

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH AGIM VINCA

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Duration: 121 minutes

Present:

1. Agim Vinca (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Noar Sahiti (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

[The interviewer asks the speaker to introduce himself, his family and the circle he was raised in. The question was cut from the video-interview.]

Agim Vinca: Yes, I am Agim Vinca, professor at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Pristina, and a writer. I was born 69 years ago, in an Albanian village in Macedonia called Veleshta. The male inhabitants of Veleshta are called *veleshtarë*, while its female inhabitants are called *veleshtare*. There is also a one-hundred-year-old famous song, the *veleshtare* song, *Moj Kokone* [Dear Kokone]. Veleshta is seven-eight kilometers from Struga, in the direction that leads you from Struga to Dibra, on that road. The mountain pass of Jabllanica is on the left, where the border is between Albania and the back then Yugoslavia, Macedonia now; on the right side there is the river Drini i Zi [Black Drin], which springs from Saint Naum, from the Lake of Ohrid and flows towards Dibra, where it crosses the border at the Bridge of Spila, that's the way it is called, to then meet with Drini i Bardhë [White Drin], nearby Kukës.

I am the eighth child of my parents, my mother Nadira and my father Nexhat. My mother was a housewife and my father was a shepherd. My mother was uneducated, illiterate, but very intelligent, everybody praises their mothers, but my mother was {shakes his head} extraordinary. A woman with a rare aptitude for managing the family, the house, hosting guests, raising children, educating them, everything. My father finished four classes of elementary school in the first ex-Yugoslavia, he was an excellent student and until the day he died, he could still remember the Serbian poems he had learned with his teacher Derebanović, that's how he called him.

I am, as I said, the youngest child, *sugar*¹ how they call it among Albanians. My parents had eight children, all of them alive, four boys and four girls. My village is a big one, inhabited only by Albanians, with a very beautiful nature, with generous people, workers, hardworking, also a bit troublemakers, but many of them also followed the paths of immigration. But they left and remained at the same time, even those who left tend to return, especially during the holidays, they organize their weddings

¹ *Sugar*: Literally it is the youngest lamb who is fed by its mother and finds it very hard to get separated from her. In this context, the youngest child who is really close to their parents, but mostly the mother.

there and so on. I was raised there in that village, with a very beautiful nature, with many green fields, with clean air, with waters flowing, with cattle, with field work. My family's fields were all near Drini i Zi, which back then used to have a riverbed, an amazing riverbed, the water was green, maybe because of the reflection of the flora, it was very clear, it also had a very rich biodiversity, it had everything. They destroyed it then, they destroyed it in the name of fixing it, of working the land, as they used to say in the beginning of the '60s.

Sometimes I jokingly say that I am not quite sure whether I first learned walking or swimming, because since I was raised near the Drin, I jumped quickly in the water, with the courage of a child who is not conscious of the dangers that follow. But my childhood is of course an interesting chapter of my life, just as it is for every individual in this world. But, since now, in the moment I am telling this story, this conversation with you, I have a kind of jubilee of myself and my generation, I will skip the childhood a bit {coughs}. I am sorry! And will stop at my youth.

In Veleshta, where I was born and raised, I finished my elementary school, my eight-year elementary school as it was called back then, back then my school was named Fejzi Vinca, now they have changed its name, Fejzi Vinca was a man of my *fis*,² who had struggled a lot to open the Albanian school in Veleshta since 1908, at the time of the *Hyrjet* [Ottoman Constitution], but unfortunately with no success, but he had brought the first *Abetare* [Primer] there from Thessaloniki, where he had studied. He brought ideas of *Rilindas*,³ that spirit, I mean, the spirit of being an Albanian, the sons of Skanderbeg, and the ideas of *Rilindas*, Naim Frashëri⁴ and friends. Since then, the song *O trima luftëtarë, o bijtë e Skënderbeut* [O brave soldiers, o sons of Skanderbeg] arrived in my village and the Vinca family. But the fanaticism was great and of course he had no success in opening the first Albanian school. The Albanian school then was opened at the time of Albania, as it is called, in '41, '43, after the Italian occupation, when the so called Greater Albania was created, those were the areas of the Italian occupation, German occupation, and so on, according to the back then geopolitical divisions of the period of the Second World War.

I finished my elementary school as an excellent student, coming from a family with very bad financial conditions, eight children, a family that was persecuted and made a living out of farming. My two older brothers, one of them had been jailed and the other one was in military service when I was a child. My father worked in the fields together with two of my sisters who were not married yet,

² *Fis* is the Albanian exogamous kinship group that like the Latin gens includes individuals who share an ancestor. *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some property in common. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor

³ Figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian political and cultural movement for national liberation.

⁴ Naim Frashëri was an Albanian poet and writer (1846-1990.) He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the the nineteenth century Albanian national movement, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

because my big sister was married around the time when I was born. Then I went to middle school in Struga, the gymnasium.⁵ Fortunately, in 1960, the first middle school, the gymnasium, was opened in Struga. It had the name of two Bulgarian-Macedonian cultural personalities, *Vëllezërit Milladinov* [The Miladinov Brothers]. The school had that name because they didn't like Albanian names, the back then ruling power didn't like an Albanian name, neither does the current one. The school was opened in 1960 because until then there was only one middle school in Skopje, there was the famous *Shkolla Normale*⁶ Zef Lush Marku, and I guess there was one in Tetovo as well, the *Shkolla Normale* and the gymnasium, but the schools in other centers such as Struga, Debar, Kërcova, Gostivar, and Kumanova were only opened in the '60s.

I belonged to the third generation of high schoolers, I mean, there were two generations before me. And in '62, as I told you, I left my childhood life, I left the pets which I was raised with and loved as if they were human beings, and I started a new life, the life of an adolescent boy who now would follow the path, his life in high school. We travelled from our village to the city by foot sometimes, sometimes by bike, and sometimes by bus. There was a bus circulating, of course you had to buy the ticket on the bus and we had no money, so from time-to-time we travelled by bike, sometimes even by foot. It was an eight kilometers way, you could walk it for an hour, and for 15-20 minutes by bike. So, in the morning we went to school, one shift because back then there were only three classes, two of them were in Macedonian and one in Albanian.

The travelling by bike is a story of its own, because we used to travel also during the winter season, when there was rain and snow. And I remember one of our trips to school with two or three other classmates, or two of them were one generation older, in a village mid way between my village Veleshta and Struga, it's called Vranishta and is inhabited by Macedonians. It was raining and snowing, more snowing than raining, how it is called, sleet, and we rode our bikes the way we were not well dressed, with our hands naked, how to say, without gloves of course. And I know when the amount of precipitation increased we returned to the village of Vranishta, there was a shed, the shed had remained from the time of the collectivization of agriculture which was done in the Yugoslavia of '48, '50, '51. Then, since the Yugoslavia of that time was somehow re-oriented, they gave up collectivization, but the shed had remained just close to the road, the road was not paved, *xhade*.⁷ And we went there to rest a bit until the snowfall and rainfall would stop.

And I remember I was with my back at the wall, and I fainted because of the cold, and the shed was, the cattle had stayed there. There was no more cattle, but there was straw, and even dung, and I instantly fainted. And yes, there were two of my friends who were really worried and they slapped my face and sprinkled me with water {shows with hands}. I recovered after a couple of minutes, I got

⁵ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

⁶The *Shkolla Normale* is a high school that trains teachers.

⁷ Turkish: *cadde*: non asphalted road

conscious again, they were really worried and then when we went to the school, we continued the road, they told somebody and people heard about this. And since my brother was also my professor, after that time I stayed at his apartment in Struga for the winter season. Eh, the school life (sighs) was interesting, as always with many memories, with difficulties, with many various problems.

I would like to say that first when we started the gymnasium, together with other Albanian students, we were taught 70 percent of our subjects in Macedonian, maybe even more, because there was no qualified staff. There were only two-three Albanian teachers in total, the teachers of Albanian Language, Physics and Mathematics, other subjects such as History, Geography, Biology, Chemistry and so on, were...were all lectured in Macedonian. And for us who were coming from the ethnically pure villages where there were no other languages being spoken but Albanian, we didn't know the language, we had many problems, many difficulties. We had learned a bit of Macedonian in elementary school, but that was lectured by some Albanian teachers who were not good at it themselves either. And in the beginning, we had many difficulties, it was not difficult for those coming from the city, they knew Macedonian, those who were coming from Struga and the mixed villages. We, coming from ethnically pure villages such as Veleshta, Laderishta, Thangall, Livadhi, Dollogozhda, Zagrapan, and Kallista, we didn't know and we used to memorize them.

I remember it and I don't even have a problem with telling it, it's my pleasure to share it, because the best humour is the one you make about yourself. We had a short Biology teacher, wearing glasses, her last name was a Serbian one, she was a Serb living in Macedonia, she lived in Ohrid, not Struga. Her name was Roza Stojanović, this was her last name. She was not married or she was divorced, with one child, one daughter, and she travelled. She came from Ohrid by bus to give classes, then she went back. She explained the lesson but we didn't understand it, I am talking about myself and I remember when she explained the brain, the human brain, I had memorized it, without knowing that *mozok* [brain] in Macedonian, *mozak* in Serbian, *mozok* in Macedonian, there's only one letter that differs in them: *mozak-mozok*, *napredak-napredok* [progress]. I remember the definition of *mozok* even after more than fifty years: *mozok je jedno masno tkivo koja se sastoji od slojnih zlezdi*, which means, the brain is a fatty mass made out of adipose glands. This is it, first I memorized it. It took me one month and a half, two or three to find out that *mozak* was the brain, you know.

It was the same about other subjects as well, especially History, where there were oral history telling just like this one, a narrative, the teacher was Macedonian, a bit too charged maybe, because he held a very denigrating attitude towards my classmate who was also sitting with me, and whose family had had a conflict with the family of the professor. But it's interesting to say after so many years that they were scientifically fairer than today's teachers, be they from Kosovo or Macedonia or all around the Balkans, Albania and Serbia as well. Because he told us back then, the Macedonian professor, Pande Skeparoski was his name, he came from a Macedonian village, Draslavića, he couldn't pronounce words properly and he said, "*Slušajte deca*, listen children. The nowadays Macedonians," he said, "Have nothing to do with the ancient Macedonians." I recall this many times, because the actual

politics in Macedonia, especially in recent years, is turning out to be very problematic. There is the tendency to connect with Ancient Macedonia. Skopje, one of the most beautiful cities of the Balkans, an Albanian city, the center of the *Vilayet*⁸ of Kosovo, has been suffocated, it has been destroyed with horses, lions, *komitë*,⁹ with figures of Greek antiquity and so on and so on. While back then, he told us that nowadays Macedonians, these Slavic-Macedonians, have nothing to do with them.

Scientifically speaking, this was very right, and the fact that time-after-time they had harsh prejudices about Albanians is something else. For example, the professor of Geography who was also Macedonian, was a young tall woman, maybe she was not bad as a human being, I remember she travelled from farther, from the villages of East Macedonia. In the second or third year, when the European geography is taught, she talked to us about each European country except Albania. Yes, this sounds unbelievable today, but I mean, and with the thoroughness and consciousness we had at that time, we discussed, “Should we say it to her? Yes, let’s say it to her. Who is going to be in charge for this?” We put a classmate of ours in charge, he was from Frengova, his name was Selman, but living in Struga and spoke a better Macedonian than we did. And when the professor came, we made our demarche, “Professor, why did we learn about Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia of course, every country all around, but Albania?” She seemed to not have been expecting that reaction and got angry, I remember she said, “No, we didn’t talk about it because it’s a small country, it doesn’t have a developed industry and doesn’t have an important economy.” We said, “No matter that, it’s a country which exists on the geographical map, it’s a country, you can say these, but you are neglecting it, it’s not good.” But, of course there was someone keeping track of these reactions of ours, you know.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there consequences?

Agim Vinca: Yes, yes, there were consequences, after what we did, there were around 25 or 30 of us in my class, maybe in the beginning we were more. But then some girls quit school because there was still fanaticism. For example, I had a girl-classmate, her name was Haxhere, who was kind of my relative as well, her father had sent her to school but when he saw her going to the Physical Education class in short pants, he decided to make her quit school, and she didn’t continue the gymnasium. My brother, Nuhi Vinca, who was the professor of Albanian Language and Literature and the class monitor told him, “Uncle Shukri,” that was his name, “Why are you stopping her? She is a good student.” “I can handle everything, but her going out with shorts, with her naked legs.” I mean, this is how it was. And in fourth grade we were all boys and only two girls, both of them were coming from the city. Two girls, Pranvera and Xhoksere, one of them is still alive and the other is unfortunately not.

⁸ *Vilayet*, Ottoman administrative division.

⁹ Literally, a group of insurgents; in this case, statues of insurgents.

And then the Biology professor with the Serbian lastname was a bit *zevzek*,¹⁰ sometimes she demanded a lot, and we decided to boycott her. After our reaction to the Geography teacher, she entered the class with a register and wanted to make a review of the subject. “You, stand up, speak!” The one didn’t speak, the second and the third didn’t speak either, then we started making a kind of murmuring as a sign of protest, “Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm,” but when 20-30 people murmur at the same time, that murmuring becomes a reverberation. And she realized that we had decided to boycott her, she took the register and as she was leaving the classroom, one of our classmates took a plank, the chairs were made out of plank, they looked like this {shows with hands}, destroyed it and threw it on the floor, and it reached to the professor’s feet. This turned out into a big deal then, it was called a nationalist act, because the students of the second and third parallel, since there were three parallels, the two first ones were Macedonians and the third one was Albanian, they expelled the Macedonian teacher only because she is from another nationality. And not only the school director, but also the inspectors of the state security dealt with this issue for many days.

I am one among the ones who were questioned, I mean I was a child, 16, or I don’t know, I was 15 at that time, I don’t remember whether I was 15 or 16 years old, once by the school director who was a Macedonian and shouted a lot. And they asked me, since my brother was my class monitor, they wanted me to report him. I knew who he was of course, but I didn’t want to do it for any price. This was my education. I solidarized with my classmates, not to say that I was the leader of such actions. And he told me, “You step on the honor of your brother,” the director... I said, “No, I am an individual on my own, he is a professor, at home we have an age gap of 15 years, we don’t communicate there either.” And then he realized he said, the director with moustache who shouted a lot {imitates the face of the director}, he said, “I guess this is not a concern of mine anymore.” He grabbed the phone and called the State Security UDB.¹¹ Yes, UDB was in the city center, and the inspector came, a terrifying inspector of the state security with a sharp face, his revolver was here {points to his waist}. Yes, and he questioned us one by one in the office of the secretary and wanted, I mean, we said, “No,” we were unprepared, “We cannot speak and we don’t understand the language properly either, we don’t understand it, we have problems.” They couldn’t uncover us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You didn’t give up?

Agim Vinca: They couldn’t find out, of course. I, neither the others, because he questioned the others as well, I even had some... people from my family somehow indirectly let me know who he was [he said], “They will expel you from school, you will be the first and the others will come after you.” I said, “Let them expel us, what can we do, we only asked to replace her with an Albanian professor.” And that’s how it happened in fact, the professor with the Serbian lastname left, she didn’t want to teach that class. And in the third year, an Albanian pedagogist came, he had graduated in Agronomy and

¹⁰*Zevzek*, Mischievous, when someone is so hyperactive that they cannot stay at the same place for a long time.

¹¹ *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional “a” for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

knew the flora well, but he didn't know almost anything about Anatomy, but he taught us. Then we might have had other troubles with him, but we were no longer concerned with language and nationalistic prejudices.

The first year, the second year, the structure of the teachers started changing a bit, improving. In the third year a professor of Philosophy, Logics and Psychology came, then another one, but still half of the subjects were taught in Macedonian. I was a good student, a very good one, because being excellent was almost impossible there, firstly because the subjects were taught in Macedonian and secondly because a part of the professors, not all of them, had an impatience, a dose of chauvinism, and thirdly because it was a school with strict criteria. High schools were terrific at that time, I mean, many students lost a year, repeated the year, now the education system is liberalized, it's something else.

And I remember, I would like to also evoke this memory here, because it's my 50th anniversary, how to say, of my gymnasium graduation. In the second year I was a candidate to have an excellent success, I, Agim Vinca. I had eight Fives¹² in the grade book and also in the grade transcripts. I still have the grade transcripts, but the grade book and the grade transcripts, the whole administration was in Macedonian and in cyrillic alphabet, with the lastname put first, they wrote the last name first and the order in the register was according to the cyrillic alphabet, since my last name is Vinca and V is the third letter in the cyrillic alphabet, it goes like A, B, V for them, while to us it's A, B, C. I was the fifth one in the register book, I was a candidate for excellence. Yes please?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you know cyrillic?

Agim Vinca: Yes, yes, I knew it, we learned it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The language was taught in Albanian, right?

Agim Vinca: No, no, we knew the alphabet, because we had learned it in elementary school as well, from the fifth grade to the eighth. But in elementary school it was lectured to us by a teacher who didn't know it properly either. When he gave us the topic of the composition, he wrote on the blackboard, *moeto selo*, my village, then he erased it and wrote with "J" *mojeto* and asked me as a good student, "What do you think?" I said, "I don't know, but I think it's without 'J'," and that's how it actually was. But we knew the alphabet, we knew it because we had the language, the vocabulary, the expressions, then we learned them. I mean, I was a candidate for excellence, I had eight Fives in the social subjects, but the Department was Mathematics. Since there was one Albanian class, a parallel, when you declared that you wanted to go to Humanistic Sciences, they would put you here because they couldn't separate us, and I had, you know, Two in Physics and One in Mathematics.

¹² Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0)

I was not good at Mathematics and my Mathematics teacher was an Albanian from the city, he died at a relatively young age, he was very fair but terribly strict and didn't have much of a methodology. I mean, he knew Mathematics very well for himself, but he had no skills of transmitting the knowledge to the students. He had worked in the gymnasium of Tetovo before the gymnasium of Skopje was opened, I mean, he was Strugan, and there were legends being told about him there, how students fainted in the re-examination while solving the mathematical problems on the blackboard and the professor had told them, "Go wash your cheeks, your face and your eyes and come back to solve the problem until the end, if you want to pass the class." He left us in re-examination, even though I was a candidate for excellence and even though my brother was my class monitor, he said, some pedagogist said, "Help him, give him a Three so that he gets an excellent success." He said, "No, no, the professor is the one who decides," and left Xhelal, my friend from my birthplace and me, for re-examination, some others as well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you pass?

Agim Vinca: Yes, we passed, but we suffered a lot until we passed. And this is also an episode that deserves to be told, I guess it speaks about the circumstances, the mentality and the illusions of youth. Then after he put us in re-examination, my brother who was the class monitor told his colleague, he was older, "Give them some math homework," and he gave us some typewritten sheets. And Xhelal, my classmate who is also my friend, together with whom I finished the eight years, and I worked in the garden, under the shadow of the apple tree. He was a little better than I, the whole summer long, July, August until September, we split the mat [homework], once each of us on our own, then we checked whether our results were correct. Well, we did it once, twice and three times. We did it and we thought, but alright, let's say we pass the exam, but what are we going to do if we don't? If you failed a class at that time, it was a big shame, you could not show your face in the village nor anywhere else.

And we, with our childish mindset took a decision which was a very difficult one, if we failed a class, first, we would kill ourselves, we would commit suicide; second, we would kill the professor with a knife, because we had no gun, and we could find a knife, we didn't have a knife either, but we could find it, in our mind we had three alternatives; and three, this was a little easier, we would escape to Albania. Veleshta was my birthplace, Qafëthana the cross border between Albania and Macedonia is twelve kilometers from Struga. In air distance it was even closer to the mountains, we didn't know the part from the mountain pass of Jabllanica of Ohrid, because it's really big, but there was a tradition in the spring when we were in elementary school, in gymnasium as well, a one-day trip by ship was organized.

A ship, we would take the ship from Struga, in the port, travel for two-three hours, it was a beautiful journey, it's not the same now. And would go to Saint Naum, stay there, we took food from home,

as much as we had the opportunities back then. We would play, sing, with friends and so on, and the border was near there, and the mountains [trees] in both side of the border were cut. In one side it was a bit higher, in the Yugoslav side, in the Albanian side it was a bit lower, but it was, how to say, as high as two rooms like this, it could've been even higher. We were not allowed to get closer to it, but we looked at it from a distance and thought that in case we didn't pass the math exam, there were three options: suicide, murder and escape. We thought that we could escape to Albania from there, because for my generation and the generation before me, Albania was a kind of paradise and every youth of that age dreamt of escaping to Albania, all of them.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did anyone escape, or did it only remain a dream for your generation?

Agim Vinca: No, there were many who escaped. Maybe they are a bit older than I, especially from the *Shkolla Normale* of Skopje and I know some of these people even today, some of them are deceased, for example, two or three of my friends escaped. Some of them remained there, some of them were forcibly returned, some of them were sent to work camps, got sad and they regretted. "Do you want to go home?" They were returned, the Yugoslav regime detained them, there are x number of cases, there are also people from Kosovo, but more from these border areas. This was it. Everybody dreamt of this at that time, because it was the love for Albania, the country where they only speak Albanian, where even the police speaks to you in Albanian, the First Secretary of the Party, the fellow students with whom you will be going to school, the professors and so on as well.

And this was our fate, even though during that whole summer we worked without resting under the apple tree. We passed the exam in September, we didn't fail the class, and we moved to the third year. In the third and fourth year then, I don't know why, but we had a Macedonian professor, there are many Macedonians there, many Macedonians with Albanian origin, but who are Orthodox. For example, the teacher of Physical Education's name was Ile Misa, not Misosk, he is still alive. I see him when I go, I saw him with a bike, because when I go there I have a bike as well. A professor of French language who came from Ohrid, her last name was Stojna Kotil, not Miskin, do you understand? But they were assimilated, and it happened that those were even worse towards their people, how to say, because there was the complex of the distance from your origin, from your race.

Yes, the Macedonian professor then had easier criteria than the Albanian one, and I didn't have problems to pass anymore. Not anymore, and I didn't even aim of becoming a mathematician, I started writing poems, sketches, stories since then, I published them in *Flaka* [Flame] for children in Skopje, in *Pioneri* [The Pioneer], I mean we had a literature group, and this was our world, our world was a world of books, we read a lot. I remember when the winter holidays came, they last 15 days, there was a library with Albanian books at school and there was a city library where two women were working, one of them Albanian and the other Macedonian. And one of these semesters, I guess it was in the second year, I took a sack with books, yes a sack, a sack {shows with hands} to read during holidays. And I made the way by foot that day, I remember, it was Ramadan and together with friends

we [walked] to Veleshta, it was eight kilometers, what else were we supposed to do? There was no radio at that time. Radio had arrived at my house since I had two educated brothers, two sisters, one brother who had once been detained, then migrated, and a family that loved education, I had a very progressive paternal uncle, a very intelligent mother and a father who had only finished four grades at the time of *Kralj's*¹³ Yugoslavia. The radio has arrived.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What radio did you listen to?

Agim Vinca: Radio Tirana. Yes, yes, Radio Tirana, Radio Skopje and Radio Pristina, we listened to them. The radio was even, I would do anything to find that apparatus, it was big and there were the names of European cities, I guess even the radio station of Tirana, Paris, Stuttgart and so on, Rome, and so one, they were written on it, and it had a button. I remember, back then I listened to Nexhmije Pagarusha's¹⁴ songs, I listened about Adem Demaçi's¹⁵ detention in '63, after the distribution of the flags from the organization LRBSH,¹⁶ it distributed flags all around Kosovo, Pristina, Peja, Gjakova, Mitrovica, Vushtrri, Prizren, it was a big organization, led by *baca*¹⁷ Adem. I listened to it, and also with my back then mind I said that now Kosovo has become Albania because once the flag comes, I thought back then, identity changes.

And our world was a world of books, the cinema was also very frequented. Struga was a relatively small city, it had one main street, one self service this side {shows the direction}, in the front there was the cinema. That's where I had watched the first movies when I was a third grade student, they sent us to the city from the village, we even thought that they, the figures, the characters, when they appeared in *gros plan*,¹⁸ we thought that they will come to us. First when we were children, then in the gymnasium we went to the cinema on our own, I mean we bought the tickets and watched movies. The movies back then were with Serbian subtitles, only Serbian, not even Macedonian, not to talk about Albanian. But, the cinema world of course developed our fantasy besides the one of the books which we had inherited from our family, because my birthplace and my family was a family that loved song, where they drank, where they drank healthily, they drank *raki*¹⁹ but drank *raki* on *sofër*,²⁰ with

¹³ Serbian: *Kralj*, king. Here, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

¹⁴ Nexhmije Pagarusha (1933-) is one of Kosovo's first classically trained singers. Her repertoire covers classical Albanian music and folk songs. She is known as the "Nightingale of Kosovo."

¹⁵ Adem Demaçi (1936-) is an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

¹⁶ *Lëvizja Revolucionare për Bashkimin e Shqiptarëve* [The Revolutionary Movement for Albanians Union], underground nationalist group.

¹⁷ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

¹⁸ Term from cinematography: close plan.

¹⁹ *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

²⁰ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

dolibash,²¹ they sang old and beautiful songs and weddings were very beautiful, extraordinary, but even death is mourned there. My mother was one of the most famous mourners of the village, she was gifted with that, Nadire, they said when she mourned {shows mourning with hands}, and my sisters especially, one of my sisters, Shpresa inherited that, she was a mourner par excellence.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they documented?

Agim Vinca: Yes, because my deceased sister was a folklorist and she collected them, she published them, they are like antique tragedies. One woman leads and the others follow, the chorus and the anti-chorus the same as in Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, that's an old tradition, old tradition. Then it faded because of the development and the modernization of life shrunk it. The New Year holidays were also a rare beauty, the Summer Day, Saint George, New Year, religious holidays, since the people of that place were Albanian, they were Muslims and they were committed to Ramadan but not as today. And Eid al-Fitr²² together with Eid-al-Adha,²³ I mean, they dressed us with new shirts, new trousers, our happiness was big. We would learn how to ride a bike for the first time, one of us had a bike and we had to pay to learn biking.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: This is what you did on holidays, right?

Agim Vinca: Yes, on holidays, especially on Eid-al-Fitr or Eid-al-Adha days. But then the gymnasium, the education lasted four years, we went through them with the troubles of the beginning, with the language, with the Biology teacher, with UDB, with inspector Bushko who intentionally took his jacket off in order to show his *kobure*²⁴ and threatened us. Of course they did nothing to us, they couldn't find out about the person because we were careful, they threatened us that they would jail us, that they would expel us from school.

With the idea of escaping to Albania in case we didn't pass the mathematics exam and many other memories, and the first crushes for some girl in class or girls from younger generations, because they were pretty, much platonic loves, how to express it in Hamlet's words, "You may say I am not your fire, you may say the sky is shut, you may say the earth was killed, but please don't say you don't love me," these are the lines Hamlet recites to Ofelia, and so on and so on.... I evoked all of these in my creations, in my poetry and especially in one poem, which I wrote 30 years ago and I republished

²¹ The tradition of toasting originates from Northern Albania, when the host first has a general toast for his guests, then toasts the *dolibash*, who is the most respected and influential man, usually his maternal uncle, or his children's maternal uncle, or the paternal uncle. This ceremony takes place in an *oda* and women are not allowed to be part of it.

²² Eid al-Fitr is an important religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting.

²³ Eid al-Adha, also called the "Sacrifice Feast," is the second of two Muslim holidays celebrated worldwide each year, and considered the holier of the two.

²⁴ *Kobure* is a shooter, old flintlock pistol with a long barrel, which is charged from the top.

recently on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of my gymnasium graduation. The end came, prom night in a hotel, songs, dances, photographs, memories, a new life would begin, “Where will you go, what will you do, what will you study?”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were the concerns of your generation? You lived in the periphery of a country like Macedonia, far from university centers.

Agim Vinca: There was no university in Pristina either at that time, there was a university in Skopje, of course in Macedonian language, Pristina had some faculties which were branches of the University of Belgrade. I wanted to study, or better said I wanted to study Journalism first, then Acting, then Literature, the third one turned out to be the true one. There was no Journalism School in Pristina and in Skopje either, there was Journalism in Belgrade and maybe in Zagreb. After finishing the gymnasium, they registered me here in Skopje, at the Faculty of Law. My brother, who was kind of the patriarch of the family said, “Justice is good, it has perspective, you can become this, you can become that,” and they registered me there. I went there late, because we had the gardens with apples and we had to collect the fruits and finish that first before I went. I felt strange, I had no scholarship and no credits, I didn’t have an apartment either. I stayed at my relatives’, one week, two, I saw I couldn’t take it, because they might’ve also considered it as a burden and I cut off my studies in Skopje, I started working as a teacher in Kaçanik, [I was] 19 years old, in the school year 1966-67.

I mean, I finished the gymnasium in ‘66 and I can say that my generation was lucky, because the Fourth Plenum of the Yugoslav Communist League, where the back then Minister of Internal Affairs, the notorious Aleksandar Ranković²⁵ fell, was held in Croatia, at the Brione Island of the Adriatic Sea in July 1966. He had...not only he, but also others had put a terrible political pressure, police pressure, on Albanians in general, the flights to Turkey, in Kosovo detentions, the action for the collection of the weapons, mistreatments, I mean, a terrible police violence. At that time it was more present in Kosovo than in Macedonia, in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Maybe, because the national consciousness and the resistance were stronger in Kosovo. Because it happened that teachers from Pristina, Gjakova came to lecture in Tetovo and Skopje at that time, later on it was the opposite.

And 1966 was my first contact with Kosovo, it was actually the second, but in the first one I had only been passing by train as a third grade student in the gymnasium in September, 1964. Based on the high school’s tradition of that time, and to some extent even today, they organized a trip around Yugoslavia. A trip that lasted ten days, maybe twelve, from where we took off, I mean, from our birthplace to Slovenia. And we had this in the beginning of the third year. I remember we came by bus from Struga to Skopje, this was my first visit, my first contact with a big city such as Skopje. That’s where we took the train and from Kumanova we went to Belgrade, our professors had organized it

²⁵ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983), was a Yugoslav communist of Serb origin, considered to be the third most powerful man in Yugoslavia after Josip Broz Tito and Edvard Kardelj.

that way, that we arrived in Belgrade the day a soccer match was taking place between the national team of Yugoslavia, the back then Yugoslav representation, and the European representation, at the Partizan stadium.

Yes, yes, and I went to that match, I went there, but it started raining so hard that it made us look like chickens, we had no umbrellas and I was wearing a new coat for the first time. I tried to shelter myself under the umbrella of a man from Belgrade who was a big fan of the Yugoslav national team. We went there, our professors were soccer fans and they settled us at a Federalist House, I don't know it was somewhere in the countryside, and it started raining. I even remember the results, there was a famous soccer player playing for the European team, he was from Portugal, his name was Eusébio, he was an amazing goal scorer, just as Ronaldo is today, Ronaldo or what's his name, Ronaldo. And it started raining, when we went back, only one of us, Nehat, from the village of Tërbesh, Ballanbenishtë, was watching it on the TV, I said, "You turned out to be the smartest." He was there dry, comfortable, there was TV in Belgrade. Then we continued the trip to Split, to Ljubljana.

We also visited the famous Postojna²⁶ Cave, Zagreb, Belgrade, I mean, by bus. I would also like to mention a detail that has remained in my memory. That's where my first contact with the sea happened, since I lived seven hours from it, and I remember the weather was warm in Split and we said, "Let's swim!" As I told you, I grew up near Drini i Zi and the Ohrid Lake, I mean, I swam in sweet waters, in the water of the fantastic Ohrid Lake, which, as it is known, is one of the most beautiful lakes of the world, and Drini i Zi, my birthplace river which is my muse, where I grew up and which to me feels like my aorta, as the veins of my blood. And we decided with my classmates Tefik, Refik, Selman and Halil, we took our clothes off and swam there and I experienced a great disappointment, because I had heard about the sea, let's go to the sea, you swim in the sea, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the difference?

Agim Vinca: The difference was that I didn't like the salty water of the sea at all, and I said what is it that they envy a lot about this? This is terrible, the salty water in your eyes and in your mouth. So we swam a bit and I went out and said, "The sea is nothing." Of course this was the first contact, and then the sea is the sea after all. The Ohrid Lake is very beautiful, it's a sea, it's just that it doesn't have salt, because considering the size and the depth, and I never forget this, of course I was angry at the sea for no reason because it was not its fault, this was in '64.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In '66, when you came here to work as a teacher...

²⁶ Postojna Cave is a 24,120 meter- long karst cave system near Postojna, southwestern Slovenia. It is the second-longest cave system in the country as well as one of its top tourism sites. The caves were created by the Pivka River.

Agim Vinca: I will return there now, and I mean this was my first, how to say, contact with the world, this is how I see it, we slept in dormitories, wherever they settled us, we ate, drank and returned, we continued teaching.

When I came to the village, a teacher in the village of Doganaj in Kaçanik, it is located near the Lepenci river, where the road to Tetovo is divided from the one that takes you to Brezovica, and it's not randomly named Doganaj, back then, Erëmirë {addresses the interviewer} they even called it Doganović, yes, they called it Doganović, and even the school was named Milan Zecar, today it's named Ali Asllani, I came here to teach Albanian Language and Literature, the one that I loved. I had been an excellent student, people liked and valued my compositions with high grades, they read them, but to teach Albanian Language and Literature, Albanian Language and Literature. The first two-three days it was taught by some man from Vushtrri whose name was Ramadan, and they told me, "The only remaining subjects are Physical Education and Housekeeping, would you want [to teach them]?" I accepted, I lectured for a year. There was no electricity in the village, we slept at the school, like that, without eating.

On Sundays I would come to Pristina to see people from where I am from who were living in private apartments or the early dormitories that were located close to where the Faculty of Philology and the National Library are today, the canteen was a bit further. The barracks of the time of Italy [Italy's occupation] were being used as dormitories, because the first dormitory, number one, was built in '68. And there I found a setting where I had colleagues, there were some, the director was a very good human being, two-three good teachers, I was the youngest, I was 19, 19 years old but there were people who had been expelled from the *Shkolla Normale* with two to three grades [completed], there were also people who had only finished the eight year school, they did nothing but play chess and cards. There was a coffee shop in front of the school, its name was Aziu, and that's where I learned how to play *pishpirik*.²⁷ They would play for the whole day long and drink tea, Russian tea, that's where I learned what Russian tea was as well, they drank strong tea, that tea with two tea pots.

And my love for the gymnasium and elementary school books had started since the seventh, eighth grade, when I started reading *Karvani i Bardhë* [The White Caravan]²⁸ and *Ata nuk ishim vetëm* [They Were not Alone]²⁹ and what else, *Afërdita*³⁰ didn't fit there. Somewhere in the middle of the semester I started reading the famous novel of Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian writer, *Stuhi në Gang* [Storm in the Gang], but I only finished it in June, when I went home for the summer holidays and I didn't return there anymore. I continued my studies in the second year, I passed my exams, I registered here in Albanian Language and Literature, and I passed my exams in September. I gave up journalism, I tried once to register in acting and I wasn't accepted so I returned to literature. That was my real vocation

²⁷ A kind of card game.

²⁸ A 1961 novel by Azem Shkreli, (1938-1997), Albanian poet.

²⁹ A 1964 novel by Sterjo Spasse, (1914-1989), Albanian writer.

³⁰ Original Title: *Afërdita përsëri në fshat* [Afërdita in the Village Again], A 1989 novel by Sterjo Spasse.

and that's where I found myself, and now I am who I am, with around 30 published books, they say that they are worth it, it's not up to me to speak about this. There, I mean, in such a setting I only could read *Rilindja*³¹ which was brought to us by the barber who came from Kaçanik, he brought food in a sack to us, the three-four teachers who were not locals, but who were coming from far away and lived there, and we could only read *Rilindja* and nothing else.

And now it's interesting, my first contact with Kosovo, the second one actually. The first one was while on our trip in '64, we went from Skopje to Kumanovo but returned through Mitrovica, I mean Belgrade, by train to Kraljevo the way you could travel through all the cities of Serbia, Šumadia and we entered Mitrovica, Vushtrri, to go to Skopje. And that's where I saw people with white *plisa*,³² since the train had many people and maybe it was daytime, some of them stood on the train, but they were very courageous because the train went through tunnels as well, but I remember. I mean, this image is stuck in my memory, because I knew Kosovo from Esad Mekuli's³³ poems, *Për ty* [For You], those poems, *Popullit Tim* [To My People], *Plisi i Bardhë* [The White Plis] and so one, from the Azem Shkreli's novel *Karvani i Bardhë* [The White Caravan].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do they not wear *plis* in your region?

Agim Vinca: No, they do, but it's a kind of white cylinder-shaped headgear, not round-shaped. They wear it in Dibra, Veleshta, Struga, in Luma they are a bit shorter {shows with hands} it's the white *plis*, some of them wear them black or even caps or beret, but my father has worn the white headgear all his life, but we don't call it *plis*, we call it white headgear. Eh, that's where I saw, I mean courageous people, healthy, we looked at them wondering and tried to decode what we had read in books, in *Jeta e Re*³⁴ [New Life]. Because I had read *Jeta e Re* since my brother was a professor of Albanian Language and Literature and a poet at the same time, I had listened to the radio, I mean, I knew Esad Mekuli, Nexhmije Pagarusha, Ismet Peja,³⁵ Azem Shkreli, I heard about Adem Demaçi as someone who is challenging the state, who is demanding the union of Kosovo and Albania. We were not politically conscious at first, but then we started becoming so.

Part Two

[A sentence was cut from the video-interview]

³¹ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

³² Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian

³³ Esad Mekuli (1916-1993), an Albanian poet and scholar.

³⁴ *Jeta e Re*, was a bi-monthly literary magazine which was published by Rilindja Publishing House. Its first issue was launched in July, 1949.

³⁵ Ismet Peja (1937-), Albanian singer.

...the First, Second and Third Yugoslavia³⁶ until the end of the twentieth century. This journey...now I finished the gymnasium and went to Skopje to study Law. I didn't like it, I felt strange. I didn't even had the financial conditions and I decided to work as a teacher for one year in order to survive. Yes, I made the first travel from Skopje to Kaçanik, the street of course was not paved and had big holes, and since I was sitting on the last seats of the bus, the back wheels of the bus fell in those deep holes on the street and my head crashed against the roof of the bus. This is how that journey was, it lasted two hours. I arrived, then I made part of the street on foot, I went to the school, I started my job as a teacher, I stayed there for one year, I mean I practically lost one year, yes I lost one year, but it was a lifetime experience, a lifetime experience.

Then in September I passed five exams in 25 days, four, five exams were left, because I had only passed one in June. And in the second, third and fourth year I earned the scholarship from the University. The scholarship, back then it was the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Pristina and the scholarship, not many students could gain a scholarship because you needed a high grade average and the criteria was strict, the scholarship was the same as the teacher's salary, I mean it was the same as the salary I earned as a teacher there, and now I obtained a scholarship as a second year student. The same in the third year, the scholarship increased in the fourth year, I remember it was 32 thousand Dinars of that time for the first and the third year, and for the fifth year it was 50 thousand Dinars, that was the same as a teacher's salary. In the fourth year I could cover my expenses, I studied, I was living in the dormitory number one near the Students' Center and I managed to even send money to my parents, my mother and my father, and that left an impression in the village, X manages to study and also send money to his parents.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So, this was your last move to Kosovo?

Agim Vinca: Yes, and I finished my studies in three years, I returned to my birthplace. I worked for one year as an Albanian Language and Literature professor in the gymnasium of Struga where I had finished my high school. In the meantime as a fellow of the university, as a student with high grades, they opened a vacancy for an assistant, I applied and I was selected as an assistant.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In the University of Pristina?

Agim Vinca: Yes, in the University of Pristina. I thought about it for six months, how will I make it? not for myself but my parents didn't allow me, they put pressure on me, "Stay here, we will take care of you. We will build a house, we will get you to marry," that parent feeling is normal, but then it turned out that...

³⁶ First Yugoslavia or Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1939); Second Yugoslavia or Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992); Third Yugoslavia (1992-2003).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which years were those, '72?

Agim Vinca: This was '71, '72, the '71 school year. I graduated in '70, '71, '72, I worked a full year then I started the second year, in the meantime I had published my first book of poems, *Feniksi* [Phoenix] in Skopje, *Flaka e Vëllazërimit* [Brotherhood Flame] in 1972. Back then a book was not small work, it was welcomed, those were the lines of my youth, you know, a lyrical diary. This, the world of...those inspirations, those concerns, those dreams, those desires, I tried to articulate them through my love for my birthplace, for humans, for the world. Eh, like this of course, I also treated love as a feeling.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did '81 find you in Pristina?

Agim Vinca: '81, airplanes were flying over people's heads, over houses' roofs and people's heads, supersonic airplanes, of course military ones, they wanted to bring fear. After, not after the 11th nor after the 26th but after the 2nd of April, when the state of emergency was declared, at that time since I had finished my Master's degree in '74, I had also finished my military service, I got married. In the meantime I became a father, I took one semester off to finish my Ph.D. thesis, but then they came, the demonstrations of '81 took place, I remember the 11th of March well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go to the demonstrations?

Agim Vinca: I didn't, we couldn't go. We couldn't because, you know, you would automatically be fired from the Faculty. They were organized by youth, by the students but we had inspired them, some of us had inspired them and supported them morally. But the notorious period of *diferencimi*³⁷ started then, it lasted nine years, nine years from '81 to '89. In '89 some of us who were considered the ones who indoctrinated the youth, nationalists, irredentists, separatists, were expelled from the Communist League, I mean around 70 intellectuals all around Kosovo, the Local Committee, they expelled us. I was punished with pre-exclusion back then, they expelled us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the reason behind the pre-exclusion?

Agim Vinca: Because...first we were sentenced for being charged with nationalism, some professors and me, then since we were colleagues, they defended us and that sentence was lowered, they modified it into: they haven't fought as much as they should against Albanian nationalism, this was it. In fact, there was no Albanian nationalism, those demands were legal, I mean, the main demand of the demonstrations of '81 was for Kosovo to gain the status of Republic. What was wrong with that? Montenegro was a Republic, Macedonia was a Republic, why could Kosovo not be so? With the borders it had, I mean, this was the demand and we supported it. Of course there were those who

³⁷ *Diferencimi* (lit. differentiation) refers to the purges of suspected Albanian nationalists after the 1981 protests demanding the status of republic for Kosovo.

judged them, because my generation, I participated in the demonstrations of '68 when I was a student, I was part of the demonstrations, not the organizer but part of them, I mean, in what is now Nënë Tereza square, it started from the theatre.

Once we gathered at the Faculty of Philosophy then, here. The demands were read there, then the police intervened, we wanted to go to the back then Province Parliament which is the current Parliament. Then the crashes started, then the breaking of glasses, destruction of cars and it was not enough. I guess a boy was killed from a balcony, a pupil of the *Murat Mehmeti* high school, 17 or 18 years old, he was killed, others were injured. I participated there as a student together with my fellow students. While in '81, I mean the professors of the university were asked to judge [the demonstrations], and there were such professors who did that with pleasure, there were others who didn't like doing it, and there were some of us who didn't want to say the heavy accusation, because we thought they were unfair and they were really unfair. That system was a system that had a monopoly over the power and the truth.

A member of the Committee Leadership who was young at the time, Agim Zatriqi, had also finished the university and said that the assessments of the Province Committee are that, "These are nationalist, irredentists, separatists demonstrations, from the Albanian nationalism and irredentism positions, and other assessments cannot be accepted," I mean the debate wasn't allowed and we...this lasted meeting after meeting, eh, how many meetings? In one week only, in '82, there were 99 meetings held at the University of Pristina from Monday to Friday, 99 meetings on *diferencimi*, because in the whole University of Pristina there were 99 organizations. I was on the agenda every day from Monday to Friday, I was punished with pre-expulsion. My colleagues and students defended me, some of them were members of the League, even as students. I mean, the professor during his lectures deals with science and has a critical opinion on political phenomena, this or that.

And in '89 they fired us. I was a candidate to be fired from the university, but the circumstances changed in the meantime, monism fell, political pluralism was legalized, political prisoners started being set free and it no longer made sense for people to be expelled because of their political orientations. But, on June 28, 1991, the so-called violent measures were applied to the University of Pristina by the occupying Serbian regime, I mean all the Albanian Deans were fired, the Rector, the pro-Rectors, and they were replaced with Serbian ones and some Albanians quislings, this is how it happened, but also the Albanians who were pro that regime. Then I was fired from the University on September 15, 1991, because it was the end of the year, the summer holidays. We returned then with the motivation that I illegally participated in the protests. I have the decision. Then the *diferencimi*, the expulsions continued, the aim of the Serbian ruling power was not to expel some of us who were considered nationalists, but to close the University, that's how it happened.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When was the University closed?

Agim Vinca: The university was closed within '91. And we organized to continue the education in private houses, in the schools in the countryside, in various facilities and so on. They had the buildings, Serbs, we held the lectures outside, I mean we didn't recognize the laws of Serbia. It was that, how was it called, the system of home schools, I mean only elementary schools were in the basements of their buildings, the high schools and the University were outside. And this is how it continued for nine years, until '99, when we returned after Kosovo's liberation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You were also engaged in other political activities, organizations...could you tell us about the Albanians' position in Macedonia?

Agim Vinca: In the '80s, especially in Macedonia, there was a terrible repression of Albanians, and it was the same for them in Kosovo, but the repression in Kosovo escalated later. In Macedonia there was a real terror towards the intelligentsia, towards the youth, the institutions, I mean, Albanians were asked to even pronounce the names of the cities in Slavic forms, not Shkup but Skopje. Even when they talked in Albanian, at Radio Shkup, "Radio Skopje is talking to you," also at Radio Debar, "Radio Debar is talking to you." Children's names, books, this was all allegedly made on behalf of the fight against Albanian nationalism. In fact, its only aim was to marginalize the Albanian nationality, to shrink their rights. High schools started to become the so-called united parallels, in an Albanian parallel they put for example five Macedonian pupils and then the lectures had to be given in Macedonian. Even the songs were forbidden, even the ones about Mujo Ulqinaku³⁸ and Bajram Curri,³⁹ not to talk about the others. People were fired from their jobs, detentions and such.

And I, as an Albanian intellectual who was born, raised, and educated there, but living in Pristina, of course it was not on me to do something, maybe we didn't even have the chance to do something, but I guess we had the chance to raise our voice a little, and that meant putting yourself and your family in danger. And I have my first writing on defense of Albanians' integrity and their rights against the political and police violence of '86, but the press here didn't dare publish them, because they did not follow the line of the League of Communists. At that time there was a magazine being published in Zagreb, a newspaper, a weekly magazine which was called *Danas*, it was published once a week, on Wednesdays I guess, and it had a more liberal stand towards the political situation in the Yugoslavia of that time. There you could publish writings, papers, reactions, longer articles, more analytic articles about these problems, especially about the situation of the Albanians in Macedonia, where even the natality rate was limited. It was a kind of genocide, yes, you had to pay taxes for the third child, no way you could get any help from the state, I mean, it was a kind of ethnocide.

³⁸Mujo Ulqinaku (1896-1939), born as Mujo Cakuli, an officer of the Royal Albanian Army.

³⁹ Bajram Curri (1862-1925), was an Albanian chieftain, politician and activist who struggled for the independence of Albania, later struggling for Kosovo's incorporation into it following the 1913 Treaty of London.

And I started there in '86, then I continued, I published many writings about the Albanians' position in Macedonia, about the violation of their rights, about the violence that they were suffering. Some of these were polemics with other Macedonian intellectuals, journalists, publicists, writers, some of them were more analytic approaches to the problem. And I know that in 1988 a terrible campaign against me took place in Macedonia, because there were just a few of us, it was like that, may somebody like it or not, this is the truth. Rexhep Qosja,⁴⁰ professor Rexhep Qosja published writings and I, also Shkelzen Maliqi⁴¹ and Veton Surroi,⁴² there were no others. Shkelzen Maliqi and Veton Surroi published from pro-Yugoslav positions, they were pro-Yugoslavia, but an entirely reformed one, democratic and liberal, let's say pluralistic. We wrote from the position of the defense of the vital interests of the Albanian nation, [which was] split, mistreated, left under foreign sovereignties, persecuted, massacred and so on. And of course, as much as we could, opposing the repressive measures that were used by the ruling power of that time, especially in Macedonia.

In '98⁴³ a terrible campaign against me took place, every radio stations from Radio Shkup to Radio Kërçova, newspapers, you know, *Makedonija*, *Vecer* and *Flaka e Vëllazërimit*, which published Albanian articles. There was even articles that said that as I student I had been expelled from the gymnasium as a nationalist, I was actually questioned, as I told you, but not expelled, I wasn't expelled and I finished the gymnasium, I even returned as a teacher for one year. With defamations, with charges, in '98⁴⁴ when they saw that I was not about to stop, the Local Committee of the Communist League of Struga, in collaboration with state security organs, because they had the files, organized a campaign, they forced [them], maybe they forced [them], not that the representatives of the social political organizations of my village wanted to distance themselves from me. The leader of the League, the leader of the Local Municipality, I know them by names, but I don't want to mention them.

The secretary of the Communists' League, the leader of the organization of the League of Fighters, the leader of the Socialists' League of the Working People and the leader of Youth, five of them published a letter in Macedonian where they said, "We have all the rights." Never in their life have they taken any document with any Albanian letter, only in Macedonian, from the moment they were born to the moment they would die. And, "Agim Vinca misinforms the Yugoslav public opinion, and we are not surprised of his actions because he is the son of a nationalist family, his paternal uncle is this, this brother is that, the one who migrated is his paternal uncle's friend," such things. There are eleven or twelve-thirteen other names mentioned in that paper besides mine, but we are surprised of how can

⁴⁰ Rexhep Qosja (1936-) is a prominent politician and literary critic.

⁴¹ Shkelzen Maliqi (1947-) is a philosopher, art critic, political analyst and intellectual. During the early 1990s he was also directly involved in politics.

⁴² Veton Surroi (1961-) is a publicist, politician and former journalist. Surroi is the founder and former leader of the ORA political party, and was a member of Kosovo Assembly from 2004 to 2008.

⁴³ The speaker unintentionally mistakes the year, he is talking about 1988.

⁴⁴Ibid.

this kind [of people] educate the new generation. That paper was published in the newspaper *Nova Makedonija* [New Macedonia] under the title, “Deep Hostile Stand of Agim Vinca” and in *Danas*, the newspaper of Zagreb, because they published it as well, I mean, but with another title there, with a softer one. And it also came to the Faculty, the red envelope with a red stamp, because that’s how the Communist League had it as a Communist, Marxist political organization, and the Faculty of Philosophy was asked to undertake measures towards me as a person who had misinformed Yugoslav public opinion.

Of course it didn’t have its effect here, because the leader of the Sanctions Assembly was a colleague of mine, and he said, “I know what happens there.” He was from Presheva and had finished the *Shkolla Normale* in Skopje, but he came to tell me, to tell me, I saw him, and I said, “Publish it, don’t put yourself in danger for me.” “No,” he said. But it was published in *Danas* and left a very bad impression, you understand, and I was forced to take the train from Pristina to Zagreb and take my documents with me and ask for a meeting with the editor-in-chief of *Danas*, Mirko Galić was his name. First he didn’t want to see me, because his secretary told me he had a lot of work to do. Then I gave him the business card of a professor there, Matvejević, he was a Literature professor and a well known Literary Critic with whom I had met during the day. And he told me that the editor-in-chief was his friend, he wrote it on the back of the card. He accepted to see me and I said, “I am Agim Vinca, about whom you published an article here and I am here to tell you, am I the one who misinforms the Yugoslav public opinion or is it they?”

In reality, they were blind tools of the ruling power, they were, they did this even if they told them that the Drini i Zi flows upwards, they would sign it, and even when they put their signatures, they did that in Cyrillic alphabet, the three of them. And I gave him my birth certificate, my marriage certificate, four gymnasium grade transcripts, my diploma, in order to prove to him that every document, everything was in Macedonian as everything else as well. And he welcomed me very warmly and said, “What can I do for you?” I said, “First, publish a long article of mine which is waiting,” and he published it right away in the next issue, in one page and a half. Being given one page and a half by *Danas* was a big deal at that time. And then, a group of intellectuals from my birthplace here in Pristina had a response for them, then this left a good impression and of course ‘88 passed and ‘89 came.

1989 was terrible for Kosovo. In Macedonia the climate was getting softer because pluralism was about to take place and some personnel changes happened. Petar Gošev, who was a little more reformist, became the leader of Communists League, some chauvinists fell. And here, because here now Milosević’s Serbia was fighting a battle for constitutional change and the return of Kosovo under Serbia, I mean, they wanted to take back the jurisdictions that Kosovo had according to the Constitution of ‘74. And in ‘89 there was a very terrible situation, a harsh campaign, swearing, offending, charges against our mothers, Albanian women were called washing machines, machines that produce children and so on and so on. And I reacted against these as well, I even published an article in *Politika* and one in *Nin*, of course they were shorter, but mainly published in *Danas*.

Then it moved, how to say, the problem moved here, also as a consequence of that repression, violence, those harsh campaigns against everything that was Albanian, from ethnogenesis to the new borns. The famous strike of the Trepça miners happened in “the ninth horizon”⁴⁵ and it shocked Yugoslavia and Europe as well, at the same time our students locked themselves in the sports hall, which at that time was named *25 Maji* [May 25], today it’s named *1 Tetori* [October 1] and I participated there, together with some other colleagues. After that, I mean, the demands for Ali Shukrija’s⁴⁶ resignation as a member of the Leadership of Yugoslavia, of Rrahman Morina,⁴⁷ who was the number one quisling in Kosovo, representative of the Communists League, Husamedin Azemi had came from the police and the Mitrovica Committee Secretary. They acted as if they resigned, then the miners withdrew, as I told you, from the pits, the students from the sports hall as well, and the repression continued, violent measures, the police arrested people.

I was there, I found out later on that the meeting of Kosovo Parliament was being held in March 23 just when the constitutional changes were supposed to be made, the Kosovo Parliament was besieged with tanks, there were policemen everywhere, the Serbian and the whole ex-Yugoslav *milicia*⁴⁸ at every step. The constitutional changes were violently made, the meeting of Serbia Parliament was going to be held. I was arrested in the early morning of March 28, at 5:30 in the morning, seven people came to my flat’s door, three policemen came to warn me. Three policemen, three civilians and a woman raided my house, they took some files, some writings and me. They questioned me for twenty hours, they asked me from when I was born until then. But I had a fortunate circumstance let’s say, that my action was public, I made writings, I made debates, I had reacted publicly, I didn’t belong to any illegal political organization, any troika, and maybe this saved me, how to say.

Twenty-two people were killed that day, in March 28, young boys and girls, while in Belgrade they were drinking champagne because now Kosovo had lost the autonomy of ‘74 and it no longer had the constitutional competences that it used to. This is what they had long fought for, the Yugoslav press was terrifying, especially the newspaper *Politika*, they made a monstrous campaign, mobbing, accusing, threatening, and everything else. We, I mean some intellectuals, there were some who were imprisoned, such as Ukshin Hoti⁴⁹ with his group, some were taken before, some were threatened, some were expelled. I was among those, I mean, they had taken me, they kept me, they questioned me and then set me free, they also took me once again for the Appeal, for the Appeal of 215 intellectuals which was made in ‘89 as a defense of Kosovo’s Constitution. Then in July 5, when the

⁴⁵ That’s how the Trepça’s pits were called, the miners’ horizon.

⁴⁶ Ali Shukrija (1919-2005) held important positions in the Yugoslav state.

⁴⁷ Rrahman Morina (1943-1990), was a Yugoslav police officer and political figure of Kosovo-Albanian origin. He is remembered as being an opponent of Albanian separatism

⁴⁸ Serbian: *milicia*, police

⁴⁹ Ukshin Hoti (1943-199), philosopher and politicians, was sentenced to five years in prison in 1994. He disappeared at the time of his release and his whereabouts are still unknown.

Radio Television of Kosovo was violently taken, they warned me not to influence my students to go to the streets, because there would be bloodshed. This was the main word, how to say, you are responsible!

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you say to your students, and why were you under supervision about this?

Agim Vinca: Like this, then 1990 came and the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation started. It was initiated by our youth, our students, former political prisoners, on February 2, 1990 in the village of Lumbardh of Deçan or Peja, of Peja. And they initiated it because in the demonstrations of '89 for the defense of Kosovo's autonomy, Serbian propaganda had spread the defamation that Albanians were not killed by the Serbian police, but they had killed each-other because of blood feuds. This was the starting point. This action expanded, and besides the students and the youth, university professors, intellectuals and other writers from Kosovo were involved, in villages, in cities, I got involved as well.

The reasons why I found it right to get involved in this Movement were, first because it was a humanitarian action, I mean, because we had the tradition of the *kanun*,⁵⁰ revenge, and there is nothing better than reconciling families who were in enmity for decades, to remove such a heavy burden from their shoulders. But, besides that, besides that, we had to create a unity, a front against Serbian hegemony, against the violence and terror which were being used, and at least I thought that it wouldn't take long for Albanians to be forced to rise, to start the fight, and they had to be united, homogenized in order to start the fight. The Action turned out to be successful, bloods were reconciled, conflicts, injuries, mainly on behalf of the nation, of the flag, of Kosovo, of Kosovo's youth. This was what made people, you know, overcome the great pain, the painful memories, because there were very tough cases as well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How old were they?

Agim Vinca: There were 30, 40, maybe even 50 or less years old cases. And of course, this mobilized the people because other movements, other forms of reaction were taking place besides Blood Feuds Reconciliations, it mobilized the people. I got involved, as far as I remember, on March 2, 1990, in the village of Bajçina, not Bajçina but in another village near Pristina. And the old man in the garden, at the gathering where he forgave the blood was taking place, his name was Hashim Bajçinca, a short man, I remember him. He was my first contact with this and then I even wrote a poem that day, I wrote a poem which is published in one of my books. It was March, April, the end of April, the 1st of May was celebrated at the time, I was about to go to my birthplace, in May 1...

⁵⁰ *Kanun*, customary law, the unwritten law that regulates all aspects of life in the mountain areas of Northern Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. A written version, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, was compiled by the Franciscan monk Shtjefën Gjeçovi in 1910-1925.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You were in the village of Bubavec as well, right?

Agim Vinca: In the village of Bubavec? Yes, I was in the village of Bubavec. A big gathering took place in Bubavec, at that time I was getting along with a person from Switzerland who had come to Kosovo for a visit, he was a teacher by profession. I don't know whether he had any other mission or not, but they told me to accompany him since I spoke French. And he was impressed by that big gathering, I mean, all those people, it was a day of celebration. It was Eid, and the *hoxha* with the priests were together, the speeches, girls, women, men, men with moustache, with *plisa*. I mean, all the possible categories, then the lunch, the lunch on *sofër*,⁵¹ he saw the way we sat, then I met him after some months during a visit in Switzerland, the gathering in Bubavec was big.

By the end of April, I would go to my birthplace in Veleshta, Struga, and I thought that since there were blood feuds there as well, because we are one, we are one nation, we have the same tradition, we have the same mentality, I thought about starting and expanding the action there as well. I thought about taking with my car some of my fellow countrymen, my fellow villagers, and send them at Verat e Llukës so that they would get inspired and do the same thing. But when I went there, I saw that there was no need to go at Verat e Llukës, because what was happening in Kosovo was being transmitted through television, newspapers and word of mouth and it had had its effect already and we gathered, wrote a strategy of starting the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliations in Veleshta of Struga. It happened that I was the one leading this group, and they came to me, since I was an intellectual who had a name, not only as a writer and as a professor, but also as a man who had resisted against Yugoslav, Macedonian, the Serbian ruling power.

They came to Ohrid, I was at, since my wife was from Ohrid, I was at her family's, two people came by car, one of them was a doctor and had a problem in his family and the other an activist, they took me, we went. In April 30, we met in the house of a nation loving fellow villager whose name was Nazif Zhuta, and other intellectuals from Pristina and from my birthplace, we made a strategy, we made the list of the blood feuds, there were five or six of them, two for each, three or something. We started, we had the dilemma whether we were supposed to start from the case that seemed the easiest or the one that seemed the hardest? We decided to start from the hardest one. There were difficulties, but there were ten, fifteen, twenty [activists], the group kept getting larger. And in two days, in May 1 and 2 in Veleshta of Struga, for the first time in Macedonia, Tetovo and Gostivar hadn't started yet, whoever says differently lies, these are documented facts in the press and everywhere else, there are also photographs and other testimonies. Five blood feuds were reconciled and two injuries and a conflict. It was a big success, some of them were very hard, two of them were in my family, Vinca, in my *fis*. One of them was, yes please?

⁵¹ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the nature of the cases?

Agim Vinca: One of them was a murder, each family had a victim, but they were not reconciled, Reqi, Vinca. And we did the reconciliation by taking the representatives of each families, by going to their families, not only in the square there, but also in the *oda*⁵² where they had coffee and then here again, it didn't happen the same way in Kosovo because the work was bigger, we mainly didn't do this for all the cases. There was another case where the father-in-law had killed his daughter-in-law, the father-in-law who was a criminal had been fighting with his son and the daughter-in-law had gone in between to separate them and he had shot her with a shotgun from below. This was a woman from my family, my cousin, and I cried when we went there, to my cousins', because I had the main speech, I had to be the first one to speak, even though I was not the oldest, but I was, let's say the leader. And when I started, because you had to convince them that it's for the better, we know it's not easy for you, but you are not forgiving it to them but to your future, to your children, to the nation, to this youth, to these people, to our values, we have our century old enemy in front of us.

These were, how to say, the words, the arguments, and when I started there, I couldn't stop from crying, I started crying because it was hard. I knew her, I mean, she was part of my family and she was killed, how to say, with her hands on dough and she left her children, five little children. And he was imprisoned, I guess he was set free, but we weren't forgiving it to him. And like this, there were very hard cases, there were various cases, none of them were the same, we were successful. And since I was still working, you know, in the Faculty, I stayed three days and I returned.

I returned in May 5. A big gathering was held in May 2, 3, 5, maybe one of the biggest after the one in Verat e Llukës, the one of Bubavec, maybe even before the one in Bubavec, the one that was held in Kolovica of Pristina. And since I was part of it, they asked me to have a speech together with Anton Çetta,⁵³ Mark Krasniqi,⁵⁴ Zekerija Cana,⁵⁵ these three. There were Lush Gjergji⁵⁶ and the *hoxha*⁵⁷ of Bubavec, Xhevat Kryeziu⁵⁸ there, as well as many others, writers, intellectuals and professors who wanted to speak. I had written it like this, *Pranvera e Pajtimit* [The Spring of Reconciliation], and it showed on the Television of Pristina, since it had not been taken by Serbia yet. It was a special moment, I mean it was a big gathering, there was even one case, a person whom I know as well, two of his brothers had been killed, from the Sfishta family from Vranjenc of Kodra e Trimave, two

⁵² Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

⁵³ Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar.

⁵⁴ Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

⁵⁵ Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian.

⁵⁶ Lush Gjergji, (1949-), Vicar of the Kosovo Diocese, philosopher, theologian, psychologist.

⁵⁷ Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.

⁵⁸ Xhevat Kryeziu, (1958-), mullah, he has been a mullah of the Bubavec Mosque since 1979, he is also the leader of the Islamic Community in Malisheva.

brothers, and he was the son-in-law of a family from Struga. He had met the girl when she had come to the Medicine Middle School, she was my relative and there were many of those who forgave it there.

A doctor from Pristina, who was working in Zagreb, showed up, I guess his name was Nazmi Krasniqi. He was a defectologist and he had come, and showed up in the tribune all of a sudden, and I remember him saying. "We are forgiving the bloods to each-other, but we will never forget the blood that Milosević, Kadiević and Mamula made us spill!" Everybody knows who Milosević was, Branko Mamula was the Admiral of the Yugoslav Army, Kadiević was the commander in chief at the Army Headquarters, many boys were killed, they came back in coffins from the army. These were, you know, all part of the situation, of the events, they were an accumulation. We had even participated in their funerals and held speeches at the opening of the memorials at their graveyards, and so on.

And after his speech, the Serbian police came and arrested him, they arrested the doctor who had come from Zagreb and they stopped the big gatherings, the big gatherings which gathered tens of thousands of people, not to say even more. And then after a few days Croatia intervened, because I guess he was a citizen of Croatia and they set him free. Like this, the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliations expanded in other Albanian lands as well, in Macedonia, in Tetovo, in Gostivar, in villages, in Kërçovë and it even continued in my birthplace in Struga, some others continued it in a village there, and sometimes they invited me. It happened that I went there for new cases, but then, how to say, this became a kind of undeclared institution.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Wasn't there in Macedonia a good relationship with the state and the law, why was there a need to solve these issues on their own?

Agim Vinca: The murders?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes.

Agim Vinca: They had happened 30-40 years ago, unfortunately they still happen. To this day they still happen, there are murders everywhere. We even sent out a message at the time, but things are being forgotten. We are a nation with values, but we also have our vices, we said, "We are forgiving the blood feuds today, we kindly invite you to open your eyes from now on, to pull yourselves together and never kill your brother or your neighbor for anything in the world and then say, I will send Anton Çetta to him and he will forgive me the blood, no!" And I mean it had its effect for some time. Now, people are people, they are alive, they are diverse, but the aim was to create unity, a front, and this happened, a consciousness. Then the events developed the way they did, I mean the political parties surfaced and in the end the KLA⁵⁹ and Kosovo managed to get liberated in '99 from almost a century of Serbian occupation. From 1912-1913 to that year, because Kosovo was an occupied land, Macedonia,

⁵⁹ Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës, Kosovo Liberation Army

Serbia and Greece had expanded during the Balkan Wars and occupied Albanian lands, Kosovo and Çamëria.

And we as intellectuals, I for myself ever since I started having my own thoughts and became fully politically aware, I would say that from 1965 I thought like this, and I have many arguments for this and I thought, because this is the legal right of my nation. I wanted to defend the rights of the others if they were violated, because a human must be a human, but they should also be humanists, before being Albanians. Montesquieu, a famous French philosopher says, “*Je suis tout d’abord homme par hasard français,*” which means, above all, I am [first] a human and by chance I am French. I think this is a saying, an epigraph, a motto which I as an intellectual have tried to follow and respect during my whole life.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where were you during the war?

Agim Vinca: I was in Pristina. Five days in my apartment, then on 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 [March] I went to Macedonia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They forcibly chased you, right?

Agim Vinca: No, I wanted to change place because the Serbian police settled in front of my apartment. There was the house of a Serbian doctor there, back then there was the Pristina Office for Water Supply, all the employees were Serbs, and the Serbian police settled there and that’s why I wanted to change place and go to a friend of mine in Ulpiana, but the paramilitary forces had gone there one night earlier and he was not safe for himself. And my wife and I had Macedonian passports, because Macedonia had become an independent country in the meantime and we had the Macedonian passports as Macedonian citizens, and we tried to go there.

This is a story in itself. Then in Veternik we got stopped by the police close to the gas station, they took me to their van and threatened to kill me, they robbed me. One of them pulled the trigger of the automatic, a Serbian police, then his boss who was checking the passports said, “Don’t, don’t dirty your hands with him, because the other ones will fix him.” That was it. And at some point he said, because we haven’t given these testimonies, “*Imaš pare kod sebe?*” [Do you have money with you?] I said, “I do.” “How much?” I had 320 Euro, not Euro but Marks because I was working in our parallel University, and the 3%⁶⁰ was created in the meantime. We started with no salaries, then with 20 Marks, 30 Marks, 50 Marks. In ‘99 my salary as a University professor with the highest professorial title was 300 Marks.

⁶⁰ The three percent fund was a creation of the Kosovo government in exile during the 1990s. All Albanians in the Diaspora and Kosovo were duty-bound to pay three per cent of their salary into this fund to finance Kosovo’s parallel institutions.

I had gotten the salary, the last salary and they had given us 20 Marks because the Eid holiday was close and I keep that money in this pocket {shows the pocket}, I don't keep a wallet. I took them out, the Serbian policeman saw them, I also had some Macedonian Denars which didn't really have a value, he saw them and put them in the pocket, and as for the Macedonian Denars, he said, "Take them!" He threatened me once more and at some point he said, "Get out!" When we got out of the car, my wife kept looking at me trying to figure out where they had hit me. Luckily they didn't hit me, they threatened to kill me, "You are Agim Vinca, Agim Vinca seems a familiar name to me. Ah you, you teach those, those from the KLA. You have asked for NATO, now you will see." I said, "You leaving for Macedonia?" I said, "I would go if there is a chance." I even regretted and wanted to return, I thought it would be better to get killed in my home rather than in the street. Then the Serbian policeman said, "You can, you can," but I still had that, "Set him free because the others will take care of him," and from Pristina to Hani i Elezit we were stopped seven times, robbed five times, we had in total 700 Marks with us, "Yes, please!" We went to Hani i Elezit, the Serbian police were in a very good mood there, because they were interested in robbing Kosovo. I also took a young woman in my car, she was holding two children by hand.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have to wait at the border?

Agim Vinca: Very shortly. The woman was from Ferizaj and I said, "Where are you going?" She said, "To Skopje." "Where?" "To my sister's." "Come in." When I crossed the border, in the Macedonian side, around ten or twelve cameras turned to me, maybe even fifteen, they were waiting there, "Why are you fleeing? Are you fleeing because you fear NATO bombings?" I said, "No." "English, English." I said, "No, *French* [English]." I said, "No, French. Nobody is moving from Kosovo because they fear NATO bombings, we are fleeing because of the terrible Serbian terror which is exercised on Kosovo civilians, where human life matters less than that of an ant. And even if they kill you, there is no one to bury you." A journalist, I guess she was Macedonian, I said, "They kill, they massacre, they rape, they rob, they do..." She said, "They rob?" "Yes." "Did they rob you?" I said, "Yes, they robbed me as well." "Personally?" "Personally. We had 700 Marks in total, they took all of them."

And I continued my journey, I sent the young woman with her children, her sister's house was somewhere in the village of Çair and then I went to my birthplace. It was already full of Kosovars, they even joked with me and said, "They should have killed you," (smiles) because now I was a refugee in my own birthplace, yes, a refugee in my own birthplace and I was the saddest Kosovar refugee. I experienced it very painfully, I couldn't even write, I only made phone calls, I paid 300 Marks. I have an apartment in Struga, I paid 300 Marks for the phone bill, there were no cell phones back then.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Whom did you keep in touch with?

Agim Vinca: I called Rexhep Mejdani, the President of Albania, Sabit Brokaj, the leader of his cabinet, my friend Dritëro Agolli, a famous writer, doctor Pandeli Qino, the leader of the Independent Albanian

Intellectuals Forum. I called professor Arben Puto, the leader of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and said, “It is terrible at Bllaca, people are dying, they do their physiological needs there, tell the president to go to Marizia Lino, the American Ambassador, and say, ‘we will keep the Albanians of Macedonia, because this is a country of immigrants, their houses stand empty while they are in Europe, the Macedonian state doesn’t spend anything.’ People are dying, this is happening...”

Of course there were hundreds like me, even more important than I, but I know that Bllaca got unblocked and 300 buses with Kosovars were sent to Korça in order not to pass through Tetovo or Struga because that’s where they stopped the Albanians, It was blocked from Saint Naum to Korça, I mean, this is what I did, they were inside. And some concerts yes, some openings which I did not attend. I couldn’t attend because I felt very sad and I wrote two, three poems, one of them was: “I envy my friends/ The dead Kosovar poets/ Who didn’t get to see Kosovo mourning/ Who didn’t get to see it burned and wounded/ I envy my friends/ Azem, Din, *baca*⁶¹ Esat/ They are better laying there/ Than here, a refugee.” I published it in the newspaper *Flaka e Vëllazërimit* [Brotherhood Flame] and some of my colleagues, professors from Gjilan and elsewhere, told me that they cried when they read it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What do you do today?

Agim Vinca: Today I am a retired professor. I keep being part of the university, I have Master’s candidates whom I mentor, I give lectures at the Fehmi Agani University of Gjakova. Two of my ex-students invited me, one of them the ex-leader of the department and the other, a dean, and I read, I write. I don’t exclude the opportunity to say what I say in the written form, in a more structured way than I managed to say it today. I wrote some after I returned, I returned a week after the bombings. Ten days after the bombings I made a journey with my car, I had a 101 [*Zastava*],⁶² with two of my colleagues and friends, Pristina-Peja-Gjakova-Prizren and back.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Have you documented it?

Agim Vinca: I have documented it with an article I wrote after I returned, titled, “*Një ditë në Kosovën e lirë*” [A Day In Liberated Kosovo], which was published in the newspaper *Koha Ditore*, which was still published in Tetovo, because its printing house in Pristina was burned. In four full pages, “*Një ditë në Kosovën e lirë*,” and I said that the after war Peja was a Hiroshima, Peja was {shows the demolition with his hands}, Gjakova had many victims, Prizren was saved because NATO troops intervened quickly, because they were stationed near Kukës, and I did this. And I also held a diary for the five days I spent here, I have published it in one of my books, I have published it at that time in the press, in Pristina press and Tirana press.

⁶¹ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful Albanian term for an older person.

⁶² Yugoslav car brand, FIAT-based. These cars were used by the police at the time.

I guess I published the diary in the fifth anniversary of the bombings, and the article “*Një ditë në Kosovën e lirë*,” I have published it right after I returned, I mean it was published in full four pages of *Koha Ditore* together with some photographs. Aside from writing, I think that we, the intellectuals of Kosovo, should’ve done more, we haven’t left enough testimony, including myself. I can say that I left some testimony, I also articulated this in my poems, but even before, even later on, also in articles such as, “*Si ai*” [Just like him], in full detail. There I spoke, you know, about my whole journey and the meetings and particular cases of what people had experienced. As you all know, I mean there are many cases in the same family in Peja, especially the Balaj family, I have written about it. The paralyzed old woman laying in bed, the Serbian police and paramilitary forces who didn’t shoot her but went around her with an automatic gerrrrr {onomatopoeic}, they did such games, this is what they did, they raped, they robbed, they killed, I have [Testimonies].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Are they in writing or oral?

Agim Vinca: Oral, oral, because we did not have anything else. Oral from the family members left alive, but I have their names, I know the name of the family, it was the Balaj family. I mean, in Kosovo the houses along the street were attacked first. As it is the tradition here, the parents of four boys built four identical houses, villas, all of them were burned down. There were no good houses at the time, there were bad ones, but this is how it happened. There was no place where you could eat in Prizren, some kebab place somewhere, and it was ten to twelve days after the NATO troops settled, of course. I did this, and it was a very good idea, with professor Jashar Gabashi, English Language professor, and with the director Atdhe Gashi who now lives in Norway. He even insisted on going to Peja to see if the house of his daughter who was living in London was burned down, it was burned down. Nobody from the neighborhood wanted to take him there, he was disabled, he had suffered an accident and I said, “I will take you.” And we went together.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have any footage of it?

Agim Vinca: No, we have no footage at all.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah, no.

Agim Vinca: There were no cell phones back then, there is no footage.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Since he was a director, I thought you might’ve documented it in that way.

Agim Vinca: Ah, no. He went there to see whether his daughter’s house was burned down. He asked a guy, he asked another, I said, “I will take you.” I was personally motivated to go. On the way it happened that we took KLA soldiers, young boys in uniforms, and we talked to them, we asked for their opinion, I also talked there about problematic political clashes, of course. But I guess I should’ve

done more, I should've done more, and it's not too late, better late than never, like this. This is it for today, because I talked too much.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes. Thank you!