Danica Seleskovitch: an exceptional life

There are sometimes encounters that determine the orientation of a lifetime. As I say in the foreword to my book, this is what happened to me: my encounter with Danica Seleskovitch was decisive for my career as an interpreter, and to a large extent, for the whole course of my existence.

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Published: April 17, 2007 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Paris, Berlin, Belgrade, Washington: the life and career as a conference interpreter of Danica Seleskovitch, known to many as just Danica (pronounced Danitsa), encompass eighty years of the twentieth century. She was an exceptional interpreter, a charismatic teacher, an original researcher, and also an attentive witness to the momentous events of her time, seen from the privileged observation post afforded to her by her profession.

Born in 1921 of a Serbian father and a French mother, Danica was from the start in contact with several languages and several cultures. She spent her early childhood in Nice, her adolescence and youth in Berlin as the Nazi menace gained momentum, and then lived in Belgrade under German occupation. After the end of the Second World War, she studied at the Sorbonne and the interpreting school attached to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC), learning the craft of conference interpreting. She first exercised her new profession in Washington, with the productivity missions organised in the United States in the framework of the Marshall Plan, and then alongside Jean Monnet at the Coal and Steel Community in Luxemburg.

Danica returned to Paris in the middle of the fifties, embarking upon a long career as a conference interpreter, which was to bring her into contact with great figures of the century, such as General de Gaulle and Marshal Tito. She already took a keen interest in training conference interpreters, and became a leading light of the École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) of the Sorbonne; she also gave a lot of time and energy to the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), where she was engaged in organising and defining the conditions of exercise of the budding profession.

Danica devoted the second part of her life to teaching and research. After her PhD, in 1974 she set up the first doctorate in translation studies at the University of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle. For over thirty years, until her death in 2001, she published, in France and abroad, numerous books and
articles on matters related to her discipline.

For many colleagues and former students the demise in 2001 of such a strong and warm personality left an emptiness that this biography, written as a tribute, attempts to alleviate.

Anne-Marie Widlund-Fantini was born in 1949. She graduated as a conference interpreter from the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs in 1975. After a career as a free lance, she joined the European Civil Service in 1995, and is today at the head of the French Interpreting Division at the European Parliament. She has published several articles on conference interpreting, and on the work of Danica Seleskovitch. Danica Seleskovitch - Interprète, et témoin du XXe siècle is her first book.

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