

The Interpreters' Newsletter

Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio, dell'Interpretazione
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EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste

via Weiss, 21 – 34128 Trieste

eut@units.it

<http://eut.units.it>

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Book review

ANDRES, DÖRTE / KAINDL, KLAUS / KURZ, INGRID (EDS) (2017) *DOLMETSCHERINNEN UND DOLMETSCHER IM NETZ DER MACH*, BERLIN, FRANK & TIMME, 274, ISBN: 978-3-7329-0336-8.

REVIEWED BY ALESSANDRA RICCARDI

The historical investigation of interpreters' lives and interpreting situations connected to a specific historical period or event is a recent line of research in Interpreting Studies (Bowen / Bowen 1990; Bowen *et al.* 1995; Gaiba 1998; Roland 1999; Baigorri-Jalón 2000, 2004, 2007; Takeda / Baigorri-Jalón 2016). Within this field of studies, autobiographical writings are gaining a special standing for shedding light on the social role of interpreters, situations of conflict in which they had to bridge the communication gap, their ethical values and how or whether they could/would adhere to them in arduous political times, if not during extreme and dramatic historical circumstances as during war.

The volume edited by Dörte Andres, Klaus Kaindl and Ingrid Kurz is a collection of papers, ten written in German and three in English, on interpreters working in totalitarian systems, during the Second World War and/or in the field of diplomacy (see Thiery 2015). Each of the thirteen chapters analyzes the autobiographical writings of an interpreter within this historical framework. They are conceived mainly in the form of memoirs (see Andres 2015), i.e. as the narration

of a certain period of one's life against the background of a historical event. Every paper clearly states the genre to which the original book pertains, differentiating between memoirs, historical chronicle or autobiography. Some of the books analyzed are mainly autobiographical in their structure, but even in these cases the border between autobiography and memoirs is rather blurred. The genre 'memoirs' can be considered, therefore, the common denominator of the volume representing interpreters from different backgrounds, life experiences, studies and expertise that give their own interpretation of their lives and work. What is common to all are the extreme, often dramatic circumstances in which they worked. What makes the difference is always the context, the persons they were working for and how they could come to terms with what was expected of them.

The contributions examine how interpreters build their own discursive identity, how they understand and describe their social role and their interpreting activity. Reviewing this collection of articles, it is difficult at times to distinguish between what was meant and reconstructed by the interpreters in their personal autobiographical writings and what is instead the result of understanding by the single authors of the collection while examining and interpreting the memoirs. Reviewing this book adds a further interpretation.

There are some common elements that can be traced in most contributions, bearing in mind that during the time considered, between 1930-1960, interpreting was not a profession as we know it now, or, at least, it was not a well-established profession. Most interpreters had received no training: learning by doing was the norm. Dialogic interpreting was the most commonly used modality, principally in the form of short consecutives without notes. Therefore, few interpreters used consecutive notes, which presupposed a specific training for the interpretation of long speeches, as in the case of Hitler's official speeches or during exhausting diplomatic meetings for reaching an agreement.

The group of interpreters discussed in the single papers by the researchers are composed of four women and nine men. Principally, they became interpreters by chance, owing to their life circumstances, with few exceptions as in the case of Schmidt and Rževskaja, or because interpreting was instrumental for reaching their life goal. In the case of Solonewitsch her objective was to find a way of leaving the Soviet Union and going abroad; Dollman could continue living in his beloved Rome; Zhou Chun and Ji Chaozhu considered interpreting as a means to enter a diplomatic career. The most common way of learning the job, i.e. to copy or receive instructions from senior colleagues, is illustrated extensively in the writings of Tamara Solonewitsch, Erich Sommer and Ji Chaozhu.

Vera Ahamer examines Tamara Solonewitsch's memoirs in the opening chapter of the volume which constitutes, chronologically, the earliest period reported on, between 1926-28 and 1931-32. Solonewitsch worked as interpreter for the Commission of External Relations of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions. She knew English and her language mastery enabled her to find a job as interpreter although she was untrained. She did not have much interest in being an interpreter but considered interpreting instrumental to her desire to leave the Soviet Union. Ahamer underlines how her opposition to the Soviet regime is clearly stated throughout the memoirs and that very few reflections are to be found about being an interpreter. Her first interpreting assignment was to

accompany a delegation of British miners around the Soviet Union for 40 days. Solonewitsch began the tour without knowing what interpreting actually was, received some instructions from an elder colleague and learnt to a certain extent how to manage meetings and visits. She was often confronted with the fear of failure and referred to the unexpected difficulties she encountered: different dialects and pronunciations, specialized jargon, acronyms, rhetorical style, working all day long, interpreting for but also accompanying the delegation into the mines and ceaselessly answering their questions. She interpreted loyally, notwithstanding her opposition to the regime and the revulsion she felt for what she had to interpret. Ahamer concludes that Solonewitsch's report is subjective, exaggerated and historically imprecise (p. 30), with little reflection on her role and the historical events, and with harsh words against the regime.

Elena Rževskaja had a completely different personality compared to Solonewitsch. She decided to become an interpreter as soon as she heard about the course for the training of military interpreters for the Red Army set up in Moscow in 1941. She was among the first students who enrolled in the first year. The course lasted either six weeks or between 4-6 months. Margarita Singer examines the years in which Elena Rževskaja became a military interpreter and worked as such for the Red Army. Her research is based on Rževskaja's autobiographical writings through which she reconstructed how interpreters were trained and why the trainees had chosen to become interpreters. Singer stresses how the inner loyalty and patriotism for their country were the motivations that instigated their decisions. Working on the frontline, translating documents, questioning and interpreting German prisoners were among their regular duties. Besides the difficulties connected with interpreting on the frontline, Singer highlights the inner dilemma that resulted from working close to the prisoners, being often the only person with whom they could communicate. Thus, gradually, Rževskaja's attitude towards the 'enemy' changed. The extreme situation of war required a balancing act between being a soldier and a military interpreter – having been taught to see in every German a Nazi and an enemy – and being compassionate towards another human being; the prisoner she was in charge of. It was a very risky behavior within the military environment, a dilemma Singer clearly highlights.

Schmidt, Jacob, Dollman and Sommer, shared a feature in common; they had all been working for the German Foreign Office. Schmidt was Chief Interpreter, Dollman was Hitler's man in Rome, Jacob left his position in the Foreign Office in 1933 because he was a Jew, while Sommer defined himself as a *bedeutungsloser Dolmetscher des Auswärtigen Amtes* (p. 86), an insignificant interpreter of the Foreign Office. He identified himself with a historian, not an interpreter, but being an interpreter gave him the possibility to witness historical events first hand and critically report on them, as Pekka Kajamäki notes. Interpreting was instrumental to his historian role and he recorded in his memoirs only so much about it as to clear the background and situation in which he had found himself.

In her Chapter on Eugen Dollmann's memoirs, Ursula Gross-Dinter looks into his life during the years he spent in Italy as *Verbindungsoffizier*, liaison officer for the Nazi-regime. Her article is very rich in references drawing not only on Dollman's memoirs but also on many other historical sources to reconstruct his

role and self-image. Dollmann had a vast knowledge of both German and Italian cultures, he was well-introduced in the Roman high society, and used the SS as a means to a pleasant and easy existence. He has been criticized for being a drawing-room hero, a trusted personal representative of Hitler, but he also defended opponents of the regime and partisans (p. 45) and was able to rescue art treasures. Dollmann wrote his memoirs first in Italian and only later in German, because in Italy – where he was considered a symbol of Nazi-occupation – there was great interest to read his diaries. Gross-Dinter's conclusion is that, through his memoirs, Dollmann wanted to justify his behavior during the period of National Socialism and Fascism to discharge himself from the accusation of participating in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre. The author underlines that Dollmann did not consider himself a professional interpreter, but rather a diplomat, a culture and arts expert, a historian, an adviser and consultant. His interpreting had often been manipulative as he admitted (p. 49-50). He was therefore aware that in so doing (p. 53) he distanced himself from the honest spokesperson, the true interpreter. Therefore, it is concluded that even though he cannot be judged by modern ethical professional norms, if Dollmann were to be evaluated on ethical norms, he would be the prototype of the negative interpreter (p. 54).

Paul Schmidt was a high ranking diplomatic interpreter and, therefore, after the war, was suspected of war crimes. During the military occupation of Germany, he went through imprisonment, interrogations, internment and had to give up the profession. There were periods, however, in which he could practise his profession again, for example, during the Nuremberg war crimes trials. In 1946 Schmidt was asked to work for the Language Division of the Tribunal, where he had already been interrogated. Hildegard Vermeiren centers her analysis of Schmidt's memoirs on the question – which already emerged with the first volume of his memoirs – whether Schmidt as interpreter was allowed to violate the rule of discretion and confidentiality giving his own testimony of events. Her answer is positive, because she claims that the circumstances of the times were exceptional. Therefore, it is possible to call on the principle of ethical transparency and reveal what happened. It would have been a crime to conceal the truth about the Nazi crimes (p. 247).

Very different from Dollmann's and Schmidt's is the position of Jacob analyzed by Michaela Montag through his memoirs, *Kind meiner Zeit. Lebenserinnerungen* (Child of my time. Lifetime memories). Hans Jacob worked as a free-lance interpreter for the German Foreign Office but being a Jew and informed about the escalation of measures against Jews, he left his job in 1933 and settled down in Paris. He was a journalist, writer, translator and interpreter. In his words, one of the most terrible things he had to endure in his work at the radio *Straßburger Sender*, was interpreting Hitler's speeches, *eine geistige und physische Qual* (p. 69), a spiritual and physical suffering. Even though he became interpreter by chance, he had a moral rule which made him decide on which side to stay. Hence, on one occasion for example, he refused to interpret the answer of a high-ranking Nazi Official, with the explanation that his conscience did not allow him to do it (p. 71). He described interpreting as a *Nebenberuf*, a side-job, to which he had arrived by chance. Nevertheless, he became one of AIIC's founding fathers and eventually became Chief Interpreter of UNESCO for nine years.

Klaus Kaindl and Dörte Andres have chosen to analyze the memoirs of two interpreters for which personal feelings and individual, universal ethical values deeply influenced the way in which they were committed towards foreign prisoners for whom they interpreted during the Second World War. Hiltgunt von Zassenhaus embodies the positive interpreter image of *Dolmetschen als Dienst am Leben* (interpreting as a service for life) in which Klaus Kaindl describes the development of her interpreter personality. He does so by taking into account that the interpreting persona is always part of the social self which is not only the result of professional socialization, but part of a complexity of biographical processes which include family, social, transnational and political aspects, all conducive to individual actions and beliefs. The concept of *biographie croisée* is used therefore as a possible means to identify the personality of translators/interpreters. Furthermore, the notion of Agamben's *homo sacer* is called for to illustrate the national socialist penitentiaries in which she worked as an interpreter. Hiltgunt von Zassenhaus was in charge first of censoring the letters of Norwegian and Danish prisoners and then also of interpreting for them. Her interpreting activity went well beyond professional commitment, it followed her personal individual convictions and discernment. Notwithstanding the fear of being discovered, Hiltgunt von Zassenhaus was able to rescue many of the prisoners she had been interpreting for from death.

Dörte Andres' contribution – *Freiwillig zwangsverpflichtet. Persönliche Erinnerungen von Eleanore Helbach, Dolmetscherin in den Mülheimer Zwangsarbeiterlagern* (Voluntarily conscripted. Personal memories of Eleanore Helbach, interpreter in the forced labor camps of Mülheim) – deals with interpreting for forced laborers, a context not researched yet in historical Interpreting Studies. Andres illustrates the interpreting activity of Eleanore Helbach, born in Russia in 1903 of German parents. Her Catholic family had emigrated there in 1860, but after her family's tragic and traumatic years before and during WWI they returned to Germany in exchange of Russian prisoners. Andres' focus is on how her life history and especially religion had influenced and shaped her individual development and thus her role as an interpreter in a totalitarian system. Her past experience of discrimination, violence, fear and also of life in an internment camp had a great impact on Eleanore Helbach and influenced the years to come. In her family town Mülheim she worked for the eastern forced laborers between 1942 and 1945. Andres has researched her autobiographical writings and illustrated how she was able to help the laborers in all possible ways, with food, medicines and clothes but also with encouraging words and energy. She would be and remained humane in a system that was against humanity, she would and could oppose a totalitarian system in her sphere of action and acted following her individual, yet universal values: responsibility before God, respect for human dignity and charity.

Robert Ekvall's memoirs as a Cold War interpreter, *Faithful Ech'*, have been analyzed by María Manuela Fernández Sánchez. She defines Ekvall's experience as an interpreter unique for several reasons. First of all his background: he was an American missionary, born of American missionary parents in China. He was fluent in Mandarin Chinese, Chinese dialects and Tibetan nomad dialect, later in life he also learned French. Besides being a missionary, he was a teacher and explorer, army officer, anthropologist, intelligence officer, military and diplomatic

interpreter. The author considers Ekvall's memoirs as a historical source for Interpreting Studies, given that there are not many other autobiographical references of interpreters in the same period. Ekvall was untrained in interpreting, he had to learn on the job, but his experience in cross-cultural communication, military background and in-depth knowledge of many subjects were a good basis for becoming a military and diplomatic interpreter. His life experiences, his multilingual background, his linguistic awareness, the ability to speak local languages and dialects, had given him the instruments to successfully face new challenges as in Panmunjon. He declared: "I set myself to the task of echoing other men's words, mirroring other men's ideas" (p. 178). Accuracy, fidelity, identification with the speaker are the guiding principles of the interpreter Ekvall. Fernández Sánchez suggests that the memoirs can be read from different perspectives. Besides being an autobiographical writing, it is a literary book, but it can also be seen as a guide to becoming a diplomatic interpreter: Ekvall was an 'interpreting scholar ahead of his time' reflecting on and debating his work as an interpreter.

Ingrid Kurz has centered her paper on the memoirs of two interpreters who worked during the Nuremberg trials, Richard W. Sonnenfeldt and Siegfried Ramler. In particular, she examines how they could cope with their duty as interpreters, despite their tragic family history connected with the Nazi regime. Sonnenfeldt was German, while Ramler was Austrian, but there are several parallels in their lives. They were almost the same age, both were Jews, living a comfortable life with their families until 1938 when they were sent to England. Soon after, Sonnenfeldt arrived in the USA, while Ramler remained in London where he worked and studied. In the Army, Sonnenfeldt was employed as interpreter for the interrogations of Nazi criminals in Paris. He was then transferred to Nuremberg where he continued the interrogations of Nazi criminals before the trials. He became Chief of the Interpretation Section for the American prosecution. Ramler arrived in Nuremberg as well, but in contrast to Sonnenfeldt, he proposed himself for the job. Given his good language knowledge and the need for linguists, he was immediately hired by the US Civil administration and worked as an interpreter during the pre-interrogations. Both Sonnenfeldt and Ramsler had no experience as interpreters, had no training and had no experience in working in tribunal. During their work they had to face and interpret the persons responsible for the persecution their families had endured. Kurz has examined their position as interpreters and whether they would comply with present ethical interpreting standards, in particular truth, clarity, trust and understanding. Their memoirs give the author the opportunity to contrast these criteria and she comes to the conclusion that although they did not have any training, they were able to stand up to today's ethical translational criteria owing to their language competence, but also to their psychological stability.

Mira Kadrić examines and comments on the memoirs of Ivan Ivanji, who was Tito's interpreter for German during the 1960-1970s. A very eclectic person who, besides interpreting, had also worked as a teacher, journalist, publisher's editor and was a successful novelist, playwright and theater director. Kadrić stresses the importance of his background and life-experiences in illustrating the way in which he considered himself as an interpreter. He was untrained and had a very close, almost friendly relation with President Tito whom he highly respected and

admired. Ivan Ivanji is described as a non-conformist interpreter who had wider power than interpreters usually have; he behaved in a very confidential way with high-level officials and politicians, a trait that possibly derived from his artistic background or simply from high self-esteem and self-confidence. Kadrić recognizes in his behavior the influence that the setting has on the way an interpreter is considered: the dialogic mode allows for a greater proximity and intimacy. Finally, highlighting Ivan Ivanji's interpreting qualities (p. 206), Kadrić sums up the characteristics of political interpreting and interpreters: equivalence of the message extending to overtones and nuance, loyalty to the principal, but also to the other interlocutors.

An atypical interpreter is Zhou Chun, the central figure in Ulrich Kautz's contribution. Actually, his autobiography is more interesting for depicting the political situation in China after 1945 and less so for the implications involved in being an interpreter in China at the time. His interpreting experience is limited to the years he had been working at the Foreign Ministry, in the German Section. He had learned English and German at school and was preparing to study medicine which he then could not follow. He became an interpreter by chance and worked once for Mao Zedong and more often with Zhou Enlai and DDR officials. Zhou Chun struggled to become a member of the communist party, which was not possible for him. Instead, he was accused of being 'rightist' and, therefore, spent many years in labor camps, prisons and remote areas. In conclusion, besides the historical picture of China in those years, little is said about the interpreter Zhou Chun, but rather about his general personality traits. Interpreting in the political context in China at the time was in fact not a real profession, but rather a possibility for further advancements in a diplomatic career.

The first part of Jesús Baigorri-Jalón's Chapter, the last of the collection, deals with the difficult classification of Ji Chaozhu's book, at a crossroads between an auto/biography, a chronicle, a collaborative life narrative and memoirs. Ji Chaozhu, an English-speaking Chinese worked for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite the title of his book, *The Man on Mao's Right. From Harvard Yard to Tiananmen Square*, he was principally at the side of Zhou Enlai and a few times with Mao Zedong. He grew up in New York, attended Harvard but then went back to China in 1950. His memoirs give an overview and personal account of the history of China during his lifetime while he served as language and cultural broker. Baigorri-Jalón criticizes Ji Chaozhu's account because the original documents on which it is based are not quoted. In addition, he relies mainly on his own memories and those of his wife and close relatives. Hence, although it records historical events, the volume cannot be seen as a conventional historical account, but a narrative through the eyes of a witness to history. The book is a mix of history and autobiography with a focus on how Ji considers interpreting. The role performed as an interpreter is apparently the main argument of the book, but actually Ji used his expertise for a career in the diplomatic service. Ji Chaozhu identified himself little with the role of an interpreter, but rather with the potential role as a diplomat. At the time, besides languages, what was needed was an alignment with Chinese ideology, therefore, Chaozhu's neutrality as an interpreter, it is claimed, was at least controversial. Summarizing, Baigorri-Jalón lists the requirements of an interpreter working in this regime: unlimited dedi-

cation to the job, together with an almost complete integration into the political power structure. Deontology and ethical obligations were not considered. The interpreter had to be trusted by his principal, otherwise he would have lost his position through banishment if not physical elimination. Interpreters' careers in China were more of a diplomatic nature than linguistic, working not only between the two parties involved but mainly for their delegations. All this meant additional stress, unregulated, if not unlimited, working shifts (p. 265). Baigorri-Jalón criticizes Chaozhu's idea of interpreting as the art of misleading, a concept that in his opinion should rather be associated with diplomacy.

The volume brings together very different ways of being an interpreter and touches on fundamental concepts that have been and are largely debated within Interpreting Studies: the role of the interpreter, neutrality, trust, partiality/impartiality, training and knowledge, personal advantages and responsibility towards the speaker, the listener but also towards the interpreter's individual values. It is a rich source for reflection on these topics, helped by the historical distance existing between us and the times when the reported persons lived and worked as interpreters.

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