Chaos in Esperanto-Land

Echoes of the Holocaust*

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The Holocaust had a profound effect on the Esperanto movement. Many of the leading members of the Esperanto language community perished, and some survived. Recent years have seen a revival of interest in those who died and those who lived. Among the dead were most of the family of L. L. Zamenhof, author of Esperanto. Among the survivors was the father of the financier George Soros, Tivadar Soros, whose memoir of survival in Nazi-occupied Budapest, written originally in Esperanto and published in 1965, was published in English translation in the year 2000. An important player in the effort to protect the Jews of Budapest was the Esperantist Valdemar Langlet, of Sweden, whose memoir of his experiences was adapted and published, first in Swedish, then in Esperanto, by Nina Langlet, his widow. In 2003, Zofia Banet-Fornalowa published a memorial volume for six Esperantist victims of the Holocaust. Among other relatively recent Holocaust-related books in Esperanto are a translation of Imre Kértesz's novel *Fateless* and a biography of Tilla Durieux.

Keywords: Holocaust, Esperanto, Hungary, Tivadar Soros, Valdemar Langlet, Tilla Durieux, Imre Kertész

To this day, the Esperanto movement is haunted by the catastrophe of the Holocaust. In 1959, as a young Esperanto enthusiast, I made my first pilgrimage to the grave of L. L. Zamenhof (1859–1917), the author of Esperanto, in the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, and to the city of his birth, Białystok. Particularly in Białystok, I was aware not only of the normal passing of time since the era of Esperanto's founder, but also of the violent passing of one huge element in its cultural mix, indeed of the cultural confluence of Poland. Recently, visiting the once primarily Jewish village of Tykocin, near Białystok, I had the impression that the village was somehow caught in amber, providing a largely disembodied glimpse of what once was there — a sentiment made the stronger by the presence in the village of a Jewish museum in what was formerly the synagogue. Over the years I have visited Poland many times, either for professional reasons or as a tourist. The sense

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of a limb amputated from its history, the phantom pain accompanying it, seems evident at every street corner, every field and forest, in this country so rich in history. The past accuses us in the ancient walls, the street names, the overgrown graveyards. Of course Jews disappeared from other countries of Central Europe, particularly from Germany itself, but the ambiguities of the past have somehow endured longer in the gradually reconstructed Poland, partly because of the sheer size of the pre-war Jewish population, as compared with, say, Romania or Hungary. When, in 2009, the World Congress of Esperanto took place in Białystok, this absence was once again made manifest, in part because of the commendable efforts of the local authorities to address the history of the city's Jewish population and the Jewish contribution to Białystok, including the opening of a new Zamenhof Center with a permanent exhibition on the topic and a library.[1]

The Esperanto movement itself is a kind of Poland: memories of the Jewish connection are apparent at every turn in its history — not just the almost completely vanished Zamenhof family, murdered in Treblinka, but the disappearance of a generation of Esperantist pioneers.[2] Hitler was not entirely wrong when, in *Mein Kampf,* he described Esperanto as a language of Jews and communists. To be sure, Esperanto is no-one's language and everyone's, and it has been used over the years for every conceivable purpose — but the number of Jews and leftists associated with it, particularly in the inter-war years, was disproportionately high. Ulrich Lins, in his book *La danĝera lingvo* (1988)[3] describes their fate: victims of violent regimes of both the left and the right, exterminated either because of their ethnic identity or because of their internationalist convictions.

Lins's study, along with the first Esperanto translation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959; a new, expanded edition appeared in 1997), and the memoir by Teodoro Ŝvarc (Tivadar Soros), *Maskerado ĉirkaŭ la morto* (1965), helped to open the eyes of members of the Esperanto movement to the anti-Semitic atrocities of the Nazis. But while Lins wrote as a historian of the Esperanto movement, Ŝvarc, though writing in Esperanto, described his own experience. His book, dealing with survival in Nazi-occupied Budapest, was one of a genre of works, initiated by Anne Frank's famous *Diary* (1950; published in English in 1952) that soon produced a torrent of works in most of the languages of Europe, about the struggle to survive — often with complex feelings of relief and guilt that resulted from survival itself.[4]

The 1965 memoir of Ŝvarc/Soros, which I edited and republished in 2001 (following the successful launch of my English-language translation in Britain in the year 2000) was one of a number of books to appear in Esperanto at about the same time, all of them dealing directly or indirectly with the Nazi extermination of the Jews. They were particularly welcome in the Esperanto movement as a counter-balance to the optimism, and sometimes lack of self-examination, that

accompanies any movement centered on the present and the future. Several of these works, as was the case with Soros's book, also had an effect beyond the confines of the Esperanto language community.

Teodoro Ŝvarc or Schwartz, otherwise known as Tivadar Soros, probably chose to publish his memoir of the Nazi occupation of Budapest in Esperanto rather than some other language because he knew that Juan Régulo Perez was interested in publishing it. Régulo's small publishing operation in the Canary Islands, Stafeto, had established itself as a leading publisher of high-quality books in Esperanto. There was no point in writing the memoir in Hungarian, Soros's native language, because, having fled Hungary in 1956, he knew that it would not find a publisher, particularly at a time when the Hungarian authorities seemed to be actively avoiding the unearthing of the ambiguous records of the war years. His earlier memoir, *Modernaj Robinzonoj* (1924; republished in 1999; published in English in 2010 as *Crusoes in Siberia*), on his experiences in World War I, was a brief account written in Esperanto during the period when he was associated, as founder and publisher, with the literary journal *Literatura Mondo* and the publishing house of that name. Although he withdrew from the Literatura Mondo team shortly thereafter, he remained in contact with the Esperanto movement. In 1947, he arranged to attend the World Congress of Esperanto in Bern, accompanied by his son George. Tivadar returned to Budapest after the Congress, but George Soros went on to a conference of Esperanto-speaking young people in Britain, managing to acquire a student visa with the assistance of Esperantist friends, and staying on to attend the London School of Economics. Now, in the 1960s, having fled during the abortive Hungarian uprising of 1956, Tivadar had less connection with the Esperanto movement, but, given that he had already published in Esperanto, Esperanto seemed a suitable mode of communication for this second more substantial and more urgent literary effort.

My work on *Maskerado* began with my completion of a new English translation, requested by the Soros family for their own use. This was their second commission: they had already asked me for an English translation of *Modernaj Robinzonoj*, which, while completed a decade ago, was published only in 2010. The latter book is of particular interest not only for what it tells us about the father of Paul and George Soros, but also because it deals with a little-known episode in World War I, the opening of a Far Eastern front.[5] But the family also had in its possession a typewritten text of *Maskerado* in poor English, apparently translated by a Hungarian-speaking family friend. The relationship between the published Esperanto work of 1965 and this typescript was unclear. Possibly the English text represented an attempt by Tivadar to get the book published in English (his widow recalled such an effort), but whether it was prepared before or after the publication in Esperanto there appears to be no way of knowing.

The translation contained some passages which did not appear in the Esperanto edition of 1965, but the Esperanto edition contained sentences and sometimes whole paragraphs not present in the typescript. Were these changes a product of Tivadar's polishing and refining the Esperanto edition, perhaps as a result of Régulo's intervention as the text was prepared for publication? Efforts to locate correspondence between Régulo and Soros were largely unsuccessful: only a single letter appears to have survived.[6]

In any event, the textual differences raised problems for the translator. Unable to decide which text had the more authority, I chose to create a composite text, using as much of both versions as I could. This text, later published as the second Esperanto edition in 2001, formed the basis for the translation. The British publication of the translation (2000) was a considerable success: two major British newspapers published extended excerpts, and the book was well reviewed. Unfortunately the launch of the American edition occurred in 2001 a few days after the September 11 disaster and accordingly received less attention (this edition was reissued in 2011).

Both editions (and also the second Esperanto edition) were accompanied by prefaces by the Soros brothers and by my extensive commentary. The Esperanto text was translated into Hungarian by István Ertl (2002) and the book appeared in several additional languages, translated from the English-language edition: Turkish (2001), Russian (2001), and German (2003). Translations into Chinese and Italian are forthcoming in 2011.

István Ertl played a key role in two other book projects — *Kaoso en Budapeŝto* by Nina Langlet, translated into Esperanto from the Swedish by Kalle Kniivilä with Ertl's encouragement, and the novel *Sensorteco* (*Sorstalanság*, translated into English as *Fateless*), by Imre Kertész, translated from Hungarian by Ertl himself. Nina Langlet, daughter of the famous correspondent of Zamenhof, Nikolai Borovko,[7] was widow of the Swedish Esperanto pioneer Valdemar Langlet, who, having moved to Hungary before the war, was lecturer in Swedish at the University of Budapest. At the beginning of the German occupation, Langlet and his wife devoted their energies to the rescue of Jews, under the protection of the Swedish Red Cross, of which Valdemar Langlet became the Budapest representative. As is now well-known, Raul Wallenberg was only the most famous foreigner who worked to protect the Jews of Budapest: collaborating with him was a whole diplomatic team — from the Vatican, Switzerland, Spain, and several other countries. Notable among the Swedes were Per Anger and Valdemar Langlet himself.[8]

The period of the Nazi occupation of Budapest was relatively short — some ten months beginning in April 1944. But it was a time in which events seemed telescoped together. The drawn-out agony of the Jews of Germany and Poland, where the Nazis tested and refined their system of extermination, occurred in

Hungary with lightning speed. The leader of the Final Solution in Hungary, Adolf Eichmann, who had long desired to apply his methods without the restrictions and obstacles that he faced elsewhere, began, within a few weeks of the German march into Hungary, the first mass deportations to the death-camp at Auschwitz, in Poland. In her book, Nina Langlet describes the details of the daily life of those who worked to protect the potential victims of the Nazi extermination machine.

Tivadar Soros approaches the subject from the viewpoint of one of those potential victims — an individual who, along with his family, succeeded in surviving through cunning and good luck. Kertész's book recounts — in the spare, simple language of a brilliant stylist — the life of those who fell into Nazi hands. It is hardly possible to retell this story in anything other than a strictly personal way: the facts are now well-known. But the existential experiences of such people as the Italian Primo Levi or the Hungarian Imre Kertész (or the German Victor Klemperer) are notable precisely because the human desire to understand is repeatedly frustrated by the cold logic of the surrounding circumstances. The Holocaust and the style of those who seek to tell its story seem to resemble the fictional world of Franz Kafka: the impossibility of explaining the facts through human logic in effect symbolizes the human condition in the twentieth century: human beings facing the machine, which devours them systematically, undemonstratively, anonymously.

Next to this, the biography by the Croatian writer Spomenka Štimec, *Tilla*, is of a quite different form and style. Tilla Durieux (1880–1971) was a well-known German actress, the wife first of an artist, then of a famous art collector and dealer, then of an industrialist. Her second husband, Paul Cassirer, successfully negotiated his way through the years following World War I, even arranging for an elderly Renoir to paint the lively Tilla. When their marriage came apart, the proud but fundamentally unstable Cassirer shot himself, and Tilla soon married the Jewish financier Lutz Katzenellenbogen. Accused of financial improprieties, under the Nazis he found his luck and his capital gradually evaporating. Tilla and Lutz fled to Prague, then to Switzerland, and finally to Croatia, where they found relative tranquility for a while. But the war followed them. Lutz finally disappeared somewhere in the Skopje area as the pair tried in vain to reach the United States by way of Turkey. Tilla went to live with her new-found aristocratic friend Zlata in Zagreb, where during part of the day she sewed costumes for the Zagreb puppet theatre, while at night she buried Partisan documents in her garden or carried messages to the Partisans in the forest.

Through all of these upheavals, all of these dangers, Tilla remained faithful to art: she sold paintings to stay alive, but she also kept and enjoyed works of art and helped others to enjoy them too. She had the same capability as Tivadar Soros to improvise, to survive, with dignity and self-assurance. In spite of all catastrophes, *Tilla* and *Maskerado* are optimistic works.

In all of these works, the question arises as to the extent to which we are dealing with facts and the extent to which we are watching the creation of fictions. Kertész claims he is writing a novel, but clearly his novel closely follows his own experiences as a prisoner. Although on occasion Soros's memoir has been called a fiction (notably, Golden Bernard so names it in a particularly bilious moment), but I have been impressed by the fact that more or less everything that Soros mentions coincides with the facts as we know them. Soros, despite his appearance of modesty, has a high opinion of himself, but he is repeatedly saved by his irony and his capability to see things objectively. More focused, less self-absorbed, is Nina Langlet's *Kaoso en Budapeŝto*, whose goal is evidently to present a positive picture of her own activities and those of her husband, although between the lines one is aware of tensions among the Swedes, whose dedication in the chaos of Budapest was not always matched by coordination. In contrast with these three biographical works, Spomenka Štimec's *Tilla* provides details that could not possibly be known to the author, even to the extent of an encounter with a small Polish gentleman on the way to an Esperanto congress in Paris in 1914 — evidently Zamenhof himself.

A quite different goal lies behind Zofia Banet-Fornalowa's *La pereintoj in memoriam* (2003). It deals very directly with the theme with which I began — the disappearance of Esperantists from the Esperanto landscape during the period of the Nazi exterminations. Banet-Fornalowa provides biographical sketches of six Poles of Jewish origin, all of whom died during those terrible years, and all of whom played a significant role in the Polish and international Esperanto movement — Leo Belmont (1865–1941), Halina Weinstein (1902–1942), Edvardo Wiesenfeld (1892–1942?), Jakobo Ŝapiro (1897–1941), Izrael Lejzerowicz (1901–1942), Salomon Kornfeld-Grenkamp (1896–1943). Her purpose is quite simple: to keep the memory of these dedicated Esperantists alive, and in this way to contribute to a balanced assessment of Esperanto history. The focus, then, is not on the horrors themselves, but rather on the brilliant lives that were cut off with brutal effectiveness by the simple decisions of the Nazis. As in Poland, so in Esperanto, the Holocaust wounded the collective heart.

Soros mentions Esperantists only once in his book: he alludes at the beginning of his sixth chapter to an Esperantist who did *not* give him help, perhaps (as Soros himself suggests) because Soros did not treat his submissions well when he was editor of *Literatura Mondo*. Nina Langlet's book deals with the work of Esperantists mostly outside the Esperanto movement. In *Tilla*, however, there are occasional allusions to the connection between Tilla's life and the activities of Croatian and Yugoslav Esperanto circles. Mladen Serment and Srdjan Flego, who later founded the so-called Internacia Arta Teatro in Paris, play minor roles. And of course Banet-Fornalowa deals with Esperanto history directly.

Stylistically, the books also offer a contrast. Soros's knowledge of Esperanto is sometimes less than perfect, so that even the original requires translation on occasion — translation into what Soros evidently intends to say rather than what he actually writes down (another of the many dilemmas facing the translator). His own references to favorite writers (he was particularly fond of adventure stories) gives some idea of the style that he sought in his own writing. He occasionally stumbles, loses his own train of thought, or misuses terms (the great Esperanto stylist Kalocsay, his colleague in Literatura Mondo, told me in an interview in 1963 that he obstinately attached himself to unsuitable stylistic oddities). The accomplished translations of Kniivilä (Nina Langlet) and Ertl (Imre Kertész) suggest that Langlet is workmanlike in her narrative, and that Kertész intentionally creates a naïve voice for his narrator. Štimec's great strength as a writer is her mastery of style and her ability to hold the attention of the reader.

Esperanto literature, while far more abundant than many who do not speak the language tend to assume (Sutton 2008), is still a relatively limited milieu. The engagement of these books with the larger context in which Esperanto has thrived or suffered reversals, along with many of the other cultural products and actors of the time, is an important addition to the canon. We might end by noting that, just as the engaged assessment of world affairs is thus brought to Esperanto, so Esperanto is increasingly recognized by those outside its circle as constituting an element in the cultural history of the twentieth century. An important player in this process was Umberto Eco, whose exploration of the search for a perfect language helped locate Esperanto in contemporary intellectual history (Eco 1993, 1995, 1996).[9] Eco's book may be a long way from our immediate subject, but it does suggest a certain awareness of intellectual and historical intersections that is relatively new for Esperanto, and that helps give Esperanto a larger place in the mainstream.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper appeared in Esperanto in the journal *Beletra Almanako* 2 (2008) 2:58–65.

1. http://www.centrumzamenhofa.pl.

2. On Zamenhof's life, see Korĵenkov 2009 and its abridged translation Korzhenkov 2010, and Künzli 2010.

3. The first, shorter edition appeared in 1973, and much of the material was also included in *Esperanto en perspektivo* (Lapenna, Lins and Carlevaro 1974).

4. A few very early efforts — Szép 1945 for example, and Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man* (1947) — met with limited response from the reading public. Levi's book was republished in 1958 to much greater public attention.

5. See my commentary in the 2010 edition, and also the second Esperanto edition of 1999. The book has recently appeared, with my commentary, in Italian translation, as *Robinson in Siberia* (2010).

6. Régulo's papers are at the University of La Laguna, where Régulo was a professor of linguistics. I am told that they do not contain correspondence relating to the publication of *Maskerado*. The letter to which I refer is in my possession.

7. Zamenhof's long autobiographical letter to Borovko, reprinted in the journal *Lingvo Internacia* (vol. 1, 1896, 115–119), is widely cited by biographers.

8. See, for example, Bierman 1995, Braham 1981, Derogy 1994, Langlet 1946, Marino 1999, Rosenfeld 1995, Skoglund 1997, Tschuy 2000.

9. The early history of Esperanto, and specifically its Jewish background, provides a backdrop to Joseph Skibell's novel *A Curable Romantic* (2010) and, to a lesser degree, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007). It is also featured in Julia Cho's comedy *The Language Archive*, which was first performed at the South Coast Repertory Theater in Costa Mesa, California, early in 2010, and was later brought to New York for an extended and successful run. The play includes a language spoken by only two people, an encounter with Zamenhof, and an Esperanto lesson. Cho perhaps takes her inspiration from David Ives's short play *Universal Language* (1993), part of a set of six short plays called *All in the Timing*. Ives's absurdist approach to constructing languages might prove distressing to the average Esperanto enthusiast, but it is evidence of the recognition of a contemporary phenomenon.

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Zusammenfassung

Chaos im Esperanto-Land: Echos des Holocaust

Der Holocaust hatte nachhaltige Auswirkungen auf die Esperanto-Bewegung. Viele führende Mitglieder der Esperanto-Sprachgemeinschaft sind umgekommen, und einige überlebten. In den letzten Jahres gibt es ein Wiederaufleben des Interesses an jenen, die starben und an jenen, die überlebten. Unter den Toten befand sich fast die gesamte Familie L.L. Zamenhofs, des Autors des Esperanto. Zu den Überlebenden gehörte der Vater des Finanziers George Soros, Tivadar Soros, dessen Memoiren vom Überleben im von den Nazis okkupierten Budapest im Jahr 2000 in englischer Sprache erschienen. Sie waren 1965 im Original in Esperanto veröffentlicht worden. Eine wichtige Rolle in dem Bemühen, die Budapester Juden zu beschützen, spielte der Esperantist Valdemar Langlet aus Schweden. Seine Erinnerungen wurden von seiner Witwe Nina Langlet adaptiert und publiziert, zunächst in Schwedisch, danach in Esperanto. 2003 veröffentlichte Zofia Banet-Fornalowa einen Gedenkband über sechs Esperantisten, die Opfer des Holocaust wurden. Weitere auf den Holocaust bezogene Bücher in Esperanto sind in der jüngeren Vergangenheit eine Übersetzung von Imre Kertész's Roman *Sorstalanság* (Esperanto *Sensorteco*) und eine Biografie von Tilla Durieux.

Resumo

Kaoso en Esperantio: Eĥoj de la holokaŭsto

La Holokaŭsto havis profundan efikon ĉe la Esperanto-movado. Multaj gvidantoj de la Esperanta lingvokomunumo pereis, kaj iuj transvivis. La lastaj jaroj montris reviviĝon de intereso pri tiuj kiuj mortis kaj tiuj kiuj transvivis. Inter la mortintoj estis preskaŭ la tuto de la familio de L. L. Zamenhof, aŭtoro de Esperanto. Inter la transvivintoj estis la patro de la financisto George Soros, Tivadar Soros, kies rakonto pri transvivo en Budapeŝto sub la Nazioj, verkita originale en Esperanto kaj eldonita en 1965, aperis en angla traduko en la jaro 2000. Grava rolanto en la strebo ŝirmi la Budapeŝtajn judojn estis la esperantisto Valdemar Langlet, el Svedio, kies prezento de siaj spertoj estis adaptita kaj publikigita, unue en la sveda, poste en Esperanto, de lia vidvino Nina Langlet. En 2003, Zofia Banet-Fornalowa aperigis rememoron volumon pri ses esperantistaj viktimoj de la Holokaŭsto. Aliaj relative lastatempaj verkoj en Esperanto pri aspektoj de la Holokaŭsto estas traduko de la romano de Imre Kértesz, *Sensorteco*, kaj biografio de Tilla Durieux.

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