

GOETHE MEDAL 2017 LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR IRINA SHCHERBAKOVA BY MARIANNE BIRTHLER

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Rarely have I been as moved by a book as I was by the small anthology published fourteen years ago by Irina Shcherbakova, entitled *Russia's Memory*. It contains 15 essays by very young people, including 14-year-old Filip from Chukotka, Timur, age 16, from Bashkortostan and 15-year-old Elena from Murmansk. They all took part in the first pan-Russian pupils' contest on "Humankind in History. Russia in the Twentieth Century" in 1999. They tell stories about the Stalinist era, about their forebears, about their neighbours and friends. To do so, they asked questions, they researched, they compared, and while reading, we feel how they were seized by the longing for truthfulness. We can almost experience their compassion, their curiosity, their fright, their astonishment and their conscientiousness. And we admire their courage to put into words what was previously kept secret. Thousands of such works are now available and their creation is closely linked to the commitment of Irina Shcherbakova.

"To put something into words" – this is a very nice turn of phrase. It expresses what this book is all about. And it also strikes home the manner that Irina Shcherbakova speaks and writes. Put into words: it is more than just speaking or talking – it means building a bridge between what people have experienced, suffered and felt and the words that can reach other people.

To put something into words involves a decision. This decision can be difficult, so difficult that people may rather not step onto the bridge and prefer to remain silent or banish their memories from consciousness. Many people carry unconscious or unspoken suffering about with them like a heavy burden and it often makes them ill. Perhaps this is why the most important task for parents is to help their children find words and communicate, to be sincere and share their own experiences with others.

In dictatorships, silence and insincerity are part of everyday experience. Truthful speech is dangerous, sometimes even life threatening. Entire edifices of lies are built to deny human experience and memory. The truth is suppressed in newspapers, public speeches, schools and universities. The truth is determined by a political party, a clique, a despot.

Irina Shcherbakova, you and I have experienced this, and many others here in the room have as well. And sadly, we also had to learn that the lies do not simply disappear along with the liars, but they continue to exist in silence and concealment, and thus retain their power.

As Federal Commissioner for the Stasi documents, I encountered people from many countries who were marked by the consequences of decades-long dictatorships and who were looking for ways to help find their country's and people's way back to justice and

civility. And as different as their individual circumstances were, all these people were united by their efforts to overcome the spiritual and moral neglect that each dictatorship leaves behind. They all wanted to bring light into the darkness of the past, both in order to tear apart the web of lies of the former rulers and so that people could find their way back to their truth and inner freedom. Both are essential if an oppressed people are to become a living civil society.

You, Irina Shcherbakova, have chosen the perhaps most difficult and most important task that needs to be accomplished on a society's pathway to freedom. You put into words what was concealed and is still kept hidden. You help us to distinguish between experience and myth, truthfulness and lies, facts and legends. Thus, language becomes what it should be: an expression of vitality and a bridge between people, not only between contemporaries, but also a bridge across generations and borders.

What you do is not just about listening, collecting and preserving reports. When you interview contemporary witnesses, you are not sitting across from a story, but a person. You encourage us to put into words what has happened, what was experienced, what people have suffered through. You stand by those who are looking for words to express their buried memories and their suffering; you are close to them as they re-live it once again and act respectfully and gratefully towards what you hear. We are also grateful for the fact that these lives have not been lost, that we and future generations know of them. You, dear Irina, are fighting for the truth together with your companions at MEMORIAL under very difficult conditions. Your work is not supported by the state, but defamed as espionage controlled from abroad. And no rule of law protects you.

International attention for you and your work is all the more important. I hope that the Goethe Medal and this event in Weimar contribute to this, and I congratulate you with all my heart. But my greatest wish is that your work be recognised not only internationally, but also, finally, in your own country. Until then, I hope that you and all your known and unknown companions will be able to rely on the solidarity and the interest of the European public in future.