

**Ivaila Alexandrova**  
**Acceptance speech during the bestowal of the national literature prize**  
**“Elias Canetti”**

*My earliest memory is dipped in red. I come out of a door on the arm of a maid, the floor in front of me is red, and to the left a staircase goes down, equally red. Across from us, at the same height, a door opens, and a smiling man steps forth, walking towards me in a friendly way. He steps right up close to me, halts, and says: “Show me your tongue.” I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it, and brings the blade all the way to my tongue. He says: “Now we’ll cut off his tongue.” I don’t dare pull back my tongue. He comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the knife, saying: “Not today, tomorrow.” He snaps the knife shut and puts it back in his pocket.*

*Every morning, we step out of the door and into the red hallway, the door opens, and the smiling man appears. I know what he’s going to say and I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he’s going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time. That’s how the day starts, and it happens very often.<sup>1</sup>*

On the following page of his autobiographical novel „The Tongue Set Free” Elias Canetti tells of Ruschuk on the lower Danube, where he was born, but I will stop citing here. Since this excerpt reminds me of my childhood. In 1947, my father wound up in Sofia’s Central Prison for political reasons. A week after his release, he married my mother, and fathered me two months after this. He was not broken, but somehow crumpled up inside. This history of my father’s has shaped me; for several years I was silent and didn’t speak up about it. “Hot Red” is my speech act. My overcoming my fear. Through this book, I learnt to voice it all, without stopping, without looking back.

Usually, the book “Hot Red” has been reduced to the history of Raiko Alexiev. In interviews that I conducted in 1994, his widow Vessela Alexieva told me about him, too. But her stories initiated more stories, and others.

Actually, the book is about the Bulgarian intelligentsia before and after September, 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>2</sup> It becomes apparent that everything goes round in circles, that heads are rolling, that beheadings take place with increasing regularity. In 1925, Geo Milev and Josif Herbst were murdered. In 1944, Raiko Alexiev, Danail Kraptchev, Jordan Badev were murdered. In March 1945, process Nr. 6 starts, the People’s Court sentences 105 writers, artists, journalists, officers – among them the already murdered Alexiev, Krapchev and Badev. 145 leftist intellectuals – outstanding ones among them – testify *en masse* against them. The judges, too, are representatives of the culture, they also hand out the verdicts, together with the jurists – 15 death sentences, 11 life sentences...

The structure of the book is based on Vessela Alexiava’s story as well as texts which I collected in the archives of the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior and protocols that I opened in connection to people with whom she was in contact. I talked to the sons of my protagonists, regardless of the side which their fathers had been on – victims, witnesses or executioners. I wanted to hear about their parents’ lives from them, from the perspective of their deaths. And it turned out that death brings more light into the puzzle – into life, into what happened during those years, into history. There are inconvenient facts in my book, too. For example, the poet Vesselin Andreev was one of the judges. So was Dimitar Poljanov. The poet Nikola Lenkov was a prosecutor.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel.

<sup>2</sup> September 9th, 1944: The Red Army’s invasion of Bulgaria. For 45 years, this day was celebrated as a day of liberation.

Still, this history is not being voiced. Because it makes us accomplices in an evil which we don't want to be part of. That hurts. Especially, when it concerns our fathers. It is hight time for us to find the words and loosen the tongue of history.