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## ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF ZOFIA ERNST\*

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### Abstract

My aim in this article is to present the life and work of Zofia Ernst, nee Kostanecka (1918–1994), a connoisseur of Italian culture and literature and an accomplished translator of Italian books for adults and children. In my argument, I draw on the ethnographic approach, using a common ethnographic tool: the qualitative interview (structured interview) to address important moments and events in Ernst's life. The focus on the life-story of one translator will help me depict the environment she lived and worked in as well as identify her embedment in particular familial and professional settings which crucially affected her work. I will also discuss Ernst's formative contribution to the image of Italian literature in Poland in the years 1953–1979, i.e. in the period of her translation activity.

**Keywords:** Zofia Ernst, literary translation, ethnographic approach, qualitative interview, Nasza Księgarnia

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Among the arts, literature is the only one to need translators—without them, it remains trapped within the borders of one nation.<sup>1</sup>

Zofia Ernst

“A translator – especially a female translator – is (with few exceptions) a social or class phenomenon rather than a literary one” – this is how Julian Tuwim describes translators in his essay titled “Traduttore–traditore,” first published in 1950, in his “legendary”<sup>2</sup> book *Pegaz dęba* [Pegasus rearing] (Tuwim 2008: 167). Tuwim describes the phenomenon of “female translators” in rather negative terms, postulating the creation of “translation courses—a special training supervised by accomplished masters of this devilishly difficult art” (Tuwim 2008: 167). In his essay, Tuwim enumerates various faults of pre-war editors and translators; several of his comments refer to female translators forced to take up this profession by financial need. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, translation was not regarded as a profession in its own right and it rarely constituted a person’s sole employment (there were, however, some exceptions to this rule, such as Aniela Zagórska – see Rajewska 2015). Although in the interwar period in Poland translation work was accorded a certain prestige, translators did not perceive themselves yet as full-fledged members of the literary milieu. Modest earnings offered to translators discouraged recognised authors from trying their hand at translating (Miłosz 1999: 352), which is one of the reasons why translation commissions were usually accepted by female translators who overlooked meagre salaries, acting on genuine passion for a given culture, literature or language. After World War II, however, a new caste of professional translators emerged who began to compete with the pre-war translators, offering their services to publishing houses.

So far, the lives and work of Polish female translators of Italian literature have not merited much interest on the part of literary scholars. Their translation activities remain largely unknown (Biernacka-Licznar 2016: 460–468)

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<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from an interview with Zofia Ernst conducted by Jerzy Ciechanowicz. See “Kolory Włoch,” *Życie Warszawy, Kultura* supplement, 21–22 March 1992, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> That’s how the book is described by Jerzy Bralczyk. In the foreword to the 1950 edition, Tuwim explains that the manuscript survived World War II, together with some of his other writings from the years 1914–1939, hidden in a suitcase buried in a cellar in Warsaw. After the war, Tuwim managed to excavate his archive; nevertheless, only two manuscripts survived: notes for the biography of Soter Rozmiar Rozbicki and the manuscript of *Pegaz dęba*. The book was published in 1950 by Czytelnik, to be reprinted only in 2008.

and there are few sources available aside from short biographical notes in the biobibliographic dictionary of contemporary Polish authors and literary critics, PWN encyclopaedias and the encyclopaedia of Polish theatre.

Should we concede to define biography as a unique event marked on the time scale, its comprehensive interpretation requires the application of methodology derived from ethnography. The best solution would be to interview the translators themselves; however, this is not always possible. Applying research methods typically used in ethnographic studies, such as interviews, (participant and non-participant) observation or analysis of various documents (such as translators' and publishers' archives and correspondence), it is possible to uncover new facts. Ethnographic methods have been used in research focused on the translators' status (Dam, Korning Zethsen 2010; Solová 2015), as well as on their work (Risku and Windhager 2013); but, so far, there have been only two such studies dedicated to Polish female translators of Italian literature (Porebska 2017; Biernacka-Licznar 2017). In this essay, I am presenting the findings of my research based on the interview technique, which is one of the research tools applied in ethnography (Kvale 2012). An interview in this context can be defined as a conversation structured by the interviewer, focused on retrieving a description of the life of the interviewee or their acquaintance (Kvale 2012: 37).

Thus far, in my research on Zofia Ernst I have focused on interviewing her family (her son and daughter-in-law) as well as her colleagues: poet and Italian translator Jarosław Mikołajewski and prose author and Italian translator Eugeniusz Kabatc, cultural consultant in the Polish embassy in Rome in 1968–1974.<sup>3</sup> The information thus obtained permitted me to compile a rather detailed biography of the translator. The present essay would definitely benefit from retrieving the criteria applied by Zofia Ernst in selecting texts for translation, as well as those followed by publishers in the period when Ernst was professionally active. Knowing the publishers' strategies and motivations governing the Polish import of Italian fiction and children's literature would certainly prove illuminating. Nevertheless, obtaining these data requires accessing the New Documents Archive (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw, namely the collection of the communist Central Office for the

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<sup>3</sup> I hereby express my thanks to Mr Tomasz Ernst, the son of Zofia Ernst, for his permission to utilise fragments of Jan Ernst's diary as well as providing access to the family archives and Zofia Ernst's personal documents. I am also grateful to Mrs Maria Ernst, Mr Jarosław Mikołajewski and Mr Eugeniusz Kabatc for all the information and materials they kindly shared with me.

Supervision of the Press, Publishing and Spectacles (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, GUKPPiW), which has been removed from public access since 2013. Moreover, my preliminary enquiry conducted in the publishing houses that employed Ernst revealed that no materials have survived regarding Ernst's translation activities. This is partly due to the fact that Ernst preferred to meet the editors in person or speak to them on the phone, so no notes remain concerning the editing process.

It should be stated, however, that based on the information provided by Ernst's family, the translator frequently recommended new Italian titles for translation. She was thus partially responsible for the reception of Italian literature in Poland.

It is worth remembering that in the communist period the relations between Poland and Italy underwent changes dictated by the "emerging binary division of the world into two political and military blocs" (Pasztor, Jarosz 2013: 17), and establishing new cultural links in the post-war period was by no means easy. In the high Stalinist period any academic, cultural and artistic exchange between Rome and Warsaw was frowned upon by the communist government; these contacts were revived, however, after 1958 and in the 1960s they became quite regular (Bernatowicz 1990). As a result, Zofia Ernst's translation activity took place at a very interesting time as far as Polish-Italian relations are concerned.

## Zofia Ernst, née Kostanecka (1918–1994)

Zofia Kostanecka, Wieruszowa coat of arms, was born in Warsaw on 22 March 1918, to Antoni Kostanecki, professor of economy and the second-in-history Rector of the Warsaw University, and Anna Kostanecka née Geyer, descendant of a rich factory-owning family from Łódź. In 1936, Zofia Kostanecka graduated from Jadwiga Kowalczykówna Secondary School in Warsaw and, in October, she commenced studies at Warsaw School of Economics at 6 Rakowicka Street. She never finished her degree, however, as in 1937 her parents decided to send nineteen-year-old Zofia to Rome to pursue a degree in art history. They hoped she would improve her Italian, which she had learnt at a very young age. Rome was the home of her mother's close relatives, Mr and Mrs Antoni Aluffi-Pentini. Together with other young ladies from Poland, Zofia took residence in Casa Santa Maria Maggiore, a boarding house, run by the Grey Ursulines, at 23 via Regina

Giovanna di Bulgaria. On 9 February 1938, at a mask ball thrown at the Polish consulate in Rome, Zofia Kostanecka met her future husband, Jan Ernst (Ernst 1988, vol. 1: 254).<sup>4</sup> She was then but twenty years old, and she was “pretty, shapely, with expressive eyes” (Ernst 1988: 254). On top of that, she was bright, had wide interests and major linguistic talents. During her studies in Rome, Zofia was fluent in French and English; she also continued to perfect her Italian. When he met Zofia, twenty-nine-year-old Jan had already earned his PhD in geography and since 1937 he had been residing in Rome on a state scholarship at the Istituto Internazionale d’Agricoltura.

The time spent in Italy was for Zofia a period of dynamic changes in her personal life. On 29 April 1938, during a trip to Taormina, Jan declared his love for her and asked for her hand in marriage. In late June, the couple went to Warsaw to pay the required series of formal family visits. When both families accepted the match, on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1938 Zofia and Jan said their marriage vows in the Carmelites Church on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw. The wedding was officiated by bishop Antoni Szlagowski, the cousin of Zofia’s father. The young couple moved in to a flat at 7 Trzeciego Maja Street in Warsaw.

Despite growing international tensions and impending war, Jan and Zofia tried to settle in their new life together. They took active part in Warsaw’s cultural life, attended concerts and theatre shows, as well as mingled socially (mostly with Zofia’s acquaintances). In 1938, Jan started a new job at Warsaw’s Central Statistical Office. In the summer of 1939, the couple decided to take a trip to Dworzyska, to stay at the manor house belonging to Jan Hewell, Zofia’s cousin. At the outbreak of World War II, the Ernsts were staying in Lviv, paying a visit to Jan’s mother. It was in Lviv, then, that Jan Ernst was drafted and he participated in the 1939 defensive war as an officer in the 19<sup>th</sup> Relief of Lviv Infantry Regiment. Zofia, together with her brother Wojciech, travelled back to Warsaw, where she moved back in with her parents at 53 Mokotowska Street. She was then five months’ pregnant. Krzysztof Ernst, Jan and Zofia’s firstborn son, was born on 14 January 1940. During the war, Jan and Zofia did not socialise much; they

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Ernst (1909–1993), professor of economic geography at Maria Skłodowska University in Lublin. In 1927–1932, he studied geography at John Casimir University in Lviv, first under the supervision of Professor Eugeniusz Romer and then with Professor August Zierhoffer. In 1932, he was awarded the MA degree in geography and in 1938 he earned his PhD. In 1930 in Lviv, he started a vocal band, Eryan’s Chorus barbershop quartet. For this occasion, he assumed the stage name of Eryan (Ernst 1988, vol. 1).

only met regularly with two other couples: Jerzy and Jadwiga Łoziński and Zofia and Tadeusz Bratkowski (the two Zofias became friends when they both studied in Rome). During the German occupation, Jan Ernst tried to earn some extra money as a pianist in Warsaw cafés. In the meantime, Zofia made regular trips to her aunt and uncle Geyers' estate in Dąbrowa Zielona near Częstochowa; it was there that the Ernsts' second son Tomasz was born on 28 August 1943. The Ernsts spent the hot summer of 1944 together in Jabłonna near Warsaw and returned to the capital on 26 July. At the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, the family were staying with Zofia's parents at 53 Mokotowska Street. On 9 September they decided to try to flee the besieged capital and were detained in the transitory camp in Pruszków. They only managed to escape thanks to a lucky coincidence and the help of the camp's hospital orderly Irena Panenkowa, niece of Professor Eugeniusz Romer, who remembered Jan Ernst from Lviv. On 10 September, the Ernsts left the camp and travelled to Częstochowa, relying on the help of their relatives from Dąbrowa Zielona.

In the spring of 1945, the Ernsts decided to relocate from Dąbrowa Zielona to Łódź. The city had not been destroyed and became Poland's administrative, academic and cultural centre. In Łódź, they were offered an accommodation on the premises of the Geyer factory. Zofia devoted her time to housekeeping and raising her sons; in her spare moments, she read extensively and tried to keep up with cultural events. In the meantime, Jan struggled to find an employment that would sustain their family of four. He played the piano in night clubs and tried to restore Eryan's Chorus, which he had founded in Lviv before the war. He cooperated, among others, with Edward Atlas, who back then had a management position in "Wojentorg" – a military institution in charge of organising restaurants and cafés for the military. In those years, Zofia and Jan became close with one of the officers responsible for handling prisoners, the Italian Aldo Nicolaj (who later became a playwright). Their friendship survived until the late 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Even though Jan spent his evenings playing music in Łódź's cafés, the Ernsts expanded their social circle. During the family's residence in Łódź,

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<sup>5</sup> Aldo Nicolaj (1920–2004) was a journalist, director and playwright. His first post-war meeting with the Ernsts took place in 1957 in Rome. Zofia Ernst translated into Polish Nicolaj's two-act play *Non era la quinta, era la nona* [It wasn't five o'clock, it was nine o'clock], which had its Polish premiere in Kwadrat Theatre in Warsaw in January 1977.

they became close friends especially with Stefa Biedrzycka, Jan Brzechwa<sup>6</sup>, Gabriel and Wiera Fiałkowski<sup>7</sup> and Stanisław Kmita.<sup>8</sup> Jan Brzechwa took a liking to Zofia, who impressed him with her wit and good looks. Jan Ernst, in turn, wrote music to several of Brzechwa's poems and performed them after the war with Eryan's Chorus, eventually revived in 1945.

In May 1946, the Ernsts returned to Warsaw, where Jan was offered a position of Head of Planning at the Central Trade Office. At first, the family took residence in Skolimowo and Jan commuted to work; it was not until autumn that they managed to move back into the flat at 53 Mokotowska Street.<sup>9</sup> The building was among few in Warsaw to survive World War II. The flat was spacious (150 square metres); but, in 1946, it was overcrowded with as many as 28 residents. For the next ten years Zofia and her family had to contend themselves with only two rooms. Financial hardships soon prompted Zofia Ernst to search for employment in the Italian section of the Polish Radio as an Italian translator.

In the early 1950s, Zofia Ernst published her first professional translations from the Italian. Her debut in this new role was doubtless facilitated by the changes in Poland's publishing policy after 1950 (Kondek 1993). It could be assumed that the suggestion that Zofia try her hand at translating Italian literature came from one of the Ernsts' literary friends (most likely from Jan Brzechwa); still, Zofia Ernst's daughter-in-law explains that the immediate motive was the family's financial difficulty. Zofia Ernst's first published translation – a volume of Giovanni Verga's novellas, co-translated with Marcin Czerwiński – was published in 1953 (Verga 1953). In the same year, Ernst joined the Polish Writers' Union. In 1954, she translated her first children's book, *Opowieść o Cebulku (Il romanzo di Cipollino)* by Gianni Rodari (an Italian author with communist sympathies, little known in Poland back then), for Nasza Księgarnia publishing house. This turned out to be the beginning of a fruitful cooperation (Aleksandrzak 1972), as Nasza Księgarnia issued three more novels by Rodari in Ernst's translation: *Podróż Błękitnej Strzały (Il viaggio della Freccia Azzurra, 1955)*, *Mali włóczędzy*

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<sup>6</sup> The couple's acquaintance with Jan Brzechwa developed into a long-standing close friendship. Brzechwa, already distinguished as a poet, was "the animator of a free, humorous and unique social life" (see Ernst 1988: 70).

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Fiałkowski and his wife Wiera were both medical doctors.

<sup>8</sup> Laryngologist, a cousin of Zofia's.

<sup>9</sup> The tenement house at 53 Mokotowska Street was built in 1924. The flat was first owned by Zofia's grandmother Brodowska; in 1935, it became the home of Zofia's parents.

(*Piccoli vagabondi*, 1957) and *Bajki przez telefon* (*Favole al telefono*, 1967). Although Tomasz Ernst has retained fond memories of *Opowieść o Cebulku* as his favourite childhood story, Zofia Ernst did not share any details regarding her collaboration with Nasza Księgarnia with her family. Nevertheless, her son insists that she was certainly on good terms with the editors. My own bibliographic research confirms that the cooperation with Nasza Księgarnia continued until 1974 and involved eight translated books in total, some of which went into multiple reprints (Biernacka-Licznar 2017: 27–29). In the 1960s and 1970s, Zofia Ernst's translations of children's literature were frequently adapted for the radio as well as puppet theatres.

From the late 1950s onwards, Ernst translated more and more extensively; she also began to work for respected and influential publishers such as Czytelnik or PIW. Her translations were highly appreciated and gradually she earned the reputation of the leading translator of Italian literature into Polish. It should also be stated, however, that in that same period another distinguished Italian literature translator was Barbara Sieroszevska (1909–1989), who started her career before the war. From the 1950s, Ernst and Sieroszevska were good friends.

Zofia and Jan's social life benefited from Zofia's involvement in literary circles and Jan's developing musical and academic career. In Warsaw, they frequently socialised with Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jan Brzechwa, Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski, who was then the president of the Polish Writers' Union. It was thanks to Słonimski that, finally, in the late 1950s, the Ernsts reclaimed three rooms in the flat at 53 Mokotowska Street, where they liked to entertain their literary friends.

After 1956, Zofia would often travel to Italy in relation to her translation work. With every coming year she translated more books, published by Czytelnik and PIW, and she readily participated in various literary meetings organised by her publishers. In 1958, she received an invitation from the writer Giorgio Bassani to participate in the International Writers' Conference in Naples, where *Sindacato Nazionale Scrittori* created a union named *Comunità Europea degli Scrittori* (European Writers' Association). Zofia Ernst was Poland's only representative at the conference.

In 1959–1970, she served as chairwoman of the Polish Section of the European Writers' Association, which she herself established. She represented Poland during the European Writers' Association Executive Board conferences in Rome, Firenze, Taormina, Athens and Paris. In those years, she became close friends with Elsa Morante, Guido Piovene and Giuseppe



Marotta (Ciechanowicz 1992: 10). In 1960, the Polish Writers' Union asked Zofia to take care of Polish American conductor Leopold Stokowski during his visit in Poland, which resulted in her making numerous new contacts among Italian musicians.

In 1961, on the centenary of the Italian unification, Zofia Ernst received the order called "Medaglia della Direzione Generale delle Relazioni Culturali con l'Estero" for her contribution to popularising Italian culture in Poland. In March 1962 in Florence, another conference of the European Writers' Association took place. Among the participants was Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, who briefly described the event in his *Podróż do Włoch* [A journey to Italy]:

Of course, the nicest part of the whole experience were private conversations. Dear Mrs Campetti came to visit from Lucca, and among the Polish delegates I enjoyed especially the company of Międzyrzejcki, delightful Zofia Ernst and Jan Brzechwa, who I dare say is the nicest man I'd ever met in my life (Iwaszkiewicz 2008: 72).

In 1963, the European Writers' Association conference was held in Warsaw and Zofia Ernst became one of its chief organisers (the Polish division of the Association had about 60 members at the time). In 1964, she joined the PEN Club.

In the 1960s, the Ernsts enjoyed a rich social life, and their flat in Mokołowska Street was teeming with visitors, including Italian writers hoping to interest Zofia in their books. Another occasion for developing friendships were annual summer trips to Ustronie Morskie and winter trips to Zakopane, where the Ernsts stayed at recreational homes belonging to the Polish Society of Authors and Composers. In addition, the couple frequently travelled to Italy, sometimes taking their sons with them. They also retained fond memories of a trip to the Soviet Union, which they visited on the invitation of Jan Brzechwa and his wife. Brzechwa received royalties which he could only spend within the borders of the USSR, which allowed the Brzechwas and the Ernsts to spend a week in Moscow and four weeks in the recreational home of the Soviet Writers' Union in Yalta.

In the 1960s, publishers often commissioned Zofia Ernst to translate contemporary Italian fiction<sup>10</sup> and soon she became an expert, especially in the

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<sup>10</sup> In 1953–1959 Zofia Ernst translated twelve Italian novels; in 1960–1969 she added further twenty-eight books, and in 1970–1979 twelve again (data available on the website of the Polish National Library.)

prose of Sicilian authors. Her main principle was: “never to betray the author and always try to fathom what they attempted to say. Nothing can be omitted or added” (Ciechanowicz 1992: 10). Zofia cultivated her contacts and friendships with Italian writers. In 1967, on their way back from Canada<sup>11</sup>, the Ernsts spent a couple of days in Italy on Riviera di Ponente, staying with their dear friends Ambrogio and Mala Devoti. At that time, Ambrogio was the president of the Italian Writers’ Union. After that the Ernsts paid a visit to Marcello and Camilla Venturi<sup>12</sup> (Ernst 1988, vol. 2: 190–191).

Zofia Ernst played an active role in shaping the image of Italian literature in Poland. In the interview given to Eugeniusz Kabatc in 1974 for *Literatura na Świecie* [World literature magazine] she discussed the activity of a council formed by the Translators’ Club of the Polish Writers’ Union, whose aim was to assess “the level of pervasion of our literary consciousness by translated works” (Kabatc 1974: 383). Ernst mentions a list of the key titles and propositions compiled by the Translators’ Club members. The list was presented to the Ministry of Culture as a series of postulates in the hope that at least some may be put into practice. Ernst used this opportunity to recommend for translation authors such as De Sanctis, Alvaro, Monelli<sup>13</sup>, Bontempelli and Federico De Roberto. She initiated the translations of many notable Italian authors – she felt responsible for the reception of Italian literature among Polish readers. According to Ernst, after World War II Italian literature in Poland was treated with sufficient respect: she stressed that, by 1974, Polish readers gained access to over a hundred Italian writers, which meant that Italian fiction ranked among the most frequently published of Western literatures in Polish translation.

In 1961, Ernst received an Italian state honour for promoting Italian culture in Poland. In 1969, 1971 and 1988, she received Premio di Cultura

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<sup>11</sup> The Ernsts visited Canada twice, both times on the invitation of Zofia’s aunt Geyer, who during the German occupation managed to escape with her husband and children to Switzerland, from where the entire family moved to Brantford in Canada (Ernst 1988, vol. 2: 201).

<sup>12</sup> Marcello Venturi’s books were published in Poland from 1964: *Droga powrotna (Dalla Sirte a casa mia)* translated by Wanda Gall, then *Biała flaga nad Kefalinią (Bandiera bianca a Cefalonia, 1968)*, *Ostatni żaglowiec (L’ultimo veliero, 1972)* and *Najdalsza stacja (Piu lontane stazioni, 1972)* translated by Barbara Sieroszevska. Information based on: [http://katalogi.bn.org.pl/iii/encore/search/C\\_\\_Smarcello%venturi\\_\\_Orightresult\\_\\_U?lang=pol&suite=cobalt](http://katalogi.bn.org.pl/iii/encore/search/C__Smarcello%venturi__Orightresult__U?lang=pol&suite=cobalt) (access: 12.02.2018).

<sup>13</sup> Monelli on at least several occasions pointed Ernst towards new titles worth considering for translation (see Ciechanowicz 1992: 10).

della Presidenza del Consiglio awards for her translations from Italian into Polish. Eugeniusz Kabatc recalls one of the three ceremonies:

I had the opportunity to celebrate with Zofia Ernst on the occasion of her award, which she received on the recommendation of Giuseppe Padellaro, chairman of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Padellaro was personally thrilled to honour Ernst, especially given that, in 1971, his own novel *Trittico siciliano* [Sicilian triptych] was published in Poland in Ernst's translation.<sup>14</sup>

In 1985, Zofia Ernst received an award from the Polish Society of Authors and Composers for her translation activity and in 1991, the Italian Cultural Institute distinguished her with the Canaletto Prize (Mikołajewski 1994). In 1993, Zofia Ernst was congratulated by the Polish Minister of Culture and Art for her translation activity, introducing Polish readers to the works of such authors as Alberto Moravia, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Italo Svevo.

In 1993, Jan Ernst passed away and a year later, on 3 August, Zofia followed her husband. In 2016, the jury of the Leopold Staff Literary Award at Antich' Caffé honoured Zofia Ernst with their "In Memoriam" Award.<sup>15</sup>

Zofia Ernst introduced Polish readers to over fifty literary works by, most notably, Alberto Moravia, Italo Svevo, Giovanni Verga, Vitalino Brancati, Federigo Tozzi, Giuseppe Marotta, Guido Piovene and Leonardo Scascia. She did not forget about children and teenagers, translating books by Gianni Rodari, Giovanni Mosca, Baccio Maria Bacci and Marcello Argilli. Her favourite novel was *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa: this was apparently the only translation she was genuinely proud of.<sup>16</sup> She also translated stage plays, for instance by Dario Fo, Gian Paolo Callegari and Aldo Nicolaj. She translated from Polish into Italian Karol Wojtyła's play *Brat naszego Boga* [Our God's brother] (Ioannes Paulus 1982), published in Italy in 1982. The passing of time and the passing of her husband prevented Ernst from completing the translation of *I viceré* [The viceroys] by

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<sup>14</sup> The author of the article received this testimony in the form of a typed statement in May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> The nominees for this prize must be late authors writing about Italy or translators of Italian literature.

<sup>16</sup> Tomaso di Lampedusa, *Lampart*, trans. Zofia Ernst, Warszawa: PIW 1961. The book had a number of reprints (1963, 1967, 1970) and subsequent editions with other publishers: 1988 – KiW, 1993 – Dolnośląskie, 2001 and 2002 – Muza.

Federico De Roberto—the unfinished manuscript remained in the flat at 53 Mokotowska Street.

Compiling Zofia Ernst's biography, I kept thinking about the specific time period which provided the background for her life's story. Her youth took place in the interwar period. A well-rounded education and command of foreign languages determined her future. After World War II, Ernst started translating, approaching her new occupation with zest and passion. She was excellently informed regarding the main line of Poland's post-war reconstruction and she maintained consistent efforts to establish links with the officials in charge of making crucial cultural decisions; she also significantly contributed to developing ties between Poland and Italy (for instance through her contacts with Iwaszkiewicz and Kabac).

Her professional activity in 1953–1979 was based in Warsaw; nevertheless, her translations connected her also with many other cities in Poland and Italy, where she would establish friendships, promote Italian culture and develop international connections. She was an energetic person, deeply committed to promoting culture, and often drew inspiration for her translation work from social ties with distinguished Polish writers.

Her translations played a big role in the market of Polish translations of Italian literature. She had a passion for literary masterpieces and sometimes personally selected new books to work on. It is thanks to her efforts that Polish readers could access Moravia, Svevo and Tozzi. She campaigned among publishers to introduce authors such as Sciascia, Morante and Piovene. She delivered new texts with ardour, each time demonstrating that “no work of art, not even the smallest one, is ever born of indifference” (Ciechanowicz 1992).

She was bright and inquisitive, with a keen eye for irony, but also full of warmth, which allowed her to take care of her home and family in the difficult post-war years. She fascinated people – especially men – owing to her personal charm and intelligence. Among her acquaintances, she liked especially Iwaszkiewicz and Professor Mieczysław Brahmer, with whom she communicated frequently.<sup>17</sup> Towards the end of her life, she often spoke of Brzechwa, Ludwik Perski, Artur Międzyrzecki and many others she used to meet at PEN Club or Polish Writers' Union events.

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<sup>17</sup> This is Zofia Ernst's daughter-in-law Maria Ernst's memory of her mother-in-law. Based on a phone interview conducted on 1 September 2017.

Zofia Ernst made a major contribution to the development of the relations between Poland and Italy and her translations played a significant role in forging durable cultural connections between the two nations.

Translated by Aleksandra Kamińska

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