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# »JUST AS EVERYTHING BECOMES FORGOTTEN IN PARIS« ON THE TOPIC OF LITERATURE AND EUROPEAN DIALOGUE



»How could you think I could possibly forget my old friends because of a little book which people have been talking about for a few weeks and which will be forgotten just as quickly, just as everything becomes forgotten in Paris?«

The Jewish-born French author, Irène Némirovsky, wrote the above to a friend before the Second World War, apropos of the surprising success of her novel *David Golder*. Surprising not only because this was the first novel of a young émigré who had fled the Bolshevik revolution in Russia with her parents, but also because French was not her mother tongue. She had graduated in France with a degree in literature and, soon after, became one of the best-known French women authors. Not that this helped when the Germans occupied France; the French police arrested her and handed her over to the occupiers. Neither did the fact that she had converted to Catholicism with her husband, also a Russian émigré, and their two daughters, a few years prior to the war. After her arrest, she disappeared without trace. Her husband, who desperately sought succor from French publishers, and through them, politicians, soon ended up in an assembly camp himself. While he had still been trying to intervene on her behalf by all possible means, or at least to find out where she was, the famed author was traveling amidst a multitude of Jews in boxcars toward Germany, clear across Germany, and eastward, to occupied Poland. After the war it came to light that her life had ended shortly afterwards, in a gas chamber at Auschwitz. Not much later, her husband also perished there. Both their daughters, also sought by the police, were saved by good people. In the first postwar year, Russian émigré writers continued to raise aid for the two

girls, then the joy of victory erased memory of them, as well as of the disappeared Irène Némirovsky, and her name sank into oblivion. No one remembered her books anymore, or her life, her flight from St Petersburg by way of Finland, her retreat from Paris as the Germans advanced, her disappearance and death. She was forgotten. Just as, in her words, everything is eventually forgotten in Paris.

Not only in Paris and not only in 1945. Europe generally tends to forget. If some of us feel as if the fall of the Berlin Wall happened yesterday, we are badly mistaken. 1989, just like 1945, is ancient history. And so are the years spent by so-called Eastern Europe prior to this occurrence, which changed the old continent yet again.

However, it is exactly these years that should not be forgotten or ignored if we are to discuss »Literature and European Dialogue,« a topic I was invited to consider by the philosopher Dean Komel. Just as in the case of Irène Némirovsky, the ideological twentieth century left its stamp on many other writers, whose only desire may have been the freedom to create at will and to reach with their writings beyond the confines of ideological walls and national languages, to have an open European dialogue. Instead, they were forced to struggle for the survival of their texts, to accept endless chains of trifling compromises to be published at all, or to grapple with the most basic matters of securing a livelihood in narrow-minded milieus, among petty people, even in the great old cities of Eastern Europe, such as Budapest, Krakow, Prague, Warsaw, Vilnius, or Riga. Those who transgressed the boundaries of censorship or overstepped the invisible line drawn by the closed, closely supervised societies, ended up incarcerated or jobless, often cursed by ostracism, which is especially devastating for an author, in a type of limbo, with no possibility of publishing or any dialogue at all, European or otherwise.



Of those who escaped to the West with great hopes, or made their way there in some other fashion, many languished in the nameless, echoless condition of the emigrant, writing for political papers of no importance and, at times, for literary journals of quality, which nonetheless had hardly any readership. Few managed to make a breakthrough with their writings in their new environments, and even they were too often unjustly and insensitively attributed political rather than literary contexts. Kundera, Škvorecký, Brodski. The vast majority lacked the ability or the good fortune to establish themselves in the cultures of the countries in which they had found refuge; at least from the point of view of literature, their fate was tragic. From the Slovenian literary scene, small but ebullient prior to the Second World War, a pleiad of brilliant writers disappeared in 1945, to reemerge

as a lively creative circle in Buenos Aires. At a time when their books would have been widely read in Slovenia, this was impossible because they were simply banned. And in the 1990s, when these same books saw their first reprints in Slovenia, no one was interested in them anymore. Grim as the word may seem, this is tragic for a writer's work and life. Of the numerous authors who had emigrated from communist countries, one persistently kept writing, leaving behind a testimony that should never be forgotten in any European dialogue, present or future: Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*.

And yet: how is it that today we nostalgically remember the many texts that gripped and shook us in the era when we lacked liberty, also works published or staged at theaters in Yugoslavia, Poland, or Hungary. We remember authors who lived under dictatorships, with literature their only refuge; they fought for it, for belle-lettres, in a »war without battle,« as Heiner Müller entitled his book: *Krieg ohne Schlacht*: *Leben in zwei Diktaturen* [War without Battle: Life under Two Dictatorships]. What was it that Danilo Kiš wrote, what were the sentences spoken by the protagonists of Heiner Müller's dramas such that not only their aesthetic impact, but also the shock waves they sent through society should survive in our recollections to this day? The shock waves that stirred in us joy over the power and the penetrating aesthetic force of a work of art, and instigated discussion, sometimes a whispered, publicly unspoken, yet ubiquitous dialogue about the issues of human liberty and the essential right to individualism, to being one's own person and having the right to voice that.



There is no need to go into the differences in circumstances in the individual countries of this part of the world – undoubtedly the greatest degree of freedom was enjoyed in Yugoslavia, but then we should remember also the Czech poets and Hungarian cinema, Polish theater and some Russian dramatists such as Vampilov – they all had something in common: everywhere art sought its way with symbols, rich metaphors, multilayered language, overt irony and covert ethical, even political messages. To this day, Western Europe has not grasped what an incessant electrifying buzz centered around literature and art in general, what extraordinary power literature had to give people courage, or at least to raise questions in their minds and make them think. While a work of Shakespeare was staged in London as a drama from English history, albeit one that transcended its time, it was performed in Warsaw as a modern-day drama; in their struggles for power Shakespeare's bloody kings were the bloody rulers of 20$^{th}$ century Eastern Europe. To stage *King Lear* in Yugoslavia meant to tell the tale of the clash over Tito's heritage. Dominik Smole's *Antigone* is considered the most consequential drama of that period in Slovenia. And although it, too,

is set in ancient Thebes, whoever read it or watched it performed understood that Smole's Antigone was burying the unacknowledged victims of the communist regime alongside her brother and speaking about modern man's ethical dilemmas, about rebellion and freedom.

In that European, Eastern European time there existed an invisible and strong tension between literature and readers, between art and society, tension with a magical, releasing effect.

More than that: only in this part of the world did literary journals, traditionally intended for a select circle of readers, remain important intellectual and social focal points, retaining the central role that they had had throughout Europe prior to the Second World War, preserved afterwards only as vestigial islands, such as Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* in France or Enzensberger's *Trans-Atlantik* in Germany. They were focal points, drawing artists and intellectuals of the most diverse profiles to contribute their work and participate in discussions, weaving a variegated fabric of aesthetic trends and engaged views about society and politics. This European model of elite intellectual groups affecting the social climate and effectuating political change from France and Germany to Poland and Bohemia, influential also in Slovenia both between the world wars and during the time of communism, is evidently withdrawing to the far margins of our current media and internet-centered society, while its influence is becoming immaterial. Let us think back to the social nuclear reactions set off by magazines with such innocuous names as *Literarny noviny* or *Plamen* in Prague or, at a later date, *Nova revija* in Ljubljana; photocopied by the thousands, the philosophically complicated texts in their limited editions provoked heated debate and triggered political reactions. The photograph of the Czech and Slovak Writers' Association building in Prague, with the guns of Soviet tanks trained on it in August 1968, documents a historical paradox that is today virtually beyond comprehension.



Soon after the fall of the communist regimes, this world started changing at lightning speed.

In the early 1990s, I was invited to Warsaw to take part in a discussion about democracy and literature. I found myself in the eminent company of the above-mentioned Czesław Miłosz and the celebrated thinker and literary theoretician, George Steiner. After appearing at the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, before an auditorium packed with a predominantly young audience, we were taken by our hosts from the Warsaw journal *Res publicae* to dine at a Jewish restaurant. Steiner recounted the time he had wandered around the outskirts of Katowice in communist Poland, looking for the factory hall in

which a theater group was staging a performance that was stupendous, the best thing he had ever seen in European theater. And now, he said, as I look around the theaters in Warsaw, there is nothing but entertainment, in fact, everything seems to be drifting toward the goal of entertainment, Broadway. How could such a profound, far from boring, very communicative yet demanding aesthetics, which was accepted by masses of people, have originated under those conditions, he wondered. The answer might have simply been: because there was nothing as entertaining as Broadway musicals. Nevertheless: What does this mean? Czesław Miłosz smiled, he did not look worried; his world and his Poland had changed so much in such a short time that he may have found this trend less perturbing than George Steiner.

For my talk in Warsaw I had chosen a thought by Witold Gombrowicz: Art loves grandeur, hierarchy, feudalism, absolutism, while democracy favors equality, tolerance, openness, and brotherhood. I saw from the discussions that I had had with the circle of *Res publicae* associates that they embraced Gombrowicz's paradoxical thought. Talking about art only partly relates to issues raised by social orders, usually when such orders curtail the freedom of artistic expression. And the glorified and so anxiously awaited democracy is, at the end of the day, almost always a matter of pragmatism and mediocrities; the people who rise through elections to the political establishment are, as a rule, of average intellectual ability, only rarely exceptional. There is nothing wrong with that. But art, the art of literature, has its own inner rules, hierarchy, feudalism. As far as I could judge, also Miłosz and Steiner found thinking along those lines self-evident.



When I read an excerpt from the same essay a few years later at the Frankfurt book fair, in a discussion with a few European authors, my musings made a well-known Dutch author lose his temper, and I had cold water thrown on my ideas. Peremptorily, the renowned author lectured, or rather, scolded me: Where do these people from Eastern Europe get off talking about democracy, they lived under dictatorships only yesterday and now they are calling democracy a matter of mediocrities. Words were on the tip of my tongue, words like: Some of us have gone to prison for the cause of democracy, dear sir, while you … But I retorted nothing. I acted like the protagonist of some play by Havel, like his Vanek. I spoke but did not answer. I may have possibly failed adequately to explain something quite plainly understandable to an author and a newcomer to democracy. The misunderstanding was complete. To this day, I sometimes think about what I should actually have said in that European dialogue. So, instead of saying while you … I should have patiently elucidat-

ed. First, I should have quoted the Slovenian philosopher and dissident, Jože Pučnik, who puts forth in one of his challenging theoretical books that society is part of culture and not vice versa. So democracy is also part of some cultural experience, while culture is not something that should submit to any one social model, not even the best of them, let alone make literature its altar. Describing a decade of life with literature and dictatorship would have worked even better. The experiences of the emigrant Gombrowicz and Milan Kundera, who never accepted a hierarchy that subordinated literature to any social model; if it had not done so to a dictatorship, why should it bow to democracy? I should have told him of that starry night on a rural road near Bautzen (Budyšina), when, far from the ears of the Stasi, the East German poet Benedikt Dyrlich and I discussed poetry and its power to rise above ideology and outlive the time in which we lived. I should have described and explained many things. And even then I should have demanded, or at least expected, to be listened to and heard by the person I was addressing. The times in which we live are disinclined to listening attentively, the way an East German poet and I listened to each other on a country road under the stars.



That is a precondition for any dialogue, also European dialogue.

Another condition for understanding in dialogue, including European dialogue, is familiarity with the subject discussed; and the dialogue runs most smoothly if the interlocutors know one another. They do not have to be friends, but having some knowledge of each other's past experiences, of what they have gone through, of the kind of environments in which they have lived, will make it much easier to talk about what they want, what they hope for, and where they are going. In present-day Europe, people speak mainly from their separate and mutual interests. In present-day Europe, people coming from its eastern part generally know what they want: prosperity and certain standards of public life. People coming from its western part know what they want: the eastern European markets, a Europe without borders, a landscape free of political conflict from the Adriatic to the Baltic Sea. Although people with separate interests often reach the best understandings, they are not necessarily the best at engaging in dialogue. And this is what we are after: dialogue, a European dialogue that will be more than merely an arrangement or understanding. An understanding should not only be a sum of interests, or their common denominator, but an attempt for the interlocutors to understand each other in their, so to say, human and historical contexts.

For European dialogue, in particular if literature is to assist in it, mutual curiosity is necessary; as well as a joint struggle against oblivion. Ignorance and

oblivion make people overconfident and arrogant. Literature can contribute much more to European dialogue than can interests. It can contribute a sensitivity to weakness, to being different, and it can contribute memory.

Memory is the operative word here. Only those who think they are building the world anew try to avoid it; or to fake it; or simply to forget about it. It would not bode well for a common future European life if what *Irène Némirovsky* wrote apropos of Paris were to come true: »Everything becomes forgotten in Europe.«

Trying to save the disappeared Irène Némirovsky from the hands of the Nazis, her champions employed all the arguments that came to mind: from her being categorically anti-Bolshevist in her world view, which was true, to her having written very negatively about Jews in her books, which consequently made her, although herself a Jew, anti-Semitic; this was not true. Anyone who knows the first thing about literature also knows that we most often write scathingly, angrily, or grotesquely about the people, characters, and events from our own cultures. The Nazis were unimpressed by the lot. They were building the world anew; they had forgotten all the essentials from their own culture, too. So it didn't matter what she had written or what her views of the world were: although already a Catholic, she had been born a Jew, so she was one of those who no longer had no place in Europe. She had to disappear.

It is much worse that she has disappeared from French, European and literary memories after the birth of the new Europe. Her unpublished texts – and her memory – were salvaged by her daughters, who had miraculously survived. One of them typed up the manuscripts. The novel *French Suite*, which Némirovsky had been writing in the final days before her arrest, was published and it met with triumphal acclaim. More than half a century after her physical and literary disappearance, Irène Némirovsky came back to life with her witty impressions, lyrical fragments and epic strokes, depicting the dangerous era in which she had lived. A happy ending for her literature, at least.

Translated by Tamara Soban
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# REPORT FROM PARTICIPANTS AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE »EUROPE, THE WORLD AND HUMANITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES – DIALOGUE IN CULTURE«,

*who gathered in Ljubljana from 10 to 12 April 2008 during the Presidency of the Republic of Slovenia of the Council of the European Union, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and with the support of the European Commission.*



Europe can undoubtedly be proud today that in the decades since the Second World War it has achieved enviable political, economic and social stability but, at the same time, it must also recognize that it is confronted with numerous factors of destabilization, even with the threat of dehumanization. It is not enough that Europe appears strong enough from the point of view of assuring its own position and interests in the world; if it wishes to remain faithful to its own humanist tradition, it must also open the possibility of understanding the world and understanding within it.

Establishing intercultural dialogue must be accepted as the basis for guaranteeing the future of Europe, which should also ensure a perspective, grounded on human rights for the world within globalization processes.

In order to ensure that establishing dialogue between cultures does not fail in a superficial recognition of diversity and difference, dialogue must also be constantly developed within individual cultures. The various cultural traditions, namely, have only been able to meet and fertilize each other in European history insofar as they have themselves opened their centers to such meeting.

The highest intellectual and creative achievements of individual European nations have also thus contributed most to the development of a common European consciousness.

Insofar as the historical aspect of shaping the European consciousness also seems to us full of conflict relations, today's efforts to overcome them have no other basis than encouraging intellectual and creative dialogue in culture,

which also gives space to dialogue between cultures. The latter of course is not restricted only to Europe but also has universal humanization significance.

This also gives Europe a special responsibility to represent on its own territory values that guarantee the dignity of man and are open to contemporary human challenges, not only from a cultural but also from a political point of view.

In the 20th century, when Europe finds itself in the whirlpool of social cataclysms, awareness has also matured that freedom which does not accept that the freedom of the other diminishes the understanding of humanity. In conditions of economic globalization, this awareness is worth further deepening and broadening through educational, research, cultural and media projects that connect efforts at understanding the complex situation of humanity in the world today.

Intellectual and artistic creativity appears in this perspective to be a key factor of opening intercultural dialogue, especially where this affects, together with its political, also its economic, social and other boundaries and limitations. Without familiarity with artistic and humanist works and ethical values, which bring us together, it is not possible to recognize contents that often go beyond the empty institutionalized framework of intercultural dialogue and fill it with the sense of the living present.



*We the participants hope that the international conference "Europe, the world and humanity in the 21st century: dialogue between cultures – dialogue in culture", also as a central event to mark this year's European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 (on the basis of Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council EU – decision no. 1983/2006/ES of 18 December 2006) will contribute to developing genuine understanding in Europe and the world.*

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