

SPECIAL TO COURIER-JOURNAL
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The 34th International P. E. N. (poets, playwrights - essayists, editors - novelists) conference held in New York recently posed the greatest threat to that international literary organization's survival in over twenty years. Playwright Arthur Miller, who was presiding as International President, was led to say that he thought the P. E. N. was showing new signs of life, but he thought nothing could destroy it; the dangers to it must always increase as it took on more vitality. But the final sessions developed into a public row, and passions rose high almost to the bursting point.

The Conference was the largest in the history of P. E. N., which was originally founded in England by such literary figures as H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and John Galsworthy. One Englishwoman stood up and delivered public reminiscences of Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells was referred to frequently from the rostrum.

The origins of the P. E. N. were not forgotten and a chairman of the Conference, Douglas Young, put the near-explosion of the final days in historical perspective when he compared the controversy to one more than two decades earlier when Nazi writers had been sent by Hitler as the delegates representing Germany, causing a violent display of furor by most other delegates.

The occasion for the fuming temperments in the recent instance was the question of totalitarianism in all its forms, including both Fascism and Communism. An impassioned speech was delivered in French (translated simultaneously into English over portable headphones) by the revered Italian novelist Ignazio Silone, who deplored totalitarianism and said that it was the duty of the writer to oppose it. The theme for the session in which he spoke was "The Writer as a Public Figure."

Pablo Neruda, a Chilean delegate who admitted in private to being a communist, criticized Silone and deplored Silone's favorable mention of the novel DOCTOR ZHIVAGO by Boris Pasternak, considering that to be a useless heating up of the cold war. Silone retorted that if the mention of Boris Pasternak heated up the cold war, Mr. Neruda must be a victim of a cold war mentality which was most unfortunate.

Valery Tarsis later made a speech as a Russian writer in exile in which he denounced Mr. Neruda by name and condemned, also by name, the Russian Communist government which he said did not represent the people of Russia, and the Nobel Prize Committee which, he said, had shamefully awarded a prize to the Communist novelist, Michael Sholokhov, who he said was unworthy of it and who degraded the very prize. Mr. Tarsis said writers must always oppose communism and he called for "not a cold war but a hot war" against communist Russia on ideological grounds.

During the Tarsis speech East German and Bulgarian delegates rose to their feet and shouted that he not be allowed to continue. The Chairman ignored their protests. After Tarsis finished Arthur Miller disassociated P. E. N. with any call for a hot war. Anti-communist speeches of great intensity were made by others, however, including the Vietnamese delegate Nghiem Xuan Viet, who emphasized that Communist aggression must be met with force and, as a Buddhist pointed out, that the so-called Buddhists who opposed an anti-Communist stand in South Vietnam were not Buddhists at all but Communists who put on robes and claimed to be Buddhists, and that no one could check on them because Buddhism is a religion without any organization or membership of any kind.

Shouting erupted and the East German delegate Heinz Kamnitzer protested excitedly. There were obviously only a handful of sympathizers on the side of the Communists at the Conference and the General Secretary of P. E. N., David Carver, took notice of and then abruptly cut short official protests of the Eastern Germans and Bulgarians following the Friday afternoon session. Carver said he did "not want to make a public spectacle," as this writer stood observing the incident and evidently was responsible for Mr. Carver hurrying off in distress.

The International P. E. N. was represented by David Carver in Moscow last April where he went to plea for clemency for the imprisoned Soviet writers Andrei D. Sinyavski and Yuli M. Paniel. No clemency was granted and writers from the Soviet Union were forbidden to attend the International P. E. N. Conference as were also three Czech delegates.

The International P. E. N. has become intimately involved in the question of totalitarian Communism, and though the majority of P. E. N. members can ignore the matter at the P. E. N. garden parties and receptions, general sessions will no doubt continue to be potentially explosive until some solution is arrived at for dealing with the matter. No solution is in sight unless it be to exclude Communist delegates as much as possible, to avoid repetition of the angry confrontations. This may be the course taken, as this writer heard some organizers of the Conference deploring the East German and Bulgarian delegates as "that bunch of Communists." It would also not be surprising if Valery Tarsis were asked to refrain from making blatantly inflammatory speeches - since P. E. N. is not meant to be a political forum, as Arthur Miller emphasized. But the controversy, which will probably continue, is a reminder that under any totalitarian government the writer is liable not to be a free spirit, and that this year's Conference theme "The Writer as an Independent Spirit" is not an irrelevant topic by any means.

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