



15 November 2009 International PEN Writers in Prison Day

Round up of PEN Centre Activities

December 2009

On and around 15 November 2009, International PEN's membership of writers worldwide, celebrated the courage of their colleagues who have suffered in the practice of their right to freedom of expression.

Activities centred around five emblematic cases: Cameroon – Lapiro de Mbanga, Iran – Maziar Bahari, China – Liu Xiaobo, Russia – Natalia Estemirova, and Mexico Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Ávila. Also calls were made for justice for the 35 writers and journalists who were murdered in the past 12 months. For details go to: [Day of the Imprisoned Writer](#)

This year's celebrations were especially successful. There were events, many of them sell-outs, with readings, performances and music in Sweden, Canada, Australia, Belgium, Catalunya, Italy, Denmark, England, Scotland, Ghana, Kenya, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, the Netherlands and Norway. Nobel Literature Laureates lent their support, with the 2009 winner, **Herta Müller** standing up for writers under attack in Russia at an event in Berlin, and **Nadine Gordimer**, **Wole Soyinka** and **J. M. Coetzee** contributing to a book of writings for Swedish PEN. Other world famous writers took part, including **Michael Ondaatje** in Canada, and **Germaine Greer** in Sydney. Many of these events featured an "Empty Chair" signifying the absence of a writer who could not attend due to imprisonment or even murder. Events included debates on censorship in China, Iran, Kenya, Ghana, Turkey, Fiji and New Zealand.

This was also an opportunity to award writers who have made particularly sacrifices in the past year. Awards were granted by PEN Canada to the Mexican journalist, **Lydia Cacho**, by the Independent Chinese PEN Centre to **Prof Xu Xerong**, detained in China, and the Ossietzky Award in Norway to the Palestinian journalist, **Mohammed Omer. Maziar Bahari – Iran, Irakli Kakabadze – Georgia, Sonali Samarasinghe – Sri Lanka, Dawit Isaac – Eritrea, and Chi Dang – Vietnam**, were all granted the Oxfam Novib PEN Free Expression award in The Hague. **Dawit Isaac** was also granted the Tuchkolsky Award in Sweden.

There was excellent coverage of the events in many countries. New technology was used extensively, with lively website contributions, sent mass protest emails, and even a Twitter campaign, all serving to spread the message.

For more, see details below and visit the PEN Centres websites.

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Summary of PEN Centre Activities for 15 November 2009 Day of the Imprisoned Writers

December 2009

The following are based on reports received from Centres. Should any PEN Centre activities have been omitted, do please contact Sara Whyatt:

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Australian PEN Centres

Sydney PEN marked the day of the Imprisoned Writer with the concluding event of the Centre's three-year "Voices: 3 Writers" series. The final lecture in the series featured Indigenous Australian author and barrister Professor **Larissa Behrendt** speaking on the subject of "Legacy" and in conversation with **Germaine Greer**. The event also featured an "Empty Chair" that highlighted the absence of the detained Uighur writer and honorary member of the Centre, **Nurmuhemmet Yasin**, and participants were encouraged to sign letters on his behalf. **Adelaide PEN** marked the Day of the Imprisoned Writer with a mass-emailing to organisations, and other interested parties, aimed at raising awareness of the work PEN does and the fate of writers who have been persecuted or imprisoned around the world. With the help of the South Australian Writers' centre, the email reached 869 people, and received a number of responses, falling either in the 'I wasn't aware of this, thanks for putting me in the picture' category, or the 'keep up the excellent work'. In **Cairns**, Queensland, PEN members joined forces with the Book Creators Circle and held an international launch on PEN day and had an "empty chair" with the brochure face pinned to it. It was a great launch of BCC and assisted to raise the profile of PEN too.

Belgian (Flanders) PEN

On 15 November, Belgian Flanders PEN held an event "Caged: Writers in Need" that featured the leading Chinese theatre director, **Sha Yexin**, a signator of Charter 08 and writer **Ma Jian** who spoke of repression and censorship in China. They were interviewed by the leading journalist **Catherine Vuylsteke** who has written on Chinese issues. The interview can be seen on this link:

<http://www.bozar.be/activity.php?id=9271&selectiondate=2009-11-15>

For an article by Ma Jian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/02/tiananmen-square-protests-1989-china>

For an interview with Sha Yexin: <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2009/05/hbc-90004993>

PEN Canada

PEN Canada marked Day by granting the One Humanity Award to Mexican journalist **Lydia Cacho**, an award-winning author, journalist and women's rights activist. Following the publication of her first book in 2005, on child pornography in Mexico, she was illegally arrested, detained and ill-treated before being subjected to a year-long criminal defamation lawsuit. She was cleared of all charges in 2007 but continues to be the target of harassment and threats. The award was given on at the PEN Canada Literary Evening with author **Michael Ondaatje** and singer-songwriter **Bruce Cockburn** at a sell out event. Also recognised was the ongoing harassment and murder of journalists in Mexico, with the Empty Chair that evening representing anthropologist and poet, **Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Ávila**, beaten to death in southern Mexico, in July 2008. The PEN Canada One Humanity Award honours someone "whose work has transcended the boundaries of national divides and inspired

connections across cultures. To read more as well as to hear a moving interview with Lydia Cacho, go to www.pencanada.ca

Catalan PEN

Catalan PEN hosted events in **Barcelona and Augramant**, as well as the Italian town of Potenza, in coordination with the Barcelona City of Refuge and the **Shaharazad Project** of the European Union carried by the International Cities of Refuge Network. Invitation leaflets and posters were displayed in public libraries and bookshops. The poster was designed by acclaimed Catalan photographer, **Eulàlia Valldosera**. To view these wonderful posters and other materials, go to: <http://www.pencatala.cat/actualitat/dia-lescriptor-empresonat-2009>

Danish PEN

This year Danish PEN had a stand at the Copenhagen Book Fair, Bogforum, that took place 13-15 November 13-15 where the Centre displayed posters with photos, names and the stories of the five featured writers, a table with postcards with the text of Article 19 in several languages (English, Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Arabic and ... Danish) printed on the front and two different texts on the back – either a text to the writer or her/his family or a text protesting to the authorities. Members of the public sent messages on these cards, paying a donation to cover mailing, and they were put into a large glass container so that everybody could see the pile of cards grow. Over 300 persons signed cards this year. Danish and foreign writers residing in Denmark were given 10 minutes to use the free word. Every hour during three days a new writer read a text of her own or by others relating to literature and freedom of expression. Danish PEN closed the book fair with an auction of books, pictures and other effects donated by writers and artists. The main pieces were a handwritten poem by Denmark's most popular poet, **Benny Andersen**, and an original signed drawing by **Dario Fo**, made specially for Danish PEN. The event also raised interest in a new anthology launched at the book fair, *Herfra min verden går* (*From here my world goes* – a quote from one of Hans Christian Andersen's most loved poems, a song called Danmark, mit Fædreland, Denmark, My Fatherland, 1850). Twenty three foreign writers from all over the world living in Denmark have contributed with poems, short stories, chapters from novels – well known and almost unknown writers. The purpose of the book, edited by **Anders Jerichow, Mille Rode** and **Dina Yafasova**, is to show the rich and often overlooked literary potential we have right here on our doorsteps and to promote foreign writers living in Denmark. See Danish PEN website www.pen.dk

English PEN

English PEN, the founding centre of the international association of writers, held its annual service at St Bride's Church, Fleet Street. This service, led by **Canon David Meara**, aims to raise awareness of the plight of writers under attack. With music from the fantastic St Bride's choir, and readings from the work of English PEN's imprisoned and persecuted Honorary Members performed by actors **Henry Goodman, Jasper Britton, Claire Price** and **Sarah Smart**, was another moving evening at the spiritual home of printing and the media. www.englishpen.org

French PEN

The French PEN Centre focussed its attentions on the plight of the Vietnamese writer, **Trần Khai Thanh Thuy**, arrested in October for publicly supporting dissidents on trial. She has long been subjected to harassment, and was imprisoned from April 2007 to January 2008 for her outspoken views. To see French PEN's website, go to <http://www.penclub.fr/spip.php?article22>. For more on Trần Khai Thanh Thuy go to <http://www.englishpen.org/writersinprison/writersunderthreat/vietnam/trankhaithanhthuy/>

German PEN

On the 17th of November, German PEN invited the public to have a look on the the situation in the Iran behind the headlines of the demonstrations and arrests of the past summer. Four famous actors and actresses read **Iranian poetry** of the past fifty years covering the period after the coup against the last democratically elected Iranian prime minister Mohamed Mossadegh in Teheran in 1953. There followed half a century of Iranian literature that chronicled oppression and human suffering under changing rulers, which also made the writers their victims. The title of the evening was "Poetry is Freedom..." The texts were compiled by Iranian friends of German PEN and the Iranian poet **Said**, now living in Munich, who also presented the program held in cooperation with the Berlin Literature festival. The event was sold out.

German Speaking Writers Abroad

This centre held a panel discussion within the Berlin House of Literature on the topic of **Russia and the Free Word**. Speakers included authors **Doris Leiber** and **Boris Schapiro**, as well as **Vera Ammer** of the German branch of the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, and the President of the St Petersburg Centre of PEN, and moderated by the German Speaking Writers Abroad WiPC head, **Freya Klier**. A highlight of the event was the presence of **Herta Müller**, who just two weeks earlier had been announced as the winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Literature who spoke in solidarity with writers under threat in Russia. For more go to:

http://www.exilpen.de/HTML/PM/pm_15nov_091119.html

Ghanaian PEN

Ghanian PEN marked the Day of the Imprisoned Writer with an event around statement protesting the **killings of 35 writers and journalists** since the last Day of the Imprisoned Writer in November 2008. The Centre also focussed on a disturbing rise of harassment, jailing and violent abuses against journalists in the West Africa sub region.

Independent Chinese PEN Centre

On 15 November, the ICPC awarded its 2009 Writers in Prison Prize to Dr **Xu Zerong**, and elected thirteen other writers held in China as Honorary Members. Xu has been detained since 2000 for having written on Chinese Communist Party history and in particular China's relations with South East Asia. He has a doctorate from St Anthony's College, Oxford. For more read:

<http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/antonians/southchina.html>

PEN Kenya

Staged an event in Nairobi - **Freedom of Expression as Anthology: Exposing Barriers to Free Expression**. The theme was to show that in Africa and other parts of the so called developing world, the understanding of freedom of expression needs to be expanded beyond State oppression; poverty in its many manifestations impinges on, or even stifles, the individual's ability to freely express themselves. This phenomenon makes understanding freedom of expression a very complex matter, and discussing it is like reading an anthology. That is why we have the title Freedom of Expression as Anthology. The event was targeted towards an audience of writers, potential donors and sponsors, publishers and the general public.

Netherlands PEN/Foundation PEN Emergency Fund

The Crossing Borders world music and literary festival hosted the **Oxfam Novib PEN Award for Free Expression** in the Hague where five writers were commemorated for their struggle for free expression: **Maziar Bahari – Iran, Irakli Kakabadze – Georgia, Sonali Samarasinghe – Sri Lanka, Dawit Isaac – Eritrea, and Chi Dang – Vietnam**. Chi Dang attended the award ceremony on behalf of all five. There were also poetry readings by Dutch speaking poets **Erik Jan Harmens, Peter Holvoet Hanssen, Ilse Starkenburg, Else Moors and Ruth Lasters**. The Iraqi poet **Rodaan Al Galidi** and Dutch poet of Moroccan origin, **Mustafa Stitou** also read. The event was hosted by the noted writer Manon Uphoff, with the award being presented by journalist **Paul Rosenmoller**. The event closed with a performance by the amazing Cote D'Ivoire singer, **Dobet Gnahore** and her band. For more go to: <http://www.crossingborder.nl/page.php?ID=30&lang=uk>

New Zealand PEN

Numerous events were held all over New Zealand by the NZ PEN Centre in collaboration with the NZ Society of Authors, and the NZ branch of Amnesty International to celebrate 15 November Courage Day. In **Northland**, a display was set up at the Whangarei library, with a large photocopied map of the world that was surrounded by the countries and names of imprisoned/murdered writers and postcards were distributed. A celebratory lunch was held where participants were encouraged to dress in costume's signifying courage. There were some interesting outfits! There were readings and postcards sent to writers featured on this year's Greetings Card list. A similar event was held in the Dunedin City library in Otago/Southland where writers gathered for an animated discussion and sent letters to prisoners.

In **Auckland** there was an afternoon of Poetry, Prose, Music and Politics. Participants were invited to come along take up their pens and write a letter to help bring about the release of an imprisoned writer. They were also encouraged to meeting with human rights groups, enjoy live music, (**Jessica Fong & Eli Moore**) food, drinks and books. Writers were also encouraged to bring their own poems which were posted on the walls and a selection of which were read out by a well known actor, and one of which to receive an award through a lucky draw. The event also provided an opportunity for Fijian rights activists to speak of the repression of the press in Fiji, and for Fijian musicians and artists to perform.

In **Wellington**, **Dr Nelson Wattie** organised an impressive line-up for a debate which he chaired, entitled "Does New Zealand enjoy full freedom of speech?" The panel consisted of **Nicky Hager** (an investigative journalist and author with a strong focus on environmental issues), **Bill Hastings** (Chief Censor), **Denis Welch** (left-leaning media commentator, journalist and author), and **Maureen Birchfield** (biographer). There was a good turn out with discussion ranging from the 1940's when the idea of *reds under the bed* led to Stazi Police style surveillance tactics in New Zealand. Nicky Hager spoke about public servants, academics, scientists and the media having their freedom of speech curtailed. This led to a lively response from the audience and one academic reporting that job tenure nowadays and the commitments required, preclude true freedom in research and personal intellectual development. <http://www.authors.org.nz/wawcs0138552/1n-nz-pen-and-freedom-page.html>

PEN Norway

Norwegian PEN marked the day by awarding its "Ossietzky-prize" for "outstanding achievements within the field of free expression" to Palestinian journalist **Mohammed Omer** at an event held at the House of Literature in Oslo on 16 November. Norwegian PEN also awarded its first honorary prize to its former president, translator **Kjell Olaf Jensen**. During this event, the newly arrived "writer of refuge" in the city of Oslo, Kenyan writer **Philo Ikonya**, read from her own texts. Mohammed Omer is a Palestinian journalist who has written for the Norwegian weekly "Morgenbladet" and worked for the "Norwegian People's Aid" in Gaza. He also writes for international media. Omer was honored as "the voice of the voiceless" and his reports were described as a "humane record of the injustice imposed on a community forgotten by much of the world." On returning to Gaza from a visit to London, he suffered beatings by Israeli soldiers and is now undergoing medical treatment in the Netherlands. Kjell Olaf Jensen is a translator and critic and former president of Norwegian PEN for more than ten years. For almost two decades he has been at the forefront in the defence of the free word. Philo Ikonya is an author, human rights activist and President of Kenyan PEN. She was recently arrested and subsequently released for taking part in a peaceful protest about hyperinflation. Philo Ikonya has been threatened and harassed and can no longer live and work in her home country. She is now a "cities of asylum"-writer in Oslo.

http://www.norskpen.no/php/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=457&Itemid=113 Also various press articles:

Dagbladet:

http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/11/12/nyheter/utenriks/norsk_folkehjelp/gaza/mohammed_omer/9004319/ Dagsavisen <http://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/article452292.ece>

Aftenposten <http://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/article3376172.ece>

Ny tid <http://www.nytid.no/nyheter/artikler/20091112/omer-far-ossietzky-prisen/>

Morgenbladet

<http://www.morgenbladet.no/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091113/OAKTUELT/711139939>

Scottish PEN

Scottish PEN held an evening for imprisoned writers at Strathclyde University at which award winning poet **Tom Pow** and Chilean musician and poet **Carolos Arredondon** gave readings and performances. The focus was on PEN's Americas Campaign, highlighting the region's alarming rise in arrests, persecution and violence towards writers, with a special focus on **Ivan Hernandez Carillo** of Cuba, and **Lydia Cacho** of Mexico, both Honorary Members of the Centre. For more go to:

www.scottishpen.org

PEN Sweden

This year Swedish PEN gave its 2009 Tucholsky Award to the Eritrean author and journalist **Dawit Isaak** who has been in prison since 2001. The award was presented by Minister of Culture, **Mrs Lena Adelsohn-Liljeroth**, at a ceremony held in Stockholm. The Tucholsky Award is presented each year by Swedish PEN to a persecuted, exiled, threatened author or journalist. The Award is named after the author Kurt Tucholsky, who in the early 1930s fled to Sweden from the Nazis in Hitler's Germany. While awaiting his residence permit he committed suicide, in 1935. He was buried in Mariefred. This year's the award giving event was a sell out and featured readings, drama, music and choreography. Nobel Literature Prize winners **Nadine Gordimer**, **J.M. Coetzee** and **Wole Soyinka** contributed especially written texts for the event. The Stockholm Dramaten theatre performed Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. There was a performance from the noted Senegalese choreographer and musician, **Papa N'daiye** and a booklet containing writings from Coetzee, Soyinka, Chengerai Hove, Chimamuanda Ngozi Adichie, Per Wastberg, Ola Arsmo, Henning

Mankell, Azar Mahloujian, Stefan Helgesson, Eugene Schoulgin and others was made available at the event. Visit: http://www.pensweden.org/English_home.htm

Swiss Centres – Swiss German, Suisse Romnde, and Swiss Italian Reto-romansh

This year, the three Swiss PEN Centres invited **Pinar Selek**, Turkish writer, sociologist, feminist and peace activist who spent time in prison and **Susanne Scholl**, author of fiction and non-fiction, member of Austrian PEN and former correspondent of Austrian Television ORF in Moscow to share their experiences and knowledge of freedom of expression in Turkey, Russia and Chechnya. Events were held in the Italian, French and German speaking parts of Switzerland – in Lugano, Geneva and Zurich. They attracted audiences interested in freedom of expression, human rights in Europe with regard to Turkey's wish to join the EU and the constant threat and pressure on journalists and writers in Russia. Pupils at the Lugano High School the Swiss Italian and Retoromansh Centre who traditionally visit on Writers in Prison Day held a lively debate about how to support writers in danger and uphold freedom of expression. The event in Zurich was transmitted live by the independent local radio station LoRa, accessible on their website www.lora.ch. In Geneva every single chair at the venue of the Swiss Press Club was taken. After an introduction, short readings, statements and back ground information were made by Pinar Selek and Susanne Scholl a lively discussion ensued. For more on Selek go to her website: <http://www.pinarselek.com/public/destek.aspx?id=45> A number of articles were published in the Geneva electronic and print media on the Day of the Imprisoned Writer by Suisse Romande PEN member Nguyen Hoang Bao Viet: on Protect Online www.protectionline.org/spip.php?article8893, *Le Courrier* and *Le Temps* which also covered the situation for writers detained in **Vietnam**.

PEN USA West

PEN USA West took up new technology in an innovative **Day of the Imprisoned Writer Twitter Campaign** which had very good results. On November 15 in commemoration of Day of the Imprisoned Writer, the centre posted 88 “tweets” at www.twitter.com/penusa over the course of eight hours which accounted for hundreds of case studies concerning journalists and other writers around the world who have been persecuted, imprisoned, harassed, and otherwise threatened for exercising their simple freedom to write. These case studies are reproduced at www.penusa.org/dotiw, a file to which the Centre will continue to add content to in the future and continue to post on Twitter. During this time, 13 Twitter users reposted our tweets, which brings the total number of potential readers to approximately 3,910! We will be looking at how Twitter can be used in future campaigns. <http://www.penusa.org/dotiw> and <http://twitter.com/penusa>

Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee

The TLRC of International PEN celebrated the day by publishing the works of the acclaimed Macedonian poet **Jovan Kotski**, who spent time in prison, on its Diversity website. Over the next 2-3 years the website will build its collection of literary texts, old and new, including some from writers in prison. <http://www.diversity.org.mk/>