They proclaimed the Constitution, and then at 2:00 in the night they called me from Greece. They had arrived in Greece. "Please notify the family, we arrived safely." Meaning they had gotten out that way, and needed the family informed.

The next day I said, "Iliriana, get on the bus and go tell them." If I went, they would have… Iliriana went. The family was very happy, sending children in that situation. She was quite "revolutionary," she liked those kinds of activities. Then we went. Nekibe and Bajram were going to Germany to take the Constitution text, to deliver it. We went to the Migjeni Association. There was a man, his first name was Aleks, I can't remember the surname. Everyone got involved to print it as quickly as possible because it had to come out. The next day, when I went out, people were saying, "Does she know what's new?" "No," I would say, "there's nothing." I wanted to see whether anything had shifted, whether public opinion knew anything.

Then I went with them. We went from there to Germany. Nekibe told my sister, "Don't make the mistake of letting Lirije go for a month, don't let her return to Kosovo yet." I stayed. They had some work in Germany. That got done too. It was proclaimed, and we were all happy it happened without consequences.

After that, I went several times because their families were there. They were monitoring me. When the parliament members made their first visit to Albania, they called me and told me they had been there. Meaning I was being wiretapped. I said, "So where did you find those white socks to wear?" A few days later, the police came, two men, not in uniform, just like that. They said, "We have an order to take you." I said, "Show me the order." They said, "No." I said, "I'm not coming." I tried to close the door, and he put his foot in and pushed the door and came in. I said, "Oh God, Lira, bring me a pair of socks." I saw my daughter, she was frightened.

Then when I got there, they said, "You wrote the Constitution." I said, "How could I write the Constitution, I…" "But you were a judge." "All of that," I said, "yes, I'm a lawyer, but I'm not a Constitution-maker. I know what a Constitution is, but I don't know how one is made." They kept me for about an hour. "Who made it?" "I don't know, how would I know?" I truly didn't know who had

drafted it. They insisted: you were involved, you sent it, and so on. They knew everything, but they let me go.

And they arrested me one more time. They handed me a paper: "Write who made the Constitution." At that time I had registered as a lawyer, but I didn't tell them. I thought I'd see what they wanted to do. I said, "I don't know." I really didn't know. "I don't know who made it, I have nothing to write." Then I said, "Let me go do my work." "What work do you do?" I said, "I'm a lawyer." He immediately got up and let me go. I left. That's how it was.

Anita Susuri: And the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (KLDMNJ), the one that collected information, did you send it outside to organizations?

Lirije Osmani: Everything, yes, everything. We sent all the information. Everything that… For example, when it was about September 3rd, when they expelled us from work and closed the schools,[29] we wrote reports, reports, and we sent them.

Anita Susuri: By mail, or how?

Lirije Osmani: No, we sent them through people. The last time I went, what date was it, Mahmut Bakalli, Fehmi Agani, and I were on the plane. We were sitting in a row, three seats. The last time, we sent materials through him. They checked every detail. But we had no luck, nothing. We went via Belgrade because there were no other flights. But we had someone who worked for us, he took all the documents and got them through. The man who was Ombudsperson, he's a member of this, of the Kosovo Electoral Commission. He had problems, he always made trouble for Valdete, what was his name? He's from Gjilan.

He was the one, and I think he too had been politically imprisoned. He worked a lot, worked very hard. All the materials were kept with him; he stayed in Switzerland. They had also prepared an indictment [of Milosevic], Bajram did it, when the Tribunal was in Italy, with Antonio Cassese. About 99 cases of violence that had happened, they worked on that too. That was the first one; the second was later when we prepared it for the Hague Tribunal. For that, I had to go somewhere, to a village. Hilmi, who is a Kosovo deputy… someone took me by car to a house of one of the Jashari family.[30] He had been a geography professor.

He was the only one, one of those people the authorities knew had been in the army, and they knew which formations they had taken part in when they… when they killed them. They had fought with the Jasharis. His house was on the opposite side, on a slope, and he had seen everything. How many took part, he knew it all. After a while, following the events, he saw people in KLA uniforms and he went down with his son. When they went down, they were Serbs dressed in KLA uniforms. I had seen it in a document, why we needed that kind of detail. They had dressed like that, grabbed him, and beat him

[29] By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

[30] The Jashari family refers to the family of Adem Jashari, one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). In March 1998, Serbian security forces attacked the Jashari family compound in Prekaz, killing Adem Jashari and more than fifty members of his extended family. The event is widely regarded as a turning point in the Kosovo war and a symbol of Albanian resistance.

badly. They tortured him almost to death and then they took him to that village – someone, activists from the KLA in Ferizaj, took him and placed him there.

She absolutely did not want… The Council assigned me to go: "Lirije, find out, because we absolutely must know which military units took part." That was the first time I understood what a "parallel military unit" meant, "parallel" meaning someone who dresses in the opposing army's uniform. Then I said, "I'm the deputy chairwoman," I was at that time, "of the Council for Human Rights. I've come only…" The woman didn't want to let us in. Later I understood why. I was with one of our collaborators from the council, she was an activist.

I said, "[I'e come] to wish him a quick recovery and to understand what happened to him." I had a notebook, believe it or not, for three or four hours I wrote everything down. I need to look for that notebook, but I didn't have time yesterday. I also have some documentation there. He explained everything that happened to him. Later, after the war, I went to Prekaz. They had opened (a shop), his wife worked in a bookstore. I know you've been there. I even bought some books there. But I couldn't meet them, to see how he was.

Anita Susuri: And when the incident happened at the Jasharis', did you go?

Lirije Osmani: No, I didn't go, no.

Anita Susuri: How did you experience it?

Lirije Osmani: How did we experience it? How does a person experience something like that, a massacre like that! Oh God! The whole family. It's… Then when the incident happened in a place like Likoshan, we went there.[31] I took the car of Refik Aga's wife, Refik Aga's daughter, Adem Demaçi's wife. It was a red Fiat. I dressed in black and I had Fazli Bala with me, and… Me and Fazli Bala. I think someone else was there too, a collaborator in the back, the one who wrote. We went to Likoshan. What happened to the Ahmetaj family! Pajazit [Nushi] told me we had to go because they suspected there may have been violence.

When we got there, we entered that house across the way. There were three young men there, those who had been hiding upstairs. I don't know if you know about the event? They saw the entire event, that the police mistreated them, and then they killed them. Because the next day, when we set out, we found them—covered in smoke, everything destroyed—and we brought them through those thickets where they had been like that: abused and killed. They described it: "They took all the bread there," because they had been about to eat when the helicopters arrived. "They took the tablecloth and the cheese." Those young men were upstairs. They had gone up, pulled the ladder up, and that's how they survived. They stayed there. A Jetliri and three others. They appeared in the newspaper a few times, but later I never had the chance to see it.

[31] Between February 28 and March 1, 1998, Serbian security forces launched a series of attacks in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez, in the region of Drenica, in response to a KLA ambush of police officers. These attacks resulted in the killing of 24 non combatants, as documented by Human Rights Watch among others in the report, A Week of Terror in Drenica: Humanitarian Law Violations in Drenica.

They told the whole story, how it happened, what they did, how they mistreated them. They were eyewitnesses; they had seen it with their own eyes. Then we went to that woman who had two children and whose husband had been killed, she too had been hiding. Then to that Sejdiu woman, the mother of four sons. That tragedy, God, God, God! "Is there anything worse," she said, "than begging them at least to give me back that 16-year-old boy?" Those two were twins, Burim and I don't remember the other one's name. One of them had finished the higher pedagogical school; that very day he was coming back, he had graduated that day. They hadn't told the mother about his brother earlier. Only later did she find out. And when he came back, they killed him too, both of them.

They had killed the older one there on the spot as well. "When they took my 16-year-old too, what terror." Then there were some other villages too, because all of this had to be prepared in order to file a criminal report for the Hague Tribunal later. The army stopped us there. I said, "My aunt died," meaning an excuse. I was dressed in black. I spoke Serbian there and we got through easily. We were being met by him, the deputy chairman, who was also a Council member. Oh God, how have I forgotten his name! In Qyqavica he was waiting for us at the top of Qyqavica to take us, because he told us: "I'll wait for you and drive you, no problem. You'll just have trouble passing by the bridge because the army is there." That's how it was.

Part Five

Lirije Osmani: So, during the time I was in Paris, the goal was to inform public opinion about what was happening in Kosovo. You know that France was not very well informed, and we had few connections with them. The task was to create awareness, an opinion and an alarm, about what was happening, so that when the world decided to help us, we would have their support as well. It was very important. For that reason, they assigned me the entire south of France, several French cities, with a schedule. At 04:00 PM I had meetings with students; at 08:00 PM I met with intellectuals who were very interested to hear what was happening in Kosovo.

In the group there was the hostess I stayed with. I also had a professional interpreter, because I could communicate in French for work, but this level, public opinion, was beyond me, so I had an interpreter. There also was a historian, Veronica Grap, a historian. And there were these hostesses, household ladies, who were activists in this Catholic Committee against violence, for aid. The Catholic Committee wasn't "aid" in a religious sense; it wasn't based on religious premises, it had nothing to do with that. But they had helped Bosnia a lot before, with programs. They had taken on the duty of helping us too, first of all with resettling refugees, because at that time there were five thousand refugees in France.

They were making projects. We also made a project: I called all the lawyers who were in France to create a project so they could be engaged to help people with how to get settled, how to do the paperwork, and if the time came to return, how to return, those kinds of activities. This historian was known; she even had books with her. These women had bought books about what had happened in Kosovo. These host women were intellectuals, retired women, activists. That's how they worked.

Besides that, her husband was a neuropsychiatrist who worked in Stankovec.[32] I had also been in Stankovec. During the period I was in France, I also went near Presheva, to a village where the municipal chairman was imprisoned. Then I went to Çegran, to Stankovec. I have all the interviews of these expulsions, everything. They all told cases. I had many cases of people who had been killed, how they were mistreated, many such stories. During that time, I also worked a bit, by chance I ended up with "Doctors of the World," with those doctors. I did some work for them too.

In fact, when 20,000 citizens from Kaçanik set off through the mountains to cross toward Skopje, they called on the phone. I translated for the person in charge, his name was Alban, a young man. Then later they went to pick up more refugees too, people kept arriving, and when people were being driven out of Kosovo and pushed into Bllacë.[33] Even a photojournalist from *Rilindja*,[34] two girls who came, I took them and didn't let them go into Bllacë. Then the police said, "Who are you?" I had the "Doctors of the World" badge, so I got out of it. And these interviews about prisoners, about everything that was happening, appeared in the French press, there were notices and reports.

Then later, when they arrested Milošević again, they interviewed me. I said, "Justice came very late, after all those massacres in Bosnia, and what is being done in Kosovo." They asked what we were doing, how many refugees there were, what their situation was, what was happening in Kosovo, what we expected for the future, "Will you stay here or will you go?" Besides that, I informed them about what was happening in the centers where the refugees were received.

Anita Susuri: And the time when the bombings started? And then Bajram Kelmendi was killed.

Lirije Osmani: That night… no, I wasn't here. The night the bombings started, I had finished the mission I had been assigned in those cities. I returned to Paris, and the director of the Catholic Committee called me. He said, "Please, can you go to the city of Châteaudun?" It's 200 kilometers from Paris. "Many people are very interested in knowing what's happening in Kosovo." I told him, "Yes, just find me an interpreter," because I couldn't find Fatime.

There was a woman, Sabina Subašić. She was a Bosnian refugee who had remained in Paris and finished university there. She and her husband made a documentary film with me. In Sorbonne, a demonstration happened, citizens, students, everyone, they brought microphones in front of me: "Who are you?" Then they took me home, anyway, that's another story; I'll tell you later. So I said, "Yes." They came and took me to Châteaudun. It started at 08:00. The hall was full of citizens. I was just getting ready to start when Sabina came in and said, "Lirije, the bombing has started." She was happy. My legs gave out at that moment. I was both glad and shaken (cries), what is happening?

I apologized and quickly went to the phone and immediately called my husband. He said, "We're here drinking," meaning they were celebrating that night. Then I returned immediately and continued. People asked questions and I informed them: NATO's forces had started bombing, and so on. Then

[32] The Stenkovec camps were a series of refugee camps established by NATO and UNHCR in April 1999 near Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

[33] Bllacë is the border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia where thousands of refugees were stuck for a few days in March 1999, at the beginning of the NATO intervention, unable to either move into Macedonia or re-enter Kosovo

[34] *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

they wanted to understand everything, why, what happened, how it happened, everything. There were also people, residents from other places, because the situation escalated here. The most important thing now was what would happen and how people would get through it. Someone asked about the population, and I said, "We are 1 million 800 thousand." A Serb stood up there and said, "That's not true, you're not telling the truth, because Milošević said 'six thousand."

I mean…I was shocked when I heard about that "green card." I asked and called someone to find out what the card meant, what had happened with it. It meant they planned to leave about six thousand behind and expel everyone else. That was the idea. She didn't explain it to me directly, she was very informed and had worked a lot on human rights, but she was very positive with me, and I think she sometimes felt bad telling me the details. I couldn't believe she didn't know what the "green card" was that they gave people, who would stay and who would leave, that horror.

Anita Susuri: Was your family here?

Lirije Osmani: No. After some time, they put them on trains: my daughter with her children; her mother-in-law with three sons; I think my husband too, he was also on the train, I think. I don't know if my sister was also there. After some time they allowed me to go find them. I learned they were in Stankovec. When I understood they were in Stankovec, then these people came with me too, and a lawyer came as well. There we met some members of the families of those who were killed in that…

Anita Susuri: Reçak?[35]

Lirije Osmani: Reçak, yes. He took the interview; I was translating while he interviewed them. Then he saw the situation. He had come to see what the situation was like and to write about it. Then we found my family. I couldn't locate them at first, but we immediately ran into them. We talked and finished what we needed with them.

Anita Susuri: How did you find out your family was in Stankovec?

Lirije Osmani: I found out they were in Stankovec because someone called me and told me, through someone else. My daughter had been in Bllacë for a week; she said, "With the children, it was catastrophic, too much." Then Flaka had said that Ilira had worked with an NGO: "She's in Stankovec," and somehow they got in and took them, you know, like that.

Anita Susuri: Did you hear anything that left a strong impression on you?

Lirije Osmani: What did I hear? There I saw horror. They tried, yes, but the conditions were catastrophic. And the case of my own family. And many other cases. I have these recorded. And later the cases from the camps, what they experienced and how they ended up in camps afterward. Violence, killings, persecution. They would line up the citizens and drive everyone out: "Gather your things." Iliriana, five minutes: "They threw us out without being able to take any clothes or anything." Her with children. The other one with three boys. The only luck was that they reached the train. Then when I heard about Bajram [Kelmendi], oh God! Catastrophe.

[35] On January 15, 1999, Serbian forces killed 45 Albanian civilians in the village of Reçak, central Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: Did you find out quickly? How long did it take before you learned?

Lirije Osmani: About Bajram, I found out immediately. A woman from the International Federation for Human Rights notified me. I was there for the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and I knew her. She had become very close with Fehmi Agani. She also informed me about Fehmi Agani. It was very, very bad. About Bajram, after that I came with a lawyer, we came to Nekibe to bring it there.

Anita Susuri: After the war?

Lirije Osmani: No, earlier, I think. Sorry, around that time, while the situation still wasn't… it wasn't quite like that yet. We had started with that lawyer to go through these places, Stankovec and then… catastrophe. Because Nekibe and I were very close friends; we worked together, even in court. I can't look at Kosovare [Kelmendi] (cries). Such a heavy tragedy. She had that boy, oh God, how good he was. He worked in Vushtrri and had a job, something for lung X-rays, I can't remember now. But Bajram, oh God! what work he did, how capable he was! He never spared himself, going to those meetings in Belgrade. He was an exceptional man; he gave so much for Kosovo. I don't know how much people recognize it, I don't know.

Anita Susuri: Aunt Lirije, you told me that in the meantime you sheltered your family in France and then you returned immediately.

Lirije Osmani: Yes. I sheltered my family, because it was still… from Stankovec, I mean. I found my family in Stankovec in very poor health, especially because they suffered a lot on the journey, especially, of course, in Bllacë. They stayed five days in Bllacë, with that mistreatment, with small children. Then we found them shelter there, and after Bllacë… after Bllacë they stayed briefly in Skopje, in Skopje before coming to Paris. The situation here still hadn't fully ended, but while they were in Skopje, Uli Boner came.

During the time I was there, the Green Party organized to send me to Strasbourg to have contacts with four departments dealing with human rights and the Kosovo issue. I met three of them, and the fourth was Uli Boner. He was the first person to come to Kosovo on a mission. Here he was based in the Army House. He realized I was there and called me, since we had discussed the situation in Kosovo. I told him, "What will happen? Will anyone help us?" His view was that no one was going to enter a war for us.

Then when he was about to go, he said, "Please, where is your daughter?" "In Macedonia," I said. "Can I contact her?" he asked. I said, "Yes, you can." They met at the Continental Hotel. He met my daughter. Then when he returned he told me she was fine, and that we were making efforts to secure her arrival in Paris. When I returned from there, Iliriana came and stayed for a time, my daughter too. But they wanted to return. When returns began, my sister's daughter returned, she was a teacher, because teachers were called first when the situation began to stabilize. Then they had to go, everyone… Her husband also wanted to return; he didn't want to stay there. He returned too. He had opened an office here.

When Mr. Uli came here, he saw the sign "Lirije Osmani" and went in and asked my husband about me. Anyway, I was still in Paris. When I returned, the first thing I did was go to his office. I spoke with him

and thanked him for meeting my daughter. I was interested in what they intended to do. Among other things, they had made an organizational structure of the municipalities but they hadn't included either Gjakova or Ferizaj. I said, "Why?" He said, "That's what I was told." "No," I said, "Gjakova is a cradle of Albanian patriots, a cradle of intellectual life. Excluding Gjakova seems very wrong to me."

Then we talked a bit more. I said, "I will return again because I still have work there, I need to finish paperwork and commitments," which they had made with a group of lawyers to help Kosovars return. Some didn't want to return, but those who did had to be helped, how to get documents, travel papers, expenses, and other things, whatever I could do while I was there.

Anita Susuri: When did you return for good?

Lirije Osmani: I returned at the beginning of 2000. The Bar Association was established in 2000. I didn't stay in Paris, I gave up the apartment and came back. And then… while I was there, they enabled me to organize a meeting about their organization. When I called all the lawyers in France to make a project, the project was done by Adem Bajri and Gani Tigani to help, because they wanted to return and work. I couldn't handle both organization and everything else.

Besides those, there was also Kolë Berisha, the deputy chairman. The day President Ibrahim Rugova returned, they called Kolë to the reception and he returned to Kosovo immediately. He wanted to greet the president, and we continued the meeting. The meeting finished, and meanwhile a delegation of "Lawyers Without Borders" from France was waiting. They insisted on meeting me and waited until the meeting ended. They proposed: they had worked in Palestine. There had been a major case, murders involving doctors; some doctors had been burned and patients had died. They had defended them. It had been a very big affair in Palestine.

They said, "We helped them, and we are interested in coming to help your people as well, those in prisons. Are you ready to cooperate?" I said, "We are ready to cooperate, but I can't give you the final answer because we have a president." We had our president who had kept the Bar Association alive for many years, because Serbia wanted to abolish the Bar Association too, but we remained independent. I said, "It's good for you to come there; I will introduce you to our president and you can speak with him. If he agrees, then we can cooperate, because I alone can't decide. I'm not even on the board."

They came to Kosovo, agreed, and we made a partnership agreement with them. Then, as we were making that partnership agreement, we also had an offer from the development agency here in Kosovo. They wanted to help us provide legal aid. Because it was clear: the bar and the lawyers were scattered, lawyers were nowhere. People needed help returning to their previous situation: returning to their homes, apartments, jobs, whoever could. There was a huge need. We made that partnership agreement, and also discussed that project, but first the Bar Association had to be reconstructed. Who would take responsibility to make the Bar function again? There was a lot of work.

Then we decided and held the assembly of the Bar Association. This happened in 2000. Since I explained the project to them, and I wasn't personally interested in leading, I wanted to work a bit for myself, still, by majority they all supported me because they weren't fully aware of what needed to be done. So they elected me president of the Bar Association. Then when the work was defined with the European Agency for Reconstruction, the project was created and they secured the resources. We said: "Let them come, let them work in our offices, and let it continue."

The project was implemented. In 30 centers across Kosovo, offices were opened for those lawyers who worked and were paid by the European agency. Then the Bar Association was constituted; I was elected president; the board was elected, and so on. Then contacts with the world began. The first thing that happened was: they came again, we also had Americans. The American Bar Association also offered us help. We had the conditions to truly work a lot and achieve results, because you know how things go here: when one person takes a duty, they engage, and the others…

Then the Bar was established. They came with a project, the first project was on professional ethics. We didn't really have professional ethics rules anymore, someone had made them 30 years earlier, but we no longer had them, how a lawyer should behave, responsibilities, disciplinary violations, sanctions, and all of that. The regulation was created and the work started very well. Thirty offices/units were created, and the Bar was formed with all its programs. Then contacts started with the American Bar Association. They helped us tremendously.

One day I went to the leader, a man named Gregor Gisvor. I said, "Please, is it possible…" because all the lawyers had become judges. Now we no longer had lawyers; only a very small number remained, and they were all older. "Is it possible," I said, "we have many young people who have graduated, could we place two or three of them in the Bar Association, and pay them something, 100 euros, no more?" He said, "Yes, of course." He thought it was a very good project. He said, "Aren't you afraid of competition?" I said, "Come on, we're all over 60." From that day, I assigned that project to Destan Rukiqi; he led it. He also had his own treasurer.

And it wasn't just that, they even gave them about 300 (euros), right after the war when things were at their hardest. The first 20 were employed and took the oath. The second time, I asked again, and they accepted two or three more, those 20 people. The program and project were created; then a second round happened with 40 people. Now there are thousands of lawyers, the number has reached over 1,000. In a way, I'm very happy it succeeded. That meeting on the professional ethics code was held, and then we prepared our own code. We studied what a professional ethics code is: lawyers' conduct, relations with parties, relations with clients and other clients, responsibility toward parties. It was serious work, we worked extraordinarily hard.

Then every meeting that took place, two or three times I ended up traveling abroad, to Vienna, when the annual meeting of European lawyers was held. They included us there too. Gradually, after some time, we were accepted into the Association of European Lawyers. So we advanced very quickly, but we had help, help also from France. Then Lawyers Without Borders called me; they had worked a lot in the Czech Republic. They were interested in offering us experience on economic issues. But that failed because it wasn't possible to work with two organizations, since we were already partners with the others, it didn't make sense to…

So that remained unrealized. Otherwise, things continued at that pace. Now we even managed to build a building, the young lawyers built a building for the Bar Association. Very good conditions were created. The only thing that matters is ethics, it's very important and very challenging to ensure it is respected. After that, I was appointed, with the U.S. government agency we worked to create the Judicial Council, the structure of the Judicial Council. They called me to be one of those who could contribute, because I knew both the judicial system and the overall system.

There was also Kartan Baruti, a very well-known former judge. We worked also with Hidajet Hyseni, who was an administrator of the Gjilan Court; he knew the administration. For six months, I think, six months, we worked intensively. The structure of the Judicial Council was created. According to the constitution, the judiciary is a power, the government is a power in itself. There are three powers, and the government cannot interfere in the work of the judiciary. The three powers are the Assembly, the government, and the judiciary. But we didn't have the structure that leads it, the governing structure.

Now who to choose, we didn't have people. All the judges, former lawyers, and those who had been judges but became lawyers out of necessity wanted to return to the judiciary. They had appointed me chair of the Judicial Council because the Americans had won the project to do vetting. Vetting is difficult for us Albanians to do, to remove these people and bring in "our own," it doesn't work like that. When I read it, after I accepted, I left my own work to do it. But there we had no right to receive a salary because we were registered as lawyers. Through administrative orders by Haki Rubi, I was chosen as chair; there had to be a Serbian deputy, Žika Jokanović, a good lawyer who helped many Albanians a lot. He agreed to join. And one from Prizren, a man named Bilgaipi, also.

They told him, "Lirije is an honest woman, listen to Lirije, don't worry, accept it." When we came, I told my daughter, "We're going, we're going to talk to the people who won the project." He even sent me a thank-you letter for cooperation, I found it here. I said, "We need to cooperate." He said, "No, Mrs. Lirije, you have read the law." I said, "Yes." He said, "For the Judicial Council, you do not have the right to interfere in issues of morality and ethics," meaning morality and property: how judges acquired wealth and how they treated people, whether they worked through connections or not.

So we thanked them and… then the newspaper *Kosova Sot* started attacking me. That was because I had handled a case involving the newspaper's owner and a Slovenian company. The case was discontinued because I had closed my office. I was only there temporarily and could not formally deregister again or take further steps, and it was not necessary. By chance, I later came across one of the meetings reported in *Kosova Sot*. When we were discussing the issue of appointing Serbian judges who had taken the oath in Serbia, I was no longer the chair of the Judicial Council, because Peci had taken over. I was the first to react. He even put it into the records. I said, "Judges who have taken the oath cannot be considered. I have nothing against judges personally, the judge who was chosen is a good judge, she can work freely, but she must renounce that oath and take the oath of Kosovo."

That kind of thing required courage. It required courage, and so I contributed as much as I could there too. As for the judges who were selected, we gathered characteristics for each person. But it seems to me the situation isn't quite like that now, much has changed. From what I'm informed, I hope it isn't as bad as it seems.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Lirije, until recently you were working, have you now retired?

Lirije Osmani: Yes, I retired in 2018, because I can say I didn't benefit much from work for myself, I was involved in these kinds of activities. Someone had to do the work. I felt bad refusing work that was in the state's interest, because the state cannot be built otherwise without everyone's engagement. That's the situation. For the work I did, I'm very grateful they gave me an award, one written recognition, and a kind of memento, a small trophy. They invited me to San Francisco, I went. The American Bar Association, publicly in front of 2,000 people, recognized me for the work I did and the success I had.

They wanted me to go to Belgrade to take an oath because someone from Georgia was going to come, and they considered it one of the best courts/judges. I refused. I said, “Can it be done in Albania?” They handed it to me in Albania. I thank very much both the Supreme Court of Albania and the organizers, because truly they respected me. They also invited some university professors and organized that meeting. It was a great, great recognition.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Lirije, if you want, to add something at the end?

Lirije Osmani: In the end, I don’t know if I’ve forgotten something. But later, as always, they appointed me to the Constitutional Commission. I…We participated there; we were in Skopje for several days with Americans who helped and encouraged us to work. Then we worked in working groups. I was in the group with Nekibe. Our chair was a former judge of the Constitutional Court, a very capable woman, Mrs. Mushkolaj. Then we went on to activities. One of the activities was to inform public opinion about the Draft Constitution of Kosovo, to explain it. Each of us did our part, for example on the judiciary.

Then I also did the part about independent institutions, such as the Electoral Council/Commission, the Ombudsperson, the media. I worked and in my working group I had Ylber Hysa and the current mayor of Gjakova. That’s how it was. And here too I tried to contribute as much as I could.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much for the interview and for your contribution!

Lirije Osmani: Thank you to you as well!