

## THINKING SEARCHING WAITING

I

### *Belgrade at the end of the 20th century*

A girl grows up in the communist multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia. She is a talented draftsman. Marshal Tito dies in 1980, and Yugoslavia begins to disintegrate. The girl as a young woman now visits the art school in Belgrade. Great talent is attested and a career predicted. In 1991, she graduates with a master's degree, showing her work in highly acclaimed group and solo exhibitions. Then she disappears into a monastery.

II

### *From Jasna to Efimija*

Jasna Topolski is born in 1965 in Belgrade to a family of philologists. Her father dies at an early age. She grows up with her mother, her brother and a stepfather later. She is a normal student who loves drawing and painting. After school, she attends the art academy, becomes a painter and completes her studies with a master's degree. All the while, she never gets in touch with neither faith nor religion. There are several Bibles in her parents' house, but for philological studies only, and not as the basis of the Christian faith. She remembers asking her mother about the contents of these books. They are about God. That must be an important man, if books that heavy have been written about him, she remembers to have thought.

Her paintings are successful immediately, her fame is on the rise, her works are being exhibited and a career as a great artist is predictable. During her schooldays and when studying at the Academy she regularly visited her stepfather and brother living in Paris. She knows Paris quite well, this capital of world famous artists and renowned studios. But then, into the youthful verve and the temptations of a career as an artist is increasingly pressing a probing question.

What is the meaning of my painting, of my life?

As a 26-year-old she makes the decision for her life. She enters the Gradac monastery, founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century 200 km south of Belgrade. She puts herself in the front of God's face, whom she had hardly known before. She takes the name Efimija\* and will live in this monastery for 25 years. She will leave it as a valued, respected abbess. However, for Efimija, standing in the front of God's face for all these years does not mean spending the day in prayer and contemplation, concentrating on her own salvation. She begins a long and thorough training as an icon painter - and the reconstruction of a community within this monastery. At the time of her admission, a lonely old woman is the only nun still living within the formerly so famous Gradac monastery, when she leaves, there will almost be twenty again.

\* At the turn of the 15th century, Jefimija was a Serbian nun and lyric poet who founded a major silk embroidery factory and is considered the first poetess in Serbia.

### III

#### *Icon as an image versus idol as a phantom*

Designing and painting an icon follow well-defined rules. An icon is not simply the portrait of a saint. An icon is a sacred, devotional effigy that is meant to induce awe in order to create a connection between the viewer and the depicted saint - or God. Icons play a central role in the theology and spirituality of the Eastern Churches. Over centuries, a unique, rigid design language has developed. Reading and interpreting the icon - which also includes the name of the saint or an adequate dictum - has entered the collective memory of orthodox spirituality.

Efimija achieves excellence in icon painting and prominence soon. She receives assignments, for small and large icons, iconostasis even, i.e. the design of the traditional dividing wall between the church and the sanctuary in the Orthodox Church. However, she never abandons her creativity. She begins modifying her icons, replacing the dominant gold with bright white areas. These paintings cast a spell over the viewer as well. And in her monastic life she continues to create a bulk of secular paintings. She does not live in isolation, but knows exactly what is happening in the world. Events of this external world, which occupy and touch her, get translated into her pictures, in a specific coding though. As a reference to her training as an icon painter she adopts the design element of the inscription in her worldly pictures, i.e. the strengthening power of words.

Jasna Topolski's retreat to a monastery does not mean a disappearance from the world. The works of Efimija can be visited in churches and chapels, in public space. Her drawings and paintings have been displayed in several exhibitions in Banja Luka, Mostar, Belgrade and other Serbian cities. She receives recognition and prizes, becomes a member of the oldest organization of Serbian artists.

### IV

#### *Crocodiles and flower fields*

Life in the monastery is largely determined by repetition, contemplation and meditation. By no means does it exclude the confrontation with the world. The encounter between these two opposites stimulates an artistic process and results in the transformation into paintings by Efimija.

Her sheltered workplace allows for peace and concentration, which radiates out of many of her works as special qualities. Her modern drawings and paintings - unlike her icons - do not shine through her dazzling white. On the contrary, the pictures are held in pastel colors, the charisma comes about thanks to the reduction to the essence of the statement, through minimal and carefully set structures, often through repetitive representation of simplified, reduced figures

- and through the "childlike" innocent shaping of her plants, animals and ornaments.

Why does she refer from painting faces or human figures in her modern pieces?

Her flowers and her animals act as substitutes. She does not want to personalize - in sharp contrast to the representation of very specific saints. Her substitutes perform in situations that have general validity, even if provoked by a personal experience or a defined event in the world. Their characters are thus proxies for human emotions and reactions. With her help, she represents relationships between beings, both positive and disturbed. Her pictures are not a transfigured representation of the world, just because they are painted with seemingly naive simplicity. One can rediscover the beauty of the ordinary day by day only, she says, by keeping a childlike innocence throughout life. Or, as the Bible teaches, the kingdom of God can only achieve who preserves a childlike soul.

And why the crocodile so often?

Crocodiles enjoy a questionable reputation in society. Hardly anyone would like to be called a crocodile. But even crocodiles are God's creatures and they they, too have a good core. Who has seen animal films that show how a crocodile mother carries her young in safety in her fearsome mouth?

A gift of God to the people is the ability to goodness and forgiveness. Or, as the title of her exhibition in Belgrade in 2007 read: "All that breathes should praise the Lorde".

V

*In France at last*

The blossoming of monastic life in Gradac fulfills Efimija with joy. But it also means the steady increase in administrative work, and for her, as abbess, the burden of responsibility for more than a dozen nuns. The hours of creative work with pen and brush are becoming less and less. Again, she has to make a decision.

In 1989, the iconographer and priest monk Luc Devoisin-Lagarde founded a center for Byzantine religious art. He builds it up in a ruined convent with a small chapel in Uchon, situated in the loneliness of the hills in the department of Saône-et-Loire, west of Dijon. This Monastère Orthodox St-Hilaire-et-St-Jean-Damascene is developing into a cultural attraction. It is entirely dependent on Father Luc, and it is about to vanish when he dies. After several difficult years of insecurity, the Bishop of the Orthodox Church in Paris approaches Efimija and invites her to run this center and continue the work. At first she cannot imagine a life in France. On a first visit, she recognizes the scenic proximity to her homeland, she notices the overabundance of painting utensils and the opportunity to return to a life as an artist - and she agrees.

Since 2016 she is back in a life of contemplation, in the freedom of artistic creation. Back in the quiet solitude of a small monastery, but saved in the hand of God.