

A Head in 1,001 Places, a Body in One

For some 10 years, Rami Saari has been living in Athens after a stint in Helsinki. His global wanderings have apparently only spurred on his career as one of the most prolific translators from Hebrew.

Ido Balas

Mar. 26, 2012

When language is not an obstacle, the world looks smaller - that's how it is when you have perfect command of over 10 languages, in addition to being able "only" to speak several others and some knowledge of yet other languages. Today Rami Saari is working on his fluency in three more languages: Polish, Albanian (from he has already translated) and Russian, which, as he puts it, "is a language I like very much, although I have no intention of translating from it."

Saari, who was a Ph.D. in linguistics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is one of the most productive Hebrew translators; indeed every year between two and four works he has translated from other languages are published in Israel. He was drawn to Athens because of his love for the Greek language and culture, after 14 years of speaking the language and making frequent visits. Apparently, there were also personal reasons for the move which, along with other such private topics, he does not want to discuss in our conversation.



Rami Saari. Credit: Michalis Mukhtaris

When I say I am envious about his life in Athens and about the daily work of a translator, he says: "That reminds of a poem by an Estonian poet, Jaan Kaplinski. A few years ago I translated his book 'The Ice and the Titanic' for Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishers. In one of the poems he writes that a friend of his who went on a trip to the distant Fiji Islands sent him a postcard. When he received the postcard he saw his name and address with a stamp from the Fiji Islands and though how exotic that was - Fiji, no less!

"But then he turned over the postcard and on the other side saw a photo of old ladies gathering potatoes in a field, and said: That's exactly what I have here under my nose in Estonia, it's the same thing," continues Saari. "I could have said what a shame that I'm not you. You're in a different place, which may be better than the place where I am; you may be at an age that I like better than my own age. There are 1,001 things that could make me think why it would be better for me to be you, rather than me.

"But I think that with that perception you seal yourself off from seeing the situation correctly. The best situation is the existing one, and the things that have to be changed, you have to change. I'm in favor of change, not in favor of remaining in

place. But in my private life I've seen all along that people who are jealous cause great injustice to themselves in the final analysis."

Rami Saari was born in Petah Tikva in 1963. As an infant he moved with his family to Argentina, and grew up with Spanish as a second mother tongue. He forgot it at the age of 4, he says, when his family returned to Israel, but in general at a young age he already showed a talent for languages. He began to study Finnish on his own while still in high school, and after his discharge from the army moved to Helsinki and began to study linguistics, languages and literature at a local university. He eventually received his doctorate in Jerusalem on the subject of "Maltese prepositions."

In the past Saari was the in-house translator for Carmel Publishing House. In recent years, he has also been editing the Scandinavian literature series Tzafon (North) for Hakibbutz Hameuchad. Saari has twice won the Prime Minister's Prize for his translations, as well as the Tchernichovsky Prize, a Science and Culture Ministry award, and the Asraf Prize from the Academy of the Hebrew Language for his contribution to enriching the canon of literature translated into Hebrew. To date he has published seven books of his own poetry, and translated some 50 books.

Saari: "It's important that the things said in the original are transferred into the target language in the most precise way possible, that the message won't be missed. Because I choose books which I think it's important for the Israeli reader to get to know, I also want the Hebrew version of the book to be as faithful as possible to the original. For me remaining faithful to the original means, among other things, that an Israeli reader in a different country, under different circumstances, in an environment that is totally different in every possible way, will nevertheless receive what the book is conveying, in terms of content and message."

In the past year four of Saari's translations have been: "The Return of the Water Spirit," by an Angolan writer who uses the pen name Pepetela (Machberot Lesifrut); "War and War" by Hungarian writer Laszlo Krasznahorkai (Babel, in cooperation with an enterprise that advances translation of outstanding literature); "Stone in a Landslide" by Catalan author Maria Barbal (Rimonim); and "The Books of Chameleons," by Jose Eduardo Agualusa (forthcoming from Machberot Lesifrut).

Soon the same publisher will issue Saari's translation of "The Maias," by Eca de Queiroz, a preeminent Portuguese author.

Past for sale

In most cases Saari says he suggests the books he is interested in translating to the publishers, who usually rely on his judgment. Sometimes publishers turn to him with an idea.

"I don't translate anything before I read it," says Saari. "Nor do I have any problem telling a publisher: Thank you very much, although I need money and want to work, I won't translate this book, because I don't translate books that aren't good in my opinion. Financial reasons are not a consideration."

His meticulous selection process has led to a situation whereby many consider his choices to constitute a standard of quality. In the case of "The Book of Chameleons," written in 2004 by Angolan writer Jose Eduardo Agualusa, the publisher approached Saari, who undertook the translation; it's his latest effort. This is the story of Felix Ventura, an Angolan albino, who sells his customers a "past" - a genealogical history of their choosing. When Agualusa thus integrates both the historical background of his country and its present-day social situation, he creates a complex and colorful world - a combination of fact and fiction, told by the albino, one of his clients and, mainly, through the eyes of a fly-loving gecko with a rich past.

"One of the things I find most fascinating in 'The Book of Chameleons' is that it is multifaceted, although it is not a novel with a broad landscape per se," says Saari, explaining why he agreed to translate the book. "It is not unequivocal, it is open to many insights and perceptions, and at the same time it isn't confused. Its polyphonic nature, with several speakers and several characters - through which you travel from place to place and move from one country to another - is not something that makes everything chaotic. The moment you get into the spirit of the book, and that doesn't take more than a few pages, you're in a place where interesting things happen.

"I think it also offers a perception of a situation that is totally foreign and yet grabs you: the world of an Angolan albino. But in almost all of the books I've translated there's a potential for identification between the reader and what he reads. It can sometimes be happy, sometimes sad, it makes no difference what there is: what story, plot, characters. There's something there that grabs you and generates an emotional reverberation. If it grabs you only because of the subject, you can read newspapers, you don't have to read belles lettres for that."

Did you feel a particular connection to Agualusa's book? As a person who speaks so many languages and travels so much, there must be an option to reinvent yourself each time.

"That seems very logical. There are several things that are connected to that in the context of the book. One of them is to know exactly where your boundaries lie, when you belong and to where, what your real identity is. The moment you're capable of being 10 different things, of traveling from country to country, from language to language or from character to character, you always ask yourself who you are."

Freedom, love and truth

Identity is a significant issue that runs like a thread through all of Saari's work, in poetry and translation.

"All the characters in the books I've translated deal with the question of where the boundaries lie, where you cross them and at what cost," he says. "These are books that deal to some extent with the question of the price you're forced to pay the moment you're true to yourself."

So, in that sense, what is the role of language?

"I think that in the transition from one language to another you can also understand many things about yourself, about the world around you, and about people who live differently, in a different culture. I feel that every new language is a way to cross boundaries. The human and ideological values that I believe are the essence of a

person's existence are freedom, love and truth. It's hard for me to think of a situation where I could live in freedom by means of only one language. I also believe that if you aren't fluent in your language, you can't become fluent in any other language.

"Learning a foreign language is not an easy thing, but we're talking about this issue of crossing boundaries, and the moment you have a good understanding of where your boundaries lie, of your language and of your possibility of expressing yourself in it - you have far greater opportunities to cross the boundary line from your language to another one. And even to deal with the rules and the boundaries presented by the new language."

Does this crossing make you choose not to live in Israel?

"I travel to Israel and I visit Israel when there's a good reason to be there. It's important to me to be physically present in a place where I want to be, at a time when I want to be there. I see life as an array of possibilities. As long as my body, soul and mind enable me to do so, there's no reason to restrict these possibilities. When I want to be in Israel I'm in Israel, when I want to be in another place, I'm in another place.

But what do you do about longing? For a language, for people?

"I feel that I'm a tourist throughout my life. I tell myself, there's no point in longing for something or other now, because parallel to this longing you also have other longings for all the other things. If I'm in Athens and I long for 10 places or I'm in Jerusalem and I long for 10 places, I prefer to think about what I actually want to do with this longing. My head can take me to 1,001 places, but my body can be in only one place."