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# Introduction to the Translation<sup>1</sup>

## *TRANSIT* vol. 14, no. 1

Karolina May-Chu

Inga Iwasiów, born in 1963 in Szczecin, is a renowned Polish writer, feminist literary scholar, and activist. As co-translators, Karolina Hicke and I are happy to present here two non-consecutive chapters from Iwasiów's debut novel *Bambino* (2008) in a first-time English translation.

*Bambino* is set in Szczecin, formerly German Stettin, a port city in northwestern Poland. The story begins in the 1950s, when the city was still being rebuilt and establishing a new identity after the Second World War. It ends in summer 1981, shortly before the communist Polish government cracked down on the opposition movement and placed the country under martial law. The novel also includes memories and flashbacks to earlier time periods that help explain the protagonists' backgrounds and motivations.<sup>2</sup>

The novel tells the story of Maria, Janek, Ula, Anna, and Stefan, who come to this city with hopes for a better future. Their lives become entangled when they meet by chance in the 1950s in a milk bar ("bar mleczny") named "Bambino."<sup>3</sup> The non-linear narrative, which spans three decades and is told over forty-two chapters, explores how the protagonists' life stories have been impacted not only by the multiple and violent changes in geopolitical borders, but also by figurative boundaries, especially those of class, language, ethnicity, and gender. *Bambino*'s first four chapters introduce four of the main protagonists, along with their family histories and life trajectories that brought them to Szczecin. To contextualize the translated chapters, I introduce the characters here briefly.<sup>4</sup>

Maria was born in 1940 in Poland's eastern territories that were incorporated into

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this introduction are taken from: Karolina May-Chu, *Border Poetics in German and Polish Literature: Cosmopolitan Imaginations since 1989*. Camden House, 2024 (forthcoming). The book includes a longer discussion of the novel. I thank Camden House for its permission to use these excerpts here. I also thank Karolina Hicke for her feedback on this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Iwasiów explains the inspiration for this novel, especially the character of Ulrike, in a non-fictional essay in a German-language anthology: Inga Iwasiów, "Ingeleine, du wirst groß sein," *Oder-Rhein. Grenzen im Fluss: eine Anthologie*, edited by Lothar Jordan and Regina Wyrwoll, translated by Joanna Manc, Kleist-Museum Frankfurt (Oder) and Heinrich-Heine-Institut Düsseldorf, 2007, pp. 134–39.

<sup>3</sup> A "bar mleczny" is an affordable Polish eatery known in the past for serving mainly vegetarian dishes that are dairy- or flour-based. During communist times, milk bars offered subsidized food to the working public and often functioned as a kind of cafeteria. Today, milk bars are also tourist attractions, but they continue to provide affordable meals and can still receive subsidies from the government.

<sup>4</sup> Scholarship in German or English that discusses the novel includes: Mariella C. Gronenthal, *Nostalgie und Sozialismus: Emotionale Erinnerung in der deutschen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur*. transcript, 2018; Ursula Phillips, "Generation, Transformation and Place in Inga Iwasiów's Novels *Bambino* (2008) and *Ku słońcu* (2010)." *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 17–35; Agnieszka Sadecka, "'This Place is Now your Home'—A Comparative View on Partition Migrants in a New City. Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* and Inga Iwasiów's *Bambino*." *Wielogłos*, vol. 22, 2014, pp. 79–104.

the Soviet Union after the Second World War and are today part of Ukraine. Due to political circumstances, missing paperwork, and their own indecisiveness, the family is unable to leave the Soviet Union until 1957. They eventually settle in a poor, rural area in Western Poland, and shortly thereafter, Maria decides to go to Szczecin to become independent and pursue an education. She is very homesick, though, and feels guilty about abandoning her family. Maria rents a room from Ula, who works at "Bambino," where Maria also meets Janek.<sup>5</sup>

Janek was born in a village in the comparatively wealthy region of Greater Poland in 1940. His father's identity is unknown, which makes Janek an outsider in the traditional Catholic community. When his mother moves to the city to find a job, Janek grows up with his grandparents. After his grandmother's passing, Janek goes to Szczecin, where he meets Maria. The two fall in love, get married, and have a child. Janek makes a career by collaborating with the communist regime, thereby advancing his family's social standing. Soon, cracks appear in Maria's and Jan's seemingly perfect life: Jan develops an increasing sense of superiority over his wife and her poor family from the East. Maria struggles with alcohol abuse, and, after she dies, Ula (Ulrike) takes in the couple's daughter.

Ulrike was born in German Stettin. She is introduced in the novel's third chapter, titled "**Ula, born 1930**," featured here in English translation. Ulrike's father was an engineer and ardent National Socialist, and he is falsely presumed to have died in the war. Ulrike's mother is of mixed German and Polish descent, and after the war, she and Ulrike evade the expulsions and stay in the now Polish city of Szczecin. Ulrike remains in the city even after her mother's death in 1947, concealing her German background, and changing her name to Ula. Ula works in the milk bar and lives with Maria. Later, Ula begins a relationship with Stefan, a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor from Warsaw. Like all relationships in the novel, theirs too is built on silences and omissions: she hides her German past, and he never speaks about his experiences during the Holocaust. Their relationship ends in 1968, when Stefan is forced to leave Poland due to the antisemitic campaign led by the communist authorities.

Anna was born in 1930 in southern Poland, in a region located in the former Austrian partition that was occupied by Germany during the Second World War. Anna's father was a Polish bookbinder who completed some orders for the National Socialists and was murdered during the war. Without a death certificate for the "head of the household," Anna and her mother lose the right to stay in their home. When her mother remarries, Anna moves to Szczecin to pursue an education and begin a new life. She finds employment in the "Bambino" milk bar.

Over the course of the novel, these individual narrative threads become more and more entwined, and this gradual merging is introduced with chapter seven, titled "**Knots**," likewise provided here in English translation. The knot is a leitmotif of the novel, and it exemplifies the entanglements between the protagonists as well as within each individual: the events that have shaped their lives, the memories that haunt their present, and the political and social boundaries that determine their relationships. The knot is also significant on a formal level: the novel has a "knotty," non-linear structure

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<sup>5</sup> An excerpt from Maria's introductory chapter, translated by Antonia Lloyd Jones, is available on the author's website: <https://ingaiwasiow.info/books/bambino/>.

that is created by flashbacks, foreshadowing, and narrator commentary, all of which are amplified by changing focalizations and narrative voices.

Translating excerpts from this novel was both an extraordinary pleasure and a challenge for Karolina Hicke and me. Iwasiów's writing is suggestive and often ambiguous, and it follows a distinct economy of language and narrative style. Where possible, we tried to preserve these characteristics in the translation.

Iwasiów's syntax, often accompanied by a great variability in sentence length, represented a particular challenge: some sentences are very long, with multiple commas and coordinate and subordinate clauses. Meaning sometimes carries over between clauses that are at some distance from one another, interrupted by insertions and digressions, like in a stream of consciousness. Other sentences are very short, even truncated. They frequently initiate associations, and they elaborate on or emphasize previously stated information. Furthermore, Polish verbs often show grammatical gender, which makes it clear who is performing an action without the need to restate that information with a subject noun or pronoun. In our translation, we tried to stay true to the original's linguistic complexity and associative style. However, for clarity and to follow the rules of English grammar and syntax, we occasionally had to add pronouns, rearrange information, break up sentences, or introduce further punctuation. We hope that our translation conveys at least some of *Bambino's* fascinating story, and the unusual and intriguing reading experience of the original.