



Why I Translate

Ros Schwartz

TRANSLATION IS MY HOMELAND. I've done it all my life, at first unconsciously, and later consciously.

My refugee grandparents, respectively from Hungary, Russia, Austria and Poland, spoke only Yiddish, their one shared language. My father and mother, first-generation English-born and determined to assimilate, quickly shed their parents' language, but I absorbed its cadences and sounds. Avid readers and Europhiles, my parents instilled in me a love of the French language, literature, music, food and wine that became a lifelong passion. Unusually for nineteen-fifties England, the songs I heard in my cradle were those of Edith Piaf and Yves Montand. My parents taught me 'Au Clair de la Lune' before I knew my ABC. When they wanted to have a private conversation, they'd speak in French, so I made it my business to decipher and master that language very quickly. Family holidays were spent in Italy, and we'd drive through France, Germany and Switzerland in our old Austin Standard 9. I lapped up the languages I heard around me, thrilling to the musicality of Italian and French and making linguistic connections.

As a teenager, I had a Saturday job at a hair salon in London's Soho. The stylists, all from northern Italy, would sit complaining about their husbands in their dialect. My sixteen-year-old ears were constantly pricked. Many of the customers were prostitutes; they'd come into the salon in pairs, and, while their hair was being shampooed, exchange news in a secret code that I could never *quite* fathom. In short, I spent my early years eavesdropping.



I embarked on a French degree. But I wasn't cut out for academia, and the University of Kent and I parted company. I ran away to Paris, aided and abetted by my tutor, David Bradby, who secured me my first job as an assistante in a Paris Lycée. I spent eight years in France, doing a variety of odd (and I mean odd!) jobs. During that time I immersed myself in every aspect of French life, from enrolling at the radical university of Vincennes to picking grapes in Provence and working on a goat farm in the Ardèche, unaware that this was the ideal training for a literary translator. My Paris friends assiduously taught me the *argot* of Belleville and the poetry of Verlaine.

Back in England in the early eighties, I discovered that I was unemployable. Speaking fluent French, as well as Italian and Spanish, picked up along the way, wasn't considered a valuable workplace skill. So I launched myself as a translator.

Publisher Pete Ayrton, then of Pluto Press, gave me my first commission, and slowly I built up a portfolio. I have now translated over a hundred books. Each one presents a fresh challenge, and I learn something new every day. I'm driven by the desire to share the work of writers I admire with an English-speaking readership. I love my work and plan to continue as long as I am mentally and physically able to do so.