

Nine, by Andrzej Stasiuk. Translated by Bill Johnston. New York: Harcourt, 2007. ISBN 978-0-15-101064-6. Originally published as *Dziwięć* in Polish in 1999.

FADO, by Andrzej Stasiuk. Translated by Bill Johnston. Champaign, IL and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009. ISBN 978-1-56478-559-6. Originally published as *FADO* in Polish in 2006.

Letters

More Details about the Soviet Genocide of Poles in 1937–1938

I appreciated the article on Stalin's Genocide of Poles by Tomasz Sommer (*SR*, vol. 31, September 2011). Many horrible details were not mentioned in this article, and for the sake of historical memory I would like to record the following:

1. In 1937 my parents' acquaintances in Bielski Podlaski (Poland) received a letter from their relatives in Mohylev (USSR) containing the following words in broken Russian: "Ne pishite do nas tak chasto" [do not write to us that often]. This seemed puzzling, but today we know why they wrote this. It was their way of telling their relatives that they did not expect to live much longer.

2. In December 1944 my family and I lived in Ostrów Mazowiecki (Poland). The Soviet summer offensive was over, the front stopped at the river Narew. The winter was severe, and our small town was crowded with trucks and soldiers.

As usual in the evening, a voice from behind the door was heard: "Pozvol'te perenochevat!" [allow us spend the night here] It was an offer we could not refuse. After the first glass of vodka the Soviet officer said: "My name is Kochanowski, the same as that of your poet [Jan Kochanowski]. I was a Pole, but now I am a Soviet soldier and a Soviet patriot. When I was 17 I joined the Komsomol." From the emotional and disjoint sentences a tragic story emerged: "I did it to save my father. I fell on my knees before the 'Tsar' begging for my father's life." These words I remember with great accuracy. He said that it was then that he became a Soviet man.

Fifty years later, I learned what happened to his father. I read a book by Jewgenii Gorelik *Kuropyty. Polski ślad* (Kuropyty: the Polish trace) (Warsaw, 1996). It contained a list of people shot at Kuropyty. On page 231 I read the following:

"Kochanowski, Adolf, son of Onufry. Born in 1883 in Wołkowicze estate, the district of Minsk. Profession: engineer at the Minsk Telephone Station. On 28

November 1937, by decision of the NKVD Committee of the USSR and Prosecutor General of the USSR, sentenced to death for spying for Poland. Shot on 15 December 1937 in Minsk. Rehabilitated 24 December 1957."

Jerzy Mioduszeński
University of Silesia at Katowice

On Polish democracy, Wojciech Jaruzelski, and the Catholic Church

I am really glad that the April 2011 issue of *Sarmatian Review* included a review of *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (edited by M. B. B. Biskupski, James S. Pula, and myself, and issued by Ohio University Press in 2010). A history of democracy in Poland is a very important topic that deserves to be the subject of many books and serious discussion. I am disappointed, however, with the fact that the review, written in an unfriendly or even hostile tone, includes several untrue statements and is, in my opinion, unfair.

Let me support this opinion with several examples taken from the part of the review devoted to one of the chapters I contributed to the book: "In his [Wrobel's] balanced and well informed description of the most important political events in Poland between 1989 and 2004," writes the reviewer, Professor Andrzej Nowak, "there are striking mistakes such as calling Porozumienie Centrum 'Wałęsa's party' in the 1992 elections. Porozumienie Centrum was formed by the brothers Kaczyński and at that time, it was already in open conflict with Lech Wałęsa" (283). This is, of course, true, yet the problem is that, on page 283 I am writing about the 1991 parliamentary elections. This date appears clearly in the text and the entire section is subtitled "1991 Parliamentary Elections."

A similar situation occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the review. "It is hardly possible to analyze the real problems of Polish democracy after 1989," continues Professor Nowak, "without paying attention to the phenomenon of post-communism." This is true again, but why does the reviewer suggest that I have ignored this problem? On page 310, there is an entire section entitled "Post-Communism."

Finally, here is the way in which Professor Nowak deals with quotations. "Piotr Wrobel states the following: 'The Church was considerably strengthened . . . by the policies of General Jaruzelski who granted various favors to the Catholics'" (312). This is followed by Nowak's comments about falsification of history and similar sins. My original sentence, without omissions, runs as follows: "In the late 1970s and the

1980s, the Church was considerably strengthened by the election to the papacy of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła and by the policies of General Jaruzelski, who granted various favors to Catholics.”

Nothing is perfect and our book may include some mistakes, but the question remains: did Professor Nowak read our book too quickly or did he review it in a biased way?

Piotr J. Wrobel
University of Toronto

Professor Nowak responds:

I hope that Professor Wrobel has decided to correct several factual mistakes which I named in my review (though he discreetly did not mention them in his a bit “unfriendly and even hostile” reply). However, I am disappointed that his answer does not tackle the most important problem which is pointed out in my review. Professor Wrobel really did write that “in the 1980s the Church was considerably strengthened by. . . [among other factors] the policies of General Jaruzelski, who granted various favors to Catholics.” And he did not mention any of the numerous examples of priests who were killed under General Jaruzelski’s regime. This is an incontrovertible fact, one difficult to trivialize for many who lived under General Jaruzelski’s regime and remember not just Father Popiełuszko’s death, but also extremely brutal police repressions aimed at such leaders of the underground Solidarity movement as Father Kazimierz Jancarz in Kraków-Nowa Huta, Father Stanisław Małkowski in Warsaw, Father Henryk Jankowski in Gdańsk, and so many others all over Poland (not to mention the “mysterious deaths” of Fathers Sylwester Zych, Stanisław Suchowolec, and Stefan Niedzielak—all “incidents” connected to the so-called Fourth Department’s of the secret police (SB), or the political police of General Jaruzelski’s regime. All these repressed priests were some of the most important leaders in the fight AGAINST the communist regime (so much praised by Professor Daniel Stone in the introductory chapter) and for DEMOCRATIC change in Poland. One could overlook these crucial facts while reading this multidimensional and in so many ways valuable book that I reviewed.

Andrzej Nowak
*Jagiellonian University and Polish Academy of
Science*

On Andrzej Bursa’s poetry

We are grateful to see our book reviewed. As they say in show business, bad publicity is better than none. On the other hand, faint praise can be worse than none at

all. We lament the fact that Professor Beata Tarnowska’s review of our translations is so negative. Surely she could have found one stanza to praise.

First, we do not understand why the reviewer refers only to me by name but never acknowledges Professor Ablamowicz by name for her contribution as cotranslator. It’s understandable that when commenting on my introduction the reviewer refers only to me since I am the sole author of that text, but when discussing our translations Tarnowska fails to credit (or blame, in this case) Professor Ablamowicz for her work. Perhaps this is due to simple carelessness or a lack of experience on the reviewer’s part, but if repeating both names takes up excessive space in the review, Professor Tarnowska could have mentioned both of our names early on and subsequently referred to us as “the translators.”

Professor Ablamowicz and I are disappointed that the review is not more balanced. Professor Tarnowska never awards us credit for something we did well, but she devotes much attention to our (mis)translation of *flechta* / *flechtów* / *flechtach*, a word that does not exist in the Polish language. We speculated that this word might be an example of a German word imported by Poles during the mid-twentieth century. None of the Poles we know on either side of the Atlantic, including one Polish linguist, was able to fathom its meaning. I myself contacted the poet’s son to ask him to check the spelling in his father’s original handwritten text just in case it was a misprint. Because the poem’s subject involves a sheath knife, blood, the pulse, and violence, we speculated that *flechta* might be derived from *fleische*, the German word for “flesh.” Subsequent research on our part now suggests that a Polish equivalent for this word could be “splot” – the word for “braid,” “plait,” “something woven or tangled up,” “entanglement.” “Intricate design” is another option, but this paraphrastic English phrase is rather clumsy and doesn’t fit all three uses equally well. Furthermore, the English term “whorl” suggested by Tarnowska refers chiefly to the wrinkled skin on one’s fingertips that produces the swirled design in fingerprints. If the knife is “shiny,” why would it be blemished with “whorls”? We admit that our translation of “flechta” and the lines in which it appears could be more metaphorical, as is also the case with the poem’s closing line “Ukradkiem z rdzy wycieram nóż / I między bajki wkładam.” We are aware of the Polish idiom echoed in this poem’s closing line: *włożę to między bajki*—“That’s a bunch of nonsense” / “That’s a cock-and-bull story.” We debated whether to follow the idiom or

stick to the literal. In the former case the word “fairytales” would be lost, whereas in the latter, more literal, version the theme of childhood, naive illusions, and lost innocence would be reserved. These themes arise in other poems by Bursa and echo another popular Polish saying that makes reference to fairytales: *życie nie jest bajką*—“Life is not a fairytale.”

In my theory of translation fidelity to meaning and tone along with semantic accuracy should take precedence over rhyme and meter. A translator’s job, it seems to me, is to try to bring the reader closer to the “guts” of the poem’s meaning and feeling, the poet’s vision and sensibility. While in the process of “Englishing” a translation I try to duplicate aspects of a poem’s formal “exoskeleton” as much as possible, I refuse to take liberties with or, worse yet, distort the original meaning and feeling for the sake of a pleasant jingle and chime. Like other modern translators, my methodology and aesthetic is influenced by Ezra Pound’s theories of prosody. The paucity of rhyme in English leads me to rely on assonance and internal rhyme rather than exact rhyme.

Having said that, I am fully aware of the liberty we took with the phrase “*klaszcze w takt stopy fryzjera*,” which literally means: “the barber claps his feet in time [to the music which is playing on a nearby radio].” We deliberately experimented with “taps” instead of the literal “claps” in order to make the poem more accessible to the English-speaking reader on both the semantic as well as visual level. In this context “taps” refers to the jerky up-and-down motion of the barber’s feet as the music plays on the radio. It does not refer to a sound of feet tapping. If we chose the literal “clap” I could imagine readers asking why would someone who has hanged himself “clap” his feet from side to side? Wouldn’t his feet be jerking up and down instead of sideways? After all, just a moment ago the man kicked out the stool or chair that he was standing on, so wouldn’t the natural reaction be to try to regain his footing? It seemed to us that the poem’s grotesque irony would be stronger if the closing image showed the hanged barber tapping his feet to the beat of the music rather than using his feet to applaud to the music’s beat. After all, in a previous line the speaker observed that the barber was “dancing” to the music playing on the radio—first a samba and then a waltz. In retrospect we regret that we took this liberty with the original language and inadvertently rewrote the line, making the hanged man tap his feet instead of clapping them together. However, elsewhere in her review

Tarnowska complains that our translations are too literal!

Kevin Christianson and Halina Ablamowicz
Tennessee Technological University

Professor Tarnowska responds:

There are different approaches to the theory and practice of translation stemming from diverse cultural backgrounds. I believe the poem to be an organic entity, therefore dividing it into “form” and “meaning” seems to be an artificial action carried out solely for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. Translators can certainly adopt another point of view and concentrate on semantics only. Such an approach may be partially justified by the fact that the use of rhyme is not as steeped in English poetic tradition as it is in Polish verse. However, in cases of such poems as Andrzej Bursa’s “Wisielec”/“The Hanged Man“, built of an elaborate web of rhymes and bouncy rhythms, focusing on the non-too-sophisticated meaning results in squandering its most crucial elements. When the poem “dances” itself, should we deprive it of rhyme and rhythm, namely all the elements that constitute its core? The decision belongs to the translators. Should they try to translate the poem by sacrificing the formal features thus creating an inadequate and poetically inferior version? Or should the fact be accepted that the poem is possibly untranslatable? It is an all-but-unsolvable dilemma.

As to the issue of being first too literal and then too liberal: I believe there is no lack of consistency in the opinion presented in my review. No other solution is available to the translator but to maneuver between fidelity to the meaning and striving for poetic mastery. The translation should not be overly descriptive and literal when the substance of the poem can be conveyed in a more concise way. Moreover, it would be ideal to not veer away from the original unless necessary.

Undoubtedly, every discussion of translation might be enlightening for both the translators and the reviewer. A critical tone does not imply a lack of esteem for the translators’ general achievements. The endeavors undertaken by Professor Kevin Christianson and Professor Halina Ablamowicz to promote Bursa’s poetry in the English-speaking world deserve recognition.

Please accept my apologies for having mentioned Professor Ablamowicz’s name in the introductory part only.

Beata Tarnowska
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn