

Newsweek, March 15, 1965

FRANCE:

The Gift of Tongues

Remember Audrey Hepburn, beautiful and sophisticated as the interpreter in "Charade"? Well, plenty of people do. Right now more than 20,000 men and women are going to school in Europe alone studying to be simultaneous interpreters. Many of them no doubt dream of becoming the gray eminences of twentieth-century diplomacy—indispensable adjuncts to the world's rulers in their polylingual debates over great affairs. Some may even hope to achieve eminence in their own right, following in the footsteps of such ex-interpreters

as U.S. ambassador to Paris Charles Bohlen and former ambassador to Moscow George Kennan.

Chances are, however, that most of the would-be simultaneous interpreters are doomed to disappointment. For they are striving to join a profession that can barely absorb 50 new people a year, that pays moderate salaries (an average of \$12,000 a year for top-rated "free lances"), and whose psychic rewards are arguable at best. In fact, reported NEWSWEEK's Joel Blocker after looking in on a convention of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) in Paris last week, most of the world's leading simultaneous interpreters lead lives of quiet—and not too prestigious—desperation.

"It is a monstrous profession," says Alexandre Blokh, the elegantly handsome chief interpreter at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. "It's frustrating, humiliating, unnerving. The last thing in the world I'd want my son to be is an interpreter." Blokh, who is French-born, English-educated, and of Russian parentage, also writes novels and literary criticism under the pen name of Jean Blot.

Other AIIC'ers, perhaps without Blokh's creative outlet, are even more cynical. Interpreting is "perverse," con-

fided one stringy-haired Frenchwoman at the meeting last week. Her companion, a pretty, young German linguist in her 20s, added: "We drink too much—that is because we work under such strain. We're neurotic, so jumpy, always making scenes. Did you hear the story of the interpreter at the U.N. who hung himself in the interpreters' booth by the wires of his own headphone?"

Despite their self-deprecation, interpreters are among the most intelligent and responsible professionals in the world. "A good interpreter," says Danica Seleskovitch, a petite, gray-haired dynamo who heads an interpreters' school, "must be as intelligent, or at least as *au courant* with the subject under discussion, as the person he is interpreting for. The idea is not to translate literally, but to achieve the same impact as the speaker."

A Knack: In fact, as many of the interpreters are only too eager to explain, language fluency is just a small part of the story. Education, horse sense, and intuition all come into play. "And most important," insists Vladimir Pojidaeff, the AIIC's Western-hemisphere vice president, "is a gift, a talent, a knack for listening and thinking and interpreting all at once."

Constantin Andronikof, the ascetic-looking White Russian prince who is Charles de Gaulle's personal English and Russian interpreter, is a man who undoubtedly has that gift. He combines extraordinary talent with extraordinary dignity. Once, when Andronikof accompanied a group of French officials to Moscow, the story is that Nikita Khrushchev, who had met him earlier in Paris, burst out in Russian: "My dear Prince, how are you?"

Andronikof, one of the founders of the AIIC eleven years ago, is proud of the fact that no member has ever been charged with betraying a diplomatic secret. But, all in all, he has no illusions about his colleagues. They are, he says, vain and irritable—comparable to unhappy housewives. Why? Explains Andronikof: "It is a frustrating job for people with talent, for people who have something to say for themselves. By the nature of his work, the interpreter is only momentarily important. When his job is done, there is no way of ever proving it took place."