

‘With Our Bare Hands’: The Roma Forced to Clean up Serbia’s Crimes in Kosovo

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During the 1998-99 war in Kosovo, Roma municipal employees were forced to clean up the crimes committed by Serbian forces, carrying and disposing of corpses with their bare hands. Branded collaborators, they were targeted for revenge after the fighting finished.

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Twenty-five years ago, Shyhrete Berisha was taken for dead, her limp body dragged to a truck and tossed on top of dozens of others. The corpse of her husband was among them, and four of their children. But Shyhrete, 37 years old at the time, was still alive.

“We’ve got to clean this place up,” she recalled hearing, shortly after members of her immediate and extended family were herded into a café in Suhareka/Suva Reka by Serbian forces, who then lobbed hand grenades inside. Forty-eight people died. Somehow, Shyhrete, her sister-in-law Vjollca and Vjollca’s nine-year-old son, Gramoz, survived.

It was March 26, 1999, two days into a NATO bombing campaign that would take 11 weeks to drive Serbian forces from Kosovo and halt a wave of massacres and ethnic cleansing against ethnic Albanians in what was then a southern province of Serbia.

Lying in the truck, wounded in one arm and her abdomen, Shyhrete saw the body of her son, Altin, and called out to him, alerting Vjollca that her sister-in-law was alive. They decided to jump, but from the rear of the truck, not the sides, to avoid being spotted in the wing mirrors. Someone saw them anyway – Ali Gjogaj, a Roma municipal cleaner who had been forced by the Serbs to help dispose of the bodies.

“I remember there were Roma people there but I didn’t remember any faces,” Shyhrete told BIRN by phone from Germany, where she has lived since shortly after the war. “After the war, he (Gjogaj) stopped me in the street... and told me he had seen me in the café and had also seen me in the mirror.”

On the same July day in 2002, Shyhrete and Gjogaj both took the stand against former Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic in his trial at the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

“I can’t say anything bad about him [Gjogaj],” Shyhrete said.

Gjogaj, who died in 2016, was haunted by what he saw and did during the 1998-99 war. He was one of a number of Roma municipal employees ordered by Serbian forces to clean up the scenes of their crimes, lifting, loading and disposing of the corpses of Kosovo Albanian civilians as part of a systematic effort to conceal the evidence of Serbian war crimes.

After the war, they and their families became targets of Kosovo Albanian revenge attacks. Many left, never to return. This is their story.

‘Only God knows what I have seen’



Ali Gjogaj testifying at a war crimes trial in The Hague. Screenshot: ICTY.

“In April and May 1999, we were taken by police to a number of mass graves, where they loaded corpses into refrigerator trucks and transported them first to garages near the mortuary in Prizren then to other sites, where they were reburied. We assisted in Prizren, Rahovec [Orahovac], Suhareke [Suva Reka], Lubizhde [Ljubizda], Korishe [Korisa], Pastasel [Pusto Selo], Xerxe [Zrze], Dushanove [Dusanovo] and other locations where these bodies were to be buried.”

And as he did so, Gjogaj marked the graves on a map.

“After that, I wasn’t able to sleep. I had constant nightmares. I had to keep working to feed my family.”

Gjogaj spoke in 2009, in an interview with this reporter shortly after testifying for the second time in The Hague. He was 56 years old and we met in a café in Prizren, where he still lived despite at least two attempts on his life.

Gjogaj had worked for a public utility company called Higijena [Hygiene], a cleaning company that also tended to the local cemeteries. When the war began, most of his Albanian colleagues were either fired or left, leaving the Roma almost alone.

They weren’t paid, recalled Luljeta Braha, a Kosovo Albanian administrative employee of the company who continued to work during the war. “They gave us some flour, oil, and jam. Those who worked in cleaning didn’t have even basic tools.”

Natasa Kandic, founder and director of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre, which has spent decades documenting war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, said most Roma “were compelled into all kinds of forced labour across Kosovo, including burying the bodies of Albanians, in most cases victims of mass executions”.

A significant number of Roma performed these tasks against their will, either fearing punishment or induced by the promise of rewards that would enable them and their families to survive. Some volunteered for the Serbian police or military units.

“The Roma were at times brought to the scene immediately after the executions had been carried out, or days later when the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition,” Kandic told BIRN. “They worked without masks, gloves, or adequate equipment.”

One of Gjogaj’s colleagues, Shefki Salihu, recalled a loud knock on his door at midnight on April 6, 1999. It was his Serb boss, Budimir ‘Buda’ Spasic.

“He ordered me to go with him, saying it was something very important. With him were my colleagues Ali [Gjogaj], Mirsad [Karce], and Isuf [Krasniqi]. We headed towards Suhareke and stopped at the shooting range in Lubizhde. We were ordered not to look behind or around, only at the bodies lit by the lights of military vehicles.”

“The military ordered us to load the bodies into a truck. We weren’t in our uniforms and had only bare hands. There were around 80 decomposing bodies.”

Salihu spoke to this reporter on January 12, 2020 at his home in Prizren, as then one of the last surviving municipal employees forced by Serbian forces into cleaning up their crimes in 1999. He had retired six months before the interview. Two days after he spoke, he died aged 61. Krasniqi died in 2016.

“Only God knows what I have seen,” Salihu said. “I don’t know how I didn’t go mad. To handle bodies with your bare hands was unbearable. There were children as well.”

Two weeks after the Lubizhde/Ljubizda ‘clean-up’, the crew was sent to Pastasel/Pusto Selo, where 119 civilians had been killed on March 31.

“In Pastasel, the bodies had started to decompose and were full of worms,” Salihu recalled. “They brought us plastic bags to put them in.”

Salihu said he tried to keep track of where the bodies were buried. “I took so many notes during April but then I grew afraid and tore most of them up,” he said. “Later, I mostly revealed things by remembering places where the bodies were buried, even when it was dark.”

“I was struggling mentally and couldn’t tell anybody what was happening to me,” he said.

In November 1999, months after the war had ended, Gjogaj’s father turned up at Salihu’s house, asking for help. “When I went to his home, Ali [Gjogaj] was under the sink in the kitchen. He couldn’t sleep from the nightmares. His wife told me he was screaming and calling my name.”

‘His clothes were always bloody’



Shefki Salihu, who was forced to take part in the ‘clean-up’. Photo: BIRN.

Gjogaj drank heavily and suffered from anxiety, high blood pressure and thyroid issues, his son, Hydajet, told BIRN.

“He started to drink during the war,” Hydajet said. “At that time, I was seven years old and I remember he barely spoke. I only remember his clothes were always bloody. My older sister used to wash them.”

“He just drank and went to sleep. It was only later we understood why he drank so much and what that blood on his clothes meant.”

From the spring of 1999, he said, his father “changed completely”.

During his [testimony](#) in The Hague, Gjogaj spoke of digging mass graves. “They told us, ‘Don’t go home tonight’. Then they sent us to Shpenadi [Spinadija] village. At a garbage dump, we dug a pit where we placed around 20 bodies.” None of the bodies were in uniform, he said, and bullet wounds were visible on those that had not yet decomposed.

The end of the war brought new problems for Gjogaj and his colleagues. Many Kosovo Albanians saw the Roma as collaborators with the Serbs; they were targeted for revenge, by ordinary Albanians and by fighters of the guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA.

“I remember one night Shefki [Salihu] called me because some armed people burst into his home, asking him to leave,” said Besnik Kryeziu, an ethnic Albanian and another of the Higijena employees. “When I went there, I saw people who weren’t KLA, at least not from this region. I think they were just gangs and looters in KLA uniforms.”

Days later, armed men confronted Gjogaj and Salihu as they worked in the graveyard.

“We’ll cut off your heads,” Kryeziu remembered them saying. “I told them to go away.”

By marking where they had buried the bodies, Salihu and Gjogaj were later able to help Kosovo Albanians’ find the remains of their loved ones, Kryeziu told BIRN.

“Among those who found the bodies of their family members were also KLA people,” he said. “It’s a shame because they [Salihu and Gjogaj] suffered so much. They were just workers. Nobody asked them whether or not they wanted to do that job.”

Another of the Roma cleaners, Gazmend Kryeziu, left Kosovo for Montenegro when the war ended in June 1999. Recalling how he would load bodies onto trucks in the western city of Gjakova/Djakovica, he told BIRN: “I wasn’t told anything. I was only ordered to follow the police. Most of the bodies were in the city, and I only loaded them onto trucks or tractors.”

Karce, a member of the ethnic Gorani community of southern Kosovo and another of the municipal cleaners, left Kosovo after the war out of fear for his life. Speaking from his home in Montenegro, he declined to talk about his experiences during the war, saying he had told everything to UN prosecutors.

Twenty-five years on, the scars of the war and what followed are still felt by Kosovo’s Roma community.

“I think these war and post-war experiences still influence the lives of individuals in the Roma community today,” said Isak Skenderi, a right activist and director of the Pristina-based NGO Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians.

Even Braha, an ethnic Albanian, was stigmatised for years for having stayed on to work for Higijena during the war. Like her Roma colleagues, Braha said she was seen for a long time after as “the enemy’s servant”.