

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH SAMI DËRMAKU

Pristina | Date: October 12, 2022

Duration: 149 minutes

Present:

1. Sami Dërmaku (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Renea Begolli (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:** Mr. Sami, could you introduce yourself, your date of birth, place of birth, and something about your family?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes. After three sisters who had died, Sanije, Selvede, and Mihana, they all died when they were children, then I was born, the first son. Instead of Sanije, they gave me the name Sami. Instead of the name Selvede, they gave my younger brother the name Selver, and so on with similar names. So, on 7 November '48, I was born in the village of Shipashnica,<sup>1</sup> into the Dërmaku family. I completed primary school there, four years. Then we did another four years in the village of Hogosht, what they used to call the eight-year school, and then secondary school.

I went to the Technical Faculty because the road to our village in Shipashnica was being built, a road paved with cobblestones. My father worked as a stone breaker. Meanwhile, a construction engineer, dressed like a gentleman, with those measuring instruments, I knew he earned four, five, even ten times more than my father. I decided I would become an engineer myself. Then I started the first year of technical secondary school here in Pristina. But after I finished school, just as I had started, one of our cousins was selling a piece of land bordering ours. We had to buy it, because back then you didn't want outsiders taking it. My father informed me and said, "You have to come back, we bought land and we can't afford to finance your studies." I returned to secondary school, to the "Zenel Hajdini" gymnasium<sup>2</sup> in Gjilan.

I had this kind of character, always getting into fights with Serbs and with two professors. One was Vilković, I've forgotten the other one's name. They taught constitutional law. They failed me in the exam, I didn't pass. Then I went to the village, in the municipality of Dardana, today Kamenica, and enrolled again in the first year. In the second year I got into a fight with Serbs (laughs), and one *shka*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Municipality of Kamenica/Dardana.

<sup>2</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

<sup>3</sup> *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

near the village of Kololeç, his name was Tasić, failed me. In the retake exam he gave me a three,<sup>4</sup> while all the other grades were fives.<sup>5</sup> Then, because of incidents like that, fighting with Serbs, they expelled me without the right to re-enroll from the gymnasium of Gjilan, in Dardana.

I returned again to Gjilan. I finished gymnasium there in the language track. But the language track didn't have mathematics, only two hours a week. And even then, who would really teach us? I enrolled in the Faculty of Construction but couldn't continue. I enrolled in another faculty, I couldn't, because the quota was full. Then I enrolled in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, high voltage, in Pristina.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Sami, I'd like to go back a little, you told me you were born in '48...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** That was just after the Second World War. And when you were a child, for example, around 1958, that was the infamous Ranković<sup>6</sup> period...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember what was happening in your family or in the village at that time?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, I'll tell you. My great-grandfather, on that side there were four brothers. When the first one was killed, they returned his wife, she was Serbian at the time. Now, whether he married her willingly or by force, I don't know. They returned her to my grandfather. That woman, my grandfather's mother, the Serbs came to take her, and she went and hid inside the hollow of a willow tree so they wouldn't take her, because she was leaving her son behind. She had a husband who wasn't guilty, he wasn't guilty, but his parents had given her back. The eldest brother had been killed, and as was the custom, they returned the wife. Now the Serbs grab her by the hair, pull her out of the hollow and take her away.

I remember it as if it were today. My grandfather went, he was left a child, he was taken... because when the four brothers were taken to be executed by the Serbs, one of them said, "Hasan, don't forget us, come with us too," and they killed him as well. They killed five brothers. And my grandfather was left an orphan. They killed his father, took his mother, and his cousins raised him. My grandfather used to tell me, and I still remember it, when we would go to see his mother, because there was a hill in the middle of the village. She would come out and walk me back up the hill and say, "Oh, my son,"

<sup>4</sup> A grade of three (3) means a satisfactory or average result, roughly equal to a C.

<sup>5</sup> A grade of five (5) is the highest possible grade, roughly equal to an A.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

because I was small, “take the ladder, climb up the ladder, open the chest, keep your head low and take something to eat.” Later, when I grew a little and understood more...

We had many gardens there. Fruit and vegetables, there wasn’t a single fruit we didn’t have in our birthplace. We worked by going to sell fruit. In Dardana there was a market. He would tell me, “Look, my son, this *shka* is wearing my father’s vest.” And I, inside myself, I was thinking how to hold back from going out and killing him (laughs). But he surely thought about going out and killing him too, and then they would kill him as well, or put him in prison. Then, when Ranković carried out the weapons campaign... I also remember a man named Rexhep. They tortured Rexhep so badly that they sterilized him. When they spoke about the torture and the misery he had lived through at that time, in the snow, in the rain...

Now I’ll tell you honestly: we didn’t know anything, because history was entirely Serbian, entirely Byzantine, there was no other history at all. Then about the Serbian flag and the constitution and everything else, all Serbian. Who even knew there was another flag? When the flag was finally allowed to be shown, they talked about Tito.<sup>7</sup> Tito, I even thought Tito was better, and I tried to write a poem but I couldn’t. But Tito was enemy number one. When I remembered what my father and my grandfather had gone through, from that moment on I was, with body and soul, against that regime.

There was racism, there was chauvinism. High school students, even primary school pupils, imagine, in eight-year school we had Serbian, and a *shka* would teach us, and we didn’t even understand what Serbian was. We even had one case: one of our classmates teased another, and this one wanted to tell the teacher, “Comrade Teacher, I was ‘playing’ with Fatmir’s mother,” “Get out!” (laughs). Because he didn’t know how to explain it properly. He meant that he had insulted his mother. So I’m saying, that’s how it was. Later on, with the so-called differentiation,<sup>8</sup> teachers were dismissed, and families who were exposed and known to be against the regime were also targeted.

People think Tito was good. But Tito was the number one source of Kosovo’s misfortune. First, he betrayed the Bujan Conference.<sup>9</sup> Then Kosovo remained the most underdeveloped. They say Ranković did all this, but Ranković didn’t act without their knowledge. Now they say Ranković did it. But

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<sup>7</sup> Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the leader of Yugoslavia from 1943 until his death. He was a key figure in the Yugoslav Partisans during the Second World War and later became the president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

<sup>8</sup> In the context of Yugoslavia, “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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

Ranković wasn't alone, there were others with him. How many were punished? How many crimes were brought to light, and who committed them, and how? Maybe it suited them that things were worse at the beginning. But the gap between the development of the other republics, especially not to mention Slovenia, kept growing. We were the poorest province, possibly in Europe at that time.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember, as a child, when you went to school, what the learning conditions were like? For example, what kind of content the textbooks had?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Only physics, mathematics, and chemistry couldn't really be interfered with. Everything else, simply, their teaching was propaganda. It was meant to glorify their own history and to make sure we didn't know who we were, where we came from, or how we had arrived there. Because there was a church in our village, Shipashnica. They tried with body and soul to appropriate it. But the entrance of the church doesn't match today's Orthodox churches. The other churches, today's Orthodox ones, are not all Serbian either, because Albanians were Orthodox too.

Now... they have always tried to confuse us, just as they have confused us even today. A large number of *shkije* were killed in ways meant to leave confusion behind. For example, in Hotel Grand, material was found after our withdrawal, meant to confuse things, to kill and make it unclear whether it was among Albanians, just as we remain confused today. I don't deny that there were mistakes, and there were acts of revenge, but the larger part... There is, for example, a village with Catholics and Muslims. They went and threw a pig into a well so that Catholics and Muslims, or Orthodox, would turn against each other.

Those who were Orthodox, the tragedy of Albanians is that they say only Muslim brothers, but not Catholic brothers, not Orthodox brothers, because religion says Muslim brothers go to heaven, to paradise. Fine, Muslim brothers, but what blood do we share with Arabs or Africans? My grandfather used to say that during the war, on the ground floor there was a Catholic brother, his door under the stairs, while the Muslim brother lived on the first floor. And then I told my father, because he thought that way: "Not just the Muslim faith. Grandfather, your father, said that in Prizren there were two brothers from the same mother, one Catholic, one Muslim. How can they not be of the same blood if one mother gave birth to them?" So for us, religion...

Then I had to force the imam, he was our neighbor, "Imam, tell him," I said, "two brothers from the same mother, one Catholic, one Muslim, are they of the same blood or not?" "Yes," he said, "and the same goes for Catholics." "And Orthodox?" "Yes, we are all brothers of the same blood." Then my father didn't even need to tell me anymore, he would just say, "The imam said it, not Sabri," (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** How did life at school continue? Was the school far? Was it difficult for you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no, look. The village school was nearby, as I remember. But in the village of Hogosht there is an uphill road and you have to go past the long fields, the road was called, in Serbian, *Dugi del*. So it took us almost an hour to get there. From fifth grade on, snow or rain, we had to be on time for class. For example, there were small streams there that would swell when it rained, floods made it difficult to get out, to cross and reach the school. Now, in the village of Shipashnica, the first teacher was [Metush Krasniqi](#). Have you heard of Metush?

**Anita Susuri:** Mm-hm.

**Sami Dërmaku:** I don't remember him myself, but he was the first teacher. I do remember Sejdi Kryeziu, the uncle of [Hydajet Hyseni](#). So the first inspirations of the village of Shipashnica came from patriotic teachers who continued that path. Then, when we reached fifth and sixth grade, we had more teachers, you know, teaching became more structured. I remember in secondary school one teacher taught us who I don't even know if he had finished the eight-year school or not. All he knew was how to read and write, because there was no staff. And then, in the village, there was Xhevdet Syla's father, he has passed away, he was in a group with Nezir Myta, who was in the same cell as Hydajet Hyseni.

**Anita Susuri:** And during the time you were in primary school, up to eighth grade, did you know that these groups existed or anything like that?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no. I'm telling you, when I went to secondary school, only then... we didn't even know what the flag was, what existed. We only knew that Metush Krasniqi, Sadri Shipashnica, had been a brigade commander at Kika. They fought the Battle of Kika, they stopped the Montenegrins, they pushed them back. They were... later they became our ideal, our role models. The suffering and torture Metush went through. Then Metë Dërmaku, who had also been an administrator in the municipality, but also had connections with them. The materials they had were found in a clothing chest and taken out. He said, "I swear, I am illiterate, they told me to keep these and I kept them," and he didn't expose his comrades, and he also saved himself.

**Anita Susuri:** And when you say you went to Pristina, to technical school, was that the first time you had gone somewhere outside?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, the first time.

**Anita Susuri:** What did Pristina look like at that time?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Pristina was just like... compared to our areas there, to Dardana and everything, it was a bit more, it had a little something. Because Prishtina in those days was like, like a small...

**Anita Susuri:** *Kasaba*,<sup>10</sup> a town.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, exactly. Then it developed slowly, little by little.

**Anita Susuri:** What were those years like for you? You say that in secondary school you began, so to speak, to become familiar with these groups...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** That such a movement existed...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Look, I'll speak openly... our task was to beat up the Serbs who were there (laughs). That's why I was expelled and... because racism was visible, a pathetic hatred. *Šiptari*,<sup>11</sup> *šiptari*, *šiptarski jezik*, *albanski jezik*,<sup>12</sup> meaning we weren't the same. As if we were a completely different people, with a completely different language. Just like today they say: Kosovo is a state, Albania is a state. There is a Kosovar nation, there is no Albanian nation, the Albanian nation is Albania. Only a *shka*, the son of a *shkina*, could be paid God knows how much to say such things. "Kosovar nation."

I once went on vacation to Shengjin, no, not Shengjin, to Velipoja. An artist from Shkodra, at first our conversation went well. Then he says, "We have a congress of the Gheg dialect," meaning the Gheg language in a certain way. I said, "Sir, the Serb, with body and soul, tried to make us different from you. He called you *Albanci* [Serb.: Albanians], while we in Kosovo are called *šiptarski*, not Albanian," I said, "to show that we are different from you. But we have one language, one tradition, one culture. If you want to do this, for what reason do you want to do it? To follow the path of the Serbs?" After that he fell out with me, he didn't take it well. He said, "I invite you as a special guest to the Congress of Tosk."

**Anita Susuri:**

So even when you were young you had this idea, ideologically speaking, that Kosovo and Albania should unite. And that was, not just a part, but the main goal of these movements: for Kosovo to unite with Albania...

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<sup>10</sup> *Kasaba* is an Ottoman-era term, used in Turkish and in the Balkans, meaning a small town or market town, larger than a village but not yet a full city, often with basic administrative and commercial functions.

<sup>11</sup> *Šiptar* (plural *šiptari*) is a Serbian term used to refer to Albanians, widely considered derogatory because of its historical use in discriminatory and hostile contexts. It derives from the Albanian word *shqiptar*, but in Serbian usage it has carried pejorative and demeaning connotations.

<sup>12</sup> *Albanski jezik* means "Albanian language" in Serbian. In Yugoslav and Serbian usage, Albanians from Albania were often referred to as *Albanci* who spoke *albanski jezik*, while Albanians from Kosovo were labeled *Šiptari* and their language as *šiptarski jezik*, implying they were a different and inferior group. The distinction was political and ideological, not linguistic.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Exactly. Now, after '45, the Tivar massacres,<sup>13</sup> the massacres where people were taken and driven into the mountains. Then Gradica, Mehmet Gradica.<sup>14</sup> The war, the brigades of Albania that, in the name of communism, supposedly fought reactionaries... look, when they say extreme Marxist-Leninist, our idea was always unification with Albania. We are one people, one nation, we have the right to one state. We fought against this Yugoslavia. I even remember when I was in prison, they told me, "Look, look who we gave a scholarship to," because I was receiving a scholarship, "we have tanks and airplanes, and you think you can defeat us."

At that time, the Yugoslav army was extraordinary, one of the strongest in Europe, I would say. Now, if we had the aim of uniting with our mother state, Albania, two similar things can unite, but two opposites never can. We were fighting the occupier, with pamphlets and everything. Like that *UDBash*<sup>15</sup> said, we with stones, and they with tanks and airplanes. We couldn't fight Yugoslavia directly, we were fighting the occupier, yet at the same time they wanted us to fight our mother state because it was supposedly Marxist-Leninist. It made us sick to our stomachs. No matter how powerful it was, no matter the massacres and torture they carried out, protests still kept happening.

Now, if Albania, the motherland, the so-called Marxist-Leninist, we couldn't become Ballists<sup>16</sup> either. Because there were no Ballists, and no Chetniks<sup>17</sup> in Yugoslavia. There was the Montenegrin communist group, communist, but more radical, and they were the ones putting people in prison. So there weren't two paths. Against the occupier, and that Albania, whatever it was, had to be accepted by us as a Marxist-Leninist organization. And secondly, what does it matter what you were? What matters is that you fought the enemy, that you spread slogans and banners about economic exploitation, about criminal taxation.

Like Deng Xiaoping<sup>18</sup> once said while Mao Zedong was still alive: "It doesn't matter what color the cat is, what matters is whether it catches mice." And for us too, it didn't matter what we were, what

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<sup>13</sup> The massacre of Tivari, currently Bar, Montenegro, was a mass killing of Albanian recruits from Kosovo by Yugoslav partisan forces in March 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Mehmet Gradica (1913-1945) was the sub-prefect of Skenderaj during the Italian occupation of Kosovo, and continued to be a military leader against the Yugoslav partisan forces until he joined Shaban Polluzha at the end of 1944. He was killed with Polluzha in February 1945 in the war of Drenica.

<sup>15</sup> Members of the UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional "a" for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

<sup>16</sup> The *Ballists* were members of the Balli Kombëtar, an Albanian nationalist and anti-communist movement formed during the Second World War. They fought against both Axis forces and communist partisans, seeking a Greater Albania, but were opposed by communist resistance groups and later by the postwar Yugoslav and Albanian communist authorities.

<sup>17</sup> *Chetniks* were Serbian nationalist and royalist guerrilla forces during the Second World War, initially organized to resist Axis occupation but later also fighting against communist partisan groups. The term is often associated with Serb nationalist militias that committed atrocities against non-Serb populations in Yugoslavia during the war.

<sup>18</sup> Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) was a Chinese statesman, revolutionary, and political theorist who served as the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1978 to 1989.

mattered was that we fought the enemy. And the others lived comfortably with the homeland, good positions, good salaries, going wherever they wanted, without bothering their heads about the issue of Kosovo's enslavement.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** You were telling me earlier about technical school, about your schooling...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Then about the expulsions, the problems you had with the Serbian population, since you were classmates with them...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did things continue after that? How did you actually come to know about these groups?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Pardon?

**Anita Susuri:** How did you find out that such groups existed?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Ah, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you learn about them?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. When I enrolled in the Technical Faculty, Osman Dumoshi was there in mechanical engineering, Afrim Loxha was there too, what was that other guy's name, anyway. And the book *The Betrayal*<sup>19</sup> by Resul was circulating. But back then you had to read it quickly, because it had to be passed from hand to hand. Skender Muçolli gave me the book *The Betrayal*. All our conversations with Afrim Loxha and his friends, Osman Dumoshi, Skender Muçolli, that's where it became clear that the underground movement was active. But I had decided to finish my studies first.

Soon after, we got to know Rexhep Mala,<sup>20</sup> Nuhi Berisha,<sup>21</sup> Isa Kastrati, Sali Malaj with his sisters Qefsere Malaj, Shyhere Malaj, and the brothers. Nuhi Berisha was active with this group, with the

<sup>19</sup> Notable novel published in 1962 written by Kapllan Resuli (1934-2022), an Albanian writer from Montenegro who spent time in prison both in Yugoslavia and Albania and was also known by the name Kapllan Boruvić.

<sup>20</sup> Rexhep Mala (1951-1984) was a prominent Albanian activist in the underground movement. He died in 1984 with Nuhi Berisha in a shoot out with the police when their hideout was discovered.

<sup>21</sup> Nuhi Berisha (1961-1984) was a prominent Albanian activist in the underground movement.

Malaj family. However, we carried out some actions together with Rexhep. For example, Kadri Osmani<sup>22</sup> was living in my house in Bregu i Diellit. We formed a three-person cell with Sherif Masurica and Kadri Osmani. I took responsibility for supplying technical equipment, and in that way I was also involved in carrying out those actions. At the same time, I also had the obligation to continue my studies. One of the actions I carried out at that time was when I took the stencil duplicator from the Technical Faculty, in the old building near the Faculty of Economics, on this side of the road, and I gave it...

**Anita Susuri:** You needed the stencil duplicator to...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, to multiply those materials. When Kadri Osmani returned to his own house after staying [with me] for a while, they found it in the bunker he had built in his house. Then, since I wanted to complete my internship at the Elektro-Kosova enterprise, I used to go to Ismet Grajçevci, who was an engineer. He only needed to give me a signature as if I had completed my internship, what mattered was that I remained free. One day I saw that they had placed a photocopier in the corridor. In fact, Ismet later gave a statement about this. And I asked him, "Ismet," I said, "what is this duplicator, why did you put it here?" He said, "We got a new one and placed it there." And to myself I thought, they're not even guarding it properly.

I pass by there with Rexhep Mala and I tell him, "Rexhep, there is a duplicator here in the corridor, we just need to break that light there," because it was a public light. I said, "and finish it, grab it." He said, "Listen to what I'm telling you, don't make the mistake of doing this, because you come here often," since it was Elektro-Kosova, electrical engineer, high voltage. "Leave this job to me." "No, no." "If you want," he said, "to go to prison and take your friends with you, then you do the action. But you shouldn't, you come here often, they already suspect you and they will suspect you even more." One day, as I passed by there, I saw the light was broken, I said, Rexhep has taken it, Rexhep Malaj.

**Anita Susuri:** And that duplicator, was it very big?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Big, of course it was big. Bigger than that {he gestures toward an object in the room}. Then Hydajet, Ilmi Ramadani, four or five of them went and took it out through the window.

**Anita Susuri:** What other activities were there? Did you write slogans? Did you distribute them?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, yes. Our main role, my main role, was supplying technical equipment. I believe I did it well (laughs). The organization distributed pamphlets, they went to the student dormitories. On our side, in Topanica, in Hogosht, Rexhep Mala carried this out with his friends. Then

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<sup>22</sup> Kadri Osmani was a political activist involved with the early Albanian underground movement in Kosovo in the 1980s. He was closely associated with activists such as Rexhep Mala and Nuhi Berisha and took part in organizing and recruiting for clandestine groups advocating for Kosovo's national and political rights.

in Trepça there was the slogan “Trepça works, Belgrade builds,” about economic exploitation, there were slogans. There were also rules about how conspiracy should function. Now, if I was in a three-person cell with Kadri Osmani and Sherif Masurica, that means I did not know Kadri’s cell. Nor could Kadri know my cell, or Sherif’s, or Rexhep Mala’s.

I stayed with Rexhep, we talked, and I also went there to Hogosht, or rather, to Gjilan where he had a house, and he also came to my place. We regularly discussed things. I understood that Rexhep was organized through *The Betrayal*, the book *The Betrayal*, because he had read it before me and tried to explain it to me. It was strict: you go to a meeting, you arrive early, you wait 15 minutes, and then you leave, you don’t wait any longer.

**Anita Susuri:** Where did you usually hold the meetings?

**Sami Dërmaku:** In apartments. In apartments. For example, they would tell me, you have a meeting with Hydajet Hyseni near the Medrese,<sup>23</sup> there at the edge, there’s a small stream there. I would go in advance to learn the place so that when I went I wouldn’t be late searching for it, because then you attract attention. But the neighborhood I lived in was almost entirely under the eyes of the UDB.<sup>24</sup> In order to go out for a meeting, I had to leave half an hour or an hour earlier to arrive. I had to jump over my neighbor’s wall to leave on that side, not to go out on the main road because they would follow you, but they could follow you from that side too, because you were surrounded.

**Anita Susuri:** And why was that neighborhood so...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Bregu i Diellit.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes. Why?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Ilmi Rakovica, yes, Ilmi Rakovica.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there many people living there who were...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, it was the whole neighborhood, houses on that side and on this side...

**Anita Susuri:** I mean, why was it monitored so closely by the UDB?

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<sup>23</sup> A *medrese* (*madrasa*) is an Islamic religious school. In this context, the term refers not only to the institution itself but also to the surrounding area, which served as a recognizable meeting point.

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

**Sami Dërmaku:** Not directly by the UDB, but by their informers, they were the ones monitoring us.

**Anita Susuri:** I thought you had them directly.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Jashar Aliu says, I don't know if you've interviewed him or not, he said, "Why didn't you go to the meeting with Hydajet?" I told him, "I couldn't go." Otherwise, if I had gone, I was being followed, they would have arrested both Hydajet and me. Because we didn't go there, we went to make an arrangement. I begged him, I said, "Sleep over, stay at my place." While he was on his way, they arrested him. When he got out of prison, I told him, "Did you believe me now that the house was being watched or not?" He said, "Yes, yes, I learned it the hard way." And that's how it was.

**Anita Susuri:** Was this at the end of the '70s or in 1980? When were you at university?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Look now — my first year, when I finished it, was '68-'69...

**Anita Susuri:** Ah, earlier.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, the protests happened here when I was one of the activists. My brother was in the army. Because of that, I had to interrupt my studies, because I couldn't pass one exam in order to register for the next year. I worked in the village, in Shipashnica, as a teacher. When the school year ended, because there was a rule that two members of a family could not both serve in the army, but because they were afraid that '68<sup>25</sup> would repeat itself, they sent me to the army as well. I even wrote a letter to the president of the municipality, I told him everything. Before going to the army, everyone got on the bus, I didn't get on. And I said, "Woe to whoever has to serve in the army." A policeman, the son-in-law of our cousins, the husband of one of our cousins, went and informed his boss, the head of Military Security, or whatever they were called at that time in the municipalities...

**Anita Susuri:** Like a chief, or something like that.

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no, it was a special office for military affairs, for security and things like that. His name was Rada Trajković. He went and informed them, "This is what Sami Dërmaku said." They sent for me... two policemen took me and brought me to his office. He said, "I'll break your bones one by one." I said, "Break all my bones, leave this one alive," {he gestures to his finger}, "I'll do it with one finger." "How dare you talk to your friend like that..." After that I went to the army late, about ten or fifteen days later. I knew that if I didn't go, as a deserter I would get a heavy sentence. After that, I began to complain that I was ill.

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<sup>25</sup> During October and November 1968, many demonstrations were organized by the Albanian population across Kosovo. The main demand was to recognize Kosovo's right to self-determination. The first and most massive demonstration was organized in Prizren on October 6, 1968. This demonstration ended in front of the League of Prizren, where for the first time the demand for the Kosovo Republic was publicly articulated.

One doctor told me... I went to report myself as sick there. I said, "I have this illness, this illness," and I explained. He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "From Gjilan." "From Gjilan exactly?" I said, "No, from Kamenica." "From Kamenica exactly?" I said, "From Shipashnica." "Near Hogosht?" I said, "Yes." I realized that someone had spoken well of me to him. "Do you want," he said, "to go home?" I said, "No, I want to be cured." "Why?" "I want to be cured," I said, "because you know how it is with us, if you leave the army as an invalid, they say the boy is making excuses" (laughs). I said, "I won't even be able to find a bride to marry." "Think about it!" To myself, I fell into a trap. He sent my referral to Sarajevo, and Sarajevo declared me highly unfit.

Now, as it seems, since I went 15 days late, they hadn't sent the documentation, the personal records, who goes where. Then there was a flag bearer, he had just arrived, and I had received the decision to be released, to be discharged. Then they received my file late, my dossier. He said, "Have you ever been in prison?" "Of course I have." "Huh?" Because I had caused problems there too. I said, "Yes." "For what?" "For fights, for those kinds of problems." "No, no, we know why you were in prison, but we found out too late." My brother was in Banja Luka. I had told him, "Don't report yourself these days, we are in the field." Because my brother said, "I still have this many days left, but let my uncle add another 360 days, what can he do." There was news that your brother is waiting for you because he has gone, and you go to visit him, and he meets you at the door. "How come at the door, when he just left?" "No, really, he came in civilian clothes."

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you, you mentioned the demonstrations of 1968, in which you participated...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it all like? The organization in those days?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Now the place was set. Novosella had taken responsibility beforehand, they put up the flags and slogans, the banners in front, at the Faculty of Philosophy. Everyone had been informed, but they hadn't come out into the square yet. When they said the time, it was as if rivers had overflowed and they came out to protest, one friend telling another. The protest was very interesting. There were slogans, yes, they were about the university and equal rights, about economic liberation, about opening the university, the flag and other things, Kosovo Republic. I even presented a paper on the Pristina protests for the 30th anniversary of '68, in 2008. Then Gjilan organized, Prizren organized, Peja. After that, protests also broke out in Macedonia. So it went in a chain, it was very widespread.

Now, the protests of '68, the Serbian regime was seen as a monster, like the devil himself, a creature without soul and without heart, savage, the ice was broken. After that, it was easier to organize protests. When the protests of '68 happened, everyone thought about what they might suffer. But fortunately, it was, as they say, the wind of Ranković's departure and of liberalization. Because later

the demonstrations became even bigger, they happened here too. But when you organize the first ones, that is when the fear is truly felt, what kind of regime we are dealing with, especially knowing the earlier history, what terror those who acted before us had suffered.

**Anita Susuri:** Were the demonstrations very large in number?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there students too, or only...?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes. Murat Mehmeti was killed there, he was killed. I was very close, like I am to you now, he just collapsed, because he was shot from the barracks, under the corridor between the buildings. Then the Serbs also entered there, shouting, “Long live Enver Hoxha.<sup>26</sup> Long live Albania!” They wanted to give the protests a different direction.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the consequences of those protests?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Then the provocations by the Serbs began, from balconies they poured hot water and threw flower pots. That angered the crowd, and they started overturning all the cars they could. I even had a cousin, a doctor of science, Ismet Dërmaku, his wife was Serbian. After the demonstrations I would go to find out what was happening (laughs), because he was the director of the archive at that time. His Serbian wife told me, “Hey Sami,” she said, because they had a car, “if it had been us with our car, what would you have done?” “I would only have said, close the door, don’t open it. I would have spared it.” “Look, Ismet,” she said, “you’re keeping a snake in the house,” she admitted it herself. They were pulling out paving stones and throwing them back, they had done...

**Anita Susuri:** Those cobblestones?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, the cobblestones. Then the firefighters came with a bus. Isa Kastrati and I climbed onto the roof of the bus with banners, and then we came down. As I was coming down, behind me there was a young man wearing a *plis*,<sup>27</sup> and a policeman struck him. I said, “Why are you hitting him? Because he’s wearing a *plis*?” He came at me too, right in the nose, and with a handkerchief I barely stopped the blood. I raised the banner, it had a wooden frame on the sides, to strike him with it. He put his hands on his head {he gestures}, when I lifted the banner {he explains the motion of striking the head}. But then Isa Kastrati, may he rest in peace, was surrounded by the police there. He fought them off like someone fending off dogs. I told him, “Get away as fast as you can, you’re in danger,” and he barely escaped. Then Hasan, the Hasan I mentioned, one of the organizers,

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

<sup>27</sup> Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

older than me, he was completely disoriented at that moment, and his friends took him and pulled him away.

**Anita Susuri:** And at that time, for example, in '81<sup>28</sup> a very large number of people were imprisoned...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** But in '68, were there many?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, there were [Selatin \[Novosella\]](#), Adil Pireva, [Ilaz Pireva](#), those at the forefront, Afrim Loxha, Skender Muçolli. [Hasan Dërmaku](#) was among them, he was sentenced to five years. Skender Kastrati, these were the main organizers. And on the side there were Metush Krasniqi, Ismail Dumoshi, Hyrije Hana,<sup>29</sup> who were consulted, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Were any of these people taken directly from the demonstration and imprisoned?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Hasan was taken. Hasan was taken, after, I think he told me, he went into "Orion" to have a coffee. Selim Brosha went with another man, took him and brought him to prison.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the whole situation like later that day, after things calmed down or passed?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Jo atëherë ka qenë zhurma e Komitetit. Shqiptarët tu i ngrehë shiptart. Tana...

No, then there was the noise from the Committee, Albanians turning against Albanians. Then...

**Anita Susuri:** Was there any...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Then there were also writings calling us irredentists, nationalists, enemies of the people, saying we wanted to destroy Brotherhood and Unity and all those stories. Brotherhood and Unity for them, because they had become Yugoslavs. I was in the same generation as Azem Syla and [Azem Vllasi](#). After the demonstrations, the first strike began at the Technical Faculty, which I organized with a friend from Mitrovica, his name was Ferki. When Azem came to tell us how we should continue our studies and lectures and not strike, I told him, "Get out, you are a traitor to the nation," because we

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<sup>28</sup> On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

<sup>29</sup> Hyrije Hana (1929-2004) was a notable Kosovar Albanian patriot, actress, and political activist. Born in Gjakova, she was among the first professional actresses in Kosovo and spent significant periods in prison for her political beliefs under the Yugoslav regime. She was also the sister of activist Xheladin Hana and is remembered for her resistance work and cultural contributions.

had known each other since Kamenica, Dardana. I said, "You are the hand of the *shka*, you are a traitor, there is no talking with you." Later someone said, "It's strange he didn't throw you out when you called him a traitor." Then we had a polemic with him. He admits that he called me Sami Dërmaku a traitor, Haqif Mulliqi made it... it's a performance. I saw it there yesterday, I had the interview. The Committee boiled over, differentiating, moving people aside...

**Anita Susuri:** You said that you were also sent to the army for this reason, meaning that maybe they identified you as a potential problem if an anniversary was held? Were you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. They were afraid that there would be protests on the eve of the anniversary, on 27 November.

**Anita Susuri:** Where were you sent in the army?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Honestly, in Bosnia, I've forgotten where exactly because I didn't stay there long. I think... I don't even know... it's that city about which Ivo Andrić wrote *Na Drini Ćuprija* [The Bridge on the Drin]. I don't know, I've forgotten. One day I even said I should check, because I still have my discharge booklet. Yes, things get forgotten, it's interesting. Now we have started...

**Anita Susuri:** No, that's not a problem. I just wanted to know whether you had, for example, any informative talks there or anything like that?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no. No, no. They didn't have documents on me until... when the document arrived, I had already returned.

**Anita Susuri:** And you didn't go back again after that?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no, unfit. Unfit, and unfit to find a bride.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you continue with your activity?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, I continued my activity after I was released from the army. So, in 1970, Rexhep Mala, Isa Kastrati, [Ferdeze Mujaj](#) and I went to Albania...

**Anita Susuri:** In 1970.

**Sami Dërmaku:** In 1970. And there they received us with the intention that we should return, not set the example of leaving, Kosovo needs you. While we justified ourselves by saying that we had gone in a military capacity in order to return to Kosovo one day when needed.

**Anita Susuri:** And how did you go to Albania? Was it illegally?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Now, since Rexhep Mala, Isa Kastrati and I had been three inseparable friends, so that we wouldn't be taken as having gone out together, it was considered as if we were a three-person cell. So I went out with this girl, she has that pharmacy in Dardana, Ferdeze Mujaj. He went out with Rexhep Mala. But the plan was that all three of us would go out at the same time. Then the three of us went to Belgrade, to the embassy, to supply ourselves with literature and other materials and to receive further instructions. When Tito came to Gjilan, not to Gjilan, but to Kosovo, I don't know which year it was, but I think it was the last time, '73, Isa Kastrati, Rexhep Mala and I were put in prison until Tito left Kosovo. Just in case we might do something, you know. About a week and something, maybe two weeks. But still...

**Anita Susuri:** One week, or two they kept you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, they kept us isolated. There was even one, Rozë Devaja, "Long live Tito, down with this one, long live Todor Zhivkov, long live..." (laughs). Insulting Tito, insulting Enver, crazy, shouting all the time. But I was afraid that Rozë Devaja would go out and start shouting some slogan.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes. I'm very interested in how you managed to cross into Albania, since it was very strict not to leave?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, I had some friends from Gjakova, from Junik. And through them, from Gjakova they told us, "That's where you should go out," because it was more suitable. It was like a hollow, between two hills. But when we crossed, once I realized we had crossed, it was the border section, what they call the neutral zone, plowed, flattened, so that when we crossed we could see the tracks of anyone who had entered, yes. But it's interesting, we had read a lot. We were inspired: Mother Albania, propaganda, words, and we read and watched films. But it wasn't like that, no, it wasn't like that. I even remember, maybe, when I said to Ferdeze, "Did you wake up? [a u gdhive? — the form used in Albania; in Kosovo one would say a u çove?]" She understood it differently. She said, "What's troubling you?" (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** And how did that place or the people seem to you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Look, when you see how Albania started, how it was under Ahmet Zogu,<sup>30</sup> he really did a lot for the founding and formation of Albania, it was completely destroyed. They started from nothing. Education was at a level, art was at a level, folklore. There was poverty. We were, imagine, Ferdeze had gone wearing a skirt just like in the West, and those poor women were dressed in those

<sup>30</sup> Ahmet Zogu (1895-1961) was an Albanian statesman who served as Prime Minister, President, and later King of Albania (as Zog I) from 1928 to 1939. He played a central role in establishing the modern Albanian state after independence, introducing administrative, legal, and educational reforms, before being forced into exile following the Italian invasion of Albania in 1939.

clothes. "Look, look, are these people really speaking Albanian?" "Yes, we are Albanians." "No, where are you from?" "From Kosovo." "But is Kosovo a big city?" "How a big city," I said, "as big as half of Albania, ma'am." "And what do you speak at home? Albanian?" That automatically closed the topic. They might write some article, something, otherwise nothing was allowed. But still, it was a wonderful place. And now what they have done, with picks and hoes. Making terraces planted with olives or with other agricultural products they could use.

**Anita Susuri:** How long did you stay there?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Honestly, about two months. Roughly two months, a month and a half, two months.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you have a place to stay?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I was in a camp, in a camp. And it was a kind of camp, but we were kept confined.

**Anita Susuri:** Really?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. Only in the last days they would take you out, take you to Tirana, to Durrës, whatever. No, no {he gestures that they were kept closed in}.

**Anita Susuri:** What was this? What kind of organization was it?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I already explained it, but now listen. A friend says in an interview I did with Haqif Mulliqi, "Why did you go to Switzerland?" I said, "Haqif," I said, "twice in prison for criminal offenses. Once with Adem Demaçi's<sup>31</sup> group, sentenced to six years. Another time, two years." Because now, when I left Albania, they told me, "Dërmak," they questioned me... after Albania, after I left, over some materials that had been distributed, twice the comrades of the organization, the underground, removed me, I don't want to mention names. When I left Albania, I came from Albania, because they don't keep you one or two months in transit prison for a misdemeanor. I didn't accept anything.

And now there was some Bleki, apparently from Mitrovica, his name was Blerim but they called him Bleki. He said, "Look, Dërmak, several times for misdemeanors," because in '85 I also went to Albania, and later for another reason. "Several times for misdemeanors, twice you were sentenced for hostile criminal acts, twice you went to Albania, we know why you went. If we add these up, you get ten years in prison. You are incorrigible." And now this Haqif, with whom I did the interview, asks me this question. I told him, "Without doing anything at all..." because they told me, "You go that way, if they catch you, you go that way, we go this way. You continue." I said, "He warned me they would give me

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<sup>31</sup> Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

ten years in prison for nothing at all, and if I did something,” I said. “Then if I go to prison, what contribution can I give? In this way, when I went to Switzerland, I carried out activities.”

Nine million and seven hundred thousand francs were collected, I have all the receipts, all issued in my name. They were given to Bujar Bukoshi.<sup>32</sup> I said, “I organized the diaspora, I collected money, I was president of the Community of Clubs and Associations in Switzerland, a founder of the LDK,<sup>33</sup> organizer of the Three Percent Fund<sup>34</sup> at the Switzerland level. President of the association that was formed for Pristina in Geneva. I organized protests, hunger strikes. I organized two hunger strikes while staying in front of the United Nations,” I said. “I have given a contribution,” I said, “not just to go to prison now, especially when you don’t even know whether you’ll come out alive or not, no matter how many hardships there are. And then the family, all the time, going from prison to prison to visit us.”

### Part Three

**Anita Susuri:** What was the reason, and how did the first arrest happen?

**Sami Dërmaku:** The first arrest? A cell comrade exposed me. When Osman Dumoshi told me that someone had fallen into prison, I knew it wouldn’t take long before it reached me...

**Anita Susuri:** You suspected it?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes. Then it was a very low setup, because Kadri Osmani had lived with me, he had served four years in prison, I don’t know if you’ve heard about him?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Sami Dërmaku:** And he connected with a man whom I actually knew better than he did, but he proposed it and I didn’t want to ruin it for him. Because of that man who later exposed me, I went once or twice to see the place where the duplicator was supposed to be taken. He didn’t dare to do it, he was afraid. I went and did it, because I was a student at the Technical Faculty, if they saw me holding it,

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<sup>32</sup> Bujar Bukoshi (1947-2025) was a Kosovar physician and politician who co-founded the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) with Ibrahim Rugova and served as Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo government-in-exile from 1991 to 2000, helping raise funds and organize parallel institutions during the struggle for Kosovo’s independence. After the war he also served in post-war government roles including deputy prime minister and minister of health.

<sup>33</sup> Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). The first political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

<sup>34</sup> The three percent fund was created by the Kosovo government in exile during the 1990s. All Albanians in the Diaspora and Kosovo were duty-bound to pay three per cent of their salary into this fund to finance Kosovo’s parallel institutions.

I would say I was taking it from one room to another. The buildings were separate. I found a sack, put it inside, and gave it to Kadri. Then he reported that Sami Dërmaku and I had gone to see the place to seize the duplicator.

“No,” I said, “that one has it easy,” I said, “to accuse me. I’m an electrical engineering student, I wanted to steal,” I said, “from where students are served. Since he was that kind of person, he must have taken it himself.” Like that. Look, you couldn’t escape it, the UDB paid many people to follow you, with money and without money, in the name of Brotherhood and Unity. Whoever was with the regime lived like a fish in fat. But not those who acted against it, they were persecuted, along with their families. When my father died, they told me the UDB agents were all around, watching the funeral. My grandmother too. I didn’t see either of them.

**Anita Susuri:** Where were you when you were arrested, and did you, I mean, were you expecting the arrest?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Huh?

**Anita Susuri:** Where were you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Here in Pristina, in Pristina.

**Anita Susuri:** In your apartment?

**Sami Dërmaku:** At home, yes, we had our home.

**Anita Susuri:** They came there?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, like beasts, like hyenas. *Bang, bang, bang*. {onomatopoeia}. My mother said, “May the devil take you, you never leave us in peace” (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** So in a way you were expecting that you would...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. But I was thinking then, if I go out, I have eight years of prison behind me just for smoking. I never smoked in prison. When I got out, I lit one again, because I didn’t know. All this, you had one enemy, and you had to stand firm. Not to disgrace yourself in front of your comrades, but face to face with the enemy. I couldn’t imagine backing down. And then the second time when they sentenced me to two years, and then the summons to interrogations...

**Anita Susuri:** And that first imprisonment, was it with Adem Demaçi’s group?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, I was with Adem Demaçi's group.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the sentences that were given to the group, for example? The maximum ones. Who received the maximum?

**Sami Dërmaku:** *Bac*<sup>35</sup> Adem, yes, *bac* Adem nine years. Rexhep Mala... there I've forgotten. Seven or eight...

**Anita Susuri:** E juve sa ju kanë dënu?

And you, how much were you sentenced to?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I got six, Isa Kastrati six, Rexhep Mala nine, Xhavit Demaku eight or nine, Hasan as well. They were draconian sentences. The aim was to show: this is how we fight the enemy. It was a setup. It was kept going for a long time. Documents arrived saying that since Kadri Osmani had been arrested, because Kadri Osmani had lived with me, "At your place," they said, "the meeting for the founding of the National Liberation Fund was held." Then they moved it to Skender Kastrati. I even had two people in confrontation sessions, because people are reduced to skin and bone from torture. They told me about myself, "Skender Kastrati was red like blood, but we made him white like paper. You're still red." And when I saw what they had done to the other one, I cried. "Isuf Karagurushi, it pains me deeply that he came out in confrontation," I said, "It pains me deeply, you criminals, look what you've done to a human being." "With all the torture we gave you, you didn't cry, now you are crying." From the beating I would faint, fall to the ground, and they would bring me back with a bucket of water.

**Anita Susuri:** And again?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** The first time you were imprisoned, where did you serve your sentence? In which prisons?

**Sami Dërmaku:** In Pristina, in Peja, in Zenica, in Sarajevo. In Zenica, Rexhep Mala and I were together, with Agim Sylejmani and others. And when they took me to the Central Prison of Sarajevo, CZ, as they call it, *Centralni zatvor* [Central Prison], there they put me in a cell that had a metal ring in the middle. My stomach was hurting because I was on hunger strike. They chained one hand and one leg and left you like that. A round iron ring. They even told me, "Do you know who was here?" I said, "I know, Skender Kastrati." I continued in his prison. And then the second imprisonment: in Pristina, Gjyrokoc, Prizren. I even caused trouble there too... In the second prison there were Shaqir Shaqiri, Kadri Rexha, and Muhamet, Muhamet, the historian...

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<sup>35</sup> *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

**Anita Susuri:** It doesn't matter. If you don't remember, that's fine. But I'm interested in the Pristina prison. What were the conditions like? How was it?

**Sami Dërmaku:** It was horror. It was horror. Some kind of wooden bed, some rags, some... the rooms were dark, only holes between...

**Anita Susuri:** The bars.

**Sami Dërmaku:** The iron bars. Just holes, you'd pass the time counting them, in front, left, right, like that. The torture was horrific. And what's worse, I'll tell you about the case in the second prison. I was being interrogated by, as he called himself, the chief head of the UDB from Belgrade. One was from Banja Luka, one from Titograd [today Podgorica, Montenegro]. Now I had received from [Hidajete Osmani](#) a bundle of materials from the Communist Party of Avdullah Prapashtica. Anyway, those were seized from Hidajete. And Hidajete was tortured catastrophically. They claimed the materials had come from me. For about a month they interrogated me.

He even said, "How shall we talk?" No, "First of all, what do you want to drink?" I said, "I don't drink anything." "What do you mean," he said, "you don't drink anything? Coffee?" "No, no." "Coca-Cola?" "I don't drink," I said. "Why don't you drink?" "I don't drink," I said, "coffee with an enemy. I drink with friends. You want to dig my grave, and I should drink coffee with you?" And it ended there. Then again he took me for questioning, and later like this... but first again after the coffee, "How shall we talk?" I said, "I speak Albanian better, I explain better." "But you," he said, "you know Serbian well." "I know Serbian, but I know Albanian better," I said. "You know what," he said, "let's speak Serbian so those outside don't understand," meaning, those ones are better men than them. But they still didn't trust them, regardless.

At the end he said, "This is the last time we are calling you, think carefully," he said, "and then," he said, "watch yourself." I said, "Is it over?" "All right." "Listen," he said, "we can't continue with you like this. They told us, talk to him," and he hits the wall with his hand, "talk to the wall. But you know what," he said, "we'll send you to those outside, you know what they'll do to you." What I want to say is: the Albanian collaborators were more criminal than the Serbs. Because they had to prove that they were sworn to continue the raging crime. I had left a girl in Geneva, Vlora... Muhamrem Dana would say, "Oh my son, have you eaten? What did your mother give you? What has she done to you like this?" As if to kill me, because you left an orphan girl, now she has nothing at all. They carried out torture in a cruel way, worse than the *shkije*.

**Anita Susuri:** How long did you serve of the first sentence? Did you serve it all or were you released?

**Sami Dërmaku:** They reduced one year. I was sentenced to six years, I served five.

**Anita Susuri:** During your first imprisonment, was the violence only during the investigation period, or did it continue afterward as well?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, the investigations lasted five or six months, and afterward, when they saw they had nothing more to extract... then the trial was just a formal formality, because in reality the committee had decided, the UDB had decided who would be sentenced, how much, and where.

**Anita Susuri:** And meanwhile, while you were in prison, were you able to read literature or have access to it?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No. While we were in Pristina during the investigations, we had absolutely nothing, no newspapers, nothing. When the investigations ended, then they began to give us newspapers to read. And then, from the Pristina Prison they transferred me to the Peja Prison. There was a wonderful director there, Fuad Kryeziu, the brother of Ekrem Kryeziu. That's when we received literature. When my father came with my little daughter, Vlora, she wasn't even three or four years old, maybe five, she would come, "Daddy, daddy," and hug me. My father said, "The little rascal doesn't even know what order is, how to speak properly, she only knows how to hug." I said, "Oh father, you don't know what a child is." He said, "Then what am I here for? (laughs) What did I come for?"

**Anita Susuri:** And how often did you have visits?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Huh?

**Anita Susuri:** How often did you have visits, for example?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Në mujt, në mujt. Kur erdh vajza shkoj deri te maqina aty me prekë. "Ik", thashë, "se babushi për qita dënohet. S'bon". Ai Fuadi e nxorri ni grusht kështu pare të ima, kështu të hekrit e ia dha. Thashë, "A", thashë, "drejtor kot e ki", thashë, "s'mun e korruption vajzën time ti".

Once a month, once a month. When my daughter came, she would go up to the glass to touch it. "Go back," I told her, "because daddy will be punished for this. It's not allowed." That Fuad pulled out a handful of small metal coins like this and gave them to her. I said, "Ah," I said, "Mr. Director, it's useless, you can't corrupt my daughter."

**Anita Susuri:** So, you did encounter support from them?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I'm saying, wherever I went, I organized strikes. Now I'll give you a book that a comrade wrote about me. I organized strikes.

**Anita Susuri:** How many strikes were there, for example?

**Sami Dërmaku:** In the Shtime Prison there were those intellectuals who had been sentenced, Ukshin Hoti,<sup>36</sup> those from Pozharan, I've forgotten the name. So, the group of intellectuals. That Geci, and in my cell, in our cell, Mentor Kaqi from Gjakova came. I told Mentor, "Come, let's organize." Hydajet had been tortured, they hadn't put him on trial. But one month later they sentenced him alone, not with the others, because of the torture they had inflicted on Hydajet. I left a letter, I wrote a letter, took out the light socket and put it inside, then placed it back. Then I told the comrades, "There it is, take it, read it," so it could be passed from cell to cell. Then one idiot there, I won't mention his name, went and left the letter on the toilet door.

So now, why did I hide it so well that no one could ever guess where I had left it, and you go and put it on the toilet door. I was shaving, there was one policeman who was decent, he joked around, I had let my mustache grow. "Come on, come on, three hairs of a mustache, three hairs of hair and you're growing a mustache," because mine was thin, sparse. While I was getting my hair cut and tidied up, the barber said, "Come, they're calling you upstairs." "Oh God," I said, "what has happened now." When I went, they said, "It's not enough that you don't let us rest outside, now you don't let us rest inside either." I said, "No, I didn't..." because I had torn out that newspaper, that white part of *Rilindja*,<sup>37</sup> and left it... whether it worked or not. I said, "No, no, nothing happened, what are you going to..." "Look," he said, "even though you are an enemy, you should at least be a little honest." I said, "I have nothing to be honest about."

When he pulled it out of the drawer, the one I had written. "Did you write it?" "I did," I said, "I wrote it," because I knew they would go and verify it by handwriting. "Is this your handwriting?" because we also had to give written statements. I said, "It is mine." If I denied it, I could cause trouble for others. "Yes, it is mine." "Where did you leave it?" Now I didn't even know where he had found it. I told them where I had left it, they were surprised. "At the switch," I said, "I took it out and left it there." In it I had written that we should organize a strike. "Listen to what I'm telling you," he said, "don't you dare cause trouble," "because I will stop the strike." I said, "You do whatever you want, in the end." And I continued the strike. They had come to visit me, I don't remember, I think I didn't go out to see them because I was on strike and like that. Then after they took me from there, they took me to Gjrokoc. Now I was already an old prisoner, they were taking everything...

**Anita Susuri:** This was during your second imprisonment?

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<sup>36</sup> Ukshin Hoti (1943-1999) was a prominent Albanian politician, intellectual, and professor from Kosovo. Known for his advocacy of human rights and national self-determination for Albanians, he was imprisoned multiple times by Yugoslav authorities for his political activities. Hoti disappeared in 1999 after being released from prison, and his fate remains unknown, making him a symbol of resistance and sacrifice for many Albanians.

<sup>37</sup> *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, during the second imprisonment, now I'm telling you. After...

**Anita Susuri:** And I'm interested in something...

**Sami Dërmaku:** And from Peja Prison then, Fuad tells me, "Dërmak, they are going to send you to a bad prison. Be careful, watch out, because you do not have Kryeziu as director there and they can stage a killing. Given how you behaved here..." However, no, it was nothing extraordinary, because we also organized strikes there. Rexhep Mala was there, before him [Binak Ulaj](#), he had gone earlier. From Peja Prison, or rather from Pristina to Gjyrakoc, I was among the oldest, as a political prisoner, although there were also others older in age. The secretary Enver Limani came, while I was still in Pristina he used to come to my cell, open it, and we would embrace. Apparently he was Sadi Nimani's brother, I had been with him in Peja Prison, earlier in the first imprisonment. And surely he had been told about me, and we embraced, then he told me, "May I never see your eyes." "And may I never see your eyes either."

And when we went to Gjyrakoc, now when they gathered us all around, it was all done. I even had a woolen undershirt there that my mother had made for me. He said, "Look," he said, "boys," he said, "so that we do not send you to prisons in Serbia, we have opened this prison here. But if you continue like Sami Dërmaku," he said, "you will all be dispersed." And I started laughing. "Why are you laughing?" I said, "Well, now regimes boast about how many factories they have opened, how many hospitals they have built, how many schools they have built. And you are proud that you built a prison here." He fell silent. "And you," he said, "what would you do if you were in my place?" I lifted my head. He said, "Would you send me to God?" I said, "Yes, indeed," laughing.

**Anita Susuri:** And what kind of prison was Gjyrakoc?

**Sami Dërmaku:** It was good. Gjyrakoc was good, it was good. We could go out for walks all together. There was a restaurant where we would sit. Even then, later...

**Anita Susuri:** Inside the prison?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. There was a restaurant there. Even then, both my father and Xhevdet Syla died. He was a truly wonderful young man. His father had been my teacher in Shipashnicë. He had been in a cell with a woman named Zymryta who was sentenced. As for his wife, Gashi was her surname, I do not know her first name, I do not know whether you have interviewed her or spoken with her or not. No? Do not leave her without speaking to her, Zymryta, I will find her for you. And his wife as well, with the surname Gashi, she was also in prison. When his mother came, his father brought Xhevdet out for the visit, and Xhevdet told him that Sami Dërmaku was also there. When she left, after finishing the visit, his father said, "What? He ended up with Sami Dërmaku? Then we no longer have a son," he laughed.

**Anita Susuri:** And from Gjyrakoc Prison, it really surprises me that there was even coffee...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, tea and coffee and such. But for me, because now as we were going upstairs, we were separated from the comrades who were on the ground floor and us who were on the upper

floor. I was making a fist and greeting them. A vile Albanian guard came and said, "Put that hand down," he said, "or I will break it." "Go on, break it. This is an Albanian hand," I said, "I do not have the hand of a Serb," I said. Then from there, "Go downstairs!" I did not go right away. I knew I was causing them trouble, I fell and grappled with him. However, they put me in a cell. A cell completely made of concrete. They found out that... and I declared a hunger strike, the whole prison declared a hunger strike. Even those imprisoned for murders and thieves and others. The prisoners came out, those on strike did not eat, did not drink, did not take anything. They even blackmailed them by not giving them water. When it came to that, I knew that as a factor in the strikes, even though some were like that, I said, "I will break the strike, I will stop the strike on one condition, that I be allowed to read." As for reading, I would not have minded even if they kept me another month. He said, "All right, we will fulfill the condition."

Then I told him, his surname was Bujupi, I said, "Do you know why you began imprisoning me in solitary cells?" I said, "Because I'm older, and you think: if we break him, the younger ones will learn what awaits them. Let me tell you a story..." I told him the story about the shopkeeper distracted by a girl in a beautiful dress, the shop getting robbed, and then them blaming the girl, then blaming the dyer who dyed the dress, and finally saying they could hang him properly because "the dyer has a higher ceiling." He then told me another story: "Hasa and Hysa went out, one to steal, one to keep watch. When the police passed and asked, 'What are you doing?' he said, 'I'm a poet, I'm getting inspired, blue sky, blue car, watch out Hasa, or you'll be caught...'"

**Anita Susuri:** To pass it on to him...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, he said, "He understood and he ran away and escaped." But with these people he was showing me that blood would be spilled. Because I set a condition, that the policeman who had threatened me must not be there. Then when I came out, everyone gathered around me, as if for the first time, telling each other, "Sami Dërmaku held the prison together, if it weren't for him, we would have collapsed." I said, "No, you would have ruined my work, because I'm not here anymore." "Why?" "Because they don't want any authority except the authority of the prison." And that's exactly what happened.

Then from there they sent me to Prizren. In Prizren, the director was a man named Mufail, from Zhur. He opened my file and read it: "The smartest, the bravest, the most..." I said, "Don't tell me who I am, I know myself. I don't need you to tell me. But I want to know: am I a detainee in transit, or am I sentenced?" Transit detainees are sent to open prisons. "It depends," he said, "on you." "No," I said, "it doesn't depend on me. I've finished the investigation."

I declared a hunger strike for twenty days. The director said, "In conversation, start thinking about your health." I said, "Sir, I have character and dignity. I can't defend my dignity except through protest. And you, did you call me here for a conversation?" "Yes." "In a conversation, we are equals." "What equality in conversation with you? I'm the director, you're a prisoner."

"Well," I said, "the seat you're sitting in, I'd rather choose prison than sit there." "Out, idiot!" he shouted, and insulted me. (laughs)

## Part Four

**Anita Susuri:** In what years was your second imprisonment?

**Sami Dërmaku:** 1982–1983.

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

**Sami Dërmaku:** Two years.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the charge?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Huh?

**Anita Susuri:** What was the indictment?

**Sami Dërmaku:** That issue with the materials.

**Anita Susuri:** Just that.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Just that. They wanted to label me as a link between the SPK and Avdullah Prapashtica's Yugoslav Socialist Communist Party. But I admitted nothing at all. When they took me to trial, Dr. Shaqir Shaqiri, have you heard? Even the policemen there said, "Dërmak, take a crate of beer, you're off," meaning... And when they gave me two years, my mother cried, "Oh no!" I said, "Don't worry, mother, I'll pass those two years like a polar bear in hibernation." (laughs)

**Anita Susuri:** I also have to ask about your family, how did they deal with all this?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I'll tell you what my sister told me. When they put me in prison the second time, Faik Nura called my mother inside and said, "Is there anyone who can talk sense into Sami Dërmaku? He won't leave us in peace." My mother said, "He's the smartest one we have, there's no one." "So, he won't calm down?" "Let him not calm down," she said. "Release him."

"Damn him," Faik Nura said, "may the devil take his head." And when they released me from the first prison term, I started moving around in zigzags. They told me I had to report to the UDB in Pristina. I didn't go. Then Avdullah Prapashtica came in a police car and stopped at my door. He said, "Why didn't you report here?" I said, "No one told me." They had told me, but I didn't want to go, why should I? "No one told me to report. I served my prison time." "No, no. you have to come."

When I went, Faik Nura was there. I said, "Hey Faik Nura, the UDB has done you well. You used to be skinny, now you're filled out, you've become a man..." And he said, "Did you pay your debt?" "What debt?" I said. "I owe you nothing, you owe me." And I said, "You know what you've done, I never hated you as much as I hate you now, because you're criminals. And you're asking me if I paid my debt." Avdullah Prapashtica was there too. Since he had formed his own illegal group, he said, "Sami Dërmaku keeps beating me to it." (laughs) He exaggerated, you know. But the words I said weren't meant for him. After that he didn't return, he went outside.

**Anita Susuri:** Between your prison terms, there are the 1981 demonstrations...

**Sami Dërmaku:** I was out.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you experience them?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I had gone with my daughter Vlora, there were problems with the child's room, with the doctor for children's wards, near the stadium that used to be there. When I came out, I heard them shouting slogans: "Conditions, conditions, conditions." I went with the crowd as far as the Faculty of Philosophy, then I left on foot with my daughter. "Conditions, conditions" what conditions? It seems it started spontaneously, because earlier a plate of food had been broken there, meaning the food conditions. But then it took a different direction, it was necessary, inevitable. When I later went out to the 1981 protests after they became massive, I was wearing a coat. Someone thought I was UDB and grabbed a stone to hit me. Then someone told them, "Don't, he's a former political prisoner."

**Anita Susuri:** Was there a lot of violence there?

**Sami Dërmaku:** The son of Daci, the professor in the history faculty, was killed. Then later there were stones being thrown at police.

**Anita Susuri:** And the city overall, what was it like?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I don't know, because I wasn't there. I was around Sunny Hill, near the canteen back then.

**Anita Susuri:** After that, the "differentiation" process began...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Curfews and all that. What was the situation like?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Azem Vllasi himself said: "There is no middle, either with us or against us. There is no in-between." But look, do you even get to speak? Those sons of communists have televisions. I don't turn it on, I've shut it off. I don't watch TV at all. Have you seen how they talk, like jackals? You can't even tell who is speaking, what they're saying, or where they're speaking from.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Sami, when you told me about the second prison, when you were released the second time, which prison were you released from?

**Sami Dërmaku:** In Sarajevo, when they took me from Zenica, I went straight into a hunger strike. And then, in that cell, those criminals, they would close me in with a metal lid, but my stomach was ruined from the hunger strike, it was disturbed. Until they brought me downstairs, I was still on strike. Anyway, after some time it came time to release me. There was a man named Ratko, a *načelnik* [chief], almost like the director. He said, "Dërmak, with this mind of yours, you'll end up back in prison again." When they transferred us from Peja to Sarajevo, it was interesting, the hatred between Serbs and Muslims, I saw it there, it was terrible. They brought me a Bosniak named Mirza, shouting, "Vlasi, Vlasi, Vlasi." I said, "Who are these 'Vlasi'?" Meaning they called the Serbs, Vlach, maybe Romanian.

**Anita Susuri:** Ah, Vlachs.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Vlachs, yes. After I went to my second prison term, I had grown a moustache; he could check the registry and see who I was. They lined us up there. I told the others, "Don't make the mistake

of trading words with the guards, they'll cripple you." Everything was clear. I have never seen a more terrifying prison. And again, my second imprisonment in Sarajevo, me again. He said, "Are you Sami Dërmaku?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Didn't I tell you, if you keep going like this, you'll end up here a second time?" And he said to the others, "That's what I told him: if you continue like this, you'll come back to this prison. And you too, if you follow Sami Dërmaku's path, you'll suffer like him." Sarajevo Prison was terrifying.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there violence? Why?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Violence, violence. Maybe they behaved that way toward others too, but the violence was also between the guards themselves. When Bosniak guards were on shift, there were fewer of them, the Serbs would beat them. When the Serb guards came on shift, the Bosniaks would beat the Serbs, screaming, shouting.

**Anita Susuri:** I think it was multi-storey?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Where?

**Anita Susuri:** In Sarajevo.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Well, inside, how many floors did I see?

**Anita Susuri:** So you were released from Sarajevo Prison?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, from Sarajevo Prison both the first time and the second time.

**Anita Susuri:** And when you were released, did someone come to pick you up, or how did it happen?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes. I must have asked for my clothes, and all that... my younger brother, the third one, the youngest, at that time he was almost of age. My mother... because in the second prison... My father had come once for a visit. He had put on a new *plis*, with the hope that maybe there would be an amnesty or something. The first time, then the second time, I got the news that he had died. And I said, "Did you dare," I said, "to come with a white *plis*?" He said, "I wore it on purpose, let them burst." (laughs)

**Anita Susuri:** Were you able to go to the funeral?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no. The family requested it, but to tell the truth, I wouldn't have gone anyway. I wouldn't have given them that "honor," so they could say how humane they are. I told my mother, she said, "We asked, but they didn't let you." I said, "Don't worry, even if they had let me, I wouldn't have come."

**Anita Susuri:** Meanwhile, after you were released from prison, were you able to work? How did you survive?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Listen, I enrolled in the Technical Faculty in 1968, the year of the demonstrations. I got angry because they were cursing the state, and I had received a scholarship from Elektro-Kosova. How could "the enemy" give you a scholarship? Then those thieves would say, "You want to bring us

down. You can't even finish university and you keep attacking us, becoming enemies, destroying Brotherhood and Unity," and so on. I ended up in prison, I served five years in Zenica. Then, in the end, I came back from Zenica and continued my studies. After some years I was arrested again, then I got out again and continued. I finished my studies in 1984. Nearly 17 years—15 or 17, something like that?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Sami Dërmaku:** But on the condition, I didn't actually get to perform my profession. But I wanted to show that what you say isn't true: the truth is that we fight for an ideal.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you allowed to continue? Because for some people they completely forbade education.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, no, not me... no. But almost all my friends, my colleagues, had become professors. I'm from the same generation as Avni Dika, you've heard of him, and Isuf Krasniqi. And then Ruzhdi Sefa, when I got out after the second prison.

**Anita Susuri:** After the second prison, did you then continue working? Did you get employed somewhere, or did you continue your activism?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No. After the second prison, Zaim Kurti, Albini's father, took me on at work. And then when the arrests started, so I wouldn't fall into prison a third time, I went underground. From the underground, I left and went to Switzerland.

**Anita Susuri:** Oh. And what did you do there, at Albini's father's workplace?

**Sami Dërmaku:** My internship as an engineer, my required professional training.

**Anita Susuri:** So only the internship.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, only the internship.

**Anita Susuri:** What year would it be that you left?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Early 1980s. The 1981 demonstrations happened, I had just come out of prison shortly before those demonstrations. It hadn't been long, ten or fifteen days, or twenty. I've forgotten exactly, but roughly.

**Anita Susuri:** And when you decided to leave, was it difficult? Surely it was. How did you make that decision?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I said it earlier, what he told me was true. When he said, "Twice to Albania, twice sentenced for hostile crimes, several times for misdemeanors..." And then when Tito came, they put us in isolation, call it isolation, it was a cell until he left. I knew that with prison I was contributing nothing. So I left, at least it helped; at least I wasn't a burden on the family.

**Anita Susuri:** At that time, had you already formed your family?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no. After I got out, I married later. I had separated from my first wife, anyway, the troubles we had. And with this one, after I... we got to know each other. I asked, "When will we do it?" You know, the formal wedding. "Not this week, not this week." I said, "Fine." Meanwhile I saw how the situation was. I went underground, stayed at a friend's, and then left for Switzerland. Then everyone kept asking, where is he, what happened. Later I called from Geneva by phone. I said, "I'll send someone as far as Ljubljana." (laughs) We did the marriage outside Kosovo.

**Anita Susuri:** And she was in Kosovo, your wife?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, she was in Kosovo.

**Anita Susuri:** And you reunited there?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, we reunited there.

**Anita Susuri:** Immediately after you left, or after some years?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, after about three or four months, five months, something like that.

**Anita Susuri:** And once you were there, how did things go? How did your activity continue in Geneva?

**Sami Dërmaku:** In Geneva? First, because I went to Albania a second time, like I told you...When several of us gathered, the one with the most authority and older was Isa Kastrati. He had just been released from prison. We decided to send Isa Kastrati... because in 1981 the Gërvalla brothers were killed, the situation in Albania worsened, Kadri Zeka<sup>38</sup> was killed. The diaspora began to split. We told Skender Kastrati to go to Albania to find out which people we could work with, and then to come and coordinate in Switzerland. But before going there, we tried here. There was Xhavit Haliti and that man from Macedonia with white hair, what was the surname of Ali Ahmeti's... the leader of the biggest party in Macedonia...

**Anita Susuri:** For the life of me I can't remember. (laughs)

**Sami Dërmaku:** Damn it! Anyway, I met him here by the monuments before I went underground. I said, "This is the problem, we need to undertake something, to act," and the "movement without an address" had formed. He said, "No, our comrades there decide," in Switzerland. So I decided to go, not Skender. Skender said, "I've just come out of prison, how can I go there?" I said, "Fine. I'll go." I left from Vuthaj. Binak Ulaj took me right up to the border. "Now," he said, "just down there." I even had Rexhep Mala's pistol, which he had given me. It remained in Albania, I have to try to find it, if he left it marked somewhere.

I made a mistake, but we didn't know. They wanted to keep Kosovo "under embers," as they say, heat it a little but not let it burn. Not let Kosovo Albanians hold the matter in their own hands, but keep it

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<sup>38</sup> Kadri Zeka (1953-1982) was a Kosovo Albanian political activist, journalist, and member of the "Revolutionary Group" in the 1970s. He worked with fellow activists such as Rexhep Mala and Hydajet Hyseni and later lived in exile in Switzerland, where he published and distributed political material supporting Kosovo's struggle. Zeka was assassinated along with activists Jusuf and Bardhosh Gërvalla in Untergruppenbach, West Germany, allegedly by agents of the Yugoslav secret service.

under the supervision of the Party of Labor. And I realized there that they were going to send me back. Binak Ulaj had warned me how it worked: when they come to take your watch, your ring, whatever you have, and then bring you your passport, they're sending you back. Because I told them: "Since you have the Security Service and the embassy, tell us which people we can cooperate with so UDB agents don't infiltrate us." On the way, as they were bringing me, I stopped talking... Honestly, while I was there he said, "Will you leave us the passport?" I said, "Here is the passport," and I thought about taking it and tearing it up, since it was foreign.

I took it, tore it up and threw it in the toilet. I said, "Take it." And I left them a letter: "Sir, I've had contacts with groups, don't send me back, they could drug me, wreck my mind, and you'll say I'm delirious." They told me, "You must stay." I said, "How can I stay? They can inject you, tie your hands, how can you resist? When they dropped me at the border, one of them started: "If it weren't for the Party, for Comrade Enver, Kosovo..." I said, "What?" I said, "What are you doing? They come with tanks and airplanes, and you're sending them masks." I said, "And I'm telling you: if it weren't for Kosovo, there wouldn't even be a 'Comrade Enver' in the first place."

"How can you say that?" I said, "When things get tight, Enver Hoxha goes to Tropoja and says, 'Llap and Karadak, rise up and fight if anyone attacks Albania.' Do you not believe the Party? I'm telling you what Enver Hoxha himself says: Llap and Karadak, rise up to defend Albania."

When I went there, I saw horror, horror. Women bent over with hoes... opening terraces, digging channels. And when they put me back at the border, the Serbian police arrived, *clack clack*, handcuffs {gestures putting on cuffs}. I told that man, "Look," I said. Then, when I got to Geneva, this is what happened. The first thing I did was reopen the "Igballe Prishtina" Club in Geneva, and then we carried out activities. Then, at the founding of the LDK, I was one of them, because some comrades said, "Come with us," since there was "the movement with an address" and "the movement without an address." Others said, "Come with us." I said, "No, you've cooked this mess yourselves. I'm not getting back into this with you."

The unity I tried to build, they sabotaged it with their own thinking, because they assumed I wanted to do what Enver Hoxha did: unite the groups and seize power. As if I wanted to be first. (laughs) I said, "No, first you hold elections with the key people, you form a council, you set the conditions of unity. Then you go to an assembly, whoever wins, wins. That's it." Then we came out as the communist-revolutionary group with the paper *Jehona e Kosovës*. The issue numbers were ready to print, but when the LDK appeared first, I told them: "This is finished, we must work within the LDK."

Even those friends I had... I used to criticize those in the movement: "You go out preaching Marxism-Leninism in the most capitalist state, you pose with Enver Hoxha's portrait, this doesn't honor you. Switzerland won't forbid it, but it won't help you advance either; it won't encourage contact or support from others." "Why are you with the LDK?" I said, "Sir, you who work with verified comrades from cells, people who have proven themselves, you have it easier. I have it harder. Because this mass, this crowd, Albanian mothers gave birth to them, they are Albanian men. Who will organize them? Who will lead them? If you leave them like that, you can neither forgive them nor sell them, they're Albanians."

Then, I did not mention it a bit earlier, while I was there, and now within the LDK, I led the "Three Percent Fund" campaign, I have all the receipts here, I can show you. Then I organized a headquarters for "The Homeland Calls" to collect money. Later, thanks to Dr. Shaqir Shaqiri, who later became LDK

secretary, the Pan-National Humanitarian Fund was formed, and I led that too. Nine million seven hundred thousand francs were collected and handed to the government from the funds raised. I participated in all the groups, because the LDK had the name. At first, the LDK people didn't want to become unified with others; they wanted the name LDK to remain, and to collect with what they had.

After the Pan-National Humanitarian Fund was created, the Popular Movement and everyone else participated too. Every week, invoices of 20–30 thousand francs would come to me in my name, issued by the bank. Then, once the government was formed, it took the funds. I had spoken with Bujar Bukoshi about placing those nine point seven million—maybe making it ten million—but he didn't want to. Then we met in Albania, at the ministry, and I told him: "You said if a village is attacked, I'll go in with an army. Where is the army? The war is breaking out in Kosovo. Second: you appear on television ads every day for 'freedom' but freedom is fought for inside, not in Tirana. Before you came out with FARK<sup>39</sup> now you've dressed people in UÇK uniforms and you're parading around Tirana, which can harm Albania."

They killed... there was Ahmet Krasniqi,<sup>40</sup> the military officer who was later killed. I found out Bujar was in Tirana and asked Ahmet, "Have you met him?" He said, "No." I said, "How can you not meet him? You're the defense minister, and we don't get information directly from you about how events are developing?" Ahmet said, "Dërmak, I've written a detailed plan. I'm about to finish it and I'll deliver it to Bujar Bukoshi. If he accepts it, good. If not, I have two paths: return to Switzerland or go into the war myself." Then they killed him, and Halil Bica became his deputy.

We gathered in a meeting. I told Azem Syla,<sup>41</sup> he was defense minister, or had been given logistics, like a minister within the UÇK. He didn't accept, maybe because it seemed too small a promotion. I told Azem: "Let's make him a second deputy prime minister, since 'minister' doesn't please him." He said, "Yes, we'll do it." Then I said: "If two armies enter Kosovo, we will kill each other. This is the last time we talk at the table. Either Albanian blood will be spilled, sons of Albanian mothers, or we will stay on the ground. Keep that in mind," I said, "like in Bosnia, where two armies entered." Later, on the way, they disarmed them in Tropoja. When they arrived, they even took their uniforms, because the UÇK doesn't exist without fighting.

**Anita Susuri:** And in Switzerland you also organized petitions, protests...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, protests. We held two hunger strikes, one week each, in front of the United Nations. While we were striking, the Albanian representative would try to greet us. I'd say, "Where are

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<sup>39</sup> FARK (*Forcat e Armatosura të Republikës së Kosovës* – Armed Forces of the Republic of Kosovo) was a military structure formed in 1998 under the government-in-exile of the Republic of Kosovo, led by Bujar Bukoshi. It operated separately from the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK/KLA) and was intended to serve as the official armed force of the parallel Kosovar state, which later caused political and military tensions between the two structures.

<sup>40</sup> Ahmet Krasniqi was a Kosovo Albanian military officer and political figure who served as defense minister in the self-declared government of Kosovo in exile and later worked to establish independent armed forces for Kosovo, separate from the Kosovo Liberation Army. He was killed in Tirana in 1998 under unclear circumstances, and his death has been the subject of ongoing debate.

<sup>41</sup> Azem Syla was a Kosovo Albanian political activist and former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander who also served as a member of the Kosovo Assembly. He was part of the KLA's leadership and later faced legal scrutiny in Kosovo for his activities after the war.

you, eagle?" Then we'd go out and distribute pamphlets. At the United Nations, those delegations, all those people, we would hand each one a pamphlet at the door.

**Anita Susuri:** And what did the pamphlets say?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Right there, rape, exploitation. Pamphlets against the occupation. You saw how I spoke there, you have to tell the public.

**Anita Susuri:** Were the pamphlets in English?

**Sami Dërmaku:** French, mostly French. And when I'd hand them out, if the Albanian representative happened to pass by, I'd tell him, "Take one, you need this too."

## Part Five

**Anita Susuri:** And these protests that were held, I saw from the video you sent me that they were quite massive, I mean...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** How did the news spread so widely that protests were going to happen?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no, organization by organization, generation after generation, through guests, friends, and others.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there both men and women?

**Sami Dërmaku:** You saw it yourself, children, women, men.

**Anita Susuri:** So this, I think, was a protest in 1997...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, 1997. Almost before the war broke out.

**Anita Susuri:** Was this in Geneva?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, it was in Bern. The capital of Switzerland.

**Anita Susuri:** And as time approached, when it got closer, we can't say the exact moment, but the year 1998...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you work, or did you have contact with those who were forming, or had already formed, an army, or surely...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Look, ordinary people didn't know anything. The people who were organizers, the ones who were thinking it through, they knew. As for collecting money in Switzerland, no one collected more than me, because they knew I don't do scams, theft, or dirty dealings. Would you believe it: 9.7 million. I carried my food with me, bread, tuna, coffee, milk, I'd sit in a parking lot, eat, rest a bit, make coffee, and go city to city across Switzerland. And never, not once, did it cross my mind to even take a coffee for myself from that money. I went there as an engineer, I could have worked as an engineer and earned ten thousand francs, fifteen thousand francs. But I lived on social assistance. I would say: I didn't come out here to profit or to benefit, I came out here to organize.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you, besides these organizing efforts you did here, did you do any other work or activities?

**Sami Dërmaku:** No, no, I lived on social assistance. Sometimes it happened the children didn't have milk for their cereal. But I'm telling you: never a single franc. With my own cars, my own fuel, I drove from one end to the other, and I never took a single cent from that fund. For *Bac Adem*, Adem Demaçi, when he got out, I collected around 27–28 thousand francs.

**Anita Susuri:** And the money people gave, was it all the diaspora?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, entirely the diaspora.

**Anita Susuri:** In 1998, when it started, when the war broke out the first attacks, what was that period like for you?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Look, then the biggest thing happened. The Nationwide Fund was created, but the government took that money. We said thank God, our government was formed. How could we know what this would become... And then, well, the problem is like they say: when two rams meet on a bridge, both fall into the river. They demanded money without giving it a function. A fool isn't going to give you money, give me the money. Even though they were given it. Meanwhile, he had the money, and in the war, nowhere, nothing. So what now?

**[Here the interview is interrupted]**

**Sami Dërmaku:** After the war, during the war, because Azem Syla and I had been in the same cell; we had been in the same cell in Prizren Prison. He knew who I was. I used to criticize the LPK<sup>42</sup> and those foolish Marxism-Leninism ideas, because I had experience and background. And when Azem Syla got out to the West, because I was chairman of the Association of Clubs and Societies in Switzerland, he knew I collected money. "We need money." Since I asked Bujar for that money and he didn't release it, claiming, "What kind of ministers do I have, I can't release it," Azem told me: "You make a group, collect money, and give it to me, because I'm one of the first in the protests." People didn't put money in boxes because they didn't know where it would go. They put the money in the bank.

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<sup>42</sup> A clandestine Albanian nationalist and political organization established in 1982 by several diaspora-based groups opposed to Yugoslav rule. The LPK played a key role in coordinating underground political activity in Kosovo throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It advocated for the unification of Albanian-inhabited territories and later became one of the main organizational predecessors of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), providing ideological direction, fundraising networks, and political coordination during the armed resistance.

I said, "Once it comes to collecting cash by hand, this is finished." He said, "Do you have someone to give it to?" I said, "Yes." "To whom?" "To the commander." "Who was the commander?" I said, "Azem Syla." "Can you write that down?" "Write it down," I said. Then he said, "Can you collect it?" I said, "And can I take that money?" He said, "You can, but they'll seize it from you at customs. But I'm the prime minister, they don't open my suitcase, and I can take it." I said, "If you take it, fine." I told him: "That money you've taken..." because he said, "I can't touch that money because it's a humanitarian fund, not for war." I said, "That's easy. You buy 'white goods' (appliances), and you can deliver weapons by helicopter wherever you want. That's not true," I told him.

Meanwhile, he created the Emergency Council for the "Homeland Calls" fund. The war was the emergency, nothing else. The Swiss aren't fools. I said, "You can't fool them." He said, "The Emergency Council will do it." I said, "Why an Emergency Council? The emergency is the war, there's nothing else beyond that." I said, "It will do the opposite. There should be a Mobilization штаб for the 'Homeland Calls' fund." And it was done, at one gathering we collected almost one hundred thousand francs. But some people from the Movement, out of fear that this fund would become like the Nationwide Fund and that the "Homeland Calls" fund would be sidelined, sabotaged it.

I called Azem: "You told me to collect money. I started collecting money. Your comrades sabotaged it." He had told me when he arrived, "Dërmak, they didn't want you at all, but you're dealing with me," you know. There was also Xheladin Gashi, Commander Plaku, he acted a bit rough, you know. When he came, I said, "Why were you acting tough with me?" He said, "How was I supposed to know you had a connection with Daja," because Azem's pseudonym was Daja. Then I got into a vehicle, actually, a truck, and reached Albania. I said, "You did me wrong. You told me to collect money; I started collecting it; they sabotaged it. I have nothing to stay there for." I said, "I came to go to war. But I'm disabled, I don't have a meniscus, I have ligament damage and a fracture." Jakup Krasniqi<sup>43</sup> was there too: "For God's sake, the young people are sitting around eating tomatoes and we can't push them, let alone the old."

So I stayed within the ministry where Azem was, in his cabinet. Later... I had a good pistol. Fatmir Limaj said, "Since you're not going to war, at least leave the pistol so they can kill [the enemy]!" (laughs) He gave me one of his own pistols. I said, "When the war is over, you'll return it." That pistol of mine, Kadri [Veseli] takes it, the SHIK<sup>44</sup> Kadri, interesting. Kadri Veseli. He takes my pistol. I said, "Why did you give it to him?" He said, "Well, as Uncle Sami said, he took it," you know. Then I sent him the papers too, so he wouldn't get in trouble. And then, from there, once NATO entered, once KFOR came, we withdrew to Kosovo. Within the ministry I was "M1," the Minister of Defense.

I saw it... let me check that no one is knocking on the door [he addresses the interviewer]... I saw what they were doing and how they were behaving. I wanted to resign. I had written an article: "I fear the mafia will come to power," because I could see what was happening. Fatmir Limaj<sup>45</sup> said, I wrote it very

<sup>43</sup> Jakup Krasniqi (1951) is a Kosovar Albanian politician and historian. He was a spokesperson for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during the 1998–1999 war and later held several senior political roles in independent Kosovo, including Chair of the Assembly (2007–2014) and Acting President on two occasions. His political activity spans the transition from underground resistance to post-war state institutions.

<sup>44</sup> Albania's state security.

<sup>45</sup> Fatmir Limaj (1971) is a Kosovar Albanian politician and former commander in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during the 1990s conflict. After the war he entered politics, served as Minister of Transport and Telecommunications, and later became leader of the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA) party.

harshly. Xheladin Gashi, Commander Plaku, said, "Man, soften it a bit, because we're getting angry looks from the others." You know, I saw what was going on. Fatmir Limaj said, "Where do you drink your water?" I said, "Look, I drink water where the truth is. The truth was more bitter than whatever you'll try to change now." But thanks to Xheladin Gashi, Commander Plaku, we softened it and published it. Fine. Later, where he drank his water, his filth, in prisons, in... I don't know if you've seen it.

Azem Syla told me... I had wanted to resign earlier. Ramadan Avdiu and some friends said, "Don't resign and leave us with a black face, wait, in a month this government will dissolve anyway, don't rush." I waited. When it ended, without going into details, Azem Syla said: "Dërmak, what do you want to do now?" I said, "For the rest of my life I will not be with these bandits. I'm an engineer by profession, I'm going back to my profession. I'm going to work at KEK." At KEK I worked in the Security Directorate.

Then, after I had some health troubles, I developed a heart problem, I went and had a stent put in over there. I told Azem Syla, "Look," I said, "you've been imprisoned, you grew up an orphan without a mother," because his mother was burned to death, "and you've left your father like a stone by the hearth. Step back, it is enough. You've done plenty. Twice you've been in prison; they tortured you, they mistreated you. You organized, you led the war, you were in charge. Withdraw, if you want to remain clean." But he said, "No, my comrades are saying, 'Uncle has left us, he's withdrawing, he doesn't want to continue the road with us.'" I said, "Yes, but with these 'white faces' you won't come out clean." And that's how it happened to him. When he ended up in prison and got out, I told him, I even wrote it like this, "I suspect he did it; anyway, may you be well and live in health."

I stopped voting. I stopped going to elections. The first time I went to vote I went thinking, thinking they were decent people. "UÇK, UÇK," they shouted. I said, "Fine, Azem, so what about us who were in prisons, and the people who came back in coffins, and the crippled ones broken by torture, what are they? Are we nothing, and only UÇK exists in this world?" I said. "They want to split the sky shouting," I said. So then I went and worked at KEK for a while. I had a heart procedure, a stent inserted, after that I withdrew completely. I feel sorry, because I struggled until I finished university, that profession, and in the end I got to practice a little. Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What did you do afterward?

**Sami Dërmaku:** After that, writing. I kept busy with writing.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me you had documented stories as well, how to say it, of your fellow fighters...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Fellow activists.

**Anita Susuri:** Fellow activists...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes. I did that in 2001, 2002, after I returned. But I never thought the time would come when I'd have to... because I didn't know who would transcribe them. Then it was about three euros per page, altogether it cost over a thousand. I signed a contract, but I didn't understand it properly; I need to talk to them, apparently they aren't even covering the expenses. Big words at first, and then they back away.

**Anita Susuri:** So now you'll publish it as a book?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, as a book. And the recording is digital, on a USB.

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Sami, how many children do you have? Where are your children? What do they do?

**Sami Dërmaku:** I have four children. Vlora, the eldest, has two wonderful daughters. They bought a house in France and also built a house here. The girls are excellent, very smart. The older one is finishing her master's in law, for the magistracy/advocacy track. And my eldest son, he finished a bachelor's in international relations; he did his master's in economics-sociology. Now he has taken a master's in law. He has finished and is continuing his traineeship.

My second daughter, after him, she finished her master's, found her traineeship to become a lawyer, and she is a lawyer too. And she's continuing another master's, this time in computing. The youngest son has now entered the hospital and is finishing his traineeship; he has a few exams to complete over a year and a half and then he'll be independent. Until now he worked here and there, so he wouldn't sit idle. He had about three thousand francs and said, "In my life I've never had more money than this!" (laughs)

**Anita Susuri:** And you're settled there now, in Geneva?

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, yes, but we live mostly here. We live mostly here; the children are there, and they come here from time to time.

**Anita Susuri:** Very good.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes, about Switzerland: I told them, "Even if you work and swear loyalty to Switzerland a hundred times, you're still a foreigner." They have the German word *Gastarbeiter*, or whatever they call them. Still, there's racism there too, not like ours, but racism. And what's worse in Switzerland: other staff in the Swiss administration are often more vicious than the Swiss themselves, because they want to prove themselves. When I went there, there were no Albanian interpreters. Then they brought a Steva, someone from Tito's time, who had come to Switzerland, I think after the war of '45, with Chetniks. He got Swiss citizenship.

They kept telling me to speak Serbian. I said, "I don't speak Serbian, I don't know the language." "How come you don't know it, you finished university?" said that Serb. "And you were in the army, and you still don't know the language?" Then I said to him, because the Swiss police chief was saying, "You speak Albanian to this interpreter, she'll translate into French for him," since he spoke French, I said, "No. If that's the case, bring a Chinese person: let her speak French to the Chinese, and then the Chinese to him."

Then I said, "Sir, you can't force me how to speak. This man didn't flee because he killed Albanians with tanks and committed massacres, I won't speak the enemy's language. Do you understand me now?" He said, "Did you think we were going to welcome you with roses?" I said, "No, I didn't think you'd welcome me with roses, but I did think you were a democratic state."

Imagine, they took me into a basement. My daughter was born, mold started spreading. They didn't let me work, they didn't let me enter employment and get housing like everyone else. A friend told me,

"Go to so-and-so..." Apparently the chief was Medvedev, a Russian immigrant. There was also a UDB-type boss they called "Goc." He said, "Go to him." Maybe they had conflicts with that one. I said, "Sir, my daughter was born in a basement; the basement is damp. I've been there for years. Please, I'm not asking for more than this," because they had told me, "When more migrants from Kosovo gather, we'll place you too."

I said, "So many migrants come, people I know, and within three or four months they get a decision. I've waited three years. In the end I want an answer. No matter how you people decide, I can go elsewhere in the world. But I believed you were a democratic state." "After two weeks," he said, "call us."

After two weeks, I got word to go to Bern, to meet there. I had taken Serbian newspapers, *NIN*, *Vesti*, and so on. The chief came, an older, serious woman. "Mr. Dërmaku, you do know Serbian," she said, because they had told her I didn't. I said, "I know it perfectly." "Good," she said. "Then we have this Serb here, speak Serbian." I said, "No, ma'am. I won't speak Serbian. An enemy who has massacred my name. I don't want to know his language or speak it." He came in and sat there, thinking he'd stay. "What do we do?" she asked. "What do we do?" I said. "We'll speak in French, since you know French." "And him?" "No," I said. "Not with him here. He could inform the UDB back there, expose my comrades and everything. I won't speak in front of him."

He got up, excuse me, like a soaked goat in the rain. And with her, we continued, sometimes with fingers, sometimes with hands (laughs). Because of me, Albanians started being hired as interpreters, until then there had been none. Truly, I suffered, but character is character. There's no price that can break me. He said, "I thought we were welcoming you with roses." I said, "No, I thought you were a democratic state."

**Anita Susuri:** Mr. Sami, if you don't have anything else to add, I would thank you very much...

**Sami Dërmaku:** Thank you as well.

**Anita Susuri:** And for your contribution.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Maybe I went a bit zig-zag, but still, I said it

**Anita Susuri:** That's how the mind works, like that. No problem. Very good. Thank you very much.

**Sami Dërmaku:** Yes.