

BEING SMALL – ITS ADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS

The situation of literary translators in Slovenia

Before I start explaining the actual happening in the Slovene translation scene, let me give you a few details on my country as it is still fairly unknown in the world and often mixed with Slovakia or even Slavonia (a region in Croatia which was often mentioned during the war operations in the Balkans during the nineties). It lies in the northwestern corner of former Yugoslavia, wedged between Austria and Italy, bordering also on Hungary and Croatia, one hour's drive from Venice and three hours' drive from Vienna. Its capital is Ljubljana.

The population of 2 million speaks Slovene, a very interesting and difficult Slavic language with some distinct and archaic features such as the dual which is observed both in declension and conjugation and creates numerous problems for those willing to learn Slovene and even for native speakers. There are two universities (in Ljubljana and Maribor) and numerous colleges.

Generally speaking, the publishing in Slovenia is very strong and variegated and although the absolute numbers of published books are small, the per capita book production is in the very top of the world production. One would therefore expect that the Slovene literary translators have a good time and a lot of work. Unfortunately, the recession of the last years has unmercifully reached us as well, reducing the number of publishers and influencing the publishing programmes. In their eternal quest for better profits (sometimes even for survival) the publishers prefer to publish the so-called bestselling titles, the »how-to-do-it-yourself« books and subjects that are »in« at the moment. The classics, the great novels and serious literature have been pushed to the side and only a handful of publishing houses still maintain the traditional collections of translated classics and great works of modern literature.

The Ministry of Culture has always been subsidizing the publications of translated literature although the system of allotting subsidies was changed recently. Originally, a list of world literary masterpieces that were still missing from our translated opus was composed and publishers that decided to publish them got monetary help for each title separately. Now, the publishers get subsidies for their yearly programmes and have to decide by themselves which titles to subsidize. And here, national literature being a priority, the translation plans usually turn into wishful thinking.

As I had mentioned before, due to the small population the runs of published books are small also. A novel may reach a run of as much as 3000 copies (rather less) and consequently, its price is high and out of reach for many potential readers. On the other hand, libraries are

reviving and often you will find waiting lists for certain popular titles. One of the government provisions has been to subsidize the libraries in order to promote reading and help publishing.

And how are the literary translators faring between the Scyllas and Charibdes of publishing problems? One of the Slovene curiosities is that there are relatively few freelance translators. Most translators combine translation with a job, usually related to publishing or journalism. There is certainly less work for them and many of them accept translations of inferior literary works to work at all. The results of a questionnaire, sent to the members of our Association last winter show that the conditions imposed by publishers are getting tougher.

Ten years ago, a translator's contract included the maximum run of copies (10.000 copies for novels and 20.000 copies for nonfiction works, valid for the period of six years) and stipulated a special fee for the main selection titles in the Book Club, while now the translators get a flat fee with no time limitations and no observation of exceptionally big runs.

We used to have a good system for determining the writers' and translators' fees: it was based on the average national monthly income and determined that a writer's author's sheet is worth such an average monthly income while the translator's author's sheet (16 pages) was worth half of it. The fees changed with the inflation of the time. A recent draft law on the translators', copy editors' and interpreters' activities foresees very advantageous fees that however remain a dream as no publisher will or can pay them as they are practically the double of the actual fees. It remains a sad fact that publishers in general tend to economize on author's fees and not on printing costs or design.

In the past, a translator received 5 copies of the published work while now he (or she) pertains only 3. At least the publishers grant him a certain discount if he (or she) wants to purchase additional copies, and if a translation is reprinted, the translator gets 1 copy of the reprint.

In Slovenia we do not know or better, we do not practice the hard cover – paperback variants. Paperbacks have never been popular with the Slovenes and all the attempts to produce cheaper brochured books failed. One of the reasons is definitely the insignificant difference in prices of the two editions (as I said before, our runs are small and usually the hard cover editions covered all the needs), another the characteristic habit of preserving books neatly stacked on the shelves (they are never thrown away, and for such purposes the hard covers are more neat). And consequently, no paperback fees for the authors!

We do not have a model contract – yet. Eleven years ago, when Slovenia became an independent state, the legislature was changed in accordance with and in anticipation of joining the European Union. The law on author's rights states explicitly that whatever is not mentioned in the contract is ownership of the author. And yet the publishers demand from the authors (also translators) to cede all the rights for digital, electronic, video and sono registration. If one dares object, the answer is usually: Take it or leave it! And unfortunately there are always persons willing to take over for smaller fees.

Slovene literary translators are organized in the Association of Slovene Literary Translators which functions on a voluntary basis. We have no professional employees (except a chartered accountant), we organize our work and events by ourselves. We have a yearly meeting on a determined theme (this year it was on TRANSLATING OF REALISTIC AND NATURALISTIC LITERATURE) and we publish a yearly book with articles from the meeting and abstracts of our major events. During the year, we organize lectures by prominent translators and experts, round tables on the problems of our profession and reading evenings. For these activities we get some subsidies from the Ministry of Culture and there are also some proceeds from the subsidiary rights. In order to become member of our Association, the applicant must have translated and published at least 2 books or 30 author's sheets of literary text. Our association is asked by the government to send 2 representatives into the commission that grants the so-called status to translators: this means that the state pays the social insurance to those freelance cultural workers who prove to have produced works of cultural relevance. A special grant is given also to very talented young translators who had just finished their studies. The status is renewable every 5 years.

Let us return to the linguistic problems. As already mentioned, Slovene is a very difficult language to learn and is a sort of curiosity because of its characteristics, beside being the language of a (numerically) small nationality. Slovenes themselves seem to have a good ear for languages and we do not lack any linguistic specialists. The most often spoken languages are English, German, Serbian, and Croatian, Italian (because of the vicinity of Italy) and more recently Spanish. A more difficult problem is how to find translators for Slovene literary works. There are a few fine experts for the Slovene language in Austria and Germany, the Czech Republic and in the former Yugoslav republics, and Slovene lectors work on all major universities in Europe and America. Most often, it is through personal contacts that translators and publishers are found in European countries. Our Ministry of Culture has created special funds for the promotion of Slovene literary production abroad and there is now an established yearly meeting – the Vilenica Writers' Meeting – where authors

from all over Europe meet to present their literary achievements and discuss the problems of the trade.

The Department of Slavic Languages at the Ljubljana University organizes a special summer school of Slovene language with differentiated levels for beginners and those who already possess a certain knowledge of our language and come to enrich it. The participants are also given lectures on Slovene literature and culture. There are some grants available for those who cannot afford to pay the course by themselves and our Association of Slovene Literary Translators invites one literary translator from abroad and pays his (or her) fees.

There is a special translation department at the Ljubljana University and young translators seem to be very much in demand – alas! not so much for literary purposes than for the necessities of the European Union and all the papers connected with it. Nevertheless, the department which two years ago was nearly closed, is now flourishing again and let us hope that the situation will eventually turn into more literary waters.