Justice in Four Languages or "Interpreters and Mistresses"


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The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial
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It is no exaggeration to say that without simultaneous interpretation, the 1945-1946 multilingual Nuremberg trial of major figures of the Nazi regime could not have taken place. A form of communication that has become a daily occurrence throughout the world was applied for the first time to a world event. Nuremberg has been criticized as "victors' justice". For the interpreting profession, it was an exemplary - and almost unparalleled - instance of human and technical triumph over the linguistic obstacles that can otherwise impede the implementation of the loftiest sentiments of fairness. As described by the interpretation system's manufacturer, IBM, the goal was "that all men may understand". "All men" included those involved in the trial - defendants, judges, counsel for the prosecution and defence, witnesses, guards and representatives of the media - as well as the world which had just emerged from a lengthy and bloody conflict characterized by great suffering on the part of all sectors of the population of many countries.

The "aquarium" - the four desks separated by low glass panels at which at any one time there sat a total of 12 interpreters - made the interpreting arrangements a conspicuous element in the courtroom. As in the Bosnia war crimes trials taking place in The Hague at the time of writing, practically everyone at Nuremberg wore headphones in order to follow the proceedings. At times many of the defendants conspicuously removed their headphones, such as when evidence was given about conditions in the concentration camps, either because "they could not bear or care to hear about the atrocities" or for other reasons. Goering, in a rage at the way the cross-examination of a German
witness was going, pulled at the cord of his headphones so violently that a guard had to remove it from his hands before he ripped it off.

The use of simultaneous interpreting had been opposed by some of the world's few professional interpreters - the small band of skilled consecutive interpreters. Even those who believed that simultaneous interpreting was feasible wondered if the electronics would be able to survive the rigors of the trial. Not infrequently the trailing wires were tripped over and disconnected. Eventually they were covered to prevent the resulting interruptions.

Certain of the participants made highly critical comments on the interpreters and their performance. The observations by Goering and Norman Birkett, the British Alternate member of the Bench, are the most notorious. Some of Birkett's verge on the unbalanced, but he deserves to be quoted in this review so that modern-day readers can smile in wry amusement. The most infamous citation is his evaluation of what he called "translators" as "a race apart - touchy, vain, unaccountable, full of vagaries, puffed up with self-importance of the most explosive kind, inexpressibly egotistical, and, as a rule, violent opponents of soap and sunlight..."

While such attitudes have, fortunately, disappeared among the "consumers" of conference interpretation, some representatives of the judicial professions, at least in Birkett's own country, still harbor similar sentiments towards these undesirable intruders, whom they view as, at best, a "necessary evil" (Herbert, 1952:4) in the legal system. One of the Nuremberg defendants, a keen observer of the interpreters' performance and analyst of his co-defendants' linguistic behavior, even went so far as to write a set of guidelines for the latter, in an admirable effort to facilitate the interpreters' work and improve accuracy. Such a practice - a form of vademecum for users of interpreter services in the courts - might well have a useful place in modern court settings, but on the whole is regrettably conspicuous by its absence.

Major efforts were made to recruit the best possible people to interpret. Some of those engaged were unable to stand the strain of the proceedings; others who showed great talent in the new profession were recruited by the fledgling United Nations in the summer of 1946, before the end of the main trial. Others stayed on for the subsequent bilingual (German-English) trials. Those who interpreted at Nuremberg came from a variety of national, linguistic and professional backgrounds. Some were very young, including an 18-year-old recent high-school graduate, and a fair number were still in their early twenties. Among others, the Nuremberg interpreting ranks comprised teachers, academics, lawyers, army personnel, professional conference interpreters - including graduates of the School of Interpreters in Geneva - and a future Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations (Oleg A. Troyanovsky, son of the first Soviet Ambassador to the United States). One of the longest-serving interpreters at the Nuremberg Trials, Austrian-born Peter Uiberall, had worked as a stock clerk and farm laborer in the United States after leaving Austria as a refugee in 1938. This experience provided him with a highly valuable work background for an interpreter.

Some of the book's thumbnail sketches of Nuremberg interpreters contain fascinating insights into the foibles and experiences of those "strange creatures" who performed this seemingly "impossible" feat, such as George Wassiltchikoff, who was "famous for the fact that he stuttered in normal conversation but not when interpreting". Elisabeth Heyward was literally thrown in the deep end. The day she arrived in Nuremberg she went into the visitors' gallery, where she was astonished to see and hear simultaneous interpreting. The next day in the courtroom she had to launch into simultaneous interpreting herself. She survived this "baptism by fire" most successfully, eventually being recruited by U.N. headquarters where she worked until her retirement in December 1981 - and then continuing on and off to work as a freelance interpreter. A fair number of those who worked as interpreters in Nuremberg became and remained professional interpreters.

The idea of using simultaneous interpretation - hitherto unheard of in this completely "live",
unrehearsed form - at the trial came from Leon Dostert, the first Chief Interpreter at Nuremberg. Born in France in 1904, Dostert had served as interpreter for both the German army occupying his town during the First World War and the American Army which liberated it. This "middleman" situation of the interpreter similarly became clear at Nuremberg, where the interpreters developed a form of rapport, (sometimes linguistic, sometimes human), with some of the defendants. Some of the defendants actively cooperated in trying to assist the interpreters' endeavours, such as passing along notes with the English or German equivalent of a word with which an interpreter was having a problem.

One of the most striking things about Nuremberg is that while it is rightly said that "everything began" there as far as the profession of conference interpreting in its modern form is concerned, simultaneous interpreting in this "electronic" form was for many years practically never again used in full-blown legal proceedings. The Tokyo Trials of Japanese war criminals did try to use simultaneous interpretation, but those proceedings foundered largely on the shoals of problems with written translations from Japanese. In Israel, the 1961 Eichmann and 1987 Demjanjuk war crimes trials made extensive use of simultaneous interpretation, but it is of note that they used the consecutive technique for the provision of the Hebrew version, the language of the proceedings and the official record.

As the main Nuremberg trial proceeded, related administrative procedures and arrangements were honed and refined. At the outset, the translation department - especially in those distant pre-word processing days - was unable to cope with the vast amount of German-language documentation which needed to be translated into the other three languages. In order to overcome this difficulty, an arrangement was worked out under which interpreters would produce instant "sight translations" of specific passages in documents. This oral technique enabled the material in question to be submitted to the Court even though no written version of the document was available other than in the original language. Later, when the defence was presenting its case, the backlog had been eliminated and it was possible to submit translated documents in writing, without reading selected passages into the record. The defence complained that they were put at a disadvantage by this differential treatment of submitting documentary testimony. The difference in procedure was not, however, a matter of deliberate policy or discrimination, simply the result of changes in a practical situation.

Those responsible for the arrangements as they affected the interpreters tried to ensure that these had the best possible conditions for their work subject to time and space constraints. Having dared take the risk of making use of an untried technique - the "simultaneous" technique had been used in the pre-war period only for the reading out of pre-translated versions of speeches or for providing multiple-language versions of consecutive interpretation - they tried to build in as many measures as possible to enable the interpreters to do the best job possible. They also recognised the human element. Arrangements were made to provide discreet signals when a speaker needed to slow down, or if it became necessary to interrupt the proceedings for reasons related to interpretation. A monitor in the courtroom constantly kept an ear on all working interpreters, and was prepared to replace anyone who showed signs of fatigue, if necessary interrupting the proceedings to do so.

Acknowledgement of the likelihood of errors led to a system of subsequent quality control in the form of a comparison between the various language transcripts (based on shorthand reporters' notes) and the original spoken material. This checking work was one of the duties of the "third" team of interpreters. On any one day, two full teams (three interpreters per language "desk") would work in court, each team working either the first and fourth 85-minute sections, or alternatively the second and third stretches. When not actually interpreting, the other team listened to the proceedings in a separate room. This arrangement was introduced after the trial had begun in order to ensure continuity in terminology and familiarity with the material.

Francesca Gaiba's book touches on many questions which are vital to the running and legal status of
contemporary legal proceedings involving the use of interpretation, including transcripts, record of proceedings, electronic recordings, quality control, collegiality, speed of delivery, errors, documentation, preparation, and many other issues. Her presentation of pre-war interpretation practice makes clear the "bombshell" that was constituted by the simultaneous interpretation at Nuremberg, however primitive the equipment and conditions by today's standards. In that sense, certainly, "it all began at Nuremberg" (Skuncke 1989).

References

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