

**HAY FESTIVAL**  
**THE PEN HAY LECTURE:**  
**WORDS, MEMORY AND IMAGINATION - 1945, AND TODAY**

**Tuesday 29 May 2018, 10am Venue: Tata Tent**

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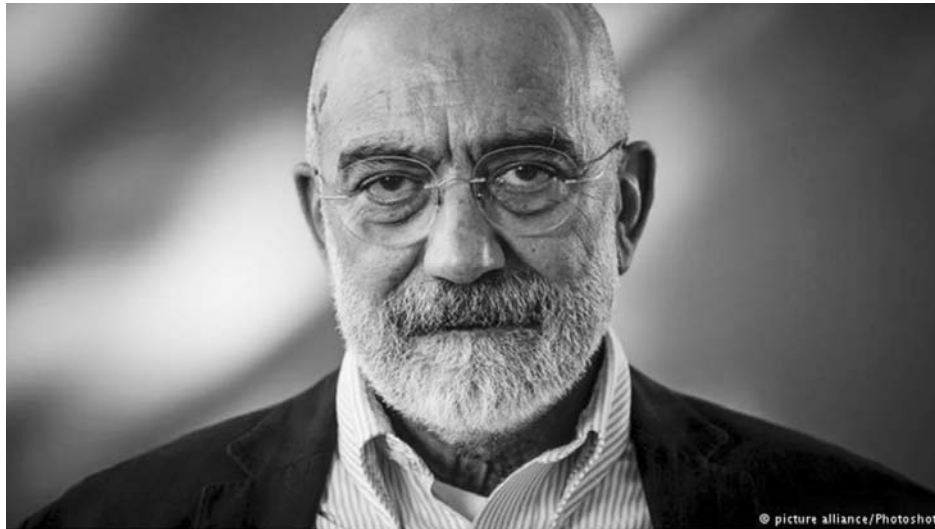
**EMBARGOED UNTIL 10 AM ON 29 MAY 2018**

**CHECK AGAINT DELIVERY**

Last month I travelled to Istanbul, a city I love, in part because it is the place where I realised I had fallen in love with the woman I would later marry, drinking mint tea at a small café by the Ortaköy Mosque, thirty years ago, in the shadow of the Bosphorous Bridge. I returned to give the Mehmet Birand Ali Lecture, named in memory of the renowned journalist, given each year to mark World Press Freedom Day. The event was organised by P24, the courageous platform for independent journalism, and held at the Swedish Consul General, in Beyoglou.

I actually attended the first Lecture, back in 2014, because I happened to be in Istanbul, arbitrating a case between Mauritius and the United Kingdom in the basement of the Pera Palas Hotel, where the guests of the Orient Express train used to stay, when the city was called Constantinople. It is possibly the finest location for any hearing I've ever been involved in, and it certainly had the best food.

That year the Birand Lecture was given by the journalist and writer Ahmet Altan, who has since become a close friend. He was unable to attend my lecture, last month, as he was in prison that day, as he had been for 590 day. His crime? Speaking a few words on a television programme, interpreted as treasonous by President Erdogan's government.



“My dear friend, I hope you might allow me to address a few words to you, in your absence.” That was how I began my lecture.

I understand entirely that your present circumstances are such that you are not able to greet me. I forgive you, even if it has been some time since we last saw each other. Remember that visit in London, in August 2015? We sat together in a sunny garden. You admired the English grass in my garden, which made me happy. I told you about my neighbor, over the fence, the judge who signed the arrest warrant of Senator Pinochet, back in 1998. You smiled when I told you that he didn't really know who Pinochet was – “Justice is Blind”, the judge told me. You loved the idea that there could be such a thing as independent justice, or that a once powerful person could be held to account. We talked about the world, your

new book, mine. Back then we laughed, we ate, we worried. We were together, and that was nice.

A few months later I returned to your wonderful city, for a performance of words and music, of gathering and conversation. You arranged for a little boat to take us across the water, under the great bridge. We walked and, as we always do, ate.

And then, within a few weeks, you were taken away. I am told this was because of words you spoke, in a public place, which made them even worse. I am told the words concerned hands entering a bag, and then leaving it. Such words were nefarious, it was said. We know, you and I, in our different ways, how words are apt to be interpreted in different ways. We know too that is their beauty, and their danger. So nefarious were the words you are said to have uttered that a judge decided you should be deprived of your liberty - not for a day, or a week, or a month, or even a full year, but ... for ever. "Life without parole", the judge said. "We will never be pardoned and we will die in a prison cell", you wrote, not so long ago, in the *New York Times*, in a few smuggled words.

And then you were gone. Your timing was impeccable, it must be said. It was a trick, a ruse, to avoid telling me what you thought about my book, the one I had been writing for six years, published in English, even as you spoke your nefarious words. The book takes the reader back to a world that existed before 1945, a time when individual human beings had no rights under international law, when the State was sovereign in an absolute sense, when the State – or the king, queen, emperor or president – could deprive a human being and groups of human beings of their liberty and freedoms, of the right to speak and to gather and, sometimes, even to exist.

*East West Street* is the name of a street in the small town of Zolkiew, near Lviv, today in the Ukraine. Really it was called Lembergerstrasse, back then, but the great writer Josef Roth decided to call it something else. His name is more attractive.

My great-grandmother was born on that street. So was the father of my first teacher of international law, who is a character in my book. No doubt you would tell me, if you were here with us today, that there is an 'East West Street' in Istanbul, as there is in Warsaw and so many other fine cities. Then you would insist that we go there together, immediately, to walk along it, to partake of one of those fine taverns you always seem to know about.

I began to write my book in 2010, after I first visited the city of Lviv. I travelled there because I received an invitation to deliver a lecture, on my work as an academic and as a barrister. Please come and talk about the law and the cases you do, on mass killing, on great violations of human rights. It never ceases to amaze me how much interest there is in such horrors! And so, I prepared a lecture on the origins of the crime of 'genocide' (which is concerned with the protection of groups) and 'crimes against humanity' (which is concerned with the protection of individuals).

I didn't have a burning desire to give another lecture, but I did hope to find the house in Lviv where my grandfather Leon Buchholz was born, in 1904. I had reached the age when one starts to be able to want to uncover the deeper recesses of unspoken family history, to recover a sense of a lost hinterland, to get to know better my own identity. I went to the Ukraine, and I found a remarkable city. Eventually, I found my grandfather Leon's house.

I could not have imagined the city I found. Have you ever come across the Polish poet Józef Wittlin, my dear, absent friend? He spent time in Lviv in the interwar years, and wrote a wonderful, slim volume. He called it *Móý Lwów* - My Lviv - and published it in 1946. Last year it came out in English for the first time, thanks to the Pushkin Press, with the title *The City of Lions*, and wonderful photographs by Diana Matar. One of the images was of a notorious prison, with a dark history across the ages. I look at it and think of those who passed through its walls, and I think of you.



Wittlin described the essence of that extraordinary city, what ‘being a Lvovian’ means. He describes it ‘an extraordinary mixture of nobility and roguery, wisdom and imbecility, poetry and vulgarity.’ He reminded his readers that ‘nostalgia likes to falsify flavours too, telling us to taste nothing but the sweetness of Lwów today’. But, he added, he knew ‘people for whom Lwów was a cup of gall’.

I used Josef Wittlin’s book as a guide to write mine. It helped open the imagination. It was published in May 2016, just a few weeks after we were last together in Istanbul. By then I had come to understand why Lviv was a cup of gall for my grandfather, a place of which he never spoke to me. By then I had also discovered – or, perhaps, accidentally stumbled across – a set of curious points of coincidence and connection. They revolved around the ancient city of Lviv. Did you know it was called Lemberg by the Germans and Austrians, Lwów by the Poles. The Russians call it Lvov, the Italians Leopoli. What do you call it?

In preparing that lecture, back in the summer of 2010, I learned that Rafael Lemkin, a former Polish criminal prosecutor, the man who invented the term ‘genocide’ in 1944, was a student at the very university and law faculty that had invited me to deliver the lecture. Yet those who invited me to Lviv had no idea!

Then I learned that Hersch Lauterpacht, a professor at Cambridge University, the man who put the concept of ‘crimes against humanity’ into international law and the Nuremberg trial in the summer of 1945 (and whose son would many years later teach me international law), was also a student at that university and law faculty, although not at the same time. Again, those who invited me were unaware of this magical coincidence!

Life can be great, no? And how remarkable, I thought, how remarkable that you can trace the origins of the modern system of international criminal justice not only to the same city, the same university, the same teacher, but to one room, the room in which their teacher, Julius Makarewicz, gave his classes.

A fourth man wandered toward that room. His name was Hans Frank. He arrived in Lviv in the summer of 1942 to announce the killing of tens of thousands of the city's Jewish residents, including the families, friends and teachers of Leon, Lauterpacht and Lemkin. He was Adolf Hitler's lawyer, and then he became Governor General of Nazi-occupied Poland, including the district of Galicia and its capital, Lemberg. He was a man of culture, a friend of Nobel Prize winning writers, of musicians. Can you believe that the great composer Richard Strauss wrote a song in his honour, in 1943?

Then, in November 1945, Frank found himself in the dock at Nuremberg, indicted for 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity', for the killing of four million human beings. Isn't it amazing how life can change in an instance? Isn't it amazing how the powerful can be brought down? And fact can be stranger than fiction, for he was prosecuted by Lauterpacht and Lemkin, although they didn't know, when the trial began, that they were prosecuting the man who killed their parents and entire families. By the end of the trial, they knew, but not the details. Seven more decades would have to pass for those details to emerge.

This was the story I came across and recited, along with a parallel detective story, one that explores the separate departures from Vienna of Leon, of my grandmother Rita, and of my mother Ruth, who was just a year old when she was whisked to relative safety in 1939, to Paris, by a person unknown.

It seems that these stories I unearthed – stories of darkness and of light – touched a broader readership than I imagined. This is a source of happiness and inspiration, for me. It illustrates the open-ended nature of larger historical narratives, which link great historical moments with intimate, tiny personal matters. The consequences of such stories are far-reaching, unpredictable, unintended, and they continue to this day. What haunts, it seems, are not only the dead, or the gaps left within us by the secrets of others, but also the stories of those who follow them.

I did not expect the reaction that followed, the letters and emails, in their hundreds, then thousands, and the translations. What could explain the extent of the interest in these stories? Perhaps there are three factors.

**First**, as you often tell me, dear absent friend, people do like a good story. A tale – or many tales - of individual human beings acting in ways magnificent or dastardly will resonate widely. And a reader likes a tiny point of detail, especially if its significance is part of a broader narrative. Such details, I have to come to understand, from the courtroom, and also from life generally, can often illuminate a larger truth, a greater truth. I notice you, my dear friend Ahmet, also like tiny points of detail. I noticed what you wrote about the chief judge who sentenced you for the words you spoke, for the crime of expressing yourself, he of the “swollen eyelids”.

A **second factor** is that the book’s central intellectual points of focus – the question of identity, of a community’s relationship with the ‘other’ – is a matter of renewed relevance for many across the world, in vogue as a tsunami of xenophobia, nationalism and populism sweeps across so many part of Europe, the United States and the world. Is there a community today that does not struggle to deal with the challenge of ‘them’ and ‘us’? The publication of *East West Street*



coincided with a moment in which the experiences of the 1930s were back with a vengeance: a few days after the book came out in Britain the country voted (narrowly) for Brexit, and a few months later the US voted (sort of) for President Trump. Your country too has its own experiences, but of course I do not need to tell you that. Still, it did not stop the government of my country rolling out the red carpet two weeks ago, to embrace the man who put you in prison for the words you spoke.

The **third factor** is fear – fear of a great unravelling, of the world that was created in 1945. The personal stories in *East West Street* offer a fragment of a larger picture, of a world that came together in that magnificent year of 1945 to create a new set of institutions and rules, to place constraints on the actions of governments, a world in which individuals and groups would have rights and where the power of the sovereign – and sovereignty itself – would no longer be absolute. The Nuremberg trial was part of a remarkable moment, one that connected the Charter of the United Nations to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Refugees Convention and the Council of Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Economic Community. It was a moment premised on new ideas, about rights for individual and groups, on economic integration as a means of removing barriers and forging a new politics of interdependence, in which the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s would not be repeated. It was to be a world in which limits would be placed on the sovereignty and freedom of states and their leaders. It was a revolutionary moment.

The world then created was imperfect, we know that. One set of barriers was replaced by another. One set of inequalities gave way to another, even more grotesque. Yet, and it's a big yet, it helped Europe achieve a period of relative peace and prosperity. Today that world is under threat, a risk of the 1945 settlement unravelling, but with no vision as to what might replace it. Has there

been a loss of collective historical memory, as the UK stumbles to ‘take back control’, and the US votes, sort of, to ‘Make Itself Great Again’? Does taking back control, or wishing the possibility to make oneself great again, mean the right to treat citizens and others as a state wishes, unconstrained by international laws and other commitments?

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I did not expect the steady flow of communications, the daily letters, emails and tweets that followed the publication. You know better than I, dear, absent friend, what it means to commune with your readership, to have “friends all around the world”, as you wrote in *The Writer’s Paradox*, who help you travel around the world, although you have never met them. “Each eye that reads what I have written, each voice that repeats my name, holds my hand like a little cloud”, you wrote in your prison cell.

Some who write ask specific questions (‘What do you mean by your final sentence?’). Others offer a critique (‘Though I have very great respect for Lauterpacht and Lemkin . . .’ etc.). Some share a reminiscence, or recollection, often personal. Others offer new information, sometimes of a captivating quality. I feel privileged to have received such communications, about the city of Lviv, about the characters in the book, about ‘genocide’ and ‘crimes against humanity’, about our golden world.

Many of those who have written touch upon the book’s historical and political implications. I was surprised by the many communications from teachers and schoolchildren, on the need to improve the teaching of history. Others – in considerable numbers – have written about parallels between the period of which

I have written and current events, especially in Britain and the US, but also across Europe, and elsewhere.

A seventy-one-year-old social worker wrote to say he worried about “parallels” between my accounts of what happened in the thirties in Poland and Germany, “and what is happening in Palestine now.” A Scotsman explained that he was ‘instinctively distrustful of all nationalism’. He asked: *Now that we in Britain are faced with a resurgent right, and live in a place where judges are called scum by neo-fascists and ‘enemies of the people’ by a newspaper which sells massively, what should be done?* Having voted for the Union in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, the book now prompted him to wonder: *Do I, in any second Scottish independence referendum, vote for what appears to be the inclusive civic nationalism of the ‘Yes’ campaign, rather than the continuation of the Union and the xenophobia which has enveloped it?* That question surely has a continuing – and broad – resonance.

A retired British diplomat, with decades of personal, high-level experience on matters European and international, reached out in the short period between the book’s publication and the UK referendum on EU membership:

*It should be read by every voter before 23 June as a wake-up call about the fragility of the structures of peace and stability we have created over 70 years and the carelessness with which we seem prepared to disregard them.*

Disregard the structures of peace and stability Britain did, by the narrow margin of 52 per cent to 48 per cent (although not in Scotland or Northern Ireland or London). Was this abject carelessness, this so-called taking back control?

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Once again a poison of xenophobia and nationalism is coursing its way through the veins of the world. The ‘strong man’ is back, but I do not need to tell you that, dear, absent friend. I see it on my journeys to the central and eastern parts of the European continent – to Hungary, to Poland, to the Ukraine. If you have seen the BBC Storyville film *My Nazi Legacy* – directed by David Evans – will have observed me standing in a faraway field in the Ukraine watching people dressed in SS uniforms celebrate the creation of the Waffen SS Galicia Division, seventy five years ago, in 1943.

I see the poison of xenophobia and nationalism in Britain, in some of the votes for Brexit, and in related political developments. I see it in the views of a British Prime Minister who recently expressed the hope that she wanted the UK to leave the European Convention on Human Rights. Can you imagine what she told her party conference, in October 2016? ‘If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere’?

Her words – did she really appreciate what she was saying? - reminded me of that passage in Stefan Zweig’s magnificent book *The World of Yesterday* – required reading for our times – published posthumously in 1942, after Zweig and his wife committed suicide. “For almost half a century”, Zweig wrote, “trained my heart to beat as the heart of a citizen of the world. On the day I lost my Austrian passport I discovered that when you lose your native land you are losing more than a patch of territory within set borders.”

Are there shades of Europe in the 1930s when a widely read British newspaper – the *Daily Mail* – runs a front page story with the pictures of three senior judges, charged with interpreting and applying English law and the constitutional requirements of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, and describes them

as ‘Enemies of the People’?

Where are we heading?

One former London mayor – Ken Livingstone – offensively evokes Adolf Hitler as a supporter of Zionism; another suggests that the EU and Hitler somehow share common aims. Boris Johnson also has no compunction (in the course of the Brexit referendum campaign) in referring to Barack Obama as “part Kenyan” to explain the US president’s perceived anti-British tendency. Several years ago, in writing about Africa, he wrote about “flag-waving piccaninnies” and “tribal warriors” with “watermelon smiles”. How remarkable, how terrible, that this man should now be Britain’s Foreign Secretary. How terrible that he, who claims a Turkish heritage, should extol the importance of free speech in Turkey by writing a coarse poem about Mr Erdogan’s adventures with a goat, and then, just a few months later, when he travels to Turkey, as Foreign Secretary, say nothing about the crackdown on free speech. Instead, he talked about his Turkish washing machine.

Where are we heading?

The United States elects Donald Trump as President. One of his first acts is to sign an executive order which would – but for the actions of independent judges and the US federal courts – with immediate effect ban entire categories of individuals and groups from entering the United States simply because they happen to hold a particular nationality. Two years earlier he called “for a total and complete shutdown for Muslims entering the United States.” What an original idea! Target human beings not because of what they have done, or their individual propensities, but because they happen to be a member of a particular group.

Actually, it's an idea with a long and dark history, as the Italian writer Primo Levi reminded us not so long after he managed to leave a place called Auschwitz, where he spent a year as a resident. He made the point rather crisply in the Preface to his book, *If This Is a Man*, published in 1947. He wrote:

*Many people – many nations – can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that every stranger is an enemy.*

When this happens, Primo Levi continued:

*when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premiss in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the [concentration camp].*

One thing leads to another. Against this background, the idea of a travel ban based on a person's nationality, or religion, is disturbing. As disturbing as the idea of putting a writer in prison forever because he spoke a few words. Experience – recent experience – teaches us to know where such a beginning can lead, to single out people not for what they have done but because they happen to be a member of a particular group, or because they have said something that is not received with favour.

How ironic, that the two countries that did so much to put in place the rules that prohibited actions of such a kind, that created rights under international law for individuals, and for the protection of groups, have now fallen off their perches. How ironic, seven decades after the opening of the Nuremberg trial, with its British and American prosecutors and twenty-two Germans in the dock, that so many now look to the country of those defendants as a primary bastion of liberal democracy, as protector of the rule of law, of the rights of refugees, of the European Convention on Human Rights, of international rules more generally.

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So, then, where are we heading?

You have a special vantage point, dear, absent friend, you who now live the life of which you wrote in your novel. The landscape that lies before you is not a place of beauty. And yet, somehow, magically, you are still able to dream, still able to see the “wide sky above”. Somehow, in your wanderings, you find the ability to encounter what you tell us are “flickers of hope”.

I imagine where you are, now, and I imagine where Lauterpacht and Lemkin were, seven decades ago, in Nuremberg’s Courtroom 600, looking at the man they are prosecuting, for ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘genocide’, without knowing that he, Hans Frank, is responsible for the killings of their parents and entire families. How does that feel? I can imagine, but no more.

Nor can I really understand how they summoned the strength to continue, in the midst of the horrors and the rumours, as they set to work on their big ideas to remake the world, to limit the power of the sovereign, to make new rules, to cast a protective embrace across each and every one of us, whoever we are, wherever we may be.

How remarkable, how remarkable, that at the worst of times they did not crawl into a corner, each of them, and weep. Like you, they continued to dream. Like you, they managed to find a flicker of hope.

Lauterpacht believed - passionately - that we should concentrate on the protection of the individual, that every single human being had minimum rights under international law. That was a revolutionary idea back then, one on which you are able to rely, dear friend, even if it has not yet brought you the freedom that will one day, once again, be yours. His minimum rights included freedom of speech

and expression, as he made clear in his famous book, published in 1945, on *An International Bill of the Rights of Man*. “The freedom of speech and expression of opinion in writing and by other means”, he wrote in his draft Article 4, “shall not be denied or impaired”.

As the overt use of racial and identity politics returns to centre stage, the experience of writing *East West Street*, with its immersion in the world of the years between 1914 and 1945, makes it difficult not to feel an acute sense of anxiety about what is stirring. Your situation, dear, absent friend, at the instance of your government, and passed over in silence by my government, serves only to exacerbate that feeling.

Yet my experience teaches me that the ideas of Lauterpacht and Lemkin – with their sense of humanity and hope, with their endearing attachment to the possibility of international rules and justice – will not soon disappear.

As a poet and songwriter put it, that “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”. “I can’t run no more”, he told us, “With that lawless crowd, While the killers in high places, Say their prayers out loud”.

Two steps forward. One step sideways. A step back. Another step forward. And so it goes on, over time and place.

So dear absent friend, where are we heading?

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A day after giving the lecture in Istanbul, I headed with my friend Yasemin Congar, who is Ahmet’s partner, to the maximum security prison at Selivri, two



hours from Istanbul. This is where Ahmet is incarcerated, along with his younger brother Mehmet, an economist, who is not only imprisoned but also fired from his position at Istanbul University, where he has taught for 30 years.

Yasemin is not allowed to visit Ahmet, she gets ten minutes with him on the phone, every two weeks. Nor has any foreigner been allowed to visit, so I am the first, three weeks ago, and only because I represent him and his brother at the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg. The prison facility is a huge complex, 11,000 prisoners, a forbidding and desolate place, even if an improvement on the conditions depicted in *Midnight Express*. I pass through no less than eight security checks, and am eventually delivered at Block 9, in a minibus. I am not subjected to the full body search my daughters were hoping for, but am required to have my eyes scanned, to be integrated into ‘the system’.

I meet first with Mehmet, who want to talk about globalisation. Then he leaves, and I wait for Ahmet, in a glass-panelled room, through which I can see other prisoners. Ahmet arrives, looking fit. “Weights!”, he says. We observe each other, and then just crack up. In fact, we spend most of our time together roaring with laughter. Ever hopeful, he says that Turkey has not yet hit rock bottom. “We are a nation of bungee jumpers, and somehow, just before we hit the ground we manage to bounce up again.” Over our half hour we talk about food, politics, his prison memoir (“a rite of passage for any writer”).

What’s going in America, he asks? When he entered prison Donald Trump had not been elected.

We agree that we are somehow less worried about America, with its robust constitution, and independent judges. Mr Trump may turn out to be a four year blip, although over those years great damage is being committed, as his

administration seeks to unmake the multilateral order created after 1945, and replace it with bilateral arrangements, ripping up trade rules, the Paris climate accord, and the Iran agreement. There is method to the apparent madness, we agree, but it will come to nought.

Britain and Brexit, on the other hand, if it actually happens, is another matter, I tell Ahmet. No mere four-year interlude, I fear. The consequences of the vote to leave are greater – in social, political and economic terms – and maybe even existential. Writing *East West Street*, I tell Ahmet, I was struck by the remarkable efforts – of politicians and civil servants – to prepare for all eventualities in the course of the war. By 1942 committees had been established to prepare for any number of possibilities, criminal proceedings already in preparation against senior Nazis. By contrast, today is totally different, as policy and action is made up on the hoof. We now know that in the run-up to the Referendum no work was done in advance to deal with preparations following a vote to leave. Nothing.

And I know – because my daily life is the negotiation, adoption and application of international agreements – that preparations for a post-Brexit world are pitiful, driven largely by a sense of hope and delusion about Britain's place in the world. The desire to roll the clock back to the great days of empire is palpable.

But of course the world has changed. We are woefully unprepared for what is coming. Our politicians dissemble, our government lies. We are repeatedly told how easy it will be to enter into our own trade agreements, once freed from the shackles of the Customs Union. It will not be as straightforward or as speedy as we are constantly told, especially if the trade agreements are to be meaningful: for the UK, it is trade in services that is vital, and no free trade agreement has ever included services in the manner the UK now needs. I know because it's what

I teach and practise as an international lawyer. It will not happen by March 2019, or March 2029.

We are repeatedly told that the jurisdiction of the ECJ is not acceptable for disputes involving our future relations with the EU. What alternative is put forward? Arbitration, says the Government. Yet I sit regularly as an arbitrator on panels of the kind identified in the Government's White Paper, and my experience is unambiguous: such arbitration proceedings are slow, costly and unpredictable in outcome. International arbitration is a lottery. The idea that arbitrating disputes that involve the rights of companies, workers and citizens is an improvement on existing arrangements, or even a viable alternative, is delusional.

As to Britain's place in the world, I can also speak from direct experience. I saw for myself, in relation to the decolonisation of the Chagos islands how, in June 2017, Britain lost a major vote at the UN, so that the matter was sent to the International Court of Justice in the Hague. Of the EU members, twenty-two members abstained, including, as the *Economist* put it, "usually reliable allies France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain". Members of the Commonwealth supported Mauritius by an overwhelming majority. Just 14 States out of more than 200 supported the UK. And then, a few weeks later, I saw how Britain lost its judge at the World Court, for the first time since the Court was created nearly a century ago. Hubris, and BREXIT, are costly things.

This is the true reality of Britain in the world today, one that I live daily. The country has fallen off the end of the top table. That reality – political, economic, social – may soon dawn on some who told us it would all be so easy. Here's my prediction, I tell Ahmet. In the end, whether we stay or leave, not much will change. The most likely outcome is a Norway-type solution, or a variation of it, in which the country remains associated in some form with the single market and

the customs union, bound by but with no say in making new EU legislation, touched by judgment of the ECJ but with no judge to contribute to outcomes, and still paying large bills. Quite why this would be an improvement is hard to fathom. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Except that the country's reputation is diminished, its global role further declined, and the sense of drift and dissolution palpable.

So what's the point, Ahmet asks? I shrug my shoulders. We chortle again about the absurdity of life. It seems that the power of memory and imagination – and their shadows and consequences – is not easily cast aside. The legacy of 1945 remains. It will not, I suspect, be so easily undone.

Ahmet smiles. Our time is up.

Will you write something in my notebook, I ask?

He takes the notebook and writes: "The worst thing is you are leaving now and we won't be able to talk any more." We hug. He leaves.

It is quite something to spend a little time with a man who has been sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison, on trumped up charges, who can laugh about his lot and the idea of President Erdogan being welcomed to this country by Boris Johnson and taking tea with the Queen.

And it is quite something to leave his prison with an unexpected feeling of elation, motivated by the sheer, towering greatness of the human spirit, of the vital importance of words, and of Ahmet.