

Written testimony of **Mr. Liridon Markaj**
submitted before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
on “Kosovo’s Wartime Victims: The Quest for Justice”
April 30th, 2019

I was born in Gjakova on April 30th, 1984. I grew up in the village Korenica, that is where I finished elementary school. My family were farmers. We were a large family of 30 members, and my grandmother was the matriarch. Much like other children, I spent my childhood playing. I loved sports. However, I also helped my family farm the land. We planted peppers, cucumbers, tobacco, and watermelon. We lived off of our land, and we had a good life. We were a Catholic family. My mother was a homemaker, and my father was a teacher. After my father was fired from his job by the regime, he began to work in the parallel system.

My father had been politically active since the 1980s. In 1992, the Serbian police arrested him because he was a member of the municipal council in Gjakova and he had spoken against the Serbian regime. He had been warned not to speak out. Nevertheless, he continued to do so. The Serbian criminal, Milutin Prascevic, once beat my father to a pulp and left him for dead. After that things deteriorated. While we were never truly free, now we were also unsafe and abused.

I went to high school in Gjakova. The walk to school was long and arduous. It was made harder by the regular beatings and berating by the Serbian police. In the winter of 1998, my father came to pick me up in the village Brekoc. I was together with my brother, my cousin, and two other friends. All six of us got stuffed into one car. The Serbian police stopped us on the road. We thought they would kill us on the spot, but we made it out alive by a stroke of luck.

When the war began, our movements became very limited and difficult. On April 5th, 1998 we were forced out of our house. Milutin Prascevic was there. The Serbian forces lined us into columns along with people from the village Gusk and made us walk to the border with Albania. Then they decided to walk us all the way back.

When the NATO airstrikes began we were in our house following the news. I will never forget the feeling of pure joy when we got word of the NATO intervention. We all went out on the balcony in exhilaration. We had no idea what would follow. After that, we were unable to walk out of our houses. We couldn't even go to our uncle's place across the yard. About 80 people were staying with us at our house.

On April 27th, 1999 my mom woke us up at the break of dawn and told us that we had been surrounded. When I looked out the window, I saw rows of Serbian soldiers. It was a foggy morning, but when we looked onto the Erenik river, we could clearly see three rows of Serbian soldiers. We could also hear screams echoing through the village.

Once the fog cleared away, we were still in our house. Some villagers from the Kamberi family came by and asked us for shovels because one of their family members had been killed. We stayed inside the house. The elders went out to speak to the soldiers but were told to remain inside the house. Later the soldiers came over and told us that we have 5 minutes to get out. We all walked toward the village graveyard. When we got there, we saw three trucks overloaded with people. We ran into the

Kamberi family. They did not have a truck, so we took them onto ours. One of the trucks actually tipped over because it was overloaded, but fixed it and kept driving towards Mehje.

When we got to Mehje, we were met by men in masks. They were Serbian military and paramilitary forces. Some of them could speak Albanian. They ordered all the men to step down from the trucks. I did not, because I thought of myself as a child. I was quite tall, but I was only fourteen years old. They dragged me out of the truck and onto the ground. They took all of our valuables and told us to walk down the street. Then they made us sing Serbian songs. First, they would sing the words to us. Then we had to repeat it to them as they shot their automatic weapons over our heads. We thought that this would be our end. I was in the line with my hands over my head and the Serbian police kept telling us to yell "Kosovo je Srbije / Kosovo is Serbia." There, in that line, is the last time that I ever saw my uncles.

After a while, we noticed that the first two trucks were leaving the area. On our way to Mehje, I had been on the third truck. It was not my family's truck. It was actually our neighbor's truck, and I had been on it with my grandmother. The soldiers took me out of the line and one of them hit me on the face with their gun. They dragged me to the third truck and made me drive it. My grandmother was still on the truck. After a few miles, I lost consciousness and my father came to drive the truck in my stead. We were stopped in every village along the way. The soldiers dragged us off of the trucks. They beat us and they terrorized us. Then they loaded us back on the trucks and drove to the next village. It went on like that, all the way to Albania.

After the war ended, we returned home. Our house was completely wrecked and partially burned down. It had been used as a military base by the Serbian forces. We slowly put both the house and our lives back together from scratch. We went back to work, continued school, and got married. Every day, we woke up anxious for news about my uncles. Every night we went to sleep with the hope that we would reunite with them.

On May 15th, 2003 I was at work at the hospital when I heard the news. They had found a mass grave from the massacre in Mehje and my two uncles' names were on the list. Uncle Gjovalin (36) and uncle Milan (35). When their bodies were brought back, my family had to relive the tragedy all over again. My grandmother carried us through it all. She insisted on seeing the bodies before they were buried. I remember that she was struck because the bodies seemed to have been burned. We buried my uncles on May 23rd, 2003.

For weeks on end, people and journalists came from everywhere to visit us. Just after all the ceremonies were over, one night, my grandmother split all her savings and distributed the money to each member of the family. The next morning, before dawn, she went to visit the graves of her two sons. On the way back, halfway between our house and the graveyard, she covered herself in gasoline and burned herself alive. 372 people died in Mehje with my uncles. Their bodies were found in Batajnice in 2003.

I ask the esteemed United States Congress to seek justice for the victims of war crimes and human rights abuses committed in Kosovo.