

Welcome to Miriam Frank, a new member of the Association. Perhaps her account will inspire other members to write about their translating experiences. Miriam's first translation, *The Man Who Came to a Village* by Héctor Tizón, was published by Quartet Books in May.

BRIDGING ACAPANZINGO AND CHRISTCHURCH

by Miriam Frank

My childhood was spent in three continents, Europe, America (the Latin part) and Australasia, where I attended nine different schools and was obliged to learn and relearn languages four times by the age of 12. I took a degree in medicine and a postgraduate Fellowship in anaesthesia, and became a senior lecturer in a London teaching hospital. Medicine satisfied my curiosity about the workings of the human body and mind, and my desire to assist fellow humans in lessening their mental and physical pains and returning them to health. But I always felt, in addition, an urge to express something much more subjective. I started to paint but after marrying my teacher, an artist for whose work I felt a deep appreciation, I decided to concentrate on medicine and our two growing daughters.

I noted with a certain interest that in my profession my function was to use a considerable expertise to enable the surgeon to do his work, while at home my energies were focussed on assisting my husband to produce and exhibit *his* work. In both cases I was taking a "secondary" role, albeit an essential or important one, to the surgeon and the painter for the benefit of others. More recently, as a translator, I recognised the analogy yet again, this time in my role in relation to the author and potential English readers. But I shall return to this later.

Following a lecturing visit to Buenos Aires, while the other Congress participants were preparing to go to Bariloche, "the Switzerland of Argentina", according to all the brochures, I decided to explore the remote Andean region in the Northwest bordering on Bolivia and Chile, known as Jujuy. The landscape, people and atmosphere of that place made a great impact on me. On my return to London I sought further reading about that area, and the Anglo-Argentine journalist, Andrew Graham-Yooll, lent me some books by an author from Jujuy, his friend Héctor Tizón. I turned to the first page and I was bewitched by the sheer strength of the words I read. They were as stark as the landscape.

Aquí la tierra es dura y estéril; el cielo está más cerca que en ninguna otra parte y es azul y vacío. No llueve, pero cuando el cielo ruge su voz es aterradora, implacable, colérica . . .

Here the earth is hard and barren. The sky is nearer than it is anywhere else and is blue and empty. It does not rain, but when the sky roars its voice is terrifying, wrathful, implacable . . .

I took the book home and settled down to read it. However, I soon found out that the language was very difficult, not

Bridging Acapanzingo and Christchurch

only were there many words I didn't understand, and could not find in the dictionary, of Quechua origin or archaic Spanish, but many of the concepts and images were expressed in a strikingly unusual style. Even so, I sensed revelations in Tizón's writing which I was determined to understand, and I suddenly realised that the process of translating it into English would help me to gain those insights. And so I sat in front of my computer and painstakingly proceeded to unravel each sentence, digest it, feel its life and rhythms and to re-create it in English. Not only was the surprising and powerful language of Tizón opening up a new world, but it was also putting me in touch with an old buried world inside me from which I had been wrenched at the age of 12 leaving me in some confusion: my life in the small primitive village of Acapanzingo on the outskirts of Cuernavaca in Mexico, which had been abruptly changed for that of Christchurch, New Zealand. I became aware of our amazingly personal relationship with language and its emotional overtones, I realized the resentment I had felt for so many years towards the English language which in New Zealand, where I first started to use it, had represented a forceful repression of all the enthusiasm, excitement and love of life which I had experienced in Mexico and expressed in *Spanish*. My translation of Tizón became a vital bridge between those two languages and between my life in Aca-

panzingo and Christchurch. It brought about a full reconciliation between myself and *English*, which I came to love and appreciate and, in addition, to enjoy the exercise of its manipulation: the wonderment of examining each word, phrase and concept, the search for clarity and precision in the face of the shifting associations and meanings of words which appeared dependent on experience, mood, and who knows what other unknown factors! The more I realised the ephemeral quality of words, the greater was my need for precision. The process was like treading on quicksand looking for an anchor. And it was revealing and fascinating.

In the correspondence that ensued between the author and myself, we frequently exchanged our thoughts on translation. He described how the translation of a literary novel involved not only the entire rewriting of the work but also, and more importantly, its *recreation*. He explained the process of interpretation, a special communion between author and translator in which one merges with and complements the other, to help one another to be *clear*.

The world that rises out of Tizón's pages is a world of sensations, reaching back to their very essence, as though everything is being experienced for the first time. Each idea on the page is a surprise, a discovery, and develops in the way our own perceptions of the world around us develop if we try to analyse this phenomenon. We are accustomed

more commonly to process our incoming perceptions into an orderly arrangement which fits our preconceptions, to force them into a system we have already created and decided we believe in and gives us the ‘meaning’ we are looking for. Tizón dispenses with this. Instead, we are left hanging without the familiar props, in an uncertain, ambiguous, mysterious world. Having been trained in my profession to think scientifically and to write descriptions of research work with the discipline of logic and consistency, I found in Tizón’s writing what appears at first sight to be the antithesis of that ordered world. And yet on closer examination I saw that —

on the contrary — it states it even more clearly, from a different angle. In the process of my translation, I learnt to face and accept the doubts and ambivalence of life and our immediate world, to recognize the gaps, be aware of the unknown and the unexplained, and to undo our automatic need to classify, organise and correct the world. Paradoxically, through Tizón’s *fantasy*, I was getting closer to ‘reality’ . . . whatever that is.

The sense of novelty conveyed by Tizón makes use of language we are unaccustomed to and a total absence of the cliché.

El vuelo de un pajarraco tiñó de sombra por un segundo la luz difusa de la ventana y esa sombra se le pintó en la cara como un claro pensamiento.

The flight of a large bird momentarily blotted with its shadow the diffuse light from the window, and the shadow was imprinted on his face like a clear thought.

Por momentos semejaba que el viento corría a sus anchas como si no hubiese paredes y hasta creyó ver unas aves en el cielo, en ese cielo de piedra de donde a veces alguna se desprendía, para caer como un pétalo pesado.

At odd moments the wind seemed to be blowing about at will as though there were no walls, he even thought he saw some birds in the sky, in that sky of stone where occasionally a piece broke away to fall like a heavy petal.

Tizón’s peculiar idiom which arises from his particular vision and poetry forms an essential part of the ambience evoked in his writing, and it seemed essential to express that strangeness in English. This demanded a knife-edge balance

between an easy, flowing English and Tizón’s unique language: it was necessary to capture one without sacrificing the other. A commonly expressed view regarding translation suggests that in the face of difficulty in reconciling the au-

Bridging Acapantzingo and Christchurch

thor's meaning with native English, the scales ought to be tipped towards the latter, the translator's professional reputation being given perhaps greater importance than the work he or she is translating. However, the stipulation that every foreign work should read in English as though it had been conceived in this language begs a number of questions. Should we aspire to narrow down concepts and descriptions which have evolved from a non-English way of thinking and feeling, to the strict boundaries of our own familiar idiom? In *vj g* case of Tizón's writing, the evocation of a world so distinct and removed from anything English would be badly served by introducing an English ambience as a result of a vernacular translation. Moreover, the English language is rich enough and diverse enough to absorb deviations from its familiar forms, and to work within the limitations of commonly used language pat-

terns would mean to give up the fascinating challenge of that language's infinite creative possibilities and, as a result, the enrichment of our experience and understanding.

To convey the world in Tizón's writing, as well as the meaning, it was important to capture the *rhythms* of the narrative, which in certain instances may give frothiness to a serious statement, or impart a subtle sense of tongue-in-cheek, insouciance, or gentle ridicule of the concept being described, rather in the way that intonation may add the final touch to meaning in the spoken language. Even the sights and smells Tizón so vividly spreads in front of us are accentuated by the rhythms and sounds used to describe them. The English rendering of his writing had to make use of comparable effects to convey the atmosphere experienced when reading Tizón.

Nuevamente llovía, pero el agua golpeaba solo un pedazo del techo de la cocina. De ahí llegaban murmullos, rumores de líquidos hirviendo, aromas dulzones de pailas que derramaban, crepitares lentos, perezosos; tintineos, picar de cuchillos sobre tablas de cortar cebolla fina. De pronto un hondo, helado silbido y un golpe de batiente de ventanal.

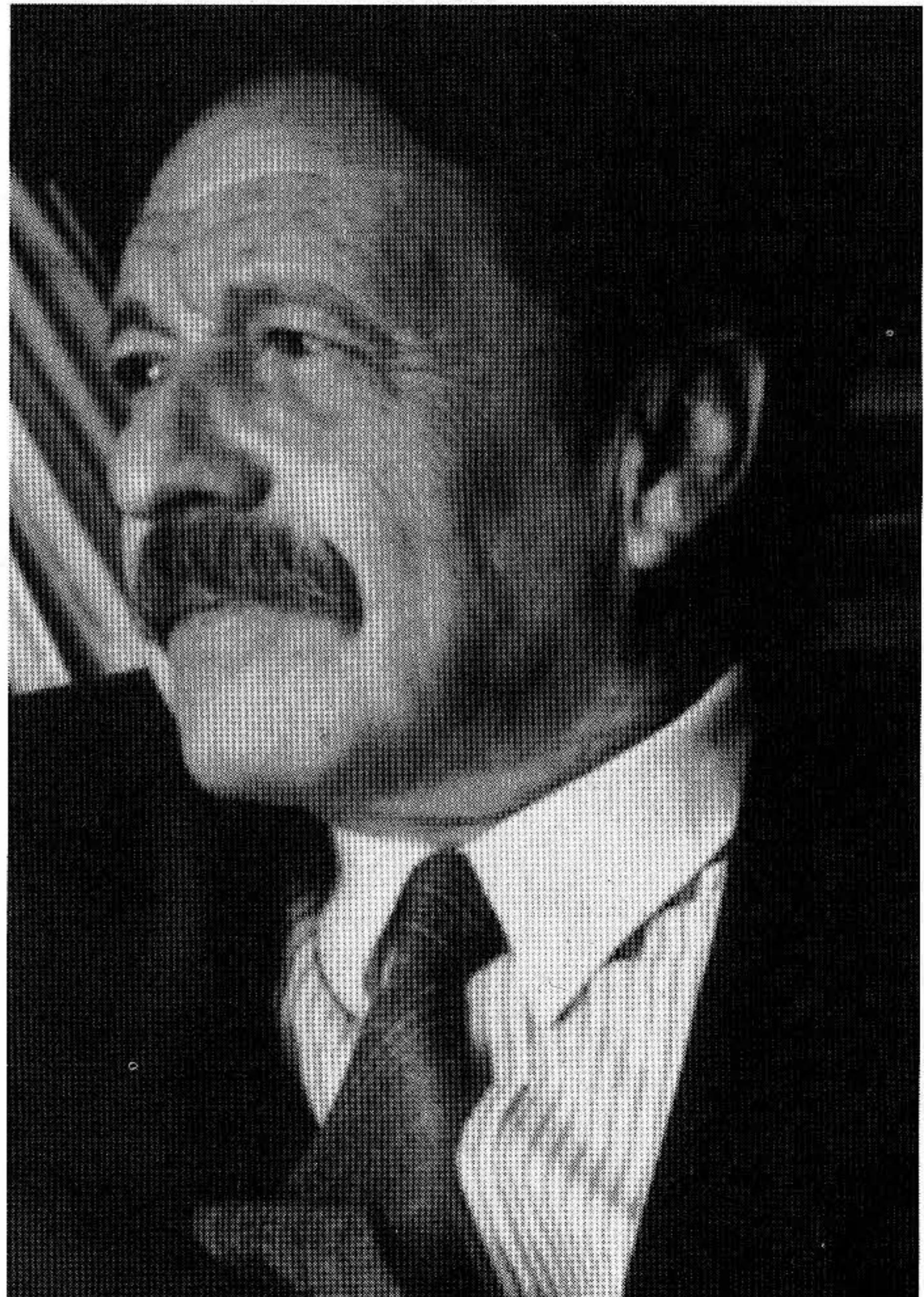
It was raining again, but the water was hitting only part of the roof of the kitchen. Murmuring from there drifted towards them, sounds of boiling liquids, sweet aromas from overflowing frying pans, slow and lazy crackles, clinking and clanging, knives chopping on boards finely slicing onions. Suddenly a low icy whistle and the slamming of a window casement.

... vió que el campanero, como un viejo murciélagos arrugado, se columpiaba del trenzado de tientos del bájano. Parecía soñar, adormecido por la vibración y el ruido, percusión y eco, que rompiendo desde el seno del campanario que hacia de tornavoz, se expandía sobre el paramo.

... he saw the bell-ringer, like an old wrinkled bat, swinging from the clapper's leather-thonged braid: he seemed to be dreaming, lulled by the vibration and the noise, the percussion and the echo, which bursting forth from the depths of the belfry that acted as a soundboard, were spreading out across the empty plains.

Having devoted a large part of this discussion to that which is different and exotic about Tizón's vivid descriptions of life in that high Andean plateau, known as the *puna*, I feel obliged to state that perhaps the most important revelation to be derived from his writing is the universal ordinariness of man here too. There are Shylocks and Hamlets in the *puna* too, as he tells us. Although there is nothing new in this insight, Tizón presents his observations with the freshness and subtlety already alluded to, giving us a sense of rediscovery, a new confirmation seen from another angle of what we hopefully already knew.

The translation of Tizón's works has added an entirely new insight into my already rich world. It has revolutionised my relationship with language, and thus with myself. It has clarified my own ideas and opened the doors to a greater communication. And it has led me — as well as acting as a vehicle to pass on the ideas of others — to my own writing.



'I am bothered by the fact that you are still unavailable in the English language ... it is and always has been my opinion that your fiction is remarkable'

Ariel Dorfman (in a letter to Héctor Tizón)