



'All the everyday things...you leave it all behind' – an interview with Gabriela Stöckli of Translation House Looren

March 31, 2025 / Tayiba Sulaiman

author literary fiction Swiss Switzerland translation/translators

As the much loved translator's retreat gears up to celebrate its 20th anniversary, we spoke to Managing Director Gabriela Stöckli about the house and landscape, creating community, and fostering linguistic diversity.

Tayiba Sulaiman: Translation is such an important part of Swiss culture, but how did your interest in literary translation actually begin?

Gabriela Stöckli : In Switzerland, everyone knows that if you travel by train for an hour or two, you'll be in a region with a different language. Supermarket products are labelled in the three main languages German, French and Italian. Multilingualism is a very important part of life. I became very interested in literary translation when I studied comparative literature. It was a natural progression. But when I started working at Looren, 20 years ago, I didn't know much about translation in the industry, or about the real work of literary translation. Since then I have translated three children's books from Spanish into German.

TS: Could you tell me how Translation House Looren got started? It'd be great to hear the story.

GS: It all began with the house. It's in the countryside, in a village less than an hour from Zurich. The house was owned by an extended family, and they were considering what to do with it. They wanted it to be a charity, that much was clear. They held a competition to get ideas. And the winning idea was to transform the building into a residency institution for translators. They formed an association and hired me as a manager in 2005.

TS: How old is the house?

GS: It was built in 1958-59. The architecture is modern, but the accommodation has been changed to make it work for residencies. But the living room, which we use for workshops and events, is as it was originally built.

TS: I've heard wonderful things about it from Jamie. And what about the landscape?

GS: It's awesome, in the literal sense of the word. Awe-inspiring. From some rooms, you can see almost the whole chain of the Alps. We have a fabulous garden, and there are also some small swimming lakes nearby. The surroundings and the house have a real influence on people's visits. They often tell us that time seems to expand when you're there. It feels like the day has more hours. They have time to

concentrate on work, but there's still time to go out, go for a walk, go for a swim, go to Zurich, to an event or to the museum.

Of course, there's an easy explanation for that. All the everyday things, your other job, your family, your home, your admin, you leave it all behind. You're just there to focus on your work. That's probably the secret. And besides the focus and the option to go out and enjoying nature, you live alongside colleagues from around the world, and get the chance to have interesting and eye-opening conversations with them.

TS: Do you have a favourite spot in the grounds or in the house?

GS: I really love the bench just outside the living room. In winter when there's a little sun, it gets warm. That's the place I like most. You can see a bit of what's going on, and watch the farm just below. It's called Looren Farm, so we share a name.

TS: What does the word Looren actually mean?

GS: Etymologically it means ground, or soil that is full of stones. Steiniger Grund. So it's a good fit for the work of translation work, at least in the sense of what the work is like, right? For many translators, it's not easy.

TS: it's not a smooth path, I suppose.

GS: Exactly.

TS: What else does residency at the Translation House offer a translator, alongside that freedom to just complete their work?

GS: We offer people the opportunity to take part in festivals, to travel to events in all four linguistic regions – this is funded by **Pro Helvetia**. We invite people to go to events at **Literaturhaus Zürich**, for example. And we offer people any advice they need. It might be about a translation, or visiting an archive, or meeting an author. Or if they want to go up into the mountains, we help them make the arrangements. And then we hold one weekly communal dinner. Everyone takes what they want from that, or makes what they want of it. It brings people together.

*TS: Yes, because I suppose a big aspect of what you do is creating community, right?
Around work which is otherwise quite lonely.*

Many translators who come for a residency want to get out of isolation and into contact with others. But for some people, a residency might be the only chance they really get to focus, so they might burrow themselves away to work. People who make most of their living from translation have to be incredibly productive.

– Gabriela Stöckli

GS: Yes, exactly. Many translators who come for a residency want to get out of isolation and into contact with others. But for some people, a residency might be the only chance they really get to focus, so they might burrow themselves away to work. People who make most of their living from translation have to be incredibly productive. Even if they don't want to engage in community activities, they have that space and a good internet connection, heating in the winter, and good coffee. That can do a lot for a person.

TS: That's certainly true. Do you have a favourite part of your job as director of Looren?

GS: What I really like is to work in a team. I'm getting more and more critical about personal achievement versus collaboration. Because collaboration is so much more valuable than the personal achievement of one person. Everyone brings their own vision, and it doesn't have to necessarily be the same as mine. It's been 20 years now, and in the **Looren team**, there are people who have been working here for years. And I really like being a host. Hearing that a residency at Looren can make a real contribution to the working life of translators, maybe even their personal life. Giving people a good time and appreciation. That's very special actually. In that sense, I feel that my work is a privilege. I mean, it is a wonderful job to have. I'm very aware of that.

TS: Could you tell us about the Blutbuch residency which the Translation House ran with Kim de l'Horizon and several of the translators? How did it go?

All the participants went home with a wealth of ideas about their ongoing work, and it was just wonderful to see the published translations coming in one after another in the following months, enriching the Looren library.

– Gabriela Stöckli

GS: The Blutbuch workshop at Translation House Looren in spring 2023 brought together the translators of the award-winning novel by Kim de l'Horizon, among them the British translator Jamie Lee Searle whose translation of the book will be published in 2025. 11 translators came together, from languages

including Spanish, French, Italian, Catalan, Czech, Slovak, Danish, Dutch etc.; it was led by Belarusian translator Iryna Herasimovich.


As the book has very experimental language, it was very important for the translators to exchange views about the understanding of literary language and registers, from a semantic but also stylistic point of view, in order to identify appropriate translation strategies.

Two aspects of the book represent particularly complex challenges. On the one hand, Kim works with Swiss German dialect from the canton of Berne in a peculiar way. Kim's personal explanations were especially important in this field, in order to understand that they work at a distance from the standard dialect usage in Swiss literature; they opt for a less emotionally affirmative or celebratory use of it, giving it a more ambiguous quality and representing it as an aspect of a conservative mindset.

On the other hand, the book takes a playful and deconstructive approach to gender-specific language. Here, the challenges in the different target languages are highly diverse: how do you show all the alterations of forms and wordplay in less "gendered" languages such as English or the Scandinavian languages, which are less binary in their grammatical structure? How do you translate all the acrobatics into which Blutbuch leads *ad absurdum* gender binarism when there are no corresponding forms in the target language?

Talking in a speculative way about alternative strategies – for example shifting from the level of grammar to the level of vocabulary/lexis – was incredibly inspiring and lots of fun. All the participants went home with a wealth of ideas about their ongoing work, and it was just wonderful to see the published translations coming in one after another in the following months, enriching the Looren library. For more context, there are several articles on the workshops on the Looren website.

TS: I was looking on the website at the events that you run to foster linguistic diversity, and I saw you've done a series looking at Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Montenegrin. You've also held events that focus on Farsi and specific dialects. I would love to hear more about that work and the thinking that lies behind it.



The important thing is to bring together audiences who might not meet otherwise.

– Gabriela Stöckli

GS: Yes, we have also worked with Kurdish and Turkish, and next year it will be Arabic. The languages we work with are among the most frequently spoken languages of people who migrate to Switzerland. We focus on writers in those languages, international writers in Switzerland. Our goal is to attract an audience that includes those linguistic communities as well as Swiss people. These were productions with music too, not just readings. And there were always between 60 and 100 people there.

The important thing is to bring together audiences who might not meet otherwise. We had support from the people in those communities with advertising the events. It makes me really happy that we

managed to attract multilingual audiences and also that our Swiss audience attended those events, accepting that they might spend part of the event listening to a text without understanding a word. I found that so beautiful. And I think it's also an indication that something that has changed — I don't think people would have accepted that 10 years ago.

TS: Do you find that the audiences you get are diverse?

GS: At that kind of event, three or four events every year, diversity is our main goal. To attract a diversity of linguistic communities, and we succeed. Otherwise, we have a lot of work to do to attract more diverse audiences, for example different generations. Everyone accepts that diversity is important, but it's a long way from acceptance to really making things happen so people do feel welcome. In Switzerland, in general, even in a city like Zurich where 40% of people haven't been born in Switzerland. It's a very diverse city, but the literary world is quite homogeneous.

TS: That is also my experience as a non-white person in German-language literary spaces. I often compare the two, like English-speaking places and German/European countries. We all, England included, have a lot of work to do in order to make non-white audiences feel welcome, and I think it's really important that we understand what the real concerns of those communities are.

GS: Yes.

TS: What are your plans for the anniversary year?

GS: Our strategic plan includes advocacy, so we want to do something towards protecting and defending translators' interests and rights. We'll be reactivating the hashtags #namethetranslator and #translatorsonthecover, which were launched by Jennifer Croft in the *Guardian* in 2021. There was a petition authors were asked to sign, to show that they want their translators to be named on the cover of their books, and it had huge visibility. So we decided to bring this all together with a specific website created for that campaign, to host a network and a community project where institutions and individuals can share their experiences.

It's important publishers don't get the impression that it mattered three years ago but it doesn't matter now. Book covers are important, but that's not the only issue. Greater visibility doesn't always translate into better negotiating positions. But we can help to increase recognition. There's value in translators participating in the campaign as individual human beings, saying, this is a work of art created by a human, not a machine.

TS: That's true. Visibility doesn't automatically equal change.

GS: And with AI, it might be interesting to put the name of the translator on the cover to show it has been done by a human being. Translation can't be reduced to copy-editing a machine-translated text. I was at the CEATL conference in Strasbourg in October 2024, where the writer Melinda Nadj Abonji was asked about AI. She said: I haven't actually been thinking about it too much. For me it's not an issue. Because I think that literature starts where language stops. Literature starts when we don't have the right word. That's when we start to work on language, to do new things, to invent, to question. If literature starts where language stops, how can AI be of any help? If a machine can really only reproduce what already exists, why should we be frightened?

Gabi, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with NBG!

photo © Seraina Boner



Gabriela Stöckli is the managing director of Translation House Looren since its inauguration in 2005. She holds a PhD in Latin American literature and has translated 3 children's books from Spanish into German. She is interested in multilingualism and in creating cultural experiences for diverse audiences. She lives in Zurich. In 2024, she was awarded a residency by Swiss foundation Landis & Gyr in one of their East London studios, in which context this interview took place.



Tayiba is a writer and translator from Manchester. She graduated with a degree in English and Modern Languages in 2023, and completed an Emerging Translators Mentorship with the translator Jamie Lee Searle in 2024. Her recent translations from German include the writings of a Viennese family who fled the Holocaust in 1938, poetry by Swiss-Croatian writer Dragica Rajčić Holzner and a verse script for the 2024 Droste Festival at the Centre for Literature, Burg Hülshoff. Her own writing has appeared in Prospect Magazine, PEN Transmissions and World of Interiors. She works at Profile Books.

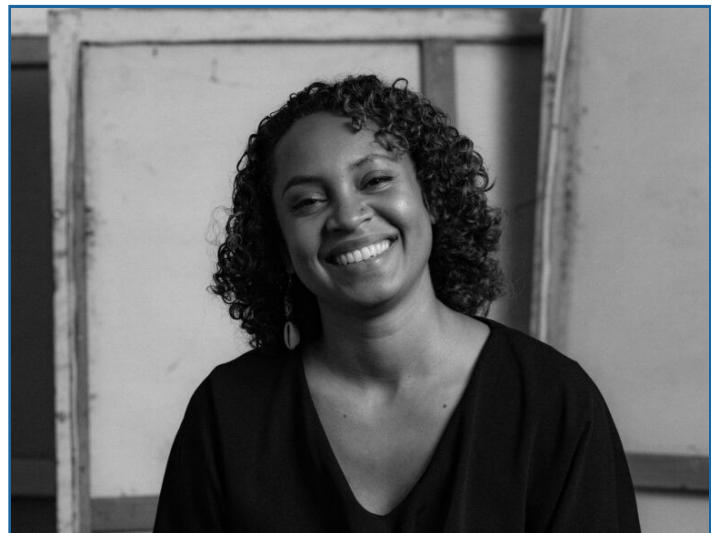


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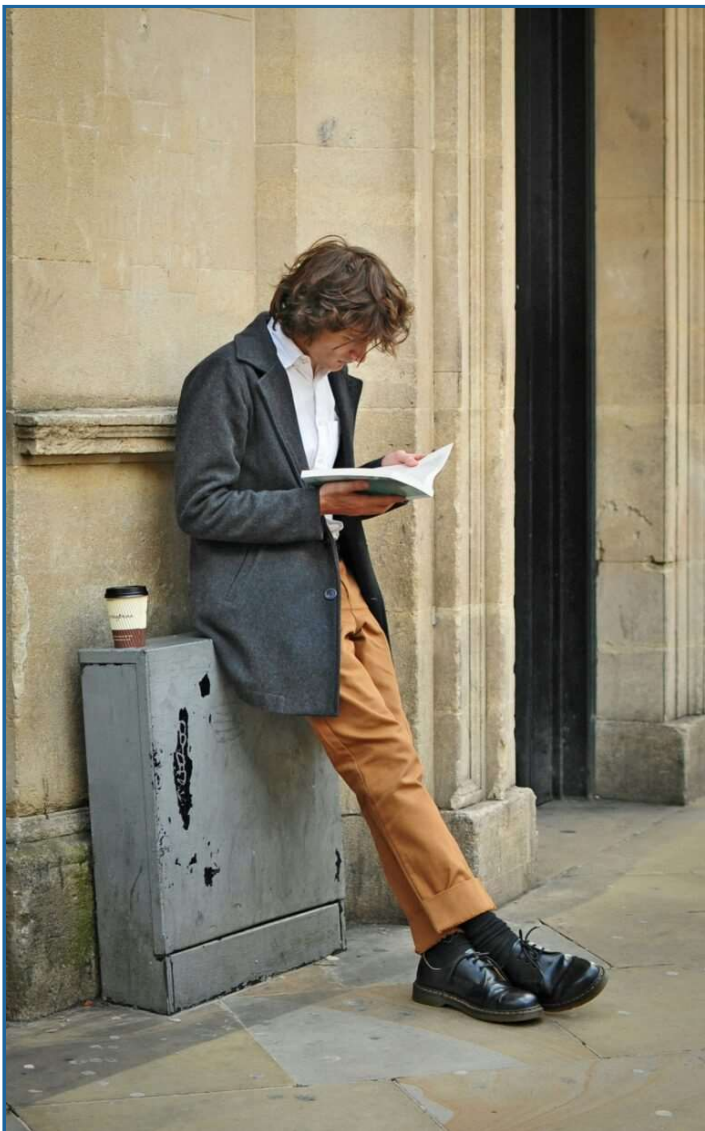


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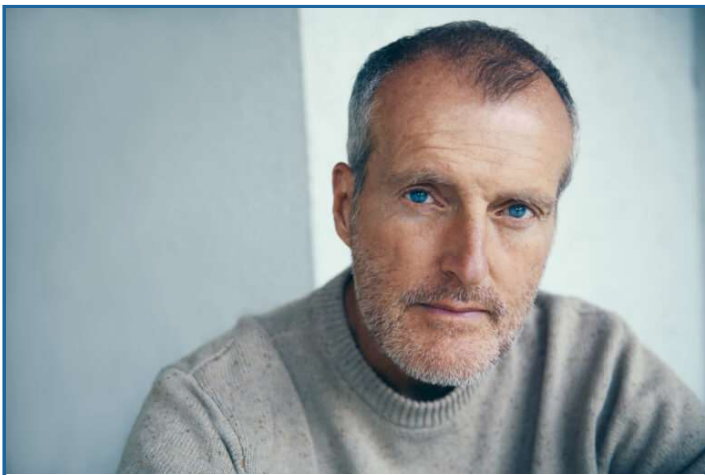


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March 31, 2025

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