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An IUC Guardian Angel

Remembering Kathleen Vaughan Wilkes

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Remembering Kathleen Vaughan Wilkes

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Abstract

This paper presents a special overview on the role and relevance of Dr Kathy Wilkes for the IUC in times of war and peace. Starting with her role as course director at the Philosophy of Science course we follow through selected memories her path through the destruction, reconstruction and blossoming of the city and the IUC.

Key words: Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, scientific dialogues, Philosophy of Science, Academician Ivan Supek, philosopher Dr Kathleen Vaughan Wilkes, cultural identity, Dubrovnik

The course director

Undoubtedly, *Philosophy of Science*, as the longest-running and still vital programme at the Centre, gave Dubrovnik a special friendship with an extraordinary person, a ‘quiet resident’ of Dubrovnik, the British philosopher and university professor Kathleen Vaughan Wilkes, called simply Kathy by the people of Dubrovnik, especially after the war (like her close friends). She started coming to Dubrovnik in the 1970s, eventually becoming the director of the course *Philosophy of Science*, in which she introduced interdisciplinary approach, which was rare at the time. She later became a member of the Centre’s executive bodies, and in the time of war she bravely replaced the comfort and safety of the Oxford lecture halls with life in besieged Dubrovnik. In the most dramatic period of war she helped the city and its inhabitants by spreading the truth about aggression against Dubrovnik and Croatia through her academic network. After the brutal attack on 1 October 1991, she immediately contacted the BBC from Dubrovnik to tell the world what happened in Dubrovnik, and her appeal for help reached Margaret Thatcher, Prince Charles and other important people. Wartime Mayor of Dubrovnik, Pero Poljanić, recalled the fact that she was the goddaughter of Lord Peter Carrington, peace negotiator for former Yugoslavia, with whom she often argued. She was also related to the former British Prime Minister Douglas Hume, with whom she intensively communicated during war.¹ As a sign of gratitude, she was declared an honorary citizen of Dubrovnik in 1993, and in 2001 she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Zagreb. Dr Kathy Wilkes was the Chair of the British-Croatian Society, with headquarters in London, until the end of her life.²

Spreading the truth

Alongside Berta Dragičević, Dr Wilkes’s close associate in the war months was Vesna Bradarić Gamulin, translator and head of the protocol in Mayor Pero Poljanić’s office. She first met Kathy Wilkes on 3 October 1991: ‘Two days after the Yugoslav National Army’s forceful attacks on Dubrovnik from the air, the sea and land and attacks on Mount Srđ, I met Đuro Kolić on Stradun, who invited me to come to the City Headquarters and help with my knowledge of foreign languages in these dramatic circumstances. I remember, in the anteroom of the Mayor’s office, Kathy was sitting at a small desk typing tirelessly on a typewriter. The next day, I got a desk next to hers and a typewriter. And so we started working together. I translated her texts, which she addressed to important people, including the members of the British Government, and she also organised humanitarian aid. Her dedication to spreading the truth around the world was so great that at first we didn’t talk about anything. War days went by, filled with difficult

¹ Tanja Rudež, »Počasna građanka Kathy Wilkes. Vrsna britanska filozofkinja nakon blokade Dubrovnika odlučila je ostati, a njen pepeo je na koncu prosut u more ispod tvrđave Lovrijenac.« (12. 5. 2018) <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/kathy-wilkes-vrsna-britanska-filozofkinja-nakon-blokade-dubrovnika-od-lucila-je-ostati-a-njen-pepeo-je-na-koncu-prosut-u-more-ispod-tvrdave-lovrijenac-7348605> <https://dulist.hr/zaduzila-grad-u-ratu-na-danasnji-dan-preminula-je-pocasna-gradanka-dubrovnika-kathleen-wilkes/783143/> (accessed in May 2022)

² Lexicon entry »Britansko-hrvatsko društvo/*The British-Croatian Society*.« *Leksikon hrvatskoga iseljeničtva i manjina*, eds. Vlado Šakić and Ljiljana Dobrovšak. Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar and Hrvatska matica iseljenika, 2020: 138. https://www.pilar.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Leksikon_hrvatskoga_iseljenictva_i_manjina_full.pdf (accessed in May 2022).

and intimate experiences, and we experienced those days together. In time our friendship grew. I remember, one morning Kathy didn't come to work at the City Headquarters. There was panic because no one knew what had happened, until she turned up in the building in the evening, all smiles, and explained that she had spent her day with the Red Cross in the occupied Mokošica, trying to find out if she can send additional humanitarian aid there... of course, she didn't describe to us in detail this risky undertaking of passing under Golubov kamen.

A theatre of war

She published her notes in *The Voice from Dubrovnik*, which was a bilingual edition.³ 'Each of her articles published in The Voice of Dubrovnik appears in two columns, in English and Croatian, on the first page of the leaflet. The dates above the articles refer to the dates of their publication. She spent four months in Dubrovnik during the most critical period of its destruction by the JNA ("Yugoslav People's Army", in fact Serbian army) forces. The Voice of Dubrovnik was distributed free of charge, and it existed from 8 November 1991 till 5 March 1992.'⁴ In December 1991 Dr Wilkes wrote in *The Voice from Dubrovnik*:

*'Mokošica: I discovered how people can talk to the aggressors. It is beautifully simple they do not look into the eyes, they look at the ears.'*⁵

In November 1991, as part of the School Health for Everyone, Dr Wilkes co-organised the professional conference *The Quality of Life and Human Rights of Refugees in Dubrovnik* at the IUC with Dr Slobodan Lang. Five days later, during the attack on Dubrovnik on 11 November 1991, she wrote:

*'I hear the bombs falling, shaking even the Mayor's office, from where I write. [...] Did you know that on 31th July there was a complaint made against Federal Army planes for flying low over the city; it was thought that vibrations from the flight might damage the fabric of the city. [...] This is my first war (I was born right after the Second World War). It is not at all what I expected [...] the truly astonishing extent of the attack against purely civilian targets.'*⁶

On 25 November she wrote: 'St Catherine's Day. My name-day; day 56 of the siege; one month to Christmas. [...] All I can say is that it is high time that we no longer needed to count by this shocking calendar.'⁷ She wrote:

³ Vesna Bradarić Gamulin kindly shared her memories of her friendship with Dr Wilkes in this paper at my request.

⁴ Darko Žubrinić, »Dr. Katherleen Wilkes devoted her life to the victory of Croatia.«, available at: <http://www.croatianhistory.net/etf/wilkes.html>

⁵ Kathy Wilkes, »Mokošica, Prague, Gdansk/Mokošica, Prag, Gdansk.«, in: *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik, Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas* br. 52 (29. 12. 1991.)/*Convoy Libertas Herald* No. 52 (29. 12. 1991).

⁶ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik, Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas i Fonda sv. Vlaho* No. 4 (11. 11. 1991.); No. 11 (18. 11. 1991).

⁷ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik, Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas i Fonda sv. Vlaho* No. 19 (26. 11. 1991).

*'Dubrovnik: city of contrasts and paradoxes. A city of light and of sun, movement and colour; now black or dark gray at night, motionless after 9.00 p.m. A city of famous fountains, starved of water. A city that has for centuries been a centre of culture and international civilization, now rarely able even to telephone. A theatre for the world, now a theatre of war. A city trying to shelter thousands of refugees, but seeing almost the same number leaving to shelter elsewhere. A route between Dubrovnik and Rijeka... via Zelenika. A city "protected" by the Hague Convention Spomenik Kulture flags [flags of the Monuments of Culture], one of which has a bomb-blast through the exact centre. An international and universal city, assaulted viciously by its immediate neighbours. With no history of ethnic violence, but now right in the middle of an ethnic assault. A commune with no military installations treated as though it were an army camp. Relief ships that bring food for the children, the sick, and the elderly... and taking away to elsewhere same people. The navy, "greeting" the city with bombs and blockades, when it used to salute it with sirens. A maritime city, prevented even from sending fishing-boats out. Self-defence treated by a large part of the international community as though it were on a par with aggression. A city of gold and lead. K.V. Wilkes.'*⁸

She left Dubrovnik very rarely, going only on shorter trips to seek help. One such trip was to the USA at the end of December 1991 ('Three days in the USA, three days to get there, three days to get back.').⁹ Before this trip, on 16 December, after one of the most devastating attacks on Dubrovnik, she wrote a letter to the public with Executive Secretary Berta Dragičević, that read:

'Dear Friends and colleagues, You have been receiving several letters and appeals from our indefatigable Director-General, Prof. Orijar Oyen, who has been working non-stop on behalf of Dubrovnik in general and the IUC [Inter-University Centre] in particular. We thought that it was time to write to you directly from Dubrovnik, to give you the news from the battlefield. To start with what - since we are both functionaries of the IUC - concerns us most in that capacity: the IUC building is destroyed, gutted, irreparable [6 December 1991]. Only the Secretariat itself was spared (and even there the roof might fall in at any time); that gave us the opportunity to retrieve most of the documentation of the IUC's 20-year history. The building was still smouldering as we worked; along with other still-smouldering buildings, it was the only warm place in Dubrovnik, where the temperature is around the freezing point. We can, happily, tell you that all those living there (some of our staff and refugees) were uninjured, although they have of course lost the roof over their heads and all their possessions, and are deeply shocked. We are determined that the IUC will rise again, and for that we shall need all your support. The mayor of the city and other authorities here, share that determination. At present the situation is still so uncertain, and so much has been devastated, that it is evidently too early to talk of re-housing and re-establishing the IUC. But, as soon as possible, we hope to see discussions begin between our Director-General, the University

⁸ Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik, 25. November, 1991. Available at: <http://www.croatianhistory.net/etf/wilkes.html>

⁹ Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik, Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas No. 47 (24. 12. 1991).

of Zagreb, and the Dubrovnik authorities for the renewal of IUC activities. For we had a dream in 1971: the project of uniting the world in Dubrovnik. With twenty founder-member universities we started and made it become true. This dream is now in ashes, not metaphorically but literally. We now have to start dreaming again; now we have the potential of 240 member-institutes, we trust that we will have as many of you as possible sharing this new dream. We will not describe the destruction in the city and the Old City. You will have seen it on your televisions; and it would make us heartsick to say more about it.

Our greetings from beautiful, devastated Dubrovnik.

*Katheleen Wilkes, Chairman, Executive Committee
Berta Dragičević, Executive Secretary. '10*

From Dubrovnik she tirelessly warned the international public of the truth about destruction and war.

'Dubrovnik... there is still no water or electricity, scant food, no glass in the windows, temperature at freezing point. But they are painting the boards that cover the windows in the main street of Stradun with pictures, jokes, prayers; Christmas cribs are being constructed with bits of rocket and broken stone; concerts and lectures are held in between the funerals. '11

Resilience

'In time our friendship grew richer,' said Vesna Bradarić Gamulin, 'and the terrible bombing on St Nicholas Day 1991 was a dramatic episode for both of us. I still remember the flames in which the building of the Centre perished, as well as my apartment and my father's apartment in the vicinity, at Pile. Some moments in life stay with us as flashes, visually powerful. That was a tragic realisation. After that, instead of going to the Centre, Kathy often went to the premises of Matica hrvatska on Stradun, where the office of the Libertas Convoy was located. They were always happy to welcome her, everybody loved her unobtrusiveness and respected her great effort. She had many friends there. One of them was the painter Đuro Pulitika. As a friend and translator, I enjoyed their meetings immensely, probably as much as they did. Once, as we were walking to the painter's studio in St John Fort, Kathy recited a few Shakespeare's sonnets. When she saw that I was surprised, she told me that as children, they got a penny for every stanza they learnt by heart.'¹² In early 1992 Dr Wilkes was getting ready to return to Oxford, to her university and students, and right after she came to Oxford, she travelled to Vienna to a meeting about the future of the IUC, where she decided to organise international

¹⁰ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik*, 16. December 1991. Available at: <http://www.croatianhistory.net/etf/wilkes.html>

¹¹ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik*, *Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas* No. 49 (26. 12. 1991).

¹² According to the account of Vesna Bradarić Gamulin.

course *Philosophy of Science* in April 1992.¹³ Executive Secretary Berta Dragičević, representatives of the Centre and the University of Zagreb also participated in the meeting in Vienna. ‘It is true that we shall need 4 million DM to rebuild the IUC! ... But we’ll get it somehow. I am confident of that!’ wrote Dr Wilkes after the meeting in Vienna.¹⁴

Organizing support

Already in 1993 she organised the visit of Dubrovnik Mayor, Pero Poljanić, to London. ‘The trip was carefully planned,’ Vesna Bradarić Gamulin recalled, ‘the invitation was addressed to the Mayor and his wife, and I was the translator. On the first evening, pianist Ivo Pogorelić gave a recital of Chopin at the Royal Festival Hall in London. This was followed by a cocktail party, attended by the Croatian ambassador Drago Štambuk and many public figures, which provided an opportunity for important and purposeful conversations. The next day we went to Oxford, where Kathy organised a public lecture with video screening of footage of destruction of Dubrovnik in a packed lecture hall. Later she hosted a lavish dinner at St Hilda’s College, where she lived. The following day, the Mayor of Oxford introduced us to the historic city, and after that we visited all the important sights with Kathy, including the Bodleian Library, with over 13 million printed items, which makes it the second largest library in Britain after the British Library. I never talked to Kathy about money, but I think she financed all this herself. Later she continued her regular work at the IUC, and our time together in Dubrovnik was intensified by the visit of Michael Foot and his wife Jill Craig, who came from London with a TV crew and the producer Jason Lahle. They wanted to make a documentary about the destruction of Dubrovnik. They visited the Head of the International Centre of Croatian Universities, Professor Ivana Burđelez, who introduced them to me, and I introduced them to Kathy. A strong friendship was immediately formed between them, strengthened by their mutual love for Dubrovnik.

They invested their private funds and enthusiasm in making of that documentary, and I helped them the same way. They made the film and it was broadcast on the BBC. Michael Foot also referred to Kathy’s immeasurable contribution in his book *Essays Old and New 1953-2003* in the chapter about Dubrovnik. Kathy’s love for Dubrovnik was so great that she wanted to learn Croatian, but this was not an easy task. She wrote:

‘Let us have, for a change, a piece that has NOTHING to do with our crisis situation. I am trying to learn Croatian, Your language is not easy, my friends; I have been trying, on and off, for quite a while now. Moreover, my memory would make a sieve, by comparison, seem like a watertight container. How much easier it was to learn languages when young! The Latin, Greek and (little) French which I learned at school are with me

¹³ I can only add that I also personally remember when I first met Dr Wilkes in 1992, when she insisted on organising the course *Philosophy of Science* at the alternative location at the Music School. ‘We cannot hold the course in the destroyed IUC building, but in the Music School park we talk surrounded by birdsong in an almost meditative atmosphere! It is unbelievably beautiful in this difficult reality,’ she told me, as she kindly accepted my invitation to the programme *Plavi razgovori* in Villa Dubravka.

¹⁴ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik*, *Glasnik Ureda Konvoja Libertas* No. 64 (1. 2. 1992); No. 66 (14. 2. 1992).

still - the Greek the best, since I have to use in my work. One problem for my attempts to learn Croatian is the Inter-University Centre itself, where (until recently) I spend practically all my time when in Dubrovnik. Almost everyone in the Secretariat seems to have fluent English, not to mention French, German or Italian. So, when working at the IUC, there is rarely any need to try to speak Croatian; all that is needed is the very basic linguistic equipment required for shopping, travelling, etc. Another problem is that I am lazy. But ah, the shame of it! I say, truthfully, that I have been coming here for twelve years now. So there is really no excuse. And, because of twelve years I have made many good friends, I get invited to their homes... and there meet their parents or children, or their friends, who perhaps do not speak English; and all I have is baby-talk. There is also the absurdity of asking “gdje?” [where?], or “zašto?” [why?], and not understanding the answer. It is a pity, though, that the recent increments to my vocabulary have been such words as “rat” [war], “žbuka” [mortar], “raketa” [rocket], “snajper” [sniper], “rana” [wound], “bombardirati” [to bomb], “sklonište” [shelter], “blokada” [blockade], “napad” [attack]. (You see now, even in this piece, the war creeps back into the subject?) Next time you see me, speak to me SLOWLY, in simple Croatian; and be prepared to switch to English. I’ll get there somehow, eventually.’¹⁵

Legacy of a Guardian Angel

Vesna Bradarić Gamulin also remembers Kathy’s passion for sailing: ‘She was often on a sailboat with us; my husband Jadran and me, she even participated in a regatta in which my husband won first place, after which we enjoyed lobsters, courtesy of the owner of the restaurant Orsan. This was one of our “sea adventures”. She also visited us in our house in Rijeka dubrovačka, although she was already in poor health, and we spent the Easter holidays together. Kathy never stopped working for Dubrovnik and the IUC. To honour her courage and great help she provided, she was made an honorary member of the Croatian Army and an honorary citizen of the City of Dubrovnik. I remember how this made her happy as a child. She continued her work even after the war, raising funds, organising demining, rebuilding the IUC. But her health was degrading. In the summer of 2003, she fell ill and died in London. She wanted her ashes to be scattered in the sea beneath Lovrijenac Fort. I knew about her wish because she often told me, when we went to Šulić Beach for a swim, that this little beach was the most beautiful in the world to her. There was no doubt about the fulfilment her last wish, and Kathy’s brother Patrick came to Dubrovnik for that sad occasion. We did as Kathy wished; we sailed out, threw wreaths in the sea in front of Lovrijenac and scattered her ashes. The next day I swam in the sea at Šulić Beach and saw the wreaths on the nearby rocks. No matter how macabre this may seem to someone, for me it was my final farewell to a friend who, I even thought at that moment, played a little joke on me.’

Nine years after her death, in 2012, the square in front of St George’s Church in Pile, not far from the Centre’s building, was named after her as a lasting memorial. Words of remembrance were spoken on that occasion in the newly-named Dr Kathleen Wilkes Square by the Mayor

¹⁵ *Glas iz Dubrovnika/The Voice from Dubrovnik*, 5. December 1991. Available at: <http://www.croatianhistory.net/etf/wilkes.html>

Andro Vlahušić, President of the City Council Olga Muratti, Director of the Inter-University Centre Krunoslav Pisk and President of the British-Croatian Society in London, Flora Turner. Here is what Vivian Grisogono wrote about this subtle memento: ‘The dedication of the nearby square on the Pile bay to her memory, twenty years after the time she helped the city in its greatest hour of need, is a perfect tribute to the lady known throughout Dubrovnik as “Naša Keti” – “Our Kathy”. It was particularly fitting that Flora Turner was able to attend the unveiling ceremony and speak about her friend Kathy Wilkes. As a reporter on the BBC World service in 1991, Flora introduced Kathy’s first message from besieged Dubrovnik to the world’s listeners; as one of the founders of the Croatian Peace Forum, Flora helped to coordinate some of Kathy’s requests for aid; as Cultural Attaché to the Croatian Embassy in London in 1998, Flora gave a speech congratulating Kathy when she received the Red Danice hrvatske; and in 2012, as Kathy’s successor as chairman of the British-Croatian Society, Flora was able to demonstrate how Kathy’s life of courageous service had achieved its highest aims: the victory of love, culture and reason over primitive savagery and greed.’¹⁶ In addition to friends and people who respected her work, this emotional occasion of in honour of Kathy Wilkes was attended by her close associates and colleagues in the war period, Vesna Gamulin, Berta Dragičević and former mayor Pero Poljanić.

The thought of ‘a guardian angel of IUC’, as Berta Dragičević and Nenad Mišćević called her in their reminiscences, still hovers over the memory of Dr Kathy Wilkes.¹⁷ This gesture of gratitude by the people of Dubrovnik, with which the small square beneath Lovrjenac Fort keeps the memory of her name, near the place she chose for her ‘final farewell’, took place in the year of the Centre’s 40th anniversary, which was marked with a two-day conference *The Dream of a Global Knowledge Society* in September 2012. One of the conference participants, Prof. Zvonimir Šeparović, subtly and emotionally dedicated his appearance in the programme of Croatian Radio – Radio Dubrovnik to the memory of Dr Kathy Wilkes, saying that ‘with her decision to stay in Dubrovnik during the war, she gave up the possibility of going back to Oxford to enjoy a peaceful life. When she realised that a tragedy was happening in Dubrovnik, she decided to stay, survive and live here and help the people and the city! For me she is a true example of a university professor truly dedicated to her social engagement. At the price of her own life, without water, without electricity – she decided to stay and help! This shows her incredible strength, courage and breadth of spirit.’¹⁸

¹⁶ Vivian Grisogono, Dr. Kathy Wilkes honoured in Dubrovnik <https://www.viviangrisogono.com/dalmatia-mainmenu-79/item/119-dr-kathy-wilkes-honoured-in-dubrovnik> (15. 12. 2022)

¹⁷ Berta Dragičević, »Memories, Memories...«, in: *Fragments of Memories of Life and Work at Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik 1971–2007* (eds. Berta Dragičević and Ørjar Øyen): 20; Nenad Mišćević, »My Three Decades at the IUC: A Testimony.«, in: *Fragments of Memories of Life and Work at Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik 1971–2007* (eds. Berta Dragičević and Ørjar Øyen): 84.

¹⁸ Excerpt from the programme *Plavi razgovori* aired on Croatian Radio – Radio Dubrovnik in 2012. It is worth mentioning that on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of Kathy Wilkes’s death, the University of Oxford organised the scientific conference ‘Exploring Identity: Political and Philosophical’ to honour her memory. On the same occasion, Kathy Wilkes Memorial Trust was established at Oxford for funding students in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Czech Republic and Croatia. T. Rudež, »Počasna građanka Kathy Wilkes. Vrsna britanska filozofkinja nakon blokade Dubrovnika odlučila je ostati, a njen pepeo je na koncu prosut u more ispod tvrđave Lovrijenac.« (12.5.2018)