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THE LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS IN SLOVENIA

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'The land on the sunny side of the Alps', Slovenia, a country of 2 million inhabitants and covering 20,000 square kilometers has prospered peacefully after a ten-day war for Independence in 1991. The country has Hungarian and Italian minorities, but more than 90% of the population are Slovenes speaking Slovene, a south Slavonic language. During a visit to Ljubljana, I interviewed the presidents of the two Slovene associations for translators, Ms Doris Debenjak of the Association of Technical and Scientific Translators and Mr Vasja Cerar of the Association of Literary Translators of Slovenia.



Ljubljana

Cay Dollerup: When were your respective Associations founded?

Vasja Cerar: The Association of Literary Translators was founded in 1953 as a

subsidiary of the Authors Guild, and we are still affiliated and share offices with them. It was one of the branches of the Slovene-Croat-Bosnian Association and at some stages, it enjoyed considerable autonomy and could establish international cooperation. But in Yugoslavia, there was always a problem with central vs centrifugal movements and towards the end of the existence of Yugoslavia we given less leeway. In 1991, we joined the European council of literary translators' association.

Doris Debenjak: Our Association was founded a few years after the Literary Translators, mostly by people who were not accepted in the Literary Association. The Slovene and Croatia branches founded the Yugoslav Society which became a member of FIT. Since 1992, we are an independent member of the FIT.

CD: What is your membership.

Doris Debenjak: We are more than 600. Membership can be obtained after the applicant's work - an original and a translation - has been checked by a commission. The only exceptions are the court interpreters who are automatically accepted as they have passed an exam administered by the Ministry. At present we have no subcommittees, but we are in the process of establishing a subcommittee for court interpreters because they have special problems with impossible working hours and unreasonable delays in payment as when they are called to some customs office in the middle of the night and do not receive payment until a year later. There are approximately 80 free-lances. The rest are people who work in-house, for instance at firms and in ministries. A few work with tenders from the Council of Europe and the European Union and some have passed the 'concours' at these institutions. Our members normally have specialties; most of them are not linguists, but have, for instance, medical or engineering backgrounds. In the construction industry, translators with a construction background are much in demand when large German or Russian firms move in and need translation of documents. It is typical of much work that clients often demand that our members can both interpret and translate: translation of documents becomes interdependent with subsequent interpreting because you pick up the terminology.

Vasja Cerar: Our membership is smaller, around 150. It spans from retired translators to young people, and a few of our members are still active in their 70's and 80's. About 20% are free lances, but the majority have other jobs and translate as a sideline. Membership has been climbing as more young people are joining us. They are, generally speaking, attracted by the events we organise and where they can talk shop. On the other hand, our members are not limited to literary translators, but also translate other types of texts - there is nothing shameful about that. In order to become a member, people have to prove that they are active translators of fiction, for instance by submitting specimen translations of their work and a bibliography. If they are not active, they do not need us - and we do not need them.

CD: What is the financial status of translators in Slovenia?

VC: After independence in 1991, there was a boom in translation with the emergence of a lot of publishers and private enterprises. This increase was not characterised by a similar improvement in quality, since much work was done by people who, unlike our members were not professionals - students and other amateurs. We do our best to maintain an understanding between publishers and translators about the fees. Until two years ago, fees were settled by the Ministry of Culture and publishers. Now we have, like other former Communist countries, signed the Berne Convention about copyright. Accordingly fees are settled by an agreement between authors and translators and this making it difficult to set a reasonable price. Furthermore the boom is over and small publishers are going bankrupt. So far, I've been talking about translations into Slovene. Out of Slovene, there is some funding by authors of literary translation, and the annual three-day Vilenica festival which has taken place for more than ten years is a major event for Middle European literature people. In 1996 we published a book with Slovene contributions on the occasion of the ten year anniversary of the Vilenica festival. There is also an annual prize for translation.

DD: Many of our members, especially in-house translators in companies and ministries may find that they are looked down upon by non-linguist specialists. But this is changing: people realise that translations must be good. A physician attending a conference will know that he must have a fully comprehensible translation. It is an advantage that we set the fees: if you do 100 pages into Slovene a month, you can live of it. Furthermore the Association makes the invoices so that all members get immediate payment. Most free lances do twice as much. This is higher than the international standard, but then we had some extremely valuable advice from our German sister association in the FIT in setting the fees.

CD: What about subtitlers?

VC: They are mostly member of our Association. The National Television has a special bureau, which employs about 3-4 people and a lector who corrects translations so that they are standard Slovene. They do all sorts of subtitling, including the news. The bureau relies on free lances who are cheaper. Private industry - for instance firms doing video subtitling - pay poorly and they often do not give the name of the subtitlers because the work is done by amateurs. There may be improvement, but it is a sobering fact that all private firms started with cheap labour.

CD: What languages do you work with?

VC: Literary translation is mostly into Slovene: many publishers have their own translators and endeavour to have translations directly from the original language - including Chinese which is being taught here. We can translate from most

languages with literary traditions. These days, relay translation is shunned. In general there has always been a fine tradition for translating much foreign literature into Slovene. This even goes for the most repressive periods in the 1940s and '50s, although much of the literature translated then was 'classical' which was considered 'safe'.

DD: Translation work done by our members takes in practically all European languages. The majority of our members work in both directions because they are expected to do so by companies and ministries. This is no problem, for many members are of foreigners who have settled here, others are Slovenes who have lived long in other countries and know the languages. At a guess, about half the work is English-Slovene, one-third German-Slovene. Spanish and Russian are not infrequent, but the demand fluctuates with the market. Italian translation is largely confined to the border region. Interpreting is normally also bidirectional except at the highest political level where we have two interpreters who translate out of their mother tongue.

CD: What about the future for translation?

DD: At the technical and scientific association we concentrate on protecting and improving the situation for our members. In other words: we fight for better fees. We are also considering internationalisation a potential danger, with the Internet as a possibility for undercutting our work. So we are establishing ourselves there, too. Our organisation is reasonably strong: we have an office with a secretariat of 3 full-time salaried employees making the invoices for our members and a newsletter which appears irregularly. We also conduct seminars.

VS: Well, we have no salaried personnel, but must rely entirely on volunteers for secretarial and committee work. We also wish to maintain fees and quality in translation work. We are a non-profit organisation with low membership fees. Some years we have been so poor that we couldn't afford to buy stamps. Now we are supported by the State, because we and the Authors Guild get royalties of books the authors and translators of which cannot be located, and we also receive some sponsorship money from private industry. Accordingly we have an annual conference, the award and some other activities. We are worried by a book tax of 5%, and by the fact that publishers are becoming less willing to take on 'risky' translations. They tend to give preference to profitable books with pictures and produced in Hong Kong rather than to high-quality material. Some years ago we came up with a list of fifty foreign literary masterpieces we thought ought to be translated. A few have appeared in Slovene, but generally speaking, the State has no active policy.

CD: What is the role of translational activity in Slovenia?

DD: Translation can be financially important for the specialists who do them, for the companies and ministries who use them, and for specialists who need them

when they go abroad. It is also important for the Slovene language, for instance, when translators have to come up with terms for new phenomena in manuals and in other contexts. They must have specialist knowledge to do that.

VS: I already said that we translate much into Slovene, so in that respect, translation is important. On the other hand, I do not think Slovene writers are influenced by foreign literature. It is my conviction that most Slovene authors do not read translations, and that this tells in their writing. Especially with the young authors there is a lack of discipline in their writings.

Cay Dollerup: Are your associations mutually exclusive?

Vasja Cerar and Doris Debenjak: No. Actually there are many translators who are members of both associations. Membership of the associations heightens the status of the individual translators. And there is also a potential for cooperation between us.



The intermittent Lake Cerknica in southern Slovenia