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11 May 2013 Solothurn Book Festival

Speech on the 80th Anniversary of the 1933 Nazi Book Burnings

Freedom of Expression, Writers Under Attack and PEN International Today

>> photo of books

Yesterday, 10 May, marked the 80th anniversary of the 1933 Nazi Book Burnings. An event, or rather a series of events that took place over several days, staged by student associations in over 30 universities across Germany. Books deemed to be unacceptable to the Nazi ideal, that propagated “un-German” ideas were piled high and ceremoniously burned, accompanied by music and singing. The most cited figure is of 25,000 books destroyed, but whatever the actual numbers, the destruction was enormous and the message stark. Hundreds of writers, maybe thousands fled Germany. Writers foreign and German, living and dead were targeted – Bertolt Brecht, Einstein, Engels, Freud, Hemingway, Kafka, Trotsky, Mann, Marx, and even Heinrich Heine, whose prescient phrase “Where they burn books, they will, in the end, also burn people” has become a warning when we see similar acts of book burnings today.

>> dinner party photo

In 1933, PEN International had already been in existence for 12 years. Established in 1921 by the English writer, Amy Dawson Scott, it started out in London as a dinner club where writers could meet and socialise. Very quickly more PEN Centres were set up in other European cities, providing places where writers could meet up on their travels and share their ideas and writings. It grew quickly. By 1933 there were 25 Centres in Europe, and several more in Latin America, and, surprisingly maybe, even in China. Soon these social clubs would start to hold regular congresses where the state of literature would be debated. But it was not until 1932 that PEN members made their first clear statement opposing repression of writings. A PEN Congress, held a year later, 1933, was to be a pivotal for PEN when a resolution condemning the Nazi book burnings led to a fractious Congress, and the subsequent departure of German PEN.

Today, 80 years later, books continue to be burned, often in elaborate, highly publicised events, often looked on by police, tolerated by the authorities. These events symbolise not only anger at whatever ideas the books contain, but also at their authors. More often than not the book is by an author who is safely in another country – sometimes an author who died long ago - but when it is happening in their home town, close by, the fear that book burnings could turn to actual acts of violence against people, specifically the writers, their family, publishers, supporters – becomes all too real.

>> photo of Azeri burnings

Take for instance earlier this year in Azerbaijan. Akram Aylisli, a highly regarded, award winning author, had his books burned outside his home by people angry at his sympathetic portrayal of Armenians and depiction of Azerbaijani atrocities in Nagorno-Karabakh in his novel *Stone Dreams*. The outcry was whipped up by the media and politicians. One opposition politician made a public offer of a reward to anyone who brought him Aylisli's ear. Although the authorities distanced themselves from the statement, they did little to protect the 82-year-old and his family, and no action was taken against the man who made the threat. At least seven Azerbaijani writers and journalists are in prison today, and there is constant harassment and threats against others, making it a key country for PEN. In 2011, Rafiq Tagi, another well known author accused of inciting ethnic tensions when he wrote about Iranian influence in Azerbaijan, died after being stabbed. Earlier this month PEN attended a hearing of Azerbaijan's human rights record where the majority of states present slammed Azerbaijan for its appalling treatment of writers. A few days later the Azerbaijani government approved an amnesty for 2,000 prisoners to mark former President Heydar Aliyev's birthday (the current president, Ilham Aliyev, is his son). It remains to be seen whether these will include any political prisoners.

>> Neupane book cover

Last October, in Nepal, an award winning writer Amar Neupane saw his novel, burned by members of the Bhujel community who accused Neupane of "denigrating" their culture. His book, *Seto Dharti*, a best seller, is based on the life of a 9-year-old widow, a child bride at only seven and then spurned by her community when her husband dies. In a press conference he explained that his book had been misinterpreted, yet, as for Aylisli, he was threatened. Things were only alleviated when he

agreed to change the surname of the girl to one that did not make it clear that she was of the Bhujel community.

>> pastor Jones photo

Aylisli and Neupane's books triggered festering hostilities between communities. Another threat to books is from the conservative right. Earlier this year, the Moldovan Orthodox Church called on the government to burn a sex education book that it said promoted hedonism and homosexuality. There are numerous bans on similar works by religious communities across the world, notably in the USA. Each year the Association of American Libraries lists books banned in America at its annual ' Banned Book's event. And, of course, there are the – biblioclasts – those such as Pastor Terry Jones who threatened to publicly burn 200 copies of the Quran last year, just one of the more recent of the many religious figures across the world from a variety of religious backgrounds who have, or threatened, to burn another religion's holy book. Here it seems that the sole aim is to incite anger and violence, a dangerous form of proselytism.

>> Timbuktu image

Libraries are at particular risk, particularly at times of war. They are often the first buildings to be targeted by invading troops, and the flames come to symbolise the annihilation not only of people, but their ideas, their history, and their culture.

Thankfully, the early reports of the destruction of the Timbuktu library as Islamist rebels fled Mali in January this year proved not to be as extensive as originally thought. Precious and invaluable medieval manuscripts recording sub-Saharan African history were spared, but there was damage nevertheless and that the rebels took their vengeance on a library, a repository of culture and ideas, is telling.

>> Bosnia image

People go to enormous lengths to protect books . Famously in 1992 during the height of the war, *Vijećnica*, the national library of Bosnia and Herzegovina was deliberately destroyed. Around 2 million books were burned, despite efforts of fire fighters and staff. Yet in Sarajevo's Gazi Husrav Beg

library, many books were saved by book lovers who risked their lives, running across 'snipers alley' carrying boxes of books to safety.

>> cover of China report

And then there is the aptly named "Great Firewall of China". Books, articles, posts and tweets – ideas - are burned in a cyber-fire even before they can enter the country. China is just one of the many countries which uses the internet as a means of controlling what its citizens read. But this is a battle of two sides. As some find ways to duck under the fire-wall, other find means to close it in. Despite the extensive censorship, internet users in China are a significant force to be reckoned with. In just one year, millions of messages are shared via the Chinese version of Twitter – weibos – and they have become an enormous force exposing corruption, confronting and demanding that the Chinese authorities take action. Of course the authorities respond by deploying armies of Internet police who attempt to close down the sites of persistent critics. Yet the more they do this, the more defiant the weibo users become. The evidence is that the pressure for change from below is slowly growing in momentum and there are signs that the old school of authoritarianism may be having to shift.

Yet today there are still more than writers in Chinese prisons – and by writers we also include bloggers - among them the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Liu Xiaobo, held since 2008 on an eleven-year sentence. A few days ago, PEN published a report on China *Creativity and Constraint in Today's China* which gives a detailed account of suppression in China today. [picture report] China has for decades been a high concern for PEN, and it has a lively, often courageous, PEN Centre representing writers both inside China and outside (Liu Xiaobo had been a leading member himself), who stage events and publicise the detentions. This report was accompanied by an appeal to the Chinese authorities signed by over 100 writers including Edward Albee, Anthony Appiah, Margaret Atwood, Paul Auster, J.M. Coetzee, Don DeLillo, Kiran Desai, E.L. Doctorow, Nadine Gordimer, Juan Goytisolo, Alberto Manguel, Ian McEwan, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Elif Shafak, Wole Soyinka, Colin Thubron, Tomas Tranströmer, Luisa Valenzuela, Mario Vargas Llosa, Marina Warner "There can be no honor in stripping writers of their rights simply for saying what they believe, and no pride in employing tens of thousands of Internet police to limit the communications of citizens," said Ralston Saul. "China, with all its rich cultures, has everything to gain and nothing to lose through free speech. "

>> Philippines photo

PEN's strength, and its uniqueness – is its thousands of members, all writers or working in the field of literature, all around the world. Even in the most repressive countries, there are clusters of writers who are willing to champion the right to write, even at risk to themselves, but in the knowledge that they are supported by a global network of support. Just some of the countries where PEN members are standing up include Bahrain, Russia, Mexico, Ethiopia, Philippines, Turkey..... So PEN not only has access to an advocacy base, but also to real, on-the-ground knowledge from those who know better than anyone else what it is to live under repression, and also what the best means to combat it is. It is this pool of knowledge that makes PEN International one of the most respected free expression organisations .

>> Caselist cover

Today, world wide, there are just over 800 writers and journalists on PEN's records as under attack. 290 of those are serving long prison terms, 170 more are on trial. A staggering 45 were killed last year. Others were harassed, threatened, beaten. Killings, imprisonments, attacks, harassment, occurred in over 80 countries, ranging from Cameroon to Zimbabwe, Brazil to the USA, Bangladesh to Vietnam, Algeria to Yemen.....

People ask me, which is the worst country for free expression? Which country locks up the most writers? I hate this question. The simple answer is the one based only on numbers but numbers, as we know, don't tell the whole story. And prison is not the only way to silence writers.

But today, looking at numbers only, Turkey is the worst offender with about 70 writers and journalists in jail, and around 60 others on trial – some of them for years without conviction. This is closely followed by China with 40, Eritrea with 27, Vietnam with 24,..... But what about those countries that have no writers in prison? North Korea has none at all but no-one would say that it is the paradise on earth that its leader Kim Jong-un would say it is. Dissenting voices are so thoroughly oppressed, that no-one dares to speak out, and even if they did, they would not be able to find a samizdat-type printer, or a Chinese-style weibo through which to spread their ideas.

>> Write against impunity cover

Mexico has no writer in prison, but it has the highest murder rate of journalists with 68 killed since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Two have been murdered already this year. Our colleagues at Article 19's Mexico's office have received death threats recent. Journalists world wide have been campaigning for an end to the killings. In December last year, PEN published an anthology – Write Against Impunity – where writers and poets from across Latin America contributed poems and writings in, as one of the contributors, Carlos Gamerro from Argentina, being “In solidarity with all the Latin American writers and journalists who have suffered violence in the past or who are now living under threat”. Here, as elsewhere, writers gather together to use their trade as writers to reach out, to move, others into action. [image]

Conversely, in Turkey one could argue that there are so many writers in prison precisely because there is a lively writing community, unafraid to speak out. It is hard to fathom why one writer is apparently free to write about contentious issues while another is locked up. It is a conflicted place where it is impossible to know who is going to find themselves in jail or before a judge. That said, you can pretty much guess that a Kurd is more likely to find themselves in prison, and particularly if commenting on Kurdish rights, or affiliated to Kurdish organisations, as is reflected in the fact that they represent 70% of the imprisoned writers and journalists. But among them are writers from the other side of the spectrum, writers who are seen as nationalists. Typically they are opposed to what they see as growing Islamisation in Turkey and who a staunch Kemalist secularists. Like many of the Kurdish writers, they are accused under anti-terror laws, and, like the Kurds, there is concern that these laws are being interpreted in such a way that legitimate comment is being stifled. Who knows how many people, supporters of minorities, secularists, there are nationalists too, held under the same laws.

Most countries, even the most oppressive, lock up their writers using laws that in many cases have been drafted and passed constitutionally. Many of those laws are, on the surface, reasonable. In a country that suffers terrorism, anti-terror laws seem appropriate. But it is the interpretation and application of these that leads to questions, like in Turkey.

>> Acosta – Nega – al-Ajami photos

Many of the cases PEN takes up are of writers accused of terrorism. Of course there have been writers who have taken up arms, and one cannot assume that just because someone is a writer, they

are innocent. The secrecy and obfuscation that surrounds terrorism trials makes it difficult to judge whether or not the individual is held for good reason, or because they have challenged the official position, supporting the cause but doing so without violence, or providing analysis with conclusions that don't comply with the approved version. It should be underlined that PEN takes no position on the views of the writer. PEN holds no political torch. It only looks at the individual's right to comment, to do so freely, to be challenged freely, but without fear of attack or incarceration.

Some current examples of terrorism laws used against writers include:

- The Qatari poet **Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami**, sentenced to life imprisonment in November for his poem that called for a Jasmine Revolution in the Gulf states, a sentence that was reduced, but still he is to serve 15 years in prison.
- **Eskinder Nega** in Ethiopia is serving an 18 year sentence for terrorism – after publishing an article in 2011 that casted doubt on whether other detained journalists were terrorists as the government claims
- In the **Philippines**, poet Ericson Acosta was held for two years, without trial, on charges of carrying explosives, charges that were never verified. He was freed in February this year. There is still no idea why he was arrested, other than that he was carrying out research into human rights and environmental issues

>> Gul photo

These are just some of the misuses of anti-terror laws that PEN is watching and challenging. In 2012 PEN visited Turkey to challenge the excessive use of anti terror laws, bringing a delegation of 15 writers from eight countries. They met personally with the President who conceded that the situation for freedom of expression casts a shadow in Turkey. Since then there have been some changes to the anti terror law, but it remains problematic. There were high expectations recently that the latest changes will lead to the releases of writers. While there were a few that were released – all them still standing trial – most remain detained – once again high hopes of change have proven overly optimistic.

>> CPJ stats

Killing is the ultimate form of censorship with repercussions that go wider than can be measured – self censorship that follows such murders is not something that can be calculated. I mentioned Mexico earlier. The Committee to Protect Journalists has recorded 980 killings of journalists since it started recording in 1992. If you include writers, the figure will be higher. In 2012 70 were killed, around half for their reporting – the others in conflict zones. 15 more were killed this year. The vast majority go unpunished. Many are carried out by criminals, but too often there appears to be government collusion - or collusion by omission- when there is no proper investigation or it is not carried out. Suggestions of complicity by police forces not addressed. For example In Russia 54 writer and journalists were killed since 1992, but only four have seen some form of justice. Most notable is the case Anna Politkovskaya. Despite long and complex court hearings, her murder has not been resolved. Nor that of Hrant Dink, gunned down outside his office in Istanbul in 2007, or of Regina Martínez Pérez, beaten to death in Xalapa, Mexico, or Raqip Tagi, writer who died in hospital after being stabbed in Azerbaijan, also last year. The list is long.

PEN, in situations where a writer's life is at threat, has a number of responses. Its network of over 140 PEN Centres in over 100 countries can be mobilised to take action through the PEN Rapid Action Network. Each year PEN issues alerts on the most acute cases of writers in danger of arrest or to their lives. These alerts serve not only a press releases, but also calls to action with advice on letter writing to governments and embassies.

>> here I shall feature three most recent RANs:

- Mexico - Murder
- Petition for detained writer in Turkey
- Tunisia – sentencing of a Blogger

Frequently writers are moved by the situation of an individual and will stage performances of the writers work, write about them, get in touch directly with the families and provide moral support, sometimes even visiting the countries to observe trials. At the PEN office we work closely with other NGOs, notably the Foundation PEN Emergency Fund that provides emergency aid for medical treatment, flights out or living costs. Last year it threw lifelines to 30 writers in 12 countries. Unsurprisingly almost half of the aid grants were given to Syrian writers who have had to flee the war.

PEN works with the International Cities of Refuge Network that provides places of safety for writers at threat. [here I will give a couple of examples]

>> Pegah Amani – Iran

>> Alixx – Egypt

>> Russian case

We estimate that in any given year, around 40% of the imprisoned writers PEN are freed. It is difficult to say exactly what the forces are that lead to the early release of a prisoner. But it is clear that the exposure that an organisation such as PEN gives, the lobbying, the ensuring that the person is not forgotten plays a significant role. The courage and tenacity of the friends, supporters and families, not to say the prisoners themselves, is central. PEN's role is to support, encourage and amplify that work...

Now you may think that my many years as a human rights activist has been a depressing one, faced with so many hundreds – actually thousands - of cases over the 20 more years, but in fact that is not my experience. On the one hand it has been an insight into just how brave and persistent people can be in the face of oppression, to get their ideas out there, whatever the danger. On the other hand there are many, many people who are moved to take action in support of their colleagues. I felt that I have been able to mobilise an army of support whenever an injustice has occurred. I have seen writers go to enormous lengths to support their colleagues, giving up hours of their time, often their money, and certainly their creativity. And over the years I have seen changes. Regimes are less likely to imprison writers, knowing that it will bring them under scrutiny. Yes, they do find other means – sometimes using terror laws, sometimes at the end of a gun. The new media is an enormous gift to free expression but is also a tool for surveillance and suppression.

>> Quote plus logo for closing image

PEN's Charter opens with the affirmation "Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals". Since then PEN has been a constant presence and support for writers through the upheavals of the 20th and 21st Centuries, from the book burnings in Germany, mass exiles of writers and intellectuals of World War II and subsequently the Cold War, then through South Africa's apartheid, the disappearances in the Americas, the Communist crackdowns in China, Vietnam, Cuba, the fascist dictatorships in Spain. The arrests in the cause of anti-terrorism post 9/11, and the death threats and killings by international crime networks in Eastern Europe. PEN members have always risen to the challenge of each new

wave of repression and brought their unified force to bear on governments. Physical frontiers have shifted with the emergence of the internet and people can access ideas in a way that is unprecedented and unimaginable to PEN's founders (except, maybe, H G Wells !) This has also brought new challenges as well. I doubt whether PEN's founding members thought that a century on it would still be here, that there would still be a need for vigilance. But I think they would recognise in the present PEN its creative force, energy and commitment, and, in fact, would have expected nothing less.