

Trauma and Healing in Zef Pllumi's Live to Tell Trilogy

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Abstract. Humanity has periodically faced tragic events, with studies seeking to explain each case. History has shown that wars, pandemics, and totalitarian regimes can brutally take the lives of innocent people. They also leave lasting trauma for survivors, making the healing process lengthy. A totalitarian regime is an overcontrolling government that interferes unnecessarily in citizens' lives. It deforms, alienates, and destroys individuals. The *Live to Tell* trilogy written by Franciscan priest Zef Pllumi¹, who was imprisoned for twenty-five years, attests to these shocking facts and the consequences of prolonged persecution on a person's life, and in this way represents society as a whole. Zef Pllumi was a survivor of the Albanian 'Gulag' who courageously reconstructed the history of persecution, specifically that of religious missionaries during the dictatorship that took hold in Albania from the end of the Second World War until 1990, in a confessional narrative. The trilogy is factual and analytical evidence, encompassing historical, documentary, reflective, analytical, and descriptive discourses. Categorised as documentary literature, this trilogy simultaneously presents facts and fiction to the reader. Above all, it affirms Zef Pllumi's human mission and desire to survive under extreme conditions, fuelled by faith in God and love of life. This historical and memoirist trilogy offers an alternative perspective on Albanian history during the communist regime. "Live to Tell", written in the Geg dialect of northern Albania, serves as a liberating confession of the true story of religious persecution. It aims to heal personal and collective trauma by revealing truths that were never acknowledged by the state at the time. The healing process requires the strength to remember and not forget the past.

Keywords: documentary literature; healing; persecution; trauma; "Live to tell trilogy"; Zef Pllumi

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¹ Zef Pllumi (1924–2007) was an Albanian Franciscan priest and memoirist. After 26 years in communist prisons, he wrote *the trilogy: Rrno vetëm për me tregue (Live to Tell)* I. *The Book of Memory (1944–1951)*; II. *Freedom between Two Imprisonments (1950–1967)*; III. *The Long Slavery (1967–1989)*, published by Botimet Franceskane, in Shkodra, 2015.

Introduction

This paper explores the profound effect of totalitarian regimes on individuals and societies, focusing on the long-lasting trauma experienced by survivors of oppressive systems. It specifically highlights the work of Zef Pllumi, a Franciscan priest who endured twenty-five years of imprisonment under the communist dictatorship in Albania. Through his trilogy, which blends historical facts, personal memoirs, and analytical reflection, Pllumi offers a poignant account of religious persecution during this period. Written in the Geg dialect of northern Albanian *Rrno, vetëm për me tregue* ("Live to Tell") serves as a confessional narrative, shedding light on the untold stories of religious missionaries and the broader societal suffering inflicted by the regime. This literary work, organised in three parts, not only documents historical events but also engages in the healing process by confronting the trauma of the past and ensuring that the truth, often silenced by the state, is preserved for future generations.

Literature review

Trauma has a psychological, cultural, and social effect on individuals and communities. It encompasses perspectives from psychology, sociology, literary studies, and philosophy to understand how it is experienced, represented, and processed by the individual or community. Violence, war, loss, abuse, and disaster cause psychological trauma, which can lead to long-lasting psychological distress, often disrupting a person's sense of identity and worldview. Meanwhile, collective and historical trauma affects groups of people, including communities or societies, manifesting through shared experiences of loss.

It is important to remember the distinction between "historical trauma" and "cultural trauma" and their representation in history and how both are transmitted across generations. Memory and testimony work through trauma. (LaCapra 1998). Communist crimes were another painful trauma in countries where communist regimes were established, as with what happened in Albania after the Second World War. The historical trauma often affects marginalised and oppressed communities in the same way that happened to the catholic clergy in Albania just after the end of the Second World War. The impact of repressed memories on the unconscious mind is a wound to the psyche that disrupts the normal development of the individual (Freud 1920: 7–74). The trauma can be deep in one's memory, for example in the form of the 'unrepresentable' trauma that cannot be fully integrated into one's understanding or narrative. Caruth argued that trauma involves a paradox of absence and presence, where the traumatic event is both incomprehensible and indelible.

This suppresses trauma and plays a fundamental role in the narrative. (Caruth 1996) This exploration of recalling trauma for some important purposes, not only for individuals but also for collective awareness and understanding, motivates Zef Pllumi to narrate the hell he went through, to explain, detail, and discover. The memories lead to a healing process. He exposes facts by understanding trauma, embodying safety by reconstructing the trauma narrative, reconnecting with others, and transmitting the long experience to everyone. The main purpose is to save the future by not forgetting the past.

There are many traumatic events reflected in personal narratives, which are a mixture of two things, literature and history. Literature's infinite creativity creates an endless game of meanings, providing unlimited communication between generations, while history activates the narrative so that it can transmit facts, dates, and events, which, under the subjectivity of the historian, can acquire emotional and colourful nuances. Both lay claim to their truths; the former takes place within the artistic domain, while the latter is based on fact. The writer of literature often assumes the role of historian, with the opposite occurring less frequently. During periods of terror, war, or ideological suppression, the reality of events can surpass the boundaries of the writer's imagination.

Trauma representation can be used in artistic creation, for example in literature through testimonial writing the testimonies of survivors of trauma, such as victims of political violence, provide a vital means of representing and processing trauma. The action of testimony itself can be therapeutic, but it can also be fraught with difficulty, as words often fail to capture the enormity of the experience. The extended period of communist prosecution in Albania between 1944 and 1990 was initiated brutally with executions and followed by popular trials, internment, and imprisonment. The dictatorship lasted almost half a century, and the survivors would not have been victorious if people like Zef Pllumi had not created such artistic works like "Live to Tell" trilogy. One of the most important ways to regain oneself from pain is to write about that pain. Narrative therapy provides a powerful framework for healing from trauma by shifting the focus from victimhood to empowerment. By reauthoring personal narratives, survivors can integrate their past into a story of resilience and hope rather than loss and suffering. Social and political trauma is not only an individual experience. It is often deeply connected to political and social structures. Social injustice, inequality, and oppression can inflict trauma on entire groups of people, shaping collective memory and identity. Pllumi's revelation of trauma caused by dictatorial persecution has a historical viewpoint. At the same time, it needs the revocation of memories to gain healing, understanding, and forgiveness. This procession helps the future generation to remember, understand,

learn, and avoid terrible events, activating comprehension of victims' stories and revelations.

The trilogy between fact and fiction: reception

The true experiences witnessed during a dictatorship, such as in the case of Albania, violent and unlike any other country in the Eastern Bloc, will become part of the memories, experiences, and survival of all those who endured them. The truth depicted by the writer, when it also encompasses factual elements, gains even more value, as the journey is simultaneously a historical and erudite one, involving stylistic choices and linguistic registers. This is precisely the case with "Live to Tell". Geg dialect used by Pllumi is not common today, as the standard Albanian language is based on the Toskë dialect.

According to Shehri (2008: 39) "Today's readers are lucky enough to witness in his work the interrupted line of Geg literature, forcefully broken by the lack of communication between authors and works banned for 50 years. Literary Geg dialect reclaims the status of a literary language that continues to be written, not just as a part of history, but as a language that witnesses and creates history."

Pllumi's testimonial literature highlights the revival and significance of Geg literary tradition in Albania after a period of marginalization and enforced silence due to censorship during the communist era in Albania (1945–1990). It also implies a disruption in the natural evolution of this literary tradition. Pllumi, as a witness, contributes to the historical record of these marginalised voices and suppressed narratives. As a creator, he actively shapes cultural and historical consciousness, influencing contemporary and future generations. Past generations were deprived of this literary heritage, and so his narrative emphasises the necessity of its revival not just as a historical artifact but as a living, evolving literary force.

"Live to Tell" has the characteristics of a memoir and documentary narrative. It can also be identified as confessional literature, although the confession here does not remain solely personal and it is possible to say the narrative is multifunctional. It is an analytical autobiography as it reflects various analyses and opinions of the writer himself, who simultaneously holds the status of both the condemned and the rebel. However, each part has a dominant element structuring the narrative. Firstly, the facts of the historical event, and secondly, his narrative perspective. Healing from trauma first requires the recollection of memories to understand the trauma and its context and to prepare oneself to confront it. The first step is to speak about it and to construct a reflection through the various mechanisms that memoir literature offers. The second step

deals with an important part of his life that practically coincides with the period before, during, and after the establishment of the dictatorship. As a memoir, the text distinguishes some moments from others through their importance and the consequences they have on the narrator. It is a big chest of old, terrible memories of the last Franciscan of that period, so survival became his mission. He did not seek to glorify himself, but to testify, by for example reporting the words of Father Superior Marin Sirdani when he said to him: “Just live, to tell”.² Thus, Pllumi considered it his mission to recount the years of blood and terror he faced with indefatigable courage.

Shehri (2008: 39): “Everything in the work of Father Zef happens within forbidden categories. He writes in the Geg dialect, which has been ‘illegal’ for over 30 years. He writes as a Franciscan writer when communication with the most revered authors of this literature had been violently repressed for over 50 years. He writes about what had happened in communist prisons at a time when forgetfulness seems already to have close the official historiographical chapter on this period.”

Why is this trilogy considered both memoir and documentary literature? Perhaps because it is a personal history. Firstly, Father Zef, as the narrator, represents an important and influential part of Albania, its culture, and spiritual life, as well as being part of the Franciscan contribution made by Seminary of the Franciscans. Secondly, the trilogy addresses a significant part of Zef’s life, which spans the period before, during and after the establishment of the dictatorship. He had to survive to tell the truth, as Father Sirdani ordered him. It is a black box of old and terrifying memories, of the last Franciscan from that period, thus survival became his mission, he had to live to tell.

This narrative is part of documentary literature since in this narrative there is a concern for the factual construction, and a respect for chronology, true events with details, specific names, and events that some of the readers have experienced and can evaluate themselves, interpreting the emotional and historical resonances. These internal dialogues diversify interpretations based on personal values and experiences. In trauma narratives, the reader is not just a passive observer but a witness. Witnessing implies responsibility for interpreting, remembering, and even acting upon the narrative. (Felman and Laub 1992) The reader outside Albania can participate in this, as the trilogy has been translated into English, Italian, and French.³

² Odile Daniel “At Zef Pllumi, mishërim i vlerave tradicionale të shqiptarëve”, në: *Konferenca shkencore At Zef Pllumi mes shkrimit dhe historisë*, 25 shtator 2008. Tiranë: Instituti i Kërkimeve Politike “ALCIDE DE GASPERI” 2008, 25. shtator 2008 (8), 17.

³ Kata Scjhan, “Live to tell- Rrno për me tregue e At Zef Pllumit në Amerikë” in *Konferenca shkencore At Zef Pllumi mes shkrimit dhe historisë*, 25 shtator 2008. Tiranë: Instituti

Literarily, the author managed to create a clear narrative style, explaining his experience and the experiences of those who shared the same as him. Marku (2008: 55): “History does not come to him as academic knowledge, as a pre-defined category, due to ideological pre-determinations; and since it is not like that, history for him is primarily the history of human destinies.” Academic history is often shaped by particular ideological frameworks, reflecting the perspectives, interests, and biases of those who write or teach it. History being experienced by individuals suggests that it is not just a series of abstract events, but rather, it is lived through individual and collective experience. These are stories of human suffering, triumph, and survival, deeply personal and shaped by individual choices, emotions, and struggles. Readers must decide what they believe, how they interpret suffering, and whether the trauma is personal, collective, or even spiritual.

Writing about this living hell became a mission of testimony for him as a man of faith with unparalleled dedication until the end of his life. There is no greater dedication than writing, especially to witness human tragedy. For the scholar Sabri Hamiti, “Live to Tell” is a three-level work encompassing: *survival, experience, and memory*. There is the missionary, the witness, the narrative discourse with multiple functions that reveal his doctrine of love, the survivor, “the ultimate Gega”⁴, the dissident, but never the defeatist.⁵ Therefore, the focus of Father Zef Pllumi’s trilogy is primarily the mission to survive, secondly to narrate, and thirdly to remember in a way that avoids repetition. However, surviving the trauma of half a century and being healed become a difficult mission that can only be undertaken by a person who exists thanks to the greatest human strength, love for life, and the desire to shed light on what happened during the wild persecution of his fellow priests: live, to tell! Therefore, he wrote the history of this persecution, his history, including everything. According to Doçe (2017: 226) “[it] seems he doesn’t expect history to be written one day by academics. He does not have time to wait, and above all, he wants to write his history, a story that is not constructed solely through cold documentary dates and facts. As a religious man, the soul is more important than anything else.”⁶

i Kërkimeve Politike “ALCIDE DE GASPERI” 2008, 44; *Live to Tell: A True Story of Religious Persecution in Communist Albania*, iUniverse, 2008; *Vivi solo per testimoniare*. A cura di Keda Kaceli, prefazione Silvio Berlusconi, Buongiorno Italia Editore, 2015; *Vivre pour témoigner*, Lousanne, Age D’homme, transl. Odile Daniel, 2014.

⁴ Referred with respect to inhabitant of northern Albanian.

⁵ Sabri Hamiti, *Stilografia*, Prishtinë: ASHSH, 2022; 68–77.

⁶ Eljon Doçe. “Rrno vetëm për me tregu, për të mos harruar”, në: *Studime Albanologjike: Letërsia si kujtesë*, in *Memoriam Martin Camaj*, 2017 (2), XXII, 226.

In the preface to the trilogy, Father Pllumi wrote, “I have left many unsaid things, which, if I were to write them, would make the book seem unbelievable.” Written by the sufferer himself, it constitutes an overview of the history of dictatorship through the eyes of a rebellious missionary. “Live to Tell” is a story that is as personal as national. According to Marku (2008: 61), it is a narration that embodies three moral acts. The first act is denouncing, directly exposing the crimes of communism as they occurred. The second act, his book, is an anti-communist book about communist crimes. The third act, derived from the second, is a moral act that relates to the fact that this work is the first of its kind, or the first model of a written work in Albania after almost 50 years, which is the opposite of the socialist realism model.⁷

Book I: The Book of Memory (1944–1951)

In Albania, the period between the two World Wars in Albania was marked by socio-economic changes as well as the rise of cultural movements. Meanwhile, the Franciscans and Jesuits had established their respective schools, with Shkodra becoming the centre of their activities⁸. Here the Franciscans excelled in the study of Albanian language and literature, culture and traditions, and collected folklore, customs, and canons. Shkodra served as a broad cultural focal point, complementing their primary mission of religion. This influence continued until the arrival of communist rule, following the liberation of the country after the withdrawal of German troops. As soon as the communist party came to power, ideological movements and purges began. Fourteen Albanian minor friars of the Franciscan order were killed or died from torture in prison, 32 were sentenced to life imprisonment, and 27 were subjected to forced labor. Eight of them were declared blessed on November 5, 2016, in Shkodra.⁹

⁷ Mark Marku, “Etika e shkrimit të At Zef Pllumit” në: *Konferenca shkencore At Zef Pllumi mes shkrimit dhe historisë*, 25 shtator 2008. Tiranë: Instituti i Kërkimeve Politike “ALCIDE DE GASPERI”, 2008 (8), 61.

⁸ The first Franciscan church was built in Albania in 1240. The Franciscan Province of Albania had over 30 convents before the Turkish occupation. Despite the persecutions, in 1832, five prefectures emerged: Epirus, Pult, Kastrati, Serbia, and Macedonia. On June 14, 1882, the Franciscan Seminary (College) was established in Troshan, while the Seminary of Bajza was transferred to the Franciscan Convent in Gjuhadol, Shkodra.

⁹ Martyrs: Gjon Shllaku, sentenced to death on 22. February 1946 and executed in Shkodër, Çiprian Nika – executed on 11. March 1948; Mati Prennushi – executed on 11. March 1948; Vincens Prennushi, sentenced to 20 years in prison in Durrës on 24. December 1947, where he died due to mistreatment, torture, and the harsh conditions in which he was held, on 19. March 1949; Karl Serreqi – sentenced to death on 8.

This is pretty much the situation where the story of Father Zef begins in the “Book of Memory” (1944–1951). November 1944 found Albania in a chaotic state under military control. In December 1944, the publication of the magazines “Hylli i Dritës” (“The Star of Light”) and “Zani i Shna Ndout” (“The Voice of Shna Ndou”), was discontinued. The book gives a historical review in a dynamic, concise, and synthetic style, serving to analyse and introduce the political situation.

Chaos

Communism had come. The meaning of this is articulated by what an old man says when talking to Father Gjon: “... Communism is like the devil who, when idle, becomes furious and kills his children. Unfortunately, it has engulfed us, and it will continue to oppress us until another one like it comes to remove its shackles.” (Pllumi 2015: 40–41). Articulated so, the devil becomes a powerful metaphor that reinforces trauma. Trauma is often described as something that does not end with the traumatic event, – it haunts, it repeats, and it possesses the subject. (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 1998). By likening communism to the devil, Pllumi evokes an omnipresent, malevolent force that transcends time and logic, returning cyclically to harm, even in moments of apparent peace (“when idle”). The image of the devil “killing his children” mirrors the way authoritarian regimes turn against their people, especially regimes that once promised freedom or a better future. This internal breakdown is a key part of the experience under totalitarian rule. From the perspective of trauma theory, this betrayal goes even further as it disrupts the personal and collective stories that help people make sense of who they are. Pllumi’s metaphor captures this inner collapse powerfully, showing how the regime does not just violate rights. It tears at the bonds of kinship and the core of what it means to be human. This political change led many prominent figures including political and cultural actors to fall into illegality. This reinforces trauma theory by illustrating how totalitarian regimes inflict generational trauma, sustain cycles of oppression, and prevent healing until an external force disrupts the pattern. It highlights the inescapability, repetition, and destructive self-perpetuation of political

January 1947. On 24. February 1947, the sentence was commuted to forced labor and heavy work in Maliq-Korçë, and ultimately to the death penalty in Burrel prison, where he died of a heart attack on 4. April 1954; Gaspër Suma – died of cancer in the Great Prison in Shkodër on 16. April 1950; Serafin Koda – died due to torture in Lezhë on 11. May 1947; Bernadin Palaj – died in prison in Shkodër due to torture before being sentenced on 2. December 1946. – <https://www.ofm.al/kuria/>

trauma, framing communism as an all-consuming force that, like trauma itself, does not simply disappear but lingers in collective memory and experience. This is the first perception of communism, the beginning of the chaos.

Zefi, a young and yet official priest, is asked to safeguard the Franciscan archive. "... In truth, it was there that I formed the conviction that history is not always what is written and learned. The truth resides differently within the vaults of the archives, with numerous secrets." (Pllumi 2015: 49). Zef Pllumi testifies for the first time that the new regime was being installed by illiterate people, who during inspections and raids on cultural temples, churches, and study centres (after closing down schools such as Harry Fultz's), proved themselves to be incredibly ignorant individuals (they did not even know what a microscope was and desecrated the tabernacle without hesitation) (101), they did not hesitate to destroy Gjergj Fishta's¹⁰ Museum room. "... On that day, the Fishta Museum Chamber was also destroyed, and all his manuscripts were barbarically loaded onto the truck that came and went incessantly." (Pllumi 2015: 104)

What about freedom?

Albania, especially the north, is known as a land of traditions and customs, governed by customary law, where even the Ottoman rulers found it difficult to exert a controlling power. However, in this period, in deep mountainous regions such as Lekbibaj, the situation is described as a turmoil of blood feuds and communist persecution. For the first time, the narrator surpasses the boundaries of the chronicler and delves into the exposition of another dimension that will be revealed gradually in the trilogy. This is the space of the intellectual, where for the first time in those conditions people were being killed due to the strict law of the Kanun, and blood feuds; on the other hand, with the installation of the communist regime that began to persecute the Catholic clergy, Zef Pllumi finds a way to aestheticise his concept of the free human being who lives in these mountains. (Pllumi 2015: 62) This concept faded away in light of the massive arrests of the Catholic clergy that were concentrated in Shkodra city. This is only the initial opening of the names and dates of the absurd, meaningless, and unmotivated massive convictions, while the greatest political absurdity is manifested in the elections of 1945. Here, we see the first abandonment of the concept of the free human being since the candidates had no opponents. This worsened conditions, and mass popular trials began in January 1946. Zef Pllumi's perspective as an anarchist and his concept about

¹⁰ Gjergj Fishta, was a Franciscan priest, and author of the poem *Lahuta e Malcis* (*The Highlander's Lute*), called the national poet. The regime facilitated him.

individual freedom, but also his subsequent attempt to escape from Albania marked the beginning of his suffering in communist prisons and forced labor camps. When he was asked about communism in the court his answer offered a critical interpretation, presenting it as a paradox in human history and political development. His words were "... Communism represents the culmination of state power on behalf of the Proletarian State of Communism, which is equal to or even surpasses prehistoric and historic tyranny: only the terminology changes. Therefore, humanity is so foolish that it repeats its mistakes time after time: humanity desires freedom and by will enslave itself through voting..." (Pllumi 2015: 278).

Zef Pllumi's narration at the beginning of this tragedy is of extraordinary clarity and memory. Perhaps also because in such circumstances a person tends to remember every act. The accuracy in names and dates coincides with everything that happened. Albania had gone to hell. The first 30 hours of his imprisonment would be the first physical and psychological test since he would not even be allowed to perform his physiological needs during these long hours. He just started to experience the tortures and to see with his own eyes the hangings in a peach tree in the interrogation building courtyard.

Zef witnessed and experienced the use of hot irons on the prisoners' bodies, days without food, prisoners' mouths being filled with salt, and so on. Zef's life was spared thanks to a stroke of luck, and they decided to reeducate him. In the prison cell, Zef realizes what it means to reach the end, how much one human being can hate another in opposing roles, and how much they love each other when facing the same misfortune, transcending religion and seeing each other as brothers. The prisoners' only consolation was each other, as they were away from their families, without communication, clothing, or food. In this context of terror, torture, and psychological pressure, many died, some went mad, and others became alienated. After his transfer to the Great Prison to perform forced labour, a gallery of descriptions, analysis, and observations of people who could have shaped Albania under different circumstances unfolds. Now they were only objects of torture, fixed in Zef's scrutiny, enduring the suffering in labour camps. (Pllumi 2015: 230)

The dream

Dreams, either those of the narrator or other prisoners, are one of the elements that change the narrative. What is the importance of such dreams in those hopeless circumstances? Perhaps to embody a connection with the human inner dimension. In those turbulent circumstances, a person seeks signs from everywhere. And when Zef seeks deeply, somewhere the voice of the universe

and God can be guided toward him. Thus, the episode of Zef's dream synchronises with the period of Tito's death. The second dream, manifested by "the voice of Aleks Baqli" in the church where Zefi would serve the first mass, comes with the period when the prisoners learn about Stalin's death. Zef Pllumi did not abandon prayers or religious services, nor the secret deepening of his spiritual knowledge during his time in prison and forced labour camps.

Survival

Physical and emotional trauma certainly affect one's overall health, sometimes leading to chronic illnesses. Forced labour in camps in swampy areas worsened Zefi's health to the point where he would later need surgery, and his health continued to deteriorate even further. In these labour camps, people were dehumanized as easily replaceable working tools. It was a camp of death through hunger, drowning in filth, and eating turtles if they were lucky enough to catch any. The labour camp was a jungle where those who acted based on ethics, peace, and mercy were prey. But perhaps because he had to live to bear witness. Pllumi survived, although, in poor health. His artistic and creative abilities are credited as being reasons for Zefi's survival in various prisons. He was very diligent due to his practical skills, for example, his printing skills meant he was able to repair a typewriter and make wooden tools. During his second imprisonment, in various labour camps, he developed his floristry skills, and his pigeon-keeping abilities were also evident.

Vocation

After his first release from imprisonment, he returned to his hometown to be with his family. The meeting with his mother after being 20 years apart from each other brings about a heavy situation within his family, as the dictatorial authorities surveyed them. Despite everyone's expectations, Zef continues his chosen path of faith. His return to Shkodra in 1949 and his determination to remain a missionary did not waver due to his spiritual vocation. This period of freedom lasted very briefly, as Zef faced his second arrest. After surviving the first phase of eradication, the political power of the time sought to control religious beliefs, proposing that the church was under the control of the popular government rather than the Vatican. This was another alarming signal coming from the installed power.

Book II: 1950–1967 (Freedom Between Two Imprisonments)

Freedom Between Two Imprisonments is the second part of the trilogy and deals with events, memories, and causes of trauma from 1950 to 1967, the most intense phase of the Albanian dictatorship. In the 1950s, the government had taken control of everything, and the Church and its missionaries who remained alive were in a difficult situation. Zef was advised to abandon his mission and become a history teacher. These were years of the 'shadow of hunger', with notable events such as the shocking explosion at the Soviet embassy in February 1951. Zef was secretly ordained as a priest on March 25, 1956. This was the safest moment for him to commit himself to his chosen vocation, to serve the Lord.

In Albania, the period from 1954 to 1959 was characterized by persecution and unjust imprisonments, slave labour in reclamation projects, and draining and cultivating land that was considered swampy, or otherwise unfit for agricultural use. Escape was impossible as the state security apparatus had improved its surveillance system. The volume deals with an episode of escape in which a baby is thrown into the water from a boat to save the family. (80)

In the time between his two imprisonments, Father Zef was assigned as priest in Shosh, a region in the northern part of Albania. The mountainous areas around Shkodra are known for their Catholic population. There was disease, poverty, and harsh winters, and the people of the highlands faced blood feuds and political pressure to minimise the role of religious belief in their lives. In Father Zefi's narrative, the night of Shën Kolli in December 1958 is significant as he is called upon to resolve a blood feud and negotiate blood forgiveness. "... Throughout the years I spent in those wild mountains, year after year, I celebrated the Night of Shën Kolli, and as always, I found such bravery and generosity that my heart was satisfied. I began to hope that these people had not lost everything. Believe me or not." (Pllumi 2015: 97). Many unsettling events happened that were traumatic to these simple and courageous people who thought differently. Amidst all this collective suffering, in Zefi's memories, intertwining stories and themes left their mark on him. Woman, or the story of one of them, is also an important part of his memories.

The figure of the Woman

The woman holds a significant place in this Book of Life. She is represented as the mother, the steadfast imprisoned woman, and the ordinary woman such as Sosa or Lena who are lost in their fate. The story of Sosa provides novelistic features within the larger narrative. Father Zef tries to save this young woman from a prearranged marriage for which she has not given consent, with her story

unfolding over the years. This small story within the grand narrative is linked to the concept of the freedom that women could not have. The second figure of the unfortunate woman, whose life was a prison, though not in the political sense, but in the social sense comes the story of Lena, a woman from Shkodra, who once, at a young age, fell in love with the young boy Zef. He discovered this infatuation from her confession. At that time, he did not pay any attention but now he recalls her confession; she states that she is living a life of failure due to the bad choices she had been forced to make.

The book also includes stories heard orally, human stories of the highlanders, of suffering lives and tragic fates. The narration invites the reader to discover the stories of mountain fighters complementing this memoirist literature with another artistic dimension, the freedom of storytelling of Zef's life spent among the mountains confined by the sky, the land, and those people under political surveillance.

During this period, the regime started organising propagandistic gatherings in churchyards or sent young men to disrupt Mass, appearing drunk during the service, and so on. The youth faced the violence emanating from the regime, which gave an ultimatum against the church. The period narrating 'Life between Two Imprisonments' unfolds how Father Zef resisted the intrigues, political plots, and ethically hostile and defamatory acts against him as an individual. He served the distant population of the northern highlands, understanding their mentality until, after nine years of service and according to a decision from the dictatorial regime, on February 27, 1967, all religious objects and cults started to be destroyed, and Albania was declared an atheist state. Father Zef returned to his village, in the Mount of Renci area.

Book III: The Long Slavery (1967–1989)

This part of the trilogy is dedicated to Pllumi's survival over the 22 years he spent in different prisons and labour camps. To illustrate the absurdity of the power at that time, Father Zef tells the story of a mother who rushes to embrace her son as soon as she sees him, but he is a soldier on guard duty and kills her because she did not understand that she should have stopped when she heard the warning to halt. This is how far the indoctrinating tyranny of the dictatorship had sunk.¹¹

¹¹ Zef Pllumi. *Rrno për me tregue, Robnia e gjatë* (1967–1989). Bot. III. Shkodër: Botime franceskane, 2015.

.... "I'm going to tell you about an incident that happened in one of the internment camps. I don't know if you were there or not. The mother had her son serving as a soldier. Since the mother didn't know how to write, she went to see her son, the soldier. It

The system was so absurd that it started imprisoning even those who had helped with its installation. Seeing enemies everywhere was the principle of the time. Therefore, Father Zef dedicates many pages of his memories to the political and cultural figures who had been factors in the establishment of power but now, ironically, found themselves in the same situation as him. (Gjin Marku, etc.) This shows Father Zef's objectivity, as he does not only see events and facts from the perspective of the victim, but also in dialogue with the other. He finds forgiveness, mercy, and the search for humanity and goodness, even in the smallest form, in every individual. (Ndreca 2008: 33)

The concept of freedom is once again intertwined with the thoughts of other prisoners. (152) This is a journey in which the gallery of the unfortunate, in descriptions, literary sketches, analysis, and observations, is quite diverse. It deals with everyone from well-known political figures to ordinary people. All the prisoners had their history of pain, and here Father Zef was able to recall them back through their stories. (199)

In the section "People and Animals," part of the third book, the manipulations and machinations of the security apparatus are vividly portrayed particularly through grotesque scenes such as the episode of the "hen's control." Guardians wanted to control even where a chicken lays eggs inside a prison cell. (212) Against this backdrop of dehumanization, the unconditional love

was very unfortunate until she reached the door of the camp. She didn't even understand where the door was. but she saw her son up there on guard and, she called out:

"Hekuran, it's your mother!"

- "Halt!"

- "Hekuran, my son!"

- "Halt!"

"I overcame many difficulties to come all the way here! I want to kiss you once and see you because I don't have time to stay. Just let me kiss you once."

- "Halt!"

"Hekuran, my son! Let me kiss you once!"

"Halt, halt!" – and the automatic fired.

Amidst the shower of bullets, the mother fell; she remained there, motionless, at the bottom of the barracks' steps. There was a great commotion in the command. Several officers from the command arrived. The commissar asked,

"Did you kill this person?"

"Yes, Comrade Commissar. I told her 'Halt! three times, and she didn't listen."

"Do you recognise her?"

"Whether I know her or not, she violated the rules set by the Party. I respected the disciplinary rules. You constantly tell us that the class enemy hides, in every garment, even disguised as family".

A written report was made. The mother was declared dead. As a reward, the son was given ten days' leave, along with a food ration and 150 lekë for the trip to his village."

between humans and animals emerges as a poignant expression of a lost natural, spiritual, and universal essence. Episodes such as the cat that sleeps at Zefi's feet, and the other one that of the cat "Kuqo" tell a lot about the solitude of the prisoners. For example, "Kuqo" the cat of the camp, upset the guardians and soon was driven away by them. After a while, it came back again and died beside its imprisoned owner. The episode of a sparrow pecking at crumbs, or that of a garden lizard are little things but illustrate how small living beings preserve a fragile thread of love and compassion in lives stripped of human dignity. (225)

Father Zef finished his sentence and was released in 1989. He went to Tirana and was one of the last surviving Franciscans after the long imprisonment. The survival of Father Zef Pllumi is not limited only to physical survival. He understands survival as an effort, as resistance and as the will to be free. (Doçe, Gjergji 2019: 37) In his mind, the will to survive was stronger than the need to surrender. He had to bear witness and carry the message "Live to tell" until the end. "From the perspective of the value of his work, he is a founder of prison and forced labour camp literature, as well as a witness to and opponent of the half-century-long communist violence against Albanian life and culture" (Hamiti 2010: 559).

Conclusions

Live to Tell became a unique voice in Albanian documentary literature. It observed the hell on earth for those people who experienced the consequences of political revenge due to the nature of their human and professional, ideological, or missionary activities, as happened with representatives of religion, especially the Catholic clergy in dictatorial Albania. It is a narrative story composed of a multitude of testimonies, that prevail over one another depending on the period and the intensity of the selected situation. This is a confession that is between fact and fiction; it is strong documentation that highlights dates, and events, denounces violations of human rights, and at the same time maintains emotional equilibrium, not reacting with hatred, but with mercy and in the name of universal love for humanity. This process of survival, recounting, and remembrance is accomplished thanks to Father Zef's connection with God, even in his darkest days when they demanded denial through torture. Father Zef, solely due to his spiritual vocation, knew how to write history as it truly was. The trilogy is a unique genre of storytelling that lies between literature and history. It documents processes, places, conditions, illnesses, suffering, class struggle, portraits, but also love, all without the language of revenge or hatred.

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