

*[Speech held in German language.]*

**Christoph Hein:**

**Stefan Heym**

One hundred years ago today in Chemnitz, the son of Elsa and Daniel Flieg was born, in the bedroom of an apartment at 13 Kaiserplatz - Helmut Flieg. Twenty years later, in 1933, at two o'clock in the morning, at the main post office in Prague – in a somewhat rapid birth – Stefan Heym came into being. The emigrant was informing his relatives of his successful escape. So as not to put those he was writing to at risk, he had to enter a false name as the name of the sender. Without thinking about it for too long, and without being aware of the intellectual affinities, he wrote a name on the postcard, a name that, in the decades that followed, his towering life's work would imprint indelibly on the history of literature, the history of Germany and Europe, the history of the battles of the twentieth century.

It was a short poem by an 18-year-old high school student that forced the young man to flee, that preordained his life's journey, that set the course of his life so decisively and that gave his life direction and him his approach to it. At breakfast, the young Flieg had read in the newspaper that German Reichswehr officers were being sent to China to act as instructors for the Kuomintang Army. Scandalised, three hours later, during an RE lesson, he wrote a couple of verses on the report: "We're exporting! We're exporting! And it's our military officers we're transporting! The bosses are sending things Germanic, if you please, | To the Chinese! To the Chinese!"<sup>1</sup>

When the lesson was over, he hurried across to the arts editor at the *Volksstimme* with his furious poem. Having read it, the editor said simply, this is bad – they'll count this against us. He gave Heym 35 Reichsmarks and printed the poem. The young student was overjoyed, astounded at the fee, delighted at the prospect of the worldwide fame that the next morning would surely bring to Chemnitz – at the start of his career as a poet.

The poem caused a furore; the whole of Chemnitz was in uproar. A pupil, a Jew, was dragging the honour of Germany and of the Reichswehr officers through the mud. At school he was beaten up in full view of a teacher. The National Socialists held a mass meeting on the "Flieg Case"; the hall was full to overflowing with people demanding heatedly that Flieg be expelled from school, demanding a ban – this student should not be allowed to take his final school exams anywhere in Germany. The conservative local paper *Chemnitzer Presse* reported on the case in detail and also called for officers' associations and the public prosecutor to take up the Flieg case. The school came under pressure, and the teaching staff asked their shameless pupil to leave.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation taken from:

Peter Hutchinson: Stefan Heym: The Perpetual Dissident, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 9

Though the boy was no longer allowed to attend school, his mother succeeded in getting the courageous headteacher of a school in Berlin to take on the disgraced pupil.

In Berlin, the young Flieg got to know his heroes in person, one Carl von Ossietzky and one Erich Kästner. But two years later, in 1933, people came looking for him again, and since they couldn't find him in Chemnitz, they took his father hostage. Helmut Flieg escaped the Nazis and reached Prague, where the author Stefan Heym was born.

Decades later, when talking about his life, Heym spoke of how the accidents of fate shape us and guide our paths. He contemplated the winding roads and crossroads that lead us, that led him, to unimagined and untravelled shores. A short poem, written during a lesson, merely because he had by chance read a newspaper announcement, which he might have forgotten the next day, led to his departure from his homeland into exile. Stefan Heym wondered whether his life, and his father's, might have been different had he not written that schoolboy rhyme and proudly published it under his own name. But whether he could have taken a different path, in Germany and at that time, is at best doubtful. He was a Jew, and this heritage alone would have led him into exile or to an extermination camp. He was predestined for the path he eventually took, by his disposition, by the nature of his upbringing, by his social engagement. His talent, his conscience, his backbone, kept him on this track.

He left Germany when his country elected the Nazis. As a soldier he freed his homeland from fascism and was highly decorated by the US Army as a result. Fifty years after liberation, the whole of Germany finally understood that they had not suffered an ignominious defeat in 1945, but had in fact been freed from shame and disgrace. But it was a couple of years, or a couple of decades, before they could honour their liberator Stefan Heym.

Stefan Heym left the USA at the same time as Charlie Chaplin, Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann because McCarthyism was becoming a dominant force, and artists, intellectuals and leftist sympathisers were essentially considered traitors.

A few years later Heym returned his decorations to the US Army, because this same army, full of his comrades-in-arms, had invaded a country in Asia in contravention of international law.

In the state where he now lived, Heym wrote his greatest works, his wonderful, much-read and much-loved literature, and, much to that state's annoyance, he persisted in getting involved.

*Uncertain Friend*, *Defoe*, *The King David Report*, *The Wandering Jew*, *Schwarzenberg*, the works that I consider his weightiest, were subject to delays in their publication and brought official disapproval and legal retribution. Under a special Heym law, a law specifically targeting him and his bold independence, the author was honoured with the attentions of the GDR state and judiciary, which made him, to his public, immortal and sacrosanct.

He became president by seniority of a popular movement, which at the end of the '80s demanded reform and took to the streets in order to achieve it. And he remained inconveniently courageous, even when his country became a democracy.

The great German writer Stefan Heym was one of the most important intellectual leaders of the opposition in the GDR. He was highly esteemed by the public, but also by the West German state and the West German press. It is all the more astonishing, then, that instead of praising and supporting him, they praised and supported individuals who had adapted to the GDR and had only briefly discovered civil liberties.

All his life, Heym was unswerving, shrewd, conscious of history. And he lived in a century where political error along with its deadly consequences were in great demand.

However, he did err once – on just one occasion his hope deluded him. In 1990, the year of reunification and the incorporation of the GDR into the Federal Republic, he published a volume of his journalism under the title *Stalin Leaves the Room (Stalin verlässt den Raum)*.

A beautiful title, a memorable title, a title that succeeded in reflecting the volume's content. But a fatally flawed title, too.

Stalin was not leaving the room. Stalin, and everything that we associate with his name – political intrigue, expedient lies, betrayal, misdemeanours and crimes to serve one's own ends, ruthless self-righteousness, total disregard for one's fellow man, an unscrupulous grip on power – they all remained in the world. Stefan Heym was very soon to experience and endure this himself in the most sickening way.

In November 1994, as a member of the German parliament, the Bundestag, and its president by seniority, Stefan Heym gave a remarkable speech, worthy of inclusion in the textbooks, to open the 13th session of the Bundestag. In response to which the members of the two most powerful parliamentary groups did not stand to honour the president, and refused to applaud once he had finished.

The reason for this insolent behaviour and the much-discussed break with tradition was a declaration that had been made a few days earlier by the head of the Stasi archives, informing the government and the public that files had been found substantiating Heym's collaboration with the Stasi. A few days after Heym's opening speech, the same office head was forced to admit that there had been a mistake, and that Heym was indeed the man of honour the world had taken him for.

That office head, who mistakenly accused Stefan Heym and who lied to the organs of state, was not penalised or transferred. The denunciation of a writer is presumably not a punishable offence in Germany. Deliberately lying to elected representatives of the people is, however, an offence in most democratic states and is punishable by a prison term in the USA.

Yet the denunciation of Stefan Heym and the misleading of the public and the most important organs of state must have seemed desirable to the leading functionaries of the main parties because the man responsible for the lie was chosen for the highest public office.

Stefan Heym was hounded, slandered and beaten while he was still a schoolboy, and he was also hounded after the war and in both German states. In 1992 the eighty-year-old was beaten up by a man in a bar in Cologne. His friend Klaus Poche, who witnessed the incident, said he thought it stirred deep-rooted fears in Heym. Memories resurfaced of his schoolroom beatings in Chemnitz sixty years before, and Heym wanted to leave Germany as quickly as possible.

I don't know what could have driven that man in Cologne to beat up the ageing writer. Perhaps he was an anti-Semite, and didn't want Heym the Jew in his local. Or an anti-communist who blamed Heym for Stalin's crimes. Or a communist who wanted to punish Heym the civil rights campaigner for his resistance to the GDR. Or a fascist who hated Heym the anti-fascist because he had taken up arms against the Nazi regime. Or a German nationalist who wanted to punish Heym because he had fought fascism wearing an American uniform. Or a compliant citizen who wanted to reprimand Heym for remaining unyielding at all times and in the face of every regime, in the name of the state interest that is always sacred to the German subject. Or an illiterate person who wanted to let the great writer know just what he thought of books and literature and writing.

Perhaps the thug in Cologne had something of all of this in him, perhaps he was a mixture of those disastrous German ways of thinking that made their barbaric voices heard in the last century and destroyed a great cultural nation and disgraced it before the whole world and for all time.

We should be proud that in Germany's darkest hour, as a bloodthirsty regime was laying waste to both its own country and Europe, and murdering millions of people, Germans like Stefan Heym still existed.

He left Germany when he could only help his homeland from beyond its borders. He stayed in Germany for as long as he was able to stand firm and with courage against an unloved and despised regime, and provide his fellow citizens with an admirable, and admired, role model.

Stefan Heym spent the whole of his life writing about all this, about the big criminals and the small-time scoundrels and the fellow travellers, about the crimes, about courage, about how to deal with rulers with cunning and guile, about fate that can render us powerless and for which every one of us bears a little of our own responsibility, about love and women and our precious, wonderful life.

He was a friendly man, but also a proud and very self-assured man. All his life he knew who he was and what he had achieved. This self-confidence sent out a clear signal to his time and to the state in which I got to know him. He pushed back against a petty state that tried to

bully him and to domesticate him, and his attitude gave heart to his fellow citizens and was at once an invitation and a provocation to them. It is possible to say no, his work demonstrated this, and so did his attitude.

During our conversations, in which he roamed through the years and the states, and told amusing tales about the rulers of the world, whom he never let get the better of him, he once spoke of a meeting with Walter Ulbricht. The all-powerful one had phoned him up and invited him over – or rather, summoned him. Two days earlier Wolfgang Harich had been arrested, and Heym wasn't sure which way the conversation would go, or whether he'd be allowed to go home again afterwards, especially when Ulbricht started the conversation by saying that Harich had sat on his current visitor's chair a couple of days before. Ulbricht had a snack during the conversation and asked Heym if he didn't mind if he ate while they spoke. Heym told me he nodded and then wondered to himself if he could ask Ulbricht whether he might use his telephone to order breakfast from the Council of Ministers' canteen.

This was more than his much-praised audacity in the face of kings. His dealings with the kings of the world were imprinted with the knowledge: I too am a king.

As with all of his books, *The Queen Against Defoe* was a report on Heym himself, part of his poetic autobiography, and today it reads like a prophetic report, written in advance, on the final years of his life. His books furnish us with an image of Germany's trials and tribulations in the 20th century, of its servile spirit, its ambition born of cowardice and its murderous willingness to adapt. But they also tell of the hopes and utopias, of the longing for a society worth living in and worth loving, for which one is ready to risk one's life. The works of this great German writer, this brave citizen, this dauntless fighter for human rights, will live on.