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THE ROLE OF PEN IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The following speech by International PEN's International Secretary was given at the International PEN Writers for Peace Committee Conference hosted by the Slovene PEN Centre in Bled, Slovenia, in March 2006.

My first memory of a PEN meeting was sitting in someone's living room in Los Angeles writing postcards to free Wei Jingsheng from prison in China. At the time in the 1980s he'd already been in prison several years of a fifteen-year sentence. I had no idea who this writer was thousands of miles away; I barely knew the other writers in that living room. On the coffee table would have been PEN's Case List, which at the time was white sheets of paper stapled together.

We wrote and stamped our post cards for Wei and other writers that afternoon. I'm sure we were provided with background on his case. I pictured these cards fluttering into a jail somewhere in China and perhaps even into the cell of this stranger to let him know we had taken note of him and cared what happened. Looking back on that blue-sky afternoon as we sipped sodas and ate crackers and cheese, I see our act as a bit fleeting, an effort to imagine the fate of another writer who didn't have our freedom to write and speak.

I have since learned of the many other actions PEN members take in support of their colleagues around the world. In considering PEN's role in the contemporary world, I start with this act of imagining someone else. It is at the heart of what we do. It is the journey we embark on as writers, and it is at the core of PEN's work. PEN's mission to promote literature, to defend freedom of expression and to advance a community of writers all depends on the freedom to imagine. Imagination is an individual and entirely revolutionary act, for it cannot be controlled.

Literature is a vehicle for the imagination, transporting us through stories and language to experience different people and cultures. PEN's role is to protect the space for the writer to do the imagining and to share his/her works in a community of writers across cultures.

A few months ago I had the opportunity of going through an underground monastery in Kiev with the United Nation's rapporteur on religious freedom. Our guide in the tunnels was absorbed by the stories she was telling about people who had martyred themselves for their beliefs hundreds of years ago. These stories clearly influenced her life in twenty-first century Ukraine. I asked my friend if she found the same true in the other societies she visited, and she said absolutely. Stories govern the present as well as the past of people. To understand a society, you need to understand its stories.

PEN members are the storytellers, the eyes and ears of their societies. Their role is to tell true stories – if creative writers, true to the heart and imagination; if historians, true to the history they uncover; if journalists, true to the facts as they find them; if dramatists, true to the drama of the human spirit. True stories

help us to understand ourselves and each other. False stories, based on ideology and propaganda, inflame passions and fuel conflicts as we've seen here in Europe and throughout the world. Today we are in a dangerous environment when false stories and rumours shoot around the world in a few hours, and the clash of cultures is broadcast on 24-hour news channels.

Imagination and stories may seem like soft power in a troubled world, but PEN members would argue that one bridges cultures with culture, especially with literature. We cross borders to each other first by imagining the crossing. When we no longer fear the other because we have been able to imagine the other, then we have begun our journey and recognize 'the stubborn, underlying sameness of the human spirit whatever the variety of forms in which it is expressed,' as International PEN President Arthur Miller once noted at a PEN Congress.

Miller, who assumed his presidency here in Bled, recalled years later in a letter to a Belgrade journalist whose friends and newspaper were under assault by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic: 'As time went on, the murders of writers and journalists in so many countries touched me most of all, since apart from their personal sufferings they are the eyes and ears of the people, and deaf people cannot support a democracy which is based on the informed will of the people ... I sympathize greatly with Balkan intellectuals and artists who must function in the midst of fierce nationalist and tribal conflicts. A bird being pursued doesn't sing. One can only hope that the artists can find a means of creating human rather than political characters, people not puppets, and thereby keep alive the concept, which wars always destroy, of immortal, universal humanity whose differences cannot obliterate their common desire to walk the earth and reach for the stars.'

PEN's role today as in the past is to defend that humanity and keep the literature it inspires alive by protecting the writer. PEN has been called the conscience of the world writing community. Founded in 1921 after the First World War, PEN grew out of a simple idea that if writers from different nations engaged each other and literature crossed borders, the super nationalism that had brought on the war might be reduced. The writers understood that if ideas, especially competing ideas, were sucked out of society because of fear and intimidation, then the pressure among peoples would build and war could result. PEN wasn't able to stop the onslaught of wars to come, but the idea of PEN grew and spread until now there are 141 centres in 99 countries.

PEN's role is lodged in its Charter, which is more relevant now than ever. The framers of the Charter understood the dangers of national prejudice and rabid nationalism and the danger of sacrificing the individual to the collective. Fired in that crucible between World Wars, PEN's Charter contains one of the dialectics upon which free societies operate.

PEN members pledge to 'use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds...'. At the same time 'PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within

nations and between nations' and opposes 'any form of suppression of freedom of expression'.

The recent explosion over the publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper of the Prophet Mohammed brings the seeming contradiction in these values to the fore. While some PEN members might oppose an offence against religious sensibilities, at the same time PEN defends the right of the artist to express himself freely, even if he offends.

The ability to abide contradictory ideas and a plurality of views is at the heart of free societies and undermines those who tolerate only one voice and one vision. Advocating for the individual creative voice and for a multiplicity of voices, PEN inevitably challenges fundamentalism and authoritarianism.

In its eighty-fifth year – and the eightieth anniversary of our host Slovene PEN – International PEN still represents that longing for a world in which people communicate and respect differences, share culture and literature, and battle ideas but not each other. PEN's founding preceded the United Nations. When UN members were drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they consulted the Charter of PEN.

In this time of globalization, PEN is one of the first truly global organizations. Whether in Istanbul, Cairo, Moscow or Paris, whether in the mountains of Nepal or the deltas of Nigeria, from the Arctic Circle to the tip of Cape Town, from India and Pakistan to Columbia. PEN members belong to a community of writers connected by the values in PEN's Charter.

Today through its Exile Network and new partnership with the International Cities of Refuge Network, PEN helps writers who are displaced because of political upheavals to find new communities. Through its Writers in Prison Committee PEN defends writers subject to imprisonment or threat because of their ideas. Through the members of its other standing committees – Translation and Linguistic Rights, Peace Committee, and Women Writers Committee – International PEN works to connect, translate and advocate on behalf of writers and literature.

PEN's organizational challenge today is not to change its mission or its role, but to update its structure and Secretariat so that it can operate at the highest standards and raise the funds necessary to accomplish its goals as an international non-governmental organization. These steps are underway.

PEN members' greatest challenge is to live by the values in PEN's Charter, to keep nationalism out of our own forums, and to see each other and relate to each other as writers, not representatives of our countries. PEN members protest political actions by countries that impinge on the writers' freedom, but PEN itself is and should remain nonpolitical.

I often tell audiences that PEN is a place where cultures don't clash, but communicate. Even when we don't agree, we are talking, translating and listening to each other. PEN's forums provide space for those conversations to take place and stories to be exchanged.

Literature takes us outside of ourselves. When young women in Tehran restricted by dress and behaviour codes read and identify with the nineteenth-

century heroines of Jane Austen, who themselves were bound and stifled by society's rules, then literature is crossing borders of time and place and cultures.

PEN is not a peace organization, but its members dare to believe that the free exchange of ideas can elevate understanding and reduce conflict. Fear of the other dissolves when we recognize in the face of the other: ourselves.

Many years after that first PEN meeting in a Los Angeles living room, I met Wei Jingsheng and shared a meal with him. How effective PEN's postcards and letters and those of people all over the world had been in eventually securing his freedom is difficult to assess. We met in a restaurant in Washington, DC. Sitting in a green velvet booth, I saw him struggling to imagine me, not me personally, but to imagine the whole strange country he had arrived in. His was a lonely journey in many ways, and freedom would require unending imagination.

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