

## Małgorzata Litwinowicz

### In Many Languages. After the Mix-Up Festival

I think they got in at the République. A bespectacled elderly lady in a headscarf, a middle-aged woman wearing heavy make-up, a young girl in eyeglasses, likely a student, and a curly-headed boy, aged approximately seventeen. Before they got off a few stops later, I'd realized they were a US-based Armenian family visiting relatives in Paris. "Следующая остановка chahrz duh gohl," the middle-aged lady said to her nephew or cousin, trying to explain to him at once where they were in their trip through the underground tunnels of Paris, how the strange name of the station's patron was pronounced, and how you say "next stop" in Russian. The simple conclusion would be that Russian turned out to have been the whole family's *lingua franca*, as it were, but that notion was immediately challenged when they began speaking about the Irish offshoot of their clan. And as they discovered at some point – watched now by the amused and curious passengers – the boy and the girl both had their immediate roots in Armenia, the United States, and Ireland. Still, to locate themselves across the family genealogical tree, they needed not only those two (or three?) languages, but also French and Russian.

I am wondering where this story fits. I can file it under the "Exotic" label, or under "Paris Is the Whole World." I can also remember reading Miłosz's *Native Realm*, from which various conclusions stem; one of them is that being able to speak three to five languages is nothing special if one wants to communicate with both the past and present members of one's family and feel at home with all of one's domestic cultures. Here I can mention a box of documents at my parents' house, with the great-great- and great-grandparents' birth, wedding, and death certificates written in Cyrillic, and those of the grandparents also in German and Lithuanian. And add in the Belarusian sing-songs and curses of my paternal grandparents as well as the family legend of the Lithuanian great-grandmother who spoke no one remembers what language, since history is silent on the subject, and as a consequence she is also silent, so I learned the pagan language for her. I try to use it whenever I visit Vilnius. I start with "*Laba diena*" in the taxi, the driver replies in Russian, then we switch to Polish, discussing

the details of the address in Lithuanian again *because* the hotel is in the former Jewish district.

I am also thinking about what the next sentence could be, something starting with the default “therefore.”

Possibility 1: “I come from a country that became monoethnic, monolingual, and monoreligious after the Second World War. The memory of the former diversity remained alive for some time, but was ultimately supplanted by a poor experience that became the basis of both local norm and image of the world.”

Possibility 2: “Multiplicity and diversity are a common human experience, present in family stories and all components of individual identity.”

In any case, it would be simpler to see the world as a constant reality, where identities don’t change, the languages are local, and the frameworks of everyday life are stable. In this world, diversity would be a pleasant exception. A seasoning. It would be worth celebrating, for “if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?”

I am afraid, however, that reality is a movie theater rather than a museum, a circus rather than a collection. Changeability, ephemerality, ambiguity, constant rescindment of organizing categories, all these dimensions of experience seem very important to me. Even if they are not universal or perennial, the world has certainly been in a swirl since the second half of the 20th century, languages and identities swirling with it. We don’t need particularly close scrutiny: if we only stop insisting on all those “for ages,” “since times immemorial,” stop sticking to all those cults of continuity and continuation, we will see that migration is a more common human experience than multigenerational constancy, reflected in a family address, or even trade, unchanged for centuries. Sure, whenever I visit the British Isles I am greatly impressed with the 300-year-old ordinary houses owned by ordinary people, the ruins of abbeys from a thousand years ago, so ordinary now that sheep herd in them, hedges pruned in the same way since King Edward’s times, old roads well travelled, and the ancient routes of nomadic shepherds. But immediately I am reminded of another map. It shows the medieval Nuremberg, consisting of little more than St.

Sebaldu Church as a result of Allied bombing, and Warsaw, a city that disappeared, its buildings destroyed, its Jewish residents murdered, the Polish ones decimated. Today, the Polish capital is a mock-up of a city, a maquette, a reconstruction inhabited by migrants from all parts of the country. The map includes also my home town, Łęborg (a.k.a. Lauenberg am Pommern), whose postwar residents arrived from what are today Belarus and Lithuania, replacing that had left west, leaving homes like you won't see around Grodno or Vilnius, cemeteries with blackletter inscriptions, Protestant churches, and a square-grid town center based on the old Chełmno rod (*alte culmische Rute*), a medieval unit of length used for centuries. *Gdańsk/Danzig, Sopot/Zopot, Wilno/Vilnius, Kaliningrad/ Königsberg/Królewiec*. Or, to get closer to Warsaw, Góra Kalwaria, a town also known as Гора-Кальварья (Russian), גער (Yiddish), or קלוואריה גורה (Hebrew). The history of Polish towns, especially in the east of the country, is often written partly in Yiddish.

I dwell upon these various historical circumstances because they seem important to me as a context for reflections on the idea of storytelling in many languages.

For many years I have co-organized the International Storytelling Festival in Warsaw, and from the first edition the question of how to translate the story being told on stage was crucial to us. We never wanted to tell our audience, “Learn languages or stay home.” We didn't want to be exclusive. Whether a multilingual story is always possible on stage is another matter – we know that it's not. But the conditions and limitations of translation aren't my focus here. I am more preoccupied with the following question: in what terms did I think with my friends from the Grupa Studnia O. collective about creative translation solutions for storytellers from different linguistic and cultural universes? Were they the terms of innovation/novelty or rather those of obviousness? Our research concerning the problem of stage translation (or rather co-storytelling) wasn't underpinned by much theory, we didn't refer to our effort as innovation or a search for new forms of multilingual storytelling. But it turns out that we thought of it as obvious: you do it because it's something you do. And you do it because the world is such that the experience of the multiplicity and free flow of languages happens more rather than less often and to some extent that agrees with out biographical, familial, and social experiences. “Multilingualism sounds familiar,” the motto could be.

Stage solutions and translation/co-storytelling techniques are a subject that merits a discussion of its own; it would have to mention Mats Rehnman and his unique way of working with the translator as someone who recapitulates the narrative and pushes it forward by asking questions. Another person who could share her experience and know-how here would be Magda Lena Górska who has translated Francophone storytellers for years and has co-authored French-Polish-Creole narrative performances.

Attending this year's Mix-Up Festival in Paris at the invitation of Abbi Patrix, an event focused on the idea of storytelling in many languages or between languages, I had a feeling of being part of a project not only time-proven, but also well rooted in the reality of contemporary culture. All innovation in cultural practice should begin, I believe, with anthropological diagnosis: how does the new idea correspond with human reality? Where are the contact points between an idea engendered through creative ferment and the "autonomous" communicational and cultural realities of the world we live in? The cult of innovation shouldn't obscure the horizon of culture, its practices and its media. No, I'm not saying that "the new is good if it proves to be old." An artistic project successfully carried out is always something new. So one new thing is the story of Shlemiel's voyage to Warsaw from Chełm (Хелім/כעלם/חלם), for two storytellers and two languages, which we have quickly put together with Clara Guénon (her speaking no Polish at all and me speaking little French). Another are the stories prepared by the French-Greek-Turkish trio of Ariane Pavin, Sophilia Tsorteki, and Aslihan Hazar, a project where three languages freely coexist and traditional Greek songs turn out to be Turkish too – the lyrics have diverged, but the melodies remain the same. A new thing is always to find a common rhythm, to play with words and sounds, to experience non-verbal communication, when the ultimate semantic keys are the meter and structure of the story, gesture, voice, the physicality of the body, the musicality of language. The specific instance of working together is always an experiment, always an attempt to produce a shared score, an exercise in being present and attentive; this creative situation is always worth initiating and renewing, bearing in mind that it can be recognized as an element of the common cultural experience: an experience of diversity, movement, the complex effort of conveying meanings. It can be recognized as something that we *know*. This in fact speaks only

in favor of the idea of storytelling in many languages, which turns out to be not a trendy theoretical experiment, but a beautiful, creative game played with our cultural experience.

(transl. Marcin Wawrzyńczak)