

Sarajevo speech 2002

Dr. Terry Carlbom, International Secretary, International PEN
(Bosnian PEN Oct/Nov 2002)

Dear Hosts, distinguished guests and participants,

Yesterday, the President of Bosnian PEN Zdenko Lesic showed me the document the Founding Members of Bosnian PEN signed ten years ago, on October 31, 1992. That proclamation is of great historic value, and is as relevant today as the day it was written.

I would like to extend my grateful thanks to Bosnian PEN for inviting me to celebrate the founding of Bosnian PEN with you. Bosnian PEN is a young Centre. It is also a very important one. Please make sure that it always remains a haven for Modernity and Common Sense. Allow me to expand on this a moment.

International PEN itself was founded, as you know, in 1921, in the aftermath of the Great War. It was founded because a set of writers in London wanted to create a space free from nationalism, where writers of all countries could freely come together and discuss issues of literature and common interest. Where they could be proud of their own language and traditions as they pursued the never-ending human quest for identity. And in the process making quite sure never to be called on to represent collectives such as governments, regimes, or political movements. In short, a national PEN club was a meeting place where they could be nobody but themselves as creative individuals.

But when Mussolini started exiling journalists, Hitler burnt books, and Franco strangled poets, International PEN rose as best it could to the defence of its colleagues.

Today, International PEN is the oldest of global literary organisations. We are in Formal Consultative Relations with UNESCO. We consist of 127 autonomous Centres in over 90 countries. Our aims today, as a modern NGO, are “to promote literature, and defend freedom to write”. And we wish to offer colleagues anywhere the knowledge that outside of their own country and community, there is a circle of solidarity in support of the creative individual who finds himself or herself under political repression! Our Standing Committee for Writers in Prison actually preceded Amnesty and other NGO’s for Human Rights, with whom we today freely cooperate, supported also by overlapping UNESCO ideals.

Today, our Members include both writers and journalists, and several other categories too. We are bound together by a common Charter, especially concerned with the ethics of free speech, - the self-imposed restraints necessary for the common good in a decent society.

Today, with the themes of this meeting concerned with literature and quality of civil society, I would like to tell you of some recent experiences of travelling in Europe. Nothing out of the ordinary – but maybe with a few conclusions that could make a contribution to our common points of discussion.

In June I visited Minsk. No-one can help noticing that past history is throwing long dark shadows

over that society. Hampered by politically promoted, introvert pan-slavic ideals, and attitudes of isolation, we see a regime not interested in free individuals or freedom of expression, but one where yesterdays mentalities are cultivated – to the advantage of the regime, maybe, but to the detriment of free entrepreneurs, free markets and free speech - and of the personal security of journalists and writers. It has become a country marching backwards into the future. It is a country seemingly unable to modernise. And in not doing so, it will inevitably trail, and be left behind.

I have, as all of us, been thoroughly sickened and disgusted by the waves of nationalism that have swept over South-East Europe during the nineties and which still influence many Balkan societies. Sarajevo is indeed a most tragic example of a wounded city. Waves of thoughtless, single-minded nationalism that have been made political tools of ruling elites, fostering the destruction of civil, age-old multiethnic society, and ultimately ending up in slaughter and murder. What chance do critical voices stand in these environments? And why must we insist that the quality itself of civil society does matter, and yesterday's mentalities must be replaced?

Because ours is the choice. The choice between Closed-minded societies and Open-minded Societies. The former, history shows us, have no long-term future. The latter, the Open-minded society, is on the other hand a society which accepts philosopher Karl Popper's careful, undramatic view that the best future is created by open-ended dialogue. One where, to quote John Stuart Mill, free speech is not a minor ailment grudgingly to be accepted, but the very precondition of development and welfare – and Modernity.

I do believe that a careful examination of the concept of Modernity will disclose that a “good” society is upheld by values that are seldom cultivated by the free market. This will be nothing new to you, and certainly something we have to construct and protect also in Western societies. The point is the link to Modernity and Development. A healthy and sustainable Welfare State cannot be created or upheld without Freedom of Speech and a variety of voices. Remembering, in a society which truly embraces Modernity, that variety is always more important than those heard loudest.

Culture is something cultivated; the Open-minded society itself depends on alternative voices both being available, and being made available. –Quite obviously these will also by necessity include the untamed, but also the independently critical and also the philosophically self-critical or ‘reflexive’. And these qualities are tied to the very core of the concept of the Welfare state; which can never be allowed to be material only, - it must also cultivate the qualities of Openness and the manifold!

Awareness of these elements is vital. This is why it is so important to make the choice – maybe especially so in the Balkan countries of today; the choice between Minsk and Modernity. The former is grim and offers tradition with threatening dimensions. The latter may well be uncertain – but, if consciously embracing the idea of creative diversity in an open society, at least it offers an intellectually honourable chance of a decent future for our societies.

‘ A Modern society’ is a civil society which by necessity is multi-ethnic and polyphonic. A Bosnian PEN Centre which obviously upholds these ideals is an invaluable contribution to the development of civil society in this part of the world. Remain true to the values of Modernity and

the ethics of our Charter, and you will find a circle of solidarity not only of moral support, but also one which offers an international platform for Bosnian culture to reach abroad.

I offer my warmest greetings from International PEN, and well-wishes for the future, as Bosnian PEN now celebrates its anniversary. I am proud to be with you.

Thank you.