

## **Bajram A.**

**“The groups from other countries will never threaten Swiss culture.”**



**Bajram A., m., born in Rezallë in Kosovo in 1956, in Switzerland since 1989**

*What's the name of the place you come from?*

I was born in the village of Rezallë, in the parish of Skenderaj, which lies north of the town of Mitrovicë. It's a largely rural area. There used to be no businesses there, no asphalt roads and no buses. When I was two years old, we moved to the town of Vushtri and lived there for twelve years. Then we moved on to Mitrovicë, where my family still live.

*Who lived in Vushtri?*

About 90 or 95 percent of the population were Albanians, with very few Serbs. But the regime ruled everywhere, even where there were no Serbs. One also felt the influence of the regime in the family. Rancovic was interior minister until 1968. After the end of the Second World War he started a campaign to disarm the Albanians. This, however, was merely a pretext to destroy the Albanian population.

*What work did your parents do?*

At first my father did farmwork. And later he was bought and sold a bit. He sold weapons sometimes, and animals too. But mostly he sold weapons illegally.

My mother was a housewife. It was her business to see that we children were fed properly, were clothed properly and went to school on time. She spent most of her time in the house, and she didn't go outside with us. But she saw to it that we are perhaps good people in our hearts. Outside we were mostly with our father, alone, or with friends.

Then my father went to Germany. He came back in 1969 and went back to Germany in 1971, where he is now retired. Then two brothers went to Germany too. I was 13 or 14 at the time,

the oldest in the house, and I had to take care of everything. Since we grew up without a father, I have my mother to thank that we didn't grow up as criminals or make problems, but were esteemed and respected by the neighbours.

My father would return on holiday sometimes. Once, in 1971 when I was fifteen, the police came to the house at two in the morning looking for my father. They didn't know that we were only expecting him later. I was angry and agitated, and they kicked me in the ribs with their heavy police boots.

*Why were they looking for your father?*

Even as a child he had struggled against the dictatorial regime in Belgrade. As a child he brought bread and information to those who were fighting illegally against the Chetniks. The Chetniks were the Serbs who massacred the Albanian population. In the stronghold of the resistance everybody had their part to play. When my father was eleven years old, he had an "Italian rifle", as it was called in those days. So he was fighting the Serbs when he was as young as eleven.

*Why did your father emigrate to Germany?*

In Vushtrri things became more difficult for him, politically and with the police. We moved to Mitrovicë then and built a two-storey house there. However, most didn't know how to work with concrete, and the house collapsed completely. He also went to Germany because of financial difficulties. In Mitrovicë we had no land. He worked for a while in a factory in Mitrovicë, but he couldn't feed a family of seven children on those wages.

*What work did he do in Germany?*

He worked in something like ten to fifteen jobs. Two or three years in this town, two or three in the next.

*How often did he come home?*

One time he was away for six years. Before that the police had threatened him that if he didn't work for them and spy on his own people abroad he'd have to hand in his passport and wouldn't be able to go to Germany any more. He left immediately, illegally, for Germany and didn't come back for six years.

*What did your father teach you was important in life?*

He taught our traditional laws: someone who steals may not live with his family any longer. I may not provoke or insult anybody, nor sleep with a married woman. Alcohol should be taken in such moderation that one does not lose control over it, otherwise bad things can happen. He also said: you must protect yourself. If someone insults you so badly that you can't bear it any more, hit back with all means. It's better to be dead than to live without honour.

*Did your mother have a different view of the world from your father's?*

My mother repeated what my father had said every two or three days, and she made sure that I didn't make any mistakes. She also had a great influence over me if I were agitated and about to react wrongly. Then she would calm me down and deal with small problems, for instance at school, in private life, or with the police. With bigger problems I had to telephone my father. For example, there was a policeman who searched us every second or third day. I telephoned my father, and he came back after three days. Because the policeman wanted to put my father and two brothers in jail, we decided to kill him. To save my father, who fed us, I should say that I was to do the deed. I was not yet eighteen years old. We discussed our plan with the clan. Everybody was in agreement. We looked for this high-ranking detective, but we couldn't find him. He must have heard something about our plan. Then my father went back to Germany, and the task was given to someone else. After my father went back to Germany, we never heard from the policeman again. Then we had an easier life.

*What were positive experiences at school, and what were negative?*

What was positive, as everywhere in the world, was that we were educated. Because in my parents' generation, 95 percent were illiterate. In their day there was no school. We were proud to go to school and we went with strong will to learn something. I had great respect for the teachers. If, for instance, I was smoking – I have smoked since childhood – and I met a teacher on the street, I'd try to hide the cigarette, because I was ashamed. At the primary school were about five teachers who had been politically persecuted. They told us in free time what they had been through. What I still values is that they told us that we should never hate another person simply because they belonged to another people. We had to hate bad people and value good ones, regardless of which people they belonged to or which country they came from or which religion they followed.

*What was your favourite subject?*

The English language.

*What did you do in your spare time?*

We were very busy at home. I was the oldest and had to care for my younger brothers and sisters. If they were at school late, sometimes until seven o'clock, and it was dark, I'd go and collect them to protect them from dangers, for instance being beaten up. I always discussed with my mother what I should buy the next day: wood, say, because we had no heating except a stove.

*What are your cultural influences?*

I have our traditions to thank. Also books. But mostly we men sat together. That was the tradition: that the men would sit together in a big room and speak together about what our parents had been through and what we were going through today. I also appreciated folklore very much. There are songs that can last for two hours. This folklore was a history lesson for me. These songs have preserved our culture and our tradition.

*What did you want to do for a living?*

Few people could study what they wanted. I wanted to attend a military academy. It was in Belgrade, but I could not accept that. However, the Serbs considered me unsuitable for this profession, because my father was an opponent of the regime. Then I wanted to study criminology, but that was no good either. So I applied for English and Albanian language and literature. But only because I didn't know what else; I saw myself in some other occupation. Then I was in the military for fifteen months, at a barracks at Nis in Serbia.

*What experience did you have of military life?*

With the ordinary ranks, who came from all over Yugoslavia, I had no bad experiences, even though there were differences of opinion and rows. Many kept some distance from the Albanians, because they knew that if one has an argument with an Albanian, he'll go straight for his gun. The greatest difference was with the officers. If a Serbian officer held command over Albanians, the Albanians suffered badly.

*How did it go after military service?*

In 1981 there were peaceful demonstrations in Kosovo. We wanted to show the world that we sought to solve this problem in a democratic manner. In the meantime, a lot had happened – imprisonments, killings: in many institutions there weren't any Albanians any more. At first the Albanians couldn't work for the local council, then for the police, then at the university, then for the government. Albanians were systematically ejected from all functions.

I still wanted to study. I was expelled from the university in 1982. I was morally and politically unsuitable and an indoctrinated person, they said. At that time we were reading writers with democratic principles or Albanian nationalists. That was forbidden. We also read illegal newspapers that came into Kosovo from abroad. They were written by Albanians who had been in Yugoslav jails and had later escaped. Then associations were founded.

*What was your goal after university?*

The university was no longer possible for me, as long as the regime was in power. Then the relationship between the regime and the population worsened extremely. I simply wanted to fight for my people's rights. With every month and every year the struggle against the regime became more dynamic. There were more and more demonstrations, which then also became more aggressive, on both sides. We were fighting with stones against tanks. Until 1989 I was involved in very dangerous affairs and was then obliged to go abroad. When I knew that the police were looking for me everywhere, I decided to hide myself somewhere. Where should I go? How should I go? My colleagues, who were active in Kosovo and abroad, decided and organised this.

*How did you travel?*

I didn't have a passport, but my colleagues sorted one out for me. We travelled a certain way in a car, then I got into another car, and then we travelled on in two different buses. We got to Switzerland via Austria and Germany. I slept one night at a colleague's in Schaffhausen and then went to the reception centre in Kreuzlingen. The first days were terrible. It was the first time I had been abroad and had to deal with a state institution. I was very sad that I had had to leave Kosovo. In Kreuzlingen they took our photograph and fingerprints. I thought to myself: have I come to a prison here? Why these stringent checks? A friend said to me then that it was normal, which calmed me somewhat. I was a week in Kreuzlingen and was then sent to Nurensdorf, where we were very nicely welcomed by Herr Vogt from the local council. The people there were also very good, and always greeted us. That was a kind of enlightenment for me. At that time I spoke English, because I couldn't speak German very well. I was really happy to have contact with people who didn't hate me. That was my first contact with another people.

*How did you live there?*

We lived in an old house. Most of us were Albanians: four refugees and three Albanian families that worked here with permits. According to the regulations I wasn't allowed to work here for three months. I realised that I had to learn German so as not to be more isolated. So I learned German for eight hours a day for the three months. When I could go to work after three months, it wasn't a problem.

I saw an advert in the *Tagblatt* looking for a waiter and clerk for the Spaghetti Factory in Zurich. I was hired as a clerk. The first words I said to my boss were: "Mr B, it could be that I can't work well. It could be that I'm not perfect or professional. But please don't shout at me. If I've done something badly, we can just say goodbye to each other." I worked two days as a clerk, then I became a kitchen help. Most of the others were also asylum seekers, from Turkey and Tamils from Sri Lanka. After two months I was responsible for the whole kitchen. I had problems a couple of times with people who didn't want to work, or who weren't clean. With a Pakistani it even came to a fight in the kitchen. I thought he was a criminal. Luckily, he didn't come back to work after that. I worked there for another year. After that I worked in various different jobs and finally was unemployed for about a year and a half. In the meantime I had got a positive decision from the Federal office for refugees. Then I worked for three years at the central cantonal laundry in Zurich and had a very good experience there. The work was harder than as a waiter, but the relationship between the managers and the staff was very good. Then I wanted to earn more and become self-employed one day, and so I quit. Since 1995 I've worked in the post office, and I'm very happy there.

*How did you meet your wife?*

We knew each other before, since my political activities. She's sixteen years younger than I am. My father put some pressure on and persuaded me to get married. Every year he'd ask: "When are you going to get married?" In 1994 he came from Germany and said: "Either you find a wife next year or I'll bring one here for you in the traditional way. And if you make problems then, you'll either have to clear off or I'll destroy you." He said it in a nice way, but he meant it. My sister in Kosovo suggested that I should speak to an acquaintance in Kosovo. I thought she was too young, but I spoke with her. So it started, and then she said yes. Now we live here, and I'm very happy with her, even though there's a generation gap. In the first year it was very difficult, until we knew each other, but now it's so good that I'm very happy.

In the beginning we lived on Josefstrasse, near the drug scene around Langstrasse. She was frightened to go out and wanted to go back to Kosovo, it was like a prison for her here. We had a very small room, 2 metres by 3.7 metres. We ate and slept there and paid 1200 francs a month for it. I said to her: "Wait a little bit. Get in contact with people. Don't be frightened, you're in Switzerland now. You're not in Serbia or Kosovo, where you need to be frightened." She asked me: "Who should I have contact with? I can't speak a word with anybody. If I'm sitting in a restaurant, what shall I order? Who shall I say anything to?" Then the first child came, and the second and the third. Because of the children she couldn't attend German classes.

She went to the employment office, and the people there helped her a lot. She was on a German course for three months and in a project for six months which involved two days at

school and three days working in an old people's home. A great change in her was soon noticeable. Since this work at the old people's home she's much more self-confident, surer in every way. And her opinion of the Swiss and the Swiss way of life has changed one hundred percent.

*Do you have contact with your neighbours here in this building?*

Yes – although not as much as I had imagined. We have other customs, and there are rules here that we sometimes forget, because they don't mean anything to us. Not that we don't respect them, but to keep a grasp of them all . . . to remember when one is to do the washing, or that one can wash until half past nine, was not important during the war in Kosovo. Some families have no understanding of that. But there are also neighbours who understand that very well and who help us. I really appreciate that, because we need help to integrate. Integration doesn't just mean attending some courses. Integration involves life in general. If Swiss neighbours have some understanding for us, that makes integrating much easier. I have a lot of contact with Swiss people, also outside this building. We keep company with families with children. Albanian families who have contact with Swiss people have a very different picture of Switzerland than isolated people.

*Would you like to stay here, or do you plan to go back to Kosovo?*

My father would always say: "I'll only stay another year. Then I'm coming home". Then the next year came and went, and the next, and the next. He retired in Germany. I grew up without a father, and why? Because he always said: "Next year I'll go back." When my child went to the kindergarten here, I said: "I'll never leave the children without a father. Either we all go back, or we all stay here." Now my daughter has grown up here and speaks the local language. She's very well integrated. I don't want the children to have to go through what I did. It's about 95 percent certain that we'll stay in Switzerland, as long as a large part of the population doesn't develop a hatred towards Albanians. If the Swiss don't want to integrate Albanians or make them Swiss citizens, then I won't stay. But as long as there's a will from the Swiss side, I'll make the effort.

*How long will it be before you get Swiss citizenship?*

Normally you can put the application in after ten years. But every local council has a couple of stipulations. In April of this year I will have been in Switzerland for ten years, but I've only been in Bülach for two. I have to stay here in Bülach for the next five years before I can put my application in. I find it difficult to understand what difference it makes whether I live in Bülach or in Berne.

*Once you're a Swiss citizen, will you take part in Swiss civic life?*

I was very politically active in Kosovo. But I won't be politically active here. In many ways I can't think like a Swiss. I can read about what's going on, but there's always a gap between someone who's born here and someone who comes in from outside.

*What is your relationship with Kosovo Albanians here in Switzerland?*

We're in a cultural association in Höri. We meet there sometimes. We have meetings together. I'm even the representative of this association to the Swiss public authorities. As well as that, I'm a member of the integration committee at Böswiesli school. In general I have more contact with Swiss people than I do with Albanians.

*What's your contact with Kosovo like? In the last ten years, before the war broke out there, did you go back at all?*

No, I couldn't go back because of the political problems. There is also a Swiss regulation that someone with refugee status can't go back to their country of origin. I have contact via the telephone most often. If someone was in Kosovo I spoke with them the whole day, asking about every little detail. It was the longing, the homesickness.

*What do you think is missing most from your homeland?*

The freedom. For me the most important thing would be that she would be free to found a state on the Swiss model. That everybody would be free and have freedom of opinion. There's no life without freedom.

*What do you feel about the image of Kosovo Albanians in the press and in politics?*

Perhaps on or two percent of Albanians are criminals. I can't accept it when I hear that "Albanians are criminals", when that tars the 98 percent with the same brush as the one or two percent. I'm also opposed to the fact that there are Albanian criminals. I'd even oppose them actively. But there are criminals everywhere, as there are good people everywhere, as there are people in between and all different people.

*Why do you think that there is this negative image of Kosovo Albanians?*

Let's take the first example in Zurich. Here people just saw Albanians selling drugs. Then it went further and further. The newspapers contributed a great deal to the idea of "those Kosovo Albanians".

I don't let myself get mixed up in Swiss politics. But the posters that read "No to Kosovo Albanians" were a shock for me. If there were no work for the Swiss and we had therefore to



Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

leave Switzerland, I'd be the first to go, whatever might await me in Kosovo. I'd say: "Thank you for letting me stay so many years. Now you have your own troubles." But I have real problems with this "No to Kosovo Albanians".

*What's needed for the coexistence of the different language and culture groups to develop positively here in Switzerland?*

An understanding of the principles and cultures of others. The various groups from other countries will never threaten Swiss culture. If, for instance, I dance an Albanian dance in an Albanian cultural association? Or if I put on a performance with this dance group? That wouldn't endanger Swiss culture. I have to know Swiss culture, because I live here in Switzerland. And I'm not saying that Swiss people have to learn our culture. But it would be much better, on a human level, if they were to learn a little of our culture too.

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch  
Translation: Simon Milligan



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