

## **My Parents' Story: A Narrative of Kosovo**

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Images: <http://www.garyknight.org/evidencekosovowarcrimesgk>



### **Florije Gerbeshi (Mom)**

In 1998 I was living in the region of Drenica, specifically the village of Komoran. The Kosovo Liberation Army along with Albanian citizens dug trenches to protect themselves from the Serbian tanks. The Kosovo Liberation Army fought in these trenches for the people of Kosovo. They warned other to relocate as Serbian forces were coming. They told my family to relocate because they did not have enough soldiers to save them.

We relocated to the mountains in Lapusnik where there were more soldiers to protect us. We stayed in these mountains until 1999. I am uncertain though how many months we hid there. With the clothing off our backs that we piled on before leaving our home and only the one pair of shoes that we left with, we shared with others who needed them, and they too shared with us when it came clothing and shoes.

In 1999, while in Lopusnik, 3-4 persons would walk to the village over in Nekofc. The Serbian forces had not yet arrived, so it was safe to go there and obtain food. Other villages gave food to those who had escaped their homes, giving them enough food for the family to survive. The village of Nekofc would then have to get good from other villages because they did not have enough for themselves.

Living in the mountains for days without nothing overhead to protect ourselves for the weather or from air strikes that the Serbian tanks propelled. After a couple of days, we began to build a small shelter out of various materials such as wooden sticks and rope, carefully constructed, and then a plastic film, like one you might see on a greenhouse, placed over the shelter. Water was obtained from a mountain stream and carried back to the shelter.

While living in the mountains, we heard from the Kosovo Liberation Army that several men and boys from our village were captured and killed. Many women and girls were raped, tortured, and killed. All these people I had known and respected. The only reason we knew about it was some females escaped during transit to other locations, and they remained hidden until the Kosovo Liberation Army came and saved them. The females lived to tell others of the atrocities committed to them and in front of them. Their lives were forever altered.

At some point we ran out of flour, as did villages. So, with my uncle and two brothers I set out on foot to our home and risked everything for the family to have food. As a female in Kosovo, it was frowned upon for me to go along with the men, but I went anyway because I did not want to live in a world where my brothers would risk their lives for me and not me for them. So the Serb forces wouldn't be aware of us, we through the mountains all day until we arrived at nighttime to what was left of our home. As we neared the area, we began to crouch down on our knees so as not to be seen and approached our home on our knees the rest of the way.

We could hear the Serbs singing their songs of hatred towards the Kosovars and drinking. Taking our chances, we approached the area where we hid our flour and vegetable oil that was stashed away from the home. The home that I grew up in had been burned down, as we knew they would, but seeing what remained of it was not easy.

Quickly, we retreated with our items secured and quietly began our departure to the shelter in the mountains. We were lucky. Air strikes continued. The United States intervened with NATO in June 1999 and began to air strike the areas where Serb forces lay. The Serbs retreated from these areas, and we were immediately able to see the Serbs going back to their home country. We were able to return to the area we used to call home and begin again.

## **Sylejman Gerbeshi**

In 1998, we were living in Marevec, a farming village located in a mountainous area. We were safe for now because the Serb forces would not attack our village without surveying our area with their helicopters and locating exactly where people lived. Because we were safe for the time being, other people city areas would come to Marevec to hide away and stay with us. I had finished high school in the city before the war began but was made aware that my K-8 school was now being filled with children from other towns.

I left for army training with the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) at age 25 to learn how to protect my village, how to shoot, how to escape if needed, and other techniques necessary during war. We had 4-hour shifts at night to watch the road entrance from the city to warn people ahead of time to get out of their homes and run. If a car of some sort was approaching the protocol was to flash our flashlights three times and if they stopped, they were our own, if they failed to stop, we were ordered shoot to stop the car.

In 1999 after serving 3 months with the army, I went home and began to work on the family farm as I used to. I began noticing these helicopters surveilling us overhead. It was alarming, but I kept working. I began running every day in the morning, but one day I saw the Serb forces approaching with tanks and began to shoot. We had just finished breakfast and upon seeing them coming we grabbed whatever food we could carry, opened the farm door for the cows to escape as well, and began running in the mountains.

For 3 days we were running and tried to reach the city, anyone we met along the way we asked where they were going. They merely responded, "I don't know." My parents, brother, and his three kids, at the time, travelled to the city. Then we were hearing that people entered the city were being killed.

In March 1999 NATO began employing air strikes against Serbian forces starting March 24<sup>th</sup>. For 78 consecutive days they did this until June 10<sup>th</sup>. They knew people would escape to the city, so they set up what one would call checkpoints every 200-300 feet where they would ask for money. We gave one Serb man money under the threat of life only to approach another point 200ft later. My father told him that we just paid the man behind us, he was slapped immediately. My older sister gave the man some money, money that was mainly Dinar or Francs. If you did not give them money, you were shot. Grashtic and Lukar were where the points were located.

As we travelled, we saw the groups of people who had left about 5 hours before us and were mutilated and massacred. I attempted to shield the women and children from the horror. We made it to the city on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day where the Serb police grabbed me by the arm because they thought my working hands had contributed to the development of trenches. My parents did not leave me behind and explained that my working hands were because of the farm work I did. They let me go.

Arriving in the city where my uncle, on my mother's side, made a friend's house available for us. We stayed for two weeks there before we heard from someone that the Serb forces were nearing there as well. The Serb police arrived and said to get out of their and go to Albania. We went to another place in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, another uncle, on my dad's side, found a place for us to stay.

Another two weeks were spent here as I tried to retrieve information on how to get back to our home, but was made aware that even if you found an area that did not have checkpoints, the Serb forces had placed land mines. The Serb military and police arrived at our home and forcibly took me and tied my hands behind my back. They took me and entered other homes and began taking others around the same age as well, under the assumption that we had information for them to use against the Kosovo Liberation Army.

We were placed in the basement of a building that had water up to my knees. They would call you to interrogate you. I did not give any information to the interrogator. They placed us back towards the wall and hands on top of our head all day, tortured to no end until it was your turn to be interrogated again. At one point I was forced to beat up another man my age. They played mind games with all of us under the threat of our lives and there

was nothing we could do but comply with every order. They threw knives. They threw knives at us for fun and laughed as we would shift aside to avoid the knife. The baton was used by the police to beat us while the military used a stick that they cut pieces off to hurt us in the most unimaginable ways.

We were only given small pieces of bread and water from the river, enough merely to live only to be tortured the next day. The bathroom was allowed only once a day. Once there were many of us in their basement, prisoners began fighting over food because they purposely cut the bread so that one person would receive a bigger piece and the other a smaller one. Fights ensued from this. I was tortured for one month and my family had no idea where I was or if I was alive or not. Starved, malnourished, dirty, and unrecognizable, the physical, physiological scars remained.

Leaving the basement, we did not know where they were taking us. They put us outside in the extreme heat, no water, and then after seeing us suffer placed us in a bus on the floor. On June 5<sup>th</sup> I knew we were in Lipljan in jail. So, I knew if the bus turned left we would approach Pristina, in we turned right Macedonia. The bus turned right. We were told we could sit on the seats once we were surrounded by mountains. We were stopped in the mountains by tanks and immediately everyone thought that this is where it all ends. They're going to kill us here and leave us.

They held us for 20 minutes before they told us to go and enter Macedonia. Leave Kosovo because it is their land, not ours. We were told to walk in line towards the Macedonian border, told by one Serb to place our hands up, by another down, again for their fun under the threat of being shot to death. Once we saw the Macedonian flag, we were all so happy. The Macedonians stopped us for 2-3 hours to ask questions. Then the U.S. and NATO came to Macedonia and gave us food, specifically cans of beans and water. Then we took a bus to a camp in Macedonia holding too many people for me to count.

I stayed at this camp for three months unable to get information back to my family that I was alive and well, nor did I know if they were still alive. Plenty of Americans were working to help us and one even helped me find a number to call my family. I had tried to seek out a phone number of a distant cousin I found at the camp, but that led nowhere. An American helped me locate the number of a cousin of mine in America, but my other brother found. Turns out my distant cousin I had found was able to somehow get word to my family. My family knew where I was and that I was alive.

Whilst at the camp I put my name down on a list for a visa for England but that one was full, so then I placed my name down on a list of visas for the United States. They accepted me but told me that I had to wait a bit longer. I went home and stayed for two days. Then I went back to camp and stayed for three months before I was finally told I could travel to the US on an immigration visa. I went to the US embassy in Macedonia for papers. In late July I left Macedonia for America.