

Croatia

Aida Alagić interviewed **Truda Stamać**.

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Alagić: My first question concerns categories of home and origin. Mrs Stamać, how would you describe your childhood?

Stamać: Well, my father was a vet, so we lived in rural areas; we used to move when he would get a new job somewhere else. When I finished elementary school in Valpovo [in Slavonia in Croatia], some thirty kilometers from Osijek, I had to travel to Osijek to go to high school and then I came to Zagreb in the '60s, to study comparative literature and German.

Alagić: Tell me, when it comes to this early phase of your childhood, is there anything in particular that reminds you of the place where you grew up?

Stamać: There is this sense of landscape which is, well, specific because Slavonia is very flat, right? There's little land and a lot of sky. Because the line, meaning the horizon is very low, there is *a lot* of space for the sky. Also, Valpovo is very old, I think it has its own castle and the whole town was built around that castle, so it has its own legend, its story. I remember stories related to this, how we used to listen to them, wonder if the heirs were still alive, what they were doing, who the noblewomen married; the nobility wasn't a general category back then [*laughs*]. It was more of an abstraction than a real concept. Who could a noblewoman marry, if not the tailor? Yes. And these possibly romantic tales - every castle had someone who was built in the walls.. It was a landscape that inspired fairy tales. There you have it.

Alagić: Tell me, do you perhaps remember imagining the future when you were a child? What was of most interest to you back then?

Stamać: As a child, I was quite a chatterbox. I was always interested in stories. From fairy tales to everything else. This must have been why I started reading - I was looking for fairy tales. Then later I was good in humanities. That gave me a sense of direction.

Alagić: Were these stories perhaps passed on to you by your ancestors, such as your grandparents?

Stamać: No. I studied German and my dad was a *Volksdeutscher* [ethnic German]. When she got married, my mum promised to raise us in German. That didn't happen. We started learning German, but the war broke out. I had a German name and last name and my dad was in a concentration camp, so we were raised as Croats. I still have a brother and I've always felt an obligation towards my father to learn this language the best I could.

Alagić: Sure, I understand. Tell me, is there some object from your childhood that you've held on to your entire life, perhaps a book, considering everything you've told me so far?

Stamać: Well, in my family, we didn't read much. Perhaps in the evening. My father had poor eyesight, so we used to read work-related texts to him. He was interested in things related to his practice, the new things he saw. He even had a PhD in veterinary medicine. He was ambitious and kept track of everything new that was going on, but he couldn't see well, he would read using a magnifying glass. We children, myself included, would read his texts to him out loud. You know what? As children we read Marija Jurić Zagorka [1873–1957, Croatian author and journalist], books such as *Vitez slavonske ravni* [*The Knight of the Slavonian Vale*], because the majority of the plot takes place in Valpovo. For example, the chieftain Varnica's attack on the castle from the novel was also part of local history and the history of the castle, as well as a particular love story.

Alagić: Considering that you're quite attached to the place where you grew up, do you perhaps remember your first trip abroad?

Stamać: I remember it because my mom was born in a small village near Valpovo called Veliškovci Gat, and my dad came from Apatin [a city in Vojvodina, in present-day Serbia]. So, he brought with him the spirit of the Danubian waters, so to speak. [*laughs.*] Somehow this spirit endured in Valpovo.

Alagić: Just before, you mentioned the war. Did you talk about it with your parents or grandparents? Was it even a topic in your family?

Stamać: Yes, it was, because my dad was in a concentration camp. The entire family was arrested, and later they let us go. I never asked why father was in the camp, it went without saying that it was because he was German. This was up until the war. After the war, he always declared himself a Croat. He studied in Vienna and so. We always used to say, "My mum is Croatian"; I used to say that, too. We felt that he was happy in the place where we grew up. I had relatives in Germany and visited them for the first time when I was in high school. They were repatriates who returned to Germany from Apatin [in Serbia], they counted as refugees, they were fugitives and used to be called that. They asked me - that is, they asked my aunt - how I was related to them. When she answered, they asked me, "So you are also German?" and I said "No! I'm Croatian!" And my aunt, who struggled to be accepted, said, "Jesus, she embarrasses us by saying that she is Croatian!" I think my aunt was embarrassed because she struggled to reinvent herself there. And there I was saying those things, not as some distant relative, but as her brother's daughter. Such were the small misunderstandings back then. They wouldn't happen today.

Alagić: When you were a child, what did you think of the neighbouring countries, like the countries in the immediate vicinity of Croatia? Were there any countries that you admired or had some special type of respect for?

Stamać: I must say that it was often [*laughs*] precisely Germany, but why? Because it was a country that I knew, I didn't know any others. Or I knew it relatively well, knew a

bit about it. And I studied German literature quite ambitiously. We had some German books at home, books about Art Nouveau with pictures that my brother and I used to browse through. And then there was this family effort - later on my mum always tried to teach us German, so we even had to take German lessons for a while. There was this lady who read German stories to us in German. We would then translate them together and talk about who's who and answer her questions. I think we had an hour of German a week; that's when we'd read German stories, yes.

Alagić: Given your strong connection to the German language, which has apparently been there since your childhood, in which language do you feel at home? Is it really Croatian or does German also play a role?

Stamać: No, no, just Croatian. German was always that thing you described as "Well, you know this!", together with its literature. I'd never let anyone tell me that English literature is more important than German. I've always had some cards up my sleeve to dispute that. Or not to mention Italian literature, with all due respect to the Renaissance and everything else.

Alagić: In your childhood, did the concept of Europe mean anything to you? Did you even know that it was a concept, something concerning you?

Stamać: There were some family stories. For example, when my dad was in the concentration camp, some people approached him because he was fluent in German, not to mention in English; he was good with languages. So, he talked to some pilots while he was in camp because he had to clean the airfield. And then they offered to help him escape. They said they'd stand there while the plane was running and that, when he saw them, he should run towards them. He didn't take this opportunity because the punishment for every attempt at escaping was being shot; every third person who tried it ended up being lined up and shot. And he also stayed because he thought to himself: "What about my wife and children, what's going to happen to them?"

Both my brother and I followed his choice, me in particular. I also wouldn't run for the airplane [*laughs*], no way. I'd rather stay. My choice would also be "I'm at home here." Here I had people I grew up with, from school friends to neighbours, little girls I used to play with - I had a childhood here.

Alagić: Tell me, just hypothetically, if you could choose any other place in Europe as your home, which place would that be?

Stamać: This place has already been defined by my life, there aren't nicer memories or people anywhere else. I like being a Croatian. I am here, this is my home, everything is here, not just the landscape, but also memories, friendships, and, also something very important, cemeteries. I visit them at least once a year, to light candles. I can't light candles anywhere else but here.

Alagić: Of course. One always has a special bond with a particular place. I'd like to move on to the second category, and that's education. What do you consider to be the most important thing you learned in school?

Stamać: School was definitely something that aroused curiosity. Firstly, there was curiosity, the wish to learn something, to see my picture somewhere and, finally, to gain affirmation. Affirmation not in the sense of being famous, but in the sense of having one's own circle of friends, that's what I actually learned at school.

Alagić: Do you have a favourite memory from this period?

Stamać: I don't know. Now, when I look back, it seems to me that everything was just survival, different attempts at doing something, some searching. As a kid, I used to draw pretty well, probably all kids do. There was this one painter who would come to paint bourgeois families, I used to go with him and also paint and took some classes. I even wanted to study painting.

Alagić: Oh, that's very interesting!

Stamać: I mean, everyone has a story like that, something they wanted. My parents encouraged this, of course. I was getting paint from Germany, my dad had a painting easel done for me. I'd walk around with the easel and paint landscapes. When I enrolled in college, I always took easel and paint with me. I used to work with a painter, his name was Ljubo Vargaš, a rather insignificant gentleman, but he knew Augustinčić [Aleksandar Augustinčić (1921–2010), Croatian painter and scenographer] and took me to see him. But I wasn't mature enough to take advantage of this. Augustinčić asked me to model for him and I was really offended by this. [Laughs.] I was a little provincial girl who came to Zagreb and wanted to do art and science and this guy wanted me to pose for him. So, I was offended and never went to see him again.

Alagić: That's an understandable reaction. Were you a good student in elementary and high school?

Stamać: I was a straight-A student in elementary school. Later I did okay, I had mostly B's and an occasional C. In my day and age, you couldn't be an A-student if you had any C's. I always had at least one C, mostly in gymnastics, so I couldn't graduate with an A. I had to take the matura exam the old way, had to take all the courses - math, Croatian, and so on. I had to take the matura exam, while the straight-A students didn't. Never in my life have I studied as much as I did for that exam. In the end, I got all the highest grades. It was a decent exam.

Alagić: It's been reintroduced now in a slightly different way. We've already mentioned at the beginning that you studied comparative literature and German. How did that come about, was there any special reason to choose this specifically?

Stamać: Our dad came to help my brother and me enroll in college. He told me that he was looking at possible fields of study and talked to one of my peers who said that she would choose comparative literature. She also said that it was mostly about reading, that there wasn't a lot of studying, only reading. When my dad told me this, I immediately said to him, "That's the right thing for me!" So, I chose comparative literature and German as something solid, where you also had to learn.

Alagić: During your college years, was there any professor who particularly influenced you? Or perhaps in the earlier stages of your education: Was there any person in the educational system that you were especially influenced by?

Stamać: I was a student of Hergešić [Ivo Hergešić (1904 – 1977), a Croatian theatre scholar, literary historian, translator and journalist]. Hergešić was a gentleman who impressed me greatly; he was very charming, spoke nicely on a wide variety of different subjects. I was stunned by the quality of his education, which he passed on to others. Apart from that, he had a very natural and easy way of talking about different things, which in itself was almost a literary genre. And then there were other excellent professors, such as Svetozar Petrović [1931 – 2005, a Croatian and Serbian historian and literary historian],¹ who we called Sveto Petrović. He taught literary theory. Back then, all of these people commanded my respect, and I looked up to them.

I have to say that it was different with German because of Škreb [Zdenko Škreb (1904 – 1985), a Croatian historian of German literature] who was very strict. It didn't take much to fail his exam, which always started with reading Gothic script. If you read only one letter wrong, you'd fail instantly. There would be no other questions. Passing his courses was always a continuous process. You could always take the test without previous notice; you could take it every week and he would fail you if he had a feeling that you didn't know enough.

Alagić: Considering this rather questionable method of conducting an exam, did you have a habit of doubting the relevance of the things you were being taught? For example, did this situation with Professor Škreb lead you to think, "Why am I studying all this?"

Stamać: I didn't question him because he never failed anyone without a valid reason. If I read something wrong, by his criterion this meant failing. And he didn't have to treat everyone equally; nobody likes or dislikes everyone equally. I had nothing against that. It was a fact that, whenever he failed me, he did so with a reason. Right after we'd enrolled, he asked, "Where did you learn German?" If someone said that they had learned German in school, he'd take off his glasses and ask, "Do you think this is enough to study German?" So, we'd all mention having relatives abroad, invent all sorts of reasons why we chose to study German. I was desperate, I hadn't had any Fs in high school, I wasn't used to that. I tried to avoid great failures. Therefore this particular failure in my German studies was very devastating, I must say that it nearly broke me. Many abandoned their studies because of it.

Alagić: Was this a defining period in which you understood what you wanted to do in life?

Stamać: No. This love for Croatian as a language was, I think, premonition. Of course, I admired the authors. And I hoped for a miracle, that someday I would also start writing great works of literature. [Laughs.] Translating helped me greatly with this because I thought: "I am writing under someone else's name." And someone else's name, the

¹ Svetozar Petrović (1931 – 2005), a Croatian and Serbian historian and literary historian.

name of the author I'm translating, simultaneously gives me an opportunity to write and being protected at the same time. When someone says to me, "You didn't translate this well," I can always respond, "It's how the author wanted it to be." In other words, I have the cover to do what I am actually interested in. I'm interested in the text, in the author, and in the process of translation—you get to see how the text was made. You see more because you read more thoroughly than the people who are just reading the text. So, my advantage is that I write undercover, and someone else has to take responsibility because, by God, that's what the author wanted.

Alagić: I understand. By mentioning an inclination to painting and writing, you expressed your general wish to have a creative career. Was this something that you wanted when you were a child?

Stamać: For my parents, this was something that wasn't appreciated. It was important to be solid. And to be brief, I've always liked talented people.

Alagić: When it comes to language, you were definitely influenced by German all your life. Did you learn any other languages, and if so, how did they affect you?

Stamać: I also had to learn English, like everybody else, but this was overshadowed by German. If nothing else, German helped me to learn how to cheat, how to create the impression I knew something that I actually didn't know.

Alagić: Just now, you said your parents did not particularly appreciate an artistic career. What would you say was the most important thing that you learned from your parents?

Stamać: Mostly their attitude. Their attitude towards people, towards what I was trying to do and more or less succeeded doing. I'm quite solid, actually. I learned to at least try and take everything that I do seriously, regardless of whether I would succeed or not. For example, my dad was quite messy, so I'm quite messy. I always have the need to be tidy and I always fail. You can see if someone is tidy or not by the dust on their desktop. You don't have to do anything to show it; if you're unable to be tidy, this will be revealed immediately. I was always caught in a mess, so I didn't even have to try very hard.

Alagić: Was your education something that your parents encouraged? Was this important for them?

Stamać: Yes, but it was important in a different way. My parents were frugal, even though they weren't poor. If anything was necessary, then our education. We, that is my brother and me. If I told my parents that I wanted to play the piano, we'd have a piano in the house the following day. And to my brother's dismay, he was showing a real talent for music. As he had a good ear for pitch, he played the violin and he got a violin, and they drove him around, he travelled to special violin classes in Osijek and Valpovo. Nothing ever came out of it. But this was never mentioned in the context of money being wasted. I never showed any interest or talent for music, but my parents would enable me to do everything I was interested in learning. For example, this painter who would come from Osijek to Valpovo to teach a drawing class. My dad would pick

him up in his car because as a vet he was one of the first to own a car. He was making sure that this man would make it to his class. He would discreetly help from the outside as much as he could.

Alagić: How did this affect the later course of your life? What was your first job and how did you get it?

Stamać: Well, I was a passionate reader. I used to read Rilke in college, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. I was obsessed with him, but at the same time didn't know how to share this with others. You can't just go around saying, "Oh, this is so beautiful." So what did I do? I started translating. And in learning to do so, I was of course testing not just whether what I had translated was correct—that is always in question—but also if others thought it was beautiful, if they felt it was beautiful. I think that by translating I wanted to show how beautiful it was, how a certain combination of just two words can create something special. I don't know, when you say "September rose" it's not as nice as when you say "*rujanska ruža*" in Croatian. Is it possible to say "*rujanska ruža*" in some other language so that it means the same thing? That was my main concern as I was translating Rilke: is it beautiful, does grieving after one's daughter emanate from these words or does something else lead to Orpheus, who sings, who cries for Eurydice?

Alagić: Do you remember some achievements from your career that you are especially proud of?

Stamać: Well, I don't know. I could tell you a success story of big rewards, of this and that, but also a story of great failures which would be just as lengthy. When I'm praised without having earned it, then I tell myself a story of some of my failures. And vice versa. When I'm being criticized, I tell myself, "It's just one thing, you're more than that." So I keep myself balanced [*laughs*] between my successes and failures.

Alagić: Looking back and speaking of failures, are there any things you would perhaps do differently?

Stamać: For me, success and failure are relative. There is hardly a situation in which you are criticized for no reason, as well as a situation in which the praise you receive is completely earned. Professor Žmegač [Viktor Žmegač, born in 1929, Croatian literary theoretician, Germanist, historian and historian of music] spoke highly of me and then asked me to translate one of his texts into German—no, not into German, into Croatian, because he is a man who has spoken both languages since childhood. He speaks German perfectly and knows Croatian even better because he is very talented. So, I translated his text and then he showed me where I was wrong; he didn't say "brilliant translator," but showed me what I did, and I still haven't recovered to this day. But he was quite right, he wasn't making anything up. I just misunderstood some things, didn't know some words I thought I knew, so I didn't look them up in a dictionary. I made real mistakes.

Alagić: I understand. The job of a translator is quite specific, precisely because of what you've mentioned—the possibility of hiding behind the author, regardless of whether we consider this to be a good or a bad thing, so it is often said that translators aren't

appreciated enough. Do you remember situations in which you felt your work was underappreciated?

Stamać: No, I don't... I believe that everyone is glad to be recognized and praised, but I never believe those who either overly praise or criticize me. I don't remember particular situations in which I was praised, but I do remember situations in which I used to think that I was being praised too much: "Ah, I fooled you!" I don't feel like I did more than anyone else would in my position. I never felt like I was doing something extraordinary. I positively noted my speed of recognition, so to speak, or not recognition, but understanding. That I understood that something was beautiful before others did, let's say that. *[Laughs.]*

Alagić: At the beginning we mentioned that you worked abroad for quite a long time. How did this affect your work?

Stamać: Well, I studied for a year in Austria, in Vienna, it was philosophy and, I don't know, some language. I felt that this year was a gift to me because I could just study without thinking about anything else. This was in my youth, and later I also worked in Austria. I think it's one of the most beautiful things that can happen to you because you're doing what you would usually be doing, and people are even grateful for it. You're working as a mediator, promoting culture, reading, knowledge. You're trying to build as many events around your studies, part of the Croatian culture, the usual things you do abroad. And they are grateful for this and even pay you. So, this is certainly the most beautiful thing to do, to represent a certain culture in a foreign land.

Alagić: When it comes to translating as a career, do you perhaps have any advice for younger generations in this field?

Stamać: I don't have any advice, everyone has to work it out for themselves. I believe some are more resourceful than I ever was. I used to translate and hold courses for some students who were interested in translating. I was almost terrified to teach a class; I was surprised by how well the younger generations knew the language. It seemed to me they knew it better than I did at their age. I was pleasantly surprised by their knowledge and interest, so it seemed to me that what I was telling them wasn't interesting, that it was too general and that they knew all of it already. I might have just pointed with my finger in a direction that they didn't pay much attention to. I never had the feeling I was revealing to them something that they didn't already know.

Alagić: If you were twenty again, would you choose the same occupation?

Stamać: I would because I do what I like, but behind the mask of someone else. I do what I usually would, I read, and I try to bring this into another language, but the writer is always the one who is responsible. He wanted it that way. Everybody says that; I'm the only one who takes it literally. And everyone says that about themselves, but consistency means different things to different people. For example, when you are translating Celan, whose poetry is very hard to understand, you translate it word for word. In doing so, the meaning is revealed to you in a much wider sense than to a good scholar or someone who bravely experiments. If you translate word for word, then suddenly more than one meaning is revealed, the ambiguity of the translation comes

to the fore. I think that this is a great joy. *[Laughs.]* And when a text is widening and opening itself up to you, it can be interpreted this or that way, and if you're skilled enough, everything can be correct.

Alagić: I understand. Let's move on to some other interesting questions I'm sure you have interesting answers to. We are moving on to politics - I would like to hear your perspective. Politically speaking, what were some key moments of your youth?

Stamać: First of all, my father was in a concentration camp and he didn't feel he was guilty of anything. Then I was expelled from school without having done anything wrong. I don't know if you know about this, but there was a student strike because of the quality of food. It was in the '60s, or rather in 1958, I think. I had a colleague who travelled with me from Valpovo to Osijek to school. She had a boyfriend who was a student. She'd tell us this, and we all used to say that the students ate poorly, that Slavonia didn't pair with hunger, that they didn't live well in Zagreb and such things. Since she was a member of the Party and I wasn't, she told on me during one of their Party meetings, when our Croatian teacher was there. She told them what I'd said, and when I approached her about it the following day, she called me a traitor. She reported it to her Party cell, where it turned out that they were all condemning the students on strike and calling them traitors. And then this teacher, who liked me very much, asked to speak to me. She saved me by claiming I didn't actually say that. Osijek is a small city, at least it was back then, so people had already started talking. It reached my relatives that I was saying all sorts of things. There were some problems because of that. It's really stuck in my memory. *[Laughs.]* I tried not to participate in this.

Alagić: What were the big names in the political arena back then? Do you remember that?

Stamać: This is always different in the provinces. The painter who used to work with me and taught classes in Valpovo was a Jew, a partisan, an early resistance fighter. One day, my dad told me, "Listen, this teacher of yours is not a good man. Every day he sleeps in the house of a certain teacher, and he reported him to the Central Committee because of the things he was saying." I thought it was terrible to betray another person and I trusted my painter. How was it possible that someone could let a person sleep in their home and that then person betrayed them? My dad told me, "You are still very young and can't understand it." I never understood it, of course. Back then, I couldn't accept that an idea could be more important than a human being. I've never accepted this: that there can be someone who betrays someone else, regardless of the reason, regardless of whether it's about me or someone else. For me, it was always important to keep every human being safe. We can always work something out when it comes to ideas.

Alagić: Did this specific event and your attitude towards it influence your future political attitudes?

Stamać: I think that it did. I've always resisted committing to anything completely. I've always prepared for myself a fallback position. I never did anything at the expense of my relationship with another person, something that would benefit or harm someone

or something in that sense. I never did anything that could disturb someone's life, interfere with it or something like that.

Alagić: What does it mean to you to be a "citizen," i.e. do you see yourself as a citizen of a certain state?

Stamać: I feel as a citizen in the sense of some basic solidarity with the place where I currently am. Now I'm at an age when I can live wherever I want. But before, when I was more involved, it wasn't like that. I wanted to live in the city, regardless of what the people in Zagreb were like, whether they accepted a foreigner or not. I am not a woman from Zagreb by the standard of the people from Zagreb, but I've always felt as one. I feel as one now, too. Even though I believe I could live anywhere.

Alagić: And do you sometimes feel European?

Stamać: Always.

Alagić: Always?

Stamać: Always. Europe is of great concern for me. I don't know anything about France, I don't speak French and this culture is not particularly close to me apart from *[laughs]* what I had to learn in general education. But deep down, I feel just as engaged with them as I do with the Germans, Scandinavians, or the British.

Alagić: When it comes to European institutions and politicians, could you say that you trust them?

Stamać: I could. I mean, it has no absolute value. You believe this as much as you'd believe anyone you're inclined to, bearing in mind that they can always be wrong, say something wrong, advocate something wrong, so I'm always entitled to a bit of reserve.

Alagić: As for Europe, is there anything that perhaps frightens or frustrates you about it?

Stamać: No, I don't think so. The individual is always entitled to defend oneself if they feel threatened by the majority. I can fight for what I care about. I don't have a problem with Europe in this respect.

Alagić: Tell me, has Croatia's accession to the EU had any effect on your life?

Stamać: Maybe by feeling that everything is somewhat freer, closer to me. In our youth, we had to have letters of guarantee when we wanted to travel abroad. Now I don't need such a letter.

Alagić: Freedom of movement.

Stamać: Yes, and I also think freedom of thought and everything else. I can accept everything from everyone, I can feel something burning within me when Notre Dame is on fire. It's not just a matter concerning the French, I think.

Alagić: Of course. Do you perhaps remember the first time you met a foreigner, what impression did that make on you?

Stamać: *[laughs]* To me my relatives were foreigners. [...] I travelled to visit my aunt, whom I had never seen, never. I didn't even know what she looked like, nothing. You

know, to me they were strangers, in terms of their education and their looks, everything. But she was still my father's sister. All my relatives are a brother or sister of my father, somewhere, anywhere.

Alagić: We often hear the saying: "Politicians destroy bridges, artists build them." Would you agree?

Stamać: Of course not. This sounds nice, all such simplifications do. But it's only moderately true. [*Laughs.*] To put it bluntly, no one is alienating me from anyone, or everybody is alienating me in the same way.

Alagić: Right.

Stamać: Yes, because everywhere you go, you have to try hard. I remember that when I came to Austria. I'd take a breath and say, "I'm Truda Stamać, I'm this and that." A head would turn, disinterested, and say, "*Na, und?*" [German: "So what?"] So, I feel this *Na, und?* all the time. And? What next? I must have an answer to this *Na, und?* every time. What does this even mean now? Why should you even say who you are? You must have a reason to say that.

Alagić: As for art, do you perhaps remember any work of art that changed your life?

Stamać: They all did, be it for a short or a long period of time. Every time you start reading, namely, or when you read more intensely, you end up with the feeling that this text is saying exactly what you feel at that moment. When I was young, I'd frivolously say that someone was a good translator if they were a bad human being. What I meant by that was that you're a human being if you can change. Because that's just the thing, we stand like rocks. We are solid and don't get lost. We lost this admiration for not being lost. [*Laughs.*] Of course, I believe that a man has a right to be wrong sometimes as long as he hasn't betrayed gravely. No one is asking of me to represent something very strongly, which is good. So, I am free [*laughs*] to say something today and soften it up a bit tomorrow.

Alagić: Tell me, is there an electronic device that perhaps changed your life, for example a laptop or a mobile phone or something like that?

Stamać: No, but all the different machines we use have changed everything significantly. For translating, at least. Before, I had to translate using a typewriter. And then when I was wrong, I couldn't cross something out or write the new word above or next to it, but instead I had to type the entire page again. Now I don't have to do that, I delete the word, write a new one, and don't have to type one page five times.

Alagić: This facilitates the process for you.

Stamać: Yes, greatly. It's less tiresome and I am more willing to change the text than I was before. Because before, the very thought that I had to type everything again...

Alagić: In the past, did you ever encounter some works of art that were forbidden in your country?

Stamać: No, but I would have gladly translated them. Before the '80s, I translated a book entitled *Is There a God?* [Croatian: "Postoji li Bog"]. We were a country back then

in which you didn't go around telling everyone you were a great believer. If you did, you were written off to a certain extent. Nowadays, you can say it. I translated the book—the translation was commissioned by the Franciscans from Bosnia, an order from Sarajevo, so I started translating it for them. I don't know which pope it was, but the pope then forbade this book and they withdrew it from sale. It was published by Naprijed [a publishing house operating from 1946 into the 1990s] and I enjoyed it when both the Franciscans and the publisher were disobedient. It was edited by Milan Mirić [born in 1931, a Croatian author and main editor of the publishing house Naprijed until 1999, when he retired].

Alagić: What is your relationship with religion?

Stamać: My mum was raised in a convent. Her teachers were nuns in a Catholic high school and my dad was an atheist. But he was not an aggressive atheist. He'd say, "There are a lot of things a man doesn't know, and so he attributes them to God. If you want to believe, then believe." He never spoke about religion; he didn't go to church. Mum did, and usually took us with her; we had to go to mass once a week. But it didn't bother me. Since we lived in small towns, our mum taught us religion. She served as an example for us and she'd read the Bible for us. I couldn't wait for the evening to come to hear these stories; there were many interesting things. Later when we'd take a walk through Valpovo, where they had religious education in a church, I'd excel in that because my mum read the Bible to me extensively. I was therefore always prepared and proud of it. And regardless of what the stories were about, she always treated them with respect for something endless, unspeakable, greater than everything else. It was important for me to cherish this.

Alagić: In this period, did you encounter any other religions? How did this affect you?

Stamać: It was very interesting for me to read how basically everyone spoke about feeling endless and very small. It was the same thing expressed in different stories, so to speak. So, for example, Hinduism enriched my own thoughts.

Alagić: You've mentioned the feeling of endlessness and some sort of freedom earlier. Do you consider freedom to be a relative term?

Stamać: It can be achieved in a relative way. But as a notion it is like all other notions [*laughs*]*—absolute and endless. But you don't move in its direction. Or make it happen. You just grab a handful, and a handful isn't much.*

Alagić: During your life, did you ever have to fight for freedom, be it individual or some sort of collective freedom?

Stamać: In any sort of relationship, you always have to fight for individual freedom. You always grab a handful. If you want more, you speak more.

Alagić: When it comes to freedom, and the notion of the border is closely related to it, do you think that the abolition of borders in the EU was an important moment for you personally?

Stamać: Now I don't travel a lot, but I remember coming to the border from when I still used to travel. The train would stop, the border guards would come and check the

passengers and all that. You'd notice the border crossing, the change in the way things functioned, in the way the trains operated. For example, in Austria, trains were fast and stopped at certain stations for quite some time, whereas in Germany you'd always have this sense of punctuality: that the train would be there on time, stop for a little while and then move on. Well, this is just a tiny observation, but highly indicative.

Alagić: Let's change the subject now. How did you think about your future when you were in your twenties? Were you pessimistic or optimistic when it came to how you saw your future?

Stamać: I had a lot of wishes and held my fingers crossed that as many of them as possible would come true. I tried to achieve that; at times I was satisfied, at least for a moment, at times I wasn't. I was often disappointed. In the end, I now believe that everything had its measure which is, I guess, like the size of your shoes. *[Laughs.]* You have the size that you have and can't change that, you have to buy shoes in your size.

Alagić: Did you have any specific wishes regarding yourself and the society you lived in?

Stamać: I don't know how young you are *[laughs]*, but when you're young, you always think that what you believe is important, that it's important to achieve this or that. Now I shrug my shoulders and think that the things around me don't have much to do with me or with my sense of success or failure. There is an extent up to which your role can be considered distinguished or successful. Later you think, "This is the most important thing." Let's say that roles fade away. Everything ends up fading away, no matter how harmonious it might seem before.

Alagić: Did you have high hopes when it comes to the development of European society? Do you have any thoughts when it comes to the concept of Europe in the future?

Stamać: I hope it will move in a good direction. That we won't all act like the British. In the end, they didn't pluck up the courage to leave completely. They left but are lingering around. So, when it comes to Europe, I expect this lingering around . . .

Alagić: The golden mean?

Stamać: Yes.

Alagić: What did you think the year 2020 would look like? What did you have planned for this year which was problematic in so many respects?

Stamać: I had no plans; I'm still waiting to see what will happen.

Alagić: That's true. Now I'd like to switch to a topic : Have you ever been an enemy or a threat to other people?

Stamać: No. And I never thought I would become something like that. Like all spoiled brats, I was always unpleasantly surprised when I learned that someone didn't like me. Then I'd think "How come, I don't deserve this!" No one told me I'd stepped on someone's toes without even knowing it.

Alagić: If we take into consideration the greater topic of conflict, do you consider conflicts in Europe to be European or national conflicts?

Stamać: I don't know. I think rather national.

Alagić: Do you think it is precisely these national conflicts that are endangering the European Union?

Stamać: Who's to blame more—the one who is yelling or the one who is deaf? The thing is, we don't hear each other well. I don't mind when someone says something about, I don't know, great Hungarians, that Hungarians are this or that. Or Croatians who can be, I don't know, quite fanatical. Well, so what? Be a Hungarian if you like that.

I agree that this shouldn't interfere with the sense of unity, but it should be taken into consideration. Someone limped, someone didn't.

Alagić: Tell me, were there any moments in which you were especially proud of Europe?

Stamać: I'm always proud of Europe. Here's why: I don't think others are better. I wouldn't rather be an American. To have Trump as my chief. Kudos to America and all that, but I never wanted to live in America.

Alagić: I'd like to stay on the topic of Europe, but we're approaching the last set of questions. They are related to the vision of Europe in fifty years. What kind of Europe do you expect in the future?

Stamać: A harmonious one. [*Laughs.*] Harmonious, I think - harmonious, generous, reasonable, I don't know. Somewhere where you can imagine even Angela Merkel.

Alagić: Angela Merkel - do you consider her an important political figure?

Stamać: Well, I think she still endures. I think she's a businesswoman and a reasonable woman.

Alagić: And tell me, what kind of Croatia do you expect in the future?

Stamać: Well, I think I'd also like Croatia to just be smart. To react in a smart way, not to be angry more than necessary, not to fake anything more than necessary.

Alagić: As for some future projections, do you think that the job of a translator could change in the future?

Stamać: I don't know how you could change it. I don't know any recipes, but it's my profession, that's why. I don't know, I want future translators to have skills and courage. And the awareness that it's a job that can never be done perfectly. It can be done well up to a point; it can go amiss. In two different editions of the same book.

Alagić: At some point you said that you didn't know how old I was, so I wanted to refer to that. I'm twenty-eight and I'm interested in your take on the influence your generation could exert on future ones, for example on my generation, which has yet to reach its important period of shaping the present?

Stamać: It depends on how much you accept what you are. If you accept it, then you are included. If you don't, you are not included, and you can act differently from what you think is right. So, you do something precisely by opposing it. I don't know whether a generation always starts in denial, by widening the scope of previous generations. In a certain way, yes, but that can be seen only later. This is just the logical flow of things, you enter in different ways. You don't start off opposing a generation, and even if you do, this opposition defines you, you take it on. That's it, to keep it short, I'm already rambling.

Alagić: [*Laughs.*] No, no, don't worry. As far as I'm concerned, it's really interesting to listen to this, precisely because of the difference in generations and different perspective you can offer. My next question concerns this same matter of generations. Do you think future generations might lose their national identity?

Stamać: No, I don't. If they enter other spaces, then they also feel difference and not just similarity. And then it is a matter of choice as to what they will work with [*laughs*], whether with difference or with similarity.

Alagić: Do think that because of this Europe will be more open or closed in the future?

Stamać: I think it will be more open. And that this curiosity about the other won't be diminished, quite the contrary. We need our neighbours both when they are near and far away.

Alagić: Do you think that these future generations of ours could bring important change to Europe?

Stamać: Why not? I mean, bring it on [*laughs*]—as long as it's in Europe, it's all welcome.

Alagić: So, you hope for positive change?

Stamać: I do hope for the best.

Alagić: Right. Well, here's the last question. Do you have any advice for us, the future generations of Europe?

Stamać: No. Future generations search for their own questions and their own directions to head in. I don't have anything to say about that. We were also a young generation [*laughs*] and tried everything that was given to us. Others have to do that as well. I have no advice.

Alagić: Right, so, you're giving us free rein to—

Stamać: Yes, I mean, do what you can, bearing in mind the greater good.

Alagić: Well, I certainly hope that we will. [*Laughs.*]

Stamać: Yes. [*Laughs.*]

Alagić: I definitely have to agree with your optimistic hopes and projections for Europe, I really hope for the best in this respect. And now, as we're approaching the end of my questions and of the interview, I'd like to thank you. Thank you from all my heart for everything that you've told me today, for all the content that you've offered so selflessly.

I'm sure that my generation and other generations to come have something to learn from you and your generation.

Stamać: [*Laughs.*] We all learn from each other, and it would be very difficult if there wasn't anyone young left behind me. I mean, I'm waiting for all the news and new guideposts.

Alagić: Well, I agree. It's a priceless experience, this exchange between generations, and the moment I'm in now, in which you have the chance to ask the older generation questions like this about their perspective, so to speak—really, a big thank you for this.

Tell me, do you have any final questions or remarks?

Stamać: No, nothing. I already think I'm annoying.

Alagić: Right. [*Laughs.*]

Stamać: [*Laughs.*]