

Rüdiger Wischenbart

Zur Übersetzung von Maja Haderlap „Engel des Vergessens“ durch Tess Lewis.

Austrian Cultural Forum New York 2015

When I read Maja Haderlap's novel "Engel des Vergessens", I clearly remember absorbing the language, while in my brain strong emotions started to build up, and I could smell the kitchen, the grass outside, and, I guess, even the father. But I am certain that a few weeks after reading the book, on a little screen, not on paper, I possibly couldn't have summarized the story. Of course I felt as if I had seen, and met, myself the father, and the contradictory sensations of father and partisan, and wartime and childhood, as if they had become a part of my own life. These sensations were strong. But at the end, it was not about the story. Instead, I had taken in, more than anything else, the language of the book.

You may say now: This is a pretty odd starting point for, today, speaking not about the German original work, but the qualities of its translation. Or is it not?

The English translation of the first couple of sentences reads: "THE WAR is a devious fisher of men. It cast out its net for the adults and trapped them with its fragments of death, its debris of memory. Just one careless act, one brief moment of inattention, and it pulls in its net. "

Despite English not being my mother tongue, I thought by myself that, somehow, the tonality in these sentences is echoing the original German. Perhaps I am wrong. For me, this would be a quality, not a mistake. Listening to Maja Haderlap, whom I know for quite a long time, while seeing her, and catching up, hardly more often than once in a decade, which I regret, I always love that Slovenian base line which I think to identify in her voice. And now, these vibes have reached me again, from its initial Slovenian, via German, in English. Quite a voyage, I must say.

This was my big surprise with the translation of her novel into English by Tess Lewis: The book was written in German, Maja's first novel, by the way. She had set out, early, in the 1980s, writing poems in her native Slovenian, which brought her modest fame at once, as the perhaps finest voice in that small community of a Slovenian minority in the Austrian borderland with Yugoslavia – the voice of an "ethnic minority", as they said, back then, a formula which always carried a note of some despise. She did not want to be labeled as such – a 'voice', of some 'community', or 'minority', as if she was servicing some purpose that was not hers, really. Rather she wrote whatever she had to write, in the language that she had found, deep inside herself.

Lately, I happened to catch up with Maya, after not seeing her for many years. It was, by coincidence, precisely when she had finished this novel, in German – which she underlined, without regret, though. And in fact, I was not surprised either by what was, by any measure, a big move, and a bold change for her.

The book, in German, brought Maja a prestigious award that is named after Ingeborg Bachman, another poet from Southern Austria, who added just a couple of novellas and one novel to her verses. Overall however, Maja's literature is still not fully recognized as she would deserve it, I think. Perhaps, this is about to change. With this translation, and the subsequent publication by a fine house in New York, in English, her voice is trespassing once again, into a foreign terrain, a new language, and an audience that she will surprise, I am sure.

I am happy for Maja, and grateful to her brilliant translator, Tess Lewis. Wait. Now, it is up to you, who listen, to read the book, and spread the news about the author, in New York, and beyond!