Passing the Porto: An AIIC Assembly diary

Now I do make sacrifices for the profession. I got up at about 4.30 on a very crisp January morning so I could fly to Porto. I am telling you all this so you can appreciate my sacrifice.

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You know what it’s like when you have this uncomfortable feeling that you should be doing something. There’s a knot in your handkerchief, but you can’t quite remember why. Well, that was exactly the feeling I had as I left my local pub "The Ferret and Focus Group" this January.

I reported said feeling to my ever-loving spouse. “It’s the AIIC Assembly, you nit”, she said. And she added darkly: “Portuguese men ask for directions. Look at Humphrey the Navigator”.

Now I do make sacrifices for the profession. I got up at about 4.30 on a very crisp January morning so I could fly to Porto. We don’t have direct flights from here, so it involved travelling via Frankfurt. I am telling you all this so you can appreciate my sacrifice.

I arrived in Porto before the assembly proper so I could attend meetings of the private market sector and the intersectoral meeting. In the dim and distant past AIIC held an Assembly in Lisbon to provide the country with some light relief from negotiating to join the EU, although back then it was simply a rather common market.

I must admit that I don’t remember much of the private market sector meeting this time round because of my jetlag, but the intersectoral was great fun. There were people there from all our agreement sectors, and we just sat back and watched the UN posse squabble. But, hey, they’re consistent. They agree about nothing.

Day 1

We are ushered into an aircraft hanger that has icicles hanging from the ceiling. We are welcomed to Portugal by the mayor and the Portuguese President, but O Presidente – you can tell I’ve been brushing up my Portuguese – does it by video having taken the wise decision to admire us from a distance.

A judge from the ECJ talks about the different ways we owe a duty of confidentiality to those who employ us. I am of course not at liberty to divulge what he said. Then a poet tells us about the delights of Porto. He addresses the city: O Porto. That’s why the Brits call it Oporto. It’s the vocative case that you learned with your school Latin. O table! O mouse! And who says what you learn at school does not prepare you for life?

After the dignitaries had gone I looked around the room at the crème de la profession in its finery.
In honour of the occasion I have donned my caribou furs and Davey Crockett hat. I really cut quite a dash.

On the first day the President gave his report. He told us about all that we had done since the last assembly in Dakar. It’s an impressive list. Here’s a new party game for you. Without looking at your pre-assembly Bulletin, name five activities AIIC has run during the last three years. If you can’t name five you have to do a forfeit. You have to spend an hour in the Alfandega dressed only in tee shirt and shorts while whistling the theme tune from *Jaws*.

Our Portuguese colleagues have arranged the assembly here expertly. Silvia Camilo, the Portuguese powerhouse, has probably kept them hard at it. With her in Lisbon and Danielle Gree, the Catalan force field, in Barcelona, it’s little wonder the Iberian Peninsula is in constant uproar.

Those who have read my meanderings in the past will remember that I set out my report with a day-by-day account of the meeting. This time I spent so much time in Porto – a whole week – that I cannot quite remember what happened when. Or why. Of course the big news is that I was elected onto the AIIC council. I would like to believe this is due to my youthful looks, boyish charm and witty repartee. But I think it was just buggin’s turn.

The meeting has not been underway for long when I realise that I’m facing a problem. In the old days an AIIC get-together was a mixture of group therapy, condescension and sheer bloody-mindedness. Now all is sweetness and light. The people who know this sort of thing tell me that it all goes back to the Dakar assembly where AIIC leaped from petulant childhood to serene maturity. But all these things have a downside. You will all remember that when Mrs Thatcher stepped down as Britain’s prime minister, satirists and cartoonists wept copious tears at losing the butt of their wit. Having worked hard on my reputation as the AIIC court jester, here I am with nothing much to laugh at. I’ll be having words with that Malik Sy.

**Day 2**

There is a certain British – well in fact English – influence on Porto. The pillar-boxes are all red and shaped like their British counterparts. The port wine industry is in Anglo-Portuguese hands. And the local dish seems to be fish and chips. The fish comes in huge portions, as if you’d ordered whale in batter. This is a deeply religious country with a lot of shops selling religious artefacts. Dinner here was accordingly once described by a traveller as “the piece of cod which passeth all understanding”.

After years working in an unappreciative world we interpreters are now seeking international recognition. We will be helped in this by UNESCO. It’s not UNESCO I have to win over, but my children. They are convinced that my life is an extended holiday. This is an exciting project and it will certainly help when people claim that AIIC is not representative. And keep the kids quiet.

AIIC has a group called NIT. We appear to take perverse pleasure in coining acronyms that are plain silly. We have PMS (I don’t need to explain – you all watch *Sex in the City*), now GUF. Guff is slightly old-fashioned British slang for rubbish, as in “a load of old guff”. NIT stands for New Information Technologies. Presumably anyone who cracks a joke on that committee is a NITWIT.

Let’s have a competition. The aim is to come up with a plausible yet faintly ridiculous acronym by the end of April. Post them below. The winner will get to take me out to dinner where I will regale the lucky person with stories about my inherited shortness of breath and ingrown toenails.

At the beginning of the Assembly I sat at the back of the room, but then moved forward to be near the seat of power. Well all right, I went and sat next to Jenny Mackintosh.

Do you realise AIIC is 50 years old this year? Me too. I will be posting full mailing address and
wish list on this site early summer so you can all get your gifts to me on time. As part of the celebration for AIC we are planning a knees-up in Paris in July, to be divided into a formal part and a party. They are looking for people with a particular talent (speaking Dutch doesn’t count) so if you are a musician, author, painter or snake charmer, now’s your chance. Some nifty footwork by Silvia will give us considerable coverage in the trade press and we have also produced a bookmark in hieroglyphics. I’ve scanned the book and website and I don’t think anyone speaks ancient Egyptian. It could say anything. “Is Ghiza within the couronne for Babylon?”

The high point of the day is the elections. Jenny Mackintosh is the new AIC president. You know, she once gave me such a turn. I was in my kitchen with my soft girl-like hands plunged into the caring suds, when all of a sudden I hear JM telling me to obey the Maastricht criteria. She was being the Minister of Finance of somewhere and speaking on the news. But it was quite a shock.

Before the elections I make a vain attempt to strike a leadership pose. I set my jaw in clenched determination. “Is it a touch of flatulence?” my neighbour asks. Despite such lèse-majesté I am elected as the representative of UK, Ireland and the Czech Republic. We Brits adopted the Czechs, mainly to stop them bouncing.

Day 3

My way of keeping warm is to try and guess the day of the week. You know what it’s like when you work at meetings that stretch over the weekend. You lose all track of time, and sometimes of place. AIC is so active that you have to concentrate to follow: a council report, a council committee, a project, a committed council, a standing committee, a report, and – that all time favourite – basic texts. So you stay-at-homes can see it wasn’t all beer and skittles in Porto.

We have a report from staff interpreters, and their main problems are a receding hairline and the need to learn Slovenian in a week. They spent a lot of time talking about enlargement, which sounds like something from the classifieds at the back of a lad-mag, but they mean the EU is about to grow. The main challenge I can see is actually recognising the language being spoken before you know where to find the relay. They’ll have a runner behind the booths shouting “It’s Estonian you doughnuts, channel 44…”

Day 4

The French region has had AIC watches produced and they are selling like hot cakes. They have the AIC logo, a minute, hour and second hand. A must-have accoutrement for the interpreter about town. Despite being chronometrically equipped, we appear to be blissfully unaware that we are running out of time. Although we now have sweetness and light (vide supra) colleagues still feel the need to take the floor to agree at length. Today’s plato fuerte is New Admission Criteria. It sounds like an economic recovery programme from the American depression, but it’s really all about letting more interpreters into our frightfully exclusive club. The discussion ranges far and wide, and I have to admit that at times my mind wanders, although I am jolted back to the here and now when Danielle Gree starts talking about elephants. I check with the person sitting next to me that AIC deals only with human communication. “It was a metaphor, you dipstick”. Sneaky buggers them metaphors.

The argument wends this way and that, appears to die down only to break out again in another part of the hall. Can we cede admission to an outside body? Are freelance tests reliable? Is testing a fair way to establish an interpreter’s ability to do the job? Who shot JR? One has to concede that cogent arguments were made on both sides. In the end we stick to the current system.
Sex. Now I’ve got your attention I’m going to talk to you about the budget. There is never enough money but lots of ideas about what to spend it on. We have agreed to increase dues by 12 per cent. We need extra money for the 50th anniversary and to give everyone an email address on the AIIC system. In future you can find me at clothears@dk1wfud.aiic.net.

The Interprètes sans frontières project is not accepted because colleagues worry it could become a source of compassion tourism. Fair enough, but what am I expected to do with the 15 litres of factor 35 sun block I bought at the January sales?

We do not manage to get through the agenda.

Post Assembly council

Let me try to cast some light on this secretive organisation. New members are led into the debating chamber, where the high wizard holds a woggle stick and asks in thunderous tones “Who seeks enlightenment?” The applicants have to answer three questions picked at random:

- What is a reasonable per diem for Gothenburg?
- Is a PECO:
  - A hybrid fruit half pear half coconut?
  - An avian kiss?
  - A country somewhere east of Berlin all hot and heavy to join AIIC?
- What is CACL and why?

If I told you the rest, I’d have to kill you.

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