

"Recollections from the office."

A mini-essay dedicated to Jane Spender

The invitation to write a few words about Jane, on the occasion of her leaving some ten-fifteen years of duty with International PEN, was too tempting to put aside. There is, of course, one problem with the title. "Recollections from the office" is not exactly the kind of stuff that send the crowds stampeding along to the local bookshop, but then it is actually written for another, shall we say internal, usage. I have long longed to tell the membership what I really think of Jane.

Anyhow, a few words to begin with about the office – then four flights or some 88 steps above the rather insignificant-looking entrance of Charterhouse Buildings on Goswell Road in London. The first thing I asked for when I arrived as International Secretary was how to find the fire escape. I think Jane's reply might have been: "the hoist", the thing you stuck out of the window to haul up anything that didn't have room enough in the staircase. Probably with the addition: "it's out of order, of course"... Her sense of humour is keen!

Jane took over from Elisabeth Paterson, and what a great pair for the benefit of PEN these two personalities have been. Elisabeth was more or less alone when she joined my illustrious predecessor Alexandre Blokh, and the office was never really adequately staffed, but what an achievement between the two of them to keep an ever expanding PEN in one piece over the years. World Congresses were for long time two per year – imagine that! – but had been rationalised into annual occasions by the nineties.

I will maybe one day write a few words about the era of change that actually brought me to International PEN, notably the Guadalajara Congress in 1996. It must have been on one of those slightly turbulent occasions that Jane and I first met. Actually, if you are looking for specific details, always ask Jane!

I do not believe it is easy to imagine what a World Association of Writers is all about. Well, this is a good time to remind anyone interested that there are quite a few very good books around about PEN. Marjorie Watts, daughter of our Founder Amy Dawson Scott, published "P.E.N. – The early years" in 1971, and was careful about dots in between the capital letters. Quite a few of the national Centres have published books or booklets over the years, and one should always remind people about the benefit of back reading. History provides perspective.

Anyhow, Jane must have rapidly assimilated all this during the first period of assisting Elisabeth, for by the time I joined there was, together with impressively competent Sara Whyatt of the Writers in Prison division and her associates, a sense of mission which never seemed to fail. Coordinating writers is not the easiest of tasks, and there is some comfort looking back at our history in realising that it never has been.

One of our first tasks together was to underline the concept of a unified organisation with a unified mission. With traditions of assisting colleagues under threat or repression from the late twenties, WiPC was given a more specific format around 1962, when Thomas von Vegesack, the publisher from Stockholm, realised the necessity of professionalism and continuity in dealings with the ruling delinquents of the world.

WiPC then became a model for Amnesty, which branched off to become the successful organisation it now is, attending to the broader concept of 'prisoners of conscience'. We, on our part, decided to retain our identity as 'colleagues for colleagues'.

At this time, WiPC had had an influx of new blood forgetting the broader setting, and regarding PEN efforts for writers and journalists in jail across the world, in contradiction of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, to be our most important reason to exist. Pressure rose to be formally independent of the parent organisation. Together, Jane, Sara and I became convinced that togetherness was a better solution, and this has happily been reinforced over the years. 'Promoting literature, defending freedom to write' became our working slogan.

Ongoing discussions of this kind, very important for the vitality of an organisation, can at times reach heights of considerably sensitivity, both within the office and at congresses, seminars or annual Committee meetings. Jane has to my mind continuously been able to handle delicate office matters of this kind with diplomacy that has been extremely important for a unified framework, never forgetting to implant a firm sense of shared mission.

May I also interject a few words about our relations with UNESCO. They became a bit of a problem during the years Jane and I worked together, and one really had to pause and take a step back now and then not to lose perspective of what either we or UNESCO were all about. But what Alexandre Blokh so conscientiously had brought together, resulting in PEN attaining formal consultative status with UNESCO, was for us to uphold.

UNESCO is a very curious construct. Like many formal international organisations it has many masters – the governments of participating countries (the Permanent Representatives in Paris) – and far too few civil servants with snappy decision-making powers. Our office counterparts in UNESCO were invariably earnest, trying under an ever tightening economic purse to do as best they could for International PEN. The energy that International PEN poured into long-term planning documents, the nerve-racking uncertainty of their decision-making concerning applications on behalf of our Centres, conforming to sometimes capricious allocation desires, and on top of that an accounting system not designed for volunteer NGO's ! But what I am sure of is that when my temper may have shortened, Jane somehow always managed to extend hers as she spent countless telephone hours scratching forth rather meagre UNESCO contributions for extremely worthy PEN projects with a smile in her voice.

Our first years together were times of reorganisation. International PEN got an international Board (first called an Executive Committee). This was absolutely necessary for many reasons. The point is that when introduced it became very much a time-consuming activity for an already hard-working office. Jane had an uncanny ability to network with all, identify priorities, and organise meetings as if nothing else worried her. And ultimately, write Minutes allowing all of us participating to actually seem quite sensible. Boy, she did a lot of us some favours there! That same flair became very visible each time the Records of the Minutes of Congresses appeared, then with abbreviated versions of every speaker at the event. Small masterpieces of a delicate Art!

In time, members may forget that in 2001 our World Congress planned for September in Ohrid in Macedonia was fairly suddenly postponed for one year when the board considered the country unsafe for participants. I only hope PEN history will not forget the subsequent Replacement Congress held in London later that autumn. Imagine a World Congress suddenly

being organised by our small office at that notice! Apart from everything else, Jane unwittingly became the linchpin of this event. Coordinating whatever volunteers that could be roped in, this was by all standards a major success for the office, and should qualify for any PEN gold medal to be imagined.

Even at the best of times Congresses are miracles of coordination. Not many Centres are well off. (In fact, we must be one of the most remarkable shows of organisational solidarity around). So for every congress there will be a well-argued very credible pile of applications for travel and attendance support. I very soon realised that the only way to cope was to let Jane maximise resources by whipping together what might be available, and then let her dole it out according to organisational knowledge and previous experience. I can think of no better way to go about it. Providing handled by someone like Jane. Not many complaints when she finally arrived at her own distributive justice.

At times, some Centres veered off course to a considerable and now and then unacceptable extent. Prolonged and tedious negotiations, never allowed to breach the walls of office discretion, never distracted Jane from being unwaveringly fair even to the most exasperating of Members!

Not for office business alone do we owe Jane our gratitude. May I remind all of the absolutely marvellous job she has provided as editor of The International PEN Magazine. Look through the diversity in themes and contributions over the years which carry Jane's editorial imprint. Again working wonders with a budget that would be considered negligible by other professionals, she has brought appreciation and respect to International PEN.

Everyone who has ever been in touch with Jane and International PEN will realise what a gold nugget with a living heart it has had in Jane. She has personified the inner makings of a great organisation, with a working remit unlimited. Grace, talent and diplomacy combined with an actually irresponsibly large sense of responsibility: that's Jane.

One thing I might finally bring up. I do hope International PEN will take good care of its' archives and whatever photos that might go with it. I hope the new office will not forget to fill at least one bookshelf with a copy of all the books ever written about PEN, and continuously exhort the Centres to be considerate about national Centre archives too. Can someone please be appointed Chief Librarian and Head of Archives? May I propose Jane? She will certainly know what she is talking about.

Your admiring International Secretary of 98 – 04,

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Terry Carlbom