

THE NEW PEN BERLIN

We're Diverse, and That's What We Call Literature

By Herbert Wiesner

Translation: Isabel Fargo Cole



Contemporary and diverse: the new PEN Berlin

Source: K-J. Hildenbrand, H. Kaiser,

B. Pedersen, M. Skolimowska, M. Schutt/pa/dpa; pa/Geisler-Fotopress; pa/U. Baumgarten Source: picture alliance/dp

Following Deniz Yücel's resignation as president of the old, Darmstadt-based PEN Germany, more than 200 authors have lost their faith in the organization – and founded a new one. Why the situation called for radical measures – and how things will be run differently moving forward.

„We stand by our word. We want a new PEN.” That's what a growing number of writers (by now more than 200) are saying – firmly but not stridently. They've heard about the disaster at the old PEN Germany's annual meeting in Gotha in mid-May, or they're appalled at the memory of a few rather marginal authors using legal tricks to force the entire steering committee to step down, destroying friendships and professional ties in the process. PEN Germany hasn't experienced this kind of schism since 1933 or the building of the Berlin Wall.

It all began with demands that *Welt*-journalist Deniz Yücel step down as president, though he'd only just been elected that previous fall by a huge majority in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt. Five former presidents, including his predecessor Regula Venske, had demanded his resignation after an event in Cologne where he thought aloud about the idea of establishing a no-fly zone in Ukraine. They resented seeing their successor claim the very freedom of speech that's central to the charter of the international writers' association founded in London in 1921. This made them figureheads for a clique that even stooped to cracking racist jokes.

Had they forgotten their erstwhile support for that very same colleague (born in Flörsheim am Main in 1973) who reported from Turkey for German newspapers and spent a long year from 2017-2018 in a Turkish prison? Josef Haslinger, president of PEN Germany from 2013-2017, has since regretted signing the open letter demanding Yücel's resignation, and is now part of a largely female steering committee that is trying to salvage what it can. In accordance with the statutes, expulsion proceedings have been launched against (unfortunately) only three members of PEN Germany who sought Yücel's ouster.¹ The only person in Darmstadt who seems to stand for genuine renewal is the playwright Maxi Obexer. Enough said.

PEN Berlin's Plans

The concerns of the fledgling PEN Berlin are entirely different. I've rarely encountered more delight in change and in the future than among the host of writers – growing and gaining in significance by the minute – who would rather establish a new PEN than continue the efforts to rehabilitate the geriatric PEN Darmstadt. I'm using the word "I" because I'm happy to out myself as one of the founders of PEN Berlin. We stand by our word – in a legal as well as a literary sense.

This Friday the official act of foundation will take place in the Literaturhaus Berlin. A newly drafted statute provides for flatter hierarchies and eschews titles. Following the model of PEN International, rather than a chairmanship there will be a board that functions as a collegiate organ, based on gender parity and publicly represented by one male and one female speaker. Until the first membership meeting this November, Eva Menasse and Deniz Yücel will act as PEN Berlin's speakers. The registered association will operate similarly to an NGO. PEN Ukraine and PEN Uganda have offered to sponsor the application for membership in PEN International. All these things present us with serious obligations. We stand by our word.

Berlin is a Vision

The name "Berlin" stands for a vision. The city that was once the headquarters for the exploitation of overseas colonies, two World Wars and the Shoah now symbolizes

¹ In the end no members were expelled. (Translator's note)

cosmopolitanism and diversity, and nowhere else does one find so many poets writing in different languages, authors working in different media, journalists and translators into German and other languages. No other city hosts so many events presenting foreign-language literature in the original. This grand community of expanding “world literature”, this “poetry of breadth”, this “temptation of diversity” invoked by the great Francophone writer Édouard Glissant is the spiritual home of our new PEN.

It will be open to exiles as well as German authors. In America, Thomas Mann spoke of exile’s perilous “asthma of the heart”. PEN Berlin will admit writers suffering from this ailment, not as protégées, but as members on equal footing who have something to teach us. Inevitably, the mingling of diverse linguistic backgrounds will affect our literary aesthetics; that is something to reflect on.

The Writers in Exile Program run by PEN Darmstadt and financed by the Federal Culture Ministry will have to be considerably broadened in the years to come. In the long run, ten or twelve fellowships will not be enough. It may become necessary to develop completely new programs. The new PEN has no intention of poaching on anyone’s territory, much less on the territory of the old PEN in far-away Darmstadt. But all those who write in German and write in Germany can count on PEN Berlin to support them. There’s a sense of new beginnings. We’re opening doors. We’ll keep standing by our word, and standing up for our new PEN Berlin.

Herbert Wiesner, born in 1937, was director of the Literaturhaus Berlin until 2003 and writes regularly as a literary critic for WELT. From 2009 to 2013 he was Secretary General of the PEN Center Germany.