

[Speech held in German language.]

**Tribute by Fritz Pleitgen to Bora Ćosić on the awarding of the
International Stefan Heym Prize on 1st July 2011**

As delivered.

Mayor Ludwig,
Mr Ćosić, Mrs Klasić,
My dear Inge Heym,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I often spoke with Stefan Heym about the future of the then divided Germany. At that time – it was a good 30 years ago – neither of us had any want for bold ideas. But despite all our powers of imagination, neither of us reckoned with a Stefan Heym Prize, to be awarded by his home town of Chemnitz, with me as a patron.

Stefan Heym would no doubt have welcomed such a development. He would also certainly have wholly endorsed this year's prizewinner. Bora Ćosić is a writer who gets to grips with our times, who breaks down doors. He leads us out of narrow ways of thinking and opens up new and surprising perspectives. And he knows how to do all this with spirit and subtle – or, where necessary, wicked – humour; he would never sell his right to say and write what he thinks and feels in exchange for a quiet life, however many unpleasant reprisals he is faced with. These are the fundamental traits that Bora Ćosić shares with Stefan Heym.

It is writers like Stefan Heym and Bora Ćosić who, in a country's dark years, when dictators or authoritarian regimes, assisted by unscrupulous henchmen and security services, have the people in a chokehold, keep the hope of a future of freedom alive. They seem to be fighting a losing battle; they are treated as subversives by those in power and regarded as fantasists by most of their fellow citizens. For years, and often decades. But it is one of history's more heartening experiences that these writers and their unwavering stance tend to prevail in the end, whether or not they survive.

While he was still called Helmut Flieg, Stefan Heym already experienced how dissidents have a tough time of it, even in ostensibly democratic societies, when they represent viewpoints that don't conform with prevailing opinion. Helmut Flieg was the name originally given to him when he was

born to Jewish parents in Chemnitz. In 1931, when he was 18, he wrote the anti-military poem "The Export Trade". The school management was not pleased and expelled the young man from high school. Bora Ćosić did better in this respect. As a 17-year-old, he wrote verses about a gigantic portrait of Karl Marx on a banner, pulling faces depending on how the wind was blowing. His blasphemy was tolerated, albeit with a frown.

The biographies of Stefan Heym and Bora Ćosić are not immediately comparable, but later in life they had similar experiences. The 20th century in Europe saw to that, a century requiring much strength of character, particularly from writers. It's also worth taking a look at one of their CVs and then turning to the other's from time to time. Their CVs and works reflect the dramatic upheavals on our continent during the last century. We can also learn from both of them how we should behave in difficult times.

I knew Stefan Heym well. We often met between 1977 and 1982, during my time as a correspondent for ARD in the GDR, and we stayed in touch. This is why it was an honour for me to be asked to be the patron of this year's Stefan Heym Conference. I met Bora Ćosić in person for the first time today. I read his magnum opus, *My Family's Role in the World Revolution*, with enormous pleasure 15 years ago, and gained a great deal from it. Others had the same experience. Reviews spoke of the discovery of a superb European writer. The book reviewer Elke Heidenreich, usually a tough critic, was just as enthusiastic. I would have liked to have got to know Bora Ćosić back then. From my twelve years as a correspondent in the Soviet Union and the GDR, I know how important it is to people living under dictatorships to have writers with backbones as their ambassadors, both internally and externally.

When I was reading Bora Ćosić's book, the war in the former Yugoslavia had spread to Bosnia-Herzegovina, just as a ceasefire had been agreed between Serbia and Croatia. I had travelled to Zagreb in order to fly from there to the besieged Sarajevo with a UN aid convoy. Our correspondent Friedhelm Brebeck had urged me to get a close-up look at what war unleashes. I was appalled that there was such destruction and suffering, whilst we in the rest of Europe were enjoying the most profound peace. Croatia and Bosnia opened my eyes to how quickly events can turn malignant when nationalism is allowed to run riot. Writers such as Stefan Heym and Bora Ćosić provide us with indispensable warnings against allowing ourselves to be drawn in to violence by vague feelings and irresponsible politicians.

When the City of Chemnitz asked me to give a speech paying tribute to Bora Ćosić, I accepted immediately. Up until then, I had read a lot by him and about him in the newspapers. Now I had the chance to get to grips more intensively with his work. I can tell you that it was well worth it.

Bora Ćosić was born to Serbian parents in 1932 in Croatian Zagreb, into a world that one year later would plunge into the greatest catastrophe in human history with the Nazis' seizure of power. At that time, Stefan Heym was still called Helmut Flieg. In spite of his youth, he recognised very quickly, at the latest after the Reichstag fire, that under this regime, with its view of the world and with his background, his chances of survival were slim. He fled to Prague, where he took the name of Stefan Heym to protect his parents – though in the end it did not save them from death. At that point their son had long since emigrated to the USA.

While Stefan Heym was struggling on in America as a journalist and denouncing the Nazi regime, Bora Ćosić – whose parents had moved to Belgrade in 1937 – was as a young boy living through a time of dramatic and rapid change in his country. He was born in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which in 1941 crumbled under the occupation of the German Wehrmacht, and this led to collaboration on the one hand and partisan resistance on the other, and to violent internecine clashes. After 1945, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was established under Marshal Tito and quickly freed itself from the red superpower of the Soviet Union and became a non-aligned state.

In his novel, *My Family's Role in the World Revolution*, Bora Ćosić bundled all these events, which at times had assumed global significance, into the life of a Belgrade family that had come down in the world. They are narrated by a child who mixes his observations of fascism, war and communism with everyday banalities. The world theatre that is politics is skilfully exposed in all its absurdity and mendacious heroism with dashes of hot spice.

In 1969, his work was awarded the *Nedeljne Informativne Novine* magazine's prestigious literary prize, became a cult book, and was turned into a play, and a film adaptation was made. The cultural bureaucrats were uneasy about its frivolous treatment of the country's history, however. The author was blacklisted and punished with a publication ban, which – to the annoyance of the cultural bureaucrats – simply brought him yet more national and international attention. Bora Ćosić had already offended the communist guardians of public morals on previous occasions. They found his wordplay decadent. They did not recommend his short stories and essays to publishers. Bureaucrats consider books and articles that they don't understand to be a particularly

perfidious form of subversion, and this could certainly have been the case with the underlying meaning of Ćosić's texts.

Perhaps it was the fault of his education that he didn't have the right ammunition to be a writer who was loyal to the party line. He had studied philosophy. Probably Hegel, Schopenhauer and Heidegger spoke to him more than Marx or Lenin did. The dogma of an ideology that claimed to be the one sole truth can hardly have been his thing; nor can the dry theory of socialist realism. His preferred art movement was surrealism. It fitted the image he had gained of the world. He stayed true to this realisation. "History for me is surreal, irrational," he said recently in an interview with the *Freie Presse Chemnitz* newspaper.

Whatever form they may take, Bora Ćosić was not made for intellectual constraints. And so it is not surprising that at the start of his literary career, he turned to poets who were equally averse to being hemmed in, such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, the rebellious Russian futurists of the early 20th century, whose poems he translated into Serbo-Croat.

But Bora Ćosić could also do much more. In the '60s he adapted the American musical *Hair* for the Belgrade stage. Just one year after its première on Broadway. And in a communist country, of all places! The ideologues in Moscow and East Berlin must have been in convulsions. I think that what particularly appealed to Bora Ćosić was the break with outdated moral values, whether they are in relation to violence or sex, that the piece expressed in such a dynamic, artistic form.

What Bora Ćosić writes also presents intellectual and political challenges. It was like that from the beginning. He used his first novel, *The House of Thieves (Kuća lopova)*, written at the age of 24, to engage surrealistically with social issues in Tito's socialist Yugoslavia. Thanks to his skills as a writer and his captivating and quirky ideas, the young man quickly became the insider's tip and a representative of the Serbian avant-garde, in a league that included Marko Ristic, Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlovic, Oskar Davico and Leonid Sejka.

"Bora Ćosić is a political writer like Stefan Heym," began the Award Committee's announcement and its reason for awarding him this prize, as we have already heard from the Mayor. How true! The works of both Heym and Ćosić are a subtle and determined intervention in politics. Both experienced backlashes from the political establishment. But this did not silence them.

Stefan Heym had international experience of it. Twenty years after he got into a fight with the Nazis, he had to live through the McCarthy era in the USA, when people with progressive views, living in the country whose constitution had declared freedom to be one of the highest human rights, were suspected of treason. Stefan Heym, who by this time had become an American citizen and a successful author, protested against political persecution and returned to Germany. He settled in the GDR, which he expected to deliver on his ideas of socialism; this was a serious miscalculation.

Initially warmly welcomed as a prominent returnee, Stefan Heym very quickly became a thorn in the side of the ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) regime because he linked socialism with freedom of expression. The relationship remained tense for decades, until the collapse of the first Workers' and Peasants' State on German soil. In spite of considerable reprisals and threats, the writer was not prepared to change his position. Since Bora Ćosić is cut from the same cloth, it is no surprise that the two of them got on well when they met in Berlin in the '90s. They have other things in common. Bora Ćosić and Stefan Heym both come, and as a representative of the sector I say this with great satisfaction, from journalism, and they are or were tremendously productive.

"Writing is hard," Heinrich Böll was wont to say. This is all the more true for well-honed, high-calibre literature. And so it fills me with the greatest respect to read in the reasons for awarding this prize that Bora Ćosić has written over 30 books. He has also written all kinds of essays, literary dossiers and newspaper articles. And it seems to me that he is still far from having reached the zenith of his achievements. We can anticipate – I am convinced of it – yet more inspiring, amusing and moving work from this writer with his own particular brand of experiences, insights and ideas. Thank goodness! In the Europe of today, where prejudice still abounds, as we are currently seeing once again to our embarrassment with the Greek crisis, we need writers like Bora Ćosić, who refuse to be overwhelmed by waves of panic.

When Marshal Tito died in 1981, observers of the Balkan states warned that Yugoslavia might disintegrate into violence. Those of us on the outside could not imagine such a thing – on holiday and at home, we had got to know Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and found them to be friendly people of our times. But then nationalist rage swept away all willingness for peace. People who had been living happily together for decades as neighbours were at each others' throats.

With horror, Bora Ćosić watched the atrocities being committed on all sides, which were to come to a terrible climax in the mass murders in Srebrenica. He had spoken and written resolutely against the destructive chauvinism that had been let loose amongst the Yugoslav nations by irresponsible and unscrupulous politicians. He had criticised Serbia's egomania under Milošević particularly harshly. But his warning words were lost in the rampant nationalism of the times. He felt only revulsion, he said later. After the moral split came the geographical one, from the regime and from Belgrade. He could not and would not stay any longer in the city where he had lived for 55 years in circumstances which seemed to him worse than the socialism of his youth. For him, Belgrade became a city from which war was waged.

In 1992 Bora Ćosić moved to Croatian Istria, which was swiftly interpreted as an act of betrayal on his part. A year earlier, Croatia had broken away from the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia and declared its independence. Although a war was expected, the Serbian Ćosić was not prepared to regard the Croats, with whom he had got on well all his life, as his enemies. The enemies for him were the nationalistic droning and the repression of Milošević's politics. He took to the field with all his might against those enemies, with articles and essays.

His resolute stance earned him respect from abroad, and also the attention he deserved. German, English, French and Hungarian publishers were interested in books he had written long ago, not just in his masterpiece that the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* newspaper had described as a subversive classic, the novel *My Family's Role in the World Revolution*, but also in his subsequent work, *Bel Tempo*, which was described as the novel of the century by Rowohlt when it appeared in German in 1998. It was feted by the critics as the virtuoso and highly comic monologue of an old woman who sits in front of the television and comments on the 20th century. For 400 pages!

While Bora Ćosić was having to endure the pain of seeing the violent disintegration of the state of Yugoslavia, and the destruction and death of many, Stefan Heym was experiencing the wonder of German unification, an event none of us had ever thought we would see in our lifetime. Unlike Bora Ćosić, Stefan Heym didn't just want to participate in politics as a writer; he also wanted to change things as a politician. He would gladly have made his dream of an enlightened socialist society a reality in a GDR with free self-determination. But history did not stay long at this station on its route; it headed straight for German unification.

Stefan Heym now wanted to fight for his political ideals in the Bundestag, the German parliament. The SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) wouldn't give him the chance to do so, so he was instead elected directly to the parliament as an independent candidate for the PDS (Party of

Democratic Socialism) – which didn't really suit him given his experiences with the SED and the Stasi. This controversial commitment led him to be treated unfairly by the established parties, in particular by the Christian Democrats. He quickly found that, as the representative of a tiny and unappreciated parliamentary group in the Bundestag, he couldn't achieve anything. He found grounds for making a fundamental protest, for leaving the Bundestag and for continuing to be as involved with politics as ever as a writer, right up until his death.

In 1995, the year Stefan Heym abruptly brought his career as a politician to an end, Bora Ćosić moved to Berlin. The first years of his exile in Croatia had certainly not been easy for him as a Serb, since the two peoples who had once been brothers found themselves in a savage war. How he felt back then can be read in his *Diary of an Expatriate, of a Displaced Person*, which is a tale of the Franco-Prussian War, with references to Proust.

Bora Ćosić did not lose any of his powers or creativity in exile. On the contrary, the distance seemed to sharpen his perspective and strengthen his drive to communicate. Book after book appeared over the years, each one in his unmistakable voice, with the originality that belonged to him alone and including – when necessary – his uncompromising criticism.

Country Zero (Nulta zemlja) looks towards the effects of the Milošević regime and describes how a country goes berserk, forcing the narrator into a state of siege and isolation. He wanders like a ghost through the “rooms of the past”, feels under permanent surveillance by his surroundings and barricades himself against impending horrors. Books like this did not appear in Serbia until a long time after the end of the Milošević years. The relationship is beginning to thaw only gradually, as more and more people recognise that Bora Ćosić, with his awkward opinions, was right from the start. But he remains a red rag to the radicals of his country – and their numbers are still large.

But he has not been deprived of recognition. In 2002 Bora Ćosić was awarded the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding. The then President of the German Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse gave a speech paying tribute to him. He described the prizewinner as a great European writer whose writing offered an intricate mix of playful irony, philosophical aphorisms and menacing insanity. He used joyful anarchy and salutary bewilderment to create a multifaceted picture of Balkan culture, which was mysterious, and frequently incomprehensible, for most Germans.

Thierse had been particularly impressed by *The Customs Declaration (Carinska deklaracija)*, which had just appeared in German. The author, he said, took an absurd incident from his life and

created an inventory of his existence. Serbian customs had demanded that he produce a list of the books that he wanted to take with him from Belgrade to Berlin. Everything had been packed up long before. So he had to compile the list from memory. Once he had set off, Bora Ćosić created a “customs station of history” from it, in which he recorded not only his material assets, but also his ideas, dreams, character traits and memories. “I think,” he mused, “that I will have to take my weaknesses with me because they belong to me. But perhaps my country has more urgent need of them than I do, because as a proud nation it relies so heavily on its strength. Perhaps it could do with some weakness as a necessary corrective.”

Bora Ćosić has not written off Belgrade. He still travels there from time to time. The old relationship has not re-established itself as yet. The city seems like his own personal museum, as he describes his visits. He has also visited what remains of the former Yugoslavia with his wife, Lidija, and this led to a book that is well worth reading. How does he approach a journey to the country of his birth? With extreme cool, with neutral emotions – as if he were going to Alaska. He makes it clear in the first sentence: “Whether a person is born here or there is a matter of chance. And so the concept of ‘homeland’ or ‘fatherland’ loses its special significance. Everything can be traced back to geographical coordinates – profane points on the map of our destiny.” Anyone who thinks and writes like this will not be taken in by nationalist demagogues and led in to war.

What does homeland mean for him now? He has a clear answer. Bora Ćosić’s homeland is the Serbo-Croat language. It has the exquisite advantage of always being with him and being transportable anywhere. Politicians’ blood-and-soil mythologising of the homeland doesn’t mean anything to him.

What Bora Ćosić writes about his journey to the Alaska of his past does not read like a longing for the country he was born in and lived in for 60 years. On his journey he can still see the deep scars of the war in Croatia and Bosnia. The courage of the cruelly mistreated city of Sarajevo impresses and irritates him in equal measure. Belgrade seems to him a city out of kilter, something unreal, an open space for many, except in relation to the fundamentals, the lives of its citizens. Lots of things strike him: the gruff way of speaking, the intrusive chaos, the dreadful palaces of the newly rich and the profiteers from the most recent war. Fury keeps gripping him about the small-minded nationalism that destroyed so much that was precious.

He finds the opposite at the end of his tour of the former Yugoslavia on the Croatian peninsula of Istria. “Here – between the Gulf of Trieste and the yellow lights of the metropolis of Rijeka – a different race of people is sprouting up,” he writes. “Two hundred thousand people, with mixed

blood, mixed customs and languages, something sublime, whose complexity perhaps comprises the whole of the European soul.” A comforting note on which to end his *Die Reise nach Alaska*. A model for us, too, not least in eastern Germany, as we still find dealings with other cultures and nations difficult.

There is no better tool than literature to help us empathise with the life, feelings and thinking of other peoples. But without help, it can't cross frontiers. Bora Ćosić has a wonderful formulation. Our ability to enjoy his works to the full in German is down to his outstanding translators. They are a breed that has my highest esteem. They are experts and artists. They have to master the finest subtleties both of the language of the author and of their own language in order to do justice to the original text and the author's intention.

To conclude, I would like to make a recommendation: if you want to enjoy some particularly good reading, get a copy of Ćosić's book *Im Ministerium für Mamas Angelegenheiten*, to go along with the other works by him that you already own. I issue this advertisement in the spirit of Stefan Heym, who always reminded me that we can never do too much to ensure that our writers are independent, and that means financially independent, too.

I congratulate Bora Ćosić on the Stefan Heym Prize and the Award Committee on their decision. In choosing Bora Ćosić to follow Amos Oz, it has once again chosen a prizewinner of high international standing and a writer who does much towards the peaceful co-existence of nations.