

Tanya Gesse

Peter Less

Lunch with a legend

Peter Less has been living in Chicago, where he practices law, for over 50 years. He attended the Geneva School of Conference Interpretation and, in 1946, interpreted at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals. Less, whose mother, father, sister, and grandmother were killed by the Nazis, had to sit in the courtroom and interpret for some of the masterminds responsible for these atrocities. How could he do it?



As I clip a microphone to Peter Less's tie, he says: "That's how they have microphones now, not these old ones bolted down in the middle of the table." I then show him some archival photos of the Nuremberg Trials.

He says, "Umm-hmm, those are the guys. There's Hermann Goering and Rudolf Hess... Hjalmar Schacht - he was one of the three found not guilty. Erhard Milch - I had him in a deposition. He knew perfect English. If there was one word in my translation he didn't like, he would correct it. He was usually right."

Would you tell me about your childhood?

I grew up in a nice, comfortable middle class German home in Koenigsberg. My father was an attorney and my mother managed my grandmother's store. As the Nazis came to power, things got worse and worse. In 1938, when I was 17, I told my parents we should leave Germany. But like so many intellectuals, they said: "This cannot go on much longer. Social democrats will come back soon." So I left alone and went to Switzerland. They stayed. My family perished. My father, my mother, my grandmother and my only sister are all gone. I am the only one still around.

Why did you choose Switzerland?

That was the only country where I could go without a visa at the time. For a while, my father would send me 50 marks a month to live on, but about six months later that became illegal. I had to find another way to survive, but I had no residence permit and no work permit. So I became a student of hotel management at the École Hôtelière in Neuchâtel, where I spent some very useful months. I learned to cook, to wait on tables, and I got good food.

When the course ended, I became an undocumented alien. The Swiss authorities issued me a so-called "tolerance permit" valid for three months. After three months, I'd go back to the police and they would ask: "Why haven't you left Switzerland yet?" And I would say: "I would love to! Tell me where I can go! The Germans are in Germany, Austria, France, in Italy, all the surrounding countries - where can I go?" And so they would renew the permit.

Eventually, the Swiss put me in a labor camp, but it wasn't bad. We got military food, so the Swiss soldiers ate the same things we did. Nice billets, a nice commander and weekends off. We were free to go to the big cities on the weekends. If we had a few pennies, we went to Zurich and had a good time chasing girls, going to the movies, and sitting in coffee shops.

What kind of work did you do in these camps?

Needless work. Dig ditches one day, cover them up the next day. We told those in charge that we could be helpful to the Swiss economy if they would only let us. "No, we can't - these are orders from above." But there were always nice people in Switzerland who helped refugees, such as the Quakers. They had

pamphlets in French, and we would translate them into German, English, or whatever they needed. And they paid us, which was totally illegal because we were not allowed to work outside of the camps.

Then one day, a nice Swiss Foreign Service officer named Merz, said: "We can get you out of here if you agree to do work where there is a shortage of labor. You have a choice: a butcher, a baker, a painter, or a barber." I chose to be a barber and got placed with a barber in La Chaux de Fond who needed an apprentice, and stayed there for about a year.

Then Merz found out that the University of Geneva was willing to give refugees a grant. By that time I knew French, so I enrolled in the Faculté des Lettres and got my University degree. Attached to the University of Geneva was the École d'Interprètes, a Rockefeller-funded department that trained simultaneous interpreters. I spoke German, English, and French, and I enrolled there. It was a two-year course. They put us in a glass booth. At first, they would speak very slowly, accentuating every syllable: "*Heute ist das Wetter sehr schoen.*" - "Today the weather is very nice." After a few weeks, they would speak quickly and with an accent. We gradually learned to listen and to speak at the same time. There were about 15 or 18 students in my class. We graduated shortly after WWII ended. At that time, the Americans, the British, and the French were organising an international war crimes tribunal. One day, American officers in uniform came to the school. They tested a dozen people and hired three, including me. "Tomorrow morning," the American officer said, "you must fly to Nuremberg."

As students, in addition to learning the skill of listening and speaking at the same time, we studied terminology - military, political, legal, including Nazi terms, and the rank equivalents in the French or American armies - so we were prepared. I was 25.

When we arrived at Nuremberg, they gave us a couple hours of training and then put us in a glass box in the courtroom. We worked in hour-and-a-half shifts (an hour-and-a-half in the morning, an hour-and-a-half in the afternoon), and it felt longer than an eight-hour day at the office. The day wasn't finished then, either, because at night we had to correct the gibberish transcribed during the day. When you interpret fast, sometimes you don't speak elegantly, but when it gets printed in the record, everything must be correct.

We also did translation work. For example, when the final judgment was issued, it had to be translated. It was 360 pages long. The military police locked us up in an old Bavarian castle and told us: "You will be court marshaled if a word leaks out of what's in those papers. Every reporter is going to offer you your weight in gold to get a scoop, to be the first." We couldn't leave, couldn't even use the phone.

What was the average age of the Nuremberg interpreters?

We were fairly young. The two French sisters were only 22, but the others were a little older.

There were four languages used for interpretation in the courtroom: German, French, English, and Russian.

The interpretation equipment was primitive: a microphone bolted down in the middle of the table, and you had to bend over to speak into it. It was uncomfortable and strained your back. You couldn't turn your head because then it wouldn't capture your voice. The earphones were big, like you see in old movies. They fit over your head, heavy and tight, and crushed your ears. They were terrible, very uncomfortable. Your ears were red when you finally got rid of them.

And the sound was scratchy, like an old record. There was also a button you could push in the interpreters' booth. It would turn on a red light that told the speaker to slow down. They'd see that red light, slow down for about 15 seconds, then go back to their usual manner of speaking. The volume depended largely on the speaker. If the speaker did not speak loud enough, there was nothing you could do to enhance the volume. And if they were shouting too loud, there was nothing you could do to tone them down. I interpreted the proceedings between German and English.

I had to "interpret" as well as translate. If a witness testified that she had to jump out a first floor window, the Americans would say, "Big deal, street level." I had to translate it "second-floor window" - then they would say, "Oh, that was quite a fall."

Sometimes witnesses would use languages not offered at the trial. They would use Yiddish or else speak too fast. In those cases, you could just get the gist of what the witness was saying, but you had to make it clear that this was not a literal translation. Some witnesses were crying, muffling their words with their sobs. We did the best we could.

What were some of the other languages that witnesses used?

Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian.



How were those languages handled in the courtroom?

In those cases, the witnesses had to give a written statement that was translated into English. The authorized translation would then be read into the record.

Where were you staying while interpreting at the trials?

We were housed in beautiful villas confiscated from top Nazis, located in the suburbs of Nuremberg. There were about three or four interpreters per villa. At the end of the workday, jeeps would drive us to our temporary homes and pick us up again in the morning to go to the courthouse.

We ate at the Grand Hotel, the only hotel that was still standing. Everything else was destroyed, but the Allies kept the hotel in good shape because they had to sleep somewhere. The waiters and waitresses were all Germans. They got paid in cigarettes. I sent my entire salary home to my wife, and used the allowance of cigarettes I got to buy things.

Once that same year, 1946, I was flown to the Four-Power Conference to Berlin to translate for two days. On my time off, I walked the streets and bought a typewriter - and paid almost a whole carton of cigarettes for it. I still have it.

How many interpreters were there total?

About 30 or 40 altogether, in all languages. All the time I worked there I didn't even know all of them, since they had different hours and shifts. I saw the ones that were sitting next to me during the same shift.

We were young and not very experienced, but we were indispensable. The Ecole d'Interprètes was the only place that trained interpreters at that time.

Did you have a supervisor?

Yes, Brigadier-General Telford Taylor was an intermediate boss. He died recently, in 2003 in New York. The real boss was Robert H. Jackson, the Supreme Court judge who was the chief of counsel. I spoke to him on the telephone just before he died.

Did you get any time off?

Yes, we had some days off, and weekends. Once I got Friday off, so I quickly went to Paris to meet my wife, who came up from Geneva.

What stands out in your mind today about your work as an interpreter at Nuremberg?

I guess the fact that we were the first. The Nuremberg Trials were the first time simultaneous interpretation was used. They had to use it, because if they used consecutive interpretation, especially with four official languages, the trials

would only just be finishing now. So we felt like pioneers, but at the same time we didn't think we were anything special. We were kids, we were adventurous, and we liked what we did. At night we went to the movies.

How did you maintain your neutrality?

It wasn't easy. You were sitting in the same room with the people who probably killed your parents, but you could not let your feelings interfere with your job. You swore to interpret as faithfully as possible, to put the speaker's idea into the listener's head. So we did.

At the recent International War Crimes Tribunal of Slobodan Milosevic, interpreters received psychological aid to deal with the descriptions of atrocities they had to interpret. Did you receive any psychological aid?

No, they didn't really know what psychology was back then - Freud had just died in 1939 - but we were young and we could disassociate our feelings from our job.

When you moved to the U.S. in 1946, did you work as an interpreter here?

No, but I did work as a translator and teacher for Berlitz, teaching German and French to GIs coming home from the war. We taught them how to say things they wanted to know (like "Where are the girls?" or "Which is the best beer?"). My wife translated for the Red Cross. She also worked for them in Geneva, translating records, looking for missing persons and prisoners of war. She even met Winston Churchill.

You told me that you were a member of the International Association of Parliamentary Interpreters, the forerunner of today's AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters). Did you remain a member after you left Geneva?

Yes, for a year or two, and then I lost contact. But I still have a certificate hanging on the wall at my house.

What was the mood like on the part of the audience?

Well, they had to remain calm, because any commotion would get you expelled from the courtroom. They had to just sit there and observe. They couldn't smile, applaud, or express any hatred or repugnance. Courtrooms are run with a lot of decorum in general, and that was especially true there, when the eyes of the world were on that courtroom. All the newspapers were there, and there was radio equipment all over the place.

Do you know if the court building is still there today?

Oh yes, I saw it years later.

What were the defendants' attitudes?

They were all different. **Hans Frank** showed genuine remorse, while others showed phony remorse in order to get a lighter sentence or escape the hangman's noose. Some were not remorseful at all, but said they "just sat in their office and signed papers."

What special terminology did you have to know?

The Nazi terminology and ranks for the army and the SS - we translated them into equivalent American or British terms. *Oberst* was a colonel, for example. Some things we didn't translate, like "the SS." It stands for *Schutzstaffel*, but you didn't translate that since everybody knew what it meant.

Did you meet all of the interpreters at Nuremberg?

No, there were nine other trials going on. I interpreted at the major war criminals' trial - **Hermann Goering, Rudolph Hess, Hans Frank, Ernst Kaltenbrunner and others**. There were also the doctors' trials, the concentration camp trials, the industrialist trials, and others. They went on from 1945-46, all the way until 1949. I did not stay until the end.

Why not? You said you were making a great living.

I sure was, but I got a visa to go to the U.S. and couldn't let it expire.

Was your visa to the States kind of a thank-you gesture on the part of the Americans that hired you?

No, I got the visa on my own. Now, because I was attached to the U.S. Army, upon my arrival in the U.S., I had to report at the Pentagon in order to get an official release from my duties.

After Nuremberg, did you consider continuing as an interpreter?

Yes, for a while. I wanted to work at the newly founded United Nations, but they didn't need German.

So after you didn't start working at the United Nations, what did you do?

I went to law school. I always wanted to be a lawyer because my father and my uncle were attorneys. I did all kinds of odd jobs to get through school.

Did you make any mistakes at Nuremberg that you remember?

Oh yes, once I made a big mistake and almost caused World War III. It was over a word - a name, actually - "Rascher." The question was "What did Rascher do?" and I translated: "What did Russia do?" The Russian officer immediately jumped up, shook his hands in the air, and said: "WHAT?! What are you involving Russia for?" I then had to explain that I meant the German General Rascher, not Russia the country, and apologized.

What were some of the difficulties?

Well, the fact that the German defense counsel were good attorneys in Roman law, and the Americans and the British were good attorneys in common law. That sometimes made it difficult to explain the concepts, not the words.

Could you do that while interpreting?

No, you had to explain the concepts before and after, off the record, because they would use terms that the other side couldn't understand. When an American attorney speaks about a writ of *habeas corpus*, a German would say, "What is he talking about?" Then you had to explain what legal document they had. On the other side, the Roman law professionals would use Latin terms that we don't know in America, and you had to be careful in explaining it, but you can't always do this in open court.



So you had to be a legal expert?

Yes, we studied legal terminology at the Geneva School. We studied international law, Roman law, and common law. So we knew what it was, but to impart these ideas into the head of the listener is not very simple, because they are all brought up in their own culture, which, to them, is the only meaningful and correct one. They don't realize that other systems are built on different assumptions.

What kind of law do you practice now?

Mostly family law.

Having lived through tumultuous historical times, what advice would you give us today?

Don't follow somebody who tells you what's good for you. I like the motto "Lead me to those searching for truth, but keep me away from those who have 'found it'."

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