Edouard Roditi

INTERPRETING: ITS HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL

Born in Paris in 1910 of American parents, the American poet, biographer, story-writer, literary critic and art historian Edouard Roditi has been bilingual since early childhood and subsequently acquired a working knowledge, as a conference interpreter too, of German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Since 1944, he has worked a great deal as a simultaneous conference interpreter and is now one of the pioneers in this profession.

An extensive bibliography of his published writings is kept by the Special Collections Department of the Research Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. It includes, up to date, close on two thousand titles of books, articles, book reviews, scattered poems, translations etc... He has translated books or poems into English or French from both these languages as well as into them from Dutch, German, modern Greek, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Rumanian and Turkish. In May 1982, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters granted him the annual Margery Peabody Waite Award "for continued effort and integrity in his art".

– I –

For lack of available documentation concerning whole periods of history of vast areas of Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia, a history of interpreting, however carefully documented, must necessarily appear to be somewhat ethnocentric, since it remains almost inevitably restricted to interpreting from and into a limited number of languages of the Western world and, at best, a few 'outsider' languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese or Malay. On the history of interpretation from one indigenous African, American, Asian or Australasian language into another-and some eight hundred different languages or dialects are currently spoken in the Republic of Papua-New Guinea alone-we lack sufficient information, if indeed any at all is available, although it would appear that the services of interpreters were traditionally used quite extensively hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago in many areas of Asia and Africa.

Our earliest recorded references to the need for interpretation, if not yet to interpretation itself, are indeed of Near-Eastern origin and are legendary or mythical rather than strictly historical. But the 'confusion of languages' which Jehovah inflicted on the presumptuous builders of the Tower of Babel surely encouraged, within a generation at the very earliest, some individuals, who may have been already of mixed parentage and bilingual, to offer their services as interpreters, perhaps like those public

letter-writers who one still finds in the market-places of countries where literacy is still rare. The Old Testament neglects, however, to record how the 'confusion of languages' was gradually overcome.

The peoples of Biblical antiquity, with the notable exception of the Egyptians, the Hittites and the Persians, nearly all spoke Semitic languages which, even today, remain in many respects so very similar that a speaker of literary Hebrew can understand to some extent, if not with relative ease, a speaker of literary Arabic, though not as readily a speaker of Amharic, which is partly a Hamitic language too. *Shema*, *asma* and *sema* thus mean *listen* in each one, in turn, of these three languages, and *malik* means *king* in all three. Joseph may therefore have needed an interpreter in Egypt, at least until he had mastered a smattering of Egyptian. When Moses, who had been reared by Pharaoh's daughter and certainly spoke Egyptian, later led the Jews out of their Egyptian bondage, 'from among a people of a strange tongue', as the Bible asserts, many of these Jews were surely bilingual or able to understand the orders of their Egyptian taskmasters, and some could certainly qualify as interpreters.

Did Solomon and the Queen of Sheba need interpreters, from Hebrew into Ghez, from which modern Amharic is derived, and from Ghez into Hebrew? Here too, the Bible remains silent, but the Queen, according to the traditions of the Falashas, the Black Jews of Ethiopia, accepted Judaism as her religion and had the Pentateuch translated into Ghez for her people.

The peoples of Biblical and classical antiquity nevertheless tended to express little respect for languages other than their own. Though the Bible refers to Solomon's diplomatic and trade relations with a number of foreign potentates, such as Hiram, King of Tyre, we find in these brief references more information about their 'abominable' gods than about their languages. The ancient Greeks likewise tended to ignore the languages of other nations and to refer to them, at best, as 'barbarian', a word of apparently onomatopoeic origin that presumably suggested 'gobbledygook' or 'incomprehensible nonsense'. If not as early as the Trojan War, when the Carians were already described by Homer as 'barbarians', then at least in the age of Herodotus, the Greeks can be assumed, however, in spite of their ethnocentric cultural and linguistic prejudices, to have begun to need some recourse to the services of interpreters mainly in their trade relations with other peoples and in their widely scattered colonies in Asia Minor, along the Black Sea coasts, in Egypt, Cyrene, Southern Italy, Sicily and as far west as Southern Gaul and Spain. One cannot imagine even Argonauts communicating with the natives of Colchis without interpreters, nor lphigenia living among the Scythians in Tauris without learning enough of their language to serve later as interpreter for her brother Orestes. In a more historical context, the Greeks of the prosperous coastal colonies of Magna Graecia, in Southern Italy, and of Sicily, Cyrene, Southern Gaul and Spain, in the age of Alcibiades and later, certainly used interpreters in their dealings with their Italic, Sicilic, African, Gallic or Iberic neighbors as well as with their Phoenician competitors in trade. But classical Greek literature fails to refer at all to their services of interpreters, perhaps because they were not considered important

enough to be mentioned. The Greek inhabitants of Poseidonia, in Southern Italy, are even blamed by Greek authors because, after their city had been conquered by the Romans and been renamed Paestum, they abandoned their Greek languages and their Hellenic heritage and become thoroughly Romanized.

Nor are classical Latin authors at all more eloquent on the subject of interpreting. In all of Livy's chronicles of Roman wars and diplomatic relations, we find, for instance, no reference to the use of interpreters in the relations between Rome and the Etruscans, or later between Rome and the Carthaginians, the Gauls or the lberic tribes of Spain. This ethnocentric lack of interest or respect for any alien languages is indeed responsible for our present ignorance of the languages of the Etruscans, the Gauls and the lberic tribes, since no Latin author deemed these languages worthy of study and of preservation in his own writings.

Our earliest clear references to the services of professional interpreters begin to appear in Greek literature in the age of Alexander the Great's prestigious campaigns in Asia, which took his armies as far as India. In the course of these campaigns, he had to rely again and again on interpreters in order to be able to communicate with representatives of the various peoples that he conquered or that became his allies. Some Greek historians even suggest that Alexander himself took the trouble to learn at least Persian, though they also blame him for abandoning some of his native Greek customs in the hope of gaining a greater popularity among his new Asian subjects. Later, the Romans, likewise, especially after the age of Caesar, relied to a great extent on the services of interpreters in the administration of their conquered territories and in their campaigns on the frontiers of their far-flung Empire.

References to the existence of interpreters remain scarce, however, in all Hebrew, Greek and Latin literature of classical antiquity, though one has good reason to assume that many Jews became interpreters in their Babylonian exile or under the Persian King in the age of Esther, or that some of the men who accompanied Xenophon on his Anabasis returned to Greece with a practical knowledge of some Asian language. References to translating and interpreting begin nevertheless to occur more frequently in Hellenistic Greek and Byzantine Greek literature, as well as in Talmudic Jewish texts, in late Latin literature and in medieval Arabic literature. We know, for instance, that translators from Hebrew to Greek were active in Hellenistic Alexandria, where the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament was produced. Though Longinus appears to have knownthe Old Testament, of which he may have acquired some knowledge in Greek, in his treatise *On the Sublime*. The Hellenistic geographer Strabo reports a mysterious story about a Greek navigator, Eudoxus of Cyzicus, who appears to have sailed as far south along the East-African coast as Mombasa, and to have found there the prow of a wrecked Greek ship which had come from even further south, and which he identified as being an Alexanderiot vessel, all of which suggests that Eudoxus was somehow able to communicate, perhaps with the help of an interpreter, with the East-Africans who supplied him with this information. In Talmudic literature, one finds

reference to *Targum*, meaning translation, and this word is sometimes still used to designate some Jewish vernaculars of the Diaspora, such as Judeo-Persian.

Occasional references to interpreters appear more and more frequently in late Latin authors of the age of the so-called Barbarian invasions, for instance in the writings of contemporaries of Sidonius Apollinaris, who, in fifth century Gaul, had frequent official dealings with the leaders of the Burgundian tribes. The Burgundians and the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, however, very soon adapted Latin as their language, and one of the Visigothic kings of Spain even achieved considerable distinction as a Latin poet.

At the time of the Islamic conquest of Spain, two centuries later, Jews were often employed as interpreters by the Arabs, presumably because they already knew both the 'vulgar' romance dialects of Spain and Hebrew, which allowed them to understand and learn to speak Arabic with relative ease. Some very ancient family names reveal to us that those who bear them now are descended from a medieval interpreter. Among Sefardic Jews of North-African origin, the family names Tordjman, meaning *interpreter* in Arabic, is still relatively common. In England, the name Tollemache, which had the same meaning in Norman French at the time of the Norman conquest of England or of the first Crusades, is etymologically of the same Germanic origin as the German familyname Dolmetsch, which also originated, most probably, at the time of the Crusades. The Old French word, *truchement*, meaning an *interpreter*, is moreover derived, in the age of the Crusades, from the same classical Arabic word as our English term *dragoman*, meaning a *tourist guide*, and as in colloquial Arabic, the family-name Tordjman.

Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, interpreting remained in most of Western Europe, to a great extent, a Jewish profession. In Spain, King Alfonso the Sage thus employed in Toledo a whole academy of Jewish translators and interpreters to compile in Latin a kind of encyclopaedic library of all known scientific literature that was then available only in Hebrew or Arabic. In Sicily, the Emperor Frederic Hohenstaufen likewise promoted translation of Arabic, Hebrew and Greek into Latin, and we thus owe to his initiative, among other such medieval Latin texts, the *Plato Latinus*. In Southern France, in the area of Lunel, Beziers, Narbonne and Montpellier, a family of Jewish scholars now known as the Tibbonids and their disciples were active translating Arabic philosophical and scientific texts into Hebrew and as interpreters who facilitated their subsequent translation, by others, into Latin. The Aristotelian revival in scholastic philosophy was indeed inspired mainly by such translations, since the original Greek texts were then unknown in Western Europe and Aristotelian thought was rediscovered mainly through translation of such Arabic commentaries on Aristotle as those of Averroes.

Gradually, in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries, the secularization of knowledge led to an abandonment of Latin as the universal language of science and to an increasing use of the so-called 'vulgar' tongues as vehicles for literature of every kind. With the linguistic diversification of the literatures of Europe, translations became more and more important. At first, the translators of purely literary texts often allowed

themselves considerable freedom. The Old French romance on the theme of the Trojan War is thus a far cry from Homer's original text; its author only adapted, with great poetic licence, a Latin prose version of Homer. But some translations of the late Middle Ages are already very accurate. The Catalan and Spanish translations of the encyclopaedic Provencal *Breviari de Amor* are in this respect exemplary. Bible translations, in particular, were always as painfully exact as possible, if only to avoid the accusation of heresy. In this respect, the two Sixteenth century Judeo-Spanish translations of the Old Testament that were respectively published in Ferrara and Constantinople are particularly interesting from the point of view of the theory of translation: because the translators considered Hebrew a 'sacred' language, they even respected its syntax, so that their Spanish follows the grammatical and syntactical characteristics of Hebrew, as far as possible. Because the Hebrew word of life, for instance, exists only in the plural form, their Spanish text has *vidas* instead of *vida*.

Although the Humanists of the Renaissance had great respect for translators, especially of the Greek and Latin classics, they almost never refer in their writings to interpreters. In *The Prince* and in his *Discourses*, Machiavelli, who was profoundly interested in politics and diplomacy, never mentions any recourse, on the part of the many rulers to whom he refers, to the services of interpreters. One finds such references to the services of interpreters, however, in such archives as those of the Venetian Republic or of the English Levant Company. In their trade with Arabs and Turks, the Venetians, the Genoese, the English and others all had recourse to the services of interpreters who appear to have been, in the Levant, mainly Spanish-speaking Sefardic Jews or Greeks. Islamic potentates likewise tended to employ either Jews or Christian slaves as their interpreters in diplomatic or commercial dealings with Europeans. This is attested as late as the Nineteenth and the early Twentieth centuries and in the memoirs of Europeans who managed to penetrate the Sherifian Empire of Morocco.

References to the services of such interpreters can now be found in a great variety of diplomatic archives of the late Middle Ages, of the Renaissance and of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, for instance in archives concerning trade relations between the Italian republics of Amalfi, Pisa, Genoa and Venice with the Eastern Mediterranean or with Black Sea ports, in the archives of the Holy Roman Empire in Vienna, and in French and English diplomatic archives. When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu accompanied her husband, in the Eighteenth century, on his diplomatic mission, from Vienna, via Belgrade and Sofia, to the Ottoman court in Constantinople, she appears, from the letters that she wrote to Alexander Pope and to other London friends, to have availed herself mainly of the services of Greek ladies as interpreters in her conversations with high-ranking Turkish ladies.

A kind of improvised Esperanto known as *lingua franca* was nevertheless developed, as early as the age of the Crusades, to serve as a common linguistic means of communication throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Since Anna Comnena, in her very detailed biography, the *Alexiad*, of her father, the Emperor Alexis, founder of the Byzantine dynasty of the Comnenes, never refers to interpreters, one must presume that

he had recourse to *lingua.franca* in his difficult dealings with the Norman invaders from Italy.

In India, the Moghul conquerors likewise developed Urdu, a composite language derived to a great extent from Turkish and Persian, as the idiom of communication in the army and in the administration of their empire. Derived from the Turkish word *ordu*, meaning *army*, Urdu has now become the national language of Pakistan, with a rich literature of its own. On the Eastern coast of Africa, Arab traders similarly developed Swahili as a composite idiom of communication, deriving its name from the Arabic word *Sahel*, meaning *coast*. Swahili is now following the example of Urdu and becoming likewise a national language, gradually producing its own literature too.

The great Genoese, Portuguese and Spanish navigators, conquistadors and explorers of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance appear to have been the first Europeans to have systematically had recourse to the services of interpreters. In seeking an alliance in East Africa against the Arabs with the legendary Christian monarch known as Prester John, Portuguese explorers managed to penetrate as far as Gondar, close to the frontiers of present-day Sudan, in Ethiopia; their very detailed descriptions of the country, its peoples and its ruler reveal that they certainly used interpreters at least until some of them had resided long enough to learn Amharic while also building the monuments which can still be seen in Gondar. When Columbus set out on the expedition that led to the discovery of America, he was careful to include in his crews a few men who would be able to converse in Arabic. Because Columbus really expected to reach Cipangu, as Japan was then called, or the Moluccas, known as Spice Islands, in Eastern Indonesia, rather than discover Hispaniola, Cuba and ultimately the coast of Mexico, and because he also knew, from the writings of Marco Polo and the reports of other travelers to the Far East, that Arab traders had reached his expected goal well ahead of him by sailing eastward, he believed that interpreters capable of communicating with these traders would be useful.

A few decades later, Antonio Pigafetta, an Italian who accompanied Magellan on his great expedition and returned, after circumnavigating the globe, as one of the very few survivors, already began to compile a vocabulary of the Tupi-Guarany language while he was in Brazil, then a rudimentary vocabulary of the language of the natives of Guam and later a more extensive vocabulary of the languages that he began to learn in the Philippines. There Magellan's slave Enrique was duly recorded in Pigafettals journal as having served usefully as the expedition's interpreter. Enrique can also be presumed to have been the first man to have circumnavigated the globe, since he turned out, although originally purchased as a slave by Magellan in Malacca, on the Malay peninsula, to understand Vizayan perfectly when he reached the Philippines. After Magellan's death, Enrique jumped ship and deserted the expedition, presumably to return to his original home in the Philippines.

Pigafetta’s lexicographical interests in exotic Amerindian, Australasian or Asian languages were most unusual in his age. Only in the late Eighteenth century did the

Jesuits of Paraguay resume systematically the task, which Pigafetta had been the first to undertake, of compiling a dictionary of the Tupi-Guarany language, but into Latin!

In the course of his conquest of Mexico, Cortez is known to have used La Malinche, his Aztec mistress who had managed to learn some Spanish, as his interpreter in his dubious dealings with her unfortunate compatriots. The missionary activities of Catholic priests, in converting American Indians to Christianity throughout the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires, subsequently led to a somewhat limited use of interpretation from and into a number of major Amerindian languages, such as Nahuatl, Maya and Quechua in Central America and Peru and Tupi-Guarany in Brazil and Paraguay.

The history of European colonial exploration, conquest and administration is thus to a great extent, from the Sixteenth century onwards, also a history of a very limited kind of *ad hoc* interpreting. In British India, a whole class or subcaste of interpreters came into existence to meet the needs of English administrators. In the area of Bombay and throughout Maharashtra and Gujarat, many of these interpreters were Zoroastrian Parsees or Beni Israel Jews, who very soon became more or less anglicized. In Kerala, they were often native Christians and, in Madras, native Christian or Armenians. Elsewhere, they were more or less culturally renegade Muslims, Jews or Hindus who are somewhat contemptuously called *Babus* in the writings of Rudyard Kipling. One has good reason to suspect that Tsarist Russia, in the course of its campaigns of colonial expansion in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia, likewise relied to a great extent on the services of indigenous interpreters, and it is known that the great Russian writer and diplomat Gorobediev used an interpreter on his disastrous mission to the Persian Court which ended in his being lynched by a mob similar to the one which, over a hundred years later, invaded the American Embassy in Teheran and contented itself, as a sign of progress, with holding its personnel as hostages.

Gradually, interpreting and interpreters then acquired a new kind of official recognition, especially in law courts, in diplomacy and in military affairs. Though inextricably tangled, for close on two thousand years, with the history of translation, interpreting thus began to emerge as a profession in itself. Until the Seventeenth century, Latin remained, throughout Western and Central Europe, the language of diplomacy, which rarely availed itself of interpreting into national languages. The prestige of the French court of 'Le Roi Soleil' then promoted French as the accepted language of European diplomacy. But neither Latin nor French proved of much use, with the expansion of international relations, in dealings with non-European powers.

The break-through in the history of diplomatic, administrative and military interpreting appears indeed to have occurred in European relations with Asia and Africa. Accounts of Napoleon's ill-fated campaign in Egypt and Palestine abound in references to the services of translators and interpreters capable of handling both French and Arabic. Throughout the Nineteenth century, which was the heyday of European colonial expansion in Asia and Africa and of the conquest of the West in the United States, lexicography, encouraged by such scientists as Alexander von Humboldt, became

increasingly diversified, though interpreting continued to acquire a status which remained, in many respects, somewhat anomalous. Interpreters, in conquered territories, were often half-castes or 'detribalized' natives, converts to Christianity or else members of indigenous religious or other minorities, such as the Parsees, the Beni Israel Jews or the Christians of India, who belonged to the so-called 'non-scheduled castes'. In the French conquests of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, native North-African Jews likewise tended to serve as interpreters.

Can anything very definite be said about the history of interpreting from one non-European language into another? From the writings of Ibn Batuta and other great Arab travelers and from the reports of European explorers and traders, we know that West-African potentates, in the Songhay and Mossi empires, among others, employed interpreters who enjoyed high rank and great prestige at their courts. It would appear that these interpreters, who generally work from one African language into another, were allowed great freedom or 'poetic licence', and that their talents as diplomats, virtuoso orators or, as the ancient Greek saying went, 'pyrotechnical sophists', above all, were appreciated, both by their employer and their audience. With the spread of Islam south of the Sahara, Arabic gradually became, however, the diplomatic language of all those African kingdoms that were now Sultanates of the interior, while Portuguese, French and English were used more and more widely in the coastal kingdoms such as those of Abomey or Porto Novo.

But these European languages soon began to suffer a sea-change from their contacts with non-European languages which follow very different rules of syntax, so that new composite languages began to develop, such as the 'petit nègre' of French West Africa, the 'Pidgin English' of English West Africa, or the Portuguese of Cabo Verde. In the West Indies, similar dialects likewise developed, and Papiamento then became the more or less official language of the Dutch West Indies, while Taki-taki (talkie-talkie) developed in Guyana. In the China Seas and in the islands of the Pacific, different varieties of 'Pidgin English' also came into being. Like Urdu, Swahili or *lingua franca* in earlier ages, all these new composite languages were used as a common ground for communication, in fact as an *ad hoc* substitute for interpreting. In South Africa, Afrikaans was originally such a language too, derived from Dutch, but with borrowings from Bantu languages, English and Malay, and has now become a national language, with a literature of its own.

Pidgin, however, does not appear to be destined to achieve the status of a national language. Although accepted as one of the four official languages for simultaneous interpretation in the Parliament of the Republic of Papua- New Guinea, Pidgin tends even there, with the rapid spread of literacy, to come closer and closer to Australian English. In the Mariannas and elsewhere in the islands of the Pacific, the local variety of Pidgin tends to develop likewise into American English and to drop almost all its earlier borrowings from Spanish or Portuguese, while the Pidgin of Hong Kong remains in a state of flux, more and more influenced, on the one hand, by British English in the more educated classes and, on the other hand, by the spoken Chinese of recent immigrants

from areas of China, such as Shanghai, other than those that speak Cantonese, the original source of the Chinese element of traditional Hong Kong Pidgin.

The evolution of all such composite languages, even if they fail to achieve the status of a national language or to produce any literature, yet has some bearing on the evolution of professional interpreting at the political or diplomatic level, where the official languages of interpretation invariably tend with time to suffer a sea-change too. In recent decades, this has become particularly clear in the technical jargon that one finds, for instance, in the minutes of the meetings and the other official documents, whatever their language, of such international agencies as those of the so-called 'family of the United Nations' or of the European Common Market. To a layman or a neophyte interpreter, much of this cryptic jargon is sheer gobbledygook.

– II –

It was left to the Twentieth century, an age of increasingly complex division of labor and professional specialization in the more developed national economies, and also of increasingly complex and hectic international relations, to recognize the importance of interpreting as a profession in itself, and to promote and organize the training of interpreters.

Viewed in quasi-theological terms, however, interpreting remained by and large, at least until the decade that immediately followed the Second World War, a profession that recruited the 'elect' who happened to be endowed with a more or less Pentecostal 'gift of tongues'. No attempt was yet made to select and train candidates, and these were recruited, for instance by the League of Nations between the two World Wars, almost by luck, if not at random. From such confused 'craftsman' beginnings, interpreting slowly matured and entered its new 'industrial' age only in 1946, when the International Military Tribunal conducted its War Crimes Trials in Nuremberg.

Because of the number of agencies of the League of Nations and the number and frequency of their meetings, more and more interpreters had already been needed, between the two wars, but still for a fairly limited number of languages, generally English, French and Spanish, sometimes also for German. The technique of interpreting was what is still known as 'consecutive': the interpreter took notes, according to an improvised system that varied from one interpreter to another, while listening to the-speaker. From these notes, when the delegate had finished speaking, the interpreter then reconstructed the delegate's speech in another language. Some interpreters who were gifted with a remarkable memory or with unusual eloquence, could manage to speak almost as long as the original speaker. One French interpreter, for instance, was famous for his eloquence; carried away by it, he once managed to speak even longer than the original speaker, who later congratulated him in rather ambiguous terms, only to be told: "I said only what you should have said."

Interpreted in this manner in two or more other languages, each speech, at an international conference, required a considerable length of time, which had its advantages as well as its handicaps. A speaker who understood the language of his interpreter could, for instance, correct him if necessary. During the interpretation, moreover, the following speakers could meditate and prepare their reply. But it began, already in the era of the League of Nations, to be felt that, for some more technical meetings, consecutive interpreting took up too much time. International Business Machines then proposed to the League of Nations its newly developed equipment for simultaneous interpreting, functioning on principles similar to those of a private and portable telephone network, with microphones for the speaker and interpreters and earphones for all, and with dials permitting listeners to switch at will from the original speaker to any one of the available interpretations. Because of the vast amount of wiring involved, this original equipment for simultaneous interpreting still posed many problems and required, on the part of the engineers operating it, considerable skill and watchfulness, to make sure that the different channels, that of the original speaker and those of the various interpreters, were all functioning properly and at an intelligible sound-level.

The International Labour Office was the only agency of the League of Nations that decided to adopt this system of simultaneous interpreting for some of its meetings, mainly for its General Assembly, while still using consecutive interpretation in the deliberations of its commissions and committees. Simultaneous interpreting thus came into use, at the international level, at first almost only for set speeches and not yet for 'free' discussions.

First used by the International Labour Office in Geneva fairly frequently, this equipment ceased to be used at all when the League of Nations and its various agencies were obliged to curtail their activities in the years of political crisis that immediately preceded the Second World War. The International Labour Office then moved, during the war years, from Geneva to Montreal, where it remained for a while more or less dormant, functioning only with a skeleton staff. In April 1944, however, it convened a Conference of Allied and Neutral member States in Philadelphia, where the IBM simultaneous interpreting equipment surfaced again. To this Conference, the ILO brought its own permanently employed interpreters, who had previously acquired their experience in Geneva and were now working in Montreal. But these were not numerous enough, and a few neophytes were therefore recruited in New York or Washington and hastily trained, in a couple of days, on the spot in Philadelphia. The author of the present report was one of these neophytes.

The Conference was held at Temple University. Simultaneous interpretation was used only for the meetings of the General Assembly, which took place in a hall that provided no booths for the interpreters, who were placed in a dark and airless basement beneath the platform where the presidium sat at a table and to which the various speakers also came, as their microphone was likewise placed there. The interpreters were therefore unable ever to see any of the speakers whom they, had to interpret, and

could barely hear them on account of the constant shuffling of feet on the boards above their heads. Nor could the interpreters be heard at all clearly, since they were not separated from each other by any partitions, so that two languages could always be heard simultaneously on each one of the two channels they happened to be using, though one of these two languages generally came through louder than the other.

Consecutive interpretation continued, moreover, to be used in Philadelphia in the meetings of the ILO Conference's various commissions, where most of the more serious business of the Conference was being conducted. The general impression of the so-called 'advantages' of simultaneous interpretation must, however, have been somewhat unsatisfactory, since it was not used, a year later, at the historic San Francisco Conference where the Charter of the United Nations was drafted.

The organization of the Secretariat of the San Francisco Conference had been entrusted to the Department of State, which had little or no experience of such matters. Although International Business Machines tried to sell, to the Department of State, the idea of using its equipment for simultaneous interpretation at the San Francisco Conference, the Department of State, for various practical reasons or perhaps only because of its faith in diplomatic traditions, remained unreceptive. Alger Hiss, who was in charge of the Secretariat, proved moreover to be - apart from the weirdly dubious political involvements of which he was subsequently accused - a kind of Johnny-head-in-air, quite incapable of foreseeing many of the technical difficulties that his task involved. Both Hiss and the Department of State, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, most of the official American delegates, with the possible exception of Governor Harold Stassen, who was by far the ablest, most impressively studious and most stolidly objective member of the Delegation, appeared to believe that the whole business of the Conference could be successfully conducted and concluded within, at most, a couple of months. Far too few competent or experienced interpreters had moreover been recruited in Washington, New York or elsewhere, by the Department of State. Fortunately, the French Delegation turned up with interpreters of its own, nearly all of whom had previous League of Nations experience.

The languages of the Conference were English, French, Russian, Spanish, and officially but not in practice, for lack of interpreters, Chinese. In the opening meeting of the Commission which subsequently became the United Nations Trusteeship Council, the Chairman and delegate of Austria, Mr. Evatt, spoke for one hour and fifteen minutes, while the present author took feverish notes before delivering in turn his somewhat abridged oration in French, in slightly more than half an hour, after which his colleague followed suit in Russian. The Spanish interpreter had meanwhile fled in a panic, so that the present author took the floor again and asked timidly in his own brand of homespun Spanish whether a brief Spanish summary was still needed. Fortunately, all the Spanish-speaking delegates have already understood the original English speech or its French interpretation, or were bored or in a hurry to adjourn to the bar or the men's room.

The final draft of the United Nations Charter now reveals, in some of its terminology, a few of the linguistic and other problems that arose in the course of the deliberations -of the San Francisco Conference, where a number of delegates appeared to have been interested in displaying their own personal intellectual brilliance and eloquence rather than in getting down to business. A Belgian delegate, famous as an authority in the history of international law, thus appeared at one Commission meeting with a pile of books borrowed from the Library of the University of California, all of them full of markers. He then set about delivering an oration that was stuffed, like a cake full or raisins, with quotations in Latin and French, from Grotius and other legal classics, and he was most contemptuous of the consecutive interpreter who subsequently asked him to pass the books on to him in order to be able to quote the same passages correctly. The speaker indeed seemed to expect his interpreter to be able to note, perhaps in shorthand, all these Latin quotations correctly while listening to them; interpreting, first back into longhand and then into another language. In any case, Latin was not one of the official languages of the San Francisco Conference, where the interpreters were not required to know it, though the present author happened to be this particular speaker's interpreter and to have once been a Latin scholar.

Such incidents of 'pyrotechnical sophistry', entertaining as they were in a way, delayed the progress of the Conference almost as much as the haggling, between the Great Powers, over the Constitution of the Security Council and their own veto rights in it. In the course of a private conversation with Alger Hiss concerning a minor technical problem which had arisen in one of the smaller committees, where the Rapporteur who had been elected proved to be incapable of drafting a report of the committee's meetings and expected the interpreter to do the job from notes which had not been taken for this purpose, the interpreter, who was the present author, expressed serious doubts about the future effects of the veto powers in the Security Council, and stated that, in his view, the day might arise when the USSR and the Western Powers might no longer see eye to eye or have the same interests, in which case a deadlock might arise both in the Security Council and in the General Assembly of the United Nations. Alger Hiss dismissed these fears as nonsense. The present author subsequently expressed these prophetic views in print, in a 1945 issue of the New York magazine *Tricolor*.

As the Conference dragged on, most of the American delegates, but especially Senator Vandenberg and John Foster Dulles, expressed more and more frequently their dissatisfaction over its slow progress and the time that its deliberations were taking. Committee meetings, on the final drafting of the Charter, began to last almost all night, often after a harrowing day, both for the delegates and interpreters, of other meetings which sometimes began at nine o'clock in the morning. Tempers too were none too easy, at times, and this may well explain some of the very peculiar drafting of the final text of the Charter.

One American delegate, for instance, was adamant about introducing into the Charter a term, 'sovereign equality', which is quite nonsensical in international law. Nations can, of course, be equally sovereign, in that they all enjoy the same degree of

sovereignty. But sovereign equality? This would mean that, while sovereign, they would also be equal in other respects, demographically, economically, geographically or in military terms, for instance. But the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg, though equal in sovereignty to the United States, is certainly not equal to it in other respects. Delegate after delegate, at the San Francisco Conference, tried to point this out to the American delegates, but all in vain. Finally, weary of useless quibbling, the other delegates yielded, and 'sovereign equality', though meaningless, remained in the English version of the final draft of the Charter, destined to pose almost insoluble problems to all those who were subsequently responsible for translating these two words into Chinese, French, Russian or Spanish.

The official documents of all international agencies are full of such pseudo-technical terms which may have some real meaning within the context of the agency itself or may even, as 'sovereign equality', be only high-sounding and have no real meaning at all. Often such terms originally owed their official existence, as in this particular case at the 1945 San Francisco Conference, to a compromise born, after much fruitless argument, of sheer weariness. Fortunately, however, they generally belong to the mere rhetoric of international relations and, once accepted, are piously repeated again and again in formal speeches, but never prove to be the object of serious discussion or disagreement. Interpreters therefore need only to learn how they happen to have been translated in the other official languages of the original document in order to be able to recognize at once that they are dealing here with a concept as vague as some of those that appear in the writings of some early Church Fathers who were combating heretical ideas concerning the nature of Christ.

Although the 1945 San Francisco Conference had managed, in spite of the inevitable delays of consecutive interpretation, to conclude its business fairly satisfactorily within a few months, the United States Department of the Army yielded more readily to the pressures of International Business Machines and, a few months later, decided to 'save time' by having recourse to simultaneous interpretation at the War Crimes Trial of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, in the American Zone of Occupation in Germany. Here the official languages were English, French, German and Russian. Because the former League of Nations or ILO interpreters who had sufficient previous experience of simultaneous interpreting were still relatively few in number, because their language combinations too were not those required in Nuremberg and, in any case, these interpreters were nearly all international civil servants whose services were now urgently needed again in the midwifery that was attending the birth of United Nations and its 'family' of specialized agencies at Lake Success and elsewhere, the majority of the interpreters recruited by the International Military Tribunal were brought there by the Soviet, the British or the French delegations and had little or no previous experience of interpreting except perhaps of *ad hoc* military interpretation between representatives of Allied General Staffs. At best, a few of them had recently graduated from the newly founded School of Interpretation in Geneva. Only two interpreters, Haakon Chevalier and the present author, had previous

experience of simultaneous interpretation at an international gathering, namely at the above-named 1944 ILO Conference in Philadelphia.

The same somewhat obsolete or down-at-heel IBM equipment was moreover used in Nuremberg as in Philadelphia. Not only was it by now close on twenty years old and in bad need of repair, so that it was subject to frequent breakdowns, but it was very difficult, when these occurred, to scare up the necessary parts at the drop of a hat in bombed-out post-war Germany. The engineers who were in charge of it were thus reduced, at times, to expedients worthy of a Rube Goldberg cartoon.

The interpreters were also reduced to all sorts of expedients. In the course of the Trial, vast quantities of captured official German documents were quoted, both by the Prosecution and by the defence lawyers and the accused. These documents referred to a great variety of subjects, ranging from medical experiments undertaken by SS doctors on prisoners in concentration camps to 'secret weapons', poison gases used in extermination camps, and works of art seized bv the Nazis in occupied territories. None of these documents were ever made available to the interpreters, who often had to improvise their translations of unfamiliar terms. Again and again, in the course of the Trial, the German word *typhus*, meaning *typhoid fever*, was thus translated erroneously as *typhus*, which in German in *Fleckfieber*, on one occasion, an interpreter who had little experience of medicine even hesitated between *measles* and *syphilis* as the English equivalent of *Fleckfieber*, since the symptoms of both these maladies can include spots and fever.

In spite of all the technical and other difficulties involved in the Trial, and in spite of its unforeseen duration which, in official circles, caused some impatience, it was generally agreed that simultaneous interpretation, like sex in the adage, was 'here to stay'. The delays in the Trial, it was also agreed, had been due to a great extent to insufficient preparation on the part of the Prosecution, which had prepared its case before devoting enough time to a sufficiently detailed study of captured enemy documents, so that again and again, while the Trial was actually being conducted, new captured documents turned up which proved, in one way or another, to contain far more conclusive evidence than some of those quoted, especially by attorney-general Robert Jackson, in the original American act of prosecution.

Another cause of delays in the Trial had been insufficient coordination between the various Allied Prosecutors. The American Prosecutor has thus tried to build his case partly on an accusation of conspiracy, a term which exists in American law, but not in French or German law. As the French judge and the German defence lawyers argued quite properly and at very great length in course, the defendants could not be condemned for a crime which did not exist under the laws of the nation where they were being accused of having committed it: *nulla poena sine crimine* being a basic principle of Roman Law and of the whole traditional legal system of both France and Germany. On this point, the French judge, Dieudonné de Vabres, was adamant, both in the Courtroom and in the closed sessions of the judges. Finally, unlike their compatriot at

San Francisco on the point of 'sovereign equality', the American, Judge Francis Biddle and Judge Parker, had to yield.

The Chief of the interpreting and translation services in Nuremberg was Colonel Dostert, an American of French extraction who managed to display, under extremely difficult working conditions, remarkable qualities for organizing and, when necessary, for improvising too. Again and again, in the course of the winter months, interpreters caught colds or influenza and, for several days, were unable to work, but were replaced by a constant flow of neophyte linguists recruited mainly from Paris and Geneva, where bilingual refugees of various origins were still both numerous and jobless. Colonel Dostert's team of interpreters thus soon acquired the reputation of being composed mainly of refugee Russian princes or Jews. On several occasions, high-ranking members of the staff of the United Nations came to Nuremberg in order to see with their own eyes how the 'miraculous' system of simultaneous interpreting was functioning there, and Colonel Dostert finally obtained, thanks to his qualities as a promoter, a contract from the United Nations to form, after the termination of the main War Crimes Trial, a team of simultaneous interpreters which would be tried out at the United Nations, with English, French, Russian and Spanish as its main languages, while interpreters from and into Chinese would still have to be recruited and trained.

This first United Nations team of simultaneous interpreters went through its initial period of training at United Nations headquarters at Lake Success. It included a number of interpreters who had already worked in Nuremberg in the English, French and Russian booths. Its first appearance 'on location', 'so to speak, was in the Fall of 1947, in Church House in London, at a Conference on Tariffs and Trade which ultimately led to the establishment of the agency now known at G.A.T.T. (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) with its headquarters in Geneva, but other United Nations Agencies soon had recourse to this team's services too, above all the International Telecommunications Union.

Simultaneous interpretation nevertheless continued well into 1949 to encounter violent opposition at United Nations headquarters in America, mainly from the older interpreters who had years of experience of consecutive interpreting at the old League of Nations. A majority of these happened to be French nationals and managed to organize a kind of lobby which, for a while, gained some support from French delegates and even from the French Foreign Office. By 1950, however, the battle had been won with considerable improvements in its technical equipment, both at United Nations headquarters and in the meetings of most of its Agencies. Only the International Court of Justice in The Hague continues, until this day, to use only consecutive interpreters, who now number over a thousand throughout the world, now have little experience of consecutive interpreting, so that only a limited number of veterans of the profession continue to practice it regularly.

Simultaneous interpretation is now used also in other inter-governmental agencies, such as those of the European Economic Community, the Soviet-dominated COMECON, the Conference on European Security and Economic Cooperation, as well

as in a great number of non-governmental international organizations and in the National Parliaments of such nations as Canada or Switzerland, which have two or more national languages. The languages used at the meetings of these various agencies, organizations or bodies vary, of course, according to the needs of the delegates. To recruit and train interpreters who will be capable to meet these needs, a number of schools of interpreting have been founded, mainly in Europe, where several national languages are regularly used in international gatherings, but also in the Americas and in Asia. Although it is known that simultaneous interpreting is also used to a great extent in Soviet Russia in meetings attended by delegates of other Communist nations or even of the various republics or autonomous regions that constitute the USSR, little information is available on the training of the interpreters they employed or on the languages spoken and interpreted at such meetings. It is known, however, that indigenous interpreters are now trained in the Soviet Union to interpret from or into some of the following languages: English, French, German, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Rumanian, Bulgarian and Arabic. One had good reason to presume that some Soviet interpreters have also been trained to handle Japanese, Chinese and Swahili, and of course, for domestic use too, such languages as Georgian, Armenian, Uzbek, Tadjik, Finnish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian. For political reasons of its own, the USSR, in recent years, has insisted more and more frequently that only Soviet citizens be employed as interpreters in the Russian booth in the meetings of international agencies such as those of the United Nations. Other member States, especially France, have nevertheless managed to impose that their own citizens, who may be former Russian refugees but have now acquired their citizenship by naturalization, should still be employed in the Russian booth by international agencies, but Soviet delegations, in the last couple of years, have been adamant, for instance at the Belgrade follow-up conference on the Helsinki agreement in 1979, in refusing that Israeli citizens who happen to have formerly been Russian be now employed in the Russian booth.

– III –

The official recognition of interpretation as a profession which requires, in addition to a knowledge of, and a gift for, languages, an adequate training and an acquired skill soon led, together with the profession's expanding field and the demand for interpreters with more complex language combinations, to the establishment of a number of highly specialized schools of interpreting, equipped with language laboratories. Generally, these new schools were organized within the framework of existing universities or schools of higher education, at first in Switzerland, France, Western Germany and Italy, but soon in nations of the Communist block too, then also in England, Belgium, Egypt and Greece as well, of course, as in the United States.

As early as 1946, a first attempt was also made in London to establish an international association of professional interpreters, though without much success. A

couple of years later, a second such attempt was made in Geneva, Switzerland, with only moderate success. Finally, two such associations were established successfully on a lasting basis: the Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC), which has its headquarters in Paris and groups some eight hundred interpreters, most of whom have Brussels, Geneva or Paris as their professional domicile, but which also counts among its members other interpreters who are scattered elsewhere in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia or the Americas, and The American Association of Language Specialists (TAALS), which has its headquarters in Washington, D.C. and groups mainly those interpreters, translators and reviewers who are domiciled in the United States or elsewhere in the Americas. Both these Associations include members who are permanently employed as international civil servants in intergovernmental agencies and others who work only part-time on a free-lance basis for intergovernmental agencies or nongovernmental organizations. Both organizations accept only qualified members whose candidacy is duly sponsored by existing members, and both have a professional code of ethics and also determine, by agreement with the more important employers of free-lance interpreters, the basic working conditions, minimal fees and per diem allowances for the latter when they are employed away from their professional domicile.

All in all, these two associations can now boast of a total of between fifteen hundred and two thousand regular members, whether interpreters or, as members of TAALS, translators or reviewers. Their languages include, in addition to Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, which are the official languages of the United Nations, also the official languages of the European Economic Community, which are Danish, Dutch, German, Greek and Italian in addition to English and French, and a number of other languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, Hungarian, Indonesian, Japanese, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Scandinavian (meaning Danish, Norwegian or Swedish), Serbo-Croatian, Turkish and Yiddish.

Other organizations of a geographically regional or professionally more highly specialized nature also have been founded in recent years, sometimes too on a merely national basis. Such organizations group, for instance, law-court interpreters, court reporters, literary translators, medical interpreters or translators, etc. A number of national associations or unions of literary, technical and other translators have moreover been founded, under the sponsorship of UNESCO, by national branches of the International PEN Club.

Two inter-governmental or governmental institutions now beat all records in this expanding field of interpretation: in Brussels, the Commission of the European Economic Communities, which has seven official languages but also occasionally uses Arabic, Spanish or Portuguese, and the National Parliament of Papua-New Guinea, which has only four official languages, as already stated, but also permits the use of any of the eight hundred odd languages or dialects of the Republic on condition that the speaker supply his own interpreter to interpret him into one of the Parliament's four official languages.

The Brussels Commission thus employs on a permanent basis some three hundred interpreters, but has also been known to employ on a day-to-day basis as many as two hundred and seventy-five additional free-lance interpreters at a time. On one occasion, whether in Brussels or elsewhere on mission and including permanent interpreters who happened to be either on annual leave or sick leave or on reserve in case of further need, it was employing, on one and the same day, close on six hundred interpreters.

It has frequently been suggested that the use of an artificial or composite international language such as Esperanto or Volapuk would liberate international conferences from the expense and technical complications of consecutive or simultaneous interpretation. But this would require that all delegates and technical experts who attend such conferences be able to express themselves clearly and with ease in such an international language; and these languages generally have a very limited vocabulary which would not lend itself to the highly technical subjects of some scientific conferences in the field, for instance, of medicine, nuclear physics or telecommunications.

Although such languages as Urdu and Swahili, which were originally 'artificial' in much the same way as Esperanto or Volapuk, have gradually been accepted as national languages within a limited geographical area, where they can even be taught to school children in whose ears and minds they are not too syntactically or phonetically alien, it is unlikely that any 'universal' language such as Esperanto or Volapuk should ever become an accepted medium of communication between people of all races and languages, if only because such reputedly 'universal' languages have so far remained basically ethnocentric, borrowing their elements and rules from a limited number of national languages, nearly all of European origin. The majority of the world's inhabitants, above all in Asia and Africa, must inevitably experience great difficulty in understanding, learning, using and pronouncing these languages at all correctly. Their use in international conferences would moreover restrict governments and other organizations in their choice of delegates, since those capable of expressing themselves clearly in Esperanto or Volapuk would not necessarily be the most competent experts in the subjects to be discussed.

Although both English and Russian have, in recent years, been more and more frequently spoken, in many international organizations, by delegates whose native language is neither English nor Russian, simultaneous is now firmly established as the most practical and time-saving means of communication in all intergovernmental agencies and in a great number of international nongovernmental organizations. In the early years of simultaneous interpretation, between 1950 and 1970, many non-governmental organizations had recourse, for their international meetings, to Simulta, a Geneva-based pioneer enterprise founded and managed by Marie Ginsberg, former Librarian of the League of Nations.

Simulta was indeed the first organization that could supply, under contract, a whole team of interpreters together with all the necessary electronic equipment and a qualified engineer to operate it. This equipment could be packed in suitcases and

installed in a couple of hours in any convenient conference room, for instance in a hotel. It was thus used for the first time in January 1951 for a meeting of the International Federation of Metal-workers Unions in one of the Burgenstock hotels, near Lucerne in Switzerland. Soon after this, for a conference held in the Palace of the Doges in Venice, electricity had to be installed there specially for Simulta and, a few days later, the Simulta equipment had to be transported by gondola across the lagoon to the island of San Giorgio, where another meeting was being held. For a conference held in Nice, Simulta was able to supply four thousand earphones, and its record distance covered for a conference was when it supplied interpreters and equipment from Geneva to Sri Lanka.

This kind of portable equipment is now used, however, less and less frequently. Throughout the world, many cities have, in recent years, built conference halls equipped with booths for interpreters and a complete installation for simultaneous interpreting. In order to attract conventions, many hotels can also offer these facilities. Portable equipment, similar to that which Siemens originally devised for Simulta, but now modernized and improved, is still in use, however, for smaller conferences held in premises that lack fixed equipment.

Although the birth of consecutive interpreting, as it is now practiced, cannot be dated at any specific moment in the past, it can be said to have been regularly practiced, if not earlier, at least since the League of Nations was founded immediately after World War I. Practiced less frequently, in recent decades, than simultaneous interpreting, it is nevertheless likely to hold its own in some highly technical fields, where speakers wish to be able to check that they are interpreted correctly, and at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. As for simultaneous interpreting, it has successfully survived the first five decades of its existence, and this has been made possible both by considerable technical improvement in its electronic equipment and by the increasingly careful selection and training of candidates for the profession.

Source : Edouard Roditi,. *Interpreting: Its History in a Nutshell*, Washington D.C., National Resource Center for Translation and Interpretation, Georgetown University, 1982, 19 p.