

Covid and the Woman Writer

30 April 2021

Panel 4: Translation

Muireann Maguire (Exeter): From the Novel Coronavirus to the Coronavirus Novel – a Translator's Perspective

Clare Nimmo (Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid): The Masked Translator: Layering in Theatre and Media during the Pandemic

Éva Cserhádi (Shrewsbury): Who Killed the Matryoshka Doll? Self-Translation as Self-Harm

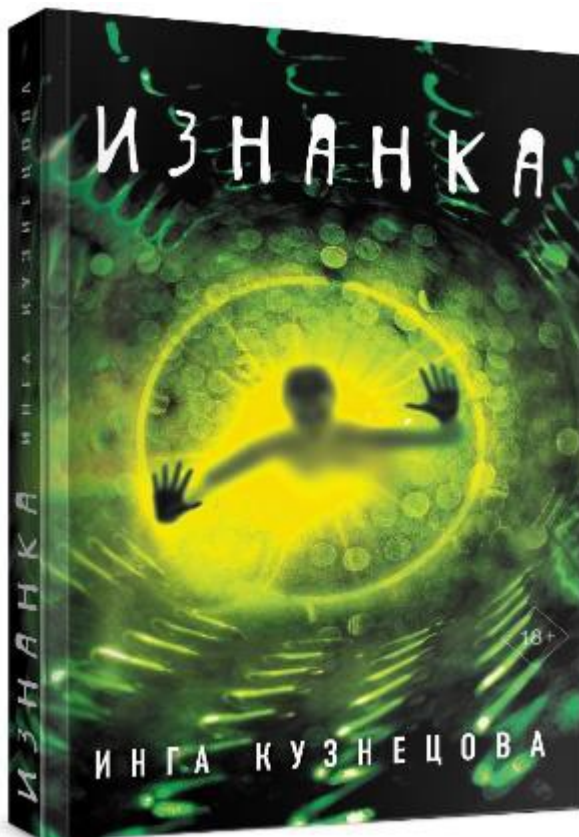


From the novel Coronavirus to the Coronavirus novel: Inga Kuznetsova's *Inside Out*
(*Iznanka*, 2020)

Muireann Maguire,

University of Exeter

In July 2020, after a month's intensive writing, the Russian poet and editor Inga Kuznetsova



completed a 35,000-word novella, *Iznanka* (literally, *From the Inside*; currently marketed as *Inside Out*).¹ AST (one of Russia's largest, most prestigious publishing houses) rushed out a hardback edition in September 2020, in an initial print run of 1000 copies which had sold out by December (see image on left); two new runs totalling 5,000 copies were duly ordered and sold out in their turn.² As early as mid-August, Kuznetsova's editor Igor Voevodin felt sufficiently confident of the book's potential for overseas sales to commission me to translate the first six chapters, and later the entire text, of *Iznanka*. This allowed Kuznetsova's literary agent, Thomas

Wiedling, to pitch the rights to international publishers. The extremely topical subject (and narrator) of Kuznetsova's new novel (her third) proved to be the novel coronavirus, COVID-19.

Iznanka is a novel narrated by a coronavirus, or more precisely, by one specific coronavirus: the original mutation which propagated Covid-19 among humans. This philosophically minded, preternaturally empathetic microorganism gradually develops its own ontology, meanwhile learning several human languages and speculating about the structure of human

¹ See Kuznetsova's page on the website of the Thomas Wiedling Literary Agency, <https://wiedling-litag.com/authors/Kuznetsova.html>

² Information derived from emails exchanged with Igor Voevodin, Inga Kuznetsova's editor at AST.

society. It radically defamiliarizes concepts that humans take for granted, including temporality, movement through space, memory, emotion, and sexuality. In the course of the novel's eighteen chapters, the virus is transmitted between almost as many hosts, starting with a bat somewhere in China and including a cat, a Chinese stallholder, a rape victim, a German pensioner with dementia, and a serial killer. Growing fond of each host, the virus regards every transmission as a personal rejection; only slowly does it realize that its existence harms its beloved 'Giants'. As the English-language translator of two of Kuznetsova's books – *Intervals* (*Provezhutok*, 2019) and also *Iznanka* – I will discuss in this paper the novel's structure and reception, touching on the unique complexity of translating a novel about the coronavirus during a pandemic.

How did Kuznetsova come to write what her publishers call the world's first novel narrated by a pathogen? Kafka is a strong influence on her fiction. Still more significantly, although Kuznetsova has at the time of writing fortunately not yet suffered the infection, she was exceptionally well-informed about the virus' life cycle. In April 2020, she edited for publication with AST an information book about the pandemic intended for non-expert Russian readers, Ancha Baranova's *Coronavirus: A Manual for Survival*. Later in the year, she published several poems on a new Russian-language poetry website, [Coronaverse](http://Coronaverse.com), intended to showcase 'poetical texts, written during and under the influence of the COVID-19 quarantine'.³ She was therefore pre-primed to explain the virus' life-cycle and the pre-history of the pandemic. Still more significantly, Kuznetsova's predilection for mystical, often abstract expressivity (*Intervals* is a near-future dystopian novel in which nonhuman creatures and even inanimate objects, including moss, a station platform and a breadcrumb, take turns to narrate the story from their unique points of view) prepared her to write an entire novel – a love story, even – from the perspective of a travelling microorganism. Here is the virus reflecting on the nature of love:

All my Hosts have intrigued me, but Myson is special; he shares with me not only himself (and although I have never been inside him, I love him already). Strange to say, it's as though Myson, knowing nothing about me, has just given me the external world as a gift, exactly as if allowing me to see it through his eyes – and for a few moments I can imagine I am Myson. It's an extraordinarily powerful sensation. In reality, no-one gave me any such gift. But when I'm with Myson, I am so much closer to being fully alive; I am a little *more* than a half-being.

³ '[...] поэтические тексты, написанные во время и под влиянием карантина COVID-19'. See www.coronaverse.com. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

[...]

How does it happen that creatures feel affection for each other? How do they start loving each other, if they are both the same size? If neither of them can dwell wholly within the other?⁴

The structure of *Iznanka*

As I write these words, the *Washington Post* has just reported that ‘Many experts now wonder if we will ever get a complete picture of the origins of a pandemic that has killed more than 2.7 million people’; a report jointly prepared by the World Health organization and the Chinese government is said to be inconclusive about the virus’ origins, but not to ‘recommend additional research on the lab leak hypothesis’.⁵ Kuznetsova has no such scruples about propagating hypotheses; *Iznanka* tours most of them. Her novel opens in a forest, near a river; the virus is clinging to the fur of a bat, swooping through the night. This bat is captured by Chinese hunters and sold to a laboratory operated by foreign scientists, where the bat is injected with a preparation that profoundly alters the original virus. Before its symptoms develop, however, the bat is attacked and eaten by a cat admitted to the lab by a technician’s carelessness; the same cat later steals shellfish from a stall in a Chinese wet market, bites the stallholder, and thus physically transmits the virus to the surface of a human’s skin. From this point, the virus rapidly crosses the globe, like a chain letter: transmitted from the stallholder, to her son; from the son, to the girl he loves, who is flying to Germany to study; from the girl to another passenger on her flight; from that passenger, to his aged, solitary father, whom it kills; and so on. The virus takes no interest in its replications, or ‘doubles’, or in the ‘fragments’ it constantly sheds within the host’s cells; it is fascinated exclusively by its human hosts, in an almost erotic, yet inevitably one-sided obsession. It first realizes its role in causing its beloved hosts harm when the German pensioner dies of pneumonia; its access to his consciousness, and his memories, has taught it about the importance of family life to humans. Only when in the body of its next host, a young computer science student who works part-time pushing trolleys at the hospital, does it become aware (through overheard conversation) of the pandemic:

“Our prof told us today that in extreme circumstances, uni might actually close temporarily.”

“If any more of the students get sick, it really might close. For quarantine.”

⁴ All translations from *Iznanka* are from my own final, currently unpublished translation. The source text is Inga Kuznetsova, *Iznanka* (Moscow: AST, 2020).

⁵ Emily Rauhala, ‘WHO Wuhan report leaves question of coronavirus origins unresolved’, *Washington Post*, march 29 2021, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/who-wuhan-report-/2021/03/29/cb6ca64e-7778-11eb-9489-8f7daced51e75_story.html.

“And then we all get to go home...”

“Which is not an idea I’m crazy about...”

“I’d love to see my Mom...”

The virus does not have enough information to realise that it, and its replicants, have been instrumental in causing the pandemic. Instead, it empathizes with the apparently one-sided adoration (resembling its own feelings for its hosts) expressed by the stallholder’s son for the girl who travels to Germany. In an extraordinarily serendipitous episode, the virus’ current host has an altercation with the stallholder’s son (who has followed his beloved abroad), enabling the virus to re-infect him and continue to observe his search for the girl. As it travels from host to host, the virus struggles to resolve various philosophical and structural questions: the nature of time; the external appearance of humans; the meaning of love; and of course the mystery of non-existence, which the virus refers to as ‘the abyss’.

Textual difficulties

As mentioned above, I had recently translated Kuznetsova’s previous novel *Provezhutok*, still unpublished in English, as *Intervals*. I was therefore accustomed to her intense, playful, intellectually challenging style, which includes extended passages of direct-speech dialogue; myriad cultural references; pathetic fallacy; and multiple, alternating narrative perspectives. *Iznanka* was in many ways *easier* to translate than its predecessor, since the virus was a single narrator with no cultural references, whether obscure or popular, at its command. With this book, textual difficulties arose from the virus’ lack of conventional perceptual structures (or apparatus), a difference which Kuznetsova creatively and evocatively addressed in the original. The simplest examples of this relate to characters’ names: the virus refers to humans as *Gigy*, short for *Giganty* or ‘giants’; there was no obvious, effective way to abbreviate ‘giants’ in English. I thought briefly of ‘Bigs’, but this (at least to me) conjured up images of multiple Chris Noths (from *Sex in the City*). Eventually, I opted for ‘Giants’; I missed out on the affectionate informality of *Gigi*, but at least I retained the meaning. I was happier with the issue of naming the stallholder’s son. Since the virus’ knowledge of human languages was still imperfect at the time it infected this first host family, it made a basic mistake about his name. His mother called him ‘Malysh’, the Russian for ‘little one’; the virus thought his actual name was *Lysh* (the second syllable). As *Lysh* became a recurring character and indeed the virus’ favourite human host, I would clearly have to sort out his name. I fixed on ‘Myson’; I could imagine the Chinese lady calling her adult boy ‘my son’ affectionately in such a way that the virus would mistake this form of address for a given name. I decided not

to shorten this phrase to (for example) ‘Son’, as the latter is arguably a fairly standard name. I wanted the reader to encounter the same faint sense of oddity that a Russian reader would experience, decoding ‘Lysh’ as a distortion of ‘Malysh’.

Much more difficult to convey intelligibly was the virus’ sense of time. Like all its experiences and perceptions, this dimension was painstakingly defamiliarized by Kuznetsova. The past was usually referred to as ‘*sdvinutaia nazad realnost*’ (literally, moved-backwards reality); the future, as ‘*sdvinutaia vpered realnost*’ (moved-forwards reality). In my initial draft translation, I tidied these awkward formulations up. But Kuznetsova, with whom I was fortunate to have a regular, helpful, and above all efficient email exchange during and after the entire translation process, swiftly reminded me that the point of these phrases was to remind us of the virus’ necessarily alien sense of reality. I therefore arrived at a flexible solution. Instead of using exclusively positional language, as did Kuznetsova, or exclusively temporal, as I originally wished to do, I tried a mix of both, changing the formula in different situations. My standard translation for *moved-backwards-reality* was ‘there-behind’; *moved-forwards-reality* became ‘there-ahead’. Reality (*realnost*’), when used on its own, I often translated as ‘now’ – exchanging a temporal expression for an arguably spatial one. But sometimes I mixed my system up again, particularly if the context already suggested physical or spatial transition. For example, here is the virus (clinging to the surface of a human eye) observing its host ring a doorbell:

The Clear Host (*Otchetlyvyi khozain*) makes a sound come out of an inanimate object, which he did not bring with him. He has certainly never used one like it before. The sound is so lifeless, yet strangely and piercingly lovely, that, it might just be a signal that *now-before* [*sdvnutoi nazad realnosti*] is making way for a *new-now* [*novuiu*]. New times [literal translation of *novye vremena*] are coming. Our *now* [*realnost*’] is moving forwards. Where did this object come from? Where are we?

The Host makes the same simple movement several times, shaking us but not too fiercely, muttering something that sounds like “Musht get m’self keez made.” Then he repeats the strange, lovely sound. Nothing happens where the Host is standing. The pause lingers glutinously, like the slime we inhabit.

Note how the virus perceives the movement of time as one of physical intervention and substitution (‘*now-before* is making way for a *new-now*’); it interprets an auditory perception (the doorbell) as a ‘signal’ for this sort of change in the nature of reality; and it makes an ambitious analogy between a temporal state, the pause after the second ring at the door, and a physical condition (‘the slime we inhabit’ – this was my modulation of Kuznetsova’s original

‘our slime’ (*nasha sliz*)). My agenda as the translator of *Iznanka* – I hesitate to call it an ‘aesthetic’ – was one of restrained domestication: I sought to preserve the intransigence of the original without risking unintelligibility.

The translator’s experience

As *Iznanka*’s first English translator, I was aware that the manuscript lacked a contract with any non-Russian publishers or any non-Russian reviews. As a result, I felt it was my responsibility to produce a text that was as challenging and absorbing as the original, yet not so challenging that the Anglophone reader (potentially less tolerant of intellectual games and cultural cross-references in their fiction than Kuznetsova’s Russian audience) would lose interest. I therefore felt a responsibility to market the book, as well as to translate it. I saw its extreme topicality (more on this below) as an advantage, a selling point; on the other hand, Kuznetsova’s insistence on defamiliarization and extreme coincidence were factors that might alienate some readers. My hesitation between literalism and domestication was perhaps well-expressed in my attitude to the title, *Iznanka*, which literally means ‘from the inside’. In Russian, the word ideally expresses the virus’ perspective, narrating from within the body. In English, there is no catchy equivalent preposition or adverb; ‘inside out’ seemed obvious and catchy, but not literal. After long hesitation, I recommended ‘From Inside’: it was a best worst solution (it carried, after all, unwelcome overtones of prison). In the end, and without consulting me again, the editor and agent settled on ‘Inside Out’; the title may well change again if the book finds a publisher.

Translating a novel about the novel coronavirus during the pandemic was, to say the least, a novel experience. At times, it felt suffocating: it was as if I was inhabiting the coronavirus experience on several levels, in daily life, in my work, and in my imagination. I was irresistibly reminded of Tolstoy’s dictum that ‘[t]he test of art is infection’, and that an artist or writer’s purpose is to ‘infect other people so that they share his feelings’.

If an author has moved you so that you feel as he felt, if you are so united to him in feeling that it seems to you that he has expressed just what you have long wished to express, the work that has so infected you is a work of art.⁶

As the kind of reader who prefers escapism to autofiction, I found the experience of translating *Iznanka* emotionally difficult: while trying to avoid infection in the real world, I

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, “What is Art?” (“Chto takoe iskusstvo”, 1897), translated by Aylmer Maude (1904), accessed at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/64908/64908-h/64908-h.htm>>.

was being metaphorically ‘infected’ by a narrative about infection; and my job as translator was to do my best to make Kuznetsova’s novel ‘catch on’ contagiously. Even on a pragmatic level, my creative process was challenged: I like to work on translations in my local café, which was of course obliged to turf out its regulars due to the UK government’s restrictions on indoor hospitality services. With no access to libraries, cafes, or even my office, I really was working on *Iznanka* ‘from inside’, in an uncomfortably restricted and intimate domestic space. It’s worth noting that the writer was herself working under difficult conditions; the Russian publishing industry was as badly affected by sales and cash flow issues during the first year of the pandemic as in any other country, and government funding for translations and marketing – and Kuznetsova herself struggled to combine novel-writing with protecting her family and doing the editorial work that pays her bills.⁷

Reception

To date, Inga Kuznetsova’s novels remain little-known outside Russia. In Russia, however, *Iznanka* in particular has enjoyed enthusiastic reviews: in the trendy cultural journal *Snob*,⁸ in the prestigious *Literaturnaia gazeta* (whose reviewer daringly links Kuznetsova’s humble, imperceptible, yet good-natured virus to the august Russian novelistic tradition of the ‘little man’),⁹ and interviews between Kuznetsova herself and well-known critics in the newspapers *Sankt-Peterburgskii Dnevnik* and *MK*.¹⁰ Due to, naturally, coronavirus-related restrictions, the first formal in-person book launch for *Iznanka* occurred in March 2021, at Moscow’s prestigious Library of Foreign Literature.¹¹ If the London Book Fair happens in-person this year, Kuznetsova and her editor will attend and publicize both *Intervals* and *Iznanka*; they also hope to make a splash at the Frankfurt Book Fair this autumn. I feel a mingled sense of excitement and vulnerability about the prospect. I’d love to see *Iznanka* and its big sister spreading across the world in multiple translations, mirroring the progress of its topic in a

⁷ See my interview with Kuznetsova and her editor at AST, Igor Voevodin, here: <https://rustrans.exeter.ac.uk/2020/05/25/writing-and-publishing-in-russia-during-the-pandemic-the-coronavirus-crisis-blog-iii/>

⁸ ‘Iznanka, ili Pervyi v mire roman c geroem-koronavirusom’, *Snob*, 25 September 2020, <https://snob.ru/profile/16332/blog/170407/>.

⁹ Igor’ Bondar’-Tereshchenko, ‘S liubov’iu, virus’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 17 October 2020, <https://lgz.ru/neformat/s-lyubovyu-virus/>.

¹⁰ For example, Vladislav Tolstov’s interview with Inga Kuznetsova in *Sankt-Peterburgskii Dnevnik*, ‘Avtor romana o koronavirusе Inga Kuznetsova: “Pandemiia ne izmenila moego chuvstva skorotechnosti zhizni”’, 9 November 2020, <https://spbdnevnik.ru/news/2020-11-09/avtor-romana-o-koronaviruse-inga-kuznetsova-pandemiya-ne-izmenila-moego-chuvstva-skorotechnosti-zhizni>.

¹¹ The launch can be watched here (in Russian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k55SUpqKskg>.

much more benign way; but where criticism of my translation is concerned, I am far from immune.

Presented as part of the Online Workshop
Covid and the Woman Writer
30 April 2021

The Masked Translator: Layering in Media, Theatre and Fiction during the Pandemic
Dr Clare Nimmo, Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid



This 2003 handwoven wool artwork by the Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri entitled 'Trabaje desde su casa' ('Work from Home') seems a suitable point of departure for a discussion of translating during the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically its impact on women practitioners. It was displayed at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) in Móstoles as part of its Collection 18 on Textiles from 29 October 2020 to 28 February 2021, for which I translated wall and website texts and had the rare pleasure during coronavirus times of seeing at the museum. Kuri's large-scale tapestry, 180 by 250 cm, represents the banality of urban job offer advertisements on a monumental scale, highlighting the space between consumers and citizens and the employment and fiscal regimes that condition and regulate their exchanges. Translating is an activity often exercised from the comfort (and constraints) of

the home and frequently in a freelance capacity, which means translators are well placed to adapt to the new working from home normality. During the pandemic this practice has been normalised, sweeping away some of the misunderstandings and even disdain that translators have faced while also spotlighting the multi-tasking that those with care commitments to other householders, both old and young, have juggled hourly alongside translation work. However, while homeworking has grown over the last year, the working conditions and rates of translators have shrunk, particularly in acutely market-sensitive commercial fields. This is reflected visually through the tear off strips in Kuri's advertisement, signalling a low status job while offering the false promise of high financial reward. This paper seeks to expose some of the professional difficulties that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 but in a more positive vein, it also highlights how literary translation projects developed by women have managed to circumvent adversity.

If we accept the premise that the 'translator needs to grasp what the words can signify in each particular context and then has try to render those additional layers of meaning' (Bielsa and Bassnett 2008, 5-6), the exceptional context imposed by COVID-19 has attached new intra-textual and extra-textual layers to this task. Principally drawing on a local, Madrid-based experience of a situation imposed by this globally prevalent disease, this paper explores how the visibility of women translation lecturers and practitioners has been both obscured and enhanced. It will discuss these impacts in relation to three projects in which women play a key role, while distinguishing between commercial and literary translation practice under COVID-19: first in communications texts for a pharmaceutical company responsible for producing a COVID-19 vaccine, second the dramatised reading of the play *Atra bilis* in translation performed online for the Cervantes Theatre and ending with a conversation with a young Spanish author and translator, Ana Flecha Marco, whose first major book came out in March 2020.

In the viral phenomenon *The Masked Singer*, which is considered a game changer as a contraflow global television format originating from South Korea, the winner remains masked, unlike the less successful contestants whose identities are revealed through unmasking. In September 2020, in-person teaching returned to all schools and some universities across Spain in various different guises. Since then, students aged six and up have been required to wear face masks in the classroom and schoolteachers and university lecturers have taught masked. Whether mask wearing in educational environments has been a winning strategy or game changer falls well beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to outline briefly the experience of in-person lecturing in Madrid order to open up discussion.

In the academic year 2020-2021, all first, second- and third-year degree courses relating to translation at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid have been delivered through a combination of simultaneous face-to-face and online lectures using Blackboard Collaborate by all full-time, part-time academic and non-academic members of staff, regardless of age, underlying health conditions or shielding responsibilities. Unless self-isolating or certified as sick, all students and lecturers are required to attend lectures in person daily. In spite of this direct contact, unlike schoolteachers, university lecturers have not been included in the priority groups for vaccination in Spain.

Having lectured on translation for 21 years at the university as a part-time associate lecturer, I had grown accustomed to physical recognition from the student body and was not prepared for the impact of the mask in this respect. Like the contestants in *The Masked Singer*, I repeatedly found students guessing at my identity, addressing me with the names of other 50+ female full-time lecturers they were more familiar with from pre-pandemic months and to whom I bore but a scant resemblance. As mentioned above, many translators work from home and when we sally out into lecturing or other external roles, the sense of physical recognition counts, perhaps more than to other professionals, as we are often veiled in our day-to-day exchanges.

This is particularly true for freelance translators working in the communications and commercial world, where virtual contact has been the norm since technology enabled this in the late 1990s. Practitioners can work for decades with clients without ever meeting them in person or being seen on Zoom, Microsoft Teams or other video conferencing tools. In recent years, e-mails requesting translation commissions habitually omit the name of the translator/s and regularly confuse the identity/number/gender of the translator/s, addressing them as ‘Hola compañer@/chicos/chicas /equipo’, and this obscuring trend has intensified during the pandemic.

Under COVID-19, the de-professionalisation of commercial translation has accelerated due to several factors. From 15 March to the end of state of emergency on 21 June 2020 in Spain, business activity, planning and event organisation ground to a halt for multinational organisations, the principal commissioners of economic, marketing, technical and legal translations. March was a wasteland for such translators and April the cruellest of months, where ‘commissionless’ freelancers in Spain found themselves in stark contrast with the bright spring world that we were not allowed step out into even for the shortest of walks. Spain had one of the strictest lockdowns in the world at this point. Unsurprisingly, when the

first major commissions to emerge in early summer, they were directly related to COVID-19. They took the form of urgent documents on health and safety guidelines for workplaces, introducing swathes of new vocabulary and sparking linguistic debate. The cause of the pandemic itself swayed between masculine (*el virus*) and feminine (*la enfermedad*) gender, until the Real Academia Española (RAE) declared both equally valid (*el COVID-19* or *la COVID-19*).

Meanwhile, companies elected to keep their staff busy during lockdown by getting them to translate documents internally, as this was a task they could usefully be asked to perform from home. Then, interns (mostly woefully paid or unpaid) joined this improvised translation workforce from the summer onwards, reducing the number of commissions for professionals further. When commissions returned, housebound corporate clients increasingly turned to free neural machine services such as DeepL and simply asked translators to furnish the required polish at so-called *tarifas económicas* or low-cost rates (5-20 euros per 1000 words) for bulk commissions. Under this new, lost-cost regime, which ailing companies have welcomed with alacrity, translators are expected to turn out ten to twenty thousand words a day instead of two or three thousand words. The concern now is that this cheap rate is likely to persist after the pandemic.

On an intra-textual level, the quality of source texts for translation has suffered from unschooled co-authorship and document sharing by executives working from home at all hours, leading to a noticeable dip in coherence and multiple contradictions involving key data. Skilled translators can pick up on these inconsistencies and query them with commissioners before they reach the public domain but there has been a rise in publications bedevilled by inaccuracies, crucially affecting public perception of COVID-19 vaccine producers. Another recent intra-textual twist is the growing number of requests for so-called deep readings of source texts, whereby the experienced translator is given license (but no guidance) to produce a press release that fits the tone and register suited to the brand, such as a pharmaceutical company, blurring the line between author and translator in a novel manner.

The lack (and current erosion) of status commercial/technical translators face is reflected in translation studies, as Maeve Olohan points out, as this genre is “considered culturally less prestigious and therefore perceived less worthy of study” (Olohan, 2008, 1). Recent studies such by Olohan herself, Michael Cronin, the aforementioned Esperança Bielsa and Susan Bassnett, Christina Schäffner and Renée Desjardin have helped to narrow this

important gap for the purposes of translator training but there are still prominent areas of professional practice that are overlooked in research.

One such area is media tracking, which consists of translating online and print news information for multinational organizations, usually through their communications and public relations functions and often for reputational reasons. These texts commonly take the form of interviews with CEOs or top executives. Unlike many other commercial documents, media tracking is not bound by confidentiality issues as the texts are in the public domain but critically, in contrast to news translation, these assignments are commissioned with a strategic corporate purpose. This makes them very appealing texts to use in the classroom, as they can range from interviews with brand ambassadors like the actor Lupita Nyong'o for Calvin Klein to business icons like Bill Gates. Translation enables global monitoring of the information published in press and social media so that the commissioner can gauge the impact on its reputation. This adds another layer to the assertion that "in news translation, the dominant strategy is absolute domestication, as material is shaped in order to be consumer by the target audience, so has to be tailored to suit their needs and expectations" (Bielsa and Bassnett 2008, 10). The repackaging of information for media tracking has a powerful corporate dimension and for a non-profit COVID-19 vaccine producer beset by reputational issues in the media, an urgent, ethical layer is attached to the translation process.

Media tracking assignments have featured several times among the translations required by AstraZeneca's Communications function including the communication plans for the local market (Spain), Q&As, statements and press releases. Corporate press interviews are the fruit of media relations, falling into the category of earned media and for AstraZeneca served as a mass communication vehicle to convey messages about the vaccine launch. The media and journalist profiles were carefully selected, based on quantitative parameters such as online and offline circulation and advertising value equivalent (AVE) and qualitative parameters such as Tier-1 media, analysis of coverage to date to ensure scientific rigour in reporting and of the reporter's ideological stance on a non-profit vaccine. Prior to publication a Q&A is drawn up by the international communications division of the company and shared with the interviewer and interviewee. In practical terms, this means a translator translates the Q&A from English into Spanish and then the resulting interview in the Spanish media is translated back into English for media tracking purposes, exposing the journalistic slant given to the information. It is a highly controlled process and the quantitative and qualitative metrics mentioned above are applied pre-publication and post-translation. This echoes Schäffner's point that reactions to news texts made in another country 'are actually reactions

to the information as it was provided in translation' (Schäffner 2004, 120), in this case scrutinised through a corporate, big pharma lens.

In Spain, AstraZeneca elected to field two principal spokespersons, providing a gender balance: Ricardo Rafael Suárez, Country President, and Ana Pérez Domínguez, Medical and Regulatory Affairs Director. To illustrate this process, two links follow. They contain interviews with Tier-1 media published before the University of Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine was approved by the European Medicines Agency: Suárez in *El País* on 25 November 2020 -["No se entiende muy bien cómo se decide el precio de una vacuna"](#)- and Pérez in *El Mundo* on 24 November 2020 ["Esto no es una carrera por la vacuna contra la Covid"](#).

The challenges commercial translators have suffered during the pandemic have affected some areas of literary translation to a lesser extent as book publishing has continued, as discussed below, but the theatre, as a live cultural event, has been hit hard. Since September 2020, The Cervantes Theatre in London, which showcases Spanish and Latin American plays in Spanish and in English translation, has sought tenaciously to carry on its activities through producing digital content consisting of dramatised readings of works in translation and conversations with playwrights. I was asked to translate *Atra bilis* by Laila Ripoll for this pandemic series, which was directed by Paula Paz and read by an all-female cast. *Atra bilis* is a grotesque farse where Nazaria Alba Montenegro and her two sisters, Daría and Aurorita, and servant Ulpiana, dredge up the past bitterly at the wake of Nazaria's husband on a stormy night with monstrous and tragic results.

Premiered in 2001, Ripoll directed the play with her own theatre company MicoMicón, casting four male actors in the role of four old women that make up the cast list. As the playwright explained in the post-performance Q&A, her decision to cast men was governed by practical considerations as the company did not have enough women to play the roles. In the COVID-19 pandemic, four English-speaking actresses, Jeryl Burgess, Jude Arkwright, Gilly Daniels and Anne Farnworth took up the roles, with Candela Gómez narrating the stage directions. However, social distance measures, heightened by age considerations, prevented them from gathering together on stage to be filmed, as was the case with previous plays in the Cervantes Theatre online series. Moreover, the day of the performance, 5 November 2020, England went into a second lockdown.

Atra bilis draws dramatic agency from a torrent of Hispanic literature, art and song: García Lorca, Valle Inclán, Rulfo, Salarrué, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, Gutiérrez Solana, Jorge

Manrique, Cervantes, Zuloaga, Bécquer, Arrabal, La Habana Vieja and translating the sometimes clear and often sly, slightly diverging references in the text to the above, as well as to Catholic liturgy, was even more of a challenge in COVID-19 times when our laptop and personal bookshelves constitute our whole library. Embittered and violent sisterhood and death are two of the main themes and characters gather round the coffin of the absent yet central male character for much of the play. As I translated, I could not help but ponder the impact that this key prop might have had if the play had been staged during the pandemic. At the Zoom rehearsal, Gilly Daniels (Daria) lamented the absence of the casket in the scene where her character urinates on the dead man in an act of defiance and disgust. In response, the Zoom stage directions provided by Paz fixed the coffin's position so that all four women gazed in the same direction both individually and as an ensemble, as the screen moved from showing one actor or more.

The Cervantes Theatre is not only exceptionally good at giving visibility to translators, as bilingual performances are central to their mission, but they also involve translators actively in the rehearsal process, this time, on Zoom. Ironically, the pandemic gave me an opportunity to be 'in the room', which I could not have been normally. I could listen to the flow of the words from Madrid, with the actors and director locked down across the United Kingdom and note down then alter any sentences that jarred as they were read, as well as take onboard the actors' suggestions. As Burgess (Nazaria) recalls at the rehearsal 'a couple of the names were simplified for the English-speaking voice and ear and I remember suggesting a slightly different word order to make a sentence feel more natural for me to say.' Burgess also flags up how uplifting it was to come together with her fellow actors and 'special it was to have the chance to be active when theatres were closed.' In a similar positive vein, Ripoll described the dramatised reading as a 'a shot in the arm, a stimulus to carry on creating.' The collaborative, choral approach adopted by the Cervantes Theatre was reinforced by the Q&A session after the performance, where all eight women (playwright, translator, director and cast) participated. The sense of ongoing conversation around the play that this created also had an impact on the viewer as Burgess sums up: 'although there has been access to many wonderful performances online during the past year, I think being able to see a live performance as it unfolded will have brought a real immediacy, as well as a feeling of taking a step back towards normality.'

The third and final project focuses on the book translation and publishing world. I was asked to translate a sample from *Dos novelitas nórdicas* (*Two Nordic Short Novels*) comprising *Story of Ø* and *Mancha* by Ana Flecha Marco supported by a grant from AC/E for

promotion at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Spain was meant be Country Guest of Honour in 2020, and now will be in 2022, after Slovenia and Italy, the invited countries of the following years, agreed to delay their presence by one year. This book was launched in Spain in early March 2020 by Mr Griffin (Mrs Danvers Collection), not the most propitious timing, as the author recalls:

Now that I think back, it is almost funny to realise that we chose the worst possible week for the book launch. We did not know it then, but just a few days later a full lockdown hit, and we were stuck at home, toilet paper was scarce, and the book was in a printer's limbo. The book presentation was postponed, then cancelled. We had no idea when and how the physical books would be available, how safe it would be to send them to the people who had pre-ordered it, how this delay would affect the sales and the general public's willingness to read a book by a someone they had never heard about while immersed in a surreal and very serious situation. I was aware of how absurd it was for me to worry about my book, which suddenly felt so unimportant.

Story of Ø tells the tale of the handful of inhabitants left living on a tiny island in the Norwegian Sea, which is sinking inexorably due to climate change. The islanders decide to try and preserve the collective memory of the land that has been their home for so many generations; a memory that lies in the objects and traditions that have shaped their personal and shared landscape. *Mancha* vividly conjures up the impressions of young woman as she arrives in Flekke, a small Norwegian village, to teach Spanish. The village is populated by a kaleidoscopic range of inhabitants whom the teacher grows to understand as she interacts with them day by day. The lightness of touch, mixing humour and insight into cultural diversity, told through a distinctive female voice, made it a delight to translate.

During the long months of strict lockdown, the book rapidly gained traction with millennial readers (and their parents) on social media, with authors like Pilar Bellver and María Sánchez (Premio Fundación Princesa de Girona Artes y Letras) praising it on Twitter, then in June 2020 in an article in *El Cultural*, the best-selling author, Elvira Lindo, indicated she was reading *Dos novelitas nórdicas* during lockdown, stating 'it's written in a curious, different style, I'm really enjoying it', thereby widening critical interest and the readership. Unable to launch the book in person until restrictions relaxed, the publisher organised an outdoor book signing event in Flecha's hometown of León in mid-July and on 4 September she presented the book with the aforementioned veterinarian and writer María Sánchez and multidisciplinary artist Andrea Galaxina in an enchantingly safe rural setting, the grounds of the Fundación Cereales Antonino y Cinia (Cereales del Condado), with a limited number of

tickets and socially distanced seating. However, it has not been possible to organise a launch event in Madrid, where the author lives, and it is possible that this celebratory moment of visibility, like so many others in the pandemic, has passed.

Flecha joins a burgeoning group of young Spanish women writers now appearing in translation and whose work she admires, such as Irene Solà, Alba Flores Robla, María Sánchez, Alicia Kopf and Berta García Faet and follows in the steps of more established authors like Cristina Sánchez-Andrade, Mercedes Cebrián and Angélica Liddell.

As a silver lining to the postponement of the Frankfurt Bookfair and building on the success of her first book, *Piso compartido (New Flat)*, her intergenerational portrait of female co-habitation in Madrid, will be published by Mr Griffin in the second quarter of 2021 and will also feature, accompanied by a translated sample, at the fair. Flecha is very aware of the international projection this could bring, stating ‘I am a translator as well as author, and nothing would delight me more than having my books translated into other languages. Commenting on the impact of the pandemic on her work she states ‘I am very lucky because, at least so far, my work as a literary translator has only been affected by the loss of social life, which used to make working from home a lot easier. Without the social factor, my job feels lonelier than ever and harder to do, since I don’t rest as much or as effectively as I used to.’ She is also quick to point out that Associations for Spanish literary translators such as ACE traductores, with a 68% female membership, act a buffer against this homeworking solitude.

In a description that can easily be applied to the translation process and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, María Zambrano (1987, 31) stated that writing is a way of ‘defending the solitude you find yourself in; it is an action that springs from effective isolation,’ she then adds a crucial layer by recasting the adjective, ‘but from a *communicable* isolation, in which, precisely because of the remoteness of all concrete things we can discover the relations between them.’ Through this paper for this workshop, my hope is that we too can communicate from our respective isolations and explore the relations between our translating experiences under COVID-19.

References:

- Bielsa. E. and Bassnett, S. 2008. *Translation in Global News*. London: Routledge.
- Olohon, M. 2008. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by M. Baker & G. Saldanha, 40-43, London and New York: Routledge.

Desjardins, R. 2016. *Translation and Social Media: In Theory, in Training and in Professional Practice*. London: Palgrave.

Schäffner, C. 2004. Political Discourse Analysis from the Point of View of Translation Studies. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3(1), 117-150.

Flecha, A. 2020. *Dos novelitas nórdicas*. León: Mr Griffin.

Zambrano, M. 1987. *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*. Madrid: Alianza.

Links:

<https://www.cervantestheatre.com/home/atra-bilis-esp/>

<https://elcultural.com/elvira-lindo-la-literatura-no-se-puede-afrontar-con-cobardia>

Acknowledgements:

My thanks to Paula Paz, Jeryl Burgess and Ana Flecha Marco for generously responding to a Q&A in preparation for this paper.

**Presented as part of the Online Workshop
Covid and the Woman Writer
30 April 2021**



Éva Cserhádi
Covid and the Woman Writer
Panel 4: Translation

Who Killed the Matryoshka Doll?

Dear Nicola,

I am the perpetrator although I haven't yet been accused by the police, nor by you. However, I think that by now you might be suspicious of me. It has been a mistake to show up on your doorstep every time you came back to pick up something from your mother's house. I was watching for the opportunity to sneak in with the Matryoshka doll hidden under my cardigan. But I never had the chance to put it back and maybe it is better this way. I try to be honest in my letter to you, though I don't expect that after all that happened, we would go to the Italian bistro when the lockdown ends and have a beer to Mrs Fornossi's memory, as you suggested.

You might not remember the exact date but you know for sure that I have been renting this house for more than three years by now. Mrs Fornossi was more for me than a simple next-door neighbour. Well, there is no need to tell you all of this, as it was you who asked me at the beginning of the pandemic to knock on your mother's door every day and to call you immediately if something was wrong. I didn't live up to your trust, and I can only hope that it wasn't me who caused Mrs Fornossi's death. To tell you the truth, for a couple of days I thought I was a murderer as well as a thief. This possibility still weighs on me heavily.

Under different circumstances I would have a good laugh at this: the crime writer turned perpetrator. I don't remember telling you that I am a writer, a crime writer. It is more likely that, when we met three years ago, I introduced myself as a literary translator. It's not as if I automatically add my profession when my name is asked, but in this country my accent right away turns into a topic in any first conversation I have with the stallholder in the market, the nurse at my GP surgery or the barmaid in the pub. So, in order to stop any appraisal of my level of English, I got used to clarifying in advance that I am Hungarian, and adding that languages are my profession. Obviously, I keep silent about that I am not an English, but a Spanish translator or at least I used to be one.

Maybe it was due to my Mediterranean connections that I felt attracted to Mrs Fornossi's company from the moment I became her neighbour. She didn't ask about my accent but told me that she was from Italian origins. Later in the pub I heard that those in the neighbourhood who knew her for some time called her La Signora. Very soon she invited me in for a coffee, and I was won over by the Italian setting: the cheap prints about Naples on the wall, the huge framed map of Italy, the battered tin containers of all sorts of pasta, and the big jar to store the amaretti biscuits. She used to fill the Moka pot with ground coffee from an old Lavazza box. I wondered how she could afford such extravagance out of the state pension. Maybe you had bought it for her, or the box was a fake as everything else. As far as I know Mrs Fornossi used to shop in Lidl like everybody else in the street.

Once a week we used to have a coffee together, just the two of us in the living room. In my childhood the women from the neighbouring flats always met in the kitchens. It was unthinkable to be invited into the rooms. I found it hard to get used to that these red brick terraced houses built for the working classes had such diminutive kitchens. It was Mrs Fornossi's ritual that after we settled down with our coffees, she would send me into the kitchen to fetch more sugar, milk or a spoon. You know that she suffered from joint pain and swollen legs. So, I knew her kitchen pretty well.

For long periods we didn't meet at all because I travelled a lot. I went home to give workshops and to participate in bookfairs. When I say home, I mean Budapest. The town you visited in the late eighties as a university student on a summer trip. It was such an experience, you told me, but you didn't venture further East. These are your words. Since then, you must have got used to that the neighbourhood your mother lives in has a lot of Poles. But you could ever suspect that Eastern Europe lived in your mother's home hidden at the back of the last shelf of her tiny pantry.

I can't recall the exact date when I found the Matryoshka doll. But I do know that I had already begun the self-translation of my crime fiction into English, and on the same day the letter arrived saying that I was given the pre-settled status. The former is more important for you to understand why I attributed such significance to the doll. And although later it turned out that its presence on Mrs Fornossi's shelf was of great importance for her too, I wasn't aware of that at the moment.

By then I had been anxious for weeks, fearful of getting disformed by the very act of self-translation. This fear is incomprehensible for all but those who had lived in between several languages. I will try to explain it for you because this is my only chance: if ever, you will only believe me if you understand that I was driven by fear and not by greed, and that I knew nothing about the jewellery.

All bookfairs were cancelled one after the other, my workshops didn't even start. With all the work postponed I could have gone back to Budapest. But I have no flat there anymore and I couldn't face the possibility of living with my brother's family for an indefinite period. So, I stayed

here and I was convinced that the time had come to embark on the work I had been putting off for years, the one I couldn't bring myself to do: to start the self-translation of my crime fiction into English.

I wasn't discouraged by all I had learned about the British book market, where crime fiction is the biggest seller yet only three out of every hundred books are published in translation, and the statistics say that those lucky authors are most likely to be males. As a Hungarian woman writer my chances of an English publication have been and remain very slim. Undertaking self-translation was a failure guaranteed.

I am ambitious and I wasn't deterred by all of this. But I was scared to death, and still am, that because of my desire for success and the act of self-translation –my only way out of the trap my circumstances had created–, would devour the person I have been. And it would be my fault alone.

But then in the middle of March the borders suddenly closed around me and the feeling was a familiar one. I had grown up behind closed borders eager to cross them one day in my own right as a high-flyer full of great plans to conquer. The lockdown ignited this adolescent determination that would spare no effort and would never get dispirited, not even by the most unpromising task.

For years I translated into Spanish just because it paid four or five times more than working into Hungarian, and I lived in Spain. While doing the second book I already knew that I was risking the most important thing in my life: my mother-tongue. The book was the diary of the last years in the life of a Hungarian author who after the communist takeover emigrated to the US. The translation work caused me sharp pain at every sentence.

I found it painful that he had read Hungarian poets every night, and it hurt me that he had filled his texts with quotes. His desperate discipline told me that he had lost the mother-tongue for good. I am a literary translator, a pathologist, I saw the abnormalities, all the wounds and alterations the long exile had caused in his language. I noticed the reduced vocabulary, the distortions in the word order, and how the anglicisms had taken over his writing, his mind. It hurt me deeply because I knew that he had seen it too. The Hungarian poetry every night was no use. And the pain was even harsher when I realised the same loss was waiting for me too.

When I finally embarked on my self-translation, I was terrified to suffer the same pathological changes. I talked to Mrs Fornossi about my doubts, and asked her if she missed talking in Italian. She shrugged and said that she had never been bothered by that thought. She was Italian, even if she lived here in Manchester, and would I like to have a glass of limoncello? She used to make it at home but these days it was impossible to buy alcohol, and she was too tired to do it anyway, so she rather bought it. If I brought it in from the kitchen, she was happy to serve one.

The day I found the dolls, Mrs Fornossi said hello to me in the back garden. Because of the virus we were not allowed anymore to enter other people's home, but she asked me to have a look in her pantry. She remembered having another tin of pasta on the upper shelves. It didn't

matter if it was out of date, her carer couldn't get any from the shops. She would wait in the garden, that must be safe enough.

I rummaged the top shelf when in the corner my hand happened upon the Matryoshka doll. As I have already said, that day I got the pre-settled status that I had applied for with the same reluctance I started the self-translation with. The doll wasn't big, it was of the size I remembered from my childhood. It was covered in some sticky, grey muck. Still standing in the stepladder I opened it, and on the next doll I could see the vibrant colours under the cracked varnish.

Suddenly, I had the feeling that the Matryoshka doll was a sign, and if I took good care of it, the self-translation wouldn't devour me. I am not religious and I don't believe in magic, but I am a writer, I see symbols and metaphors where others only see empty pasta boxes. If it hadn't been a pandemic, closed borders, my conflicting mixture of ambition and fear, I would have never have stolen the outer doll. At that moment I had the sudden and irresistible urge to take it home and clean it.

I didn't say a word to Mrs Fornossi, I couldn't find a good excuse. Instead, I gave her all my spaghetti and promised her that if I heard the news that Lidl had some again, I would bring her a couple of boxes. Once fully cleaned, I was planning to take back the doll too. But it didn't happen.

I set my thoroughly cleaned doll on my desk, and she smiled at me, while I was translating and deliberating about textual problems. If my reader would understand that the Hungarians never said Budapest, only Pest. If it was clear the generational and historical difference between a personnel officer and an HR manager. I meant if my reader would capture in the language use the half-century long conflicts that went back to the World War II. To the war whose glorious memory the BBC kept polishing on a weekly bases in the collective memory of the Brits.

That's why you might find it silly that I was ill at ease in the VE Day street party because I was afraid of somebody making a joke at the expense of the defeated powers. It was a sunny May day and Mrs Fornossi sat in the front garden next to the camelia bush. I noticed that her legs were more swollen and she gained weight. I asked her if she as an Italian wasn't bothered by the celebration. She said that Italy had pulled out and who cared anyway I should enjoy the sunshine.

But I could feel that my cheerfulness was empty, I sounded hollow, like the Matryoshka doll in my desk. I needed my emptiness to be filled. While Mrs Fornossi was chatting in the front garden, I sneaked in by the back door, the one she kept unlocked in spite of your warning. I went straight to the pantry shelf, and took with me the next doll. I left behind two, I could hear the inner one clunk as I placed them back in the corner.

The publisher in York to whom I had sent the first chapters of the English translation, thanks to the recommendation of a friend, asked me to change the names to easier ones. The original ones were too complicated for the British reader. I did it. He advised me to insert long descriptions of the Buda Castle and the Margit Island, so the reader could feel the attraction of my exotic post-socialist country. He argued that this exoticism would sell my crime fiction in the British market. Seemingly, the obligatory exoticism didn't apply to the names.

I applied for settled status because I was afraid that in a worst-case scenario, at the peak of the pandemic my health care could be influenced by my legal status. I have been living here for almost a decade but I haven't lost my Eastern European distrust in governing systems. When I asked Mrs Fornossi, she replied that she had British citizenship because she had arrived in 1956. The date called my attention because of the Hungarian revolution, and she added that indeed there had been many Hungarians in the old military camp where she had spent the first weeks. She had arrived as an orphan and a family took pity on her. They had all passed away long time ago, she concluded.

The settled status application was approved. The publisher asked me to delete the more complex historical parts of the book, because at the end of the day this was a crime fiction, he said, and the readers would find history tedious. Obediently, I started to shorten the text. I was grateful for his attention and advice, and I was determined not to rebel. My main character should be a "modern Mrs Marple", he suggested, but I had no idea how to shape into an English septuagenarian my DCI Judit Telki-Nagy –or in her new name Judith Telki– from the Special Division of Crime Against the Person who was in her forties, almost two meters tall and married with one child. I understood that the task was to make her a Brit without losing her Hungarian exoticism.

The daily routine of self-translation apart from causing constant fear was a struggle to resolve this glaring contradiction. I was in this mental state when one day under the pretext that I was to leave the shopping in Mrs Fornossi's kitchen, I took the last two dolls. To relieve my guilty feelings, I bought her a good bottle of high quality limoncello. You might find that it is still there.

Right after that last visit I fell ill with the virus and although I had no serious symptoms, the quarantine lasted two weeks. The first days' high fever made me believe that the disease was a well-earned punishment: I had become a thief in every sense of the word. That's why the news of Mrs Fornossi's death reached me a couple of days later. It struck me that I had to be her murderer: only I could have taken the virus to her home during my last shopping. Mrs Fornossi had been shielding since March.

I was so relieved when you knocked on my door one day and told me your mother had died of a heart attack in her sleep. Her care worker had found her in her bed. Oh, I thought it was me, I confessed hastily. You smiled at me saying not to be silly. It was then you suggested to have a beer to Mrs Fornossi's memory after the lockdown ended. I had the feeling it was not a drink you wanted but a date.

I wasn't worried any more about the Matryoshka dolls. The four of them were set in a row on my desk. I finished the translation of my book. I was proud of my achievement that this was the third language I could produce a text. I sent it to my friend John, who offered to proof read it.

A week later you came again saying that you had a strange question: Have I ever seen a Matryoshka doll in Mrs Fornossi's house? I gasped. You know what I mean, those Russian nesting dolls that can be placed one inside another, you explained misunderstanding my silence. My stomach felt knotted up as I shook my head. You might remember that I said nothing. In her will,

you continued, she left me everything, but specifically mentioned the Matryoshka dolls. I don't understand, you gave me a supplicant look as if I knew your mother better than yourself.

Hurriedly I got rid of you and ran to my desk. I took the smallest doll first and scrutinised it. At the bottom I noticed a light line of glue. The magnifying glass revealed that the bottom had a small cover that I was able to remove with a knife. A screw head appeared. It was easy to take out the plug, and wrapped in a yellowed cotton a ring, a Hamsa with the star of David and a gem stone fell into my hand.

I know that it would have been easier to give you back everything then, and not to start to play detectives. But I didn't know what to say. The next few weeks I avoided your visits. There are all sorts of experts on the internet, so it wasn't too difficult to discover that the Matryoshka wasn't Russian but Ukrainian from the 1930s. Not only her shape and dress proved it but also the word written in Cyrillic on the bottom of the largest doll: Mukachevo. It is a town in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine that belonged to Hungary until 1920 and in between 1938 and 1945.

Another expert assured me that the screw was Brit and it didn't match the internal thread of the plug. To identify the glue, you will need the assistance of a special laboratory. It is likely to be English. Mrs Fornossi must have known what was hidden in the dolls because at some point she took out the screw and replaced it.

I didn't manage to find out much about the jewellery, but it is likely, a historian told me, that it was the property of the Jewish community in Mukachevo. They were almost all killed in the Holocaust. The Jews in Mukachevo were Hungarian Jews, Nicola. Fornosi with one "s" is a common Hungarian surname in the region. Although it is not Jewish.

I leave you to find out the rest of the story.

Mrs Fornossi could have been a Jewish refugee child with a Magyarised or Hungarianised surname who escaped Hungary through the green corridor during the turbulent times of the 1956 revolution. And she could have been born in a Transcarpathian Hungarian family, who had searched for hidden valuables in the brick factory where the Jews of Mukachevo had spent their last night. A lot of jewellery was found in shoe polish tins in between the stoves.

And of course, Mrs Fornossi could have been Italian, although such a name doesn't exist. As you said, your mother had never visited Milan again, and she got very upset when because of Brexit you wanted to apply for Italian citizenship. Maybe the real reason wasn't that her papers had been lost. Maybe Milan wasn't her hometown in the first place, but Mukachevo.

But there is no reason to believe your father wasn't Italian either: a one-night stand as she said. It is likely that she joined a group of Italians in the refugee camp and a family took her under their wings. Thousands of Italians arrived to Manchester in the fifties.

The rest is yours to discover.

This letter is an apology. My apology to you and to Mrs Fornossi's memory. In sleepless nights I am haunted by the possibility that I killed her by taking away her secret. If you think

otherwise, and you find my story credible I would be happy to have that beer with you before the second wave hits us.

I enclose the key to the safe deposit box and a bank authorisation where you can collect the dolls.

With sincere regret,

Éva

PS: The publisher from York has given up on me because I took out the extra descriptions of Budapest and my DCI won't be a modern Mrs Marple. I reinstated the original Hungarian surnames with the historical parts I had deleted. My friend John says I should not betray the refugee children my novel is about.