

## **OPENING CEREMONY SPEECH**

**WALLY DE DONCKER**

**36<sup>TH</sup> IBBY INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS**

**ATHENS, 30 AUGUST 2018**

**9:45-10:15**

Dear friends,

It's my great pleasure to welcome you all to the 36th IBBY Congress. As you know, we were compelled by circumstances to move the congress from Istanbul to Athens. I would like to extend my genuine thanks to our IBBY members in Turkey for their dedication, perseverance, and goodwill.

I would also like to take this opportunity to deeply and sincerely thank IBBY Greece. Vassiliki and her courageous and hard working organizing committee took on the nearly impossible task of preparing this congress in less than two years. This was a bold undertaking, and IBBY Greece deserves an Olympic medal for their achievement. Congratulations on behalf of the entire IBBY community!

Forty-two years ago, in 1976, Athens played host to the 15<sup>th</sup> IBBY International Congress. The theme at that time was 'How Can Children's Literature Meet the Needs of Modern Children: Fairy Tale and Poetry Today' During the opening ceremony, the Greek Minister of Civilization and Sciences, Constantine Trypani warned that radio and television formed a serious threat to both books and reading. Despite his foreboding, children's and young adult literature is still alive and well, and has come through with flying colours.

The theme for 2018 is 'East Meets West around Children's Books and Fairy Tales'. Athens and Istanbul lie at the crossroads between East and West, where the continents of Europe and Asia meet. From ancient times, this intersection has served as a hub, and both continents have been enriched by the trade in spices and goods as well as by the exchange of ideas on science and philosophy. It has also been the scene of clashes between cultures and religions.

Because of the wars in Syria and Afghanistan, large streams of refugees

are fleeing their homelands. This has put the political systems in Europe and the Middle East under enormous pressure. During the international IBBY Congress in Auckland, in August 2016, the national sections of IBBY addressed the question of refugee children and their access to books in the context of the current refugee crisis. With its projects for refugees, IBBY sets a good example of how refugees should always be welcomed and treated humanely, with children receiving top priority. We are all responsible for our fellow human beings. No, we cannot allow children to die at sea. No, we cannot put children behind bars because they had to flee their countries. No, we cannot allow children to live in the miserable hell that is war. No, we cannot discriminate against children based on their gender or where they come from. Children must be treated with respect. Full stop.

I only have to look back at the history of my own country. During the First World War, tens of thousands of Belgians fled to the Netherlands and England. At the start of the Second World War, my own relatives were among those who fled to France. In spite of the difficult conditions, they were welcomed and looked after. And yet it seems that many have already forgotten this recent history. We must give refugee children a warm and friendly welcome. We must welcome all children and provide them with every opportunity, no matter where they're from. Every child has the right to the best a society has to offer. A different culture or a different language cannot be allowed to be a barrier to this – on the contrary. I would like to tell you about Artur, a six-year-old Armenian boy. I was teaching the first year of school at the time, and Artur – who spoke almost no Dutch – entered my classroom looking rather ill at ease. He has now become a well-known photographer and is travelling a new path, that of a visual artist. During interviews Artur always stresses how very grateful he is for the warm reception he received in his new country. This is something we can be proud of. Refugee children like Artur make our society richer. Many of the players on the football teams of both Belgium and France, the world champion, arrived in those countries as refugee children, and are now cheered on by the majority of the population. IBBY members also welcome children with friendliness and humanity, on the Italian island of Lampedusa, on the Mexican-US border, in Lebanon, in Sweden, in Greece, in Canada, and beyond.

I am very pleased that during the congress more than 180 speakers will take a closer look at how children's literature can play an active part in the tensions between sameness and diversity, the local and the global, and the national and transnational. In many countries there is an urgent need for reading promotion projects that welcome refugee children in the most

helpful way. I am looking forward to hear about these worldwide projects.

In the book *Twenty Years of IBBY*, Jella Lepman wrote that ‘Children’s books should be free of radicalism and carry the message of true tolerance.’ There are still children’s books being published that promote ultra-nationalism and racism, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly. We are seeing more and more children’s books being published that meet with praise from neo-Nazi parents and extremists. Some of the big book chains prohibit the selling of products and children’s books by hate groups based on ideologies that promote or glorify hatred, violence, one-sided nationalism, racial, sexual, or religious intolerance. We know this doesn’t always reflect reality, and they must also keep hate groups from using their platforms. IBBY continues to promote tolerance and humanity, which has been at the core of our mission since the beginning. Anything that deviates from this is unacceptable.

I am pleased to see that attention for Jella Lepman’s work continues to grow. In recent years, *A Bridge of Children’s Books* has been translated into Spanish, Chinese, and Italian. This also speaks well of IBBY and the International Youth Library.

IBBY is a wonderful organization made up of people who want to become active members of society and work for a better world. This has been my experience wherever I’ve been invited.

Unfortunately, I won’t have enough time to list all of the wonderful moments I’ve had with IBBY, but I’d like to name a few: The memorable exuberance and energy of the IBBY International Congress in Mexico in 2014; the establishment of the Andersen Hall on Nami Island and the inauguration of the Republic of Tamnara on Jeju Island in South Korea; opening of the wonderful exhibition in Taipei to celebrate 50 years of the IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustration; the Maori welcome ceremony at the IBBY International Congress in Auckland in 2016, which was unforgettable for everyone; I was very pleased with the warm welcome from the audiences at my guest lectures in Roehampton, Dublin, Paris, and The Hague. the uplifting visits to Bangkok, Beijing, Dublin, Moscow, Putrajaya, Riga, Seattle, Shanghai, Tokyo; and, the intense and also extremely enjoyable annual working visits to the IBBY office in Basel.

IBBY International is frequently called upon to attend the ceremonies for the major children's and young adult literature awards, including the BIB Awards, the Bologna Ragazzi Awards, and the Chen Bochui Children's Literature Awards. This can be seen as a feather in IBBY's cap, and an acknowledgement of the important role it plays within this literary world.

Shortly after my IBBY presidency began, my wife was diagnosed with a terrible disease. What was a high point in my career coincided with a deep low point in my personal life. I won't deny that it was, and is, sometimes difficult, but the support and understanding of the IBBY community around the world have helped me. IBBY is an organization with a heart. There were many memorable moments, moments in which we sang, and laughed, and were also moved. It was a true gift and a privilege to be allowed to support and help to lead an organization like IBBY.

I won't deny that I also met with some difficult challenges during my time as president: enthusiasm and passion for IBBY has sometimes resulted in lively debates. This was how it was in Jella Lepman's time, and it's certainly no different today. However, the debates always ended in decisions that were in the best interest of IBBY and its mission. IBBY is part of the wider world, and as a result we also ride the waves of world events. Certain world leaders are even endangering our mission. Sowing the seeds of division among peoples and building walls are certainly not – and never will be – our aim. During many IBBY Congress, whether it is a regional congress or the biennial international congress, there are IBBY members who are unable to attend because of unfriendly diplomatic situations existing between their countries. This is incomprehensible. People who want to help build a better world, no matter which country they're from, should never be turned away.

One of the goals I had for my IBBY presidency was to build stronger working relationships with other world players. An example of this is the inclusion of the Rights of the Child in the new Memorandum of Understanding between ILA, IFLA, and IBBY. In the near future, a new MoU will also be signed with the IPA (International Publishers Association) that also includes the rights of the child. IBBY has a good working relationship with the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award – the ALMA. Astrid Lindgren attended IBBY's founding meeting and supported IBBY's mission along with her publisher Hans Raben, who was IBBY's second president. IBBY and ALMA promote quality work by authors, illustrators, and reading promoters worldwide.

Within IBBY we are delighted that our working relationships with major international book fairs have grown stronger in recent years. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the book fair organizers in Bologna, Frankfurt and Shanghai.

IBBY has also received requests from a considerable number of organizations asking us to collaborate. This underlines IBBY's importance and also the respect it enjoys within the international book world. Still, we should proceed with caution, and approach any potential collaboration with a critical eye to make sure that our IBBY objectives remain intact. At the same time, it is also important for IBBY to continue to keep children, especially those in crisis situations, in mind.

Through social media, our mission has become even more widely known, and receives broad attention from the national and international press. At every national and regional IBBY conference, I have seen an increase in both the numbers of journalists present, and the degree of their interest. IBBY does a great deal of work, also behind the scenes. At the same time, we have to be bold enough to be proud of our achievements. An article on the international news site InfoMigrants on 2 October 2017 contained the following description of IBBY's work on Lampedusa: 'The IBBY library will offer refugee children the right to have access to information and literature and has a symbolic value, turning on a light for the whole world from the centre of the Mediterranean.' This is a powerful acknowledgement of the work IBBY members do.

After this congress I will concentrate on my writing once again, and on all of the related projects. I won't be getting bored, because I have plenty of work waiting for me. I'm going to try to experience IBBY from a different perspective. In November I'll take part in the IBBY Camp on Lampedusa, and I'm already very much looking forward to this.

And... I'll say it once again: Only the best is good enough for children.

Thank you so much for everything!

*Wally De Doncker, 22 August 2018*