

**Notes of the Early History
of the International P.E.N. Club**
by Thomas von Vegesack

The founding of the P.E.N. Club was one of the many attempts made after the end of the First World War to unite European intellectuals. The P.E.N. Club, however, differs in one decisive respect from other associations. If one compares it, for example, with Clarte, Henri Barbusse's left-wing international alliance of intellectuals, it is surprising to see, what a large and complicated organization Clarte had, an organization that was doomed from the very outset never to function properly in practice. The P.E.N. Club, on the other hand, was an improvisation. A virtually unknown English woman novelist by the name of Catharine Amy Dawson-Scott had the idea of founding an evening club for writers. If similar clubs were founded in other European capitals, writers would know where to turn on their travels to meet fellow authors. More than that was not intended.

On 5 October 1921 the first dinner was held. Amongst those present one would have seen John Galsworthy, who had agreed to become the P. E.N. Club's first president. It may perhaps be surprising that Galsworthy of all people committed himself to the cause of the P. E.N. Club. Only a few weeks previously he had replied to a Swedish newspaper that had invited him to take part in a writers' peace congress, that in his eyes writers were not particularly suited to international collaboration.

According to Galsworthy, international competition and art had nothing to do with each other. For Galsworthy, however, the P.E.N. Club had no ideological or political objectives, and this absence of all such goals certainly accounted for the success of the organization. 1923, When the P.E.N. Club held its first international congress in London, centres were already in existence in eleven different countries. A year later the figure had risen to eighteen.

But it was not long before political differences of opinion found their way into the P.E.N. organization. One can see the decade of Galsworthy's presidency as a protracted battle against the ingress of politics into the club. It was a battle for what, in the long run, was to prove a lost cause.

Even during the first congress, the oppositions became apparent. The Belgian delegates refused to participate, if the German writers, with Gerhart Hauptmann as their head, were invited. The reason for this was Hauptmann's behaviour during the war. Romain Rolland, who had sharply criticized Hauptmann's chauvinistic remarks in 1914, published in open letter in the journal Europe, in which he attacked the Belgian writers. If intellectual collaboration was only to be possible after all crimes had been stoned, not a single stone would be left of Europe, Rolland wrote.

Rolland had been elected honorary president of the English club. This was treated with the utmost disapproval by the French, who could scarcely forget Rolland's anti-patriotic line

during the war. Anatole France, the president of the French organization, refused to accept Rolland as a member.

The political antagonisms came out into the open, when in the spring of 1926 the P.E.N. Club held its fourth congress in Berlin. It was the first international congress of any importance to be held in Berlin since the war, and for that reason it attracted a great deal of attention. On the day the congress was due to begin, the magazine *Die literarische Welt* published a sharp attack on the P.E.N. Club. A large number of young writers, with Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, Robert Musil, Joseph Roth, Ernst Toller and Kurt Tucholsky at their head, protested against the claims of the German P.E.N. Club to represent German literature. I believe the deliberations of the Berlin P.E.N. Club will stand under the sign of the banquet, Bertolt Brecht wrote. I have not even considered what those old people might achieve. They have so deliberately excluded anything youthful, that this congress, so far as the German group is concerned at least, is absolutely and hopelessly superfluous, indeed harmful.

John Galsworthy was upset at the massive criticism on the part of the younger generation of German authors. In his book on Galsworthy, Hermon Ould, the secretary of the International P.E.N. Club, describes a meeting between the president and three young German writers, Bright, Toller and Arnolt Bronnen.

It was, Ould says, considered in retrospect, an amusing occasion, Galsworthy spoke practically no German; mine was very much less good then even, than it is now. Of the Germans only Toller spoke English at all and he with no great ease - I remember how frequently he assured us that the situation was <penible>, which indeed it was. Toller was soon to play a central role in the P. E.N. organization. It was he in the first instance who pleaded for a politicization of P.E.N. activities. After the congress of 1930 in Warsaw, - the first in which he participated, - he commented: The idea of the P.E.N. Club will be exhausted, if one is unable to give it new impulses, It is an illusion to believe one can confer on a plane removed from politics and social questions. In a letter to Galsworthy Ould quotes Toller's remark and adds that he will come to represent a problem for the organization. Ould is shocked by Toller's attempt to adopt the Russian authors into the P.E.N. Club.

As early as 1923 Boris Pilnyak, who was living in London at the time, had attempted to found a club for Russian writers. Pilnyak believed that such a club could include authors from Soviet Russia as well as those living in exile. It soon became evident, however, that none of the partners was interested in the attempt. Toller himself had approached the Minister of Culture, Anatoly Lunacharsky, directly. The suggestion roused the interest of the Russian authorities, and Bela Illes, the president of the International Organization of Revolutionary Writers let it be known that they were prepared to send a delegation to the P.E.N. Congress in Amsterdam in 1930.

Horried, Galsworthy sent a hasty reply that the Russian writers would be welcome in the P.E.N. Club as soon as they had founded their own centre; but that one had no intention of accepting any particular left wing faction within the organization.

The last meeting attended by Galsworthy was held in Budapest in 1932, He opened the session with a Five-point declaration. It can be regarded as a summary of the P.E.N. charter, which he himself had helped to draw up some years previously.

- * The PEN stand for Literature in the sense of Art (not Journalism, nor Propaganda) and for the diffusion of Literature as art from country to country.
- * The PEN stands for hospitable friendliness between writers, in their own countries, and with the writers of all other countries.
- * The PEN. stands for the principle that its members shall do and write nothing to promote war.
- * The PEN. stands for humane conduct.
- * Such words as nationalist, internationalist, democratic, aristocratic, imperialistic, anti-imperialistic, bourgeois, revolutionary, or any other words with definite political significance should not be used in connection with the PEN.; for the PEN. has nothing whatever to do with State or Party politics, and cannot be used to serve State or Party interests or conflicts.

At the congress in Dubrovnik the PEN. delegates already had reason to recall Galsworthy's words. This meeting was attended by German PEN delegation that only a few months previously had ejected all Jewish and Communist members and had elected a new committee, the first official act of which was to telegram a declaration of loyalty to Hitler. The German club's decision to send delegates to Dubrovnik was not undisputed.

In a newspaper article the writer Will Vesper attacked this decision and wrote, We can expect nothing but embarrassments from this journey.

The German club did not lack support, however. After its reorganization, it had received messages of sympathy from P.E.N. Club members in Italy, Austria and Switzerland. Letters of good will had been sent even by English members, the German P.E.N. committee revealed at a meeting on 20th May.

On their way to Dubrovnik the Germans observed that many delegates greeted their German colleagues with cordiality. On the eve of the congress the Germans were able to arrange a meeting with some of the most important representatives present there. As was reported back to Berlin, H.G.Wells accepted the proposal not to mention the burning of books and the persecution of radical and Jewish writers, and contented himself with the acceptance of a generally worded resolution by the congress, a resolution that made reference to the importance of freedom to state one's opinion, without special mention being made of Germany. One Belgian delegate did not stick to this agreement, however. In the names of his own centre and those of a series of other clubs, he put forward a much more biting worded resolution. Behind the scenes the German delegates. with the aid of Jules Romains and others, tried to have this resolution" watered down. The Germans agreed to accept the new version on condition that it was adopted without discussion. Wells rejected this condition. However. In his opinion, the organization would be making itself a laughing stock, if it did not allow a discussion of the extremely critical situation in Germany.

Hermon Ould was the first person to speak. He asked the German delegation two direct questions. Had the German P.E.N. Club protested against the persecution of intellectuals and had there been any reaction to the burning of books? Was it true that letters had been sent to members telling them that persons holding Communist or left-wing extremist views could no longer consider themselves members of the club? When Ernst Toller, who had been personally invited by the Yugoslavs, requested to speak, the German delegation left the room. A number

of Austrian, Dutch and Swiss delegates followed their example. "Such a thing would never have happened under Galsworthy," the Dutch delegate shouted.

The German club was not excluded in Dubrovnik. On its return to Berlin it held a meeting to discuss the new situation. All those present were agreed on continued membership of the organization. In the autumn a meeting of the international committee was convened in London. When it again called on the German delegates to account for events in their country, the German representatives informed the committee that their club had decided to leave the organization.

The final assembly at which the German P.E.N. Club participated was held in January 1934. At that meeting a decision was taken to form a new international organization of nationally minded writers. Hanns Johst was prepared to accept the presidency of the new organization. Gottfried Benn assumed the office of vice-president.

The association of national authors tried to recruit members amongst the P.E.N. delegates who had supported the German representatives in Dubrovnik. But if the Germans believed the Swiss or the Italian P.E.N. Centres might be prepared to change organizations, they were mistaken.

In Vienna these events did ultimately lead to a division of the club, however. When the leadership determined to send a letter of protest to Berlin, on account of the attacks on intellectuals, no less than a quarter of the members resigned from the club. For many of them the decisive factor was not sympathy for the Hitler regime; they rightly feared that they might be excluded from the German book market.

Wells was to remain president of the P.E.N. Club for only a short time. At the Barcelona Congress in May 1935 he was persuaded to remain in office for a further year; but he declared that he no longer thought it possible to keep the P.E.N. Club out of international politics. Nor was he successful in his attempts to have Russian writers adopted into the organization. At times, Wells remarked, one had the impression that it was the special task of P.E.N. to combat reactionary forces; but that was a mistake. It was the responsibility of the P.E.N. Club to fight for freedom of opinion, regardless whether the threat came from left or right. And he added: "Today liberty is threatened more from the Left than from the Right, the Left being more dangerous, because its theories are more subtle and more to the taste of the younger generation.

As successor to Wells the English P.E.N. secretariat favoured the Czech author Karel Capek as president. But Wells had made contact on his own with the French writer Jules Romains, and when Capek heard of this he withdrew his own candidacy.

Jules Romains was elected to the office of president of the international organization at the congress in Buenos Aires in the autumn of 1936.

The election was a controversial one. Romains had been sharply attacked by the extreme left wing, since he had maintained friendly contacts with the German youth movement, which was National Socialist inspired. It would be wrong to call Jules Romains a reactionary, however.

He was more of an opportunist in his desire to please everyone. But it was an unfortunate turn of events for the P.E.N. organization to acquire a president of his stamp for the difficult years ahead. Furthermore, Jules Romains's relations to the English P.E.N. leadership had been

on a bad footing for some time. As early as the 1920s he had suggested that the P.E.N. Club should transfer its headquarters to Paris.

In September 1939 the annual P.E.N. congress was due to be held in Stockholm. At the last minute the Swedish Club decided to call off the meeting. Many foreign guests had already arrived, and H.G. Wells made a last-minute attempt to persuade the Swedes to change their mind. It was the wish of Wells and his English friends that the P.E.N. organization should tell the world once more that the intellectuals were not prepared to take part in another World War. This stance did not correspond at all with that of Jules Romains, who had taken it upon himself to issue a declaration, calling upon all P.E.N. members to support the endeavours of their respective governments to defend democracy against the threat with which it was faced.

When the German troops marched into France, Jules Romains fled via Spain and Portugal to the USA. In New York he took the initiative of founding a European P.E.N. Club in Exile. The international secretariat in London sensed a threat to itself in this. Without consulting the international president beforehand, a congress was convened in London in the summer of 1941, at which Jules Romains was removed from office. From the outset one had reckoned on making H.G. Wells president of the international organization again. But he was prepared to accept only on one condition: namely, that he should have three vice-presidents to support him. Initially Thornton Wilder, Thomas Mann and Jacques Maritain expressed their readiness to stand for office. Mann and Maritain withdrew their candidacies, however, on learning that the meeting in London had expressed criticism of Jules Romains. After the conclusion of the London congress, Hermon Ould appointed two other candidates to these positions on his own responsibility. For this reason one can hardly claim that the P. E. N. Club had a formally elected leadership in the legal sense of that term, during those years.

The P.E.N. Club that resumed its activities after the war was in many respects a different organization from the one that had existed in the years between the two World Wars. The difference manifested itself quite clearly when the various P.E.N. centres gathered for the postponed congress in Stockholm in the summer of 1946. A large part of the discussion was taken up with the politically explosive question, how one should deal with those writers who had collaborated with the Nazis. A Dutch suggestion that the various clubs should draw up and exchange blacklists of collaborators gained a majority, although Hermon Ould pointed out in a contribution full of pathos that such a step would be contrary to all P.E.N. principles.

In Stockholm the P. E.N. Club finally acquired a tighter organization. Up to then it had been run by an international committee that met from time to time in London, where it was rare for all the members to be present at one time. A motion was passed to form an executive committee, to which all P.E.N. centres would be able to send delegates. Whereas the P.E.N. Club had been run by its president prior to the Second World War, power now devolved upon the secretariat and the executive committee.

The major question after the war concerned the stance that should be adopted towards the German writers. At the Zurich Congress in 1947 the problem was resolved. Thomas Mann was amongst those who were of the opinion that one should entrust the German authors with the founding of a new club. But from those countries that had previously been occupied by the Germans there were many voices against this proposal. The Belgian writer Louis Pierard recalled the way the German question had been discussed after the First World War. At that

time there had also been a wish to adopt Germany into the organization, and people had referred to "reliable intellectuals such as Gerhart Hauptmann. But how had these reliable intellectuals behaved during the Hitler era? The same Hauptmann who had been described as a model of republican virtues, had turned out to be an opportunist and coward. RThis time we should be more cautious. Let us wait a year or two. Other writers such as the Frenchman Vercors were less severe. Vercors said that a German club would be conceivable, provided it was placed under the control of an international commission.

The commission was expanded by members from countries that had been occupied by German troops. German literature was represented by the German P.E.N. Club in Exile and by those writers who had remained in Germany.

The new German P.E.N. Club was founded at a meeting in Gottingen in the autumn of 1948. It was decided to elect no less than three chairmen, - Hermann Friedmann, Erich Kastner and Johannes R. Becher. The election of the last of these three was a controversial issue. Prior to the foundation of the German Democratic Republic Becher had already held a number of official positions, and during the Cold War, the central stage of which was to be Germany over the following years, the conflicts within the German P.E.N. Club were concentrated about his person. In 1951 three German P.E.N. Club members, with Theodor Plievier at their head, demanded the dismissal of Becher. Becher was re-elected, however, at the annual general meeting of the club. The West German members, who formed the largest group at the meeting, decided to leave the club and to found one of their own. The large role played by politics within the organization. At first, when the problem was discussed at a meeting of the international executive committee in the spring of 1952, the West German club was refused recognition. A French delegate remarked ironically that he had heard of minorities in revolt, but the fact that a majority could feel itself persecuted was something new.

In the autumn of the same year both German clubs were accorded recognition after all. The centre controlled by the East Germans had members in both German states for a time. The deteriorating international climate forced the P.E.N. organization to take a more active political line against those states that suppressed freedom of expression. The fact that the Club drew attention to authors who were in prison on account of the works they had published was nothing new in the history of the organization. As early as March 1924 the French P.E.N. Club had written to the leadership in London suggesting that the French and English clubs should make a joint protest against the fact that the Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera had banished the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno to a remote island. The English replied that this was a political problem and could therefore not be dealt with by the P. E.N. Club. At the same time French members had also suggested the setting up of a special committee to draw attention to cases of this kind. The English succeeded in deferring the issue. Only 36 years later was it possible to realize the French idea. The initiative came on this occasion from the Swiss P.E.N. Club. The Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) began its work in April 1960. The committee comprised three members, David Carver (who had succeeded Hermon Ould as secretary to the international organization), Storm Jameson of the English P.E.N. Club, and Victor van Vriesland from the Dutch club. Not long afterwards amnesty international was founded, partly in the mould of WiPC.

Whereas attacks on freedom of expression were relatively rare in the years between the two World Wars, after the Second World War they became increasingly frequent. In the long run mere protests were not enough. In January 1971 a number of Dutch P.E.N. members took the initiative of setting up a special fund to help persecuted writers and their families. Heinrich Boll, who happened to be international president in that year, handed over part of his Nobel Prize money to the fund.

Today the P. E.N. Club is the sole existing international association of writers. It has outlived all other models of this kind, from Clarte to COMES. The explanation for this is to be found in its independence. In contrast to most other attempts to unite the writers of the world, the P.E.N. Club has always refused to accept any support from political parties or organs, or state. The P.E.N. Club has never acted as anything other than the representative of its members. In those cases where political issues were touched upon at P.E.N. congresses, this was not the expression of any wish on the part of the organization itself to wield political influence, but because politics had directly threatened freedom of expression, without which the activities of the P.E.N. Club would be meaning- less. In this respect Galsworthy's determination to preserve the unpolitical character of the P.E.N. Club is still of significance today.

Translated by Peter Green