



# El amor de una LENGUA

(The Love of a Language)

**BY BOB SKIPPER**



*Dr. Melissa Stewart*

**FOR MELISSA STEWART, HER LOVE FOR SPAIN BEGAN WHEN SHE WAS A JUNIOR AT HAMILTON COLLEGE IN NEW YORK. THAT'S WHEN SHE SPENT A YEAR LIVING WITH A FAMILY IN MADRID. "IT WAS THE KIND OF EXPERIENCE THAT WE ALL TALK ABOUT, AND IT SOUNDS REALLY CLICHÉ, BUT IT CHANGED MY LIFE AND IT MADE ME FALL IN LOVE WITH SPAIN AND THINGS SPANISH," SHE SAID.**

Dr. Stewart, a professor in the Department of Modern Languages at Western Kentucky University, has continued her love affair with Spain, spending more time there after high school and earning master's and doctoral degrees in Spanish from The Johns Hopkins University. She also directs a yearly summer trip to Madrid and Segovia through the Kentucky Institute for International Studies.

While in graduate school, her interest turned to an area of Spain called Catalonia in the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula. Here the people spoke Catalan as well as Castilian, or Spanish. "When I was looking around as a graduate student and thinking about my dissertation, I was interested in the region and the whole idea of bilingualism," she said. "I'm not trained as a linguist, but I was so interested in the area and attracted to the historical aspect of the literature."

As she worked on her doctorate at The Johns Hopkins University, her focus turned to two contemporary women authors from the region, Montserrat Roig and Ana María Moix. "There weren't any courses given in Catalan because it was a pretty small doctoral program, so I sat down and taught myself Catalan," Dr. Stewart said. "I taught myself to read, which is what I needed to do a dissertation on these two authors."

During the process, Dr. Stewart became more interested in the cultural differences between the two regions and the role of history, especially the Spanish Civil War. The Romance language enjoyed resurgence in the nineteenth century, however, when Francisco Franco took power following the Spanish Civil War, Catalan and other languages were banned in the name of a unified Spain. The language became clandestine, publishing ceased, and people only spoke it in their homes, she said.

Although *Testament in Prague* by Teresa Pàmies is from an earlier generation than the authors in Dr. Stewart's dissertation, she is interested in the historical nature of the narrative. "This goes back more because of my interest in the Civil War," she said. "Her writing is highly autobiographical. She was a member of the Communist party and, to her, the political is very personal and vice versa. Those two things can't be separated in her mind."

Dr. Stewart said Pàmies' work was interesting because it combines her voice with that of her father, Tomàs. Stewart calls Tomàs a simple, salt-of-the-earth kind of guy, a union organizer who was politically involved during the Civil War. After the war he left Spain and went into exile, eventually settling in Communist Czechoslovakia, which to him was a paradise. "He really inspired his

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daughter," Dr. Stewart said, adding that Teresa was a teen when she was part of a delegation that met with Eleanor Roosevelt in the United States to try to get help for the Republican cause in Spain.

"He's not a writer at all. He's just telling his story, about his involvement in the different political movements," Dr. Stewart said. The other part of the text is the daughter talking to her father. "She has a dialogue with her dead father and while some may say it's political and not that interesting, it's extremely personal at the same time and that's what makes it so unusual and interesting on a variety of levels. It's really a daughter talking to her father about political stuff, but at the same time, about their relationship — just saying all those things one doesn't say before a parent dies."

The dialogue is intensified by a crisis in Teresa's political life caused by the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. "This has caused many very loyal members of the Communist Party to stop and say 'hmm, what's going on?'" Dr. Stewart said. In the book, Teresa tells her father about what happened:

*"So many things have happened, father, in the course of a year, that General Pavel, who went to your burial, became a minister during two months, and since he confronted his former torturers, he was obliged to resign. You couldn't have ever imagined it. Our Soviet comrades appeared in Prague with tanks because they believe that men like Pavel should not be ministers, as if it weren't the Czech and Slovak citizens who should choose their ministers. The tanks, father, yes, Soviet tanks like the one that the people of Prague have surrounded by flowers on the other side of the river because it was the first tank that headed up Koniev's forces, which liberated them from Nazism...."*

*"My friend Milena told me about it crying: 'If your father had not died, all this would have killed him.' And Milena did not cry from fright, but from sadness; sadness not so much for her people, but for those adolescent soldiers up on the tanks that*



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*looked disconcertedly at the young people like them who were asking, 'Why?,' just as you would have asked, father, if that day you had been alive in Prague and not dead and buried."*

Teresa also recounts her father's death and burial. "She has siblings scattered throughout Europe because of their family situation and they come to bury the father and so there's a lot of sibling dynamics as well as personal family stuff," Dr. Stewart said. "And at the end she has her say and corrects him about certain things."

Stewart said the process of securing the rights to translate *Testament in Prague* almost caused her to give up several times. "I was very naive about what it was going to involve. Because the author was alive, the whole issue of the rights was a thorny problem," she said. "I had this idea that this would be fairly easy to do, and I wrote to the author and she said I would have to write to the publishing company and I did. And they said I would certainly have to pay something." She said the big publishing house in Spain was not

"It was a whole new world for me," she said, adding she had to pay for the rights herself. She switched publishing companies to University Press of the South, which agreed to the other conditions of the Spanish publishing house. "This is something that you don't realize until you get into it."

Dr. Stewart said she sensed that Teresa Pàmies doubted that the project would be completed when she gave her permission for the translation to take place. Others had proposed the idea, but none had followed through. "She seemed skeptical, so I would really like for her to know that it happened," Dr. Stewart said.

While the publishing house in Spain received ten copies when the book was published in 2005, Dr. Stewart said she does not know if Teresa Pàmies received a copy. "If she hasn't been given a book, I certainly want to give her one."

Dr. Stewart plans to work her experience into a course on translation. "Translation is something I think will be really useful for students and they have expressed an interest in it," she said. Her class will focus on the technique and art of translation and offer practical experience. "I think this is something that people think is a lot easier than it is. It really is extremely difficult," she added.

Interpreting is even more difficult and challenging. She is often called on to interpret in the community and for visitors making presentations on campus. "It's all spontaneous. A visitor is giving this talk about his artwork and all these art students are there and I'm supposed to go along and tell what he's saying," she said. "That's really challenging for me and I've had a fair amount of experience." ■

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Teresa wrote the original work in Catalan and later translated it into Spanish. "I used both versions because they were slightly different, and I found that interesting," said Stewart. "It was interesting because there were corrections that she had made." She added the translations were similar and Teresa tried to translate word for word, "but she couldn't help herself." The modifications for the most part were minor, and Dr. Stewart noted those differences in her translation.

interested because the project was not going to be profitable.

The Spanish press wanted a U.S. publisher to agree to pay for the rights, "and of course an academic press is never going to do that," Dr. Stewart said. She tried to get grants from the government of Catalonia, which wants to promote the language and culture, but they wanted the publishing company to apply. "I was just lost in this limbo," she said. "I learned a whole lot and was nearly going to give up several times."



View of Charles Bridge  
Prague, Czech Republic