

Seeking Freedom Amid Ruins

**A Narrative of the Life and Work of
Shukrije Gashi of Kosovo**

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Acronyms

CDHRF	Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms
HPD	Housing and Property Directorate (UN-HABITAT)
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IFOR	Implementation Force
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
LDK	League for a Democratic Kosovo
LRSHJ	Movement for an Albanian Republic within Yugoslavia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SFOR	Stabilization Force
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administrative Mission in Kosovo

Just a Child

One November evening in 1968, eight-year-old Shukrije, or Shuki, overheard her grandmother discussing with Shuki's father a demonstration planned in the city. Her grandmother, tall and elegant, wore her long, curly hair free, or sometimes in a ponytail. Shuki overheard mumblings about a change to a constitution, a word she was hearing for the first time. She asked her grandmother what a constitution was, who then looked down at her kindly and told her she was too young to understand what was going on. She sent Shuki off to play with her siblings in the yard.

One evening later that week, the young girl snuck into the living room and hid behind the television to hear her grandmother discussing the demonstration again. She told Shuki's father she would open the door when the visitors arrived. Excited by the news and curious who the visitors were, Shuki found it hard to go to sleep that night. After days of eavesdropping on the conversations, she was not going to miss the big day. When the doorbell rang at six o'clock in the morning, she crept down the stairs to see who was there. Hiding so no one would see her, Shuki peeped out as her grandmother opened the main door, let in two men, and led them to the carpentry workshop.

Shuki's father owned the workshop, a small room in the house where he made furniture. Sometimes on the weekends Shuki helped him with simple tasks like varnishing the wood or handing him his tools. But this morning was a school day and she was not expected in the workshop. She quietly followed the visitors as they made their way to the room. Staying in the shadows, she saw her father rise from his workbench when the men entered. He opened a trunk, retrieved a neatly folded red cloth, and handed it to the men. Shuki forgot she was eavesdropping and spoke up, "What are you carrying, father?"

She startled everyone. Her father asked her what she was doing up so early in the morning, and Shuki replied that she could not sleep. He told her to go and prepare for school, but she insisted on knowing what he was carrying. Her father sighed and said, “It’s our flag.”¹

Her grandmother scolded him for telling Shuki, just a child, about the flag. She patted Shuki’s shoulder and sent her off, but the little girl lingered in the hallway to hear her grandmother utter something about the big demonstration in Prishtina, before her voice died out.

A few days later, Shuki stood in the doorway of her house, waving as the demonstrators marched by. Some waved back, but others told her to stay in the house, as her mother had also demanded. Shuki reluctantly obeyed and went upstairs to the second floor to join her sisters and brothers at the window, staring down at the sea of people in the street below. The Kosovo Albanians were demonstrating peacefully, demanding that their province be proclaimed a republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY),² and that Kosovo be granted its own Albanian-language university, rather than a provincial branch of the University of Belgrade. Some more radical demonstrators sang pro-Tirana songs and shouted slogans demanding that Kosovo be united with Albania.³ Shuki recognized the red flag her father had revealed to her in the workshop. The demonstrators sang even more loudly as they came face to face with the Yugoslav police, who then sprayed teargas into the crowds. Shuki watched the people crashing into each other as they tried to disperse. Her mother ordered the children to move away from the window and do their homework.

¹ The flag depicts a double-headed eagle in black against a red background. It is the official national flag of Albania. Kosovo Albanians use the same flag for Kosovo.

² The SFRY, now referred to as the former Yugoslavia, was composed of six republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. It also included two provinces located within the territory of Serbia: Vojvodina in the north and Kosovo in the south.

³ Belgrade is the capital city of Serbia, and at the time, was the capital of the SFRY. Tirana is the capital city of Albania, which borders Kosovo.

Later that evening, there was a pounding on the front door. Shuki perched at the top of the stairs, wanting to see who was knocking. The lights in the house, like the other houses in the neighborhood, were off. Shuki made out the forms of six men, one of whom was carrying the Albanian flag. Despite the darkness, Shuki recognized her cousin, bleeding from his left ear. Supported on each arm by a friend, her cousin headed to her father's workshop, the young girl tiptoeing behind them. From the shadows she watched them clean her cousin's wound and crept into the room to get a better view. Again forgetting she was supposed to be hiding, she asked her grandmother what happened to her cousin. Her grandmother sent her away again, telling her she would understand the significance of the day when she was older.

Stomping off to her room, Shuki was angry with everyone for not answering her questions. Her sister soon found her on the bed crying, and consoled her by explaining that the family loved her, but she was just too young to understand the day's events.

Hearing voices from the living room later that night, she rolled out of bed and went downstairs. The living room was crowded with familiar faces—the extended family was gathered at the house, as Shuki's father was the eldest and there were important events to discuss. They began talking about the day, but kept the lights in the house off, not wanting to attract the police. Tucked behind the sofa, Shuki listened as her cousins recounted the story of a little girl who had been wounded. She heard the pride in their voices as they spoke, amazed at the little girl's courage to march in the front line carrying the Albanian flag in the face of the police. Shuki leaned into the sofa and imagined herself in the midst of all the people, waving the flag proudly.

Family History

Born in 1960, the fourth child in a family of eight, Shukrije Gashi was raised in a large, influential Albanian family in Kosovo. As a child, Shuki learned of the Albanian struggle in Kosovo primarily through her family. Kosovo Albanians, who were primarily Muslim as a result of 500 years of rule by the Ottoman Empire, sought freedom from the oppression of both the Ottoman Empire and Serb governments; the latter had ruled Kosovo since 1913. Kosovo was considered the spiritual homeland of the Serbian Orthodox Church and contains religious relics treasured by Christian Serbs, but Albanians believe they are descendants of the ancient inhabitants of the Balkan region, the Illyrians. With both ethnicities claiming rights to the territory, the powerful Serb regime discriminated against and subjugated the local Albanians. The young Shuki would sit on the balcony on the second floor of her house and listen to her grandmother tell stories of the Albanian struggle and sing Albanian revolutionary songs while she knitted. Shuki's favorite was the tune about Mic Sokoli, an Albanian national hero who fought in the nineteenth century against the Ottoman Empire.

Broadcasts and information from Albania were prohibited in the 1960s and 1970s in Yugoslavia,⁴ but many Kosovo Albanians identified with the country as the motherland. With the volume low, Shuki's mother listened to Radio Tirana, broadcast from the Albanian capital. Shuki absorbed the pain of the struggle when her mother would cry silently. As melancholic songs about Albania were played on the radio, tears would slide down her mother's cheeks. When asked, her mother said her tears were for her dead mother. Years later, however, she revealed the real reason she cried. As a two-and-half-year-old child, the Serb police, or žandari in

⁴ Albania was ruled at the time by Enver Hoxha, whose communist ideology closely followed that of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia was controlled by Josip Broz Tito, also communist, but he had broken ties with Moscow in the late 1940s. Albania and Yugoslavia had extremely tense and often hostile relations during this time.

Serbian, killed her father and stabbed two of her uncles; two days later, they forced her and her cousins to watch as they beat her uncles to death.

Shuki's grandmother, Zahide—a leading mediator known among Albanians from two provinces in Kosovo, Gollap and Llap—was a present fixture in Shuki's childhood, “a strong, powerful woman with a presence.”⁵ Zaha, as everyone fondly called her, had beautiful eyes and an elegant walk. She always wore a smile and never turned anyone away who came to the Gashi household.

Zaha's interest in mediation was influenced by a family tragedy in the 1920s. The žandari abducted her sixteen-year-old brother and tortured him. He was put in a sack, along with a cat; the sack was then hung on a pole. The police hit the sack many times, and with each swing, the frightened cat scratched the boy. When Zaha's brother was finally released, he disappeared and was never heard from again. The loss of her youngest brother challenged Zaha to confront the authorities about the wrongs of their activities. Later, she married a trader who had also suffered at the hands of the ruling Serbs: he survived imprisonment for teaching the Albanian language, then prohibited by the government of Serbia as part of a policy of repression against the Albanians.

Shuki was fascinated by her grandmother's mediation work, which mainly involved settling blood feuds, traditional customs in Kosovo and Albania. Blood feuds refer to revenge killings or vendettas—if a member of a family is killed, the victim's family has the responsibility of killing a member of the offending family. Reciting her stories of the settlements of these serious disputes, Zaha was unaware she was sowing the seeds for a future mediator in her granddaughter.

⁵ All quotations not cited in the text or footnotes are taken from interviews with Shukrije Gashi between September 19 and October 29, 2006.

Straining Friendships

Growing up, Shuki's best friend was a Serb girl named Lila. They lived on the same street and always visited each other and shared toys. One day when the girls were about twelve, they decided to play at Lila's house and skipped the three blocks from Shuki's home. Lila dragged Shuki to her bedroom, saying she had something to show her, and then pulled an axe out from under her pillow.

"Why are you keeping an axe under your pillow?" a bewildered Shuki asked her. "It shouldn't be under the pillow. Axes are for cutting trees in the woods."

"My grandmother said that while I play with you I should never forget that you are Albanian and I should not trust you. She gave me this axe, saying I'll never know when I'll need it," Lila whispered.

Stunned and beginning to cry, Shuki ran out of Lila's room and straight to her father's workshop to tell him what her friend had said. He sat her on his lap and put his arm around her.

"Don't cry. It's not true what she said. It is just a bad dream she had. It is not true that Lila's grandmother said such things. You should go and invite her over and play together again," he said as he wiped Shuki's eyes.

He went to Lila's house to speak with her mother. She invited Shuki to their home and tried to calm her down, telling her that what Lila had told her was untrue. Still, Shuki felt something within her had changed. Whenever she saw Lila's grandmother, the greeting was now merely out of politeness.

The Danger of Love Songs

Influenced by her grandmother's voice and the songs from Radio Tirana, Shuki learned a number of Albanian folksongs. One she adored was set during a time when Kosovo and Albania were united within the Ottoman Empire. With the defeat of the empire, when Kosovo remained under Serb occupation, many Albanians were separated from each other. In the song, a young couple is separated, the young man staying in Albania while his wife is in Kosovo. They never see each other again.

One day in high school, Shuki was singing the tune in the school corridor when someone yanked her hair from behind and hissed in her ears, "Shut your mouth and never mention Albania again." She turned and was surprised to see it was a teacher of Albanian language and literature. Without thinking, Shuki slapped him. He grabbed her by the wrist, pushed her against the wall, and threatened to call the police.

Her father was summoned to school over the incident. The teacher asked him why his daughter was singing a nationalistic song, and he threatened to have Shuki expelled from school. Shuki's father expressed his surprise that a teacher of Albanian language did not know the meaning of a simple love song. In response, the teacher said he did not have to know the meaning of the song; he had already heard of the Gashi family and their political activities. Any further disturbance would endanger them.

Shuki's father went to see the school principal to have the matter solved amicably. When he translated the song, the principal promised to talk to the teacher and ensured Shuki she would not be expelled or reported to the police. He leaned over his desk and in a whisper revealed to Shuki's father that the teacher in question was not a teacher, but a spy planted by the Yugoslav

state security services in Kosovo, known as the Kosovo Provincial Secretariat for Internal Affairs, to monitor school activities.

The Key

On her eighteenth birthday while she was getting ready to go out with her friends to celebrate adulthood, Shuki's father entered her room smiling, holding his hands behind his back. He said it was a very special day in both their lives, then handed her a present. First struggling with the wrapping paper, Shuki's mouth dropped as she tore it open. She hugged him, with the key to the main door dangling in her hands.

He said, "You are now an adult and I am giving up some responsibilities. With this key, your mother and I will no longer have to stay up all night waiting to open the door for you. Now, it's time to go and celebrate with your friends. If you are not back before ten o'clock, we will go to bed."

Shuki's eyes filled with tears. Her father's gift and words were like "something knocking on my head, reminding me of the new step I had taken in life. He showed me that he trusted me and let me know that I could lead my path of freedom. With the key I could open any door."

A Beginning

One night in the late 1970s, Saime Isufi, a student of Albanian language and literature at the University of Prishtina, visited the Gashi home at the invitation of Shuki's elder sister, Nafije. Saime was involved in informal, and illegal, national and youth movements against the Serb regime both in the country and outside it, in the Albanian diaspora communities in

Switzerland and Germany.⁶ She engaged Shuki in discussions about the political situation in Kosovo, probing her thoughts on what the younger generation could do to change policy within Yugoslavia to benefit Albanians.

She asked Shuki whether she knew Nuhi Berisha, Saime's relative, also a student of law at the University of Prishtina.⁷ Shuki said she had not met him—there were 2,000 students at the university. Saime laughed and said, “You will like him when you meet him. He is a political activist, and very intelligent, handsome, and tall. You two will get along fine. With your journalistic aspirations, his opinion on some of the youth activities will be useful.”

During a class session not long after her first conversation with Saime, Shuki and her close friend, Suzana Zakuti, were debating the 1968 and 1974 Yugoslav constitutions. The constitution of 1974 had been amended by the Yugoslav government to give both the Kosovo and Vojvodina provinces autonomous status within the Yugoslav federation. Shuki, however, argued that the two constitutions were the same and that the latter was only good on paper. As they threw ideas back and forth, they noticed someone peering over their shoulders. Shuki asked the intruder whether he wanted something. He said he had overheard their conversation and liked their ideas, but Shuki was unimpressed and turned away to ask the professor to comment on whether the new constitution would benefit Kosovo Albanians. The professor tried to avoid the question, but Shuki reiterated it. Stressing each word, he responded, “You can think whatever you want, but you are not allowed to share your thoughts.”

Discussing politics, especially the Kosovo issue, was dangerous at the time in Yugoslavia; personal political opinions were gagged. The professor tried to continue class, but

⁶ Saime was later married to Kadri Zeka, leader of the Group of Marxist-Leninists of Kosovo. In January 1982, Zeka was killed, along with the brothers Jusuf and Bardhosh Gervalla, in Stuttgart, Germany, for their involvement in the Kosovo Albanian nationalist movement.

⁷ Shuki began attending the Faculty of Law at the University of Pristina in 1979; she was also interested in journalism.

the students applauded Shuki. Failing to calm the students, the exasperated professor said he would deal with the question in the next lesson.

As they were leaving class, the young man who had eavesdropped on their debate called to her and held out his hand. “Isn’t your name Shukrije Gashi?”

Shuki, surprised, turned to look at him—attractive with blond hair—and nodded, affirming that was her name. He continued holding out his hand. “I am Nuhi Berisha, a cousin to Saime and Ahmet Isufi. Saime has told me a lot about you, and I am happy to meet you. I am impressed that you could ask such a sensitive question.”

Shuki took his hand and remembered her conversation with Saime. Before long, Shuki and Nuhi were debating the political issues of the time. She discussed with him the books she read and the articles she wrote, and they came up with strategies to avoid attracting attention from the regime while trying to educate youth about the political situation. They talked of existing social and political organizations and the possibilities of merging them into one coalition. She felt she could openly discuss her political orientation with Nuhi in a time when even writing the words “Kosovo Republic” on a piece of paper was enough to be imprisoned.

Unrest in Prishtina

On March 11, 1981, students at the University of Prishtina gathered to demand improved living conditions and better food in the cafeteria. The university was severely overcrowded and neglected by the government in Belgrade. A member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Azem Vllasi, was sent by the government to quell the student demonstration. He stood tall and asked the students why they had not sent representatives to meet with the government. The students shouted back, “We did send representatives and you have had enough time. You have

seventy-two hours to meet our demands. We don't trust you. You are not in our shoes. You are a servant of the criminal government."

In the students' dining room, they started banging plates on the tables and chanted, "We need better conditions! We don't want traitors here! We don't want servants here! We want honest representatives of our rights in the government!"

The police soon began arresting the known student leaders. Rather than suppressing the protests, however, the show of force by the regime provoked the rest of the Kosovo population and culminated in widespread demonstrations a few weeks later.

Days after the initial demonstration, Shuki went to the university. At the entrance of the law faculty building, she met Suzana, who asked her if she had seen Nuhi yet. He had told Suzana he was preparing to leave the country because the police were looking for him, but passed along a telephone number to give to Shuki.

After her lectures, Shuki ran to a phone booth to call him. He could not say anything on the phone because the lines were tapped, but they arranged to meet later that day. When they met, Nuhi told her how the previous night the police had surrounded the student house looking for activists, and his friends in the next room advised him to leave the university immediately to avoid being arrested. He jumped down from the balcony, just as the police burst in and the shooting started.

He seemed anxious now, and finally asked Shuki whether she was willing to join a burgeoning organization, the Movement for an Albanian Republic within Yugoslavia (LRSHJ). He wanted to know her position on their ideas and asked if she would join it once it was fully established. Shuki told him she wanted to think about his proposition before signing her name to

any lists, but was willing to contribute to any student movement that could grow into a national movement for Kosovo independence.

Two days later, Ahmet Isufi, Saime's brother, took Shuki to meet Nuhi, who was now in hiding while he was planning for activities to be carried out in his absence. Though he moved among four different houses, the house he was staying in that day was owned by an old man who lived with his son. The house became the communication center for the movement: brochures and leaflets were printed, and distribution strategies were conceived over cups of coffee. Code names were also created at these meetings. Shuki chose *Fitore*, meaning "victory" in Albanian.

On a morning in April of 1981, Shuki joined a crowd of students demonstrating again at the university. One of her classmates turned to her, "Shuki, I have a bad feeling about our future. I am afraid it will turn into something that none of us will like."

In the crowds, Shuki found her cousin, Hedije, and marched beside her. In the early evening, the riot police sprayed teargas into the crowd. Running with her cousin, Shuki heard screams as the crowds scattered. She saw riot police dragging women by their hair and beating demonstrators on their genitals. Shuki and Hedije saw a low brick wall and ran toward it, Hedije scrambling over first. Atop the wall, Shuki looked back to see a policeman aiming his pistol at her. Their eyes met for a moment. As she jumped to safety on the other side of the wall, the shot she expected never came.

They entered the first house they saw, breathless from the teargas in the streets. The woman in the house was sympathetic and gave them onions to neutralize the effects of the teargas. She said they could stay in her house until it was safe. When they were able to leave, they took side roads and hurdled fences and walls before reaching home.

Later in the evening, all the relatives assembled at the Gashi house. Shuki's father pulled her aside and cautioned her about her involvement in the demonstration. He was concerned her political activities would endanger the family, already under police surveillance. He said, "I don't want to discourage you, nor do I want to encourage you. Just remember not to do anything that would harm your life and put the family in danger. If you go ahead, I will still support you."

Shuki decided to continue her activities; she met with Nuhi and Ahmet late that night to chart out what needed to be done while Nuhi was away. During the meeting, they discovered that thirteen people had been killed and over one hundred arrested. Though dangerous, for Shuki it was a time of youthful exhilaration and determination: "We were young and proud of ourselves and wanted to make our contribution to the future of Kosovo."

Love in Uncertainty

After another session about how to continue with their political marketing, Nuhi tapped Shuki's shoulder and motioned for her to stay behind while the other members filed out. She lingered in the room, waiting until he finally said, "I need to talk to you before you leave. It is not about our activities. Could you please sit down and listen to me?"

Shuki rested in a chair while Nuhi paced about the room saying nothing.

"What did you want to talk about? I need to get home. There are friends waiting for me." She could see he was nervous. "Are you OK? Can't you speak? What's happened to you?"

"I don't know how to start," he muttered.

"Just say what is on your mind."

Nuhi came and stood in front of her. "I don't know how to say this because I am afraid of getting a negative response from you."

“I won’t be able to give you an answer if I don’t know what you have to say,” Shuki replied.

Nuhi sighed and took a deep breath before continuing, “You know I leave Kosovo on May 15. If you say you don’t love me, I will find it difficult to return.”

Shuki was shocked by his confession. “We are just friends, Nuhi. I cannot give you more of an answer,” she sputtered. She saw tears form in his eyes. She had not envisioned this scenario and was at a loss for what to do.

“Please give me an answer. If you don’t love me, then it will be impossible for me to return,” he repeated through sobs.

“Give me time to think about it and then we shall see,” Shuki said and stood up to leave.

Nuhi took her hand. “You have accepted!”

“Stupid guy,” Shuki teased when he pulled her into a hug.

Shuki went straight to her room when she got home and tried to work at her typewriter, but she could not bring herself to write anything. She had forgotten she was going to meet her friends for an evening of poetry. Her thoughts kept floating back to Nuhi and his request. She was unsure of her feelings, though she knew she was attracted to him. An hour had passed when the telephone rang. Her mother popped her head in the door to tell Shuki, lost in thought, that the call was for her. She took the receiver.

“Did you think about it?” Nuhi asked from the other end.

Her heart beat fast and she took a deep breath. “About what?” she retorted.

“Come on, about what I tried to tell you today, about my feelings for you,” he said.

“I did not,” she lied. “Just give me time and we will see. Goodbye,” she said as calmly as she could muster, and hung up before he said another word.

Her mother, standing in the background, noticed Shuki's unsettled look when their eyes met. "What's wrong? Who was on the phone?" she asked, concerned.

"Just a friend of mine," Shuki replied and retreated to her room.

Nuhi was a poet, eloquent, humorous, charismatic, and always in a good mood. He respected all people regardless of ethnicity, religion, or background. One winter evening while walking, Nuhi and Shuki saw an elderly Serb woman slip and fall. Nuhi ran to the woman to help her to her feet. Albanian bystanders rebuked him for helping a Serb, but he replied, "We are all human beings and she is a citizen of Kosovo."

The days before Nuhi's departure flew by between studying and continuing with the recruitment of members into their organization. Shuki thought about his proposition, and Nuhi pleaded to have her answer before he had to leave. She knew she would tell him she loved him back, but wanted to express her love for him through actions. After one meeting, Nuhi pressed her for an answer, but she just smiled at him. He was growing impatient and insisted on knowing how she felt about him. Shuki, in defeat, told him, "I am here, I am talking to you, and I spend a lot of time with you. If you were smart enough you would have understood that I have feelings for you."

Nuhi broke into fits of laughter, stood up, and danced around before embracing her.

A Small Drop in the Ocean

Before Nuhi finally left Kosovo, he told her, "I am sorry that I have to leave you at this time. I have a duty to our people and our country, and you know it is impossible to fulfill these obligations here. I promise I will be back soon. Because we are together, I am motivated to return. I want you to continue with our activities in my absence."

Shuki faithfully took the lead while Nuhi was in exile, and he was able to return later that year. Together, they continued spreading the idea of a Kosovo republic among the students. His main goal in returning to Kosovo was to unite all the political groups and establish a solid national movement within Kosovo. In addition to raising awareness among students, they also tried to convince the broader population to join them. They contacted well-known, politically-conscious families, talking to two or three people at a time.

One night in 1983, Shuki and Nuhi were discussing new plans to reach more towns in order to disseminate political information about the movement. A friend burst into the room where they frequently held the clandestine meetings and told them that colleagues in their network had been arrested. Although they had lived with the knowledge of imminent arrest looming over them, these detentions came as a shock. She had heard of the various torture techniques the interrogators used to extort information from political dissidents: burning them with cigarette butts, extracting fingernails, battering and raping women. Many people had given in under the strain of torture and revealed the names of people in their network. She did not blame them—she realized there was a limit to the stress someone could handle. Shuki was sure her name would be revealed.

When she left Nuhi's apartment that evening, Shuki rushed to inform Suzana and another close friend, Sadije Çoçaj, about the latest developments. Shuki warned them to watch their movements and to limit contact with members within the political network, and also to avoid using the telephone because the lines were bugged. With her work finished, she went home.

Shuki lay awake late into the night. Her concern was not the fear of being arrested, but whether she could withstand the torture and not reveal the identity of other members within her network. She felt that life had given her a different mission from other students in the rest of

Yugoslavia and that it was her duty as a Kosovo Albanian to fight for the liberation of Kosovo. There were thousands of other Albanians doing the same, and she felt she was just “a small drop in the ocean. We did not mind dying for our country. Our ancestors had tried and failed. We were aware that the liberation struggle would take time and our generation would not survive to see Kosovo’s liberation. We made a sacrifice for the future.”

In the days that followed, Shuki felt a “strange, unsafe feeling,” like she was being stalked by a shadow. The secret police did not rush to make arrests, but kept the suspect under surveillance until the time was right. She constantly threw glances behind her, but saw no one. Her circle of friends was disappearing as she waited for the police to come knocking on her door.

Early one April morning that same year, the telephone rang. When Shuki answered it, Ahmet’s father said, “Fitore, I want to let you know that Shaqe⁸ is unable to meet with you today because he has gone to his uncle’s wedding.”

“Thank you. Goodbye,” she said hurriedly and hung up. Shuki froze in the darkness. She had expected a time like this, but still was not prepared to deal with the coded message of Ahmet’s arrest. Realizing she and Nuhi were in danger, she put on her coat and ran to his house.

He was still sleeping. She knocked several times before he opened the door. “What are you doing here so early?” he asked groggily.

Pushing past him into the house, she said, “You need to pack your bags and leave now.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“Ahmet has been arrested,” she whispered. “Pack your stuff and leave. Don’t you know you are in danger?”

⁸ Shaqe was Ahmet Isufi’s code name.

She helped him pack, throwing clothes and other necessities into a suitcase. Together they burned papers and other incriminating material. She was trembling and expected to see the police bursting into the room any minute.

When they finished packing, Nuhi turned to Shuki. “It seems like this is our last meeting, but not our last effort, to achieve what we want. I believe that freedom is coming.”

When Shuki stepped into the cold, Nuhi called to her, “Shuki! Don’t look back. Go.”

“Yes,” she answered as tears streamed down her face. But when she got to the end of the street, she looked back and met his gaze, just as he too glanced to see her one last time.

Living on the Edge

Shuki managed to avoid police officers on her way home, but when she entered her house she met Higi, her younger sister, who whispered that she was in danger and had to leave immediately. Two police agents had come looking for her. As the sisters continued talking, Shuki’s favorite cousin, Emine, arrived. She had seen the police agents sitting on the rails of the bridge over the Prishtina River, just outside their home.

Shuki asked her to accompany her to the store to buy running shoes—she knew if she was going to be on the move, the shoes would be a necessity. They did not realize they were being followed when they entered the Palace of Youth and Sports, a large shopping center for athletic equipment. The shopkeeper caught her eye, signaling them not to enter his shop. They entered the next one. The shopkeeper from the previous shop came over and whispered, “Be careful, the police are here.”

Back in his own shop, they heard him say, “No, I did not see them.”

Showing the policemen a wrong entrance, the second shopkeeper hid Shuki and Emine in his storage room. They stayed until it was safe, and he told them which exit to use to get back home. When Shuki tried to pay for her shoes, he refused to take the money. “No, I don’t want it. I just wish you a long life and success in your activities.”⁹

They arrived back at Emine’s house safely later that night, around nine o’clock. Emine’s parents, Fehmi and Arife, were distraught—they hurriedly explained that the police had entered the neighborhood. Just as her uncle Fehmi, her father’s brother, finished, Shuki heard the dogs barking uncontrollably. She fled to the neighbor’s yard and crouched in the tool shed while the police questioned her uncle. After they left and she returned to the house, her uncle sent her to hide in the attic for the night. If the police returned, he would softly tap the ceiling twice with his walking stick, an indication for Shuki to go to the neighbor’s house.

The faint tapping on the ceiling came twice and broke through her reflections on the day’s events. Again the dogs started barking. Shuki opened the window and got onto the roof. Crawling on her stomach, she reached the edge of the roof and jumped into the neighbor’s yard. Before she could knock, the neighbor opened his door and pulled her inside.

Her uncle came for her at five o’clock in the morning to take her to Sharban, her mother’s village, an eight-hour walk from Prishtina. They arrived there in the evening, but Shuki’s great-uncle was distraught when they disclosed the reason for the abrupt visit. Her relatives were concerned that the police would track Shuki to the village and arrest the family sons for aiding a fugitive. However, one of them, her uncle Dalip Alshiqi,¹⁰ reminded them that Shuki, a child of the home, had come seeking help in a time of need and it was their duty to protect her. It was

⁹ Years later, Shuki visited the shopkeeper to thank him for helping her. He said he had heard about her political activities from someone else and felt it was his moral obligation to help her because she was young and had endangered herself for the cause of Kosovo.

¹⁰ Dalip was later a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and was killed by the Serb police during the war in 1999.

agreed that she would sleep in a forest a few miles from the village. For ten days, Shuki spent her nights among the trees until her uncle could organize how to smuggle her out of the country.

Her uncle Dalip had convinced a good friend of his, a businessman, to take Shuki to Ferizaj, a quaint town where a family had agreed to hide Shuki for a number of days. She was concerned about putting them in danger and told her uncle about her worries, but he reassured her by saying it was in their honor to keep her safe in their home. They drove in a truck, avoiding main thoroughfares. Her uncle kept watch through the side mirrors to see if they were being followed.

When they arrived in Ferizaj, a middle-aged woman led Shuki into the house and warned her not to tell the rest of the family the real reason for her stay. She met the rest of the family at dinner, claiming to be a distant cousin. After the meal, the woman led Shuki to the bathroom. It was refreshing to bathe after ten days in the wilderness. The woman gave her clothes, underwear, socks, and pajamas. Shuki offered to pay for everything, but the woman declined the money. In the guestroom, the sheets smelled fresh. Shuki rested on the bed and thought about her mother. She wanted to hear her soothing voice telling her she was safe. She tossed and turned all night, wishing she had turned herself over to the police instead of endangering more people.

After ten days with the family in Ferizaj, she moved on to Prizren, a large town near the border with Albania, where another family was eager to host her. A young woman and an elderly man who wore a patch over his left eye opened the door of their house to Shuki and her uncle. The man had a large moustache and was in traditional Albanian dress and hat, reminding Shuki of Mic Sokoli, the legend her grandmother used to sing about.

Her uncle left as soon as Shuki had entered the house and she immediately apologized for putting the family in danger. The man took her by the hand, led her into the house, and told her,

“Listen to me, my daughter. Don’t dare apologize to me for living in my house. Nothing is going to happen.” He turned and pointed at the wall where a large gun hung. “With that gun I will fight until the last bullet rather than surrender you into Serb hands.”

The man sat with Shuki and entertained her with stories about his military exploits during World War II. He pointed to his eye patch and said he had lost his eye to the Yugoslav communists because he had advocated for the formation of an ethnic Albanian state in Kosovo. He was enthralled that Shuki, an educated Albanian woman, was involved in the struggle for the liberation of Kosovo, and told her, “I will continue fighting for the liberation of Kosovo until my last breath. It is better to be an eagle for just one day than to live a hundred years as a blackbird.”

After dinner, they agreed that Shuki would spend the days in the house and the nights at the old cemetery of Prizren. The cemetery was a frightening option, even though the man said the graves were over 600 years old and the area relatively safe. Shuki spent her nights writing poetry by moonlight. She felt at peace, grateful she was not really endangering this family to a great extent.

There were two young men living in the house, and one confided in her that he was part of the movement to which she belonged. He later delivered the disappointing message from her uncle: the people who were supposed to smuggle Shuki out of Kosovo had not shown up at the appointed place. Her family wanted her to return to Prishtina.

Back in the capital, Shuki lived each day waiting for the police to come knocking at her door. She spent her time working out a story that she would stick to if she was arrested. She would tell the police that she was only Nuhi’s girlfriend, and because she loved him she had provided him with food and clothes. She would claim to know nothing of his political activities.

The Final Station

Shuki thought she was dreaming when she heard a faint knocking on her bedroom door, but the continuity of the rapping and her mother's voice saying the police were there startled her out of her sleep. She tried to get rid of incriminating evidence before going into the living room.

There were two policemen; they told her to get her clothes together immediately. Shuki asked them whether they had an arrest warrant; they laughed in her face and said they did not need one. Her mother wanted to know whether they had children. When one replied that he had four daughters, she asked him to think about them. He promised her mother he would bring Shuki back home safely after the interrogation.

The line outside the grocery store across the street was particularly long that morning. Crowds gathered to get a better view of what was happening at the Gashi residence. Shuki nodded at them before entering the police car parked outside her house.

The car made a detour to a government clinic where the doctors told Shuki they were going to give her medicine to help her relax and feel better. She had heard of the use of "truth serums" on prisoners to make them talk, so she struggled to break free, only to be restrained by the two policemen who half-carried, half-dragged her into a little room where she was tied up. She felt a prick on her arm as the world around her darkened.

Soon, a hand was roughly shaking her and a voice was screaming at her to wake up. She opened her eyes, disoriented, and tried to absorb her surroundings. She looked out of the car and saw it was parked in front of a prison. She had not realized she would be spending her time incarcerated in the notoriously brutal prison of Mitrovica.

Once inside the prison, she was marched through a seemingly endless hallway. While walking by the cells, she heard a mournful voice reciting poetry. It was the saddest voice she had

ever heard, and despite being warned not to look sideways, she turned to see where the voice was coming from. She saw a young man gripping onto the bars of his cell door, his face bloody.

Shuki was led to a cell with a three-tiered bunk bed in the corner and a very thin mattress on the floor. There were three other occupants: an old woman who appeared to be in her seventies, a middle-aged woman, and a teenage girl around fifteen years old.

Lying on the mattress, her head pounding terribly, Shuki was shivering and had a high fever. A splash of water hit her face. She fought for breath and tried to open her eyes, making out the forms of two nurses and the warden bending over her, mumbling words she could not understand. Falling in and out of consciousness, her dreams were filled with wolves and tigers chasing her. She woke up screaming, only to find herself bound to the bed by ropes.

The next morning, a female guard came and untied Shuki's hands. She asked her whether she wanted something to eat, but Shuki declined the food. The guard warned the other inmates not to give her any of their meals. When she walked out, Feride Zeneli, the fifteen-year-old inmate, moved near Shuki's bed and offered her a piece of her cake, but Shuki could not open her mouth. Feride pleaded with her to drink a little water to help her regain her strength.

The guard returned in the afternoon and summoned Shuki to her office. When she failed to stand up, the guard roughly lifted her off the bed and led her down the hall. She offered Shuki a piece of bread and meat, sweetly telling her she wanted to treat her differently from the other inmates. Shuki asked her whether she had also given bread and meat to the inmates in her cell. When the guard answered in the negative, Shuki refused to touch the food. She weakly mumbled that she was a prisoner and would eat what the other prisoners were given. The guard stood up and slapped Shuki, who slumped back in the chair, only to be splashed with water again. The guard told her not to be so stupid, saying that Shuki was young and should have stayed on to

complete her studies instead of getting involved in politics. She promised to let Shuki continue with her studies in return for providing the authorities with information on student activists. Shuki told her to get someone else because she could not act as an informant. The guard, in frustration, pushed Shuki off the chair. She fell on the hard floor and was too weak to get up. Another guard came in and dragged her back to her cell.

In the evening, a female guard came to the cell and asked Shuki to dress up because she had a special visitor. She was led to the interrogation room, with gray walls and dim lighting. Shuki stopped in her tracks when she saw the interrogator in the room—the policeman who had promised her mother he would return her home safely after the questioning. He acted politely and offered her a seat, which she took hesitantly.

The interrogator told her they had checked through her medical records and discovered that she suffered from kidney complications. Shuki remembered the job at the government clinic, and responded that she never suffered from kidney complications before and accused them of trying to kill her. The interrogator sat back in his chair, arms across his chest, and said he felt sorry for her mother. He reminded Shuki about the promise he made the day she was arrested, adding that she would be released within two days if she told the truth. Asking her about her involvement with Nuhi and his movement, he demanded to know which students were also collaborating. Shuki stuck to her story and denied involvement with the movement, claiming she was only Nuhi's girlfriend. When the interrogator realized he was getting nowhere, he pleaded with her to save her life and return to her family; she was young and would have plenty of time to engage in politics. Shuki said it was not her intention to become a politician. She only admitted to participating, like all the other students, in the demonstrations in 1981.

The man reminded Shuki of the question she had asked the professor in her law class in 1981 about the relevance of the two Yugoslav constitutions. He asked her why she thought that the people of Kosovo did not enjoy the same rights as those in the rest of Yugoslavia. Startled that he knew this information, Shuki admitted to asking the question, but then tried to debate with him about whether the 1974 document “was a real constitution or whether it was a just a flexible instrument that could be changed at will.” He did not answer. She continued, “In the constitution, if Kosovo had been made a republic like the six other republics within the Yugoslav federation, we would not be fighting for equality with other republics.”

Frustrated that Shuki seemed to be lecturing him, he stood up, hit her across the face, and told her she was being charged with crimes to break up the Yugoslav federation. He eventually sent her back to her cell, but reminded her he would see her again after midnight.

Shuki sat in her cell and waited. She kept telling herself to be strong and to stick to her story about being Nuhi’s girlfriend and having no information about the LRSNJ. Not long after midnight, Shuki was summoned to the interrogation room. Her examiner was not alone this time, but paired with another agent. They went through the same pleasantries, though this did not last long. Shuki realized they were playing a game with her, bombarding her with questions and not giving her time to think or answer: Who are you working with? What faculties are involved in the LRSNJ? How do the students communicate? What is the aim of the LRSNJ? Why do you think Kosovo is unequal to the other federations? Why is the LRSNJ pushing to secede and join Albania? Why did you support Nuhi with food and clothes when he was a fugitive? Shuki only responded to the last question, saying she did so out of love and was unaware of Nuhi’s alleged activities. In exasperation, one of the interrogators threatened to kill Shuki and her family if he

proved her involvement with the LRSJ. She kept quiet and stared at the floor until they started beating her. The session lasted two hours before she was released to her cell.

Feride burst out crying when she saw Shuki. She went to her and tried to clean her face, bruised and bloodied from the beatings. Feride soothed her, saying one day the beatings would end. They huddled together on the thin mattress on the floor for over an hour, but Shuki was concerned that the other women would report Feride to the guards, so she thanked her and sent her off to sleep. As she sat and stared at the corridor, the sounds of heavy snoring and Feride's muffled sobs were Shuki's companions that night.

Surviving Behind Bars

Life in prison was often monotonous. After rising at five o'clock, Shuki was allowed to bathe for three minutes and eat two pieces of stale bread for breakfast each morning. The prisoners were usually allowed a five-minute walk around the prison yard. While on one of these brief walks, Shuki heard someone shout from the tall prison building, "I wish you a long life, you in red!"

She was the only prisoner wearing red that morning. She shaded her eyes and looked up to make out the face of her well wisher, but saw only an arm waving through the bars of a tiny window.

The interrogations continued every other day. During one occasion, the chief interrogator asked Shuki whether her parents knew of her relationship with Nuhi, and if they were aware that he was a criminal. She replied that she had her parents' blessing and that she did not consider him a criminal. He stood up and slapped her. Shuki stared at him, remembering he had told her mother he had four daughters. He noticed she was lost in thought and called for her attention.

Turning her gaze to him, she said she was thinking about his daughters. “Perhaps when they grow up they might do something similar to what you accuse Nuhi of doing.”

“Don’t provoke me by insinuating that my children could ever turn out like you,” he hissed.

“Well, you never know,” Shuki calmly replied.

He was silent for five minutes before he spoke again. “I am unhappy with my children. It’s not because they are bad children. One of my daughters is disabled, having been born with one leg shorter than the other.”

“I am sorry about your daughter. Just think about how you treat other people’s children and pray you are not punished by God,” she warned.

“Well, maybe.” He was surprisingly calm. “I am just doing my job and trying to do the best for my children,” he said before leaving Shuki alone in the room.

After a long spell, another interrogator she had not seen before entered the room. He was a tall, thin man with light hair, a moustache, and small glasses. He bent over Shuki and asked where her boss had gone. She replied that she had no boss in this place. “The gentleman who has been here is your boss during your jail sentence,” he replied.

He placed a chair in front of her and smiled. Shuki stared back at him unsmiling. He told her he had a daughter, and that he empathized with Shuki’s father. He asked her to confide in him as a parent and promised to get her out of prison if she was sincere.

Shuki watched his face under the dim light and noticed his mouth was twitching uncontrollably. Although his face was blank, she read nervousness in his eyes. She asked him whether he was nervous. He flared up and cursed her for teasing him in return for his politeness. He stood up, lit a cigarette, and walked behind her. She sat still as the smell from the cigarette

filled the room. He yanked her hair and pulled her up from the chair. Pushing her against the wall, he blew smoke into her face. He continued smoking and cursing her, then took the cigarette from his mouth and held it on her right eyebrow. It was excruciating, but she did not want to scream and give him the satisfaction of knowing he had inflicted pain on her. She could not hold out long and screamed, “You are an animal!”

He dropped the cigarette and started hitting her. Shuki lost consciousness and fell to the ground. She woke to water splashing on her face and his voice saying faintly, “Wake up. I did not invite you to this place. You came out of your own will and you will have to pay for it.”

Her eyebrow stung from the burns, but she clenched her teeth to hide the pain. He asked her whether she was ready to continue with the torture or if she was ready to talk about her activities. Shuki replied that she had told him and the other interrogators her story and that even if he threatened to kill her, she had nothing else to say. He scoffed at her and said, “Well, you will sing like a bird. Your story is not finished. I will let you go now because I am going to meet your colleagues.”

The female guard who came to take Shuki back to her cell asked about the burns on her eyebrow, but Shuki just told her to ask her colleague. As they walked down the dim corridor, the guard mumbled that she did not consider him her colleague, that he was evil. Shuki kept quiet. As they passed a closed door, they heard a terrified scream, a woman’s voice begging for mercy. The guard told Shuki she would face the same torture if she did not tell her story faster. As they walked down the prison corridor, they passed two male prisoners who watched them through bloodied faces.

Back in her cell, Shuki needed to find ways to deal with the silence, since speaking was prohibited. She was denied pen and paper to write or books to read. When the silence threatened

to choke her, she would softly hum the revolutionary songs her grandmother loved. Every time she heard the melodies, the guard quickly ordered to stop, so Shuki resorted to doing sit-ups on the floor. The older woman in the cell, who kept to herself most of the time, cautioned her, “No, my daughter. Sit still. Don’t do anything to get into trouble with the guard. She is watching us.”

At night, Shuki would dream about Nuhi. She had not heard anything about him. In one of her dreams, he had lost both his legs and was walking with crutches for support. She was beside Emine, her cousin, while Nuhi walked toward them and tried to speak to them, but his voice was carried away by the wind. He clutched a bag, but because of the crutches, he stumbled and fell. From his bag spilled out a pencil, a piece of paper, lipstick, and a box of facial cream. He handed Emine the lipstick and facial cream, and blessed her marriage. Giving Shuki the pencil and paper, he told her she would remain unmarried. Shuki asked him why he was saying such outrageous things, and he responded, “I am sorry my darling, but we will get married when Kosovo is liberated.”

She heard shooting and saw police and military men coming toward them. She tried to help him but he pushed her away, telling her she had a mission to continue but that he had completed his duty. Shuki woke up sobbing.

On the following day of interrogations, Shuki happened to be wearing black. The chief interrogator expressed his condolences and figured she must have heard about the incident. Shuki did not know what he was talking about. He smiled and said that Nuhi had killed himself. Shuki, still shaken by the dream, tried to conceal her shock. She remarked that Nuhi would not have committed suicide and that if he was dead, the Serbs must have killed him.

She tried not to believe them, remembering when Nuhi said that if she was ever arrested she should not believe any story the interrogators tell her. Unable to hold back her anger, she

cursed them for having killed Nuhi, but said they could not kill the will of the Albanian people. Another interrogator moved toward her, trying to calm her. She exclaimed that she was going to get involved in politics and continue the work Nuhi had started. With that, they struck her, telling her the outburst was confirmation that she had been lying to them all along.

In her cell after the questioning, she wanted to ask the other prisoners if they had heard of Nuhi's death. She knocked three times on the thin wall and held her mouth to a plastic cup pressed against the wall. Speaking into the base of the cup, the guards could not hear her. The other inmates said they knew nothing about the reports of Nuhi's death.

The Season is Broken

One day after work in the tailoring workshop in Lypjan prison, a rehabilitation center Shuki had been transferred to, a guard met her in the corridor and told her to pack her clothes because she was leaving. Shuki thought she was being transferred to a different prison, so she entered her cell sobbing and began packing her belongings. She told the women in her cell she was being transferred to another prison and they started crying as well—until the guard told them Shuki was being released, eight months earlier than her scheduled date of freedom.

It was 1984, and after seventeen months on the inside, Shuki stood outside the prison gate with her luggage. There was no one waiting to take her home. Her heart was empty. Her shoes had no laces. She decided to walk, not knowing where she was headed, but soon a car came driving toward her. It stopped beside her, and the driver—the prison doctor—beckoned her to get in. He drove fast and only managed to tell her that her relative had secured her release. When they reached the outskirts of the capital city, he ordered her to get out.

Shuki stood in the street and stared into the distance. Prishtina, “the city of four seasons,” had changed in her absence. It was not the cobbled stones, narrow roads, or Austro-Hungarian and Turkish-style architecture that had changed. It was the air. Shuki started down the familiar streets she had longed for the past two years. She turned into Bihaqi Street where her childhood home stood. She moved slowly to the main door and finally knocked. Nobody came. She pushed the door a little. In the house, a two-year-old child with blue eyes sat sucking his thumb and staring at her. Shuki called out for her mother. She finally appeared on the second floor, followed by her sister. Her mother walked down the stairs slowly, saying, “I always knew my daughter was strong and would come back home. This is a happy day for me.” She beckoned Shuki’s sister, “Come and see. Life is beautiful.”

Shuki collapsed in her mother’s embrace.

When she saw her father, he could sense the tension that lingered in her gaze, even though she was surrounded by her family. When he asked, Shuki explained she was home physically, but her spirit was still with the friends in prison she had left behind. She had developed close friendships with several of her fellow women prisoners. With her knowledge of law, Shuki had written petitions and complaints on behalf of other women prisoners and advised them in legal matters. She felt she had abandoned them. Her father pulled her on his lap like he had always done when she was a little girl. “I know it is difficult for you to leave your friends in prison. But now you have a mission to fulfill. You can help them more while on the outside than the inside.”

Shuki asked her sister to tell Emine, their cousin, that she had been released. Moments later, Emine burst into the house barefoot and screamed when she saw Shuki. The two girls shrieked in joy and hugged each other like they were still kids.

Emine asked Shuki if she would like to have coffee at her house where they could be alone to talk. As her cousin made coffee, Shuki asked her why Nuhi had not sent a message while she was in prison. Her cousin looked away, trying to conceal her tears. She then held Shuki and said, “Sometimes things are not always like we want them to be.”

She asked Emine whether Nuhi wanted to be with her anymore, but Emine responded that Nuhi had truly loved Shuki to his dying day.

Shuki stiffened and stepped back. She had lived a whole year believing that the interrogators had lied to her about Nuhi’s death. But she now learned that Nuhi and his best friend, Rexhap Malaj, had been killed on January 11, 1984 in a shootout with the police. Dashing past Emine, she burst out of the house, not stopping until she arrived at the house Nuhi had lived in while in hiding. She knocked on the door.

“Fitore, it’s been two years since I last saw you,” the owner responded when he opened the door.

She moved past him and headed straight for Nuhi’s former room, trying to find something of him, a souvenir she could hold on to, something tangible to add to the memories in her head.

The furniture had been changed. She opened the trap door that led to the basement where they had printed the brochures and newsletters for distribution. The printing machines were gone. The room had been cleaned of their memories. She climbed up and bumped into the owner’s young son. “Fitore, when did you come?”

Shuki stared at him blankly. He pulled her close and whispered, “I know you were released today.” His words and embrace seemed to give her a release to at last mourn for Nuhi.

Her family was relieved when she finally walked back into the house. Her father put his arms around her and stroked her hair. “My child, I know you are strong. Nuhi does not belong to you alone now. He belongs to the whole nation and you should be proud of him. He still lives among us, in our hearts and our minds. For the price he paid, he will forever live on.”

The Voice of Kosovo

Shuki still felt as if she was being watched, even after incarceration. Her passport had been confiscated after her arrest and efforts to get a new one were futile. She did not continue with her political work, and soon found that she was unable to continue with her studies or get a job—she had been blacklisted. It took her five years to get back into law school and complete her law degree, which she completed in 1989. In the interim, the only job she could get was as a freelance journalist, writing under a pseudonym.

Her career, however, would change course early one morning in 1990. Shuki was drinking tea and reading the morning newspaper when the doorbell rang. Her father went downstairs to answer it and then called out to her saying she had visitors. Putting away the paper, Shuki walked to the living room, but stopped in her steps when she saw the four men seated in the chairs, among them Adem Demaçi, a well-known Albanian intellectual. He had written numerous books and was an eloquent speaker who demanded that Kosovo be made a seventh republic in Yugoslavia. As a result, he had been imprisoned for twenty-eight years. Now, here he was in her home. She could not hold back tears as “Kosovo’s own Nelson Mandela” was sitting in her house, seeking audience with her.

He stood up to greet her, then pulled her toward him when he realized she was crying. He told her that he knew she had been imprisoned and that Nuhi had been killed by the regime

during her incarceration. He had come to visit her because he was proud of her and the young generation.

With Adem was Salih Sefa, recently released from prison after eight years. It was there that Salih had heard about Shuki and Nuhi's leadership in the student political movement. Ali Duli, a former actor in Macedonia in the 1970s, a teacher of the Albanian language, and now a human rights activist, along with a man named Nuhi Ahmeti, an economist who had been imprisoned for eight years, also stood alongside Adem.

She was shaking with excitement at having these respected men sitting in her house. While they drank coffee, Adem said they had read a newspaper interview on Shuki's life, political activities, and time in jail. They had also read her poetry in a number of newspapers, periodicals, and magazines.¹¹ Her life and work impressed Adem, and he asked her to join them in setting up an organization called the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (CDHRF). He wanted her to head the Prishtina regional office. Shuki was honored and humbled, but somewhat afraid of the responsibility, though Adem convinced her to accept the proposition. After all the work she had done clandestinely as a revolutionary student, she could now work as part of a human rights organization, still on behalf of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. They quickly set about brainstorming the duties of the council and compiled a list of activists who could support them in their early work.

Starting in a small room given freely by the owner of the building, all the staff made small contributions and items for a proper office; Shuki donated her typewriter. She worked voluntarily, moving from town to town investigating the arrests of civilians and writing reports from the office in the capital city. The council received calls from people throughout Kosovo informing them of incidents of police presence and repression. One such call came early one

¹¹ Shuki's poetry collection, translated *The Art of Oblivion*, was later published in Albanian in 1997.

morning in 1991 from Drenica, an area to the west of Prishtina. Zahrie Podrincaku, the CDHRF representative in the area, said the Jashari family home had been surrounded by Serb police. Zahrie abruptly hung up, afraid that the phones were bugged. The area was then cordoned off by the police, but Zahrie broke through it to travel on foot to Prishtina to tell them the story. She arrived at the office late in the evening, exhausted and afraid.

The next day, Shuki and another activist traveled with Zahrie to Drenica to find out why the home had been surrounded. Although the head of the family, Shaban Jashari, was known for his resistance to the regime in Belgrade, the family had not done anything to warrant the current police presence. It was believed that someone in the village had called the police with a false story. Plainclothes police kept the house under twenty-four-hour surveillance, making it difficult for anyone to contact the family to get the real story. Reports indicated that the family members had been beaten when they refused to reveal the whereabouts of Adem Jashari and his brother Hamzë, who the police believed were involved in rebel activities.¹² Shuki sent reports of this information to foreign embassies in Belgrade, international agencies, and international and local media.

The CDHRF documented such cases and became the voice of ordinary Albanians in Kosovo to the outside world. Shuki's work involved photographing the abuses suffered by torture victims and recording testimonies of each case, which were then presented to international agencies, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, in order to support claims of mass human rights violations in Kosovo. She also wrote daily bulletins in both English and Albanian, and educated young women and girls on human rights. Her days started at seven in the morning and ended at midnight. She worked this way for seven years without pay, during which time the council established sixty-three branches throughout Kosovo.

¹² In 1998, Adem Jashari and over fifty members of his family were killed by Serb police in the village of Prekaz.

As a result of their documentation of abuses by the Serb regime, the council was a frequent target of threats and intimidation. On one particular occasion, the police circled around the office. Most of the staff escaped before they entered, leaving only Shuki and Sami Kurteshi, the general secretary of the council. The police officers noticed a bullet shell on the table and asked them why they had it in their offices. Sami said it was part of the evidence they were collecting to back their claims of the Milosevic regime's repression in Kosovo. One of the police officers grabbed Sami and pulled him into the corridor.

Adem soon rushed into the office and asked the police what authority they had to insult his staff. One officer sneered and drew his pistol. Adem opened his coat, pumped out his chest, and dared the officer to kill him. Another officer retorted they did not want to waste their bullets, and they left the scene.

Sami, severely hurt, was taken to the Mother Teresa clinic, one of the only clinics accessible to Albanians. Shuki and Adem visited him there; he tried to smile through his bleeding, swollen face—an effort that made him softly wince in pain. His pelvic bones had been broken and he could not move. Shuki stayed with him until evening before returning to the office to send her reports to embassies and international agencies about the beating.

Harassment and Frustrations

Shuki, together with Afërdita Saraçini Kelmend, a journalist with Voice of America, and Advije Gashi, a human rights activist, attended a women's conference in Sarajevo, Bosnia in 1996 and they were interviewed on the political situation in Kosovo. During the interview, Shuki affirmed that documentation supporting the claims of human rights abuses in Kosovo had been

sent to different international embassies and was printed in daily newspapers. She had no idea the interview would be broadcast worldwide.

On the way back to Kosovo, the bus she was traveling in was stopped at the border of the Republika Srpska.¹³ Serb paramilitary soldiers climbed onto the bus and told Shuki to carry her suitcase and disembark. She was taken into a room filled with more soldiers, who began harassing her about the interview. One of them started playing with her hair, but she pushed his hands off. She demanded to know why they were detaining her. One of them replied that she was “a special guest who would be treated in a nice way.”

The same man pointed at the seven other soldiers standing in the room and invited Shuki to take her pick. She retorted that she had her fair share of men in Kosovo. One of them came close to her and held a bayonet against her neck. The blade was sharp, and shone in the light. She sat still while he bent down and whispered in her ear that they would first rape her before killing her. She told him to go ahead and kill her because she was not afraid, prompting him to hit her across the face with the back end of the bayonet and push her against the wall. She thought of the words of the patriot in Prizren who had hidden her in 1983: “It is better to live one day as an eagle than one hundred years as a blackbird.” She looked for something to strike the officer with. She picked up an empty bottle, smashed the base, and pointed the serrated edge at him. He laughed at her and asked his colleagues who wanted to go first.

One of them started unzipping his trousers. Shuki lunged for a gun leaning against the wall, but the men crowded around her and started beating her. She did not cry out. They ordered her to put her suitcase on the table and display its contents. Slowly, she removed her clothes,

¹³ The Dayton Peace Accords which ended the four-year war in Bosnia divided the country into two separate entities: the Bosnian-Croat Federation, comprised of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, and the Republika Srpska, made up of Bosnian Serbs.

including her underwear. They chuckled and one of them grabbed it, sniffed it, and proclaimed it smelled good, throwing it to his colleagues to smell in turns.

Right when Shuki thought there was no escaping rape and then murder, Stabilization Force (SFOR) troops¹⁴ entered the room. Before he could be held back, one of the paramilitary men pushed Shuki to the window and threatened to kill her if she ever passed through the Republika Srpska again. He told her the presence of the SFOR had saved her this time. Two of the paramilitary men accompanied her on the bus to Belgrade, insulting her all the way. She switched buses in the Serbian capital, and when she arrived home to Kosovo, Shuki was questioned by the police about her remarks at the Sarajevo conference.

Despite harassments such as these, Shuki continued to develop networks with the international community to report on the situation in Kosovo. These attempts were continually frustrated by the government in Serbia. In 1997, when invited to attend a conference in Vienna, Austria coordinated by the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative, Shuki still had no passport. She informed a number of influential people about her passport dilemma, including Elisabeth Rehn, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the former Yugoslavia, and Richard Miles and Elizabeth Bonkowsky, American diplomats in Belgrade—but nothing happened. Shuki's friends and fellow activists, Sevdije Ahmeti and Vjosa Dobruna, wrote to the conference organizers canceling her attendance, but the organizers in turn contacted Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State, to intervene.¹⁵

American pressure on the Belgrade regime to issue passports to former political prisoners worked in Shuki's favor. In the government office where she went to obtain her passport, a man

¹⁴ The SFOR was the second group, after the Implementation Force (IFOR), created to enforce the Dayton agreement. Both forces were led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

¹⁵ Shuki was later informed of Albright's intervention by a Serb inspector in the Kosovo Provincial Secretariat for Internal Affairs.

of medium build greeted her in Albanian. Shuki was sure there were few Albanians left in the government after the 1990 mass dismissal of Albanian nationals from public offices, so she was wary of this man. He said he had not seen her in a long time. In response to Shuki's startled look, he added that she had never seen him before, but he was nonetheless her guardian angel and had always taken care of her—he was a spy, assigned to watch her every move after she had been released from prison. She interrupted him, saying she was running out of time and needed to get her passport. He warned Shuki that she would pay a big price for involving foreigners and making her passport issue a big deal. Nonetheless, Shuki got her passport in fifteen minutes, after a struggle of fifteen years.

New Journeys

Shuki was seated beside the podium, covering the funeral proceedings of Halit Gecaj, an Albanian teacher from Llausha who was killed in crossfire between the Serb police and what the public had been told was a militant rebel group called the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The KLA had allegedly been attacking Serb police in 1995 and 1996, but they had an almost mystical character; by this November day in 1997, the fighters had yet to make themselves publicly known. Even Ibrahim Rugova, the president of the League for a Democratic Kosovo (LDK) and political leader of the ethnic Albanians, dismissed them as a product of Serb propaganda—an excuse by Milosevic to step up attacks. Many Albanians, however, were hoping they did exist and would liberate the province from the Serb regime.

As Shuki fiddled with her mini-tape recorder, three men took the stage. They addressed the 20,000 mourners and claimed they were fighters in the KLA, that indeed, the rebel group was

real. Shuki caught the speech on tape, which was later broadcast on the German news outlet, Deutsche Welle.

She rushed back from Llausha to the hospital in Prishtina. Shuki's mother had been diagnosed with cancer earlier that year, so Shuki balanced her time among the hospital, working as a freelance journalist, and serving as an interpreter for international agencies and media. Her mother disapproved of Shuki's decision to cover the funeral in the Drenica region—ethnic tensions were increasing and she feared for her daughter's safety. But when Shuki arrived at her room and told her that the KLA did exist, all her mother could do was smile; she momentarily forgot her pain.

Shuki's mother could only enjoy the news of the KLA for a short while, however, as her condition deteriorated rapidly. By the time the doctors had discovered the cancer, it had spread too far. Shuki and her sister Bahria were at her bedside when she died. They witnessed the bruises on her skin disappear as she breathed her last.

Shuki and her family tried to live normal lives after the death of their matriarch, but the backdrop of the growing insecurity in Kosovo made this even more difficult. Throughout 1998, the KLA actively engaged the Yugoslav army and paramilitary units in battle; in return, the regime in Belgrade intensified the terror as Milosevic began a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Fleeing Home

The early months of 1999 brought some hope that there would be an end to the fighting between the KLA and Serb forces. A Serb massacre of ethnic Albanians in the village of Racak led to an outcry from the international community. With the threat that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces would bomb, Milosevic agreed to peace talks in Rambouillet,

France, though these negotiations ultimately failed. On March 22, the same day that Milosevic received his last warning from the international community that NATO would indeed bomb, Yugoslav internal affairs police broke into Shuki's apartment and her family home on Bihaqi Street.

While the conflict intensified throughout the previous year, Shuki reported on the humanitarian situation and continued her other freelance work, writing primarily on human rights violations and women's issues. By the close of 1998, she began work with World Vision International, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with an office in Prishtina that conducted psychosocial programs for children affected by the war. Primarily because of her work disseminating information on the rising violence to international agencies outside of Kosovo, Shuki was again being targeted by the police. After her homes were searched, Shuki decided to go into hiding until she could safely leave the country.

Concealing her computer and books in the ceiling, she left everything else in her home untouched. She took a few clothes, mainly sweaters and underwear, as well as family pictures, a mini-tape recorder, and her identity documents. She sewed her documents in the seams of her jacket, hidden from the policemen who would otherwise destroy them at checkpoints.

NATO began its bombing campaign against Yugoslavia on March 24, 1999, causing Milosevic to ratchet up attacks and the ethnic cleansing of the Albanians. A few days after attacks began, Shuki's cousin agreed to accompany her out of the country. He was tall and wore a long beard like the paramilitary soldiers, so his appearance did not attract attention as they joined the flow of Albanians rushing to leave the city. Some soldiers even smiled and waved at them from a distance, thinking they were Serbs. As they walked away from the city of four seasons, they saw houses ablaze and paramilitary soldiers pulling people out of cars and forcing

them to walk. Shuki and her cousin were waiting in line at the train station when a green military car screeched to a halt in front of them. Paramilitary men jumped out and grabbed a man who was standing with his wife and children in line. They pushed him against a wall and shot him. Shuki restrained the wife as she attempted to rush to her husband. Gathering her luggage and children, Shuki and her cousin urged the woman to get on the train and not incur the wrath of the soldiers.

The Prishtina train station was now teeming with the mass of people forced out of their homes by the Serb police, all trying desperately to get on the train. People were climbing through windows to enter the carriages. Shuki, her cousin, the widow, and her children made it on safely only to witness a six-year-old child put his hand out of the window, beckoning his father to get inside. A paramilitary soldier walked to the window and slammed it shut on the boy's hand. The boy collapsed, his wrist broken.

Consistent with their campaign of ethnic cleansing, the Serb paramilitary was looking for adult males, Albanian men of fighting age, to kill. Shuki's cousin, now on the train with other Albanians, would no longer be taken as a Serb. He laid down on the floor while the many women and children sat on him to conceal his presence.

As the train moved out of the station, Shuki felt ashamed and distressed to be abandoning her country and family. Her father had refused to leave, saying he was too old to flee. Her sister Bahria, a nurse, stayed on in Prishtina to be of service to the wounded. As the train sped through the countryside on the way to Macedonia, Shuki saw all the towns deserted, abandoned by people, even by God.

Refugees

There was a line of people waiting to enter the Bllace refugee camp, north of the Macedonian capital of Shkup (also known as Skopje). When Shuki entered the camp, she walked around in a daze. It was like being in prison again—the inhumane conditions, the barbed wire fence around the camp. The sick were left unattended and international aid trucks were blocked from entering for days on end. The early spring rain was falling on the refugees who had no raincoats for protection. They covered themselves with plastic bags and waited for medicine, food, and tents that had been promised. Shuki recalled words her mother had once spoken: “The worst fate in the world is to be a refugee.”

Because Shuki worked with World Vision in Prishtina, Albanian activists from the humanitarian emergency staff in Macedonia managed to get her out of Bllace. She went with her cousin to the town of Dibra, where she was grateful to live instead of in the squalid conditions of the camp. She tried to get her brother and his family, also refugees in Bllace, out of the camp to live in Dibra. The Macedonian government, however, refused, so Shuki and her friend and former boss at World Vision International, Karmit Zysman, ensured they received enough blankets, food, and clothes to get them through the rains.

In the town of Dibra, Shuki established a new radio channel called Era, which aired a special program for Kosovo refugees in Macedonian camps called “Open Microphone.” It served as a conduit to link separated family members. Refugees called in to give names of family members, which were then read over the radio. It also became a platform for people to share their experiences of the conflict and displacement.

As the refugee situation in Macedonia improved, Shuki wanted to use her skills for Kosovo refugees in Albania, where the situation was progressively worse. The World Vision

International office in Tirana sent a car to bring her to the country, the Albania of her “childhood dreams.” At the border, the car was stopped; Shuki told the policeman she was a refugee from Kosovo. He, an Albanian, saw the tears in Shuki’s eyes and told her, “My sister, you are welcome here. We know your documents were destroyed. Go ahead and continue your trip.”

As they entered the country that she had only imagined through Radio Tirana in her childhood home, Shuki asked the driver to stop the car. She got out, sat on the road, and kissed it through the tears streaming down her face. She had never imagined she would touch Albanian soil.

In the capital, Shuki worked both as a logistics coordinator, making sure humanitarian aid was reaching refugees, and as a program assistant on a psychosocial program. She lived with an Albanian family, who like many other Albanians had welcomed refugees from Kosovo into their homes and shared the little they had.

But her time in Albania was short-lived. NATO ceased bombing the former Yugoslavia on June 10, 1999. With Milosevic clearly defeated, and now indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), he began pulling his troops out of Kosovo as NATO forces moved in. Shuki was eager to get back home to see her family, to breathe the “fresh air of the fragile freedom.”

Memories Under the Ruins

The roads were lined with large trucks and cars heading to Kosovo. Along the way, Albanians stood on the roadside waving, while traffic police gave the returnees food and water for the journey. At the border, NATO troops—under the name the Kosovo Force (KFOR)—were inspecting cars entering Kosovo. Shuki’s heart raced in anticipation of reaching Prishtina and she

held back tears. After the checkpoint, she asked her driver to open his window, but the air that struck her face “smelled of war.” As they drove on, they heard shooting in the distance. KFOR troops advised them to stop their journey for the night. There was sporadic fighting in Prizren, south of Prishtina, as Serb paramilitary soldiers were refusing to flee and resisted surrender. The KFOR soldiers let Shuki and other returnees park their vehicles in the yard of their base for the night.

In the morning, they continued their journey through Prizren. Shuki remembered the town from the time she was on the run—its beauty and ethnically-mixed inhabitants waking to the sound of both cathedral bells for the Serbs and the muezzin calling the Muslim Albanians to pray. This morning, however, the town was silent and empty. She did not recognize the road they had taken and all the road signs had been destroyed. They passed burned houses, and in the town center, the few people she saw walked hurriedly. When they finally reached Prishtina, the sight of the city overwhelmed her. When she fled in April, she thought it was the last time she would be seeing the city of her birth. Like in Prizren, the city was deserted with only a few people scampering in the streets. But the sight of KFOR troops filled her with joy; there were no longer any Serb soldiers to drag them out of the vehicle, force them to walk, or destroy their documents.

When she reached Bihaqi Street after the long journey, she was paralyzed for a moment, looking down the road for memories of her childhood. Finding few, she walked to her house and knocked on the door several times before her sister Higi looked out through the window. She screamed when she saw Shuki, threw open the door, and hugged her tightly. When her father came to the door to see about the commotion, he took both of them in his arms.

Higi soon went to prepare something to eat for them, leaving Shuki to wander in the yard. She looked at the spot where her mother used to sit, near her father’s carpentry workshop.

Wishing her mother were still alive to breathe the air of freedom, Shuki cried, “Mother, where are you? Why are you not here to welcome me home?” She thought she heard her mother’s voice reply, “I am right here.”

When Bahria arrived with her husband and daughter, Shuki could not hold back her tears. Her sister had lost a lot of weight and now wore a timid look; she “had no voice, no tears.” Shuki hugged her and whispered, “Please, tell me what happened to you. Why won’t you speak to me?”

Sensing Bahria was deeply traumatized by the war, Shuki later learned that paramilitary forces had come to her home many times threatening to kill her and her sons. She witnessed two truckloads of corpses being buried in a mass grave near her house, but had not told anyone about it, “afraid that even the apartment walls would record this information” and the police would come to kill her family.

In the days that followed, Shuki walked around the town in search of traces of her past. She often took strolls with her father to the national theater. On several occasions, she saw people singing and dancing, celebrating Kosovo’s freedom—but Shuki sought her history in the bombed out streets and buildings, finding little. She was left with her “memories under the ruins” of all that was destroyed.

A Fresh Start

After the war and the return of thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees, the new United Nations Interim Administrative Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was overwhelmed by legal cases involving housing and property disputes. In addition, the arrival of the United Nations meant that locals with English language skills were in high demand. Shuki utilized several of her abilities as

she began work with the Housing and Property Directorate (HPD) of an agency called UN-HABITAT, or the United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

Working sixteen-hour days, Shuki researched and translated legislation on housing and property rights from the Kosovo parliament, which required fluency in both Serbian and English, in addition to her native Albanian. She also liaised with prominent lawyers in Kosovo, became a media spokesperson for the agency, and eventually drafted legislation on property rights. In her spare time, she taught English language courses to legal advisors, not only because the UN required its staff to have command of the language, but also because she understood the importance of local capacity and the necessity of voices from the ground entering the dialogue on the future of Kosovo. “I made sure the international experts had feedback from local people. I wanted to show the international community that we were ready to cooperate and we deserved to become a country. We had a lot of capacity.” Her hard work led to an appointment as the co-head of the Legal Department in the Kosovo Cadastral Agency.

A Specific Form of Violence

Just as adult Albanian men had been singled out for murder in Milosevic’s strategy of ethnic cleansing during the war, women also suffered a distinct type of violence under the genocidal policy: rape and sexual abuse. In the early 1990s when Shuki was working as a journalist, she helped the founders of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, Sevdije Ahmeti and Vjosa Dobruna, by writing articles for the center and reporting from the field on gender-based violence that was occurring even before the major war later in the decade. But after 1999, the number of cases of violence against women skyrocketed. Many Serb soldiers and police were ruthless, believing that the rape and forced impregnation of Albanian women would

destroy the ethnic lines of Albanians. In one case from the center, a twenty-two-year-old woman was raped by Serb policemen in front of her parents. Her father was bound, gagged, and forced to watch as seven Serb policemen took turns raping his daughter, carved the four Cs of the Serb nationalist symbol¹⁶ onto her breasts, and then broke each of her fingers before she finally lost consciousness. Her younger brother was subsequently killed; her father “lost his mind and memory.” The woman decided to speak out about what had happened to her, in the hope that others like her would follow suit to expose the cruelty of the Serb campaign.

After the war, Shuki again helped Sevdije and Vjosa at the center in her spare time. In the post-conflict atmosphere, Shuki—in her new role as mediator at Partners Center for Conflict Management—began receiving reports of human trafficking. From those reports and the local press, she learned that many girls and women who had been raped were taken as prostitutes to Italy and western Europe. Some of the girls, like one named Flutura, escaped and returned home in hopes of reconciling with their families.

Flutura came to see Shuki on a referral from a friend working with an international agency who knew Shuki could help mediate between father and daughter. The young girl was tall with blonde hair and blue eyes, but timid despite her beauty. She looked frightened and her eyes constantly darted around the office. She spoke in a low voice to Shuki, afraid someone was eavesdropping. Her story was like many other disturbing testimonies Shuki had documented about paramilitary soldiers holding Albanian girls in captivity and using them as sex slaves during the war. Flutura had escaped from the soldiers after three weeks, but she was shunned by her father upon her return home. He spoke harsh words: “I feel sorry for you, but I cannot accept

¹⁶ In the Cyrillic alphabet and Serbian language, the four Cs stand for *Samo Sloga Srbina Spašava*, “only unity saves the Serbs.”

you home. You have brought shame to our family. Killing yourself would have made it easier for all of us.”

With no home or family, Flutura joined the wave of young women being trafficked to western Europe, believing they would at least have income and a new opportunity abroad. But she soon learned the reality of the brothel and was able to escape Italy and make her way back to Kosovo. Flutura first went to a rehabilitation center, but said she did not feel welcome. She lived in a safe house for a time and got a job at a cafe, but the owner made sexual advances toward her.

Flutura leaned over Shuki’s desk and whispered that she needed to be reconciled with her family—she had nowhere to go and missed them. Throughout their conversation she kept repeating, “I hate myself. I hate my life. I am not important to anyone. I feel like a used dress that needs to be dumped in a trash can. I don’t know to whom I belong. I am afraid the ‘bosses’ will come looking for me.”

Shuki asked her not to get in touch with the men who had taken her to Italy. She agreed, and Shuki committed to meeting Flutura’s parents.

At the initial meeting with the couple, Shuki started off discussing the situation in Kosovo, asking about their lives and their health. They were curious as to what kind of work she did, and she told them she worked with UN-HABITAT—but that now she was a mediator. She then mentioned how important it was to solve disputes between parents and their children. They drew back, the father asking in a solemn tone why Shuki was in their home.

Shuki tried to appeal to his pride: “I am going to be straight with you. I know that you are a strong man and stayed here during the war. You did not leave your country. I was not as strong as you are; I left my country. But I know you were strong and brave, you are proud of yourself,

your people, your country, and that is why I knew I could come and talk to you openly. I believe you have a big heart and can forgive.”

The man took off his hat and held it between his hands in his lap. Sighing, he looked at Shuki. “You think I am a strong man?”

“Yes, I believe you are a strong man. You have children and I can only imagine how difficult it was to face the soldiers. We have been suffering for so many years for freedom. The terrible things that happened to us were not our fault. And it was not your daughter’s fault. Have you thought about how she is feeling?”

He broke down in uncontrollable sobs and could not speak. But Shuki continued, “Do you think it was easy for her? Hasn’t she been through enough being raped? And then she is thrown out of the house by her own father.”

The man pleaded with her to stop. Shuki allowed him to gain his composure before they discussed him accepting her back. She tried to show him that his daughter’s situation was not her fault and so had not brought shame to the family. He agreed, but was concerned that Flutura would return to prostitution because of peer pressure. He asked Shuki to guarantee her good behavior, something she could not promise in good faith. But she reminded him, “We are all human beings and capable of making mistakes. We are not gods. Please give me your *besa*¹⁷ that you will not treat her badly.”

He promised, still crying, and stood up to embrace Shuki.

But “not everything we do turns out well.” Shuki soon discovered that Flutura was back in Italy. The “bosses” had stalked her down.

¹⁷ *Besa* is an Albanian word for oath.

Tradition

Shuki was well-respected for her imprisonment on behalf of the freedom of Kosovo Albanians, for her journalism, and for exposing human rights violations with the CDHRF. In the 1990s, she also gained notoriety for her work with the Council of Reconciliation, spearheaded by University of Prishtina professor Anton Çeta. The council brought together Albanians from within Kosovo and from the diaspora to settle sometimes decades-long blood feuds.¹⁸ It was as a prominent mediator for the council that Shuki learned the practices of traditional Albanian mediation—primarily from the *Kanun of Leke Dukagjini*, a fifteenth century document regulating Albanian life—and how to adapt it to the modern culture of Kosovo Albanians and contemporary practices of conflict resolution.

Shuki was still working for the Kosovo Cadastral Agency when she was approached for a job at Partners Center for Conflict Management-Kosova, or Partners-Kosova, a local NGO that is part of the international group Center of Partners for Democratic Change. Shuki accepted the job, becoming the Executive Director of the center. Her primary responsibility, in addition to her administrative tasks, would be to mediate disputes in communities throughout the region.

Shuki's experience with the council in the 1990s set the foundation for her mediation work with her new organization. In one outstanding case of a blood feud in a rural village, a man had been killed in a land dispute and the victim's family was trying to exact revenge on the offender's family. The latter family was effectively in isolation, confined to their homes in fear of being killed. They approached the organization to help them settle the dispute without further violence. Though warned the victim's family was dangerous, Shuki took the case.

In her first visit to the village, Shuki and a colleague pounded on the large metal door knocker, but no one answered. A man called from the balcony and asked who was there.

¹⁸ See p. 9 for more information on blood feuds.

Remembering she was in a traditional village, Shuki cupped her hand over her mouth “like a man would,” and shouted, “Are there any brave men in the house to open the door for guests?”

From the balcony, the man could not tell whether Shuki was a man or a woman. He leaned over and put his hand across his forehead to shade the sunlight and get a better view. He refused to open the door until he knew the identity of his visitors. Shuki was honest and said she was from Partners-Kosova, there to mediate his conflict with the other family. The man, disgusted, retreated into the house, retrieved his gun, and shot it in the air. Shuki and her colleague fled.

A few days later, Shuki again approached the village. When she knocked on the door this time, a woman asked who was at the door. Shuki again appealed to traditional values, saying she was thirsty and needed water—in the Albanian tradition, it is morally wrong to deny people water if they request it. The woman opened the door and was pleased to see that Shuki was Albanian. Shuki, trying to build a good rapport, praised the woman’s garden. The hostess invited her in, seating her on a classic Albanian three-legged chair and brought her water and juice. When the woman inquired about her visit, Shuki told her she was there to discuss the family’s land dispute and perhaps to mediate for the two families. The woman directed her to the vineyard where the head of the family and his sons were working.

Shuki approached the vineyard, calling from a distance and asking if she could taste their grapes. The men welcomed her and sat on the ground, grateful to have visitors as an excuse to take a rest. Shuki followed suit and sat cross-legged on the ground with them as they began exchanging pleasantries. The head of the family thought she looked familiar, and Shuki responded that she was a journalist from Prishtina. “My name is Shukrije Gashi.”

“The Shukrije Gashi who was imprisoned?” he stood up in disbelief. Tipping his hat, he remarked. “I stand up to show you my respect. It is an honor to have you here.”

Shuki was humbled, and used this exchange to explain the real reason for her visit. “I know you are a well-known family and that when you know why I am here you will accept me. I would like to mediate the feud you are having with your neighbors.”

The man started playing with his moustache, contemplating Shuki’s remarks. He finally responded that for four years he had been receiving other men with moustaches who were trying to help, but he never listened to them. “But you are a woman and had the courage to knock on my door. You are Shukrije Gashi and have done good deeds for Kosovo. Now, have you heard the story?”

“I have heard only one story, but I want to hear the other side.”

He said it was a sensitive and complicated issue and should be discussed over a meal. He invited her in. Over lunch they conversed about the situation, which led to explanations and debate, which led to dinner, which led to more discussion, which ended with Shuki gaining the man’s trust. Together, Shuki and the head of the family drew up a strategy for the mediation. They would choose a third neutral house in the village for a large meeting with both families, to take place in two weeks.

The families met for a total of five sessions, with over forty people attending the final meeting. Shuki watched as the head of the victim’s family, the man who had risen to his feet to demonstrate his respect, forgave the family of the offender. The families shook hands, promising to no longer pursue their violent ways, and then went about preparing a feast for all forty people—and Shuki.

Freedom

This successful case is just one of the nearly 200 disputes Partners-Kosova has mediated and settled since 2001, the year Shuki became director. With forty-five volunteer mediators and over 2,000 participants in mediation sessions, Shuki and the center are “spreading the advantages of mediation,” and have even drafted a mediation law that is waiting approval in parliament. Her work is the culmination of all she learned from her family.

I am very thankful to [my grandmother], that she provided me with the knowledge of how to deal with dispute matters. I am grateful to my parents’ unwavering support all my life, for teaching me how to respect people and treat them equally regardless of their national upbringing.

Her work with Partners is demanding, but it is one way Shuki is helping to rebuild Kosovo as it looks forward to independence, even while still under international administration.

From her youth when she learned of her family’s struggles under repression, to her time as a political prisoner, to battling authorities in order to return to school or to get her passport issued, to having to flee the violence and insecurity of the 1999 war, to her work defending human rights, to trying to liberate her clients from patriarchal attitudes and the bitterness of past injustices, Shuki has found that “the most important thing is freedom, meaning the possibility of a person to live the life she or he wants, freedom as a citizen to be treated equally by law no matter his or her nationality, religion, or race.”

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