

# Increasing visibility and stagnating fees: *A decade of literary translation in Poland*

*Ewa Rajewska*

For practitioners, researchers and critics within the field of literary translation – and, not least, for readers – the last ten to twelve years have seen some great and inspiring developments but at the same time, other tendencies mark a more worrying development. It has been an interesting, intense time, marked by a clear increase in translation as an artistic activity and as a subject of reflection in Polish translation studies, in literary criticism and in literary life. But simultaneously, the remuneration and working conditions for literary translators do not seem to be improving, actually rather the opposite. I'll explore this paradoxical development by giving an overview of the past decade in the Polish translation landscape.

## **Professional prestige**

The symbolic starting point of the decade was the establishment of the Polish Association of Literary Translators (Stowarzyszenie Tłumaczy LiteratURY – STL) in 2010, the end point was the 1st Congress of Polish Translation Studies (scheduled for 2020 but postponed to 2022 due to the pandemic). Both events were crucial to translators'

visibility and created a renewed focus on translation as a topic of research.

Today, the STL has more than 450 members – almost half of all literary translators in Poland. It deals with the representation and protection of the interests of literary translators, educates new and upcoming translators on their rights and promotes literature and reading. In October 2022, STL became a signatory to the Kraków Convention, an agreement which defines the principles of cooperation between publishers and creators with the aim of raising standards in mutual relations. So far, nearly twenty influential Polish publishers have signed this convention.

To make the profession more attractive to new translators, STL emphasises the visibility of translators under slogans such as “A translator is also an author”, “Translators on the covers” and “Shakespeare did not write in Polish”, printed on T-shirts, bags, pins, stickers and internet banners. In 2016, literary translator, co founder of the Association and former president Justyna Czechowska recalled, “I see

a marked improvement in the media since STL was founded. Notoriously, we began sending letters to editors [who had published reviews or excerpts from translated books – E.R.] asking them to include the translator’s name [...]. And indeed, our letters had an effect – several translators even received an apology.” Looking back now, there is no doubt that the climate around literary translation has changed considerably.

### Making translation studies visible

In May 2022, the 1st [Congress of Polish Translation Studies](#) gathered translation scholars from 25 universities and academic centres, who presented nearly a hundred papers in thirteen panels and covered a wide range of topics, relating both to the practice of literary translation (such as the problems of multimedia translation, Shakespeare in Polish, translation of children’s literature, and exploring riddles from Polish literary translation history) as well as to translation criticism and problems of contemporary translation studies. The need to make Polish translation scholars’ research more widespread and support their interdisciplinary and inter-institutional cooperation was discussed, and ways were considered to develop a more coherent translation education for young scholars. This work will continue as the 2nd Congress is scheduled to take place in Poznań in 2025 and the [1st Summer School of Translation Studies](#), aimed primarily at PhD candidates and graduate students, will be held on 12–16 September 2023 in Łódź.

Both the establishment of STL and the 1st Congress seemed foundational, which they of course are not; after all, translations, borrowings and inspirations from foreign literatures have nourished Polish literature from

its medieval beginnings, and Polish translation studies celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007, half a century after the publication of Olgierd Wojtasiewicz’s *Wstęp do teorii tłumaczenia* (‘Introduction to the Theory of Translation’), considered the first modern Polish book on translation studies. The field of literary translation and translation studies is, in short, an ever-changing, dynamic field that has experienced many shifts in topical focus and many highs and lows in the course of time, and right now, there is a sense of ‘new beginnings’ with the two abovementioned events.



**Roman clay money box from around the 2nd century AD. Archäologische Staatssammlung, Munich**  
Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

### Regaining past prestige

In Poland, the profession of literary translator was quite prestigious in post-war times – in a communist country relatively close to the West, but isolated by the Iron Curtain, the classic works of world literature were translated within the framework of a state publishing policy. In 1989, a new era began with the political transformation and abolition of censorship soon after. The liberation of the publishing market resulted in a flood of translations, all too often of poor quality, and the

prestige of the profession temporarily dropped. Over the last decade, literary translation has regained prestige, reflected in the collective coming-out of Polish translators – from the insides of books to their covers.

**“In this profession, the gap between prestige and market practices is huge”**

Translators are indeed increasingly visible on the covers of the books they have translated – and not only the most established translators or literary classics. Translators’ prefaces and afterwords are more common than before, and biographical books and interviews with translators are published. Translators can be seen at literary festivals, and an increasing number of cultural events dedicated solely to the art of translation are being organised, such as ‘Found in Translation’, the Gdańsk Literary Meetings (held every two years since 2015). Activities take place on the occasion of International Translation Day, and in the years around 2020, a regular series of meetings with literary translators started in Sopot (‘Translation Before Publication’), in Warsaw (‘Translation Before Proofreading’), in Kraków (‘Putting it Translationally’), in Szczecin (‘Lost in Translation’), and in Poznań (‘Faithful, Beautiful, Invisible’).

### Awards...

In December 2009, following the ceremony of the **Angelus Central European Literature Award** where the hosts thanked the sound engineers but forgot to mention the literary translators, Czarne Publishing House submitted an open letter to the Mayor of Wrocław. It read: “How can the foreign books be presented without mentioning their translators? [...] How can one – while boasting a newly created award – fail to mention those for whom it was created?” As a result, the Angelus Prize for the best prose book by a Central European writer has, since its 2010 edition, also included the translator. New literary prizes dedicated to translators have been created as well: in 2014, the Gdynia Literary Prize was expanded to include a category for translation into Polish. Established in 2013, the Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński Translation Award of the Mayor of Gdańsk is awarded to the translation of a single work and as a lifetime achievement. Since 2016, the Wisława Szymborska Award is not only granted to a book of poetry written in Polish published in the preceding year, but also, every two years, for a book translated from a foreign language – to its author and translator.

### ...and money

However, when we take a closer look at the prizes for translators, we see that they are fundamentally unequal to the prizes for authors of original works. As a rule, the translator of an award-winning book receives a financial sum several times lower than that of the author. For instance, the Gdańsk-based European Poet of Freedom Award values the translator (as much as five times)



*Ewa Rajewska is a translation scholar, translation editor and literary translator from English into Polish. She is Professor and head of the M.A. translation specialisation at the Institute of Polish Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, member of the editorial board of *Przekładaniec. A Journal of Translation Studies*; and Chair of the Board of the Western Section of the Polish Literary Translators' Association.*

**Ewa Rajewska**  
**Photo: Łukasz Bartoszewski**

lower than the author: in 2020, Sinéad Morrissey received the equivalent of 22,000 EUR for her volume *On Balance*, while her translator Magda Heydel received ca. 4,500 EUR. Only the Wisława Szymborska Award has adopted the same principle as the International Booker Prize: an amount (ca. 22,000 EUR) shared equally between the author and the translator of the winning book. At the other extreme is the Gdynia Literary Prize: its translation category places literary translation on an equal footing with the other categories – poetry, prose, essay –, all four honouring the winners with the same sum (ca. 11,000 EUR), but in this case it is the original author who has no share in the award.

For all other translation awards, we see that even when over the years the translator's share in the award money has increased a little, the translator never receives more than 25% of the money awarded to the author. The problem of equivalence in translation remains central and still unresolved. All this being said, festivals and awards can give a sense of energy and excess that is misleading with regards to the

working conditions of the translators. In 2016, literary critic Justyna Sobolewska diagnosed the situation: "Translators in Poland are awarded prizes, and they have their festivals, but at the same time they are paid humiliating rates, their names are overlooked, and the publishers look for the cheapest done job rather than the best quality. In this profession, the gap between prestige and market practices is huge."

A survey of the professional situation of literary translators carried out by STL in the second half of 2022 shows that, despite rampant inflation, the average rates of remuneration for an author's sheet of translation (approximately 22 typed pages) have changed only little in the preceding decade (110–150 EUR in 2012 to a median of 160 EUR in 2022) and generally do not increase with the translator's experience. Sadly, the rise in professional prestige is not matched with an increase in fees. For tangible changes on this latter issue, we will still have to wait.