

Albania

Mariana Kostandini interviewed **Maks Velo**

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Kostandini: Well, should we start?

Velo: Yes!

Kostandini: Greetings from Pogradec in Albania. My name is Mariana Kostandini. I am 33-years-old, I graduated in Musicology and Art History in Paris, where I live and work as Production Manager in the lyrical department at the Opéra. It is a great honour for me to be here today with Mr Maks Velo to conduct an interview in the framework of the European Archive of Voices organised by the *Arbeit an Europe* association – “*Working on Europe*”.

Maks Velo is a great and complex intellectual figure: architect, artist, writer, scholar, free-thinker, political prisoner. The story of his difficult life and the forces he had to endure made him a symbol of courage and hope for many Albanians. Like Velo, many people were victims of the cruel communist regime that was installed in the country after World War II and lasted until 1992.

Born in 1935 in Paris to two Albanian parents, he spent his early years in that city and came to Korçë in 1939 [...] where he spent his childhood, and after studying architecture at the University of Tirana, he worked as an architect on urban projects in that city until 1978, when he was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for “Propaganda and modernist influence”.

Simultaneously, before being sentenced, you worked as a painter. One of the reasons you were convicted was precisely for what you had created beyond the permitted artistic parameters. The sentence lasted till 1986 when you were pardoned after eight years of solitary confinement in Spaç Prison [high-security political prison that was active during the communist dictatorship in Albania from 1968 to 1988], one of the most horrible work camps in Albania. From 1986 to 1991 you worked in the abrasive substances factory in Tirana, because you refused to cooperate with the regime as a spy for the State Security Service – Sigurimi.

After 1991, with the fall of the communist regime, you returned to art and started writing, testifying, speaking out, and rehabilitating your image. You are the author of a number of literary and visual works. You are a [public] figure who is both respected

and sensible, a free voice who never accepts compromises or remains silent in the face of injustice.

If it is ok to start now with a question that goes back to your childhood? How would you describe your childhood? In a few words, how was it?

Velo: Well, some time ago, a couple of months ago, I had a meeting with some students and they asked me, one of those students asked me "Professor Maks, how could you handle all that stuff in prison". I said "I coped with all that stuff, because I had a happy childhood." It seemed like an endless reserve. I think childhood is very important, the creation of human dignity happens in childhood! I spent a part of my childhood in Paris. I have an unexplainable impression that all this modernity I brought to Albania comes from there. I do not know how to explain it, because I could not have initiated all those works I produced without a base, without an initiation.

Well, back in Paris in 1935, all the greatest artists of the world had gathered there and in the house we lived, it's near a Romanian church [*L'Eglise des Saint-Archanges*]. I believe that's why my father picked it and lived there. Now that building contains the Brancusi Foundation [Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957, Rumanian sculptor, naturalised Frenchman], which was also from the Balkans. It is as if I had, I still have a feeling, in my consciousness, a mission to bring that modern European art to Albania. Otherwise it's difficult to explain how I was the one to bring modernity to Albania in everything, architecture, drawing, painting, sculpture! This is the truth.

Childhood in Korçë was happy. Korçë was probably the most cosmopolitan city, with people coming and going from Greece, Romania, and America. It was the most Byzantine city in Albania. That is to say, all those Byzantine values were there, were preserved in Korçë. This was obvious in Korçë's urban planning, in the lifestyle, in the way people worked. That was evident with all those hundreds and hundreds of churches. In Vithkuq alone, namely in Voskopoja, there were thirty churches in this area with all those gothic elements, all those icons, which infused in me the germ of painting. I was drawn to art from icons! Icons are extraordinary, they are surreal, impressionistic and the costumes, symbolic movements are modern art in fact.

When I looked at the Korçë Cathedral of St. George, icons half a metre high at the iconostasis, made of wood. Those Easter and Christmas processions made you feel you were living in Constantinople. This was really like a golden treasure in Korçë, and it was up to me to live it. That was its beauty.

That period made me richer as a person. It made me resist. Then Korçë had a city centre with churches and the bazaar. The bazaar was an extraordinary one, with merchants, labourers, handicrafts, inns, horses, travellers coming and going from villages. I have constantly drawn them. So Korçë was a real asset. It could be described as a medieval city in a modern world.

Kostandini: At a crossroads?

Velo: At a crossroads? Yes! At a crossroads, but it was modern, was probably the most modern city in Albania! There were other cities that were undeveloped!

They were undeveloped, or partially undeveloped, whereas Korçë was on the cutting edge. There were piano plays, there were serenades, carnivals. I experienced all this with the greatest intensity, and it shaped me, it has helped me build the background of my primitive art.

For example, recently I've been doing a carnival sculpture deriving from those carnivals! Korçë Carnival! Well, life is a continuum. One's memories of childhood are critical and my impressions of Korçë were pure, they were so visual, so powerful, they were very Balkan.

Many critics ask me: "Well, how is that possible?" I say: "This is Balkan primitiveness, it's not African primitiveness, it's the Balkans." This [aspect of the] Balkans is concentrated in Korçë. I remember those celebrations held in the monasteries and my mother and her friends used to take their children and we used to sleep there. There were several, it was like undertaking an excursion in the Middle Ages. In Korçë you learned all the stages of history. Unfortunately, it's no longer there, it's all gone. This was the disaster of modernity in Albania, erasing all these great values that once existed.

Kostandini: When was it that people couldn't go to church anymore? That started before; did it start in the 1960s? You were lucky enough to live this childhood and get in touch with these works of art and these institutions, but in the 1960s, all that became impossible.

Velo: Yes! Of course, it went on, that is, even after the liberation, but not with that intensity, with that freedom, with that joy. Then the fear started, it started to be reduced, then started to get damaged. So, that period [childhood before the war in Korçë] was really strong, impressions in my childhood were extremely powerful. The second thing that helped me a lot was the contact with Viktori Puzanova [1893 -1967, artist]. She was a Belarussian who has studied all of Albanian Byzantine art. I undertook several expeditions with her. Her work was of great quality; she completed four very important articles [on the subject]. She discovered Onufri [Orthodox icon painter and Archpriest of Elbasan, active in the 16th century in southern Albania and south-western North Macedonia] and others.

Moreover, she was probably the number one copycat of frescoes in the world! In Belgrade, they have a copy by Viktori at St. Nerezi Church, near Skopje and keep it as original, they have displayed it there as an original. Look at the original one in Apollonia church, which is now damaged, and compare it with the copy that Viktori made. Viktori copied Byzantine art extraordinarily.

I have seen some exhibitions there in the new church in Paris [*Cathédrale de la Sainte-Trinité de Paris et Centre Spirituel et Culturel Orthodoxe Russe*] but they did not have Viktori's artistic level. The time I had with Viktori in Berat in Myzeqe churches helped me a lot. Byzantine art in general is my base, so one has to get caught somewhere!

Kostandini: And all this comes from childhood. This was the foundation of your art.

Velo: It was, but what is more, we had great teachers. Korçë high school had the tradition of the French Lyceum. The French Lyceum had influenced these professors to be very professional, very rigorous.

It had its influence even in lower schools, in the unique [school system in the pre-war years, equivalent of high school today] and primary schools, which had very rigorous professors and I was a very good and attentive student.

Kostandini: You were in the French Lyceum?

Velo: Excuse me?

Kostandini: Did you attend the French Lyceum?

Velo: No, of course at that time the French Lyceum was gone.

Kostandini: It was closed?

Velo: It had closed. But I could tell we had professors who had worked with the French and had taught during the time of the French Lyceum. Those professors who were teaching before were still teaching, because the French had left. For example, it was Boris Plumbi playing the piano, who had learned from the French.

Well, there was a small cultural centre in the French tradition in Korçë, because Enver Hoxha [1908 – 1985, Albanian communist politician, head of state of Albania from 1944 until 1985] studied there with many other communist leaders. Let's call it a small start-up university, even today the universities are not at the level of that French Lyceum, which played a major role in the development of Albania. But, at the same time it played a greater role in the development of Korçë and I was there at a time when the French Lyceum was closed, but the same lecturers continued teaching and that was it, the second [influence] is that I used to watch Mio [Vangjush Mio, 1891-1957, Albanian impressionist painter].

Mio is one of the truest painters, let's call him that, a true one! In the sense that he was like those French painters going out in the "*plein air*", with his bike and classic easel box, without following the party line, no obligations, he used to go out and paint landscapes of Korçë.

Kostandini: He was free, he's a free painter.

Velo: He was a free painter and I had been to his studio. I used to see him there at the Theatre preparing the set. That was it. I could say Korçë had a very rich folklore generated from a combination of a pagan culture with a Christian culture.

Carnivals, Christmas, Easter were celebrated in a Byzantine way, that is, in a very sophisticated manner. I have a great respect for the Byzantium, because it has been one of the greatest cultures in the world even now it is being reassessed and if Albania has a real thing, it is the Byzantine culture!

Speaking about Byzantine culture, there are about 20,000m² of Byzantine frescoes, 10,000 Byzantine icons. You know all of this was true, there were moving studios. They also prepared lay painters. Then thankfully, my father was a doctor. We had access to toys, books, books in French that I still keep. And all this made me an open-minded man! This made me into an open-minded man and a man of interests! This made my whole life!

Kostandini: Did you speak French since you were little?

Velo: Yes, definitely, since I was little.

Kostandini: You learned that in Paris or later on.

Velo: [in Paris] But then I kept learning it in the books I received, looking at picture books and this way I continued improving French later on.

Kostandini: Korçë as a border city, very close to Greece, what was the relation with the border in those childhood years? Were there people coming and going to Greece or was the border untouchable and inaccessible? I know your father had studied in Athens. Does that mean the relation between Greece and Korçë people used to be close?

Velo: Yes! Of course, Greece is a neighbouring country, a country that I love and respect, because of its great culture! It is a fundamental culture of all European culture, and Dardhë is close to the border with Greece. I recently had a little excursion there. Dardhë is the village my parents came from.

Kostandini: Just to explain it.

Velo: Both my parents came from Dardhë, my father and my mother. My father is a Velo, my mother is a Poro. My father had two brothers and a sister. One brother, Jani, lived in Athens, he was married there, and never returned to the village. He had three daughters.

Dardhë people had a lot to do with Greece. They had strong relations there, back then my grandfather had a saw in Konica, which they used to cut wood in the forest, then they used it to produce battens and sold them in Janina [in Greece]. This was what

they used to do, and they used to cross Rehovë, close to Gramoz, then they would get to the so-called “hospital bend” and then straight down to Konica. I also crossed this road once lately to see how my grandfather and father did that. It is a road that goes to Ersekë, a little further up, then to the so-called “hospital bend”, and then you get to Konica.

Thus, relations with Greece have been very close, and in my opinion during the Ottoman period there was an “underground” [connected] world, the world of the Christian – Orthodox [people]; that is, in the inns, the movements, the Manastir Inn [monument of cultural heritage] in Korçë for example, the convoys leaving for Manastir. The inns, where people parted for Greece, the relations that the Albanian Orthodox had with the Greeks, Romanians and Bulgarians, the centres they had in Sofia, in Bucharest.

The centres later became centres of the national movement, and in all this was a spirit of coexisting in peace, so to speak, with locals or in case of Balkan conflicts. It was like a united community as the Jews had all over the world, so it was here and all that was destroyed with the advent of communism. Dardhë and all these villages had the life sucked out of them when this underground structure collapsed. Then they weakened.

Kostandini: Dardhë, Voskopoja.

Velo: All these and many other, Hoçisht, Progër this made them united. This structure had also the work, the reward, the relationships, the marriages, and the churches, the church was a very powerful institution. The Orthodox Church, I mean the Bishop, was an important figure for the Orthodox community of Korçë.

Kostandini: Let's come back again. I was saying, I was talking about the education you received at school, in those years, how you were informed about geography, the history of the countries around you, and speaking about Greece, the information was local [knowledge] due to proximity with Korçë. What about other countries at school? What information did they give you about what was happening at that time, during your childhood years, as these were also years of war?

Velo: Yes, the war for me at the same time was like a movie, it was a giant theatre [laughs]. I remember when Italians came, then when Germans came. No, the Italians, then the Greeks came; warehouses were full, then the Greeks left, the Korçars were evacuated, the warehouses were emptied, looted. Then Germans came, then the partisans in Dardhë. I mean I have experienced all this. It was like one big [film]. Maybe a child has a different perception of all this.

Kostandini: Does a child experience it like a game?

Velo: Like a game, a beautiful game that I can't get out of my head, not as it used to be. It was difficult to distinguish reality. Yes for sure the tragic part came later, it came

in the communist era, but all these phases and the gradual descent into communism were very tragic both for the family, for Korçë and for Albania.

Kostandini: Then you studied architecture in Tirana. What drove you to study architecture and simultaneously keep on painting, which you started when you were little and which has always been your passion, how did you decide to choose architecture as profession?

Velo: In fact, I have created my bond to art since I was in Korçë and we used to see the bourgeoisie attending theatres, including my mum. She was friends with the Konds [one of the great bourgeois families of Korçë].

Kostandini: The Konds were from Korçë, the Konds?

Velo: The Konds were from Korçë, but they had many properties even in Romania. They were bourgeois, rich, they possessed fiefs. There were two sisters, single, and they had a piano. I also took some guitar lessons, at first with Kiço Venediku, and then with the Kondi family. Afterwards, I continued lessons with Boris [Boris Plumbi – Pianist from Korçë]. I mean, at first I took up music, as I told you before, but I was impressed by icons, from Mio. I used to draw a lot, whereas music helped me [in other ways] and I continued practising it even in Tirana with Guraziu [Tonin Guraziu, 1908-1999, Pianist], till I had to stop because I had no instrument, I had no piano at home.

When we went to Tirana, in 1951, I completed the third and fourth year of high school. Back then Tirana had only one high school, the high school *Qemal Stafa* [Qemal Stafa 1920-1942, was a founding member of the Albanian Communist Party] [...] it was time to decide what to do in life. I was a student of ten [in Albania students are evaluated from 0 to 10, 10 being the highest score], but I knew I would not go abroad, and my brother [and I] asked to attend higher education. Pirro won the right to study medicine, I won the right to study engineering.

Kostandini: Construction engineering, that was it?

Velo: Those viewed as “déclassé”, or viewed with some suspicion were accepted to the difficult faculties that were not required by others. At that time there was no faculty of architecture, and I started engineering, it was the second year of the engineering faculty. My brother and I had been in the same year, from the first year until graduation, then Pirro started studying medicine, I started studying construction engineering.

Since there was no branch for architecture, the head of the department, Besim Daja, picked from the students when he needed architects. He picked me and Petraq Kolevica and as a result we became specialised in architecture. After I graduated, I was first employed by the Municipal Directorate in Durrës, then in Tirana, where I worked for the big park [the Lake Park] with a Bulgarian architect, until Tirana Design Bureau was established, and I was employed there.

Kostandini: So in a way, you are one of the first Albanian architects?

Velo: No, wait a minute! To be accurate, this is a whole story and it is quite different. The first Albanian architects, there were four of them! This year marked the 100th anniversary of Albanian design, and the first Albanian architects were Kristo Sotiri from Korçë, who went to Romania, then moved to Venice where he was married to an Italian woman and then moved to Durrës with his family. This was the first architect, then it was Anton Lufi and Luarasi. There was also Qemal Butka!

These four were the first and they served during the Zog period [Zog I, King of the Albanians, 1895-1961], until the liberation. Besides foreign architects – Austrians or Italians, Albanian architects – these were the four Albanian architects! Then under communism, most were sent to study in the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary. Most went to the Soviet Union. It was an era of hard-working architects who established the institutes: the Urban Institute, the Project Institute, the Civil Project Institute and the Industrial Project Institute. These institutes have done a great deal of great work in construction during that time period.

Well, I would say I was the third generation. They were the first generation. The second generation were those of the Soviet Union, namely Besim Daja, Sokrat Mosco, Koço Mio, Gani Sazimiri and others. We were the third generation, but for me, the fact that I didn't study there [in the Soviet Union] was a good thing in the sense that I was not influenced in my projects. This was my *atout* [French: asset, advantage] and also the possession of a graphic concept which I reflected in architecture, which made me create those works.

Kostandini: You mean the fact that you didn't study abroad?

Velo: Yes, yes! In the sense that I might have been influenced much more by Russian architecture, which I wasn't. That was it!

Kostandini: So the experience as an architect was a positive experience during those years for you?

Velo: Yes, the fact is that I have been dealing with a lot of things in life, and I've always wanted to be like those Renaissance artists who did everything, like Leonardo.

Kostandini: Michelangelo.

Velo: Why? Because I was a very curious person.

Curiosity comes first. Knowledge! The desire to *understand* stands before the desire to *do*. I mean, the desire to be acquainted with things has been that great and I've tried with all my strength, as much as I could to be in contact with everything at the time. So, I got into architecture and this was so interlinked to painting and I could not consider them separate. Graphics, paintings stand together! Architecture and sculpture

are the same thing! They are shapes that one gives to the world, they might be small or big shapes.

The only things out of this realm [of painting and architecture] what I hadn't planned to do, was writing books, literature. This was as a result of the difficult time in prison. Being a witness to all that, an extraordinary experience of characters, unimaginable shocking events, I tell you something now, these events cannot be forgotten, and I wanted to convey this to people!

I have written ten books, novels and stories about prison. One was translated into French, *Le commerce des jours*. There are also translations into English. I have also written poetry, but I will tell you there is a story that I couldn't write. I have been writing all this for almost 30 years, but I couldn't write this story in particular. You would say, why not? Because every time I start writing it, I get overwhelmed and cannot cope with all that emotion.

The story is real, this is real! It happened in the Elbasan camp, the cement factory was under construction. There was a convict sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment and he had just two weeks left in prison before being released when he got the last letter from his daughter. The girl wrote: "Dad don't come back! If you come back, they'll deport us, I have a little girl and my husband will divorce me." So, one day before being released, he took a ladder which he backed up to the wire fence and started to climb. The guard warned him "Get off the ladder [...]" then continuously shot him till he was dead. The man had just accomplished what his daughter had asked him. This is extremely heavy!

Kostandini: So painful!

Velo: It's horrible! This shows it all. It's not that girl's fault, taking into account the psychological conditions of his daughter or that of her father who commits suicide to accomplish what she had asked him. It is hard for me; however I have decided to finish writing the story within this year. I know I'm not creating any great literature right now, but this fact is so shocking and so meaningful!

How could I not write it, how could I? This is how it was then. One suicide of a prisoner I witnessed personally. He was a boy with five sisters who had become spies. His mother came with one of his sisters one day and told him they had heard something. He came back, I was present, waiting there to be shaved; he jumped up to the wire fence and he was shot dead. That world was horrible, a nightmare! I tried to resist, I managed to resist. My resistance was to the point of not being defeated, as I was asked six times to cooperate with the Sigurimi.

Kostandini: While you were in prison?

Velo: Yes, no! They had called me once before I was convicted. Then four times, once when I was in custody, once when I was in prison, once again, and the last time was a

few days before I was released. There is a document that has been published, a very shocking document. Four days before I was released, there were three officers who asked me to collaborate, I told him "I have been very correct in prison".

I've been in prison for seven years, three months and ten days, alongside the investigation. I was sentenced to ten years, a few months were deducted due to work I performed for them, as well as an amnesty. I had less than a year then, I said: "I've worked, I've done these two buildings, the two buildings in Spaç, that one at the entrance and the nursing building were designed and built by me and my friends."

Kostandini: While you were in prison?

Velo: While I was there, along with the prisoners. That is what I said to him:

"Listen, I graduated as an engineer. If you want me to work for the Interior Ministry as an engineer, I'm ready! But I can't do the spy job," I said. "I have been asked several times, I can't do this! You do what you have to do." "Well," they told me, "there is a very good opinion about you in Tirana. You will be released and someone comes and confesses to you that he will escape. What will you do?" I said: "I would tell him what you would say to him, 'Do not escape'." "Will you tell us?" "No! I won't", I said. "I will tell him: *Do not escape man, firstly because if they learn about it, you get punished for the escape attempt,*" I said. "*Secondly, if you go to the border and you get caught by the border guard, you get shot and die. Thirdly, let's suppose you crossed the wires and went to the other side, your whole family will be deported,* I said. *What's the sense in that?*" "So, you won't tell us?" "No, I won't", I said. "I have to do with that man, not with you".

The conversation was too long. It is the document where they say "Velo is a lifelong enemy". When I was released, I was taken to the factory of abrasives from 1986 until August 1991, where I was rehabilitated.

Kostandini: Yes, one question, how was the first day you got out of prison? Do you remember what you did that day, the first day, after eight years of isolation? What did you experience, what did you do that day?

Velo: Of course, I remember it. I think there is no prisoner who cannot remember. It was a sunny day, a little bit snowy. That night we lit a fire there, stood up all night. In the morning the first secretary, Xhela Biba, of Mirdita, came also from the Ministry of Interior. They did the usual speeches and some checks. I had two sacks. In the first sack, I had some small woodwork which I did over six years out of boxwood. I went straight to the police commander and I said to myself, I better show it to the commander. The policeman opened them a little and said "Okay, okay."! He didn't check it and we could get out, the door was open, the outer door, you could freely walk through it. It was incredible how you could walk out and not get shot in the back by a policeman!

We walked up to Reps where the buses were waiting for us and every district had brought its own buses. I got to a bus, the driver was from Shkodra and we knew each other. Afterwards we parted for Tirana. Of course, what you feel at that moment is that the world is a miracle [laughs]. Everything seems so beautiful! Those women looked like they came from another planet [laughs]. They came from another planet!

We got off at the Sports Palace. Then I took the bus with those sacks on my back and went home.

Kostandini: Who was waiting for you at home?

Velo: Mum opened the door and the sisters. My father was dead. They had prepared a room for me, that's it. That bedroom seemed just like a dream come true. Then I tried to fix what we might call a studio which is a bigger room now. I haven't had a studio all my life and all the Albanian artists took care that couldn't get a studio, "Maxi shouldn't have a studio". This is a part of their "kindness".

Nonetheless, I started to repair and fix what I had left. Afterwards, I started working, touching those paints. When I was in prison, I once told my mum who used to come there to bring me a couple of brushes. She said: "What do you want them for?" But I said: "Bring them to me!" She brought them one day and prison guards there said: "What do you want them for?" "Here," I said, "I touch my hand with them." [laughs] I touched my hands with the brushes.

Kostandini: In a way, is it the painting that brought you to prison, but also painting that released you after you got out of prison? Released you on the inside?

Velo: Yes, it got me into prison.

Inside myself was such big despair, as I had an irreparable loss. A loss no experienced by any other artist in the East. No artist lost any artwork. In Albania too, no artwork was destroyed of Edison Gjergu, Ali Oseku, nothing.

Kostandini: How many artworks were burned when you were arrested?

Velo: At the time of the arrest, 246 artworks were taken from me, besides the copper relief at Vollga [modern residential complex in Tirana conceived and built by Max Velo], 246... and all those were burnt, but thankfully, some of the works had been photographed before they were burned. They were put into my file as criminal evidence and I have managed to take those photographs in an attempt to reproduce them. I am trying to reproduce some of them.

Kostandini: So, the damage is irreparable, morally, personally, artistically?

Velo: Yes, the damage is irreparable for an artist who has a deep connection to his artwork, it's just like giving up a piece of human life, a piece of life but the problem is

that the people are not rehabilitating that quickly. Our people inherited many limitations from 500 years of Ottoman rule, and this cannot change that quickly. This is what we had to pay for that part of the history.

Kostandini: In 2017, if I'm right, you got access to your file, because the Albanian government allowed people to consult personal files of their trial and prosecution and it was a tough moment because you realised that you were reported on by your very close circle of friends and family. How did you experience that moment, as this was another post-prison shock. It took place just a few years ago?

Velo: Recently. Part of the file I had already received, that is. You have to understand, it's the documentation of State Security following you: It is the prosecution files when you are under investigation! It is the court's files, when you're on trial, three! It is also the prison files when you are in prison! There are four types of files. I had received part of the documentation, as everyone had. We had obtained the court files. As for what you said, it has to do with the State Security files, which were provided by the government. So, I sent a request to the Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents. They worked long hours and handed over about 120 papers, which I have published [in summary].

So, this was the whole dossier, including the part I had [already] received and published, the expertise, indictment, court decision, along with the Supreme Court files. Those were the documents I possessed. I was missing those of the State Security and those of the prison.

I did not even have a prison sentences, besides one document I had about a conflict with a friend in bed. That friend was sleeping, and had thrown the blanket and put his hand over my bed and I wanted to get in. I put his hand aside, and the blanket on his place. He woke up and started hitting me. "Why did you touch me?" But I couldn't get inside my bed.

We had started a fight when the prison guard came. This was the only conflict I had in prison in eight years, the only conflict recorded, in fact there was another conflict when they wanted to kill me by throwing me in the cooker, but we were not taken to the police officer. This was the only one.

So, I received this part of the dossier related to the Directorate of State Security, which is definitely the most interesting part, where I was pursued from 1960 to 1990 by the Sigurimi. All the secret files, relationships, conversations with the *Albanian League of Writers and Artists* [ALWA], the links between the Ministry of Interior with the Artists' League. The denunciations by artists, which are a lot, there were people I couldn't even imagine such as Zef Shoshi for example.

Kostandini: Zef Shoshi, the painter?

Velo: All the artists, decorated by the state as “*Artists of the people*”, “*Deserving Artists*”, had become ordinary agents. In addition, I had been denounced by neighbours as well; the file contained all the denunciations they had made against me constantly for 30 years. How the Sigurimi operated, how they had followed me for entire days. The whole story was there in the file. If you read it, you understand the whole story of man’s persecution in communist times.

Kostandini: So to say, this file reopens the wounds of what you went through, as the security file is recent.

Velo: Definitely, they needed to be opened! We need to know everything, the merits of people, as well as their wickedness. We need to know everything! They want to cheat you, but people need to know who did that evil thing! In my opinion, it is unfair that all these spies escaped punishment! All these people! What would I think? I have often thought about that! I think they should have the same punishment: two months in Spaç. All the spies should go there for only two months and eat the food we used to eat, without working. They should be released afterwards, but at least receive a sentence! What happened is not right, because they lied, they destroyed families; they created countless prisons. No one was convicted, not the secretary of the League, Kujtim Buza, no one! This is unfair.

The Germans have punished those who, of course, those who have committed the biggest crimes in the camps, but here in Albania they also should have had an exemplary punishment. Well, we cannot just say of them “he/she is a spy”, it needs to be a punishment! A few days ago Genc Hajdari [Albanian sculptor] was in a bar there and said to others: “I sent him to Spaç,” he said. They brag!

Kostandini: And you think the whole process of trial and conviction is made to set an example to others or is it a personal attack against you, for what you present as a free-spirited figure out of the mainstream, with a different mindset and so open-minded to the world and art?

Velo: Yes, this is actually the problem. In July 1975, the Chinese cut off aid for Albania and several branches of the Ministry of Interior were ordered back then to arrest as many people as they could. Meanwhile, the Interior Ministers were executed by shooting, then it was the turn of the Ministry of Defence. It was the time of Abdyl Kllëzi [1919-1977, Albanian politician of the Communist era] and Theodhosi [1913-1977, Albanian politician of the Albanian Party of Labour (PPSh)] and later there was Mehmet Shehu [Mehmet Ismail Shehu, 1913-1981, Albanian communist politician who served as the 23rd Prime Minister of Albania from 1954 to 1981] who killed himself etc. Now I could have escaped all this! The Party used to act that way, prepared the file and all of a sudden ordered the arrest of as many as possible! In periods of happiness, no arrests were made, in other periods, arrests were carried out.

Enver Hoxha, strangely, started with art, in 1973. He started criticising [artists] and then arrests began! Of course, I was one of the conspicuous targets! I mean, I had done things that were eye-catching, I was more of an “avant-garde” artist and all the time I had people supporting me, I had also people who were against me, for example Fadil Paçrani [1922-2008, Albanian politician, writer and playwright] supported me, Ismail Kadare [born 1936, Albanian novelist, poet, essayist and playwright] supported me. There were these people. Todi Lubonja [1923-2005, Party of Labour journalist and politician] also supported me. The people who were innovative, contemporary, realized that Maks had a different mindset and needed support. While others, who were not qualified and had no aspirations and always embraced that bad socialist realism would not accept me. Well, this was the case for them after the break-off of relations with China where they convicted not only me, but also ten people from the Politburo were executed by firing squad. All that occurred in that period.

Kostandini: The period was very bad.

Velo: Yes of course, that was the period from 1973 until when Mehmet Shehu committed suicide, then the story was closed. The years 1972-1982, that decade was a real massacre and there were other reasons for that! Besides the break-off of relations with China [the Sino-Albanian split was the gradual worsening of relations between the People's Socialist Republic of Albania and the People's Republic of China in the period 1972–1978] where aid was cut off, it was also Enver Hoxha deteriorating health conditions. He felt that death was approaching and had lost control. Yes, he was feeling the end approaching and took decisions out of fear, his decisions were irrational and illogical and were completely absurd; and that was the period. Well, we were deceived by that period of 1970-1972, because many things started to be allowed and modernised, and we thought we really reached a phase of socialist reformation, a greater openness to the West. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Kostandini: Was that a period when you had access to information, contacts with foreign artists?

Velo: Yes, yes! Books, movies, ensembles, we travelled to the West. Professors Ksenofon Dilo and Danish Jukniu [Albanian painters] from the Academy [Academy of Fine Arts in Tirana, today University of Arts] went to France. Thus, there were exchanges; there was coming and going, movies, and theatres.... It started with a word [?]. It was an exhibition I remember from the UNESCO that had reproductions of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso there in the Hall of the League, where we thought that everything would go well!

Kostandini: It was almost a trap! You were invited to this game and then you were punished, not premeditated maybe, but that was the result! You were invited to this dance and then punished for what happened.

Velo: I don't think it was a trap, because it's a man who sets a trap. That is: he understands and sets the trap...No! The Party of Labour was totally disoriented. It made decisions confusingly and it was a consequence of the [fallout with the] Chinese, not the result of a [deliberate] trap. Do you understand? Because when he [Enver Hoxha] broke up with the Soviets [1955 – 1961], he did the same! When he broke up with the Yugoslavs he did the same thing. It was a consequence of a bigger policy [change]. When the situation was bad, then he was repressive internally so that they were all afraid of him and this has been repeated three times, it's not that the Party knew that Nixon would go to China and agree with Mao, and then set up the trap! It is a trap is the person who prepares the trap. They couldn't predict international actions which hit them like a bomb. [He was like] An executioner that starts to increase pressure as he has nothing left to give to his people! This was the problem!

Kostandini: The way that Albania reacted after problems with China in the 1970s, the same it did when it overthrew the communist regime as a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even this time, it was the influence of major political events that occurred in Europe and in the world and thanks to what happened with the Berlin Wall, in the 1990s that the communist regime fell in Albania! People were faced with a sudden freedom! How did you experience this sudden freedom to travel, to travel freely, to be another person?

Velo: Yes. All of us and you, who are younger, are aware of those moments, they are stuck in the memory of not only us but in the memory of Europe, the escape to Italy with those ships, which was real madness! And that was because the country was really in an anomalous state, nobody can act as we did back then. It had never happened! They went to Bari [Albanian "Great Exodus" to Italy, right after the opening of the border with Europe in 1991], thousands of women, children, without knowing where they were going, girls, men, boys, youngsters, not knowing where they were going, and what would they do? Naked, shabby, in critical psychological condition as Albania was!

Albania had gone through horror for 50 years and it was as if you were thrown into an oven, as you had just run out of Auschwitz camps. I remember those days, my friends at the abrasive factory were saying, "Maks, let's go!" "But no," I said, "I am not coming" [laughs] I also had a friend Valer Dyrzi. I took Valer to the Italian consulate. We crossed the park, since the Elbasan road was occupied by the police, so we went via that park, from St. Prokop. We went down there and he got inside [the consulate] as the wire was open. "Come with me," said Valerio. "I'm not coming," I said, "You go!"

Valer fled to Italy, he lives there now. So I wanted to show you that all this, my attitude showed that all the accusations the Party made were false! [laughs]. I wasn't a man who didn't love my country. The charges are all there. "Maksi will live in Paris, New York, China," they hypothesised everything, nothing was true and I didn't leave!

Kostandini: You even got an American passport in 1992 as your mother was born in America, immediately after when the Wall fell, which means you had the opportunity to leave if you wanted to.

Velo: Definitely, I could get a French passport too, since I was born there, I had to get either the American or the French passport. Yes! I chose the American passport, but after all this, I had a connection with this country [i.e. Albania], with all the suffering, with all those little works of art, I wasn't young enough to go somewhere and start a new life!

Although they were waiting for me, the reception in France was very friendly, and my scholarship was the first to be given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Ministry of Culture, for an art residence in Cité des Arts [in Paris] there. They did it several times. But I thought I was more useful here [in Albania]. I will pay my cheque in the country where I endured everything.

Kostandini: And after all these years of transition, almost 25 years of transition, where Albania has gone through many difficult moments, do you think we can or should join the European Union? What is your opinion on that?

Velo: I think we should definitely join the EU, otherwise we risk too much! We are in great danger because there is a strong oriental inclination. That's the problem! In the meantime, a small town is created in Manzë where they have brought 6,000 Iranians.

Kostandini: In Nantes of France?

Velo: In Manzë.

Kostandini: Where is Manzë?

Velo: It is near here, close to Tirana! That big mine, close to Rinas! Americans found it convenient to discharge any Islamic issue to Albania given that the country has a high percentage of Muslims! The Chinese Uyghur, now the Iranians! The pressure is put on by Erdogan! The construction of this new large mosque in the country, considered the largest in the Balkans! Indeed it is the largest, but with an unattractive architecture. The great danger of reunion with Kosovo! If we unite with Kosovo, we reach a population of 93% Muslims!

Kostandini: You don't see religious mixing as a force, you see it as a problem.

Velo: Definitely a big problem, really a big one, as there is a population that loves the oriental world! They have also showed how many fighters they had in ISIS! Even women and children, and now the women have returned, and are punished. Thus, the unification with Kosovo is a real issue!

Kostandini: Because you think defining Albania as an oriental country certainly doesn't help us.

Velo: It doesn't help us, it doesn't. In that FBI study of what Europe will be like in 2050, whether Europe will be old, Catholic, Byzantine, Albania is not mentioned at all, they leave us out!

Kostandini: How do you imagine Europe in 2050?

Velo: We definitely need to join the European Union, we need it, otherwise Albania will get worse. It will get much worse, we risk becoming an Islamic state! There are news these days of ISIS commands in Bosnia for example, in the newspaper, and these "underground" forces in Albania are very powerful, because there is a lot of money coming from the Arab countries only for that reason, keeping Albania as an island, an Islamic reserve!

Kostandini: So, in a way, Albania joining Europe is a kind of recovery for the country?

Velo: Exactly, at least it will be a recovery! It will be a reestablishment, or an inability for the evil to develop, to stop here and gradually get a balanced proportion, in order that they have no power to act in Albania, politically, institutionally, economically as they are openly doing!

Kostandini: This religious imbalance in Albania creates a problem and unlike the image created where Albania is a country with religious harmony, this means it is not in as much harmony as it seems.

Velo: Problems have always been created by religions, and they cover it with a great dosage of hypocrisy, stating there is understanding among religions! Always the same! Yes, there was another mosque built, and here another and another, Albania was filled with mosques! You have seen that the number of girls covered has gone up, little girls!

Kostandini: Yes, since a couple of years, yes!

Velo: It has already started in Tirana, and this is a problem, it is growing dramatically. So that is because it's not the problem of freedom of religion, this is not it! This is the cover or the urge to advance further and then force you to do what they want! This has always happened, always! You are not free anymore! That little number in France and Germany is also a matter of concern, not to mention that higher percentage in Albania! The only recovery for Albania is joining Europe!

Kostandini: How would you define Europe? As a more cultural, political, or economic union? As a union of diversity? How would you define it?

Velo: Certainly, the three of them together. As a cultural, political, and economic union and all this makes it more beautiful as a union of diversity that has a priority and a

much greater value now because they have managed to eradicate conflicts. Even when they have conflicts, such as the case with England, they resolve them peacefully! It has also made it a huge territory with many values, free movement, exchanging values, which are so tangible. The progress is very obvious with youngsters, students, and this is your case. All these values affect one another and the integration of these values to one another becomes much easier. Europe has reached its maximum and now I hope it resolves those few conflicts that are inevitable since there is still much diversity, but they have the organs to solve the conflicts!

Kostandini: Right. As for the students, since we talked about students, in Albania in the 1930s, like your father who was a student in Athens, then in France, and returned to Albania to invest in building a new Albania! He laid the foundations of Albanian intellectuals. Do you think today students who study abroad should return to invest in Albania as there are many of them studying abroad in the 2000s, and very few returned. What is your opinion on this?

Velo: That is a big problem because the problems are here! The problem is that the number of those who went abroad and returned was inconsiderable! Currently, there are 30,000 who study abroad and 30,000 are here. A huge mistake has been made, which continues, and is not sorted out yet; yesterday there was a very good article written by Professor Xhepa on this phenomenon, about universities' inflation, poor diplomas for faculties, let's say, political sciences! What do they mean by science? Social science! Thousands of students, useless diplomas, just to steal from them [the students], and all those private universities. This cannot be fixed, meaning the state has given them the right to open that faculty and for me the new "pyramids" now are the rectors, like the pyramid schemes [Pyramid schemes in Albania were Ponzi schemes that precipitated the 1997 unrest in Albania]! Even the owners of TV stations, newspaper owners! Those are today's ponzi schemes. They have created a pyramid, and nobody can go against the scheme!

In fact, no drastic measures are being taken. In Kosovo, some three or four universities were closed, whereas in Albania, twenty universities need to be closed because they are useless! How is it possible, 2,000 architects, maybe more, 3,000, as 300 graduated each year! We even get foreign architects to do the work! So there is one; I said that night at the architecture conference that Albanians had two dreams, to get a diploma and a home! You obtained a home through a passport in communist times! One used to get a home passport and a diploma. Now you don't need the house passport, then only diplomas are left! The latter are a fictitious choice because it is a great social hypocrisy! The way they are educated, that is, mother says to daughter: "Just get that diploma because I have already found my son-in-law." [laughs] "Just get that diploma." [laughs]

Kostandini: Just paper?

Velo: Just papers! But it is just a document, it can't replace the skills of those who have from abroad who are qualified! This is the hypocrisy of our society, that is. I have said it several times, several times on TV "What is our main deficiency? We don't want to work." That's what distinguishes us from Europeans! They love to work! I have said that work is like therapy! They do not fight for polling stations, nor for vote counting, not for anything, because they work! Work brings you income and when there is income, there is no need to stick to one party or another! No need to fight and demonstrate!

Because they work! But this is a defect, a genetic defect that was inherited from the Ottoman Empire! And it is very difficult to eradicate it! In the meantime, everybody is acting! They try to appear modern, but all day long they think how to get more money without working [laughs] So, the problem you mentioned is very complicated!

Kostandini: While you are one of the hardest working people! This year you turn 84, on August 31st, and you keep working every day.

Velo: Every day, you saw my latest works of art.

Kostandini: What is one thing you have accomplished that you are most proud of all these years? What is the most fulfilling thing for you?

Velo: Well, since you ask this question... I find it difficult to answer because what my accomplishment is, what makes me proud, is exactly what I do every day, God, I can't help working, even for a single day! That makes me proud! I feel very bad when I have not worked a day! I feel like I owe a debt to people!

I had to pay it off even though people have hurt me; not all of them, of course, but a good part of them, they even took my father's house in Dardhë village! They destroyed it, and my father built it! He made a new home when he got married. While I was in prison, my uncle lived there, and they destroyed it and turned it into a stall, I even suggested to them rebuilding it, to fill it with works of art and leave it to the village as a gift! They do not want it, they want to steal it! Every square metre of it! So, my sufferings are endless, but what keeps me going is the virtue that until the end, till the last day, I will be a useful person to others!

Kostandini: One last question. Your voice is heard, despite all people who have done you wrong and deliberately made your life difficult. There are many others who respect you, and value your words and find them inspiring and give them hope! What message would you give today to people of my generation who have things to build, a mission to accomplish?

Velo: I would say this [laughs] if I can tell you a recent story. I went out, it was the last symphonic concert here on Friday three weeks ago. There was an Italian conductor there and so he only played Italian music at the Academy of the Arts concert hall. He had chosen all the most beautiful pieces of Italian music, which closed the season. It

was also great fun because there I was seeing *these conductors*. I said, "They want to look like composers". I felt like it was Verdi! [laughs].

The Italian conductor wants to resemble the Italian composers, the French conductors the French composers, this is understandable! Well, it was a very joyful atmosphere and I went out when the concert was over. I was walking slowly and I could hear gipsy music in the background and people yelling, when someone appeared unexpectedly. A woman. She caught me and told me: "Mr Velo". "Yes," I said. "What can I do so that my son becomes like you?" she said. [laughs] "How?" I said. "What?" I said. [laughs] "Yes, my son," she said. "To be like you." "What is your son's profession?" "Architect." "Well, where does he work?" "Well, he paints walls, they prepare stuff and paint walls," she said. "What do you want then, you want your son to be like me?" [laughs].

It was very noisy there and her request was so absurd, so foolish and I had just come out of a concert and I didn't know what to tell her. I couldn't explain to this woman that she could not ask for that. Your son needs to be your son, not like someone else! No reason to be like someone else!

That is all I want to say, you need to be yourself. If he feels himself, positively I mean, because he may feel negatively about himself, like those we see, those Saturday or Sunday covers. There is such an illogical show of those beautiful girls [laughs] in Monte Carlo, Indonesia [laughs], one girl today was with her private helicopter. Oh God, this is so negative, that is negative for our youth. Yes, what can a girl living in the remote mountainous areas do after she watches this on TV? What can she see? That is: I think everybody should be themselves. If you can be yourself, that is it!

Kostandini: Thank you very much for your time. Many thanks for everything!

Velo: Thank You!

Kostandini: Then, I think I didn't tire you!

Velo: Excuse me?

Kostandini: I hope I didn't tire you?

Velo: No.