How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the War

By *Gadi Goldberg*

Translated from the Hebrew by *Noam Ben Ishie*

In early 2012, an editor with an Israeli long-standing, distinguished publisher contacted me to inquire if I'd consider a commission for a new translation to Erich Maria *Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front.* Realising that July 2014 would mark the First World War centenary, the publisher had come up with the idea of reissuing the book in Hebrew, in honour of the event.

My first reaction was breaking out in cold sweats. This was, after all, one of the great classics, of German literature in particular, and of European and world literature in general. Classics are a daunting prospect to start with and if that weren't enough, the novel had already been translated into Hebrew three times. As early as 1929, only a few months after its publication in German, two Hebrew renditions of the novel had come out, almost simultaneously, in Tel Aviv and in Warsaw. (In those pre-WWII days, before the ensuing destruction of the European Jewry, the centre of gravity for translations into Hebrew was eastern and central Europe, particularly Berlin, Vilnius and Warsaw.) A third Hebrew translation had come out in 1982, and while it had now been 30 years since then, making it more than legitimate to consider a new translation, I nevertheless had my reservations. The story, after all, takes place among German soldiers during WWI. How would I convey the feelings and experiences of Paul Baumer to the Israeli Hebrew readers without making him sound too much like your average IDF soldier? Was it even OK for me to describe German soldiers in terms borrowed from the Israeli military?

As I often do when overcome with fear and concerns, rather than focusing on the concrete issue at hand and asking myself whether or not I was worthy of the mission of re-translating the piece, or even up for it, I resorted to abstract considerations (in true philosophy-graduate-student form). I tried my best to convince myself that I couldn't possibly endeavour to re-translate a classic of such magnitude. I recalled Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous statement from The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world". Wittgenstein referred of course to language in general, rather than any specific tongue, but I was off on a tangent, reasoning that the famous statement could also be construed to mean that there was a limit that delineated the world of one language, separating it from the world of another, and never should the twain meet. Every language was a world sealed within itself, as every language was a structured system of sentences, each practically referencing the others, particularly the system as a whole. This in turn meant that a sentence in a given language could not be understood without a comprehensive understanding of the language in which it was said as a whole, as every term in the given sentence, as well as the connections between the terms, were unique to the specific system of the language at hand, relying on its other sentences.

But not only, so I persuaded myself, could the sentence be understood only through an

understanding of the system as a whole, but it also had no meaning without said connections. Language, I maintained, was acquired as we acquired our knowledge of this world, and not independently of it. Learning the word “home”, for example, one had no previous concept or image of the home to which the word was attached, but acquiring the concept, the understanding of this state of affairs called “home”, coincided with learning the language. Therefore, I let my logic run away with me, any of these concepts was inextricably tied for me with the world in which they had been acquired. It therefore followed that any language was inextricably tied with the world whereby it was learnt. And if this world was unlike the one in which another language was acquired, so I reasoned, the obvious inference was that never did or could the twain interact.

Translation from one language into another in fact means translating one world into another, while facilitating interaction and penetration. And yet these worlds are usually apart, sharing no point of contact. If you had acquired a language in a given world, there was no logical way to translate that language, so I told myself, because this also meant conveying, through the translation, the overall contexts in which it had been acquired.

There was no escaping the conclusion: translation was an altogether impossible endeavour! A novel written in German would span the full gamut of German language contexts. Translating into Hebrew meant taking it out of these contexts and embedding it in a whole new contextual world. Every sentence in the novel would take on a whole new meaning in the new language, drawing on the contexts typical to the target language. Even a simple sentence like “it was in the fall” was untranslatable, as “fall” in German was felt and understood in a totally different way than its counterpart in Hebrew. It exuded different temperatures, while carrying other sounds, smells and sights, and crucially, exerting a different cultural notion.

I therefore had to turn the editor down. Not only was I not going to re-translate *All Quiet on the Western Front*: from then on I was not going to translate, period.

Eventually it was Remarque himself who pulled me out of this rut. On a television interview about *All Quiet on the Western Front*, he once noted: “My subject matter was in fact purely human, that is, 18-year-olds who were meant to face life, then suddenly sent to face death.” It was not a German matter that Remarque had explored, but a human matter, and therefore, I thought, there had to be a way to convey it in any human language; there had to be a way to find a point of contact between the languages, and that point was humanity itself.

If I was going to re-translate the book (and I was still unsure if I could overcome my reservations), I would have to find a way to use a certain language, Hebrew in my case, to describe a human-universal subject. If Remarque had achieved this feat in German, there was no reason why it couldn’t be done in Hebrew, with one significant difference: Remarque, writing in German, had tapped into the case of German soldiers to explore a human-universal theme; I, in turn, would have to find a way, so I thought, to leave in place the right measure of alien elements from this different world, so that every Hebrew reader could tell these were German soldiers during WWI, rather than IDF soldiers, while familiarising Hebrew readers with the text, so that it transcended that alien world. I had to allow them to assume the protagonist’s human-universal point of view and experience first-hand the turmoil that the book had sought to inspire, so as to drive in the universal anti-war message of the novel.

Here too it was Remarque who came to my aid. He himself had had to find a way to instil in readers the point of view of the ordinary soldier and human-universal essence of the war. For this end, he employs two main ways, both evident as early as the opening sentence of the novel: “We are at rest five miles behind the front.” First of all, Remarque has his focus on “we”, rather than “I”. The only instances in the text where it goes deep inside the mind of the individual are when the protagonist mediates on his future or reminisces on his past; the battle experiences, on the other hand, are universally felt in the first person plural, the human-universal person. Second, and perhaps more crucially, the events of the war and the soldiers’ experiences are delivered in the present tense, the tense of the unmediated experience. This use of the present tense had been a fairly rare literary device back in the day, I figured, and therefore indicated a conscious choice on the part of Remarque, in order to draw readers into events and make them feel as if they were at the eye of the storm themselves.

At this point I could also see the necessity of new translation for this novel. For the previous Hebrew version, published back in the 1980s, the translator made the decision to conform to Hebrew literature prevalent norms of the time and convert the present tense into past tense, which pulled the carpet from under a major pillar of Remarque’s literary style.

This fact eventually tipped the scales, as my reservations made way for a wish to embark on this new translation: it was the wish to restore the present tense to this book, so as to reengage Hebrew readers and allow the human-universal theme to resonate with them too.

A pleasant surprise concerning translation’s power to facilitate an inter-cultural bridge and connection awaited in December 2020, during the second lockdown, in the midst of a harsh, physically isolated winter. One day, a literature teacher from a religious all-girls school called to say that her students had read my Hebrew translation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and wondered if they could meet me on Zoom to talk about this specific translation and translation in general. I am normally averse to all manner of Zoom interactions, where I feel the human touch is amiss. But this time I was happy to oblige, for the culture of religious girls in Jerusalem is, in a sense, alien for me too, as a secular man based in Berlin. I talked to them a bit about the thoughts I have just shared here, but mainly listened and was struck by how the book had resonated with them, realising just how right Remarque had been when stating that the subject matter of his text was in fact “purely human”.

#Klassiker, #Neuübersetzung



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Gadi Goldberg is originally from Israel and has lived in Germany for more than 20 years, 17 of those in Berlin. Since 2005 he has been a full time translator of German literature and philosophy into Hebrew. He has translated the works of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Herder and many others, as well as the authors Wolfgang Köppen, Erich Maria Remarque, Joseph Roth, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Stefan Zweig, Arno Schmidt, Uwe Timm, Robert Menasse, Clemens Setz, Saša Stanišić, Kathrin Röggla, Barbara Honigmann and many more. Since 2011 he has led the German-Hebrew ViceVersa translation workshop together with Anne Birkenhauer.

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