

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH KIMETE MITROVICA BASHA

Brussels | Date: February 25, 2026

Duration: 113.25 minutes

Present:

1. Kimete Mitrovica Basha (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer and 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

**Anna Di Lellio:** Okay. Thank you, Kimete, for agreeing on this interview. This is Kimete Mitrovica Basha. We are in Brussels. It's the 25th of February, 2026, and we're going to do this interview in English, although Kimete is fluent in Albanian, and she's going to explain why.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, I think our first contact was in English, and while I know your Albanian is perfect and mine also, I just felt that the natural way to speak together would make me feel more comfortable, more relaxed with you, is to speak in English. So I'm grateful to you that you've accepted to do that with me. So yes, it's just because that makes me feel more relaxed, and being interviewed is important, but I want to be able to express myself without feeling constrained. Thank you.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Can we start from the beginning? Where and when were you born, and can you tell us a little bit more about your family and your childhood?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I was one of seven children. I'm the second daughter of four daughters with three brothers. We were all born in Australia, all of us born between 1952 and 1960, seven children in that period. We were raised in a post-war period. We were raised in a country that was receiving refugees that were not from England, not that they were, you know, but let's just say the immigration had, the nature of the immigration to Australia at that time began to change, because up till then, they were receiving only the British, basically. But the war period, of course, created a dramatic situation where they accepted people from the former... well, from the countries that would fall behind the Iron Curtain.

And so Albanians were accepted, and my parents went there. It's a long story why they went there, but it's not a particularly interesting story. And so we were raised in a country that was having difficulty assimilating this new form of immigration and would not recognize, basically, what they could bring.

So my parents, both of them highly educated, my father with two degrees, doctoral degrees, was refused work, for example, at the university, and he was, subsequently became a labourer, as he put in my birth certificate, and worked in various menial jobs, which led, frankly, to my family dealing with exclusion. I dealt with exclusion very early, with not even, it's almost brutal racism, actually, and with this feeling that we didn't actually belong. So for me, being raised in Australia, while I was a happy child, I was also witness to great injustice.

And that injustice has actually been, is the seed of who I have become, and who I am today.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Well, may I ask?...As you said, it's not very interesting as a story, but I would be interested in knowing...How did your parents get to Australia, as Albanians?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, my mother was in a camp at the end of the Second World War. My father was not. My father, I think he made a choice not to, and partly because his uncle, from his mother's side, Xhafer Deva,<sup>1</sup> had been, had been working, worked with the Germans. So I think it was a moral decision not to go into the camps. I never had that conversation with him, so I don't know, I'm just assuming that.

So at some point, and I don't exactly know how, my mother and my father were in Syria, in Damascus. So in 1948, '49, they were, they were both there, and a huge group of Albanians were there. And my father met my mum, and fell in love, and six months later, they were married.

And then there was...they were...the refugees were being dispersed across the various places in the world that were receiving these, these communities, and these refugees. And originally, my father had been given permission to immigrate to America. But, and this is just how life is, and how incredible life can be sometimes, my father had a hernia, and he needed to have an operation. So he had the operation. But in the meantime, his chance to leave, to go to America, had passed. That was the first element. The second element was that my father had no family in exile. My grandmother, my, his sister, etc, were in Albania. And my father, my mother's father, and was, was with them. So, my grandfather was sent to Australia. And my mother was very close to her father. So, my father, I think, first of all, the opportunity to go to America was now in question.

And my mother was grieving the fact that she was going to lose that connection with her father. So my father, I think it was an act of love, decided to, okay, then we'll go with grandfather...let her have her family, since I won't have mine. And so they went to Australia. I think...I'm sort of happy, actually, that they didn't go to America. But it was still an ill-fated decision, because their life in Australia was so difficult, so very, very difficult. So that's the story.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Where in Australia were you born and where did you live?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I was born in Melbourne, in the south. It was lovely...It was very British. It still is the most British of the Australian cities. Very gracious, very conservative. Yeah, I was born in Melbourne. I was very happy.

I mean, it's very interesting, the paradox. I saw so much pain and loss. I lived with an exile community, nostalgic, longing, exclusion, loss of identity. I understood this without really understanding it then. I felt, you know, that there was sadness in this community. But I lived in a...in a sunburned country, you know, I had space, I could play outside, I had, I had a feeling of great bigness, you know, that the way that Australia's sun was so generous and sky so high. And as a child, I didn't really understand. I felt something. I really felt it when I would watch my father come home from work. I would always watch him come home from work.

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<sup>1</sup> Xhafer Deva (1904-1978) was a leading Albanian nationalist political figure. During World War Two, after the Germans took control of the region, with their support he and Bedri Pejani founded the Second League of Prizren, a nationalist movement whose ultimate goal was the establishment of Greater Albania.

**Anna Di Lellio:** We were talking about this nostalgia and the longing. But you were born in Australia and how did you come in contact with Albanian culture? You were living in an exile community. But what did you hear? What did you know? What did you learn about Albanian culture or family history?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I didn't learn very much about my family history, not till later. But Albanian culture, we were in an Albanian home, we were an extended family situation. We were living with my grandparents, my uncle, also my mother's half brother, and his four children. And we were living together, we ate, we had codes, you know, when my grandfather came into the room, we stood up. When we ate, the children ate together, and the parents watched us, but we were 11 children living together at some point, you know, it's a little community.

Albanian was the language of the home. Albanian food was the food we ate. You know, we didn't eat fish and chips, we ate *pita*<sup>2</sup> and *pasul*,<sup>3</sup> you know. We were taught the codes, you know, we were, hospitality, the way we greeted our guests, the way we, I suppose, even though that would change later, we were told to not talk, listen. We had responsibilities, even as children, that every member in the family had a role to play. I don't know, I think we were just nourished with the music, with the language, with the food, with, with the, the sense of belonging to that community.

So, I was deeply rooted, even though I, again, I didn't really comprehend that. It was, it was, just was. And I, I lived in perfect harmony with that, and with my Australian friendships, and the world outside. I, I think that I learned, I understood early, although I think I couldn't have articulated it, that I had to build connections with that community, because it would have been some form of internal exile if I hadn't. So I quickly connected with my friendships, and they became extremely important to me. I'm loyal in friendship even today, but as I think...those early friendships are really important.

And, but I lived...I...When I went home, I was a good Albanian girl. And I stayed a good Albanian girl, because I think as I grew older, it became...I felt it was important not to disappoint my parents, because they'd had so many disappointments. So I was a very good Albanian girl. And, but I...I lived in perfect harmony with the world outside. It's very interesting. I had a very happy schizophrenic experience.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yes. You...I'm curious, because you talk about your father being educated in, in Italy, in Bologna, because I'm Italian. So I'm curious, how did he end up there? What did he tell you? Did he tell you anything about his experience in Italy?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I know a little bit about that period. My father, my grandfather, Dervish Mitrovica, was very close to Fan Noli.<sup>4</sup> They were very, very close friends. And in fact, there was this idea in the family, and I think it may be rooted in truth, that my...that Fan Noli was my father's

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<sup>2</sup> *Pita* refers to a traditional, homemade savory or sweet pie made with very thin, hand-stretched phyllo dough.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional white kidney bean stew rooted in Albanian, Kosovar, and broader Balkan cuisine.

<sup>4</sup> Fan Noli (Theofan Stilian Noli, 1882-1965) was the founder of the Orthodox Church of Albania and Prime Minister of Albania for a brief period in 1924. He was also a writer and a scholar and died in exile in the United States.

godfather. They're very close. And my grandfather was associated really with the anti-Zogist<sup>5</sup> movement. So he actually went to...he went with Isa Buletini to Tirana, not the 28th, the 29th [1912] because the Serbs had stopped them on their journey down to, to Vlora.

But they got there on the 29th, and they, and then my grandfather was part of the Noli's government, and so on. But when Zog came to power, they went into exile. And my grandfather went to Croatia, in Zar, where actually, he had a little shop, and this is a military man, you know?

And my father was educated in the Jesuit schools. And then, he went, I think, because of the Croatian... like, you know, Austria, and so on with, he was, he went to study, his university studies were done with, in an Italian university, Bologna. And I think Bologna, because even then, Bologna was associated more with forward thinking, liberal, liberal education, you know.

So he went to...he did...he did a law degree there, actually, and did a doctoral studies afterwards. So that's how he got there. And he was very, very rooted, you know. I told you, I think I mentioned to you at some point that, you know, opera, and all these things were part of our life. He would sing from arias and things, he was...he spoke Italian beautifully, wrote it, lived it, I think. He had great affection for his...as we all do, for the years at university, you know.

But that's how we got there, because my grandfather was in exile. And so, it's funny, isn't it? The story of exile is a common theme in generation after generation. They go back, and then they leave again, they go back, and they leave again. Now I've gone back, and I...hopefully we won't have to close doors again, you know. Yeah.

**Anna Di Lellio:** When did you go to Albania or Kosovo for the first time in your life?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I mean, the first time I went to Albania was in April of 1991. We had...in December of 1990, we were contacted, my husband and I, Ydriz Basha<sup>6</sup> and I, were contacted by the founding members of the democratic movement in Albania. Veton Surroj,<sup>7</sup> knowing about our political activity during the 80s, had told them when they were looking for help that there is a couple in Brussels who will support you, and they got our contact details. It's quite a story, because they called like, you know, one o'clock in the morning, and probably because that's when they could get a connection, because it was so, you know, uncertain, the telephone connection.

But they called, and it was very exciting for us, amazing that, you know, we're talking to Tirana, you know, and they are asking us for help. And so we did that. My husband and I immediately organized a

<sup>5</sup> Anti-Zogist were the opponents to King Zog I (1895-1961). Born Ahmed Muhtar bey Zogolli, taking the name Ahmet Zogu in 1922, was the leader of Albania from 1922 to 1939. At age 27, he first served as Albania's youngest ever prime minister (1922-1924), then as president (1925-1928), and finally as king (1928-1939).

<sup>6</sup> Ydriz (Idriz) Basha (1939- 2015) was born in Novosej, in Northern Albania. He left Albania in 1948 as a child, when his family fled for political reasons. He lived in Belgium since 1956 and was trained as a psychoanalyst in Paris. As a publicist and activist, Ydriz Basha is known as one of the leading voices of the Albanian diaspora in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. From 1997 through 2001, he was Ambassador of Albania to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Parliament. In 2015, he received posthumously the medal "The Order of Skanderbeg" from the President of Albania.

<sup>7</sup> Veton Surroi (1961) is a publicist, politician and former journalist. Surroi is the founder and former leader of the ORA political party and was a member of Kosovo Assembly from 2004 to 2008.

visit for the first delegation of the Democratic Party to Paris to meet with all the major political parties there, basically to get help to organize the first elections, and of course here at the...here in Brussels at the European Parliament. So that was February, we brought them in February, a very successful, very, very exciting period. And then they invited us to go to Albania for the first congress of the Democratic Party, which was taking place in April. And so my first visit to Albania was in April 1991.

My first journey to Kosovo happened in 2016. In the meantime, of course, I'd met and worked with [Ibrahim] Rugova, and he had told me, you know, to come back and to do this and to do that. But the circumstances were always very complicated, also for family reasons. My husband had grown very ill, and it was difficult to leave him.

But in 2016, my husband had recently passed away. And Mitrovica organized a kind of conference just to mark the 100th anniversary of my father's birth, Xhelal Mitrovica. So, my older sister Lolita, my brother Dervish and I, traveled to Kosova. And that was something really (chuckles), that was really even more meaningful than the first trip to Albania. I distinguished...I didn't make a...a distinction between Albania and Kosovo. I was raised in a family and in a home where there was no distinction. But something about being in Kosovo and being in Mitrovica moved me so deeply, really did.

So, I sensed that my connection with Kosovo would be deeper and more meaningful, that I would make a greater commitment to it. I sensed that there was...my history was not a burden, it was a wealth in Kosova. Because in Albania, every time people mention Xhafer Deva, somehow I became implicated in the German occupation period, you know. So I felt that there was always this sort of fear about that, you know — people making judgments and implicating me in those...

Well, that didn't happen in Kosovo. They really didn't, they engaged with me in a generous way and a very respectful way. And even when they had their issues with the Xhafer Deva's period, but I didn't feel implicated, you know, I never met him.

**Anna Di Lellio:** But you didn't go there to celebrate Xhafer Deva, you went to celebrate your...Xhelal.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** That's right. And that was so meaningful to me, Anna Di Lellio, because you've already sensed my connection to my father is very, very deep. I have great respect for him. So, as well as love, of course.

So, to go...to go there and see that they have been he mattered. And that he was returned, at least in my psyche, to a place where he should have been, and could have been rather than this man who woke up at 5 and came home at 5 in the evening, to feed his seven children an incredible hardship. I have... it was just so jubilatory, and so, so celebratory, and so fulfilling. And so, I felt he had been redeemed and somehow I was with him. So no, it was a very meaningful trip. But it was '91 for Albania, and 2016 for Kosovo.

**Anna Di Lellio:** What were they celebrating about your father? What role were they celebrating him for?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Just his birthday. And they were mentioning that...my father was a journalist, and was the founder of Radio Prishtina. Yeah, you know, the first radio program, the building is still there.

He was, for, you know, during the period of the Second World War, he represented Kosovo in the Parliament, you know, you know, the ethnic parliament. So he was... he was...he derived from a family of service with my grandfather, commitment to the protecting Albanian language, territorial integrity, all these issues were part of the heritage. But then, of course, this, this anti communist, sort of engagement too.

So they were celebrating the man and, and the, I think they were celebrating also the family, but they were celebrating his, his, his vision for Kosovo, which is now a debatable one, you know, I mean, but he, I think that's what they were doing. And we were invited to...to do that.

It's interesting. When we were, my brother Dervish didn't speak Albanian very well, he speaks it better now. We're talking 10 years later, and he studied it, he's really committed to learning it. And they added...we were received by the mayor, and we were sitting around the table and somebody around the table, when Dervish was talking, said...whispered to the man next to him, "Look at this Dervish, Mitrovica's grandson can't speak Albanian."

But my brother understood Albanian. And he turned to him with this aplomb, which I was so proud of. And he said, "I may not speak the language, but I and I may not be able to communicate to you with Albanian, in Albanian, but I am Albanian. And I am here as the son of Xhelal Mitrovica. And I care about that," you know, something like that, you know, but he refused the judgment. I thought it was really brave of him, you know. So it was a bit, it was an exciting time. I've been lucky. I've lived through exciting times.

## Part Two

**Anna Di Lellio:** Okay, you mentioned Xhafer Deva. Was he your maternal grandfather?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** No, he wasn't my grandfather. He was a great-uncle. Great-uncle...My grandmother, Sabrije. Sabrije was raised by Xhafer Deva's father, Ibrahim Deva. I don't understand or I have never been told why that was the case, but she was raised as his daughter. And so, as long as I've lived, and wherever I go, people talk about Sabrije, a grandmother I never knew, but for whom I have the deepest respect, was his sister. In fact, she was his cousin. But I consider myself Xhafer Deva's great-niece. That's the relationship with Xhafer Deva. I never met him. I never spoke with him.

But interesting enough, he's very present in my life. And I keep having to explain the relationship. I've often said, and this sort of summarizes it, I will not be his lawyer, but I'm very careful about who I allow to be his judge. That's my position about Xhafer Deva. It's a complicated relationship. It has a lot of weight. And sometimes surprisingly, because it is a paradox, I never met him. He was so far away from me. And yet he has so much weight in my life when I'm in contact with Kosovar.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Still, still today.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Oh, yes. Do you know, when I married, when my husband decided to marry me, well, the story is lovely, but we met very quickly. We decided very quickly to marry.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Where did you meet?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I beg your pardon?

**Anna Di Lellio:** Where did you meet?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** We met in New York. We met in New York. We met in November 1977. And three days later, after I met him, we were engaged to be married. And he returned to Europe. And he introduced me to his father, not as Dervish Mitrovica's, I mean, well, granddaughter, and Xhelal Mitrovica's daughter. He introduced me as Xhafer Deva's niece. And over the years, after I got married, when I came to live here in Belgium and I encountered the sort of patriarchy which I had never encountered before, the weight of the misogyny was incredibly heavy.

Sometimes remembering that he did introduce me as Xhafer Deva's niece came in very handy because sometimes it kind of, forgive me putting it bluntly, but it shut the men up. I had power because of that relationship. And sometimes I used it.

I have one interesting and very funny occasion. We were...just me in a room of men, as happened very often. And they were talking, and they were talking about Kosova issues. This was the 1980s. And we'd been deeply implicated in creating, first of all, the pedagogical information or kind of activity here to inform, to teach, you know, the wider Belgian public where Kosovo was and what the issues were, but also influence policy by going to the European Parliament, forcing a first resolution and so on. I knew what I was talking about.

And here I am in the room with these men who are dismissing me, ignoring me. And anytime I had something to say, they would sort of grumble that, "Oh, there she goes again!" you know. And at some point, Ydriz realized that I was going to blow, because there were times when I could get really annoyed. And so to calm things down, he said, "Oh, by the way, just so you know, this is, this is, Kimetë, she is Xhafer Deva's niece. And the very same men who dismissed it and openly disdainful of me suddenly became the most effusively servile, feeding me, like coming up and cutting the chicken for me and so on. It was ridiculous.

So sometimes I, you know, it came in handy to have that male power just defend me, you know. And sometimes cynically you use it, why not? you know. Did I forget the question?

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yeah, can we backtrack just a little bit because we talked about your father and your relationship with him. Well, what about your mother or all those children? And also for her, the exile, the experience of exile.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes. My mother was a woman of great resilience. Truly, she was a model. She wasn't an easy woman. She was...let me just try to sum her up. I think my mother had lived her early life through war and that had marked her, made her distrustful, made her very private, very closed —

things you don't say, things you don't do. She was devoted to her father and in some ways I think loved him more than she loved anything else in the world, including us. But she loved us like a tiger loves.

She had a protective streak that was sometimes even violent. She was capable of excess. But she was probably the most loyal woman. (teary eyes) She was a good partner for my father. She knew how to fight. She knew how to survive. And in these circumstances of exile and poverty, she confronted them with courage and strength.

She had a terrible accident. Her back was damaged badly. She had to undergo several very difficult operations when we were very young. And they told her that she would never walk again. Well, she walked again. She got up and she walked again. That's how strong she was, you know, kind of psychologically. Then she's 48 years old and she's left with six children at home. My older sister was married by then. My father died of terrible, terrible cancer and died within a year after being diagnosed. And she took up the battle. When he died, I think she had a year of great suffering and loneliness and struggled emotionally, psychologically.

But she came back and she raised us. And she did what she had to do to continue the work that my father started with her, which was a common theme in our home. We will take you into the light, *dreit dritës*. And so she did that on her own. So when my father died, I was the only one still at university level. My sister had done a library degree.

We were still at the beginning of something that was happening that would be good for our family, that we would be helping my mother more and building something more economically stable for her. But she did it. But, you know, she trusted no one. She had great difficulty with people. She had, I don't know what had happened, but she trusted no one.

That was difficult for me because I was such an optimist, still am, an idealist. I believe in the goodness of people. She thought I was naive. She often criticized me for my friendships. She felt that I invested more than I should have. And she always sort of felt that there was something transactional in human relations that I didn't. So we had very often different opinions about things. I didn't always agree with my mother's vision of the world. But I think it was her protective streak.

But that protective streak became quite controlling sometimes. So, it was a battle with my mother to remain sometimes, not always, she wasn't always difficult, but, you know, and I wasn't always in conflict with her principles. But sometimes she would be really difficult about what I could and couldn't do. And this became especially difficult after I got engaged because, you know, I was 24, 25 years old, and she was controlling my movements.

I was working at the university, and she would tell me, what time are you coming home? And if I wasn't home at four, she'd be hysterical. What if Ydriz realizes you've been out? It was so weird. But I think it was really protecting us, but overly doing that. So there became restrictions and limitations. There was a fear that, you know, it was difficult with my mom. But she was, you know, she loved us fiercely.

And she overcame, really, all the hardships with great strength. I'm very admiring of my mother now. I wasn't when I was 20, but I'm 70 now, and I see, I look back on a woman, 48 years old, alone, with six

children, in a new country. We'd only been in Canada for four years. You know? And she held us together. She maintained the idea that we belonged to each other. Strengthened us in our love for each other.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Okay, but we were in Australia, now we are in Canada. We're in Canada. How did you go to Canada? Why did you go to Canada?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, that's another story of disappointment, actually. In 1967 or 68, my father was invited to go to the United States by the VATRA<sup>8</sup> organization. And he came back to Australia with this invitation that he was going to come. We were all going to go to Boston, and we were all, and he was going to take over the publication of the newspaper *Dielli*,<sup>9</sup> which was established by Fan Noli, which had this family connection. So it was decided that we were going to go there. Something happened. I've never understood what. But we suddenly aren't going to Boston. We're going to Toronto. So, we go to Toronto. There is no VATRA job. There is no nothing.

This is a chapter I'm actually...I'm beginning to do some research on, because I'm looking at the people who were there in the 1960s, and there was the death of one man, Sheiko, who was one of the leaders of VATRA. I think that probably, this is still to be worked out what happened. But we're in Canada. They've taken us from our home, whatever it was, seven children, and we arrive, and now, nothing.

So, yeah. So this is 1969, 1970, and my parents now have to start looking for jobs. My mother found a job as a nurse's assistant, Toronto General Hospital. We were integrated into the school system. My older sister, who was a brilliant woman, who's still a very brilliant woman, did not continue her university education because suddenly we needed someone. There was nothing.

Economically, it got worse. Then my father found a job. I don't really remember what the first one was, but I think it was a cook in a brewery or something. And my sister was working also with the, I don't remember what she was doing. I should ask her, but it's a long time ago. Anyway, the three of them were working. I finished high school there. I did my last year of high school there and then went to the university. My sister married. A year later, she was married, two years later.

It was not a happy time. It was a very difficult time. And then the worst of it is my father is diagnosed with cancer, and it really goes haywire. It really goes haywire. And through it all, we kind of stuck it through, and we turned something that was really difficult into something good because we were really, we are a good family, and we love each other very much. And I took responsibility. I have to give myself credit.

I was through my years of university. I worked full-time and kept a full-time position at work at university. I didn't keep my first-class honors, but I got my degrees. And I also had two professors who were really my cheerleaders, you know. One of them has passed away. The other one I continue to be friends with today.

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<sup>8</sup> VATRA (Pan-Albanian Federation of America) is a historic non-profit organization founded in 1912, located in the Bronx, NY.

<sup>9</sup> Oldest newspaper in Albanian language still in operation.

And they helped me get through those difficult last years of university because, you know, my father was dying, and I spent more time at the hospital than I did in my classroom. But, yeah, we went to Canada in 1970. In 1974, he was dead, and my mother was alone. And we were in an economic situation that was very, very, very difficult.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Your grandfather passed away?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** My grandfather passed away after my father – my grandfather, my mother's father. I was married and had children.

**Anna Di Lellio:** So he was there with you in Canada?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** No, no, no. He was in Australia. We came to Canada on our own. We were just my mother, my father, and the seven of us.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Were they from Kosovo, too?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** My grandfather, no. My mother's grandfather...my mother was from the far south of Albania, Skrapari. We had, you know, we had the north, the very far north, right near the Serbian border and right near the Greek border. We kept saying we were the embodiment of the ethnic Albanian ideal, you know. (chuckles) The two extremes, you know.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Now the question is, what kind of Albanian do you speak, Gegnisht or Tosk?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** When I got married, I spoke mostly Tosk. Faulty. But over the years, it's evolved, and now it's something else. And then it has evolved again. Because, you know, when I got married, Ydriz was obviously from the north. We spoke a very strong, you know, gag kind of tonality, intonation and vocabulary, structure, grammatical structure (smiles).

So I incorporated that into my own way of speaking because it was local and it influences you, right? And then, of course, Albania opens up and you're meeting intellectuals, poets, journalists, archaeologists, you know, politicians, all who have been educated in literary Albanian. And so you make an effort to communicate (chuckles). You know, I remember the first time we went to Ismajl Kadare's home, his daughter was very young then, and he and Ydriz and I were talking to Ismajl, and she chimes in with, "What are these people, Kosovo?" Like, you know, with the accent.

So, slowly it's evolved into something again else, you know. I mean, I think my Albanian now is richer, that's for sure. Vocabulary-wise, it's much richer. But I think what happens is when I'm with the people, you know, who... I think I adapt. You know, I adapt according to the situation. On Sunday, we had...we celebrated the 40th anniversary of our radio program, *Jehona Shqipës*. I was one of the founding members, the only woman. And, of course, I was there. And I prepared something because I was emotional about it. I knew I would be, because very few of the original team are still alive. And so it was a lot of nostalgia as well as pride that I was feeling, but a lot of nostalgia, including my husband. He was the first editorialist, and he wasn't there.

And I thought I'd do an editorial, you know. But I did it with the literary Albanian because this was something that I thought was going to be almost like a historical thing, so it had to be spoken well. So I choose, you know. But I can do it (smiles). That tells you how improved my Albanian is, you know. Yeah.

### Part Three

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I can talk about that...There is so much to tell...you don't really kind of go down one alley...

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yes, of course you were telling me that your mother lived in Greece for a long time.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes, she did.

**Anna Di Lellio:** How come?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** My grandfather, Sadik Mulla, he was a kind of businessman, he was living in Greece and they were working in Greece. And Greece is so close to the border, when you think about it! They lived in Thessaloniki for 17 years but then if you asked my mother about this she would not give the details. "It is the past," she would say, "it is the past." But she spoke Greek beautifully. In fact I had Greek friends at the university, when I was at the university, in fact one of my friends was George Papandreu, Papandreu's son who then went back to Greece but George and my mother spoke Greek and he used to say how beautifully she spoke, she spoke Italian, German fluently. My mother spoke...she was multilingual, and she was an extraordinarily intelligent woman too, analytical about things, but, you know, but, but she...yeah, she lived in Greece.

She's, she... she had a great fondness for Greek things, but she was definitely not Greek. In fact, my...we had the visit of my father's sister, Kimet; in '72, I think it was. That was a disaster for many reasons, but her biggest mistake was to say to my mother that...that she was Greek. That was like, that was like she just didn't know that she had just crucified herself, you know? (laughs) And my mother said, "Greek? Who told you I'm Greek?" you know? "I'm Albanian!" And so, you know, but she had great fondness, she... she was imbued with, with some of the rituals of Greek life.

Like, I remember at Easter time, she was from the Bektashi sect, right, so a very liberal Muslim sect. And, but at Easter, we celebrated Easter with red eggs and things. And when, and sometimes she would light candles and things like that. She was... she had this, I think my mother was deeply spiritual in some ways. She believed in angels... She believed in... in... it's very interesting, she kind of had this need for, for something more, you know. And I think she had found that, I think, in this world of ritual that she brought with her from Greece.

It was very foreign to us. We would look at it with some amazement and, you know, love the eggs, but didn't get the candles, you know (chuckles). But let her, you know, that was her way of, of being who she was. And we allowed... we, we allowed it. That's not clear. We, we respected, that's who she was. But we found it very odd, you know. But she, my mother, in typical of my mother, she didn't care. She did what she wanted, you know. Anyway, yeah.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Do you have a religious education?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I beg your pardon?

**Anna Di Lellio:** You have a religious education?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** We had exactly the same education that I'd given my daughters. I think my father and my mother, my father was, they were both Muslim, you know. But we, but we, we were, I think what we were educated in was values.

We were taught...We were given, I think, an education that...that would provide us with a moral compass. There were things that were important. Honesty. Oh my gosh, honesty and humility. These were the, I don't know how many times my father said these were the two principles that should guide us. Honesty and humility.

**Anna Di Lellio:** But not necessarily connected to the Quran or Islam?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** No, no, completely separate. I don't think they were either of them, you know, members of any kind of organized religious order. But we had a deep sense.

We were given this idea, you know, I mean, if somebody stole or something like that, that would have been the, you know. No, it was a moral compass. You know, it was the idea that these are the values by which you should live your life if you want to live a good life. And a good life is a moral life. And so, they demanded... they demanded honesty. They demanded loyalty. They demanded generosity. It was very important to share. Yeah, these were the things that I think marked us and became part of who we are.

And also, and it became a theme in our life that came from my father, but it was also embodied in my mother, the underdog, you know, those who are excluded, those who need help. You know, my parents didn't have a lot of money, but I remember every time there was somebody who was in difficulty, my mother would find us to help them. You know, you had to, you had, you know, you had to give of yourself.

This was... that was my religious education. And my daughters...I studied with Northrop Frye, who was Minister of the United Church of Canada, but was the major, one of the major literary critics of the 20th century. And I studied with him two things, one of them, foundations of Western culture. So, I studied mythology and the Bible with him. And I also studied the course he gave, Bible as Literature. And I understood from those, that course, how man has searched for meaning, you know, the patterns, the lessons that recur and are reinterpreted from myth to biblical setting, and so on.

And basically, the search for meaning in a way itself is a value. And so I have tried to...what I tried to do with my daughters was to give them access to those patterns. So, I encourage them to know the biblical stories, they still ask me, tell me what's what, you know, tell us the story, because they don't, they haven't yet invested in that, my younger one, maybe a bit more.

But the myths, you know, knowing the myths, understanding what they're teaching us. So it was more through a literary education that I was engaging with, with this same teaching about, again: What is a good life? How do you fulfill your potential as a human being? How do you become a moral person? My husband was more influenced by Jesuit teaching, you know, action, hope and action. But both of us were giving them the idea that action is necessary, you know, I just didn't think of it as a Jesuit model, I thought of it as something else.

But ultimately, we're teaching the same things. And yeah, I've never been a member of any organization, never been a member of a political party, although my views are very strong. And never been a member, never go to a church, never been a member of a church or any organized religious thing. I just don't trust them. I just don't feel I can fit into it. Because everything... I just...I have too many independent thoughts about things. I can't do it. I can't, I can't sort of reconcile myself to belonging to something so structured.

**Anna Di Lellio:** I was about to ask, and you were talking about your ethical education. I was about to ask you about your intellectual education. You began a little bit mentioning Northrop Frye. But is there anything else you can add about that? What was your strongest intellectual influence in your life? Obviously, maybe, you know, that's also what's out of the family when you went to university, you know, reading.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I think that I'm a literature student, you know, and I think that my reading, intellectual education, I studied also with Bloom, you know, *The Closing of the American...*

**Anna Di Lellio:** Harold Bloom?<sup>10</sup>

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Harold Bloom. Yeah, I, you know, I was...I was lucky. I think I was very lucky. I had very challenging professors at the university. But also my father, my father wouldn't, my father read, you know, John Stuart Mill with me, you know, because I couldn't understand it. I was reading, I was only 16, I think, and I had to read *On Liberty*, and I couldn't get it. So I went to him and I said, I don't get it. He said, read it with me. And he, and he clarified, he was a very good teacher, you know. I don't know my intellect...just a lot of things.

I think reading has always been something I've loved. And I've read everything and anything I can get my hands on. I'm reading less now than I was before, I think, for a lot of reasons. But I, I, I was fascinated by the mythology. I read a lot growing up. I love fairy tales. I love them. Yeah, I read a lot. I don't know.

That's a good question. I think I've slow, I think, as a child, I think the myths, this wonderful world of, of wondrous things that can happen, transformations, you know, the metamorphoses and so on. That gave me a lot of hope, actually, because, you know, things can change, things can become magical, you know. And then encountering Northrop Frye, the challenge of being able to keep up with some of the things that...

**Anna Di Lellio:** Lucky you with these professors.

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<sup>10</sup> Misunderstanding. The person mentioned by the speaker is Allan Bloom, an American philosopher and classicist, best known for his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yeah, it's incredible. He was, and then what was interesting about him, he was so gentle. So, he would blush. He was such a gentle man. That also teaches you something about humility and, and how, you know, knowledge and status does not necessarily mean, you know, arrogance and all of that.

So that too, the lessons of humility. But I think I'm thinking, you know, I have to say that I...Virginia Woolf was one of the main influences for me. I think she made me think a lot about me, myself as a woman, what I need to exist, how to exist, her struggles, not only psychological, but, you know, creative struggles, devotion to something.

But I think I said, you know, *A Room of One's Own* that trap that was like a lightning bolt in my life, you know, I, I felt that she told me she was telling me something about what I needed to do to really exist. *Pfuhhh!* You know, I had never lived, I had never had, no one had given me the right to privacy. You know, so suddenly, I was claiming it.

And I was searching in my own way for things that may, you know, were maybe going to be difficult to reconcile with my Albanian identity, you know – how to be free, how to express. So she, she was, she was influential. But my reading, my literature was, you know, I read, I read Plato, and I was trying to figure all these things out, you know, and I read... I'm trying to think, you know, like there was so much.

I remember reading *Madame Bovary* and being overwhelmed, you know, by this woman in this dissatisfaction, you know? And I thought, “well, why are so many women that I'm around dissatisfied?” you know? all these things were happening at the same time, there was a kind of questioning. And then I think that... when I came away from the intellectual world, married, entered into the Albanian world, then all that was being tested. Then it took on a real meaning, it wasn't just abstract thinking about dissatisfaction, privacy, the right to exist as you decide your relationship with truth.

And then I think that when I came back to the Albanian world, there was a kind of real meaning to all this. All these things began to mean, to be battlegrounds. And I had to stand up for myself.

I had to fight. And I didn't ever want to abandon my... my femininity, to be honest. I wanted to remain a woman, not an angry woman, a woman, all the strength that remains. But to confront some of these things, it wasn't always easy. But I did it. I think I did it fairly well.

And I've raised two daughters that are independent minded, strong, willful, and generous. I've succeeded because I think I modeled for them something else. And I think that that's important to me. So my intellectual journey began with fairy tales and myths, and ended with, well, it didn't end, it's a constant, isn't it? I mean, you're always becoming, uh, but I still continue, you know, now I don't read so much fiction. I used to read a lot of fiction. Now I read, I read a lot of philosophy now, you know, I'm reading a lot about identity now, a lot about identity now. But I think it's just, yeah, I think I've wandered a bit too much on that answer, because I haven't worked it out myself, I think.

**Anna Di Lellio:** That's, that's great. It's just, sometimes we think as we speak.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And it's very interesting, because from what you said, you know, previous conversation, but also you hinted that you had an encounter with your husband, and it was love, right? This romantic love. But then you talk about all the things you mentioned, things you did together. So there was also friendship and, and collaboration. Can you tell me, tell us a little bit more about this? Why were you in New York? How was this...when you met your husband? You were in Toronto, we left in Toronto, you were in Melbourne, then in Toronto, then now in New York.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, how it was, it was, it was, you know, look, my, again, my father's influence on my life is really profound. But I think that in a way, he led me to Ydriz. Okay, so my father dies in 1974, in November 1974. I'm... I have begun teaching, and I finally have a little bit of money.

So I decide with my brother, in the summer of 1977, that we're going to do something fun. And so he and I, my brother Dervish and I, decide to backpack around England, Wales and Scotland. So we leave. And I have grieved my father, I'm still grieving my father. I'd also had a platonic, I have to stipulate, but a very meaningful relationship with one of my friends at the university. And that had not worked out. And so I was also grieving that. And so we go on this trip through, you know, backpacking and, and then I return.

In August of 1977, I'm back in Toronto with my brother. I've...I'm strong, I'm healthy, because we walk so much. And I'm feeling, I actually wrote in my journal that it was, I was going back like at the end of a Fellini movie, you know, everything had worked out, there was harmony, you know (smile), I felt good.

And then I hear that there is a meeting of the *Legaliteti*<sup>11</sup> Party in New York in November. And I realized that it will be important, I felt it was important that a member of the family be there, although I have no monarchist tendencies whatsoever, absolutely none. But I just thought the presence, the Mitrovicas should be there. So I told my mother that and she's not keen about this, because she knew that it was really a man's world. And it was going to be, you know, like 300 men, and what...you're going to be the only woman there, you know? So, I insist and argue that my godfather, Abaz Kupi's son,<sup>12</sup> Petrit Kupi, would be there, and I'd be with him. And finally, she agrees a bit, kind of just said, "Oh, go!" you know.

So, I go. And on the 27th of November 1977, I'm sitting with my godfather waiting. I've just arrived 15 minutes before because I didn't really want to hear all the speeches. And then it's time to get up for lunch, get up. And this man, I've been hearing he's speaking French, sitting in front of me smoking a cigar. And he gets up. And my godfather says, "I'd like to introduce you." And he introduces me to Ydriz Basha. Ydriz Basha says to me, "Oh, I'm sorry," you know, in a very funny...(chuckels) "I'm sorry, I no speak English."

And I said, "That's okay, I speak Albanian." But I said, "*S'ka problem, folim skip.*" [correct Albanian: *S'ka problem. Unë flas shqip*] (chuckels) So, he, he kind of went like this {mimics being startled}, you know,

<sup>11</sup> The *Lëvizja Legaliteti* (Legality Movement) was an Albanian royalist and pro-monarchy faction founded in 1941. It sought the return of King Zog, who had fled the country on the eve of the Italian invasion in 1939. The *Legaliteti* consisted of supporters from mostly the northern mountain region.

<sup>12</sup> Abaz Kupi (1892 – 1976), Albanian political and military figure, founder and leader of the movement *Legaliteti*.

and, and the moment he shook my hand, I cannot explain it to you. I knew he was going to marry me. I knew I was going to marry him.

I went out of that room with my godfather. And I said, “Who is he?” And he said, “He's a doctor. He's a doctor.” He said, “He studies in France.” It was all wrong. He was not that at all. He had studied medicine, but he was a psychoanalyst and he was in France. I call my mother. I go to a phone and I call my mom.

And I say, “You have to come to New York.” And she said, “Why?” I said, “Because I have met the man I'm going to marry. But I won't marry him unless you give me your permission.” And she said, “Are you crazy?” And she really, you know, absolutely. She came down and he, on that Monday, asked me to marry him. And I accepted.

#### Part Four

**Anna Di Lellio:** Okay, he knew too, right? You knew you were going to marry him and he knew too.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes, yes, yes, because of course it was lunch and he'd gone to lunch with Selim Damani, who was a former judge, husband of the sister of Eqrem Çabey.<sup>13</sup> And Selim Damani was his very good friend and subsequently would become the witness at our wedding.

And he said, “Who is that girl?” And Selim Damani said, “Oh, she's one of ours,” because Selim Damani and my grandfather were very close. And Rexhep Kasniqi, who was also part of the *Lëvizja [Legaliteti]*...anyway, who was close to our family as well, they were all there and they were all talking and they were, “Oh no, she's ours, she's ours, you know. So we'll arrange this for you,” this kind of thing. So, two days later they arranged that we would have dinner together and he asked me to marry him, at least with my mother there.

He asked. He spoke to my mother first. It's lovely too that, you know, that's where you play the game a little bit, because he was, so the Saturday, Sunday, we'd had events were happening, I'd seen him. And it's still a lovely romantic moment, because it's so Albanian, really.

He, I was in the hall, he came out of the hall. And he saw me and I was on the phone with my sister. And he came toward me. And I said to my sister, “Oh my God, he's walking right to me.” And she said, “Turn away from him, turn away from him. Is there anyone in the hall who would see you if he talks to you?” And he came up to me and I just spoke to him (chuckles), you know, and he said to me, “Have you ever come to Europe?” And I said, “No, I've been to England.”

And he said, “Well, you should come to Europe.” (chuckles) Stupid little things like that. But it was suddenly...I don't know, they were beautiful little things that were so charged with this feeling and reserve and all those things that make those moments the most romantic moments of your life, you know.

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<sup>13</sup> Eqrem Çabey (1908 – 1980) was an Albanian historical linguist and scholar.

Anyway, he asked me to marry him, and I married him. We didn't see each other. I mean, I became engaged, we didn't see each other for nearly eight months, nine months. But we began writing to each other. And only began writing to each other after the misunderstanding was cleared up. Because he...my brother-in-law had told him, when he'd asked for my address - I didn't think to ask for his - he, my brother-in-law, refused to give him my address. So, months passed before I heard from him. There was some concern on my mother's part that this was somehow...because my mother was my mother, somehow this was going to be all a disaster (chuckles). And I'd be, I was going to be shamed and all the rest of it. And so we called, I called a man whom I had great fondness for, that my father had asked to take care of us when he was dying. He knew Ibrahim Kula, who was...he owned restaurants in Peterborough, Ontario, a good man.

And Ibrahim flew to Europe to figure out what was going on. And the next thing I know, I'm getting a call from Ydriz while Ibrahim is with him, explaining that "Kimete, I was told not to contact you." And so...and I think that day I realized that I was in a context where I thought it was about Ydriz and me. But I had entered a context where suddenly people, including Ydriz's side, thought they had authority over me and would dictate how these things worked out and how they would move forward, that men were going to decide that. Of course they were protecting me, but actually they were asserting their power.

And so Ydriz and I had to work that out. And we did. We wrote to each other every single day. And once a week we wrote a very long letter to each other. (cries).

**Anna Di Lellio:** These are all good memories, very good memories.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes. I think that Ydriz and I revealed each other to each other through those letters. And I understood that Ydriz was...saw this union not as only a marriage of a man and a woman, but as preparation for service. He had identified in me what I didn't know myself, that I was capable of taking on a public role and that he needed someone to do that with.

He was aspiring to be a leader of the Albanian community, but he was already 40 years old and nobody was taking him seriously because in the patriarchy a bachelor is as dangerous as an unmarried 20-year-old woman, right? He has no place in society. You have to be married to be a *burr*. [Alb: man] And so, he needed to be married and he found his partner and we had a partnership. We had, you know, like every marriage, we had our ups and downs, we had our battlegrounds, we had things to work out, but we had incredible ability to speak the truth to each other. And I don't know why I never feared that.

So we built a partnership and that partnership was directed not only to raising our two children in the context of, you know, harmonies, no, you know, Ydriz had a capacity to dream that I learned. To realize those dreams, to make them come true, was something incredible. That man had this power to make dreams come true. But he needed me to make them come true. And we worked together. We worked really well together.

So when we started in the '70s, very quickly to, you know, to start organizing activities in the Albanian community, of course, the '81 in Prishtina, the demonstrations, focused our work and we began to work with Enver Hadri<sup>14</sup> and others to...

**Anna Di Lellio:** You were living in Brussels?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yeah, in Brussels, yeah, to organize demonstrations, but also to internationalize the issue, you know, basing a lot of our work on the obligations of Yugoslavia based on the human rights agreements that, you know, the Helsinki Parliament, European Parliament had been established, you know, use that as a force. So, like I said earlier, you know, we had a kind of a three prong approach, it was pedagogical, informational, but also influence policy.

So, we organized our activities, we worked really, really hard. And he saw that I was capable of helping him, and I had no complexes in public. There's one really funny occasion when we were organizing here, there were discussions here in Brussels about the situation in Kosova, there were often, but there was a meeting, a high level meeting, and they had organized, and they had asked me to translate a letter from, you know, English into Albanian, and then to read the letter in English at the demonstration. I didn't understand why I would do that.

So we're in front of these hundreds of Albanians waving their flags and, you know, liberty and, you know, and I get to the microphone, and there's all the men, you know, and the speakers, they're all behind me, the men. And I said to the crowd, I said, "You know, they want me to read a letter to you in English. Do you want me to read the letter to you in English?" And everybody starts laughing, right? And I said, "How many of you actually speak English?" And of course, they're laughing, it's more fun than anything. And I said, "You know, I'm not going to speak to you, I'm not going to read you this letter, the letter, you can get, you know, share it." I said, "Here's what I'm going to say to you."

And I still remember it. I was so...I got caught up in the emotion, you know. And I said, "We keep seeing each other. We've met on the streets of Bonn. We've seen our street, we've met on the streets of Frankfurt. We've met on the streets of Paris. We're now on the streets of Brussels. One day, we're going to be in the streets of Prishtina walking like free men and women." And I, who could never do this sort of thing, did it with them. And everybody's cheering.

And Ydriz just comes to the microphone just like he said, "Oh, well, now she's killed my speech." He, he, he enjoyed this, you know, he wasn't threatened by it. So he allowed me to express myself and become the full potential I had in me. Because in this misogynistic world that I was in, if he had not supported me, I would have been crushed.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Did you have problems with others?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Oh, a lot. Yeah. They tried to stop you or say...Oh, yeah, when I started working, I was told I, I was, you know, anything but a "whore," you know, I mean, "We don't send our women to work." And at university, I wasn't going to stay home, you know, and do what?

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<sup>14</sup> Enver Hadri (1941-1990) was an Albanian nationalist activist and a leading figure of the Albanian diaspora in Belgium, gunned down in Brussels by agents of the Serbian State Security, as established by a 2025 trial.

**Anna Di Lellio:** What were you doing?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I was teaching at the International School of Brussels. Originally, that was my first job. And I remember I went out to look for the job in the morning, I came home with a job in the evening, you know, and everybody's saying, you never get a job, you can't get a job, and I got the job. And it was a wonderful job. It was a...it helped our family a lot, because it gave me a lot of freedom. And it was a community around me that supported our work. It gave me access to the elite in Belgium. And so it also opened doors that maybe would have been more difficult if I didn't have those personal connections. I earned the respect of the people at the school, not only professionally, but on a personal level.

And so, for example, when we went to Albania in 1991, the whole school celebrated it. So, when we began to try to support schools and other things in Kosovo and Albania first, the community came and generously supported it. So it became not only a source of my, you know, kind of professional life and support and financial stability, because it offered a very, very lucrative professional life. It also provided access, you know, to everything that might help that could help us, you know.

So yeah, I started working. But yes, I did. I encountered great barriers, you know, the constant reminder that I was just a woman, you know, the limits of what that allowed me to do in their mind. But you know, I don't know, I just didn't. I, I think when I was in the family situation, and it is a conservative family, I think the worst of it was the...the unkindness of my sisters-in-law. But I didn't really, I didn't, I didn't adjust my behavior.

I made sure that I existed the way I wanted to, even though it was not easy. So you were working, raising children. Yes. And organizing and lobbying and advocating. Yes, I did it all. I did it all. And I did it, and I never...I was energized by it. I was tired sometimes, but not really. I, I, yeah, I did it all.

And I did it after, at a certain point, Ydriz was working less, because he wanted to be, you know, especially as the...after 1990, right, it was more Albania and Kosovo than, you know, psychoanalysis. So financially, it became a burden, which I carried primarily on my own for the family. But by that time, we had paid off our apartment, and there were less, but still, it was difficult sometimes.

I joke about it, that after Ydriz died, and I sold the apartment, because my daughters were...they had gone, one was living in England, one was living in Portugal, I had this huge apartment, it was costing more than it was providing. So I decided a year after he died, I was going to get rid of it. I was also going to just keep living and live differently.

But to do that, I had to sell the apartment, because I needed to have financial stability. So I sold it. And I joke about that: it was the first time in my life that I didn't have to worry at the end of the month. You know, that finally I could feel free. I had no emotional connections like this, I didn't guilt myself for saying I wanted to live differently. I was a widow.

And I think I've honored my husband since he passed away. I've worked very, very hard to protect his legacy, and to honor our partnership, because I exist in that story, too. But I will not be a prisoner of grief. And I will not be a prisoner of people's expectations of the Albanian widow. I will not do it.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And certainly not a prisoner of an apartment, since you have been traveling all your life and been moving around.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes, it's a thing, isn't it? It's nothing. It's a thing. That's also something that I think is fundamental in me. Sometimes my children don't understand it. But I never owned anything. Nothing was mine as a child. Nothing. Nothing was mine. And so I don't really, I love, I've created an environment that I think reflects me. I'm comfortable, I think it's welcoming, and I think there's beauty here. But I don't really care about things. You know, I really don't.

It's fairly hard. The only things I don't give away are gifts that people have given me. I respect gifts. But it's a joke. My daughter said, don't tell her you like it, because she'll give it to you. Because if you said to me, oh, I love that, I said, would you like it? I don't own things. It's funny, I feel that I'm just a caretaker of things. Don't tell me, because there are a few things I like. No, I'm a caretaker, because it's part of my growing up.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Listen, I want to ask you, because you were talking about all these activities, how did you live through the course of a war? When the war started? How did you live through the course of a war? How did you experience it? Because you were away, I don't know if you had relatives there?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** No, I have no relatives that I know of. Well, Ydriz was at the embassy then. He was representing Albania. He was Albania's ambassador during the war. And that created a conflict, because he, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pascal Milo, was primarily concerned with establishing in Europe credibility for the Socialist Party in Albania at the time. His priority was not Kosovo.

And Ydriz felt that the Albanian government should make it a priority. He felt that it was a historical betrayal, that it had happened before under [Enver] Hoxha, and it was happening again. And I think, incorrectly, he had assumed that at the embassy, as an ambassador, he would be able to defend the Kosovo cause more effectively. In fact, he realized that the embassy had created barriers to the freedom to speak. So he began to write and publish on a personal level. Like I said, like, this is not the ambassador, this is Ydriz Basha.

And that created more and more conflict with the government, and finally led to our decision to leave the embassy, which they actually, in a very cynical way, did not acknowledge. And then they sent a fax, unsigned, to say that he'd been removed. You know, it was a terrible time. Dishonesty, you know, petty politics, you know. But how did I live through that period? I lived with great suffering. I really felt deeply.

I worked, you know, one of the advantages being the wife of the ambassador at the time, was that it gave me access to the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières. I worked with all these organizations to do something or to try to help. I couldn't help directly in Kosovo, but I could do something about the people that were streaming into Belgium and France. And so I worked with those organizations. I tried to organize activities for the women in the camps. We did, we made, I know it sounds like a little thing, but it was a day of jubilation in a time of suffering. We organized for the children, I'm sorry (cries).

## Part Five

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** It was a very difficult time, and as I was saying, we organized, we mobilized the European schools and international schools here, and we created a kind of *tournoi* [tournament] of soccer. So we got the children their t-shirts with the eagle, and we got the footballs, and we organized games so the children were planning to play, rather than sit around and do nothing. And these awful, well, they weren't awful, but you know, they were, they had come through trauma, they were in a country, they didn't know how long they were going to be here, they didn't know what was going to happen, so creates, gives them something just to occupy the time.

We created a library. We did a lot of little things to try to improve the quality of the time that they were there. That's at least something, but it, you know, it fundamentally didn't change anything, but it, I felt that it, it told them that they existed, that we cared about them, and that we cared what was happening to them.

These, you know, I met some of the women, and you could see they were traumatized, and you come in as the wife of the ambassador in your comfortable world, it was humbling, it was profoundly humbling. And also I think it was...this incentive to do more.

So, the other thing I suggested, because I worked with the minister, one of the...I think it was minister of cooperation and so on, I think I've forgotten his name, but anyway, I said "We should be recording everybody's names, we should be keeping track of these people, where they've come from, because at some point, they're going to want to know what happened to their family. And we should be doing this in every camp." I don't know if they did it or not. I just felt it was important that we should record things, you know, document things, this was partly the librarian in me.

But we should have, we should have historical records of this experience. And we should be sharing it with others. Because these people are lost right now, they're not in there. They don't know they're living with uncertainty and fear and trauma. But it's not going to be forever, this is going to end. And when it ends, we should be able to connect people, we should help them find each other again, you know, did wait, you know, whatever.

So we were...this was also something I was working really hard on. It was. But it was really a feeling of helplessness in a way, you know, these little things that you think you're going to do, but you can't change what's happening. And you're watching this stream of people. And you're reading about what happens at the border with Macedonia. And you, you understand the... this, the horrors are recurring.

And you know, what's happening to women in Kosovo, that, you know, you know, and you think this is just the beginning, this is not the end (smiles). And how are we going to be a part of the healing? And how are we going to be a part of the future? You know, it was extraordinarily...a period of great emotional turmoil for me. But I have this...I call it, I am resilient. And I don't...

My daughters have this too. We look for solutions. You can linger and complain and, and bemoan your situation. Or you can say, "Well, let's see how we're going to make this better." Or "How can I contribute in a way that is positive, it's...?" you know, take from it what I can make positive. And from the suffering of the Kosovar people during that time, the only thing I took away from it, I think, was

that, there was, there was purpose still, there was still a lot of work to do. And I had to find a way to continue to contribute.

Because Bernard [Nikaj],<sup>15</sup> the person I wrote the book with, *Dreit Dritës* [Towards the Light: A Conversation with Kimete Mitrovica], keeps saying, “Well, you know, you, you should be proud of yourself.” I don't think so. I mean, yes, I'm not, I'm proud of myself. But you don't sit and say, “Well, I did that in 1981.” No, you know, you have to keep thinking about how you can continue to contribute. And it, you know, it's, for me now, it's about...

You know, these people, they went through that war. Now they're going back, not all of them, most of them did. And they're trying to build these institutions and this democracy. My role now is to figure out where they need me to help them. And for me, I've chosen quite modestly to help the National Library of Kosovo. Because I think it's an institution that will, protects knowledge, is, has, is the mission to, to gather people around an idea. And that, that's important.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And in what way are you helping the National Library?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, I've, I've, I've given them, first of all, all my family's archives. I've handed it over in digital form. I can show you, I digitized all our papers and everything. I haven't completed it. I still have quite a few video cassettes and other things that I need to do. I've done some of them. But all the paper has been digitized. And that I've given to them already in digital form.

And I've organized it as a searchable database. So I've given that to them. And they'll do what they want with it. But it's available. And one day I hopefully will provide some information about what was happening here in Brussels, through the '70s, '80s and '90s, when all of this was happening in Kosovo. Because for me, the message is one of hope.

And also it's one of recognition that I don't, they didn't know it then, but they weren't forgotten. Their voice was being heard in Brussels and Paris. We were speaking for them. And we were defending them. Their suffering wasn't happening in isolation, even though they didn't know it. I want that to be heard.

But I also think that what I would like to do now is... the director of the new, the director of the National Library will be coming to Brussels. And I've arranged for her to meet with the director of the National Library here. And I'm hoping that this will be a bilateral agreement. Because I think the National Library and as equals, they are two directors of two national organizations. Our Madame Rogova, who is not coming, is not coming to ask for something. She's coming to build a relationship to build something together.

So I'm trying, I've organized that as well. I'm hoping that this will, this will build more connections for the library in the European sphere, and hopefully help in some way that they'll define, improve services, maybe outreach programs. That's for them to work out.

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard Nikaj is a lecturer at the university RIT Kosovo. He previously served as Kosovo's Ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg, as well as Head of the Kosovo Mission to the European Union and NATO. He was Minister of Trade and Industry in the Government of Kosovo.

But I am a supporter of the National Library of Kosovo. And I'll do what I can to help them keep building to a vision that will make it recognized even in Kosovo, because I get the feeling that people don't really understand its role, or value it. So some PR for the library as well, you know. That's one of the things, you know.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Well, it seems like it's very important that the archival material that you are providing, maybe because I'm more aware of what happened in the United States, and what happened in Europe in those years, in the '70s, the '80s. But obviously, you were here with Ydriz, and with Enver Hadri, and others, doing all this work. And it's important to understand it. And talking with Teuta [Hadri] yesterday, she was telling me that when Enver Hadri was killed, there was really a sense of something... kind of...it was traumatic for this community. Can you, I'm sorry to revive another bad memory, but can you explain what happened there? Because obviously, someone who's very present in the leadership was taken out. It must have been also worrisome for you, because you understood...

**Kimete Kastrati Hadri:** Oh my God!

**Anna Di Lellio:** ...you know, the fear that something could happen. Can you tell me, tell us, more about that?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I can tell you a lot about that. Because during the '80s, we were... Enver's family and my family...My children were very, very young. My first child was born in 1980, my second in 19...the end of '81. So, very close. They're very young. And there was a lot of fear in the community. We got...and Enver's family, like our family, was often invaded by armed police, checking, thinking that perhaps we were involved in various activities, terrorist activities...

**Anna Di Lellio:** You're talking about the Belgian police?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes. You know, there'd been an...some sort of attack at the embassy, nothing really serious, but...and ineffective, the Yugoslav embassy. And suddenly, Enver's family and my family were invaded with machine guns, and people going through all our belongings, and not once, several times.

And one of those times, one of the representatives of the security services of Belgium, he's, I won't name him, but he came to our home while these, these armed...other sort of people going through our papers, and he sat down with Ydriz and I, and I'm trying to, you know, keep him away from my children. And he says, "Well," he said, matter of factly, like this, like we're talking, you know, he said matter of factly, he says, you know, "Well, you know, the Albanians think that the Yugoslavs are going to kill you." He's telling my husband this, "They are going to assassinate you. And the Yugoslavs are sure that the Albanians are going to assassinate you."

I'm sitting right there. And he says, "But you know what? I think you're going to kind of, kind of get through, because neither of them...they're going to wait for each other, so you'll get through." And he adds, "Not so sure about Enver Hadri." He said that. And I said, "I beg your pardon? You're talking about people's lives here. They have family, they have children." "I'm just telling you how it is." Blasè, unfeeling, you know, completely insensitive to what he was saying. I thought that was funny.

And so, fast forward, and they killed him. They killed him there. And they killed him one night. And we are at home. And we have guests that evening. For some reason, Ydriz insists that we watch the news, the seven o'clock news. He said, "No, because so much is going on.." he never wanted to miss the news. So we go to the library, and we put on the television. And there it is, Enver, you know, they don't quite say, "Enver died." They, you know, "Opposition, this and that."

Oh, my God! I fainted. I was overwhelmed with emotion (teary eyes). He was my friend. And he was my colleague. We had, you know, we had shared apples together, because we didn't have enough money to buy food. When we were in Strasbourg, we bought apples to eat together and cheese, because we really had no money. This was the person we were...they had killed. And so, it upset me deeply. And I mean, seconds, I sort of, you know, and then I... And then the next thing I'm thinking about is...

And this is also really important. We live in a world where things are not real. We hear about deaths every day in Ukraine, they're not, they're far away, they're abstractions. But at that moment, things become really real. And I thought, my God! My daughters were in there, like 10, 11 years old. They could be without their father, a fate that Teuta had to deal with all her life, you see. What will that mean? This could happen to him too. And from that day on, Ydriz and I never walked together in the street, not for years and years and years. If we were anywhere with the children, he would either walk way behind us or way in front of us.

There's always this thing: that it could happen. It passed. It passed. You know, it passed. But for years, it was he wouldn't, he wouldn't, he didn't want to put us in any danger. We got rid of the car. My car...We had a car. And one day I was in the car, Ydriz stepped out of the car and it was, it started moving. And the...I don't drive, (chuckles) so I'm trying to pull this thing and suddenly it, you know, just rolling, you know, like rolling. And then of course, it stopped and Ydriz came in and we couldn't understand what had happened. So we called the people to come and check the car we got out of. Well, of course, they tampered with the brakes. It was lucky that we had, that had happened just while he was parking. So we never drove again. We never had a car again in the family. Never. Little things like that, that affect your life, that came from Enver's death.

Enver's death was a profound psychological and emotional shock for me. It moved the reality of what we were doing out of the abstract into the real. I began to understand for the first time that, that what was at stake here, that this wasn't just gesticulation. This was, this was real. We're dealing with a regime that is capable of murder and that there will be victims. Enver, unfortunately, paid a high price.

But I grew up that day. I became lucid and I became, I think, a better partner for my husband. Because often I used to think he's, he's overreacting. You know, he's living in a James Bond movie. But I realized it was real. It was all real. And that I had to accept that. And I needed to have courage now because I understood that I could lose him. I really did. We got so many threats, so many letters, so many things.

So, you know, and yeah, it was amazing. But you know what? I'm proud of myself. I walked through that valley of, you know, darkness in a way. And I came out of it feeling that at least, you know, I'm sorry, Anna, I'm going to say this because I mean it. I feel that this whole experience gave my life meaning. I, in some ways, have been blessed to be so committed to this cause. Because I'm going to die one day. And when I do, I will have done something worthwhile.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And I want to ask you, why did it take you so long to go to Kosovo, given your commitment and your proximity and you are from that sort of family?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** It's a good question. I think, you know, when Ydriz...a lot of it had to do with my family situation. Ydriz...in 1994, had a fall. He fell down four flights of stairs. And he would have been okay, because nothing was broken, except when he hit the bottom, he hit the wall with his head. So the damage was all neurological. His brilliance, because he was brilliant, the neurologist told me that he, and who's become a friend who has written an introduction to a book my daughter wrote about Alzheimer's.

He told me that Ydriz's brilliance was such that he was able to camouflage the damage for a long time, that his ability was reduced, but reduced to a level that most people have of intellectual ability. So he camouflaged it for a long time. During the time that he was at the embassy, I think the stresses of those years precipitated the decline.

And so in the early, say 2008, that period there, it became clear to me that Ydriz was incapable of solving problems. Psychologically, neurologically, the damage was showing its signs. So in order to protect him, because I knew the cruelty of the Albanians, I closed my door. I took care of him. And I, yes, and I just made sure that nobody would see him like that, that this ego would stay in the image, would stay intact, the image of this powerful man. So I focused only on him, and protecting him, working hard to pay for the bills.

There were a lot of bills, medical, and others. So my life was reduced dramatically in those years. I say that in a way I put myself to sleep. I put myself to sleep as an activist, as a woman, as everything. I worked to protect him, protect my daughters, and make sure that he felt safe. That was my goal. And so, I didn't go to Kosovo because I had no energy to do it, and I had no reason to do it. In 2016, he died, and months later I was in Kosovo. So I'm sorry that I didn't go with him. It would have been wonderful, but I didn't.

## Part Six

**Anna Di Lellio:** You're going to tell us something about your daughters.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Yes, I'm very proud of my daughters. Yes, I have two and both of them are opinionated and committed to being good mothers, but to fulfilling themselves independently of a family role. So one of them is an artist and the other one...artist, astrologer, mentor. She works with women's groups, works with artist groups. Sarah, my older one, who is the artist of this family portrait {points to the canvas behind her}.

Sarah has an almost quite striking ability to read people. She has a strong intuition and that intuition is often right. She has a sensibility about people and can read them very well and engages with them in interesting and very enriching ways. Sarah is a people person.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Is she in London?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** No, she's in Portugal. She has two lovely children. And Sarah, when her father died, when her father, yes, well, was very close to her father, very, very close. There is no photo where they are not touching. And a very lovely relationship. But when he died, she was pregnant with her first child and that was a very difficult time for her. But Sarah, and I have to say like her mother, decided that grief was not going to be a burden. It was going to be a motor.

And so she decided that she was going to examine, because Ydriz was treated in the end as an Alzheimer's patient. He had all the characteristics of an Alzheimer's patient. She actually engaged with a group of people in a home here, treating Alzheimer's patients over a three-year period.

And she married her interest in the arts with her curiosity about the process of decline of people with dementia and Alzheimer's. So she actually, for three years, worked in a home here, and she ended up making this book {shows her book}, which she called *What Remains*. Because she used Polaroid photos.

And this book actually was presented at various art books [fairs] and has been highly rewarded in various places. But what she did was she understood and she gave it form...that whomever has this terrible, terrible challenge to live through, there's always something that remains. And what remains almost in, well, not almost, in every single circumstance of the people she lived with {holds the book again} and worked with for three years, but also in her own family, what remains is love.

Every single person holds on to a love story. It can be the love of an instrument, a musician, who can do nothing else, cannot concentrate, cannot think, but sits before the piano and can play. It can be the love of a child for their mother, remembering their childhood. It's love. Ydriz, when he was really far gone, really far gone, the only clear memory he had was of our meeting. Love, love remains. So Sarah did that.

And Aurelie, our historian, the younger one, not as outgoing, but a deeply, deeply loyal, reflective woman. Of course, she's a historian primarily concerned with the Cold War period, American Cold War period, and her fascination with Robert McNamara. Because her interest is military history, interestingly enough. So she wrote her book too. (smiles) {holds the book}. I mean, every member in our family has written a book, but this one, *I Made Mistakes*, examines a completely new perspective on McNamara's period as Defence Minister. And since then, she's become very, very close with McNamara's son, Craig, who's a walnut farmer (chuckels) . But she too did this for her father.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And what is the title of the book?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** *I Made Mistakes*. It's a phrase from a speech he gave in Montreal: "I made mistakes, but not the ones people say I did." And so I actually edited this book for her, although officially it was the people at the Cambridge University Press.

But we worked together quite well too. So, but she too took from her father's illness a wish to do something, not to, you know, to be something. And so she dedicated this to her father, this book to her father. Aurelie and her father had more of...a different kind of relationship. But what I find really interesting now is that she often refers to the lessons of her father. You know, daddy this, daddy that.

In *Life's Challenges*, she constantly refers to what he taught her about how you do not, you know, compromise values and things like that. Sometimes I feel like saying, well, mummy taught you that too. But it's, they're both very, they took from the grief and they transformed it.

And they've used it to be, to be better than they were before, rather than to succumb to the darkness, they've gone to the light, you know. So I'm very proud of both of them. Very, very proud of my daughters.

**Anna Di Lellio:** As you should. You said everyone in your family has written at least a book, but your husband, you just showed me a collection of volumes.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** But he also wrote, and I edited the book in Albania after he died - I had it republished - he also wrote *A History of Albania*, was never accepted by the French publishers because they said it was too polemical. I'm actually thinking about going back to it and maybe working with that.

And those five volumes we did in Kosovo, but you know, these are his articles and so on. So the girls have written...Aurelie is writing another book now, and I'm, I've just published something in Kosovo. So we were right, we value books and we value the act of documenting, you know, of putting things down, protecting things.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Also, your book is about what? Can you tell me a little bit?

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, you know, it's, ostensibly it's a life story, but it really, the question that, the fundamental questions that Bernard [asked], it's a dialogue, it's a conversation.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Like this one.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Like this one, exactly. We recorded conversations like this, and then we drew from it. And then I would take the core of it and then I would spend maybe two or three weeks examining that more deeply and then move on. But it's fundamentally a story of, well, the main question that Bernard asked was, why did you choose to be Albanian? Why didn't you choose to be something else? You could have been Australian, you could have been Canadian...

And the question, the answer is, it takes a whole book to explain (chuckles). But I say that, I fundamentally talk about the journey to realizing that without that identity, I am less, you know, and that I find strength and purpose in my identity as an Albanian woman, but that there are many ways to be an Albanian woman and that you can decide that for yourself. You have to decide that for yourself and you have to stand by it, even in the face of the contradictions and the conflicts that that may create.

You know, that if you don't want...I remember being here at this table, there was the ambassador of Albania, a woman who was a member of the board of our small foundation and other members of the board who were here. And the lady, the woman said, "Oh, but it was so much better! Do you remember when you could come home and it was all, you know, some, you know, we came in and out of our

homes and during the day during..." and I said, "That's because the woman had to stay home all day." I said, "There was a price to pay for that. I'm not so sure it was so much better." (chuckles)

So, she was a bit surprised, but that's the reality. So, how we define our Albanianess, how we give form to that, and how we can uphold that, is a personal decision. And we don't have to, we don't have to listen to what people tell us is a good Albanian woman. There are many ways to be a good Albanian woman.

So, the book is an examination of accepting that this is not only a condition, it's a choice. And that...so, it covers...but at the same time, it covers the movement of Kosovo into, you know, the light (chuckles) and Albania too, because we were so involved in all those democratic movements and so on. So it's, I think it looks at how my life intersects with history. That's, I think, basically it. Perhaps Bernard can be more articulate about it.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Thank you very much. I think for me, it's maybe time to close, but do you want to add anything? I mean, I thought this was a really nice way of wrapping up.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** I want to say, first of all, how much...what a pleasure it's been to meet you. And please put that in this, that you are a phenomenon and you are worthy of the highest respect. I am intimidated by the things you've been able to do and for a community that, basically, why would you care? But you care. And not only do you care because everybody cares, but you do something about it. So I'm very proud that you've asked me to be part of this project.

I'm grateful to you for that. I hope that, yeah, I have, I think I've said what I have to say, but I think, can I just say one last thing about women? I think that, you know, we are the motor. We are always the motor for change. And we should accept that as a challenge and not as a threat. We should not be stifled. We should raise our voices, speak our minds, and speak our, take our place in the agora. And I think you're helping women do that. So I think it's wonderful. Well, I couldn't agree more with you.

**Anna Di Lellio:** And I thank you very much for your time and everything you said.

**Kimete Mitrovica Basha:** Well, thank you.