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The P.E.N. Club in Zürich.

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THE P.E.N. CLUB IN ZURICH

By K l a u s M a n n

Zurich, June

Men who have similar interests and ideas ought to get together, once in a while -- even though they may speak different languages. Politicians, dentists, chess-players, spiritualists, fashion-designers, vegetarians, psycho-analysts hold their international meetings in regular intervals -- why should not writers enjoy the same privilege? It was a brilliant idea on the part of some English authors, including the late John Galsworthy and the late H. G. Wells, to found, soon after the end of World War I, an international organization of Playwrights (Poets), Essayists and Novelists -- in short, of men whose weapon and tool, whose pride and livelihood is the pen (respectively the typewriter). Since then, the P.E.N. has established itself as an institution of world-wide prestige and influence. Its International Secretary, Hermon Ould of London, was right when pointing out, at the inaugural meeting of the XIXth International Congress, that "we have earned a reputation for integrity -- the most valuable quality a man or an organization can acquire."

This was the second international P.E.N. Congress to take place since 1938 -- the first one having been held last summer, at Stockholm. It was there, in Sweden, that the international writers were supposed to meet in August, 1939, but were prevented from doing so as History interfered with their peaceful project... And now, not quite two years after the conclusion of hostilities, the intellectual representatives of ^{thirty-four} ~~twenty-seven~~ nations proved capable of discussing matters of common interest in a spirit of tolerance and solidarity. How grateful we are, these days, for any sign of international good will and coöperation! To see intelligent, urbane men and women trying to understand each other, to reconcile their various points of view --

what a reassuring, indeed, what an inspiring sight! It might have struck us as even more reassuring, even more inspiring, if it had not been for the absence of some major nations -- Argentina, Mexico, Japan, Spain, and, alas, the Soviet Union...

As for the others, they seemed to get along nicely enough (apart from a few minor squabbles) and to enjoy themselves on the shores of the picturesque Lake of Zurich. No doubt, the beauty and charm of the city and its surroundings, the lavishness and grace of Swiss hospitality contributed to the success of the meeting. Zurich -- more radiant than ever -- must have impressed many of its foreign guests as a kind of heavenly mirage, an oasis of peace and prosperity in the midst of misery and destruction. The poets, essayists and novelists coming from China, India, Poland, France, Holland, Yugoslavia, England, and other impoverished countries showed themselves most appreciative of the accomplishments of Swiss cuisine, while even delegates of wealthy nations, like Sweden, Brazil and the U.S., could not help admiring the exquisite taste of Swiss-made goods displayed in the shopwindows. I shall never forget the curious mixture of pride and embarrassment with which a German poet, ~~Johannes R. Becher of Berlin~~ -- admitted to the Congress in a "consultative" capacity --, showed me a pair of shoes he had bought himself in Zurich. "They are wonderful -- aren't they?" he said, awe-stricken. "But can I dare to wear them in Germany? I'm afraid it would be suicide. Why, my best friend wouldn't hesitate to murder me, for the sake of such magnificent shoes..."

Although taking place in a German-speaking city, the Congress had adopted French and English as its two official languages. That is not to say that German was ruled out altogether. The president of the Zurich P.E.N. Committee, Prof. Robert Faesi -- a noted Swiss poet and scholar -- opened ^{the} ~~the~~ inaugural meeting with a speech in three languages

(English, German and French), invoking, most appropriately, Goethe's ideal of Weltliteratur (World Literature) with all its unifying, peace-promoting implications. And the only full-length lecture offered to the polyglot gathering was delivered in German by a German-born author -- Thomas Mann, whose speech on "Nietzsche in the Light of our Experience" followed the introductory addresses of Prof. Faesi, Hermon Ould, and Philipp Etter, President of the Swiss Confederation.

The German problem -- or, to be more precise, the question of whether or not the German P.E.N. Centre should be re-established -- caused a good deal of heated discussion; a whole business session, morning and afternoon, was devoted to that controversial issue. While a number of speakers, including Thomas Mann and members of the German Emigrant Group of London, maintained that German liberal writers should be given a chance to renew their international contacts, certain other delegations took a different view. Together with the Palestine and Yiddish Centres, the representatives of formerly German-occupied countries protested against the admission of a German group. Max Deauville, speaking for the French-Belgians, declared that he saw no reason to trust the Germans, considering the appalling crimes they committed against civilization in general and, in particular, ~~and~~ against his, Deauville's, nation. Another member of the Belgian group, Louis Piérard of Bruxelles, reminded the assembly of a similar debate which took place about twenty-five years ago, soon after the end of "l'autre guerre." Then, like today, the former enemies and victims of Germany were asked to prove ^{their} reconciliatory spirit by admitting the establishment of a German P.E.N. Centre -- a group of "reliably democratic" German intellectuals, to be headed by that great liberal poet and champion of humanitarian ideas, Gerhart Hauptmann. -- "And how did most of those 'reliable' German writers behave when Hitler came to power?" ^(M. Piérard) demanded bitterly. "The

same Gerhart Hauptmann who had been described to us as a paragon of republican virtue turned out to be an opportunist and a coward who acquiesced in the atrocities of Nazism. Let us be more careful this time! ~~Any decision we may make, at this early point, is likely to be rash, premature.~~ Let us wait another year or two!" -- This suggestion was backed by the Guest of Honor of the Dutch delegation, J.C. Bloem of Amsterdam. Mr. Bloem -- one of Holland's most distinguished poets -- was applauded by the Belgians, ~~French~~, Czechs, Poles and others, as he referred to a "certain German mentality" which has by no means ceased to exist but continues to be a potential danger to the peace of the world.

Less intransigent than the representatives of the small European nations was the French delegate, Vercors. One of the intellectual leaders of the Resistance movement, the author of Le ~~Silence~~ Silence de la Mer was cordially cheered as he rose to explain his own view and the attitude of his group. "Obviously," he said, "it is not quite easy for us to consider this matter in a detached and objective way -- in fact, I cannot help feeling that it is rather cruel to make us consider it at all, at this early point. Certain painful memories are still too fresh in our minds..." -- Yet, the French speaker was able to announce that he and his colleagues had no objection to ^{an} ~~the~~ immediate re-establishment of ^{the} ~~a~~ German group -- under the strict control of an international commission.

As the English delegate, Mrs. Phyllis Bentley, supported the French proposition, the assembly was asked to decide by formal vote whether a small group of German writers, to be selected by a Control Commission, should be allowed to join, or re-join, the International P.E.N. Club. Twenty-one official delegates came out for the motion, while two (the representatives of the Yiddish and Palestine Centres) voted against it. There were nine abstentions -- a silent expression of doubt or disapproval on the part of the formerly German-occupied

countries and some other nations, like China, Scotland and South Africa.

The Resolution passed, but the discussion continued -- in fact, it became more and more violent. There was a lot of bitter arguing about the composition and the competences of the Control Commission, which the Belgians and Dutch wanted to be dominated by representatives of the liberated nations. So stormy grew the dispute that the chairman -- it was Jean Schlumberger, Guest of Honor of the French group, who happened to preside over this dramatic meeting -- thought it advisable to interrupt the session and to suggest a "cooling-off" pause of ten minutes or so. (M. Schlumberger, by the way, did a remarkably good job in directing the heated debate. A delicate-looking man in his late seventies, the well-known novelist and literary critic -- one of the founders of the Nouvelle Revue Française -- commanded enough authority to keep a tense situation under complete control. His diplomatic skill was indeed so impressive that my neighbour -- Playwright Elmer Rice, of the New York Centre -- asked me, with a mixture of suspicion and admiration: "Who is he, anyhow? Metternich?" But there is no resemblance, really...)

Finally, by way of compromise, it was agreed ~~upon~~ that two Germans -- one German of Germany and one of the Emigrant Group -- will ~~be ad-~~ ^{constitute} ~~mitted to~~ the Control Commission, together with the International Secretary, Mr. Ould, and three delegates from ex-occupied countries: one Scandinavian; one Dutchman, Frenchman or Belgian; one Czech or Pole. No German writer will be ~~considered acceptable~~, ^(admitted to the P.E.N.) unless at least four of the six commissioners endorse his election; in other words, no German writer can join the ~~P.E.N.~~ ^{organization} against the will of the three "liberated" delegates in the Control Commission.

The three German writers who acted as "Consultants" at the XIXth International Congress, are supposed to form the nucleus of the new German P.E.N. Centre. They are: Poet Johannes R. Becher of Berlin,

who spent the whole period from 1933 to 1945 as an exile in the Soviet Union; Novelist Ernst Wiechert of Wolfratshausen in Bavaria, whom the Nazis sent to a concentration camp on account of his unorthodox views; and Erich Kästner of Munich, a popular satirist whose books were banned under the Hitler regime and who is now the literary editor of an American-operated German paper.

Hermon Ould, in his opening address, stressed the purely literary, unpolitical character of the International P.E.N. Club. The members of the organization, he pointed out, are free to adhere to any religious or political creed, as long as their ideas and actions remain compatible with the basic principles incorporated in the P.E.N. charter. The International Secretary warned most emphatically against any possible attempt to use the Club in the interest of some non-literary cause or movement. A forum and meeting-place for creative, independent minds au-dessus de la mêlée^e, the P.E.N. is to keep away from the controversies and rivalries of the political sphere.

But as politics have become an integral part of modern man's thought and life, literature, or the conversations of literati, can hardly be "unpolitical." After all, a discussion among international men of letters does not take place on a celestial plane or in a vacuum, but in this troubled, messy world of ours. And if the most precarious, most explosive issue -- namely, the Soviet Union -- was carefully avoided throughout the whole congress, the example of the German debate demonstrated only too clearly the ^(political) excitability of what we may call the intellectual vanguard and elite.

It is true, most of the ill temper seemed to have spent itself in the course of that particular session; the application of the Austrians for re-admission to the P.E.N. was granted without any argument. It was the Polish representative, Jan Parandowski of Lublin, who welcomed the first delegate of the new Austrian group,

Franz Theodor Czokor, an anti-Fascist poet and dramatist who escaped to Warsaw when the Nazis invaded his country.

But ~~if the Austrian motion was handled in a spirit of understanding and cordiality, another critical situation developed when it came to discussing a Resolution submitted by the delegation from Palestine --~~ *—(endangered the peace again.)* Va'agov Cahan and Reuben Grossman of Tel Aviv. According to their draft, the Congress was not only to express its sympathy with "the great misfortune that befell the Jewish people," but also "to declare to the peoples of the world that as long as no positive solution is found for the problem of the national and political redemption of the remnants of Israel, the mark of Cain will not be wiped off the brow of mankind."

~~The uproar caused by this motion was at least as violent as the one following the German proposition.~~ If M. Schlumberger had had to preside over an agitated ~~and quarrelsome~~ gathering, the chairman of the Palestine session found himself confronted by an equally tense situation. Fortunately, the man in charge of that particular meeting -- Denis Saurat, recently appointed Vice President of the International P.E.N. -- proved quite capable of upholding discipline, even under rather trying circumstances. An anglicized Frenchman -- author of a brilliant book on Milton; formerly director of the Institut Français at London, now active there as a professor for Romance languages --, Mr. Saurat is perfectly bilingual and, furthermore, a person of unusual tact and sensitivity. Not only with patience and politeness but also with real sympathy and understanding, he listened to both the Jewish spokesman and his Arabic antagonist, ^gthe delegate of the newly established Lebanese Centre, ~~representing the Moslem point of view, criticized certain phrases contained in the Palestine text -- references to the "creative genius of the Jewish race" and "the right of the Jewish nation to deal with others on a basis of equality."~~ In the P.E.N. declaration submitted by the gentleman from Lebanon, a stern warning against the "terroristic tactics of certain minorities" (obviously

alluding to the Zionist Underground) was to be incorporated, along with a formal expression of sympathy with the plight of the Jewish people.

After a good deal of rather turbulent talk, it was decided to put off any further discussion of the delicate case, which is to be re-opened next year, at the XXth International Congress. The assembly in Zurich however, demonstrated its cordial feelings towards the Jewish people in general and Jewish writers in particular by acclaiming a message from the Yiddish Centre (New York). "The extermination of the Jewish people has decimated also Yiddish literature," the Resolution states. "Only one tenth of Yiddish writers have survived in Europe. This historic outrage must penetrate the consciousness of civilized mankind..."

Contemporary Yiddish literature -- the cable message continues -- mirrors and dramatizes the tragedy of Israel in our time. But Yiddish authors find their audience dwindling, even in Palestine. It is therefore necessary to translate as many Yiddish-written books as possible into other idioms, lest those works be lost to the world. ^{Yd}as P.E.N. has pledged active help to the UNESCO plan to promote the literatures of smaller nations by increasing translation, the Yiddish Centre hopes for, and requests, adequate representation of Yiddish literature within the framework of that international project.

If the International P.E.N. Congress had to face a certain amount of difficult and controversial issues, there were plenty of other questions that could be settled in perfect harmony. The news that the great poet of Belgium, Maurice Maeterlinck, had accepted the presidency of the organization, was received with unanimous applause. Equally cordial and spontaneous was the reaction when Ben Huebsch, speaking for the American group, invited the International P.E.N. to hold its next meeting in New York.

Everybody seemed pleased to see a representative of the United Nations -- Mr. Duckworth Barker, Director of the Information Centre at Geneva -- who suggested that a message be sent to the Secretary General of the U.N., reaffirming the determination of all P.E.N. members to work in the interest of peace and international understanding.

Everybody listened with respect and sympathy to the representative of UNESCO, Stephen Spender, who reported, in a remarkably lucid and informative manner, on the past activities and future projects of his organization -- that "world-coordinating brain," as he put it --, dwelling in particular on the desirability and feasibility of closer collaboration between UNESCO and the P.E.N.

And everybody was moved by the grave and candid appeal which the president and guest of honor of the Italian group, Ignazio Silone of Rome, addressed to the assembly, at a special meeting in Bâle. The author of Fontamara -- a man who has proved his readiness to suffer for his ideals -- admonished his fellow-writers to beware of the two cardinal vices corrupting intellectual life in our time: Complacency and Cynicism -- that nihilistic faithlessness which we thought a special characteristic of Nazism, but which ~~has~~ survived the fall of the Hitler regime. "Everywhere, in all countries," Silone said, "this nihilism is today noticeable, in a more or less virulent, more or less dangerous form. As far as I can see, there is no political party, no church, no institution which has not been affected by this moral plague."

It behooves the creative mind to ~~remain free~~ ^{liberate himself} of both skepticism and pharissism. The true mission and function of the intellectual is not to promote certain ideologic programs or national interests. ("At certain literary meetings," the speaker ^{observed} ~~suggested~~, "one can hear, these days, a lot of ominous and irresponsible talk about a new ideologic crusade...") We can do our duty and live up to our vocation only by

remaining loyal to that tragic and complex reality which is human life. "The archetypal image of this reality is, to us Christians, the Cross. On the plane of personal experience, it is the anxiety and disquietude of the human heart, which no progress, no social or political development will ever silence."

Words of such simplicity and seriousness cannot but leave a lasting echo in the minds of a responsive audience. The Congress continued according to ~~the~~^a thoughtfully pre-arranged schedule -- including a trip on the lake of Zurich ("weather permitting"), a visit to the Landesmuseum, a fashion show, and a farewell banquet ("dinner jacket or dark suit, ladies preferably evening dress"). It was fun to see old friends again and to make new ones; to talk shop and listen to witty speeches. ("Do you know who that guy on the platform is? Prince Wilhelm of Sweden. In ~~the~~^a person! Yes, he's a writer, too. And rather a brilliant speaker...") -- But in the midst of all these cheerful goings-on, a poet from Peru or a novelist from Latvia may suddenly have remembered ^{Silone's} ~~the~~ stirring appeal: ~~Erasmo Silone addressed to the international writers:~~ not to indulge in bigoted dogmatism or cynical indifference; not to betray certain basic ideals and truths -- however inconvenient or dangerous ^{loyalty} such ~~as~~ may become, at times --; not to lose faith in man's improvable and perfectibility -- in spite of all his present follies, sins and crimes.

Try to remain confident, even while accepting the tragic complexities of our situation! -- That ^{is} ~~was~~ the advice the Italian delegate gave ^{to} his colleagues, at the XIXth Congress of the International P.E.N. Club. -- Try to remain hopeful -- malgré tout, trotz allem, after all...

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