

გამარჯობა.

You have most probably guessed that I greeted you in Georgian; and I did it on purpose. But before I go deeper into explaining the meaning I put behind my Georgian word, first let me express my gratitude to you, to the International Publishers Association for giving me the wonderful opportunity to use this platform and also to the very dedicated teams of the Georgian Publishers and Booksellers Association and Georgian National Book Center. I am honored to be here. Thank you.

It is my third time being present at the Frankfurt book fair, but it is also the most remarkable one. This year Georgia has an exceptional status – it is a guest of honor introducing its special program which is conceptualized around the unique Georgian alphabet and language. Georgian is spoken by only 4 million of people in a young republic which counts only 27 years of independence from the Soviet empire.

The years of independence and especially the beginning have not been smooth and easy, mainly because of the heavy heritage we acquired from the past. The Soviet Union drastically changed not only the lives of its people but also every aspect of it – among them literature. I am sure if we had had a different past, some other writers would have taken the possibility to talk from this platform and it could have been before me, much earlier.

I myself was a Soviet child; I was born behind the iron curtain. So, I know how it felt to live inside the closed borders, with too many restrictions and extremely limited opportunities, with censorship and propaganda, with the constant threat to the language and culture. It all started with the great terror of the 1930s when the totalitarian regime punished the most vivid and brilliant figures of Georgian literature – men were shot; women were totally muted or completely marginalized. And those who survived physically - were forced to conform, to be in the service of the regime. For a long time we lived with the image of a writer as a conformist – even now, no matter how provocative, how rebellious or how young we are – we continuously struggle with that image that the wider public in Georgia still holds of us.

This, as I said, was the heavy luggage we inherited after gaining independence in 1991. In the 1990s, Georgia, like many other post-Soviet republics, was fraught with wars, internal conflicts and economic turmoil. It was then, that I started writing my “novels”. I was 13. And all the stories I wrote were about the imagined lives of other teenagers who had their fun, traveled a lot and what is most important, who lived in a very peaceful country. They had Georgian names. I wrote these “novels” on the remaining empty pages of my uncle’s notebooks. These were chemistry notebooks from the 1970s that my grandmother had luckily kept as a proud

parent of a talented student. I stole those notebooks because my family could only afford to buy some for school.

I also remember myself as a reader in my early 20s, how desperately I wanted to find something authentic, written in my own language, with the protagonists, with women, to whom I could relate to. The available authors were mainly foreign, I was fascinated with Alice Walker or Elfriede Jelinek, but I remember that urge, that longing and desire to read something written originally in my own language, where the context could be too familiar and too similar to the one I myself had been living through.

It was in 2004 when I accidentally came across the texts of Ana Kordsaia-Samadashvili. It was the time when the new voices, like Ana's, started to emerge in Georgian literature. With all my body I still remember that excitement I felt when I was reading her short stories. These were the texts I had had craved. This is why the stories written in native languages matter too much, regardless if this language is spoken by 4 or 40 million. I will not talk much about the special attachments we have to our own native languages, through which we express ourselves, construct the world and communicate with it.

There was one more thing I was very desperate in my early 20s. It was traveling. My first foreign country became Germany. Since then I have been travelling a lot but I still

keep a special intimacy to this country, the kind of intimacy we all build with our first foreign countries. I think they remain special in our lives. The first foreign translation of my first novel also turned out to be German. This country is also the first biggest host for our literature. So, I find some kind of logic behind it. I think that with open borders, along with many other things, also comes the free movement of literature. I very much believe that literature is something that really connects people, makes them less superstitious towards the world or towards each other; that it builds very important bonds, no matter which part of the world we come from. I believe in open borders, though I am constantly asked at the EU border, at the passport control when I return back to my home country (and I assure you, I am always back). I still believe in it although a few years ago I was invited to the London book fair but my visa application was rejected. It seems that I can still be considered too suspicious, even as a writer.

I strongly believe in one more thing - there are no single stories written only for big book markets, only in "big" languages. The world consists of many different stories, written from many different perspectives, told in many different languages - among them the one spoken by 4 million. This year, at this book fair you have the possibility to get to know to our stories. Here I would like to emphasize the role of translators and their dedicated work. Please take into account that during the Soviet times, within the closed

borders, the only available translations of Georgian texts, with extremely few exceptions, were Russian.

I am convinced, that I am a historically lucky author to be present here, I am also a happy one, since I am a part of this courageous project of introducing our literature; I very much believe that this is the opening and very important step towards other big markets and fairs so that our voices, the voices of small countries are heard. And in the beginning of my speech I symbolically did exactly that: I wanted to hear my own voice as well as make myself heard, as I greeted you all in Georgian.

Tamta Melashvili

IPA General Assembly

Frankfurt, October 11th 2018