

A Memory

by Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

Thirty years ago in January, 1986 at International PEN's Congress in New York City, the Women Writers Committee was first conceived, though it didn't officially become a standing committee of PEN until 1991.

Here is my memory of my own participation. I was at the Congress as a member of PEN Los Angeles Center (currently PEN USA); we had been registered along with the foreign delegates. I was a fairly new member of PEN and knew very few of the writers there. I sat through panel after panel and grew increasingly uncomfortable because the speakers were almost all male. I mentioned that to an editor friend who wasn't at the Congress, and she said, "You should say something." I thought, "Yeah, sure, I'm going to stand up and say something in front of all those writers."

The next day I was sitting in the chandeliered grand ballroom of the hotel about to listen to another all-male panel and muttered to the person next to me, "Where are the women?" My memory is that I was sitting behind Toni Morrison, who said, "You should say something." Is that memory true? Did Toni Morrison, one of the writers I most admired, really tell me to say something? It's possible my memory has embellished that, but what is not embellished is that I did say something, prompted by the following statement from a panelist. "Since the 19th century, rationality has been the sole criterion for citizenship in the United States." He then went on to discuss whatever the panel was about. The theme of the Congress was "The Writers' Imagination and the Imagination of the State," a controversial topic since many writers argued that the state had no imagination.

At the question and answer period, I could sit still no longer. I rose and said something to the effect, "I beg to differ, in the 19th century rationality was the sole criterion for citizenship only if you were white and male....But what is also bothering me at this Congress is the lack of women on the panels. Where are the women writers?"

Then I sat down. Part of me thought, "I can't believe you just did that. Well, at least you said what was on your mind," I told myself. Little did I realize that it was on many women's minds at the Congress, and once the question was asked, those women writers who did know each other, including Grace Paley and others, mobilized.

A meeting was called. I was asked, along with two other women writers, to take down the women's protest statement. The only picture of the PEN Congress on the front page of *The New York Times* was of that women's meeting. In the foreground was the executive director of American PEN in a debate with Betty Freidan. In the background at the table taking down the statement of the women was Meredith Tax, one of the founders of PEN's Women Writers Committee, myself and another writer.

Norman Mailer, president of the host PEN American Center, helped the cause of the women when he tried to explain the absence of women. He said that more women had been invited but hadn't come, then he added that the organizers had wanted writers AND intellectuals, and there were not that many women intellectuals. God bless Margaret Atwood, who I still remember being witty and blistering in her response on behalf of the women.



*Foreground: left – Karen Kennerly,
Executive Director of American PEN
Center, right – Betty Friedan,
Background: (L. to R) Stary Krueger,
Joanne Lzedom-Ackerman, Meredith Tax.*

After that New York meeting, I returned to Los Angeles with considerably more writer friends in New York. A few years later I become president of PEN Los Angeles Centre, (whose name had changed to PEN USA West) and Meredith Tax, Grace Paley and other women rallied from countries around the globe, set about organizing the Women Writers Committee to bring the voice and spirit of women writers into higher profile in PEN, most of whose forums at the time were largely male. We met at the intervening Congresses, and finally at the PEN Congress in Vienna in 1991 the Women Writers Committee was born as a standing committee of International PEN. This year International PEN's Women Writers Committee celebrates its 25th anniversary.