György Radó

HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

In the Middle Ages, when Latin was the *lingua franca* of Europe, some legends of Hungarian saints were translated into national languages: the Legend of St Stephen, first "apostolic" king of Hungary, into German, and motifs of the Legend of his son St Emeric into Polish; motifs of the Legend of the knightly king St László (Ladislas) appear in Old Russian chronicles, while the Legend of St Margaret, the daughter of king Béla IV, who lived as a humble nun on the island later named after her, was translated into German and Italian.

For Hungary, the modern age began with the catastrophic defeat at Mohács in 1526. Thereafter the country was divided into three parts, the largest of which suffered under the Turkish yoke for a century and a half, while the Western and Northern parts formed the Kingdom of Hungary under the Habsburg dynasty, and Transylvania in the East became an independent principality. During the incessant struggle to expel the Turks and reunite the country, literature too reflected the warlike atmosphere. The first outstanding poet who wrote in Hungarian, Bálint Balassi (1551-1594), described the warriors' life in his *Katonaének* ("Soldier Song"), and the Polish poet Adam Czahrowski (1565-1599), who took part in the fighting in Hungary, after returning to his country translated freely–or rather adapted–this poem in relation to the Polish-Cossack war.

In the 17th century a heroic poem connected Hungarian literature with a foreign language in a unique fashion: an outstanding poet translated an epos written by his own brother, also an outstanding poet. Miklós Zrínyi (1620-1664) wrote in Hungarian the epos *Szigeti veszedelem* ("Sziget's Peril"), which describes the tragic defence of the fortress of Sziget by the poet's great-grandfather against the Turks; it was then translated into Croatian by his brother, Petar Zrinski (1621-1671).

Hungarian literature revived at the end of the 18th century. The poet János Batsányi (1763-1845), who was a partisan of Napoleon I (he translated the Emperor's proclamation to the Hungarians), and lived in Paris until its occupation by the Allies, translated some Hungarian poems into French under his pen-name Charles Bérony, and published them in the review *Mercure Étranger*. They passed almost unnoticed, because Hungary, situated on the border of European civilization, was thought of by Westerners merely as a country of wine,

fiery songs and dances–the only exception, perhaps, being Sir Philip Sidney, who having visited Hungary in the 1570s, wrote about the people's "songes of their Ancestors' valour which that right souldier-like Nation thinck the chiefest kindlers of brave courage."

Two anthologies began to dispel the fog of ignorance. A bilingual literary writer, Count János Mailáth (1786-1855), published in 1825 a book *Magyarische Gedichte* ("Hungarian Poems"). This collection–and others which followed it: *Magyarische Sagen und Märchen* ("Magyar Myths and Tales"), *Handbuch der ungarischen Poesie* ("Handbook of Hungarian Poetry') and *Blumenlese aus ungarischen Dichtern* ("Anthology of Hungarian Poets")–had considerable influence. The first Russian translation of Hungarian verse, *Narodnye Tantsy* ("National dances"), was published in an almanach in Odessa in 1839, and three Hungarian lyrics, translated into French, appeared in 1830 in the *Mercure de France au XIX^e siècle*; in both cases the translations were made from Mailáth's versions.

The second anthology which paved the way for Hungarian literature abroad appeared in English. It was advertised by an article in the *Monthly Magazine* "Progress and Literature in Hungary" (1819) and by the English translation of a ballad by Sándor Kisfaludy (1772-1844) in the *Monthly Review* (1827). Another writer, Sir John Bowring, made a pioneer collection of Hungarian lyrics. A British diplomat who had served in the Far East, a globetrotter and businessman, Bowring was also a poet-translator. He studied many languages, translated lyrics of several nations, published Russian, Dutch, Spanish and other anthologies, and also a volume entitled *Poetry of the Magyars* (1830). It met with a mixed reception in the British press, but drew a certain amount of attention to Hungarian literature.

At that time, before the revolution of 1848-1849, Sándor Kisfaludy, author of the cycles *Kesergö szerelem* ("Plaintive love") and *Boldog szerelem* ("Happy love"), and the novelist Miklós Jósika (1794-1865), were popular abroad.

Universal interest in the Hungarian revolution of 1848-1849 opened new ways for the literature of this country, defeated in its fight for liberty. Three Hungarian authors–the poet Sándor Petöfi (1823-1849), the novelist Mór Jókai (1825-1904), and Imre Madách (1823-1864), author of *Az ember tragédiája* ("The Tragedy of Man")–became famous in many countries.

Enthusiasm for Petöfi was based on the fact that the "Poet of Liberty" had died for his

ideas on the battlefield–now translations helped to make him known. A comprehensive biography in French by Charles-Louis Chassin and a profusion of articles made him popular in many countries, but the translations of his poems did not justify this fame. A zealous admirer of his, Károly Kertbeny (1824-1882), travelled far and wide to persuade famous poets to translate Petöfi. But the major part of the mass of translations made in the 19th century were as weak as most of the German versions by Kertbeny himself, or those by Sir John Bowring, who produced a volume *Translations from Alexander Petöfi* in 1866. Among the German translators, most of whom worked from the Hungarian original, several are better than Kertbeny and some are even very good. In Italy, too, there was a worthy interpreter, Guiseppe Cassone, who spent many years translating Petöfi's poems from the Hungarian original. Contemporary critics highly appreciated the Swedish translations by the Schöldström brothers and later translations from the German language area, such as those of Heinrich Glücksmann and László Neugebauer, while Ignác Schnitzer and József Steinbach issued complete collections of Petöfi's poetry.

From the almost boundless list of Petöfi interpretations we mention two particular cases. Hippolyte Desbordes-Valmore, the son of a well-known French poetess, published with the help of a Hungarian geographer 200 poems by Petöfi in very flat French prose, and a well-known poet, François Coppée, versified some of those texts, altering them according to his own style. The a Cuban poet, Diego Vicente Tejera, friend of the national hero José Martí, was moved so strongly by enthusiasm for Petöfi that he translated Coppée's versions into Spanish. One can imagine how far this chain of repeated translations separated the Spanish text from the original, and moreover, none of Petöfi's famous revolutionary verses were to be found among Tejera's versions, so that readers of many countries could not understand why Petöfi was called the "Poet of Liberty."

The position was similar in Russia, as appears clearly from the list of Russian translations of his poetry in the 19th century. The poet stabbed to death by a Cossack became especially popular in the country of the Tsar, and many translations of his poems were published in the democratic as well as in the reactionary press. But, while the democrats adored the revolutionary poet, because of the censorship they published chiefly versions of his descriptions of the Hungarian countryside and poems in the style of folk-songs. The right-

wing press, for its part, preferred his anti-Austrian poems, written e.g. when the Habsburg ruler failed to aid the Tsar in the Crimean war, or when Austria arranged the "Compromise" of 1867 with the Hungarian nation. Here again we meet with a chain of repeated translation: some Russian versions made from German were translated into Ukrainian by the revolutionary poet Pavlo Hrabovsky during his exile in Siberia.

Mór Jókai's novels were translated more or less from the original, but sometimes these too were distorted by the interpreter. Thus, e.g., anti-Tsarist motifs in his novel *Riumin* were ignored by the anonymous translator in the pleasant, poetical Czech version *V tajemné zemi zlata* (1889). Jókai was not anti-Russian; he hated tyranny but idealized progressive Russians, e.g. the poet Pushkin in his *Szabadság o hó alatt* ("Freedom under the snow"). His popularity in many countries is proved by the fact that some translators specialized in translating his works–Robert Nisbet Bain into English, Ludwig Wechsler into German, František Brábek and Gustav Narcis Mayerhoffer into Czech, Aleksander Callier into Polish, and so on–and some publishers issued whole series of his volumes; e.g. Jarrolds in England published 17, Borový in Prague 27, and Janke in Berlin 47 volumes of his works.

Imre Madách's dramatic poem *The Tragedy of Man* was translated before World War I, seven times into German, twice into French, twice into Polish, once into Dutch, twice into Serbo-Croat, twice into Czech, once into Romanian, four times into Russian (the first edition was destroyed by the Tsarist censorship), once into Slovak, once into Italian, once into English, once into Esperanto, and one scene even into Latin. (The above order of the languages corresponds to the chronology of the translations.) Beyond the borders of Hungary this dramatic poem was performed for the first time in Hamburg (1892), then in Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Cracow and Zagreb. Famous authors of different nations loved and popularized it: the Czech poet Vrchlický, the Slovak Hviezdoslav, the Serb Zmaj, and the Dutch A. S. C. Wallis (1887 *De Tragedie van den Mensch*) translated it, Maxim Gorki published it, James Joyce was influenced by it. After the outbreak of World War I it was performed for the first time in neutral Switzerland (1916), and its triumphal march has lasted till today.

Between 1849 and World War I, ballads by János Arany (1817-1882) and the national anthem-like *Szózat* ("Appeal") by Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1885), and, at the end of the

century, novels and short stories by Kálmán Mikszáth (1847-1910), were translated, mostly into German, Czech or Russian.

Would Hungarian literature, which had enriched world culture during the 19th century, continue to do so in the 20th century? A firm answer to this question was given by the poet Endre Ady (1877-1919), who introduced Western literary trends into his country and presented contemporary Hungarian literature to the world. To translated Ady's poems involved new tasks. If a text by Petöfi is transposed with maximum artistic fidelity into another language, the reader will get an almost true reflection of the original; but the national symbols and ideas of Ady presupposed a thorough knowledge of the Hungarian past and mentality. For instance, his poem *Nekünk Mohács kell* ("We need a Mohács") could be translated literally into a language of East-Central Europe, where people knew that Mohács was the scene of that disastrous battle which, in 1526, opened the way to the Turks into the heart of Hungary; but the English translator who wanted to make the intention of the poem (that Hungary used to recover mostly after disasters) clear to readers in distant countries, rightly wrote: "We need a defeat." Ady's poetry was translated into many languages, near and far, as were some novels and short stories by Ferenc Herczeg (1863-1954),most of them before World War I, and comedies by Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952) up to the present day. Molnár's novel for young people *A Pál utcai fiúk* ("The Boys from Pál Street") is one of the most popular in this genre almost everywhere in the world.

Between the two World Wars, Hungarian literature, especially from the point of view of translation into foreign languages, was almost split in two. Some works written in the country itself, actually novels written by poets, *A véres költö* ("The Bloody Poet") and *Édes Anna* ("Sweet Anna") by Dezsö Kosztolányi (1885-1936) or *Halálfiai* ("Sons of Death"), *A gólyakalifa* ("The Stork Caliph") by Mihály Babits as well as naturalistic works by Zsigmond Móricz (1879-1942) were translated into many languages; some novels which have won international prizes, like *A halászó macska utcája* ("The Street of the Fishing Cat") by Jolán Földes (1903-1963) and *A budapesti kaland* ("The Adventure in Budapest") by Ferenc Körmendi (1900-1972), were more popular abroad than in Hungary. In a similar way, the works of communist emigrants living in the Soviet Union–Béla Illés (1895-1974), Máté Zalka (1896-1937) and others–were translated into Russian; works by the philosopher

György Lukács (1885-1971), who was also a theoretician of literature and the fine arts, appeared mostly in German.

Two prominent poets characterize this period: Attila József (1905-1937), giving voice to socialist ideas at the highest artistic level, and Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944), a victim of the Nazi regime. Multilingual translations have made their poetry widely known in many countries.

Among Hungarian classics of the 19th century, the poet Petöfi and the novelist Jókai are still popular in many countries. Petöfi's poems were translated in 1925 by a leading Soviet politician, Anatoli Lunacharsky, and after World War II an almost complete edition of his works was published in four volumes. *The Tragedy of Man* was performed with excellent effect at the Burgtheater in Vienna before the war, and a new wave of popularity of this work ensued. Translations into English, Italian, Swedish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, Slovenian, Finnish and Japanese were published under the influence of that success, and this triumph continued after the war. Up to now Madách's dramatic poem has been translated into 30 languages, including Hebrew and Arabic.

After the war, the translation of Hungarian literature was included in the plans of the other communist countries, while publishers in Western countries turned especially towards works which criticized the Stalin-Rákosi system and its consequences. The short novel *Niki* by Tibor Déry (1894-1977) and *A látogató* ("The Visitor") by György Konrád (1933-) were translated into many languages. Jozsef Lengyel (1896-1975), who endured the tortures of Stalin's concentration camps, wrote memoirs which are read in many languages.

Hungarian does not belong to any of the European language families (Teutonic, Romance, Slavonic): it is related only to Finnish and Estonian, and its vocabulary differs widely from these. Not many foreign literary translators know Hungarian, and the majority of works are therefore translated from translations. Despite such difficulties, the quantity–and, with the general rise in the level of translation, also the quality of interpretations of Hungarian literary works is steadily increasing. In the present short survey we can only cast a quick glance at this story, emphasizing the main tendencies; but it shows, at least, that there has been a striking evolution since the time when "Hungarian" was identified only with nine, music and dances.

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