

SMALL TO SMALL

Learning Latvian by translating its poetry:

Experiences from the Translation in Motion project

Elizabeta Lindner

Poetry is an art form that not everyone is very willing to access. It can be a real challenge for readers, and for translators. From that point of view the approach of the [Translation in Motion project](#) that I recently took part in can be considered truly unusual: translating poems from a language I wasn't familiar with yet: Latvian.

I'm an editor, publisher and also an experienced translator of poetry. My mother tongue is Macedonian but as I was born in Macedonia in Yugoslavian times, this meant being bilingual (Macedonian and so-called Serbo-Croatian), which made my path to learning other languages a bit easier. I studied German and Slavic languages (Russian, Slovak and later Slovenian) and literatures, and I learned English as a 'natural' connector to the world

through the internet which made my work as a translator 'easier'. [Translation in Motion](#) is an "initiative to support the professional development of literary translators working from and into the languages of the Western Balkans", or, as I see it, a project with a goal to enable contact between EU countries by way of literary translation. For many language combinations there are only very few translators, or none at all, as is the case for Latvian to Macedonian. Instead of turning to indirect translation to solve this problem, the project offers a programme to get experienced literary translators from other language combinations in a short period ready for translating 'uncovered' language pairs, such as Latvian into Macedonian. As an experienced translator and linguist, I was offered the opportunity to apply

and take part in the project and was excited and open to embarking on this new and unusual ‘translation trip’.

“It was the first time I translated poetry from a language I was still learning”

Understanding the heart of the language

Latvian is very different from the other languages I work with, and I also started learning it in a totally different way – through translating poetry. In fact, it was the first time I translated poetry from a language I was still learning without learning to speak it.

Before I started, I first chose a few authors and poems, after reading the English or Russian translation. Then I slowly started working on the translation while learning Latvian. The process included in-depth grammatical and linguistic research and analyses of the original, diving into words and sentences, trying to understand and ‘define’ them in my mind, so I could then transmit them into the Macedonian translation. For my research I was able to use excellent online lexicons and dictionaries – English, German and sometimes Russian. I’m used to researching words and expressions through English. As a translator of several so-called small languages (my mother tongue, Macedonian, being

one of them), it is not always possible to find good dictionaries for these less frequent language combinations.

I started gathering questions about the grammatical and linguistic rules related to the translation and my excellent teacher of Latvian helped me understand the ‘heart’ of the language. I began to analyse the poems in the original, working slowly and intensely with every word and expression, considering poetical sound and other characteristics, like alliteration.

Thus, I learned Latvian by *doing*, using my experiences as a translator, bilingual poet and linguist. And for me it worked well as the process resulted in Macedonian (and a few German) translations of several Latvian poems, which I was happy with. Below an excerpt of a Latvian poem (‘Esterei’ [‘For Esther’] by Edvīns Raups). Its English translation is by Margita Gailitis, followed by my Macedonian and German translations:



*Edvīns Raups and Elizabeta Lindner, Riga 2021
Photo: Ieva Balode*

uz brīdi iestājas laiks

un vējš kā dabūjis spērienu
ar nāvīgu tukšumu krūtīs
piestāj paelsot
parkā

for a moment time stops

and the wind as if struck
with a deathly emptiness in its breast
pauses to sob
in a park

за момент се сопира времето

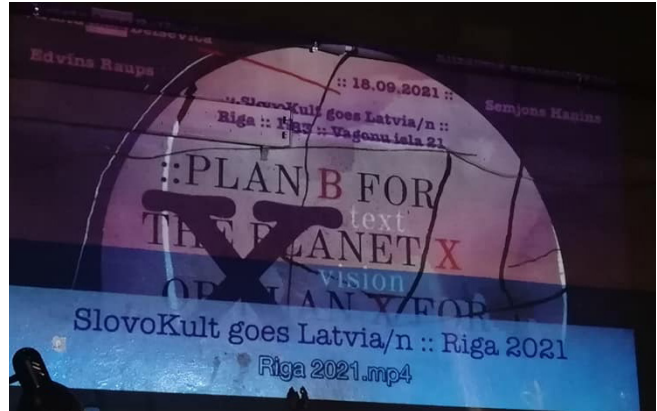
а ветрот небаре е клоца
со смртна празнина во градите
запира да земе здив
во паркот

für einen Augenblick hält die Zeit an

und der Wind als wäre er ein Tritt
mit tödlicher Leere in der Brust
verweilt im Park
um zu verschnaufen

Multilingual polyphony

Since every good poem well translated also sounds beautiful in other languages and transmits the same picture and feeling, poetry translations were an essential part of the interdisciplinary art festival SlovoKult :: literARTour that I initiated in 2018, and am still developing with colleagues and friends. In 2020 I wanted to present the texts at the festival in Skopje and Berlin in multilingual polyphony, i.e. a parallel reading of a poem in 2 or 3 languages



SlovoKult in Riga 2021

Photo: Ieva Balode

with a small pause between languages. I did that first ‘experiment’ with the recordings of the reading voices of the authors and the translator(s). The audio/video poems and the performances can be watched in this [art video](#) on the poem ‘Crepusculum’ by Crauss in German, English (by Mark Kanak) and Macedonian by me in a 2020 live stream video from the ACUD Theatre in Berlin, from Crauss – [Mehr + Blumen](#), and in an [art video](#) of the poem ‘Pogodi’ by Semjon Hanin – in Russian, Macedonian, Croatian, Latvian and German.

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Our planned event to present the poetry/text and translations in multilingual polyphony live in Berlin couldn’t take



Elizabeta Lindner is an award-winning literary translator, mainly from German into Macedonian and vice versa, but also from English and Serbian. She is founder and editor of the multilingual onlinemagazine *SlovoKult :: Literatur/a*, publisher at the eponymous small press and founder and artistic director of the contemporary arts biennial *SlovoKult :: literARTour*. Lindner studied German and Slavic Philology and has translated around 30 books from German into Macedonian (Thomas Bernhard, Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Celan amongst others).

Elizabeta Lindner in Brotfabrik Berlin
Photo: Silvia Lorenz

place due to the worldwide Covid restrictions in 2020, since not all the participants were available for streaming. However, in the framework of the Translation in Motion project and with the support of *Ventspils House*, we were lucky enough to be able to present them live in Riga in 2021. Both the participating poets and the audience enjoyed the performance.

Hopefully, we can present Latvian authors in a similar multilingual polyphony in Skopje and Berlin 2023 for the third edition of the postponed festival. A short anthology of Latvian poetry translated into Macedonian and German is also being planned.