**PEN Norway interview imprisoned Gezi defendant and film maker Çiğdem Mater**

**Published: 01 July 2022**

### **PEN Norway interview with the imprisoned Gezi defendant and film maker Çiğdem Mater:**

### **“These days will pass, we know it. Knowing we are in the right strengthens our state of inner peace.”**

### **PEN Norway has followed every hearing in the Gezi trial in which film maker Çidem Mater was one of sixteen original defendants charged with ‘Attempting to bring down the state by violent means’. Mater was accused of having made a documentary about the Gezi Park protests of 2013 and yet no such film was made or shown in a film festival, as the prosecutor claimed.**

**On 25 April, 2022 Çiğdem Mater and her co-defendants in the room were sentenced to 18 years in prison and were immediately arrested. Defendant Osman Kavala, who was already in pre-trial detention was sentenced to life in prison with no parole. PEN Norway witnessed this shocking abuse of the justice system and are interviewing each imprisoned defendant in turn.**

**Dear Çiğdem, we’ve seen the messages you’ve been relaying from prison. You’ve said, “I’m very well, because I’m in the right.” But how are you at present? How’s your health and state of mind?**

Since the night of April 25th, I’ve have been detained with my co-defendant in the Gezi trial, Mücella Yapıcı, in a room of nine square meters including the bathroom. We are sandwiched in between a bathroom of 3 square meters, bunk beds of 2.2 square meters, with a two-door iron cabinet, a 90 by 90cm table, two chairs, a refrigerator, and a shelf with 4 drawers occupying the rest of the space. The physical conditions of Bakırköy Women's Prison are quite bad, but the humanitarian conditions are good. We have limited time in the open air as we still haven't moved to a dormitory. Many lawyers and MPs visit us (I am grateful to all of them), which gives us a chance to go out of the room often and this is a blessing, considering the conditions of the room... My health is good, and it is very important that it stays so, because we have serious problems in accessing health services.

**As a film maker you produced a short film based on the recent correspondence of Osman Kavala called ‘Letters from Silivri’. But how does a film maker and journalist see the prison experience, when it becomes a reality and not only an observation from afar? Are there particular problems exclusive to women’s prisons in Turkey?**

Not only as a journalist or a filmmaker, but as someone who is always curious about the world, I activated all my “receivers” from the moment I arrived here and tried to understand, learn and digest everything. One thing I didn't reflect on before coming here, but am realizing after my arrival, is the "masculinity of prison literature". However, a women's prison is a place with different needs and different experiences. Besides, this is a place where nearly 50 children stay because children up to the age of six are admitted here too. Therefore, not only women’s but also children’s needs must be met here. About 25% of the detainees and convicts are foreigners, and lot more than half of them are ordinary prisoners pending trial and convicts. This is a place where there are many women who are economically deprived and have no access to legal aid. Naturally, the economic crisis is having an impact in this place as well. For example, we are faced with increasing canteen prices every week. By which I mean, you are really stuck if you do not have family, friends or relatives who can provide financial support from outside. Drinking water in the prison is sold in 1.5 litre bottles which cost 3 liras each. Therefore drinking water alone is expensive and can be out of reach for some people.

**One of the charges against you in the Gezi trial was that you gave alkali-based Gaviscon to protesters in the Gezi Park protests to ease the effects on them of tear gas. We know that the use of pepper gas cannisters against protestors was excessive at Gezi. How do you feel about this charge? Are all kinds of help and solidarity between people under attack in Turkey?**

According to the indictment and the reasoned judgement that followed, one of the crimes I allegedly committed was that during a protest that took place near my office in September 2013 I distributed in Gaviscon to citizens who took shelter in the hall of the building where my office is located. Although the prosecutor did not say which particular legal act declares this to be a "crime", as far as I can tell, I had “attempted to overthrow the government” by spraying Gaviscon in the entrance hall of the building where there were people who’d been tear-gassed. Of course, this is one of the oddities of the long and bizarre indictment and the reasoned justification that followed, but it is a pathetic situation in terms of the disproportionate use of force by the police and our rights, which are guaranteed by international conventions. With many deaths during the Gezi protests such as Metin Lokumcu and Elif Çermik, we in Turkey have personal experience regarding the consequences of using pepper spray. This is an issue that needs to be seriously investigated.

**During five years of monitoring these hearings in person, we at PEN Norway did not observe a single concrete piece of evidence against the Gezi defendants in relation to the charge of “Attempting to bring down the state by violent means”. We observed instead that your basic rights and freedoms in relation to a fair trial were continually obstructed. How can you stand tall against such egregious and fundamental rights violations?**

The answer is already in the question. We were tried with allegations that were based on no evidence, completely unlawful, illogical, and contrary to the ordinary course of life. At the first verdict hearing we were acquitted, then this time we were sentenced to 18 years with the exact same case file. When announcing the judgment, the panel of judges said that there would be no reduction in the penalty because we did not express any remorse. Naturally, there was nothing to feel remorseful about since we did not commit any crimes. This peace of mind that comes with knowing you are right and being innocent is priceless. This feeling I have has helped me a lot both in court and in prison since April 25th.

**We know that through your film making you’ve made important contributions in highlighting the stories of women’s lives. But we wanted to ask you this: half of the Gezi trial defendants were women. The women’s struggle in Turkey, the way they organise and resist is an inspiration to women all over European, too. What do you think women’s roles signify in terms of defending freedom of expression and the rights of assembly and demonstration in Turkey, and of course in the Gezi protests?**

The Gezi Trial may be the first case where the Republic of Turkey respects the gender equality. Well, this wasn’t exactly what the women’s movement intended in its perennial resistance and struggle for equality, but anyway that’s still an improvement: 16 people were tried during the Gezi trials, and literally half of them were women. A great success!

But all jokes aside; from Diyarbakır to the Black Sea, from the resistances against the cutting down of olive trees in the Aegean region to the tremendous young women in Istanbul, the women’s movement in Turkey inspires and excites us all. Women have been resisting and learning with great organizing skills since the 1980s, and we all make progress by learning from the previous and future generations and then we self-improve. Women are everywhere, and of course they were present during the Gezi protests, they were many; they did not back off from the streets, the nights and the parks. Despite all attempts to suppress social movements these days, the women's and LGBTI+ movement stand tall and do not obey. I cannot help but admire this.

**When you were arrested, the judges stated that there was a “suspicion of absconding”, using that premise to demand your immediate arrest. But we, and everyone in the court room, knew that you had returned from Germany specifically to attend this hearing. What do you say about this?**

“Suspicion of absconding” is an extremely meaningless “suspicion” not only for me, but also for my friends with whom I was arrested and for Osman Kavala as well, who has been in prison for nearly five years. If we wanted to go, we would have done. If I had "done" something, was guilty of something, I wouldn't have returned to Turkey for that hearing. Everybody who knew about this process and read the files, including the panel of judges and the prosecutor who prepared the indictment, are aware that we are innocent.

I'm pretty sure the panel of judges in particular is aware of this. Even though the court of appeal, in its decision to quash the judgement, ordered a “re-examination of the evidence”, the panel of judges hastily concluded the trial and handed down the judgement without asking a single question, that is, without actually fulfilling the demands of a higher court. Moreover, they arrested us on suspicion of absconding whereas normally the arrest is not a method used in such cases. They knew we wouldn't abscond. We wouldn't have come in the first place if we were to run away. We were there, looking right into their eyes, telling all the truth even though they didn't listen. It didn’t matter whether they listened or not, we made a footnote to history, we spoke our word.

These days will pass, we know it. Our righteousness bolsters our inner state of peace. We are not the first to have experienced this. The history of Turkey is full of similar examples. We're not the first, but hopefully we'll be the last.

**PEN Norway stands in solidarity with all defendants in the Gezi trial and with the legal defence teams in their efforts to have these unjust and unlawful decisions overturned. PEN Norway will continue to campaign for the freedom of Çiğdem Mater and her co-defendants.**