

Hermann Kesten-Preis des deutschen PEN-Zentrums, 11.11.2012 in Darmstadt

Dankesrede von Irina Khalip

Ladies and Gentlemen! Dear Friends!

This award is a special honor for me since it is named after Hermann Kesten, an outstanding writer and humanist, former president of the German PEN. It is also an honor since in the past it was awarded to Harold Pinter, Liu Xiaobo and my colleague Anna Politkovskaya, «Memorial» and «Journalist in Danger».

I would have liked to thank you all personally here in Darmstadt. Unfortunately I don't have such opportunity: last year after 5 months of my arrest I got a suspended sentence of two years in prison and now, until the period of suspension ends, I cannot leave Belarus. However at this ceremony I understand an empty chair is a tradition. I'm not the first who couldn't address you from the stage of Darmstadt theater. Unfortunately I'm probably not the last one.

I always loved books and believed that ideals from the books do not disappear in the real world no matter how cruel it is. I keep on believing that a person who in youth read «Klein Zaches» would be scared to resemble the main character of this book. It looks like the dictators didn't read E.T.A. Hoffmann. Neither did they read Jonathan Swift, George Orwell or Kurt Vonnegut. Sometimes I have strong doubts if they ever read anything. A normal person who learned to make words out of letters and sentences out of words has to be interested in what others did with words and start reading. The effect of reading is irreversible. Having read «Doctor Faustus» you will never be the same.

However the writers don't need to regret that uneducated people who didn't read their books would become dictators. The writers must know that their word is needed for the victims of dictators, for prisoners thrown in jail by dictators. Believe me nothing helps more in prison than a book. Namely a book, and not thoughts about the relatives: it is painful to think of them and one tries to block out thoughts about families. Whereas a writer is not your relative but a person very close to you. A writer could be with you and help.

When in KGB prison where I was threatened that I would be imprisoned for 15 years during which time my son would be in an orphanage, because the same fate was prepared for my husband, I remembered the books of Alexander Solzhenitsin, Varlam Shalamov, Anatoly Rybakov who went through Soviet prisons and camps. So I understood that in my country that bade farewell to the remnants of the Soviet Union 20 years ago nothing has changed. That meant that all their methods are well known, I have read about it. It's easier for me than for my wardens: unlike them I've read the books and can predict not only their

actions but even their words. Whereas they, who haven't read anything, they will loose. When the history of Belarus gets out of the dead end and turns to the right path — towards Europe — all our wardens and executioners will be at a loss: they will become powerless and helpless. Those people don't read books and don't know what happens to their likes after changes occur in the country. Maybe they will start reading then, out of curiosity. Better late than never.

I love my profession. To a great extent thanks to journalism I understand better the value of freedom and abomination of the absence of freedom. A precise word cannot be but free. A precise word gives hope even in a hopeless situation. A precise word can save a person, stop the war and deal with corruption. It can make one think and analyse. A servile word has no value: it is phony, it irritates, leads to mistrust and fastidiousness. If a journalist restricts freedom in an article, essay or investigation the trust of a reader evaporates quite quickly. Under dictatorship a free word becomes dangerous for a journalist but it is valued even more by readers. They trust only in the free word. Readers feel falsity. They can forgive mistakes but not lies.

I love my country — unbearable and monstrous as if coming out of the pages of the worst anti-utopia. If somebody who has never been to Belarus learns how we live, it might look like a comedy. It may look like a farce but imprisonment and death of people is real. My colleagues Veronika Cherkassova, Oleg Bebenin, Vassili Grodnikov, Dmitry Zavadsky were killed. My friends and colleagues Zmicer Dashkevich, Ales Byalyatski, Nikolai Avtukhovich, Mikola Statkevich are being tortured in prisons. They are sober-minded people and they didn't want to become part of this satirical pamphlet, that is Belarus today. They wanted to live «not according to a lie» as Solzhenitsyn said. Dictatorship prefers to eliminate or isolate such people.

In my country the native language is being eliminated, and those who speak it are regarded as enemies of the State. In my country there is a criminal responsibility for «inaction». In my country a toy teddy bear is a state enemy and those who dare to take pictures of it are put in prison. In my country good music is banned and blacklisted and popular musicians cannot perform in their country before the audience that loves them. Can you imagine that in my country the whole performance together with spectators can be arrested as it happened with the Belarus Free Theater. In my country journalists are arrested for their words because for those who didn't read books a word is taken as a weapon. In my country a lie has become a state ideology. And a lie hates freedom and fights it with every means.

But my country had Vasil Bykau and has Ryhor Baradulin. There are many other names that symbolise the glory and the essence of Belarus. However these two great Belarusians are the most important for me today: Vasil Bykau who found a precise word for

the ruthless truth about the war and about the current tragedy, and Ryhor Baradulin who in the language of freedom asserts the spirit and the richness of Belarus.

The word is immortal. Journalists can be thrown in jail, but still articles and books will be written. Journalists can be killed but the words will remain. All the books of the world can be burned, but then Shakley's Mnemone will enter the reality. The word is not only immortal — it is free.

And freedom is indivisible. There can be no personal freedom without the freedom of choice, including the choice of a government. There can be no freedom of choice without the freedom of assembly. There can be no freedom of assembly without the freedom of thought. For me, in the beginning there is the freedom of speech.

I want to thank you once again for this high award which I see namely as a support of freedom of speech in Belarus.