

USBBY REGIONAL CONFERENCE (16-18 October 2015)
LÉMAN MANHATTAN PREPARATORY SCHOOL, NEW YORK CITY
SPEECH IBBY PRESIDENT WALLY DE DONCKER

Dear friends

It is an honour to address you here today. In 1919, my grandfather and some of his brothers migrated to East-Moline in Illinois to start working in the factories of John Deere. He told me a lot of stories about it. Two years later, he returned to Belgium to persuade the love of his life, my grandmother, to move to America. However, my grandmother refused to move and so my grandfather didn't return to East-Moline. In hindsight, he made the right choice. They loved each other to bits.

During my childhood, Flanders was inundated by American culture. TV-shows such as *The Flintstones*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Donald Duck*, Walt Disney productions and even *Comedy Capers* were aired daily. I devoured books during my childhood and read dozens of American novels that were translated into Dutch: novels based on TV-shows such as *Zorro*, but also *The Hardy Boys*, *Winnetou* and countless comic books. Too many to sum up... Most European children looked up to the acclaimed Americans who had freed Europe from two terrible World Wars – Belgium was the battlefield – and who had been able to land on the moon. Not just children revered the Americans, adults also indulged in the U.S. frenzy. We installed American kitchens and my mother wore, like many other Belgian women, a golden necklace with the image of President Kennedy. He was considered somewhat of a saint back then.

But the belief in American culture began to fade when we were able to follow the daily war reports from Vietnam. Slowly, it became clear that the applauded President Kennedy also had a darker side.

You might be wondering what this personal introduction has to do with IBBY! Well, much more than you might expect.

The years in which IBBY was founded are very much related to America and it was Jella Lepman who played a big role in this relationship.

Just before World War II IBBY's founder Jella Lepman had seen the books of Erich Kästner and others thrown onto bonfires – books and reading were dangerous.

Lepman, born in 1891 as the daughter of a Jewish clothing manufacturer in Stuttgart, fled to Great Britain in 1935. When she returned to her native land in 1945, she did so in the uniform of the U.S. Army Advisor for Women's and Youth Affairs.

She was a woman of astute political views who aggressively sought out scarce material resources to realize her vision of an International Children's Book Exhibition. She was determined that these books should serve both as a model for possible future publication in Germany, and as a sobering reminder of how much Germany had isolated itself under Hitler. The success of this endeavour encouraged her to turn the temporary traveling exhibition into a permanent library. For this, however, she needed financial support.

Lepman's resolute personality intersected with the nascent political and philanthropic post-war agenda of the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1947, the New York-based foundation

announced its ambitious *Program for European Recovery* to assist the reconstruction of West European universities and research institutions devastated by the war.

Lepman successfully tapped into the Foundation's resources and received a travel grant to go to the United States to raise money and materials for her project to establish an international library.

The International Youth Library was established in 1949 and was admired by Germans and Americans alike, from author Erich Kastner and the German Federal President Theodor Heuss to Eleanor Roosevelt, and was praised by its patrons at the Rockefeller Foundation as one of their most significant contributions to West German reorientation and world peace. The Rockefeller Foundation's support of the International Youth Library represented a unique moment in its own history when it extended its mandate beyond the patronage of pure scholarly and scientific research. For her part, Jella Lepman never allowed the Foundation to dictate her actions. Instead, she adapted and rejected, reshaped and manipulated her patron's attempts to influence her cause.

After the founding of the IYL, IBBY soon followed and since its creation in 1953 IBBY has steadily grown. As you all know, it has not always been easy to find funding. Still, the initiatives kept on coming and IBBY evolved into what it is today – 77 national sections all over the world. It represents countries with well-developed book publishing and literacy programmes, and other countries with only a few dedicated professionals who are doing pioneer work in children's book publishing and promotion.

IBBY has accomplished a lot over the years. But we still have to work very hard, because I am rather worried about what the future may bring.

One of our objectives is battling illiteracy. IBBY takes this battle further than most other NGO's who are concerned with the promotion of learning to read. IBBY wants to promote a reading culture and give every child the opportunity to become a life-long reader and this is only possible if the child enjoys reading.

As a world organization, we have to keep arguing that reading is a basic right for everyone. To be able to read, good materials, such as poetry books, novels, picture books, have to be available to all children. Recently, a librarian told me that we are creating a new elite, by which he meant that children who enjoy reading could do so because their parents have the means to buy books. IBBY must continue to advocate for all children to have the right to great literature; this includes children from underprivileged families, immigrant children, refugees, disabled children and sick children. Those who cannot (or may not) read are excluded. As the cornerstone of development, literacy unlocks human potential. It leads to better health, better employment opportunities and safer and more stable societies. In short, literacy matters – to children, adults and nations.

To Jella Lepman, the most important mission of IBBY was the promotion of mutual understanding between nations through good literature for children. In a globalized world, this should be self-evident. There are a few signs that tell us that we are succeeding in this mission as nations start to work together on economic, environmental, emigrational and cultural levels. However, there are also many countries torn apart by conflict.

I would like to thank the people of USBBY for their extraordinary efforts within IBBY. Fellow speakers always advise against calling out names, because you are sure to forget someone. However, this time I would like to put Ellis Vance in the spotlight. Ellis has served on the IBBY

Executive Committee since 2006 and was appointed treasurer of IBBY International in 2008 and I would like to thank him for his motivated and heart-warming dedication to IBBY.

Twinning is a concept promoted by IBBY that signifies a special mutually beneficial relationship between two national sections. Currently, USBBY has such twinning partnerships with the national sections of Haiti, Lebanon, Palestine, South Africa, and Zambia.

During the 2012 IBBY General Assembly in London, the IBBY members approved the introduction of a formal commitment to the principles of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child as ratified by the United Nations in 1990 to the current IBBY Statutes. Because of that action it is our responsibility to uphold these rights.

USBBY is an advocate of children's rights despite the fact that the USA is the only country in the world that has not yet ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (Somalia and Sudan ratified the convention this year). USBBY has started a petition to push through the ratification. However, this proves to be very difficult.

Eleanor Roosevelt has a very strong connection to Jella Lepman. Eleanor Roosevelt was the chairman of the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations, the driving force behind the creation of the Charter of Liberties of 1948, which will forever be her legacy, this became *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Right up to the end of her life, she pleaded for the acceptance and implementation of the rights as described in the Universal Declaration. The legacy of her words and work is traceable in the constitutions of countless countries and in the ever-evolving international law that today protects the rights of men and women all over the world.

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

IBBY protects the rights of the child when needed. When these rights are being violated, we will always choose to protect the child. Political agendas do not impress us when it comes to the rights of children. IBBY Italy gave us an exquisite example when they chose to help the flood of child refugees arriving on the small island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean. The political leaders of Europe had not moved an inch by the time the international community of IBBY rallied around this project.

More recently USBBY, IBBY Mexico, IBBY International, the American Library Association, the Texas Library Association and REFORMA have called on the US Government to care for the thousands of unaccompanied refugee children and families after they cross the Mexican/USA border on their incredible journeys from their war-torn and violent homelands in search of a place to live and grow. Upon their release from the detention facilities we ask the Government to allow them access to appropriate books, to have contact with Spanish-speaking librarians who are trained in bibliotherapy, and to ensure that their well being is monitored as they are processed through the system. Books and reading save lives and give traumatised children a chance to become whole, contributing citizens as they grow up.

But it does not stop here. IBBY takes it up a notch. It is unacceptable that there are countries in this day and age in which girls are banned from reading or even learning to read. It is unacceptable that some countries destroy children's libraries with impunity. It is also unacceptable that many children are unable to read at an adequate level after finishing

primary school. It remains unacceptable that children's libraries are being closed because of financial cutbacks, thus rendering books inaccessible to children from underprivileged families. Every child has the right to read.

Amanda Craig wrote in the British newspaper, *The Independent* on 23 June 2015, that we are now living in a Golden Age of children's literature. The First Golden Age started in the 1850s thanks to the increasing status of children. The Second Golden Age, which fed the imagination of the baby boomers, ran roughly from the 1950s to the 1970s, and is quite different in that it reverberated with a new moral consciousness. This Third Golden Age is ripe with an extraordinary amount of talent. It is an enormous field, and is publishing vastly more books of all kinds. What might once have been called comics are now graphic novels and are treated seriously. iPads have enabled books to become animated, with sound, music, special pop-up features that young children especially love to explore. The creative potential of books in a visual sense is growing all the time. We have never had so much access to so much information, and we have never had so many ways of enjoying it through story. Really, this is an astounding time in which to be a reader!

We must present a front against the increasing commercialization of children's and youth literature. We must refuse to consider young readers as commercial products. We want to cherish them by giving them quality literature and illustrations.

"One of the fascinating things about children's literature is that it's a barometer of the times. You can use it to take the cultural temperature. I can't understand why no-one's been interested in this before!" wrote Rosemary Goring her column in the Scottish newspaper *The Herald Scotland*.

Just like Rosemary Goring, I cannot understand the lack of interest in children's literature. I am often staggered by the fact that some of the leading people in the literary community know so little about children's and youth literature. In my opinion, children's books are the best ambassadors of a country and culture.

A recent UN report states that 775 million people – the population of the whole of Europe – are functionally illiterate. In other words, they lack the basic reading and writing skills to manage daily living and employment tasks. The number of out-of-school children and adolescents is on the rise, standing at 124 million worldwide – while some 250 million children of primary school age are failing to master basic literacy skills even while attending school. These figures really are cause for concern.

The World Literacy Foundation (WLF) has warned that illiteracy is "a worldwide crisis" that will cost the global economy 1.2 trillion dollars this year – 1.2 trillion dollars!

The same Foundation has put forward that a global body should be created to manage resources for international literacy initiatives.

Children's reading skills must be improved at an early age to combat illiteracy.

Well, IBBY has been working on this for more than sixty years. The UN report and the findings of the WLF show that the importance of IBBY will grow in the future.

Thank you for your attention!

Wally De Doncker, 11 September 2015