Letter from the President: Bonne année!

New Year is traditionally a time for taking stock: AIIC, with its 2685 members across the world, should be no exception.

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Last November I was invited, as AIIC President, to give the keynote speech at a conference organised by the Shanghai International Studies University on the part played by AIIC in the professionalisation of conference interpreting. Although very familiar with AIIC history, I was very struck, in preparing my paper, by the overwhelming importance of AIIC’s role in establishing this relatively new profession which, despite often being referred to as the second oldest, only really came into being at the Nuremberg Trials held after the 2nd World War. When the association was set up in 1953, our founding fathers and mothers (as we know, conference interpreting is a largely female profession) set about drawing up a code of professional ethics, agreeing on standards designed to protect members’ health and well-being and establishing relations with the major international organisations on working conditions. In 2003, AIIC members celebrated its 50 years of existence with memorable events across the world, including a spectacular soirée of theatre, music and dance in the very rooms at UNESCO in Paris in which the founding meeting was held.

In order not only to remain in touch with its worldwide membership but to reach out to users of interpretation services, would-be interpreters, potential clients, AIIC has developed this sophisticated website on which you can not only read Communicate! but also find information on all aspects of the profession. This Spring, the BizOrg project will come online, enabling conference organisers to find the names of bona fide consultant interpreters virtually anywhere in the world. Young interpreters and students will be able to go onto the AIIC Vega website to find guidance on how to join the profession, where to go and what to do on their first day in one of the large international organisations. And would-be interpreters can already consult the list of interpreting courses which meet the training criteria agreed by the association. AIIC’s highly professional Secretariat in Geneva coordinates the activities of the Council as well as numerous committees, working groups and negotiating delegations. A General Assembly is held every three years (the next one will be in Brussels in 2006) which any member may attend and cast his/her vote.

AIIC is a well-run, well-oiled machine – but even the best have to face new challenges, and new challenges there are. The two principal ones may seem somewhat paradoxical, until one remembers that AIIC covers the entire world. Members in Europe face a rapidly expanding European Union which jumped from 13 languages to 20 overnight, whereas in other parts of the world there is a growing inclination to conduct international meetings in just one language (usually English), which is not always conducive to good communication if only because this can be a deterrent to those who might otherwise make a significant contribution to the debate.

The problems that can arise when a meeting is conducted in 20 languages have been entertainingly
discussed in the media, but for the interpreters they are of vital importance. There are logistical problems: how many interpreting booths can be fitted into a meeting hall and how are the other booths to be linked to the meeting room in such a way as to ensure the necessary sound quality and lines of sight? No interpreter can know all 20 languages so it may be necessary to interpret from another interpreter’s rendition of the original message, involving a number of additional mental processes. There can be pressure to acquire one or more of the newly added languages to add to one’s usefulness in such a multilingual setting. In all of these areas AIIC and its members are working together with the organisations concerned to find the best solutions: a demonstration of the fact that AIIC is recognised by the employer organisations as a partner.

My new year’s resolution? To build on that spirit of partnership to the benefit of members and users alike.

Happy New Year!

This Issue

In our first article we revisit Nuremberg through Tanya Gesse’s interview with Peter Less, who “attended the Geneva School of Conference Interpretation and, in 1946, interpreted at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals.” The conversation delves into Less’ personal history as well as his experience as an interpreter at the trials.

Communicate! has published various articles on Nuremberg. After reading the interview, you may want to take a look at: “Justice in Four Languages or "Interpreters and Mistresses” by Ruth Morris, “Tout a commencé à Nuremberg...” by Marie-France Skuncce, and “The Nuremberg Trial” by Patricia Vander Elst.

Next up, Michelle Keating introduces us to the International Criminal Court, a new international body headquartered in The Hague. A staff interpreter at the ICC herself, Michelle aptly describes the court, its recruitment practices and working conditions. She concludes with some pertinent comparisons of court and conference interpreting. For more on court interpreting, consult our September 2000 issue.

Every year the AIIC Staff Interpreters’ Committee reviews and updates the situation in international organisations. Glean information on structure, recruitment, working conditions, salaries and evaluation systems in the latest Overview of Organisations.

We may work with the spoken language, but we also recognize the importance of unspoken language. A group of University of Geneva students - Chantal Besson, Daria Graf, Insa Hartung, Barbara Kropfhäusser and Séverine Voisard – recently delved deeper into The Importance on Non-Verbal Communication in Professional Interpretation for one of their classes. We thank them for sharing the result with us.

We have changed the title of our regular column linking readers to news available on the internet to “Language in the News” to better reflect the scope of coverage. Connect now to news from Russia, China, Lebanon, Canada, Australia and even Geneva! Find out who has published memoirs, why top prizes can’t be awarded, and what else rats, monkeys and humans have in common.

We thank Jennifer Mackintosh for offering to write this issue’s “cover letter.” And along with her, we wish you all a Happy New Year.