The Language of the Enemy

By *Iwona Nowacka*

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When I was 12, I attended my first foreign language class at school in Poland. It was 1992, and, with Russian declining in popularity, the Russian teacher had retrained during the summer break. When the new term began on 1 September, she stood in front of the class as a newly qualified German teacher, picked up a book and said, “Das ist ein Buch.” It was love at first sentence; I’d never heard anything so beautiful in my life.

A recently procured satellite dish gave me access to the lurid commercials of RTL and Pro7 and provided me with my first listening comprehension triumphs in German. It slowly dawned on me that as well as sounding beautiful, this new language had the power to shift my world’s borders. At home, my love of the German language met with a less than enthusiastic reaction: “But there are so many nicer languages in the world!” people said. My later career choice was just as coolly received; “Oh well, someone needs to speak the language of the enemy, I suppose,” is still a common response.

In secondary school, my Italian teacher called me “The Berlin-Tokyo-Rome Axis”, frequently adding, “All you have to do is learn Japanese, Iwona, and you’ll have them all”. Once, when we were studying *Conversations with an Executioner* in Polish class, the teacher had us act out a trial, assigning me the role of the SS criminal’s defence attorney. It infuriated me that my beloved German language was continually being linked to history – and to one specific period in German history at that. For two weeks, I plotted my revenge, getting myself so worked up that when my day in court came, I delivered an impassioned closing speech. The trial ended in the defendant’s acquittal, a result no one was happy about.

My grandmother once told me that I become another person when I speak German. A young actor warned me not to speak the language in her presence as she was plagued by nightmares about her forebears’ wartime experiences. I had a nightmare too, dreaming that I was being tortured by Polish partisans for betraying my country. At the time, I had just started a relationship with a German man, and evidently it was no easier for him to be with a Pole. Over one romantic dinner he asked for my forgiveness for the evils perpetrated in the name of Germany against the Polish people. The relationship didn’t last very long.

“Why German?” people often ask. What they really want to say is, “What’s wrong with you?” When I mention what I do for a living, I tend to get a caustic retort. Recently, I’ve taken to saying that I translate plays. Generally, no one bothers to ask what languages I work with. The German language has become an increasingly fraught issue here over the past few years. In 2016, a Polish professor was attacked on a tram in Warsaw for speaking German with a colleague. Now whenever I’m on the train, I take a good look at the other passengers before deciding which book to take out of my bag. I always have a Polish book with me just to be safe.

My first translation was a play, a monologue spoken by Emmy Göring (or at least someone who thinks she's Emmy Göring); yes, it's difficult to escape the German stereotypes. In the monologue, Frau Göring is sitting in a dentist's waiting room because one of her wisdom teeth has started to speak, saying thing that aren't quite in line with her and her husband's outlook on the world. Weird new texts like this, texts that you haven't quite decoded yet, texts that resist your attempts to get to grips with them, can be unnerving at first. Then you embark on the difficult but wonderful process of domesticating this strange animal. You go through phases of worshipping the text, phases of being utterly perplexed, phases of hating it. And there are phases of not knowing whether you'll make it to the last sentence. It's always a journey into the unknown; you may have a map, but the route isn't marked, and you never know where the urge to give up will get the better of you. Where you will sit down in the middle of the street and say, "I can't go on". And that point comes in every translation. If it doesn't, it's even more worrying, because you may have walked into a trap without even noticing. What I fear even more than despair is encountering texts that don't "touch" me.

The Polish word *Niemcy*, which means both "German" and "Germany", comes from *niemy*, meaning "dumb", "unable to speak". The Germans spoke a language no one understood, and so the Polish denied them the ability to speak at all. As a translator, I am an invisible person giving a dumb language a voice and meaning. It sounds almost magical.

And translation really is a quite magical process. It's not unlike acting: I get a text that I have to "perform" in another language as if I hadn't just written the text myself, but experienced it too. And it's not easy to step off the stage. You can overidentify, drown in someone else's thoughts. I'm the psychosomatic type, developing a fever as soon as someone near me has one. Over the past few years, I've translated texts dealing with child abuse, euthanasia, war, torture and violence, which partly explains why I needed to take a year off in 2019.

I'm an anxious person, but I used to think that when translating, I could be free of fear and feel at home. The German language was something I chose for myself and made my own, an expression of my autonomy. When I was growing up, this language was a "safe space", my secret language; I even wrote my diary in German. But we can't do without fear entirely. Fear is part of life, a survival mechanism. We just have to make sure there isn't too much of it. Fear … eats the soul.

Iwona Nowacka is a translator, a curator of theatre and literature projects, and a member of the independent performance mini-collective Turkowski & Nowacka. She has translated into Polish works by authors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Fritsch, Juli Zeh, Falk Richter, Gesine Danckwart, Daniela Dröscher, Andres Veiel, Katja Brunner, Bonn Park, Milo Rau and Sibylle Berg. She lives in Szczecin.

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