
# BRIDGE OF WORDS

## ESPERANTO AND THE DREAM OF A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

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# Contents

**Part II. Doktoro Esperanto and the Shadow People**



***Samideanoj* II: Iznik to Białystok, or *unu granda rondo familia***



**Part III. The Heretic, the Priestess, and the Invisible Empire**

## Author's Note

Because I have used pseudonyms for most of the Esperantists mentioned, I have reversed the usual practice of using asterisks to indicate pseudonyms. Thus pseudonyms appear without asterisks, and asterisks are reserved for actual names (at first mention). Historical figures and cited authors are referred to by their actual names, without asterisks.

All translations from Esperanto are my own, except where otherwise indicated in the notes.

# BRIDGE OF WORDS

# Introduction

On the muggy July afternoon when I visited the Okopowa Street Cemetery, the dead Jews who'd slept on while the Nazis packed their descendants into cattle cars bound for Treblinka were still asleep. After hours tracking the contours of the Ghetto behind a detachment of Israeli soldiers, I was relieved to be among the lush ferns, rusted grilles, and mossy stones. Here and there, tipped and broken monuments had settled where they'd fallen among yellow wallflowers. In other sections, weeded, swept, and immaculately tended, huge monuments incised with Hebrew characters bore a heavy load of sculpted fruits, animals, priestly hands, and the tools of trades. The stones were cool to the touch, amid a musky odor of rotting leaves.

Among the largest monuments in the cemetery—the baroque monument to the actor Ester Rachel Kamińska; the porphyry stone of writer I. L. Peretz; the ponderous granite tomb of Adam Czerniaków, who after pleading in vain for the lives of the Ghetto's orphans took his own—was a large sarcophagus. On top rested a stone sphere the size of a bowling ball. Below a ledge of marble chips planted with plastic begonias was a large mosaic, a sea-green star with a white letter *E* at the center. Rays of blue, red, and white flared out in all directions. It was gaudy and amateurish, awkward in execution. The inscription read:

DOKTORO LAZARO LVDOVIKO ZAMENHOF
KREINTO DE ESPERANTO
NASKITA 15. XII. 1859. MORTIS 14. IV. 1917

Esperanto: I recalled one glancing encounter with it when I was twenty-three, an American in self-imposed exile, living in a chilly flat in London. The reign of Sid Vicious was about to be usurped by Margaret Thatcher, and the pittance I earned in publishing was just enough to buy standing room at Friday matinees and an occasional splurge on mascara. My boyfriend, Leo, and I found a rock-bottom price for a week in the Soviet Union; the only catch was that January, the cheapest time of the year to go, was also the coldest: in Moscow, 28 degrees Fahrenheit below; in Leningrad, a balmy zero. Leo took his parka out of storage; I borrowed warm boots, a fake-fur coat, and a real fur hat, and off we went. (In fact, I found it much warmer in the Soviet Union than in London, at least inside—chalk that up to central heating, which I could not afford.)

At the Hermitage, I wandered over to a large, amber-hued painting labeled Рембрандт. *Pembrandt?—no, Rembrandt.* A prodigal myself, I recognized it as a painting of the Prodigal Son, a young man kneeling in the embrace of a red-caped patriarch. As I drew closer to the supplicant, I noticed he had an admirer besides me: a tall, slender woman about my age with wispy bangs, stylish boots, and a brown wool coat. The previous day, a well-coiffed Intourist guide had explained to me that there were three kinds of women in Russia: women with fur hats, women with fur collars, and—she paused for effect—women with no fur at all. Here was one of the latter, and while I noted her furlessness, she greeted me in Russian. "Привет."

"*Preevyet.* Hello," I said.

She smiled. "My name is Ekaterina, I am from Alma Ata. Where are you from?" She seemed to be rummaging for more English words, but after "Do you speak Esperanto?" the pantry was bare.

Laughing, I asked, "*Français?*" but she wasn't joking.

"*Ne, ne,*" she said deliberately, her gray eyes narrowing, "Es-per-AN-to." One of us, I was sure, was ridiculous, but who? She, speaking to me in a pretend language? I, ignorant of Russian, Kazakh, and Esperanto, in my red Wellingtons, got up as Paddington Bear? Even as we shook hands and parted ways, the conversation was swiftly becoming an anecdote, a story to tell next week at the Swan over a pint of bitter.

Twenty-five years later, with prodigal sons of my own, I stood at what might have been, for all I knew, the grave of Esperanto itself, and thought of Ekaterina. She'd be in her late forties now, her forehead lined, her hair

graying or, more likely, rinsed flame-red. Still furless, she'd be stuck in a concrete high-rise in Alma Ata (now Almaty), where years pass slowly, heaving their burdens of debt and illness and worry. I wondered how Esperanto had journeyed from Poland to Kazakhstan, how long it had endured, and who had erected this monument. Who laid out this mosaic, chip by tiny chip—men? women? both? Jews? Poles? Kazakhs? Where had they come from, and when? And why such devotion to a failed cause, to the quixotic dream of a universal language?

I didn't know it then, but I would spend most of a decade trying to find out.

* * *

The man who called himself Doktoro Esperanto (Doctor Hopeful) was a modern Jew, a child of emancipation adrift between the Scylla of anti-Semitism and the Charybdis of assimilation. Ludovik Lazarus Zamenhof was born in 1859 in multiethnic Białystok under the Russian Empire, the son and grandson of Russian-speaking language teachers. For a time, as a medical student in Moscow in the 1870s, he had dreamed among Zionists, but dreams are fickle things. His did not lead him to found a Jewish settlement in the malarial swamps and rocky fields of Palestine. In fact, they led him to dream of a Judaism purged of chosenness and nationalism; a modern Judaism in which Jews would embrace—and, in turn, be embraced by—like-minded others bent on forging a new monotheistic ethical cult. He believed that a shared past was not necessary for those determined to remake the world, only a shared future—and the effort of his life was to forge a community that would realize his vision.

Had Zamenhof been one of the great God-arguers, he'd have taken God back to the ruins of Babel for a good harangue. God had been rash (not to mention self-defeating) to ruin the human capacity to understand, and foolish to choose one nation on which to lavish his blessings and curses, his love and his jealousy. But Zamenhof was not an arguer. Benign and optimistic, he entreated his contemporaries, Jews and non-Jews alike, to become a people of the future. And to help them to cross the gulfs among ethnicities, religions, and cultures, he threw a plank across the abyss. As he wrote in *The Essence and Future of an International Language* (1903):

*Ludovik Lazarus Zamenhof, Doktoro Esperanto*
*[Österreichische Nationalbibliothek]*

> If two groups of people are separated by a stream and know that it would be very useful to communicate, and they see that planks for connecting the two banks lie right at hand, then one doesn't need to be a prophet to foresee with certainty that sooner or later a plank will be thrown over the stream and communication will be arranged. It's true that some time is ordinarily spent in wavering and this wavering is ordinarily caused by the most senseless pretexts: wise people say that the goal of arranging communication is childish, since no one is busy putting planks across the stream . . . ; experienced people say that their progenitors didn't put planks across the stream and therefore, it is utopian; learned people prove that communication can only be a natural matter and the human organism can't move itself over planks etc. Nonetheless, sooner or later, the plank is thrown across.

In time, he hoped—and, against strong evidence, believed—that this simple plank laid down by one man would become a bridge of words.

With the tools of modernity—reason, efficiency, pragmatism—he sanded down the plank till it was smooth; people would cross over without getting splinters from irregular verbs or knotty idioms. Then, unlike most language inventors, Zamenhof renounced the privileges of a creator, without reneging on a creator's duties to his progeny. He is the only language inventor on record ever to cede his language to its users, inviting them to take his rudimentary list of roots, combine them with a handful of affixes, and invent words for new things, new occasions. And where roots were not to hand, Esperantists were *by fiat* free to invent new ones. It didn't matter whether the plank was thrown across a stream or an ocean; if one were determined to cross, it would reach.

The "international language," as Zamenhof initially called it, was designed not to replace national languages but to be a second language for the world. While earlier lingua francas, such as Greek, Latin, and French, had issued from empires, Zamenhof invented a language that would commit its users to transcend nationalism. Free of imperial or national identity, Esperanto would serve neither dogma nor nationalism nor arms nor money but the conscience and reason of its users, who had determined to become a better people of the future. Perhaps no dream of the century was more quixotic, except for Zamenhof's other dream: that human beings would, decade after decade, choose this inheritance,

treasure it, and expand its expressive reach. And yet, for well more than a century and on six continents, people have done, and still do.

Esperantists, even in their most practical moments, have always dreamed of change, but they have not always shared the same dream. Zamenhof's "international language" has been used by anarchists, socialists, pacifists, theosophists, Bahá'ís, feminists, Stalinists, and even McCarthyites; as sociologist Roberto Garvía puts it, "Esperantists ended up speaking the same language, but not dancing to the same music."[1] Ironically, while Esperantists were often vague about what united them, totalitarians, fascists, and Nazis were not; sooner or later, Esperanto would always be reviled as a cosmopolitan, subversive movement inimical to nationalism and tainted by its Jewish origins. As we shall see, a few Esperantists made strange bedfellows with imperial powers, but sooner or later, they were forsaken. And being forsaken by an empire, for Esperantists, usually meant being banned, imprisoned, or shot. When Esperantists confronted the dreams of Hitler and of two latter-day Josephs—Stalin and McCarthy—the results were at best perilous, at worst murderous.

But the story of Esperanto is also a story of fantastic resilience, adaptation, and renovation. The early concept of the *fina venko*—the final triumph of Esperanto as a world language—has died a thousand deaths, most notably in 1922, when the League of Nations remanded a proposal to teach Esperanto in schools to a marginal committee on intellectual cooperation. Since then the ranks of the *finavenkistoj* have steadily dwindled. During the Cold War era, in place of the *fina venko*, Esperantists raised the banners of human rights, pacifism, and nuclear disarmament. In 1980, a later generation of Esperantists would officially renounce the *fina venko,* declaring themselves to be an autonomous, diasporic culture. With the Raumists, as they were called (after the Finnish town where they convened), Esperanto's universalist ideology was recast in a late-twentieth-century sensibility, askew, decentered, and skeptical of grand narratives altogether. Instead, the Raumists addressed themselves to the well-being, culture, and development of the Esperanto community, devoting time and attention to Esperanto in exchange for all manner of satisfactions: social, psychologial, ethical, political, aesthetic, intellectual, sexual—everything, that is, except political power and financial gain.

When I mention my work on Esperanto, I'm often asked, "How many people speak it?" I too, have asked this question, to which some Esperantists have offered answers. Amanda, ex-president of the Australian Espe-

ranto Association, replies, "How many people collect stamps? How long is a piece of string?" Others point me to the website of the Universal Esperanto Association, which records "hundreds of thousands, possibly millions," in seventy countries. The only estimate with academic prestige is that of the late psycholinguist Sidney Culbert, who in 1989 put the number at between one and two million. Still, as Culbert conceded, "the tendency to overestimate the number of speakers of one's own language is not uncommon";[2] this particular psycholinguist spoke only Esperanto at home and drove a Honda bearing plates with the greeting "SALUTON"—Esperanto for "hello."[3]

The internet has augmented the number of learners, if not speakers. The online lernu! course, between 2004 and 2016, chalked up nearly twenty million visits to the site, and the Esperanto Duolingo website, launched in 2015, boasted 333,000 members after only ten months. How many Esperanto learners actually learn it well enough to participate in the community, online or off, is impossible to say; no doubt many take it up for the sheer fun of it, with no thought to the community at all.

My favorite answer to the question "How many?" was offered by Adél, a wry Hungarian teenager: "*Sufiĉe!*" she joked, meaning enough to comprise a vibrant worldwide community—and enough asking how many.

Esperantists may be hard to count, but they're not hard to find. On a recent bus tour of Central Asia, I had a free day in Samarkand. It was late at night when a minute or two of web surfing revealed an Esperantist within range: *Anatoly Ionesov, Director of the International Museum of Peace and Solidarity, whom I had never met. At 11:00 p.m., I emailed him; at 11:05 he invited me to meet him the following morning. That day I spent sitting in the parlor beside Anatoly and his wife, Irina, drinking tea at a table laden with enough cakes, cookies, dried apricots, sweets, rolls, and marmalade to feed a multitude. Anatoly oriented me to the museum: here were forty years of disarmament posters; there, autographed photos with peace greetings from Whoopi Goldberg, John Travolta, and Phil Collins. He told me about learning Esperanto in the Russian army, in Siberia; I told him about my travels in Cuba and Brazil. We admired photos of each other's children, and all the while, he was fashioning tiny origami swans, which he gave me when we parted. Strangers hours earlier, we embraced warmly, bona fide members of what Zamenhof called *la granda rondo familia*—the great family circle—of Esperantists.

When I returned to the group that evening, my companions all asked the same question: "Did you speak in Esperanto?"

"If we hadn't," I said, "it would have been a very quiet afternoon."

"Then . . . it works?"

It works.

To convince them further, I could share a long email I just received from a friend, tenderly announcing his new grandchild. He wrote, in Esperanto, about how eager he was for his son to finish his tour in the army; a spiritual crisis that happened while he was reading the Book of Numbers; his ninety-five-year-old father, shuttled back and forth from nursing home to hospital to rehab; a nasty gust of wind that slammed a screen door on his finger; the X-ray results (not definitive); the chances of receiving workers' comp (not good); and the prospect of missing days of work (a mixed blessing). Only a vibrant, living language could be equal to rendering the nitty-gritty of a life, replete with aging parents, children, and grandchildren; jobs and sick days; everyday fear and everyday hope.

To make a census of Esperantists, even in the days when one had to enroll or subscribe rather than simply click a mouse, was always a fool's errand. Today's Esperantists are eastern and western; northern and southern; men and women; students and retirees; moderates and leftists; activists and homemakers; gay, straight, and transgender. They come in more colors than the children on the UNICEF box—who, if memory serves, are only peach, brown, gold, and red.

Adél is right; enough asking "how many." I spent seven years among Esperantists not to count them but to listen to them. I wanted to get beyond the pieties and the utopianism and find out why real people choose this language, over others, to say what they have to say. What I heard sometimes sounded like a cacophony of voices, talking about ordinary, everyday things; universal harmony is not the first idea that comes to mind. But listening over time, and in so many places, I became convinced that these voices speak to our moment.

Multiculturalism, which is the lifeblood of Esperanto, has acquired prestige in our day as the last, best challenge to militaristic nationalism and violent sectarianism. We live, as never before, in the interstices between cultures, plying among a repertoire of people and places. What do we know when we are multicultural? That we may have different words for things; that there are ways and ways of life; but that we all have bodies. We were all born; we all will die. We make love, and some of us

make children. How difficult should it be, then, to remember we are all human? In many parts of the world, it is very difficult, and since we live amid global networks, with access to images and sounds occurring at the ends of the earth, we live in those places, too. As I write these words, schoolgirls in sub-Saharan Africa are being kidnapped and enslaved; in the Middle East, the children of Abraham are lobbing rockets at one another; ISIS is breaking the heart of Syria by cracking its breastbone. Esperanto was invented not to teach us humanity, but to allow us to practice it freely, as, where, and when we choose. And where humanity is concerned it is hard to imagine a world more in need of practice than ours.

"Only connect," wrote E. M. Forster; ah, if it were just that easy. But even now, in the Internet age, Esperanto is about connection, not connectivity; about social life, not social networks. Esperanto has no passwords. It is a homemade, open-access affair invented by one man—an amateur in every sense of the word—and made available to all. The Internet may point Esperanto toward a future rather different from its past. But Esperanto reminds us why we strove to make communication easier, faster, cheaper, and ubiquitous. The Department of Defense may have wanted the Internet for security; what the rest of us wanted was one another.

* * *

The monument in Warsaw, commissioned in 1921, is the work of many hands. The winning design was submitted by Mieczysław Jan Ireneusz Lubelski, a Polish sculptor, and the Scottish granite was donated by the Esperantists of Aberdeen. Transport of the monument from Scotland to Poland was paid for by the Warsaw Monument Committee, with help from the Polish government, the Jewish community of Warsaw, and the laborers, who worked for a nominal fee. It was erected and dedicated in 1926; the mosaic followed, but only after 97 percent of Warsaw's 350,000 Jews had been destroyed, Zamenhof's two daughters and son among them. The Esperantists returned to his tomb and did precisely what Jews do at graves: place stones.

This book, however, is not a memorial. I did not write it to elegize a bygone hope, to portray a quirky cult, or to roam a neglected byway of modernity. I wrote this book to discover why Esperanto has, unbelievably, beaten all the odds: competition from rival language projects, two world wars, totalitarian regimes, genocidal death factories, the nuclear arms race, and the emergence of fundamentalist sectarianism—not to mention

the juggernaut of global English. The language-movement of Esperanto survives because it addresses a particularly modern predicament: to negotiate the competing claims of free individuals on the one hand, and on the other, communities bound by values and traditions. Esperantists reconcile liberalism and communitarianism *by freely choosing a tradition of ideals.*

But as much as I respect Esperantists for making this choice, and for the gorgeous language and culture they have made, they are also the victims of their own mythology. Specifically, they uphold the myth that Esperanto's vaunted political neutrality (which has its own unhandsome history) removes it from the arena of politics. On the contrary, Esperanto is *essentially* political, as I have argued to roomfuls of disconcerted Esperantists; it was created to enable diverse peoples to talk not only past their differences but also about them. Zamenhof envisioned multiethnic cities, states, and continents—indeed, a multiethnic world—using Esperanto for the sake of reconciliation and harmony. I want to honor the achievement and longevity of Esperanto, but even more to herald its untapped potential to bring us closer to political justice. Esperanto's greatest power of all is to be powerless and yet to compel us to move from bafflement to understanding, from conflict to resolution.

*Bridge of Words* began as a biography of Zamenhof, who, like the subject of my biography *Emma Lazarus*, was a modern Jew of the pogrom-ridden 1880s, trying to steer a course between universalism and particularism. But because Zamenhof gave his universal language to its users, Esperanto is their creation, too. Hence this book is a biography of Esperanto's collective creators, the Esperanto community, and a report from its trenches. And like the universal language, a hybrid of several tongues, this book is a hybrid of cultural history and memoir. Each of the four parts pairs a historical narrative with a memoir of my sojourns, visits, on five continents, among *samideanoj*—which is how Esperantists refer to one another, invoking the commonality of vague "same-idea-ness."

The Esperanto world is a place where minds are changed, and mine was no exception. As the memoirs in this book will show, encountering hundreds of Esperantists in far-flung places was also an encounter with myself. What I realized, during the seven years I spent speaking the language of "the hoping one," was how keenly I needed to infuse my life with hope. And living in the universal language, among people from distant countries, I realized that I had failed to understand—and make myself understood by—those closest to me. Esperanto brought me to a

reckoning with the choices I had made and those I had yet to make. Had I predicted, when I began this project, the course my future would take, I'd have been very wrong. Regarding the future of Esperanto I am no prophet either, but of one thing I am sure: there will be no *fina venko*, when the whole world is speaking Esperanto. But Esperanto does not need to succeed in the future. It has already done so in the present, a human creation that is rare and valuable, and the intimation of a better world.

PART ONE

# THE DREAM OF A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

## 1. Zamenhof's Babel

My friend Michael was reading galleys of his new book when an email arrived.

> Dear Sir,
>
> I am the proud translator of your book into Swedish. I have two questions (there will be more, I promise!):
>
> 1) "She had as much success reading *The Cat in the Hat* as she would a CAT scan." The book *The Cat in the Hat* is translated into Swedish, so far so good, with the title "*Katten i Hatten*" which is almost the same. A CAT scan however is a "*datortomografi*" or "*skiktröntgen*"—no cats in sight. I thought of exchanging the CAT scan for "*hattiska hieroglyfer*"—"Hatti hieroglyphs"—they should be pretty hard to read! But then we have to shift the resemblance from "CAT-Cat scan" to "*Hat-Hatti.*" Or would you prefer something more technical and CAT scanny?
>
> 2) When you come home and find the knives "behind a set of rarely used dishes," are these some kind of plates or more like bowls?
>
> Best wishes,
> Anders

The email made Michael anxious. He imagined his Swedish readers coming upon "Hatti hieroglyphs," lowering the book, and staring into the

middle distance, where they would find, as Anders put it, "no cats in sight." With cats become hats, scans become hieroglyphs, and dishes become plates or even bowls, was this still his book? "If only," Michael said wistfully, "I had written the book in Esperanto."

His assumption, of course, was that Esperanto was invented to be a universal language that would put us all beyond translation, and I can see why he thought so: it's an ancient dream, the dream of reversing the curse of Babel and restoring us to some lost capacity to understand language perfectly. But to put us "beyond translation" is decidedly not the project of Esperanto. Instead of deeming language to be compromised by its humanity, Zamenhof placed his confidence in human beings: both in their will toward understanding and in their recognition that understanding, at the best of times, is a fraught endeavor. A language of collective invention, he believed, would be far more likely to succeed than a language closely held, meted out, or even ostentatiously bestowed by its inventor. In fact, the more users coined new words, the more likely the language was to be widely used and cherished, for each new word traced a crossing from one language to another. Esperanto was invented not to transcend translation, *but to transact it*.

By aligning universal understanding with the future rather than the past, Zamenhof broke with the West's central myth of linguistic difference: the story of the Tower of Babel. Though biographers René Centassi and Henri Masson dubbed Zamenhof "the man who defied Babel," Zamenhof knew that to defy Babel was folly. For Zamenhof, Babel was not a curse to be reversed, but the mythic elaboration of an epistemological problem: how can we know the meaning of another person's utterance, whatever language they happen to speak?

Zamenhof was not only an acute reader of Genesis; he also spent most of a decade translating the entire Hebrew Bible into Esperanto, completing it only three years before his death. If Zamenhof doubted that there existed a unitary world language before Babel, he would have found the biblical evidence on his side. I don't simply mean the long chapter on human diversity—the "table of nations" (Genesis 10)—that immediately precedes the story of Babel. I want to suggest that even in the Garden of Eden story, the notion of an original, universal language is at best dubious.

Chapter 1 of Genesis represents both divine and human speech, and while God and Adam seem to understand one another—no one asks for translation or expresses befuddlement—what each does with language is

clearly different. God creates with it, Adam names with it, and their languages differ as much as "Let there be light" differs from "You're a lemur." Even the appearance of mutual understanding may be deceptive; after all, God uses the word "die" in a deathless world without bothering about being understood. And while the biblical redactor is noncommittal about whether the humans understood their God, the poet John Milton in *Paradise Lost* was unequivocal: they did not because . . . how could they?

This occlusion of understanding may be why there is only a modicum of conversation in Eden, very little of it quoted. For example, whether Eve actually speaks to Adam is anyone's guess, since she is never directly quoted in conversation with him. After Eve eats the fruit, the doings that follow—sharing the fruit, donning leaves, hiding out—occur speechlessly, in a quick dumbshow of shame that ends in the first rhetorical question: "Where are you?" God asks, and the ensuing duet of inquisition and blame isn't much of a conversation either. In the cascade of divine curses—on man, on woman, on serpent—speech travels in one direction, from power to powerlessness, and after Adam renames "the woman" Eve (Genesis 3:20), he will never name anything again, ceding the naming of his sons to their mother. At best, Edenic conversation is a lopsided affair; at worst, it's sabotaged, whether by divine commandment or serpentine deception.

By the time we reach the story of Babel in Genesis 11, whether God and humans speak the same language is almost beside the point; they barely speak to one another. After the flood, when the smoke from Noah's sacrifice rises, God, for the first time, can be heard muttering to himself: "for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). What takes God by surprise, in the Babel story, is that humans have connived to do something in concert and on their own initiative. After the fiasco in the garden and the fratricide in the field, after all the quotidian murders, rapes, and betrayals, one wouldn't have thought so: "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4). Their project—manifold and complex, like so many human undertakings—was hotly debated by the rabbis of the Talmud. Some apologized for Babel's builders, whose aim, they reasoned, was to climb up and slit the tent of heaven where another unjust flood awaited innocent and guilty alike. Other rabbis staunchly defended God. For them, the builders were a

concatenation of sinners with various motives: to colonize heaven, to worship idols, to lay siege to the kingdom of God. And accordingly, they argued, God meted out fierce punishments to the builders, some of whom were turned to apes and others to phantoms.

But perhaps the rabbis overlooked a different provocation:

> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Gen. 11:5-7)

What exactly was their offense? This was not the first time human beings "imagined" evil plans repugnant to God. In Genesis 6, when the "sons of God came in unto the daughters of men," he'd conceded that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and . . . every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). What was new to Babel was the builders' plan to "make us a name," for to name oneself is to usurp a divine prerogative. And since the punishment at Babel was to avenge the human will to "make . . . a name" for oneself, God doomed each of the builders to speak *only unto himself*—to speak without being understood by another. God might have punished the builders of Babel by constraining the power to build, to rule, or to go to war, but he did not. Nor did God ram unintelligible phonemes into their mouths. Instead, having direly misestimated the power of human conversation, God blunted the human capacity to understand others and to elicit understanding.

In fact, the biblical narrative says nothing about the multiplication and dispersal of languages. The proverbial name for the story, from the Middle Ages on, is "the confusion of tongues" (*confusio linguarum*), not "the diffusion of tongues." In fact, the Hebrew word for "language" (*safah*, a lip rather than a tongue) is always singular in the story, as it is in the Latin Vulgate and the English King James Version. The "curse of Babel" renders all language as opaque *as if* it were what we call "foreign" language, and though "the same language and the same words" spoken at the beginning are spoken after the tower falls, translation has become

necessary, even for speakers of the same tongue. If mortality is what it is like to live after Eden, misunderstanding—to speak perpetually in need of translation—is what it is like to live after Babel.

But the ruin of understanding was only one consequence of Babel. After destroying the tower, the builders' hedge against being "scattered abroad," God scattered them throughout the world. What better way to punish their arrogation of peoplehood for themselves, their choice to be a people? To give God his due here, we can imagine God's weariness, his exasperation with humanity. "I will never understand them," God might have thought. "I made them Eden, they sinned; I dried up the flood and they sinned again. Twice I filled their lungs with heaven and twice they spent my breath in evil. I have tried twice, twice, to make humans.

"Now I will make Israel."

When God renamed Abram *Abraham,* the curse of Babel was complete; with one carefully interpolated syllable, an idolator's son became the first Israelite. God's crowning revenge on the builders of Babel was the choice of Israel, and there, on Israel, God's attention rested, leaving the rabbis of the Talmud to finish off the builders of Babel. Which they most certainly did, declaring "the generation of the scattered" personae non gratae in the world to come.

The Tower of Babel story is not only a myth of misunderstanding; it is also a myth of the diaspora as an existential condition. From the Babel myth, Zamenhof intuited that the perpetual impulse of humans to stake "a name for themselves" on a piece of territory only compounded the problem of misunderstanding. And while Zamenhof accepted misunderstanding as part of the human condition, he refused to accept its human costs: lives lost to tribalism, anti-Semitism, and racism; pogroms just yesterday and perhaps a war of empires tomorrow. Instead, he set about to convince misunderstood and scattered human beings that they had the capacity, without divine intervention, to understand one another better by joining together not over land, not over a tower, but over language. (Even the people Israel, he pointed out on numerous occasions, were now among the scattered, and if they were going to claim any authentic, modern identity, they, too, needed to take the matter of language into their own hands.) Perhaps the language of Adam was given by God, but the language that would rescue Adam's and Eve's heirs from their worst impulses would be a very human thing.

## 2. West of Babel

Zamenhof's radically humanist revision of the "curse" of Babel sets him apart from the history of language invention in Western Europe, where Babel's curse was taken to be the doom of linguistic difference. To reverse this "curse" was not only to dream of language which was divine and perfect; it was also to dream of human beings capable of perfect understanding—beings who are different from us.

The most audacious of those who sought to reverse the "curse" of Babel yearned for God's own language, for words empowered to speak the universe into being. Others imagined secret, esoteric languages that were the preserve of initiates: kabbalistic acrostics, numerology, and anagrams; the gnostic "magic languages" of Paracelsus and the Rosicrucians; the divine "signatures" perceived in nature by the seventeenth-century German mystic Jacob Boehme. Still others invented devices, symbols, and meta-languages designed to mediate between human beings and the words they failed to grasp. Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language* surveys a millennium of such inventions, among them that of Ramon Llull (ca. 1230–1315), a Franciscan who asked himself what language might best propound the truth of Scripture to infidels.[1] Starting with logical propositions rather than glyphs and words, Llull selected nine letters and four figures, combined them into questions, compounded questions into subjects, and multiplied subjects into propositions. Using only these elements and the engine of combination, Llull's *Ars Magna* purported to generate 1,680 logical propositions, a repertoire from which one might choose a few key points to which an infidel would, without translation, *necessarily* consent. Such propositions would have a kind of liquidity from culture to culture, on which the truth could skip like a stone. By "truth," of course, Llull meant *his* truth, not the infidel's. That Llull died at the hands of the Saracens may suggest that something more than revelation was lost in translation.

In the early modern period, language needed to do more than propound truths; it needed to translate a host of others to European interlopers in Asia, Africa, and the Americas—merchants and governors as well as missionaries. Llull's Saracen "infidel" was displaced by the Chinese, Hindus, Native Americans, and Africans. Polyglot Bibles became the model for massive polyglot dictionaries called polygraphies. The frontispiece of Cave Beck's *Universal Character* of 1657 features a table around

which three men in various national costumes are seated: a Dutch burgher, a mustachioed and turbaned Indian, and an African in a toga. On the right stands a native of the New World in a grass skirt and a Carmen Miranda–esque headpiece, who salutes in the universal sign for "Hey, no problem!" His long spear, its tip resting idly on the floor, is conspicuously flaccid, to assure us that he's checked his aggression at the door.

Meanwhile, the printing press, less than a century after its invention, scattered projects and programs for language reform all over Europe, many of which had germinated in newly emerging scientific societies. After the restoration of the British monarchy in 1660, several members of the new "Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge" were spurred to invention by the legacy of Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Bacon's profound intuition, as he put it in *The Advancement and Proficience of Learning* (1605), was that "words are the footsteps of reason"—*written,* not spoken, words. Bacon held that written words could do more than simply refer to speech; they could refer directly to thought itself. Though Zamenhof was an autodidact when it came to philosophy and linguistics, his invention of roots that referred to ideas rather than words is remarkably consonant with Bacon's call for the invention of "real characters."

Thus with Bacon, philosophical rather than divine truth became the desideratum of language projects. Invoking Chinese ideograms, arbitrary signs that "expresse neither Letters, nor Words, but Things, and Notions," Bacon imagined characters that would represent thoughts with a philosophical rigor *exceeding that of words*. Moreover, Bacon believed Chinese characters to be universally legible among the peoples of Asia. Not only would "real characters" mean the same thing to one Briton and her neighbor; they would also be legible to people speaking different tongues—in fact, to all peoples and nations. The use of "real characters," in short, would grant Europe what Bacon believed Asia already had: a way of communicating without resort to translation, with characters that could be entrusted to convey thought itself. What Bacon didn't realize was that legibility across cultures did not imply that characters were understood identically among cultures. As soon as characters were interpreted as words, their philosophical purity was compromised.

Such was the problem with the boldest attempt to answer Bacon's call, that of John Wilkins (1614–1672), the first secretary of the Royal Society (and Oliver Cromwell's brother-in-law). Wilkins was a man of large

ambitions, undertaking to develop a comprehensive, "pansophic" system of knowledge. Devoting five years to his pansophic obsession, Wilkins tried to tabulate all knowledge in the form of concept trees split by distinctions based on sensory data. In the case of animals, his taxonomies are recondite but effective; but to define tickling via rigorous concept trees was another story. Tickling, in Wilkins's view, was a titillation (rather than a piercing) entailing "dissipation of the spirits in the softer parts by a light touch" (as opposed to "distention or compression of parts" or "obstruction in nerves or muscles"), and which while light is nonetheless painful (unlike actions that "satisfy appetites"), and which is a corporeal action addressed to "sensitive bodies" (as opposed to "vegetative" or "rational" ones), an action absolute (rather than relative) and peculiar to living creatures (as opposed to an action imitative of the gestures of creatures).

In Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*—a tome measuring two feet by one foot—"real characters" finally appear in Section III. Here Wilkins rendered in strange glyphs each of the ultimate terms in his branching tables. To rocket language beyond ambiguity, he invented a script that looked like squadrons of tiny antennaed spaceships. The problem was that there were 2,030 distinct characters, so that to use them would require prodigious feats of memory. As a work-around, Wilkins then represented each glyph by combinations of letters. "For instance," he wrote, "If (De) signifie *Element* then (Deb) must signifie the first difference; which (according to the Tables) is *fire*: and (Debά) will denote the first Species, which is *Flame.* (Det) will be the first difference under that Genus, which is *Appearing Meteor*; (Detά) the first Species, viz. *Rainbow;* (Deta) the second, viz. *Halo.*" But loading each letter with such a huge burden of information was dangerous; stuff happens, including misprints. For example, if my son writes to me about his "psythology" instead of "psychology" paper, chances are I'll chalk it up to a late night out, but if Wilkins's "Deb" appears in lieu of "Det," we're dealing with a meteor instead of a fire.

The pitfall of Wilkins's *Essay* is not the multiplicity of characters; it's the multiplicity of words. Heaping up terms to make precise categories and heaping up categories to make precise distinctions, Wilkins delivered heaps and heaps of words, not universal ideas. Moreover, tall stacks of words were left off the tables; an appendix includes a dictionary of some fifteen thousand English words keyed to the tables by synonyms and

periphrases. In Wilkins's system, there was even a metaphor particle that magically transformed any word into a figure of speech—"dark," for example, into "mystical."[2] Figures within characters, characters within universes, wheels within wheels.

Wilkins's very public failure to invent a language purely of ideas provoked extreme responses. On one hand, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) sought a method for producing knowledge rather than organizing, defining, and representing it. His *caracteristica* were designed to reckon with truths as one would with numbers, to conduct ratiocination by means of numerical ratios. And with such a calculus, blind to the particular propositions being manipulated, Leibniz claimed the power to put truths to the test, and even to discover new ones. On the other hand, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), skewered the idea of a "Universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations." In the Academy of Lagado, Gulliver encounters "a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever; . . . that since Words are only Names for *Things*, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on." "I have often," continues the empiricist Gulliver, "beheld two of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs, like Pedlars among us; who, when they met in the Streets, would lay down their Loads, open their Sacks, and hold Conversation for an Hour together; then put up their Implements, help each other to resume their Burthens, and take their Leave."

Leibniz envisioned a shining steel language of logic beyond the stain of things; Swift satirized a bulky language of things beyond the trammels of logic. At the end of the dream of a universal language without misunderstanding lies a language without words.

## 3. A World of Words

By the end of the seventeenth century, the British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) delivered a death blow to philosophical language projects. For Locke, the notion of words (or characters) with transparent, universal meanings was worse than a fantasy: "It is a perverting the use of words," Locke wrote, "and brings unavoidably obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas

we have in our minds." Locke's stark, uncompromising theory of language in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) sapped words of all their power: the power to infallibly represent and refer, the power to convey one person's ideas to another, above all, their power to propound and compound knowledge.

Wilkins and Locke are divided by the watershed between ancient and modern views of language. Where Wilkins had been invested in the notion of a divine "curse" of Babel, Locke grounded the human capacity to understand (or misunderstand) language in God-given liberty. "Every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases,"[3] wrote Locke, that no one could possibly evoke his own ideas in another's mind. In Locke's view, such mental "liberty" is rarely disruptive of communication when dealing with simple ideas; but when it came to moral ideas "concerning honour, faith, grace, religion, church &c.,"[4] one was as likely to misunderstand a term in one's own tongue as in a foreign one: "If the sounds they applied to one idea were such as by the hearer were applied to another . . . [there would be] two languages."[5]

Locke approached this predicament as a trial for society rather than as a conundrum for consciousness. Human beings, he observed empirically, were willing to forgo the radical liberty of language in favor of convention and conformity, entering into a sort of linguistic social contract. Speakers of a language were to avoid abusing words (especially as metaphor, which he libeled, famously, a "perfect cheat"); otherwise "men's language will be like that of Babel, and every man's words, being intelligible *only to himself,* would no longer serve to conversation and the ordinary affairs of life" (my italics). It was for a novelist, Laurence Sterne, to reveal both the darkness and the comedy in Locke's vision, suspending his characters in *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) between "hobby-horse" solipsism and dire miscommunication. When the amorous, anxious Widow Wadman asks Uncle Toby where he was injured during the Siege of Namur, Uncle Toby does not point to his mauled groin. Instead, he builds her a scale model of the battlefield and points to a bridge.

*Where*? . . . *There.*

After Locke, the era of the a priori language project—a philosophically rigorous language created from whole cloth—gave way to reformist a posteriori projects, which involved rationalizing existing languages. Such projects were abetted by a new interest in discovering a "universal

grammar," residing deep within existing languages; this, in turn, prompted the development of "laconic," pared-down, grammars of European languages. By 1784, a rationalized, regularized French was disseminated in Count Antoine de Rivarol's "On the Universality of the French Language." In the glare of the French Enlightenment, language became the spear of reason, renovation, and revolution, and the ensuing revolutionary-Napoleonic period became a crucible for the power of language to remake the social order. Not only were monuments, streets, towns, and playing cards renamed; so were the seasons, the months, and the days of the week. Those named for kings—the Louises and Lerois—took the names of Roman liberators.[6]

But whereas in France language was coopted for reason and revolution, German thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment regarded language as an inherited armor against reason's ruthlessness. Language, since it evolved in tandem with historical, environmental, and racial factors, was culturally particular. Yet, as Giambattista Vico had argued in the *New Science* of 1725, language was also universal, insofar as it evolved in all cultures according to universal patterns. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) believed that language shaped the entire worldview of particular cultures; while Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) held language as the means by which the *Volk* would shape its destiny. That language and culture were utterly enmeshed suggested to Humboldt a pair of looming dangers: language could not only estrange us from one another; it could also be used to injure people and damage whatever they held dear.[7]

## 4. A "Vexed Question of Paternity"

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the rise of nationalist language movements in Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Such projects inspired Zamenhof's sense that language could be assigned a moral mission, though, as Garvía has noted, his interethnic purpose was diametrically opposed to nationalism.[8] In fact, proponents of these movements of national revival viewed the notion of an international language with suspicion and distaste. As the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) put it, a universal language would be "the most enslaved, impoverished, timid, monotonous, uniform, arid and ugly language ever . . . incapable of beauty of any type, totally uncongenial to imagination."[9] In France, Antoine

Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) warned against the desire for a universal language, conjuring a jejune, homogeneous intellectual life centered on an ossified authority.[10] Behind all these misgivings is the menacing specter of a universal language driven by the exigencies of imperial power.

By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Napoleon's imperial adventure, having laid new networks of communication and transportation, had given rise to new international bodies and protocols for international trade and research. The *Encyclopédistes*' efforts to make language more effective and efficient now took root in France and spread to Germany, Scandinavia, and Italy. Not since the seventeenth century had so much time and energy been spent on language building. The first scholarly study of invented languages, published in Paris in 1903, surveys thirty-eight projects, almost all of them a posteriori "improvements" on existing European languages.

In the spring of 1879, a night of insomnia gave rise to Volapük, the first invented language to capture the imagination of thousands; perhaps tens of thousands. Volapük's inventor, a German Catholic priest named Johann Martin Schleyer (1831–1912), claimed he'd received the language in a vision from God. Schleyer's claim notwithstanding, the design of Volapük was anything but divine; in fact, designed for and embraced by an elite, it was effete, feeble, and very difficult to master. The first problem was phonetic. Aiming for a universally pronounceable alphabet, Schleyer changed the letter *r* to *l*, ostensibly to benefit the Chinese, yet it soon emerged that Japanese speakers had problems pronouncing *l*. Deformations of familiar phonemes soon became fodder for satire. In 1887, a skeptical commentator for the *New York Times* wrote:

> It may startle the reader . . . to learn that he is a *melopel* [American] who is perusing his morning *pöp* [paper] unaware of the true state of his case. . . . He may have come across the Atlantic from *Yulop* [Europe] or have smuggled himself and his pigtail into California after a month's voyage from *Sinän* [China]. . . . In any case, his *daduk* [education] is sure to be incomplete, since he is not proficient in Volapük.[11]

But Schleyer's phonetics were only one problem; another was that his words were inflected with a myriad of endings. With its endlessly morphing verbs, whose endings indicated tense (including six conditional

*Johann Schleyer, the inventor of Volapük*
*[Österreichische Nationalbibliothek]*



tenses), number, mood, voice, and sometimes gender, Volapük entered the realm of absurdity. That a single verb might take 505,440 different forms[12] became, for Volapük's detractors, proof of its lunacy. As the late Donald Harlow, former president of the Esperanto League of North America, once put it, the problem with Volapük was that it had "more verb forms than speakers."[13]

As Garvía has shown, Volapük clubs sprang up within a narrow demographic of male, educated, German-speaking Catholics, and its membership never diversified.[14] Attaining any fluency in the language seems to have been optional; German, not Volapük, was the lingua franca of the congresses of 1884 and 1887. Within a decade of its inception, the movement foundered while Schleyer bickered with reformists in his ersatz academy, contesting the notion that Volapük might be used in commercial settings.[15] The dissonance between Schleyer's account of passively receiving the language from God and his harshly proprietary behavior did not go unremarked. In 1907, the historian W. J. Clark mused on the debacle as a "vexed question of paternity": "This child . . . was it a son domiciled in its father's house . . . ? Or a ward in the guardianship of its chief

promoters? Or an orphan foundling, to be boarded out on the scattered-home system at the public expense?"[16]

## 5. *Lingvo Internacia*

Meanwhile, in Warsaw, a young man about to father his own language was watching the rise and fall of Volapük closely. The son of emancipated Jews who retained strong ties to the Jewish community, Ludovik Lazarus Zamenhof hailed from Białystok, a "Babel of languages," in which Russians jostled Poles; Poles, Germans; and everyone, Jews, since they made up about 70 percent of the population. Multilingualism was not the preserve of the educated; it was the way one bought eggs, greeted policemen, prayed, and gossiped with coreligionists. At the same time, Zamenhof grew up convinced that linguistic difference lay at the root of interethnic animosity, and before he was out of his teens he had set out to fashion an auxiliary language for peoples crammed together in multiethnic cities, for ethnically diverse nation-states, and for the growing number of organizations designed to modernize commercial relations among countries.

An 1896 letter from Zamenhof to his friend Nikolai Borovko is Esperanto's own Book of Genesis; it tells a story not of making but of unmaking. Like the proverbial Indian wood carver who sculpted elephants by "removing everything that is not elephant," Zamenhof crafted Esperanto by turning language over in his hand and then paring it away to an austere simplicity. In a bid for rigor and economy, he at first tried out a conceptual grid much like that of John Wilkins, denoting concepts by letters and combining them in easily pronounced phonemes. To express the eleven-letter *interparoli* (to speak one to another), he ventured the two-letter syllable "pa": "Therefore, I simply wrote the mathematical series of the shortest, but easily-pronounced combinations of letters, and to each gave the meaning of a definite word (for example, a, ab, ac, ad,—ba, ca, et cetera)." But unlike Wilkins, Zamenhof tested the scheme on himself and, finding that it made prolific demands on the memory, aborted it.

His watchwords were simplicity and flexibility. He had already rejected the idea of reviving Greek or Latin, convinced that a truly international language had to be neutral, nonethnic, and nonimperial; in other words, a language that did not yet exist. While he was inventing conjugations, he encountered the comparative simplicity of English grammar:

"I noticed then that the plenitude of grammatical forms is only a random historical incident, and isn't linguistic necessity."[17] In short order, Zamenhof simplified his grammar-in-progress to a brief document of a few pages. For verbs in the present indicative, he used a single ending: *Mi kuras*, *li kuras*—simpler, in fact, than English (I run; he run*s*)—avoiding Volapük's overinflection of verbs. There would be no distinction between singular and plural verbs: *mi kuras* (I run) and *ili kuras* (they run)—simpler than French (*je cours* but *ils courent*). Except in reference to persons, personal pronouns, and professions, there would be no distinction between masculine and feminine subjects.

Zamenhof collated his lexicon of nine hundred roots mainly from Romance languages, German, English, and Russian; conjunctions and particles he culled from Latin and Greek. When in doubt, he favored Latin roots: "house" was *dom-*; "tree," *arb-*; "night," *nokt-*. To attain wordhood, a root simply donned a final vowel, a sort of team jersey identifying it as a specific part of speech. *Nokt-* with an *-o* ending joined the noun team: "night." With an *-a* ending it joined the adjective team: *nokta*, as in "night-hour"; and with an *-e* ending, the adverb team: *nokte*, meaning "by night," et cetera. It could even join the ranks of verbs, as in the compound *tranokti* (to sleep over). Like Schleyer, Zamenhof relied on a system of affixes for word building, though he attributed this element to an epiphany he'd had about commercial signs: the suffix *-skaja* was used on both a porter's lodge and a candy shop. In Esperanto, for instance, the prefix *ek-* (begin, or start), added to the verb *lerni* (to learn), gives us *eklerni,* "to begin to learn," as in *Kiam vi eklernis Esperanton?* (When did you start to learn Esperanto?) Suffixes, like cabooses, also extend the reach of words: the suffix *-aĵo* (a thing), added to *manĝi* (to eat), gives us *manĝaĵo* (food); the suffix *-ejo*, *manĝejo* (dining hall). Some affixes, taking noun, adjective, or adverb endings, can become free-standing words: *ilo,* a tool or device; or *male,* "on the contrary." Strung together, affixes sometimes offer gains in concision, but at the same time create clunky polysyllabic words. The early poets in the language regarded the prefix *mal,* meaning "the opposite of," as the verbal equivalent of ankle-weights, and over time many *mal-* words—such as *malsanulejo,* literally, "a place-for-unwell-people"—have been bested by lithe competitors, such as *hospitalo.* Yet many affix clusters have survived, incurring affection and loyalty precisely because their Esperantic origins are so obvious.

Despite the prestige of Esperantism in the construction of new words,

Zamenhof placed a premium on the internationalism of his lexicon. A century and a half before digital algorithms emerged to assess the internationalism of a word,[18] Zamenhof used his own multilingualism and a stack of dictionaries to accomplish the task. To combine words from distinct European languages must have seemed natural, too, to a speaker of Yiddish. It was not Volapük but Yiddish, a mongrel of Germanic, Semitic, and Slavic words, on which Zamenhof modeled his international language. (Apart from the interrogative *Nu* and the exclamatory *Ho ve!*, however, there are few overt borrowings from Yiddish; some speculate that *edzino*—"wife"—derives from the Yiddish *rebbetzin*, a rabbi's wife.)

What had happened to Yiddish over a millennium, in mass migrations of Jews from Western to Eastern Europe and back, Zamenhof would try to recapitulate within his new, international language. The percentage of Slavic words in Esperanto and Yiddish is similar (15 percent). But whereas the ratio of Germanic to Romance words in Yiddish is more than three to one, this relationship is reversed in Esperanto. Zamenhof had already spent several years trying to modernize Yiddish, but with Esperanto, he found another, better way to recast Yiddish as a modern language. It was as if he wrapped Yiddish in a chrysalis, where its medieval German metamorphosed into French modernity. When it emerged, it would have shed forever its ancient Hebraicism. And as we shall see, it was Esperanto, rather than his romanized Yiddish, that Zamenhof would offer up as a modern language for emancipated Jews.

Still, the early practice of cobbling words together instead of borrowing them inoculated the infant language from the antibodies of the world's dominant languages. These days, when so-called "international" words are invariably drawn from English, the Akademio de Esperanto has rigorously resisted the anglicization of Esperanto. The Internet, for example, is not *interneto* but *interreto*, using the Esperanto word for "net" (*reto*); a computer is a *komputilo,* using the Esperantic suffix for a tool or device; a website is a *retejo,* a "net-place"; and to browse or surf is *retumi,* which means "to do something on the net." Several words are now in use for a flash drive: *memorbastoneto* (memory stick), *poŝmemorilo* (pocket memory device), *memorstango* (memory rod), and most simply, *storilo* (storage device). And there is another reason for preferring Esperantic coinages to international borrowings: such coinages do for Esperanto what idiomatic phrases do for national languages—turn a language into

a sociolect, which fosters community. No wonder, then, that Esperantists get a charge out of decoding these clumsy, agglutinative words, such as *polvosuĉilo* (a "dust sucker," aka vacuum cleaner) or *scivolemo* ("the inclination to want to know," aka curiosity), or *akvoprenilo* ("a device for taking out water," aka hydrant). The bulb that flicks on when an Esperantist encounters or generates an unfamiliar word yields both light and warmth.

What leaves many novices to Esperanto cold, however, is Zamenhof's system of correlatives, also known as *tabelvortoj* (table words). The correlatives are a highly elaborated version of correlative systems Zamenhof knew in Romance, Germanic, and Slavic languages. In English, for example, if we want to ask a question about place, we start with *wh-*, add *-ere* and get "where." Similarly, if we want to make a demonstrative statement about place, we start with *th-* and add *-ere* to get "there." Esperanto has five groups of such word beginnings, not only for interrogation and demonstration but also for indefinites, universals, and negatives. It also has nine groups of word endings, not only for place but also for time, quantity, manner, possession, entity, etc. Now imagine a grid in which the five word beginnings are arranged horizontally across the top, and the nine word endings are arranged in a column at the far left. Combining beginnings and endings creates the forty-five correlatives in the table.

Zamenhof never expected his readers to memorize the lists of correlatives, and no tables appear in the inaugural pamphlet of 1887. Only a fraction of correlatives are in frequent use; many are used routinely, and some are rarely used. Some can be used as pronouns, for instance, *ĉiuj,* which means "everybody," or as adverbs—*tiel*, meaning "in this manner." And they are essential for word building: for instance, *tiusense,* meaning "in this sense," or *ĉiutage*, meaning "everyday." When novices find a correlative leaping into their conversation, it's the first intuition they have of their competence. And the casual, comfortable use of correlatives—in conversation and as building blocks—is a good indicator of fluency.

* * *

Given that Esperanto was forged in Europe, designed for Europeans, and built from European languages, the charge of Eurocentrism is hard to deny. As we shall see in Part III, however, far from barricading it against non-Europeans, the Eurocentrism of Esperanto was largely responsible for its initial forays into China and Japan. That said, not all Esperantists

*Esperanto Table*

agree that the language, even from a linguistic perspective, *is* Eurocentric; some, citing Zamenhof's earliest accounts of creating the language, say that it is not Indo-European at all. Zamenhof hinted at this when he confessed that he'd created Esperanto in "the *spirit* of European languages" (my italics). In the spirit—but not in the flesh? Apparently not, since Esperanto's morphology, the rules by which words change according to tense, mood, number, and gender, is signally different from

that of Indo-European languages. Esperanto roots, unlike words in Indo-European languages, *never* alter their internal constituents when they take different endings. In English, today I *swim*, and yesterday I *swam*; but in Esperanto the root for swimming—*naĝ*—is always the same, no matter when I dive into the pool. Zamenhof's aim was to rationalize morphology, making roots instantly recognizable and easy to look up in a dictionary. His term for the division of words into "immutable syllables" (morphemes) was "dismemberment":

> I introduced a complete dismemberment of ideas into independent words, so that the whole language consists, not of words in different states of grammatical inflexion, but of unchangeable words [roots]. [The reader] . . . will perceive that each word [root] always retains its original unalterable form—namely, that under which it appears in the vocabulary.[19]

Thus, insofar as Esperanto glues together immutable roots, endings, and affixes, it is an agglutinative language, like Japanese, Hungarian, and Navajo.

But though this morphology would have been alien to most Europeans, Zamenhof counted on his European-derived lexicon to make Esperanto seem natural and familiar to his European readers: "I have adapted this principle of dismemberment to the spirit of the European languages, in such a manner that anyone learning my tongue from grammar alone . . . will never perceive that the structure of the language differs in any respect from that of his mother-tongue." Like Bacon and Wilkins, Zamenhof demoted words to secondary status; Esperanto was not a "world of words," after all, but a world of roots, concepts, structures that became a language when humans actively and ingeniously turned them into words. And though Zamenhof's roots recall Bacon's and Wilkins's "real characters," there is a crucial difference. "Real characters" were an end in themselves, inscribing a pristine and unique knowledge of the world; but Zamenhof's roots were destined for the rough and tumble of endings, juxtapositions, and linkages, for conversation and debate. Even Esperanto words are little dialogues between roots and their affixes.

Esperanto was invented to bring conversation to a world of misunderstanding. It was designed so that we should not always speak "only unto

ourselves," but to others, despite difference of nationality, creed, class, or race. But what Zamenhof discovered, having created a language "in the spirit of European languages," is that it was more than a *tradukilo*—"a translation device." By using Esperanto, he came to think in Esperanto, which had a spirit all its own. As he wrote to Borovko in 1896:

> Practice, however, more and more convinced me that the language still needed an elusive something, a connecting element, giving the language life and a definite, fully formed spirit. . . . I then began to avoid word for word translations of this or the other tongue and tried to think directly in the neutral language. Then I noticed that the language in my hands was already ceasing to be a . . . shadow of this or that other language . . . [that it] received its own spirit, its own life, its own definite and clearly expressed physiognomy, independent of any influences. The words flowed all by themselves, flexibly, gracefully, and utterly freely, like a living, native tongue.[20]

Like Mary Shelley's Doctor Frankenstein, who took lifeless body parts and turned them into a creature, Doktoro Esperanto took the "dismembered" parts of other languages and created a new being entirely. It must have been a lonely venture, being the sole speaker of a language yet to be put before the world. But whereas Doctor Frankenstein fled the laboratory on seeing his creature, Zamenhof engaged his in conversation. And then it happened: entrusted with his own thoughts, the *lingvo internacia* suddenly spoke in its own voice, from its own spirit, spontaneous, animated, free. By 1887, there was no longer any question: a child of his own brain, this "clumsy and lifeless collection of words" had become a living language. If there is a note of wonder in his recognition that the language had a life apart from his own, there was also apprehension about the life it would live in other minds, on other tongues.

# *Samideanoj* I
# NASK, or Total Immersion

## 1. *Ĉu vi lernas ĝin?*

*Ĉu vi lernas ĝin?* asks my green-and-white T-shirt with the Esperanto insignia. "Are you learning it?"

Apart from online learning, to study Esperanto in the United States is not a simple matter. Aside from a few classes taught in university towns or major cities, courses are few and far between, but this was not always the case; in the 1950s, seven towns in New Jersey alone offered weekly classes. Since 1970, however, the foremost course in the country has been the North American Summer Esperanto Institute, or NASK, which also happens to be the most intensive Esperanto immersion course in the world. Residing for three decades at San Francisco State University, it moved for a few years to Vermont, then to the University of California at San Diego, where I enrolled for the three-week program. (Since then, to boost enrollment, NASK has been scaled back to eight days; enrollment skyrocketed.)

I signed up for the intermediate level and started to prepare by studying on my own. On Amazon I found a hardcover book, published in the 1980s, called *Esperanto: Learning and Using the International Language*. It's a ten-lesson program written by an American, David Richardson, for Americans—people who live in New York and drive cross-country to California, who measure out their lives in miles, pounds, and dollars. The dialogues feature a bumbling father, part absent-minded professor, part Homer Simpson; a bossy, know-it-all mother; two eye-rolling teenagers. No one has time for Dad's endearing foibles, everyone talks over everyone

else, the kids leave the table before dinner is over—a typical American family. Except that around the dinner table they speak Esperanto.

In search of a more interactive method of learning, I clicked on a few links from the Esperanto-USA homepage and arrived at the bright green, user-friendly website called lernu! ("learn!"; lernu.net). A section of the site is designed specifically for English speakers, English being one of forty-odd languages made available by the "lernu! team." A variety of online courses are available, at various levels, the most famous of which is *Gerda Malaperis* (Gerda Disappeared), a mystery novel scientifically designed by Claude Piron to teach words in descending order of frequency. But the audio of *Gerda* was dauntingly rapid, so I opted for a basic course called *Mi estas komencanto* (I am a beginner). Lesson one got off to a nice, slow start: *Kio estas via nomo*? (What is your name?); *De kie vi estas*? (Where are you from?). The next couple of lessons enabled me to ask if someone were a student and if not, what "labor" he or she did; whether that person had come on a bus or a train; and to confess that I was nervous. I wasn't—until lesson six, when it emerged that the course was designed to prepare me for an Esperanto congress.

*Ĉu vi volas loĝi en amasloĝejo aŭ en ĉambro*?
*Kio estas amasloĝejo?*
*Amas-loĝ-ejo estas granda ejo kie multaj loĝas surplanke.*

Do you want to stay in an *amasloĝejo* or in a room?
What's an *amasloĝejo?*
*Amas-loĝ-ejo* is a big place where many people sleep on the floor.

It sounded like a youth hostel for Carmelites, but the point was to show how Esperanto builds words from the ground up. *Amas-* is a root meaning "mass"; *loĝ-*, a root meaning "stay" or "dwell"; and *-ejo,* a suffix (or stand-alone word) meaning "a place where." There was also the issue of the *ĉapeloj*—diacritical marks called "hats" in Esperanto. The Esperanto alphabet has twenty-eight letters, five of which are *c*, *g*, *h*, *j*, and *s* wearing tiny "hats"—*ĉ*, *ĝ*, *ĥ*, *ĵ*, *ŝ*—that alter their pronunciation. The letter *c* is pronounced "ts," but when topped by a *ĉapelo,* it becomes "ch." Also *u*, when preceded by *a*, usually puts on a crescent to become *ŭ*.

Once I registered for lernu!, I immediately began receiving emails, entirely in Esperanto, with the lernu! "word of the day." Most days, thanks

to my experience with French and Italian, I could decode the word easily: *kurta,* like the Italian *corto*, meant "short"; *trista* (in French, *triste*) meant "sad"; *tosto,* of course, meant "toast"—a champagne toast, not toaster toast, which is *toasto* (toe-AHS-toe). The words I couldn't spontaneously decode I had to interpret from context: "*ĈERKO: Kesto, en kiun oni metas la korpon de mortinto.*" Decoding: "*ĈERKO:* a chest in which one puts a dead body"—i.e., a coffin. Then there was "*PUM: Pum! la viro falis en la riveron.*" "The man falls in the river," I managed, noting that *pum* could be redoubled to evoke a nuisance. And with the ending *-adoj,* it could be turned into a relentless, repetitive cacophony. Where Americans hear "boom-boom-boom," Esperantists hear *pumpumadoj* (poom-poom-ah-doy).

With a modicum of Googling, I discovered an alternative to lernu!: an online phrasebook designed for English-speaking congress-goers with more than one type of congress in mind. Unlike the wholesome, patient lernu!, where one repeated, repeated, repeated, here things were said only once.

*Mi ŝatas renkonti novajn homojn.* (I like meeting new people.)
*Mi ŝatas vin.* (I like you.)
*Mi amas vin.* (I love you.)

At this point one chose one's own adventure. For the amorous, there was *Mi volas vin* (I want you), and *Mi ne povas vivi sen vi* (I can't live without you). And just in case, there was *Mi estas graveda* (I'm pregnant) and *Kiel vi povas fari tion al mi*? (How could you do this to me?). For the less venturesome, there was *Mi sentas la mankon de vi* (I miss you) and *Samideane* (Regards—"used only for a fellow Esperantist"). Knowing I was more likely to say *amasloĝejo* than *graveda,* I returned to lernu!, and two weeks later, found that I was capable of a halting reading—in Esperanto—of the NASK website.

## 2. Affixed

There are twenty-four students at NASK, ranging in age from seventeen to eighty-two, plus the instructors, Greta, Benedikt, and Wayne; Nell, an administrator; and an assistant with the unlikely name of Slim Alizadeh, a thirtyish Iranian-American IT guy. Slim's role is various: he edits

and produces the daily newsletter, solicits presenters for the evening programs, and leads the optional afternoon excursions—which begin today, Slim announces, with a hike to the *glisilejo.* I can't find it in my dictionary, so I try to decode it: *glisi,* "to glide"; *-ejo,* "place." A gliding place? A place for gliding? Life at NASK often seems to be about finding opportunities to teach affixes, and our afternoon excursion to the Torrey Pines Gliderport is clearly one of them.

Assigned to suites in a dorm, we learn the difference between a roommate (*samĉambrano,* "same-room member") and a suitemate (*samĉambrarano,* "member of the same cluster of rooms"). We're roughly grouped by gender and age. In my suite are three middle-aged women and myself, while the seven or eight college students room downstairs in suites whose doors are always propped open. All the female students are science majors and all the male students are humanities majors—data point? In practice, it only means that the women are quicker with advice for a frozen MacBook: "Just take the battery out." Residing in the next entryway are students in a Stanley Kaplan SAT intensive, who are referred to affixedly as *Kaplanuloj*—Kaplaners. It is Slim who refers to non-Esperantists in general as *mugloj*; muggles. Our dorm is hardly Hogwarts, but stocked with twenty-nine Esperantists, it is a place apart.

There are no pledges to sign, no vows to take, but it goes without saying that we're to speak only Esperanto, morning, noon, and night; on campus and off (assuming the company of other NASKers). And almost without exception, we do. Had there been an explicit rule, it would have been simple: *Neniam krokodilu!* (Never crocodile!). *Krokodili* is the first slang word any Esperantist learns; it means "to speak one's native language at an Esperanto gathering." But Esperantists, a great many of whom are polyglots, are given to fine distinctions: *aligatori* (to alligator) means to speak one's first language to someone else speaking it as a second language; *kajmani* (to cayman) means to carry on a conversation in a language that is neither speaker's native tongue.

Only Esperanto could have brought together the four women in my suite. There is Marcy, a travel agent who arranges Esperanto-language package tours each July and the producer of a goofy instructional video series called *Esperanto: Pasporto al la Tuta Mondo* (Esperanto: Passport to the Whole World). Across the hall is Kalindi, a jolly forty-six-year-old secretary from Kathmandu. She has long, shining black hair

and applies peppermint-pink lipstick as soon as she finishes a meal. On hot days, she favors cotton saris; on cool ones, track suits in mint green and fuschia. She has come the farthest of any participant, and after NASK she'll continue on to the Universal Congress in Rotterdam and then travel around Europe for a month with *samideanoj.* Kalindi hosts every Esperantist who passes through Kathmandu in her home, where one bedroom is designated the *Esperanta Ĉambro* (Esperanto Room).

The fourth member of the ensemble is a heavyset woman in her sixties who sits on the landing beside a heavy-set bearded man; perched on folding chairs, they could be a couple escaping a stifling Bronx apartment for a gulp of fresh air. Greeting me, she says in flatly American Esperanto, "*Mi estas Tero, jen mia edzo, Karlo*" (I'm Earth; this is my husband, Charles), handing me a shiny green cardboard star. Outside of NASK, he is David, a computer programmer, but she is harder to nail down. She was born Angela Woodman, the daughter of a trombonist with the Detroit Symphony who'd also played with Artie Shaw: "Look him up on the International Tuba Euphonium Association oral history website," she urges. Every afternoon she can be found writing the words of Esperanto pop songs in indelible marker on a huge lined, easeled pad, kindergarten style. One day it is "*Ĉu vi, ĉu vi, ĉu vi, ĉu vi volas dansi*" ("Do You Wanna Dance?"), another, "*Kamparanino*" ("Guantanamera"). When we walk through the leafy campus to class in the morning, Tero picks up pieces of eucalyptus bark and turns them into eerie gray masks. She tells me she spent many years on a Hare Krishna ashram but one day left with the ashram's mandolin in tow and never looked back. ("I knew I could use it in my clown act.") At home in Northern California, she is a part-time Berlitz teacher, but mostly, she and Karlo work as sound engineers for . . . she pauses, not to find the word, but to coin it.

"*Filkfestoj.*"

"*Kio ĝi estas*?" I asked. (What is that?)

She explains, in what will become a familiar resort to paraphrase and circumlocution, that "filkfests" are musical jam sessions that occur at science fiction conventions. I add the word to my glossary.