

Antoine Cassar

## Unter den Linden (Under the linden trees)

*From the 13th to the 16th of March, on invitation by the MCCA and the Maltese Embassy in Berlin, Antoine Cassar presented his latest book of poetry, Mużajk - an exploration in multilingual verse (Edizzjoni Skarta), at the Leipzig book fair and the Berlin Literaturwerkstatt.*

Across the former GDR, pedestrian traffic lights are graced with a charming design, showing a quaint little green man wearing a brimmed hat, seemily strolling along – ironically enough– towards the west. Reproduced on countless posters, t-shirts, schoolbags and other forms of collectible memorabilia, this little green man has become somewhat of a symbol of liberated and liberal Berlin. With my own poet's hat atop my balding head, we make our way to the enormous glass hall hosting the Leipziger Buchmesse, the second most important book fair in Germany, known to be more 'intimate' and less commercial than its counterpart in Frankfurt, the largest international book show of them all. The sun has peeped out and we find the literary greenhouse stuffy and heaving, with hordes of people gathering around the stalls of television stations to catch a glimpse of the live interviews taking place with well-known local authors. Luckily we are part of a different crowd, and we slither our way over to Hall 4, the section for international literature.

I'm here to read at the stand devoted to Small Languages, Great Literatures, in the company of Elo Viiding, known to critics as "Estonia's most evil poet", and her translator Irja Grönholm, who is monitoring the session and debate. The stand has a nice homely setup, much like a literary café with snug wooden tables and comfortable chairs. As Walt Whitman would say, I am in my place; the ambience is certainly not one of fleeting, passing traffic, and the poetry can be heard and appreciated in full. As I read, I cannot help noticing the widening eyes and smiles of the younger generations of the audience, and a number of passers-by stop to listen, intrigued perhaps by the mixture of tongues and their common tempo. As usual, the poem *Ciao amore ciao* elicits the warmest response. Michael Apweiler's German translations of the mosaics (kindly read out by Kornelia Klenner of the Maltese Embassy) are also much appreciated, having masterly rendered the rhythm as well as the meaning of the multilingual originals. By the time I read the final poem *Gonbidapena*, the audience has doubled, all the better for the debate and questions that ensue.

Elo Viiding's poetry is scathing, unafraid to put the pen in the wound wherever necessary: not for the fun of it, but because her reaction to past and present social and institutional repression doesn't allow her to write otherwise. We talk about the pain of writing, and the need to compose as much from the viscera as from the heart in order to be true to ourselves and to those around us. A question is asked about the Maltese 'poetry market', two words which simply do not seem to glue together. I tell the hard truth – sell fifty copies of a book of verse in Malta and you can consider it a success; sell a hundred, and call it a miracle. That said, thanks to the selfless initiatives of organisations such as Inizjamed and PoezijaPlus, in recent years the situation appears to have greatly improved. I am also asked if I believe that poetry can unite people across differing languages and cultures. Whitman and his fluffy, planetary beard come to mind again, as do his words in a letter to his friend John Fitzgerald Lee: Whitman's dearest dream was for "an

internationality of poems and poets binding the earth closer than all treaties or diplomacy". Naïve as that may sound, his dream later found its expression in Pablo Neruda's Ode to the Apple, where all the peoples of the world congregate along a Mississippi river of apples, united in the simplest yet perhaps most educating act on earth: biting an apple.

Later that evening, I read again with Viiding at the Theaterhaus Schille in the centre of Leipzig, one of several events organised within the framework of Leipzig Liest in conjunction with the book fair. There happens to be a small exhibition of painted sonnets hanging on the walls, the work of a local poet who publishes only on glass and on canvas, avoiding the paper medium. It is a beautiful concept, as the sonnet's proportional shape may have been inspired, upon its invention in medieval Sicily, by the same golden ratio that informs all other manifestations of art. Again I am in my element. Despite choosing to read a number of more 'violent' or 'visceral' mosaics, the response of the audience is superb. Also reading with us are Czech novelist Martin Šmaus and Irish author Alan Titley, whose short stories in Gaelic sound wonderfully musical, and have us all cracking up with laughter when we hear the translations.

### **In search of a language burned**

An hour up the river Spree from Berlin begins the historical region of Lusatia, or Lausitz in German, or better still, Łužyca in Lower Sorbian, one of two languages spoken by the Sorbs, a West Slavic people that politics has condemned to being a 'minority' community within the modern German state. Lower Sorbian is today spoken by around 14,000 people, yet the language is not being passed on to the new generations; Upper Sorbian, spoken further up the river in Saxony, fares a little better with 40,000 speakers. Both languages enjoy special legal status, although the public finance received in one year by the Sorbian linguistic and cultural organisation Domowina is less than that given to a Berlin theatre in a single month.

As the new phase of the Mužajk project explores endangered and minority languages, I have come to Lubnjow (Lübbenau in German), a gorgeous little town in the Spreewald well reputed for its canals and cucumbers. The streets and houses are the same colour as those I have seen in the towns of Czech Bohemia. The tangy soup I savour by the river ('soljanka') tastes Slavic too. Unfortunately though, not much is to be found or heard of the Lower Sorbian language: the tourist office is closed, whilst the local museum exhibits baskets upon baskets of painted easter eggs, a handful of old artefacts and an old Sorbian bible. Apart from that, there is a single poem in Sorbian hanging on the wall, a lamentation of the misfortunes suffered by the language and its people.

The reason why so little literature in Sorbian survives, and why the Sorbs have struggled so hard to cultivate their tongue and keep it alive over the past seven centuries, is a series of orchestrated bonfires: already a prohibited language in a number of cities (including Leipzig) in the early 14th century, in 1667 Freidrich Wilhelm, Prince of Brandenburg, ordered the immediate destruction of all printed material in Sorbian. Their literature given to ash, Sorbian authors fervently continued to write, to such an extent that the Prince's brutal order was repeated only two years later, and was carried out so successfully that the only document in Sorbian surviving from the time is a letter giving news of the blaze. Later, the practice of burning books was revived by the Nazis in the 1930s, with Sorbian

teachers and intellectuals forced to work in other parts of Germany, and Sorbian activists sent to concentration camps. Communist GDR treated their Slavic cousins with greater respect, though not without subordinating their identity to that of the nationwide, culturally homogeneous proletariat. During that period, the local population and landscape were devastated by lignite mining. My personal aversion for the static notion of nation state, of countries proudly overflowing with symbolism and significance, continues to deepen.

### **The Berlin Literaturwerkstatt**

On my last day in eastern Germany, I read at the Literaturwerkstatt, a renovated old brewery now dedicated exclusively to literature. On this very stage have read poets Adam Zagajewski, Gabeba Baderoon, and Derek Walcott, whose poetry I conversed with throughout most of my stay in Berlin. This is highly professional stuff: each of the writers is introduced and interviewed by renowned literary critic Jörg Plath, who writes for a number of national newspapers and radio stations in Germany and Switzerland. Again I read a number of the more visceral mosaics; this time it is *A Dunánál*, a poem reflecting on how the leap from communism to consumerism transformed modern-day Budapest into a giant advertising billboard, which receives the greatest applause from the audience. The other three authors of the evening have brought along more humorous writing and have the audience in stitches, particularly Romanian novelist Dan Lungu, with his riotous accounts of family life under and after Ceaușescu. Very happily, at the end of the event, all copies of the *Muzajk* book I brought with me to Germany are taken, and a member of the audience invites me to the May Poesifestival at the LiteraturHaus in Copenhagen.

### **Unter den Linden (Under the linden trees)**

If the word 'serendipity' has been abused, it may be because it occurs so often, at least in the experience of poetry. To go to Germany for the beautiful phrase / "unter den Linden", which, like a branch in sunshine, / means, "without History, under the linden trees," / without the broken crucifixes of swastikas, / with the swathe of summer, green hillocks and red roofs [...] These are the opening lines of a section of Derek Walcott's book-length poem *The Prodigal*, of which I found a wonderful bilingual edition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. The following day, there I was, strolling down the beautifully named street stretching from Alexanderplatz to the Brandenburg Gate. The linden tree, known as 'lipa' in most Slavic languages, is also the symbol of the Slavic peoples, and gave its name to the city of Leipzig. In German folklore, it is also the tree of lovers, with its heart-shaped abundant foliage (looking from above and when the tree is not unnaturally pruned) and heart-shaped leaves. The appearance and symbolism of the linden tree match the openness, hospitality and freedom of Berlin almost perfectly. Ich bin ein Berliner. The monumental Brandenburg Gate, a symbol of peace which became one of division and then reunification, may not inspire the same joyful feeling as an avenue lined with linden trees, but at least, it is a gate with no doors to close.

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