

STORIES ABOUT THE TRAUMA OF WARTIME SEXUAL VIOLENCE



*Beyond pain
towards courage*



Prishtina 2021

BEYOND PAIN TOWARDS COURAGE

STORIES ABOUT THE TRAUMA OF WARTIME SEXUAL VIOLENCE

forumZFD – (Forum Civil Peace Service / Forum Ziviler Friedendienst e.V)

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(Note: For safety and protection purposes, names of narrators and other characters, locations and details potentially leading to disclosure of identities, have been removed or anonymized and codified)

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“Helping others overcoming difficulties is where civilization starts”

Margaret Mead

Breaking the chain of pain

From suppressed pain towards social solidarity, through the survivors’ stories

The previous memory book, published by forumZFD, Integra and Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT), entitled “I want to be heard”, revealed for the first time the stories of women and girls, survivors of sexual violence during the war in Kosovo, that have been rehabilitated in our centre for years.

It is well known that rape as a means of war is used to instil terror and humiliate a people, by creating chasms inside families throughout the country, that inevitably manifest in the communities and in the society. Harm, disrupt and destroy, is the final goal of this organised crime, which imposes silence, despise and grief, that go beyond mere survival of rape. This is also pointed out in this book, by being re-emphasised in each of the stories narrated by the protagonists, because: consequences are never limited only to the person directly experiencing the violence, but also affect their families, the wider community, and future generations.

Unfortunately, our society has unknowingly implemented the strategy of the wrongdoers in Kosovo war, by silencing this crime and leaving the crime unpunished. The silencing has been stronger with male survivors; as for them, the sense of hurting their pride and their core responsibility of protecting the honour of the family, caused them silence due to possible de-balancing of the statutory norms within the society. Thus, the stories of men and boys unfolded in this book, in one way or another complement the thrilling histories of the survivors from the book “I want to be heard”.

This time, KRCT and forumZFD are bringing the book “Beyond pain, toward courage!”, which is an exclusive collection of the stories of men and boys that have not been spared from the brutality of sexual violence during the war in Kosovo, as well as the stories of survivors’ family members, with the aim of informing the general public on these painful truths and with the purpose of dealing with the past.

This book further deepens our understanding of the gender dynamics of the Kosovo war, which also influenced men and young boys, bringing into surface yet another painful truth, which has been commonly bypassed by the social discourse, further deepening the pain and enforcing further silencing of the survivors of this crime.

Raped men and boys live with an extraordinary stigma in our society, just like the women and girls that have experienced this war crime. They live with the heavy weights of shame for not being able to protect themselves from the humiliating act of rape, they feel disgraced and guilty, without being able to access sources of support. Psychologically, that even shakes the foundations of their male identity, and pushes them to keep this pain as a shameful secret. But, oppressing the pain does not undo it; on the contrary – it detaches it from the possibility for treatment and cure.

Through the courage of the survivors, continuous and professional work of KRCT’s psycho-social staff and the trust built over the years, protagonists of this book managed to overcome the feeling of guilt and shame that has gripped them. They decided to speak out, by overpowering the pain and by finding strength to share with the general public their experiences of anguish, suppressed for year.

It took KRCT extensive and enormous efforts to impact the situation, both in personal level - with the direct emotional support with the survivors and their family members, as well as in the social level - through awareness-raising campaigns against stigmas and continuous advocacy with institutions. The work done over several decades already, has enabled a change of paradigm, where many of the survivors today feel encouraged to speak out about their traumatic experience of rape. This book is also part of the same endeavours of KRCT for a meaningful rehabilitation of the survivors of the sexual violence during the war.

Conversely, the secondary traumas experienced by the family members of the survivors of the sexual violence during the war are being discussed even less than those of the survivors. The agony following the position of the witness of macabre crimes - helpless in front of the most inhumane attacks of a state machinery, where they experienced the pain and the powerlessness to protect their child, sister, mother or wife, as well as other family members; leaves inerasable traces in the mind of each family member or witness of this most monstrous crime of human history.

The consequences of the trauma caused by the sexual violence during the war are multi-dimensions and unfortunately do not spare neither the generation following them. They feed one-another in a vicious circle, which, if not treated with an inclusive approach, will be passed over to next generations like a chain of pain. Hence, unquestionably we are dealing with traumatised families.

On the other hand, sharing their stories with the others has a powerful and irreplaceable impact in creating a perception of acceptance, in legitimising their experience and in encouraging them for accessing treatment and overcoming trauma.

As long as a patriarchal society determines rigidly the roles and responsibilities of men and women, by relating them to expectations within its norms, when a terrible event such as rape shakes these expectations of patriarchy, a deep crack happens in the self-conceptualisation of the survivor. Both women and men feel tainted, devalued and defeated, as human and social beings.

Only by speaking out and witnessing the truth of the war, with the courage of the protagonists of this book, we challenge a whole system of toxic patriarchal values.

Social solidarity begins with empathic listening and encouragement of the survivors to speak out and share their pain, so they don't feel alone, helpless and ashamed. Furthermore, the recovery of the survivors and their families is possible only through changing the social paradigm and mobilising of the community to not prejudice them and to accept them. This solidarity and social change is claimed from the new generation, as they say it themselves in the pages of this book:

So, I would primarily ask the youth not to forget the war; to remember the hardships of the elders. May the youth come to their senses.

My duty is to tell, and inshallah God will help everyone, and will not forget (their deeds).

(Rashid, protagonist in the book)

This message must echo in the conscience of our society as a whole, not only young generation. For each one of us, these stories are a reminder to our awareness, and this book of memories is a direct undertaking in fulfilling this essential message of the survivors.

We do hope that these stories, so personal and painful, of both the survivors and their family members, will echo with the reader. We hope that they will inspire the sense of compassion, awareness and readiness for support. This way, this book, together with the previous one of the same focus, will be an impetus for fighting the stigma against the survivors of the sexual violence during the war in Kosovo.

Therefore, we should never forget the call of the survivors: "My wound has a voice, and this voice is the call for persecuting the crime, because only then we can sense the freedom".

Dr. Feride Rushiti

Executive Director, KRCT

Kosovo, I love You

As war spreads, so too does coldness, cruelty and hatred. Human nature is built upon the unbelievable ability to love yet simultaneously destroy. Historically, recurrent themes such as the violence in Kosovo tend to manifest when conflict arises between groups. Civilians are exploited and affected by cruelty, violence and the unpredictability of the oppressive invaders.

Trauma is the psychological response one has to the overwhelming experiences. War always brings complex trauma and long-term consequences that we define as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. No one can completely escape war and conflict unscathed. The lasting damage can be witnessed by the survivors' physical, mental and emotional scars.

Publicly speaking about sexual violence is a challenge in itself. As humans, we have a tendency to deny things that bring us discomfort. Sexual violence not only creates discomfort for survivors, but to all people in general. That's why it is extremely important to listen to every single story of the survivors of the sexual violence during the war activity. To make a space for the heroes of the most terrible cruelty.

Many survivors of war and conflict struggle with not only the experiences they endured, but also with finding the ability to communicate to the outside world these atrocities and the devastation that follows, in a manner towards which audiences more receptive. To find effective narrative language and begin sharing about personal trauma takes time and patience, understanding, support and love.

There is no distinct timeframe, it depends on the person and their access to support and resources. The healing process is always person-centric, but a collective need within the healing process is the opportunity for survivors to share their narratives. Their experiences need to be told to be able to start healing the various wounds at the hands of war.

To talk about trauma is to discuss personal experiences, individual pain and damage, inhuman levels of cruelty, abuse and torture and the consequences of these violent acts.

Data is important, but it can also dehumanize the people who it is intended to speak for. Instead of seeing a person, we see collections of numbers and percentages. Data does not accurately portray the pain war-raped survivors continue to live with. Data can be superficial.

Kosovo is working hard to break the social stigma of the sexual violence during the war. This unbelievable work is absolutely necessary to rebuild people's perception of the meanings of the sexual violence. The biggest obstacle regarding the experiences of rape survivors is how to get audiences to give up their comfort and not misconstrue or deny the survivors' experiences. Comfort zones are not only a form of privilege, they can be essential for survival in a world filled with brutal realities. Denial comes into play when confronted with the harsh realities faced by others. In order to protect our privi-

lege, we marginalize their reality. With this philosophy, anything perceived as uncomfortable and emotionally challenging is not welcome

The book, "Beyond pain, towards courage" shows the narratives of people who have decided to stand up for themselves, their families and their communities by sharing their experiences with the world. It is an act of courage when war rape survivors are able to revisit their pasts and share with others in hopes to heal. This too is an act of prowess. It takes prowess to be vulnerable to an audience one lacks any emotional connection with and be as transparent as possible regarding their suffering and struggles in full detail.

To be open to the past, one needs to have a strong sense of identity. War-rape survivors must be honest with themselves and with the outside world regarding their trauma, especially trauma related to the sexual violence. They must find within themselves a sense of courage that goes beyond words.

To read the testimonies from Kosovo war-rape survivors is to focus on their power to be resilient even if they struggle with major Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, War Rape Survivors Syndrome and the many other consequences of torture.

Every hero from the book who was subjected to violence, sexual violence and cruelty, survived because they kept alive their identities as loving parents, spouses, family and society members.

Knowing who you are is a protection against erasure and total destruction. Perpetrators can temporarily humiliate victims, exploit and damage their bodies and minds, but their spirit and hearts have been inherited and will survive many successive generations as well.

Each story is about Kosovan vitality, hope and will for life. Each story teaches vital lessons with regards to the human spirit, resolve to fight against tremendous odds and the power of identity. Each story demonstrates how survivors can try to overcome the consequences of war and heal when they find their voices and have access to platforms which allow them to be heard and heal.

Through the power of narratives spoken by war-rape survivors, the truth is what brings perpetrators to justice. A war-rape survivors' ability to stand up and speak out, even with indescribable pain and outside opposition, is the medicine to heal not only the survivor but society as a whole. All stories from the book are an attempt to cease the spread of trauma to successive generations that follow. Kosovo's efforts to heal as a nation are an investment in their next generations not being victims to transgenerational trauma.

Storytelling and oral traditions have culturally stood as one of the most effective ways to teach and share experiences, values, traditions, beliefs and also our trauma. When the real story, the truth, has been shared, change is created. Something that was previously indescribable can now be identified and put into words. Personal narratives give meanings and provide relative experiences shared with the public.

The memory of the past is marked. As they share their narratives, the bodies and brains start to experience relief from their trauma. This change happens inside one's self, their families, their communities and eventually at the national level. Every Kosovo hero who has participated in this book project, has worked relentlessly to shape the future of their country and the world. You are heroes Baca B, Besim, Dardan, Hasije, Luli, Merita, Nita, NN, Pëllumb, Refik, Shpejtim and Skender. This book is dedicated to the many heroes who have waged war against their trauma and have stood up and spoken up. This book is about the healing process and hope for the future generations.

Dr. Wiola Davie

Clinical director of the Residential HANAC program, Rape counselor at the emergency room of the Presbyterian Methodist Hospital and private practice therapist working with and for war rape survivors. Member of International Psychoanalytic Association, Women's Institute Therapy Center NYC. Licensed psychoanalyst

Violence Still Haunts:

Stories of War, Justice, and Healing in Kosovo

This collection presents the testimonies of eleven Kosovar citizens about violence, abuse, and loss they and their loved ones endured during the 1998-99 war in Kosovo. These are the accounts of lived experience of nine men and two women about extreme violence in war, the trauma manifested in various forms in everyday life, and as a consequence, the redefinition of intimate relationships. The narratives blend the personal experiences of wartime violence with those of close family members. The narrators speak about the violence of their partners, and/or parents and sisters, who were subjected to abuse and violence during the war. They recount war – as a personal and collective experience – and situations of extreme violence during the conflict that not only exist as mental constructions, but also how that experience lives on, shaping their lives twenty-one years after the end of the war.

A micro perspective on history of the Kosovo war by ordinary women and men emerges through their narratives, offering insight into unimaginable situations people experienced in war, but also of resilience and empowerment after the war. This storytelling contributes to our understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of war. The narratives also speak to the challenges of transitional justice and social integration in Kosovo as they become part of a collective memory, demonstrating over and over again, that in order to understand war and achieve justice, the voices of survivors must assume centrality in justice and collective memory.

Survivors' stories help to understand, in addition, the gendered nature of violence in war that is expressed differently against women and men. The narrators speak of wartime rape, imprisonment, torture, and forced displacement. Two men speak about rape, the other men about sexual violence against their wives and sister, a daughter about her mother, a woman about her sister, who survived wartime rape. The two narratives are of male victims of wartime sexual violence whose invisibility remains largely unspoken and undocumented in Kosovo war narratives. With these testimonies, the silence surrounding wartime sexual violence is broken as many survivors prefer not to speak out because of the strong stigma associated with war rape. Hence, the accounting provided in these narratives enables understanding of wartime sexual violence as a weapon and strategy of war. It also shows how female and male bodies become the battleground and an instrument of ethnicised masculine and militarised power.

An undeniable picture of gender-based and sexual violence during the war emerges from the stories, showing that wartime sexual violence was not an exception, but a norm. The picture provides important documentation of wartime sexual violence and confronts the stigma and shame attached to it, still strong in Kosovo. The two men who speak about their experiences of war rape break the taboo of sexual violence against men. Sexual violence against men has always been a tool in the oppressor's playbook, however, it has been vastly underreported throughout history, including the wars of 1990s in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo. These narratives broaden our understanding of the relationship between constructions of gender and sexual violence in war and negotiation of power in the post-war period. While sexual violence is the connecting thread running through the stories, it becomes evident that wartime sexual violence resides in the spaces between silence and speaking. The harm done and the silence around sexual violence needs to be respected. But the memory should be honoured along with the struggles of survivors to rebuild their lives. This collection of testimonies serves this very purpose.

The storytelling included in this collection entails interpretations of war experiences. True, narratives are a means of constructing identities and searching for meaning in life. These stories entail subjectivities, memory, and culture. The narratives shared more than words on paper; they are interpretations of the past, meanings that shape the present, but also glimpses of a vision for the future. These stories contribute to an understanding of the conflict and the present-day challenges in Kosovo related to dealing with the past, justice and social inclusion. Survivor narratives are relevant for truth-telling as they stand against impunity. Truth-telling is about giving space to victims to narrate their experiences and enhance opportunities for social reintegration. The memory and narration of victims confronts the myths of war and amnesia. Survivors' stories are valuable documentation to inform victim centred approaches to address the legacy of the conflict and the root causes of violence, as well as strategies for victim re-integration into post-war society.

As truth-telling accounts, these stories are important mechanism for achieving justice to help overcome impunity of war crimes and human rights abuse in war. The narratives speak to the broader question of dealing with the past and the challenges of transitional justice. We learn that truth-seeking goes beyond reparations even though reparations are a significant part of transitional justice. These testimonies show that violence still haunts the survivors and they struggle with economic and health problems, anxiety, as well as with the feelings of shame and guilt. These narratives are about individual and collective violence, justice and healing. They show that healing is multifaceted and a long process with many draw backs and positive shifts. The narratives once again demonstrate that healing is interconnected to justice and truth. The narrators have achieved a measure of emotional release, solidarity with others who endured similar pain, and more importantly have been able to get on with their lives. The support system and solidarity the narrators speak of have improved their social relations and contributed to healing. Yet, it is evident that to address wartime sexual violence and recovery, the clinical approaches of trauma treatment may be important, but additionally there is a need for a holistic approach to healing to ensure genuine empowerment.

Justice is a cornerstone of peace. Impunity maintains injustice and a sense of powerlessness that discourages victims for seeking justice, truth-telling, and social integration. Impunity proves to be counterproductive for peace and reconciliation. The testimonies here are not only renditions on experiences of extreme violence and abuse in war, but describe what happened at an individual level, and as well, in the broader society and how both individuals and society changed as a result of the painful experiences. These narratives are interpretations of the past and standpoints on issues of justice and peace beyond mainstream ideologies of war. They stand against the homogenised discourses of war because they offer personal experiences and interpretations of violence, justice, and healing. It is this storytelling that may help shape a new era in Kosovo society defined and enacted by principles of justice, human rights, and peace.

Dr. Vjollca Krasniqi

Sociologist and associated professor at University of Prishtina

BEYOND PAIN, TOWARDS COURAGE!

few words to the reader from the editor of this volume

Feelings of pain, suffering, anxiety, nightmares, sickness, fear, self-stigma, all remnants of inhumane torture, rape, and deaths witnessed during the war, are narrated by twelve people in this volume. Dear reader, this in your hand is not a book of light reads.

The victims—subjects of these stories—are referred to in the public discourse as “survivors of sexual violence”. The definition clearly conveys the notion of rape, but it doesn’t even closely describe the scope of physical violence suffered, often resulting in chronic illness. The above definition also misses—as the reader will clearly understand—the full range of the psychological damage that the victims suffer to this very day, more than two decades later. One woman who recounts the story of her sister claims: “My sister is a victim of a massacre, not rape. She was butchered and survived.”

Ten of the narrators in this volume share the commonality of being among the most beloved persons of the victim (often their spouses) who for years in a row have been the only ones to know the full truth about the torture suffered by the victim during wartime. Two men narrate themselves the tortures they endured.

A word of wisdom has it that when shared, joy gets doubled, while sorrow gets halved. The self-stigma among the victims fearing that everybody knows and is speaking ill of their secret, turns for their close family member into an anxiety shared. Let us remind ourselves, these are survivors, both women and men, who have frequently fainted from the tortures they endured. In one of the stories, the victim collapses every day for three weeks in a row in the time of war.

Another saying has it that the biggest secrets of our soul can only be shared with a total stranger. Each of us who have experienced this know how true it is. Truer yet is the other claim, which says that being able to share someone else’s suffering which so closely mirrors your own is to bless that suffering in a very special way.

The KRCT professional staff benefits from these wisdoms. In their chain of therapies, says one narrator, they also use group therapy with the victims of rape. Victims meet others like themselves. From the same narrator we learn that this therapy is reinstalling love into his wife’s life. Love for life. For new friends. For happiness. The narrator shares with the reader the joy that his wife has found laughter again, having made new friends from different parts of Kosovo, during group psychotherapies with women who share the same misfortune. Her world has expanded. Self-stigmatization has shrunk even further.

Another narrator tells how she grew up only with her mother and brother after the war at home with her uncle and his family of seven, while her father preferred to live alone in Croatia, where he ran a business, and not return to Kosovo to see his children grow up or take the whole family with himself. The girl's curiosity regarding the reason for her father's coldness grows along with her and is quenched only when she becomes an adult and learns what had happened in the time of war. A story like this provides a good material for a novel without much need to fictionalize.

However, the stories within this volume are also of endurance, survival, and empathy. Some are even stories of heroisms rarely witnessed in interpersonal behavior, to the point of serving as a model to humanity, being among those that require of an individual not only one single magnificent act of heroism, but an entire life. A life of love shared with the victim of torture. Only thus is the emptiness in the victim's soul from the time of war filled considerably, even if never completely.

One such story is that of a former KLA fighter who was seriously wounded in the war and treated somewhere in a zone free of Serbian forces. There he encounters a girl who stands beside her wounded brother, who tells him she no longer intends to live; she wants to commit suicide. The fighter learns the reason behind her intention. Only a few days later, he proposes to her. Everything is played during the last week of the war. Their life in freedom they start as a married couple. When the story ends, the reader is left with the impression that they have just watched a movie.

Through such extraordinary stories we receive oral histories, which, being true, are useful for scholars of our recent history. Of course, the professional will have to verify the time references, especially for those narrators who do not pay particular attention to dates.

In the end, although the narrators and the characters of these stories are named with pseudonyms, given that the stories themselves are real, we invite the reader to further divide the sorrow contained in them, thus acquiring their own share of this collective wound, but also to double the joy of every success achieved by family members and professionals in restoring the victims' love for life.

Gazmend Bërlajolli

Editor and proofreader

The heritage of sexual violence trauma from the last war in Kosovo

"Beyond pain, towards courage! Stories about the trauma of wartime sexual violence" is an attempt to document wartime sexual violence, unveiling the manners in which the trauma transcends the subject of the lived experience, and 'appropriates' families, the community, and the society in general. The book aims to shed light upon the crisis and gross human rights violations during the last war in Kosovo, by placing on the perspective the traumatic experiences and by subjectivizing the victims, the survivors, and their families.

Using oral history as a working principle, the book explores the implications of wartime sexual violence and social justice, through stories from men and women, daughters and sisters, who (co)exist and face the trauma, the shame, and the collective stigma. In this inquiry, the oral history approach enables space for 'unknown stories' – experiences and realities that are foreign for the majority – to enter and affect our field of awareness. Also, in the context of working with survivors of wartime sexual violence and their relatives or family members, oral history allows difficult stories on violence and rape to be heard with sensitive nuances, rather than generalizations or statistics.

The stories in this volume were collected by placing on focus the 'do-no-harm' principle. The team comprising of experts from different disciplines was established and was engaged in facilitating and conducting the trauma-informed interviews. The narratives and their use are regulated and conducted with full consent, signed by the narrators, while the working team signed confidentiality agreements, legally and morally binding. The interviews were organized as biographies told in the first case, eliminating questions, sub-questions, additions, affirmations, and conversations with the researchers. The repetitions in the narrative content were also eliminated, while the data presented in the volume follow a coherent structure, preserving the authenticity and the dialectic nature of the narrative language. For the safety and security of the narrators, the content was anonymized by removing or coding identifiable elements.

The book you hold reflects the manners in which the trauma of wartime sexual violence affects the intra-and-inter-personal relations of the storytellers, their self-perception and self-actualization, and the social cohesion. Through in-depth interviews with ten family members (partners and relatives) of the survivors of wartime sexual violence, and with two men survivors of wartime sexual violence, the book illustrates how direct or indirect exposure to the trauma of wartime sexual violence and the social stigmatization affects the survivors, their partners, family members, and the community in the first place; and how it further affects personal, social, and economic relations, as well as the collective awareness of the Kosovo society in general.

The variety of life experiences presented in this volume is the essence of acknowledging and understanding current political, social, and cultural antagonisms in the country and the region. While reading these stories, the interconnectedness and the joint fates

of narrators' experiences come to the surface. Every story builds a piece of the picture with intertwined experiences that reveal a network of cause and effect, of action and reaction, under the conditions of existential threat.

Storytellers in this volume emphasize not only the implausible challenges of their lives under a violent and oppressive military and police system but also what they want, what they continue to live for, and what they struggle with. Survivors and the family members of survivors describe also their feelings and positive memories, highlighting a part of life that unveils hope and dignity.

This volume is the second in a series, part of exploring trauma related to wartime sexual violence. It follows the publication "I want to be heard: memory book with stories of women survivors of torture during the last war in Kosovo" (2017) which delivers a detailed insight into experiences of wartime sexual violence, stigmatization, exclusion, denial, etc., and of the resilience, support, and comfort.

"Beyond pain, towards courage! Stories about the trauma of wartime sexual violence" is a documentation and advocating resource that examines the long-term inter-generational repercussions of wartime sexual violence, and counters the predominant, one-sided, and glorifying narrative about the war, by diversifying it with the inclusion of sidelined and marginalized voices of war.

Among others, the purpose of this volume is to call for humanly reflection and sensitivity by acknowledging the experiences of the past. The stories that abstract the ways people understand human nature and human actions should be heard, known, and explored. Reflections on violence, rape, torture, fear, and anxiety in war settings are vital for a healthy way of dealing with the difficult past and establishing social cohesion and sustainable peace. The storytellers in this book, while shedding light upon the traumatic experiences of war, also testify about the vital value of storytelling and remembering, as a lesson non-reoccurrence of historical wrongdoings.

Korab Krasniqi

forumZFD Kosovo

Project Manager

Warning: This book contains detailed and graphic descriptions of persecution, fleeing from war, violence, rape, murder, torture, suffering, hunger, etc., caused by war, which may trouble the readers or re-traumatize them who have gone through similar suffering.

The language used and views expressed in this publication are those of family members of survivors of wartime sexual violence and men survivors of sexual violence interviewed for this project, and do not reflect those of the organizers and partners, associates or supporters of this project.

*Beyond pain
towards courage*

A decorative flourish consisting of two symmetrical, flowing scroll-like elements on either side of a central vertical line with a small diamond shape at the top.

STORIES ABOUT THE TRAUMA OF WARTIME SEXUAL VIOLENCE

**“BACA B., HAS SUFFERED SINCE GOD
GAVE HIM LIFE UNTIL THE PRESENT DAY.
BUT I SUFFERED THE MOST BECAUSE OF
WHAT HAPPENED TO MY WIFE.
I SWEAR TO GOD IT’S A GREAT INJUSTICE.”**



The oldest narrator, Baca B., is 83 years old. He remembers the Second World War when his father was killed. He fought alongside Shaban Polluzha. After his father died his mother remarried the brother-in-law’s son, so she would not leave her three sons. Baca B. as the eldest, left his uncle’s house when he was only 13 years old. He built a house on the land inherited from his father and he took his mother and two brothers with him. His mother, who had four children with her second husband, goes back and forth from one house to the other.

After some time, Baca B. got married. His wife gave birth to seven children. When she was pregnant with the eighth child, she suddenly died. During the war, two of Baca B.’s sons, his brother, and two nephews were killed. His second wife is a victim of sexual violence committed by Serbian paramilitary forces.



WITHOUT GIVING WHAT IS PAINFUL, YOU NEVER GET TO HAVE THE DESIRED

I became an orphan when I was five years old. My father died because the Serbs killed him. He fought alongside Shaban Polluzha. When Shaban Polluzha and Mehmet Riza appeared, my father joined them. My father was killed in the village Rakenica. To this day, his bones remained there and nobody took them. After some time, the state took over that place, and now it's agricultural land there.

While my father was alive, he divided his land into equal shares. After he got killed, I was the eldest of the three brothers. I remember my father very well. I was crazy after him, God made me like that. I loved my father a thousand times more than my mother. I always helped him when he went to work. He would go to the field to work the land and I would grab one side of the plow because at that time we were plowing the land with the help of a horse. I would tell him, "Let me hold one of the plows". I would watch him when he was sharpening the plow and I would tell him that he is doing a good job.

We used to make krelana¹, and other similar foods. We had casserole dishes made of clay. Once my father took me with him to send a goat to Skenderaj, but we didn't manage to sell it. The distance from Skenderaj to Llausha is a couple of kilometers, and when we were returning home, he carried me on his back because we were walking uphill. He took off his jacket and he put it around his neck. People were joking with him, "Hetem, is your son riding a donkey?".

My mother suffered a lot, a year after my father was killed, she married my uncle's son. Her father told her, "My daughter, for God's sake, God left your children without a father, don't leave them without a mother as well. Go and stay there in that neighborhood, at least you will wash and clean them, and if needed you will sew their clothes." Sew, because then we didn't have many clothes.

At that time, we were wearing woolen clothes or clothes made of felts from animal fur made by our mothers and grandmothers. They were making vests made of wool. At that time, we had about 20-30 meters of that material and we had to hide it in the well at least twenty times. The well was very deep, maybe eight or nine meters deep. Then we would take the material out with hooks. We hid them because the Serbs would take them away.

When Tito won the war for a very long time, they made us send chicken eggs, cheese, and sheep wool to the municipality. They were saying that it's needed to take care for the people. They took everything from us. We even had to take hay to them because they said their horses and cows need it. We had to pay for having a dog. Also, for having a carriage.

But, alhamdulillah from God, people were a little more compassionate at that time. Those representatives of the village councils, that's how we called them, knew that I was an orphan. So, I didn't pay for the dog, nor for a house or for the carriage. They helped me then and they are helping me now, they always helped me.

We dealt with cowhide for a long time. When we would slay a cow, we would take the skin and then we would cut it. When it would rain, it would soften. When we would put it in the stove or oven to dry, it would corrugate. And then we had to work it again. We would make it look like a thread. We would make peasant shoes with that material. After some time when we saw the first rubber shoes, we were very happy. Everybody had their own peasant shoes, and we wore them in the house. We also made candles. Very few people had candles then and we would make them from cloth, oil, wax, and then it would make light.

I swear to God, once I went for a visit at one place and we were eating at the same place where they kept their cows. Suddenly, a cow stood up to urinate and someone shouted, "The cow stood up!" All the splashes from the cow fell on our tray. At that time, we all ate from one food tray. Not like now, everyone in the family, even the baby, has his own bowl. At those times, ten or twenty of us would eat from one tray and we would drink water from one bottle. In those times people suffered, but I swear to God, there was love. We cared about each other.

At those times, we couldn't do anything without the permission of our eldest. We did not even dare to go visit even our uncle if our grandfather didn't allow us. We had a poor neighbor and our grandfather would always tell us, "Whenever you pass by, hide that cigarette because our poor neighbor will envy. And if you have money, when you pull your bag out, do it secretly. Don't let the poor people see that you have because they will covet." There was a lot of poverty. But we could still find joy and have fun.

Our house was made of some bricks, it was poorly built. We had no wood either. We had a bit of oak so we would keep ourselves warm. The houses were very weak then. Just enough to get protected from the northern wind.

I hope my mother forgave us but she suffered a lot because of us. When I grew up, when I turned 13 years old, I went to my own house. After eight years of staying at my uncle's house I left. While I stayed at my uncle's place, I've done some things but my uncle forgave me. After I left, I told my mother's husband, "I want to go and live in my own house. If you take your share of inheritance from your father then you can come and stay together with my mother. I will consider you to be my father and I will respect you as a father. And if not, then let my mother go!" But it was very hard for my mother.

She had four children on the other side, they were more than us. She had two girls and two boys with the other man. Both of her daughters died, one when she was very young and the other later. Her two sons are still alive.

So, I went to our new house together with my mother. I built a house on the land which I inherited from my father. We didn't have a good relationship anymore with the uncle's son, because he did not want to take me together with my mother. Sometimes he would take the older children from my mother, sometimes he would give them back. I took care of those children, I raised them, I helped them get married.

Once, when I came home, my mother was baking bread by using some flour mixed with ash. The bread was being made mixed with ashes. And when I entered the room she said, "This is how I have to trick the children, there is no bread at all." I went immediately to village Vërboc to meet a person called Halil Tokniqi and that village was about three kilometers away from us. I swear to God I ran without stopping. Halil was sitting in his house yard. He was my mother's cousin. I greeted them and I told them why I came. Halil called his wife. At that time women were wearing some black towels, one by one meter large. Halil told his wife, "Go and fill this with flour." I took that flour, and then my mother was able to bake with it and she fed the children. The four children were the children of my uncle's son.

One of the boys grew up and he went to become a soldier. He asked me, "Uncle, what should I do, should I put on the uniform?" I told him, "First you have to ask your father. I will find the uniform for you but you have to ask your father first." He asked his father and his father told him, "Put on the uniform." He told me what his father said and then I said, "I will send you the uniform" and so I did. When he came back, I also found him a bride in village Kqiq, near Vushtrri. His father was sitting there and the well-wishing people would congratulate me, "Congratulations Baca B. for finding a bride for your brother!". They couldn't tell anything to his father because I raised that boy. I still take care of them.

I swear to God, my mother had a very hard time because of him. When her first daughter was born, he told my mother, "When she grows up, we will give her to this person to become his wife." At that time, they were exchanging daughters, giving a girl for a boy. I swear to God he was beating and hurting my mother. And I was taking care of his children.

Then he sold his other daughter. Two or three times she was taken from my house. I swear to God she would leave from my house. I made her ready to go. I went and took her. She had children, I went and took them, and sometime later we got crowded because she had five daughters and two sons.

I went to school for only four years. The schools were terrible then. By God, we had to wait for half an hour until one class was over in order for the second class to start, because there was no other option. The schools opened late. I was maybe ten years old when I went to school. For about five or six months I went to Polaq, Skenderaj municipality, because we didn't have schools here. After five or six months, we returned to this one because the other one was farther and the road was bad, it was muddy. My teacher was Ramiz Peja. He would ask us to bring him sticks so he could beat us in case we didn't learn the subject. Once, he beat up my neighbor because he didn't know the lesson. And I started crying.

When I started crying, he told me, "You will come to my house after the end of the classes." When I went there my teacher asked me, "Why did you cry for your friend?" and then I told him, "You don't know what it's like for him because if you knew you would never beat him and you wouldn't say anything to him! His mother has remarried just like mine and his two brothers are not letting him touch the books or notebooks to study. And so, by beating him, how can he learn? Didn't you see how weak he is?" There were times when we would go to school during winter in snow and he would have almost bare feet. After I spoke to my teacher, he didn't beat him anymore.

When we finished school, some of my friends told me, "Come on Baca B., we will go to Mitrovica and register to take the lectures by correspondence". I said, "I swear to God, I don't have money for that." One of my friends went and he finished the school and then he became a teacher. He was in the same generation as me. He died twenty years ago.

I got married late. I was 30 years old or more. At that time, you needed to have money if you wanted to get married. They asked for three thousand dinars, so that the bride would come out. I didn't have any money. Three or four years later, my mother's cousin found me a bride in Prekaz, and I took her. When I got the bride, we were all happy.

God blessed my wife with seven children, and after seven children she passed away. She was pregnant when she passed away. I took her to Glogovc to see a doctor. The doctor was Serbian specialist from Prishtina. She said, "This is the referral. She has to go to Prishtina immediately because she is very ill". This happened two or three years before the former Yugoslavia collapsed. But my wife said, "No, by God, I can't go to Prishtina, I can't leave my little children at home." It was a Thursday. My mother took one of her children, my son, daughter and she went to visit a woman. I had seven children, three girls and four boys. My wife was pregnant with the eighth child. She passed away two months before giving birth. She had a boy in her womb.

We had dinner and after dinner she was fine. I fell asleep. Sometime around one or two after midnight, she woke me up, "Wake up because I am not feeling well. You will lose me". I stood up and I called my mother. They laid my wife in a small bathroom. They washed her and they changed her clothes because she was all covered in blood. We grabbed her and we put her in some car in order to take her to Glogovc. When we arrived, the nurses told us that the doctor would not come until 7 o'clock in the morning. My wife was fainting and one of the nurses told me, "Brother, any minute lost is too much for her, take her immediately to Prishtina". I couldn't take her to Prishtina, we didn't dare to go there. Another nurse told me, "Take her to Skenderaj, there is a doctor called Riza Mala". And I knew that doctor and I knew where his apartment was and so I went to Skenderaj.

I entered that building. I knocked on the doctor's door. He came out and said, "Don't stop here but let's go directly to Mitrovica and we will meet there." As I was going down the stairs I told them, "Let's go to the ambulance to quickly prepare the papers." The doctor's wife was a gynecologist. We immediately got in the vehicle and, my God, the way the doctor was driving that vehicle I thought that we would all end up in a ditch. But we reached there.

When we reached the hospital, we put her in the elevator and went to the third floor. My eldest son was with us and they asked him, "What is your relationship with the patient?", he said "She is my mother." They told him to get out. Then they asked me, and I told them, "She is my wife". The nurse then said, "Help me get her undressed." Until the other doctors came, I was trying to take her clothes off and then Dr. Nura (who was her cousin) came and he said "We have to urgently take her to the operations room". They all gathered there and they wouldn't tell me anything about what was going on. A Serbian cleaning lady came after some time and she told me, "I don't think that she will make it because her face turned pale". My wife passed away and then her cousin came out and told me, "She is ill because of her kidneys". He said, "I will take her to Nis." But he just wanted to trick me because she had already passed away.

My wife passed away and she left seven orphans. She was 38-39 years old. A brother I had from my mother's side, went by car to Glogovc and he brought a doctor who administered injections to the children so they would calm down. They were very upset. My wife's brother, the children's uncle, and my wife's sister-in-law loved the children very much. This sister-in-law also loved my wife very much. At one o'clock, my wife's brother came. When they came, I swear to God, I was completely confused, I didn't know any-

thing about what was going on. When he entered the guest room, he said, "I arrived here with Zoja." Zoja would go and play with the children and they loved her, as if she was their mother. My youngest child was only four months old.

My mother became my brother, my father, my everything. She was a very capable woman, very wise. I always used to say; when my mother passes away, I will go crazy from sadness. I never thought that I would feel happiness after my mother dies. This is all God's work. My mother died during the offensive. I called two people from each house to participate in her burial and the village had 60-70 houses. My cousins came and I told them, "I called you to bury my mother in the ground, but there is their checkpoint and they are shooting at people. They shot and killed one person". They killed seven people from one family at once with a grenade. As this family came out of the house, the grenade fell on them and killed the mother, three brothers, two sisters and my sister-in-law who was in late pregnancy. All of them died. Only one of them is still alive. After the war this one that survived would tell me, "Baca B., I didn't know whom to grab first - my mother, brothers, sister-in-law or my sisters."

My uncles had their houses on one road. When the fighting started, the one fought by Adem Jashari, my uncles left their houses and they came to us. They came together with the livestock and with everything they had. A hundred families entered our house. There was a guest room and we used to lay blankets on the floor because we didn't have sponges for all of them. My mother was very ill at the time. An uncle of mine told me, "Baca B., even if the mother dies, we will conduct the ceremony". But we were locked for three months, how could we get out? And when my mother passed away, there were about 20 or more neighbors who came. Two of my cousins from our neighborhood came to me. They were living far from my house and they told me, "For God's sake, we will help you if you don't have a way. We will help you to notify everyone in the village". I said, "No, there is no need" because I had people who were helping me. They went out and they called the people from the village.

Around 70-80 people gathered to go to the burial. The graveyard was far away. I swear to God, when I put my mother in the vehicle and the congregation started walking, I didn't know where we were going and how we would reach the graveyard because I was terrified that they might shoot at us with grenades and they would kill the people and I thought that my mother's body would remain on the road. I was so afraid that my nephews, cousins and uncles would get killed. But, God willing, we reached the graves, we buried her and then the people dispersed. When I came to the house, I was very happy that we managed to bury her. I had a feeling as if my mother is alive again. And now when I tell my sons and cousins about that situation, I tell them that I thought that I will be full of sadness and sorrow when I will bury my mother but the situation made me feel happy for managing to bury her. Nevertheless, time does its deed. After I calmed down, it was like a small infection which poisons you eventually, I started feeling sad.

It did not take long and the war started. When the war broke out, thirteen times I surrendered to the Serbs at their checkpoints. Because the children were orphans, I couldn't just leave them.

They took me to State Security Administration offices in Glllogovc. When I was sent there, I asked, "Why was I brought here?" That SSA officer was tired from beating the people. He said, "You are taking care of them, watching them and guiding them in the village." and I told him, "I swear to God, even if an armored vehicle came to my door, I wouldn't be able to see it, because it's not easy for me. My wife has passed away and she left me with seven orphaned children. I have a 4-month-old baby. There is nothing more difficult for a man than to wash the baby when it gets dirty and to feed it with a bottle. Even if an armored vehicle would come to my door, I wouldn't be able to see it let alone guard the village". Thank God, he did not beat me. Those words saved me.

But during the war, many members of my family were killed. Five men. They killed two of my sons on the day of Eid. One was 17 years old, the other 23 years old and they also killed my 55-year-old brother and two nephews. We never found two of the bodies.

We escaped; we went to Tërdevc because I had a half-sister living there. The women and the children stayed behind. I just took my son and my brother's son. We walked for eleven hours during the night until we came home. When we came, they had no information at all. The boy stood up and prepared some Krelan² for us. When we started eating, I told the boys, "Happy Eid." At 5 o'clock in the evening, they killed my family members and I didn't have any idea.

Then we got caught up in the offensive. There were 30,000 women and children in our village, and there were about 15-16 old men. Eleven stoves were cooking food. A military corporal who was 40 days away from completing his military service told me, "Let me tell you something." He pulled a letter out of his pocket and he said, "We are breaking the law 2000 percent. Look at this letter. We have orders to destroy villages Likovc, Makërmal, Polluzha, Shqytica and Qereq and our orders are not to leave anything standing, not a fence, or a well, or a living thing, or straw, stable, nothing at all. We were ordered to destroy everything." We would see some sheep, goats, maybe two kilometers away. We were telling the children "Bring them here". The children were bringing the livestock and then we would slaughter the sheep and goats. We would cut off a leg and give it to the children, "Go and tell your mother to prepare the meat for you." The cows were abandoned. One cow's breasts were swollen and it was hurting it. And out there were 30 thousand women and old men and no one dared to go to that cow. A man, older than me, went and he started to milk that cow. The children were waiting with some plates. He was giving the children milk to drink.

Then they beat up a cousin of mine really bad. They killed another one in the field. Then they set on fire the field and his body burned there. That corporal told me "There is a bunker somewhere here" In village Pica there is a well from which water did not come out, it was 5-6 meters deep and wherever our army found Serbs, police officers, troublemakers, they would kill them and throw them there. He said, "And if you decide to speak up tomorrow, the infantry will come. If you talk to them nobody will dare touch you with his finger, and if you don't talk, they will wipe all of you." A paramilitary soldier came and with his rifle he shot a dog that was there. The children screamed. My daughter came immediately because she thought that I was killed.

Then on the last night they just stormed inside. There were 30-40 Serbs, there were paramilitary officers but also some soldiers. Some women would go out during the day and ask them, "Give me a cigarette". And on the last night, when their intentions were to remove us from there, they started abusing the women. Since that day I don't like the army. Why, for God's sake, didn't they shoot us all? A bullet for each and every one of us. You could hear their screams all over the place. Over a hundred women were raped that night. They took my neighbors daughter-in-law and they started beating her and she was continuously screaming.

Then they took my sister-in-law and her two children. They took her in and then they threw her out. I got remarried after my first wife died. My wife screamed when they took my sister-in-law. Then they took my wife as well. When we left the next day, she couldn't stop crying. She is still stuck in that day. Now by God, I can't leave her. She still cries and shouts. Someone told me, "It's good to report her case and maybe she will get half of a pension for her sufferings".

She screamed so much that she lost it. When some women found her, her clothes were all cut and she was covered in mud. What am I supposed to do with her for God's sake? She has only one son and if he gets married what will she do. She is really close to him.

When I came here to you, these sisters helped me a lot. I will never forget this good deed. Even the psychologist and Feride asked me, "Is she capable of giving a statement?". I said, "No, I swear to God, she will stay all day long here but she wouldn't be able to give a statement." They told me, "You should go to the doctor, to get a certificate and then you should come and give a statement." After two or three months, I had to come and give a statement instead of her because she couldn't.

My wife sometimes cries or sometimes laughs. Sometimes she just cries, I swear to God, it's a problem for me. Sometimes she says, "I am a fool because I screamed when they took Aba." That night they abused Aba 2-3 times, but that night they abused my wife too. Next day when we woke up at 8 o'clock in the morning all the girls, women and old women decided, "We will run away towards the fields and if they kill, so be it". I told them, "Let's wait for half a day, let's see what is going to happen", I swear to God, I didn't know anything. I just thought that something might change. God willing, the order came to remove us from that place and they took us to Skenderaj. When we reached Skenderaj, they told us, "Go wherever you want." My daughter was 14-15 years old at the time. My son was younger. We stayed there for five weeks.

I was sitting together with my cousin in one of the rooms and their headquarters was about 50-100 meters away. It was the checkpoint where the Serbs were located. There they had a place and we could hear how they were beating the Albanians that they caught. Just when I remember their screams, oh my God! They came out and we were sitting outside in the shade. They wanted to shoot us. We just heard the sound when the bullets flew near us. My cousin screamed, "Run, they will kill us!". We escaped from there. When the airplanes wanted to shoot at them, the police officers were calling the children to come out and then they would throw sweets in the yard. They thought that the airplanes would see the children they wouldn't shoot. Sometimes they would hide among us.

Your Baca B., has suffered since God gave him life until the present day. But I suffered the most because of what happened to my wife. I swear to God it's a great injustice. I had a back injury of the worst kind. When autumn came, I had to meet with a commander from KLA, Raif was his name but they called him "Lugat". At that time, I didn't have any money and I had to borrow 50 deutsche marks and give them to Raif, so he would put my house from first category to the fifth. Just to get under the roof of my house. The commission told me ten times, "This house is not suitable for living, you can't stay inside this house." Only a metal frame remained from the front of the house. It was all covered with bullet holes. Even when the people from Prishtina municipality came with cameras they were surprised, "This should be turned into a museum, because it's impossible to live in it".

We left Skenderaj when the infantry arrived and we returned to the village. My cousin who was together with me said, "We have nowhere to go." I asked, "And why?" he said, "We will starve to death because they did not leave any food or anything. Everything was burned." And then the NATO soldiers came with their tanks and I remember we were hugging those NATO soldiers. Some village representatives came to us and asked us, "How many members are you?" They were giving us flour when we went to our houses and when we went to our house it was completely burned. My house was the one of the first houses which was burned in the village. Oh, I felt so sad because of the TV, and because of the music instruments, the *sharkia*³, *çiftelia*⁴ and the violin. I used to play the violin in the guest room. When I went back to the house, I found some of the strings which survived the fire. Everything was destroyed except for the walls. There was nothing left standing. The house was full of burned tiles and ash. So, when we came back the children and the girls were cleaning it.

³ *sharkia* - five strings instrument

⁴ *çiftelia* - two strings instrument

One guy from village Bërbaliq came to me and said, "Come on, I have a cousin in Mitrovica, he has construction material and wood". And when we went there, he said to his cousin, "I brought you a customer, he has five members of his family killed. His house is heavily damaged. I'm not saying that you should give him material for free but it would be good if you could help him somehow." And then that Bosnian guy said "If you take these, I will sell it for 5 euros cheaper for you, if you take by meter, I will sell them 3 euros cheaper for you and if you take planks with cubic meters then I will sell them to you for 50 euros cheaper". When he said this, I couldn't hold my tears and I started crying. He was Bosnian. He was trying to speak in Albanian to comfort me, but he couldn't because he didn't know the language. I told him, "Speak in Serbian because I understand". He told me, "If you keep on like this you will lose your mind and then your children will suffer too. Because you cannot undo what has happened even if the world turns upside down".

The municipality made a decision to give four or five ar of land to all families who have a family member killed. When I went there, they didn't give anything to me. I have been fourteen times to the mayor, but he didn't want to receive me. On the fifteenth time I entered and I said to myself I'm not leaving even if he beats me up. He said, "What's the matter?" I told him everything. He started justifying himself and he was saying "I swear I didn't know anything" and he told me that he didn't have any idea what had happened to me. He was the head of municipality and also the chairman of the commission was there.

They skipped me, apparently, I was not entitled to that right. I've had six victims in my family and I don't have that right. God knows, maybe I needed to have some connections. He told me, "This is a closed matter. I can't do anything for you but I will give you one apartment." I said, "Ok, fine, at least an apartment." When the apartments were built, I went there again. And then he said, "I will be honest with you. There are people who are more capable than you. And there were many of them and all the apartments have been given away. I couldn't save any apartments for you. But at least I will employ one of your sons" I said, "Well, there is nothing we can do. At least my son will be working."

It was very hard for me when I would go to gatherings. Also, when I went to the market, I couldn't hold back my tears. Once Hashim Thaçi came out to see the situation in Sкендерaj and he came to the football field. I lost my strength; I couldn't stand on my feet. I felt much weaker than how I am feeling now when I am 80 years old. I sat down and I looked at him, my tears were running down my face. I used to say, "Look at all these people that have survived and my sons and my brother died." I didn't even know where their bodies were. And when Hashim Thaçi appeared the people were clapping. I have never seen him before, just on TV.

He said, "Brothers and sisters, Drenica has suffered the most, materially, economically and physically." He spoke for quite some time, but among others he said, "This leadership of today that has brought us this freedom, will be thankful forever for each and every loss, every worry and all the blood that was shed for this land". I swear to God, I got this sudden strength and I thought that I would be able to stand up and start running. I got so much encouragement. I felt so strong that I thought I would be able to play with the ball. I said to myself, "Alhamdulillah from God. All those men have died but since there is someone who is interested and will take care of us, maybe there will be some justice after all".

I thought that they were telling the truth, but for 20 years I swear to God only Halil Kastriati came once, a girl came a week ago, and I wish she stayed for longer, and the Red Cross which gave me 100 deutsche marks. Nobody else ever came to see me at the door and to ask me if I am still alive, if I have any problems, am I still sane or just to tell me God help you. Never.

This woman Selvia asked me, "Baca B., how many daughters do you have?" I said, "I have three daughters." And she said, "Put me in that group too. From today and on consider me as your daughter as well." And now I address her as my daughter. I went to the organization and the workers asked me, "For whom did you come for?" and I tell them, "I came to see my daughter." They started laughing.

I said to myself after the war ended, maybe now life will get better. Many men have died but there was nothing we could have done. They say It is always darkest before dawn. But I swear to God, that is not true. They never gave me a house, nor did they give me any land, nobody ever told me, "Here, take this because you need it." A week ago, one of the sisters brought me 100 Euros. "This is from the association, it's for the people who have missing members of the family" she told me. I said, "Thank you, sister."

We still haven't found the bodies of my son and my brother's son. My brother's son was 23 years old and he was the same age as my other son who was killed. And my son, whose body was never found, was just 17 years old. Whoever would see me they would ask, "Oh God, did they kill that son of yours who was a good guy?" They were asking about my older son but both of them were very good. Also, my brother was 55 years old when he was killed. Then the rest of us continued living like that.

I worked in a construction firm in Peja. Once I fell down and I injured three ribs and I dislocated five discs on my back and neck. When I went to the doctor, there were two of them, Shaban Hasi and another doctor called Kemajl from Peja, they wanted to operate on me. Shaban was a bit weaker and Kemajl was more experienced. Shaban came and asked me, "Do you want to be operated on tomorrow?"

I said, "Why are you asking me? I'm not a doctor!" He took a cup, apparently to remove some of my blood in the evening, to prepare me for the operation the next day. And then he said, "Don't tell Kemajl because he will shout at me but if you would listen to my advice, I wouldn't do the surgery." and I asked, "Why?" He said, "Listen! There is no doctor in the world who can operate five discs without leaving you with some sort of injury. You could die or you won't be able to speak, or maybe you won't be able to hear, it's possible that your hand or leg will be paralyzed, or your entire body, so if you don't have any pain, I wouldn't do the surgery." I told him, "Then, I will do as you say".

The Serbs were giving me 300 deutsche marks then and the Albanians are not giving me anything at all. For two years I didn't receive my pension. I swear to God, there are some people that are getting a lot of money. They receive their pension, but they are not giving me anything. Well, they gave me 200 euros for my brother, but they stopped giving me my pension. How can I survive? How can I calm down? Instead of them saying, "This person has washed the land ..." I have shed blood for this Kosovo. I have shed blood for this land. Cows and sheep were not sacrificed for this land but the lives of our men! Even if they would give me the entire world it wouldn't be enough until I find my missing son.

I don't need anything else from this world. A brother of mine once told me, "Brother! There were hundreds of young people in a prison in Serbia. Maybe we should look for your son there. If we can find out anything, or get him out with money" He then told me, "But you can't communicate with these men anymore because they were tortured, beaten." I said, "No! Even if you find my son there and bring him here, I will not keep him! If he wouldn't recognize me or wouldn't know what I am saying to him, and if he wouldn't know what our relationship is, I wouldn't take him back! Why should I take him? He is already dead!".

I swear to God, I spent 1000 deutsche marks looking for my son. Someone would tell me, "This guy is a fortune teller." I would go to him and they were saying, "Oh, in the name of God, in two days you will... but you have to give me 100 marks!" Then others would come doing the same. Go here and go there and do this and do that. It was all useless. I was getting worried sick. Praise be to Allah the mighty, he saved and protected me because otherwise I wouldn't be around anymore. I was worried sick.

As for the missing men, I would have done something, because there were other missing people as well and some were even older than me. But this is injustice! Land has been given to people in my village, and I swear to God, I have nothing. Those people were given apartments and houses. I swear to God, they dug wells for them, and repaired their houses and nothing for us. One person got injured while he was running away, he got scratched on a branch, and he would say, "I was hit by a grenade." Today he receives a pension of 400 or 500 euros, I don't know how much he gets. This injustice kills me. What happened to my pension? I won that pension when I fell and then the Serbs evaluated my condition and they gave me 300 marks a month, and the Albanians stopped it. I will never agree with this! What should I say? They have known that my children were orphans and they knew about the condition of my house. I am fed up with them.

I remember when everyone was saying, "It's important to liberate Kosovo, to remove the Serbs from here." The police officers were doing everything to us. Whatever they wanted they did to us. Everywhere was the same, not only here. And when the Serbs got removed, now we have this injustice ... it's very hard to move on. They are not hiring my son. Sometimes he works three days, or four days, or a week, or a month ... Sometimes he works for three days here and there. They don't have any compassion at all, they should say, "Wait a moment, this family lost so many men. The least we can do is to hire his son to work." I hardly managed to find a job for my brother's son who is 22 years old.

The elders, the wise ones, used to say, "Things can always go from bad to worse." Now the men are already gone, I forgot about that and now I am dealing with this. Now I deal with my own suffering, what can I do? That was my fate, to suffer since I was born.

Two weeks ago, my son and daughter came to visit me from England. And, God knows, maybe they heard that I have given that interview to Halil Kastrati regarding the house. And when they came, they were happy, they found us there and they said, "We thought that we would not find you alive." We took so many photos during those two hours. Whenever I would speak that girl would start crying. She couldn't hold her tears. She called me a week ago, "I will come for the New Year, I will come to stay with you." I told her, "Come whenever you want. You can stay here as much as you want."

Now I'm living with my two sons. My eldest son went abroad. He went to Germany. I missed him so much while he was there. My boy stayed there for eight or nine years. I bought him bricks for his house. The nephews, his uncle and everybody helped him to build his own house. Now he has three healthy daughters. He doesn't live with us. I live with my two sons from the second marriage.

I am thankful to God, because he has saved my mind. I could have lost my mind because of all the things that happened. I remember when we would take our mother and her children and the uncle were on the other side, and the children were coming to the fence and screaming, "Mommy!". My mother suffered a lot and I hope that God will have mercy. She had never-ending worries. Some people suffer all their life.

I even told Halil Kastrati, "I can't pass on all the worries I've had in my life". And when I said that, his manager asked him, "Halil, be honest, could you have faced all the injustice and all the sadness that uncle Baca B. experienced until now?" and Halil said, "I swear by Allah, but nobody could have helped him but God."

I swear to God, very few people would be patient and would have endured as I did. It was a big emotional load. But thanks to God, he helped me and he is still helping me. Nowadays it's hard to go out. I am not at anyone's mercy. I have a cow and I take her here and there; I walk a bit myself; this is how I enjoy my time. At home, it is crowded. In Vërrsnik, I have no children to talk to. I watch TV all day long, I watch the news. Thank goodness, I like sports and I watch it. I liked Barcelona a lot but not so much anymore. They beat Barcelona very badly. Pity.

"...she started crying. I told her, "Talk to me, as you would with your own brother." And then she said, "I want to kill myself, because I was raped." I felt so much sadness. I was terrified. I wouldn't have gotten so upset even if it happened to my own sister."

Besimi was a teenager in Suhareka when the '90s started. Because he fought with some Serbs during high school, he was forced to flee from the Serb-Yugoslav police to Germany together with three friends. Foreign countries' independence inspired his friends to go to Albania, where they worked in making connections with others who were training to enter Kosovo as fighters.

While fighting with Yugoslav military forces in Kosovo, a mortar shell exploded nearby sending Besim six meters into the air. He fell to the ground and had nine wounds. Two of the three close friends, with whom he left Suhareka and went to Germany, ran towards him to grab him. They both got killed.

As a survivor, Besim was being treated in the village Krojmirë, held by Albanians. There, during the last month of the war, arrived a group of civilians who were fleeing from Klina to Macedonia. One of the civilians was seriously injured and he couldn't move. He remained to be treated in village Krojmirë. His sister and his old parents also stayed with him. She asks Besim to promise her that when the war is over, he will return her brother to his home. Besim becomes curious as to why the girl is trying to split the life paths with her injured brother.

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I AM NOT PLANNING TO LIVE ANYMORE

I am from the village of Tërbesh. When I was in the second grade, at the age of 8, we went to live in Suhareka and I still live in Suhareka. I remember when I was a child we would play with a ball when we were in the village. We would also herd livestock. When guests would come for a visit, we were very happy because there weren't many people around. When we went to live in Suhareka, life was different. We had many friends and there were many pupils at the school. After I finished the second semester of the second grade at primary school, we went to live in Suhareka.

We were not a rich family but my father worked in Slovenia in the past. We started having problems with some of our neighbors. They were arguing with us. My father was disabled; he did not have an arm. But even in such condition he was able to work a little but he also had some financial assistance from abroad. We lived somehow. We were seven children, three sisters and four brothers. I was much closer to my father because he was disabled. He needed help. I'm the third eldest son of the family.

School was not bad. We were naughty as kids, we didn't study as much, and we did not listen to our teacher. My teacher's name was Nazlije, and she taught us until the fifth grade. In the fifth grade my class teacher was a well-known man. I still speak to him but not as my teacher but as if he was my father. To this day we drink coffee together and we have very good conversations. Our class was full of problematic kids. He always says, "You were the biggest troublemakers but I had the best time with you. You were angels in comparison to how next generations were".

When they would say that "This teacher is the caretaker of the corridor", no doors dared to open. He himself said, "I want to take the class that is the most problematic." He also educated us and we are thankful to him because we also socialized a lot with him. Nowadays we meet occasionally, he is of an old age but he still teaches at the same school. He teaches history. When we meet, I still get the feeling as if I am still in elementary school. We were close to each other like a family. No one dared to tease the girls from our classroom. No one dared to do something wrong to the girls from our classroom.

I enrolled in high school for an electrician. At that time, we started getting that feeling that we can't live with the Serbs anymore. During high school, we have some grave memories because things started changing, things became clearer. It was during the years '89-'90. We were attending lessons in guest rooms of private houses. Schooling in these houses was a bit humorous, we would say, "Today we are going at the house of so and so", because we had to make sure that the Serbian police didn't find out so we were pretending that we were going just as guests. We would hold the lesson, the professors would explain the subject, and we connected with the people who came from other villages, without ever knowing them before, we connected with others because it seemed to us as if they came to support us. I went to high school for a year and a half.

We had a good time during the first year. I had a good company. From all the friends I have had, 20 of them were soldiers and 14 have fallen as martyrs. These were all close friends of mine; they were like brothers to me. They were also my neighbors. Six of us are still alive.

When we started the second year at the school, the letter came to my brother, who was three years older than me, to go to Nis and be recruited for the army. At that time, they were killing the soldiers. However, during the second year we had a fight with some Serbs.... They even blacklisted me. Police were looking for us. They looked for me at my father's house. But I made a hole in the ground under the carpet, and I would hide whenever they would come and search for me.

A guy from Peja came and he told my father, "I will take you to the hill up there." My father told him, "Just get me the papers and I will immediately go." He said, "You don't need papers to go to the village" and my father said, "No, I was thinking of Albania." I was in that hole and I could listen to everything that they were saying. I was afraid that they might beat my father if they would've seen me under the carpet. He said, "I am not talking about Albania." Dad told him, "Ah, that is another issue, I thought you were telling me about Albania, just get me the passport and I will go immediately". It was a feeling that touched my heart, because I thought that he would beat my father and I would have to stand up. I was young and hiding, I was endangered. After that happened, we decided it's best for me to leave Kosovo.

One of my father's friends was working in Germany, and my father told me "We have to get you out from Kosovo". I left together with five friends. That night I was very sad because of my family, but I was young and I said to myself, people are working and I will work too, I will work and then I will come back. It was hard, because I longed for Kosovo. I did not dare come back so we just talked on the phone. My family members were telling me, "Stay there, you are fine." They noticed that the situation is getting worse and they didn't allow me to come back.

For several years I didn't come back to Kosovo. I went to Germany when I was 17 years old. But then they started looking for me even there. For almost two years I stayed in Germany, in a town called Koln.

I went to Albania where I stayed for three and a half years. In '92 I went to Germany. In the years '94-'95 I was in Kruja, then in Durrës and in 1996 I was in Tirana. I stayed there for 3 years. Then we went to Kukës. We went from Kukes to Durres, and then Kavaja. We stayed in Kavaja for almost two years. After Kavaja, we came back to Durres. We worked there in Durrës for some time and afterwards we went to Tirana. While we were in Tirana, we made contact with the people from the League. The goal was to get in contact with them, with the League.

In Albania I worked in construction, as a workman. I would help them with styrofoam. I had to help my family as well because the situation worsened in Kosovo and my father couldn't work anymore. My father needed to get some documents, because Yugoslavia ceased to exist. Even though I had bad living conditions I had to help him.

The war was raging. I forget the date when Adem Jashari was killed, but two months later I was in Kosovo. I joined the KLA and I was appointed in the area of Pashtrik 123, it was an intervention unit. In May, I got wounded.

I was with those five friends with whom I came from Germany. From them, two were killed and one is still alive. I was wounded in front of them. As they were dragging me away, they both got killed.

We had our training in Tropoja. It took about 3-4 months until our turn came. We had those trainings. When I entered Kosovo, at the place called Rrasë t'Zogut, I had the feeling as if I am hearing my mother's voice calling me, and I stopped, lit a cigarette together with a friend, who fell a martyr and I said, "I think I heard my mother's voice calling me." It was the end of '98. There were stones on the road but we did not feel them, we just kept on walking. We were young, we were 23 years old. Today, when I see the young 23 years old men, they are all walking crooked, I don't know what they will do when they turn 40 years old. We were like wolves. I thought that I could destroy a tank with my Kalashnikov. But it was not like that. We realized it after we entered. Yes, I remember that event in Rrasë të Zogut. My mother was anxious at that time because 4-5 years have passed without seeing me. From happiness that I am getting near her I thought I can hear her voice.

Six months after I entered Kosovo, my older brother came to see me. He found out that I entered Kosovo because I stopped calling them and some mutual friends told him that I am in Kosovo. He came to Kleçkë, because I was there for three weeks. They would send us from one area to another, because we were an intervention unit. And then a friend told me, "Your brother is here." I didn't see him for 4-5 years and I had changed a lot, and also, we didn't clean ourselves because it was war time, we were all dirty. I walked in front for 50 meters and then I saw him but I couldn't recognize him. When

we approached, my brother said, "I am here to see one soldier." I recognized his voice because we were talking on the phone, and my tears started running down my face and I said, "I am the one you came for."

I took off my hat and I hugged him. We stayed there for a couple of hours. Now the problem was how to separate from him? But eventually we had no options but to separate because he was not a soldier. He told our mother and then my mother came two months later. At that time, I was at the Nerodima area, and I informed my family where I was through some friends. We knew the people that were supplying the city. The older sister, who is now in Switzerland, came as well. They were not escorted by men, nothing, they came just to visit me.

When my mother came, she got worried a lot. Like mothers do for their child. I would tell her, "Why are you upset? You have to be proud of your son. You have a son for Kosovo and you have three more at home ". She told me, "I have three more but none can replace you." That gave me a lot of willpower. I was thinking, I have my people somewhere, I have a place to worry about. We spent 3-4 hours with them. But when my older sister left, she started crying and it upset me. The other sisters were young at the time. She is a year older than me. I asked my sister, "What's wrong?" "No, it's nothing." I said, "You know, I will come back." and she said "I don't know". I said, "How can you say that you don't know?" She said, "But, will you come back?" I said, "Yes, I will." and she said, "I didn't hear well." Even today, when she comes from Switzerland, I ask her "Do you want to come? Will you come or not? Don't talk to me like you did during the war when you made me go crazy." Even today we say that.

Then the first offensive started. Soon after the second started and after six months, everything stopped. Ceasefire, it was winter. A friend told me, "You can go home." It was a ceasefire, there was no fighting. I said, "I am going because even I miss the village's greenhouses, let alone my parents." We went at night and we entered our house. He went to his house and I went to mine. I stayed there for three hours, not more, because I got surrounded by some of my neighbors, who were collaborating with the Serbs.

Those neighbors noticed me. A child saw me, and his elders went and reported me because the child could not. My father had strong observation skills. He has seen them from afar, and he told me, "You have to get out of the house." I jumped over the walls and went to the neighbor's house because I knew that he was faithful. I told the neighbor's mother to go to my friend's house and to warn him and tell him, "Watch out!" My friend was married and his wife still tells this story when that woman came to warn them.

I am one hundred percent sure that he was in the bathroom because he was late. He came out wearing only his underwear. Together with my neighbor's mother through darkness he came to my house. We found him some clothes. There were people in the city that supported us and this gave us even more willpower for our cause. Because at that time there were rumors that we belong to the SSA (Serbian State Security). But we noticed that the people started supporting us.

It was not easy for the mother of that neighbor, who risked her life by going through police cars to warn my friend. Their intention was finding me, because when that spy went there, he told them about Besim, and nothing about my friend, who was living a little further away. I survived so in order to save my friend I put that old woman's life in danger. Today I love her as if she was my mother. She is still alive; she is 83 years old. She is still strong, wise, brave, even now. We left the house at five o'clock. After that we did not dare return to our families and put their lives in danger until the war ended. We were not afraid but we didn't want to endanger our families.

That day they surrounded the house and since they couldn't find me, they took my father and brother instead. They entered inside the house and they searched around. Mother told me that afterwards those neighbors came, and they were telling her, "Yes, we heard that they took your old man and your son. Maybe they will not do anything to the old man because he is disabled, but they will beat your son a lot". I got upset because my mother was angry at me and told me, "You shouldn't come here at all, we will come to you. Look how you endangered them now."

After saying these words to me, she didn't let me come anymore. They kept my father and brother for three days and three nights, asking them the names of the KLA soldiers. They didn't admit anything. At the end, they themselves told my father the names they got from the spies. They even knew the names of people with whom I was at war, all of them from Suhareka. They told him, "Your son is in such and such place, on this date he was at this place." They told my father all the dates and information. My father told them, "I don't know. I know that he is in Germany for work. He used to send me money but he is not sending me anymore." After they let him go, for ten days my father was laying down on bed and they covered him with sheep skins. My brother had only his hands swollen up, even though they beat him all across his body. They also broke his nose bone because they kicked him in the face. I was worried and I felt guilty. I would say to myself, I caused all this trouble. Of course, I didn't do it on purpose. I missed them and I wanted to see them.

Then I went to the KLA again. Second offensive started. We wanted to fight, it was an interesting feeling, and if today they would ask me, "Are you willing to come to the front and fight again?" I would go. My opinion is that it's good to fight for your country. I never regret what I did.

The order came to go to zone 121, to help them because they were surrounded. We went and we fought there for three days. After three days we went back to 123, where our main headquarters was. In April of '99, on the 21st we started the fight to take that place we were aiming for. On the 29th we took that place. It was a place from where you could observe completely area 121, the area of Nerodima and our area as well. We went during the night and we surrounded it. We finally made it.

I lost many of my friends in that battle. We also had several wounded people but we did not surrender. On the 3rd of May, at 8 o'clock, we got into our positions and I went and got some bullets from Sharrci. It was eight-fifteen when I reached Sharrci, which means that at eight-thirty the mortar shell fell near me and threw me 6 meters up in the air. It threw me out of the road. I heard my closest friend shout at my other friend, "Besim is hurt, let's go and get him". I could hear him but I could not move because I was all torn apart. My leg was torn and also, I had a wound near my ribs. I had nine wounds, in short, blood was everywhere and I started feeling dizzy because of the smoke. They both came and grabbed me. As soon as they threw me down the plain on the hill, a bullet caught my closest friend, my soul friend, directly in his forehead. He immediately died. It was terrifying. My other friend closed his eyes. He then immediately grabbed me to put me on his back and just screamed "Ufaaa". I heard no other noise. He got shot as well and a bullet went through him. Both of them died there.

Our friends were following us behind and then they saw that the two of them were not moving, I was trying hard to move but I couldn't, let alone help them. The other friends then came and they dragged me away. I was insisting not to leave my friends there. I asked some soldiers to take them away, the two of them. Even the commander told me, "We are in much need for the living and not so much for the dead." I said, "Alive or dead, today it's all the same, we can all die today but I am not leaving without them. Don't touch me." I had a weapon in my hand and then I even threatened them, I said, "Don't dare touch me. Go bring them back." and then some of the soldiers dragged them back.

I was then taken in a village near Suhareka. At the former General Headquarters of the Nerodime area. The medical aid on that side was much better, and they could not take on the other side since our brigade was destroyed. I was in so much pain there. I met some guys which I didn't see for maybe six years. They reminded me of my childhood and youth. They hugged me and hugged me, and one of them felt so sorry for me and he would say, "How come this happened to you, I haven't seen you for so long and now I am seeing you in this condition". Then a doctor came and asked me, "Hey, what happened?" I jokingly said, "I was bringing them some water, but they were hungry and not thirsty." He said, "Don't joke, you are seriously injured."

He was a very good doctor. I had a big wound, and he took the scissors, cut the skin around and he stretched it to cover the wounds because I was wounded in many places. Three doctors, good surgeons, they operated on me in order to stop the bleeding. At 3 o'clock in the morning they took me after my operation and sent me away. There were some wounded people there, some soldiers from the Pashtrik area and they could not go to Raca, where the wounded people from the Nerodima area were located.

You had to go walk for 20 meters, crouching and then there was something like a room in there. They adapted it and we spent a day and a night together with the doctors. On the 4th of May, a soldier came and told them, "You have been surrounded by the Serbs and whoever can escape should do it immediately." They left us wounded there for three days and three nights without food, without water, without medicine, without any help. But our strength was the strong morale that was keeping us and after three days ten soldiers came from the Nerodima area and they pulled us out. It was a forest area, a bad place but they dragged us all the way and they took us to the village of Krojmirë. The situation calmed down a bit, the OSCE entered and everything calmed down a bit. It was sometime on the 18th-19th of May. Then they accommodated us, some were put in one tent and others in two old houses. We stayed there for about ten days. This happened after the second offensive. I was treated there by some doctors and two nurses. Both technicians and doctors were very good. Doctors did their job wholeheartedly. A grenade tore me under the arm and he stitched me. I still have the scars. He fixed me because I was bleeding a lot.

While we were in village Krojmirë, a large group of people came from Klina fleeing from danger. As soldiers, we didn't know where that region was, as we know it today. I was never there before. They said that a large number of civilians are coming from Klina and they are going towards Macedonia. We welcomed them as family, with great respect. They arrived late, because they had obstacles along the way. When we got up in the morning they were already there. In that group was also a person who later became my brother-in-law.

The doctor there told me, "These people that came from Klina are in very bad condition." He said, "Two of them are in really bad shape." I went to look at them. I was holding my crutches because I couldn't walk well. I saw a young man there; he was fat and a bullet went through his mouth. On the other side was Gezim, the brother of the woman I later married, and he was laying down because he could not move. Doctors said that the first patient needs just to get his wound cleaned.

At that moment this girl arrived, she was staying together with the wounded persons, and she said, "Doctor, this is my brother, my cousins are going to Macedonia. What can I do with my brother?" They all came there with their cousins and all other civilians. I was stunned, I didn't know her, and I did not know who she was. The doctor asked her, "What do you think you should do?" She said, "I should take my brother to Macedonia." I asked her, "And, where are your cousins?" This was our first conversation. She said, "They already left." And I knew that once they left, they would not return anymore. I asked her, "How are you going to carry this man and catch up with them?" She said, "I have

another brother in Germany, and I want to send my brother to Macedonia and leave him in a safe place, because my parents are old and they don't want to move." She said, "I am not interested anymore in my life, only my brother's life." Her wounded brother was hardly alive. I started talking to him a bit, trying to calm him down. I asked him, "Did you drink water, have you eaten any food?" He said, "Yes." But I could see that his lips were completely dry, he was tired, exhausted.

I could see that she is worried, worried for her brother. I went and I asked the cook, I knew him very well and I loved him as a friend, "Is it possible to provide us with some bread and food for a person, whatever you have". He told me, "I have some goulash sauce and nothing else. I have also some salt." I asked him, "Can you put it on a plate?" I took the plate and I gave it to him. I asked him how many brothers he has. He started eating the bread, he told me that he lived a little further in that village Krojmirë. I insisted on helping her brother, for the sake of God. She was getting worried more and more.

One day my mother came to see me. The village of Krojmirë is next to Shtime. She also brought me cigarettes, some sugar and tea. While sitting in the shade at the ambulance yard, this girl came by. I introduced her to my mother, I said "This is my mother, this is the little sister of a wounded soldier". She had tea with us and then she went to her parents, the house where they were staying. My mother was feeling a little dizzy, and she asked me, "Where is this girl from, did anyone from her family get killed?" I said, "She is from Klina and her brother is wounded". She asked me, "Is he in a very bad shape? Because she seemed to be worried too much." I will never forget that. I said, "He is in bad shape but he is getting better." Doctors were treating him. But now the situation calmed down, they also had medicine.

On the ninth day, I asked her "Are you spending good time with that family?" She was angry, she wanted to talk on the phone or something and then she asked me, "Will you promise me that when the war ends you will take my brother and my parents to our home?" I said, "I will take them home but I don't know where your home is. But, as soon as the war ends, if not me, then my brothers will take him home." and I said, "But, the war will end." It was almost the end of war; NATO has started bombing. It was June 6th or 7th 1999.

We started talking. I asked her, "Do you have other brothers?" I started thinking, why was she alone with her old parents and her wounded brother. I didn't know what was bothering her. I told her, "I will take your brother and parents, but first you have to tell me what will you do afterwards, will you go someplace, or are you getting married or what? Because when I take them home, I have to tell them where their daughter is." She said, "There no marriage for me anymore". She was a good and polite girl. I asked her, "You are a young girl, everybody experienced war, not only you". She said, "Yes, but war hurt me much more." I asked, "Are you injured?" She said, "No, I am not injured, but much worse than being injured." I asked her, "But what happened?" I was asking her but it never crossed my mind.

She started crying. I told her, "Talk to me, as you would with your own brother." And then she said, "I want to kill myself, because I was raped." I felt so much sadness. I was terrified. I wouldn't have gotten so upset even if it happened to my own sister. She told me earlier how much she suffered in life. After she told me this, I couldn't ask her anything anymore. I was completely stunned. Then after some time I told her, "It's not a solution to take your own life, but you have to look at what you can do. Thank God your brother survived. You are not the only one. We heard cases that it happened to men as well, let alone women".

She stood up and wanted to go to that family where she was staying. I told her, "Tomorrow I want to see you here sooner." Her words upset me, but at that time she didn't know that I got so much upset. I spoke to a doctor there. I told him about everything. He said, "We have to help her." I said, "Look after her brother, you need to heal her brother." He said, "We are doing our best."

She went on the road and then halfway she returned. I don't know why she returned. I never asked her. But I think that she had a bad intention, a very bad intention, because she thought that I was inside and she came to see her brother for the last time. I noticed this.

I asked her, "Did you forget anything?" At that moment I was talking with the doctor about her. She said, "No, I didn't forget anything, I just wanted to see my brother once again." We started talking again about that experience. It was agonizing because she told me everything. I asked her, "How did it happen?" She said, "We were many people sheltered in a house. Serbs took some men from there and they put them in the yard - and all of them were shot and killed in the yard. One of them escaped and he is still alive today. Then, all those who took refuge in that house went out and they all escaped. The Serbs left the corpses in the yard for three days. They were stationed there by the road. One day they came and they took the calf. I went out and took my brother inside. But when they saw that the refugees went out, they returned to see if there were any others. First two of them came, one was darker and the other white, but he did not speak either Serbian or Albanian. The darker skinned man once spoke in Serbian, insulted my mother. But my brother could not move, because he was wounded and then that man took me and threw me in the other room. That's when I was raped.

After she told me this, the doctor came to administer me the injection, I told him "I don't want it". He asked me, "What's wrong?" I said, "I don't want to be injected". Her story made me numb so much that I did not feel the pain of my wounds. The doctor asked me, "Where does it hurt?" I said, "No, no. It's not hurting me anywhere."

I did not sleep at all that night. There was a commander there and he noticed me rolling in my bed all night long. In the morning he asked me, "Besim, aren't you feeling well? You smoked cigarettes all night long. You never smoked inside the room." I didn't tell him anything. It was the 9th, and for two and a half days I didn't sleep at all, I didn't eat any-

thing, I didn't drink anything. I was just thinking about this girl. I was struggling to make a decision, but I did not know what to say to her. I was thinking maybe after the war to take her and her brother to live in my house, as a sister, as part of my family. But I don't think that she would accept it. I used to think, how could they have done such an atrocity? After two and a half days I got exhausted. She came and she brought her brother some milk. My throat was dry. I will never forget that day. She said, "Where were you? I haven't seen you around, I thought that you left!" I said, "No, didn't leave, I was inside here." I didn't get out at all after she told me. And then she gave me some milk. She was worried, she was crying and I told her, "I'm going to make a decision in relation with you."

On the second night I made a decision, I decided to propose marriage to her. I told her about my decision. She said, "There is no chance, I'm not good for anyone anymore. I was violated on both sides and I am not worth it." I thought about some things and then I asked her, "Will you tell me something honestly? Imagine you're talking to a woman and not to a man" She said, "Yes?" I asked her, "When did you have your menstruation?" She said, "I had them twice." I told her, "Listen to what I am telling you, it would be a great mistake if you try to do anything to yourself." She said, "Why?" I said, "You should be happy that you are not pregnant." She would always tell me that she was afraid that she might have gotten pregnant. I said, "Life must go on, you must confront these things." After about three hours of talking I said, "If you believe that there is a God somewhere, I swear by God, that only you, I and God will ever know about this issue from now on. After today, this issue is over." I said, "For me this is a closed matter and so it should be for you as well. You have to get it out of your head. You have to make a decision now, I proposed marriage to you and you have to make a decision". But she didn't accept the proposal.

She arrived the next day in the morning, "We can't keep this a secret. I can't ruin your life. I can't live with this burden." I was trying to convince her, "But this didn't happen only to you, you are not the only one". But thanks God, thank goodness for her brother, God gave him strength and at that moment he just stood up and said, "Besim, will you give me the crutches?" I gave them to him, and I called a couple of friends to help him out, she grabbed his hand and he took two steps using my crutches. After that happened, she became more positive, I could see it in her face because I did not look at anything else. I did not look at anyone else, I was trying to convince her not to kill herself, that's it.

After an hour or two, I asked her, "What do you think about my proposal?" She said, "All the men say the same and then after a year you will mention that thing to me. That day that you mention that issue to me I will kill myself." I said, "I swear by God that I will never mention it. My mouth will never speak of it. For me, this is a closed matter." I swore not to mention it to her ever again. I would rather shoot myself in the head than say to her, "You were raped".

My mother and my third brother came while I was talking to her. I have taken the therapy, the doctor called me, she went and talked to my mother, they talked like women do but not about that issue. She asked my mother some questions since they were getting to know each other. Mother asked her, "Where are you from?" I have a loving and kind mother, and she told my mother how she suffered. They started having a conversation. After I received my therapy, I came out, she left and my mother told me, "Look, son, you have to do everything you can to help her because she's a good girl." She was talking about her brother, "They both suffered a lot". I said, "Mother, I am watching this boy, but I am watching more closely that girl because I like her."

I have already made up my mind, I was just waiting to see her reaction. She said, "Don't be like that. Don't embarrass me, take care of your dignity, because it's war time. Nobody knows anyone" I said, "Mother, I have made a decision, if she agrees I will take her." My mother didn't oppose me. I am grateful for that. My brother was older than me and it was not my turn to get married. The next day my oldest brother came, and she still didn't make this decision, and I have told him what I have decided. I said, "I have made a decision, I will either marry that girl or I will kill myself." He said, "You want to take her, but will she accept you?" We were very close to our big brother. We loved each other a lot and we still do. My brother knew that I had a relationship, a friend from my village. But I heard that she got married 3-4 years ago. Actually, we did not have a relationship at all, just like friends, but my aunt proposed her to me.

Next day she came and I went in front of her. I proposed to her again, I said, "You will either marry me, or I will kill myself. I will not leave you in the streets." She didn't know that for three days and nights I didn't eat, drink, or sleep. I was just thinking of her. I didn't tell her about this.

I was thinking to myself, Klina is very far, where will they go? I also thought of taking care of her brother and parents, and not only her. Those were my thoughts. We talked and talked until 11 o'clock at night. At that moment the doctor came out, he was listening to the news, and he said, "Besim, Milosevic accepted NATO to enter Kosovo with their infantry".

I have never touched her hand before that day but when I heard the news, I was so happy that I grabbed her and I hugged her. I was happy because NATO entered Kosovo. She was stunned. Next day, on June 12th, we went to our village, where we gave each other the promise not to do unjust things to each other, to look after each other and to never mention that issue ever again. Our uncles and brothers were in the village. We went there during the night. We got married that night when NATO entered Kosovo. It was a

formal marriage, that we accept each other. I was not in a very good health condition, but that night made her change because life connected us.

When we came to the house, we were with my family, I was always worried because she was talking very little and when she would sleep, she would talk in her sleep. She would startle. When I went out, to the doctor or somewhere else, I was always worried about her falling asleep. Every time I went out, I would tell her, "Don't sleep during the day because then you can't sleep well at night." She said to me, "Why are you telling me this?" But I knew what was happening to her at night.

God has blessed us with a child in 2000. I was very happy, but mostly because I thought that my wife would get a hold of herself. I was always thinking about her. During the night when she would sleep, she would mention some names and she would scream, "Go away, don't touch me", she would startle, scream from top of her lungs. Once, I fell asleep because I was exhausted, I took some therapy before because I operated my hip. They removed two pieces of the grenade from my hip and I was very tired. My wife screamed at night, and my mother heard her in the other room. Also, my father heard and he said, "Go and find out what that crazy man is doing, is he beating his wife or what is happening?" I was asleep because I was tired from the operation. My mother came and watched us. My wife was screaming and I was asleep. My mother woke me up and switched the light on. My wife woke up as well. My mother asked her "What's wrong?" but she didn't know what to say. My mother told me, "I thought that you died when I heard her screaming". But she was screaming because she had nightmares.

My wife was sleepwalking. It was very difficult for her. One night she opened the bathroom door. She went out, but when she came out, I heard a bang in the kitchen, I don't know how God sent me there. I stood up and I saw her going back to the bathroom, she slammed the bathroom door but before she closed the door and I saw her holding Vim (bleach) in her hand. I asked her, "Why do you need the bleach at two o'clock after midnight?" She said, "I need it for something." I shouted, "Open the door!" Then I broke down the door. I asked her, "What are you doing?" and she said, "I want to drink it because there's no more life for me." That night was agonizing. My sister-in-law came out and I couldn't tell anyone what was happening because I swore not to tell, not even to my mother. She doesn't know, nor will she ever know. We will both die and she will never find out because I have sworn that day. My brother and my sister-in-law came out because I broke down the door. I immediately told them, "She is upset because of our ill daughter." We woke up. I caressed her, not as a woman but as if she was my daughter. Then for some time, I guarded her all night so she would not commit suicide.

In 2001, God blessed us with a son. After we got our son, she calmed down a bit. She regained her strength. In 2005 or 2006 she had a miscarriage. Her situation worsened again. But now we had the boy, I do not know why she felt like that.

We had our son and we went to live on our own, because my biggest concern was that they will find out about that issue. I didn't want anyone to find out, because she was doing those gestures at night but not during the day. We went to live in a basement. Then she had a miscarriage, we did not have enough money and life started getting harder. One night, I noticed that she was moving in the kitchen and I thought that something was wrong. It can happen anytime. I found her opening the lid of the bleach. I asked her, "What are you doing?" and she said, "I am tired of this life" Three times in my life she almost caught me by surprise. I was about to go crazy. She wanted to kill herself again.

I have always looked after her, supported her, and I will continue supporting her, because I have sworn to God. I didn't swear only in front of her but also in front of Allah. I believe in Allah, and his blessings. I have promised God and I promised her. I made a promise to Allah that I will not wrong her and that I will support her more than myself. I told her this straight to the face, I love her with my soul. I am indebted to God, to the blessed Allah. And I thank God, because He brought her into my hands, so she could live.

Three years ago, she applied here, when she started getting treated. At the beginning when she came for treatment, she mentioned some names. She mentioned some names and now she has new friends. I see that she is getting better, because in the past sometimes she would scream, she would get very nervous. I always had to treat her with care in a nice manner. It would take an hour until she would get better.

I would take her to the doctor and then for a week or ten days she would be fine. And then suddenly it would hit her. Sometimes, there were moments when she would react like that in front of people, even in front of guests. I took her out and calmed her down. That's how we got away, we kept it a secret and avoided that issue.

After that episode I started being more careful. I am thankful for my sister. She doesn't know anything about her case, but I told her, "My wife has trauma since the war when they wounded her brother" so I told her all other things. Even now, my sister helps her and I help her financially, not because she helps my wife but because I want to help her. She is always there for her. When my sister is at home, I feel more relaxed when I go out. They have good conversations with each other, because she supports her, but my sister knows only that my wife suffers from war trauma.

She saw a case on TV and when I went home, she told me about it, "They did this and this to a 13-14-year-old girl during the war." I asked her, "Yes, but did she survive?" I know it's a crime what they did but I wanted to change the subject. She said, "Besim she is alive, but she was only 14 years old!" I said, "Thank goodness that she survived." I tried again to change the subject. And then she started arguing with me. "How can you say thank goodness that she survived?" I said, "Thank goodness that she survived because she could have died" She said to me, "How are you saying that? How can you?" I reacted and I objected. That reaction did her well, but I have promised never to react like that again. I have been married for 22 years and I have never been rude to her. I said,

“I want three things from you to respect, I hate thieves, betrayal and lies. If you made me hit you for the first time, we can work it out, if you made me hit you the second time, we can still work it out but if it happens for the third time then it’s finished”. There is no need for domestic violence. I went out and started talking to myself, “Why did I do that to her? What have I done?” and I started crying.

After half an hour she came out, it was three o’clock after midnight. She made me coffee and said “I’m sorry”. Since 2011 she had traumas up until the time when she came to you. But since she came here, especially after the seaside she always mentions a friend of hers and other names of women survivors. They share these terrifying experiences among themselves, and now they know that there are also other women and they can make it through this pain. I don’t ask her about the meetings, I don’t want to, I can’t. I don’t ask her about her friends, I just ask her if it was okay. I don’t ask about any of those things. But when I see her talking on the phone, I see that she is feeling a sense of relief. Especially when she meets her friends. Life is much more normal now. It’s not like how I suffered in the past. It is much easier for me to go out with a friend, or go to work. Because I know that she calmed down a bit. I have supported her and I will always support her. As long as I have a soul, I will never turn my back on her. I love her, but also, she is the mother of my children. Sometimes I call her “my oldest daughter”. Yes, I am a tolerant man, and I swore by Allah, not to turn my back on her. We lead a normal life.

We have a good relationship and I believe that we will continue like this until we die. I swore by God, I can’t escape my promise, whatever happens. But the words I have uttered in front of Allah, nobody else heard. God heard me. I stayed for three nights sleepless until I made the decision not to leave her in the street. Because I thought about it and it could have happened to my sister as well.

I saw that she doesn’t have anyone to support her. Nobody supported her. I got convinced, God sent them to me, and convinced me to make a decision and save her from that situation. I’m not saying that it was easy for me. I wanted to regret that decision because I have suffered too much. But my own belief did not allow me to regret. When she would lose it, when her condition worsened, I sometimes said to myself, “What have you done to yourself?” But it wouldn’t last even five minutes and I would say to myself, “Besim, what are you saying?!” I wanted to regret my decision, but God has enlightened me. And now, it’s been a couple of years, I think things are much better now. Also, our children grew up. We have three sons and a daughter.

We don’t have much wealth, but we are happy with what we have. When she gets nervous, I take her out and we go for a walk. She is allowed to do everything. She can go alone wherever she wants to as long as she tells me, not that I’m jealous, but I’m afraid that something might happen to her. I know what she has experienced, how she suffered, what behavior she had after the war, until the time she became stable. But I took care of her and I was very careful with her because I didn’t want anything to happen to her which would turn her back in that state.

She called me on the phone and said, “My sister came, can we go somewhere?” Maybe it was not the right time but I never opposed and I would always tell her, “Go, enjoy!” Maybe I remained alone and I had to prepare food for myself but I told her to go. Because I didn’t want her to be nervous. I always thought of the worst cases. She went through a crisis but life is like that. On one hand, she would make me depressed as well, because I didn’t know what to do with her.

Once while we were talking, I told her, “Let’s go see a doctor, a psychologist”, because I fell into such a state that I didn’t care anymore even if the whole world knew about it, I just wanted her to get well. I didn’t care anymore if anyone is going to find out or not, that’s how I felt. She said, “I am not crazy.” I said, “You are not crazy but doctors went to school for issues like this. If you have a stomach ache you have a doctor for it, the same goes for the head and all other parts.” She asked me, “Do you remember what you promised me?” I said, “Yes I know, but it’s good for me and for you.” She said, “Do you remember?” And I told her, “Ok, fine, I will not say a word anymore” because she left me speechless and I went outside.

I smoked 3-4 cigarettes. There was nothing to think about, I couldn’t start the conversation for the second time. I can’t take her to the doctor by force; I can’t say that my wife went crazy. So, I never tried again. If she would have accepted it herself, I would have taken her here and abroad, I would have sold the land and the house, only so she would get well because both me and my wife were suffering. I was traumatized, because I wanted to help her but I couldn’t.

I have to thank God, because since she came to this organization and met her friends, after the seaside she is much better. She socializes more and has fewer nightmares. She doesn’t have those nightmares anymore.

She once told me, “A couple of friends want to come. I like talking to them, can I tell them to come? and I said, “Did I ever stop you from doing anything?” I asked my sister, “If you can, go a little earlier, because her friends are coming over and you can help her.” I told my sister, “Listen to what they are talking!” I wanted my sister to pay attention to my wife’s reactions, see what conversation is calming her, and also check if those friends are crazy. My sister went there. When I called my sister on the phone, she told me, “If you could hear how your wife is laughing, I want to send it with Viber so you would

hear and it would warm your heart.” I said, “I am glad that she is laughing, I just don’t want her to cry. We are trying to make her laugh” My sister said, “They are laughing and enjoying time together, as if they grew up with each other.” Of course, they spoke about something completely else. I thought to myself, well, it’s a good that they are laughing.

After my sister left, my wife called me and asked, “Can I go out for coffee with my friends?” I said, “You can go wherever you want.” I said, “Don’t go to some cheap place, and go to the best one.” They went out and they had fun. One of her friends had her own car, and they went there by car.

Later at home I told her, “Did you see her? She drives her car. She is living life without the help of anyone.” We are trying to help you and you still won’t get a hold of yourself. You have to help yourself. Tell yourself, “Nothing has happened. Whatever happened, it’s finished now, you have your life in front of you”.

I see that things are better now. She is much better. Of course, she has additional support, not only from me but also from her friends. I would like to thank the organization and her friends. I have to accept what happened to her, not only me but every family member out there must accept it because I am not the only one. That thing didn’t happen only to her. This group of friends should have been created before; it could have been created in every municipality. Coming together and socializing because it’s different when you can talk to someone and it’s different when you keep it inside and you’re unable to express yourself. But still, better late than never. She has to accept what has happened to her, and also, we as a family.

First of all, I would like to thank God for blessing us with our children, they give us strength and we have a perfect family. No matter what happens, she has my support, not because she is my wife but because I have devoted myself to her, I don’t want to and I will never leave her. At that time, I didn’t think that the state would support them but the initiatives they took have a good influence on her psychological state.

It’s difficult; it’s not easy to deal with what has happened to them. But it was also not easy for me to take these decisions either. In the beginning it was not that hard, but later it was very hard because she suffered a great trauma. I swear to God, sometimes she would make things so hard that my brain would boil. I couldn’t help her; I couldn’t even take her to the doctor. I didn’t know what to do. But I decided to support her and I will support her as much as I can. Sometimes the easiest thing to do is to tell everything about the case and take off that burden from you. Just talk about it!

I wanted to take her to a psychologist. I thought that they would give her medicine and calm her down, treat her. Money was not in question. Whenever you speak and express yourself, you get to speak about what is bothering you. In 2017, I think that they even started talking about it on TV. A couple of times she switched off the TV. She heard what they were talking and she just switched the TV off, and I did not dare to react because the children had grown up. But I was interested to know what they’re saying because I needed a psychologist. Money was not an issue. Then we started talking, I was talking about it and I thought maybe I will convince her. And then we took a decision because of what doctor Feride was talking about on television.

My wife told me, “Turn it off!” I said, “No, I will not turn it off because she is right. She is supporting you and she is supporting us.” First, she got nervous, but then Feride started telling how many people there are, that she made an appeal for everyone, not only women, but also men who are suffering, that they have accepted but could not find a solution.

I thanked doctor Feride for saying that those who stay silent don’t do anything, and those who speak out get rid of the evil. The one who is silent is hiding a crime. Then I started using her words. Those who committed the crimes can be punished but not by being silent.

We came to Prishtina. She wanted to go back. At the traffic lights she screamed, “Turn back!” I had nowhere to turn. I told her, “I will turn here, here”, when I saw that she opened the door, I entered a side road. I went to the other side, just to calm her down. I turned back and stopped the car, and I asked her “What did you do?” She said, “I don’t want to go there!”

Three weeks later I convinced her again. There was a television show again. And she finally convinced herself to come to you. I brought her to you. I would like to thank you as an organization because you have calmed her down as much as you could. You calmed her down. You know their pains, the worries that are in their souls. Not only my wife’s, but all the ones that have experienced this are wounded in the soul. I have been shot with a mortar shell and I have nine wounds on my body, but their wounds are far worse than mine. As for me, that day when I grabbed my rifle, I knew that one day I could get killed. And these women were unprotected.

I don't care about money, of course, everyone likes to have money but for me money is not everything. For me it's important to live a normal, stable life, not to cheat anyone, because once you betray somebody then all the money in the world would not matter anymore. That's just what I think.

I hope that law gets adopted, I hope that the state becomes a proper state, to catch these criminals, that is my greatest desire. Not only for my wife, but for all the people. And when they see that the criminals are being punished, they will feel a little easier. Even if the Albanians did such things, it's a crime, and it shouldn't be committed. These criminals should be found and punished. I think that they should be punished. That would be the best way to heal the victim's hearts.

But at the moment I don't see that it's going to happen, but things will change, because good things come slowly and bad things come fast. God willing, a good man will come and lead us because these things will eventually come to light. Yes, there has been a delay for almost 22 years and that's a lot. But they deserve to be punished because of all those Albanian mothers that are full of sadness. It's terrifying for a person who feels pain.

The victims should be supported as much as it's possible. First of all, we should seek refuge in Allah, because life has sacrifices, trials. God tests you to see how strong you are with your decisions. I hope that God gives strength to all of them. Because without making the decision yourself, you can't be strong. I hope that Allah will help all of those women and bring knowledge to them.

We have to be strong, to face everything, to stand in front of justice and tell the world what they have done to us. My spiritual pleasure would be to punish those criminals. I'm feeling a little better as a family member, because since she came here, she is feeling better, she is calmer, because she can see that you are supporting her. They didn't have a place where they could express themselves. My wife had my support, but she didn't have anyone else to talk about that issue. She kept it inside, and to keep it inside then it becomes a psychological problem. But you as an organization have done a great job, you as a psychologist, and Dr. Feride who has started this initiative. This is great for those women, those mothers, those sisters. Personally, for my family, you have helped us a lot, because when my wife is well, then we all are.

“... I WENT OUT OF THE HOUSE. I DIDN'T WANT TO SEE ANYONE; I DIDN'T WANT TO TALK TO ANYONE. THAT NIGHT I DIDN'T RETURN HOME. I CAN'T DESCRIBE IT. IT WAS THE WORST FEELING EVER, THE WORST THOUGHTS WERE GOING THROUGH MY MIND. DIFFERENT THOUGHTS...”



As a teenager, Dardan was inspired by Zahir Pajaziti and he realized early that freedom can only be achieved through war. He was 22 years old when he joined the KLA. In high school years he socialized with a girl and after a while he got engaged to her. During the war, during one of his secret visits home, he got the idea to get married. The initial idea was to take his bride with him to the mountains, but his superiors didn't allow it.

Since the Serbian forces were harassing the people in the village, the family escaped and Dardan lost contact with them. When he finds them in his uncle's village, he notices that his wife speaks to him somewhat coldly.

The war ended and people started returning to their burned houses. Dardani is on duty in the barracks together with the KLA soldiers, but comes home once every few days. There he learns that his wife was in hospital in Pristina and had an abortion. While sobbing, she tells him the reason behind her decision.



AS LONG AS GOD GIVES ME LIFE, YOU WILL BE MY WIFE

I grew up in a village in the municipality of Prishtina. We were a poor family, and there were many members in my family. We could never realize the dreams we had as children. It's hard when you live in the village! We were taking care of the livestock, but as children we wanted to go out and play with the ball. When we went to guard the livestock, all the shepherds would gather and we played with the ball.

I took care of the cattle since I was in the first grade of the primary school, so I was seven, maybe eight years old. Usually, I would go together with my brother as he was three years older than me. But when he was busy and couldn't come to take care of the cattle I would go alone and because of that I was never afraid of anything. When I was in fifth grade, I remember a case, it was very dark. We lost something valuable and we had to go out and start looking for them. The distance from my house to the place where I've been was approximately six kilometers and there was no light, there were no houses, it was completely dark. I remember that I managed to return home but I didn't dare turn my head and look behind. I just walked forward and that's how I reached my home. Since that moment and on I was never afraid of anything and I never had any kind of phobia. I can be startled but not scared.

I was not a good student; I was a bit problematic. I was always thinking about sports. I would escape the classroom only so I could play with the ball. In my family I didn't have anyone who encouraged me to study. My mother was a housewife and she dealt with housekeeping. My father was ill, he had a problem with his bones so he couldn't work as much. He was herding the sheep mostly, he really liked them. Since I was born, I have always had a bit colder relationship with my mother. I don't know why. She was always reserved with me; I don't know how her relationship was with the other siblings. I had a very good relationship with my father.

I worked with wood. As soon as I would finish school, I would go home, take a saw and head towards the forest. I would cut a meter of wood and I would go on and sell it. Since I was very young, I had my own money. Before that, I would always ask money from my brother, "Give me some money because I need to go to school."

After the '90s, I'm not sure when because I am not very good with dates, we separated from my uncle and we went to live in our own house. My older brother got engaged and soon after he got married. I lived in the house together with my mother, three brothers and four sisters. I finished primary school in my village. I attended secondary school, there only was the general gymnasium. I didn't have any possibilities to travel to the city and attend another school so I went to the gymnasium which I never liked. I was never dedicated during secondary school. I was just going there to get a diploma at the end and not to learn or study something new. I was not good at it.

During the first year of secondary school, I met my now-wife. She was attending the eighth grade. We were attending the same school building. She had classes in the morning and I was going in the evening. I just knew her as a person and I had no idea who her family is, where she is from or anything about her. We were kids and I said to myself I will go out with this girl. During the first year I can't say I had any serious intentions, to marry her or something like that, we were just going out like school children. When we went out two or three times, she told me her biography and she said, "This is me". And there and then as they say I set my mind. I said to myself there are no games with this girl and I decided to marry her. So, we socialized and met secretly, just how they did it in the past. There were no phones then so we had to set a date a month in advance in order to meet. Sometimes these meetings would fail.

During primary school, Zahir Pajaziti was an inspiration for my love towards our country. Our families knew each other. He came to our house several times. One of my brothers had ties with him. At my primary school, Zahir came often and sometimes he would even enter the classrooms. He would tell us about Serbs, "Don't trust them." He always told us, "Don't trust them, they will smile at you, they will pretend to support you but when the right moment comes, they will slay and kill you." So, he put this thought in our head that they cannot be trusted. There and then I got the courage to fight, so since primary school. During secondary school, some pupils were gathering and we were trying to organize some tournaments. I started learning about gatherings and organizing people. We usually organized tournaments. Zahir would almost always come to those tournaments. He wouldn't play, maybe for five minutes, or ten minutes but he always gathered the youth. He never insisted on taking charge. He would always let others do it. He was always careful how things were happening and what was going on. During those meetings he would always use the opportunity to talk about the Serbs, "These are not police officers, beware and don't tell anyone about these meetings." I think that he was telling us "Learn how to be secretive, to work in secret". He was working in illegality.

Maybe he tried to bring us in his circle but God had different plans and took him early. I didn't know who Zahir was at that time. I found out what Zahir was dealing with only when the entire Kosovo found out.

I have good memories from primary school. I have the best memories from the tournaments we had when we competed with different schools. I was able to play for 24 hours with a ball. It happened very often that I played for so long that I couldn't stand on my legs anymore. When I attended the eighth grade I participated in a tournament and there I met my now-wife. Her school came to my school to play a tournament. That was when I met my now-wife. If I could pick the best day ever during my primary school time, I would pick that day. I was very happy that day, not only that I won the tournament but I also met her and I wasn't used to socializing with girls that were not from my classroom.

However, I don't have good memories from my secondary school. The situation got worse and they didn't allow us anymore to attend the school. We would go there, enter the classroom but it could happen that after ten minutes they would come and expel us from the classrooms. Everyone was afraid that they might come and beat us up. We were never relaxed. We were expecting something to happen any moment.

I managed somehow to finish my secondary school. I have a friend from secondary school with whom I don't meet often but since then we are really good friends. I also have other friends with whom I meet, we go out for coffee and talk. I have a friend who happens to be my neighbor, he lives close to my house. We have had a friendly relationship since the fifth grade.

Almost everybody in my family finished secondary school. It was obligatory to finish it. And from my close family, only my son graduated from university. He was the first one that attended the university. He is the eldest child.

My wife never attended secondary school because of her family, I guess. Personally, I tried to influence her family but without results. At the time people wouldn't support you much to go to school. Maybe they thought that she wouldn't need it in the future but I would tell her to continue school because then I would meet her there and if she wouldn't attend school we couldn't meet as many times as we wanted to. I would be very happy when I knew that I was going to meet her. I knew that I would see her that day and that I might not see her for two-three weeks or even a month. And later, we got engaged. Even after we got engaged her family didn't allow me to go pick her up and go in the city for coffee. I was not allowed so we continued meeting as we did in the past.

On August 1998 I became a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army. My cousin joined before I did. In order for me to join the KLA, the brother of Zahir got involved. I was on the list to join, one man from each family. Those days we had happy occasion in my family. And if I wouldn't be present everybody would ask, "Where is Dardan? Why isn't he at home?" We were afraid that they might suspect something and that they would find out. At that time, it was too early to speak about KLA, everything was still a secret. My cousin joined the KLA and he lied to everyone as if he was going abroad. Now, it was my time to leave and I told my cousin, "I want to go where you have been". He said, "I was in Hungary" and I told him, "I know that you were not in Hungary." I knew because I had contacts with my uncle. My uncle was part of KLA. When he came for a few days to rest, he told me that KLA is in village Shala. And so I told my cousin, "No. You were at this place". I told him all the places he visited and then he was forced to admit it to me. He then went and spoke to them and he set up a meeting with them. So, I went along. I was only 22 years old when I held a weapon.

I was the happiest person on earth when they gave me a weapon. I got hold of it and I said to myself, "Now we are going to get rid of the Serbs." I thought that one automatic rifle can do God knows what and in reality, it was nothing. My family knew one of the superiors because he was from our area. He was a senior leader and he would explain to us about the rifle and he motivated us. I will never forget what he was telling us in case we see a tank, "Don't get in front of it because you can't even scratch the paint off of it". And I thought that I could destroy tanks with my rifle and in reality, the rifle is used only to protect yourself within 50 meters, not more than that.

I went and completed some kind of training. Nobody in my family knew where I was. They thought that I am trying to go abroad. Maybe one of my sisters knew a bit of something but even when I came back, she never asked me anything.

Then we continued our part, a group of thirty persons was formed and we continued with our activities based on the order of our superior. When needed, we were sent to the Shala area. Sometimes we stayed there for a week or two, in order to help the soldiers.

During that time I didn't stay too much with my family. I could have gone and stayed for a day, maybe two-three, but not more than that. My family realized where I was when KLA appeared publicly. After I returned from Shala my family found out, so maybe after a month, because when I came back, I was exhausted. We had a guest room and I was so tired when I came inside the house, instead of taking off the uniform and putting on my civilian clothes, I just fell asleep while wearing the uniform. My sister arrived later and she was always interested to know where I was and what I was doing. With her, I always had a close relationship. We never hide anything from each other. Sometimes I rather talk to her than to my wife. We keep each other's secrets. She is not only my sister but she is my friend. Now, she got married and has children and she is living far from here but at least once per month we meet for coffee, or we meet in Pristina and talk for a couple of hours.

So, they found my uniform. They found out where I have been. They were suspecting a bit because I wouldn't come home for two-three days and I was telling them, "I am going to visit friends, to work something there." But when I would come home my brother would always ask me, "You are working and you don't have any money!" so I always had to invent some lies, "They didn't have money at the moment. They will give it to me some other day." So, I went on with this until that day when I came home exhausted, without any sleep for two days, and I just lied down to sleep and I forgot to take off my uniform. They found out when they saw me. I told them, "Today I am here, but as long as the war lasts you can't count on me at all. Maybe I will survive the war, maybe not. If I survive, that's a different story but until then you can't count on me." But, chances to survive were very slim. I hope I will never experience war again.

I suffered a lot during the war, sometimes we wouldn't eat anything for four days. Initially there was an organization, we prepared and had food, but when the NATO bombing started, we went out from the command line and everyone got separated. We weren't organized anymore as an army, to have one command, "Do this and do that, you stay here and you go there." Sometimes I happened to receive an order, "You must stay here" and for two days I wouldn't see a living soul. So, the fighting was not as it used to be before. In '99, during the third month, if I am not mistaken, a big part of the population was located in our village. In our village, there were a lot of people.

I didn't have any information about my family, I thought they were at home. The entire population was on this side, we were overloaded, I couldn't move. I couldn't say, "I want to go home for some time" because we were overloaded. Most of the soldiers remained in the village Puricë. They couldn't cross on the other side of the road; it was very hard to cross on the other side because of the Serbian forces. Also, these were the orders we received; we couldn't have frontal war on that side because of the population. Because Serbs would take revenge on the population. We couldn't go anywhere, beyond that place was Serbia. When that Serb was killed, that night I decided to go home.

Also, after an offensive in '99, I went home. The fighting ended and I lost five of my friends there. Two days later, when I returned home, I said, "Send my wife's uncle and tell my wife that on Sunday she will be picked up." I don't know. While I was there, I just took this decision. I had a different idea but it didn't happen. I took my wife with me to war. To be together with her. I thought that she would be safe. And they took her and they brought her home. I was a soldier of the KLA when I got married. It was another concern for me. I felt that I have more responsibility because I have a wife at home, and I have to take care of her. It was not easy after three days of marriage to leave my wife home and join the army. After two days I left. Sometimes I would come back after a week for one day or night and I would have to go back during the night. It was not easy at all. I tried to take my wife with me but they didn't let me. Where I was located, there were very few women in the KLA, almost none. Women would prepare food in the kitchen or make bread for us, but there were very few female soldiers.

Then I spoke to a superior. He told me, "You and your wife can't stay together. You must be someplace else." I said, "But I want to be with her!" and he said, "It is not allowed." I was truly disappointed. I started worrying a lot. Why did I marry her now, I wish I married her after the war? Because I didn't know what would happen to me. Nobody went to war by saying I will go to fight and survive. I thought that I would not even have a family. Every day I was expecting to be shot, today or the next day.

My wife was the first one to know that I joined the KLA. Before anyone else. When I joined, I didn't tell her. She met with a friend of mine and she asked him about me, "Where is he? I'm trying to find him but he is not answering my calls. I asked many people around. Is he at home or where is he?" And my friend told her, "Well, I am sorry but he went abroad" and she felt disappointed because she thought that I went abroad and I didn't tell her. But I had contacts. I told my friend to tell her, "I am coming back soon, I am not going abroad." She had her doubts because there were rumors that people were joining the KLA. And when I came back, I met her and I told her that I joined the KLA. She started shouting at me, "If you have decided to join the KLA and go to war, why did you get into a relationship with me? Do you think that you will survive? You will get killed! And what will then happen to me? What will I do without you?"

When a soldier got killed there, they removed the people from our village. One night before that happened, I was at home for three-four hours. I told them, "Get ready because tomorrow we are escaping from here." My brother asked me, "Where should we go when all our people are still here?" I told him, "Tomorrow at 5 o'clock, you will see everybody moving". "How do you know that?" and I told him, "Get ready, prepare your things and just go." So, they all got ready. I returned home at eight thirty. When I returned, I could hear everyone walking slowly?

Everybody from the village was on the move because the Serbs started shooting at us, chasing us and ethnically cleansing the area. I stayed with three other people. I will never forget it and very often I mention it. I say, "Tea was never sweeter". I was lying down on a pillow and having tea. After the people left, maybe after an hour, the Serbs shot with an RPG at the house. They were maybe 700-800 meters away. The entire house rolled over because a basement wall made of stone fell over. We went behind the house and they shot at us non-stop. We escaped from there and I got separated with the command and other soldiers. I didn't have contact with them anymore. That was one of the worst days ever. Things were changing from minute to minute. They shot at us for thirty minutes. Thank goodness, we were not shot. As I was walking bullets were flying over my head but none hit me. We went to a nearby village and we asked some people that we knew, "Have you seen my family?" and they said, "Yes, they are alive and they went towards the village Gradice."

After three weeks or so, people started coming back to the village. We were keeping an eye on everybody who was coming back hoping to see anyone we know. People started coming back to their houses. Usually, the villagers were coming to take some food or to see if their house survived. And we, the villagers, know each other so we stopped one person because when you stay at one place you get to see much more than when you are on the move. After ten days we had no cigarettes and he offered us a cigarette. I will never forget it. We asked him, "What are you doing here? Where are the people?" and he said, "All the people that went to this nearby village, they went afterwards to Prishtina. And then they walked down to village Makovc. Then they separated, one group went to Prishtina and the other went back to our village".

We didn't know how many people there were but we knew that our families were there. The person that we stopped knew our families. "Did you see if they came to our village? Did you see any member of our family coming from Prishtina to here?" He said, "I did not see them. I don't know if they stayed in Prishtina or if they came here, I really don't know." He said, "But they must be somewhere... he mentioned a village where my relatives are." At the moment when he mentioned that village, I knew immediately that they were at my relative's house because my aunt lives there and I knew 100 % that they went to stay at my aunt's house. When we knew that they might be there we got ready to enter that village.

I found them there. I noticed immediately that my wife was acting a bit cold towards me. At that moment I didn't know what had happened. I stayed with her that day but I didn't stay overnight because of security reasons and I went away because the people started talking, "Some KLA soldiers have arrived." Also, some Serbs were moving in that area so we withdrew and from time to time I went to visit them.

The war ended and people started going back to their houses. I didn't think of what could have happened. I thought maybe she didn't want to see me because I couldn't take her with me, or maybe because I left her with my family and maybe they behaved badly with her. More than two months passed and we didn't meet. At that time, I met her two-three times when I would go to my aunt's village, but I would stay there only for five-ten minutes because we had to go withdraw immediately. Also, my friend's family was near mine.

After the war ended, the KLA soldiers stayed at the barracks in Prishtina. From time to time, we would go home to rest. Two days we would stay there and the third we would rest. One day, when I came home, my sister told me, "She was in the hospital and she

had an abortion.” I felt awful. When I met my wife she said, “It’s good that I aborted!” I asked her, “Why?” and she said, “Because!” She didn’t want to speak to me. Her words stuck on my mind; I was thinking why would she say something like that? I went back to the barracks, stayed for two days, and then I told my superior that I have to go home.

My wife started crying and she said, “I have to tell you something because I can’t live like this.” I thought she wanted to tell me, “I can’t live with your family”. That’s the only thought I had because I didn’t know what kind of relationship they have since I was not at home most of the time. She said, “I have to tell you something, my life will end.” When she said that her life will end, I thought that something bad could have happened to her while travelling from village to village ... I said to myself, someone did something bad to her. Once, I saw a scar on her but she said that she got it because she fell and at the time, I didn’t know anything. I got curious.

She said, “I was raped by the Serbs.” I had the feeling that the weight of the world got on my shoulders. I grabbed her by her shoulders and I shouted, “Pull yourself together! What are you saying? Do you know what you are talking about?” and she said, “Yes, I know, this is what happened.” I couldn’t say a word anymore! After some time, I asked her, “With whom were you? Does anyone know?” She said, “The sister-in-law knows”, my brother’s wife. She said, “Mother doesn’t know, maybe she does, but she didn’t say anything because I told her that they’ve beaten me up.”

I went out of the house. I didn’t want to see anyone; I didn’t want to talk to anyone. That night I didn’t return home. I can’t describe it. It was the worst feeling ever, the worst thoughts were going through my mind. Different thoughts were going through my head. I remembered the words of my superiors and the people who fought in the war in Croatia. They knew things that we didn’t know. They would tell us what happened and what they did.

I returned home and I took her close to me. Her eyes were full of tears. When I went home it was very cold. Other family members went someplace and just the two of us remained home. My sister went to the city, my mother went to visit her brothers and me and my wife remained at home. I told her, “Listen, this didn’t happen just to you, you are not the only one.” I don’t know how I managed to say those words, how they came out of my mouth. “It happened and you shouldn’t talk to anyone about it.” She said, “You will leave me. I can’t be your wife anymore.” And I said, “As long as I am alive, you will be my wife”. I said, “Don’t talk and don’t tell anyone. Tell your sister-in-law to shut up.” She got better because she thought that I would leave her after she told me. I have never mentioned it again to her. Sometimes when we had an argument about something she would just back down. I guess she was always afraid that I would bring it up. But I never did.

In 2000, I started working. I lost my will. I fought the war for freedom, to live freely, enjoy life, I thought to myself now there is nobody to harass us. In the past we were afraid to go to the city. But when I would go to work my mind was always on my wife. I was always afraid that when I came back, I would find her hanged or that she stabbed herself or took some medicine. Our love was not the same anymore. Everything got very hard, I was trying so hard. I would go to work and my mind would be with her. We lost our house, we had nothing. I had to buy even spoons because we had absolutely nothing.

In my workplace, the salaries were very small. I always wanted to take her and go out but because we didn’t have money, I couldn’t take her anywhere. My salary was 150 Euros. What was I supposed to do with that money? I tried working also privately in the forest in my village. But all the time, up until when my son was born, in my mind I was always afraid that she might hurt herself ... I was thinking that she will do it, it will happen, because she didn’t talk much, she was withdrawn. Always when she would go out, she was quiet. Maybe because I knew and I would notice it, others maybe didn’t notice it.

When she was in a bad mood, I tried to take her out and I would tell her let’s go visit your uncle because he was not feeling well. My purpose was just to get her out and not visit the uncle at all. I would use the opportunity then and we would go for coffee someplace.

At the beginning she was friendly and open but then she became distant and kept to herself and then my family members started telling me, “Leave her, why do you continue staying with her? She is going crazy. Can’t you see? She never speaks a word!” I tried to defend her all the time, trying to get away from what had happened, trying to blame them for bothering her while I am not home. When I noticed that she started worrying a lot, I tried to take her out so she would relax.

When my son was born, it was a special feeling. When I took him in my lap, I felt special because he was my child. In the past I held other children as well but this time it was different. Then my wife started changing as well. She started getting hold of herself because she didn’t have too much time to think about what had happened to her but she was thinking about our son. When our son was born, I started to support my wife even more. I found excuses to go out more, for example I would say we need to take him to the doctor, or we would take him for a walk. When you go out, you socialize with people, talk about different things and you start feeling better. I noticed that this is making her feel better. On the other hand, I had more time and I worked full shift. The salary started getting better. I took a bank loan and I started building my own house. I made the foundation for the house and then I got stuck because I thought that I could make a house with 3000 Euros. It was a positive experience for my wife because I was telling her, “Now we are building our own house and we will move in as soon as we finish it” and I was telling her, “Don’t worry about anything”. When my son was born, it was easier for me because I knew that now my wife will not hurt herself. I felt relieved. And then after a year and five-month God blessed us with another boy. My wife was now getting a bit-tired dealing with two children while I was at work.

We somehow managed to finish the house. At the moment when I went to live in my own house my family started bothering me. My sisters and my younger brother were telling me, “What happened to her? Look at her! Why are you still with her? Can’t you see that your wife is crazy? She doesn’t talk at all.” They started saying that she is beating the children. Maybe she did but there is no one who can convince me that she would beat them because of what happened to her. It would be a mistake to beat them because of what happened. But sometimes if you don’t beat your children, they will make you go crazy. Maybe she beat them up when it was needed, so they would be afraid a bit.

So, I found an additional reason to leave my family, I told them, "You are causing me pressure, why are you interfering in my relationship with my wife?" I got this strength because they crossed the line when they told me that my wife is crazy and that she is beating the children. So, I said, fine, I will take them away from your house.

Somehow, I managed to finish the house and we went to live there. At the moment when we entered the new house my wife changed. I had much more time, I didn't have to justify to anyone where I was going. I would go out and wouldn't come back home all day long. I would take my wife and we wouldn't come back home at all. There was nobody to question us all the time, "Where were you?" or "Why didn't you come earlier?" or "Where was your wife?" because now we were in our own house. I supported my wife even more, we would go and travel everywhere, we would go to Albania. Whenever I would notice that she is worried I would call my boss immediately and I would tell him, "I am taking the week off".

I took her to Albania, we enjoyed walking in the city, we went to Rugova valley, we went everywhere throughout Kosovo. Sometime when I would come back from work and I would notice that she is sad I would ask her, "What's wrong?" she would reply, "No, it's nothing". When we came to live in our house, I started talking more to her, "Don't be a fool. Things like that happen. You didn't do it willingly. It could have happened to anyone anytime; it can happen even today. A psychopath comes, a crazy guy and it could happen again. Things like that happened. You are not the only one. Look at the news, there are 20,000 other women" and she would say, "I have the feeling that everyone knows" and I would tell her, "Nobody knows. Maybe it also happened to the people in our circle but we don't know it." I tried talking to her and telling her that she needs to overcome it, now the children are also here and thank goodness they are healthy. We need to work for them, fight for them. She started getting a bit better but not for long because she always felt that it happened only to her and to no one else and that everyone knows about it.

When we would talk, she wanted to tell me the story and she would tell me where they stopped. I listened only until the part when she said that they entered the yard and then the Serbs arrived. She expressed it in that way, "When the Serbs arrived". I told her to stop...I don't know what happened and how it happened. I know that she told me that someone saw them afterwards on the road all exhausted and they got on a tractor. And if I am not mistaken, they were brought here. But regarding that particular part, maybe it's my mistake, maybe it would be easier for her if she would talk about it, but while I am alive, I would never want to hear that part.

I brought her to the Center of the victims of violence during war. I spoke to her, "You see, there is a place where you can express yourself, tell somebody, talk to somebody." Then I got interested in the organization itself. I heard about it also earlier but I couldn't tell her, "Go there!" She decided herself, "I will go there. They support everybody. Maybe it's better this way. What do you think?" and I told her, "You should go there. I couldn't tell you to but if you want to go, I will take you there."

Some people consider that if you go see a psychologist there is something wrong with you. That's stupid, why shouldn't you visit a psychologist? I always feared that if I told her, "Go because there is a good psychologist there" that she might get hurt. But, when she saw on TV the cases she said, "They treat us like this and that". And after some time, she made the decision herself. We came, I brought her.

First day after she left this place, after she spoke to you, I noticed that she was much more positive. She opened up, started talking and she was saying, "They told me this" and "They told me that" and I was joking a bit and I asked her, "Yes, they said many things but did you say anything?" and she replied, "Not really, I just listened, they were asking me about some things, about life." But I immediately noticed that she became livelier, it seemed as if she was less burdened with that issue. Every time she came, gradually, she got used to it more and more. Now I can say that it's not the same person she was when she first came to your organization. She is 90 percent different; she is much more relaxed.

In these last ten years money was never an issue. I would take my salary, give it to her, "Here you go, manage it, do whatever you want." Poverty was never an issue, having no money, or not being able to travel, or buy things. She had money, freedom, I just told her, "I wouldn't want someone to call me and tell me that they saw you somewhere. I would like you to call me and tell me, I am going to the city or I am going to Prishtina. Just call me and we're fine. Don't get out of the house without telling me. I would like to know where you are. If you meet a friend, a cousin, a niece or anyone from your family, just let me know. I wouldn't want someone telling me that they saw you somewhere and me checking on you." And she never did that to me.

Now we have a great relationship. She is not only my wife; she is also my friend. I always tried to make her be my wife, my friend and my everything. I tried all the methods that I could think of but I was unsuccessful. The biggest success for my wife came from your center. Now we have three children, she started getting a hold of herself and forgetting the past, dealing with the children, but since she came to your center, she is 90% a different person. Maybe I have made a mistake that I didn't let her tell me, but I couldn't find a trustworthy person for her to talk to.

Of course, my wife cannot delete from her memory what happened to her. But I am glad to see that she is much happier now, she is calm, and she talks more to me. Sometimes she talks to me and tells me things like, "My psychologist told me this and I told her that, and then I said this, what do you think? Do you see, I was wrong!" So, she tells me about the psychologist from the Center, she told me about 50-60 times what they would talk about and now I am able to transmit all the sentences that had an impact on her. So, she is focused on the conversation with the psychologist. She says, "The psychologist is smart, she said it for my own good".

Now I have a better life because I see her smiling. When I come home, she comes out smiling. I have 23 years of marriage, except for the beginning when my marriage was in pieces. Now when I go home, she waits for me smiling. It didn't happen before but now she wakes up, prepares coffee and she calls me to have coffee with her. I told her that she doesn't have to wake up early for me. When I wake up, if I want to have coffee, I will prepare one for myself, there is no need for her to wake up. I wanted her to sleep and rest. Now she tells me that she never wanted to make coffee for me.

Very often she tells me, "There was nothing I could do but when I would look at you my eyes would hurt" and I would ask her, "Why, what have I done to you?" and she says, "I am just saying. Why didn't you tell me to get lost? I know what I would have done with my life, with my body!" and I told her, "I thought that I am doing the right thing, I didn't know that I was wrong" and she would say, "No, no. You did the right thing".

Thank goodness, our children are healthy and I have no problems with them. They listen to us; they respect us and especially their mother. I have educated and talked to all three of them. Maybe that issue influenced me in working hard with the children because they make her happier and they are really close with her. In case they don't see their mother for an hour or two, when they see her, they jump and hug her.

We have a very happy life, also from a financial aspect we have all we need. We have a regular house, nothing luxurious. I have a car and if my wife or children would like to go to Albania, I am willing to take them there. In the past I didn't have money and I couldn't take her even to Prizren and I had to find excuses saying that I am busy this week, or that I have to do something, things like that. I had no options and today is a different story. Huge difference.

I say often to myself, "I went to war and fought but I couldn't protect my most precious person." That is my weakness which I have never told a living soul but often I tell myself that I failed. Maybe it was impossible to take her with me but still I regret not doing it. I regret asking my commander about his permission. It would have been better if I didn't ask anyone. It was written for us to have challenges and suffer. It was not easy for me; I often imagine if you fight an enemy and they do that to you and there is nothing you can do about it. Today, when I see sometimes Serbian registration plates, I want to rip them apart.

Just when I see their registration plates, I get angry, I hate them, I used to hate them also before this happened to us. I would wipe them off the face of earth. I swear, I would wipe them off, I wouldn't get too stressed if they have children, or husbands or wives, I wouldn't care who they are and what they are. But I could never do this to any Serbian woman, I could put a bullet in their head but I could never do such a thing. But because of their blind hatred they want you to suffer all your life. It's not sufficient to burn your house because you can rebuild it and that's it. They want you to suffer all your life, to have this concern in your head all the time, something that you can't share with anyone as long as you are alive.

I have never looked at my wife differently because of what happened. Regarding the child that she aborted, when she said, "It's good that I have aborted", we spoke only twice about that. I didn't see that document, when she came back home from the procedure, I asked her, "Did you have the paper at the hospital? What did they tell you?". She said, "No, I don't know where that paper is". When she aborted in that document it was written how many weeks, she was pregnant. But she was scared and she kept it hidden.

Not because it happened to my wife but I wouldn't want something like that to happen to anyone in the world. I felt weak, but I told myself to slow down. War made us stronger. While I was fighting, I knew that things like that are happening but I never thought that it could happen to me. It's the worst experience in my life. I have been through many things these years and I have never experienced a harder moment than when she told me.

When my father died, I was very young and I was very sad because I knew that no one can replace my father. But when this happened to my wife, I was more mature, I knew more things about life. It's something very difficult to cope with. I think that my brain exploded.

After the war ended, I couldn't help myself nor my wife. I overloaded my head. After the war I went to the neuropsychiatry for a month. Five days I couldn't recognize anyone. I had that illness until 2014. I couldn't get too happy or too sad, I always needed to keep a balance. I visited many doctors and a doctor called Mentor Petrela helped me a lot by talking to me. At that time, I was overloaded. I would faint very often. Then I started worrying even more because I thought that I would lose my job.

My doctor told me to get rid of these thoughts, throw them away in the sea because the sea is large. Simply put, I am telling you to take things easy. Just let it go. If you have a task to fulfill, don't push yourself to finish it today, do it the next day. Or the day after tomorrow. Leave some things for other days, don't push yourself too hard."

He really helped me. I tried to use the same words also for my wife, and I would tell her, "Take it easy. Don't push it too hard because it can break". But she would always tell me, "It's easy for you to say because it didn't happen to you". When she would say this, it would shut me off for five minutes because I didn't know what to say then. I couldn't just say, "Things will get easier" or "You will forget it" because it didn't happen to me.

But I tried my best to support her. And if I could, I would tell everyone, go and talk to someone, talk to a professional because it's good for you. I say this because of my wife. It became much easier for me and I am willing to support her even more when I see that she is getting better. I am now willing to support her in different ways, like, take her out for coffee or I would take her someplace, or maybe buy her a small present. These things make her happy.

**“”WHERE DID ALL THAT WEIGHT GO IN
THREE MONTHS, O SISTE, WHY DID YOU
LOSE SO MUCH WEIGHT?”
”I HAVE SUFFERED” SHE SAID.
“I HAVE SUFFERED””**



Hasije is among the women who in each of the two most turbulent years of Kosovo, 1998 and 1999, gave birth to children in each year. Just before the bombings began, while holding an infant at her breast and a little girl over a year and a half old, she was forced to flee to Kukës. Her husband tries to accommodate his parents in Lezha. Hasije remained for four days at the border in a car. Together with the children, there were eight of them in the car.

They continued going to Shengjin, but then they lost contacts with their people. Arriving refugees would continuously bring news about people's family members informing that they have died. After several months of no information at all, when they returned to their burned house, they learned that everyone was alive and they learned that the eldest brother suffered abuse. But when Hasije met her sister, she noticed immediately that she was behaving differently. She insisted in finding out why she was behaving differently.



NOT EVEN MY SISTER AT HOME KNOWS ABOUT IT

I was born in Orllan, municipality of Podujeva. We are seven children, three sisters and four brothers. The sister which was abused by the Serbs is the oldest one, she is three years older than me. I am much younger than my eldest brother. When he got married, I was attending the second, maybe the third grade of primary school. I don't remember it very well. We had a good relationship among us because we didn't have a large social circle and we were all very close to each other. My sister was also close to all my brothers and our parents.

I don't have uncles nor relatives. We grew up only with our parents. We were a very advanced family, we had a normal life, and we had a good life. To be honest, we had good living conditions. My father used to work for KEC and my mother took care of all the kids because we were many children and also my father was wealthy so she couldn't and she didn't need to work. She had to deal with us. My brothers worked the land. They had some hectares of land and two hectares of forest land. Before the war started my father had a shop.

Three of my brothers used to live abroad, the eldest brother returned now. My oldest brother was forced to take my younger brother abroad because the Yugoslav army was looking to recruit him. My eldest had a wife and two children and he had to return because of them. Now my second eldest and my younger brother are living abroad.

So, us three sisters and two brothers are living in Kosovo. I live with my older sister in the same house because we got married to two men who happened to be brothers. Also, my little sister is married, but her husband died two years ago. Now she is alone with two kids. Also, my brothers are all married and we all have children. We all live with our own families.

Even though my father was an imam, he never tried to influence how we live our lives. He used to say, you must respect religion but first you must educate yourself, you must advance. He was always supportive. I finished my primary school. I attended the secondary school, branch of electro technics, but I had to discontinue because of the state regime at the time. We were generation '72-'73 and as everybody knows at that time, we attended classes in private houses. I couldn't travel to school because the Serbian soldiers were located in the middle of the road and we were afraid to go there on foot.

To this day I still regret not going to school. I believe there were three girls from village Orllan that were afraid to travel. Sometimes I travelled together with twelve other boys, friends from the class, on the asphalted road but then it was too much for them and they said, "We're going through the forest because it's shorter". Because of me they were using the long road but then they got tired and I was afraid to use the short road. They were going through the forest, taking the short road.

My brothers took the news hard when they found out that I stopped going to school, much more than my parents. My parents knew that I am scared and when you are scared so much you can't learn anything anyways. But my brothers always had high expectations for me because I was good with math. They had a shop and they needed me to finish math so I would help them in their business. Two-three years after I stopped going to school, some professors that I met, told me: "Come and continue your education, it's not late to finish it". After the war ended, I took classes, passed exams and I finished secondary school.

During the time I went to school I had many friends. I had a really good female friend but she passed away. I had another good friend but she is now living in Germany. All of my male friends are now living abroad. Reason why they're all abroad is because at that time the Serbian regime was looking to recruit them in the army. I haven't seen any of them for maybe 10-15 years. We had a good relationship with everybody. We went to school together, we travelled together, and they never said anything bad to me. We were really good friends. Our generation was like that.

My older brother suffered a lot during the war. He was entitled to a pension, but he never asked for it, he was arrested during the war but he was also arrested in '89 because of the demonstrations. Luckily, my aunt's husband intervened and managed to get him out of the prison. They abused him a lot. Also, during his military service, he was ill-treated. He was born in 1960. My brother dealt a little bit with politics, not too much, because he dealt with health problems.

My brother now has his own business. He underwent an operation because he had a brain tumor. Doctor Mentor Petrela operated on him. After that he had an injury and 18 times they operated his leg, he is now unable to work. But it's good that he can still walk and that they didn't have to cut his leg off. Thank goodness he managed to create a family.

We respect the oldest brother like how the Albanian families do, we always asked him regarding anything and we were never afraid of him. We were very free and open with each other, very civilized. He was not bothered if we would go out or if we went to school. I worked in the shop together with my brothers, I helped them. Even though I was young I worked wherever my brothers asked me. In general, we were free to do anything we wanted. The only thing that I regret is the fact that I didn't continue my education. I could have continued after the war but then the children came and also it was not the right time because everything was destroyed at my in-laws.

In 1995, I got engaged, and after a year, I got married. That's when I gave birth to my eldest daughter. My older sister is married to my brother-in-law. I knew him from before, they were from a very good family, very calm. We have been living together for 25 years, our children grew up together. My sister's daughter has two children, a daughter and a son.

I always had close relationship with my older sister. The younger sister was a little bit different; she was more engaged in helping our mother so I was closer with my older sister. Maybe that's why I noticed that she changed after the war ended.

I have been working since 2004. I was employed just for seasonal work and afterwards we were fired. In 2008, I returned to work. I love working, I don't mind it all. I go to work even if I'm in a bad mood, I've had many worries in my life, after my son was born, but at work I felt happy. I always go there smiling because that's the nature of my character. I am very active at work.

My daughter was born in '97. Afterwards in '98 I was pregnant with my son and then Serbs forced us to leave the house, I believe it was June. I have written about the war experiences and also about the time I gave birth to my daughter, she was born at "Nene Tereza". They would keep us there for two hours only and everybody was afraid that we might have a hemorrhage after giving birth. They didn't have beds to keep us there. I would like to thank the staff that worked at "Nene Tereza" at that time. I don't remember their names because I stayed for only two hours. I remember that the main doctor was very kind to me while I was giving birth and she encouraged me a lot. I wasn't operated on. I gave birth with their help using a sheet. After I gave birth, everything went fine and then without planning I got pregnant again with my son. I didn't have a regular menstrual cycle.

I was pregnant when they forced us to move. They said, "You have to leave the house immediately". They kicked us out of our houses, so we were forced to go to our father's house in Podujeva. When we reached Podujeva, they gave orders to expel people also from there.

So, our family, mother, father, me and my sister, we were all forced to leave. I had my daughter with me and my eldest sister had her three children and her father-in-law. My husband remained here at his place of work; he was working at KEC. We left and went to my uncle and we stayed there for two weeks. I am not sure how long we stayed there but I remember that I celebrated my daughter's first birthday there. There were many people there. Also, at the house of my eldest uncle there were many people. At my mother's uncle house, at that time there were around 50 people.

I don't know how many families we were there. So, we were forced to walk through a vineyard, in order to reach the house of my husband's aunt. It was an uninhabited house but it was furnished, she was staying at Sunny Hill in Prishtina and she said, "You can stay at my house." My husband's family and I went there and my family remained in the village.

After some time, they called us and said, "Come now, they're allowing people to go back to Orllan." My older sister continued staying in Prishtina with her three children. I took my daughter. It was very hard for me, I was pregnant and I had a small girl, I started worrying because I didn't know where my husband was.

My husband was at home but then they forced him to go to another village. There were many people from village Orllan. My husband was unemployed in '98 but he started working in '99. We didn't see each other for two-three weeks. Then one day, I saw him coming with his cousin. Then after two days my husband told me, "Hasije, since we have only one child, I think it's better if we leave. Let my brother continue staying here with his wife (my sister) and with their children and let him also take care of the mother", because their mother was diabetic, "and since the road to Orllan is open we will go and see what happened to our house." People were walking through the forest, not on the main road.

So we went to Orllan. In Orllan, we first found my eldest brother-in-law then the other one. They came to my father's house. When I went there, I saw my in-laws together with my brother-in-law, his wife and four children. As soon as I entered the yard my mother-in-law, who was very ill because of diabetes, came in front of me. My father-in-law was healthy and physically a strong man. I asked them, "Did everybody survive?" People didn't use telephones so much. I told them, "They remained at our aunt in Prishtina and I returned since my parents came back" Then also my brothers came, and my in-laws together with their wives and children stayed at my father's place for ten days.

After some time, we decided to go back to our house, we just cleaned it because they didn't damage it at all. Almost no damage at all. I remember during the entire year of 1998 would write about the situation, but they took those stories at my school. I wrote how they went to Jashari family and how the Serbs wounded their girls during the month of Ramadan.

I would write about everything I heard on the news. I was always interested in taking notes. I wanted to leave a piece of history for my children, for them to understand what we experienced, so that even if we make a mistake, they should know that we are a generation that experienced war and that we suffered a lot. I wouldn't want any person alive to experience what we have experienced. In March of '99, I went to give birth to my son. I went for a checkup at four-thirty. My husband and my brother-in-law (my sister's husband) were there. I always travelled with someone because there was a curfew and you never knew what can happen. We got on the car and we went for a checkup and when we arrived there, they told me, "You walked too much, you will give birth before 9 o'clock in the evening" There was so much pain in that place, they didn't have basic conditions, there were only two beds for women to give birth. When I saw other women there, I lost my contractions because I got scared. Also, the police curfew was in place and I didn't know if my husband and my brother-in-law would stay for me. They didn't manage to go home and instead they went to his aunt in Sunny Hill in Prishtina. At the hospital I tried to help other women who were in more pain than me because I lost my contractions.

Next day in the morning I gave birth. I remember that the pain started and then the main nurse came to deal with me and I would like to use this opportunity to greet her. I hope she has luck and good health in life. She saw me at my father's house in '98. She came through the forest. My father went out and told her, "Girls, come this way. I will take you to the other side." She saw me and then I was pregnant, we just greeted each other. Luckily, she told me that she works in "Nene Tereza" because at that time I didn't know how birth procedures were being done.

When I got out of the hospital, I noticed that I was not feeling well. I noticed that I am getting tired more and more. I told my husband, "Come to pick me up". He said, "We didn't manage to bring anything because we got stuck at our aunt's, I will bring just a blanket or something so we can cover our son because there is a police curfew." So, the nurses helped me get out, I took my son, and I went to the car. While we were on our way to Dumnica, I saw some corpses at the big bridge. It was March of 1999. I wanted to put my head out and to see if there were bodies under the bridge but then my husband and my brother-in-law told me, "Don't look there and don't worry about it". They were trying to protect me because new mothers are more sensitive, for at least a month. Even now every memory is still fresh to me because you never forget your sufferings.

Then I got scared even more. When I went home, my window was facing a checkpoint where the Serbs were staying. I didn't dare turn on the lights to change the baby. I couldn't even breastfeed my baby because my father-in-law told me, "Light can be seen from far away" and they were shooting at people for fun. He said, "Its better if you come to my room because here you can't take care of your child" It was in their tradition not to allow new mothers to come down for a month and during that time mothers were in their rooms. But I couldn't stay in my room. We had good living conditions at my father-in-law's, I can't complain, but I couldn't stay in my room because of those police officers. The Serbs were staying on a hill. They were observing and shooting for fun.

They shot at my husband's neighbor just for fun. Just because he was wearing the white cap, they killed him for no reason at all. We were really stressed, we got scared. I decided to come down from the second floor. I stayed in my father-in-law's room. On March 24th, I remember that my husband and my sister came to see me because they were concerned about me. They could see what was going on and the situation was very bad. My sister said, "Come on sister, get ready because on the news they say that NATO is going to start bombing". My husband came to pick me up. I told him, "You take the daughter and I will take the son". My daughter was a year and seven-eight months old.

When we reached the entrance door, it was as if we planned this to happen, NATO started bombing. The regular Serbian army was located there. Today our army is located there. I was wearing trousers and a red sweater but everything turned green. Since the bombing occurred very close to us, because of fire, the red clothes seemed to be green. I screamed. I thought to myself, "Oh my God, they killed my family". Because my family was surrounded.

My one-month-old baby fainted, I started screaming. I got very exhausted, I started losing weight, and I didn't have enough milk for the baby. I couldn't sleep, I had some kind of depression. This condition lasted for several years even after the war ended, it lasted until 2006-2007. I needed to get some treatment but at that time we didn't have good living conditions.

After that happened the Serbs came and they forced us to leave our houses. Crowds of people arrived and they told us to "leave the houses". I even saw many people getting beaten up. They stopped us and they picked some people from the crowd and they would beat them. We travelled by car towards the border.

On the way to Kukes, the hardest part was when I was at the border. There was nothing I could give my son, I lost breast milk because of fear. I was forced to give him water mixed with sugar instead of breast milk. At the border the queues were very long. Women were coming from Mitrovica and they would beg us to hold their babies for a bit because their legs were all swollen up. We experienced terrible things there. For 7-8- hours they kept us there.

Afterwards, we managed to cross the border. At the border we were very sad because four vehicles in front of us stepped on landmines in the border zone with Albania. They put landmines throughout the road. If you would leave the main road you would step on

a landmine. One entire family died there; they were from the same village as my husband. My husband's cousin was married in that family. She died there together with her 17 years old daughter and her two sons. Five members of that family died there.

I started falling apart, I started losing it, and everything was going wrong for me. My son was giving me a bit of hope but he started getting tired as well. I kept him for four days inside the car. I didn't have my husband near me, only my brother-in-law and my sister were there. My husband was somewhere in Lezha, trying to accommodate his parents because his mother had diabetes. Somebody had to deal with his parents. So, I stayed in one vehicle with my brother-in-law and my sister and their five children, so eight of us. Eight people in one car for four days. I changed the children's diapers in that car because at that time my daughter was still wearing diapers. I would like to thank my mother-in-law a lot. She went out and said, "We don't have a place where to clean the diapers anymore", so we had to rip the clothes that we were wearing and we would put them on the children instead of diapers. We had no other option.

Kukes was full of mud and water. Whenever you would put your leg, you would step on water. That was our luck. We still remember April the 16th because that day it rained a lot. That rain saved us because the Serbs were running away and otherwise, they would have killed us. My father-in-law went to buy Pampers diapers. They were very expensive but we had no other option, we hit rock bottom. I remember when my father-in-law at that moment said, "We need to save the son, and we have to move from here" and we went to Lezha because there was no place to stay anymore. When we reached Lezha, they put us in a house which was under construction. Maybe for 50 years nobody stayed there. It didn't have doors, no windows, maybe it was an abandoned military building, only God knows what that house was. We started cleaning it and we slept on the wooden floor. After some time, my breast started hurting. The Italian doctors came. First, I would like to thank God and then the Italian nuns. They brought me clothes, food for my son, my daughter, and for my sister's children. And then my breast started hurting again but the Italian doctors told me, "There is a wound on your breast but there are no signs of cancer." I guess that because of the stress I lost my breast milk.

Two-three days after we got accommodated, I received the news that my entire family was murdered. My sister and I we didn't have any information but people were coming at the place where we were staying and I personally heard them say this. I didn't dare tell my sister that they killed our father, brother and the little sister. They were saying that they shot at my little sister but luckily, they didn't manage to shoot her. While looking with binoculars they saw my sister and they shot at her but she was lucky. They thought that they killed her. After that happened, she slept in the bathroom. She didn't dare come out of the house for two days. Luckily, she survived.

I heard that they killed my family and every day I got worse and worse. I was losing weight and I didn't have more than 47-48 kilograms. Nobody could recognize me.

After some time, my brother came from Germany and he was looking for us. We were listening to a radio which was being powered with sunrays and we heard on the radio that Hasan Krasniqi is looking for his family. My father's family was isolated in the village

and we didn't have any information about my parents or my brothers. I remember when my brother came and they told us, "Your brother is here" and when we met our brother he just said, "Sisters, you are everything that's left from my family". For three months we didn't know anything about our family. My brother gave us money and he was trying to support us.

My little sister was kicked out four times from her house and she was told to go to Fushe Kosove. She gave birth to her child on January and I gave birth on March. I always thought about her, where she is and how she is.

My brother left two days later because he stayed for a week and he spent too much money. I was changing my son on a piece of wood which I put on some stones. We stayed there from 16th of April and then we found an accommodation in Shengjin where we paid rent at the house of one family because of my son and my mother-in-law. We stayed there two days after Kosovo was liberated. My brother went back to Germany because he was spending too much money.

As soon as the situation got better, we immediately returned home. As soon as Milosevic signed that agreement. At that time, I was in Shengjin staying with that family. Even now I still go for vacation there because they live at the beach and during the war, they took good care of my son. One day, I just saw my husband's cousin coming and he was smiling at me. He said to me, "Hey, someone is here to see you!" And I said, "Who came to visit us? We don't have anyone left!" and he said, "Your brother is here!" I can't describe how I felt in those moments. It was my brother from Kosovo, my brother for whom I thought that he is not alive anymore.

I quickly went into the room and I told my sister, "Come on, our brother is here." She said, "How is that possible?" Then after some time we all gathered together, my brother and my little sister came. KFOR took them. As soon as KFOR arrived, they took my father's family to his house. Serbs stayed for four months at my father's house. I was all destroyed, they wanted to set it on fire in three different places but they didn't manage. We still have the photos. They burned the place where electricity was located, the entrance door and the carpet in the corridor. My father had good living conditions and he had a nice house and they couldn't set it on fire. My mother was telling us, "KFOR soldiers gave us a phone", and they told her to "talk to your sons who are abroad and tell them that you returned home and that you are fine".

When we went to meet the brother, I also saw my little sister. She was not married then. Also, our cousin was together with them. We all gathered and then they told us that the Serbs abused them a lot. They tortured him a lot and now he has undertaken several operations because of that.

Our brother told us, "Get hold of yourselves. Be strong, it's important that we survived" but they were abused and they were suffering. When the Serbs came to our house, they saw the family pictures and they asked my father, "Who are these girls?" because my sisters are very pretty. They are blonde and very pretty. And my father was forced to say, "I don't know them." The army stayed on the first and second floor of the house and my father was forced to stay in the basement. He didn't leave the house. My father told them, "My father and me worked hard to build this house". Then after some time they kicked him out of the house by force. He was then forced to go to the village where my mother and brother were located, isolated.

We decided to come back to Kosovo. I was very tired; I could feel that I am not well but when you hear good news it somehow gives you strength. When we arrived at the house, my father-in-law said to my husband, "We can't take her home." He meant at my father's house because they noticed that I am sensitive and I'm taking things to my heart and my husband's house was burned to the ground. I remember that for the first three months they didn't let me go back to the house of my husband. So, for 5 months I stayed at my father's house and there were 10 people staying there.

After some time, after we all recovered, I remember that my older sister came with her husband. She went to her husband's house because it didn't get burned. We met with the sister after three weeks or maybe after a month. Maybe it was the end of July. I just remember that it was hot outside. We saw that our sister is coming together with her two children and nephew. She had to come faster so she could bring the nephew. Luckily Prishtina survived and it was not burned down.

Our brothers helped us a lot because we had no income. Our husbands and my father-in-law were not working so we had no income. All of them used to work at KEC and then KEC closed down. My brothers were forced to help us. My brother that lives abroad helped us a lot and also my father helped us a lot. Now he left us, he died.

I was tired and I changed a lot but the very moment I saw my sister's eyes I had my doubts. I don't know how and why. She said to me, "Sister, I'm not feeling well and also my son doesn't cry" When we met, first I thanked God that my sister was well. I said, "We thought that we will not find you alive". There are no words to describe how happy we were and how much we hugged each other. When we went up, my father's house was cleaned and renovated. For four months the Serbian military stayed there. We threw away the beds and carpets because they defecated and urinated there, it was nasty. Then they stole goods from around the village and they put all the stolen goods in my father's house. They stole them so they would take them but they didn't have enough time. There were many carpets and blankets. My father went out and informed the people from the village, "Come and collect your things, everybody will recognize their TV set and their carpet".

I am the skinniest from all my sisters but because of the stress I lost a lot of weight. At the moment I saw my sister for the first time we both started crying. But her eyes were full of tears all the time. I started having my doubts, "My dear sister, why are you crying? Now we are together. We are all close to each other and our parents are alive. We have to thank God, we live in front of us" But I noticed that my sister just couldn't get hold of herself. I would ask her, "What happened to you in these three months, why did you lose so much weight?" and she would tell me, "I was in pain and I suffered a lot. First they told us that Arkan's soldiers are coming to Makovc and they will slay and then burn us".

There are many people who were killed in Makovc where my uncle lives. She said, "We were in that group of people. Because during the war I stayed at the uncle's house" she said, "They told us to go to Stankovec, I stayed in Marevc and Grashtice, and we also stayed in the forest"

I started telling her how I suffered because of my breast wound. It was just her and me in the room and we were changing the babies. She was changing her son and I was changing my son. Then suddenly she started crying. I asked her, "What's wrong sister?" I was trying to relax her but even I was not feeling good. She said, "Ah, my dear sister, I must tell you because I can't hold it in me anymore and I hope that no one will ever find out about this except for you, me and God" To be honest, initially I didn't think that this happened. I was afraid that the youngest sister could have been raped because she was a girl. I thought that nobody would touch mothers.

The youngest sister was 22 years old. I thought that only the young girls are being raped and I never would have thought that somebody would rape women that gave birth. When she started talking, she would barely talk and I was insisting, "Tell me!" and then she told me everything. She said, "I was together with my sister-in-law. She is deceased now but she was a good person." She said, "They let her go and they stopped me".

My sister was pregnant at that time and they raped her two-three weeks after she gave birth. My God, how hard it was to listen to what she had to say. She made me swear on my children that I will not tell anyone. I told her, "I swear that no one will ever find out" because she was afraid of her husband's family circle. She has seven brothers-in-law and four or five sisters-in-law because they had two mothers. My sister said, "Since you insist, I will tell you but you have to give me your word that our parents and siblings will never find out".

We have a family relation with my sister's in-laws because my brother-in-law's daughter is married to my sister's brother-in-law, and that's why she was afraid that someone might find out. I kept that word for 21 years, now 22 years. As she was telling me what happened to her, I was feeling pain, maybe more than her. She said, "Fear makes your mind numb". I didn't tell anyone about this for ten years. After ten years thank goodness, I started working and then I told my colleagues. It felt like I was holding a burden. She is a victim, why shouldn't she speak about it? Somebody must speak for our sisters. Our government officials didn't do anything for our sisters.

I shared this with my colleagues. They were mostly men because we were only two women there, I worked mostly with men. There were only two women and maybe we didn't work on the same shift. Now we don't work together anymore.

My colleagues expressed their compassion. Some were saying, "It was war time" and some others were saying, "Talk about it, get rid of it from your mind, let it pass" I also had nerve-based problems. Because of fear my belly button dislocated and I went and visited many alternative medicine practitioners because doctors couldn't help me. It happened during the war. After I gave birth, the problem went away. It took me three-four years until I regained my strength.

My family members noticed as well that we were not feeling well. They were saying, "It's because you gave birth during the war." and that is what we would say as well. I was never fat. I have photos. But my sister had almost 80 kilograms. Where did all that weight go? Why did she lose so much weight? Everybody was asking her, "Is your husband treating you well?" and our family members started suspecting a bit but I never said a word. I started talking about it and getting rid of this burden in order to help our sisters. I started by telling my colleagues.

Then a colleague of mine told me about your organization and he said, "Hasije, why don't you tell your sister to go there?" Two or three of them told me to go but one of them was the initiator. He was a prisoner himself and he knows about the suffering. I told him, "I'm afraid that she is afraid to go there because of her family circle. Her husband knows and he supports her a lot". And it's true her husband supported her a lot. My sister told me, "Never in his life did he mention it to me".

We met very often while I was staying at my father's house. When our brothers would see that we are losing weight and that we're worried they would come and take us out. Neither of us had good living conditions. My living conditions got even harder. We had good living conditions before the war started and then we hit rock bottom. All three sisters were in a similar situation. Our youngest sister was not married. She got married in 2001.

I have this sense of pain but also, I feel hatred. How could they abuse and rape a mother that gave birth just three weeks before? How couldn't they feel pain, I would feel pain for an unknown woman even if she was from a foreign country in Africa. I cannot describe my sister's horrifying experience. My sister experienced another pain in her life because her son doesn't speak at all. He is disabled.

I was always close to my sister but now we are inseparable. We speak for hours on the phone, so she would get rid of the stress. We speak about our families, about our children. I feel sorry for her, not only that she was raped but now her son doesn't speak at all. But she has a daughter that has all good marks at school. She had all straight A's. However, she didn't manage to get into university, she had no help from the government at all. I feel sorry for her. She is not married; she worked a little but now because of the pandemic she is not working anymore.

I try to talk to her, to give her advice, to encourage her, to give her some help. I didn't give her any financial aid because I didn't have good financial situation myself but I talked to her. My brothers and my father helped her with the finances. I have to thank God for the family we have, for the brothers we have. My youngest sister got married at a good family. He had good living conditions and he helped my other sister. Every time I hear them talk about Mufti's family, I remember my sister and I feel pain. Mufti's brother took my sister and my nephew that doesn't speak to Skopje. They took him also to Tirana to cure him, they don't know what happened to my sister. Nobody knows. Mufti's brother helped them a lot because of their son.

I never felt ashamed because my sister is a victim. Why should I? I feel proud of my sister and with her husband who supports her. I would like to thank him because he never said anything wrong to my sister and he supported her and helped her a lot. My sister had different problems with her health, she had blood pressure, stomach problems, and he always supported her. He bought her medicine; he took her out and didn't leave her inside the house. Because I have experienced depression myself and sometimes you get the feeling that if you don't go out in the yard or at least to the door that you will suffocate, you get anxiety and your heart starts beating fast. Her husband took her to see many doctors, more than my husband took me.

I would like to help the entire community, help all of our sisters because they are victims. I want to help them. Why should those victims stay unrevealed? None of them did it willingly. These women are bigger heroes than our fallen heroes. Because our fallen heroes got shot by a bullet and they died. I know that it's very difficult, there were many massacres but this is being massacred and left alive. My sister is a victim of a massacre, not of a rape. She is massacred and still alive. When you do it with your husband you feel a bit of pain let alone if three-four people force it upon you. To be ripped apart, to be bitten, left unconscious. How can you not help them? The entire nation has to help them. This was the first issue that should have been addressed. I wouldn't even talk about other victim's before addressing this issue, for our sisters.

I got information from my colleagues but also from TV about your association because I saw Feride speaking. That got me inspired. I said to myself, why should we keep these things hidden? Why shouldn't I bring my sister to tell her story? She doesn't want any financing; she just wants to be recognized as a victim. Let all the victims speak up, what the Serbs did to our Albanian sisters. Not only to my sister, but to all the sisters. But my sister didn't want to. I have been begging her for more than a year.

I told Atifete, I have told everybody that my sister was raped. My sister asked me, "Are you crazy? What will happen if my husband's family finds out?" I told her, "I will go instead of you and tell what they did to you and how you have suffered. I will tell that you were raped by Serbs, and how much you have suffered in Makovc and in Fushe Kosove and that you were abused four times on the road Prishtina - Fushe Kosove while you were with your three weeks old baby. For that reason, I had to tell my colleagues."

First, I would like to thank God for giving me this courage because she is my sister and I was afraid that this would destroy her family. I have never asked my sister if her husband knows that I know. I have never asked her because it's very hard. I try to protect her. I just couldn't. I thank God for the courage he has given me, and also, I would like to thank my colleagues and the association. I think that this association deserves the biggest merit because they are helping our sisters. I am a woman myself and I know what it would be to experience these things and I would like everybody to reveal their experiences not only my sister's experience.

“WE WERE PUT INSIDE THE POLICE STATION ONE BY ONE. MY TURN WAS AROUND THE MIDNIGHT I REMEMBER IT LIKE IT WAS YESTERDAY, IT WAS RAINING. YOU COULD HEAR SCREAMS COMING FROM THAT PLACE, DIFFERENT KIND OF TORTURES...”



Luli was born into a family which, due to her grandfather's commitments and the geographical position of the house where he moved, became one of the first KLA cells in Kosovo. A teenage boy, he becomes a courier of messages between important figures for the preparation of the war. In '98 he carried weapons for the army. He was arrested right after the attack in Llapushnik Gorge.

He is raped while in custody, beaten, tortured by inhumane methods, fainted, moves from prison to prison. In Dubrava prison he experiences the days of NATO bombing, and the bloodiest plow of the Serbian regime against prisoners during the war. He says it was "completely unconscious, life and death were nothing to me!" The survivors of Dubrava, as soon as the war ends, are transferred to the Nis prison until March 16, 2001, when the international factor intervenes.

In freedom, life goes on, he marries his fiancée. His biggest problem is how to tell his wife the one of kind of torture: rape.



MY MESSAGE IS, DON'T HOLD IT IN YOU!

The living conditions during my childhood were not so good. Just like everybody else during the occupation. Only my father used to work. A small salary for all of us, a family with nine children, five brothers and four sisters, father and mother.

My grandfather and my father were very religious. My late grandfather was involved also in politics, he was punished three or four times by the Yugoslav regime. As I remember, he was involved in the early stages of the movement. He was a gunsmith, a very capable one. Tito held in his hands a rifle that my grandfather made.

Every time when he would make a rifle, they would come and take it away. He would them: "You can come and take it away, but you can't take away my knowledge, I will make another one and you can't stop me". And my father, no, he was never involved in politics.

My grandfather used to be an imam as well but he was not strict, God rest his soul, he was not like some current ones that are quite racist. I was less than ten years old when I remember my grandfather saying "Women must wear trousers!" and that time none of the women used to. Everybody would question him and ask him: "How come you are an imam and you say such a thing?" he would reply "If I have the right to wear trousers then so should they". He was a very open-minded person, everybody loved him. He was close to everyone. Whoever had a problem, he would solve it. Everybody loved him. He was a very capable worker and he used to work in a factory.

I grew up in a childhood without a TV, nor radio, absolutely nothing. Until later, we didn't have anything because we were punished from Serbian regime, former Yugoslav regime. They took all of my grandfather's land and they put him on a mountain. It was only a house

there, in the middle of some valley. Our house was kilometers away from the village. Only the sky and the forest can be seen from the place where our house was located.

My father went away when I was 11 years old. He went to Switzerland. Then there was a possibility to get electricity like everybody else but no, the Serbian regime never allowed us. When father went to Switzerland, our living condition improved a bit. He brought us a TV which we rarely watched, only when we had gasoline for the generator.

My father was always pro-education, since the time before the war, before it became normal to see a boy and a girl walking alone. My father used to be a very good pupil at the school, but grandfather didn't allow him, neither did the regime since we were persecuted by them. But my father used to tell my sisters "Do you want to go to school? Go ahead, go! I will support you all the way. But when you go to school and you fall in love with a boy, please tell me, it's not a problem. I will check him out and everything will be fine". So even such a long time ago he was very tolerant. He is still alive. He can't stand injustice. He treated equally all the daughters and sons. He told his daughter: "If you don't want to go to school, I will not set you up for marriage or engagement without you seeing the man first yourself". He brought to the house her man and she saw him. It was a normal thing and everything went fine until the war started.

As an 11 years old kid somehow, I got to be responsible for the family. Grandfather died when I was 10 years old and then father went away so I was taking care of my brothers and sisters as I was the eldest child. One sister is older than me but I was the oldest from the boys so I had to take care of the family. It was very hard to do so at that age. If you told someone now that I took care of the family at the age of 11 it would be unimaginable for them. But I had to provide wood for the winter myself by using my shoulders. All by myself. With a lot of effort.

I was also going to school and during weekends I used all my free time to carry wood on my shoulders because we didn't have a carriage. We carried wood together with my sister, in order to prepare for the winter. Our house was a kilometer and a half away. We also had to provide flour for the winter. Winters used to be very harsh, not like nowadays. Buying the flour and carrying it slowly with a wheelbarrow so we would have enough to pass the winter.

I had extremely good relationship with my brothers and sisters, especially with my older sister. At that time my older sister was like a brother to me because she was two years older than me. She always stood by my side. When I would go to the forest to cut wood, she would always be there with me. If I would go to the village to do something or fix a fence, she was always there with me. She was my right hand and she still is. I have four other brothers and four sisters but with this sister I was inseparable up until the time she got married. But even today I am still closer to her rather than with other siblings.

Nobody dared to help us out because our families were surveilled by the police. Almost everybody gave up on us and the people from our village were afraid to give us help because they were forbidden to do so. They were surveilled by the Serbian regime.

When family takes one direction, also the children follow those steps. When you grow up in that kind of environment, you have no options but to follow those steps. When our army started appearing, so during the early movement, they always came to our house. There was no other way to reach our houses, only one way. And our liberation army felt safer at our house.

So during the early beginning when they appeared for the first time in 1994-1995 they stayed at our house all the time. If you would tell someone that Liberation Army existed in Kosovo at that time, nobody would believe you. Since 1994 they were always at our house. Usually, they would come during the night so the children wouldn't see them. Their movement was very limited but we had our houses near the forest so there was no problem. They stayed for days and nights at the guest room. All this happened after my grandfather died. But then my uncle was there every time. He was also a soldier.

I was pretty good at school. I started primary school when I was eight years old, since I was the eldest son. They took me to school a bit late because the winters were harsh then. The teachers there were persecuted. All the former prisoners were, and always since childhood I was their liaison. I would secretly send them back and forth letters. I did it since I was 11 years old because father was not there, we were all alone.

When I finished the eighth grade, I started the first level of the secondary school. I had friends but not so many. Friends my age had other friends, but our friend group was smaller and we didn't go out and play with other kids. But I completed only the first year. When the second year started in September because of the pamphlets

we made the police was looking for us. So, I was forced to leave school. We started the second year and if I am not mistaken two weeks later the police came and kicked us out. We had to discontinue going to school. After that I dealt with cattle, in the forest.

I had a relationship with my uncles since a long time ago. There was a man early in the movement and he always kept contact with us. I joined the national movement, and very rarely did I go out to the market or do something. Mostly my sister would go out and she took care of us until she got married.

Father helped us a lot from Switzerland. He would come occasionally but they maltreated him. My uncle or my brother would go to the police station but not me, I was afraid. My uncle at that time used to work at a factory. When my father would plan to come to Kosovo for a visit, my uncle had to go to the police station to inform them how many days he plans to stay and on which day he would come, he would then obtain a document from the police and then my father would come. When my father would decide to go back to Switzerland, he had to go to the police station and inform them "I will leave tomorrow at this time".

I started dealing with the army much more. Since I was 11 years old, I was with them. And when the war started, I was inseparable with them. But today ... I am very disappointed with those things. I am not against the things I have done for my country. We were indebted to the country, but the way our people lost the values and diminished the struggle, I never imagined that such a thing could have happened.

War started for me in 1995. I was visiting my cousins, my father's first cousins. They were living in Germany but they came for vacation and I was staying at their place. We would go to them because they had a television, better living conditions. I remember Serbian police came to their place and took my cousin away. In matter of second I managed to escape from there. They entered inside the house yard. It was winter, snow, lots of ice. I went out through the window in the corridor, behind the house, because I was always ready to escape. I always tried running away and away but at the end I ended up in prison.

The same day they took my cousin and they sent him to the police station where they told him "You have a traffic fine for your vehicle". They did this only to take money from him because both of them were working in Germany. They maltreated him; they beat him up. Then they would non-stop ask for weapons from them.

Just because they had money. The spies that cooperated with police would tell them "This one has money, ask for weapons". And they didn't have anything because they were not involved in those things. So, my cousins were beaten up, maltreated and money was taken from them.

My duty was to carry the weapons. I was in Albania seven times. I was very young. I used to carry their documents, from Berisha, from ... Very few people knew what KLA was. When they appeared for the first-time wearing masks, they were more open to the public. We would go wherever they would take us; I was a bit younger, so people wouldn't doubt that I am dealing with these things. Nobody ever thought that I was involved because I was very young, ordinary, just a child. But I always did their tasks.

When the war started in 1998, I was home. We never left our house. In December of 1997, since we had two houses, they asked us "Would you allow the KLA to use one of your houses and you both families to move in the other house?"

Then my family stayed at my uncle's family most of the time, because our house became like headquarters, even before the capture of Llapushnik gorge. When the family went to stay at my uncle, I would visit them often. My mother, brothers and younger sister stayed there but also my uncle's living conditions were not good. And I had to take them away from there, they couldn't stay anymore.

Luckily, my mother is still alive but she is very tired. She has a high blood pressure. My mother had a great role in my life, since childhood she was both my father and mother. I tried to respect her. She was very strict in every aspect, regarding money and other things. She did not finish school but she always counted the money to the last cent. During the daytime she couldn't do it so she did it during night. She knew where every cent is going to be spent. She suffered a lot because of me. I joined the army very early and she was there for me all time day and night. While I was free maybe I didn't appreciate her so much but this changed when I was imprisoned. When I was imprisoned, my mother suffered a lot.

In '98 when the army started the offensive to capture the Llapushnik gorge, my mother and the rest were at my uncle's house. I went there and a soldier, now a martyr, told me "We need you much more without a uniform rather than wearing a uniform". I risked a lot. I went to Prishtina many times to take money in order to bring supplies for the army. I was a civilian; I was not wearing a uniform and holding a rifle on my shoulder. So, my task was to bring money and letters to Adem Demaçi and the army at that time.

In '98 when the Llapushnik gorge offensive took place, it was July and a friend told me "Go to your family!" I told him "But it's the same, here and there" he said "The situation is not good. You must go to your uncle, to your family". I told him "I am safer here rather than at my uncle's place" and he told me "Listen, go to your family". As soon as the Llapushnik gorge fell, the Serbian forces entered, I remained at my uncle's. We stayed there until the September offensive, which took place on 25-26-27 September 1998. On 27th I was imprisoned, caught by the Serbian army and police.

They took us to the police station in Shtime. At the police station yard there were some garages full of men which were brought there. Sometime at 2 or 3 in the afternoon they started taking us one by one and checking with paraffin if anyone used a weapon or gunpowder. We were put inside the police station one by one. My turn was around the midnight. I remember it like it was yesterday, it was raining. You could hear screams coming from that place, different kind of tortures were taking place.

I entered, they prepared the paraffin sample and I was waiting to be interrogated. Then two police officers just grabbed me and put me inside the bathroom. I tried to resist but it was impossible. I was screaming and shouting while one of them was holding and pushing my head down. The other one, by using a knife removed my trousers and belt and ... the first one raped me.

I don't know their names. If I would see pictures, I would recognize them. Unfortunately, Hamze Hajra is not alive anymore because he would have recognized them. He was a translator at the police station. While I was screaming and shouting, this Hamze Hajra heard me and he saved me. He saved me from the second one, because the first one did what he intended to do. But Hamza came, kicked the door and pulled me out and then they didn't interrogate me anymore. He didn't take me to the place where they were interrogating people. He threw me out. I had a problem even when I was out. Others who were being interrogated were all coming out beaten up. And I came out without being beaten up. Then everyone was asking me "What happened to you? Why did they beat us up and you were not beaten up?" I was unable to tell them what happened to me. Because, when Hamze Hajra pulled me out from the bathroom, he told me, "Don't tell anyone about what just happened". And I never told anyone except my cousin, I told him. That night we stayed at the police station hungry and thirsty. We were drinking water only when it would rain, when water would drip from the cover because we didn't have any water.

Next day they prepared a list. They prepared two full buses to go to Prishtina. On 28th September, the next day, we were brought to the prison in Prishtina. Then the prison maltreating started, just like the S.U.P. (S.I.F. - Secretary of Internal Affairs) knew how to maltreat people. They interrogated us for three days in a row; I was tied for 48 hours and questioned about everything. All the questions were about the Liberation Army and they had photos; they just wanted to maltreat me because they had all the photos: photos of the Liberation Army, of everyone who was a soldier. Whoever was killed they put an X on the photos.

They tortured us in every possible way. They would put needles under our nails in order to force us to talk. They were asking about everybody, about Azem Syla, about Ymer Elshani, about leaders of KLA, asking where they were. They interrogated for 48 hours and I didn't drink or eat anything. In such times a person doesn't think about food, you can survive without food but without water it was very hard. I was tied to a radiator and there was a small table in the middle.

One of the officers was throwing at me a 1.5-liter plastic bottle full of water. Initially I tried to defend myself because my hands were tied but that was done to psychologically destroy me. I was young, 18 years old. After 48 hours, the S.I.F. officers changed. But I was unable to talk after 48 hours. My tongue got thick. I barely spoke and said "I am unable to talk if you don't give me water". He said "Yes, but you will drink it the way I tell you to!" I told him "Just untie my hand". The bottle was on the table and seeing it but being unable to drink is worse than death itself. He untied my hand and I took it. I know that I drank the water and then I lost my memory. I lost consciousness immediately. Then I just saw myself, waking up after some time in the room.

I was heavily abused, beaten up, broken. They took a boiled egg while it was hot and they put it in my armpit. I was thinking to myself at that time "It would be better if they would kill me rather than what is happening to me". And then the trial started, the judge was Danica Marinkovic. She told me "Starting from today you will be safe because when you appear in front of the judge – and I am investigating judge – you will be safer".

I have talked always and maybe that is why I suffered more. I was always stubborn, I never backed down. I was the same in front of the judge, same in front of the UDBA officers (Yugoslav State Security Administration) when they interrogated me, same in front of the court – our judge was called Dragoljub Zdravkovic – and I never agreed with what they had to say. For the first six-seven months I didn't think too much of the rape, it was just like a foggy memory. But after we went through the heavy abuse, it became harder and harder for me. Years are passing by and the issue of rape is not fading away but it's getting harder every day. In every movement of anyone, when I hang around with family members whenever I hear someone talking, I think "They are talking about me, they found out!". It's a very heavy burden for me.

I stayed for six months in Prishtina's prison. You can't imagine how they abused us. After six months they took us to Lipjan prison. It was a rule, like a house rule that whenever you would be transferred from prison to prison you would get beaten up so hard that there are no words to describe it. When the NATO bombing started, I was in Lipjan prison.

From Lipjan they took us to Dubrava's prison. In Dubrava we received more bread. They removed the prisoners from there and they converted it to a military base. When we went there all the prison doors had holes made by knives. In Dubrava they brought all the political prisoners: Ukshin Hoti, Avni Klinaku, Nait Hasani,

Bislim Zogu and Enver Dugolli from Srem of Mitrovica, all of them were together with us. When they brought me to Dubrava, I had the opportunity to talk with Ukshin Hoti, Nait Hasani and Avni Klinaku. I socialized with Avni also in Nish prison, after the Dubrava massacre ended.

On 16th of May 1999, it was a Sunday, I remember it as if it happened yesterday, they released Ukshin Hoti. He and two other persons were released that day. Unfortunately, I don't remember the names of the other two persons. On 19th of May they bombed the prison for the first time, they bombed only one pavilion and we broke the doors and we went outside, because the guardians were also running away during the bombing. On the 19th they bombed only once, then on the 20th they bombed once the second pavilion but not where we were located. When they bombed the first time, one person was killed, he was from Ferizaj. When the bomb hit a part of the ceiling fell and killed him because he was locked in isolation.

On the second time, on 20th they bombed only once one pavilion and on 21st they bombed all day long the entire prison. All the objects inside the Dubrava prison were bombed. We broke the doors and went outside. We were in front of the kitchen when they started bombing. First, they bombed the central heating. The second projectile hit the kitchen; we were in front of the kitchen and from there we went outside to the sports field.

That night we slept at the sports field. We were not safe inside from the bombing. We took some blankets, some thin mattresses that we've had on our beds and we placed them on the sports field. We could hear them moving all night long and talking. They were saying "Serbia is done". There was movement all night long and in the early morning one of them came out from the observation tower and shouted through a megaphone "Everybody line up. We want to count you and remove you from here because it is not safe here anymore" And as soon as we formed the line at the sports field, they suddenly started shooting at us with Kalashnikovs, snipers and throwing hand grenades at us. More than 20 years have passed and I still don't understand how I survived when they started shooting at us.

There was a small slope which protected us a lot from their shooting. Personally, I prayed to God, because only God decides when your soul will be taken, and I prayed my soul to be taken. It is better to be dead than to hold such a burden that I have. And 100 times I have prayed to God, "Take my soul, and don't let me live". Because I feared that if someone would find out then life would be unbearable for me.

We stayed for another four days there. And we were hiding in every possible place, sometimes in the kitchen basement and other times in the sports field. We hid also in the sewer shafts because in the Dubrava prison the shafts were big, maybe two by two. We would hide wherever we could and if they noticed just the slightest movement, they would shoot at us with a sniper. That day we were hiding in the kitchen basement, constantly agonizing that "any minute now they will come for us, to execute us".

I didn't care anymore. I was praying "God, I hope a bullet will hit me so I would not live any longer with this pain". My throat tightened and because of the memory of what happened to me I couldn't breathe. But nothing happened to me. God didn't allow it. And here I am today.

We hid all night long and the next day they entered the prison. They were shouting "Surrender!" and we were already surrendered, we didn't have weapons, we were prisoners. They entered and they started throwing hand grenades in sewer shafts and kitchen basement which were full of prisoners. At that time regular army arrived. We would tell the difference because they were younger. And the paramilitary forces and reservists were older persons. And then when they arrived then for a half an hour or more, they were shooting at each other. One was screaming "Do you want me to cut your head, I have a quick hand?". All this because they dressed up and armed the Serbian prisoners as well. We know who they are, we have their names and photos, everything. So, for a half an hour they fought with each other. Then the regular army entered and one from their lines shouted "Nobody dare shoot another bullet!" he said "We are the regular army", "Don't try to escape across the walls, because whoever gets close to NATO will get killed". He also said "We are also endangered and there is nothing we can do".

We went out. We started gathering the wounded, there were over 300 wounded persons in the cruelest way. We gathered the bodies, the deceased, and we started writing their names, last names, and we folded the papers in a plastic bag and put it with the deceased so they would have some sort of identification, we did what we possibly could. We covered them, because it was May, high temperatures, the smell ... We stayed there with the corpses for four days. The bodies started smelling very bad. We were hungry. All of us became emotionless; life and death meant nothing anymore. It became all the same, you get killed, you don't get killed, all the same.

Four days later they removed us from there, they returned us to Lipjan prison. We stayed there for another three weeks. On 9th of June in the evening they tied our hands so strong by using ropes that prisoners were getting sick. They untied us the next day and on 10th of June 1999 we were sent to Serbia. The "Nish Express" bus came and took us, I remember as it happened yesterday, took us to Nish prison. At that time, I was still not convicted. Then we went in front of the judge and they sentenced us ... Even though the war has ended they still continued abusing us, while the Milosevic regime was in place, they abused the Albanians a lot. But when Milosevic regime fell, we he got arrested, it became a bit easier for us. They didn't abuse us anymore because Red Cross came and also international organizations started visiting us, so the situation started calming down. From that moment we were not ill-treated so much anymore but we just had to serve the sentence which we were issued. The guardians in Nish wanted to guard us because we were giving them good cigarettes which we would receive from home.

My mother came to visit me at the prison in Nish, but the trip caused her car sickness. My mother came together with Enver Dugolli's mother and with Bislir Zogu's mother. All of them got in one vehicle and came to visit us. They told us that we have to speak in Serbian language with them but my mother didn't attend school for long. I told them "But I have to explain in Albanian language everything that happened, she didn't go to school". So, we decided not to go out, better not to see them rather than talking in Serbian language. None of them spoke Serbian language. Our mother never knew Serbian language. Women never knew Serbian language.

So, we appealed with the lawyer for human rights in Serbia ... I don't remember his name but he was an Albanian. He visited us and we made a request that, if we have the right for a visit, we must be able to speak our native language because our mothers don't speak any other language. And then they allowed us. My mother then came for the second time and she came together with my fiancé because I got engaged before I was imprisoned. They were also treated badly. My mother didn't know the rules that she is not allowed to give anything to me, that we are supposed just to talk. And she knew that I was always fond of watches. So, when she saw that I don't have my watch she took out hers and wanted to give it to me. "You can't!". That day three times my visit had to be interrupted. I spoke more with guardians, explaining my mother, rather than talk to my mother. I feel sorry for her because she suffered a lot because of me. Every time she came to Nish she would be holding an infusion. She gets carsick easily. We tried to give her different medicaments, but they were useless.

My fiancé would come together with my mother. We got engaged in 1997. She always stood by my mother. Her father came very often to visit us.

In year 2000 the Serbian prisoners were asking to be exonerated. They broke everything and they set the prison on fire. Huge riots occurred. We remained locked. First floor was intended for prisoners with regular offences and we were located on two floors above. On the second floor the Gjakova prisoners were located, 145 of them and we were on the third floor. We barricaded the door because there were many of them outside, many were drug addicts. For ten days the situation remained like that. Natasa Kandic and Flora Brovina came to visit us. Flora was released from prison two weeks prior, or maybe a month, I am not sure.

In June of 2001 we received the news from the court that in Serbian parliament they adopted the law for exoneration, after pressure from internationals. I received a letter that I will be released. I was sentenced for holding meetings with the intention to separate Kosovo from Yugoslavia and creating Great Albania. We were accused that we went to Albania, carried weapons and held meetings how to separate Kosovo from Serbia and to join Albania. We were accused with articles 125 in connection with article 136, for terrorism.

Red Cross came to take us, it was a Friday. They welcomed me in Pristina because KFOR didn't allow anyone to come close to the border. I came to Pristina where my entire family waited for me. It was a huge contrast. When I was imprisoned all of them were very small, my brothers, everybody. And now when I left the prison, they seemed to me like they all grew up. I went home, big happiness. Father came from Switzerland a week later because he couldn't come earlier. He stayed for a week and he was saying "I will go to Switzerland for a month and then I will come back and organize a big wedding for my oldest son" but my in-laws convinced him otherwise. Everybody convinced him "We will do everything, you can go". Father also didn't have much time to stay. I got married a month after I was set free. And then we were celebrating and I didn't have too much time to think of what happened to me. When my son was born, it was a bit easier for me. But as the years were passing, instead of getting easier it just became harder and harder for me. I was always afraid that someone will find out. Always afraid and under pressure, always feeling guilt, afraid that someone might bring it up! Even today, if I hear family members talking, my mind will be "They found out, they're talking about me!". That feeling is causing me problems, it's not going away but it's getting harder and harder every day.

My second son was born two years after. In 2015, I had my youngest daughter. Since June of 2004, I rented a house in Prishtina. And I left only to stay as far as possible in case anyone ever finds out. When we rented his house, my younger son was only two-three months old and I remember for four days and nights we were eating from a small pan, barely surviving. My wife is like that, she doesn't give up. We would go to my in-laws and they would ask us: "How are things going?" I would reply "Everything is good, we're doing well" and in reality, we didn't have food at home. I just came out from prison; I couldn't find work because it was July and it was hard. I left the house years ago and I am staying with rent because of my issue. I never had any problems at home with the family members. I did it just because I was afraid that they might find out.

Then the law for status recognition was adopted. Our Center for Rehabilitation used to be near the Students Canteen, somewhere there. I went four-five times up to the place where the German Eye Clinic was located. I went four-five times and I returned. I simply couldn't speak to anyone. And when the law was adopted then I went. We waited for a year after we applied until they accepted. Now it is much easier.

But the biggest relief for me was when I told my wife. I told her before my status was recognized. I couldn't believe that she will react the way she did, but thanks to God, I have her full support. And I know that she helped me a lot. Every time when I talk to her, she tells me: "Listen, that's in the past now. Look forward to life, just think positively, and think about the children". She tries to make it go away for me. But that is something that will never go away, it stays in the heart, and my wife knows very well, but she is always supportive. She is my right hand.

And it's always on my mind, even when I talk to my wife, I say: "What if the children find out?" and she tells me "No one will find out!", she supports me a lot but my biggest concern is what if the children find out tomorrow, then what? Maybe nothing will happen, but a man always thinks of the worst.

My message is, don't hold it in you like I did for so many years. It would have been better if I spoke to my wife earlier. Since I spoke to her, I feel such a relief. Talk to your close ones, to the ones you trust more. Don't hold it in because it will destroy you. I know that these concerns will never disappear for us; we will take them to the grave. But at least share this experience with your close ones. Personally, since I arrived here and spoke to you and to my wife, I am much relieved!

“I THOUGHT ABOUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES BUT THE RAPE ITSELF IS EXCRUCIATING! IT’S SOMETHING THAT YOU DON’T WANT TO DO, BUT YOU’RE FORCED TO. IT IS VERY HARSH; I WORRIED A LOT. I WOULD PUT MYSELF IN THAT POSITION. THINKING ABOUT THE HUSBAND, THE CHILDREN, THE FUTURE, THINKING ABOUT EVERYTHING. THINKING ABOUT EVERYTHING BUT THE PAIN THAT YOU’RE EXPERIENCING. BUT SHE NEVER GAVE UP. JUST BECAUSE OF US!”

Merita

Since the war ended, Merita grew up feeling emptiness because of her father’s absence. Not that she doesn’t have a father but he was never there for her. He is a director of a company in Germany and rarely does he come to visit his wife and two children in Kosovo. Curious to understand the reason for his coldness and the endless tears of her mother pervaded Merita’s entire childhood, and even shaped her character.

And if this was not a sufficient burden while they were growing up then the life of these two children and their mother was made even more difficult by living under the same roof with the family of the father’s brother, the uncle of the two children, where they had to endure everyday comments and rude behavior of the uncle’s wife against them because the brother-in-law turned his back on them. When Merita turned 16 years old she became more mature, she understood the truth which was as old as the war itself.



WHEN I FOUND OUT I COULDN'T JUSTIFY HIM!

I am 24 years old. I grew up in a village called Jezerc and it's the best village I've seen. Not only because it is my village but this village has everything you need. We had very good living conditions. I remember when I was 5 years old my mother took me to preschool. It was a very good school, I had good classmates and my teacher taught us almost until the fourth grade. It's one of the best periods of my life and I remember it fondly.

My father did not come often, he was staying in Germany. He had a construction company with his own employees. I grew up with my mother. I have only one brother. We stayed together with two uncles where one of them had five children and the other had four. We all lived together. After the war ended my father didn't come that often, so my mother took care of us.

Mother worked with hand embroidering. An organization was located near our house and some women would come and give her work with embroidery. My mother was very good at it, when she was a young girl she learned how to embroider and sew. My mother says, "We would earn money for our work and that would make our life easier, but also it was enjoyable because women from the neighbourhood would gather and we would meet, talk and socialize".

During the time when my father was not there, my mother played the role of both my father and mother. She took good care of us. My uncles behaved well with us until a certain point, but then one of the uncles built his own house. My father built that house but my uncle went to live in it without any prior agreement and we stayed living with the other uncle and from that moment the situation among us just worsened. My uncle's wife, the one with whom we were living was a very difficult person. She was very jealous of my mother, "Why is your husband living abroad and mine isn't?" Or when she would wash the clothes, she had five children and my mother had only two, she would always complain, "The laundry detergent is being spent!" Father would sometimes send money but my

uncles misused it and then he got disappointed with them. At the beginning there was a connection between my mother and father but as the time was passing by my father would come very rarely and that connection just faded, we really missed him.

I spent the best period of my life while I was at school. I used to be a good pupil. When I started growing up, both me and my brother, we understood that the fact that our father isn't coming back became an issue for the people around. I had the feeling as if we were in the center of attention. It would make me feel worthless. I was afraid of being judged. And as much as I was saying, "My father is abroad!" deep down I knew that it was pointless because I knew that he is just not interested in us. My mother wouldn't tell me why father isn't coming back.

I would see how my uncles behaved with their children and I would envy that feeling. My mother did her best around us, she taught us and educated us, but we felt the absence of my father a lot. Especially when we were with our uncles and we would see their children with both parents.

I remember when I started asking my mother, but now I don't remember what she would tell me. When I turned 12 years old, I started understanding some things more or less and I started missing my father's care. I remember when he would arrive from Jezerc and he would buy things for me, chocolates and other things. Even though these are minor details, I remember him as a kind person.

We were of similar age with my cousins and we played different games together, we played with a rubber band, with strings, hide and seek, hula hoop. We had walnuts, we would plant beans, harvest beans, we took corn cobs, just like life in the village has it. We would help the elderly in the fields in the morning and evenings.

Since five or six of us were of a similar age we would go to school together, maybe someone was two-three years older but we would all go together to the school in the morning or evening depending on the schedule. We had a really good time because we were all children, but as soon as they grew up, they got influenced and they started asking us why our father wasn't coming. They had a bad influence. They were asking us, "Where is your father? Why doesn't he care about you?" and as they were growing up, they heard their parents saying, "He is not coming back. He doesn't know where his wife and kids are." They were saying that my father has another wife abroad, that he has other children.

I remember that my uncle's wife made me cry very often because she hated me and she behaved badly with me. Once she told me once: "You are a scoundrel!" and that is something very harsh to say to a child. I remember I would go to the second floor and I would cry in our room. My mother was protecting me.

But it's not easy when your father is not there to protect you and tell her, "You can't say that to my child!" It's different. Also, the child wouldn't shed a tear anymore, because its heart wouldn't tremble. I was a quiet child. I would hear the wives of my uncles arguing with my mother and that would influence me. Then when I was in school, I never wanted to argue with anyone because I was afraid, they would intimidate me. I lost my self-confidence.

I never gathered strength to stand up against anyone, to object, to protect myself. If my mother would tell me something bad, it would destroy me. I always dreamt of my father protecting me, to tell my uncle's wife "Don't dare say that to my daughter. Take care of your own kids!" but I never had that. Mother took good care of us. My school was good and it was close to the place where we were living. Every time I pass by it, I feel like crying. I have many good memories, but also bad memories. I had good schoolmates. I studied, I loved reading. When I would read, I would forget everything about how they were behaving with us at home. I remember when some foreign investors came and they repaired the library in the village, it was perfect, they supplied it with computers, tables and many good Albanian books. My teacher from preschool, the one that taught me until fourth grade was appointed head of the library and that was an advantage for me. He knew about my situation; he knew that father didn't come for years. He would support me. He died several years ago and I still regret why I didn't go to meet his wife or at least go to visit his grave. He didn't live far from me. He was a good man; he would pat me on my head and when he was doing that I would imagine as if my father was doing it.

My first cousin was in my class, she was the daughter of that uncle's wife that was always complaining. My teacher liked her as well but not as much as he liked me. My first cousin could see that the teacher likes me more and she was very jealous. It was hard for me when I would see how my uncle was helping her and I would envy that. Both parents have their own roles. You can't say that a mother can replace a father or vice versa. My mother talked with us a lot. She never gave up, or at least she didn't give up in front of us, she tried to keep us in a good mood.

I had two really good female friends. I also had male friends. The boys were good in general, maybe even better than the girls. In general, they were more reasonable, very polite and very good persons. I would like to meet them again but now it has been 11 years since we left the village and it has been a while. Some of them went to study in Pristina, we are all scattered around.

Sometimes we go to the village. But we don't have our own house there. We go there on the occasions when we have to congratulate or express our condolences towards someone, depending on the occasion. But we don't go to stay there for a longer time because of what I experienced there. However, we have our land there. The thing that makes me the happiest when I go there are the mountains. School. Childhood memories emerge from the time I was in school. There were two fields there, the football field and the volleyball field. I loved playing volleyball. Girls would divide into groups and we would play together. Sometimes even my first cousin behaved well with me, when her mother didn't influence her. But when her mother would argue with us then even the children wouldn't have a good relationship with us. My brother didn't pay attention to her at all, just like boys do. But he also did not have any kind of support. He wouldn't react and he wouldn't say a word but I was different, if my uncle's wife would provoke me, I would hold it and hold it but eventually I would explode and say something. Then I would feel sorry for my mother.

The hardest period was when they started arguing. We couldn't stand my uncle's wife anymore. Then my mother said, "It's better if we leave!" She spoke to her brothers because my aunts and uncles always supported us and we left village Jezerc because there was no point in staying there anymore. So, before I turned 13, we left. It was around 2009 or 2010. My uncle's wife was intimidating us and I noticed that each and every time my mother was getting scared more and more. When I was young, I didn't understand that much. Even when we left the village, I would see that my mother is still worried, she was continuously crying.

I know that my mother called my father and told him, "I am not staying here anymore! I will take the kids and I will leave because I can't stand it anymore." I don't remember well but I think he told her, "Leave that place!" and he found us a house where to stay, without him coming here at all. He gave us someone's phone number and we went to Ferizaj. It was a three floored house and we were staying on the second floor. The owners were staying on the first floor. On the third floor a family

would come occasionally to live there but I don't remember them well because they didn't stay for a long time. We rented the house for three years. Mother had a very good friend and she was the owner of the bakery. She would go there and take bread for us. Her friend told her, "I need a cleaning lady!" Then my mother accepted and she would go and clean the baking trays and the entire premise and it was not a hard job. She was working part-time and she was paid well. So, mother took care of us with the money that she earned. My father wasn't interested in us. I know that he got ill, got diabetes and started losing his sight.

I was 13 years old when we moved to Ferizaj. I continued my education at "Rasim Kijina" school. I left my village school. I left my friends. But I was well received at the new school and I regained strength because we were psychologically tired, our heads finally rested! Initially we were very sad for leaving that place, we cried a lot. I still remember my brother's tears and voice. But we got exhausted and we reached a point when we didn't care anymore if we had anything to eat or not. We just wanted to leave. It's very hard to leave your birthplace, there is no place better than your birthplace. We had a water spring nearby with three spouts. It would pour water near our houses. We had asphalt, they laid it on the roads. We had a shop nearby, also the train station was there. It would take 5 minutes to go from Jezerc to Ferizaj. Whenever I go that place will remain dearest for me. Time teaches you to adapt to new places but you never forget your place.

My uncle's wife made sure we don't enjoy it anymore. She ruined everything. Regardless how much you care about your place whenever I would go back, I would hear her words and remember her wrongdoings. For example, if me or my brother would take a banana, she would shout at us. Even if that banana was bought by my father, she would still shout at us.

When I moved to Ferizaj, I started regaining my self-confidence. When I started the new school I had little difficulties, I was a bit stressed out and I didn't study as much. They put me in a class where I didn't know anyone but I was telling myself, "It's better that I don't know anyone". Even though I was happy that I escaped from my uncle's wife I was still afraid how the new classmates would welcome me, are they going to ignore me or are they going to happily let me in their circle? After I held the first-class hour my teacher told me, "We found you two friends from your village in another classroom." One of them was from my village and we were in the same classroom while the other was from another classroom and we shared the same last name. I was much happier that these were boys and not girls from my village. They came, spoke to me, welcomed me, I was put on the front bench and I was received well. The one who had the same last name like mine was very happy that I came but also the other one. Both of them were good, they were very good students. I am still in contact with the one who had the same last name as mine. He went to live in Ferizaj a couple of years before we did because his parents were working here, his mother was a teacher. So, when I arrived here, I adapted very well, I started reading, writing, drawing, I was eager to do everything. Even though we were in pain because our father wasn't there for us.

It was quite hard for me when the time came to change the school again. I reached tenth grade, so it was time for secondary school. I passed the exam and I could get admitted wherever I wanted. I liked foreign languages so I got registered at that school. But that period of life was the hardest for me because I could see that my mother was not feeling well again. For some time, I thought that she was continuously worried about father, which was a normal thing to think, so I never pressured her with questions.

My mother started writing and at that time I didn't understand because I was young why she would write about her husband. Now it's different, I matured and I understand now, sometimes even I write myself. But at that time, I thought she was just wasting her time. She was always tired, always sensitive. She would hide these notebooks and once I managed to find one and read a bit. It's not shameful if your child reads what you have written for your husband. If it were me, I would feel very proud. She wrote about how much she misses him, about her love towards him, how she waits for him. She would write something similar like, "I am willing to wait for you even though we have been separated for many years now, but for our love I will wait for you" or "I know that you still love me and that gives me strength to stay here with our children, to raise them, I have the will to continue". Of course, I didn't read all of these. But my mother would express her love and sometimes anger why her husband isn't coming back. At that age, I was able to read only two words from those pages and I would understand everything that was being said. There was a reason why they called me "anchorwoman" at the school, they always gave me the best nicknames.

Then came the time when my mother felt the need to tell me what has happened. She couldn't keep it to herself anymore. I grew up and I understood. I was already 16 years old. I started insisting, "Why is father not coming back, who is he staying far away from us? He must have a strong reason for him not wanting to stay with us." She would tell me stories about how they loved and respected each other. She would tell me how happy he was before the war when he would come from Ferizaj or from abroad. And I couldn't understand why he didn't want to come anymore.

They didn't know each other before they got engaged and married. My mother would tell me, "I didn't pick him. One day my father just told me that his family members came and they just took me away. God has set my fate like that." Then they were saying, "It's in God's hands, God will provide for us if we have our hearts pure." I would listen to her very carefully and then I would ask her, "And what made our father have a change of heart? Is there something I should know because it's bugging me every day?" I would ask because I was growing up without a father.

Before I found out what had happened my father started coming, he wouldn't come very often, I remember that he would come occasionally. Maybe because I was young and I didn't know how to behave, maybe because I'm still young but when I found out what had happened, I couldn't justify him. Never!

My mother would say, "Father is very sad about some things. He cannot accept them. But he is fair about some other things." She would mention the war, how hard it was for everyone, how the women suffered. She was talking in general. But then when I grew up, I finally understood. When you're a child you can't understand. Because my brain wouldn't understand how you can love someone so much and then a moment comes and - bam, you distance yourself! Five years pass by and he behaves as if his love died or something.

She would continuously tell me bits, for example one day she would tell me some things and then for two-three days nothing. One day she told me how my father loved her: "He used to buy me things". In the past she wouldn't cry in front of me. She was careful. And I would think: "Of course she is crying because she is missing him, but he can't come because he has a problem at his company". My God!

When I would go out in the evening in Ferizaj, I would see couples entering a cafe bar or restaurant together. And my head would get tired from all the questions I had, from analyzing things every day. Something must have happened, I knew it, because my mother continuously mentioned the war and she was saying, "The women suffered a lot. Grandfather died from fear that something might happen to the women." My mother told me also about my uncle's wife, the one which was difficult, when they were home the Serbs took her upstairs in a room, "They didn't do anything to her", she said, "they just scared her".

My friend's mother was crazy in love with her children, also her father was! And I still don't understand how our father doesn't care for his own children. But when my mother told me what had happened, I never pushed her anymore. I wanted to make her talk because I could see that she needed to. But then I would notice that she is psychologically exhausted. Lucky for my mother she had her sisters and brothers who were very close to her, they were very connected to each other and they would come to visit us, they helped us with everything. Also, I had an aunt who used to live close to us.

We talk to our father sometimes. He just calls us to let us know that he is alive. But whatever would happen to him, I wouldn't feel much pain in my heart. My heart cries because I didn't have his love and nothing can fill the emptiness in my heart. Even if he came now and stayed for 20 years with me, he couldn't replace all those years when I missed him. When we needed him the most, he was simply not there.

This emptiness can never be forgotten. I feel sorry for my mother because of this. It's hard for a child to know that they have a living father and still their mother has the role of both father and mother.

My mother told me about the moment when she told our father. It was very hard listening to what she had to say. It was very hard. But she told me how she suffered. She told me that in those moments she would say to herself, "I want to die!" and in those grave moments her only thought would be, "But who is going to look after my children?" and now she says, "You are the main reason why I continued living". My mother told me that shortly after the war ended, as soon as my father came, she told him about what had happened. My father is a person that keeps to himself. My mother says, "He got very sad. He just kept on repeating "Why did this happen to me?" My mother says that he didn't blame her because of what had happened but she said: "He just got cold towards me, unsupportive." Unsupportiveness defines everything. Not supporting you is sufficient, it's ignoring you.

I feel like a fool for not being able to understand it earlier! I was reading books, I was good at school, and still I wasn't able to understand my own mother. Maybe I blamed her somehow. But I have never justified my father, there were no reasons for his actions. There is no justification. Because he is not the only person to whom this has happened.

Now, I feel somehow at ease because at least I understand why my father doesn't want to come. I was trying to find out the reason. As a young girl who misses her father, you want to find out the reason why he is not close to you. I would say to myself, even if it's the worst possible reason I deserve to know why. Because everything happens for a reason.

And when I finally did find out, regardless how hard it was, it was much better. I justified my mother for everything and I would cry together with her. Initially I didn't say anything and I would just listen to her. Because she wouldn't talk all the time. But when she would she would talk slowly-slowly. I know that she was very careful and she kept this away from my brother because she was afraid that it would affect his pride and that would make things harder for her. My brother still doesn't know what had happened. Even in the village when people would argue he always protected my mother and he would tell her, "Mom, go to your room, don't say anything, don't pay attention to them." He was young but always very capable. Sometimes I thought that maybe he will find out because seeing your mother's eyes always in tears you eventually start wondering why.

My mother was scared while we were in the village, I don't know exactly why, maybe she was afraid of the rumors. And I didn't know the reason why she was afraid. I thought to myself, it's not a reason to be afraid that your husband is not around. Then I would think that maybe my father is married to another woman and my mother is afraid that others will find out that he has a wife and children. But he never had another family because after a few years he took my brother abroad with him. My father then took my brother to Italy before he turned 18. As soon as I finished my primary school my brother left.

Father got ill and he couldn't continue working anymore. He lost his eyesight. Every month he would do a checkup and then he underwent an operation. I know that he removed cataract from one eye. Doctors told him: "For 10 years you were worried so much, now you can never wear glasses anymore and you will have to remove cataract continuously because diabetes has damaged your eyesight". Then he had other illnesses with blood pressure, he would lose balance, he was also on dialysis.

When my mother would talk about what happened, as she would talk, she would get worse. It was very hard for me seeing her like that. I don't know how I managed to go to school, but when you are young you just push yourself. Sometimes there is simply nothing you can do but they say that when you are young you can endure everything. But I could never justify my father. Before rushing and talking or before taking any actions, before taking a decision one must look at all circumstances, all the reasons and causes how they occurred.

Initially I didn't understand things as clearly as I do now, but then I became 17, 18 years old and I matured. I finished secondary school. I started developing as a character. As I said you can't justify him. If he couldn't connect with my mother, he could have done it with the children. There was no reason for him to abandon the children, no reason at all. Even if the child does God-knows-what, as a parent you must do your duty and you must stay close to the child. At least talk to the child. If the child wants to listen then fine. If he doesn't then at least you tried.

I thought about the circumstances but the rape itself is excruciating! It's something that you don't want to do, but you're forced to. Nobody asks you anything. This is very harsh, I used to worry a lot. I would put myself in that position. Thinking about my husband, thinking about the children, thinking about the future, thinking about everything. Thinking about everything else but the pain that you're experiencing. But she never gave up. Just because of us! Because of this I always had a good relationship with my mother. Always. I am proud that I never allowed myself to feel hatred towards my mother. Even as I was growing up, I never felt a change of heart regarding that matter. I was saying to myself Why should I hate her? With a big question mark at the end. I never had bad feelings towards her. On the contrary, I just connected to her even more. I have the feeling as if I have entered her soul when she tells me, "Nobody understands my heart as you do!" She also tells me, "Even if I had ten daughters, no one can replace you!" And I feel sorry for her, I feel pain because of her. I cannot imagine how hard it must have been. It's very hard.

But she was not the only one. She didn't do it willingly. I didn't allow her to change, I even think that I managed to help her. I told her that she has to cry and she cried all night long. She spoke with a quiet voice but she needed to let it out. After she told me what had happened, she started talking to me. She spoke about that and even now sometimes she has the need to speak about it and it makes me happy. I say, "Wow, that's so good!" Even before coming here and talking to you there were many cases when she spoke about that experience. Not only my mother, but I would understand every woman that would come forward.

At the beginning I thought maybe someone knows and it would be really hard if anyone else knew. Also, it was hard because our father was not here. "Her husband is not coming back" I was expecting the worst rumors about us. But now people have become distant with each other, everyone looks after their own affairs, nobody cares anymore. But at those times it was different, people were judgmental.

We left Ferizaj after a year. My brother went to Germany to stay with my father and then he went to Italy. Two years later he got the papers and started working immediately. He went there before he turned 18. He would send us money. My brother is very good. Sometimes he had a temper but overall, he was very good. When he was here, we used to hang around together a lot, both when we were children and when we grew up. He had some friends from the village who were of the same age as he was, he would play with them, he would herd cows and we spent time together. In the afternoon my father would always take us in and we would go to sleep. When we would come back from the school, we would do our homework ... he was always faster because he wanted to go out and play with friends. We always had a good relationship and thank goodness we still have a very good relationship.

I don't know if it would be a good idea to tell him what happened with mother. I am not afraid that he would accuse mother or misbehave with her, I simply wouldn't want him to go through with what I did. I will spare him. My brother will create his own family soon, let him live his own life. I don't want him to go through with everything I did until I understood my mother. It was a mess until she regained composure. Now she tells me everything even if she has the slightest problem. Now she talks about everything, not only that horrific experience.

Sometimes it happens when she gets very distressed, she breaks down and she wants to express herself. I never object. It also happened to me to lay down, trying to forget the pain, hoping that my head will rest just a bit. Because at the beginning I thought a lot about it, I don't know how I made it through. I was asking myself why it happened to my mother. Everybody loves their own mother. You can't compare your own mother to anyone else because you think she is the best. Also, my mother would say, "I never did a bad thing to anyone. I never hurt anyone" and when I grew up, I would tell her, "Mom, there is nothing you can do. You're not the only one. You never did it willingly. Just forget

about it! You have to keep pushing for us. What would we do without you!" I would also tell her, "It was war. Things like that happen during the war." I would always tell her things like that. Sometimes I wouldn't know where I was finding strength to say all those words.

When I started dating a boy, my mother's only concern was that he might deceive me. She would tell me, "I don't want to worry about you! I don't want to keep thinking of your wellbeing. Please take care, spare me the worries." Words like that, in such context. And I would talk to her about that boy. She would say, "I will not create an opinion based on what I hear but I trust you." I have been with a boy from Gjilan for five years. I never allowed my mother's issue to influence our relationship, so I kept it to myself.

As soon as I finished secondary school I registered at university, I studied tourism management. During the first year of studies, he would go after me and we eventually met with each other. At first, I was afraid that he might find out about my mother because we started liking each other and I thought that he would find out and it was difficult for me. I don't know, I decided to just let things flow.

It has been seven years since my brother works abroad and he takes care of us. Now he moved from Italy to Germany. My uncles and my aunt live in Germany. My brother obtained the papers for my mother and then he took her to Italy, they visited many places, and then he took her to Germany. He acted as if I told him, "Brother, take our mother abroad because she needs to travel, she needs to see different places." It was such a relief for me. And then I would get this thought as if nothing has ever happened. Maybe not completely but almost as. When time passes, even if it's something that will never be forgotten, it still becomes a bit easier. I know that my mother will never forget it and it will be a fresh memory for her whenever she remembers it. But it was easier when I knew that my brother was taking her places, she would go to visit her brothers, she would go out and also, she herself would go there.

My mother was happy when my brother went abroad, she would say, "He will become his own master! Not only for me. I will live as much as God allows me to!" She was very happy for my brother. Also, my brother loves our mother a lot. But my brother also keeps contact with our father.

As for our father, I don't feel that he is my father. I tried talking to him, but he can't enter my heart. Now after five or ten years he shouldn't come at all. But when we were young, we needed him. And what about now? Now, my mother doesn't care at all. Because her children grew up. She says: "I fought for my children and God rewarded me. God didn't let me lose hope which I had for you!" My brother, God bless him, is very energetic, loveable and generous. He would tell my mother: "Mom, the more money I give you, God is giving me even more. Money comes and goes, having good health is the most important thing".

Seven or eight years ago we left Ferizaj and went to live in Prishtina. When we left Ferizaj it was almost the same sadness as it was when we left the village. In a village near Prishtina I have an uncle from my mother's side. In Ferizaj the landlord raised the rent and my mother was still afraid. She would say: "It's better while your brother is not with us if we leave for some time. Things will be a bit different but uncle will be close to us." My father wasn't interested in us.

Here in Prishtina we are paying rent. My brother told me, "I came to Italy with a purpose to work, earn money and take care of you and myself". He said "Merita, you should go to school the same as everyone else. If you want to study, I will help you. Only if you want. Because you can't force anything in life and especially not studying." So, he supported us continuously. Every time he came, he would take us out and buy stuff for us. He comes very often. He never misses coming for vacation during New Year's Eve and also during the summer. He is doing very well for himself; he bought a very good car. Now, hopefully we will buy our own apartment in Ferizaj. That means that after eight years we will go back to Ferizaj. We miss that place. Also, quite some time has passed and nobody cares anymore what has happened. When we left, my mother was very happy. On one side it was very hard, but on the other she was saying it's better, it's easier. Because when I left the house, I was also afraid that someone might know. But after I understood what had happened to her it was an irritating moment and I never expressed these feelings to my mother. My mother told me how everything happened, where it happened, the building and everything else. She was saying, "There were many women. It was scary." I was thinking to myself, maybe I went to school with the daughter of some other victim. When we left Ferizaj, even though we were very sad I would tell my mother, "Nobody knows anything there. We will finally calm down." Also, we had the feeling that my brother was willing to leave and that made leaving that place easier for her.

This pain that I feel would be the same even if I found out yesterday, or tomorrow, or even after ten years. Pain is always the same. I was surprised with myself having in mind my age and circumstances, how I managed to refrain, how I was under stress and still managed to keep emotions to myself.

Today, I am proud of both my mother and my brother. My mother's smile is important to me. You come from school, enter inside and you see your mother smiling. Before my brother went abroad my mother was very worried but when he left it became worse. She still keeps his school bag with the notebooks and pencils he left. But when he went abroad, he adapted quickly to the new surroundings and he learned the language. Everything went fine. He also loved working. Before he left, when he was young, he would say, "Mom, I want to go and see my uncles! Please, prepare a bag with clothes for me because I need to help them with something!" My uncles were hardworking people. I had four uncles, one died and three remained. Two of them live abroad and one is still here.

When my brother left, my mother said, "He is careful! He is a hardworking person. For himself, for us." If we buy the apartment in Ferizaj, things will be much easier for us. My mother says, "Times have changed, nobody cares what happened anymore, that time has passed." In fact, I managed to bring that self-confidence in her because in the past she would say, "Someone will recognize me, or some woman must have seen me escaping." This is what she was afraid the most.

But many years have passed and time makes you adapt with everything that happens to you. And by talking and talking I taught her to express herself, not to hold her feelings in because she noticed herself that the more, she was keeping the feelings in her, she would get ill and that would hurt everyone. I would tell her: "Mom, how come you sent your son to work only so he could pay for your medication?" And that would make her think, she would stop and then she would always say, "Children make you go through fire" and she still uses this sentence. She says, "I kept going only for you and I will keep on going just for you!" Now she became like a psychologist for herself. She is more open; she doesn't hesitate to talk and for me this is a big improvement.

I feel sorry for everything that she has suffered, I feel sorry that she spent a life without a husband. I feel sorry for myself for finding out at such a young age about what has happened to her and I am surprised how I managed to face it. I also feel sorry for myself for not having a father.

When my boyfriend decided to go to the United States, I didn't express my feelings to him. After he left, I said to myself: "I'm afraid I will have the same fate as my mother did!" Just when I think of the feeling I had when he left, but I know he is different from my father. I was thinking to myself maybe I will be unable to go. It's stressful. I still didn't apply for the papers. I think the US embassy still didn't start operating. He asked several months ago but they told him that they still didn't start working.

Sometimes I say, I hope that God will never allow anyone to suffer as those women have suffered, like my mother did. I am afraid of my decisions. I trust myself and my boyfriend. But I am afraid that, God forbid if something happens to him, how will I raise children without a father? How will I live through the same things my mother did?

My brother said that in case I get to go to the United States he will take my mother, he would say, "I am not leaving our mother here!" and I ever have the possibility I will take her with me and I will never allow her to meet father, never again! If God is willing and I go to the United States I am taking my mother with me. I will not let her meet father. Because when he retires, he will come back, when he gets tired maybe he will come back. And I know my mother, she always says, "He broke my heart" but I am afraid that when he comes back, she will say, "Let him stay, I will take care of him."

I also told my mother the same words. Only if I get the chance and I hope to God I do. She never says anything, she understands me very well and I don't think that she would go against me. I tell her, "Did you stay with us? Then I am taking you with me!" And I will not leave her here with father.

My brother says, "I will not leave her here. I will take her!" but I would never leave her here only because of my father. Because when we needed him, he was not there, and now when he gets tired, he wants to come back? No. I wouldn't be worthy of being considered my mother's daughter anymore. My heart wouldn't allow it, the emptiness in my heart wouldn't allow it.

My father and his brothers were never religious but my uncles from my mother side were devoted and they practised Islam. My aunt (father's sister) is a very good person. I know that this happened and my father became distant with my mother. I am not saying that he killed people or he did any wrongdoings but because of that case he is simply out of my heart. My aunt has a golden heart. She gets very sad. She talks to us and keeps contact with us but my father never told her why he doesn't come here anymore. He told her that he has a problem at work, that he is ill and has to go to see a doctor, always the same excuses. But she was always very kind to us. She would say, "Poor brother. Look what kind of wife he has and he is not coming to her" but she doesn't know what my mother suffered. My aunt loves us a lot. She doesn't like other sisters-in-law. I have three uncles. One is in Germany with his wife and son and his son is married. And two other uncles are here. My aunt visits them and also comes to visit us as well. Whenever my brother comes to Kosovo, he takes us to visit my aunt. We invite her for lunch or dinner and regardless of the fact that we are not close to our father we keep a good relationship with my aunt.

Before the war started, my father was apparently sending lots of money here, but they misused him and he got disappointed with them. Also, my first cousins were educated thanks to my father's money. My aunt says that my father is disappointed in his brothers and their sons. And then she says about us, "There is no reason for him not to come back. Just look what kind of children my brother has!" She prays for us and she loves us dearly. She kisses my brother's hands.

I have never worked. I only attended different trainings and I participated in some. My brother provides for us. At the moment I don't work with anything. My mother has a passion for sewing and she has a sewing machine. My brother bought her the machine when she was in Italy. Sometimes she sews for a cousin, sometimes for her aunt or her father. She never takes any money; she just likes to sew. I wanted to open her a small workshop where she can practice sewing. I was telling her, "You will pass your time!" but she spent so much time worrying that I think that glasses will not help her anymore. There are no glasses that will fit her. Maybe they will fit for a month but after a month they are useless, that's how much she damaged her eyes from crying.

“I COULD HEAR HIM SCREAMING UNTIL HE GOT TIRED. I CAN STILL HEAR HIS SCREAMS. I WAS AFRAID OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME. HE FAINTED. THEY WENT OUT RUMBLING, SHOUTING, AND SWEARING.”



Nita gets married and lives in her husband's village, somewhere in the municipality of Klinë. When the war starts, she sees that the forces of the Serbian army and police get stationed there, they come and they go right outside the windows of their house. The husband's family has a small house in Mitrovica. Nita decided to run away together with her husband and their baby daughter. Outside the house in Mitrovica, they could hear every day the cries of Albanians who were being tortured by the Serbian police in a nearby cafe.

A group of paramilitary forces entered their house. They didn't touch Nita and the baby. They took her husband into one of the rooms. The half-hour torture inside that room will dictate forever the mental state of her husband, and with it, the fate of Nita's entire family.

I CAN STILL HEAR HIS SCREAMS

I grew up in one of the largest villages in Vushtrri. We were a family of three sisters, four brothers, a father, and a mother. My parents dealt mostly with agriculture and my father also worked in the ammunition factory in Prishtina. My little sister and I are very close to each other. We used to share toys when we were young. I had very good relations with my brothers as well, especially with my second brother.

I was very attached to my mother. I was attached also to my father, but as a daughter, I was more attached to my mother. We had a good life in the village. It was a beautiful place.

When we were young our favorite game was playing with three or four friends where we were imitating the adults and we pretended to socialize with each other and then we would set up a beautiful table, we would play like that. We didn't have toys as they do nowadays, we had much simpler toys. My father used to make wooden toys for us.

I always wanted to make things out of paper. I thought that after I grow up and after school, I will create something myself, I will open up a shop. I always thought about how to make beautiful dresses from paper for my dolls, or how to make toys for children.

My father used to meet with people from the village in our guest room. They held secret gatherings and meetings there. The children were never allowed to come near there. We knew when the village leadership would meet there. Until the war started, all these political parties held their meetings there. My father's guest room was large and everybody knew about it. I still remember my mother telling us, "You can't go there!"

The whole family fasted during Ramadan. Dad prayed until the day he died. Now I continue to pray. Also, my grandfather and two aunts used to pray. Now even the children fast during Ramadan.

I have very beautiful memories of my childhood. Maybe we didn't have the conditions like today, but we were much happier than we are now. When I was six years old, I wanted to go to school but they wouldn't let me go until I was seven. When I was six years old, I went to school with my cousin for a month but they didn't let me enter because I was very young. I waited for him at the school entrance. I liked school and the mentality at that time was, "It's better if our girl goes to school with her cousin, it's safer ...". I still remember how much I enjoyed that period when I stayed for a month every day in front of the school. I liked it so much, I was so excited to go to school. It felt really good, preparing to go to school.

Then when I turned seven, I finally went to school and I was very pleased. Even though we walked for two kilometers every day on foot. I have very fond memories which I will never forget, how we played with each other, how we went out when it was snowing, or even when it was raining. We didn't care, we had fun. We were friends. The group was made of many children because our village was pretty big. We were connected to each other as if we were brothers and sisters. With some of the children, we had a family relationship.

One of my best friends was also the daughter of my father's uncle, we were very close friends. But we were a group of seven or eight children who went to school together.

I was so happy when I first received my pencil and notebook to write and learn. Even nowadays when I take my kids to school, I feel happy. It gives me this sense of joy when I tell my children, "You will go to school and you will be educated".

I went to school for eight years. I always thought that I would come out of it educated, that I will become maybe a doctor or a teacher. But I knew that there is no way because of the road. And for eight years I went to school always thinking that I will continue my schooling. My parents always said, "If we are given the opportunity to leave the village, everybody will go to school, both boys and girls." My brothers went to school and got educated. None of the sisters got educated because we could not travel. The primary school was two kilometers away, but I don't know how far was the secondary school in Skënderaj.

But during those eight years that we have gone to primary school, we had much fun. Because of my desire, my parents enrolled me in a six-month tailoring course. In '92, I finished primary school and the next year I went to the tailoring course in Skenderaj. I walked for two kilometers to the place where the bus was leaving. Sometimes I would go by bus and sometimes I would walk. We traveled together with my brothers, or with the children from the village, we traveled however we could. I was very pleased to have taken that course and I completed it very successfully. To this day, I work in that profession and I enjoy working it. Now I am able to help my children and my husband because

of that profession. I enjoy working as a tailor, I have fun doing it. As long as I have work to do, I am very satisfied, I think only about the work I have to do. When the sewing machine starts working, I'm happy.

I have a close friend who happened to also be my relative and when she turned 13 years old, her uncle took her to Germany so she can help her brother. To this day she is in Germany, but we never stopped talking to each other. And when she comes here, we have fun as we did when we were children, we talk about the toys we used to play with, we socialize, we talk about when we would go for sleepovers to her place or mine, about the food we used to eat, what her mother would prepare for us, things like that. I look forward to when she comes. We talk to each other every three or four days. If we don't talk then we write messages to each other. She has two children. She is my soulmate. She knows that we suffered during the war and she tried with all her heart to help me, to get me out of here and take me there. But she doesn't know all the details of what had happened to us during the war.xxxx

When I was 18-19 years old, I started my relationship with my husband. There was another relationship between our family members and then someone proposed marriage for us. My first cousin was living at Fehmi's place in my neighborhood and she introduced me to him, and then our families agreed. And like all the girls, I thought that now I have grown up and I have become a beautiful woman and an adult and that I want to decide for my husband. I would talk to my mother about the messages which my husband was sending me. My mother was guiding me.

I met with my husband five or six times before I got engaged to him. It was a good time. We spent a good time during that period. Then after a year, we decided to get engaged. Our families met with each other. We had a family party and both families were happy. I was a little young, but when I turned 19 years old, I decided to get engaged, and then we didn't get married for another year and a half. When I was 21 years and three or four months old, we got married. It was a good time. We had dreams to live together in joy, to have a happy life. We were thinking of beautiful things, we wanted everything to go well for us. I was thinking of having children.

The wedding was very beautiful. My husband's parents had my husband after three daughters. This was the happiness of that household and I was the first bride in the family. I found myself very happy with his family, I was well received. Everything went well.

I also had a wedding at home in the traditional way, together with my friends from the village. When a girl gets married, many girls from the village gather and they give her presents. My wedding lasted for three days. I celebrated together with my friends, family, and women from the village. We lived in a big village and my friends and I were connected with each other. After I got married, I went to live in the village of my husband, in that part of Klina.

After two years of marriage, I became a mother. I felt very happy when our daughter came into our lives. Mothers always wish to have a daughter and men wish for boys; I

believe so. I always wanted to have a daughter first. We were very happy when our daughter came, it was the first child in that house after 20 years. The whole family says, "Everything became so lively when that child came!".

When she came in the first days as a baby, she was very beautiful and very sweet. Then you see your child growing up, developing, she gives you warmth. She tries to communicate with you as a mother, it's amazing. The first child is everything. The first child connects the family. I always remember her first word, her first steps. The toys with which she played for the first time. I still have them. It's an indescribable feeling when you become a mother with your first child.

I remember when she said her first word, "Mommy". I still remember her voice when she would say "Daddy" or other words. She had a beautiful toy; it was something like a pheasant. She still has it today, even though she is 21 years old now. We have fond memories of that toy. When she walked for the first time, she walked from me to her grandfather. How happy they were when they saw her walking.

I had another pregnancy two and a half years later. But everything was different then. My second child was born after the war. The eldest daughter turned a year and a half when the situation worsened and when the war started.

Every night we had different kinds of problems. Different kinds of abuse. We didn't dare leave the house at all. My husband and I decided to take the girl. The in-laws said, "We are going wherever the people from the village are going! You can go to Mitrovica. You have the house there and maybe you will feel safer there". My father-in-law said, "They know us here. You are young. You can take your wife and daughter and leave from here. You will be safer in Mitrovica". We had our house there and we decided to go there.

My husband worked in a shop before the war. Many people knew him. Then at the beginning of March '99, we went to Mitrovica. In the village, the Serbs were staying in front of us. We saw the army, the paramilitary forces, they would go inside the village, they were checking people, they were coming and going. They would tell us, "We have nothing with you!" They thought that people from other villages would come to our house. Every night they were checking us, they would take our men, separate them. They would return them again.

They entered our house. At one point, nothing happened. They were just checking, they were saying, "Don't you dare and make a mistake by taking in people from other villages!" Then, in late February, early March, they started bringing weaponry. I could see it from the window of the room, it was some very heavy weaponry, it was located very close to the window of my room. We saw them getting equipped with weapons. And how could we stay there any longer? We were staying inside, looking out from the window because we didn't dare go out in the yard. The men guarded us during the night. Then my father-in-law said, "You must leave for Mitrovica." We went out. That night when we got out of there at three in the morning, we could hear a hail of bullets and it sounded the same as when it rains. From a distance, they directed us to go to the road. The entire village went out but then the elderly turned back. According to an agreement, allegedly the Serbian side had nothing against the Albanians but we didn't dare return to the village. We stayed in Mitrovica.

We had a small house and we stayed there for a couple of days. We were all afraid all the time. Night and day. Sometimes we had electricity, sometimes we did not. With a small baby at hand, it was very hard. There was a bar in front of our house and we would hear screams every night coming from there. The police were beating people up. We couldn't sit in peace; we didn't dare switch the lights on. We would go to the corner of a room and cover the light well so nobody would see the light and know that we were there. When my daughter would start crying, we would immediately start playing with her, trying to calm her down because we were afraid that her voice could be heard outside. I don't know how many days we stayed there. Whenever we heard the other doors banging, we thought that they were coming for us. We were all so scared. My husband didn't dare go out at all. When I would go out to get food, I would go through another house yard.

We were getting food from a house which was located behind our house. There was a basement there. In the past, my husband would take flour and other food to that basement. My husband filled that basement for our needs. We knew those neighbors and we gathered enough food there for the daughter and us. Sometimes these neighbors would give us some things, sometimes we would give them. I am calling them "neighbors" but I don't know where they were from. I have never even seen most of them.

Then the paramilitary forces came to that place. We saw them coming with large vehicles, you could see their vehicles over the wall when they would pass by. When they came to our place, they broke the front door. They came before the evening. I was terrified, I was

in the beginning of my second pregnancy. My daughter started crying. As soon as they entered the front door, they started insulting my husband with the worst insults. There were four of them, one was staying outside the door. Two of them entered inside, the third was staying in the yard. They were wearing masks, gloves, I could see only their eyes. They started beating my husband. My daughter was screaming on the other side. It was very hard, it was terrifying.

They took my husband and they dragged him to another room. They entered that room shouting and swearing. I didn't dare approach my husband because they were beating him. They were shouting, "So you are here, are you? We were looking for you!" and then they told me, "Go away! Take the baby with you!" I could hear my husband screaming until he got tired. I can still hear his screams. I was afraid of what will happen to me. My husband fainted. They went out rumbling, shouting, and swearing.

All this lasted for half an hour or so. When I went into the room, I found him unconscious, covered in blood, his clothes were torn on all sides and he was naked. I saw that he was bleeding from the colon! He had wounds on the head and hands! All over the body! He was beaten up badly! In those moments I didn't think that something worse could have happened to him. I was just thinking, "They beat him a lot!" I didn't know what to do with my daughter. I took some water and I poured it on his face. I waited until he woke up.

Afterward, when he regained consciousness, he asked for water and I gave it to him. I was trying to clean his face and we stayed like that until it became dark. When it got dark, I heard some Albanians passing by. I asked them for help. As soon as I heard someone moving, I screamed, "Please help me!" They opened the door. These were some unknown people; I just know that they were Albanians. They said, "He needs to be sent to a doctor, we will take care of him during the night." I remember that they mentioned Bajram Rexhepi, they said, "We have our doctor, we will take him there". They took my husband, they tried to help him and then they returned him and said, "You must leave from here, don't stay here anymore!". When my husband woke up and came to his senses, he was very quiet. He didn't say much. He was tired and broken.

We managed to join the refugee crowd and we went out after a week or so. My husband was sick and I was holding my daughter and we managed to leave with no help at all. I didn't know anyone. When people would see that my husband is beaten up, tired, and sick, they would ask me, "Is he severely wounded?" It was very difficult for us but we managed to go from there to a place called Tavnik. We started walking and then someone threw my husband on a tractor-trailer. When we reached Tavnik we stayed there for another two or three days. Tavnik is located in Mitrovica, just above Mitrovica. There were a lot of people there.

I was afraid because I thought that I would lose him at any moment. It was very difficult! He couldn't eat or drink, he would hardly have some water. I did everything I could to help him. Some people sometimes helped us with some things. I didn't know whether to look after my daughter or my husband. My daughter was too young and he was wounded, he was broken. It was very bad! He just kept quiet, thinking, even when he was feeling well. He just kept silent! He was scared a lot during the night. All night long he would say, "They are coming now! They will hurt us even more!" He was saying things like that. Then from Tavnik we joined the refugee crowd and we went to Albania.

I thought that something like this would never happen to him. I always thought that it could happen to me and I was always afraid for my daughter, "Fine if it happens to me but what will I do with my daughter?" I found out later that my husband had constant bleeding from his colon. I thought to myself, "Why is this happening? Why is he bleeding like this?" Every time I would ask my husband about it, he would just keep quiet. Then after some time, I found out that they did things to other men and women. While the war was ongoing, I would often think, "Maybe something similar happened to him as well!" But he did not speak to me, he wouldn't say anything to me. The signs were there, but I couldn't believe that it could happen to a man. I was trying to make my husband feel better by saying, "We are going now to Albania. We will go to the doctor and we will have good food". But his condition just got worse and worse every day. Every day he would get extremely exhausted and he was always thinking. He had terrible wounds. I can't describe it. May God help everyone who has experienced things like that!

While we were in Albania, he wanted to say something to me but I interrupted him and I said, "Many people are experiencing different things, this one was affected and that one as well".

And he told me about the whole thing after the war ended. About sexual violence. During the war, he couldn't speak about it. I could see that he was silent, he was thinking a lot. In Albania, I tried to deal with him, to help him get hold of himself and clear his mind. Many organizations came to check on us. The doctors came in tents and they were cleaning the wounds. After the war ended, when we came back to Kosovo, I let him deal with himself to clear his mind a bit. Then one day he told me, "I fainted, but I know that they sexually abused me!".

At that moment when he was telling me about his experience, I felt terrible. I felt so bad that my ears started ringing. Perhaps if I had experienced it myself, I wouldn't have felt

as bad. I didn't know if I was listening to his experience or am I having a nightmare. It was a very bad feeling. During the war we thought that something bad could happen to us, maybe we might get shot or someone might beat us up. But something like this? Terrible! My husband was embarrassed while he was trying to tell me, "I don't know how to tell you!"

It was very hard for me. What was I supposed to do? Should I keep it a secret or should I tell someone? What is going to happen to my husband? I thought that his condition could get worse, I was afraid that he might lose his mind completely. He started losing weight, he was exhausted all the time. For months he couldn't get a hold of himself. Months! I was thinking to myself, what should I do now? How will I raise my daughter, how will I deal with my husband, he is sick, he is feeling very bad? I needed to support him, to help him.

I tried to support him but I never mentioned what happened to him, I never said, "It was wartime and everyone experienced something terrible and our terrible fate was to experience that. Now we have a daughter and she is growing up. The war has ended now. We don't want to think about the war anymore, we want to survive. I want to help you not to think about that, I want you to heal." But we have never spoken about war. We didn't go to socialize with other people because we were afraid that everyone would tell their own story. I always avoided them, "Come on, we're going out somewhere else." Then after some time, I saw that he started recovering, he saw that I was supporting him. I noticed that I have an influence on him. I told him many times, "We will not talk about that part, that's in the past. Many people were killed, they have disappeared." That would help him a bit. He would tell me, "I don't know what I would do if it weren't for you!".

Then I gave birth to my second daughter. We started dealing with our children. I told him, "Now you have to deal with the eldest daughter and I will deal with the baby." I was trying to engage him so he would think about other things. Sometimes he wouldn't say anything and he would just stay silent. We would talk and talk and he would get a hold of himself and it seemed that it's helping him. When I had my second daughter, it seemed to me that he was doing better because our family got bigger. So, every day I would talk to him, I was trying to get him involved.

Three or four years after the war ended his condition was very difficult. It was very difficult for me too. I was thinking every day about him, how is he feeling today, or how will he feel tomorrow, is his condition getting worse, is he going to improve? I had a small child and he was sick. Sometimes he would shut himself off and there was nothing I could do. What was I supposed to do?

He told me, "Don't share this with my parents or children when they grow up, I don't want them to know. You are the only person who knows about this and you will remain the only one." And I kept it to myself for years. I tried to adapt to my husband in order to help him. I always think that if it would have happened to me he would help me as well. That's why I never mentioned that issue to him. I gave birth to my second daughter only so he would deal with the family, just for him to be happy.

Now we have four children, we had one before the war started and three after the war. Every day my husband says, "My children make me happy. You are the first person to help me and you have always helped me." Our life is good. I have good relations with my husband. He still has some consequences, some headaches, and nervousness. Even the children sometimes ask me, "Why is dad so nervous?" I tell them, "He is like that!". Sometimes he complains, "My head hurts a lot!" and he has headaches for 24 hours even if he takes medication. I always tell him, "Let's go out!" I try not to let him think so much about those things. And since we've been here, it seems that he is feeling a bit better. He deals with the children. When he notices that he is about to get nervous, he goes to another room for some time.

But he is much better compared to how he was in the past and every day he is getting better. Maybe he will never forget it. Those things are never forgotten, but he does not want to talk about the war. Very little or nothing at all. He doesn't want to remember that part. For me, it was very difficult until our children grew up because my husband had war traumas. I am still afraid when I go to sleep. I think, "When I wake up I will not find him there!" Many times it happened that I found him in the yard. I would tell him, "Come on, it's cold outside. Let's go inside!" Sometimes I still have the feeling that I will not find him asleep in the bed. I would ask him, "Why did you go out?" and he would tell me, "I went out because I have a headache!" I don't tell the children anything. I try to keep it away from the children.

May God help all the people who have experienced the same fate as I did, because it is very difficult for a woman to raise her children in this way. To think all your life if there will be consequences for your husband. Always thinking whether his condition is getting worse or better.

Sometimes I say inshallah God will delete those things and my husband will never think of them again. I rarely leave him alone, I'm always afraid that something might happen to him because I know that he would never leave me. Even the children sometimes ask

me, "You're always at his side. Why do you support him so much?" and I tell them, "We have to support him because you are four children and he is only one father. We must help him." I say this because I don't want him or the children to feel bad but I see that he enjoys it when I say that. He joins and tells the children, "You must always help us. Now we are getting old. You have to support us."

The eldest daughter is 21 years old and the second daughter is 19 years old. They have realized that he is nervous. They know that my husband has been nervous since the war. The children support him, they listen to him and they ask me very often, "Did they beat our father during the war? What did they do to him? Where was our father?" Even when the subject of war comes up, when someone speaks about it, the children always ask us, "Were you afraid during the war?". Even now, when he notices that he is about to get nervous, he just leaves, he doesn't want to be with the children when he gets nervous.

I thought that I would have a completely different life. I thought I would be happy with my husband. I never thought that I would have a life like this one. It was very difficult for me. Since the war ended, we had a very difficult life. And when he is silent, when he closes in on himself, he doesn't speak a word. I'm always afraid that he will get worse if he tells someone or if he talks to someone about it.

We need to think of the life we have now with children. I often think about what happened. I don't want to, but I think about it. I can still hear his voice when they took him. Until his voice disappeared, until he could not be heard anymore.

I always hope that he will change one day. I see his health, and God willing his condition will not get worse, we will keep moving forward. We are dealing with the children and my husband does not think about the past. I see it myself how pleased he is to see the children being well. Our daughter is about to graduate. He really enjoys it when I talk about our children and about life. He stops and listens to me. He says, "Yes, things will get better!" Maybe as time goes on, children will grow up, and slowly he will forget about what happened. They are never forgotten, but I like to think so. He always tells me, "You have helped me a lot!". When he comes home, he looks for me. He likes when I welcome him home, he feels great relief.

Yes, now he gets nervous. For three years we were happy and he was never nervous before the war, I know him very well. We were engaged for one year and married for two before the war started. I

thought that my husband would work as he had worked before the war for the sake of our children. This bothers me a lot. Now there are some limitations. I thought that he would work to help the children and our family. The work that he used to do got discontinued. Just thinking about it is hard for a woman, let alone for a man. I always thought to myself, "I will have to work myself and raise and educate our children until he gets better". This is what I thought then and it still bothers me. If he was like he used to be in the past, he would work and we would have a better life. He tries to help, but his will is not the same as in the past. Now he has fatigue and stress.

It would have been better if my husband was not sick. It would have been better if we had a better financial situation and if the kids had better living conditions. I hope that things will get better. Our children's lives are ahead, we have to think for the children as well. But, regardless of the burden that he has he always thinks about the children. He says, "Inshallah the children will prosper!" We have the same opinion about these things.

Sometimes I think, what about those women who have experienced something like this and they are all alone, how do they survive? It was wartime, we knew that war doesn't bring anything good, but things like this?

I always try to connect him with everyone in the family, to get him more involved. I tell other members of the family, "This came from your father" or "Your father brought this." My husband likes it when I do this. When I say things like that he feels very well, he behaves completely differently those days. Even the children know that he has war traumas and they stand by his side. There is also fatigue sometimes. He says, "I didn't do anything but I am feeling very tired." Once after the war, for two days he didn't eat anything.

Sometimes I feel depressed because some things have been imposed on us since the end of the war. I forgot about myself! I completely left myself aside. Sometimes I think how hard this has been for me, are things getting worse, or what is happening. I can never think of myself. It's something you can't talk to anyone about it. Sometimes I say to myself, "How could have I lived with all this pressure?" I say, "Maybe I will get sick myself from all these worries in my head." I have high blood pressure. Always keeping it inside. It's not something that has been broken and can be bought again or repaired. It's a part of life, and you can't talk about it with anyone, or ask how it happened or what had happened!

You need to keep it inside. I always have to be careful. Be careful with my husband because he is sick, be careful not to hurt him, be careful around the children. It seems to me that I am putting pressure on myself, it's so hard. Sometimes I feel that I am getting very tired, I feel like a closed person. It affects me a lot both in psyche and in fatigue. Even the children ask me sometimes, "Mom, what's wrong with you today?". I tell them, "I'm just tired because of work." I can't talk about that issue with anyone because it might hurt them.

I always tried not to think about it so much, but sometimes I get overloaded with thoughts. It's difficult when you are living with a person who has experienced such traumas. You always think about the same things. Even if you don't like it, you think about it. You think to yourself, "Am I helping him or not?" It always crosses your mind. These worries will never go away.

I hope that things will get better. If my husband would be well, he would be trying to find a job for sake of a better future. Sometimes I talk to my husband and he says, "It would have been so good if I had a good job." I know what bothers him. He remembers those things, he thinks like me. And life goes on, no matter how you are.

But these things that he has experienced, they need to be written somewhere. Very often I think, my children shouldn't know who I am talking about but these things must be written somewhere. I am glad that you have invited me to talk about it because these words must be written somewhere. These are living facts that people have experienced.

**“...SO I ASKED HER, “WHAT’S WRONG?”
AND SHE SAID, “I’M NOT GOOD ENOUGH
FOR YOU ANYMORE. I WAS RAPED BY
THE SERBIAN POLICE. I DON’T KNOW IF
THEY WERE POLICE OFFICERS OR
SOLDIERS, BUT THEY RAPED ME””**

NN

The narrator of this story doesn't feel comfortable even if we gave him a made-up name, so we will refer to him as NN (No Name). In the time of war, NN left the village together with his whole family on a tractor, but then he got separated from them. Together with a friend, he stayed in the village of Shajkovc. He lost communication with his family members for some time. But because of war, he lost contacts for a long time with a girl, his “sweetheart”, who would often come to his village as a guest at his neighbor's house. As teenagers, they had some kind of platonic love for each other and hope for the future.

Immediately after the war ended, when NN moved to Prishtina, they met again by chance.

[Redacted text]

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I AM NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU ANYMORE

We were always calm and quiet as a family. We had average living conditions. I was the youngest of six sisters and four brothers. Our father died very early. I was somewhere around seven years old when he died. We lived in the village. Our mother died after the war so during the war I lived together with my mother and brothers. All of my sisters were married. The eldest brother was around 35-40 years old when our father died.

We lived based on my father's pension from abroad so we didn't suffer much. Our house in the village was the same as every other house, it was a large two-story house. Our house is still in the village but nobody lives in it anymore. It's abandoned.

We didn't live far from our school. It was about half an hour away by walking, it was not a problem for us. The teachers at the school were very good. They were quite capable. Some of them have already retired, and some others are not alive anymore. We had a very beautiful life. We didn't have as much as we have today, but we were happy with what we had.

At that time if your parents would buy you a bicycle it was as if someone bought you a car nowadays. Everyone was happy just to have a pair of sneakers, you were happy enough with sneakers. And today if we buy them, it's nothing special. We used to have an average life, but beautiful.

As a child, I was very happy. I was even happier when I met my now-wife. We were children then. I was somewhere between 14-15 years old. She would come to our village because she had some uncles and cousins living in my village. We met for the first time as children. She was a very beautiful girl, a lovely girl.

I worked a bit in the private sector while I was growing up. I was going to school and at the same time, I worked. I finished the gymnasium, I attended the fourth year, and then the war started. When the war started, I was around 19-20 years old. Serbian barbarism has already reached our village so we took our stuff and left our village. Fortunately, we did not suffer any losses, because we did not lose any family members, relatives, or cousins.

We arrived in Prishtina and from there we continued towards the village Shajkovc. We traveled with our tractors, and we took everything we were able to carry. We did not wait for them to come and burn us. Because the Serbian barbarians had arrived, they were burning the houses nearby, and we could hear them shooting, we did not dare stay in the village anymore.

I will never forget my mother's reaction when we told her, "We have to leave!" her lips were trembling and she knew that whatever we leave behind is lost. The men who kick you out of your house have only bad intentions. I know that my mother was very upset about everything. She was very upset because we were many children and no one knew what our fate was going to be. My mother was a very noble person, very gentle, soft. She was always calm and gentle with us. She never yelled at us. Somehow since my mother died everything has died. My life has changed for 90 percent.

Everybody from the village, our neighbors, and our cousins, we all got into our tractors and we went towards Gollak and then we continued towards village Keçekolla. From Keçekolla we reached Prishtina and then we parted our ways. I didn't continue with my family, so I decided to go back. I stayed with some of my friends and my family left.

I didn't know where my family went, because they came to Prishtina and I moved to Shajkovc. During the war, I stayed together with my friends, my good friends. We stayed away from our families for about 3 weeks or a month. Then from Shajkovc I arrived in Prishtina and I met with my family. I didn't know anything about them, except that we knew that they were in Prishtina and most of them were fine because that day when we reached Shajkovc the paramilitary forces withdrew from Shajkovc. The police and the army stayed at the water supply in Batllava.

We suffered a lot for food. In the house yard of a cousin who let us stay at his house, we were about a hundred people. I remember one day while we were eating bread with a friend, his mother signaled to tell us, "Get up and leave because there is no more food!". We left the table and we were still hungry. We were forced to take the road from Shajkovc and come to Prishtina, in order to find a solution. We were trying to find some food for everyone.

When there was food, whoever could cook would prepare something for everybody. Those people were not my family members but we considered them as friends, acquaintances. I was staying all the time together with my friend, I didn't separate from him during the war, and I would always tell him, "Wherever you go, I will go too!" But he was a little scared because he would say, "If the Serbian army or police stop us, they will ask you where your family is", because I was all alone and that could pose a problem.

To this day we are very good friends. I can call him on the phone every day, but I don't do it because I don't want to bother him. He works in the post office; he has a very high position and that's why I don't want to bother him. But when he calls me, I always tell him, "I think of calling you every day, but I'm afraid I will bother you!" He would say, "Even if you would call me at midnight, I would answer the phone." But I don't want to bother him. I don't want to bother a man that I highly respect, a man that always helps me, because every man has his worries, problems, and troubles.

My wife was an orphan when she was a child and that's why she stayed with her uncles. She was a charming person. Her mother died too early. I remember her mother a bit. After her mother died, I knew that she was an orphan because her father was disabled. She was the first girl I ever liked and the one I always had in my mind, I always thought of how we will live next to each other. And then slowly-slowly, we passed time together, we would look at each other, we would talk to each other, just like children do. But then war crushed everything.

She decided to leave Kosovo. A crowd of people was leaving and she was together with her father and aunt at the border with Macedonia. They took her out from the queue and they told her father, "We are just checking her documents." They asked for her ID card and then they took her, as she said, "They took me further away, I was inside a vehicle like a jeep". They started raping her there when she was only 18-19 years old.

After the war ended, when we started recovering and going out a bit, one day I saw her getting some aid in a neighborhood of Vranjevc in Prishtina. I was together with that friend of mine. I saw her waiting in line. As soon as I saw her, I was surprised. Because I didn't see her for a year, or a year and a half. Because before the war, it all became a mess and we couldn't meet as often because she wasn't coming anymore to my village.

When I saw her, I approached her and she spoke to us. She was just looking at me, she couldn't believe that she was seeing me. Maybe she thought that I got married. Or maybe because of her problems, she thought, "He will not be interested in me anymore". I asked her, "How are you? Did you all survive?" She said, "Yes!" I told her where I live and the next day, she came to my house together with my niece.

In the past, I used to live with my brothers, but then my brothers went different ways, some went to live in the village while others stayed in Prishtina. So, the next day she came to my home together with my niece. We were happy when we met, we were happy that we saw each other, but nobody knew anything about her problem. We didn't have any idea! Also, I didn't know at first what the problem was.

After some time, I told her, "If you agree, we can stay here together. We will live here!" She stayed there for some time, she had coffee with me and then she went home. When I met her for the second time, I asked her, "Do you want to continue where we left off?" and she said, "I am willing to continue, but I have a problem, I have a very big problem." I remember it as if it happened yesterday. We went out in the city, not for coffee but just for a walk. I still remember even the place where she told me. She started crying. I didn't know why so I asked her, "What's wrong?" and she said, "I'm not good enough for you anymore. I was raped by the Serbian police. I don't know if they were police officers or soldiers, but they raped me."

I asked her how it happened. She told me everything. She even showed me the scar on her head when they injured her while raping her inside that car. In those moments, to be honest, I felt as if the whole world knew about this. But I told her, "We will find a solution." She went home crying because she thought that I didn't want her anymore and that I don't love her anymore. She came again to my house together with my niece. They stayed at my home, and they had some food and drinks. But it was hard for me, it was hard to look at her, it was very hard. I don't know, but it seemed to me that the whole world knows about it. I don't even know how to describe it; it was a terrible feeling. I told her, "I will close my eyes to it." Her father knew about it, even her aunt knew but they never told me anything about it. When I met with her father, he thought that I have no serious intentions with her and that I will eventually leave her.

But we met again and I disregarded all those things, I disregarded them and I didn't think of them anymore. I never mentioned it to her and I never spoke of it again. We got engaged and then we got married and then we started a family. Today, here we are. I mean, it all ended in that way.

My mother loved her very much. But war never allowed them to get too close. There were always some sacrifices. We couldn't meet with her. Even when she was a child, my wife would come to visit us. For three years she came to visit us at our house, and we socialized, and also my mother socialized with her. That part of Gollak welcomed everyone. My mother loved her a lot since she was a child, and maybe my mother knew that in the future she will be part of my life. But my mother didn't live long enough to see her in my life since my mother passed away.

We got married immediately after the war, in 2000 if I am not mistaken. I was somewhere between 20-21 years old. We didn't have a wedding because my mother died just before we got married, while I was engaged to her. So, we just went in four or five cars and took the bride. There was no longer any mood to make a celebration. We just went and took her and we had a smaller ceremony, with sisters, brothers, my uncles, and nobody else.

We had no problems during our marriage. In fact, with the birth of the first daughter, our life changed a lot. Because we were young when we became parents. It was joyful when we became parents. We had a good life in Prishtina. I also had a very good job. Everything was beautiful after we got married and when our daughter was born. Before we became parents, I saw her many times worried and upset and I would tell her, "There is nothing you can do, you have to agree with fate!" But since we had a baby, we got rid of all the worries and we didn't care anymore. I mean, she didn't worry as much. Of course, it's a wound that will never heal but we have to get over it in time. If she continues every day thinking of the bad things that have happened to her, there might be other consequences. These consequences appear after a long time. But, in time she has to overcome it, she has to forget about it.

Now our daughter is almost 20 years old and our youngest child is five years old. Sometimes we would talk to our children about the war but we never spoke about what had happened to their mother. But I think that they are suspecting because they are always calling us and asking us, "Where have you been?" I think that they know. That day has to come eventually, we have to tell our children, we have to accept it.

I often pray to God and thank God there are no such things anymore, to hurt our children, to happen to them as it happened to my wife. I feel sorry for all those parents, who probably are not among us today anymore, for what has happened to their children. Today I wouldn't be able to bear it if anything would have happened to my child. Maybe there would be nothing I could do about it, but I couldn't bear the idea of it! But these things have happened. The Serbian barbarians did all sorts of things!

I still work in the same place as before. I never stopped working. At the moment I work as a guard. My wife also works. She never stopped working for ten years. In fact, with her help and with my help, today we have an average house, an average life. The children go to schools. Only during the pandemic, they did their schooling online.

I am thankful for my wife, she helped me with everything. I would never leave her, nor I could turn my back on her when she was a girl. I loved her because I was young and she was young and I couldn't care less about anything. Maybe I could have found a better wife, but I couldn't turn my back on her because I loved her. And, my love for her has increased even more when she told me the truth. We agree about everything. Today I am very happy. My wife helped me a lot. Without my wife, I couldn't have finished my house.

We both work and we both live together and we're happy. We have family problems as everyone does, these things happen sometimes. But even when I'm angry I would never mention to her that issue. I would never use it as a tool to humiliate her character or to insult her because nobody should know or hear about it. So, this is my life.

“AS OF ‘99 AND TO DATE I AM AFRAID TO SLEEP ALONE. I DREAM BEATING ME UP AND KILLING MY YOUNGEST DAUGHTER. I DREAM AND IT SEEMS AS IF IT’S HAPPENING IN BROAD DAYLIGHT AND THEN I STARTLE AND TRY TO ESCAPE. “DO YOU WANT US TO KILL YOU OR THE DAUGHTER?” THEY SAY, AND I TELL THEM TO KILL ME, THEN THEY GO AFTER MY DAUGHTER AND I TRY TO PROTECT HER.”



From Germany, where he has been since 1977, Pëllumb returns in the ‘90s. In ‘99 war broke out in his village. Serbian police catch him and his cousins in the car. Pëllumb is kept for 21 days in the basement of a bar, where captive civilians are interrogated. The torturing police officers want to learn from Pëllumb about his family members in the KLA, especially about his brother.

The reader should be warned that Pëllumb describes extremely torturous experiences, which he suffers from twice a day, and which almost always end in fainting.

The day before he is finally released, he is severely beaten and, half dead, is left behind some containers. Today, Pëllumb describes family sufferings who go beyond the days of war, that have left many health problems, and beyond.



I STILL DO NOT DARE TO SLEEP ALONE

I am Pëllumb, I was my parents' second child. I am a part of a family which was neither rich nor poor and we dealt mostly with livestock. I helped my parents with the livestock - with sheep, cows and others. My mother was a housewife, she dealt with knitting. She would make socks or even carpets. They would sell them because we had sheep wool.

I was educated with the help of my parents. At that time, they were not so old so they were able to send us for education. Even though the living conditions were hard, they managed to send four of the children to school. I have completed my primary school in the nearby village. I have completed first through eighth grade of primary school.

I remember the first day of school because we went to school together with friends on foot and the distance from village to school was over three kilometers. But the trip was joyful because we would play on the way.

I had a good relationship with my family and especially with my father. I inherited my grandfather's name. My father dealt with

blood feud reconciliation and he solved different problems that people had in our village or other villages as well. Whenever he would go to such places, he would always take me with him. They would always call my father because my father was a bit educated; in '40-'41 he finished his school. I don't know what kind of school or course it was exactly. I don't remember if he completed it in Prishtina or Gjilan, I believe it was Gjilan because it was closer to him. He went there together with a friend and together they finished the school.

He was a Serb from our village, they were the same generation. As we were told as soon as they finished the second course they got employed. My father used to work as a policeman in Gjakova, I don't know for how many years. My father learned reading and writing in both Albanian and Serbian, but mostly in Serbian language. Then he dealt with helping people solve problems; wherever they invited him he would go. In each and every place he went he would take me as well but now I forgot all the places. I used to know all the exact places and names where my father used to go up until '99-2000 but now I have forgotten.

I registered secondary school in Ferizaj immediately after I completed primary school. The secondary school lasted for four years. I have completed secondary school travelling on foot because there were no transporting means and conditions were as they were at those times.

I had a really good relationship with my brothers but the best relationship I had with my sister because we were six brothers and we had only one sister. She was clever, she wanted to go to school but father didn't allow her to continue. At those times they wouldn't allow them to go because they had to travel on foot and from my village to the city is more than seven kilometers. And for that reason, my father didn't allow her. Also, because she didn't have any female friends and my father couldn't let her travel alone. However, me and my brothers we continued going to school.

I discontinued going to school in '76. I have finished secondary school but I didn't continue further even though I had the opportunity. In July of '76 I went to complete my military service. Immediately three-four months after I finished secondary school, I joined the army. One of my uncles was working at the municipality office responsible for recruiting soldiers to the army and he said: "There is a free place in the army, would you like to go?" and I agreed because it was close, not even 50 kilometers. My uncle told me "You will be a driver".

I came to Pristina, I became a soldier in former-Yugoslavia and for seven months I stayed in the "Marshal Tito" barracks. After seven months I had completed the training for a driver but they refused to make me a driver because there were no Albanians in the army at that time, I was the only one. So I was not appointed to be a driver but I was appointed to be an infantry observer. So, from Prishtina I was sent to Mitrovica at

"Meto Bajraktari". I worked there as a mailman and I stayed for seven months there because I never used my military leave.

I completed my military service in '77. I don't remember the exact month. As soon as I completed the service, I got the passport and I went to Germany. My plan was to go to Germany and work so when I come back, I will have enough to buy a truck. I calculated that it will take me two-three years to work and then when I come back here, I will obtain a driver's license and continue working as a driver. But as soon as I went to Germany I never came back.

I worked in Germany until '90. Initially for seven years I worked as a waiter because I went and finished a course. In that course they were teaching two subjects, courses for waiters and cashiers. So, I also completed that course for computers, where the money was going. So, after seven years of working as a waiter I worked for six and a half years as a cashier in a department store. I also did some other work. I was not only a cashier. When needed I was appointed to work other things as well.

Those years while I was in Germany, I came only once home. We would go in March and we would come back in July because it was seasonal work. So, we would finish in December and in December we would come and rest for three months and then we would start next year. I did seasonal work for four years. Then I obtained a visa, not a permanent one but only temporary. I worked until '90 with that visa. In 1989 I got ill but I don't know the name of the illness.

My eyebrows would fall off. They were saying it happened because of the absence of a vitamin but I don't know which one. All of my body hair would fall off. Not only hair but everything. When I would come back home in '89 and stay for a week here my hair would start growing back but as soon as I would go back to Germany it would fall down again. I struggled for a year like that, I would go to hospital and again the same problem would appear. I was in the hospital bed next to another Albanian from Gjakova and as soon as I found out that he died in the hospital, the next day I immediately purchased a plane ticket and I came back home. I never went back to Germany. I was afraid. Because we had the same illness.

Two months later I regained my strength and I was as I used to be before, my hair grew back and I started working with foreign currency exchange. I would convert cash from deutsche marks to Yugoslav dinars and from dinars to deutsche marks. Exchange of foreign currencies with former-Yugoslav dinars. I worked until '98. That year, because the war started, I stopped working.

In May of '98 all members of my family were interrogated because they were looking for weapons. At that time my father was over 70 years old. I managed to save my entire family. The Serbian police summoned me, my father and my brother who is now a martyr to appear in front of the Serbian police station. My brother didn't come because I told them: "My brother is in Switzerland, only my father and I are in the house". We had three members of the family who had similar names - my brother Qahil, my cousin Qamil and my other cousin Qail.

In '99 I stayed home because I didn't work. I stayed with my wife and children because my children were young. My brother, joined the Kosovo Liberation Army. I helped the soldiers a bit because my brother was there too. I hid a pistol which I brought from Germany and I didn't dare tell anyone about it. When the war started, I took it and I gave it to my brother and I told him "Since you joined the army, here you go". I didn't get the pistol because of war but I purchased it because I was fond of it and I took care of it. My brother started with that weapon and then he got his supplies from cousins because all of my cousins were in the war.

In '99, on April, there was fighting in the village. I helped them because my house was the last one where the fighting was taking place. The soldiers brought the weapons near my house and from there I would

help them and carry the weapons to where the fighting was happening. The fighting lasted for two and a half hours in the village. Two people were wounded. My brother was grazed by a bullet, it hit his hair. He survived that time but two others got wounded.

That day, we escaped from the village and we went to a hill which was a kilometer and a half away, maybe two. The entire neighborhood escaped there. Our army took care of us there and they monitored the situation. If I am not mistaken, I stayed there until the 15th. Then the Serbian forces started shooting at us so we escaped to another village. The distance between my village and this village where the entire neighborhood stayed was six-seven kilometers. I think it was the 29th of April when I returned to my village. I remember it was a Thursday but I don't remember which date and I saw an imam who was close to my age and he asked me: "Where are we going to do the Jum'ah (Friday prayer) tomorrow?" and I replied to him: "Imam, first I need to reach my home and tomorrow is another day. See you then."

The same night my brother together with three other soldiers told me: "Stay here and take some of the stuff from home in order to take them tomorrow". Two soldiers planned to go to a nearby village the next day, on Friday. So, I went to sleep alone. At seven thirty a cousin came and told me: "Come on, we are moving on!" I didn't know where we were going. We just got inside a car and left. When we left the main road in order to reach that village, we came across the army and police. They were placing landmines on the road. They started shooting at us from the moment they saw us until we stopped, but we didn't stop initially. When we stopped, there was a tank on the road and the Serbian forces caught us and they maltreated us. Both police officers and soldiers were located there; soldiers didn't mistreat us at that moment only the police officers did. I recognized three or four of them. They didn't know me by my name, they knew me by my nickname, because I used to hang around with two friends who had a known surname and they assumed that I belonged to that family as well. These two friends also worked with currency exchange. The police beat us up badly. They cut a tree and with sticks they beat us up bang-bang-bang. They broke the leg of my cousin who was a soldier and they also broke my foot.

From there they took us to the police station. While they were taking us there, police officers were communicating with radio among themselves and they were being told to: "Throw them out from the car and take their ID cards". I thought they were talking about us from what I could understand. But they were not talking about us. A bit further on,

maybe five hundred meters further, there was another communication and they were told: "We took from the other guy the cigarettes and his ID card". Then I understood that they were not talking about me and my cousin but they were talking about some unknown persons. Later, after I was released from prison, I found out who they were talking about and both of them were killed. The first one came from a nearby village, I knew him. The second person was from another village. Both of them worked with trading.

They took us to the police station and they abused us there. The police were staying in the mosque. One of the officers said: "Call the others, let them see the terrorists we caught!" They came. But when they came, I recognized several police officers because I worked for eight years everywhere in Kosovo.

Police officers came out from the mosque, they put me in the vehicle and they told me that the deputy commander wanted to see me because the commander was killed. I also recognized the deputy commander but he didn't know me because he didn't deal with me. Another officer was in front of me. He saw my money. He asked: "Why do you have so much money?" I showed him the money on purpose because I was wearing a jacket and I opened it because it was warm. I wanted him to see it. Then I pulled the money out and I said: "This money belongs to the police" I said "I have a witness that your employee gave it to me. Your employee gave the money to me. He stole your money; I gave him the deutsche marks and now I have this money left".

There were over 4000-5000 of deutsche marks which I placed in front of him. He said "Why are you leaving this money here?" and I said "To find a solution, to help me somehow". He said "I can help you by not sending you to a place where they are abusing the people a lot. I can send you to Bankkos. There are all women." He didn't say anything else. He wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to the police officer who brought me there and he told him: "Take him to this place". So, they took us, me and my cousin, from Bankkos to Ferizaj.

I was on the right side of the vehicle. When we arrived, I saw that the doors were open because the Bankkos doors were big. I saw there many women, most of them were young. One of them came out and as soon as he saw me, he said: "What are you doing here?" I rolled down the window and told him and he just said: "Aha, a terrorist!" he tried to punch me but I rolled up the window and didn't let him. He hit me a bit. He then went on the other side where my cousin was. My left hand was handcuffed to my cousin's right hand. He beat up my cousin more and then he entered the vehicle. We waited there for an hour because they didn't want us there, the police were using that place for sex. The police there were all uniformed, there was no one without a uniform. We stayed there for an hour or maybe an hour and a half. They didn't want to take us so there so they took us to "Pranvera". We waited for three-four hours outside. "Pranvera" was a place which they used to take the civilians which they caught, men or women, initially take their details and then take them to other places. "Pranvera" was a place where they would take civilians and imprison them in the basement. The basement was four by five meters wide. Before we entered the basement, they took our details. I was taken by police because I was a civilian and soldiers took my cousin because he was a military man.

I am not sure if they took my cousin to Pristina hospital. I didn't see it, only what I was told there. I was held initially at "Pranvera" in Ferizaj. The basement was filled with forty or fifty centimeters of water. I stayed there for 21 days, maybe 22 days. I would be taken by a Roma person from the basement to the second floor. I don't know who was taking the others. At the time when I was there, they wouldn't keep people for more than two hours, two-three hours and then they would take them. I never saw that Roma person taking anyone else. He would take me to the second floor, on the right side where Avdi Bajgora was together with Boban Krstić, that was his first and last name, there were also some other persons there which I would see but I never managed to learn their names, except for these two.

On one side they would interrogate me and on the other side I would be taken to put a signature. Then they would take us back to the basement. Sometimes they would interrogate us once in the morning and once in the afternoon. They were not interested in why I was together with that soldier or where I was going. They were mostly interested in my family, how many soldiers there are and where are they located. While I was there, I heard that two of my cousins were killed. I was caught on April 30th. One of those

cousins was a commander and he was killed on April 22nd. My family didn't know about this but I learned while I was imprisoned that two of my cousins were killed but still, I didn't believe them. They told me: "Feim and Ali were killed!", but there were two people named Ali and both of them had the same last name. One of them was commander of the village brigade. Next day I was interrogated again and they were asking me about my brother because he joined the army. The abuse increased even more after those soldiers were killed and they were telling me: "We heard on the news that your brother was killed".

I believed this to be only their tactic. I wouldn't admit that my brother is a soldier because in '98 I gave a statement saying that my brother is in Switzerland. I was telling them to look for the statement I gave earlier and they found my statement in which I stated that my brother is not a soldier but he is in Switzerland. They had some accurate information and they were trying to convince me to say that he is a soldier. I would admit everything they said accurately for the others but I wouldn't admit regarding my brother because I knew that I gave a statement earlier and it was my final statement. I gave that statement seven-eight months earlier. At that moment they put me down and they told me to sign a paper, but I refused to do so because that paper had few written sentences which I have said and then there were 10 centimeters of blank space and then the place to put the signature. I refused to put a signature there and he slapped me twice. I told him: "I will not sign even if you kill me, I will not sign down here". They didn't let me sign up under the text. He said: "Only down here!" then they wrote whatever they wanted. Fine. Anyways.

The abuse continued every day, I was sent down-up, down-up, they were interrogating me mostly about my brother. Every day they tortured me using a bayonet, with a knife. And every evening they would come and take me again.

For 21 days I didn't talk to many people because they would keep them there for a short time, one-two hours at most. It didn't happen for anyone to stay a longer period of time there like one day or overnight. Only one person stayed for one day and one night and I learned his name.

The abuse initially occurred in Goga's cafe, a cafe bar near the basement maybe thirty-fourty meters away. They made the NATO sign on my forehead using a knife. Imagine the pain. I had to stand still while he was cutting the flesh with his knife and blood was continuously dripping. I am not sure how long I stayed there, thirty minutes or an hour. The person

who was transporting people came in and I remember they were telling him in Serbian language: "Shaban, bring him ... take him". I don't know if that was his first name or last name. During the day the next abuse happened, they cut my thumb. There they addressed that person with Ismet and not Shaban anymore. But during the time I stayed there for 21 days I learned his name, his true name was Ismet Shabani, a Roma from Ferizaj. I searched for him, I checked two-three Ismet's but it was none of them. It's possible that he was not from Ferizaj but I never found out who or what he was. I was interested to know if he did anything else. But I never found out where he is or where he lives.

The abuse started on the second day and it continued for 19 other days, they used the same methods. I had wounds starting from my head, where they cut the NATO sign using a knife, until the tips of my fingers and also part of my left testicle has been damaged. For 21 days this abuse occurred in "Pranvera". I don't remember the exact date when I was released, but I counted how many times I was abused. As I counted the last day was the 21st day.

He was holding a broom in one hand and I don't know for sure if he was holding the bayonet on the other hand, but he shouted: "Take off your trousers!" and so I did. Then he told me: "Take off your underwear!" and I didn't want to comply. And then I don't know, I was down on my knees on the side, my head was facing the wall. I don't know who did it, was it that police officer which abused me or that Roma who was standing there because I fainted. I don't know if they used on me the bayonet or the broom because I lost my consciousness. I don't know how many hours I stayed there unconscious. When I tried to stand up I noticed that blood dried on the back of my body and I was feeling cold. I put on my underwear and trousers and I leaned towards the wall. There was a pool table there because on one side they were abusing people and on the other side they were playing pool. I couldn't see them but I could hear many voices talking, they were playing, I could hear the pool balls. The same police officer came out and he was wearing a mask and he said: "Who told you to dress up?" I told him that I was cold and he asked me: "Did you notice anything?" I was afraid to say No because I thought he might do it again so I said Yes. Then he told that Roma "Take him to the basement!" and the Roma person took me to "Pranvera", he dropped me in the basement and I crawled inside. Water helped me. Maybe it helped others as well, but others didn't suffer abuse like I did.

During one of these 21 nights, I don't know which night it was, they cut a piece of my flesh from the right side of my body by using pliers. That night they brought two people and both of them were wearing dress shirts and they were under 30 years old. The same person that abused me hit the first person with a bayonet on the left side of his head. That person fell on the ground. We were in the same cafe and there were some black blankets and a plastic cover. He would throw them there so there wouldn't be any traces of blood. Because the plastic cover wouldn't let blood leak and the blanket would soak it. I saw when he hit him from behind, he didn't say anything, and he just dropped him on the ground. Probably he was experienced, maybe it was not his first time, and he did it like how the butcher knows how to kill a cow. He hit him and that person didn't even move. He fell dead on the ground. Then they grabbed the second person and stabbed him between the ribs and stomach, he didn't move and he fell behind as well. They left both of them there.

That night I stayed awake until the morning, there was electricity, they would turn on electricity when they were abusing people. They would play pool but at the place where they were abusing us the Roma would switch off the light and he would go out. There I lost all hope because I realized that I'm not going anywhere. One of them, the one who stabbed that guy in the front, had a pack of cigarettes in the pocket and I entered and took it from him. At that time, I was smoking and I said to myself, if he comes out and sees me smoking, he will kill me, so let it be. I took the cigarette and I smoked it but luckily, he didn't come out. When he came out, he just said: "Too much smoke!" and I didn't say anything.

They returned me to "Pranvera" and interrogated me about what I had seen the previous night. Avdi and Boban were asking the same questions. I told them: "I couldn't see anything because I was here". He asked: "Maybe you could see something" and I replied "I couldn't see anything because it's impossible to see anything. I can't stand on my feet. There is that little window and nothing can be seen from it" he then said "You were at Goga's cafe, did you see what happened there?". I said "I don't know, a piece of me was cut there" and I said "I fainted, I couldn't see what had happened". He asked: "Was anyone there?" I didn't dare say yes. He then told me: "You will take this medication because you stayed for a long time in water. It will help you prevent a cold because your kidneys can be damaged from the water".

Not that he fooled me but I was forced to take it. It was a small bottle and its color was blue, almost like the color of the sky. They gave it to me and I noticed that when I swallowed the acid was very strong. He said: "Keep your mouth shut!" and I kept it shut for a couple of seconds and then I noticed that my teeth started cracking. I understood their intention and I said to myself: "It can't get any worse than this" and I opened my mouth and spat out most of my teeth, most of them cracked. I spat and he slapped me, he said: "You're supposed to open your mouth only when I told you and not so early!" and I said: "I couldn't hold it anymore because it was hurting me".

He then said: "You have to drink all of this again; I will make sure of it". I don't know if it was medicine or what it was but I know that it was hurting me. My teeth fell off during the time I was there, then in the basement they just became smaller and smaller. Both internal sides of my lips were covered with a rash and whenever I would put my finger in - it would feel like a burning sensation. There I lost all my teeth, they just decreased. It was not the last day. It was maybe two or three days before the end. The last day was when they removed a piece of flesh above the finger of my left hand and they told me: "This is going to be your last day and you will become like your other friends!" They returned me to the basement. In the morning they took me upstairs where they were hanging around in a small room and there was a person called Destan Shabani staying there. I saw Destan that day there and other days I would see him just passing by. I knew Destan from before because he was investigating us. That is why I knew him. He was a police officer but he was working in civilian clothes. They came, I didn't recognize the other person but he beat me up badly. He beat me up with a baseball bat on the left side of my body. He damaged my left kidney and left ribs.

I know I fainted and I don't know who grabbed me but I was left near a container on the left side of the road. The little mosque was on the right side and "Pranvera" and Goga's cafe were on the left side near each other. They left me leaning on the container made of steel. That moment I was so lucky because some women were heading to the train station. They saw me there and apparently, I asked for a cigarette from them, but I can't remember this. Then they asked me: "Who are you? How are you?" because I was all swollen up. I remember vaguely when they helped me stand up and I told them where I was from. And then those women came back and I don't know how they carried me. There were five-six or more women and one man was with them.

I used to know that man's name but now I forgot it. They took me to a house and they changed my clothes. One of the ladies gave me some large underwear. They removed my underwear and she put on me the new one. For an hour or two I was calming down and they covered me. I came back to my senses and she asked me who I was and what had happened. Then I was able to tell her who I was. She asked me about a person who was at the same place as me. Lucky for him, that person stayed there only one night and day. The following day he was taken away from there. While I was imprisoned, I managed to communicate a bit with that person and we learned each other's names. I said: "One night I was together with a person from Ferizaj. I know what they were asking him and what".

She said: "I am his wife". Thank goodness, even after all the torture I have suffered, I still had goodness in me. I told her the story of her husband and I told her: "They your husband to Vranje". Because I heard them, when they were torturing people upstairs you could hear them communicating downstairs.

Afterwards, she found a person who was work-

ing as a taxi driver, who was transporting people out of the nearby village by using a horse and a carriage out of the village and sending them to the train station. He would take 10 deutsche marks to transport persons from that village to the train station. This woman went out, found that taxi driver and told him the exact place where to take me. He was at the village, she paid for the taxi and she gave me a box of cigarettes. She said: "Take this one across!". She didn't come with me. She put me on the carriage and the taxi took me to a village, near the city.

They took care of me for a month because I stayed there until June 22nd. As I remember the events, the police tortured me for 21 days. And based on how they calculated it was more than 21 days. But according to the injuries on my body it was 21 days. Some told me that I came on the 19th but I don't know for sure, anyway one day more or less doesn't matter. A family there took care of me. I was lucky to have known most of them because they were uncles of the soldier, who was caught together with me.

There was a person there who took great care of me. His brother used to have sheep and their family slayed four-five sheep and covered me with animal skin. I am thankful to him for doing this for me even though he never met me and the others, those soldiers, most of them knew me. While I was staying with this family, I found out that my brother and my first cousin were killed.

A doctor there, a veterinarian, from village Gaqka administered me with an injection. I saw there all the people from the neighborhood, twenty of them, who used to go collect their pensions in Skopje. All of them used to work in Skopje. One of them was working as a veterinarian in Skopje. He administered me with the first injection. Then there was another doctor called Sylejman Topalli. He helped me with other medication that a young woman brought to me. She was providing medicaments for soldiers through a soldier from that neighborhood.

She gave me some medications for relieving pain. I don't know the name of the medication but I was using it. On 22nd of June I was sent to Skopje because my family was not in the village anymore. I went to the village and I asked around where my family is and I was told that they are in Skopje at the house of my uncle. After I stayed for one month with this family, my actual family members did not recognize me. They couldn't recognize me.

We stayed for two days in Skopje. Together with my family we returned to the village on 22nd, 23rd or maybe 25th of June, I am not certain when exactly. As it happened for the entire population of Kosovo, the same happened to our family: houses were burned, they killed a cow and then they threw it in the well. Soldiers that survived came and inquired about me. Two days after I came back home, I went immediately to the infirmary to heal some of the wounds which were still open. That day I got checked by a really good doctor. He checked my colon and told me: "It's not infected but there are some cysts, they are out, but there is no need to intervene anything. By using a cream, they will dry out". He prescribed some other medication as well and gave me some bandages and told me: "Keep them just in case!" I went to the pharmacy and they had nothing. I went to Ferizaj but also there I couldn't find anything. My uncle from Skopje found those medicaments and I used them and they helped me.

One day I had to report to the doctor at the infirmary because I was receiving infusions every second day. I lost count how many infusions I have taken, hundreds and hundreds. I still take infusions. While I was at "Pranvera" also my stomach was damaged because they didn't give us any food or water. I took whatever I could find, I drank water from that place where I was staying. For two-three days I drank that water and then I used my shirt to filter and drink the water. But the water dirt and hair would penetrate the shirt as well because the toilet sewage was coming directly from the first floor to the basement. All that they would defecate and urinate from upstairs would come directly where we were staying. In those twenty days I have stayed there, they cleaned the basement only once. That person called Ismet came once and he removed the place where the tube was located. He removed and cleaned it, he didn't wash it but just put some water and then locked it. Then he turned on the water upstairs for two or three hours until the level raised for 20 centimeters and he left it like that.

Then I started drinking that water. In 2000, my stomach started hurting, I went to the doctor and it was the same doctor who checked me before. He said that I need to check it. I told him what kind of water I drank and the doctor told me: "We need to check it with an x-ray". At that time in Kosovo, I didn't have options where to go but also, I didn't pay too much attention to it and I used for a year medication which were easing the pain a bit, so I didn't deal with my stomach issue.

I had a heart attack before my operation. In 2002-2003, I am not certain when I had a heart attack. The doctor told me "It happened because of your stomach". I stayed in the hospital for 21 days in Pristina.

Within three-four years then I also had a stroke, for two-three days I lost my consciousness. All this because I was cut in the back of my head in two places and also, I was hit on the head. I went to see a neurologist in Ferizaj. I believe his name was Enver. He checked me and then I was sent to the neurological department for a checkup. The next two years and also in 2017 they operated my stomach because it was completely blocked. I didn't know what was going on. They told me: "The entire intestine canal which is connected to the stomach has been damaged". They removed half of my stomach and the intestine which is connected to the stomach. Doctor told me he removed five centimeters but I don't know if that's true and then they combined the intestine and stomach with a connecting bridge, apparently that's how they call it.

Since 2017 I still have problems with my stomach. Also, my left kidney is damaged from the time I was beaten up with that stick, that part is severely damaged. They told me I have to undertake an operation but I didn't, hoping that I can do something with medication. I use medicaments for my kidney because it doesn't clean as it should, as I was told by my doctors. I use medication for my kidney, stomach because I get anemic.

For two years I had also problems with my lungs. In 2019 I was in the hospital because I had internal and external bleeding, I was bleeding from my mouth and colon because when they connected the intestine something that digests food was not directed at food. God knows when they operated on me, it's not directed towards food and I don't know what happens in medical terminology but the bleeding occurs.

So, this is my story. I live here with my wife and my daughter-in-law. My wife and daughter-in-law take me to the doctor regarding all these health problems. My son is at work most of the time but all the issues I have with anemia and stomach occur during the night and then my son takes me to the doctor. Other than that, I spend most of my time at home with my wife, daughter-in-law and my two grandchildren.

I met my wife for the first time while I was attending secondary school. My wife wasn't going to school but I got to meet her because her sister married my brother. We met in '76. I was then a soldier and my brother was already married. Then in '77 I finished the army and I went to Germany and then I returned in '78. I bought a car and one day I took my sister-in-law to her father and there I met her sister who was then attending 8th class in '78. That's when I saw her for the first time. In '80 we got married. For two years we dated and our families knew that. They never stopped us from dating and they never interfered. We would go out with parent's approval.

I have six children, four sons and two daughters. All four all married, they have children and they are all employed. Me and my wife are unemployed, she is a housewife. I work a bit in agriculture, but I can't work too much but just to entertain myself for the day. I can't work but I just don't like seeing the land fallow so I work a bit.

I have changed a lot after the torturing. Since '99 and still to date I am afraid to sleep alone. I see nightmares of being beaten up, I see them killing my youngest daughter. I see them and it seems as if it's happening in broad daylight and then I startle and try to escape. My daughter was born in '99 and I don't know if she was even one month old. I see all these things in my nightmares. I see nightmares of them asking me "Do you want us to kill you or the daughter?" and I tell them to kill me and then they go to kill my daughter and I try to protect her. This nightmare reoccurs very often.

For twenty years my wife never left me alone. She even doesn't go to see her family members. If she goes, she stays only during the day and stays until the evening. In the evening I go to pick her up or one of the boys does. These last 20-21 years I never stayed alone in the house. My family takes good care of me. And they should because I took care of them before the war. We had good living conditions, they were educated, and I always provided for them everything they needed. My wife would go wherever she wanted to go, I would never disallow anything, and I provided good living conditions before '99. And then in 1999-2000 my wife took care of me; she cleaned all the body wounds I had for three years. She treated me as if she was a nurse. Now I have to return the good deed for those that took good care of me.

At the moment I am dealing with these illnesses that I've been carrying since the war. My biggest concern is my stomach and the anemia. I am not optimistic that they will heal, time did its deed, I am now old and I know that things will not get better. I am relieving my pain with medication because my stomach doesn't let me eat. Before eating anything, I must take one pill every day.

So here it is, this is my story. This is everything I had to say. I would like thank you and the association.

“BUT WE HAVE TO HELP, TO SUPPORT THEM AS MUCH AS WE CAN. WE SHOULDN’T MAKE IT HARDER FOR THEM. SHE HAS A LOT OF ANGER AND SADNESS... THE SITUATION WOULD GET JUST WORSE AND WORSE. WE HAVE TO BE READY TO HELP AT ANY TIME, BE AWARE AND STAY CLOSE TO THEM AS MUCH AS WE CAN.”



As Refik points out, his family was always together during weddings, death ceremonies and also during the war. When the Serbian state campaign for the cleansing of Kosovo intensified, the population of Llabjan was forced to flee as well. But Serbian forces did not allow families to flee together. They separated young men from the others.

From that moment the abuse, torture and humiliation became a daily routine for Refik, his brother and four hundred other prisoners from that area. When the end of the war was signed, these prisoners were sent by buses to different Serbian prisons.

Only after the intervention of the International Red Cross, Serbia was forced to release the prisoners. There, Refik found his brother, with whom he had been separated since the second day of being imprisoned. He rejoices while saying, “If I would see my family as well at that moment I wouldn’t mind even if I died there and then.”

However, when after about ninety days they came back to their ruined house, they reunited with their mother and two sisters, they found out about the violence which the rest of the family had suffered.



MY SISTER JUMPED FROM THE TRACTOR TOWARDS US

We were seven members of the family, three brothers, two sisters, my mother and father. My father worked in an office in the village. We, the children, went to school in that village. There was only one school for several nearby villages.

We had very poor living conditions. Now we have much more than we had at that time but somehow even then we managed. I started my primary school in 1981. The very same year my father was imprisoned because he participated in the student's protest. Father stayed for 40 days in jail and that year I did not attend school. I lost that year. Next year I registered again the primary school. Our living conditions were very difficult, we had no income, we didn't have anything. Matter of fact, a year has passed until my father managed to return to the old place of work.

I have two older brothers. They struggled to find work for themselves in order to survive. We always had pressure caused by the Serbian state and by Serbs and we have suffered as a family which belongs to the

Bosniak community. We bought our land a long time ago and then the Serbs in 1985 came and took it away, the size of the land was 1 hectare and 20 are. So, everything you thought you have, you actually did not have. We had to buckle up and work. We had no other way out.

When they came my father was at work and so my mother went to speak with that Serbian person. We have bought the land from the state. But that Serbian person apparently gave it to the state. My mother didn't allow our land to be taken because that land was providing food for us. You had to do something in order to survive somehow because those were difficult times so we had three cows, you had to buy low and sell high. When my mother went out, she told that Serbian person, "Don't do anything or I will stab you with a pitchfork" and she went in front of him with a pitchfork made of steel. My sister was two years old at that time. They arrested both my mother and my two-year-old sister and they kept them arrested for 12 hours.

They issued a fine for my mother because they couldn't keep her in prison since the little girl was with her. And then war messed everything up.

In '89 my father died. He used to work as a mailman. He was distributing mail for twelve villages. These were mostly military service summons, children vaccination, traffic fines, etc. My father worked for 28 years. When they took his land, he became worried sick and in 1989 he died.

My second brother was a soldier in Banja Luka. At that time, I was attending I believe the eighth grade at school. My oldest brother was hired in the brick factory. For that I thank my neighbor. Because of him they hired my brother. He noticed that we don't have any kind of income and then he said, "You have to come and start working because you don't have any other options." He helped us a lot. Also, many people from the village helped us a lot regardless of the fact that we were Bosniaks, we were together with them on every occasion, weddings, death ceremonies, anything, it didn't matter because we were together.

After some time, my brother finished his army service and he came back. He started working and worked for almost two years. He worked the same job as my father did. My father died at his place of work. My brother worked until '91 and then he went to Italy. Then I replaced him at his place of work for some time. I worked there until the decision came to sign for the Serbian state. When that decision came, I quit my job and I didn't work there anymore. From time to time, I would work in some private companies, here and there, so I would meet ends.

I finished only the first year of my secondary school. We didn't have any income and we had to provide for 5-6 members of the family. Our living conditions then were much harder than now. From all the men in my family I am the youngest. My sisters loved me a lot, we were a like-minded family. When the time would come for work, we would all be working. We never begged anyone for help. My father tried his best raising us and

educating us but war time eventually came.

War destroyed everything. The Bosniak community was destroyed the most. Just before the war started and during war time, many people from nearby villages escaped war and came to our house. When most of the people from my village gathered, they escaped war just like everybody else and they went to the nearest village. I really can't tell how many people there were, but there were many, I know that there were 936 tractors. There were also tractors with trailers and they managed to cross. Whenever needed me and my brother were watchmen.

On 7th of May three Serbian paramilitary officers came. They had scarves over their heads. And people that saw them and those who had more experience told us not to run towards the woods. We had to display a white shirt or something, show them that we are surrendering. My family was among all the people there. Someone raised a white shirt or sheet and they surrendered. The Serbian military surrounded us. They searched each tractor and robbed people off their possessions, they took all their money and gold. They were stopping the men and ill-treating the women. They took their gold, their rings, money, just about anything they could find. From there we continued our road towards Stragan from Llugave te Drinit and every 20 meters there were 5-6 or even 10 paramilitary officers. I was on my neighbor's tractor and my family was with me. I was sitting at the end of the tractor because it was not a good idea for a woman or an elderly to sit there. Each and every one of them was asking for money and gold. When we came close to the Balkan house, as they call it, the one that has the buses operating from Pristina to Peja, I remember it as if it happened yesterday, they stopped us there and I noticed that they were taking the young men away. But they didn't pay too much attention to the age. One of them was saying stop them and

the other was saying let them go. They told me, my brother, a neighbor and five other men from the village to get down from the tractors. There were 936 tractors who went on their way, one after the other.

My mother and two sisters were in the crowd of people and everybody was just trying to find a place to sit on the tractors. There were many that were left on the road because they didn't have means of transport. The ones which were on foot would get killed by the Serbian criminals, the chetniks. That's why everyone should give a statement and tell the young generations what happened during the war.

They told us to get off the tractor there. I had 30 deutsche marks in my pocket, intended for my family in case they need to buy bread. And then, suddenly, one Serb hit me with a rifle buttstock on my back. They were shouting, "Walk here". One of them was searching our pockets and the other one was hitting us as hard as he could. One of them was sitting on a chair and he was giving orders, "This one goes here, that one goes there". I turned to look behind in order to see my family and to see my brother who was also taken off the tractor and at that moment they started beating me. One of them said, "Give me your ID card!" and after I gave it to him, he said, "You're a Bosniak?" and I said, "Yes, I am" and he asked me, "Why did you leave your house, who told you to leave?" I said, "The army." He asked me, "KLA or the regular army?" and I said "I didn't see KLA here, it was your army." He then hit me so hard that I almost fainted. I saw that at the same time three of them were beating my brother. My eldest sister jumped from the tractor to grab my brother. A fight started there and from the beatings I lost control and I lost my family, I lost everything.

Two people grabbed me and they put me inside one house. If I would go today, I could tell which house but I never went to that place ever again. I don't know if there were 90 or 100, I don't know how many people there were. I don't know what happened to my brother or my sisters. They left us there for two hours or maybe more.

From there they took us to the school in village Staragan. They told us not to look left or right, just to look down and to hold our hands up. And when we reached that place, they told us to kneel and our legs eventually got numb, we were unable to stand up. They were beating us as much as they could. It started getting dark. They took a man, who was around 40 years old, inside a house and they pointed a rifle at him. We heard a shot coming from that house. He would go away, another would come. They put that man on the side only so they would scare us into thinking that we are going to get shot. They took that man to his tractor and they threw all his belongings on the ground. They gave him an order, "Get on your tractor!" and as soon as he would try to climb the tractor, they would point the rifle at him and get him down.

Maybe an hour has passed or so. A bus and a truck covered with tarpaulin arrived. It was Serbian police. They started searching us one by one and they took everything we had in our pockets and they took all of our ID cards. They even removed our trouser belts. Then they started beating each and every one of us and they just put us inside the bus. The bus and that truck got full with people. We stayed there for some time, I don't know for how long because we didn't have watches, and after some time they took us to village Gjyrakovc. While we were in village Gjyrakovc they took us to a private agricultural pharmacy. So, imagine all those people, maybe nearly 100 people were put inside one room. Doors were locked and windows were locked. In the morning when we woke up the ground had two centimeters of liquid. Because there was no air flow and the liquid was created by people as a result of the torture and everything else.

Someone had cigarettes with him and another person had a lighter, but the lighter wouldn't ignite because there was simply no air. It was hard to keep our body and soul together. Maybe less than 500 meters from that place they had something similar to prison cells. These were some tiny rooms. All the criminals from Peja, who were Serbs, were taken to that place for interrogation. When we were sent there, I saw my brother and my neighbors there, I saw that everybody was there. Two, three and sometimes four police officers would interrogate us. They were from Yugoslav State Security Administration (YSSA) and they were asking us, "Why did you escape? Who made you? For what reason did you and your brother escape? You are Bosniaks, there was no need to escape, why did you end up in prison? You could have stayed home if you would have gone to the police and told them, "I feel endangered, give me some weapon and I will stay here." And I told him, "No. I grew up with Albanians and we celebrated and cried together." He asked me, "Didn't you also have Serbs living up on that hill as well?" and I replied, "I never entered their house. I never stepped on their fields. Wherever my village goes, I will go with them." He then said, "Are you belittling the state of Serbia?" and I said, "I don't know, this is Kosovo." He then said, "This is Kosovo, really? Ok, sign here." And as soon as I signed, I saw myself in the corridor being kicked and beaten up.

They took me to a room. Inside that room there was a person from Naberjan, my brother, one unknown person and myself. They continuously beat us; we were barely managing to catch our breath. They took my brother for an interrogation. He didn't comply with their orders, he said you can kill me but I will not speak in Serbian language. He was like that. They tried to make them sign a paper that they're being sent for 30 days to a detention center and my brother took that paper and ripped it apart. There are also other witnesses that can state the same. And when they

brought my brother near the room, six of them started beating him. He fell on the ground. As my brother put his hand on the ground in order to stand up, one of them who was wearing military boots stepped on his hand and ripped his hand between the fingers.

We stayed there for four days and nights. Every hour they would take us to collect water in a 10-liter bucket. We would fill the bucket with water but since it had cracks underneath, the water would leak from the bucket. As we were walking, they would continuously beat us. They were torturing us. They would send us into a room and they would beat us there. When they would finish, they would just open the door and kick us inside. On the fourth day they brought us two slices of bread and two boiled eggs. But our jaws wouldn't work anymore, we didn't chew anything for four days and nights and you couldn't chew anymore.

We stayed there until the morning. Then the buses came again for us. They took us one by one and as they were putting us in the bus, they were beating us. They took us to Peja. They took us to a building behind where the police station is located now. When we reached Peja they took us off the bus and then they started beating us by kicking us, punching with fists, they were hitting us with rifle buttstocks and rubber pipes. Everyone knows what a PVC pipe is, it's a pipe which distributes water. They were beating us with that kind of pipe. They sat us in a rounded formation so we would rest. Everyone was sitting in the corner, but not as you would normally sit, but we were kneeling down on a cement bag. So we wouldn't be able to stand up and it would be easier for them to beat us. Every person that came to that room would beat us. They would ask for money from us. They were even checking the zipper in our jackets thinking that we would hide our money there. They made us sing for Serbia, they

made us sing for Milosevic. They tortured us. We stayed there for thirty days. They had a court, not where the Basic Court is located now but where the employment bureau is located there was a court there.

Before the war I would go out with my car and sometimes some police officer which I knew would stop me. Then one day one police officer told me, "Hey Bosniak, are you with them?" and I said, "Yes, I am." The police officer then said, "We will find out if you put on their uniform and I will put you near a wall and shoot you with an RPG. This will not take your soul away but I will destroy you with an RPG. Not only you but I will destroy your entire family as well." I didn't do anything; I didn't say anything. Maybe someone from those guards was an Albanian, I don't know, but I know that there were some from Bosnian community. There was someone I knew. I wish I could have coffee with him, and what I would do to him is another story. He said, "A Bosniak joining the KLA?" and I told him, "When my father died, you didn't come to my father's funeral, but this entire village did. They are everything I have." He asked me, "What did the first officer tell you?" and I told him, "The Serbian officer told me that he will shoot me with an RPG if I join the KLA." He then said, "I will do much worse than that." I said "If Allah lets me live, I know who and what you are, and God willing when everything ends, we will meet again."

And then 5-6 minutes later I was handcuffed inside the police car. Inside the car were two police officers, that officer that was driving was also a guardian as far as I know. He took me with that car to the Employment Bureau. He then said, "Now you will be put on a stand and they will impose several years of sentence which you will have to serve". On the second floor there was a prosecutor and a lawyer and both of them were Serbs. I smoke cigarettes but during that time it has been almost three weeks or almost a month that I didn't smoke and when I saw a cigarette pack, I got a bit emotional. "Do you smoke?" the prosecutor asked me. I said "No, I don't". She said, "Your eyes say yes and you say no. Fine." They removed handcuffs from me.

She said: "Why are you, a Bosniak, with them and not with us?" and I told her the same thing, "I am a Bosniak, I will not deny it because I am proud of it but I will always follow my brothers, wherever they go I will go with them". "So, they are your brothers now?" and I said "Yes, they are" She said, "Did you guard until 6 in the morning, all night long?" I said "Yes I have" and then she asked me, "So you are also a guard. Who else was a guard up on the hill?" and I said "I was not guarding" and then she started swearing and insulting me in Serbian language with everything she could think of.

I stayed in prison for a month or maybe a bit more. I have the papers somewhere but I don't know exactly how long. On 10th of June at 3 o'clock after midnight they told us that the war had ended. We were in prison and the police were waiting in front of the doors. When NATO would bomb Serbian targets, we could hear everything. One evening, they bombed nine times the place where the army was located, the paramilitary forces were staying in the barracks. They also bombed nine times the big Zastava factory, because the army was located there as well. We could hear them saying, "Leave the prisoners here. Don't open the doors. Let's escape to the basement". We were lucky and they

didn't bomb us, maybe they had information that there are prisoners here. Maybe that saved us. On the 10th, at 3 o'clock they woke us up and said, "Take your clothes because we are taking you to prisons in Serbia". There were approximately 400 prisoners in Peja and they put us all in eight buses. Outside the prison police officers formed two lines until the bus which was maybe 100 meters away. Every prisoner had to enter in between them and I have no words to explain what kind of violence we endured. They handcuffed us with some plastic handcuffs which, if you moved your hands, they would cut your skin. They couldn't be removed, they just had to be cut off. We travelled all day like that from here to Leskovac.

My brother was in the other bus. Also, while we were in the prison, they didn't let us stay in the cell together. There were usually 17-18 people staying in one room. On the way to Leskovac they were beating us, they were making us sing for Serbia, sing for Milosevic and other criminals. In the bus in front of us, the bus driver was a person called Dragan Vitojepašić from Llabjan. He used to work in Kosovo Trans. A prisoner was near him and he accidentally dropped a soap on the ground and it fell near the bus driver. The driver then said, "You want soaps?" and the prisoner said, "I took it to wash my face" the driver then said, "Ok, no problem". They had many packs of soap bars on the bus and they made all the prisoners eat them. Whoever refused to eat it would get beaten up and then they forced him to eat the soap bar. A nephew's relative told us. He also said, "That prisoner just dropped the soap bar. We paid an expensive price for that".

We started going from Peja towards Prishtina. In Prishtina the Russians could have saved us because at that moment the Russians were in Prishtina. But Russians have brotherly relations with the Serbs. They just took pictures and they said drive away.

When we arrived in Leskovac there were 400 prisoners from Peja. They aligned us and there were also the Serbs from Kosovo not only the ones from Leskovac. They started beating us, some would punch you and others just slap you. I was at the end of the line. As my brother was the first in line, about six of them started beating him for almost an hour. I could see clearly what they were doing to my brother. A police officer - doctor came and he told the police officers, "You can stop now." And then that doctor told a person from Llabjan and one from village Ramun, "Grab him and give him some water." When they gave my brother some water, he started recovering a bit. Those two neighbors were witnesses of the beatings but also the other 400 prisoners can tell you the same. As soon as my brother recovered a bit, he only asked about me, "Where is my brother? Did they kill my brother?" From there we were put in the buses again. Some were sent to Leskovac and others to other places. There were many prisoners, like my friends, that couldn't get on the bus.

There were some police officers that put the heater on and they told one prisoner, "Come here to get warm". His clothes burned down and not only the clothes but also his leg. After a while he went back to the bus and as the bus was moving his wound got worse and you could see his bone through the wound. When I saw him my body shivered. All 400 prisoners were crying because of him. He couldn't stand on his feet. There were people that would set on fire the prisoners' jacket and the prisoner couldn't take it off so he had to endure the pain caused by fire until it would burn.

From there we were sent to Zajecar. It was maybe midnight or two o'clock after midnight, I don't know. Nobody dared to ask in which prison we were being transferred. As we were getting out of the bus we were being beaten up. Four-five of them would gather and they would beat us. Serbs from Zajecar, as I managed to notice, were not so aggressive towards us. But when they would see how the Serbs from Kosovo were behaving with us then they would become aggressive as well. The situation was so bad that the head of the prison was informed and he ordered the Serbian police from Kosovo to give away their weapons and tools with what they were beating us with. He said, "There is law here." They noticed that we were exhausted, sometimes we were being fed with only one slice of bread and days were long, the body cannot endure all that.

They abused us there as well. They were beating us up in the afternoon and in the evening. My brother stayed with me for two days. As soon as they realized that we were brothers they separated us. My brother was on the second floor and I was on the first floor. They would take us for a walk which would last for 107 steps, I know it because I counted them. They would take us to a park and we would walk in a circle. Sometimes I would raise my head to see if I could see my brother on a window. Above those rooms were the guards and as soon as they would see you raising your head they would start shouting, screaming and insulting. Sometimes the guards would throw their cigarettes on the ground and many prisoners would take the leftover cigarette, hide it in their pockets and then they would smoke them in the room.

I didn't care about tobacco, or the house, land, nothing - I just cared about my brother, mother and my two sisters. I didn't know where they were, where they had gone, I didn't know if anything happened to them. For three months I didn't have any information about them. I didn't communicate with anyone except for those friends with whom I was sharing the room. In the room we had a prisoner who was 68 years old from Radavc. There were 16-17 people in a room. He would pray three times a day for all of us. Those two weeks in prison were longer than if you would stay now two-three years in prison. We didn't know if we were going to

make it or not, or if they were going to kill us and chop us into pieces. It was agonizing. You couldn't know, any moment a truck, minibus, or a military jeep with two-three police officers or soldiers could come and take you away and since we were prisoners nobody would ever find out about us. How did all those people disappear?

The food was a bit better there, but we paid for it in other ways. Just when I think of the torture we had to endure. Three-four days before leaving the prison, it was a late afternoon, the corridor had floor tiles and we could hear some people walking and no one was talking. We could hear a large table being moved, our door was broken and it was 5 centimeters above the floor tiles. A prisoner, told us, "We are in Zajecar prison!" "Where is this Zajecar?" we were asking each other but nobody knew. He knew all the places. He was the representative for our room in which there were seven prisoners. He was the "commander" because in prison only one person could speak on behalf of everybody, the others would turn their heads towards the wall. When he would talk to the guards, he kept his head down and ask, "We need this and that" and in case you would ask for bread you would get beaten up.

When we didn't have water, we would be shaken up. We could hear that table being moved and our representative said, "I can't tell what it is". Do they want to beat us, or slay us, I couldn't see. I could hear some people, some voices, they were changing, others were coming, and nobody knew what was going on because this was happening in the corridor. One of us tried to peek through the keyhole but he couldn't tell what was going on. I don't know how much time has passed. They would just come and take the door key and they were banging on the door and shouting "Come on terrorists, wake up." And they were swearing at us. We got ready, only our representative could speak with them and the rest of us couldn't move a muscle. He spoke to a guardian. The guardian told him, "From today on you can raise your head when you talk to me."

We were stressed out thinking that they will separate us again, we thought that they might take us to Nis or Leskovac again, or even Belgrade. He said, "Get ready, everybody will get out from the room and wait for the guardian." We all came out of the room.

That morning before this happened a big guardian came. He was so big that he could hardly fit the door. He punched me only twice and I was already on the ground. He said, "You all have to give me the papers you received when you were detained. Whoever doesn't have them must report to me." In my jacket I had the papers for both my brother and myself. I had a dilemma: how to give the papers to my brother? So, I gave my papers to the room representative. "Count how many prisoners there are, do you have their papers? If not, let me know".

I asked that fellow prisoner about my brother's decision, "Can I give it to him?" He said, "One of them has his brother's decision". And he said, "You have to give me that decision." I pulled the decision slowly from my pocket and I gave it to my fellow prisoner. We were all afraid because we didn't know what that table was being used for. Finally, we had sufficient numbers and the one who was checking the decisions said, "I see a bunch of papers". We gave them the papers and we didn't know if they will use those

papers to give us additional 2-3 months or 6 months of imprisonment, or are they going to use them to send us to different courts or they will transfer us somewhere else.

There was one prisoner locked up with us. These were four brothers who were arrested. One escaped and only three remained. They were from the village Dobrusha. Dobrusha has the largest Bosniak community. You have also Bosniaks in Vitimirica, Baje, few in Gjurakoc, also few maybe in Istog. They told him, "You will deal with these prisoners and you will translate for them". He said, "I will" but I didn't like when I would see that prisoner on the other side of the table. Things were changing every moment. They asked our room representative, "Where were you in prison?" He said, "Gjurakovc, Peja, Leskovac, Zajecar". They told him, "Sign here." He signed and he was told something but because we were scared, we couldn't understand what he was told. They separated and he came towards us and the other person went the other way. We wanted to ask him what happened but we couldn't because the guardian was there and he was ordering us to shut up. And when he told us to shut up, we lost hope about us. We thought there was no chance for us. When we went there, they told us, "Put your name and last name here". The guy from Dobrusha winked at me, trying to tell me that things are not bad. And nothing happened. We were back to our cell.

They brought us dinner which was a slice of bread or something. Then just before nine o'clock the guardian knocked on the door. He opened the door to see if everything was fine. He was Hungarian. He said, "There are 17 of you in this room, that is too much". He gave us tobacco. I said to myself, something is wrong here because this guy is giving out 17 cigarettes, this can be anything but tobacco. As everybody took a cigarette, I took one as well. He then said, "Tomorrow you are leaving Serbia." I got shivers all through my body. I said, "Is this person normal? Where will they send us now?". He said, "You are free to leave. That is why I offered a cigarette to all of you. But you will not leave alone to Kosovo. The International Red Cross will come for you. They will pick you up with KFOR buses."

It was afternoon. The room representative came and said, "It's time." But we couldn't see anything because we were still tied up. He said, "We shouldn't rush". I told him, "Something is wrong here. You are alone in this prison and I have a brother here". He said, "I know your brother" and I told him, "Not only that he is in prison but you have no idea what they did to us in Leskovac, I am afraid that now it's going to be worse for us." I said that because I was afraid. The time was passing, five o'clock, six, seven - it became dark outside and nothing happened. I told him, "Do you believe me now?" he said, "Don't worry, if we don't get out tonight, we will get out tomorrow for sure, and because we gave our statements when we were in prison." I said, "And what if they return the decisions as they were?" he just said, "No".

We woke up in the morning at 6 o'clock and we fixed our beds. The Head of the guardians said, "This is in good condition but the room in very bad condition". We said, "But we didn't do anything there, it's very dirty" and he said, "I want to see these ceramic tiles shining otherwise you are never going to leave this place." Someone took a bit of water; others took a bit of detergent and we were happy. The friend from Grashtica took a blanket and said, "Two persons grab it and pull it across the room and move around.

Everybody sit at one corner and don't touch the beds".

We finished that task. It was around 1 o'clock. We heard somebody in the corridor near our room. He came and he was banging the keys on the door. He said, "Come, you are all free to go." I couldn't believe my ears. But then I thought and what about my brother? When I was thinking about my brother, he was thinking at the same time, "Will they release my little brother?" I believe there were two buses from Zajecar, all the seats were taken and few people were talking. My brother was sitting on the second stair and tears were running down his face. When I saw my brother, I had the feeling as the world is mine. If I would see my family as well at that moment I wouldn't mind even if I died there and then.

We stayed there outside for three hours. Guardians never spoke to us. Some of us had some coins to buy cigarettes, or a cookie because there was a canteen there. They said that the International Red Cross came but they were waiting for the president to arrive. The Director of the Red Cross came and she spoke in German language, they were respecting her. They brought her a chair and she sat on it. And the main person told her, "This is the list and they can leave. The buses are near and the prisoners can get on the buses, there is no problem". She said, "Not like that. We have papers, pens, and each and every prisoner will have to sign in my presence". And she would call everybody with their first and last name, the translator was there as well.

At that moment, when I saw my brother and those internationals, my stress levels decreased. They had their drivers. One by one everybody prisoner sat, each of us had two liters of drinks, Coca-Cola or carbonated water. We were given match sticks, two packs of Marlboro and a sandwich. Three buses left that place. We had to connect to the road which connected Zajecar with the other prison which was located in the other Serbian city. We were waiting on the road for the other bus. We spend a lot of time there. The Jeeps with internationals were located in front of us and behind us, and the buses were in the middle. Then the other bus arrived and it was escorted by two jeeps with internationals. One in front and the other behind. So, four buses gathered there, from Zajecar and Leskovac, and they brought us all at the same time to Kosovo. Approximately 100 meters before reaching the Merdare border, the Commander of Serbian police returned to the vehicle because KFOR was there and he couldn't cross. We were so happy and we teased him by telling him, "If you come across, you will suffer the same as we did."

KFOR was driving in front of us with their armored vehicle and they brought us to Pristina. There was a large warehouse and the American and British KFOR soldiers were positioned there. You can't imagine how they welcomed us there. Every prisoner could eat and drink anything they want. It was like being home, you could have taken a chocolate, or a cookie, or a fruit, a banana, whatever you wanted. You could eat bread as much as you wanted, there were packs with beans, the best that God could provide. We slept there that night.

Some people came and they were bringing us mobile phones in order to call whoever we wanted in Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia or Switzerland. Luckily, I knew by heart the telephone number of my brother in Italy. An older woman approached me and asked me, "Would you like to make a phone call?" and I said, "Yes, please. I will say just two sentences. I will just notify my brother in Italy" and she said, "No, speak as much as you want". I called my brother and I told him that we were in prison and how they abused us, they beat us up, they did everything to us but we are still alive. I asked him, "Where is the family?" meaning about my mother and two sisters. He said, "They are in Albania and they will come tomorrow or day after tomorrow, or maybe after a week, I don't know. They are hardly fine." When he said hardly fine, I immediately knew that something had happened. I asked him, "Can you tell me what happened?" and he said, "When they come, they will tell you. It's important that they are alive". I spoke for 15 minutes with my brother, I notified him about the neighbors which were with us in the prison, I told him that they are all alive. He told me about some neighbors, they killed both of my neighbors' brothers. It was soul crushing because I was very close to them and they were my friends, we were together in the school and we were like a family.

Before I forget, that night when they brought us from Serbia, I would like to thank one of the Commanders because he came here and he waited for us. He shook our hands and spoke to each and every one. He gave a very encouraging speech. I thank him for coming and talking to us, it was just a half an hour, but for us it was a big thing.

The next day buses arrived and they took us from Prishtina to Klinia, Prizren and Gjakova. Many people were inquiring about their family members, if they're alive or dead and where they are, will they come back. They took us to Peja. When we reached the place where the wood combine is located, one of my neighbors saw me. From that place and all the way above the promenade are approximately 4 kilometers and he ran all

the way after the bus when he saw us. He ran after us. When we came off the bus he was there with us. We were at the place where the former municipality was located, now that the cadastral office. At that place another Commander was waiting for us. We stayed there for thirty minutes, he held some speeches, and he said some great things. He is a great man, very capable.

We were going towards our houses. We came directly from the municipality below Peja. There was the KLA station. They noticed me and I was wearing long black boots. A young man came out and he was wearing a KLA uniform and I was happy and wanted to say, "Wow, our soldier". He said, "Good afternoon" and I replied "Good afternoon" he said, "Can I ask you something? Who are you and where have you been wearing these boots?" and I said, "I will certainly tell you who I am but you have to tell me who you are as well" and he said, "You see that I am wearing a uniform" and I said, "I am happy seeing you in that uniform" and I told him, "I am this and that person, I was imprisoned and yesterday they released us from the prison. There are also others". They let us go to the center and I wanted to go home. He said, "No, we have to inform the main commander." I said, "Mister, you inform whoever you want, I want to go and see if my family is still alive because I can hardly walk. I'm exhausted. I can't stand on my feet."

A uniformed person, now deceased, came up front and when he saw me, he said "Neighbour" and I replied "Brother!" A person came driving a kombi van Mercedes 207. There were no seats, only two in the front. And this person stopped that van and asked the driver, "Where are you going?" He said "I am going to *he mentioned a village*". He asked us, "How many are you?" and he counted us eight. He told that driver, "You must send them to this village. Whatever you do, within an hour you have to confirm to me that you have taken them there because they are my people and they were imprisoned."

We got inside the van. There were eight of us. We all went towards our houses. Me and my brother remained the last ones. We live at the beginning of the village. The house was covered with bricks. Trees have fallen, they seemed like tunnels.

"- Brother?" "- What?" "Step only at the places where the car was driven because there might be a landmine or something." So, we were walking slowly, dragging our legs. Just 4-5 minutes before we reached our house, we met our neighbor who came with two other neighbors from Albania.

When he saw us, he started crying for us. He had more than 60 years of age. He died last year. "I am so happy to see you, as if I saw my own children. Thank goodness you survived. Your family is in Albania." he told us. "I don't know when they will come, tomorrow or when."

We were unable to enter our house. I couldn't take off my boots anymore. I lied down. They brought us tea. I said, "I don't want tea, I just want a drop of water." I was looking at the destroyed houses, there were no people there anymore. I asked my brother, "Should we check if our cottage is still there, so we can have a roof over our heads?" and when we went there, it was terrible, cows, horses and dogs entered our old house.

The house was in terrible condition. We just found a spot and laid there. I didn't care about the house, I just wanted to see my sisters. I went into a room; found a pillow and I just fell down because I was exhausted. In the morning when I woke up, I saw that the body of my dog, Bubi, was under the pillow. Somebody put the pillow over him, but I didn't notice it because I was exhausted. We were exhausted, we couldn't stand on our feet. I told my brother, "Brother, we have to do whatever we can to repair a room for us to stay in it." That room was 2 by 3 meter wide. We threw away the carpet and everything else and we put some wood on it so we could sleep in it.

Next day, in the afternoon, a neighbor arrived and he came with our people, mother and sisters, from Albania. He was crying because he lost a cousin. I asked him, "Are those our people that are coming?" he said, "Yes, they are" he also said, "They had a problem with a tire near the cupboard factory and they will come as soon as they fix the tire." The truck couldn't pass because the road was narrow. The neighbor's daughter started calling for me and my brother but nobody replied because we were someplace else. And then she went back and told my family, "They lied, because they are not there." My mother almost lost it. After some time, I told my brother, "Let's see where our family is" and just before we reached the truck my younger sister saw us and said, "They are alive, they are hardly walking but they are coming." We met. They immediately started explaining what had happened to them and I told them, "This is not the place to talk about it. There are eight different families in this truck."

The brother of the Commander arrived and he brought me flour and everything else I needed. I will never forget what the village did for me, I hope I will be able to return the favor to them.

That night my mother and sisters started telling what had happened, and I said, "Nothing for tonight! We will talk in the morning. Seeing you alive is enough for me. Tomorrow we will continue." But where are we going to stay? The house had two and a half floors but it was unfinished and it had only the walls and the roof. We couldn't stay there due to the bad smell. We put some sponge mattresses on the second floor, we put a blanket over the window and another blanket where the door was. We couldn't do more than

that. We fell asleep. At around 5 o'clock like an early bird I woke up, I went to the balcony and I said to myself, "Thank God my family has reunited" except for my brother in Italy but he is doing fine, he doesn't have war.

Sisters woke up and they made coffee. They told us everything. How they took them, and how they used force on them. Sisters told us that they were taken, the older sister jumped from the tractor and ran towards us but she was taken. They hurt them badly, they did everything to them. It was very hard listening to them. Because when someone hurts your family, they hurt your soul. Everybody should imagine how hard it would be if your sister would be raped, it's painful and nobody can heal that pain. Can anyone heal the pain I endured for 90 days in Serbian prison? No. Also her pain will never get healed. But we have to help them, find help for them and support them as much as we can. We shouldn't make it harder for them. She has a lot of anger and sadness and what would happen if we were angry as well? The situation would get just worse and worse. We have to be ready to help at any time, be aware and stay close to them as much as we can.

My sister has changed a lot since that happened. We can't leave her alone, always somebody must be near her. She was traumatized. She recalls very often what had happened to her, what they did to her, and we have to support her much more. We try to talk about other things and we try to keep her closer.

My sister never created a family of her own. It's hard to create a family. She lives in that psychological condition and then it's hard for her to endure everything. Our family will keep on trying to help her as much as we can. Whenever needed we will be there for her.

Very often I tried to start talking about that issue with her. She would stop, start crying, get angry and then she tries to change the subject so I wouldn't feel sorry for her. I take her with me and we go to the city, so she would think of other things. I tell her, "Sister, this happened during the war. It will go away eventually; you have to create a family of your own. Look at this one, she has little children or look at the other one she has big children." I try to convince her that she needs to have a family of her own. But it's not easy.

Me and my brother, we forgot about our sufferings when we think of what our sisters have suffered. Because it's terrible, it's much harder for them. Men are like men, they go out, they work and they forget a bit. But she stays at home, doesn't go anywhere and she just thinks, "look at what had happened to me".

I still didn't create a family of my own yet. I still live with my mother, two sisters and my brother. Nobody from my family got married yet. Hopefully, we will like everybody else did.

I had many problems with this sister. I had to forget my problems and deal with hers.

I had to keep her close to me. And we have poor living conditions. You can barely survive from working in agriculture or work in manual labor. I don't have my own company. I don't have anything. I live off the 120 Euros from what the state gives me because I was in prison, I don't have anything else. That money is not sufficient to buy medicine for myself, nor for my mother or for my sisters. But I still hope. I hope that things will be better because things can't go on like this forever. And we will, God willing, create our own families. My sisters, my brother, me - everybody.

I would ask the youth to understand what we have suffered during the war and they should focus only on school and work. Don't lose time with manual labor, or working in agriculture, don't do it. Only go to school and work. Nothing else. Without school you're nothing. Don't get fooled with businesses. Some are successful but remember that school is in the first place. School has everything, you get educated and smart. So, I would beg the youth never not to forget what the older generations suffered during the war, they should be smart. This was my story to tell, and I hope that God will help everybody and will not forget their deeds.

**“MY SOUL HURTS BECAUSE OF HER.
IT’S DIFFICULT, ONLY HER BODY AND SOUL
KNOWS BEST. EVEN IF YOU GIVE MILLIONS
TO ALL THE MOTHERS AND SISTERS THAT
WENT THROUGH SOMETHING LIKE THAT,
THEY WILL NEVER BE HAPPY.”**

Shir

In Baballoq, where he was born and raised, Shpejtim had bad experiences with representatives of the Yugoslav state since he was a child, when the police made his hands bleed by beating him with a baton. His experience is just the continuation of many bitter experiences of his family and the whole surrounding area.

In 1998, Shpejtim joined the KLA. After leaving home, he lost all contact with his family. When he got wounded in the war, the news reached his family members that he had been killed, and people came to express their condolences to his family. When he finally returned from the war, upon seeing him, all the women of the family fainted. He found his house in the village completely demolished.

A few years later, Shpejtim learns about the fate of his wife during the war from a man whose wife was herself a victim of sexual violence. He decides not to say anything to his wife until she gets the courage to tell him.



I DID NOT EXPECT THESE WORDS FROM YOU

I was born in village Baballoq, Deqan's municipality, in 1962. I am the first child in my family. I have five brothers and two sisters. We had a very happy childhood, there was a lot of love. Also, an uncle lived together with my family. The grandfather was the only child himself and he had two sons. Since I was the first child, everybody loved me more. My grandparents loved me the most.

When I was at the age of three my father went to work in Slovenia. He worked in construction. Grandfather has always been with us. Father would come once a year. Those were good times, we had a lot of fun, it was completely different from today because now people have it all, but we could never repeat the joy and pleasure we had in the past. We also had better health; everything was better in the old days. People wouldn't hang around with each other for a specific interest, there were no differences among us, we all had fun, we socialized together, those were good times.

At the age of 6-7, I went to the first grade of elementary school in village Baballoq. It was quite far to travel back and forth but we had fun, I am still friends with the childhood friends from that school. We never lost our friendship, some got married, some went abroad, but we still remained close and when we met we spent time like in the old days, we talk, we joke, we love each other without any interest. It's pure friendly love, same with men and women. I have a better relationship with friends from elementary school than with those from secondary school. I have 4-5 friends whom I meet almost every day and two female friends with whom we have been in the same school from first to eighth grade.

My brothers have always listened to me. When I would tell them to "Shut up" or something, they wouldn't say a word, because I had the authority as the eldest and I guided them, just as my grandfather, grandmother and my mother guided me. I don't remember my father very well, because while I was growing up he was present in my life for maybe 20-25 days.

In that short time when he would visit, he would bring with him love, but since we were children, we couldn't understand it. I used to call my father "uncle", and I called my grandfather "father". My grandfather was so close with me that I couldn't call him "grandfather". I also called my grandmother "mother", and I would call my mother by her name. I slept with my grandmother and grandfather, they never let me sleep with my mother, my father or my brothers. Up until I became an adult, I slept with my grandmother.

We had some flour mills in the village and when we were children we would play with clay, we would build mills of our own and we would play all day long with that. We pretended that we would put corn in it and grind it. We were playing with corn cobs as children, we would clean them and then we would make play houses with them. We would go out in nature, sometimes to collect flowers, other times to play in meadows, so it was a very, very good life, joyful for children. These were the games we had; we did not have other games like they have nowadays. We were driven to play in nature, we learned how to play in nature. The place, land, forest, we would take fallen leaves and build houses. That's what we had. That's how life was in the village.

I finished secondary school in Skenderaj when the orientation school started. I loved physical education, but also math and physics.

My family was not too religious. Grandfather went to the mosque only during Eid al-Fitr. They were much more interested in work. They were interested in having a job and a family. Absolutely nobody in my family dealt with politics. My father worked in Slovenia for 36 years. The rest of us didn't receive any salaries from our state. Our state did not like us, did not support us, and did not offer us a job or anything. To them, we were like enemies of the state. We always had doubts about our state's intentions towards us. We didn't even dare to apply for a job, because Serbs killed our great-grandfather.

That state worked against us, it was not kind to us, and so the elders nor the family didn't allow us to work for them. Even if they hired us, they wouldn't let us work for them. Because of them, we had victims in our family even in the Second World War.

We worked in agriculture and construction. I have always loved the profession, and continue to love it to this day. Up until now, because I was operated on, I have always worked in building houses, I have never stopped. I worked physically in construction but then my health problems appeared. I have not worked for two years now. I have no help from the state. My wife works now because I can't. Those years when I worked have been a waste because I worked in the private sector and now, I don't have any pension, I can't cherish my many years of working. We worked for ourselves; the state did not care at all. The only option for me is the old age pension. But I am still young for that. I thank God and I thank you for your support, you have intervened, and thank God that has given you the possibility to help. We thought that we were fighting a war, but the women were fighting a harder war.

For our family and the entire area where we live, the war started in 1987, when the Serbo-Slavic forces of Belgrade came. I was terrified. I will never forget the shootings and the screams.

In '87 I was young, I was still not married. They were shooting at them with cannons and the ground was shaking. All that for one person only. It's so shameful what happened and history will never forget it. All that for one person, who didn't have tanks, nor did he have airplanes but their cruelty against our people is a known fact, they brought tanks from Belgrade and the helicopters were flying over the house. Since this happened, they came 3-4 other times as well. It was war. They say that this fight was the first fight that happened. Then there was another one, that was the second time, and then it happened at the Jashari family. Since then, it never stopped.

We were always concerned, every news we would hear was that Serbs will destroy Drenica. And we always kept our ears open, always cautious, listening to any shot or anything else, always afraid that they would enter today or the next day. At any moment. When fighting started, we considered it that the war had begun then, the KLA war, when the KLA appeared in front of them. Because they were always after us, always chasing us.

If you met a Serb and greeted him in Serbian and said, "Dobar dan" they would beat you up because you spoke to them. Once, when I was a child, they beat my hands with their police baton. My hands immediately got swollen up. I passed nearby them and I didn't say anything, I didn't say "Dobar dan" or anything. A police officer asked me, "Why didn't you greet us?" and I replied, "I didn't see you". He said, "How come you didn't see us?" and he started hitting my hands with his police baton. "Go back and say Dobar dan". He made me go back ten times and repeat that. When I greeted them the last time he asked me, "Why did you talk to us?" I said, "You told me to." He said, "Really? Put your hands in front." They started hitting my hands until blood burst, they were cruel idiots. Their fantasy was to behave with us as if we were from a jungle.

So, since we did not dare to go out, we rarely went out. From that time, I was afraid of them and wherever I saw them, my body would shiver, even today, because they beat me up. I was beaten up three times by them. Once, in 1994 they took me to Prishtina central police station. Most people know where the central police station is. They took me upstairs and people from Belgrade came to beat me! They beat me up all day and night until at 9 o'clock in the morning, they were looking for a weapon. I did not admit that I have it. I had no permit for the weapon. But somebody reported it and they also had its number. They knew everything about it. In fact, everything they were looking for was true. But I did not admit it, because if you would admit having a weapon, they would kill you. They would throw me in the snow, and then they would throw hot water at me in one cabin and I would faint, they did everything they could with my body. I was beaten all day, all night, and at 9 o'clock in the morning I was thrown out from there. I went out crawling on my elbows and knees. While I was crawling down the stairs, I injured my head in two places. Because my legs couldn't hold and I would slip down. I was not allowed to go in the city. And when the war started, I joined the KLA.

I got married in 1989. I have an older daughter, a son and a younger daughter. Five years after we got married, in '94 we got our first child. I became a father at the time when I was beaten. When we first married, we lived in village Baballoq, we lived together with my brothers until the war ended. We were five brothers, my mother, and half of us were married. But we all had a good relationship with each other. My father and mother were alive even after the war ended. My mother died three years ago, my father has been dead for seven years, we were close with each other. We had a good relationship with everybody, with our neighbors and fellow villagers. There is no one who can speak ill of us, but neither can I, because our relations were very good, there was a good cooperation between us.

Before the war started my brothers went abroad, two of them went to Slovenia and one to Germany. I was with one brother at home during the war. My brothers tried to come and join but they were not allowed to come. They provided many material contributions to our army. They went with their friends, and they made a great contribution because in war it's not only the soldier carrying the weapon that matters but also the child that brought water for us. Because there was no soldier who could have grabbed their weapons if they didn't have food or water to drink. The main fight was having food and water then came the other things.

As for the war, when the first rifle fired in village Vujnikë, sometime in 1997, Drenica was in flames. There were raids, beatings, all the worst things happened. They never wanted anything good for us. They have always been our opponents. Serbs were our enemy. It is a known fact.

But since 1997 the war hasn't stopped around the Dukagjin area. Yes, it was in 1998 when it started everywhere but until then the majority did not experience it. We have experienced it before. Since 1997 we couldn't go to work or go out freely. We were always locked in, in fear.

Many villages around us did not dare to move. Whoever they caught would be entrapped and would be put down. Many families started being afraid, they wanted to leave but they didn't know where to go and what to do.

I joined in 1998, in January. I have been a guard since '97. The night watchmen in the villages were armed with whatever they could find. The main thing was not to be caught off guard sleeping, otherwise they would come in and kill us all. Since the fight happened, we knew that the Serbs were preparing for us. Some of us had some training in Albania, others here. In 1998 everybody arrived and the KLA was formed. When it was formed, the Serbs heard about it, and in '98 the first shots were fired. I was at that time together with my brother, mother and father. We woke up to a rifle shot, it was about 9 o'clock. At that time there were no phones like nowadays.

Then the news came, "Whoever can help us should come because we want to cut the road for the Serbs." I grabbed my rifle, started walking and we went there. There we waited on the road, we took by force an excavator from a company, because they did not dare to give it to us, and we left the excavator sideways on the asphalt. When the Serb tanks came, we shot at them with our RPGs, with what we had. You cannot imagine how many losses they suffered that day. First, they thought that this was just a game but when they saw their tank on fire and falling down on the stream, they started running away. When they reached the end, they returned and then they started shooting at all the houses in the villages nearby. They shot at them using machine guns and rifles, they shot in anger because they suffered a great loss. They shot at the school, killed a teacher who was holding a teacher's diary in his hand when he died. Since then, we never had peace up until the time when the war ended. I did not see my family members for another three months after that.

My family moved around in these villages. They didn't know anything about me and I didn't know anything about them. In '99 when I got shot, they received the news that I got killed. People went to express their condolence for my death. They couldn't have known anything because I was in our brigade. It was quite far from our village. Maybe 40-50 kilometers.

The only information I had about my family was that they escaped from Baballoq. As soon as they came out on the asphalt, they were caught by Serbs. We saw it with our own eyes. They sent them to Deqan. From Deqan they took them to other villages. They wanted to take them to Albania, but then they returned them to this side. My wife was under tremendous pressure. She says that when the Serbs came to Baballoq, they had settled in neighborhood number two. She was enduring a lot of pressure from them because they were asking her about me, "Why is your husband dressed in the KLA uniform, he is shooting at us every day". They knew that I was wearing the uniform. My family in neighborhood two was taken by Serb Commander called Stoshiq. Many of them were local Serbs. They were from Kosovo and they knew us. But this paramilitary commander, Stoshiq, was not from Kosovo. He said to my wife, "Your husband is wearing the uniform, tell us where he is, we will go and kill him and then we will let you and your children go free." My wife told him, "My husband is in Germany. I will give you his number" Luckily she knew by heart the phone number of my brother. He said, "Are you sure this is the number, if it's not, I will kill you." She said, "Kill me if it's not".

Our son was three years old. And my youngest daughter was less than a year old. My wife was holding our son and she gave him the phone number. Commander told someone there, "Call this number and check if it's in Germany." That person called and then confirmed, "Yes, it's a German number." He said, "We will call your husband later. Take the kids and get lost" and they took her to a place where they were staying, just a house above them. The paramilitary forces wanted to kill them there.

The Serbs brought all the families to Deqan. And then they entered each and every house. They did terrible things to them. I could hear them but there was nothing I could do. If we were in freedom maybe I would have killed 70 times my wife by now. If I knew that I would get hanged, I would kill her with my own hands, but it was war and I couldn't protect her. Maybe they would have done worse to me if they caught me. They did the same also to men. Then I stopped to think. Was I able to protect her? No. When I found out I said to myself, this is nothing. After the war ended, quite some time had passed and she never told me anything about it. I heard it from someone else, but I never spoke about this subject.

When I returned from the war, I entered the yard of my house and everybody started fainting, my grandmother, mother, wife and my older daughter. We met here in neighborhood two, where we were. They didn't go anywhere. House was completely destroyed to the ground. Nothing survived. Even the foundation of the house was gone because my house was used by the KLA as headquarters.

Wife of one of my friends told her husband about what had happened. And then her husband told me. He said, "Also your wife was there among many other women." At first my world turned upside down. My whole body trembled, I said to myself, "Lord, how did this happen?" I got up, got a hold of myself. I put my finger on my head and I started thinking, was there a way for her not to do it? There was no way. Could have she escaped? She couldn't. Could have she ended up cut in pieces and thrown in the well as others were? She could have. Could have they disposed of her body completely? They could. What was I supposed to do to protect her? Why didn't I take her with me? I couldn't take her with me, I left her with my own hands. Because I couldn't take her with me. When the most dangerous moments come, one doesn't fight for anyone but his own soul. In those moments you don't think about your children or wife. It's a lie whoever says that you do. When the fighting strength gets a hold of you, you don't think of anyone but yourself.

When I found out about it, I would say, "God, give me an answer, do you want me to go crazy? Allah, are you trying to open my eyes? What should I do? Leave her? No way. The children. If I ask her why? She can say to me, "Were you able to protect me?" No I was not. End of story. You were not able to save me, to protect me. You let go of my hand. Why did you leave me? Why did you tell me to go? Why didn't you keep me near you so we would die together? And what am I supposed to say to all that? I simply couldn't say anything. Why should I say anything to her? I decided not to say anything to her until she decides herself to tell me. She started going to this organization, I believe it was in 2002. I was also in that interview; we went to the park in Prishtina. They called us to talk about war sufferings but when we went there, they explained everything in detail.

I told Drita, your colleague, about a woman that was raped by the Serbs. My wife turned red. They cut that woman in pieces and then they threw her in the well. First, they played with her and then they cut her and threw her in the well. When I said this my wife started crying. I asked her, "Why are you crying? Do you feel sorry for her?" But more or less I knew why she was crying. She said, "No. I have to tell you something as well because I can't hold it in me anymore" she said, "Take a knife, slay me and throw me in the well." I asked, "Why?" She said, "Because the same thing happened to me too" I said, "What are you saying woman?" and she started crying loudly.

I stopped, I looked at her and I asked her, "Why are you crying?" she said, "Because I can't show my face to you" I said, "No, no. Your face is much better than it was in the past. Wife, I couldn't protect you" I said, "It happened by force and there is a way for it, there is a solution." She hugged me. She said, "I didn't expect these words from you." I said, "It could have happened to me as well. Do you know why? Because they did the cruelest things, because they are Serbs. It's not that you did it willingly. Then I would have shot you in the head. That's what you would get from me. I would just search for your forehead. But what they have done is different, I am a man and if they would have caught me, they would have done worse than they did to you." I said, "Strong men forgive about things like this. And I am forgiving you, I don't want to talk ever again about this. As if nothing ever happened. I want you to continue your life together with me. Leave all the bad things behind."

She said, "I thought a thousand times about dying. I was hurting inside and I was trying to tell you" she said, "But I never dared". I told her, "It's nothing. It happened to many others" she said, "Yes, but I am dealing only with you, not with others." I said, "Maybe there are men who wouldn't forgive their wives, but I do. And don't you bother yourself at all about this as long as we're alive."

It was very hard for me; I was carrying the weight of the world. I knew it for a year and I didn't tell her. For a year we both kept it inside ourselves. But that was something that was done by force to her. It was a violent revenge. It's typical for Serbs. It's not typical for Albanians, we have different religion. They have different religion. It's typical for them to slay you, massacre you, and our nation is different. They are our sworn enemy. During the First World War they were our sworn enemy. During the Second World War they were our sworn enemy. The third war in Kosovo they just confirmed that they are forever our sworn enemy. Whatever they wanted they did to our people. They killed, they massacred, they raped, and they did everything they could think of. They didn't spare anyone.

I had a lot of stress and pain for my wife and my family and I have even bigger pain for the mothers that still don't know where the bones and graves of their children, husbands, sisters and mothers are. Today I feel burned out. We still don't understand how low we fell. We want to make an agreement with Serbia. There should be no agreement until they return the bones of our people. No history will be written in which we will forgive them. Parallel to the killings are the raping. Parallel. Many couples have separated because of them. For those people that divorce their wives and cause them distress I would like to say: You are weak. You shouldn't pressure your wife, or daughter, or sister if during that time the Serbs made them do that by force. You should never look at them with a different eye. You must keep them closer as if nothing ever happened. And you must love them even more. I love my wife even more because I know that it was forced upon her.

My soul hurts because of her. It's difficult, only her body and soul knows best. Even if you give millions to all the mothers and sisters that went through something like that, they will never be happy. They will never feel good again. I would appeal to everybody, come close to each other, love each other because that is not a weakness but its bravery and it's noble if we keep these women, mothers and sisters closer. We expected Serbs to commit things like this, all these killings, massacres because they are our sworn enemy. They came here to destroy us. I would ask all the people, men, mothers, women to come close with the people that were raped during the war, talk to them, not harass them. By law I would punish the people that harass them. It's very cruel to say something about them.

My mother, God rest her soul, told me twice, "I feel so lucky to have you for a son" and I would ask her, "Why do you say that?" and she told me, "Because strong men do as you did and forgive. Weak men are weak and it's better to stay away from them. Also, I feel sorry for being your mother because, I swear to God, I saw when they took her but there was nothing I could do. Her screams were terrifying. Not only hers, but whoever they got a hold of, the same happened."

My mother was able to always calm me down, she would take away my pain. She would do it by telling me, "Son, I swear to God Almighty, they would have done even worse to me and there was nothing I could have done. Just imagine what kind of situation we were in. I hope that I will never see what I have seen that day" and I told her, "Mother that is a closed matter. It's finished." Nobody else from the family knew about this. Anyway, to be honest I never bothered anymore.

Today, my life is a little bit more difficult because we are both ill. I swear to God, the salary my wife gets doesn't cover the medications we have to buy.

We get that pension and we try to survive as we can. After the operation I was unable to lift anything. Not even one kilogram, the doctor told me you can't hold anything with your hands and you must wear a belt.

I think I could support the victims much more. Even if you gave them gold, it wouldn't be enough. It's not only my wife, there are many more. There are also men that fell victim to this. Because of the circumstances, because of some weak people I decided not to give my name because after giving an interview they would make you go through things that have no point of return. Other than that, I wish I could say everything that I have to say publicly because I would like to hear all of them. But we are living in a place where you have no options. These people that harass others, they just try to find a weak spot in other people.

There were many cases when the worst happened. I don't want to mention names because they are still in prison. Because of these words. If I went up front and spoke about these issues, I would have ended up dead or in prison. A person that knows and understands these issues, he works in the police as a station commander, he told me, "We have almost every day cases like that. You don't know as much as I do." He then said, "It's very realistic to do what you say, but having in mind the condition we are in, you can't do it" he said, "Someone could come and provoke you in a way that you couldn't take it. What would you do if someone told you in a bar "Look at this guy that was protecting his wife and the Serbs did this and that to her" How would that make you feel?" I said, "No, I wouldn't be able to take it." Someone mentioning that to me? No way. That's why I stopped myself, because we are living in that kind of place.

**“I LIKE YOU AND I WANT ONLY YOU AND
IF I CAN’T HAVE YOU THEN I WILL REMAIN
SINGLE ALL MY LIFE. FROM THE MOMENT
I SAW YOU I LIKED YOU AND I DON’T CARE
ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE.”**



Skender was 17 when he decided to join the KLA. As early as 1998, someone told his family that he had fallen in the war. They think of him for dead until they are reunited at home right after the war.

The other joy in Skender's life is that he manages to marry the girl he likes, although she refused to meet him for months, and when he goes out on a date, she tells him why she doesn't think she'll ever marry. Skender understands and opens up his arms.

The first child is born with health problems. The wife blames herself, tries to commit suicide. They move somewhere in the West. As the head of the family, Skender enters and leaves the hospitals with his wife and son. After reviewing the application for residence, the authorities of the western state return them to Kosovo, despite the malignant problem that doctors find in his wife.



TODAY WE LIVE AT OUR HOMELAND, WITHOUT WORK, WITHOUT ANYTHING

As a child I lived with my father, mother, three older sisters and my brother. We lived in Prishtina. We had a normal life, nothing luxurious. We didn't lack anything. My father used to work all the time. My mother was a housewife. My parents were very committed to me. I was the fifth child, their youngest. When you are the youngest, the older ones support you more and it's always easier to be the youngest. As they say, you're the family baby.

I used to play marbles with my siblings. I have a childhood memory how one of my sisters would always beat us at that game, it was hard for us boys to accept it. Our neighborhood was as it used to be at that time, full of mud and stones. We had many neighbors and we used to play all the time outside because there were not many cars then. We used to go to school together, we were a total of 12-13 kids all belonging to the same generation. We had a lot of fun as children. We didn't have things like the nowadays kids have, TV's and computers. We had almost nothing but we were happy with what we had.

My older brother took me to the school for the first time. There were 32 pupils in my classroom. I remember that we had a very strict teacher. He used to shout at us a lot! But to be fair, also we didn't study that much. My brother helped me the most with my homework. He always took care of me. He was 9 or 10 years older than me and that's why he helped me much more.

My mother used to be very religious. Also, my father was but he didn't have time for it as he was working all the time. Whenever he had a free day, sometimes a Saturday or a Sunday, he would do some work and fix something around the house. My mother was very calm by nature, not only with me but with all the children. Every mother shouts sometimes when children misbehave but my mother tried to educate us as best as she could. Once, when I was four or five years old, I was involved in a fight with another kid. I remember my mother shouted at me and slapped me twice or three times. I remember that. But, she did it for my own good because I caused a big problem. She also used to shout at me when I wouldn't study because I wasn't very good at studying. My brother, however, was trying in his calm way without shouting at me. He is the calmest by nature in my family. I have never seen him scold anyone, he never told a two-year-old kid, "Go there!". He is very calm.

When I reached fifth grade at primary school, my class got the hardest teacher. It was hard for us but we managed somehow. Because we got used to having only one teacher and then suddenly, we had 12, it was completely different. Our teachers were soft, we had a good time with them. I didn't have good grades. I used to love physical education because we used to play with a ball and the teacher was good. He liked me and I had the best time from fifth to eighth grade.

After eighth grade I didn't continue going to school. I physically grew up and then the situation got worse and all the children would study in private houses. I didn't manage to get registered at any secondary school so I did not continue anymore. I started working a bit just for my own needs. I worked with trading. The situation worsened because they wouldn't pay the workers. For example, if you would receive your salary today, you could exchange it the next day for only two deutsche marks because the dinars would lose in value very fast and we were being paid in dinars. All the siblings were trying somehow to help our father.

Then this mess of a war started. I became a member of the Liberation Army. I joined in '97. Some friends from my generation decided to join and I told them, "I am coming with you!", I was young, only 17 years old but my willpower was driven by love. While I was exercising my family didn't have any idea what I was doing. We would depart early and then we would go back after lunch time, we would exercise shooting. I would tell my family that I am going out with friends or something like that. My father would be at work and then it was easier with my mother, I would just tell her, "I'm going out!" and that was it. I held more than 15 days of exercise and then we were told, "You must come after the exercises".

When the time came to leave the house, my father came from work and I told him, "I have to leave from here because any moment police might come looking for me." Because the police would investigate at that time. I told them, "If I get caught, consider me dead. I am going with my friends; I have made my decision and I will go through with it." I told them, "Up until today I was your child and from today and on, I am everybody's child." My mother started crying because I was very young. I told her, "My fate has been decided" and she told me, "You are the one who decides about your fate!" My father said, "I hope that Allah will give you good luck, I don't know what else to say!" and I got dressed and I left the house. It was very hard because when you say goodbye, you're leaving alive and you might come back dead. But God was gracious and I survived.

I had a good relationship with my friends while I was there. My friends took care of me when I would get worried. It was hard for somebody as young as me to leave and they were always there for me. I also participated in a few actions. Some of my friends were killed. It is hard when your friends get killed.

Once every month or two months I would secretly come to visit my family. Everybody in the neighborhood found out about me so I had to come and leave only during the night. You couldn't trust anyone those days. So, I would come, wash myself and stay for a night or two. I would stay only home with my family members whom I missed so much. Then I would join my friends and we would go away.

In '98 someone told my family, "Skender was killed". But when they went out looking for me, they couldn't find me because they were told, "He was killed in the village nearby." They were worried so much. When they finally saw me alive their eyes were full of tears. That time I got very sad. Then I decided that I will not go home until the war ends. It was quite a long period of time. After our country got free, I met with my family.

Nobody from my family left the house. All of them stayed put. It was very hard for them, but they didn't leave. They would say, "If we die, we will die at home because our son became a soldier. If he dies, what the point of living anymore, we are old anyway". I would write them occasionally a letter when my friends would come by. We would write to each other sometimes but then the situation worsened and we had to stay at our assigned positions.

After liberation, lots of time passed and I was trying to work but I couldn't. I was managing just a bit for my own needs. I didn't want to join the KSF and put on the KSF uniform like many did. I said to myself, "I want to live a free life! I don't want to take orders from anyone." And I never took orders from anyone, I managed all by myself.

When the war ended, I didn't know what happened to my family and friends. I made a decision on my own. I handed over the weapons, my uniform and I went home. I found my mother sitting outside. It was one of the happiest moments in my life seeing them alive. Father was not there. My mother still did not prepare lunch and then she made us lunch. During the war I lost a lot of weight and I was always thin. My mother was worried about me and she would ask me, "What did you eat?" and I would always tell her "I ate what the others did."

After war ended, I would go out with my friends and I never got involved with anything war related. I still have a relationship with my friends. They are the same old friends and I asked them please don't talk about the war period because I don't want to. It's in the past and I don't want to think about the past. I want to think only about the future. After eight-nine years I met my wife because we had a common friend. I met with my friend accidentally and I asked her about my wife. I said, "What's up with her, why is she not socializing with anyone?" and my friend said, "I don't know, she is very quiet!" I said, "I like her attitude". Then I was asking her out and she was not willing to go out with me and eventually after several months of asking her we finally went out. When we went out, I really liked her. I started telling her about my life and then she just said, "I don't want to get married to anyone or anything because when I was young, I was raped". At that moment when she said that I thought to myself that I would be the worst man on earth if I thought of using her and leaving her. So, I told her, "You shouldn't feel bad because I am not interested in your past and you shouldn't be interested in mine." And I said, "I like you and I want only you and if I can't have you then I will remain single all my life. From the moment I saw you I liked you and I don't care about anything else." She started crying and I felt really sorry for her because I also have sisters and it could have happened to anyone. And I knew what I had suffered during the war. Serbs were cruel, they were evil. They did anything they wanted. So, I said to myself, "I believe I will find peace with this woman, rather than taking any other". There are no people without problems.

I told her, "You shouldn't talk to anyone about this issue." I was very close to my mother and she was the only person I have told. So, only the three of us knew about this. My mother said, "I will not interfere because it's your life. I will not live forever. I will not tell anyone. You know best. You decide. You have always decided for yourself, so make a decision this time as well. I can't interfere in your life. You will live with the person you love." So, I kept my word and I married her. We had a small ceremony, only our family members. The usual, taking the bride with cars and things like that. I was very happy.

After we got married, we had many difficulties because we couldn't sleep together. I was patient, I was waiting for her to be ready and not when I was ready. After a while she became pregnant. When our daughter was born, she had a condition called hemoconium, blood would amass in her body. When she saw our child, she wanted to jump from the fourth floor. A woman saw her opening a window and she called me quickly. She would tell me, "Look at what happened to me. It's all my fault". It was very hard. I was calming her down and telling her, "It's not your fault. It could have happened to any mother". Then the child started getting well, and her condition improved every day.

I provided for my family by trading with vehicles. I would buy a cheap car and sell it so I earned a bit. Enough for my family. But I never managed to do anything more than that. I got concerned for my child, I was scared that she might have some other serious illness and I sold my part of inheritance and with that money I emigrated. I left. Here I didn't have money to go after doctors. After I emigrated, I was able to go see doctors.

When my daughter was born, my family had a change of heart. They didn't like her. They didn't like my wife either because she wasn't able to work as much. She was always ill and in pain. They didn't know things that I did and for that reason I wanted to emigrate. I noticed that they are not respecting us at all, they didn't love us. My mother was trying a bit by calling my wife, "My daughter" here and there but it was not enough.

When I emigrated, I dealt mostly with medical treatments for my daughter and my wife. I tried hard to help them. I couldn't work at all because I was taking care of my wife and children. After my first daughter, my wife gave birth to another girl while we were there. I took care of my daughter growing up, feeding her, everything, I took care of her like a mother because my wife would sometimes stay for a month or two in the hospital receiving therapies.

The worst was when they told us, "She has a tumor in her head!". I was broken ... but I never surrendered. I will never surrender as long as I can breathe, but it was really hard for me with two children. Then they took my wife far away and I couldn't visit her every day. The children missed her a lot. They were very young. I would send them to school, to kindergarten. And then I would pick them up. They had specific hours. I tried to give them my best, because they were young and I didn't want them to miss their mother or father. I was very committed to them. And I still am. I would do anything for them.

The kids started growing up and I was trying to fulfill their wishes because, you know, kids want things. But we were unlucky because they returned us. They did give us the papers. They were saying Kosovo is a safe place now. You have health institutions; you have everything now. They don't know that here you will die for nothing, but still they returned us. And then again, the same story, I was visiting doctors and doing the same things all over again. And again, I can't recuperate and start a business or work something because I can't leave them alone. Now with this pandemic it's even harder, it's very hard for a father to do everything. But I am managing somehow and I am happy that I can provide as much as it is required from me.

The day starts for me like this, I wake up, I prepare the morning coffee and breakfast. Sometimes I go and buy groceries but sometimes I get lazy too. I go out and play with the kids and my wife doesn't go out so much. She likes to stay alone; she doesn't like to stay when there is light. She says, "When I see people talking, I always think that they are talking about me." That is the reason. She goes out with us once every second week and I go out almost every night with the children. We go in the evening for a walk or maybe to have an ice cream and they always ask, "Why is mother not coming with us? Why can't she come with us" and I always try to justify her and I say, "She is not feeling well, she has to take her medication". When my children grow up, I wouldn't want them to know anything about our life. They will have their own problems and I don't want them to know our problems. You never know what the future will bring but my opinion is that our children shouldn't deal with our problems. I like to keep my problems to myself.

Sometimes I encourage my wife, I try to do it, but after a day or two she goes back to her old self. I try really hard; I talk to her. A lot. And since the beginning I have told her, "I don't want to talk at all about that issue. If you want, we can visit a doctor, for a checkup" and then I tell her, "I love you a lot. I am happy with you. Look how good our kids are" and I keep trying, I take her, I tell her, "Come on, you are like me! We are one body. I am going out and you are not coming. Why don't you come out with me?" I tell her, "We have kids, imagine if I decide to just lay down and we leave kids on their own". I try to encourage her like this. "Can't you see that our kids have needs, they need to play games, come on let's go out" and somehow, I convince her to go out. But other times she just doesn't want to listen and she tells me, "Just leave me alone because I have a headache and my back hurts." When we were in the West the doctors told us that she needs to do the operation on her head. I didn't agree because the doctor told me that there is a 95 % chance that she will not make it. He told me, "She is in great pain" and "Sign it!" Part of her brain is damaged. But I didn't agree. I said, "It's better to have her alive near the children than to operate her." I didn't want to make that decision. Because I don't have an idea what has happened to her. I never wanted to talk about that and discuss it.

I was also afraid. I didn't want anyone to find out about my issues because it's very hard for me. If I didn't say those words, she would feel even worse so I was forced to say, "Don't operate on her!" Because she is cut exactly at this place and there is sputum like it comes from your nose but it's in her head.

And today we are in our country and we are unemployed and we have nothing. It's very hard for a head of the family. The children are not going to school. I didn't register them, we have nothing. No kindergarten. It's a mess, no one knows what will happen to us.

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