

## INTERVIEW WITH SALA AHMETAJ

Pristina | 10 June 2015

Duration: 107 minutes

Present:

1. Sala Ahmetaj (Speaker)
2. Lura Limani (Interviewer)
3. Lirika Demiri (Interviewer)
4. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Camera)

*Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:*

() - emotional communication

{ } - the speaker explains something using gestures

*Other transcription conventions:*

[ ] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

*Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names, or expressions*

## Part one

**Sala Ahmetaj:** I was born in the village of Radisheva, municipality of Skenderaj. It is a typical mountain village, the northernmost point, you know, of the municipality. I was born in the year... on July 12 of the year 1950. I spent my childhood at the village and had the typical childhood of a life in an isolated village, I mean, where people lived with many others like a family, all of them. Because, I mean, isolation from other...it was a village quite far from other villages, five to six kilometers from the closest village, and surrounded solely by mountains. Thus I have idyllic memories of my childhood. We used to keep sheep, cows, [our] typical games were very traditional.

I remember for example things that have impressed me the most, the holiday of St. George, when our parents would bring all kinds of herbs from the mountain... or we would decorate the house. They would place them under our pillows, they call them nettles, you know, you probably know {pointing at the ones present} and other herbs. They would sprinkle water on us, early in the morning.

All village girls would come together, I was very young, later on I could not observe these rites, when I started school and left... Yes, they would come together, sing along songs, I don't know how they called them, you know, the swings, they would make them themselves with a rope and a cushion. My father would go far, to the Mokna mountain peak, near Radisheva. They would walk very far to collect some sort of herbs to bring them for the animals so they would keep healthy, or during the summer. These are the things that have left the most impression in me.

One more detail. My father was self-taught, you know, he was not literate. My mother as well. And they would tell me, for example, it is, at that time my father was a keen enthusiast of education. I was maybe around three or four years old, I was the first child, later I had three brothers and he told me, "If you learn well, I will send you to school." Which was quite something, you know, 65 years ago in a mountain village. And he had that kind of love, you know, it grew in him during the Second World War. Because, they, you know, in Kosovo in general, there was a big drama during that war, because people did not know which way to go, with whom it was better to side.

And they initially went, joined the forces of *Legaliteti*,<sup>1</sup> they said, in Peja. And my father told me, “I have listened to a lot of lectures from the officers.” We call them, he called them speeches, good ones. And it was there that his love for school awakened. Then they spoke to them about Skanderbeg,<sup>2</sup> about national history, about everything. And from that moment on, he fed that love. And for example, he named my brother Skender, after the stuff he heard when he was with the forces of *Legaliteti*. Later they dispersed. And I heard from him for example, back then particularly in the villages, they sang a lot of epic songs, about Muja, Halil.<sup>3</sup> Well, I knew all of them by heart, as I listened to them every evening. Then, Gjergj Fishta<sup>4</sup> for example, a lot of that is still in my sub-conscious (laughs).

And, you know, besides the rest... and later, after they were dispersed, there were also partisan brigades. But unfortunately that’s what my father told me. Now I don’t know the whole truth, but he said that in the partisan brigades that came to Kosovo, for example, were infiltrated people who were *četniks*,<sup>5</sup> as they call them, who were extremely nationalistic and chauvinistic. And they killed many people, especially in Drenica, many, many... without reason, without making any exception or... and this was the motivation for Shaban Polluzha<sup>6</sup> to organize, I mean to stir some sort of protest against partisan brigades. Because in the beginning, they thought that they [partisans] will be, that they will be the liberators perhaps. And my father and many of my fellow villagers were part of that organization. Some of them got killed in that war. My father survived, however he had terrible stories. As he told us, for example during that time people in Skenderaj walked on corpses, so many [of them]. And you know, they were confused about what was happening.

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<sup>1</sup>*Legaliteti*(Legality) was a nationalist pro-monarchic Albanian movement that was active during the Second World War. It demanded the return of King Zog, who had fled the country upon the Italian invasion.

<sup>2</sup>Gjergj Kastriot – Skanderbeg (1405-1468) was an Albanian nobleman and leader. Taken hostage as a boy by the Ottomans, he served the Empire until 1443 when he became “the Chief of the League of Albanian People” in the League of Lezhë. He led a resistance to the Ottoman Empire for the next 25 years until his death, and is considered a model of Christian resistance against Ottoman Islam throughout Europe. He is the greatest Albanian national hero.

<sup>3</sup> Muja and Halil are two brothers, protagonists of the songs of the frontier warriors, (*këngët kreshnike*) an oral epic of folktales and legends based on mythological or historical events, which is sung in men’s chambers (*oda*) in Kosovo, especially in the northern mountains, accompanied by *lahuta* (lute).

<sup>4</sup>Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) was an Albanian Franciscan brother, a poet, an educator, a politician, and a national hero, the author of *Lahuta e Malcis* (The Highland Lute), an epic poem of over 17,000 verses.

<sup>5</sup>Serbian movement born in the beginning of the Second World War, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. Its name derives from *četa*, anti-Ottoman guerrilla bands. This movement adopted a Greater Serbia program and was for a limited period an anti-occupation guerrilla, but mostly engaged in collaboration with Nazi Germany, its major goal remaining the unification of all Serbs. It was responsible for a strategy of terror against non-Serbs during the Second World War and was banned after 1945. Mihailović was captured, tried and executed in 1946.

<sup>6</sup>Shaban Polluzha was the leader of volunteer forces in Drenica. He joined the partisans, but in late 1944 he disobeyed orders to go north to fight Germans in Serbia, having received news that nationalist Serbs and Montenegrins were attacking civilians in Drenica. He fought against partisans forces until early 1945, when he was killed.

That organization of Shaban Polluzha was... I mean it did not have, it wasn't a regular army. Naturally, he had created formations, battalions. I know, people of my village were in the first battalion and the guy who led them was Ymer Fazlija, who is very well known. However, you know, their effort was very difficult ... this was one of the reasons for the massacres that were committed. But also the ideological aspect. They did not want communism. And he told me that Fadil had, Fadil Hoxha<sup>7</sup> had a meeting with Shaban Polluzha in Skenderaj. And he [Polluzha], among others, tells him, he says, "We won't attack you if you stop the killings"- there were so many prisoners there - "and if you set them free." And those who were lucky to live, you know, they were set free that evening, because every night they killed a certain number of those in prison.

One of those who survived was my uncle, one of my uncles, Ibrahim Spahiu, son of Mullah Ilaz Brojë, that is his name. But he was from Kastriot<sup>8</sup> as they call it now. And he was, you know, he was educated, at the time. He has finished the *madrasa*<sup>9</sup> in Skopje with Idriz Ajeti<sup>10</sup> and others. And people tell, those who were lucky to live... that meeting of Shaban Polluzha with partisan formations, some of them have survived. And now I don't know the other details. I know they went near Podujevo. They were attacked by partisans treacherously and many people were killed there. And then it just dispersed as a formation.

Now, about my childhood, as a child I went to school on my own. The school was... my village did not have a school as it was a small mountain village, and it was five to six kilometers to Runik, a locality. And there I, we always went up to there on foot of course. A mountain path, you don't know, we say where only goats walk, which zigzags a lot, very steep. That path, I was the only girl who walked across the mountain, to Runik. And back then it snowed a lot. Very interesting, now it snows less, or perhaps it seems to me so (smiles). Because for example, while I was going to school, the snow would come up to here {touches the knee}, above the knee. And I had to open a *rrenë* they call it {gestures with a hand}, you know, a path. You know, very difficult.

I was very curious even as a child. Also, in school of course, back then we went to mixed classes. When I was in first grade, I learnt all the lessons for students in third grade too, as I listened to them, I mean, we were together. Then, when I started in... I too, for example, a dress, for the first time, in fifth grade, I sewed a dress myself. I bought the fabric... I have the photo, but I don't know if I should... and I bought, you know some sort of *basma*<sup>11</sup> and I sewed it. I have a photo of my friends and me, I was wearing it.

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<sup>7</sup>Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly Obilić.

<sup>9</sup>Muslim religious school, the only school where teaching could be conducted in Albanian until 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Albanian writer and academic.

<sup>11</sup>*Basma* is a thin cotton fabric with a simple pattern, colored and with various flowers.

There was a library in... and that was like a location, not a town, but more like a village ... it was like a community place. And there was a library and I constantly borrowed books. I've read so many books, you know from the fifth till the eighth grade. And always, you know I wished to get educated and do something. As I, you know, back then even as a child, I had noticed that everyone was illiterate, eighty percent.

I have seen a female teacher for the first time when... in the sixth grade of primary school. She came from Mitrovica, a young one, so certainly back then, she had not finished school entirely since there was a demand for people to work. And I was in sixth grade, she was very beautiful, Sanije Maliqi. I can show it to you, I have a book on female teachers of Drenica. And we would lean onto the windows to see how does a girl, a teacher looks like, you know, since we had not seen it. We thought that there were only male teachers. She, with curly hair, beautiful, and I had read *Afërdita*,<sup>12</sup> by Sterjo Spasse, perhaps dozen of times. It had a girl with curly hair on the cover page. I thought she came out of that novel and she came in human shape (smiles). And she did love us a lot. She was very loving, very nice. She would often take me where she lived.

Afterwards, when I started seventh grade, two other female teachers came. Moreover, even so, the other teacher was Fadile Zhubi, from Mitrovica. Seeing our curiosity, perhaps even our will, you know, they supported me even more and gave me books. For example, Sanija prepared sweets, some kind of sweets that I've never seen before. As you know, back then in the village they only cooked *halva*, a rice pudding or... or baklava. Much later have these started to enter as...

And, when I finished eighth grade, my father told me, "You will now go to *Normale*<sup>13</sup> in Mitrovica." Perhaps it sounds unbelievable to you. We went from Radisheva to Mitrovica on foot, which is six hours walk. And we had an admission exam. There were plenty of applicants since back then there were only few high schools. You know, only Mitrovica and Pristina had *Normale* school I think. There was no other, I believe not. And you know, there were so many applicants, I was afraid of whether I would be admitted or not. And after we were done they told us, "You should come after a week and check whether you are accepted in the school, in *Normale*." I slept there for a couple of days, my mother had a cousin, this guy Ibrahim Spahiu, so I stayed at their place. When I went to check whether I was accepted, I might have looked at the list a few times and still could not believe that I had been accepted. I was ranked sixth in the list (smiles).

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<sup>12</sup>The speaker is referring to the novel *Afërdita* by Sterjo Spasse, published in 1944. *Afërdita* is a city girl, who upon finishing her studies is sent to teach in a mountain village, where she struggles to emancipate the local "backward" population. Spasse wrote a sequel, *Afërdita përsëri në fshat* (*Afërdita returns to the village*) in 1955. Both books were a huge success.

<sup>13</sup>The first *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during WWII, these were the first schools in Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina and later on in other cities.

And so I enrolled in *Normale*. I finished it with excellent grades. They selected me as the best student of the school when I was in third grade. And back then it was published, there was a journal, *Front*, for the whole of Yugoslavia. They selected the excellent ones from all Yugoslavia. Imagine my father, he found out from the headmaster of the school in Runik. He was a Montenegrin. And when he saw him in Runik he told him, Ali was my father's name, he tells him, "Ali, did your daughter visit you?" "No," he says, "She rarely comes." Because back then there were no buses, only one that departed from Peja and did not stop in Runik. Five, seven, eighty people in one bus. And he says, "No, she did not come for a long time." And he says, "Hold on, I will tell you something nice." He had seen the journal and told him, he says, "Here, your daughter... you know the council of school teachers, they have..." And when I went, out of desire to tell him, he says to me, "Well, I did find out" (smiles). Later on, when I got to fourth grade, they enabled me to finish two grades in one year. That's how it was back then, for students who were, you know...

And I, I could hardly wait, you know, I started working as a teacher in Runik a year earlier [than graduation]. That was the greatest dream of my life. And I did other things later, but not something as impressive as that. Because the dream I had for years came true... and I worked a few years as a teacher there, and then I enrolled in the faculty as a part-timer in 1971. I did not have good financial conditions, you know, due to the fact that they only did farming, back then there was no possibility to... and I wished to help my family so my brothers got an education too and my parents, so I enrolled as a part-time student.

The same year I got a job in Runik, electricity came to Radisheva for the very first time. You know, because I finished primary school with... at the time they called it an oil lamp, gas [lamp]. I pinned a nail, on the [wall]... above my head {points with a hand}. I studied with it as late as I could, or during daylight -in *Normale* as well - when I studied at home. At my uncles', it was a huge difference you know, since they had a television in Mitrovica, and I remember I was watching some American serials. And now, there was a huge difference, you know from the life in the city and in some localities that... Runik had electricity for example, but that was a mountain area and with scattered houses and it did cost a lot to bring it over. And when I started to work, electricity became available, you know. And three or four days before it was completely installed, I bought a TV set (smiles) and brought it over. And that was a joy not only for my family, but for all the neighbors would come to watch it every evening, since it was something special, unusual for them.

Or for example, my grandmother, she was ninety years old, the mother of my mother...because they did not have electricity in Kastriot, now Kostërrc, it's a village. And she, I mean she was ninety years old, it was something...something strange for her, or unimaginable, a cultural trance. And when she watched television, when the images started to get larger she thought they want to come out of... and said (smiles), you know, she would put her scarf on, out of fear that they would see her. We would tell her, "*Loke*,<sup>14</sup> they don't see you. No!" And then she would, "I swear on the soul of..." her brother ..." they are coming out!"

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<sup>14</sup> Granny, an Albanian colloquial term for older ladies e.g. grandmother.

We would tell her, “No!” Or for example, in the evening, my eldest brother, he got killed, he was a soldier in the last war...and he told her, “Loke, shall we turn it on?” He would tell her that [we were seeing] a big house, and a lot of people, and that it was the evening. But then it was difficult for us to explain, you know.

Very interesting, she was so old, and yet she would look at me with so much love. She liked that... she was different from those who said, “It is not good, because a girl goes astray while at school,” even in my village, everyone. Perhaps it is one of the few villages that did not have fanaticism, very interesting. We all lived without fences, how they make them at... without wooden fences as they call them. They lived, for example they stayed together, they worked the corn together, we harvested the corn together. I did harvest as a child, with a reaping hook. And I cannot say that there was fan [aticism]...there isn’t... of course there are elements of it, it was the same for everyone. But not in the sense that just because I went to school I abandoned the customary codes.

There were perhaps many reasons, since traditionally in Radisheva there was a great resistance against Turkey. My grandfather was imprisoned for twelve years in Turkey. Later on, he fought together with Isa Boletini<sup>15</sup> and he was there when the independence [of Albania] was declared. It is a strange coincidence, as today we have the reburial of Isa’s bones. And my grandfather, he was with him in Podgorica, when Isa was killed. He managed to escape together with Isa’s son. They even brought his horse to Kosovo. Though Isa was killed, Isa’s son and my father survived... my great grandfather, whereas some of my cousins were killed, two of them together with Isa. Perhaps these might be the reasons why.

And then, Shotë Galica<sup>16</sup>... grew up in Radisheva, and the very fact that she was an unparalleled fighter for the Balkans, not only for Albanians. Azem<sup>17</sup> had two other wives, as many had two, three wives, even Isa even... but, Shota was the one who became a fighter, who took the gun, that... Then, [she was] the one who led the unit, you know even after Azem was dead, she, together with a cousin, Mehmet Delia, were leading for years. And perhaps these factors influenced my growing up with a kind of pride, let’s say. My friends used to tell me, they even tell me now, because I had, you know, and continue to have good friends in Mitrovica... I mean, I did not have any wealth but I never felt shy, so perhaps these factors made

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<sup>15</sup> Isa Boletini (1864-1916) was a nationalist figure and fighter and a major leader of the armed revolt against the Ottoman government of the Young Turks. His remains, originally buried in Podgorica where he was killed, were reburied in the village of Boletin, in the northern side of Mitrovica, in June 2015.

<sup>16</sup>Shotë Galica, born as Qerimë Halil Radisheva, was an Albanian insurgent fighter and the wife of Azem Bejta, the leader of the *Kaçak* movement. Galica participated in dozens of attacks against Royal Yugoslav forces in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the *Kaçak* movement succeeded to put under their control temporary free zones.

<sup>17</sup>AzemGalica (1889-1924) was born Azem Bejta but took the name Galica from the village where he was born in Drenica. He was the leader of the *Kaçak* (outlaws) movement against the Kingdom of Serbia first, and then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Bejta's units put under their temporary control a free zone in the western part of Kosovo. He died from wounds received during a confrontation with royal forces. Together with his companion ShotëGalica, Bejta acquired legendary status as a national hero.

it possible for me to be... I also have aspirations, I could say, to do something not only for myself. And I am happy (smiles).

I worked ten years in Runik, you know, Runik and then Skenderaj, I worked with my whole being. Perhaps my greatest energy was spent there, and I am happy about this. For example, I, as a teacher... we organized all kinds of things, all kinds, even literary classes, we issued journals, and plays, we staged them ourselves, I did role-playing, for example. We ran competitions with other schools, at the municipal level. We tried hard, you know.

I used to see myself, perhaps I am not modest if I say it, as a missionary. I wished that my example influenced the education of all the other girls, you know, to show them that being educated makes you more dignified, more skillful, more useful, contrary to the existing, general opinion. I gave them everything to read, all kind of books. Do you know how many books I bought back then? Hundreds! Unfortunately, they were all burnt, as I left them in Radisheva, at my brothers'.

So, you know... afterwards when I finished university, I was still working there, first as a teacher in Runik, then as a professor in Skenderaj for two years. Perhaps it might be interesting for you, as I don't know what is best to...

For example, in Skenderaj, in the year 1976, back then, a national awakening had already started, you know, some sort of a national rebirth... of Kosovo, it was then when our national rebirth took place, since we were very late... very, very. When I read this book {the interviewee points to the bookshelf} on female teachers of Drenica in '41-'71, and in the years such as '40-'48, all of those who came to Drenica were not from Drenica, [they were] either from Gjakova, or from Albania, male or female teachers. So it was an absolute darkness.

Then the ammunition factory opened in Skenderaj. I will never forget, I was a professor then. You know it was an unusual celebration of joy. And I assigned my students to write, to write an essay, as it was called then. So, the title [was], "The factory sirens are being heard in Drenica too, this is not a legend".

And after I finished that school year, it was professor Rexhep Ismajli back then, I had two more [years], and he said, "You girl..." Back then they used to hold exams jointly, in one classroom, not like now (laughs). And there was the wife of Mehmet Kraja, Zize Rexhaj, another who lived in Mitrovica, and many... He said, "We want to keep you at the faculty". And I sort of... I could not imagine that these two would coincide... He said, "How many exams do you have left?" I had two more exams to graduate. He said, "Once you are done, you will be here." And this is a part of my youth. I don't know if I achieved, it is difficult that a person [realizes] every... you know, everything that you wish for, or perhaps at this moment I cannot recall the rest of quite important things (laughs).



## Part Two

[Part of the interview *cut* out from the *video*: the interviewer asks the interviewee about her youth.]

**Sala Ahmetaj:** I, you know, when I came to the university... for example I came for the first time to Pristina when I got enrolled in the university. One of my colleagues even drew [a map of] the road to there. When I stepped out [of the bus], the station used to be where the Television building stands now, in the direction of the Committee, where the Ministry of Culture is now, so you turn left, etc.

However, perhaps my story might not be the best possible, due to the fact that I have studied part-time. My friends were full-time and I envied them. But I came perhaps every week, or every two weeks on Saturdays. They stayed in the dormitory and that sight looked majestic to me. This was a rebirth for me, you know. There were so many girls studying, and quite intensively. And they were studying in all fields.

I know that when I finished the *Normale*, the school headmaster told me - as then I finished two grades in one year, and the Medical Faculty opened for the first time -, he told me, "You will go to Medical School." I did not like it much, also I had other financial reasons so I enrolled in the Language Faculty. So I visited every week, it was a great pleasure for me since I left a provincial life, without a cultural life, for example. Only teachers or professors had a cultural life as per their possibilities.

When I came for a visit here at the dormitory, I had fun with my friends. So many girls, so many boys and you know... or for example, back then we, they booked the tickets, every time I came to Pristina we would go to the theatre. I saw the best theater plays at the time, and they were extremely good. Perhaps that is how they seem to me now, you know... Then we went out to the *korzo*.<sup>18</sup> Do you know how beautiful that was, I mean it was indescribable, as a sight, as an experience.

And this is, I mean it was a huge cultural movement, it was educational for the whole of Kosovo as you know, those first effects came to the surface then in the '70s... teachers who came from Albania and teachers who emerged from Kosovo. And now, you know, that is like, like when the plants blossom and it was, you know, a very nice cultural movement. Cultural-artistic associations were formed in many places. In Pristina, you know, these are my best and most special recollections. I cannot speak for the students' movement as I lived, I mean, I did not live through it. I don't know any element of, what else can I say.

**Lura Limani:** So, you were living in Skenderaj, right?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** In Radisheva.

**Lura Limani:** And you commuted every day from Radisheva?

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<sup>18</sup>The pedestrian promenade in the center of a town.

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, I commuted, you know, when I came for the exams. I wasn't full-time, but part-time. Only for exams and you know...

**Lura Limani:** When did you come to Pristina?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** To Pristina, to live?

**Lura Limani:** Uh-uh.

**Sala Ahmetaj:** I mean, when I got accepted in the university, in the year 1978, that is, when I got married (laughs), and I live in Pristina since then. One more detail, for example I, when I finished the university even then, card boxes [full of books] and we had, besides the exams... we also [studied] literature, and world literature, perhaps I had to read around one hundred books, and I had... now, for my mother all those books, it was incomprehensible. And I enrolled in a Master's degree program, and now she could not imagine... she said, "I thought that you are finished with school, there is no more" (laughs). Because of the social context they lived in, they could not understand that school has no... knowledge or school have no limits.

And then... or one more element. I, as a child, never liked my name. And we... I went with my father to collect the hay, you know, I mean when the grass has dried, and when I was in eighth grade perhaps, or seventh, I said, "Father, I don't like my name." "Yes," he said, "what name did you want?" I told him, "I wished to be named Shqipe" (laughs). "Well," he said, "I didn't do much school, and I didn't know how to find a better Albanian name" (laughs).

For example, my acceptance at the university, and... as I was the first one in the university out of all the boys and girls in my village, and I always hanged out in the *oda*<sup>19</sup> with my cousins. Always... quite naturally, you know, they were proud of the work I did. Even when I got accepted in the university it was, you know, a celebration for my cousins and for everyone, it was something... because in all the villages of that area, nobody did...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Were you the first woman professor in the University of Pristina...?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** No, no.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Can you speak a bit about that time period?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Time period... I don't know, perhaps in my Faculty... I might not be accurate, but in the Language Department yes, you know, I was the first one. Even at the University, at the time there were only few women. Yes, unfortunately, that... that incentive of ours, in the '80s it did not last long and in the '80s... the first obstacles appeared.

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<sup>19</sup>Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

You know, until the years 1980-81, we had a very comfortable life, let's say. For example, for the Masters we went to the National Library, we had places where we could read. After the year 1980...up to then, afterwards, we were extremely constrained in many aspects as the social context changed, especially after the 1981 demonstrations. The University was attacked the most, because they labeled it the bastion of nationalism, of irredentism. I do not know now in which context it could...

**Lura Limani:** Can you speak in general of how was the University organized and how in fact was that related to the protests, as it did precede the movements that happened in...

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, that was, naturally it would have happened since in the University... The University, you know, was not only the place where we got educated, but the University was the pride of Kosovo for the very fact that we were educated there. And it means the level of civilization went up - we cultivated that civilization in a way. We became more European, so to say or, you know, the national conscience was awakened. For example, when one reads, one also gets informed about rights and about... it means not only about your personal rights, but also collective rights, the national rights. And, you know, we, the students, the professors, were extremely good and all of them were idealists and they worked based upon ideals. And you know, the job was not only to teach a lesson, or a subject matter, or an exam, but, you know...

Those professors, Anton Çetta<sup>20</sup> for example, I am picking one of the names, or some others, they also cultivated the love for the nation, for the homeland, for freedom. And I saw, myself, and many of my colleagues of that generation, we saw that we lacked collective freedom, national freedom. Because we saw, like for example, Serbs used to have more privileges, they were all in [high] positions and back then we, I mean one could see that. And that kind of general social context that was created is the contribution of the University of Pristina. The majority of academics were educated, you know, in Zagreb, in Ljubljana, and there they had also received a more European culture, more... and that influenced, you know, even students by reading more and etc., getting more aware and demanding greater national rights.

I had this kind of awareness even before that, and the others had it too perhaps because when one experiences it in her own family, I mean, it is something you have seen since childhood. I had an offer, for example, when I finished the *Normale*, to be a member of the Provincial Youth Committee, because there was a conference held in Skenderaj, and I still have the handwritten speech on education for girls. Even then, you know, they elected me to be in the chairmanship and have a significant post. I hesitated for three months and then did not join. And people did tell me off since I could have had, you know, a material gain, but you know, my belief was that it is not my country, you know it's not... I did not see myself there and so I did not go, you know. And when they saw me after a few years at the University, in

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<sup>20</sup>Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar. In 1991 a mass movement for the forgiveness of blood feuds (*pajtimi i gjaku*), was launched among the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was initiated by a group of students, former political prisoners, who approached folklore scholar Anton Çetta and others seniors figures in academia to lead the process. The movement reconciled thousands of cases, and it became a movement for national unity

the year 1981, when the riots happened, one of them told me, “You came to a better place than where we wanted to [bring you]. Yet, we wanted to take you away from the province as we saw that you could achieve more. And out of fear that you would remain only a teacher...”

Now, exactly the ‘70s, they were the golden years and everything we have achieved today is the result of the work of the University in the ‘70s. From the year... meaning since it was established, until the year 1981 and afterwards, the University was always punished and always under surveillance, so to speak.

**Lura Limani:** You personally, were you... do you remember any episode during the protests in particular?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** In the 1981? Yes, my brothers were students in the year 1981. I gave birth to a second daughter back then and I was on maternity leave. And, you know, my brothers were at the protests and besides... all of Kosovo and two of my cousins. And, you know, I... my husband went to see... they did not come to my place or the dormitory, since all dormitories were besieged by the police. And my brother, then, he saw that he could not, so they saw themselves in jeopardy. They didn’t go to the dormitory at all and he came to my place, I was relieved. My daughter was in tears inside the room from the smoke they sprayed. Imagine! And we were staying in a private apartment, because I didn’t have my own apartment yet, in that neighborhood there, I mean how they call it, I don’t know... on the road to Podujeva, there. And she was in tears even from the far room, my six months old daughter, her eyes were in tears from the smoke. And when my brother came, to add a detail, they went out again, as you know, when a person pursues an ideal the fear is gone (laughs).

And they call, and say, “They have arrested Sala,” talking about me. Because they knew that I, there, you know, I was a bit under police surveillance. Even when we were in Albania, in the year 1973, you know they interrogated us, especially when it came to me, because I read so many books at the time, so many.

And one of my uncles tells me, “Tell your brother Skender not to wear that jumper with stripes anymore...” Because people, you know, therefore I do not wish to... and even those who were working back then [for the regime], some of them, you know, have contributed [to the national cause]. And someone was with the security or the police. Now all the photos that were made, based upon these photos they identified or captured them in the streets, or wherever they found people. They told him, “Cut your hair completely and do not wear the jumper,” because an acquaintance of his told him, “He is quite recognizable.” And I threw away his jumper, he cut his hair to avoid prison. I was not a part of... because of my circumstances. I don’t know what other detail can I...

**Lura Limani:** It is alright. Can you tell us a bit about your professional life? So, you told us that you worked as a teacher in Runik, and then as a professor in Skenderaj and finally at...

**Sala Ahmetaj:** ...at the University, yes.

**Lura Limani:** ... that you worked at the University. We left off at the Masters Degree. If you could continue?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, yes. So I, when I got accepted in the University, I registered in the Masters program then. Exactly that was when I was selected... was hired, you know, to teach the subject of Syntax with Hilmi Agani, and he was very rigid, and everyone was telling me, "You were lucky to be chosen by Hilmi Agani." But the subject, Syntax, was not much a favorite amongst... and so I took Syntax for my MA thesis. When I finished it, I enrolled in the doctorate.

But then it happened... the period, the '90s, when they evicted us from the institutions. Some of my colleagues and I, we are the victims of that time. And we then gave up in a way. Even though we had enrolled because... there are those who got the doctorate degree at the time, but we, you know, it was very difficult in that social context in Pristina. Firstly, there was no office, there was no library, you didn't have a place to work. Secondly, at home, you know, every day something important happened that I wanted to hear about, or to look at or... Thus, it was difficult to concentrate on work.

We had, the International Seminar on Albanian Language, Literature and Culture was organized at the Faculty of Philology. Perhaps this was one of the greatest achievements of the University at the time. Because the Seminar was the only window out of which we could see people from around the world, or the world saw Kosovo. I mean, it was interesting for us to meet some French, German, someone... I mean, perhaps we thought they were different, they are... they are people too, now we know. So you see, for us it was a tremendous curiosity. In other words, besides its scientific, cultural and educational significance, this was quite important as well. Because, you know, we, we had meetings with people who came to learn Albanian. And we have, I was part of the Seminar continuously, first in the language courses, then at the Directorate of the Seminar, in charge for references from the field of Linguistics, a member of Steering Committee of the Seminar. In recent years I also had on offer for its leadership, which I didn't want and so on, you know.

However, in the '90s, they stopped the Seminar, the Seminar as well. Naturally, when we were going to private houses... it was impossible to organize such thing. And so we held it in Tirana for two years in a row, in the year 1995 and in 1996. I will tell you a detail from the year 1995, even from 1992. Is it possible, prior to this, since I remembered, for example, in the year 1992, the twentieth anniversary of the Orthography Congress was held in Tirana. And we were invited, the Department of Albanian Language and the Albanological Institute. And now we ... an agency had paid for our travel. I think it was Sion Tours, from Mitrovica. They took us for free to Albania and brought us back. However, we went to Macedonia with a passport, and from Macedonia to Albania with ID cards. It is clear to you? so it does not... and they hid our passports somewhere, I don't know somewhere inside the bus. And then we passed the border Macedonia-Albania with ID cards. And we had the 100th anniversary... the twentieth anniversary of the Orthography Congress.

Whereas in the year 1996 I went from Turkey to Albania for the Seminar, since I had, you know... since I had an Albanian stamp in my passport. When we entered... And now, when I came back from Albania, I slept one evening in Llojan, a village in Kumanovo, near the border. Besides, there was an obstetrician with one of my students, I mean she was married to one of my student from Skenderaj and so her family drove me to Preshevo illegally, not through borders, but through the fields. I remember sitting on a tractor, I said, "Did we pass?" They said, "Do not worry because you are in Serbian land." (laughs). And, so these were sacrifices too. You know, we had to make such sacrifice in order to do our job.

In Albania also... or for example, when I was invited to the one hundredth anniversary of Naim Frashëri.<sup>21</sup> The Academy of Sciences of Albania invited me, you know. And my colleagues had their passports in Pristina you know, I had to go to Mitrovica. And it was impossible, I mean, they made it impossible for us to go. And so that is how I went to the Seminar, you know.

It was very difficult to do genuine science, even though we, you know... there are various fields... so language study did not require special means for experts, etc. etc. But we didn't have the possibility to contact, to see... even though we, all the literature was translated in Serbian. If there was one good thing about knowing Serbian it was that the entire world literature, the world linguistics was translated in Serbian, or Croatian, or... and I, for example my husband, at the time he was studying graphic design in Belgrade, and brought all of them. There was someone called Benveniste, a well-known linguist, de Saussure, John Lyons, and others, you know, this way.

But we managed to establish contacts with other universities with... Nevertheless, the Seminar helped us a lot. And we continued it later, after the war, immediately in the first year without any funds. Before the war we, we did not even get any compensation. We did it voluntarily. And after the war, until it was... our Kosovo institutions were established. So, the Ministry then supported us. But...

### Part Three

[Part of the interview *cut* out from the *video*: the interviewer asks the speaker to continue to speak about her professional life.]

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, for example, after the year 1981 we were also restricted, threatened, in a way. We had meetings so often, for example at the Faculty. So often they required from us to distance ourselves from, you know, from the students' actions, from the protests, from... We did not do that. Anyhow, not the Department... perhaps our Faculty more specifically. Because our Department was entirely Albanian. And I might not know now... or the Language Department... There was a Department of Serbo-Croatian

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<sup>21</sup>An Albanian poet and writer. He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (the Albanian National Awakening) of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

Language but I don't have any memory of it, since I did not have any communication with them. However, you know, we always lived under tension, continuous tension.

And so, for example, a detail, with everything restricted, we, back then, we ... they allocated apartments to professors, teachers. And I remember, the University had few apartments that... and now the Directorate that was for... you know, for those issues, says, "You... if the University does not pay the balance, we will reclaim all your apartments." Imagine! Sixty percent was paid by the Directorate of Housing... whatever it was, [a directorate] of the municipality. It was responsible for everything, because that is how it always worked. But you know, this was one of the ways that we were also... so, even financially, so to make our lives much more difficult, so we fall into despair, that... And now, we had either to buy those apartments ourselves, to add that money, or we lost them.

And I remember it was Hasan Mekuli, at the time the Dean of our Faculty, and he says, "Those who do not have apartments, it is better to pay that forty percent, borrow or take a loan, or... because that other part that we have... that was given by the University or the Housing Directorate, will be lost. They are threatening us!" And that was a threat. You know, they wanted us not to have financial wellbeing, nor an apartment, nothing and... You know, they used all the instruments.

And so... or for example, especially after the '90s, in the year 1990, when Kosovo autonomy was abolished, those were very difficult days for us, very, very, very. And it is very interesting, for example back then they evicted all of us from the institutions. And first they evicted those at the Commission for student admission, two, three [of them]. Then, the second group... and every day we, all of us, went together. We were forced to go to the Faculty every day, or we were forced to go to the dormitories, to monitor [students].

I, this is true, enjoyed the students, we did not even discuss the issues we were supposed to. Because they said, "You should check the students," and we had to be the guardians, each day, one after the other, the professors, each in certain dormitories, in the whole University. Those [days] were very straining. And I went to do the guard, for example... Understandably we did not perform the task they thought we ought to carry out. So we were [supposed] to say to them, "We have good conditions, we have sufficient rights," etc. etc. I never said that to them. And the students, for example, I drank coffee with them, we talked about literature, about... or about other stuff.

Moreover, we had to go to the Faculty every day, every day, and to wait for what was going to happen. Now after... after they evicted those who were... you know, with pretexts. Now the second group... I got expelled in the second group. Why? Because we were in a protest together with the students in front of the Faculty. And even I was in one of the pages of the newspaper, we are quite visible there. You know, I standing, few older women, and elderly and everyone else would come. And now, they knew who we are, of course. Then, the smoke gave me so much trouble in that protest.

And then they expelled us, the second group just because we were at the protest, together with the students. Perhaps this was the biggest achievement when professors broke the silence. In other words, even us, in silence of course... we did not make a declaration in public, but back then we were out. And so, they expelled the majority of professors one by one. And, only few remained. And so they were not feeling comfortable, because you would remain under [the threat of] violent measures. And they requested... some then left on their own will. Rarely any of them remained for a certain time. But the majority left.

And we then got reorganized. And I remember our Faculty held a meeting in the Institute of Albanology. And we elected other [administrative] bodies, ourselves, you know. And you know we decided to continue lectures in private houses. Unfortunately, most of the houses were... that part towards Xhemajl Ibishi street, do they call it that way? There is a school, I don't know how it is called, it was May 1stor... I don't know how it is called, Nazim Gafurri or... too far. The classrooms were [originally] mainly destined for warehouses or shops, all of cement, bricks. And trust me, I felt sorry for the students. For example, one sat on a brick, and held the book on his lap. Very cold, always.

I suffer from rheumatism; I think since then it got much worse. And since then I started to wear trousers and I always wear them. As we had the impression, the female professors, a teacher should wear a suit, more classic, more... Now from Dardania, where my apartment is, to Xhemajl Ibishi road, I walked perhaps an hour and twenty, or fifteen minutes. We held lectures. To tell you the truth, a lot of students were very bright at that time. For example, the young ones in our Department now, are a product of that time. Very interesting.

Later on, the police started to follow us too, for example here and there to expel them from... and I remember a colleague, he was Murat Blaku, "Sala..." he said, "The police..." that is, where I was, where I was supposed to hold lectures, he said, "They came to me and asked me that." I said, "Hey Murat, don't tell me anything because they will not ask me the same, I don't even want to think about it. If they come..." You know, very delicate circumstances.

For some time, we didn't get any salary, you know. After a while it was around 50 Deutsch Marks back then. Meanwhile my daughters were, especially the third one, very young. And sometimes she would say... I said to her, "Jeta, this time I went on foot, I will give to you the money meant for the road." Like all children they would play with their friends, and by nature she was a bit more... She wished to have a toy, a...

So, besides this, the circumstances under which we worked, were unimaginable, you know, unimaginably difficult. Many students were stuck then ... since the war till now, particularly the region of Drenica and Dukagjini... I know, and some of them came to me... I had told them, "I am willing to take you, or to give you anything I can afford, in case you are left without money, or..." Because they, they lost contacts with their family members.



Human beings sometimes... now I am surprised for example by the great motivation we used to have. I never felt tired. There were cases, I went all the way there for only one student, who either had a thesis presentation, or an exam. Because I felt sorry, I knew that she came from, you know... it was very difficult to reach, or the road to there... Or sometimes I invited them over to my house, to my apartment. Because I felt sorry for them, [it was] cold. Sometimes, for example even the owners [of the house] were very nice, a lot, eighty percent of... but some of them did not even have the means to heat those premises.

I too, very often, invited them to my house, even though I did not have any major comfort. Especially for the exams, I invited them home, very often. Nowadays, they introduce themselves when they see me occasionally, or... This was, you know, a time of survival. And we didn't do everything, or if we didn't achieve the best in terms of educational plan, we maintained cohesion. And, you know, we removed the youth out of the streets, out of desperation, while hoping for better. And I think that we did well, considering the circumstances under which we worked.

And when they expelled me from my job, so I don't forget to mention, it was for the first time that I was glad that my parents were not alive. For the fact that, you know, in the social context they lived, they were very happy that their children, because my brother was a professor at the University too... even now, with all that hard work, with all that sacrifice to finish school, to get a job, they expelled us from [our] jobs. It was something quite difficult for them. And for another fact, because when, you know, when the situation got worse and Yugoslavia started to fall apart, we were still hoping. Being an idealist, I did say, "No, they cannot do anything to us."

And my father, without a day of school, because life taught him that we need to have some other things, you know, not only school... I mean, to not only be educated, but to have, you know, your legal rights. And I remember that time when, you know, when we used to teach this way and I used to say, "They cannot do anything to us." I know, we stayed up till morning, we were watching television, the Congress of Yugoslavia when Yugoslavia fell apart. At five in the morning the Croats, the Slovenes went out. And we were still hoping that... My father told me, "I feel sorry for you, but you should know, you have nothing. And within three days, they will take away everything you have. Because you don't have an army, you don't have police forces. You have a school, but that is not enough. I mean, you are all educated, but you don't have institutions that protect you." And that is exactly how it happened. But he was not alive to prove his words.

Or my mother for example, I was surprised back then, now I wonder. We did not know much about Albania back then, you know. We did not have all the information about Albania not being powerful, thus unable to help us... And my mother said, "Albania is doing nothing." "Why, mother?" "Because it is not helping you at all, do you see what you are going through." You know, we were educated, but some of us, you know, we believed that we would achieve everything without even making this great sacrifice. The one we had to make. I remember the foreigners used to tell us, for example, "We did protest in front of the

University.” And I remember, oh God, how... Or on October 1st, for example, then I went out, my husband went out, everyone.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** In 1997?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, and we did protest. And foreigners would say, “Fine, did anyone die in front of the University?” So you know you made a sacrifice, however not the greatest one. And you know, later the context was such that we had to... because nobody wants war.

**Lura Limani:** Will you... you said it very well that without the great sacrifice it would not have changed, for Kosovo to be freed from the Serbian occupation. Can you tell us about your experience, I suppose from the years... from '97, '98 and during the war?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, yes. Namely that is the most difficult period of my life, I do apologize (cries). My entire family was involved in the war. My oldest brother was a soldier. Namely, when the first cells [of the Kosovo Liberation Army] appeared in Drenica, I did meet them. Even when in Pristina nobody knew that there was an army, moreover they thought that these were only speculations, or words of Serbian propaganda, etc. etc. And I went to Leqina, a village at the border with the municipality of Istog. A cousin of mine, went with me on foot, and I said, “I, want to see them alive,” you know like... soldiers. It is strange... perhaps seventy percent of them were my students in Runik, since Leqina is near Runik. And they all were hugging me, “Oh teacher,” I said, “Look, this time I should bow to you, not you to me” (cries).

Then, my brother went almost completely underground since '94, because in 1994 the police took him from home. He was with wife and children. They arrested and tortured him so much that they threw him on the road, near some sort of a canal somewhere, thinking he was dead. And accidentally... life, you know, while passing by, two people see him, they take him and see that he is alive. And then with these sort of sheepskins, with those traditional remedies, they healed him partially, they found a doctor somewhere and kept him hidden.

And a cousin comes to me, from Radisheva to Runik, to tell me, because he was afraid that I might hear it from the news and it will be a shock for me, you know. And I said, “I am going to lectures,” we held them at Xhemajllbishi Street. So in order for him not to tell me in front of my daughters he said, “I am coming with you,” he said, “and we go together and...” And on the road he told me. He said, “I want to take you with me, to see Kapllan.” When I saw my brother, I said, “Oh God, is it possible for a human to endure...” You could not recognize his hand, neither the legs nor... Everything, as if all bloated with water. You know from... from being too swollen, and being wrapped in sheets.

And because he was quite idealistic, extremely idealistic, he studied history, but you know he did not finish it. And he told me, “You go. You, your duty is much more important where you are, instead of staying [here]. You don't have to stay here with me.” Later on he healed and then got involved in war, you know. Even in 1998, when it happened... I was, I went to a funeral in Likoshan. They were concerned you

know, why didn't I come back and there, I told them, "I..." And that evening I slept in Skenderaj. One of my cousin told me, "Sister Sala, you have to go back tomorrow because...", they knew, she said, "All Serbs are leaving. And something tragic will happen here, something big." And that day I, I departed from there in the morning, perhaps I arrived here at eight in the evening barely, on... partly on foot, partly with a vehicle to Mitrovica, then here.

When I arrived in Pristina that evening, at five in the morning she called on the phone and told me, "The Jashari family<sup>22</sup> is under fire, thus inform everyone you can. At the time Vlora was 17 or 18 years old, so she went and told Fehmi Agani<sup>23</sup> and others, you know, so that they were at least alerted. I, a few days after this happened, saw my brother. I am not a believer in the sense... I lean more towards atheism, but I got convinced that there is something, or there are things that you... When I said goodbye to my brother, trust me, when I was back, I told my husband, "I will not see Kapllan again." It seemed to me that everything... I felt an unease that I could not describe. And I told my other brother, I said, "Skendë..." And that is how it happened.

So, he was killed in August, the police took the body, took it to the hospital and perhaps it is not good to upset you with this story, it is a very sad one, and I don't know how many...and Liri Loshi was a...he was my student in Skenderaj, a very good [student]. That night he announced the murder of three soldiers from Radisheva on the news, and I knew that one of them was my brother. He said, "I did not have the nerve to mention the names, because when you know someone personally it is much harder." I went to Mitrovica, and a doctor who did the autopsy, said...I mean, people performed a humane duty everywhere. He took the data and told a...someone, he said, he wrote, and said, "Kapllan Ahmetaj is killed and it is good that the family knows." For example, it is better that I found out back then, than to think he is missing and live in anxiety all your life. It is also harder.

And he, I met him and he told me, he had a bullet here, another here {she indicates the forehead and knee with her hand) and died on the spot. The body was not given to us. Even today we haven't managed to rebury him, he is beyond the bridge over the river Ibër. He too is hostage to Kosovo's status, I mean, his remains (cries). Because I did not want to go and take him illegally. Why risk other people, I mean until [the situation] normalizes. We know where he is buried approximately.

Also my daughters were very involved, the eldest and the second. And I hanged out in the balcony till eleven in the evening to wait for their return. When they evicted us from the apartment, perhaps that was

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<sup>22</sup>In March 1998 Serbian troops surrounded the compound of the Jashari family, whose men were among the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and killed all of them, including the women and the children. This event energized the Albanian resistance and marks the beginning of the war.

<sup>23</sup>Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a philosopher, sociologist and politician, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. He was assassinated by Serbian troops as he attempted to flee Pristina disguised as a woman to avoid detection.

one of the most difficult moments. Not because of my home but because I was leaving Kosovo, you know. This is one of the sacrifices, you know, because in Kosovo you have plenty of dreadful stories. My brother [was killed] by the bullet at least, while many other got killed in my village. They only mention those in big villages, but it is tragic when you compare the number of survivors to the ones killed. And my uncle's son, he had a sixteen years old son, his name was Alban. And he would [walk] all the way to Mitrovica on foot to let us know, for example about the war, about... [He was] a very young child, and the police cut his {points to her neck}. Only the skin was left. They massacred them, him and many others. So, and then after a few days we found them.

Naturally, I am happy that the Kosovo youth live without this terror today. I know that everything is not in perfect order, but at least, you know, time will solve the other issues, that...

#### Part Four

**Lura Limani:** You mentioned that they evicted you from the apartment during the time of Bajram,<sup>24</sup> what... then you went to Macedonia I suppose. Can you tell us about what happened after the exit to Macedonia and after you returned voluntarily to Kosovo?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** So in Macedonia, we... they welcomed us extremely well there and we didn't have any difficulty in terms of, you know, the essentials that one needs. However, we did live with anxiety - what is going to happen and when will we return. I did not wish to go abroad to... but we wished to return to Kosovo and we refused some offers. The moment that NATO went in, Vlora returned to Kosovo that very day with NATO troops. And they stayed for three nights at the Grand Hotel, surrounded by tanks, these NATO [tanks] that had come, out of fear that there are still paramilitaries around or... And she told us then, "Mother, do not return yet, as there is no water nor electricity, nothing in Pristina."

We didn't... what, who could have stopped us (laughs). We left and perhaps that was the most impressive sight in my life. Hundreds of vehicles, hundreds of tractors, a caravan returning to Kosovo. And I was aware of what happened to the apartment, and did not care to tell you the truth, and so we returned three or four days later, we were some of the first to return to Kosovo. And one guy in Tetovo, at whose place my girls were staying, as my husband and I were in Ohrid, he supplied the car with all kind of food, brought them to us, when we came back we had supplies for almost a month. You know, that intoxication of freedom, you know... did not last long and then real life started.

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<sup>24</sup>*Bajram* is the Turkish word for festival. Albanians celebrate *Ramadan Bajram*, which is the same as *Eid*, and *Kurban Bajram*, which is the Day of Sacrifice, two months and ten days after *Ramadan Bajram*.

We started, we started working at the University then. We found nothing there, no books, not even in the Faculty, I never forget, you know, a lot... Yes, political organizing started too, you know. So, I continued to work on my doctorate. They did make me an offer to join politics. I was quite hesitant. I have observed politics passively, but I, perhaps due to my conviction that, you know, that it is more difficult for people who are sincere and open, you know, even today I think like that, it is more difficult to... to practice the profession of politics. They kept coming to my house and eventually I got persuaded, you know, to join the Democratic Party at the time. The reason was that this was a political line, which my family as well...you know, a resistance that was more active. I was elected member of Parliament in the mandate... you know, initially in municipality of Pristina, the first elections being municipal ones, during one year. And this was with open lists, but an honest one, since they did not know many [candidates]...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** In which year?

**Sala Ahmetaj:** In the year 2000, I think... yes because 2000... yes 2000, 2001 then 2004, 2004-2007 here. And then they proposed me as a Deputy at the Kosovo Assembly, in the year 2001. You know, that was an extraordinary experience of mine, and you know, a dream that I made come true. We worked a lot, especially during the second mandate. And the Deputies were extremely responsible. For example, the first law to be adopted at the Assembly was the Law on Education. And I spoke on behalf of the parliamentary group on the Law on Education. Naturally, we had a lot of flaws. We did not have experience in state organization. We didn't know, we didn't know many things, even when it came to protocol issues, or the manner of communication, or...

So, we worked on drafting laws, [we had] debates on political affairs. For example, we had to achieve standards before status,<sup>25</sup> which was something quite difficult for me. And I remember, those discussions, it took me a week to prepare them, and now they tell jokes about it, "Mom, it is like when you wrote essays for..." (laughs). You know, out of fear that I was not being responsible... And so the issue of achieving standards prior to status, you know, it was always required from us to do something other than [what was] perhaps [required] from others. And in one of my speeches I pointed out, "Which standard has been accomplished by Greece for example, regarding the rights of Albanians in Greece?" I mean, Albanians don't exist for the Greeks, or... and they are in the European Union. And then, some colleagues told me, "Well, you don't do much political discussions," in the sense...

But we constantly, you know... I have learned a lot of things from politics. First, I saw it for myself then... as I was an idealist and I thought that everything can be achieved if you want to. And then I saw that we do

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<sup>25</sup> In 2003, the UN mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) compiled a document with benchmarks titled "Standards before Status," delineating standards of good governance that Kosovo had to fulfill before its status could be determined. The provisional government of Kosovo organized groups to deal with particular benchmarks, and in 2005 a UN-commissioned report concluded that no further progress could be achieved on the standards without discussing Kosovo's status. The report was a major push to start the Kosovo Status Process, which ended with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.

not have enough power, that, you know, alliances always work. Even when you are good, even when you have qualities, as a nation or as a people, and even when you fight hard, if you do not manage to create alliances, you cannot achieve your goals. So, I saw it, for example in heavy discussions, plenty... since you know, there ought to be a balance, it had to, you know... And then from being an idealist I have... I have become a pragmatist and a realist, because I saw that we cannot get everything that belongs to us. You cannot achieve it on your own. It is very difficult without an ally or friends in the political sense.

They took us to the political school in Strasbourg, and I did learn so much there. But at the time it seemed so difficult, since it was soon after the war, you know. Because in order to achieve consensus, or a... however, some time is required. And they would speak to us for example about how Germans and French reconciled or... And we held at the University a... right after the war, some sort of a round table, and they spoke to us, to University professors, they spoke to us about political affairs. A Belgian woman, a Dutch woman, a... and that was, you know, immediately, the year 2000, too soon. And some of us... I asked a question, I asked them a question. And I remember, Halit Halimi, a colleague from the Department of French, said, "You made my day, professor. You said it very well." He said that... I told them, "You can have completely, you know, I don't contradict the reconciliation they have reached, but for every reconciliation you need for the parties to be equal and the victims should heal some, and you know, not when my wounds are very deep, my wounds are open." I said, "What do you think?" And I asked this question... and the colleague, he told me, "The coffee will always be on me because it is..." you know...

Afterwards, as an MP, you know, I have seen that sometimes politics strips your humanity off, I don't know, or even your reason. Because in order to achieve political goals, you, even a cause which is just perhaps, you don't do it because you want to... your rival...how I... it doesn't seem very... very appropriate. I worked even, you know how... as a Deputy I was very committed to issues of gender equality. And we did work a lot in the drafting of... of a national plan on gender equality, the national plan. We have done it, few Deputies together with, you know, there was the United Nations, I mean UNIFEM. And we drafted the Law, I am one of the drafters of the Law on Gender Equality.

So, the issue of gender equality. I, and a few of my writings were published in *Koha Ditore*, and so I have read Simone de Beauvoir and others. When there was the debate around the quota... in a place such as Kosovo, you know, I was convinced that equality cannot be achieved... of course, the Law ought to be drafted but there ought to be also a promotion of other strategies of collective awareness. Because the law itself cannot, the law takes a long time when there is no general culture, or if you don't promote ideas that embody gender equality. Now, the quota obliges, obliges the institutions to include women as well. Now, whether those who deserve it or not get in, that is another issue. I think that until we have reached a greater awareness, the quota should remain.

In Scandinavian countries there is no need for a quota since you know gender equality has been achieved organically. And on gender equality we should be starting at kindergarten, then family and school, and up to school books. I know, my daughter used to tell me, "Mom, why only dad makes tea? No other man

serves tea.” Because that seemed atypical to her, despite the fact that other husbands were educated, they were professors, or engineers or... It means that it is very difficult to change the mentality. And you know, in order to change the mentality, you should promote it further, you know, together with other projects, and with... so, [you should] promote equality or through concrete examples, or use other instruments, not to rely only on legislation.

Following the second mandate, I ceased to deal with politics, you know, and it was good that it happened because then I finished the doctorate, otherwise it would have been lingering. You know, I started this work some time ago, but because some of my colleagues and I were victims of external circumstances. I have published many scientific papers in the field of language, the field of syntax, on the norms of written Albanian. Those papers, are something that fall into a narrow professional, scientific scope. I continue to work at the University and I always did it with love because I do value education. Now, I believe that I did accomplish my mission and so a few days ago I was interviewed by a television, and I said, I told them, “At the time, we thought that one should aspire to be only a teacher. Fortunately, you know, nowadays there is greater development and a better one, since women nowadays can perform a variety of roles. Because that was the very foundation of education, whereas... but we also didn’t have our own state. Nowadays you can become a judge, you can become a lawyer, you can become a journalist, you can become a sociologist, you can become a film director, an actress, you know, all kinds of available professions.” And so, even the promotion of equality can be done this way. Because when you are present everywhere, you are also... so even equality is achieved better.

Even when it comes to politics, I don’t like these organizations. I have told them, but they thought that... for example, the Women’s Forum, what is that? Why have a Forum? You should ask to have forty percent [representation] in the Steering Committee of a political party, instead of having a Women’s Forum where women talk to each other. What is that? Or to have, for example, you have the Office of Education, of Gender Equality, as part of the Department of Culture or Education and that is where you promote it, where you establish a working group, but not separate ones. Nowadays designers too and... so now you can exercise any possible profession that you like or have the skills for. And this is the best way to promote gender equality.

Naturally...they told me, something like... you cannot have... the concept of gender equality as part of... you cannot have gender equality, without having first overall freedom. That is the dome. And then one through laws, the constitution, etc. promotes gender equality. But national freedom is the dome, and the most important thing, through which we, you know... we accomplish our vocations, our affinities by abiding to laws and justice and humanity principles, values.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** I have a question. At the time...you were in the Parliament at the time when the concept of quota was introduced.

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes... no!

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** How was that, because it should have been there from the beginning...

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Yes, yes. It was from the beginning.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What was the mood in the Parliament on your colleagues' side, from... because I know that it was a heated debate in fact.

**Sala Ahmetaj:** Very heated, I have even written an article back then. You know, quality or quota? Both, I love both quality and quota because my qualities sometimes cannot come to surface without a quota, due to the fact that we still have a society, not traditional perhaps, but more masculine. Naturally, this is less obvious in Pristina, yet even in Pristina, in the family, I wouldn't say eighty, but perhaps sixty percent, the lifestyle is not at a desirable level of culture that promotes equality. Because I am aware, for example, of a life culture, not of a primitive kind, but of an older time, let's say, when the husband worked the land, cut the wood, while the wife cooked. And that was the way of life, because the wife did the easier chores. Nowadays there are no more chores for women and men and each has to do the job they are more capable of, or that they can do better. Nowadays you have so many kitchen chefs who are men, all around the world.

You know even... but to achieve a better equality it requires... for all institutions to promote it, especially the media, and that is not being done. Because media represent women more as an image, only as fashion, or as an object, as... not as an intellectual value, or a professional value, or a... And this is the duty of the media and the school and politics. For example, if you have a look at the Parliament, there is no woman President of the Parliament. Finally, there is a woman President of the state and even in her case it was a product of the context, you know, not because we really wanted to have one. I have always minded this. For example, even when it comes to random social gatherings, only men are going, only[male] Deputies. And I once told the Chair of the Parliamentary group, at the group meeting, "What is... this? Just like in the *oda*, only... Why don't you invite us when you go to some event, or to some..." And he is a Deputy. He is elected to promote... Because, you know, cultural development, and cultural emancipation, emancipation of equality, cannot be done easily and quickly either. You can change your hairstyle, and the dress, and... but awareness alters slower. And for it to alter faster, all mechanisms should be put to work.

**Lura Limani:** I only wanted to thank you... and Kaltrina do you have more questions?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** No.

**Lura Limani:** I want to thank you very much for the time you gave us and for sharing these beautiful and sad, yet extremely touching stories.

**Sala Ahmetaj:** I am happy if I managed to give some, some contribution or... a tiny one for your work and further.