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Zukiswa Wanner Surrenders Goethe Medal

My name is Zukiswa Wanner. I am a writer, editor, publisher and curator who considers the African continent my home. In 2020 I became the first woman on my continent to receive the Goethe Medal alongside Bolivian artist and Museum Director Elvira Espejo Ayca and writer Ian McEwan from the United Kingdom. While the Goethe Medal is conferred by the Goethe-Institut to ‘non-Germans who have performed outstanding service for international cultural relations’, it is important to note that the award is an official decoration of the Federal Republic of Germany. I note and appreciate Goethe-Institut President Carola Lentz’ statement from an article of 14 January, 2024 in *Der Spiegel* where she states, and I quote, *Longstanding partners in the international cultural world are losing trust in the liberality of Germany’s democracy* and poses the question, *should the Aaswartige Kultur und Bildungspolitik (AKPB) support only persons or groups who accommodate the political/moral agenda of the respective German government?* She concludes otherwise and notes that organisations like Goethe-Institut must not become the extended arm of the government, particularly in difficult political times. In the same vein, Goethe-Institut Johannesburg, which is the regional headquarters for Sub Saharan Africa stated in statement on 7th February, 2024 ‘*As to the current war in Gaza – we are convinced that in view of the catastrophic situation, a new ceasefire is urgently needed. The rising number of civilian victims is unacceptable.* It’s important to state this so I highlight that this is NOT a statement surrendering the medal because of the Goethe-Institut and its position even where we may not always agree.

In May 2023, while attending Palestine Festival of Literature and months before October 7, I was in the Occupied Palestine Territories and travelled to Ramallah, Nabi Saleh, East Jerusalem, Hebron and Lydd. As a writer coming from a country with a history of apartheid, what I experienced shook me and resulted in my writing a long essay **Vignettes of a People in an Apartheid State**. One did not need to be from a country with a history of apartheid to see the daily injustices visited on Palestinians from separate roads, number plates to having strangers from United States or white South Africans with apartheid nostalgia come with guns with the protection of Israeli Defence Forces to settle into their homes. Indeed, unlike most literature festivals, PalFest takes the writers to different cities since Palestinians are unable to travel without permission from Israel, much like the pass laws in South Africa during apartheid.

I say all this by way of background on why I am giving up the medal.

I understand Germany's guilt for the Holocaust. I do. I wish the German government had the same guilt for their history in Namibia with the Herero-Nama genocide and in Tanzania for the genocide during the Maji Maji Rebellion. Equally important, I wish that the German government, in reflection and saying 'never again' would acknowledge that NEVER AGAIN should be for ANYBODY. Instead, what I see is Germany being on the wrong side of a genocide again (as per International Court of Justice provisional ruling to the case brought on by South Africa). Additionally, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Germany and United States are the biggest arms exporters to Israel. With more than 30 thousand killed in Gaza, this should have been a mea culpa moment for the Federal Republic of Germany, instead, they seem to have doubled their support for a very problematic government.

Culturally, since October 7, 2023, I have seen Germany disengaging from artists for their position on the colonial state that is Israel even in light of Israel's failures to adhere to the Oslo Accord (which was a super mediocre document for Palestinians). I am reading that of the cultural events cancelled by Germany, 30 percent are by Jewish artists who are anti-Zionist. This has failed to make sense to me that Jews can be considered antisemitic (obviously ignoring that Palestinians are a semitic people as those in support of the Israeli government seem intent on forgetting). More recently, during the Berlin Film Festival, Palestinian filmmaker Basel Adra and Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham won best documentary prize for their film *No Other Lands* which shows the eradication of Palestinian villages in the West Bank. The German Cultural Minister is reported to have stated her applause was only for the Israeli half of the filmmaking duo. South African history has a phrase for this. *Petty Apartheid*.

I thus find myself unable to stay silent or keep an official decoration from a government that is this callous to human suffering.

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