

Luxembourg

Samuel Hamen interviewed **Erna Hennicot-Schoepges**

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Hamen: I am sitting face to face with Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, who was born in 1941 in Dudelange, which is where she also grew up. She spent a few years in Troisvierges in the North and can look back on an extraordinary political career at the national and European level: In 1987 she became mayor of Walferdange; from 1989 to 1995 she was the first woman to chair Parliament as President; from 1995 to 2003 she was active in various ministerial positions over the course of two governments, which included those for Culture, Education, Higher Education and Public Works. During this period, very important projects for Luxembourg's cultural architecture were implemented, including the *Philharmonie*, the University of Luxembourg and MUDAM, the *Musée d'art moderne* in Luxembourg. In addition to its political aspect, her biography is also particularly interesting for our project. This is because it includes a profound cultural education, which started very early on with her training as a pianist, which then led to studies in music, philosophy and literature in Brussels, Paris, Salzburg and Luxembourg.

In addition, she has also worked in different cultural institutions, among others, the National Library at the very beginning of her career and later on for Radio Luxembourg. She has also played various concerts as a concert pianist and has won several medals. Between 2004 and 2009, when she retreated a little from the national stage, she was also a Member of the European Parliament. She is currently Vice-President of the *Institut pour la diplomatie culturelle*. What is probably the cherry on the cake of her biography is her accumulation of several honorary doctorates over the years.

At the other side of the table sits Samuel Hamen, born in 1988, who grew up in Luxembourg and who studied German and History at Heidelberg University in Germany, where he is now writing his German studies PhD thesis. He covers Luxembourgish and German media as a cultural journalist and also works as a literary critic and host. His first novel was published last year. The literary part is the second pillar, so to speak, of his current activity. Okay, that was the introduction, and now for the first question. If we start with *Home and Origin*: When did you first encounter the idea of Europe as a child?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Perhaps not Europe exactly, because Europe was at war. My childhood is indeed very strongly marked by the Second World War. But there was already a difference in terms of the nationalities I grew up with,

because my father, who had left Germany before the war in 1934, had married my mother in Luxembourg. There he worked for *Arbed* [Luxembourgish steel company, founded in 1911, was an important driving force in the Luxembourgish economy]. In other words: Even as a child I was aware that there was not only Luxembourg, but other countries as well. My grandfather talked a lot about his father, who had come from France and settled in Troisvierges. So, I knew that there was more than just one country and that during everything I experienced as a child, there was a war going on between countries. So, there was this imprint left by the war before the question of Europe came up. It was different from the Europe we understand today.

Hamen: So it was a rather negative idea of how countries treat each other – and not a positive one?

Hennicot-Schoepges: It was not a positive idea, because we were occupied by the Germans. We were occupied by the troops and suffered greatly from it. I mean, due to the steel industry, the South was the particular focus of the army, of the Wehrmacht, and the people of Dudelange had to be partly evacuated, because it was feared that the ‘*Schmelz*’ [smelting plant] would be bombed. We were as stateless as my father was. We were not on any list and then we went to Troisvierges, to my grandparents, to my grandfather’s house for two years. Until the war was over.

Hamen: And if I understood that correctly, your father came to Luxembourg from Germany in 1934 and then he gave up his German passport and lived as a stateless person. Was that a stigma to be without a nationality? Or was that no longer a problem?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Both. There was a stigma because my father was German. We were also always called ‘*d’Preisen*’ [Prussians in Luxembourgish, the term is still sometimes used in Luxembourg to designate the German population as a whole; after the the Second World War, it took a pejorative connotation and is no longer considered politically correct], even though my father had already worked here as a child on a farm. My father was born in the Eifel [low mountain range in western Germany, eastern Belgium and Luxembourg] and came from a family of eight children. His mother died when giving birth to the eighth child, and his father had to place the children. And my father spent part of the time in Wintringen on a farm tending the cows. This was until he started working in the steel industry and met my mother.

In that sense, my father’s story is that of a German who relinquished his nationality. And the certificate – I still have it – where his German nationality is withdrawn, is from 1934. But in the meantime, he had been working in Luxembourg, where he had joined the *Arbed* in 1930 as a German. Basically, during the whole time that he was stateless, there was nothing that made us

feel that this was the case. This was because we could go to school and communicate with the neighbours. And this was true for many other Luxembourgers. There basically hasn't been any research conducted in connection with the Second World War with respect to how many stateless persons lived in our country. I can remember one neighbour who had come from Russia, who had also not yet obtained Luxembourgish nationality. My father only got his in 1956.

Hamen: Because he took care of it so late? Or because the procedure just took that long?

Hennicot-Schoepges: No, no, he had immediately applied to become a Luxembourger, but that was in '35. That was of course before the war, and what was the law like back then as far as obtaining Luxembourgish nationality was concerned? That probably wasn't so easy. And the signed confirmation – he only received it much later.

Hamen: And if we take a closer look at family life: Was that a German-Luxembourgish household? One where, your father contributed some degree of German culture, maybe in terms of literature or something else? Or was it strictly Luxembourgish?

Hennicot-Schoepges: It was a Luxembourgish household, a working-class milieu. That is to say: My mother – apart from learning to sew – hadn't really received much of an education. Also, my mother was first married to my father's brother, who died when she was six months pregnant. And then married his brother, my father, with whom she had two more children, my sister and I. And these people spoke our language, *Eifelplatt*, which strongly resembles Luxembourgish. So I'd say there were no cultural differences within our household. The only thing that was difficult was when my father received his conscription letter to join the Wehrmacht. At that time, of course, my mother got very scared, and she took the letter to a neighbour who worked at the municipal administration. And he told her: 'Throw this into the waste bin, your husband is not on any list and it will be alright.'

Hamen: And since we are discussing the war, which unfortunately is a necessary topic when talking about Europe: Was it a topic at the dinner table or within the family after '45? Did anyone tell any anecdotes, or did everyone keep quiet about it?

Hennicot-Schoepges: More than anything, there was the pride of being a Luxembourger. And I can remember that my mother had hidden the Luxembourg flag, and when the liberation troops arrived, there were some neighbours who no longer had one. So she cut it into pieces so that out on the street other people could also have a piece of the Luxembourg flag. That was

more the state of mind, and of course, towards the end of the war we also had the American soldiers in the school across the street from us, so as a child you realised: Here there is an army that had helped free us. And there was also, I think, the openness of the Luxembourgian population towards these soldiers, which was quite great. Those were human, interpersonal relationships that actually worked out well, as those boys were also invited into houses. My sister and my brother had learned a little English at school and tried to act as interpreters in those situations. So, you could say that the human element actually prevailed.

Hamen: You previously mentioned that there was a school across the street from your house. Did you also go to this school?

Hennicot-Schoepges: I went to that school at first, because it was on the other side of the road. That was for my first and second years of school. Then as I was about to have my First Communion, my mother thought it would be better if I went to school with the nuns. The school was Catholic and in Dudelange. I ended up going there, where I naturally got a very Catholic education. This meant that before I even went to school, I had to first go to mass. And this was the tenor of my upbringing. It had a distinctively Catholic backdrop.

Hamen: So let me try to summarize this: You are saying that, on the one hand, there was this steelworker environment in the South of the country – this big steel industry, which guaranteed the wealth of Luxembourg. And that was what they nowadays refer to as ‘multi-culti’, which means that many of the workers there were from other countries. And you, on the one hand, grew up in this environment. You said you had Russian neighbours, Italian neighbours. And then there was this school: Was it a school that was also attended by other foreign children? Or was it mostly Luxembourgian students?

Hennicot-Schoepges: This convent school was more of a Luxembourgian school, where the children were mostly from Luxembourg. As a result, I of course didn’t have any foreign children as my classmates: The immigrant population in Dudelange was rather big, and that was mostly because of the Italian community. I did play with those children in the street. So I knew nevertheless that there were also Italians, that there were different nationalities. We got along with each other.

Hamen: And when did you go abroad for the first time?

Hennicot-Schoepges: My parents, siblings and I went to visit our relatives in Germany immediately after the war. My brother bought his first car in 1949, so we drove to the Eifel to visit my father’s relatives. That was my first visit abroad. And because of my piano studies at age 15, I actually started travelling to Brussels every week to go to the conservatory. For this reason, foreign

countries became a topic that was no longer foreign to me. But it was a journey that only took me there to study. And I did not find it extraordinary in any way, because that was my weekly routine and I also had friends there and I also learned to manage on my own there. On the train I naturally met many strangers.

Hamen: Nowadays with Schengen and the ICE [German high-speed train] which runs between Paris and Frankfurt, it sounds so natural. But at that time, it was not so easy for a 15-year-old girl to travel to Brussels once a week, alone by train.

Hennicot-Schoepges: It was not easy. No, that is obvious. It was also not that easy because it also meant that I had to manage by myself in Brussels. First of all, I had a problem with the French language. We did not speak French very well back then. And then there was the fact that I was alone in a big city. That was new for me too, but I learned to fend for myself.

Hamen: So, it never occurred to you to say: 'Brussels is such a big city', because Luxembourg back then was more rural than it is now. Did you never think: 'I want to stay in Brussels now?' Or later, when you studied in Paris, did you ever think: 'I like this city so much now, I'll give it a try'.

Hennicot-Schoepges: I never had those kinds of thoughts. I thought something more along the lines of: Life in Luxembourg is pretty good, because in two, three hours, you can be anywhere. You can be in Brussels, you can be in Paris, and I appreciated this mobility I also found it very important for my personal development. Because, I think, if I had only lived here in Luxembourg during my whole youth up until I went to university, then my life would have been different. Somehow, I did not have this fear of going abroad. And I also believed that I was capable of doing it. But leaving Luxembourg, that was never in my thoughts.

Hamen: Okay. You have already mentioned the school before, the – for now I'll give it a lazy name – the nuns' school. Was that also the place where you discovered your predilection for culture and the piano? If not, how did it happen that you found the enormous energy to commute to Brussels once a week?

Hennicot-Schoepges: No, the piano, that was a story that had to do with my family, with my sister. And with my mother, who was suffering from a heart condition and had a lot of health problems. My sister, who was born in 1930, was a lot older than me. She was in Belgium at a boarding school that many Luxembourgian girls attended after the war, partly to improve their French. And at this boarding school, she had started to learn music and how to play the piano and mandolin. And then, when my mother was not doing so well anymore, my father then persuaded my sister to come back home by promising to buy

her a piano. And that is how we ended up with a piano at home. My sister had a friend [the Luxembourgian term 'Kollegein' is used for 'friend', but can also mean work or classmate] at the boarding school whose little sister played the piano well. And she was enthusiastic about it. So, the sister said: 'The piano should not be for me alone, now Erna will play the piano.'

So, while paying private tuition, I started to learn at the age of six through lessons given by Jean Eiffes, who is the composer of our famous song '*Kettchen, Kettchen*' [traditional folk song about a waitress from the Moselle region]. He was from Dudelange and gave private piano lessons. In the beginning I received these lessons at home, but then the music school in Dudelange opened. There I went to lessons given by Norbert Thill, who was also the church organist. So it is something I learned at home starting from childhood. I was also admonished at home by my sister, and, chiefly, my brother. They made sure that I always practised and was properly prepared for my exams. So that it was actually there that I eventually began to learn discipline and started to learn music.

Hamen: Do you have a favourite piece? Or did you have a favourite piece back then? Maybe it hasn't changed since?

Hennicot-Schoepges: I started to play Beethoven's *Mondscheinsonate* ['Moonlight Sonata'] at a very young age, and those were the pieces that you played for exams or could play at an audition. And at the age of 14 I had won First Prize [the highest possible level to be attained at the music school] at the music school in Dudelange, Mister Thill believed that I should not go to the conservatory in Luxembourg City, but instead to a conservatory abroad. And that is how we found the solution to travel to Brussels once a week. All of this had been arranged with the conservatory in Brussels, and with my school in Esch, which was very flexible. I had a special authorisation from the Ministry of Education that allowed me to miss school one day a week and travel to Brussels, and that is what I did until the '*Premièresexame*' [final exams for secondary school].

Hamen: And were there specific values that the Luxembourgian school system gave you that were positive?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well what was really important for us at our school, when I look at the education at the '*Lycée*' [secondary school] was that we learned a great amount, because with the system in place we were able to learn languages. Girls could only start to learn Latin in '*Quatrième*' [10th grade]. The boys started as early as '*Septième*' [7th grade] and we started in '*Quatrième*' and...

Hamen: Sorry for interrupting. For those who don't know: the Luxembourgian language system is structured in such a way that basic literacy is taught in German, a few years later French is added and a few more years later English is added. Luxembourgish is actually a language spoken at home, which is only marginally taught at school.

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, that led to the fact that we knew all those languages and could also read authors in their respective language. But in hindsight, as far as speaking was concerned, we also did not have sufficient opportunities to express ourselves, to speak. But it did make our minds flexible and we were lucky back then at the Escher Lycée to have teachers who were good at theatre. In fact: Our school had started to regularly perform on stage. We did plays by contemporary authors in French and that was enormously enriching. We also had teachers who made contemporary German authors from that time so accessible to us that it greatly contributed to the value of our learning experience.

Hamen: So a kind of intellectual flexibility, which can be attributed to the fact that there was a French influence, a German influence and so on?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, yes. There was always a balance in the learning material. It was also well-prepared by what we did at school, thanks to the teachers that we had. It really was of great quality.

Hamen: And so did you have – to ask, the previous question in a different way – a favourite book in French or German?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Oh, we read. We read so much! We picked Ernst Jünger to pieces, and in French we performed Ionesco. And we were always quoting things from those plays, so we did gain some insight into the contemporary literature of the time.

Hamen: It is interesting – I mean, I am just imagining, how other conversations for this project are going. And of course, we have been talking about Luxembourg the whole time, but by speaking about issues of French and German culture, we are also speaking about Luxembourg. So I find it interesting that as soon as one tries to find out what has happened here in Luxembourg historically, they find that it is necessary to start moving beyond its borders.

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, it is also remarkable that here in Luxembourg after the war, the idea of not learning German never came up. We just accepted it and continued learning the language of the occupying power, even though we had been forbidden to speak Luxembourgish during the war and many people had been sent to concentration camps because they had spoken it. And

because we also had the forced conscription, because the people, when told that they were now Germans, did not just accept it.

Hamen: What would you attribute that to? To some kind of pragmatism?

Hennicot-Schoepges: This pragmatism was evident when the state was founded in 1843. The first law regarding schools stated that Luxembourgers were to learn German and French, because they might not find work inside the country and would then have to go looking for it outside its borders. And there was even an argument by the municipalities in the border region, who said: Wouldn't it be possible for us to learn only German? We live on the German border. But the government said that no, both languages have to be learned. So our society is basically rooted in this (idea of bilingualism).

Hamen: And then, for your studies, you not only went to Brussels, but later also to France and to Salzburg. Was there a university experience which particularly shaped you as a person? I mean, a course or a teacher?

Hennicot-Schoepges: At the *Cours* [first year of university studies in Luxembourg before continuing abroad], the time when I was at the *Cours*, the teacher who had the biggest influence on me was Léopold Hoffmann [Luxembourgian writer and teacher of German, 1915-2008] as well as Jules Prussen [Luxembourgian philosophy teacher, 1911-1976]. Those were two professors, one in German, the other in philosophy, who were really remarkable personalities. And then there are of course other people from those times who could be mentioned, like the French teacher, whose name I can't remember now. So there are many other prominent personalities. I mostly saw them during the time I was working at the National Library. And there I was in touch with those teachers who regularly came to borrow books.

Hamen: But for you it was – if we look at later stages in your life with Radio Luxembourg and the fact that you also gave piano lessons at the *Cours* – was it eventually natural for you to stay within the cultural field?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well my whole life has been a series of stages of what was possible, because I was never fully able to do what I would have wanted to do, because I didn't have the financial means for it. I would have liked to have been a pianist and for that I would have had to go to Paris at the age of 14 and to stay there, and then I would have received the proper training. I would have had enough time to practice. My parents, however, did not have the means for that, so the compromise was: one or the other, within the realm of what was possible.

And that is how my life has gone ever since. I had to see how I could get along every step of the way. When it was necessary to earn money, because there

were no subsidies to continue studying music, I had to pay for this from my own resources afterwards. And that is how I ended up always doing several things at once. I worked, first at the National Library for one year and after that for two years at my convent, my school. I taught primary school pupils – at the time that was quite possible if you had your *Première* [final diploma from the classical regime of secondary school] and then I was lucky enough to get in at Radio Luxembourg, where I was a full-time radio host for three years, until I reached the moment when I wanted to get married and where my contract stated: If you are married, you have to stop. And it was the same for all the girls of my generation, all my classmates were in the same situation: Those who joined the public sector could not become civil servants. They could only become employees, because when they got married, they had to stop. We could not open our own bank account, which meant that we were a generation who always had to adapt to what was possible and just make the best of it.

Hamen: I'm stepping into the breach for you: It wasn't simply being adaptive by saying that this is how the structures are, nor was it defeatist to say: Okay, that is how matters stand. On the contrary, you were also very active in politics so that you could change those structures for future generations.

Hennicot-Schoepges: That is exactly what might have been one of the motivations for me personally to get into politics, when I was asked to participate in a party and to run for office. It was to play an active role in this field and to not only influence from the outside, but to really roll up my sleeves. I think, it is nevertheless important today to think back to the situation of those generations who have now all reached retirement age. There were limits for us. And those limits were measured by the financial situation of our parents. My friend from Rumelange, whose father was a bus driver, and I, we were the only two children at the *Lycée* who came from a working-class environment. All the other kids, their parents were lawyers, doctors, or business people. So that was also one of the limits that was always set for me. And to deal with that, that was of course also a challenge. But that never depressed me.

Hamen: And what are you particularly proud of? Well, your career is extremely long and diverse, so it is probably difficult to pick one thing, but which achievement from your professional career are you particularly proud of?

Hennicot-Schoepges: There isn't really a particular one. I would put achievement in quotation marks. I am actually living proof of the fact that as a wife and mother of three children, you can also have a professional life and many, many things on the side. That it is a question of organisation and is not about saying: I don't have these or those possibilities, if the state doesn't make sure that you have them. Rather, it is simply taking the initiative and making something out of it. That you can do. If you want it to, it works.

Hamen: And would you, that is the dangerous question: Would you choose the same path, the same curriculum again? If you had the possibility, would you try to pursue that career as a pianist?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well, there's always that urge. The artist always wants to have the maximum of what is possible. And of course, this was a possibility that was not given. Therefore, I am not pining for anything. I have been able to do many things thanks to exactly those temporary situations and difficulties, because they also gave me a strength, a challenge and a will to assert myself. And I do not have any regrets in that regard. Today I wouldn't ask myself what would have happened if I had done things differently at the time. But that would also be my attitude to life, which might be based on my education, my Catholic education, on that sense of basic trust that it gives you. One that is somehow guided by the thought that those things happen that are supposed to happen. And my parents were also taken with this idea. My father always said: 'No harm is so great, that there is not also some benefit.' And this faith you had, it guided you, also in the difficult moments in life, when you fail. But then there is exactly this sentence: 'Who knows what good might come of it?' And that attitude leads me to the following conclusion today: What happened, happened. And do I have any regrets? No.

Hamen: You've mentioned before that you are also the mother of three children and briefly mentioned that it is possible to manage when you are organised. What was your work like as a politician? Because you have to travel a lot as Minister of Culture and you probably have to spent each third evening at some function or opening. How did the link between family and work function during the time that you were Minister?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well, in our time – again for my generation – there were no public day-care centres. The children went to school for the first time at the age of four when they went to kindergarten. And there was the possibility of hiring a maid, and that is what we did. And I also have to say: My husband always agreed, we always made our decisions together. He also travelled a lot professionally. We arranged to have a maid who came every day, who took care of the household. But we also made sure to have lunch together, that I would always be there for lunch, and in the evenings my husband would be there. When I had obligations in the evening, I knew: He is with the children and he is also a man who can lend a hand with practical things, who could occasionally iron a shirt, change the children's nappies or bottle-feed them. So that was an ideal framework for a couple, with the wish that everyone succeeds professionally in their own way. However, in terms of the household's organization, it had to work out in a way that met the children's needs. They were close in age and they maybe also developed relationships among themselves. It helped for it not to be detrimental to the children. But it was a

family life, an intense family life where there were rules: at lunch we ate together, Saturdays and Sundays were spent together, so the family atmosphere was also maintained.

Hamen: You then also – to go back to geography for a bit – travelled a lot as a politician. Which European countries – maybe I have to ask the question this other way around, otherwise you have to make a huge list – which European countries have you not been to yet?

Hennicot-Schoepges: I have not been to these Northern countries: Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. And I have not been to Bulgaria among the other European countries. I had been – before I started my career as Minister – a member of the Council of Europe. And there I was a member of the Migration Commission. We were the first delegation to travel to Cyprus – Southern Cyprus – when it was attacked, when the Turks invaded it. And there I also absorbed a lot from my foreign colleagues and their many experiences in international politics, even as early as when I was as a member of Parliament. Well, later as President of Parliament you get to travel the world a lot. In the meantime, the children had become adults and as far as the family was concerned, that was no longer an issue. I obviously had meetings as a politician during the initial years of the European Union, when I was President of Parliament – there were 12 EU member states at that time. And back then we also pushed through those *organismes spécialisés* for European affairs in our respective national parliaments, because we all, each in our own way, had noticed that European politics did not have sufficient repercussion for national parliaments. So that is one example of what happened there on a parliamentary level in terms of European politics.

Hamen: And in hindsight would you say that you were then intensely involved in European politics over the last 30 years? In your opinion are there – mistakes might be too big a word – but moments where tracks were laid down in a direction, that today one might reconsider?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, there was in any case that moment from 2004, when the EU experienced a significant enlargement. Because before, the way we were working when I was Minister from 1995 to 2004, it was basically – if I may put it this way – a club of expert ministers, Ministers of Culture, where everyone knew each other. We had relationships, you could also call a colleague beforehand and say ‘Listen, I have a problem, could you help me out?’ And those situations, they changed with the enlargement. Because when there are so many of you, as there are today, then this is no longer the case. Now the question is: Should the enlargement have occurred in this way? Or should the treaties have been changed first to take this into account, because it was well-known that they had a few weaknesses. So my question is: What should have happened with those countries? They had been under the

Communist system in the past and they were now awaiting this freedom. And if the step had not been taken to immediately pursue an enlargement of this scale, a new block might have formed. Then, what Mister Juncker [Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg from 1995-2013] had always stated – ‘We brought geography in line with history’ – would not have happened. And you can say that was a mistake. But was it? Was it a mistake? And if it was, then it is a mistake that can be corrected.

For me, the main question we are facing today is first of all a big transformation of what we understand as democracy. We used to understand politics as a form of service. Today one is under the impression that career politics has gained the upper hand, that one becomes a politician in order to organise everything in a way that leads to their election. And if you have been elected, you want to stay elected. And that is fundamentally a weakness of devoting oneself to politics, which is noticeable at the local and national level, as it has a rather detrimental effect on the credibility of politician.

That is one thing. But another is that we did not talk enough about culture when we founded the European Union. We forgot that Robert Schuman had said in his speech on 9 May [The so-called Schuman Declaration on 9 May 1950; regarded as the founding document of the European idea after the Second World War and pleads for the foundation of a European Community for Coal and Steel]: We want to ‘*unir des citoyens et non coaliser des états*’, which means that we should see Europe in a way in which the diversity that exists on a cultural level should also be part of our fundamental values as Europeans. That is why we cannot pass judgement on subjects such as the dominant culture [*Leitkultur*] because we know it reflects only a small portion of those, who belong to Europe, of those who identify with the European idea. We cannot force everyone else to give up their culture in order to be a part of Europe either.

But how do we do it? That is the big question, that is the big challenge. And if there has ever been a mistake in the integration of Europe, it is that cultural diversity has not been sufficiently taken into account. I wonder: Why don’t we say that the Council of Europe, which has more countries [than the EU], which basically includes the whole continent and has a lot of authority in the cultural domain, why do we not approach the *Conseil de l’Europe*, with all its authority and resources for promoting cultures, and entrust it to develop this diversity as a value? The EU could lend financial support, because the approaches that are already taken up by European cultural bodies are already proof enough: The European Parliament’s commission for culture is the one that is least sought after by colleagues. No one insists on joining it, because nothing happens there, no prominent decisions are taken there and because culture simply is not a topic with a lot of political traction. There is a lack of attention there that needs to be remedied.

Hamen: You've already mentioned all these words: Europe, political project, economic project or, indeed, a cultural project. But one could then also just be argumentative and say that there can be a completely different way to think of Europe, one which is not institutionalised via politization, in the sense that one doesn't need to involve the Council of Europe or its commissions. I mean, the fact that we need them is clear – they are necessary. But if we look at it from a historical perspective, one can see that an idea that speaks to European integration has often emerged through works of art. You yourself went to Brussels as a girl from Luxembourg to study Beethoven. So the value of art itself – or however you want to put it – maybe also need to be upheld. That is not the business of politicians, but maybe that of the citizens or however you want to designate them.

Hennicot-Schoepges: It is not for nothing that in surveys about credibility, artists are mentioned the most often. With this, they have overtaken politicians as well as journalists. And that means that artistic expression is in that sense ground-breaking – ground-breaking! And if we have a closer look at theatre performances today, the kind of sentences that are pronounced there, then we get clues on the challenges ahead. Politics in the European Union can in my eyes no longer be viewed as a political mechanism, but as a mechanism for regulating economic interests. Everything is about how we can regulate in a way that the market functions. And, the market is basically the highest imperative – everything depends on the market.

Hamen: But then we are in the realm of utopia, when we think about the beautiful value of culture. There you can express utopias in a different way than in some political commission, where very pragmatically, the next free trade agreement is discussed and not some new incarnation of the European idea. I find that interesting, because you naturally have a background in the political realm and have a lot of insight to offer in this respect. Yet I, at the same time, naïvely step forward and keep saying: culture, culture, culture! And there probably ought to be a middle way for convincing politicians to hold the value of culture in higher esteem, or to maintain or stimulate the idea of culture as a means of integration.

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, these shortcomings need to be formulated very clearly. In politics, formulating them clearly means having to pick a side. This already raises suspicion from all those who belong to the other sides. That makes it difficult. But if our desire is for Europe not to disintegrate into a few trade organisations, but rather have it become a cohesive project – as it was conceived in the beginning – then we have to be able to talk about common borders. We have not done that so far, because we have not even defined our common borders and have not really defended them either. We left this defence

to countries that were located at the borders and ended up with the current result.

Hamen: We have been at it for almost an hour. That means that I would now like ask a question to summarize for today, as we will do the rest of this interview the day after tomorrow. Well, we have more or less finished our five points. I'll try once more to address the main issues we covered: We started with your childhood and with the first years during the war, with the biographies of your parents, which in an interesting way are already European. This is not meant in a negative way, because the establishment of borders was to some degree already visible then. To ask a very dramatic question: The European idea – as you have witnessed it over the course of 70 years now – how has it developed? Like a beautiful flower that has bloomed, or like ivy that has proliferated, or like a hedge? In other words, can you summarize this development in a picture or with an explanation?

Hennicot-Schoepges: The first thing that comes to my mind are those generations who were born after the Second World War, those who no longer know what war is. They have not experienced it. They have in many ways not experienced what it means to have borders. I mean, we were limited by financial possibilities, but we were also limited by our insufficient opportunities to communicate with others. Because I could very well go to Brussels, but I couldn't have gone to London – and other examples of this nature!

But this development, that we have had peace for such a long time, that we have developed economically, that is indeed remarkable, but one should not forget the negative aspects of all this. What are these negative aspects? If we set aside climate change, which is a different topic, we have produced a society of abundance with all its negative aspects: overexploitation of nature, excessive waste, disregard for the little gifts that life gives you... This is because everything has to be so flashy. And I wonder sometimes if we haven't reached a certain decadence because of the many hedonistic phenomena within our society that hint at our living in a period of moral decadence. And this issue is of course difficult to demonstrate politically, because it is of no use to bring it up. Then you have to provide facts to base this on and then you also need to have proposals for solutions.

But all this should not make us forget that we have peace and that we are no longer at war. What fundamentally bothers me, however, is that no one asks why we still keep producing and selling weapons. In this respect, we are not really seeking peace, because, again, it is an issue of markets. If we don't build and sell them, others will do it. This is one of the problems, but I think, that is enough for this question.

Because of a technical problem, the beginning of the second conversation that we had two days after our first meeting is unfortunately not available. So very briefly, the necessary context: In her first answer, Erna Hennicot-Schoepges refers to family-related memories from the Second World War. Later on, we talk about the background of the German author Ulrich Boschwitz, who had to flee from Nazi Germany. Towards the end, she talks about her time as Minister of Culture, when there was a public debate in Luxembourg about a sculpture by the Croatian artist Sanja Ivekovic. Next to the Gëlle Fra, a monument, considered in Luxembourg as a symbol of national independence, Ivekovic had put a second sculpture. It was a woman who was pregnant and partly covered with sexist statements.

Hamen: Yes, that biography [of the Jewish author Ulrich Boschwitz, 1915-1942] is hard, I mean I did partly cry, when I read those personal documents, also the ones belonging to the mother, who received the last letters by her son, and those details: about how he actually tied the manuscript of his book around his body like a life vest [Labelled a so-called enemy alien, Boschwitz was sent to an Australian detainee camp by the British government in 1940. On his way back, he tied the manuscript he was working on to his chest so that he would not lose it. The boat he was traveling on was sunk by a German submarine in 1942].

There was also the one episode where the friend of the mother who seems to have been in Wiltz. (The episode with the neighbours, where she had rung the bell to offer to paint something and they immediately called the cops and said: There is someone here, why don't you come by?)

Hennicot-Schoepges: There have been many biographies written about the war about all those who had been forced to enlist.

Hamen: Yes, it has, I think, almost become a distinctive genre in Luxembourgian literature. After '45 there were these memoirs about forced conscription or the Germans who invaded us. There was a lot of this, I believe, in the 50s and 60s.

Hennicot-Schoepges: You had for instance a biography, the one by Pepin [Edmond Pepin, 1923-2013, a Luxembourgian primary school teacher and writer, who had been forced to enlist and later became president of the *Fédération des Anciens Combattants Luxembourgeois de la Brigade Piron*], who later was my husband's teacher. And what that man had to endure. He was with the Resistance after the war. When I had the controversy with the *Gëlle Fra*, that was very, very bad, and Pepin wrote me a letter. I still have it. It's from his association: He wanted to apologise for the tone used by the others, because this *comité de vigilance* had asked for 16,000 signatures, because the *Gëlle Fra* had apparently been 'violated' by this Lady Rosa. And that man was

embarrassed and asked to meet with me. There I said: 'Well then, let's classify the monuments, so that this cannot happen again, so that they'll be protected as historic, even though it had not been an attack on the monument itself, but on a replica.

Hamen: One of the questions I had given to you beforehand and that you have already answered: At the time, at the age of 20-25 years, did you have an optimistic or pessimistic view of the future?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well, by nature I was sometimes melancholic or depressed, but that had nothing to do with my vision of the future. I think that what has guided me personally was a kind of basic faith in God. And that is how, through my education, my father's statement – who knows what it is good for – affected how I viewed all the things that happened. For now, it is what it is – who knows what will come of it? But what kept me going were the fundamental values of honesty, of treating others with dignity – basically what my religious education had provided me with. For this reason, I did not see the future in a pessimistic nor in an optimistic way, because life was not easy in my time. You didn't have a lot of money, and that made it so that you couldn't buy all of the books that you wanted to have, and that you were also limited in terms of travel. You simply had to earn everything, though that was not a reason to avoid looking into the future. You felt that you could at least work your way up. You could move beyond that, if you worked a lot and just considered what was possible.

Hamen: You have also been talking a bit about values. If one were to begin to compare generations: Which values were transferred to you by your grandparents or your parents and which values did you transfer to your children? Are they the same? Did something change over the course of the decades in terms of worldview?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Well, a core value that I would put at the very top has always been family. It was solidarity within the family, because that was the place where you could always go to and where you felt safe. And I think we passed this value on to our children. And I think they have also passed it on to their children, because we have many discussions in our family. Generally, that is no longer a matter of course nowadays. Other values include of course, telling the truth, meaning honesty and correctness; and respect for the older generations, for the elderly, for the sick. And this was instilled in you, because without it you would surely have been reprimanded with 'This is not right, what you are doing?' I think those values are also still essentially held by the young people, by our children. But where the world might have changed is with respect to the impact of the religious education, which contributed to a slightly narrow worldview that you overcame with time. I experienced this when I started to work at the radio. I basically noticed that people had a completely different view

of the world, were much more liberal and didn't take it so seriously when you were married. Things were as they were and there was nothing wrong with that. But the relaxation of this stricter view has led to more solidarity, to more tolerance and openness, as it concerns marginal groups as well as homosexuality and all the other elements.

Hamen: How do we achieve the notion of freedom?

Hennicot-Schoepges: The notion of freedom is not supposed to mean that I can do anything I want. Freedom always has its limits, which is where it offends the other. However, viewed with respect to communication, interpersonal relations and our society as it exists today with the current media, then we have to say: This freedom, it does not mean that you get to do absolutely everything that you are able to do. There also have to be rules which are accepted by everyone. And if we then analyse freedom in relation to truth and honesty, then we do find out where those limits lie.

Hamen: Freedom also has to acquire some degree of limitation in order for it to be valid. It is not about arbitrariness, about allowing everyone to do everything. Rather, it is a civil idea of freedom for everyone.

Hennicot-Schoepges: Yes, I think, one cannot only interpret it in an individual sense, but as a value for the society as a whole.

Hamen: Now if we think about it a bit: Even then freedom is not without its conflicts in that sense. So it is also partly about friction, about having to verify your values by interacting within society. In your curriculum, were there ever any moments that you can remember where you rebelled or said no? Or did you ever encounter structures that forced you to say 'No, in this case I have to oppose it'?

Hennicot-Schoepges: Oh yes, we were, I mean, our generation, we were quite angry with certain things, such as the communist regime in 1956. Here in Luxembourg it led to a big rebellion where students wrecked the Russian embassy in order to protest against the tanks invading Hungary. And well, other events later occurred that caused the students to respond, where we as a generation said 'This right here, this is not okay.' When you look at those 68ers later, where there was also rebellion against the authorities of that time, that was not present in our thinking then. We accepted authority and did not rebel against it in principle, but when it was excessive in the regimes that were not liberal, then we resisted.

Hamen: In hindsight, are there moments where you think that you should have said 'no' more resolutely?

Hennicot-Schoepges: I saw it in a more positive sense, and therefore I became politically active, because over all this time I did see – also through my personal relationship with my brother, who was already involved in politics and in unions – that some things had to be changed. For example, the situation for women, the nonage [period of legal minority as opposed to age of majority] that a woman had when she got married. That had to be changed. As a result, my perspective was not so much to demonstrate, but to roll up my sleeves and to try to actively shape society.