

# A memoir which in Spain became a diary

## Abstract

This article investigates the Spanish translation of Miron Białoszewski's *Memoir from the Warsaw Uprising*. I discuss the erroneous translation of the work as a "diary" according to Spanish dictionaries and literary theory works, the paratexts (introduction and afterword), and the reception of the work by the Spanish speaking community. In the last part, I examine a few passages to demonstrate how Białoszewski's style has come to be flattened in the translation process.

## Keywords

Miron Białoszewski, war literature, translation, reception of Polish literature in the world, Spanish translation

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## Genre Trouble, Title Trouble

In 2011 the prestigious Spanish publishing house Alba Editorial from Barcelona published a translation of Miron Białoszewski's chef-d'oeuvre. Just to give some example, Alba is the Spanish publisher of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Bertolt Brecht, Daphne du Maurier, André Gide, David Herbert Lawrence, Joyce Carol Oates, Sylvia Plath, Tennessee Williams, Stefan Zweig (which to a specialist in queer literature is instantly a signal that the editors appreciate queer modernism), not to mention Spanish contemporary writers and classics, and world literature classics. As for Polish names, Alba is also the publisher of Tadeusz Kantor. Katarzyna Olszewska Sonnenberg who translated the work has also an impressive list of achievements which includes the names of Czesław Miłosz, Zofia Nałkowska, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Borowski, Włodzimierz Odojewski, and more. The translation and publication of the book was supported by the Poland Translation Program of Instytut Książki. So much for the bald facts.

Surprisingly enough the book ended up with the title *Diario de levantamiento de Varsovia*. "Diary from the Warsaw Uprising". "Dziennik". Not *Memorias*, not *Memoir*, not *Pamiętnik*. Adam Poprawa in his recent article on "Dziennik", that is, let me suggest, *Diamemorias*, or *Memodiary* or *Diamemoir*, used the Spanish translation difference to discuss one of the earlier versions of *Memoir*, the so-called "Notebooks of *Memoir*" version, which blended diaristic notes from the 60s with the memories from 1944. The critic commented that Olszewska Sonnenberg was not that wrong in her choice of words, especially that in Spanish, according to some dictionary, "diario" might also mean "memories" (Poprawa 2021: 103). Things are more complicated, however. Strictly speaking, this explanation does not hold true and the translator's choice has to be considered an error. It does not hold true neither on the level of everyday conversational Spanish, neither on the expert level of the Spanish understanding of poetics. As for the former, the best source, i.e. the RAE (Real Academia Española) dictionary defines "diario" as "relato de lo que ha sucedido día por día", i.e. "an account on what has happened day after day"<sup>1</sup>. This could apparently open the possibility of including accounts from the past which employ "day by day" chronological structure, however RAE is, as usual, extremely precise: there is a difference between "de lo que sucedió" and "de lo que ha sucedido", much as in English between "of what happened" and "what has happened", where the latter implies "just has happened", i.e. very recently. My favourite dictionary *Clave* states the same without any shadow of doubt: "relación o relato de lo que ocurre cada día" (Clave 2001: 617), "an account of what is happening every day", the use of present excludes texts that use this structure to talk about the past. As for Spanish poetics, Demetrio Estébanez Calderón (1999: 286) in his *Diccionario de términos literarios* makes a precise remark about the use of time(s) in "diario": "uso preferente de los tiempos de presente y pretérito perfecto, dada la cercanía entre el momento de la narración y el acontecimiento narrado". This implies the use of the same times as in both dictionaries, present and present perfect, "given the proximity between the moment of narration and the narrated event". We know that Miron in his *Memoir*

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are my own (PS).

makes it clear that he is writing it in 1967, which is the “moment of narration”, therefore we cannot absolve the translator with this definition. Things get a bit more complicated though when we look at the definition of “memorias” in the same dictionary, because Calderón states that before the proliferation of various modalities of autobiographical writing, such as confessions, self-portrait, diary, and autobiography, they were all called “memorias”. He adds then that sometimes the boundaries between these genres might be blurred, yet they have notable differences (Estébanez Calderón 1999: 653; see also Platas Tasende 2007: 183-184, entry “Diario”, who says that in diaries the narrator interprets, hides or overplays many details just like in “memorias”, but the difference between them is the use of time). Therefore it is the diary that could be somewhat straddled inside the bigger category “memoir”, yet not otherwise. And this is exactly what Białoszewski does in his book: inside the “memoir” supernarrative, he employs the traces of the narration proper for diaries. Another difference raised in more than one source is the position of the speaking subject: diaries are more focused on the “I”, while memoirs on “I” and “the others” in “circumstances”<sup>2</sup>. This applies perfectly to Białoszewski’s chef-d’oeuvre which presents the main character, and the speaking “I” in a group of his close family and friends, and also inside the bigger group of civil survivors, yet also in the context of common circumstances<sup>3</sup>. To conclude: Spanish poetics, Spanish definitions do not differ here that much from neither Polish, neither English, nor French uses and definitions<sup>4</sup>. Spanish definitions of “memorias” apply perfectly to Białoszewski’s “memorias” dubbed “diario”. If we need to find an excuse for the translator’s choice, it must lie elsewhere.

## The Paratexts: the Known and the Unknown

The book was published with two accompanying paratexts, the translator’s *Nota preliminar* (her name is misspelt as “Olszewska”) and an *Epilogue* by Leszek Soliński from 1988 (his name is misspelt as “Leszek Smoliński”). Olszewska Sonnenberg begins with situating the Warsaw Uprising on the map of World

<sup>2</sup> “es prioritaria la exposición de la realidad exterior y de los otros, por más que se haga en función del yo-narrador”. And furthermore on “diario”: “es una minuciosa constatación de hechos cotidianos, que puede suponer una intensificación mayor de la expresión subjetiva pero que es de alcance más reducido al no poder presentar la panorámica total de una vida, como es el caso de la autobiografía”. (“It’s a detailed account of everyday events which might imply an intensified subjective expression but it’s scope is more reduced than in autobiography since it does not present a panorama of the whole life”) (Berrio, Calvo 2016: 228).

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Pozuelo Yvancos (2009: 903-904) in the entry *La Ficción* in the dictionary *El lenguaje literario. Vocabulario crítico* uses the theory of Philippe Lejeune which he connects with the Spanish writer Corpus Barga’s theoretical standpoint to distinguish “memorias” from “diario”: the former do not tell the story of just one individual, but also the others and the background; “diario íntimo”, according to these authors, “lacks the retrospective dimension” (“le falta la dimensión temporal retrospectiva”). All this applies to Białoszewski’s *Memoir*, although in my opinion the conclusion that “intimate diaries” do not reach to the past is wrong or too far-fetched a conclusion and certainly it does not apply to Białoszewski’s *Secret Diary*.

<sup>4</sup> I consulted the use of the terms ‘diary’ and ‘memoirs’ in Spanish literary studies with Łukasz Smuga, PhD, a member of the research group “Memorias de las masculinidades disidentes en España e Hispanoamérica”.

War II events, especially as seen from the Polish perspective (September of 1939, German invasion, Russian invasion, the Katyń genocide, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). This gesture seems to belong to the qualities of "memoirs" in the light of the definitions given above; this is, however, the knowledge that Białoszewski assumed to be widely known on behalf of his (Polish) readers<sup>5</sup>. In the next move the translator gives the numbers, i.e. she uses the discourse of traditional history, the history of "great events" in numbers (i.e.: before war Warsaw had 1.300.000 citizens, in the first five days 40.000 civil people were executed by the Nazis, the total number of fallen after the uprising was 250.000). Once again, these are the things that Białoszewski assumed that his (Polish) readers know. However, Olszewska Sonnenberg uses this fact to explain the character of Białoszewski's work – and its "genre", that is to say, to explain her decision, why this narrative could be called a "diary":

Białoszewski, el autor de este libro, es uno de esos supevivientes. Y, como muchos otros testigos de la destrucción de su ciudad, decide de dejar memoria de su experiencia. *Diario del levantamiento de Varsovia*, el resultado de su peculiar reconstrucción de los hechos, tiene poco que ver con otros libros de memorias de la Segunda Guerra Mundial.<sup>6</sup> (Białoszewski 2011: 10)

The translator seems to be saying that because Białoszewski does not include the "Great History" discourse, the panorama, but a witness' perspective, and because so many books on WWII which represent the genre of "memories" or "memoirs" employed that discourse and a panorama view, they are the true "memorias", while this one is totally different. That explains why she chose "diario", although she mentions justly that this is a "reconstruction" of "events" (we are supposed to understand: the events from his witness perspective, not the Great History events which she had to supplement in her introduction). Why would this "reconstruction" be "peculiar", however? The translator gives a few reasons. We might conclude from the paragraph's logic that the first reason is because "ordinary" reconstructions make use of the Great History and panorama discourses. She reinforces this aspect in one of the following paragraphs: "una segunda característica de *Diario de levantamiento de Varsovia* es la humildad del punto de vista. En el relato de Białoszewski no se hacen concesiones a la épica y, mucho menos, la grandilocuencia de las grandes gestas" (Białoszewski

<sup>5</sup> Two things have to be commented here. First, Białoszewski wrote for the Polish reader and while he was writing, he probably did not take into account the possibility of translation(s) to foreign languages, he was rather concerned about the Polish publication coming to a happy end. Second thing is the knowledge of WWII history in Spain. I do not know any research on that, yet for sure, also due to the fact that Spain did not participate in WWII, this knowledge is less widespread than in Poland. Therefore it is a good decision of the translator to remind about these historical events in a nutshell.

<sup>6</sup> Białoszewski, the author of this book, is one of the survivors. And like many other witnesses of his city's destruction, he decided to leave a memory of his experience. *Diary of the Warsaw Uprising* is a result of his peculiar reconstruction of the events, and it has little in common with other memories from the WWII.

2011: 10)<sup>7</sup>. Another reason for using the word “peculiar” is the style of the account: here the translator describes this style as if forestalling the accusations that she did her translation wrong. This accusation is probably every Białoszewski translator's concern that needs forestalling, and probably on as early stages as the conversations with the publisher and their editors<sup>8</sup>. However also the characteristics of the style as she gives them suit the description of the language in diaries in (Spanish) poetics: no embellishments, spoken, lively, and colloquial language which is both spontaneous and “immediate” regardless of grammar norms (“la espontaneidad y la inmediatez del recuerdo se anteponen a la corrección gramatical”) (Białoszewski 2011: 11). Especially these two last qualities, spontaneity and immediacy, are similar to dictionary descriptions of “diario”: “lenguaje coloquial con frecuentes elisiones y frases cortas (...), inclinación por el apunte rápido, motivado por la economía de tiempo”, Estébanez Calderón explained (Estébanez Calderón 1999: 286)<sup>9</sup>. This certainly can be applied to Białoszewski's book. However the translator remarks – she has to in order to ensure accuracy – that this style of writing applies to “recollection” (“recuerdo”). Spontaneity and immediacy of a recollection are actually either imprecise, either a contradiction. Certainly, we who know Białoszewski, understand her point: she means not that Białoszewski experienced sudden jumps and ejaculations of recollections and he wrote them down as fast as he could; we understand that he tried to recreate this impression of here and now, of a spontaneous narration, perhaps to conceal even the fact to which he “pleaded guilty”, i.e. that he talked and talked this topic over and over before. In another paragraph Olszewska Sonnenberg mentioned that the book was written more than two decades after the uprising and this – she claims – makes it different from the other works<sup>10</sup>. This claim is problematic, or, rather, imprecise: we who know Polish literature might guess that she means that *Memoir* is different than the stories by Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Nałkowska, or Jerzy Andrzejewski, written and published 1-3 years after the war; still there was a number of works, also on Warsaw Uprising, that were published years and decades later. She concludes finally: “Y, sin embargo, el autor no renuncia a la reconstrucción cronológica y detallada de los hechos; en definitiva, a la forma de diario” (Białoszewski 2011: 10)<sup>11</sup>. Nonetheless, Spanish readers, who are facing this book for the first time

<sup>7</sup> One more aspect of the *Diary*... is the humbleness of its viewpoint. In his account, Białoszewski does not make concessions to the genre of epic nor the grandiloquence of great gestures.

<sup>8</sup> Luca Bernardini spoke about his problems on the Paris conference on Białoszewski's *Memoir* in 2021 and in his paper *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego Mirona Białoszewskiego (wreszcie!) we Włoszech*, forthcoming in print in “MiroFor”.

<sup>9</sup> Roughly: “colloquial language with frequent elisions and short sentences, (...) a tendency to write fast due to economy of time”.

<sup>10</sup> Compare: “El primer rasgo que distingue este libro de otros de similar temática es el lapso de tiempo transcurrido entre los hechos y su recreación literaria: veintitrés años”. (Białoszewski 2011:10). (The first feature that makes this book different is the time lapse between the events and their literary recreation: twenty-three years). Certainly you can reduce it to absurd, too: that any work that was written not after precisely twenty-three years is significantly different than this one.

<sup>11</sup> (Nonetheless the author does not reject a chronological and detailed reconstruction of events; that is, in sum, the form of diary).

(and not the fortieth time like myself for instance), do they really understand all these implications and nuances, and, finally, the choice of “diary”? I think what the translator’s note lacks is a phrase that Białoszewski wrote his memoir as if it was a diary. This quality did not go unnoticed by the Polish literary critics, e.g. Kazimierz Wyka (1970: 22) or Stanisław Barańczak (1973: 204-205). This “as if it was” represents the “time difference” emphasised in all the discussions of how diaries differ from memoirs.

As for the second paratext, Leszek Soliński’s *Epilogue* (Białoszewski 2011: 305-310) is a bit of a mystery. This text has been practically unknown to Polish scholars of Białoszewski. Apparently the story behind it is that Soliński wrote it in 1988 for the German translation of *Memoir* which was published in 1994 with this text. It was published also in Polish in an ephemeral theatre programme which is not available in any library, therefore it is safe to affirm that the text actually does not exist in the Polish discourse. Six years after Soliński’s death his husband and copyright inheritor, Henk Proeme, offered that it be included also in the Spanish translation. Had this text been published in Polish in 1988, or even in 1994, or even in 2011, it would have been a sensation, because it unveils a few unknown facts. Even if today since 2020 we know some of the facts given previously to international readers, there are still some new pieces of information here. The text begins with the presentation of Soliński himself in a way that clearly suggests a gay relationship – they lived twenty five years together and were friends for thirty three years. This in a way justifies why he is the right person to write this epilogue, but also explains in a way the form of the essay, which combines elements of biography, commentary, recollections, or even gossip. After giving a biographical introduction with a special focus on WWII times, Soliński mentions 3000 books on Warsaw Uprising written “until now” (i.e. up to 1988, I suppose), among which Białoszewski’s book is unique. I suppose this is the source that Olszewska Sonnenberg used in her introduction. Soliński then in a paragraph mentions the negative criticisms the book received. This paragraph seems a bit mythicized. It speaks of “criticisms” and only of the negative ones, while, as we know from the history of reception, there was in fact one negative review and over two dozens of positive to enthusiastic (Sobolczyk 2018: 197-207). All the accusations that Soliński attributes to “criticisms” in plural come actually from one review by Wojciech Żukrowski. I think the author wanted to create a somewhat dramatic or sensational effect, and also to create a sharp contrast between the critics who misunderstood the work and the reading public who loved the book from the start. This view is quite mythicized, however. Not only most of the reviews were positive, as I have just mentioned, but also the book was not so popular among readers in Poland, excluding school kids, nor did people spoke of it as a “good read”. It was rather the more professional readers who overtly expressed how the book was and is important. Perhaps this paragraph is of little importance to Spanish readers, however it could have been more significant to German readers. In the subsequent paragraphs Soliński gives the details that remained unknown in Poland, at least to wider audiences, scholars included, and some of them sound fresh even today. Namely, he says how Białoszewski was writing his book for twenty years and destroying early versions of it. We knew it. However, Soliński

gives a title of one of the early versions that the writer burnt in 1950: *Five Years Under Occupation* with two main characters, Stefa and Marcelek, and written in the style of Bruno Schulz. This we did not know. Next, Soliński tells how Miron took him on a trip through the ruins of Warsaw in 1950, telling the story of the uprising, and there they met Frania, Miron's grandmother, who lived among the ruins. This we did not know. Another novelty is the story of a "trigger" that made Białoszewski write the final version of *Memoir*. This trigger was a public reading of war stories by a peer writer which both Miron and Leszek considered very bad, full of pathos and affected language, so they left the meeting stealthily and Białoszewski allegedly made a vow that his version will be very different. Soliński does not give the name of the incriminated author, yet it is easy to guess that he meant Swen. He had to omit the name because Swen is a character – one of the main characters – in the book (although international public did not know that he was also a published writer after war). I am not in the position to say that this story is not true, however some things seem to be mythicized in the light of the facts. We must be in the mid 1960s. Białoszewski was in a conflict with Swen back then, they did not talk anymore, which makes it little probable that he went to Swen's reading, although not impossible: perhaps they not only came out stealthily, but were there stealthily all the time. What Swen must have been reading, were the war stories that were included in his book of prose *Pejzaż Gnojnej Góry*, published in 1968. All the stories were written in the early 1950s in Kobyłka, however, where Miron spent a lot of time and the two then-friends would write their works and read them aloud. I am positive that Białoszewski knew *Kość krzewu gorejącego* from 1954 (the last story in the published book) from the moment it was written. Moreover, I believe that some of his early versions of *Memoir* were written there in Kobyłka at the same time, as if on a literary competition, and the two writers read them aloud and discussed; and, last but not least, that Białoszewski's early version was quite similar in style to Swen's. If anything, in mid 1960s Białoszewski was disgusted rather with the fact that Swen did not re-evaluate the poetics that once they shared, but then time passed, and the very Białoszewski changed drastically (Sobolczyk 2021; Sobolczyk 2022a). In short, Soliński's presentation seems unfair to Swen, however it brings some light on why Białoszewski emphasised that much Swen's character in his book. Perhaps Białoszewski would recount this evening in a different manner than Soliński does. Finally in his epilogue Soliński mentions the notebooks of *Memoir* and even quotes some phrases from them: most of us, scholars, actually learned about them around 2019 when Adam Poprawa started working on them and preparing them for publication. This is what I meant when I said that had this text been published in Polish earlier, it would have been a sensation. Still, the benefits for the Polish reader are one thing, and the significance of this paratext to Spanish readers is something different, therefore I have to ask now, how important this was and is for Spanish readers. No doubt they would not notice those tiny nuances that I am now dragging up. It is a good introduction to Białoszewski's biography and to what he did during WWII, and in contrast with the translator's introduction, it is personal, so that these two accounts are complementary, the more traditional view on history and a personalised one. Although I must say I would perhaps

reverse these two paratexts and would give Soliński first, and the translator at the end: his account would insert the reader already in the perspective of the narrator, adding some details; hers would complement the personal story with historical facts, adding a more general context. One thing for me is certain: because of the fact that Soliński discusses Białoszewski's talking over and over, writing over and over new versions and destroying them as time was passing, it all plays against the choice of "diario". It could work for the concept of a "re-created diary" or "mock diary" as an inner genre dipped in "memoir", yet it is not presented here as such. Thus I believe that Białoszewski's text with this paratext rather leave the Spanish reader confounded: why is this called a "diary"?

## The Reception in Spain

How was the book received in Spain? Jocularly speaking, among Spanish readers the translation was the biggest hit among my Erasmus students of "Polish Gay Literature & Social Change" course at Jagiellonian University: I estimate that even 30-50 students chose this book for an exam, some of them also bought it. When the translation was published, only one professional review was published in the traditional media, i.e. Francisco Luis del Pino Olmedo's double review of Białoszewski and Jan Karski under the title *La tragedia polaca* (Pino Olmedo). Ironically, so to speak, it was published on April 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, which was the day of the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As the title already suggests, the author's discourse is focused on "la tragedia y el valor de Polonia durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial", i. e. on the tragedy and courage of Poland. This starting point is certainly more favourable, so to speak, to Karski's account, and it is also more "Polish" according to an auto-stereotype, and perhaps also to the Spanish stereotype of Poland<sup>12</sup>. Karski's book, published the same year, "eclipsed" in a way Białoszewski, because it received ca. ten professional reviews in the newspapers, including the famous Spanish philosopher Jorge Semprun, and also some eight more articles on Karski were published. Also in this review Karski's book eclipsed Białoszewski, because the actual review is of Karski exclusively, while there is an additional note on Białoszewski after or as if "inside" the main text. Pino Olmedo starts with the Great History discourse adorned with the martyrological flavour on Poland under WWII: the country suffered a lot, so many people were killed, but the Polish people never gave up. From there he moves to the account of Karski, but he also mentions Józef Czapki's book. As for the note on Białoszewski, it starts with Soliński's information (repeated, not credited) about three thousand books on the uprising published and this one being the most original of them. The reviewer accepts the genre of "diary" as written after a longer time: "Su diario, escrito veinte años después del levantamiento, narra la transhumancia familiar y ciudadana entre escombros y sótanos" (His diary, written twenty years after the uprising, narrates the familial and civic nomadism between ruins and basements). He then

<sup>12</sup> If there is such a stereotype, it is among the intelligentsia. The two sociological surveys I read, one in "El País", and the other one conducted by a Polish researcher (Nalewajko 2016: 281-307), for some reason did not include any stereotypes about culture or history.



calls the narration “excellent” and a “terrifying literary piece of tenderness for the ones around the author”, roughly (“asombrosa pieza literaria de ternura por la gente que vivió el levantamiento junto al autor”). Curiously enough, the reviewer noticed the poetic dimension of Białoszewski’s style, calling it “lyrical in its dryness, profound in its apparent narrative vulgarity” (“lírico en su sequedad, profundo en su aparente vulgaridad narrativa”). Even in such an epitomic form, this is a very favorable review, and very on point. Paradoxically this short note on Białoszewski is closer to a proper literary review, while the longer text is more a presentation of Karski’s history, not an evaluation of the book as such.

Perhaps due to the fact that Poland was becoming a more and more popular tourist destination for Spanish citizens, also as an Erasmus destination, and one of the places in Poland that were extremely popular, was the Warsaw Uprising Museum in Warsaw, Białoszewski’s book enjoyed, so to speak, a “second life”. This time it was among both professional critics and the so-called “non-professional readers” (not literary critics, and not in official journals)<sup>13</sup>. The first of the reviews from this second wave is the professional one. In 2015 a Spanish writer José Ferrandis Peiró (2015), a historian by education whose first novel, *El Círculo de las Bondades* (2012), was set in Poland during WWII and told the story of Irena Sendlerowa (the book was not translated to Polish), published a short review of Białoszewski on his blog “Jungleland”. He also republished his essay as a comment-post on a website “Alibrate” where readers share their opinions. Ferrandis Peiró was well-equipped to understand Białoszewski because he already knew the context. I am not sure if he read Białoszewski as a part of his research on WWII in Warsaw before finishing his novel, or was this reading a consequence of his specialisation (probably the latter: if he read Białoszewski prior to writing his novel, why would he publish the blog entry as far as in 2015? Nonetheless, his book should be studied in search of “Miron’s traces”). In his review he uses the word “memorias” interchangeably with “diario”, which he attributes to the necessary work of (traumatic?) memory: “Ese fue el tiempo que le costó terminar de asimilar todo lo ocurrido, ordenar sus notas y reunirse con familiares, amigos y conocidos para subsanar pequeños errores de memoria”<sup>14</sup>. He must have read Soliński’s epilogue, drawing correct conclusions from it, and his background in history must have been helpful as well. As for the “diaristic” side, he sees it in the day-by-day narrative of the insurrection events, which is not entirely true in Białoszewski<sup>15</sup>: it exists as a subsidiary discourse, but the narrative is not organised around it (this could be historian’s thinking that took over, though). He also repeats – in good faith, considering that he could not verify it – Soliński’s vision of a chef-d’oeuvre attacked en-masse for its style. However something interesting

<sup>13</sup> In an amplified reception theory I wrote about the “non-professional” circulation and its connection to queer subculture especially: Sobolczyk 2018, Sobolczyk 2015a, Sobolczyk 2022b.

<sup>14</sup> This was the lapse [more than twenty years] that cost him to finish to assimilate what happened, sort his notes out, reunite with his family and friends and acquaintances to amend small errors of memory.

<sup>15</sup> Compare: “El diario desgrana cómo los insurgentes van ganando y perdiendo terreno según avanzan los días”(roughly: “The diary shells [sic] how the insurgents advance gaining and losing territory as the days move on”).

and problematic arises when he summarises Białoszewski's style in his own words, not repeating after Soliński or Olszewska Sonnenberg: "Białoszewski relata los sucesos con un lenguaje llano, plenamente comprensible para todo el mundo y con bastante frialdad" ("Białoszewski narrates the events with a simple / plain / direct / straightforward / flat language, completely understandable for everyone, and quite cold"). Any of the English adjectives we take as an equivalent to Spanish "llano" – and I could not pick one – we, Polish readers, think that the reviewer is incorrect; that obviously leads to the question of the quality of the Spanish translation, which I will examine in the last section of this essay. Certainly in Polish it was the language "not understandable for everyone easily" that shocked some readers and I doubt that many Polish readers would call *Pamiętnik* an easy read. As far as I remember the exams of my Spanish Erasmus students, they were saying something like "at the beginning the language is strange, but you have to get used to it, and then it flows" (they said the same of *Las puertas al paraíso* of Jerzy Andrzejewski, by the bye). The writer might have slipped up in the "illusion of common awareness" or "false consensus effect" in social psychology (Sobolczyk 2018: 115-116), i.e. project his own greater competence of a writer, avid reader and a historian, on less competent readers. In addition, Ferrandis Peiró makes a very well-informed comment on the political situation of the Nazi destruction of Warsaw and the Soviet troops awaiting the destruction<sup>16</sup> (in passing it should be noted that in Spain there is still a certain sentiment for Soviet Russia on behalf of the rather leftish anti-Frankist intelligentsia due to the fact that they helped fight the fascist troops in Civil War. This implies that critical discussion of Soviet enslavement is not always understood similarly to Polish experience, although it is changing and I daresay such voices have an easier way than in France. However, our reviewer is informed well enough to be critical of Soviet army).

To conclude the second wave of professional criticism, I should also mention briefly my text in a popular Spanish cultural magazine online – a presentation of Anna Świrszczyńska's poems about the Warsaw Uprising in my translations to Spanish with commentaries (Sobolczyk 2020). There I mentioned Białoszewski and/or his *Memoir* fifteenth times, starting with the problematic translation of "diario" instead of "memorias", and then showing similarities between the images of barricades in both writers, the civil voice, the help given to insurrectionists by the citizens (with a note that in one scene Miron notes a woman who remonstrates), the solidarity between people, sexual relationships during the uprising, and, last but not least, the similarity of time lapse between the events and the publication of their respective literary works.

<sup>16</sup> Compare: "Los insurgentes se sublevaron porque, pese a entender que el dominio nazi estaba a punto de acabar, los rusos estaban apostados cómodamente a la espera de entrar en la capital y hacerse con lo poco que dejaran sus enemigos. Obviamente, lo último que deseaban los polacos era que un poder sustituyera al otro. De modo que el levantamiento fue la única salida ante una situación límite" (roughly: "The insurgents arose even though the Nazi rule was about to decline, because the Russians were standing comfortably and waiting to enter the capital and combat only the few remaining enemies. Obviously the last thing that the Polish people wanted was to fall from one regime under another. So the uprising was the only solution in such a limit situation").

A “fan” entry by “Alberto Boo” was published in May 2018 on the blog dedicated to Polish Forces during WWII. While I was unable to ascertain if “Alberto Boo” is a real name – and if the person is from a Spanish-speaking country – the review is written in Spanish and it quotes Polish books in Spanish translations. The blog has a quite military bias which does not always suit Białoszewski greatly. Nonetheless, the author mentions also some other books including Józef Czapski and Helena Janeczek, he also gives a short portrait of Krzysztof Baczyński. All the entries on literature are observably shorter than the ones on soldiers, equipment and military actions. Therefore Alberto Boo had to make a reserve: “en el libro no se describen combates ni acciones heroicas pero muestra la dureza del día a día” (in this book battles are not described, nor heroic actions, but it shows the hard times day after day). This “day by day” aspect might give credit to the “diario” in the title; Alberto Boo says that this book shows “la vida diaria de su autor durante toda la batalla” (“the everyday life of the author during the whole battle”), where “diaria” as an adjective is an equivalent of “civil” as opposed to “military”. This military focus of the blogger justifies a quite extraordinary explication of this book’s value: because Białoszewski moved a lot from place to place before these places were bombarded, he described the details of these places (the implication is that these places were interesting, because they were bombarded): “Un aspecto que hace especialmente valioso su testimonio es la variedad de refugios que habitó y que le permiten describir con detalle la vida en las diferentes zonas del alzamiento y como poco a poco estas fueron siendo eliminadas por las tropas y la potencia de fuego alemanas”. (The aspect that makes his testimony of such great value is the variety of places he inhabited while escaping, which gives him the opportunity to describe in great detail the life in different zones of the uprising, and also how these zones one after another are erased by the German troops and fires). Alberto Boo makes an interesting remark that Spanish tourist can use this book as a guide to visit streets and tunnels and corners described by Białoszewski; however – and I am not sure what it tells about the author – many of the places that Białoszewski described look different now, and many of them do not exist anymore. Lastly, he almost copies Ferrandis Peiró’s phrase about the easy-read quality of the book, adding – justly! – a note on Białoszewski’s humour<sup>17</sup>.

As I have already mentioned above, on “Alibrate”, a website for booklovers, where they share their opinions and recommendations, José Ferrandis Peiró published the essay from his blog. This is a professional review. There is one more comment-post on Białoszewski’s book which I qualify provisionally as “non-professional”, i.e. not written by a writer or literary critic. It was written by someone under the pseudonym “Dafatota”, they gave the book 8 stars (Peiró refrained from judging the book in this code); the post was liked 4 times. The “non-professionalism” of this review is apparent in its simple syntactic-stylistic structure, but also in the historical inaccuracies, which makes me think that it could have

<sup>17</sup> Compare: “Realizado en un lenguaje sencillo y con gran ritmo se convierte en un escrito de fácil y agradable lectura que incluso, a pesar de la crudeza de la historia que nos cuenta, contiene numerosas notas de humor” (roughly: “Delivered in a simple language with a great rhythm it turns into an easy and pleasurable read, which even, in spite of the gloominess of the story, includes numerous hints of humour”). The observation on rhythm is also spot-on and Alberto Boo’s original.

been written by an Erasmus student and not necessarily of history, perhaps even by one of my former students. These inaccuracies include calling the Warsaw Uprising “the first act of people’s organised resistance against the Nazi violence”, supposedly in the occupied Poland, however, this is not true (“el primer acto de resistencia popular organizado contra la violencia nazi”); or that the author was a militant (“el autor de este libro se convierte a sus 22 años en un combatiente”). As for the topic that I am pursuing here, the diaristic, Dafatota says the most firmly of all: “como todo diario nos muestra el día a día de los personajes” (“just like all the diaries it shows each and every day of the characters”). As for the other topic that I am pursuing here, the apparent easiness of reading, Dafatota seems to be repeating almost literally what the others also said: “el libro está escrito en un lenguaje sencillo, de fácil y agradable lectura, a pesar de la crudeza de la historia” (“the book is written in a simple language, easy to read and a pleasurable reading spite of the cruelty of history”) – it looks like a copy-paste phrase of Alberto Boo. There is also an original opinion, even if ultimately it also falls under the category of “inaccurate”. Dafatota says that the church plays a great role in all war conflicts, and Białoszewski’s book demonstrates how heroically the catholic church helped save people (this strong conclusion is drawn from the secondary in fact thread on Benedictine nuns), and that the religiousness of Polish people is demonstrated in the religious rites in the basements. Certainly this did not come out of nothing, but the religious topics in *Memoir* are much more complex and ambivalent, not to mention the very Białoszewski’s quite explicit attitude (Poprawa 2022), here bypassed. I think that either this is the reviewer’s own agenda, either this whole view is driven by the pre-assumed stereotype of Polish religiousness, which was mentioned in the sociological research as one of the strongest and also exaggerated stereotypes of Polish people, along with drinking a lot of alcohol (Nalewajko 2016; Leszczyński 2012).

I must say it quite surprised me that none of the Spanish readers, the translator included, mentioned the possible similarities between the Warsaw Uprising and civil war in Spain. In Spanish culture the trauma of the war – and its consequences – marked their literature and cinema to not lesser extent than is the case with Polish culture and WWII. I believe that research on the similarities between Polish and Spanish literature, and *Memoir* in particular, could be productive in the future.

One more important thing needs to be emphasised to close the discussion on whether it makes a big difference if we call this work “diario” or “memorias”. If we accept the interpretation of Białoszewski’s *Memoir* as a traumatic text – like in the readings by Joanna Niżyńska and myself (Niżyńska 2013; Sobolczyk 2021) – this whole dimension of traumatic memory and remembrance would be blurred if we called it a “diary”. While we might try to read the traumatic experience in a diary written during the war – like in Dawid Rubinowicz’s account<sup>18</sup> – the understanding of trauma is far more evident when we include the time lapse. None of the Spanish readings mentioned the category “trauma”; the discussion if this confirms my point is open.

<sup>18</sup> Curiously enough, the Polish editors entitled this diary “pamiętnik” (*Pamiętnik Dawida Rubinowicza 1987*). German and English translations use the word “diary”, however.

## An Overview of the Translation Style

Now let me face the myth of *Memoir* that through becoming a “diary” became also an “easy read”, as so many reviewers said. As I have said above, it is not the easiest narrative for Polish readers. This suggests that the translation might be simplified<sup>19</sup>. The first thing that you notice without even studying the translation in detail is that the translator sectionalized paragraphs which do not appear in the original version, where the text is more of a “stream” (not of consciousness though). For sure it makes the narration easier to read. On the other hand some little paragraphs of Białoszewski were ignored. Sometimes the language is not exactly simplified, but made less colloquial through simple omissions and corrections: “25 września — no, to był ten dzień decydujący — od rana do nocy — dwanaście godzin — bombardowanie całej Warszawy”. (Białoszewski 2014: 73). Here three small details are changed, but the effect is less of a spoken voice (“no” – “well” – is omitted) and more of a traditional written narration, because in one case a nominal sentence (“bombardowanie”) is given the verb, and also the graphics of this phrase is reduced: “El 25 de septiembre – el día decisivo – bombardearon Varsovia de la mañana a la noche, doce horas seguidas” (Białoszewski 2011: 99). “El día decisivo” without any “pues era...” makes it a more official statement as if from the point of view of History, while this “well...” marks this as a personal comment. Occasionally the translation is very close in the use of words, but the result is a misunderstanding, like in the case of Miron making poo next to an elderly lady in a white coat: “Przez cały czas gadaliśmy ze sobą po sąsiedzku”. (Białoszewski 2014: 81). In the Spanish translation: “Y estuvimos charlando todo el rato como simples vecinos” (Białoszewski 2011: 109). (Literally: “And all that moment we were talking like simple neighbours”). The sense is lost: both Miron and the lady are squatted and making poo in two booths with no doors next to each other, that is the sense of “neighbours”, not the style of conversation. Sometimes such small changes are misinterpretations. Compare the famous phrase about the Polish people as “Arians” during the Easter of 1943: “Aryjczycy — tak zwani jeszcze wtedy my — po kościołach — odświętni — a tam — to piekło — to wiadome, tylko bez nadziei” (Białoszewski 2014: 73-74). Białoszewski is bitter ironic about the Polish people *being* called, included in the group of “Arians” *still*. This sense is not only lost, but garbled infelicitously: “Los arios – seguíamos llamándonos así – estábamos en las iglesias, de celebración, mientras que allí, en aquel infierno, lo sabíamos, no había esperanza” (Białoszewski 2011: 99). Perhaps instead of analysing the changes, I will just re-translate this phrase into Polish literally: “Aryjczycy – tak siebie wciąż jeszcze nazywaliśmy – byliśmy w kościołach świętując, podczas gdy tam, w tym piekle, wiedzieliśmy już, nie było nadziei”. The difference between these two Polish sentences is an epitome of the constant changes in the translation which actually *iron* and flatten the text. The true litmus test would be the “Białoszewski style”, as in this fragment: “Jakie były tak zwane powody bezpośrednie i niezależne od tego, że się znało prawo wiercenia się i miało

<sup>19</sup> I studied the English translation of *Memoir* in this respect and it indeed is simplified (Sobolczyk 2006).

stosunek do siebie i względności przeprowadzań się? Czy bezpieczeńciowe? Że jednak? Że ta piwnica ciut wystaje, ma za mało filarów? Czy jak? Tak. Coś z tego" (Białoszewski 2014: 84). The Spanish version "flows" much better according to the linguistic norm, yet we cannot say that in this case (like in many others) the translator conveyed the concept of "Białoszewski's style", or at least put a bug of its uniqueness in the ears of Spanish readers. On the contrary, this indeed is rendered as an "easy read". Take a look: "¿Qué motivos objetivos tenemos, más allá de lo que llamábamos 'el derecho a deambular'; motivos no personales que tuvieran en cuenta el valor relativo de cambiar de lugar? ¿Motivos de seguridad? ¿Por si acaso? ¿Porque el sótano no era profundo y no tenía suficientes pilares? ¿Por eso? Sí. Algo de eso había" (Białoszewski 2011: 113). Once again, instead of explaining each and every change, the best option will be to re-translate it back to Polish: "Jakie obiektywne powody mieliśmy oprócz tego, co określaliśmy mianem 'prawa do włączenia się'; motywy nieosobiste, które brałyby pod uwagę względną wartość zmiany miejsca? Powody bezpieczeństwa? Może to? Bo piwnica nie była głęboka i miała za mało filarów? Dlatego? Tak. Coś z tego". Suffice it to say that while in the "Białoszewski phrase" in Polish I understand what Białoszewski means, I have no clue what his voice is saying through the translator's mouth.

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