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Writers Behind Bars: PEN Writers in Prison

by Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

One of the first ex-prisoners I met when I took over as Chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee was a journalist from the Maldives. He had come to London, as many ex-prisoners did, to be treated for the torture he endured in prison. He had been sentenced to two years for criticizing the government.

"I sat for forty days in solitary confinement," he said. "I became an object... Next I was handcuffed to a generator outside, not allowed to wash, with only a bucket for a toilet... I was chained outside in the rain during monsoon season." He'd never heard of PEN, but while imprisoned he received a book from English PEN. That book inspired him to start a book of his own in prison, and it encouraged him that he was not alone.

At the same time, another case began to unfold in Bangladesh. A Muslim, Taslima Nasrin, had a death threat issued against her from a local mullah. The previous year, Nasrin had written a novel about a Hindu family attacked by Muslim extremists during religious unrest. At first, the government offered her protection, but as the case escalated and local pressure intensified, the government brought charges of blasphemy against her. Thousands marched in the streets of Dhaka calling for her hanging. Snake charmers threatened to release 10,000 poisonous snakes if she was not executed. Taslima went into hiding. PEN members—including American, English, French, German, Canadian, and Swedish advocates—lobbied their governments. Finally, a member of Swedish PEN flew to Dhaka where Taslima went quickly before a court, was granted bail, and then was flown out in the middle of the night to Stockholm.

Governments have been imprisoning writers probably since the beginning of the written word and certainly throughout this century. What is unique to the latter half of the 20th century is the sustained, organized and global protest against such treatment. At the end of World War I, after the loss of half a generation, writers in London founded the organization PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists). Early members included John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, and its founder Catherine Dawson Scott, better known as Sappho. They united under a charter which declared: "Literature, national though it be in origin, knows no frontiers, and should remain common currency between nations in spite of political or international upheavals... In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion." The members of PEN pledged to "at all times use what influence they have in favor of good understanding and mutual respect between nations; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class, and national hatreds, and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world."

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

The idea and organization quickly captured the imagination of writers throughout Europe and in America. In 1922, the American Center of PEN was founded in New York. In the 1950s, a second U.S. Center was founded in Los Angeles. Today there are over 131 centers of PEN in 94 countries with the International PEN office located in London. Though initially founded to

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connect writers to each other and to provide hospitality to fellow writers who were traveling to each other's countries, PEN began to work for writers who found themselves in trouble with governments because of their ideas. In 1937, PEN sent a telegram on behalf of poet Frederico Garcia Lorca, who was captured at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Lorca was shot without trial by the Nationalists before the telegram arrived. However, when Arthur Koestler was arrested shortly after Lorca in Spain and condemned to death, the protest of PEN members and others on his behalf resulted in his release. In 1960 PEN founded a standing committee called the Writers in Prison Committee to allow the ever-growing organization to work systematically on such cases. When Amnesty International was founded a year later, the founders in London consulted with PEN to learn how the Writers in Prison Committee was organized and how PEN did its work.

In 1996, International PEN celebrated its 75th anniversary. Founded almost 25 years before the United Nations, which recently celebrated its first half century, International PEN was established on the ideal that literature and ideas should not be bounded or restricted by national borders, political systems or political ideologies. This ideal, crafted in the PEN Charter, was among the intellectual precursors to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a declaration 48 countries voted for in the U.N. in 1948, a declaration which undergirds the work of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee. Article 19 states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Writers are put in prison, kidnapped, and even killed because of their words and the expression of their ideas in countries all over the world.

The realization of this right in the practice of governments has been less than ideal. In fact, those governments who voted in support of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—including today's democracies such as Turkey, Peru, and Ethiopia—still imprison writers. The original signatories also include today's totalitarian regimes of China and Myanmar (Burma), where the governments now argue that the human rights are not necessarily universal but relative. They claim that what the government perceives as good for the whole of society supersedes the rights of the individual in society. While the concept of a universal right may not have penetrated the mechanisms of all states, the invocation of the universal right to free expression remains one of the essential tools with which PEN and other organizations apply pressure and insert a wedge into the conscience of nations. Governments have all the mechanisms of the state to employ against the dissident writer. PEN has the slender arrows of ideals with which to defend the writer, the same ideals nations recognized a half century ago when they acknowledged the existence of universal human rights.

Today, International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee network includes writers active in 50 centers around the world connected to imprisoned writers in more than 100 countries. It includes a member in the Unites States writing in Portuguese to an imprisoned writer in Indonesia, a member of Ghana PEN writing to and on behalf of an imprisoned writer in Peru, Polish members corresponding with and for an imprisoned Vietnamese writer, Mexican members working on behalf of imprisoned Turkish writers, Slovak writers working for Chinese writers in prison, an English PEN member in long term correspondence with an imprisoned South Korean writer, Canadian writers working on behalf of imprisoned Nigerian writers, Danish writers on behalf of a writer from Yemen, Swedish writers on behalf of a Kenyan writer, etc. The Writers in Prison Committee is an interlocking geographic network of individuals who, through their work, have committed to the premise that the fate of a colleague halfway around the globe matters and is connected to their own lives. If this network was charted on a map, the Writers in Prison Committee would configure the globe with channels of concern, zones where freedom of expression is defended one individual at a time.

PEN doesn't send in a commando team to rescue writers, but from time to time we have fantasized we should develop one, especially when the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa ignited. A novelist and popular television

vriter, Ken Saro-Wiwa protested the ecological abuse by he government and oil companies in the Ogoni region of Nigeria. An outspoken critic of the Abacha regime, Ken Saro-Wiwa had been arrested on a number of occaions and released. But in November of 1995, he eceived a death sentence and was hung a week later gainst the backdrop of worldwide protest.

The Writers in Prison Committee has no power xcept the power of persuasion. International PEN has consultative status at the United Nations, and represenatives from International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee appear at the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva each year where they lobby govrnment representatives on behalf of imprisoned writers. PEN also brings individual cases before the various U.N. mechanisms, such as the mechanism on Arbitrary Detention or Torture. However, the Committee primarily works through its members all over the world. A Writers in Prison Committee of a PEN center adopts a vriter in prison, and then fellow writers will write to that ndividual. Members also write to the family, to the Ambassadors both in the country of the imprisoned vriter and their own country, calling attention to the ase and often urging release. The main office in London researches and updates the facts on the cases daily and coordinates worldwide campaigns.

Three writers in the Cote D'Ivoire were imprisoned, charged with insulting the President because they suggested in an article that he brought a football team bad luck by attending the Championship Final.

A poet in Africa reported, "The Inspector General of Police called me to his office when I was in prison and asked me who I was. I replied that I was not an oppositionist but a writer. Give me a piece of chalk or a pen and I will write. The Inspector replied that they had never had so much trouble as over me, and he was not just talking about Amnesty International. Distinguished writers had written... from Brazil to Australia, and these came from PEN."

In the past five years, free expression organizations have connected across the globe on the Internet in a consortium called the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX). Whenever PEN wants action on a case or seeks information, it can place a call on IFEX to the dozens of organizations across the globe who will also advocate on the writer's behalf.

Most of the 800 to 900 cases International PEN tracks each year and the 150 or so it actively works on as main cases don't make headlines. But all the cases have one element in common: the writers risked their lives as collateral for their words. These words, though not forged in steel or fired in furnaces, are viewed as weapons by many governments and the ideas they contain as threatening as any host of arms. Writers are put in prison, kidnapped, and even killed because of their words and the expression of their ideas in countries all over the world.

Governments also use words to define their reality and to create laws to preserve this reality. In Turkey over 200 writers, most of whom have written about the Kurdish

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situation, find themselves facing detention for "disseminating separatist propaganda," or "inciting racism," or "insulting Ataturk." In a recent case, writers were detained for "making propaganda to incite the public to perceive military service in an apathetic way."

In China, where PEN records the most long term imprisonments, over 60 writers are in prison on such charges as "counter-revolutionary propaganda," "slandering the people's democratic dictatorship," and one writer was sentenced without trial to serve three years in a labor camp for anti-government articles sent to Hong Kong by "an unauthorized fax machine."

Wei Jingsheng served 17 years for advocating democratic reform. Esber Yagmurdereli, a blind writer, who served 13 years in Turkish jails, was recently returned to jail for as much as 20 additional years for speaking out for Kurdish rights. Both Wei Jingsheng and Esber Yagmurdereli have been released after widespread protest by PEN and other human rights organizations. Both men were released on medical bail; neither is completely free. Mr. Wei, who has since come to the United States, cannot live free in China; Mr. Yagmurdereli's sentence was suspended until his health improves, and then he can be returned to prison.

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In a multitude of countries, including Belarus, Cote D'Ivoire, Cuba, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Guinea, writers have been imprisoned for "insulting the President" or head of state or other government officials. Three writers in the Cote D'Ivoire were imprisoned, charged with insulting the President because they suggested in an article that he brought a football team bad luck by attending the Championship Final. In Zambia, a writer faced charges for referring to the President as a "twit" in an article.

In Syria, two writers are imprisoned for their writing which the government deemed "intended to create anxiety and to shake the confidence of the masses in the aims of the revolution." One writer whose 15-year sentence expired in 1987 still has not been released by the Syrian government.

Countries with long running conflicts within and without their borders such as Turkey, Peru, Algeria, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia use the language of Anti-Terror and National Security Laws to arrest writers who have written about the conflicts.

Perhaps the most bizarre situation is that of an Iraqi writer who was imprisoned for not writing. He was reported to be facing treason charges because he refused to write a biography of President Saddam Hussein. The government produced the cover of the book, but the writer, who was allegedly tortured, refused to fill in the pages with words.

While governments imprison writers for their words, it is the imagination behind the words which governments have not been able to imprison. Imagination has always been the enemy of tyranny, for the exercise of the imagination is an individual and revolutionary act which cannot be controlled by another.

A few years ago, some of the worst prison conditions existed in the Western Sahara. A jailer told a prisoner, "You come here to die. Forget the outside. Don't think you will get out or be judged or that anyone will care about you." Yet that man got out and visited the London office of PEN where he spoke of his experience and that of others, including writers PEN had worked to free. The prisoners were forbidden to write, he said, but they managed to write because writing kept them sane. They wrote plays on their trousers with the half-bar of soap given to them for washing their clothes; then they memorized the plays before they washed their trousers. One writer wrote a 100-verse poem tracing the history and culture of Africa; he and the other prisoners learned the verses by heart and repeated them to each other.

Seven men were kept in a cell that measured two square meters, about one square foot per man. The only light came in through two tiny holes in the wall. They were given five grams of lentils and some beans during the day and some gruel at night, he said. The prisoners were routinely tortured and beaten. The man who visited PEN spent nine years in prison before he was released in a general amnesty and escaped the country. He was told to say nothing about his prison life. But he said people went mad there. Many died. Those who went mad were put in solitary confinement. To stay sane he and others found ways to write. On the few occasions they were allowed into the courtyard to exercise, they gathered scraps of paper and wrote on them using thick coffee for ink. They hid their writing in their belts.

Within these prison cells, the writers held to the belief that words mattered, that ideas mattered, and that the action of one man mattered to the life of another. It was the ability of these individuals to imagine and to create that kept them sane. It was the ability of those outside to imagine these men and to work on their behalf that had at least some part in their release.

Writers are essentially idealists. They believe ideas matter. To them words and ideas are keys to reality. For those in prison, they are both the key and the vehicle that allow the writer to dwell in another place inside his mind when his physical reality is unbearable. In a current case where a poet has been in prison for 13 years, he told a visiting writer, "The responsibility I feel makes me go on. I move my situation out of the prison when I write and gain control over reality. Then I can write about the fundamental principles, against terror, discrimination, and for justice."

A number of the writers PEN has worked for spent their time in prison crafting better societies in their heads. The most famous is perhaps Vaclav Havel, whose case PEN championed as early as 1970. In 1994, Vaclav Havel, playwright turned President of Czechoslovakia, addressed the International PEN Congress in Prague. Another such writer was Adam Michnik, who spent his time in prison in Poland writing *Letters from Prison*, which set forth the nonviolent strategy of the Solidarity movement.

Two lights shine in the grim world one studies and works within as Chair of International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee. One is the writing of those who endure the prison experience. Some of the best of that writing over the 75 years of PEN's history was collected in an anthology, *This Prison Where I Live*, edited by Siobhan Dowd and published by Cassells Publishers. Tracking the prison experience, the book starts with an essay by Arthur Koestler, "When the Cell Door Closes," and ends with an afterword by Malawian poet Jack Mapanje about life after release.

The other light is the work of writers all over the world for their colleagues in prison. One of the privileges of serving as Chair was reading correspondence from prisoners to PEN members. Real friendships developed. Recurring images appeared in the writers' work from many different countries. One of those images was of the spider.

A prisoner ten years into a twenty-year sentence wrote to a PEN member: "Yes, I can hear bird singing. But they are not my friends. They are too far from me. My best friends are spiders and mantis. They are only living things to watch amusely in my solitary cell. I live and play with them all day long."

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The writer who had been tortured in the Maldives told of his time in solitary confinement. "I had a chance to observe nature: rats, cockroaches, spiders," he recalled. "Ah, spiders, they are brilliant!"

Cuban writer Yndamiro Restano, who was arrested in 1992 and sentenced to ten years in prison for preparing and distributing counter-revolutionary propaganda, wrote a poem entitled "Prison":

Mother,
do you know where your poet is?
Well, they have dragged me into a dark,
narrow, lonely cell.
And do you know why,
Mother?
For not allowing fear to carry me away.
But I am not completely alone,
Mother.
I have got to know a good friend here.
A small spider visits me every day
and spins in the door of my cell.
When the guard comes,
I let it know so it hides away.
And doesn't get killed.
I want it to live,
Mother,
because I know that it has inside it
something that I also possess.
However,
it seems that the guard does not know this.
Mother,
do you know where your poet is?
Well, they have dragged me to a cold,
narrow, lonely cell.
And do you know why,
Mother?
Because the poet is the only person
who never forgets
the meaning of freedom.

The spider, like the writer, can survive, weave, and work wherever it lives. The more difficult the circumstances, the more ingenious the web it creates. Scientists are currently studying the unique structure of the spider's silk which gives it the tensile strength of a steel fiber, yet allows it to stretch and rebound from at least ten times its original length, something no metal or synthetic fiber can do. The writer's silk, his tensile yet flexible fiber, is his imagination. It is the imagination and the life of the mind that allows the writers for whom the Writers in Prison Committee works to survive.

Restano was released in 1995 after sustained pressure from many human rights organizations, including PEN, and he now lives in exile.

A letter from a South Korean writer in prison since 1985 to his German minder shows the fortitude of many of these writers: "Do you know what makes me joyous these days. That is fast growing of pumpkin and cucumber in my garden. Every morning when I go out to the ground for exercise, I check how much they have grown for a day." And in another letter: "Thanks to your concern... My tooth is so so. But I brush eagerly my tooth three times a day with the tooth brush and paste you sent to me. Thanks again."

Of course, many prisons won't allow prisoners to have gardens, to receive or write letters, let alone receive gifts like toothbrushes and toothpaste. But even in those prisons, PEN receives word that attention from a writer outside sets in motion the weaving of a web that hangs, perhaps for a long time only in a corner of consciousness, but becomes a place for imagination to dwell, both for the imprisoned writer and the jailer. With enough imagination, we have even seen jailers open the prison doors.

I would like to end with a poem from the PEN anthology *This Prison Where I Live*. The poem is by Osip Mandelstam, one of Russia's great poets who was arrested in 1934 for having written a poem which ridiculed Stalin's predilection for torture and execution.

You Left Me My Lips

You took away all the oceans and all the room.
You gave me my shoe-size with bars around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words,
even in silence. AWP

For more information on how you can help PEN Writers in Prison, please contact:

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