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I met Arthur Miller only a few times, once sitting with him at a dinner in New York and another time at English PEN's Writers' Day in London, where he arrived having forgotten his talk and improvised a brilliant presentation. He was one of the grand writers in PEN. I was of a younger generation, inspired by his work and leadership, but not personally connected to him, except that we were both Americans.

When, as Chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison

Committee in the mid-1990s, I asked him for a video message for a Freedom of Expression conference on behalf of imprisoned writers in Turkey, he obliged quickly. A decade earlier he and Harold Pinter had travelled to Turkey for International PEN, and that trip still resonated with writers and officials there.

Arthur Miller served as President of International PEN from 1965 to 1969 in the years of the Cold War and incipient détente. His imagination quickly grasped the possibilities of this worldwide association of writers dedicated to the free transmission of ideas and literature among nations. His imagination helped shape those possibilities. Miller knew little about the organisation when PEN's General Secretary David Carver first visited him in Paris in 1965 to propose he take on the presidency at a time when PEN was straining under the ideological schisms of the Cold War. Because Miller was a writer of international reputation and because he'd taken a stand in the face of the US House Un-American Activities Committee, refusing to confirm names of writers suspected of ties to the Communist Party, Miller would have the support of writers from both the West and the East, Carver said. In 1965 PEN had centres in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia as well as in most of Western Europe and in the Americas, Asia and Africa.

Carver told Miller that PEN was trying to save lives, sending telegrams and letters on behalf of writers persecuted for their political views at a time when Amnesty and other human rights organisations were just beginning. In 1937 PEN had won the release of novelist Arthur Koestler who faced execution in Spain, and in 1956 PEN had been successful in getting the Hungarian government to release and allow a number of imprisoned writers to leave the country after the Russians invaded. PEN was now collecting information and publicising cases of other writers, particularly those behind the Iron Curtain.

Miller himself would send a letter the following year to Nigeria on behalf of a playwright whose name he barely knew. Wole Soyinka was slated for immediate execution by General Gowon during the civil war with Biafra, but when Gowon received Miller's letter, hand-carried by a businessman, he is said to have asked if Miller was the man who'd married Marilyn Monroe and, when assured that he was, Gowon released Soyinka, who left the country, went on writing and subsequently won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Years later Miller observed in a talk at an American PEN dinner,

> I've never been able to imagine how realistic an idea PEN was to the writers who started it after World War I. These founding fathers were greatly famous writers like George Bernard Shaw, Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, who had no need of an organisation to protect them; they were known and revered wherever books were read. But successful as they were, they were also moved by the millions of squandered lives in the recent war, and resolved to do what they could to prevent a repetition. The idea was to try to unite the intellectuals of Europe in an organisation, a fellowship is probably a better word, around the demand for unfettered communication and publishing, so that super-nationalism might be stopped in its tracks by criticism from abroad. The Bolsheviks were already winning in Russia, and hardly more than a decade later Hitler was in power in Germany, and that was that.

But like his idealistic predecessors, Miller saw the possibility that dialogue and exchanges among writers might break through isolation, especially for Soviet writers. At the International PEN Congress in Bled, Yugoslavia, in 1965, the Soviets sent observers for the first time. By the end of that Congress, presided over by Miller, the Soviet writers wanted to engage with PEN. 'Almost despite myself I began feeling a certain enthusiasm for the idea of international solidarity among writers, feeble as its present expression seemed,' Miller wrote in his autobiography *Timebends* '. . . I knew that PEN could be far more than a mere gesture of goodwill.'

Thirty years later, in a letter to a Belgrade journalist whose friends and newspaper were under constant assault by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia, Miller recalled that it was the murder of writers and journalists that most affected him since these were the eyes and ears of the people, and democracy depended on a well-informed citizenry. He felt particular sympathy for those who tried to function in the face of nationalism and tribalism in the Balkans, and insisted on the need for the writer to resist those who saw art as serving only political and partisan ends.

The path towards this goal, and certainly the goal of détente in the mid-1960s was not a straight one, however, for Miller or for

PEN. At the International PEN Congress in New York in 1966, the Soviet Writers' Union had intended to send observers, but cancelled at the last minute, most likely because of criticism over recent imprisonments of writers in the Soviet Union and the presence of Soviet dissidents at the Congress. Writers from the other Eastern bloc countries did attend.

At that New York Congress Arthur Miller, the first (and to date only) American president of International PEN, presided over more than 500 writers, the largest gathering ever of American and foreign writers. 'The Writer as Independent Spirit' set the theme of the Congress as writers from a wide political spectrum, especially throughout Latin America, gathered in official and unofficial forums. Members of the American Center had managed to get the US ban on 'political undesirables' lowered, thus allowing writers like Pablo Neruda, the poet and Chilean Communist, into the United States.

In his opening address Miller said, 'None of us comes here as a representative of his country. None of us is obliged to speak here as an apologist for his culture or his political system.' PEN is 'a neutral ground, a kind of sanctuary', where reality isn't defined by politics and its divisiveness but by 'the stubborn, underlying sameness of the human spirit whatever the variety of forms in which it is expressed'.

Miller recalled in his autobiography that he felt uplifted by the New York Congress where 'with amazing unanimity writers of the most conflicting political commitments refused to reduce to polemics what turned out to be really informative discussions about the conditions of writers'. By the end of the 1966 Congress Miller was convinced that PEN had to be the conscience of the world writing community. In his closing speech he called on the delegates to seek out what was similar among them and to isolate what separated them, to resolve their differences and to set aside what they couldn't resolve. At the Congress he said Soviet writers were welcome to join PEN as soon as they were prepared to conform to its rules, which insisted upon freedom of expression and publication. In response, the Union of Soviet Writers asserted, 'Attempts to speak to Soviet writers in such a tone and to confront Soviet writers with one-sided conditions are foolish and fruitless.'

Thus the stage was set. In 1967 Arthur Miller travelled to Moscow to meet with the head of the Union of Soviet Writers. By

that time he had sent many wires and letters protesting the arrests of writers in Russia and the Balkans; he'd managed to get exit visas for a few writers, and he understood the distance between the practices of the Soviet government and the demands of PEN's charter. From his friendship with other Soviet writers, however, he also understood that PEN provided them with an opening to the West, the possibility of translation and also of protection for freedom of expression.

In Moscow he met with Alexi Surkov, the head of the Writers' Union, whom he had met earlier at the Bled Congress. He recounts the meeting in his autobiography:

> At last Surkov said flatly, 'Soviet writers want to join PEN' . . .
>
> 'I couldn't be happier,' I said. 'We would welcome you in PEN.'
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> 'We have one problem,' Surkov said, 'but it can be resolved easily.'
>
> 'What is the problem?'
>
> 'The PEN Constitution . . .'

The exchange continued but it soon became clear that the Charter of PEN – which obliged its members to commit to the principles of freedom of expression and to oppose censorship at home and abroad – was not going to fold easily into nor paper over the gulf between systems, at least not for this group of writers at this time. It would take twenty more years before the first Russian centre was admitted into PEN in 1988. In those intervening years PEN members maintained contact with Soviet writers, however, both as literary colleagues and also as advocates on their behalf when they were imprisoned.

Arthur Miller presided over two more PEN Congresses in the Ivory Coast in 1967 and in Menton, France, in 1969. He extended PEN's work in Africa and Latin America, but the main watch of his presidency remained on the frontier for which David Carver recruited him, pacing along the wall between the East and West of Europe, a lone American, who had himself once been attracted to the ideas of Socialism and Communism as his colleagues in Czechoslovakia and other countries had been, but who had rejected the totalitarian grip. As an artist Arthur Miller was committed to the freedom of the individual conscience and as an American he was

moved by 'the miraculous rationalism of the American Bill of Rights'.

'So this was my function,' he reflected years later in his autobiography,

> to be fair, to keep the peace, and to persist in apolitically advancing the political concepts of liberty of expression and the independent author. The great thing was that these were the unspoken longings of most of those present, no matter where they came from. . . . Maybe my very remoteness as an American was my value here . . . I was a stranger to their old feuds. They were first to grasp this, but I caught on at last.

Since Arthur Miller's presidency the Berlin Wall has fallen, the Iron Curtain has lifted, debate and discussion have opened around the globe, and PEN has grown in every region, almost doubling in size, now with 141 centres in 99 countries. At a dinner in New York in April 2001, Arthur Miller told an audience of writers:

> That it [PEN] is still around after three quarters of a century when it has no army, no navy or air force, no political rewards or threats of punishment, is possibly a triumph of illusion over reality, the illusion that hope is rational in this world . . . [W]ith all its flounderings and failings and mistaken acts, it is still, I think, a fellowship moved by the hope that one day the work it tries and often manages to do will no longer be necessary. Needless to add, we shall need extraordinarily long lives to see that noble day. Meanwhile we have PEN, this fellowship bequeathed to us by several generations of writers for whom their own success and fame were simply not enough.