

## PETER SKRZYNECKI'S LITERARY CHARACTERS SPEAK POLISH

My connection with Peter Skrzynecki's poetry began one Saturday afternoon, in 1975. Having arrived from Poland only a couple years earlier, now happy parents of a toddler and a very young baby, my husband and I didn't have much free time for entertainment. We would often take the pram and the stroller for a walk in the city and Hyde Park. Visiting bookshops which, unlike other stores, were open longer, was always an exciting event.

During one of such outing, we noticed a familiar name on the shelf of poetry collections. Peter Skrzynecki! Yes, of course we knew him. Piotr Skrzynecki was a leading cabaret singer and entertainer in Krakow, the city where we were from. We knew he composed and published lyrics, but the fact that his texts were published here, in English? This was fascinating. As the babies had woken up and were getting restless, we quickly paid for two copies of the blue-covered 'Immigrant Chronicle' and headed home.

We began reading our books straight away, on the train. Alas, this was not 'our' Piotr Skrzynecki, but a different, Australian, one. Nevertheless, this Peter Skrzynecki sounded very interesting. After tucking the children into bed we spent almost all night reading. The book was new, yet from the perspective of culture, incredibly familiar. It was about people we had met here and talked to.

The next day was a Sunday and we showed the books to some friends, who had gathered in front of St Vincent's Church in Ashfield, after the midday Polish Mass. The younger people grabbed it straight away, giving us the money for the books. The older generation looked at it saying, pity, it's not in Polish... We brought more copies of the 'Immigrant Chronicle' the following Sunday..

Pity, it isn't in Polish – the words rang in my ears...

Several years went by. A full-time job at Newtown High School, two more babies filling the spacious house that needed to be paid off – and my love of literature had to be placed on the back burner. Almost 12 years later, in 1987, we were invited to the book launch of Peter Skrzynecki's collection of short stories –'Wild Dogs'. From the extracts the author read, once again many familiar incidents emerged. Stories similar to those the rapidly-aging generation of post-war migrants had shared with us. I could only imagine how they would love to see stories so pertinent to their own lives written in Polish. That night, at the book launch at St Patrick's College at Strathfield, I sheepishly approached Peter Skrzynecki asking if he would have any objections towards my translating the book. He was thrilled... 'I'd love my characters to speak Polish. This is how they've been communicating'.

Marianna Lacek

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Translation was done! The book 'Wild Dogs' has been printed in Kraków, bringing some very positive literary reviews.

Sydney's book launching was going to be held at the Polish Consulate. The night before the event, we were having dinner at my place. From Poland arrived professor Faron, the literary executive of 'Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne' which published 'Bezdomne Psy'. Peter Skrzynecki presented an impromptu poem, composed on the spot: 'Translated to Polish'. While the guests engaged in conversation over after-dinner coffee, I sat down at the computer and translated the poem. The literary critic, professor Faron read the first draft of translation carefully. He made a couple of minor suggestions and the poem was ready to be published. Without any exaggeration, that was probably the fastest possible thought-to-critical review-via translation process for a poem.

Here is the original poem:

I wonder what my parents  
would say knowing  
my poems and short stories  
are being translated  
and published in Poland –  
back to the language  
I grew up with  
before I learned to speak  
and write in English.

#### NIEZAPOMNIANE SPOTKANIE

Though I've lived  
in Australia for fifty-five years  
I sometimes still feel  
out of place – having  
become the traveller  
who does not want to return  
after he makes a trip to Europe.

Looking at the translated works  
it's impossible  
not to see the irony –  
knowing that Polish  
is the language I'm quickly forgetting  
since both parents have died,  
finding myself  
more and more of a stranger  
of Polish nouns and verbs  
every time I have  
to use them correctly.

One part of me says  
it's terrific  
about the translated works.  
Another part asks,  
'Does it really matter?'  
Goes on to ask more questions  
about identity and fate  
and why my life  
ended in Australia.  
I think of my birth  
at the end of World War II  
and snippets of history from it  
enter my head  
as if they had a hidden agenda:  
Dresden, Warsaw, Stalingrad,  
the fall of Berlin –  
the railway tracks leading  
to a Nazi death- camp in Poland  
over whose gates  
the sign read, *Arbeit Macht Frei*.  
'Now there is an irony,'  
The first voice says, 'Thank  
your lucky stars  
your parents took you on a railway journey  
that lead to the ship  
that sailed to Australia.  
Listen to the stories  
and poems translated into Polish.  
You will hear  
the voices of your parents.

*Peter Skrzynecki*