

Accounts  
of children's  
wartime  
experiences

# Hijacked childhoods



abazja bes 20.08 '85—04.05 '99  
abazibra jasmine 10.03 '85—05.05 '99  
abdullahu mirsad 03.01 '81—24.12 '98  
abdylymxihti bakh 03.05 '82—26.05 '99  
ademaj kreshnik 16.11 '82—11.05 '99  
ademaj bekim 06.05 '81—27.04 '99  
ademi baki 01.01 '99—25.03 '99  
ademi esat 15.07 '85—30.04 '99  
ademi besnik 15.11 '84—09.01 '99  
ademi jetullah 10.06 '84—01.05 '99  
ademi ragim 12.10 '82—25.03 '99  
ademi mazlam 01.08 '82—27.04 '99  
ademi bujar 25.05 '82—31.03 '99  
ademi gani 15.09 '83—24.09 '98  
ademi burim 18.11 '81—24.09 '98  
ademi fatmir 01.11 '81—24.09 '98  
agaj leutrim 22.02 '96—05.06 '98  
agushi ramiz 27.03 '85—28.05 '00  
agushi urim 01.01 '83—13.04 '99  
agushi zhemal 17.10 '81—18.09 '98  
ahmetaj ardur 26.10 '98—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj norin 15.03 '97—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj florentina 20.10 '97—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj leutrim 05.09 '92—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj arbresa 18.12 '95—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj arbresha 18.04 '92—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj arbnon 05.12 '94—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj arbnon 18.08 '83—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj saranda 01.11 '85—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj valon 12.10 '83—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj viora 17.09 '86—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj arban 01.01 '92—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj egzon 10.10 '91—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj agon 22.10 '89—13.05 '99  
ahmetaj lirdon 01.05 '82—27.04 '99  
ahmeti abedin 09.09 '81—25.03 '99  
ahmeti alban 12.12 '81—25.07 '98  
ahmeti besim 10.07 '81—30.03 '99  
ahmeti safet 10.07 '83—30.03 '99  
ahmeti tafi 01.07 '81—30.03 '99  
ahmeti efije 20.02 '88—11.09 '98  
ahmeti xheti 20.09 '99—11.09 '98  
ahmeti leutrim 26.02 '91—11.09 '98  
ahmeti volca 05.09 '93—11.09 '98  
ahmeti elhami 20.01 '82—28.02 '98  
ahmeti jeton 06.08 '88—22.05 '99  
ahmeti shvedit 10.05 '82—02.05 '99  
ajeti nederim 20.10 '86—03.02.00  
ajeti feni 21.05 '83—15.04 '99  
ajup hushim 17.09 '81—17.07 '98  
alijaj agron 20.12 '82—27.04 '99  
alijaj filloreta 14.04 '84—14.04 '99  
alijaj hatmame 05.11 '82—14.04 '99  
alijaj ali 27.03 '87—26.03 '99  
alijaj arben 27.05 '84—26.03 '99  
alimehaj leonard 17.06 '93—07.04 '99  
alio levan 30.07 '88—28.04 '99  
alio burim 12.06 '82—01.05 '99  
aliuka avdyt 01.01 '82—05.04 '99  
aslanaj lirona 15.11 '96—23.09 '98  
aslanaj viora 04.12 '98—03.04 '99  
asliani albiona 01.01 '98—26.08 '98  
asliani antongina 01.01 '97—26.08 '98  
asliani xhaper 01.01 '95—26.08 '98  
asliani shpend 01.01 '93—26.08 '98  
asliani ilijaj 01.01 '91—26.08 '98  
asliani ejup 11.07 '88—26.08 '98  
asliani lumnie 01.01 '86—26.08 '98  
asliani burim 23.06 '85—26.08 '98  
avdiya levan 01.03 '82—03.03 '99  
avdiu zejnete 16.02 '88—29.04 '99  
avduhalaj gezim 24.04 '84—01.04 '99  
avduhalu ymer 04.06 '82—27.04 '99  
avdyt volca 09.06 '85—16.07 '98  
avdyt bashir 01.02 '83—27.04 '99  
avdyt shafiq 15.07 '82—17.06 '99  
azy sl 08.02 '84—17.06 '99  
azem kujtim 03.06 '85—16.06 '99  
bajraktari kreshnik 22.05 '83—14.05 '99  
bajrami beltrina 01.12 '95—14.04 '99  
bajrami kalirina 06.05 '88—06.05 '99  
bajrami naser 27.03 '84—19.09 '98  
bajrami islan 26.10 '84—30.04 '99  
bajrami driton 01.01 '83—30.04 '99  
bajrami hulezim 16.03 '82—27.05 '99  
bajrami ramadan 01.01 '82—27.04 '99  
bajrami shpresa 07.10 '81—17.04 '99  
bajriselmanaj besart 25.11 '88—03.05 '99  
bala nita 01.01 '94—12.06 '99  
bala rina 01.01 '92—12.06 '99  
bala agon 25.01 '93—12.06 '99  
bala dardane 14.09 '88—12.06 '99  
bala hajri 06.08 '86—12.06 '99  
bataksa lirim 24.03 '84—26.03 '99  
batusha bahr 15.08 '82—26.03 '99  
batusha visar 19.07 '83—26.03 '99  
batusha bekim 31.03 '81—26.03 '99  
bazaj sokol 01.04 '85—15.05 '99  
bazaj smaji 30.03 '80—05.03 '98  
begu fitim 27.07 '81—15.04 '99  
behrami edona 28.11 '93—28.03 '99  
behrami ardita 10.10 '85—28.03 '99  
behrami gafat 24.06 '88—11.06 '99  
behrami jeton 23.11 '82—18.04 '99  
behrami burim 27.10 '82—11.04 '99  
bejta burim 15.04 '82—19.05 '98  
bekta pajtim 20.12 '90—05.06 '99  
bekta fidan 01.01 '82—24.09 '98  
beqaj kujtim 05.08 '83—27.04 '99  
beqaj armen 06.06 '82—27.04 '99  
beqaj dritan 13.02 '82—27.04 '99  
beqiraj arinda 11.09 '92—11.06 '98  
beqiraj asim 09.07 '82—27.04 '99  
beqiri shkelzen 21.01 '99—28.04 '99  
beqiri cilirim 22.06 '98—23.09 '98  
beqiri halim 24.07 '85—15.01 '99  
beqiri ibadete 07.09 '84—30.05 '99

beqiri hasan 01.07 '83—12.05 '99  
beqiri ilir 22.09 '82—01.05 '99  
beqiri bukurije 13.01 '82—10.05 '99  
berisha besmie 01.01 '82—01.05 '99  
berisha zejnie 01.01 '82—01.05 '99  
berisha elhame 02.10 '98—02.04 '99  
berisha lezha 17.07 '97—02.04 '99  
berisha shkurtesa 30.03 '95—02.04 '99  
berisha njomeza 05.01 '93—02.04 '99  
berisha almedina 10.10 '90—02.04 '99  
berisha valmir 18.12 '91—02.04 '99  
berisha dafina 05.06 '90—02.04 '99  
berisha shpirtan 09.09 '87—02.04 '99  
berisha atidheta 02.07 '98—02.04 '99  
berisha ahmeta 05.03 '98—02.04 '99  
berisha salihina 01.01 '98—02.04 '99  
berisha valon 31.12 '96—02.04 '99  
berisha erim 01.05 '96—26.03 '99  
berisha ismet 09.09 '96—26.03 '99  
berisha redon 23.05 '97—26.03 '99  
berisha alin 06.01 '89—26.03 '99  
berisha berolinda 26.11 '85—26.03 '99  
berisha majlinda 26.05 '83—26.03 '99  
berisha doretina 03.02 '96—26.03 '99  
berisha edon 01.10 '86—26.03 '99  
berisha gloriant 01.01 '82—26.03 '99  
berisha vloran 01.01 '96—26.03 '99  
berisha gen 09.12 '95—26.03 '99  
berisha mirat 22.09 '89—26.03 '99  
berisha hanusha 28.12 '87—26.03 '99  
berisha merim 18.11 '86—26.03 '99  
berisha zana 11.05 '85—26.03 '99  
berisha zara 14.07 '81—26.03 '99  
berisha drilon 20.02 '96—26.03 '99  
berisha dafina 27.03 '83—26.03 '99  
berisha kushtrim 20.05 '87—26.03 '99  
berisha sherin 05.02 '82—26.03 '99  
berisha besnik 04.12 '87—18.04 '99  
berisha famur 21.12 '86—18.04 '99  
berisha dajur 29.03 '84—18.04 '99  
berisha feni 11.12 '82—18.06 '99  
berisha shpejtim 20.09 '98—11.09 '99  
berisha berat 16.09 '89—04.06 '99  
berisha esad 01.01 '87—01.05 '99  
berisha elvis 01.01 '82—01.05 '99  
berisha shvet 01.01 '86—01.07 '98  
berisha kreshnik 18.07 '86—02.05 '99  
berisha besnik 01.01 '86—20.04 '99  
berisha shkelzen 15.04 '84—14.08 '99  
berisha elhasan 28.11 '83—27.04 '99  
berisha drilon 22.03 '83—26.03 '99  
berisha blerim 14.02 '83—08.10 '98  
berisha agron 16.06 '82—19.05 '98  
berisha patri 16.11 '82—01.06 '99  
berisha ilir 27.11 '81—10.05 '99  
berisha faton 08.11 '81—16.05 '99  
berisha agron 12.06 '83—02.07 '99  
berisha maksut 17.09 '81—13.07 '99  
berazer syle 25.11 '81—15.04 '99  
billali ahin 12.04 '82—30.04 '99  
bilimli sefidin 01.12 '81—30.04 '99  
bisimli lukaj 01.11 '83—27.03 '99  
blagojevi srečko 22.05 '85—22.09 '98  
blakori labinot 02.09 '84—06.05 '99  
bogujevi nera 02.04 '84—28.03 '99  
bogujevi shpend 08.09 '86—28.03 '99  
bogujevi shpirtan 13.04 '89—28.03 '99  
bojaj egzon 12.07 '89—04.04 '99  
bojaj kreshnik 12.07 '85—11.05 '99  
bojaj elhasan 06.06 '87—11.05 '99  
boletini besart 01.03 '86—06.04 '99  
borcinaj valon 16.01 '94—04.04 '99  
bo n' anic nemanja 05.05 '82—18.07 '98  
brabah faj 26.11 '82—25.09 '98  
brahimaj fidan 01.01 '83—14.04 '00  
brahimi aslan 15.02 '85—23.09 '98  
brava sud 11.03 '83—22.05 '99  
brudar julija 05.10 '89—30.04 '99  
bujupi emine 20.08 '88—28.08 '98  
bunajko bekim 13.05 '83—31.03 '99  
buzhala bahr 16.10 '80—18.07 '98  
bytykaj nehat 27.08 '84—21.04 '99  
bytykaj alton 02.17 '97—25.03 '99  
bytykaj kujtesa 14.12 '92—08.01 '99  
bytykaj bahnje 01.11 '86—04.09 '98  
bytykaj fitim 12.01 '85—01.04 '99  
bytykaj kujtim 01.01 '83—15.10 '98  
bytykaj elmaz 24.10 '82—04.09 '98  
bytykaj envor 17.10 '82—15.10 '98  
bytykaj hasan 09.05 '81—16.04 '99  
caka diona 01.09 '97—02.04 '99  
caka delvina 05.11 '91—02.04 '99  
caka dalina 13.09 '85—02.04 '99  
caka ilir 12.04 '82—13.04 '99  
cakaj arqib 01.07 '87—09.06 '99  
caraku hasan 15.11 '87—17.04 '99  
caraku besart 09.09 '86—17.04 '99  
ceti beat 04.03 '82—10.04 '99  
cabrati faj 01.01 '82—21.05 '99  
callakaj xyfe 01.12 '82—28.08 '98  
calita jahja 13.04 '82—15.04 '99  
dacic senad 01.01 '83—25.03 '99  
dajalip perparim 12.06 '86—13.05 '99  
dajalip shpirtan 01.07 '83—13.05 '99  
dana labinot 12.02 '82—11.04 '99  
dani shpionje 02.12 '98—11.05 '99  
dautaj besart 10.09 '85—29.05 '98  
dauti sinan 17.06 '90—12.04 '99  
dauti fidan 28.01 '83—25.03 '99  
dautaj linton 28.08 '83—27.04 '99  
dedaj nikolte 27.12 '81—27.04 '99  
delijaj gani 01.01 '82—10.08 '98  
deliu jeton 20.09 '88—26.09 '98  
deliu menduhije 16.05 '94—26.09 '98  
deliu diturije 17.08 '98—19.11 '98  
deliu antigona 02.06 '84—26.09 '98  
deliu mihane 05.02 '82—26.09 '98  
deliu donjeta 12.08 '91—26.09 '98

deliu gentiana 07.05 '90—26.09 '98  
deliu valmir 21.09 '86—26.09 '98  
deliu leart 17.02 '83—03.04 '99  
deliu vlor 25.02 '87—03.04 '99  
deliu selim 16.11 '83—20.04 '99  
deliu pakize 20.04 '83—23.04 '99  
deliu bastri 30.05 '81—30.04 '99  
demaj emil 01.05 '98—25.04 '99  
demaku driton 03.05 '82—17.05 '99  
demirovic d 05.15 '83—01.07 '99  
demjaha argjent 04.07 '93—02.04 '99  
dervishaj envor 01.01 '82—15.03 '99  
dervishaj burhan 21.12 '80—14.10 '98  
dibrani fitim 21.10 '98—22.02 '99  
dibrani sherif 23.03 '83—15.05 '99  
dallavleraj agron 04.12 '82—25.03 '99  
dimic dragan 01.09 '95—11.05 '99  
dina namit 01.07 '83—26.03 '99  
dinaj besmir 26.05 '91—02.04 '99  
dobra lirdon 03.01 '84—28.03 '99  
domi ylka 18.08 '82—07.05 '99  
duraj lulezim 20.11 '82—11.04 '99  
duraku ajet 01.01 '83—26.03 '99  
duraku berat 18.03 '82—26.03 '99  
duraku jeton 17.11 '81—26.03 '99  
duraku jehona 15.10 '91—06.05 '99  
duraj agron 01.10 '86—12.08 '99  
duraj albion 11.11 '96—28.03 '99  
duraj mizmoza 25.08 '94—28.03 '99  
duraj arber 01.10 '91—28.03 '99  
duraj dafina 11.10 '81—28.03 '99  
duzhmanaj agron 20.04 '82—07.04 '99  
dvorani hazir 01.07 '83—21.05 '99  
dvorani mureddin 28.08 '92—01.05 '99  
elcaz nushi 27.04 '81—24.03 '99  
elcaz gen 25.05 '83—04.04 '99  
elmazi mesur 29.06 '81—27.03 '99  
elshani nederim 01.01 '88—17.04 '99  
elshani kujtim 01.01 '94—17.04 '99  
elshani donjeta 11.07 '90—15.05 '99  
elshani shmesi 03.12 '87—24.10 '98  
elshani burim 28.08 '81—26.03 '99  
elshani shahirje 25.08 '81—05.06 '99  
elshani arben 20.04 '81—14.04 '99  
emrullahu uran 27.11 '89—01.06 '99  
emrullahu muhamet 20.11 '88—17.10 '99  
faziu fazli 06.05 '82—14.04 '99  
feka refki 01.01 '89—05.05 '99  
feka hajdin 07.09 '82—12.04 '99  
feka sami 20.12 '81—20.04 '99  
ferati naser 22.06 '83—20.03 '99  
ferizi nazif 08.09 '84—30.04 '99  
ferizi rahim 28.09 '81—30.04 '99  
ferizi gezim 12.09 '82—28.05 '99  
fetahu blerim 01.05 '84—31.03 '99  
fetahu remzi 01.01 '83—03.04 '99  
fetoshi ardan 24.05 '83—25.03 '99  
fondaj ramadan 01.01 '87—21.10 '99  
fondaj arben 28.11 '81—15.04 '99  
franca sheqir 22.06 '83—12.04 '99  
frokru marjan 13.03 '84—08.07 '99  
gallopi burim 25.09 '84—28.03 '99  
gallopi nuri 03.08 '82—08.03 '99  
gashani fatmir 09.01 '82—30.04 '99  
gashi safet 11.05 '89—01.05 '99  
gashi jeton 11.04 '82—31.03 '99  
gashi hulezim 03.01 '81—23.09 '99  
gashi salih 14.02 '82—05.07 '98  
gashi armen 01.01 '82—06.03 '99  
gashi makfretis 01.01 '85—06.03 '99  
gashi serberze 08.06 '81—12.04 '99  
gashi agron 01.01 '82—07.05 '99  
gashi arben 10.10 '82—15.04 '99  
gashi arif 01.10 '81—26.03 '99  
gashi bashkim 27.11 '82—15.04 '99  
gashi ilir 31.08 '97—08.06 '99  
gashi agron 10.11 '82—12.03 '99  
gashi kushtrim 24.04 '81—24.09 '99  
gashi bekim 04.06 '82—12.04 '99  
gashi emir 01.09 '95—25.03 '99  
gashi fisnik 05.01 '89—25.03 '99  
gashi natrya 04.08 '91—25.03 '99  
gashi lumitje 14.07 '81—25.03 '99  
gashi bleriz 23.01 '84—25.03 '99  
gashi vorim 27.09 '91—25.03 '99  
gashi viora 28.12 '89—25.03 '99  
gashi arben 22.02 '83—25.03 '99  
gashi sedat 12.06 '86—25.03 '99  
gashi besarta 02.01 '86—25.03 '99  
gashi binak 15.08 '82—31.03 '99  
gashi dca 03.05 '90—07.04 '99  
gashi deniza 16.07 '94—07.04 '99  
gashi rea 25.11 '92—07.04 '99  
gashi bledar 07.04 '99—07.04 '99  
gashi mirget 07.06 '95—07.04 '99  
gashi servete 01.09 '81—07.04 '99  
gashi naim 17.03 '82—15.04 '99  
gashi arif 05.05 '84—07.04 '99  
gashi mentor 26.04 '83—18.04 '99  
gashi fam 28.05 '94—28.04 '99  
gashi surtije 28.12 '92—31.03 '99  
gashi shkelzim 31.05 '92—26.04 '99  
gashi salih 13.02 '87—10.81 '99  
gashi ibrahim 21.06 '82—30.04 '99  
gashi armen 20.06 '83—03.05 '99  
gashi fatmir 01.01 '83—21.10 '99  
gavranej sefidin 29.03 '83—01.04 '99  
gaxhij kushtrim 04.04 '95—15.05 '99  
gaxhij arden 06.09 '91—15.05 '99  
geci arbesa 13.11 '98—20.04 '99  
gegaj sokol 07.03 '83—26.05 '99  
gegaj skender 06.08 '81—13.05 '99  
gerguri zejzeta 23.04 '83—23.05 '99  
gerxhalu sabudun 09.09 '92—31.05 '99  
gerxhalu mybera 07.08 '91—31.05 '99  
gerxhalu abdurrahman 09.08 '89—31.05 '99  
gerxhalu mehxit 14.02 '88—31.05 '99  
gerxhalu muharram 13.09 '85—31.05 '99

gerxhalu shaban 28.06 '84—27.03 '99  
gerxhalu shaban 01.05 '83—31.05 '99  
gerxhalu safir 04.05 '91—31.05 '99  
gigollaj arben 24.10 '83—10.04 '99  
gigollaj ylber 09.12 '82—26.04 '99  
gikolli qazim 05.05 '81—28.03 '99  
ginovci arton 20.11 '83—31.03 '99  
ginovci xhavit 04.08 '83—01.05 '99  
ginovci arton 01.10 '81—02.04 '99  
gilavea avdyt 22.06 '85—30.04 '99  
gilavea urim 22.11 '84—30.04 '99  
gilavea defim 16.06 '86—30.04 '99  
gilavea arton 11.03 '82—30.04 '99  
gilavea hulezim 30.08 '82—07.05 '99  
ginovci behta 17.04 '89—26.06 '98  
govedari demush 29.01 '83—08.05 '99  
guaci arif 14.05 '99—20.05 '99  
guaci ndrimesa 27.09 '97—28.03 '99  
guaci fitim 11.06 '92—21.05 '99  
guri nerimane 16.07 '89—08.04 '99  
guzdenovic viktor 11.04 '82—14.12 '98  
hadregonaj skender 01.06 '82—27.04 '99  
hajdaraj shkelzen 28.04 '84—04.04 '99  
hajdari albana 30.03 '93—24.12 '98  
hajdari miftar 15.12 '88—06.04 '99  
hajdari ganime 06.07 '84—06.04 '99  
hajdari mursel 30.03 '85—26.03 '99  
hajdari vesel 02.01 '82—26.03 '99  
hajdari abedin 20.04 '83—26.03 '99  
hajdari gazmend 10.04 '83—28.03 '99  
hajra gani 14.05 '82—08.06 '99  
hajrizi ilir 01.01 '88—25.02 '99  
hajrizi leonora 25.06 '85—02.04 '99  
halilij drilon 01.09 '95—05.04 '99  
halilij diana 20.03 '93—05.04 '99  
halilij valmir 28.07 '86—05.04 '99  
halili albert 26.06 '89—01.06 '99  
halili blerim 22.12 '83—30.04 '99  
halili bujar 13.11 '81—24.09 '98  
halili nexhat 13.07 '81—24.09 '98  
halimi bahr 13.02 '99—15.05 '99  
halitaj halime 01.01 '81—27.08 '98  
haliti jetelira 01.02 '99—28.04 '99  
hamza burim 18.05 '81—03.07 '98  
haradinaj myrvete 25.03 '83—28.04 '99  
haradinaj hime 10.08 '81—24.03 '98  
hasanaj luan 16.07 '82—27.04 '99  
hasani elzabeta 15.02 '94—13.03 '99  
hasani besart 01.01 '90—09.07 '99  
hasani fitim 21.10 '88—04.04 '99  
hasani lumitje 01.01 '87—04.04 '99  
hasani emrah 06.06 '87—11.11.00  
hasani bedrush 03.02 '84—25.03 '99  
hasani hasan 15.07 '83—08.06 '99  
hasani besim 10.01 '84—04.04 '99  
haxha rafet 24.03 '89—15.05 '99  
haxha nexhat 15.08 '87—15.05 '99  
haxha armen 10.04 '84—22.04 '99  
haxhiavdiya rina 02.04 '95—02.04 '99  
haxhiavdiya egzon 20.02 '94—02.04 '99  
haxhiavdiya doruntina 03.07 '91—02.04 '99  
haxhidema gazmend 23.12 '85—30.05 '99  
haxhiu arbnesh 04.06 '84—30.04 '99  
haxhiu bedri 01.01 '84—28.05 '99  
haxhiu berat 27.05 '82—02.04 '99  
haziraj sazani 10.08 '81—20.04 '99  
hereti arben 15.09 '81—17.05 '99  
heta aziz 25.12 '81—01.05 '99  
hota arnirant 15.02 '99—06.06 '99  
hota driton 03.12 '96—04.09 '98  
hota armen 30.06 '94—27.04 '99  
hota samir 04.01 '87—14.04 '99  
hota sutki 01.06 '85—03.09 '98  
hota kreshnik 20.06 '84—26.03 '99  
hota perparim 01.01 '83—05.04 '99  
hota valon 03.05 '82—26.03 '99  
hota petr 09.08 '81—26.03 '99  
hota ilir 14.05 '81—26.03 '99  
hota bekim 10.05 '81—26.03 '99  
hoxhaj elvana 20.05 '90—17.05 '99  
hoxha famur 17.11 '86—27.04 '99  
hoxha xhuz 05.10 '84—13.06 '99  
hoxha shukur 16.05 '84—02.04 '99  
hoxha flaka 25.09 '83—02.04 '99  
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hoxha beltrina 01.06 '81—27.04 '99  
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hysenaj ganime 01.01 '85—26.03 '99  
hysenaj ramadan 15.06 '83—02.05 '99  
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hysenaj binak 12.03 '82—27.04 '99  
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ibrahimi gezim 08.03 '88—28.06 '99  
ibrahimi shpend 21.12 '83—25.03 '99  
ibrahimi shpend 07.05 '82—08.04 '99  
ibrahimi arif 01.01 '87—10.81 '99  
idrizi ardan 07.07 '92—12.09 '99  
idrizi antigona 07.05 '97—08.05 '99  
ilazaj muhamet 02.11 '82—21.10 '99  
ilazaj hysen 07 '11 '81—21.04 '99  
ilmic predrag 27.09 '85—22.04 '99  
imeraj arif 04.06 '97—26.03 '99  
imeraj arjeta 09.10 '88—26.03 '99  
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imeraj violeta 03.11 '83—26.03 '99  
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imeraj florije 16.07 '81—26.03 '99  
imeraj hasan 01.01 '82—25.03 '99  
isaj faik 05.04 '82—02.04 '99  
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ismajli naser 28.12 '81—16.04 '99

istrefaj merlijana 04.10 '88—31.03 '99  
istrefaj albeduna 01.09 '88—31.03 '99  
isufi vezire 13.11 '84—12.04 '99  
isufi valjeta 21.08 '92—14.04 '99  
isufi lavdim 17.02 '88—14.04 '99  
isufi kujtim 05.05 '81—14.04 '99  
isufi bajram 30.09 '83—27.04 '99  
isufi besnik 11.04 '82—30.04 '99  
isufi sami 23.03 '82—30.04 '99  
ivan evic midrag 01.01 '92—22.04 '99  
jahaj naser 16.02 '86—28.03 '99  
jakupi muhamet 01.01 '83—23.05 '99  
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jakupi elton 01.01 '82—22.04 '99  
jakupi arvan 15.11 '81—22.04 '99  
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janovic zoran 20.12 '86—15.07 '99  
jashari fitim 09.05 '80—07.02 '98  
jashari kushtrim 26.03 '85—07.03 '98  
jashari afe 16.08 '90—07.03 '98  
jashari besim 01.12 '81—07.03 '98







# Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's wartime experiences

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forumZFD – (Forum Civil Peace Service / Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst e.V)  
Prishtina, 2022

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Print:  
**Prograf**

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Published by:  
**forumZFD – (Forum Civil Peace Service / Forum Ziviler Friedendienst e.V)**

**Missing Persons Resource Center**  
Prishtina, 2022

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**Hijacked Childhoods**

Accounts of children's wartime experiences

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This project is implemented by the forumZFD program in Kosovo and Missing Persons Resource Center and is supported by funds received from the German Federal Ministry on Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ) and the Embassy of Switzerland in Kosovo.

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## The Child

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### Rabindranath Tagore

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The first flush of dawn glistens on the dew-dripping leaves of the forest.  
The man who reads the sky cries:  
"Friends, we have come!"  
They stop and look around.  
On both sides of the road the corn is ripe to the horizon,  
-- the glad golden answer of the earth to the morning light.  
The current of daily life moves slowly  
between the village near the hill and the one by the river bank.  
The potter's wheel goes round, the woodcutter brings fuel to the market,  
the cow-herd takes his cattle to the pasture,  
and the woman with the pitcher on her head walks to the well.  
But where is the King's castle, the mine of gold,  
the secret book of magic,  
the sage who knows love's utter wisdom?  
"The stars cannot be wrong," assures the reader of the sky.  
"Their signal points to that spot."  
And reverently he walks to a wayside spring  
from which wells up a stream of water, a liquid light, like the morning melting  
into a chorus of tears and laughter  
Near it in a palm grove surrounded by a strange hush stands a leaf-thatched  
hut  
at whose portal sits the poet of the unknown shore, and sings:  
"Mother, open the gate!"  
A ray of morning sun strikes aslant at the door.  
The assembled crowd feel in their blood the primaevial chant of creation:  
"Mother, open the gate!"  
The gate opens.  
The mother is seated on a straw bed with the babe on her lap,  
Like the dawn with the morning star.  
The sun's ray that was waiting at the door outside falls on the head of the child.  
The poet strikes his lute and sings out:  
"Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living!"  
They kneel down, -- the king and the beggar, the saint and the sinner,  
the wise and the fool, -- and cry:  
"Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living!"  
The old man from the East murmurs to himself:  
"I have seen!"

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# Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts  
of children's wartime  
experiences



## **HIJACKED CHILDHOODS**

Accounts of children's wartime experiences

### **The War and the Children**

In the wars of former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, civilians became victims of persecution, violence, and murder, carried out by the police, military and paramilitary units, and subject to aggravated violations of human rights and freedoms as envisaged by international treaties and conventions.

In Kosovo, from 1 January 1998 until 31 December 2000, a total of 13,518 people were killed, among them 10,794 Albanians, 2,197 Serbs, and 527 from other ethnicities, with 11,661 men and 1,857 women. Of them, 8,662 were civilian Albanians and 2,132 guerrilla soldiers; and 1,197 civilian Serbs and 1,000 soldiers of Yugoslav army, Serbian police, and/or paramilitaries.<sup>1</sup> Around 20,000 women and men (of various ages) were raped.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from human harm, the war spread fear and terror, caused mass expulsions, looting and demolishing of architecture, material damages amounting to around 22 billion Euros,<sup>3</sup> hostage-taking, imprisonment and mistreatment, theft or alienation of pension funds, cadastral documents, archaeological and museum assets, etc., which were applied as means of war.

Children too were not spared from the terror of war – they were murdered, kidnapped, and forcibly disappeared (individually or in groups); they were banished from schools and homes; assaulted with bombs from the ground and the sky; beaten, tortured and violated; kidnapped or murdered in hospitals; thrown down the wells or waters to hide the crimes and/or to poison the waters; inside houses and private buildings; they were mutilated and murdered in mined areas during and after the war, etc.

There are 1,024 children of Albanian, Serbian, and other ethnicities who were murdered during the last war in Kosovo,<sup>4</sup> of whom 239 children aged between 0 to 5 years old.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, kidnapped or missing children

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<sup>1</sup>Kosovo Memory Book 1998 - 2000

<sup>2</sup>Hikmet Karic, Tanja L. Domi, We Need a Better Way to Prosecute Sexual Assault in Conflict, Foreign Policy, 9 March 2022

<sup>3</sup>Nadie Ahmeti, Over 22 billion Euros of war damages, Radio Free Europe, 23 September 2018

<sup>4</sup>Kosovo Memory Book 1998 - 2000

<sup>5</sup>Shkëlqim Hysenaj and Lendi Susuri, How many people were murdered in the Kosovo war?, Radio Free Europe, 12 June 2018

are registered 109. According to the Humanitarian Law Centre – Kosovo, trials about war crimes against children were conducted for a total of three aggravated cases (including charges for war crimes against adults and other human rights violations). Fifteen individuals were accused of the account of the cruel murder of 36 children, throughout three trials, and of them, 10 were sentenced to a total of 158 years of imprisonment, 4 were acquitted, and 1 indictment was rejected. The trials were mainly conducted in the courts of Serbia during 2006-2018, for the cases in Podujevo, Trnje, and Suhareka.

## Violation of Childhood

The United Nations Security Council recognized six degrees of aggravated violations against children during wartime: (1) killing and maiming; (2) recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups; (3) attacks on schools or hospitals; (4) rape or other violations; (5) abduction of children; and (6) denial of humanitarian access for children.<sup>6</sup> Of those, at least 5 violations were applied in Kosovo, except for violation (2), given that largely, children were kept outside of military formations.

The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines the child as a person under the age of 18 years old, with fundamental rights to grow, participate, and achieve their potential with distinct standards for education, health care, social services, and criminal laws.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of the child that dominates in the popular discourse and is supported by the international conventions (UNCRC) is represented as universal but in fact, it is a product of Western philosophical, psychological, and sociological thought. In various legal and cultural systems, some competencies are recognized before (or even after the age of 18) but at a certain moment in time, each society defines when a person is transferred from childhood to being a responsible adult.<sup>8</sup> Childhood may be understood as a circumstance or situation experienced by all children.<sup>9</sup> Their 'passivity' or 'incompleteness' justifies and compels the provision of protection and care by the family, relevant institutions, the state, and the international community.<sup>10</sup> Children are often deemed as 'pre-social', which restricts the articulation of the political or social positions of children in the public discourse.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>UN Security Council Resolution 1612, 2005

<sup>7</sup>Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations (OHCHR), 1989.

<sup>8</sup>Helen Berents, 'This is my story': Children's war memoirs and challenging protectionist discourses, 2020, p. 464

<sup>9</sup>Tobias Hecht, *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>10</sup>Olga Nieuwenhuys, 'Growing Up between Places of Work and Non-Places of Childhood: The Uneasy Relationship,' in Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv (eds), *Children's Places: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup>D. Sears and N. Valentino, 'Politics Matters: Political Events as Catalysts for Pre-Adolescent Socialisation', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 1997.

There is a 'conceptual division' between the child and the political or the public, an 'isolation' of the concept of the child as a particularly non-political subject.<sup>12</sup> This makes it possible for children to be used as a motive for political action. By placing them in the passive and the private realms versus the public and the political, the children are 'prevented' from participation and articulation, while they become delegitimized within the multitude of experiences. The concept of the 'child', as seen by the adults, distorts the perception of the experiences that children lived through during the war.

These cultural norms limit the agency of children and prevent the consideration of children as competent contributors to the narrative, even in peaceful conditions. At war, children are characterized in essence as passive victims, and therefore, the numerous approaches to dealing with the past and the transitional justice relegate children and their experiences to the margins: children's wartime experiences are not discussed in the local, state, or regional initiatives; children are rarely invited to participate in these initiatives; the strategies for dealing with the past are designed without dissecting the knowledge or experiences of children at war or their needs and demands afterward, etc.

## **Methodology and Accountability**

The ethics for scrutinizing children's traumatic-narrative texts, places the need on finding suitable methods for reading within various social, cultural, and political contexts on the one hand, and disciplinary or scientific contexts on the other hand.<sup>13</sup> In compiling this volume, added attention was given to the methods of how the stories of children can be read, understood, reproduced, and contextualized within the bigger frame of collective memory, focusing on the potential harm that may be caused. Taking into account intersectional inequalities between the power and the voices (in their production), the book invites the readers, scholars, knowledge producers, and cultural and political operators to reflect on their involvement with the stories.

Due to limitations and the format (as this is not about a qualitative analysis or scientific research), the book does not delve sufficiently into the interpretation of the content of memories presented therein but instead, builds a review of experiences that places the focus on children and the war. In the center of extracting and presenting stories in the book

<sup>12</sup> Helen Brocklehurst, *Who's Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Kate Douglas, 'Ethical Dialogues: Youth, Memoir, and Trauma', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2015, p. 273.

lies the ethical principle of 'do no harm' to avoid the reproduction or strengthening of victim identities and other forms of generalizations, by focusing on the life stories of the subjects.

The interviews were conducted using the 'oral history' research method and were audio-recorded with the written consent of the interviewees. Further, the material was transcribed and edited, and before each story, a short instructional or descriptive text was compiled. The interviews are organized as life stories, removing questions, sub-questions, additions, affirmations, and out-of-context dialogues. The content of stories in this volume is authentic and is showcased in a systemized manner through a coherent structure, with preserved language authenticity and the dialectal nature of storytelling. The book is illustrated with pictures of the interviewees, their family members, and children's surviving belongings, such as school bags, clothes, notebooks, pens, coloring pens, rulers, toys, journals, etc.

The interviewees were selected on the premise of ethnic, geographic, gender, and circumstantial representation. The book presents 12 interviews: 8 conducted with Albanian subjects, 2 with Serb subjects (displaced from Kosovo), and 2 with Roma subjects (one displaced from Kosovo). Of these interviews, 9 are with parents whose children were murdered or went missing, 1 is with a brother and 2 with children whose parents went missing during the war. A total of 5 interviews were conducted with men and 5 with women, whereas 2 with spouses together.

### **Hijacked Childhoods: Accounts of children's wartime experiences**

Genuine addressing of the dark heritage of the war in Kosovo remains highly impaired due to political antagonisms (within and outside of borders), populist rhetoric, and isolation. The political architecture and power in Kosovo, from the proclamation of independence in 2008, remains highly fragile and with a ruptured cohesion. The harsh political battle for power and legitimacy drives governments towards their frequent consolidations and dissolutions, enabling the democratic processes, strengthening the rule of law and accountability, fighting crime and corruption, improving the quality of education, healthcare, and public services, improving living conditions for citizens, etc., to wander around a vicious circle without any bright of success. On the other hand,



the lack of political will and sustaining a frozen political-discursive conflict between the governments in Prishtina and Belgrade have resulted in matters that are closely related to addressing the heritage of the war being compromised at a large scale.

This collective climate has installed an extremely exclusive political culture and practice of memory, in which, the public history of the last war in Kosovo is told through two biased lenses: the glorifying one about the histories told by the experience of militarized men, and that of maintaining and strengthening victimizing identities through which, in a generalized way, the sufferings of the people and the heroic efforts for liberation are articulated.

Building the collective memory on the other hand remains an extremely marginalized process that is led by decentralized and poorly coordinated initiatives, mainly by the civil society and academia, countering the political monopoly of history, by introducing numerous civilian voices and experiences. This includes stories on experiences of women during the war, of the civilian victims, of the family members of the wartime missing, of tense historical episodes during the '80s and '90s, and of social movements of students and women.

The difficult and violent environment of the last war in Kosovo had and continues to have a deep impact on all people who lived and live within this space. The children resisted the war actively. 22 years later, the surviving children continue to live among the daily consequences of war meanwhile, for the murdered and missing children, the wounds remain still open for their family members and the broad community.

When talking about the war, children largely lack agency. The politicization, alienation, and exploitation of history and historiography by different interest groups and stakeholders in the area of reconciliation and transitional justice, the mathematization of the narratives, and the lack of research initiatives that would shed light upon the experiences of the war position children and passive victims. The exclusionary approach in documenting grave violations of human rights limits the collective capacity to fully understand the difficult past and narrows down the responses and possible support for the children affected by the war and their family members.

To fully understand the implication of the children's experiences at war,

the accounts, and social histories at times of crisis must be first and foremost taken into consideration. Since the agency of children is often concealed within the formal discussions about preventing or resolving conflicts, the stories of their experiences provide a way for recognizing their role and capacity in the construction of collective memory and legitimize their voices and experiences especially when produced within and regarding the repressed mnemonic spaces.

Memories of children and for children at war provide a space where the diversity of wartime experiences becomes visible and tangible for a broad popular audience and a source to inform public discussions about the institutional architecture for rehabilitation, acknowledgment, compensation, and memorialization. Through exploring oral histories, this volume seeks at pluralizing official history and the inclusion of accounts of children's wartime experiences into the collective memory, as a way to facilitate addressing the systemic silence and generalizations in the history of the last war in Kosovo.

'Hijacked Childhoods' speaks to us about the sacrifice and human resistance for survival and the resilience to keep going with life. Accounts showcased in this book help building-up ideas about children and childhood, and their experiences in war, and reveal cultural spaces that nurture and transfer narratives - placing them at the heart of the spaces of 'struggle' to acknowledge individuals and groups affected by the war. This is how the complexity of the experiences of children at war is unveiled, offering a better understanding of their lives and experiences, and is an opportunity to address the violence and trauma of the war as a way of engaging in peacebuilding.

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**Korab Krasniqi**

Project leader  
forumZFD program in Kosovo

## **HEALING PAINFUL MEMORIES**

### The children and the war

Reading these stories, unlike conducting personal interviews with eyewitnesses and the survivors during and immediately after the war of 1998-1999 in Kosovo, reveals a more thorough dynamic of the war narrative and convinces us that the survivors, the family members of the war victims and of the missing communicate through the pain in their souls and their sufferings and sacrifices they did and continue to do to keep on living. They sob because they could not do more to save the murdered and the forcefully missing members of families, and they ask for nothing more than justice, restoration, and recognition for those who no longer are. At the same time, they empathize with the victims of other ethnicities, precisely because they share the pain and experiences better than those who do not have any family members murdered or gone missing at war.

These personal accounts display horrendous facts of cruel murders and kidnapping of children, or how mothers sent off their children to pastures and they returned dead. In a state of shock, a mother tells: "I had them in my hands but I did not know they were my children" after she goes to the field where she found her children lying in pools of blood.

The last war in Kosovo did not eschew the civilians: undefended elderly, women and children, and persons with disabilities. Many were victims of torture, bombing, land mines, and other explosive means, used in populated areas, where families were torn to pieces and thousands of children died or suffered consequences for the rest of their lives. The war did not spare the children with disabilities either, who, apart from their families, had no other care or support. "Yes, he had disabilities, he did not even know what they were saying to him. As soon as they were let go, they headed towards Llausha, but he separated and headed to our houses in Polac. He walked by the shepherd's hut by the river, after the bus station, where he came across some police officers. I saw it with my own eyes when they killed him by the river, because the police went there, seized him, he pushed a police officer and threw him on the ground. When he fell on the ground, the other one killed him." This is recounted by the elderly brother of one child murdered during the war. You will find the full account in this volume.

Many other children were kidnapped and were never found again. The wish to at least find their bones and the wish for justice are eternal. This

pain has crushed the souls and faded physically many other family members, who could not find ways to deal with the suffering and feelings of guilt for not having been able to do enough to find serenity, peace, and justice. Mother Dragan e, as her missing son Ivan used to call her, says: “When I go to church, I light up a candle for him, as if he were alive, and below I light candles for all the kidnapped and the forcefully missing, for the murdered I know and I do now know. For me, he is still alive. I wish I knew at least where he is, while I am alive, as he appears in my dreams. He calls to me, he keeps the phone in his hand and says, 'I left but I do now know where to go’”. She does not want to die before she knows where her son's bones are, even if she learns who the murderer is, “I will – she says– forgive him”.

These stories reveal an unimaginable and unknown world for all those who did not live through war and did not experience the same pain as the storytellers in this volume. The stories illustrate the sensation of tears and laughs, of the love towards a family or community member, the compassion for the missing and the murdered, regardless of their ethnic, gender, or racial affiliation, and the transformation of the pain for their loved ones into a sacrifice to survive with the living. These stories bring us a young generation, like Marigona, who is growing up without her father but instead lives with his memories and virtues, passed on by her mother. She continues to express her pain and grief through poetry, prose, and painting.

After more than two decades since the end of the war, these stories of war breathe particles of hope and life although memories may fade while pain remains strong. The will to continue life with the living gives these survivors strength and to us a message that nonetheless, a human being uncovers ways to overcome the suffering, the pain, the sacrifice, and the sadness.

Hanumshahe mourns her two sons whom she says the war did not take from her but found death in the post-war mines: “These two who died, they do not even come in my dreams, because when you are too sad, you do not see them. They came into my dream laughing, in the middle of a meadow, somehow full of flowers, full of light, and told me 'Mom, we did not die, don't you see us among the flowers, we are doing so well'. Light, light, light, flowers, meadow, they were laughing, running. When I woke up, it somehow felt like I spent time with them as if they had been close to me, and I said they are well. I saw them there once, and never again.”

Nowadays, two other sons who bear the names of the murdered sons, give Hanumshahe and her family the force to go on with life.

These stories serve us as references and sources of information about the last war in Kosovo, about certain places and events where murders, fights, kidnapping, burials and exhumations, eternal parting, and longing took place. These stories will help us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history, how they felt while telling the stories after a long time, which was the emotion and message that these stories gave us, so that future generations learn what happened and do not repeat our mistakes.

What makes this range of stories special is the huge will of the survivors to live, and their wish to restore to a certain degree what they lost forever - their most loved ones and their dignity. By renewing the names of murdered children, parents kept their memories alive. The father of the murdered Roma girl, Elizabeta, has only one wish before he dies: to fix up a grand grave for her daughter with the other graves of family members in Mitrovica. He is happy that the name of his daughter, Elizabeta Hasani, was finally included in the memorial plaque in Mitrovica.

These stories of war reveal the cycle of life too, because after each storm, just like the sea calms down, so does life continue. As children grow up, parents live on with their open wounds among the living, always preserving the memories and wishing to one day join their murdered children and family members in eternity.

These stories have their social and political importance; stories of war carry a great emotional resonance for the readers. In these stories, characters often deal with loss: a parent, a brother, a friend, a pet, or something less tangible, like a home, a neighborhood, or their past.

Wars always bring sudden and dramatic upheavals. However, when faced with the truths, the youth who did not experience the war can facilitate change in others – and this makes their pain, and the pain of their predecessors, easier.

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**Nora Ahmetaj**  
Human Rights and Restorative  
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## **HIJACKED CHILDHOODS**

A foreword by the editor of this volume

There is no greater trauma for a parent than seeing their child die. The relationship with the child is for them the most extraordinary of this life: they nourish, clothe, clean, educate, encourage to success and comfort their child in failures, and so little by little rear that child for the life of adulthood. The child remains a responsibility to the parent even after they move out on their own. Furthermore, and quite naturally, the parents hope that the child will continue to inhabit this earth even when they no longer will be here.

That is why the death of the child is the calamity that cracks an eternal rupture through the peacefulness of the parent's soul, thus diving everything into two eras – the life before and after it. The premature death of the offspring deprives the parent of the opportunity to further exercise their parental role. It disrupts what they consider to be a natural course of life. It is a pain that persists, piercing at times and numb at others, for the rest of their life. It is, in the life of the parent, the greatest tragedy.

There is not a single parent in this volume to recount today, two decades later, the death or the disappearance of a child during the war or immediately after it, without a tear coming down their cheek.

“When I saw the smoke going up, I went out into the yard. I saw their uncles and all the other villagers running upwards. They shouted, 'The children stepped on mines. All the children are dead.' Rushing, I went climbing up the slope, to get to my children. My brothers-in-law, their uncles, came in front of me, 'No, you will not see them!' I said, 'I want to see them, I want to see my own children! Do not stop me!'” – Zoja, whose sons stepped on a mine planted during the war by the Yugoslav army, says sobbing, although the text, focused on documenting the events rather than the emotions, does not reveal it.

Among those parents who, being young, have had other children after the war, it is not uncommon to renew the name of their deceased son or daughter. In other cases, a sibling did this when they begot a child. In this publication, we confirm this fact, which we have already learned by words of mouth. Yet, there is another amazing insight we obtain from this volume about the renewal of names, which probably none of us had

ever thought of: the difficulty of uttering the name, of using it to call another child under the same roof.

Fourteen years after the death of his younger brother, Beqir, another narrator of this volume, begets a boy, but he just cannot get used to calling his son by the renewed name of his brother.

“We renewed Ardian's name. I insisted. Coz, they'd renew them then. But, we still don't call him by his name properly. We started calling him Lumi, got used to it, coz we just couldn't. We just renewed our son's name, but never could call the other one that,” says Hanumshahe, whose son, whilst sheltering in the mountains, was killed by a grenade launcher along with his sister, while another daughter was seriously wounded. And this mother says this today, although 'Lumi' is now twenty years old.

The way the narrating parents are managing to cope with that part of their being left empty after the loss of a child varies from one to another, this being natural, as no two people are the same. Perhaps the most desirable for both mental and spiritual health is the hope embraced by Ajete—the mother who saw her teenage son's head split in two by the bullet—who, holding fast to her faith and having understood the unshakable truth about having to live the rest of her life as 'a living among the living,' prays: “May God unite us in the afterworld.”

Self-deception? Useless beliefs? Well, the other end of the spectrum is to continue living in a vegetative state, simply by existing, to extinguish any kind of capacity for interaction, to alienate all pleasures and joys, as has happened—we learn from his wife, Dragana—with Ivan's dad, whose teenager son went missing a few months after the war, the day he was leaving Kosovo for Serbia to continue his education.

Indeed, most parents are somewhat comforted by the knowledge that it was a war and that they were neither the first nor the last to be plagued by this misfortune. However, the yearning for the offspring is never quenched:

“When your mother and father die, it is a great sadness, yet in time, the wound closes. But when your child dies, the wound only gets bigger and bigger your entire life,” Murseli shares from his sorrow, whose ten-year-old was killed during the war in a tractor-trailer while escaping the village with her grandmother. “The wound grows bigger each time I see



her friends who have grown up, are employed, have started families—adds his wife Bahria—especially when I see them on the street, who run and weep, hug me with both their arms.”

The theme of murdered children, though predominant, is not the only among the oral histories summarized in this volume. There are others, narrated by children raised without a murdered parent, by a brother for a brother, and by mothers of children gone missing during or just after the war.

We hope that the chaste human pain, embedded in each one of these stories, will serve for generations, in Kosovo, in Serbia, in the region and elsewhere, as a reminder that no matter what group, society, ethnicity or nation we belong to, we are in essence and above all separate individuals, temporarily in this world, and it is up to each of us to decide whether, during this temporariness, which we call life, we will establish with the Other a relationship of understanding, cooperation, love and peace, or observe them under the lens of “our gang,” and create hostilities with the outsiders that can go as far as to have children for victims. The only way in which the entire humanity can advance towards a brighter future is by having each and every one of us righteously resolve this dilemma within ourselves.

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**Gazmend Bërlajolli**  
Editor and proofreader

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**Warning:**

The book contains a detailed and graphic description of persecution, fleeing from war, violence, murder, torture, suffering, famine, etc., caused by war, which may be disturbing for the readers or retraumatizing for subjects having experienced similar war-related difficulties.

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The language and views expressed in this publication are those of family members of children killed or forcibly disappeared, and of children whose parents went forcibly disappeared in wartime conditions, interviewed for this project, and do not reflect those of organizers, partners, associates, or of project supporters.

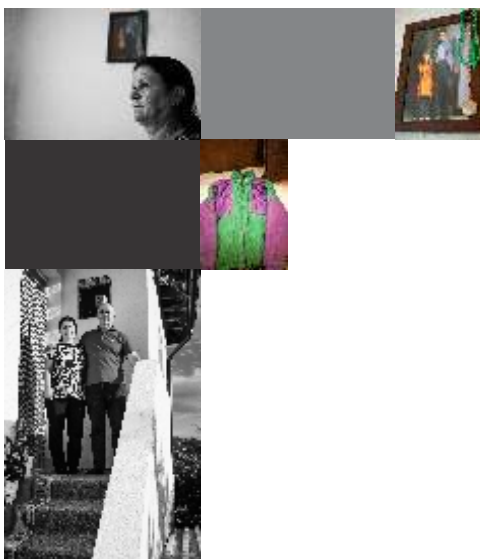
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When I dreamt of him the second time, he was all grown up, he was an adult. He was bald. I asked him, “My son, why did you shave your head?” and he said, “Over here where I am, they don't allow hair.” I asked him, “Please stay with me a little longer.” And he said, “No, I stayed enough, I am leaving, it's much better there.”





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## Ajete Ahmeti

Ajete's husband joined the KLA in a time of war. She was left with four children, with the youngest child not even three years old and her old father-in-law. When the Serb forces approached the village, same as elsewhere, the residents were forced to flee to the nearby forest.

Ajete says that during the war she did not see mass killings of civilians, the rape of women, the inhuman torture of men. But, on the day when they escaped, just before she entered the forest with her eleven-year-old son, Ajete experienced something that would mark her entire life - the sniper killed her son, split his head in two.

**Hijacked Childhoods**  
Accounts of children's wartime experiences

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# I thought that he is still breathing

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Ajete Ahmeti



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My name is Ajete Ahmeti and I am from village Selac. I was born on January 20th, 1967. We were four brothers and six sisters. My father was not employed anywhere but he had cattle and he dealt with in agriculture.

My family was not rich, we were like many other families. We lived a happy life together with our parents, brothers, and sisters. I am the eldest of all the children. We didn't have much, but we were happy with what we had.

My parents had their last say in our family, whatever my parents would say that would be final. They assigned everyone with duties, "You will do this, and that task will be done by you, you and you". Everything was done as we were told. We had to deal with corn, wheat, beans, mowing the grass, collecting the hay, everything had to be done. We never dared



say, "I am lazy to work today, let the others do my tasks."

We didn't get much education from school. I finished only primary school, and I didn't continue my education because of our living conditions. I was good at school but the circumstances, the distance, the transport, there were many reasons why I couldn't go to school. I wanted to go to school, but we had cows, sheep, we had to milk them, to do our chores. I would get up early and start cooking at 8 o'clock. Today I have my diploma from primary school, where I had all the best grades.

I had many friends. We were 20-25 pupils from the same village, Selac. At that time it used to be a big village with many people but now there is no one living there. In total there are five, six houses, not more than that. Our teachers were good, and they taught us very well. They used to teach us the Serbian language and French language as well. The director of all schools was a person called Mursaik Ajvazi. Whenever there was a rally there, they would ask me to speak because I loved school very much. I loved studying very much.

I remembered for a long time many of the lessons I learned in primary school, but after the war, I forgot them. When this happened to me, I forgot almost everything. But when I think about the past, when you are focused on your studies, you never forget them. I will never forget the teachers I had in primary school. From all the teachers I had, I only met Murat Jusufi after the war, he works in the municipality of Mitrovica.

After the war ended, I was in contact with only two friends. Now I am friends only with my cousin with whom I was in the same class until the fifth grade. I am friends also with another girl who was from our village. Now, I don't know what happened to them. I don't know whether they got married or if they went to live abroad. We had a very good time together. As a friend, I never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings. I still don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. If I would take a piece of paper, I would share it with my friends. We would break a pencil into two parts and share it with friends because we had a great relationship.

I didn't go to secondary school. The eldest brother and the third brother finished secondary school, but none of us, sisters, attended secondary school. We just finished primary school. I wanted to continue going to secondary school. When I was in the seventh grade, I remember a girl called Ferdane who came from Prishtina, I don't remember her last name,

and she gathered all the parents at the school. They gathered and after the meeting one of the parents said, "By God, I will take my daughter to secondary school." Of all the parents, only one said that he will take his daughter to school. Today that girl is a nurse.

And now I am 53 years old and I always dreamt of going to school. Since I couldn't do it myself, God fulfilled my wish and blessed me with my children. I always dreamt of going to school. I told my children, "It doesn't matter if you work or not, you must attend school, you must give your best, you must study".

When I finished the eighth grade, my father died. I was 15 years old. My dad went to get some corn and take it to the mill. As soon as he came from the mill, he died at home. He suffered a heart attack.

Our mother struggled to raise us, and she made great sacrifices, all while in poverty. But Allah rewarded her efforts, we are now all doing well and we have our children. When my father died, we were very sad. At that time my youngest brother was only five years old. None of us were working and my eldest brother was in the army when dad died. But everyone helped us a little. Two years after my brother came back from the army, he went to work in Germany and the rest of us siblings (six sisters and three brothers) remained here. Our brother helped us a lot.

My mother cried and she was worried so much, "He left me with all these children, what am I supposed to do with ten children, without income, without anything." Someone had to go work as a shepherd and take care of the sheep and cows. The girls started to grow up and you never know how the boys end up; my mother was worried all the time. When my brother came from Germany, he would tell her, "I promise you, everything will be fine, just don't get upset." I used to tell her as well, "Mom, we will do everything you tell us." She guided us very well, and fortunately, we all prospered, we all got married well.

At that time, we didn't have cars to travel back and forth to Selac, we had only horses. There was no way to get groceries; in those times we didn't need much because we had our milk, cheese, and everything else. There was a shop in Bare, in Shale of Bajgora. We used to go there by horse and get what we needed and turn back because the road was bad. Our village was very good.

After the war ended, we went to Kroni i Vitakut – my brother lived there.

He doesn't live there anymore, now he lives in Sweden. His house is still back there. My mother, two brothers, and four sisters lived there. My second sister and I got married. After that house got burned, they came again to Tunel, and they stayed in an apartment. But, my mother was very upset about my brother, because he went abroad when he was very young.

I got married in village Kutllovc. I got married in '87 when I was 20 years old. When I got married it was very difficult for my mother because I was the eldest daughter and I was always by her side. After I got married, she would ask me, "Ajete, please come to visit me at least once every two or three months." Thank goodness, even though she lived far away I had the possibility to visit her quite often. I did it for her sake. And then my sisters and brothers grew up. But the sadness for losing our father never went away.

Dad always loved working in the field. We were always nearby him, at the wheat or in the cornfield, we were always there. Father loved his daughters more than the boys. And my mother loved the boys more. Dad looked after us a lot, we respected him, we were ashamed to say something in front of him. I loved my mother more. I don't know why. Maybe because I was the eldest daughter and I could see my mother working hard. That women's work was never done, and that's why I loved my mother very much.

Now I feel sorry for my mother because she lives alone in an apartment. She has four sons, and all of them live abroad with their families. Only my nephew lives here. He is 19 years old and he lives in Mitrovica. Thank God, he is doing fine. They take him abroad, he goes and stays for five or six months, sometimes a year. Then he comes back and after a while, he goes again. He doesn't like living abroad. But thank God he is doing well now because in the past he suffered a lot. Life was very difficult.

I got married when I was 20 years old. My husband is nine years older than me. I remember the wedding day. It was September 23rd and it was a very nice and sunny day. It was far away to travel from village Kutllovc to Selac, it took three hours on foot or one and a half hour by carriage. But there were not many carriages at that time. They were horse-drawn carriages. So, four such carriages came and took me. There were many men and family members. There were plenty of people.

When I came here to my husband's place, there were around 30 household members. We got married as they used to in the past. My cousin and my brother-in-law worked together as school handymen. He spoke of his brother and my cousin talked about me. Then my cousin met my brother and told him, "They are asking for Ajeta's hand in Kutllovc". I told my mother, "Mom, don't do this to me, I am still young. I still want to stay with you, I am the eldest" She was all alone and someone had to help her. My mom said, "My dear, nobody wants to marry an old woman. You are almost 20 years old." And then I said, "Okay, as you wish."

That was my fate. Three weeks later he came again and I got engaged. We were engaged for six months and then we got married. I got married on September 23rd and on January 20th I celebrated my 20th birthday.

When I went to my husband's house, I couldn't find peace because I left my mother. I never believed that someone could replace me and do the work I did for my mother. But all of my sisters replaced me, one by one. Because all of them got married as I did, with the consent of our mother and brothers.

When I came to live here, my husband was unemployed and only his brother was employed at the school. The other brother-in-law who lived with us used to be a teacher in village Rahova but the Serbs fired him. A year after I got married all of the brothers-in-law went separate ways in their own houses. After Jeton was born all of the brothers went separate ways.

Jeton was born on August 6th, 1988, in a hospital in Mitrovica. The day I went to give birth, the situation was not good. But when you become a mother for the first time, you are very happy. He was a good and intelligent child. When Jeton turned seven years old, he was crazy after his father. He went and collected wood, planted wheat, collected hay, he went after the cows and sheep. On top of that, he went to school and he never stopped. When he attended the first grade, he said, "I will study hard and I will become a Kosovo soldier." He heard this from his father. Whenever our family gathered, we talked about Kosovo, we said that it's good to give your life for the homeland, and my son heard this. My son never went to school without hugging his father and me.

He attended the first and the second grade in a house; they were teaching the children from the first until the fifth grade in some house so they

wouldn't come to Tunel. He was a good pupil, but he didn't live long enough to finish school.

Two years after Jeton, our daughter Fitore was born. By that time Shefqet and his brothers parted ways but we lived in the same yard. Our children had a great time with the other children. We enrolled Fitore in school when she was six years old so she would go together with Jeton. He was attending the second grade and she was in the first. She was more energetic than him but they had a very good relationship with each other. Then Liridon was born two years after Fitore. Liridon didn't attend the school there, he just attended school in Tunel, because that school in Kutillovc was closed.

Four or five years later, Dafina was born. Dafina was born in '97. Dafina was two and a half years old during the war. We got Dafina five years after Liridon. When she was born, the situation was very bad. She was born in Mitrovica, on the north side, in a hospital in Mitrovica. Then after the war ended, we got Valentina and Jeton. They have a year and a half in between.

Children have very good relations with each other and they help each other. We were always a quiet family; we always paved the way for how to behave well. And thank goodness they learned our lessons.

Also, their father has always told them how to be better and better. He talked to them about family values. When he went to become a soldier, he told them, "Look, I am going to be a soldier..."

I never thought that anything will happen to him, I thought to myself – he will go and he will come back one day. He left me with my father-in-law and four children. The brother-in-law took his children and he went to Germany, he left just before the war started. We were alone there, there was no one in that neighborhood, there was just one house a bit below our house. My father-in-law was 80 years old.

We had a lot of cattle, and Jeton worked hard. At 11 o'clock, he was always running to bring the cows inside. All the jobs that a man would do around the house, he has done it. He was just eleven years old and he would do everything because my father-in-law couldn't work anymore. We were looking after the old man, the children were young, my husband went to become a soldier, and there was no one to help me. But, thank God, we did well. We had just enough. Thanks to Allah, may He bless us, we had just enough.

When Shefqet went to the KLA, he just got up early one day and said, "I am leaving." He left together with his cousin. Jeton and I were looking out from the window and Jeton said, "Dad, where are you going?" He said, "I am going to liberate the homeland. Do you remember what I have told you earlier?" Jeton said, "Yes, I know." And then my husband's cousin asked me, "Ajete, how is your mood?" I said, "I am okay." He then asked me, "Please go and calm my wife down." They were living a little further down from us.

After they left, I still thought that it's not a big deal. I went to speak to the wife of that cousin, and I asked her, "What's wrong with you? Why are you crying?" She said, "They are gone, and no one knows whether they will return alive or not." I said, "It's up to God to decide. If it was meant to – they will die, if not- they will survive"

After about two or three months, Shefqet returned, but he would go back and forth again. He was always insisting that the children must attend school. When we came here in Tunel, a neighbor asked Jeton when he was at school, "Where is your father?" Jeton said, "He is in Germany." "You are lying, your father is in Albania. We will kill you and your father." I don't know who that person was, but my brother-in-law knew who he was because he was their neighbor. That brother-in-law came to Tunel before the war started.

We stayed in Tunel for a month and he went to school here. I was very scared. One day he said, "Please mom, for God's sake, let's go to live in Kutllovc, even if we live under a tree." I said, "My dear son, we can't live in Kutllovc, all the shops are far, everything is far away", he said, "Let's go mom, we will take the children and grandfather and we will go." The next day I took the children, I took the father-in-law and we went to an old house.

When Shefqet came from where he was a soldier, we repaired a bit the place together with a cousin and I started living there. I was staying there together with four children, also the cousin was living in a house close to us.

One night, it was snowing, it was very cold and windy, the whole door was blocked with snow. We hardly managed to gather the cows. The Kutllovci antenna was above us. I was afraid. I remember at one moment I

said, "God, help us." And my son said, "Don't be afraid, dad is a soldier and it's shameful to be afraid." My father-in-law said, "Bravo! That's right!" He was not even eleven years old when he said that.

The dog barked that night, we could hear the rifles shooting, and we didn't close our eyes that night. After some time, my father-in-law got sick, oh my God, he got sick badly. His back was hurting, his stomach too... I called my brother-in-law to come and take him to the doctor. Jeton was dealing with and feeding the cows all the time. We were doing it together.

Two or three days or maybe a week later, we made a tent in the forest. We were two families living in it, Shefqet's family and us. The Serbs noticed us and they started shooting grenades at us, they were just shooting and shooting. There was a boy, cousin's only son, I told him, "Isuf, take Jeton with you". Then they went out, they went to the river and they stayed there. When they came back, their faces were all pale because of the grenades.

The next day we left for Bare. We went on foot there; we all went there together with the children and we walked as much as we could. We spent a month in Bare. After some time, we didn't have bread nor flour anymore. I got up and I took Jeton, we got on the horse and we went to Selac. We loaded the horse with 100 kilos of corn, my uncle helped me load them. From Selac we came to Bare on foot together with Jeton. As soon as we took the corn to the mill, they told us, "The Serbs surrounded us". We left everything behind. We went from Bare on foot towards Kutllovc. And then we didn't get out of the house at all.

The day when Jeton was killed, my sister-in-law was here as well, we cooked and we baked bread. It was May 22nd, at 11 o'clock. We saw that the Serbs were coming, but we didn't think that they were Serbs, we thought that someone came to collect the cabbage from the field.

My son asked me to put sugar in his glass of milk, and I told him, "My son, we don't have any." I still regret why I didn't have sugar for him. As soon as we went out in the yard, the forest was maybe two-three meters away, everybody started running and they went to the forest. My sister-in-law, took my daughter Dafina because she was two and a half years old. I told my son, "Jeton go, I will just take a piece of bread for us". I thought to myself, I need it for the children because they will be hungry.

He said, "No, I will not go out without you."

My father-in-law went to the forest. They all entered the forest. The two of us, as soon as we stepped out, he was by my side, God made him bigger, he became much bigger than me. As soon as we stepped into the forest, he just fell. I just saw that a part of his head went off, and his brain fell on the ground.

When I saw him, I screamed, "God we are in your hands, they killed my Jeton." God gave me strength and I grabbed him and I went into the forest.

Before taking him up, I tore my shirt and I wrapped it around his head. My sister-in-law threw me a sweater, I wrapped him up because I didn't want his brain to fall down. But until I reached that place his brain fell on the ground. There was nothing left.

I laid him there. The Serbs were coming towards us. When they got close to us, they started firing their rifles. In order to reach village Rashan, my brother-in-law said, "Ajete let go of Jeton!" But God sent me strength, and I couldn't let go of him. He said, "Leave him here." I told him, "I can't leave him here, he is still alive". I thought that he was still breathing. He then told me, "Ajete, no, the boy is not alive." He said, "The Serbs are coming." There were seven or eight of them, maybe more. He said, "Leave the boy here and we will come back for him because I am afraid that they will catch us all". I told him, "I will never leave my son behind for anything in this world. Let them catch me, let them kill me." I told him, "You go ahead and go." He said, "I will not leave you alone."

Dafina, my youngest daughter, stayed without food and water until 2 o'clock after midnight. She stayed together with us, close to Jeton's body.

And then a couple of soldiers, at around 2 o'clock, started burning the houses. Not only that they killed my Jeton, but for two days I couldn't find my other son, Liridon. When they started shooting, Liridon started running towards the forest, and he ran to village Zasella. I said to myself, "Oh God, I will lose my mind, this child has gone, Allah has written it that way, but where is my other son?" Two days later my brother-in-law called me and said, "We found Liridon in village Zasella".

The men came and they buried my son. I went and I collected parts of his



brain and I told them, "Take this, it's my son's brain". I buried him near the forest. Also, his brain is buried with him. He lost all of his brains, he shed all of his blood. His eyes dried out, his body completely shrunk, because half of his head was shot.

No one heard me cry, and no one has seen me cry. Why? Because Shefqet has spoken to us as if we were children, he told us, "If the war starts, whatever happens, must be faced, we must stay strong". I always thought of his words. My husband didn't know at all that his son died. He found out when the war ended. They all knew what happened and when my husband came, he saw the grave and he asked a relative, "Who is buried in that grave?" and the relative told him, "Your son was killed." When they killed our son, we went to Reshan that night. I couldn't find my other son. Two days later we found out that he is in village Zasella, and we went there and we stayed there for three nights. We stayed with my brother-in-law's relatives. They took us to Montenegro. I remember screaming, "I don't want to go, my son was killed. I have nothing left!" and my father-in-law was insisting, "You have to leave, you must." And so, we left.

The police stopped the bus and they pulled out my brother-in-law and Shefqet's father. I had no documents, no ID card, nothing. They came in and they started asking. My father-in-law was crying, "I don't care for us but Ajete has no documents". I told him, "Don't worry, nothing will happen. There is no point to live anymore because Jeton is gone." "No, don't say that. Don't forget about the other children?" and I said, "These three are my children too, but..."

But thank goodness, they didn't stop us and they didn't ask me for documents. My brother-in-law and Shefqet's father returned to the bus, they were asked for documents.

We spent three weeks in Ulqin in Montenegro. They made some tents for us and we stayed near the Little beach. Some people were crying for their property and those that lost their loved ones didn't care for the property. I didn't care about the property we lost because my son was killed. And many of them were crying, when we were in Montenegro, "Our house was burned, we had this, we had that..." I was not interested in listening to them. Because I had my heart crying for my son that was killed. No one can replace him but God blessed me with another son.

When we came back from Montenegro, we came directly here. My brother-in-law bought this place before the war. Shefqet stayed here since there was no other place for him to stay because everything was burned. So, we stayed there for three weeks and then we came here. We found Shefqet here. We lived in that place for five years without buying it, and after five years we finally bought it. We bought this apartment, and then he bought the one on the other side and so the entire family came together.

When the first Eid celebration came, it was very hard for me. In the past, we were all happy to come together for Eid, because we were a happy family. We hardly managed to go through the first day of Eid without our Jeton. My mother came to visit us and that day and she said, "You can't behave like that, you have other children as well". She said, "Think about how I felt when I was left with ten children and being the head of the house, what was I supposed to do?" She said, "I faced my problems, and God rewarded me for my suffering. Also, you have to find peace." My mother's words calmed us down a bit. And thanks to God, we found peace.

Immediately after the war ended, my brother-in-law was thinking of organizing a wedding for his two sons – and they didn't want to celebrate. But I was the first one who went and turned on the music. I did the same for his second son as well. I don't want to affect anyone's happiness because of me. The living needs to stay with the living, and the dead with the dead. I always said that, and even today I still say it. Everybody felt sorry for what happened but all the people that died had a mother somewhere. Everyone suffers the most for their own child.

Even today they ask me, "How can you cope, why did you play the music?". I did it because I didn't want others to suffer because of me and say, "Just because of Ajete, I couldn't play music at the wedding, or, I didn't enjoy the wedding ...".

I am very happy with my children; I hope that whoever has children cherishes them. Very often I get very sad. But I always relied on God, and I am thankful to him, I am not the only person that experienced this.

It was war time, and I understand that people die but he was just a child, he never did anything wrong to anyone. I guess God wrote it.

When I was 35 years old, I got pregnant. My daughter Valentina was born. I never said, "Why God did you give me a daughter?" I love my daughters. She is a very beautiful girl, a very good person. And then I got pregnant immediately. When my son was born, I was in dilemma: should I renew the name or not? Someone said, "No, it's not good to renew the names." But I made the choice. I decided together with my husband. It wasn't a matter should we renew his name or not, for us it was important to start calling the name Jeton again in our house. And thank God, they even look alike. Whenever we go to the graveyard to commemorate, we all go together and young Jeton never cries when we are there. "God commanded, and we have Jeton here" Yes, we have Jeton, but no one can replace the one that passed away.

After the war ended, Shefqet worked for free for a year at the KPC – Kosovo Protection Corps. We had a cow, milk, cheese, we had all of it. We educated all the children. We also had bees and honey. We still have. All the kids managed to attend universities thanks to him. He would sell milk and cheese. Most of the school teachers would buy from us because the school was nearby.

In the past, when Shefqet was in Kutllovc before the war started, he brought milk here. He was unemployed, so he sold milk and cheese as much as he could here in Tunel; he carried everything on his shoulders. Even the children, after we came here, they carried the milk, just so they could earn some money to get educated. They never misused that help, and they repaid him by studying hard.

But as a family, we never had money. Our children never asked, "Why don't you give us 50 cents, 20 cents, or buy me something." Never. Because they knew that we don't have. Today they earn themselves. My daughter got married and she has two children. Liridon graduated from university. He studied abroad, he bought a car, and he built a garage. He also helped us repair this house. This house was in terrible shape, it was impossible to enter and live here. Even the stairs were not safe.

Liridon, thanks to his father with the honey he sold, but also thanks to the scholarship, had the money for himself to buy a car and also to send some to us. We don't have a lot of wealth, but we are doing fine. The greatest wealth is being happy with your children. We have just enough. I take a pension because of my son, Shefqeti gets his own pension and also, he earns a bit with honey. This year was not good but overall, we are doing well. But Liridon gave us wings.

Fitore is the oldest girl. She graduated law at the university. Fitore was always very polite and very smart. Whenever we have an issue, we turn to Fitore. Before we take any kind of initiative, first we discuss it with Fitore. Fitore is incredibly intelligent, and she is well-spoken.

She completed her master's degree, and then she met a boy. That boy was her friend's brother. Fitore opened the office and started practicing law, in fact, Liridon helped her open it. She got engaged when she started practicing law. After she gave birth to a son, she had to take some time off from the office, but then she started working again. Then she had a daughter and she still didn't start working.

Dafina is about to graduate from the faculty of education. She has prepared her dissertation, she will defend it in September, and get her diploma. Also, Dafina received a scholarship. Dafina had all the best grades. Also, Liridon and Fitore did. Valentina is attending the faculty for Albanian language and she is studying in Prishtina. She is doing very well just like all the others. Jeton is in the gymnasium, and he is a straight-A student. My dream became a reality since I couldn't go to school myself. I still dream of going to school.

In this Jeton whose name I have renewed, I see the old Jeton when I look at his eyes and body. I couldn't stand if someone would shout at him. I would get upset if he would complain, "It hurts me here" or things like that. My heart immediately aches for him. All of them are my children, but I couldn't bear listening to him crying. I can't even bear seeing him nervous. It just breaks my soul.

Three years ago, he was here and it was very cold, it was wintertime. He took a sled and he went down the asphalt, and on the way, there was a broken car, and he injured his leg there. A boy from the neighborhood said, "Come and take Jeton, because he got injured." That time was the only time I yelled at him. When I saw his leg, he almost tore it to the bone. I said to myself, "Oh God, look what happened to him." We took him to the doctor. A total of 17 stitches were needed. But thanks to God, he is well, of course he has a scar but he is fine now. What I wanted to say is that I can't bear listening to him crying. I can't even see him be nervous, because I always fall weak. Whenever I look at him, especially when he turns his back on me, he looks just like one that passed away. In the beginning, after Jeton died, I dreamt of him but now it happens very rarely. I don't see him anymore. In the beginning, I dreamt of him

In the beginning, after Jeton died, I dreamt of him but now it happens very rarely. I don't see him anymore. In the beginning, I dreamt of him telling me, "For God's sake, take Liridon and bring him sometimes to Kutlovc because you are keeping him inside all the time. It's very beautiful weather in the morning, bring him". We kept him inside, we would not let him out. They all would go to a swimming pool there, but we didn't allow him. Today he rarely goes out, he even doesn't go out during the night. He does his tasks and he doesn't envy going out. The little one goes out more often.

When I dreamt of him the second time, he was all grown up, he was an adult. He was bald. I asked him, "My son, why did you shave your head?" and he said, "Over here where I am, they don't allow hair." I asked him, "Please stay with me a little longer." And he said, "No, I stayed enough, I am leaving, it's much better there."

I remember these two dreams I've had. Now I don't dream of him so often. 21 years have passed. On his birthday I wrote one page of text and I sent it with Viber to every member of my family. I will always remember him, a parent never forgets. Maybe also his siblings will not forget him.

When I go back and start thinking about it, I understand that it was wartime. Many people lost their loved ones. We did not see much of what they did. We just saw that our son was killed by a bullet. We did not experience rape or being beaten up. We didn't see those things. But for me, it was enough of war.

All the Serbs that were here, I think that surely one of them has killed my son. That day they killed my son and then they went down, they caught my uncle's daughter-in-law with family, they beat her up, they did terrible things to her. They beat her in the presence of the children, they hurt her. Her mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and children were there.

If I knew who killed my son, I don't know what I would tell him. I couldn't do anything to him because Allah is the only one who punishes. Whoever did this to a child of God, because my son was a child of God, he was only eleven years old, I would say, "May Allah punish you. May Allah bring upon you what you deserve. Because the child of God didn't do anything wrong to you." But, he was a Serb, he didn't care if it was a child or a woman.

My son loved school very much, he loved reading books, he loved studying. A year after he was killed, I went to his school because they commemorated him at school. There was a girl and she recited a poem about him. No one could stop my tears. They even put flowers at his desk.

It was very hard for me, but some people lost their whole family. If only one survives, you must keep on living. I am happy with my children and I believe that God will give goodness to all. May God unite us in heaven with our loved ones, and I hope I will unite with my son. I hope everyone finds happiness with their own loved ones.



**Ajete  
Ahmeti**

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# Hijacked Childhoods

accounts of children's  
wartime experiences

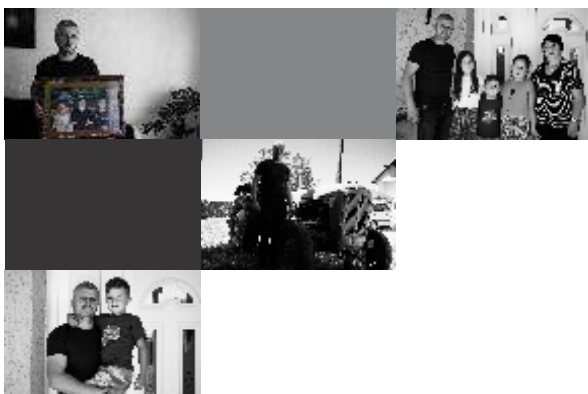




I looked at Esat's whole body, he was not shot anywhere but as a young man, I guess he had a heart attack. The bullet didn't catch him at all, and my brother Jeton was shot. He had many wounds, I approached him and I saw it.







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## Beqir Koci

In March 1999, on the eve of the bombing by the NATO Alliance, when the inhabitants from village Polac were forced to flee to save their lives, the men were separated from the women, so Beqir Koci, then 18, was separated from his mother and grandmother. The group in which he was located was attacked by Serbian forces, and they killed his minor brother. His mentally disabled older brother, who was with his mother and grandmother, was killed after being removed from the column of refugees. Beqir speaks about the difficult times during the war and right after it when he went to search for the corpses of the brothers.

**Hijacked Childhoods**  
Accounts of children's wartime experiences

# I recognized him based on his clothes and teeth

Beqir Koci



I was born in Polac. I lived together with my mother, father, grandfather, and my grandmother. Before the war, we were five brothers, and only three of us survived. I went to school in Polac until the eighth grade, and I didn't continue more than that. The same was with my brothers, some attended eighth grade, some until ninth but nothing more.

Xhevdet, the eldest brother, was born in '79, I was born in '81, Jeton in '85, Nexhmedin in '87, and Driton in '88. My dad was born and grew up here in village Polac. He served the army in Slovenia and then continued working there. He still lives and works in Slovenia to this day. He comes often but now because of this pandemic he didn't come for a while. My mother was born in Drenica.

Me and my brothers we grew up playing together. We also went to school together. Our life was as you would expect life in the village to be;

we had cattle, we would herd them, we played all kinds of games. Out of all of my brothers, I had the friendliest relationship with Jeton. The eldest brother, Xhevdet, had mental disabilities, so he didn't come often to play, he stayed more at home. Jeton and me we went out on the field, we played with the ball, we played everywhere. We were brothers but we were friends as well, we went everywhere together. We even took care of the cows together.

My father stayed always abroad; except when he would come for a week or two on vacation. And our mother, she was our everything - mother, father, everything. Okay, we also had our grandparents, but we were more connected to our mother. Every child is connected more to its mother.

We always had to take great care of Xhevdet, we always had to stand close to him. When he would come out, I always stayed near him, I never left him alone, because at any moment he would suddenly get some kind of seizures. So, you were never free to play with friends because you had to take care of him.

When I started going to school, Xhevdet started coming together with me. We went together until the eighth grade, and then he had to stop because he was getting those seizures. There were days when nothing would happen to him, and then there were days when he would get seizures three or four times a day. Sometimes he would get seizures at school and then one day the teacher said, "It's better if he stays at home because he is bothering you too".

Jeton got registered at school two or three years after us, so I was in the third grade and he was in the first. He was an average student. At first, I was doing very well in school, and then later my grades became worse. By the fifth grade, I was an excellent student. From fifth grade and on, since I was the eldest in the house, and only grandfather was working, I started to help him by going out in the fields to work the land, so I didn't study as hard as before. As a child, I was always interested in construction. In every house that has been built in the village, I always spent time with the builders. I always wanted to become an engineer, but it didn't happen.

We had good relations with our brothers. They were younger. I, as the eldest, took care of them all. I took care of everything. When they started

going to school, I was like their parent. I always went to parent meetings for them. Whatever was needed at school, I took care of it.

The '90s began with protests and strikes. I remember when they put poison in the school. The students got poisoned. I didn't get poisoned, but some of my classmates were. We helped them; we gave them water. But I didn't get poisoned.

A car would pass by and something like smoke or steam was coming out from that car and the students would get poisoned, they would faint and fall on the ground. One of my female classmates got poisoned very often. As soon as we went on a long break at school, they would be waiting for us. There were protests, but I never took part in them.

When the war started, I know that Halil Geci was killed first. Then the war started here in Qirez and Likoshan. It was February 28th, we were in the yard, and we saw the people, they were saying, "War broke out!". The next day we went to see ourselves, I was there myself and I saw the corpses. We all gathered there, there were men and children of my age, even younger than me. You could see everything there. It was terrible, horrible, a massacre! We got scared a lot when we were there. They killed the Ahmeti family on the other side, they killed a pregnant woman and many others. We went in every house together with my cousins, and some older men were saying, "Don't let these young men enter." I was 17 years old. They were shouting at us, but what we saw was horrifying!

Afterward, on the 5th of March, the fighting started at Adem Jashari. We went there to see what happened. I even participated in the burial ceremony of the Jashari family. The second day we didn't go anymore. On the first day, we looked around, everything was destroyed. We started digging graves as much as we could. Then we were ordered to leave from there. The Serbs were parked with armored vehicles in front. After we left, they buried them. I didn't go there anymore.

On the day when the fighting happened at Adem Jashari, we were at home. We escaped and we spent the entire day in the forest. The place in the forest was called Lugu i Lajthisë. We stayed there until it got dark, and when it got dark we came home. The fighting continued over there, but the next day I decided to stay home, I didn't go out at all. Some even went to the forest because they didn't dare to stay at home. I wasn't afraid to

stay at home, and also my grandmother told me, “Stay here because they will not come here, they are fighting over there.” She spoke to us and she didn't let us go out.

The Serbs had a checkpoint at a place called Kodra e Zane, they stayed there all the time. Somehow, we continued living, but we avoided going on the asphalt. We used only dirt roads, we had to continue living more or less dealing only with agriculture and dealing with things around the house. So, everything was interrupted, we just dealt with village work to survive. Our father would send us money from abroad, otherwise, we wouldn't have enough to live.

An offensive began in September. They started shooting early in the morning. Grandpa stayed up all night guarding us, and then he called us and said, “Everybody get up, God help us, but I think that today it's going to start here.” The Serbs started shooting and we got on the tractor. I took the whole family, and I also took some neighbors because we were the only ones that had a tractor, four or five houses near us didn't have a tractor.

Our whole family was in the house - my grandmother, my mother, and five brothers. My grandpa didn't come, he just went to the forest. A woman we call Dada Hafize came with us. Dada Feride also came - her



husband was killed, so she and her two daughters came. The neighbors of uncle Emin came as well, and a woman with two little daughters and two young sons; the older ones didn't come.

We took mattresses, sheets, everything we needed, and we planned to stay in the forest. We took as much food as we could carry. But not everything we needed, because we left in a hurry. And so we went to village Shtutica, through Doshevc and Gradice. The wife of my father's cousin is from village Gradice. We spent the night there. She stayed there, and the rest of us continued towards village Kushnica because I had two aunts who were living there. We stayed there for two or three nights, and then we went to Bajr, in Mitrovica. In Bajr there was a person who let us stay at his house; to be honest I have forgotten his name. We stayed there until the OSCE entered with those orange vehicles.

Then my father came from Slovenia and took us from there and we went home to Polac. When we arrived, we saw that the guest room was completely burned but not the entire house. We had an old house made of stone and there was a corridor between the rooms, so on both sides there was a room. Our guest room was one of the first places which were burned in Polac. Also, Rizai's house was burned. We had the whole field planted with wheat – we had half a hectare of land, and we were just waiting to start the harvest, but they burned it completely. So that winter we stayed home until March arrived.

It was that time when the mediators started talking. We spent the winter watching what is going to happen, we were listening every day to the news. Life was hard, we couldn't work and we couldn't live properly. It was a warlike situation everywhere.

Dad stayed with us for a while, and he provided some food for us. As soon as things calmed a bit down, my dad left. We didn't know how he is going to leave, or will he manage to leave, whether they will stop him or not. We were very scared for him until he got there.

Until March 21st, 1999 we stayed at home. On March 21st, the Serbian police and military began their actions starting from village Prekaz. They moved above Radevc, and from Prekaz they started shooting everywhere. We immediately got on the tractor, but no one knew what direction to go. My mother, grandmother, my four brothers, and I were on the tractor. We went to village Rezalla e re, and from there we went to Kllodonice to my aunt and uncle. We stayed there until the NATO bombing started.

I remember when the bombing started, we were sleeping in the room. They shot about 200 meters away from where we were, and then a grenade dropped from the direction of Mokne. I don't know how, but they were saying that the Serbs were shooting from the direction of Mokne. My cousin, who was 20 years old, went up there to see what has happened, and when he came back he said, "Some people were killed," he said, "they were killed because the grenade had fallen on a house yard." Then we decided to spend the entire day in the forest. People were saying that civilians are gathering in village Tushila, so we decided to go there.

From village Kllodonice we continued by tractor in the direction of Tushila. We were two families there, my cousin's family and my uncle's family. Xhevat also came there with his tractor. Both families were put on the tractors. On the uncle's tractor got my uncle's entire family. Two cousins, my aunt, and the wife of my other uncle. My aunt's husband died in a traffic accident when he came from Germany, he had left orphans, also his sister was there, sister of Xhevat and Esat, they were two brothers and one sister.

We went from Kllodonice in the direction of Turiqevc, and we reached Tushile. There they said that men should be separated from women because the women and the children are not being harassed. People were saying, "The men should go and hide in the forest". Because they were killing all the men.

Then we met some of our soldiers, I knew three or four of them. We left together with them. My mother, my two younger brothers, and my grandmother stayed with my uncle's family, so they got separated. I got separated from my brother Jeton, Xhevat, Esat, and my father's cousins. We had some relatives that were soldiers. Xhevdet stayed with our mother. We started leaving Tushile in order to reach Polac because they were saying, "The Serbs are coming this way!" Every time we somehow planned to stay behind them during the night, so that we would be behind them during the day, we thought that we would be safer like this. But in war you are never safe, you are not safe anywhere.

We kept walking for some time until the sun started to rise. When we reached some valley, in the hills, they said, "Until it gets dark in the evening, we will stay here. When it gets dark again, we will continue." So we spent the day there. And then some people came to that place because the Serbs were chasing them. When the Serbs started shooting at us, we climbed the hill in order to escape from them. They were shooting and we



were running away. We were a large group of people, maybe about 100 people, maybe more.

While running away, we managed to reach the hill, because we were following the forest path. But when we reached that place, the Serbs were waiting on the road. My father's cousin, who was four years older than me, always used to say, "Don't run away quickly, when they shoot at us just lay on the ground". And at the moment when they started shooting, I was about 30-40 meters behind my cousin Esat and my brother. They were in front, and we were behind.

Jeton was killed, but I didn't see it with my own eyes until later. Then I also saw Esat on the way back. While he was running back, he just fell. I ran towards him, grabbed him, and my father's cousin, Bashkim Koci, came with me. I put his head on my lap and I started calling him, "Esat, Esat". Bashkim started checking his body, to see where the bullet caught him, to see from where he was bleeding, in order to give him first aid. And then in those moments, a bullet passed between us, crushed the tree and we laid on the ground and didn't move at all. We stayed there for half an hour, pretended to be dead until the Serbs left. We didn't move at all.

Esat passed away. And when we started moving, we noticed that two other persons were killed a bit further. It was my brother and a person from Prekaz. But we didn't know who they were until we came close to them. Bashkim stood up and said, "Stay here because I am going to see if the Serbs are still here." I stayed lying on the ground until he came back and said, "The Serbs are gone".

I looked at Esat's whole body, he was not shot anywhere but as a young man, I guess he had a heart attack. The bullet didn't catch him at all, and my brother Jeton was shot. He had many wounds, I approached him and I saw it.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, it started getting darker. Another person from Prekaz was killed as well, we knew him as a figure, we knew whose brother he was. We were thinking about how to bury them, we were planning but we had nothing to do it with because we had no tools. Our houses were far away. We had no shovel at hand. So, we had to leave them there. There were three of us, Bashkim with his brother and myself, we spent that night in the forest. The other group already left. It rained all night long, and we had nothing to cover ourselves with. And Xhevati, my other cousin, in those moments ran away far. He was



killed in Llausha while attempting to return to Tushila. He was found after 4-5 years.

As soon as it got dark, we decided to stay because we didn't know where to go, we couldn't orient ourselves, we were afraid that we might run into the Serbs. As we were walking like that, there are some high voltage lines, which go through Polac, Llausha, and they go to Montenegro. When we saw it, we knew how to position ourselves. We said, "Tonight we are staying here, when it gets dark, we will observe the terrain a little, looking for a way to exit". We stayed underneath the lines.

And when suddenly they started to shoot at us, we were completely lost. We didn't know where to turn. Three days and three nights we stayed hidden in the forest. On the first night, it rained all night long. When it dawned, we went a little further up the hill, and we saw the path to Skenderaj, there was a valley and we slowly went towards that way. There was a person from Llausha, he had some bread with him and he gave it to us. He said, "Listen, everybody left, you are the only ones left here. As soon as it gets dark, you should leave from here and go this way".

We spent the whole day with him until it got dark, and at around ten we continued our way, we went near the town of Skenderaj. We went to the neighborhood Tre, and someone gave us some bread there. Then we went towards Prekaz, we entered behind Polac, and we spent the night in Deshevc. When it started dawning in Deshevc, we saw an uninhabited house. It was a building where they leave the animals and the food for livestock. The three of us slept there on some hay. From there, as soon as it dawned, we went to the top of the forest, and we saw Polac. We went there and we saw many of our cousins there. They were asking us, "Did every one of you survive?" and we told them what happened. They got upset and sad when they heard about the death of my brother, the nephew, and others.

Then we spend the whole day there. They had food with them because they would go to the house during the night and prepare some food, and during the day they would stay in the forest. Then we came down here. All the houses were burned. My cousin's house was burned, and he repaired his garage so his family could stay in it. We went to his garage. We stayed there during the night and we prepared food. My grandmother came from Kllodonice, she passed through all the Serbian checkpoints. She passed but she was stopped many times. She said, "They would put

the knife on my throat.” When she came to the place called Te Betoni, just above Hadeç, she said, “My sons were killed here”, and she checked 25 corpses in a row, she looked at them and she asked, “Which one is my son because he was killed”. She was convinced that we were killed because someone told her so.

When she came here and found me alone, she asked, “Where are the others?” We tried not to tell her that they were killed. “They are in the forest; don't worry they will come” and we would tell her things like that but eventually we told her. She was very upset. She spent a night with us, and then she went to stay with her relatives in Drenica. They gathered all of them at the school in Tushile. And from there they left for Albania. So, from my whole family, these two brothers were killed. Only my grandmother and I knew that Xhevdet was killed, he was taken by the police. Until the war ended no one knew that they were killed.

Xhevdet was taken by the police when he was in Tushile. They separated men from the women, and Xhevdeti remained with our mother in Kllodonica. When the Serbs came, they told each and everyone in Tushila, “Get out of here.” They started burning the tractors. They burned our tractor completely. People started walking in the column. Serbs were on both sides. They stopped every male adult they saw. Xhevdet was more attached to our grandmother because she didn't bother him due to his condition.

Grandmother said, “I was holding him by the arm, and the police took him away; I told them, 'Please don't. He is disabled' but they didn't listen to me.” They had taken him to the police station in Skenderaj and they kept him there all night long. Some people that knew him, told us afterward that they tortured them, but the next day they were released and they were told, 'Go to your houses because no one will kill you.' But, he was disabled and he didn't understand what he was told. As soon as they were let go, all of them went towards Llausha, but he got separated and went towards our house in Polac. He went behind the bus station and there were some police officers there. My mother's cousin said, “I saw with my own eyes when he was killed near the river. The police officers went and grabbed him and he pushed one of the police officers to the ground. As soon as he pushed the police officer down, the other police officer killed him.”

A person from village Vojnik, in the neighborhood Dy, lived just above the police station, and his mother died and he couldn't bury her. He was afraid to go out, so he had to go to the police station. He went there and

he asked them, "Will you give me permission to go and bury my mother, and can you help me carry her with something because I have nothing to carry her?" They told him, "Yes, we give you permission, but you have to take also a person who died at the police station, he started to smell bad". They didn't tell him that they killed him.

They had given him permission, he said, "The Serbs came with an armored vehicle". First, they took his mother and afterward they went to that place and they took my brother. They went to the graveyard, they opened a grave, and they put him in.

After the war ended, we looked everywhere for him. We asked people around. Xhevat's father-in-law was from Llausha and he asked around as well. A year and a half or two years after the war, he told us, "Someone says that he buried a person, and based on your description of what he was wearing, it could be him".

So, my grandmother, grandfather and I, went to ask that person for more details. He told us what he could remember, and based on what he told us, it matched. We went to that place, and we started to dig. My cousins wouldn't let me dig, "No, you stay there, stay over there." When they dug his grave, some clothes appeared and they asked my grandmother, "Is it him?" My grandmother looked at him and said, "Yes, it's him." In order to be sure, I said, "I want to see myself." And when I saw him, I said, "Yes, it's him". I recognized him based on the clothes and based on his teeth. The body was decomposed, but I could recognize him.

Then my cousin took me away from there, they didn't let me stay any longer. They unburied him, covered him and then they buried him. Then we held a burial ceremony. People came here to the house to express condolences.

We got separated, because the people were saying, "The women and the children should stay all together because they won't do anything to them". Then the Serbs came, and they expelled them, they sent them to Kllodonica. They entered all the houses and they gathered all the people at the school in Kllodonica. They told them, "Now all of you must walk towards Albania." When we knew that the Serbs entered, we were leaving Kllodonice, and we asked the grandfather from mother's side, "Come in the tractor with us." He just said, "I was born here, I will die here, I will not leave my place, let them come and kill me, but I will not

leave my place". They killed him at the door of the barn, while he was feeding the cattle.

The rest of the family left towards Albania and they joined the column of refugees. They continued walking through Turiqevc, they went to Buroja and then they continued towards Klina, Gjakova, and they reached Prizren. From there they went to the other side. Initially, they went to Kukës, as they say, there was some kind of a camp there with lots of people. My father came from Slovenia. They waited all day long in line to speak on the phone and inform my father that they came out. They couldn't do it that day, so they had to do it the next day. Many people were waiting to inform their relatives abroad. Finally, they managed to inform him that they are in Albania.

My father went from Slovenia to Albania, he found them there and he took them from Kukës to Durrës in a village called Shijak. He settled them in a house, and he also paid for the rent. My grandmother was also there, and even though she knew who died, she didn't tell anyone, she just kept it to herself.

During all this time I stayed here in Polac for about two-three weeks. When we went to see the cousins who live nearby, their house was burned but they had a garage. We went to that garage and we made some bread and some cousins said, "We will not leave at all." My cousin had a basement in front of the house which was a hole the size 60 by 60. There was no other entrance to it, and before it dawned seven of us entered inside it. We pulled a burned stove, and we put it over the entrance hole. At around 11:00 hrs in the afternoon, the Serbs came to the yard. There were seven of us inside. The Serbs stayed all day long there. The Serbs were above and we were under.

There were three houses in a row, two were burned and the third one was not. They were stationed there, we heard them speaking in Serbian. I didn't understand Serbian, but some of us knew it, and they were saying that the Serbs were planning where to put the guards. When it got dark, at exactly 11 o'clock we all went out and we went up in the forest.

In the forest, there were some people from the Ali Uka neighborhood, they told us that seven people had been killed that day. We found them in the evening burying them after it got dark. From there we continued in the direction of Mikushnica, and from Luzhnica we went to Lubavec and

then to Kuqica. My father's cousins had their relatives there. I stayed with them for about three weeks there. Then we returned to Polac from Kuqice, and I stayed for a week in Polac. Then I went to Kushnica where for three weeks I stayed at my aunt's place. My aunt was already in Albania and only her son-in-law was there and I stayed with him.

Village Kushnica didn't have a valley or a forest, so the Serbs didn't go very often there and so we stayed in the village houses. They were all burned, but we repaired them a bit, we would put a cover over just so we would stay there. There were some cows, we had milk and flour, and so we continued living there.

As soon as the war was over, from Luzhnica I returned to Polac and I stayed with my cousins, in the valley of Lajthia. During the day we prepared food and during the night we stayed there. We made a plastic cover, when it rained, we would go under it, and when the sun would shine, we would sit under the shade.

We would listen to the news with a transistor and we didn't even have batteries. We charged the batteries with a tractor battery just enough to listen to the news, to know what was going on. We were in the mountains when the Voice of America said that NATO is entering Kosovo. We were very happy. When the Serbs started to gather their forces in order to withdraw, we came out from the forest, and before they left, we went to our houses and I stayed with my father's cousins.

Here at my house, everything was destroyed. There was nothing, we had no chickens and cows. The grass grew and it was all a mess. That day we stayed at the house and the next morning, I said, "I want to go find the bodies and bury them." The others said, "Yes, we will come with you." Also, Bashkim Koci came with me. We followed the high voltage lines to Montenegro. We knew where we left the bodies and we got oriented through the high voltage lines that go to Montenegro. We found the path, and we continued to follow that path even though it had changed a lot. It was foggy and in March there was no fog. NATO still didn't enter Skenderaj, they just came to Drenas.

We found the bodies. First, we found Esat, and then Jeton. There were three of them in that place. When we found them, it was late in the evening, so we weren't able to take them. We decided tomorrow to go take them and bury them. The next day my cousin came with a tractor.

My cousins noticed that I was getting very upset. They told me, "You stay here, tell these people where to open the grave and we will go and bring the body". They went there and they were very late. They took their nephew to KlloDonica and buried him. Some of their uncle's neighbors came and buried him and then they brought my brother here. I asked them, "Why did you take him there without me?" I asked because I wanted to participate in the ceremony but it was over.

My grandfather had a brother, who lived at a place called Belincë which was in the forest. It was located closer to the Serbs and he lived there before the war started. My grandfather stayed all the time with him, I never knew where grandfather was. He stayed all the time there and he had no idea that our family members were killed. Only when he found me, he found out about the ones that were killed. Then he got very sad. People started coming to see us, to express their condolences and we had no place where to receive them, there was no place. Some of them stayed under the shade and they comforted us.

When we buried Jeton all my cousins and my father's cousins were present. We went and we opened the grave. I took some bad boards because we didn't have better ones, I placed them, and we buried him.

I don't know who killed him, because I didn't see it. It would have been good if the case would be solved, if someone would get convicted for these crimes, not only for my brother but for every crime in Kosovo.

Two or three weeks after the funeral, my mother came from Albania. When they came, only me and my grandfather were here. We had nowhere to sleep, there was no house, we were staying in my father's cousin's basement because also their house was burned. We stayed in the basement until they gave us a tent. Then we stayed in the tent in the yard. The house that got burned was quite old, it was made with stones, and it collapsed. Only the guest room was not old because it was built later, it had some walls, and then we bought tiles, we covered it somehow and we continued living there. For three years we stayed in that room. Just a corridor and one room.

When mother came and found only me, she understood what had happened, and she got very upset, but then grandmother told her slowly about everything.

The cold weather started in September. We were fixing the room up until autumn. We covered it, we paid a person for two days to fix our roof. A cousin works with electrical installations, and we called him to install electricity. He didn't take any money from us. I fixed a part of the house with cement. We made some wood plank walls, and we also made a ceiling so we can pass the winter. It was warm enough, but it was a small place for all of us.

We started to repair the house in 2001. They gave us some building material as aid. I wanted to have a two-story house, but we didn't have money to pay the builders, so I built this house myself. I was about 20 years old and the boys also helped me a bit. I made the foundations myself, I filled them, but I also asked people to help me. I made the walls, tiles, I did everything up to the roof. I did all by myself because I was the eldest in the family. My grandfather was old, he couldn't work because he was 75-76 years old.

Until 2004 we stayed in the guest room, and then the house was finished. My father was in Slovenia, but he had a very small salary, just enough for food, so he couldn't send us money for building the house.

I worked for my relative, he was selling construction material and things like that, and I took material to build the guest room and then I repaid my debt by working for him. I washed the roof, I worked here and there, I was trying to make some money, to have something. When I was building the second floor, my father came from Slovenia and he bought some blocks, and then little by little, we built the house until 2004 when we entered it. At the moment in this house lives Driton, my brother, his wife, my mother, my wife, my grandmother, and my father when he comes from abroad. Nexhmedin bought an apartment in Skenderaj.

Nowadays I work with water and heating installations. Now I have built a house for myself, and this one now belongs to Driton, and our mother and grandmother will stay with him. I have worked for different people since 2006, and four years ago I opened my own firm, and I am doing a little better. I work together with Driton, my younger brother and I have one employee.

I got married in 2008. My wife's name is Valmira. We got together with a wedding arranger. I got engaged in 2007. I was 27 years old, and the whole family wanted me to marry because I was the eldest, but I was

saying, “No, not now because it's not the right time”, because our living conditions before and after the war were very difficult. We were a poor family because we had no income. And now our life is better. And my grandmother, mother, and aunts were always saying “We hardly wait for you to get married”. One day my father's cousin came and my grandmother told him, “We must find a wife for this boy because I want to see him get married before I die”. And she lived long enough to see all three of us get married.

We got married in a traditional way: we invited all the relatives, cousins, and friends. We went to take the bride with many cars. I didn't go, I got married according to the tradition we have in these parts. But, about three months before I got married, my grandfather died. Just before he died, he fell ill for a couple of months. His daughters came often to see him. We had already decided when I will get married, and I remember him saying, “My will is that you don't stop the wedding, even if I die, the wedding must go on and the drums must be heard”. And my aunt paid for the drummers. And so, we had a wedding, some 100 men went in 25 cars, and they brought the bride.

We got married on August 10th, 2008, and our daughter was born on August 7th, so she was born three days before our first anniversary. When the baby was born, of course I was a little emotional, as parents are for the first time. You are happy and all that, but it's an additional obligation, things get different then.

Then two years later Jetlira was born, in August 2011. Our third child is Jeton, I gave him my brother's name. He was born in December 2014, and this year he will be six years old. I renewed the name; I wanted to have a son and give him my brother's name. When he was born, I told my mother what I want to do. Everyone wanted that, they were happy.

At first, I could hardly call him by his name. But here in Drenica many people renewed the names of their loved ones. People used to tell me, “It is better to start calling him by his name, and later it will not be difficult for you.” And now when I call him by his name it relieves my pain a bit.

My son knows where he got his name from. Usually, on the night of Eid when we visit the graveyard, I always go to clean the graves. My son was three years old when I went to the graves, and my second daughter and my son said, “We want to come with you”. My grandmother came as well.



When I go to the graveyard, I always clean his picture. My son was three years old when I took him there. He just stood at the photo and he would clean it. Now he knows he had an uncle.

The other brother, Nexhmedin, has a son, Elion. Dritoni got married this year. But because of the pandemic, he didn't make a wedding. He got engaged and we had a small engagement party. We wanted to make a wedding for him, but the pandemic complicated things and so he took his bride without a wedding. He is now married; he is living well and he is staying at my place.

For the people who read this book, my message would be that the past should not be forgotten, we shouldn't forget the war, we shouldn't forget what happened, the blood of our martyrs, the blood of the killed civilians, we shouldn't forget the suffering of all the persons that lived in this country, everybody should work for this country a little better and try harder.



**Beqir  
Koci**

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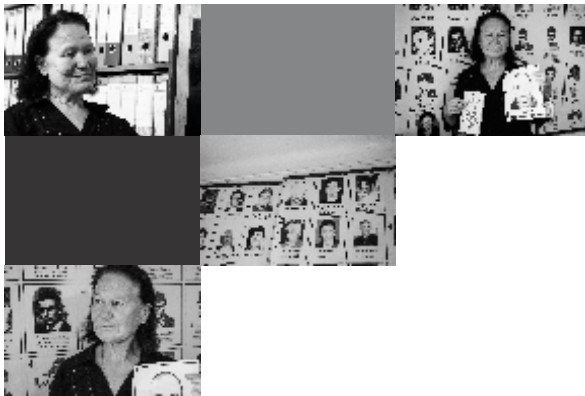
## **Hijacked Childhoods**

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences



I can't say that I mourn my child more than a Muslim or Croatian woman or more than someone else who mourns their child. Mother is a mother; pain is pain and misfortune is a misfortune.





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## Dragica Majstorović

"Killer, you will be forgiven", says the poem of mother Dragica who lost her teenage son a few months after the end of the war and who still "had neither known true love nor had a chance to buy a razor and have his first shave". Her family of four had decided to stay in Pristina after the war, believing that they would not suffer any harm since they didn't harm anyone.

As soon as she realizes that inter-ethnic coexistence had become impossible, she is forced to relocate and work in Leskovac, Serbia, until

the day came to take her whole family there. And as September and the new school year approached, she enrolled her young son in a high school there.

Today, 21 years after the disappearance of her son on that August day, the disappearance of her son who was coming to join his mother, after a series of superhuman and desperate efforts to find out about his fate, Dragica doesn't seek justice anymore. She has only one last wish.

# I want to find the truth, in order to find peace

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**Dragica Majstorović**



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My name is Dragica Majstorović, maiden name Jerić, otherwise, they call me Dragana. Until 1977 I lived in Fushë Kosovë, at home together with my mother Petrija, father Ivan, brother Slavko and sisters Miroslava and Danijela. That year I met my husband, Milorad Majstorović, born in Obiliq, who lived and worked in Skopje, so I went after him and we lived there. I worked at the Skopje Military Hospital. In Skopje, I gave birth to two children. Nikola, the eldest son, who was born in 1979, and Ivan, the youngest, born in 1981.

In Skopje, we lived and worked until 1992. With the withdrawal of the army, because I was a civilian staff working in the army, we went to our hometown, in Pristina. In Pristina, I worked in the ambulance of the military garrison as a medical worker, while my husband worked with the electro-economy in Obiliq. They gave us an apartment in the neighborhood “Kurriz”, where we lived and raised our children. The eldest

son graduated in electrical engineering, the youngest was attending the third year of high school "Ivo Lola Ribar" in Pristina. I finished medical school in Pristina and graduated high school in Belgrade.

My work has always been based on medicine. I had Albanian, Gorani, and Serbian friends. I helped all nationalities, I helped all people and I have always been involved in humanitarian work. That's how I thought of all the people around me because they thought the same as me.

We didn't have any serious problems before the events of the war, because we were not connected with anything, neither politically, nor engaged in anything other than our work. The war itself found us in office. I worked all the time in the military ambulance, where we treated civilians, military insured persons, and everyone who was at risk.

My children were not working. The older one was about to start university studies and the other son just finished school. It was summer break, the school stopped working and we took them with us. We mainly stayed in Fushë Kosovë, together with my parents, in order to have the children under control, to stay all together. All that period of the war and after the war we stayed mostly together and we survived together. After the war, we decided to remain in Prishtina, because we had our apartment there, we had lived there and we considered that we didn't do any harm to anyone and we thought that we could stay there peacefully.

After the army withdrew after everyone left, we stayed and I started working a little in the hospital, in surgery, as I was an instrumentalist in the operating room. This lasted only ten days after the terror began in the hospital. The Albanians who had worked there before, came and they started harassing the people and they expelled us. I realized I had no place in the hospital and I headed home.

We constantly reported violence around us, but UNMIK and the British KFOR told us that they could not provide us with protection, they told us we had to leave.

After about ten days, one morning some people came, and they forcibly broke into my apartment and they just kicked us out of it. We took the documents and went to Fushë Kosovë to my parent's place. I was out of work, my husband had not started working yet, the children were in need, one to finish school and the other to get enrolled in college. So, we had to look for other solutions.

I called my command and I received the invitation to return to work. I went to Leskovac and I started working there. My husband and the children stayed with my parents. And on that fateful August 19th of '99, my son and our neighbor Dragan Stefanović took the road to come to



Leskovac because I enrolled my son in Leskovac to finish the fourth year of high school. On the Fushë Kosovë-Merdare road, they were abducted and they were taken in an unknown direction. We later learned that in Batllava there was a Detention Center.

They left with the neighbor's car. We were waiting for them in Merdare, but they never crossed the border. My parents and husband told me that they had been escorted. They were most likely abducted in the Llap area and they were sent in an unknown direction.

Later we received accurate information from our Albanian friends. We had many friends with whom we have cooperated, with whom we have lived well, whom we have helped. One of them told us that they were in the investigative prison in Batllava and that their fate was still unknown. A few days later, this witness was mysteriously killed. After that, we had no other information.

There was various information that people had been transferred to Albania for organs, that these collection centers were in Prishtina and Batllava. We tried all possible ways. The first attempt was when my husband, my mother, and father went to the English KFOR base in Pristina and reported my son's disappearance, indicating that they never reached the place where they were going. They didn't take any information, they only said that they are very busy and that they don't have time to deal with that problem and they were told to report it to the Red Cross. They immediately went to the Red Cross to report the case and there they just registered the case and did nothing.

Then we tried, through our private connections, through some Albanian friends, various non-governmental organizations, to find out anything. We said we would pay, we would sell the apartment, we would do all this, but we had no success. Then we addressed our state, the Serbian government, and the representative offices. In the end, many families came together and we formed an association to find the truth more easily and to learn where our missing members are. We constantly cooperated with UNMIK and with KFOR, every week we met with the pathologist Jose Baraybar. I was in the first delegation, I went to Pristina long before the government was formed, but when they released the Albanian convicts, we left and I had a meeting that day. Seven of us, parents, were there to see what happened to our people.

Flora Brovina was there; I talked to her because she got a human rights award, so I said, "You got the American human rights award, now that award obliges you to help other people." Normally she promised, but she never answered again. Afterward, we had meetings with the first Prime



Minister Rexhepi, behind closed doors. That man told us everything. Oliver Ivanović arranged the meeting for us and we hoped to find something out. However, one of them told us, "There is no one left alive." And then I said, "If they are dead, at least give us the bodies." Rexhepi said, "We cannot do this. UNMIK is here, so let's ask them. When they find the bodies, you will get them." Afterward, Oliver Ivanović asked us, "Did he say anything to you?" I said, "In two sentences, that man told me everything." But, I would still like a confirmation that my son is dead.

It was clear to us that nobody survived. We asked we appealed that with the release of these Albanians convicted of crimes, they should release our people because the number of abductions was about 1700. And there were 2022 Albanians who were in Serbian prisons. I also went to those prisons, I asked the Albanians who had their people in the prison to do something about our people, to exchange all for all, for something to happen, because we had information from the Albanians that people had been abducted here because of the prisoner exchange. This was the first variant, those that were kidnapped to be exchanged in order to set the prisoners free. But the government of Koštunica and Đinđić did not listen, because they had probably received orders that they should be released, and we didn't find out anything anymore.

We continued inquiring; we held various rallies in front of the embassies, we met with Hækkerup, regarding the first protocols that were signed. We met with UNMIK, KFOR, we gave them different information, we tried in every possible way, but everything was and still is unsuccessful. And in all these 20 years we had to survive, to support our families. Meanwhile, due to stress, we all got sick. The whole family suffers from thyroid glands. My mother died because of this, then my father died a few years ago, now my brother also died. My sister and I, are being treated and we are receiving therapy for the thyroid gland.

Meanwhile, I wrote a book, dedicated to all the abducted and missing persons, because our abducted persons are still listed as N.N. When they are found, they take the name and surname, but until then are listed as unknown. I dedicated the book to the children and the slain, and even there is a poem addressed to the murderer. There I begged the murderer, I told him that everything would be forgiven, just to show me where my son is. Because it's terrible to live my whole life and not know what happened to my child.

When I met Dick Marty, I told him, "I don't know if you are a father or a grandfather, but just imagine that you have a dog who didn't return home last night. What would you do for that dog? Probably you would go out across the neighborhood and engage everyone to find it. Now imagine what we are doing to find our children."

I have worked in the army, but as a health worker, on the humanitarian side, so I never did a bad thing. I treated people who needed help, and I still do today. My husband was employed, so we didn't do anything bad to anyone. All the neighbors have always confirmed that we just helped them. But it is very likely that we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were on the other side and our religion was wrong, and that cost us our lives. So, my child paid the price because he was a Serb. He was neither guilty nor indebted, he was a high school student who was about to enroll in the fourth year of high school. They say in our language, he neither ate onions nor smelled onions. Still, he was a victim.

Now, we must live with this, we must keep hoping. I still hope in people of good will, in the sense that I can't hope that after 21 years he is alive somewhere, because if he were he would have called me eventually. I just pray to God that he didn't end up in the "Yellow House". That would be the hardest thing for me, to discover that his heart beats today in somebody else's chest. I just hope this didn't happen to him. When I think about these things, I think that it would have been better if he had been killed on the spot, just not to have his organs taken away.

The most difficult time for us is the holidays. When they come, we always have one empty chair. He was only 17 years old when he left the house. Now, on September 5th, he would have been 39 years old. So, not only that one life was lost, but an entire family was lost. If he were alive, he would surely have a family. But what to do? When you have such problems, you are mostly left alone. My husband gave up immediately, he was unable to search for him. He gave up, whether because of guilt because we stayed, we didn't leave immediately, because he kept telling us constantly, "We have to stay, we have done nothing to anyone, we will stay in our house." Probably this is haunting him all these years, convincing us that we should stay and peacefully wait. Because that's what people were saying then, "Stay in your homes!"

I have witnessed several meetings of Mike Jackson telling us, "Remain safe in your homes, no one will touch you! We came here to make peace, not to make war." And my husband used to say "Listen to what people are saying." Our leader Milosevic said, "People will come to take care of you, you do not have to leave your homes!" When Mike Jackson came to all the meetings, in all the villages, in Caglavica, in Fushë Kosovë, and in Obiliq, everywhere he said, "You do not need to leave your homes, normal life will continue, the situation will be fixed, people still have to live normally. An entire nation cannot be expelled now!" And we were guided by the idea that it really was like that, that an elite army would take care of everyone equally. But we found out the contrary. First when we reported the disappearance, when a soldier told us that they don't have time to

deal with it, that they are not interested in that. Secondly, when we complained that people were being evicted from their apartments, no one wanted to come. Then we realized that there is no salvation for us, that we will have to go somewhere. And so, it happened.

And today we are still displaced. We have left Prishtina, our city, our building, our road, our people. We live here now. Belgrade is beautiful, but as Verica said, "Pristina is in our hearts." We lived there, we loved there, we worked there, we had our linden road, we had friends, we lived happily, despite all the quarrels that happened from time to time. We didn't want to leave, we wanted to stay. We thought we could since we were innocent.

I initially worked in Leskovac for eight months. I had nowhere else to go. I was alone, my family stayed in Fushë Kosovë. Ivan would come; he left on August 19th, 1999 to enroll in the school and to stay together with me. When he was abducted and disappeared, I stayed in Leskovac for another eight months because I had nowhere to go. I had no money, no shelter, I had nothing. I worked all the time. My parents stayed in Fushë Kosovë until 2000 and in the end, this neighbor who lived in Switzerland came and offered to buy our property, so my father sold it. When he sold it and bought a house here, we all went to that house. At one point, there were 16 of us living in that house. They bought it, and after they settled down, around March or April, I also came from Leskovac and then I took my family, my husband, and my son, and we lived together with my parents until I managed to sell the apartment in Prishtina. Afterwards, I bought an apartment here.

Ivo Andrić says, "There is nothing more beautiful than living in a place forever because that city becomes yours, the roads are yours, everything is yours". So, I went to Leskovac first, I was there for the first time. It was not far, but I didn't know anyone there. It was very difficult for me in Leskovac, because Ivan was abducted immediately. So, I lived in agony, looking for my boy, calling, petitioning, and I distributed hundreds of pictures of him with the caption, "Does anyone know anything, has anyone heard anything?". Then I contacted friends from Pristina, people from Serbia, the state, the government, to do something. So those eight months were hell for me.

When I came to Belgrade, it was even worse, it was very difficult, I had to calm my parents. It was the hardest for them because they escorted him that day. I couldn't calm them down; I am his mother and I had to comfort my parents. They were constantly watching how I am reacting and I was constantly holding back my emotions with courage, saying that there is time, that we should not give up yet, because you never know. Then we

got in touch with people from Albania, some friends, who told us how during the Second World War my uncle went to Albania. They were imprisoned, but the people returned. So, with different people who survived that way, we were constantly asking questions, looking for witnesses who had been in a camp, whether they had seen anyone or heard anything.

My brother-in-law and my sister stayed in Kosovo for another two years because of my Ivan, in order to find out anything. Hoping that maybe someone will show up or that maybe he will come back. So this was an agony for the entire family because the children were traumatized, we were traumatized, and during all the time we had to work, to keep on living. I worked in the emergency room and I could no longer enter the operating room, by any means. The work I used to do was of high level, dealing with orthopedic-traumatological instruments. I had specialized in that field and I was very good at it. But when this happened, I asked for an easier job, I was looking for nothing high level and I think there is nothing easier than working in the emergency.

I worked all the time; I never took a day of sick leave. From the first day until retirement, I never took a sick leave because it was always much easier for me to work, look for Ivan, write, and support the family. My intention was to reunite the family, to provide for the family because my husband immediately gave up.

Then I negotiated with the Albanians for the sale of the apartment, I wanted to buy an apartment somewhere, and again we bought an apartment near my parents, in order to help each other as a family. To participate means to have someone to talk to, to share the pain.

Thanks to our association, we knocked on every door, and there is not an effort we did not make. Here you will see photos, meetings with all embassies and all the ambassadors. We appealed, we also made a movie, I wrote a book and I dedicated it to my son to leave a mark in history.

Our family, my father, and mother, had 20 hectares of land, a house, and a garden. My parents were retired when all this was happening when that peace agreement was signed. They didn't want to leave, they wanted to stay, but because everyone was leaving, and we were passively listening to how people were being forcibly expelled, my brother said to me, "I cannot leave them, I will stay with them" When we made the decision, my brother and I went to meet Michael Jackson and he persuaded us to stay. On the other hand, we could see that the general situation was getting worse. People were being killed, abused, abducted, but my parents didn't want to leave their property. They said, "If we leave this

property, you will be left on the street, so we will sacrifice ourselves. If they kill us, let them kill us, but at least there will be something left behind that you can sell."

We had the family graves there, my father's parents' graves. We could not persuade them to leave. They stayed until the end. They had good neighbors, but also my parents were very noble people. The daughter of our first Albanian neighbor helped our women give birth, she worked in the gynecology department. They went to see my father and they told him, "We can no longer take care of you, you have to sell the property because a group of people wants to kill you and we are fighting for you because we know you are an honest man and you never did anything bad to anyone. You better sell us your property and leave, otherwise, you will die here."

When their neighbor said these things, my mom and dad decided to sell their property. And when they came here, it was very difficult for them. First, because my child was abducted, but also because they came to another city, another place. That year, my brother's child failed the year at the school because he just couldn't study. Even for my son, it was very hard to cope with everything. It's still hard for him. He got married and he named his child after his brother. So, he named his daughter Ivana and son Ivan. Little Ivan, my grandson, is now 8 years old. That was my grandfather's name, then my son's name, and now my grandson bears that name.

On the day when I was expelled from the hospital in Pristina, I came to Fushë Kosovë and I told my parents that I have to leave if I want to keep my job. My son's friends who had already gone to Serbia, kept asking him, "We will start the school soon, you are still not registered what will you do when you come?" And when I was leaving, I told him, "You will stay with my mom and dad, you will stay with your dad and brother and you will wait until I call you." And he – he used to call me Draganče – he said, "Don't worry at all Draganče, everything will be fine". He sat down in front of the computer and just said, "Go, we will not say goodbye, we will see each other later." That was the last greeting.

Then he started calling me on the phone and saying, "Everyone is gone." His friends were calling him and asking him what is he going to do? How is he going to finish the fourth year? He would have to repeat the year if he did not enroll in school, so we had to arrange to enroll him somewhere. I went to the gymnasium and I enrolled him. Then I was thinking about how to transfer him? The buses were not moving, there was no escort, no organization. Finally, when that man was about to leave for Serbia, I told my son to go with him. So, the two of them set off on a journey with no return.

I have my other son, but Ivan, maybe because he is no more, he has always been special. As a child, his grandmother took care of him so he learned to speak the Serbian language very well. When he came to Macedonia, after a year he spoke pure Macedonian language and he went to a Macedonian school. I paid for English lessons for my eldest son Nikola, but Ivan learned English better than Nikola did. He was also a swimming champion. They both swam for "Vardar" in Macedonia. He was first in his group, he had medals for swimming. He swam and practiced karate. One day they studied English, one day practiced karate, one day swimming, both of them. When we came to Pristina, he was outstanding. He immediately fit in. There was an Albanian judo coach, and he immediately recognized his talent and took him to his club in "Boro and Ramiz" and trained him for judo. In high school, he was one of the best chess players. He did not play chess normally; his brother moved the pieces and Ivan turned his head on the other side and played chess like that. So, he was more advanced than the others.

When KFOR came, it was the Irish KFOR, he called me on the phone and said, "Draganče, imagine how well I speak English, I am talking with English KFOR and Irish KFOR." So, he went around with the Irish KFOR and helped the people.

He was a child who could offer a lot, so he enrolled in high school. He said, "I don't know what I am going to work in the future. All my friends already know what they will do in their life and I like at least five or six professions. I don't know which one to go after." I told him, "Enroll in high school." He said, "I will go in the most difficult direction, the natural-mathematical school so I will be able to determine." But September began and he never finished the fourth year.

If he was alive today, he would surely become some kind of doctor. He loved medicine very much. Since I practiced medicine, he also wanted to practice medicine, he knew a lot about medicine, he was always interested. He was a sportsman, he spoke the language very well, he was a good mathematician, a chess player, and he knew a lot about medicine because he was very close to me and he wanted to study medicine in the future and since we were always engaged in humanitarian work and we were always helping people.

When I go to church, I light a candle for him as if he were alive, and I also light candles for all the abducted and missing persons, and all the slain persons. To me, he is still alive. I would like to know at least where he is while I am still alive because he appears to me in dreams. He tells me, "I am in Albania, in an Albanian camp and I have escaped." He calls me, he holds the phone in his hand and says, "I ran away, but I don't know where



to go." I tell him, "You are very capable, you will succeed everywhere, just don't return to Kosovo." And he throws the phone and says, "Okay." Or, I dream that I am looking for him in a cemetery, and he comes and tells me, "For how long are you going to look for me in the cemeteries, we have to move on."

We were in Merdare to identify some clothes. And I saw a gray blouse because my son had a similar one and black shorts with a ribbon. So, I said, "Let's check that blouse, maybe it's his." I went to UNMIK and I waited. Before that, I had seen a dream. My son was telling me, "I'm not dead, let's move on." And I sat down and my heart was beating fast. I calmed myself down by saying, "Don't worry! For sure it's not him. He told you that he was alive and that we had to move on." And when I went there, I waited for half an hour and it turned out to be the body of a 60-70 years old man.

On that occasion, I wrote a poem entitled "Let 's move on". In poetry, those who talk to me end up saying, "Let 's move on." This is our motto. In that despair when we didn't know what to do, I said we should give the magazine a title. I proposed the title "Abducted Truth" because people were abducted, but also the truth about those people was abducted. And the truth must be heard, whatever it may be. So our magazine is called "Abducted Truth" and our motto is "Let's move on".

I would love to find him, but I don't believe I will anymore after 21 years. If someone just calls me and says, "Your son is alive and he's in Australia, but you have to sign a paper that you'll never see him" I would say, "Yes, I agree." If I could only know what happened, whether he is alive, whether they took out his heart, or they killed him immediately. I have the right to know the truth, at least that. It's difficult to agree with the fact that someone is dead, but the fact is that after 21 years, if someone would have been alive, he would have found a way to say, "I am alive." Most likely he is no longer alive, or perhaps they have taken his heart.

I have not heard that anyone has returned. Nobody came back. It is terrible that our state released those Albanians who were convicted and found guilty. The Hague also released and amnestied them, meaning that no judge has proved anyone to be guilty, they were all released. But some people came back. My uncle was imprisoned in Germany for three years, my aunt's husband was imprisoned for three years, my other uncle was also imprisoned in Albania but he returned. One even received compensation after a few years for being in a labor camp in Austria. But I can't understand this kind of inhuman treatment of innocent people.

When we speak about justice, is it justice that I don't live anymore in Prishtina, that the apartment I furnished and where I lived happily with my family I no longer have, that I lost an innocent child? I don't believe in justice. Whatever the justice, there will be no satisfaction for me. Maybe someone will get justice, but I don't believe in it. Finding out what happened to my child would mean justice to me. That's why I wrote this poem, "Killer, you will be forgiven." Because, whatever justice may be, even if ten people were hanged here now, I would say, "Don't." It would be hard to see someone getting killed.

I would say, "Have mercy on them." Some people are surprised when I say this, but I can't see anyone getting hurt. I couldn't stand something like that. Maybe my son would be angry with me, maybe he would say, "Eh Draganče, you forgave them and I suffered." But I couldn't have gone through with it. You know how powerless a person is in his pain, whatever he does. A man once told me, "Why didn't you kill yourself right away?". I said, "If he comes back, who will look after him? Why should I kill myself, I will not be killed? If I kill myself, it means I have surrendered. It doesn't make any sense."

I am reading this poem dedicated to the murderer.  
Killer, you will be forgiven, just tell me where did you bury my son.  
Did you put a stone on his chest, or did you cover him with Sitnica land?  
Maybe you threw him in my field. How did you punish him?

How did you find him guilty? What did you say to him at the end?  
Did you blindfold him, or did you bravely look him in the eyes?  
He had neither known true love nor had a chance to buy a razor and have his first shave, he was constantly waiting for his brother to grow up.

Killer, tell me, did he pray to God at the moment of death, did he call for his mother?  
What kind of death did you assign them? Did you shoot him? But he was just a child, how could you?  
Killer, will you be forgiven, just tell me where did you bury him, under which tree did you end his life, and what kind of grass is growing above him?

And when you went home did you caress your children after you killed my child?  
How did you sleep last night? Have you dreamt of my son?  
Killer, you will be forgiven for everything, just tell me where did you bury my son,  
or did you sell his heart in the world market?"



Maybe the killer will not calm down, maybe he will tell someone that he killed them. Because it's difficult for a person to live with the fact that he has done so much harm without ever telling anyone.

There are not many poems here, there are lamentations dedicated to some events, they were written in despair. There is a poem called, "Where will I go today, on whose door should I knock?". Then there is the poem dedicated to those who were found in Retime, parcel number 1. Then there is a poem about the mother who, after many years, found her son, and something is dedicated to her.

Then there are poems about Ivan, dedicated by my sister's daughter, who went to America and she doesn't know where her brother is. These are the stories of our lives. There should be some traces left, it may be a small contribution but it's full of tears and suffering. Those pages are full of suffering.

My grandson bears my son's name and I see that there is some resemblance between them. The little one is very cheerful and very agile. He plays football now, and my son used to swim and practice karate. I sometimes tease him, "You must have determination, if you start playing football you must go all the way to the end, you must never not give up." I am trying to exercise his character to make him persistent, as his uncle used to be. Love is shared, so now, as a grandmother, I love my grandchildren and take special care of them constantly, but a part of me is much more connected to him. Another part of me will always remain empty. And normally I am devoted to them, I have retired earlier because of them, to help them, so that they grow up having happy childhoods.

Last night when I went to bed, the little granddaughter named Ivana asked me, "Grandma, when you were little, how many children were you?" I told her, "We were five" and, to spare her, I did not tell her that my sister drowned in Lake Badovc when she was eight years old. She asked me, "Who was the best child according to you?". Again, I didn't want to tell her that I was close to my brother, who is now dead so I told her, "I was the best." "And how come?" "Well, I was the third child, I had to listen to the older ones." I said, "and I also had to listen to the little ones, and also I raised the aunt, the youngest one." I said to myself, look at how the children are interested, they constantly ask questions. They know now that their father had a brother, but I don't want to burden them with those things. Only the eldest one speaks about it and she asks me, she knows everything. The little ones are so traumatized. The uncle, my brother, my mother, and my father all died, and these poor children are traumatized.

I am very disappointed in the international community, which promised us peace and coexistence, which was pure deception. I always have to mention Michael Jackson, who received awards and decorations, I don't know for what. So, 50 thousand soldiers did not have the strength to establish order, so that people could live. If the mission was to ethnically cleanse Kosovo and Metohija, it would have been appropriate if they gave us a corridor, to tell us, go to Greece or somewhere, leave everything. There would be fewer consequences and trauma. First, I was very disappointed by their mission, second by all the administrators who came. It seemed that they just came to fulfill their six-month mission and collect documentation. We have been interviewed thousands of times. We kept telling the same story as parrots, and in the end, they just collected the documents and left.

I can't believe that such an elite army didn't find the bodies of those killed and massacred and that it didn't make any reports. No one can convince me. So the English KFOR and the French KFOR, and all those KFORs should open administrations for humanitarian reasons and say, "For God's sake, people, enough is enough, let's tell the family members, maybe there is a truth hidden somewhere. We will not bring them back, but at least their family members will find peace."

We received the documentation proving that we were right, from the Advisory Committee. We received the answer that we have the right to compensation. The attitude towards justice is very specific, maybe I am unfair, maybe I don't know the law, but why do I need any compensation for the boy I no longer have?

I don't need anything, I have a pension which is enough for me to live peacefully. You know that peace of mind cannot be bought. There is no money that will restore my peace of mind. A grandmother lived with us and she always said, "Oh God, don't let these unbearable things happen to us!". Now I am in that situation that I have to endure, and I can't, it is difficult, but I have to.

We also met with Jacques Chirac, and we begged him when we were there. He said, "My friend's friend is also my friend." Come on, try to find out anything, try to help us, we are not looking for any philosophy other than the truth, we want to know what happened to the people. We have this right also according to the Geneva Convention.

If the Serbian people stopped the Balkan war and said stop, for the Bulgarian convoy to pass, and it was humane to stop the war, so the wounded enemy soldiers would pass, how come even today in Geneva they thank the Serbian people and say "be humane like the Serbs are",

why you are not so humane, you are in power in all these places where you can help people, regardless of religion, nation and ethnicity.

I suggested to Jose Baraibari, "Make a phone line intended just for this issue. They don't have to introduce themselves. Let them just say, "These people are dead and they are located in this place, they are gone" We need just that information.

I was in Kosovo last year. We always go there to the "Monument of Truth". In Mitrovica, there is a monument, made on June 22nd, where the victims from that region have been registered. The victims from Rahovec, Retime, meanwhile, have one at the church gate, they have their names written and we commemorate them, we go there and we lay wreaths. We don't have anything, because our cases are individual cases and I don't expect anyone to make a monument just for my son, so we visit the church of St. Mark, we have a plaque there and we go and lay wreaths and hold that memorial service on 28th, on Saint Vid Day and we hold a memorial service for all those killed and all the victims.

I go every year to Mitrovica in Kosovo, and I also go to Fushë Kosove and I visit the cemetery. I visit the graves because I have my grandmothers there, grandparents, my sister who drowned in the lake. So, I visit those graves and until a few years ago also my parent's house was there but it's not anymore. It was demolished and now there is a building there. It was at the entrance of Fushë Kosovë, once that street was called "Lenin 8", then "Car Dushan", now of course it has another name. Once upon a time, at the end of Prishtina, there was a big field and behind it, there were many houses. My house was fourth from the beginning but it no longer exists. I never went to visit the apartment in Prishtina. I go to the buildings but now the people I used to know don't live there anymore. I went once to see the neighborhood. Yes, everything has changed. I left the apartment full of things but now I don't want to see it. There are the tapestries I embroidered, the photos, the four seasons of the year. There are our beds, our new furniture, we just settled in our apartment.

While I was looking for Ivan, I was also struggling to calm down Nikola, to make him realize that we are looking for his brother. All the time I took care that he will not do any stupidity as a young man. How do I know what was going on in his young mind? That is why I have always told him that we will keep hoping, that I am working in that association and I am meeting with different people, and that I still believe we will discover something. For a long time, the hardest thing for Nikola was when we had a celebration or when some music was being played. Then we would always sing Ivan's song and we always mentioned him, so Nikola always asked for it and we have never skipped it.

I think that he suffers the most because he is silent, he doesn't do what I do. When he had to get married, I was against it. How could he get married when we still didn't find one child? Then people told me, "You are not normal, let the boy get married." And what was I supposed to do, I decided to make a wedding. And, indeed we did. There were 40 of us, close family members, and I was the first one to dance. I was the most cheerful even though it was very hard for me. Even my mother said to me, "Oh Dragana, how can you dance like this?" and I replied, "I must be cheerful because my son is getting married."

He made the right decision, and in that situation, I was not right. I was angry that he was getting married but in fact, he was the smartest of us all. He got married, started a family, and had three children. His wife didn't want to, she wanted only two children. "No," he said, "we must have three, one for my brother." And so, it happened. Thank God he has three children. Thank God for those grandchildren.

Every time I say, "I'm going to an interview tomorrow," he asks me, "Will you be able to?" I say, "Yes, why not, I always can, this is something I have to do, don't worry about it". And my husband, he doesn't want to talk about this at all, as if this story is over. He cannot deal with it at all. He doesn't go anywhere, he doesn't leave the house, he doesn't have any contact with people. He is completely withdrawn; he is waiting to die. Last night he told me, "Slavko is dead", my brother, "he saved himself." I ask him, "How can you say something like that?" He says, "I wish I was in his place?" and I told him, "Everyone's turn will come, slow down, don't hurry."

But my husband never made peace because he feels responsible for what happened since he persuaded us to stay. He used to say, "Why wouldn't we stay? Why should we leave, we always lived here, we are innocent." I think that because of that it's very difficult for him.

What can I tell you, life goes on, it doesn't stop but it's very difficult? I thought things would become easier over time, but in this case, time means nothing. It seems to me as if it is happening now, as if we are stuck at some point in '99. Sometimes when I have to write the year, I feel like writing 1999. Sometimes I feel as if time has stopped until I remember what year it is.

Probably people over time, like it or not, hold on to the hope that the problem will get solved. But over time it becomes just more and more difficult because even those killers are already dead. After all, they were certainly mature people who fought. Then I start thinking that there will be no one left to tell the truth. Unless under any command responsibility

it is decided, "These were the responsible persons under the command responsibility of that region, these persons were in this region, they were there."

And I don't believe in this court at all. They will do nothing. It's all politics. Politics change as the wind blows in different directions, so I don't deal with it at all. I don't even burden myself with that court in The Hague, because you can see that everything is just a formality. For us, families, this means nothing. That is why we appealed to read those protocols, the literature, those reports. So, to tell the International Red Cross the names of the people killed, for which we don't know if they will be found or not. If we could get at least some information, so that people won't keep their hopes high after so many years, hoping that someone will show up. It's different when you know that someone is dead when you get the information. But after 21 years, I don't believe that anyone will return because so far no one has returned.

What should we do? We must move on, this is our slogan, just move on. Hope dies last. I am always of the opinion that the truth must be told. Let people read about it, I stand behind what I have said, that was the truth. We have heard enough lies and deceptions. Truth must be told, these are historical facts, this is history. My small contribution is here and we have written magazines and books, and we had various activities all these years, calls, requests. So, we left documentation and it's very important that this documentation remains.

This book is entitled "The abducted truth", and it includes the various activities that we've had, gatherings, calls, requests, meetings with Jacques Chirac, with various representatives and delegations. Here we are in Merdare when we went to check the wardrobe. Here we are with Montgomery at the American Embassy, and at all the embassies because we went everywhere. We were the first delegation to hold a meeting at the Albanian parliament. I was there with seven other parents without any permission. They asked us, "Why are you going?" and I said, "We have to go, we are parents, we have to look for our children."

I can't say that I mourn my child more than a Muslim or Croatian woman or more than someone else who mourns their child. Mother is a mother; pain is pain and misfortune is a misfortune. If there has been a war, there are protocols. I first heard Haradinaj boasting that he kept a diary, so he knows about his part because he was responsible for his zone. I always said, "Let's go through the zones to see which commander kept prisoners, who were the prisoners, who was killed." So many years have passed, half of the people have died, and even half of those who have killed have died. But protocols must be opened for the sake of humanity, all situations must be

resolved once and for all, for every missing person, every abducted and killed person, for the families to find their peace.

You know that Slovenian story "Servant Jernej and his right" eh, I believe there is no justice. I am not seeking that kind of justice at all. I want to find the truth, in order to find peace. If a child has died, let us know so we will weep over his grave. We don't want to take a body that we don't know. We gave blood for DNA analysis, to find our child, to find out the truth, to learn if he had died. If he is alive, imprisoned somewhere, or somewhere working in Iraq, Iran, or if he was turned into a fighter. At least we deserve to know if he is alive or if he is fighting there or if he died in that war, so whatever the case the family deserves to know.

Life goes on, you work, cook, wash, clean, you take care of everything, but there is a worm that constantly asks, "What is he doing now?" When I sit down to eat, I always think, did he die hungry, was he hungry when he died. What else will the mother think, other than how the child ended up, what happened.







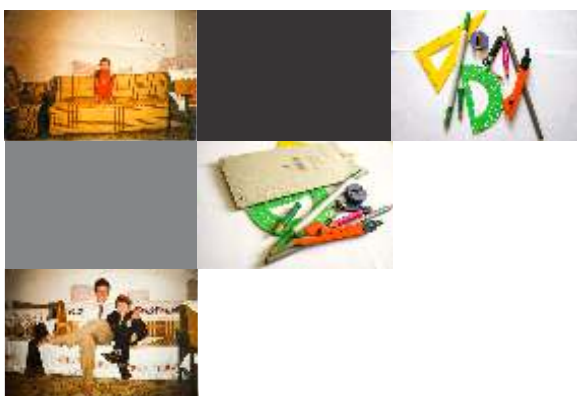
**Dragica  
Majstorović**



When I went to visit for the first time the children's graves, I went together with all the members of my husband's family. We go there every year and I change the flag, I put a new one.







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## Hanumshahe Gaxhiqi

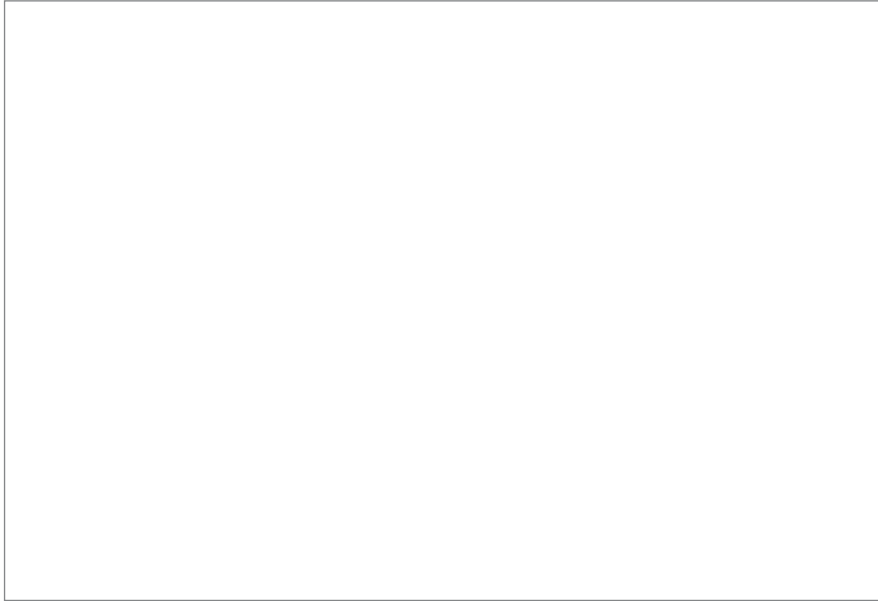
When the Serb paramilitaries arrived for the first time at the Hanumshahe's family in 1998, they fled and took refuge in the forest, where they had previously brought items necessary for survival. After a week they went back to the village, and they found the house burned down by the Serbs. They lived for six months in the basement of the house, without water or electricity, until the NATO bombing began, and then they were forced to go to the forest again.

Hanumshahe at that time had two sons and two daughters; the youngest was eight months old and still in the cradle. One day, while sheltering in the mountains, Serbian forces fired at them with mortars. The grenade fell quite close to the place where Hanumshahe's children were playing.

# I was holding them in my hands, but I couldn't tell if they were my children

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**Hanumshahe Gaxhiqi**



My name is Hanumshahe Gaxhiqi and I am from Klina. I was born in 1973 in Dollovo. I was married and we lived in village Murg, but after the war we came to live here in Klina. I live with my mother-in-law and two sons. My daughter is married, her name is Ardiana. My sons are called Armend and Ardian and my mother-in-law is called Zade Gaxhiqi.

I had a good childhood. My mother took good care of us, she educated us. My dad passed away when I was in third grade. Also, my father took good care of us. We had a particularly good relationship, and our father liked us daughters more than he did the boys. We were four brothers and three sisters: Bajram, Ahmet, Arif, and Mehmet Hoti and Zoja, Mane and me, Hanumshahe. We, the siblings, had a good relationship with each other. We never had any problems. Our mother was very careful and she supervised us. I was very close to my mother; she gave me the right education. I had her support, more than anyone else.

Three of my brothers live in Germany, my eldest brother lives here, also my older sister lives in Kosovo.

At school, in Grabanica, from the third grade up to the eighth grade, children from two villages went all together, boys and girls. We were so good, kids from both neighborhoods went together, they never went without each other. We all went together, and we finished school together without ever parting from each other. People would envy us. We went together for eight years. There were about ten or twelve of us in total. We went together to school, and we came back together. We always stayed together.

We had a good relationship with both the young and elderly. For many years they used to say about me, "How did this tragedy happen to her, she was the one that kept us together" We were all close to each other as sisters. I still have a great relationship with my first cousins. They respect us as if we were their sisters. Our uncles and cousins still come to visit us. Our mother taught us a lesson that we have to be led by goodness. "Even if you see something bad," she told us, "you shouldn't talk about it!" I still live by that rule. I do not want to grow negative feelings, I don't want to do a bad thing.

All four of my brothers attended high school. We, the sisters, did not attend high school. I didn't even finish the eighth grade. I attended only three months of the eighth grade because I got married when I was 16 years old. I wanted to get married at a later stage of my life because I didn't want to leave school. I was a little embarrassed when I would see my friends going to school and I was a bride. But then, I got used to it, there was nothing I could do.

Yes, I got married with the help of a wedding arranger. My uncle's wife had family relations with my husband. I was engaged for three or four months, and then I got married. In my husband's family, he was the eldest, and they wanted things to happen in that way.

I never met my husband before the wedding day. When I was engaged to him, I was 15 and a half years old. It was 1988. We had kind of an exchange with their family. They have given a daughter for my brother, and I got married to their son.

My sister and I got married on the same day. It was wintertime, snow was everywhere, two weeks before the new year. I went to live in village

Murg which was farther from my family, but I was close to my sister. On our wedding day, I woke up early in the morning because we had to fix our hair and make-up since at that time there were no hairdressers in the village. My uncle's wife did our hair and make-up at our house. While she was doing my sister's hair, I cleaned the guest room for the groom's family which was expected to come. As soon as my sister was done, it was my turn.

They came with many cars to pick me up. When I woke up the next day, I didn't know where I was or if I got lost... but, all in all, I had a good time with his family. It was not a big family and I lived only with my in-laws and their children. They had four sons and three daughters.

So, I stayed for 16 years in my family. I have been living with my husband's family for 19 years now, and my husband died 12 years ago.

A year after we got married, our child Ardian was born in Drenas. So, I was 17 years old when I gave birth to him. Two years after Ardian, I gave birth to baby girl Ardiana. Then I had Gentiana, and I was very happy when I gave birth to her. If I had to compare, I was much happier when I gave birth to my daughters than sons. After Gentiana, so during the war in '98, three weeks after Prekaz was in flames, I gave birth to Armend. He was only eight months old when we escaped to the forest. After the war, Ardian was born, so I renewed the name of my eldest son.

When the war started, I was seven months pregnant with Armend, and he was the fourth child I had before the war. My family was very afraid, they heard that pregnant women are being killed, and they were concerned about where and how I will give birth. They were telling me that the situation is becoming risky and they told me it's better if I go to my family. My mother came to pick me up and she took me home to take care of me.

I spent two or three nights there, but I got scared because the Serbs were staying near that place. Only a road separated us. So, I woke up in the morning, and I told my mother, "I swear to God, I am afraid that the Serbs will sooner get here rather than in village Murg" and she said, "Why are you saying that?" I said, "I think I'd rather go to my home." And she told me, "No, it's much more dangerous in Drenica". I said, "No, no, whatever happens, it's better if I stay with my husband's family and my children".

She agreed and took me back there. Three weeks later, just as I thought, the village of Dollova where my family was living was in flames. The first

village set on fire after Prekaz was village Dollova. Exactly where I was staying. I escaped from there because I could see the Serbs moving around and people started talking about them. The Serbs burned my family's property in the village but luckily we didn't lose any family members.

Afterwards, the Serbs came to my husband's village, and they started setting the houses on fire. As soon as they started setting the houses on fire the entire family escaped. We prepared our belongings such as clothes and flour and we went to the forest. I was giving a bath to Armend in the morning when the Serbs came. As soon as I saw them coming, they were just a few meters away, I quickly gathered all the children and we escaped to the forest. We rushed in a hurry and we left behind the food on the table. If they would have caught us there, they would have killed us all. This time the Serbs set our houses on fire. We went to the forest, we stayed for a week there, and then we came back and all the houses were burned.

We stayed in the basement. We had no place to sleep, there was no water, no electricity, everything was burned. We lived like this for six months. As soon as NATO's first bomb dropped, the next morning we escaped again to the forest. We stayed for a month in the forest. There we ate, we drank, we cooked, we did everything there.

While we were in the forest, they shot at us with mortars. Two of my daughters and my eldest son were playing in the river. They shot at them with mortars. It happened just as I turned my back because I wanted to go to Armend. He was in the cradle; he was just eight months old. It was as if I had a premonition that something bad was going to happen. They shot from all sides. The mortar fell straight into the river where the children were playing. All the people were there, but the mortar fell exactly where my children were playing. There was also a young woman holding her baby daughter in her arms. The baby survived, but her mother died. Both my son and my daughters were wounded.

When the mortar fell, no one knew where to go or what to do. I had a bad feeling, I said to myself, "Oh my God, my children were shot." When this happened to me, I couldn't see anything clearly anymore. I ran towards them, first I grabbed my eldest son, he was in the third grade. I grabbed him and I took him to my mother-in-law.

Then I ran towards my daughters. The eldest daughter was badly wounded. But the youngest daughter was in the worst condition. I

remember giving my children to my in-laws, I gave them and at that moment I didn't know anymore where I was. So, God has given me just enough strength to go take them and leave them in the hands of my in-laws. I became numb, I didn't know anymore where I am, nor what was going on. I was holding my children in my arms, but I couldn't tell if they were my children.

For a night we kept them close to us because the police were coming shooting at us, they were insulting us, harassing us, they did everything to us. That night we stayed in the forest, and I kept the children like that. Some of my cousins said, "Let's protect them." My son and my daughter died. We took them with us to the forest, we were holding them in our hands. The Serbs came to us again and they took us away from there. We were all women there, there were no men.

They took my two children and they buried them somewhere in the forest. Also, that woman was buried together with them. Early next morning, they removed us from there and we walked to village Shtrubullove. We walked all day long. I was barefooted, I didn't know anything. My daughter was wounded, and I gave her to my mother-in-law, and I went back. They were looking for gold jewelry, I was afraid that they will kill my other two children. I put my daughter and my mother-in-law on the tractor. A woman was driving the tractor. Those Serbs were shouting at that woman, they were insulting and beating her. They were shouting, "Drive away with that tractor!" She couldn't drive because she was a woman, and she didn't know how to. She said, "We need to remove somehow the wounded people from here!"

Those paramilitaries were the same as the ones who abused us in the forest, we had so much pressure from them. They were ripping the jewelry off from our bodies. They were insulting us and calling us names. No one dared to say anything. I took off my jewelry and I gave it to my mother-in-law, I was afraid that they will kill my daughter, so I thought that this jewelry might save her.

And I returned through the flames because I had to put bandages on my daughter's wounds, on my daughter that survived, I had to clean her wounds. They would tell me, "Don't go back, they will kill you." I said, "Even if they kill me, I have to bring my daughter something to drink." So, I went back, I took diapers, water, milk, and bandages to cover her wounds because she was bleeding, her calf was ripped off, she was covered in blood on the head, face, and hands.

They took us to Shtrubullove, and they placed us in some barracks. When we were there, they said, "Stay here, we will see what Milos tells us, to kill you or slay you." They left us there for half a day, without water, without anything. I didn't even know where I was, I was just thinking of my children. We didn't know what they will do to us. They took us and they left us for a month in Shtrubullove.

We spent the night in the yard of one family. An old man and woman came out from the house and, God save them, they said, "Come inside the house and bring your daughter in, don't stay in the yard". Outside was raining and snowing, it was cold.

We went there, and they took care of us for a month. I stayed there together with my in-laws, sister-in-law, my daughter, five members of the family and we all shared just one piece of bread, we didn't have more than that. We couldn't find corn, or wheat, nothing. We lived like that for a month.

Then I met a family that was living nearby, there was a girl who finished medical school. She said, "Yes, of course, I will come and clean your daughter's wounds". We didn't have iodine, I didn't know where to find some, and then she said, "Don't worry, I will find some, just enough to clean her wounds." She helped me to cleanse her wounds the whole month because maggots would form from the wounds.

Every morning the police came to check on us. We had to hide the iodine from them, so they would not find it. Every morning they were telling us, "Get out of here and go to the meadow." They wrote our names on some cards, it was a list of people that will be killed. We were on that list, we had the cards. They were telling us that these cards are used just for information on how many members we are.

The mother of that young woman who died together with my children saved my daughter because for a month she brought milk for my daughter. I couldn't give her anything in return. She took the cow with her, and I fed my daughter for a month with that milk. For a month, she boiled the milk and brought it for my daughter. She would say, "Let her drink, let her survive."

And so, as soon as they left a month later, we came back. We walked from Drenas to Murg. We walked back, some were crying, and others were happy. But I made peace with myself because at least two of my children

survived. One month later, we re-buried the children from the forest to the village graves. They are now buried in the village graveyard.

After the war, we left immediately, my brother-in-law brought us here. He brought us here because we lived very close to the graveyard, and I couldn't bear the pressure. After the war, I suffered a lot of pain. After my children died, I had a terrible headache. I was under their supervision, and they took care of me, I would like to thank them because they supported me, because I remained alone, and it was very hard.

At that time all the men went to the forest. My husband would come back during the night after it would get dark. He was kind to me, he tried to calm me down. There was a female doctor there, she gave me an injection, a sedative because I didn't know how to calm down. My husband would say, "I'm fine, just look after my wife because she is not."

Then, after the war, I took Ardiana to the doctors, because she had shrapnel in her leg. We took her for an operation and they removed it away. With the help of an association, we took her to Austria, because the shrapnel was touching a nerve. They removed that piece of the grenade. I used to have that piece of the grenade but my children threw it away. It was a sharp piece of metal.

Now Ardiana lives well, she is married here in Klina and she has a two-year-old son now. I suffered more with the children that survived than with the ones that passed away.

When I went to visit for the first time the children's graves, I went together with all the members of my husband's family. We go there every year and I change the flag, I put a new one.

Both of my children were very capable. My husband's family worked a lot with them. The eldest child, the one that died, was in love with studying. He was a straight-A pupil until the third grade, he was very smart. He never went out to play if he didn't finish his homework. As soon as he would come home from school, at the doorstep, he would say, "Mom, I have homework, I have to learn a poem." I used to help him learn the poems, I used to help him with homework, and after he would finish the homework, he would go out to play.

And my daughter was four years old, but she was smart as a ten-year-old child. My children were very capable, everyone would envy them. Now also the other children study a lot.



My youngest son was born shortly after the war ended, in 2001. I had so much pressure during pregnancy, I was full of sadness and anger. I had a lot of problems because of sadness.

We named the baby after the eldest son that passed away, Ardian. I wanted to do it. They used to renew the names at that time. But we still don't call him by his name. When he was just a baby, we started calling him Lum, and now we still call him Lum, we couldn't call him by his name. Even my mother told me at that time when she was alive, she said, "My dear, you are renewing the name, but you will not be able to call him with that name." She used to say to me, "Call him Lum", just before giving birth to him she would tell me, "Give him a different name, because you won't be able to call him by the name of the boy".

His friends call him Ardian. And we call him Lum, except for the father-in-law who calls him Ardian. When you have a child, you have a strong will, and that will carry you through life.

We lived together with the in-laws there in Murg and after a year we came here to Klina. My father-in-law died two or three years ago. Now I only have my mother-in-law. Now we are in the brother-in-law's house. We couldn't stay there anymore; we couldn't experience again those pains.

Then in 2008, my husband died in an accident. Sometimes when you think about it, the parent always thinks about the children, God save them, a parent wants to see them prosper. It is what it is. I must overcome the suffering for sake of the children. I never speak about this in front of the children, because then they get sad. They are young, they have their lives ahead of them. I don't want to burden them.

Armendi is finishing school for craftsmanship, he is trying hard, Ardiani is now finishing high school. Now he is about to continue school in Prishtina as well, but he doesn't know what to register. He is capable of anything, he understands everything.

I never dream of the ones that have died, because when you are full of sorrow you can't dream of them. Once, after the war ended, I saw both of them in the middle of the meadow. There was a lot of light around them. Since they passed away, they appeared to me only once. They were laughing, on this side, in the middle of the meadow which was full of flowers, light, and they said, "Mommy, we didn't die, can't you see us in

the middle of the flowers”. The light was everywhere, flowers everywhere, meadow, they were laughing and running around.

When I woke up, I felt as if I was with them as if I was close to them, I said to myself they are fine. That was the last time I saw them, never again.

Today we live well. A normal life. I receive a little help, a little bit from my brothers, or my brothers-in-law. Now everyone has their own pains. I have mine. But everyone has their own pain.

## **Hanumshahe Gaxhiqi**





## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences



We were young when our father disappeared, I was 13 and he was 15 years old. Our mother lived with us. Then our mother suffered a lot and she got sick. We took her to the doctors, but we couldn't save her. After some time, she got very tired. When our mother died, our uncle took care of us.





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## Homez Kpuzi

The real saga of the Kpuzi family begins right after the war, when their father is kidnapped, and they never find him again. The father of this family was a man with a disability, as he could barely stutter anything. He worked in front of the Pashtrik Hotel in Gjakova as a shoe polisher.

His son, Homez, with a few additions from his brother, recounts the day of his father's disappearance few days after the end of the war, he also speaks about the deaf mother, and their hard life in poverty. Shortly afterwards, while searching for his father, he himself falls hostage to a group of people who wanted to kill him.

# Why did they take my father?

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**Homez Kpuzi**



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I am Homez Kpuzi. We are three brothers and two sisters. We suffered a lot as children. My father's name was Ismet Kpuzi. Immediately after the liberation, we learned that he disappeared. I thought to myself, "Why did they take my father? My father didn't even know how to speak." He drank, he used to drink alcohol, but he never did anything wrong to anyone. They took him immediately after the liberation. I never saw him again.

My mother died in 2004. I have never heard anything about my father to this day. Our uncle took care of us, I am thankful to him. Also, his sons took care of us. He really looked after us. Also, he looked for my father, but we didn't manage to find him, we don't know where he is or what happened to him.

Now I live with the children, with four orphaned children. My sisters are married in Peja. They can't talk, also my father was unable to speak.

Father could speak a bit, but he stuttered. And we spoke to our sisters with fingers. My mother was also unable to speak.

I went to school, but I was not interested in it. Because I was sick as a child. Azyi Kpuzi gave me blood and I was not feeling well, I was always thin and weak, I was not feeling well. I was telling my family this, and they would tell me, "You better go and study". I would complain and they would tell me, "Okay stay home and we will tell the teacher that you are sick", and so I didn't attend school and I lost many lessons.

I was enrolled in school, and I started attending the first grade, but I was not good at it, I didn't go regularly, and I would escape from classes because I didn't like it at all. Now I have children, three daughters and a son. My eldest daughter Sagita attended eight grades. She was doing well at the school, but I had to take her out from the school because there was no one who could take care of those three children. We were at work. Emra Kpuzi is the name of the second daughter and she has three twins. Then is the third and youngest child, Elmedina.

My children are orphaned because I got separated from my wife, I didn't have a good relationship with her. My youngest daughter was three years old, and now she is almost eight. I raised four children myself. Also, I raised them with the help of the people from the neighborhood, because they helped me – they brought me food for the children. They helped by bringing clothes, sneakers, socks, and slippers for the children. Most of the people from the neighborhood helped me. They knew that we have bad living conditions, that we were poor. They helped the children get clothes when they go to school. I had to wash the children, put clothes on them, prepare them and send them to school. I raised the children myself. I would put water on a cup, sweeten it and give it to my youngest daughter.

When I had money, I would buy milk and I would give them milk to drink. This is how they lived. Like orphans. But now, they go to school and they are no different from other children. I made a request to give them same homework as for the other children. I complained, and I got no response! Now we are waiting. So, they can study. To study so they can continue going to school. I would like my children to continue studying, and not live like I have lived. I didn't go to school; I cannot leave my children without school! That's why I feel sorry for my eldest daughter, she was doing very well at school, but she had to stop attending because of the kids.



My father was a very nice person. He worked at Hotel 'Pashtriku', as a shoe polisher. My father was very happy when we got liberated. He went out of the house; he was with his friends and they went for a drink. He used to drink alcohol. One day he left and then after some time the news came to us, "We can't find our father". We all went out trying to find him, my uncle, and my brother and me, but we couldn't find him. We searched for him in the hospital, in the headquarters which were created after we got liberated. The Commanders headquarters, because there were no police then.

We informed the commander, it was a person called Besim Vokshi, he was responsible for Gjakova. We went there and met them, because they knew my father. He would polish their shoes; they would give him money and help him. They said, "No, he is not here. We have people who will find him. He's a good man", they praised our father.

My father went out, and he also took his toolbox. He took his brushes, his things, and the cart. He went to polish shoes in front of the hotel. From there, he went to the street, near the Halil Hoda's bakery. Just before reaching there, they took my father, his cart and stuff and they put him in the trunk of the truck, and they drove away. A friend of my father saw everything, and he immediately came to tell us. My father was drunk but he was muscular.

My father was very happy when we got liberated, because we suffered a lot because of the Serbs. I remember once when I was a child, I saw my father getting slapped and I never forgot how I felt. He went and he saw his friends, he was so happy he cried. His friends told us. My father also worked as a cleaner of the toilets, he used to hang around with some older people from the hotel.

When my father went out of the house, we were at home. That morning only me and my father, and mother were home. Mom was making coffee for Dad. He had his coffee, smoked two cigarettes, took his things and he left. I asked him, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to work. When I come back home, I will give you some money or I will buy something for you in town."

As far as I remember it was the uncle that saw him. My uncle passed away; he was very old. He saw him near Halil Hoda's bakery and he wanted to take the cart away from his hands. He said, "Not the cart, I will not give the cart to anyone." He didn't like anyone taking his stuff. Not



even with us, for example, he wouldn't give the cart to us to bring it home, he hated it. When my uncle came, he told us, "Go and get your father", he said, "because he got badly drunk at Halil Hoda's bakery".

We went over there, but we didn't see anyone there. We asked the people from the bakery, they said, "He took some bread, he put it in the cart and then he left for home." Then they told us that someone put him inside a car, but they didn't tell us what happened correctly. In the truck. Car or truck, they didn't know.

When we came home, we told our cousin. We told him, "We can't find our father anywhere." "How come you can't find him anywhere?" Then my cousin went out and started to search for him around.

He went everywhere, but he couldn't find him. He didn't come home all night long. Also, my uncle went out and looked for him, he went to the hospital and in the headquarters. We couldn't find him anywhere, we also reported to the KFOR. There were cameras at KFOR. The Italians were stationed here then. We also requested help from the Germans in Prizren. They also searched for him. Hazyri went to the Italian KFOR, and I went to the Germans in Prizren. There was a translator, I was talking to him, and the German was just taking notes.

My brother was a translator. Ermin. Yes, he used to live here and he was not married. He spoke Italian language, he learned it together with them and after the liberation they wanted to hire him. But my brother escaped, he went to live abroad and now he is currently in Italy. He left because he was afraid that he might get killed. We were also afraid for him. Because someone burned my uncle's house and since my brother was working with the Italians, he told them everything. He told them who burned the house, he told them that they burned the house on purpose. As soon as my uncle managed to finish that house, they burned it. My brother told the Italians who burned it and for this reason he escaped. "Brother, it's better if you go away, otherwise they will kill you. They took our father, what's the point if they take you or me or the others." So, in 2000, or 2001 he left, he went abroad.

We were young when our father disappeared, I was 13 and he was 15 years old. Our mother lived with us. Then our mother suffered a lot and she got sick. We took her to the doctors, but we couldn't save her. After some time, she got very tired. When our mother died, our uncle took care of us. Then, when our uncle also died, our cousin took care of us and gave

us food, water, he got us dressed, he washed us, everything. He took care of us. Uncle Haziri's son raised us, he gave us food and water. He didn't leave us in the street.

Even when our mother was alive, he took care of us. We lived together, we slept home, we were all family members, we all ate and drank there. My cousin made this house for us. We have two rooms, a bathroom and a corridor. He did not leave us in the streets, and he wasn't doing well himself either. But the most important thing is that took care of us. He never left us to suffer.

Now, we are doing fine, thanks to him. I have no problems with my cousins, they are trying to help me with the orphans. They help us during Ramadan, Eid or a holiday.

Hazyri suffered a lot together with us, and with our mother when she was alive. Hazyri took our mother all the time in hospitals, they visited different doctors, he provided for the needles, he has done everything he could. He tried hard to help her; he loved our mother very much. He has not separated us from his own children, he had seven children, and plus we were five. We all stayed together. He worked in Qabrat with garbage. He took care of us, he provided food and water for us. I am thankful to him.

Then I got married. I was young, I rushed a bit and I left them. I was staying in a rented house and the conditions were very bad. Sometimes I did not pay for the rent, and they would kick me out of the houses, and then I would go to another place and another place, and that's how I lived. My cousin helped us get married. Now I don't know what will happen, maybe God will open the way for us, to make a house, do something.

When my mother died, I felt very bad. She had a heart attack. I slapped her four, five times so that she wouldn't die, to return her soul. I was crying but nothing happened. My cousin Hazyri went together with my brother, and they took her to the hospital, where she passed away. Don't cry brother, things will get better. She had a heart attack at the hospital. I was with Hazyri's wife, her name is Valbona. They didn't tell me anything, I just remember when the doctors came near me. They put a needle in my arm to calm me down. Then, after some time I see that Hazyri is not feeling well, he came out crying. I asked him, "What's up? Is mother better?" He said, "Yes, she is better" and my mother had passed

away. He cried a lot when we were in the hospital. I started crying as well.

I didn't see our father when he left the house. He would leave the house early in the morning.

When we went out to look for my father, some people here from Gjakova caught me too. They were from Qabrat, I remember it very well. They took me to a big house, but I can't remember which house it was. They locked me in. They kept me locked for 24 hours. They were asking me, "tell us what have you done during the war. Did you kill anyone?" I told him, "I don't know anything. I'm a young boy." They put in front of me some sticks, pistols and rifles.

I didn't know who they were, and I still don't know. They beat me up a lot. I was completely broken. They cut my hair, they kicked and punched me. After some time, they untied my hands. I asked help from Allah, and thanks to him, he gave me great strength and I escaped, I jumped from the third floor. It was an old house. I remember while I was escaping from Qabrat, an old man came to me, I don't know his name. He saw me covered in blood, and I fell to the ground, I couldn't stand anymore. The old man grabbed me, brought me inside, gave me water, took care of me, he was asking me questions and I didn't know what to say. I was scared. Then, Hazyri went out to search for me. I told that old man, "I want to go home." I didn't even know how to explain that old man where I live because I was beaten up badly. I managed to come here to the house. When they saw me, I was all covered blood.

I didn't go to the hospital, and they wanted to take me there. They took me to the headquarters. I didn't know who those guys were, and I couldn't remember the house where they took me. They would ask me, "Do you know who those people were?", I said, "No, I don't". Then they said, "No, you know them, but you are afraid to tell." and I said, "Why should I lie to you? An old man took me to his house when I ran away from them." I know they took me to Qabrat.

I still don't know where they took me. I don't know because I was unconscious, I was in a very bad shape. I was trying to save myself, to escape from them so they wouldn't kill me and that's why I didn't remember anything. I remember when I was running that I was in Qabrat. I don't even remember the old man. He mentioned his name, but I was all beaten up: my face, all over my body.

They beat me with sticks, they threw me around, they beat me, they cut me. I was beaten very badly, very, very badly. I was unconscious. Plus, they cut my hair, they kicked me, they were even pissing on me. To be honest with you they did terrible things.

That old man kept me at his house for three hours, and I just wanted to leave. I was so much afraid that I thought that also the old man wants to kill me. His family members were wiping my blood. I was afraid of them. I was telling them, "Just let me go home." They gave me a hood and a t-shirt and said, "Let's take you home". I didn't know where my house was and I escaped also from the old man.

I ran away and I came running home. Hazyri was at home, he asked, "What happened to you?" I told him what happened. It was a Monday when they took me. Hazyri took me immediately to the headquarter. He told them what happened, but I didn't know the place, and I didn't remember where it was.

It took him ten to fifteen days to get well again. I was in a very, very bad shape. His hands, body, legs, and face were all black from the beatings. We hardly managed to heal him.

They locked me in a very small room, not even two by three meters. There was nothing there and I was handcuffed. I was handcuffed with police handcuffs on the back and they tied my legs. I couldn't see who was coming in because it was dark, the lights were switched off, but I could hear when they came in. They were watching me.

If our father was alive at that time, he would come for you. He would have reported, he would have done something to come to me. I think that they killed him, I don't know. Those were dangerous times. Immediately after the liberation, it was a big mess. There was still no proper freedom. Now we go out, we walk, we work, we live. During those times it was not like now.

I would like to thank you very much for coming here. More or less, you have given us a good thing. I would like to find my father, dead or alive. At least his bones, so we would know that he died, and we would bury him. That's how I would know that I found him, to have something from him.

# Homez Kpuzi





## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences





I used to dream about him, but now I haven't dreamt of him for a long time. The last time I dreamt of him was after I put on the hijab this year. He appeared in front of me exactly how I see him in the photo. I saw him, I was in the room myself, he came and he hugged me so much that it seemed to me as if he was hugging me for real... I said, "Dad, can I hug you just one more time?"





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## Marigona Preteni

**Hijacked Childhoods**  
Accounts of children's wartime experiences

Born in 1998, Marigona was just a baby the day paramilitary forces killed her uncle and took her father in an unknown direction. Everything she knows about him today, she has learned from her mother, her aunts, and her uncle. Already grown up and at the end of her studies, she recalls how she grew up all her life waiting for some news about her father's fate.

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# Can I hug you just one more time?

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**Marigona Preteni**



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I am Marigona Preteni. I live together with my mother Sheribane, my brother Fatos, his wife Qendresa, and my nephew Ferit. I was born in 1998, in Mitrovica, on the north side of the city. Of course, it was not easy for my mother, especially because in the north more doctors were Serbs.

I grew up in Mitrovica. I don't remember the war; I only know what my uncle and what my mother told me. They told me stories about my father and what kind of person he was. My memories of him are only from the pictures.

My father named me Marigona and I was told that he was very excited to give me this name because Adem Jashari's family also had a daughter called Marigona. My parents thought of other names as well but my dad insisted to name me Marigona. After I was born, he visited me from the mountain. We lived for a short time in a neighborhood nearby where we live now.

I finished elementary school here. The school is called "Bedri Gjinaj". As a child, it was very difficult for me to adapt to new friends in elementary school because I was very sensitive. Especially when we would talk about my father.

I don't remember clearly the beginning of school, I only know that I went there together with my mother and they asked us about our parent's names, they asked us about our family members, nothing special. In the beginning, I didn't have many friends, because I was not a very sociable type of person, I stayed alone. I used to get hurt with whatever they would say, even if they wouldn't mean harm. Then, as I grew up and when our teacher was changed, I started understanding more and I kept more to myself.

My younger uncle often came to the school. Up until the fifth or sixth grade, they thought that he was my father because he took great care of us. My uncle lived with us until three years ago, so he stayed with us for 18-19 years. He took care of us and he made sure we never miss any school classes. When we had parent meetings at school, my uncle would attend those meetings very often. He would come every two weeks and express his interest. My uncle worked as a teacher. Once he worked in village Bistrice, he taught mathematics, and for a year he worked in village Maxher as a teacher. Now he is unemployed. He lives together with his wife and he has a one-year-old daughter.

I finished the gymnasium in Mitrovica, in "Frank Bardhi". At the gymnasium, I had lots of friends, and most of them understood my situation. Most of the class also knew about my case. I had a good relationship with everybody, but I was closest with two friends. I am still in contact with these two friends. I am a little closer with one of them because he knows more about my life and my family. He came and socialized with my family. Nowadays we don't see each other often, since both of us are now busy with our own studies and work, but we still have a good relation. With the other friend, I still communicate through social networks. Sometimes I go out with her. Maybe I went out with her three or four times since we finished high school.

I am now in my second year of studying the English language at AAB. I don't have many friends. I socialize more with my family members. I spend more time with them. I always liked the English language and I learned it better since I am attending the faculty. I think that I will have more advantages by studying English. Both at work and in life. Maybe

after my studies, I will find a job at the government. Having a steady job gives you some safety.

My mother was always both our mother and father. She took good care of us during these 21 years. She suffered many difficulties because we didn't live in our house. We stayed in a house without an owner. We searched a lot, but we couldn't find any information about it. My mother tried hard, and she went to different associations, as much as she could. Other people helped us a lot, up until my brother grew up. Now he is working hard for us.

My brother, unlike me who would always cry whenever I got upset, he always kept his emotions to himself. He is a calm and wise person. He also finished the gymnasium but he didn't go to the university, because he wanted to work, to help his mother. For a year now he is in KSF. He lives with me, my mother, my sister-in-law, and my nephew. His wife is a very calm person and we have a great relationship, I think of her as my sister. My nephew is named after my father, and now I have the feeling as if I am growing up together with him. He is very smart, hyperactive, he never sits down.

I don't remember my older uncle so much, because seven or eight years have passed since he died. He was also a soldier and he was killed on the same day when my father disappeared. My second uncle lives in village Melenica.

My three aunts are still alive. I have very good relations with my aunts. Especially with the one that lives in Podujeva. She and my father had only two years difference in their age, and when I go to visit her, she tells me many things about my father. She talks about him non-stop. I have learned a lot about my father from her because my family, knowing how sensitive I am, didn't talk so much about him. I am very open with her and every time I go to visit her she tells me something new about my father.

I am very close with my mother's family, probably because we grew up in the same circle. Our uncles always took care of us, the aunts as well. I have an aunt in Germany, and she, whenever she had the opportunity, helped us a lot.

I usually do seasonal work during the summer, if I can find any. These last two years I worked, and with the salary I received, I paid for my

university. Two years ago I worked at the ETC market as a sales agent, but that didn't last long, maybe a month and a half. Last summer I worked as a cashier at an Aquapark which has opened by the lake. This year I also worked at the cashier, selling tickets. At the moment I am not working anywhere, so usually I work only during the season.

My father was born in village Melenica. He dealt with cattle and agriculture. During the war, we stayed in the mountains as well and I was told that he came to visit us from time to time. Whenever it was possible for him.

Until recently I thought that he was still alive and I waited for him. Now I don't know what to think. Sometimes I think that he is still alive, I still have hope. But if not, my greatest wish would be to find his bones and that would be enough for me.

As far as I know, my uncle was killed by paramilitary forces in the Tavnik neighborhood of Mitrovica, and my father was also abducted there. I don't know more than that, I don't have any specific information. I know only what my mother told me. Usually, my mother tells me more about the life they had and how happy they were with each other. They were like friends. I also know that, as they used to do it before the war, they got married with msit (wedding arranger). So, they didn't know each other up until the moment they got married.

I know that when I was in the fifth grade, I understood the fact that he is not among the living. I often read about missing persons and I listen to the news. I always hope that he will be found somewhere, either alive or dead.

I get sad very often for no reason. I find peace when I write. There are letters that I wrote which I have lost. I had many letters. Now I have just a few. I usually post them for anniversaries. During anniversaries, the whole family gathers and we first go to the memorial plaque where my uncle was killed, then we go to the cemetery in village Shipol, to the uncle's grave. After performing the cemetery ceremonies, we go to the village. We gather and socialize with all the aunts and my uncle.

I had an article I wrote last year when President Hashim Thaçi declared my father Hero of Kosovo:

"Hero of our hearts, even though I was six months old and I could not say

the prayer, God bless you. Today I extend my hands and heart to God, so that wherever you are, peace may be with you. I hug your photos and all the love accumulated all these years is hidden in my eyes. I don't consider myself to be alone, because you are the hero of my life. I thank God for the memories which exist, I am thankful for my mother which keeps fresh the memory of you. Today, you were declared a hero of Kosovo, and before that, in my cradle, where my mother shook me, you were always my hero". This is just a short piece I made. I have many other writings, which I can't find at the moment.

It's very difficult not knowing anything about your own father. When we go to visit my uncle's grave, I wish I knew at least where is my father's grave, where are his bones.

I used to dream about him, but now I haven't dreamt of him for a long time. The last time I dreamt of him was after I put on the hijab this year. He appeared in front of me exactly how I see him in the photo. I saw him, I was in the room myself, he came and he hugged me so much that it seemed to me as if he was hugging me for real. He told me, "I'm back, Marigona." He said, "You grew up." He said, "When I left, you were little." He said, "I am so proud of you, I'm proud of what kind of a girl you became. Even if I was around, I couldn't have educated you better" and I said, "Dad, can I hug you just one more time?"

But I couldn't do it. I don't remember anything else. I just know that it seemed so real to me.

Usually, in my dreams I see both my father and my uncle together. And when I wake up, I spend the entire day thinking, and then for another two or three days I think that everything will be fine, I think that one day we will find out about his fate. But no, every day continues the same. I put on a hijab a year ago. I believe that everyone has the freedom to do whatever they want. And I feel free like this. I feel like myself, and I am happy to fulfill my obligation towards God.

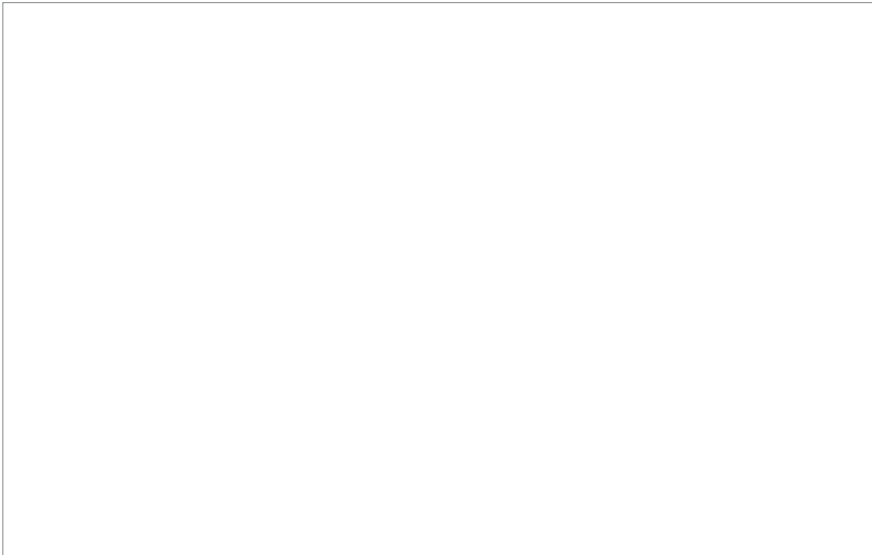
I like to read a lot, usually novels. But the last book I read is not a novel. It's about Aisha, Radi Allahu Anhu. She tells stories about her life. It is very important for women to read that book.

I also like painting. It's not that I am good at it, I just relax when I paint. I paint whatever I feel like, I have no preferences. I also like to walk in the morning.

I always think that if I had a dad, I would feel safer. It's not that I am not

safe, but I would have stronger support. And Fatos always dreamt of becoming like him. Maybe now he managed to realize that dream. It would have been much easier for Fatos, for our mother, for all of us, if we had our father here beside us. If he would be here, first I would hug him a lot and then I would tell him about my life and the shortcomings I had while he was not here. I would tell him everything.

In the end, I don't have anything specific to say but I can just say that the state didn't support us much as a family of a martyr that we are. Almost nothing. So, our message to them is that they should do as much as possible for the families of the missing, and they should try harder to find out about the fate of the missing persons.



## **Hijacked Childhoods**

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences

# Marigona Preteni





## **Hijacked Childhoods**

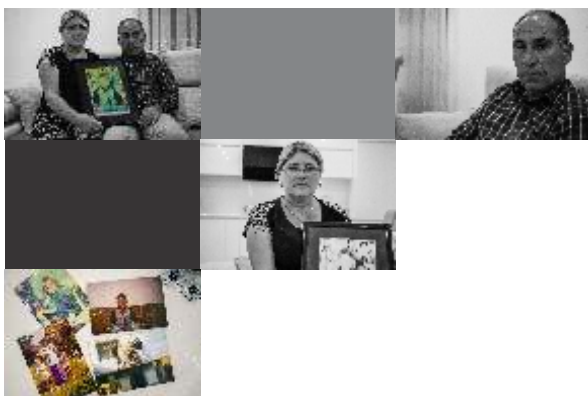
Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences





... I remember it clearly; paramilitary forces came and they were wearing scarves and they had their faces painted. They hit my husband's uncle with a machine gun and also my son. My son lost his consciousness. I held my son in my hands. When the other van came, they took my son.





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## Mursel and Shehrije Veliu

Mursel and Shehrije got married in 1988. A year later they got married, and they got a son. Ironically, the firstborn child of Veliu family was named Gëzim, which means happiness in Albanian language, but he caused them so much sadness and grief.

In 1999, while the family was in a column of refugees leaving for Albania a Serb paramilitary hit him hard on the head with a rifle. The nine-year-old boy lost his consciousness.

Serbian soldiers wanted to put him in the van and take him for medical treatment. At that time, his father was in Slovenia where he worked in order to support his family. The boy's mother had three other children with her in the column of refugees. So, the boy's aunt went together with him to the van. After much trouble, Gëzim and his aunt finally arrived in the hospital of Prishtina.

# When I woke up, the boy was not there

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**Mursel Veliu**



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My name is Mursel and I was born on May 1st, 1964, and I am a mechanical engineer by profession. I was born in village Polac, to father Hazir and mother Shehide. I have four children, with Gëzim there were five. I don't have a brother but I have four sisters, and they are all married.

We had average living conditions, more or less like everyone else at the time. We grew up together, in a not-so-good economic situation. I finished primary school in village Polac, high school in Skenderaj and then I attended my studies in Mitrovica. All of my sisters finished secondary school except for my eldest sister, she finished only primary school.

My father was a manual worker in a brick and block factory in Skenderaj. My mother was a housewife, she has helped us, raised us and prepared us for life. Our family relationships were very good, they took good care of us and they always helped us.

When we were younger, we would usually go to school in the morning or in the afternoon. As children, we took care of the cattle in the morning, and in the afternoon, we went to school. When I was a child, I really liked to work the land. However, when I grew up, I changed my interests and I oriented myself towards technical high school.

I went to high school in Skenderaj by bus, but very often I went there by walking. Such were the circumstances then; we would walk all the way and then we would come back together with my friends. Afterwards I enrolled in the Higher Technical School, Machinery Management in Mitrovica, in '85 / '86. I finished it on time, and I immediately got a job. As a student, I lived in Mitrovica for a while, because I had to cooperate with my fellow university colleagues, so we lived there.

In those years, as I was growing up, I started understanding more about the political situation. The situation was not good. We had many obstacles; it was difficult for us to work or attend studies. My father helped me with my education, but he couldn't do much so we both had to work in order for me to get educated.

I got engaged to my wife according to old traditions with a msit (wedding arranger). I got married on October 9th, 1988, one year after I graduated from university. We got married in the traditional way, as people did at that time, lots of family members with cars going to pick up the bride. At that time the wedding ceremonies were simple and good.

Gëzim was born on September 26th 1989 in the hospital of Skenderaj. We were very happy; it was our first child. Gëzim was a very good child, he was very smart. He was in the fourth grade at that time. He was nine and a half years old when he was killed. He was an excellent student. Every time he went out of the house during the war, he carried his school bag in his arm. He was a very talented pupil.

Two years after Gëzim, Edona was born. She was a very capable girl; she was a very good pupil as well. They had a great relationship with Gëzim. They played together and they went to school together. Two years after Edona we got Qendrim.

Qendrim studied physical education at university but then he changed his mind and started learning about electric installations. He considered that there is no perspective with that university degree. At the employment center people with Master's degrees were waiting for seven or eight years

for a job and so he decided to leave the university even though he was a very good student. Now he works with electric installations.

Two years after Qendrim, in 1995, Mërgim was born. Mërgim works with water installations. He has completed a course for that profession. Our youngest child is Bleona, who was born in 2000. She is very talented. She is a good student. From first grade until high school, she never had a bad grade. Now she is attending the third year at university and her average grade is 9.7. So, she has only one or two 9s.

War started early for us. The situation before the war was almost more difficult than the war with our enemy. We have experienced many serious things, people were fired from their jobs, people were getting killed here and there. So, in '97 I was forced to leave and go to Slovenia. My wife and children experienced the war more than I did. Up until 1997 I can tell you about demonstrations and people being expelled from their jobs and also on March 5-7 of 1998, when the attacks against the Jasharis took place, I was here and I experienced it myself. However, my wife and children experienced the war and they experienced being expelled from our house.

When the Jashari family was attacked, we were in the houses and we could hear some movements, we could hear that we were being surrounded, that we were under surveillance. They mostly examined the part where the highest resistance was coming from, at Jashari's place. They were the main focus, the Jasharaj neighborhood and Prekaz in general. We lived close to them. It was a very difficult moment; it was a state of war. Everyone knows what kind of resistance they have put up.

When the following attacks took place, I was no longer there. For economic reasons, I had to return to work in Ljubljana in order to take care of my family. Therefore, my family, parents, sisters and children have experienced the war much more than I did. They were expelled from their houses.

When they started entering our neighborhood, my family got separated once or twice. Once my father and mother went to Drenas, and the children stayed here in Mitrovica. In the beginning, when they left the house, they went to Vushtrri and they stayed there for three weeks. Actually, they stayed in Vushtrri after Gëzim was killed.

When they were expelled, the children together with my wife and sister went to Mitrovica and they stayed at my uncle's place. Then, they were

forced to leave again and many residents from Mitrovica were kicked out in the streets and they were ordered to go to Albania. For two days and two nights they travelled with a little rest. My wife with children, my sister, and my uncle with his family were all going towards village Gremnik. They spent one night in Gremnik, and the next day they continued going towards Albania. Then suddenly a van full of Serbian paramilitaries stopped in front of them and didn't let them continue but they ordered them to return to the crowd.

My uncle was walking in front and my wife and children were walking in the crowd of people. When they stopped at a police cordon, a police officer tried to hit my uncle with a rifle buttstick. However, my uncle moved away and the police officer hit my son who was behind my uncle. My son was hit with a rifle behind his ear, and he immediately fell down on the ground. My son lost his consciousness, he was laying there and the other people continued walking. My wife, my sister and the children stayed behind with my son.

Those paramilitaries left and then another van came with some other Serbian paramilitaries. This is what my sister and my wife have told me. When the other van came, they said, "If you tell anybody what happened here, we will slay all of you. You have to say that you don't know what happened here. You can't tell anybody who hit the kid." and then they took my son away. The biggest problem was that somebody had to go with them. My wife had three other children with her, Qëndrimi, Edona and Mërgim. So, my sister went with Gëzim.

From there they took him to Klina e Begut to see a doctor. The boy was unconscious almost all the time. My sister told me that she was left in the corridor with a soldier or two, and the child was sent inside the room. Then they took an ambulance and took them to Peja. The driver of the ambulance was a Serbian civilian. They kept him in Peja for an hour and then they said they wanted to take him to Prishtina. When they came to Prishtina, my sister didn't even know which department they took them to. "He was unconscious all the time", she told me.

My son lived only three more days. There were very few patients at the hospital, but the same case happened to another child who was of a similar age. There was a woman with that child. They stayed together with them. "On the third day," said my sister, "it seemed to me that Gezim was opening his eyes." There were not many doctor visits. They didn't check him much. They just stayed there.

My sister says, "He was opening his eyes, I think he was getting better. I was happy. Sometime at around half past nine in the evening I fell asleep. I don't know how much I slept, maybe about twenty minutes or half an hour. But when I woke up, the boy was not there." she said. "I went out screaming, 'Where is he?' They were saying, 'We don't know'. The corridors were full of soldiers. Some were saying 'He is dead'. 'How come? He was fine, he was opening his eyes.'" My sister told me, "He died and I didn't see him dying. Before I fell asleep, he would open up his eyes" she said. "I don't know where they've taken him" she says.

Also, the other child which was in the hospital died. My sister was forced to put on hospital pajamas, because it was dangerous. She had to dress up as a patient in the hospital together with the other woman during those nights while she stayed in the hospital. The other woman stayed alone. It was dangerous for both of them.

My sister then left Pristina by bus and she went to Vushtrri. There were very few people, only the army and police were moving around. "I went from Vushtrri", she said, "by another bus, to Mitrovica. I was sitting on the bus, when the police took me off the bus." She went to the bus station and they didn't harass her anymore, she said. Then from the bus station she went to our uncle's place who lived on the road to Vakanica.

I returned from Slovenia in 2002. We didn't know where to look for our son. There were no records in the hospital. UNMIK came in 2004 and they took our DNA; they took DNA samples from the children, my wife, me and then some people from UNMIK in Pristina called us and informed us that they found Gezim's remains. I couldn't go. I had no heart. So, my father went to Rahovec where they were located in a morgue. "It was like a tent," my father told me, "There were several corpses there." Our municipality provided a vehicle and they went there.

I think that in the Drenica district, the third or the fourth body which was found was Gezim's body. Many people participated in the ceremony when we buried him.

They gave us some papers but there was no information in those papers. For four years we didn't even know where Gezim was buried. I found out all this after four months, they didn't tell me anything at that time. We don't even know who were those people who killed my son. Maybe someone in that crowd of people knew them, but the case was never investigated. There was no attempt by the state or UNMIK, EULEX or KFOR to identify those persons.

It was very difficult. I wish someone would do something about this issue. Maybe they would find out who were the people who did this. Who were the ones that killed children? Maybe someone would recognize them. But they had their faces painted. I don't know what else to say.



# I will not leave him alone

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Shehrije Veliu



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I am Shehrie Veliu, I was born in 1973 in the village Rezalla. My maiden name is Zabeli. My father worked in a factory; he was a simple worker. My mother was a housewife. We were six brothers and three sisters. I have a sister who is married and she lives in Slovenia, the second sister is in Prishtina and she works as a hairdresser. One of my brothers is in Austria, one is in Sweden, and one is in Germany, and three other brothers are here; one works in Prishtina, one in Skenderaj. I attended primary school until the fifth grade. I got married when I was 15 years old, because the times were different then.

My first child was Gëzim, and then we had Edona, Qëndrim, Mërgim and Bleona. I remember very well when the war started at Jashari's place. We were at home eating breakfast, when someone said, "They came now also in these parts" and we decided to escape. We had no idea where we were going. Some of my children were at the place where the war started in the

Jashari neighborhood. The other children were here, I myself was elsewhere with my in-laws. Then two days later we all gathered in Vushtrri.

Except for my husband who was in Slovenia and one sister-in-law the whole family gathered at that place. Gëzim came and they told him at school, "Their forces came at the factory, war will start tomorrow" and he started crying. I told him, "Come on, eat something." He said, "No, I don't want anything, because the war is about to start." When my father-in-law came, he said, "We have to remove the children, we have to save them." My younger sister-in-law and I went to my husband's uncle in Mitrovica. My son was very upset. They told him on the bus, "They will take your mother, they will take everyone who doesn't have an ID card".

We left from the uncle's house and we went to village Shipol where we stayed at my cousin's house. But then the column of people was formed and we were forced out from there. We started walking towards Albania, and just before we reached Gjakova they told us that we have to go to Igramnik, some village there. We walked for four days and four nights. My sister-in-law and my husband's uncles were with me. Also, my children: Gezim, Edona, Qendrim and Mergim.

While we were walking, they would come out from their vehicles and with machine guns and by waving knives they would say, "We are going to chop your heads off". We walked until village Vojtesh which was on the half of the road. We spent the night there and then we left for Runik and Gjurakovc. It took us four days and four nights. There they took our jewelry. Then they returned us on this side but one day before leaving, I remember it clearly, paramilitary forces came and they were wearing scarves and they had their faces painted. They hit my husband's uncle with a machine gun and also my son. My son lost his consciousness. I held my son in my hands. When the other van came, they took my son. My sisters-in-law went with them. She said, "I will not leave him alone." I stayed with the other children.

They took them to Klina, Peja, and then to Prishtina in the hospital. We went to our house, first here and then to Mitrovica. We stayed there for a night or two, and then they forced us out from Prekaz again. My children were crying, all three of them, I didn't know what to do with them. The grenades flew over our heads, we were thinking that it's just a matter of time when we will be hit. We finally came to Prekaz. We stayed there for a week or more than a week.

I didn't know anything about Gëzim until my sister-in-law arrived in Prekaz after a week. She just said that my son has died, nothing else. Now after many years she tells me bits and pieces because then I was in a very bad condition.

After a week we went to Klina, we stayed there for another week or two and then they sent us back to Skenderaj. They didn't let us go out in Albania.

After everything ended, we started looking for the boy. In Prishtina they were telling us, "He is not here". My father-in-law searched for him the most. My husband didn't know anything about him for four months because we didn't tell him. Then, in October, four or five months later they called us and they took our DNA, including the children's. The children were afraid when they came to get our DNA. When they called me, I was in a very bad condition. We were waiting all the time for some news, and I thought to myself, "I will lose my mind." I only prayed to God, because I couldn't do anything else.

Then in 2004 the people from UNMIK called us. They called me. We were in Mitrovica after the war, we stayed in the house of a gypsy because we had nowhere else to go. "We found the body", they told me. My husband couldn't go, so my father-in-law went. They gave us some papers. The bones were in a bag. We buried him at the graveyard. We didn't look at the bones because five years have passed. This was in 2004.



**Mursel and  
Shehrije Veliu**

## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences





When your mother and father die, it's great pain, but in time the wound heals itself. And, when your child dies, maybe at the moment it is a small wound, but it keeps on growing all your life. You see their friends growing up and it's very hard. Some of her friends graduated from the university and became professors...





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# Mursel and Bahrie Gashi

Mursel Gashi, a former KLA soldier, and his wife Bahria complement each other in the story they tell about the murder of their minor daughter, Vlora, who was murdered together with her grandmother while they were running away from home in a tractor-trailer during wartime. "When my mother and father died, it felt a great pain, but in time the wound healed by itself. But when my child died, the wound grew bigger and bigger", says Mursel. My wound grows when I see her friends as they grow up, as they get employed, create families, adds Bahria, and especially when I see them on the street, they cry and run towards me and they hug me with both hands.

Hijacked Childhoods  
Accounts of children's wartime experiences

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# Let them kill me, I want to be a martyr

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## Mursel and Bahrie Gashi



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**Bahrie:** My name is Bahrie Gashi and I was born in Suhareka. Besides my father and mother, in my family we are four brothers and four sisters. I went to primary school until the third grade, and then I stopped going to school. My father was a farmer. Some of my siblings continued attending school, and others went to work. Some have gone to work in foreign countries. Life is like that. I got married here in the village Reshtan to Mursel Gashi. It used to be very good here, he had a big family, but the war left us completely burned, completely broken.

**Mursel:** I am Mursel Gashi, from village Reshtan, and I was born on September 8th, 1956, in a family with a father, mother, and eight brothers. My parents didn't have a daughter. We were a poor family. I finished primary school in Suhareka and high school in electrical engineering in Prizren. In '74, as an 18-year-old, I got employed in the



"Balkan" factory in Suhareka. They had good salaries. I worked until the '90s when the occupier fired all the Albanians. Up until '99, I was unemployed and I stayed at home. After the war, I continued working there for six years. We were a big family. There were eight sisters-in-law and many children in our family. We were 50 family members in total.

After we started working, we helped our father financially because he only had a pension. My father was old. My brother went to Germany in the '70s, but he returned in '74. In '80 he went to work in Switzerland. Then we started doing very well. We lived in a house in the lower part of the village. We bought this piece of land, and we built eight houses for eight brothers. We always had a good relationship among us. My eldest brother, who was in Switzerland, has now died. The second brother was killed during the war, one day before my daughter was killed. I am the third brother. The fourth brother died from a heart attack, the fifth and the sixth brother are living in Switzerland. The seventh brother is living here and the eighth brother is a police officer in Suhareka.

As for school, I finished elementary school here in the '70s. In '71 I went to Prizren to school and at that time my brother had already gone to Germany, but the salaries in Germany were small so we didn't have enough money. It happened often that the bus conductor would kick me and my brother off the bus, because we didn't have tickets, and then we had to walk back home on foot.

After I finished high school, I enrolled in university and after some time I was contacted by people from the "Balkans" factory and I immediately started working. I received a good salary, and I was able to support my family.

Before we got married my wife used to live near our house, she lived maybe a kilometer away from me. Their fields were close to the Suhareka graveyard. She traveled every day together with her father and they passed nearby our house. My eldest brother once told me, "Let's send a msit (wedding arranger) for you. She seems to be a good girl, she is helping her father." They worked as farmers at that time.

The wedding arranger was my wife's cousin who went there to talk to them on our behalf and they told him, "We agree with the proposal because he seems to be a good boy, and we also heard that he started working in the 'Balkans'". At that time 'Balkans' factory had a very good reputation. At that time if you were a teacher or if you worked for

“Balkans” you had no problems getting married.

Two special scarves were brought to me that day, one from Suzum and the other from Suhareka. They told me, "You have to choose one." I said, "I will choose the one that arrived first," They said, "The one from Suhareka arrived first" and I said, "I pick that one".

I got married in '79. It was a very big wedding. My family members walked on foot from our house until her house because it wasn't far. There was also a horse-drawn carriage for us.

The entire village attended the wedding because at that time our village was small. It was really good then; I think it was better than now.

I have four children now. They are excellent, they are good children. My son works as a manager in a company, my daughter is in Germany, the other daughter works in the Municipal Assembly, she has completed the faculty of law. My other son has a degree in economics. Also, my daughter-in-law is educated. My son went to Germany for about three years as a student, and his work manager asked him, "When you finish the university, will you come back?" My son said, "Well, I will try to come back." And now he is living here. He also brought his wife here, she is German, she has now given birth to a daughter.

When my wife gave birth to our first child, the child lived for only two weeks, and then she died. She was a girl. A year later, in 1981, Leonora was born in Germany. She was treated like a princess, not only by us but by everybody. Wherever I went, I carried her in my hands. The whole village knew her. They still ask us about her.

At that time, we didn't have modernized toys, but there were some children's toys that were made by the carpenter. In village Samadrexhë, I made her a single wheel toy and she played with it all day long on the village road.

Our second child was Liridon who was born in '84. The third child was Liridon because the baby that died was our first child. After two daughters, we got a son and it was an indescribable joy. After Liridon, Albulena was born. To be honest with you, when she was born I was not even at home. I went to buy a truck in Serbia, and I stayed there for two or three nights because at that time we had a lot of money. He bought it brand new from the factory. Then I went together with my friend Gafurr to exchange francs in Serbia. When I came back home, they told me, "You have a daughter." And to tell you the truth I was happy but at the same time I was not happy. He was happier for the truck.

Even my daughter says, "Dad, you were not happy when I was born." She went to school, she finished school and she is now a very capable woman.

After Albulena, Vlora was born. Vlora was born in 89'. At that time we and the miners from the "Balkans" were on strike. For seven days I didn't come home at all. When my older brother took my wife to Prizren to give birth, he called me from the hospital, I remember telling him "I hope that she will give birth and that they will be fine, but I can't get out from here".

He couldn't get out from the protest. This is the fate of Kosovo. This was our fate.

Vlora was a very smart child, and when I enrolled her in the first grade ... she was six years old ... I went to school, and teacher Sadiku told me, "Vlora is very intelligent, I am surprised by her every question". The teacher asked her, "What will you become when you grow up?" She said, "I will be a Doctor because when my father and mother grow old, I will take care of them." That was two or three days after she started going to school.

What is more interesting, when the war broke out, from March and onwards, I went through Drenica to see how things are going. On the 8th of June, we came here to the village, right here at the guest room where the house was burned. I left Vlora with her uncle, and she started learning the Serbian language by watching television. When I came back after about three months, she told me, "Dad, I learned the Serbian language from TV. If the police ask me at school, 'Who is your father?' I will say that I am the daughter of Xhevdet Kuci – my uncle's daughter – because if I say that I am the daughter of Mursel Gashi they will kill me". Her uncle was in Germany, and she thought that they won't do anything to her. Because she was coming from Suhareka to school. She would read every day the newspaper, and then she would go to school. Sometimes she would stay until two in the morning watching TV. Whatever she didn't understand, she would write it down.

**Bahrie:** Children still have a good relationship among themselves. Whenever the boys get together they immediately call the sisters. They contact them all the time. They all loved Vlora.

My mother-in-law took Vlora, and it was their fate to get killed together, because she could have taken the eldest daughter, or she could have

taken the daughter of her sons, and not my daughter. But she didn't go anywhere without Vlora. "I want to take Vlora with me," she said. I asked, "Why Vlora" and I started crying. I told the girl, "Go with your grandmother because I feel sorry for her." My mother was 60-years-old but she was a lady. I put a dress on my daughter, I hugged her and I told her goodbye. When they left, on the way they met her teacher on the road and her teacher told her, "Vlora you should stay, don't go!" and Vlora started crying because her teacher loved her very much. She wrote many poems, she loved writing, all by herself.

My sister-in-law from Peja told me, "She is so smart" Also her son was an excellent pupil but she was saying, "Your daughter is much smarter than my son." My daughter sometimes spoke like an adult. Such is life.

She would always draw, and study, she stayed all the time in the room, she didn't play much with the other children.

**Mursel:** Sketch at the school... We have recorded the sketch at school, where she acted like an old woman, but we never watch it. We rarely watch it. We have all the tapes. We even took a tape when we were in Germany. We couldn't watch anymore the first sketch she made at school. Her teacher brings flowers to her grave every year.

During the war, I stayed at my family's house, while my husband was in the mountains, and my daughter was saying, "Mom, I want to go to school" and I told her, "No my dear, Dad is at war, there will be enough time for school if things get better." And two of my daughters went to school, Vlora and Albulena, they enrolled themselves in school. They were surprised at how smart they were.

Her teacher asked her, "Who was your teacher?". She said, "Teacher Sadik from Suhareka." And when that teacher met Sadik, he said, "I am a very old teacher and I have had many pupils, but I have never seen such a smart pupil." and Sadik replied, "Aaa, Vlora is my deputy".

Then sometimes he would come to see my daughter and he would say, "Don't let her go to Reshtan. The police are at the bridge, don't let her go there. If anything happens to her, you will be responsible."

**Bahrie:** The next day I woke up, I was working with a machine we had and I was holding the children's clothes in my hand, and I started crying. She was getting ready to go to school and she said, "Mom, I read the

newspaper and I am taking it to aunt Vala and then I am going to Reshtan". I said, "Daddy told me yesterday, 'Don't let the girl go to school.' and she said, "Oh mom, let them kill me. I want to become a martyr" and then I started crying even more. She got ready, for days I accompanied her, she would come and go, and she would say, "I don't care even if I die. Dad is at war and I will not leave my teacher and my school friends, if they want to kill me - let them kill me." So, she stayed with my mother and they both got killed.

My mother came back together with my daughter. "Let's go back to the house," she said since they were very close, but they couldn't get out anymore because of the police and they stayed there. When Gafurr's house in Suhareka was set on fire they got scared and they wanted to come back. They found the brother there because they thought that he died. They all got on the tractor, it was full of clothes, they got on it and then in village Peqan they were shot and killed. They were killed in front of my uncle's house. As soon as they entered, police were there or special forces or whatever they were, and they killed my mother and my daughter who were on the tractor. My brother ran away, he jumped off. It was nighttime. When this happened he went to the KLA.

Then we left, but we came back again because I didn't want to go to Albania either. My youngest son was six years old. I left together with my family, and then for three months I didn't know where we were or if anyone had survived. I didn't know anything for three months. But I thought that my husband would not survive. We knew that he was in Pagarusha, but we didn't know if he was alive. Three months later, my husband came back, he took us and we came here. Everything was burned and our house was destroyed. But we were dealing with what happened to our daughter and we didn't think so much about the house and other things. There was a mattress in the house and the children were sensitive, they were not used to sleep like that. They didn't like what the aid organizations were giving and also the clothes that we received didn't fit them.

Liridon was caught by the police driving a tractor in a nearby village. They asked for money from him and he said: "I don't have any". The woman that has given him the tractor, took out 100 marks and tried giving it to the police officer. The police officer started cursing at my son, "A 100 marks? I want more money!" He said, "But, I don't have any more money" and then my son told us, "He insulted me and kicked me, and then he pulled out his machine gun to kill me". Then he said, "Someone

called him to go somewhere and he threw me in the mud, and he didn't take that money at all."

I left with my family members and I left my son and husband here. My husband had a ring and he gave it to our son, just in case, because we had no money during the war. We were building our house. He was insisting, "I want to stay in the war, to fight."

And when we went to Kukës, my son almost went crazy when he saw my husband's friends from Prizren, Bexhet, and Miftar, who used to work in the municipality. My son asked them, "Where is my father?!" And they said, "We don't know anything about your dad." We spent that night in the mosque and my son was scared, he would talk while sleeping, "Where is Vlora, where is Vlora?". And I would tell him, "We will find her now".

Then we went to Vlora in Albania, where we stayed for three months there together with the children. My brother-in-law went to Germany, and he was telling me, "Come to Germany". Some of my family members were in Switzerland. I said, "I will not leave my husband behind, my daughter died there, I want to return to Kosovo, even if I get killed I will not go abroad without my husband and my daughter". I thought that I would find my daughter when we get back.

My eldest daughter is very sensitive. She finished high school, but we couldn't afford to send her to university. She used to say, "Mom, I hope that she died because if she survived then she must have gone crazy, it's not worth living like that because she is very sensitive." I said, "No, I want to see her", but I never saw her again. At the house only one carpet was left there, the washing machine and other things were stolen.

I used to wake up during the night. My husband was not only a friend but much more than a friend. I would wake up at night, and I was looking for my daughter, I got used to having her close to me.

One day, my son Ilir woke up and went to search for Vlora to find where she is. He was 16 years old. When we got up in the morning, the boy was not there. We were looking at the nearby houses, they were all burned down. We went to the graveyard, but he was not there. It was already eleven o'clock. I was upset that we couldn't find the boy, I was afraid that I would lose another child. When it was noon, or maybe one o'clock, he came back. He was crying and he said, "I went to the house of your uncle in village Peqan, mother Ije and Vlora were killed there".

My daughter was found about a month after we returned. They found her after the burial ceremony for Mursel's brother. Many people attended that ceremony. They found my daughter at Suhareka graveyard. They were killed in Peqan and they were buried there. They found her together with my mother's body.

**Mursel:** My brother, who was killed on the 25th, and my daughter who was killed on the 26th, were together. They knew that she was my daughter, the Serbs from the village knew her. They knew them. I don't know who killed them, it was nighttime. They dug up the graves of my mother and my daughter in Peqan and the graves stayed open until late.

After the war, there was a Gorani who lived here and he knew everyone who was killed and he knew who killed them. We asked him, and he told me, "Your brother and your daughter are in this place." I saw the graves, but I didn't go there, on June 12, the next day I went to the graves. But I didn't tell my family anything.

**Bahrie:** He didn't tell us anything. We were going to Suhareka, he didn't take me there but he took me on this side. I said, "Why aren't we going this way, towards the basement?" Because I didn't want to look in that way. He said, "No, it's better if we use this shortcut." Afterward, I told him, "So, you have known all along where the bodies are", "Yes," he said, "I knew".

**Mursel:** On June 8th, the army entered our village and I was the chairman of the Democratic League, the Suhareka, and Reshtan branch. I said to myself, the party is down. We went to the mountains, we stayed here until August 23rd when the first offensive in Reshtan started. He didn't take them to his brother's house, but they were stationed at our house.

Three martyrs died, right here was the station, the sniper, a soldier, was in this house, and behind the houses, we had our trench. The one who ran away went out from the window, but they killed him. On the 23rd of August, three martyrs died here, we left and on the 24th we came back for the bodies and we didn't come here anymore up until June 12th.

I found out about my daughter immediately that night. On August 26th, at two o'clock, we were in Semeti, because on the 24th NATO bombarded. On the 25th my brother was killed, and on the 26th my brother-in-law came, my wife's brother, and he told us that the Serbs are in Peqan and we were in Semeti, so we were very close to each other. The Serbs were

maybe 500 meters away from us, also additional 100 meters because of the terrain. While we were there I heard someone shout, "I am Muhamet from Suhareka!" He was shouting so we wouldn't kill him. He came and said, "They killed my mother and Vlora." He said, "I was coming with a tractor, together with my mother and Vlora. I hope that we will survive, but they were killed, that is what happened".

On the 27th I wanted to go there. The police were there, I wanted to take three or four soldiers and to go and look, but my friends didn't let me. On 28-29 we left for Drenica, because our position was breached. Malisheva station fell, and the Semetisht line didn't fall but they came from behind and we were forced to leave completely. We went to Drenica, stayed there for five or six days, and then we returned to Semetisht. Then I went and saw that place where they were killed. I saw a commotion. It was a terrible sight. The tractor was covered in blood, and all the clothes were taken by the people who returned.

We were in Semetisht and my brother-in-law told me what happened that night, "They were shooting at the tractor, they didn't know who was there". He jumped from the tractor because the tractor was shot. The tractor and the trailer were full of bullet holes. They shot as much as they could. My son went there and he saw the tractor and he got very upset. He saw it after the war, and I saw the tractor during the war. It was full of bullets. There were some clothes on the ground, some pictures. They took the bodies immediately, after they killed them, they wanted to bury them in Peqan but someone told them, "Don't bury them here, because they will be recognized." My mother was recognized. And so, they buried them in Suhareka. As soon as I came to the graveyard, he immediately told me... He told them with numbers. I went there and I saw the graves. When we removed them, KFOR took them out, I was present, they invited me to go there. My brother's body was taken out and his body was preserved, he looked almost as if he was sleeping. He was there for two-three months. They pulled out my daughter and she was wearing her clothes.

**Bahrie:** He didn't tell me anything at all, but I could see it in my dreams. I said, "I saw Vlora, I spoke to Vlora". That day when they pulled them out from the graves, I saw a dream. I dreamt of pulling water from a well during the war. I was pulling with a bucket, not with a hydrophore. My daughter was telling me, "Mom, grab the bucket because the police are here, grab it before I let it go." I woke up. Then I cried all day long.



And my husband went there, they called him to go there but he didn't tell me. To be honest with you I wanted to see her. In the afternoon a neighbor from the village arrived and he told my husband. My husband went and saw them. When I heard about this I asked my husband, "Why didn't you call me, why didn't you let me see my daughter once more?". He didn't tell me anything, he never tells what he saw and what he heard, nothing.

I saw her but it would have been better not to have seen her at all. My body trembles when I think about it.

Sometimes when I see Vlora in my dreams I get very happy. Sometimes it seems to me like she is real. But I do not see her very often. Once I saw a dream of her, we were in Prishtina, at a market and she asked me, "Mom, I want some bread" and I was looking around and I couldn't find bread to give her. When I got up in the morning, I said to myself, I left my daughter without bread, and I cried and I cried. All day long I was sick. The next day my son said, "Let's go to Prizren, or Prishtina for a walk because I want to go together with you". And all the time I could neither eat nor drink because I was thinking of her. And then everyone got sad and they all started crying. "Until when," asked my son, "are we going to keep doing this?" I said to him, "What can I do, she came in my dreams. Maybe I was spending good times with you and she is not well."

I haven't seen her anymore but I would like to see her. Last winter, after the New Year I saw her. I saw her this year as well, but now I'm forgetting. We were somewhere together, but she disappeared, she was gone. Yes, I rarely see her, and I get upset when I see her and maybe that's why I don't see her anymore. If I would see her again, I would be very happy.

**Mursel:** I sometimes dream of her but ...

**Bahrie:** What do you see? Say something. He never tells me anything...

**Mursel:** In '90, we had two classes at school, and at the initiative of my older brother, we decided to enlarge the school building and to make two more classes, and we had a meeting to talk about expanding the school a little, because there were many students, and there was not enough space anymore. In the beginning, nobody was giving money and my brother said to me, "You start first! Someone will give money, others will not but we will finish the school." We made two additional classes, and when the

village noticed that we were serious they helped us. In '94 we built a two-story school, and in '95 my daughter went to the first grade. Sometimes I dream of her telling the other children, "My dad has built this school". I have this dream because I heard her with my ears saying this to the other children.

**Bahrie:** Thank God the grave is far in the village because if it was close, I would uncover her just so I could see her. It's good that she is far.

**Mursel:** Also, my mother-in-law was there in another grave. She was reburied later. KFOR pulled out my daughter and my brother, and we buried them here in the village. My family members wanted to keep her there with my mother, but my husband didn't allow it. Here are 28 victims. We have fixed the graves for the victims. We also have the martyr's memorial.

**Bahrie:** My mother was buried in Suhareka. In a family graveyard. My family members said, "We can fix the graves of our mother and your daughter". But my husband didn't allow it. My mother was taken out of her grave twice, after my family members buried her, the commission took her out for examination. They took her out and they sent her to Rahovec. My brother came from Germany and he went to see her. I asked him, "Why didn't you take me too?" He said, "I can take you, but it's difficult to see her like that. It's better not to see her like that", and so I decided not to go and see her.

I have not seen Vlora since that night. It's very hard for me, but I have to get over it. Many times, I got so upset I would get sick, and when I would get better, I would say to myself, "I'm not going to worry anymore, what did I gain from all that worrying? Nothing at all." And now there are children in our family and we have daughters-in-law and we are having a good time.

When your mother and father die, it's great pain, but in time the wound heals itself. And, when your child dies, maybe at the moment it is a small wound, but it keeps on growing all your life. You see their friends growing up and it's very hard. Some of her friends graduated from the university and became professors. They became someone.

War got her. When we went on that side, she said, "I want to pour some water". Whenever I would pour water they wouldn't shoot, and when she would go out herself, they would shoot. When she came inside she said,

"Mom they shot at me." When I went out, they would stop shooting, maybe it was our fate from God. I always wondered, "Why aren't they shooting at me?" Snipers!

When the reburial took place, there was organization. There are tapes and everything was recorded. We have the tape, the road was full of people until the graves. People came from other villages, and everybody from our village was there, also the pupils attended. The line of people was from here, everybody from the school attended. The children recited, and there were many wreaths. The son of my brother-in-law recorded everything, we have the tapes.

During the war, we stayed with my mother for two weeks at my uncle's house, right where they were killed. My older uncle said, "My, oh my, what a great person Vlora was. The pupils were crying and her friends were reciting". I said, "Yes, uncle, we didn't know her value". She was very smart, they all knew her. He said, "I have never seen a burial ceremony like that one." And her friends, as Mursel was saying, some became doctors and others are working, they have jobs. It's a pity. When I see them on the street, they cry and hug me, they hug me using both hands. Some of them I don't even recognize anymore, because they have changed. They tell me, "I am Vlora's friend". It was our fate from God to lose our daughter by the hand of Serbs.

Even Liridoni was in danger and I thought that we would never see him again. Every time my son went to Pagarusha I started crying. I thought to myself, "They will kill him". Luckily we went to Albania because otherwise we would have been killed, in an hour they would destroy all of us. But some survived, others didn't, there is nothing we can do about it. I was sad and upset and some old women would come to see and they would tell me, "You have to find forgiveness because it was wartime, don't worry so much!" But every child has their place. Sometimes I lose my mind. I get upset so much; I get completely blocked.

My husband takes care of me. "Where do you want me to take you, do you want to go out?" My husband saved me, otherwise, I would have gone crazy. He would call me from Prizren, while at work, "My dear, don't cook anything today. Wait for me and I will take you to Prizren for a walk". He would take me out, so I wouldn't stay home alone. He took good care of me, I will never forget it. We went through our sadness together. Today, he is ready to take me anywhere I want but I don't want to spend too much money. This year we went twice to the seaside. He says, "We

should go again!" and I tell him, "I feel sorry for you and the car," I told him, "We went twice this year and we stayed for 16 days, we don't need more than that". We have a great time, he understands me and knows my pain. I know his pain. I see and I appreciate what he does for me.

**Mursel:** When the war ended, we had a tent which we received as aid. As an organizer, I gave it to my younger brother, who has now died. The tent was large, and when I entered the yard ...

**Bahrie:** People started coming into the tent to express their condolences.

**Mursel:** We mounted the tent. People started coming and expressing condolences for my brother and also for my daughter. And in this tent, people smoked a lot of cigarettes, and my son Liridon took the ashtray to throw it in the trash, and one cigarette was still lit, and in three seconds the whole tent burned down. People barely managed to get away. Some of them got burned a little. We stayed in the meadow. My brother came from Switzerland, and he brought me some money because when the war started, my brothers and I separated from each other. We decided to build houses for every brother. We managed to build the houses and I was about to enter my new house to live together with my family but unfortunately, the war started. Everything was destroyed, the upper floor collapsed, the flames have burned the stairs and the house. We didn't have any clothes.

They took everything, there were no windows, nothing, we stayed in the burned house for several months. When my brother came from Switzerland, he gave us some money, I fixed a room a bit and we spent a year, or two in that room. Then we started to work a bit. Just enough to put some food on the table.

We had a car dealership in Prizren. The dealership was under my name, and after the war ended some KLA soldiers were stealing cars from me, I didn't dare say, "Don't take my cars!". My friends were the real owners - Kastrat, Fadil and the ones from Dushanova. Islam and Kastrat from Dushanovo, Bexheti, and some friends. They were the owners of the car dealership. I spent almost my whole life in Prizren, I have been there for 50 years, and I go there every day. My friends said, "We are going to put the car dealership under your name" They did it because you were in the KLA. I received a good salary while I was there. Even my son worked in the dealership, and after the war ended many people from Peja came and bought many cars. So I made some money and I started to slowly repair my house. Now the boys are doing well. They all got married.

Fortunately, we don't know who killed them. Because if I knew, I would take his soul. It would have been good if we knew, but there is no way to find out. They started shooting in Peqan at 22:00 and we were nearby. We got tired all day long, it was a tough offensive. We laid down in Peqan. That day at 20:00 the shooting ended, and for two hours and twenty minutes nothing happened. When they started shooting at 22:20, I said to myself, "This shot burned something in my soul." I felt it somehow because we were very close. And when my brother-in-law came, I asked him, "Did they shoot at you at 22:20?" He said, "Yes, they did." My brother barely managed to escape that night.

**Bahrie:** Our mother called and she said, "We are leaving from here and we are going to KLA, because Gafurr's house is in flames, and we can hear the police screaming". She said, "We are going to escape towards Peqan, and then through village Semetisht, we will go to Pagarusha." Those were her last words. I thought to myself, "Oh my God will I get to see Vlora again?"

My eldest daughter wanted to go after them, she said "I will try to protect Vlora. Vlora will get killed; she will get killed!". And so it happened, they were gone, we never saw them and we never heard anything from them. They never came back. I'm happy with my sons and with my daughters-in-law. We are very close to each other. They look after us, they love us, they respect us and we let them do what they want. They have their freedom. Now we go to Germany only by plane, because my husband can't travel through Serbia.

**Mursel:** They found some pictures then. This is where they found them. They took our camera and they developed the pictures. My young son, three years ago when he went ...They stopped him in Merdare, or Subotica, I forgot where. My son is now in Germany. He was a student then. They said, "This is Mursel's son." They kept him for some time and they told the police commander there, "We have the son of a terrorist here." When that police commander went there, he looked at the passport, my son was born in '93 and the war happened in '98 -99, my son was five years old then. He told those officers, "What was the fault of a five-year-old boy in the war? Let him go."

One of those police officers knew everyone from here, he knew even Qaza who was killed. He said, "I had an apartment in the basement, I know all of them by names." Those were Serbs from this area. They are the worst. If they would have told my son, "Bring your father here", it would be over for my husband because he would immediately go after his son. But, luckily that commander saved him and since then my husband doesn't go through Serbia.

They say that there are 1333 children killed in Kosovo. It would be good if they would make a big memorial and write all those 1333 names, possibly divide them into municipalities, for example, children from Suhareka, children from the municipality of Prizren, and so on. It would be good if they would make such a memorial. I'm not saying to invest a lot, that's not the point. There is no war without blood, and freedom heals everything. Freedom is more valuable than anything.



## Mursel and Bahrie Gashi

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## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences

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It was in a black bag. My wife told me, as people started running away, you could see people's fingers in the wires. It was a big bomb. Elizabeta was on the ground, and the bomb ripped the flesh from Elvira's legs.

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## Rrahim Hasani

In March 1999, a bomb exploded in the Mitrovica marketplace. Rrahim Hasani's five-year-old daughter Elizabeta dies on the spot. The other seven-year-old daughter, Elvira, got wounded on both of her legs.

Rrahim, now living in Podgorica, remembers the times when he lived and worked happily throughout Kosovo. He is happy that on the memorial plaque of the victims of that day, placed by the municipality of Mitrovica, the name of his daughter was finally added. Her name was initially not there. As Rrahim approaches the age of 70, widowed, half-paralyzed from the legs down, with no regular income, alone between four walls, he has one last wish.

# I know who dropped the bomb

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**Rrahim Hasani**



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I am Rrahim Hasani and I was born on May 17th, 1953 in Mitrovica. My father Ramadan Hasani was from Mitrovica, and my mother's name was Selvie Hasani. I had seven brothers and four sisters. We all got our education in Mitrovica. Each of us has completed high school. We were the first in Kosovo to make handmade brooms, which we would then go to the market and sell. We did well. My father went to Germany, and he worked there for many years. He earned his pension there.

I got married in 1972. In '78 I had a civil marriage to my wife Nada in Mitrovica, and then we left Mitrovica, and we lived in Belgrade until 1996. I came back to live in Mitrovica because I reached a certain age and I had my house here. I came back together with my wife and children and I worked as a taxi driver from '96 to '98. My 75-76-year-old mother lived in our neighborhood. I never had any problems with anyone. Many people from Mitrovica know me because as a young boy I used to play music in

cafes and hotels. They used to call me Rruti. The people of Mitrovica know who Rruti is, I would like to greet all of them.

My father was born in Bajgora, but he moved out very early from there, I believe he moved from there in '47 –'48 and he went to Mitrovica. His brothers stayed back in Bajgora. He also had three other brothers - uncle Nezir, uncle Beqir and uncle Feriz. They all passed away, and one of them, Beqir, was my hairdresser in Mitrovica. He used to work in the Center, and my entire generation knew him because he was a good hairdresser.

My late father used to work in a factory. During Yugoslav times the factory where he worked did very well. They cooperated with Belgrade, Minhel was the name of the factory. In '69 my father went to Germany, he stayed there for many years and he received a German pension. He was a driver in Germany and he even used to repair some machines there. When he received his pension, after the Germans overworked him, he didn't live long. Just a year later he passed away. In '80 he passed away at the age of 51, he was very young. My dad was a hard-working person. He knew nothing else but work. He never had any friends. He was a hardworking person and he minded his own business.

My mother didn't go out much, she was a housewife. She worked around the house and she would read the Qur'an. At that time, she prayed all five daily prayers. She minded her affairs and she took care of the house. We grew up without a father because he was in Germany. My mother raised us, educated us, she taught us not to harm anyone. My mother helped us as much as she could with her own strength until she died.

All of my brothers were employed. One of my brothers, Isuf, worked in Zvecan, and he was a worker at the place where they melt gold. He retired at an early age because he got sick 18 times due to lead, the lead dust got into his blood. He received his pension, he was a good worker.

I had a brother called Tarzan, he was the owner of the company that made flowers. The other brother, Binak, wanted to join the police, but they refused him because he made some trouble in the neighborhood, and they kept him in prison for about 15 days and because of that he couldn't join the police, even though he wanted to. He finished school for that line of work, he wanted to join the police but it wasn't meant to happen. All of my brothers finished high school. They never did anything wrong to anyone.

I finished primary school in Mitrovica, the name of the school was 'Svetozar Marković'. I also finished secondary school in Mitrovica. I had a friend from Peja - Ramiz Muriqi was his name. If he is alive, and if he reads this I would like to greet him, Greetings from Rruti, you know how much I love you. He finished school in Mitrovica, and he was a good friend of mine and I was very close to him. I apologize to his brothers Abdyl, Ahmeti, I hope they are still alive. I apologize to everyone, you are my brothers, you know that. I was at your house, I ate food together with you. I got along with them, I never had any problems.

Our family was very friendly and respected. We lived a good life. We made brooms and we would sell them. When a man works then he lives a normal life. We had enough to live a good life, we never complained and we never harmed anyone.

When I was at home, I socialized only with my brothers. When I went out to cafes to make music, I socialized with Albanians, because I played Albanian music. I socialized with Albanians, I had the Peja orchestra with the police, we played music when they had their banquets. If he is alive, I would also like to greet Shehim Krasniqi, he was an inspector, a very good man. I would like to greet Haxhia, Meti, all of them. I'm still alive, but I'm living in Montenegro now. You were all good to me.

I had a good relationship with Albanians, but that thing happened, my daughter was killed there. Everyone suffered because of the war. Everyone lost, the Albanians, the Serbs, us Roma, we all lost. But no matter what happened, life is good. Alhamdulillah, thank God Kosovo was liberated, it's good. I am a Kosovar, man. If I went to the other side of the world, I say that I am from Mitrovica, Kosovo, because my father's father was born in Mitrovica.

I have a brother who lives in Belgium, in Audergem. The others, live in France. They live in the city of Lyon. All of my brothers and sisters live there. One sister even bought a piece of land and she built her own house. They are living well, they have a good life and they don't have problems. Sometimes we speak on the phone, sometimes they send me some money, sometimes they send whatever they can because Europe is not what it used to be.

At the time when I was at school, there was no hate. We, the citizens, were like family members to each other. Albanians know this, I ate and I drank with them. They slept in my house, and I slept in their house. I have some friends from my generation, I believe they are still alive, that know that I am telling the truth. There was no jealousy in Tito's time. Now, I don't know if Tito was good or not for everyone, I don't know, but

for me he was good. I had a good life, I had freedom, nobody offended me, I went where I wanted, at night, during the day, no one ever harassed me, nor did I harass them. But, now it completely changed, now these are different times.

I played solo guitar, sometimes also bass guitar, I even made a name for myself. In every well-known hotel, such as "Bozhuri", "Theranda" in Prizren, "Pashtriku" in Gjakova, they all wanted to listen to my music. I learned to play the guitar myself. When I went to Greece in '74 I entered a competition and I got first place, but in order not to lower Greece, that Greek composer for buzuki Theodore Rakitzis, said to me, "You can't win the first place". The commission said, "We need to put you in the second place because you are humiliating Greece with the way you play your instrument." Because when they played the guitar, they played it using three fingers and I played it by using five fingers. It's called staccato, playing it with five fingers. In '74, I took first place in Greece, and I was a young boy. Journalists wrote articles, how I won among 36 cities. Then I was told, "You got the first place, but we have to put you second, we cannot put Greece in second, I will give you the second place because I am the best composer of Greece".

I mean, I got into music and I loved it. For example, I played music with singer Dani. I believe that he lives abroad now, I don't think that he is in Peja. I had a friend called Lan Burgiash. I would like to use this opportunity and greet Lan. I worked with Arif, Dërvish, and Xhaferi. They were musicians from Peja, and they were very good. I worked with them for many years in Peja. We played folk music. There is one song that I like, it's called "I'm thinking of getting married." It was very popular at the time.

Some songs touch you straight in your soul. Albanians would come, take out their money, and they would say, "Brother, take this and keep on singing, don't stop". At that time everyone could work, but there was not enough money. We had a circle of friends, we had love, friendship, we had a good friendship. There was no hatred at the time. I don't know how everything turned upside down. At that time a different culture was present. Nobody cared who you are, what mattered was just if you are a good person. If you were a good person, all the doors would open up to you. I had a good time during my youth, especially with the Albanians, my people from Mitrovica know this. I worked with Mahmut Bakalli as well, I spent time with him in Deçan, we drank and ate food together.

I met my wife, Nada, in Belgrade. There has never been a more beautiful woman. She was together with her father in Belgrade checking out some books. When I first saw her I pulled her hair a bit. She looked at me, and I

stared at her eyes, and wherever she went, I followed her. We started talking. After a short time, we ran away, because I had a son with another woman. Nada accepted him and she raised that boy. In 1998 my son was involved in a traffic accident in Italy and he passed away. Nada raised that boy. I took my wife in '72, and in '78 I married her, I left Mitrovica and I went to Belgrade in 1996. When I returned to Mitrovica, I became a taxi driver.

I had eight children with Nada. Now I have six daughters, with the one that died they were seven. I also have one son. Sadetja was first, then Selvia, Jasmina, Dragica, then Elvis and Elvira, Elizabeta and Maria Tereza.

Sadetja was born in Mitrovica in '78. I had a big party at the Adriatic Hotel. Muharrem Serbezovski was popular then. I invited him because he was my friend. He came during the celebration for her first birthday. We had a great celebration. I took good care of my children.

I always wanted to fulfill all their wishes and I didn't want them to have a childhood as I had. I wanted to give them everything they wanted, everything. I'm a parent who never yelled at my kids. I took care of them as much as I could. The eldest daughter got married at a young age and she went to live in Germany. The second daughter got sick at the age of eight. She had a fever and the temperature went up to 40, 41 degrees. For 15 days they couldn't decrease the temperature in Mitrovica. And when she turned 38 years old, about five months ago, she passed away. She never bothered anyone, she was very calm. She played with her dolls, she was 38 years old and she still played with her dolls. She didn't even know how to ask for food. We were giving her food.

Jasmina got married, and she lived in our neighborhood. I am very close to her. Dragica is named after my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law was Serbian. My wife's father was a Muslim, Haxhi Drini from Gjakova, and her mother was a Serbian. She had five sons. None of the sons wanted to give their children the name of their grandmother, so I said to myself, "By the grace of Allah, I will name my daughter after her." Dragica, my daughter, is married to a Montenegrin, a businessman from Niksic. She has three sons with him. They fell in love with each other. The Montenegrin came to me and said, "I love your daughter and I want to marry her." I asked my daughter, "Did you inquire what kind of character he has? What kind of behavior does he have? What kind of person is he? Don't come to me after some time saying that I gave you away. I wouldn't want to hear you say, 'You gave me away.'" And my daughter said, "Dad, I love him, he has good manners."



Elvis and Elvira are twins. They always ate together. If they had chocolate, they would hide half of it for the other twin, sister for the brother, or brother for her sister. It was hard for them when they separated after the daughter got married.

And Elizabeta, at the age of five, had knowledge as someone who is twenty years old. "Where were you dad?" she would ask me. "Why, what happened?" I would ask her. "Do you know how much I cried for you, daddy" My wife would signal me that she didn't cry at all but she just wanted to get on my lap. "I cried so much for you. Why are you leaving me alone?" and I would say, "Dear daughter, you are with your mom, sisters, and with your brother". "No, when you are leaving me, I am crying all day long."

Maria Tereza is the youngest one. She is now a mother of four children, she has two daughters and two sons. She is married and she lives in Budva. She is doing well, she has her own house and she doesn't have problems. None of my children have problems. They are all right, I can't complain about the in-laws.

I never visit my daughter's in-laws, I don't want to. Are my children happy? Yes. Then why should I go to the in-laws? I can have coffee at home. My daughters are coming to me, visiting me, they are helping me, cleaning, but I don't go to visit them. They ask me, "Why don't you come for a visit?" "My dear, I know that you are having a good relationship. If, God forbid, you wouldn't have then I would come there." As long as I am alive, I will never allow anyone to mistreat my children. I'm sitting here, taking care of myself. I'm lucky, I'm about to be 70 years old.

When I lived in Belgrade, it was an interesting thing about it, it's a city open to everyone. You still have Albanians living there. Many TV presenters work in Belgrade because there are many TV stations there. No one bothers you if you mind your own business. Don't put your nose where it doesn't belong. Otherwise, you will find what you seek. For as long as I stayed there, I have never heard any offense from the people there. The work I did, I did it for myself. I tried to raise my children as best as I could. I had a good relationship with my neighbors. When the time came, I sold the apartment.

While I was there, I dealt with trading. We, Roma people, are good with trading, we buy here, sell there. But I decided to come back because I was 47 years old. I was thinking of my old age. I was thinking, "I have a job and my house in Mitrovica, what am I doing in Belgrade? I am going to Mitrovica, even if I die, I will die in my town, I will die where my house

is". My wife agreed with me. I sold our private apartment. I sold it to the mayor of Opština Stari grad. I sold it for good money. And so I came to Mitrovica.

To tell you the truth, I found Mitrovica in a little bit of a mess, there was a lot of Serbian police. At that time, there were no Albanians in the police. In '96 there were no police, but there were some people, I don't know what they were and from where they were. They behaved like madmen. By God, I was not used to seeing that kind of behavior. I even had a problem with an inspector. He asked me for my car because he wanted to take his wife and child to the doctor. When I said, "Give me back my car," he said, "Oh, I am going to Montenegro because I am going to visit my in-laws." I said, "No way, you will not take my car as long as I am alive, no way. You will get fired, you will see". I went and I complained, I said, "I gave him my car so he could take his wife to the hospital" because Mitrovica was small, we all knew each other. That guy took his wife and children and went to Titograd. He was then fired because you can't do things like that. What I am trying to say is that the police at that time were not normal.

In '97 I was at the "Adriatik" when the police officers from Belgrade came. A two-meter-tall man pointed his finger towards me. I raised my hand and said 'no' with my finger. He came to me and asked, "Why are you not coming when I call you?" I said, "I am with my wife. You are pointing the finger at me as if I am your wife." He said, "Show me your ID card!" I gave it to him. He looked at it and then he started saying some things. They did not behave well.

The Serbs, to be honest, had more power but they were not fair to the others. They were taking the food and drinks from women. The situation was pretty bad. They started the war. I would ask all the Serbs I had in high school, "Why did you put all these checkpoints? What are you preparing for?" and they would tell me, "You should look at your own business.", "Man, but this is not okay. What are you doing?" I went to school with them, and so I was free to talk to them. Whoever had some kind of possession, they would take it away from them.

I was working as a taxi driver at that time, I was going everywhere. In '98, the KLA caught me at the bus station at one o'clock after midnight. I was waiting for a man to come by bus from Podgorica. The bus would arrive at two o'clock after midnight. They came in a jeep, they were wearing masks, "Give us an ID card! Lay down on the ground." I said to myself, "They are going to kill me."



They left my ID card on my back, I don't know where they went and what they did. They left me on the ground. After a while, I stood up, looked around but there was no one there. I took my ID card, took my car and I went for a drink, the passenger that I was waiting for arrived, I took him and we left. Why did they let me go? They saw that I am clean, that I am not involved in politics. Today no one is stupid. They have university degrees, people are smart. When you are righteous, no one will harass you. Whoever says otherwise is lying.

When we came from Belgrade to Mitrovica, one day I sent my daughter to buy bread at the bakery. When she came back, she said: "Dad, I am afraid to go buy bread because of the people here". And those were our people, the Roma. I told her, "We are the same as them." And she said, "No, no, they are dirty." I could not convince her. She said, "Dad, I'm afraid to buy bread for us. I'm afraid to go near those people." And so I went and I bought the bread. My children didn't go to school. They didn't speak Albanian. All of my children were born and grew up in Belgrade and they didn't know how to speak the Albanian language.

In '98 my eldest son died. As soon as he died, I left my wife and children, and after burying my son in Mitrovica I went to Italy. I was imprisoned in Italy for two and a half years, and in 2002 I came here to Podgorica. So, since 2002 I have been living here.

Nobody ever did anything bad to me in Kosovo, except for my daughter that was killed. My wife told me because I was in contact with her. She went out with children, my older aunt was there, she helped them. They went to the Serbian area, they went to Leposavic. Then they put her on the bus. They wanted to take her by bus to the Peja region. My wife asked them, "Where are you taking me with all these children?" Those Serbs asked her, "Show us your ID card. What are you doing in Serbia?" My wife knew how to get out of difficult situations. They saw that she had an ID card from Belgrade. "I am from Belgrade, my husband is from Mitrovica, I came here as a guest. Where are you taking me?" They let my wife go. She went out in Leposavic. She stayed there for a while, then some of my friends found her number for me.

I told her to come to Podgorica, but she didn't know how to come because she didn't travel much. I said, "Just take the bus to Podgorica. In a few days, I will get out of the prison." When I came out from the prison, you know what I was seeing? Tents were all over the place, a complete disaster. They built some barracks in Podgorica. Those barracks were terrible, the rats would come to the trash cans. We stayed there until we moved into the apartment. When we moved to the apartment, I started

crying out of joy. I said to myself, human life is bath, hygiene, and cleanliness. We moved here in 2005.

During the war in '99, a few months before the bombing started, my wife went to the market. She took with her two of our daughters. One daughter was five years old, and the other seven. One was called Elizabeta, the other Elvira. A bomb exploded in the market. My five-year-old Elizabeta was killed there, and seven-year-old Elvira was wounded on both of her legs. Twenty-one years have passed. I would like to thank the brothers who came and got interested in my daughter, and I would like to thank the journalists who called me from Kosovo and got engaged to put her name and correct date of birth on the memorial plaque, and I believe they did. I would like to thank them and greet them. I have never been involved in politics, I have never owed anything to anyone. But anyway, it was wartime. Everyone lost something, both on your side and on our side.

I know who threw the bomb and I know the person, there is no need to say who he is. He was an Albanian, but he didn't kill on purpose my child. He would have protected them, but it just happened. That bomb exploded and my daughter died. My other daughter had undergone several operations for several years.

I'm not saying that someone intentionally killed my daughter. She was hit and she died, but to be honest with you I am a little bit angry that 21 years have passed and no Kosovo association ever thought of coming to ask me what happened and how it happened.

Elizabeta was killed in '99, I was in prison and they didn't tell me. I was told by an Albanian from Albania, from Vlora, his nickname was Qorri. He said, "Rrahim, I will tell you something, just don't tell anyone that I told you", because there were some people from Mitrovica there. He said, "I think that one of your daughters died and another one was wounded in '99." I asked him, "Are you crazy?" and he said "Rrut, do you have a daughter called Elizabeta and an Elvira Hasani" And there and then I found out what happened.

When I left the prison, I met my family. They were staying at a place in Italy, but no one wanted to take them in, they were staying there at a place, I forgot the name where they were staying. I had Italian documents, a driving license, and an identity card. From here we took two vans and we took off and went there. And there I saw all my family members, my brothers, sisters-in-law, children, everybody was there.

I took them out of there, because my sister and nephew had a big apartment, because in Europe they provide you with a residence based on square meters, so we took them from there. Some wanted to go to Belgium, others to France. We went and left them all across Europe. I decided to stay here in Podgorica as long as I am alive. My mother died and she was buried in France. Also, one of my sisters died in France.

In the beginning, here in Podgorica, they were giving us aid every week. They provided us with food and drinks. They were bringing it with trucks. We never suffered for food or drinks, only the place where we stayed was not good. Some Italians were working there, and I started chatting with them. I had it better than the others. I socialized with the Italians, I spoke Italian well and I had a good time with them.

Elvira was wounded on both legs; she had many scars. She had undergone seven or eight surgeries, the kind that was removing skin from the side and filling the wound. She was skinny at the time but as time was passing, she gained weight more and more. If you would see her legs today, you would say, "This girl is lying, she was never wounded." She was wounded on both sides; you could see her bone on both sides. Her flesh recovered and she got better. I always thought about whether she would find a man who would accept her with those scars. And yes, God willing, she healed well, she is now married and she is a mother of three children. She lives nearby here, in the neighborhood. She has a good life; she is doing well.

When my wife told me about Elizabeta, she said, "It was March, very cold, I couldn't let them at home because the fireplace was burning, I couldn't leave little children there. I took them with me, I wanted to do some shopping and to return home". When they went into the marketplace, she bought what she needed, and she left the bag with two children. She told them, "Stay here because you might get lost in the crowd." From that place, like a warehouse, only cheese is sold there, my wife went on the other side where vegetables are sold and then the bomb exploded. It was in a black bag. My wife told me, as people started running away, you could see people's fingers in the wires. It was a big bomb. Elizabeta was on the ground, and the bomb ripped the flesh from Elvira's legs. Those people that were running away, ran over Elizabeta when she fell. No one has told me this, but logic tells me. She died terribly, but what can I do? I guess that was her fate.

The army helicopter came and took both of them, they took them to the hospital in Prishtina. Elizabeta passed away. Elvira stayed there for about three days, the doctors operated on her legs and then they sent her back

to Mitrovica. Also, my wife was in the hospital at that time. She had an operation; they found some stones. Both mother and daughters were in the hospital. My late mother took care of my youngest children. She took care of them because no one else could do it since I was in prison.

Elizabeta was buried by my neighbors from the Factory Street where we lived. By our people. She died in Mitrovica and she was buried in Mitrovica. Now they say that they put a memorial plaque at that place, a journalist informed me.

Some 12-13 years ago I took all my family members and I went from here to Kosovo. I wanted to see where my daughter was killed, but there was no memorial plaque. They put the plaque later. I asked for a document from the Albanians, no one gave it to me, also the Serbs didn't give me anything. I went there for nothing.

I am a parent. When they put the memorial plaque without the name of my daughter, I felt bad. You can't lie to yourself. A child is a child. I felt terrible because she was killed, and no association in Kosovo didn't get interested to ask me, "Do you need help, Rrahim?" You are the first people to ask about my daughter in all these 21 years. I was disappointed because all the people from my generation knew me: Rroti, the guitarist from Mitrovica. I felt bad how no one asked me anything. If I had the power, I would take out the body and bring her here close to her mother and sister. If I could I wouldn't leave her there.

Once they came, I think it was in 2004, to talk to me about coming back. It was a girl who knew me, she used to be my neighbor. "Rrahim," she said, "your place is in Mitrovica." I said, "I will not return. You know me, you know my life, I will not return." She went, and others came. They were saying, you need to have the documents, I don't know what they were saying. I said, "Brother, stop with all these lies. We can't have two documents, both from Kosovo and Serbia." They were saying, "Rrahim, we will find you an office job and we promise when your son grows up he will be a police officer". I said, "No, I will not return." They begged me to come back plus they promised me an 800 euros salary. This is what I was told, but I didn't want to. I stayed here. I am working as a translator from the Italian language.

Like how everyone who has a mother knows, I don't want to talk about the pain that Elizabeta's mother suffered for her child. Everyone intelligent knows what pain the mother suffers. My wife died in 2015, in the seventh month. We buried her on the day of Eid. Suddenly she was out of breath. We drove her to the hospital. For two days she lived connected to devices at the hospital, on the third day we were informed that she passed away.

She was my friend. We never argued with her. I had a good relationship with her. Whenever she argued with me, I would go out for about 15-20 minutes. I would tell her, "Here is the wall, fight with the wall". I would get out, when I would come back in, she would pour me coffee and apologize to me. I never hit her. I loved her, we had a good relationship. She was very beautiful. She had green eyes.

She suffered a lot for my son who died in '98 in a traffic accident, she suffered a lot for him because she loved my eldest son very much. After he died, my wife's health started declining, she started getting ill, she was upset, she smoked a lot, she was sad because she raised him herself. When my 31-year-old died, he left a wife and four children. Afterward his wife remarried somewhere in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. They took my grandchildren, and now my eldest granddaughter got married.

Then the thing with Elizabeta happened, and also my other daughter got ill, Selvie, and she couldn't go anywhere without her. They were inseparable, wherever she went she would take her too.

As a father, I couldn't wash anymore my 38-year-old daughter in the bathroom. A wise father doesn't do it. I asked my youngest daughter, Tereza. I said, "Daddy can't wash her anymore." She said, "No problem." Also, Jasmina washed her. I would put her clothes in a bag, she would understand and she would go to her sister for a bath. Then my youngest daughter took care of her for five or six months.

But she had diabetes, and I didn't know as a parent that she has diabetes. Sugar killed her. She didn't know how to tell us, the sugar level went up to 40, the doctors then found out. Because of diabetes, she died. She died five months ago, not even five months.

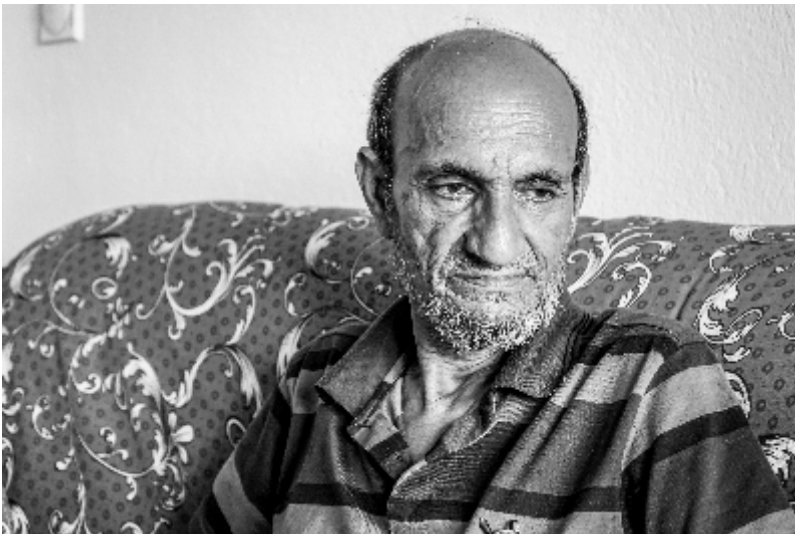
It's hard for me because I see the bed where she used to sleep and it's empty now. I can't sleep at night; I am alone with four walls. There is nothing I can do. You cannot fight against time. Sometimes the girls come, "Dad, take these ten euros, take these twenty euros". They don't have it for themselves. I am living one day at a time. I don't spend too much. I don't worry at all, things are good. You cannot escape your fate. Unfortunately, now I am having some health problems with my legs, and it's a little harder for me to get out and earn some money because when I was healthy, I earned myself.

I got some liquid in my legs and suddenly my legs started swelling. I was watering some flowers at the mosque. Early in the morning I would go and open the mosque, water the flowers and I would also wash my legs. I

thought that cold water was refreshing my legs, but I was making my bones cold and I got rheumatism. I removed 28 liters of water from my body. When that liquid was removed, I got paralyzed. I couldn't walk at all for four months, I only stayed inside these four walls. Just when that isolation period started, but thank God, I had a Muslim brother here. When I needed to, I just called him on the messenger, and he would come in a minute, he was there for me for everything I needed, for food, for drinks. God willing, now I am standing on my feet and I am walking a little.

I would like it if my daughter's grave would be fixed. To fix it there in Mitrovica. Her name is Elizabeta Hasani. She is buried on the Serbian side, near the road that goes to Zvecan, on the left. Also my father is there, Ramadan Hasani. His tombstone is there. Ten meters above from there are my brothers Nezir Hasani and Ramadan Hasani. Just below my father's grave is the grave of a son I had who died at a very young age. And then there is Elizabeta's grave. I wish someone could fix her grave properly, maybe put a tombstone because I'm certain that she doesn't have one. I would be thankful if anyone could do that for me.





**Rrahim  
Hasani**

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## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences

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I dream of Albulena. There was a store nearby our house and she would tell me, "Dad, I bought cigarettes for you because I see that you need one." She was fast like a butterfly; she would go fast and return even faster. Without lighting the cigarette, without ending the cigarette, she would come.

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## Sabri Kelmendi

Born into a poor family with eleven siblings, going abroad, and working hard as a teenager, Sabri, now 61 years old, has experienced a lot in his life.

Also, during the war, Sabri had terrible experiences. Sabri joined the KLA and he exchanged fire with the Serbian army while transporting the family on a tractor trailer while going towards the border; he saw his own daughter die from a shot on her forehead; he sheltered his wounded mother, wife, and other family members who were injured by a mortar. He went to look for help, but when he returned, he never found them again; he was caught as a prisoner of war; he was held in prison and tortured; he returned only to find his house completely destroyed and the surviving children sick.

Today, while coping with heart problems, he tries to support the family members of his three brothers and his cousin, who are no longer alive.

# My daughter's name is Albulena

Sabri Kelmendi



My name is Sabri Kelmendi, I was born in Lutogllava on April 19th, 1960. I lived in Lutogllava for about thirty years and then I moved here, in village Zallq, Municipality of Istog, where I bought some land. I built a house on that land. My life has been difficult because we were always mistreated and we didn't have enough capital. My father had eleven children. He worked hard in order to take care of us. I was 16 years old when I went abroad in order to support my father. I worked for some time in Montenegro, then I went to Slovenia, five years I spent in Libya, three or four years in Austria. I worked up until recently. Life was quite hard for us.

I had a mother, seven brothers, and three sisters. Now have four brothers and three sisters. I got married twice. I had four children, two daughters and two sons with my first wife. With the second wife, I have two daughters. Now my family has eight members, I live with two sons, two daughters, and my daughter-in-law.

I finished primary school at the "Rilindja" school in village Tresenik. As soon as I finished school I went to work in Titograd, Montenegro. I worked there in construction, we were building houses. In Libya, I guarded the hospital patients. In Austria again I worked in construction. Here, too, I worked in construction. I used to build houses. I still work in that profession, but now I am quite old so I don't dare anymore to climb high.

I was wounded, I have some problems with my heart, and I have a blocked vein so I need to take medicine. I take care of my brother's wife and my cousin's wife, and also the children help them, they support them.

We had a poor life when I was a child. We worked whatever we could and we also worked the land. When I grew up, I went abroad and I took my brother with me. From that moment things were a little bit better until the war started. During the war we did some good things, we bought some land, things started getting lively for us but again everything was destroyed. Now times have changed and we are doing something else.

I got married when I turned 27 years old. I saw my wife, we talked with each other and her parents agreed. I had a good life with my wife and we did everything together. But she lived a short life, they didn't let her live long.

The birth of our first daughter, Albulena, was our first joy. She was a very beautiful and smart girl. Then Albana was born, then Egzon and Veton at the end. I took good care of them. I worked hard and I was pretty good at it because I could afford everything for my children – they all went to schools and they had clothes, they had everything. They didn't suffer as we did when we were children, because we were too many children and my father had little land.

My brother Bajram and I, went abroad to work, and we helped all our brothers and sisters to get married. The two of us made the entire family capital, both for ourselves and our brother and for the whole family. Also now the situation is not bad. Even now we work a bit, but when your heart is broken it's very hard to feel fulfilled.

Before the war in Dukagjin started, there was some exchange of fire in Drenica when the police stations were being attacked. We suffered some torture here, up until Commander Stajković came because he used to work at Police Station in Gurakovc. My little brother Beka was abused a

lot and so was I. Before the war started in Dukagjin, we were tortured three or four times here.

Once I was digging a well and as soon as I reached the water, they interrupted me. "You're not allowed to work!" and I asked them, "How do you mean I can't work on my own land?" They said, "Shut up!" but I didn't shut up. They kept me locked for 24 hours because I wouldn't shut up even if they would have killed me. I was digging a well on my own land! They went afterward and they closed the well with an excavator.

Later, the war broke out in Dukagjin, where Ramush was located. I was involved, but illegally. No one knew about it. I participated wherever was needed in the Istog area and up to Glogjan. Until the war started at our place in village Lutogllava. I remember once we were ambushed, and we fought with them all day long on May 6th, 1998, from 6 in the morning until 5 in the evening. Until 3 o'clock we even fought face to face with them. When they saw that they couldn't break us, they surrounded us from Malushgana and they bombed us from Deçan direction. Then we were forced to leave because we couldn't hold the line anymore, otherwise, they would have destroyed us completely. We left Zllaq and we headed towards the east and there I joined the 133rd Brigade of "Adrian Krasniqi".

When I went home, I saw my family members at home. Stajkovic came with a group of twenty policemen and he said, "You must leave Zllaq because you are terrorists. You have five minutes." They forced us to go out, we couldn't take anything with us. We got on the tractors and started going towards village Staradran. My brother Beka and I were on one of the tractors. Beka was driving and I was protecting him and my cousin Gani was driving the other tractor.

We took the road with the tractors. As soon as we entered village Tersenik we heard the pistol shooting at us. I was above the tractor. I had the bullets above the tractor. I got off the tractor, took my pistol, and returned fire. When I started shooting back, they got scared. Beka drove the tractor and I was in the back shooting at them and they were shooting at us. But their bullets couldn't do anything to us. They didn't want to let us pass, they wanted to catch us alive. We fought back until we passed the range of the bullets. When they realized that they can't catch us, they took the mortars which can shoot up to a kilometer and a half away. They shot at the tractor with a mortar in the middle of the road in village Tersenik. Everybody who was in the tractor driven by my

cousin got killed. And in our tractor, I just saw when they hit the trailer of the tractor where my mother, my daughter Albulena, my wife Fata, Beka, his wife, Bahrija and Bledari were located. And in the tractor of my cousin were Gani, Rinor, and Qerimi, my uncle.

Then the bombing started. Some 10-15 grenades exploded. I removed the victims from the tractors and I hid them behind some fertilizer. My wife was still alive, but she was grievously wounded in the stomach area. I put the tractor in the middle of some oak trees, and I put on it whatever I could save. I left them behind a fertilizer because on the other side bullets were flying. My daughter was shot and instantly killed. She was shot in the forehead with the first bullet they shot. On her forehead. Bahria was alive and she was also wounded in the stomach area. My mother was also alive when I put her down on the ground. She was wounded in the chest area. I was wounded on the neck and near the eye.

I told my mother, "I will take you and put you in one of the rooms" because there was a house nearby that was still not set on fire. She said, "No, my dear. Don't touch me. If you move me, I will die." I went to see Fata and then Bahria. Beka was a little stronger than them, and he said, "I will try to come back myself because if they catch me, they will kill both of us."

My mother was saying, "Son, give me some water, please give me some water." I didn't dare give her any water. I knew that she is going to die because you get thirsty when you lose blood. Bahria was also asking for water and I couldn't give her any water.

I decided to go to village Trubohoc to find a doctor. I wanted to take my mother and my wife with me but they didn't accept because they were bleeding. At 11 o'clock at night, I left from there. I couldn't see where I was walking. I went out to find a doctor, or maybe something to carry the wounded. When I arrived in Trubohoc there was no one there. And then when I tried to come back, I couldn't because the Serbs had taken them.

After this, I spent the night in Staradran. On May 8th, they formed the column, we entered the column of people which was going from Staradran to Klina and then to Albania. When we arrived in village Zllaq, the Serbian police recognized me. I had my little son Veton with me and I was holding him on my neck because I was trying to hide my wound on the neck with his legs. I was also holding him because he couldn't walk. But as soon as they saw me, they shouted, "Come here!" At that moment

both of my brothers and Ramadan stopped as well. People continued walking and we were taken to prison.

I was tortured in prison, I was beaten and abused. They even wanted to kill me because they recognized me. Also, before the war, I didn't get along with them. They took us to Glogovac and then to Peja and for a month they kept us in Peja. When I was being beaten up, for two minutes I would sweat because of the heat. Afterward, I would put the wet towel on my body and in two minutes it would dry up.

That day when the agreement was signed, they took us to Leskovac and they kept us there for two months. Two of my brothers, Ramadan, two-three other persons from the village, and myself. There were many of us. Some 150 came out that day. Even along the road, they did everything they could to us. Ramadan was on the other bus and they made him eat a soap. When we crossed the border, the buses would stop and they would open the doors for children to come inside and beat us, "Come in and beat them!" The children were beating us.

We have suffered great torture. When I got out of the prison, I weighed about 42 kilograms. When I came home, my father was talking to me and he asked me, "Where is Sabri?" I told him, "Dad, it's me. I am Sabri." I lost a lot of weight because in prison they would give us food only so we would survive and not die. When the day came to let us go, they brought half a bread for each of us. They said, "Eat some bread because we will send you to another prison". They didn't tell us that they were letting us go. Afterward, we understood that they were giving us food so we would not collapse when we get out in front of the International Red Cross.

When we got out from the prison, after we entered the buses, an Albanian translator told me, "They are taking you somewhere far." I joked a bit and asked him, "In a worse prison?" and then he asked all of us, "Who among you smokes here?" No one dared to speak a word. I was exhausted and I said, "I want a smoke." He gave me a cigarette and then he said, "Don't worry, you can smoke on the bus." And then the translator said to me, "Do you know where you are going? Do you know that you are free?" I said, "It is not true." He said, "It's true, we are going to Kosovo."

Then he got up and he asked everyone once again, "Who wants a cigarette?" Nobody responded! He then told me, "Stand up and tell them!" I said, "You tell them because I can't tell them." Then he said, "You are all going to Kosovo. Your prison time has finished, Kosovo was liberated".



He then went and gave a pack of cigarettes to everybody. "Smoke all of it, all the way to Kosovo." That was the moment we realized that we were free. That day, when I came back from the prison, my family returned from Albania. We came home at the same time.

When we came back all the houses were burned, there was no place to put the children in. The Red Cross gave me a mattress. The children slept on it and I stayed awake all night long. Someone made a tent, others something else, we started to repair a room because they were completely burned. In fact, we still didn't finish repairing our house but it's not bad.

I don't know what happened to my family members which were injured that night. I don't know what they did to them. Beka was wounded there and the regular army came and first they wanted to get rid of them, to kill them all. Beka's daughter was also there wounded and also my mother-in-law was there, she couldn't walk at night. The army took Beka, his daughter, and the mother-in-law and they took them to the hospital in Peja. Initially, they wanted to kill them but their commander didn't allow them. From there they took Beka to Rozhaje because he begged them to get out. Beka told me afterward, "They would put the knife on my neck, so I begged them - you either kill me or take me away from here. Because they wanted to cut me." Then he said, "They took me to Rozhaje." He recovered a little in Rozhaje and then he returned here but he was severely wounded on his leg. He walked by using crutches.

As soon as I got out of the prison, I started looking for them everywhere I could. One day I went to Peja municipality and I asked the mayor Agim Çeku, "Can you tell me if there is any grave of my family?" He said, "Kelmendi's are in Peja, at the new graves". And so, I went to that location and I found them just as I lost them, I found all the graves and, on the graves, it was written: "Lutogllave, Lutogllave, Lutogllave, Lutogllave".

At that time Tahir Dema was responsible for the protection of human rights and freedoms. He took a team of doctors with him and they went to exhume the graves, but how could we recognize them based on the photos when the buried bodies in two months change a lot. We took the bodies, thinking they are our family members and we buried them in village Lutogllava. We raised a memorial stone and then, two years later, UNMIK came and said, "We have to exhume them because they were taken by mistake." What were we supposed to do? Accept it or not? They took our blood for analysis. They told us, "If they are yours, they will be



returned, if not they will not be returned." But, in the end, they were not our family members.

Then they brought the body of my uncles Gani and uncle Nican. They were brought from Batajnica. The other family members are still missing.

I was once in the Prishtina morgue, looking at some clothes to see if they match with my daughter's clothes or my wife's clothes. But I couldn't tell, I was unable to do it. Some clothes seemed to belong to my daughter and I said, "They look similar to me, but I could be wrong because my child was covered in blood." They visited us; they took information from us in order to find them but nothing happened.

Nobody was found, neither Albulena, nor my mother, nor my wife, nor Bahria, nor Bledari, nor Rinori none of them.

I often wonder how different our lives would be if they were still alive. Once my wife told me that our daughter said, "I am afraid that they will massacre us." This was two days before the war started. She was only eleven years old but she was very smart. I imagine that now Albulena would have been a member of the parliament or a minister. There was no better student than her.

I remember once I was working with my wife. Albulena had fallen asleep and when she woke up, she already missed the first two classes at school. When she woke up, I said, "Don't go to school today. You already lost two classes." When I went out, my wife said to me, "Our daughter is drowning in tears. Why did you tell her not to go to school?" and I said "But she has only two more classes, and then she will be released home" and then I told her, "If she wants to attend those two last classes, I don't mind." and she really went. She loved school very much.

I remember Fata once said that there would be no life for us. The first house they burned in the village was our house. My wife was scared and she said, "We will never be able to rebuild another house." I told her, "First let's win our freedom, and then in the name of God, we will build a new house and we will have everything." She said, "Don't go to fight, our house has been destroyed, if you get killed then who will take care of the children?" I said, "Don't worry, even if I get killed the house will be built, I will not stop fighting." and you see at the end what I went through. I was almost killed same as my wife and my entire family. We would not win the freedom otherwise. Without the bloodshed and without our hearts being broken, freedom does not come.

And my mother ... no one can replace my mother; my mother was the pillar of my life. I remember her telling us, "Don't go to war" because all of my brothers went to war, except for Isa, the eldest brother who stayed at home. We told him, "Stay here and try to transfer as many as you can." My mother used to say, "It's enough if only two of you go to war, not all of you", but we had a very strong father. My father used to say, "All of you should go, it doesn't matter even if all of you get killed, we must face the enemy."

My cousins told me, "In Albania, your father forgot about the deceased members of the family because of you and your brothers." And when I came out of the prison, my father asked me about Isa and Bajram. He said, "Are they alive?" I said, "Yes, father, they are alive but they are in prison." He said, "It doesn't matter even if they keep them in prison for ten years, as long as they are alive." My father had many worries in his life. Many members of his family died at the same time.

When I came out of prison, I tried to comfort him because he was an old man, I would tell him, "Dad, don't worry, we finally got our freedom." and he would say, "Yes, my son, yes, but there is a big cave in my heart." I knew it myself, but I was trying to comfort him.

We suffered a lot. It was a wicked war for the whole of Kosovo; some have suffered a lot and others didn't suffer at all. Eleven members of our family are gone and that is just too much, war has devoured them.

These three brothers, who have died, were all teachers. Bajram, the second brother, also worked a bit together with me in construction. Beka used to deal with trading. We were doing well, we helped all of our brothers, we built houses for them but they all got burned in the war.

Bajram was wounded during the war and he had two bullets in the leg. One bullet was removed but they didn't dare to remove the second bullet and from there he got cancer and later he died. Isa died because of prison torture and cancer. Beka was tormented by the torture he endured in prison and his heart betrayed him. All three of them left families behind. And, by God, I also have to take care of Beka's family members because even when he was alive, he could hardly walk using crutches. He was disabled when he got married. We always had to give him money. He left behind a son and a daughter because he was married for the second time and now, I have to take care of his son until the boy grows up. The boy is now 15 and in two or three years I hope that he will get a proper job.

Ramadan, my cousin, also has a young son who is 16 years old now, and it would be great if we could find him an easy job because he is still a young man. Ramadan had older daughters and two of them got married.

The children that were on the tractors, Albulena, Bledari, and Rinor were all dead when we took them off the tractor. I have no hope that we will ever find them. As for my mother and my wife, I think that maybe the bones will appear somewhere because they were a little older. I don't think that my mother, my wife, and Bahrija are alive, since my two uncles and my cousin were found in Batajnica, Serbia, in the graveyard. They must be buried somewhere in Serbia. I heard that they burned the children in ovens, to delete traces of war crimes. Because a child is a child, there is no law that will protect you if you kill a child, nor is there any law to kill a civilian, but in a war, nobody asks about this.

I wish my daughter was alive and I believe she would become a member of the parliament at least. If my mother were alive, I would tell her, "Mom, look what the Serbs did to us but we will find a way". I would tell my wife, "Here is the new house, because you were crying about it." These would be the messages I would give them, and I would tell them, "Take care of the children and raise them now in freedom", I would tell this to my wife and Bahria.

I dream of Albulena. There was a store nearby our house and she would tell me, "Dad, I bought cigarettes for you because I see that you need one." She was fast like a butterfly; she would go fast and return even faster. Without lighting the cigarette, without ending the cigarette, she would come. "How did you go so fast to the store?", "I went on foot, father". "And you came back so soon?" "Yes." I once had a dream about this. And, very often I dreamt of her going to school.

Today, when I see Albulena's friends, they are so tall and two of them are now working in the municipality. They mentioned her very often, "If Albulena was alive, she would be working with us because she was smarter than us", they tell me.

When I returned from prison almost at the same time also the rest of my family came from Albania. When I saw the children, Albana, Egzon, and Veton, they all had rashes because they slept on the street or in tents. They had some kind of rash; I don't know what it was. I had to take them to the doctor in Peja, actually, the Italian KFOR intervened and the children were cured.

My son Egzon got some lung illness, because of all the suffering. He was also on the tractor that day. He was young but he remembers, he knows that he doesn't have a mother, he knows that he doesn't have a sister, he knows all of that. I took care of him and today he is well and healthy.

I remember I hardly walked after being tortured by the Serbs. In my life, I never had any rest. I rushed to find a doctor for the children, I continuously searched for the missing family members, I went through the burying and exhumation of the bodies, making of the memorials, repairing the burned houses. I've had lots of trouble in my life.

When we came, the children were little and someone needed to provide them with food, to wash them, and I couldn't do it myself because I had to work, I had to provide a shelter for them, a place to sleep somewhere. So, I decided to get married again. My father said, "You either get married or get out of my house. Do you want me to raise your children?" So, I decided to get married.

I went to Xhemila's family together with a friend and I asked for her hand. I was very straightforward with her and in presence of her family members I said, "I would never get married if I wouldn't have three children, if you take care of them as if they were your children then we are getting married and we are going to have a happy life, otherwise we're not getting married". If I didn't have these children, I would have never married. Then her mother said to me, "May God bless them in Paradise. And if my daughter doesn't look after the children, leave her. You need to get married, you are still young." I was 39 years old. I got married well, in 2003, and thank goodness she raised these children as if they were her own. She is very close to them. They go to our school clean, they come back clean, and she always helps everyone with their lessons and with everything else. She took care of them.

After a year and two-three months of marriage, we had our first child with my second wife. Now we have two daughters. The first daughter is called Albulenë. I named her after the daughter I lost. My wife wanted to give her that name. I named the second daughter Arjeta.

The young Albulena studies a lot. Now she attends the faculty in Prishtina for social sciences, and she is receiving the best grades at the faculty. She reminds me a lot of the other Albulena. She is very smart and she is very dedicated to studying.

Nowadays I can't complain. I'm working a bit, my son is working and my daughters are helping me as well. It's not bad, also my sons are helping me. We are living as best as we can. The new generation is not properly employed in Kosovo, their salaries are small, but luckily we still have our land and we are somehow managing with the help of agriculture.

During the war, there were both the army and paramilitary forces. That day when they shot at us, I saw them, the army forces were positioned waiting for the columns of people. They tried to liquidate everyone with bullets, but when I shot back they started hiding because I shot as much as I could at them. It would have been better if they caught me rather than catching those on the tractor. They didn't dare shoot at us until we went away for a kilometer and when we reached the meadow. Then they shot at us with grenades because they realized that they can't stop us.

I don't know what their names were. I know that a person named Sejković, a police colonel, was very committed to attack Lutogllava because he has known for a long time that we are ready to fight back. Then he took the initiative. For a month he was making plans on how to surround us. We were guarding all night long, until May 6th, when there was no other option and when we all went out.

We sought justice at EULEX many times. We gave them names, we gave everything, but they were just telling us, "We will look into it, this and that". Nothing concrete from them. We also tried with KFOR.

Then they brought the Serbs here. They returned them after the war, about seven or eight years ago. They made tents for them. We protested, in a month we had three protests. Dell, the American ambassador, and the mayor Hajredin Kuqi, and Beqir Shala all came to see me. I told them, "You don't need to build them houses. We will give them our own houses and we will leave from here." and Dell said, "We also fought, but we have to reconcile." I told him, "These people killed my family, they shot at me in '99 in village Zllaq. If I would kill your family, would you accept me to be your neighbor?" He said, "Isn't there any way?" I said, "The only way is if we all give up and leave and let them come and live in our houses." He just told the KFOR commander, "Let's go". He said, "Sorry to bother you!" I said, "You are welcome to come anytime, but this is my condition, otherwise no." Next day the tents were removed. I didn't leave them alone; I threw them every night. How could I live with them here? When there are ten or eleven thousand slaughtered and families with five or six missing members, and you want to bring them to our door? Mr. Dell removed them from here because if it were for Hashim Thaçi they would never be removed.

We are going to seek justice until our missing members are found. I will never give up. Even if they are not found, we will never give up on them. Just to find out where they are. Were they burned, or just to receive some news about them?

Justice is needed here, but where can I find that justice? Since the state is in charge, why does it want a dialogue? Why do you need a dialogue with them? Forget about the dialogue! We won the war, they should return our missing family members, and then they will have a dialogue. They should do their job and we will do ours. Someone has to be held responsible for all the victims and the caused damage. They attacked us on our soil, we didn't go to attack them in Serbia. This is Albanian land; they have occupied it. They have colonies in Croatia, Bosnia, all around. Kosovo was colonized. We shed blood for this and now you expect us to go and have a dialogue? All these people are still missing, there are 1620 or 1630 persons still missing. There was so much torture, destruction, and murders here.

I hope we will become a proper state. It is easy to deal with the missing persons - the President or the Prime Minister, they just put their hand on their heart. But no one from the state ever knocked on my door and asked me, "Do you have an unemployed son? I will employ him." Nobody from the state ever came. Thank goodness we have this freedom, we don't have any foreigners' knocking on our heads. But, to be honest, I am not happy with our state. First of all, the Prime Minister should take into consideration the war martyrs. At least one of their family members should have been employed in the government. Even if they are uneducated, couldn't they work at least as a guard? They should find them a job somewhere. I have to find a connection in order to find a job for my son.

If the state doesn't fix these things, there is nothing to look forward to. They are changing like dogs, they stay in power for a year, or two, and then a new one comes, and each of them grabs as much as they can for themselves. That's why things are as they are. The state should prioritize these things. If it weren't for this blood that was shed, we would never be free. Never. Thanks to America because we didn't have weapons to fight with them properly. Even if Albania joined the war, it would have lasted long like in Palestine. America has saved us, but I am not satisfied with our people.

Finally, I would like to thank you as an organization for doing some good work in my opinion. A public wider than Kosovo should know. Kosovo knows, but foreigners should also know what happened here. The work

that you are doing has a good purpose because this history must be written somewhere.

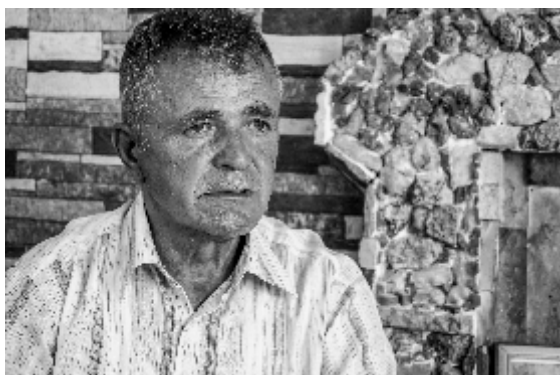
As for the state, at the moment I'm not expecting anything from them. I made a memorial stone, all with my own money. Some family members that live abroad helped us a bit. We placed it in Lutogllava. We have to maintain it because it can get damaged if you don't take care of it. And they make memorials only for their soldiers, or their relatives, friends, but not for the others. It's not in their interest.

Someone has to look after the population and see how they are living because the state as a state is moving forward, buildings are being built overnight and you must have money to build it. The buildings are being built very quickly. Someone became very rich, but it doesn't matter.

I heard that Clinton once told Rugova, "Can you fight the war for a week or not? Don't mention America for liberation, because in order to intervene, some blood must be shed. I can't intervene if no blood has been shed" And here blood was shed only for this land. I hope the following generations will cherish it in freedom.



# Sabri Kelmendi

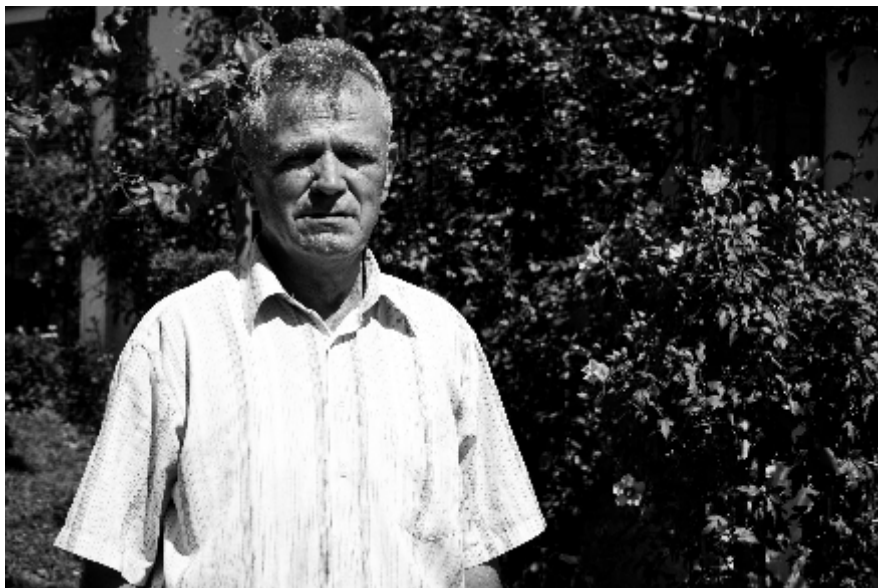






## Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences





I see them very often in my dreams. I see them coming and hugging me. When I was about to give birth to the second Adem, the first Adem came to me and hugged me, "Mom, I came. I will come again to this world, and you are upset, you are crying too much. Why are you crying? Adem is coming again to you."





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## Zojë Gashi

After they burned the village where Zoja lived with her husband, two daughters, and two sons, the whole family, after many vicissitudes, finally managed to move to Germany. With the decision of her husband, they returned after the war ended in order to rebuild their burned house and to start their life in Kosovo.

They lived a happy life until July 10th, 2005, when a landmine exploded on a mountain slope in front of their village. Three children were killed immediately on the spot. Zoja's son was one of them. The other son was seriously injured. He died a few days later in the hospital of Prishtina, right after his mother gave him the last hug.

Today, despite all the years that have passed, Zoja and her husband still suffer the trauma of losing both of their sons. Although they have returned to everyday life, and even though their family increased with two other boys, the pain of losing their children is something that even time is not healing.

# It will not go away until I join them

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Zojë Gashi



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My name is Zojë Gashi, Hoti was my maiden name. I come from village Dollova, I am 52 years old and I am married here in village Gremnik. I grew up in Dollovo, together with my father, mother, and siblings. I have four brothers and three sisters. In the past, we lived the same as everyone else did. Our father passed away early, so he left us when we were very young, we grew up with my mother taking care of us. Our living conditions were not bad. When my brothers grew up, some of them went to work abroad.

When I was 20 years old, I got engaged here in village Gremnik to Afrim Gashi. His village was not that far from mine, not even three kilometers. First, I met his sister and then later we got married.

We had a large family in village Dollova and everyone was very good. The majority of the people living in Dollovo village belong to the Hoti family. I grew up together with my uncle's family and my cousins. 30-40 years ago,

our living conditions were much different than now but still, we lived well.

I went to school for eight years in village Grabanica. Everybody from village Dollova went to the school in Grabanica village because we didn't have a school in our village. We went to the school on foot and we came back on foot, the distance was about five kilometers. For eight years we always went on foot. We didn't have buses or cars. For eight years I went to school and I had a lot of friends from the village. We went to school together and we had a good time at school.

My father was 40-45 years old when he married our mother. My father was an older person. He dealt with agriculture and he worked the land. In the past they planted tobacco. We used to help our father by sowing the land. He has educated us to the best of his ability. My sisters and I attended eight years of primary school and our brothers attended also the four years of high school. This is how it happened in the past; they didn't allow the girls to be educated. Only the primary school. I wanted to go to school because I was good at it. But my father was old and our living conditions were not so good. How was I supposed to travel to Klina? It was quite far from Dollova.

If I had been educated more, today I would have worked only in charity. I would help people in Kosovo. I always wanted to help people and do good deeds. Kosovo needs good things. Maybe I would have finished school for charity or something similar. But our living conditions were not good at the time.

My uncles were wealthier. So, in a way, our uncles raised us by helping our mother. One of the uncles went earlier to Germany and he helped us more. Because at the time it was hard for my mother with all the children, working the land and other things. But we grew up fine and we never had any problems with anyone.

My mother was a hardworking person. She comes from village Ceskova which is close to our Dollova. She got married to our father, God has given her children and they worked in the field until we grew up. We were closer to our mother, because when my father died when we were all very young. I was in the seventh grade. As a child, I was more attached to my father. My father loved me a lot, more than the boys because I was the first daughter after the boys. He always fulfilled all of my wishes. I would say to my mother, "Oh mother, I miss dad so much." After my

father died, we all became more attached to our mother. She worked hard and to the best of her ability she educated us and we didn't suffer for anything.

I had two uncles and an aunt. My aunt died very early. Our uncles did very well. I had an uncle in Germany and one here. At that time, they had lots of livestock so they were rich. I went very often to my uncle's place. My aunt lived nearby them and they took care of her.

After my father died my oldest brother took over and worked a lot. We had a tractor and he would sell gravel. We used to have an excavator and my brothers would transport with tractors gravel and sell it. They used it only for trade. After he finished with the army, the second brother went to Germany, because the eldest brother was also in Germany. After the war ended my mother was all alone so my brother Bajram returned from Germany. My sister, Mana, was in Kosovo after the war and she took care of our mother but then got married and she went to live in Germany, so my brother Bajram returned to take care of the mother.

All the other siblings went to Germany before the war. Only Mehmet, the younger brother, went after the war. The younger brother was supposed to get married in 2005, but when my children died, he didn't have a wedding at all. All my other brothers are abroad and even my older sister is living abroad.

My mother died eight years ago. It was hard for me. We were close to each other. She suffered a lot; she had many worries throughout her life. Our sister, Hanumshah lived in Klina and lost two children during the war. My mother and I grieved a lot. My mother and siblings cried a lot for our sister because her children were killed in the war. I never thought that I will lose my children too after the war.

My mother used to say, "This experience with your children has shortened my life for ten years." I lost both sons to landmines. My mother got so much worried that she suffered a heart attack. She was saying, "My heart is completely broken!" I guess this was our fate from God. Afterward, my mother died and Bajram remained all alone. He went to Peja and he lives and works there. Other brothers are living in Germany and they help us, they take care of us and they talk to us. Sometimes they even take us on vacation. I visited Germany two or three times, even Hanumshah did. We stayed there for five or six weeks. They took us there to forget about our worries a bit. I went there together with my daughters and they even took care of my younger daughter.

I met Afrim through a msit (wedding arranger). Afrim's sister saw me in village Dollova and she liked me. She told Afrim about me and then they arranged a meeting where she came together with Afrim and I came with my brother and sister. We all met in Klina. We met there and we liked each other. There and then we decided to get together and continue our life together.

My engagement day was very nice. I got engaged in village Dollove. My father-in-law came with his brother to take me and my brothers congratulated me. I got engaged in June and then unfortunately Afrim's father died in August. I got married on December 17th without a ceremony. They just came and took me. There was no wedding ceremony at all. They came in two cars, took me and I got married. My brothers said, "You're getting married". We were all very sad. Because my husband's father died at a young age, he was only 41-years-old.

When they came to pick me up, I cried all the way. I entered their car crying and I came out of the car crying. They wanted to make a big wedding, but God had different plans.

In December will be 31 years since we got married. Before we got married, we didn't meet each other. So, from that day when I met him for the first time until I got married, we didn't see each other. Times were such, they just wouldn't let us. They were saying it's shameful. But I never had any problems with Afrim. He is my friend, my husband, my everything. He understood me, we understood each other. We shared our sadness. He was the oldest child in his house, he lived there with his mother and brothers. His mother was young because Afrim was 22 years old when he got married. I got married in December, and in February I turned 21 years old. So, we were both young, but at that time everyone got married at a young age.

My eldest daughter, Merita, was born a year after we got married. She was the first joy in our family. They wanted the baby to be a boy because of their father. They were happy, but they were saying, "We wanted the baby to be a boy and give him our father's name". But God gave me a daughter. The child was healthy and everybody loved her and played with her. The baby helped them be cheerful again.

After a year and three months, I gave birth to my second daughter, Dafina.

After she was born, we went to Germany. Afrim's second brother from Germany said to my husband, "Take your wife, come here and stay for some years." We stayed there for two and a half years, a little less than three years. God gave me a boy in Germany. We named him Adem, the same as Afrim's father.

We had a good time in Germany. My husband didn't work too much. Their social assistance was very good. We had our apartment. But after their father died, two years have passed and Afrim as the oldest brother wanted to come back. And so, we did. After we came back, I got pregnant again and I had Ardit. Ardit was born '96. He was a good and healthy child. We were a very happy family; we didn't have any problems in our lives. I had good living conditions; I was the first bride in that house.

We had two boys and two girls and we were a happy family. The children grew up and all four of them were attending the school in Gremnik. They were good pupils, they all had good grades. They were smart children. They were very well educated. Adem was about to get in the seventh grade and Ardit in the fourth.

They didn't wait to learn their lessons at school, but they would learn the lessons before. They were very smart, the teachers were surprised, they would say, "These children are very intelligent." They were the first children in my husband's family and everyone worked with them a lot. We loved them, we had a good approach, we taught them, and we were dedicated. There were school programs that my children led at school. My sons went and performed a recital.

After Ardit was born in '96, we didn't have other children. The war started and the children grew up. We suffered a lot during the war. We heard that village Prekaz was on fire and also the village where I grew up, Dollova, was on fire. We went up the slope, and we could see how the houses were burning. My mother, sister, and my little brother Mehmet, who was a KLA soldier in village Këpuz, crossed the Drini River and they all came to my place. They came here to Gremnik, because there was nothing left to go to in Dollova. They burned everything there, even the cows, the houses, everything was destroyed.

My mother was sometimes in Klina, sometimes in Peja, she was staying at the relatives. We escaped and the war started. We managed to stay for a month in the village, continuously hiding. The KLA started fighting with the Serbs. They were near us, at the turn to Gjakova, at a slope. From



there they could see all of us crystal clear. The fight started and then they told us, "If you don't leave the village in an hour or two, we will destroy the village."

We left our houses carrying the cribs and children's clothes at 4:30 in the morning, as soon as the dawn started. My brother-in-law, father-in-law, and my husband grabbed everything they could and we left. We immediately left going through the forest and fields trying to reach village Sfërkë.

We have spent a week or maybe ten days in village Sfërkë. Some family members would go during the night to get flour or children's clothes because the second floor of the house was completely burned. But then it was already impossible to return anymore because everything turned to ashes. Both houses, garages, everything we had were completely burned.

In village Sfërkë we had our cousins and we stayed at their place. Then the shooting started there as well. We could hear the grenades in village Gremnik. We had to run away from there as well. We went to village Panovc and we slept there for two days together with the children. We ate some food and had some water. My brothers and brothers-in-law in Germany were telling us, "Get out from there for the sake of the children. Don't stay there anymore."

We went from village Panovc to Drenovc, which is located in the Malisheva municipality. We stayed there for a week or ten days. From Drenovc we found the road which goes to Prishtina, and we went to Komoran. At that time the Serbian police occupied Komoran so we went to some village called Negovc. We went there during the night, walking slowly on the asphalt. From Prishtina we went to Albania. We passed car after car and together with our four children we went to Vlora, where we stayed for a week. After a week we left Vlora, we risked and we went to Italy. Together with our four children during the night, we boarded a motorboat with 60 people in it. We traveled all night long and we arrived in Italy at 6 or 7 in the morning.

The Italian police stopped us, we showed them our IDs and they didn't cause us any problems. They said, "Okay, you may pass." They knew that we are escaping from war, we told them how much we have suffered. Afrim's brother sent us some money. From Italy, we found the train connection to France. I had some cousins in France, and from there they took us to Germany.

We stayed for more than a year in Germany. I had three brothers living in Germany, near the border with France. And my cousins were living at the border between France and Germany. My cousins took me straight to my brothers. We slept there, and then we applied for asylum. They took us to that place where we were for the first time, before the war, in Ravensburg, at the border with Konstanz, Switzerland. They found us on the computer and they said, "You were here before, you should go there." We stayed there together with our four children. We didn't suffer, the German state helped us with everything.

But such was our fate and my husband returned to Kosovo. People started going back after the war ended. My husband said, "I am the eldest, I must go, my young brothers will not come." My husband came here three months before the rest of us, because he said, "I need to repair our place" because everything was burned. As they say, we started everything from scratch, we didn't have anything.

My mother-in-law stays in a tent in the yard until my husband came back. My husband repaired the first floor, he covered it with some plastic cover so that snow wouldn't enter. I came three months later in the middle of the winter. After the war we received aid. That first year was a disaster. My sons and the husband were working all the time and they were repairing one room at a time.

I spoke to my second sister, Hanumshah, who lost two children, who were killed by a grenade in village Obri. I met my sister at my mother's house in village Dollove, she came from Obria to Klina. We all cried and wept. My sister's condition was miserable. We couldn't talk for an hour or two, so we wept with each other. She was grieving, she lost two children, our mother was worried sick, also I was when I was in Germany. We wept and cried but there was nothing we could do. You have to continue with your life. There is nothing harder in life. After some time, my sister started living in a house nearby. We visited each other, we talked and talked. I always cried because of my sister's fate.

My children immediately started attending the school in Gremnik. Everything went well. My daughters finished the eighth grade and then they enrolled in a high school in Klina. The boys were here in Gremnik, the school was nearby, they were well educated.

After the war ended, KFOR would come and check the yard, they were saying "You can enter the school without any problems". Because the

school in Gremnik was not set on fire. It was an old school but after the war, a new school was built. Then the children got educated there.

Immediately after the war, Afrim bought a bus. He worked in the past in Klina, in Sfërkë, and we survived thanks to the bus. Also, my brothers worked a little, they worked in their garden. In the past, we planted cherries and watermelons and we would sell them in the city, village, in Malisheva, in Klina, in Peja, we would take them everywhere and sell them. We didn't suffer much, our children had decent living conditions.

We had a field near the house, a bit like a slope. The children would herd cows every day. In 2005, one morning, my husband's cousin came. He was 14-years-old. He woke up my two sons who were still asleep. I will never forget that day. Both of them went out of the room, they went straight to the yard. They washed their faces, they put some clothes on and they ate boiled eggs. "Come on faster," said my husband's cousin, "because the cows are free! Let's go play together!"

Afrim, my mother-in-law, and I were there. Our daughters were asleep. We were sitting at a table outside. The boys told me, "Hurry up mother, we will let the cows out because we want to go play with the children." That second son, Ardit, rarely went to herd the cows. Always the eldest son did that. But God took him there. Afrim was fixing the bus, he was about to leave because in the past they were carrying passengers going to Albania. But he didn't go that day, his brother went. Afrim said, "I am staying here because the bus is not in a good condition."

My youngest son hugged and kissed me on both cheeks. "Okay," he said, "Make us some food. As soon as you finish", he said, "I will wave at you, and I will take Adem" and I told him, "Bring back the cows at around 11-12 o'clock because it's too hot. When you bring them the food will be ready."

The children went to play, and like every morning I was doing some work around the house. They went up there, and I don't know what happened but a loud explosion was heard and it was so strong that the windows all over the village were shaking. The black smoke went up and the whole village was terrified. Everyone was shouting, "What happened?"

When I saw the smoke coming out, I went out into the yard, I saw the uncles and everybody from the village was running up there. I started running. They screamed, "The children have fallen into the landmines."

They were saying, "All the children have died."

"Oh my God!" I said. I was running towards the slope, where the children were located. My brothers-in-law and uncles stopped me and said, "No, you shall not see them!"

Oh," I said, "I want to see them, I want to see my children! You can't stop me!" When I went there, I saw the eldest son bleeding. The second son was lying face down close to him. I started screaming and I fainted, I didn't know anything anymore. The same happened to my husband, he was completely lost. Our neighborhoods, the in-laws, and the whole village dealt with the children because we were completely lost.

They called the helicopter and KFOR came, many people came from Klina as well because five children fell on landmines. Afrim's cousin, Shqipdon, found the toy which looked like a pencil. They were eating berries, and while playing with a ball, he found it and said, "I found something!" The children went to look at what he found. He removed it from the place and it exploded immediately and wounded all of them.

The landmine pieces wounded the face of the boy that found the device. My two sons and the other cousin were together. The landmine knocked them to the ground. The 14 years old cousin died at the spot. Also, the boy who found it, the landmine wounded his face.

The KFOR helicopter came and took all of them, the place was full of army soldiers, police officers, I didn't know what was going on. Some doctors came and gave an injection here at home. I said, "Oh, I want to see them! Why do you want me to lose my consciousness?" And again, I fainted and they administered me with an injection. I went up there with my uncle's wife and my cousin, I said, "I want to go where my children are, I want to know what happened to them."

While I was here, they were telling me, "The children didn't die, they are just wounded." But I knew what happened because they told me that Adem died immediately. Afrim came and told me, "Oh woman, Adem died immediately and Ardit", he said, "he is alive, and they are taking him to Prishtina". I said, "This is the fate that God destined for us. We fled during the war, but this was the fate of our boys".

On the 11th we buried Adem. There were many people at the ceremony. I almost lost my mind because of everything. That happened on July 10, and the next day Adem and his cousin were buried. All of Kosovo came, they saw this place, many people were coming and going, and I was lost.

Afterward, they dealt with my other son, my brothers-in-law and my husband were going to Prishtina. When I went to Prishtina to see my son, there was nothing to be seen. He was all covered in bandages. The doctor said, "Talk to him because even though he can't talk, he will hear your voice." I spoke to him, I said, "Mom is here, talk to mom. They have covered you with bandages. Can you see your mom?" I spoke to him as much as I could. I was worried sick and spoke to him about everything.

He did not react at all, at all, at all. His head was all covered in bandages, his eyes were covered, I couldn't see his face, I could see only his body. I touched his legs, hands, and neck. His skin had yellow color because he was wounded, he was connected to devices. I stayed there for about half an hour, I spoke to him, I cried all the time until the doctor came and said to me, "Did you tell him everything that you intended to tell him?" I stood up and I went to the door and then I turned back once more and I hugged him.

As I was leaving the hospital, the doctor informed me that Ardit had died. The doctor said, "It seems that your son wanted to get permission from you before he leaves us." He died at the hospital on July 15.

Ardit used to be attached to me. He never went to school without seeing me escort him to the front door. He wouldn't go to school without hugging me first. The first son loved me very much, but he was more attached to his father. And Ardit couldn't stay a single day away from me.

On the 16th we buried Ardit as well. I don't know how we managed to live through it, I was worried sick, I was trying to comfort my husband because he was in a worse condition comparing to me. He was unconscious, he couldn't stay in the room when people came to express their condolence, doctors were taking care of him, he was in a terrible condition. I was administered injections, I was completely lost, sometimes I wouldn't even know where I was, I was crying all the time.

And so, the days went by, full of sadness. For two years I visited many doctors and I was treated with medicaments. It was terrible. Also, my daughters were very upset. They were already grown up. When they would see us, they would get even more upset and they would weep and cry. They would go to school crying and they would come back crying. My second daughter, Dafina, skipped one school year when we were in Germany. So, when we came back to Kosovo, she went to the same class as Adem. Because of us, our daughters were never happy when they would go to school. Since then, we never celebrated anything.

But because of the children life must go on. My husband was saying, "How will we continue living? I want to kill myself; my sons are gone." And even though my heart was broken too, I would tell my husband "My dear, this is our fate from God, there is nothing we can do about it. We escaped to Germany in order to save them. We came back, and they died." I told him, "There are many families that have completely disappeared, and what can we do? This was our fate."

We were depressed for almost a year; we were both in a very bad condition. My husband couldn't work anymore. His brothers were working and taking care of us. My husband went to visit a doctor called Agron Zajmi from Gjakova, he was checking my husband's head. My mother-in-law, our brothers, and the people around us were all supporting and they were encouraging us. My mother-in-law told us, "Life goes on, you must keep on living, you can still have more children. It was God's will for the ones that left us". She would say, "You can still make children". They were giving us a will to live. My husband's entire family helped us a lot. My mother-in-law, my mother, brothers, our people, they would all talk to us, they would come every night and every day. We also went to different doctors.

Two years later, I got pregnant and God blessed us with baby Adem. I named him after my firstborn. We were so happy that we cried all day long when he was born. My brothers, Afrim's brothers, all the family members, our close family, and friends that were in Gjakova the day when Adem was born were all very happy, we all cried a lot. My daughters were so happy, the whole family rejoiced.

And then after a year and three months, God blessed us with another baby boy which I named after my second son Ardit. I would like to thank the doctors from Gjakova because they have known our situation and they helped us a lot. I will never forget them. With their help, I got pregnant again because I had a problem getting pregnant again after a break of ten years, but then God blessed me with baby Adem.

Even when Ardit was born, we were full of sadness. Full of joy, but also sadness. We were happy when the first Adem was born, but we were happier when we renewed their names. They all used to tell us, "It's not good to renew the names of children." But I insisted, and also my husband said, "They will have their names, they will not be called by any other name. I will never forget them." Even though they cannot take the places of those who left us, it's enough for me that I call their names every day.

Now even the children know what happened, we told them everything. We told them last year in 2019. After the children started attending the school, somebody told them, "You used to have two brothers, their names were Adem and Ardit". And when they came from school they asked us, "Mom, dad, some pupils at school are saying that there was a boy called Adem who was 12 years old and a boy called Ardit and that they stepped on the landmines that the Serbs put here". My husband said, "My dear, it's better if we tell the children." So, we brought the children to the living room and we told them everything that happened.

And then we drove the children by car to the graveyard. When we were at the graveyard both of them were just staring at us. "Hey mom, why are you crying? You see that I am here" said Ardit. Adem said, "Mom, you have us now. We will grow up" They were joking, "If they had not gone, would you have made us?". They were teasing us when we went to the graveyard. But then they got sad too, and both of them started crying. The older son was hugging my husband and the young one was hugging me. But God has blessed us with them, thanks to the Almighty, it's as if they are alive once again. They even have the same faces, both of them. God has given me the same children.

I suffered a lot in this life, I don't know if there is anything harder. It was very hard to go through all this, very hard. But I don't know, God gives you strength and courage. Our loved ones, family and friends, helped us to start living again because it was very hard for us.

As for the landmine, they were saying that the Serbs put it there, because they informed us before, we asked them, "Have you checked this area?". KFOR said, "Yes, we checked it." Because the Serbian army stayed in Gremnica, right there on the slope. There were many trenches up there. They said that the Serbs made them.

This boy who found that device, when we asked him, he would tell us, "I found it and it looked like a pencil. When I opened it, it exploded." The people responsible for landmines came and they searched the place but they couldn't find anything. It was mounted there, and it exploded there. The explosion was so loud that everybody in the village stood up, many windows got broken. Everybody said, "What was that noise?"

Many people came here to take photographs, to record, they were saying, "These are the consequences of the war. The Serbs left it here. This is part of the war. This was the children's fate. The whole of Kosovo is full of

landmines." They used to say, "The landmines are hidden because the Serbs placed them. We have searched this entire place. We checked all the places."

Maybe there are still other landmines, we can't know for sure, we are not free to wander around, there were many Serbs here. Throughout the war, the Serbs were positioned there, at that slope. Most of the time they spent there, because the entire plains, all this valley, Klina and everything else, can be seen from that slope.

After the war, the foreigners were coming to the school, explaining with translators. We used to talk to the children, together with my husband and our brothers-in-law, we would tell them, "As soon as you find something, don't touch it because they are landmines. As soon as you see something unusual, let us know. We will inform the police, or KFOR and they will come to remove it".

Also, the children were always afraid of the landmines. They received a lot of information at school about these landmines.

But, unfortunately, that one exploded and it killed the children. The feeling of sorrow never goes away. Now I came to a certain age and I am experiencing it even harder. I see their friends, they are getting married, they are having children, and it's very hard for me. It's very hard for me as their mother. My husband gets out a little, but for me as their mother it's difficult.

Both of my daughters got married. Both, Merita and Dafina, were very sad when all this happened. Now they have two young brothers, and no sister in the world cares more than they do. They raised them themselves, I just gave birth to these two boys, but my daughters took care of them, they changed their clothes, they gave them food. My daughters took great care of their brothers.

My eldest daughter went last year to Belgium. She raised my sons when she was here. She worked here as a teacher, she has a degree in pedagogy and also a master's degree. She turns 30 now on October 10th. My daughters were very sad when everything happened. Now when they come, they look after me, they love me. When they see that I am sad, they try to cheer me up, they take me out, for a walk, they take me everywhere, they do everything to please me, me and my husband. But, sadness doesn't go away.



I regret that I didn't manage to see their faces. I saw a little bit the eldest one but then they didn't allow me to see him anymore on the day when they buried him. I couldn't see the second one either because he was covered with bandages. I couldn't see anything at all. After that morning when they left, I saw nothing. They were just gone.

I see them very often in my dreams. I see them coming and hugging me. When I was about to give birth to the second Adem, the first Adem came to me and hugged me, "Mom, I came. I will come again to this world, and you are upset, you are crying too much. Why are you crying? Adem is coming again to you."

I see my second son more often in my dreams. Every time I see him in my dreams, the next day I go to his grave. I go often there; I will also go these days because they have their birthdays these days. When July 10 comes, the day when they stepped on the landmine, I go up the slope there and I cry there.

Until recently, my husband couldn't come to the children's graves. He just couldn't. I always went there with my mother-in-law. Then when my daughters grew up, I went there together with my daughters, my mother-in-law but my husband could never come with us.

My husband doesn't let me put pictures of them in the living room. I would like to see their photos, but he has a very weak heart, and he immediately faints, then he just cries and he cries. "I can't," he says, "I can't see their pictures." Now he started coming to their graves because he couldn't come for a long time. He never took part in the burials in the village. The whole village knew how hard it is for him. He would go two or three days later to express his condolences, but he never participated in the burial ceremony. Even when we had deaths in our family, he couldn't go to the burial ceremony because he could not bear it.

It's good that God has given us these two boys. Our hearts are broken and forever wounded. They will never be forgotten until we join them. Sadness never goes away, it just increases. Now our children are taking the sadness away, we are happy with them, they love us and we love them. We see them both go to school; we take them there. They study, we are happy with them. But our hearts are broken. God has blessed us again, and he has softened our hearts and the hearts of the whole family.

I was happy for my daughters; they are not as sad as they used to be. The sisters grieved for their brothers almost the same as I did. Now things have changed, the children grew up. The eldest son turned 13 this April. The youngest turned 12 on August 19th. They are growing up; we are having a good time with them at home.

It's hard for a mother, for the family, for the parents, there is nothing more difficult in this world than to bury your children. For me, this was the hardest thing in this world, which I will never forget until I join them.

But life goes on, there is no other way. Because of my husband, because of the daughters, because of all the loved ones, I had to keep on living even though it was very hard. There was nothing harder. But God gave us children, God saw us, and thanks to him we are overcoming.

## Zojë Gashi





## Hijacked Childhoods

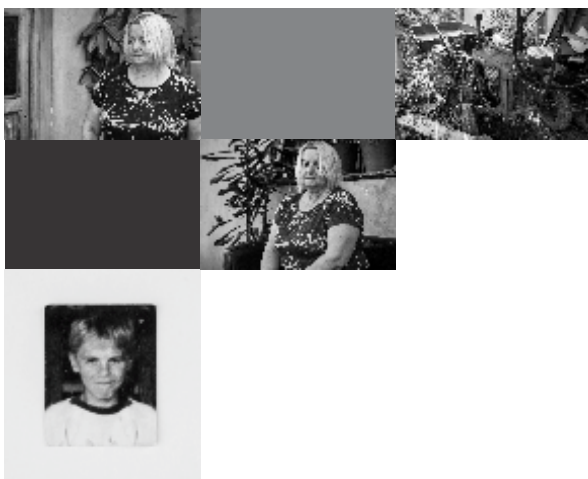
Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences





Today I want nothing more than to know the truth.  
That would be the greatest justice for me. Only the  
truth and nothing else! Because that child didn't  
know anything, he didn't hurt anyone, neither he,  
nor I, nor my husband.





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## Zorica Blagojević

Zorica says that Serbs have lived well in the village mixed with Albanians. Up until 1998. At that time, she recalls, the Serbian regime uniformed the skilled Serbs in the villages as military reservists. This act frightened a lot the Albanian neighbors. The two village communities, which had once wished each other well for the feasts, which drank water from the same well, and shared the blessings of the land, suddenly wanted to "rip each other's heads off".

Now, after being away for more than two decades in Serbia with her family, she recalls all the unusual circumstances of her family's everyday life on that day in September 1998. Although that day started with the same routine of her son going to the school in the morning, many things happened in the meantime, and today it seems to her that it was fated, and it all ended in the evening when her son never came back home.

# He went with his uncle and he died too

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Zorica Blagojević



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My name is Zorica and my maiden name is Matić. I was born and I have lived in village Bratutin until I turned nineteen years old. Bratutin is a very good village. Two nationalities were living there, Serbs and Albanians. We had a fair life with the Albanians, but things happened and those who should not suffer have suffered. We grew up together and we went to school together. We went to the same school; we just had separate classes for us. We played together, walked together, and celebrated together. When we had Easter, they would come to us and when they had Eid, we would go to them. That was the situation up until '98. Until then life was normal and we had no problems.

I finished primary school, but I did not continue the schooling. After I finished school, I didn't work anywhere during the time I lived in Kosovo. I had a good childhood; I lived with my brothers, mother, and father. They were farmers. They have finished primary school to some extent, and they didn't work for the government because they lived off agriculture.



I had very good parents. They always lived in harmony with each other; we always had a good life. They had to work hard in order to raise us. They worked mostly in the vineyards. Dad was working hard in order to educate us, to feed us, until we grew up, and then we were able to help him too. We were in harmony with our brothers and sisters. Of course, sometimes we would argue, but God forbid we never fought with each other. Even now, we socialize and we go visit each other, we help each other, we maintain the same relationship.

We had good communication with our parents; I loved equally both of them. I could never say that I love my mother more than I loved my father. Up until two years ago, both of them were alive. Losing both parents in less than two months was a disaster. My mother fell ill, she suffered from cancer, and afterward, my father died as well. He was five years younger than she was, he got married when he was eighteen years old and my mother was 23 years old. Times were different then, there was no one to take care of you and they got married at a young age. After my mother died my dad mourned for her and, less than three months later, he died. The burial took place here in Banja. She grew up together up with him; they had fifty-three years of marriage. My dad was only 19 years older than I was. I am the eldest of the children, and then comes Zoran, Negovan, Bobani, then Mikica, and Dalibori, the youngest brother. Boban saddened us a lot, but when my son was abducted, this killed both my parents and me.

I went to school regularly. When I grew up, I met my husband and back then, times were different, we used to go to dancing evenings and we would meet each other there. We had a little fun and we liked each other. I met him for the first time at my aunt's house in the neighboring village, Movlan. We got to know each other there and after two or three weeks we got married. Of course, he came to my home and asked permission from my parents. I didn't want to escape, I wanted us to do it properly.

I got married in village Rečan in Suhareka. I don't remember the exact date when I got married, but when the child that we are talking about was born, we went to get married in the municipality. I didn't go to the church. At that time this was not required, we just went to the municipality, we signed the papers and that was it.

I started a family and life together with my husband. He used to work and I didn't work. I didn't need to work because we had enough to live, we had enough land. He was a very good person; he was four years younger than I was and we had harmony among us. His family was a little bigger than mine was, he was the only son and he had four sisters. He had an uncle with his wife, who had no sons but had two married daughters.

My husband worked in "Balkan", as the leader of the works; he worked there until the time we escaped here. After that he received that minimum wage, we had no other income, and I didn't have any working experience. However, when we came here, I had started to work. I educated my children in Kosovo and when we came here, they continued the school. What to do, life is like that.

Srećko was born in 1985 in Prizren. It was the greatest joy in my life. It was the happiest day when you become a mother for the first time and when you hold your baby. Now, this interview is turning me back in time. I was happier then, now I am just sad. It's very difficult, God forbid, no one can replace your child.

Then Stefan was born in '86, followed by Jovanka some thirteen or fourteen months apart. Then two years later, the youngest daughter was born. I had five children and I don't regret it, I am the happiest mother. I have very good children; everyone would wish to have children like mine. They are very obedient. Here they suffered a bit. Back home they were children and they didn't have to work. But here they had to work and finish school. The social circle here was different. But the kids adapted. The eldest works in a firm, he is the head there and he has been working for twelve years there. The other son also works for a firm but he is not registered. When there is work, he works, when there is no work, he doesn't. His wife stays at home. What to do. My daughters got all married and each has her own life. One has a daughter, the other has a daughter and a son. One of my sons has a daughter and a son, the other has a daughter. Only the youngest is still not married.

In the village, back in Kosovo, everything was fine until the situation started to get worse. We lived well with the Albanians. We always did everything together; we never parted from each other. If they were having a watermelon or grapes, it was impossible not to give to my children as well. We took water from the same well and drank it together. However, when the situation changed, then we wanted to rip each other's heads off. All this, for what? For politics. They were not guilty and neither was I. Politics are guilty because it forces you to do things, even if you don't want to, but have to do it. Such was the situation then. This was seen in 1998. It was the worst time. The situation started declining in '96. It started then, not with us in the village, but in the city. They started leaving the "Balkans" of Suhareka. I don't know what it is called now. Maybe it's still called like that.

Then the Albanians left their jobs, only the Serbs worked. Then the same happened at the police. Albanians did not work, but those from Serbia worked. Then they started to hate each other. However, we in the village had no problems with our neighbors. Never!



The situation was worse in Bratutin because there were far fewer Serbs and they felt much worse. Everyone there became part of the reservists, whether you wanted to or not. They came to give you the uniform, you had to take it and then the neighbor hated you for wearing that uniform. This was the biggest conflict; the state did this to us.

My brother, which was abducted, was a reservist. My brother who lives now in Zrenjanin was also a reservist, while the eldest was not. The youngest brother was too young, they couldn't recruit him. And then mutual hatred was introduced.

We were worried about what would happen, but we didn't think that we would leave from there. Never! We thought that we might die but we never thought that we would live in Serbia. I never thought of that.

During the war in the village, a neighbor told my husband: "The situation is what it is, you better sell something. You have enough land and you should buy a house for the children to have over there. I hope that God will never let something like this happen again, but it's better if you buy something so that you have a place to take the children away." My husband told him: "Forget about it! How can I live there, when I have a place in the center here? How can I go and live in Serbia now, in an unknown place?" He replied, "The situation is like this, you will not do it willingly, but the time will come when you will have to leave, believe me". He was right because so it happened. My husband didn't want to sell anything but he wanted to leave the land to the children so they can build a building in the future.

However, things happened as he said. "The time will come for us to leave, but it will be much worse for you because you are a minority here and there are more of us." Then we escaped. We just got on the tractor and left. I was together with my children, my husband, the wife of my husband's uncle because she had no children and she was with us as well as my husband's daughter. My husband had a daughter from his first marriage. We also had a neighbor with her husband and children. All of us were in that tractor and also an old neighbor was with us. There were nine of us on the tractor, all from village Recani. We didn't take anything else. We had some money with us and we didn't even know where we were going. When we arrived in Suhareka, they didn't allow us to come here. We went to Pristina and we slept one night in a hotel, I don't remember which one and then on the third day we went to Serbia. We didn't know where we were going, we had small children. The youngest daughter, Bojana, was then three and a half years old, four. The children were on the tractor, they were asking for milk, we had nowhere to buy it, and we didn't know where we were going, where we would sleep.

However, we had to move on; we threw a mattress and slept either on the trailer or under it. This lasted for several days.

We went to Llapova, to a school there. The children slept on the concrete, on the tiles. After Llapova we went to a village, I don't know what it was called. We slept there and then we arrived in Kraljevo, in Adrena at a school. We stayed there for a month and a half or two. We lived in a collective center; there were over 40 of us, divided into two classrooms. The Red Cross helped us; they gave us some food, water, and mattresses to sleep on. There was no place to shower, no place to bathe, and no place to bathe the children. It was horrible. The children got sick, they had a fever, and they got a rash on their hands because of the dirt. May God not bring this experience to anyone. I am not saying that only we suffered, also your people have fled like that. I talked to our neighbor. Also, your people have suffered too, their experience was not any better than ours. Politics has done all of this.

Then a friend came and found us a small house, here in Vrnjacka Banja. My husband started working privately. Initially, we settled in this house and we lived there for three years. Now no one lives there. Then we lived in several places here in Vrnjacka Banja and when we sold the property in Kosovo, we came to this house. Our house in Kosovo was demolished and our neighbor bought the land. We couldn't do it otherwise, because one ar of land here is very expensive.

On September 22nd, 1998, I wish I would forget that day, my son Srećko left for school. He went to school in Suhareka. I will never forget that day as long as I live. He left by bus in the morning. At about eleven-thirty, I saw him and my aunt coming home. She lived about four miles away from our house. He had seen her waiting for the bus to village Movlan, and he asked her, "What are you doing here, aunt?" She said, "I'm waiting for the bus, son" He asked his teacher to release him and he came together with her on foot. He accompanied her. I saw them coming and I asked him, "Why did you leave the school classes?" He told me, "I felt sorry for my aunt and I came with her." "Good," I said. I made coffee to drink it together with my aunt, and an hour later the bus came and she left.

My brother Boban came in a car to visit me with his wife and his two daughters. He dropped my brother's wife, the brother who is in Zrenjanin, so we would go to visit the aunt in village Movlan. I asked him, "Can't you see how the situation is, don't go any further because they don't know you, maybe someone will recognize us since we know each other as neighbors and they will release us, and you just came from Bratutin, they will certainly not let you go".

He said, "No, now there is nothing going on. My brother-in-law went with his friend by bus, I am going too and I will be back soon." I insisted that he shouldn't go. He didn't want to listen to me and he left. And then my son started crying after him, he wanted to go with him. I told him, "Son, can't you see how the situation is, don't go there." He said, "Yes, but I go to school every day and no one is harassing me." I said, "Yes, but you are going alone, as a child. Don't go with your uncle."

However, when my brother saw him weeping, he turned back to take him. I told him, "Don't take him, he can't go." He said, "How? I can't leave him crying and go on my own" He grabbed him by the hand, they got inside the car and they left.

If anyone asks me, I know what kind of pants, t-shirt, and shoes he wore that day. I remember everything.

Less than an hour and a half later, my husband came home. He saw the sister-in-law with two children, she was also pregnant, and he asked, "Where are Boban and Srećko?" I told him, "They went to Movlan." He said, "You will never see them again." I asked him, "How come I will never see them again?" He said, "You will see, they will be abducted because they know who is passing by. Our people from the village will not be affected, but whoever comes from out of the village is guaranteed one hundred percent to be abducted." and so it happened.

Then we called the SPB, and they went up, but we never found out anything, never again. They told us, "They will not touch the boy, since he is a child and the other one is older. But they will not let him go so that he doesn't tell who they are." They were Albanians from our village. If my son was alone, they would have released him for sure, but because of this other one, they didn't release him.

I went to Prizren and everywhere else, as much as I could, while I was in Kosovo. Every day I went to both Pristina and Belgrade. There is no place that I didn't go to.

Our people lived in Movlan. There were also two nationalities living there, Albanians and Serbs, and they had some passage permits. They didn't dare tell this to us, but only to those who were from that village. They had some permission to cross, and they were able to go to Suhareka and return. We could go up there, but people from other municipalities couldn't. So, this is what happened, because he came from Bratutin to Suhareka, which is another area and also, he was in uniform and that was the worst thing. They must have said, "Why did you come now, cop?" Maybe they thought that he wanted to kill someone.

The kidnapers were maybe from the third house away from us, because the owner of that house was some kind of an officer in the KLA. When we asked him, he said, "It wasn't me." He is a neighbor who works in Italy. Everyone in that family works there. He told my husband, "If I had been in that group and seen your son, I would have released him, but it was another group."

We met this neighbor after about six years in Merdare because he bought a part of our meadow. When he came to give us the money, we had to meet with him. He brought the money; he had barely collected it and I went to sign that the meadow could be transferred to his name.

My sister Mikica was 23 years old when her husband was killed. She got married when she was young. She lived across the street from us, in Reçan, in the same village. Her husband worked as a deputy officer in the army. He had been there for years and one day he went to visit the army on the ground. They were five people in the car. He was killed in an ambush, along with everyone else in the car. She also escaped with her family when we left. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law stayed to live in Kraljevo, and after a few years, she came to Vrnjacka Banja, where her father-in-law bought a house.

I see Srećko in my dreams all the time, but I always see him as a young child. I can't think of him as an adult because he would now be 35 years old. I can't do that; I always see him as a child.

While I was in Kosovo, I had contacts with UNMIK members working in Prizren, I had some hope that the boy was alive somewhere. However, I had no hope for my brother because I heard that he was wounded in the car. He was a reservist police officer, so I was sure that he was not alive but I had hope for the boy. Because he, as a child, didn't harm anyone. So, I hoped, if you don't cause harm no harm will be caused to you. If you don't harass anyone, no one will harass you either. If you have done something wrong, they will do the same to you. But to be honest, since I came here, I have lost all hope because many years have passed. If he had been alive, he would have found a way to call me.

We found my brother's Lada car after a month and a half, some thirty kilometers away from the village. We found it when the army passed by. We could see where the bullet had entered. They said that the boy was sitting behind, not by the side of the driver. Now I can't say anything, I can only guess, but I don't know what happened.

I have been severely depressed for days. I took a lot of medicine and, even to this day when it's my son's birthday or when there are holidays, I

always feel bad. For days, I just wait, thinking that he will come out from somewhere. Also, the other children have experienced it severely, and they agreed among themselves that whoever gets a son, he should be named Srećko and when my son became a father to his first child, I didn't want to get involved, I stayed silent, but he named his son Srećko. This was the most painful point of my life but I feel happy when I call my grandson by that name. How to say, it's like I see my son in him now.

Now we live normally. I have been working as a cook for years. The children work too. We managed to settle here. Children have friendships and they help each other. At first, it was quite difficult. You walk like a goose through the fog. An unknown environment.

My husband worked in the "Balkans", and here he got the minimum wage, which was eight thousand five hundred a month and he worked with a tractor, privately, when someone would hire him but he also worked in construction as much as he could. Then one day while he was working around the house, he fell and hit his head. He died on the spot. He slipped and fell. When I woke up in the morning, my son told me, "Dad has fallen", I told him, "Tell him to stand up" he replied, "He is dead!". My husband has never taken any medicine, he has never gone to the doctor, he didn't even have a health card. He was never sick and he never felt any pain, nothing at all.

I hope to God no one will go through this kind of stress. After some time, as soon as that stress went away, my mother and father died. So, I experienced lots of stressful situations. I hope to God that no one experiences what I have experienced. I wish everyone to be good, to respect each other, to appreciate each other, to cooperate, to have a good life.

If we had some property here, I would not live in rent because we have been renting for nine and a half years. Every month, whatever you earn you have to pay for the rent. Then the rent was 120 euros, and we had to pay for the electricity, water, food, clothes, and school for the children.

I would be the happiest if tomorrow I could do something at the place where I gave birth to my children. If nothing else, at least go during the weekends, or stay a month or two and come back. However, I cannot do it alone unless others return as well. If we could return and live in the village as we used to in the past, I would have returned one hundred percent. I also told my neighbor, "I'm sorry that my husband sold the land, now I would make a weekend cottage there and I would come at least once a month." He said, "You can come to us whenever you want." But that's not a solution. It's different when you have your own home.

I never went back to Recan again, I just couldn't, I find it difficult. But I met with the neighbor in Merdare. I still keep in touch with him. I keep in touch also with another neighbor. With these two we talk regularly on the phone. They were always correct. "If you need anything," they say, "feel free to tell us."

My youngest son goes often to Kosovo. He works with some vehicles. My eldest son goes too, but not so often. They went everywhere in Kosovo, even in Prishtina and in Peja. He makes some vehicles and then goes to Kosovo to work. They also went and visited Recan. They say that the house is covered with grass, there is nothing there. The church was demolished in '99 and the monuments have all been destroyed. The cemetery was destroyed as well.

The eldest son went together with my husband while he was alive. My husband went every year to the village, but it was too hard for me. Also, the children wouldn't let me go. They knew that I was suffering a lot and after a long time I went to Kosovo. I needed to go because of the documents. When we sold the land, I also had to sign at the notary office. Since then, I have been several times in Kosovo.

Today I want nothing more than to know the truth. That would be the greatest justice for me. Only the truth and nothing else! Because that child didn't know anything, he didn't hurt anyone, neither he, nor I, nor my husband.

My son was an excellent student. Sometimes very good, sometimes excellent. He was a good person, a quiet person. What did he know? He was thirteen and a half years old then. He was not like the nowadays children with cell phones. Then there were friendships, games with a ball, everything was normal.

I saved my neighbor's children when the village was being cleansed. These children had jumped over the fence, and they came to our yard and they said: "Please save us". I took them to my room; I risked my life and my children's life to save them. Children as children are not guilty of anything. They were the children of my two neighbors, one had the house behind mine and the other was living in a nearby house. I put these children in my room and I left them with my own kids. After a while, the army came and asked, "Let's see if there is anyone here!" I told them, "There is no one here, only my children". What if they saw these children there and someone said to me, "We are fighting, they have abducted your child and still you are rescuing their children!" I put my children's lives and my own life at risk. However, that is stronger than me, I had to save those kids. It's stronger than me. How can I see them crying and not save them?



Now I speak to their parents. We talk constantly, two or three times a month. That neighbor is pretty much older than I am but we talk constantly. His children work in Switzerland. He always tells me, "We are forever in debt to you. No one would do what you have done for us." Even though I was 32 years old then, I didn't think at all about the other members of the family, but it was very hard for me because imagine, they were just children, they were not guilty of anything. They have not harmed anyone. If you and I are guilty, they are not. They haven't done anything to anyone.

My brother Boban was an extremely good man. He was a soldier in Croatia when the situation was the worst. He barely escaped when the war broke out there. He escaped and came to village Bratutin, and stayed here as a reservist. He was kind to everyone, he never quarreled with anyone, ever. He was not guilty because he wore a uniform. Just as your people had to go to the KLA, so did our people had to go to the army. There was no option I want-I don't want to. You were summoned by the SPB and you had to sign and get on the uniform, without any objections. The situation was like that. And afterward what happened? We couldn't look at each other anymore. For what reason? It's a hard situation, but what to do?

Then we came here to Serbia and everything was unknown for us, we had to start everything from the beginning. Here they accepted us, but they always looked at us as foreigners. This is normal. Now, we are almost half-half here in Banja, and most of us went to Kraljevo. My children have really good friends, and I also have good colleagues here, they don't look at us like that. However, at first they did, I guess until they got to know us. Until they saw who and what we were.

Even my youngest daughter already has her own friends. The beginning was very difficult, but now 20 years have passed and that's quite some time.

I mostly blame myself for not being able to save the boy. The greatest wish in my life would be to find out where his grave is.

Now I say that it was his fate, it seems that this is how it was written, for him to go together with his uncle so that both of them would die. This is how I see it. Meeting him after school and then him disappearing from my life. He met my aunt, he walked with her for four kilometers, my brother came that day, and they left together that day and got killed the same day.

My husband, whenever he would drink a little more, would tell me, "Your brother lost my son!" Eh, that makes it even harder. Much harder! If my brother had known, he wouldn't have gone himself. I would suffer the most when my husband would say these things. On one hand, I lost my brother, on the other I lost my son. I wish God will never allow anyone to experience what I have experienced. To nobody! My mother and father died from sadness.

They came to us two or three times; they took our blood samples in order to check the DNA. But so far nothing. There were many people abducted in one place, not the Hoqa e Madhe but another place, where two brothers were abducted, and then a whole family of 12 members. Some bodies have been found and buried in Belgrade. However, so far, I have not been called for anything. While we lived there, they used to come and they took our blood, in case they find a body or something. After some time, we went to Kosovo to check some wardrobe in case we recognize any of it. We didn't recognize anything. In the village where I have lived six people have been abducted; two brothers, my cousin, a neighbor, and my son, all abducted from this village. The others were abducted a month before my son. One of the abducted persons was in the military. He was ill, he went to Belgrade, and his brother and cousin went to Belgrade to bring him back to Dule, where they were abducted.

I have something to say for the Government: they should find a solution for us; they should help us find out everything about the missing persons. Both our government and yours. Even if they build me a skyscraper, I don't need anything, I just need to find out information about my son. This is my only message. That would be the greatest wealth for me. To learn if he is dead, to light a candle for him and if he is alive, to know that he is alive. But I know nothing. Insecurity kills you; this is the worst feeling. If they have killed him, I want to know where his bones are.

Then, I received different information like the one about the yellow house, this and that, and these things just raise my blood pressure. No one is telling the truth. I can't say that these things didn't happen on your side as well. Many people died on your side as well. I am aware of this. Maybe the ones who didn't do anything were the ones who were killed. I am not talking only about my son. No. We should find information for all of them! This is my message. Let the truth come out once and for all, let the fate of those missing persons be known. So not just for Serbian or Muslim families, but for all of them.



# Hijacked Childhoods

Accounts of children's  
wartime experiences



**Zorica  
Blagojević**



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**Katalogimi në botim – (CIP)**  
**Biblioteka Kombëtare e Kosovës “Pjetër Bogdani”**

94(496.51)  
316-053.4/.6(496.51)(092)

Hijacked Childhoods : accounts of children's wartime experiences / project leader Korab Krasniqi ; translation (Albanian to English) Dardan Ibrahim. - Prishtinë : Forum ZFD, 2022. - 214 f. : ilustr. ; 24 cm.

Kosova -- Historia  
Lufta e Kosovës, 1998-2000 -- Fëmijët  
Intervistat -- Tregime personale

1. Krasniqi, Korab 2. Ibrahim, Dardan

**ISBN 978-9951-775-15-1**

Aleph [000104683]

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ISBN 978-9951-775-15-1



Pristina 2022

Implemented by:

forumZFD (Forum Civil Peace Service / Forum  
Ziviler Friedendienst e.V)  
Missing Persons Resource Center

Supported by:

German Federal Ministry of Economic  
Cooperation and Development (BMZ)  
Embassy of Switzerland in Prishtina