

FLAMING IGNORANCE

Speech of GINO LEINEWEBER on the commemoration of the event of the book burning on the 10th of May 1993. The commemoration was organized by Hamburg Writers' Association and VS Association of Writers in 2010.

451 Fahrenheit is the temperature at which paper starts burning and books catch fire. *Fahrenheit 451* is also the title of a novel by an American writer Ray Bradbury. In the novel Bradbury gives a picture of the book banning society. He describes how one of the institutions, disguised under the image of fire brigade, marches out to find the banned books, to burn them and arrest the owners of the books. In the novel, the public is pictured as being kept away from any information that might prevent this deed, from anything that might prevent destroying literature with differing points of view and depths of unfamiliar worlds.

For those who are determined to turn their point of view into the unquestionable and total collective truth, the role of a book--as broadening horizon of a reader-- is a horror.

Thus, in all historical times there had been censorship cases--this unbearable situation for any author when he or she is demanded to remove a part of a story or of a poem under the threat of not being published or, worst, banned forever. An impressive example of how writers feel in societies of oppression, is life of Osip Mandelstam after in one of his opening verses in 1934 he inscribed the famous Stalin's epigram full of criticism towards the dictator:

" We are living, but can't feel the place we live in, / More than ten steps away no one can't hear what we say..."

Without books there is no education. Books stimulate creativity and expand our possibilities of representing the self. The written thought of a poet or a writer might change, secure and enrich our ways of thinking as well as the world we are living in. Those who consider their ideas or ways of thinking as the absolute truth and derive their actions from it, look at a different thinking with suspicion and try, because of their narrow-mindedness, to suppress the difference. But they are naïve to believe they could

control the thinking of others because "thoughts are free...", and not only because the popular folksong says so. Already in the 12th century German poet Walther von der Vogelweide mentioned this idea in his writings. When thoughts are free, the representations are free as well, and censorship cannot do anything.

This counts for books burning as well. In all of these cases the ideas of authors already have life of their own. The purpose of book burning though is not only to prevent thoughts and ideas going public, but to eliminate them. It is believed, that with the burning of the books the ideas would also be burned. Perhaps it is believed that the ideas would be destroyed along with the worlds that had been created, the visions, the pictures of misery and suffering, of happiness and wealth. This is shortsightedness.

Today we are remembering the book burning which was initiated and planned in advance by the "brown rulers" around Hitler. The act was framed with the motto "action against the non-German spirit," and carried out willingly by German professors and students. They took from libraries everything that disagreed with the thoughts of the Nazis, hence what was non-German, and enthusiastically threw it to flames... Flaming ignorance of a group of people who were "chosen" to know something better than the rest. But this--without denying the unique kind of incident in Germany--was neither the first, nor the last book burning in the history. That could be proved by the following short list of events with no intention to expand it now:

In the fourth century the non-Christian magic literature was burned. In 1242 there were burnings of Talmud in Paris, and along with it Jewish books in France, England, Portugal, and Spain were confiscated and destroyed. In 1415 the works of the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus were burned, and in the end of the 15th century there were book-burnings in Florence, including Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and all the works of Ovid. In 1501 a papal bull was arranged to burn all writings that were "hostile" to Pope, and in 1561 in Yucatan all texts of the Mayans were put on fire for similar reason. In 1650 the incineration of religious writings was established in Boston--a long tradition of books burning in the U.S., and in 1793 in France Robespierre had ordered burning all religious writings and books about the French kings.

The leading role in this list takes an American, Anthony Comstock, who lived from 1844-1915 and believed to be a devoted Puritan. He had burned about 120 tons of books. The "New York Society for the Suppression of Vice" founded by him in 1873 after

his death “added” to fire another 80 tons of literature by such authors as John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway. In the early days of the World War I, in a retaliatory action against the attack of German troops, the Library of the Catholic University of Leuven and its irreplaceable medieval manuscripts were burned. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, in several Federal States, singing patriotic songs, the German books were randomly picked from the bookshelves and passed to flames. In 1953, the U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy during his communist subversion agitation in the United States, ordered the confiscation and partial incineration of incriminated literature from the libraries of the United States Information Agency. One of the causes of the Civil War in Sri Lanka in 1981, was burning more than 97,000 books of the Tamil Jaffna Public Library.

Even individual books have been burned:

Augusto Pinochet in 1986 has burned approximately 15,000 copies of the dissident book *Clandestine in Chile* by Gabriel García Márquez. Two years later, Muslims burned Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. In 2001, in Pittsburgh, during a "books burning-church service" J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* was burned as a work of magic literature. In the same year, in Indonesia Khalil Gibran's poetry book *The Prophet*. And, of course, the Bible has been burned, for example, recently, in 2002, in Tbilisi, Georgia, before TV camera, tens of thousands of Protestant Bibles. Funny (if not sad) seems the edict of a Turkish district administrator on the 30 March, 2005, when in the southern Turkish province of Isparta all books by the future Nobel price winner Orhan Pamuk were ordered to be removed from public libraries. However, the book burning had to be “canceled” because in the bookshelves there was not even a single volume of the author left. They didn't find it there.

Perhaps the incendiaries believe that destroying books they do not jeopardize their power and their claims to a world, which they seem to design according to their own perspective. They insult the writers and intellectuals and call their books blasphemous, heretical, immoral, mutinous, or, for example, non-German, as in the incident for which we are gathered here today. The books burning on the 10th May, 1933, was one of the many crimes the Nazis committed, and perhaps not the worst. But it symbolized the shortsightedness of those who did it in order to abuse cultural history

and make the German people to believe that they, in truth, are different kind of people, some valuable and some useless, and as a result this books-burning contributed a lot to the Holocaust. Therefore the actions of the followers of Hitler, especially of the "German students," cannot be considered simply as shortsighted actions, but, most importantly, they have to be viewed as a dangerous signal for destruction of different worldviews and the people behind them.

In this action on the 10 May, 1933, we can see clearly that the spirit which ignited the flame against the literature, did not only harm the literature, but also areas far beyond it. The book burning of 1933 is nearly forgotten. And the most unknown thing is that the book burning was integrated in the program "Action against the non-German spirit"--a several weeks' campaign which started with an innovation of humanities in order to make the emerging Nazi dictatorship more effective. Therefore it is important to call attention to this event again and again. An event that, despite the number of similar ones, has no adequate in its effects.

In Ray Bradbury's novel, the clandestine book-lovers provide for the failure of the dictatorship. Love to literature, to philosophy and to wisdom prevails, and this is one of our affections, even if it is absent--or it seems to be--from the habits of our everyday life. The truth actually is that the thoughts are free, and the burning of books doesn't change it. May no one suffer anymore from authorities that ignore this truth.