



Publishing for Minorities – Not Just Survival

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Abstract: For a small publisher, publishing books for minorities can nowadays present a way of positioning and also surviving in the market. Within the hard battle for profit, certain niches, which are not lucrative enough for big publishing houses, remain open for smaller publishers. One of these niches is publishing for minorities. It is in the following that I shall present our company's projects of this type from the viewpoint of their demands, particularities, problems and effects. I proved my hypothesis that although publishing for minorities is a demanding and a low-profitable publishing activity its results assist in the very survival of minorities and publisher.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, children with special needs, tactile picture book, multilingual picture book.

Minorities as a publishing niche

As the guru of publishing A. Schiffrin said on his visit to Slovenia, many large publishing companies put up such a fight for profit that smaller companies are mostly left with marketing niches, which are not lucrative enough for the larger publishers.

Every publisher selects a programme according to its target groups, as a rule to gain profit from sales. The publishing house determines its target groups in its own way and adapts its strategy and focus accordingly. The readers, who read, buy or borrow books according to brand recognition, also participate in the shaping of the publisher's image and uniqueness of its programme. If a publisher can break out its imprint and have it recognized by the public in a meaningful way, identified with a specific editorial or market position, then the publisher will have achieved the ultimate success in niche publishing.

The Slovenian book market

The Slovenian book market is one of the smallest in Europe. This, along with the fact that Slovenian is not one of the world languages, are the decisive factors, which influence editorial strategies and the economic side of the publishing business. The print runs are low, due to the small absorption of a two-million-strong market, and export is limited only to Slovenian minorities and expatriates. Print runs sold range around an average of 500-700 copies; rarely does a bestseller manage to sell in thousands of copies. Low print runs result in high production costs per copy and a consequently low profit. If we can say that it is self-evident that the book is a marketing product in developed EU countries, it is then a typically shameful venture to try to profit from book-selling in Slovenia. As a commercial company



poorly subsidized by the state, we as publishers have a negative public image, especially among professionals, even though we only wish to survive. The non-stimulative tax policy, one of the highest tax levels on book-sales in Europe and a subvention policy, which is less inclined to youth literature, the unwillingness of buyers to buy books, together with a high library take-out (there are 58 public libraries in Slovenia), and above all the chain of bookstores, owned by the largest publishing houses, make it hard for the smaller publishers to survive. For them is vital searching for a way to survive and publishing for minorities is one of those ways (Woll, 1998: 23).

Mis založba and minorities

The Mis založba publishing company issues approximately 35 new titles per year, three-quarters of which are for young readers. It is a publisher renowned for high quality youth literature. The key parts of our editorial strategy are diversity and tolerance, which is why they are, beside the text quality, the key criteria when choosing books to be translated. This is also the reason why we earmark books to individual marketing niches and so to different minorities:

1. national minorities in Slovenia (Italian, Hungarian), Slovene autochthon minorities in neighbouring countries (in Italy, Austria and Hungary) and emigrated minorities in Slovenia,
2. Slovenian emigrant minorities around the world,
3. children with special needs (the blind, dyslectic, struggling readers...).

The books published for various minority target groups have up till now mostly contributed to the positioning of the Mis založba and shaping of its image. There was not a project among them that would bring in a loss and even though we did not benefit from large profit with any of them, these types of editions financially merely meant survival. In opposition to this, they helped build the Mis's image as one of a flexible, quality-oriented publishing company, which takes care of minority target groups.

Children's books for ethnic minorities and emigrants

The Barbara Hanus collection "O Jakobu in mucu Mici" (2009, 24 pages, 22,95 €). Barbara Hanus, a professor of the Slovenian language with many years of experience has recognized the need for a combination of Slovenian texts and their translation in everyday



pedagogic practice for children whose mother tongue is not Slovenian, mostly the children of parents from the republics of former Yugoslavia. At the same time we also recognized the need for a combination of the Slovene language and the language of the countries that are home to Slovenian minorities: Italian, German and Hungarian. The project gives incentive to learn more languages, partake in intercultural collaboration and understanding, where the goal of this picture book is also the emphasis on two-way communication, as the translated text can also be interesting for Slovenian children. The key problem we face is the number of languages into which the story had to be translated. We intended this collection to perform as a means of learning to read (firstly in Slovenian). Therefore, the book had to have few pages, no more than 24 and this is why we decided to simultaneously translate the story into three languages, thus publishing a book that includes the story in Slovenian and three other languages. We also added a picture dictionary of the most common and most important words from the story. So, the first story entitled *Rojstni dan (Happy Birthday)* was published in two books:

1. Slovenian – Croatian/Macedonian/Romany (languages of emigrants)
2. Slovenian – Italian/Hungarian/German (languages of Slovenian minorities in neighbouring countries).

The text is simple and easy to understand; its source is the child's imaginary world with an exceedingly positive message of mutual friendship, understanding, respect and cooperation. The picture book can also function as family reading. It is a nicely illustrated picture book with dynamic illustrations, which can capture and further corroborate a warm family feeling and friendly atmosphere. The way it is designed makes reading easier, the colourful background is soothing for the eyes of beginner readers and dyslectics.

The picture book was among the five nominees for The Original Slovenian Picture Book Award 2010, and is also taking part in the "EPBC II" project (European Picture Book Collection II). Both are considered exceptional achievements.

It is harder to break through to the readers. We estimate that it will take a number of years before the pedagogic professionals recognize the advantages these types of picture books can offer their field of work – it is to this that we shall assign many activities in the future. In the first seven months we have sold 270 copies in Croatian/Macedonian/Romany (500 printed) and 372 (500 printed) copies in the Italian/Hungarian/German language. The interesting difference in the number of copies sold can be explained in many different ways.



Considering that the largest number of books was sold to public and school libraries, the best explanation would be that libraries might prefer buying the Italian/Hungarian/German version due to a subconscious prejudice towards the languages of former Yugoslavian republics. The libraries mostly buy only one of the two books, which demonstrate their lack of understanding of the usefulness of these editions. The analysis of library sales has shown that the number of copies bought by libraries in nationally-mixed areas also does not differ from the number of other picture books purchased. In fact it is the exact opposite: there are libraries on the Italian/Croatian border area, where apart from the Italian minority, live a lot of emigrants from the republics of former Yugoslavia, who do not wish to buy this book, although they buy other books published by our company.

In corroboration that these types of books become a necessity, here is an excerpt from one of the reviews:

I believe it is important for adults to talk to children about foreign languages, as there are also many foreign children in our kindergartens and schools now. My wish is that the degrading phrase: he doesn't even know Slovenian! be changed into a complement: he's learning Slovenian, but he knows brilliant Macedonian! (Simonovic, 2010).

Tactile picture books

There are only 15 blind children under the age of 15 in Slovenia, which is why it would be economically unpractical to publish a book just for them. The first Slovenian tactile picture book "*Snowflower* (Mis zalozba, 2005) by Aksinja Kermauner was handmade and published in 40 copies. It was exhibited at the 2005 book fair in Bologna under the IBBY Documentation of Books for Disabled Young People. However, on publishing this book we came to the conclusion that these types of picture books are not and should not be meant for blind and visually impaired children alone. They are also incredibly important for children with fully functioning senses – who can use these books to receive their first introduction to the Braille alphabet and become aware of their peers with special needs. We strive towards the goal that these special picture books for the blind and sighted find their way onto the shelves of every Slovenian library. It will then be possible for every blind child, who attends a local school to find something he can read in his own community, which means realising the European principle of inclusion. It is also extremely important that these picture books be viewed by children with healthy vision, who are so unobtrusively introduced to this unknown



world with the Braille alphabet, and develop empathy towards people with special needs and widen their own horizons.

The characteristics of Aksinja Kermauner's *Ziga spaget gre v sirni svet* (April 2010, 20 pages, 29.95€) are:

- It is possible to read, look at, touch and even smell the picture book.
- To aid visually impaired children, the colours are strong and contrasting.
- Illustrations are clear and unobscured, presented objects are life-size, which helps with visualization.
- The binding is spiral, which allows the book to open up entirely, so that the blind and visually impaired can easily feel and follow the text and illustrations.
- *Spaget*(the spaghetti) also wasn't picked at random, for it is easier to follow, feel, the story when the character is in a line shape.
- The text is printed in large letters and in the Braille alphabet.
- The text for the blind is printed in dark red, to ease the contrast, allowing dyslectics to read it.
- The picture book has an appendix: instructions for parents and teachers.

The witty story follows Ziga the spaghetti, who escapes from the pot and on his way into the world meets an apple. The apple is convinced that the spaghetti is in fact a huge worm that wants to eat it.

We waited a long time for the right technology to print the Braille alphabet and tactile images that would allow larger print runs, simpler to that of tactile texts, meaning a much lower production cost and higher accessibility for readers. We succeeded in doing this with the technology of applying different UV coatings. Experiments went on for months, during which we were helped by blind and visually impaired children. Our wish was not to create a picture book just to improve our image, but rather insisted on its practicability.

There were of course many obstacles on the way to create this picture book. From which coatings will still be touchable to choosing a real apple smell. The complexity of printing also claimed a missed deadline and a few errors to be made, due to which a couple of pages needed to be reprinted.

The first tactile *Snowflower* already received major media publicity and positioned our publishing company to the eyes of the public, as a publisher which takes care of children with special needs. The second published tactile picture book was also subject to wide media



coverage, its patron being the President of the Republic's wife Mrs. Barbara Miklic Türk. We printed 750 copies, selling 492 in the first three months.

Books for emigrants worldwide

We dedicated two bilingual anthologies by two renowned Slovenian authors for children, poet Tone Pavcek and storyteller Svetlana Makarovic, in Slovenian and English, to Slovenian emigrants worldwide and foreigners living in Slovenia. An ever increasing number of Slovenes seek employment around the world; this will allow their children to grow up reading Slovenian stories and poetry.

In November 2008 we published *Svetlana's Fairytales* by Svetlana Makarovic. The characteristics of this incredible book are: sixty stories in Slovenian and English, 843 pages, a big format (19,5 x 25 cm), top-notch illustrations by the internationally recognized Alenka Sottler, two-colour print and the print run of 800 copies. The biggest problem we face is the extensiveness of the book, which has, due to high costs of translating, illustrating and printing, led to the high price of 210€. Regardless however, in a year and a half we sold 560 copies of the book, which had been named by the media as the Slovenian "publishing project of the year". The characteristic behind the sales of this book is the fact that it was mostly purchased by individual buyers.

The success of this book gave us the courage to also publish a bilingual anthology of poetry for children and youth *Maying Songs, Budding Songs* by Tone Pavcek, one of the most important Slovenian poets, who is this year's Anderson Award nominee. Illustrator Damijan Stepancic received the IBBY honour list 2010 for this work.

The book was published in June 2009 in 1,000 copies and has its place in the British Library. We made a reprint of the book for a paperback edition, the print run consisting of 3,000 copies, as it was chosen to take part in the primary and high school Slovenian language competition, and in January 2010 it came out in an additional 1,000 copies. To sell-out 4,000 copies of a book of poetry in less than half a year is an amazing achievement, which stands witness to the fact that the book has also found its way to the Slovenian reading public.

Conclusion

The ascertaining result of this analysis of the marketing and selling of the books discussed is that though Slovenian ethnic and emigrant minorities formally possess equal



rights, they are still highly neglected in everyday life. Books for children with special needs enjoy a wider media coverage, than books intended for national minorities, which are in desperate need of them. The same goes for the attitude towards these books: the books intended for national minorities unfortunately seem redundant to many librarians, and interestingly, this is more the case in urban areas than in the countryside.

With the discussed books the Mis založba has started to fill certain minority niches in Slovenia, which contributes to their survival and the survival of the company. It is above all typical for youth literature intended for minorities not to bring in any profit worth mentioning, firstly though, it had co-designed its public image and increased brand recognition. The immeasurable categories are also important. Publishing these books offers higher creative satisfaction to the authors and the publisher's employees, as we are aware that by publishing these books we do not only satisfy the readership of minorities and create books, which are something special even beyond our borders, but also help mould young non-minority readers into more tolerant people.

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