INTERVIEW WITH IDRIZ MEHMETI

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Duration: 113 minutes

Present:

1. Idriz Mehmeti (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. Idriz, thank you for agreeing. If you can, please give us a short biography of yourself and begin with your family history, your earliest memories.

Idriz Mehmeti: First of all, thank you for the invitation, for your interest, and for your commitment to shedding light on this segment of history, a history that is both painful and proud, ours. I think there are few institutions, television stations, or other media that devote the proper importance to this field. Thank you very much for choosing me to have this conversation.

Anita Susuri: It's nothing.

Idriz Mehmeti: Otherwise, I was born on June 26, 1956, in the village of Krasmirofc, municipality of Skenderaj. Our family was a large one, the extended family counted more than sixty members. My grandfather was a *hoxha*,[1] but he was a remarkable hoxha; he never in his life wore the red cap, only the white *plis*.[2] So, I grew up in a large household where my grandfather also lived together with his nephews, the sons of his brothers who had been killed earlier, and with his youngest brother. They all lived together.

So in my grandfather's *oda*,[3] which was very frequented at that time because of his wide circle of friendships, the conversations mainly revolved around the national question, our fate, the wars that had taken place, and the problems we had mainly faced with the occupiers, specifically with the Serbs. I learned these things from listening to the others as those conversations unfolded in the *oda*.

My great-grandfather, my grandfather's father, was killed by Serbs. I do not know the exact year, because I only heard others speak about it and later forgot the date. It was sometime between the First and Second World Wars. His name was Mehmet. He was executed by Serbs.

[1] Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.
[2] Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.
[3] A traditional guest room or men's chamber in Albanian homes, especially in Kosovo and northern Albania, used for hospitality, communal discussion, dispute resolution, and oral storytelling.

Later, three of Mehmet's sons, my grandfather's brothers, were also killed. Jetullahu was killed in Mihaliq on the eve of the Second World War. Hasan was killed in Novi Pazar during the *Chetnik*[4] campaign of extermination. At that time, Novi Pazar had been inhabited by Albanians. There were no Bosniaks then, as he understood it. He said that community was later artificially constructed; back then, they had been Albanians. Hasan had gone there together with comrades and fellow villagers from around Qyqavica to support the local people, and he was killed there. Hasan Mehmeti, in other words, was my father's uncle, my grandfather's brother.

Finally, my grandfather's third brother, Islam Mehmeti, was also killed. He was executed during the war of Shaban Polluzha,[5] because of the support given to Polluzha's uprising. Shaban Polluzha and his fighters had stayed in our *kulla*,[6] in my grandfather's family compound. At some point, word got out, I don't know exactly how it happened, that they had been there. The authorities then took the eldest son of the family at that time and executed him, together with one of my maternal uncles. My mother's cousin, her uncle's son. Both of them were executed in the village of Shtuticë.

These conversations were mainly about suffering, sacrifice, and bloodshed, and as a child I began listening to them. That was where the desire was first born in me to serve the national cause, and at the same time the hatred toward the Serbs, toward the occupier, also began. In short, that was what inspired me. Later, I completed seven grades of elementary school in the village of Gradicë, from where…

Anita Susuri: I just wanted to ask you something before we go further. Did you actually live in a *kulla*? Did it still exist?

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes. My grandfather's tower house was demolished in 1971. I was born in 1956, so that makes about fourteen or fifteen years. I remember that *kulla* very well. It had two floors and two windows facing east. It was large…

Anita Susuri: Did it have those narrow windows for…?

Idriz Mehmeti: No, it didn't have loopholes, that's what they're called, loopholes. No. But the walls were thick, stone walls, of course.

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

[5] Shaban Polluzha (1871-1945) was a regional Albanian leader of volunteer forces in Drenica. Shaban Polluzha joined the partisans, but in late 1944 disobeyed orders to go north to fight Germans in Serbia, having received news that nationalist Serbs and Montenegrins were attacking civilians in Drenica. He fought against partisan forces until early 1945, when he was killed.

[6] Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

Anita Susuri: And what was family life like in those days? Was there organization inside the family, a shared household? How did you live?

Idriz Mehmeti: There was. All the men, old and young, had more or less divided responsibilities. Some worked with the horses, some herded the sheep, some plowed the land. Everyone had their duties. My grandfather mostly went to the market in Vushtrri to buy a liter of kerosene or a few small things, because there was nothing, there was extreme poverty. We fought 365 days a year just for our daily bread.

I grew up in that spirit, and I remember many cases when someone would come, someone I didn't know, sitting in a corner of the *oda*, and during the conversation someone would ask, "Have you secured enough bread for this year?" It was always uncertain whether they had enough food for the year they were living through. I heard those things with my own ears. Of course, I was curious about everything discussed in the *oda*, and I listened to a lot of it and remembered much of it. Now age has done its work. There are many things that, if my memory were fresher, I could tell you, but I've forgotten.

Anita Susuri: You were born in the period of Aleksandar Ranković[7]…

Idriz Mehmeti: This period of the weapons collection has been mentioned many, many times. Our family had long been under suspicion. In my grandfather's tower house, besides Shaban Polluzha, there was also Mehmet Gradica,[8] who was his right-hand man in the fighting. Later, he became the son-in-law of the Bunjaku family of Samadrexhë. And we are Bunjakus too, the whole village. Since we were relatives, they came to us when they were in hiding, and stayed in our homes. Since Mehmet Gradica was their son-in-law, he also came and frequented our house. The authorities had this information and kept us under surveillance.

In 1956, they took my grandfather's nephew, his name was Milazim, Milazim of Hajra, as we called him. They took him and tortured him in the most brutal way. I heard him describe it hundreds of times. He always wore sheepskin on his back because they had destroyed it by beating him. This was from the time after the end of Shaban Polluzha's war. In 1956, while searching for a rifle, they found the typewriter that Shaban Polluzha had left in our *kulla*. Bali Xim, that was his nickname, though his real name was Milazim, had kept it hidden. They took him out to a stream and threatened to execute him. He had been carrying a pistol but hadn't drawn it. In the end, however, they found both the pistol and

[7] 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.

[8] 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 1994. He was killed with Polluzha in February 1945 in the war of Drenica.

the typewriter. After all the torture and violence, they asked him, "Does it hurt?" And he answered, "By God, as much as my soul." He was very strong, truly remarkable.

Anita Susuri: And what did they use that typewriter for?

Idriz Mehmeti: They used it during the war; later he simply kept it. No, it wasn't used afterward. He knew how to write, he had taught himself to read and write as an autodidact, but he himself didn't use it for writing. He kept it as a symbol of Shaban Polluzha, a symbol of Shaban Polluzha's war.

Anita Susuri: I suppose they used it to write leaflets and decisions like that.

Idriz Mehmeti: Back then, during the war, as far as I know, because I've read many books about it, it was used. There was a man named Azem Hajdini, known as Xani, from our side, from the village of Deshevc. He had been authorized to write and issue communiqués. How much they succeeded in that, I don't know. I wasn't even born at the time, but that's what I've heard.

Anita Susuri: You also told us a story about your father, who worked in the mine and was arrested.

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes. My father worked for around twenty years in Kosovo's electric economy, here in Hade, Ballaqevc, and Obiliq. Then, in 1968 or maybe 1969, he went to work as a miner in Vulljakë in the Dukagjin region. He was a miner, the first man there who knew how to blast rock to extract ore. He was in charge of detonating the mines and had advanced to leading a group of workers. When the ore was collected for transport, it was mainly sold to Romania. It was stored near the railway tracks, where it would be loaded into train wagons.

The person responsible for weighing it was a Serb, I've forgotten his name, though I knew it because I had read their indictment. My father and one of his colleagues, who was also a foreman but on a different shift, were arrested on accusations that they had tried to sabotage the Yugoslav railways. But that was completely untrue. My father had always been considered suspicious and monitored by the UDBA.[9] They arrested him and then arrested his colleague as well. In the end, the guilty one turned out to be the Serb, and my father was released after they had kept him for about two months in the prison in Peja. Had it not been for that Serb working at the scales where the ore was weighed, everyone else would have ended up with a very serious charge. They called it "economic counterrevolution," an attempt to destroy the railway. But in the end, he served only two months, that was his luck, and the luck of the other man too, because the Serb had been the one in charge of the weighing.

Anita Susuri: And how did your schooling continue? You said you started elementary school there. Was it nearby, or did you have to travel?

[9] *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.

Idriz Mehmeti: No, I completed my first seven grades in the village of Gradicë. From first to seventh grade, because there was nothing beyond that. I finished eighth grade in Qirez. Surely you've heard of Qirez.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Idriz Mehmeti: After finishing the eight-year school, I came here to the Technical School in Prishtina. At that time it was called 19 Nëntori.

Anita Susuri: Was it difficult to come from that place and move to Pristina? What was it like?

Idriz Mehmeti: It was very difficult. The beginning was hard for me because I came from a rural area, far from the center. I had never even gone as far as Pristina before. But my father loved education deeply. He had started working early and had worked for a long time. He valued schooling a lot. Besides us, his children, six sons and three daughters, he also educated his own younger brother, especially the second youngest, whom he cared for deeply. He brought him here to the *Shkolla Normale*[10] in Pristina.

And I want to mention something very important: at the *Normale*, he studied together with Fazli Grajçevci,[11] the martyr and teacher, if you've heard of him, I'm sure you have. Fazli Grajçevci was the nephew of one of our relatives, Ibish Miftari. But Fazliu spent much more time with my uncle, Ismet Mehmeti, and with the rest of our family. When he came to visit his uncles, he stayed more with us than with them. And this too is connected to my inspiration.

Later, in 1963–64, when Fazli Grajçevci was killed, tortured to death in the prison of Pristina, and when Adem Demaçi[12] was imprisoned for the second time, all of that influenced me to take the path I eventually followed. I don't know how much I managed to do; these things depend on one's strength. But these were the things that inspired me and showed me the road I had to walk. So I came to Pristina from a remote, forgotten village in the plain of Qyqavicë. It wasn't easy or simple for me, but I eventually integrated here.

Anita Susuri: Your younger uncle was here studying, right?

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[10] *Shkolla Normale* refers to a teacher training institution, a school specifically established to educate and prepare future teachers in pedagogy and curriculum. The term comes from the French *école normale*, originally created to set standards or "norms" for teaching and was widely used historically in Europe and elsewhere for teacher training colleges. In Kosovo and Albanian-language regions during the Second World War era, *Shkolla Normale* "Sami Frashëri" in Prishtina was established in 1941 to train Albanian-speaking teachers and operated until its closure in 1944, with later continuations after the war.

[11] Fazli Grajçevci (1935-1964), member of *Ilegalja*, the underground Albanian nationalist movement, killed in detention.

[12] 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.

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, my youngest uncle was here studying. His name was Sali Mehmeti, but he has passed away. He had a connection with Ibrahim Gashi, who worked at the dormitory of the secondary schools in Pristina, and he got me into the dormitory. For me, the dormitory was like a dream come true for that time. But by then it had become more for the Serbs than for us. There were both Serbs and Albanians there, but we from remote areas could at least find shelter there. And, to be honest, it also took connections, without them it was difficult to get in.

Later, the dormitory became the starting point of my journey onward. In the dormitory of the secondary schools in Pristina, the Serbs used to write slogans like *"Živeo Ranković"* [Long live Ranković]. Filled with anger and bitterness over the suffering the Serbs had caused us, I made a wedge-like tool out of lead here in technical school, and with one strike I would scrape off their slogans. Since I was the youngest, underneath them I would write, *"Long live Enver Hoxha,"* period. It was an act of revenge. I wasn't organized at that time, but I always carried that feeling that they had caused us great pain, so I used this… I don't know what to call it… this act.

Anita Susuri: A method?

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, this method. And little by little they discovered it. There was a director there, a very bad man, the director of the secondary school dormitory. If I'm not mistaken, his name was Qamil, I won't mention his surname, also because he had no problem dealing harshly even with children, and I was just a child. They found out through my handwriting in notebooks and other things that I had written those slogans.

He called me into his office. There were two UDBA agents there, though I didn't know at the time they were UDBA. He said to me, "Can you write an application for me? My typewriter is broken." I was naive. He dictated, and I wrote. Years later, during interrogations in the prison of Prishtina, the UDBA put that letter in front of me as proof, because it was written in my own hand.

I had written another letter too. This one happened after they left us without breakfast in the dining hall because of some problems. One morning they shut it down because of a scandal, a serious scandal. The storekeeper, the man in charge of the kitchen, had been arrested over some major issue, and the canteen remained closed. So we were left without breakfast. I wrote a complaint together with two friends, we formulated it together, but it was in my handwriting. It wasn't political; it was simply criticizing the administration for leaving the students without breakfast, saying they didn't care about us. I hung it on the door of the dining hall.

Then many students gathered there, pretending to read it, while the three of us stood there first. It was me, Gëzim Kelmendi, he was living in Drenica then, though he was actually from Peja, and another boy named Bizariqi. We gathered all the students, banging bowls and making noise, protesting because we had no breakfast. That letter was photographed. Later they compared the handwriting to the slogans I had written under the Serbs' slogans, and when I was imprisoned in 1975, they put it in front of me. That was the consequence of being exposed by the dormitory director. But as for the

dormitory itself, I got in there through my uncle, with the help of Ibrahim Gashi. He was a wonderful man, one of the best educators the dormitory had at that time.

Anita Susuri: And at that time, when you say the director called you in, did they take any measures against you then?

Idriz Mehmeti: No, no, no. I was in my second year of secondary school. They waited until I had turned eighteen. When I was imprisoned, I had just turned eighteen, but I hadn't yet turned nineteen. I was arrested at the end, at the beginning of March 1975. The incident when the director called me had been in 1973, before 1974. I don't remember the exact month. But I know I was seventeen-something, and surely because of my age they didn't take me then. They were waiting for the right moment.

My arrest coincided with the arrest of many, many Albanian men. Back then, people said around 300 had been arrested. It was about that group, if you've read the books of Selatin Novosella, Kosova *'75*, there was *bac*[13] Adem Demaçi as the nineteenth man in the first group, and then Adem Rukiqi, in whose group I was, the second group. We were twelve there, thirty-one altogether. They had arrested around 300 people, but like cheese being sliced little by little, they removed the layers and in the end left us thirty-one. They raised an indictment against us and brought us to trial.

The first group was sentenced under a harsher article because they were repeat offenders. Our group, with Adem Rukiqi, was sentenced under a lighter article. We got sentences from one and a half years up to nine years maximum, which Adem Rukiqi received. The first group got from four years up to fifteen; *bac* Adem Demaçi got that. So this was their trap, their revenge for things that had happened much earlier, and they tied me to that group. Through some people from my village, five of them from the same neighborhood, the neighborhood called Rukiqi where we lived.

Among them was my teacher, the teacher I loved most in my life, Tafë Rukiqi. Their main goal in arresting me was to pressure me and turn me into a witness against my teacher, Tafë Rukiqi. They also took another young man like me, a fellow villager, but I don't want to mention his name. Everyone knows who he is, and they know too. They took him; we went through the same procedure. He stayed there for two weeks and then went home. They kept me. Me and Arif Rukiqi, as newly-of-age young men, they sentenced us to one and a half years in prison each.

Anita Susuri: Before the imprisonment, I wanted to ask, had you already begun any activities, or were you still not organized?

Idriz Mehmeti: No, I wasn't organized, except for the things I mentioned: the slogans in the secondary school dormitory and that letter I posted on the dining hall door. I wasn't part of any organization. But because of those things, they linked me to the organization. Their main goal was to make me a witness. When that didn't happen, then I… and I want to be very honest, I didn't have the strength not

[13] *Bac* is a respectful and affectionate Albanian form of address for an older man, especially in Kosovo; roughly "uncle" or "elder," without necessarily implying kinship.

to sign papers. I signed a paper that I shouldn't have signed, that I wasn't supposed to sign, but I signed it with my own hand. Believe me, if I had had an axe, I would have cut my hand off here {gestures at wrist} just so I wouldn't sign it. But I did sign it. I don't want to act like an idiot now… many come out as heroes saying, "We never signed anything." I signed a paper.

Anita Susuri: And what kind of paper was it?

Idriz Mehmeti: They wrote it for me, saying that I had been with the teacher, that he had taken me in his car, deceived me, that I hadn't known anything, and so on, and then they said, "Sign it." I denied it hundreds of times. They used unbelievable, horrific violence, criminal violence, and, unfortunately, most of them were Albanians, most of them. There were moments when I was so exhausted that I could no longer resist, and I signed. As I said, if I had had the strength, if I'd had an axe in my hand, I would have cut off my hand right here {gestures at wrist} rather than sign it.

If I'd had the strength to break free from them, I wouldn't have cared five cents for my life, I would have thrown myself in front of a train. That's how filthy and terrifying the torture they inflicted on us was. I've heard it from others too, but most of the prison comrades said, "The most tortured group was the group of '75." That's what they said, and I experienced it myself. It's strange, most of the UDBA agents at that time were Albanians.

Personally, I remember one man named Slavković, they called him Mille. I don't know his exact first name, but his surname was Slavković. The Albanian UDBA officers tried hard to ingratiate themselves with him. They admired him so much: Mille! Mille! And there was also a Romani man, I think he may have been Gorani or Bosniak. Those were the only two I heard speaking Serbian to me; the others were Albanians. As for my friends, there were many Serbs involved with them, but in my case, apart from those two, the rest were all Albanian. Albanians, I tell you.

Anita Susuri: I want to ask about your teacher. What kind of activities was he involved in, and did you know at the time that he was engaged in these activities?

Idriz Mehmeti: I didn't know that he was organized. I learned that later. But I do know that one of his brothers had been organized much earlier, around 1964, Ajet Rukiqi. Later he became a martyr, killed in the last war, the Kosovo Liberation Army war. Ajet Rukiqi had been organized, and since he was his brother, I really don't know… truthfully, I never asked my teacher, "Were you organized?" Nor did he ever tell me, "I was" or "I wasn't."

But what I do know is that Ajet Rukiqi, from the documents I've read, from the indictment and the verdict, and from the newspaper *Shqipëria e Re* [New Albania], had many books and brochures from Albania found in his possession. During the interrogations they would present those to me and say, "Look, you're trying to protect him, but he himself brought them." I knew they were lying, because he hadn't brought them there, they had found them.

From our area back then, I know for certain that Ajet Rukiqi was organized. I know that exactly because I saw it, and I read it. And later, after I got out of prison, I spoke with him. He said, "Yes, they were mine, I have nothing to hide. But I didn't want to admit it to them." That's how it was.

Anita Susuri: And when they arrested you, how did it happen? Did it come as a surprise? Where did they take you?

Idriz Mehmeti: The arrest happened like this: I was in the *oda*, not the old one, my grandfather's *oda*, because that had been demolished in 1971. We had built a newer *oda* after that, and by then the family had split into six households. My grandfather's brothers had been divided into six homes. We had built this new *oda*, and I was sleeping there. They came before dawn, early in the morning. Many forces had come. They had surrounded three houses — mine, my uncle's house, and the house of one of my cousins.

Idriz Mehmeti: Three houses that were close together, we had alleys all around them. They had sealed off that alley with a cordon. Seven or eight of them entered our yard, and then there was a wider outer ring surrounding the whole neighborhood. So there were three layers of encirclement, all to come and arrest one child.

When they came, they grabbed me by the legs. I was asleep. It still hadn't gotten light. The policeman who grabbed me by the legs was from Gradicë, the village where I had completed seven years of elementary school. They came in while I was sleeping, entered the *oda* without being noticed.

It was unfortunate that we hadn't locked the door with a key, but back then in the village people didn't lock their doors. In fact, we would even mock someone if we found their door locked. "Who locks their door?" That was the mentality of the honest villager, I think, even though now it seems it was a mistake. Anyway, they took me from the village and brought me to Drenas, because the police of Drenas had come to arrest me. I stayed there for two or three hours, maybe three, I don't know exactly. Then they brought me to Pristina, and there it started immediately… though I'm forgetting some things.

A few days before my arrest, a man named Ajet Istogu had been shadowing me. I mention his name with regret, but if he wasn't ashamed to follow a child, I'm not ashamed to say it. The main man assigned to hunt me down, and the so-called "Drenica Group," was Ajet Istogu. Of course, he didn't work alone. Later I found out who else had been involved, but he led it. He followed me for about two weeks, like a shadow.

He reminded me of a man who worked in administration at the mine where my father had worked in Klina, a man who had helped secure me a scholarship. I had received a scholarship during secondary school from the mine in Klina. He looked like an exact copy of him. Every time I turned to greet him, I thought it was him, his name was Sali Ibishi. But whenever I turned, he would suddenly look away, as

if he had nothing to do with me. I kept asking myself, "What happened? Is it him or not?" But it was actually Ajet Istogu.

When they brought me here, to Pristina, I saw this same man who had followed me for days. But it still didn't strike me, because I had no idea I was on that list. The first thing he asked me was, "How is Smajli?" He knew my father's name. Then he said, "How is Ismeti?" my uncle, a teacher, who had studied at the *Normale* earlier. He knew the whole family, except he didn't mention my mother. Everyone else: "Who is this? How is Salihi? How is Mustafa?" I asked him, "And you?" He replied, "Who do you think I look like?" He had seen me turning to greet him before, but had never given me the chance.

I said, "You remind me of someone, but I don't know if it's you." He laughed. I was inexperienced; he was what he was. He asked again, "Who do I look like?" I made a mistake and said, "You look like Sali Ibishi." He said, "How could you forget me? Yes, I'm Salihi." I fell right into the trap, thinking I was talking to Salihi. Anyway, nothing happened right there, but he had cast his bait. I thought he really was Sali Ibishi. But in fact, he was Ajet Istogu.

That same afternoon they took me to Mitrovica. The day they arrested me, they had first brought me to Pristina and kept me there for a few hours with Ajet Istogu. He didn't use violence, nor did he question me deeply. He only asked about the family, as if to show, "We know everything. We know all about you."

In the afternoon they took me to Mitrovica, and there two other UDBA agents handled me. Late into the evening they took me to the prison in Mitrovica, where they kept me for four days. During those four days, no one laid a hand on me. Not a single slap. They cursed me, threatened me — "You'll never get out, you have no choice but to tell us," and so on — but physically, no one struck me.

Anita Susuri: Psychological pressure, then.

Idriz Mehmeti: Psychological pressure. No food, no drink, no sleep, but no physical blows. On the fifth day they brought me to Pristina. That very day, when they brought me there, they beat me. They beat me without asking me anything at all.

Anita Susuri: In prison, or there at the ministry?

Idriz Mehmeti: At the SUP, the Secretariat of Internal Affairs. They beat me there without saying anything, without asking me anything. They just beat me and then took me to the prison of Pristina and handed me over. That's when the real misfortune began. I never knew whether it was day or night. Sometimes during the day, sometimes at night. There was no schedule, whenever they wanted, they came. Not just for me. After a while I began hearing voices, and realized they were beating others too. From the questions I could hear — "Do you know this one? Were you with them? When did you meet

them?" and so on, I understood the prison was full. I could hear the voices of people being beaten. Usually, I heard all this at the SUP.

It's strange, in most cases, when they took me to wash the blood off, because they had bloodied me many times, Ajet Istogu would be the one escorting me. He personally never hit me. He was there, and by then I understood he wasn't Sali Ibishi. By then I knew he was someone else, some kind of devil, though I still didn't know exactly who. But he was always there, always accompanying me. The interrogations were terrifying. They were beyond logic — the kind of torture they inflicted is impossible to comprehend.

I said it before, but I'll repeat it: there were moments when I simply couldn't endure anymore. "Come on now, tell us," they would demand, forcing me to confess. And I would say, "I don't know what to tell you, I don't know what to say, because I don't know anything." And then it would start all over again. They kept me for 17 days in the prison of Pristina. Those 17 days were hell for me. After those 17 days they transferred me to Mitrovica. There the interrogations became less frequent, not every day anymore. They had arrested so many people, and they didn't have enough space to deal with everyone at once. They spread us out across all the prisons: in Mitrovica, Pristina, Prizren, and elsewhere.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: And what was the prison in Prishtina like? The cells, I imagine, were small and crowded.

Idriz Mehmeti: The prison in Pristina was built like a half-circle. At the entrance, the main gate was at the back of the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, that's how it was. Then it curved around and connected back to the Secretariat. There was even a door there, and when they took us out to beat us, and brought us back afterward, they would usually push us directly in through that door. There were many prisoners, but at that time, I'm speaking of my own experience, I was always alone, kept in solitary. But I could hear them when they went out into the yard for walks, I could hear them when they were shouting or coughing. Those were the sounds I heard in prison.

I didn't often hear beatings there, though I did hear some. Mostly it was the guards, but in the rooms of the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, that's where the real slaughterhouse happened for us political prisoners. Because the prison also held murderers, thieves, and all sorts of criminals. But with us, the real work was done in the Secretariat.

Anita Susuri: Was violence carried out with weapons?

Idriz Mehmeti: No, no, not with weapons, but with beatings, severe beatings. With batons, slaps, punches. Even today, one of my ears is damaged because some idiot hit me unexpectedly. I don't even

know who it was. One man was in front of me asking questions, and my answer didn't satisfy them. At the same time, another one struck me hard across both ears, and the left ear took the worst of it. I had 17 injections afterward, but it never healed properly. It has never worked right since. Then, after those 17 days in the prison of Pristina, they transferred me to Mitrovica. There the interrogations were much rarer.

That prison was small. It was completely circular, like a cigarette ashtray. It wasn't attached to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs. At night, two UDBA agents would take me there on foot, handcuffed, and bring me back the same way. But there was also something else, the issue of my family. They arrested me, I think, at the beginning of the week, maybe Monday or Tuesday, I don't remember exactly anymore.

As I said, my father worked in the mine, and he used to travel once a week. He would leave on Monday, either Sunday evening or early Sunday morning, and return either Friday evening or early Saturday. He worked the whole week and came home only for the weekend. When he got off the train, because our area mostly traveled by train, coming from Klina, after passing through Drenas, there was a station in a village called Dobroshevc, now called Driton. He got off there, and another man from Gradicë, named Sefer, got off too. I won't mention his surname because it's a very respectable family. They had to walk part of the road together.

It was at least an hour's walk, since our villages were nearby. All the way, this man kept telling him how two young boys had been arrested. "I think they were from your village," he told my father. "They arrested them because they stole a cow." Then he said, "But on the other hand, people are also saying they raped a girl somewhere and killed her in the mountains, and that's why they were caught." All the while, he was describing me without mentioning my name. He kept saying, "Two boys, two of them," because there was another boy from my village who had been arrested at the same time as me.

The whole time he was speaking to my father about these terrible things, and my father sensed he was talking about me, but he said nothing, pretending not to understand. When he got home, he asked my mother, "Where is Idriz?" She said, "The police took him." "When?" "Three or four days ago." "And?" "We know nothing. The police took him." So, when my father got home and heard this, he didn't go back to work the following Monday. Instead, he began searching for me, who had taken me, where I was. Back then they called the police station in Gllogoc [today Drenas]. They even named some of the policemen, including one from Gradicë and others. They told him there had been many of them.

He went to the police station in Drenas to ask, and they told him they had sent me to Prishtina. "We don't know anything more." They gave him no answers and treated him badly. He went to Pristina. There they said, "He's not here. We don't know. Maybe he's in Mitrovica." When he went to Mitrovica, they said, "He's not here." Then he went to Skenderaj, back then they called it Srbica, and there too: "He's not here." So, he kept going from one place to another, from one center to the next. Go there, go here, we don't know. In one place they told him, "He killed a girl." In another, "He stole a cow." The

stories kept changing. They couldn't allow family visits because of the torture, they didn't want the families to see us.

I spent four days first in Mitrovica, then seventeen days in Pristina. After that, I don't remember how many more days passed. At first I tried to count the days by scratching lines into the wall, but after a while I lost track. Even that got mixed up. I no longer knew how many days had passed, what day it was, or anything else. And my father kept exhausting himself, running up and down, searching everywhere. "He's not here, he's not here." And he kept saying, "Did he kill someone? What happened? How can the state take a child and he's nowhere to be found? How is this possible?"

We had a family friend in Drenas who worked in the municipality. If I'm not mistaken, he was the municipal secretary. My father went to him and said, "My friend, they took my son and he's nowhere to be found. He's not here, not there, nowhere," he said. "I just want to know where he is, the rest can wait."

Since he held a position of authority, he said, "I don't know what to tell you, but I'll try." At the police station in Drenas he had some kind of relationship with them, especially with the deputy commander. He said, "I'll try, but I can't promise anything."

Then he called my father and said, "Wait here in the corridor." They went inside the office, this friend and the deputy commander. His name was Islam Heta, I mention him by name because I value what he did for me, it was a great favor. Islam spoke with the police officer from Drenas and explained the situation. The officer said, "Yes, yes, I know the case," because he was the one who had sent the men to arrest me.

"And?" "By God," he said, "I am forbidden to deal with this matter. I only sent him where they told me to send him. But I know who asked for him." Then he added, "If my friend doesn't expose me, I trust you and him, and I'll tell you where he is and why. After that, go to the District Court in Pristina and ask for permission to meet your son. They will never tell you where he is unless you find out yourself."

My father had no idea. They had sent him in circles, he's not here, he's not there. But then this friend called the deputy commander, and he finally said: "Listen, your son is not a murderer, he didn't steal a cow, it's political." My father said, "What politics? He's just a child, he just turned eighteen." The officer replied, "I don't know, but I can tell you that this authority has taken him, and investigations are underway. Things are not looking good. But go to the District Court in Pristina. There, among the judges, you'll find the key. Get permission from the judge, and they may allow you to visit your son."

So my father went to the court in Pristina. The investigating judge was Durak Jashari**.** This was the man who had only seen me once, only once, in the middle of the night, after the UDBA had broken me down, beaten me, and forced me to sign a statement. He came then, as the investigating judge, to take my official declaration. He introduced himself.

I gathered my strength one last time. I had already been beaten a hundred times. I thought, let them beat me once more. I pulled myself together and said: “No.” I denied everything. I denied every single thing. He said, “But you signed this.” And I said, “Yes, I did sign it with my own hand, because I had no way to cut it off.” I said, “I signed it.”

There were three devils there, three UDBA agents, and in the presence of those three UDBA men, in the middle of the night, he wanted to take my statement, skillfully, as if without violence. But I denied it. I said, “I know nothing about these things I’m being accused of.” He stopped, looked at me pitifully, like a cuckoo. More pitiful than me, because I was physically destroyed. He gathered the papers and left. My eyes never saw him again. Month after month I would receive a letter saying, “Pre-trial detention extended due to suspicions of this and that,” signed by Durak Jashari. He never saw me again; the UDBA did all the work. Anyway, that passed. But when my father went there, he gave him permission. Now, I don’t know exactly how many weeks later the first visit happened.

He came for the first visit, which I had in the prison of Pristina, in the presence of three UDBA men and the prison director. He was a monster, a man so evil God could not make a worse one. From his appearance, from his soul, there could not be a worse man. He had been the eternal director of the prison in Mitrovica, his name was Sherafedin Ajeti. He was a criminal. He had the eyes of a criminal, the face of a criminal, the soul of a criminal, the body of a criminal. When they brought me back from the SUP, the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, back into prison, it would be night, and I would be beaten, broken, exhausted. I was small then, but he was even smaller than me. He would come right up close to me, almost nose to nose, saying, “You are resisting, you are resisting. I will destroy you. I am the state.” God could not make a worse man, I say this honestly, and with regret, but that is the reality.

My father came in the presence of those three UDBA men and that Shera. I was in the state I was in. He said, “How are you, son?” I said, “Good, good, good.” “What’s going on? How is it going? What did you do to be here?” I said, “I did nothing.” “Then why are you here?” “I don’t know.” Those three devils were there. They immediately started reacting, immediately telling him, “Be careful, know what you are saying to your son. You may turn out worse than him.” They threatened him. He said, “Listen to what I’m telling you: if you did something, stand by it yourself; if you didn’t, be careful not to put someone else in danger.”

My teacher Tafë Rukiqi and my father are the reason I was not disgraced and did not collapse. Because at that young age, and under such extreme violence, I could have broken. Those two are the reason I have the strength to look anyone in the eye, all those I was in prison with, to befriend them and walk with them day and night. Otherwise, maybe I would have become black-faced with shame, unable even to meet with you, unable ever to meet honest people, only the disgraced ones, like those we know how they were. Maybe I’m exaggerating about this, but that was the reality. That was how it was.

Anita Susuri: So at the beginning, in those first months, it seems there was physical violence?

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, yes. The most terrible violence was during those 17 days in Pristina. After that it became less frequent. But our investigation lasted eleven months. Only after eleven months did they bring us before the court. One day before they brought us to trial, they threatened me for the last time. They didn't beat me. I don't want to accuse anyone falsely, zero in that sense, because what had already happened was enough, more than enough. They didn't beat me, but they threatened me. They took me from the prison in Pristina, because they had gathered all of us from the different prisons, from Prizren and elsewhere. I had been in Mitrovica. They brought me from Mitrovica here.

One day before they took us into the courtroom, the UDBA took me again. There was a door there they could use to take you in, and there they threatened me. They said, "You will be liquidated if tomorrow you do not admit what you have done." I said, "Tomorrow I will admit everything I have done, don't worry." And when I went out there, when my turn came, because the trial lasted several days, when my turn came to give my statement, I stood firm. I said, "I am the victim of those who fabricated this trick. I know nothing. Apart from this teacher of mine, I do not know any of these people." "How do you know the accused Tafë Rukiqi?" I said, "I know Tafë Rukiqi as my teacher, that's all." They said, "He is accused here." "For me he was my teacher, and he is still my teacher today."

And then, "Did you sign the statement?" the judge asked me too. I said, "Yes, I signed it." "Why did you sign it?" I said, "If they had grabbed you and told you, 'Are you Hitler?' you would have said, 'Yes, I'm Hitler.' So let this be understood: I know nothing about what these people are talking about. I know only about the things that are mine," and those I had admitted. "These things that happened in the dormitory of the secondary school, I accepted as mine, because they were mine. But these other things are fabricated, there is nothing true in what is said in the indictment by those who set this up." That is how it was.

They put one man there with me in the ward, a fool, five or six years older than me, a grown man. He kept saying, "Tell them, tell them straight! You tell them because I don't know, you tell them, I don't know, you tell them." I won't mention his name because there's no need, but the poor man had broken. I have nothing to say against him. There were some who broke, not many, but there were. One in the first group, one in the second group. But overall, we got through it.

Anita Susuri: And how were you sentenced?

Idriz Mehmeti: In the first group, as I said, uncle Adem Demaçi got fifteen years, and the others down to the minimum of four. They were sentenced under Article 117. There were several points in that article, but I don't remember them because I'm not a lawyer. In our group it was Article 118. Adem Rukiqi got nine years, Tafë Rukiqi six, Bektesh Rrudhani six, Zydi Bilalli three and a half years. They had smashed his jaw and broken his teeth; they could never force his mouth open. Three and a half years for the doctor. Another one got two and a half, another one the same, Arif Rukiqi got a year and a half, Bislim Bajraktari four years, Xhevdet Nasufi two and a half years — my God, what a man he was, extraordinary. They could never make him talk, never! Others too: Sedullah Zeqiri, I don't remember exactly, maybe three years. I got a year and a half, Ajet Rukiqi four years, and there was also Adem

Pavataj, who got two and a half years. Maybe I forgot someone, I hope not, but I think I remembered all twelve of us.

Anita Susuri: And in that group, did they take only you at such a young age and without guilt?

Idriz Mehmeti: Me and Arif Rukiqi, they called us "young adults." In the indictment and in all the papers, in the extensions of pre-trial detention and all the court decisions until they brought us to the main hearing, every document wrote "young adult" for me and for Arif Rukiqi. We both got a year and a half, while the others, as I said, got from two and a half up to nine years, which was for Adem Rukiqi.

And with Adem, I saw it with my own eyes: he couldn't keep his hands or feet steady in that circle there when we stood up to declare ourselves innocent. In his closing statement, I heard it without needing translation, though many say, "No, he was free." Let it be whatever it may, but I heard it with my own ears: "If this man were really the Adem Rukiqi described in the indictment, I would call myself proud." I heard that man say it, with my own ears, no translation.

After the verdict, I served the rest of my prison term entirely in Kosovo. I served seven months in Pristina, and before that thirteen in Mitrovica. Later I served two more times, about two more months in Pristina and another two in Kotor. But those were for other things, because I had conflicts with Serbs. I was young, they looked at me badly, and I would get into trouble. It happened twice: once in Mitrovica, for which I served two months, and once in Ulcinj, after which they took me to Kotor.

Anita Susuri: Some kind of dispute?

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, yes. Now I'm speaking only about the case in Ulcinj. He called his son, he turned out to be a policeman, though I didn't know it. I had run away there to find shelter, to work a few days with a shovel. I had escaped, and we went out to play football on a field. "Why are you playing here?" he said. He heard us speaking Albanian. "*Dođi da izbijemo*" [Come, let's beat them up]. Do you know Serbian? {addressin the interviewer}.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Idriz Mehmeti: "*Dođi da izbijemo ovi Kosovari*" [Come, let's beat up these Kosovars], cursing our mothers and everything. We tried to run, we tried to get away, but they caught one of us, so we had to go back and help pull him out of their hands because they wanted to beat him to death. I don't even know how it happened. They say God gives strength. I don't believe too much, but they say God gave me strength and I smashed heads against heads.

Anita Susuri: This was before your imprisonment here…

Idriz Mehmeti: No, afterwards, afterwards. Because I had run away, I had escaped to hide. They wouldn't leave me alone anywhere, always chasing me, trying to trip me up. This was after I got out of prison…

Anita Susuri: What interests me is also that moment…when you got out of prison, what was that day like, for example? Do you remember? Did someone come to wait for you?

Idriz Mehmeti: My father never missed a visit, never missed one. But only when I was already sentenced, because there were other punishments too. Once I was sentenced, they set traps for me, they set traps, it's very interesting. I had two traps set for me during those months I stayed in Mitrovica, and two more in the prison in Pristina. The first one there in Mitrovica prison involved a nasty man, convicted of theft, five years in prison because he had stolen meat from hospital patients and abused it for his own purposes. To reduce his sentence, he did dirty work.

I took it upon myself to write a letter. Imagine, we wrote letters using match heads because we had no pen. Whoever smoked would save the match tips, put them back into the matchbox, and with a flame they would leave black marks on the paper. That's how I wrote a letter to someone who was nearby in Mitrovica prison. I had found out which room he was in, and another inmate told me. In this case, there were four of us in the cell, so I wasn't alone. They had to interrupt my isolation, because due to my age they couldn't legally keep me in solitary for eight months or six months like they did with all the others.

Still, they kept me there, two months in solitary, then three or four days or ten days or maybe two weeks with others. Then this planted man, the first time, took a brush and toothpaste and threw them on the floor and started banging on the door, *bam bam bam*. The guard came, "*Šta je*?" [What happened?] He said, "This one threw my brush and toothpaste on the floor." The other two, whether they were asleep or lying down, hadn't seen whether I threw it or not. "He threw my brush and toothpaste on the floor." They beat me, dragged me while beating me, and that monster too, that director, that Shera I mentioned before, and the one who beat me, they called him Imer Vllahija, a brute of a man. He beat me senseless, for pleasure and by order… and because they found me guilty.

That was the case of the brush and toothpaste, and two months in solitary. The second case, I tried to write another letter to someone, and the same man, the meat thief, exposed me. They found the letter. Even though I tried to hide it and destroy it, they found it. He took it and brought it to the director, to that Shera. He came and said, "Read it." I read it, it was written in Albanian, there was nothing to hide, it was a document, my letter. "Read it," he said. I read it. Then he said, "No, no, decipher it for me, tell me what's here." I said, "It's written in Albanian, read it." I knew he had no mercy. "Should I read it?" he said. I answered, "You." Then he shouted, "Commander!" and right away, "*Samnica*!" *Samnica* meant solitary confinement. And there went another two months.

So I spent six months in solitary in Mitrovica, because of traps, not because they had any legal right to keep me there. They claimed I had violated rules. But I also had visitation punishments, because they said I made mistakes. And here in Pristina prison it was something similar. In fact, during one of those punishments here, they caught me talking with one of my comrades who had been sentenced with me, Bislim Bajraktari, who later died during the [COVID] pandemic. He was a wonderful man. We had arranged it, the two of us sentenced for the same things. We had never known each other before, but

he was on one side and I was on the other. There was a small window nearby, I was at one window and he was on the other side, and we were talking.

They noticed us. Someone had informed on us, and I know who it was. It was a murderer, a criminal who had killed three of his cousins. He killed them in a matter of seconds, and now he wanted to save himself from execution, even by collaborating with the UDB. They were watching us and caught us. "Who's talking?" There was a rule not to put your comrades in a difficult position, to take the fall yourself if necessary, or if there was an injustice, to go on strike together, because that's how it was among political prisoners. The others weren't always that interested, but some did join in.

So they caught us. "Who's talking?" I said, "Me," and stepped forward myself. The two Serbian guards asked, "What did you say to him?" I said, "Are you upset? Is anyone coming to visit you?" "What else?" "Nothing else." "You must have said something else." "I didn't say anything else." And I spoke loudly on purpose so that he could hear too, because I knew he was standing nearby at the door, watching. "You see," he said, "you'll pay for this now." They locked our door and went to him. "Who were you talking to?" "I don't know," and he gave the same answers. "What did you tell him?" "Is anyone coming? Are you upset? How much longer do you have to stay?" And so on.

Then they brought ordinary chains, the kind used to pull horse carts. They twisted them into the shape of an eight and locked them in the middle with a padlock. Twenty-four hours — whether you ate, drank, slept, or went to the toilet, it didn't matter. Twenty-four hours and not a minute less. That's what they did over these things. Then they punished us by suspending visits. A visit day came, but my father wasn't there. He came to the door and was turned away. But it wasn't because he didn't come, he came every first and fifteenth, whenever I had visitations.

Anita Susuri: Once a month you had the right, right?

Idriz Mehmeti: Twice a month. On the first and the fifteenth, that was the rule. Sometimes my father came with my mother, sometimes with someone else, whoever was willing. Not many were willing, but there were some. One of my father's cousins came once, he was a *hoxha*, but a modern *hoxha*, not an idiot like some of them today. In fact, I was exhausted, young, and worn out, I didn't look like myself. And those bars, there were two layers of them, so it was hard to see clearly. But he saw me and said, "What's happened to you?" I answered quietly, "I'm fine." He said, "Lift your head up. You have nothing to be ashamed of. By God, that filled my soul with energy. You didn't steal, you didn't kill anyone, lift your head up high," he said. May God protect him, because I had…

After I got out of prison, there were people who would turn their heads as if they didn't see me. Truly, there were some I had been friends with before, young men, I loved football, I had started playing football before I was imprisoned, and their fathers and uncles wouldn't let them near me. "No, because this one…" Or another case: someone close to us, I won't mention his name, the brother of those two brothers, Tafë Rukiqi and Ajet Rukiqi. Those five were all Rukiqis, but Tafë and Ajet were brothers.

Their brother was sitting in a café in Drenas drinking coffee or something, when some bandit, some fool, a fellow villager of mine, was joking around with his friends and said, "Look, look, Idriz, Smajli's son, is getting involved in politics. So what's Bakalli doing now?" He meant Mahmut Bakalli.[14] And he replied, "To hell with Bakalli, you and Bakalli too," he said. "You and Bakalli are the ones who sent him there, because he's a young man, he's a good boy, and may God strike you down," he said, "because you're the ones who sent him there, and now you talk politics with Bakalli." That's the kind of thing we went through. Terrible, but true.

There were only a few who came close to me, but still, there were some, there were. May God never leave this country without good people. In my specific case, when I got out of prison, I tried to continue school because I hadn't finished the fourth year. I tried in Drenas, Obiliq, Pristina, Skenderaj, in Mitrovica…not a single school accepted me. Wherever I went, the UDB followed me. Whichever school I knocked on, they were there with me.

I went to Mitrovica. There had been a teacher in Gradicë whom I had served tea to hundreds of times because he used to come with my uncle, who was also a teacher. He would come to our house, and I would serve him tea. When I walked in there, pretending not to know me, he had become a UDB man. I went there to enroll. "Forgive me," he said, "I don't recognize you." I had served him tea with my own hands. I felt deeply insulted because I knew he recognized me. I didn't know who he had there with him, and only later did I find out. He said, "Forgive me, I don't recognize you." At the time he was secretary at the Technical School in Zveçan. I don't want to mention his name because he became a martyr; he was killed in Brussels. Anyway, and so on.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: After prison, you began organizing in these groups…

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes.

Anita Susuri: It seems in the Marxist-Leninist Organization.

Idriz Mehmeti: After I got out of prison, wherever I found willingness, I drew close and tried to do something. At first through conversations, later with newspapers, wherever we could get them, however we could. Fate followed me. I traveled with people who made names for themselves, who carried out patriotic activities. It was fate, not because I chased it so much myself. For example, starting with uncle Adem Demaçi. When I came into prison, I had only heard of him. For example, here

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

is what I had heard: right at the beginning, when Fazli Grajçevci was killed, as I mentioned, he was our relative, Demaçi was sentenced, and people talked about it.

I heard my father with my own ears saying, "Demaçi was sentenced again," meaning his second sentence. They had apparently told him, "You're too small to be doing these things, too small to bring down the *država* [state]." My father was commenting on it, he hadn't been there, but that was how people talked. They say *bac* Adem answered, whether he really did or not, I don't know, to be honest, I'm not sure if I heard it directly or later, my memory fails me. They say he may have laughed.

My father used to say, "The judge told him, 'You're too small to destroy a state.'" And Adem supposedly replied, "Small or big, here I am, even a bug is small." He said, "A bug grabbed onto an oak tree and gave itself the task of climbing to the top. It grabbed on," he said, "made some progress, but fell. It grabbed on a second time, made it halfway, and fell again. It grabbed on a third time," he said, "and reached the top." And with uncle Adem, that is really how it happened. I heard my father talking about this during his second imprisonment, saying that this was what Adem Demaçi had said in court. Whether he really said it or not, I do not know.

Then, as I said, after prison I was lucky enough to become close to *bac* Adem. I was not only fortunate to know him, but with these two hands of mine I drove Adem Jashari. Fehmi Lladrovci had been my childhood friend, my friend from secondary school, and later a soldier in Zagreb in the Yugoslav army. We had been together. And with Fehmi I began entering into a trio with Fehmi Lladrovci, and a man named Gani Veseli from the Klina region. Fehmi gave me the connection to Gani. The three of us became a group. Over there, with Gani, we formed another trio. Together with Gani we found Hysni Elshani and a man named Nazmi, they were cousins, sons of uncles. And that is how it developed.

I began organizing in the underground after I came out of prison. Before that everything had been accidental, nothing concrete. After prison, wherever I could find a link, I grabbed onto it. Because of the danger, there was discipline, and it was hard to find the threads, but still, for my part, I managed to find them. I found the threads and joined the Marxist-Leninist Organization of Kosovo. From 1982 onward I had plenty of literature. In 1981 my brother went to Germany, and in 1982 he went to Switzerland. There he made contact with Zija Shemsiu and with the underground movement that operated more freely abroad than in Kosovo.

I had every issue of *Zëri i Kosovës* that came out. I also had newspapers called *Rruga e Lirisë*, *Liria*, and *Bashkimi*. These newspapers, printed in Switzerland and Germany, were brought to me by my brother, Halil Mehmeti. I didn't keep them only for myself. Wherever I dared, wherever I trusted someone to take them and read them without exposing me, I gave them away. I hid them among beehives, in the cattle trough, there wasn't a place where I didn't hide them. I don't know how many times they searched my house, but they never managed to find them. They found and took them only after I came out of prison in the 1990s, when it became allowed to speak openly about newspapers, to admit I had them, to share them openly, *Zëri i Kosovës* and the others.

At that time I had taken them out of hiding, the materials I used to keep concealed. I had a whole bundle of them. They were taken from me on November 3, 1993. That was when it became possible, at least, to communicate with one another openly, if only by word of mouth. But this time they had not come to take newspapers, this time they had come to take me and to find a Kalashnikov. I had three rifles at home, but they didn't find them. Fate had it that I was not at home.

They took my two brothers and beat them badly, but it made them better afterwards (laughs), because they did not wait long before taking up arms and going to join the Kosovo Liberation Army. They had already been good, but they became even better. Their legs were beaten badly, but they were released on the condition that they set a trap for me. They said, "Yes, no problem, we will set a trap." But when they got out, they guarded me instead. While I slept, they kept watch over me.

Anita Susuri: You told me that after prison you organized in the Marxist-Leninist Organization. Besides distributing these materials, what other activity did that organization carry out?

Idriz Mehmeti: During the underground activity of the *Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës*,[15] the main goal was to organize someone you trusted, someone you knew for certain would not expose you, and we worked through literature. There were no activities of the nature of organizing weapons or things like that. All of that came much later. Otherwise, mainly…look, when we managed with one of my comrades to write a slogan somewhere, it felt to us as if we had done something enormous. I tell you honestly, for me, a slogan written on the asphalt somewhere, "*Kosova Republikë*" [Kosovo Republic], felt like bringing a machine gun from Albania during the war and lining it up on the front line. That is what it was like back then.

I worked for some time, I am one of the rare political prisoners who managed to find work. But I got that job through a cousin of mine, one of those of the Bunjaku family I mentioned earlier, the same Bunjakus whom my grandfather had sheltered. He was the son of Shaban Bunjaku, Gani Bunjaku. He was some sort of director at the gravel factory in the Klina region, the same place where my father had worked. My cousin told me, because in 1981 I had left university. I had tried to finish university in Mitrovica, but it didn't happen. Then 1981 came, and everything of ours ended all at once.

At that point I was without work and without school. "Cousin," he told me, "come, register yourself as a resident of Klina and I'll get you a job. I don't care about the Party." I knew who he was, whose son he was. Believe me, I became a resident of Klina and within less than two weeks I had started working. That is the truth. My friends never took Tito's money, never knew it, because they were never given jobs. We were, honestly, persecuted many times over. No school, no work, they would not let you anywhere, for anything. Anyway, I got into work there in the Klina region, and there I found a good circle of people, and there I created a cell.

[15] Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës (OMLK; "Marxist-Leninist Organization of Kosovo") was a clandestine Kosovo Albanian political organization formed in the late 1970s that combined Marxist-Leninist ideology with advocacy for Albanian rights and self-determination under Yugoslav rule; it played a prominent role in underground publishing and the 1981 demonstrations.

I had already built one in Mitrovica with a boy from Prekaz, a man named Januz. At the time his surname was Mustafa, now it is Prekazi; he lives in Switzerland. I had contact there, and I was directly integrated into a three-man cell with Januz and Xhafer Durmishi from Stanovc. He had to flee within a few days because these three-man cells had been heavily watched, and this too was part of the OMLK. Later I heard people say, "No…" uncle Sabri Novosella mixes these things up, saying, "No, these were the Marxist-Leninists," making some distinctions between them. Xhafer Durmishi, like me, was a Marxist-Leninist, what happened later, I do not know.

Right at the beginning, I'm speaking about 1981. Because, otherwise, in 1981, the demonstrations of 1981, I formed the conviction that we were going to win, because that was when I saw the people in the streets: the students, the pupils, the workers, everyone in the streets, saying, "We are Albanians, we are not Yugoslavs." From that moment I was convinced that we would win. Until then, Albanians had believed that indeed we were Yugoslavs, and this had been built by these small three-man cells. And 1981 carried that forward; the demonstrations of 1981 were the decisive blow given to Yugoslavia to show it its place. Naturally, with many sacrifices, with prison and everything else, all the way to the war.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember, surely you remember exactly, how that day of March 11 [1981] went, and the days that followed? How do you remember it? Where were you?

Idriz Mehmeti: As for me, at that time I was in the village. On March 11, I was in the village. My brother, Halil Mehmeti, was a student here in Pristina. And I knew only as much as was reported in the media, on television. Personally, I did not know that it had been organized or that another demonstration would happen immediately on the 26th of March. But I hoped…the sparks had already been seen. Still, I knew they were lying on television; it was not at all as they were saying. When the 26th happened, they beat the students here in Pristina so badly that when Halil, my brother, came home his back was completely bruised because they had abused him, they had destroyed him with beatings. That was when things became much bigger.

And when the 26th happened, I was still in the village because I was neither in school nor at work. On the 1st and 2nd of April, I was in Drenas, on Thursday, market day. That day I took an active part in the demonstration, but not in organizing it, because I knew very well that I was being followed, that they were watching me, and I had already gained some experience. Since I was organized, I preferred not to expose myself, not to be seen, and that is what happened. But on that day, when the demonstration took place in Drenas, my brother, who had returned from Pristina, pointed out to me with my own eyes Ajet Istogu, the man who earlier had been the architect of my imprisonment, together with the chief of the UDBA in Prishtina.

My brother said to me, "That professor there," I was wearing a mask, "that professor gave us a speech that day on the 26th." I asked, "Which one?" He said, "The one next to Ajet." "Get out!" I knew him, I knew that idiot, that criminal. I said, "He's not a professor, he's UDBA." I had my face wrapped up to here {points to his eyes} so Ajet would not recognize me. But that man from Pristina, during our

interrogations, had been the chief investigator. I don't want to mention his name. But even if I did, it wouldn't matter, since he felt no shame being such a terrible man, Hasan Mehmeti. They say he was from Sallçit of Vushtrri. I do not know exactly. I saw him with my own eyes in Drenas and I avoided being seen by him.

So, as for the demonstrations of 1981, my part in them was only as a participant, nothing more. But I am convinced that they gave direction to the broader masses to take the road, to follow the path that we eventually followed. Otherwise, until then, most Albanians had believed that we were Yugoslavs. I know fellow students of mine, because before 1981 I was still a student in Mitrovica, trying to study technology, though it didn't work out. One of my female colleagues was grabbed by a Serbian singer, some Zdravko Čolić, at the stadium, embracing him. My group mates told me about it, I wasn't there myself to hear him, but they told me by name. The police had to intervene to pull her away while she was trying to hug Čolić, an Albanian student.

Albanians had believed we were Yugoslavs, this is not a lie. It is painful and bad, but it is reality. That is how it was. 1981 opened many eyes, gave direction, and paved the road for where Albanians had to go. The groups began to grow, they multiplied. They were no longer just three-man cells, but became thirty and forty. Until the largest group, when Fehmi Lladrovci was arrested, after we had finished military service. I don't know if I mentioned it: Fehmi and I had been childhood friends, friends from technical school, and we served together in the army in Zagreb. After coming out of prison, we reconnected there to do something together. And we started with groups of three, all the way until the day he was arrested.

Anita Susuri: And when you were in the army after prison, did you have any problems?

Idriz Mehmeti: A lot. It was just like the interrogations, except for the beatings, except for physical violence, I did not have that. But everything else: torture without sleep, without food, threats — "Who are you trying to blow the barracks up with? When are you planning to poison the food?" and so on. There were plenty of those traps. I say it with regret, but I knew how to protect myself from the experience I had already gained, because even in the army, like many others, I could have ended up in prison. But I knew, I knew quite well. I learned. I got some schooling in that sense too, yes.

Anita Susuri: Until what year were you in the organization?

Idriz Mehmeti: Until 1990.

Anita Susuri: Did the organization function until then, or…?

Idriz Mehmeti: After the imprisonment of those leaders in 1981, after they were arrested, some time passed before things recovered, because the cream had been cut down. But I should return once more to the main action for which I was accused. It was on December 24, 1974, when a major action took place. There had been many small actions, but the big one happened on December 24, 1974. Leaflets

were distributed and slogans were written in the student dormitories. Those leaflets and those slogans were written by five people. We were thirty-three people sentenced for that, thirty-three. Besides the other things I mentioned, the slogans I myself wrote in the high school dormitory, those were very small, almost nothing, because I did them alone and I was not organized.

The slogans in that action were written by Kadri Zeka,[16] may he rest in peace, Hydajet Hyseni, Hilmi Ramadani, Gani Syla, and one more — Kadri, Hydajet, Gani Syla, Hilmi Ramadani, and another one, I'm forgetting now. It's important, and I regret I can't recall it now. We'll continue. So, the biggest action was this one in December 1974, of the underground movement. In all the dormitory rooms at that time, each one had a leaflet slipped under the door, and slogans on the walls.

Slogans on the walls, and people woke up, people saw that something had to be done. Because before that, people just went on: be careful, work, entertain yourself, Serbian music everywhere you went, and they did not even care what was being sung. The majority, I say this with regret, but it was the reality. That is how it was.

Then came 1981. As I told you, 1981 paved the road for the broad masses, and little by little it led all the way to the outbreak of the liberation war, which was the roof, the culmination of the activity. I think of this whole process as something that began in groups of three and ended with brigades, and finally with divisions.

Anita Susuri: I'd like to ask you a little about something I saw earlier in the interview you sent us, about the preparation of military groups in Albania in 1991.

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes.

Anita Susuri: That is, about those initial phases of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Idriz Mehmeti: In 1990, this underground activity of the *Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës* had, more or less, faded. After 1981, once the group of Hydajet Hyseni and the others were arrested, as OMLK the activity had weakened, especially in Kosovo. Abroad it continued. But I do not know exactly in what year it was declared as the *Lëvizja Popullore e Kosovës*.[17] Yet with the OMLK platform they continued to work until 1990. In the 1990s, when there was a major change in the broader masses and the positioning toward liberation from Serbia, there were different currents.

It was no longer called the Marxist-Leninist Organization, because the primacy had been taken over by the LPK. Earlier it had been LPRK, and later they removed even that "R." They were now thinking of all Albanian lands, not just the Republic of Kosovo, but all Albanian territories that had been within

[16] Kadri Zeka (1953–1982) was a Kosovo Albanian journalist and political activist, and a leading member of the OMLK who organized and published underground material from exile in Switzerland. He was assassinated in West Germany on 17 January 1982 alongside the brothers Jusuf and Bardhosh Gërvalla.

[17] People's Movement for Kosovo, originally founded as a political movement by Albanian nationalists in 1982. The LPK's ideology was left-wing nationalism.

Yugoslavia. They called it the People's Movement of Kosovo. I was not directly organized in the Movement, but I cooperated constantly with the people of the Movement, with these same people, nonstop.

The military training happened in 1991. Personally, I was not in training, but Adem Jashari was there with his group, and Zahir Pajaziti[18] was there with his group. I did not know Zahir personally, so I do not know who was with him, but I knew Adem very well. First of all, he was a family friend. Adem's sister and my aunt's daughter were sisters-in-law… they used to bake *flia*[19] under the same *saç*.[20] Adem's sister, Zyla Jashari, has since passed away. So yes, I knew Adem.

I knew well by the end of the 1980s that he was organized. As Adem, I had known him even earlier, and when I saw him sometimes in Skenderaj, he looked to me like a bear walking. He had a characteristic walk, a characteristic expression, he was very interesting. So I knew him, and I knew when he left and when he returned. Personally, I was not there, since at that time we still organized in threes, but I was constantly active with them. Regardless of the fact that I was with the Democratic League of Kosovo, I never hide that, and I am not ashamed of my work.

I was with LDK until a certain point. I think until 1992, when there were elections for the assembly and a referendum. Up to that point, LDK made sense, and it is unfair for others to try to deny it, because LDK did its work. For three or four good years it was active, and at that time the Serbs were killing even because of the LDK. But when LDK stopped, when for me it had exhausted itself, this may not be how it was for others, but for me it was exhausted when there was nothing left except coming to Prishtina every Friday and returning home, then these boys began. And Adem, he had returned in December 1991.

I had been in his house, and I knew that he had been in training. I told him, "But get me a rifle too." I already had one of my father's rifles. "Adem Jashari, can you get me one too?" He said to me, "Go to such-and-such place and buy it," and he told me the place. I went and bought it, three thousand German marks. I went with Adem's brother-in-law, his name was Man Veliu. Back then they called him Veli, now he is Man Veliu. I went together with him on Adem's instruction, but I bought it with my own money. Nowadays I hear many saying, "Adem left it to me," or "Adem gave it to me." Not to me, he didn't give it to me. But with these two hands, I drove him.

Part Four

[18] Zahir Pajaziti (1962–1997) was an Albanian commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). He was the first Commander of the KLA, known as "First Gun of Freedom." He was killed on 31 January 1997 in a gunfight with Serbian forces.

[19] A traditional dish in Albanian cuisine consisting of crepe-like layers cooked with cinders under a lid.

[20] *Saç* is a traditional Albanian cooking method involving a dome-shaped lid placed over food, typically bread or meat, with hot coals spread on top. This creates an oven-like environment that cooks the food evenly. It is commonly used in rural areas for baking bread and preparing traditional dishes.

Idriz Mehmeti: So, as I said, in 1990 many things changed. The Democratic League of Kosovo had meaning as long as it organized things, up to the referendum on the status of Kosovo and the elections, the first elections they held. After that, there was no longer any real activity, and the groups organized by the *Lëvizja Populllore e Kosovës*, not agreeing with that kind of monotony, began to become more alive, more active. Then actions began. Actions happened that we all know about. For example, in Drenas there were two cases of police killings. Two cases happened, and we know very well how they happened. They were organized actions.

I was not personally in any of those actions, but more or less I was with those people I kept company with, even though I was with the LDK, and they knew it. Adem knew very well too, but he never once said to me, "Why are you with LDK?" I drove him with these two hands of mine. He sent word to me, "Come do me a favor, help me with something." I had a car, so I went. "What is it?" He said, "I need to speak with Rifat Jashari." Rifë, the elder brother Rifë.

Anita Susuri: Rifat Jashari.

Idriz Mehmeti: He was in Germany. He said, "I need to speak with Rifë to clear something up." I asked, "Okay, but where?" "On the telephone." Back then there were no mobile phones, where could you find a telephone? This was in 1992, a few months after the first attack on the Jashari family. It might have been February or March, around there. There was snow, I know exactly, snow and freezing cold.

I thought of my uncle who lived at the entrance of Drenas, in what we call Çikatovë e Re, but I was not sure whether he would receive us or whether I would put him, and myself, in a bad position. On the other side, I had a cousin, my uncle had died in 1982, and his son was about twelve or thirteen years old then. I thought he would not understand much, and his mother even less.

I said, "Adem, I can find you a telephone, but there's a bit of a problem." He asked, "What?" I explained: my cousin lives in an apartment block in Drenas, but there was a UDB man living there too. One floor below my uncle's apartment lived a UDB officer, an Albanian, a bad one, a disgrace, Ahmet Dobruna. Since he had no shame working with the Serbs, I have no shame naming him. I told Adem all this. He said, "Then we're safer." I asked, "Why?" He said, "If something happens, we pin it on him and he'll get us out of the circle." I swear that's how it was, and there are still people alive who were with us and know it.

Jakup Nura, who is one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and Adem Nura, who is my aunt's son, so, Adem Jashari, Jakup Nura, and Adem Nura all had Kalashnikovs, bombs, pistols. I had only one pistol. I was the driver. We set off from Prekaz toward Drenas to communicate with Rifë.

At the entrance of Drenas from the side of Skenderaj there was a crossroads, and at that time there was always an armored vehicle stationed there. The agreement was: if they stopped us, I had to give a sign that we were stopping. Then, when they came to check our documents, those who had their hands free were to open fire, and I would drive off so we could escape. That was the agreement.

We set out from Prekaz, and by luck the armored vehicle was there, but it was dark, and they did not stop us. We passed safely, both us and them. We went to that apartment, and he spoke on the phone with Rifat Jashari, with Hafiz Gagica in Germany, and with Imer Berisha in Switzerland. These people had been part of organizing the military training that had taken place earlier in Albania. Adem's conversations with them were mostly about one thing: "Who exposed us? Who betrayed us?" He wanted to know, he was determined to know who had deconspired them, Adem Jashari. Thank God he never found out, because he would never have spared that person's life, I guarantee it. He never learned who had exposed them. Anyway, I won't go further into that, because I wasn't part of it myself, even though I kept company with them, walked with them, worked with them as I said, and drove them with my own hands.

From these activities, despite the fact that I was in the Democratic League of Kosovo, in the eyes of the UDB I was deeply involved,much more than LDK, far more than LDK. Many arrests happened, because some actions had taken place, as I mentioned, actions I had not been part of. Then they came to arrest me, Jakup Nura, as I mentioned, one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and Adem Nura, on the same day, November 3, 1993. By luck, I crossed paths with them in a village called Prellovc, like this, we crossed each other {he explains the crossroads with his hands}, they were going from Prellovc toward my house to arrest me, and I was heading toward Skenderaj. They didn't even know it was me. I sensed they were going somewhere, but I did not realize they were going straight to my house.

It wasn't long before I found out. Someone came to tell me there in Skenderaj that besides Prellovc they had gone to two families and had gone to Krasmirofc too, where they had caused havoc until around three in the morning. They had wrecked our houses, all three of them. As I said, I had three rifles: my father's, the one I bought myself, and my brother's. We had three, but I had hidden them well and they did not find them. But my brother, seeing them moving around the holes where they were hidden, watched with his foot, and they noticed and told my father, "These should be taken." I forgot to say, at the very beginning when they arrived, they hit the doors with the armored vehicle, smashing them hard. Even if the doors had been made of steel, they would have opened. And they did.

They entered and asked my father in Serbian, "Where are your sons?" He said, "I don't know. I have six. Two are here, the others I don't know." "Where is Idriz?" "He went to Skenderaj," though back then we called it Srbica because in front of the Serbs you couldn't say Skenderaj. "Do you have people here being pursued by the state?" They were referring to Adem Jashari. He said, "No." "Are you sure?" He said, "A hundred percent." "Do you have weapons in the house?" He said, "I have six sons, maybe each one has one. I don't have mine. In the room where I sleep there is none. In the other rooms…" He knew very well, he was no fool, that they had come to search and that they would leave no corner untouched. Whether they found them or not, he said, "The six of them may each have one, but in my room, where I sleep, there is none."

My father was calm, very calm, very stable. They went inside, searched, made a disaster of the place, but found nothing except those papers I mentioned earlier. The newspapers my brother had brought

me from Switzerland — mostly *Zëri i Kosovës*, but also others, *Rruga e Lirisë*, *Pararoja*, some communiqués, some photographs of Jusuf Gërvalla and Enver Hoxha — those they found. But I was no longer hiding those; now I was hiding something else. What I had hidden, they did not find. Still, they took my two brothers: the younger one, Bekim Mehmeti, and the third one, Skender Mehmeti. They beat them badly for two days and then released them with the promise that they would set a trap for me. When they came back, they kept watch over me; they stood guard while I slept. That's how that whole story went. Now, where did we leave off? What else is of interest here?

Anita Susuri: Yes, I wanted to ask…you said you left in 1994?

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, yes. For about two months, November and December. I stayed here and there, underground, in deep hiding. But it was not easy, I say it honestly. When I went somewhere, it happened to me, I won't name names, people I knew, they would look at me badly. I would think they were saying, "He had nowhere else to go, he still has his mother and he came to us, not because he wanted to." I began to feel bad, you know, and eventually my mother, my father, and my wife said, "It would be better if you went somewhere else." "Really?" "Yes." "Alright," I said, "then I'll go somewhere."

I left planning to go only for a short while, and believe me, I really did leave with that intention. I told Adem Jashari at the time, "I'm going to Switzerland," because my brother was there. He told me, "For cigarettes, bread, and sleep, stay here with me as long as you want. But to earn money," he said, "I'm not earning anything either. I'm staying here with a rifle, weigh your options." I said, "No, I have to go. I'll rest a few days and come back, I won't stay long." He said, "By God, you won't return." I left, honestly, only for a short time, but I went, and I stayed.

But when I went there, I did not remain passive, to tell the truth. I tried my utmost — through clubs, through associations, through the Democratic League of Kosovo, and through the People's Movement of Kosovo. Whoever showed even a little interest in stepping forward, in doing some service for Kosovo, I found common ground with them and worked with them. I did not make a name for myself, but I was a worker in the effort to solve our problem, with all of them, with Gani Syla, with Hasan Mala, with those comrades who were active abroad. By God, I even drove Hashim Thaçi a hundred times with my own hands, and not only there, but also here in Kosovo before the war, and in other places too.

I used to say, "When the war breaks out, I'll be there." I would speak like that at gatherings. Then the war happened, and I felt bad there, I did not feel right. I was compelled to take the final step, and in June 1998 I came back and joined the war. First, I went to Albania, but it would not be right not to mention one detail. Before I came to join the war, one man called me on the phone and said, "It's Baca [the elder]," because I had stayed at the mourning gathering for the Jashari family before leaving for Germany, I stayed there ten days because I knew them. After the mourning, he called me and said, "It's Bac. I want to meet you." I said, "I don't know who 'Bac' is." It was Ahmet Krasniqi. Maybe you have heard of him, he was Minister of Defense in the government of Bujar Bukoshi.

He said, “Rifat Jashari and Xhafer Shatri have spoken to me about you. I want to have coffee with you.” He gave me his number, gave me the address, and I went and met him. He said, “Give me a connection to the Kosovo Liberation Army,” he asked me for a link to the UÇK. “I intend to become part of it,” Ahmet Krasniqi told me. I started thinking. He said, “I want a connection with someone I can meet either in Switzerland or in Tirana, but someone who actually goes to the front lines.” I remembered and said, “Well, yes, I can give you a contact, but I have to ask him first, because I don’t know if he’s interested.” “Who is it?” he asked. I said, “I need to speak with him first.”

Then Hashim Thaçi came and I met him. I told him everything. I had always kept relations with Hashim. I said, “The minister of Bujar Bukoshi is asking for you, so that you can cooperate. I don’t know how that will work, but you know. He wants cooperation with you.” And Hashim found understanding, later President Hashim Thaçi. He said, “Yes, I am ready to cooperate with anyone who is ready to fight for the liberation of Kosovo.” I brought them together. I organized their first meeting. I know they started cooperating, and I know they started well. How it ended, who drove wedges between them and ruined that cooperation, that is for others to say. I have not even a gram of part in that, and it is regrettable.

That man was needed by Kosovo. He was a professional, and he was ready. I heard with my own ears when Hashim Thaçi told him, “Be careful, they will kill you. In these positions, they will kill you.” He replied, “So what? They kill one Albanian. I will line up to fight the Serb.” I heard that with my own ears, no interpreter needed. And they killed him. I do not know who killed him. May God punish whoever killed that man, because Kosovo needed him. Kosovo had a need for him. That is what I know. As for what others know, I have read many things where people insult him, curse him, say, “He had a Serbian wife.” I do not know what kind of wife he had, I never saw her. But I do know that he was committed to serving the war effort. That much I know.

After that case, since I had completed my duty with them and done what they had asked of me, I set out and came to enlist myself. In June 1998, I came from Tirana. In fact, I first went to Tropojë. It is a very interesting story, I met my brother there. He had come armed, and he had come to collect a heavier machine gun. We met in Tropojë, and he was surprised when he saw me. “You?” he said. I replied, “Yes, me. But what about you?” In fact, I knew he was coming, but he did not know that I had come out to wait for him. One of those who organized the collection of military equipment had called me. Gani Koci told me, “Besi is in Tropojë.” I asked, “Have they left?” He said, “Yes, they’ve gone.” I was already on the plane. I went and found him in Tropojë, but I did not return with them, I did not travel with them.

They traveled on a route that took 38 hours one way. It was a terrible road, exhausting. I traveled only seven hours on foot, because I took another route, the same route Hashim Thaçi and his comrades had used. I entered by a road where I only had to walk seven hours. They escorted me; there were 23 of us traveling together. The leader of that group was Abedin Rexha, surely you’ve heard of him. And we were received at the first base of the Kosovo Liberation Army in the village of Gërçinë, by a family

called Gutaj family. I take this opportunity to thank them from my heart, because they welcomed us well.

We arrived covered in mud, walking through the night without even seeing where we stepped. They brought all 23 of us inside, we washed, dried ourselves, slept, and ate hot fried dough. From there, my feet did not touch the ground again until I arrived in Likovc. I joined the war there. In December 1998, when there was a kind of false ceasefire, a sort of agreement between Adem Demaçi, Richard Holbrooke, and Slobodan Milošević, I went back, thinking, "Let me go see my children for a while." I had left them in Switzerland. Again, Hashim Thaçi told me, "Spring will be hot. If you want to see your children, go now, this is the best moment." So I went and saw them.

I stayed there until the end of March. I was at a protest held in Rambouillet, when the Rambouillet delegation was there. I was also in Paris during the second round of talks. At one point they needed someone to come and make contact with the zone commanders and others, so I stayed there two days during that period. I stayed with Hashim Thaçi and the others. Only Ibrahim Rugova did not feel comfortable staying with me and my comrades. There were several of us there. He did not want to see us, I don't know why, I had done nothing to him. I had been with the Democratic League of Kosovo as long as it was moving. But when it stopped, I told them, "I'm continuing, because I never made a name for myself." I didn't have the strength to carry one hundred kilos, but when I could carry two kilos on my back, I preferred to carry them where they were needed.

There were bad people among them too…In the LDK there were good men, but also black-faced ones, people who would go around spreading bad words, and they held it against me and my comrades. With Gani Syla, Jashar Ali, and Mustafë Ademi, we were in Paris at that time. He despised us, ignored us, but honestly I was not uncomfortable because of him. Not at all. He was in bad shape, confused. Anyway…

Anita Susuri: And when you came back in March, did you take part in any brigade, were you organized?

Idriz Mehmeti: I came in June 1998…do you mean in March 1999?

Anita Susuri: Yes, when you returned again.

Idriz Mehmeti: When I returned then…When I first came, I was in Brigade 114 under commander Fehmi Lladrovci, and I took part in the battles fought in 1998. I was involved twice in entering Likovc, and I fought in those battles, as well as in the September offensive, which is very well known. I don't think I need to go into detail about the September offensive now, because it would take time and many others have already covered it. It is well known how that offensive unfolded. So in 1998 I was inside Kosovo during the war until December 1998.

From the end of March, beginning of April, I came to Albania to return again to Drenica, because that is where my place was and where I knew best how to do my duty. But when I arrived in Tirana, by order of the then Minister of Defense, Azem Syla, I was ordered to go to northern Albania. There I served as assistant to Commander Xheladin Gashi. They did not let me go back into Kosovo, though I was desperate to return because my family was there, my brothers were there. It wasn't only because of them, but because there was nowhere else I could do my work better than there. Still, under their orders I went and served as Xheladin Gashi's assistant over three military points: Vlanë, Cahan, and Elshan.

In Elshan we had around 2,100 soldiers. There they conducted training and preparations, with officers from Albania, for whom I have great respect, they helped us a lot, but also with Kosovars who had previously served in the Yugoslav army. Many of them came and were stationed there. I want to single out one of them whom I saw working with dedication, because among them too there were many tricksters, many careerists, and deserters…even deserters who had come in 1998 like I had, only to run away again. There were such cases too.

But at the border, where the preparations were being made to send groups inside, I want to mention by name Bilall Syla in particular, a man of dedication, who worked to the maximum and in whom I never saw a crooked line, not a single sign of ambition for position. He returned to Germany. He is still my friend to this day and works there. And so it went. The entire time of the bombing I spent at the border. I was desperate to go inside, but they would not let me. When the war ended, when the war ended, I returned. I went to Switzerland because my papers had been preserved, they had not been invalidated. I thought about coming back to Kosovo, like many others…

Anita Susuri: When the war ended, did you come back into Kosovo in June 1999, when it ended?

Idriz Mehmeti: I returned to get my children and planned to come back with the whole family. In fact, I came to Kosovo, but I left the children there for the time being. Yes, I came here to make a nest, to prepare a place to return. The houses in the village had been flattened to the ground, there was nothing left, zero. In Skenderaj, the mayor, the first mayor of Skenderaj, told me, "My salary is 400 marks, for 350 I can make you a place in the administration. If you want to return, return." And the Minister of Public Services, Jakup Krasniqi, also offered me a possibility in the administration with a salary of 350 marks.

I thought to myself, "Can I manage on 350 marks?" I had taken four children from here to there, turned their language around, watched them grow, watched them integrate. Could they return again and turn their language around once more? That thought stayed with me. But with that little money, and with no other solution. In the village there was nothing, no roads, zero prospects. If I went out somewhere and rented a place, I thought I would turn my four children into street kids. It never seemed right to bring them back. My papers had been preserved, so I returned there myself. To this day I don't know what I did. I know it is painful, but I remained outside. I did not return, and now I have retired. Last year, on July 1st, I became officially a pensioner.

And since I didn't return, how could Dardan Mehmeti return? He doesn't return at all. I hope conditions have been created so they can travel more often and come, God willing. These planes now…in two hours from Switzerland you arrive in Slatina Airport. That is the only hope I have. Otherwise, I thought I was doing something for my country. But often I wonder if perhaps I did something wrong for my family. That thought comes to me, I don't know. I do not have a clear answer whether this was the right thing or not. There, in fact, my children integrated well. I have two daughters and two sons. All four played football. The youngest still plays, he plays for FC Prishtina Bern there in Bern. It's not at the highest Swiss level, but he plays for FC Prishtina because the Albanians of Bern love Prishtina.

Anita Susuri: What generation are your children?

Idriz Mehmeti: Dardan is 30 now, and I have two daughters. Both of them played football for the Switzerland women's national football team and played well. One of them…another girl tried to compete with my daughter, but she didn't even come close to her heel, the others were nowhere near. Jehona Mehmeti is the younger one who played football and excelled. She played for Switzerland's national team in Serbia. She played football there, and when she went, she wanted to wear an Albania women's national football team jersey underneath the Swiss one, and when the match ended she wanted to take off the Swiss jersey and walk out in Albania's colors. She told me, "I'm going to do it." I said, "Don't." She said, "Yes." I said, "No." Jehona said, "Yes." I said, "No."

Do you know how I convinced her not to do it? I told her, "You'll never play football in Switzerland again, not even for the small teams, forget the national team." That was the only way I stopped her. And I stopped her simply because I didn't want her to make trouble. Not because they could have done something terrible, but still. I think I did right by convincing her not to do it. I told her, and I had forgotten this, "Do you want to make me happy?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Then score goals." And when the match ended, before she even went to wash or to the dressing room, she called me on the phone and said, "*Vogëlush [*Little one], because "Little one" was what they called me in the underground. She said, "Little one, I avenged you." "What?" I asked. She said, "I scored two goals against the Serbs and took three points from them" (laughs). Like that. It still stirs emotions in me…

Anita Susuri: So in the underground you also had a nickname, "*Vogëlush*" …

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes.

Anita Susuri: To avoid being exposed…

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes. Not everyone had one, because it depended on which cell you were in. As I said, I did not work only with one cell. I worked with many different trios. But one trio had no connection to another, so even if I knew something or did something with one, the others did not know. Back then it was propaganda; but propaganda's paint wore off and war came. A person has to follow the times, the means of the time, those are what fulfill the duty. Earlier, even if we had brought out cannons, we

would not have been able to use them. But when the time came that we needed cannons, the letters had lost their color, and it was time to carry weapons on our backs.

As for me, even though I already had one rifle, when I came from Albania I brought another one too. With my own means. I forget exactly how many bullets I brought. I know I used half of them myself during 1998, and the other half I left behind. Because when I returned, as I mentioned, I left them with those boys, because I had left them organized: my brothers, my cousins, and others beyond them. During 1998 I did not have a fixed station. I carried out the duties I was assigned. For example, in my house there was a military hospital for six weeks, but I had nothing to do with it directly. Except for providing food, I did no other work with them, because it was not my duty.

I also had the printing press of the Kosovo Liberation Army, though it never functioned, because some materials that were needed were never brought, and then offensives happened. But it was preserved. The Serbs never took it. They never managed to enter that building, because it was in the mountains, in Qyqavica, the highest house there. They fired at it from afar, shelled it, destroyed it. But they never got inside. It survived. That's how it was. I don't know what else to say.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much. If you have anything else to add, we can finish here.

Idriz Mehmeti: Yes, we can finish, because if I start detailing things now, honestly it would take two weeks. But I think…

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much.

Idriz Mehmeti: And I thank you as well, very much. Thank you for being willing to do this kind of work, because honestly much of it has remained in the shadows. Very much has remained in the shadows. Success to you!