

Outloud Podcast

The Lubeniq Massacre from the memories of a survivor

K: I am Kumrie Jahmurataj from Lubeniq. Here in our village, there have been three massacres. The first one was on May 25, 1998. The second one on April 1, 1999. On the second one, about 80 people were killed, among them my father-in-law and my husband. My father-in-law's bones were brought to the cemetery from Batajnica. When they brought them from Serbia. While we still know nothing about my husband. The third massacre happened on April 7, 1999. We were a very happy family, we had a very good living. My father-in-law worked in Germany, he was retired. We had good living conditions. Of course, we dealt with agriculture as well but we lived well.

D: This is the Outloud podcast by Kosovo 2.0.

K: May 25, 1998. Then when they attacked the village, first through grenades, they put them on the road to Decan and started to grenade the village and walked in, through the fields and the Hamza family, and everyone they caught in their homes, Hamza family was the father and his two sons, Zeqe Hamzaj... there was another one, Ali Mehaj, who was killed while returning from the mountains. He sent his family to the mountains they say, and on his way back home he was murdered by snipers. That day they came to our home as well. We had closed our yard door; usually in villages we have surrounding walls around the yard and they broke the door and came in. We were situated in the basement because of the grenades. They went straight to the home, it was two floors, they went to the top and found nothing, then they came to the basement. When they came they took my father-in-law, my husband, my brother-in-law, and my husband's uncle with his son, daughter-in-law, children, and his wife. They took his son as well and took them outside. My husband's uncle was old so they left him there. When they took them outside they put them in a line and asked for money from my father-in-law, saying give us money. He told them I have no money because I built this house, I married my sons, I do not have any. They threatened him with a knife, "If you don't give us money", we will cut your sons.

My mother-in-law put her head from the basement once, because another policeman was guarding us, and when she put her head outside to see what was happening because we could hear yelling. So they shot bullets below her to tell her to get in and not lookout. Then they took them away from the yard, outside the doors. When they left the yard, they let long automatic shots out and we thought they had executed them there. But then there were too many people and not all of them left, the others were at the house searching for something and we were not allowed to go out because of them.

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They had taken them to the main street, which is the road to Decan, and they took them there; on the way there they had asked for money from my father-in-law again, they took his wallet and some money he had with him. My father-in-law told us that that saved them, he asked for his wallet back, but he was told he wouldn't need it anymore; knowing that they would be executed then.

But luckily the day they were sent there, the main person in charge there let them go and told them to go home. After they started to come home, they told them they had to still hide somewhere because many were coming from the village and they thought some of them let us go, the others may kill us. They survived that day, when they came inside, of course, the village calmed a bit and they went out to see what was happening. The news had spread that they were executed, the Hamza family. That night was a great terror at the village; a great terror. All night long, we, the uncle, and an aunt and neighbor - their house was burned down so they stayed in our basement; none of us slept but we just stayed up until the morning.

During the night we could hear cars, people were leaving the village, many of them. The men left then and took the corpses and took them to the mosque that night. In the morning my father-in-law told us to take the children and leave, if you can go to Peja go, if you can go anywhere in the fields, leave the house. He and my mother-in-law stayed at home. We left from the four houses, as we were together; we left together, we went one street down the main one and continued walking and went to Peja by foot. When we went there we went to the people we knew, we stayed there. After a while, we got back together and we stayed in Peja for seven weeks. After seven weeks, my father-in-law came at night from Peja to the village here because we had cows here and he felt bad, he said he would leave the water running; he had already done that but the door was closed. But when he'd go back, the faucet was turned off because every day the Serbs controlled to check if they could find somebody.

When they attacked the *Logje*, because they came for *Logja*, in Peja. When it was attacked, we were threatened to stay even there. We went to Montenegro. We left by bus, and the men followed by foot through the mountains. In the summer of 1998 we left, around July 17 I think and on the way to Montenegro, when we went beyond Peja, in Saminovova where there was the police station, they stopped us and the bus driver, the conductor, they had told us, because they knew, if we could take them to Rozhaja. They told us that if they ask us, tell them we are going to Mitrovica because the road beyond Istog was blocked. They stopped us and did not ask where we were going, they asked for our documents. But one of the policemen who stopped us was probably from Lubeniq. I did not know him because I was not originally from Lubiniq. Because when he took my ID and asked where I live in Lubeniq; I tried to explain it to him, near the mosque I said. He turned to me "What house? Your house was burned down. Where is your husband?" Because he asked where he was before I said at home. He knew there was nobody in the village, he said your house was burned down and your husband was killed. And then he went to my mother-in-law and asked her where her son was. She did not understand him, I translated, she said at home. He got angry at us as well.

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There were two of them, one on the top floor of the bus the other on the lower. The one near us was late talking to 3-4 people, the other one checked the rest of the bus. Then they let us go. We went and stayed in Montenegro until the beginning of November. When OSCE came then and started calling out because it is safe now, nobody will bother you, we will protect you. They told us, whoever lived then knows. The Bosnians warned us not to return because this is what they did in Bosnia, as well. But your place calls for you so we returned, we came back. We did the traditions at home as we could, my father-in-law would leave and go to Peja. When he did he was maltreated on the bus, by words not physically. When he would come back and I asked how did you get back, he would say I came back today as well.

I also went out to finish some services because my husband did not leave at the time. Because it was a practice at that time for cars and uniforms to pick up people on the street and they would be found dead somewhere. Nobody would know who picked them, the young men were not allowed to go out freely. And as such, the days passed by. On April 1, before that, they started killing, murdering in Peja. Peja was emptied before our village. Then we knew they would attack; we knew because we could see what they were doing.

They had planned to take the men through the mountains to Montenegro before April 1, and for us to leave by trucks to go to Albania. But then the men left; it was snowing quite a lot. They all stayed in the mountains for two days in a cabin and then two or three men of the village returned and let us know that they could not go any further because there was too much snow. They could not tell which roads they could walk and which were unworkable because of the snow. Then all the parents asked for their sons to come back down.

Then they came back from the mountain, as if it happened this morning, the next morning we were surrounded. And when they surrounded the village, they shotguns from all sides, it was full of smoke. Then we started to leave with our children. When we went down the road we saw that they were separating the men from the women, and my husband was stuck there. I went with the women and my two children, my mother-in-law, my unmarried sister-in-law, we went to the other side. I kept looking back at the crowd and up until some point I could see my husband but then there were too many people and I did not know where he was anymore. When the group of people who were coming was there, they told us to start walking because they just wanted to check them for something. We started walking, on the way, before getting to the main road to Decan, a truck full of soldiers came and again told the group of people to walk toward Decan.

We started walking toward Decan; we did not get far when we heard some long gunshots and there we thought that they were now executed. Later, three villagers who they had let go came, and they caught up with us. They told us to walk because the rest will come as well. The entire time we walked with the hope that they would catch up and join us.

On the way, we had children, we had elders, we were tired, there was a car following us the entire time. There were five-month children, there were young children. But, then they would not even let us rest each time they saw us trying to sit, they told us to continue walking. We walked

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as such. The night fell before we reached Gjakova; we passed through there in the dark. As I remember, it was dark and I think near the previously burned Bazaar, we walked on glass. It was dark everywhere except for a bar where there were lights turned on, there were songs playing. They were probably preparing because that night there was a large massacre in Gjakova; And they were entertaining themselves, preparing to be in a better mood, as they were. And we walked quietly so they would not notice us, we passed them. The entire village was there, we went all together up to Gjakova.

Whoever was at the head of the group, at the exit of Gjakova, they were told not to go toward the border because it's night and you will get killed but they told us to go to a village, I do not remember it, to pass the night. There was a burned school I think there when we went there, we arrived at around 9. When we went there it was not clean to go inside and sit, it did not seem proper so we went out to the field and we all sat on bags, some people laid the children on the ground so they could sleep; because those who had more children did not have another way. I and my mother in law put our children to sleep on our stretched legs. But for our luck, heavy rain started and we had to get up, take the children and enter the place we did not like at first; we sat there and stayed until the morning; of course, nobody managed to sleep. When the morning came, we got back on our way. Someone knew the road. We left through Qafa e Prushit to Albania, and we started walking but when morning came my mother-in-law could no longer walk; because for the elder it was a long road since we had walked all day; she could no longer stand up straight. Then, I had some clothes I had taken for my sons and husband, thinking still that he would catch up with us, I threw away all the clothes because I was scared my mother-in-law would be left behind. And I told my sister-in-law to take my children and not to separate from the villagers, wherever they go, you go, I will catch up wherever you are. Because we were left behind, we walked 5 steps and then had to sit back down. My husband's uncle's wife was old as well, she couldn't walk either. They would sit and I would wait for them. When we were almost at the border because a villager was on a field, and the men asked him if we were near and he said yes.

The soldiers stopped us before we got to the border, they turned us around "Come, we will drive you there, you don't need to walk" and they walked us into a field. When we went there, they had put refugees there before as well, there were small mattresses and plastics to cover up when it rained, who knows. And there they asked for our documents, anything we had on us from Yugoslavia, to give them in if we did not want to be checked by them because if they found them, it would be worse. Then we handed in the IDs and children's documents, certificates... we gave them in order not to be checked or something.

But at the time, they were coming from Gjakova. They said the entire city had left, it was a long column of people. That night there was a large massacre, I think that was the night they killed the children - the ones they all killed in one room. We were there the previous night so it was April 2. We were at the field, and a large column of people was coming from Gjakova. The soldiers were then telling us, they started putting the rest at the field as well, and told us from

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Lubeniq to leave. Of course, the people from Gjakova were trying to leave as well. It was a mess there, they took us to another field and told us not to walk.

At some point, they told us to start walking two by two because there are mines everywhere and you cannot roam free. We then started walking. That's when I told my sister-in-law to take my children, not earlier. I told her not to separate. I stayed behind with my mother-in-law and uncle's wife. The column came by and passed us, but there were so many people it did not end. At some point, two or three tractors carried some sick people. Then another tractor came by, and my mother-in-law and uncle's wife were tired so I got in front of the tractor. He asked what I wanted, I told him to take the two older women; he said he would take one of them. I said they cannot be separated, my mother-in-law got on and he started driving the tractor quickly. I told the uncle's wife, you grab on because I will not let go of you. As he was driving as fast as he could, because he found it funny if she would fall, he did not find it a big deal. I then managed to put her on as well. Then the other travelers told me to go with them and not let them alone. I then grabbed on at the end of the tractor and we then went to the border with them. We did not pass then until my sister-in-law and children came along and we got together.

When we went to the other side; they did not bother us at the border, they of course had information about what happened. They only asked if someone had taken gold from us or something else, let us know because we can bring them back. We knew that was nothing, but we went to the other side. We spent two nights at a nearby school near Qafa e Prushit. There were many refugees there; there were a few from the village so we decided wherever we would go we would go together. More or less, we knew each other. They said they had called someone, trucks came by and brought stuff. On the third day we started walking, we went to Kruma e Hasit on foot. We spent another night at a school.

I forgot to mention that during the road, that's when I realized that you do not get hungry for food at all. But wherever we saw a drop of water, our throats would get dry. We all went together; the more we walked the thirstier we got, you apparently need it a lot. You could live with no food, you don't know how to get hungry, not when you are sad.

When we went to Kruma e Hasit, then the children got hungry as well. Because at the previous school we had no bread, they brought some strong bread but it was so tough you could not bite it. There were some cookies, but we ran out, there was no bread. One day, the bakery baked bread three times, we did not manage to get at least two loaves of bread for the children because there were too many people and then a cousin of my husband's who had accidentally survived came with us. He was married. And we went with them by the evening to see if there were any shops, thinking like we were used at shops where there is bread, we kept asking and being told no.

At one shop, once it got dark - I want to mention a good deed of a woman, that's why I am telling this. He told us, we don't have any. After we left, a young man followed and asked if we were many people. We told him we had some children, and we were not hungry but the children

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had not eaten for a while. He said we have some refugees at home but come with me and if there is bread there, you can take it. Then I was thinking, he was such a good man, we went through a dark road with no fear that something might happen. When we went we could hear noise, because they were hosting 15 people from Prizren. He went in and told the lady of the house about us and that's where I know that she gave it full-heartedly - we did not hear her say no at all. She came out and gave us bread, she gave us a few onions, some salt, and some sugar so we would have it. We took it, the young man walked us to the school where we were staying. Then we fed the children, they strengthened, we spent the night at the school benches. The next day, with two trucks that had probably brought flour, the men of the village talked to them and we loaded on the two trucks and went away.

When we left, at first we did not know, up until 3 AM we did not arrive there. Once we did, we realized that the first truck was on a road between Durres and Tirana where there was an Italian camp, I am not sure where it was located at the time. The people of our village were stopped there. We told the driver to stop us there as well, but he went a bit further because he could not stop right there. While we were getting down, he got stopped by the police and asked why he was letting us out there. They told him to take us to a depo there, he took us to the four roads of Shijak - a small road, a broken building, but so to spend the night there. In the morning we got up, we left to go where we had seen the villagers previously. People from a neighborhood there got out and told us to stay with them. But we were afraid, we were many people, we did not have our men with us, so we just wanted to get there. We went where the others from our village were and spent the day there.

From when they had attacked us the first year, some cousins of my husband, two brothers, Rama and Neziri, had gone to Albania in 1998 because Nezir was shot and they were situated there. They had heard what had happened in Lubeniq and went out looking for us. They heard what had happened and near the evening they found us at the field we were staying at. They came and picked us up with a truck and took us to the house where they were staying. We were quite a few people, we were some families, not just one, a few from the neighborhood. They then gave us food, they set up their own beds for us to sleep, they did not have a place to lay down themselves so they stayed up until the next day.

There was a refugee camp being built nearby by the Italians near Mali i Robit. We went there the next day and were situated at the camp. Five nights later, we managed to lay down for the night, in a tent it seemed like we were laying our feet in a hotel room because our bodies were locked in by staying uncomfortable, and we stayed at the camp until the time came to return.

D: When did you get the first information?

K: The first news, to tell you the truth, we knew what had happened. We knew that it is difficult for someone to survive. But all the time, whoever you talked to, they would say that people were hiding somewhere. But until we came back here I hoped that they are somewhere, I thought maybe they were stranded somewhere under a shelter. My brother from Switzerland had sent

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me some documents to join him with my children. But at the time, until I put together all the documents, Serbia had given in and the agreement was reached for us to return. Then I no longer wanted to go. Because I thought that they might be alive, and I felt as if I was running away from them, and I wanted to return.

The day we returned, we left on July 1 evening. On July 2, at 10:00 we arrived at the village. The road from the asphalt was full of grass because no one was walking it. When we went to the place where they were executed, there was no grass there. Bags, jackets, shoes, matches.... Hats, who knows how they removed them when they removed the corpses. How the things were left behind, blankets... but no grass, there was no grass because of the blood.

Then we went to the house. When we went there, there were two thorns growing on the door. My mother in law, ironically plucked them and asked "What do you want here"? We got in, the house was burned down. We climbed up to the ceiling just to check, through the ruins, through the yard, through the well which was in the yard if we could find something. How can I say, as if they were hiding and we were looking for them everywhere. The evening came, we had arrived at around 10:00 and forgot that we had to enter and sleep inside at some point, we were not prepared to spend the night somewhere. We were lost.

Then when the evening came we entered, because the first floor was not fully burned. They probably, in order to burn the houses, had thrown something, it seemed the walls were wet with something but the first floor did not burn down; the doors were burned in the first floor as well, but the walls were okay. The second floor was all burned down, the ceiling, roof and all. Then we laid down at some point, we had some clothes to lay down. We went to bed, we got up the next day, again the same. The children went outside all day looking at what was happening. They were crying, not knowing what was happening. They were all cutting the grass because it had grown; my 9-year-old son Faruk took the mower but we were afraid of mines or something. Then I took it from him, even though I did not know how to use it but only wanted to open a road so to walk. I told him to give it to me, what are you doing? He said I want to mow because there is no one else here to do it. So I took it; until my cousin, Isa who had survived and had been with us came and mowed our lawn and then left and mowed his own.

Then, the hope was paling that they might be alive, it was paling because we knew what had happened. When they started to open the cemeteries in Serbia, Batajnica, in 2004 - that's when they brought the first round. Some corpses from Lubeniq were there. In June 2004, my father-in-law was found there as well. And that day, when we heard about him, it seemed as if they had killed him on that day. Even though we had no hope he was alive, they had vanished, but we hoped we could find them somewhere. It all turns back, it feels as if they killed him on this day. They did all this maltreating with a large purpose, to mistreat people badly. They still know where the rest are, but they do not tell. They know well where the rest are. Then they brought the bones, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law went to Rahovec to check on them. Because we were told before we pick them up that we can go and take a look at the corpses there. Before that my mother-in-law did not believe it, she said that they are bringing animal

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bones to deceive us, to tell us we brought them. And when they went there, when she saw it, my son Faruk told her to bring us the clothes back. When they went, my brother-in-law took one jacket even though they did not want to give it to him because they wanted to use it for a museum. He had told them that he would take it back but the children had asked for it. He worked as a policeman in Rahovec at the time. And they brought the jacket; the jacket was not rotted, it was as if it was burned in some places, it was crunchy like burned. During that winter, my father-in-law's jacket had burned on the stove and my mother-in-law had repaired it with a thick thread. And that piece had survived. And from the clothes of the grave that they found together in a place, my mother-in-law was convinced there that that was the thread she had sewn with "This ensures me these are his bones". We then returned the jacket, they just brought it. Then we held the funeral; they were buried. But until they were buried, a sort of worry was there, after they were buried there was a sort of relief. After they are buried, you know where his bones are sleeping, there is a type of relief. My mother-in-law said that if only I could see my son's bones brought, to put them in the ground here, I would have no worries left.

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