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100 years/100books: a celebration of the Czech-Norwegian diplomatic relations

Adéla Ficová

Abstract

Norwegian-Czech diplomatic relations were celebrating 100 years in 2021. On this occasion, the exhibition 100 Years/100 Books which presented the history of Czech translations of Norwegian literature was organized in the Moravian Library, Brno. The report concerns with the exhibition vernissage, the anniversary, as well as another exhibition focused on the historical events of Czech-Norwegian diplomatic relations.

Key words

Norwegian literature; Czech translations; diplomatic relations

In 2021, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Norway, an exhibition about Norwegian literature in Czech translations was held. The exhibition entitled *100 Years/100Books: Hundred Norwegian Books in Czech Translations* was organized by the Department of German, Scandinavian and Netherland Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno, in cooperation with the Moravian Library, under the auspices of the Embassy of the Norway in Prague.

The exhibition could be seen in the Moravian Library since 9 November 2021 when the preview took place. The event was opened by speeches of Robert Kvile, the Norwegian ambassador to the Czech Republic, Margit Walsø, Director of the Center for Norwegian Literature Abroad (NORLA), and Martin Bareš, Rector of the Masaryk University. There were many Czech and foreign guests who had also the opportunity to listen to the Hardanger fiddle which is considered to be a Norwegian national instrument. After the preview, a meeting between the representatives of NORLA and the Moravian Library, which enabled the experience exchange, took place. The NORLA representatives also met agents of Czech publishing houses that have recently published Norwegian literature.

The exhibition commemorated 100 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, representing the history of translations of Norwegian literature into Czech. The exhibition texts were written by doc. PhDr. Miluše Juříčková, CSc. and her PhD student, Mgr. et Mgr. Adéla Ficová. The visualization of the exhibition was carried out by Bedřich Vémola, while Mgr. Martina Šmídtová took care of the exhibition's production. The exhibition was extended until 21 January 2022.

Not only authors of the world literary canon such as Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Knut Hamsun and Sigrid Undset were represented. The exhibition also paid tribute to Czech translators, thanks to whom Czech readers can keep in touch with the Norwegian literary scene, and publishing houses that have consistently devoted their work to Scandinavian literature. The translated titles were presented both on panels, accompanied by educative texts, and in showcases. There was also a readers' corner where visitors could sit down, browse some of the books and read.

The exhibition offered an overview of the most important Norwegian literature that has been published in Czech language so far. Many Czech readers might think that detective stories are the main literary genre translated from Norwegian; however, even though this genre has been strongly presented especially in the recent years, it does not represent the main the Norwegian (and Scandinavian) literature as a whole. There are many other important genres, and the exhibition's aim was to give evidence of the transcultural transfer.

Although the Czech audience has had access to Norwegian literature for more than hundred years, the interest in Norwegian books grew even more after the diplomatic relations between the two countries were established. The diplomatic documents for the first Czechoslovak envoy to the Kingdom of Norway were signed in January 1921. The last hundred years, which were the subject of the book exhibition, had three peaks of translation and publishing activity: the 1930s, especially in the wake of Sigrid Undset's Nobel Prize (1929); the period before the communist coup in 1948; and finally the present, when we can witness the diversity of genres published, from the already mentioned

detective fiction (Jo Nesbø), poetry (Jan Erik Vold) and plays (Jon Fosse) to popular science literature (Thomas Hylland Eriksen).

At the exhibition, visitors could have seen a timeline representing the volume of Norwegian titles translated into Czech. Despite some serious setbacks during the communist era, especially in the 1950s, the number of Norwegian books translated to Czech has been growing year by year, especially after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and in the recent years. Nevertheless, the exhibition was not arranged chronologically, but presented topics and areas shaping the Czech readers' understanding of Norwegian literature.

The exhibition focused, for example, on Norwegian drama. Henrik Ibsen's work has been translated, published and adapted into Czech several times and we can surely look forward to more interpretations. Another presented playwright was Jon Fosse, who is sometimes referred to as a new era Ibsen; however, he is famous also for his prose. The panel texts also covered the Nobel Prize winners in literature – Knut Hamsun, a very popular but also controversial author, and Sigrid Undset – and writers who are less known today.

Importantly, the exhibition drew attention to the driving forces of the cultural exchange – Czech publishing houses and Czech translators. In the interwar period, books by Scandinavian authors were published by Topič's publishing house (in the edition entitled *Bílé knihy/White Books*), Ladislav Kuncíř, Vyšehrad publishing house, and SNKL/Odeon publishing house (in the *Růžice/Compass* and *Světová literatura/World Literature* editions). After the Velvet Revolution, private publishers such as Pistorius & Olšanská, Kalich, Baobab, Kniha Zlín, Host, Argo, and Brno-based Doplněk have published Scandinavian literature.

The cultural transfer is also mediated by the personality of translator. In that regard, we should mention Hugo Kosterka and Milada Lesná-Krausová. Jarka Vrbová is currently the most productive translator of Norwegian literature in the Czech Republic. All translators from Norwegian are supported by NORLA. Norwegian Literature Abroad has provided financial support for Norwegian books published in the Czech Republic since 1989 and it has certainly had an important impact on the ongoing cultural transfer.

When it comes to Norwegian literature, one should not omit non-fiction. Books by polar explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen and travel books by Helge Ingstad and Thor Heyerdal became very popular especially in the communist Czechoslovakia. These days, Norwegian non-fiction literature is represented by, for example, Thomas Hylland Eriksen.

Last but not least, Norwegian literature in Czech translations is associated with children's books. Norwegian folk tales have been published in various editions. Children's and young adult literature has found a long-lasting resonance with Czech readers. Let us mention the books by Jostein Gaarder (*Sophie's World*, *The Solitaire Mystery* or *The Christmas Mystery*). Serious topics are also characteristic of Maja Lunde's work; her book *The Snow Sister* deals with grief after the loss of a loved one.

The exhibition documented the rich tradition Norwegian literature in the Czech environment. Its content drew on the extensive holdings of the Moravian Library and presented literature across a wide range of genres.

The exposition was accompanied by another exhibition on the historical events of Czech-Norwegian diplomatic relations – *100 years of Czech-Norwegian diplomatic relations*. The ten panels were created by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Prague. They presented a summary of the greatest successes, as well as a few unfortunate incidents that took place during the century-long bilateral relationship between Czechoslovakia/Czechia and Norway. The exhibition also documented the contacts between the two countries by decade with texts, photographs, and graphs of the mutual trade of goods. The Norwegian Embassy has also published a booklet about the anniversary. The Faculty of Arts plans to publish a brochure about the anniversary and exhibition as well.

The relationship between Norway and Czechia has been developed not only through a rich array of translations, but also through a number of scientific and bilateral cultural projects. Thus, we can look forward to more interesting projects (and exhibitions) in the future; currently the exhibition *Noráci* about Czech men who were sent to forced labor to Norway during World War II is taking place in Jirí Mahen Library in Brno. The Department of German, Scandinavian and Netherland Studies at the Faculty of Arts has played an important role in strengthening the relations between our two countries and it will surely continue to do so.

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