

A translator's notebook – John Woodsworth

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When Lisa Carter recently invited me to share some ideas on literary translation with readers of this blog, my first thought was: there are so many experiences to draw upon over my evolving (over the past 50 years) career as a translator that it is difficult to know where to begin. The logical answer came: *begin at the beginning: tell how you became a translator in the first place*. I could say, facetiously, that I turned to literary translation when my part-time position as a Russian language teacher fell victim to budget cutbacks. But that would be only a small fraction of the truth.

I think it is fair to say that many careers are launched on the basis of what one is exposed to in childhood — including very early childhood. Though [my mother](#) spoke only English, she was a world traveller, active in several international organisations. When I was about four years old, she had the foresight to enrol me in a privately-run French-immersion kindergarten — a rarity in 1940s Vancouver. Music studies also helped contribute to my early exposure to aural sensitivity. Despite a linguistic 'drought' during my primary-school years, my interest was rekindled in high-school (a private boarding-school), where in addition to French and Latin, I was also able to study German, taught to a few pupils several evenings a week by the school gardener ([Bernhard Dinter](#), originally from Germany), who supplemented his classes with informal conversational practice in the garden and persuaded me to write my first published article — a description of the school in German for a Vancouver German-language newspaper, *Der Nordwesten*... So how did I end up with Russian? We are coming to that.

A couple of times my mother graciously took me (and her mother, then in her late 80s) with her on her trips abroad. In the summer of 1956, after a month's stay in London (UK), where my mother had lived throughout the 1930s, she drove us all around Britain and southern Europe, visiting the cultural highlights of Belgium, West Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, France and the Netherlands. While she represented Canada at an [IFUW](#) conference in Paris, she arranged for me to spend a week with a couple who served as concierges for La Maison Internationale at Paris'

[*Cité Universitaire*](#). I had the time of my life exploring the famed 'City of Light' on my own as a curious twelve-year-old, hopping on and off the *métro* at stops all over Paris.

In 1959 the triennial IFUW conference was held in Helsinki (Finland) and again, my grandmother and I were allowed to tag along. This involved motoring (my mother again at the wheel) through Norway, Sweden and Finland (including the Norwegian Far North above the Arctic Circle), circling back to Britain by way of Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. In Stockholm my mother briefly represented Canada at a congress of the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#), and all three of us sat in the Swedish Parliament to hear two-time Nobel prize-winner [Linus Pauling](#) give the keynote address on the dangers of nuclear armaments. Here, too, was my initial exposure to Russians in the flesh: we became acquainted with Russia's first official observer at a WILPF meeting — [Maria Dmitrievna Ovsyannikova](#) (a former Red Army major, no less), then editor of the [Sovetskaia zhenshchina](#) [*Soviet Woman*] magazine — with whom we spoke through her interpreter. I still have a letter which she wrote to me shortly afterward (in Russian, which I could not yet read at the time). In Stockholm she invited us to visit her at her office in Moscow.

While Moscow was not then on our itinerary, Leningrad was. Following the IFUW conference in Helsinki, my mother, grandmother and I took advantage of the rare opportunity (offered by the conference organisers) of a five-day trip to Russia's ancient capital on the shore of the Gulf of Finland (which has since reprised its original name of St-Petersburg). My grandmother (then 89) had the first flight of her life — on a small Russian plane. Russia was still not equipped to serve Western tourists in their accustomed manner, and in the hotel we were assigned to (the [Oktiabr'skaya](#), on Insurrection Square) none of the staff spoke English, apart from our Intourist guide, who was not present all the time. Language was no barrier, though, to my grandmother's flirtation with the head-waiter, who must have grown up in pre-revolutionary times, as he appeared only slightly younger than she. Over the five days we saw all the major cultural sites, mainly from an official tourist coach. But one evening we decided to foray out on our own, and took a ride on their impressive [metro line](#). A group of Russian women sitting opposite heard us talking English and presented us spontaneously with the bouquet of flowers they were carrying.

After that brief introduction to the country and language, Russia had locked its hold on my fascination and career ambition. I began studying the language as best I could on my own, and a couple of years later entered the Russian programme at the University of British Columbia. Two years of grammar and pronunciation, however, yielded no conversational ability whatever. At this point I took an intensive summer programme at Indiana University in America, where students were obliged to speak nothing but Russian for eight weeks. That was the start of my command of spoken Russian, which eventually provoked comments from native-speakers such as “you must have been Russian in your past life” or “you have a Russian soul in a Canadian body”.

In 1964 I secured summer employment in the Translations Department of a religious publishing house in Boston, which was repeated (following my graduation from UBC) the next year. Initially, this involved mainly translating from French and German, though there was an ever-increasing need for Russian... and Polish (another Slavic language I also studied at UBC).

While I went on working on a free-lance basis for the same publishing company over the years (an association which continues to this day), my career up until the 1990s was mainly focused on Russian-language teaching at various Canadian and American universities (1982–2000 at the University of Ottawa). In 1980 I took a group of (mostly) American students on a three-week study-tour of the Soviet Union, visiting Moscow, Smolensk, Novgorod, Leningrad, along with the Belarus capital, Minsk. This was my first visit to Russia since 1959! Subsequently I had the opportunity for several more visits to this fascinating country, including a three-month stint at the Pushkin Institute in Moscow in 1982, headed by prominent educationalist and translator [Vitalij Kostomarov](#).

In the mid-1990s Kostomarov himself commissioned my very first book translation — a treatise of his entitled [My genius, my language: reflections on language in society](#). The author later told me it was evidently translated “with love”. Since then my literary projects have included stories, novels and poems by Russian-Canadians and Russian-Americans, archival materials (especially on Tolstoy and his sponsorship of the Doukhobor emigration to Canada in 1899), the wildly popular 9-volume [Ringing Cedars Series](#) by Vladimir Megré, and a 1200-page autobiographical memoir by Leo Tolstoy’s wife, Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya, entitled [My life](#), which won the 2011

Lois Roth Award for the best translation of a literary work into English, presented by the Modern Language Association of America.

Along the way I developed a special fascination for *poetry translation*, in which I recognised the need to render not only the semantic meaning, but the so-called 'suprasegmental' features of rhyme, metre etc., as an integral element of the author's creation. But that is a subject for another day. In the meantime I invite you to explore my own website at <http://kanadacha.ca> for further insights into (among other things) my career as a literary translator.