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JUSTICE IN FOUR VOICES

Review of

*THE ORIGINS OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING:
THE NUREMBERG TRIAL*

by Francesca Gaiba, University of Ottawa Press, 1998

It is no exaggeration to say that without simultaneous interpretation, the 1945-1946 multilingual Nuremberg trial of major figures of the Nazi regime could not have taken place. A form of communication that has become a daily occurrence throughout the world was applied for the first time to a world event. As a legal event, Nuremberg has been criticized as “victors’ justice”. For the interpreting profession, it was an exemplary - and almost unparalleled - instance of human and technical triumph over the linguistic obstacles that can otherwise impede the implementation of the loftiest sentiments of fairness. As described by the system’s manufacturer, IBM, the goal was “that all men may understand”. “All men” included those involved in the trial - defendants, judges, counsel for the prosecution and defence, witnesses, guards and representatives of the media - as well as the world which had just emerged from a lengthy and bloody conflict characterized by great suffering on the part of all sectors of the population of many countries.

Before the trial, both prosecutors and judges reacted with a mixture of concern and scepticism to the proposed use of simultaneous interpreting. The idea was opposed by some of the world’s few professional interpreters - the small band of skilled consecutive interpreters. Even those who believed that simultaneous interpreting was feasible wondered if the electrical system would be able to survive the rigors of the trial. Not infrequently the trailing wires on the courtroom floor were tripped over and disconnected. Sometimes languages would become mixed in the interpretation because of technical problems. Eventually the cables would be covered by planks of wood to minimize the need for repairs.

A few statistics will make the enormity of the interpreting task at Nuremberg clear. It has been estimated that some six million original-language words were spoken at the main 1945-1946 trial, which lasted a year. At one point, nearly 300 translators and interpreters were employed in the proceedings - not including the Russian team. The interpreter turnover in the first year at Nuremberg was 104%. Four tons of various electrical “gadgets” were required for the sound system that enabled the interpreting to be provided. Listeners used the 600 or so headsets with selector switches with which the courtroom was fitted.

The “aquarium” - the four desks, separated by low glass panels, at which at any one time there sat a total of 12 interpreters - made the interpreting arrangements a highly visible element in the courtroom. This conspicuousness was heightened by the fact that practically everyone at Nuremberg wore headphones in order to follow the proceedings. Interpretation was even needed to allow the judges to communicate with each other. At times many of the defendants conspicuously removed their headphones, such as when evidence was given about conditions in the concentration camps, whether because “they could not bear or care to hear about the atrocities”. At one point, Göring, in a rage at the way the cross-examination of a German witness was going, pulled at the cord of his headphones so violently that a guard had to remove it from his hands before he ripped it off.

Major efforts were made to recruit the best possible people to interpret at Nuremberg. Some of those engaged were unable to stand the strain of the proceedings; others who showed great talent in the new profession were recruited by the fledgling United Nations in the summer of 1946, before the end of the main trial. Others stayed on for the subsequent bilingual (German-English) trials. Those who interpreted at Nuremberg came from a variety of national, linguistic and professional backgrounds. Some were very young, including an 18-year-old recent high-school graduate, and a fair number were still in their early twenties. Among other things, the Nuremberg interpreting ranks comprised teachers, academics, lawyers, army personnel, professional conference interpreters, including graduates of the School of Interpreters in Geneva - and a future Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations (Oleg A. Troyanovsky, son of the first Soviet Ambassador to the United States). One of the

longest-serving interpreters at the Nuremberg Trials, Austrian-born Peter Uiberall, had worked as a stock clerk and farm laborer in the United States after leaving Austria as a refugee in 1938. This experience provided him with a highly valuable work background for an interpreter.

Some of the book's thumbnail sketches of Nuremberg interpreters contain fascinating insights into the foibles and experiences of those "strange creatures" who performed this seemingly "impossible" feat, such as George Vassiltchikoff, who was "famous for the fact that he stuttered in normal conversation but not when interpreting". Elisabeth Heyward was literally thrown in the deep end. The day she arrived in Nuremberg she went into the visitors' gallery, where she was astonished to see and hear simultaneous interpreting. The next day in the courtroom she had to launch into simultaneous interpreting herself. She survived this "baptism by fire" most successfully, eventually being recruited by U.N. headquarters where she worked until her retirement in December 1981 - and then continuing on and off to work as a freelance interpreter. A fair number of those who worked as interpreters in Nuremberg similarly became and remained professional interpreters.

Certain of the participants made highly critical comments on the interpreters and their performance. The observations by Göring and Norman Birkett, the British Alternate member of the Bench, are the most notorious. Some of Birkett's verge on the unbalanced, but he deserves to be quoted in this review so that modern-day readers can smile in wry amusement. The most infamous citation is his evaluation of what he called "translators" as "a race apart - touchy, vain, unaccountable, full of vagaries, puffed up with self-importance of the most explosive kind, inexpressibly egotistical, and, as a rule, violent opponents of soap and sunlight..." Gaiba comments that, "ironically", the soundest remarks about the interpreting weaknesses turned out to be those made by Göring who was more interested in exploiting than correcting them.

While attitudes as such Birkett's have, fortunately, disappeared among the "consumers" of conference interpretation, some representatives of the judicial professions, at least in Birkett's own country, still harbor similar sentiments towards these undesirable intruders, whom they view as, at best, a "necessary evil" (Herbert 1952:4) in the legal system. One of the Nuremberg defendants, a

keen observer of the interpreters' performance and analyst of his co-defendants' linguistic behavior, even went so far as to write a set of guidelines for speakers, in an admirable effort to facilitate interpreters' work and improve accuracy. In the ultimate accolade, one of the defendants condemned to death in the subsequent proceedings which followed the main trials wrote a letter of appreciation to the interpreters who, he felt, "had given him the chance to understand and be understood in court. He thought he had thus been given a fair trial."

As the main Nuremberg trial proceeded, related administrative procedures and arrangements were honed and refined. At the outset, the translation department - especially in those distant pre-word processing days - was unable to cope with the vast amount of German-language documentation which needed to be translated into the three other languages. In order to overcome this difficulty, an arrangement was worked out under which interpreters would produce instant "sight translations" of specific passages in documents. This oral technique enabled the material in question to be submitted to the Court even though no written version of the document was available other than in the original language. Later, when the defence was presenting its case, the backlog had been eliminated and it was possible to submit translated documents in writing, without reading selected passages into the record. The defence complained that they were put at a disadvantage by this differential treatment of submitting documentary testimony. The difference in procedure was not, however, a matter of deliberate policy or discrimination, simply the result of changes in a practical situation.

Those responsible for the arrangements as they affected the interpreters tried to ensure that the latter had the best possible conditions for their work subject to time and space constraints. Having dared take the risk of applying an untried approach - the "simultaneous" technique had been used in the pre-war period only for the reading out of pre-translated versions of speeches or simultaneously provided multiple-language versions of consecutive interpretation - they tried to build in as many measures as possible to enable the interpreters to do the best job possible. They also recognised the human element. Arrangements were made to provide discreet signals when a speaker needed to slow down, or if it became necessary to interrupt the proceedings for reasons related to interpretation. A

monitor in the courtroom constantly kept an ear on all working interpreters, and was prepared to replace anyone who showed signs of fatigue, if necessary interrupting the proceedings to do so.

Acknowledgement of the likelihood of errors led to a system of subsequent quality control in the form of a comparison between the various language transcripts (based on shorthand reporters' notes) and the original spoken material. This checking work was one of the duties of the "third" team of interpreters. On any one day, two full teams (three interpreters per language "desk") would work in court, each team working either the first and fourth 85-minute sections, or alternatively the second and third stretches. When not actually interpreting, the other team listened to the proceedings in a separate room. This arrangement was introduced after the trial had begun in order to ensure continuity in terminology and familiarity with the material.

The idea of using simultaneous interpretation - hitherto unheard of in this completely "live", unrehearsed form - at the trial came from Léon Dostert, the first Chief Interpreter at Nuremberg. Born in France in 1904, Dostert had served as interpreter for both the German army occupying his town during the First World War and the American Army which liberated it. This "middleman" situation of the interpreter similarly became clear at Nuremberg, where the interpreters developed a form of rapport (sometimes linguistic, sometimes human) with some of the defendants. A number of the defendants actively cooperated in trying to assist the interpreters' endeavours, such as passing along notes with the English or German equivalent of a word with which an interpreter was having a problem. After listening for just a few minutes, defendant Albert Speer would give a highly relevant opinion on the potential of a new recruit being tried out as an interpreter. Another example involved Jodl, who had noticed that interpreters' performance was improved if they were provided in advance with a document being read out. He therefore obtained permission to supply the text of his plea in advance and have it pretranslated. Referring to this linguistic "complicity" between interpreters and a number of the defendants, Gaiba writes that interpreters "were probably the only people in the courtroom who treated the defendants like human beings and accepted their help and suggestions." She points out that the interpreters were providing a specific service: to ensure communication

between groups speaking different languages - and “that required cooperation ... with the speakers, including the defendants.”

The author - who trained as a conference interpreter at the University of Bologna - has drawn extensively on previously unpublished sources and oral testimony, much of it obtained by considerable perseverance. Over fifty years later, she has succeeded in giving a voice to some of those who worked at Nuremberg and helped give today’s modern interpreting profession a flying start. She comments that, “astonishingly”, historians have paid no attention to the “miracle of simultaneous interpretation” at the trial. A number of papers about the origins of simultaneous interpretation have referred to Nuremberg as seminal event in the history of the profession, but this is the first book to focus specifically on the interpretation at the War Crimes Trial and those who provided it.

Francesca Gaiba’s book touches on many questions which are vital to the running and legal status of contemporary legal proceedings involving the use of interpretation, including transcripts, record of proceedings, electronic recordings, quality control, collegiality, speed of delivery, errors, documentation, preparation, and more. Her presentation of pre-WWII interpretation practice makes clear the “bombshell” that was constituted by the simultaneous interpretation at Nuremberg, however primitive the equipment and conditions by today’s standards. In that sense, certainly, “it all began at Nuremberg” (Skuncke 1989).

One of the most striking things about Nuremberg is that while it is rightly said that “everything began” there as far as the profession of conference interpreting in its modern form is concerned, simultaneous interpreting in this “electronic” form was for many years practically never again used in full-blown legal proceedings. The Tokyo Trials of Japanese war criminals did try to use simultaneous interpretation, but these proceedings foundered largely on the shoals of problems with written translations from Japanese. In Israel, the 1961 Eichmann and 1987 Demjanjuk war crimes trials made extensive use of simultaneous interpretation, but importantly used the consecutive technique for the provision of the Hebrew version, the language of the proceedings and the official record. Gaiba

writes that simultaneous interpretation with electric/electronic equipment is seldom used in courts today because of its cost to the government. Her 1979 source for this statement is out-of-date: other possible reasons for the general absence from the courts of full-blown simultaneous interpreting include the greater difficulty of monitoring interpreted output and the concomitant reduced control over the interpreter by the court or lawyers. Another reason may well be conservatism on the part of most courts.

One of the few hilarious episodes of the trial involving interpretation is embodied in an anecdote quoted by Gaiba. One interpreter was reprimanded by the Presiding Judge because of a tendency to give truncated renditions of testimony during the questioning of a witness, Mr. Pine:

The judge got very cross about this on one occasion, and gave the interpreter a going-over in front of everybody saying, “Now look here, I want you to translate *everything* I say, *exactly*. Do you understand?” The interpreter nodded, and the judge signaled to me to proceed, saying, “Yes, Mr. Pine?,” whereupon the interpreter said, “Ja, Herr Tannenbaum?”

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