

City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize 2017

Speech

by Mayor Barbara Ludwig

As delivered.

Ms Bator,

Members of the German Bundestag, the Saxon State Parliament and Chemnitz City Council,

Members of the Award Committee,

Ms Kijowska,

Mr Rotstein,

Mr Magirius,

Dr Uhlig,

My dear fellow residents of Chemnitz,

Honoured guests of this celebration,

“It is as if someone has thrown open the windows! After all these years of stagnation – of intellectual, economic, political stagnation – after all these years of dullness and staleness and bureaucratic arbitrariness, of official blindness and deafness.”

Stefan Heym spoke these words at a rally on Alexanderplatz in Berlin in 1989, five days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. During the biggest demonstration the GDR has ever seen.

There were 500,000, perhaps even a million people.

His words reveal perhaps the greatest and most important gift of a good writer, commentator or journalist: to provide a sharp, penetrating, incisive description that perfectly captures the state of a society.

There are not many people whose words – both spoken and printed – are able to conjure images in the minds of others whilst also holding a mirror to their audience. And yet they do exist – fortunately enough – in perhaps every society.

Stefan Heym was one such thinker, writer and speaker. This is abundantly clear in all his writings. It is clear in his keen-witted, insightful analysis of circumstances, in the face of which he never minced his words. Not once.

Stefan Heym was, as you know, an exceptional writer. And not only that: he was also a journalist. A keen observer and sharp critic, he started his career – at really quite a young age – at a time when National Socialism had begun to replace independence of mind and freedom of expression with conformity.

Stefan Heym made full use of words, full use of his writing, at all times. He upheld the values of independent thought and freedom of speech that made him such an unerring witness to history. But it was precisely this that also made him – and I say this with the highest regard – an inconvenient, uncomfortable contemporary.

In 1932, as Helmut Flieg, he passed his A-Levels in Berlin and embarked on further studies – including journalism – writing for various newspapers, for example Ossietzky's "Die Weltbühne". The following year, he emigrated to Prague, where he worked for German and Czech newspapers. One of his pseudonyms, which he used to protect his family, was Stefan Heym.

In the late 1930s, by this time living in New York, he had scaled the ranks to become editor-in-chief of the weekly paper "Deutsches Volksecho".

After the war, in which he fought as a soldier for the US Army, Stefan Heym became one of the co-founders of the Munich-based paper "Die Neue Zeitung".

Later, after moving to the GDR, he wrote columns for the "Berliner Zeitung" from 1953 to 1956. The qualities that distinguished his literature were also plainly evident in his journalistic work: Stefan Heym was, in the best sense, suspicious of any set boundaries. He was clear in his stance and spot-on in his language.

Address/salutation,

Free media create openness; they bring visibility to a problem. They enable participation. They are supposed to present facts, to criticise, to spark discussion, to help us form an opinion.

Yet it is precisely this quality which, in my profession and others, means that such people are not always viewed kindly. The 'uncomfortableness' that journalists and commentators are known for, so necessary for in-depth investigation and understanding, is often a pain to the recipient of the criticism. Who enjoys having their actions questioned, and in public at that? Who accepts that

published opinion and therefore public opinion – which, incidentally, is not the same thing – not only criticises but triggers change?

Good journalism must be allowed to be, indeed must be, the thorn in our side. It is the life blood of a functioning democracy. Its most important asset is credibility.

But this demands an exacting standard, one which becomes harder to meet, the more the headlines become currency in our media reality.

Louder, more strident, faster: fake news, hate commentary. When social debates are whittled down to buzzwords, then language creates its own reality: one in which we no longer have confidence in our media. And this may ultimately become its downfall. Preventing this fate requires skill, willpower, backbone and responsibility from those who work in journalistic circles; from those who work with language.

Moreover: each and every media-maker is a person in their own right, with their own private opinions and personal values.

So how realistic, how objective is the image that comes into being under these conditions?

To ask oneself this question is the task of the journalist, just as it is the task of the reader, the listener, the audience. Asking questions, questioning ourselves – this is something we must all do.

After all, debates about the often complex topics of our time require culture. We must listen, we must have an opinion, we must defend it – but we must also listen to other views. Without this, democracy cannot survive.

Here at home, it is expressly permitted to be critical. Freedom of speech and freedom of opinion are among the guaranteed basic rights of every individual.

At the same time, over the past two years, here in Saxony we have watched as volume increasingly determines the debate. Irreconcilability, hardness and hate. So what can we do to counter this polarisation?

The journalist Carolin Emcke, who won the 2016 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, outlines two ways: differentiating where things should be simplified. And self-doubt. It seems that those

who so gleefully question democracy the loudest usually have doubts only about everyone else's standpoint, never their own. They find themselves in an echo chamber of their own opinions.

Today, the media is criticised or reviled as liars – for not being critical enough, for reporting incorrectly, for not researching properly in the first place.

Journalists must grapple with these developments if they do not want to lose their biggest asset: credibility. I see that many are doing so.

Address/salutation,

When we in Germany talk about the media battling a credibility problem, elsewhere there is a far more existential issue at hand: the survival of democracy.

Today, journalists in Europe and across the world are assailed for their work more than ever before; they are discriminated against, insulted, harassed and imprisoned. We are experiencing this to an extent that, until recently, was inconceivable, at least for the western world.

What we are witnessing in Turkey, in Hungary, in Poland – attempts by politicians either to instrumentalise the media or to muzzle it – pose a serious threat to democracy.

We read in Immanuel Kant that injustice is that which is not suitable for publicity.

This explains why those in power fear critical journalists; fear the control that no government exercises any longer. But what happens in societies in which there is nobody to bring to light things that are supposed to remain shrouded in darkness?

“Over the last few weeks, we have overcome our speechlessness,” declared Stefan Heym in his address on Berlin's Alexanderplatz. It is our task – of journalists and indeed of us all – not to lose our language, our speech, in the face of the worrying developments that we are currently witnessing. This requires courage and talent. It is uncomfortable. It is arduous. But to be able to do it is our great fortune, and one that cannot be taken for granted.

Dear Ms Bator,

Last year, you said in a newspaper interview: “I believe in the power of words.”

Stefan Heym too believed in this power, and much more besides: he understood his craft and the possibilities that came with it.

As you – Ms Bator – said, words can change the world.

For better or indeed for worse. To be alert, to be sensitive to change, to be cautious in our use of language – this is the great responsibility borne by all journalists and commentators.

The themes you address relate to the social issues that we encounter every day on a fundamental level – a parallel to Stefan Heym's work. And just like Stefan Heym, you don't make it easy for readers to stand on one side; you challenge them.

Your books go to the heart of questions that have no easy answers: home, identity, belonging, marginalisation – how do people change, how do societies change when they must change themselves?

Honoured guests,

Today, when we award the International Stefan Heym Prize for the fourth time, we do so in honour of a truly great writer and journalist. We honour and celebrate freedom of word and freedom of thought, just as he did.

And above all, we congratulate this year's award winner, Joanna Bator, who continues to advance these values in her written work.

Thank you.