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International PEN Women Writers Committee (IPWWC)

INTERNATIONAL PEN WOMEN WRITERS COMMITTEE

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A REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Women Writers' Committee and all PEN members.

The brief (9 month) year since the Tromso Congress has been extremely busy.

The tri-lingual IPWWC website is now up. You can find it at www.ipwwc.org. It still needs a bit of work, but we're getting there.

The first issue out of Australia of the newsletter 'Network' was available in English and Spanish at the Tromso Congress. We are having trouble finding translators into French.

Entries to the tri-lingual anthology 'Our Voice' closed on 1 December 2004. One hundred entries were received. The anthology is in preparation.

Plans have moved ahead for the women writers' meeting proposed by Vera Tokombaeva of the Bishkek Centre in Kirghistan. It will take place from 24 to 26 June 2005. International PEN has granted 5000 pounds towards the meeting. Attenders from non-central Asian countries will have to cover their own airfare, hotel and other expenses. Proceedings will take place in Russian and English.

The proposed Real-Time Direct event discussed by Melbourne PEN Centre and some members of IPWWC has been postponed from International Women's Day 2005 to 2006. It will involve women writers across the globe and we felt we really needed time to plan it properly. It will be properly discussed in Bled.

Our Bled meeting will also consider the IPWWC Standing Orders and begin planning for the next Women Writers' Conference which I hope will take place somewhere on the African continent (perhaps Nigeria) after the Congress planned for Senegal in 2007.

I look forward to seeing you all in Bled and Bishkek and to hearing your reports.

Best wishes

*Dr Judith Buckrich
Chair of the IPWWC Committee.*



Karin Clark (German PEN - Writers In Prison Committee Chair), Judith Buckrich (Melbourne PEN - IPWWC Chair), Kristin Schnider (Suisse Romande PEN Centre), Elisabeth Nordgren (Finnish PEN - Board member)

THREE POEMS

by Safia Siddiqi (Afghan PEN Centre)

CHASTITY ON FIRE

And on the day of Id¹
While we waited
Our eyes caught
Each in the other's
Sweet dreams in both
Heartbeats visible
Like my misfortune – visible
After our embrace
And entanglement in
Your manly chastity

¹ Id is the day that marks the end of Ramadan, when Muslims celebrate and exchange gifts.

Until my chastity
In flames like the candle's
Melted tears
Forced my eyes to the floor
There I was left
With a wound in my heart
That is why
Your received no greeting
From me
On the day of Id

EXPECTATION

Do not speak of our separation
Do not remind me of those moments
When cascades of tears shook me
Beloved! Do not speak of leaving
I will beg for morning
Do not tell me of your long nights
Stay here in my eyes as tears
Do not tell me they are falling away
Stay with me and love me. Now.

INTERRUPTED DREAM

What a lovely night it was
What a blessed moment
I remember you
You came into my room
And I forgot that someone might see you
And judge you
You sat on the edge of my bed
My tongue stuck to my palate with fear
You, like me, used to glowing
Like lamps at midnight
You could not say a word
Only our eyes searched
As our hearts beat
And our lips were silent
While our eyes spoke
Then, from an unknown place
I accused you
And you me
Everything between us became a complaint
Eyes, heart and our hopes
Became complaints
We melted, merged into each other's eyes
I awoke from the Mullah's call to prayer
"Oh, the Muslim prayer is better than sleep"
I answered: Yes, without a doubt, but I
Just wish to finish my dream

SAFIA SIDDIQI: TAILOR, JURIST, POLITICIAN, POET

Interviewed by Elisabeth Eide (Norwegian PEN Centre)

When she was five-six years old she would sit on the roof and listen to the teachers who were teaching the boys in the mosque nearby. There was no school for girls in her village outside Jalalabad. The teachers and students down there in the mosque also read poems. She learned them by heart, all of them.

The Department of Rural Reestablishment is teeming with life. So is the office where Safia Siddiqi is working as equal rights consultant. The last time we met was at her wedding when she was dressed up and made up in every possible way with red spots in forty different colours of lipstick on her cheeks. The orchestra played a beautiful tune, to which she had written the lyrics, while she was enthroned on the podium, the way Afghan brides should be.



Safia Siddiqi (Afghan PEN Centre)

In the Bridal Chamber

Now in everyday clothes, she was on her way to the literature festival in Göteborg. Five days later she called us to say she only made it to Islamabad because her visa was not in order. "I told them I have an important position with the state, that I am married here. What more do they need?" she muses but accepts the cancellation of the trip with composure. Such events are minor inconveniences in the life of an Afghan.

Our next meeting takes place in her home in Mikrorayon², a residential area, inspired by Eastern Block architecture, along the road to Kabul airport. The grey buildings are surrounded by trees and play areas. Across the street is a nursery school funded by the Japanese. Outside one of the buildings twenty fat sheep are grazing.

To be away quietly from the rest of the family we hide in Safia's bedroom. The four-poster bed on which we are sitting is decorated with tulle and glitter and covered by a gold-coloured bedspread. It has looked this way since the wedding. She married at what might be called a ripe age and now she must see to it that her in-laws have food on the table too. For, in addition to being a bureaucrat, a writer and an organiser, she wants to be a proper Pashtun wife.

Safia Siddiqi (39) is from an educated family. Even so, she did not go to school until she was fifteen years old. Since that time she has taken three Masters' degrees and published an equal number of poetry collections. Her grandfather and her father were both jurists. As the oldest of the children, it was perhaps not so strange that she chose law as her field of study. Although she really wanted to study journalism, she says that those four years (1984-88) at Kabul University were the best years of her life. In spite of the war, in spite of all the tragedies around her. She became a jurist in four years and she published her first collection of poetry, which brought her an income equivalent to an average yearly wage.

Student and Weaver

"I dreamed of becoming a lawyer, of being a member of Parliament, of becoming a leading politician. But the pressure on my family increased. My father and uncles were not popular with the communists. The whole family was threatened and my father asked my brother and me to flee. That was the beginning of all our misery. I abandoned all my hopes

and dreams in Kabul and left with my brother and sixteen other young members of the family.”

She fled on March 21, during Nowroz, Afghan New Year, a day of rejoicing that marks the triumph of spring over winter, which can be exceptionally harsh in Kabul. It is a day of excursions and picnics, of family gatherings. The year was 1988 and Safia weeps over her memories. It was a long leap from her Kabul existence to the refugee camp Nasir Bagh outside Peshawar, Pakistan.

“For more than eight months I could not write a poem. I forgot what it was like to be an educated woman. I left everything behind in Kabul. In Pakistan I was just a female refugee who had to wear the burkha and make money for the family.”

Her history in the role of family breadwinner goes far back. Many duties await the eldest sister. When the family moved from Nangarhar province in the east to Maimana in the northwest, the younger children went to school, but not Safia. “How will I manage all this work?” said her mother who was accustomed to Safia’s efforts in the household. Safia stayed at home but helped the younger ones with their homework. This was in the seventies. “Ever since I was a toddler I had to take care of some of them. I never fought with the others; I accepted the responsibility.”

From a very young age Safia has managed to make money. She has made her turquoise suit herself. She has always been interested in needlework, in making rugs, sewing, creating patterns. In Maimana she learned to tie carpets from a girl her own age. After a while she created her own design. “People came to my father to get my design. And I also made clothes for myself and my sisters.”

In 1979 the family went back to Jalalabad. Safia was fourteen and started to make larger carpets with the girls in the village. With support from her father, she became a kind of first-aid worker for sick people. Her little sister started the eighth grade, the only girl among four hundred boys. A daring choice. Safia stayed home.

The Martyrs’ Cold Winter

Her first poem, Cold Winter, was written the year after the communist party coup took power from President Daoud. “One of the families in our village – there were four brothers – had only two sons between them because two of the brothers were not married. Then both the sons were killed, one by the communists, the other by the Mujahedin. Such pain! They were twenty and twenty-two years old and were students at Jalalabad University. One of them was already married and his wife was pregnant; the other one was engaged. The family no longer saw any hope for the future. You know that in Afghanistan, so far as inheritance and honour is concerned, much is tied to sons. Sons must take care of their parents. When I heard about them, I just asked: How could this happen? I knew nothing about politics. I did not know the two boys personally, just their families. It was terribly painful. Then I wrote a poem.”

She was fifteen and the communist party held power; it was just prior to the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Two-three months later two newly married couples were killed in a Soviet bombing raid, the day after the wedding. Safia wrote again - this time a short story.

“It was a heavy time for me,” says Safia. “They plundered and killed all around us: the Mujahedin at night, the communists in bright daylight. Young girls were abducted. We lived in constant fear, especially young daughters. The Russians and their Afghan allies fetched one of our relatives in his home. He was newly married; they said it was merely an interview. They took him and several other male members of the family into the mountains and killed them. The Mujahedin had targeted all state employees and the government targeted everyone!”

Safia has many such stories from her corner of the world, the village by the main road to Jalalabad, directly in the crossfire of a war neither she nor her family had wished for. Asking her to tell her story is like turning on a steaming faucet. “I began to write after all these events took place. In reality I started writing little stories and poems before I went to

school. I didn't show them to the family, writing was almost shameful; it didn't feel quite right. In some of the poems I also wrote about love, and someone might misunderstand – so I hid them.”

Yes, I Am a Poet!

The house, or the *qual*, which is really a house and a garden with a surrounding wall, had many guests. One of her uncles, who often showed up, was a poet. “I hung around with him so much that my father claimed I liked him better! ‘Yes, ‘cause he’s a poet,’ I answered.”

“One day, after I had made the food, my uncle asked if I could recite poetry. I answered that I could and asked if he would help me become a poet. ‘What?’ he said. ‘Yes, I want to,’ I said. ‘Yes but poetry is a gift from God,’ he said. ‘Yes, but I want to learn,’ I said. He laughed at me. ‘Safia it’s not possible.’ ‘Yes, but I can do it!’ I said. He didn’t believe me and he was the only poet in the area. He gave me a newspaper article nevertheless, showed me a headline and said: ‘Write a poem for a martyr.’ The next evening I showed him what I had written and he asked me where I had stolen the poem. ‘This cannot be yours!’ ‘Yes, uncle,’ I said, ‘it is mine. I have written poems for one year already!’ Then I told him about the two young dead men and he was convinced.”

After that her uncle was converted and became her best supporter. During family gatherings he encouraged Safia to recite. The family adopted this new Safia with pleasure; her fears had been exaggerated.

“I owe everything I have today to poetry. My father could have given me away in marriage, that was normal in my family. My poems helped me to go forward. I didn’t lack for suitors, but I rejected them all. My father supported me, even if my cousins were ever so charming. I thought I was going somewhere, although I didn’t yet know where that was.”

She was still in Jalalabad in the *qual* where she had sat on the roof absorbing all her knowledge from the mosque. Then her father received a judgeship in Kabul. His mother, three daughters and three sisters came along.

Her father’s salary was barely enough to pay the rent. At that time government employees received food rations so the family did not suffer. But things were tight. “That’s when I told him I could take a job. ‘No, you’re much too young,’ he said. I must have been sixteen or seventeen years old. ‘I am tired of taking care of my brothers and sisters,’ I said. ‘Of course it’s possible.’ If there’s something you want, you can do everything! I took a course in typewriting. But then I met a girl from the Panshir valley who had a tailor shop. ‘Can you sew?’ she asked. I never say no, I always say: ‘Yes, I can! Then I worked there for a while.”

Suitors: No and No again!

Self-taught Safia had yet to set foot in school. But the husband of one of her cousins was a teacher and one day she was asked to apply to his school. She passed some tests and entered seventh grade, after three months she passed on to the eighth and soon the ninth. “I didn’t enjoy it very much, the other students were younger. And I was big; we’re a little heavy-bodied in my family. The others were small and slender. So I waited for enrolment into the tenth grade and in the meantime I sewed clothes for tourists and made more money than my own father. In addition I’d become known a little as a poet, through periodicals and newspapers.”

Because she has attended school so little, Safia recounts in detail how she finished the gymnasium in two years while somewhere between the eleventh and twelfth grade managing to pass the entrance exams to law school with honours. We detect a father who must have seen his oldest daughter’s potential, who must have overcome a few conventions or who could not overlook how smart, proud and stubborn she was.

Then a new suitor appeared, a university lecturer in economics. “My father was really thrilled. The man was from our district and he had studied in Germany. He was

handsome too. But I said no, now I'm starting university! My father and mother insisted that it was high time I got married. My brother liked him too. But this potential husband was of the opinion that his future wife had no business at a university. I said, 'Oh God, I could never take this man as my husband. Sorry, I shall study.' I chose career above family. And my family took it nicely too."

The family is well represented in the flat in Mikrorayon. The mother, whom we remember from the wedding when she cried the way all mothers do when their daughters marry or are given in marriage, patters about and talks with the husband's relatives. Four older women hover among the floor cushions in the living room, waiting for Safia to give them lunch – after we, the guests, have had ours. We sit there on the gold-covered bridal bed and think of our own lazy moments on a sofa. But Safia, does she ever get to lie down for a sinful little rest, on a Friday day off or Saturday morning for instance? Does she have time to read, listen to music, write poetry? "I can't remember when it happened last," is her answer.

From University to Dressmaking

She is a person who wants to do much simultaneously, perhaps because she has had to do much. Among other things she wants to uphold tradition. Safia is a proud Pashtun. Her first collection of poems was entitled *Lupata*, derived from the word *dupatta*, the shawl with which women cover their heads. "It is related to Islam and tradition both."

"Do you consider yourself a modern woman?"

"We were used to covering ourselves in our village. When we arrived in Kabul, we continued to wear a shawl. But the burkha? No, not even my mother; nobody in the family wore it. At university I was in the minority but I had many girlfriends who did not wear anything on their heads and I wore regular slacks. To me the shawl means the protection of women from outsiders; it represents Islamic values. I think that in order to be respected you must respect those who believe in tradition, those who want to preserve those kinds of values."

The happy times at university came to an end and Safia became a refugee; her very essence was tied to this. The poet, journalist and activist from Kabul ended up in a refugee camp where she had to concentrate on survival, her own and that of others. There she put on the burkha for the first time. Among the male refugees obstinate ideas prevailed about women's duty to be invisible.

She got a job in a dressmaking shop funded by Danes. I, the interviewer, lived across the road. She came in the spring of 1988 and I was a frequent guest in the shop because they sold so many beautiful gift items. I went home that same year. Did I see her then? Did we know about each other? Could the fact that I did not see her tell me something about how little we know about what goes on under the surface among women in a dressmaking shop in a refugee society? There she was, family breadwinner, sewing shirts faster than anyone else while she forgot about being a poet. The managers quickly discovered her and she was promoted to teacher. "Well, well, I was supposed to be a politician, a judge and poet, not a teacher in a tailor shop. My dreams paled. I forgot my education, the poems, everything was overshadowed by refugee life. Ten people depended on me, my brother, my sister-in-law, nieces and nephews."

All the Way to China . . .

Her parents were keeping alive in Kabul. Their house was hit by a bomb that did not explode properly, so they survived. Safia rose in rank to become production manager, then manager for the entire project, which provided a living for hundreds of women in the refugee camps around Peshawar. For the first four years she kept a low profile.

"I was a woman and women like me were not well regarded in the refugee community. But in 1993 I became more extroverted. With a few other jurists I was invited to the United States and I began to write more actively. I was sent to Sweden and Denmark to take

some courses and participated in a lot of meetings with women's organisations in Peshawar.

The Koran says that you must seek knowledge even if you must go all the way to China to find it. Safia went to the women's conference in Beijing in 1995. Seven Afghan women participated, from different corners of the world. When Safia returned to Peshawar, she started the Afghan Women's Network. "We were threatened and many of us were afraid, of Hezb-i-Islami particularly, which is worse than the Taliban."

In 1997 she published her second poetry collection, *Nalosta Ketab* (The Unread Book), ten years exactly after the first. At this time Safia was supporting twelve family members and still did not think much about marriage. "I couldn't leave them and go to another home. And besides – many Afghan men in Pakistan were unemployed, and such men would not even dream of proposing to me."

Perhaps as a consequence there was more time to study for a Master's degree in literature at the university in Peshawar and a similar degree in Business Administration from a private college in 1988. The Taliban had come to power in Kabul and her father lost his job. More refugees, more people to support. And still an important public job to maintain .

Life as a refugee became tougher. The fundamentalist groups spread their threats, targeting women who worked for charitable organisations. Safia stayed on the job. Toward the end of 1998 she was invited to the United States and while she was away, her family was visited by threatening men asking for her.

Refugee Twice

"My father called: 'Don't come back.' That was the end of my ten years in Pakistan. There I was, in New York City. Where was I going to go? I called an uncle in Pakistan. He agreed with my father: 'You must stay away, you have endangered your family enough, pray for them!' I had some relatives in Canada, so I asked for political asylum there. That was a bad day, a tough day. I had been crying all night. I did not want to become a refugee twice, but I had no choice. For one year I cried night and day because I was a refugee, a woman with no one to take care of me."

Once again Safia abandoned her poems and her family. Would they be killed? They were all she had. A form of security she did not want was forced on her and she learned to live with it. Two years passed. Then she met the man who was to become her husband. "I had been invited to a conference in Montreal. I had heard about an Afghan with a big book collection. He had been part of the resistance, fought with the Mujahedin. I called him. He was familiar with my poems and invited me home where he had made a delicious dinner. We met the following day as well. Not long after he called and asked if I thought he might play a part in my life. I was no longer of marriage age but I asked him to come to Toronto. He came, we sat, we talked. Then we were engaged, in May 2001. Another turning point in my life. He is a very brave man, yes, he is also a writer. As a very young man he was imprisoned by the communists. I think I've made a good choice."

Perhaps her marriage in March 2003, in one of Kabul's better restaurants, has given new impetus to Safia, the poet. Her new collection is entitled *Lashna asnan Baran* (Rain without Clouds). She is also working on a collection of short stories called *Nesaware* (Rage).

I Have Struggled for so Long

Safia has written in traditional Ghazal style and in more contemporary styles. "They must fit the message," she says. And the message is suffering, love, defiance. "Female artists here have suffered more than many others. Playing with words has no status, singers and writers are often looked down upon. Especially if their families do not respect them."

We have seen this in other places. Herat, the city in the west, has long been known for its female musicians, orchestras that played at weddings. But the orthodoxy, old and new, regarded them as prostitutes.

“Do you regard yourself as an Afghan feminist?”

“I don’t like the word, but I’ve struggled for so long. My situation and yours, as a western woman, are so different. I’ve grown up with war, with crushed hopes and with my commitments I put my family in danger. I once went from Pakistan to London. I was interviewed by the BBC along with two other Afghan women. They could say whatever they wanted. I was going back and had to hold my tongue about a lot of things.

“Have your crushed hopes been replaced by new ones?”

“Women still have no status. One of the reasons I stay here is to work for their – our - improved conditions. There is hope now, other and different than before. From the time I came back to Afghanistan, after the fall of the Taliban, I feel as if what I’m doing has a purpose. It gives me extra energy. But I don’t have all that much time for poetry.”

JOURNEY IN KURDISH HEARTLAND

These excerpts are from “Destination Kurdistan” by Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel de Allende PEN Centre). To read the whole account, email < lucina@unisono.net.mx >

At the border we endured control booth after control booth of intimidating Turkish soldiers until suddenly we were on the other side and the Kurdish militia appeared smiling, speaking Kurdish openly and offering us tea. The Kurdish media took Zaradachet and me onto the road near the control booth. We gave interviews. “International PEN has come to Kurdistan,” the TV announced that night.

For some it was a literal homecoming, Hevi Berwari, chair of the Kurdish PEN’s Women Writers Committee, and Berivan Dosky both come from Duhok. Hevi told me this trip was her first chance to see her relatives in ten years. Some of Berivan’s relatives appeared at the hotel. One shy Duhok writer summoned his courage, approached me and said that he had known Hevi twenty years ago, before she fled Saddam Hussein and went into exile, and even then she was outstanding as a pioneer in Kurdish women’s literature.

...The next day we were in the bus snaking through wonderful mountains almost all day, traveling through panoramas of almost 360 degrees with snowcapped mountains in the background and rivers, the Tigris and its tributaries, and almond trees bursting into bloom in the foreground. One time we saw a beautiful ancient walled city named Amedi up on a bluff. Later I found out that this was the very long way round to the capital, but I couldn’t possibly regret it. It has left me with the impression that one of the most beautiful sights on the planet is Kurdistan in the spring.

One of the reasons for taking the long route was to pass by the grave of Moustafa Barzani, a military leader in the Kurdish fight for freedom...When we arrived at Moustafa Barzani’s grave, simply marked with rustic stonework and bursting with irises, the Kurdish media were already there, following the day’s doings of International PEN in Kurdistan. Often we turned on the television at night to see what we had been doing all day and how we looked doing it.

...It was after nightfall when we arrived in Kurdistan’s bustling capital, Arbil. But nobody calls it Arbil. The Kurdish name for this city is Hawler. This has happened to the Kurds in many places. I have a map of Kurdistan from the Kurdish Institute in Berlin. Very few place names coincide with those on regular maps of the same area. At first I couldn’t even tell if the Kurdish world and the regular world were on the same planet. I had to look at land forms and lakes and deduce.

I do not know what the Kurds should do about this situation. If they insist on the name Hawler, nobody will know where it is, quite disastrous as it is the capital of their region. All maps say Arbil. I never even heard the word Hawler until I was in Kurdistan. I had seen telecasting from a TV station I knew to be in “Arbil.” In fact, the first few days I kept

wondering why nobody ever referred to this city. The airport too is in this place. They need to expand the airport and arrange many more international flights. What will they call this airport? To what city will travel agents sell tickets?

...In the capital we had meetings with ministers who told us about government programs. Six years of education is available in the language of the people of every village, whether it be Kurdish, Arabic or Turkish. Also, depending on the village, the religious education unit is taught about the Muslim, Yezidi or Christian religions. There are even nomadic schools for the nomads who fled into Kurdistan during Saddam Hussein's repression. (We saw these tent people and their tent school when we were traveling to Lalish.) Last year, the six years of education became mandatory. This is probably the most effective means of combatting a gender gap in education which persisted even after the region became autonomous.

...In Suleimani I participated in teaching a university class. That was great fun. We were invited to interrupt an interesting poetry class (about the Ottoman-era poet Kanih, from the Iranian part of Kurdistan) to talk about human rights, non-governmental organizations and International PEN to a group of very receptive young people. Berivan and I were the ones who did the talking. I was gratified that girls, who comprised at least half the class, as well as boys were very forthright in their questions. Maybe they were especially encouraged by seeing Berivan and me on the podium. "To be active internationally is my dream," one girl in a Muslim headscarf told me in English.

At a writers' meeting in Suleimani we met a Kurdish woman poet, Arhawan, whose life had been threatened in a Suleimani-based Arabic language newspaper because of a poem she wrote. Her poem was about Halabja, a nearby town almost on the border with Iran. It was the site of a particularly horrible gas attack by Saddam Hussein; its name is now almost synonymous with the massacre of Kurds. The poem was written in honor of an anniversary of the Halabja attack... Since this threat, she said, her children are frightened when they see her writing poetry. We asked for details and copies of the newspaper for International PEN. This sort of threat indicates a hostile and dangerous situation for Kurdish writers.

...On the way out of the city, on the road to Arbil/Hawler, we saw the fires that burn away natural gas from the oil fields. They were close, maybe 150 meters from the road, out the left windows of the bus. Everybody crowded to the window to look. Immediately afterward, we were back within Saddam Hussein's boundary of Kurdistan and safely launched on our return.

That night the television announced, "International PEN visited Kerkuk." The modest meeting had significance. One Kurdish writer told me, "Thank you for coming to Kerkuk with us. Though Diyarbakir might be considered the mind of Kurdistan, Kerkuk is its heart."

...I am disgusted with the use of land mines in Kurdistan. Oppressive governments have sown them in many places in North Iraq as well as on the border between Turkey and Syria. The mines kill and maim children in particular. All of the Kurdish writers that I talked to had lost children in their own families to land mines, members of Kurdish PEN as well as those I just met. Children's magazines and comic books that I picked up included sections on recognizing land mines. This disgraceful situation has not been publicized sufficiently.

THE GOODS

*An evening of reading and discussion on March 8th, International Women's day
By Kristin T. Schnider (Swiss German PEN Centre)*

To highlight International Women's Day, the Swiss German PEN Centre and femscript, the Swiss network of women writers, organised an evening of readings and discussion. It was the second such cooperative event, and we hope to continue with more, certainly another one next year, same day, same context.

Rather than emphasising directly political concerns, like the demand for an increased presence of women in the upper echelons of politics as well as the economy, or protesting gender inequalities in our still male-dominated societies, these events offer a platform for women writers to introduce their books and discuss a chosen topic freely and from their point of view.

Last year the phenomenon of "migrations" was tackled – of people, peoples as well as their texts, texts in their migrations from one language into another. This year's focus was on commodities, consumer goods, consumer behaviour.

Although in affluent societies everybody is encouraged to "shop till you drop", women are main movers and targets in the world of daily shopping. They meet at the till, the wondrous entities housewife-mother-cum-employee and the housewife-mother-cum-temp often separated only by difference in income and the little conveyor belt transporting the goods to the gently downward-curving chute to be collected and packed.

Nicole Müller, a successful Swiss writer and journalist born in the sixties, and Sybille Brändli, historian and cultural anthropologist at the University of Basel, read passages from a novel and a study respectively. Later on the writer Elisabeth Wandeler-Deck led the discussion.

In Nicole Müller's novel *Kaufen! (Buy!)* the protagonist Simone, a young student working part-time in a department store, falls for the fascination of dealing with consumer goods and is drawn into the world behind the facade of the consumers' temple, where she begins to regard the people handling the goods as a peculiar family. Moving from section to section – upward - she ends up writing advertisements. Leaving the innards of the store to travel the world with the store's public relations manager, then her best friend, both photographers and stylists in search of the good shot and the best story, her disenchantment and alienation grows. Her texts, which try to include (however discreetly) too much of a reality which could be detrimental to the joys of shopping, are unwanted, and judged 'too long'. Indignant about a guideline issued to remind people not to – not even linguistically - exaggerate demands for gender equality, she composes a satirical answer and has it distributed amongst the management. Small wonder that none of her masters is amused about her proposal to use the feminine address for all managers and directors and regard it as just as gender neutral as the usual masculine form is claimed to be. Pointing out that 77 percent of the workers in the store are female, as well as 60 percent of the customers, doesn't help. She receives such a put-down that she finally quits.

In Sybille Brändli's book *The Supermarket in one's Head: Consumer culture and affluence in Switzerland after 1945*, she meticulously describes and analyses market and marketing mechanisms, the change from scarcity during and after the war to the advent of affluence. She also describes the invention of Mr. and Mrs. Consumer who had to be – and still are – continuously re-educated in order to adapt to new ways of shopping. In the 50s self-service, at first shocking in its impersonality, had to be brought home to Swiss customers, which caused some upheaval. One of its advocates, Elsa Gasser, economic counsel of one of the big supermarket chains, in her enthusiasm went so far as to describe the new supermarkets as "...little paradises where Eva's daughters do their shopping"; gardens of Eden where original sin has been suspended and the ever tempting "apple" is on eternal display. Women at last were detected as primary shoppers, and treated accordingly.

The passages Sybille Brändli read from a subsequent essay on the introduction of self service in the well known Migros Swiss chain of supermarkets in the 1950ies, caused some amusement. Her analysis of an unpublished report of Migros managers on supermarket marathon in the US, sheds some light on almost forgotten anxieties about how growing consumer culture, its implementation and its implications influence and shape our ways of life.

Having chosen a line from Allen Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California" for her title, she also indicates the surrealities of shopping: "Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes".

So the audience was offered much food for thought, and it showed in the ensuing lively discussion. Despite flare-ups when opinions diverged on how to perceive and judge our lives "as material girls in a material world" – present men of course included – there was a general feeling that even today there is no end to surreal and initially shocking changes within the world of commodities, nor to our treatment as consumers on the one hand and as staff behind the glittering aisles. There were no answers, of course, thanks to suggestions that we may be no more than targeted victims of seduction or even ensnared in a sado-masochistic relationship with those who aim at selling us nearly everything. It was also doubted that human beings would irrevocably turn into mere commodities if the development of the world into the Total Market could not be halted. "Humankapital", i.e. human resources, had been chosen as the German "no no word" of 2004; this did not impress many in the audience, neither could the writers really perceive their products, their books, as mere commodities.

Thoughts about the development of shopping trolleys familiar with our habits and predilections, and houses that would relieve us of the tedious drive to the supermarket by ordering our frozen spinach and toilet-paper automatically, ended the "official" discussion on a note veering between amusement and slight anxiety, reminding us of the misgivings people in the fifties harboured about self-service and shopping malls.

CATALAN PEN WOMEN WRITERS COMMITTEE

Edited by Josefa Contejoch

In 2004, Catalan PEN held the following events:

April 1: In Barcelona's Athenaeum, a **Tribute to Teresa Juvé**, celebrated for her historical mystery novels. María Barbal and Núria Cabré organised the event, and produced an *Album* dedicated to the novelist.

October 28: In the Àgora Room of the Francesca Bonnemaison Women's Arts Centre, a celebration for the centenary of the birth of **philosopher María Zambrano**. The evening was organised by Mercé Otero and Rosa Rius and the speakers were philosophers Rosa Rius and Elizabeth Uribe. It finished with readings of Zambrano's writings, arranged by Núria Cabré, Caarme Castells and Georgina Rabasso, and a video *Mirar un cuadro* (*Looking at a picture*), in which Maria Zambrano speaks of her love of the Flemish painter Flémalle's *Santa Barbara* at the Prado Museum.

November 22-23-24: A memorial tribute over three days at the La Cuina Theatre in the Women's Arts Centre, in honour of poet and writer **María-Mercè Marçal**, a founding member of our Catalan Women Writers' Committee, who died in 1998. We celebrated ten years since the publication of her single, prize-winning novel *La passió según Renée Vivien*.

On the 22nd, there was the re-staging of a dramatised reading of María-Mercè's poems first performed under the direction of Marta Puyo after the poet's death in 1998.

On the 23rd a discussion was held on the subject "Passion and the work", with Mercé Ibarz, Eulalía Lledó and Arnau Pons, chaired by Neus Aguado. Ester Xargay's documentary video *María-Mercè Marçal with artists* was shown.

The occasion ended on the 24th with a work *Ni cap indret enlloc* based on the poet's voice and performed by Nora Ancarola, Constanza Brncic, Jesús Galdón, Maïs, Àngels Ribé, and Marga Ximènez, directed by Ester Xargay.

December 14: An event in the Women's Arts Centre, in honour of writer María Dolors Orriols. Joaquim Ferrer spoke, and the organisers, Montserrat Abelló and Joana Bel, produced an *Album*.

As for our 2005 plans, we have first of all an evening in honour of the deceased writer Helena Valenti (with the release of an *Album*), one for Aurora Bertrana, one to celebrate ten years of the Conference of Pequin and, as well, to send on its way the ambitious *Itineraris* project. This will be seven discussions in seven locations in Catalan country, upon the art of women writers of poetry, fiction and criticism in Catalan.

WOMEN IN WAR

Teresa Cadete (Portuguese PEN Centre)

We have the pleasure of announcing to you the project of an on-line anthology by writers, at the site of the Portuguese PEN Centre. It's still being built, new texts are still coming or being translated, but the idea is, as we have already told you, for a work in progress, with texts both in Portuguese and in one of the PEN working languages, about a theme which is (alas!) always actual, I would dare to write, as long as humankind remains alive...

If you like to visit the site (<http://penclube.no.sapo.pt>, then click "Woman in War"), my colleague Ana Mafalda Leite and I would be very pleased. As I said, this is only the beginning of a project which doesn't need to depend on publishers.

<trcadete@mail.telepac.pt> <anamafaldaleite@oninetspeed.pt>

BORDER CROSSINGS

By Jenni Calder (Scottish PEN Centre)

Over a year ago Scottish PEN embarked on a project to produce a CD featuring contemporary Scottish writers. After months of hard work raising the necessary funds recording has now begun. Twelve writers have been selected to represent the range and vigour of those writing in Scotland today, and to express the overall theme of the CD, 'Border Crossings'. The material crosses borders of all kinds, internal and external, geographical and psychological.

Among the women are Margaret Elphinstone, whose most recent novel *Voyageurs* explores early nineteenth-century connections between Scotland, England and North America, poet Valerie Gillies, who writes evocatively of Scotland's landscape and history, Kathleen Jamie, a much-travelled challenging and award-winning poet, Joan Lingard, one of Scotland's leading writers of fiction for adults and children whose books engage with issues of conflict and exile, and Dilys Rose, a consummate short story writer whose perspectives are international and approach multi-cultural in the broadest sense of the word. All of these writers are concerned with crossing divides.

We hope to have the CD available early next year and to give it an international launch at the 2006 International PEN Congress in Berlin. A free copy will go to every PEN centre around the world. It is being supported by the Scottish Arts Council and the Scottish Executive, and will be distributed to every school and college in Scotland. We see it as a showcase of Scottish writing, which will enable Scotland's voices to be heard all over the world. If it is as successful as we hope, we plan to follow it with a second CD on a different theme.

Look out for information on how to purchase your copy!

THE TRANSFORMATION

By Muge Iplicki (Turkish PEN Centre)

Dönüşüm (The Transformation), a new project by Turkish PEN Women's Committee, aims to reveal and document forms of women's self-expression from various parts of Turkey, such as their poetry, tales, riddles, jokes, regional recipes, and handicrafts. Not many written sources currently provide knowledge of women's means of self-expression in Turkey. By bringing these invaluable sources to light in a decentric and anti-hierarchical manner, *Dönüşüm* expands what is known of the social and cultural realities of these women.

Initially, *Dönüşüm* will be applied in ten selected cities in a long term project including Ankara, Antakya, Artvin, Batman, Istanbul, Izmir, Kayseri, Mardin, Sinop and Kastamonu. 20 literate women from these cities will volunteer to be trained as regional instructors through three weeks of intense oral history and literature courses titled "Your Life" and "My Life". They will be responsible for passing on this training to other women from their cities. The outcome of the project will be documented in to-be-published books, regional periodicals, and other media.

PRIZES

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY AWARD (ORGANISATION)

On December 10, 2004, the Australian PEN Centres were awarded the Australian Human Rights Community Award, after determined campaigning for the rights of asylum-seekers in Australia's detention-camps. Members of the Sydney and Melbourne Centres' Writers In Detention Committees were present at the announcement, as well as Ivorian journalist Cheikh Kone, a former Writer In Prison now released into the community.

THE NIGERIA PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

Nigerian author Akachi Ezeigbo's book *House of Symbols* is one of the three winners in the award of The Nigeria Prize for Literature, on October 9, 2004. Each of the successful authors won US\$5,000.

WALKLEY AWARD FOR FILM

Carmela Baranowska, of the Melbourne PEN Centre, won this section of the 2004 awards for fine journalism in Australia with *Taliban Country*, produced for SBS-TV.

Embedded with US Marines in Central Afghanistan, she followed them both on cordon and knock operations and the US Army's "hearts and minds" campaign, discovering in the process that the Marines' ally, Governor Jan Mohamed, and his militia were terrorizing the population. Independently, she returned to the area; her exposure of US Marines brutalizing the local community led to her removal from Afghanistan. As a result of her program, the US Army and Marine Corps both announced separate enquiries.

The film is also a finalist in the IF Independent Spirit Awards.

SKY-HIGH FLAMES

by Unoma Azuah (Nigerian PEN Centre), AmErica House, Maryland, USA.

This is the story of a vivacious naive young girl who morphs into an unforgettable, strong woman. Ofunne lives in a society that defines her status through marriage and children; nevertheless, she dreams of building a career for herself. Once in school, her high spiritedness leads her to constant trouble, but she excels as a student. She is however taken out of school to marry the man of her parents' dreams, but all is not as it seems and she soon discovers that her husband is less than ideal. Though caught in a whirlpool where many would feel inclined to succumb, she finds her way out. In a world where there are no choices, Ofunne refuses to be a tragic victim, her story becomes an indictment of a culture and her victory gives us hope. This book tells a tale of innocence, of sadness, of sacrifice, and of victory in the face of sky-high obstacles."

Your support in form of reviews, purchases, critiques, etc. would be greatly appreciated!

Unoma Azuah <unomaazuah@yahoo.com>

NOT NEBUCHADNEZZAR: IN SEARCH OF IDENTITIES

By Jenni Calder (Scottish PEN Centre), Luath Press, £9.99

Jenni Calder's new book explores aspects of the author's life story in a series of lucid, thoughtful essays, which examine the concept of identity in general as well as in particular contexts, exemplified through a practical, busy, thoughtful life, always influenced by literature, imaginary lives, biographies of others. "Even in my tenth year I know that I am not Scottish in the same way as my parents are. I also know that my father was born in England and that the fact that he is Jewish makes him a different kind of Scottish from my mother. I know that I am an American child, almost, and also Jewish and that 'home' is Scotland, and that soon I will be living in England."

It seems it is easier to know what you are not than what you are (hence the allusion to a guessing game in the title) – and that includes not being male – although in her prologue Calder makes the point that "identity is about being the same as well as about being distinctive". One essay tackles the issues of writing biography and autobiography, teasing out some of the ways in which we construct our self-identity. Calder's life runs parallel with those of many women of her generation: a childhood during and after the war, a self-driven wish to work hard and do well, achieved academic success, the mismatch between intellect and sexuality in what is expected of women, the marriage trap, the giving up of one's own story in order to make another's possible, the realisation that this is happening, the inevitable tensions that result and often the breaking point.

Since retirement from working at the Royal Scottish Museum, where Jenni was involved in the creation of the new Museum of Scotland, with deep questions concerning Scottish identity and distinctiveness, her life as a writer has continued to flourish; her enquiring mind is very much still at work, as is her social, radical conscience and her compassionate understanding. Her identity is still not 'straightforward', but "straightforward was never an option, and probably isn't for most of us".

Review by Tessa Ransford

ANOTHER COUNTRY (New expanded edition) Rosie Scott and Tom Keneally editors (Sydney PEN Centre), Halstead Press, Sydney A\$25. 00

A country where people driven mad by despair die by their own hand, or slowly day by day, as years wear on. Where mercy has no place and children die of grief.

The anthology came about from the realisation that there were writers – mostly political refugees - imprisoned in Australian detention camps, living in harsh conditions, always with the fear of deportation at the back of their minds. The Writers in Detention Committee set about the long complicated task of contacting them, encouraging them to send their writing, working with them on their pieces and arranging for translations.

This edition was launched on April 30 at the very gates of Baxter Detention Facility, in semi-desert 300km north-west of Adelaide. The 100 present included Iranian Ardeshir Gholipur, released two days before.

“By turns lyrical, despairing, angry, hopeful and brutal.” “A deeply disturbing collection...encapsulates our collective shame.” (The Age)



Rosie Scott, editor of *Another Country*, at the book-launch outside Baxter Detention Centre



The gates of Baxter Detention Centre

TO MAKE OURSELVES HEARD

by Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel de Allende PEN Centre), *Biblioteca de Textos Universitarios of Salta, Argentina*

There is now a second volume of *To Make Ourselves Heard*, Lucina Kathmann's writings about travel and freedom of expression for women writers. Both volumes are published in bilingual edition (Spanish/English).

Lucina Kathmann has traveled all over the world working on behalf of writers who have been harassed, threatened, jailed or murdered. A former Chair and Commissioner for Human Rights of International PEN's Women Writers Committee, Lucina is now an International Vice-President of PEN and its delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. In her books, she reveals intimate moments she has had and places she has visited in her human rights work, such as the home of a Senegalese woman writer's griotte, a person who sings from memory the long history of an African family. *To Make Ourselves Heard*, Volume II, gathers newspaper articles, papers for conferences, case histories and speeches, written in the last two years. Both volumes cite many works by women writers which are difficult to obtain. In many cases the author has translated them for the first time.

The books are useful for English speakers who are learning Spanish as well as Spanish speakers who are learning English. Both volumes can be obtained online at www.spdbooks.org or by request through any Barnes and Noble Bookstore. ISBN:950 623 026 9. To contact the author: lucina@unisono.net.mx.

WITNESSING HISTORY: ONE WOMAN'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM AND FALUN GONG

By Jennifer Zeng (Sydney PEN Centre), Allen & Unwin A\$29.95

Despite a life-threatening illness, Jennifer Zeng was given fresh hope through practising Falun Gong. Soon after she discovered it, however, Falun Gong was banned, in the most far-reaching suppression and persecution experienced in China since The Cultural Revolution. After several arrests, the bright young scientist and happily married mother was blacklisted and imprisoned in a purpose-built forced-labour camp – without any formal trial or charge.

During her year-long detainment, she was 're-educated' – a delicate euphemism for 'tortured' – and saw many tortured to the point of dying. Prisoners were brainwashed, overworked, deprived of sleep and forced to renounce Falun Gong. Many remain in these camps today. On her release, Zeng fled to Australia.

Witnessing History is a powerful and moving account of one woman's escape from persecution, providing a fascinating insight into life in modern-day China, and into a little understood yet widely practised belief system. This is the first time a Chinese Falun Gong practitioner has shared their story, bearing witness to an important period of history that is still unfolding.

ASIA AND PACIFIC WRITERS NETWORK

Asia and Pacific Writers Network (APWN) is an alliance between PEN Centres and individuals and organizations that work with language and stories, in all their forms, including: poets, novelists, storytellers, academics, journalists, publishers and documentary-makers.

There are many issues that the regions' writers and their communities face – the negative effects of globalisation; endangerment of indigenous and minority languages; freedom of speech; and multiple forms of censorship. Writers are often in direct confrontation with these issues, whether it be through writing an article or novel that is not approved, or by writing in a minority language.

APWN provides a forum to develop better understanding of, and engagement with, the writing, cultures and issues of the region. Through APWN, we aim to promote the regions writing, discuss relevant issues, such as independent publishing and distribution, or freedom of speech, share information and provide support for each others endeavours.

The APWN website is currently being developed and will very shortly be up and running. It is multilingual, and publishes writing and news, houses a directory of writers and organisations from across the region and operates forums. We are aiming to build a representation of the diversity of writing, writers and activities from across the region. Visit apwn.net The writing is published on a monthly basis by guest editors and if you are interested in editing an edition contact [berni m janssen](mailto:berni_m_janssen) with a proposal.

In the long-term, APWN will only be sustainable through the participation, ideas and energy of writers, individuals and organizations, interested in writing and language in the region.

If you are interested in participating, contact [berni m janssen](mailto:berni_m_janssen): [<bmj@net2000.com.au>](mailto:bmj@net2000.com.au)

**REPORTS ON THE 49TH SESSION OF UN COMMISSION ON THE
STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW), *Feb. 28 - March 11, 2005, New York City*
BEIJING PLUS TEN
*By Lucina Kathmann***

Beijing Plus Ten, as this year's sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women was called, felt like a celebration. On aesthetic grounds alone, it was beautiful. Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the anniversary sessions attracted more representatives of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) than ever before. The rooms and halls overflowed with African women in colorful clothing, Muslim women with scarves and veils, indigenous women such as the Quechuas in their derby hats, women from the Indian subcontinent in saris, all sorts of women. Instead of about 1000 women, there were 6000.

The UN tried to plan for the crowds. An extra tent-restaurant was created on the concrete esplanade, adequately heated somehow - a necessity considering the record snowfall in New York this year. Temporary movable panels in the corridors created extra meeting rooms. There was a system for giving out tickets two per NGO, for specially popular events. The opening session had to be held in the prestigious General Assembly auditorium instead of the usual Room 2 in the basement. Subsequent meetings in Room 2 were supplemented by an overflow room into which the Room 2 proceedings were televised.

There was glitter galore. One spectacular presentation featured two Nobel peace prizewinners: Wangari Maathai of Kenya (2004) and Rigoberta Menchú of Guatemala. On the first day I heard Mexico's first lady Martha Sahagún talking about the First World Conference on Women, which was held in Mexico City in 1975. Minutes later I heard Chantal Campaoré, the first lady of Burkina Faso.

The consensus of the meeting, which has been the consensus for some time, is that the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 is still a good and powerful document. The focus was to be on its implementation. We did not want change in the document; we just wanted to endorse it by means of a resolution.

At first NGO representatives, and even the government representatives, were concerned because the United States had presented an amendment making explicit that the Platform does not guarantee the right to abortion. It was interpreted as an unnecessary and retrograde effort to limit women's reproductive rights. There were many extra meetings about this matter. The division we feared did not happen. Region after region rejected the amendment. One morning a veiled representative of the Arabic Women's NGO coalition rose to report that the Arabic women unanimously supported the resolution without the US amendment. Discovering that nobody but the Holy See was in accord, the United States finally withdrew the amendment at the end of the first week.

New items of interest:

Half of the representatives of Rwanda's new parliament are women. 30% of the seats were guaranteed to women by law, but other women ran for men's seats and won.

Sudanese Nubian women in colorful clothes and jewelry appeared with their somber, scarved northern Sudanese sisters, allegedly their "enemies," to talk of their joint antiwar activism that has finally led to a peace process getting underway. Unfortunately, despite Security Council Resolution #1325, which mandates the participation of women in peace processes, now that there is a formal process under way, the women have been shut out. An old story.

REPORT

By Tsung Su

This year's session of CSW, known as Beijing Plus Ten, provides for more than 6000 women representatives from 130 plus countries a forum for review and appraisal of the implementation of women's rights around the world since the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) defines and underscores the 12 critical areas of women's rights, such as Women and Poverty, Women and Health, Violence against Women, Women and Armed Conflict, Women and Economy, etc. Since Beijing, the annual UN session of CSW and women's NGOs provide follow-up evaluations and forward-looking planning of the work outlined in BPFA. This September will also mark the fifth anniversary of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted unanimously by UN in 2000.

Of the many panels, workshops and discussions attended by capacity audiences, the recurrent theme of Trafficking and Violence against Women (VAW) usually generates spirited discussions. Several case studies are presented by South East Asian representatives. Cross-nation trafficking of women as sexual slaves is a scourge well organized by the international sex trade. Poverty-stricken women and girls, enticed by the prospect of overseas jobs as migrant workers, are actually trafficked into forced prostitution to the Middle East.



Tsung Su (Chinese Writers Abroad and Writers In Exile Centre)

The Six Countries Alliance formed by India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan networked to combat this crime against women in the region. Local NGOs organized boat and rickshaw rallies, street plays and performance of folk songs to spread the message of women's rights. National celebrities and mass media were also asked to raise the issues of women's fundamental rights as human beings. Of the many discussions on VAW, whether it be the 'honour killing' in Pakistan, 'dowry killing' in India, wife-beating in Canada, day-rape in China, incest violence in Cambodia, or sexual trafficking in Thailand, it is fair to say that violence against women is a crime that knows no cultural or national boundary. Yet it is not all bleak. In all the above-mentioned countries, the national governments and NGOs work in tandem to legislate laws and mechanisms for women's rights protection. But to change cultural customs and traditional attitudes requires more than policies and laws. It requires the education and enlightenment of the human hearts and minds.

In the area of Women and Peace and Security, it is stressed frequently that education is essential to cultivate a culture of peace. The landmark Resolution of 1325 of the Security Council in 2000 underscores the vital role of women in peace-making. Several panels address women's contributions to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. In armed conflict, women and girls are the most vulnerable victims as targets for sexual assaults. Rape is frequently used as a weapon in many wars. Resolution 1325 ensures that war crimes, including sexual crimes against women and girls are prosecuted with gender perspective. Thus the slogan: "Peace Needs Women, Women Need Justice."

A panel on general review of Beijing Plus Ten and MDG Plus Five heard country experiences by representatives from Brazil, Cambodia, Honduras, Kenya and Yemen. The

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from the Millennium Declaration focus on eight world development goals to be achieved by 2015. The goals are :

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
- Achieve universal primary education;
- Promote gender equality and empower women;
- Reduce child mortality;
- Improve material health;
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- Ensure environmental sustainability;
- Develop a global partnership for development.

To achieve these goals and to implement the BPFA in the coming decade require international cooperation, resources as well as the political will of governments and NGOs alike.

The overall mood of the 49th Session of the CSW can be summed up as realistically sombre and cautiously expectant. After all, this is the Janus-review year, looking both forward and backward. A NGO named Business and Professional Women International (BPW Int'L) gives Beijing Plus 10 the verdict of "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back." It lists the 12 Critical Areas of BPFA and the countries /regions that made advances or were set back. To cite just one example in the area of VAW (violence against women), the countries that made advances are Chile, Costa Rica, Argentine and Japan; countries that regressed are USA, Mexico, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia. It is interesting to note that in the matter of violence against women, a country's 'development' or lack thereof, does not make much of a difference.

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF INTERNATIONAL PEN WOMEN WRITERS COMMITTEE
at the 70th World Congress of International PEN
Tromso, Norway
7 September 2004**

Attendees: Sarah Lawson, Judith Buckrich, Maureen Roberts, Caglar cabuk, Aysu Erden, Muge Iplicki, Talabi Aisie Lucan, Elisabeth Nordgren, Tsung Su, Kathy Barazetti, Sibila Petlevski, Perla Martinelli, Chiara Macconi, Reiko Hikawa, Yukiko Chino, Maria Elena Ruiz Cruz, Elisabeth Eide, Maria Kristina Modig, Kristin T Schnider, Joanne Leddom-Ackerman, Shoudabeh Alishahi, Ren Powell, Vera Tokombaeva, Lucina Kathmann, Berivan Dosky, Shulamit Kuriansky.

Judith Buckrich (Melbourne PEN) was in the Chair.

The 26 members present introduced themselves and gave brief descriptions of their positions and work in PEN. An attendance sheet was circulated and copies of *Network/La Red/Le Reseau* were distributed.

1. Chair's report.

Contributions are sought from women writers for *Nuestra Voz*, volume 3, preferably from those not published in volumes 1 or 2; published or unpublished work; the deadline is December 1, 2004. There is to be a website soon. Send information or contributions to Judith Buckrich judithbuckrich@optusnet.com.au.

Tiina Pystynen (Finnish PEN) reports *in absentia*. Tiina is starting a mentoring program for women writers in prison and is looking for cases that might suit her program. She also needs a list of IPWWC members willing to take part.

Fawzia Assad (Suisse Romande PEN) is involved with the organization Women Defending Peace, which meets in November, involving 300 representatives of NGOs. Fawzia is going as a delegate of the Writers-in-Prison Committee.

We ask **Kristin Schnider** (Swiss German PEN) to go as our representative.

2. Berivan Dosky (Kurdistan PEN) reports that Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran have been prevented from using their own language. Now women have organized Kurdish Women Against Honour Killing, for the situation of women in Iranian Kurdistan is very worrying. However, women in Iraqi Kurdistan have succeeded in making honor killing legally murder, and there are now women judges there. Taboos are finally being broken. At a London exhibition about women and violence, a Kurdish woman exposed the traditional violence of the wedding night, when the blood of the virgin bride is shown to the family and is celebrated. The new charter in Iraq calls for equal rights. Women writers are in the vanguard of the struggle for equal rights in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

A PEN delegation is to go there in October consisting of Berivan, Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel PEN), and Terry Carlborn (International Secretary). Berivan will report back to IPWWC about the visit.

3. Sibila Petlevski (Croatian PEN) reports that exiled writer Dubravka Ugracic is now published in Croatia, and there are now women on the best seller list. Women are writing tough “male” writing, to much controversy in the media. Parliament has debated maternity leave. If it is increased to 3 years it sounds good on paper but is used to promote the birth rate and encourage women to stay at home.

Sibila reports that she herself has been attacked in the writers’ union as an “enemy of the nation”! Her colleagues waited two weeks before they defended her. She sees the motives for the attack as a combination of nationalist, fascist, and sexist ones. She has been subjected to a campaign of intimidation. She is married to an Armenian-born German. She was intimidated by border guards who said, “Watch your bags. If someone should put something in your bags nobody in PEN could help you.” In spite of all this, Sibila is optimistic about both the Croatian government and society.

4. Maria Elena Ruiz Cruz (Mexican PEN) reports that in northern Mexico a journalist was killed. Five women from Mexican PEN and Reporters Without Borders founded the organization In Memoriam; one founder has received death threats. The situation in Mexico is dangerous: narcotics traffickers are prosecuted by local authorities now, whereas formerly they were under the jurisdiction of the federal authorities. This journalist was murdered for writing about drug dealing.

This matter is to be referred to **Tiina Pystynen** as our Commissioner for Human Rights, but the Women Writers’ Committee will also write an official letter to President Fox to protest the death threats. We propose to add a note to the WiPC resolution to the Assembly of Delegates about protection of lawyers for women.

5. Elisabeth Nordgren, (Finnish PEN) reports that Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian journalist, courageously goes to Chechnya and writes books about genocide. On a recent trip there she drank tea on the plane, became ill and had to be hospitalised. A colleague of Anna’s, a woman journalist in Chechnya, has received death threats. We consider presenting a resolution on this subject to the Assembly of Delegates.

6. Aysu Erden (Turkish PEN) reports that Turkish PEN WWC is to help produce work of new and established women writers. The International WiPC is supporting a project for an archive and anthology of work of writers in prison, and Aysu suggested an anthology of



Welcoming us at Tromsø: Elisabeth Middelthun (Norwegian PEN)



Aysu Erden (Turkish PEN Centre)

women's writing from prison. Berivan Dosky then suggested that Turkish PEN might also help Kurdish writers get published in their own language. A lively discussion followed about women writers in prison.

7. Japanese PEN women writers invited Naiko Takato to a symposium of women writers. She had been one of the three Japanese hostages taken by Iraqi insurgents. When they were freed and back in Japan, the media attacked her because she was a woman. They raked over her past, asked what she was doing in Iraq in the first place, and so on. Women writers in Japan suffer generally from sexism; for example, male reviewers regularly attack books *ad feminam*, paying more attention to the author than to the book.

8. Iranian PEN. Zahra Kazemi was arrested and killed by the police, but at the trial the wrong person was blamed. This matter was referred to **Tiina Pystynen**.

9. Chiara Macconi (Swiss-Italian PEN) suggests considering a program for encouraging young women and school pupils to write. **Talabi Aisie Lucan** (Sierra Leone PEN) is planning a training program in schools. There is to be a workshop in January. There is a book for school children, but Sierra Leone hasn't had a long history of women writers.

10. Tsung Su (Chinese Writers Abroad and Writers In Exile Centre) again attended meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. As always there was grave concern about violence against women. In war zones women and girls suffer most; even UN peacekeepers are reported to have raped and abused women and girls. However, there have been some positive steps, like educating men about women's roles.

11. Vera Tokombaeva (Kyrghyzstan PEN) reports that in Kyrghyzstan women suffer from self-censorship. The main writers of the country are the President and his wife and children. Their books are best-sellers because citizens are required to buy them. As for the linguistic situation, as of March 2004 the official language is Kirghiz, although 80% of the population are Russian-speaking. The PEN Centre has little money. There is widespread corruption and money mysteriously disappears from offices of international organizations staffed by local people.

12. Judith Buckrich (Chair) suggests a plan to support women writers of central Asia in a very practical way. After the PEN Congress in Bled next year (14-21 June), IPWWC could have a follow-on conference in Bishkek. Vera says the approximate travel cost would be \$700. Judith believes funding might be found for various parts of the program. The question is put to the Committee: does it agree to ask Judith and Vera to investigate the possibility of having this post-congress conference? And the answer is an enthusiastic Yes.

13. Summary of Action. The action decided upon at this meeting is: (1) to protest the murder of the journalist in Mexico; (2) Tiina Pystynen to protest in the case of the Russian journalist and look into the case reported by Iranian PEN; (3) Vera Tokombaeva and Judith Buckrich to work on the post-congress meeting in Bishkek.

Sarah Lawson, Minutes Secretary



Sarah Lawson at Tromso. (Minutes Secretary of IPWWC Meeting)

IPWWC PRINCIPLES – A DISCUSSION

*By Tiina Pystynen (Finnish PEN Centre)
The Human Rights Commissioner of IPWWC*

As IPWWC Human Rights Commissioner, I make appeals for many terrifying and complicated cases. Some are very clear, some not. I felt I needed help from other IPWWC activists and that's why I started discussion.

One case was the murder of Fanny Ann Eddy of Sierra Leone, founder of the Sierra Leone Lesbian and Gay Association. It was clear that something should be done, of course, but as it turned out that Fanny Ann Eddy cannot be called a writer, this was a case for discussion, to clarify our task.

It should be possible to work in different areas though IPWWC. The main area is writers and journalists, freedom of speech. That's where we should put our energy.

But there are other difficult problems to deal with. To start with, the fact that girls have fewer opportunities for education. The line between what is our field and what is not is not clear at all. As in Fanny Ann's case.

Kristina Hultman made this point: the fact that Fanny Ann was not a writer must be understood in the African context, indicating the need to consider African cultural tradition, which is not primarily literary in the sense of white and western ideas about writing.

Also **Kristin Schneider** feels we should have discussion within IPWWC about our task and function in IPWWC. "That could make us feel more certain about when and how to act – as individuals, activists in other groups, or going to IPWWC as our organisation with suggestions. So as part of an organisation (PEN) and as the special committee (IPWWC), we can speak out on cases like Fanny Ann, but without promises of further action and without making it its own case."

Sarah Lawson wrote: "I am sorry to play the wet blanket, but I think this is outside the scope of IPWWC. It is certainly a revolting crime and should be vociferously protested and publicised, and if individual members want to do that, they should, but we as a committee have plenty to do in concentrating on women writers. I trust there are other organisations whose remit would include this kind of case. We need to be fairly narrowly focused...we should be realistic and limit ourselves to our special concern: women writers."

Also **Elisabeth Nordgren**, the president of Finnish PEN, agreed that it was not a PEN-case. She suggested that everyone could personally act and make their own appeals, contacting other women's organizations which work with such cases.

Kristina Hultman wrote: "I think I understand how you think Sarah, but are we sure this woman never wrote? I personally know too little about her to be certain. Being a lesbian activist does not exclude the identity of women writer, and vice versa. Some PEN centers are also more liberal than others in these fields. A number of women that we have been in contact with in Sweden had mixed identities (as it often is with women); researcher and writer or poet, for example. political activist and editor (Asiye Zeybek). Journalist and activist. I just wanted to make that remark, without knowing anything about this particular case. Of course Sarah, you could be right - that it falls completely outside the PEN agenda. But how do we know? Also it's important to make the link between different forms of oppression that block women's rights to talk and express themselves freely. This form of violence - against openly lesbian women - is one way women get silenced. As I see it as our duty - as PEN members within the women's committees - to make sure that we at least do not contribute to the silencing by marginalising women on the basis of sexual orientation."

Marta Cerda, former chair of the IPWWC, wrote, "In certain cases the important thing is the human being, not whether he or she is a writer."

Lucina Kathmann wanted to act as soon as possible and wrote, "Democracy is a real nuisance! But never mind, you almost have a consensus on this one. Not quite, but there is a lot of support. (compared to anything else we ever discuss.) I am always afraid if we

talk about things forever we will never do anything. As a women's organization I think we ought to speak also on behalf of those who do not have a voice."

At the Mexico congress, the IPWWC made a statement against the multiple murders of young women in Juárez and the congress sent a letter about them signed by the IPWWC and Homero Aridjis and all the writers.

Kristin Schneider wrote about this action in Mexico: "The 'Juarez' case you mentioned is a pointer in that direction. I also hope that by voicing our protest in such cases we show presence, that in itself might lead to further networking, to people who will take note of IPWWC and perhaps some day be useful and helpful when we need more information and/or support even.

"PEN as such comes into such discussions for me where we advocate our endeavour to help the 'world be a better place', getting our angles straight on 'the word - and literature' where we get in on educational matters, supporting the fight against analphabecy, supplying schools with writing materials, all things we are already doing in one or the other centre, and then of course personally I think we are at work at a very important angle of human rights fights, the word: without it you can't even tell what's happening, without media you can't spread the word. We should not underestimate that as a core aim of PEN, and if we let others know that this is what we are doing by 'only' supporting writers and journalists we might get somewhere, too. I like the sentence in the mission statement where it is pointed out that literature has a social value. But to point that out I guess there is a lot of preliminary work also to be done."

Judith Buckrich wrote: "In the light of recent communications, we really need to make decisions about what IPWWC will and will not do and form sub-committees to take on certain tasks. Recently, members discussed how we could deal with the case of Fanny Ann Eddy and the idea of making Anna Politkovskaya an IPWWC Honorary member. These are important issues. But I am also very conscious of the limits of our time and energy." Judith recommended we send the letter of appeal as soon as possible and this was done.

Anyway, I am a bit wiser after all this discussing. I think little working groups would be a good idea to clear up present IPWWC-work, draw limits for our work in IPWWC and find out the different fields we could work with, and then we'd try to find the people who would be interested to work in those different fields.

How much work we have! I don't know how it all will be done. But I am glad to have got so much help and valuable ideas from all these IPWWC-activists in e-mail discussion.

I wish us courage and strength to go on with this important IPWWC-work!

- IN MEMORIAM - *FATOU NDIAYE SOW*



Fatou Ndiaye Sow

Fatou Ndiaye Sow died unexpectedly on October 23, 2004 in New York, where she had gone to attend a conference of the Organization of Women Writers of Africa. Her body was returned to Senegal.

A tireless organizer and an outstanding poet combined in one person, Fatou, who was about 67 years old, was a founding member of the IPWWC and its coordinator for French Africa since even before the committee formally existed. Hers was a striking presence at International PEN Congresses: an exotic-looking little lady, with headdress and matching Senegalese cotton boubou dropping off one chocolate shoulder, taking notes in the General Assembly, reporting in the Women Writers Committee or rummaging about in the huge purse from which anything at all might emerge.

Fatou carried a lot of important things in that purse. She carried the news, some of it quite frightening, from writers in other countries in West Africa. She carried her own volumes of poetry. A lifelong champion of children, she always carried many pamphlets, comic books and children's books (some bilingual French/Wolof), many of them about the rights of children. She carried little gifts.

Fatou was a devout Muslim. She traveled with her prayer rug and prayed every day, but she broke every western stereotype of the Muslim woman. Though she never drank alcohol herself, she absolutely enjoyed cocktail parties and carried a glass of orange juice around at them. Frequently she traveled alone, even to lands where she did not speak the language. She took whatever lodging was offered to her, no matter if it involved a long walk to the conference center, many chances to get lost and no language in which to ask questions. I can't remember her ever complaining about anything.

She suffered because of abuses that were committed in the name of her religion. One that especially concerned her was the practice of sending young boy children far away to special Muslim schools in which they were taught nothing but to recite Koranic verses in a language they did not understand. These boys were separated from family life, rarely were able to return, and frequently ended up as cannon fodder in wars. Her stunning and almost unendurable poem "A Mother's Lament" ("La complainte d'une mère"), which is published in her final poetry book, *Les Tisserands du Rêve*, speaks in the voice of a mother whose little boy is being taken away from her to go away to this sort of school. Of course, the mother has nothing to say in the matter.

Fatou's name was an adjectival form of Fatima, a daughter of Mohammed. I asked her what qualities that might refer to and she said "Oh, submissiveness and such things." I asked her if the name fit her. She said no, that her husband had remarked that she was not very submissive. He said she never agreed with anything unless she happened truly to agree with it.

She had a gift for finding the positive path in everything. I don't think Fatou even worked at it. It wasn't a question of avoiding confrontation; Fatou always managed to find her place in any situation and begin to work. She said that she had many advantages, because in Senegal she could find support for her work at every level, from her family to the president of the country.

But this cannot be all. I think she had found a mission that sustained her every day. Fatou died carrying out her calling. It is now our painful task to get along without her.

Lucina Kathmann

