

Press release

Warsaw, September 13 2023

**Tomas Venclova, outstanding Lithuanian poet
Receives the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2023**

On September 13th the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2023 was presented at a Gala Ceremony, held at the *Teatr Polski* in Warsaw. This year's recipient was Mr Tomas Venclova, universally regarded as Lithuania's most important poet, who fought for human rights in Lithuania as a dissident during the Soviet era. The PZU Foundation is the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award's strategic partner.

The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award is a distinction on the literary world stage, presented in recognition of outstanding artistic and intellectual achievements, inspired by the ideals which Zbigniew Herbert's work exemplifies: independence, love of freedom, intolerance of deceit, inequality and violence.

Conferred since 2013, the Zbigniew Herbert Award, Poland's only truly international prize, with a uniquely global reach, underlines the presence, role and position of Polish literature – and more widely Polish culture – in the international arena. The Award is conferred by a jury, composed of poets, essayists, translators and publishers from Europe and the United States: Krystyna Dąbrowska (Poland), Edward Hirsch (USA), Michael Krüger (Germany), Mercedes Monmany (Spain), and Aleš Šteger (Slovenia).

The Laudation was given by Mr Edward Hirsch, Jury Chairman of this year's Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award Jury, who said: *"Tomas Venclova is a poet who has dedicated his life to the world of letters, as well as to combating authoritarianism. He is the greatest living Lithuanian poet, a major east-European writer, one of the last links in the chain from Herbert, Milosz and Brodsky. (...) He is a human thinker who has determinedly stood for democracy all his life. His work has dignity and gravitas"*.

Katarzyna Herbert, the poet's widow, and Foundation founder, commenting on this year's choice of laureate stated: *"I am pleased that this year's Award has been given to an excellent poet, whose work Herbert knew well and admired"*.

Tomas Venclova was born in Lithuania on September 11th 1937, and published his first tome of poetry in the underground press in 1958. He was associated with a circle of USSR based dissident writers, among others Anna Achmatowa, Borys Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky. In 1977, as a dissident and co-founder of Lithuania's Helsinki Group, he went to the United States, where he taught Slavic literature at Yale University for many years.

He is laureate of numerous literary awards and holder of many honorary doctorates. Czesław Miłosz published a translation of his poem *Winter Dialogue* on the pages of the Paris-based émigré literary magazine «Kultura» ("Culture") and thereby brought Tomas Venclova's poetry to the Polish reader. Tomas Venclova's poetry has also been translated by Stanisław Barańczak, Zbigniew Dmitroca, Beata Kalęba, Alina Kuzborska and Adam Pomorski. His poems have, among others, also been translated into English, Chinese, German, Italian, Swedish and Ukrainian.

Tomas Venclova not only translated and commented Zbigniew Herbert's poetry that he first got to know at the start of his literary career, but also – not unlike Herbert – often alluded to classical history in his poetry, regarding poetry and history as inseparable. In his work he also stands in opposition to cruelty and injustice, does not avoid difficult subjects, will not impose answers, and encourages independent thought.

The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award was presented to the laureate, by Ms Grażyna Melanowicz, respectively board-member of the PZU Foundation and Mr Tomasz Różycki, member of the Zbigniew Herbert Foundation's board.

In his acceptance speech Tomas Venclova, among other, states: *"Zbigniew Herbert's poetry was one of the defining poetic experiences for me, his essays helped me crystallize my own aesthetics and historiosophy. It is said that over the course of a decade or even several decades, God turns his face to this or that country, blessing its poets. In the times after World War II, Our Lord probably turned His face towards Polish poets. They wrote most powerfully about historical catastrophe, about disinheritance and uprooting, but also about the experiences of resistance and the continuity*

of culture, about its opposites and polyphony, without which resistance would collapse. They found answers to the challenges of Hitlerism and Stalinism, also to the anachronistic mentality that was unable to meet these challenges. We read their poems in Vilnius; our peers read them in St. Petersburg and Moscow, also in Kiev and Lviv, Riga and Tartu, Minsk and Tbilisi. There was a certain snobbery in it, but a lot of genuine curiosity and simply wonder. Zbigniew Herbert stood out, even against this background. Joseph Brodsky considered him the best Polish contemporary poet (just as Norwid as the best among Polish and non-Polish classics)."

Tomas Venclova also reminisced about the influence Zbigniew Herbert's poetry had on his generation in the former Soviet Union: "We sometimes knew Herbert's volumes by heart, including 'Chord of Light' (*Struna światła*), 'Hermes, Dog and Star' (*Hermes, pies i gwiazda*), whilst we passed others between ourselves, such as 'The Barbarian in the Garden' (*Barbażyńca w ogrodzie*) - a book of essays which later, in exile, served as a guide to old Europe, but not only that, for it also explained our cruel age. (...) Through him we learned about the Polish resistance ethos, calm, self-mocking and somewhat laid-back. We liked his cool tone, not devoid of elegant humour, whilst all at once resounding with a note of a condensed Greek tragedy, ancient catharsis. (...) Herbert's classicism and distance, and above all, his stoic moral attitude, which he probably learned from Marcus Aurelius after Elzenberg, have become a shared generational treasure," commented the laureate.

In addition to the Laureate's poetry, guests gathered at the Polish Theatre, Tomas Venclova's family and friends, all had the opportunity to listen to selected poems by Zbigniew Herbert interpreted by Maksymilian Rogacki.

The ceremony was also enriched by the performance of young jazz musicians from Lithuania, Ukraine and Poland, Nika Zundelovič (vocals), Maria Tsapenko (piano) and Krzysztof Panek (double bass). The concert was held thanks to the support of the Lithuanian Culture Institute, and the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania to the Republic of Poland.

The PZU Foundation is the Strategic Partner of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2023.

The Zbigniew Herbert Foundation Partners include: the Warsaw based Arnold Szyfman Polish Theatre (*Teatr Polski im. Arnolda Szyfmana*), The Adam Mickiewicz Institute (*Instytut Adama*

Mickiewicza), and Poland's National Library (*Biblioteka Narodowa*). Polish Radio (*Polskie Radio*) is the media patron.

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More information about the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award at:

* www.fundacjaherberta.com

* www.facebook.com/FundacjaHerberta

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