

Nobel Prize in Literature 1984



Jaroslav Seifert

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1984 was awarded to Jaroslav Seifert *"for his poetry which endowed with freshness, sensuality and rich inventiveness provides a liberating image of the indomitable spirit and versatility of man"*.

Jaroslav Seifert - a Czechoslovakian poet, 83 years young, can look back upon a career of more than 60 years which shows many signs of being likely to continue. With almost thirty volumes of collected poems behind him, and a few excursions into the realm of prose - above all, his recently published memoirs - he stands out today as the leading poet of his own country. He is read and loved by his countrymen, a national poet who knows how to address both those who have a literary education and those who approach his work without much schooling in their baggage.

Jaroslav Seifert comes from a proletarian background. Born in a working-class district in the outskirts of Prague, he has never lost touch with his popular roots or with the impoverished and socially weak people among whom he grew up. As a young man he believed in the socialistic revolution and wrote poems about it and the promise it held out for the future that enthused many of the other young people of his own generation. His poems were clear, apparently simple and artless, with elements of folk song, familiar

speech and scene from everyday life. He rejected the elevated style and formalism of an earlier period. His diction was characterized by lightness of touch, sensuality, melody and rhythm, a lively ingenuity and playfulness alternating with feeling, even pathos. These features of his art have remained constant ever since. He is not, however, a naive artist. He is a poet with an unusually broad stylistic register. At an early stage he came into contact with contemporary European modernism, especially with French poetry, surrealism and dadaism. He is also a sovereign master of traditional forms of poetry with complicated rhythms and rhyme-scheme. He is at much at home with the drastic force of the broadside ballad as with the sophisticated artistry of the sonnet.

The versatility and flexibility of Seifert's continually inventive and surprising style is matched by an equally rich human register on the level of feeling, insight and imagination. Although a social and political commitment was indeed evident in his very first volume - and has remained a constant feature throughout his oeuvre - he has never become a writer with a party programme. His empathy and his sense of solidarity has focused not upon a system of narrow programme but upon human beings - living, loving, feeling, working, creating, fabulating, suffering, laughing, longing - in short, all those who live, happy or unhappy, a life that is an adventure and an experience, but not one of oppression in accordance to a party programme. Human beings are the ones who create society. The state is there for the people and not vice versa. There is an element of anarchy in Seifert's philosophy of life - a protest against everything that cuts down life's possibilities and reduces human beings to cogs in some ideological machine, or yokes them to the harness of some dogma. Perhaps, this sounds innocuous enough to people who themselves have never had to suffer oppression and destitution under political tyranny such as, for example, ourselves here in Sweden. But Seifert has never been innocuous. His poetry, this cornucopia, has also been a political act. Even his juvenile poetry meant a liberation and an adherence to a future that would abolish war, oppression, and would provide joy in life and beauty for those who had hitherto had little thereof. Poetry and art would help to achieve this. His demands and hopes had the confidence and magnificence of youth. During the

1920s these hopes seemed to be on the verge of fulfillment - an avant-garde literature and art accorded with these hopes. But during the 1930s and 1940s the horizon darkened. Economic and political reality proved unable to live up to the rosy dreams. Seifert's poetry acquired new characteristics - a calmer tone, a remembrance of the history and culture of his own country, a defence of national identity and of those who had preserved it, especially the great authors and artists of the past. Even purely personal experiences and memories were touched with melancholy - the transience of life, the inconstancy of emotion, the impermanence of the childhood and youth which had passed, and of the ties of love. Yet all was not melancholia and nostalgia in Seifert's work - far from it. The concreteness and freshness of his perceptions and his images continued to flourish. He wrote some of his most beautiful love lyrics, his popularity increased, and it was at this time that the foundations of his position as a national poet were firmly laid. He was loved as dearly for the astonishing clarity, musicality and sensuality of his poems as for his unembellished but deeply felt identification with his country and its traditions. He had dissociated himself from the communism of his youth and from the anti-intellectual dogmatism it had developed into. Towards the end of the 1930s and during the 1940s, Czechoslovakia fell under the yoke of the Nazis and Jaroslav Seifert committed himself to the defence of his country, its freedom and its past. He eulogized the Prague rebellion of 1945 and the liberation of his country. At the same time he was active as a journalist, writing in newspapers and periodicals.

The immediate post-war period, however, proved to be one of great disappointment to Seifert and his fellow patriots who had hoped for freedom and a bright future. Poets were expected to engage in political propaganda and satisfy the demands of the powers that be, to whitewash the communist state. Poetry of the kind that Jaroslav Seifert wrote was considered to be disloyal, bourgeois and escapist. It was imperative to "educate the masses". Seifert was accused of sinking deeper and deeper into subjectivity and pessimism and of having betrayed his class. But he refused to conform to the slogans of social realism. He hibernated - to return in earnest in connection with the thaw of 1956, and, following a

long period of illness, has continued to work diligently, first and foremost as a poet, but at times also in political manifestations. He has repudiated the Soviet invasion of Prague and he has signed Charta 77. As has already been observed, he is greatly loved and respected in his own country - and has begun to achieve international recognition as well, in spite of the disadvantage of writing in a language that is relatively little known outside his country. His work is translated, and he is regarded as a poet of current interest in spite of his age.

Today, many people think of Jaroslav Seifert as the very incarnation of the Czechoslovakian poet. He represents freedom, zest and creativity, and is looked upon as this generation's bearer of the rich culture and literary traditions of his country. He does this partly because of his uncompromising defence of cultural and literary freedom but mainly because of the special quality of his poetry. His method is to depict and praise those things in life and the world that are not governed by dogmas and dictates, political or otherwise. Through words, he paints a world other than the one various authorities and their henchmen threaten to squeeze dry and leave destitute. He praises a Prague that is blossoming and a spring that lives in the memory, in the hopes or the defiant spirit of people who refuse to conform. He praises love, and is indeed one of the truly great love-poets of our time. Tenderness, sadness, sensuality, humour, desire and all the feelings which love between people engenders and encompasses are the themes of these poems. He praises woman - the young maiden, the student, the anonymous, the old, his mother, his beloved. Woman, for him, is virtually a mythical figure, a goddess who represents all that opposes men's arrogance and hunger for power. Even so, she never becomes an abstract symbol but is alive and present in the poet's fresh and unconventional verbal art. He conjures up for us another world than that of tyranny and desolation - a world that exists both here and now, although it may be hidden from our view and bound in chains, and one that exists in our dreams and our will, and our art and indomitable spirit. His poetry is a kind of maieutics - an act of deliverance.

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