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The Swiss-Spanish wordsmith

How a poet from St. Gallen wrote in Spanish to earn a place in the annals of Swiss literature

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Can there be such a thing as an author who is inspired and sustained for a lifetime by a distant land in which they spent their childhood, and who can write so authentically and adroitly in the language of their former home that one of the greatest writers of said country, a Nobel Prize winner no less, expresses surprise at the “charm and tenderness” of the author’s stanzas? Yes, there can indeed. The author in question was Hans Leopold Davi, the distant land the Spanish island of Tenerife, where Davi was born on 10 January 1928 – the son of parents who had emigrated from Kaltbrunn (canton of St. Gallen). His prominent literary admirer was the Spanish poet Vicente Aleixandre (1898–1984).

German premiere in Paris

Davi attended elementary school in Tenerife, before entering upper secondary school in St. Gallen at the age of 19 and going on to do a bookselling apprenticeship in Zurich followed by an internship in Paris. The Parisian printing house Georges Girard published Davi’s German-language debut “Gedichte einer Jugend” (Poems of youth). One of the poems in this work – “Nächtliche Heimkehr” (Nocturnal homecoming) – contained the following verse: “Where art thou, the unknown, / That nourishes my dreams? / Where art thou, the unnamed, / That gives me a home?”. However, Davi’s second work in 1956, “Spuren am Strand” (Trails in the sand), published by Diogenes, was a dual-language collection of poems written in Spanish and translated additionally into German by the author himself. “Kinderliedern” (Children’s songs), the 1959 work that so impressed Vicente Aleixandre, shared the same dual-language format, as did “Stein und Wolke” (Stones and clouds) in 1961 – and indeed all Davi’s poetry collections from then on until his final work, the dual-titled “Me escaparé por el Hueco de la Chimenea” / “Ich werde durchs Kaminloch entkommen” (I will escape through the chimney).

Writing Spanish poems in Switzerland

The author, who lived in Lucerne with his wife, painter Silvia Davi, from 1953 until his death on 12 August 2016, produced poems of high spiritual concentration and tremendous lyrical intensity within their laconically minimalist linguistic genre. His works recall the great Spanish poetic tradition and remain clear and comprehensible at all times despite their occasional daring. They express wonderment

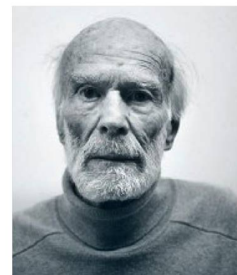
at life’s strange unfathomables and chronicle the author’s search for the “unknown God”. Mostly profoundly, almost all of them seek to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of life, death and love. However, Davi – a skilled translator who rendered works by Dürrenmatt, Hilde Domin and a whole string of Swiss authors into Spanish – never shied away from highlighting injustices just for the sake of aesthetics. He repeatedly addressed the horrors of the Franco dictatorship, while his 1990 poem about Argentina’s national library in Buenos Aires referred to the unpunished human rights violations committed during the military junta: “Or do humans in these and other parts of the world / maybe count for less than a book or a document?”. In 2000, Davi also criticised refugee policies that focus more on valid identity papers than actual human suffering.

Not Swiss enough

Davi was highly respected in Spain but regarded in Switzerland as insufficiently Swiss. When the author offered to bequeath his works to the Swiss Literary Archives (SLA) in Berne in 2015, the SLA director replied saying that it was impossible to list him because no one in Berne could archive manuscripts written in Spanish. Until the very end, however, Davi refused to sacrifice his love of Spain, the Spanish language and the landscapes of his dreams for a received idea of Swiss patriotism. His “Gebet eines alten Mannes” (Prayer of an old man) in 1999 ended brilliantly with the following wish: “Being something: a whiff of morning breeze / a speck of dust from the North Star / a fleeting trace / in your brightest dreams”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Ein Reisepass für das Wort” (A passport for words), 2000, is available from Orte Verlag, while the childhood reminiscences of “Erlebtes und Erdachtes” (Experiences and ideas), 2007, are published by Pro Libro, Lucerne.

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HOME

This little pile of earth
on which I stand
and place my feet,
and that other unknown,
faraway land
on which I do not stand,
but to which my wings carry me!

Hans Leopold Davi, from “Spuren am Strand” (Trails in the sand), Diogenes, Zurich, 1956; out of print