

It's a Small World

By Steve Vlasta Vitek
Magister of Arts,
A freelance technical translator
from Japanese, German, Czech, Slovak,
Russian, Polish and French into English
USA

*Some say the world will
end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of
desire
I hold with those who
favor fire.
But if it had to perish
twice,
I think I know enough of
hate
To say that for
destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

Robert Frost

My wife likes to criticize a certain Polish girl just before 10 AM on most weekday mornings. We never met this particular Polish girl. Her name is Milena, she lives in Warsaw and works as a weather forecaster on a Polish station shown on the International Channel in our cable lineup (channel 224 in Chesapeake, VA). The thing is, Milena is on from about 9:55 to 10:00 AM and Japanese news starts at 10 AM. My wife always complains about Milena's poor taste in clothes, usually in her trademark mixture of English containing a fair amount of juicy Japanese words, in this case it is usually "ya da" (hate it), and "hidoi" (ugly). My personal opinion is that for somebody who is as young and pretty as Milena, it does not really matter what she wears, if anything. (Is my wife reading my mind, which is why she gets so upset about the color of another woman's blouse and skirt? Scary!!!) But I usually keep my opinion to myself. I grew up in communist Czechoslovakia where it made good sense to keep your opinion to yourself.

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I wonder how many Japanese women who live in America and watch that Polish weather person, as she would no doubt wanted to be called if she lived here, treat their husbands most mornings to a scathing criticism of the Polish taste in clothing. I bet all of those married to European men who grew up in Central Europe do that. The world has gotten so small in the last few years. For example, yesterday, I found the following e-mail in my mail box, along with about 20 other messages from porn site operators, scam artists in Nigeria, America and Europe, Microsoft, mortgage lenders, and makers of different

products and providers of different services, none of which I need or even want to know about: "ICH BRAUCH UNBEDINGT EINE UEBERSETZUNG VON MEINEM NAMEN FUER EIN TATTOO SO WIE ICH GEHOERT HABE IST EBEN SCHON VIEL MIST GEBAUT WORDEN BEI JAPANISHCHEN UEBERSETZUNGEN." This guy Bruno who lives in Germany, or maybe Austria or Switzerland, found my web page and he wants me to translate his name into Japanese so that he could have a Japanese tattoo of his name on his skin. I could translate it easily for him, of course, but then I would have to explain to him that in order to display Japanese katakana characters, he needs to have Global IME activated for Japanese on his computer. And since it took me a while to figure out how to activate it - you can download it from the Microsoft website, but it's a huge site and first you have to find the right download, which depends on whether you use Windows 98, ME, or XP, and if you use XP, it's not going to work anyway unless you pay at least \$250 or so to Bill Gates who really needs your money for the whole Office XP Suite package, and so on, and so forth, etc. I don't think I could explain all of that to Bruno, who is probably just another narcissistic, self-centered German teenager, judging from the fact that he wants to have his own name tattooed on his freckled skin. Had he asked me to translate Brunhilde or Gertrude into Japanese, I might have done it, but I have to draw a line somewhere.

The world used to be full of impenetrable borders some years 30 ago, when I used to listen to France Inter and BBC World Service on my radio as a cautiously subversive teenager, soaking up behind the Iron Curtain foreign languages, Czech beer and Hungarian wine like a sponge in a town called Prague where every walk through the streets of old town was a beautiful adventure that would stay in your memories for the rest of your life. The borders are gone now and the town is full of American fast food joints, so convenient for group after group of Japanese tourists, who usually stop there for one or two days, snapping pictures of themselves on Charles Bridge as much needed irrefutable evidence that they have been there, as well as in Rome, Vienna, Amsterdam, Paris, and London. They almost never leave their tourist groups because otherwise they could get lost as they speak only Japanese and all they have is about 8 days for the "whole Europe" before returning back to their sushi-style packed underground trains and smoke-filled offices in Tokyo to start showing off their pictures. I happen to think that you have only been to a place if you somehow manage to get lost in it for a few years. At one point, I got lost for 10 years in San Francisco. And I must say, the 10 years spent wondering through the streets of Prague, followed

by another 10 years wondering through the streets, parks and beaches of San Francisco were probably the best two decades of my life.

The world is a small, borderless place today, but it is not necessarily a good thing when the same food is being sold with the same plastic taste everywhere, when graffiti is gracing the walls of a subway that used to be safe and clean when I used to ride it 30 years ago, and when crime, violence and AIDS is on the front pages of newspapers whether they are in English, Japanese, or Czech. It is as if a new wave of a violent global civilization, if we can call it that, is washing over the whole world, bringing along lots and lots of raw sewage into every corner of the world. Even the news on Japanese TV is mostly about crime these days. Little kids being molested and kidnaped, cute Japanese girls in Tokyo whose perfectly legal scam is to get a few dates with a guy, weasel out an expensive ring worth thousands of dollars from the poor idiot and then dump him and zero in on another idiot, or investment advisers who take their clients' money without investing it, just like here. Well, in Japan, crooked investment advisors sometime commit suicide when they get caught. Here, they usually go to jail for a couple of years and then find some other lucrative scam to work on. I remember how I once took a long walk after midnight, alone in a moonlit, deserted park in Tokyo in mid eighties to sober up a little after too much sake and schochu on a cold, January night. When I watch Japanese news, I wonder if I would dare to take the same walk now.

The world is a much smaller place now than 30 years ago. Because I had a part of my website translated into German and Japanese to make it possible for Japanese and German search engines to find me, some of that raw sewage ends up now in my mail box in different languages. Sometime I never even find out what language a message is in because you have to first chose the correct encoding form to display it correctly and there are some thirty different encoding types (4 just for Arabic, 5 for Cyrillic, 3 for Central European characters) to chose from. In other words, it is much easier to communicate with other people nowadays, but that does not mean that we are communicating better today. In fact, it looks like the opposite is the case. We seem to be understanding the world around us less and less. And the world does not like it and tries to grab our attention any way it can, just like spam operators who clog our e-mail box with junk and TV stations that managed to turn off most people who have a choice (= disposable income) so that they tune in only to programs that have no or almost no commercials.

It is our job as translators to facilitate communication between people who speak different languages, but it is a tough, ungrateful job when people speak at each other instead of to each other, and when they are mostly interested in communicating about how to make more money rather than how to learn something about the other culture and language because well, because other languages and cultures are worth knowing about.

During the Cold War, both America and Soviet Union were building up a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons which neither side was really able or willing to use because to

destroy your enemy was tantamount to self destruction. In the sixties, I used to listen as a kid to the Czech service of Radio Free Europe, which as a service of Voice of America was broadcasting American, British, but also some French and Italian pop music from Munich. The music was so popular among Czech and Slovak teenagers that you would hear the same station, financed by US taxpayers, from transistor radios of kids hanging around medieval squares, parks and other popular hangouts between 3 and 5 PM in just about every town in the country. Listeners who were mailing in their requests for songs were urged to use aliases to avoid reprisals from Czech authorities. So, for instance, a Beatles song would be played for Olga from Pilsen, or a song from the group Canned Heat would be on the air for Stepan from Cesky Krumlov. After more than 30 years, I still remember the voices and the personalities of the DJs from Radio Free Europe. Rozina, who was a religious peacenik and had a sultry, sexy voice. Jano who spoke Slovak in a deep voice with a trace of American accent and who was taping his shows about American music in New York. This particular program, a mixture of pop music and short blocks of uncensored news presented by Czech announcers from Munich, was in my opinion more instrumental in bringing about the eventual demise of communism than all the US nuclear weapons put together. I heard on C-SPAN that a similar program called Radio Sawa, which means "together" in Arabic, is now being broadcasted in Arabic on FM from Qatar and on AM from Greece. A mixture of Western and Arabic music with short blocks of uncensored news broadcasted in Arabic to young people who live in repressive regimes and whose hearts and minds will be very much at stake in this new, brave world of the twenty-first century. According to an article in Washington Post, people are listening, at least in some countries. According to the same article, the radio station was able to establish FM transmitters in Jordan and Kuwait and airs there 24 hours a day. It has also been approved in the United Arab Emirates and is expected to win approval in Bahrain and Persian Gulf countries. The core of the Arab world, however, remains out of reach, at least on FM. Egypt, with 70 million people the most populous Arab country, keeps broadcasting under state control and is finicky about content. Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are also not likely candidates for FM broadcasts, although even these countries can receive a few hours of the old AM signal from transmitters in Greece. According to the same newspaper: "... the broadcast is routinely heard in taxis, coffee shops, hair salons and other public spots, Jordanians say. Sipping a frozen lemonade with friends in downtown Amman, Ahmad Sharabit, 18, was quick to show a visitor how he had programmed Radio Sawa into his mobile phone so he could listen through the earpiece."

I believe that this is precisely the kind of thing that we need to be doing in the world that has shrunk so much during the last few decades if we want to make this small world a little bit safer for our kids. And even if Jordanian teenagers for cultural reasons may be less likely to become fascinated by Beastie Boys and Rob Zombie as my children are, maybe they will listen to Enya, unlike my kids who ostensibly despise Enya in particular, partly because they know how much I like her peace and love inspiring music.