

Introductory speech, Yerevan

Oct 8, 2003

Dear Hosts and honoured guests,

I am very happy to be here today, and I would like to begin by stating how impressed I am by good work done by our PEN Centre here under its president, Mme. Anna Hakobyan, and her associates and supporting organisations – among them UNESCO.

International PEN brings together PEN Centres in nearly one hundred countries. In each country, the PEN Centre cooperates with local writers associations; - we are not in competition, we are complimentary; we want to be “the value added element” of being an international circle of solidarity in all countries in ‘promoting literature, defending freedom to write’.

PEN is held together by the aims and ethics of its Charter document. And one of the elements to be derived from our charter is our relationship between ‘identity’ and ‘nationality’.

How then do these two concepts relate to one another? Please allow me a very brief reflection on this matter.

We believe to begin with in the creative individual. PEN holds that all of us have the birthright to our mother tongue, to express ourselves in the language of our choice. PEN also believes that the creative individual by necessity will want to explore the concept of identity, and that the honest answer – in this maybe ultimately entirely open-ended quest – must be an individual one.

Thus, the individual himself or herself must always be the core value, even in a collective setting. And the important thing about your identity is that this ultimately must be defined by yourself – not by any collective! If you do not define yourself, then be sure someone else will always be willing to define you instead – and maybe for purposes beyond your wish and control.

To quote a colleague from the war-torn Balkans (poet Mirko Mirkovich from Croatia): “all great literature is national – and all nationalistic literature is rubbish”. Yes, we need pride in identity, but we also need our integrity and intellectual independence. And so we approach the classic definition of human rights: all rights you wish to claim for yourself, you must be willing to accord to every other person too.

Ours is not the solidarity of the collective herd - it is the solidarity of the concerned and caring individual, a solidarity with a fragile world and fragile civilisations, - and the solidarity that can provide comfort in the sometimes very lonely process of human creative writing.

Then, what better than gathering together to share poetry and the beauty and power of the written word. Thank you, dear Hosts, for working so hard to bring us together; we cannot but feel welcome, eagerly looking forward to the sessions ahead.

Thank you for inviting us!

Terry Carlbom

International Secretary, International PEN

