

BOATING FOR BEGINNERS

68th PEN International Congress, Ohrid 17-24 September 2002

Lake Ohrid, in the south of Macedonia, is very beautiful, its vast expanses uninterrupted by sailing craft or pleasure boats. On the further shore are the forested mountains of Albania. The silence is prehistoric. The rocky Macedonian shore was the birthplace of the Cyrillic alphabet, designed by St Cyril and St Methodius in the tenth century AD, and the coastline is studded with extremely ancient Byzantine churches, most of them tiny, and many of them with their original painted interiors unrestored. The churches were closed up during the Soviet period, unlike the Hotel Metropole, where we were staying. We imagine that middle-ranking Party members from Moscow stayed here when they had earned a bit of time off. The décor, chiefly in orange and brown, is a little the worse for wear. The food was not great, nor was the local wine.

The West, however, has its foot in the door. This is a UNESCO Heritage Site. The Ohrid Agreement was signed here, after the civil unrest in summer 2001 which led to the 67th PEN International Congress being moved to London at short notice; NATO troops are stationed here.

We wandered into the next-door hotel, the Belle Vue, and found ourselves caught up in a pharmaceutical conference, where prescription drugs were being flogged to the Macedonians.

Macedonians are proud of their cultural heritage. The annual International Summer Festival in the little city of Ohrid, and the Poetry Festival in nearby Struga, are attended by poets from all over the world – Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney have given readings here.

But with a population of fewer than two million, this is sparsely populated territory. It is perfect guerrilla country. We had a four-and-a-half-hour bus drive from Skopje in the north, to Ohrid. The bus took the longer route because the direct route was deemed unsafe, due to recent shootings; on the way back to Skopje airport by the quicker route, at the end, we passed tanks being transported on flatbed trucks, and all our planes were delayed by an hour as military aircraft zoomed in and out, presumably refuelling.

On our way down to Ohrid we saw nothing but seemingly uninhabited forested mountains until, nearing the south, there were fields of unhealthy tobacco plants, strings of red chilli peppers on every balcony, vineyards, and the odd goat. Tired, dusty and hot we were decanted with other

delegates at the Metropole. On our way to our rooms in the ‘annexe’ – obviously rarely used, and in need of renovation – we bumped into Sasha Tachenko who announced: ‘Today is horrible, much travel, dark, tired, sad, is homesicky. Tomorrow is beautiful sun, glowing lake, working, and I promise you expresso.’

And so it turned out.

Next morning, with delegates neat and clean in suits, saris or African robes, we took our seats for the opening session of the Assembly. A solo Macedonian flautist played us in to the strains of Poulenc, followed by another performer on a local vertical flute. This was an aural illustration of the very active and generous members of the Macedonian PEN Centre, who were wonderful hosts and put on all manner of entertainments.

Victoria and Susie attended several meetings of the standing committees, including Writers in Prison, and Susie sat in on the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee. It was attended by only a handful of people, and Anna Gerasimova of Belarusian PEN highlighted the plight of the small republic of Tatarstan. Tatar, which belongs to the finno-ugric group of languages, is best suited to Latin inscription. Since

the break-up of the Soviet Union, all textbooks, official documents, signposts etc have been rendered in Latin script. But the Tatars are accused by the Russian Duma of having 'separatist tendencies' and instructed to change every single book and document back into Cyrillic script, at huge emotional and financial cost. The Tatar delegate was in tears as he outlined the predicament. The more intimate meetings, such as this one, were very powerful, but when this subject came to the vote in the more formal framework of the Assembly it lost its immediacy and many of the delegates found it hard to understand.

Our main role was as delegates of English PEN to the Assembly, where we sat between the Egyptian and the Esperanto delegates. The President of International PEN, the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis, chaired the Assembly. The proceedings were conducted in English – with eloquent interventions in French from the French delegates, who resent the anglophone hegemony - with simultaneous translation provided through earphones. The International President is a big-hearted and charming man whose English is heavily accented with Spanish. 'We will now take the vote' came out as 'We will now take the boat.' We were continually taking the boat, but rarely getting anywhere.

We were invited to approve the creation of new centres for Uzbekistan, Sierra Leone and Tibetan Writers Abroad, and then discussed the closure of some small non-active, non-contributing centres, which included Languedoc PEN and Welsh PEN. When we came to the boat, Welsh PEN was deemed to be ‘dormant’ rather than dead, and rather to their surprise your English PEN delegates found themselves apparently charged with the task of penetrating into literary Wales to unearth recalcitrant PEN members.

‘Apparently’ is the operative word, because the procedure was very muddled. One minute we were to raise green cards for ditching centres, the next for saving them, the next for abstaining. It was embarrassing, particularly since Teresa Wagner, the UNESCO representative responsible for channelling funds to International PEN, was on the platform. The following day Terry Carlbom, International Secretary, apologised for the muddle, but nothing improved.

It was of course unlikely that we would disagree with resolutions submitted by the Writers for Peace Committee and Writers in Prison Committee for greater freedom of expression in Iran, Columbia, Cuba, China, Vietnam, Russia, Belarus, Turkey and Zimbabwe. But although these concerns are deeply serious we did not feel that English PEN’s, or

indeed the Assembly's, support was likely to transform the situation for writers in those countries, especially since the most emotional debates were over the (very pedestrian) wording of each resolution. There was, too, a frequent confusion over the method by which the vote was being taken – ie, whether we were to raise green cards for Yes (in which case counting took an age) or red cards for No (in which case an uncomprehending Tibetan Writers in Exile delegate, desperate to get his centre created, saw no green cards at all, and became bewildered and distressed). Moreover a resolution, when finally passed by these tortuous procedures, would only have real value if it precipitated some action. Mostly, they don't.

On Sunday Victoria went to a reception given by the President of Macedonia (only one from each centre was invited) at his modest villa commanding magnificent views over the lake. This used to be Tito's summer residence. The President is an upstanding man who looks like a sportsman just beginning to run to fat, and he shook hands with everyone and stayed talking for the duration of the party, and there were eloquent speeches. Those who attended certainly got the feeling that hosting the Congress was an important and gratifying occasion for Macedonia.

One of the Assembly's tasks was to select four new members for the

Board of International PEN. We were given a list of ten candidates but no CVs, and were only canvassed by one, Sabry Hafez of Egyptian PEN, who sat next to us. He (and only he) circulated a flyer outlining the reasons for voting for him, which included a seductive promise to promote the 'PEN massage' throughout the Arabic world.

Susie was attending the Sunday afternoon session, expecting to hear the report on the Emergency PEN Fund. But with no warning, the Chair skipped several agenda items and announced that the Assembly would now vote for the four new members of the Board. Since we of English PEN had not yet selected our candidates, Susie had to hurtle up and down stairs and along corridors to find Victoria in the distant annexe and drag her back to the hall. We chose our candidates along the way, and got back into the hall just as Terry was calling for the English PEN vote. The final selection of new Board members – from Japan, Finland, Croatia and Colombia – seemed eminently suitable, but we might so easily not have had our say.

Outside the Assembly, and at meals, we tried to sit with as many different people from as many different centres as possible, and had fascinating and informative conversations. We did escape one day with other delegates to a family-run lakeside restaurant, where the local fish

(Ohrid trout in particular) made a welcome change from the hotel food. When after lunch some of the group took a boat (literally, this time), we decided to join a party to visit one of the ancient churches on a cliff further along the shore. On the way Victoria's sandals slipped on a sloping rock and she fell into the lake with all her clothes on, which gave everyone a laugh, including her. Susie's ingenuity and sleight of hand with a pashmina saved the situation.

From our contacts and encounters, it was borne in on us that one of the most important functions of the annual Congress is simply to enable the delegates – many of whom come thousands of miles, at painful cost and sometimes personal risk – to talk, freely and at length, both in the Assembly and informally outside it, about problems and preoccupations. Something that came out of all the talking from our point of view was the evident necessity for English PEN to make contact with and provide some support for writers in exile in England, who often feel very isolated. German PEN in particular has a very evolved and generous system of support, funded by local authorities. We came home determined to initiate a project of our own.

The most important item in the whole Congress from English PEN's point of view, and the one in which we became most deeply involved, concerned Agenda item 15(a), Amending Resolution to the Charter, submitted by the Canadian and German centres.

The desirability of changing the wording of the PEN Charter had come up at the London Congress in 2001. The changes were to be only in the first paragraph, which at the moment reads as follows:

'Literature, national though it may be in origin, knows no frontiers, and should remain a common currency between nations in spite of political or international upheavals.'

The proposed amended version was composed by email and by committee over the past year. It reads as follows:

'Literature of whatever provenance or language is a world cultural heritage and must be protected and upheld at all times as the free and common currency of all people, particularly in periods of political or international upheaval.'

Given that many writers in exile – and they were movingly represented by Reza Baraheni, President of Canadian PEN, who spoke of ‘elsewhere’ and ‘heterotopia’ as the metaphysical *topos* of exilic literature – feel very strongly that writing is absolutely not national in origin, some change seemed reasonable. But it was clear to both of us within seconds that the proposed amendment was not stylistically in keeping with the spare, clear wording of the Charter (Mr Baraheni, the dominant member of the amending group, is a brilliant but not a native English-speaker) and that simple excisions of the words ‘national though it may be in origin’ and ‘between nations’ would be better than a complete rewrite.

Victoria stood up and made the second of these points as persuasively as she knew how. It seemed that many in the hall agreed with us. Then the dissenting voices came in, and a much more complex picture emerged. The delegate from Poland asked if the benefit of changing the wording was greater than the risks of keeping it the same. Sasha spoke very passionately about how much the world ‘national’ has come to mean in the CIS. The Romanian delegate was in tears as she described how at every PEN meeting in Communist times the Charter was recited like a mantra representing democracy and freedom of expression. Other delegates felt that the Charter was a historic document, rather like the Declaration of Independence, and should not arbitrarily be changed with

changing times. Vincent Ngombe of African Writers Abroad preferred to let the amendment stand as it was, chiefly because he felt that the word ‘protected’ reflected many of his PEN priorities.

As the debate unrolled, we both felt an enormous weight of responsibility on us. This was something real and desperately serious, and more than just words seemed to be at stake.

Protocol was consulted. The Canadians and Germans had issued an Amending Resolution; it was considered that English PEN had suggested an amendment to an amendment. Since we could not statutorily propose a new amendment, we were asked to sit down with Reza Baraheni and Isabelle Henry from Canadian PEN and come up with an amending resolution that we were all happy with.

This took four hours - we missed the Macedonian dancing – and eventually we came up with the following:

‘Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.’

How that took four hours is another story, but it encompasses everything

that PEN is about – communication, tolerance, impassioned discussion, literary quotation, story-telling, poetic digressions, tales of wrongful imprisonment, life-stories, laughter, plus drink, cigarettes, and the salutary input of Susie’s more analytical interventions.

Jane Spender, meanwhile, discovered that the Charter has been amended two or three times in the past, so the current wording has no historically sacred status. The amending resolution will be formally voted on at the next International Congress in Mexico in November 2003 and will be circulated to all centres six months before that. (It was not clear at this stage whether or not comments from all the centres would be taken on board for a final redrafting.)

Susie was paying the hotel bill while Victoria was in the Assembly listening to the In-Session Resolutions when the Secretariat dropped another boating bombshell: we were suddenly, now, to boat on whether to adopt the amendment to the amendment or not. It was the last day, and the Congress was already thinning out; the motion was just carried by the necessary two-thirds of the votes cast.

The fate of the Charter will not be clear until the next Congress, if then. But the intense drama of this particular debate proved to us, if proof

were needed, that a PEN International Congress is about far more than speeches and protocol, and that the conflicted, beating heart of this unique international association is passionately alive.

Victoria Glendinning and Susie Nicklin, October 2002