***László Kúnos***

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Literary translator, editor, university tutor and director of a publishing company

Translates from English, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish

* Graduated from Eötvös Loránd University in English, Hungarian and Scandinavian Studies
* Worked for 15 years at the Department of English Studies at ELTE University; he still has two about English architecture there
* Secretary of the Hungarian PEN Club between 1982-1993
* Director of Corvina Kiadó publishing company
* Prizes: Wessely László Prize (1989); Forintos Prize (1996); Hieronymus Prize (2005), József Attila Prize (2007)

I first encountered the work of László Kúnos, when I read Jonas Jonasson’s book titled *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* in Hungarian in 2011. I really liked the translation and I decided to look into the original Swedish and the translated English version. That was when I realised how good the Hungarian translation was, how precise, but still a very amusing text to read. So, I started to be intrigued by the translator, whose translation I really liked. “Who is he? Does he speak Swedish? What is his relation to the Scandinavian languages?” I tried to look up these pieces of information but I could find them nowhere. Therefore, when we got a project that we should create a professional profile, I thought of him immediately. “It is time for me to get answers to my questions.” I visited him in his office at Corvina Kiadó and spent an hour with an interesting conversation. He is a very busy man; he was called on the phone twice during the interview. But who is he and furthermore, what is his relation to Scandinavian languages?

He studied English and Hungarian at ELTE but he was not satisfied with what was going on at the Hungarian Department and still had some unsatisfied curiosity in himself. That was the time when he started a Norwegian language course and was captured by the language and culture so that these still have a hold on him. At the same time, these awoke in him a sense of curiosity and a sense for adventure. This was the time of the foundation of the Scandinavian Department, so he studied Norwegian from his third year. A second Scandinavian language was compulsory at the department, so he got to know Swedish and Danish as well.

He wanted to start translating very early and at that time it was common that translators applied to publishing companies and offered their services. He received good feedback from the proof-readers and got more and more work because by knowing three Scandinavian languages he became important. And then he was asked to translate a Danish short story for an anthology. But his career started when in 1974 two Swedish writers received the Nobel Prize. Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson. The Európa Kiadó wanted immediately to publish something from either author and he was offered to translate Johnson’s book, which later became known in Hungarian as *Rózsák és lángok*. It took him nearly one year to translate it but despite working so long on it, he got good feedback from both his editor and the publisher. He learned a lot from the corrected text as well. Then came a book by Martinson and his career began but besides translating, he still worked at the English Department at ELTE university. Since then he has always had something to work on.

The easiest language for him is Norwegian because he received formal education in that language and as a student he had an opportunity to study the language in Norway. However, 70 percent of his work is translated from Swedish and the rest is half Danish, half Norwegian. Classics take out the biggest part of it. There is a considerable amount of Ibsen translations from Norwegian. At first, Swedish was problematic for him because he had learnt it without any help. Sara Lidman’s book titled *Gruva* was a great challenge for him. He had to look up almost every word in the dictionary and dialects made his work even more difficult That was the point when he realised that it is not enough just to learn a language. There were occasions when the editor informed him about the differences between Norwegian and Swedish.

Literary translation at that time was a highly-acknowledged profession and he thought that it was a really serious work. He did not have the creativity to write down his own thoughts but he wanted to write, so choosing literary translation was an obvious decision. He believes that he creates something valuable when translating. At first, he was unsure but his thesis was quite a step towards literary translation. He wrote about a Danish-Norwegian playwright, Ludvig Holberg and his literary reception; how his work got to Hungary. He compared an early Hungarian translation of one of his plays with the Danish original and the German translation. However, Holberg’s play *Jeppe* was not translated, so he did that just for fun and won a prize at an anonymous university competition. He believes that it is not enough just to study literary translation but translators have to encounter the group of experts that can judge the work, i.e. the editors and writers. “In order to be part of the guild, you have to be accepted by the masters of the guild and that is not easy.”

“Micro happenings” and tiny feedback from great writers helped him on his way. Iván Mándy’s gesture, when he held up his hand and showed a sign of OK meaning that the translation of Kúnos was great, means a lot to him. The other one is the question of Péter Esterházy related to a short story by Ronald Suckenick translated by László Kúnos. It became clear then that Esterházy borrowed a word, created by the translator, from the short story.

He liked to translate Ingmar Bergman the most. Bergman wrote five important novels and all of them are translated by László Kúnos. He liked these moments when he could spend the time together with a great author. He is lucky because he has always got quality pieces to translate, so there was not any work he did not like. However, *Vägen till Klockrike* by Harry Martinson and the recent book of Per Olov Enquist proved to be difficult for him because these were written in a style different from the usual. There are two or three plays by Ibsen that he would like to translate but he has not had the opportunity yet.

He thinks that it is good to re-translate works, especially plays. In his opinion, novel translations do not become obsolete fast but there are books written in a certain register that need re-translation. The re-translation of plays is justified, according to him. It was always the theatre that ordered the re-translation in his case. He translated many plays of Ibsen and Strindberg. In the theatre, everything has to be clear to the audience and it should not be too much. “Here, this was an exciting challenge. To find the minimum that has everything in it and still it is clear.”

He follows other translators’ work. In his words, he has a filter in his head and if nothing gets caught on it, he finishes the book satisfied. There were occasions when he abandoned a book because of the poor quality of translation.

His ideals of the older generation are Klára Szőllősy and Zsuzsa Rab. He encountered Zsuzsa Rab’s work first when he was asked to re-translate Andersen’s fairy tales. That was the point when he realised that these translations are not only precise (from German!) but also masterpieces. Therefore, he advised the publisher not to re-translate them. Later he had an opportunity to translate Andersen which caused him great pleasure. He mentions his friends and colleagues from his contemporaries, such as István Bart, Ádám Nádasdy and István Géher.

“It feels good to be among them.”

He believes that it is important not only to be educated but also to be well-read in this profession. First and foremost, Hungarian literature. It is important to have a knowledge of literature, to know the traditions of style and to integrate them into one’s work. These are inspirational sources. On translating his first book by Johnson, when there was no inspiration, he sat down to read Péter Pázmány, who was a big cultivator of the Hungarian language. “Reading a good text turns on something in ourselves.” He realised only when he translated the books of Jonas Jonasson that this literary genre full of humour had been unknown in Scandinavia. He advised the English translator of the Swedish book not to suffer and open the English translation of *Svejk*.

So, this is the connection between László Kúnos and Scandinavia. I think that he is a very kind and knowledgeable man. I am very glad to have met him.

Some of his translations:

* Eyvind Johnson: Rózsák és lángok (novel) Európa, 1976; Corvina 2000
* Harry Martinson: Messzi volt Klockrike (novel) Magvető, 1977
* Ingmar Bergman: Rítus, Szenvedély, Színről színre in: Színről színre Európa, 1979
* August Strindberg: Álomjáték (play) Európa, 1980
* Ingmar Bergman: Fanny és Alexander (film novel) Európa, 1985
* Henrik Ibsen: A vadkacsa (play) Szolnoki Szigligeti Színház, 1991
* Henrik Ibsen: Hedda Gabler (play) Debreceni Csokonai Színház, 1994; József Attila Színház, 1996; Katona József Színház, 2002
* August Strindberg: Haláltánc (play) Budapesti Kamaraszínház, 1996
* Ludvig Holberg: Jeppe (play) Csiky Gergely Színház, Kaposvár, 1999
* Per Olov Enquist: Az udvari orvos látogatása (novel), Európa, 2001
* Caryl Churchill: Kék szív (play), in: Drámák, Európa, 2007

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