

NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: CZECH REPUBLIC

Get to know your translator

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We at the [Association of Translators, Obec Překladatelů](#), of the Czech Republic have long been considering how to bring about a change in the situation of the literary translator, even if only in a small way. Despite their pivotal role in the very existence of foreign literature, translators are still too often anonymous, and for the most part readers are unaware of the work involved in enabling them to read their favourite foreign author in our language. This is especially true here, since Czech is a small linguistic region where translations account for the majority of the annual book production.

With this in mind, we have launched a long-term project called [Poznejte svého překladatele](#) ('Get to know your translator') in partnership with the Czech public and scientific libraries. Our goal is to make the profession known to the general public and thus to make readers aware not only of the name of a book's author, but also the name of the translator. In an ideal scenario, readers would be able to choose a book according to their favourite translator. What we are trying to demonstrate is that a foreign work does not make its way to the bookshop shelves all by itself: a translator will have read the original work, translated it, undertaken the

meticulous task of editing and correcting the text, sometimes writing the blurb on the cover, and, finally they may even have been involved in promoting the book through public readings, which are often given free of charge.



*'Get to know your translator' event at (A)void Café, Prague, February 2022
Photo: Filip Štoidl*

Collaboration with libraries

Our project was conceived just before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that a large number of meetings had to be cancelled: of the forty or so scheduled, only half actually took place in 2020 and 2021, with audiences of variable size. Some of the meetings were held in schools, as part of a course of literature classes. Of those held in libraries, one of them was so successful that a second had to be organised with another translator. The library used actors from the town's municipal theatre

to read the extracts. Generally speaking, attendance is better in small towns and libraries, where people appreciate even the smallest cultural event, whereas in large towns with a wide range of cultural events on offer, the number of attendees tends to be relatively small.



(A)void Café in Prague, February 2022
Photo: Filip Štoidl

Cooperation with municipal librarians, who are usually enthusiastic readers themselves (in the Czech Republic, the profession is still largely female), has been excellent. They often set up a small exhibition of the speaker's translated books, allowing the audience to become acquainted with their work before actually meeting him/her. In some cases, advertisements in the local press include an original poster. Some libraries asked for a translator of genre literature (e.g. science fiction), others wanted a translator of a specific language field, and one library specifically asked for a translator of young adult literature.

Our association is in charge of sourcing the speakers, while the libraries take care of organising the gathering. A member of our committee liaises with them and provides the necessary material. Together we look after advertising and promoting the event on social networks: the libraries announce it in their newsletters, in the local press and on their own networks, and we do the same. We also publish photos

of the meetings on our association's Facebook page: we believe that a report on one meeting can attract people to subsequent events. The meetings are quite informal and the photos succeed in capturing the relaxed, friendly and pleasant atmosphere that translators create in their discussions with their readers. We have also received positive, enthusiastic and flattering feedback from librarians, some of whom have reported that they only became aware of the full implications of literary translation as a result of these meetings. So, in addition to the reading public, our story also resonates with library professionals.

As our association still lacks sufficient resources to host such events on our own, we have arranged with the libraries to provide a fee for the translator, while our association pays for their transport. However, libraries are not exactly flush with cash either, so in many cases the translators do the event for free or for a nominal fee. We hope to eventually obtain state funding, which would allow us to pay for the speakers' travel expenses as well as for the presentations.

The speakers are usually chosen from among our members, but we sometimes contact external translators.



Stefan Hertmans' Konvertitka, translated from the Dutch by Radka Smejkalová
Photo: Filip Štoidl
Cover: Garamond Publishers



Anna Tkáčová is a Hispanist, Spanish translator, editor and member of the Czech Translators' Association (OP). She specialises in the translation of Spanish and Mexican essayists such as José Jiménez Lozano, Fernando García de Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Sergio Pitol, Elena Poniatowska etc.

Anna Tkáčová
Photo: Jan Tichý

This is a way of attracting their interest in our association and encouraging further cooperation and perhaps even membership. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a speaker to apply for membership of our association shortly afterwards. The project is proving to be a great success not only with librarians, but also, and above all, with the translators themselves, who see it as a unique opportunity to present their texts, take a break from the computer, and get direct feedback on their work, with comments from the members of the audience, instead of articles in the press or literary magazines.

Readings on a boat

For Prague audiences, we found a place on a boat permanently moored on the Vltava River, which belongs to the cultural association *(A)void Floating Gallery*. During the winter, meetings are held in the hold in front of a wood-burning stove; then, when the weather is clement, we sit out on the deck and enjoy the views of Hradšchin Castle while listening to our favourite author. The translation evenings held here, every first Tuesday of the month, share the same goal as the library meetings: to

make the translator better known and more visible. Music is an integral part of the programme, and this is often followed by an informal discussion with the audience. A first meeting took place in October 2021 which was attended by just four people; the last two meetings saw forty curious people who had come to listen to the translator.

(A)void Floating Gallery's boat meetings continued throughout the pandemic, although cooperation with the libraries was interrupted. In autumn 2021 and spring 2022, we managed to catch up on some of the meetings originally scheduled for 2020. Now the initiative is back on track and our plan is to continue with our programme which has turned out to be so successful. After all, why should debates and meetings with readers be reserved for writers only? Especially since the Czech Republic boasts one of the densest public library networks in Europe! As we all know, translators are also authors.

Translated from Czech into French by Hana Fořtová, from the French into English by Penelope Eades-Alvarez