Sasha Marianna Salzmann im Gespräch mit Maria Stepanova und Olga Radetzkaja

Transkription

Sasha Marianna Salzmann (S): Hi, I am Sasha Salzmann. I am very excited to speak today about this marvellous poetry book, »Telo Vozvrashhaetsya«, »Der Körper kehrt wieder«, »The Body Returns«, with the poet, journalist, editor-in-chief of colta.ru, a platform on contemporary art and culture in Russia, Maria Stepanova. Maria, I am very delighted to have you. Welcome!

Maria Stepanova (M): Thank you so much for inviting me.

S: In Germany, Maria is known for her widely acknowledged novel, »Nach dem Gedächtnis«, »Pamyati Pamyati« – »In Memory of Memory«, I believe, is the English translation – which won two of the major prizes for literature in Russia and is translated into fourteen languages. And with us is the translator Olga Radetzkaja: Berlin-based, studied Slavic and Comparative Literature, and is also a co-author of the documentary film »Spurwechsel. Ein Film vom Übersetzen«, and has been an editor at OSTEUROPA magazine since 2008. Olga Radetzkaja, you're very welcome.

Olga Radetzkaja (O): Hello.

S: Olga's translations are highly appreciated and admired by the critics, and last year – 2020 – the two of you were awarded the Berlin Brücke Preis for Literature and Translation for »Nach dem Gedächtnis«, published by Suhrkamp Verlag. Masel tov to this very beautiful award!

O: Thank you.

M: Thanks so much.

S: So, Maria, let's start speaking about »Der Körper kehrt wieder«, »The Body Returns«, »Telo Vozvrashhaetsya«. It is interesting; it was broadly discussed; people are amazed by your brain and how it absorbs centuries of literature. And you referred to them playfully in your own creation. But what really strikes me is people speak also a lot about your humour, and/or irony. I wonder what your stake is in these two words and how it is connected to what you do. Because when I read your poetry, I feel that pain and irony is in a constant dialogue, I mean entangled. So, would you like to deliberate on that, maybe?

M: First of all … And, once more, thank you so much for all your kind words. And well, that is an interesting question, because a part – and a good part – of my readers are considering the stuff I am writing as something entirely and utterly tragic. Maybe because of the subject, maybe because of, well, some undertow of basic seriousness. And it is pretty depressing. There was a funny story: A certain radio broadcaster was doing a programme about contemporary lyrics, and I was a part of it. And I did some reading. And afterwards, in the corridor, she approached me with a question. And the question was: »How are you able to move through your, throughout your life, carrying in yourself that awful cube?«, etot parallelepiped, with something horrible contained, I suppose. And well, I was a bit frustrated, a bit surprised. Not exactly inspired, but I am still thinking about it. And for me it is a highly humorous situation. Because when you are entering the language's territory, the playground of the language, you have to be as playful as the language is. To be ready to follow languages ... What it does is it throws you

those tiny balls, those rhymes, those coincidences, those hidden and not-so-hidden quotations, and you catch these balls and throw them back. And in a way, it is a playful dialogue of siblings, as if the language was not that ancient and everlasting substance one could drown in, but something else, a playmate. Something that is able to understand and cooperate. And this feeling was always important to me. That we are somehow equal in this mutual understanding and in this mutual game. And it is all about being funny and not being too serious about yourself.

S: Oh, I see. Yeah, I see that. In a way, you can really hear the children on the playground when you read these – of course, with very heavy topics – poems of yours.

S: Olga, I have a question to you. Because something that your colleague and wonderful, marvellous writer Esther Kinsky said … something about what a translator does. She said that some people think of the translator as a tour guide: he or she shows you the foreign, the exotic, the other, and explains it to you. Like, you know, a culture mediator would be, maybe. And Esther argues, of course, in a whole book against it, and tries to describe what it is for her. And I was wondering, do you have a metaphor for the artistic work you do?

O: I don‘t have one; I think I have several metaphors that come up and fade away with books coming up and leaving me. With Masha‘s poetry, I think it‘s something like taking a very complex construction – or maybe a toy, or maybe a radio or something – taking it apart and putting, trying to put it back together. And, obviously, ending up with something different. But it‘s very ... it has a very constructive part to it. And at the same time, something very organic. Because what brings me into a poem is always its rhythm, its movement. So it starts in the legs, actually.

S: I see. But this is something ... Maybe an obvious question, but Russian rhythm, Russian melody and the logic of the Russian language is so entirely different from the German, you know. So I was wondering, what is your biggest challenge and what is your biggest inspiration in putting this radio into pieces and then bringing it back to life as something else?

O: Well, the biggest challenge with these poems is obviously their immense richness, and lightness at the same time. Because they deal with all these heavy ... all this heavy stuff like tradition, rhyme, metre, quotes and quotes and quotes many, many storeys high. But they still move around very gracefully. And sometimes, as you said, in a very funny way. For the Russian … I don‘t think that there is one Russian logic or one Russian melody. Each book is different, each author, each text is different. Each line, actually, in the poems very often is different. So of course there are ... For me, it is not the logic. Maybe if I have to say something general about Russian and German, what is different for me is rather their sense of space and time.

S: Mm.

O: For instance, in Russian, when you speak about something that is outside of the window, you say it is »behind the window«. Whereas in German, it is »in front of the window«. That is an entirely different perspective. Now that is something that sometimes matters, and sometimes it doesn‘t. When you have a text that plays with this beyond-ness of what is outside of the window, then I have to find another way of expressing this. Or sometimes I might even do a little violation of the German and actually say »hinter dem Fenster«, behind the window. Which is wrong in German, but I can try to make sense of it. Or I find another way of somehow expressing this longing that might resound in the beyond, in the »behind the window«, right?

S: Yeah.

O. But the poetry is … it's not the language, it's what moves through the language, and the way it moves through the language. That's what it is about. So I have to find a way of moving through my language in a similar way.

S. Right. Yeah. I have to say … I mean, I said it already, there is a beautiful dance you do with Maria and her works. Maria, I would like to ask you something about writing as creating history. This is something I came across reading Hannah Arendt, who thinks about the sentence that »History is made by those who write it«. And then it made me think about what James Baldwin said about poets, that poets are witnesses who leave a testimony about their times. And I was wondering, first of all, if you agree. And second of all, if that is a thought in your mind while you write or maybe when you publish, which is also a different step to do. That people will read you, maybe in another century – and they will for sure read you – and they will think this is how it was.

M: You know, it is a complex thing and a complicated situation. Because, of course, I have been thinking about it a lot, mostly because, well, you know, I wrote this book about memory that is questioning the appreciation of memory, or of every human attempt to catch up with the past. And I am pessimistic. Well, more or less, but yes, pessimistic about the notion. It has ... I don't really believe we can resurrect the past, or even reconstruct it to restore it. But what is possible to do is this endlessly futile attempt of leaning back. This attempt filled with longing that somehow gives you a sudden flash of a revelation, a sudden understanding that may be futile as well, or it may be lying to you. But this sense of being connected, for a short while, of being rhymed with events or people or words of times past – it works and is worth the effort. And thus, I think that what is so special about the literature and the sensibility of our times ... We don't believe any more in a solitary voice. Because when we are looking back what we are able to see is a chorus, a choir, and an endless number of solitary voices that you are able to hear all at once. And I think that poets or writers, even the best of them, the best of us, have no kind of preference here, no kind of privilege, because in a way, when it comes to remembering things, it is a place of equality.

S: Olga, your other colleague, Sasha Dugdale, who is Maria's translator into English, said something really striking about a poem which is also in »Der Körper kehrt wieder«, »The Body Returns«, »Telo Vozvrashhaetsya«. In the original it is »Voyna Zverey i Zhivotnykh« – you translated it as »Krieg der Tiere und Untiere«. And Sasha Dugdale said this one was absolutely untranslatable before Brexit. But then, with the political change, not only the language changed but also the way people were speaking about their inner worlds changed, and suddenly she translated it as »War of the Beasts and the Animals«. And she felt that people could more connect. And I was wondering if you feel similarly or make similar observations about the German language since it is also changing very rapidly, connected to the political changes in Germany, which of course are entirely different from what is going on in the UK, but still, we have changes, we speak differently. What does it mean for the artistic work you do?

O: Hm, that is an interesting one. For me as well, »War of the Beasts and the Animals« was the most difficult part of this book, but I would say for different reasons. I found it very difficult because it has also ... it also derives and works with all these traditions – rhyme and metre and so on. But in a much less playful way. I felt it was in a less playful way than, for instance, »Spolia«, which is the second cycle. And it has a lot of violence and death in it. And the combination of violence and death with rhyme is something that feels very strange in German. So that was really difficult. But the violence and the death

and the war, all that, to me, is already part of the German language, has been part of the German language at least for large parts of the twentieth century. And in a way, we don't need a Brexit, we already have all that in our storage room, you know?

S: Yes.

O: And I probably worked rather with this layer than with today's layer, you know? But maybe it works in the same way, after all. Because ... I mean, this is not from »War of the Beasts and the Animals«, but you have this line in »Spolia«, I think: »moy brat skazal, chto ty fashist« – »my brother said that you are a fascist«. This »fascist« in German – it's so clear who it is talking about. It is actually talking about us, you know? And the history that plays this big role in these poems is a shared history, in a way, between our language and the Russian language. It derives from the same events, but from different sides. But, in a way, we are connected in this knot of violence. So I don't have to look far; it's very close, actually, in the language; it is very close to the surface.

S: Yeah, it totally makes sense, we don't need a Brexit. I have, alas, a last question to the two of you. But that is only a teaser so everybody who has not read yet your wonderful work will do it now. And we are going to meet, hopefully, this year and in the next years to come for readings of yours. But my last question, first to Maria – and then, Olga, if you feel like joining, I would really love to hear your opinion, too – is on poetry as a political matter. Well, let's agree on poems: they don't start a revolution. Okay, fair enough. They can be a highlight of an inauguration, right? They can be a part of a political speech in a parliament. And, of course, they can be a motto in a demonstration. So, Maria, what is your take on that? What is the political force of a poem?

M: Hmm. Well, of course, sure, a poem is good for all the things you enumerated. And for a good number of other things. But when I think of the political potential of poetry, strangely, the first idea, the first story that comes to my mind, is something else. When I was in my late teens, I was reading – I still do – a lot of memoirs. And at the time, the biggest part of it was somehow dealing with the Russian 1930s, 1940s, 1950s. With the repressions and concentration camps of Stalin's times. And there was one thing that felt striking. A person who knew enough poems by heart, who was carrying them in his brain, in her brain like in a suitcase, was somehow more apt for survival. Because of this inner hiding place that every poem she knew served for. And not only for that particular prisoner, but also for all the people around her. Because it was a thing that did not have a material dimension, and yet it was shareable, it was something you could invite a person to, as in opening a room or opening your house to a total stranger. And it was a powerful tool of survival. In very practical terms – I don't mean anything, you know, sentimental or romantic, you know, your poems that are helping you carry on during, well, something. Yeah, they are perfectly able to do that as well, but … Simply, a human that knows some poems by heart, is more ... That is an interesting thing ... is more what? More spacious. There is this beautiful phrase by Mary Wollstonecraft that is always speaking about enlarging her soul. Poetry enlarges your soul in spatial and very practical terms. And when I was older, I was reading the German memoirs – with the same stories, the same motif of poetry as a hiding space, a crawl space. Not a means of escape, but something else. And I think that nowadays, when our notions of politics are rapidly changing, it is something we should consider. This particular ability poetry has.

S: Oh, that's very beautiful. Yeah, it made me of course think of Mandelstam, whose poetry survived because people remembered it and passed it throughout generations. Of course. Olga, would you like to add something on the political in poetry?

O: Maybe just one aspect that I encounter – especially in translating this poetry. It creates a different awareness of my own language. Even if I read German poetry, it very often feels as if this language was not native any more. As if it was a foreign language within the native language. And that does have a political aspect to it, when it makes you regard that which you consider your own, your home, your Heimat, as something foreign. It creates a different perspective, and it also opens your mind, I think. So that has a political dimension.

S: Oh, absolutely. Those are the best closing words from the two of you. Thank you so much for this amazing conversation. You two are the ground-breaking minds of our times and I am very, very thankful for this exchange and am looking forward to more in the future.

O+M: Thank you. Thank you so much.