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UCSB POET GIVES HUNGARIAN VERSE NEW LIFE IN ENGLISH

To generations of Hungarians, he is János Vitéz -- John the Valiant -- fictional warrior hero of a 19th Century poem that is revered as

a national treasure.

In English-speaking countries, he has been John the Obscure, little known to any without fluency in Hungarian.

But thanks to poet John Ridland,

an English professor who teaches literature and creative writing at the University of California, Santa Barbara, there may be new conquests ahead for János. Ridland has just completed an English verse translation of János Vitéz, potentially exposing millions more hearts and minds to the clever charms of the mischievous hussar horseman, who was created in 1844 by Sándor Petöfi.

Ridland said he expects the book to be popular among Hungarian-American immigrants.

"I've spoken with people who said they learned large parts of the poem verbatim when they were kids in school," Ridland said.

"I met a librarian one time who was Hungarian and he said they used to act it out like cowboys and Indians."

Such adults might wish to present the work to their English-speaking children and grandchildren as a means of keeping touch with Hungarian culture, Ridland said.

The book includes Hungarian and English versions of the poem with original and translated stanzas on opposing pages throughout.

Ridland's journey to publishing his book was accidental.

After becoming close with Gyula Kodolányi, a Hungarian Fulbright scholar visiting UCSB, Ridland was invited to visit his friend in Budapest in 1987.

While there, he dined one evening in a restaurant richly decorated with mural depictions of a young man engaged in various adventures.

Each depiction was accompanied by two stanzas of verse.

The scene captivated Ridland, who was told the rhymes were from Petöfi's classic poem János Vitéz.

Ridland remained interested in the poem.

Back home, he found an English prose version and marveled at the hero's lively adventures with bandits, Turks, a French princess, giants and witches.

The story also dealt with romantic sexual love, treating it as the epitome of earthly pleasures -- something that surprised Ridland in a poem read widely by children.

"I had never seen the elements of fantasy, realism, romance and fairy tale combined like this in a poem in English," he wrote in the preface remarks that accompany his translation.

A French scholar, Guy Turbet-Delof, had reached a similar conclusion. "Our literature, however rich, offers nothing like it," he said.

Ridland was smitten by the piece and wanted to translate it to English.

But with little knowledge of Hungarian, the task seemed daunting.

Then in 1991, Ridland met Marta Egri, an assistant to another visiting Hungarian professor, Tibor Frank.

Egri said she, too, loved the poem and volunteered to help Ridland translate it.

"Of course, there was already a version of it translated to prose," Ridland said. "But I just really felt it should be in verse the way it was intended to be."

Seven years and many major revisions later, Ridland finally was satisfied with the result: The poem had four beats to the line, approximating the 12-syllable count of Petöfi; almost every line ended almost exclusively in true rhyme, an important goal for Ridland; and the meaning and flavor of the poem were intact.

"Marta told me later that from the start I had captured the spirit of the poem," Ridland said.

Ridland enlisted Peter Meller, a UCSB emeritus professor of the history of art and architecture, to provide illustrations for his book.

Then he succeeded in finding a publisher -- in Hungary, of course.

This past summer, Ridland and Meller were invited to Hungary with Dr. Antal Bejczy, a CalTech robotics engineer who had helped raise funding for the book's publication.

They participated in a week of events celebrating the book's launch, which included a bilingual reading sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and attended by prominent Hungarian writers and translators.

Ridland shared the reading of several chapters with well-known Hungarian film and TV actor, Andras Stohl.

The launch nearly coincided with the 150th anniversary of Petöfi's death in battle at the age of 26.

While there, Ridland presented a copy of the book for

a special display in its honor at the Séchenyi National Library where his John the Valiant was included with other translations of János Vitéz into other languages. He found himself in good company in the display.

The Russian translation was

performed by Nobel Prize winner Boris Pasternak, author of Dr. Zhivago.

Everywhere he went, he was impressed by the passion with which the Hungarian people embraced the poem.

And he was glad he hadn't fully realized the poet's fame and power until after he completed his work.

"After seeing how much the poem meant to them, I thought, 'Wow, if I had known this, I might have been too intimidated to try,' " he said.

Ridland will read from his work and sign copies at Chaucer's Books, 3321 State St. in Santa Barbara on Sunday, Nov. 21 beginning at 2 p.m.

About UC Santa Barbara

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