The Birth of a Profession: Preface by the President of AIIC

Interpreters tell their story in this coming-of-age book about modern-day conference interpretation.

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It is a great pleasure for me, as President of AIIC, to be able to write these few words of introduction to a long-awaited work.

It is extremely fitting that in the year when we celebrate our 60th anniversary we should finally have a written history of AIIC and, therefore, of the profession which was created through the devotion of our pioneers in the turbulent but creative era post WWII and has continued to develop ever since.

From the uncertainties of the first Assembly we can now read along the milestones of our association as it became a global reference point for the profession. We can look back and thank our founder-colleagues whose foresight in organizing, negotiating and regulating for the good of the community has meant that, over the years, thousands of conference interpreters, members and non-members, have been able to enjoy the benefits of good working conditions as a result of collective bargaining, research, standardization and training. Our code of ethics has been copied such that every employer considers that a professional interpreter should be bound by the rule of confidentiality and our example of impartiality at work is recognized – almost – universally.

On the basis of documents selected from our archives – now preserved in the AIIC offices in Geneva and long-removed from their initial and perhaps anecdotal home in Christopher Thiéry’s bathtub – together with their own written testimony, our authors tell us our story as it evolved. Without the living memory of events, a history is hard to tell and sadly several of our authors are no longer alive to see their work in print. Continuing their work, the present group has gallantly reorganized their drafts into a coherent and finished work.

This project was first launched some 30 years ago, when AIIC was only half its present age – and the battle of David and Goliath, AIIC and the FTC, had not yet taken place. Deregulation was a turning point in our history and I believe we are now at another. The increased role of English as a global vehicular language, increased recourse to tenders adjudicated on the basis of lowest price for the purchase of even professional services, linked to the growth of intermediaries seeking to dictate market conditions, and the increased competitiveness on what, in some areas, may be shrinking markets, means that we must think hard about the future of our profession, of how responsibly and collegially to meet the challenge of change.

What better way to do so than by a careful study of our past? Times change but without knowing whence we came, can we know who
we are and what our future path should be?

With my heartfelt thanks to all the authors – past, present and future – I hope that our story will continue for many years to come. I wish us all a fascinating read, and guidance and inspiration for those who, present and future, volunteer to work for the good of all.

Recommended citation format: