

GOETHE MEDAL 2016
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY
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- Check against delivery -

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Dear Sabine Stöhr,

On the occasion of my grateful acceptance of this award, created under the symbolic patronage of the great poet, scholar and – as precarious as it sounds today – great European Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, I have decided to fall back on one of my essays published in the anthology *Engel und Dämonen der Peripherie* and so to let you hear some fragments of that text.

OH, UMLAUT

German was taught to us earlier than Russian. For Russian, the *lingua franca of the peoples of the USSR*, was not on the curriculum until grade two, but German right from grade one. In that first year, though, we did not learn to read or write, but only pronunciation, and less actual words than individual sounds. I remember how our teacher had us practice an “ich” fifty times in succession (pucker the lips into a smile, the tip of the tongue extends to the lower lip, but without touching it), or, say, all of those “glühen” and “blühen.” Yes, the most difficult were the umlauts. The lips had to be specially trained for each of them. When you are seven years old, you cannot understand what such phonetic torture is supposed to be good for. Maybe it was not the Germans who thought them up, but our teacher? Maybe there is no such language in reality? Maybe it’s all just gymnastics for the lips, tongue and palate? But then why does the teacher make us keep repeating “Goethe, Goethe, Goethe”? Altogether and individually, the same thing every day: “Goethe, Goethe, Goethe”?

It was not until later that we found out about him when we learned to read and write German surrounded by his portraits. The same antiquated gentleman, I believe with a medal on his chest, looked at us keenly and searchingly from the walls of the classroom, from the schoolbooks and the covers of the exercise books. That must be a very important German, indeed, when he is everywhere, we thought. Shortly thereafter, we learned his “Heidenröslein” by heart and the half-page biography on the facing page (to this day I do not know how the authors of the textbook managed to be so brief!) informed us that the most important life’s work of this very Goethe is the tragedy Faust.

In late summer, the time of the herbaria began. Actually we were supposed to collect the leaves throughout the whole summer so that they would look dry enough by September. That was our Botany homework over the summer holiday. I put it off, like all normal pupils,

until the end of August. Then the same thing as always happened – probably even always on his, Goethe's, birthday: My father, who was a forester, poured a whole bag of fragrant green onto the table in front of me. It was like a bad botanical joke to cover me up to my head in these leaves in which I would not find my way. Perhaps it was the Erlkönig himself who mocked me in this way, the hero of that fearsome ballad that I knew from the rehearsals of the boys' choir? And thus, the presence of the inconsolable father in my story is anything but a coincidence: My son, why cover your face in such fear?

My father was the first person in the world to show me a ginkgo tree. It impressed me deeply that it might still remember the dinosaurs and that it came from China. But most of all, this word, the word as such: ginkgo!

What I'm trying to say is that poetry, after a poet has brought it into the world, never disappears from it. Yet we cannot always recognise it, because once spoken, it ceases to be just words, it is realised in things, gestures, situations and so-called coincidences. It's like those metamorphoses of plants described by Goethe himself: seed, seedling, rampant growth.

What I'm trying to say is that we give back poetry as an echo, but often we do not know it ourselves. It suffices to think of that curious Ukrainian school at the end of the thaw and the 1960s, grade one, the little seven-year-old Ukrainians, the extreme exertion of their facial expressions ("act as if you want to blow smoke rings," the teacher advises us, not quite appropriately), and our lips purse so that exactly what is required emerges from them: an un-Slavic, strange sound in the middle of a great, foreign name: Goethe, Goethe, Goethe...

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That was the translation of my essay by Sabine Stöhr.

In closing, I would like to read that poem, "Gingko biloba," to you in my own translation. Today, allow it to resound in this hall in Ukrainian.

Цей листок, цей пагін Сходу,

Що в саду моїм живе,

Нам таємну дав нагоду

Осягти знання нове.

Поділилось, розладналось

Щось одне в істоті цій?

А чи двоє поєдналось

Так, що бачиш дві в одній?

Щоб на правду відповісти,

Чи почуєш, як з глибин

Я співаю – теж двоїстий,

Я двоїстий, та один?