

The Finno-Ugric Literary Café and Poetry Collection

In 2023 and 2024, the Estonian Literary Museum hosted poetry meetings as part of the so-called Finno-Ugric literary café (Soome-ugri kirjanduskohvik, SUKK). The project was supported by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research through the Kindred Peoples Programme.

THE LITERARY CAFÉ

The idea of the Literary Café in general is to discover other languages through different senses. The same literary work is spoken in different languages and in this way participants can ‘taste’ another language by speaking it, as each language is revealed in all its beauty and uniqueness. Listening to and reading one linguistic artefact in different participants offers the opportunity to understand the phonetic features of the languages and get to know their melodies.

The aim of the Literary Café is to increase understanding between different cultural and linguistic communities through literature. Multiculturalists, translators and enthusiasts are invited to attend. The Literary Café uses the method of close reading to present different literary works and read texts in different languages (originals and translations) in order to hear the characteristics of languages and learn about the nuances of cultures.

The Literary Café also brings together experts to talk about the history of a work and the peculiarities of its translation, and the difficulties of understanding the text and its interpretation. Comments on the translations help participants to see the peculiarities of the linguistic worldview that influence the specificity of the language.

Another goal of the Literary Café is to motivate interest in the process of translation and to help participants understand the possibilities and limitations

of transferring meanings from one language to another, which helps to overcome the linguocentrism inherent in any culture and increase the value of languages other than the mother tongue. Therefore, both professional and amateur translators are invited to Literary Café meetings.

THE FINNO-UGRIC LITERARY CAFÉ

The Finno-Ugric Literary Café has been running for two seasons on the premises of the Estonian Literary Museum. The first project started in April 2023 with meetings once a month, except for July and August, for a total of seven meetings in 2023. The project was designed to run for one year, but at the request of SUKK participants and encouraged by the positive feedback, we decided to continue. We re-opened the café in April 2024. We had six events planned for the new season.

Each SUKK event was dedicated to a work of Finno-Ugric literature and its translations. The choice of authors and works was largely determined by the availability of translations, so we tried to find as many as possible. Unfortunately, for some works we found only a few. When we had to choose between several authors and/or poems, we sought expert advice. Unfortunately, some Finno-Ugric literature has not been translated, so the new translations made by the participants of our meetings fill this gap to some extent. There is very little biographical information about some authors, even though they are recognised as classics within their respective national cultures. We have also tried to fill this gap.

The meetings were held in a relaxed atmosphere over a cup of tea/coffee, usually with national pastries of the respective nation. The following poems by Finno-Ugric writers were performed at SUKK evenings over the two years (in chronological order of the thematic evenings):

Komi – Ivan Kuratov: “Менам муза” (My muse)

Udmurt – Ashalchi Oki: “Сюрес дурын” (By the road)

Hungarian – Sándor Petőfi: “Nemzeti dal” (National song)

Mari – Sergei Chavain: “Ото” (Grove)

Moksha – Raya Orlova: “Сире пингонь мокшень мора” (Old Moksha song)

Erzya – Yakov Kuldurkaev: “Эрмезь” (‘Ermez’)

Estonian – Lydia Koidula: “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My homeland is my love)

Livonian – Baiba Damberga: “Kõd kiēlkōks ma sīndiz” (I was born with two languages)

Livvi-Karelian – Alexander Volkov: “Liivin virret” (A word about the Livs)

Nenets – Yuri Vella: “Няхадовш” (Nenets triptych)

Saami – Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: “Mu ruoktu lea mu váimmus” (My home is in my heart)

Mansi – Yuvan Shestalov: “Mākem at” (Breath of the Motherland)

NEW POETIC TRANSLATIONS

In the two years of the existence of the Finno-Ugric Literary Café our meetings have been attended by people with a wide variety of native languages and cultural backgrounds from Estonia and abroad such as Poland, Ukraine, Great Britain, France, Hungary, Finland and others. We invited the participants to translate the selected works into their (native) languages; we are happy that there are still many translators among us who love poetry. Some of the translators were very active and submitted translations of several works, while others managed to translate only a few poems. Przemysław Podleśny, who translated all the poems discussed at SUKK into Polish, deserves special mention in this respect. Some of the translators had completed their translations before our project, but not published them, and these translators have kindly provided them to us for publication. The translation of Sándor Petőfi’s “National Song” into the Seto language by Anti Lillak within the framework of the SUKK project was published for the first time last spring (see Lillaku 2024: 10).

The poems have been translated into quite a number of languages: English, Erzya, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Kazakh, Komi, Moksha, Polish, Réunion Creole, Rumenian, Russian, Seto, Udmurt, Vepsian, Votic, and Võro. Thus, in two years we have collected more than 60 new literary translations, a huge number.

The same poem sounds different in every language. Each translator shapes it in his or her own way. In collecting new translations, we did not want to judge their quality or consistency with the original. (Let language specialists, professional poets and literary critics do that.) Our aim was different. We wanted to encourage people who speak these languages to make new translations of Finno-Ugric works into as many languages as possible, so that Finno-Ugric literature can become better known. By the way, to our surprise, some poems were translated in disappointingly small numbers.

THE BOOK

From the poems translated for the SUKK we have compiled and published a book (the project was also supported through the Kindred Peoples Programme). The book is a direct result of the activities of the Finno-Ugric Literary Café.

The structure of the book follows the sequence of SUKK events. Thus, it is divided into blocks by author.

Each block contains brief information about the author. We deliberately took information about the authors from the most multilingual ‘people’s’

encyclopaedia Wikipedia, so that each reader can refer to the quoted text and read a more extensive article (sometimes we had to shorten the Wikipedia text, sometimes supplement it), and by switching to an article about the author written in another language, find new data (articles in different languages in Wikipedia, even about the same person are noticeably different).

After the information about the author, each block is followed by an original poem by that author and new translations of the work in different languages.

Each block ends with a commentary by experts who provide information about the author and his or her work in general, discuss the work from a linguistic, artistic, poetic and/or other point of view, and draw attention to the peculiarities and possible difficulties of translation.

And so on for each author and each work discussed. In total, 13 Finno-Ugric authors are represented in the book: in addition to the 12 SUKK authors listed above, we have added the Finnish poet Eino Leino and his famous work “Nocturne”, which was discussed in another similar project (‘Keeled ühendavad’, The Integration Foundation), but which is ideally suited for this book, despite the fact that we have to be content with only one new translation of this poem.

CONCLUSION

In a way, the book is a summary of what was done in the Finno-Ugric Literary Café held at the Estonian Literary Museum in 2023 and 2024. With both the Café and the book, we want to contribute to the promotion and dissemination of Finno-Ugric languages and literatures, as well as raising awareness of the value of different languages in general. The book consists of poetry and texts in different languages. We believe that it will bring aesthetic pleasure and the joy of discovery to both poetry lovers and professional philologists. We hope that it will also be a source of inspiration for translators.

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REFERENCES

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