

# “A place to put heads together”

An interview with *Dr. Renate Birkenhauer*, vice-president of the EÜK

Every year, more than 750 literary translators from all over the world make their way to the small town of Straelen in western Germany, very close to the Dutch border. Here, they stay as residents at the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium, which since its foundation has been a place of gathering for translators and translated works – obviously with a strong focus on German language literature but most of all a truly European, or even global, place of cultural activity within the world of translation. Counterpoint has asked the vice-president of EÜK, *Dr. Renate Birkenhauer*, to share her views on the continuous need for a place like the EÜK. But firstly, we wanted to know a little about the background for the foundation of the Kollegium.

The Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium was founded in 1978 on the initiative of two translators: Elmar Tophoven, a native of Straelen, translator of Samuel Beckett and then living in Paris, and Klaus Birkenhauer, then chair of the German translators' association, my late husband, then living in Tübingen

(an old university town) who was supposed to manage the house and to develop its cultural activities.

**What were the main ideas behind the Kollegium when it was started? And has this changed over the years?**

In order to understand the main ideas behind the EÜK, one should be aware that more than 40 years ago people didn't have personal computers. But there was a dream among literary translators in Germany to have a place to come together, a big library with all kinds of dictionaries and reference books from almost every field and every era, and offer all of this, together with studio apartments, to professional colleagues coming from Germany and abroad with their translation project: a place to put heads together, where they could exchange their knowledge and their thoughts and, with a bit of luck, meet a colleague from their source language, a 'two-legged dictionary'. Actually, the name 'Kollegium' does not mean 'college' but is derived from 'colleagues'. A non-profit association was founded

with the aim of finding supporters and financial backers for this dream. Elmar Tophoven managed to convince the mayor and the city manager of his birthplace, the small town of Straelen, to offer a complex of five very old, mostly uninhabited historic houses, which had to be reconstructed according to the needs of an ideal translators' house: a big two-storey library of dictionaries and reference books forming its core, the so-called 'Atrium', and 29 studios arranged around them.

**“There was a dream among literary translators in Germany to have a place to come together”**

The bookshelves of the two-storied library were filled quite quickly. Klaus Birkenhauer, staying in touch not only with his German but also with his many foreign colleagues, asked them 'to go shopping', to search in antiquarian and modern bookshops and bring along all the important dictionaries and reference books they could find. This is how we managed to get some very rare and famous encyclopedias like the famous one by Diderot and d'Alembert (1751-1772) or the rare 82 volume encyclopedia of the Russian Empire Brockhaus-Efron (1907). But, of course, the Kollegium offers a representative selection of classic and

modern literature written in German as well. These books fill the shelves in the studios, and so you can say that our guests live in a library which creates a productive atmosphere. Translators also get to know new authors and recent publications and a professional librarian is in charge of the library.

Translators appreciate the absolute silence of this place, which is reminiscent of a monastery. They feel stimulated by their industrious colleagues and often report that they work more effectively than at home. By contrast, the big kitchen, where they cater for themselves, is a centre of communication and discussions.

#### **Who funds the Kollegium?**

The Kollegium's work is being funded by the federal state of North Rhine-Westfalia and the small town of Straelen, who endorsed the idea of establishing international contacts and creating an international meeting point in a rural area.

The *Kunststiftung* ('Art Foundation') of Northrhine-Westfalia is a very important donor as well, endowing the great annual *Straelener Übersetzerpreis* together with a promotion prize as well as sponsoring the bi-annual *Atriumsgespräch*. This is a 4-5-day conference where a German author of a successful recent publication meets all the translators of their book to discuss all the difficulties and special features from the first page to the last.

#### **What other activities does the EÜK engage in, besides residencies for translators?**

The EÜK is a founding member of the DÜF *Deutscher Übersetzerfonds*

(the German Translators' Fund) which, apart from awarding working grants and residence scholarships to colleagues who translate into German – has developed a variety of training courses for professional translators. The EÜK organizes and hosts various of these seminars and workshops throughout the year, for instance the very effective bilingual *Vice-Versa-Workshops* like German-Chinese or German-Spanish which bring together translators from one pair of languages, e.g. six translators with German as target language meet six colleagues with German as source language for one week, each of them translating his or her current book, guided by an experienced translator from either language. Thus, each translator meets a native speaker from their source language.

Literary Translation is a course at the University of Düsseldorf, and twice a year the students have a work placement at the EÜK. For one week, experienced colleagues supervise their work and also teach them practical skills of the profession like copyright law, negotiating with



**The Atrium at EÜK**  
**Photo: EÜK**

publishers and doing research and translating under time pressure.

The EÜK has become something of a home for literary translators, and the three of them – the German translators' association, the EÜK and the DÜF – complement each other in professionalising the work of literary translators and promoting self-confidence. Translators are involved in public readings and events nowadays and have become more visible to the reading public, although public awareness of this professional group is low compared to other freelancers.

### **What do you see as the greatest challenge(s) for literary translators (in Europe) at the moment?**

I think there are two problems: Firstly, the still very low fees in many countries. There are differences, of course. Most European translators cannot live on their work and have to do other work as well, at least those among them who do not translate from English. Secondly, the general decline in the culture of reading which also affects independent bookshops. Reading has lost its status as an important leisure-activity, especially among young people, whose reading ability is declining.

### **What role do you think EÜK in particular, and translators' residencies in general, have to play in the world of literary translation?**

Translators' residencies have to keep up their strength and creativity in drawing the attention of the public to their work. There is still a need for information about the importance of this job. We have to make the public aware that translations of books by international authors do not just fall



**Renate Birkenhauer** was born in Berlin and studied German literature and linguistics, lexicography and electronic procedures in Tübingen. After doing her PhD, in 1983 she co-founded the publishing house *Straelener Manuskripte* which focused on two areas: the publishing of special vocabularies that had been collected by translators and were not available in dictionaries of that time, and the publishing of bilingual editions of foreign poetry and books on the art of literary translation. Since 2009, she has had an honorary post as vice-president of the EÜK.

**Renate Birkenhauer**

**Photo: EÜK**

out of the sky, nicely translated into the readers' mother-tongue. We have to insist that the names of the translators appear on the cover and in reviews and that they are estimated as authors.

The *Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium* ('European Translators' Kollegium', or EÜK) in Straelen offers residencies for varied periods of time in its 30 studio apartments and large self-catering common kitchen. The Kollegium accepts applicants for residencies from all languages, as long as they have published at least two longer translations and are working on a translating project commissioned by a publisher. Residencies are free of charge for professional literary translators, and it is possible to apply for grants in connection with a residency.

The overall objectives of the EÜK are threefold:

1. to introduce foreign literature in Germany and to make German literature known abroad
2. to improve the quality of non-fiction and literary translations
3. to emphasise the significance of translating internationally

Besides residencies, the EÜK arranges seminars and workshops, offers a 'translator in residency' program and is the home of an extensive library of dictionaries, lexica and literary works from all over the world.