

Report to the Board on visit to Armenia, October 2003.

Via Prague, where I met other international guests, i.a. Gustav Murin (Slovak PEN), Veno Taufer with wife Jasna (Slovene PEN), and Fatou Ndiaye Sow (Senegal PEN) – the first visitor from Senegal ever to visit Armenia after the fall of the USSR and independence- we arrived in Yerevan 4 a.m. on the 9th of October. Among other guests were also Grigorij Krujkov from Russian PEN and Milena Bernadelli of Italian PEN.

The event was the International Conference “The Future of Poetry through Translation”, Oct 9 – 13, 2003, organised by Anna Hakobian, president of the Armenian PEN Centre, with the dedicated support of her husband Mikail Danelian (Chair of the Helsinki Association) and a marvellously friendly group of assistants and interpreters. It was also associated with the Armenian Writers Association and Yerevan State University, where the Opening Ceremony took place on Oct 10th. Here, in one of the main auditoriums, Prorector, Deans, faculty members and a delightful assembly of some 200 students made an introduction to PEN and PEN values seem very worthwhile.

Before this, though, Anna had on the 9th arranged participation for the two of us on a morning TVchat-show, followed by a quite well-attended press conference. Later that afternoon, international visitors visited the towering memorial to the Victims of the 1915 Genocide of Armenians, magnificently situated overlooking the city, with snow-tipped Mount Ararat reaching high on the near horizon. Then on to the one and only remaining pre-Christian temple, in Garni, built in the first century AD, destroyed in an 18th century earthquake and rebuilt in 1975. After the Armenian kingdom, first among all countries to officially adopt Christianity as state religion in AD 301, nearly all pagan temples were destroyed in pious enthusiasm – if not by subsequent earthquakes.

The literary sessions were well-organised into three round tables of academicians, linguists, translators and well-known poets and writers; agonizingly short but by necessity time-limited slots, which – although much maybe was left unsaid – still allowed core theories and translator experiences to be aired and views exchanged,- some impassioned. Among others by the French ambassador to Armenia, essayist M. Henry Cuny. The participatory effort seemed to mirror enthusiasm over this, as I understood it, first conference of its kind in Armenia, presupposing precursors to have been specifically academic. A decision was taken to subsequently print the quality contributions.

There is a strong element of cultural pride in the collective identity of Armenians. This runs across the fortunes and adversities of history. From the great intellectual feat of the composing of the Armenian alphabet in 405 A.D. by

scholar Mesrop Mashtots, through 20th century history with the heart-rendering massacres mentioned, to present day land-locked nation, surrounded by neighbours of mainly Islamic faith. This pride in national identity did, though, in our PEN environment, seem to be totally compatible with the internationalism of PEN; obviously, Armenian PEN has as one of its main aims to link on to the international literary and poetry scenes through PEN; nothing wrong in that, as it also opens for two-way interchange between Armenian and the international scenes.

Generally speaking, the contributions during the three separate working sessions were energetic, focussed and interesting. I got the impression of considerable satisfaction with this international gathering, not only because of warm and generous hosting. Many contributions, also at the end-session poetry reading, were very memorable.

The way the conference was organised was well planned also in that the second session was located to Oshakan Village in the Aghtarak region. Here, where scholar Mesrop Mashtots is buried, and in the beautifully austere and compact church, with origins from that time, masses were sung in Gregorian style in a unique commemoration of “Translation Day”, the annual celebration of the transubstantiation of the spoken word into the written word, through the instrument of the alphabet. One of the proudest achievements of his successors was the early 6th century translation of the Bible. Outside, Fatou in magnificently coloured robes had a spontaneous and happy interchange with wide-eyed school kids from the local school. As some will recall, this is the age group that Fatou pays special attention to in her own writing in Senegal.

The first part of our visit to Oshakan was an award ceremony arranged by the Armenian Writers Union and Armenian PEN. Two special awards for outstanding translating achievements were presented, and special interventions were made by international guests including PEN members, and also a delegation from Russia. The ceremony was rounded off in a stunning way, with an elderly lady beautifully singing/reciting an age-old song interlaced by her husband’s bass voice reading of the poetry it was built on. The second part, the translation discussion session, took place in the Church School seminar rooms after a traditional lunch nearby.

Late afternoon, our selected route back to Yerevan took us to the recently renovated Cathedral of Etchmiadzine, seat of the Armenian Patriarch and of highest symbolic importance to the Armenian faith. Again, an unforgettable experience as the bells suddenly chimed their evening summons over the surrounding city. The weather was all along sunny and warm, sometimes hot, but now with autumn colours across the valleys of the countryside, with long-

stretched barren and sometimes very eroded mountain ranges always on the horizon. Yerevan is itself on the 1500 meter-level, the hills and mountains often over 2500 metres. Lake Servan, largest in the Caucasus area, is itself on the 2000 m level.

Sunday, Oct 12th was the last conference day. A late start allowed a quick excursion to the local street markets before being called to order for the last session, as lively as the ones preceding it. Although concluding with the official closing, in reality it continued with the Poetry evening already hinted at. All made their contributions to an attentive and positive audience, with a small and accomplished music group in the back-ground. As many of us were preparing for a 3 a.m. wake-up call, seeing that the connecting plane to Prague had a departure time of 5a.m., the evening came to a close at around 9.30. But next morning, attentive as always, Anna and Michail were there to accompany us through the crowds, queues and close scrutiny processes of the airport.

Summing up, my impression was that this was all one can wish for; very well organised, with significant contact areas for PEN information, and hopefully creating for Armenian PEN the high profile it deserves in its' very worth-while civil mission in local society.

Terry Carlbom
International Secretary