

Living proof that PEN is mightier than the sword

The champion of writers' freedom has plenty to celebrate as it turns 90, says

Catherine Nixey

Dear Arthur, Dear Harold," The letter between Ali and his new pen friends begins confidently enough. But, within a few lines, anxiety appears. A meeting has clearly been proposed between the three, and Ali seems unsure how to address his new-found friends in the flesh.

A common enough worry for any correspondent, but Ali, it seems, has rather more cause for discomfort than most. "What would I say?" he wonders later in his letter to them. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen." "Or should it be: 'Hi! Arthur and Harold'?" Or, perhaps "Hello Mr Miller, hello Mr Pinter"?

The encounter becomes even more improbable as one reads on. It is clear that they are not meeting backstage in a theatre, as one might imagine, but in a Turkish prison. For Ali Taygun was a Turkish playwright and human rights activist, sentenced to eight years in prison in Turkey in the Eighties for belonging to an illegal peace movement. While in prison, the playwrights Harold Pinter and Arthur Miller began to write to him — and even came to visit him — to protest against his treatment. The organisation that enabled them to do so was PEN, the writers' association, which this year celebrates its 90th anniversary.

PEN is the oldest human rights organisation in the

world. It was founded in London in 1921 by Mrs Catherine Amy Dawson Scott, a writer, and the sort of Englishwoman who tends to attract the adjective "redoubtable". Its first incarnation was a London dining club where writers could meet and debate; its rather refined name the "Poets, Essayists and Novelists Club", or "PEN" for short. Influential from the beginning, early members included John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.

This year, as it turns 90, PEN is no longer a cosy London club of august authors but an international campaign group with offices across the world, fighting for "the freedom to write, and the freedom to read". Nor is it any longer only poets who are protected: membership is now open to anyone who works with words; so historians, playwrights and journalists.

Journalists such as those in Egypt where, according to Jonathan Heawood, the director of English PEN, "writers, journalists, publishers are on the front line; and they very often pay the price". On January 29, Egyptian journalists saw that price being paid in their own offices, as Ekbal Baraka, a journalist, novelist and the chair of Egyptian PEN, explains.

"Ahmed Mahmoud, one of our journalists, was standing in the window of [his newspaper's office] with his mobile in his hand, taking photos of the demonstration," she says. "A police officer saw him; and didn't want something like this to be published. So he shot him. Right in his forehead." He died five days later.

Mahmoud is not the only journalist to have been harmed: other journalists have been threatened, detained, attacked and had their equipment and offices vandalised. So far, says Baraka, the confusion has been too great for PEN to begin working on their behalf: as yet it is not even clear who has been arrested. But soon, she



PEN POWER The writer Yousef Azizi; Harold Pinter, below, was a strong advocate

says, Cairo's Journalists' Syndicate will "issue a list of the harassed journalists during the uprising and then we will start acting". Any other action is, in the present situation, impossible. "Of course we can't do anything," Baraka says. Except, she adds: "We can write. Our weapon is the pen."

PEN (whose own motto is "Mightier

than the Sword") has been helping Baraka and other journalists to use this "weapon" by issuing a statement that she has written on its website, by protesting about the arrests and ill treatment of journalists on Twitter and Facebook and by translating articles by PEN's members into English to give them a wider audience. When asked if this lobbying really helps, she practically

bellows her response: "Of course it helps!" One writer with personal experience of quite how much it can help is the Iranian academic and writer Yousef Azizi. "I was imprisoned in 2005 in Iran for criticising the regime for the killing of non-violent demonstrators in southwest Iran," he says. "I was imprisoned for 64 days. They tortured me; I was in solitary confinement in a cell that was 2 x 3m. They wanted to kill me."

While he was in prison, PEN's Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) learnt of his arrest. WiPC is one of the organisation's most important campaigns and works on behalf of imprisoned writers by lobbying governments, organising protests and publicising unjust imprisonments to the international community. It immediately started to work on behalf of Azizi.

"After five days [in prison] my wife called me and told me that PEN supported me." It was the last time that he could speak to her while in prison: after this conversation, his telephone rights were removed. But that conversation had been enough. "It meant [much] to me," he says. "I felt I had friends in the world who supported me, that did not forget me. It helped me to be strong in torture. It supported my soul."

Fifty-nine days later he was released from prison on bail. He fled the country in 2008 to escape a second arrest. Then, in 2009, while he was living in exile, he was invited by English PEN to come to London to give a talk. Once he arrived here, PEN began lobbying the Home Office to offer him asylum — which was granted. They also got asylum for his wife and daughter. Azizi is enthusiastic about his adopted country: "The UK is an example for freedom of speech to the world!" he says.

Others would disagree. "Our law is anti free speech," says Simon Singh, the science journalist and libel campaigner. "There's stuff we cannot read any more because our libel laws are so restricted." Singh knows this at first hand: he was sued for libel and now works on the Libel Reform Campaign that PEN is, running with Sense about

Science and Index on Censorship. This campaign describes our laws as a "global disgrace". "Global" not only because people around the world are appalled by them, but because people around the world suffer from them through libel tourism. It is not of course, only literary activity that is impeded by the loss of this freedom: science too is stifled. "If scientists and researchers can't challenge things," says Singh, "then medicine doesn't move forward."

Significant though this campaign is, Heawood feels that "one of the most important things that PEN does is actually the simplest thing that we do: to write to prison-

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ers". Prisoners such as Taygun, who was finally released in 1986, after concerted international campaigning by PEN and other organisations.

Throughout his incarceration PEN members such as Miller and Pinter wrote to him. Their letters, perhaps surprisingly, got through. Miller and Pinter, however, did not. When, in 1985, they travelled to his prison to see him, they were refused entry. Taygun's carefully prepared greetings went unheard. However, as he wrote to them in his next letter: "I felt no dejection when I heard you wouldn't be permitted to see me," he writes. "Why should I? What they do not understand, what they cannot comprehend, is that I am now in that room where you are, with you. We are more 'together' now than we ever would have been, had we been together physically. I know that."

The letter ends, as it began, confidently, as Taygun proposes: "A toast, then, my friends: To the triumph of human dignity!" english.pen.org



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