

Clamouring to be read

Boasting tens of thousands of visitors and millions of books on display, the Leipzig Book Fair runs from the 13th till the 16th of March. A showcase of international standing, this is one of the best book exhibitions in Europe. **Norbert Bugeja** was there

As I enter the main hall of the New Leipzig Fair Grounds, an irrepressible sense of exhilaration takes hold. I am at the *Leipziger Buchmesse*, a foremost German book fair hailed by many as the most prestigious of its kind. For three days, Ian Richie's levitated glass hall – the world's largest – serves as an Entrance Hall to a sprawling 20,000 square metres of printed matter. Thousands of people enter this place every hour. I inch my way forward. Journalists, TV and radio crews are there, covering a list of eminent writers: Ken Follett, Charlotte Roche, Miro Gavran, Feridun Zaimoglu. For any ardent reader, I tell myself, this is sheer gold dust.

Our captivity

I am here as the guest writer for Malta, thanks to an excellent collaboration between the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts and the Embassy of Malta in Berlin. I will recite *A Tango for the Stairs of Valletta*, a lyrical triad that will feature in my upcoming collection, 'Bliet' (Cities), now kindly taken up by a major publisher. My first reading is at the bustling 'Small Languages, Great Literatures' stand. I read in Maltese, followed by a reading in German. Then I comment on my work. The audience is visibly captivated by the rhythms and sounds of Maltese. They inquire about the Mediterranean context in my poetry. Among them is Zvonko Makovic, one-time president of the Croatian PEN, and perhaps the greatest living Croatian poet. We nod at each other. I met Zvonko for the first time in 2005 at the Lodeve Poetry Festival, where he volunteered valuable comments about my writing. Zvonko is very keen on getting to know the Maltese creative *milieu*. At a Croatian stand brimming with translated works I spot the novelist Roman Simic, who was in Malta some time ago on an LAF/Inizjamed collaboration. He pours me a glass of Dalmatian wine. I am introduced to two Cypriot authors: Yorgos Trillidis, who quips about our desire to "become" writers of fame, and the charming playwright Eurydike Pericleus-Papadopoulou. We see a stronger network of Mediterranean writers emerging, a generation clamouring to shed obscurity, to emerge from the shadows of the world's "official" languages, to speak of regional and cultural spaces rather than of canons and of nations. Deep down, we all know what the pickle is. We are imprisoned in the languages that contain our work, held up by the very tools that we use so deftly, hindered by the medium that nourishes us. Maltese is my national language as a Maltese citizen, and my gilded Alcatraz as a Maltese writer. The natural course of action for the Maltese writer today is to shun the shallowness of provincial rhetoric and patriotic discourse, to rebut the impulse of ramifying and wallowing in one's own tradition, to spread one's wings and fly into other languages. The fare will not be low-cost, but the destination is inexorable.

To read, yes - but what?

On Friday morning, I improvise my way through the labyrinth. Every publisher is here. The Reclam, Diogenes and Suhrkamp-Insel stands heave with translated editions of prose, poetry, and essays from all over the world. In an increasingly globalized book-world, every shelf speaks Translation. Translation is not an exercise any longer, but a language in itself. What's more, it has become the language *par excellence* of the book fair - the ensemble of translated works available here testifies to cultures speaking across and through each other. The book fair marks a step ahead of online purchasing, or even of going through one's local retail agent. There are people here crowding the bookshelves, handling books, poring over their content, deciding what to lump and what to dump. There are many education representatives, checking out the latest products and consulting their editors as to the adequate material to carry back home. I think of Malta where, in spite of the truly impressive improvements in our education, some dated textbooks have lingered on even as their usage blatantly misguides our students' cognitive abilities. Are our education scouts doing their work out there, eyes peeled on the European bookshelves, sounding out the publishers in order to bring the best and latest educational material to our college and University libraries, where a number of our academic sections are desperately wanting? I watch as clusters of school children meander through the bookstands. Over here, promoting reading in terms of getting people to read will look gross and naive. Leipzig flaunts a perception of reading as *a priori* the principal factor in shaping healthy and judicious mindsets, especially among young readers. It is about giving our young ones the necessary tools to discern, to choose their book, the thinking skill of reflecting, as autonomously as possible, on what will be their most fruitful choices for reading throughout their lives. Giving our students the opportunity to visit these Fairs might not be a bad idea. They will obtain rich, cutting-edge exposure to the very latest publications hailing from the cultural realities of other regions and countries within their continent and beyond.

Next stop Istanbul

Tourism-wise, if only we were to invest in such an effort, our presence as a country in large-scale European book fairs will make a lot of sense. My jaw falls as I wind my way about the Turkish book stand, a shining example of aesthetic marketing. I learn yet another lesson: online and TV advertising, bill-boards, Malta-painted buses and high-brow magazine reviews are effective – but are they as real to the potential tourist as the actual touching and handling of the Malta product even before one chooses to visit it? We need to take our movable products - our printed books, that is - out there and make them available to these eager readers. Any avid book reader who is in 'pre-tourist' stage will want to handle as much in-depth information as possible about their target destination. This means that one of the next steps Malta now needs as part of its tourism policy is a massive, unprecedented effort of translation. By this I mean not only translation of our writers, but of a very significant and eclectic chunk of our Melitensia and of the research work that has and is being done *a propos* Malta's people, heritage and cultural present. We need to get this material, including all of those nice English-language folio editions, translated into all the major European languages, possibly even in Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese etc. If we do not have the required resources, then let us approach major international publishers who keep churning out mouth-watering print editions and e-

books. Surely, negotiations at ministerial level may achieve the desired goals. Meanwhile, having myself wormed through a pile of full-colour folios, I have decided - the next holiday is Istanbul.

Through Bach's Back Door

My last reading takes place at the Schille Theater, a quaint old venue almost in the shadow of the steep-roofed St Thomas Church where Bach worked and is buried, and where Martin Luther introduced the Reformation in Leipzig. The audience is fascinated by the phonetic beauty of our language. I end up reciting, impromptu, other works I happen to know by heart. I face another barrage of questions by Lithuanian, German, Estonian listeners, asking about the Maltese literary vista. I oblige, and with pleasure, thinking about an emerging generation of writers who, with proper financial assistance in their staggering challenge of translation, may reach out to these readers and hold their own with any other literature.

I wish to thank Davinia Galea, Bernardette Glanville and Adrian Mamo at the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts for making my visit possible. I also wish to thank the Malta Embassy in Germany, especially Kornelia Klenner who, besides organizing my visit to the last detail, is busy working on bringing the young literature of Malta to the attention of German publishers and audiences. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Dominik Kalweit and Ray Fabri, whose thorough German translations of my work have elicited many a smile, nod, expression of wonder and requests for *encores* from my German audiences.

Norbert Bugeja is a Commonwealth Doctoral Scholar in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick