

OUT & ABOUT

From Romania to Belgium:

Seven questions to Doina Ioanid and Jan H. Mysjkin

Where did you stay and for how long? What made you choose that particular location?

We spent the first half of July 2020 at the [Vertalershuis / Translators' House](#) in Antwerp. We tend to choose our location according to the specific project we are working on: the Vertalershuis in Amsterdam for Dutch authors, the European College of Literary Translators in Seneffe for French-speaking Belgian authors and the International College of Literary Translators in Arles for French-speaking authors. We also come to Antwerp when we are translating a Flemish author.

What have you been working on? Can you tell us something about the text and the writer?

On this occasion we were working on Willem Elsschot, a classic Flemish writer. According to a survey by the De Standaard newspaper, he is the most translated Flemish author in the world, but there isn't a single book by him in Romanian. For our first title we chose *Kaas* (*Cheese*), the novel that the author himself considered to be his finest work. The text is simple and

dense, yet not at all long. It's both tongue-in-cheek and touching at the same time, which appeals to people. We believe that the novel will be very well received by Romanian readers.

What is the most challenging aspect of translating this text into Romanian?

In terms of composition, Elsschot plays around a great deal with verb tenses, which change abruptly, sometimes from one paragraph to the next. At times these changes correspond to an inner voice, a dialogue which the character has with himself, at others to a scene in which one feels like a spectator. We had to carefully follow this shift from one verb tense to another and make sure that it would occur naturally in Romanian. Fortunately, Romanian is more flexible in this respect than French, for example.

You have already done literary translations together. How did this collaboration work?

One of us produces the first draft, and sends it to the other by e-mail, with variations and questions. This is followed by translation sessions over the phone, which can easily last as long as two

hours. Finally, we try to meet together at the same table in one of the colleges or translators' houses, surrounded by a battery of dictionaries. Once we have reread the text aloud and resolved any difficulties, the translation is ready.

You have translated a great deal of poetry together. Is your method of translating a prose text different? If so, in what way?

No, we have stuck with this effective method of working in tandem for both poetry and prose. Each text, whether poetry or prose, demands that we capture its specific voice, that we sense its atmosphere. As we work in tandem, we speak about this voice, we refine it, we adjust it. Most of the time, we are on the same wavelength, but occasionally, we may argue passionately over a single detail.

How has your translation project benefitted from this residency?

First of all, due to the possibility of physically sitting at the same translation table. Also, the president of the Willem Elsschot Genootschap / Association of Friends provided us with translations of Kaas into German, English, French and Italian, which we consulted from time to time to see how other translators had dealt with a specific problem. Usually, when we are in Antwerp, we spend several afternoons a week in the excellent Hendrik Conscience Flemish Heritage Library carrying out research on our author. We were unable to do so this time, as there was simply not enough time for proof-reading *and* research.

How does the situation of literary translators in Romania differ from that of your colleagues in Belgium?



**Exterior of Translators' House Antwerp
Photo: Bob van Mol**

First of all, from a down-to-earth perspective, they are badly paid. We had problems demanding a rate of 5 euros per 2,000-character page. And there are many publishers paying lower rates, which is simply insulting. All too often the translator is considered to be a negligible quantity. There are publishers who don't even mention the translator's name in their catalogues, let alone on the cover. However, the name of a good translator is a guarantee for the quality and sales of the book. The translators' association, which is affiliated to the Writers' Union of Romania, is rather slow and/or ineffective. In Romania, there is no translator's house, and this is unlikely to change any time soon. Nevertheless, translators, who are living on the poverty line, do a good job, keeping their dignity. It's pathetic, but it's the truth.

Translated from the French original by Penelope Eades



Jan H. Mysjkin (left) and Doina Ioanid at work in Translators' House Antwerp
Photo: Karen Thys

Jan H. Mysjkin was born in Brussels in 1955. Since 1991, the year in which he received the National Prize for Literary Translation in Belgium, he has led a semi-nomadic life between Amsterdam, Bucharest and Paris. He has written about ten collections of poetry, some in Dutch and others in French. He has translated poetry and prose, ranging from the classics to avant-garde authors. His translation work has garnered him awards in the Netherlands, Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

Doina Ioanid was born in 1968 in Bucharest. She started out as a French teacher and since 2005 she has worked as a cultural journalist with the *Observator Cultural*. Her personal work consists exclusively of prose poems, which explore female individuality, translated into a dozen languages. Translator of Marguerite Duras and Georges Rodenbach, among others, she has been working with Jan H. Mysjkin since 2012, translating from Dutch into Romanian and from Romanian into French.

The Translators' House in Antwerp (Belgium), part of **Flanders Literature**, is situated on the second floor of 'Oostkasteel', a big apartment building in the city centre. The apartment can host two translators at a time. Accredited literary translators who don't live in Flanders and have a contract with a publishing house for the translation of a literary work from Dutch, can apply for a residency from 2 weeks to 2 months.

For more information on the conditions and application procedure, please click [here](#).