

INTERVIEW WITH ZEQIR SOPAJ

Prizren | Date: June 1, 2016

Duration: 63 minutes

Present:

1. Zeqir Sopaj (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)
3. Ard Morina (Interviewer)
4. Noar Sahiti (Camera)
5. Shaban Morina (Son-in-law)

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

[The interviewers ask the speaker to tell where he is from, where he was raised and details about his family. This part was cut from the video-interview.]

Zeqir Sopaj: I was born in Llapushnik, in 1925. I was a young shepherd, I went to Orllan with my grandfather, we had one hundred goats, cows. The house, the *oda*¹ on the second floor, had room for one hundred men. The *meshliçet*² took place there, at the time we used to serve food to the guests. Then I registered in school, at the time of *Kralj*'s³ Yugoslavia. I registered in 1936, I registered in school. I finished elementary school in 1939, it lasted four years.

Then in the '40s as I shepherd I tended to goats, cows and goats. We shepherds played, at that time we played the shepherds' games, various games in the *oda*. In 1941, Yugoslavia fell, *Kralj*'s Yugoslavia fell, and the time of Albania came. Italy entered Albania in 1939, Yugoslavia in 1941 *sene*,⁴ the German on the other side took and destroyed Yugoslavia. We were now able to breath, because we had been occupied by the *Kralj*. The *Kralj* took our arable lands, we went to *shkije*,⁵ to Serbs, we said, "Give me half of my land." We remained in the fields, he took the land on the other side...Eh, the Germans, Kosovo was [divided] in three pieces, one piece was with Tirana, one piece with Belgrade, one piece with Sofia, Morava. We were Peja, Gjakova, Prizren, Pristina, we were connected with Tirana, you know, three pieces.

¹ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

² Turkish: *meclis*, conference, assembly.

³ Serbian: *Kralj*, king. Here, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

⁴ Turkish: *sene*, year.

⁵ *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

In Yugoslavia's time, [Kosovo] was [divided] in four *banovina*.⁶ There was the Zajecka *banovina*, Rahovec, Peja, Gjakova, we had the center in Cetinje. The *učitelj*⁷ who came to school with us, at that time we used to call him, *učitelj gospodin* [Mister teacher]. Eh, there was Prizren, Drenica, Komoran, there was the Vardaska *banovina*, and they had their center in Skopje. The region of Gjilan was the Moravska *banovina*, they had their center in Niš. From Mitrovica to Glogoc [today's Drenas] they had the Ibarska *banovina*, they had their center in Kraljevo. Kosovo was [divided] in four *banovina* back then. In Tito's days, when he took it, Kosovo was a whole. We had no *banovina*, Kosovo was a whole.

In the King's⁸ days it was [divided] in three *vilayets*.⁹ Prizren, we were in the King's days, as my grandfather told us, we were under the *vilayet* of Shkodra. The region of Drenica on the other side, was under the *vilayet* of Monastir. I am talking about the King's days. The Mitrovica region was under the *vilayet* of Sanxhak in Bosnia, in the King's days. We were [divided] in four *banovina* in Yugoslavia's days as well. Also in the days of... how we used to say, of Albania, in three pieces, as I told you. As for Tito's days, we were Kosovo, he gave us autonomy, it was a full autonomy with no *bano*... we were Republics, only Kosovo... Yugoslavia became six republics, he decided in 1943, it was November 29, because Churchill was... he decided Yugoslavia, he put together six republics and two autonomies. Kosovo and Vojvodina had autonomy. There were six republics, there was the Republic of Montenegro, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Macedonia, in Tito's days.

[The interviewer asks the speaker about his personal and his family history. The question was cut from the video-interview]

Zeqir Sopaj: I grew up among shepherds and with cows until the time came for me to go to school. Then the time of Albania came, after I went to school. And four years, four years later they called me into the German SS. I was a German SS for six months, as they called it, the *Skanderbeg Divizija* [Skanderbeg Division] was established. It was established by Isa Boletini's¹⁰ sons and Xhafer Deva,¹¹ they established it. They were Asllan Boletini and Pajazit Boletini...then we left. The occupier started

⁶ Serbian: *Banovina*, principality, political territorial division.

⁷ Serbian: *učitelj*, teacher.

⁸ Here the speaker uses the Albanian word for King, *mbret*, in this context the Ottoman Sultan.

⁹ *Vilayet*, Ottoman administrative division.

¹⁰ Isa Boletini (1864-1916), an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter. He was one of the leaders of the Albanian Revolt of 1910 the Kosovo *vilajet* and became a major figure of Albanian struggle against the Ottomans.

¹¹ Xhafer Deva (1904-1978) was a leading Albanian nationalist political figure. During World War Two, after the Germans took control of region, with their support he and Bedri Pejani founded the Second League of Prizren, a nationalist movement whose ultimate goal was the establishment of Greater Albania.

getting destroyed, they called it occupier and fascist. When it first came, they said, “You should not write fascist, but fascist and occupier.” Hitler was the occupier, Mussolini was the fascist. These both, they are punished for starting the Second World War in 1926 [sic]. They were punished, you know. Then I left the SS, I brought the *mamzera*¹² and the shotgun home, I came home. Then I joined...the Communist Party came. It came...It came in September, 1944, no, not in September, but in November, they completely settled down in November.

Then I became a partisan guard, as they called it, I became that till November 9, until May 9 when Hitler was finished, you know, until we turned into the People’s *Milicia*¹³ and went to Rahovec. We didn’t know, we were wearing *tirqe*¹⁴ and our clothes, you know. Hasan Kryeziu and Ramadan and Kadri Minush were the leaders of the district, they said, “Until today, you were *Roja Partizane*, *Partizanska Straža* in Serbian, *Roja Partizane* in Albanian [Partisan Guards]. Now you are the People’s *Milicia*. Do you know what you are?” God be with us (smiles). He said, “You are like the former *Kralj*’s gendarmerie which was in the name of Maria,¹⁵ you are in the name of the people.” I stayed there until the first [month] of 1946. In 1946 we received uniforms. I had my father, my mother and my paternal uncle at home, my brother was killed in 1944, he was killed on December 2, 1944. Brahim Gashi told me, “Zeqë, do you want to go home to keep your father and your mother? Halil was killed in *Frizofiç* [Ferizaj]. Habib is little and he needs to go to school, your parents will remain without anyone. Do you want to go and keep those elders?” I said, “Yes.” I gave up my duty just because of my mother and my father, I went there to keep them.

Then, it was established...yes, in 1944, once they entered, the Headquarter of the Communist Party was in the village of Berisha. There were Mehmet Hoxha and Ismet Sheqiri. I was a *skojevac*,¹⁶ as they called it back then, I was, you know. They held meetings, “Be united, the Communist Party will come, the *Kralj* is over, the King is over, he is no more! We are brotherhood-unity.” “How come brotherhood-unity?” “We are brotherhood-unity now, and will be. But when the war is over, everybody will be at their own homes.” “We will work with Tirana, not with Belgrade, Kosovo, that’s

¹² *Mauser*, semi automatic pistol produced by Germany since the 1870s.

¹³ Serbian: *milicia*, police

¹⁴ Tight-fitting embroidered white flannel breeches with decorative braids at the bottom of the legs and on the pockets, traditional Albanian wear.

¹⁵ Princess Maria of Romania, married to Aleksandar I, the King of Yugoslavia from 1921 to 1934.

¹⁶ Russian: *skojevac*, communist youth.

how it will be when the war is over. But for now we are together in the war against fascism and the occupier, you know.” Then Hitler came to his end, in 1945.

When the war came to its end, they said, “No, now we have to be under Yugoslavia.” “*More*,¹⁷ how come under Yugoslavia? We had our connections with Tirana.” “That’s how it was decided.” They put us [there]. Churchill decided. He said, “Now there are six republics and two autonomies. Europe is united, and it will be, Europe will be united just like on the other side, it’s the same as the other side.” “No, how come on the other side? Not like the other side. We were with Tirana.” In 1947, Albania had a big famine, they had no bread. We collected the wheat and rose up because our brothers are dying of hunger in Yugoslavia, I mean, in Albania. This happened in 1947, eh.

We were in 1948, since I was very young when I was released, they said that I must go to the army again. I went on March 28, 1948, I went as a soldier to Koprevnica. I was laying in my bed there, there were two pairs of beds. One pair up and another one down, because there was poverty, you know, the army. I was *skojevac*, a certain Binok from Vuthaj was in the Party. The commissary entered before we woke up to exercise. {Points to the wall}. There was the photograph of Stalin, of Tito and of Enver, the three of them framed. He removed Stalin and Enver, he put them under his arm, only Tito remained.

I was...I said, “Binok,” I said, “I swear to God this is a big deal,” I said, “They removed Stalin and Enver, only Tito has remained.” “Don’t make it a big deal.” When it happened...he shouted, “Troops,” we stood up, we exercised, we ate breakfast, we entered a hall. The Cominform¹⁸ there, it started, *bum and bum* [onomatopoeic], we cut our collaboration with Stalin. Yugoslavia cut its collaboration with Stalin and it...Tito allied with America. And cut his collaboration with....Back then, in 1948, there was the *Rezolucija e Infobyrove*,¹⁹ I remember these well from the army. Then I came, I finished the army, I came home. I joined the social organizations where the youth worked. I was in Bërzbonovic, in Sarajevo, we gathered, I was in Vllasina, in *Novi* [New] Belgrade, there.

I worked in social organizations, I finished the army in 1950 and I came, I joined them. I was a member of the Committee in Glogoc, a member of the state, I had everything there. Then all of a sudden it

¹⁷ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English *bro*, brother.

¹⁸ Cominform, or Communist Information Bureau, stands for Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties, the international forum of the Communist movement founded in 1947.

¹⁹ Decision by the Cominform to expel the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1948. After that, in Yugoslavia those suspected of sympathies for Moscow were prosecuted as Cominformists.

came for me to join the collective, to enter the collective.²⁰ But we were in the mountains, they didn't catch us there.

My father told us, he said, "I went down to Rahovec..." There was Pop [sic] Giga of Rahovec, the *poslanik*²¹ at the time of the *Kralj*. He, the *narednik*,²² asked my father for three rifles. "I had no rifle, and I went to *hoxha*²³ Dallav, *hoxha* Dallav wrote a letter for me. He said, 'Go to the *Načelnik*²⁴ in Rahovec.' When I went to the *Načelnik*, I said, 'So and so, the *narednik* has caught me,' and he went and six returned..." He was a Democrat,²⁵ the *narednik* at the time of the *Kralj*, he was a Democrat. Six houses [families] returned, "The Democrat returned all..." Back then it was the Radical²⁶ *Kralj*'s time (smiles).

And when the collective was established, my father said, "I met Pop Giga in Rahovec, but he is a bit old. I put my hand on his back, and said, 'You saved me once at the time of the *Kralj*.'" We went to the *teqe*²⁷ of Rahovec, and drank water together {unites his hands and imitates drinking water} and looked if he was looking at us. He said, 'Did you join the collective?'²⁸ I said, 'No.' He said, 'Don't you dare join, because there is nothing there, it's going to get transformed.'" Then he said, "I took a deep breath, because the collective was tough back then." Then the collective was transformed. And we joined organizations, I worked, as I said, in Glogoc, until 195... until 1966, with no money at all. Where to now? In 1996 I was in labor relations, I worked as an administrator, in Komoran, I worked there for 30 years. And I took my pension. This is my biography (smiles).

Ard Morina: What happened later?

²⁰ Collectivization of agricultural land established in 1948 by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia, and ended in 1955.

²¹ Serbian: *poslanik*, a delegate of the King.

²² Serbian: *narednik*, sargent

²³ Muslim Cleric.

²⁴ Serbian: *Načelnik*, the city mayor.

²⁵ Democratic Party.

²⁶ Radical Party.

²⁷ *Teqe* in Albanian, *tekke* in Turkish, is a lodge of a Sufi order, in this case the Bektashi. It is inhabited by a Cheikh or *Baba* and by dervishes.

²⁸ It is period of time after Second World War, when all private property assumed a collective character, this period impoverished many, but a better social and economic standing had those who implemented the policies of collective property. Here the speaker uses the term rather colloquially, terming any work in public sector as collective.

Zeqir Sopaj: I wouldn't last longer with this.

[The question, cut from the video, solicited more stories from the Second World War]

Zeqir Sopaj: He was older [the older brother], his name was Halil. He finished his school in the *Kralj*'s days, four years. But we had no money to go to school, we had to go to Albania. At that time there was [King] Zog, he [Halil] and three others, there was Salih, a neighbor, and Rexhep Gashi, they were talking among themselves. They were talking under the shade of a plum tree, I was looking after the lambs. He said, "Today we will go to Albania." At that time we looked after the corn, because pigs would eat them in the fields.

They went in the morning and didn't return. Lunch time came, they didn't return, my father and my mother, "Where is Halil?" I smiled. I said, "I swear to God, they went to Albania." "What?" May the odds be with us, eh, they went. My father had a *reshperë*,²⁹ that's how we used to call them back then, they made the clothes when someone in the villages got married. And he went and slept over at our place. He said, "Can Halil help me go to Albania?" he said, "Have you got any sign from him, Hajriz?" Because he knew him. "No," I said, "There's nothing I can do for you." And they returned, they came. My father went and notified the station about this, he said, "They came, they came." Then they went to the station, the *narednik* was tough, "But without beating them a bit..." There was one Xhemë Lahi...he knew the gendarmerie. He precisely said, "I will beat them a bit, then set them free there."

Then the day of Albania came, when he [Halil] joined the gendarmerie. He spent three years at *Ura e Shenjtë* [The Sacred Bridge] here in Xërxe. In 1944 they call him to Tirana, they invite him to the Party school in Tirana...the school of the gendarmerie. But as Hajrullah told us, the teacher who taught us, his wife's brother was in the Peshkopia fields with Mehmet Shehu. And he said, "What do we need [the gendarmerie] school for, communists are destroying our Albania, they want to burn our flag." Mehmet Shehu took the brother of [Rifat's] wife, he told him, "Wait for four hundred gendarmes from Kosovo. You know where to put them." "Yes, send them there." Four hundred gendarmes from Kosovo go inside a gorge, in the fields of Peshkopia. The communists took over the gorge, *trrak* {onomatopoeic} and four hundred rifles surrendered, *rrap e rrap* {onomatopoeic}. They said, "Whoever wants to come with us, come. Those from Kosovo who want to go, go." Faik Grabovci [Faik Berisha from Graboci] and he [Halil], they went, they said, "We want to come with you."³⁰

²⁹ Family business.

³⁰ They joined the IV Albanian Brigade of the Anti-Fascist Liberation Army.

When they went to Mehmet Shehu,³¹ he said, “Where are you from?” “I am from Kosovo.” “Where from in Kosovo? “From Llapushnik.” “Is Berisha near there?” He said, “Yes, absolutely.” “Do you know Rifat Berisha? He said, “Yes.” “How many brothers does he have?” “Four.” “Which one of them is the oldest?” “Mustafa.” “The second one?” “Sadik.” “The third one?” “Islam. Rifat is the fourth one.” “What about Tahir?” “Yes, I know him, he has brown hair and is tall.” “What about Latif, the father of...” “Yes, he is fat and pretty big.” He said, “I am the brother of Rifat Berisha’s wife. I am the brother of Beri...’s wife, there, from Gjirokastra.” He tells Mehmet Shehu, “I am responsible for this one because he knows the whole situation,” and I [sic, but it is not I, but he, Halil] became a commander of over 80 people. Over 100 of them left.

America brought us materials, there. We lighted a cross-shaped fire in the fields of Peshkopia, cross-shaped like this {shows with hands}. The balloon came and we put the racket on it. It released the racket, and went over Greece. Then it would come back and bring materials, rifles, bombs, food and clothes, English clothes. Seventy kilograms, they said, came out of a bread loaf [sic]. When the morning would come, we would see many items, clothes, that America kept in Albania’s fields, the English as well.

Eh, we started the war in Kërçova with Fadil Hoxha. I went there with six other people, to check out what was there. Five people of mine were slaughtered, only two of us survived. I returned and I told them, “We started the war, we fought face to face with them at Kërçova’s graveyard. We defeated them. We took Kërçova, we overthrew them and took over immediately.” Not two hours later, Xhemë Gostivari³² hopped in and shouted, “Oh, who is Xhemë Gostivari!” And made us *pikë e pesë*.³³ Then he [Halil] came from Kërçova with Faik Grabovci. They came on foot all the way to Llapushnik, you know. When he came there, the Headquarter of the Communist Party was in Berisha. Brahim Gashi’s mother and sisters were with Rifat Berisha, he finished the *madrasa*,³⁴ the one that is now in Pristina. There

³¹ Mehmet Shehu (1913-1981) was an Albanian partisan and powerful Communist leader very close to the Head of the Communist Party Enver Hoxha. He was found dead from an alleged suicide in 1981, after which all the members of his family, including his wife Fiqirete Shehu Sanxhaktari, were imprisoned and he was denounced as a traitor.

³² Xhemë Hasani-Gostivari was a *Ballist* leader in the Western region of Macedonia. *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.

³³ Colloquial, made pieces of us.

³⁴ Muslim religious school, the only school where teaching could be conducted in Albanian until 1945.

was Isa Berga who had finished the *madrasa* in Skopje, he was educated back then. And I went there, I met Ismet Sheqiri and...Hoxha.

Ard Morina: Mehmet Hoxha.³⁵

Zeqir Sopaj: Then the Communist Party was established there, he [Hali] came in, we said, “O stop!” He said, “There’s no way I can stop, because I came from there and I need to find a way somewhere.” And they went to *Frizoviç* [Ferizaj], war broke out in *Frizoviç*, it broke out on December 2, 1944. The war broke out in *Frizoviç*, then he was killed in *Frizoviç*. Then we returned seven or eight days after he was killed, there’s still his memorial there from Belgrade. When *shkije* would see this, they wouldn’t feel good at all. “Where at that time...where did you give?” Because Fadil [Hoxha] said, “We have to give them something. When the *sofra*³⁶ is served, we have to put something on the table. Whose is this? I will him pay back. We, Kosovo, are a very small part of the world, but an egg, that egg, we will pay it back.” But, for God’s sake, we weren’t paid back at all (smiles). This was the biography of my brother, and mine.

[Part cut per request of the family]

In 1947, there was the action of the *ferexhe*,³⁷ I was an activist. We held a conference in Kievë, in 1947, in Kievë, to remove the *ferexhe*, enough with those primitive [tradition], [women] covered and *adalet*.³⁸ Rasim Bujipi’s wife was Bosnian, her name was Baftije. We went up there, she removed the *ferexhe*, “Down with the *ferexhe*!” We applauded *uuuu* {onomatopoeic}, in 1947. That was an action. In 1950, once we entered, we took an action with the law and removed the *ferexhe*, “Enough with those primitive [things].” I held a conference, I held a conference in the village of Vukoc. Someone interrupted me, you know him, Shaban {addresses his son-in-law, who is present}. His name was Veli, he was my godfather. “Veli, don’t interrupt me,” I said, “Because it’s my turn, but, I am giving you the *besa*³⁹ of God that your daughter, your daughter-in-law, and your son will become engineers, they will become doctors, they will become professors.” And today, Shaban knows the son of Veli. He said, “Aiii

³⁵ Mehmet Hoxha (1908-1987), a Gjakova-born leader of the Kosovo partisans, held several leadership positions in the Yugoslav state after the war.

³⁶ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

³⁷ *Ferexhe*, a veil concealing the whole face except the eyes, worn by Muslim women in public.

³⁸ Turkish: *adalet*, justice. In the Albanian context the word stands for “a lot,” “a mess.” Here, “all that mess.”

³⁹ In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

godfather, I was wrong.” I said, “We lost that stuff, they are over.” It was the thing of the *ferexhe* back then. It came to its end in 1950.

We gathered to remove the *ferexhe*, what *ferexhe*? Why were they covered? Now they will walk uncovered. Albanian girls will become doctors, engineers, professors. *Kuku*,⁴⁰ people wanted to throw themselves in the fire. Now we achieved that, you see. And women assemblies were held, in schools, and the primitive things that they were, they told us that they will come out. A poster came out. There was a goat on a tree, a goat on a tree, with its tongue between the scissors {imitates with fingers}, the tractor, and no ox there, to go to the *zhgiela*,⁴¹ no horses, and no cows. The tractor goes to till the land. The tongue was between a scissors, whoever doesn't learn how to read and write, will have their tongue cut. The goats will be lost, because without removing that worm from the goat, then the worm becomes a tree and the mountain is over.

This happened in 1950, then were the meetings held, the conferences, in the villages. Because I was an activist, I held the conferences. How would the future turn out to be? We ate cornbread, we ate barley bread, we ate...now the wheat bread will come, no one will wear *opinga*⁴² anymore, no one will wear old clothes anymore, there will be no fleas, there will be no *stenica*.⁴³ Good houses will be built, the tractors will go out on the fields, the harvesters will go out to clear [the fields]. We will not need to harvest or break the soil anymore, neither will we need to mow anymore, the machines will do it. They didn't trust me, no way (smiles). They explained it on paper, to the masses, we, the activists, told them. The time will come when women will not know how to embroider socks. *Haj medet*,⁴⁴ how come? They will come ready, and fabric will not be sold anymore. You will choose your shirt, you will choose your trousers, you will choose your coat, you will choose everything, everything. Today, see, we had to tell this to the wide masses. My life...

My father, we were home, the brother of my father, he was a worker, he worked the land. My father had to stay in the *oda*, in the *oda*, to wait for the guests, he stayed with Tahir Berisha.⁴⁵ Tahir Berisha

⁴⁰ Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

⁴¹ Old Albanian: *zhgielë*, the spot where two bulls are tied, it's made out of wood in the form of a necklace.

⁴² Similar to moccasins, made out of rubber or bovine leather, mainly used by the villagers.

⁴³ Serbian: *stenica*, insect, a type of louse.

⁴⁴ Colloquial, it is used when expressing great desperation, pain, pity, fear or terror.

⁴⁵ Tahir Berisha (1871-1953) is remembered as the administrator of Komoran during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but also as an informal local leader, as a renowned elder, Albanian nationalist, and custodian of national history.

was a philosopher, he knew all about the future. He told us what the future was going to be like, what it would turn out to be like. He smoked a lot (smiles). And like this....

Part Two

[The interviewers ask the speaker to tell more about his life in the cooperatives and how Albanians and their agricultural lands were treated at the time. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

Zeqir Sopaj: The land was taken once from us, in 1922, in 1922. Serbs came, and took all the uncultivated land. In 1928, the *Kralj* brought the agronomist out, he took all the cultivated land, he took all the land we had. Then we went to *shkau* and asked what... "Could you give me half of this land to cultivate, my land?" He took it from us, we remained in the fields, we remained there, with no land, without anything. There was one Adem Jetullahu from Llapushnik, he worked in Skopje. He went to the consul of Albania. He said, "Go to the restroom because I will come." That Adem went to the restroom, you know, the WC. He went to the Embassy and said, "If *shkau* crashes in on the upper floor, you stay on the lower floor. If he crashes in on the lower floor, you stay on the upper floor. Don't you dare give up your place!" Because we wanted to go to Turkey. "Don't you dare move!" He didn't dare talk anywhere else but in the WC, Adem Jetullahu, at the Embassy of Tirana. This happened in the days of the *Kralj*.

The *Kralj* took it all from us, I remember it as if it happened today. In each village, they took note of our wealth. This is your wealth, this and this, and wanted to take us to Turkey. Yes, the priests cried in Europe, the priests.

Ard Morina: Catholics.

Zeqir Sopaj: He said, "I swear to God, they are forcing them, they want to take the entire Kosovo out." Then, we paid two people, Islam Zabeli and Hysni Kizhareka, we sent them to Turkey, to look at the place. When they returned, they said, "Don't you dare move, let them kill us here!" Because we have no place to go to, they wanted to take us all to Turkey. I remember that as if it happened today.

[The interviewers ask the speaker to talk in details about the tax over agricultural products. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

Zeqir Sopaj: *Haj medet, otkup,*⁴⁶ we had to give the wheat, the corn, everything we harvested, we had to face hunger. We had to send them, because if we didn't, they would imprison us. They took it from me, I swear to God, I send it to Dobrovoda as they called it, Ujëmirë, that's where we had to send the wheat and the corn, I also sent hay there. We weigh them there, potatoes, there was nothing left without being taken by them, butter, wool, goats and whatnot, everything else. The time was difficult. *Otkup* was, it was big trouble. We had to give the cereals, everything that came out, people remained without flour, without bread, facing hunger. Come on... {addresses the present} (smiles).

Ard Morina: What about the campaign for the collection of weapons, can you tell us? The campaign for the collection of weapons.

Zeqir Sopaj: Ah, I'll tell you about that (smiles). That was, that happened in...1956, the campaign for the collection of weapons was, it was trouble. I swear to God, Ramadan Bogiçi was the commander of the station, he came and told me, I was an activist, he told me, "Zeqë, go inside and tell the people, *rok*,⁴⁷ and bring the rifle within an hour, not in just one day, or two." I said, "Ramadan, won't we put them in trouble?" He said, "No, no, this is between you and me, don't you dare tell..." I went inside and told the people, "Whoever is asked for a weapon, say, *rok*, the officer of UDB⁴⁸ was there, *rok*." We let them go, they survived without being beaten that day. Then the next day, they forced us to [walk] all around the school, the snow until here {touches his knee} and the *milicia* beating the people in the corners of the school as if they were cows, it happened all around the school building. It was an illegal action, very [illegal], the collection of weapons.

[The interviewers ask to know why the weapons were confiscated. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

Zeqir Sopaj: If you had it, you had to give it, if you had it, if you didn't, they would beat you. It was a dangerous action, it was, very. May God not bring anything worse, people suffered a lot at that time. And like this...is there anything else? (smiles)

[Interviewers ask if the speaker knew any story about Shaban Polluzha. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

⁴⁶ Serbian: *otkup*, taxes over agricultural products.

⁴⁷ Serbian: *rok*, deadline.

⁴⁸ *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), at times with the additional "a" for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

Zeqir Sopaj: Yes, even detailed ones. Shaban Polluzha's⁴⁹ [brigade] was formed, he became the commander of the brigade. He went to Podujeva. The brigade [back in Drenica] took people and shot them. Because back then, the order came from Tito. People cannot be shot without going to court, neither can they be sworn at nor beaten, no way. But they were all together, sworn at, beaten, and shot at the same time there. Shaban then returned, and the war raged for around twenty days, it was transformed. A certain Dervish Shabani and Mehmet Gradica⁵⁰ of Voran, of Tersenik. We were guards on this side, the bullets went like this during the whole night {clashes his fingers}.

And Petar Boroviç destroyed the *kulla*,⁵¹ he shot it with a cannon twice, *ving e ving* {claps his hands}, the war was ended. Shaban and Mehmet [Gradica] were taken. Shaban Polluzha was sent to Bresila, beyond Dobrošec. Mehmet Gradica was buried in Gllanasella, and the war came to its end there. Then they came, they were suspected to be alive. The brigades came, went to work, Shaban was found, Mehmet was found, there is no more lie, the war is over, it was over, they were found.

I spent time with Mehmet Gradica in Komoran, yes, I. The Headquarter of the Communist Party was in Berisha. Mehmet Gradica came with three hundred people to occupy the Headquarter of the Communist Party in Berisha.

Bajram Tahiri, the son of Tahir Berisha, came to my *kulla*. He said, "Zeqë, can you go to look which way they are going, because they took Mustafa, and went down to Likoc and Kezhareka." I went out with my paternal uncle, a cousin of mine was caught on the way, they unloaded the flour from his horse in Komoran. They loaded the mortars and went up to Berisha. I went and said, "Give me the horse back." He said, "Go inside and ask Mehmet." Mehmet Gradica was in the office, and a gendarme from Gllobar grabbed me by my coat. He said, "How will you call him?" He said, "Call him mister sub lieutenant, otherwise he will beat you." When I entered, I said, "Hello mister sub lieutenant!" He said, "Hello!" He shook my hand. He had a golden *hyrie* [bracelet] this big, {touches his hand wrist}, a parabellum gunshot cut in the waist, *kuku*. "What do you want?" I said, "You took my horse yesterday with mortars, twenty five members of my family have remained without flour, if you can give the horse back, if not, I will go and ask someone to give me one." "Where is the horse?" I said, "There!" The

⁴⁹ Shaban Polluzha (1871-1945) was a regional Albanian leader of volunteer forces in Drenica. Shaban Polluzha joined the partisans, but in late 1944 disobeyed orders to go north to fight Germans in Serbia, having received news that

⁵⁰ Mehmet Gradica (1913-1945) was the sub-prefect of Skenderaj during the Italian occupation of Kosovo, and continued to be a military leader against the Yugoslav partisan forces until he joined Shaban Polluzha at the end of 1944. He was killed with Polluzha in February 1945 in the war of Drenica.

⁵¹ Literally tower, the Albanian traditional, rural, fortified stone house.

flour... I went out with two-three people, but there were three hundred people in the front, I took the bag. "Don't touch it! Because you are young." Two people, each of them with one bag, they loaded the horse. "Is it alright?" I said, "It's alright!" He said, "Don't turn your head around or I will shoot you with a gunshot in the middle of your forehead, because there are communists in Llapushnik." I said, "No, I don't know them." He had golden teeth {opens his mouth}. Isuf Gradica and Banush Hodllari were there. When I went out, Mustafa, Rifat's brother, with his hands tied, waiting to be shot. Mustafa said, "Zeqë, if I survive, Isuf Gradica is saving me. If I go..." He told me about the man, but I cannot tell that.

And when the attack happened in the evening, the Communist Party shot Rifat Berisha with three other people [this happened later, in 1949].. That kind of danger, where in the evening there was an armed attack.

Let me tell you another one, I spent time with captain Shefqet. Captain Shefqet was a captain in Gjilan. I was going, I was at the Party school. With a small bottle of *rakia*⁵² here in the pocket, he was wearing *tirqi* and a scarf, "Oh, old man," he drank his *rakia*. Some drenicak [people from Drenica] stopped, they used not to drink *rakia* back then. He said, "Man, you know how this is, you have your *oda* covered, you just sprinkle the dust and it doesn't rise up. If you let the water flow there, you destroy that part. If you clean it without wetting it, it becomes dust." He poured the *rakia*. He said, "This is captain Shefqet." I said, "Oh, that's you?" "Yes." I said, "To be honest, I was in your siege, in Lldroviç." "What? When did you surrender? Whom did you surrender to?" I said, "I surrendered to someone." Anyway, okay, eh, he said, "Tahir Berisha invited me to Sadik's *oda*...In Nekoc, Sadik Qumuri, when I left Gjilan." He started telling me about the Communist Party, "I said, 'Tahir, please stop it, I am better than you. I know better than Fadil. In the days of Zog I was begged to join in Albania, but I didn't. I am giving you the *besa* of God, Rifat Berisha, Brahim Banushi will die from the rifle, I will die because of natural death.'" Because captain Shefqet had finished the military academy in Rome, he was an officer of Zog. He said, "Three times....I escorted Zog for three years because I was his officer. He begged me, but I didn't join them."

Eh, they were...the captain of the army in Gjilan. Ali Shukrija⁵³ and Srdjan Brodetini, communists in Gjilan. He said, "Let's set up a meeting in the *oda*." And I went, when I went, Srdjan was sitting there, he had his machine-gun in the corner. I left mine there and sat down. It didn't take long for Ali Shukrija to come. Ali Shukrija was untrustworthy, he put his machine-gun by the door. I said, "Srdjan, the way Ali is sitting, I won't even let a fly move freely. What is our agreement?" "No, no, Ali, go, leave your

⁵²*Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

⁵³ Ali Shukrija (1919-2005) held important positions in the Yugoslav state.

weapon there.” He left it there and we sat down. Srdjan here, Ali here {shows close to himself}, I was sitting in the middle. I said, “See, as long as there’s a ruler ordering me, you have nothing to do with me. The day the ruler comes to its end...” Once Italy capitulated, because Italy was occupied by the Germans on September 9, 1943, Hitler took Rome. He said, “I gave up my duty and came home.” Because I spent time with him as well, I talked to him.

[The interviewers ask the speaker to tell more about his life after the Second World War. This part was cut per request of the family]

Zeqir Sopaj: (Smiles) I got married in 1948. I swear to God, I had no quilt (smiles). I used the same quilt I used to cover myself in the *oda*. My maternal uncle gave me a quilt that night, he took it the next day. Then, I went to the army, and I returned. When I returned, we started working, we started tilting the soil, mowing, harvesting the wheat and...I found a snake while I was picking up the gloves, the snake was under the glove.

I was bitten by a snake when I was little. I was little, the snake bit me and I got stuck. My father brought the goats in the morning, he was smoking when he saw me and ran towards me and grabbed me by my hands and lifted me up. They dugged a hole, and put, they put cold water. Metë Sylja was the mayor of the village. My father went and took him, and he came. He took my leg out, and washed it and found the spot, it had bitten me here {shows his leg}. He sucked it with his mouth, *ving, ving* {onomatopoeic}, his mouth was filled, he spit it, and my leg was cured. And I was electrocuted, a friend of mine opened a mill, and the electricity needed to be installed there. We were pulling the wire just when the electricity came.

[The interviewers ask the speaker to tell more about the antifascist fight with the Serb-Albanian coalition. What position were Albanians in, and what was the position of Serbs? What happened with the ambitions of the Albanians who wanted to unite with Albania? This part was cut as per request of the family].

Zeqir Sopaj: I was a *skojevac* in 1944. We held the meeting in Berisha, there was Ismet Sheqiri and Mehmet Hoxha. We will fight together, *shkije*, Albanians, to remove fascism and the occupier. When the war comes to its end, everybody will take their part. We will be with Tirana, we will work with Tirana, with whomever wants to. That’s what we fought for, we knew, the communists of Kosovo knew that we will work with Tirana, not with Belgrade. Then we returned to Belgrade in 1945. Now, when it was decided...I was surprised, when they said, “We will work with Belgrade.” “How come with

Belgrade? We have to work with Tirana. Tirana works with whoever it wants.” That’s how the [Communist] League was back then.

Eh, Dušan Mugoša, Đoka Pajković, Miladin Popović⁵⁴ were there, they had the organization in Albania. Yes, yes, Đoka Pajković and Dušan Mugoša didn’t keep their word. Miladin Popović kept his word. He said, “That’s how the League was, Kosovo will be with Albania.” Then on February 28, 1945, the delegates went to Belgrade. Miladin Popović kept his word. Đoka Pajković and Dušan Mugoša didn’t keep their word. On March 17, they slaughtered Miladin Popović in Pristina, he was blown into pieces.

Then at the funeral, when Miladin Popović was killed, they didn’t want to send Fadil [Hoxha], because he was Albanian. They said that he was slaughtered by Albanians. Miladin’s mother said, “No, no, let Fadil come freely because I know who has slaughtered my son.” She knew that her son kept his word, that is why he was slaughtered. Spasoj Đaković slaughtered him. He was above the UDB of Yugoslavia, that’s the rumor that circulated at the time.

Since the beginning of the war and after, in 1948, we did not have a border with Albania, we were together. Belgrade, Tirana, together, but we had a connection with Tirana. Let Tirana work with whomever it wants to. Since 1948 and after, since the beginning of the war until the *Rezolucija e Infobyrove* took place, we were together with Tirana, not with Belgrade. In 1948, when the *Rezolucija e Infobyrove* took place, the border was established, because we didn’t have borders. We didn’t have borders at the time when Halil was killed. It was the same, the war was...as I said, they told us, “When the war comes to its end, everybody will send a tip. We, from Kosovo, will send an egg, but that egg will pay off. Someone will send a goat, someone else a bull, someone else an ox.” “But there’s just a few of us.” “Alright, that’s enough, but that will pay off.” But we weren’t paid off then, in 1948 and after.

[The question, cut from the video, asks the speaker to tell the story of Ramë Bllaca]

Ard Morina: What was his name?

Zeqir Sopaj: Ramë Bllaca⁵⁵ ...back then, I told you you earlier, that we had, that Yugoslavia had registered us to send us to Turkey, eh! Rama gave his fingerprint back then, it was all with fingerprints, they didn’t know how to write their names, in Belgrade. Qazim, the son of Ramë Bllaca, told him,

⁵⁴Miladin Popović (1910-1945) was a Communist leader from Montenegro who worked in Albania and Kosovo alongside Albanian Communists and was assassinated in 1945.

⁵⁵Ramë Bllaca (1872-1937) was representative of the district of Suhareka in the Yugoslav Parliament.

“Father, go and rip that paper where you put your fingerprint on, because you are a traitor of Kosovo.” Eh, they gave fingerprints at the *Župan*’s⁵⁶ in Skopje, he was a representative [in Parliament] back then, Rama was a representative, he went to Skopje, and asked, “Give me the paper where I put my fingerprint on.” The *Župan* had no other way but to give it to him, he was the representative, he took it and ripped it into pieces and threw it into the trash. Then the telephone call came to Suhareka right away, “Wait for Rama, because Rama tore the paper.” They waited for him at the door of his yard, when Rama went there, they killed him because he had ripped the paper.

Ard Morina: What was that paper? What was the reason for it?

Zeqir Sopaj: But as I told you, all the representatives gave their fingerprints, for us to go to Turkey. I told you about the registration that was made for us to go to Turkey. Eh, Qazim was in the faculty in Belgrade. “What did you do, father?” He said, “We gave...” “Ahh, go rip that paper, because you will be a traitor of the Albanian nation.” They didn’t know, no way, none of them. Ramë went to Skopje to the *Župan*, and said, “Give me the paper, let me see it.” The *Župan*, “Really, representative?” He said he just did it, *fysh fysh* {imitates ripping the paper} and threw it into the trash. Because they gave their fingerprints for us to go to Turkey, all the representatives, they signed for us to go. There was no representative to break it then, but Ramë, Ramë Bllaca. That is why he was killed.

[The interviewers ask the speaker to tell who killed Ramë Bllaca. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

Zeqir Sopaj: The gendarme of the First Yugoslavia, the *načalnik* of Suhareka. He was above the gendarme back then, the *načalnik*. He waited for him at his garden’s door, when he returned from Belgrade. He said, “Kill him, because he ripped the paper.” They caught him and killed him, that happened in 1937. That’s all I know about him, about Ramë.

Anna Di Lellio: If he wants to say something about his family, when he married his wife. How many children?

Zeqir Sopaj: (Smiles) I had six daughters, one of them died, I have five daughters and one son. But one of my sons died as well, one daughter and one son. Five of them are alive. They went to school, the first of them was Fetija, the mother of this [Ard], in Pristina. Then the others in line. Eh, the girls got educated, also the boy. Then I sold Llapushnik because the place, the place was deserted, it was dry

⁵⁶Serbian: *Župan*, city mayor.

and it got wasted. I bought ten are⁵⁷ of land here. First I bought ten are. Then I built this house, I built it in 1969. I brought my children here to get educated, nearer. I was on duty in Komoran, for twenty years. I went there from here.

[This part has been cut has per request of the family. The interview continues with the narration of the 1999 war].

They kicked us out us at five o'clock, on March 28 [1999]. We found our tea pots the same way as we left them. They took my *likovan*,⁵⁸ which I was carrying on my chest, it was yellow. They took the car, they took clothes, they robbed us, they only left the *japia* [the house's skeleton]. Then they came...the *japia* were empty, Arbi knows.

We went with Arbi to the castle of Skanderbeg together. We looked at everything, I cannot get enough {the phone rings}...and I told him, "Read them [the signs] for me please, my son, so that I know what they are." The next day they didn't even ask me for money there. Some of them were drinking down there. "Kosovar, can you come here once?" I said, "Yes, sure." "What about Kosovo?" I said, "Kosovo has washed its hands," and I shed some tears. He said, "Slow down, man." I said, "How can I slow down? Every valuable person, educated, skilled, is in the mountains. We are elders, blind, disabled, elders who have remained in their homes. Now they will take us out, but they are besieged, they will die because of hunger." He said, "No, no, Miloš [Milošević] doesn't dare go over two hundred thousands." "Is there one million inside?" I said, "Yes, there is." He said, "Miloš cannot go over two hundred thousands, he can go until two hundred thousands." "Why?" He said, "You have to give two hundred thousands." "Ah, if eight hundred thousands remain, it's enough." He said, "But Miloš doesn't dare go over two hundred thousands. They forced you to go there until around two hundred thousands, he doesn't dare go over two hundred thousands." I don't know what his position in the days of Zog had been. But they... "He doesn't dare go over two hundred thousands," he said. I said, "No, if eight hundred thousand of them survive, then it's enough." We went together with Arbi.

[This part was cut as per request of the family]

Here's the city of Ahmet Zog. He was from Mati. We went there, to Fushë Krujë. Then Shaban came, my son-in-law, and Mustafa, they had heard. They took us and sent us to Kruja. Two people from a village near Fushë Krujë came, "What are you doing here?" We said, "Not much." They said, "Come with us, we are taking you." And they took us and sent us there. They gave us lunch...then they sent us,

⁵⁷ Are is a unit of area, equivalent to 100 square meters.

⁵⁸ War decoration, a badge.

Shaban, Fetija, Shaban's daughters, Hadri and me to the same place. Ali Mustafa stopped here, he stopped there. My wife then said, these...one sister of mine was in Gostivar, another one remained in Berisha...and the daughter of mine that lives in Germany. The others were spread, we didn't know where we were. One of them had remained in Gelaca. She said, "What do I do with Rahime?"

I met someone from Gelaca there, "Did Sanija come out?" He said, "No, she is still in Gelaca." "Kuku!" {raises his hands}. I lied to Hatixhe, I said, "No, no, she is here." She said, "No, I know she remained there." When they attacked, we came here, I said, "I will go to Gelaca, let Mustafa go there with the ones from Albania and check because they have burned the houses." She said, "No, no, the houses are safe."

[This part for cut as per request of the family]

When we returned, the house was still here, they were removed, some carts that were here. They had taken the covers, the quilts, the blankets. They also took my safety razor, my *likovan*, I had two or three of them. They thought it was made of gold (smiles), you know, they used to give them to us in the days of Tito. The suffering, the suffering of going to Albania. Oh my God, the Italians would come, they had brought them by buses two months earlier. They kept carrying as many as they could, to send them to Albania.

Now...man, what if I told you that I was here when they were putting up the statue of Enver back then. They all applauded here. I was crouching and I stood up. I said, "Oh, I swear to God, just as they are applauding, they will slap each-other taking down Enver Hoxha's stones." That Zepa looked angrily at me, Qamil, "Please *bac*,⁵⁹ for God's sake." And I told the one whose house we were at, "Send me to Tirana, to the statue of Enver." When I went there, his stones had been destroyed with hammers. I said, "I told them." "How do you know?" I said, "Eh, how I know."

Bajram Tahiri, the son of Tahir Berisha, had gone to Albania, he was a very good friend of my father. And he sent him a word, "Ask Bajram, how is he living in Albania?" He said, "Say hi to Hajriz. You know Refka *magjupe*,⁶⁰ who went door-to-door to beg. I want nothing else but her stick, her clothes, her bag and to be able to beg for bread loaves around Drenica, and go and eat them in Berisha, I want nothing else. This is my living!" I said, "I know how they lived." Eh, like this...what my life dealt with. "How do you know...?"

⁵⁹*Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

⁶⁰ Commonly used word for gypsy, it can have derogatory meaning.

Eh, Qamil told us later, “The KLA came then to Munich, and had a speech. ‘Do tell!’ I said. They are saying whatnot about Enver, they,” he said, “I don’t know why.” I swear to God, my father said it himself, they will take down his statue just the way they are building it, and I said, “What are you talking about?” But, the elders know. When the Albanian brigades came, the ones that came to Kosovo, I told you that we were together, until 1948, there was no border, they would kill you if you said bad words about *shkije*, “Because we are brotherhood-unity, we are. Why are you saying bad words about them?”

E...Mulla Sherif used to tell, “I said, ‘What are you doing here?’ And they said in the *oda* there, they [the brigades] were spread among different *oda*. We, the poor people in the villages, kept the brigades for one year. We suffered a lot while in Tito’s first days. And he said, ‘We are brotherhood-unity.’ I said, ‘A cat plays with the head of the ox. The head of the ox in the ground [buried], the cat as one *okë*.’⁶¹ Someone from Albania said, ‘We will eat together,’” he said, “And I stood up, and left rapidly.”

Now, the ones from Albania said, “We swear to God, even the cows of Kosovo were smarter than we are.” When, I told you, my brother discussed with Mehmet Shehu, he said, “We are doing it for Kosovo, we don’t give any soldier for Albania because we have 1912 guaranteed, we’re only fighting for Kosovo.” “With Mehmet Shehu,” he said, “We discussed in the fields of Peshkopia.” He said, “Did you contribute to Kosovo? He said, “Oh, to be honest Mehmet, I swear to Kosovo, Belgrade will never give up on Kosovo.” They discussed without any...in the fields of Peshkopia with Mehmet Shehu. He said, “We have it guaranteed, Albania is doing all this fight just for Kosovo.”

It was only in 1948 when the war was fought together. In 1948 [unity] was destroyed, you either had to go with Tirana or with Belgrade. Then Stalin cut his relations with Tito in 1948. They called it *Rezolucija e Infobyrove*. When A.V.N.O.J.⁶² took place in Jajce, Churchill established six republics and two provinces, and for the *Kralj* not to come back. Tito took the place of the *Kralj*, and had his own army. When Stalin heard about this, he said, “Tito cannot become [the leader]. I will have the army. England and America better stay calm otherwise they will be destroyed.” He didn’t open his mouth after that.

⁶¹ Short story signifying asymmetry of power between Albanians and Serbs. A cat's head is one oke, the ox's head is ten oke means the cat (Albanians) is way smaller to hold the ox's (Serbs) head. Where were Albanians in Yugoslavia? A cat vs. an ox at that time - yet we would talk about brotherhood and unity [explanation by Ard Morina].

⁶² AVNOJ, *Antifašističko Veće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije* (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia). Its second session was held in Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in November 1943.

I, in 1948, in 1949, I was a soldier in Bellovar. The Russians went to Hungary. We woke up at night, *uzbuna* [alarm], that's how they called it, slowly-slowly, I said, "I swear to God, this *uzbuna* will change." We took boxes of bullets and went to the border. The Russians at the border with the Magyars [Hungarians], the tanks, and what tanks! Until the United Nations reached an agreement, we stayed there for three days, then we returned. In 1948 we had to declare, I was a soldier in Kopernica, whether we knew anything about politics. I was asked, "Who is the greatest friend of Yugoslavia?" I said, "Tito is the greatest friend of Yugoslavia." "Who made general Enver?" I said, "Tito made him." "Five!"⁶³ (smiles). When we cut the cooperation with the *Rezolucija e Infobyrove*, I was asked that question again... "Who is the greatest friend of Yugoslavia?" I said, "Enver is." He said, "Five!" (smiles). I said, "We were together until 1948." And in 1948...{waves his hand}.

⁶³ Highest school grade on a scale of Five to 0.