

Kyiv, April 6, 2022
Austrian National Library

Dear Prof. Woldan, dear readers and attendees!

It's difficult to feel poetry in times of war. Poetry tiptoes silently on the edge of the abyss of tragedy. And today Ukraine is stitched with missiles. Bombs are setting the country to fire. Poetry gazes at unknown time horizons. And today we have no clue how each day will end for us. Poetry is "an immortal touch on the soul" from space. Ukrainians are now witnessing the bottom of this abyss of hellish violence.

So, I am all the more grateful to Alois Woldan for this unique creative joy – the opportunity to meet you all in the Austrian National Library, in this beautiful library. Its silence speaks across centuries through the voices of different writers and artists. Thanks to Prof. Woldan, I have the chance to salute your incredible country – the country of Mozart, Rilke and Klimt. And the country of the unforgettable Ingeborg Bachmann, to whose loneliness and death I have dedicated an old poem of mine, written at a time when my name was banned in Ukraine under the Soviet regime.

Prof. Woldan is an outstanding scholar – and a skillful master of translation. Ukrainian poetry is extremely challenging to translate in particular because of its inherent sense of rhythm, which is difficult to reproduce in other languages. Alois Woldan managed to achieve this as well – his poetic use of German is filled with unparalleled elegance and harmony.

At other times, in my greetings from Kyiv to Vienna, the baroque style of Kyivan churches, the capricious lines of liberty style houses would shine. I would send you the noise of the Dnipro River, of Kyivan poplars and chestnuts. But today I send my best from one corner of Europe to another, where your Europe speaks to us through libraries and universities, in which antique statues guard the silence of folios. And our Europe reaches out to yours – from its bombed libraries and universities, its bomb shelters, mined fields and razed cities.

I already experienced this in my childhood. Just as I woke up as a child from bombs being dropped on Kyiv at dawn on 22 June 1941, I was awakened by bombs at dawn on 24 February 2022. 'My first poem is written in the trenches' – well, as it was written – bred with a dry twig on the wall of the trench – not a metaphor poem, but a story about my first lines erased by war, when "the shell hit – the wall crumbled."

Now I see war again. But we all must not allow our culture to crumble under these bombs, shells and missiles. Which is why I see something else: in this tragic moment for Ukraine and for each of us, today Ukraine stands to full height. Because it is defending its dignity. Its freedom. Our freedom. And your freedom, too. Citing Luther, "*Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Amen*" ["*Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. Amen.*"].

So, I thank Prof. Woldan, the Wieser Verlag publishing house, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all of you for organising this event. I wish you a lovely and bright evening and I salute you with my lines about the only freedom that no one will ever be able to take away from a person – the freedom of the soul:

Душа – єдина на землі держава
де є свобода чиста як озон
Кордон душі проходить над світами
а там нема демаркаційних зон

The soul is the only true state on earth
where freedom is as pure as ozone
The boundary of the soul passes over worlds
and no demarcation zones will be there

Lina Kostenko

Translated by Jaroslava Barbieri