



Address by
Václav Havel

President of the Czech Republic

at the opening session
of the World Congress
of the International PEN Club

Prague, Atrium Hotel, November 7, 1994

EMBARGO TILL DELIVERY

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

Several times in my life I have had the honour of being invited to a world congress of the International PEN Club. But the regime always made it impossible for me to attend. I had to live to the age of fifty-eight, go through a revolution in my country, become the nation's president, and see the World Congress held in Prague, to be able to participate in this important event for the first time in my life. I am sure you will understand, therefore, that this is a very moving moment for me.

I also know you will understand that I must welcome you all to Prague first and foremost as a colleague who is delighted to be able to meet here with so many authors I have long held in high esteem, and only secondarily as a representative of the Czech Republic, which has the honour of hosting your gathering. I trust that your presence will introduce important spiritual and intellectual stimuli into this

sometimes too materialistic and somewhat provincial setting, and that for a while at least you will help draw the attention of my fellow citizens to matters that transcend the narrow horizon of their everyday cares and concerns.

To you, then, I extend the wish that your stay here be a pleasant one, that your debates be lively and fruitful, and that you might also find some time to explore this magic city, whose streets were once trod by fascinating people like Rabbi Loew, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, Arcimboldo, Gustav Meyrink, Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel and Jaroslav Hašek.

This congress is to be devoted to the theme of tolerance, and it will therefore have to deal with the theme of intolerance as well.

National, racial, religious, social and political intolerance has been the lot of humanity for millennia, and it is unfortunately deeply rooted in the human psyche, and in the spirit of entire human communities. The problem is that like many other things, this

phenomenon — now that we live in a world with a single global civilization — is far more dangerous than it has ever been before. The time when conflicts between peoples, empires, cultures, and individual civilizations had only local impact is gone forever. On today's overpopulated planet, girdled by dense networks of political and economic relations, and of information and communication links, everything that happens now inevitably touches and concerns us all far more and in far different ways, than it ever did before. The many horrors of the world today have an impact on us that is not just moral — since these are evils done by some human beings to others — they touch us more and more in an almost physical sense as well, as something that directly threatens us. Yes, we live in a remarkable time. It is not just that we now learn, almost instantaneously, about all the deeply shocking atrocities that take place in the world; it is also a time when every local conflict has the potential to divide the international community and become the catalyst for a far wider conflict, one that in many cases is even global. Who among us, for instance, can tell where the present war in Bosnia and Herzegovina may lead, to what tragic

confrontation of three spheres of civilization, if the democratic world remains as indifferent to that conflict as it has so far?

This alarming state of affairs has not yet come home to a large part of humanity, particularly those who do not yet feel directly threatened by any of the contemporary ills of civilization. Nevertheless, it is precisely this state of affairs, when human malice ceases to be a mere assault on our feelings and becomes a direct threat to us, that can lead to a reawakening in people of a sense of responsibility for the world. But how can that change in awareness be brought about? How can people be made to understand that every act of violence against individuals ceases to be just a reason to feel compassion, and becomes a real act of violence against us all? How can it be explained to politicians and the public that a short-sighted focussing on purely personal or group interests, on immediate interests, is only paving the road to hell?

I think that in these matters, writers and

intellectuals can and must play a role that only they can fill. They are people whose profession, indeed, whose very vocation is to perceive far more profoundly than others the general context of things, to feel a general sense of responsibility for the world, and to articulate publicly this inner experience.

To achieve this, they have essentially two instruments available to them.

The first is the very substance of their work — that is, literature, or simply writing. A deep analysis of the tangled roots of intolerance in our individual and collective unconsciousness and consciousness, a merciless examination of all the frustrations of loneliness, personal inadequacies and the loss of metaphysical certainties that is one of the sources of human aggression — quite simply, a sharp light thrown on the misery of the contemporary human soul — this is, I think, the most important thing writers can do. In any case, there is nothing new in this: they have always done that, and there is no reason why they should not go on doing so.

But there is another instrument, an instrument that intellectuals sometimes avail themselves of here and there, though not nearly often enough in my opinion. This other instrument is the public activity of intellectuals as citizens, when they engage in politics in the broadest sense of the word. Let us admit that most of us writers feel an essential aversion to politics. We see entering politics as a betrayal of our independence, and we reject it on the grounds that the job of the writer is simply to write. By taking such a position, however, we accept the perverted principle of specialization, according to which some are paid to write about the horrors of the world and human responsibility, and others to deal with those horrors and bear the human responsibility for them. It is the principle of a rather doubtful division of labour: some are here to understand the world and morality, without having to intervene in that world and turn morality into action; others are here to intervene in the world and behave morally, without being bound in any way to understand any of it. It reminds me of the kind of specialization that happens among scientists: some invent

chloroflourocarbons, others investigate the consequences of the holes in the ozone layer that the hydrofluorides cause. A writer with an aversion to politics seem to me like a scientist studying the holes in the ozone who is not bothered by the fact that his superior is inventing hydrofluorides.

I once asked a friend of mine, a wonderful man and a wonderful writer, to fill a certain political post. He refused, arguing that someone had to remain independent. I replied that if you all said that, it could happen that in the end, no one will be independent, because there won't be anyone around to make that independence possible and stand behind it.

In short, I am convinced that the world of today, with so many threats to its civilization and so little capacity to deal with them, is crying out for people who have understood something of that world and know what to do about it to play a far more vigorous role in politics. I felt this when I was an independent writer, and my time in politics has only confirmed the rightness of that feeling, because it has showed me how little there

is in world politics of the mind-set that makes it possible to look further than the borders of ones own electoral district and its momentary moods, or beyond the next election.

I am not suggesting, dear colleagues, that you all become presidents in your own countries, or that each of you go out and start a political party. It would, however, be wonderful if you were to do something else, something less conspicuous, but perhaps more important: that is, if you would gradually begin to create something like a world-wide lobby, a special brotherhood or, if I may use the word, a somewhat conspiratorial mafia whose aim is not just to write marvellous books or occasional manifests, but to have an impact on politics and its human perceptions in a spirit of solidarity, and in a coordinated, deliberate way — if necessary with the kind of personal commitment Susan Sontag showed in Sarajevo — and in many visible and invisible ways, to help open its eyes.

Politicians, at least the wiser ones, will not reject such activity but, on the contrary, will welcome it. I, for

instance, would welcome hearing, in this country, a really strong and eloquent voice coming from my colleagues, one that could not be ignored no matter how critical it might be, a voice that did more than merely grumble, or engage in esoteric reflection, but became a clear public and political fact.

Dear colleagues,

If it seems to you that I have used, and perhaps abused, this platform to deliver a small sermon, I ask you to forgive me. And if I have asked something of you that you have already been engaged in over the years, I apologize all the more.

Let me conclude with one final plea: do not fail to raise your common voice in defence of our colleague and friend Salman Rushdie, who is still the target of a lethal arrow, and in defence of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, who is unable to join us here because his government prevented him from coming. I also beg you to express our common solidarity with all Bosnian intellectuals who have been waging a courageous and

unequal struggle on the cultural front with the criminal fanaticism of the ethnic cleansers, those living examples of the lengths to which human intolerance can eventually go.

I thank you for your attention, and wish your congress every success.



Vážení přítomní,

milé kolegyně a milí kolegové,

Projev

prezidenta republiky

Václava Havla

na zahájení

Světového kongresu PEN klubu

Praha, Hotel Atrium, 7. listopadu 1994

EMBARGO DO PŘEDNESENÍ!