

POLISH AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF HORST BIENEK AND THE QUESTION OF SILESIAN IDENTITY

DANIEL PIETREK*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1582-6070>

UNIVERSITY OF OPOLE

Abstract: Horst Bienek (1930-1990) was one of the greatest German writers of the 20th century. He was born in Gleiwitz, in Upper Silesia, and his works contain many references to Silesian culture and language. This, however, is often overlooked in his translations, both into Polish and English. It seems that Bienek's Germanness is overwhelming for his translators who see in him a contemporary embodiment of *Sehnsucht* – a nostalgic desire for the past. However, the most important aspect of Bienek's writing is his multiculturalism, expressed in the use of toponyms, but also dialectal lexical elements. They play an important role in the work of the Upper Silesian writer, because thanks to them it is possible to express the historical truth of the complicated relations between Poles, Silesians and Germans.

Keywords: Horst Bienek; Silesian identity; multiculturalism; translation studies; Silesian dialect; cultural specificity; Gleiwitz tetralogy

1. Introduction

Translation of literary texts related to Silesian literature is one of the most interesting issues in contemporary translation studies and literary studies, both Polish and German. This is due to a number of factors. In addition to the standard procedures associated with translation, resulting, for example, from the need to adapt the original text to the *Erfahrungsraum* (space of experience) and *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation) of the target text's audience, there is yet a third, hybrid space to be considered in translations of Silesian literature. This space consists in language (the use of dialect), images (e.g., a specifically constructed landscape) and cultural elements (iconography, characters and events) related to Silesian culture, literature and identity. These are the elements that need to be taken into account in order to find a suitable strategy for them in translation. I would like to highlight these aspects in my paper using examples from Horst Bienek's chosen works.

First, it is necessary to present the most important biographical facts about Horst Bienek. Regardless of our methodological apparatus, the belief that literature is

* danielpietrek@poczta.onet.pl



supposed to create the effects of the output language in the target language still prevails. However, effects of ‘foreignness’ are also important and valued by critics and readers. To demonstrate the specificity of foreignization necessary for the successful translation of Bienek’s prose, I also provide a historical context about Silesia, where he grew up.

As the youngest of six children, Horst Bienek was born on May 7, 1930, in Gleiwitz, Upper Silesia. However, his childhood in Upper Silesia “between factories and coal dumps, the Klodnitz River and the Oder River, between the Don Bosco League and the Hitler Youth Service” ended quickly (Morita 1988: 5).

In 1942 his mother and brothers died, and he saw his father only once after that. In addition, he had an accident. While climbing a fence, he impaled himself on it and damaged his urethra. His sensitivity, readiness to help and commitment to others, especially to outsiders, outcasts and persecuted people, can be traced back to the tragic experiences of his childhood and adolescence, including the death of his close ones, his witnessing the horrors of war, then his arrest in Berlin and imprisonment in Soviet prisons and camps (1951-1955).

The very traumatic event of January 19, 1945, when Bienek witnessed the SS-driven concentration camp prisoner columns, was a recurring theme in the Gleiwitz author’s works and mentioned in his memoirs, one of which he would still write about 40 years later:

“I was fourteen when the train of concentration campers met me on the way home, it was January 1945, KL Auschwitz was being cleared. [...] The Kapos beat the striped prisoners with sticks. In front and at the end went the German guards with machine guns. I have never forgotten this picture.” (Bienek 1993: 117)

After the invasion of Russian troops on January 22, 1945, Bienek was conscripted to do dismantling work. In March 1946, he had to leave Gleiwitz after refusing to accept Polish citizenship and moved to Köthen / Anhalt in the Soviet occupation zone. After graduating from high school, he worked (thanks in part to the recommendation of August Scholtis) as an editorial trainee at the *Tagespost* in Potsdam. In 1951, he was accepted into the theater class of Bertolt Brecht’s “master students” at the Berlin Ensemble, but was arrested by the German Democratic Republic’s State Security Service as early as November 8, 1951, and transferred to the Soviet Ministry for State Security. After six months of pre-trial detention in a solitary cell, he was sentenced on April 12, 1952 to 20 years of forced labor in the Soviet Union for espionage and anti-Soviet agitation.¹ Since June 1952, Bienek was in the labor camp in Vorkuta, one of the most notorious of the Gulag Archipelago. Besides the brutality and despair, which came to the fore especially in the very late texts², he also learned here “to love the Russian language, to read the Russian poets, Dostoevsky above all, Chekhov and

¹ For a more detailed account, see Pietrek, Daniel. 2012. “Horst Bienek’s Arrest: Archival Records, Confession and Self-Representation. In Reinhard Laube and Verena Nolte (Eds.). *Horst Bienek – A Writer in the Extremes of the 20th Century*. Göttingen, 209–231.

² Cf. especially: Bienek, Horst: 2013. *Workuta*. Göttingen.

Pushkin” (Bienek 1987: 12). There, he also wrote some poems that were later published in the *Dream Book of a Prisoner* (1957).

In 1955, when Adenauer negotiated the repatriation of the German prisoners of war detained in the USSR, Bienek was also released from the labor camp on October 10, 1955.

Later, he described his experiences in his books. The most important part of Horst Bienek’s work is the Gleiwitz tetralogy, which was written between 1975 and 1982 and is set between 1939 and 1945 in Gleiwitz (and in the last part also in Dresden). Although very important historical events are woven into the fictional plots, history is supplemented by fiction, thus resurrecting in a literary way a world that historically ended in 1945, but which literature allowed to continue. As Heinrich Böll noted, the protagonist of the entire Tetralogy was the city of Gleiwitz and the whole of Upper Silesia. The German Nobel Prize winner said that Bienek’s prose was “a hymn to the Upper Silesian land and the people who lived and worked there” (Böll 1975). Interestingly, this prose uses very modern techniques of presentation, in which language is not a finished material. The author is interested in what is organic and alive in language, which surrounds people in their everyday lives and is overlooked. Moreover, he uses narrative leaps and breaks, and incorporates into his texts linguistic “found objects” – overheard scraps of speech that “lie in the street” (Joachimsthaler 2012: 78-91).

2. Problems of Bienek’s Translations

Bienek developed his peculiar writing techniques in his early phase while working on a novel about Bakunin. The novel demonstrates how to write one’s biography by describing someone else and how the process of writing such a novel can change one’s own identity. Bienek uses exactly the same method when he puts together and combines in the tetralogy. In the table below, we can find a fragment from *The First Polka* (1975) in Polish and English translation. Characteristically, both translation overlook cultural specificity of Bienek’s prose, omitting Silesian references:

German Original	English Translation	Polish Translation
Valeskas Augen tasteten die Werbesprüche ab, ohne sie richtig zur Kenntnis zu nehmen:	Valeska ran her eyes over the advertising slogans without really noticing them:	Oczy Valeski prześlizgiwały się po reklamowych sloganach, nie przyjmując ich naprawdę do wiadomości:
<i>Bewunderung ein Schuh erregt Der ständig mit Egü gepflegt</i>	<i>Your shoes are always looking fine If you don't forget that Egü shine</i>	Chcesz, by but twój budził podziw, pastą Egü czyść go co dzień.
Dazwischen in dicken schwarzen Buchstaben: HIER WIRD NUR DEUTSCH GESPROCHEN	Between them, in thick black letters: ONLY GERMAN SPOKEN HERE	Wśród nich grube czarne litery: TU MÓWI SIĘ TYLKO PO NIEMIECKU

<p>Sie sah auf ein paar alte Frauen mit weißen Kopftüchern, mit Gesichtern, die das oberschlesische Land gefurcht und verstein hatte, die Lippen dünn und zusammengemischt, damit kein Wort entschlipfte. Sie sahen sich manchmal an, nickten sich zu, eine von ihnen zeigte auch mal mit dem Finger nach draußen. Zu hause sprachen sie eine Sprache, die hier verboten war. Hier waren sie Stumme. Valeska hätte sie fragen können: <i>Jak wom idzie?</i> (Bienek 2000: 63).</p>	<p>She looked at a few old women in white headscarves, whose faces the Upper Silesian land had furrowed and tuned to stone, their lips thin and pressed shut so that not a word could slip out. Sometimes they nodded or looked at each other, and one of them even pointed out of the window. At home they spoke a language that was forbidden here. Here they were mute. Valeska could have said: <i>Jak wom idzie?</i> (Bienek 1984: 54)</p>	<p>Popatrzyła na kilka starych kobiet w białych chustkach na głowach, z twarzami pobrużdżonymi i skamieniałymi za sprawą górnośląskiej ziemi, z cienkimi, mocno zaciśniętymi wargami, by nie wyszły się z nich ani słowo. Od czasu do czasu spoglądały na siebie, kiwały sobie głowami, jedna z nich pokazywała czasem palcem za okno. W domu mówiły językiem, który tu był zabroniony. Tu były nieme. Valeska mogłaby spytać je po polsku: <i>Jak się pani wiedzie?</i> (Bienek 2008: 53-54)</p>
--	---	---

In the above fragment, Bienek uses advertising slogans, official announcements and dialectal phrases (sounding strange to the German reader). They immediately follow each other and get fused together, but at the same time they are typographically differentiated, which means that in their multi-level coding they have the same value. In *The First Polka*, these textures are used to emphasize the exclusivity of Silesian identity – in opposition to the *Deutschtum* (Germanness) of the Reich. These quotations underline the fundamental opposition of Silesia and Silesians to the Nazis and Nazi ideology, which is constructed throughout the Tetralogy. One of the elements that Bienek uses in creating the identity and exclusivity of Silesia and Silesians is the Silesian dialect. At the end of the above passage, the phrase *Jak wom idzie?* / *How are you doing?* is an example of the dialect used in Gleiwitz in the 1940s.

In the Polish translation, we have four fundamental errors in this passage alone. First, the translation unifies the quoted passage at the level of editing, not emphasizing (as the author wanted) the four different textures from which it is built. Secondly, it adds in the last sentence the phrase “po polsku” [in Polish], producing the utterance “Valeska mogłaby je spytać po polsku” [Valeska could ask them in Polish]. Thirdly, and this is my most serious objection to the Polish translation, the Upper Silesian autochthons spoke neither Polish nor German, but only Silesian. In fact, Valeska could not speak Polish. In Bienek’s novel, Silesianness is a synthesis of Polish, German (also Czech) cultures. Thus, such an interpretive doxology (applied by the translator) not only spoils the effect of this scene, but it destroys the author’s intentions and the vision of the world created in his work.

The fourth mistake consists in an improper use of dialect: “*Jak wom idzie*” is replaced with the phrase “*Jak się Pani wiedzie*,” which is a rather untypical Polish phrase, because it smacks of sophisticated register. In 1939, such a language could be used by the representatives of the intelligentsia or aristocracy in the Polish capital Warsaw, but not by simple women living in the German countryside of Upper Silesia.

Thus, the translator neglects the question of cultural appropriateness and erases the local character of the world of Bienek's childhood. In his works, Bienek does not mourn or sentimentally recollect his German homeland, but (re)constructs a homeland for German, Polish and Jewish Upper Silesians, stressing the fact that this myth was destroyed by the Nazi's ideological obsession to clearly define the national identities.

In his famous poem "Gliwice Childhood," published in his poetry collection *Was War Was Ist* [What was What is] in 1966, Bienek formulates his program for epic poetry and the determinants of his writing – memory, recollection, mythologization – and lists the tools to bring them out – language, smell, sounds, colors and landscape, and again – the Silesian dialect. In the fragment of the poem below, we can see a different translation strategy, which does not erase Bienek's cultural specificity:

Memories of a winter woodland
 of Pistulka and his merry men
 of a turbid river sluggishly flowing
 of a Corpus Christi procession
 of the drunken shouts of the next-door Mainkas
 and once the local broadcast program
 interrupted by shots
 as the prelude to the great drive eastward

Nothing more
 just a few pictures
 from an overexposed film
 sporadic shadows and
 if I peer hard enough
 perhaps a face
 a motion
 a gesture
 someone's smile

Does boyhood consist of memory
 or memory of boyhood?
 Reading Borges I am struck by the relentless memory
 or Ireneo Funes
 what interests me in Sartre
 in his reaction to Descartes
 I would like to know what went on in Coriolanus' mind
 when they made him captive

Then the sudden
 cracking of an almond
 the smell of fish frying in Bunzlau earthenware
 a jay squawking in Laband Woods
 blurred scenes
 flicker across the retina (Bienek 1989: 69-70)

The vocabulary is simple, the rhythm of the poem is created by repetition and sequence, but above all by the staggered lines, which are unobtrusive and

“imperceptible, like pulsations” (Kalow 1966). In addition, there are the dense images which determine not only the thematic scope of the poem, but also of the later *Gleiwitz Tetralogy*: Remembrance, memory, and mythologizing. Moreover, the tools for bringing forth these themes are also defined. They are made tangible with the use of all senses; they are images, smells, sounds, the unique color of the Upper Silesian dialect. This also includes the sound of the names of tributaries of the river Oder which are so natural for the author that he gladly accepts their potential incomprehensibility for some readers, because they do not provide material for geography lessons, but are themselves a part of the poem’s musical composition.³

The above translation is successful, because it preserves the key to Bienek’s world, which lies in Upper Silesian tradition, culture and language.

3. Conclusion

With his portrayal of the Upper Silesian Chronicle, Horst Bienek undoubtedly advanced to become one of the central figures in the literary debate accompanying the efforts to achieve German-Polish understanding. With the *Gleiwitz Tetralogy*, he offers an alternative reading of the expulsion as well as an alternative model (to the expellees’ associations) of the cultural memory of Upper Silesia. The importance of the author and the significance of his literature for the cultural heritage of Upper Silesia can be seen, among other things, in Bienek’s victory in the 2012 survey of the magazine *Fabryka Silesia*, which ended with an “overwhelming success of Horst Bienek” and led the main editor to the statement: “But could anyone predict years ago that Bienek, with the Gliwice Tetralogy, would be the most important classic in Polish Upper Silesia at the beginning of the 21st century?” (Lewandowski 2012: 16). For me, this is an interesting phenomenon, because this success happened despite, or even in spite of, the poor Polish translation of the first novel of this tetralogy, *The First Polka*.

References

- Ahrens, Thomas. 2000. *Auf der Suche nach der Heimat: Horst Bieneks Gleiwitzer Tetralogie*. Michigan: UMI.
- Bienek, Horst. 1983. *Beschreibung einer Provinz. Aufzeichnungen. Materialien. Dokumente*. München.
- Bienek, Horst. 1984. *The First Polka*. Translated by Ralph R. Read. San Francisco: Fjord Press.
- Bienek, Horst. 1986. *Der Blinde in der Bibliothek. Literarische Portraits*. München.
- Bienek, Horst. 1987. “Das allmähliche Ersticken von Schreien. Sprache und Exil heute.” *Münchner Poetik-Vorlesungen*. München.

³ A letter from Horst Bienek to Mr. Seitz, dated August 26, 1966, archived in the Carl Hanser Verlag Archives.

- Bienek, Horst. 1987. *The Gradual Stifling of Screams: Language and Exile Today*. Munich Poetics Lectures. Munich.
- Bienek, Horst. 1989. *Selected Poems 1957–1987*. Translated by Ruth Mead, Matthew Mead, and Eva Hesse; with an introduction by Hans Bender. Greensboro: Unicorn Press.
- Bienek, Horst. 1993. *Journey to Childhood. Reunion with Silesia*. Munich/Gliwice.
- Bienek, Horst. 2000. “Die erste Polka. ” In *Bienek, Horst: Gleiwitz. Eine oberschlesische Chronik in vier Romanen*. München.
- Bienek, Horst. 2000. “Die erste Polka.” In *Gleiwitz. Eine oberschlesische Chronik in vier Romanen*. Munich.
- Bienek, Horst. 2008. *Pierwsza polka*. Translated by Maria Przybyłowska. Gliwice: Wydawnictwo “Wokół nas.”
- Bienek, Horst. 2013. *Workuta*. Göttingen.
- Böll, Heinrich. 1975. “Das Schmerzliche an Oberschlesien.” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 11.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2007. *Reguły sztuki. Geneza i struktura pola literackiego* [Rules of Art. Origin and Structure of the Literary Field]. Kraków.
- Capote, Truman. 1994. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. New York.
- Frühwald, Wolfgang. 1985. “Sprache als Heimat: Zum Verhältnis von Erinnerung und Geschichte im Werk Horst Bieneks.” *Loccumer Protokolle* 1983, 30: 42–56.
- Joachimsthaler, Jürgen. 2012. “Das Atmen der Sätze in der Enge des Wort-Raums. Zu Horst Bieneks Schreibweise.” In *Horst Bienek – Ein Schriftsteller in den Extremen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Reinhard Laube and Verena Nolte. Göttingen.
- Kalow, Gert. 1966. “Poetry as Document: ‘was war was ist’ – New Poems by Horst Bienek.” *FAZ*, December 31.
- Krüger, Michael (Ed.). 1980. *Bienek lesen*. Munich.
- Lewandowski, Jan F. 2012. “Czterdziestu wybiera kanon” [Forty Choose the Canon]. *Fabryka Silesia* 1: 15–17.
- Morita, Linda G. 1988. *Wandlungen von Stil und Themen im Werk Horst Bieneks*. University of South California, August.
- Orłowski, Hubert. 2000. “Überwachung und Ausgrenzung: Horst Bienek, *Das allmähliche Ersticken von Schreien. Sprache und Exil heute*.” In *Literatur und Herrschaft – Herrschaft und Literatur*. Opole.
- Pietrek, Daniel. 2012. *Ich erschreibe mich selbst. (Autor)Biografisches Schreiben bei Horst Bienek*. Dresden.
- Pietrek, Daniel. 2022. “Hinter diesen oft grellen Kulissen spielte sich sein anderes Leben ab, sein Leben voller: Solidarität und Freundlichkeit, sein entschiedenes Eintreten für andere...” *Wer hat Angst vor Multikulturalität? Erfahrungen und Vorstellungen in der deutschen und polnischen Kultur*. Edited by Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg and Izabela Surynt. Wiesbaden: Studien zur Multikulturalität, vol. 5: 275–286.
- Pietrek, Daniel. 2023. “Horst Bieneks oberschlesische Bilder (Schlesien).” *Von Popkultur bis Stereotyp. Handbuch der deutsch-polnischen Kommunikation*.

Teilband 3, edited by Sylwia Dec-Pustelnik et al. Wiesbaden: Studien zur Multikulturalität 1(3): 139–162.

Laube, Reinhard, and Nolte, Verena (Eds.). 2012. *Horst Bienek – Ein Schriftsteller in den Extremen des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.