The last decade has turned out to be more important for Polish literary translation than any other during the last fifty years. The orderly, fixed world of before 1989 fell apart to be replaced by much less orderly though more vivid one. Some literary critics claim that it is European normality even if the position of translators is much lower than before, other voices protest that a well working order has been pointlessly destroyed. A larger perspective would still be required to decide which opinion is correct. The point here is to try to sketch the width and depth of the changes while the question that this paper will attempt to answer is whether literary translation has lost or won in the process.

The free market economy which took over about 1989 practically destroyed the state organized book publishing industry and seriously altered the position of literary translation. It is clear, as Jerzy Brzozowski notices that the esteem the translators once enjoyed was somewhat in excess of their actual position and value. Translations used to be largely discussed in the press and other media, they were sought after by readers for whom they were the only contact with the world.

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1 A brief debate on this subject can be found in: Czapliński, Przemysław and Piotr Śliwiński. Bogactwo i chaos. O tłumaczach i tłumaczeniach. in: Megaron 10/96, pp. 16-18.
from beyond the Iron Curtain. When *Ulysses* was published, it became the most sought after commodity (almost distancing original blue jeans and dollars) to such an extent that black market price of the volume exceeded up to 50 times the cover price\(^3\). When, in the 1980s, a young English scholar re-translated *Winnie the Pooh* (beautifully translated by Irena Tuwimowa in the 1930s) changing (among other things) the sex of the poor bear\(^4\), the discussion raged all over the Polish press.

The job of translator was the dream of many a student of foreign languages. Such a position was not easy to attain though - it required a long period of apprenticeship before a publishing house would accept a young person. Being accepted, however, meant a stable job with a regular income well above the average, and supported further by income from press (publication in instalments), radio and TV. This period was marked by the emergence of a group of eminent translators, as Zofia Chądzyńska, Stanisław Barańczak, Carlos Marrodan Casas or Maciej Słomczyński who took over the tradition of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński or Julian and Irena Tuwim\(^5\).

This world was organised and controlled by state institutions. Publishing houses were to fulfil specific aims and publish specific kinds of literature. Thus PIW published the most "elite" works, Czytelnik the more popular authors, while

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\(^3\) This story may be found in translator’s preface to the 1997 edition of Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Kraków: Zielona Sowa.

\(^4\) The translator, erroneously supposing that Winnie was a diminutive of Winnifrede or Winston (and not of Winnipeg as was the case), decided that the bear (referred to as 'he' throughout the books) was actually female, creating thus *Fredzia Phi Phi*.

Wydawnictwo Literackie from Cracow grew famous as the publisher of the French and South American authors. This division was fixed that is no publisher could infringe upon the rights of others on so divided market.

The fact that the state owned most publishing houses (apart from a few small church affiliated ones) meant that they were not expected to bring an income. This freedom from financial reality, however, allowed publishers to embark upon enterprises seldom heard of in other countries as two editions of the complete works of William Shakespeare produced by Maciej Słomczyński and Stanisław Barańczak for example. While costs of production were unimportant, income was also not an issue - a bestseller was worth precisely the same to a publisher since a catastrophe as the state would cover any losses and take any income. The print runs were limited by paper allowances - a publishing house would get a fixed amount no matter how successful one of its titles might have been. However, success could not be pursued since no more paper than the original allotment was given.

One should note, however, that the print runs were incomparable with these of today. A popular book would be published in a hundred thousand copies or more while a text addressed to a more intellectual readers in fifteen, twenty thousand copies with respective figures being ten and one thousand for today. Within the 50 years 1944-1994 23 461 books...

were translated - approximately 7500 from English, 5000 from Russian and 2000 from both French and German\(^7\).

Fortunately, the staff of the publishing houses tried to keep as high a level as possible, and, apart from the obligatory production of works from other socialist countries especially those written by their eminent leaders, foreign literature published in Poland was usually of the highest quality. A large part of today's publishing consists of reprinting existing translations. It is especially important as the quality of translation and editing of some works has not yet been surpassed.

A much more liberal attitude towards culture than in other East Block countries which included the publication of works that did not appear on other Eastern markets, led to one more important role played by the literary translation. In consequence from the 1960s on, Polish became the foreign language highly valued among the intellectuals of Czechoslovakia, Lithuania or Russia as it was the only way to access otherwise inaccessible works.

Naturally, this liberalism was always under close censorial control. Actually, the coexistence between translators and censorship was quite peaceful\(^8\). The publishing houses simply did not order anything that would offend the established order. The list of forbidden subjects was rather short but meaningful: criticism of communism, socialist Poland, Polish-Russian


\(^8\) Anna Car in her article Polityk w przekładzie discusses of the cases of authors who could not be published in Poland as Vaclav Havel. Fast, Piotr ed. Polityka a przekład. Katowice: Śląsk, 1996, pp. 183-193.
friendship and sex. As for the first three, underground publishing houses that first appeared in the late 1970s did their best to fill the gap, but Poles had to wait till 1989 for the last one.

The position of a translator established on the market was thus close to an ideal. The publishers with fixed and known range of interests operated on the basis of gentleman's agreement - once a translator proposed to translate a book no other translator or publishing house could touch it. Foreign publishers often simply gave their rights for free. It was impossible to transfer money out of Poland so they treated such cooperation as a kind of charity. A good translator could thus translate only those books which he or she found valuable with the possibility to plan for many years ahead.

The translator could also count on help from editorial staff. As costs did not matter, each publisher employed an army of highly qualified editors. The time also did not matter so the translator could work for years to achieve the perfect shape of his work. This situation had one serious drawback - good command of both languages was expected only as far as the most commonly known languages were concerned. As for the less popular languages, such as Spanish, a command of the foreign language was sufficient - thus the editors had to "translate" books from translators', into literary Polish.

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9 William Wharton, an American writer very popular in Poland, received about £500 royalties for his three novels published prior to 1990 which sold in a hundred thousand copies each.

Changes came slowly, and began in the late 1980s with the change of political attitudes. The state-owned publishing houses were too big and too slow to answer the new demand from the market. When censorship was abolished in 1988 and free market opened, a large group of new privately owned publishing houses appeared to satisfy the readers. These publishers could very quickly flood the market with the works of authors such as Ludlum or Clancy keeping the print runs on the pre-1989 level, the former author sold, within three years, 883 thousand copies of his novels\textsuperscript{11}.

The scale of the demand was so huge that virtually anyone with any knowledge of English (as it was the language of 80% of translated works while other foreign literatures disappeared) could become a translator. The jump from the average of a hundred books translated from English in the 1980s (e.g. 88 in 1984), to 1091 in 1995 alone, forced the new publishers to seek new translators. As the number of publishing houses reached, at some point, almost four thousand, it is obvious that the level of both translation and editing dropped seriously. Everybody wanted to join in as print runs of about a hundred thousand copies guaranteed hefty income (provided the publisher existed long enough to pay).

The honeymoon lasted for three years. About 1992, the demand on the market changed - it was possible to buy more interesting goods such as VCRs while generally the financial possibilities of Poles dropped seriously. The print runs within one year fell from a hundred to ten thousand copies and they have continued to fall ever since and have stopped on average,

\textsuperscript{11} Konewko, Wacław. Ibid. p. 31.
at three thousand copies. Many publishing houses went bankrupt leaving translators with finished works they could not sell. During the next five years, the market settled down - every year ends with the mantra "it can't get any worse than now"\(^\text{12}\), though it does. For translators this means one thing - the royalties have been kept on more or less the same level for three years - with inflation running at between 15-20\% per year, it is not a success.

The situation of literary translation in 1998 can be roughly described as follows: the number of publishers (in 1997 there were 1637 of them) is more or less settled, while the market belongs to about twenty large houses - one of the most important is Bertelsmann. They have divided the market between them similarly to what it was like before 1989 and most of them work within a narrow range of specialities.

New copyright law introduced in 1994 (which replaced regulations from 1952) enhanced protection of the rights of translators\(^\text{13}\). The period of protection was changed to fifty years and translation now enjoys exactly the same protection as an original work. After that period the publisher should pay 5\% to 8\% of the turnover to a special literature promotion fund. This has led to a situation where it is cheaper to order a new translation (which may cost 2.5\% of the turnover) than to use an old but good one. Consequently, within the last three years we had three different editions of Saint-Exupery's *Petit Prince*\(^\text{14}\).


\(^{14}\) Dąmbska-Prokop, Urszula. *Tłumacz-kanibal?* in: Filipowicz-Rudek, Maria. op. cit. p. 73.
The social attitude towards translators has also changed. We have joined the mass of badly paid "intellectuals". Our plight is very well reflected by the attitude of journalists who usually do not even bother to mention the names of translators in their reviews while any comment upon the quality of translation (except for extremely bad one) seems a waste of space. Jerzy Brzozowski notes than within the December 1995 edition of the monthly Literature, only half a sentence, "published in beautiful translation of Eugenia Siemiaszkiewicz," applied to literary translation. Similarly, since its establishment in 1994, "Notes," a monthly magazine addressed to publishers, has included only one article about literary translation - entitled "How to get cheated?" and presenting the methods that publishers use not to pay their translators.

Translators became anonymous, even for literary critics, to such an extent that when "Literatura na Świecie" awarded their yearly prize for debut in translation of fiction the awarded translator answered that he would have accepted the prize ten years ago when he had made his debut but now it would not seem reasonable of him.

The very job of translator has changed completely. He or she has to be a typist well versed in computing and also his or her own editor. In the early 1990s, some publishing houses did almost completely without editors (to cut down the costs) and today even if there are editors they prefer translators who do

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15 quoted after Brzozowski, Jerzy. op. cit. p. 49.
not require much editing - an attitude quite understandable as an editor gets no more then £50 for editing a novel.

The first and most important problem of translating is that it is no longer a job paid well enough to make a living. To make an average monthly salary, a translator has to produce at least 100 pages monthly (which brings about £200) which means at least three medium size books per year. Royalties for an average hardcover book of 500 pages do not exceed £1200\(^\text{17}\) (with the national monthly average at about 200) and they are paid after the publication (up to a year of waiting) which excludes practically any investements either in dictionaries or books, or travelling to expand one's knowledge of language\(^\text{18}\).

This situation leads to a general downfall of quality of translation - only a few of the best translators who make their living selling the rights for books that they have already translated and published - as Carlos Marrodan Casas\(^\text{19}\), Zofia Chądzyńska or Jolanta Kozak - can afford to spend sufficient amount of time on their work. The rest, out of necessity, combine other jobs (non-literary translation pays three times more) with translating which most often, sooner or later, ends in their complete abandoning of the job. The publishers do not seem to mind, however, since there are always students of foreign language departments willing to work for peanuts.

\(^{17}\) Specific data provided here are based on royalties paid by Poznań based publishing houses. They may vary - translator's income will be somewhat higher in Warsaw but may be much lower in smaller cities.


\(^{19}\) In a radio interview in Program 3 of Polish Radio Mr Marrodan stated that he never translated more than one book per year.
The conclusions are, therefore, rather grim. Literary translation has lost all its charms - it is no longer the only way to approach distant lands, pop-culture pushed it aside completely along with much easier access to travel and TV. The translators failed to defend their position (the completely passive role of the union must be at least mentioned here) and they have been pushed down the line somewhere between cover-designers and editors and squeezed in the 15%-25% of the cover price that cover various royalties\textsuperscript{20}.

At the same time, after ten years, Poland truly belongs to the world book market, with world-bestsellers appearing within weeks of their US or UK premieres\textsuperscript{21}. We have a vivid market flooded by bestsellers and their printruns are similar to those in France - 5000 copies within a month makes a number one. Within the last ten years Poland has, to a great extent, bridged the gap with the rest of Europe that had been widening since the Second World War. This gap however has been bridged at the expense of both literary translation and translators. And as there is no support from the state and very little support from both local and foreign cultural institutions (one should mention Norway or Spain) there is no great chance for any amelioration in the foreseeable future.

\textsuperscript{20} Strupczewska, Grażyna. \textit{Kup pan książkę}. Gazeta Wyborcza. 64 (2660) 17.03.1998, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{21} Such bestselling books as \textit{Scarlett} by A. Ripley or \textit{Icon} by F. Forsyth were published in Poland and the US simultaneously. In the case of writers as William Wharton and Jonathan Carroll whose popularity in Poland greatly exceeds the recognition they enjoy elsewhere translations appear before publication in the original.