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AT THE DAWN OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION IN RUSSIA

This is a brief outline of the early history of simultaneous interpretation in Russia from its first use at the 6th Comintern Congress (1928). The hightlights of the early postwar period included the active participation of Soviet interpreters in the Nuremberg Trial and the Tokyo Trial of major Japanese war criminals. The real baptism of fire for a large group of Russian conference interpreters was the International Economic Conference held in Moscow in 1952. Since the 19th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, simultaneous translation has been more and more widely used on such occasions. The technique and hardware of simultaneous interpretation, at first somewhat crude and primitive, were gradually upgraded approaching international standards.

The history of simultaneous interpretation in Russia dates back to 1928 when the Soviet Union hosted the 6th Congress of the Communist International (Comintern). One of the few remaining traces of conference interpreters' presence is a photo in a time-yellowed copy of the Krasnaya Niva magazine showing interpreters seated in armchairs around the podium with bulky mike-holding gadgets on their necks. No earphones were available. The sound came directly from the podium. It was not until the 13th plenary session of the Comintern Executive Committee in 1933 that specially equipped booths were first used and headphones were provided for interpreters, enabling them to hear the speaker whose voice was no longer drowned out by background noise (Gofman 1963: 20).

Although simultaneous interpreting was tried out at some of the international conferences in Moscow, they were few and far between in those days and little known to the public at large. The first appearance of Soviet conference interpreters en masse on the international scene was at Nuremberg Trial of major German war criminals. This is how Evgeny Gofman, a veteran of Soviet simultaneous interpretation, describes the setting of the Nuremberg trial.

> We found ourselves in the gloomy grey building of the Palace of Justice. The time-honored main hall, imbued with the spirit of the Middle Ages, looked unusual. On the left, behind a massive oak barrier, were two rows of benches for prisoners in the dock. On the right, placed on a platform, was a long table for the judges, and in the middle the tables of defense counsel and stenographers. Further inside the hall were the four tables of USSR, US, British, and French counsel for the prosecution. And in the left-hand corner was a strange structure of glass, resembling a honeycomb, made up of four cells dotted with black microphones. Those were the interpreters' cabins where we were to spend about a year (Gofman 1963: 21).

The simultaneous interpreters faced a number of serious challenges: interpreting the remarks of the presiding judge interrupting a counsel's statement, the complex and ramified German legal terminology, the realia of German judicial procedure, having to "play by ear" in rendering long passages of legal documents being read, etc. Furthermore, the interpretation was taken down in shorthand, and the shorthand reports were used by the prosecutors and the press. Each national division of the International Tribunal provided interpretation into its native language. Interpretation into German was the responsibility of US interpreters. Each cabin accommodated three interpreters in accordance with the number of working languages (for instance, the interpreting from English, French, and German into Russian was done in the Russian cabin). There was a portable microphone on the desk, and the interpreter in whose language remarks were made immediately reached for the microphone.

At the trial of major Japanese was criminals in Tokyo, a different system was used. The equipment was provided by the IBM. There were three working languages–English, Russian, and Japanese. The Russian interpreters translated from Russian into English and from English into Russian. Their colleagues in the English cabin translated from Japanese into English and those in the Japanese cabin from English into Japanese. The interpreters in cabins other than Russian were, as a rule, Nisei (American-born Japanese) or professional English interpreters of Radio Tokyo. They assured the judges that impromptu interpretation from English into Japanese and vice versa was impossible because of the radical structural dissimilarities between the two languages (later on I found out that it could be done).

Therefore simultaneous interpretation was practiced in Tokyo on a limited scale (only when texts were available at least in one of the two languages–for instance, English or Russian).

Interpretation on relay was widely used. For instance, remarks in Japanese would be rendered into Russian on relay via the English cabin, and when Russian witnesses were on the stand, our Japanese and English-speaking colleagues would rely on our interpretation from Russian into English.

Sometimes there were even more complicated cases when, for instance, a witness testified in a language other than one of the working languages of the Tribunal. For instance, a problem arose when P. Chogdon, a Mongolian border-guard officer, was summoned to testify on the Khalkhin-Gol incident, a clash in Outer Mongolia between Mongolian and Soviet troops, on the one hand, and Japanese forces, on the other. Chogdon refused to testify in Russian because, he said, he didn't know that language. Then the Tribunal offered the services of two Japanese professors of Mongolian. During a dress rehearsal after court, the Mongolian witness turned down their services on the ground that they spoke an antiquated version of Mongolian.

Finally, the court steeled for Chogdon's personal interpreter, a Buryat (a member of an ethnic group in Russia whose language is closely related to Mongolian). As a result, Chogdon's testimony was first translated into Russian, then from Russian into English, and, finally, from English into Japanese. The same thing happened when Henry Pu-yi, the last Chinese emperor and later the puppet emperor of Manchuria, insisted on testifying in Chinese. He was interpreted into Japanese, then into English and, finally, into Russian. There was a somewhat embarrassing moment when the witness did not understand the Japanese interpreter and said in perfect English: "I don't understand the translation".

We had our own terminological problems in Tokyo where court proceedings were based on the Anglo-Saxon system. We had to fill lacunas in Russian legal terminology by coining equivalents for terms absent in Russian jurisprudence by transliteration (for instance, exhibit–a document admitted in evidence–was rendered as ekzibit, affidavit–a written deposition made under oath–as afidevit, etc.). Our lawyers soon got used to such innovations and began to use them themselves.

In other cases, we would find an equivalent in old (pre-revolutionary) Russian terminology that would ring a bell to Soviet lawyers. For instance, marshal of the

court–sudebnyi pristav, a somewhat archaic term in modern Russian. Another problem was with formulaic phrases used in certain situations as, for instance, when a witness was sworn in. Our lawyers objected to the use of the English oath ("Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you god?") in the case of Russian witnesses as incompatible with official Soviet atheism. Instead they used the formula, adopted in Soviet courts ("You have been warned of your responsibility under Article 95 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR for committing perjury"). The Mongolian witness was in a class by himself because nobody seemed to know what oath was administered in Mongolian courts. Finally, the Soviet lawyers settled for the English formula ("so help you God").

When the text of the Tokyo judgment was being translated, the translators were segregated in a suburban villa to prevent leaks of information. Our superiors strongly objected to the segregation of Soviet translators (unlike our Western colleagues, we had to double as translators and interpreters). They feared that long exposure to an alien ideological atmosphere might lead to our contamination. Finally, they talked their Western colleagues into making an exception in our case, and our ideological purity was saved.

For many of us the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials were a prelude to a long career in conference interpretation. In the early postwar period, the biggest event on the conference interpretation scene in Moscow was the International Economic Conference in 1952. About 50 conference interpreters were mobilized. By and large, it was a motley crowd. A few of them had some previous experience in the booth (in the UN and other international organizations), some of them came from institutions where interpretation was taught (the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow), some language veterans from Radio Moscow (TASS, etc.), while many of them had to learn interpreting on the job with a varying degree of success.

Each booth provided interpretation-both ways (from Russian into a foreign language and back into Russian). This system, differing from the one used in the West and in international organizations, is still practiced in Russia. It is largely due to the long-established system of training interpreters in Russia whereby interpreters are trained to interpret from one foreign language into their own and the other way around. As a result, if you are in the English booth, you do not interpret directly from French but via Russian. The

cabins are centrally controlled from a control panel switching them to Russian or to a foreign language. That means that when interpreting from a source other than your No. 1 language, or Russian, you had to do it on relay. Additionally, a special booth was provided for languages, not listed as official.

Interpreting on relay has several disadvantages, the most serious being that you are at the mercy of the "pilot booth", and the quality of your interpretation fully depends on that of your "pilot."

Soon after the International Economic Conference, the 19th Congress of the CPSU was held with simultaneous interpretation for foreign delegates. When party congresses moved into the new Palace of Congresses, provision was made for simultaneous interpretation into 29 languages including such rare languages as Indonesian, Vietnamese, Korean, Norwegian, Czech, etc.–a unique feature for international conferences where the list of working languages includes, as a rule, only major European languages. But facilities for such languages were used relatively seldom (once every 4 to 5 years for big and pompous events such as party congresses). Besides, the novices who interpreted from those languages could familiarize themselves with the text in advance (all texts of speeches at party congresses were made available which enabled teams of interpreters from exotic languages to divide them among themselves and rehearse their interpretation; in other words, it was not purely simultaneous interpretation).

The new Palace had on each floor rows of glazed air-conditioned cabins with TV sets. Each cabin had a window facing the conference room so that an interpreter could have a bird's eye view of the huge auditorium as a whole and use TV for close-ups. That dual system had obvious disadvantages and was probably introduced for security reasons although it impaired contact between the interpreter and the audience.

The interpretation was monitored by an official from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. Once the head of the Italian delegation (Togliatti) decided to present his message in Russian. The Central Committee man mistook him for an interpreter and demanded that he should be immediately replaced "because he speaks Russian with a heavy accent." Interpreters were treated as second-class citizens. In the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, we were issued passes without access to the auditorium. All international work regulations were ignored. We worked as long as necessary and were often asked to do

written translation in between the spells in the cabin. The pay was meager–20 rubles a day. The organizers meticulously fixed the actual number of hours spent in the cabin. A turn was 20 minutes (three interpreters per booth). Today it is usually half an hour with two interpreters per booth.

During an international conference of communist parties in the late 1960s, we were kept on standby all day until the Rumanian delegation had its position approved by its party bosses in Bucharest and got just peanuts for half an hour of actual interpreting. Now the situation has radically changed. The pay of conference interpreters is much higher than that of university professors, and many faculty members of prestigious institutions of higher learning have resigned to become full-time free-lance interpreters (Shveitser 1996). Previously such an occupation did not exist in Russia at all, and all interpreters had full-time jobs as translators, language teachers, language editors, radio commentators, etc.

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