A talk with Teresa Oyarzun [1], who has devoted her whole life to our profession - as an interpreter, a consultant interpreter, and an office-holder in AIIC - is in a sense a journey back to a time that is viewed by many, somewhat unthinkingly, as the "golden age" of interpreting.

The Musketeers

I joined AIIC around 1962, and I'll tell you how it happened because it's funny. Around that time, an Interpol meeting was held in Spain. The Spanish government, which was all about Spanishness back then, insisted that the interpreters should come from Spain, with peninsular Spanish accents. I was working with a local colleague, but practically everybody else came from the French region - or rather from France, because AIIC wasn't organised into regions at the time.

One day I asked my teammates over to lunch at my house, and they suddenly asked whether I might want to join AIIC. I'd never heard of it. They told me about its aims and the way it worked, and I thought it sounded great, because I knew four interpreters who had pioneered interpretation in Spain - not AIIC, mind you, but conference interpretation. We called them the four musketeers - Gussie Jessen, whose family background was German and Spanish, Raimundo Rodríguez, an Argentinian with Spanish roots, Dora Lenard de Alonso, who was English, and Marcela de Juan. It was Marcela who had encouraged me to become an interpreter; she worked at the Foreign Ministry and organised conference interpretation courses, which I finally made up my mind to take.

I also attended courses organised by the Foreign Ministry itself. We would meet at the Biblioteca Nacional, where we were allowed the use of an office with a funny little booth. It was all a bit makeshift, but you got to learn technique. Back then I was working for the US Embassy, but classes were held at 7 p.m. so I was able to attend without inconveniencing anyone.

When I joined AIIC, my Parisian colleagues told me there was already an AIIC member in Madrid - just one. It was Paco Caballero, whom I knew very well. I was quite surprised to learn that no one in Spain was aware of AIIC or of the fact that Paco was a member. Of course I asked him to be one of my sponsors, in order to fulfill the requirements for joining.

Around that time I quit my embassy job for another at an international organisation. It wasn't long before I left that as well. I decided to go for it and try my luck at interpreting. And luck there was, I have to admit, because a lot of work came my way from the very start.

AIIC Spanish Region Founded

I tried to spread the word about AIIC and managed to get plenty of people to join, even though it was
very tough becoming a member back then: there were very strict rules. We did make a lot of money, but that also made us somewhat unaffordable. Things were tough, but we didn't let that get in our way; it took a lot of determination to fulfill all AIIC obligations. We advocated direct interpretation from all languages without resorting to so-called "relay" interpreting, and we explained the minimum number of interpreters required in each booth. So yes, we abided by the rules, but lost a lot of work in the process.

Fortunately, regions were set up at one point. There were so few of us that I seem to recall being chosen as representative for Spain. A region required a minimum number of members. Since we didn't have enough, an Austrian colleague, a wonderful man and an excellent, highly educated interpreter, became a member for Barcelona, where no AIIC interpreters were based at the time. So we made the threshold and I became Regional Secretary.

There were very few of us and I didn't have much work to do. Our region managed to comply with AIIC rules very well. We never charged the organiser or our colleagues a cent; in fact, we never charged anyone: we simply billed our fees.

After the regions and Council were set up (the Spanish Region was established in 1965), I was made Council member for Spain. I continued in the post for a long time, not for any personal merit but merely because others didn't feel like it: you had to travel to Geneva, argue, explain the situation in Spain, and so on.

It was a bit like lay missionary work. There was very little work, and at first very few interpreters. We tried to work in pure booths and that was more complicated. I guess there must have been some relaying, but only out of necessity. Gradually we came to bring more people on board and managed to come up with good, and balanced teams. I think I served as Council member for three more mandates. And we kept working and fighting the good fight for our profession.

**Barcelona Joins**

I was friendly with a number of interpreters in Barcelona. I figured it wouldn't be a bad thing for them to join AIIC. I started to raise the matter and got some positive feedback. I also took it up with AIIC's secretary at the time, Irène Testot-Ferry; she thought it was a fabulous idea and said she'd help.

After months of talks with the Barcelona crowd, I had a phone call from one of the colleagues I knew best and she said yes, they wanted to join. And we did everything we could to make this possible, because I felt - as many others did - that even though they might find it hard to meet AIIC requirements, as they usually worked "both ways", it would be better to have all those good interpreters inside AIIC. And that's how it happened.

Over time, the number of interpreters grew. Many of those who came from abroad were not AIIC members yet, because they were fresh out of interpretation school and were trying their hand here in Spain. Some of them came to join AIIC in time.

**AIIC and the International Market, in Spain and Abroad**

Here in Spain they used to call us AIIC members the "internationals" - that was our comparative advantage over those who lacked the international projection of AIIC. We enjoyed a degree of prestige, which doesn't put bread on the table but is certainly gratifying. For instance, I did a lot of work for the FAO in Rome - it was my best client - and I also often worked in London.

The Spanish booth included interpreters from Spain, exiled Spaniards, and Latin Americans. In Franco's time, particularly in the early years, I'd say there were barely any meetings with interpretation in Spain. I can't be certain of this because I wasn't an interpreter back then, but seeing
that there were just three interpreters who came out of this period around later on, I expect there wasn't much demand. Interpretation came into its own much later, when the country opened up.

In the early years, the market for interpreters working into Spanish was mainly international. From time to time a conference might be held in Spain, such as the Interpol one, but there wasn't much of a Spanish institutional market (i.e. government ministries, foundations, and so on). The few freelances all had other jobs: Marcela de Juan was on staff at the Foreign Ministry, others did translations, and so on.

In the early 80s a protracted stage of CSCE work within the Helsinki Process was held in Madrid. It lasted three years and involved a huge number of interpreters. I seem to recall that all those based in Spain were AIIC members, who were there not only because we belonged to AIIC but also because the organisers knew us. In my case, I had met them abroad, in Vienna, where I worked for them. I did a lot of work in Vienna before the heyday of the CSCE, at UNIDO and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Spain hasn't been a regular venue for annual conferences held by international organisations or institutions. I think we've had very little of that.

The Future of Our Profession - Benign Skepticism

Ours is a tough market. Some people hire an interpreting team because it adds cachet to a conference; they care little whether the interpreters are good, average or poor, as long as they can claim they provided simultaneous translation.

Some people do care about quality. I remember a conference held by a good client of mine, an international organisation that was to hold a meeting in Italy. The Italians wanted to provide the interpreters. The person in charge of organising the conference refused on the grounds that there was a team that had been doing it for years, but there was nothing to be done about it. Result: a deadlock. I suggested the following: "Here's a compromise solution which entails some risk but could also be beneficial: let's take half of our own team and hire the other half locally." Deep down I was thinking that if things got too bad we might be able to save the day.

So we set it up that way. The locals, except for one woman who did a good job, were all bad, really bad, so of course it was a failure, and that taught the organiser a lesson. Never again did they agree to work with interpreters other than their own regular team. Sometimes you pay a price for being bad. And one for being good, too. Everything takes its toll in the end.

As you can see, I'm rather skeptical, in a benign sort of way. I'm not bitter - I couldn't be, I've done very well. I've been extremely lucky.

Many years ago I was asked to write an article for the well-known Madrid daily ABC. Its title, "Interpreter - a Profession for the 20th Century". It was published on page 3, photograph and all.

As for the 21st century, well, what can I say? I'm often asked to help young people who want to become interpreters. I usually answer, "If you must, I'll help, but personally I feel it's not a career to embark upon right now. It's a very uncertain career."

Of course it wasn't exactly a secure job when I started out, either. Have I told you what that English lady, Dora Lenard de Alonso, said to me when I was considering whether I should quit my steady job? After a few assignments in the booth, I felt I'd much rather be an interpreter. While I was trying to make up my mind, Dora, one of the four musketeers, dragged up Saint Augustine himself.

"Look, Teresa, security is for mediocre souls."

"Oh Dora, what are you saying? I don't consider myself an exceptional soul, but neither do I want to be mediocre."
How about that? The quote didn't make up my mind for me, but it was beautiful and I've always remembered it.

English version by Mary Fons i Fleming.

[1] An earlier (and longer) version of this article appeared on the website of ESPaiic (Spanish Region of AIIC). Communicate! thanks our colleagues in Spain for allowing us to use it.

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Recommended citation format: