Nellie Manis, a 2013 graduate of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois, and a current Fulbright grantee, sat down with 2013 Workshop in Scholarly and Literary Translation from Slavic Languages participant Ross Ufberg to learn more about his recent publications.

Ufberg is a current graduate student at Columbia University and co-founder of the publishing house “New Vessel Press.” His translation of Moldovan author Vladimir Lorchenkov’s book *The Good Life Elsewhere* was just published in February 2014.

NM: How did you get involved with Vladimir Lorchenkov? Can you describe your relationship with him?

RU: I have never met Vladimir in person. But we have emailed quite often. Even his emails are full of snares and traps, a joke or a pun or a witty remark lurking around every comma, period, parentheses. He was quite helpful when I was working on the translation. Up to now, I’ve translated dead prose authors (with the exception of Anna Frajlich, a Polish poet, who is very much alive!), so when you’re stuck, you’re stuck. You can’t ask the author what he meant. But with Lorchenkov, I asked a million questions and got a million answers, and ultimately, I believe it made the translation better. Not only more accurate, but more full of life, because when you enjoy working on something, and when the author is a personality you connect with, it shows.

NM: Your translation of Lorchenkov’s article “Is Moldova the 51st State?” appeared in The New York Times on December 26, 2013. Can you tell us more about how this came to be?

RU: “Eastern Europe” is a massive place. “The Former Soviet Union” is, in fact, one-sixth the entire world. But often the media speaks in broad terms about changes that occur in various places around the world. Kiev is a very different place from Chisinau, and Lviv is different from Tiraspol. Part of why Lorchenkov wanted to write an op-ed in the Times is, I believe, he wanted to say, “Hey, things are complex here. It’s not as easy as it seems. And no, the answer to all of our problems is not always to just join with Europe. We are part of a very distinct geographical region with its own histories and motivations. That must be considered. Also, don’t blame Russia. At least not ALL the time.

NM: Your translation of Lorchenkov’s book *The Good Life Elsewhere* was just published in February. Can you tell me a little about this project?

RU: *The Good Life Elsewhere* is a really funny, satirical, and fast-moving novel. One of the reasons I was so attracted to it is because it’s very different from what we in the West, or in the United States, think of as “Russian” literature. I know Russian literature is every bit as quirky and fun and whacky, and oftentimes even as concise as American literature. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy aren’t the whole picture. I wanted to share that unexpected aspect of Russian literature with people.

NM: Your translation of Lorchenkov’s article “Is Moldova the 51st State?” appeared in The New York Times on December 26, 2013. Can you tell us more about how this came to be?

RU: This past summer, you participated in the Workshop in Scholarly and Literary Translation from Slavic Languages at the University of Illinois. Tell us about the pieces you were working on during the workshop. Have you been able to publish any of them?

RU: This summer, I worked on the poetry of the Polish poet Anna Frajlich. I have had some
luck placing Anna's poetry, and I'm still waiting to hear back from a few places. My translations of her work have appeared in Modern Poetry in Translation, Habitus, and other places. She's a poet of rare beauty. Her work is concise, unadorned, yet still lustrous and pitch-perfect. It's an honor to work with her.

**NM:** What were the most useful experiences to you during the workshop?

**RU:** Being able to work one-on-one with the wonderful translator Joanna Trzeciak. To sit with her and watch her take apart one of my translations – it was like handling an old clunky thing to a master watchmaker and watching as the expert made the timepiece run so much more smoothly.

**NM:** You are one of the founders of a new publishing venture, "New Vessel Press." What made you want to start your own publishing house?

**RU:** I have always loved translation, and then, a few years back, a friend, Michael Wise, and I got to talking seriously about starting a publishing house. We had spent so much time with each other talking about the works of literature we'd read from around the world, which we loved, and many of which were mutually unavailable to us. Michael reads French and German. I read Polish and Russian, but the only common language we have is English. And literature is something we're both passionate about. Plus, it's an incredibly interesting time to be in the book industry. So much is changing. Nobody knows what might be around the corner. But one thing is clear: there is more being published in the U.S. today from around the world than there ever was before. And I think that trend is going to continue. America is slowly opening up to the world. It's nice to think New Vessel could have a part – even if only a very small one – in that.

**NM:** What kind of works is New Vessel interested in publishing? Is it specifically a publication outlet for works in translation? Can translators submit materials to the house directly?

**RU:** We are always looking for good literary fiction and nonfiction. More broadly speaking, I'd say we like books with a healthy sense of humor, books that have real literary merit yet don't take themselves too seriously. We accept submissions at [http://newvesselpress.com/contact-us/](http://newvesselpress.com/contact-us/).

**NM:** How do you balance the academic demands of your program at Columbia, your professional obligations, and your translation work?

**RU:** Hmmm. I try to sleep less. And it also helps that I really love what I do. I love teaching, writing, translating, bringing books to press. So it's work, yes, but it's all love.

**NM:** Are you currently working on any translations?

**RU:** The short answer is, yes. The long answer is, I am not sure which of the fifteen projects floating around in my mind I'll end up sticking with. One thing, though, is that I'm going to continue working on Anna Frajlich's poetry. It's good for my blood pressure.

**NM:** When considering whether or not to translate a work into English, what kinds of characteristics do you look for?

**RU:** I don't know that there are any specific characteristics. A good story is a good story is a good story. Beyond that, why make rules? Who would put parameters on grand entertainment?
NM: What are your plans for the future as concerns your career and, more specifically, translating?

RU: Well, there is one Polish writer I’m NOT working on but dream of it – Edward Stachura. But I admit it, I’m afraid. Stachura’s language is so incredibly difficult, so beautiful, I don’t know that I’d be able to tackle it. Translating Stachura is like trying to climb a craggy mountain made of cotton balls.

NM: Is there anything else you’d like to add or comment on?

RU: I am so grateful to REEEC for the time I spent in Urbana. To be so far away from home, without any of the worries of the everyday, and to be able to really dig into a project – that was a gift of incredible value. What I did in a week at REEEC would have taken me a month at home, simply because I had so many experts so close at hand and such concentrated periods of time to do real work.


To learn more about the Workshop in Scholarly and Literary Translations from Slavic Languages, to be held June 16-20, 2014, at the University of Illinois, please see http://www.reeec.illinois.edu/srl/programs/translation.html.