

# GOETHE MEDAL 2019

## ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY DOĞAN AKHANLI

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“Then” and “There”  
Doğan Akhanlı

*Mr Lehmann, Mr Klein, Mr Hoff, Mr Görgen, Insa Wilke, ladies and gentlemen, friends!*

One thing I especially like about the German language is subjunctive II. It opens the world to us of the unreal, of dreams and the improbable. In the form I love most, subjunctive II even transposes this realm of fantasy into the past. This form sometimes looks so complicated and at the same time so beautiful that I have the feeling that I'm not reading a sentence, but a magical mathematical formula.

If my partner hadn't wished to celebrate her birthday with me in Granada two years ago, I wouldn't be here now. If, back then, the Turkish government had ceased to criminalise me, I wouldn't have been arrested again in Granada, and if the Goethe-Institut in Spain hadn't heard of my arrest, I also wouldn't have been a guest of the Goethe-Institut in Madrid for two months. If all of this hadn't happened, I wouldn't have written the book *Arrest in Granada*, wouldn't been invited, by Ms Bachsoliani and Ms Soghomonyan, to Armenia by the Goethe-Institut in Yerevan, and I would not be standing here now. Everything could have been quite different: If the German press hadn't shown any interest in my case; if the German Chancellor and the Foreign Minister had not intervened; if my German lawyer Ilias Uyar and my partner Perihan Zeran hadn't managed to get a ticket to fly to Madrid; if my Spanish lawyer Gonzalo Boye had been in Vietnam or anywhere else in the world at the time. But in the end, everything went well. I was rescued in time and now I'm standing here in Weimar as a recipient of the Goethe Medal. I'm not exactly sure who to thank for this award, which makes me so proud. But I know that my persecutors and their criminalisation attempts have failed. Due to the solidarity of many people, which is just as magical as subjunctive II.

Many thanks to numerous initiatives, associations, media, cultural and memorial landscapes of Germany, Spain and Turkey, to Insa Wilke for her words, to my German literary voices, Hülya Engin, Önder Erdem and Recai Hallaç, to my friends whose protests reached me all the way to my cell, even back when I was sitting in the Turkish high security prison.

Many thanks also to the selection committee, the executive committee and the vice-president of the Goethe-Institut, Christina von Braun, who honour me along with the great artist Shirin Neshat and the publisher Enkhbat Roozon. I happily accept the

Goethe Medal and I dedicate it in tribute to the imprisoned Cologne artist Hozan Cane, who like tens of thousands of other people has become a victim of state arbitrariness and arrogance in Turkey, including Ahmet Altan, Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş.

When he visits European countries, the Israeli writer David Grossman always notices a minor linguistic thing. Those who talk about the annihilation of European Jews often say that happened *back then*. In Hebrew or Yiddish, according to Grossman, even today, when they talk about the Holocaust, people never say “then,” but “there.” And “there,” according to Grossman, doesn’t mean just an actual place, a city, a camp, but “there” also means an immaterial place, a place in the midst of people, indeed in the heart of all humanity! The will to destroy not only found its way into a walled place, but into a place within the human soul. This destructive will still exists, Grossman says, it is not gone from the world, not from the objective, not from the spiritual! We, too, are now “there.” Weimar is not only Goethe and Schiller, but also Buchenwald, the former concentration camp. But aren’t we also “there” in the dual sense that Grossman speaks of?

Although I knew from a poem by Nazım Hikmet, the most important Turkish poet of Polish and German descent, that Germany had broken all its neighbours’ bones and skinned them alive during the Second World War, I knew little about the dimension of the Holocaust before I came to Germany. In late 1991, I fled to Germany with my family and my memories of my country’s long history of violence. It was the time when the former Buchenwald prisoner and surviving Spanish writer and winner of the Goethe Medal, Jorge Semprún, experienced a country that had previously tortured and wanted to destroy him, but was now in a process of change. The 1990s were the years of remembrance, as the memory researcher Aleidia Assmann emphasises. I am a witness to this transformation. In my country of origin, forgetting was the rule and remembering the exception. In Germany, it seemed to me, the exact opposite happened.

Remembering could, I hope, be a means of establishing and reappraising the connections between the historical and contemporary history of violence in my country of origin as well. Remembering could be a key, I hoped, to understanding what my personal experience of violence had to do with the victims of the genocide of the Armenians 100 years ago, with today’s repression, arbitrariness and injustice against Kurds, Alevis, Jews, Christians, against homosexuals and women in Turkey. Inspired by the reappraisal in Germany, I began to think beyond borders and times and to feel a connection between myself and the victims of the genocide of the Herero and Nama in present-day Namibia, of the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, of Jews and Roma-Sinti in Europe, the Tutsi minority in Rwanda. Because of the remembrance work that Germany has done, I was able to identify with this country. I liked that people here did not like to use words like “nation,” “flag,” “fatherland” or “ethnic.” But I did not recognise that the programme of remembrance, meant to protect us from the annihilating spirit of the Nazi era and its resurrection in the heads and fists of neo-Nazis, never arrived in one part of society.

This part of Germany now wants to revive the past and turn back history. They call themselves “concerned” or “angry” citizens. They call themselves AfD, they call themselves NPD, they call themselves NSU. They are out and about with their murderous fantasies. They act misanthropically; they insult six million Holocaust victims as the “*bird shit*” of history. They kill, according to their own statement, because they don’t like “foreigners” or because “foreigners” don’t suit them. They suffer from a pathological, blind longing for the past. They represent the “there” in the spiritual sense, as Grosman meant it.

Politics may not be able to make it compulsory for all to remember, but it must defend the remembrance every day against the new prophets of destruction. We as a civil society will do the rest on our own. And we will not allow a mind-set that permitted genocidal crimes to be re-asserted. “Germany is our Germany,” Paulino José Miguel said, “We do not have to justify why we’re here, where we’re from; it’s our country. Period.”

Thank you very much.