

Outloud Podcast

[Podcast]

The story of Lush Kransiqi, survivor of the Meja massacre (27.04.1999).

First: Life before the war

Lush: We are here in a hamlet, "Kodra e Hutit," part of the village of Ramoc; our village is very geographically spread. It occupies a large area, but has a small population. Regarding our life, before the war, before '99, we were a big family. We lived in complete harmony with our neighbors.

My parents, Gjoni and Maria, had 11 children, seven sons and four daughters. My father was a farmer and a builder. We grew up with slightly difficult conditions, but somehow managed to get an education. We were employed and worked in construction and agriculture at that time.

Our big brother was a rhapsodist. He was a folklorist and a singer. Obviously you cannot be a singer without being a patriot. And to be a patriot in the time of Serbia meant being the enemy; he had some confrontations with them and some short imprisonments.

The second brother had been to the High School of Machinery. He was an auto mechanic and worked in a factory in the city, Metaliku. During the war, in 1998, he became platoon commander, a commander of the tithe. The tithe, this is how it was called. Of course, after NATO started bombing, everything changed and the massacres began throughout Kosovo. I was the third brother, but now I remain the eldest in the family.

Second: The round-up

Lush: In general, until the 90s, and particularly '98s and '99s we lived well. Then, as anywhere in Kosovo, tragedies started to happen in our place as well. The biggest was on April 27, 1999, when close to 25 villages, starting in Junik, Reka e Keqe..., all the way to Gjakova, were surrounded on all sides by the Army and Police. The Army had stayed mainly in mountainous areas, with the purpose of expelling everyone, all inhabitants of these villages and to do an ethnic cleansing, as we all know.

The massacre of April 27, 1999, took place on a Tuesday, it was one of the biggest in Kosovo. Then comes the massacre of Krusha e Madhe, then Lubeniq, Izbica, and so on. What made this one special is that a week before, here in a village below, in Meja, four officers of the Yugoslav Secret Service, UDBA, were killed.

A week later, the Serbian Army and Police executed a classic revenge operation and avenged 100 for one. Because four of them were killed that day, a week later 377 Albanians were killed, of course, innocent civilians. Then those successive tragedies began.

We were around 50 family members, waiting, as was the norm, to be kicked out of our homes, something that happened around 7 p.m. on April 27, 1999. One of my brothers, Pashku, the older, lived in the city, but came here because he thought it was safer. However, instead of finding safety, he was lucky enough to be seized. We were surrounded by the Yugoslav Army. It was the regular Army and they divided us. First, the family men. There were about 15 male members over 15 years old. There were verbal threats and insults, but I cannot say that they treated us badly, considering how they could have treated us. They killed another villager here in our yard. He was a guest at that moment, Pjetër Marashi.

When we were surrounded, he was a guest. After seeing the Serbs, he fled. While attempting to leave, they shot him, killing him. And then after an hour of having us surrounded, the commander of that army unit called someone. I know Serbian very well and he said: "I have a number of people here. Shall I shoot them?"

I do not know what the other replied to him, but after that he smirked. They did not let us take anything with us, no bread, no water, no baby clothes, nothing... They did not even let me free my cattle, because it was already locked inside... They just told us that "you have to go to Koronica," and Koronica is about 5 km from here. "There will be a verification whether you have dealt with arms and tomorrow you will be returned home." It was just an excuse, not to unsettle us while driving us away, but at the last moment they separated three of my relatives from the group of men: uncle Peter and my brothers Pashku and Mark. They had another captive with them; we later found out that it was Hysen Dragani, from Skivjan, a nearby village, who we later found out had the same fate as my brothers. He was killed in the same place, transferred to Batajnica and later in 2005 returned and reburied in the cemetery at Meja.

Third: The expulsion

Lush: After they took them and went in the opposite direction, they forced us to load on the tractors of the neighbors and take the road to Albania, to move and to leave our homes, and so it happened.

At that time it started getting darker. It was after sunset when we hit the road.

We were close to 100 people with two tractors in the column, as many as there were here [in the village] back then. At that hour there were not many columns marching, since most of the expulsions took place in the morning, while in our case it was late in the evening.

On the way to Koronica we went through two police checkpoints. One of them had three or four policemen that robbed us right in our tractors, taking any money, gold, etc. Then, some 200 meters beyond that, we were stopped again by a group of policemen who only IDed us. They only held us for about 10-15 minutes before letting us continue our way. So we continued, joining about another hundred that had been expelled. We went on and stayed for a week in the house

of some brothers of our cousins. A lot of people in Kosovo had to stay those days with some relatives, and so did we.

Then we moved to another village, where we stayed until June 11, the day Kosovo was liberated. Only then we had the chance, the opportunity, to return to our homeland, to our hearth, where unfortunately everything was burned and destroyed. Even worse, back then we did not know about the fate of the three relatives that had been killed.

Fourth: Understanding the fate of our relatives

Lush: There was a lot of misinformation, not only during the war, when everything was unclear, but even after Kosovo was liberated, people still thought they were alive, maybe kept prisoners somewhere. There was no information, but misinformation.

Thankfully, in the cases in my family, we started finding a lot of clues right away. They pointed at them having been killed.

We found a witness, a Roma man who worked in a municipal company in Çabra dealing with funerals and burials who was tasked by the police to go to the forest to get them, to the scene where they were killed. To take the four persons. He got them with a Lada, the Lada Niva was a vehicle used often to transport coffins, employed in funeral services; regular, public services. And there, according to the witness, according to the Roma, he took them himself, two at once and then the other two, and buried them in the cemetery of Koronica.

He recognized them because my older brother was a familiar face.

When we went to the scene where they were murdered, we found many marks, we found a sweater, cigarette butts, a shoehorn, bullet casings, my brother's pair of shoes. It was very likely, almost proven, that they were killed there. This belief got stronger when he took us to the cemetery where he had buried them. There we found the pair of shoes of my other brother in a pile of around 40 more. Also one of my uncle's shoes. So, there we had a connection, a continuation of the tragic event that made us realize they were dead.

After he took them to the cemetery in Koronica, the village's cemetery, he buried them there, of course under the pressure of the Police and the Army. After that came the order from the Supreme Leader of Serbia to clear the ground from corpses because there was an order or a rule... There was an international rule that "if there is no corpse, there is no crime." Based on this, the Milosevic dictatorship, considering that "if there is no corpse, there is no crime," took that step and nearly 900 corpses were exhumed and sent to Serbia. These are those whose fate is still unknown.

Fifth: The reconstruction of the massacre

Lush: There were two points in Meja. The operation took the form of a horseshoe, like the shape of a U. Three sides were blocked, so that the whole population could be oriented in the direction chosen. To execute some kind of murder, some kind of massacre. Now we will visit the part down there, where it is thought that some 200 people may have been killed in one place,

those that were separated from their family. They were gathered and got killed, every now and then in the cruelest forms, most through a classic shooting. There are some special cases that might have been killed in their homes and then burned.

But most, in the hundreds, were killed at those two points. And those were the final points. Those who lived are whoever managed to avoid them. No one who ended up there has survived. We don't have any living witnesses of the massacre, not a single one from the 377 who were stopped there. None survived.

Around 30 bodies were found in the fields, in houses, while some 320 were found in two mass graves of Batajnica, BA03 and BA05. In BA2, another mass grave, all the bodies came from Meja, without mixing with corpses coming from other massacres. At the same time, in yet another mass grave, BA05 they found corpses from Meja, from the Massacre of Gjakova, from Çabrat, Lubeniq and Krusha e Madhe. It seems that, after closing BA02 — just one of the graves — they opened another and filled it with corpses coming from anywhere they had bodies. However, BA02 was entirely filled with the slain in Meja.

The overall number of deads in Meja for which we have records is 377.

Among them, three women; an old woman, one middle-aged and a girl.

However, we still have some information that, since this was a very large area they cordoned off, there were other people present who were not residents here and, since we don't know that they were here, are not in our statistics. The area was heavily populated and many people fled here before we were expelled. So, there may have been people from Drenica, from Rahovec, people we don't know existed and that might have been killed here and we still do not know. The final list of 377 covers the municipalities of Deçan, Junik and Gjakova.

Sixth: Post-war — The return of corpses

Lush: The association was created immediately after the war, seeing that people already started to search where their family members had remained. We noticed that everyone had someone missing, a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, so we gathered and saw that we needed a common circle to walk through it, or seeking something together, so we formed the Association. We named it after the day of the massacre, April 27, 1999, and after the place where the crime took place, which was Meja. Then we found out there was little information, to this day we know very little even though this massacre was done from higher levels of Serbian government.

Obviously, there were protests at first, requests and discussions with UNMIK at that time, with KFOR, etc., etc. However, the first results, the first identification, even the first piece of information we got regarding one or two of these 377 missing persons came from the Hague Tribunal.

The Tribunal conducted an exhumation in Batajnica, near Belgrade, in the shooting range of the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, the SAJ as it's called in Serbian. Normally no one has access to these ranges, but the Tribunal found evidence there, along with the bodies, they got some ID

cards in 2000/2001. All of that was documented in The Hague. From that we found out that the ID card of x person was found in the mass grave of Batajnica. Not having any other information, we figured out that some of the bodies of Meja may be in Batajnica.

Also, on May 23, 2003 the first Contingent of missing persons identified in Serbia arrived. On that date we buried 29 bodies that had been identified in Meja's cemetery. The handover took place in Merdare; the corpses were brought and handed over by Serbian pathologists. I have been there 19 times, both in the name of the association and personally. We got there the names of those identified, and then we, the families, organized the funerals.

We had to deliver the information about any missing person to the head of the family. It was very difficult, sometimes one family had seven or eight persons missing. And if one came, we had to remain discreet about the other seven or eight, according to the needs and requests of the family. It was a very tense situation, but we managed to cooperate and reach a common understanding. That allowed us to be as well-organized as possible for the wait and the formal reception there in Merdare, and then the re-identification.

In those 19 times that corpses were delivered, the Kosovo Protection Corps (TKK) had already been formed, so they arranged honors and transportation to the morgue in Rahovec. Re-identification happened there, and then the corpse was handed over, with a relative signing the corresponding document of receipt. After that, the organization of burials was up to them. They decided whether to bury them individually or as a group, with the KPC providing transport for the last homage, until the coffin was placed in the grave. It was a great pain, but thankfully those who found their family members are in a much more favorable situation. However, 20 years later there are still families waiting to find their relatives and in a very hard position.

As for my family, the three corpses did not come at once. Two came in 2004, while the other brother came in March 2005. In that contingent there were another 16 identified persons. I, both personally and on behalf of the Association, decided to bury them on the sixth anniversary of the massacre. We buried them on April 27, 2005, on the sixth anniversary of their deaths on April 27, 1999.

When we had the commemoration of the event, we used the moment to give the families some relief, to come both to honour and to bury their people. We even had the honor that some women from Srebrenica were there that day. And that was one of the biggest massacres in the Balkans, with 8,000 killed. My family hosted some of them. Of course, that brought great pain. We also had DioGuardi that day, Joseph DioGuardi, who called Meja the Srebrenica of Kosovo in a public speech.

So, the first contingent was in 2003, while the last contingent was... Of course with one or two that were identified, because there have been cases that up to 45 we have buried at once. In the last three to four years we have had no identifications. However, since out of the 377 there are 16 left without identification, we can call it a success. In fact, this phenomenon is never solved 100 percent. The problem of the missing has not been fully solved in any country of the world.

Seventh part: The remembrance

Lush: When we received the corpses in Merdare, we discussed what we were going to do with the clothes, with the personal belongings that were found on the bodies... Some of them were returned from Serbia. The relatives, me personally but the Association as well, decided not to bury them, but to leave them for a museum in the future.

We are very dissatisfied with the treatment of the clothes and corpses that were found in Serbia.

So we agreed that they should be part of history, historical memory. Meanwhile, the state has not shown any consideration for them.

I have here the shoes of my two brothers. I left those we found here in the bedroom, but we left those who came from Serbia somehow at the service of the state. We thought the State might be interested in them, so that the next generation could see what happened with a piece of Kosovo's painful history.

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