

BOOK REVIEWS

Anne-Marie Widlund-Fantini. *Danica Seleskovitch: Interprète et témoin du XXe siècle*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2007. 237 pp. ISBN 2-8251-3697-2.

Reviewed by [Jennifer Mackintosh](#)

As a genre biography is difficult. At one extreme it can be little more than wild speculation about states of mind, what the subject might or might not have thought, felt or hoped for. At the other, it can become an enumeration of undifferentiated facts, some trivial, others significant, that leaves the reader with little sense of a life lived or its motivations. An account may be factually true while telling the reader little about who the person really was. The art of biography is to be able to enter into the character of the subject in such a way as to illuminate the whys and wherefores, to shed light on the subject's thinking and ideas and suggest how they developed. A good example is Michael Ignatieff's 1998 biography of Isaiah Berlin. In her biography of Danica Seleskovitch, Anne-Marie Widlund gives a well rounded account of the events surrounding her subject's life but there is rather less about its whys and wherefores.

Danica Seleskovitch was of great importance to the conference interpreting profession. As Executive Secretary of AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, in its early days, she was instrumental in developing its Code of Ethics and professional norms. As a conference interpreter she set standards of excellence, and as the mainspring behind the Etude Cuvier (interpreting consultants) she made a significant contribution to professionalizing interpreter recruitment. As a teacher and subsequently head of the Interpretation Section (and later director) of ESIT (École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs) in Paris, she laid the groundwork for the recognition of the profession as a subject for academic research. In 1974 she established a doctoral programme at the University of Paris/Sorbonne Nouvelle, having been awarded one of the first doctorates in the field for her groundbreaking thesis on consecutive interpreting (Seleskovitch 1975), in which she set out the principles of her Interpretive Theory of Translation (ITT), or 'théorie du sens'. Widlund was a student of Seleskovitch at ESIT and remains a great admirer.

Widlund's account of Seleskovitch's life is largely chronological, with the inclusion, at the end, of excerpts from a journal kept by Seleskovitch when she visited the Bosnian Serb Republic in 1997, not long after the end of the war that had ravaged the Balkans. Seleskovitch's father was a Serb, a philosopher and germanist,

her mother French. As a child and adolescent, Seleskovitch lived variously in Serbia, France and Germany. Her childhood was overshadowed by tragedy: her mother committed suicide when she was four years old, and Danica and her older brother Zoran went to live with their maternal grandmother, first in Paris and then Nice. Widlund tells us that Seleskovitch never spoke of her mother and transferred all her affection to her grandmother, who returned it in good measure. This makes it all the more strange that, many years later, Seleskovitch, having broken off all relations with her brother after a quarrel, decided she could no longer see her grandmother because she was living in Zoran's house. They never met again. This extraordinary fact is not commented upon by the author and illustrates how Widlund's reluctance to address her subject's emotional life can leave the reader feeling baffled.

In 1929, Seleskovitch's father remarried and in 1931 she and her brother went to live with him and their new stepmother in Berlin. Seleskovitch and her stepmother had a difficult relationship, which is hardly surprising given that this nine-year-old child had, in the space of four years, lost her mother, been separated from her father, and had transferred her love to her grandmother from whom she was then separated. She had to adjust to new family relationships, a new city and a new language. The author does not comment on how such a succession of wrenching separations might have affected her, although she does say: "Elle était avare de confidences sur sa vie privée" (She was sparing with details of her private life) (p. 26).

The Seleskovitch family experienced the rise of Nazism in Berlin, leaving shortly before the outbreak of WWII for Belgrade, where they experienced considerable hardship, along with the rest of the population. The war over, Seleskovitch moved to Paris on a French government scholarship and completed degrees in both English and German. In 1950, armed with a diploma in conference interpreting from HEC, she set off for the USA where she was employed as interpreter/translator within the framework of the Marshall Plan. In 1953 she moved to Luxembourg to work for the European Coal and Steel Community (forerunner to the European Union), returning to Paris at the end of 1955 where she was much in demand as a freelance. In 1956 she joined AIIC and in 1957 began teaching at ESIT.

As AIIC Executive Secretary, she made an important contribution to the professionalization of conference interpreting (CI), setting standards of excellence. For anybody interested in language mediation and communication across languages, Seleskovitch's career at ESIT would constitute the most interesting part of the book. However, it is not until Chapter XI that the author discusses her achievements in developing a theory of CI, her research and her teaching. Given the large body of work she published (there is a list of sixty-five titles at the end of the book), the 13 pages devoted to her central preoccupation are a little meagre when compared to the many pages depicting her travels to exotic locations. This is all

the more regrettable as Seleskovitch's theoretical work gave rise to lively debate in the 1980s and 1990s, some of it highly critical of her certainties and her dismissive attitude towards other approaches involving disciplines such as communication theory, psycholinguistics and indeed linguistics generally, which she saw as concerned with words but not the construction of meaning and therefore irrelevant to CI. Criticism centred around what many claimed was the incompleteness of her theory rather than its falsity. More recently the pendulum has swung a long way back and the seminal part played by ESIT's *théorie du sens* is once again being discussed, starting with Setton's 2002 article "Seleskovitch: A radical pragmatist before her time", in which he pays tribute to the pioneering role she played in establishing the new discipline of Interpreting Studies (IS) and the robustness of her *théorie du sens*:

In practical terms, the interpretive approach is vindicated by cohorts of interpreters driving multilingual communication in Europe (...) ESIT's pragmatic, communicative approach is no fossil. As interpreting studies matures, perhaps we will (...) re-read, update and integrate Seleskovitch's radical insights, at a time when mainstream cognitive science is beginning to build context and intermediate representation into models of language and cognition. (Setton 2002: 123)

The central tenet of the *théorie du sens*, first outlined in Seleskovitch's 1968 book on the role of interpreters in international conferences, is 'deverbalisation', in which, to use an early image, the interpreter divests the message of its original clothing, the words of the SL, to arrive at its meaning or sense and, having identified it, re-clothes the message in the words of the TL. In order to extract the sense of the message, the interpreter has recourse to his/her prior knowledge or, as Marianne Lederer puts it, '*compléments de sens*', i.e. to memory and context. This very simplified schematic representation of the interpreting process has proven a powerful teaching tool but, as has been pointed out by numerous authors, the '*théorie du sens*' provides an inadequate account for the other factors involved in the comprehension and production of speech across any given language pair. To quote Setton and Motta (2007: 205):

The prescription that interpreters should focus more on the sense than the words of the original is a commonplace among professional conference interpreters and is often repeated to trainees. But the famous notion of 'deverbalisation', embodied in what has perhaps been the most influential theory of interpretation, the *théorie du sens*, has never been formulated with enough precision to satisfy everybody, or perhaps, to be properly tested and is consequently controversial.

Marianne Lederer, Seleskovitch's close friend, colleague and fellow theorist (and successor at ESIT), has recently co-edited a three-volume exposition of ITT and its applications (Israel & Lederer 2005), reviewed by Ivana Ceňková in *Interpreting*

9:2 (2007). Lederer's own 1978 doctoral thesis on simultaneous interpreting extended Seleskovitch's earlier work on consecutive.

The last chapter of the book is in sharp contrast to the rest. It deals with the civil war in former Yugoslavia, and ten of its 18 pages are extracts from a journal Seleskovitch kept when she visited the newly formed Serbian Republic of Bosnia, in 1997. The introductory pages of the chapter give a brief historical overview of the situation, with something of a pro-Serb bias, alleging that to the Western powers Serbia alone was responsible for the events in former Yugoslavia, and that they closed their eyes to the culpable actions of the leaders of Croatia and Bosnia. In fact it is widely recognised that Franjo Tudjman of Croatia would have been indicted by the International Tribunal on Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had he not died first.

It is hardly surprising that Seleskovitch, born of a Serbian father and having lived through WWII in Belgrade under German occupation, identified strongly with the Serbs, but the vehemence of her account and claims of Serb victimisation were a shock to this reader at least. In her account 1997 journey, she and her two companions travelled towards a town called Derвента:

Là le pays est saccagé. On commence à voir combien est terrible la vengeance exercée par les Allemands de Kohl et Genscher sur les vainqueurs de 1945. En imposant le démembrement de la Yougoslavie, ils ont réussi là où Hitler avait échoué. (There the countryside has been ransacked. It is starting to become clear what terrible vengeance has been exercised by the Germans of Kohl and Genscher over the victors of 1945. By imposing the break up of Yugoslavia, they have succeeded where Hitler failed). (p. 221)

There is a lurid account of how Muslims kill Serbs (p. 226), and the young Bosnian leader of Srebrenica, Naser Orić, is described as a 'véritable bête humaine' (p. 227), at the head of a band of killers. Seleskovitch alleges that after he fled Srebrenica, he was left in peace. In fact he was later arrested and taken to The Hague where he was tried by the ICTY and sentenced to two years imprisonment. However, as much of the work of the ICTY occurred after her death, she was not to know that not only Serbs but also Croats and Bosniaks were to be held to account for war crimes.

Perhaps the most extreme statement is Seleskovitch's claim that General Mladic liberated Srebrenica:

Au mois de juillet 1995, Général Mladic libère Srebrenica (...). Mladic fait venir un grand nombre d'autocars, les Musulmans y sont entassés et emmenés jusqu'à la nouvelle frontière entre la Fédération croato-musulman et la République Serbe. (In July 1995, General Mladic liberated Srebrenica (...). Mladic summoned a large number of coaches, the Moslems were packed into them and taken to the new border between the Croat-Moslem Federation and the Serb Republic). (p. 227)

Seleskovitch also states that although Izetbegović (the Bosnian leader) claimed that the Serbs had murdered 6,000 Moslems, a UN check on the area in which it is claimed the bodies were buried produced only 70 unidentifiable corpses, and that despite further searches no mass burial ground was found. In the Krstić case, the ICTY stated in its judgement (ICTY 2001) that 7,000 to 8,000 men were systematically murdered or killed in Srebrenica, and the accused was sentenced to 46 years imprisonment, reduced on appeal to 35 years. A warrant is still out for the arrest of General Mladic for genocide. Seleskovitch also claims that American units were crisscrossing the countryside in armoured vehicles supervising the destruction of Serb weapons while supplying the Moslems with millions of dollars worth of arms, and that food aid provided by the US was either unsuitable or past its use-by date.

Widlund herself shows a certain gullibility. Referring to the notorious photograph of emaciated camp inmates of the Trnopolje holding centre that so shocked world opinion when published in August 1992, she states that it was in fact a photograph of a Serb peasant suffering from TB, looking into a field through a barbed wire fence (p. 204). This unlikely assertion has been disproved by evidence before the ICTY as well as by a lawsuit in the High Court in London, where a UK TV news broadcaster (ITN) and the journalists involved sued Living Marxism for defamation after it published an article by a German journalist, Thomas Deichman, claiming the photo and associated news story were a deliberate misrepresentation. The court found in favour of the plaintiffs, who were awarded £375,000 (\$750,000) in damages (The Guardian, 15 March 2000).

Given Seleskovitch's genuine compassion and sympathy for the poor and dispossessed it is possible that she would have been deeply distressed at the evidence produced, despite the extreme positions she adopted at the time. During the build-up to the conflict, she sought very actively to enlist support against it, writing to a number of eminent persons in France in an attempt to avert the war. Seleskovitch pointed out to one of her correspondents (Simone Weil) that the Serbs saw themselves as victims of a giant global conspiracy and that it was vitally important that the world be made aware of how they felt (p. 204). She welcomed Kostunica's defeat of Milosevic in the 2000 elections, having previously been critical of the latter's refusal to resign.

The trip to the Bosnian Serb Republic in 1997 was to distribute food, clothing and money she and friends had raised for the affected population, and throughout her life she showed concern for the less fortunate, reacting strongly to perceived injustices. Seleskovitch could be warm-hearted, charming and generous with both her time and her money. She was a loyal friend and had a devoted following, 'les inconditionnels de Danica' as Widlund calls them. On the other hand, she could be very harsh in her judgements and quite unforgiving. She did not leave people

indifferent, but even those who disagreed with her admired her intelligence and recognised her importance as the virtual founder of IS.

Widlund's biography is rich in events: whom Seleskovitch met, went on holiday with, where her travels took her, who her friends were, but there is not a lot to give the reader a feeling for what made her tick. This paucity of insights into the emotional life of her subject, into the light and shade of what was clearly a rich and complex personality makes it all the harder to come to terms with some of Seleskovitch's extreme positions. It is understandable that Widlund should have felt a certain reluctance to speculate about the inner life of her subject while the people who were closest to her are still alive. Nonetheless, if a biography is to be more than a list of facts like birth, education, professional life and death, it has to also peer into the emotions generated by those events. On that count, this biography falls short. On another, however, it succeeds. It gives the reader a lively and readable, well-researched account of the ascertainable events in Seleskovitch's life, setting them in the context of their time and place. It will be of great value to probable future biographers, eager to focus more specifically on her life as a scholar.

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