Letter from the Editor: Remembrance

Recalling our history should move from celebrating notable achievements to defending all translators and interpreters who face problems today.

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I sometimes wonder if there is some sharp edge to conference interpreting that carves a timeline into the human brain. Or are chronologically-gifted humans equitably distributed among all professions and trades? Whatever it is, it would seem that many colleagues have the uncanny ability to pinpoint an event as having occurred just after “the XYZ conference” and just before “the PDQ seminar”. Perhaps it comes from so much jotting in pocket agendas and PDAs.

AIIC’s timeline is now at 50, as our readers surely remember having been told as much countless times already this year. The association was born on November 11, 1953 in Paris, so there was certain logic in having our birthday party in the City of Light. Our gadfly reporter Phil Smith was there and managed to remember enough of the festivities to file a fairly accurate chronicle of a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

The bash set me to remembering also. Upon entering the Kleber International Conference Center, I was given a card with my assigned dinner table: “Sacagawea” was all it said. Hmmm…. could this be a French word I had forgotten? One of those verlan backslang inventions perhaps? Wait, I was born in the USA and this is history night: interpreter… woman … Native American … Lewis and Clark. Got it!

Sacagawea was born a Shoshone but spent part of her childhood among the Hidatsa. In the language of the former her name means “boat launcher,” while in that of the latter it means “bird woman.” At 16 she joined the Lewis and Clark expedition that was heading west over the Rocky Mountains into what is now the northwest United States. She was deemed to be useful for her command of both the Shoshone and Hidatsa language. In other words, at the age of 16 she became an interpreter. She was the only woman to accompany the party all the way to the Pacific Ocean and back.

I don’t know about you, but when I think of interpreters in history I recall the danger of the messenger being punished for the message. Recently Jean François Leduc, a staff interpreter at ESCAP here in Bangkok, passed on this image of what such chastisement could be like. Information with the picture suggests that the punishment was for having deliberately made an “error.” True or not, we’ll never know.

“No doubt they want his professional services, but, having used him, they may be inclined to punish him for what they will regard as his treachery.” No, that was not a quote found under the engraving; it is in fact taken from fiction, uttered by no less a genius than Sherlock Holmes (in “The Greek Interpreter” by Arthur Conan Doyle)
Thinking of such perils – certainly not relegated to the annals of history as we are reminded all too often these days – brings to mind the opportunity I had to interpret for the International Freedom of Expression eXchange, an international grouping of press organisations that puts out alerts on violations of free expression occurring around the world. Around that time (2001), AIIC had issued a press release on the imprisonment of two translator/interpreters. I discovered that IFEX had issued alerts on the same occurrence as it had also affected journalists. I remember feeling proud of my professional association on that occasion. I hope we will continue to keep our collective antenna up and come to the defense of all members of the interpreting community who run into such problems.

To get back to the business at hand, one of our most widely read articles this year was Elsa Michael Sacristán’s piece on interpreting jokes and swear words. Elsa rejoins us to talk about those rebellious words that just won’t behave and provoke tongue twirling in the booth. She even offers a few anecdotes (or do I mean antidotes?).

Patricia Longley, interpreter and teacher of interpreters, is remembered by many. She established the Conference Interpreting Techniques course in London. Recently the University of Westminster held a commemoration ceremony in her honor. Phil Smith attended and recalls what Pat meant to so many people.

There has been a recent spate of language courses designed for interpreters – a very welcome trend indeed. Getting that passive language up to snuff – or simply keeping it there – is not exactly easy, and traditional language courses don’t cater to our needs. AIIC regions and members are filling the gap. In this issue we offer a review of a French Refresher Course recently offered in Paris. Thanks go to Idette Swetye and Estela Zaffaroni for putting finger to keyboard for Communicate!.

In February 2001, we published a paper by Marzena Drabek asking for input to her MA thesis on anticipation strategies in simultaneous interpretation. It would seem that her strategy worked – she got the anticipated responses from readers (and her MA!). She remembered and has come back for more. Interested in creativity in simultaneous? Have any notions about it? Read her article and leave a comment.

One thing I never have to remember to do is drink coffee. Recently I was in northern Thailand and just had to have a cup of this joe: Arabica Viengping – the coffee of nobility, special formula for good people, strongly bitter like English noble people but sweet like “honey”, a little bit like charming Thai ladies from northern Thailand. Now that is true intercultural transubstantiation! If you hear of any job openings for menu writers, please remember to contact me. If not, we’ll meet again in December.

And Happy Birthday to 50 year olds the world over.

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Picture: An interpreter being punished – an engraving found in India by D. Stephens

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