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2018

## Five Poems from *Miss Suki, or America is not far* by Utz Rachowski

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### Recommended Citation

Stoehr, Louise (2018) "Five Poems from *Miss Suki, or America is not far* by Utz Rachowski," *Transference*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol6/iss1/19>

Louise Stoehr  
Five Poems from *Miss Suki,*  
*or America is not far*

Utz Rachowski  
Miss Suki  
*oder Amerika ist nicht weit*

[untitled]

My dog and I are listening  
to songs by Theodorakis

just slightly

our walk outdoors is delayed

since we're watching another film  
about Federico Garcia Lorca

for all that unlike me  
my clever dog doesn't need glasses

my doggie has such long ears  
ranks number forty four

on the dog intelligence list  
they told me

my place among humans  
no one has told  
me

Louise Stoehr

Utz Rachowski

My Tricolor

Meine Trikolore

Three colors  
has my doggie I took an oath on them

Three colors  
that I keep secret

So they never become a flag

Among them beautiful white  
freedom for all colors

*The Large Bird*

*Der große Vogel*

You became  
very  
frightened

a large bird  
black and gray  
flew over your yard

all the birds  
at once  
fell silent

beneath its shadow

it was none other  
than war

Louise Stoehr

Utz Rachowski

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving

Your nose  
like a marvel  
made of black plastic

is so lively  
at the word *Thanksgiving*  
just a bit you raise your head

days in advance  
you smell the turkey  
in which the *key* to truth

lies stuffed with fragrant  
memories plump from the year  
for this one Thursday

Louise Stoehr

Utz Rachowski

The Trace

Die Spur

A springy  
zig-zag  
is your gait

your knowing nose  
pressed  
to the forest floor

as though you were  
tracking  
down my lifelines

who

else  
knows about them

## Commentary

### About Utz Rachowski

The five short poems presented here seem to be easy-going, but that first impression is deceptive. Selected by Utz Rachowski himself as some of his favorites from the 2013 volume *Miss Suki oder Amerika ist nicht weit* (which translates as *Miss Suki, or America is not far*), these poems reveal that, in addition to the celebration of a dog's enjoyment of life, the threat of political repression is never far. Utz Rachowski's early life was indeed molded by dictatorship—both at home from his father and in general from a repressive regime—and betrayal.

Born in Plauen in 1954, Rachowski grew up in Reichenbach in the Vogtland region of the former German Democratic Republic. Expelled from high school for reading so-called subversive books, Rachowski was forced into manual labor until, after compulsory military service, he was permitted to begin studies at the University of Leipzig. He was later exmatriculated and arrested by the *Stasi*, the East German secret state police, on October 5, 1979, on suspicion of “subversive activities against the state.” After seven months of interrogation, he was given a 27-month prison sentence for circulating his own poems as well as texts by other writers critical of the regime, such as Jürgen Fuchs, Reiner Kunze, and Wolf Biermann. He was released through the efforts of Amnesty International after seven months of hard labor and inhumane treatment in prison that led to serious health issues. At age 25, Rachowski began a ten-year exile in West Germany, living most of that time in West Berlin.

His poems and prose texts have established Rachowski as one of the most important voices in the effort of working through all aspects of living under the repressive control of a state whose surveillance seemed to reach all social areas. In this sense, much of Rachowski's work is what Jürgen Fuchs referred to as *Erlebnisliteratur*, that is, literature of one's own experience, and deals with the overarching themes of childhood, love and friendship, and oppression. However, these experiences are not self-centered but exemplary. This insight is perhaps the

reason that, since 2003, Rachowski has worked in the professional capacity of counselor for people affected by the GDR dictatorship for the state of Saxony (“Bürgerberater für Betroffene der DDR-Diktatur im Auftrag des Sächsischen Landesbeauftragten zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur”). As a result, one could argue, life in the GDR has been Rachowski’s professional topic at several levels.

In spring semester 2012, however, Rachowski’s writing added a new quality. Rachowski was Visiting German Writer-in-Residence at Gettysburg College, during which time he was also the caretaker for Suki, a young Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. The semester with Suki was a pivotal event for Rachowski. Since his experience in the United States and, in particular, his connection to unconditional affection from Suki, Rachowski’s writing has taken on a new lightness—a lightness, though, that is tempered with a subtle awareness of contemporary threats.

### Translating Utz Rachowski’s Poems

Translation is, for me, the act of recreating in English the world that the author has created in the original German language. Clearly, there are a series of filters through which this act takes place, the primary consideration, of course, being how the translator interprets and reproduces in the target language the multiple levels of meaning inherent in the original text. In a nutshell, the translation’s words are my choice, but they should “speak” in the poet’s voice.

Therefore, in addition to recreating Rachowski’s multi-layered message, it is similarly critical to maintain, to the extent possible in the target text, the lyrical quality and rhythm of the original. At the same time, the visual experience should reflect the visual experience of the original text; the physical shape of the translated poem should mirror the textual image of the original.

In addition to following these basic guidelines, I had the benefit of Utz Rachowski’s reactions to my translations as I worked on them. While we sat down together, we engaged in animated conversation about his writing and how best to think about some of the more difficult passages for an English-speaking reader.

## Mein Hund und ich hören Lieder von Theodorakis

“My dog and I are listening / to songs by Theodorakis” begins by describing the poet’s quiet evening at home with his dog. Yet even here, the choice of music and film is not arbitrary but very specific because they allude to the poet’s personal experiences—being spied on by the East German *Stasi*, interrogated and subsequently imprisoned before being exiled to West Germany—and gives the poem a definite political resonance. Both the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca were persecuted for their left-leaning political convictions. Theodorakis has been imprisoned and exiled several times during his lifetime, and Lorca disappeared in 1936, mostly likely assassinated by Spanish fascists during that civil war. Rachowski’s own imprisonment and exile did indeed delay—by decades—his walk outdoors with his dog.

## Meine Trikolore

“My Tricolor” works at several levels. At the surface level the poem refers to the tree colors of the dog’s coat. Also, at first sight, the poem has a rhythmic character that is reminiscent of the children’s song “Mein Hut der hat drei Ecken/Drei Ecken hat mein Hut” (which also has political references, specifically as a satirical verse against Napoleon). However, Rachowski explained that he had not thought of that song when writing this poem. Nevertheless, the three-fold political dimension is present in Rachowski’s own experience of having lived in three German states, all of which were represented by a three-color flag. On the one hand, the poem seems to suggest a certain weariness in terms of political allegiances. On the other hand, the poet has no hesitation declaring his allegiance to Suki, whose three actual colors he never divulges, presumably to protect her from broader political cooptation. The only color the poet mentions is the color white, which is no color at all and, therefore, the “color” of freedom.



## *Der große Vogel*

“The Large Bird” is the most overtly political poem of the five selected here. The reference to a large bird is clearly to a military plane and the threat of war it represents. This poem serves to illustrate a few translation choices that are exemplary of specific choices I made for all these poems. First, *groß* in the title, of course, suggests “big,” but this would be an unfortunate choice because it would most likely evoke the large yellow comic Big Bird from Sesame Street rather than a terrifying image of a war machine. Second, word order in German and English varies; therefore, it is often difficult to maintain rhythm and length of line without placing certain keywords in different places. Examples of this are found in the first and third stanzas. In contrast, the second and the last stanzas of the translation closely reflect the syntax in the original German. “The Large Bird” underscores the extent to which German and English, as two closely related languages, can express the same meaning in linguistic structures that sometimes are very similar and, at other times, diverge.

## Thanksgiving

At the center of this poem is the word play based on the German word for “turkey.” The German word *Truthahn* indeed contains the English word “truth,” thus creating a translation challenge. I capitalized on the “key” in “turkey,” and refer to the “key to truth,” thus reflecting how the German original explains that “truth” means *Wahrheit* in German. In general, this poem demonstrates the importance of individual word choices, that is, of finding the right word, or *le mot juste* as Flaubert would say. *Wunder* in reference to the dog’s nose, for example, does not represent “wonder” or “miracle,” but rather a “marvel,” which best evokes the sense of awe in light of such a feat of creation. In the German original, truth is “filled” to almost a bursting point with memories. Maintaining the image of the Thanksgiving turkey that underlies this poem, and in keeping with German culinary terms, the English “stuffed” offered itself as the obvious choice. However, the playful image of an overstuffed turkey, expressed

by *prall* in German, suggested a positive and joyous sensation that could be rendered as “overflowing” in English. The problem with this word choice, however, was the syllable count of the word, that is, both its length and rhythm, which would have created a comparatively long line that did not easily flow in English.

## Die Spur

“The Trace” begins deceptively simply in its description of the dog’s zig-zag gait as she trots through the woods, yet there is much more going on in the poem than first meets the eye. The German title suggests a trail that one might follow or clue to some mystery; still, neither “trail” nor “clue” are appropriate translation choices, for either one might well lead the reader down the proverbial garden path. Likewise, the noun “track” could evoke the inappropriate image of a race track, hence the choice of the noun “trace” for the title, while the verb “track down” is indeed the appropriate choice for the German verb *nachspüren* in the third stanza. In addition to its linguistic complexities, the poem also contains a subtle yet powerful political allusion. Rachowski playfully suggests, using the hypothetical subjunctive verb form, that the lifelines Suki might be tracking are a form of intimate knowledge. At this moment, the poet seems to be startled by the possible intrusion into his privacy—not by Suki but by others, by forces he so well knows from his own experiences with the East German *Stasi*.

Source text:

Rachowski, Utz. *Miss Suki oder Amerika ist nicht weit!* Mironde, 2013, pp. 14, 17, 32, 63, 66.