

## OUT AND ABOUT

# From Israel to Austria:

## *Six questions to Shiri Shapira*

*Hanneke van der Heijden*

*Literary translators often work at home. But sometimes they move their desks for a while to a place abroad. Shiri Shapira, translator from German, Yiddish and English into Hebrew, is one of them. Living in Israel among speakers of her ‘target language’, she took part in an Artists in Residence Programme in Vienna, one of the cities where the author she is working on lived in the 1930s.*

### **Where did you stay and how long?**

I stayed in Vienna for two months in the summer of 2019 as part of KulturKontakt’s Artists in Residence Programme. I applied for this particular residency because Austria was the missing piece in my knowledge of German literature. Apart from wanting to explore an unknown literary territory, I came upon the call for submissions shortly after I was commissioned to translate two Austrian novels. This residency was open for artists, writers and composers of all kinds, and literary translators could apply as long as their project involved Austrian literature. It seemed like a perfect opportunity not only to make use of the fact that I was

translating Austrian literature, but to be in a more interdisciplinary environment than my usual text-based interactions.

### **What have you been working on?**

I’d been asked to translate two novels by Ödön von Horváth – *Der ewige Spießer* (published in English as *The Eternal Philistine*) and *Ein Kind unserer Zeit* from German to Hebrew. However, within a two-month time frame, I only managed to complete part of the translation of the first novel.

### **In what way did the residency contribute to your translation project?**

Aside from enabling me to make time for translating simply by being away from my regular jobs at home, I had a chance to browse Horváth’s manuscripts of the two novels at the Austrian National Library, which was indeed illuminating with regard to his work process. It was somewhat encouraging, especially when dealing with such a seemingly effortless novel as *Ein Kind unserer Zeit*, to see that he had made countless major changes in the text before reaching the final version.



**Exterior of the residence in Vienna**  
**Photo: Kultur Kontakt Austria**

### **What is the biggest challenge of your translation project?**

*Der ewige Spießler* is full of humor and slang, two things that are especially difficult to retain in translations in general, but definitely in Hebrew translations in particular. Even today, there is no common approach to the representation of spoken language and dialect in Hebrew literature, and more so in Hebrew translations. This is a known problem, due to the unusual and non-continuous history of the language. Plus, Hebrew has no dialects. Between the two World Wars, the period in which the story takes place, there was still hardly any spoken Hebrew used in a modern context. So, in order to translate the dialogues in the book I have to generate a kind of artificial, older

colloquial language and make it seem as consistent and distinct as possible to represent each of the different variants of German the author used.

### **What was the best thing about your stay?**

I loved getting a taste of the local literary scene, which is unfortunately not as active during summer, but was still very approachable. **The O-Töne Festival** at the Museumquartier is most noteworthy here, and I was amazed at the massive public interest in prose readings by debut authors as well as by more established ones. I was also deeply inspired (and honestly, full of envy) by the extent to which the Austrian government supports literature, and especially young authors.



*Shiri Shapira is a translator and editor from Jerusalem. She completed a BA in German Literature and Hebrew Language at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, as well as an MA in Literary Translation and a second MA in Yiddish Studies. Shiri Shapira translates novels, short fiction and essays from German, Yiddish and English into Hebrew. She also publishes short fiction in Israeli literary journals, and since 2016 writes the Hebrew literary blog “Books on Buses” (Sfarim be’otobusim).*

**Shiri Shapira**

**Photo: Jonathan M. Barzilai**

I still need to read more, though, to examine the question of whether this governmental support can also guarantee the making of good literature.

### **How is the position of literary translators in Israel different from that of your colleagues in Austria?**

Of course working terms as well as the financial circumstances for literary translators in Austria are better than those in Israel, as I imagine is the case with most other professional activities. From what I heard, the Austrian government supports local publishers, which helps sustain less commercial endeavors. The state of Israel invests very little money in the local publishing industry, and the support system is quite difficult to navigate. In addition, the investment in education is lacking, so the vast majority doesn't see the value in reading anymore, and book sales are continuously dropping. Naturally, an Austrian literary translator can also find work in the other German speaking countries, and I see the

advantage of this beyond the simple fact of reaching and selling to a much broader readership. Here I think the question of cultural and geographical diversity comes into play, and unfortunately Israel and the Hebrew language have unfulfilled potential in this sense. Before the Second World War, Hebrew (and – to a larger extent – Yiddish) was emerging in several countries as a language fit for modern literature. But the course of history and national and international politics stopped this trend, and turned Hebrew into a language mostly spoken in Israel. Indeed, nowadays there are some Hebrew-speaking writers in other countries as well, but they generally identify themselves as Israelis. It is a pity for Hebrew to be confined to this tiny dot on the map, as interesting as this dot may be. Imagine the possibilities!