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Memories of Dubrovnik's Global Citizen—Kathy Wilkes

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This is a personal memoir about the life, work and courage of Professor Kathleen Wilkes, a Fellow in Philosophy for 30 years at St Hilda's College, Oxford University. The article traces—and sets out to explain—particularly her links to Dubrovnik and Croatia and the Inter-University Centre since 1981, and supported strongly through the 1980s and even during the 1990s, remaining on site during the cruel siege of the city when the IUC suffered a devastating fire. Three key aspects of her life are explored—her work as a significant philosopher of science; her outstanding courage and work in defending academic freedom widely over the East Central European region, and her warm personality and generous friendship. This is why she can be regarded as Dubrovnik's Global Citizen, the IUC was only too ready and willing to host this conference in her honour.

Keywords: Kathy Wilkes; Inter-University Centre; Dubrovnik; Oxford; St Hilda's College

This volume of papers from a recent conference at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik is now published in fond memory of the philosopher, defender of academic freedom, and friend to many, Kathy Vaughan Wilkes.

It may seem a stretch to appreciate why a distinguished Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St Hilda's College, Oxford University, for 30 years, should be so honoured at a conference in the Philosophy of Science, held at the IUC in Croatia. But to all who knew her—and that was a privilege I shared—knew her for her devotion, solidarity and courage relating to the infamous 1991 siege of this evocative treasured medieval city. As such, this honour is entirely appropriate.

We, happy band of philosophers, fellow thinkers, friends, and supporters, gathered for this event with some pride in the main hall of the IUC, which Kathy so loved, in April 2022, to discuss a range of philosophical issues, including intentionality, goal-directed behaviour and behaviour regulation, machine learning, and action understanding, all of which would have had Kathy jumping in to discuss with many perspectives. Oh, if only she could have been present with us, too, brandishing her wit, flashing her dry humour, and keeping us to the mark, until, that it was time, for her to lead us all to enjoy and relish the “down time”, when discussion would, of course, continue.

Before our proceedings were underway, we were treated to a tour of the famous city taking in certain key spots which had meant much to Kathy. We visited the small, picturesque Pile harbour, just before the main Pile gate entrance to the city, with its blue sea and undulating waves, where Kathy would sit and look out, so inviting for a dip, and, no doubt, sometimes she would swim there. But it was also here during the darkest days of the 1991 siege of Dubrovnik by the invading Serbs, with electricity cut off, with water and supplies extremely short, we were told that she once saw a dead body floating in those waters, and, by her own admission, the full horror of the war was brought home to her, savagely.

Back in 1991, having already spent a decade associated with the IUC which was now caught up in the crossfire of the siege as part of the War of Croatian Independence, Kathy, caught in the country at the time, instantly committed herself to supporting and defending the centre. She became unofficial English language assistant to the Mayor. She chose to spend long periods in the city, even taking a year of absence from her college teaching duties at Oxford, as we learnt from her close colleague, Professor Anita Avramides, to express personal solidarity through her presence. She even took to dressing in fatigues as befitted her sense of embattlement and would start off morning gatherings at the centre with a review of the latest battle lines to identify just where invading troops had reached. No wonder she was even made an Honorary Private in the Croatian army.¹

In a memorable moment, during a lunchtime interview on a BBC radio news programme, which I happened to hear live, she was asked, as she sat in the IUC Library room, just how bad the situation was, and, indeed, to confirm what were the various background noises that could be heard, on air. “Oh, well, it must be firing and bombing,” she replied in her nonchalant way, and airily held her telephone out of the window so the BBC audience could hear the full extent of the noise and confirm the sounds of shelling. It rather confirmed Kathy as the intrepid character she was, while we listened sitting in our homes and offices.

¹ Kathy says in her reported acceptance speech when receiving her honorary degree from the University of Zagreb, she recalls that she was awarded the post of Honorary Private, though more widely she is thought to have been made an Honorary Colonel.

Next to the Pile harbour area, our group turned to walk about a very short street or square, with some four dwellings. Remarkably the City Council decided to honour Kathy in recognition of her many contributions and her work with the IUC, by installing a memorial plaque here, recognizing her as an honorary citizen of the city of Dubrovnik, for “her outstanding friendship and courageous support during the 1991–95 aggression”. Later that street would also be named after her.

At the unveiling ceremony in February 2012, then Mayor of Dubrovnik, Mr. Andro Vlahušić, and the Chair of the City Council, Ms. Olga Muratti, expressed their deep thanks to Professor Wilkes for her dedicated help to Dubrovnik during the war period in 1991 when she refused to leave the city while electricity was cut off and there were food shortages. She also used her many connections through interviews and reports, and brief forays abroad, to inform the world about war damages, and to seek support and medical resources. She even raised funds to pay for mine removal equipment. In 2001, she would be recognised further, with the award of an honorary degree by Zagreb University.

Her decision to stay in Dubrovnik during the brutal attack on the city, “to be with her brave friends”, the citizens of Dubrovnik, to share their ordeals first hand, has left a deep impression. So, it really was a moving moment for all our memorial conference participants to gather under the plaque for various memorial photographs of our own.

Next, our band moved through the busy Stradun or main drag of this fine medieval city, which was hit during the siege, taking in the bustle and hustle of the many wide-eyed tourists, until we reached the City Hall, where in the main assembly room there are just four framed portraits of honoured dignitaries. These included Stjepan Stipe Mesić, Croatian lawyer and politician, who served as President of Croatia (2000–10), and before that prime minister of Croatia (1990).

Alongside is a portrait of Lord (Christopher) Patten, currently Chancellor of the University of Oxford, but formerly the European Commissioner for External Relations and so much involved in the formation and establishment of the new republics that emerged from the former Yugoslavia, including an independent Croatia.

Next, there is the founder of the IUC itself, Professor Ivan Supek, to whom it would also fall to supervise the rebuilding and restoration of the Centre after it was bombed and the library burnt in the 1991–2 siege and war. Harrowing images of the devastation can be seen in record albums when visiting the Centre.

The IUC had been founded 20 years earlier following an international gathering of university leaders held in Montreal in 1970, when the Rector of Zagreb University appealed to his colleagues to help him to create a new kind of Peace University that would be “free of government control” and which could serve as a meeting place for East European academics to meet in dialogue with colleagues from West Europe. He managed to gain the support of some 250 university leaders and

was given the old Teachers' College in the city which he turned into the IUC, along the way persuading Norwegian sociologist/mathematician, Johan Vincent Galtung, who was promoting a discipline of Peace and Conflict studies, to serve as a founding director.

By the time Kathy joined the centre in the 1980s, alongside her Oxford colleague, Bill Newton-Smith, it was already renowned as a cross-over point—allowing dissident intellectuals from the former East Central Europe region to meet with sympathetic Western liberal, anti-authoritarian thinkers, sharing ideas, building moral and generating solidarity, of the deep, lasting, personal kind.

It is acknowledged that embryonic plans for a new free, model, international university for the region were first floated at these IUC Dubrovnik meetings—which later emerged in 1991 in Prague as the Central European University, with an outpost in Warsaw. Its later homes in Budapest, and Vienna, now its current main home, were also explored at the time, as well as Bratislava. As its founding CEO Secretary-General, I was involved in all these discussions and regard the IUC with due reverence.

Finally, there is the portrait of Professor Kathleen Wilkes, who appears to have been on a long journey from her relatively traditional English roots to her position as honorary citizen of Dubrovnik. Yet, perhaps, it was not quite as surprising as it might seem. She was born into the Anglican faith, her father was a vicar in the Church of England, yet she gave up religion. Both sides of her family appear to have been connected: her father taught at the renowned English public school, Eton, and her mother also had connections to the school. Eton is characterised for its apparent elitism, but it seems to have left Kathy with the will and desire to stand up for the underdog and fight for access for the disadvantaged. She would also give up family sympathies for the Conservative Party, and emerge with strong liberal, and, at times, even socialist, sympathies—but never, of course, for Communism as to be found in the Soviet bloc.

It strikes me that there are at least three pathways by which readers of this volume can find connections to Kathy—and, indeed, share in feelings of gratitude for all that she achieved in general, and for the IUC in particular. First, of course, Kathy as the Philosopher of Science. She is probably best remembered for her many contributions to the Philosophy of Mind, especially on the so-called mind-body problem. Her many articles and chapters, more than 50, in professional journals established her reputation as a leading exponent of a nuanced and realistic view of physicalism, that there is just one real or physical world. Her two main works were *Physicalism* (1978) and *Real People* (1988).

She was influenced by many leading thinkers at Oxford where she studied classics (or “Greats”), at St Hugh's College, before going onto to spend three years at Princeton, where she studied with Thomas Nagel, and Richard Rorty among other highly distinguished figures, then to

King's College, Cambridge, and finally settling at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she was a Fellow in Philosophy for 30 years, and interacting actively with many distinguished fellow philosophers, but also in many other disciplines. Indeed, her willingness to engage directly with scientists and operate freely in an inter-disciplinary frame, particularly with medics, physiologists and psychologists, marked her out. She taught philosophy of science, especially brain and behavioural sciences, but also ancient philosophy, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion.

A sense of her characteristic exuberance and down-to-earth approach is, in fact, so well described by Professor Denis Noble in his paper, on Teleology, included in this volume. Denis Noble discusses the lively exchanges that took place in seminars on *behaviourism* he shared with Kathy and others in the 1980s, which would ultimately find exposure in a book entitled *Goals, No Goals and Own Goals*. Kathy is shown as a philosopher, looking for reasonable explanations, appreciating complexities over simpler models often favoured by biologists and behaviourists such as Watson, and who veered towards practicalities and away from “grand theory” approaches.

At St Hilda's, where she lived almost continuously in college in a variety of rooms, she became what we would term a fixture, as a well-known and much loved, if somewhat formidable, figure around the college, dining in hall, lecturing at the University, spending days in the Bodleian Library. Above all, she developed into a hugely conscientious tutor—and this also I know first-hand from many close contemporaries—which earned her much respect and affection, not just from her many students but also from her academic colleagues. They report on stimulating and rigorous tutorials, but also on her patience and her caring attitudes. She always seemed ready to give and share: I can still recall, particularly, one evening with her, encouraged by some good red wine, where she patiently and excitedly explained to me the significance of the Stoics, whom she much admired.

As the “good citizen”, she was also a feisty College and University committees member—for example holding her ground on pressing her minority position for her College, the last of the Oxford colleges originally founded for women students—to embrace the brave new world and “go mixed” (as it is now, of course), pressing the Philosophy sub-faculty to support the initiative to support Czech dissident academics, discussed below, and, as we noted, holding out at the IUC despite the clear personal danger of falling ordinance round and about.

Second, so pertinent for this volume, we can recognise Kathy as a stout defender of academic freedoms, who absolutely put her principles into practice. Indeed, she was rather proud to be descended from the great English eighteenth century liberal defender of free speech and freedom of the press, John Wilkes.

Kathy, encouraged by her good friend, Steven Lukes, the Oxford sociologist, appears to have played a critical role, as the secretary of the Oxford Philosophy Sub faculty, in persuading it to respond seriously and positively to what appeared as a much corrected, typed askew, somewhat crumpled, letter, from the Czech philosopher, Julius Tomin, appealing to four apparently leading world universities to uphold their responsibilities to protect academic freedom by coming to Prague to continue teaching philosophy to those who still wanted to study and learn, even though the Communist regime had expelled many academics and students preventing them from pursuing studies in such “banned” topics as Kant’s ideas, structuralism, phenomenology.

As it turned out, Oxford was the only one of the four approached universities to respond—the others I believe were the Free University in Berlin, Harvard, and the Sorbonne. Kathy herself was one of the first of the so-called Oxford *Velvet Philosophers* to visit Prague to deliver “underground” lectures which were hosted in basements, flats, and other private spaces. Kathy’s first visit resulted in four long seminars which the crowd was eager to hear and study, but after two more visits, she was met at the airport by the FSB, the Czech secret police based in Bartolomějská Street, and she was turned back even before starting her talk, and other Oxford philosophers were also expelled.

These expulsions, though, received world-wide coverage, and led directly to a group of largely Oxford philosophers creating the Jan Hus Educational Foundation, which was committed to send regular lecturers and supporters to give talks and lectures at private seminars, provide material support and smuggle *samizdat* (*clandestine*) books sometimes disguised as novels, and bringing back dissident writings. Among this group can be numbered Alan Montefiore, Ralph Walker, Roger Scruton with many other supporters. Our Jan Hus group would often be working with leading members of the Human Rights, *Charter 77* group, that was founded in 1977 by Vaclav Havel and others in the wake of the famous Helsinki Accords on human rights—including academic freedom—in 1975.

Kathy’s continuing support for the JHEF and for Czech dissidents would later earn her a Commemorative Medal in 1998 from Vaclav Havel as President of the Czech Republic. She would make several visits to Prague, made many friends. She had an ungainly walk and was often in pain, having had her back damaged in a riding accident in her teens when her horse tripped over an unseen wire, and yet she would walk the streets until her limbs and back ached in her efforts to lead any following secret police on wild goose chases. In 1981, she volunteered to drive Julius Tomin and his family out of Prague across the border, with risk, ultimately, to safety—and, indeed, freedom—in Oxford, where she went on to help ensure their housing and schooling for the two sons, and the family settling in the UK with Zdena Tominova, former Charter 77 spokesperson going on to work for the BBC’s World Service Czech bureau.

All this rather confirmed her status as *persona non-grata* and denied visa access to Czechoslovakia. But this merely seems to have led Kathy to extend her many contacts behind the Iron Curtain and across many countries in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe beyond Dubrovnik and Prague. Kathy was soon involved in meeting a wide range of beleaguered contacts, from Poland and Bulgaria, mainly, but also Romania, Albania and then the former Yugoslavia, often taking along colleagues and students but also trying to get them invitations to the West.

Indeed, one could say that this became her politics. Not the formal politics of parties and votes, manifestoes and parliaments, but a kind of politics of emancipation, of supporting people, intellectuals, academics, trying to live out their lives openly, trying to think freely, and to realise their own potential.

A third frame is Kathy as friend to so many. For Kathy, everyone mattered. Her students of course, as discussed above, her colleagues, and her fellow philosophers. She loved people, she was warm hearted, and she was always ready to put herself out. She was generous with her time and always ready to share her ideas. Whenever I met her in the early 1980s, I found she had made a point of reading my most recent article so we could discuss it. When I pointed out politely that this was really not expected or required, she would look at me quizzically, and, rather kindly, said she would want to read them anyway, it was important.

Val McDermid, the well-known crime novelist, who was taught by Kathy, also remembers her as a woman of “great generosity and sheer brilliance”. She recalls often discussing philosophy with Kathy long into the night. “Kathy taught me how to think, and she also taught me how to drink!” she added. That could be true for many of us. Another close friend who met and go to know Kathy in from Prague, Jana Frankova, recalls the warm personality of Kathy who “as a friend was open, sincere and helpful’ and who became like a member of her family”, helping to look after her kids and take them shopping while smuggling in books and money. The fact that Jana too was a St Hilda’s language graduate no doubt helped. She recalls a personal friendship that “made the lives of so many people in our country at least somewhat easier”. It mattered that those from the UK and other western European countries came and cared.

Val went on to base a key character in her novel, *The Skeleton Road*, on Kathy set during the siege of Dubrovnik. “She considered it her duty to help and support the people of the city and to inform the world what was happening there,” she says.

She would never make much of her work supporting dissidents, which she considered, disconcertingly perhaps, as “normal”. She could do it, so she did, and so would anyone else, with the time and the resources, perhaps the understanding, who thought deeply enough about it. Of course, this is a fallacy. But it helps reveal much of the nature of Kathy—the deeply liberal-democratic global citizen.

She was meeting people who could not do what she took for granted—to be able to read, think and discuss. Surely, such individual acts would pose no clear political threat. Yet, of course, it challenged the underlying ethos of the Soviet regimes. The Communist party elites were fearful about where this all might lead, no doubt influenced by how similar “freedoms” generated the momentum that led to the 1968 Prague Spring, which ended in the infamous USSR tank invasion.

All these three frames pointed the way towards Kathy emerging, somewhat inevitably, as what might be termed a global citizen of city of Dubrovnik. She joined the board of the Inter-University Centre in the early 1980s, and became Chair of its Executive Committee in 1988, until 1996, though staying in touch right to the end of her days.

She is remembered as an “outstanding”, “active”, and “innovative” Chair, always at hand to give advice, and utilize her wide network of contacts with prominent scholars and sources of financing to support the IUC.

She would play a key role in many of its academic programmes, but especially in the Philosophy of Science seminar series, to which she invited and brought in many distinguished colleagues from all over the world, including some involved in this volume, and which has been held every year since its initiation. This volume celebrates the return of what the IUC, understandably, regards as one of its most prominent course series after the Covid-19 interruption.

Yet, all these activities had taken their toll on her health and personal well-being. In 2003, I can remember a delightful sunny evening with a few other friends and former students, sharing some red wine on the balcony of her rooms in St Hilda's, overlooking a batch of then current students practicing sports in the evening sunshine. As we reviewed past exploits, laughed over memories, recalled common friends, delighted in the peacefulness and idyll of the scene, all seemed right with the world. To our great sadness, though, she would die not long after.

Freedom, people, philosophy all mattered to Kathy. Above all it was Philosophy which opens the mind to new ideas and new ways of thinking, a kind of liberation, which in many ways, serves as a fine metaphor for the work of the Velvet Philosophers generally, and Kathy, in particular, crossing borders in spite of restrictions rules imposed by Communist regimes, to help unlock these new modes of thinking. The IUC was founded on the principle of international “openness” and Kathy more than fully subscribed this principle.

None, by definition, were or should be contained, within boundaries, or limits. She associated so closely and personally with those brave Prague dissident philosophers and intellectuals she first met in the 1980s, and she carried her commitment to them and their cause, almost with religiosity, to other Soviet territories and ultimately in support for the IUC and Dubrovnik.

This conference, represented in this volume, was the second in what is planned as a regular series around themes in the philosophy of science. The first was held in Oxford at St Hilda's, as part of the College's 125th anniversary celebrations. It was inspired by Professor Anita Avramides, who worked with Kathy for three decades at St Hilda's and covered for her when Kathy opted to stay on in Dubrovnik during the siege. She was supported by Professor Riccardo Viale, Director of the Herbert Simon Society based in Torino, Italy, who had studied at Balliol College, Oxford, with Professor Bill Newton-Smith. He also interacted directly with Kathy, who had first invited him to an IUC conference in 1983 even though he was, at that time, a psychologist. It was an experience that convinced him to switch his interests to philosophy, full time. Finally, myself, as a close friend of Kathy from my Oxford student days, but more as a colleague within the Jan Hus's various Prague initiatives, and as a journalist reporting the work with dissidents. Nada Bruer, the secretary of the IUC, was quick and enthusiastic to join the initiative once she was approached, and the conferences series was set up with three pillars linked to Oxford, Dubrovnik, and Torino.

The Dubrovnik conference allowed us all to share new thinking on a range of the themes within the Philosophy of Science. It also allowed us to recall and share memories of Kathy Wilkes. This volume is dedicated to her in the name and to new thinking.