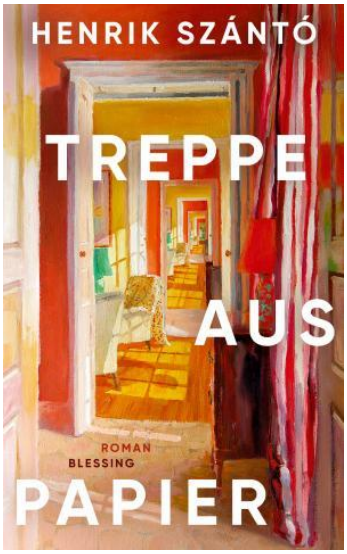
Henrik Szántó

# Paper Stairs

# [Treppe aus Papier]

## Outline + Sample Translation




Novel

Blessing, 224 pages, August 2025

What stories would the walls tell, if they could speak? A house and its inhabitants, from the Nazi era to the present day

When 15-year-old Nele Bittner and 90-year-old Irma Thon meet in the stairwell of a four-storey period building, their conversation breathes life into what Nele always thought was boring old history.

The narrator of Nele and Irma's story is the house itself, whose walls, hallways, pipes and nooks and crannies harbour the memories of all those who have lived in it over the past hundred years. Irma has a special connection to the building: she and her Nazi-supporting parents lived here when she was a child. Nele, meanwhile, lives on the top floor, in a flat once occupied by the Sternheim family – and Irma feels responsible for what happened to them.

For this house, everything happens simultaneously: when little Ruth Sternheim skips down the stairs, the house remembers the SA who, years later, will smash the window of the Sternheims' ground-floor watch shop with their truncheons. While Irma looks back on her life, Nele's questioning of her own family brings to light things they had hoped to suppress.

A daring, courageous novel about remembrance, responsibility and the shadow cast by history.

• For fans of Imre Kertész, Saša Stanišić and Jenny Erpenbeck

**Henrik Szántó**, born in 1988**,** is a half-Hungarian, half-Finnish author and presenter living in Hannover. He performs as a spoken word artist on stages across Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and has won several fellowships. He also works as an instructor, running poetry, creative writing, public speaking and performance skills seminars, and stages events showcasing both new and experienced voices. He is particularly interested in multilingualism, remembrance and multiculturalism.

# Sample Translation

**By Jo Heinrich**

**1**

The Bittners have ordered in food tonight. A hard-working guy trapped in a zero-hour contract and slightly late from the traffic takes pizzas up to the top floor. Thomas answers the door and gives him a tip. We approve. Motorcycle couriers and delivery people often come to us, and we know who the skinflints are after someone's come laden down, struggling in heatwaves or sub-zero temperatures through ice and slush to hand over the sweet and sour duck while it's still warm. Thomas isn't thinking about these working conditions as he's putting away his wallet (artificial leather, a thermoplastic polymer made from vinyl chloride); no, Thomas simply doesn't want the delivery people to mark his household down as tight-fisted.

He takes the pizzas into the kitchen, puts them on the work surface and passes Martina the cutter. While her husband leaves the room for a moment, Martina mixes sour cream and mayonnaise with spices and garlic to make a dip for the crusts and cuts the pizzas into equal slices, which she transfers to platters she's warmed in the oven.

Nele sets the table, hastily folding some paper napkins and laying them on plates. She keeps glancing at her phone, and she keeps dying inside, because Laura isn't replying. She doesn't notice her mother watching; all she can think of is Laura. She fiddles with a napkin before finally putting it down. Baloo senses his dinner's coming, and prowls around wondering when he'll next get a tickle. Nele looks over at her mother, who's scattering some herbs on the dip. Martina arches her back, closes her eyes briefly and takes a deep breath. When she sees Nele watching her, she smiles, claps her hands, says 'There!' and points questioningly at Baloo.

Nele darts past her mother, fills the dog's bowl, runs a hand over his ears and thinks about her to-do list. German; geography; history – there's no homework but she needs to revise; physics; keep out of Laura's way as things stand right now; hand out cutlery; chemistry; take Baloo out; cry; listen to the new BTS album; doctor's appointment; set the washing off; English; mock interview at the end of careers week; real interview at the end of the school year, if Nele finally gets kicked out of grammar school and has to make do with last year's exam results; maths; celebrate her birthday! It's stressful turning sixteen: your

hormones toss a coin every morning and if you're lucky it might not land wrong side up. Tossing a coin, every morning. Do the errands; clean the bathroom; negotiate pocket money with Mum; art (it sucks when you get art homework at this level); politics and economics; the future; come up with a plan; don't die of starvation; don't die of thirst; maybe a gap year and then evening classes to sit the school-leaving exams; biology; blood tests; maybe smoke weed on the quiet; driving lessons; sailing licence; Latin. The list in her notebook is never-ending, and if she looks beyond the edge of the page, an endless loop awaits her: the future, work, taxes and loneliness. Why the hell did she send Laura a video of two dogs snuggling without adding a comment? People who do that kind of thing clearly die alone. German assessment (a lifeline to make up for the days she's missed): do a presentation on a book the class doesn't have time to read because of their workload, but Nele still has to read the book to be able to do the presentation, and then, then she'd simply die alone with a pile of uncompleted tax returns, Baloo would have to go out on his own and… 'Dinner!' Mum calls, and Nele's eyes dart to her phone.

*Sweet*, Laura writes, and Nele's heart skips a beat; she sits down at the table and chomps on pizza. Between bites she looks at the phone on her lap.

Thomas thinks the edges are too crispy. 'Maybe we could make it ourselves,' he says to Martina, meaning her rather than 'we'. Martina ignores him, dunks her crust in the dip and lays her other hand on her daughter's shoulder, giving Nele the cue to drop the phone out of sight between her thighs.

'How was school?' Martina asks, and the question makes Nele's blood ring in her ears; she starts to put together an answer before finally growling the tried and tested response of 'Good': after all, teenagers speak to their parents in Morse dialect. Plenty of short answers, not so many long. Martina's face gives away the fact that she doesn't believe a word of it, and that says a great deal when it's only one word.

'What did you have today?' Thomas asks. He's looking at his plate rather than at Nele. He's distributing pineapple over the pizza slices with a fork.

'Maths, English, history.'

With each word Nele draws out the syllables a little longer, as if it's hard work adding a third one to the second. Her stomach tenses in the silence, as she knows what her mother's about to ask, and Martina knows her daughter isn't enjoying this conversation, so she focusses briefly on her breathing and her fingertips grip the tablecloth. A gift from her parents when they moved in. Thomas has his mouth full.

‘What exam have you got next?’ Martina finally asks.

‘History,’ Nele replies.

‘And after that?’

‘Maths.’

Martina takes a long look at her.

‘And then English and German,’ Nele says.

Martina nods, lets go of the tablecloth and carries on eating. She takes her eyes off Nele and casts them around the room. The sports bag, *Thomas Bittner* stitched on it, is in the corner. His gym top’s hanging out of the opening; the sweat has almost dried. Polymers with ester linkages in their main chain, with water, salts, lactates, acids and sugars, pH 4.5. The long-chain fatty acids have already broken down, revealing the smell of the push-ups, the squats, the jumping jacks. Traces of a strict routine. He follows his father’s example and still works out.

‘Have you put your things in the wash?’ Martina asks him.

‘What are you doing in history at the moment?’ Thomas asks. ‘Is it the Hitler years?’

Nele is about to answer when Martina repeats her question.

‘Not yet, love,’ he replies.

Martina rolls her eyes and looks over to Nele again. We are familiar with the expression Martina uses to get Nele to do the washing, freeing herself from the sweaty sports things as well as Nele’s mounting leaden rage.

‘Well?’ asks Thomas, who doesn’t want to be distracted by the minutiae of housework, and whose appetite isn’t going to be spoiled by the gravity of Nele’s topic. Nele finally nods. Thomas seems satisfied.

‘And? How are you finding it?’

‘Fascinating,’ Nele lies. They’ve actually finished 1945 and are now looking at the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, but Nele refrains from putting him right and eats faster instead.

‘As my old man liked to say, they were different times,’ says Thomas, folding his slice of pizza.

When no one reacts, we hear the sounds of dough on china, sweetcorn kernels and pineapple pieces falling onto plates; a fork plays with a tomato half, Martina eats to the crusts and then dunks them in garlic dip while she talks to Thomas about the weekend and

the bathroom fan. Nele gives up after the third slice. Not even melted cheese can bring out her appetite.

'Can I go to my room? I've got more revision to do,' she says.

'May I,' Martina automatically corrects her and casts an ambiguous glance over the two thirds of the pizza left.

'Clear the table first, though,' she adds, and the thundering in Nele's ears fades. She hurriedly drops the plates in the sink and empties her dad's sports bag into the washing machine. Thomas is reminiscing about his father, and he starts bringing up Grandpa's other sayings.

'Thanks, pumpkin,' she hears him say as she gently closes the door behind her.

*Sweet*, Laura wrote. Nele reads the message eleven times over, then Baloo becomes restless and she gets the lead.

Martina is doing another online seminar about inclusive style and image consultation, and she arranges her sofa as the background, following the principle of staged homeliness. She tucks the empty pizza cartons under Nele's arm; she doesn't want to be disturbed later.

The stairwell is where the past pulsates the most. A procession of all the footsteps ever taken in us. The Bittners live on the top floor, and when Nele steps outside the door with the cartons under her arm, to us the pizza delivery man's still there, and next to him Martina Bittner double-locking the door every morning, the paramedics who were summoned in 2003, long before the Bittners lived here, and for good measure the guy who called for the paramedics in question, although it turned out only to be heartburn and not a cardiac arrest. Mr. Sternheim is off to one side, praising Ruth's school report. 68 years separate him from the paramedics. His wife greets him with a kiss on the cheek. Mr. Sternheim looks at his watch with growing concern. Ruth's cleaning her smart shoes. The flat's being vacated and sealed off. Boxes line the hallway. People are constantly moving in or out on our stairs; someone's always throwing open a new door, full of hope, or closing the one they know so well for good. As with the flat opposite Nele's that's empty right now, where the neighbours she liked used to live.

She puts on her headphones and bounces down the stairs, weighing up which video she could send to Laura next. She takes off her headphones on the third floor to hear if anything's kicking off in the students' flat. The only thing kicking off is Özlem's blood pressure, as she's struggling with her application for a master's degree abroad; moving away

from home was such a big deal in the first place, but Mira's currently organising her Erasmus term and so she's a great help with these things. Suji ought to be stressed by her friends' impending relocation, but a new love is balancing that out with distraction and serenity. Nele doesn't know the three young women's names, but they all say a friendly hello when they see her, and Nele's interested in how these adult students spend their time, and rightly so: after all, their flat holds the sediment of four decades of student life, and we're sorry Nele never had the opportunity to meet the physics student who likes to explain the concept of linear time at the legendary 1986 party (three police cars and even a sniffer dog, and a patrol car later for a good poke around) as that student's explanation has stayed with us ever since, and the police dog was – unfortunately we have to use the past tense here for biological reasons – called Siduri, which the main tenant finds funny, because he's doing his doctorate on Gilgamesh. Two years later he drops out of university.

Today there's little for Nele to hear on the third floor except engine noises from the old man's apartment opposite the students. Maybe he's fallen asleep in front of the TV. Raivis, the gentleman in question, takes great offence to being described as 'old', and in fact he hasn't fallen asleep; he's busy listening to his audio cassettes from days gone by, on which he compiled the sounds of various racetracks, and he's contemplating which new passion would suit him now he can't travel as much, but Nele doesn't know that, and her dog, who's pulling a little on the lead, even though he knows he shouldn't, isn't interested in cars or cassettes, but in the shrubs outside our entrance.

Maybe Baloo can still smell the sniffer dog. He's been up and down the stairs with Nele hundreds of times. The people who live higher up flow through us in a continuous stream. There's a constant toing and froing in the stairwell. Surrounded by her own self, Nele passes everything that's gone before her. She cuts through the much-too-big satchels on the little shoulders, then she bounces on, her Patagonia backpack thrown casually over her shoulder, towards the adventures of puberty, before hormones and doubts over an increasingly complex world take effect. We can see her with her hair dyed blue, coming home from swimming, and with her father carrying her up as a baby, wrapped in white fleece, his eyes tired and free of wrinkles, supporting his wife, then struggling up the stairs with three suitcases, and Nele's mother stone-faced, enduring a tantrum and pulling the screaming Nele behind her. Nele meets herself on the way downstairs, full of hope, just finished primary school and proud of her results. We can see her friends who come round for dinner after school, until they don't come any more. Nele brushes past herself crying on

the step because an argument with Mum has escalated, and she overtakes herself struggling downstairs, manhandling the wheeled case she's packed to go and live with Grandma and Grandpa. A little later, she's whimpering as she drags the case back up, because she couldn't remember the way. Her parents haven't gone to look for her. Nele traverses through time, the centre of attention, a coveted child on the throne in her mother's womb. This time is short-lived. When work and daily life knock her off her pedestal, Nele often looks for something to do between the spindles of our banisters and keeps an eye out for her grandparents, who do know how to celebrate her existence in style. We can see her prancing around her grandpa's legs or pausing obediently while Grandma straightens her bow. Nele doesn't accuse her parents of having hoped for a son, but it does occur to her that her father's better with boys. Just as it occurs to her that Mum gets really tense as soon as a child starts screaming. And in fact, Grandma and Grandpa don't remain in her memory forever. But on the stairs at least, her time with them doesn't fade away completely, and bygone moments swarm past Nele on her way to the front door.

We always like it when Nele and Ruth Sternheim brush past each other, as the thought that they might have got on well comforts us. Maybe they would have chatted about past tenants: the woman who likes to draw with charcoal, the man who holds eye contact for far too long and who's scared of deep water, the tax clerk who can't be convinced that the moon landing actually happened, and the silver spoon collector who likes to belt out songs and who's glued to the TV in July 1969. We know how the families sit together at the table behind closed doors and weave their own legends by alternating between omissions and embellishments. We know how many hours it really takes to prepare a Christmas goose and what the secret ingredients are. We know the household remedies and the secrets entrusted to each other. The little ones and the incriminating ones. We know how convinced many people are that their own grandparents, parents, uncles or aunts were in the Resistance. On the quiet, at least, and if they weren't, only very reluctantly would they have gone along with things, as it was a dangerous situation and anyone who didn't go along with things was simply bumped off. Anyone who moves into us brings their family with them, whether in the holiday snaps on the fridge, in the emergency contacts on their phones or purely in their memories. In the question marks, the unspoken accusations or overlooked appreciation. Children become men, become women or decide for themselves what they want to be, become fathers, mothers, parents, and care for their fathers, mothers, parents when earlobes and nasal hairs grow longer and the weight of the

years ploughs furrows. They all shuffle by with their heads down, past the doors and the mats with keys hidden beneath them.

Nele walks through police officers, Amazon drivers, undertakers, the clerk who worked for the Gestapo, GIs. People dance around her with mountains of washing and shopping. Letting agents sweat in their stiff suits while they show people flats and break down the additional costs for them. Nearby the remains of slush and snow fall from boot soles, drips of rain mingle with dust, and Mrs. Georgiadou is unveiling her first Thermomix before it's even in her flat. There are decades of old bottles and jars outside the doors. Bags of them from before the deposit system was introduced, and among them, people gathering up the glass and taking it off in the hope of a little money back.

Nele hurries past the second floor. There's plenty of movement off to the left; tenants change frequently. The ones living there the longest are a boy with his mother; it's during the 2006 World Cup that he can first be heard swearing about black people at the top of his voice, and now it's another flat share there: two men, quiet. Doru lives there with Peter, who doesn't want his old friend living on his own under any circumstances after his heart transplant.

To the right live Patrick und Yvonne, whose fights often resound through us and can be so loud they've even woken Nele on the fourth floor in the past. Once her mum shouted back, and her 'Get a grip on yourselves or I'll call the police, for God's sake!' still echoes within us: it's quite something when Martina sets aside her agnosticism and turns to threats laden with divinity.

Girlfriends and boyfriends, romances and encounters, mistakes and hostilities interweave between permanent residents and people entrusted with keys, loved ones who can come and go, and then their final days, the farewells, slammed doors, unanswered love letters and discarded peace-offering bouquets. The sum of their steps determines how loud their lives are, and we can hear every single one, even the solitary, tentative ones, hidden in the everyday background noise.

Our breath smells of onions on the first floor. Every Wednesday Irma cooks her onion soup there, and Nele can tell it's Wednesday from the aroma. Every single receptor on the cells of her respiratory tract remembers the smell. It makes the floorboards rise and fall. Irma Thon regularly opens the windows braced between our ribs, and Thomas Bittner at the top sometimes starts swearing and even takes in the washing from the hallway, which is unusual for him. Irma's been cooking her onion soup for 36 years. One day, the loudmouths

from the second floor complain, and Irma cooks onion soup every day for a week and serves up a taster in her best bowls to all the residents. They all think it's delicious, and everything's fine after that. Even Torsten, the caretaker, gets some. He's up a ladder repairing the first-floor light that hangs too low, as a result getting knocked and broken by a wall unit, broom or shelf every time anyone moves in or out. A frosted glass sphere, constantly being smashed and replaced afresh, on, off, intact, broken: a light that exists in both conditions, with Torsten sweating beneath it, a screwdriver between his teeth. Once, someone pees against our door on their way home and is caught in the act by Torsten. He briefly forgets the breathing exercises from his anger management course, and while we don't advocate violence, we do favour consequences. It's gratifying when a man with his trousers at half mast has to scarper from consequence personified, known as Torsten. We appreciate Torsten. He ought to be appreciated for everything he has to put right. When Nele sees him, a trace of fear washes over her at the sight of his tattooed arms, but Baloo likes him and Torsten always asks if he can stroke him.

Opposite Irma, there lives a young family who are rarely there, because the parents-in-law live nearby and they have a garden. As the family have no time for dogs, Nele has no time for them either and she's always slightly relieved when she doesn't bump into them with Baloo.

Nele reaches the bottom of the stairs and has her first actual real-life physical encounter. Irma's standing by the postboxes, just back from her evening walk, one hand on her stick and the other holding her bunch of keys and trembling. Nele wonders about her trembling and how she manages to do her makeup so perfectly. We know how: with patience. A discreet hint of perfume surrounds Irma; her blouse with its starched collar is impeccably ironed. Baloo is panting amicably. Nele takes off her headphones and puts down her cartons.

'Hello,' she says, 'Can I help?'

Irma nods, and Nele unlocks the postbox, opens the lid and sees there's nothing inside, while a procession of postmen and women is stuffing letters, leaflets, postcards, parcels, catalogues and padded envelopes into the slots. Irma stands there patiently, the tenth decade of her life in full swing, next to herself as a child. An inquisitive girl, with a stern 'Irmgard!' being yelled to her from the first floor. Irma, neat and dishevelled, composed and confused, defiant and meek. Irma the child, and Irma the old woman. Nele locks the postbox and Irma sees her beloved dad, who brings her sweets in the fold of his newspaper, who

always takes off his leather gloves before giving her the confectionery, who distributes the letters and opens the ones addressed to the Sternheims beforehand. Her father, who faint-heartedly creeps around the building, who haughtily raises his chin, pauses in his freshly polished boots and remembers the long days at the post office, who clicks his heels loyally and sets the young ones to work on the business in our façade, a man reformed by his zeal for his Führer, and beside him the colleague who turns up during the War to report to him.

'Nothing there,' says Nele, laying the postbox key in Irma's creviced palm.

'It's better that way,' replies Irma. Her eyes bright, her voice thin. 'At my age no news is good news.' Nele smiles although the words make her sad, and Baloo yanks on the lead, and with it, Nele from her thoughts.

'Have a nice evening!' she calls, a little too loudly, and Irma, very pleased with her Danish hearing aids, smiles, says the same and is left alone at the foot of the stairs.

**2**

In the time you call the present, sixteen people are living in us, divided into eight separate tenancies. Raivis is pushing his reading glasses up his nose and poring over a catalogue of kitchen knives. Opposite, Suji is on Facetime with her new heartthrob, while Özlem's writing on a white envelope and putting her application inside. Peter is clearing out boxes; Doru's rehabilitation is being extended, to Peter's relief; he can stop the workaholic from fitting a kitchen while his scar's still healing. Yvonne's on the phone to her mother, Patrick's on a shift, and Mira's looking for a thank-you gift for her Erasmus coordinator in the shop on the ground floor. There's a bookshop there, with a constantly changing selection of other items. Greetings cards, calendars, colouring books and card games were recently joined by mugs, and wool has just been added to the range. To date, 217 different people have lived in us; nine have died here, and 22 babies were conceived but only three born here. One of these three, Irma, is living here again and, turning ninety this year, she will have spent the most time with us. If we were a tree, Irma would be a growth ring with a missing centre. The first baby's name is Ruth. The third is on the way. That might sound like a riddle, but there's no need to concern yourself.

We come into being in 1899, just skimming the 19th century. The documents that remain are meticulous, listing surnames and professions. In the first few decades, our occupants included bath attendants, clockmakers, postmasters, carriage drivers, street masons, butchers, metal turners, war-wounded, boilermen, beer delivery men, grocers, engravers, pipe fitters, carters, kennelmen, clerks, fire station officers, electricians, even more war-wounded after 1945, forwarding agents, clerical workers, typesetters, auditors, stove fitters, ice-cream sellers, motor mechanics, tax assistants, then at that point the earliest Italian workers appear in the records with first names and surnames, but with no profession, which might sound strange but they had to take on too many jobs to all fit in such a small section. The job titles are dropped in the seventies, and everyone appears with their first names. This is also the case for the women who aren't single, who before then were invisible, subsumed under their spouse's household. That's until the first names disappear again, as conspicuously living alone as a woman can also represent a risk. It's not easy, we regret to say. Especially if you have migrated here. Some have a short journey and come from a nearby town; others travel hundreds or thousands of miles. We take them all in: families

from Poland, Turkey and, over three generations ago, Greece. We welcome a couple from Morocco and a student from Japan, and now we host Raivis from Latvia, Sugi from India and Doru from Romania. We rejoice in every country brought to us, every well-travelled memory and every new language, as even just a short stay adds precious facets to our world. We look upon the outside world with curiosity. We get some things, but most we don't. We're just one place among many, and we only have a vague idea of the subtleties and fates that make you so unique in your experience and reasoning. That is precisely why you're so welcome here and why we're so curious about the riches you bring.

We've been renovated. Our façade might be modest, but we feel magnificent. Our pipes take the waste to the sewage system at a satisfying rate. It's an exhalation, and when the wastewater leaves the scope of our perception, our belly relaxes. We inhale the electricity. Voltage streams from the invisible cables, filling us with energy that races out of the switches. Should you consider living in us, rest assured: it's reasonable. The location's good, and the people trustworthy, as soon as you get to know them. The maintenance company goes to great lengths; the Danish property conglomerate is discreet. Rubbish is disposed of at the beginning of the month.

In the time you call the past, people live in us in very confined spaces. All is calm in the first few years, just after the Great War. According to the land register, our owner's name is Alwin Sternheim. A quiet man with elegantly trimmed fingernails, who maintains clock mechanisms with the utmost care on the ground floor. A man who volunteered to fight for his country to show his loyalty for the new fatherland, and who in thanks was berated as a slacker and a wet blanket in the trenches, between bullets and boredom, trench foot and bread padded out with sawdust. A man awarded medals for outstanding bravery and promoted to officer. A man who's carrying his firstborn in a bundle up and down our stairs and carefully putting one foot in front of the other without taking his eyes off the gurgling soul entrusted to him by Golda: Ruth. It's early morning, and Alwin's walking up and down the stairs with her to let his wife recover from the night.

His first steps are tentative; he cradles her as he goes, as if the slightest vibration might disturb Ruth's slumber, until a new-found confidence slackens Alwin's frown lines and he draws her to his chest, humming softly. With every footstep he inhales her scent, and with every breath that widens his nostrils, he feels taller and stronger.

One of the metal turners from the third floor is leaving for work and congratulates his landlord on becoming a father so loudly that Ruth begins to stir. The metal turner's mother stands in the doorway and shakes her head at his effusiveness, before congratulating Alwin too. He nods, wishes them a good day and carries on humming, but Ruth will not settle. An initial cry goes through our stairwell, and Alwin, on the fourth floor by now, looks out of the window and remembers the song his mother sang as she held him in her arms in the back of a carriage when he was barely three years old: 'Shlof main Fegele'. When he closes his eyes he can still feel the rough fabric of her sleeve against his cheek. The smell of soot and coal under her fingernails. He can hear the smack of the hooves in the mud and the creak as the carriage takes a bend. How his mother holds him so he can see the way ahead, and strokes his hair, just as he's doing with Ruth's now.