

A Translator's Dream Come True: The "Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium" at Straelen, FRG

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Article abstract

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A TRANSLATOR'S DREAM COME TRUE :

THE «EUROPÄISCHES ÜBERSETZER-KOLLEGIUM» AT STRAELEN, FRG

Résumé

L'article présente un centre européen, unique en son genre, pour les traducteurs d'ouvrages littéraires et savants. Fondé en Allemagne de l'Ouest, en 1978, «pour encourager un échange culturel international dans le domaine de la traduction des ouvrages littéraires et savants», le Collège Européen des Traducteurs («Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium») peut loger confortablement les traducteurs qui visitent l'institution. Celle-ci met également à leur disposition des salles de travail et, avantage qui n'est pas des moindres, une excellente bibliothèque spécialisée, laquelle compte 40 000 volumes, dont 2 500 dictionnaires dans plus d'une centaine de langues. Plus de 300 traducteurs venant de plus de 30 pays visitent tous les ans le «Kollegium», qui anime également des ateliers de traduction et des séminaires internationaux pour les auteurs et les traducteurs.

Consider the following : you are in the process of translating a novel, or a scholarly manuscript. You have pored over your text, you have made progress, but you are still agonizing over certain formulations and phrases, pondering solutions that have so far escaped you. You are frustrated and you have reached an impasse. And then you have this dream :

There is a place where you can take your half-finished manuscript, where you can stay for a while and think over your problems. This place offers all the resources you require : a superb library filled with the latest reference works, dictionaries, glossaries, encyclopedias, all of them easily accessible and available to you. There is also a good selection of primary literature in many languages, along with translations where translations exist. You may use all these works right in the stacks or, if you prefer, gather up an armful of helpful tomes and retire to your apartment located in the same building, in order to continue your consultations for as long as you are staying.

The place of your dreams comes equipped with data processing equipment and with typewriters, which you may borrow ; and should you feel the need to discuss your work and your problems with other colleagues, you will find knowledgeable and interested translators like yourself who are working on their own projects and who are willing to lend an ear and able to offer helpful hints. You may join these colleagues for a cup of coffee or for a glass of wine, have lunch with them at a local pub, or perhaps invite them to a meal prepared by yourself, in a fully equipped kitchen right on the premises. You might even want to sit in on a workshop, perhaps on new reference works available in your field, or on how to deal with your publisher. Or you might want to take part in a seminar

for writers and their translators, and if you are especially in luck the author of your own to-be-translated novel might be there in person.

But this is only a dream ! Or is it? The dream has come true ! There is such a place ! Actually the dream began to come true some twelve years ago. On January 10, 1978, an association was founded in the small West German town of Straelen, close to the Dutch border and within easy reach of Düsseldorf and Cologne, called the «Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium» (literally translated : European Translators' College), whose purpose as expressed in its charter was :

«...to promote an international cultural exchange in the areas of the translation of literary and scholarly works, and to strengthen the idea of understanding among peoples.» This purpose was to be achieved through the establishment of an international centre at Straelen, where apartments, work areas and a specialized library would be available to German and foreign translators while they were working on their projects. Any «useful and valuable solutions to translation problems» would be made available to others through a special information service, and «exemplary translations» would be encouraged and supported.

The «Kollegium» has come a long way since its foundation a dozen years ago. The first international centre for translators of literary and scholarly works, it now houses a library of some 40,000 volumes, among them 2,500 dictionaries in more than one hundred languages, and offers to visiting translators from Germany and other countries, comfortable work space and the use of computers.²

In addition to having become a haven for visiting translators of literary and scholarly works from around the world — more than 300 guests now stay at the «Kollegium» every year, from Germany and from over thirty other countries, e.g. from Argentina, Brazil, China, England, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Canada, Israel, Japan, Poland, Sweden, the Soviet Union, and the USA —, the «Kollegium» also forms an attractive venue for translators' workshops and for international seminars of authors and their translators.

Straelen itself is a pretty little town, long known for growing and marketing an abundance of flowers and vegetables. The foreign visitor to this border area is impressed by the openness of the border itself and by the uninterrupted two-way flow of traffic between the two countries. As if to symbolize the international atmosphere of the area, pedestrians cross border points unhindered on picturesque paths, to visit and to enjoy a meal at local restaurants on either side.

The prime mover behind the idea of establishing the translators' centre at Straelen was the late Elmar Tophoven (1989), a well-known translator of Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon and others, into German. Straelen was chosen because Tophoven is himself from Straelen ; his father once practised

medicine there, and Elmar was able to convince the town fathers to lend support to his vision. And so Tophoven helped to establish at Straelen a new kind of *Escuela de Traductores*, the famous school of interpreters that existed in the 12th century at Toledo, Spain, where Arabic manuscripts were converted into Romance and Latin by an assembly of scholars.³

Financial support for the Centre comes from several sources. The present building — soon to be expanded — in the town's *Kuhstraße* was bought by the town at a cost of 3.2 million marks and has been renovated extensively, to suit its new purpose. Three-fifths of the annual cost of running the «Kollegium» is assumed by the State of North-Rhine Westphalia, the remainder to be picked up by various sources, the town, the district and several foundations. Support has also been forthcoming from Federal authorities as well as, from time to time and for special meetings organized for visiting groups of translators, from publishing houses and from other institutions.⁴

Every year, a number of fellowships are made available to suitable applicants interested in completing a relevant translation project at the «Kollegium» while in residence for a period of time, from a few weeks to several months. Some fellowships include both room and board, i.e. free accommodation plus a daily food allowance. Certain fellowships are awarded specifically to translators working on a literary project from one European Community language into another. Scholarships are also awarded through the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany and are targeted for foreign translators of German literature.⁵

Scholarship holders and applicants accepted for temporary residence are housed right at the Centre, in pleasantly furnished one-room apartments with individual bathroom and shower facilities. The guests have the use of two well-equipped kitchens, where they can prepare their own meals, and may of course use free of charge the «Kollegium's» excellent library facilities, as well as typewriters and data processing units. Last, but by no means least, they have an opportunity to consult with other resident translators.

Residence and fellowship applications are accepted at any time by the «Kollegium» and should include name, address and telephone number; a short biography and a bibliography of works translated, an accurate description of the project to be carried out at Straelen, as well as the suggested time of stay, with alternate dates.⁶ Because of the great interest of translators in working at Straelen, there is a waiting list, and the competition for possible financial support is intense.⁷

The visitor to the «Kollegium» comes away with the impression that it is run with a maximum of efficiency and expertise and with a minimum of bureaucracy. The driving force behind the Center's activities are its thoroughly capable administrative director, Mrs. Karin Heinz, and the resident director of projects Dr. Klaus Birkenhauer, who is himself a well-known translator from English. Their efforts are

complemented by a professional librarian, Ms. Regina Peeters.

In addition to attracting an ever-increasing number of translators, organizing regular seminars and meetings and continuing the expansion of its specialized library and other translation-oriented collections, the Centre produces its own series of publications, the *Straelener Manuskripte*, of which an impressive number have appeared over the last decade, ranging from editions of German translations of contemporary Dutch, Hungarian, New Zealand, Slovakian, and Italian poetry, to glossaries of Black American English, Nazi terminology and other specialized glossaries. These compilations are especially useful to translators working from the German.

In his address given at the opening of the Straelen «Kollegium» in 1980, the late Nobel laureate, Heinrich Böll, called the realization of Tophoven's vision an «almost unique» experiment. It is unique in our time. For translators, it is a dream come true, a grand vision realized in a small town on the Dutch-German border and a fitting symbol of the cooperative character of a new Europe.

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NOTES

1. The author was an invited guest at the «Kollegium» last spring, while working on a scholarly translation project supported by the Canada Council and the Department of External Affairs.
2. The Centre is now so well known that when some time ago a postcard mailed from another European country was addressed simply to the «House of Literature near Krefeld, Federal Republic of Germany», the German postal authorities had no difficulty in re-directing it to its proper addressee located within a few miles of the Dutch border, near the Dutch city of Venlo.
3. The story of the Toledan school of translators is a fascinating one. Created by Alfonso VI of Castile (1072-1109), this school was instrumental in transmitting Greek and Arabic thought to Medieval Europe and the Christian West. Toledo was at that time home to a large and highly educated Jewish population. The Jews were fluent in Arabic and in Latin or Romance (the forerunner of modern Spanish and French) and were thus able to play a vital role in the work of translation. Translation often proceeded as a team effort, with Jewish scholars translating the original Arabic into Romance, and a Christian producing a Latin version.

In addition to native scholars and translators, a number of Western scholars also participated in this historic effort, among them Adelard of Bath (c.1090 — c.1150), who introduced Euclid to the Western world; Robert of Chester (c.1110 — c.1160), who produced the first Latin translation of the Koran; and Gerard of Cremona (1114-87), who is said to have translated some ninety Arabic works, during an extended stay in Toledo. For more on this fascinating story, see *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, by Jan Read (1974), London.

4. The «Kollegium» is in need of and is very grateful for support from individuals. In addition to cash donations, for which receipts are issued for income tax purposes, gifts of dictionaries, glossaries, encyclopedias as well as literary works in any language, including translations, are cheerfully accepted. The address is: Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium e.V., Postfach 26, D-4172 STRAELEN 1, Federal Republic of Germany.
5. Among the various literary and scholarly projects pursued at Straelen while I was there last spring were translations of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Martin Heidegger into Polish, Sigmund Freud into French, Peter Weiss into Russian, and Virginia Woolf into German. Work was also proceeding on a dramatic text from the Italian Renaissance and on an anthology of contemporary Dutch poetry, both being translated into German. In most cases, the translators were holders of prestigious fellowships and/or awards for literary translation.
6. Foreign academics interested in carrying out a translation project may apply to the «Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst» (DAAD), Kennedyallee 50, D-5300 BONN 2, Federal Republic of Germany. There is a special application form, which may be requested from the DAAD or from Straelen.
7. Translators working at Straelen are requested to submit a copy of their finished translation to the «Kollegium», together with any useful notes and comments gathered in the course of their work that can be made available to other interested translators.