



International PEN Congress in Uppsala, 27 September 2022

Report of Women Writers' Committee Meeting

By Sarah Lawson

The WWC met in Room IV in the very grand main building of the University of Uppsala. About thirty people were present at the meeting, chaired by Zoë Rodriguez. Confidentiality was assured by means of the "Gadget Room". For the first time at a PEN Congress everyone was asked to leave any recording devices, including laptops and phones, in a specially designated "gadget room", where we wrote our names on sheets of paper and left our phones and any other device on it, to be picked up later.

Elizabeth Nordgren (Finnish PEN) was singled out as a long-time member of the Committee and former President of it. Zoë commended her on her long service to the Committee. Both Joanne Leedom-Ackerman (International Office) and Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel) spoke in praise of Elizabeth. Joanne remembered her from the PEN Congress in Vienna in 1991, when she was a "calming presence". Lucina recalled Elizabeth's days as Chair of the WWC, when her dedication and administrative ability won much respect. Elizabeth remained modestly in the audience as Zoë spoke of our appreciation for her. The Committee arranged to propose her candidature for International Vice-President. (The General Assembly subsequently elected her to this post.)

Zoë said that our experience with Zoom had been wonderful, and our Women Writers' Committee had been the first PEN committee to use it. She reminded us that the VIDA count was continuing, and we were urged to add the information pertinent to our countries. It might be tedious to do, but it was necessary to show the worldwide picture. Pavlo Bilyk has made an online form that is easy to fill in.

Zoë thanked the board (Lucina Kathmann, Sarah Lawson, Judyth Hill, Tanja Tuma, and Neža Vilhelm) for their help and announced the poetry reading for that evening, ably organized by Judyth Hill.

Our keynote speaker was Mansour Razaghi, an Iranian Kurd now in the Sydney PEN Center. Judyth Hill introduced him, saying he had been a refugee in 1992, having escaped from prison. As a free man, he studied journalism.

Mansour spoke about the developing case of Mahsa Amini (Kurdish name Jina), a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was arrested by the "morality police" in Tehran for not wearing her hijab in the proper way. She was beaten and died in police custody. Mansour knows her

family, since they are from the same home town. There have been supportive protests in many places outside Iran. Women are a leading force in opposing the oppressive Iranian government. The hijab is a form of suppression and even part of the identity of the imams. Women must be treated as second-class citizens. This is a diversion from the actions of the government, and now there are protests all across Iran. The paradox is that women are needed for the economy and they outnumber men at university. People must send strong message to the government that it must be accountable. We have a massive responsibility on our shoulders. Women must be free to express themselves and choose their own clothing. We are “freedom fighters” and together can force the Iranian government to be responsible for what they do. This eighty-eighth PEN Congress must show solidarity and fight back.

Following on from this, Zeynep Oral (Turkish PEN) reports that demonstrators supporting the Iranian women or cutting their hair are likely to be shot. The stringent rules about wearing a hijab are not just about hair, but life-style choices. The essential principle is secularism. Where there are religious laws, there can't be democracy. It is not a matter of clothing but secularism, she emphasized. “If God had not wanted women to show their hair, He would have created bald women.”

When Mansour was asked what we could do to help, he answered that our support sent an important message. Zoë suggests that we compose a resolution to be put before the General Assembly of the Congress, and Lucina offers to disseminate a tweet on Sunday, as that is when the demonstrations take place. Zoë will draft a resolution to give to the Secretariat.

The war against Ukraine is uppermost in our minds. Putin's aggression has been going on for seven months, and we are concerned for our colleagues in Ukraine and also our colleagues in Russia for different reasons. As a gesture of support, some centers are producing translations and anthologies featuring Ukrainian writers, and Tetyana Teren, the Executive Director of PEN Ukraine, expresses her gratitude for this support. Ukrainian PEN has 145 members, and women writers and journalists continue to write in all genres; it is all the more important for them to write because so many men are in the army now. Women writers are cultural diplomats, representatives of Ukrainian society, which is cohesive and mutually supportive. Now the emphasis is on saving Ukrainian culture and language, and many Ukrainian writers who formerly wrote in Russian have now changed to writing in Ukrainian.

In other PEN centers:

Women writers are active in Lebanese PEN and occupy positions on the board in spite of the pervasive patriarchy and misogyny in the country. Lebanon is in a dire position, although not as tragic as that of Iran. It is hostage to a powerful Hizbollah; institutions are under threat and the banking system has collapsed.

Anthologies are popular among the PEN centres. Argentina and Finland are producing anthologies of writers who do not write in the majority languages of the respective countries. Malawi PEN is compiling a book of poetry and essays by women.

Some PEN centers are contacting each other and making plans to work together. Suisse Romande has contacts with Latin American centers; Malawi is working with Zambia and Kenya, easier now that they can meet by Zoom; and Danish PEN is translating the manual by

Finnish PEN on hate speech, originally written in English. The San Miguel de Allende center in Mexico is liaising with other Spanish American PENs and also a group of African centers.

Latvia, Lebanon, and Kurdish PEN highlight violence against women in their societies as a concern, and both Kurdish and Turkish committee members called for secular governments, as theocratic rule tends to lead to oppression of women.

San Miguel de Allende is another center that is grateful to Zoom for allowing it to have meetings every week instead of three times a year. San Miguel has redone its website and is expanding into social media; it also manages the PIWWC website. San Miguel is in the fortunate position of being able to act on behalf of some other Central American PEN centers, like Nicaragua, where PEN has been outlawed. There is a plan to have a “digital party” for other Latin American PEN centers at the New Year. Some African centers have also been invited to the party. But in Mexico, Judyth Hill says, “there are no writers in prison, but *dead* writers. You don’t get arrested, you get shot while you’re drinking coffee.”