Series of events commemorating Nuremberg Trials off to a successful start

Revisiting the historic event and the role interpreters played in it was made more poignant by the setting - the very courtroom where the trials took place.

Tony ALLEN.
Published: May 16, 2013 Last updated: December 2, 2015

On the evening of Sunday 5 May 2013 the series of events commemorating the advent of simultaneous interpreting at the Nuremberg Trials got off to a flying start.

An hour prior to the event visitors had the opportunity to take a guided tour of the museum at the courthouse where the Nuremberg Trials took place. Historian Henrike Zentgraf gave an informative account of the trials and why they took place in the form they did, clearing up some common misconceptions along the way. With a wealth of visual material on show, the museum allows visitors to see the trials from the perspective of the accused, the journalists, the judges and, last, but in our case certainly not least, the interpreters.

The event itself, with simultaneous interpretation provided into English and German, took place in the courtroom in which the Nuremberg Trials were held. It was extremely poignant being sat in the very room where such a significant piece of history was played out.

Any fears of a low turnout quickly proved unfounded as the hall filled up for the start of the event. The proceedings got underway with a video of the opening statement from the Nuremberg Trials. This was then interpreted consecutively from English into German (Elke Limberger) and French (Phillip Quaine) respectively, with the interpreters’ notes projected onto the big screen behind the stage.

Once the simultaneous interpretation began, the
non-interpreters amongst the audience were quickly exposed. Their excitement and awe was clear to see as they put on their headphones and stared towards the booth where our AIIC colleagues were plying their trade.

Each member of the panel, made up of Professor Hilary Gaskin, Phillip Quaine, Barbara Besching and Gisela Siebourg, covered various aspects relating to the use of simultaneous interpretation at the Nuremberg Trials. The audience heard how the interpreters were selected, the conditions in which they worked during the trial, the quality control mechanisms which were in place to ensure that the standard of interpretation remained at a consistently high level throughout, as well as some of the technical challenges posed by the equipment, which had never before been used for this purpose. The training of the interpreters was also mentioned and examples were given of some of the techniques, still applied today, which the interpreters were instructed to use to avoid mistranslating pivotal evidence.

One of the most moving things about this event was learning about some of the individuals who interpreted at the Nuremberg Trials. The audience were captivated as the panel used video footage, quotes and anecdotes from personal encounters to relay first-hand accounts of what it was like to be there in person and how difficult it was to process the sometimes harrowing content which the interpreters were confronted with during the trial. In the lobby outside the courtroom there was a small exhibition displaying information about the interpreters and what they had gone on to do once their work at the Nuremberg Trials was complete. Some, it emerged, remained in the profession whilst many others chose an altogether different path.

The level of interest in simultaneous interpreting shown by the members of the general public in attendance was hugely impressive. During the break between the two sessions visitors were given the opportunity to have a look inside the interpreting booth and learn how simultaneous interpreting works, a prospect which people considered highly enticing, as evidenced by the long queue which formed in front of the booth entrance. The questions asked by the audience, too, indicated that there is a degree of fascination for interpreting amongst people unfamiliar with the profession that we as interpreters often forget or fail to realise. It was encouraging to see that people are interested in and impressed by what we do, and this event provided a wonderful opportunity for us to give people insight into what being a professional interpreter involves.

The event was a resounding success, giving AIIC the chance to showcase our profession and to pay tribute to those who set the ball rolling for simultaneous interpreting. A big thank you goes out to everybody involved.

The series of events is being organised in cooperation with the Memorium Nuremberg Trials, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), the Federal Association of Interpreters and Translators (BDÜ) and the European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association (EULITA).

Next event

Sun. 2 June 2013, 6.30 pm

No globalisation without communication
Simultaneous interpreting as an instrument of communication

Multimedia presentation in German and English (with simultaneous interpreting)

To see the full program click here.