



## Translating a poem from Polish

### 'Kurczę blade' by Wanda Chotomska (1929-2017)

#### *About the author*

**Wanda Chotomska** was a Polish children's writer, screenwriter and poet. She was born and lived in Warsaw, where she also studied journalism.

At the age of four Chotomska learnt to read from street signs. The first poem she wrote was about her father, who wasn't actually too impressed that his daughter wanted to be a writer. But she persisted and became Poland's most prominent children's author – a Polish Astrid Lindgren (*Pippi Longstocking*) or Tove Jansson (*Moomins*). Many libraries and schools in Poland are named after her.

Her daughter, Ewa Chotomska, is also known for her children's books as well as children's TV programmes.

#### 1

The first stage in encouraging students to translate *Kurczę blade* is to have them hear the poem read aloud in Polish. If the teacher has no Polish, he or she might still convey much of the 'music' of the poem by 'de-coding' the text aloud. Alternatively there are numerous recordings available online, including:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEV6f\\_1Sd9Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEV6f_1Sd9Q)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf9zixiT9Hg>

Once the students have heard the poem read in Polish, they should read it aloud themselves, perhaps in groups or with a partner or individually. That will help them become familiar with the poem's rhythms, rhyming structures, as well as its tone. Some of the meaning might also emerge from such reading – they might be able to pick up some familiar sounding words (for example 'marmolada' – marmalade, 'klepie' – [he] claps/pats [himself]).

It's worth reminding the students at this point that many translators are in the same position and are not familiar with the languages they 'translate' from. Many translators work with collaborators who help them with the literal meaning. The students should remember that translation is a creative process and its aim is producing a new poem in English.

## ***Kurczę blade***

*Kupił dziadek jajko w sklepie  
I po brzuchu już się klepie.  
Naszykował szklankę z cukrem:  
- Kogel mogel sobie utrę!*

*Naglę co to? Awantura!  
Dziura w jajku! W jajku dziura!  
A w tej dziurze kurczę blade.  
- Kurczę blade - krzyknął dziadek.*

*- Kurczę blade! Kurczę blade! -  
i ze ściany porwał szpadę.  
Wyskoczyło kurczę z jajka,  
kurczę blade, to nie bajka!*

*Bo jak dziadek złapał szpadę,  
to nie trudno o wypadek.  
Leci kurczę blade z trwogi,  
za kurczakiem dziadek srogi.*

*Złapał dziadek kurczę blade:  
- Zrobię z ciebie marmoladę!  
- Marmolada lepsza z jabłka -  
powiedziała trzeźwo babka.*

*- Lepiej upiec kurczę blade  
w piekarniku na obiadek.  
Jak wsadzili je do pieca  
to dopiero była heca.*

*Bo uciekło z pieca dziurką  
i zostało tylko piórko.  
Piórko blade, piórko blade,  
które zjadł na obiad dziadek.*

The next step is providing the students with a word-for-word, rough, literal translation, sometimes called a 'trot'. It will in most cases be devoid of certain nuances, such as rhythm, melody, rhyme and even some levels of meaning, but it will give enough of an idea of the meaning to be a good starting point. Below is a 'trot' of *Kurczę blade*.

### *A Pale Chick/O, Blimey*

*Grandpa bought an egg in a shop  
And is already patting his belly.  
He got a glass with sugar ready,  
'I will whisk some egg yolk with sugar!'*

*Suddenly, what is it? Some commotion/disturbance/turmoil/racket!  
A hole/crack in the egg, the egg has a hole/is cracked!  
A pale chick sits in the hole.  
'Oh, pale chick/oh, blimey,' grandpa screamed.*

*'Pale chick/O, blimey, pale chick/o, blimey!'  
And he grabbed a sword from the wall.  
The chick jumped out of the egg,  
Pale chick/O, blimey, this not a fairy-tale!*

*Cause when grandpa has a sword  
It's not difficult for an accident [to happen].  
The chick runs, pale with fright,  
Followed by scary grandpa.*

*Grandpa got the pale chick,  
'I will turn you into marmalade'  
'Marmalade is better made from apples,'  
Grandma said matter-of-factly.*

*'It's better to roast the pale chick  
In the oven for lunch.'  
When they put it in the oven,  
Another commotion/disturbance/turmoil/racket broke out.*

*Cause it escaped from the oven through a hole  
Only leaving a feather behind.  
A pale feather, a pale feather  
Was what grandpa had for lunch.*

### 3

The particular difficulty of this poem is not just its music, rhythm and rhyme, but the very concept of the title, on which the whole story is based. 'Kurczę blade' literally means 'pale chick', but in the Polish language also has an idiomatic meaning and functions as a mild expletive, similar to 'O, blimey'. And while, when it comes to the title itself, the translator might be tempted to stay with the literal meaning of the phrase, later on the other, idiomatic meaning comes to the fore with strength (for example, 'Oh, pale chick, grandpa screamed').

In the Students' Notes I offer some possible versions of the title – in the hope that the students may pick up the idea of deploying trial and error methods to find a satisfying version:

*The Cheeky Chicken*  
*Chicken on the Run*  
*Chicken on the Loose*

And, finally, the official version of the title (in Barbara Bogoczek's and Tony Howard's translation) is *What a Cheek!*

#### 4

As the students will notice, each version will be different. It's all about experimenting.

This applies to the translator's other decisions: about line-lengths, rhythm and rhyme (or the lack of it). What matters is the true ring of the poem in English, and whether it catches something of the feel, tone and atmosphere of the original.

#### 5

The poem has an official, published translation (by Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard, published by Babaryba, 2010). There is also another translation, by Soren Gauger (see below). It might help the teacher in dealing with certain particular problems during the translation process or it might be used just to compare students' versions to the published one, but it should never be presented as the 'one and only way to translate this poem'...

#### ***Frickin' Chicken***

*Grandpa's lips were already smacking*  
*He'd bought some eggs, and home he was packing.*  
*Sugar, milk and flour, all were prepared:*  
*– Flapjacks tomorrow! – Grandpa declared.*

*But hey, what's this? Are you pulling my leg?*  
*The egg's got a hole! There's a hole in the egg!*  
*And in that hole – a frickin' chicken.*  
*– A frickin' chicken! – Grandpa clucked.*

*– Frickin' chicken! Frickin' chicken! –*  
*From the wall his sword he plucked.*  
*From the egg the chicken hopped,*  
*Frickin' chicken, he must be stopped!*

*Because with his sword, as you might guess,*  
*Grandpa could make an awful mess.*  
*The chicken flew from Grandpa's lickin',*  
*And Grandpa flew behind the chicken.*

*He nabbed the bird, his face all cross,  
And roared: – I'll smush you into sauce.  
– Apple sauce is best for flapjacks –  
Grandma said as a matter-of-fact.*

*– A frickin' chicken is best when you roast it,  
We'll eat it for supper, then we'll drink and toast it.  
Into the oven the dinner goes,  
But then look out! There she blows!*

*Through a hole in the oven it sped out the door,  
Just a handful of feathers were left, and no more.  
Frickin' feathers, frickin' feathers  
For Grandma and Grandpa to eat together.*

Translated by Soren Gauger

Anna Blasiak, 2018

Text of the poem in Polish republished here thanks to kind permission granted by Ewa Chotomska and Karolina Golba.

The text of the English version of the poem in Soren Gauger's translation republished here thanks to kind permission granted by Wydawnictwo Babaryba and Soren Gauger.

The official English version (translated by Barbara Bogoczek and Tony Howard) is available from Babaryba's website: <https://babaryba.pl/pl/p/KURCZE-BLADE-What-a-cheek-Wanda-Chotomska-Edward-Lutczyn/114>.  
The book can also be bought from Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Kurcze-blade-cheek-Wanda-Chotomska/dp/839318052X>