

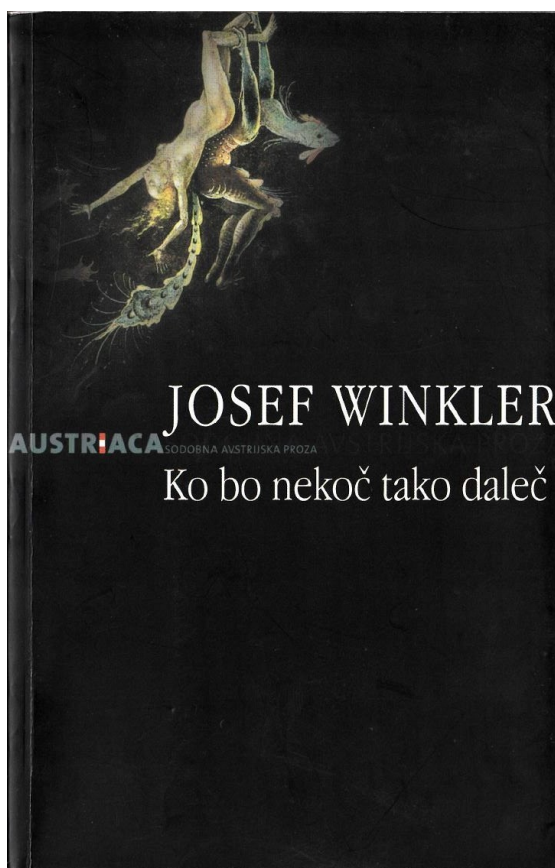
Vulnerable Territory

By *Amalija Maček*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

Your invitation reaches me in what is – seen from the outside – the calmest, most settled period of my life, but beneath the smiling surface there is an incredible churning – not a foreboding, but rather, certainty: harder days are coming. My life strategy so far has always been one of escape – just getting away, always proceeding onward. But now I'm reduced to inner exile, to a mental existence via ZOOM, where you have to look everything in the eye. Everything arises in the lull of Corona and half-sleep. I suppress it, watch a movie that moves me to tears, and wonder how recklessly everyone falls into each other's arms ... I suppress it by trying to cheer others up. Family clown. Happy heart. Grateful for so much. Now even for restlessness, because looking back it finally makes sense.

I'm all too familiar with the questions about *Berühungsängste* - fear of touch, contact, engagement – and vulnerability. Yes, there have been books in my translation biography that I didn't like, there have been good texts by authors who were ethically questionable, the arduous revision of a fifty-year-old translation of Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*, a NO to an indirect translation of a work by Amos Oz that was to be translated into Slovenian via the circuitous route of German translation. And yes, I have actually experienced a German author telling me that he prefers a male translator colleague, because he would better understand the desire of his male hero...



Slovenian book cover

Deeply moved, I have translated texts that no one else wanted to “touch” because they were too gloomy, too depressing and full of corpses – two books by Josef Winkler, for example. I love long, convoluted sentence structures – they ward off stupidity. And mostly, out of an emotional impulse, I translated and suggested texts by authors who later won esteemed awards in the German-speaking world, such as Terézia Mora, Ulrich Peltzer, Raoul Schrott, and Josef Winkler. *One must imagine Sisyphus happy*, Camus wrote, and so I too have voluntarily translated texts on the edge of what I can comprehend, such as Max Weber or Hans Kelsen’s *Pure Theory of Law*. Because I liked the publisher, because authors like Gustav Radbruch honestly interested me, because I started with translations of scholarly treatises and sometimes perhaps approached things a little fearlessly. Last year, I reached my mental and physical limits in translating texts by Aby Warburg. They were selected and complex, but not always intended for publication. Fragments of memories of a far too well-read polymath, plus notes from his students. I was also expected to translate from Latin, Old Italian, and Luther German, footnotes upon footnotes, 300 pages. Why did I accept? Out of love for art, out of respect for Aby Warburg, out of the desire to work again after a few years with the renowned publishing house and the lovable legendary publisher who sadly passed away in the fall of 2020? Out of vanity, because she flattered me that I was the only one in Slovenia who could translate this book? I tried hard, consulted experts, neglected people dear to me, hardly slept, but I am not satisfied with the translation. The texts were too hard for me.

It’s a stroke of luck when you find “your text” as a translator. For me, that was the short story *Three Paths to the Lake* [*Simultan*] by Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Wall* [*Die Wand*] by Marlen Haushofer, and *My Year in the No-Man’s-Bay* [*Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*] by Peter Handke. With Handke, I entered territory full of political land

mines. I don't want to repeat the whole Serbia and Nobel Prize discussion here, much less reignite this ersatz war. The Nobel Prize embarrassed the Slovenians. Handke is still received in Slovenia as "one of us". His Karst walks are legendary, almost identity-forming; generations of readers have grown up with his works. No one has expressed Slovenian melancholy as well as he has. The writer Drago Jančar congratulated Peter Handke from the Blue Sofa at the Frankfurt Book Fair (mentioning the fact that they did not always agree politically), there were isolated personal resentments against Handke, but otherwise people kept silent, ducked away – the survival strategy of a tiny nation. There were no official congratulations, no particularly loud criticisms. In the spring of 2020, my new translation of the story *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* [*Wunschloses Unglück*] was published. In the afterword and in interviews, I did not defend anything I could not defend. The literary quality of this wonderful text speaks for itself. A space opened up for a calm, civilized discussion about Peter Handke. It was suddenly possible again, even "hip," to read and like Handke. An emotional dam of silence was broken, the book was widely read and commented on, also in letters to the editor, personal reactions. The most Slovenian thing about Handke's mother was perhaps her suicide, for which the author found a respectful, restrained and at the same time artful language. The book is highly topical for Slovenia, where even more people than usual have taken their own lives this year. People are silent about that, too.

For 20 years I have desired to translate Handke's opus magnum *My Year in the No-Man's-Bay* [*Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*], a book that contains the whole of life. My friend and colleague Fabjan Hafner, who died far too early, once advised me to translate the book one story after another until it was translated in its entirety and then pitch it. Five years ago, the publisher promised me he would fulfill this wish. It is an enchanting book in which the first-person narrator goes into a yearlong voluntary suburban quarantine, accompanying his friends and relatives only from a distance. The focus is on loneliness, and the desire to belong. It's a book that I am not translating chronologically. Instead, I open the book to a different page each time, like an oracle, and literally get lost in it. Not every time, but amazingly often, the passage speaks exactly about something I've just been thinking about. There is so much insight into human nature in this work. No imperial Austrian hypocritical politeness – instead an exposing honesty combined with hypersensitivity, almost petulance. Handke's work belongs to our literature like Maja Haderlap, who continues to be considered a Slovenian author, although we read her last books in Štefan Vevar's wonderful translation. And like the word magician Florjan Lipuš belongs to Austrian literature, even though he writes in Slovenian.

It is through this territory of vulnerability that I move.



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Amalija Maček is a translator and university lecturer based in Ljubljana. She has translated authors including Marlen Haushofer, Josef Winkler, Ulrich Peltzer, Terézia Mora and Peter Handke into Slovenian.

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