

## **Standing Aside From Politics**

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When PEN was founded in London in 1921 by Mrs CA Dawson Scott, with John Galsworthy combining the roles of chairman and president, the original plan for a dining club where the English members would entertain foreign writers visiting London, was rapidly enlarged and transmuted Galsworthy wrote. "Anything that makes for international understanding and peace is to the good...." and the early members seem to have agreed with him. The well-known writers joined Mary Webb, Violet Hunt, May Sinclair, Rebecca West and Radclyffe Hall, Conrad, Chesterton, Yeats, Barrie, Anatole France and Shaw, a reluctant recruit. And, though it was agreed that PEN was to "Stand aside from politics," its charter soon expressed concepts of one humanity living in peace, the universality of literature and works of art, the need to dispel race, class and national hatreds and to oppose the suppression of freedom of expression and censorship in times of peace.

The prospect of PEN in every capital city appealed, and the writers of other nations joined enthusiastically: though not all the centres formed were to London's taste. The French members were thought to be too young and too left wing, the Americans too exclusive.

In 1926, when the yearly international meeting assumed the dignity of a congress, writers from fifteen nations met in Berlin, and PEN was still growing. Gradually the idea that a centre could represent a language and, or, a literature took root.: Basque and Catalan, Irish and Scottish centres appeared. Belgium was permitted two. Yugoslavia four.

The organization was still run on a minute income from two tiny offices in London. Galsworthy approved of this frugality, and rejected suggestions of grants and club houses. "If PEN is not an idea it is nothing," he said. "Tie it to bricks and mortar and it will shrink and may perish." The "idea" was about to be challenged.

In January 1932 the London committee launched an appeal to "All Governments," concerning religious and political prisoners and, complaining of the little prominence given to it by the press. Galsworthy tried to interest a member of the cabinet. They also protested about two Italian writers in prison, but the Rome Centre assured London that the writers were there for their political activities *not* their writings and so the matter was dropped.

In 1933, when Galsworthy died and HG Wells was elected president, the news of the persecution of the German intellectuals reached London. The German Centre tried to soothe the London Committee, telling them not to believe "the alarmist views being put about," but this time they stood their ground and demanded a statement on Ernst Toller, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, all of whom were reported to be in exile. As alarm grew the committee "met informally in Mr Wells's flat." They decided to consult the other centres by telegram, and to tell the press they were doing this. Then they issued a strong protest against the treatment of intellectuals by Hitler's regime and came to the conclusion that "if German PEN *has* been reconstructed in accordance with nationalistic ideas, it must be expelled."

Then, still in 1933, came the Burning of the Books and the German Centre failed to protest. Meeting in Dubrovnic for its eleventh international assembly, PEN was suddenly a very different organization. *The Manchester Guardian* reported:

It is ironical that a meeting of writers pledged to stand aside from politics should have been the occasion of one of the stormiest of political demonstrations. The burning of books in Germany and the fact that the greater number of well-known German writers are living in exile cannot be ignored by an association which has always worked for the free interchange of ideas through literature.

Nearly four hundred persons representing twenty-six countries, were present, including delegates from Germany, Palestine, and the Yiddish Centres, and it was inevitable that sooner or later the high tension generated by enforced restraint should end in an explosion.

Mr HG Wells had the almost impossible task of keeping politics out of the discussion, of pacifying the more excitable delegates who were burning to attack the Hitler regime, and of seeing that the German delegates had fair play.

The American delegate presented a resolution calling upon all centres to reaffirm the principles of the charter. Other delegates framed a more explicit resolution which the Germans refused to accept on the grounds that it was political. It was amended; the German delegates informed the chairman that they would now support the motion on condition that there was no discussion. Mr Wells refused to bargain. An English delegate asked leave to put two questions to the German delegation. Had the German PEN Centre protested against the ill treatment of intellectuals and the burning of books? Was it true that the Berlin Centre had issued a notice to its members depriving those of Communist or similar views of their rights of membership?

Ernst Toller, one of the ill-treated members, whose appearance provoked enthusiastic applause, asked if he might speak after the resolution had been passed. The German delegation objected and when H.G. Wells upheld Herr Toller's right to speak, they withdrew their support for the resolution and walked out, leaving the meeting in uproar. *The Manchester Guardian's* correspondent ended his account: 'It is the prevailing opinion that this year the PEN has entered upon a new phase. The gracious, astute, steady presidency of John Galsworthy has given place to the highly stimulating but more provocative presidency of HG Wells.'

PEN formally expelled the German Centre at its next international meeting and turned its attention to the needs of the exiled German writers who were flocking to London. The committee organized parties. Humbert Wolfe, the poet, offered to look after those in distress. The refugees formed the first of PEN's exile centres: The German-speaking Writers Abroad.

The Austrian and Italian PENs were both in a state of upheaval. H.G. Wells was driven to emphasize PEN's determination to champion freedom of literary expression. The committee wrote to the Italian Centre on this subject and about yet another Italian writer in prison. They protested to the German government on behalf of Ludwig Renn, also in prison. As the thirties progressed and Europe seemed to be rejecting PEN's ideals, HG Wells suggested launching a special fund for writers persecuted by their governments and then in 1936 there was another blow: the Italian PEN announced itself solidly in favour of the Italian government and maintained that they were defending civilization and justice in Ethiopia and London knew that another centre would have to be cast off. But H. G. Wells

, growing old, resigned and the decision was postponed. Six hundred persons attended his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday banquet.

Well's resignation brought to an end the tradition that the President of English PEN was also International President. The duties were divided. Jules Romains elected to the International Presidency while J.B. Priestley took over the English Centre. This was an important step in the long, confused evolution of International PEN which only achieved complete separation from its English parent in the late 1970s.

When Priestley resigned, the committee asked Humbert Wolfe to take his place. He answered that he thought it "Undesirable at the present juncture in the history of PEN and world politics, that a Jew should be the London President. " His decision was accepted regretfully, but he did consent to being elected a vice-president.

In 1937 Arthur Koestler, in Spain on behalf of the *News Chronicle*, was arrested in Malaga and condemned to death. A hasty cable was sent to General Franco, appealing for Koestler's release and bearing the names of some forty writers, the members of the PEN Council with the addition of E.M Forster and Aldous Huxley. The protests worked and in June 1937, Koestler wrote to PEN:

Arriving in London after more than three months imprisonment in Seville, I want to express my deep gratitude for the unstinted help your organisation gave in obtaining my release.

I am fully aware that it was no personal merit of my own, but in the deeper interests of the free expression of opinion, which is the life-blood of democracy and humanity that this help was given.

That a free public opinion should have thus proved so strong is as much to me as my own personal liberty.

The next congress was to be held in Prague. The treatment of the Jews in Poland and the war between Japan and China were on the agenda. A suggestion that Japan might be asked to spare China's cultural monuments and universities had been made. In London they were collecting money for Austrian and Czechoslovakian writers, sending food parcels to those in Catalonia.

In 1938 Storm Jameson became the first woman president and had immediately to protest to Italian PEN. Their *Bulletin* had contained a poem glorifying the exploits of Italy in destroying the Abyssinians, who were described as 'black ants.' Her letter received no reply.

Soon after the outbreak of war, the Home Office appointed PEN as an adviser on internees and, led by Storm Jameson, the committee worked hard to provide the information needed to obtain the release of the German writers, establishing their identities and proving that they were not spies or members of the fifth column who wished to claim release under CAT 20 to write to the Secretary of PEN.

Wartime London was full of PEN centres. Some had arrived intact with President, Secretary and minute book, and when, despite bombing and blackout, it was decided to

hold a congress, they mustered the Austrian, Catalan, Czech, Norwegian, Polish, Yiddish and German-speaking Writers Abroad Centres, as well as members of the Belgian, Dutch, Greek, Romanian and Hungarian PENs.

The English PEN committee continued to meet regularly with the problems of the exiles, fund-raising, the shortage of paper and meetings for refugees and lonely writers, doing war work in London, always on the agenda. But it was not until 1943 that the Nazi treatment of the Jews began to cause alarm. And it was in 1944, when the bombing was 'very bad,' that the news of 100,000 Hungarian Jews deported and murdered broke in London. The committee, deeply shocked, proposed a broadcast, but then doubts were cast on the accuracy of the report. The authorities and the BBC were consulted; no-one believed that such an act was possible.

After the war, refugee writers in distress abounded and the funds ran out, but gradually life settled down. In the late forties appeals and protests were being sent to the Greek government which was ill-treating its writers and Chile was asked to allow the poet, Pablo Neruda, to leave the country. In 1950 a protest was made to Iran, where, it was said, the political prisoners were enduring great hardship.

During the 1950s an Hungarian writer, Paul Labori, joined the English Centre and it was he who suggested an International Writers in Prison Committee to investigate the cases of writers imprisoned solely for their writings and opinions and to co-ordinate the actions of the centres. The Committee was formed in 1960 and had, at first, only three members: Storm Jameson, Victor van Vriesland from Holland and the General Secretary of International PEN.

Amnesty International was not founded until the following year.