

GOETHE MEDAL 2017

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY IRINA SHCHERBAKOVA

WEIMAR, 28 AUGUST 2017

- Check against delivery -

Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, Colleagues, Members of the Jury:

It is a great honour for me to stand here, and I regard this award mainly as recognition for the work we have done for several years with many other Russian friends and colleagues in the International Memorial Society. I thank you with all my heart for this recognition!

When I received the news of the Goethe Medal, and that it would be awarded on the 28th of August, I was reminded of what odd coincidences there are. For on this very day 74 years ago, my 19-year-old father was not thinking about Goethe when he was severely wounded on the southern front in Eastern Ukraine. His company was very close to the trenches of the German infantry, and almost all of the soldiers were killed in that battle. My father was lucky, he became a war invalid, but he survived. And so I was born six years later. One can imagine his feelings towards Germans at that time. But when I was seven years old, my parents, both philologists, chose German for me as a foreign language, because in spite of the cruel war, German literature, especially the classics, were still the most important in European culture for them. Faust translated by the famous Russian poet Boris Pasternak was important reading for their generation.

In those years, however, hardly any of my friends considered German a beautiful language. In the 1950s and 1960s, German was still the language of the enemy for many. Memories of the brutal war were transferred to the language, and it was perceived as coarse and barking like the orders and commands heard in war films. But after a while, the era began in which everyone who considered themselves intellectuals was reading the works of Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Franz Kafka. As soon as I learned to read, my German began with the poems of Goethe and Heine. In the wonderful translations of the great Russian poets, “Der Erlkönig” and “Wanderers Nachtlied” became the jewels of Russian poetry. And I was only able to read these lines in both languages because of my German skills.

A very important tradition tied into this: the tradition of the Enlightenment. After all, what did people in Russia hope for in the 1970s, after the “thaw” ended, and the leaden Brezhnev era began? It did not look like we would ever experience a change. But it helped us in our conviction that the idea of enlightenment and education, so important to the Russian intelligentsia since the nineteenth century, should be maintained. And the decisive factor was to do whatever was possible to research and gather the truth about the past, about the Stalinist terror, about the fate of the victims, even if this could only be done in secret, yet in the hope that a time would come when it could be made public.

When perestroika came, and processing history suddenly became the order of the day, for many, especially for those who founded the Memorial Society, not only Germany’s example of processing the past, but also tangible help, mutual research, and support were very important.

And in all these past years, our activities would have been far more difficult without this support. Were I to name all of the institutions, foundations, historians, journalists, politicians, and civil society actors from Germany we worked with together over these years, the list would take a very long time.

In recent years, with the marked turn in Russia towards nationalism, isolationism from Western countries, the atomising of society, becoming accustomed to a lack of freedom, and above all the constant search for enemies, this support and collaboration has become much more important. For the only thing we can use to counter these very dangerous tendencies is solidarity. And I consider this medal a sign of this solidarity, and we are extremely grateful for this solidarity, which we need today like never before.