

GOETHE MEDAL 2024

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR ISKRA GESHOSKA

BY BORIS BUDEN

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- Check against delivery -

Since I've known Iskra Geshoska very well for almost thirty years, I can tell you straight away: she doesn't believe that she deserves this honour – the Goethe Medal. And it's not some noble character trait like personal modesty that keeps Iskra from simply accepting the medal, as they say, "with pride and humility." It's something else, something that goes far beyond the personal and individual. Instead of it decorating "me," one person, she wants to share this honour; she wants to dedicate it to "us," a group of persons, or better yet, to a cause. I and my laudatory speech must remain committed to this cause and this group.

When I was invited by the Goethe-Institut to give this speech in Weimar, my first question was: In what language? For here in Weimar I taught almost exclusively in English for ten years at the Bauhaus University. When I was told that I should speak in German, I immediately realised that my speech in praise of Iskra would also be a speech in praise of the German language. It's no wonder. After all, I was a translator from German. What's more, translation is an authentic part of my linguistic and intellectual experience, which has always been an experience of the untranslatable.

There's a German word I never found an equivalent for in any other language; a word that I also absolutely need to make sense of this laudatory speech for Iskra. I've already said it. The word is *Erfahrung*.

To reiterate: The focus of my laudatory speech is not just one person and her achievements; Iskra Geshoska and the extraordinarily important role she has played in the art and cultural scene of North Macedonia for so many years. Rather, my praise is for the *Erfahrung*, the experience she has gained in the process.

As you may know, the word "*Erfahrung*" comes from the verb "*fahren*" ("to travel") and implies knowledge that one has acquired in the course of events and encounters, for example on a journey. "When someone goes on a journey, he can tell a story," Walter Benjamin quotes the vernacular. However, people are just as happy to listen to someone who's stayed at home and knows local stories and traditions, he added. Iskra is the kind of person who stayed at home in Macedonia. But it was the society in which she lived, as well as the culture that she helped to shape and mould, that went on a dramatic journey: from a multi-

ethnic state of Yugoslavia that fell apart in the bloody wars of the 1990s, through the short but violent Macedonian civil war, which the country only just survived, through shocking cultural changes, blatant ideological turnabouts, and forced name changes, to a present that consists only of uncertainty.

What do art or culture stand for under these circumstances? How do you make art in a constantly disintegrating cultural sphere? What is its role in a society that now only exists in its decay? Where do you find money for books, concerts, events, and conferences when a country's economy is far more an abyss than a foundation? And finally, how do you maintain your moral and intellectual integrity? Ernst Bloch said that it is not possible to walk upright if social life itself has gone askew. Iskra, however, managed to walk upright even when the ground was pulled out from under her feet.

How? The answer lies in her experience. In German, one makes one's own experience. In English, *one experiences something*, or in our Slavic *čovjek može nešto iskusiti, biti iskusan*. Both words do not come from "to travel," but from "to try" or "to taste," and have a scientific connotation of experimentation. Moreover, you can't make an *experience* or an *iskustvo* yourself. It is knowledge that life stamps us with and leaves on us. By contrast, you can make an *Erfahrung* yourself, take it from life, so to speak, and, as knowledge generated oneself, imprint it on this life. *Erfahrung* is knowledge that you make yourself in order to pass it on.

She can only be honoured for this *Erfahrung*, which she made herself and gives to us all, in German, which in turn is enriched and educated by it. Incidentally, Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the true purpose of translation, its *telos* so to speak, in its ability to educate the language and spirit of one's own people through the experiences of others.

That is the reason why the Goethe Medal and my praise for Iskra Geshoska go to her experience. She, this experience, and not just the person, is what wants to be taken seriously as valuable, useful knowledge from which one can and should learn. This is not knowledge of the other that seeks to be recognised as part of a foreign identity – say the identity of the Balkans or of history as an endemic disease of "delayed" nations. These two extremely dangerous self-deceptions of Europe – that the Balkans are the Other of Europe and that history remains in the past – should be forgotten once and for all. The time has come to listen carefully to the story that Iskra's experience tells us, the story of – well, what is this country called now? – Makedonia or Macedonia, FYROM (*Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*)? Or, perhaps ultimately, North Macedonia? Names are not so important, as even Horace knew: "*mutato nomine / de te fabula narratur*" or "The name is changed, but the story is about you." About you, Germany, about you, Europe.