Bush Writers Profiles

By Anna Aslanyan

Anwar Hamed

The life story of Anwar Hamed defies that famous Kipling line, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”. Born in a small West Bank town to a Palestinian family, he moved to Turkey and, at the age of twenty-three, came to live in Hungary before finally arriving in London to work for the BBC's Arabic Service. His variegated past and present make him unique not only in the linguistic sense – Hamed speaks several languages and writes in three – but also as a witness to the changing political, cultural, and social landscape of the countries he has experienced first hand.

Hamed's early short stories were written in Arabic. When studying literature in Hungary, he started writing in Hungarian, publishing his first novels in the language so different from his native tongue. The latter he rediscovered after immersing himself into the English-speaking environment which proved stimulating and beneficial for both his fiction and poetry. Indeed, it was London that brought out his potential in full, at all levels.

Hamed remembers his time in Hungary as important to his development as an author and, perhaps more importantly, as a human being. “I wanted to connect with people and, in a way, I succeeded – I probably felt more at home there than some of those who had always lived there”. Hungarian culture, somewhat insular and inward-looking, was not the easiest to assimilate into, from the language itself to the traditional views dominating in the society. “I wouldn't dare speak Arabic on a bus there – everyone would start staring at me. Here it is the most natural thing to do. The Hungarian system of values seemed black and white to me. London, on the other hand, is all about colour”.

Hamed's palette, whether applied to poetry or news bulletins, is fresh and bright. When putting on his journalistic hat, he sometimes finds it difficult – moreover, unnecessary – to change his style completely. “Part of my job is to write articles on arts, in particular, literature – reviews, authors' obituaries. I think it apt that pieces of this kind should convey some of the richness of the language cherished by the very people they are dedicated to. This has often been a source of debate between my editors and me. My prose is not something they are used to, but I always try to stand my ground. There are things which one can raise to another level while adhering to the BBC editorial policy, and that's what I like doing”. Hamed's poetry is, of course, where his vision is at its most perceptive. *Butterfly*, a poem he wrote in Hungarian, was admired by native speakers because of its colourful imagery.

She, who's sick dancing with kings
Wants to fly, but got no wings

She, who dates orchids and tulips
Wants to smile, but finds no true lips

She, who blooms with every new spring
Parted with dance and will never sing
(*Butterfly*)

When it comes to politics, Hamed again refuses to see things in black in white. It is his background that gives him the power of observation: "Most of the world news comes from the Middle East. Politics is in our blood – we cannot afford not to be interested in it, not to be involved in it". He was shocked to see how some Hungarians, rejoicing at the fall of Communism, embraced what they saw as the only alternative to it – the American way. "By then I knew Europe quite well and didn't sympathise with the Soviet regime. But I had also seen other places and was sure that things ought to be a lot complicated than this polarised picture".

The Arabic service where Hamed has worked for six years is also a much bigger entity than what its name might suggest. "The Arab world is a universe in itself", says Hamed. "People from Lebanon, say, are very different from Saudis or Egyptians. Of course, we all speak a common language – everything is broadcast and written in classical Arabic. At the same time, there is a huge diversity". And this is what he enjoys most – both in the newsroom and on the streets of London. Having long yearned for a society where tolerance is practised in all aspects of daily life, Hamed knew straight away that Britain was his destination.

The multicultural, cosmopolitan atmosphere of Bush House is another manifestation of the same phenomenon – the Great British melting pot of individuals, beliefs and ideas. When he first started at the BBC, Hungarian service still existed. Hamed was a frequent guest on their programmes, commenting on current affairs, surprising the listeners by that unusual combination: an Arabic name and a perfect spoken Hungarian. After relocating to Egton House, Hamed is still attracted to the old building: "It's full of history. Egton is modern, all glass and computers and huge TV screens, but it's not as inspiring as Bush. And, of course, it's just us and the Persians working there, so I miss my other colleagues". He looks forward to reuniting with the rest of the World Service one day.

Apart from writing in different languages, Hamed translates his own works – a process that has much to do with retelling. He does it to be understood by the audience that may or may not be familiar with his subjects, cross-cultural references and connotations. In his novel *The Bridge of Babylon* he draws on his Palestinian roots as well as the knowledge of Hungary. His messages become even more complex and the perception of his fiction more important when Hamed returns to his home ground, the West Bank. His characters, both Palestinians and Israelis, are never the same hue within their group, and he is careful to preserve their originality. He hopes that one day his books will be translated into Hebrew and become his own contribution into establishing a dialogue between the two peoples.

The readership in Britain is a lot easier to communicate with, says Hamed. "People in this country are so used to everyone being different; they never assume your book is going to be dealing with well known themes. They are more prepared to make an effort to understand what you are trying to say". The same goes for other aspects of life, not just literature. The fact that Hamed is perfectly at ease with his own identity certainly plays some role in his ability to bond with those he lives side by side with. As does his career at the BBC, with the opportunities it provides: to meet people who, like him, are open to diversity and willing to see things in colour.

Maybe you'll only have enough of your glut of love in winter
When my deep verses have been frozen over
As for me
I'll keep grieving for you with songs, tulips, butterflies and rainbows
(*Vanilla Carpe Diem*)

Hamid Ismailov

A mix of different cultures is a natural habitat for Hamid Ismailov who was born in Central Asia, where most people communicate in several languages all their lives. Apart from his native Uzbek and Russian, he picked up Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and other languages early on. Eventually learning the basics of yet another one became a matter of days for him; he once won a bet having digested conversational Latvian in two weeks. Even his cat is trilingual.

Ismailov was forced to flee Uzbekistan in 1992 and, after spending some time in France and Germany, came to the United Kingdom, where he started working at the World Service as a producer. For the first six months, he was the only person from Central Asia within the company, "the first Uzbek at the BBC" as people used to introduce him. He now heads the BBC's Central Asia and Caucasus Service – the place which, linguistically and culturally, is equally, if not more, rich than that of his native land.

As an established author of fiction and poetry, a translator of Russian and Western classics into Uzbek, and Uzbek and Persian classics into Russian and English, how does he choose from his vast store of languages when conceiving another book? For Ismailov, the main factor is the nature of experiences he wants to describe. "Certain things are firmly associated in my mind with Uzbek – my childhood, for instance. Then there is Russian, the language of my institutional life, from kindergarten to school to university. And then there is English – a large chunk of my time has been spent here. I write about a particular layer of my life using the language it evokes for me".

One of Ismailov's early contributions to the BBC was a series of programmes about Uzbek songs – a subject he loves. He researched it thoroughly and later published a book on it. This became extremely popular with intellectuals in Uzbekistan and Afghan jihadis alike. There were also some angry letters from people who found it hard to come to terms with one of his discoveries: a traditional wedding song proved, on a closer inspection, to have a homosexual meaning. He mentions that piece of work as an example of combining journalism and his own writing which has always been of great importance to him. "Literature is something you keep for the sake of your sanity". This, according to Hamid Ismailov, is what allows people to be free, to transcend the limits of everyday life.

Working for the radio taught Ismailov some vital lessons as a writer of fiction: "I

learnt to cut out the unnecessary. Coming from the Soviet school where long, verbose texts, kilometres of it, were a norm for self-indulging authors, I found this job a benefit for my style, my preciseness". In this sense, his only regret initially was that he came to the BBC relatively late – he could have gained more if it happened when he was a less mature author.

In his upcoming book, *Comrad Islam*, a reality-novel which begins on 11 September 2001, Ismailov sets himself a challenging task: to merge factual reports with a traditional narrative. "It wasn't meant to be a parody of journalism – rather, I wanted to upgrade it, bring it level with literature. You can build a model out of various things – paper, scraps, you name it. It is the same with fiction. I wanted to play with non-fiction tools in order to create a proper novel, with a well thought-out plot. In other words, the idea was to marry together two very different genres, journalism and *belle lettre*".

> He spoke of *jihad*, a holy war against the infidels and above all against the empire of Satan – America; he spoke of *shahids*, who had died a righteous death on this path, of children who had been made into orphans, but also avengers, and yet again Yosir wondered in amazement where Muhammad Tahir found that blazing passion that spoke prophetically above and beyond his own thoughts, will and his lips, so that he never faltered, or hesitated or stumbled over a misplaced breath. He didn't learn it all by heart, did he, he didn't rehearse it all in front of a mirror – for where would he get a mirror?
> (*Comrad Islam*)

Talking to Ismailov, you feel convinced that any concerns about your paid job hampering your creativity are, for the most part, a mere excuse. It does not matter what you do – if you have a style to lose you won't lose it simply because you have to process news items daily. Your true vocation will find an outlet. "And, you know, an author is a very cunning and shrewd animal, so he'll use any opportunity to carry on with his writing, to enrich it by whatever else he might be doing. When you are divided between the two halves of your own self, you can also get very interesting things out of it". Recently Ismailov managed to dig up some fascinating facts about George Orwell – a figure he has long been interested in as an Englishman who worked for the World Service. He went to the archives and learnt about literary games Orwell used to play during his time at Bush House. Take, for instance, his interviews with dead people, Jonathan Swift among them – a brilliant idea which Orwell the writer was able to realise in his other capacity.

Ismailov collaborates with his translators – only when asked to do so. He trusts them enough not to interfere, but when they come up with questions he is eager to respond. "Sometimes", laughs Ismailov, "they make me really understand what I'm writing". Robert Chandler – who compared translating *The Railway*, a book in which Ismailov presents a vivid, multi-faceted picture of his homeland, with "restoring a precious carpet" – still remembers the many discussions the two of them had and is grateful for the author's input. It is partly because of his luck with translators that Ismailov does not believe the language of his novels is particularly affected by his job at the BBC. "The vocabulary of Bush House is quite restricted. After all, a journalist usually talks about things like earthquakes, terrorist acts, deaths, and so on. As a result, your working language is reduced to a handful of words you actually use. I can't say my vocabulary has been widened by the experience I have gained at Bush House – in fact, I tend to learn new things elsewhere and bring them here".

> In Herat, before the burial vault of the great vizir and poet Mir Alisher Navoi, the uneducated Maike began to recite ghazals in Persian; Djebral-Semavi, the Persian keeper of this burial vault, was so struck by the wild magnificence of Maike's poetry that he invited [them] to be his guests. […] On the eight day, as they were taking their leave of one another, the unschooled Maike sang in Arabic a farewell elegy to the extinguished hearth.

> […] As they travelled on, Maike once again began to sing in Kirghiz – that way the flock grazed and multiplied better; and after they passed Mazari-Sharif […] they were overtaken by Djebral-Semavi, who had disposed of all his property in order that […] he might see the promised land which had brought forth such prodigies as the incomparable Maike.
> (*The Railway*)

After first reading *Dzhan (Soul)* by Andrei Platonov, Ismailov thought it was such a masterly novel he was depressed and felt there was nothing left to say about Central Asia. Despite that, Ismailov found his own stories to tell, both to his readers and to the listeners of the World Service. He keeps finding them all the time and telling them in his own voice.

Anthony Rudolf

For a poet, Anthony Rudolf strikes you as an extremely numerate man. He speaks of joining the BBC in 1974 thus: “I did my sums and figured out that if I took a job in the newsroom I'd be able to manage. The BBC salary was a base, I also made occasional freelance programmes with language services, and this, along with my income as a publisher and translator, was just enough to stay afloat”. A distinguished author and critic, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Rudolf published poetry in translation for forty years – a labour of love at its purest – while working shifts at Bush House for nearly half a century. “It was, essentially, a clerical job”, he says modestly. “But I also did some more interesting things – for instance, I enjoyed my stint as a lexicographer, providing newsroom input for the BBC dictionary”. The shift system was vital to his schedule, very tight, made possible by “rigid time control”. Unconventional hours allowed Rudolf to pursue his publishing career at a normal pace, which would have been impossible if he was working from nine to six. However, the relative freedom came at a price: missed weekends, lack of sleep, early morning writing, lunch-time meetings followed by night shifts – the kind of double life one can only lead when one is full of energy and, crucially, ardour.

Throughout his time at Bush House, Anthony Rudolf engaged in his passion for poetry without letting it interfere with the stable routine associated with his job. His motto was to do what he was paid for, and more when required: “I knew I had my responsibilities. If at times I couldn't work up much enthusiasm for them, I would give back more on other occasions. It all balanced out in the end”. One often has to choose between a true love and a convenience relationship. For Rudolf that triangle was never symmetric, literature, especially poetry, always lying closer to his heart. He was good at distancing himself and his muse from the daily grind: “My work at the BBC made no impact whatsoever on what I wrote, or the way I wrote”.

Rudolf's publishing activities certainly benefited from the years he spent at Bush House where his would often meet like-minded people. He was, of course, not the only

author there, a lot of his colleagues were writing – sometimes on a night shift. “Some were doing crossword puzzles to stay awake through the small hours; a friend of mine was translating Mallarmé, which is also a crossword puzzle of sorts”. The atmosphere of Bush House was special in those days – a result, in Rudolf's words, of that unique combination: “Anglophile foreigners and easy-going English people”. The former tolerance towards eccentric intellectuals on the management's part helped to create this “benign circle”. The place was a kind of club where people full of literary ambitions thrived on the very environment that enabled them to realise those ambitions. “Some books were, in fact, born, thought up in the BBC bar”. Rudolf remembers fondly the late John Casson who started as a typist, eventually becoming the newsroom manager: “His real talent was writing radio plays – the highest form of art, in my view. I used to think it would be great to write a crazy, Beckett-style radio feature. Maybe one day I will”.

Rudolf – who, despite being the author of short stories, does not believe that he has an ear for dialogue – once thought of writing a murder mystery set in the newsroom. “It would have been a perfect plot: a confined space, people who know each other inside out, and behind one of those desks – a murderer...” But that remained a fantasy and the BBC a source of income not inspiration.

Always careful about protecting his anonymity as a literary figure, Rudolf stayed out of the limelight as much as possible, trying not to mix the BBC job with his other interests. Why did he feel that way? For reasons, he says, mainly personal, psychic: to be able to juggle those two parts of his life, intrinsically different as they were, it was necessary for him not to let them overlap. Still, it was impossible to keep everything secret. How did his colleagues perceive his other, non-BBC personality? “I don't think I was ever unpopular because of that. There were a few people I didn't get on with, I don't know why – perhaps, I rubbed them up the wrong way. I was fully committed to my other work and sometimes sailed close to the wind. But I had my supporters, too. It was a wonderful place to work; it may have given me more than I gave it, but, after all, they kept me for twenty-three years – I must have done something right.”

Two-step
two-time
the faithful,
poetical feat
of clay
to the ear
(*Mandorla*)

The late 60s were the golden age of translation in Britain – it was then that many Central and East European poets were discovered and brought into English culture by a handful of enthusiasts. The founder of *Menard Press*, Rudolf published an impressive 160 books, among them collections of French poetry, notably by Yves Bonnefoy, as well as works by Russian and other authors. Far from being preoccupied with big names and political agendas, Rudolf talks admiringly about Soviet poet Evgeny Vinokurov: “It is a shame that he seems to be almost forgotten nowadays. When translating him, I was astonished by how easily he lent himself to English. And there was, of course, that cliché, *Soviet* poet, so I was not sure what kind of reaction to expect from people like Brodsky. Fortunately Brodsky admired him”. A book of Rudolf's own poems, *Mandorla*, came out in 1999, the same year as his memoir, *The Arithmetic of Memory*. In the latter (drafted on the tube, during the commute to Bush House), he reflects on the unreliability of memory, on the gaps between our own experiences and things we are led to think we remember. Rudolf's writing can be seen as higher mathematics that combined with its opposite, poetic licence, yields pages of fine prose.

> Many of the recollections undoubtedly represent, elide, conflate, hundreds of similar ones, and many more, some of them certainly quite important, have slipped through the net or been missed by the spade, forever. [...] But if I was obsessive enough to want to list *everything* I would of course be in the position of Borges' College of Cartographers in *Dreamtigers* whose 'map of the Empire [...] had the size of the Empire itself', and end up listing nothing – as well as listing heavily, like a fishing-boat in a storm. (*The Arithmetic of Memory*)

Does Anthony Rudolf miss Bush House? “I look back at it with affection”. He still thinks of it as a place that actively encouraged different cultures to coexist. The policy of impartiality created an atmosphere where a German and a Jew could work together on a bulletin covering Arab affairs – a situation which, according to the German colleague involved, “is amazing, but should be normal”. One is left with the impression that Rudolf is somewhat nostalgic about his BBC days. Torn between love and duty, he managed, in a sense, to get the best of both states he had been in simultaneously. “The point”, Rudolf insists, “is not whether as a writer you *draw* on your day job; what's more important is whether as a writer you *need* a salaried day job”. Even if, at the beginning, the BBC was a mere fling for Rudolf, what matters is that his main passion blossomed into exquisite books. A marriage made in heaven – or on air – needs a firm ground to stand on.

> And so it was: the fingers were clenched.
> They took the place of memory.
> The sorrowful guardian forces had to be loosened
> To throw off the ocean and the tree.
> (*Memory*, *Yesterday's Wilderness Kingdom* by Yves Bonnefoy, translated by Anthony Rudolf)

Nicholas Rankin

Nick Rankin's background is perfect for a career at the BBC World Service. A colonial child, he spent his early years in Kenya, was educated in England, lived in Spain, worked and travelled in the "southern cone" of South America. Today, however, his tales of these places serve as a mere backdrop for the main show.

We meet at Bush House and, before our interview starts in earnest, talk about Nick's first book, *Dead Man’s Chest*, in which he followed in Robert Louis Stevenson’s footsteps from Scotland to Samoa. Published in 1987, *Dead Man’s Chest* reads as a gripping account of Stevenson’s travels and is full of witty and insightful observations that connect fiction and life, history and modernity.

> “The 1880s were a time of upheaval and social ferment in Britain; it was an era of discontent which some feared might lead to violent revolution. In this context, it is possible to read even a 'romance' like Treasure Island as a social parable of Britain at the time, written by a Tory.

> The Establishment – Squire, Captain, Doctor and loyal retainers – are treated by the Pirates, who can organise a Black Spot ceremony (' “According to rules,” said one. “Fo'c'sle council,” said Morgan') like socialists or trade unionists, but who are liable to relapse into a superstitious mob, fuelled by drink and bent on violence. Social envy feeds the pirates' resentment: ' ”I want their pickles and wines, and that,' says one; and Silver wants to be an MP”.

After a few more recollections – Rankin mentions Borges whose gift, a pebble, was the inspiration behind the book – Zinovy Zinik takes us to a studio. Watching two old colleagues converse is like taking a masterclass in broadcasting. There is, of course, no script – unlike in the old days, at the dawn of the BBC. “Everything had to be scripted. Even phrases like 'And how are you today, Mr Zinik?' – every single word,” remembers Rankin, this in response to the question about differences between writing for the radio and for the print. It was never a problem for Rankin – in fact, his Stevenson tribute, much enjoyed by Graham Greene, got him into the BBC precisely because it was written in a lively radio style. “I was lucky – I always wrote in montages. It fits my brain”. Still on the same subject, we start discussing varying levels of editorial control over scriptwriting and are rewarded with a quote: “So, is there any censorship at the BBC?” – “No, they make you do it yourself”.

Nick Rankin worked at Bush House for 20 years, winning two UN awards for his programme *A Green History of the Planet* and becoming chief producer. When asked what this imposing title means in the corporate hierarchy, he quips: “Purely invented. I got my boss to make me a chief – I was, after all, a top feature maker, one of my programmes was about American Indians, so I thought, that's what I've always wanted to be – a Chief”.

While working at the BBC Rankin wrote *Telegram from Guernica: the Extraordinary Life of George Steer, War Correspondent,* where he tells the story of the ground-breaking reporter and front-line propagandist. Rankin makes an ideal biographer for George Lowther Steer – indeed, he shares a lot with his subject: both were born in Africa and travelled widely, both have a gift and a passion for journalism and, most notably, both in their writings tend to support smaller countries struggling for independence. This was the stance Steer took when reporting from Ethiopia in the '30s, and Rankin is clearly in his camp. Steer's coverage of the civil war in Spain and his sympathy towards the Basques is also something that Rankin, with his own experience of living in Barcelona during the transition from Francoism to democracy, easily relates to.

It was Steer's reportage that inspired Picasso to paint *Guernica* in 1937. Sixty years later, Rankin's book sprang out of a feature on the masterpiece he did for the World Service. That was another of his numerous radio documentaries whose topics range from ecology and evolution to drugs in nature and culture.

Our conversation turns to the British Empire as the institution that created the World Service. Rankin is thrilled by its history: “It began as the Empire Service in 1932. King George V made his first speech on Christmas day; it was written by Rudyard Kipling. The King sounded like the real grandfather of the nation, and yet the words were Kipling's. It was a marvellous speech – it had just the right kind of imagination this new media required at its dawn”.

Having broadcast in Russian for many years, Zinik invites Rankin to comment on the relationship between English and other languages that can be heard in the Babylon that Bush House has been since 1938, when the first Arabic programmes were broadcast. “Oh, but it's not just about linguistic differences – at least not for me; I wrote my scripts in English, communicated with my colleagues in English. Although I agree with you – the World Service is, in many ways, a microcosm of our society”. And this, Rankin insists, is why his writing, instead of being hindered by his job at the BBC, fed off the constant influx of ideas, voices, encounters it provided.

Today, as a freelance writer and broadcaster, Nick Rankin is still able to find themes

which, while rooted in history, ring many bells to the modern reader. In his recently published *Churchill's Wizards: The British Genius for Deception 1914-1945,* Rankin tells fascinating stories of the two world wars – stories of "the English defence of the Home Front through ridiculously serious camouflage and seriously ridiculous deception". Trickery and deception which abound in the book are somehow linked to the British sense of humour. How does this quality manifest itself in the history of the BBC?

In many ways, it appears, although when we first touch upon George Orwell and his notorious room 101 the answer is far from obvious. Orwell takes a tedious situation (he used to sit through boring meetings in that room) and makes it into a horror show; the Churchill's wizards – specialists in camouflage, secret codes and propaganda that are the heroes of Rankin's story – take a serious situation with a good deal of humour and make it into a victory. Nor does Rankin underestimate the role of laughter in radio work. One particularly vivid example is ITMA ("It's That Man Again"), a much-loved BBC comedy series broadcast during the Second World War. Its name was a reference to Adolph Hitler's popularity as the subject of news coverage at the time. According to Rankin, those spirit-lifting programmes became a source of numerous catchphrases and had thousands of listeners, including Queen Elizabeth. "It was her 60th birthday – and what was her present? A special broadcast of ITMA at Windsor Palace!"

Going back to Orwell, Rankin remarks unexpectedly: "He never struck me as a BBC person. In my eyes, he is a much freer voice". *Churchill's Wizards* portrays Orwell as a servant of his country, but also as a man torn between different views, political and personal.

> "Orwell had had a dream one night back in August 1939 that helped convince him of his true feelings. He dreamed that the war had already started, and this had two lessons for him. The first was that he would be relieved from dread when it did happen, and the second was the sure knowledge that he was patriotic at heart, that he would not sabotage his own side, and that he would support the war and fight in it if possible. The next day he had read in the newspapers about the Nazi-Soviet pact".

As we leave the studio, Rankin stops to engage a young sound engineer in a professional chat about tapes – "You do know what they are, how to cut and splice them, don't you? Amazing!" - before striding off down the corridor, a pile of books, old and new, under one elbow. Outside Bush House, leaning against the wall with the familiar plaque, he smiles: "You never really leave the BBC".

Zina Rohan

Zina Rohan spent nearly a quarter of a century at the BBC World Service. As a staff writer and, later, a freelance broadcaster, she made features on a variety of topics, from Communism to Islam, travelling to the pre-velvet-revolutionary Czechoslovakia and the

post-Soviet Central Asia, among other places. An observant witness to the processes going on in the countries she covered, Rohan remembers the changes happening to Bush House over those years, between the late Seventies and the early Noughties. “To be fair, the staffing here reflected not so much the multicultural trends of modern Britain, but rather the priorities of the Foreign Office. The language services here depend largely on the international politics. Many of the European services are now gone – the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians, the German Service some time ago, the French... Before I joined there had been the Swedes and the Finns, the reason presumably being the Second World War”.

Still, the World Service has always, to some extent, represented a mini-UN, and Zina Rohan, with her cosmopolitan background, fitted in naturally. Born in London to war refugees, she has a lot of peripatetic experience: Britain, Central Europe, the East. Does she ever feel fully at home anywhere? In the melting pot of London (“If London is where she has come to rest, then so be it”, as the heroine of Rohan's latest novel, *The Officer's Daughter*, muses on her fate) – or, indeed, here in Bush House? “I do – in London. It's the mix that it is, and it does the job nicely. Last year I went to Prague for a week and it occurred to me briefly that I could try to move there. It would have been very enjoyable, but then I thought, no – it's too white, too inward-looking, and I would miss the theatre. It's the same with the English countryside – much as I like it; I could never live there because it's too English”.

As a little girl, Zina Rohan wanted to be English and ran away from home when her Russian mother told her that was impossible. Later, however, she realised she was glad to be what she was – otherwise her storytelling would have never been the same. Is this what she thinks to this day, having lived here and written in English all her life? “Oh yes, and I am extremely fortunate to have been born into this situation where English is my first language and, at the same time, I come from an international family. It's great not to have an exclusively English outlook”.

“The BBC was paying for my continuing education; I travelled”, says Rohan. Did she find this useful as a novelist? Although trying to keep her private life separate from work, she always tended to see things as a whole. In her first novel, *The Book of Wishes and Complaints*, set in Czechoslovakia, Rohan drew on her frequent visits to the country, both as a BBC journalist and as a wife of a Czech. Her two angles of perception, professional and personal, were very much intertwined – everything had to be put in a political context. “In a way, I managed to get a wide spectrum, meeting my friends and interviewing such political figures as Havel, Klima, Vaculik – a lucky position for a writer. That and eavesdropping. I am a notorious eavesdropper, I just can't help listening to other people's conversations on a bus – and stealing them, because that's what novelists do”. And this is where her perfect pitch developed by years of broadcasting must come in handy.

Talking about Rohan's books, one wonders if there was a downside to working for the radio? After all, her prose style seems quite distinct from the manner in which scripts are usually written. How did the two types of writing interfere with each other? Rohan confirms that these were very different tasks. She used to write talks for the BBC and, knowing that her texts would be translated into a different language, often to tight deadlines, had to pare them down as much as possible. “It was a useful linguistic exercise, but also rather dull”. At some point she realised that she had to stop if she were to write any fiction. “I got myself an editorial job instead – I could work with other people's scripts but not with my own. That's when I started writing my books”.

Bringing up three children and working full-time, Rohan wrote her first two novels on snatched Sunday afternoons. The third and the most ambitious one was going to require a lot of research, so she left the BBC – and was immediately asked to come back as a freelance. “It was an extremely interesting time, the early Noughties. I did programmes on

terrorism; the last one, in 2002, was on the history of Iraq. And then I said, that's it, I am no longer a journalist, I have a different life". She went away to finish *The Officer's Daughter*, the book based on the memories of her first mother-in-law. The young heroine is crashed between the superpowers at the beginning of the Second World War, arrested and sent away from her native Poland to a Soviet labour camp, before eventually being evacuated to Iran.

> "In single file they slink across the track and slither to their stomachs, heads down, like Indians in a cowboy film, Marta thinks suddenly, lurking to ambush oncoming settlers. There is something about this train that feels unusual. Its vibrations seem to come from deep within the earth as if the engine is ploughing a way through, gouging out a new path and laying track as it goes. It must be very heavy. And, thank God, it's slow! The engine has passed and cautiously they raise their heads. Flat-bed wagons bearing great black smooth-sided crates. No carriages, no windows. No people. […] And, now it's gone, the bisected air is closing together behind it, and their only chance has been snatched away."

Our conversation keeps going back to Rohan's origins. She once said of her kids that "what made them physically who they were was Hitler and Stalin: if it hadn't been for this pair of dictators competing to outdo one another in tyranny, my children's grandparents would not have criss-crossed the continents as they did, meeting and marrying the people they did, resulting in the extraordinary international mix that sat at our kitchen table that afternoon". In a way, the turmoil of the last century, its effect on millions of lives aside, is a rich material for an author, as Rohan's fiction testifies.

Marta, the main character of *The Officer's Daughter*, thinking of her own destiny and that of her friends, notes that "... it is a luxury to suppose you will grow up and live out your life in the place where you were born. Or married. Or found your love." Does that mean that her creator is longing for a quieter, more traditional past? "Not at all. We are lucky – born after the war, we have not been bombarded. My heroine's generation were young at the time of the worst upheaval, they were flung about and shunted between European borders. The luxury I was talking about was not my feeling but the feeling that I ascribed to that character. Marta is a Pole who would have wished to stay in her homeland".

Perhaps the same can be said about Rohan's parents. Her father, a German Jew, sent out of the country to England in 1935, was later interned in Australia. When he finally returned to Oxford, he met his future wife, whose family fled Russia after the revolution, settling in Serbia. That Rohan's mother worked as a typist in Bush House, back in the early days of the Serbo-Croat Service, is one of those twists that make you think of ordinary people's life-stories as the best plots available to any author. Talking to Zina Rohan and reading her prose makes you realise how deeply she herself understands this point.

> "Why is the hospital so far away? She ought to croak some reply a simple, straightforward thank you for your interest but I'm afraid I really cannot accept because I am promised to another. Strictly speaking it wouldn't be true, since she hasn't yet told Antoni that she's decided to brave the marriage after all. Dr Shirazi really is a very handsome man, and a good, kind one. No doubt he's a 'catch'. But he is not Antoni. He doesn't make fun of her as Antoni does – he wouldn't know how; and he doesn't know her as Antoni does; and she doesn't know him as she knows Antoni. She likes him a lot but she doesn't love him. Does he love her? Is it possible? It would be terrible if he loved her. Which is worse: to love unrequited, or to be loved where you cannot return the love?
> Her mouth is dry, and the polite words don't come."

Zinovy Zinik

Zinovy Zinik needs little prompting to remember the many gothic tales from Bush House he has witnessed here over thirty-odd years. Writers whose careers are connected with the BBC World Service in some way or another often talk about different cultures, languages, traditions abounding there. Most literary styles, from poetry to humour, have been explored; but macabre? It takes a novelist with a varied experience to read (or write) it into the history of the place.

"You have to start with the specific role of Eastern European Services, in particular the Russian Service at the BBC", explains Zinik who was born in Moscow and, after emigrating to Israel at the height of the Cold War, eventually settled in London. "Back in the Soviet day, radio was the only way of communicating with the Eastern Bloc, at all levels – political, cultural, personal. Were it not for the World Service, the peoples of those countries would be denied any opportunity to hear free speech. The BBC – although it had, of course, its counterparts such as Radio Free Europe, Voice of America – stood out among them as a neutral observer. When I first arrived here, the BBC would never touch an internal affairs subject without first consulting experts – in fact, it was always quoting somebody else on all Communist issues, thus remaining an objective voice". And how did it feel personally? "As a writer and as a human being, broadcasting was the only way for me to talk to those I left behind in Russia. I was dead sure at the time I'd never be able to come back to the USSR. That created the world of the gothic novel. My friends were the hub of the universe for me, and it was for them I would broadcast. Bodily I was here, in London, but my voice, my soul was with them, in Moscow – a perfect gothic scenario which gave rise to a number of plots I have exploited in my novels".

We turn to one of them, *Russian Service* the novel – does it use the BBC as a literary plot device, or was the author's intention deeper than that? "My deepest intention was to write a book everyone would read, which would make a lot of money. But my working for the BBC meant that I wasn't allowed to write about the corporation – nothing whatsoever. Be it as it may, even though my novel is called *Russian Service,* it's not about the Russian Service*.* Naturally, I used my experience to a certain extent – after all, the place that the Russian Service was in the 70s was populated with most amazing characters: White Russians, refugees, defectors. Among the typists, for example, one could find some incredibly interesting personalities. In those days, of course, everything used to be typed; scripts, news bulletins, even short dispatches. Back to my novel, it conjures up that circle of eccentric émigré characters, which was inspired by listening to some of the broadcasts. You'd hear, for example, a commentary in that beautiful pre-revolutionary Russian, so well balanced, spoken in such a great voice. In those days the BBC was, for many of my fellow countrymen, a fantasy world which clashed with reality in various peculiar ways".

> “On his first day at Radio Interbroad, he wandered through the rabbit-warren of corridors in search of Naum Gerundov, until somebody eventually told him that this worthy personage had been dead for more than a year. What listeners heard now was a tape, since Gerundov had had the foresight to record topical commentaries four generations ahead. It was a revelation to Narator to learn that there was not always a face behind a voice, and also that a face could be most unlike its voice. […] Sometimes, too, at first he felt completely washed up here in London, and imagined there had been something for him to hold onto before; but later he came to realise there had been nothing in the past and there would be nothing in the future. Just voices which bore no relation to the faces behind them”. (*Russian Service*)

Radio voice, radio ear, radio instinct – it's impossible not to notice that Zinik is all of these things. Although certainly important for a writer, could it also be a dangerous trait? Arguably, having too many sounds in your head may be an annoyance as much as a source of inspiration. “I think it's all about translatability. Working for the radio is invaluable for any writer who doesn't belong to the Anglophone world. When I first started here I was doing a lot of theatre reviews, and I tended to write them the way that was considered fashionable in my Moscow circle. Soon it became clear that I had to change tack – the phrases had to be less convoluted, the syntax neater, but, most importantly, I had to make sure that my sentences – although broadcast in Russian – can be easily translated into English for the audience to be able to follow and enjoy my stories. Thus, my radio job taught me a very important lesson, one that I've been trying to apply to my writing ever since”.

So, is the multilingual environment of Bush House a definite boon to someone's fiction? Zinik has no doubts on this point. “Bush House is, essentially, the British Empire – plus there are all the Iranians, Russians, Africans, you name it, which makes it possible to establish contacts I could never dream of. Also, there are no barriers; I would, for instance, hesitate to mention my trips to Israel to a Muslim friend from Moscow, whereas here at the World Service nothing could be more natural. We share the air – that was the spirit”.

It was this spirit that allowed Zinik to reflect on his identity in his fiction, openly, calmly and without a single patronising note. “When I first arrived in this country, I found it very strange: everyone wanted to know where I was from – everyone wanted to know where everyone was from, people were genuinely curious and proud to tell you about their origins. In Moscow, of course, it was the other way around – everyone was trying to hide things about their background.”

Xenophobia is not the only raw subject *One-Way Ticket*, Zinik's collection of short stories, deals with in a fearless way. The book has in it some masterly stories set in places as far apart as Portugal and Ukraine, and the author's voice is fine-tuned accordingly, its radio malleability lending itself easily to the written word. The trouble with the 21st century Russian literature is that very little of it can be rendered adequately in translation; Zinik's prose takes an educated guess at what another language might do to it. The afterword to *One-Way Ticket* concludes thus:

> “A man who is left in the wilderness without a compass will always wander in circles. For a writer there is, and always will be, only one way to liberate himself from this vicious circle of invisible confinement: to write a new work, to create a new style. Maybe that is why I have written this confession in English, not in my native Russian”.

In his 1983 essay, *Emigration as a Literary Device*, Zinik talks about the duplicity every author – and, more generally, “every modern man in this world” – has to live with, their past separated from the present, their inner self from the outer world. In his case, the effect is even more pronounced – in fact, to those who know him there are multiple Ziniks, and you can never talk to the same one twice. Radio for Zinik seems to be yet another way of emigrating from himself – his fiction, his *Freelance* column in the *Times Literary*

Supplement, his many interests, from avant-garde art to traditional pastimes.

Zinik's latest collection, *Mind the Doors*, is written in English. The translatability of these stories has not suffered as a result – you can imagine reading them in Russian or, indeed, Italian with equal ease. Their circumstances may not be immediately close to everyone's life events, which makes you keep on reading – and thinking at the same time.

Novelists often leave the BBC to write full time, yet Zinovy Zinik, with eight books under his belt, seems attached to this place. Why? “Well, I was never staff, which helps. But I love radio, I love working with sound, cutting voices. Making features for me is a chance to talk about something I wouldn't be able to approach otherwise. I could never write things I've been saying on the radio – it's a completely different logic”.