

*[Speech held in German language.]*

**Bora Ćosić on the awarding of the  
International Stefan Heym Prize 2011**

*As delivered.*

**SPEECH FOR CHEMNITZ**

Amos Oz, my predecessor, loves the desert. He says he that has had the habit for years of going for a stroll there in the early morning, to look at the mountains and valleys that have stood unmoved for millennia on that very spot. If he sits there in the sand for a few moments, he is able to concentrate and, as he himself says, to find the true measure of things, to get back to what it is to be human. Because the civilisations we know originated in the desert, and it was only later that everything else was added. Listening to his voice, his almost prophetic voice, I sense the absolute opposite in myself; I am nothing more than an ageing city boy. Someone whose life has been lived in European towns, both small and large, and which are only discovering their mirages and deserts in retrospect.

In spite of everything, I long ago gave up trying to draw a strict distinction between life in the East and the West. In this I have been helped by the poet Adonis, who says that there are several Wests in every West and several Easts in every East. When we say East and West, we make things easier. We can say there are Easts in the West that are much more eastern than the East, and Wests in the East that are much more western than the West.

In the same way as there is no real basis for dividing politics into left and right or for using one hand, one geometric direction, as the basis for attributing artificial meaning to progress and progressives and the other for the backward and the retrograde. Because when I stand in front of a map of the world, I can see that what we call the West is on the left, and what we call the East is on the right.

This gives rise to doubts, and not only for Adonis. The renowned art historian Gustav René Hocke wrote a definitive paper on the subject, positing a permanent dialectical relation between the “Asiatic” East and the “Atticist” West. Hocke himself was aware that he had a precursor, Eduard Norden, who described the Atticist (“western”) style as conservative and the Asiatic (“eastern”) style as modern.

Now we can see for the first time that we are dealing with an obvious abuse of a magnificent compass direction, the East – perpetrated by Brezhnev, Honecker and Ceaușescu. The event that I'm thinking about reaches back deep into the past, into the fifth century before our era. When classical Greece met the culture of the East. This was when balanced Greek thought unexpectedly discovered that something western had been happening in the East for a long time, something that the Greeks called "phantasia". Perhaps that's why all life in the left-hand East at the time was so upside down, artificial, synthetic. It's just that without the fundamentals of fantastical Asiatic style there would have been no Khlebnikov, no Malevich no Dziga Vertov.

As with writing, Hocke continued, music also developed *from these "Asiatic" traditions. Most of the musical instruments used in Europe until the time of Bach came from Asia.* We had to come to this argument, this musical argument, to put an end to the instrumentalisation of this issue, which leads to unavoidable differences between East and West, where in fact one complements and supports the other.

I only knew Stefan Heym, thanks to whose work we are all gathered here, for a short time. But I am joined to him and to his dramatic life by my own fate, which is also balanced between West and East. In a beautiful region of Lower Austria there is a little town with two districts, Krems and Stein. There are a few houses in the middle, and the people there say that they live in the "and". I think that Heym's life and the lives of many like him and my own life, too, have ended up in this "and" settlement, on a small piece of land, almost a no man's land, as they call the strip of territory between two front lines. We must not give up this small piece of land, though, this land that belongs to us. We are the in-betweens, and it is to the in-betweens that this evening should be dedicated. This narrow space is not always comfortable because it can be everyone's target. But in return, it gives you a great view of both sides. The Yugoslavian nations were an example of this kind of historical intermission, which unfortunately came to a very dramatic close, not in the slightest bit as funny as René Clair's film *Entr'acte*.

There are big differences between our two lives. My destiny played out in the quiet zone, sheltered from the wind, of so-called soft Yugoslavian socialism, and if one or two of my books were sometimes banned, no one actually threw stones at me personally. Stefan Heym, however, was condemned for his writing and subjected to embarrassing surveillance. Recently his wife showed me exactly where the spies used to stand behind her garden hedge, with a piece of paper and a pen in hand, to note down precisely when the poet left the house and when he came back. Because how and why a writer's spirit moves is one of the greatest mysteries for every informer.

Stefan Heym was also a prophet. He spoke at demonstrations, took aim at all the illogicality with which human history is filled.

This is why, even today, we should follow his appearances at the time as if they were a living reading list, and as if his precious voice were still coming to us from those tempestuous times. Did he not demand, from the speaker's platform in Berlin, at the moment when Honecker's wall was just beginning to crumble in people's consciousness, that power in the world must be divided equally between all? That it should not be given to just one small group of individuals, just one organisation, one party.

Throughout all his experiences, confronted with the hardship faced by many, he held fast to hope and to his faith in the human species probably because he had fought among General Eisenhower's troops to destroy an inhuman system in June 1944. To the end, Stefan Heym was involved in the renewal of the world we all share, in many attempts to bring this about.

Unfortunately, like many others, I don't quite believe this is possible. Because for as long as civilisation has been able to think, it has always relied too heavily on the development of human abilities, on the moral and social progress of our species, without it being certain that there is any basis for this. The great renowned zoologist and geologist Stephen Jay Gould said *that culture doesn't have the slightest retroactive effect on the human brain, which has the same structure as the brain of humans who lived several million years ago, at a time when there was nothing that might have resembled a civilization.*

*I do not find the idea of progress convincing,* said the religious philosopher Raimon Panikkar. *I think we shouldn't ascribe too much importance to science,* said Erwin Chargaff, an eminent biochemist who was full of scepticism.

For me personally, no elaborate scientific argument is capable of explaining the brain structure of that Serbian soldier who in the last war in Bosnia kicked the head of a murder victim as if it were a football. We may have made tremendous technological advances, but *humanity has forfeited its cultural, religious, and in the final analysis, its human identity precisely because technology has homogenised us,* says the same philosopher from Barcelona, Panikkar.

It's just that this technological homogenisation is coming apart step by step. In my western enclave of eastern Germany, household appliances break down every day (because you have to generate sales of new ones), the post sometimes takes an age to arrive, and we very often have

railway accidents with many casualties. Computer technology has taken a great leap forwards. Here, Paul Virilio delivers a direct warning: *The current revolution in information technology is inevitably going hand in hand with a revolution in denunciation.* We can see for ourselves how personal privacy is crumbling step by step. These days, any neurotic who knows a thing or two about IT can control the daily realities of our time on Earth, just like Orwell's Big Brother. I no longer know if there's a difference between East and West here; the world is a merry-go-round, an imperfect entity, and we have to make the best of it.

On such unstable ground, what can someone do whose only weapon is a pen? If anyone in the country I left were listening to me, they would hear me humbly asking my Serbian countrymen to show respect for their Albanian neighbours to the south, just as much I wanted to curb the intolerance the hard-working Kosovan nation sometimes displays towards the Serbs.

During the reign of terror against the Kosovans, a Serbian man of letters said quietly that justice was being done because they were not human. It is hard to do anything in situations that have lost every last breath of humanity. However, I take strength from a small group of kindred spirits in Serbia and try to convince the unpleasant majority of my country that the Albanian people in Kosovo are part of the human species, all the same. By invoking some of my Albanian friends, I turn to this likeable and small but courageous nation with the plea that they do not allow their own hard-won independence to be compromised from within by the bad example of others. The freedom that has been created is still a fledgling and requires much patience and care.

I do not want to ruin this wonderful celebration by talking about states of affairs that can't easily be changed. But this gathering shows that people always allow themselves to be found, even if it is in a tiny number, ready to form a spiritual brotherhood. Within this brotherhood, I thank the kind and generous benefactors who thought of me in connection with this award. I would like to thank the City of Chemnitz and its mayor, Mrs Barbara Ludwig, for their hospitality; Fritz Pleitgen for his kind speech; Herbert Wiesner and all the members of the jury; the friendly journalists who have been following this event. I thank everyone present here today. My special thanks go to Mrs Inge Heym, who has been such a guiding spirit for me in receiving this honour that has been accorded me.