

Latvia

Ilze Seipule interviewed **Ausma Kantāne-Ziedone**

Interview date: 4th January 2020

Seipule: Hello. It is a great honour to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. My name is Ilze Seipule, I am 32 years old and I work, creating cultural content and events at Kalniecma Quarter and Āgenskalns Market, as well as promoting and preserving the heritage of wooden architecture.

Today I am with the actress, politician and public worker Ausma Kantāne-Ziedone at her home in Riga city centre.

Ausma Kantāne-Ziedone was born in Riga on 10th November 1941. From 1963 to 2001 she was one of the leading actresses at Dailes Theatre, where according to the publication “100 Greatest Latvian Actors”: “The storm of Dailes Theatre” she has played 76 roles. She was active in Latvia’s political scene between 2002 to 2010, serving as a member of the 8th and 9th Saeima (parliament of the Republic of Latvia) from the political party “New Time”. She has also worked as a teacher of body and speech culture at the Riga Dome Choir School, helping her students transform from individuals into personalities. Ausma Kantāne-Ziedone was the wife of Imants Ziedonis, one of the most significant Latvian poets, writers and creators of our self-awareness as a nation. She has always been a publicly active person with a strong opinion on current events.

Seipule: Let’s start with a question about your childhood. How would you describe it?

Kantāne-Ziedone: War, war. I think that it is a great imprint in itself which has left its mark. I was born and raised during the war. We left Riga for Courland, the Courland Pot¹, where all of the roughest battles took place. If you were to ask me, I don’t even remember a single detail. But I do recall a sense of turmoil and unrest. We had to rush somewhere, crawl somewhere - under the bed in a country house. It is all like a small, distant flash of something dramatic happening. But no details.

The house mistress had a cow. The mistress also had children. And I had a sister. We were all fed on that cow’s milk. Both sides came in during the battle², so we had to

¹ The Courland Pot is known as the siege of the German army in the Courland peninsula during World War II that formed on 9th-10th October 1944 when the Red Army reached the Baltic sea at river Mēmele and cut the possibility for the German army group “North” to retreat over land.

² During 1944 and 1945 six great battles took place in the Courland Pot between Germans and the Red Army.

hide the cow to stop her from bellowing, otherwise, they could destroy it, simply kill her for meat. So, my mother tied her to the floor so she wouldn't moo.

After the war, the mistress thanked my mummy for saving her and gave her the cow. We returned back home to Riga. Our apartment was already taken by other people, so we went to live with relatives of my grandmother's father. We also sold the cow immediately because it had no place there. The people who bought the cow sued mum for selling them a sick cow. It had tuberculosis. Mum said that she didn't know; me and my sister were also sick with tuberculosis. We were treated where the tram has its last stop, next to where the Riga Zoo is now.

There was this white house, I remember it clearly. I haven't seen it in a long while. They treated children with tuberculosis there. Up until our school age, me and my sister attended kindergarten there. And then we were sort of cured and were not treated further. We were sort of healthy. I remember that I was sicker than my sister because they gave me an extra slice of bread with butter and cocoa. It was like an additional layer. I was taller and weaker, a bit scrawny. I guess they saw that this one here was a bit more miserable.

I don't know if I should tell you this but later it turned out that the tuberculosis, I had was not only in my lungs but in both of my fallopian tubes, too. I struggled with - I really wanted to have children but I didn't and couldn't have them. In the end, the doctor asked me: "Have you had tuberculosis?" I told him: "Yes, in my lungs." "No", he said, "in your fallopian tubes as well." That was a big shock for me. It was very hard. So, if today anyone asks me about war, I tell them - No, it is a subject I do not talk about. It is something that drew a dark line into my life.

Seipule: As a child, how did you feel? Did you feel safe or on the contrary - insecure?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Horrifying. If I told you the details...Mother was, yes, well, mum was already working afterwards. Since she had finished all those schools, she couldn't work anymore. The department store, where Galleria Riga is now, used to be the Army's economic store and mum worked there. They made cakes and pastries that anyone could buy. Mum said that even [Kārlis Augusts Vilhelms] Ulmanis [Latvian political leader]³ had been to the store and that she treated him with pastries. Mum was very taken with Ulmanis. I am not going to talk about it. It is harder for me. The more educated a person is, the more they think about it from every perspective. Well, maybe that isn't a topic for today.

We were very poor. When we returned from the war, we had no apartment, no equipment. So, they gave us an apartment because my father started working at VEF

³ Kārlis Augusts Vilhelms Ulmanis (1877-1942) politician, one of Latvia's founding fathers, first leader of Latvia's temporary government and Prime Minister for multiple terms. After the coup on 15th May 1934 he became an authoritarian leader of the state and the president in 1936. After the occupation of Latvia in 1940, he was arrested and deported to the USSR where he was imprisoned and died.

[one of the largest factories in Latvia and the leading manufacturer of communication technologies in the USSR after World War II]. And this house by the Freedom Monument,⁴ nobody knows about it today, but look at the third floor. It was a VEF house, built for people who worked at VEF. On the third floor, there are these huge windows, unlike the second or fourth floor where people lived. That is because, before they built the VEF Palace of Culture, the cultural centre was here. As a child I was running barefoot down the stairs, we all were, to watch children's movies and cartoons.

So, we were watching that, and I don't know if I can tell you such tragic details..... Why was she maybe so culture-oriented herself? We were all hungry for culture, or graced. Our bodies were tingling with excitement so much that mum gave her only pair of shoes to the pawnshop. It was in one of the small streets behind the Riga Russian Theatre. Mum had to go to work but there were huge queues to drop off your coat or shoes. So, she started queuing at night, not knowing if she would be able to leave by morning. After the war, everyone took their things to the pawnshop, everybody left something there. Although, it's kind of silly because, you know, you have to pay interest to get it back.

When the summer came, we were already big girls to our mum. So, then mum took her lipstick and wrote "136" on one of the doors, for example, because she had to go to work before queuing. Then we came to stand in line in the early morning, because she had already been there through the night. Then she came back later and left her things at the shop. We were taken to Mežaparks⁵, theatre and various cultural events with that money. So, I know that the money and everything we saw had special value. Oh my gosh, if you would now have to queue all night to get into the pawnshop to leave a single pair of shoes.

Seipule: Were you aware back then of your money's value and how poor you were?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, I don't think I knew money's value. Maybe I was even happy that mum was buying something for my sister, too, since we were both the artistic type. My little brother, who was born later, was more of a practical type. Although, no, he also had these artistic sentiments. And mum had it. She later attended sculpture classes with the sculptors Līze Dzeguze and Alders⁶.

So, it was very hard. Mum was selling candy, sort of like the soft fudge sweets "Gotiņa" that Skrīveri⁷ is making now. She made the candy and the paper wrappers herself and then took them to sell. And when she sold the whole batch, we could buy lunch for two

⁴ The Freedom Monument is a memorial located in Riga, Latvia, honouring soldiers that were killed during the Latvian War of Independence (1918–1920). It is considered an important symbol of the freedom, independence, and sovereignty of Latvia.

⁵ Mežaparks is a neighbourhood in Riga and was built as a park in 1901 to mark Riga's 700th anniversary. It was also the first garden city in Latvia.

⁶ Latvian sculptor Līze Dzeguze (1908 - 1992) and her husband, sculptor Rūdolfs Alders (1907 - 1987).

⁷ Skrīveri Food factory was opened in 1956 and they started to produce the soft fudge candy "Gotiņa".

days, as well as products for another batch. Today you would call that speculation because she didn't sell them cheap. Since she had the necessary qualifications, she knew how to make those sweets properly.

There wasn't much we could afford. I had never eaten chicken. There were these guts and pieces at the market - head, neck, wings, legs, stomach and heart. The big chickens were sold separately, we couldn't dream of those.

I said: "Mum, get those guts". And there was a lady standing before us who gave my mum some money and said: "Here, buy it for that child if she wants it so bad!" So, yes, poor, very poor. Although, when I was already married to Imants [Ziedonis, a famous Latvian poet, writer, publicist]⁸, his mum in Ragaciems was boiling chicken. She cut the head off and threw it away.

"Oh, my", I said. "Don't throw that away! That's edible."

"What, the head?", she replied.

"Yes, the comb, the wattles, it's crunchy and so tasty!"

And his mother looked at me and thought: "Oh, poor child, where has she lived and what has she eaten?!"

Yes, well, it was tough.

Seipule: What does "home" mean to you? What makes you feel at home?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Today?

Seipule: I'm thinking more about your childhood.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Nothing. We lived at the very top of VEF, in the attic. Although, it's a paradox now - Koziols⁹ [Latvian property developer] has lifted the roof to insert a window and has reconstructed the building. I'm just thinking if it wasn't [Jānis Frīdrihs] Baumanis' [Latvian architect] project. And how did they even allow this? I think it's a cultural heritage site.

We played *kazaki razboinyki* [Children's game] there and all sorts of different games, bare feet around the Freedom Monument. We climbed up on the gable. The current owner has lifted the roof to put windows in the same attic towards the Freedom Monument, luxury apartments, basically. But nobody lives there, maybe they haven't

⁸ Imants Ziedonis (1933 - 2013) was a Latvian poet, writer, publicist, author of short prose, translator, script writer. One of the most noticeable Latvian authors of literary tales, significant public worker during the Singing Revolution, member of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia. Life partner of Ausma Kantāne - Ziedone.

⁹ Viesturs Koziols (1963) is a Latvian developer of real estate, media and sports entrepreneur, photographer, art patron, political and public worker.

finished the project yet. Then we took pillows and went sliding down the roof. And the railing that held us there, well, that was... Today I think, oh my, children are little daredevils. You either have God standing beside you there or you don't. If I look up there today and think that I was sliding down that roof, well, you couldn't force me out there now!

Seipule: But you felt at home there?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No.

Seipule: You didn't?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, no. We were crammed there.

Seipule: Was there a place where you did feel at home?

Kantāne-Ziedone: I didn't feel at home for a long time. When we got married, Imants rented a small triple room on Tallinas street. And we came there.

Our wedding was spectacular. It was at the Writers' Union in the old Benjamins' House¹⁰ and everything looked wonderful. The Writers' Union had a chauffeur - Pauls Endikos who took us. In the end, everyone left, and it was only us. So, we thought, okay, let's go home. I remember we walked home in the middle of Lenin's street down to Tallinas street and the St. Gertrude New Church. We had a small room with no furniture, only a folding bed they called *raskladushka*. That's how we started our life. And again, no feeling of home there. Then the Writers' Union built a house on Valdemara street and gave us a two-bedroom flat there. But mum was with us over there, so I also didn't feel at home. I basically call this apartment here my own, we moved in here in 1980. And our house in Murjāni¹¹ that we built it to have everything we didn't have here in Riga. Everything out of wood, everything colourful, interesting, so it wouldn't have that dark, grim cement. Riga didn't have a single spot where the eyes could relax and look at something beautiful. So, we made this apartment to our liking. It is quiet here, because we're in the very centre and you can't hear any outside noise. We liked it here.

Seipule: So, you consider this and the house in Murjāni your home?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, that's how it was. But the Murjāni house is sold now. There's a museum. And this apartment is very quiet now. There's a small street here and the apartment is facing towards a small yard with two chestnut trees that blossom in spring. When you open the window, you don't know where you are. Nobody could tell that they are in Riga city centre. Beautiful Zāļā street. We both enjoyed art, listened to music. You could tell actual legends about every picture on this wall. Jānis Pauļuks

¹⁰ House of Benjamins was owned by the influential mass media couple Antons and Emilia Benjamins. The house was built in 1876 and it was home to Latvian Writers' Union after World War II.

¹¹ Murjāni is a small populated place in Sēja County.

[painter]¹² painted this picture right here in this apartment. It has all been so unreal. That is why every picture here is like a deep breath that helped me discover such personalities. A very interesting man, a rich man. From a different art world - fine arts. And this one, for example, is by Līga Purmale [painter].¹³ It was very interesting. We went to visit them in Āgenskalns [neighbourhood in Riga]. She was living with Miervaldis Polis¹⁴, the accurate painter. If he painted a fried egg on a pan it looked like a photograph. I really enjoyed that greenery and her haze. When you live in the city, you're hungry for that fresh air, that greenery, especially Imants. When I saw it, I thought, oh God, if I had that picture at home, I would feel good every morning. I would just breathe and breathe and feel glad. She went into the other room, came back and said: "Here, take it!" I was speechless. What? Take it?! "Yes", she said, "you have my permission to take it". That's the kind of people we had back then. It was good.

Seipule: Do these things help you feel more at home?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, they fill me with their personalities. And all of the works were wanted, more or less. Beautiful. We have wedding gifts here. As I said, there is some sort of energy coming from these works. It is like a law of eternal energy that these people have put in here. They fill the space. I come into a different energy here that is close, familiar and makes me happy. It makes me glad. Why wouldn't I stay here?! I lay here, read, the sun is shining in from the window and I am happy. And that is basically all I want. I enjoy absolute minimalism. I think I would live like this now - bed, table, one painting where I could meditate and that would speak to me, energize me or on the contrary - calm me. Music that I could put on. I cannot play beautifully myself.

I have worked very, very much for all of my life, ever since I turned sixteen. When I was studying, I worked at the Young Pioneer camps for cultural workers in Asari [neighborhood in Jūrmala, located by the sea] every summer. I worked every summer, all of them. I have worked since the first day a person is allowed to work. That's who I am. So, I have worked for many, many years. And when you have created and nourished the environment around you, you realise that you don't really need that much. All of those redundant things. We took them everywhere with us. As Imants called them - little rag dolls, Lāčplēsis¹⁵ and Spīdola [both are symbolic character in

¹² Jānis Pauļuks (1906-1984) is one of the brightest personalities in Latvian painting after World War II. His strong individuality was influential on his contemporaries, especially the development of young art talents for many decades.

¹³ Līga Purmale (1948) is a Latvian painter. Together with her husband at the time Miervaldis Polis they are considered pioneers of photorealism in Latvian painting in the 1970s. Awarded with the Order of the Three Stars. Her works can be found in collections in Latvia, USA, Canada, Russia.

¹⁴ Miervaldis Polis (1948) is a Latvian painter and performance artist. In the 1970s he started photorealism in Latvian painting together with his wife at the time Līga Purmale. He was also one of the first painters of photorealism in the Soviet Union. He turned to performance art in the 1980s.

¹⁵ Lāčplēsis is a symbolic character in Latvian literature and cinema. He symbolises the greatness of his people and his heroism represents a man's courage when defending his homeland against invaders.

Latvian literature and cinema]¹⁶. Now I put them all in a box if I don't have a place behind glass. Otherwise, they just collect dust. Now I just want to pick out special ones. Today you understand what true value is. Maybe I'm more interested in the overtones now, not so much in the base tones.

Seipule: Let's switch from the "sense of home" to a broader notion - "sense of belonging". Where do you feel that you belong most? On a wider, or narrower scale? Maybe it is in a place, or with people?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Definitely here, in Latvia. In my homeland with my people. I think Imants was completely obsessed with it. We got married and in the second year we went walking across Courland [cultural and historical county in the west part of Latvia]¹⁷ to write "Kurzemīte"¹⁸. We were both sitting in the carriage, rocking our legs while the lady was leading the horse and telling stories. Imants said: "See, women know everything. Women can tell you about two hundred years back, men can't. Men just either work or drink. They can't tell you any stories." Men rarely have that "higher" sense or understanding. But ladies, they see the rhythm of nature. She opens the door and sees the forest and trees in the distance that turn into different colours in spring and autumn, going from grey to brownish yellow. And the lady in the carriage said: "Women are smart". Maybe God created them more open and with a better understanding of the world.

Seipule: Has this sense of belonging changed during your lifetime? Or has it, maybe, shifted or transformed?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, well, being elsewhere in the world and seeing how. Especially those few trips we took as members of the Soviet Union. Yes, then one thing became clear to me - I was hurt by the fact that we [Latvia] were so small. I saw how they tell history there. You know, the Pope used to lead from France, not from Italy and the Vatican how it is now. The first four popes were French. We went to Avignon and saw all those places. This year I went to the French Riviera, to the south of France by the Mediterranean - Nice, Cannes, Marseille and Monaco. To the places I thought I needed to see. What is this world? How did they live there? Van Gogh was treated there. And then I really felt that yes, we are also by the sea. But the air there is dry. Mountains and the sea, but the air - you don't feel it. Oh, God, how easy it was to breathe! And I thought, why is it so humid here by our sea? We don't have mountains and that warmth. And all of that wealth that they have. I like those fine French balconies with railings crocheted like Brussels lace.

¹⁶ Spīdola is a symbolic character in Latvian literature and cinema. She is a controversial character. Initially, she's been described as a witch representing dark forces. However, she is together with Lāčplēsis supporting him in his battles against evil.

¹⁷ Courland or Kurzeme is a cultural and historical county in the west part of Latvia. The modern territorial identity of Courland can be traced back to the beginning of Courland Diocese in 1230.

¹⁸ "Kurzemīte" (Little Courland) is Imants Ziedonis' work of documentary prose and memories in two parts (1970, 1974)

But every trip like that has also hurt my heart. Okay, those are very special places and only those who can afford it go there. And I have been happy about it. But then I think, everything hurts when I think of Latvia. The fact that we are so small, that we are not as open, a bit shameless, a bit tricky and it somehow hurts me very much.

I think we could afford that if we were at least five, six million. Then you always have some dropouts. As they say, every nation has those they are not particularly proud of, those who are slacking, without any willpower. As Piatigorsky¹⁹ said: "The good and the bad - they are in balance". But we are so few, two million, maybe even less now. Then I think that the fewer we are, the more good there has to be. We cannot afford any defects, any wasted people. We all need to be better and to try. The main thing is to understand that "no, I have to do this!" and overcome laziness. Where is the laziness? Where is the willpower? Why is there no willpower? Why is there no self-esteem, self-awareness, respect? After all, I am standing here! And you represent a certain place in the world where you can express yourself and do something that no one else in the world can. You have to realise that. You have to value that.

I still stand for humaneness. I believe that you have to be human first. But why has God also created the rainbow? If we are all the same, then there will be no rainbow. Why has he put one nation in the mountains, one in the valley, one by the sea, one on an island? Another somewhere far in the desert. It means that each of these small entities are made for something, they have value and meaning. You cannot destroy it. Look at China when they started shooting sparrows²⁰ and the worms ate all the rice and crops. It was breakdown after breakdown. The notion of balance is in the very foundations of nature. It hurts me to see that we, the minority, don't improve. I would like to see a big geometric leap now, yet I remain an optimist. I don't think it will only be the bishop and rook making moves. The time will come for our knight and then everyone will say: "Look at that, look at that!"

If you have been created, you must have certain potential. And we have that. We just can't seem to find what it is that we, Latvians, can shine with into the world. We are already shining, though - our athletes, our artists, our singers, our sculptors. Our design has some wonderful artists now. And think of our singing. It is like this "eee" for Russians, pulling barges with their hands. We have worked hard in threshing barns, but with singing. Has every nation sung like us when they're doing hard labour? Maybe that is why God has given us the ability to turn our hardships into artistic forms. The reality needs to be transformed into a higher truth. Another reality is a higher reality. And that is the higher value we can be proud of, the ability to sing like that.

¹⁹ Alexander Piatigorsky (1929-2009) was a Russian philosopher, scholar of South Asian philosophy and culture, historian, philologist, semiotician, writer.

²⁰ The Four Pests Campaign was one of the first activities carried out by China during their Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1962. The four pests that needed extermination were rats, flies, mosquitos and sparrows.

Seipule: Going back to traveling, I understand that you and Imants have travelled a lot, right?

Kantāne-Ziedone: I wouldn't say so. Imants has travelled a lot, me - not so much. You really couldn't, back in those days. You see, my work in theatre during Soviet times meant that I only had two summer months free to travel. Now you don't even have these two months. Now it's a month or ten days. And you need money, too. But we travelled around Latvia a lot - in Courland and along the Lithuanian border. I have also been all over Latvia with theatre. I think I've been in all the big cultural houses. I could say that I know Latvia well. Maybe less in recent years, but I have been to many places.

Seipule: Out of all the places you've visited outside of Latvia, is there somewhere you could imagine yourself living? Some place that you could call home?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, no.

Seipule: Nowhere?

Kantāne-Ziedone: You know, I'm a resident of the temperate zone. I can't bear the heat. Cold neither, but okay, I'm not going to the North Pole. No, I'm a moderate person. Some of my friends say: "Let's go somewhere warm!" I tell them: "I can't bear it." It is hard for me. I feel like I'm carrying myself plus another person. I like it here and I am still living with this sense of mission that we need to show everyone who we are as a nation. I think it is not right at the moment that we ignore the people who live here - Jews, Lithuanians, Estonians, Russians and other minorities. How can we develop that right, common and ideal view of society that could appeal to everyone? I guess that is what Chardin²¹ said when he talked about an idea that would make every young person in the world say: "Yes, we want to create that! We want to fulfil that!" .

Here in Latvia we don't have natural disasters or storms that would take down half of our trees, or rain and lightning that would kill half the population. The small number that we are would be long gone in the Amazon fires. So, I think if someone would find it, he doesn't need to be a government worker or a politician, just a *wise* man. Someone like Jesus Christ if there ever was one. And if he didn't exist, I have always thought - but there must have been something. Some ideal man who could cure people and feed them with a slice of bread. Legends don't emerge out of nothing! There must have been a person who made this legend revolve around him. Okay, call him what you want. Think of another name if you don't like Jesus, but I think that he existed. In this higher reality where everyone works in order to prove it. But for *me* to say what it is! That is like searching for a new messiah or a new invention. And it doesn't matter anymore how big we are - ten, twenty, two million or four hundred million.

²¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French idealist philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist.

How to find that common thread that would unite everyone? I think there has to be one, like a tornado that swirls but has peace and quiet inside, a centre. And if there would be such a centre, an idea uniting us all, we would all bring our contributions and leave them before "It". There has to be something that we admire and look up to as a whole, that brings awe. There has to be some sort of centre. I think that Europe has lost it now. Asia still has their gods, but I think Europe does not anymore.

I also go to church, well, not so much recently. But the church can't keep preaching the same way they did yesterday. Some say that: "No, it can't be changed. It is a constant whole and that is that." No, I don't agree with that. You can't get to that young person. He doesn't listen. You need to stop him. He's running. Stop! How do you stop him and what do you say to him? When you take the bottle out of his hand what do you put in the other hand? You don't know what to put in the other hand. Then you can't take the bottle away, you have no right. You have to put something in the other hand.

It would be perfect if there could be one thing for the whole of humanity. Or one for the whole tribe, or one thing for a nation that holds it all together. So, it could be that the highlander would visit the valley, river people, forest people, desert people, mountain people.

Seipule: Do you think that, for example, what we currently have in Europe - the centre of the European Union - is not enough?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, definitely not. I don't see the spiritual status. Yes, neither the economic or social but I can bear it if I don't have something to eat or if I don't have that dress to wear. But with this I need to show that I have come into this world to give a piece of me to this centre, this notion. I need to have that satisfaction that I have contributed my share. I just don't know what that share is. How to make everyone want that? How much did you share? Oh, so much? I still have to work for it!

So that everyone would contribute to something. I was watching the film "Les Misérables" on TV. I see that there can be more humanity in a criminal than in the people around me. The character comes to a realisation - he looks at his enemy and *forgives* him. He knows that he must be punished for what he's done. And in that moment, I see that he feels regret. The other one can see it in his eyes and understands.

And then they find themselves in changed roles where the policeman can rightfully kill him, but he doesn't. He knows that because of his status as a policeman he must kill his old enemy. Yet, they look at each other and realise that they are people, after all. They are something higher, behind their profession and status. And they unite in this higher status. Knowing that he will be held accountable before his superiors, the

policeman dies. But he gives freedom to someone else. It is something higher where they both met. A thief and a high ranking official. It shows that it is possible to agree in the name of something bigger.

When this bare, real, truthful person is standing before you so pure, so open, so selfless, I say - take it. Take it all! Nothing that a rust or moth can destroy can bring me happiness. But I see a beautiful person - pure and honest. Or as I say - wise and honest. Show me these people! Maybe it is a story about ideals, but maybe it is all very insignificant.

Seipule: In this hierarchy, do you see this spiritual centre within every country? Or then is it, for example, the centre of Europe? Through one centre we move on to the next?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, yes, yes. It won't be the same as it was with Jesus when they brought faith in with guns. I think you have lost the minute you raise a weapon. You cannot fight for a new idea with old means. By destroying you destroy your own idea at its very core. If your idea demands destruction, it's already the end of it. Then it is what Rainis [Latvian poet, playwright, translator (1865-1929)]²² said: "The highest idea doesn't know the pity of a man." He then said that he revokes it. No, you can't do that. If you don't pity a man, throw your idea away. The idea is wrong. You cannot take a person's life in the name of an idea; you may not. That is why I think that everyone should have this notion. And everyone wants to participate. Every person on this Earth adds value. Everyone. They just can't seem to find their way of contributing. They don't find it and say: "There's nothing!" But there is.

Seipule: If we try to bring this notion down to Earth a bit and look at Europe today, tell me, do you think there is a country that is at least half a step closer to this idea than we are?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, I think it is the Nordic countries. Denmark has this writer Peter Høeg.²³ Oh, this could resolve it. He wrote the novel "Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow". It was translated into many different languages. He also received his life's pension from the state for this novel. In the novel he depicts a woman who lives in Greenland and is fighting the "good old" centre of Europe. That really old one which might already be jagged and rotten now. It is because they have lost the thing I am talking about here. Their centre has become wobbly. Can they hold on to the old centre? I don't think so. They have to look for a new one, let them seek. And this girl is self-taught and educated by the wise centre. But she also feels the snow, she feels the earth, the sand and water. She feels it all. But they don't. And then she becomes indestructible. In the book, she prevails over the centre and comes out as the winner. It is because

²² Rainis, real name Jānis Krišjānis Pļiekšāns (1865-1929) was a Latvian poet, playwright, translator, theatre worker, politician. Significantly influenced the development of Latvian literary language.

²³ Peter Høeg (1957) is a Danish writer of fiction. He is best known for his novels "Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow" and "The Woman and The Ape"

she has preserved the foundations - the Earth's elements that give life to you the same way as it does to a rock, a tree, a flower. If there is still something that keeps me alive and gives it all some meaning, it is these elements that you cannot ignore.

Seipule: I just thought of Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, while you were describing this.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, yes, yes. That is why I'm saying there has to be a new notion. I think that religious faith can no longer hold us because we have reached a critical mass that is already lost. It is impossible to regain that thread. The same about Latvians. We are a minority and our politicians and wise men should understand this. They should come together once every few months and show us - stop, stop, this is wrong, we missed something. What are we building this for? There are no people here. So, think, my dear friends! You have your top, average and low priorities that need to be fulfilled, but always remember about the highest one and how everything relates to it. Otherwise, it will be like what Indulis Zariņš²⁴ once said: "A student is drawing an eye. He draws it so precisely and delicately, but it turns out that he doesn't see the whole person and the eye is on the arse." (*laughs*). You need to see what you are building, then move on to details. Otherwise, we don't see what it's all for and it becomes useless.

Seipule: Rarely does anyone see the whole picture.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Also, to see it from the outside when you're in. So, please, go and leave the country for some time. Live there for a while! See, observe! And then we can come together and talk. And this serving for others okay, I understand scientists who need equipment. But Ambainis [Latvian painter]²⁵ and everyone who came back [after working abroad] are building and are in all the unions that they do their research work for. You can also transfer. It doesn't really matter nowadays where you work.

Seipule: What did you want to become when you were little?

Kantāne-Ziedone: A ballerina. I even took lessons. I wanted to because it had movement. And then they said I would be too tall to become professional. I said: "No, then I'm not even going to start." Why should I learn if I know that I will never be able to dance on the big stage? Ambition - for me it was all or nothing. They took all my measurements and told me that. They can tell it right away. And then I wanted to become an actress. Now I realise that back then I didn't know, poor thing, that you can also not be an actress. But that psychology, it was interesting for me to observe people. That is why I'm less interested in theatre plays and more in how to portray this or that. And if we look at it from this perspective? Or if we try to portray it in a completely

²⁴Indulis Zariņš (1929-1997) was a Latvian painter. He painted figural compositions, portraits, still life and book illustrations.

²⁵Andris Ambainis (1975) is a Latvian mathematician, actively working with computer sciences. Professor at University of Latvia, full member at Latvian Academy of Sciences, professor at the University of Waterloo.

opposite way? How we did it was: "Oh, the sun is shining! Aaah" (*ironically*). So, you know the sun was shining that day. Everything was wonderful but I was just sick of it all. You see, we *painted* the words. I don't know who taught us this fakeness, but that school was pretty fake. They taught us but no one could hold it. So, in the end, I understood that I could be a lawyer or a teacher. I wanted to help people. Show them that they can. You can. First of all, believe! You have to believe it first. If you don't believe it then you can't do anything. And do! Do, do, do - it is a verb.

I want to help. I am not just a talker; I have a colourful imagination and emotionality. I think that as an actress I could communicate and get to people more easily. I could be good at it. Back then I thought that is the way for actors, but now I don't anymore. I could go around the world and tell people. I don't know. I regret only two things - that I don't know languages and music. I regret that I couldn't do that. I didn't have the money to do that.

Seipule: If you were twenty again, would you go on to become an actress?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, definitely not. Pardon me, but an actress is like a prostitute. You can never perform what you want. The director tells you: "I don't see it in you, no. You see, here is Anna and here is Ilze. They can, but I don't see it in you." Another director would see it, but he doesn't, so you can go shoot yourself. What can I do?! It's a horrible dependence on what and how they give you. And then they give it to you but don't know how to help. If the director gives it to me then I think it is because he sees something in me: "That actor has a different colour. Look at him! I should get this out of him. I have observed something in him, how he looks at this and I'm really interested in this side of him. So, I give him a character that will bring out certain qualities." But for us it was: "Well, this one goes to her!" On the surface, on the surface. So, when I finished, they asked me: "Are you not coming back to the theatre?" I said: "No, it's not interesting to me." If there would have been a director that said: "Ausma, come, let's do a piece." I would have gone.

Seipule: Is there a director that you would be ready to work with?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, Arkādijs Kacs [theatre director and lecturer in Latvia and Russia].²⁶ He staged "Barbarians"²⁷ and "The Precipice"²⁸ with us. He worked at Riga Russian Theatre at the time, then moved to Moscow. Jewish. He knew how to tell you! He had that ability to work or as we say - you need to take action, not just paint words.

²⁶ Arkādijs Kacs (1931) worked as a theatre director and lecturer in Latvia and Russia. He has been the artistic director at Riga Russian Theatre, has worked at Vakhtangov State Theatre in Moscow, Latvian National Theatre, Latvian State Conservatory and Michigan State University.

²⁷ "Barbarians" by Maxim Gorky was staged at Dailes Theatre in 1974

²⁸ "The Precipice" by Ivan Goncharov was staged at Dailes Theatre in 1982.

But what is it you want to say with those words? He knew how to write, and it was very easy for me to work with him. I thought: "Oh, if only we could do this!" See, you can!

Seipule: If you look back over your career as an actress, you played 76 roles.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, give or take. It doesn't matter. Big directors, such as Smilgīs²⁹, need five. If you have played five roles, it's a very good indicator. Very good.

Seipule: What has been the highest point for you in your career as an actress and why?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Definitely "Brand". Ibsen's "Brand". It all came together, such artists! I could never have imagined that Raimonds Pauls [Latvian composer, pianist, politician]³⁰ could write such music. I thought it's going to be something like "Mežrozīte".³¹ And [Ilmārs] Blumbergs [Latvian scenographer and graphic artist]³² made a spinning plane. Everyone said it can't be built. But you see, there are artists who tell you how it's going to be. And then you have those around who work to make it happen. "No, it can't be built." But he proved it can. The Rector of Riga Technical University at the time Ivars Knēds helped him. So, I understood that you can overcome any struggle.. But you have to try extremely hard to make it happen. We don't have people who would try hard enough. Just don't have the people.

I also like tragicomic roles. In "Widows" [play by Ākošs Kērtess]³³ I and Lilita Bērziņa [Latvian actress]³⁴ played Anna. She's very dear to me. Also, the contact between partners is very important. I cry in this play: "But I paid him, paid him so much. He just takes it and goes to the holiday house in my place." Then I told myself: "A person is either a giver or a taker." And my Anna was a giver. She gave what she had. She wasn't very smart, but her heart was good, and she gave everything - her good thoughts, actions. She helped in whatever way she could. And that smart Hanna, played by [Vija] Artmane [Latvian/Soviet theatre and film actress]³⁵, was next to him. But what good does it do? she couldn't help him. It's interesting with people.

There are many roles. We did a concert in the small hall with Raimonds Pauls called "All trees are God given". I recited Vizma Belševica's [Latvian poet, writer and

²⁹ Eduards Smilgīs (1886-1966) was a Latvian theatre director and actor. Founder of Dailes Theatre.

³⁰ Raimonds Pauls (1936) is a Latvian composer, pianist, politician. He is one of the most popular Latvian composers of all time.

³¹ "Mežrozīte" is a song by Raimonds Pauls, lyrics by Alfrēds Krūklis. A light pop song.

³² Ilmārs Blumbergs (1943-2016) was a Latvian scenographer and graphic artist.

³³ "Widows", a play by Ākošs Kērtess where Ausma Ziedone - Kantāne played the role of Anna (1979)

³⁴ Lilita Bērziņa (1903-1983) was a Latvian actress. She worked at Dailes Theatre from 1922 until almost the end of her life.

³⁵ Vija Artmane (1929-2008) was a Latvian/Soviet theatre and film actress, public worker and politician. Considered to be one the greatest Latvian theatre and film actresses of the 20th century.

translator]³⁶ poetry, there were real birch trees. He played, not on the piano, but xylophone? No.

Seipule: Synthesizer?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Synthesizer. And the artist Večella Varslavāne³⁷ made me this linen. I cut a pony for the first time, put in these earrings made from driftwood and had this linen dress. Then I went there among the birch trees. It was very well received. That's how it was. We didn't play Chekhov or Shakespeare back then. I had to play Kyrgyz, Tajik, Armenian, Moldavian, Russian plays. That's what I had. It wasn't a classic. I played a Soviet person. I didn't have anything to feed from, nothing bigger to hang on to. Although I had a few jobs that were okay, yet the dramaturgy was very weak. We had to play what was accepted.

Seipule: Did you have any other sources that you used to gain knowledge?

Kantāne-Ziedone: I was reading, watching. We went to different nations' theatre festivals that gathered people from across the world. I was in a theatre festival in Warsaw and Hamburg. I have been to two. Back then Lidija Freimane was the director of Latvian Theatre Union. Each republic sent three actors. So, we went to see all of the latest in Europe. In the USSR we always had the big stages but here it was theatre in a room, all of a sudden. I went inside, it was Turgenev's "A Month in the Country" in a big room like this, all covered in green. They put a small river there and a blossoming cherry tree in the corner with a spotlight on it. I open the door and it is: "Oh! Wow! What is this?" People are sitting from all three sides in a room such as this, such as that table. And I'm there with Kroders and Romānova or Māra Zemdegs [Latvian actors]. Then I say: "I'll check if that cherry is real or not." You know, Japanese make them so thin. I look and it's not real, thank you. And then the play, how they performed! To see how the theatre went from a loud "Oooh! I'll do this and that!" to a silent whisper.

Now they all use headsets on big stages but when I was playing in "Brand", Liniņš³⁸ was running down in the front yelling: "Ausma, I can't hear you! Can you speak louder? Can't hear you." I'm dying and I have to yell. Well, that's why it is absurd. Each performance requires its space and environment where it should be performed. I can't perform today the same way I did twenty or fifty years ago. Everything changes. And artists have to go along with it as much as they can. Even now. Others say: "In my time, it was the best. I don't even want to see all that new stuff. No, I won't even see it. It's not for me." Many people say: "I don't like this theatre anymore."

³⁶ Vizma Belševica (1931-2005) was a Latvian poet, writer and translator. Honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences.

³⁷ Večella Varslavāne (1930-2015) was a Latvian costume designer, worked on many popular films and theatre plays

³⁸ Arnolds Liniņš (1930-1998) was a Latvian actor and director. Teacher at Dailes Theatre studio, Culture Academy of Latvia and the State Conservatory.

Seipule: And how is it for you?

Kantāne-Ziedone: If it's a quality play, I like it. I like this conditioning, but I want to see a human. If you can, go see "Antigone" at the National Theatre. Grasbergs³⁹ is playing there together with Maija Doveika⁴⁰. Oh, I was crying like this (*shows*). And then you're thinking: "No, wait, who is right here? Wait, wait! Oh, she's asking him this. Well, what are you going to say?" You're truly living along with them emotionally. And then you think: "Oh, my, I'm exhausted". You rarely come across a performance like that. Even though they are performing in a small room with nothing. A wall. A small box and they're performing. No deserts, no Creon in the desert. But how they perform! You don't need all of that. But then you need to have such masters. Otherwise, if they started playing theatre in that box it would be bad.

[Elmārs] Seņkovs [young Latvian theatre director] is a genius. "Once every hundred years, a small dwarf is climbing up."⁴¹ That is why they say that you rarely get these talents. You're lucky if you catch the wave and it takes you. But if you're born in a time of a downfall, then... That is why my life is so different. I was born in the Soviet Union and grew up with all that. Now I go to the new, independent, renewed state and compare. Not just with my head but with my whole heart. To experience it with your whole body. Then you can look at it all and judge. I think about the youth, parents are giving them everything. When I go to a party I say: "I don't know what gifts to bring." I'm not going to buy things. They will look at it for ten minutes and put it in the corner. I only give them tickets to the cinema or books. No, not books, they don't read books. I buy them a magazine, a yearly subscription. Something that they can go and see. I can't support what I don't like. I can't do it. Why do such nonsense - I don't like it myself but do it for others? I think that is a great achievement, to not do this nonsense. I have grown and understood this. Maybe time has taught me that today I can say: "No." For fifty years I couldn't say no. Today I can say: "No, that is not true what you are telling me. I don't think so." But I can also say: "I think like this." And it is important that you can say - how. It is like Bruno Rubess [Latvian entrepreneur]⁴² said: "I'm not interested in what you can't do. Tell me what you can do." What can you do? Nothing?

Seipule: What has changed? Why can you say "no" today?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Because it is a different time. You can talk. And many don't like it. I listen to the radio where the old people talk on open mic and I think: "Oh, God, what are these people fighting with?" They are still fighting with the occupants living here. Stop it! Nothing is going to change, they [Russians who remained living here after the collapse of the USSR] have stayed here and are here. I think we need to find a

³⁹ Gundars Grasbergs (1977) is a Latvian actor. Working at the National Theatre since 2006.

⁴⁰ Maija Doveika (1980) is a Latvian actress. Used to work at Dailies Theatre and the Theatre Observatory. Works at the National Theatre since 2014.

⁴¹ From the poem "Imanta" by Latvian poet Andrejs Pumpurs.

⁴² Bruno Rubess (1926-2009) was a Latvian entrepreneur. After Latvia regained its independence, he was approved as a member of the board at the Bank of Latvia in 1992 and as a councillor in 1999.

consensus. And I still believe that we can unite for a common cause, a common idea. And each person can find their contribution to the cause. That is my belief. If I didn't have this belief that holds me together, I would just be like a duck shit floating on water.

Seipule: If we talk about politics, which we already have done a little bit, and if we look back at the past, can you tell me which political events have influenced you and your life the most?

Kantāne-Ziedone: You mean now, during our independence years?

Seipule: No, from your birth.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Oh, from birth.

Seipule: Which political events do you think have set you on course? Or which have had the biggest impact on your life? You already mentioned your career as an actress, Soviet times. Maybe there is something else?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Well, yes. In 1991, Imants had heart surgery in Chicago, USA. I went to the culture days in Canada. And I know that Imants has been transferred and I have to go to Chicago, but I don't have a visa. Somehow, I don't know why, but everyone thought it would be easy and I would get the visa. "No", they said, "go home, get a visa." I said: "I can't. I still have to apply for a visa in Russia. Then I have to go to Moscow because Latvia is not yet declared as an independent country. I can't." I laughed when I saw that this works in every country. It is what we called "blats" [Latvian phrase for a beneficial connection, when you know people who can help you get what you want or need] in Soviet times. Really. I don't know how but I found one Latvian who got me the visa.

This goes back to that film "Les Misérables" and humanity that I told you about. I saw what the new medicine is. A helicopter brings you and lands on the roof. "See", I said, "all of this awaits us. This is what medicine will look like." When you go to a nurse and ask for help. Do you think she goes? No. "That's okay, go hold his hand if you need to. His indicators are stable."

Imants was operated by this doctor Karpa. I see this man and I don't like him. It simply doesn't click, there's no connection. I can feel it instantly. (*Whispering*) I'm thinking, God, why this, why couldn't they give us another doctor? Eventually, he had four surgeries instead of one. He was bleeding on the table. And the doctor calls me at home. He cannot proceed without my consent. When we went in for the third time he said: "No, there's an infection." They cut him open, nothing has healed, and the infection is there. He'll need a fourth surgery. I collapsed. And when they did it, there was something from [Victor] Hugo⁴³ in it. Imants even asked: "Are you all Jewish here?" Yes, Imants asked them like that. Doctor Karpa said: "Yes, heart surgeons are

⁴³ The morales in Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables"

only Jewish." Also, when Hermanis⁴⁴ wrote in his "Journal" that 17-18% of the people in New York are Jewish, it says a lot. We were in Chicago, though.

Okay, we go in for the fourth time. But it wasn't Karpa, it was some Gotlieb. The surgery goes on for an hour, another hour. Then he lets me in his office, I'm exhausted. But then I had this light, light flash and it brought me peace. I thought I had seen God. It was like in that [Alvis] Hermanis [Latvian theatre and opera director] play about the Pope: "I can't tell you anything, I just saw it. What is this force? What is happening to me?"

Then, after four hours, the doctor came in and I thought I'm going to kiss his hand, thank him. He came in, and guess what he said to me? He said: "*I think* the operation was successful." For us there were never these "*I think* the operation was successful." That stayed in my memory forever. Then I wanted to kiss his hand, but all of a sudden, I thought: "Am I crazy?" He doesn't know what a Latvian is. He might think we're some sort of aborigines. I am going to humiliate my people if I kiss his hand now. "No, Ausma, you'll humiliate your country! You cannot behave like this. They will judge your people based on you." Can you imagine how all these thoughts were running through my head.

Then he looked at me and took his hat off which revealed a Jewish head cover. I just thought, see, that one was a Jew and this one is also a Jew. But the story is not about Jews. Again, why is there this humanity in him? What is it in him that stands above a nation, above everything? I thought to myself: "This is what I'm looking for in the world." When is it revealed? How do you appreciate it? What do you call it? How I wish that he would exist in this world. So that I just look...

There are people about whom I think - see, God has given them everything. They stand as angels before me. And they say: "This is how I do it, I think the world works like that." And then there is the other type: "Oh, dear, sweet thing, they'll crush you! They'll run you over. No, no, they'll slap you with one hand and you'll go tumbling down." You see, for me, this only confirms that there is this humanity that I can't put into words. It exists beyond borders. It is there.

I don't understand. Everything is set free; you have this respect and then you think you are this animal living amongst people when suddenly you see another animal. "Hey! There are more of us, good ones." No, not good ones, but we do exist in the world. There is something among people. But how do you awaken it and how do you get to it? I think there are those who are born with this sense of mission that you cannot take and cannot steal. Oh, God, you were born knowing this? And then there are those who you teach and teach, and they still don't get it. It is weird how people are made! Very

⁴⁴ Alvis Hermanis (1965) is a Latvian theatre and opera director, former actor. Artistic director of the New Riga Theatre. In 2016, he published the book "Journal" about his work as a director.

weird. Yes, and that is how he⁴⁵ played this big role for me. An old man. Not that old, sixty. But cut these things out, I'm just going on and on. You can take half of it out.

Seipule: Who were the great teachers in your life?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Rainis. I have read, he talks of banal things, but it is all true because the truth is as simple as that. (*Ausma Kantāne goes to her bookshelf and brings over a selection of influential books*). Hans Selye [pioneering Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist]. If you haven't read it, read this book. It has just come out. Hans Selye "The Stress of Life". He is an endocrinologist who was acquainted with Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga⁴⁶, by the way. They both come from Canada. Although he is from East Hungary. I want to show you, so you know how I work. I figured that I would return from Imants⁴⁷ and re-study. I would have gone to study psychology. I went to St. Petersburg for two years where I got several certificates. Since he had four surgeries, he couldn't drive anymore, so I became his driver. I didn't have the chance to go study anymore so I was self-taught. See (*shows the book*), my notes have already faded here. You need to read this; it is about that awe towards an idea.

So, Hans Selye's "The Stress of Life", Rainis, Viesturs Renģe [Latvian psychologist]⁴⁸, he was a wonderful professor, head of the psychology department. I think, okay, I didn't study in the day group like a regular student. Did that regular student perceive his lectures the same way I did? Did he study like I did? It was only because I am interested. I read this book like a novel. Nobody believes that someone can read like that - hungry for science. Hungry because they want it. But I couldn't do it anymore.

And Imants, without a doubt, Imants. And many books. Also, this one, just published - emotional intelligence is superior to IQ⁴⁹. When a person is gifted with empathy, he can feel and be more determined. You know, I tell this about children that one is an eagle, the other is a turtle. But I have to take them all there - the eagle, the turtle and that lizard and bunny as well. How should I treat them so they would each accomplish what they need to accomplish? You see, intellect is given by God. God or genetics. It is your DNA. It is what you have and, sorry, but you cannot have. You can fulfil it all, but we don't do that. Then God gives you something else. It is especially the talented ones, who like to have a drink, that can fall apart very quickly. Then the slow turtle is moving forth with a certain motivation and you wonder - has he gone so far even though he didn't have as much intellect and understanding in the beginning. Here, this book - Daniel Goleman's "Emotional Intelligence" - wonderful! I have a bunch of working books, but I can't give them to anyone because they are full of my notes. I

⁴⁵ Doctor Gotlieb from Chicago hospital.

⁴⁶ Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (1937) is a Latvian public and political worker, scientist, professor and honorary doctor at many universities. From 1999 to 2007 she was the President of Latvia.

⁴⁷ Return from the USA where Imants had his surgeries in 1991.

⁴⁸ Viesturs Renģe (1952-2012) was a Latvian psychologist, professor. In 1975 he graduated from the Faculty of Psychology at the Lomonosov Moscow State University.

⁴⁹ Daniel Goleman "Emotional Intelligence" (1995)

also have this innate phobia, this fear. I don't know what they call it now - manic, no, that depression.

Seipule: Vegetative dystonia.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, vegetative dystonia. But I get this rush where I want to scream. Why? I don't know. Some kind of anxiety. It comes when I'm on stage and I don't understand where I am. I'm just floating. In premieres they carry me through the whole show. I cannot control it; I don't understand anything. I'm just speaking my lines automatically. "Ausma, you need to leave. Ausma, something's not right with you, this is not good for the stage". In the last performances, when I went out there and spoke my own lines, how I wanted them and how I saw them, it was all fine. But as soon as I have the responsibility of speaking someone else's text (*sighs*), yes, that is some sort of.... Who knows, if it was a different time. I would have mastered the language. I think I would have gone around the world and studied a lot. And sometimes I think that, in summer, I could take an instrument and play in Vienna on the big Broadway road and earn some extra money. I don't even know which instrument, maybe guitar, maybe kokle [Latvian folkloric string instrument]. I would play something and say something. I know many people who went to Vienna in summer to earn money. Yes, that's how I would express myself. Both of my cerebral hemispheres - the logical and the emotional - are working, it's extremely hard. They both fight. I control everything, it's terrible. They tell me - don't do that. When an artist does something, they need to throw themselves into it with their whole being. But my mind is controlling me: "No, like this, you can do it differently." It is not good. There is some sort of explorer in me. I'm interested in dispute, in dialogue. I am a team player. I would like to meet the whole world. They would tell me about their country or their community. I would tell them about mine. And we would all figure out how to change the world, where it's gone wrong. To build that tower because we need to hold that vertical. That is how I would have wanted to work in the world.

Seipule: Could this also be the motivation for why you went to work in politics?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, more or less. I wanted to prove that I am an honest person. I am not taking anything, and I thought that Einārs Repše [Latvian physicist, financier and politician. Founded the party "New Time"] was the same. Could really nothing come out of this? But I saw that it was so intertwined that it is impossible to unravel it. I never thought it could be like that. If we would have fifty-one votes we would solve it - this is the most honest and righteous way and we pass it [she refers to her work in the 8th Parliament when Einārs Repše was the Prime Minister and was forced to create a minority government in 2004 when one of the parties stepped down]. But then they say: "No, wait, you won't pass that. I have to fight for this." Okay, then you get something, you get something. But now we have five parties in the coalition. And they all want something. So, you have to manage them all. Only Kariņš [Arturs Krišjānis

Kariņš, current Prime Minister of Latvia] can do that. Anyone else would have tripped over five coalition parties. It is impossible. But Kariņš listens to twenty-six and to a hundred and six and thinks of how to keep them all happy. I think if it would sway, we would need to take Harmony [social democratic political party], otherwise it's impossible to put a government together.

Seipule: Would you go?

Kantāne-Ziedone: No, never. No, I can't. You have to make terrible compromises. A [political] party is an art of compromise. I am a strict and direct person (*laughs*). Okay, I understand, you can take small turns. And I see that not all who come in get a say, there are three, four, five people who set the course. In the end, they say: "Wait, if we have to solve everything, we will fight in our own party. How can we then work with others?" But we said: "Stop, we don't accept that!" We had Solvita [leader of the political party "New Time" between 2008 and 2011], then and she said: "You can accept it or not, but it will be as I say." Well, they accepted, but it was very interesting.

Seipule: An experience, right?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, and I think that children should be taught - "me and family". That's what I think. In a family you need to split between three, four things, so the world becomes more complicated. And then there is school and the state, and one school with another one. (*In a childish voice*) Oh, my, this is very complicated! And then the whole world! (*Sigh*) But wait, where am "I" in all this madness? Where is my place in the world? That is why I have these ideas of a common notion that we all contribute to. Everyone contributes. Be it a janitor or anyone else. They all can give their share. "Everyone must lend a hand to move the great work forth." [From Rainis' poetry book "The Strewing of the Storm"]. See, Rainis already talked about this. But that is an ideal. Could it really exist? I don't know. But I need to lend my hand. I can't live, otherwise. I can't live with that pillow or with this fork and knife.

Seipule: How did you feel when you worked in politics? Was your voice heard?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, a little bit. I was one of the first to say that my concern is the children. I was in the cultural committee, nothing there. Artists don't want anything, they don't need any laws, just money, more money. Māra Zālīte [Latvian poet and dramaturg, born 1952] said: "They are total idiots. They don't understand a single thing. Those artists are unimaginable." I said: "Māra, I completely agree with you. I am leaving for the social and work committee." Because you can't do anything in the cultural committee. Then they all cursed me. I said: "Sorry, but I am in Saeima. I pass the laws. I am not the money. Go ask for it from the ministry. I am not the money, this is not the place to ask for money, dear friends! You don't know what it is I do here."

Then I went there.⁵⁰ Mothers were now paid child support for a year and a half, before it was one year. Back then I said: "Dear friends, we have now decided that a mother can stay home for a year and a half. But who will pay her for that year and a half?" My law was passed in the first reading. Back then [Ainārs] Šlesers [Latvian entrepreneur, politician and millionaire] and his wife Inese⁵¹ were in the parliament. No, they didn't [vote]. What is it that Ausma talking about? Then I had to go to each individually. I went to Inese and said: "Dear, Inese, you have four children", now there are five, "please, vote for me, please! In the name of humanity and your mission as a woman. The party cannot vote but I need those votes so my law would be passed in the reading." These were the challenges. Peters' son Krišjānis⁵² was also in Šlesers' party. I was scolding him like this (*shows*) in the hall. I said: "Krišjānis, what are you doing? What are you doing? You'll be embarrassed. Won't you feel ashamed before your father?" That evening his father called me: "Ausma, what are you going on about? Didn't you know it all works like that?" (*Whispering*) I was so confused. I said: "No, Jānis, I didn't know. I really didn't know it's all so tragic." That is what [Jānis] Jurkāns [Latvian politician of Polish origin]⁵³ told me: "Ausma will see what a mess it is here. See how it looks from the inside. How they fight, tearing each other's head off." Yes, I was there for two terms, didn't go back for a third.

I also saw how Einārs Repše "trumped" it all. He bought a yacht, wants to be a businessman and a politician. The first president [of Latvia, Jānis Kristaps] Čakste said: "Either a businessman or a politician. They can't be combined." Einārs fell for that saying: "The journalists destroyed me!" No one from the party could tell him. Everyone was just: "Ausma, tell him!" You see, it is because I didn't want to build a career. Everybody was building a career. I said: "Einārs, don't talk like that. It is wrong. You're doing it. You." No party can be destroyed if they don't destroy themselves from the inside. You can't do it from the outside. If we would have been standing strong, no one could destroy us.

Seipule: Did he even hear you a little bit?

Kantāne-Ziedone: What's that?

Seipule: Did he listen to you?

Kantāne-Ziedone: I gave him a book about the strength of authority. I don't know if he read it, I don't think so. He is not a leader. He's not. He is not a team player. Einārs

⁵⁰ To the Social and work committee.

⁵¹ Inese Šlesere (1972) is a Latvian model, philologist and politician. Ainārs Šlesers' wife.

⁵² Krišjānis Peters (1975-2014) was a Latvian politician, former Minister of Transport. Son of Latvian poet Jānis Peters.

⁵³ Jānis Jurkāns (1946) is a Latvian politician of Polish origin. First Foreign Minister after Latvia regained independence.

is alone: “That is how I think.” If two more people are beside him, he won’t hear the third anymore.

Seipule: Leader.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, I felt saddened. I expected more from him.

Seipule: I would like to turn to an essential topic that we have already mentioned a little bit. But it would be very important to go more into depth - freedom. The first question I want to ask is - what do you understand by the word “freedom”?

Kantāne-Ziedone: I read a lecture on this topic. There was this professor Gunta Ancāne, head of a psychosomatic faculty. She said: “Ausma, Imants is not here [anymore], you do it.” That was about five or six years ago. First of all, I’ll quote Rainis again: “Free is he who has the courage to be free.”⁵⁴ It comes from within you. You can be free, or you can be captive.

Seipule: Under any political regime?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Under any. Many musicians say: “Me? I was free. I wrote exactly the same things that I write now.” Okay, in music, yes. It’s an abstract art, as they say, that crosses continents. It has no words. You can think about thirty-seven wars or praise some madmen.

But in text. I saw this when I played theatre. As soon as we put in some subtext, the hall was full. Were they coming to see theatre in Soviet times? They came looking for that subtext and that sense of community. Basically, as soon as these times [Latvia was a part of the USSR] were over, the theatres were empty. And we didn’t know what to perform. Until then, we were always playing subtext. Now that they could all go out in the streets and talk; they’re not interested in theatre anymore. I think nobody needs that “real art” anymore!? Then the art was a secondary thing for them. I had a flash before my eyes (*laughs*). See, it’s all the other way around from what I thought.

That’s how it is with freedom. Like you said: “Why can I say “no” now?” Not that I could say “no” politically or ideologically. I wasn’t talking back. Okay, we all told anecdotes of how we celebrated Christmas etc. But I couldn’t say “no” as a human being. A human being. Now when I refuse something I can say: “No, I’m not going to do that. That is against my principles. That is against my values and it is unacceptable to me.” I can say no. I used to think differently, like in a miracle - “freedom, brotherhood, equality”, according to the French revolution principles. Now I understand that a person’s inner freedom has the highest value.

Also, in art. You know when you can call yourself an artist? When you show how you think. Everything has been thought of in the world. The ancient Greeks already thought

⁵⁴ From Rainis’ play “I Played and Danced” (1919)

of everything. There is nothing new you can think of. But you can have that small “how”. Bend that big truth a few degrees. And then you see, oh, that’s interesting! I hadn’t thought of that!

It is mine what I have acquired, grown, accepted, understood, or found. Many times, when I talk to people, they all say: “Yes.” I sit and think: “Well, I think differently.” But you have prominent people there. I’m not a professional in that field, I’m not a philosopher or historian. Then I find the same thing in a book (*loudly*): “See, see!” I was right! I thought that it wasn’t right. Then I feel good. Yes, it was right not to scream out that I think differently. Some might say: “Silly Ausma, you can think whatever you want. Why should I care what you think?” It is important that you value freedom. Of course, people have the right to express themselves. As the old saying goes: “I disagree with you, but you have the right to say it.” People need to express themselves because that is the way they think, that is who they are. If I have someone close, I can talk to them about this topic in more depth.

But that real freedom - like Mahatma [Gandhi] fought for India. They all stood in the big square with guns, then one wanted to shoot, then another. He just pushed the gun down: “We will stand with our conviction that we are right. We are right. And with this sense of righteousness and freedom, we will get our way.” And they did. With no bloodshed, no confrontation. That is why Hamlet never wins. He is also too young, asking why should he come build what’s been destroyed? Why me? Why have I been chosen to do this? He stabs his enemies and is, undoubtedly, stabbed himself. You cannot kill. As Imants said: “You’re mad! No, you’re mad yourself.” Two madmen cannot come to a solution.

Hans Selye also says that a teacher or any leader must withstand. Everyone says that “Ausma, you’re this and that.” I listen to it all and say: “Thank you, I understand. I heard you. Now, let’s keep working.” Can you or can you not? You can’t? Then you cannot take that high position. That’s how strong you have to be! That is the freedom I have within me. It gives courage, awareness, and restraint.

Rainis also says that “those who can change shall exist.”⁵⁵ And you have to try to keep up with the times. If you’re being pushed from one side, you can step to the side. This stoic peace.

This is where the practical goes back to the vertical, to the dominant that is reaching out and without which the world cannot exist. If you don’t have that - fate, God, idea or light, call it what you want... When you believe that there is another reality. And that is beautifully described by [Stephen] Hawking. He was an astrophysicist who studied the universe - from the big bang until today. When he resolved all of the questions, he reached a border that pushes back. It does not allow you to move forth. He said that he has reached a point in science where you can’t go any further: “This is where

⁵⁵ From Rainis’ play “The Golden Horse” (1909).

science ends and God takes over. Scientific word and God's word. Now you can go to the Pope for answers because he is closest to God." He mentioned that we have three geniuses in science: Copernicus - "the world turns", Einstein with his relativity theory and I forgot. There was a wonderful movie⁵⁶ about him where he is young with his wife and children. Terrible how, in the end, he could only write in Morse with his little finger. But the way his mind worked! And then you think - where is God's truth in this? How can you solve the world when things like that happen!?

There will probably be some finer equipment one day, some genius mind. But for now, they can't go any further. Hawking reached the point that drops you back. He said that "I can't go any further with my knowledge." Cannot study further with current formulas. This only proves that there is something else. When two people look, not at each other, but in the same direction. Or if we both have a notion that we both accept. Either way, the story is about a third notion, such as faith, hope, love. God, nature, work like it was for Brigadere [she refers to Latvian writer Anna Brigadere's novel "God, Nature, Work" (1926)].⁵⁷ Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, not dialectics but trialectics. Who can say what that notion is? Then the whole humanity could somehow agree, especially the young ones. They don't have that notion.

Seipule: Reflecting on what you said about freedom and what it means to you, I will paraphrase my question a little bit. When do you think you have reached out for this inner freedom the most in your life?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, I just wanted to say - why is it so hard to explain that we, a nation of 2 million people, gained our freedom? We didn't even fight all that much, just the Singing revolution [name commonly used name the for events between 1986 and 1991 that led to the restoration of the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania]. (*laughs*). Why can't 20 million Kurds have an independent state? And why can't the ones next to Israelis, not Portuguese, but...

Seipule: Palestinians.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Palestinians. Can't get it. They are also more than us. Who determines these things? Coincidence? Chance? Some conspiracy up there? Masons' lodge? (*laughs*) I don't think there are coincidences in the world. I think it is all natural. But when we can't explain it, we call it coincidence. Sorry, excuse me. When have I felt the freedom?

Seipule: At what moments in your life have you reached out to it the most? Personally. For your personal inner freedom.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Quite late. Was I really a victim of the Soviet times, crazy and damaged? Or maybe when I started in the Theatre faculty which, in a way, was a

⁵⁶ James Marsh's film about Stephen Hawking "The Theory of Everything" (2014).

⁵⁷ Latvian writer Anna Brigadere's novel "God, Nature, Work" (1926).

certain isolation from the world. It was so interesting for me there that I even missed the fact that they sent [Yuri] Gagarin into space in 1961. I was like: "Gagarin who? It is all happening, this is the real world! This is what grabs my soul, my whole being, my spirit. I don't know, I'm not interested in this Gagarin. Who is Gagarin?!" I was so enthusiastic about it after high school. I didn't like high school. When I told them, I'm going to the theatre, they said: "Ausma, are you really going?" I figured they won't look at my math and physics results. But I tried to apply while still in the last grade because they only enrol once every four years. And I got in. I wrote to the Ministry of Education and they accepted it.⁵⁸ I could only do it if I finished the classes with top scores, otherwise I couldn't. They accepted me and I did it.

I had lost my freedom back then. I wasn't interested in it at all. Freedom then came with Imants, he very much influenced me. I felt it when I started traveling the world. I went, but there were many who hadn't been out at all until that day [The restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991]. For the first time I went with the Writers' Union. I desired these suede shoes in Denmark. I put them on and "Ahh" (*excited sigh*)!

Denmark, Finland, Sweden - the Writers' Union went there. One time the whole delegation was at a buffet table, we took the plates, and someone said: "Look, we had to take the small plates, not the big ones!" Can you imagine, writers, educated people (*laughs*) go 'snap', put them down and take the right ones. Then I saw that one Afro-American was eating from whatever plate he wanted. Why should you care? But here (*loud sigh*) - this slave [the Soviet people who didn't know the Western culture and its possibilities] has entered the arena, and he bows to every column. Then I saw that captivity, that foolishness that you are serving some sort of presumptions of the world. things such as (*angrily*) well, I do as I please! Some put their feet on the table, some eat over there, they all move about. and we, writers from Latvia, are no fools. basically, when I got out was when I saw that slave in me, that slave in all of us: "oh, that's how it is. Oh, my, oh, my." It was in the late 70s and the 80s. That is when I distinctly saw how ridiculous we were compared to all that. And it was only because a person was not free. Why couldn't we stick with the plates we had? Fifteen people were running back to switch plates. I'm embarrassed when I think back to it.

That is why you cannot expect it from the nation. What are fifty years [being part of the USSR] and what are these thirty years [since the independence in 1991] that we have now? You cannot ask that. Some still haven't left the country even today. And now when I go somewhere, I see many things that I don't like. I don't see myself as a slave anymore, and I see what dominates there. It is that misunderstood meaning of freedom, that other meaning. When I come in and all the Chicago students, all the residents are sitting on the table. And when the doctor comes in, do you think anyone climbs down from the table? (*Exclaims*) Again, my jaw drops! It has gone that far. If they tell me now that the director cannot check the student's bag at school - European human rights, I think it has gone from one extreme to another. How? He could open

⁵⁸ That you can skip the last grade in secondary school, in order to start at a university.

his bag and shoot us all, but you, the director, cannot check his bag because of human rights? See where Europe has gone to. Those are the opposite extremes of freedom. From slavery to some sort of artificial imagination. I don't know who comes up with all this. Who controls all these human rights? They have long been misunderstood. We will hit a ditch any moment now.

Seipule: In conclusion, let's talk about the future. What do you think is the influence that your generation has left on future generations?

Kantāne-Ziedone: What we have left already? Or what we still want to leave?

Seipule: What you have left.

Kantāne-Ziedone: What we have left. The last Mohicans - last idealists. THE LAST IDEALISTS. When me and Olga [Dreģe] went performing in concerts, Andris Bērziņš told us: "You fools, what is the amount you ask for a concert? A hundred? Oh, my... (sighs) I don't go anywhere without a thousand." "Andris", I said, "is that the most important thing?" "Dear, girls, you're pulling our whole price down! We can't do it now because they say that Dreģe and Kantāne are asking for this price. Why do you do this?" Me and Olga just laughed. There is a ten, maybe fifteen, year age difference between us. I can't imagine how it is with the youth now. Maybe they don't even make a move without three thousand. I don't know. and i don't want to know. yes, we were idealists. we believed and saw that this is not the real world, even in the soviet darkness. that there should be a light, there has to be. we cannot reach it, but there is this inner belief that the light is there. that there is light. and that it will show, as well as faith. i am a pessimist when it comes to details, i could sweep it all under the rug. all those little monsters that are shameless and steal a little, lie a little. Tiny little things. I say: "If you want to steal, go to the bank. Don't steal the last cent out of someone's pocket. Rob a bank and I will defend you." I like people with that sort of scope! But if you steal a wallet out of an old lady's purse, that is pathetic. That is not good at all. That's ugly. An animal wouldn't do what you just did. If I had a child and had no money, you know what I would do? I would go into the store and take that pastry: "Yes, I don't have anything to give to my child. Put me in prison."

But on the other hand if we had left that freedom like certain dissidents. Latvia has had a few, maybe ten dissidents. If everyone were dissidents we would not exist. Lancmanis [Latvian painter and art historian], the director of Rundāle Castle, said it well: "If the Latvian hadn't bent his back like a wildflower in the wind, he would have been broken a long time ago." It is very important that we bent. It gave us that horrifying crooked back of slavery. Today I say: "No, no, stand up straight! (very loudly) You can finally stand straight, dear friend! Straighten up! I am embarrassed. Don't bend. What are you afraid of now?" "You know, it's my career, everyone will think this and that." "Not so selfish, no!"

There was one time when we were in Nice, France, it's the last day and we're at the airport. And there is this crazy French lady, working for the airline. For the first time I saw how intolerant the French can be. We hadn't paid some sort of sum, so we had to pay extra now - thirty euros. Our guide said: "You shouldn't have to pay, I know. But if they ask, pay. You will come back to Riga and get that money back." The French woman was rude. And suddenly a Latvian woman was screaming next to me: "How can you do this?!" I grabbed and held that person by the hands: "What are you doing? You are not alone. We are in a delegation and I will not let you embarrass our nation. I won't let you do that. We are all here. Go to her and say that you are travelling alone. But you will not embarrass our whole Latvian delegation." The way she looked at me! You know, to say that you're crazy and the other one is crazy means that you're both crazy. I don't deal with the crazy ones. She was terrified of me. She didn't expect anything like this. I don't even know where it came from. I grabbed her by the hand and said: "No, don't scream over everyone here. They are all looking and laughing. They can see what's going on."

I have this truth in me. It is like I told you about that doctor whose hand i didn't kiss. imants was completely obsessed with this latvianness. Completely. he went around the countryside collecting stories from old ladies. Then he said: "Oh, God, these women are so smart. You see, others get an education and are not half as smart." We called them "heart-wise". Heart-wise people. You need to take what you can from them. They will all be gone very soon. The countryside won't have these ladies who live in their own rhythm. Now they all come in a car, work, jump back in the car and leave.

That is what I think characterises my generation - toughness, endurance. Like Lancmanis said that we "bent our head". Yes, I think we survived, but were crippled. Crippled in the soul. Those who have some sort of understanding about the meaning of life and higher principles can straighten their backs. But the majority are crushed. And again, I feel sorry for my compatriots. I feel sorry. They blame everybody else. We haven't yet distinguished our own values and our own work. There are interesting lectures happening now at the National Library organised by the library and the Constitutional court. I go to these conferences that happen twice a year. I went to the one in autumn where they talked about the spiritual and the timely power. I don't know what they will have in spring now. There was also one about Daugava and one about written works that have left their mark on Latvian people, texts from the Bible and the last one was Astra's speech.⁵⁹ I haven't read it but I need to get that Astra's speech. People have quoted it.

Yes, that is what I think of this influence. The toughness, the idealism - people don't believe in these things today. Yes, and the light that we believed in. But as I said, a lot

⁵⁹ Gunārs Astra (1931-1988) was a Latvian freedom fighter and a notable dissident during the Soviet occupation. In 1983 he made a famous speech during his trial where he was accused of resisting the Soviet regime.

has been damaged. Me too, regardless of the fact that I understand that I am more or less the victim, I lose it sometimes. It is like the answers have already been prepared - this one is white; this one is black. I don't have to think. I take a book - class struggle, put it down. Poor man - rich man. I sort them in three seconds. All of the literature has been analysed. Terrible. That is why nobody is reading Rainis. I say, start with his journals and with his letters where he says that him and Aspazija⁶⁰ should grow a little joy. A small joy, so that they can simply be joyful every time. I have this habit where I have to cross my heart and smile on the street every time, I see three numbers. And when you smile, you immediately straighten something out in your head - assume and release. That is very important. How can you fool yourself or make it a reflex?! When you can go and (*smiles*) - pretty, (*smiles*) - pretty!

Seipule: One concluding question that is no less important. Time is slowly running out. This is in a bit of a wider context than nationality – a European context. What does Europe mean to you today and how do you see its future? Do you even think about it and do you care about its future?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, I care very much. I would live carelessly if I didn't. Why care? How long have I got left? If you have money, go around the world, eat what you want, see what you want - no concerns. It doesn't concern me anymore. (*In a firm voice*) But it does concern me, and I am interested! I turn on the TV: "No, no, I will just see what the topic is today and what people they have on there. Ah, no, I know this one, I know what they will say. Oh, this one I'm interested in. Kazāks [Latvian poet, playwright, and politician]⁶¹, for example." I know that we cannot exist without Europe. We would be gone on the second day. Everyone understands that much; that such a small country cannot exist without Europe. All three of us [Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia] couldn't. It is good that there are three of us. We would be swept away if we were alone (*laughs*). And we don't know where we would end up. Maybe the Swedes would take us. You don't know how it would end eventually.

But looking at the big picture, I don't like that. Basically, I would want it to be like it is with taxes. That those who earn more pay more in taxes than the little ones. I guess for us it is the same for all. Last time there was this special tax that people didn't want to pay. Progressive? That is what [Ingmar] Bergman was also worried about because you have to pay 35% in Sweden. So, if he earned three million, he had to pay one million in taxes. He didn't want that. So, he said that he will do the next film in Germany. I don't know what percentage they have there, maybe seventeen, but still. He won't do it in Sweden. But Swedes are social democrats.

I don't know it all that well. You see, I was there [at the Social and work committee] only in the last four years. If I had stayed there for longer, I would have looked at all

⁶⁰ Elza Johanna Emilija Lizete Rozenberga, later Elza Pliekšēna (1865-1943) was a Latvian poet, playwright, and politician. Commonly known as Aspazija.

⁶¹ Mārtiņš Kazāks is a Latvian economist. He has been the president of the Bank of Latvia since 2019.

the social things in more detail. But I stood up for children with that law that was passed in the first reading, where parents must get child support for a year and a half because children can only start kindergarten when they are that age. What would they do otherwise? The state is not paying but the child is at home. But it is now done and taken care of. Thank you. Then they raised pensions to all the Soviet time seniors. I said: "Repše, I'm ashamed. Teachers who worked in Soviet times will come; their pensions are so small." They even came with doctor's notes to me and said - look. I said that I don't understand medicine but I'm a professional patient. "I know that this one is for blood pressure, you need that. What else do you have? You will die without these pills." "But I don't have any money." I just opened my wallet and gave. I paid many people. In the end, I said to some that I can't pay for everyone's medicine. Although, when I went working in the parliament, my salary was six hundred seventy or seven hundred sixty, I don't recall. But from the one hundred twenty I had in theatre to six hundred - I felt like a millionaire! Wait, what was the last question?

Seipule: About the future of Europe.

Kantāne-Ziedone: European Union. Yes, well, that is why I don't like how the big and old; like Peter Høeg said in "Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow" that they don't give equally but give more to themselves. In agriculture, for example, they mostly credit the big ones, but that's not good. I think that it's not fair. You want them to enter the market under the same terms, but you compensate them by paying them 60%, whereas you only give us 20-30%. How can you do that? I think that is not fair and I think it is wrong. How do they justify that we can't? There is this lady - Vaidere.⁶² She is responsible for agriculture. And Krišjānis Kariņš [member of the European Parliament] fought very much for that. He was known there because he actively participated. And I know that Krišjānis won't take a single cent for himself.⁶³ Not a cent, never. If he does then I think the world will crumble. Then I don't understand anything anymore.

Fine, we don't bring as much money to the table as others, our payments are smaller. But as a citizen of the European Union, I feel that if only they were honest and would truly understand that it is a rainbow after all and that we will lose one of its colours here. The same way that the animals are dying out, pandas are dying. If you don't give some extra money to that panda, it will die out. And if a panda dies [becomes extinct] then so can a Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian. Even so, I stand for the European Union as the only possible way for our survival. But as I said about Miss Smilla, I think they have lost something very important. They could see it if they wanted to. Maybe in a couple of years they will come here to eat the only grass and the only milk and cheese because it will be the purest here. It will be the best here. Does nobody see it like that today? Are they really living with the thought - I only have ten, twenty years left, I won't bother! I know what it means to be one against a crowd. It's tough and

⁶² Inese Vaidere (1952) is a Latvian economist, politician, expert of international trade and foreign affairs. Member of the European Parliament since 2004.

⁶³ Krišjānis Kariņš as the current Prime Minister of Latvia.

hard. Are those that we elect, are they active? Are they the right people? I don't know what Nils and Ameriks⁶⁴ are doing over there. Okay, maybe some of our people are snoozing, I don't know. I know that Krišjānis was fighting.

Seipule: We don't have that many votes there.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, we don't. But you know, a small droplet can chip away a cliff. There comes a time when that rock changes shape. And if there was one who saw that this togetherness is beneficial. Not just for us but for both sides. And if there was someone who could lead the way and explain that we need them as much as they need us. Because we don't know how it's going to be tomorrow. Maybe it will be packed here in summer because they will come here on holidays. If only someone would find this discourse, then they wouldn't think that we are only takers. Yes, we are takers, but we can also be givers. They⁶⁵ are already running from their country because of the heat and overpopulation. It would be the golden middle ground that would unite and bring everyone forth. If only we were as wise and farsighted.

These are the three levels - highest, middle and lowest. On the highest you should have someone like that woman [refers to current Commission president Ursula von der Leyen] who is now standing up for the Earth, so it wouldn't all go down the drain completely. Those are the first signs, right? That is how I see this convergence. And we have our singing and dancing.⁶⁶ I was surprised by one German who had been to the Song festival and wrote that it was terrible. "What you do here is terrible! I get fears and phobias here. Such a crowd. That is not normal." I was reading that for the first time and thought - wait, what's happening? It's the first time I hear that this is causing someone negative emotions. He said that he is full of fear. Apparently, there is some sort of force or energy that has traumatised him.

Seipule: Maybe he is afraid to be in such large crowds?

Kantāne-Ziedone: maybe. but it is also that pressure from the rhythmical action that everyone is doing at the same time. it breeds fear, not joy like it's supposed to. not the beauty and happiness but something else.

i think that everyone should contribute to the common fire. that is how we should build the world so that anyone, regardless of whether they are a mountain climber, professor or if they clean horse shit off the street, can contribute to that common good. so that

⁶⁴ The infamous former Mayor of Riga Nils Ušakovs and the Vice Mayor Andris Ameriks who "fled" to work at the European Parliament in order to avoid responsibility for the corruption at Riga City Council.

⁶⁵ People of the old Europe, meaning the EU founding states - Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, Great Britain.

⁶⁶ The Latvian Song and Dance Festival is one of the largest amateur choral and dancing events in the world and an important event in Latvian culture and social life. It happens once every five years and has been held for 26 times since 1873.

each of them can share. otherwise, the world cannot exist. Europe exists in that mutual benefit. they can benefit from our snow, nature, warmth, forests. we can bring something that is only ours and that differs us from them. they have lost it. they have basically lost the part where you, as a human being, are a part of nature. that you are a product of nature.

Seipule: Excuse me, what do you mean by "them"?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Europeans. The centre of Europe - French, English...

Seipule: The dominating ones.

Kantāne-Ziedone: Yes, the dominating ones. The old Europe or as we call it - Yesterday's Europe. They need to realize that they have lost something. And that they cannot survive without it. Why do they say that the old Europe is crumbling? For them, the ethics are weaker, they don't go to church. Where do they have what I wish to see - a pure man? When a person is standing before me; I don't care if he is Romanian, Bulgarian or French.

Seipule: Basically, we should find that common direction, right? That common thing?

Kantāne-Ziedone: Not direction. That notion which develops a person's mind and intellect, as well as his heart, soul and spirit. When a person is whole. People are not soulless animals. We shouldn't lose that. We are needed.

When I look at their art, it mostly shows in works of art - design, painting, art theory. It is essential not to lose humanity, the warmth a person can give to another person, regardless of who they are. When you are walking down the street in France and a beggar comes up and gives you a piece of bread. It doesn't matter who you are. When mercy and humanity will prevail. I think they are greater than education because only intellect and knowledge can press one button and destroy us all.

Seipule: I think with this beautiful thought we can finish.

Kantāne-Ziedone: (*laughs*) Yes, something like that.

Seipule: Thank you very much for your time, energy and thoughts. Good luck!

Kantāne-Ziedone: Thank you. Good luck to you, too!

Seipule: Thank you.