AIIC 50th birthday celebrations in Berlin

For once interpreters were in the spotlight when long-standing users of interpreting services paid tribute to a profession which takes pride in invisibility.

Katherine VANOVITCH.
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When the German Foreign Office moved from Bonn to Berlin, they must have brought a spirit of Karneval to the sandy wastes of Brandenburg. The festivities in the Auswärtiges Amt to mark AIIC’s 50th birthday turned the world topsy-turvy for one seditious evening, as interpreters hogged the limelight while long-standing clients paid tribute to a profession which takes pride in invisibility.

From back office to master of ceremonies, diligent polyglots demonstrated what we all secretly suspected: that the best way to run an efficient conference is to leave things to the interpreters. True, there were a few jitters close to the day that the guest list was spiralling beyond the 200 mark and that the Europasaal would overflow, but despite rumours to the contrary local members were not instructed to refrain from drinking the champagne. Chatter was sustained by an excellent buffet as many an old acquaintance was revived. The German region was out in force, doubtless attracted by a double bill featuring a weekend AGM, but there were also many friends of the profession – users, teachers, journalists, one-time colleagues and hopeful newcomers. Indeed, fellow AIIC members even arrived from remote corners of Europe, like Lisbon and Sutton Coldfield, apparently for the mere pleasure of toasting our common history.

The AA did more than kindly supply a venue befitting the occasion. Live music was provided by jAAzz – men from the ministry revealing skills we rarely witness. But it was the panel debate, the official highlight of the evening, which afforded the most striking role reversal between the interpreting community and the political and commercial world we serve, with men and women of public standing acknowledging a debt to our profession.

From left to right: Jörg Moberg, Director of Sales, Fidelity Investment Services GmbH; His Excellency Mr. Andrzej Byrt, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland; Jennifer Mackintosh, President of AIIC; Martin Schulze, Phoenix TV (moderator); Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, former Federal Government Commissioner for Foreigners’ Issues; Hans-Dietrich Genscher, former Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs; and Nobert Glante, MEP

The theme was “Comprehension – understanding: The role of the interpreter in international communication today and tomorrow.” The discussion was chaired with much empathy by TV journalist Martin Schulze, musing that interpreters collectively may well deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Addressing communication scenarios rather than the obvious matter of language, he questioned panellists about the rapport they seek to develop with their interpreters. With ex-foreign
minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher he discussed the importance of trust in critical diplomatic meetings, with Euro-MP Norbert Glante how working with interpreters can enhance parliamentary rhetoric, and with Jörg Moberg from the world of high finance the value to business clients of a well-initiated interpreter. (Fortunately Jenny Mackintosh was on the panel to recall that interpreters liked nothing better than to be thoroughly initiated by a client and that it was once customary to be paid for a good briefing.) Andrzej Byrt, Poland’s Ambassador to Germany, reminisced about his own youthful interpreting experiences and the vicissitudes of intercultural communication. Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobson, once federal commissioner for foreign residents (and the daughter of an aiic founder), observed that there are many areas in society where such communication is still undervalued. Our president talked of future challenges – EU enlargement, remote interpreting – and throughout 90 lively minutes of debate she remained the ready-tongued guardian of professional standards and interpreters’ health. The 90 minutes passed rapidly and the moderator broke with conference tradition by deciding to conclude while everyone was still interested in the subject.

Flattered by so much wise and witty attention, an audience of interpreters withdrew once again into the shadows. There are many to thank for their efforts. We do so namelessly.

Photograph: Christa Zander
German region of AIIC: www.aiic.de

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