

**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.