

In search of myself

56 Comments

35

727 views

By Ingrid Piller | May 21, 2018 | Language learning, gender & identity

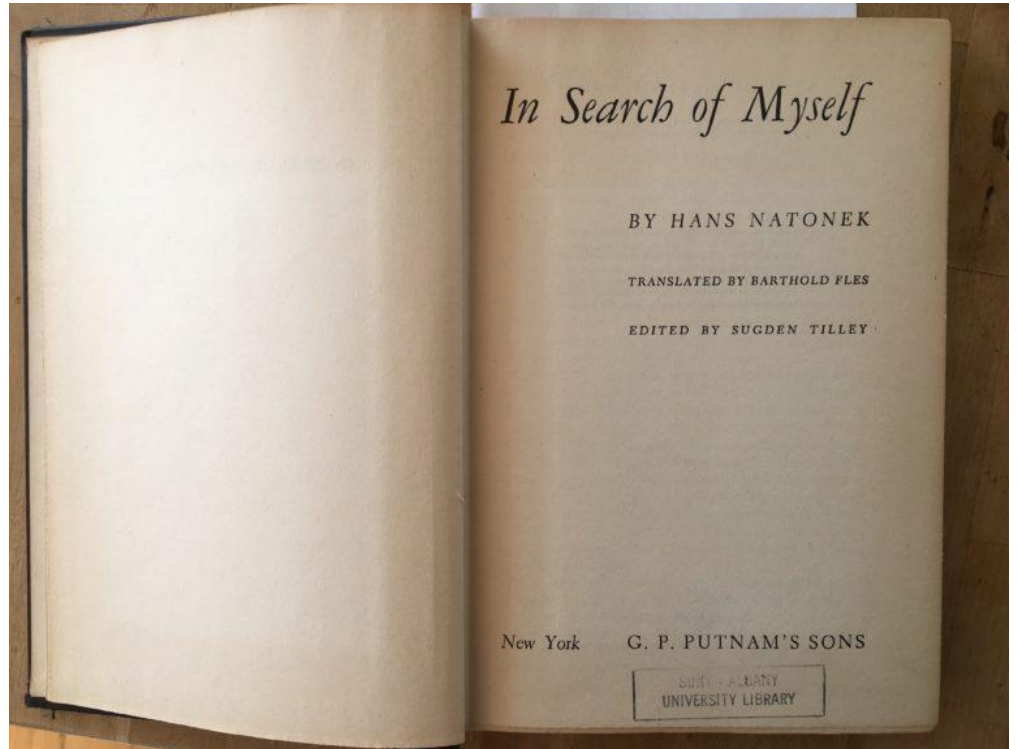
This week is Library and Information week (#LIW2018). [Library and Information Week](#) aims to raise the profile of libraries and information service professionals in Australia. What better way to celebrate libraries and the people who work there and to show our appreciation than to participate in the [Language-on-the-Move Reading Challenge](#)!

The theme of #LIW2018 is "Find yourself in a Library".

The book I read in the category "a memoir of an adult migrant and language learner" describes exactly that: a refugee in search of his past and his future. The public library is one place where this refugee finds solace:

It has become my habit to gather together a small store of provisions, some biscuits, chocolate, an apple or two, and repair each morning to the reading room of the Public Library. There I lose myself in long dead time and not rouse until the shrill, too early summons of the closing bell. This way of living is extremely economical. [...] I have discovered that a moderate hunger increases both sensibility and concentration. It is not a new idea. Since the times of the monkish visionaries fasting has been the essential preliminary to revelation. The library is my monastery. (Natonek, 1943, p. 124)

The author, Hans Natonek (1892-1963), was a refugee from the Nazis and the public library he refers to is in Manhattan. Hans Natonek arrived in New York in 1941 after having been on the run for almost a decade. One of the foremost literary critics of Weimar Germany and a well-known social critic and author, Natonek had fled Germany for his native Prague in 1934. As the Nazis conquered more and more of Europe, he had to flee again; first to Paris, then Marseille, which became a trap for many refugees as the Vichy regime handed them



back to the Nazis. Natonek escaped and managed to cross the Pyrenees into Spain and was finally granted a US visa in Lisbon.



Hans Natonek and Anne Grünwald in Arizona, 1950s
(Source: Arts in exile)

the age of 50.

I love my own mother tongue, but I recognize with sadness that separated from the soil in which it roots it must wither. It cannot be artificially maintained. The mother language does not transport nor grow nor bloom under alien skies. It is, at best, no more than a memory to be used on occasion to recall a friendship or another life. (p. 158)

Unfortunately, Natonek discovers that the growth of his English is in no way proportionate to the withering away of his native German and his beloved French. In fact, despite all his strenuous efforts to improve his English, he had to write *In search of myself* in German and leave the translation to his publisher.

It is not only the loss of German that throws Natonek out of balance. It is also the loss of prestige and professional standing. In America Natonek discovers a thoroughly materialistic culture that has no patience for intellectual pursuits. While he tries hard to adapt, he cannot get himself to accept the prevailing “jobism” as he calls it. He feels that everyone expects him to move on, find a job, make money and be happy; but Natonek insists on his right to grieve for his lost life and for his home engulfed by disaster.

By the time Natonek arrived in New York shortly before his 50th birthday, the loss of his previous existence and the long years of constant danger and insecurity had taken their toll: “Flight softens the morale. To escape is to arrive nowhere. Escape is a negative, a fallacious rescue. Every fighter knows that. We are all fighters.” (p. 68)

In his memoir *In search of myself* published in 1943, Natonek asks what his refugee status means for his identity: he considers himself cut off both from his past and his future. His former language and identity have become meaningless and he feels disconnected from the language and identity options valued in his new environment.

For a writer, professional identity and language are inextricably linked and both have been taken from him: “A writer! Am I still one in point of actual fact? Tell me, then. What is a writer without a language and without a past? He is a mechanical absurdity, a piano without strings.” (p. 17)

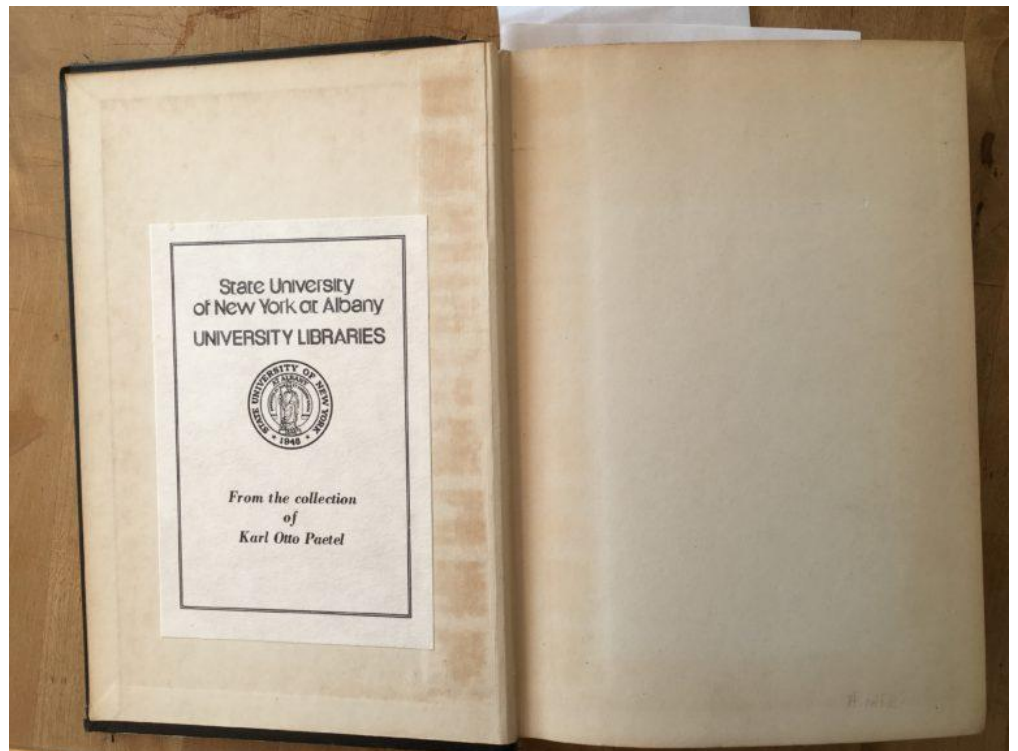
Natonek tries hard to reinvent himself in English, even as he bemoans the difficulty of doing so at

^

They are unanimous in exhorting us to bend every effort toward the rapid adaptation of the American point of view. Waste no time in dalliance, they advise. Get busy. Forget the past. Embrace the new. It is the only way to demonstrate a decent gratitude. I am not exactly clear why I so stubbornly oppose this theory of rapid adaptation linked to the theme of gratitude for rescue and asylum. My soul rebels against it as a child rebels against forced feeding. An approach to living, a point of view on life, cannot be changed as abruptly as a lantern slide. I am not one of those worms which may be cut in two and go on living. Life flows like a blood stream from the past, through the present, into the future, and what a man is, is the result of what he has been. (p. 95)

In America, Natonek finds, work that is not profitable counts for nothing. While he is refused a small loan that would enable him to concentrate on finishing his book manuscript, he is offered a loan to start a small business. Bitterly, he scoffs: "Apparently there were too few beauty parlors, too many books." (p. 157)

Some healing ultimately comes from books and he rediscovers a part of himself when he finds that the New York Public Library actually holds copies of the books he had published before having had to flee Germany. Even more astonishing to him, the library also holds a copy of a book written by his grandfather:



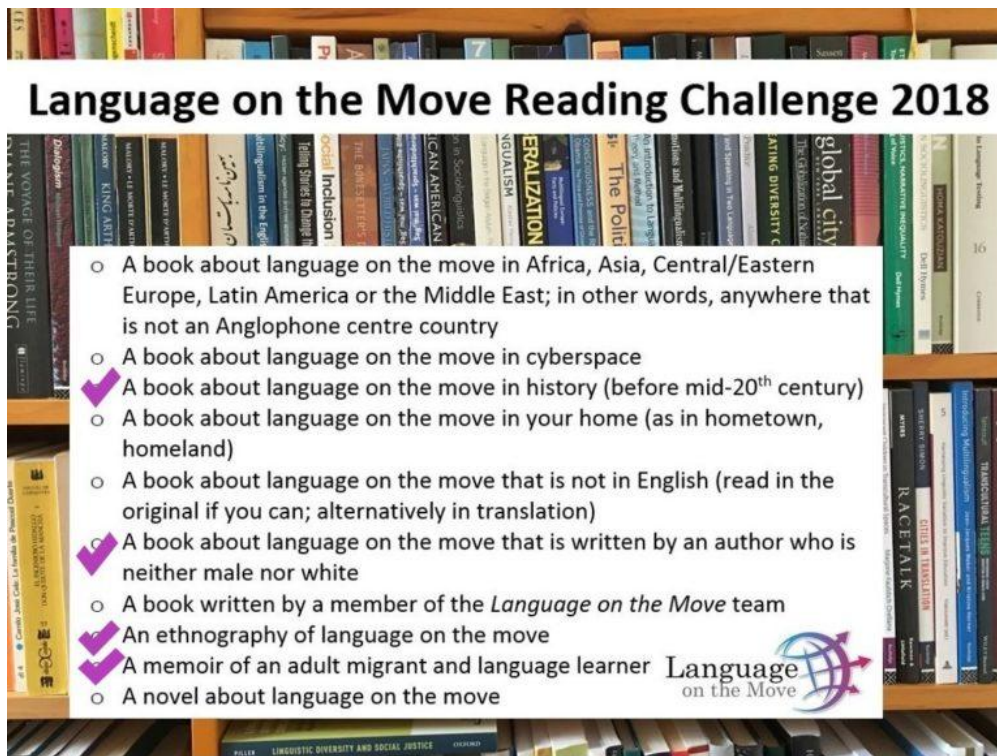
Beyond the handful of my own poor records I saw a single card. It bore my grandfather's name. It was as though he spoke to me in love and confidence from out the past. (pp. 125f)

In search of myself is a moving account of the refugee experience. Its poignant message of loss and destruction but also the healing power of ideas is as important today as it was in 1943.

Given how topical [the search for language and identity](#) is in our time, I would wish the book a new generation of readers. Unfortunately, the book has been out of print for a long time. No copy is held in any Australian library and none seems to be on sale even in the vast world of e-commerce.

I had resigned myself to not being able to get my hands on the book when I discovered that Google had ^ apparently digitized the book in 2007. So, I asked Macquarie University Library to trace the digital version for me. Amazingly, they got me an actual copy through interlibrary loan instead.

Being able to hold this wartime copy (“There are many more words on each page than would be desirable in normal times; margins have been reduced and no space has been wasted between chapters.”) in my hands has been a privilege I am grateful for. And that is another reason why #LIW2018 matters and why we all need to appreciate and support our libraries – for ourselves and all the other seekers who find solace there. #findyourself

A photograph of a bookshelf filled with books. Overlaid on the image is a white poster titled "Language on the Move Reading Challenge 2018". The poster lists ten criteria for book selection, with some items marked with purple checkmarks. The "Language on the Move" logo is at the bottom right of the poster.

Language on the Move Reading Challenge 2018

- A book about language on the move in Africa, Asia, Central/Eastern Europe, Latin America or the Middle East; in other words, anywhere that is not an Anglophone centre country
- A book about language on the move in cyberspace
- A book about language on the move in history (before mid-20th century)
- A book about language on the move in your home (as in hometown, homeland)
- A book about language on the move that is not in English (read in the original if you can; alternatively in translation)
- A book about language on the move that is written by an author who is neither male nor white
- A book written by a member of the *Language on the Move* team
- An ethnography of language on the move
- A memoir of an adult migrant and language learner
- A novel about language on the move

Language on the Move

Further reading

Reading challenge


- In search of a language and an identity
- One orientalism or many orientalisms?
- Why are you not citing any African female expert?
- The devil's handwriting
- Globalization between crime and piety
- *Language on the Move* Reading Challenge 2018

Libraries

- Getting published while foreign
- Are we killing the joy of reading?
- Serendipity, Cyberspace, and the Tactility of Documents
- Bitter gifts: migrants' exclusive inclusion
- Multiculturalism alive and well in Austria
- Herder: an explainer for linguists
- Barbarous multilingual devil worshippers

 Facebook 26

 Twitter

 Google

 Email

 Print

 More

ENGLISH

FRENCH

GERMAN

IDENTITY

LANGUAGE LEARNING

MIGRATION

REFUGEES

USA

