

Croatia

Milka Car interviewed **Irena Vrkljan**

Interview date: 24 April 2020

One of the activities planned within the project Arbeit an Europa was a series of conversations with witnesses of European history from Southeast Europe. The biography of the poet, writer and screenplay author Irena Vrkljan proved very interesting in this respect. However, it turned out that the planned conversation could not be conducted in its standard form of a live interview, because the spring of 2020 turned into a long-lasting quarantine and a dangerous period, especially for the elderly. Therefore, in March, we gave up on meeting in person. The situation then went from bad to worse when in the middle of the pandemic, Zagreb was hit by a strong earthquake on March 22nd, which devastated numerous important cultural and historic monuments and severely damaged the city centre, where Irena Vrkljan lives. Not long after we had arranged a telephone interview instead of a meeting, Zagreb was hit by yet another strong earthquake, this time followed by ominous deep noise. This is precisely what Irena Vrkljan mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, emphasizing how devastated she is by this situation, her complete isolation due to her age, as well as fear and trauma induced by the aftershock, all contributing to her feeling completely beyond herself. I would therefore like to emphasize the peculiar circumstances of this interview and the amount of strength it took for Irena Vrkljan to participate in this project and discuss the past and future of Europe under these circumstances. She also underscored her conciseness and brevity and indicated that this would be the manner in which she would answer the questions and that everything else could be found in her books. This conversation should therefore also be understood as an incentive to read her books and discover the time period they capture. Since Irena Vrkljan's biography is that of an artist, the dedication to art as a supranational heritage functions as a common thread of the entire interview. It is a pity that we were not able to conduct this conversation in person because of Irena Vrkljan's beautiful tone of voice, which is both lively and smooth – another reason for also listening to this interview.

Car: We begin our conversation in the peculiar spring of 2020, when we are facing several difficult problems, but we will begin with beautiful memories of home, origins and the concept of memory. I would like to begin by asking you to describe your childhood.

Vrkljan: I always used to say that I have no geography, I have a room. Even as a child, I liked living with four walls around me, so that I can't see or hear anyone [laughs].

Car: So, you associate the place where you grew up mostly with indoor spaces?

Vrkljan: Yes, because naturally I travelled a lot to here and there and never had my own geographic landscape. I could never visit my grandma at the seaside or go to an island. I was always in the city, riding my bike or roller-skating, while this was still possible. This was in 1937, so I needn't tell you anything further [laughs].

Car: Tell me about the visions of the future you had as a child. What were your dreams about the future and what were you most interested in?

Vrkljan: You know, I was never interested in this, just as I never wondered if I was happy. I never gave the future much thought, I was always in the present, in the present time. I didn't want or maybe was afraid of making plans; plans or some dreams that wouldn't come true. I don't know if actually it was very early on that I tried to live in the present and not in the future, not to think of some future... I don't know.

Car: Do you have an item from your childhood that you've kept and still own?

Vrkljan: Aha, wait! I do, I have some letters from childhood because I had a very good friend, Miron Flašar from Belgrade, who later was my professor of Greek at the University of Belgrade. When we left for Zagreb after the bombing of Belgrade on April 6th,¹ he kept writing to me from 1941 to 1944. I always enjoyed reading these letters, I must still have around a hundred of them, I never really checked how many. I did save some things, but this was much later on. An hourglass, because I liked those, then big blue vases and then those desk paper or letter holders with pictures of different cities. Ok. That's all in the past. I didn't take anything with me to Zagreb when my husband [the German author and screenwriter Benno Meyer-Wehlack] died in 2014,² I didn't take anything.

Car: Do you remember the first time you travelled somewhere?

Vrkljan: Well, yes. We used to leave Belgrade because back in the day it would be very hot there, so we always went to Slovenia. One summer I suffered from pleurisy when we were travelling to Bohinj, to Bohinj or Radovnica. Those were my first trips, I was really a child back then, it was in '42 od '43, so I was around 13 years old.

Car: Did you speak about the war with your parents or grandparents?

Vrkljan: No, no. My dad always used to say, "not in front of the child", so it was not until after the war that I learnt about the war and generally about the time I lived in, mostly from [Miljenko] Stančić [a Croatian painter and graphical artist]³ and my friends from the Faculty of Archaeology. I didn't know anything, anything. I didn't know anything about the state, this state or that state, nothing, nothing.

Car: You were a protected child. Did you feel safe as a child?

Vrkljan: Yes, they were very nice to me, especially my mother, who at the time didn't suffer from depression as in her old age, so she would read Heine to me and we would read together. Dad also read poems to me, he gave me Dostoevsky to read,

¹ The bombing of Belgrade on April 6th 1941, when the Wehrmacht started its Balkan campaign, also known as "the day when Belgrade was burned".

² Irena Vrkljan's second husband, Benno Meyer-Wehlack (b. 1928, Stettin – d. 2014, Berlin), was a German writer, screenplay author and radio play author and also translator of numerous Croatian texts into German.

³ Miljenko Stančić (b. 1926 – d. 1977), a good friend of Irena Vrkljan, a painter and graphic artist and also a member of the art group "Petorica". A proponent of the modernist, surrealist style in painting.

so I read *The Idiot* when I was 14. He was actually very strict, but also kind at the same time. He died very young.

Car: That is interesting, very interesting. Tell me, Europe – did this exist for you when you were a child?

Vrkljan: No, no. Just as there was no Yugoslavia, there was nothing as far as this is concerned. They [her parents] somewhat cocooned me. I have a feeling that they turned me into an indoor child.

Car: Very nice. When it comes to a sense of belonging, what is home for you, where do you feel most at home?

Vrkljan: You know, home for me would once again be my room, my books, my plants, photos of my friends on the walls. As I've told you, I have no landscape and I have no surroundings, I actually have just this room. And it stayed like this. I'm living here now, aren't I?

Car: Yes, of course. Especially now, when we are all locked in our apartments.

Vrkljan: Yes, when we are locked in, that's when I feel at home. The only thing I miss is walking. I walk around the room, but it's not the same thing.

Car: Since our listeners probably don't know this, tell me of the times in your life when you had to leave your home.

Vrkljan: Yes, we had to leave Belgrade in 1941, after the bombing on April 6th because that's when my sisters were born. They are twins, ten years younger than me, born in 1940. When we had to leave in 1941, there was no milk for them nor any bread, I can still remember that. We were in a train travelling to Zagreb as some fugitives when there was another air strike, a Stuka airplane⁴ above us, and we all came running out of the train and lay on the embankment next to the rail tracks. And when we finally stood up, I thought that some just continued laying there, I didn't understand everything that was going on. When we came to Zagreb to stay with my father's relatives, I was terrified of noise, so at any loud noise, such as banging the doors, I would run and hide under the table.

Car: You've changed countries; you've changed languages. Which language do you consider your language, the language of home?

Vrkljan: Well, I have two tongues [laughs] because I had two mother tongues at the same time. When I was a child, everybody spoke German to me and then I went to a Serbian-German school in Belgrade. So, I've always had these two languages and I was always reading books and everything else both in our language and in German. It's true that this is extremely rare, but there have been other authors with the same experience, for example Beckett was also bilingual and could write in both languages. I wrote books in our language, almost all of my prose books are in Croatian, I also wrote poetry in Croatian, and then I also wrote things in German, in Berlin. I published radio plays and similar things there.

⁴ Junkers Ju 87 or Stuka, a German dive bomber.

Car: That's right. So, tell me: Is Europe your home, the place to which you belong?

Vrkljan: Absolutely. In any case, my notion of it encompasses more than just Zagreb or Berlin. I travelled through France with Benno⁵ and liked it very much; we also visited Marseilles and, I think, Lyon. My sister, an Austrian, married a Frenchman and lived in Tours, in Rue de Gramont. We used to visit them, so I also got to know France very well and I quite liked it, found it very interesting. My French wasn't very good, but it didn't matter because you could also speak English. We didn't talk much there, we just spent time with them. He could speak German and she didn't know French very well. Now she lives in H. [inaudible] in Germany because his company moved from Tours to H. [inaudible], so he had to leave France. Now the poor thing lives there alone because her husband died ten years ago, he was twenty years older than her.

Car: Tell me, have you ever felt as a foreigner or alienated, as if you didn't belong. And if so, when did you feel like this?

Vrkljan: As a foreigner? Mhm, you know, in the words of Virginia Wolf, who I like very much and read very often: "Every poet is essentially always in exile." As a poet, you are always foreign to people who don't read, to people who aren't interested in literature or what you do. They would be more interested in me if I were a singer of evergreens or something like that, than they are in my poetry and prose writings. Still, I must say that my experience in this respect is very good, I've received many letters from both male and female readers. But yes, mostly from women, women read more than men.

Car: I'd say that this has already been confirmed. Tell me, how did your origin define you, what impact did it have on you and has it been relevant for your writing? Since you switched between them, which place would you choose as home, Zagreb or Berlin?

Vrkljan: Well, that's why I left Berlin – because I felt that it wasn't good for me. I wrote under the name Irena Vrkljan and they couldn't even pronounce my surname, so the publishers told me I should change my surname, which I didn't want to do. I was from Croatia or from Yugoslavia at the time and this didn't change. And I think that this is what really matters, it's not a longing for home, but for a language. Language is also a kind of homeland, is it not?

Car: That's right, that's beautifully put, yes. Let's move on to education, to the first two years in school. Could you perhaps say what was the most important thing you learnt in school?

Vrkljan: Well, we learnt all sorts of things in school, it depends. The 6th Gymnasium [secondary school] I went to here in Zagreb was very good. For instance, one of my teachers was professor Bujas, as I've already mentioned to you on the phone, she

⁵ German writer Benno Meyer-Wehlack who Vrkljan was married to until his death in 2014.

was the wife of Ramiro Bujas⁶. She'd read to us, we even did Breton's *Manifesto* with her in school, during our Croatian classes. She laid the entire literature before us, she was very interesting and very good. Another good teacher was Ms. Radić, our biology teacher. She was so good that it was probably because of her that I wanted to study medicine. I was generally very interested in medicine and I always thought I'd be a doctor, that I'd study medicine to become a doctor.

Car: So, your memories are connected to literature on the one hand and discovering science on the other. What do you recall most vividly about that, maybe some special day?

Vrkljan: No, I don't remember any special days, just that I enjoyed going to school, I even went earlier because I was always giving classes of my own to bad students. I'd come half an hour earlier and help those who had difficulties learning. I could even say that I was a good student [laughs]. I even didn't have to take the oral part of the graduation exam, just the written one. I had the best marks in the entire school, so I just took the written part. I had a friend, Đurđa from Samobor. We often went to her house; her family had a vineyard. They had wonderful beds with those fantastic soft pillows, and it was great there. We would eat corn mush with milk, I used to love that.

Car: When you were a child, did you have a favourite book? Can you even determine this in such a formative period of life?

Vrkljan: A painting?

Car: No, a book.

Vrkljan: Oh, a book. I must say that I loved Heine back then, I mean, his poetry. I still have it here. I hated that [German children's] book *Struwwelpeter*.⁷ It wasn't my parents who gave me this book, I don't know who did. No, I was only interested in poetry, poetry. The book of poetry, Heine.

Car: Yes, wonderful. While you were at the university, was there any defining moment that changed your life?

Vrkljan: Well, there were some excellent professors. Since back then there was a quota on studying medicine, our gymnasium could send only two students to medical school. I gave my place to Karla Pospíšl because I couldn't study medicine. I had to start working. I could study on Wednesday or, say, Thursday, since my dad found me a position. I could only be a part-time student, so I enrolled in the study of archaeology and ethnography. I had a very interesting professor of ethnography, now I can't remember his name. He used to read to us. Instead of teaching about numismatics or something like that, he read to us from *Christ Stopped at Eboli*⁸ [memoir by Carlo Levi], which I found very interesting. He was an interesting professor in general.

⁶ Ramiro Bujas (b. 1879 – d. 1959), Croatian psychologist, founder of scientific psychology in South Eastern Europe and the first professor of psychology at the University of Zagreb.

⁷ A children's book by the German author Heinrich Hoffmann.

⁸ Memoir by Carlo Levi, published in 1945

Car: You financed your studies yourself?

Vrkljan: Yes. We were starving rather than studying, ate at some student restaurant, pay was meagre. I graduated from high school in 1948 and had nothing. First, I rented a room in an apartment owned by a friend of my parents, he was an educator, a musical accompanist and also a singer, I think. In any case, I was allowed enter the room I stayed at only at 8 p.m. when he would stop teaching. I don't know where I was in the meanwhile, I must have sat on a bench somewhere, I didn't have enough money to go to a café.

Car: What was your relationship towards authority? Did you have any important role models while you were studying or as a child? When did you start to question those role models, what were the first signs of doubt?

Vrkljan: I didn't have role models that I would have to question later. My role models were always in literature or authors and painters, and I was never disappointed by them. I never had anyone that I considered an authority, I couldn't say that. That's not how I felt. I've always had a deep love for reading and I used to spend a lot of time at exhibitions. I liked Stančić⁹ and all these paintings. When I met him, we used to sit a lot together. One of the dreadful things about old age is that all your companions are dead, right?

Car: Yes, yes. Friends.

Vrkljan: Friends, yes.

Car: Do you remember any moment in which your education played an important role? Were you able to finish your education?

Vrkljan: Well, I know, my education was mostly literary. I began working on TV around 1960. Before that, I worked at the radio station where they told me that just working the news wasn't enough for me, that I had to go to TV, do the movies. And then we did portraits and encounters, films about painters, about artists and authors. Until 1967 I'd made about 60 films and then one friend, a journalist, sent me forms to apply for the Film and TV Academy. So, I went to Berlin to take the admissions exam. I passed, but I felt like an alien there. Had I not met Benno, my husband, who was a dramaturge and professor at the Academy, I wouldn't have stayed in Berlin, I would've returned to Zagreb.

Car: Yes, you've already told me about the languages you've learnt and spoken, how you were influenced by history and geography lessons. Was this the source of your knowledge about the European context, about the countries you visited, especially Berlin and Germany?

Vrkljan: Certainly. I liked geography a lot, I was always reading a lot about it. For example, I also liked Vienna and Austria a lot. I read a lot of tourist guides of different cities, I have them now in my collection, as well as travelogues. I was always interested in that sort of stuff.

⁹ Croatian painter Miljenko Stančić (1 March 1926 – 13 May 1977)

Car: Did you have any other sources of knowledge apart from school? What was important for you as an alternative source of knowledge, did you practice something like that during your life? Reading, I suppose?

Vrkljan: Well, yes, medicine. I read a lot about psychosomatics, I was interested in that. Then I read a lot about theory, photography, art, literature. I was also interested in essays, Virginia Woolf's letters, I have her whole correspondence, her diaries, I was very interested in individual destinies, in all destinies. She was English, but I felt close to her, as if I really knew her. I even wrote a poem for her – *Ljubičice za Virginiju* [*Violets for Virginia*].

Car: Yes, we'll have to find this. Who was responsible for your strong interest in culture, literature? Your parents, I suppose?

Vrkljan: Yes, because they read to me when I was a child. Dad read [Christian] Morgenstern [a German poet] to me, all his poems. My mom was from Vienna, she came to Belgrade from Vienna when she was 27 and met my father there. So, I was immediately surrounded by three countries – Austria, Germany and Croatia. I didn't live just in one world, but in a European world, actually.

Car: Would you recommend parental influence on children's education?

Vrkljan: I think this is very important. Parents should look after their children, it is very important that they read to them if they want their children to understand literature and to really feel *Robinson Crusoe* and all the books you can read to children. This relationship and tenderness are very important, of course, being hugged by your mother. There are very strange parents, I see it at times around me – parents who don't take care of their children so warmly. I think that education happens more at home than it does at school.

Car: This is very true. I must say that my children absolutely love *Robinson Crusoe*, I read the whole book to them and it was a book they particularly liked. I read an unabridged version, interesting that you should mention that. So, let's turn to our third topic – work. For many people, work is much more than just earning money. You've already mentioned where you got your first work, was it on TV and what did you learn there?

Vrkljan: No, I got a job at a radio station before that. My father found me my very first job – in some sort of a loan office. We were situated in a basement, there were wheat bags all over the floor. I hated that job. Then I switched to cartoons, after that I worked as a copyist for the Zagreb School of Animated Films.¹⁰ Back then Vukotić and Neugebauer still worked there and that's where the copyists worked. Fadil Hadžić was the director. I spent two years there and then I somehow grew tired of it. Soon I met my first husband, Zvonimir Golob.¹¹ We were freelancers, lived from our

¹⁰ The Zagreb School of Animated Film, a world-renowned school of animation, which brought avantgarde techniques into animation in the 50s. Its most prominent member was the Oscar-winning Dušan Vukotić, to whom Irena Vrkljan refers in the interview.

¹¹ Zvonimir Golob (b. 1927 – d. 1991), a Croatian poet and one of the founders of the journal "Krugovi", which was of great importance for Croatian poetry after WWII, and also Irena Vrkljan's first husband.

translations. We translated around 30 novels because we had no other source of income. I didn't come to TV until 1960 when my father died, and I had already been divorced from Golob. First, I came to work for the radio and then for TV.

Car: When did you realize what you wanted to do in life? When did you find your calling?

Vrkljan: Well, actually I think it was after college, when I was in the co-op [a Zadruga, i.e. a socialist cooperative]. In high school I wanted to be a doctor. I realized that very early, but unfortunately it didn't happen for me. Later I came to realize that I can't and wouldn't become some silly bureaucrat. I rather wanted to do something connected with art. So, I went to animation, they took me in and later I went to work on radio and TV.

Car: Apart from being bored at the office, did you ever feel scared at work?

Vrkljan: No, those were all very nice people, I have to admit. In the 50s, I did cartoon screenplays. The director was Viculin¹², who came from a theatre in Istria, where he was an actor and director. He liked my screenplays a lot, as well as my poetry. He used to quote poetry and was very pleasant to work with. We made 60 films in 6 years. We had to produce 10 a year, roughly one a month. This was a lot.

Car: Yes.

Vrkljan: Each film was 20 minutes long. Just recently we did a reconstruction of one film so it could be digitalized. We did that after I came back from Berlin because they found my screenplays. They did find the images, but they didn't know when the poetry and text should be introduced, so we did everything anew. I spent two years working on that. I was back in 2014, and we did this in 2015 and 2016. Recently, a catalogue with the list of all the films recovered was published. They found 34, we couldn't reconstruct them all. Viculin died, so there wasn't anyone to turn to. And all the other artists are also gone. I don't know if Gabrijel Stupica is still alive... In any case, we reconstructed that film and I worked on that. Now I live off my pension.

Car: When it comes to fulfilling the dreams from your youth, do you think that you really did the things you wanted to? Of the things you wrote, what are you most proud of?

Vrkljan: Actually, my fondest memory is that of working with Benno. We wrote 27 radio plays together, all of them were directed by Bajsić¹³. We were always in love with someone, so he directed all of our radio plays. My relationship with Benno was a really good one, there was never any competition between us, even though he had one big crisis and writer's block. I tried to help him through it as an amateur doctor. In Berlin, we also used to help our foreign workers [Croatian "Gastarbeiter" in Germany]. They didn't know German, of course, so we helped a lot in the hospital or contacted lawyers for them. This took up a lot of our time. Benno loved Zagreb a lot.

¹² Ante Viculin (b. 1925 – d. 1976), from 1957 an independent director for the Children's Programme at the Croatian National Television.

¹³ Zvonimir Bajsić (b. 1925 – d. 1987), the inventor of the Zagreb feature, i. e. a special form of documentary drama.

Recently, his journal from the time has been published.¹⁴ We were always visiting our friends and were acquainted with Karlo Štajner.¹⁵ I don't know, we saw the Stančić family every day, we loved them very much. Unfortunately, he died very young. And now his son still visits me [laughs].

Car: Very nice, very nice. Were there any moments in which you felt your work wasn't appreciated enough and how did you react to this?

Vrkljan: No, I didn't. I've always had good reviews back then. "Studio"¹⁶ was still being published, a magazine awarding wreaths or cacti, depending on whether the show was good or bad. Our shows always got four wreaths [laughs]. I've never had any bad experience with reviewers. Zdravko Zima¹⁷ also wrote about my poetry, I've always gotten fairly good reviews.

Car: For your novels as well.

Vrkljan: Yes, for the novels too. This was always ok. People wrote to me; they would stop me in the street to tell me they'd read my books and that they'd made them happy. I was very pleased by this. My niece, who is a historian of art, and her husband, a jeweller, are golden to me. So even here, I have excellent intellectual companionship. I can't complain, that is, I can: They work a lot, so I can't see them as much as I'd like to.

Car: In any case, one can say that you have always received support from your family.

Vrkljan: Yes, absolutely.

Car: You've mentioned that you worked both for the radio and TV. When it comes to technical innovations, do you remember the first time you've used a computer? To what extent has this new technology influenced your work?

Vrkljan: Each generation has something that makes it specific. I feel quite analphabetic in this digital age. I just have an old telephone, so no mobile phone. I have a computer – my niece Sandra gave me hers and I use it just for e-mail. That helps me a lot, surely. However, now I'm too old to start learning, I don't really understand that at all. I might be wrong, but that's how I feel. Of course, I watch TV, I have CDs and other fantastic stuff, I was just sent some by one of my friends. He

¹⁴ Benno Meyer-Wehlack: *Zagrebačke bilježnice 1967 – 1988* [*Zagreb Notebooks 1867 – 1988*], a book of notes, short prose and essays. In the twenty years this book was being written, Zagreb was a place of advanced cultural life, but also a space in which the author notes some accidental encounters through which he discovered collective German traumas. In this respect, he noted an encounter with a man who starts talking to him in German upon realizing the author is from Germany. After the author asks the man how come he knows German, he answers that he was in a concentration camp. The space in which we live is always interesting to observe through the eyes of another because in this way we can notice things we usually overlook as regular or part of everyday life. It's about the city and the way its people used to be.

¹⁵ Karlo Štajner (b. 1902 – d. 1992), a Croatian writer of Austrian descent who survived the gulag and wrote the book *hrvatski publicist austrijskog porijekla koji je preživio Gulag i napisao knjigu 7000 dana u Sibiru (7000 Days in Siberia)*.

¹⁶ A popular journal for TV and film in Yugoslavia.

¹⁷ Zdravko Zima (b. 1948), a Croatian writer, essayist and literary critic.

sent me Cohen, an old favourite of mine. I consider technology very important for future generations, but I can't enter this world.

Car: Of course.

Vrkljan: You know how every generation has something special. I have an aunt in Vienna, my mother's sister, who we often visited because she lived alone. Recently, a book my husband wrote about her has been published. She begged us to show her how to take the metro [laughs] because she didn't dare go alone. She always rode streetcars and buses and didn't know any better. So, we went with her. She was the generation of 1902, a generation that had a problem with technology. It was all foreign to her and she didn't dare use it herself. My niece Sandra, for example, she knows all about this, works online and everything, and I don't have a clue [laughs].

Car: Was there any special challenge in your career and how did challenges change as the years went by?

Vrkljan: Every film was a challenge, of course. It was a challenge to make it the best you can. It always took 8 days to go and talk to the artist who was the topic of the film, then it would take another 8 days to make the screenplay, that's two weeks. And another 8 days for the shooting, that's three weeks. The fourth week was editing. I was very much interested in editing, I think that editing films influenced my writing, its fragmented character is definitely connected to that. This was one of my biggest challenges: to make a film that wasn't silly and that was somehow different. You can't force all films into the same mould, you have to find a different approach.

Car: If you had the chance to be 20 once more, would you choose the same profession, would you still be a writer, an artist?

Vrkljan: If I would have the same biography, then definitely yes. But with different parents or if I had been born in France or elsewhere, then I'm not sure how everything would have turned out. I also travelled to America and saw the difference between Europe and America. I went there in '64, I got a scholarship called *Women in Television* from some organisation, I have no idea how exactly it came to that. I spent two months there and the difference between Europe and America was obvious at once. Having come from Europe, they treated me as if art itself had just arrived. I was everywhere, also as a guest on TV and they wrote about me in Boston.

Car: Do you have any advice for younger generations working in your profession – on radio and TV, authors?

Vrkljan: To do their job as they want to, to make it true, not to get seduced by something that sells easy, but to do what they truly like and consider important. Not to think who likes them or not. Just to be themselves.

Car: Let's move to the topic of political awareness and start talking about your political awakening in childhood. Do you remember what your family used to talk about at the table, were there any names mentioned?

Vrkljan: As I've already said, they didn't talk about politics in front of me. My dad didn't even talk about it with my mum, he probably spoke of it with his friends, I don't know. Dad read the papers. Later, I also always used to read the papers. But as I child I didn't read them. The first time I heard about politics was in 1945, when I started living on my own and met Stančić, Kolovaj and other people and heard about their biographies. What did I know? The way Stančić spoke about Varaždin, his childhood, about the poverty, all of this was news to me. And then I saw how politics, or not politics, but rather social status influenced the lives of people. And it was only after 1945 that I became aware of this.

Car: And later, in Yugoslavia? Did you know anything about the political events, the Croatian Spring or something like that?

Vrkljan: Yes, I met Šibl¹⁸ and Neva¹⁹, they were very good friends of mine. In their house I also met Tripalo²⁰ and Savka Dapčević²¹. I knew that they were connected to the Croatian Spring, Vlado Gotovac²² also, they were politically very prominent at the time [note: political and intellectual figures involved in the Croatian national liberal movement, also called the "Croatian Spring"]. I also knew Krleža²³, did a film about Bela, and another one after his poems *Agramerski kantilen*, so we saw him all the time. I also knew Murtić, I found Goran's portfolio²⁴ very nice, how they published *Jama* in the middle of the war, then illustrations by Prica. I bought it and even have a reprint. I found it very interesting that you could do such free art in a communist system, I mean in the partisans. And Šibl was also a partisan, in Belgrade he was somewhat disappointed. Once we got very political and he told me that as a general (he was named a general when he returned from war) he had spent some time in Belgrade but left because there was talk that there hadn't been any Croats among the partisans. So, he left. Just like Hebrang²⁵. I knew Marijan Stilinović²⁶, who was interesting to us because he helped the "Krugovi" [group supportive of modernist poetics in opposition of the poetics of social realism]²⁷ and modern literature a lot, we were some kind of surrealists. He fell into disfavour, so Golob and I used to visit him. He had three children, so we would bring bananas, some oranges. He wasn't allowed to have guests and so [...]. Before that he used to hold large gatherings, he

¹⁸ Ivan Šibl (b. 1918 – d. 1989), a Croatian politician and partisan general, a folk hero. In 1971, he resigned from all his duties after the leadership of the Croatian Central Committee was removed from office at a meeting in Karađorđevo.

¹⁹ Neva Šibl (b. 1931), Ivan Šibl's wife, a justice of the Croatian Supreme Court.

²⁰ Miko Tripalo (b. 1926 – d. 1995), a Croatian politician, one of the most prominent figures in the so-called Croatian Spring.

²¹ Savka Dabčević Kučar (b. 1923 – d. 2009), a Croatian politician and economist, one of the leaders of the national reform movement during the Croatian Spring.

²² Vlado Gotovac (b. 1920 – d. 2000), a Croatian politician, journalist, poet and dissident.

²³ Miroslav Krleža (b. 1893 – d. 1981), the most important Croatian writer, an institution of left thought after WWII.

²⁴ A portfolio of graphics by Edo Murtić and Zlatko Prica, based on the poem *Jama (The Pit, 1944)* by Ivan Goran Kovačić.

²⁵ Andrija Hebrang (b. 1899 – d. 1949), a Croatian politician and statesman, killed in the infamous Belgrade prison Glavinjača.

²⁶ Marijan Stilinović (b. 1904 – d. 1959), a member of the National Liberation Movement in Croatia, editor-in-chief of the journal "Borba" and a member of Sabor, the Croatian parliament.

²⁷ A group named after the journal "Krug" (1952 – 1958), which supported a modernist poetics and opposed the poetics of social realism, open to younger writers and a new perception of literature.

liked authors and painters a lot. I met Karlo Štajner in his house. Marijan Matković²⁸, the president of Croatian Writers' Association²⁹, called and told us we couldn't visit Stilinović, but Golob and I still went. We were almost part of a resistance movement [laughs].

Car: So those were some political moments when you took the position of silent opposition?

Vrkljan: Yes, absolutely. We were on the side of the persecuted [laughs] or those proscribed as such as much as possible. Stilinović published a book, he left Zagreb later and went to, I think, Šibenik or someplace else at the seaside, where he finished his book. I hated that they blacklisted him after he had spent 12 years in prison.

Car: Who or what formed your political attitudes?

Vrkljan: Well, probably people. Hanging out with people who were actual dissidents and it was also no coincidence that I hung out precisely with them. They liked me, Krleža did. Ok, I did those films and through those portraits I also became acquainted with Kaštelan³⁰. Then I also did that show *Ekran otvoreni, Četvrtkom otvoreno, Ekran na ekran*. Those were produced by Angel Miladinov³¹, and I did a number of interviews there. Angel loved my writing and always invited me to work with him. So, it must have been that I met all these people because of my job, and this influenced my political attitudes, which can generally be summed up in always rooting for the losers and not for winners [laugh].

Car: My next question is connected to this. How much control do you feel you've had throughout your life? To what extent have history and great political events influenced your plans in life?

Vrkljan: Well, I can't say that they have. What has? Making 60 films has had an impact on me, I said that I just couldn't take it anymore, inventing screenplays. I was tired and needed a change of milieu, so I applied for the Academy and went to Berlin. There I met a lot of Chilean people, then all sorts of foreign workers from Croatia, and through them also Bosa Schedlich³², in one of the homes we visited. This was a different world for me, not our usual bourgeois milieu, but workers who became our friends. We were a very diverse group, consisting of both workers and intellectuals. We knew both Günter Grass and our Ljubo from Keča Ves. That is how we used to be; Benno was like that.

Car: Inclusive.

Vrkljan: Yes.

²⁸ Marijan Matković (b. 1915 – d. 1985), a Croatian author, editor-in-chief of the journal "Forum" and head of the Institute of Literature at the Yugoslavian Academy of Arts and Sciences (JAZU).

²⁹ The Croatian Writers' Association also took an oppositional stance.

³⁰ Jure Kaštelan (b. 1919 – d. 1990), a Croatian poet, theoretician and writer. His most known poem is entitled *Tifusari (Typhus Patients)*.

³¹ Angel Miladinov (b. 1928 – d. 1984), a Croatian TV director and editor at Zagreb Television.

³² http://wikipacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page_id=3478

Car: Do you remember how you crossed European borders when you were travelling?

Vrkljan: We had passports. As soon as I came to Berlin, I got a residence permit because I was a student at the Academy. Later I had to change my surname to Meyer-Wehlack because I had just that permit, and it had to be renewed at the police station. You always had to wait there for a very long time, it was horrible, with all these people who also wanted to renew their permits. It was a police station specializing in foreign nationals and after the wedding one of the officers told me to take the surname Meyer-Wehlack and that I would be granted a permanent residence permit. This turned out to be true. After changing my surname, my permit was renewed for another two years, and then I got a permanent one. Because I was from Yugoslavia, a different country.

Car: Was there a moment when you felt different, that your attitude was different from those prevailing?

Vrkljan: Here in Croatia?

Car: No, back then, in Berlin.

Vrkljan: Except with Benno and our people at the Academy, I felt very strange at the time, in 1986, no, it was 1976. There were student riots and they perceived us from Yugoslavia as traitors. They were not Stalinist, and perceived Yugoslavia as Stalinist and hassled me, so I felt uncomfortable. I hung out with one student I found interesting. He was half-Egyptian, Haroun Farouki. Another one of my friends was the son of Alexander Mitschelitsch, the psychoanalyst. He wrote that book about the inability of Germans to mourn, and the three of us applied for funds to make a documentary. The others wanted a feature film, but I wanted a documentary because I for once wanted to do the portraits and direct myself. I also made a film about Farouki, he now has an institute in Berlin, I was contacted by them to send this short film about him. They said it was fantastic that they got it because they had no material about him from that time. He became quite famous in the meanwhile with this institute. I don't know exactly because I don't live there anymore.

Car: Have there been any political events in the past few years which have particularly touched you?

Vrkljan: Well, I think that our situation during this coronavirus crisis is very good. Our civil defence headquarters [Croatian national centre for the fight against the coronavirus] is excellent – both Beroš [Minister of Health] and Capak, as well as doctor Markotić [Capak and Markotic are epidemiologists]³³. I always listen to their press conference at two o'clock. We keep hoping that somehow it will blow over soon.

Car: What does it mean for you to be a citizen or to belong to a certain state?

³³ "The civil defense headquarters" refers to the national headquarters for the fight against the epidemic of the coronavirus. Davor Božinović is the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vili Beroš is the Minister of Health, Krunoslav Capak is an epidemiologist and Alemka Markotić is the head of the Clinic for Infectious Diseases in Zagreb.

Vrkljan: Well, for me it means the place I come from. Although my life was pretty diverse in this respect, my origins are bourgeois. My mother was from Vienna, my father was a manager in a company. My mother always had fantastic clothes and she would meet with her friends in the coffee house. Even though I've left all of this behind me, my origins are bourgeois, yes.

Car: Did your partner influence your political beliefs? Did you share beliefs and agree with each other?

Vrkljan: I'd already formed beliefs and he had beliefs similar to mine. There was no need to influence each other because we were both already fully formed individuals. I was 38 and he was 40 when we met. We weren't babies.

Car: Did you feel as a citizen of Europe when you were living in Berlin?

Vrkljan: Well, yes, I did, both as a Croatian and a citizen of Europe.

Car: So, both. How would you describe the role that the Croatian nation played in history?

Vrkljan: Who? Oh, yes, Croats in history. Well, to me it didn't matter if the people were Croatian or not. What mattered was what kind of people they were and what personalities they had. I also found that important with the Chilean people. It was more important that Claudio was a painter and that he was writing poetry than that he was from Chile. He also didn't think it was significant. I never felt that national pathos. Perhaps only lately. I visited [Franjo] Tuđman [former president of Croatia from 1990-1999] back in the day. And Benno wrote a text entitled *Drugi atlas (The Second Atlas)*, which was published in the journal "Mogućnosti" while Sanader³⁴ was the editor-in-chief, so Tuđman visited us because he felt it was an interesting text. Benno found all the places where we were mentioned and made an essay that was translated into Croatian and printed in Germany. So, we invited Tuđman, and Alexander said it would be interesting for me to tell him about that, Tuđman was interesting then. This conversation was probably recorded, a conversation about the situation of our people in Berlin, how we were perceived then and I told him everything about that.

Car: Very interesting. Do you currently trust European institutions and politicians?

Vrkljan: Well, yes, I do. I hope that it will work out with their intention to help us and so. Here I also watch German news on my TV. *3sat* always broadcasts news at 7 PM and I always listen. Of course, there is always a lot of talk about Europe and a lot of reports about that. I also watch a show called "Presse", journalists talking about certain topics, very often the topic is Europe, so I also listen to that. I hope that things will work out and that Europe will stay the way it is and that it will show solidarity, that it will help Italy and Spain and I don't know who else also needs help. Von der Leyen has some intentions in this respect, we can only hope, I don't know how it will end. But I do consider European solidarity very important for our democracy.

³⁴ Ivo Sanader, PhD (philology), a Croatian politician and later also Croatian prime minister who had to resign because of corruption.

Car: During your life, have you felt or realized how the project of the EU has changed, how it has developed?

Vrkljan: I do feel that it has developed although I don't really know, I'm not a politician. I can only repeat what I hear in the news. It seems to me that they are trying everything to save the European Union and that is important because what would be do without Europe?

Car: Did the moment in which Croatia joined the EU affect you?

Vrkljan: Well, no, I was very glad. We still aren't part of the Schengen Zone, but we are a part of the EU. We are now presiding over the EU, Plenković is doing a good job.

Car: You've spent a lot of years in the EU and now you are elderly. What does it feel to be an elderly person in the EU? Does this provide you with a feeling of safety or is this hard to tell?

Vrkljan: I can't say, I don't think it applies to me. What is happening to me is what is happening in Croatia. I know that we're not well off economically, but now no one is because of the coronavirus. That's a heavy blow no one counted with, no one even knew that it would happen. It is a big, huge problem for Europe and solidarity. These are brand new circumstances, aren't they?

Car: That's correct.

Vrkljan: Von der Leyen is trying hard, at least she says that she is. I hope that she will succeed in helping.

Car: We've been talking for quite some time, maybe you would like to stop now? We still have the topics of culture and freedom to go over, do you want to continue, or should we talk about them some other time?

Vrkljan: I'd like to continue now to finish it because you know the state I'm in.

Car: Ok. Let's continue then. Do you remember the first time you flew with an airplane?

Vrkljan: My first time was the flight to Berlin, it was when planes were still flying [laughs]. I was very afraid. Once Benno and I flew to Dubrovnik from Zagreb, it was in '67. I was very afraid and didn't want to fly. Later we always travelled by train because I was too afraid. Back then the train from Berlin to Zagreb via Munich was called "the Magyar Express" and the ride was over 18 hours long [laugh]. What is interesting that recently I visited my Chilean friends for Christmas, and I wasn't afraid at all. I don't really care if I live or die anymore, so in that sense the fear went away.

Car: Now comes an interesting question: Do you remember the first foreigner that you've met in your life?

Vrkljan: The first foreigner? I think it was Erich Kugli, the journalist that worked for "Spiegel", the famous German journal. It was during an exhibition I went to. The woman at the cash register told me that there was a gentleman from Germany who

would like some information about the painters, that was in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb. So, I met him, and he said I was very interesting and that he would like to do an interview with me, so we met another time in the *Palace Hotel* [in Zagreb]³⁵ and that was it. Another foreigner [I met] was Orson Welles because I knew a lady who worked as his scenographer when he did the film on Kafka in Zagreb, that happened in the *Esplanade Hotel*³⁶. When I met him, I wasn't a child anymore, I don't even know which year it was, must have been before '67, around '63 or something like that. I know that I met him, but Kugli was before that.

Car: Which European countries haven't you visited yet?

Vrkljan: England. And I've always wanted to go because of Virginia Woolf, to see the Monk's House [laugh], but also her garden. After she committed suicide, her husband Leonard planted roses, and everybody says that it's a fantastic garden. I've always wanted to see that, their garden, but I never got to see England. I wrote a book about that. And I'd like to see the Tate Gallery because my Rothko, the painter I adore, is there. I have an American friend who read my book in English and then wrote to us and came to visit. She was a very good friend of and used to work with Miet, the woman who was hiding the Frank family during WWII. Anna Frank and her parents were hidden in her house and she would bring them food. My friend Allison wrote a book about Miet and a book about Anne Frank and when she came to visit me, she gave me a book she wrote and Miet wrote a small dedication to me, so I have that too. [laugh] Life can be very funny, yes.

Car: If you had to single out ten songs or films that best represent you, what would they be?

Vrkljan: When it comes to films, I don't know, definitely Tarkovsky, I consider him a great director, perhaps Godard. I can't remember the name of my favourite director who did films of shadows. His wife was called Rowlands, he made two or three films and he was an alcoholic. What was his name now? I just can't remember, my brain stopped. [Note: Vrkljan probably refers to the American actor and filmmaker John Cassavetes].

Car: And music?

Vrkljan: When it comes to music, definitely Beethoven. *The 5th Symphony* is a concert for me. But I have a big heart, so I say that I also love Cohen, it's quite a big range. But Beethoven is my favourite. Whenever I felt down, then *The 5th Symphony* was my concert. You come alive listening to that and his last fugues and sonatas.

Car: There is a saying that politicians burn bridges and artists rebuild them. Do you agree with this?

Vrkljan: Well, I don't know if all politicians burn bridges, I wouldn't claim this so definitely. I'd say some artists do that too. They can be very different among themselves. I think... I don't know... Ok, I liked Obama very much and I've read

³⁵ A small historical hotel in Zrinjevac Park in Zagreb.

³⁶ Also an important hotel in Zagreb, situated near the railway station and built along the route of the Orient Express.

Michelle Obama's book, *Coming Out*. Claudio sent me this book. But mainly it's Kafka, of course. Kafka is someone I think is fantastic. So, Kafka and his letters to Felice, his letters to Milena. When I went to Berlin, I took Kafka's diary with me, I took Pessoa with me, a Portuguese poet. And what was the third thing I took with me? I think it was just those two books. Yes, Kafka and Pessoa. And I took Pessoa because of the poem called *Tobacco Shop (Tabacaria)*.

Car: What kind of a song is that? I can't remember.

Vrkljan: Well, he invented four biographies and wrote under four names, didn't he?

Car: Very nice. One could say that your life was completely dominated by art. Was there anyone special?

Vrkljan: Well, it does seem that way now that we're talking, but I don't think about it that way. Now it seems to me that it truly is so.

Car: Yes, absolutely. Do you remember the first time when you used a telephone? When did TV start having a big role in your life?

Vrkljan: TV? That was already in Berlin, actually. Because Benno also liked football and then we'd watch matches together. We had a TV in Berlin, so '67 or '68. And the telephone – also in Berlin. The telephone was very important to me, I could use it to speak to Zagreb, to my sister Nada, the mother of my niece Sandra, in the same apartment in Čanićeva Street, where I live now. Actually, it was very important to us to have a telephone. All connections, arrangements, when someone would come, when we'd see someone, everything went through the telephone [laughs]. And did we have a phone at home before that? I think that we did, when I was little, after 1941, when we moved to Buconjićeva Street. We definitely had a phone then, but I don't remember it because I didn't use it as a child.

Car: Talk to me about humour, about laughter. What did you laugh most at? What were the funniest moments?

Vrkljan: Chaplin [laughs]. If I ever laughed, than at Charlie Chaplin.

Car: Is there any recurrent joke in your life, one that you might know since puberty?

Vrkljan: Well, when it comes to humour, I don't have a very good sense of humour, but Charlie Chaplin I find unforgettable, especially *The Kid*, the movie where he takes a boy in and then feeds him, fantastic scenes. I don't know how it's translated into Croatian, I saw it in Berlin, of course.

Car: When it comes to tradition, which day do you celebrate the most? What is the most important day for you?

Vrkljan: We don't celebrate. Benno and I were known for not celebrating our birthdays. We'd declare some other day beautiful and say: "This is our birthday." Then we would go out to a restaurant. And on the birthday itself – nothing, because birthdays were all about the telephone, visits and baking cakes [laughs]. So, we were an anti-birthday couple. Benno was similar to me in this respect. Even as a kid, I hated birthdays. When it was my birthday, dad would always hold some big speech,

I'd sit there with the other girls, there were some stupid gifts. I just wanted books and they'd bring me candy. So even as a kid I started hating my birthday. When I began living on my own, I stopped celebrating birthdays.

Car: As for ways in which art came into your life, do you think it came early enough? Would it change your life if you'd seen some films earlier or do you think it was in the right moment?

Vrkljan: I was dragged to the movie theatre by my mum because she liked movies, Greta Garbo and so. It was very early that I was watching movies and they entered my life. Of course, later I also saw different kinds of movies, my mum didn't watch Godard, that's for sure. It wasn't even available at the time. The first sound film with Brigita H. [inaudible], those were the actresses whose photos I was collecting because mum liked photos of actors, for example Valentino and I don't know who else. That was an entirely different time. It's as if a whole century has passed since I was a child, perhaps even two. It's a miracle that I can still remember anything.

Car: We turn to the concept of freedom. Do you consider it a relative or an absolute notion?

Vrkljan: Well, freedom is something very important, I don't know what you mean under "notion". I'm trying to be free as a person.

Car: That's right. When you longed to be free, did you find freedom to be something self-evident?

Vrkljan: Then the latter, definitely the latter. I didn't have to long for it. I went where I wanted to, saw who I wished to and did what I liked. There were no restrictions, any kind of restrictions.

Car: Did that feeling of freedom change later on?

Vrkljan: No, we do what we believe in, it's always like that. I'm not on a political stage, I can only speak as a writer. I have no influence; my only influence is that of a writer on a literary basis.

Car: When you travelled, what were your parents' reactions to your travels?

Vrkljan: Well, they were actually very pleased by them, especially when I travelled to America and so. When I went to Berlin, no one understood that, not even Stančić or anyone else and they were very surprised. So, I told them I was tired, I wrote about that in *Silk, Scissors (Svila, škare)* [Irena Vrkljan's most famous novel]³⁷. In the end, they were unhappy that I was leaving, saying that there was nothing for me in Germany, that I had a fantastic career here, in TV, that I should stay and such things. But I wanted to go at the time, I think I was very stubborn.

Car: Crossing borders, erasing borders, is this a symbol of freedom for you?

Vrkljan: Certainly. It would be great if the whole of Europe were without borders, wouldn't it? If Europe was open, if you could travel, go wherever you want to, go to

³⁷ Irena Vrkljan's most famous novel.

Paris when you want to see something, go to the Louvre, it would be ideal for me. It's just that I'm not the one who can make this decision.

Car: As for your intellectual freedom, did you have a special place for thinking, were you ever prevented from thinking?

Vrkljan: No. No, no. Not in the things I was writing. Interestingly, my main boss was... I can't remember her name now, whatever. Anyway, I was reading and writing screenplays that weren't controlled by anyone. It just entered the program; this was a miracle in the middle of socialism. I wasn't a member of the Party³⁸ or nothing like that. Ok, perhaps Vicko³⁹ protected me a little because he had been in the partisans, but I don't believe that's the reason. Zora Horvat, that was the name of our editor. She never read anything we wrote; it was just aired without any control or censorship.

Car: Yes, it's true and your books actually never had any...

Vrkljan: No, this was done by Nives Tomašević⁴⁰. I'd send her something at night and she'd print it the next day [laughs]. Once she'd read it, it would be printed immediately. I was never, never controlled by anyone.

Car: We come to the future-related questions. When you were in your 20s, were you optimistic or pessimistic about your future?

Vrkljan: Surely more optimistic than not. I wasn't pessimistic when I was 20.

Car: It seems to me that even then you had a very clear idea of what you wanted in life?

Vrkljan: That I did, yes, yes. In any case I wanted to be able to always do what I want without needing to jump through hoops for anyone, not for the sake of the career, not for the sake of applause. Just wanted to do what I believed in, there weren't any dilemmas for me. Benno also wasn't interested in money, earning a lot by writing and what not. You know, the publishers have also changed. Now all they want are bestsellers. It's best when a book is a bestseller that earns a lot of money. This was never interesting for us. If the circumstances were like this, we rather didn't print it. Everything I wrote in German was published in Austria. I had a publisher named Droschl, he liked working without a contract, he'd just print my texts. He died, unfortunately, and left everything to his daughter who does some completely different things like *Sexual Life in the Ukraine*⁴¹ and I don't know what else.

Car: Were there any moments in which you felt that your future wasn't open, that you can't move forward?

³⁸ The Communist Party.

³⁹ Director Ante Viculin, see footnote 9.

⁴⁰ Nives Tomašević, a Croatian editor and university professor who spent most of her career in publishing..

⁴¹ I. V. Refers to the study *Feldstudien über ukrainischen Sex* (*Field Studies about Ukrainian Sex*)

Vrkljan: Listen, I'm at an age when I can't remember those things. But I don't think I had such moments, no.

Car: Did your expectations change over the decades, especially when we remember WWII and the rapid progress and modernization thereafter, even in Yugoslavia? Did you feel there were radical changes in your life?

Vrkljan: No, because as a child I didn't know anything. I didn't even know there were governments or authorities, Ustasha [Croatian fascist movement]⁴² or Nazi. I was... Well, I didn't feel that, I found out about that only later. Later I read books, about the persecution of Jews, about the Holocaust, it was all much later on. It was not until later that I realized what had happened and what my pre-war and war life was. It was not until later that I learned about the number of murdered people and Jasenovac [Ustasha death camp]⁴³. My grandfather, my mother's father, was hiding a Jewish lady during the entire war, I found out about it only after the war, but it certainly marked me because I said that if there were going to be new persecutions or pogroms I'd go with them [the Jews]. In that case I wouldn't like to be the oppressor or a traitor, I'd always much rather be a victim.

Car: Did something you weren't expecting happen, something you considered completely impossible?

Vrkljan: Well, it was this love story with Benno, I certainly wasn't expecting that because I thought I'd be writing and making movies or something, I wasn't expecting a change in my private life. I was 38, of course, it was an unexpected encounter, to meet someone like that, he was an incredibly good man.

Car: What are your hopes for the society in general?

Vrkljan: Well, now I'm a little... Maybe it's the coronavirus and everything, so one's pessimistic because of the earthquakes and everything. I don't know how one should... I'm a little depressed at the moment, especially because Benno's gone. I don't know what he would do if it were impossible to travel around, it would all be very complicated.

Car: Did you imagine 2020 to be like this?

Vrkljan: No, I didn't.

Car: Yes, I think no one could imagine this.

Vrkljan: Yes, it came unexpected, like the earthquake.

Car: We come to the chapter about conflict and resistance. Did you have enemies throughout your life or the feeling that you were someone's enemy?

⁴² Croatian fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia during World War II

⁴³ Jasenovac, a place of suffering, the largest Ustasha death camp in the so-called Independent State of Croatia, a satellite state of the Third Reich.

Vrkljan: Well, I had the feeling of envy. Nothing specific, I have a feeling that no one likes me, and why should they? There was definitely envy of my success. But I can't name anyone who is doing something bad to me, no. It's not like that.

Car: Have you personally ever been in a situation of great danger or peril?

Vrkljan: Ha, in my age you are always in danger. Somehow, I don't like being old, but other than the earthquake and this current danger from disease, no.

Car: As for the European umbrella, do you think that conflicts in Europe stem from an overly strong European narrative or from its weakness? How strong is this awareness, especially in Croatia?

Vrkljan: Not enough, I think it's not enough. But there are other cases of undeveloped awareness, for example about the situation in the health system or in culture. I think we still have around two bookstores. Who reads? I think it is the same elsewhere, when I hear what people are saying in the streets in Germany, I see that education has been neglected and that we should do everything to make education as good as possible. Also, something must be done for the book, but I can't do it from my couch, can I? Only those who are in power can, no, should do something. I never wanted to be a politician; I think it is a very hard job.

Car: But have you as a European ever felt pride or were you ashamed because of Europe?

Vrkljan: No, I was never ashamed. And what pride is, I have no idea. But I was never ashamed, no.

Car: Perhaps this question is too broad, but do you think that the European community has a responsibility towards its former colonies, I mean the European past?

Vrkljan: Well, I've no idea. I think Europe must be liberal, no idea. In any case, Europe must see that all the countries remain democratic. You need to have the right to your own opinion, journalists must be able to write freely and critically, and we must abide by the laws, isn't that right? Only those laws that are fair should always be respected, we should pay attention to the quality of our schools, I looked at the situation in Germany and it seems to me that the schools are the right way. Money is being squandered on all sorts of things, more on automobile or plane industry than on education.

Car: We're approaching the last two topics, one of them is religion, so the question is: What feeling do you have when you hear the word religion: profundity, indifference, rage?

Vrkljan: What was the third thing? No, not indifference.

Car: What was the role that religion played in your life?

Vrkljan: Not a big one. My dad was very into this, he was the one prone to philosophy, he took me to Šeparović, who spoke on the topic whether there was a God or not. Dad was like that. From the age of 11 to 14, when we returned to Zagreb, I went to school run by nuns because it was the best high school in Zagreb, it was in Savska Street. I had two nuns as teachers who did their job fantastically and took good care of us kids. Sister Estera taught biology and Sister Agneza literature, they were very interesting people, one of them even took off her habit later [laughs]. I've already written about this. Even as a child I knew that in this education all they wanted was to see me stealing cookies or something like that or not to see me, so that I would think I committed a sin. But all this didn't affect me much. Especially not in Germany because Protestantism is dominant there. Berlin is a Protestant city, religion doesn't play such an important role as in Catholic countries, as in the south of Germany. The south of Germany is Catholic, and Berlin is Protestant. And Protestants are very polite, very advanced, really different from Catholics. I liked that; I must say. And the new Pope is good, I like him, I have nothing else to say about religion. I'm not someone who goes to the church, that's a fact.

Car: Then you would say that religion or faith didn't influence you and you didn't have to rely on religion?

Vrkljan: No, no.

Car: So, our questions on religion are...

Vrkljan: I already wanted to ask you to make it shorter...

Car: Yes, ok. Maybe tell us something about the Christian roots of Europe – how important is this for Europe?

Vrkljan: Well, it is certainly important. I think it is important for the formation of the spirit. If we take the Bible and the Song of Songs into consideration, Europe certainly has roots in Judaism and Christianity, those are our foundations, right? This also applies to Greek mythology; they are surely all very important...

Car: When it comes to the future of Europe, can you imagine Europe in the next 50 years? Do you think about the future of Europe?

Vrkljan: I don't think about the future anymore, I must admit. In my age, there is no future to think about, there really isn't. So, I don't think about that.

Car: So, all the questions about Europe...

Vrkljan: You'll have to ask someone younger.

Car: Do you have any message for future generations in Europe?

Vrkljan: Tolerance. That's something that would be very important to me.

Car: Maybe one last question. What is the role of national identities in Europe, what do you think?

Vrkljan: Well, I don't think they should be too strong, European consciousness should be stronger than the national. The national egoism shouldn't be...

Car: What are the biggest mistakes that should be avoided?

Vrkljan: (interruption)

At this point the conversation was interrupted, the phone battery died. During our plans for the conversation, Irena Vrkljan warned me that she didn't have a cell phone, but an old landline phone with a weak battery. Since the conversation lasted for quite some time, the battery didn't. Later I phoned Irena Vrkljan just to thank her for the interview. I believe that, in spite of the interruption, all the recorded answers testify to a 20th-century European biography and function as an important European and artistic message for the future. Our conversation about Europe doesn't yield any declarative slogans or ideologically unambiguous messages. It is far more important to understand Europe as a cultural, civilizational and common heritage that enables us to move in a joint spiritual space in which the past and future are inseparably intertwined. Precisely this is the goal of a truly artistic biography, such as the one of the great artist, Irena Vrkljan.