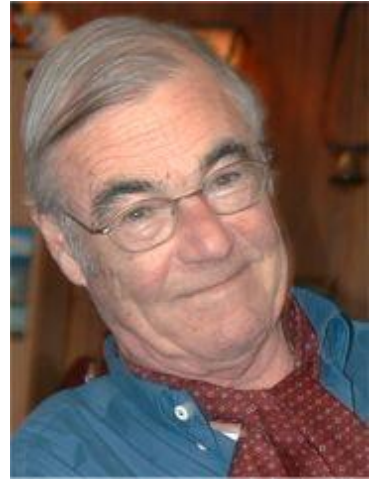


F. Springer in translation

A new picture of his own work

by Marc Mijer

Five of his books have been translated into four languages with the number of copies printed running into the tens of thousands. New translations are on the way. Springer therefore finds himself among the growing stream of Dutch authors who have found success beyond their own borders. For Springer, however, being translated means more than just being read abroad.



The first translation ever made of his work remains unpublished to the present day. This is the English version of *Bougainville* produced by Professor Beekman of the US. The lack of enthusiastic publishers has meant that the English-language area has still to make acquaintance with F. Springer.

A pity, the author himself thinks. "The Americans always want to talk to my agent first – but I don't have one. The British consider that they already have exotic writers of their own, such as Somerset Maugham and Conrad. That evidently is where their interest in me ends. I myself would be delighted if my work were to appear in English. Anglo-Saxon literature is close to my heart. My publisher is accordingly still canvassing that market."

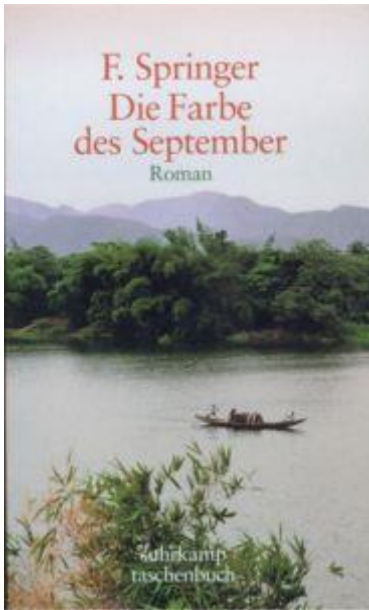
Curiously enough, the unpublished English version of *Bougainville* did lead to the very first published translation. Beekman's document was doing the rounds at the Frankfurt Book Fair in the late 1980s. It was spotted by a French publisher and the first French-language paperback version of *Bougainville* appeared in 1988.

Satisfaction

F. Springer is the pseudonym of Carel Jan Schneider. He was born in 1932 in Batavia (the present-day Indonesian capital Jakarta) in the former Dutch East Indies. His colonial past frequently crops up in his books. The same applies to his careers as civil servant and diplomat. This personal background is the source of the "exotic" element so characteristic of his books. His novels are located in countries to which Springer was taken by his career, ranging from Indonesia to Iran and the US to Bangladesh. His border-hopping life resulted in transfrontier work that is now also being read outside the borders of the Dutch-speaking world. Apart from *Bougainville*, translations have now appeared of *Quissama*, *Kandy* and *Bandoeng-Bandung*. Springer's books have been published in Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany and Japan and will shortly appear in Slovakia.

The circle would therefore appear to have been completed. Does the author himself think so as well? "In the first place I'm delighted that my work has crossed the border. It's strange to think that right now someone in Sofia might be reading one of my books in Bulgarian. In other cases it can go somewhat further. In particular the Japanese translation of *Bandoeng-Bandung* arouses special feelings for me. The book portrays the Japanese internment camp in which I spent the Second World War as a child. Many young Japanese people know little

about this part of their history. Thanks to my story – and the translation – they learn more about that time. Yes, that does give me some satisfaction."



Literary tours

That his work would ever appear in other languages was never in the back of his mind. Now that they have, the possibility of translation still does not affect the way he writes. "That would make things too complicated. I concentrate on my original readership. I don't think about translations during the creative process. It's not something I push in any way. My publisher Querido draws extracts from my books to the attention of foreign publishers."

One of the ways in which they do so is at international book fairs such as the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Salon du Livre. Springer sometimes also puts in a personal appearance. "So I'll find myself in a stand for introductory meetings with potential publishers. Before taking on one of my books they want to know what sort of a person I really am."

For Springer being translated means more than just being read abroad. By going on literary tours, supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his former colleagues at the diplomatic missions, he meets his foreign public. "I have been doing so since 1999, accompanied by my literary partner Liesbeth Dolk. Among other things we have been to South Africa, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, France and Germany. Our main purpose is to put Dutch culture in the spotlight by giving talks and chairing discussions. The interesting thing is that the discussion can develop in highly specific directions in each individual country. In South Africa, for example, the concern is with the differences between colonialism and apartheid, while Indonesia it is between the 'good old days' or *tempo doeloe* era and the current situation in the country."

Staying with the translator

Being translated as a writer is a bit like giving up a child. You can only wait and see what the translator makes of your book. Or is it? In the case of translations into German – a language in which Springer himself is fluent – he is closely involved, and his role goes beyond simply reading a draft manuscript. "During the translation of *Bougainville* I stayed for a few days in Hamburg with Helga van Beuningen, a top translator. We genuinely worked as a team. She asked questions that often came as a great surprise to me. Why does one of the characters act in precisely that way at that point? What kind of person are we in fact dealing with? This gave me an entirely new picture of my own work! During those sessions I sometimes also got the feeling that I might have dropped a few stitches here and there." In the case of other languages the involvement is less marked; Springer is unable to read Bulgarian or Japanese. That does not however mean that there is no consultation with the translator.

At present Springer is working on a new project "in fits and starts". Through force of circumstance he has not yet got around to finding the isolation he needs in order to write a new book. But the translation machine churns on. The Slovakian version of *Quissama* is in the pipeline. *Teheran, een zwanenzang* is to appear in German. Nor is Springer's literary train

coming to a halt. Among other things a trip to Bangladesh is planned for next year. This is the country where he was a diplomat in the early 1970s and where the opening scene of *Bougainville* takes place. For F. Springer, fiction and reality continue to intersect.

Bougainville

F. Springer's most translated book is *Bougainville*, first published in 1981. The novel describes the life of two childhood friends in a series of detailed snapshots. After their repatriation from the Dutch East Indies to the Netherlands, Bo becomes a diplomat and Tommie an official with the UN. The latter reads his grandfather's diaries and keeps his own diary on the still unused pages. When Bo reads the two diaries he notes that the disillusionment of grandfather and grandson are not far apart. After the two friends met one further time in Bangladesh, Tommie swims out of his life on Cox's Bazaar beach. But it might just as well have been a beach on Bougainville. Shortly before he had said, "If I want to flee, I quietly recite those names. I am a first-class escapist. Cape Farewell in New Zealand, Mandalay in Burma, Bougainville in the Pacific."

Springer believes in the theory that writers are familiar with just a few topics that keep getting repackaged in a different guise. Certainly in *Bougainville*, one of the themes referred to by the author himself is in evidence: making mistakes, in love and politics, which can then no longer be reversed.