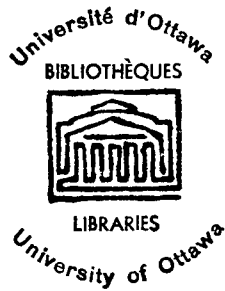


# THE NUREMBERG TRIAL

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Much of the discussion about the organizations had taken place with Jackson over the phone or by letter. He was spending more and more of his time in Nuremberg where he had a responsibility from which the other prosecutors were spared. Jackson was concerned with the physical arrangements for the trial. The US Army was working in a ruined Nuremberg where 'utilities, communications, transport and housing had been destroyed'. (45) He had to create a courtroom, a secure jail, and accommodation for up to 600 lawyers and staff, interpreters, clerical assistants and the Press and visitors. Ensuring adequate air and rail transport, setting up a motor pool, installing telephones and other forms of communication with the outside world was a nightmare. The military installed 124 miles of telephone wire in the courthouse alone; (46) 250 Pressmen were expected to file 180,000 words a day and needed signals equipment. (47) A hospital and dispensary had to be provided; messing and shopping laid on. Colonel Gill directed teams of US Army units and German POWs, including numbers of SS men in the building operations.

In midsummer the courthouse had been a shambles – one wing had been smashed in the bombing and further damage inflicted in the course of a last stand by SS units. Over everything hung a pink powdery dust which rose each time the wind blew over the devastated centre of the building. The courtroom itself was then being used as a recreation centre for a US anti-aircraft unit – the future judges' bench was the bar with pin-ups behind it, there was debris in all the corners, and spent shells, rags and rusty cans littered the floor. (48) The room only seated 200, so a wall had to be ripped out and a gallery constructed to make room for 500. Just as construction work was making some impact in August, the floor suddenly collapsed and faced the engineers with yet another problem. Yet when representatives of the prosecution teams flew out for a two day visit on 17-18 August they were reassured by the progress which had been made. They visited the jail where Andrus reported that Goering was in 'a filthy temper' and Ribbentrop had 'let himself go' and had not shaved for four days. They went to choose their future billets. The Russians found an ideal home – a house on the outskirts of the city which was large enough to accommodate almost the entire legal team and which had 'a large wall round it'. (49)

A major decision had been taken which solved the problem of how to run a trial in German, Russian, French and English. The Chief Interpreter at the US State Department had suggested using the new simultaneous translation method. (50) Robert Jackson's son, William, got in touch with

IBM in New York who could provide immediately their International Translator System. Its control panel provided up to five language channels for translators; these were then fed to headsets to be worn by participants in court, allowing them to switch to any language they chose. IBM were willing to provide this equipment free of charge, together with 200 headsets and the necessary boxes and cable, on condition someone else paid for the transport and installation. (This was an outstanding example of a 'loss leader'. Thanks to the great success of the system at Nuremberg, IBM were later able to sell it to the United Nations in New York.) This simultaneous translation system had actually been used recently, for instance at the International Labour Organization office in Geneva, but it was still relatively unknown. The initial reaction of the prosecutors in London to the idea of simultaneous translation was highly sceptical – it was hardly credible that one system could provide access to five languages, and beyond imagining that translations would ever be able to keep up with the proceedings. They could only believe that it would work for prepared speeches and previously translated documents. (51) However, under Jackson's persuasion, they agreed to a trial run.

Since the system was so new, it was obvious that translators would be difficult to find. Approaches were made to the State Department who recommended an outstanding man to run the system and hire the staff – Leon Dostert, at present a Lt. Colonel, but with wide experience in teaching languages and translating. He set to work to audition staff, finding that the job required 'mental concentration, fluency, composure, alertness and clear enunciation'. (52) The young were better than the old, he said, men were better than women, bilingual speakers better than those who spoke several languages. More headsets would be needed. The Army was scoured for a further 400. In addition it was decided to record the entire proceeding on wire – to give a check on the actual words used and the accuracy of their translations into the four languages. Did the US Signals Corps have enough wire recorders? Court reporters would also be needed to provide a daily transcript of proceedings. All the staff had to be hired and transported, then fed and billeted. All their equipment had to be found. How many typewriters, filing cabinets, desks, copying machines would be needed? How would they find enough paper in a continent so bereft?

Having sold the idea of a simultaneous translation system to his colleagues, Jackson went to the States at the beginning of September to persuade his government to speed up its decision on which American judges would be appointed to the Tribunal. Their choice finally fell on Francis Biddle – a Philadelphia Biddle, so an East Coast aristocrat. Biddle had always told Roosevelt that he did not enjoy being a judge and when Jackson was promoted from Solicitor General to Attorney General in 1940 Biddle got his heart's desire and became Solicitor General. Not for long, however. From 1941 to 1945 he again replaced Jackson, this time as Attorney General. In this post he won the respect of Truman – because of, rather

Thomas Dodd had to pen a tactful note to Jackson to say that up to 31 December he had been paid a daily rate by the OSS. But the OSS had then 'gone out of business' and Dodd had not been paid for six months. (64)

Such nuts and bolts were important for the smooth running of the trial, but they were imperceptible to outsiders. What outsiders noticed and marvelled at was the vital cog in the machinery – the simultaneous translation system. It was truly simultaneous. As long as speakers maintained a steady hundred words a minute, the translators in their glass booths could provide an almost current version of the trial in any language. Given documents in advance, so that there was time to prepare, the translators could be synchronized even more exactly with the speakers. It was an extraordinary achievement and it staggered all visitors to Nuremberg. The art of simultaneous translation was virtually unknown at the time. Of the teams of interpreters at Nuremberg possibly only two members – Haakon Chevalier and Eduard Roditi – had ever practised it before on the new IBM equipment. The others had had scarcely any time to learn: the equipment went astray and only turned up five days before the start of the trial. This allowed merely five days of rehearsal: reading documents to each other to see if it was going to be possible to talk in one language while listening through headphones to the court proceedings in another. (65)

Colonel Dostert, the head of the translation section, had grouped his simultaneous translators into three teams of twelve: one team had to sit in court and work a shift of one and a half hours; another to sit in a separate room, relatively relaxed, but still wearing headphones and following the proceedings closely so as to ensure continuity and standard vocabulary when they took over; the third having a well-earned day off. The work was exacting. It needed great linguistic skill and total concentration. For many of those involved the subject matter imposed a further emotional strain. Working conditions were uncomfortable: the translators were cramped in their booths, even hotter than others in the courtroom. They spoke through a lip microphone to try to dampen their sound (the booth was not enclosed at the top) but not even the use of the microphone nor the huge headphones they wore could deaden the noise made by their colleagues. As they worked they had to fight the distractions of other versions and other languages. The elaborately coiffured woman universally known as the Passionate Haystack produced the most inescapable and nerve-racking sound – a penetrating twang which provided a steady background screech on many of the sound recordings of the trial and sometimes gives the impression that a particularly incensed charwoman had come into the courtroom to stage a protest about working conditions.

Colonel Dostert was a hard task master – woe betide anyone he found in the rest room without headphones. He imposed high linguistic standards; everyone had to acquire the jargon and technical terms required by the evidence. But Dostert was universally respected. Though he demanded more than most people would have believed they could give, he always

estimated exactly how much strain they could bear. The efficiency and accuracy of the translations owed everything to his planning and expectations. Accuracy was essential both to avoid confusion in court and to provide an impeccable record of the trial. Each team had three monitors and a chief interpreter attached to supervise its version. The monitor sat outside the booth, maintaining the flow of documents to the translators and controlling the speed of speakers with the red and yellow buttons. Every day the sound recording of the translators was checked against the verbatim shorthand account of the court reporters. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved; if they involved the interest of the defence, their lawyers were consulted and asked for permission before changes were made.

Though the printed record was to be as impeccable as possible, inevitably the simultaneous translation heard in court had its imperfections. On the whole it avoided confusion, such as that caused one morning when a German witness was asked by his American cross-examiner whether he had been kept for eleven weeks in 'Ashcan' and he bewilderedly explained that he had been imprisoned in Mondorf in perfectly humane conditions and never locked 'in a refuse bin'. (66) But there was criticism of the linguistic abilities of some of the teams. The Russians had insisted on bringing their own staff for work into Russian and native speakers thought their translations were poor. (67) Experience proved that good translation depended on perfect mastery of the language from which, rather than into which, the translator was working. Most of the Americans did not speak German as their first language and their lack of fluency, let alone vocabulary, was particularly aggravating to Germans. Birkett was ruffled too. To be fair to the interpreters, Birkett used language of a rare exactitude and purity, but he could not abide their use of what he considered 'American' rather than 'English'. He condemned as 'crimes against humanity' such words as 'argumentation', 'orientation', 'activated', 'motivation', 'finalize', 'visualize', 'concrete observations' and 'reprivatization'. (68) Other people were irritated by the tendency of some interpreters' voices to 'colour' testimony through vocal inflection. No one ever came to accept women's voices speaking the words of a German general, let alone a thick Brooklyn accent delivering the speech of a German aristocrat.

Such criticisms, however, were matters of taste, of superficialities rather than of substance. The unanimous judgement on the simultaneous translation system was that it was a miracle like Pentecost. No one was ever unreasonable enough to expect all the translators to reach the standard of the ace of them all - Wolf Frank. He was a German and at the same time an English officer. His use of German and English was noticeably better than that of most native speakers. His voice and manner, the nuances of his vocabulary, the ability to convey the character of the person for whom he was translating were all outstanding. Dostert actually broke his shift system to take advantage of them. It was Frank who translated into German the judges' sentences on the defendants. And Frank who performed one of

the most extraordinary feats of the whole trial. Singlehanded he translated into English the whole of Goering's performance in the witness box, a total of twelve hours.