

**Aviva Palencia:** Great hello, thanks for coming to talk with me today.

**Diana Senechal:** And thank you for having me.

**AP:** Of course, so today we're going to be discussing your translation of—forgive my pronunciation—Gyula Jenei's poem "Scissors" from Hungarian into English which won runner-up in our 11th annual Jules Chametzky Prize. Congratulations again.

**DS:** Thank you, it's a great honor.

**AP:** Firstly who or what drove you or drew you to translation?

**DS:** That was a long time ago, so when I was majoring in Russian at Yale, I began translating poetry because I was writing poetry. Poetry was my focus, or one of them, and when I was studying Russian and taking courses in Russian poetry, I began translating them, and in fact my senior essay consisted of translations and commentary. And then one of my professors, Tomas Venclova, who is a Lithuanian poet—he was one of my professors at the time, and in fact my advisor for my thesis—invited me to translate his poetry, which was actually wonderful for me because I had found his poetry in the library and it wanted to read it more carefully and I didn't speak Lithuanian yet. So I plunged in! And so it's a long story. But anyway, he gave me Russian literal translations and I had the original text, but he also read the original out loud onto tape. So I had tape recordings of the original, I had the original text, and I had the Russian literal translations and with those I would translate in such a way that as to in some way simulate the rhythm and the form of the original.

That was a long time ago. A book came out of that, and then another book, and many publications. And after a while, I didn't translate anymore of his poetry, except on occasion, but here and there, informally and then the translation picked up again when I moved to Hungary. And so, Gyula Jenei's was the first that I took on seriously here in Hungary.

**AP:** I love the description of the experience of having all those different versions of the poem that way you can incorporate all that into your translation, that sounds like a really fun experience, actually. So, it sounds like you had a little translation spree a long time ago, and then came back to it.

**DS:** That's accurate. There were some translations in between, and there were times when I was asked to translate something and times when I translated something informally just because I wanted to, but, yes, there was a large spurt early on and then much more recently the Hungarian translations.

**AP:** So how would you say your relationship to translation has changed between then and now, both in terms of your philosophy, and your methods and approaches?

**DS:** I will try to keep this short! So I think one of the strengths and weaknesses of my translations of Tomas Venclova's poems was my emphasis on the form and my efforts to recreate the form, rhyme, rhythm, sound, and so forth. And in the cases where I did this well, it worked very well, but some of the criticisms of the translations, which I think were in part quite legitimate, were that the English was stilted, because I was so focused on the sound of the Lithuanian that I forgot the English, in a way. And so, looking back I see many ways—and when I went back to revise those translations, I saw many ways to loosen this—and still preserve what I was trying to, loosen the rhymes a little bit. And I became more more attuned to half rhymes, slant rhymes, and so forth, and also to variations in rhythm that are very pleasing and interesting to the ear, and ways of avoiding the stiltedness and still doing something with sound, rhythm, form, and so I have actually had opportunities to revise those old translations, so now my approach is much more flexible, in terms of I'm less insistent on preserving the exact form.

But I'd say more alert to different ways of simulating it; not exactly, but maybe through some kind of translation of form into something else. And so I see more possibilities, essentially. I've also become much fonder of certain free verse—not all free verse—but I've found a love of the kind of free verse that really is not free, because when you look at it, you see that it couldn't easily be any other way, that the way it is is perfect for the poem that came out of it. But also the playfulness of free verse and the exploratory, improvisatory nature of it I find I welcome now in my translation, so I tend more now to translate free verse though that is not an absolute. And prose as well. In a nutshell, that's it.

**AP:** Alright. So you have worked and studied in a lot of fields, based on your website. Some of them include linguistics, literature, philosophy, and theater. You've had musical endeavors, worked in computer programming, editing, I'm sure others. How has this breadth of experience influenced your translation work and how you view language?

**DS:** I would say the first that comes to mind is the music, certainly the music. For instance, this fall I'm leading a seminar in the US at a literature conference and the topic of the seminar is setting poetry to music, and I've been paying attention to this closely here in Hungary. Because music introduces, in addition to the inherent form that a poem may have—and form understood in different ways, there many ways to define form in relation to poetry—the music, if a poem is set to music, can establish a tempo that is different from what a reader might give it when reading it out loud without music. And I'm very interested in the pacing, the tempo of a poem and how that can be felt in the poem itself, independent of the reader's own interpretation and reading out loud.

So when I read and translate a poem, I am hearing how many beats a word has, how many beats a particular syllable has, and it's not only a matter of stress, there are syllables that get elongated and syllables that get shortened and so forth. And that's one of the things that happens. And I also hear volume, so I hear increases and decreases in volume and the way a poem can build up into commotion of a sort and die down into a whisper. That's where the music comes in. As for the rest, I believe that writing in many different kinds of writing have all influenced my translation. Whether it's nonfiction, fiction, poetry, it's all making me more alert to

the possibilities within a word, the possibilities in a sentence, the possibilities within a larger span of text, and I could go on answering your question, but it would be very long.

**AP:** You can if you want, I am on the *Mass Review* official account so it won't boot us out after 40 minutes.

**DS:** I believe that certainly, in my life, all my interests have in some way tied together. I don't want to connect them artificially, but, for instance, when you write a computer program—and I did a little bit of this, not very much, but some—you are really looking to give something a structure, and you're looking to the essence of what you're trying to do. And so you can find all kinds of little ways to work around and to get to where you want to go with the program. And there are very messy programs that take roundabout ways, but when you look at the essence of what you're trying to do, you may find either a simpler way, or if not a simpler way, a way that is going to yield more variation and more possibility in and of itself, and so I believe that connects with translation as well.

You're not looking for necessarily the simplest translation, you know. This comes into play with this particular translation, there were times when I translated the translation as somewhat simpler than the original and there are times when it's a little bit more complicated. But what you are looking for throughout is a way to go to the essence and and this route to the essence should yield the rest as well, the subtleties and the changes of tone. Everything else that's in the poem to the extent possible should be yielded by this route to the essence. That's the connection that I can see with computer programs. However they are quite different other than that.

**AP:** I was going to ask you specifically about that, because that was very interesting to me. I also loved what you said about translations in connection to music. I started out as a teenager translating songs, so I had a similar experience and it was rewarding.

So you've talked a little bit that you have worked with Russian, Lithuanian, Hungarian? This poem is from Hungarian. First of all, how did you choose these languages to focus on?

**DS:** They chose me! They absolutely chose me! I mean I've always been drawn to languages, enjoyed them, been drawn to them, wanted to learn them from childhood. When I was a little kid, well the first language I spoke—but I don't remember any of it—was Portuguese because we lived in Brazil when I was a baby and that was what I began speaking. But then we came back to the US and continued with English and we lived in the Netherlands when I was 10 and we lived in Moscow when I was 14. And that's how I learned Russian, was when we were living in Moscow for a year, but I definitely chose to learn it because it would have been possible and fairly easy to spend a year there without learning much Russian because they have an embassy school. It's possible to get by just speaking English. (The same is true in Hungary, by the way.) So I insisted on going to a Russian school which actually specialized in French so I could continue that. So language is a part of my life and I took Latin and Greek in high school. But I

always wanted to go further with the challenge of a language and go beyond what's normally considered fluent into a deeper knowledge.

And so with Hungarian, when I came here to teach—and that's a whole other story about how I came—but I came here without knowing any Hungarian, and that was five years ago, and I was determined to learn, but I also knew that one year wasn't enough. Definitely not enough. Two years wasn't going to be enough, you know, by two years, you're probably conversing simply but fairly competently on a certain limited number of subjects, and you can handle text with a dictionary and so forth, but I wanted much more than that and I'm in the midst of that, yes. And so they found me, the Lithuanian again found me because of Venclova inviting me to translate his poetry. And I took Lithuanian and plunged into it. But I don't speak Lithuanian very well, and I can handle some basic conversation maybe at this point.

**AP:** Have you encountered or have you had to take different approaches to different languages?

**DS:** That's difficult to say. Each one is its own world. It's very hard to describe. Each one has its particular resonance, its particular way of working. I would say there are concepts that in certain languages are very difficult to translate accurately, for instance, time. The way time is expressed in different languages can be profoundly, profoundly different. And even simple matters such as how you express the future or the past differ so strongly from languages, and even the present and gradations of present and future, that it creates a serious dilemma. And this was one of the most interesting aspects of translating Jenei's poetry, and particularly "Scissors" is, *how do you handle this future in which the poems are, you know what I mean? The future with which the poem begins, right?* Like "my mother will have other scissors, too." Why "will have?" That could strike the reader as strange, but this was done on purpose, but it sounds a little different in Hungarian.

**AP:** I was gonna ask you about that.

**DS:** It definitely sounds like an intentional, definite future tense being used, but somehow softer. It's somehow a little bit more present than the "will" of the English language, and so I struggled with that a little bit, but then decided, *Just go for the strangeness here and let the reader come into it.*

**AP:** Well, that segues pretty well into my next question, which is, were there features of the Hungarian that you wanted to highlight or preserve in the translation?

**DS:** Yes, well, time was one of the key ones. And so the first challenge was definitely deciding where to use the "will" to convey the future because the entire premise, the premise of the entire book, *Mindig más—Always Different*—is that the author at around age fifty imagines himself as a 10-year-old looking forward into the future and seeing things as they actually do unfold. So there's a little bit of a prophetic tinge, but mixed with that all the uncertainties of memory at many moments along the way, not really being sure whether it was this or that, or when exactly

things happened, or whether certain things happened at all. So it's a tiny bit of prophecy, a lot of uncertainty mixed in, and then a kind of matter of fact narration of everyday life that yet has so many layers of history, of family relationships, of a changing society—a society in a world that is changing right around the boy and he may or may not be aware of it as it's happening. And so, yes, one of the challenges for me was capturing this sense of future and present and past, and finding the right gradations and transitions between them.

And so also, another question that I think that comes up in any translation, is to what extent to clarify any references for the reader? And in this case for this particular poem I didn't, I just expected that readers would know about the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and there are various references to that throughout the poem— and that the historical references would not be so obscure that they would need a note or anything like that. In the translator's afterword for the book, I explained a few of the other references, literary references, but that's always a question, how much clearer to make it for a reader who's not immersed necessarily in that culture and history?

I guess one of the aspects, the features, that I love about the Hungarian language is the word order, which is so different from the English and of course I had to change that, but not everywhere. There were ways where I could keep things more or less in the Hungarian sequence, and I enjoyed when that was possible. And also, although this is free verse, the line breaks are important when they happen, it isn't random. You play around with it, you change it a little and you see that the poem is different. So more or less, taking grammar into account and taking word order into account. Here, and in other Jenei poems, I followed where I could, the locations of the line breaks and if I couldn't then I simulated them in some other way. And then there are word plays, and there are word inventions, and word conglomerations that occur and that happens near the end of this poem, and there I tried to do something similar in English. And then I will say there were times when I would actually break with the original in some way. So one example is the very end of this poem, the very last two words, [in Hungarian](#), it's “békebeli boldogtalanság” and then in English it's “unhappy peacetime.” So the literal translation of the Hungarian of the last two words would be “peacetime unhappiness.” And I switched it around and turned it into “unhappy peacetime,” and I spent a lot of time deliberating which would be better. And it seemed to me that “unhappy peacetime” was somewhat familiar. It was a phrase with some resonance. It seemed that “peacetime unhappiness,” for the ending of the poem, seemed a little bit too convoluted in the English speaking ear. So although it does invert the meanings slightly, I believe here, still, the essence is preserved.

**AP:** Do you have an example of the line where you were able to keep the Hungarian syntax?

**DS:** Yes, so let me see, just a moment. . . Well, it's impossible to keep it completely. So, I mean absolutely, there's no way.

**AP:** Of course, yeah.

**DS:** But in the very beginning, I would say more or less I did. So the first two lines, in fact, the first four lines, more or less, follows, not exactly, but very closely follows not only the syntax, but the location of the line breaks as well. So there, I followed it as much as possible. It's so difficult to go into the details, so I'll just give an example here, so "my grandmother will have other scissors too." In the Hungarian, it's "nagyanyámnak több ollója is lesz" and so literally that would be, "To my grandmother, several or more scissors also will be," which sounds like a very different word order, but actually it's much closer, it's relatively close, to "my grandmother will have other scissors too." And then it proceeds from there.

A similar kind of closeness, for example the fourth line: "They have been looking at each other for 100 years." You can omit the pronoun in Hungarian so you don't have to say "they" so "néznek egymásra száz évig is." And so, I would have to go into a detailed explanation of Hungarian grammar, so there are omissions and additions that have been in the translation, as well as a following of or departure from the syntax. But more or less that opening is close.

**AP:** Great, thank you. So you have translated a lot of Gyula Jenei's poetry, right? And you said you were attracted to free form poetry, so I'm sure that's part of what drew you to his poetry. But can you tell us a little bit more about why you decided to translate him?

**DS:** Yes, and first to clarify about free form poetry and free verse. It's not exclusively that I love it, but I've come to appreciate it more over time and to be more drawn to it over time. But certainly, I love formal verse at least as much.

Well, when I came to Hungary, I began teaching in Szolnok, which is a city almost as much in the center as you can get in Hungary, center slightly south and so it's to the slight south and east of Budapest and it's about, say, an hour and a half away by train or a little bit less. And so I began teaching where I still teach, at a high school, The Varga Katalin Gimnázium, and for a whole year there I had no idea that I had colleagues who are poets, actually they were at least two. And I had no idea for a year that one of them, Jenei, was regularly inviting Hungarian writers to the school to speak with students, and a student eventually told me about this, and I eventually found out that (Jenei) was a poet and started reading the poetry. The thing was that immediately I memorized a poem right away and my first conversation with him, I simply walked up to him and recited a poem of his that I memorized. It was an unusual first conversation. He was quite surprised, you know, it's not something that you necessarily expect at a day at school, but pleased.

And then I started reading the longer ones from this collection. And I was absorbed in it to the extent that I thought, *This should be a translation*. And his wife also is a critic and has written some beautiful pieces of criticism, and there was one essay that was actually about another Hungarian poet's haiku verse, haiku poems. And so she discussed these haiku and what they meant and how they connected together and what the volume as a whole was saying. And I wanted to translate that as well as the haiku poems.

So I approached them both and I said, "Look, I'd like to translate some poems of Jenei's and I'd like to translate this essay," and they were delighted. And at this point I spoke almost no Hungarian, I mean, I spoke a little bit of Hungarian, but very little, and so the first time I met with them, they invited me over to their apartment and we had dinner together and talked about the translation and his wife, Mariana, was translating a lot of the time. And there were these wonderful, awkward silences where I couldn't say anything that I wanted to say and they didn't know what to say to me, but it was just great. A friendship was formed.

Another thing that happened during this, I believe it was the first meeting but maybe the second—here again, the uncertainty of memory coming into play—is that they started for that one of his poems, is "Rádió," which is about a radio and about the family listening to the radio at home, and the different shows, and hearing the news that Kennedy was shot, you know, as a little boy hearing this news and how that changed his tiny child's view of the world. But then later realizing it was not JFK, it was Robert Kennedy, who was shot at that time that he heard it on the radio. But then talking about the different shows on the radio and he as a little boy believing that the sound was coming from little people who lived inside the radio and wondering how they lived and how they managed to do everything in that little box. But there was a song that was mentioned in the poem and they played an old recording of this song for me and they actually also showed me the scissors, the very scissors that are the subject of this poem, of "Scissors." And so I held the scissors, I heard the song, and through these different conversations, I came into contact with the authors and also with the tangible aspects of these poems. I got to it, and came to know a little bit more about the life surrounding and underlying them.

**AP:** That sounds great.

**DS:** Yes it was. To this day, we continue, now much more fluent, much longer conversations.

**AP:** Did you have a section or line that you sort of built your translation off of for "Scissors" or did you just take the whole poem in and start from the beginning?

**DS:** I took the whole poem in and started from the beginning and I remember that day clearly because that was the year when—that was in 2018-2019 and it was either in the late fall of 2018 or the winter of 2019, one or the other, and I had a long break in the day on Wednesdays when there were several hours between one class and the next. And I would go to a completely deserted cafe, a cafe that was completely silent, and I had my dictionaries with me and I had my notebook with me and I would just sit and that is where I would write the first drafts of the translations. And then I would go and refine them later. But I remember being there and I was so engrossed in this poem and the translation for several hours that afterwards I didn't know how I was going to go out, back into school, back into the world, but it worked out. I was able to. And I would say the part that really to this day, I wouldn't say it puzzles me, but it seems that I can turn it in so many different ways, is that towards the end of the poem when the poem says that I am not interested— "having no interest in the question / of power or birthplace either. this cannot be quite / correct. I should disambiguate this *havingnointerest*, / and explain why not." And so this pause and uncertainty over his own words, and a wish to clarify what he actually

meant by that, but then that clarifying, and that specification, he then relates to the sanding and polishing of the scissors. So that's a curious twist, you know? You think that when you clarify a point, you're actually drawing finer lines into it, but in this case it results in its being in some way compared. There's an analogy between that and wearing the faces down, making the faces less distinct rather than more. But then in another twist what emerges from that is the basic essence of these two faces, faces on a pair of scissors, "unhappy peacetime." And so there are several twists in this line of thinking, but if you follow them you come to something magnificent, some kind of everyday magnificence.

**AP:** Right, right? It's not a clarifying of detail, but rather of the full picture.

**DS:** Exactly exactly.

**AP:** I also loved that section. So my final question to you is that because the Chametzky prize is in part a response to the "Great need for literary journals to internationalize," did you have a vision for what you wanted to give your audience, give an international audience?

**DS:** I wanted the audience to be able to enter this poem and love it as though—not as though it had been written in English—but as though they were reading the Hungarian in some way, or maybe some combination of the two. I wanted it to be strange, but in a way that is enterable and in such a way that when you read the poem you end up sat next to the grandmother as she's cutting with her various scissors, and playing with the scissors, and then sensing the past dissolving, and the grandmother being buried in time going by. The sweep of history, the long sweep of history and the shorter sweep of history and these things remaining. There's something about this poem, it has something that's so specific and at the same time something that people can live as they read it. I think it's probably a simple thing to say, but that's part of what translation should do, right? It should bring out the specifics of that language, that culture, that way of life, and at the same time there should be some way for the reader to enter it and be glad for having entered it.

**AP:** All right, that's all I have, thank you so much for talking with me.

**DS:** Thank you.