

Goethe Medal 2012

Laudatory speech for Irena Veisaitė by Aleida Assmann

- Check against delivery -

Biography and historical background

In 1928, the fates dealt anyone born Jewish in Kaunas, then the capital of Lithuania, the bitterest lot of the 20th century. Irena Veisaitė grew up in a time that would soon be characterized by ostracism, brutality and annihilation. The first disaster in the life of the ten-year-old was, however, her parent's divorce in 1938. Her father moved to Belgium and the daughter lived from then on with her mother. After the beginning of the Second World War, Lithuania, only recently liberated, became the setting of alternating military occupations. After a brief initial phase under Soviet control, which led to fierce resistance and the merciless persecution of the Lithuanian population, the German Wehrmacht seized Lithuania in 1941. In 1944, the tables once again turned when the German troops began to flee to the west and Soviet occupation was reinstated, a phase that would last until the year 1990. The National Socialists replaced Communism's ideology of salvation with their racist-motivated anti-Semitism and, with support from the collaborating Lithuanian government, launched systematic persecution of Jews. Ninety-five percent of Lithuania's Jewish population were slaughtered in mass executions in the surrounding forests and within a few months, the blossoming culture of the 'Jerusalem of the North,' as Vilnius had been proudly named, was destroyed. This left behind a landscape of hidden, secret mass graves.

In July 1941, the month of the German invasion, Irena's mother was taken from the hospital in which she worked to a prison where she was murdered. A month later her daughter was sent to the ghetto of Kaunas. She remained in contact with a Lithuanian family that smuggled her out of the ghetto in 1942 and put her up. Because of her excellent Lithuanian pronunciation, she could pass as a Lithuanian girl. Following the exchange of power, she experienced the second dictatorship of Soviet repression. Her second foster mother, who she had to visit in prison after her retention in 1946, was, like many other Lithuanians, sent to Siberia. Irena made outstanding progress in school, arousing the interest of the intelligence service, which attempted to recruit her as an informer. She escaped these reprisals by moving to Moscow and Leningrad, where she studied German and wrote her doctoral thesis on Heine's late poetry. She taught literature at the Vilnius Pedagogical

Institute until 1997. Her love of German literature, in particular of Goethe, Heine, Brecht and Thomas Mann, accompanied and shaped her throughout her life.

Lithuania's independence initiated a new era for Irena Veisaitė. The Lithuanians were the first to break free of the Communist union of states, a self-liberation that, unlike the GDR, it paid for with bloody sacrifices. In 1990, at the age of 62, a new career began for the theatre scholar. Until 2000, she was director of the Soros Foundation, which financially supported the process of democratization in a number of eastern European states with generous donations. No more suitable person could have been found for the task of Lithuanian cultural ambassador. Her impartial humanity and honesty opened up many doors and hearts to her.

Person of Tolerance

For this work, which she carried out in very close ties with the Goethe-Institut, she has received a number of honours and medals. The most fitting of these public tributes is the title 'Person of Tolerance,' which she was awarded in 2002. This phrase very well describes the dual personality of Irena Veisaitė, a Jew and Lithuanian, who lived through the shift of two dictatorships and the dual experience of persecution and salvation. Perhaps this is why she has the unique ability to always see both sides of a conflict and to mediate between political opponents. She thinks nothing much of one-sided remembrances, sweeping judgements and resentful hatred, nor of self-heroizing and self-righteousness. As a Holocaust survivor she shares the conviction of her friend Zygmunt Bauman that a dark chord can be struck in every person to make them susceptible to fanaticism and wrongdoing. One sentence by Irena Veisaitė impressed me deeply: *Few are needed to kill many, but many are needed to save a few*. Gratitude is a central trait of Irena Veisaitė and the basis of her optimism. After all the suffering, crimes and repressions of history, she is happy about the freedom of her country. However, she is not merely a patriotic Lithuanian, but most of all a committed European who, as a thoughtful citizen, continually advocates the social and cultural opening of her country.

She has special talents for her cultural policy involvement: besides her impartiality towards others, also intellectual curiosity, profound literary knowledge, a positive attitude attuned to understanding and, not least, the great gift of the many languages she speaks, which also opened her windows into other cultures during times of isolation: Lithuanian, Russian,

German, Yiddish, English, Polish, French, not to forget the language of her deceased husband, Estonian. She speaks English with her grandchildren in London.

On a Saturday morning this June, I had the great fortune to accompany Irena on a tour of the cemeteries of Vilnius along with one of her grandchildren. We strolled under the old trees of the Peace Park established by Germans, where a heroic monument from the First World War still stands. We were in another cemetery where the heart of the Polish freedom hero Pilsudski is buried, drawing busloads of Polish tourists every day, and we also visited the heroic gravesites of the Seventeen Martyrs of 13 January 1991 in the large Lithuanian cemetery. Irena Veisaitė was truly at home in the artist colony of this cemetery, where the intellectuals and dissidents are gathered. She knew everyone there and had a touching and thrilling story to tell of each of her friends. All of them told of the devotedness, esteem and thankfulness that still tie her to these people. However, she by no means lives in the past with the dead, as her close and confidential exchange that morning with her grandson demonstrated to me, in whose world she took intense interest and was well familiar with. That morning, I learned what re-staged history and embodied past are and how both can be combined with a vivacious interest in the present and curiosity for the future.