
ENTREVISTA

MICHAEL R. KATZ

Michael R. Katz graduated from Horace Mann School (New York) and attended Williams College (Massachusetts), where he was the very first Russian major. Following graduation in 1966, he studied at Oxford University and the University of Leningrad, where he received his D.Phil. (or Ph.D.) in Literature from Oxford. He first taught Russian at Williams and in 1984 became Chair of the Department of Slavic Language and Director of the Title VI Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1998, he accepted a position as Dean of Language Schools and Schools Abroad at Middlebury College (Vermont). Since his term as Dean ended in 2004, he has been a full-time professor at the Russian Department.

Prof. Katz has published several articles on literary translation and written two books. Additionally, he is a published translator of more than a dozen works into English, including novels by Herzen, Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, Turgenyev, Tolstoy.

During the first semester of 2010, Katz was a Fulbright Visiting Lecturer at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), where he taught two courses: “Realism in the Old World and the New” in the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês (PGI) and a “Translation Workshop” in the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos da Tradução (PGET).

In this interview¹, Katz explains how he became a translator, and addresses some important issues concerning the market for translation, his relationship with editors and publishing houses, translation and its critics, and some of the challenges he encountered translating from Russian into English.

Maria Lúcia Barbosa de Vasconcellos,
Rafael Matielo and Reginaldo Francisco
UFSC

Cadernos de Tradução (CT): *What was the driving force behind your move towards translating literature?*

Michael R. Katz (MK): I began my career as a translator of Russian novels in the 1980s when I was teaching a course entitled “The Soul of Russia” at my alma mater, a small private liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts. It was a part of the program in “The History of Ideas” and examined major themes in 19th century Russian intellectual and cultural history. The course was designed for students who didn’t speak Russian, and I had chosen my readings from a list of previously translated novels and essays. I made mention of one particular work by the great mid-nineteenth-century Russian socialist and memoirist Alexander Herzen. The book, entitled *Kto vinovat?* [*Who is to Blame?*] initiated a series of influential novels with searing interrogative titles, the most famous of which was Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *Chto delat?* [*What is to be Done?*]. I kept referring to Herzen’s novel and lamenting the fact that it was not available in any English translation, even a bad one. One of my students threw down the gauntlet: “Why don’t you translate it?” he asked. “Me? Because I’m not a translator!” My answer made sense at the time, but I soon began thinking: “Who was a translator? What was a translator? Why wasn’t I a translator? Could I become a translator?” So, thanks in part to this student’s question, I translated Herzen’s novel. Not only that, I was awarded a grant to undertake the project, and shortly thereafter, a contract to publish it; subsequently, my first translation even won a prize! What a set of lucky breaks! Thus was I reborn a translator. By the way, the second work I translated, or better to say, “retranslated,” since it already existed in two deplorable versions, was Chernyshevsky’s infamous novel with the interrogative title.

CT: *What do you find most gratifying in translating literature?*

MK: What gives me the greatest pleasure in life is nineteenth-century Russian literature: reading it, talking about it, writing about it,

and sharing it with other people — in the classroom, in one-on-one conferences, at national conventions and international scholarly meetings, in journal articles, and especially, in my translations. Translating has become a source of great personal joy. It also keeps me in touch with the magnificent Russian language — the one that I have been studying since 1950. Fifty years! It's hard for me to believe that I've been working at it for so long, and I still don't know it all! I continue to consult dictionaries and I still make grammatical mistakes. Someday I hope to get it right, but I suspect that there will always be something more to learn. Finally, translating these wonderful novels has made me better acquainted with the fictional characters in them: I learn more about what they think, how they act, how they speak, even what they dream. Thus I can reduce the distance between them and me; I hear them speaking inside my head; I think that it has made me a better reader and a more astute critic, and hopefully, a more effective teacher.

CT: How did you become a published translator? What kind of challenges did you face in the beginning of your career as a published translator?

MK: A new grant program launched by the National Endowment for the Humanities (N.E.H.) to support literary translation of previously untranslated works happened to coincide with my decision to translate Herzen's novel. Applicants had to make the case for their choice: describe the author, the work in question, its literary and historical context, and its reception; we had to provide a sample of the translation with the corresponding pages of the original. All of these materials were sent out to readers to undergo rigorous review. I was fortunate enough to receive a grant on the first try and was awarded a summer stipend for two consecutive years, which relieved me from any obligation to supplement my modest income by teaching summer school. I could devote myself entirely to the task of translation. Shortly after the grant

was announced, I received a letter of congratulations from a major university press inquiring about the possibility of considering my work for publication. I sent them my grant proposal and, to my utter amazement, soon received a signed contract. I didn't realize at the time how fortunate I was. Never again was publication quite that easy. In fact, since the recent economic crisis, it has become extremely difficult to get any literary translation published. I have approached several publishers with my current project now nearing completion, and the most promising prospect requires that I submit a completed manuscript before it is even willing to consider it. I don't want to brag, but that is from an established scholar who has a record of twelve translations, published by the likes of Cornell University Press, Norton Publishers, Oxford, and Northwestern.

CT: *What do you find unique in Russian Literature which is worth disseminating via translation?*

MK: The nineteenth-century was unique in Russian literature and perhaps even world literature. From Pushkin's birth in 1799 to Chekhov's death in 1904, the so-called "golden age" produced a dazzling array of brilliant writers: Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. And they are merely the most talented writers and the best known. Such a burst of spectacular and original creativity, primarily in prose fiction, is unknown in any other culture. Russian novels are characterized by the intensity of the experiences depicted. Raskolnikov's dream of the beaten mare in *Crime and Punishment*, Turgenev's description of Bazarov's illness and death in *Fathers and Children*, and Pierre's encounter with the peasant Platon Karataev in *War and Peace* are three of the most extraordinary examples of powerful prose one can find in any language. These writers were only interested in important issues, what they called "burning questions" [*zhguchie voprosy*]: life and death, youth and old age, war and peace, love and hate, faith and doubt. No time for superficial ple-

asantries in these works. The characters in the novels are vivid, vital, and alive. They jump off the page and hound you with their words, their ideas, and their actions. You live with them, converse with them, argue with them, love them, and hate them, but you are intrigued by their fates. Finally, Russian novelists were the very first to depict the subconscious of fictional characters, their deepest fears, and desires that motivate their words and deeds. The frequent inclusion of fictional characters' dreams and fantasies are an indication of their investigation of this heretofore-unstudied realm of human experience. Sigmund Freud once wrote that he wasn't the one who "discovered" the unconscious: it was the "poets and philosophers" who came before him who did that; he merely provided a system for talking about the unconscious. I am convinced he had the Russian novelists in mind!

CT: How is your relationship with editors? Do you normally choose what you want to translate? On the basis of what criteria? What is the role of the reviser/editor in the whole process of translating and getting published?

MK: I am fortunate in being able to describe my relationship with editors as extremely congenial. The reason why is that those editors I have dealt with have harbored great respect for the art and craft of translation — that has been essential. Second, I am compulsive about answering their inquiries just as soon as they arrive. They never have to come looking for me, electronically, telephonically, or geographically. Third, I abide by whatever deadlines we agree to. I try to set reasonable deadlines for myself, and then I stick to them. I recognize that they are running a business and have plans that need to be fulfilled. Finally, I try very hard not to lose my temper if one of the press readers says something inappropriate or inaccurate about my version. I take a deep breath, wait a day or so to reply, and then write a very careful and reasonable refutation of my critic's absurd views! I only agree to work on those

novels I really want to translate. I never accept commissions to tackle a text I have no interest in. Friends, colleagues, and editors occasionally make suggestions, submit titles, and sometimes even send me works to consider. I usually resist and wait until I have come across something that engages or intrigues me. I translate mostly what I would call “second-tier novels,” works that do not really qualify as “literary masterpieces,” but ones that proved to be extremely influential in their time and now deserve to be read and appreciated by a wider audience. With a few notable exceptions, I don’t retranslate the “very best” novels that Russian literature has produced: they already exist in multiple versions, some of which are very good indeed. Instead, I look for novels that are significant from a cultural, historical and political point of view, ones that either have never been rendered into English or have been badly translated by well-meaning people who didn’t know Russian at all or at least not well enough to produce an accurate and readable version. My editors manage the whole process: they set deadlines, approve the choice of cover art, the drafting of the publicity blurb for the catalogue and website, the sending of copies to journals for review and to teachers for course adoption. The editor’s work is indispensable; maintaining a cordial relationship with the editor is essential to the smooth production of a book and for keeping open the possibility that that publisher will consider your next proposal.

CT: Would you say you have a translation methodology (a poetics of translation) that you follow in every work? If so, would you describe it as a result of a gradual building-up as your translating career progressed?

MK: I’m not sure that I subscribe to the idea of a “poetics of translation.” I think of translation as something “I do,” but rarely theorize about. Perhaps I can best describe what could be called my “prosaics of translation.” When I set out to tackle a new project, I first reread the text; very often it is a book I have taught numerous

times before and I know it well, but I still reread it from cover to cover before I begin. I consider the author's other works; I read a selection of critics, both Russian and Western; I examine other translations and think about how mine will differ from theirs; I consult with colleagues and ask their advice. Then I begin — at the beginning; at first, the process goes slowly — a paragraph a day, then up to a page, rarely more than two a day. I always translate early in the morning, when my mind is freshest and there are fewer distractions. After an hour or two, I stop. No more until the next day, same time, same place. After I've completed some 25 pages I print out the excerpt and edit it in hard copy; when the whole thing is done, I print and edit it again. Then I give it to a native speaker of Russian who knows English and to two native speakers of English. Next I rework my draft and finally I send it off to the editor. He/she sends it out to one or two readers who know Russian, along with a copy of the original. Those readers' comments are shared with me and my response is solicited. Finally the editor takes my revised draft and the readers' comments to the board of directors of the university press. Their decision is communicated to me, along with further suggestions for revision. The final manuscript is sent to a copy editor (who usually doesn't know Russian); yet another set of revisions is required; then I have to peruse one, or sometimes two sets of proofs. It is a lengthy and exhaustive process.

CT: What are the most frequent translation problems you face when you are translating from Russian into English? How do you deal with them?

MK: Russian is the most widely spoken Slavic language, a branch of the great family of Indo-European languages. It has an alphabet consisting of 33 letters based largely on Greek, attributed to St. Cyril, a 9th century apostle to the Slavs. Modern Russian emerged from two sources, Old Church Slavic, the language of the Russian Orthodox Church, based on the Macedonian dialect spoken by

Cyril and Methodius as they translated Greek texts into their own spoken language, and Old Russian, as it was spoken in the Russian territories during the middle ages. These two sources frequently offer high and low style variants of the same word and thus require a fair amount of linguistic sophistication to distinguish between them. In addition, Russian verbs are marked by aspect (perfective and imperfective), and that creates numerous difficulties translating into the tense system of English. Russian names are long and complicated, often loaded with meaning; furthermore, Russians use their own and others' patronymics frequently; first names are regularly replaced by diminutive forms, some neutral, some affectionate, and others derogatory. Pity the poor translator, and even more, the poor reader! I always provide a list of principal characters, explaining the semantic content of their names and including all forms and diminutives. Lastly, as a highly inflected language, Russian word order can be relatively free since it is usually easy to tell what goes with what from the grammatical endings. English, with hardly any inflections, has much stricter rules governing word order. But, as every translator knows, these are not really problems: they are opportunities!

CT: Since translation is culture-bound, how do you deal with cultural references in your translation from Russian into English? What is the role of the so called translator's notes in your work? When, how and where do you use them?

MK: I include a set of footnotes or annotations in every translation I do. I regard them as a vital aspect of my work. As indicated above, I consider my audience students of literature, history, politics, etc., as well as general educated readers who possess little or no knowledge of Russian — the language, culture, and history. Nowadays, alas, it is rare that an American can understand individual words and phrases in a language other than English. Therefore, I include two kinds of notes: 1) all foreign words and phrases are in-

cluded in the text in their original language, but they are also translated into English, preferably appearing as footnotes at the bottom of the page containing the item; 2) historical, geographical, literary, and cultural references are identified either in footnotes on the page or in endnotes after the translation. Translators prefer footnotes, thus increasing the probability that they will actually be consulted; editors prefer endnotes because they are easier to format; they also fear that footnotes may intimidate the general reader. I usually write an introduction to the work, setting it in its literary and historical context; I include an annotated list of the main characters; and I provide suggestions for further reading in English. Occasionally I have invited a specialist to contribute an introduction or an afterword to my translation. For example, when I translated Evgeniya Tur's novella *Antonina*, I asked a colleague who writes primarily about Russian women authors to explain the significance of that work in the context of 19th century women's writing.

CT: How do you evaluate the role of critic in relation to published translations? How do you think that critics may influence the translation task?

MK: This is a sore point. Most critics ignore both translations and translators, or at best they dismiss us with an epithet or two. My absolute least favorite word is "supple." To me it indicates that a critic wants to say something about the translation to show that he is aware that the original was written in a language other than English, but he really has no way to judge, since he doesn't know the original language. He can't very well say "accurate" (what if it's not?), or "brilliant" (how would they know?), or "smoother than the others" (because they usually don't compare it with previous versions). So he says "supple." It's like saying "nice." Thanks, but no thanks. As a translator, I want and I need feedback — praise or criticism, but feedback. I work for two or more years on a translation and all I get from a critic is supple?

CT: *Given your position as an experienced published translator, what would you say has changed for the past years as regards translation, considering the increasing globalization in the world?*

MK: I think there is growing recognition of the importance of translation in general and, in specific, the translator, more outside my own country, alas, than inside. I fear the old adage is still true: “What do you call a person who speaks three languages?”

“Trilingual.”

“What do you call a person who speaks two languages?”

“Bilingual.”

“What do you call a person who speaks one language?”

“An American.”

The European Union has come to recognize the importance of the languages of all its member states. The birth and growth of Translation Studies as an academic discipline is further testimony to the development of the field. Professional organizations, conferences, workshops, lectures, websites, and online venues for “publishing” translations (for example, the outstanding “literaturewithoutborders.com”) all provide evidence of change for the better. On the other hand, there are sobering unknowns: what impact will the growth of English as a global language have on translation? What will be the role of machine translation? What is the future of new offers us both risks and opportunities. *Caveat tradutores!*

CT: *How do you approach these issues in your courses/workshops?*

MK: My original course in this area is entitled “Literary Translation.” I have taught it several times, both for undergraduates and graduate students. I begin with a short poem in classical Chinese, an excerpt from Homer, and a passage from the Bible, on the assumption that few students will have mastered the original languages of those texts. We compare different versions of each and discuss how one can possibly evaluate translations without kno-

wing the original language. The rest of the course is divided into parts: in the first we read well-known excerpts from works in the theory of translation, analyzing and comparing different approaches; in the second, we turn to the craft or technique of translation, reading articles by practitioners from a variety of languages to see how each solves problems encountered in the pursuit of their craft; finally each student selects one text by an author from any national literature he/she has studied and prepares a literal version, then a literary translation with an introduction and annotations for speakers of other languages. An excerpt of this project is brought to class with the original text and the entire class participates in a thorough discussion of the method used and the student's results. Ample feedback helps them revise and rework their own translations. This course makes my students into better translators. Often their works are suitable for publication.

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1. This interview was originally videotaped in June, 2010 and may be retrieved from <http://www.pget.ufsc.br/paginas.php?nomePag=Entrevista_com_o_professor_Michael_R._Katz>.

ANEXO

Annotated Translations

Who is to Blame? by Alexander Herzen, Cornell University Press, 1984.

What is to be Done? by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Cornell University Press, 1989.

Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Norton Publishers, 1989; second edition, 2001.

Tolstoy's *Short Fiction*, Norton Publishers, 1991; second edition, 2008.

Devils by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Oxford University Press, 1992; reissued 1999.

Polinka Saks and *The Story of Aleksei Dmitrich* by Alexander Druzhinin, Northwestern University Press, 1992.

Fathers and Sons by Ivan Turgenev, Norton Publishers, 1994; and Norton Critical Edition, 1995; second edition as *Fathers and Children*, 2009.

Prologue by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Northwestern University Press, 1995.

Antonina by Evgeniya Tur, Northwestern University Press, 1997.

Sanin by Mikhail Artsybashev, Cornell University Press, 2001.

The Five by Vladimir Jabotinsky, Cornell University Press, 2005.

The Seagull by Boris Akunin, *New England Review*, v. 27, no. 3, 2006.

Notes from Beyond the Tomb by Vladimir Pecherin, University College: Dublin Press, 2008.

Suburban Husband by Ivan Shcheglov, Northwestern University Press, 2009.

Books

The Literary Ballad in Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature, Oxford University Press, 1976.

Dreams and the Unconscious in Nineteenth-century Russian Fiction, University Press of New England, 1984.

Articles

“Chernyshevsky in English Translation,” *Slavic Review*, 46 (Spring, 1987), 1.

“Teaching Literature in Translation: Whose Territory and Which Audience?” *ADFL Bulletin*, Winter 1998, v. 29, no. 2, 36-38.

“War and Peace in Our Time,” *New England Review*, Volume 29, No. 4, 2008.

