

Why PEN International?

It is both an easy and a difficult question! Easy because I am an honorary member of the Swiss PEN. Quite frankly, I think PEN International is one of my favorite international organizations in the world (with the one I co-founded with Alain Navarra-Navassartian of course). Difficult, because I owe it to you, as a group of writers, thinkers, intellectuals, to give a more elaborate answer as to why it is the case.

Why is PEN International one of my favorite organizations? Let me give you just three reasons:

- **# 1:** Because it is a venerable organization, a **venerable institution** with a long history, which was founded in the post world war one period in 1921 in London to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers everywhere. Because it is the organization that brought together some of my favorite writers in Congresses that have found their place in history like the Buenos Aires PEN Congress of 1936 with writers such as Stefan Zweig, Jules Romains, Alfonso Reyes, or Emil Ludwig. At the same time a congress of the Nazi party was taking place in Germany. While the Nazis were burning his books, Zweig did not protest. But Ludwig made a very strong anti-fascist speech. This long history of engagement (today we would probably say "sustainable") also gives the organization credibility, I think.
- **# 2:** Because PEN International is **committed to defending** the most important human rights of all, in my view (and this is of course open for debate): **freedom of expression**.

This is the organization I have worked the most with on freedom of expression issues as "Director, Freedom to Publish" of the International Publishers Association (IPA).

We did trial observation and fact-finding missions together in many countries, including Belarus, Tunisia, Turkey, Vietnam and even Armenia back in 2009. On this fact-finding, I was with my colleague from PEN Norway, Anders Heger. We conducted between 30 and 40 interviews, including that of Mrs. Hakobyan. This led to the drafting of a joint report criticizing the state of freedom of expression in Armenia and making recommendations for improvement, which we submitted to the Universal Periodical Review (UPR) Working Group of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. This was also the beginning of a long, and at times perilous adventure, leading to Yerevan being nominated World Book Capital 2012 in 2010. But I suppose I will not elaborate on this as PEN International is, for a reason I do not understand, not on the jury of World Book Capital.

With my counterpart of the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International, Sara Whyatt, we did a lot of work (some would say *good work*) to promote freedom of expression in as many countries as possible by organizing events defending freedom of expression, going on the ground sometimes in the face of vicious regimes like that of former President of Tunisia Ben Ali, by submitting reports to the UN, by campaigning (sometimes successfully) for the release from prison of writers and/or publishers. The Vice-President of PEN International, Eugene Schoulgin, a man I admire deeply (I will come back to it) and I campaigned for instance relentlessly for the release from prison of Turkish publisher Ragip Zarakolu.

- # 3: Because PEN is **made up of** possibly the people who are **my favorite people in the whole world: Writers**. But not only just writers if I may, but committed writers who see themselves not only as artists, but also as **human rights defenders**. Here "courage" is the word that comes to mind. **I have rarely seen more courageous people in the face of power**. Defending what's right, defending their colleagues, yes in that sense it may seem a bit corporatist, but above all defending a fundamental principle, freedom of expression, in the face of sometimes vicious regimes. In Tunisia for instance, with my colleagues of PEN International we at times defended this principle physically facing the plain-clothed thugs of the regime on several occasions, and not being afraid. Or at least not showing this fear. That said, it is not only physical courage that comes to mind. But also **the courage to speak the truth to power**. Here let me tell you a short story about one of the most courageous things I have ever witnessed in my entire life. It was back in 2005 when western media were still upbeat about Mr. Erdogan and the AKP and the democratization of Turkey. I was attending a dinner organized in Istanbul by the Marmara Group for the EU Ambassador in Ankara with the local business and political elite, sometimes referred to as the white Turks. There a huge U-shaped table. At the tip of it, like a proconsul, the EU ambassador to Turkey, Hansjoerg Kretschmer. Seating at the table: 200 of the most powerful people in Istanbul. During the dinner, there was one keynote speaker: the Vice-President of PEN International, then living - or soon to live - in Istanbul, Norwegian writer Eugene Schoulgin. I will always remember when Eugene took the microphone to talk what was then, already, our daily business, the dozens of freedom of expression trials targeting writers and publishers, sometimes the prison sentences they were facing. Then he dug deeper and became very solemn and gravely asked, yet with passion, a suddenly mesmerized audience: "When the hell are you going to recognize the Armenian genocide?". There was a long silence after this. No one protested for they knew he had spoken the truth. I remember thinking this man is crazy. He wasn't. It was simply an act of courage, panache, and profound intelligence, understanding of the underlying causes of why Turkey has so many human rights issues to this very day. An understanding which most stakeholders, in particular NGOs, too often lack. He was simply speaking the truth to power. Simply brilliant.

I realize this is only a partial view of why I think PEN is not only a beautiful organization, but also a necessary one in today's world as it was 100 years ago for too many writers (today sometimes in the shape of journalists, bloggers, etc.) still face prison sentences, and at least judicial harassment.

There are many other reasons why PEN International is so vital in today's world. There are other committees defending the other goals of the organization. The writers for peace committee defending peace. The translation & linguistics rights committee defending a cause Hyestart, the organization I co-founded with Alain Navarra-Navassartian, also believes in.

The above are all very good reasons why a strong and active PEN Center is very much needed in Armenia where all these issues (freedom of expression, peace, translation, linguistics rights, the role of women) are acutely raised. Armen of Armenia and many of you here believe in the noble cause of translation for instance. A strategy and activities in relation to all these issues need to be put in place and there is no better place than a PEN center to do so. Let me also add that there are not so many international NGOs, which are represented here in Armenia. This golden opportunity should not be missed. Please join PEN and be active in it.