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Poet of hope

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Born in 1941, Curman was the President of Swedish Writers Union (1987-1995) and then Chairman of The Swedish Joint Committee for Literary and Artistic Professionals (1996-2006) -- an umbrella organisation for 19 creative unions representing the cultural scene of Sweden. He has also been one of the driving forces behind the literary cruises in the Baltic Sea (1992) and in the Black Sea and the Aegean (1994) that resulted in two dynamic Writers' and Translators' Centres under the auspices of UNESCO on the Sweden island of Gotland and the Greek island of Rhodes.

Curman is also the initiator of the new Swedish digital printing house PODIUM -- an initiative aimed to introduce new technology as a tool to distribute new literature to the readers worldwide. Curman came to Pakistan to receive his award. At this occasion, PAL published the translation of poetry in English, Urdu and Gurmukhi. During his trip to Pakistan Curman also visited Karachi and Lahore and met local intellectuals.

Curman, a leading anti-war poet went to Turkey in January 2003 to participate in a big anti-war demonstration in Istanbul. Curman also does not approve of the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and calls Israel an unnatural state. The poet sat with The News on Sunday (TNS) for an interview in Lahore.



By Zaman Khan

The News on Sunday: Tell us about your family background.

Peter Curman: I have five siblings. My father was a child psychiatrist. I went to school in Stockholm in an ordinary environment. I wrote poetry because I did not succeed in doing anything else. I think some people have to choose between criminality and creativity. Criminality is also some sort of negative creativity. I don't really know how to define it. But I have not done, what we in Sweden say, a real job.

I started in a traditional way, going to a university and doing courses but I never did it in an academic way. But what I did practically was working as a guide with a travel agency and used to go to Greece and Turkey and also learn Greek. I have been a freelance journalist. For a few years, I was also employed as chief editor of a morning and evening newspaper. But I have been

writing most of the time. I have also been working for the Swedish Writers Union. I was chairperson of the union for ten years. Then I was president of a creative union for about ten years. I spent quite some time administrating these things.

TNS: When did you write your first poem?

PC: I think as a teenager, in school, I wrote a love poem for a girl. My poetry always starts from my private experience.

TNS: You have been awarded Quaid-i-Azam Award by Pakistan Academy of Letters. How do you feel?

PC: I am overwhelmed with this decoration. I am very glad that my poems are translated into Urdu, Punjabi and other languages and they understand the spirit of the poet. When you have written a poem you do not own it any more. It is the reader who owns the poem and it is his judgment that the poem is going to live or not. Of course, I feel glad that it is a Pakistani award. It is so different than our situation in Sweden. I am just an ordinary poet in Sweden like other poets. I had fighting and had difficulties with my publishers. So, in that way, it is also a sort of victory.

TNS: There are more than 30,300 members of the Swedish Writers Union. How do you make someone a member?

PC: To become a member of the Writers Union, a candidate should have published at least two books. We have a reading committee that reads the books and makes the judgment.

TNS: The theme of the Writers Union is, "The role of the writer in the area of conflict". How do you define the writers' role?

PC: A writer can discuss issues beyond political borders and conflicts. Perhaps that is a very important role with word as tools to discuss problems. As for other way, we know how destructive it is and it does not lead to any solution when you use weapons. I have also noticed that in all the areas of conflict, there is, at the same time, an enormous need for human presence to discuss, to use words, to understand. All these Writers Union centres have been created in areas where there have been conflicts.

TNS: Do you think that these centres have been productive?

PC: Yes, I think so, because these centres were very productive some fifteen years ago. They still exist and they are very much used. I think you can benefit from the international spirit. Anyone can go there and stay there free. When you are there you can meet writers from six, seven countries. You make friends and you can discuss things.

TNS: Have writers been able to stop war or build peace anywhere in the world?

PC: I don't know if they have been able to stop war. I think we have been very important in making people aware about what is going on. Also, in our region from the Baltic Sea there has been lot of tension after the long Soviet Union's suppression of the Baltic States -- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and so on. The writers started to speak to each other. In the beginning,

everybody kept at a distance because they were forced to read Russian language in schools. So, the Baltic writers refused to speak Russian. They only spoke English and Russians did not understand English. It was their way of paying back aggression. But after a year or two, the situation eased up and they started talking to each other.

TNS: I am told that somebody refused to translate your poetry? What was the reason?

PC: Yes, it was my poem, Bird. I wrote that birds came like black clouds, down the mountains from Kosovo, that they were refugees. They could not stay because they were bombed. This translator got so upset because the Americans said that they have never bombed a bird. They said you can't use a bird as a symbol for refugees who fled because of the American and NATO bombing. I find it very strange but I think that what happened in New York on 9/11 was horrible and the consequences were terrible. In relation, if you read Swedish newspapers, you will feel all Pakistanis are members of al-Qaeda because allegedly Osama bin Laden is somewhere in the region. We must be much clearer what we are talking about.

TNS: After 9/11 has racism grown in West?

PC: Yes, very much -- racism and xenophobia. In a country like Denmark you have a very strong xenophobia against all kinds of Muslims. And I find that very dangerous.

TNS: Switzerland has put a ban on the construction of minarets of mosques.

PC: In Sweden, we have a law which says that all religions should be respected but you don't have minarets in Sweden either, but they have bells in the churches everywhere and this is also some sort of limited freedom. I mean religious expression has its own place in a society. A colonial country like Britain always had all these people and at the same time suppressed them. I don't say we don't have prejudices.

TNS: What do you think is the general opinion about the occupation of Afghanistan or Iraq?

PC: I think many people are against the war and now more people are critical of Britain's involvement. I think we have always been critical of the American way of interfering in other countries.

TNS: Some time ago, you took part in the War Tribunal in Turkey. How was your experience?

PC: It was special because Turkey has been very obedient to the US. They have loans given to them by the US, but suddenly they said that they didn't accept troops marching into Iraq. That was the first time in my life when I thought the Turkish government had shown some guts. We had a meeting in Istanbul. We also went to Ankara. We met parliamentarians. In that connection, I wrote the poem, What a poet can do. We joined many poets from many countries.

TNS: From where did the idea of cruising the Baltic States come to your mind?

PC: I went to East Germany. I attended a European writers' meeting. I was told that they would select the guests. I told them that being the host, it was our

prerogative to invite guests. During my visit, a security man suggested me to have a meeting in the Baltic Sea. This was a time of change. Many things were possible.

TNS: Your four poems: What a poet can do, Jerusalem, Birds, and War are often quoted. Why?

PC: The first one and the last one are interrelated. I wrote these at the time when we participated in the demonstration. And I read it when I was standing on the roof of a bus outside Sofia, a big mosque in Istanbul.

TNS: What was the occasion?

PC: The demonstration was against the war in Iraq. We have our bullets, not from guns but from our pens. We can use our pen as a weapon. Words are also ammunition.

TNS: They are more lethal.

PC: Yes. War is a private affair for me. I have been many times to Jerusalem and each time I must decide if I want to go to Ramallah to see my Palestinian friends or I would like to go to Haifa to see my Israeli friends. When you land in Jerusalem, security officers are very friendly. They ask me why I was going to Ramallah. I say because I have friends there. They said you have friends among terrorists. No, I would say, I am going to see writers. They would say there were no writers in Ramallah. I reply there are a lot of writers in Ramallah.

I think we have to blame ourselves, the Europeans, who arranged this artificial state. The best thing is if one can make an arrangement similar to South Africa. There is a lot of progress there today.

TNS: Do you think writers today are playing their role properly. There is criticism that they are not as active as they used to be in the 1960s and 70s?

PC: Of course, I was disappointed by writers after 9/11. They had to be much stronger to go against the Bush administration. We had the biggest demonstration in Sweden after the invasion of Iraq. But after a while everyone got used to the war. It becomes a way of life. One leader that escaped easily from the whole problem was Tony Blair. He was also responsible for the invasion. I think Tony Blair and George Bush should be taken the International Criminal Court in Hague.

TNS: Any message for Pakistani writers?

PC: They are always welcome to Sweden and we also want to come to them. I think Pakistani writers have much to give us. Our interaction could be very important. We are very happy that many Swedish writers have been invited to a conference in March 2010. I think that can be a new start.

TNS: What role Pakistani and Indian writers can play in bringing peace in the region?

PC: You should ask this question to yourself. I think by making many international alliances, to show that you and we are interconnected. We should interact more in terms of publishing and meeting and find other ways of protesting. That is what we can do.

TNS: Some people think that it was the West, especially the US, which created religious fundamentalism?

PC: There is some truth in that.

A word about letters

By Kazy Javed

Poet of hope

"Poetry is the language of your inner thoughts and your beating heart. It tries to convince before you know it yourself. Poetry is the inner voice in us and a poet somebody that can listen to it and express that voice in a way that we all recognise. That is how we can say that this is true and that is false," said Peter Curman.

Peter Curman has come to Pakistan for the second time. He first came here in 1995 to participate in the International Writers Conference organised by Fakhar Zaman as Chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters. The conference was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto who announced on the occasion two international awards: Quaid-e-Azam international Award for Literature and Quaid-e-Awam Award for Democracy.

The awards, which carry Rs 2 million each, were never announced for political reasons. Now after a gap of 14 long years, the first Quaid-e-Awam International Award for Democracy has been given to Shaheed Benazir Bhutto while Peter Curman has been honoured with the Quaid-e-Azam International Award for Literature. He came to Islamabad to receive the award.

Peter Curman is a Swedish poet with more than a dozen volumes of poetry, literary criticism, anthologies and a novel Meltdown to his credit. His first collection of poetry was published in 1965 under the title Obs! Viktigt! His

poetry has been translated into several languages and has won him international fame. But he is also known for the role he has been playing in international literary politics since long as president of the Swedish Writers Union and chairman of the Swedish Joint Committee for Literary and Artistic Professionals.

The Pakistan Academy of Letters recently published English, Urdu and Punjabi translation of Peter Curman's selected poems in separate volumes. The English translation has been done by Verne Moberg, Jim Potts, Karin Altenberg and Peter Curman himself. The book, titled *The Charioteer in Delphi*, also carries an article of my friend Professor Razi Abedi on Curman's poetry which was originally published in this newspaper on August 19, 2001. The poet Khalid Iqbal Yasir has translated the poems into Urdu while Jamil Pal has rendered them into Punjabi.

In a message read out at the award distribution ceremony in Islamabad, President Asif Ali Zardari described the Swedish poet as a "poet of the generation that has seen so much strife and conflict but is not disillusioned and refuses to give up hope. He believes in constant struggle like Allama Iqbal and is sustained by hope that in itself is the reward and justification for living and striving".

Peter Curman also paid a short visit to Lahore where Fakhar Zaman hosted a lunch for him at his Model Town residence. It was attended by more than fifty writers and journalists including Hamid Akhtar, Razi Abedi, Masood Ashar, Shafqat Tanvir Mirza, Anis Nagi, Asad Mufti who lives in Holland and poet Sarwat Mohyuddin of Islamabad, Afzal Tauseef, Dilshad Tiwana, Tasnim Minto, Atiya Sayyid, Altaf Qureshi, Tauqir Nasir and Dr Anis Alam.

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