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When the Iron Curtain Falls: Scandinavian-Czech Translation 1890-1950

IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSLATION of Scandinavian literature into Czech, Hugo Kosterka (1867-1956) appears to be a translator of special interest for more than one reason. Firstly, he was one of the first translators who worked from the original languages directly and not via German as most other 19th century translators. Secondly, he translated from all three Scandinavian languages and introduced many major contemporary Scandinavian authors to Czech readers. Last, but not least, his activity as a translator covers a period of almost 60 years (1890-1949), and thus the study of his activities may provide the basic idea of a «minor-language» literature and culture mediation in the disturbing decades during which the Bohemian Lands would re-emerge as a part of several different political units with various international links. In fact, he appears to be an emblematic as well as unique translator and culture mediator of the constitutional period of Scandinavian-Czech translation.

In this paper I shall focus first on the archaeology of translation, on mapping the basic detailed facts. Only then will I proceed to relating them to a wider literary, social, as well as political context of the time. The concept of the history of translation I endorse here, is not that of studying the history of thinking about translation, as performed by Jiří Levý, among others (Levý 1956), but that of taking into account the human translator, as promoted by Anthony Pym (Pym 1998: p. 160-177). The main subject of our interest is not the idea of translation, nor the make-up of the translation, but the fact of translation, and its

publication or not, under specific historical circumstances, as well as the role of the translator as an intercultural mediator and a member of an interculture (Ibid.: p. 178-192). Discussing system and action theories, Pym complains that «[...] recent theories have had precious little room for people» (Pym 1998: p. 149). This paper is devoted to a particular human translator. We shall see, however, that an interplay of translation, literary, publishing and political «systems» appears to be ubiquitous in the situation analysed.

Studying his translations from the Scandinavian languages, we need to keep in mind that Kosterka was a polyglot translating from a number of European languages including Portuguese, Spanish, French, English and Serbo-Croatian. He was the first Czech translator of Oscar Wilde¹, and he translated Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. However, Kosterka was not a professional translator, he was a post-office bureaucrat often travelling to various European countries. As such he brought European literature to Czech readership not only metaphorically, via his translations, but also literally: by train.

Kosterka's translating activity from Scandinavian languages was immense. Over a period of 59 years he published over 110 translations from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, about thirty of which were republished. Moreover, he collaborated with a number of literary magazines, publishing a large number of short stories and novel extracts, as well as poetry translations. On top of that, Kosterka was closely connected to Czech literary and cultural life as I shall show later.

Kosterka published his first translation in 1890, when direct translation from Scandinavian languages to Czech was not an everyday practice. The Bohemian lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prague being a somewhat small provincial town in comparison to Vienna and Budapest. German was commonly spoken and written side by side with Czech, resulting in (1) a reduced need of translation into Czech and (2) numerous second-hand translations using German as the most common and natural mediating language. The tendency initiated already in the first half of the 19th century with the beginning of the National Revival, however, was to stress the importance of Czech, and by 1890 Czech had gained a strong and indisputable position. Yet, the influence of German, German culture and German reception of international culture on Czech intellectuals remained

¹ His translation was published in a special issue of the *Moderní revue* literary journal dedicated to Oscar Wilde in June 1895, i.e. in an immediate reaction to Wilde being accused and convicted of homosexuality. At the time, it was a radical contribution from both a national and a European/international perspective.

strong, until the infamous forced transfer of the German population in the post Second World War period.

In the beginning of the 1890s, Kosterka published his first translations in various student magazines, where he introduced writers such as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Edvard Brandes, Arne Garborg and others. His true reason for translating from the Scandinavian languages will always remain unclear. The fact is that with authors such as Bjørnson, Ibsen and, later, Strindberg, Garborg or Ola Hansson, Scandinavian literature was a must for every Central European intellectual of the time. German translations were available and read in Bohemia too. Kosterka's selection was based not on his personal knowledge of the Scandinavian literary context, but on his reading of the German translations and thus on the German reception. On translating Arne Garborg's famous novel *Trette Mænd* (1891, Weary/Tired Men), Kosterka inevitably translated the title from the German *Müde Seelen* (Weary/Tired Souls, *Zemdlené duše*).

The 1890s saw an abrupt development in the mediation of young international literature. Side by side with more established literary journals, a number of new progressive journals cropped up. Arnošt Procházka, Jiří Karásek and Hugo Kosterka founded a most vigorous and distinctive literary journal titled *Moderní revue* (1894-1925), focusing on the decadent, and later symbolist, literary movements across Europe, most notably in France. From the very beginning, *Moderní revue* was an art-for-art's-sake project. The individuality of the artist and the aesthetic quality of the artwork were highly esteemed, regardless of any social and other foreseeable impact. The high authenticity of the artist and of his work equalled high literary quality. The necessity of unlimited artistic freedom, meant *inter alia* that nothing was *a priori* taboo. The other way round, a work that was taboo for the majority, gave the impression of a true art-for-art's-sake. Therefore it was rather natural that a special issue of *Moderní revue* was dedicated to Oscar Wilde (see note 1).

Suddenly, *Moderní revue* became the platform for a large number of small publishing houses promoting the new Czech and international literature. Kosterka's relationship to *Moderní revue* was, however, a loose and non-dogmatic one. He offered translations both to the small publishers and to the larger ones. As for the choice of writers to translate, he was rather pragmatic. For instance the most shocking Norwegian decadent writers, Hans Jæger and Christian Krohg, remained untranslated, even though they would have matched the profile of *Moderní revue* in 1890s. Besides Bjørnson and Kielland, already «classics» of the time, he translated Hamsun, Strindberg,

Lagerlöf and Kierkegaard. Kosterka's pre-war portfolio was not void of purely commercial books either, such as the then very popular novels by Emilie Flygare-Carlén.

The editorial board of *Moderní revue* had an intercultural nature, also due to the fact that Kosterka received many visits from Scandinavian writers:

In 1897 and 1898 he visited Denmark and Sweden and made contacts with the translated writers. Since then, every Nordic author travelling through Prague would not neglect to pay a visit to Kosterka and, thus, also to the *Moderní revue*. So there would be plenty of new yet pleasant duties linked to our task as a host and a Cicero. A number of writers would come here, including Georg Brandes, Sophus Michaëlis, Aage Mathisson-Hansen and Sigbjørn Obstfelder! (Karásek 1994: p. 202)²

The Great War hit severely not only people's lives and thinking, but also, naturally, the activity of publishing houses. Most of them operated on a subscription basis, and the subscribers having gone to the front in 1914, many publishing houses, small or large, discontinued their activities. Many of them got into serious financial trouble, and never recovered completely from the losses, and finally went bankrupt. At the same time, the Great War led to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishment of Czechoslovakia, Prague becoming its self-confident political and cultural centre.

Moderní revue could not avoid being affected by the Great War, but it survived and closed down only when the chief editor Arnošt Procházka died in 1925. However, the Great War amplified a paradoxical tendency that had already appeared shortly after the turn of the century: a collectivistic tendency. In his article on *Moderní revue*, Otto M. Urban argues:

It is striking to what extent a number of the modernists – even though they resisted being ordinary and mass-oriented – under the existing circumstances, especially the Great War, intentionally or unintentionally inclined to various modalities of *collectivism* in their civil and political standpoints. One particular and rather large group of them would flee from the *bourgeois collectivism*, and seek refuge in *proletarian collectivism* ascribing to it utterly idealised features of a system that would free the individual. (Urban 1995: p. 36)

Most of Kosterka's contributions to *Moderní revue* and the respective publishers are from the pre-war period and his choice of texts is undoubtedly void of any current target-culture ideology.

² All translations of quotations from Scandinavian languages and Czech are mine.

Meanwhile, Kosterka had his first major competitors in the field, who however represented no real threat (in the sense of competition) or him; for instance, Hanuš Hackenschmied, another important translator from Scandinavian languages of the time, was a direct disciple of his. Among translators from these languages, Kosterka had a prominent position for a considerable time. He was known to have a large number of connections making it possible for him to have published projects that other translators would hardly manage to get through to a publisher. For instance, Robert Hansen writes to Kosterka on May 6, 1924:

Mrs. Lesná-Krausová [another major Scandinavian-Czech translator] [...] has given me your address [...]. The thing is that Mrs. Krausová has not been able to sign a contract with any publisher she works with to get my novels published. She thought however, that what she has not succeeded with, might be possible for someone else who has better connections in the purely entertaining literary field – and she gave me your address³.

However, no novels by Robert Hansen were ever published in Czech. Kosterka could no longer reckon that he could translate any novel/author he would choose to. For instance, he was interested in translating Sigrid Undset, but the letter she wrote to him on December 12, 1925 says clearly he was late: «[...] I regret to say that I have commenced negotiations with another translator of my works into Czech.»

The interwar period saw significant changes in publishing and translation practices. With the leading shift being professionalisation of publishing, the rather small amateur publishing houses, run by enthusiasts and based on the subscription system, would gradually disappear. For the most part, only the larger publishing houses survived. The newly established ones were more professional from the start and demanded higher discipline from their translators. The shift is quite evident in the ever more carefully formulated contracts that were now stipulated between translators and publishers. In the 1890s, the hand-written contracts between Kosterka and the publisher would consist of a couple of sentences on a sheet of paper stating the basics facts and requirements. In the 1920s and 1930s, the pre-printed, several-pages-long contracts included details concerning the use of language and the make-up of the text. A contract between Kosterka and the

³ All quotations from letters and contracts can be found in The Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archive, Hugo Kosterka fund, received correspondence. Translations are mine.

Družstevní práce (DP) publishing house dated after 1930 defines the obligatory use of normative philology:

The manuscript shall be handed in to the editor of DP without any philological mistakes and shall require no further corrections. If in doubt, the author-translator will check the latest edition of *Pravidla českého pravopisu* [Czech Orthography Rules] published by Státní nakladatelství, and *Naše řeč* [Our Language] journal. In the case of necessary corrections, these shall be made by a language expert at the author-translator's expense.

In one respect however, the situation had not changed substantially. The authority of the German translations and German reception of the Scandinavian literature remained high. Foreign literature would come to the Bohemian Lands via Germany until the Second World War. Czech readers would first learn about a particular book from its German translation and only then, in some cases, from the Czech translation, be it a first or second-hand translation. Although second hand translations were very rare in the inter-war period, the prior knowledge of the German text made it necessary to translate and publish books bearing the expectation of the target-language reader in mind. This publishing practice, embracing not just book titles but also the organization of the text is, in Kosterka's case, documented as late as in 1927. In the translation assignment of August Strindberg's *Kniha lásky* (A Book of Love) from July 13, 1927, the publisher Alois Srdce writes: «[...] please finish the translation by September 1, this year. The translation must not exceed the extent of the German translation of *A Book of Love*. You may change the chapters to the benefit of the Czech readership». In a letter from October 11, the publisher gives further instructions: «The organization of the book must follow exactly the German edition of *Das Buch der Liebe* published by G. Müller, München». The German edition, and later also the Czech one, was a selection from Strindberg's *En blå bok*. In fact it was not a translation of the Swedish text that the publisher expected, but a translation of the German one.

Another significant change involved the selection procedure. No longer was it the translator who chose the books for translation. It was the publisher and his specialised editors. This is evident from the aforementioned assignment by Alois Srdce and even more so from the example of the Czech translation of Olav Duun's monumental six volume novel *Juvikfolket*. Josef Knap, an editor of the well established Topičovo nakladatelství publishing house, wrote to Hugo Kosterka on June 26, 1932:

Mr. Topič has written to you that he has decided to publish Duun's *The People of Juwik* and he asked you to do the translation, but he has not received your answer yet. We would be very pleased if you could manage this. It would be a rather tedious and exhausting job as it would be published part by part in rapid succession, but this should not be a problem for you, as you are so industrious. Moreover, you would not need to translate in detail and the translation could progress swiftly, as Dr. Walter agreed to review and prepare it for print. And you do not need to bother to proof read the Uppdal novel, as he promised to do it; you do not need to worry about mistakes in print (especially in proper names or foreign words and phrases).

Besides the fact that the idea of a translation comes from the publisher, and not from the translator, we learn two other things. The translator had little time for his job (the contracts show that he had about two months for each of the 250 page volumes of the novel). The translator was expected to make just a «rough» translation, subsequently fine-tuned by the editor. Knap writes about the novel *Stigeren* by Kristoffer Uppdal (published in Czech in 1932) and about proofreading by the Czech Nordic scholar Emil Walter. Further correspondence gives evidence that a similar practice was widely used for urgent commissions. Publisher Ladislav Kuncíř sends a letter to Kosterka on February 23, 1933, enclosing an original copy of Sigrid Undset's novel *Jenny* and writes: «[...] you shall hand in the complete translation on April 15, 1933 at the latest [...]. We shall proof read it on our own, not to hinder you in translating.» Kosterka had less than 2 months for the translation.

Let us look at the writer Josef Knap (1900-1973), who worked as an editor in chief of the Topičovo nakladatelství publishing house from the 1930s, and who played a major role in promoting Scandinavian literature in the then Czechoslovakia. He was a member of the Czech ruralist movement – in its early apolitical flavour – and he regarded the inclination to the North as a necessary «corrective» (Knap 1916: p. 15; see also Putna 2004, Kalista 1997). The deflection from the West, from the inorganically imported Romance avant-garde experiments, was also a deflection from Prague, «the formal one with its clubs and cafés» (Knap 1926: p. 17). The nations of the North and East, «which are not granted much sunshine, and therefore glitter, grace, ardour, fever» (Ibid.: p. 15) were – according to Knap – more familiar to us. In cooperation with Milada Topičová, wife of the publisher Jaroslav Topič, who – as stated by Knap – had a major impact on the profile of the publishing house and on the launch of a special contemporary foreign literature series (Knap 1997: p. 238), Knap introduced a number of

Scandinavian authors, some of whom were translated by Hugo Kosterka.

Knap and Topičová focused exclusively on authors whom they thought represented a traditional realistic writing in modern times, such as Sigrid Undset, Olav Duun and Johan Falkberget. Topičovo nakladatelství being the main publisher of Scandinavian literature in Czech, the modernist authors and their works were translated very rarely, predetermining a stereotypical perception of Scandinavian literature as traditional and realistic.

Gradually, the normative requirements the translator had to satisfy grew. The draft of a contract between publisher Josef R. Vilímek and Kosterka from March 1937 concerning the translation of the book of travels *Från Pol till Pol* (From Pole to Pole) by the famous Swedish traveller Sven Hedin, gives evidence that the requirements involved not only normative grammar, but also the style of the language employed. Moreover, potential sanctions are included now:

[...] the manuscript shall follow the language rules as given in *Pravidla českého pravopisu* published by Státní nakladatelství and the latest issue of the *Naše řeč* journal. Similarly, the work will be correctly expressed in the style of the language. The manuscript will be legible, all final corrections applied. The text having been given to the typesetters, all further changes of the original formulation will be, in accordance with the statement and bills from the printer, subtracted from the royalty on payment [...]

The translation of Hedin's book is remarkable for another reason as well. It shows the way apolitical translators, whom Kosterka undoubtedly appears to have been, would become embroiled in ever more serious political issues with ever wider impact. We read in a letter from J. R. Vilímek's publishing house, written on October 22, 1937: «Due to the recent strife between the Third Reich and Sven Hedin, we have decided to publish his book of travels immediately after the New Year [...]». The publisher tries to speed up the publishing, the reason being a sudden disagreement between the Third Reich and Sven Hedin. It appears to be a sort of political protest acceleration. A protest which the translator inevitably becomes part of. In the end, the work was never published in Czech.

The Second World War halted most publishing activities. Immediately after the war, Kosterka, now almost 80 years old, came up with new translations. Publishers offered him more or less specific commissions. Kosterka, for instance, offered some novels to the Tisk publishing house and received a positive answer (February 18, 1946):

We are interested in the Nordic novels you are writing about, and if these are valuable works, that are interesting and remarkable from today's point of view, the size is insignificant. However, we regard social novels without any interest in what is happening in society as too luxurious for the time being. Quality youth literature, travel books and other valuable literary works are welcome.

As early as April 9, 1946, the publisher agreed to publish two of Kosterka's translations. It was due to the 1948 Communist *putsch*, as we shall see later, that none of these were published.

Once again, the collaboration between Knap and Kosterka proved fruitful. Before the war, Knap was «a kind of “official” culture representative in the Agrarian Party and as such, he automatically, without any effort, became one of the key representatives of the Culture Front» (Kalista 1997: p. 278). The right-wing Agrarian Party and its Culture Front were gradually perceived (though unjustly) as a movement with an affinity to the Nazi *Blut und Boden* and thus as a threat to freedom, as understood by the upcoming regime. After the 1946 election, which the Agrarian Party was excluded from, and the victory of the Communist Party, Knap left Prague⁴ (Ibid.: p. 278-285). One of his employers was the Brno publisher Moravská kola to whom he recommended Kosterka as a translator from Scandinavian languages. They worked together on the Czech edition of Hjalmar Söderberg's *Den allvarsamma leken* (Czech edition 1948). It is striking that in comparison to the pre-war 6 months, it took two years now to prepare and publish a translation. Editors' undiscussed corrections are an ongoing practice at this point: an unsigned letter dated April 19, 1946 reads: «Regarding the language and style we shall have the manuscript reviewed, which we hope you kindly agree with [...]», while a letter dated May 3, 1946 (signed Václav Renč) reads: «I have reviewed the manuscript as to the use and style of language, and I am glad you approved – in advance – the changes I made on behalf of the cause.» It is important however to bear in mind that Kosterka was almost 80 years old at that time, and that the language of his translations was somewhat outdated. On the other hand, this was not the reason to discontinue the publication of his translations.

On September 24, 1948, Gustav Pallas, a famous Czech Nordic scholar, wrote to Kosterka:

⁴ At a political trial in 1951, Knap was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment. For health reasons, he was released from prison in 1955. He was rehabilitated in 1967.

[...] yesterday I discussed further steps in publishing the complete works by Sigrid Undset with the director of Vyšehrad publishing house, Dr. Fučík. I told him you intended to translate some of her older works, such as *Fru M. Oulie*, *Fru Waage*, and some stories. Dr. Fučík asked me to convey that he cannot guarantee he will publish these works in Czech translation. If yes, then only much later, taking into account the existing tension between a number of Scandinavian writers and us. I ask you, therefore, not to commence the work, and if you have already begun, please do not continue. The next volume will be the children's series *Lykkelige dager*, then perhaps *Vige-Ljot og Vigdis* and maybe *Vidmund Vidutan*. My daughter would translate these, but it is not certain at all, whether this will happen⁵.

The letter from the Mladá fronta publishing house dated August 9, 1949 conveys a clear message:

Dear Sir, we regret to say that we cannot publish your translation of Ellen Duurloo's novel *Man kaller det kærlighet*. Shortage of paper, and ever higher quality requirements for our publishing scheme, compel us to choose works which not only meet certain artistic quality criteria, but which at the same time furnish the young with a positive attitude to work and the situation of today.

In both cases, the political reasons underlying their refusal are more than obvious. The tension between the Scandinavian authors and Czechs mentioned by Pallas concerned the February 1948 Communist *putsch*. Both in the Nordic countries and in Czechoslovakia, the left-wing parties had an evident majority. In the North, however, it was the Social Democrats that made it impossible for the Communist Party to come to power. And the Nordic writers openly supported the strict Scandinavian attitude. In Czechoslovakia, the Social Democrats helped the onset of totalitarian Communism, denied vehemently by the Norwegians immediately after the first Moscow Trial. The strict Nordic attitude and their criticism of the regime installed in Czechoslovakia stopped the translation and publication of Scandinavian literature in Czech. For the reasons above, the last of Kosterka's translations was published in 1949, not because he had ceased translating. The obituary published in the *Literární noviny* newspaper on June 9, 1956 reads: «[...] Kosterka was active almost until the very last moment. His unpublished works include five novels ready for publishing.» Ironically, one of these unpublished translations from this period is a novel by Jonas Lie written in 1901 (a novel without any political overtones) called *Naar jærnteppet falder*, *When the Iron Curtain Falls*.

⁵ None of these works were published.

Summing up this study, it is possible to formulate some hypotheses concerning the history of Scandinavian-Czech translation. These will be based on this case study focusing on a single translator who appears to permit a synecdochic view of the historical period and language area concerned, and therefore one must bear in mind that they have limited validity.

The basic shift in the period 1890-1950 involves professionalisation, normativisation and politicisation of translation, regarding both language and style, choice of text, mediation and publication channels. In the 1890s, Scandinavian literature was mediated through a sort of organic system, an interculture whose members were numerous, both indigenous and international men of letters, publishers and translators. This, to a certain extent, amateur system, based on idealism and personal enthusiasm was, in accordance with the social changes speeded up by the Great War, being professionalized in the interwar era. The roles of the participants became even more precisely defined, the translator lost the possibility to affect the choice of text and the final make-up of his or her translation. Now conducted by the publishers and their specialized editors, the choice was biased in favour of distinct political and/or ideological criteria. On the eve of the Second World War, the translator became embroiled in ever more serious political issues. Publishing activities being substantially suppressed during WWII, a renewed and vivid translating and publishing activity is witnessed from 1945. The establishment of the totalitarian Communist regime in 1948, however, put an end to these activities. It brought a consolidation of political and ideological reasons of the choice of both individual works and geographical/political areas from which one was allowed to translate. The translator became part of a system on which he could hardly have any bearing.

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