

Svetlana Alexievich

2013

Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2013
Conferment Speeches

Liao 2012
Sansal 2011
Grossman 2010
Magris 2009
Kiefer 2008
Friedländer 2007
Lepenies 2006
Pamuk 2005
Esterházy 2004
Sontag 2003
Achebe 2002
Habermas 2001
Djebar 2000
Stern 1999
Walser 1998
Kemal 1997
Vargas Llosa 1996
Schimmel 1995
Semprún 1994
Schorlemmer 1993
Oz 1992
Konrád 1991
Dedecius 1990
Havel 1989
Lenz 1988
Jonas 1987
Bartoszewski 1986
Kollek 1985
Paz 1984
Sperber 1983
Kennan 1982
Kopelew 1981
Cardenal 1980
Menuhin 1979
Lindgren 1978
Kołakowski 1977
Frisch 1976
Grosser 1975
Frère Roger 1974
The Club of Rome 1973
Korczak 1972
Dönhoff 1971
Myrdal 1970
Mitscherlich 1969
Senghor 1968
Bloch 1967
Bea/Visser 't Hooft 1966
Sachs 1965
Marcel 1964
Weizsäcker 1963
Tillich 1962
Radhakrishnan 1961
Gollancz 1960
Heuss 1959
Jaspers 1958
Wilder 1957
Schneider 1956
Hesse 1955
Burckhardt 1954
Buber 1953
Guardini 1952
Schweitzer 1951
Tau 1950

Gottfried Honnefelder, President of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association

Greeting

How could the task of a peace prize be anything other than to give a voice to that which serves the most fragile of human commodities: Peace. From the very beginning, the German Booksellers and Publishers Association has understood that its Peace Prize embodies a highly unique task. Indeed, the publishing of texts via the medium of print implies nothing other than the act of granting a sounding board to the spoken word: and it is precisely this sounding board that goes far beyond the usual audibility of that which is said, and ultimately grants the spoken and written word a presence capable of persevering and reaching as many readers and listeners as possible.

Of course, many things become audible via the printed word: quiet and loud things, important and unimportant things, things that inspire knowledge and orientation, and even things that spread lies and sow the seeds of prejudice and confusion. On the one hand, language can provide us with insights, make us understandable to one another and bring us together; on the other hand, however, it can also lead us astray, create rifts and become an instrument of hate and violence. Amid the increasing din of voices – all of which are trying to be heard yet are hard to distinguish from one another – *the* voice gets very few opportunities to show that peace is even possible and to explore what the word peace even means.

Each year, the Board of Trustees of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade sets out to find a voice that has consistently opened up a conduit for peace. The bearer of that voice is then awarded the prize while also receiving the international attention that comes along with it. The result of this annual search is a sequence of voices that have vocalised the concept of peace in a unique and wide-ranging array of themes and apostrophisations: in sounds of appeals and incantations, but also of sadness and despair, in the resonance of experience expressed in soaring literature just as much as in longings and visions.

Increasingly over the years, the Peace Prize began to function as the medium of those who had no voice at all. After all, can we say there is peace when individuals – and, with increasing modernity, even entire groups of people – are rendered

mute? Can we say there is peace when the world loses sight of and sometimes even completely forgets these people as if they were merely the marginal phenomenon of a political process? In a world such as this, there is nothing more necessary than a person who commands the power of words and has the courage to give a voice to those who have been silenced.

This year, the German Booksellers and Publishers Association is extremely happy and especially grateful to have found a voice that has this power and performs this function in an extraordinary way. We are delighted to be able to award Svetlana Alexievich with the 2013 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade and thus to be able to generate additional resonance for her essential and inimitable voice.

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Svetlana Alexievich uses the entirety of her literary might to make sure that the voices of those people once rendered mute – those individuals and groups whose hopes have no chance of being fulfilled and who are obliged to carry out their existence as mere pawns in the hands of those more powerful – are revived and become audible again. And she does so in a measure that is equally as selfless as it is brave. In 1985, in her first book, what became audible again were the voices of women who had been forced to serve the Soviet Union as soldiers in the Second World War; it was from these voices that we gained a full sense of the horrors of that war – horrors that contrasted heavily with the heroic prose officially propagated by the regime. In her 1989 book, it was the voices of those mothers whose fallen sons returned from the war in Afghanistan in zinc coffins, thus earning them the name »zinky boys«. In her 1997 book, it was the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster – she captured their lost voices in the lamentations and indictments of the people who survived. In her latest book, which was just published in German under the title »Secondhand-Zeit« (»Second-hand Time«), it is the voices of those individuals living in post-communist socie-

ties who are forced to exist in a niche world – a so-called »kitchen society« that goes unnoticed and is overlooked by those in power – and to seek in vain for a way to survive intellectually and to live their everyday lives in this manner.

As already mentioned, the act of lending a voice to those who have been rendered mute – the act of giving the »suppressed« an opportunity to speak openly – requires not only »humility and generosity«, but also an entirely new literary mode. It requires that an author write her own novel as a novel of voices; and it requires that she do so not in a filtered or glorified manner, but rather using the »hard camp prose« that Svetlana Alexievich has always sought to make available for her readers to experience.

This approach has led to a body of work that reads like an over three-decade-long discussion with individuals who have been silenced and rendered mute. It is a body of work that is the outgrowth of an unflinching devotion to those who have been overlooked and forgotten. It is a body of work that reflects a never-ending process of listening. In addition, Svetlana Alexievich has always worked in the face of protests and publication bans. She is a chronicler who never withdraws, even during her trips abroad, including her time as a DAAD scholar in Berlin. She always returns to her hometown of Minsk. »It's very simple,« she says in one interview, »I have to be in the place I'm writing about.«

It is the message contained in Svetlana Alexievich's work that has earned her this year's Peace Prize. It is a message that can be heard in the translations of her books into 35 languages. It is a message that goes far beyond the concrete memory of those unhealed wounds that world events of the past several decades have left behind on the societies she describes. Indeed, not brushing over the victims, not doubling the insult by letting those who got lost along the way also fall

victim to being forgotten – this is the essential core of humanity without which individuals and mankind itself cannot find their peace. Svetlana Alexievich's clear message is that if we lose this core, we will enter a second-hand epoch that »produces no new thoughts«. As she argues, this era will be one in which »technological progress leads to a state of war between humanity and itself« and in which »the idea of a fulfilled life« is displaced by »mediocrity«. In the interview already mentioned here, Alexievich states: »I always hoped that my books would contribute to preventing people from becoming cynical«. In that same interview she notes: »I believe that mankind can survive only with the help of compassion. Unfortunately, even the Europeans are becoming increasingly impoverished as a result of rising rationalisation.«

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What more can the awarding of the Peace Prize hope to achieve than to remind us of the core of humanity without which peace is not possible? Only in being remembered by others can those individuals who have been pushed to the margins and robbed of their lives regain their dignity and their voice. Svetlana Alexievich's work makes us feel that we are these »others«. And this is precisely why we have her to thank for reminding us of the core of our own humanity. The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2013 is the *symbol* of our deeply felt gratitude.

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

Peter Feldmann, Lord Mayor of the City of Frankfurt

Greeting

The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize was announced just this week. And today we have gathered to award this year's Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Ladies and gentlemen, we bestow peace prizes because we remember war and because war is still being waged out there. We bestow peace prizes because we remember what it is like to live without freedom and because many people today continue to live without freedom.

We see the dictatorship in Belarus and the tragedies in Syria and it is easy for us to bemoan such situations vociferously from a distance. However, we are not entitled to a prize for this. On the contrary, the images of Lampedusa urge us to reflect at least for a minute on those »non-freedoms« often required to obtain our freedoms. Peace and freedom themselves are not worthy of a prize. Indeed, they should be a given.

We award the Peace Prize to those courageous voices that have spoken out against oppression and war. In fact, many of those voices have spoken out despite threats of incarceration, repression, censorship and vilification. Brave voices such as your own, Ms. Alexievich.

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In her work, Svetlana Alexievich has placed the emphasis on three focal points: the Second World War, Chernobyl and Afghanistan. These are at once Russian *and* German themes, and this fact alone proves that her work possesses a universal validity and represents a world-class oeuvre.

Your books, Ms. Alexievich, allow us to reflect our own German history. Our path to democracy was long and arduous, but it was successful. It was only fifty years ago in 1963 that the Auschwitz Trials got underway just a few metres away from

here in Frankfurt's historical Römer building. And only a couple of days ago, the Fritz Bauer Institute published tape recordings of 318 witnesses online. The act of giving a voice to suffering and enabling contemporary witnesses to be heard: this is also your literary process.

Dear Svetlana Alexievich, please take the acknowledgement you receive here in Frankfurt home with you to Belarus. Tell the people there that they have many supporters. Tell them of this venerable place, the Church of St. Paul, where 165 years ago democracy took its first steps in Germany. The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade has been awarded in Frankfurt since 1950 - here in the city of critical thought, the city of Goethe and Adorno, the city of books and of literature.

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We are proud to be the host of the Frankfurt Book Fair. We are proud that the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade is awarded here each year. And I am especially proud today to be able to bestow this important award upon such an outstanding author as you, dear Svetlana Alexievich.

Congratulations!

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

Karl Schlögel

Voices in Chorus: Invoking an Era

Laudatory speech for Svetlana Alexievich

A new sound - a new genre - comes into the world when a story cannot be told in the old, familiar language. This usually happens with an upheaval, with the revocation of a hitherto valid canon or with a sober declaration of mistrust as to what literature and language are even capable of achieving. And so it must have been with the young Svetlana Alexievich, who, as she herself admits, grew up as a *knishny chelovek*, a book-worm, with three generations of teachers before her, raised - one is tempted to say - in the good Russian, Soviet tradition. »I belong to the generation that was educated from books, and not from reality«, she once confessed. Books signified a place in the world of the mind; they denoted passionate debates among the intelligentsia. Those who contribute to great literature break away from the confinement of the provinces and know something of the beauty that will save the world, as Dostoevsky says. It is the barrier erected against meanness and filth, one that secures spiritual survival, even in those places where people are sentenced to die: in the camps. In beautiful literature, at least, values are cultivated that in the real world are invalidated. In other words: it is like a holding point, an utter and saving grace. The writing of Svetlana Alexievich begins with a farewell to beautiful literature. The reality she is drawn to, that confuses her, that seizes her, like an addiction, is a reality that does not exist in literature. The result is a collection of books that, in retrospect, unite in a coherent, indeed epic, oeuvre. The titles of her great books - »War's Unwomanly Face« (1985), »The Last Witnesses« (1985), »Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War« (1989), »Enchanted with Death« (1993), »Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster« (1997), and finally »Second-hand Time. Life in the Rubble of Socialism« (2013) - are like chapters in one large continuous book that she

herself once termed a »Red Encyclopedia«. It addresses war, communism, Soviet imperialism, her home country Belarus, but ultimately it deals with people in extreme situations, with people in states of emergency, with »naked people on this naked earth«. She has found a readership well beyond the Russian-speaking world; only in her home country are her books not in print. Alexander Lukashenko, who rules Belarus as an authoritarian figure, indeed as a dictator, condones no independent voice besides his own. After the suppression of the protests against election fraud on 19 December 2010 - we all still remember the nighttime images of Minsk's October Square, when heavily armed OMON formations bore down on the demonstrators (average citizens, female students, opposition politicians) in order to, in the words of one of Lukashenko's men, »wipe them out in seven minutes« - Svetlana Alexievich wrote an open letter to Lukashenko: »You believe in force, I believe in words. The government and the people must talk with one another. For now we speak through barred windows (at the detention center) on Okrestin Street. Those who think differently get clubbed in the head. But together we should talk, discuss and contemplate our past, as well as the future.«

I

Svetlana Alexievich did not need to invent the stories she told. She found them in the part of the world in which she spent the majority of her life. Those who, like her, were born in the Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk and then grew up in Belarus were surrounded by the legacy of the war: by

the trenches that had been overgrown with weeds, by the rusting steel helmets that lay strewn about the forest, by the war-disabled managing to move through the streets on little wooden wagons. The villages were mostly inhabited by old women and children, as the men had either died in the war or disappeared in the camps. When Svetlana's family moved to Belarus - her father was Belorussian, her mother Ukrainian - they moved to the epicenter of a country that had been devastated and depopulated by the Second World War, a country where it was unclear how it could ever recover. Belarus during the war: overrun several times by advancing troops; the setting of a demographic catastrophe unrivaled in Europe; 3.4 million people killed, i.e. one-third of the population; almost every Jew annihilated by the mass murder perpetrated by Einsatzkommandos; thousands of villages burned to the ground; the large cities - Minsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Vitebsk - nothing but debris and ash; hundreds of thousands on the run or already living in forests and swamps in alliance with the partisans. The young Svetlana Alexievich, who had graduated in 1967 from Minsk University with a degree in journalism and then worked for a while in the countryside, near Brest, for a newspaper, was familiar with this topography of death and the struggle to survive. In the official memory of the Great Patriotic War, there were the heroes, who, as a rule, were men. There were also heroic deeds, in which the actual war played no part. However, this real war was invoked by the women, the mothers, the grandmothers, the widows, who had never been consulted, but whose voices Svetlana had heard throughout her childhood. Never before in history had as many women been active in the armed forces as they were in the Soviet army during the Great Patriotic War - around one million women: as doctors, nurses, radio operators, sharpshooters, pilots, parachute jumpers and partisans. Addressing these themes involved not only correcting the unbalanced history of the Great Patriotic War, but also a shift in perspective, a different perception, the dark side of the heroic war, the gruesome reality that emerged in detail, in snapshot. One of the women talked about how after the war, she could no longer see the color red - neither in fabric, nor at a butcher; another recalled partisans who hid from the Germans by crawling inside a disemboweled cow cadaver. For Alexievich these details are of utmost importance. »You can't make up something like that« and »You can't deceive in the details,« she says. Emboldened by others who had already embarked in this direction - Ales Adamovich,

Vasil Bykau, Janka Bryl, Daniil Granin - the author found the genre in which she would continue to work thereafter: the documentary tale, the documentary novel, or, as Lidiya Ginsburg called it: the construction of documentary prose. The protagonists in these stories, as the author once noted, »are not made up; they are real, living people; they don't come from me - not from my will, my imagination or my professionalism«. The censors struggled with this sort of realism - naturalism was the scornful term for it in those days - thus the publication of »War's Unwomanly Face« was delayed until 1985, the year of Perestroika, and only in Minsk and Moscow. Its huge success - over 2 million copies sold - proved that such a book was long overdue, and a later trial - concerning the Afghanistan book - showed that the challenge to the cult of the male hero had struck one of the most sensitive points of the Soviet self-image. »Without a doubt, we are a society defined absolutely by war«, said Svetlana Alexievich in conversation with Tatiana Bek, »a society thoroughly proofed by war ... We've struggled with it all along; we prepared ourselves for the war; we remembered the war«. It is a fundamental theme that remained in existence until the dissolution of the Soviet Union; and in moments of crisis, it can apparently still be reactivated today.

II

Svetlana Alexievich, who had never planned to concentrate entirely on war, became literally overtaken by war, in particular the secretive and taboo war begun at the end of 1979 »at the southern border« of the Soviet Union. Now it was not about the memory of the generation of mothers and fathers, but about a war in the present. Alexievich visited the theater of war, but above all she met the war's participants, the so-called »Afghans« who, changed persons themselves, returned to a country that no longer was, and to an everyday life that they, sometimes maimed and traumatized, could make little sense of. The book is based on hundreds of conversations - ordinary soldiers, commanding officers, nurses, surgeons, mothers, wives, whose names are also included. It is also a montage of countless images. It is about the candor and recklessness that pervades when one has nothing more to lose and nothing more to hide - the parameters of the conversation are like those

of an exchange between two perfect strangers on a long train ride. It is also the precise, overly sharp image of lacerated bodies, torn-off limbs, drinking binges, drug trips and emergency operations around the clock. The horror seems incidental, as if relegated to a dependent clause, accidentally emerging from the subconscious, when a soldier mentions that the zinc caskets intended for casualties were also used to smuggle home war souvenirs, such as dried and threaded human ears, furs or drugs. But they, the model heroes of yesteryear, who hold fast to the belief that not everything was for naught, seem to have fallen out of time; it is the image of a lost generation. This book is not a military history; it addresses a war that has left behind its traces on the bodies and souls of its participants, and for which – in a radical departure from the Great Patriotic War – there was no patriotic basis whatsoever.

III

And, as if that were not already enough: Chernobyl. It took 10 years for Svetlana Alexievich to gain the courage to write about it, about a war in which all forms of weaponry were entirely useless. She once said: »To get on with a new book, you have to become a new person.« When Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, located at the border between Ukraine and Belarus, exploded at 1:23 AM on 26 April 1986, hardly anyone could have imagined what it meant. In the Second World War, one-third of the country's inhabitants were killed; now one-fifth – over 2 million people – live on contaminated ground. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of countryside and forest were no longer usable. Cities and villages were evacuated – oftentimes too late, since the May Day parade still had to take place and the leaders were to ill-informed or simply too cowardly to confront the catastrophe head on. Lucky is the land with no shortage of heroes – so the saying goes. But what would have become of Europe if this were not the case? 800,000 conscripts, firefighters and volunteers from all over the Soviet Union were sent to the reactor as liquidators to extinguish the nuclear blaze: a continuous stream of helicopters over the reactor, men clearing the area of graphite chunks and molten bitumen using only their hands, miners who dug a tunnel under the reactor. Buildings were scoured, soil removed and buried, every liv-

ing animal killed and buried in mass graves. No statistics on the liquidators who suffered miserable deaths and no diagrams of the rising cancer rates and shifting patterns of illnesses can reflect the horror. Svetlana Alexievich: »One night we arrived at a new place in the story. We leapt into a new reality, and this reality transcended not only our knowledge, but our power of imagination as well. The contiguity of time had been broken.« Once again, life proved to be far more bizarre than the doomsday scenarios produced by artists to explore the apocalypse. The inhabitants of Belarus, whose existence was acknowledged by the rest of the world seemingly for the first time, had become »black boxes«, records of what happens to men after the worst accident imaginable – messages sent from a laboratory for posterity. The body of the fireman, Vasily Ignatenko, disintegrating in the hands of his wife, who did not leave his side because she loved him so much. The Geiger counter in the hospital room going haywire. The doctors explaining that the human body itself becomes a reactor and that the corpse cannot be released due its radioactivity. Suddenly, all the ideas people had had about the calamities that could befall humans seemed so antiquated!

IV

We would know less or nothing at all about the fates of women in war, about the traces left behind by the war in Afghanistan, about the despair of the WWII veteran and hero of the Brest Fortress, Timerian Sinatov, who at 77 threw himself in front of a train because he could no longer bear the »dog's life« to which he was doomed in old age, if Svetlana Alexievich had not given them a voice. She succeeds not only because she has mastered her trade as a journalist, but because she perceives the world through voices and has done so since as far back as her childhood in a small Belorussian village. Perceiving the world through voices. She has trained her hearing to pick up different tones, rhythms and gestures that set in when words break down and a silence indicates that the word has capitulated – the surest sign that something still remains unexpressed, hidden. So, as her books possess a specific sound, they also have a specific rhythm. The conversations almost always begin casually, but suddenly arrive at a situation that brings the talking and breathing to a halt.

Alexievich's texts typically feature long ellipses, pauses in which the talker stops, leans back, rummages about his or her memory, perhaps expanding on something, adding a seemingly inconsequential detail that suddenly, like a lightning bolt, illuminates the scene and crystallizes time in an image. One example would be the conversations with Vassily Petrovitch N., 87 years old and a member of the communist party since 1922. He not only took part in the war, but was also tortured, almost to death, by the NKVD, his own people. The text contains parenthetical comments, not stage directions, but rather notes on the non-verbal, merely gestural messaging: »He has the cat on his lap, petting it ... The three of us laugh. His grandson sits next to us, listening. N. coughs and wheezes. He ponders. A long silence. ... The grandson says nothing during the whole conversation. ... He laughs like a boy. And I realize how handsome he still is ... « The conversation breaks off, then picks up again, like a monologue, almost like a confession; such conversations somewhat resemble a prayer. Perhaps the repetition, the liberty to recline in the loose rhythm of the conversation, the enumeration of the long pauses, and the sustaining of the rest notes provide the only possibility of giving form to the unspoken, or to that which is not yet ready for expression. Hence, the eloquent silence. The respondents are amazed that there is someone interested in their story, in their life. They had taken part in something horrible, but never in their lives had someone asked about it, never before had they encountered someone who would find what they say valuable, let alone worthy of being written down.

V

One need not speak so intently about sound, mood or rhythm, when focusing merely on a problem of literary form and questions of narration, on the withdrawal or even complete disappearance of the »auctorial narrator«, of that central figure of incessant literary discourse. But what did freedom of expression mean in a political system where rules of speech apply, the violation of which could have deadly consequences? What did it mean in a country in which open dialogue was hushed, where the people resorted to whispering and in which the fear of eavesdroppers and denunciation had become second nature? What do free, unhindered,

groundbreaking, meandering stories mean in a doctrinaire world? The author Svetlana Alexievich does not concede, she merely takes a step back. By no means does she disappear. On the contrary: the full labor of her efforts seems aimed at lending words and voices to those who never had the opportunity to be heard, be it due to shame, or fear, or because their ability to speak up and speak out has been lost altogether. And so it happens: those silenced up to now rise to speak; those previously deprived of names reclaim them; where before there had only been masses, one class and collectives, there are now single, individual voices and unique destinies. Individual human beings return to the stage in the theatre of history – a stage that had virtually been emptied of individuals. All these voices give rise to one chorus, a chorus of many voices, and still more: it is somewhat like a conversation with oneself, the inner monologue of a recovering society coming into its own again. It is these voices that provide the substance from which a narrative will emerge that attempts to explain what happened: for example, that it was an epoch of world wars, socialism, communism, an age of extremes and the so-called »short twentieth century«. These are the short formulas and makeshift terms used to compress yet never fully capture the experiences of entire generations.

For those of us born into later generations, it is difficult to conceive of even *one* catastrophe; but what if catastrophes start to blend together, one running right into the next, calamities piling onto one another? What if it becomes increasingly difficult to discern who the victims are and who the perpetrators are? »We grew up among perpetrators and victims«, says one interviewee to Svetlana Alexievich.

And another: »My generation grew up with fathers who either came from the camps or came from the war. The only thing they were able to tell us about was violence. And death. They seldom laughed, they kept quiet. And they drank ... « And what happens when the scorched earth left behind by the Second World War overlaps with the zone contaminated by the nuclear catastrophe, which then becomes a refugee area for displaced people forced to flee, say, the Caucasus or Central Asia? How does one commemorate victims in a country where thousands upon thousands were killed, an untold many in Maly Trostenets, a concentration camp built by the Germans, and still more not far away in Kuropaty by NKVD troops? And what happens when a man who had been denounced returns home from the Gulag and must again

share a workplace with his denouncer, a person he can blame for ruining his life? What are the words to describe the fate of Jews who managed to escape the ghetto, but were not taken in by the partisans to whom they fled, and were sometimes even turned in by them? And what of the family history of Katja P., whose childhood coincided with Chernobyl; that of her parents with the Second World War; and that of her grandparents with the First World War, revolution and civil war! How many people were first deported as Kulaks, then fought for their homeland as soldiers and then were conceivably sent back to the Gulag because they had ended up in German prisoner-of-war camps? What happens when a nuclear catastrophe coincides with the societal catastrophe accompanying the dissolution of an empire? And when historical powers of judgment reach their limits and adjudication and condemnation don't help? How much misfortune can a country endure? And what form should memory take for it to even partially grapple with such a series of catastrophes? Perhaps Bertolt Brecht's words »To those born later« can be of help:

You who will emerge from the flood

In which we have gone under

Remember

When you speak of our failings

The dark time too

Which you have escaped.

VI

»We must speak about what happened to us,« remarks the laconic Svetlana Alexievich. As an archaeologist of daily life under communism, which she knew from personal experience – and it had its harmless lighter sides: the parades, vacations in pioneer camps, the endless kitchen conversations about God and the world – she knows that day-to-day life does not change the moment a new political state is proclaimed. As someone who observed the outbreak of ethnic hatred in the Armenian pogroms in Baku, the fighting on the Sukhumi Promenade at the end of the 1980s and the

beginning of the 1990s, and the ongoing hunt for Tajik guest workers in Moscow, she holds no illusions with regard to the birth of the »new man« from the collapse of the old world. Voices are raging in all directions. From hate songs, desperation, disappointment to self-abandonment. The panorama she creates is something different than the master narrative of the automatically smooth transition from dictatorship to democracy and from communism to a market economy. Svetlana Alexievich describes the post-Soviet world disregarding all teleology. Everyone who is better acquainted with history, yet not on their own merit but rather only because they grew up on this side of the Iron Curtain – and I count myself in this group – can learn from her what it means when life plans crumble from one day to the next and the lives of everyone are thrown off course. We can understand better what happens when people all of the sudden feel »like a forgotten exhibit in the basement of a museum. Like a dusty shard«. We can understand when war medals and honors for rigorous lifelong work are suddenly being sold at flea markets for a pittance; when for a certain time hundreds of thousands of people experience the black market as a type of university, where former engineers, officers, and doctors of science learn to earn a living as tourist shoppers to make ends meet for their families; when life experiences, professions, values, rules of speech and patterns of behavior that had applied for their whole lives become invalid overnight. Now people must withstand new pressures: the competition and stress that freedom brings. But with all the despair that lies across the ruins, there is something that approaches a miracle. Amid Alexievich's post-Soviet babble of voices, people emerge who, despite all difficulties, do not simply wait for manna to fall from the heavens; they set themselves in motion to build a new life – a halfway normal life – for themselves and their loved ones. Indeed, all of this falls short of the utopian new man, and is perhaps even »second-hand«. The heroes of yore are replaced by heroes that can cope with their everyday lives and have learned to leave behind the idea of a war of everyone against everyone, which was a real possibility and which actually broke out in several regions of the old Soviet Union.

VII

As she demonstrated in her open letter to Lukashenko, Svetlana Alexievich sees a conversation between power and the people as the only way to break through the *circulus vitiosus* of violence and confront the recurrence of Stalinist practices. As a writer she has nothing to offer other than her word – persevering, fearless, poignant – in her confrontations with the authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet world, and not just in Belarus. This word is strong, and within it is the language of a reality that is stronger than the manipulated reality of the state-controlled media. Within this reality, experiences are given a voice that cannot be silenced for long, even by bans, censors, secret services and show trials. Then again, this conversation includes a conspicuously large number of women who, even today, hold the country together where the old order lies in ruin. Svetlana Alexievich leaves no doubt that funda-

mental change in a country so depleted and traumatized by historical catastrophe will not arrive overnight. But it *will* arrive if the perpetual cycle of a return to violence can be broken. It will arrive if the dialogue is continually re-opened and remains engaged, in the rhythm of Svetlana Alexievich: listening, pausing, without illusions as to what people, for better or for worse, are capable of, and with the forbearance unique to those who grew up in dark times. This work, which now spans an entire lifetime, is truly worthy of a peace prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

Svetlana Alexievich

Why do I descend into hell?

Acceptance speech

I would like to address you today as »my dear neighbours in time«. Indeed, although we certainly carry the same smartphones in our pockets, what unites us even more are the fears and illusions we share, the temptations and disappointments that plague us. It frightens us all that evil is becoming ever more sophisticated and inscrutable. We can no longer proclaim, like Chekhov's heroes, that in 100 years the heavens shall sparkle with diamonds and man will be glorious. We do not know how man will be.

In Dostoevsky's »Legend of the Grand Inquisitor«, freedom is disputed. The road to freedom is rocky, agonizing and tragic...

»Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much?«¹

Man must constantly choose between freedom and prosperity with a good life, between freedom with suffering or happiness without freedom. Most choose the second path.

»The Grand Inquisitor says to Jesus, who has returned to the earth: 'So why have you come to disturb us? For You really have come to disturb us, and You know it'.

By showing him so much respect, Thou didst, as it were, cease to feel for him, for Thou didst ask far too much from him. ...Respecting him less, Thou wouldst have asked less of him. That would have been more like love, for his burden would have been lighter. He is weak and vile ... How is the weak soul to blame that it is unable to receive such terrible gifts?

'So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find some one to worship. ... man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find some one quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born'«.

I spent the majority of my life in the Soviet Union. In the experimental laboratory of communism. The slogan at the gate to the horrific camp on the Solovetsky Islands read: »With an iron hand we will drive mankind to happiness«.

Communism had a ludicrous plan - to remodel the old human, the old Adam. And in that they succeeded. It is perhaps its only success. In a period of over seventy years a new breed of man emerged: *Homo sovieticus*. While some saw him as a tragic figure, others dubbed him »Sovok«. But who is he? I believe I know him; he is familiar to me; I lived many years side by side with him. I am he. My acquaintances, my friends, my parents are he. My father, who recently passed away, remained a communist until the end of his life.

*

I have written five books, but for almost twenty years I have essentially been writing one single book, a Russian-Soviet chronicle: Revolution, Gulag, War ... Chernobyl ... The Fall of the »Red Empire« ... I tracked the Soviet era. Behind lies a sea of blood and a vast grave of brothers. In my books the »little people« tell their story. History's grains of sand. They are never in demand; they disappear without a trace, they take their secrets with them to the grave. I seek out those who have no voice. I listen to them; I hear them; I overhear them. For me the street is a chorus, a symphony. It is a dying shame how much is said, whispered, screamed into the void, existing only for a short moment. In man and in human life there is much that art has not only never addressed, but about which it hasn't even a clue. That which arrives in a flash and then disappears, and today it disappears especially fast. Our life has become very fast. Flaubert once said of himself that he was »a man of the pen«. I can say of myself: I am a woman of the ear.

Each of us carries a piece of history along with us, sometimes large, sometimes small, and collectively these compose the great history. The great era. I seek out people who have experienced a convulsion ... through an encounter with the mystery of life, or with another person. Sometimes I am asked: do people really talk so beautifully? People never speak as beautifully as when they are in love or near death. We people who come from

socialism are like everyone else, and we are different: we have our own ideas about heroes and martyrs. And a special relationship to death.

*

Voices ... voices ... they are in me ... pursuing me ...

I remember a tall and beautiful old man, old enough to have seen Stalin. What was legend for us was for him his life. It started when his wife was imprisoned in 1937; she went to the theatre and never came home. Three days later he was picked up as well.

»They hit me in the gut with a sack full of sand. Everything was squeezed out me like I was a squished worm. They hung me from a hook. It was medieval! Everything runs out of you; you no longer have control over your body. It all leaks out of you everywhere ... Enduring that pain... The shame of it all! Dying is easier ...«

In 1941 he was released. He had fought for a long time to be able to go the front. He returned from the war with medals. He was summoned by the party committee, and there they told him: »Unfortunately we can't give you back your wife, but you can have back your party membership book.« »And I was happy!« he said. I couldn't understand his happiness.

»One cannot pass judgment by the laws of logic. Damn those bookkeepers! Understand for once! One can only pass judgment by the laws of religion, of faith!«

Or another story... »I simply adored our aunt Olja. She had long hair and a beautiful voice. When I was I was all grown up I learned that aunt Olja had informed on her beloved brother, who was then killed in the camps. In Kazakhstan. She was already old when I asked her: 'Aunt Olja, why did you do it?', 'Did you ever meet an honest person during Stalin?', 'Do you regret what you did?', 'I was happy back then. I was loved.' Do you see? Evil is never cut and dried ... It isn't just Stalin and Beria, it's lovely aunt Olja as well ...«

I heard these voices in my childhood. In the Belarusian village where I grew up, there were only women after the war. They worked from early morning till it got dark. But in the evenings they dreaded staying in their empty little huts, so they went out to the street and sat on benches together. And talked about the war, about Stalin, about

grief. From them I heard that the war was hardest to bear in spring and autumn, when the birds were either migrating south or returning north. The birds knew nothing of the dealings of men. They often flew into artillery fire. They would fall from the sky by the thousands.

The women spoke of things that my child's mind couldn't comprehend, but I remember them. How entire villages with all their inhabitants were burned to the ground. How those who managed to get away and hide in the marshes returned home a few days later to find emptiness. Not a human soul remained, only ashes. And, by chance, two forgotten horses at the collective farm. »And we thought: they should be ashamed of themselves, doing something like that in front of animals! The poor horses had to stand there and watch it all...«

Or this ... Before an execution young SS soldiers threw sweets into the grave in which they buried Jewish children alive ...

Or this about partisans ... They took fugitive Jews out of the ghetto and into their division. These partisans fought bravely against the enemy; but in their free time they raped the »Jiddenmädchen« Rosa (»Jewish girl« Rosa). She then became pregnant so the partisans shot her.

According to Nietzsche: »Culture is but a thin apple skin over a fiery chaos.« »Man is in flux« wrote Tolstoy, everything depends on how he may gain the upper hand. The ideas are to blame, but man himself is also to blame. Above all, the individual himself. He bears responsibility for his life. Remember? »Did you ever meet an honest person during Stalin?« The words of lovely aunt Olja as she justified herself before her death. Monstrous, unspeakable and unimaginable describes the »banality of evil« (Hannah Arendt) in »dark times«.

What I heard in the street I could not find in the books at the home of my parents, who were both teachers in the countryside. Like everyone else, I wore the badge showing the curly-haired Lenin as a child. I dreamed of becoming a Pioneer and a Komsomolet. I took this path until the end ...

Memories are a fickle thing. They are our depository for everything: how we lived, what we read in the newspaper, what we saw on television, whom we met in our lives. And whether we were happy or not. Contemporary witnesses are less witnesses than they are actors and inventors of history. We cannot fully approach reality, for between us and reality lie our emotions. I know that I am dealing

with versions; everyone has their own version, and out of this, out of its entirety and its cross-sections comes the image of time and the people who lived in it.

The primary joy hides precisely there, in the warm human voice, in the living reflection of the past. There, too, the inevitable tragedy of life is revealed. Its chaos and its passion. Its uniqueness and its incomprehensibility. Everything is real.

I have written a history of »domestic« and »inner« socialism, about how it looked in the human soul. A history of emotions: what man has learned about himself, what he has made of himself. The entire world of his life. The smallest and the most human. I have jotted down my notes in flats and small huts, in the street, in cafés and on the train. In peace and in war. In Chernobyl.

*

Voices ... Voices ... The faces disappear from my memory, but the voices remain.

Moscow. Victory day. We still cannot relinquish this holiday, for without it we are left only with the Gulag.

»After a battle, you walk across a field; the dead are strewn about like potatoes. And they look up at the heavens. They are all young and beautiful. You pity them, one like the next. Dying is unpleasant. You absolutely do not want to die.«

»When the war was over, for a long time I was afraid to look at the sky. So many of our young men had been killed in action! After the fighting we threw the dead into a grave and walked on. The next morning, again, another grave. We marched from grave to grave.«

Kabul, 1988. An Afghan hospital. A young Afghan woman, a child in her arms. I approach and hand the child a plush teddy bear, and he takes it with his teeth. »Why does he take it with his teeth?« I ask. The Afghan woman pulls down the blanket the baby is wrapped in, and I see a small torso with no arms and no legs. »Your Russians did this.« »She doesn't understand« explains a Soviet captain standing beside me, »we brought them socialism.« »Go home and practice socialism. Why did you come here?« says an older Afghan man, who is missing a leg. I recall a huge hall full of

people - none of them unscathed ... »Your Russians did this ...«

In a barracks. The distraught faces of our youths, who do not understand what they are dying for here. They answer me angrily: shoot or don't shoot, such are the questions asked after the war. If you shoot, you kill first; if you don't kill, you're killed. Everyone wants to go back home. To their mother ...

Some were made drunk with vodka, put in an airplane, and by night time they were in Kabul. They wailed, screamed, attacked the officers. Two committed suicide, hanging themselves in the toilet. Others volunteered to come. Children of village teachers, of doctors ... they were raised to believe in their country ...

In one year they will return home, and their homeland, which has sent them to murder, will no longer exist. The great communist experiment will end before their very eyes.

The explosion in Chernobyl ... I drove there ... at the reactor site, men roamed around with sub-machine guns, military helicopters at the ready. No one knew what to do, but everyone was ready to die without hesitation. We had learned that.

I took notes ... those were entirely new texts ...

The fire-fighters who had battled the fire the first night died one after the next. A nuclear reactor was burning, but they were summoned as if for a normal fire. They had no protective clothing. They were exposed to doses of radiation that were more than 100 times greater than the norm. Deadly doses. The doctors kept the crying wives from their husbands.

»Don't get any closer! No kissing! No touching! That is no longer a loved one, that is a contaminated object.«

In a thirty kilometre area around the power station, thousands of people lost their homes - forever. But still, no one believed it. Full buses and a silence like at a cemetery. House pets - cats, dogs - crowded around the buses. The animals were left behind. People didn't dare to look them in the eyes.

»The birds in the sky ... the animals in the forest ... we've all betrayed them. We left a note for our beloved dog Scharik: 'Forgive us, Scharik!«

Suffering is both our gift and our curse. The great dispute in Russian literature: Solzhenitsyn maintained that suffering makes people better; they emerge from the camp as if having been cleansed in purgatory. However, Shalamov was convinced that being in a camp ruins people, that what is learned in the camp is needed only in the camp. Time has proven Shalamov to be right. People whom socialism has left behind were skilled only at life under socialism.

*

The 1990s ... everyone spoke of freedom ... expecting a celebration, but the country around them was destroyed. Antiquated factories were closed down, countless garrison towns died away; all at once there were millions of unemployed; dilapidated flats suddenly cost money, along with medical services and education. Everything lay in ruins

...
We discovered that freedom was a celebration only on the streets; in reality it was something altogether different. Freedom is a demanding plant; it cannot thrive just anywhere, from nothing. Only from our dreams and illusions.

I remember how shaken I was when I was at the courthouse for the trial against my book, »Zinky Boys« - I was accused of libelling the Soviet army. While there I spotted the mother of a fallen soldier. The first time we had met was by the coffin of her son; he had been her only child; she had raised him on her own. In despair she had banged her head on the coffin and whispered: »Who's in there? Are you in there, my boy? The coffin is so small, but you were so tall. Who is it in there?«

When she saw me she called out: »Tell the whole truth! They drafted him into the army. He was a carpenter; he renovated dachas for generals. They didn't even teach him how to shoot. Then they sent him into the war and he was killed after only a month.« In the courtroom I asked her: »Why are you here? I have written the truth.« »I don't need your truth! I want my son to have been a hero!« At the courthouse I met a grenade thrower who was blinded in the war ... The poor, terrible »Red Man!«

New voices clash ...

»The nineties ... wonderful years, the best I ever experienced. A gulp of freedom ...«

»When it comes to the nineties ... I wouldn't say that it was a good time; it was despicable. A 180-degree turn in people's minds ... some couldn't handle it and went crazy; others killed themselves. People were constantly being shot in the streets. An unbelievable number of people were murdered. Every day there were criminal activities. People divided up Russia for themselves ... everyone wanted to snatch something, and beat the others to it ...

I know very well what a dream is. Throughout my entire childhood I wished for a bicycle, but I never got one. We were poor. In school I secretly trafficked in jeans, at the institute with Soviet army uniforms and various Soviet paraphernalia. Foreigners bought them. It was a regular black market; in the Soviet era the punishment would have been three to five years of prison. My father ran up behind me with a belt and screamed: 'You speculator! I shed blood outside Moscow, and my son does this shit!'

What was a crime yesterday soon became a business. I bought nails at one place and replacement heels somewhere else, packed them together in a plastic bag and sold them as new goods. I brought home money and shopped; the refrigerator was always full. My parents always figured I would be arrested. (*He laughs loudly.*) I dealt in household goods. With pressure cookers and steam cookers. I managed to bring a trailer full of that stuff home from Germany. But that didn't last long ...

In my room I had an old computer box full of money, it was the only way the money was real to me. You keep taking money out of the box and it's still not gone. I had essentially already bought everything: a car, a flat ... a Rolex ... I remember the rush ... you can fulfil all your wishes, all your secret fantasies. I've learned a lot about myself: first of all, I have no taste; and secondly, I have complexes. I can't deal with money. I didn't know that a lot of money requires work, so that it doesn't just lie around. Money is a temptation for people, just like power and love ... I dreamt ... and drove to Monaco. I lost a lot of money in the Monte Carlo casino, a whole lot. I couldn't stop ... I was a slave to my box. Is there still some money in there, or not? How much? There had to be more and more. I was no longer interested in the things that once interested me. Politics ... demonstrations ... Sakharov had died. I went to his farewell send-off. Hundreds of thousands of people ... everyone was crying, even I cried. And not so long ago, a newspaper said of him: 'One of Russia's great fools

is dead.' And I thought: he died at the right time. When Solzhenitsyn came back from America, everyone pounced on him. But he didn't understand us, and we didn't understand him. A foreigner. He wanted to come back to Russia, but he could have been in Chicago ...

Where would I be today with Perestroika? A small-time engineer with a ridiculous salary ... (*He laughs.*) And now I have my own eye clinic. Several hundred people, together with their families, their grandmothers and their grandfathers, depend on me. And people like you are rummaging around inside your heads, reflecting - I don't have this problem. I work day and night. I just bought brand-new equipment, and I send my surgeons to France for training. But I'm no altruist; I earn good money. I've achieved everything on my own ... I had only 300 dollars in my pocket ...

I started out with partners; you would faint if you saw them walk in here now. Gorillas! A very severe look! They're no longer here; they vanished like the dinosaurs. I walked around wearing bullet-proof vest; I've already been shot. If someone eats worse sausage than mine, I don't worry about it. You all wanted capitalism. You dreamed of it! So don't cry now and claim you were tricked ...«

There are few winners but many losers. And, twenty years later, young people are reading Marx again. We had thought that communism was dead, but this illness is chronic. The same conversations are still being had in kitchens: what to do and who's to blame? There are dreams of another revolution. Polls show that people are for Stalin, for a »strong hand« and for socialism. The end of the »Red Man« has been postponed. And old KGB man sitting across from me in the train put it bluntly: »Without Stalin we would have nothing. What is a man? Shove a chair leg up his rear and he's no longer a man. Only physically. Ha ha!«

I'd heard that before ...

Everything repeats itself ... in Russia ... in my little Belarus; thousands of young people are taking to the streets again. Sitting in prison. And talking about freedom.

Before the Revolution of 1917, the Russian writer Alexander Grin wrote: »The future is no longer in place.«

Now again, the future is no longer in place ...

Sometimes I ask myself why I descend into hell time and time again. To find people ...

*

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the jury for the great honour of receiving this award. I would also like to thank the German and Swedish PEN Centres and the French writers who supported me in a difficult situation when I was forced to leave my country for political reasons. My gratitude also goes to my longstanding publisher, Elisabeth Ruge, who has accompanied me for decades, and to my agent, Galina Dursthoff.

I thank all my heroes, who shared their secrets with me and told me their lives. Many of them are no longer living, yet their voices remain.

I thank you all.

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

¹ »Why should one understand that damned difference between good and evil it that's the price to be paid?« - This and the following citations are from chapters *Rebellion* and *The Grand Inquisitor* in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated from the Russian by Constance Garnett, New York, The Lowell Press, 1912, pp. 259-291.

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