

The Short Career of Riccardo Selvi as Translator of Czech Poetry in the Early 1930s



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SYNOPSIS

This article reconstructs the short career of Riccardo Selvi as a translator of Czech poetry. Thanks to archival documents and reviews published in Czech newspapers regarding his work, we have been able to reconstruct his rather singular literary path. In addition to his translation of *Máj* ('May') by K.H. Mácha — his most famous exploit —, we examine his translation of the libretto for Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka* in the context of the controversy that ensued in the newspaper *Lidové noviny*. Selvi's efforts help to shed light on the essential role played by Czechoslovakian institutions, in terms of their financial support, and on various strategies of poetic translation outside the academic world during the 1930s.

KEYWORDS

Riccardo Selvi; poetic translation; cultural transfer; K.H. Mácha; Czech-Italian relations; *Rusalka*; Antonín Dvořák.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the translation of Czech literature into Italian has always had its share of ad-hoc figures, chance encounters, and paradoxical outcomes. But of all the translators who ever worked on significant works of literature, Riccardo Selvi undoubtedly occupies a singular place. By retracing the short trajectory of his career, we hope to shed some light on the practice of cultural mediation between cultural contexts, one that had been previously limited to a few experts in the field. Known almost exclusively for his translation of K.H. Mácha, who has undergone a revival in Italy since the publication of a new translation of his works in 2013¹, Selvi is emblematic of the translator working outside of academia that characterises poetic translation of the 1930s. There are few surviving traces of his life and publishing initiatives, so we will

1 Karel Hynek Mácha: *Maggio*, ed. Annalisa Cosentino, transl. Alessandra Mura. Marsilio, Venezia 2013.



look instead, at least for the purposes of this study, to the arc of his development as an intellectual figure, one who represented the hopes of many Czech intellectuals, but also a poet in his own right and a translator worthy of the classics.

On the Italian side, the history of relations with Czech culture has long been characterised by an episodic and often — with very few exceptions — amateur interest (Cronia 1958). Yet it is well known that the First World War brought significant change to these relations, if only briefly. It was a time when even the most prominent figures of Italian politics and culture were compelled to take an interest in the history and culture of this Central European country, one that might well have become an important ally to Italy in the region (Catalano 2015). It is in this context that Slavic studies first developed as an academic discipline during the early interwar period, starting with the foundation of the first chair of Slavic Philology in Padua (1920/1921), and culminating in the publication of *La Cecoslovacchia* (1925), as well as the first credible scholarly journal *Rivista di letterature slave* ('Review of Slavic literatures', 1926). In the course of the 1920s, however, many of these promising signs, for various reasons, would slowly fade away. Such was the case with Giani Stuparich, who came to Prague with great expectations as a professor of Italian literature, only to leave a short while later. It was likewise inevitable that Ettore Lo Gatto, in spite of his great organisational efforts and several noteworthy works in the field of Czech literature, would eventually settle on the Russian context. And it is a similar case with Arturo Cronia, who devoted himself more and more exclusively to the field of philology (Catalano 2019). So it appears to be rather symptomatic of Slavic studies in the 1920s, at least in the context of Czech literature, that an initial period of vigorous activity in the field (including publication) did not always translate into lasting growth or dissemination to the broader cultural sphere. As a consequence, the most popular elements of the Italian press have long remained the providence of journalists and publicists (Ugo Dadone, for instance), together with intellectuals who relied largely on German translations (Taulero Zulberti). It is no coincidence, moreover, that short summaries on Czech literature remained the sole work of Czech critics, in particular Miroslav Rutte and Bartoš Vlček, until the appearance of more expanded articles by Giovanni Maver, and later Wolfango Giusti.

THE BIRTH OF A TRANSLATOR

It is in this context that Riccardo Selvi, in the early 1930s, began to take an interest in Czech poetry, alongside several high-profile Italian Slavists of the period (one thinks of Renato Poggioli, for instance). Who was this virtually unknown thirty-year-old poet, and what made him think he could translate one of the most demanding works of Czech poetry of the 19th century? Based on reports by Selvi himself (reprinted here in the appendix), as well as reports by the Czech newspapers of the time (often based on information provided by Selvi), we will try — at least partially — to reconstruct the trajectory of his career². Selvi was born in Gorizia in 1900, and we know,

2 The following summary is based on the sparse bibliographic information provided by Selvi in his own publications, along with information gleaned from various newspaper articles cited below.

based on a letter in Czech dated 20 July 1933 (reprinted in the appendix), that he was the son of Clelia Bolaffio, the sister of the known painter Vittorio Bolaffio, and an army doctor by the name Maximilian Spitz (1870–1943), italianized like Selvi, who resided in 1933 at 20 Havlíčkova in Olomouc. Though we do not know how Spitz came to meet Selvi's mother, this information does reveal the translator's direct connection to Czechoslovakia. The fact that his father was a military doctor leads us to believe he was the same Maximilian Spitz who, in 1942, along with other members of his family, was deported from Olomouc to Terezín, and in December of the following year to Auschwitz where he died³. We also know that Riccardo Selvi completed his high school degree in 1919 in Maribor before going on to Prague to study for one or two years in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University (though he did not complete his studies). He would go on to study at the University of Padua and to live for brief periods in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. It is a strikingly unorthodox path, though perhaps not so unusual at the time, especially for somebody living near the border with family roots in Central Europe. Undoubtedly, it is to this rather itinerant life that we may attribute Selvi's considerable language skills — which is to say, the excellent grasp of Italian, German, English, and French, and fair command of Czech to which he professes in 1933. In another letter dated 1945 (reprinted in the appendix), Selvi maintains that he has always been opposed to fascism, that he was an expatriate in Prague, and that he has had numerous clashes with members of the Italian consulate. In 1932 he lived in Rome, working as translator for the E.J.A. Cinema Consortium, before being hired as a certified translator for the court. It is difficult to know how often he travelled to Czechoslovakia during this period, but we can be certain that he was in Prague as a 'collaborator' of the university Italian lecturer Nicolò d'Alfonso. During 1935, he seems to have spent some time in Paris studying for a degree in 'hermetic sciences'. Based on several letters from the archives we can deduce that from 1936 he lived in Milan, where he wrote a letter in August 1945 (the second letter reprinted here) in which he requests, through the Czechoslovakian consulate, to be considered 'for a teaching position in Italian language and literature at one of your universities'. In December 1945, the Ministry of Education and National Culture forwarded the request to Charles University, which put the matter to a commission made up of professors Václav Černý, Josef Kopal, and Jan Rypka. Their verdict, issued in a brief statement dated 30 April 1946, is that Selvi did not qualify as an 'habilitated expert' as 'he cannot claim even one scholarly work in the field'; the highest position for which he may be considered, they conclude, is that of lecturer — a position that, in Prague, was already filled. It was therefore suggested that he contact the Masaryk University in Brno, since 'given his knowledge of the Czech language and interest in Czech literature, there is no doubt that his stay in the Czech environment would greatly contribute to the promotion of our literature.'⁴

At that point, Selvi must have returned to Rome where, as we learn from a letter written to the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral in December 1948, he seems to have col-

3 <https://www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-victims/victim/125297-maximilian-spitz/> [31.12.2020].

4 See the materials preserved in the university archive, Prague, Archiv Univerzity Karlovy, Filozofická fakulta, Riccardo Selvi.



laborated with the International Refugees Office⁵. We are able to confirm this letter was written by Selvi thanks to the signature, which matches those on his letters from the 1930s. Moreover, his connection with the occult lends credibility to the notion that he wrote the first complete and widely circulated Italian translation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published at the end of the war⁶. In response to a letter that Selvi wrote to the magazine *Azione nonviolenta* ('Nonviolent action') in 1966 — his last letter discovered to date —, the editor Aldo Capitini defines him as 'a fine spirit and open to noble causes' (1966, s. 19). This is the only concrete information we have at present concerning the year of Selvi's death.

THE TRANSLATION OF MÁJ

Even Riccardo Selvi's literary work is difficult to reconstruct in its entirety, comprised in large part of projects left unfinished — a consequence of the economic hardship he must have faced for much of his life. According to sources that do not seem entirely reliable, Selvi published a dissertation in Lipsia in 1922 with the title *Goethe als Orphiker* ('The orphic Goethe') which does not survive in any German library, as well as 'lyric poems, novels, and an abundance of articles in various periodicals'. It would seem as well that, in 1932, he was working on a book in French with the title *La Dramaturgie Cinématographique*. Selvi himself claims in one of his poetry collections to have written 'poems and plays in German, unpublished', as well as various 'lyric poems in the magazines "Squille isontine" ["Bells of Isonzo"] and "Il pensiero" ["The thought"]'. But we can only be certain about the publication of two slender collections of poetry: *Liliana! Febbre e fantasmagoria* ('Liliana! Fever and phantasmagoria', 1929)⁷ and *Amore vecchio* ('Old love', 1930)⁸. The latter closes with the poem 'Fervorino' ('Rebuke', where it is noted: 'from the Czech by K.H. Mácha')⁹, consisting of a paraphrase of Mácha's text 'Z temna lesa žežhulička' ('The Cuckoo in the Dark Forest') from his cycle *Ohlas písní národních* ('An echo of national songs'). The first significant publication relating to Czech literature, however, is an incomplete version of *Máj* published under the title *Maggio, Stagion d'Amore!* ('May, season of love'), in a 1932 issue of the Palermo magazine *Arte Nostra*¹⁰. This was followed two years later by the publication, at Selvi's own expense, of a 'poetic translation' featuring an illustrated portrait of Mácha by Cyril Bouda and a design by the translator. The book also

5 Chilean National Library, Author Archive, <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/623/w3-article-135904.html> [31.12.2020].

6 Bram Stoker: *Dracula*. Fratelli Bocca, Milano 1945. This edition does not provide any indication of its translator, but we do find this information in the second edition from the same publisher, Bocca (Milan 1952); see Berni 2014.

7 Riccardo Selvi: *Liliana! Febbre e fantasmagoria*. Editoriale Italiana Contemporanea, Arezzo 1929.

8 Riccardo Selvi: *Amore vecchio*. Ed. C. E. L. V. I., Trieste 1930.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

10 It includes the four cantos without the two intermezzi, 'Maggio, Stagion d'amore!', *Arte nostra* 9, 1932, no. 10, pp. 147–151.



contains flattering reviews by the Czech intellectuals František Krčma and Hanuš Jelínek, as well as Italian Slavists Giovanni Maver ('on the whole I like the translation *very much*') and Luigi Salvini ('I have read and admired your quite beautiful poetic translation')¹¹. According to Selvi, his translation was inflected with 'something in the atmosphere of Rome'; the 'plasticity' and 'colouring' of the city in particular, as well as the first intermezzo, are the outcome of a personal search: 'to enable me to compose something like the libretto to the *Danse macabre* symphony by Saint-Saëns, I wanted to draw from the Italian-Spanish jargon used in *auto-da-fés* — some old terminology that has its roots in the Neapolitan dialect, since Naples has a long history under Spanish rule' (Selvi 1937, p. 373). As for versification, he claims to have respected 'the rule of matching the natural accent of Italian words with the accent of the strophic scheme'; he continues: 'I have carefully observed how in Italian prosody, from my point of view, vowels that are side by side must always be read together as one syllable, whether inside a word or at the interface between two consecutive words. This is fairly new in Italian traditional poetry' (ibid., p. 374).

Selvi's contacts with Czech culture therefore intensified and grew during the first half of the 1930s, as we can confirm by the exceedingly positive reception of his translations in the Czech press. In one of the first articles on Selvi, only several months after the appearance of his work in *Arte Nostra*, Krčma (who was an editor of Mácha's writings) described Selvi's translation as 'a big success, quite delectable' (F.K. 1932). Later, in an article on new translations of *Máj*, Krčma would maintain that Selvi's book 'deserves the full attention of the Czech cultural public' (Krčma 1934; the article also features a photograph of Selvi). Josef Bukáček, a lecturer of Czech in Padua and Trieste, writes that Selvi 'translates in some places [...] paraphrases in others' and 'elsewhere (in the first intermezzo) makes some directorial adjustments', but is certainly to be commended, not only for attempting a poetic translation of the work but for choosing such an unusual versification (the nine-syllable *novenario*) (jb 1934) — 'a brave formal talent', he adds, 'who has a fine poetic ear and rhythmic inspiration, and whose destiny it is to translate Erben's ballads'. Bukáček would go on to develop his argument in a subsequent article emphasising the translator's classical inspiration (Petrarch, Metastasio, and above all, Goethe) and describing Selvi as a 'great hope for our poetry' precisely for having reworked this text into a format that was bound to be more interesting to the Italian public than a translation 'in bored prose that only a translator could consider an acceptable stand-in for verses' (Bukáček 1935, p. 352–353). One of Selvi's closest counterparts, Julius Skarlandt,

11 Also accompanied by a short introduction, and explanatory notes, as well as the aforementioned poem 'Fervorino', it is organised in six cantos with the titles 'Vittima' ('Victim'), 'Carcere' ('Prison'), 'Intermezzo macabro' ('Macabre intermezzo'), 'Il supplizio' ('The torture'), 'La masnada' ('The rabble'), and 'Il poeta' ('The poet'), where the second interlude is briefly summarised in prose: "*Máj*". *Poemetto romantico ceco di K.H. Mácha († 1836). Il capolavoro della letteratura cecoslovacca. Versione poetica di Riccardo Selvi.* ('Czech romantic poem by K.H. Mácha († 1836). The masterpiece of Czechoslovakian literature. Poetic translation by Riccardo Selvi.') [Tipografia Coppitelli & Palazzotti], Rome [1934] (but it could have also been printed at the end of 1933, as Selvi himself writes in one of his later works, Riccardo Selvi: *Motivi Praghesi*. Milan 1938, p. [7]).



promoted Selvi to the Czech public on several occasions, describing him as a man ‘of Romanticist persuasion himself, with strong affinities for Máchá’s work and fate’¹². Following up on Bukáček’s arguments, he too appreciated that Selvi chose to produce a translation in metre and rhyme, ‘which is the true art of translation, capturing the poetic lustre and formal quality of the original’ (Skarlandt 1934b). Earlier in 1934, Skarlandt had mentioned the existence of several handwritten translations of texts by Karel Hlaváček, and praised Selvi’s translation of *Máj*, repeating the notion that he was destined to translate Erben’s ballads (Skarlandt 1934a). Other authors repeated this idea in turn, sometimes adding that Selvi intended to translate Božena Němcová’s *The Grandmother* as well (tč 1940)¹³. Rather than reflecting genuine sentiments on Selvi’s prowess as a translator, these claims most likely speak to a certain desire on the part of many Czech intellectuals of the time with an affinity for Italian culture. It is along these lines, for example, that Karel Polák, in a work comparing foreign translations of *Máj*, emphasised that if Selvi was compelled to change ‘the content, meaning, and sense’ of the original, it was in the manner of ‘a true Italian poet’. ‘He not only changed Máchá,’ writes Polák, ‘but surpassed his spirit. It is the highest that a translator of poetry can achieve’. He concludes that ‘even in incomplete form, it is already the most distinctive and beautiful translation ever written’ (Polák 1940, pp. 234–236).

We are compelled to dwell on these perspectives because the support of Czech intellectuals and institutions was fundamental to Selvi’s short career as a translator of Czech poetry. But there is another important aspect to his career, this time concerning his efforts to secure financial support from Prague. Letters from the Embassy of the Czechoslovak Republic in Rome, preserved in the archives of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, allow us to examine these efforts in detail, and to assess more precisely how he came to publish his translation of *Máj* ‘at his own expense’. In a letter from May 1932, Rome submits a request for Máchá’s works to be sent from Prague in relation to ‘a certain Riccardo Selvi’, briefly described in the letter, who has asked the Slavist Luigi Salvini to help him with a translation of Máchá’s masterwork¹⁴. Another request is made a few months later, this time for support from Milan to finance the planned ‘new illustrated edition’, with an attached letter from Selvi dated 12 December 1932. In this letter, he writes about receiving ‘the most flattering compliments’ for his partial translation, recently published in a magazine, and asks for help ‘selling advance copies’¹⁵. Problems encountered obtaining illustrations from Czech artists¹⁶ were followed by the breakdown of negotiations with publishers, as well as personal financial difficulties, which led to his decision to publish the book on his own. But this would require a more substantial contribution from Czechoslovakian institutions¹⁷. In his letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reprinted here,

12 He also recalls a trip that he made years earlier with Selvi to Okoř Castle (Skarlandt 1944).

13 Also see *Národní politika*, 5. 5. 1940, p. 8.

14 MZV, III. Sekce, Itálie, 529, 19. 5. 1932. Also see the positive opinion expressed in a later letter, *ibid.*, 20. 6. 1932.

15 *Ibid.*, 23. 12. 1932.

16 *Ibid.*, 7. 3. 1933.

17 *Ibid.*, 30. 5. 1933.



Selvi requests a contribution of 427 lire in exchange for 61 copies, which had been reserved by various Czechoslovakian institutions. Ten of these were sent to Prague by the Roman embassy on 30 January 1934¹⁸. Economic support from Czechoslovakian institutions was therefore clearly indispensable for the success of this project, as was often the case in the 1920s and 1930s, just as positive reviews of his work were necessary if he hoped to be considered for future commissions as a translator of classic Czech literature.

As we have seen, it is worth reflecting further on the positive way in which Selvi's translation was received, and not only in the Czech context. In his 1950 review¹⁹, Czech scholar Jiří Levý praises Selvi for his poetic talent and the liberties he has taken with his translation, describing it as 'the most original approach' of the 1930s. He especially admired Selvi's choice of nine-syllable metre, for the reason that 'theoretically, the most interesting translations are those which depart rhythmically from the original' (Levý 1971, p. 161). Václav Polák did not look as favourably on these aspects of the translation, speaking of Selvi's tendency to 'paraphrase' the original rather than presenting a direct translation. He emphasises, on the contrary, that one of the main problems is precisely Selvi's choice of nine-syllable verses, rather than duplicating Mácha's verses of 11-, 12-, and 13-syllable lines, as this has forced the translator to sacrifice important passages from the original (Polák 1951). Significantly, the only response in the 1930s that was critical of Selvi's work came from Arturo Cronia: 'the mistakes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings of the original spirit present an image of *Máj* that is strikingly distorted' (Cronia 1936, s. 151). Ettore Lo Gatto, in a note to his new translation, is similarly critical (Lo Gatto 1950). Undoubtedly, the question of how to translate *Máj* deserves a much more in-depth analysis²⁰, yet we would like to focus instead on the repeated praise Selvi's translation received from Czech critics (and poets) in the 1930s. Aside from the enthusiasm shown, quite reasonably, towards anyone concerned with Czech culture and matters of Czech interest (a phenomenon we still know well today), the positive reception of Selvi's translation must be understood within the more general approach towards literary translation that we see in a certain aspect of Czech culture. In addition to the 'poeticity' of Selvi's language, what critics found particularly praiseworthy was his choice to translate in metre at all — as Bukáček puts it, to actually rework the poem, which is of greater value than a faithful translation rendered 'integrally, but unrhymed, in verses that more resemble prose, as is often the case in Italy' (jb 1934). It is not within the scope of the present study to explore this phenomenon in more detail, but it is clear that Bukáček's statements reveal something else about Selvi's poetic method: that it was, with its conservation of rhyme and archaic vocabulary (Polák speaks of a 'pure Italian musicality'; Polák 1940, p. 235), of a style that had long fallen into obsolescence. This, however, did not prevent the young Italian poet from aspiring to the musicality of Mácha's verses, a musicality 'that only a poet can handle, abiding it in his own way' (ibid., p. 236).

18 Ibid., 30. 1. 1934. Also see the delivery of another 300 copies on 10. 4. 1934.

19 Also see the analysis of Annalisa Cosentino (2020).

20 For the Italian context, see the analysis of Alessandra Mura (2013).



THE TRANSLATION OF *RUSALKA*

If the ‘poetic translation’ of *Máj* is a common topic among scholars, the same cannot be said of another translation by Selvi, in large part because it was never published. In the documents reproduced here, Selvi claims he translated both *Princezna Pampeliška* (‘Princess Dandelion’) — ‘the play for children’ by Jaroslav Kvapil — and a libretto by the same author for Antonín Dvořák’s *Rusalka*. The second translation represents a long forgotten episode in Czech-Italian relations, one that deserves to be remembered, since it will allow us to make more general observations. Indeed, there was something of a controversy in the Czech press at the time, one that tells us something about the practice of poetic translation in the 1930s. It began with an interview published in the newspaper *Večer* concerning an upcoming performance of *Rusalka* in Rome, conducted by the celebrated Bernardino Molinari. In this interview, J.A. Sura erroneously attributes the Italian translation of the libretto to a lecturer of Italian language in Prague, D’Alfonso, whom we have already mentioned above (Sura 1935a). A few days later, D’Alfonso corrected the news, clarifying that the translator of the libretto was actually Selvi, and that he himself was the author of the introduction only, adding that the translation had been carried out under the auspices of his own institute, Audio-Vox²¹, described as an ‘institute for the translation of literary and scholarly works in foreign languages’. Then, ostensibly to make up for his original error, the journalist published another interview in *Večer*, this time with Selvi, discussing his strategy as a translator and focusing in particular on the need to create new Italian terms for folkloric characters (Sura 1935b). The interview was accompanied by several excerpts of Selvi’s translation. Though it is expressly stated that anyone interested ‘can receive a copy of the translation, typewritten on a machine at the institute of Prof. Dr. D’Alfonso, Audio-Vox, Prague, Jungmannova tř. 38, pending publication’, no copies of this translation can be found. J.A. Sura returns to the subject in *Národní listy* (‘The National Newspaper’), where he reproduces Selvi’s words in more detail. Again the translator describes his method, similar to that of his poetic translation of *Máj*, which consists in adapting the original verses to the Italian poetic context. He discusses at length the characters and (with great ingenuity) his choice of renaming them. Just as he had invented a new name for the protagonist ‘Jarmila’ in his translation of *Máj*, he approached the same task in *Rusalka* on the basis of presumed etymological similarities. In renaming the protagonist, he chooses again ‘Rosalba’ which, instead of ‘white rose’, makes use of the German word for ‘elf’, *albe*, as a descriptor: ‘to be aquatic or nymph-like’. The name he creates for *ježibaba* [the forest witch of Czech folklore, similar to ‘Baba Yaga’ in other Slavic traditions] is ‘Arruffona’ (based on the Czech word *ježít* meaning ‘to ruffle’, or *arruffare* in Italian), and for *vodník* [a mythical water sprite] the somewhat surprising ‘Silurone’. In this case, rather than drawing from the possibilities offered by classical mythology, Selvi was inspired by the memory of a catfish he saw in a Prague aquarium whose expression reminded him of the *vodník*; discovering it was a ‘dangerous’ fish, he then decided to attach the augmentative suffix, on the model of such Italian words as *brontolone* [grouch] and *barbone* [tramp]. In this way

21 ‘Uvedení Dvořákovy opery „Rusalka“ v Římě’ [‘Introduction of Dvořák’s opera “Rusalka” in Rome’]. *Večer*, 9. 3. 1935, p. 4.



Selvi believed he had found an effective solution, one that would enrich the Italian language with the addition of a legendary creature, the Czech water sprite, which had no equivalent in Italian folklore. In his words, he had created ‘something completely new and valuable’; yet he would be compelled — by generic constraints, the musicality of the original text, and the vocal format for which it was destined — to adopt ‘old words and expressions no longer used in common Italian today, but which actually exist in dictionaries, as well as poems by Petrarch, Dante, and so on’ (Sura 1935c, p. 1). Here again, as in the case of *Máj*, we see that Selvi is faced with a rather clear choice, one that, on the other hand, might very reasonably be seen as controversial.

Unsurprisingly, Selvi’s choices provoked an almost immediate reaction from *Lidové noviny* (‘The People’s Newspaper’), followed by his own heated defence. Renowned translator Adolf Felix, who had recently published the anthology *Italští básníci 1900–1930* (‘Italian poets, 1900–1930’, 1932), acknowledged the musicality of Selvi’s *Rusalka*, but reproached him for failing to effectively recreate the atmosphere of the original Czech fairy tale, and for subscribing to the tradition of opera librettos that ‘teem with unlikely turns of phrase and outdated, ridiculous expressions’ (Felix 1935). He spends much of the article criticising precisely Selvi’s adaptations of folkloric characters, which strike him in Italian as totally ‘ridiculous’. Rather interesting, from our point of view, is Selvi’s response, which draws attention to the differences between the ‘poetic translation’ of *Máj* and [literal] ‘translation’ of *Rusalka* (which was ‘as direct as possible’), and justifies his use of archaic words and expressions (‘I am a passionate philologist, a Petrarchan’), as well as the metre (‘consistent with the aesthetics of the verses, rich in rhymes, especially dactyls, which are rare in Italian poetry’). As for his decision to rename the characters, he cites his choice of ‘Silurone’ in particular, which, he claims, was intended to be humorous, as it meant that *Rusalka* would not logically address him as ‘the spirit of the waters, the aquatic one’ but instead by a familiar name. Responding to the objection that the verses did not seem appropriate to the Czech context, he once more emphasises his intention to ‘orient some of the verses in the direction of the ontological’ (Selvi 1935). Given the relevance of this method for the arguments we have tried briefly to outline here, we find it appropriate to propose this ‘heated defence’ in our own case. After all, as Selvi would later write, he aptly describes his strategy as a kind of ‘intransigent’ translation: ‘I take sides with the intransigent poetic forms in their structure, believing that every poetic composition must be inspired by the criterion of work, and that even poetry has its laws, its discipline’ (Selvi 1938, p. [9]).

CONCLUSIONS

We do not know if Selvi’s critics played a role in ending his aspirations as a translator of Czech literary works. More likely, it was the difficulty of obtaining a stable job in Prague. What is certain is that after his return to Italy, the ambitious projects attributed to him in the Czech press were never realised. The last traces of his aspirations are connected to public conferences in 1936 in Pilsen (Skarlandt 1939) and Prague²², the last of

22 It was also publicised in tč [Nina Tučková]: ‘O Máchovi z hlediska italského’ [‘Mácha from the Italian perspective’]. *Národní listy* 76, č. 148, 29. 5. 1936, p. 5.



these being a Slavic seminar at Charles University. The proceedings, published probably the following year, were accompanied by one of Selvi's sonnets, translated by the poet Josef Hora (Selvi 1937)²³.

For lack of further documentation — though undoubtedly it does exist in other (including private) archives —, the last book published by Riccardo Selvi, in December 1938, is comprised of a series of sonnets inspired by Prague collected under the title *Motivi praguesi* ('Prague motifs', Selvi 1938)²⁴. As he states in one of his letters reprinted here, some of these poems were later translated into Czech by Nina Tučková²⁵. Illustrated with photographs, the book opens with an epigraph that, in the dramatic autumn of 1938, testifies one last time to Selvi's great affinity for Czech culture: 'The sacrifice of Czechoslovakia deserves universal recognition [...] because it has made the ultimate sacrifice for world peace with great moral strength and dignity'²⁶.

MATERIALS

1.

V Římě dne 20. července 1933

Slavné Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí v Praze

V obzoru „Arte Nostra“ v Palermě uveřejnil jsem italský překlad básně „Máj“ K. H. Máchy a dovoluji si připojit jeden otisk. Toužil bych vydati svazek s úplným překladem, a sice s dvěmi mezihrami, které ještě schází a které jsou již delší dobu přichystány ku vydání.

Jak jsem panu Ladislavovi Plechatému, tiskovému referentu Vašeho zdejšího vyslanectví, dokázal, docílil jsem od veřejné italské kritiky mnohých uctivých a pochvalných uznání a obdržel jsem jen v Římě asi 300 zakazek pro příští vydání. Od čs. úřadů dostal jsem následující objednávky:

- 10 otisků od slavného Ministerstva zahraničních věcí,
 - 20 otisků od slavného Ministerstva školství a národní osvěty,
 - 30 otisků od pana Krbce, generálního konzula v Terstu a
 - 1 otisk od konzulátu v Catania.
- souhrnem 61 otisků

²³ Namely, Selvi's sonnet 'Neuhasitelno' ('Unquenchable').

²⁴ With the attached notebook of 'auxiliary' translations, distinct from those published later, 'Doslovné, jen pomocné překlady k "Pražským motivům" Riccarda Selviho' ('Literal, only auxiliary translations for "Prague Motifs" by Riccardo Selvi').

²⁵ The poems in question here are: 'Šárka', 'Kacíř' ('Heretic'), 'Smrt Seniho' ('Seni's death'), and 'Křtěnec ohně' ('Baptism by fire'), included in the anthology *Ohlasy z Čech* ('Echoes from Bohemia'); Schwarz 1940, pp. 21, 108, 155, 174).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. [5].



Jelikož nemám pro svoji okamžitou nezaměstnanost tolik potřebných peněz, abych již předem zaplatil tiskárnu za výtisky, prosím zdvořile, aby mi slavné Ministerstvo poukázalo pro výše uvedených 61 otisků à 7 lir, dohromady 427 lir, čím bych mohl vyhověti objednávkám čs. úřadů.

Zároveň předkládám prosbu, abych byl vzat v úvahu k obsazení po případě volného místa ve Vašich konsulátních úřadech v Itálii.

Jsem narozen v Gorici (Gorizia) v Itálii, 33 roků stár, ženatý, a jsem synem z prvního manželství podplukovníka zdrav. Dr. Maximilana Spitze v Olomouci, Havlíčkova č. 20. Maturoval jsem v roce 1919 v Mariboru, navštěvoval jsem pak dva roky filosofickou fakultu v Praze a vrátil jsem se z rodinných důvodů do Itálie. Ovládám úplně italskou, německou, anglickou a francouzskou řeč a dosti dobře českou.

Po případě mého přijetí do Vašich kancelářských služeb slibuji, že vyplním svoje povinnosti k úplné uspokojivosti nadřízených, při čemž jsem milerád ochoten ve svých prázdných hodinách překládati díla vynikajících českých spisovatelů a básníků do cizích řečí a tím širší vrstvy inteligence obeznámiti s českou literaturou.

Očekávaje, že moji prosbu příznivě uvážíte, zůstávám
v hluboké úctě

Richard Selvi,
Via dei Mamili 6, Roma (52).

Reference:

Dr. Hanuš Jelínek, člen čs. akademie a přednosta oddělení Ministerstva zahraničních věcí,

Dr. Fr. Krčma, badatel spisů Máchových.

[MZV, III. Sekce, Itálie, 529]

—

Rome, 20 July 1933

Illustrious Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague

In Palermo's 'Arte Nostra', I have recently published an Italian translation of the poem *Máj* by K. H. Mácha, of which you will kindly find one copy here. I would like to publish the complete translation, with the two missing intermezzi which have been ready for publication for some time.

As I have conveyed to Mr Ladislav Plechatý, the press officer of your local embassy, I have received many deferential and flattering compliments from Italian critics, and I have received about 300 orders in Rome alone for the next edition. From Czechoslovakia I have received requests from the following authorities:

10 copies for the famous Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

20 copies for the famous Ministry of Education and the National Ministry of Education,

30 copies for Mr Krbec, Consul General in Trieste and



1 copy for the consulate in Catania.
for a total of 61 copies

Since I do not have enough money from my temporary unemployment to pay the printer for advance copies, would the illustrious Ministry please politely remit the total amount for the aforementioned 61 prints à 7 lire, for a total of 427 lire, so that I could fill the orders of the Czechoslovakian authorities.

In addition, I would request to be considered for a vacancy in one of your consulates in Italy, should one arise.

I was born in Gorica (Gorizia), Italy. I am 33 years old, married, and the son of Lt. Col.'s first marriage. Dr. Maximilan Spitz in Olomouc, Havlíčkova No. 20. I graduated in 1919 in Maribor, then attended the Faculty of Arts in Prague for two years before returning to Italy for family reasons. I am fluent in Italian, German, English, and French and have a fair command of Czech.

In the case that I am appointed to serve in one of your offices, I promise that I will fulfill my duties to the full satisfaction of my superiors, meanwhile devoting my free time to the translation of works by leading Czech writers and poets into foreign languages, in this way acquainting Czech literature to the broader intellectual milieu.

In anticipation of a favorable evaluation of my request, I remain
in deep respect

Richard Selvi,
Via dei Mamili 6, Rome (52).

Reference:

Dr. Hanuš Jelínek, member of the Czechoslovakian academy and head of the department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

Dr. Fr. Krčma, researcher of Mácha's writings.

[MFA, III. Section, Italy, 529]

2.

Milano, 9-8-45

Spett. Consolato Cecoslovacco
Roma

Nel 1932, costì, intrapresi, compii e pubblicai, a proprie spese, prima Palermo e poi a Roma, la mia, e unica, versione poetica italiana, integrale, ormai molto lodata, del poema romantico "Máj" di K.H. Mácha.

Contrario, da tutto principio, al "fascismo", in cui mai altro vidi che il brigantaggio eretto a sistema, credetti, anzi dovetti, espatriare e riparare a Praga, sperando in un appoggio da parte di quel Governo. Ma la Legazione Italiana di Praga col famigerato fascistone Riccoboni, colà molto influente, fece di tutto, spietatamente, per rendere



vano o [g]ni mio sforzo di affermarmi e sostentarmi. Ebbi soltanto qualche lezioncina privata d'italiano, e traduzioni i [ta]liane per il Congresso Internazionale d'Insegnamento Commerciale, svoltosi a Praga, qualche conferenza a Plzeň e alla Karlova Università di Praga. Riuscii tuttavia, malgrado tante strettezze, a tradurre il libretto di Jaroslav Kvapil dell'opera "Rusalka" di Antonín Dvořák, il dramma per bambini pure di Jaroslav Kvapil "Princezna Pampeliška", che ora vorrei pubblicare, e delle liriche. Gli slavisti italiani, tutti fascisti, ignorarono artificiosamente la mia attività.

Coi miei miseri risparmi, nel 1935, andai a Parigi virgola e da lì, dopo alcuni mesi, quel Consolato Italiano mi fece rimpatriare col fo [gl]io di via.

Sembra che più tardi a Praga, dopo tanto ritardo, la mia attività culturale e letteraria fosse apprezzata, poiché nel 1938 il Ministerstvo Školství, tramite questo Consolato, mi finanziò qui a Milano, della mia raccolta lirica "Motivi praghese", di cui dispongo ancora di due o tre centinaia di copie che metterei a Vostra disposizione. Fu tradotta in ceco da Josef Hora e soprattutto dalla valente letterata boema Nina Tučková, a suo tempo domiciliata a Praha III. Karmelitská č. 14, nelle raccolte "Ta krásná země" a "Naše Krajina", signora questa gentilissima che spero sana e salva, e di cui Vi chiederei notizie. A Milano compilai poi subito dopo un libretto d'opera, "L'incantesimo di Ovinni", tratto dal "Song of Hiawatha" di Longfellow, da essere musicato con motivi della "Sinfonia del Nuovo Mondo" di Antonín Dvořák.

Scopo precipuo di questa mia lettera è di chiedervi di tenermi benevolmente presente per una cattedra, di lingua e letteratura italiana, presso qualche Vostra Università, dato che parlo ormai speditamente la lingua ceca.

Ho 45 anni, cultura accademica, la laurea in scienze ermetiche (Parigi).

Accludo copia della presente perché vogliate trasmetterla al Vostro Ministro di Praga, magari corredata da una traduzione ceca Vostra, affinché colà non si debba ricorrere a qualche esponente già fascista, quali Lo Gatto, Cronia & Co., nel qual caso mi troverei allo stesso punto di prima.

In attesa di un Vostro cortese sollecito riscontro, direttamente a me, senzaltro in lingua ceca che comprendo a perfezione, con ringraziamenti anticipati [e] distinta stima.

Riccardo Selvi
Via Guicciardini 5, Milano

[Praga, Archiv Univerzity Karlovy, Filozofická fakulta, Riccardo Selvi]

—

Milan, 9-8-45

Esteemed Czechoslovakian Consulate
Rome

In 1932, I undertook, completed, and published, at my own expense, first in Palermo then in Rome, my Italian poetic translation, unabridged, now much praised, of the romantic poem *Máj* by K.H. Mácha.



Opposed from the very beginning to ‘fascism’, in which I never saw anything but systematic thuggery, I believed, indeed I had to, that I would leave Italy and take refuge in Prague, in hope that its government would support me. But the Italian Legation of Prague, with its infamous fascist Riccoboni, who is very influential there, did everything, ruthlessly, to ensure that my efforts to succeed and support myself were in vain. I only had a few private lessons in Italian, and some translation jobs for the International Congress of Commercial Education, held in Prague, as well as some conferences in Pilsen and Charles University in Prague. In the face of so many difficulties, I still managed to translate Jaroslav Kvapil’s libretto for Antonín Dvořák’s opera ‘Rusalka’, and Jaroslav Kvapil’s play for children ‘Princezna Pampeliška’, which I would now like to publish, as well as some poems. The Italian Slavists, all of them fascists, cunningly ignored my activities.

With my meager savings, in 1935, I went to Paris, and from there, after a few months, the Italian Consulate compelled me to return to Italy with an expulsion warrant.

It seems that, after a long delay, my cultural and literary activity finally came to be appreciated in Prague, since in 1938 the Ministry of Education, through the Consulate in Milan, financed my collection of poems *Motivi praguesi*, of which I still have two or three hundred copies that I would gladly put at your disposal. It was translated into Czech by Josef Hora, and above all by the talented Czech scholar Nina Tučková, who was living at the time in Praha III. Karmelitská is. 14, in the collections ‘Ta krásná země’ [‘That Beautiful Land’] and ‘Naše Krajina’ [‘Our Country’], a very kind lady who I hope is safe and sound, and of whom I would ask you for news. In Milan, I then immediately compiled an opera libretto, ‘L’incantesimo di Ovinni’ [‘The Enchantment of Ovinni’], taken from Longfellow’s ‘The Song of Hiawatha’, to be set to the music of Antonín Dvořák’s ‘New World Symphony’.

The main purpose of this letter is to ask you to kindly consider me for a teaching position in Italian language and literature at one of your universities, given that I am now fluent in the Czech language.

I am 45 years old, with a background in academia, and a degree in Hermetic Sciences (Paris).

I am enclosing an additional copy of this letter, should you wish to forward it to your Minister in Prague, perhaps accompanied by your Czech translation, so that there is no need to resort to some former fascist representative, such as Lo Gatto, Cronia & Co., in which case I would find myself right back where I started.

I look forward to your courteous and prompt reply, directly to me, certainly in the Czech language which I understand perfectly, with thanks in advance [and] with distinguished regards.

Riccardo Selvi
Via Guicciardini 5, Milan

[Prague, Charles University Archive, Faculty of Arts, Riccardo Selvi]

3.

Překladatel se brání

P. Riccardo Selvi, italský překladatel operního textu Rusalky, píše Lidovým novinám vzhledem ke kritice jeho překladu:

1. Není pravda, že jsem přeložil libreto pro mistra Molinariho, a ani jsem tím nebyl nikým pověřen, ale na svoje vlastní přání pro kohokoliv, protože se mně tato opera líbila.

2. *Moje básnická verze Máje* (tak zní pojmenování v podtitulu) jest zcela rozdílná ve zpracování od *mého překladu* (tak zní pojmenování jako podtitul) opery Rusalka.

3. Utekl jsem se zúmyslně k zastaralé italštině, stále však užívané, vítané a oceněné v hodnotné italské poezii, protože obě tato díla, *Máj* a *Rusalka*, se odehrávají ve středověkém, nebo alespoň romantickém ovzduší. Jsem vášnivý filolog, petrarkovec.

4. Nemůže se mluvit o italské mytologii, ve které by chyběl pojem „vodník“: v nejlepší případě o mytologii klasické, tj. helensko-latinské, z které právě jsem nechtěl čerpat, abych neublížil českému folkloru.

5. „Silurone“ však, od „siluro“ = sumec, ohromná žravá ryba, která stahuje pod vodu, praobyvatelka českého podnebí, jež nutkavě připomíná masku vodníka, je název úmyslně žertovný (buffo), ne však směšný (a proč také?), přezdívka z Rusaličiny úst, a odpovídá asi jakémusi pomyslnému českému „sumčák“, odvozenému od „sumec“. Vodník by byl duch vod (il genio delle acque, l'acquatico), jak jsem také užíval toto poslední pojmenování tu a tam, v didaskáliích, a když se o něm zmiňuje člověk (hajný a kuchtík). Ale *Rusalka*, vodní víla sama, ze své strany nemůže přirozeně oslovovati ho jako ducha vod nebo vodníka (genio delle acque, acquatico), bytost sourodou, ale musí ho nazývati vlastním jménem. Jméno „ondino“ také mně navrhované, bylo by téměř souznačné s oněmi dvěma druhými, stejně nevýrazné, stejně nepopisující, připomínající „ondinu“ nečeskou, ani ne slovanskou, nýbrž německou (Lortzing, De la Motte Fouqué) a novolatinskou („ondina del lago“ od Portugalce Braga). — „Arruffona“ je překlad etymologický „Ježibaby“, a také logický, obě jsou jména spíše vlastní, než strega = čarodějnice.

6. Pasus: „fiore di loto, d'ignoto, vuoto — vuoto — vuoto —!“ byl špatně pochopen panem kritikem, který myslí, že je míněn lotos květina. Tento květ jsem však vždy překládal slovem „ninfear“, aby se zabránilo nedorozuměním. „Loto“ v italštině však znamená bahno, kal, a je proto patrné, že tento pasus znamená: Květe bahna (kalu), neznáma (poněvadž z tajemné prahmoty, nyní prázdné, to jest bahna, neznáma), prázdného (právě protože jeho květ, „Rosalba“, která sama může znamenati také lotos — rosa alba, to jest bílá růže — odešla mezi lidi). Tento pasus má proto význam fenomenologický, v němž *Silurone* popře své otcovství v *Rusalka* — není již proto duch vod, není již jakýsi Nereus, otec nereidek, ale bytost odlišná, byt i sourodá, jinak by byl otcem *Rusalky*, což není úmyslem ani českého originálu: a tato bytost proto musí nésti vlastní jméno, jako *Rusalka*, například *Silurone*. — Bylo právě mým úmyslem, jako též v básnické verzi *Máje*, prohloubiti některé verše ve směru až ontologickým.



7. Na podkladě srovnávajícího vědomí musím považovati svůj překlad Rusalky za jedinečný, doslovný do největší míry možností, aby jinak zůstal slučitelný s estetikou veršů, bohatý na rýmy, zvláště daktylské, vzácné v italské poezii.

R. Selvi

[*Lidové noviny*, 18. 7. 1935, p. 7.]

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The translator defends himself

P. Riccardo Selvi, the Italian translator of the opera text *Rusalka*, writes to *Lidové noviny* in response to criticism of his translation:

1. It is not true that I translated the libretto for Master Molinari, and I was not entrusted with it by anyone, but by my own desire that someone translate it, because I liked this opera.

2. My poetic translation of *Máj* (this is the subtitle) follows a very different approach with respect to my translation (this is the subtitle) of the opera *Rusalka*.

3. I made deliberate use of outdated Italian, which is still used, welcomed, and appreciated in respectable Italian poetry, because both of these works, *Máj* and *Rusalka*, take place in a medieval, or at least romantic atmosphere. I'm a passionate philologist and a Petrarchan.

4. There can be no talk of Italian mythology, which lacks the term 'vodník': at best, classical mythology, that is Greek-Latin mythology, from which I simply had no desire to draw from, so as not to offend Czech folklore.

5. 'Silurone', however, from 'siluro' = catfish, a huge carnivorous fish that pulls people underwater, native to the Czech climate, whose face bears an immediate resemblance to that of the vodník, the name is intentionally playful (buffo), but not ridiculous (and why?), a nickname from *Rusalka's* mouth, whose equivalent in Czech is probably 'sumčák' ['catfish'], derived from 'sumec'. Vodník is the water sprite (il genio delle acque, l'acquatico ['spirit of the water, the aquatic one']), as also appears here and there in the didaskalia, as well as whenever he is mentioned by a human character (the gamekeeper and cook). But *Rusalka*, a water sprite herself, cannot naturally address him as 'water sprite', or vodník (genio delle acque, acquatico), a rarified creature, but must call him by a name of her own invention. The name 'ondino', also proposed to me, would be almost synonymous with the other two, equally indistinct, equally nondescriptive, reminiscent of 'ondina' neither Czech nor Slavic, but German (Lortzing, De la Motte Fouqué) and Neo-Latin ('ondina del lago' from the Portuguese Braga). — 'Arruffona' is an etymological translation of 'Ježibaba', and also logical, both names are distinct from strega = witch.

6. The passus: 'fiore di loto, d'ignoto, vuoto — vuoto — vuoto — !' was misunderstood by a critic who thought it was meant to refer to the lotus flower. However, for the word 'lotus' I have always used the word 'ninfea' to avoid confusion. However, 'loto' in Italian means 'mud', 'sediment', and it is therefore clear that this passus means: The flowers of the mud (sludge), unknown (because of the mysterious primordial mat-



ter, now empty, that is, the mud, unknown), empty (just because its flower, ‘Rosalba’, which itself can also mean the lotus — the rosa alba, that is, the white rose — has gone among the people). This passus therefore has a phenomenological significance, in which Silurone denies his fatherhood in Rusalka — he is no longer the spirit of the waters, he is no longer a kind of Nereus, the father of Nereids, but a different being, albeit rarified, otherwise he would be the father of Rusalka, which is not the intention of the Czech original: and this creature must therefore bear its own name, like Rusalka, for example Silurone. — It was precisely my intention, as in the poetic translation of *Máj*, to extend some verses in an ontological direction.

7. On the basis of my comparative knowledge, I believe my translation of Rusalka had to be unique, to the greatest measure possible, in order to remain consistent with the aesthetics of the original verses, rich in rhymes, especially dactyls, which are rare in Italian poetry.

R. Selvi

[*Lidové noviny*, July 18, 1935, p. 7.]

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