**‘Live to tell’**

**Betim Berisha talks about life before and after the massacre where his loved ones were killed.**

**Transcript**

**Betim [00:26]**: I am Betim Berisha from Suhareka. A family member of missing people from the Suhareka Massacre. I am 39 years old. My father, brother, and mother are missing. My brother was 12 years old at the time. We are still hoping that one day their remains will rest in peace where they deserve to and where they belong.

**[01:01]** Our house is located in Suhareka, Rishtani street. I have lived in that house since I was born. It is behind the bus station. My father was named Avdi and they have nicknamed him, as they usually do in our region, Dushi. His occupation was as a medical technician. He worked until the end, until the event [of the massacre], at the Health House in Suhareka.

My mother was named Fatime, she is from Suhareka [as well]. She also worked at the Health House in Suhareka until she passed away at the massacre.

**[02:05]** We had a good life, a calm life in our immediate family. I also had a brother. We were a small, four-member family and we lived in normal living conditions for the time back then.

**[02:22]** My brother’s name was Kushtrim. He was younger than me, we had an age difference of 6 years. At the time he was in primary school, I was in high school in Prizren. Thus, most of the time I was separated from them during the period I was in high school. Even though we lived in a provincial mentality, we were equal, there was no difference between the older and the younger, we lived normally. There were no such differences.

We had a very good relationship as brothers since he was younger than me. We couldn’t have had any sorts of problems or conflicts since we had a large age difference, 6 years so we didn’t have such conflicts that kids of the same age usually have.

**[03:36]** My passion to become a shepherd began because my grandfather had a herd of sheep and when I was in 2nd or 3rd grade I started helping him. Until the 8th grade, at the end of primary school, I took care of them. Then, because I did not have the means to take care of them at home, we sent them to a village where I went and visited them. I had them until the end of the war, and after that, I did not look into what happened.

To this day, I feel pleasure when I think about that part of my life. Even though there were issues from my family because it was a bother to keep them. But I lived that experience, and I feel proud when I look back at my life and remember that I took care of [the sheep].

I didn’t keep them for material gain, I kept those 10-12 sheep because I enjoyed it. I didn’t materially benefit from them, no milk, no lambs. It was a hobby because I feel it is my life’s passion to take care of them.

**[05:20]** When my generation started to understand the relationships [between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo] began to worsen, it was the end of the ’80s. I remember when the protests started, and however insignificant the event is, I remember when we got stuck at school and our parents came to pick us up because of the tear gas. I remember that event and I think that was the beginning of when we began to understand that the relations between Albanians and Serbs would only get worse.

**[06:00]** I remember when they changed our schools because they would not let us learn at our proper schools. We had very bad conditions at the new schools but at least there they allowed us to learn there. Then, at high school in Prizren, we had continuous checks from the police because we traveled by bus and we passed the Lubishta Police Station.

There we were faced with harassment, we were beaten, they insulted us, they made us get out of the bus and then everything… They had a hatred for us simply because we were Albanians, not because we were doing anything as students. I remember this period when the relations started to get cold.

**[07:12]** At the time when the offenses started, we went away for a while, together with the family we lived in Prizren. After the end of the offenses, or so to say, the establishment of the [OSCE] Verification Mission in Kosovo, my parents and brother returned to Suhareka because they had to start working while I remained in Prizren. That was my luck because I was in Prizren during the massacre, thus, I survived. The rest of them did not have my luck because they were in Suhareka. They only returned so they could work.

**[08:04]** All those who were victims of the massacre lived in a close radius. The furthest house was the house where the OSCE mission was established, 50 meters away from my house. All I remember was that it was a situation full of tension when the decision for the mission to be removed. It was the last time I was at home that day, later my parents sent me to Prizren.

**[08:55]** My father worked at the Health House as an x-ray technician. My mother worked as a dentist’s assistant in Suhareka at the time. They worked until the end.

All I can remember about the time when the OSCE was established there, I remember from the weekends I spent at home because, for the remainder of the time, I was in Prizren. There was a dose of great relief because, near the OSCE house, there was a cafeteria, which remains — it’s called 501 — and all the workers from the diplomatic mission hung out at the cafeteria with the citizens and it gave a dose of relief. But nothing concrete, because in the surrounding villages there were continuous attacks.

But within the city, I cannot remember clearly because I did not live there at the time, however, it was a little bit calmer. But our army was located in the villages where the situation was tense.

**[10:30]** With the relocation of the OSCE mission, I had the last contact in person with my parents, we then kept in touch through the phone but I never saw them again. The [NATO] bombings started on March 24, we had contact until March 25th, and as far as I can remember Eid was on March 26. I attempted to call them but they did not answer.

**[11:35]** When we realized that they were no longer [alive], it was after the war. The massacre was talked about but because of fear, hesitation, traumas… people felt bad [to tell me about it]. Maybe they even knew but they did not want to tell, not to alarm people because they weren’t completely sure it had even happened. Most of the people said things they only heard about.

**[12:22]** The first stories about the Suhareka people started to surface when they were deported to Albania when some members of the Berisha tribe told stories. It has been a long time and I just remember that during the war, my uncles on my mother’s side lived in Suhareka near the mosque where Serbs lived nearby.

My grandfather on my mother's side was in Suhareka until June. [The massacre] was definitely known when he came to Albania, and he told his wife and his sons. He did not tell me but he knew, he realized because he had heard the Serb neighbors talking about it. But because I was young they protected me from trauma.

I turned 18 years old during the war while in Albania. After the end of the bombings, there was a period during which we did not return home. I remember Shyhrete [survivor of the massacre] came to Albania to get medical treatment. Then the Albanian press started publishing stories, the international press arrived, and we knew something had happened but we kept hoping that someone had survived.

But when we returned home, it was around June 16 or 17, my aunt's husband told us everything that had happened. He was a soldier and knew from the beginning, March 26. He had contact with Shyhrete from March 28-29 when they took her to get treatment at a KLA base. For a period after the war, he took care of me.

**[15:28]** I've lived at the same house since the house itself was not damaged, I cleaned it — the furniture had been stolen, but it was not burned — and I lived there.

It is hard. But I gathered the strength to live at home when I realized that there is no one at my uncle's [on father's side] house. Nobody had survived at another relative's house. And with the help of my friends, I lived through it. I was proud to live in that house because at least a little, I reasoned that my family gave up something for this country.

**[16:46]** Right after the end of the war, except the time I spent with my now wife, I lived with my aunt [on my father's side] for a while. Then I spent my time with friends of mine from Prizren, Orlandi, Florenti who was a classmate, Naimi with whom I now work, and Valoni who during the war was in the diaspora. We are connected among us and they gave me the motive to move forward and forget the past. The past cannot be forgotten but they pushed me to work, to create a family, to simply move forward.

To this day I continue to have a good relationship with all those who I mentioned, they are an inseparable part of my life. Maybe we created a good relationship because we were in the same classroom. But they are also inspired by my life because they never heard me complain about what happened. We have a healthy family and we continue to work. These are inseparable parts of my life since the end of the war.

**[18:55]** In specific cases such as anniversaries, I mention it [the massacre] — even though I work with Naim and I’ve told him during anniversaries I will not come to work — but he doesn’t ask, and I don’t talk about it. I think this method [of coping] is healthier and more reasonable, for me to deal with the future, not the past. Why? I believe it is better because in such a way I managed to raise my family, so my parents know that they left someone behind.

**[20:09]** With the energy I gained after the war, now that I am a parent myself — even though the past cannot be forgotten — in 2019 I told my children about what happened to me, even though they had heard from others, but never before from me. My son is now 12 years old and this year, for the first time, I told him about what happened to us during the war. I believe they waited for a long time for me to tell them and I thought it reasonable for them to know.

**[21:20]** I believe there will never be justice or payment for the damages they have caused. But, should we move forward? We should. From my point of view, I am not impacted by politics and the solutions they offer. In the end, it is our choice. We expected a lot after the war, but I believe even the life we are living is not so bad. At least that’s how I see it.