

Akram Aylisli

For courage shown in his efforts to reconcile Azerbaijani and Armenian people

We request the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award the Nobel Peace Prize 2014 to Akram Aylisli, an Azerbaijani writer who demonstrated amazing courage in the cause of overcoming hostility between the peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Mr Aylisli is one of the most prominent Azerbaijani writers of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. He was born in 1937 in the mountainous village of Aylis, in the Nakhichevan region, near the borders of Armenia and Iran. Most of Mr Aylisli's works are associated with this village. Mr Aylisli's stories and novels, so subtle and full of affection for peasant life, are very popular in Azerbaijan and have been translated into more than thirty languages. Mr Aylisli was awarded the title of "People's Writer" as well as the highest state awards of Azerbaijan - the medals of "Shokhrat" ("Honor") and "Istiglal" ("Independence"). In 2005, he was elected as a member of the parliament of Azerbaijan, representing his native region. With such recognition and respect, it could only have been expected that the writer would enjoy a comfortable and tranquil existence in his old age.

However, Mr Aylisli chose to sacrifice all that. In December 2012, he published his novel "Stone Dreams", devoted to the pogroms of Armenians in Baku in 1989 and the massacre of Armenians in his native village by Turkish troops in 1918. The scenes of the recent past and the tales of old people about the Armenian massacre intertwined in the novel. The book was written in 2006 but the author did not dare to publish it. The decision to do so only came following the extradition of Ramil Safarov to Azerbaijan. Mr Safarov - an Azerbaijani army lieutenant - had hacked to death an Armenian army officer in Hungary, and was subsequently welcomed home as a hero of the nation.

"When I saw the crazy reaction and the artificially aroused hatred between Armenians and Azerbaijanis which went beyond all limits, I made up my mind to publish my novel," Mr Aylisli said.

Soon after "Stone Dreams" was published, the honored writer became an enemy of the state. President Ilham Aliyev withdrew Mr Aylisli's title of "People's Writer" and a personal pension as well. The Ministry of Education withdrew his works from the school curriculum. His plays were banned from theatres. The chairman of Caucasian Muslim Board, Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazadeh, branded him an apostate. His wife and son were fired from their jobs. Mass media launched a wide-scale bullying campaign. Writers, artists and academics repudiated him. In Baku, Ganja and in the writer's native village, rallies were organized where people cried out slogans such as "Death to Akram

Aylisli!", "Traitor!", and "Akram is Armenian!", and they set his books on fire.

"Let them burn all my books because they have not saved anyone," the writer answered.

Parliamentarians required to deprive Mr Aylisli of all state awards, and even his citizenship, and to have him examined to determine if he was genetically ethnic Armenian.

"If I were Armenian, everybody would have already known about that. And I would not be ashamed of that," said Mr Aylisli.

Finally, the pro-government party - Muasir Musavat - announced that it would pay ten thousand manats (USD 12,000) to whoever cut off the writer's ears. It was only due to the active intervention of the international community - namely Human Rights Watch, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, Russian PEN center, U.S. Department of State, etc. - that the Azerbaijani authorities were forced to call off the murderous vendetta.

Despite the real threat to his life, the long-running bullying campaign in the mass media, numerous demands to deprive the writer of his citizenship and expel him from the country, Mr Aylisli decided to stay in Azerbaijan.

"Stone Dreams" came as a bombshell not only because of its contents, but also because of who had written it - the most popular "peasant" writer of Azerbaijan whose works are full of fascination with his native land.

Mr Aylisli's book caused a big stir in Armenia as well. Though many media outlets used the response to the book in Azerbaijan to ferment hatred, most Armenians responded positively, viewing the book as a breathing space in two decades of enmity.

Mr Aylisli was the first Turkic author to write a novel about the Armenian genocide. Many Turkish writers - such as Nazim Hikmet and Orhan Pamuk - told the truth about the genocide, but Mr Aylisli was the first to express that pain in a literary work which is very personal, deep and hard-won.

The Azerbaijani authorities burn the paper on which this hard truth was printed and try to oppress its author. But strange as it might seem, the artistic truth can be more powerful than the repressive state apparatus, more powerful than military force and mass media.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis who had lived together for ages on shared land were divided by the bloody Karabakh conflict. Both societies have been overwhelmed with hatred for twenty years. The governments of both countries use this hatred to strengthen their power. The peace process cannot go beyond the deadlock and thus, the fragile peace can always turn into a new war. Only the voice of honored

people can encourage both nations to forgive each other and finally reach an agreement. Mr Aylisli was brave enough to be the first to take this step and offer his hand to the enemy. And we are sure that in Armenia there are people who are willing to respond in kind.

Mr Aylisli's actions are important not only for Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but for others all across the former Soviet Union, who have been blinded by ethnic hatred. In places where people have lost the skills to live together peacefully - and where the word "pogrom" has resurfaced again - Mr Aylisli's example has immediate resonance.

His example in fact transcends location, ethnicity or political persuasion. His lone resistance, his defiance, his willingness to sacrifice all for the sake of truth, is an encouragement to each of us to be brave.

Mr Aylisli is a brilliant writer. However, we would like to nominate him not to for the award in literature but for the peace award, because his book - though very worthy as a literary work - is foremost a civil feat.

Mr Aylisli is one of those rare people such as Martin Luther King and Andrey Sakharov, whose personal courage and moral impulse can change a nation's fate and destroy the walls dividing nations.

We request the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award the Nobel Peace Prize 2014 to Akram Aylisli because we know of nobody who deserves it more.

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