

Speech on Exile of Can Dündar, held on October 29, 2018 at the invitation of the Körber Foundation in the Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg. The speech is the highlight of this year's "Days of Exile" and at the same time the prelude to the first Exile Media Forum of Körber Foundation.

The spoken word applies.

„Speech on Exile“ 2018, Körber Foundation Can Dündar

Ladies and gentlemen,

I arrived here in Germany still smelling of gunpowder from the assassination attempt...

On my jacket, the soot of my burned books...

In my ears, the voice of the prosecutor demanding a life sentence;

on my skin, the damp of the prison cell.

Before my eyes stood mobs screaming 'Hang the traitors!'

My heart breaks at the thought of my loved ones left behind...

You can't see any of these marks, because they're locked in my mind...

I hide it all behind a smiling face...

I'm coming from a massive earthquake... Some of us were left under the rubble, other are still trying to claw their way out. Those who got out, grieve for those who couldn't.

Were we expecting it?

No.

We can see much more clearly now that all the clues were there. Five years ago, we still thought we could defeat the darkness sinking over us with our light.

Our intellectuals who warned us of the approaching danger were slaughtered one by one... Our glasses were smashed.

Young people speaking out for the sake of a park in Istanbul were shot. Mostly in the eyes... We could no longer see.

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You know about the boiling frog. We were boiled in a cauldron, brought up to temperature slowly so we wouldn't leap out at once... It was too late by the time we noticed.

We were being cooked.

Evil lay in ambush. Waiting for its hour in a cage, locked by the bayonet, by the fear of sin, of 'shame'.

A black wind blew and smashed the lock. Evil was unleashed, rewarded, encouraged.

'The worst' became a role model.

Whatever was sinful or shameful until yesterday became the norm.

And so began the rule of evil.

The 'good', struggled to accept it at first. Anyone who objected was banged up in the cage the wicked had left. Those who remained, slunk into a corner.

In five years we became exiles in our own land.

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Every dissident is a potential exile in actual fact...

Your exile begins the moment you challenge the mainstream that is social belief, the framework drawn up by the state or the generally accepted norms...

You're marked as a 'traitor' the moment you say 'no'.

If you live in a part of the world with a low threshold of tolerance and a high tendency to authoritarianism, you know you have to be prepared for the courts, being sidelined, slander, threats, abuse, prison, and even silenced for ever – a series of punishment and deep, cloying loneliness.

This knowledge, forces some into silence, prison, or even the cemetery...

Hrant Dink, one of the last representatives of a folk who suffered the worst exile of the past century had asked just before he was assassinated:

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‘When did we get to plant a tree to eat its fruit?’

That fruit tempts some people to give up their own ideas than their homeland. That’s also hard.

You can never recover your self-respect even if you could go back.

Others leave their land that can’t bear their ideas – rather than abandon their ideas.

Murathan Mungan squeezes the mindset of the leaver into a few words:

‘It’s not really the one who leaves, but the one who stays behind than, abandons...’

Another exile, Theodor Adorno, defines ‘mental exile’ as ... ‘not feeling at home in one’s own home.’

Now imagine for a moment that you have no home to go to when you leave this hall. Everything you’ve toiled and scraped to save your whole life has been taken away... No longer do you have your comfy chair, your bed, your bookcase, your cat or your dog. You have to leave it all behind and leap into a bottomless void.

And this is the price you pay just because you choose the risk of opposition instead of the comfort of submission...

Would you bow down so you don’t have to pay?

Our tragedy is due to our response.

“No!”

Masses are enchanted by government propaganda.

It takes courage to warn them:

‘It’s all lies. You’re not flying; you’re falling into the precipice.’

It leads to punishment, loneliness and exile.

The first thing you hear is this:

‘You don’t belong here.’

Sadly, that’s exactly the waiting for you at your destination too.

And soon you begin to believe that you are a perpetual outsider. And you come to Stefan Zweig’s sentence:

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'I belong nowhere.'

Last spring I went to exhibition on Stefan Zweig in Luxembourg. I spotted a clutter of cardboard boxes at the entrance... At first I thought the exhibition was coming to an end; it only dawned on me later:

Those boxes were the travelling trunks of an exiled writer who had been forced to pack time after time... And now they served as display cases in an exhibition dedicated to him.

Zweig concludes his memoirs as follows:

"I've packed and got ready. (...) Europe, our home, (...) had suffered a destruction... Now we are truly homeless."

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The exile takes his old life, his censored ideas and banned art along.

The Turkish word for exile is "sürgün".

It also means "A new shoot".

Exiles might find a gentler climate where they go, one that will allow them to burgeon and bloom; but, like any uprooted plant wrenched away from its water and natural flora, whether it will ever take root again elsewhere is a mystery. Either it does and fruits, or it dries up.

History is rich with examples of both...

Turkey's greatest poet Nâzım Hikmet had to leave his country after spending years in prison. He was stripped of his nationality. He died in exile, homesick.

Turkey's greatest film director Yılmaz Güney had to leave his country after spending years in prison. He was stripped of his nationality. He died in exile, homesick.

One of Turkey's most popular musicians Ahmet Kaya had to leave his country after being branded a 'traitor'. He died in exile, homesick.

All three are revered in their country now...

Their poems, films and songs are everywhere...

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Turkey has a special talent for damning its rebellious children, burying them in other soils and hanging heroes' medals on those far distant graves.

Isn't that what happened to Thomas Mann who was stripped of his German nationality by the Nazis?

I thought of him last year when a Turkish lorry driver informed on his wife for 'insulting Erdoğan.'

As Mann wrote of his desire to see the German forces lose the war, he admitted:

"That my sons would be forced to inform on me to the SS should they ever come across these words is sufficient to explain the extent of our catastrophe.'

Evil is a disease that can infect your nearest and dearest...

It follows you to the ends of the earth.

As it did Zweig.

The fear of evil defeated him in that farthest place he could go.

Let me return to Zweig once again:

He wrote the following lines eight months before he took his own life:

"... the swastika waves from the Eiffel Tower, the black storm troopers parade provokingly through Napoleon's Champs Elysées. (...) Life is no longer worth living. I'm nearly fifty-nine. The years ahead will be dreadful. Why should I put up with all this humiliation?"

You can imagine just how unsettling these lines are for someone like me:

Nearly fifty-nine, his belongings in cardboard boxes, watching terrified the rise of evil in his own land and across the world.

Zweig's tragedy offers lessons to us today:

The exile hopes to find freedom and peace where (s)he goes. They'll be no clatter of guns at his/her door, or threats of the police. No shackles on his/her pen, no padlock on his/her tongue...

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But that's not what happens: the clouds rising from the land of your verb follow you, and obscure the sun where you are.

And sometimes it overwhelms you from the inside:

One of the shackles on your feet is all that you left behind. Every courageous sentence you form pleases you but imperils your loved ones far away. Traces of those loved ones mark the pages of the biographies of countless crushed exiles.

Another padlock on the tongue is your hopes for a return. Every opposing word of dissent, pushes that hope little further away, tears you away from the land of your birth, sentence by sentence...

Some mistake, silence or submission to be capable of opening the gates to return. Even if they were to return, nothing will be the same: the land of return is not the land that was left, nor was the returning person the same one who went away...

In short, as the bitter Turkish proverb observes:

'Go away, and you may never come back;
come back, and you may never find.'

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As for where you go...

Where the exile goes to, is an enigma. You have no idea where to climb to the top and where to sink into the mire. Your tongue is different, you can't ask. The most painful part is settling in as you lick your fresh wounds. You have to battle with homesickness on the one hand, and a strange land in the other as you're tossed like a falling leaf.

Alienation is inevitable, an ache for the comfort of belonging.

Because you're an outsider here too, just as you were in the land you'd left.

It's impossible to settle in; everything feels temporary.

You're unhappy because you're outside society,
shamed because you're different,
scorned because you've come unwanted.

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Unhappiness invites depression.

But the refugee has no right to be unhappy or pessimistic, or fall sick. You have to bury your pain, start everything from zero, in order to cope in your new land, to make a new life, fill your belly, fetch water to the fire in your own land and find solutions to your kith and kin back home.

If you stay in close contact with your homeland, you run the risk of a crash like a driver who's constantly looking in the rear view mirror.

If you never look back, you flounder in the void as your roots come loose.

Like a good driver, you have to keep your eyes on the road and check what's behind all the time.

That's actually quite difficult in an unfamiliar traffic, all on your own, and damned at every error.

Some sink into an incurable melancholy and never step outside.

Some take to crime in anger.

Very few remain standing in that merciless traffic.

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Dear friends,

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The twentieth century virtually demolished gravity that affixes us to the earth. Humankind was thrown to the four winds like stray pearls tumbling away when the rope breaks. This terrible storm threw some of us to other lands, and others into the void...

This awful legacy has only grown in the twenty-first century.

The number of displaced persons – due to wars, violence or other causes – has reached sixty-five million... Every third second, someone is forced to leave home. Half the migrants are children.

Eighty-four per cent in developing countries...

So they're not here, in rich Europe.

Europe sells weapons, those weapons are used in wars, people flee those wars... and are left behind the walls. Europe slams the gates shut and secures itself. Pays people like Erdoğan, to set up camps in distant lands. Turns a blind eye to refugees being kept hostage there, used as bargaining chips.

Migrants who've made it to Europe, in the meanwhile, triggered a great change in the old continent. Panicking that their jobs, cities or life styles are under threat, the masses flock to the wings of promises of even higher walls.

If AfD forms the government in Germany tomorrow, the migrants are likely to be sent back; but you can be sure that most of you will feel like migrants in your own country.

Just like us who've become exiles in our own land in Turkey...

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Exile is a minefield:

It could be your grave or your throne.

It could bury you into silence or unleash your tongue.

Breaking away from the local might push you into the void – or make you universal...

You might become lonelier – or more crowded...

You could become comrades with the victims of your new land; but there is a danger of linking arms with the rulers too.

Elia Kazan, a first generation American, spent half a century in penance for joining in the 1950s witch hunt in his new land.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is remembered today as much for his searing criticism of the Gulag Archipelago as his condemnation of America for pulling out too soon from Vietnam...

The Frankfurt School, on the other hand, was the bountiful fruit of the exiles from Nazi Germany.

Another danger that awaits the exiled writer is turning into a political figure, compelled by the thrill and rage of having escaped the pincers, of having broken free from the chains.

Politics enters your blood, makes you unable to write about anything else.

Creativity isn't always whipped up by rage – which occasionally serves as its shroud.

The exile is locked in a battle with the axe that had severed the ties with the land; what's crucial and equally hard is to transform that battle into ideas, into art, into literature. Exiles unable to manage it, unable to shake off vindictiveness die as 'dissidents in exile.'

Then there are those who return, only to fail to settle in. Theirs is a tragedy in its own right.

Like Bruno Alfred Döblin, who, unable to find the cultural climate he sought in Germany, had to go back to France where he had sought refuge during the war.

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Wasn't there a single hero's welcome?

Of course there was.

Let's chase away these dark clouds and take a positive look at exile.

Allow me to recall Ernst Reuter at this point.

The Mayor of Magdeburg was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in 1933 for opposing the Nazis. There he was beaten, humiliated and tormented.

In 1935 he left Germany carrying a single suitcase, a passport not as yet confiscated and a modest amount of money in his pocket.

He told his friends as he left:

'We may be going into the wilderness for ten years, but we shall return one day.'

He went to no wilderness; it was Turkey that welcomed him with open arms. And just as he had anticipated, he contributed to the build of new Turkey for ten years, even as he carried on he struggled to free his own land. He created a roadmap for a post-war Germany.

And on his return, he became mayor of free Berlin, and participated in the resurgence of his country.

Reading his story here, where I arrived carrying a single suitcase, a passport not as yet confiscated and a modest amount of money in my pocket gives me hope.

Yes, exile is as hard as homelessness, being 'heimatlos', losing your parents...

Yes, exile is a painful, trying, sad experience...

But it also opens new doors to writers, artists, academics, intellectuals, politicians.

Eighty-five years after Reuter, academics sacked in Turkey for signing a petition for peace, come to Germany. They reverse a century-old migration and invest in the futures of both Germany and their own land.

Journalists unable to defend the truth in Turkey shout it out here...

A library of works by displaced writers shows that pain feeds a profusion of creativity – and it's called "Exiliterature.."

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There is no doubt that the wave of migration that stamped its mark on the globe in the past decade will give birth to a new generation of writers and exile literature.

'Exile-ish', continues to be one of the most prolific languages of writing as it pours from pens sharpened by pain.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

My dear lecturer Ünsal Oskay was fond repeating Adorno's 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly'...

When our country becomes unbearable, and all objectors are imprisoned, we can do one of two things:

In order to secure what we have, we can enter into dirty agreements with the land we had grown up – even though it hurts our conscience – or cover our eyes with the satin shades of indifference.

Then there are those who are forced to leave their homeland.

Like the Jewish writer Nelly Sachs who fled from Germany in 1940... The first thing her friends said when she arrived in Stockholm was:

'From now on, language is the only thing you own.'

That single asset made her a Nobel Laureate in 1966.

Adorno condones intellectuals choosing to 'stay on the fence' if they're caught between 'alienation' and 'social worship'.

'Writing becomes a habitat for the homeless,' he says.

Creating a homeland out of writing...

A cure for Zweig's pessimistic 'I belong nowhere'...

Pessimism that Thomas Mann defies with his optimism:

'Wherever I am, there is Germany.'

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Being a 'loose balloon' is as risky for writers, artists, politicians academics, as it is productive.

It hurts to break away from home, but it also sets your spirit free.

It protects you from established norms, smothering prejudices, peer pressure, conforming to avoid danger and the insistence fabricated to protect dictators: 'protection of the national interest.'

It gives you the opportunity to leave established motorways in order to carve your own path – and that's where you meet the YOU, you didn't know until then.

The tape over your mouth is gone, as are the shackles at your ankles and the blindfold over your eyes.

Now you're alone, but also independent.

Leaving your comfortable home to recreate yourself in a new universe is ambitious defiance. Like diving into cold water, you may shiver first, but you feel invigorated, rejuvenated, fortified, liberated.

Keeping in step with, and staying on your feet in, every situation, refusing to fall into the stream no matter what and carrying on your objection alone if need be everywhere and against everyone; all this reinforces your self-confidence.

Exile also offers the opportunity to test your own skills, and to make your language, issues and battles heard beyond your own borders.

As it gives the destination country new viewpoints.

Didn't Edward Said, a Palestinian-American, teach the West that fundamentalism was not the monopoly of Islam, that Christianity and Judaism also had their own versions?

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Famous as the land of migrants, Germany developed with the energy of the foreigners it embraced, and grew into a global giant just like America that had done the same. Its willingness to open the doors to migrants was impressive.

Even though I'm horrified by the rise of those who want to kick them out, I take heart from the solidarity of the demonstrators, their slogans saying 'We shall defeat hatred!' surrounding those hate rallies.

Just as my German friends stand shoulder to shoulder with us in Turkey's fight for freedom, I walk alongside them against racism.

It's our principles that divide us now, not our countries.

Our solidarity for shared principles goes beyond borders.

We fight to raise love, not hatred where walls were demolished – so that we can eat the fruit of the trees we had planted.

It's time to accept that we live in a world of migrants.

Many of us may never return to the lands of our birth.

Never see again the cities we were born in, the roads we'd walked, the seas we'd swum in.

Our belongings will travel alongside us, packed in oversized boxes...

Home will live on in the smell of gunpowder on our clothes,
the soot on our jackets,

the dampness on our skin and the love of our loved ones.

If you see a smiling migrant when you leave this building, think of the suffering behind that smile.

Listen to their experiences so that you may never have to suffer the same way.

It's up to us to stand up to suffering and to defeat it.

We shall carry on writing freely in our new land, in our land of literature.

And to anyone who says I'm too far from Turkey, allow me take the baton from Thomas Mann:

'Wherever I write, there is Turkey.'