

# My three languages

## *The political backdrop of a Polish translator's career*

**Hanna Jankowska**

I sometimes wonder if I still have the right to call myself a translator of Arabic? Yes, I graduated from Arabic studies at Warsaw University, and for nearly 20 years I worked as a translator and interpreter of this language (not every Oriental studies graduate was so lucky). I mention three languages on my CV: Arabic, English, Russian, but for the last 25 years I have rarely translated from Arabic. Since 2000, I have only translated two books, one of which is waiting to appear in print (*My Name Is Adam* by Elias Khoury) and several poems by an Iraqi poet, Hatif Janabi, who happens to be my colleague. More often I do fact checking of books about the Middle East for various editors.

I probably would have stayed with my profession as a translator of Arabic if it had not been for the changes in our part of the world.

It was not the fascination with the exotic that brought me to Arabic studies, not *Arabian Nights*, not an interest in Islam, but political events. In the six-day war of 1967, Poland, as well as other countries from the socialist camp “headed by

the Soviet Union”, supported the Arab countries. The declared and obligatory political support, however, did not go hand in hand with the dissemination of information about these countries. I wanted to know what the Middle East turmoil was really about, to read the press and literature from the rather unknown Arab side, to understand it and to present its arguments. And to do so, knowledge of the language was essential. So, I started to learn on my own with the *Teach Yourself Arabic* tutorial, a mimeographed textbook for language courses and the Arabic–Russian dictionary by Baranov. By the time I started my formal studies I could read a simple press article. The Arab press available at the time in Poland was the weekly *Al-Akhbar*, an organ of the Communist Party of Lebanon, which had quite a good cultural section. This is how I became acquainted with the poetry of the Palestinian resistance movement, which fascinated me, and these were thus my first exercises in translation.

While still a student, I managed to have some translations of poetry published in literary magazines, but my real

## “By translating Arabic literature, I hoped I would break entrenched stereotypes of the Arab world”

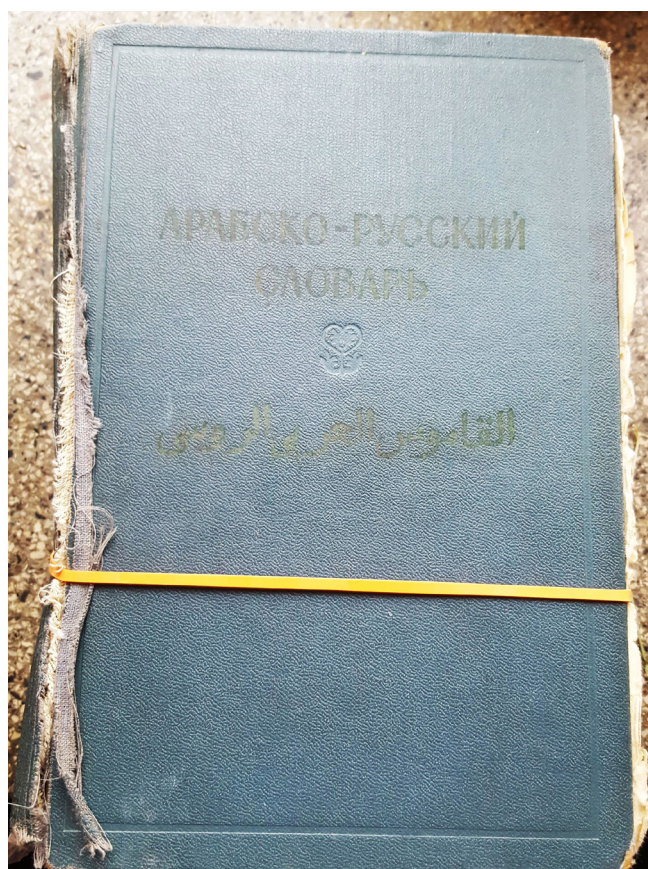
debut did not come until 1984: *Beirut Nightmares* by Ghada Samman. The book was very important to me, because a few years earlier I had worked as an interpreter for a group of wounded victims of the Lebanese Civil War who had come to Poland for treatment. Listening to their stories, I felt sorrow and helplessness. When I found out that such a book had come out, I did my best to get it. I proposed it to the [Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy \(PIW\)](#) publishing house which had greatly contributed to the promotion of world literature in Poland (it had published the full edition of *Arabian Nights* and the first modern translation of *Quran*).

The next book was offered to me by the same publishing house, and it too was a book of my dreams: *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* by Emile Habibi. A professor of Arabic studies, who had reviewed it for the publisher, declared it to be untranslatable due to its language full of puns, the local realities unknown to the Polish reader, and so on. But I dared to do it, and the book was received very well by reviewers in literary periodicals.

As it turned out later, my first three translated Arabic books were among the first 15 of the best hundred Arab novels selected by the [Arab Writers Union](#). The third was *Zayni Barakat* by Gamal Ghitani published in 1990. Shortly afterwards, I also completed the translation of this author's second book, *The Zafarani Files*, but PIW abandoned its publication for financial reasons. State funding was over.

### English taking over

At the beginning of the 1990s, not only political but also cultural priorities changed. Private publishing houses which mushroomed at that time tried to make up for lost time in presenting world literature to Polish readers. And “world” at that time meant mainly Anglo-American. The book market was flooded with crime novels, thrillers,

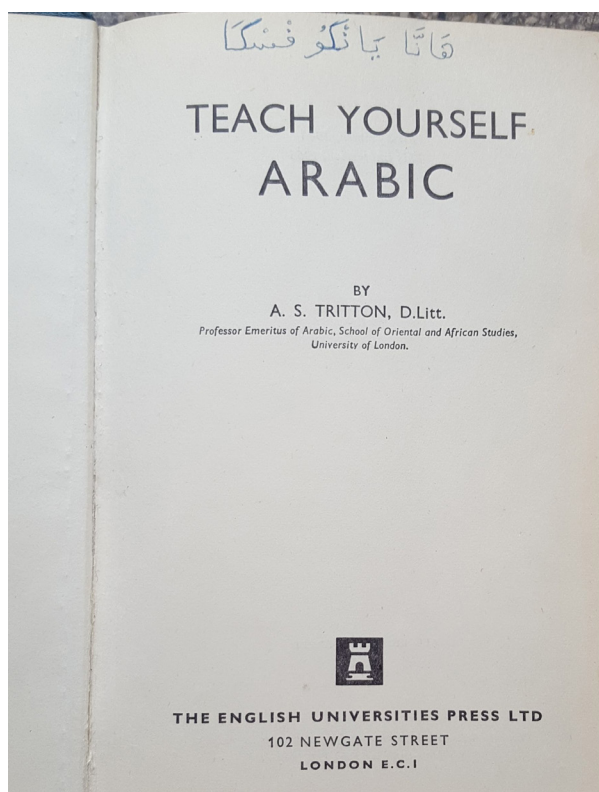


Copy of the old Baranov dictionary  
Photo: Hanna Jankowska

tear-jerkers, pop-psychological guides – all those kinds of books that had been unwelcome in communist Poland. As one translator of Swedish, who unsuccessfully tried to persuade publishers to publish translations of Swedish literature, put it, “Polish publishers firmly believe that God speaks English”. Even today, translations from English account for around 60% of all translations of foreign literature published in Poland, and according to various estimates translated books account for 26–40% of the book market. In that strange chaotic period at the beginning of the transition there was such a demand for translators from English that many people with various language skills tried their hand at the profession. Some have proven themselves as literary translators, others have not. I tried it, and I succeeded. My first translations from English

**“Reading crime stories [...] I discovered a lively modern language that we were not taught at school”**

had some connection with my specialisation – a friend of the editor who was looking for a translator for *Not Without My Daughter* by Betty Mahmoody remembered that she knew someone who had graduated in Oriental studies. (Iran – Iraq – apparently that didn’t make much of a difference?). Together with my late friend Grażyna Gasparska we translated the book under a pseudonym. The second one, about oppressed Saudi princesses, which was also a co-translation with Gasparska, I do not even want to mention. I am not proud of those translations, being aware that I have contributed to the consolidation of the orientalist stereotypes that I so wanted to fight against. Fortunately, no publisher asked me again to translate books of this kind (and if they did, I would refuse). Having no background in formal English studies, especially in English literature, I did not dare to translate English fiction. In my work with Arabic I focused on language, style, cultural background, etc. In working with English, which I consider a kind of contemporary Latin, the subject matter is important. I was (and still am) lucky to translate books on themes that interested me. I found fulfilment



**First page of Teach yourself Arabic**  
**Photo: Hanna Jankowska**



in translating non-fiction literature, essays, biographies, travelogues. After several years of dealing only with Middle Eastern issues it seemed to me that new worlds were opening up to me. I cannot but be proud of acquainting Polish readers with the books of such distinguished authors as Benjamin Barber, Richard Sennett, Naomi Klein, Alberto Manguel, Michael Walzer, Tony Judt and others (perhaps it was a kind of compensation for my unfinished PhD thesis in political science).

### A sense of mission

Until the mid-1990s it seemed that Arabic literature would disappear irretrievably from the Polish market. But this did not happen. Poland turned out to be the only East and Central European country where more books translated from Arabic were published after the transition than before it. For example, in the early 2000s the Smak Słowa publishing house published several translations of modern Arab prose. Nevertheless, translations from Arabic represent only about 0.09% of all translated books in Poland.

I remember that in my youthful naivety I had a sense of mission: I hoped that by translating Arabic literature I would break entrenched stereotypes of the Arab world. Now I am aware that in the reality of the present book market original ambitious literature can hardly compete with sex-and-violence thrash books on oppressed Muslim women and bad terrorists. But its presence is important, and it is available for those who care.

The majority of the few Polish literary translators from Arabic have been and are academic scholars. To put it



**The Polish translation of *H is for Hawk***  
Photo: Hanna Jankowska

bluntly: if someone wants to do this work, they must have another source of income, because they can't earn a living from translation. English has enabled me to become a freelancer and a full-time literary translator. It gave me the freedom so that I, in the mid-1990s, was able to leave my job at an Arab embassy in Warsaw where, due to the dwindling political and cultural relations, my work had become rather pointless and unsatisfactory.

### Missing the Russian melody

As for Russian, that's another story. I have always had a sentiment for this language, for its melody, for Russian poetry, classic novels and songs. At the beginning of the 1990s, access to



*Hanna Jankowska is a literary and audiovisual translator of Arabic, English and Russian into Polish and has translated about 90 books, mainly non-fiction, and dozens of documentary films. In 1997 she received the award of the Polish Translators' Association for the translation of The Clash of Civilizations by Samuel P. Huntington. Jankowska has a MA in Arabic studies from the University of Warsaw and is an active member of the Polish Literary Translators' Association (STL).*

*Hanna Jankowska. The text on her T-shirt is one of the slogans of STL: "Love translators!"  
Photo: Iwonna Natkańska*

Russian culture was practically cut off, which was quite a natural reaction to forced love for the Soviet Union. I missed it – not the USSR but the culture, of course. I borrowed Russian books from a rental shop in one of the booths of Jarmark Europa, the giant bazaar in Warsaw Stadium. Reading crime stories by Marinina and Dontsova, I discovered a lively modern language that we were not taught at school. After several years Russian films returned to some new TV channels and my refreshed Russian turned out to be of use when I was asked to translate feature films and TV series. Have I completely moved away from Arabic literature? It's hard to tell. I do not follow its recent developments as carefully as my colleagues in the Academia do but I keep up with its publications in the Polish book market. From time to time I translate poetry.

Publishers remember me when they look for translators of books by Arab authors who write in English (Anthony Shadid, Hisham Matar). My old fascinations have faded, but still there is one book I would love to translate. It is Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography *A Mountainous Journey* that enchanted me many years ago. Maybe someday I will have a chance to present it to Polish readers ...