

John Ralston Saul
Opening Ceremony of International PEN Literary Festival – Free the Word!
Linz
22 October 2009

HERR Bundespräsident, Heinz Fischer
HERR Landeshauptmann
Ambassadors of Canada and Japan
Jiří Gruša
Eugene Schoulgin
Wolfgang Greisenegger

This is the first time I have spoken as the newly elected president of International PEN. The honour of standing in the long line of Heinrich Böll, Alberto Moravia, Arthur Miller, Mario Vargas Llosa, Homero Aridjis and, of course, Jiří Gruša, speaks for itself.

Bundespräsident Fischer, the support of leaders such as yourself for the specifics of our cause is invaluable. Let me say, on behalf of us all, that as the representative of the Austrian people and the Austrian state, you do us a great honour by your presence.

We, the hundreds of writers in this hall, cannot make such an exclusive claim about who we represent. But we can say that we represent the thousands of writers and publishers who are members of International PEN in more than one hundred countries. For eighty-eight years PEN has been the leading voice defending and advancing the reality of literature – and therefore defending and advancing the reality of Freedom of Expression. You see us here gathered together at the international level. But the secret of our strength and our ethical core lies at the grassroots with thousands upon thousands of writers in countries of every description around the world.

Across a century of unprecedented violence and disorder we have worked for the unleashed word. Thousands of our members – and other writers who were not able to be members – have died for their expression of the word, have been imprisoned, silenced and driven into exile, which is often another form of silencing. What can a writer do, stripped of her language and public? Exile may represent physical freedom, but it is more often than not a prison of silence.

The wonderfully unforgiving Thomas Bernhard wrote that our societies “lock up the great thinkers in our bookcases, from which they stare at us, sentenced to eternal ridicule.”

The writers of International PEN with great difficulty climb out of those bookcases to work and to speak for the central cause of our civilizations – the free and creative and active use of the word.

None of us can do what we cannot say and write. We cannot even think what we cannot say. We may feel it. But feeling does not replace writing, or thinking, without which we are on the road to populism, not to free expression. The life of a fair society becomes impossible if literature and thus language is imprisoned. It is not only authoritarian systems which fear the imagination. Over the last decade we have seen some of this confusion grow in western democracies. And we see it in today's enormous systems, public and private, driven by the dead language of administrative efficiency. In all these cases it becomes increasingly, in Joseph Roth's phrase, "a matter of indifference whether a man lives or dies." Indifference from the executioner. Indifference from the observer of the execution.

PEN has long focused on keeping writers alive and getting them out of prison. In 2010, our Writers in Prison committee will have been at this for 50 years, with a long line of successes. And yet today we are working for the freedom and safety of 900 writers, imprisoned and in danger. And we are central to the creation of networks which help writers forced into exile to recreate their lives and keep their voices. We help them to break out of their prison of silence. We are working to change the situations which in Mexico have caused the murder of almost 30 writers over the last five years; in Kenya has fed a violence which includes the repeated arrest of our PEN president there; in Cuba keeps 26 writers in prison; in China 40; in Russia involves the murder of writers. All of these writers have risked everything for the word.

And yet, these words do not belong to any of us as writers. Freedom of expression and creativity are as much about reading and hearing and thinking and action as they are about writing and speaking. Writers are among the first to suffer because they are on the front line of expression; but to read and hear you must somehow approach that line.

Writers speak their minds. That's why they are in prison. They speak our mind.

The members have heard me talk about the importance of advancing the role of our three official languages. But also of concentrating on minority languages and cultures. These languages face a new type of threat to freedom of expression. The simple force of international languages can easily fall into what amounts to imperial intellectual structures. Everywhere indigenous and other languages are disappearing, which means literatures and cultures are disappearing. There is no advantage in this to any of us. This is not progress. It is regression from the complexity of different cultures learning how to live together.

Some might say that with the end of this Congress and the beginning of the festival, we are moving from the politics of freedom of expression to the world of the imagination and literature. But that is not so. Literature and Freedom of Expression are one and the same. They are the foundations of International PEN, just as they are central to the creation and strength of any fair society.