Nuremberg: The Trial of Six Million Words

The goal: ensure effective multi-lingual communication. The means: good organization, the best equipment available, and teams of top simultaneous interpreters.

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At 00:43 Moscow time on 9th May 1945, the representatives of the German High Command signed the Act of Military Surrender in Karlshorst, Berlin, thus effectively ending World War II. The news came two days after the first Instrument of Surrender was signed in Reims by German General Alfred Jodl, who then famously expressed his hope that “the victors will treat them (the German people and its armed forces – R.M.) with generosity.” (Kynin & Morozova, 2000)

That same year, a conference of the four Allied Powers – the USSR, the USA, the UK, and France – was held in London from June 26th to August 8th. It was during this conference that the parties reached an agreement on the Charter of the International Military Tribunal[1].

The Bavarian city of Nuremberg was chosen as the location for the trial of leading Nazi criminals. Apart from being a highly practical decision for a number of reasons, it also was highly symbolic, for it was in Nuremberg that the National Socialist party held its conventions in the 1930s, thus making Nuremberg the cradle of German fascism. The victors decided it would be only fitting to make the city its grave.

Each of the four nations sent its own prosecution team[2] to Nuremberg. Lord Justice Colonel Sir Geoffrey Lawrence, Lord Justice of the Court of Appeal of England and Wales, was appointed presiding judge.

Twenty-four leading Nazi criminals[3], who held prominent government and military posts in the Third Reich, were indicted on charges of:

1. Conspiracy to commit crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity
2. Crimes against peace
3. War crimes
4. Crimes against humanity

The victors did indeed treat their defeated enemy with a certain generosity. The IMT Charter granted broad rights for every defendant, either on a personal basis or through his legal counsel, to present evidence in his own defense. Furthermore, Article 16 of the Charter provided that “a copy of the Indictment and of all the documents lodged with the Indictment, translated into a language which he understands, shall be furnished to the Defendant at a reasonable time before the Trial” [emphasis mine – R.M.] (Nuremberg Trials of leading Nazi war criminals, 1954:18) and that “a preliminary examination of a Defendant and his Trial shall be conducted in, or translated into, a language which the Defendant understands.” [emphasis mine – R.M.] (ibid.)

A challenge thus arose for the organizers: how best to ensure effective interpretation during the sessions of the court to implement the provisions laid out in the last of the aforementioned paragraphs of Article 16, and to ensure understanding among all members of the Trial?
Colonel Léon Dostert, General Eisenhower’s personal interpreter and a member of the OSS [Office of Strategic Services], was tasked with finding a solution to this problem upon his appointment as head of the interpreting division of the IMT Secretariat. Dostert realized that consecutive interpreting, by then widely used in international conferences, would be out of the question in this particular case; it would significantly slow down the trial, already expected to be long because the prosecution had collected extensive evidence to prove the atrocities committed by Nazi leaders against humanity.

This was why the colonel suggested using simultaneous interpreting (SI) during the court hearings. This method of interpretation requires the interpreter to render the speaker’s speech into a foreign language at the same time the speech is being delivered. It should be noted that simultaneous interpretation had been used internationally even before the Nuremberg Trials, but usually consisted of a simultaneous reading of a pre-translated speech, or a consecutive interpretation performed simultaneously by several interpreters working into different languages.

The American IBM Corporation offered to equip the Nuremberg Palace of Justice Courtroom with state-of-the-art equipment – the modernized IBM “Hushaphone Filene-Findlay (sic) system[4]” – at no charge, with the US government only paying for the shipment to Nuremberg and installation in the courtroom.

The simultaneous interpreters’ working area was made up of four three-person booths, one each for English, Russian, German, and French. The “aquarium” was located inside the courtroom, in immediate proximity to the defendants’ benches. This too was suggested by Dostert, who as an experienced interpreter himself understood better than anyone how important it was for the interpreters to keep an eye on the behavior of the court’s villains. The booths were
surrounded on three sides by low glass panels. The top remained open; in other words, there was absolutely no question of any kind of soundproofing, now one of the mandatory working conditions for simultaneous interpretation.

The booths could sit three interpreters at a time, and provided three sets of earphones and one hand microphone. Earphones were also provided for everyone in the courtroom itself, thus enabling participants to listen to the original speech as well as its interpretation into any of the official languages. The system had five channels: the first channel transmitted the original speech, the second was reserved for English, the third for Russian, the fourth for French, and the fifth for German. The interpreters’ headphones were set only on the original (channel one).

There were six microphones in the courtroom: one for each judge, one on the witness stand, and one on the prosecutor’s podium.

From the beginning, Dostert and his aides decided that each simultaneous interpreter was to interpret the speaker directly into only one other language, thus avoiding a double physical and mental strain.

While working on the technical side of the matter, the organizers were also looking for skilled interpreters who would be able to interpret simultaneously at a highly professional level.

The main issue lay in the fact that before the Nuremberg Trials, there were no established training programs for simultaneous interpreters anywhere in the world. Therefore, the organizers decided to employ established consecutive interpreters.

The candidates had to demonstrate an excellent command of the source and target languages, as well as a good knowledge of legal and military terminology and a high level of resilience to stress. Interpreters who had successfully passed a series of tests to determine their potential as simultaneous interpreters, awaited their encounter with the unknown. They would be writing history…

The International Military Tribunal’s first session began at the Nuremberg Palace of Justice on 20 November 1945 in Courtroom 600. The oak-paneled room was dark. It was, decorated with carved granite and French carpets, and no natural light penetrated the heavily curtained windows. Powerful lamps hung from the ceiling. The guest gallery (100 seats) and the press bench (150 seats) were filled to capacity.

By 9:30 local time, members of the prosecution teams and the defense counsel had taken their places, and the 12 interpreters sat ready in the “aquarium.” At 9:45 American Military Police escorted 20 defendants into the courtroom, and the great hall fell silent. The defendants then took their seats on the two rows of benches. At 10:00 the court secretary called the room to order: “Order! Please stand! Court is in Session!” The judges took their seats at the high bench, and the session was declared open. Thus that day, 20th November 1945, may be considered as the official birthday of simultaneous conference interpreting, in its current meaning. The justice machine was set in motion, and the interpreters were, needless to say, one of the main forces driving it forward. The task ahead of them, and the responsibility it entailed, were truly colossal. Extreme physical and emotional concentration would be required, which was why the interpreters had to follow a strict working schedule designed by colonel Dostert and his aides from day one.

The interpretation and translation department was split into five groups:

1. Simultaneous interpreters (36 people).
2. Auxiliary consecutive interpreters (12 interpreters with languages other than the four official languages used during the proceedings).
3. Translators (8 sections with 20-25 people per section; 15-18 translators would prepare “raw” translations, with the remaining 8 later editing and proofreading the translated material; each team was allocated 10 typists).
4. Shorthand reporters (12 people for every working language).
5. Shorthand editors (more than 100 translators were tasked with editing shorthand notes by comparing them to the recordings of the proceedings).

The number of simultaneous interpreters remained constant throughout the trial. Three teams – A, B, and C (12 interpreters per team) – worked in shifts. Their typical work day would look something like this: team A would work for 85 minutes in the “aquarium” in the morning. There were three interpreters per booth, each with an allocated source language, from which they were meant to be interpreting into the language of the booth. While one interpreter was working, the other two waited for their turn. Whenever there was a change in speaker or source language, the interpreter would pass the microphone to the colleague who worked with that particular language.
During this time, the interpreters from team B sat in the neighboring Room 606 and followed the proceedings through headphones. They were on standby ready to replace one or more of their colleagues in the courtroom if, for whatever reason, the colleagues were unable to continue interpreting or made serious mistakes in their interpretation. Furthermore, interpreters from team B made their own glossaries, based on the simultaneous interpretation of their colleagues from team A. This ensured that all the teams used the same terminology, and provided continuity in the interpretation.

During the sessions, two auxiliary interpreters were always behind the judges’ bench. The judges resorted to their help whenever they had to communicate urgently with each other. Both interpreters had three working languages (Russian, English, and French).

The team’s head interpreter sat between the English booth and the officers of the court, and was tasked with ensuring that the equipment worked well, and that the interpretation was of good quality. Furthermore, he was the go-between for the judges and the interpreters in the booths. He operated a control switch that would flash a yellow or a red light. The yellow light was used to notify the presiding judge that the speaker was speaking too quickly, or to ask the speaker to stop and repeat what he had just said (the optimal speed for SI was 60 words per minute), and the red light was used to inform the judges of a serious issue, such as one of the interpreters suffering from a coughing fit, or else equipment failure[6].

After the first 85 minutes were up, the teams would swap places: team A would go to room 606, and team B would take its place in the “aquarium”. At 13:00 the presiding judge would announce an hour-long break, after which the two teams resumed their work according to the same schedule. This would be a rest day for team C. At a later stage the third, resting, team would check the verbatim reports, help their translator colleagues on the documents and interpret at closed IMT sessions.

Thus, every team would spend on average three hours a day working in the aquarium, four days a week (the court sat every day except Sunday, from 10:00 to 17:00, with a one-hour break for lunch). This rotation ensured the most effective results and remained unchanged, even after Colonel Léon Dostert was replaced as Head of the Interpretation and Translation Department by Commander Alfred Steer, U.S.N.R.

One of the main problems, as has already been mentioned above, was that of recruiting and selecting candidates. Only Andre Kaminker (the French delegation senior interpreter) had some experience interpreting simultaneously. Even the Geneva School of Interpreters founded in 1941, and one of the most respected schools in the field, did not yet graduate simultaneous interpreters. The recruitment process was organized in two stages. First, deputy chief interpreters on location (in Paris, London, Geneva, Washington, etc.) would rigorously test candidates to explore their ability to listen
to the speaker and interpret the speech at the same time. Those who passed this first round of tests then went to Nuremberg, where they faced a second round of tests to determine whether they were indeed suitable for the task. Patricia van der Elst, who interpreted from French into English during the Nuremberg Trial, recalled how she went through the selection process:

“A test was organised at the Geneva University School of Interpreters which, to my surprise, I passed. We had learnt consecutive interpretation only and to find myself speaking into a microphone at the same time that I was listening to a disembodied voice through earphones was thoroughly disconcerting.

“With the ink of my degree scarcely dry, I set out for Nuremberg. It was my first job and, though I did not know it at the time, also my biggest. I went into it with the innocent enthusiasm of my 21 years, looking forward to the freedom from home, the glamour of a foreign assignment and the lure of the unknown… When I did reach Nuremberg, I was billeted at the Grand Hotel where I was allowed to remain for the duration. I spent a week in the public gallery listening to the proceedings in the Court Room. Then, after a brief test in the booth during a lunch-break, I was told I would be starting in earnest the following day. I felt it was a matter of sink or swim. I swam.” (Van der Elst, 2002)

Another interpreter, Elisabeth Heyward, started working in the booth the day after her arrival at Nuremberg, and successfully passed this “baptism by fire”.

However, not all candidates had as short a journey to the “aquarium” as Patricia van der Elst or Elisabeth Heyward. Many started out in the translation service and were transferred to the simultaneous interpreters’ team only after some time (ranging from one week to several months). Occasionally, the opposite happened as well. Some simultaneous interpreters, victims of Nazi concentration camps or children of such victims, could not bear the immense psychological strain and transferred to the translation service. For example, one young graduate of the Geneva school, Jewish by birth, who had shown amazing potential for simultaneous interpreting during the selection process, froze and was unable to utter a single word when she found herself in the booth during the trial. She later said to the senior interpreter that she was simply unable to work, seeing before her the people responsible for the death of so many members of her family.

There was a constant flow of simultaneous interpreters throughout the trial. And the Geneva School was far from the only source of interpreters [2]. Soviet interpreters, who were sent either directly from Red Army Headquarters in Karlshorst or through the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS; Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul’turnoi Sviazi s zagranitsei), were educated at Soviet universities. For instance, Evgeniy Abramovitch Gofman, an interpreter from German into Russian, graduated from the Military Department at the Second Moscow State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages (MGPIIA; Vtoroy Moskovskiy Gosudarstvenny Pedagogicheskii Institute Inostrannykh Yazykov), and Tatiana Alexeevna Ruzskaya (interpreted from English), Inna Moiseievna Kulakovskaya (interpreted from German) and Konstantin Valerianovich Tsurinov (a simultaneous interpreter, later secretary of the Soviet delegation) – had all graduated from the Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature (MIFI; Moskovskiy Institut Istorii, Filosofii i Literatury). However, during the aforementioned selection process, it frequently transpired that a higher degree in linguistics did not always guarantee that a candidate would have real potential for simultaneous interpretation. Along with professional interpreters, talented people from other professions were also recruited to work in the “aquarium”: teachers, lawyers, career military. Yuri Sergeievitch
Khlebnikov, a simultaneous interpreter, was a graduate of the HEC business school in Paris (Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales de Paris), and his colleague Peter Uiberall worked as a stock broker before the war. Many simultaneous interpreters working from Russian came from White Russian émigré families, for instance, Prince George Illarionovitch Vassiltchikov, princess Tatiana Vladimirovna Trubetskaya, who headed the Russian section of the Department, and the aforementioned Yuri Khlebnikov. For many of them two (or in some cases more) languages were native from childhood.

Furthermore, not all simultaneous interpreters were involved solely in interpretation and translation work. For example, Richard Sonnenfeldt, a senior interpreter with the American delegation, also acted as assistant to their Chief Investigator, and following a request from prosecutor Robert H. Jackson was awarded a Commendation for services to the US Armed Forces. Oleg Alexandrovitch Troyanovsky (son of Alexander Antonovitch Troyanovsky, the first Soviet ambassador to the USA) and Enver Nazimovich Mamedov were only nominally interpreters, although they did frequently help their colleagues in the “aquarium”. Both were diplomats: Troyanovsky worked as secretary to the Soviet judge Iona Timofeyevich Nikitchenko, while Mamedov was tasked with secretly delivering General Paulus, captured during the Battle of Stalingrad, to Nuremberg to testify at the Trial. The Soviet Union’s Prosecutor General, Roman Andriyonovich Rudenko, later recalled that the appearance of Paulus in the Courtroom had the effect of “a bomb exploding,” as in Germany he was believed to have died in the Stalingrad “cauldron”.

The interpreters’ salaries varied from one delegation to another. Interpreters working for the American delegation had the highest salaries; those working for other delegations were paid considerably less. The American delegation also employed the most interpreters and translators, at least 640 people, while the Soviet delegation, for example, only had 40.

A large number of documents presented during the trial as evidence for the prosecution were in German. Translators prepared translations of these documents, and the team leader would give the translations in special folders to the interpreters before the start of each session, so that they would have the visual materials to help them while working with various statistical data, full of figures and proper names. However, because of the immense workload, translators did not always have the time to translate all the documents. In this case, the interpreters would receive the documents in their original language for sight translation.

The Nuremberg trial was referred to as “a trial of documents”

The way the trial’s organizers treated the simultaneous interpreters varied greatly. In the beginning, some well-known consecutive interpreters had spoken out against using simultaneous interpretation, some expressing doubts regarding its quality, and some voicing a well-grounded concern about the new equipment that had not been thoroughly tested before. Some members of the prosecution team were not well disposed to the interpreters, and regarded them only as a “necessary evil”. In his memoirs, Sir Norman Birkett, the British alternate judge at the trial, described in an unflattering light the simultaneous interpreters working at the trial 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 ...” (Morris 2000)
Some of the defendants would also criticize the work done by simultaneous interpreters. Hermann Goering, Defendant Number One, had a fair understanding of English and would often turn and look intently at the “aquarium”; Rosenberg had studied in Russia at one time and knew the language, Schacht had an excellent command of English, and Ribbentrop and Speer were fluent in both English and French. From time to time they would use their language skills to show off their education, or to soften what they considered to be a harsh translation of witness statements or documents exposing the barbarity of the crimes they had committed. Some of the defendants would even make a point of taking off their headsets during the screening of recorded evidence, or when listening to witness testimony about the abuse of prisoners in concentration camps.

Goering suggested that his fellow defendants resort to the following tactic during questioning: “When hearing an unpleasant question, get on your high horse and tell them that, for instance, the interpretation is wrong, or use some other excuse” (Gilbert, 2004: 354).

During one of the sessions, Lieutenant General Rudenko presented the court with a verbatim report of a meeting of riechskommissars of the occupied territories and members of the high military command, held on August 6, 1942. Goering was one of the speakers at that meeting. Having read out Goering’s harsh orders to his inferiors, Rudenko turned to the defendant and asked, “Do you see that extract? Is this is what you said at the conference?” (Nuremberg trial of leading German war criminals Nurnbergskiy protsess nad glavnymi nemetskimi voennymi prestupnikami, 1960: 29) And he got the following response: “That quotation has not been translated by the interpreter as it is written down here in the original. The interpreter who is translating your words into German is using many strong expressions which are not contained in this document.” (ibid: 29)

At another session, Alfred Rosenberg, the Third Reich’s main ideologist, while listening to the interpretation of one of the prosecutors, suddenly took off his headset and, turning to the “aquarium” said loudly and angrily, “Not pictures depicting God – Gottesbilder, but icons – Ikonen, madam.” (Stupnikova, 2003: 121).

T. Stupnikova, a Soviet interpreter working at the trial, would later remember that “the sudden nature of the remark, and the fact that it was in perfect Russian, shocked the interpreters.” (ibid: 121).

At one time N. Alexandrov, a member of the USSR Prosecution team, read out a fragment from “Hitlerjugend” on the characteristics of the Nazi methods of educating German youth, and asked Von Schirach, the book’s author, “Is that contained in the book, the passage I have just read?” (Nuremberg trial of leading German war criminals Nurnbergskiy protsess nad glavnymi nemetskimi voennymi prestupnikami, 1960: 322) To which Von Schirach defiantly replied, “What is in front of me now, is contained in my book. What I heard from the interpreter is not in my book.” (ibid: 322).

However, on other occasions the defendants, for instance Schacht and Speer, would try to work together with the interpreters in the “aquarium”, suggesting German equivalents for some foreign words. One of the defendants, Fritzsche, even made a list of linguistic recommendations for his fellow defendants to make the interpreters’ work easier, while Frank, speaking extremely sharply about Ribbentrop to the American military psychologist Gustav Gilbert, went as far as to sympathize with the simultaneous interpreters: “No, seriously, his [Ribbentrop’s] grammar always gave me a headache. I do hope that the interpreters will find some way to transmit the meaning of what he is saying.” (Gilbert, 2004: 296).

Of course, given the immense psychological stress, the interpreters would occasionally make mistakes, despite their considerable concentration. For instance, one young Soviet interpreter, when interpreting Goering, failed to understand the meaning of the phrase “Trojan horse politics”. She paused, lost the thread of thought, and was unable to continue, forcing the presiding judge to stop the session.

In his book, The Nuremberg Epilogue, Arkady I. Poltorak, then the secretary of the Soviet delegation at the International Military Tribunal, wrote, “The question of correct interpretation during the Nuremberg trial went far beyond a purely technical task, turning at times into a high-stakes game of big politics. The anti-Soviet rhetoric of Dr. Stammer, Goering’s lawyer, comes to mind here. While questioning one of the witnesses, he quite frequently used the word ‘besetzung’, when talking about the liberation of Poland by Soviet armed forces in 1944. This word can be translated into Russian as either “seizure” (okkupatsiya) or “occupation” (zanyatie). The general tone of the lawyer’s questions was such that it lead the Soviet interpreter Evgeniy Gofman to interpret ‘besetzung’, as ‘seizure’. R.A. Rudenko instantly rose in protest. The western judges, who had heard a more neutral interpretation of the term, did not understand the purpose of the Soviet prosecutor’s objection. The court was adjourned. The judges withdrew to consult, and our interpreter explained the issue. The court reconvened, and announced its decision: in the minutes the word ‘seizure’ should be replaced with the word ‘liberation’. Dr. Stammer winced, but did not dare protest …” (Poltorak, 1965: 33)

If we take into account the psychological atmosphere that the Nuremberg simultaneous interpreters had to work in, the technical issues they had to deal with, and the very fact that this was the first time that simultaneous interpretation had
been attempted at such a large scale and at an event of such international significance, we will see that the criticism the interpreters had to face was not always justified, and sometimes, quite frankly, without any merit, as the majority of the interpreters employed at the trial were extremely well qualified.

Nuremberg was a miserable sight and, having been heavily bombed by the allied forces, resembled a ghost town. To get to the Palace of Justice from the Grand Hotel or the confiscated mansions where they were staying, the interpreters had to make their way through heaps of phantasmagorical ruins.

Technical issues were a regular occurrence. The large, heavy headsets often failed, the wires giving way in the heat of the discussions. During one of the cross-examinations, outraged at the evidence produced by one of the witnesses, Goering angrily yanked the cord of his headphones, nearly breaking it…

Day after day, witness testimony, documents, and physical evidence brought before the court helped to paint the picture of Nazi crimes for the interpreters and everyone else in the courtroom. In one of his reports from the Nuremberg Trial, Soviet journalist V. Vishnevsky gave the following description of the screening of a documentary on one of the German concentration camps: “Hundreds of pairs of eyes glued first to the screen, then to the defendants. They have nowhere to hide. Guards with tears streaming down their faces. Deathly silence. The voices of those liberated from concentration camps ring from the screen. They are appallingly thin, beaten, their eyes inexplicably, sickeningly sad… A quarter of an hour goes by, as people stare at the defendants, their gaze unwavering, silent, and horrified.” (The Bar of History (Sad istorii), 1966: 42-43) The interpreters saw these bloodcurdling images, and sat so close to those responsible for the mass murder of the prisoners of Dachau, Auschwitz, Majdanek, and other death camps, that they could look them directly in the eye. During one of the sessions, the Prosecution presented evidence from the collection of the Buchenwald SS-Standartenführer [first commandant]: long pieces of human skin processed as leather, and the mumified head of a young boy in a glass case. In spite of this, the interpreters had to remain calm, and to maintain their concentration, interpreting the defendants’ words in a clear and dispassionate manner, without betraying their personal attitude towards the defendants. The most important was for them to interpret what the defendants said, word for word, even if they knew the defendants were lying...

Sometimes, when they got too emotional, the interpreters would start interpreting too loudly, for which they were reprimanded by the team leader. As was discussed earlier, the booths were not soundproof, and it was important that the Hushaphone (“whisperer”) not be turned into a Megaphone (“speaker”).

Some fifty years later, Patricia van der Elst would say, “Looking back, I am amazed how well we coped and how quickly we acquired the new skills.” (Van der Elst, 2002) In one of her interviews Tatiana Ruzskaya remarked, “It was probably only our youth that helped us endure such terrible stress…” (Korolyova, 2000)

Most of the interpreters at the Nuremberg trial were less than 30 years old, and the youngest was a young woman of just 18. Marie-France Skuncke, also an interpreter at the trial, said that “the quality of interpreting improved along the way.” (Skuncke, 2002) As the trial progressed, so did the simultaneous interpreters, improving dramatically, sometimes even beyond recognition. For instance, Prince Vassilitchikov, who was known for his stammer, rid himself of it entirely while working in the booth. In her book, Nothing but the Truth, Tatiana Stupnikova remembered an interesting story that happened when she was working in the “aquarium” interpreting Sauckel, who became very emotional and started shouting, trying to convince the judge of his innocence. “We were interpreting all of this, quickly and accurately, and the interpretation flowed smoothly to the headphones of Russian listeners in the courtroom. And then something inexplicable happened to us. When my colleague and I came back to our senses, we realized to our utmost horror that we had leapt from our chairs and, standing in the interpreters’ ‘aquarium’, were engaged in an angry fighting match, just like the prosecutor and the defendant in the courtroom in front of us. What is more, I felt a sharp pain in my upper arm, just above the elbow, and, when I turned to look at my colleague, I saw that he was gripping my arm and telling me, just as loudly as the prosecutor, but in Russian, ‘You should be hanged!’ And I, crying from the pain in my arm, was shouting back at him, ‘Don’t hang me! I’m a worker! I’m a sailor!’ All those present in the courtroom turned to look at us.

“I don’t know how this could have ended, if it were not for Judge Lawrence who looked at us in a kindly manner that reminded me of Mr. Pickwick. He said very calmly and with no hesitation, ‘Something seems to be the matter with the interpreters. This session is now adjourned.’” (Stupnikova, 2003: 131-132)

This example is a very good one. Later many simultaneous interpreters would compare simultaneous interpreting to acting. “It is understandable why some angry administrators would call us “prima donnas”, too temperamental for any good use. We are nothing if not artists, and we operate under terrific pressures” (Quoted by Visson, 2007: 32), wrote simultaneous interpreter Robert B. Ekwall in one of his articles. Lynn Visson, a well-known American simultaneous interpreter, also noted the “acting side” (ibid: 37) of the simultaneous interpreter’s mentality. In an interview with “Linguist Online” Patricia van der Elst said, “My son is a professional actor, and we were once comparing our two
professions. He and some of my friends, also actors, used to tell me that it is natural to feel very nervous while you are in the wings, but the moment you step onto the stage, the fear vanishes. And if it doesn’t, then you will never be an actor, nor a simultaneous interpreter.” (Baker, 2004 – 2005)

The close bonds between the interpreters at the trial, their team spirit, and the feeling of togetherness (quite literally, as the booths were not that spacious) helped the interpreters in their coordinated work. They also went on to relax together after their hard workday, enjoying dances organized in the Marble Hall of the Grand Hotel. From time to time each of the four delegations would hold receptions, and the interpreters were also invited. It is true that at these events they worked more than they relaxed, acting as intermediaries between the hosts and their foreign guests.

On September 30, 1946, the judges began reading out the Judgement of the International Military Tribunal. A number of major Fascist organizations (The National Socialist German Workers’ Party, the Gestapo, the SS, the SD, etc.) were declared to be criminal, and their volunteer members to be criminals. Three of the defendants (Schacht, Von Papen, and Fritzsche) were acquitted in the absence of compelling evidence of their guilt in the alleged crimes.

The final, 403rd, session of the International Military Tribunal began at 14:52 on October 1, 1946. Everyone in the crowded courtroom waited impatiently for the presiding judge to read out the sentences to the nineteen defendants. The judges stepped up to the bench. V. Velichko, a journalist for the newspaper Pravda, described what took place next, “And then the heavy steel doors slowly opened. The military police brought in Goering. The defendants stood, one by one, to hear their sentence… The presiding judge declared:

"Defendant Hermann Wilhelm Goering, on the Counts of the Indictment on which you have been convicted, the International Military Tribunal sentences you to death by hanging.” (The Bar of History (Sud istorii), 1966: 300)

Volf Frank was the interpreter working in the German booth at that particular moment. He would later remember that the simultaneous interpretation system that Goering had criticized so frequently throughout the trial, had seemingly decided to take revenge and fail at the exact moment that his sentence was being read out to the former Reichsmarschall. No sooner had Judge Lawrence begun to read out the sentence, than Goering signaled to the interpreters that he could not hear anything through his headphones. The technicians solved the problem, and only then was Defendant Number One able to learn his fate.

The defendants were brought into the courtroom one by one, and the interpreters, their voices emotional with stress, voiced the Tribunal’s sentence in their respective languages.

Ribbentrop, Keitel, Kaltenbrunner, Rosenberg, Franck, Frick, Streicher, Sauckel, Jodl, and Seyss-Inquart heard through their headphones the same sentence as Goering[8]. The other defendants were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment[9].

At the end of the session the presiding judge announced that the IMT member for the USSR General Major Nikitchenko had expressed his dissent from the judgement[10], and that this dissenting opinion would be put into writing and annexed to the Judgment, and would be published as soon as possible. Following this announcement, the Tribunal was adjourned.

The Supervisory Board for Germany denied the defendants’ requests for pardons were denied, and the upheld the death sentences, which were carried out during the night of October 15-16, 1946, in the courtyard of the Nuremberg prison. Goering committed suicide by potassium cyanide two and a half hours before he was to be executed.

The Nuremberg Trial lasted 216 days. During this time the International Military Tribunal held 403 open sessions, which were broadly covered by the international press, and broadcast live by radio in the UK and the USA. The complete Russian verbatim report was 20,228 pages long. The Prosecution took 74 days to present its evidence, the Defence took 133 days. The Prosecutors presented 2,630 pages of written evidence, the Defence – 2,700. A total of 116 witnesses was brought to the stand. The International Military Tribunal studied thousands of written witness statements given under oath. Five million pages with a total weight of 200 tons were carefully analyzed. The proceedings were captured on 27,000 meters of tape and in several thousand photographs. The sessions were also video recorded. Simultaneous interpreters spent almost 1,500 hours in the “aquarium”. More than 60,000 passes had been issued for the Palace of Justice. Many famous people attended the trial, such as essayists Harold Nicholson, Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop, the Mayor of New York City Fiorello H. La Guardia, and the Viscount Frederic Herbert Maugham, the brother of William Somerset Maugham, among others.

The bar of history, or, as it is sometimes called, “The Trial of Six Million Words”, took place despite the many calls from high-ranking western officials during and after the war to lynch Nazi criminals[11]. In his opening statement, which has since been recognized as a fine example and a true masterpiece of legal reasoning, and has been quoted in every textbook published since, the US Chief Prosecutor Robert H. Jackson thwarted such unreasonable calls to action
by explaining, “That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to Reason.” (Nuremberg trial of leading German war criminals Nurnbergskiy protsess nad glavnymi nemetskimi voennymi prestupnikami, 1954: 101)

Many lawyers, including those representing the defendants, tried to question the legitimacy of the Trial, quoting the legal principle of “Nullum crimen sine lege”, and suggesting that the victorious nations had abandoned it, creating law and giving it retroactive effect[12].

The International Military Tribunal proved those statements to be worthless, and handed down fair sentences to Nazi criminals.

For the first time in history, statesmen and politicians were brought to trial for making the state itself their weapon, and for the first time in history aggressive warfare was declared to be the gravest of international crimes.

The Nuremberg trial had a profound impact on the entire world. Suffice it to say that the legal principles of the Nuremberg Judgement were codified by the United Nations Organization and used to draft the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity (1968), the four Geneva Conventions on the Protection of War Victims (1949), and their additional protocols (1977).

The historical dimensions of the trial have been described in numerous articles, monographs, and other academic publications which, as a rule, speak very little about the interpreters who worked at the Palace of Justice. Peter Uiberall lamented that simultaneous interpreters are hardly mentioned in the trial’s official documents. He remembered that they were largely regarded as simply a “part of the system.” (Keiser, 2004: 580) On the other hand, is that necessarily such a bad thing? In his article, “Translation as a Type of Social Behaviour”, A.V. Sadovnikov wrote that “the interpretation is considered to be the best where the presence of the interpreter is felt the least.” (Sadovnikov, 1981: 9) And Lynn Visson adds that “the interpreter is noticed not when he does a brilliant job, but when he does a bad job.” (Visson, 2007: 33)

Sir Hartley Shawcross, Chief Prosecutor for the United Kingdom, highly appreciated the work of the simultaneous interpreters working at the trial, and remarked in an interview, “I am of the opinion that simultaneous interpretation should be adopted at all international meetings as it saves so much time.” (Keiser, 2004: 580)

After the trial was over, some of the Nuremberg simultaneous interpreters went on to work at the UN, and their names have been written in the history of interpreting. But it was there, in that “aquarium” in the main courtroom of the Nuremberg Palace of Justice, that these simultaneous interpreters proved, by coping so brilliantly with the task at hand, that such a form of interpreting was indeed viable. It is now being taught at universities all over the world, and used, just as Shawcross had once recommended, at all international conference

References


Footnotes

[1] A further 19 states joined at a later stage: Greece, Denmark, Yugoslavia, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Belgium, Ethiopia, Australia, Honduras, Norway, Panama, Luxembourg, Haiti, New Zealand, India, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

[2] The main prosecutors were: for the USSR, the Prosecutor of the Ukrainian SSR, State councilor of justice, 2nd class, Lieutenant General Roman A. Rudenko; for the USA, Robert Houghwout Jackson, Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States; for the United Kingdom, Attorney-General Hartley William Shawcross; and for France, François de Menthon, a member of the Provisional Government of the French Republic (he was later replaced by Auguste Champetier de Ribes, a member of the Provisional Consulting Assembly).


[4] Named in honour of its two American inventors, the Boston entrepreneur Edward Albert Filene, and IBM radio engineer Gordon Finlay.
The defendant Ernst Kaltenbrunner was absent from the trial during the first days due to illness.

The interpreters had two cards: one had “Slow” written on it, the other had “Stop” written on it. In case any difficulties arose, the interpreter would show the right card to the head interpreter, and he would then press the corresponding light switch.

The Geneva School of Interpreters alumni who interpreted at the trial: Stefan Horn, Frédéric Treidell, Patricia van der Elst, Armand Jacoubovitch, Peter Less, and Norbert Berger, among others.

Martin Bormann was sentenced to death by hanging in absentia.

Von Schirach and Speer – 20 years, Von Neurath – 15 years, Doenitz – 10 years. Hess, Raeder and Funk were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Nikitchenko showed his dissent from the judgement acquitting Schacht, von Papen, and Fritzshche, his dissent from the lenient sentencing for Hess, and his dissent regarding the court’s decision not to recognize the Imperial Cabinet, the General Staff, and the High Command as criminal organizations.

In this regard the Morgenthau Plan (named so after Henry Morgenthau, Jr. who held the position of the United States Secretary of the Treasury from 1934 until 1945) should be of particular interest, as it provided for the removal of leading Nazi war criminals without legal proceeding, the demilitarization of Germany, and the destruction of its basic industries.

“No crime without law” (lat.)

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