

### Esther Schor

*Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language.* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016), 384 pp., ISBN: 0805090797.

In her last book, Princeton professor Esther Schor offers a Jewish perspective on the history of the Esperanto movement. By doing so, she contributes to different academic literatures, including Jewish studies, social movements' sociology, interlinguistics and even political theory. There have been previous attempts to tackle the relationship between Esperanto and the Jewish world, mostly focused on the language creator's biography, such as Naftali Zvi Maimon's *La kaŝita vivo de Zamenhof* (1978), Alexander Korzhenkov's *Homarano* (2009), Andreas Künzli's *Esperanto, Hillelismus (Homaranismus) und die "jüdische Frage"* (2010), Walter Żelazny's *Ludoviko Lazaro Zamenhof, Lia pensaro, sekvoj kaj konsideroj* (2014), or the fictional *A Curable Romantic* (2010) by Joseph Skibell. However, *Bridge of Words* has a much broader scope, as it aims at explaining the history of the whole social movement made up of the language supporters. And Schor carries it out with an extensive framework, both temporal and geographical, from its beginning in 1887 until now, and from Europe where it was first developed to the rest of the world.

The relevance of Ludwik Lazarus Zamenhof's (1859–1917) Jewish background in his decision to create an international auxiliary language is evident in his own words: "My Jewishness has been the main reason why, from earliest childhood, I gave myself completely to one crucial idea, one dream—the dream of the unity of humankind" (p. 59). As a teenager, Zamenhof was a fervent (proto-)Zionist, but after 1883 he would deal with the Jewish question from a non-nationalistic perspective: a combination of Esperanto, an easy-to-learn neutral language to be used in international communication, and Homaranism, a pseudo-religious proposal based on Hillel's principles.

Once having explained the Jewish roots of Esperanto, Schor analyses its consequences for the evolution of the social movement. For instance, the high proportion of Jews among the first Esperantists, mainly in the Pale of Settlement. She examines different episodes of anti-Semitism, such as the Dreyfus affair, but also the Holocaust. At the same time, the reader will learn how the movement for an international auxiliary language gains influence among intellectuals and within civil society, particularly in France, achieving a social status far from marginal. In this historical narrative, several characters are particularly well drawn. One of them is Lanti, the main defender of Esperanto as a tool for the class struggle (with new revelations on his relationship with George Orwell). Another one is Ernest Drezen, the leader of the movement in the Soviet Union. The reader feels a strong connection between the author and

Lidia Zamenhof, Ludwik's youngest daughter and a passionate Baha'i activist; and a much weaker one with Ivo Lapenna, the main figure of the movement during the Cold War, partly due to his adventures (and successes) at UNESCO. Humphrey Tonkin, another crucial figure in recent decades, deals with the same institution regarding the so-called McBride report, which suggested a new world communication order.

Similar to Roberto Garvía's *Esperanto and Its Rivals* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Schor stresses the relationship of the Esperanto movement with other social causes, such as feminism and anti-fascism, a topic not often addressed in this field. Another noteworthy aspect is that she examines Esperanto in Asian countries, such as China and Japan. Here new characters appear, mostly anarchists and anti-imperialists. Among others, fascinating are the blind writer Vasili Eroshenko and Teru Hasegawa, a Japanese woman who joined the Chinese resistance against her own country's fascism.

The reader will find in this book much about the author herself, her background but also her biases, and this is at the same time part of its weakest and strongest points. For example, the text begins by an in-depth analysis of the myth of Babel. In addition, the American context is perceived along with the text, with a detailed description of several events in the history of the Esperanto movement in the US. Thus, whereas other historical analyses have focused on the persecutions suffered in dictatorships such as Stalinism and Nazism (notably Ulrich Lins' *Dangerous Language*, Palgrave 2016), Schor sheds light on the difficulties faced by the Esperantists in a democratic regime during the McCarthy period.

Apart from historical events, the book also follows the author's personal journey in today's Esperanto movement in a way that is reminiscent of Arika Okrent's *In the Land of Invented Languages* (2009). Thus, the reader accompanies Schor from her first language lessons, through a number of Esperanto congresses in different places (California, Vietnam, Cuba, Poland, Turkey) and right up to a community and rural school for poor children in Brazil. Such a global and future-oriented approach is one of the main contributions of *Bridge of Words*.

In a sort of ethnographical research, the author carries out dozens of interviews (which a sociologist would probably call life histories) with charming and intriguing Esperantists. In this way, we learn about the different motivations that make them feel attracted by the international language and what exactly the *interna ideo*, expressed consciously in an ambiguous way by Zamenhof, means for each of them. In other words, why Esperanto is more than a language. By doing so, this might be the best study so far of the current community of Esperanto speakers, which the author feels passionate about.

In fact, Schor is not only transparent about that, but also about her whole role in this story. For this reason, her look into the countries she is visiting is an honest one, which allows her to offer insightful sociological observations of every society she interacts with. She does so by building from subtle remarks and anecdotes that might seem banal on a first reading. For example, she is confronted with the health effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese people, with the fact the Cubans are poor but healthy, and with the strong relationship between Spiritism and Esperanto in Brazil. On another front, the different standard of living between the Esperantists in the West and in other countries shows that the Esperanto community mirrors some of the contradictions and inequalities of the external world. At the same time, the fact that American students have stronger accents in their mother tongue, which they mitigate when speaking in Esperanto, reflects the equalitarian potential of the international language. Similarly, her description of the different cultural practices and traditions of people she meets helps indirectly to make explicit how Esperanto helps break cultural barriers.

The book also includes a brief discussion of political theory. According to the author, Esperantists reconcile liberalism and communitarianism by “freely choosing a tradition of ideals” (p. 10). She expands on this idea in the last pages, with references to John Rawls, Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer.

As far as neutralism is concerned, Schor argues that the Esperanto supporters’ belief that the language is neutral is a myth, because Esperanto is essentially political. Probably some Esperantists would respond to her noting that neutrality in this context only means that Esperanto, different from any other language, does not belong to any particular nationality.

In fact, the author concludes, Zamenhof’s ideas are still relevant today. First, in countries with interethnic conflicts, a neutral language “could promote the participation of linguistic minorities, ensuring an inclusive and more equitable representation and a fairer distribution of goods” (p. 103). Second, such language could also serve as a public sphere where citizens of various states can “discuss issues of common interest” (p. 103). These two points (language rights and the communicative dimension of democracy) argued by Zamenhof in 1913 are crucial in the current interdisciplinary field of research known as linguistic justice, and they apply as well to the global language regime. As one person interviewed in *Bridge of Words* states, “the problem isn’t English. The problem is that language is an institution of power” (p. 124).

In regard to the book’s possible criticisms, several minor points can be stressed: First, taking it as a collection of essays; many of them are consistent, but some imbalances exist. For example, in respect to the current movement, there is probably too much attention devoted to the author’s personal

experiences in California and Brazil. On the contrary, the reader would have appreciated some illustration of today's Esperanto in Western Europe, as well as in the leftist main organization, the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* (or World Non-national Association). Furthermore, sometimes Esperantists appear with their real names and others with a pseudonym without further explanation. Whereas on certain occasions this is understandable, on others it is bizarre, especially when the author is giving enough details to identify them. Finally, her main political theory intuition is persuasive, but the argument could have benefited from a dialogue with the more recent debate between Philippe Van Parijs and his critics of linguistic justice. The interested reader will find such a dialogue in "Zamenhof and the Liberal-Communitarian Debate", a journal article published by Schor in 2015 in *Language Problems and Language Planning*.

This ambitious book had to overcome multiple challenges to accomplish the Herculean task of explaining the political evolution of the movement, both externally (in relation to the outer world) and internally (with its own tensions). In addition, the text introduces Esperanto culture and the way its different international congresses work, including in-depth explorations of the demographics and the geography of the movement, its organisational dynamics and its power struggles. Written in a light style, this is a solid work, in many respects ground-breaking. A must-read for everyone interested in Jewish history, interlinguistics or social movements, but also for Esperantists themselves.

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