

## Ready for the polyglots

*Dedicated to Egon Kisch*

“Our native birds sang so confusingly that experts believed their nature had suffered for unknown reasons. Or was there something in the food they ate, the water they drank? They migrated in droves to other lands as if they had experienced abysmal happenings back home. Theirs was to be a new destiny.”

“That does not make any sense!”

“Oh, but it does... if we give them a predictable sentence, like *Birds sing in spring and migrate in winter* and so on, it would be just too easy. What else do you want? Something with some serious literary value?”

“No whingeing! We need to keep ’em out, d’you understand? The fifty-word dictation test must be so hard that whoever takes it fails, no exceptions made. In this way...”

“In this way, they’ll be unable to enter the country and...”

“Go on.”

“... and they’ll be sent back to whatever place they came from!”

“That’s it! You got it! Keep’em out of the cities and out of the bush and out of the outback, that’s what I say!

“And so, what do you want me to do?”

“Give’em some tough spelling! As tough as it gets!”

“I understand what you mean, but...”

“No buts!”

“Let me write this down.”

“I want it now!”

“Now?”

“I was told you were the best. That you could do things as in *now*.”

“I’ll try... I’ll try to do it *now*...”

“Remember this is the cornerstone of our country. It’s, after all, 1901. A whole new century ahead of us! We should be able to come up with some good and effective solutions. Something to stop’em in their tracks! It must be a foolproof text, and so nobody, but nobody, will be able to crack it. D’you get it?”

“Of course, wait a moment. Give me a minute or two...”

“We don’t have much time. There’re several ships arriving from the South Seas in the next couple of days. Give it a burl! I want it *now*! ”

“Wait, I think I’m nearly there.”

“What is it?”

“I have it! Something certainly more obscure, with some intolerable spelling...”

“Yes?”

“Here it is: Our autochthonous ornithoid creatures produced such a cacophony that ornithologists presupposed the problem concomitant to their psyche. Had there

been calamitous occurrences that swayed their nature towards the sibylline and the opaque, changing their migratory itineraries? Or had their ingestion of sustenance been meddled with, were there constituents of a dubious nature in their liquescent intake? Or could it be that...”

“Stop, stop, I get the idea. A beauty, but it’s probably over fifty words already. Fifty words only, remember. That’s the law!”

“No worries, I can cut it down.”

“They’re obviously bloody difficult words, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m thinking that...”

“What?”

“What if someone doesn’t make a single mistake?”

“Impossible! That would be truly exceptional. I mean, we’re talking about indigenous populations taking the test, people without schooling of any sort.”

“But it’s a deadset possibility, isn’t it?”

“Well, I... I don’t think that would ever happen. Not a chance!”

“But what if it did? What would we do then if someone were to pass the dictation test?”

“But it would be a one-in-a-million case!”

“But it’s a possibility, isn’t it?”

“Well, I suppose it’s a possibility, but...”

“A possibility, you admitted it! There’s no room for a possibility of this sort, d’you understand?”

“But...”

“No buts!”

“Yes, but...”

“Hold on, I seem to recall a clause... Yes, I remember now. The law doesn't preclude taking dictation in another language.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, after the first test in English, and if the potential immigrant is successful, however incredible this may sound, we could demand dictation in a second language.”

“A second... language?”

“Indeed. Could you give it to me in a second language?”

“A second language?”

“Yes, a second test for anyone who passes the first test in English!”

“But...”

“I was told you were the best!”

“But...”

“The very best!”

“Well...”

“Well what?”

“If you insist, wait a second.”

“I can't wait for long.”

“Well...”

“Yes, well what?”

“Ah, here it is. Something like...”

“Like what?”

“Like this: *Nos oiseaux indigènes ont chanté si confusément...*”

“That sounds good, whatever language that is. And...”

“And what?”

“What about a third language, just in case anyone passes this second dictation test?”

“Someone passing dictation tests in two different languages? That would be impossible!”

“I said I want the test in a third language, just in case those taking the test happen know the second language as well. Could you give it to me in a third language?”

“I really don't think that would be necessary.”

“I insist!”

“Well, give me a minute...”

“Quick, there's not much time!”

“Hold on...”

“Yes?”

“Here it is: *Las aves originarias de nuestro país cantaban con tal confusión que...*”

“Great! Again, I don't understand a word, but I can see you're well prepared.”

“I... I try to be when it comes to words.”

“So, to conclude: we need those fifty words in at least ten other languages.”

“Ten? What do you mean *ten*! I'm not sure I master ten languages...”

“Ten, I said. Perhaps even more, just in case. Heaps of languages! Heaps and heaps! You see, we have to stop'em getting into the country!”

“But...”

“I was told you were the best!”

“But...”

“I'm sure you know what I mean!”

“That... that we've got to be ready for the polyglots?”

“Too right! That’s exactly what I mean!”

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