

# Literary Translation behind Bars in the Late Soviet Union: Contextual Voices of Vasyl' Stus and Ivan Svitlychnyi

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Résumé de l'article

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# Literary Translation behind Bars in the Late Soviet Union: Contextual Voices of Vasyl' Stus and Ivan Svitlychnyi<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Translation in captivity is nothing new, nor is it restricted to a particular place or historical period. However, this social and cultural phenomenon is marked by a far more frequent occurrence in totalitarian societies. This article examines the practice of literary translation in Soviet labour camps, where, as a result of political repression, Ukrainian scholars, writers, translators, and lexicographers (aka prisoners of conscience) constituted a large part of the incarcerated population. The fact that translation activity thrived behind bars despite brutal and dehumanizing conditions testifies to the phenomenon of cultural resistance and translators' activism, both of which deserve close scholarly attention. This study provides insights into practical, historical, psychological, and philosophical aspects of translation in extreme conditions. It seeks answers to the questions of why prisoners of conscience felt moved to translate, and how they pursued their work in situations of extreme pressure. Through the lens of translation in prison, the article offers a wide perspective on the issues of retranslation, pseudotranslation, translation editing, text selection, and the functions of literary translation. The focus of the paper is on Soviet Ukraine in the 1970s-80s, when a wave of political repressions led to the appearance of a new generation of prisoners of conscience. Case studies of Vasyl' Stus and Ivan Svitlychnyi are discussed, drawing on their letters during the incarceration period and the memoirs of their inmates.

**Keywords:** Vasyl' Stus, Ivan Svitlychnyi, translation in prison, prisoners of conscience, Soviet Ukraine.

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n scholarly discourse, literary translation is addressed from multiple perspectives. Recently the attention has shifted from the textual analyses of

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source and target texts and an identification of specific translation strategies to the human and social aspects essential for a better appreciation of the translating process (Chesterman; Pym; Wolf and Fukari; Kinnunen and Koskinen) and to a description of the cultural and political contexts of translation practices (Tymoczko; Baker). Without this context, “we are really no closer to understanding why certain translations are the way they are, we have tremendous difficulty relating the textual to the social” (Pym 29).

Literary translation is often discussed by considering the relationships between translators and publishers/commissioners, translators and editors, translators and readers, translators and critics. We wonder who chose the text for translation; what was the degree of the editor’s influence; how long did it take for the text to see print; and how was the translated text received by the target audience? In our discussion of literary translation, we might focus more on the quality of the translated text or the agents behind it, but we normally take it for granted that the translation is either a commissioned product—the result of a deal between a publisher and a translator—or a product of the translator’s inspiration—an outburst of his/her creative energy. Also, it is assumed that a translator works in a quiet environment, conducive to creative work, and that a metaphorical “translator’s desk is cluttered with different kinds of books: source text editions, dictionaries, reference works and previous translations in a variety of languages” (Paloposki, “Tauchnitz for Translators” 161). What is missing in such discourse is the assumption that literary translation can be performed in a hostile and repressive environment that is incompatible with the creative process necessary for translation. The totalitarian society, with its methods of suppression, coercion, total control, and restriction of freedom, is an example of such an environment. The Soviet system was particularly notorious for its state violence against intellectuals, including writers and translators, and this attitude frequently resulted in their incarceration and physical execution. Thus, investigation into translation performed behind bars opens a new perspective on the traditional definition of literary translation, since “what seems like a minimal condition for translation is challenged by extreme conditions of violence and conflict, and in particular by a situation in which a population of people is treated as non-human” (Simon 209). Simon was referring here to Nazi concentration camps, but her description also holds true for Soviet labour camps.

Such a context of translation activity provides a different angle on the issue of freedom, which has become a focus of increasing attention in contemporary translation studies. In scholarly discourse, it goes hand in hand with the notion of constraints, imposed on translators by their environment, that limit their freedom. A discussion of constraints on the work of translators usually involves issues of norms, patronage, ideology, poetics, readers’ expectations, and actual working circumstances (Toury;

Lefevere; Paloposki, "Limits of Freedom"); in other words, constraints that "regulate, to some extent, their freedom" (Paloposki, "Limits of Freedom" 206). In such discussions, what is basically meant by translators' freedom is "translators' textual power" (Paloposki, "Limits of Freedom" 191), their freedom to choose the text for translation and the strategies of its reproduction, the freedom to negotiate with publishers/commissioners and editors; or, in more general terms, as Lefevere put it, "the freedom to stay within the perimeters marked by the constraints, or to challenge these constraints by trying to move beyond them," that is, the freedom to exercise their agency throughout their practices (9).

Tymoczko maintains that postcolonial contexts underscore the importance of the material constraints on translation, including constraints exerted by those in power (15). As the Soviet repressive system showed, constraints that hinder the translator's activity might go beyond financial, political, social, or ideological barriers. In the context of Soviet camps and prisons, Lefevere's notion of "perimeters" acquires a physical dimension as a space, or to be more exact, a walled perimeter delimited by the constraints of captivity. Consequently, freedom will be articulated here from the perspective of a binary opposition between inner freedom (agency) and lack of freedom (confinement) as an indication of disparity between the inner and outer life of an incarcerated translator. By curtailing individual freedom, "a defining condition of being a human," the constraints of captivity became a driving force behind translators' agency, and the tighter the constraints were, the more agency was exhibited (Smith 4). This brings us to the issue of power: in certain social and political contexts, agency acquires the distinctive features of resistance and opposition. As Frankl convincingly demonstrated in his *Man's Search for Meaning*, "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (75).

The fact that translation activity thrived behind bars despite brutal and dehumanizing conditions testifies to the phenomena of cultural resistance and translators' activism, features that deserve close scholarly attention. Translation in prison is evidence of translators' agency, that is, their "willingness and ability to work" in extreme conditions of incarceration under the watchful eye of prison warders and censors, and their use of creativity to respond to repression (Kinnunen and Koskinen 6). On the other hand, it is obvious that the constraints imposed by confinement influenced both the translation process and the functions of translation, along with its performativity, and this deserves careful scholarly scrutiny. In view of the considerations mentioned above, this study investigates the context of translational activity in captivity and the activism of imprisoned translators. The focus is on Soviet Ukraine in the 1970s-80s, when a wave of political

repression led to the appearance of a new generation of so-called prisoners of conscience.

#### MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

Here, I reconstruct, in Munday's words, "a context via one or more individuals' experience in the past," using case studies of Vasyl' Stus and Ivan Svitlychnyi and drawing on the letters written during their incarceration periods and the memoirs of their inmates (72). Both types of sources belong to "extra-textual material" in Munday's typology (65), and I view each source as indispensable for producing a "microhistory," with the further construction of a social and cultural history of translation and of translators (64-65).

383 letters of Vasyl' Stus that survived were published in 1997 in the sixth volume of Stus's complete works, compiled and discussed by Mykhailyna Kotsiubyn's'ka (1931-2011), a literary scholar, translator, and a member of the Ukrainian Sixtiers Dissident Movement. A total of 514 letters written by Svitlychnyi to his family and friends were compiled by his wife, Leonida Svitlychna (1924-2003), and published in two books titled *Holos doby* (*The Voice of an Epoch*) in 2001 and 2008. Here I emphasize the cultural and historical value of these letters, not only as records of conditions of incarceration in Soviet prisons and camps (however scarce the information filtered through the censorship was), but more importantly as translators' voice imprints. In this research the extensive use of personal correspondence during the incarcerated period will raise the visibility of the translators and give ample space to their voices.

Elaborating on "the voices framework" for translation studies, Alvstad and others link the contextual and textual dimensions, suggesting that this is an indispensable condition for a reliable analysis (3-17). This holistic approach focuses on the polyphony of voices belonging to multiple agents of the translation process, which are expressed in and around translated texts. Consequently, a distinction is drawn between *textual voices* found within the translated texts and *contextual voices* that appear in prefaces, reviews, and other texts that surround the translated text (Alvstad et al. 3). The voice of the translator as a main agent of the translation process can be, as Greenall observed, "either textual or contextual, depending on whether the translator expresses him or herself within or through the actual translational product (the text) or through various kinds of contexts, such as unpublished drafts, correspondence, prefaces, and interviews" (22). My focus here is on the voices of incarcerated translators, voices forcefully hushed and silenced, but fortunately imprinted in their letters. They fall under the category of *contextual voices* in the above classification and will be used as data for an

exploration of a number of issues related to the translation process and the translator's agency. These letters are addressed to families and close friends, and although this is not business-like correspondence between translators and publishers, editors, or other agents traditionally involved in the translation process, personal and professional aspects are nevertheless inextricably interwoven there. They reflect an intensive literary life behind bars and provide authentic insights into the work of translators.

Given the tight restrictions on personal correspondence imposed by the Soviet penitentiary system, where prisoners were allowed to write no more than one or two letters a month in a best-case scenario, the attention given to translation matters in these letters shows how important literary translation was in their everyday lives. The details encapsulated in the correspondence shed light on various stages of the process of translation—something we generally know very little about.

Another important source is survivor memoirs. Despite widespread misgivings regarding the reliability of memoir writing, due to the temporal gap between the inmate's experience and the narration itself, I agree with Gullotta that "memoirs are crucial to any research into Soviet repression" (60). The cross-referencing of information provided by memoirs, letters, and other sources will increase the objectivity in the analysis and strengthen the findings. Unlike the retrospective nature of memoirs, letters from prison are much more accurate in this regard, as they are synchronic to the experience itself. Yet, they need to be analyzed carefully, bearing in mind their use of Aesopian language as a means of self-censorship.

In the approach I have adopted in this research, a study of the translations themselves and assessments of their quality are left aside, and the main focus is the way the process of literary translation functioned behind bars. I explore the questions of why the prisoners of conscience felt moved to translate, and how they pursued their work in the extreme conditions of incarceration. A host of issues needs to be addressed to reconstruct a clear picture of the translation process: the selection of source texts and the ways prisoners acquired them, the prisoners' access to dictionaries and literary or historical sources necessary for the translation, the editing of the translations, the ways the translations were transported out of Soviet prison camps, and, above all, the translator's agency and personal resistance. Such "microhistorical" research of translation practices behind bars will enhance our understanding of Ukrainian translation history *per se*, because, as Munday maintained, "the detailed analysis of the everyday experience of individuals can shed light on the bigger picture of the history of translation in specific socio-historical and cultural contexts" (65).

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The practice of literary translation during captivity has been reported in various countries over time. A textbook example of a translator-martyr is William Tyndale, a sixteenth century English scholar whose translation of the Bible brought him to prison, and whose work on its translation continued behind bars until it was interrupted by his execution in 1536. Pavlo Hrabovs'kyi (1864-1902), a nineteenth century Ukrainian translator and a life-term prisoner of the Russian empire, produced an astonishing number of translations from twenty-seven national literatures while in exile.<sup>2</sup>

The social and cultural phenomenon of the translator-martyr has occurred far more frequently in totalitarian and authoritarian societies than in liberal and democratic societies. In his article "Translating in Jails: The Case of Contemporary Iranian Imprisoned Translators," Emam Roodband provides an account of fourteen Iranian translators as prisoners of conscience in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. No such study is presently available regarding Ukrainian translators who fell victim to the political repression of the Soviet regime. Stalin's purges resulted in arrests, imprisonments, and executions of people of various social strata on a massive scale, but there has been no estimate of the number of repressed translators. In her seminal book *Ukrains'kyi khudozhnii pereklad ta perekladachi 1920-30-kh rokiv (Ukrainian Literary Translation and Translators of the 1920s-30s)*, Lada Kolomiyets includes fifty-two biographical essays describing Ukrainian literary translators whose lives and professional activities were affected in the bloody 1930s. This list represents just the tip of the iceberg, and translators were subject to political repression practically until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Repressive practices of the 1970s, during the so-called "Brezhnev era," which largely targeted the dissident movement, resulted in a new generation of translators as prisoners of conscience. Maksym Strikha, a researcher of the history of Ukrainian translation, points out that literary translation counted for much more than just a translation practice for Ukrainian dissidents of the 1960s-80s, and that this phenomenon had no parallel in modern Russian literature (334). The translation performed by Ukrainian prisoners of conscience took on new functions and significance, bringing the notion of resistance to the fore. The nature of this phenomenon is yet to be explored.

So far, the study of translation in captivity is largely an uncharted area of translation studies. Pioneering studies by Michaela Wolf of the role of interpreting in Nazi concentration camps suggest it was used as a survival strategy (in a physical sense) in settings of extreme violence (*Interpreting in*

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<sup>2</sup> On Hrabovs'kyi's activity as a translator, see Moskalenko; Strikha 153-57.

*Nazi Camps; “German Speakers”*). Her focus is on the mediating role of interpreters between Schutzstaffel (SS) guards and prisoners or between camp inmates. Yet, literary translation in camps and prisons as a phenomenon of moral resistance and psychological survival is nearly non-existent as a subject of translation research. In his detailed study of Gulag literature, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923-1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration Camps*, Andrea Gullotta examines Russian literary works produced in Soviet camps but leaves translations out of his focus. A similar approach is adopted by Claudia Pieralli in her article “The Poetry of Soviet Political Prisoners (1921-1939): An Historical-Typological Framework.” This lacuna is addressed by Brian James Baer, who delves into the phenomenon of prison translation in Russia, with a focus on Gulag translations. Susanna Witt discusses the case of the Russian translator Tat’iana Gnedich (1907-76), who worked on her translation of Byron’s *Don Juan* in solitary confinement at the internal prison of the state security police (KGB) in Saint Petersburg in the 1940s (“Byron’s *Don Juan*”). As for Ukraine, it is “still in many respects a cultural *terra incognita* for most Westerners” (Chernetsky 34). The Ukrainian context of prisoner translations under a totalitarian regime has received scant, if any, attention in Western scholarship, and has not been studied comprehensively in Ukraine.

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Vasyl’ Stus (1938-85) and Ivan Svitlychnyi (1929-92) were near contemporaries and of similar cultural and educational backgrounds. Both completed university degrees in Ukrainian Language and Literature, both were PhD students at the Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR, both were accomplished poets, translators, and critics, and, above all, they were powerful voices of dissident movements in Ukraine. For their activism and pro-Ukrainian stance, they faced charges of “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” and “anti-Soviet activity” and became long-serving prisoners of conscience.

Stus was arrested in 1972 and sentenced to five years at a strict regime labour camp and three years of exile in the Magadan oblast, RSFSR. Shortly after his release, and after joining the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, Stus was arrested again in 1980 and received the maximum sentence of fifteen years’ imprisonment and internal exile. He was sent to a strict regime concentration camp *Perm 36-1*, near the village of Kuchino, in the Perm oblast, RSFSR, where harsh persecutions led to his premature death in 1985.

Svitlychnyi was arrested for the first time in 1965 in connection with anti-Soviet propaganda and underground *samvydav* (*samizdat* in Russian) publications but was released eight months later due to insufficient evidence



of his offence. In 1972 he was arrested again with regard to the same charges and received a sentence of twelve years (seven years in a strict regime concentration camp in the Perm oblast, RSFSR, and five years of internal exile in the Gorno-Altaiisk oblast, RSFSR). Inhuman incarceration conditions combined with an adverse climate wrecked his already fragile health, but even after he suffered a stroke in the prison camp, followed by a clinical death, and underwent neurosurgery in unequipped basic prison facilities, the Soviet penitentiary system proved to be too rigid to agree on the premature release of a disabled man.

Incarceration, coupled with forced labour in harsh working conditions, meagre food rations, hunger strikes, inadequate health care, ill-treatment by guards and camp administration, weakened the bodies of prisoners of conscience but, paradoxically, intensified their inner life. In spite of extreme conditions of work and danger of the physical destruction of their texts, Stus and Svitlychnyi carried on with their professional activities and led meaningful and fulfilling lives.

## DISCUSSION

### *Captive and Free*

Literary translation by incarcerated individuals brings to light a translator's agency—specifically, the ability of the prisoner to rise above debilitating circumstances and maintain an inner freedom. Austrian psychiatrist and founder of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl, who had first-hand experience of surviving Nazi concentration camps, believed that even in such gruesome conditions some people were capable of reaching great spiritual heights and managed to retain their full inner liberty, enabling them to rise above their outward fate (76-80). His observations suggest that the inner selves of sensitive people used to a rich intellectual life were less prone to damage because “they were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom” (Frankl 47). According to Frankl's idea of logotherapy, the primary motivational force for such people was “striving to find a meaning in one's life” (104), and “creating a work” was posited as the first possible “avenue on which one arrives at meaning in life” (146).

The letters of Stus and Svitlychnyi indicate that their escapes into creativity were meaningful constructions of another reality that could satisfy their emotional and creative needs. Kotsiubyns'ka observed that in such a “reality,” an individual leads a fulfilling intellectual life by engaging in his or her interests, and, amazingly, achieves tangible results against all odds (*Lysty i liudy* 11). This process is aptly described by Stus as “*samosoboivnapovnennia*” (“filling your own self from within”)—an

occasionalism used in his poem “Meni zoria siiala nyni vrantsi” (“A star shone just for me this morning”), the first poem written following his arrest in 1972. Self-fulfillment and self-generation of his own mental space, a living embodiment of Stus’s most passionate convictions and his philosophy of life, suggested a coping mechanism in dire circumstances. Although physically isolated from the outside world, Stus approached it as an existential encounter and managed to gain mental freedom over his bodily confinements. Stus’s philosophy of survival entailed a cognitive escape—an escape into creative writing. His poetry and his translations acquired a special significance in the circumstances of forced isolation and the wanton violation of human rights, giving him “a sense of self identity and self-preservation”<sup>3</sup> (Stus to his family, 7-10 Dec. 1975; Stus to Vira Vovk, 27 Nov. 1975).

Retreating into his protective shell, feeling secure and empowered, Stus turned his bodily confinement into a space of freedom and creativity through which he performed his daily acts of resistance. His creativity thrived in isolation, as evidenced by his letters. In one of them, written to his wife five months after he was taken into custody, Stus said that he had prepared gifts for his significant other, namely almost 200 poems and 100 translations (14 June 1972). Behind the bald statistics that indicate that nearly 300 works were produced within 150 days amidst endless interrogations and pressure, exists a man of indomitable will with a clear sense of purpose, who is determined to “[his] own self be true,” to quote Shakespeare.

In the first letter upon his arrival at the labour camp, dated 17 December 1972, Stus expressed a willingness to use incarceration to his benefit: “I think that these years might give me something—for my development and my experience alike, as well as for my creativity”; “I think I will get the most out of my time here—I am going to study foreign languages, read, and translate.”

Similarly, Svitlychnyi, as witnessed by his cellmate Ivan Kovalenko (1919-2001), perceived the labour camp as “a place to work under extreme conditions” and worked in every spare moment day and night (Leonida Svitlychna and Nadiia Svitlychna 472). In a letter to his friends—the dissidents Iurii Badz'o (1936-2018) and Svitlana Kyrychenko (1935-2016)—dated 1974, Svitlychnyi admitted that there were many inconveniences in his situation, but that they should not be dramatized because there were some advantages as well—one being that prisoners who lived by the spirit were able to concentrate on their inner lives, unlike

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<sup>3</sup> All translations in this article are mine. Stus’s letters are cited from Stus, *Tvory*, vol. 6 (book 1—letters to his family; book 2—letters to his friends and acquaintances). Svitlychnyi’s letters are cited from *Holos doby* (years 1973-77 from book 1 and years 1978-81 from book 2).

anywhere else. With this frame of mind, he used the time during his incarceration to translate and to write his own poems, to compile a dictionary of synonyms of the Ukrainian language, to study foreign languages, and to engage his cellmates in literary and translation discussions. It is therefore not surprising that in one of his sonnets, Svitlychnyi metaphorically referred to his camp reality as *Parnassus*, a place where daily atrocities were dwarfed by intense creative activity and cultural and spiritual values.<sup>4</sup> This allusion was later used by the compilers of his camp letters published under the subtitle *Letters from Parnassus*.

### *Out of a "Large Zone" and into a "Small One"*

The prisoners of conscience would remark that, ironically, their new places of confined residence—the so-called “small [penitentiary] zone”—hardly differed from “the large zone,” that is to say, the rest of the country, hinting at the suffocating repressive atmosphere in both. The “large zone” was a far cry from the country “where a man can breathe so freely,” as repetitive lines of “Song of the Motherland”<sup>5</sup> trumpeted incessantly. On the contrary, the KGB’s watchful eye and its silencing of dissenting voices reached a point, as Kas’ianov observed, where the transfer to a labour camp did not entail drastic changes in conditions of existence: in fact, they were just out of the “large zone” and into a “small” one (151-52). Stus made it explicit, admitting that “so far the conditions for creative writing here are not worse than in Kyiv, unfortunately” (Stus to his family, 28-30 July 1974).

A year earlier, a similar observation was made by a top Ukrainian translator, Mykola Lukash (1919-88). He openly called things what they were in his letter of protest against the imprisonment of Ivan Dziuba. The latter was arrested in 1972 in connection with his pamphlet “Internatsionalizm chy rusyfikatsiia?” (“Internationalism or Russification?”), in which he denounced the hypocrisy of the Soviet Union’s language policy in Ukraine, noting the huge difference between the reality and what was officially declared, which amounted to a camouflaged destruction of the Ukrainian nation. In a letter (March 1973) addressed to the highest authorities of the Ukrainian SSR, Lukash offered to serve Dziuba’s sentence himself on the grounds that he fully shared Dziuba’s views; he noted that he

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<sup>4</sup> For the analysis of Svitlychnyi’s sonnets written during his incarceration, see Kryś.

<sup>5</sup> “Song of the Motherland,” better known by its first line “Wide Is My Motherland” (“Shyroka strana moia rodnaia”), is a famous patriotic song of the former Soviet Union, a bright example of Soviet propaganda.

could not see any difference between being *in* or *out of* prison,<sup>6</sup> explicitly projecting the image of Soviet Ukraine as a prison.

In tune with this, when describing his impression of the political atmosphere in Kyiv in the 1970s, Svitlychnyi pointed to “the ever mounting pressure exerted in the harshest ways” (Svitlychnyi to Zynovii Antoniuk, 1 Aug. 1979). Dozens of Ukrainian writers of that period were blacklisted and deprived of the possibility of publishing their works; some literati were imprisoned while others lived in anticipation of arrest. From exile, Stus reacted to the atmosphere of intimidation and pressure in Kyiv with “Sometimes I wonder how one can live there” (Stus to Oleh Orach, 24 June 1977), and added a few months later that both he and Svitlychnyi were much happier in the “small zone” than many of those living in Kyiv (Stus to friends, 21 Nov. 1997). Stus’s return to Kyiv in 1979 after his first imprisonment reinforced this impression: “Kyiv has come as a shock to me—it is much worse than Magadan” (Stus to V'iacheslav Chornovil, Dec. 1979); “Kyiv has appalled me. Its heart has been ripped out of its chest—and I can see it bleeding, the chest of the singing, joyful, and crazy city” (Stus to Ievhen Sverstiuk, 29 Feb.1980); “Life here is kind of amoral, vegetative, and one-dimensional” (Stus to the Svitlychnyi family, 10 Mar.1980); “If you believe that Kyiv is better than Bagdaryn,<sup>7</sup> you are wrong” (Stus to Ievhen Sverstiuk, 19 Apr.1980).

Svitlychnyi, for his part, asserted that he had become *persona non grata* to the authorities long before his first arrest in 1965, and was treated as an outlaw. In April 1971, in his letter to Zina Genyk-Berezovs'ka, he complained that “even innocent translations cannot see the light of print.” For almost ten years before his incarceration in 1972, Svitlychnyi was denied any employment opportunities, being prevented not only from pursuing his professional activity as a writer and a translator and publishing his works, but also from doing anything for a living. These facts and many others illuminated the magnitude of the violations of human rights in Soviet Ukraine and were referred to in Svitlychnyi’s open letter to Mykola Bazhan<sup>8</sup> in December 1975, where he expressed his determination to renounce his Soviet citizenship (Svitlychnyi, *Holos doby: Lysty z “Parnasu”* 514-26).

As freedom in Soviet Ukraine was in name only, the transition from “freedom” to detention was not drastic for many. In an interview given to the

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<sup>6</sup> For the full text of Lukash’s letter and information on the consequences for its author, see Koval’.

<sup>7</sup> A village in the far east of Russia.

<sup>8</sup> Mykola Bazhan (1904-83) was a Soviet Ukrainian writer and translator, and an influential political and cultural figure. He was a long-term member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine and a Head of the Writers’ Union of Ukraine (1953-59).

newspaper *Unita* in October 1974,<sup>9</sup> Svitlychnyi remarked that he did not lose much following his arrest, as he had been expressly outlawed long before that (*Holos doby: Lysty z "Parnasu"* 515). He added that he was not certain of what he had gained or lost personally, but made it clear that many of his friends at large were not to be envied.

### *Prison Universities*

Ironically, the communities formed in the prisons embodied the "official" Soviet policy of friendship among peoples aimed at welding the multinational people of the Soviet state into a single entity. The inmates of the Soviet labour camps represented different social strata, different ethnicities, and different languages and cultures.

The incarcerated literati turned their situation into an advantage by learning from each other and acting as readers and critics for one another. They also taught each other foreign languages needed for their translation practices. For example, Stus studied French with the help of Estonian inmate Mart Niklus. Svitlychnyi took lessons in French from his cellmate Ivan Kovalenko, a poet and a former teacher. In return, Svitlychnyi reviewed Kovalenko's poems and even engaged the latter in a translation competition with himself and Ihor Kalynets' (b. 1939) (both Kovalenko and Kalynets' were outstanding poets but had no translation experience); he suggested that the competitors translate one of Baudelaire's poems. The result of Svitlychnyi's translation experiment was sent in a letter to his wife (13 Mar. 1974) with the following request: "Here are three translations of the poem 'The man and the Sea'; read them together with your friends, with Mykhasia,<sup>10</sup> Mykola,<sup>11</sup> Maestro,<sup>12</sup> and let me know which one is the best." Two months later (12 May 1974), Svitlychnyi informed his wife: "I have received the review of 'The man and the Sea.' It is quite objective and did not surprise me at all: I expected it to be like that and my own evaluation was similar. But my word is not as weighty for the others as Maestro's opinion."

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<sup>9</sup> The interview was initiated by Svitlychnyi himself, after he and the other prisoners of labour camp 389/35 had been on a two-month hunger strike. He prepared questions to be answered by a dozen of strikers with the intention of smuggling the text out of the camp. Eventually, the collective "interview" was passed to Western journalists during a press-conference given by Andrei Sakharov on 30 October 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Mykhailyna Kotsiubyns'ka.

<sup>11</sup> Mykola Lukash.

<sup>12</sup> Hryhorii Kochur (1908-94), a Ukrainian translator and a ten-year prisoner of the GULAG (1943-53).

Svitlychnyi's attempts to spark the inmates' interests in translation shed light on educational activities behind bars. Hryhorii Kochur, who was reverently referred to as Maestro (due to his great expertise in translation matters),<sup>13</sup> was formerly a mentor to his own cellmates during his imprisonment in GULAG camps three decades prior. When sending one of his translations in a letter to his wife (3 Aug. 1949), Kochur remarked:

The second poem is a translation from Tristan Derème. Among his poems, exquisite and challenging, this one, quite the contrary, is characterized by an absolute simplicity and even by a certain banality. I chose it because it was used as a teaching material—I taught people how to translate and, of course, I chose an easy sample. As a result, there appeared two Ukrainian translations, one Russian, and one Georgian. Meanwhile, I also tried to translate it, and in the end the poem appealed to me." (Kochur and Voronovych 47)

But then again, their exchange of knowledge was a two-way process, and Kochur learned new languages from his inmates: "I cannot but boast that I have learned how to read and write in Georgian, and I have memorized a dozen of words. I want to translate some of my favourite poems with the assistance of my friends" (Kochur to his wife, 24 Dec 1952; Kochur and Voronovych 53). Apart from Georgian, Kochur studied Estonian, Latvian, and Armenian languages in a similar way (Kochur and Voronovych 42).

Similarly, Sviatoslav Karavans'kyi,<sup>14</sup> a long-term prisoner of Soviet camps, picked up some English from his fellow inmate Rostyslav Dotsenko,<sup>15</sup> who also encouraged him to try his hand at translating poetry. Karavans'kyi was appreciative of their "translation universities" and of the interlinear translations done by Dotsenko specially for him—particularly of poems by Kipling, Byron, Burns, Shakespeare, and others that prompted his translation activity (Karavans'kyi 16-17).

Thus, the multilingual and multicultural environment in Soviet camps proved to be a knowledge-sharing platform for incarcerated translators and facilitated their language learning and literary translation practices.

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<sup>13</sup> This is also a telling example of self-censorship. In 1974, when Svitychnyi wrote the letter, Kochur had been persecuted again; therefore, mentioning his name could have led to the confiscation of the letter.

<sup>14</sup> Sviatoslav Karavans'kyi (1920-2016), Ukrainian linguist, lexicographer, translator, and a thirty-year prisoner of Soviet camps (1944-1960; 1965-1979), emigrated to the US in 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Rostyslav Dotsenko (1931-2012) was a Ukrainian translator, literary critic, and a ten-year prisoner of Soviet camps (1953-63).

*Invisible Agents of the Translation Process*

When Kochur returned to Ukraine after years of exile and settled down in Irpin, a small town in the vicinity of Kyiv, his house became a place of gathering and discussion for both budding and mature translators, which earned it the nickname of “Irpin University.” Camp letters of Svitlychnyi and Stus, however, shed light on less visible aspects of Kochur’s mentoring activities. He took on the role of an informal reviewer and editor of translations produced behind bars, drawing from his translation expertise and his personal prison experience. However, Kochur could not write to his imprisoned colleagues because he was under the watchful eye of the regime, which stripped him of his human rights again in 1973 by expelling him from the Writers’ Union and making him effectively a persona non grata in literature. To overcome this restriction, the prisoners’ wives, Leonida Svitlychna and Valentyna Popeliukh, mediated by receiving the translations and giving them to Kochur. They copied his reviews and added them to the letters they wrote to their husbands. For instance, in a letter to his wife, dated 20 January 1975, Svitlychnyi sent his translations of Paul Verlaine and Leconte de Lisle with a request to show them to Maestro, inviting his comments, and, as is evident from his March letter (10 Mar.1975), he was heartened by Kochur’s feedback:

The letter with the review of my translations was very interesting for me. I have not digested and thought over everything yet—it takes time, but most of the criticism is certainly fair, and you please thank Maestro for me at the earliest opportunity. In the short run, after going through translations and the corresponding comments, I will write to you a special formal and detailed letter on this subject, but now I will confine myself to a word of thanks and hearty greetings.

Leonida Svitlychna also acted as a go-between for Stus, when he was working on Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Their correspondence during 1975 and 1976 revealed that Svitlychnyi’s wife had hand copied Kochur’s comments on Stus’ translations and added them to her letters to the imprisoned translator. Stus repeatedly stressed in the letters to his family and friends how stimulating this criticism was for his translational activity: “I got a letter from Liolia.<sup>16</sup> Thank you. I have read it with pleasure. There is still so much work on the sonnets needed. Thus, I will greatly benefit from the critical comments—they will encourage new failures in my challenge with such a giant as Rilke is” (Stus to his wife, 16 July 1975). The letter to Vira Vovk<sup>17</sup> (21.07.1975), written a few days later, was more eloquent:

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<sup>16</sup> Leonida Svitlychna.

<sup>17</sup> Vira Vovk (born 1926) is a Ukrainian writer, critic, and translator living in Brazil.

Meanwhile, the gods have smiled on my “Sonnets to Orpheus”: the translators of Verlaine’s “Chanson d’automne”<sup>18</sup> are flailing me at every turn, and I happily come back for more. Because I really do not want my glorious defeats in struggling with Rilke to ever end. To slightly paraphrase the poet, *mein Wachstum ist: der Tiefbesiegte von immer Grosserem zu sein*.<sup>19</sup> That is the point of it, and not only in the translational sense. Welcome, therefore, slings and arrows—let the pummeling continue!

Such a metaphorical description of his interactions with informal reviewers was typical of Stus’s perception. He spoke figuratively of the criticisms received from Kochur and Badz’o<sup>20</sup> as a “pogrom,” a “hot bath,” or a “trial” his translations were exposed to, but at the same time he praised its healing and invigorating effect as well as its huge stimulating power (Stus to his wife, 3 Jan.1974; 3 Aug.1975). Stus regretted, however, that distance and time placed limitations on these interactions, depriving him of full engagement and meaningful discussions with those who acted as translation critics under such tragic circumstances.

Stus was receptive to the remarks of his reviewers and responded with new versions of his translations. For example, the first sonnet from part one of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* had already existed in four interim translated versions sent by Stus within the space of ten months in 1973, when the final version, inspired by his friends’ feedback, was produced in 1975. Stus remarked that he took into account not only the explicit comments of the reviewers, but also what, in his understanding, followed from the criticism (Stus to his wife, 10 Nov.1975). How helpful this feedback was can be deduced from Stus’s comment on a new version of his translation of the ninth sonnet from the same cycle: “I had a hard time with this version, but I managed to take into account all the remarks by respectable Master.<sup>21</sup> Thus, suppose this version is more successful now, it is thanks to him” (Stus to his wife, 10 Nov.1975).

Translation reviews by Kochur were thorough and comprehensive, resembling, in Kotsiubyns’ka’s observation, scholarly pieces of research into

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<sup>18</sup> Stus hints at Kochur and Lukash, the translators of “Chanson d’automne” (“Autumn Song,” 1890) by Paul Verlaine. For censorship reasons, their names are not mentioned, as both of them were subjected to state repressions in 1973 and had the status of “unpersons” in Soviet Ukrainian literature.

<sup>19</sup> “This is how [I grow]: by being decisively defeated by constantly greater beings”—a modified line from Rilke’s poem “Der Schauende” (1906). Here, I use Robert Bly’s translation, known under the title of “The Beholder.”

<sup>20</sup> Iuri Badz’o (1936-2018) was a literary scholar, a member of the Ukrainian Sixtiers Dissident Movement, and a nine-year prisoner of the Soviet regime (1979-88). Before his arrest, Badz’o reviewed Stus’s translations of Rilke.

<sup>21</sup> Stus is talking about Kochur, who reviewed his translations.



versification and translation theory (*Lysty i liudy* 161). By the same token, Stus's responses to the criticism of his colleagues evolved at times into extended analyses of his own translational decisions compared with other Ukrainian or Russian translations of the same text. A notable example of this can be found in Stus's letter of 10 November 1975, in which he sent his translations of all twenty-six sonnets from the first part of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, accompanied with deep deliberations of two thousand words on his understanding of Rilke's poetry and the challenges it poses to translators, his successful findings and losses, a comparative analysis of his and the recently published Bazhan's translations of Rilke, Badz'o's and Kochur's criticisms of the translations, and his own translation method.

### *The Challenge of Translating*

The personal correspondence of imprisoned translators offers an insight into the logistics of the translation process behind bars. Letters from their families and friends were used as a channel to provide the prisoners with the texts of foreign writers they wished to translate. Similarly, letters travelling back from prisoners to families and friends contained translations to be reviewed or just to be kept safe.

The source texts carefully copied out by prisoners' wives and friends were exposed to the same censorship as the letters themselves. Unless the originals were written in Russian, the letters aroused much suspicion, even if the information about the authors and the titles of the texts were accurately indicated. "Some letters in which you sent verses reached me, but... only with the texts in Russian. Those in foreign languages are still somewhere under examination, but I was assured that I would eventually get them too," Svitlychnyi informed his wife (10 Feb. 1974). Kamovnikova described this phenomenon as linguistic suspicion that reflected "an apprehension of the effects foreign ideas and texts might have upon their readers" (26). Such suspicion resulted in the close control of both form and content in foreign texts. Under the established practice, the poetical texts of foreign authors were sent to Moscow where they were literally translated and subjected to rigorous scrutiny, notwithstanding the information provided regarding each book the source text was taken from: "I have not received the texts which you sent as separate letters but was told that they had already arrived and had been sent somewhere to be translated" (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 28 Jan. 1974). This practice led to lengthy delays in source texts reaching their final destination:

The original texts for poetical translations take so long to come. Actually, I have received the first four ballads by [Vitězslav] Nezval (thanks!), while

this is not the case with the poems by [Jan] Brzechwa, Desanka [Maksimović], or [Charles] Baudelaire, which, in your words, were sent long ago. They tend to be examined long, very long, sometimes for three months, sometimes less—perhaps, the language of the original matters, or there might be some other reasons, it is hard to say . . . (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 04 Aug. 1974)

“Waiting time” was often significantly extended: “Some original poems by Baudelaire took more than six months to reach me since you sent them” (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 10 Feb. 1975). Such delays affected and interrupted the creative process of an imprisoned translator, and what is more, they made it difficult to maintain regular communication with the family. Therefore, Svitlychnyi asked his wife to send him the texts for translation separately from the personal letters. He also suggested that she tear the pages of foreign poetry out of the books and send printed texts instead of copying them out, as this might “facilitate the work of the censor” (10 Feb. 1974). Stus, in his turn, asked his wife to send no more than three or four foreign poems at a time, “so as not to have objections from the censors” (24 Sept. 1974). Obviously, such “requests” were meant to be read by censors and were intended to smooth the way for the source texts.

The difficulties with getting source texts brought to the fore the importance of certain cognitive skills for incarcerated translators: such cognitive skills are generally in less demand when translation is produced under normal working conditions. In situations where foreign texts were out of reach, on account of lengthy scrutiny or confiscation, translators often had to rely on their memory as a unique text repository. A notable example in this regard is the case of a Russian translator, Tat'iana Gnedich, as discussed by Witt (“Byron’s *Don Juan*” 35). Gnedich, who was sentenced to ten years in correction camps in 1945, embarked on her translation of Byron’s *Don Juan* while staying in the KGB internal prison in Saint Petersburg. By her own admission, she started her translation from memory, knowing some original cantos by heart, and for quite a while she committed her translation (at least one thousand lines) to memory as well (see Etkind), performing an incredible “feat of memory” (Baer). Therefore, as Witt concluded, “the process of translation involved the double mnemonic load of both source and target text” (“Byron’s *Don Juan*” 35).

Stus’s inmate, the Russian writer Mikhail Kheifets (1934-2019), had a similar experience when he was placed in a solitary punishment cell for seventy-nine days. Since prisoners in such disciplinary cells were not allowed to have books, and therefore lived only in the privacy of their own minds, Kheifets decided to translate Stus’s poetry into Russian from memory and succeeded in his experiment (Kheifets 44). Stus also had to translate from memory at times, as in the case with Rilke’s sonnets: “I am writing this from memory, as it is almost two weeks since I was left without the original

of this sonnet—they have taken it away for scrutiny and still keep it” (Stus to his wife, 1 Sept.1973).

Memorizing was very common among incarcerated translators, and it was used as a tool for saving texts. Zynovii Antoniuk (1933-2020), Svitlychnyi’s cellmate, pointed out that the translator had “an exceptionally purposeful memory,” and although it was not particularly retentive, it “moved in a spiral by relying on a certain compensatory mechanism” and intellectual strain, enabling Svitlychnyi to re-create all his texts produced in the Kyiv KGB remand prison once he arrived at the labour camp (Antoniuk 255). On the other hand, memorizing was one of the ways to save translations that were already committed to paper, as paper translations were constantly exposed to the risk of being confiscated during the frequent searches. It is remarkable that prisoners of conscience demonstrated collaborative efforts and collective commitment in keeping the texts safe. For example, Stus’s poems and translations were learned by heart by his inmates and could be retrieved from their memories upon release or during relatives’ visits.

Difficulties in getting texts for translation were far from the only methods of obstruction policy faced by incarcerated translators. The absence of a minimal translator’s working environment constituted another big hurdle to the translation process. Ievhen Sverstiuk (1928-2014), a notable Ukrainian writer, philosopher, and a long-term prisoner of the Soviet regime, noted that even a pencil and paper were among the items proscribed, and repeatedly became the subjects of prisoners’ protests. Stus fought with hunger strikes for the “privilege” to write. Through hunger strikes, he sought permission to receive a two-volume edition of Goethe’s works sent by his wife (Ovsiienko, *Svitlo liudei* 119).

Dictionaries and relevant books were lacking, and this affected the translation process. Camp administration imposed a ban on sending books to prisoners by friends or relatives, so the only available option was to order books or to subscribe to journals through a special shop “Knyha—poshtoiu” (“Books by post”); needless to say, the books available were exclusively Soviet ones. However, there was no assurance either that the ordered books would be delivered to the prisoner. In his letters, Stus aired his grievances in this regard:

I feel very bad without books. For over four months now, all my book orders have been rejected. And it is so hard without at least a spelling dictionary, Hrinchenko’s dictionary,<sup>22</sup> etc. There is no linguistic environment here, and

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<sup>22</sup> The Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language, compiled and edited by Borys Hrinchenko.

I rack my brains for the stressed syllable, and my decisions are random, and my writing is raw. (Stus to his wife and son, 22 Aug. 1973)

I feel very bad without a spelling dictionary; I have mail-ordered it three times but all to no avail. (Stus to his wife and son, Sept. 1973)

Similarly, Svitlychnyi voiced his regret over the absence of dictionaries which he badly needed for his translations. In September 1974, he informed his wife that he had finally received the original poems by Desanka Maksimović, Charles Baudelaire, Vitězslav Nezval, Jan Brzechwa, and Jan Zahradníček that were sent in March (6 months ago!). He felt relieved that he finally had the texts to translate from and, even more, he could choose what to translate: “I would give primacy to Desanka, but I still do not have a Serbian dictionary and I am afraid to translate without it. I have ordered this dictionary in several places, but my hopes of getting it are fading” (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 05 Sept. 1974). Without dictionaries the process of translation was seriously hindered and in some instances interrupted completely for fear of misinterpretation, as “even one misinterpreted word could ruin the whole translation” (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 25 Feb. 1974).

A lack of reference works was another hurdle faced by translators. Stus wished he had a commentary on Rilke’s sonnets, as without one he had to “translate blindly, which is just the same as to paint blindly,” admitting that text clarification and comprehension took 80% of his efforts, while producing a translation received only a small share of his mental energy (Stus to his wife, 10 Nov. 1975).

Every disciplinary punishment was accompanied by denial of access to books and dictionaries and a prohibition to translate. As disciplinary punishments were notorious for their frequency, the translation process had to be continually put on hold. “For some time, I will not be able to work on Rilke and Goethe, as I have neither texts nor a dictionary with me,” Stus reported in a letter dated 22 January 1974. He complained that they had seized his two-volume German-Russian dictionary, the short stories by Goethe, and Shevchenko’s *Kobzar*,<sup>23</sup> which he had taken to the solitary-confinement cell where he had been transferred earlier that month in response to his suggestion that camp prisoners honour the memory of the deceased Lithuanian inmate Klemanskis by taking off their hats. After all the effort Stus put in his protests, he was given *Kobzar* back, while the Goethe translation was proscribed for six months:

Today, on the 43rd day of my demands, I was given *Kobzar* at long last. Well, I have made some progress, but neither German[-Russian] dictionary nor

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<sup>23</sup> A complete collection of Ukrainian poems by Taras Shevchenko.

Goethe's short stories are allowed (so, no need to send me elegies and sonnets by Rilke). (Stus to his wife and son, 22 Feb. 1974)

Two months after his release from the special prison cell in the camp, Stus implicitly informed his wife that he was taken to the punishment cell again. Details related to translation were used as a secret code, a kind of Aesopian language, to pass the information about the change in his status: "Valia! Now I will not need Rilke as specific conditions will not make it possible for me to use the text, and continuing my work on translations is utterly out of the question" (Stus to his wife, 11 Sept. 1974).

Similar restrictions regarding access to books and dictionaries applied to convicts in prison hospitals. Stus regretted that he was wasting his time in the hospital having no possibility to polish his translations of Goethe, which he was simply not allowed to take with him (Stus to his wife and son, 15 Feb. 1973). Stus could not take his mind off translating, even during his hospital stay in Leningrad, where he underwent surgery for a life-threatening perforated duodenal ulcer: "According to the house rules, I cannot work on Rilke; therefore, I am studying English and doing other random things" (Stus to his wife, 3-4 Dec. 1975). Any attempt to protest the banning of books in prison hospitals was cruelly put down. One such episode was graphically recounted in Stus's letter to the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, in which he renounced his Soviet citizenship:

Quite recently, on 14 May 1976, on the grounds that I refused to go to hospital without books, I was handcuffed, and along with this, showered with swearing and kicks. I have had aches and pains all over for two months, but psychological abuse is felt much more. I filed a lawsuit against my offenders, but I was punished even more in revenge, which was meant to show my total defencelessness before the local law. They did not even hesitate a moment before throwing the man, who had just undergone a major surgery (stomach resection), into a disciplinary cell for two weeks, under the pretext of slander in his complaints. It went far beyond their traditional practice and camp punishments, to such an extent that it triggered off a two-week hunger strike of eight prisoners, a hunger strike effectively provoked by the camp administration. (Dmytro Stus, *Vasyl' Stus* 338)

When it comes to possibilities to read or translate, camp conditions were less extreme in comparison with solitary punishment cells or prison hospitals, yet the administration recurrently tightened restrictions on books, eventually decreasing the permitted number per prisoner to five. Vasyl' Ovsiienko (b. 1949), Stus's inmate, provided a graphic description of the crackdown on books in the labour camp:

The total number of permitted books (including journals and brochures) in your cell is five. The rest must be taken away to the supply room. However, each of us subscribes to journals and newspapers, tries to work on something or study a foreign language at the very least. It means that you need a dictionary and a textbook. But the regime is relentless, and all the books which are over the limit are thrown away. As books are believed to be to blame for all the troubles, the guards meticulously observe this rule. Here is a warrant officer Novitskii counting out loud: “How many of you are here? Four? It is twenty books and journals.” He scrambles the books up from the table and kicks them around the cell and into the corridor. (*Svitlo liudei* 68)

Stus took such restrictive measures particularly hard: “They demand that I keep only five books, and I have no idea how I can do without them. They want to turn me into a submissive and spiritless animal” (Stus to his parents, 1 Nov. 1974). In order to save some books, he sent them home by post in small batches. When his imprisonment in the Mordovia labour camp was approaching its end, to be followed by exile, Stus asked his wife to send him books to his new destination, expecting no more restrictions on the number of books or ways of receiving them:

Valia, have the books ready for mailing to the Siberia (at least 100-200). Start with the German[-Russian] dictionary (2 volumes), Rilke—3 volumes, all Russian editions of Rilke, the best of poetry: French (Baudelaire, anthologies, Éluard [in Ukrainian as I do not know him]), Pasternak, Akhmatova. From Ukrainian authors—Skovoroda, Tychyna, Bazhan. (Stus to his wife, 10 Nov. 1976)

At the top of Stus’s wish list were titles related to translation, which reflects his desperate need for creating at least a minimal working environment, with dictionaries, source texts to be translated, texts translated into other languages by other translators, etc. This need was quite apparent in his first letter from exile, which included the shortened, top priority, list of books:

I would ask you to send me two volumes by Goethe (in German), Russian translations of his poems in case they are available, also Rilke—both in German and Russian (two books by him were to be published in “Nauka” and “Khudozhestvennaia literatura” publishing houses). Plus a large two-volume German-Russian dictionary. That is it so far. Perhaps a volume by Pasternak, or Eliot if you manage to get it, perhaps something interesting out of periodicals or new titles—but not too many (no more than 20 books). (Stus to his wife, 08 Mar. 1977)

Apart from having difficulty getting texts for translation, books, dictionaries, pens, or paper, incarcerated translators faced another challenge in their working environment. Personal space and the possibility

of being alone were sorely lacking. Stus repeatedly complained about “intense hunger for silence” (Stus to his wife, 31 Mar. 1977), “lack of solitude, which suppresses [his] creative urge” (Stus to his wife, 24 Oct. 1976), his dream to “live to see privacy and quiet” (Stus to his wife, 31 Mar. 1977), and he even saw the advantage of a disciplinary cell: “I have some advantages here: solitude, peace, introspection. God willing, it will pay off with my verses. God bless my close-cropped head<sup>24</sup> with inspiration!” (Stus to his wife and son, 22 Jan. 1974). He regretted, however, that he was not allowed to translate in the cell, for he believed its dead silence could be conducive to his creative endeavour:

It would be ideal to work on Rilke in a solitary punishment cell, but they do not permit you to take any “writing stuff” or Rilke along. Therefore, unfortunately, I can only work on Rilke in this unbearable clamour. Hence all my troubles: I have neither enough time nor strength to be on a par. (Stus to his wife, 23-24 Sept. 1974)

Thus, the right to translate as an integral part of the right to freedom of creation was systematically violated in Soviet labour camps. The process of translation behind bars turned from a purely creative activity into a form of resistance and an act of moral courage, a manifestation of tremendous effort in the face of an utterly lacking professional environment and in the presence of the highly obstructive tactics of the labour camp administration. In order to protect their translations, incarcerated translators had to resort to:

- personal letters as a safe venue for translations;
- self-censorship and Aesopian language in their personal correspondence;
- conspiracy as a means of hiding translations and smuggling them out of the camp;
- “feats of memory” performed by both translators and their inmates as a translation-saving means;
- hunger strike as a form of protest against the confiscation of translations, bans on books, or the curbing of rights to write and translate.

Translating behind bars also required tremendous effort on the part of translators’ relatives and friends—the invisible agents who copied the source texts and sent them to the prisoners, received and took care of translations, maintained the reviewing and editing process, and subscribed to and sent the necessary books to the labour camp. This invaluable

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<sup>24</sup> All the prisoners in Soviet camps had their hair shaven or closely cropped.

assistance with the logistics of the translation process operated as its effective engine.

### *Translation Issues*

The phenomenon of prison translation broadens our understanding of various issues within translation studies, such as those related to translation policy and text selection, translation editing, retranslation, pseudotranslation, translation networks, and most importantly, the function of literary translation as such. Since the physical constraints of captivity significantly affected the entire process of translation, it acquired new “atypical” features and functions needed to adjust to the new environment.

Translations produced behind bars were not intended for publishing, as, by an unwritten law, imprisonment entailed full exclusion from the literary process. Thus, a typical professional environment consisting of “multiple actors whose roles and performances are defined in interaction” changed significantly, and many of the key roles described above were performed by spouses and friends (Abdallah 11). The traditional hierarchical structure, in particular, principal (publisher)—agent (translator) relationships, usually of a business nature, were transformed, as translations were no longer at the service of publishers. In view of this, economic incentives were irrelevant for incarcerated translators, and their efforts to pursue translation in conditions of extreme external constraints can be regarded exclusively as manifestations of their agency and cultural resistance.

For prisoners of conscience, translating became a coping strategy, “a token of self-certainty, self-preservation” (Stus to Vira Vovk, 27 Nov. 1975). The same holds true for the selection of texts for translation, as eloquently articulated by Stus: “Rilke I *will* translate. Because I feel that I myself badly need it” (Stus to his family, Feb. 1973). Thus, the choice of authors and texts to be translated was determined by translators’ personal preferences and emotional needs rather than by external factors. Both Stus and Svitlychnyi translated the authors spiritually close to them. For Stus, above all, these were Goethe and Rilke, his favourite German authors, whereas a large proportion of Svitlychnyi’s translations produced behind bars were the products of French poets, particularly Béranger, Verlaine, and Baudelaire. Stus opted for texts that had a special resonance for him and his experience: “I would ask Mykhasia to copy out some poems by Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova for me—I could possibly translate them. You will feel what I could translate—something consonant with my spirit” (Stus to his wife and son, 01 June 1981). Svitlychnyi, for his part, pointed to the “optimistic mood” of the poems that appealed to him most, and admitted that he “translated [Verlaine’s] ‘Chanson d’automne’” only because he had nothing else at hand



and “*had no choice*,” and for him this translation was a kind of “poetic exercise rather than *necessity*,” adding that if he had a choice, he “would translate quite different things” (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 20 Jan. 1975; emphasis added). On another occasion, when sending his translation of Verlaine’s “*Puisque l’aube grandit...*,” Svitlychnyi noted that the poem is cheerful and optimistic, which was unusual for Verlaine’s style, but that was the tone he liked more than anything else and would like his wife to select more texts of this kind for him to translate (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 24 Feb. 1975). This explains his fascination with the songs by Béranger, whose intellectual humour, bitter irony, and sarcastic overtones reverberated in Svitlychnyi’s translations. Salyha claims that “Béranger helped Svitlychnyi deepen the humorous and satirical foundation of his artistic thinking, so badly needed by the epoch he lived in” (15). I would add that, indeed, Béranger helped Svitlychnyi in his personal strategy of survival, serving as a source of vital optimism in the gloomy atmosphere of captivity.

### *Pseudotranslation*

Béranger’s “help” for Ukrainian prisoners of conscience lent his name a new dimension. His name was used to lull the vigilance of Camp censorship, which was much stricter with respect to the original writing of prisoners than to their translations. Svitlychnyi disguised his own poems as his translations from Béranger by explicitly indicating this in a letter (Svitlychnyi to his sister Nadiia, 30 Sept. 1977). A stinging satire on the Soviet Union would have no chance to see the light of the day even in the “large zone,” should it be identified as Svitlychnyi’s original work. In the same way, Svitlychnyi managed to outwit the censors by passing his own texts off as translations of Baudelaire and Leconte de Lisle (Svitlychnyi to his wife and his sister Nadiia, 31 Mar. 1977; 21 Sept. 1977). Moreover, Svitlychnyi applied “a disguised mode of presentation” to help the writing of his fellow inmates see a way out of the camp (Toury 40). In one of his letters, he sent a text titled “*Ternovi tertsyny*” (“Thorny terza rima”) with the following comment:

I do not have so many translations now, which is why I am sending just one, “Thorny terza rima.” Do not show this translation to Maestro, as he apparently has no original, and how can one evaluate the translation without the original? On the other hand, he has good taste in poetry, so he could read it without the original, just for pleasure. (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 12 May 1974)

With the help of Aesopian language, Svitlychnyi informed his wife that the text he sent was not a translation, and therefore no review by Kochur

was needed. It was revealed later that the text belonged to Svitlychnyi's cellmate Ihor Kalynets', a Ukrainian poet and dissident. Similarly, Stus sent his original poem placed among his translations from Rilke and introduced it as "pre-sonnet Rilke" (Stus to his wife, 07 Jan. 1975). In translation disguise, original prison writing would not only get out of the "small zone," it also made its way back into it. For instance, Svitlychnyi's wife would send Stus's original poems to her husband, passing them off as translations. Svitlychnyi confirmed receipts of the texts and in an Aesopian manner displayed his full awareness of a game of translation:

I always enjoy reading *the translations* you send me. Despite some of them being quite tragic and painful to read, one cannot evaluate them by the standards of social realism, *given the time and place of the originals as well as the circumstances in which they were created*. It is one thing when beautiful and unique time is described by Tychyna, but this is a whole other thing when *Baudelaires and Norwids*, cursed by fate and circumstances, *talk of themselves and their times*." (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 10 July 1974; emphasis added)

These facts provide a wider perspective of the notion of pseudotranslations or fictitious translations, traditionally referred to as "texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed" (Toury 40). In the history of translation, most cases of pseudotranslation resulted from authors' attempts (1) to free themselves from the confinements of target language norms and to introduce innovations into the target system, showing more tolerance to translations than to original writing; (2) to break the social norms and tackle controversial issues in society; (3) to take on more prestigious or more profitable projects and benefit from the superior status assigned to translation; (4) to play mind games with readers and manipulate the reception of the text by the target culture (see Toury; Bassnett; Gürçağlar; Delisle and Woodsworth 205-09). Such texts may "function" as translations for a long while, and some mystifications might never be dispelled.

In the Soviet context, the practice of pseudotranslation went beyond the author's personal endeavour and became a part of the state translation policy, lending a new facet to the issues of translation and power. In other words, fictitious translations "were initiated from above (presumably pursuing official explicit or implicit goals)" as a vehicle for spreading propaganda and building a personality cult (Witt, "Between the Lines" 154). This manipulative practice reached a point where, as Witt demonstrated, non-existent original texts in the source language would come into being through "back translation" from Russian pseudotranslations ("Between the

Lines”; “The Shorthand of Empire”). In this way, fictitious translations were followed and supported by fictitious originals.

In this regard, prison writing presented as translation could be categorized as a unique type of pseudotranslation in terms of its function and ambivalence. First, it was outside official practices and was fully initiated “from below (pursuing individual goals)” (Witt, “Between the Lines” 154). Second, these texts never functioned as translations in Ukrainian literature, that is, in Toury’s words, they were not “culturally acknowledged as translations” (41). A distinct feature of these pseudotranslations was their ambivalent nature, which stemmed from a dual target audience that functioned repressively (censors) or protectively (family and friends). By relying on their “contextual voices” in personal correspondence, incarcerated translators used paratextual markers to send out ambivalent messages, so that each part of the intended audience would get the “correct” information (Alvstad et al.).

In Svitlychnyi’s letters, for instance, veracity markers intended for censors included the name of the author of the “source text” (which was invariably a real name, belonging to the poet[s] he really translated), metonymic substitution of the genre by means of explicit reference to the text as translation, text placement (among real translations), and additional remarks or comments. Aesopian language was widely used to circumvent censorship. The translator would hint at the true nature of his texts by indicating that he translated without having an original at hand (Svitlychnyi to his wife and his sister, 20 Apr. 1977) or by asking his family not to search for the source texts at home (Svitlychnyi to his wife and his sister, 31 Mar. 1977). Quite often, after his disguised texts safely got out of the camp and reached their addressees, Svitlychnyi, under the pretext of their further editing and polishing, suggested textual changes to unmask the pseudotranslations. Some changes were clearly meaningful to the insightful reader, as for instance the substitution of the Dnieper, the main river in Ukraine, for the Rion River from ostensibly Béranger’s translation (Svitlychnyi to his sister Nadiia, 09 Oct. 1977).

It follows from the above that pseudotranslations as a phenomenon of Soviet prison writing performed an exclusively protective function for the original works of prisoners of conscience. Being qualified as a pseudotranslation was a temporary mask to outsmart the censors, and the status of the original texts was re-established immediately after their safe escape.

*Retranslations*

Letters from prison, which served as the main (and the only legal) channel of communication between prisoners and the “large zone,” took on a protective function as well. In conditions of frequent searches and confiscation of written material, letters were regarded as the most secure place to save translations, even their draft versions. When sending his translations of Rilke’s sonnets, Stus admitted that they were in rough stages, and he would continue working on them, but at that moment he was sending them the way they were as “you never know what will happen tomorrow” (Stus to his parents, 9 Oct. 1974). The same feeling of uncertainty and the perceived threat to his works are reflected in his letter to family and friends written on New Year’s Eve, 1977: “many pieces were far from being completed, but the whole point was to save them from the misfortune.” Thus, the hostile environment in which translations were produced added one more link to the chain of the translation process (apart from the traditional links of text selection, translating, editing, and publishing), the effort to keep them safe. This explains the appearance of multiple versions of translated texts reflecting different degrees of readiness. In this regard, letters functioned as translators’ personal safes and archives, which adds to their scholarly value.

The multiplicity of translations produced behind bars is attributed to a combination of factors. The multiple versions were produced not only due to the risk of text confiscation by security, but also as a result of repeated rewriting from memory. Since letters of prisoners were often confiscated or disappeared without explanation, those containing texts of translations had to be rewritten several times in the hope that at least some letters would reach their intended recipients: “Meanwhile I will rewrite some recently translated sonnets, which I have to send for the second time as my previous dispatch was confiscated. So here are Rilke’s sonnets” (Stus to his wife, 5-9 Feb. 1975).

On the other hand, retranslations often reflected attempts to improve the translation, as in the case with Kipling’s poem “If,” translated by Stus in 1973, then retranslated in 1981 and 1983 (the last and final retranslation was confiscated, and it did not survive). Stus’s letters preserved multiple interim versions of his translations, thus providing valuable insights into his “creative laboratory.” Particularly, the Rilke “translation project” was a frequent item in Stus’s correspondence from 1972-84. Stus admitted that most of his works were either retranslated or significantly amended: “These sonnets (9-17) I changed several times (in fact, there are several versions of each one)” (Stus to his wife, 13-17 Oct. 1975); “Starting with sonnet 14, I have improved almost every one by changing the text fully or partially” (Stus to his wife, 10 Nov. 1975). Such continuous work on polishing translations

inspired Stus to use neologisms to refer to the various versions: “*pershopereklady*” (literally—first translations; first drafts), “*novopereklady*” (new translations), and “*chystopys*” (final version). In a similar vein, Svitlychnyi produced multiple versions of his translations of French poetry, notably Verlaine, which, in his own words, he retranslated several times (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 20 Jan. 1975; 10 Feb. 1975).

Yet, Stus and Svitlychnyi were at opposite poles when it came to the retranslation of texts that had already been translated into Ukrainian by someone else. Stus pursued his Rilke project even after Bazhan published his own translations of Rilke poetry: “Rilke I *will* translate . . . And no matter that Bazhan has already translated it” (Stus to his family, Feb. 1973). Svitlychnyi, on the contrary, flatly refused to translate such texts and consistently filtered them out during the selection process, maintaining that there was no point in “duplicating the others” and producing new translations when “the previous ones are there and their quality is good” (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 10 Feb. 1975; 24 Feb. 1975). Presumably knowing his performance limitations due to imprisonment, Svitlychnyi regarded retranslation as redundancy and preferred to invest his time and effort in translating works unrepresented in Ukrainian literature:

Could you find out and let me know how things are going on with translations of sonnets by Palamarchuk?<sup>25</sup> I remember that he translated Heredia<sup>26</sup> (and therefore, I did not translate anything by this poet), but I do not know who else’s works he translated; please let me know lest I should do the same. Also, let me know which exactly Baudelaire’s works were translated by Maestro—here I do not want to retranslate either. (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 20 Jan. 1975)

This position imparted some inferiority to Svitlychnyi’s occasional retranslations, as he lowered their status to just an exercise:

This, as you can see, is a sonnet, and therefore *there is a threat* that it was translated by D. Palamarchuk. Let me know whether this is the case or not, and besides which Baudelaire’s works have already been translated—by D. Palamarchuk, H. Kochur, and anybody else. The *Zhovten’ (October)* journal announced the forthcoming publication of the selection of Baudelaire’s poetry, but I know neither who performed the translations nor what pieces were translated. Can you possibly find it out for me? Meanwhile, I will send you whatever I have translated so far, even though *it might be all for naught*. But since I have already done it, let it be preserved

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<sup>25</sup> Dmytro Palamarchuk (1914-98), a Ukrainian translator.

<sup>26</sup> José-Maria de Heredia (1842-1905), a French poet.

at least as *a poetic exercise*. (Svitlychnyi to his wife, 10 Feb. 1975; emphasis added)

Thus the phenomenon of non-translation, which is usually related to institutionalized censorship, acquired a new dimension when the translator exercised his/her agency through a non-retranslation strategy aimed at filling a void in Ukrainian literature.

### *Incarcerated Translations*

For Stus, translation was an effective tool against forceful isolation and helped him to turn his time in captivity into a *Time of Creativity* (*Dichtenszeit*), as the title of his collection suggests. He compiled it within eight months spent in a Kyiv KGB remand prison following his arrest in January 1972. Along with Stus's original poems, the collection included his translations of more than two hundred poems by Goethe, an author with whom Stus sensed a deep affinity and whom he regarded as his first teacher. "I have always regretted that I had come to like Goethe when I was 18 or 19, and not before. I have never known a writer wiser than he was. I seem not to have ever read anyone like him in my life," remarked Stus in one of his letters to his wife (15 Apr. 1982). Two years later, he added that for him there existed just three poets: Goethe (the greatest of all; however, this is hard to sense from translations), Rilke, and Pasternak (Stus to his wife and his son, 15 Jan. 1984).

Stus continued polishing and improving his translations of Goethe in the labour camp in Mordovia (1972-77) and tried to send them in instalments in letters to his wife. All in all, 69 translations were sent within February 1972 and June 1973; then, for some reasons, this process was interrupted and never resumed. "Do not be surprised that I have stopped sending you Goethe's *Roman Elegies*. These are local peculiarities. I will send them as soon as I get a chance. And for the time being, Goethe is farther than you are," Stus informed his wife in September 1973.

Stus's work on translations of Goethe was hindered in other ways as well. What we learn from his letter of 22 May 1973, is that he had translated twenty elegies by then, which amounted to over 450 hexameter and pentameter verses. Trying to follow the original rhythm and to avoid the domestication of classicizing verse in Goethe's elegies, Stus requested that his friends send him some information on ancient metric versification, in particular, the metrical schemes of hexameter, pentameter, alexandrine, etc. However, when Kotsiubyns'ka sent these, the letter was confiscated because the metrical schemes were taken for language in code. In a second attempt, she added comments to the censors with an explanation for each metrical

sign and a request to pass the letter to the addressee; fortunately, this worked out. Svitlychnyi found himself in a similar situation following his arrest on 30 August 1965. During a home search conducted by KGB officers the day after Svitlychnyi was arrested, a piece of paper with a scheme of stressed and unstressed syllables prepared for the translation of some poem was seized under the pretext that it contained information written in code, despite the assurance of Svitlychnyi's wife that such "codes" are studied in literature classes by schoolchildren (Svitlychna 29).

Kas'ianov cites another notable example of ignorance and absurdity when "innocent" literary translations were used as tools of repression against dissidents (54). Thus, when Opanas Zalyvakha (1925-2007), who was, inter alia, a painter of Stus's portrait and an illustrator of his *Palimpsesty* poetical collection, was brought to trial in 1965, all the writings seized during the search received rigorous examination as possible sources of evidence to support the allegations against him. An expert board of Lviv scholars qualified a typewritten text as an anti-Soviet nationalistic work by an unknown author, failing to recognize an English translation of a well-known poem, "Dolia" ("Fate"), by Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national bard. Ironically, the very translation was published in Moscow in 1964 to celebrate Shevchenko's 150th anniversary and was translated by John Weir (1906-83), a Canadian communist translator loyal to the Soviet regime (Shevchenko).

These are illustrative examples of censorship based on remarkable ignorance and total suspicion driven by a sinister desire for political reprisals against dissidents. In camps, it led to indiscriminate confiscation of letters sent to/by prisoners and their translations. Notorious unsubstantiated claims of "text conventions" ("*uslovnosti v tekste*"), vague and without explanation, were reasons for confiscation, and such practice of mental abuse was common in Soviet labour camps. Stus's letters reveal some of the grim reality:

I wrote to you on 9 August [1976], but the letter was confiscated. I wrote to Valia on 19 July [1976] and then on 8 August [1976], but everything was "confiscated" because of "conventional idiom of the poems," despite the fact that those were my lyrical poems. Then I copied out the sonnets by Charles Baudelaire and then a couple of poems from Shevchenko's *Kobzar*. They found "conventional idiom of the poems" everywhere. The letter from Oleh was confiscated, as were the letters from Valia and Ryta. (Stus to his parents, 18 Aug. 1976)

In most cases censors confiscated translations without explanation, and these acts of intellectual violence were a frequent occurrence during both terms of Stus's imprisonment (see the Appendix).

Stus's letters during his second term of imprisonment, starting in 1980, indicate that censorship tightened and took even more extreme forms. His practice of sending translations in private correspondence faced an outright ban. In this way, Soviet censorship revealed more and more features inherited from the imperial censorship of tsarist Russia, which prohibited incarcerated men to write:

And now I have been officially informed that I am forbidden to send my poems and translations in my letters until the end of the term of imprisonment. That is to say, they have objections to poetry in general, rather than to its content as before. It resembles Shevchenko's being "without the right to write or paint." Actually, they have said that I am allowed to translate, but everything written by me will be taken away and returned (how can I be certain?) just prior to my release from the camp. (Stus to his family, 12 Sept. 1983)

In December 1983, Stus informed his wife that he had lodged a number of complaints against this prohibition, with no hope of getting a satisfying answer. He also urged his family to turn to the Writers' Union for support, on the premise that he translated poets (Rilke, Goethe, Verlaine, Baudelaire) who were widely published in the Soviet Union and had nothing to do with the Soviet power, as they were simply unaware of it. Besides, given his membership in the Pen Club, his several published collections of poems and translations, his dozens of literary studies, and his unpublished translations (over five hundred pages) of Russian, Belarusian, Polish, German, French, English, and Spanish poets, this inexplicable ban was an act of savage barbarity (Stus to his family, 12 Sept. 1983). Whether addressing the Writers' Union could be of any help was a tough question. Vakhtang Kipiani claimed, "the Writers' Union, whose leadership were clearly aware of the weight carried by Stus's poetry, was openly a repressive institution. These alchemists of the soul bribed by the regime were almost unanimous in condemning the 'inappropriate behaviour' of Ivan Svitlychnyi, Valerii Marchenko, and Ievhen Kontsevych" (662-63). From the few letters that managed to get through to Stus's family during the period to follow, we learn that the situation was further aggravated, and eventually Stus was not even allowed to keep his poems and translations. On 15 January 1984, he wrote to his wife:

I have got some news: all my poems are taken away and put in the storage facility outside the camp. Whatever I will write will be there, in a best-case scenario; that is, I will see it only when I am released from the camp to be sent into exile (or it will be confiscated if the worst comes to the worst).



This cruel twist to Stus's situation is also mentioned in an eye-witness account by Vasyli' Ovsienko, who recalled hearing Stus's dissenting voice raised in front of Volodymyr Chentsov, a KGB officer:

You say that my manuscripts are placed in the storage room outside our zona. However, I know that you want nothing to be left after me when I am dead... I have stopped writing my own verses and deal with translations only. Why cannot you let me finish at least something...? ("Sertse, samohubstvo chy vbyvstvo?" 624-25)

Under "normal" circumstances, censorship in penitentiary institutions was more lenient to translations than to original poetry. Whereas the latter tended to reflect the ideas of prisoners themselves, translations were considered a reflection of the author's worldview, that is, in Toury's words, "the presumed non-domestic origin of translations makes them look less menacing" and "there seems to be no way of actually going after the 'absent' author, who should presumably take most of the blame" (42). This approach did not work in Stus's case. His translations were subjected to repressive actions on par with his original writing. Stus realized that his works were confiscated for reasons other than their content and saw this as severe psychological abuse and a specific form of violence. Its ultimate aim was to destroy the man by destroying what gave meaning to his existence. Some years before, amidst fears of losing his poetical works, Stus explicitly referred to them as his own flesh and blood:

My heart is bleeding over my verses, which were taken for reinspection; taken before 12 January 1977 and have not been returned since. There are quite a lot of them there. Leaving them behind is just like a wounded animal dripping its hot blood onto the snows of Kolyma. (Stus to Oleh Orach, 05 Apr. 1977)

In this way, Stus's oppressors used his works as a weapon against their creator. Their forceful confiscation, which continued unabated, had a devastating effect on his life and posed existential threats. In his diary titled "Z taborovoho zoshyta" ("From the Camp Notebook"), Stus made it quite explicit:

We have lost any right to belong to ourselves, let alone have our own books, notebooks, or notes . . . . It cannot continue this way for long: so much pressure is only possible before death. I do not know when they will meet their demise, but personally, I feel like I am a condemned man. Whatever I could do during my life, I have done. Pursuing any creative activities is out of the question: each and every one of notes with poetic lines is withdrawn as soon as a search is conducted. (678)

Unlike his letters, this diary was not self-censored, as it was not meant to go through prison censorship. According to Stus's inmate Ovsienko, sixteen pieces of crib sheet written by Stus in minute handwriting on condenser paper were smuggled out by a Lithuanian dissident, Balis Gayauskas, via his wife Iryna Gayauskene when she visited him in prison in summer 1983 ("Sertse" 625-26). The text eventually made it out of the Soviet Union and was published in Munich, in the *Suchasnist'* journal (vol. 11, 1983). Its publication had a bombshell effect and led to a prolonged solitary confinement of Stus in deplorable and inhuman conditions. Keeping a diary at a hard labour camp was a perilous idea. For Stus, in his own words, it was a "desperate attempt" as "the regime in Kuchino reached its peak of a police state" ("Z taborovoho zoshyta" 677).

This diary was destined to become the last known text by Stus. Besides "the camp notebook," within five years of Stus's second confinement, from 1980 until his death in 1985, only forty-five letters and a few translations survived, including six poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, one piece each of Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Rimbaud, and Marina Tsvetaeva. The other texts seem to be irretrievably lost, as the KGB did not return the confiscated original and translated verses even after Stus's death. These were the texts of the mature Stus, with his forceful style and deeply crystallized artistic taste. In December 1983, Stus wrote that he had completed a major undertaking of his *Perm 36-1* period: "I have finished my collection *Ptakh dushi* [The Bird of the Soul]; it is desperately prosaic, without pathos, without rhymes, in conversational tone, melancholic, without emotional strain. It is stoical—that is its clef" (Stus to his family, Dec. 1983).

This collection included both original poetry by Stus and his translations, and their number is estimated at three hundred. From Stus's letters written within two years before his death, we know that he was working on translations from Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Kipling, a few French poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but above all, he carried on with his Rilke project, polishing his translations of *Sonnets to Orpheus* done in the Mordovia camp during his first term of imprisonment and taking on the intellectual challenge of *Duino Elegies*. These were completed by the end of 1983, as evidenced by Stus's letter to his family of 12 December 1983: "I have translated Rilke's *Elegies*—it is about 900 lines of extremely complicated poetical text. My head was spinning because of such work." Ovsienko assumes that he was the only one who read all eleven elegies by Rilke in Stus's translation in Kuchino. It was a forty-eight-page notebook filled with small handwriting from cover to cover (*Svitlo liudei* 69). Translating Rilke was a rewarding and very emotional experience for Stus:

I have been toiling away at the translation of Rilke's "Requiem" and was very delighted as the work was going smoothly, and it turned out quite good

(what a pity that I am not allowed to copy out my verses in my letters; otherwise, I would have definitely shown it to you!). (Stus to his family, 10 May 1984)

I translated (at last) “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” by Rilke. I like this mini-poem so much, and I so much adore some lines from the text (you know it yourself—it is all that refers to Eurydice), that I was scared to go deeper into the text while translating, so as not to lose, heaven forbid, the dearest impression I have of it. It is similar, say, to the first sexual experience: you feel both desire and apprehension. Thank God, I have coped, and I am pleased, even though I do not know what exactly I am pleased with: Rilke, source text, or translation. (Stus to his wife, 1 July 1984)

Tragically, Stus’s *Bird of the Soul* never flew out of the KGB cage, and his translations fell victim to the Soviet regime as further evidence of its appalling atrocities. Like in the bloody 1930s, when translations were subject (along with their authors) to Stalinist repression—for example, Zerov’s translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* was destroyed in Solovki—the Soviet regime of the 1980s, despite approaching its imminent collapse, continued its repressive policies toward the cultural heritage of Ukraine. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, inquiries submitted by Stus’s son and widow to Russia’s authorities about Stus’s notebooks in the KGB archive were to no avail, with the response that all the documents of the hard labour camp Perm-36, where Stus was kept during the last five years of his life, were destroyed following the closure of the camp. Stus’s son estimates that at least one hundred translations from Rilke were lost, in addition to those of other authors and from other literatures. “A pollarded tree of Stus’s poetry” (Kotsiubyns’ka, “Fenomen Stusa” 684), with its “upper branches” removed, with its top and the most mature part taken away, deprives us of a holistic picture of Stus’s poetic heritage and the “farewell period” of his creativity in particular (Sverstiuk 740). This is undoubtedly a great loss to the Ukrainian culture, yet, as Strikha claims, even those few translations by Stus that made it out of the “small zone” speak of his astounding stoic fortitude (341).

## CONCLUSION

This microhistorical research into the functioning of literary translation in Soviet labour camps provides only a glimpse of the intellectual abuse and state violence perpetrated against the literati, on the one hand, and the acts of translation as a conscious project of resistance, on the other. Importantly, it helps to fill in the blanks and shed light on the less visible pages of the history of literary translation in Ukraine. Translation activity behind bars testifies to the existence of an alternative model of Ukrainian translation,

which was different from the official Soviet model. It was shaped by translators' agency and cultural resistance, with text selection and translation strategy being matters of personal preference, rather than activities dictated by publishing and language policies of the Soviet Union. In some respects, the process of incarcerated translation and the network of agents involved in it resembled underground activities, with high degrees of conspiracy, self-censorship, and Aesopian linguistic camouflage. Inmates with literary inclinations used literature translations as a spiritual escape and as a means of overcoming isolation. The protective function of translation pertained not only to translators themselves, but also to their original writings, which were "smuggled" out of prison disguised as translations.

Translation activity behind bars is largely an unexplored ground, even though it proved to be a far more complex phenomenon when compared with original prison writing, which has received more scholarly attention. Unlike poets or writers, literary translators need physical access to the texts of the originals to be translated as well as dictionaries, commentaries, and scholarly literature; these tools were not easily accessible in camps; access to them was frequently blocked by censors and had to be literally fought for. Incarcerated translators also faced an intellectual challenge of "double mnemonic load" when they had to memorize source texts and their translations or when mastering a foreign language in such texts. It is therefore possible to speak of translations in captivity as remarkable feats of mental endurance, stamina, integrity, and resistance.

In the Ukrainian context, where the boundaries between the "small zone" of the Soviet labour camps and the "large zone" outside them were very fluid, the notion of "prison" can be metaphorically extended to social and literary seclusion. From this perspective, research into the activity of translators who were not physically imprisoned, but whose voices were forcefully hushed and silenced by their "persona non grata" status in literature and who were deprived of any possibility to publish their works, could add to the discussion of translation in captivity.

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## Appendix

**Stus to his wife, 2 Feb. 1975:** “I have already written to you about this, but the letter was stolen for some reason, and no explanation provided as to why it was confiscated. There I had included my latest translations of Rilke’s sonnets. I had finished them about two weeks before, and thus far, I have no new translations.”

**Stus to his wife and his son, 25 Aug. 1982:** “I wrote to you earlier this month, but the letter was confiscated. It contained my translations from Rilke (I guess they were a thorn in someone’s side).”

**Stus to his wife, 30 Apr.-2 May 1983:** “I had sent you my translation of Rilke’s “Elegy to Maryna”<sup>27</sup> twice, but it was confiscated. I translated some poems by Arthur Rimbaud with the same result. The same happened to my own poems. Therefore, I do not know whether in the near future you will be able to read whatever I have been lucubrating in the privacy of my cell.”

**Stus to his wife and his son, 12 June 1983:** “I am rewriting my letter sent in June, as it was confiscated for absolutely no reason. I devoted the whole letter to Dmytro,<sup>28</sup> guiding him through his life choices, and included a new version of my translation of Kipling’s “If” as well as the Russian translation by Mikhail Lozinskii, and added my comments. There were no ‘conventions’ at all, and it was a twenty-page letter, but all for nothing!”

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<sup>27</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, “Elegie an Marina Zwetajewa-Efron” (1926).

<sup>28</sup> Dmytro Stus (b. 1966), a son of Vasył' Stus.