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IN MEMORY OF IRIS URWIN LEWIT

Towards the end of last year Czech literature, not only fiction but also academic writings, lost one of its most productive English translators. Iris Urwin Lewit died on 27 November 2008. Though of an advanced age (she was almost ninety-three) and physically weak, her decease was unexpected. There had been no sudden illness, nor other symptoms of failing strength. When I last visited her at her pleasant house in Dobřichovice, accidentally a few weeks before her death, I found her mentally as active as ever. In spite of being confined to her chair and suffering from failing eyesight, she took, as always, a keen interest in the news from the field of English studies (for that matter, in all current cultural and political events). The latest news was a lecture by Ronald Carter, concerning the changes in English grammar and vocabulary which had taken place in the last decade. She wondered at the words *wag* and *yummy mummy*¹, and recalling some translation problems in this connection, enlarged on English equivalents of the Czech idiom *i kdyby trakaře padaly* [even if wheelbarrows were falling]. Considering the phrase (*it rained*) *cats and dogs*, she pointed out its inadequacy insofar as the Czech phrase has a more general application than just denoting a kind of rain. The word *trakař* alone then appeared to present another problem since the kind of cart denoted by the English word *wheelbarrow* differs from that referred to by the Czech word. Leaving her, I envisaged many future discussions of this kind. Her death was indeed unexpected.

Iris Urwin Lewit was born in 1916 in Pontypridd, a Welsh village, the native place of Tom Jones. Her life and career may have been predestined by this birth-place coincidence with the famous literary hero. A graduate of old French, during World War II she met her husband Karel Lewit, the future renowned specialist in manipulative rehabilitation therapy, who was then a soldier of the Czechoslovak army in Great Britain. After the war she followed him to post-war Czechoslovakia. Here she worked in the British Council and later acted as lecturer in the Department of English Studies at Charles University. Here she conducted classes on translation, and English cultural life and institutions (e.g. the education system in Britain), in addition to being engaged in the work on Ivan Poldauf's Czech-English dictionary. Her academic career was prematurely brought to an end by a tragic accident that happened to her son, to whose care she then devoted herself. Fortunately, this allowed her to continue working as a translator. As shown by the attached selected bibliography of Iris Lewit's literary and academic translations, this activity covered a large field, showing the translator's great versatility apart from the quantity, which in itself inspires great respect.

However, even the most comprehensive list of her translating achievements cannot include facts that are well worth stating. Her translation of Comenius' hitherto untranslated texts into seventeenth-century English was officially appreciated by UNESCO. Many appreciative comments on her translations can be found in her collection of cuttings from the British press. In the sixties, her translations of Jan Werich's articles and texts appeared in the *Prague News Letter*. Some of her translations had to remain anonymous for political reasons (e.g. *My Companions in the Bleak House* by Eva Kantůrková, with the foreword by Václav Havel).

A great deal more could be said about Iris Lewit's life and work, but let me conclude with what made me personally indebted to her. For a long time she acted as a native English corrector of the contributions by Czech authors to the predecessor of the present journal, *Philologica Pragensia*. As the then executive editor of *PP*, I was in the best position to appreciate her help. Still more helpful to myself personally was her role as consultant when I was writing my university grammar of English. I was able to consult her on all problems involved in many English examples, and fully rely on her qualified judgment. Iris Urwin Lewit will be missed by friends and colleagues not only for her professional qualities, but as an amiable and distinguished woman, among whose friends it was a privilege to be counted.

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Note

¹ *wag* – wife and girl friend of a footballer; *yummy mummy* – young, working, good-looking, efficient mother of young children

SELECTED TRANSLATIONS BY IRIS URWIN LEWIT

A. Fiction

MAJEROVÁ, M. (1953): *The Siren (Siréna)*. Artia, Prague.

HRUBÍN, Fr. – ČAPEK, J. (1954): *The Blue Sky*. Artia, Prague.

MARTINŮ, B. (1956): *Legend from the Smoke of Potato Fires (Legenda z dýmu bramborové nati)*. Cantata to verses by Miloslav Bureš.

DRDA, J. – AŠKENÁZY, L. – WEISS, J. – MAREK, J. (1957): *Four Czech Short Stories* (Drda: The Silent Barricade; Aškenázy: The Glow; Weiss: Faithful Service; Marek: A Mother Speaks). Orbis, Prague.

DRDA, J. (1960): Mr. Hromek's Angel (from *Krásná Tortiza*). In: Sterling, D. ed. *I have seen war*. Hill and Wang, New York.