

Awardee: Irena Veisaitė, literary and theatre scholar, Lithuania

Irena Veisaitė is a prominent Lithuanian intellectual. She has published over 200 articles in the Lithuanian and international press, is the co-author of many textbooks, and the editor of a number of books. Persecuted as a Jew in Lithuania by the Nazis and still living there today, she advocates reconciliation and cultural dialogue with Germany, said the conferment commission. She always was dedicated to the arts even when her life was threatened. For her, the word is a life strategy.

With great courage and dedication, in recent decades Irena Veisaitė has worked in the arts scene of Vilnius towards networking with German cultural organizations and, after Lithuania's independence, initiated many projects for cultural dialogue. Veisaitė is a significant factor in the cultural life of Lithuania and is highly esteemed as an independently thinking intellectual. As a Holocaust survivor, she actively advocates reconciliation, thus building a bridge to young Jews in Lithuania. Veisaitė always advocated reconciliation and cooperation and today still hopes for a mutual Jewish-Lithuanian retrospection of history. "Foreign languages were decisive for my destiny," she once said. Veisaitė, who speaks German, Lithuanian, Russian, English, and Yiddish very well and also Polish, French, and Estonian, is an impressive example of multilingualism. Irena Veisaitė is being honoured with the Goethe Medal for her life's work as a driving force in German-Lithuanian cultural dialogue, her creativity, and her political courage to address even uncomfortable themes.

Irena Veisaitė was born in Kaunas in 1928. She is among the few Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Irena Veisaitė was raised a Lithuanian patriot. Yiddish was the language of her primary school and at home with her parents she spoke Lithuanian, Russian, and German. But, her school years would be only brief for Irena Veisaitė. After Lithuania was occupied by the Nazis in June of 1941, she was sent to the ghetto of Kaunas. Her mother was murdered in July of 1941. In 1943 she was able to flee from the ghetto and survived in Vilnius, where she lived under a false identity and worked in an orphanage. She was given shelter by her second mother, who was arrested in 1946 and deported to Siberia. The second Soviet occupation meant liberation for Irena Veisaitė, but she was also hounded by the Soviet security police. She was advised to flee from Vilnius, so she went to Moscow, where she had relatives, and studied German. In 1963, she completed her studies in Leningrad with a dissertation on the late poetry of Heinrich Heine. From 1953 until 1997 she was a lecturer at the Vilnius Pedagogical Institute, where she taught the history of Western European and German literature. Irena Veisaitė was 62 years old when Lithuania regained its independence in 1990. In 1999, she was conferred with an honorary professorship by the Vilnius Pedagogical University. She has published over 200 articles in the Lithuanian and international press, is the co-author of many textbooks, and the editor of a number of books. In the re-established Lithuanian state, Irena Veisaitė took up the task of founding and expanding the Lithuanian branch of the Soros Foundation (Open Society Institute). Today, she is still active in international cultural networks for the Soros Foundation as well as for other institutions and is a welcomed speaker at international academic and political conferences.

Veisaitė was also the director of the Thomas Mann Cultural Centre in Nidden and until 2011 a curatorial member of the Thomas Mann Festival, in which she is still actively involved. Irena Veisaitė lives in Vilnius.

Quotes by Irena Veisaitė

“In the Soviet era, foreign languages were our window to Europe and the rest of the world. We could read books that had not been translated. Thanks to my language skills, I had something to contrast the primitive Soviet ideology and grasped how complicated the world and human beings are composed. I was therefore also able to not think in terms of stereotypes. Moreover, it was also very important for me to be able to communicate with many of the most interesting people in different countries. After Lithuania declared its independence, I was able to immediately incorporate myself in positive work, leave my forced isolation, and contribute to the revitalization of the international contacts of our nation.” (In an interview on multilingualism, Goethe-Institut Vilnius, September 2010)

Irena Veisaitė on Lithuania:

“I love this country.” (ORF, 2009)

Irena Veisaitė quotes the three commandments her mother gave her from hospital: “Always be self-sufficient, neither beg nor complain, always align yourself to your own possibilities,” “Always live with the truth, do not lie, and do not betray others,” and “Never, especially for personal reasons, take revenge.” (ORF, 2009)

“The Nazis physically annihilated the Jews in Lithuania, and then the Soviets culturally annihilated the few survivors. Today, life together among Lithuanians and Jews may not be without tensions, but policies are aimed at compromise.” (*Südostbayerische Rundschau*, 2009)

Irena Veisaitė on what she learned from the experience of the Holocaust: “To understand others and not compare suffering; to never think that suffering confers on one any sort of privilege; to never judge a people for something individuals have done; to forgive in order to go on living, even if it is not easy.” (ORF, 2009)

“I recommend that the young generation learn languages, and very intensively. Even today they are an enrichment of our lives that enable us to be in contact with the outside world, and prevent us from thinking in terms of stereotypes. But, of course, one must not forget one’s native language.” (In an interview on multilingualism, Goethe-Institut Vilnius, September 2010)

“In the collective memory of the Lithuanian nation there was no Holocaust.” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 2003)

Quotes about Irena Veisaitė (all for her 80th birthday)

“Dear Irena, among the contemporary names in Vilnius, you are one of the most important – and not only for me.”

(Prof. Tomas Venclova, poet, writer, and translator)

“It like it that Irena tells those who ask for help that she can give them only the fishing-rod, but one should never hope to also be given the fish. I think that not a few of us have been given this fishing-rod.”

(Arūnas Šikšta, Director-General of the telecommunications firm Teo)

“When one speaks about Irena, it is important that one remembers the genuine meaning of some words that are increasingly disappearing from our memories: forgive, give, share, do not betray, thank, support, be happy together, get to know one another, come to reason, bring together, homeland, values. The words are very important to Irena. They have accompanied her all her life and support her at the same time. They give her life meaning and even shape.”

(Vytautas Toleikis, Director of the Lithuanian National Committee of United World College)

Bibliography

Dramen der DDR, edited by Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius: Vaga, 1982, 444 pages, contains Lithuanian translations of works such as *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, Bertolt Brecht. *Amphitryon*, Peter Hacks. *Die Schlacht*, Heiner Müller

Bertolt Brecht: Mutter Courage und weitere Stücke, edited and with a preface by Irena Veisaitė

Irena Veisaitė-Kromanova (ed.): *Lavastaja Grigori Kromanov. Mālestused, artiklid, kirjad, päevikud*. Tallinn 1995

As co-author:

The Shoah (Holocaust) in Lithuania, edited by Joseph Levinson; The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum. Vilnius: Vaga, 2006 (Vilnius: Vilniaus spauda), 527 pages

The case of the massacre of the Lithuanian Jews: A collection of documents and articles, Vilnius University; edited by Alfonsas Eidintas. Vilnius: Vaga, 2001 (Vilnius: Vilspa), 823 pages

Reconciliation, with a preface by Irena Veisaitė; edited by Živilė Šlekytė-Stanton. Chelbury: Elena Gaputytė Trust, 2002, 52 pages

Kazimieras Kuzavinis – Sprachwissenschaftler und Pädagoge, edited by Gražina Akelaitienė, Liuda Kadžytė-Kuzavinienė. Vilnius: Vilniaus pedagoginio universiteto leidykla, 2009, 239 pages

Der Lituanist Albertas Zalatorius: Literaturwissenschaftler, Kritiker, Pädagoge, Kulturwissenschaftler, edited by Vytautas Martinkus, Eglė Zalatoriūtė. Klaipėda: Eglės leidykla, 2007, 332 pages

Awards

1995 Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas, fourth class (Lithuanian Presidential Award)

2002 Person of Tolerance Award by the Sugihara Foundation "Diplomats for Life" (Vilnius)

2006 Barbara Radvilaitė Medal for Special Merits in Culture and Education

2008 Award of Honour from the Lithuanian Educational Ministry