



Photo: Svetlana Geier, with her granddaughter Anna, looks eagerly out the train window en route from Germany to Ukraine, Geier's first return to her homeland in 65 years.

Film Review: *The Woman with the 5 Elephants*

By Susan Welsh

Die Frau mit den 5 Elefanten (*The Woman with the 5 Elephants*), a fascinating documentary of the life and work of translator Svetlana Geier (1923-2010), will be of interest to all translators, regardless of language pair or specialty. Geier was the famed translator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's principal novels¹ ("the five elephants") into German, as well as of the work of many other Russian literary giants. The film, by Swiss director Vadim Jendreyko, has been widely acclaimed at European film festivals; unfortunately, it has drawn very little attention in Geier's native Russia. It opened in New York on July 20, 2011, and can be purchased in the U.S. by libraries and educational institutions. A DVD is available in Europe, but will not be marketed in the U.S. until late 2011 or early 2012.

"I read a book until the pages are full of holes. I virtually know it by heart. Then the day comes when I can suddenly hear the melody of the text."

—Sweetlana Geier

We modern translators, who are accustomed to counting our pennies by the word and our words by the hour, will find the film as slow-paced as is the "workflow" of its subject. But for Svetlana Geier (née Svetlana Ivanova), who lived on her university pension from her retirement to the age of 87, and kept translating until almost the very end, money was irrelevant. She was dedicated, heart and

soul, to re-creating, in the minds of her German-speaking public, the experience of reading Russian literature. This does not mean she did not feel the pressure of time, however—she felt it acutely. When the interviewer asks her why, at her age, she works all day and into the night without taking breaks, she replies, "I am too old for breaks. I still owe life something."

There are many things that could be said about this film and Geier's life, such as how it came about that a Russian girl living in Kiev with her parents ended up in Nazi Germany in 1943, and returned to the land of her birth only 65 years later, with her granddaughter Anna Götte and a film crew. For the story, I refer you to the film, limiting myself here to the subject of translation.

"A Translation Is Not a Caterpillar"

Geier finally goes back for a visit to Ukraine in 2008, when a school invites her to come and address the students. She tells the young people who are studying to become translators:

When we translate, we have a book lying in front of us and we *think* the story starts in the top left-hand corner and finishes in the bottom right-hand corner. I had a wonderful teacher, and when I was translating something, she would say to me in German: 'Stick your nose up in the air when you're translating!' In other words: 'Raise your head, don't look at the page.' She insisted that this little girl not read along from left to right, but take in the whole sentence, raise her head, and then translate it.

That's all. I have nothing more to tell you! In fact, I could leave again, right now, this evening. You see, that is the most important thing.

A translation is not a caterpillar, crawling from left to right. A translation always emerges from the whole. One has to make the text entirely one's own. The Germans say it has to be *verinnerlicht*. You have to internalize the text, take it into your heart. Make it your own.

"I am too old to take breaks.
I still owe life something."

—Sweetlana Geier

Back in Freiburg, Germany, where Geier lives, we see her at work with her two faithful collaborators, Hannelore Hagen ("A person who really knows German; that is a rare virtue.") and Jürgen Klodt ("He is a musician and reads my translations aloud to me.").

Frau Geier sits with her Russian text and a dictionary in her lap, while Frau Hagen takes dictation on a *typewriter* (!). Sometimes the clackety-clack of the machine drowns out Geier's soft voice and a phrase needs to be repeated. Geier is not translating extemporaneously, although it seems as though she is; she has read the book so many times that she knows it inside and out. "I know what is written on each page and how it will work. But on the evening before, I really look at the building blocks... I read a book until the pages are full of holes. I virtually know it by heart. Then the day comes when I can suddenly hear the melody of the text." Then she is ready for the typist.

By the time Herr Klodt enters the process, the first draft is done: "Now we are really concentrating on words, pauses, and consistencies." While listening to "the melody of the text," Geier and Klodt argue, line by line, over the placement of commas, the subjunctive versus the indicative, and whether the "horses" referred to by Dostoevsky are coach horses or the horses upon which one rides. It is a miracle that the elephants ever made it to the printer!

Actually Human Translation

What lessons, if any, does this film hold for those of us who are not master translators of the world's great literature? Geier, who had the good fortune of financial independence, had talents that developed during the course of a very unique life history. What about us, the translators of corporate annual reports or users' manuals for refrigerators?

There is a reason our modern search engines are called "crawlers." Like Geier's "caterpillar," they creep along from one bit of data to the next. However complex they may be, they are linear, unlike the creative human mind. If we translate like "crawlers," we are justified in worrying about whether we will be replaced by machine translation! If all a human does is to translate each word and then line them up in a row according to some syntactical and grammatical rules, there is nothing uniquely human in the activity. A machine will be able to do it.

The electronic applications that have become the almost indispensable tools of our trade—translation memories, glossaries, online dictionaries, Internet research, machine translation—are of great value, but they can also make the work of translation more decorticated. Tired after a long week, have you ever sent off a rush job and asked yourself, "What was that document about, anyway?"



Film Review: *The Woman with the 5 Elephants* Continued

The story of Svetlana Geier's life and work poses a challenge to all of us: do not fixate on the computer screen. "Stick your nose up in the air when you're translating!"

Production Information

Die Frau mit den 5 Elefanten.
Directed by Vadim Jendreyko, 93 minutes (Mira Film of Switzerland with Filmtank Hamburg, ZDF/3sat, Schweizer Fernsehen, 2009). You can view the trailer at www.5elefanten.ch/Intro.

Note

1. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Raw Youth*.

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Tips for cleaning up your online profile

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Six Tips to Help You Make Contact

1. Check spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
2. Update your contact information, especially your e-mail address and phone numbers.
3. Use the "Additional Information" field, noting education and career experiences, unusual specialties, and any dialects you can handle. By using a "keyword" search, clients can find your services based on a set of very specific skills and experience.
4. List your areas of specialization.
5. Review your listing monthly to experiment with different wording or add new information that may set you apart from others.
6. List non-English-to-non-English language combinations, such as Portuguese into Spanish and French into Italian.

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