Interpreting on trial

The professionalism of the Nuremberg interpreters highlights shortcomings in current UK interpreting standards.

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The Nuremberg trials that followed the second world war have cast a long shadow. For jurists and lawyers, journalists and, of course, interpreters the trials set or established an incredible range of standards.

No surprise then that for an event featuring Siegfried Ramler – one of those providing the groundbreaking four-way simultaneous interpreting at the trials – every seat was taken.

Organised by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), what came across from Ramler’s account, and speeches from lawyers, interpreters and translators still working in international criminal trials, was the total co-dependence of interpreters, lawyers and the court.

The translation based on the interpretation itself becomes evidence – a status that at modern tribunals is fully recognised. Working in demanding conditions, beyond recommended modern time limits, the interpreting and resulting transcript were, as Ramler put it, ‘not polished – but strong enough, because this was a trial with a death sentence’.

There was no ‘code’ for interpreters as AIIC now has, but the fundamental standards were the same – with independence and accuracy at their heart. Asked repeatedly by barrister Philippe Sands QC about the place personal feelings played in an interpreter’s performance, Ramler presented a solid wall of professionalism.

A teenage witness of the Anschluss and Kristallnacht, saved by the Kindertransport, Ramler was ‘preoccupied with doing a good job’ – and looking back clearly more interested in the challenges of the four-way simultaneous interpreting than the drama of the consecutive translation he provided for the pre-trial interrogation of Hans Frank (‘Butcher of Poland’).

Without that sort of commitment, these would have been different trials with poorer credibility. I came away with the clear sense that a lapse in interpreter professionalism would have mattered as much as Justice Jackson’s botched cross-examination of Goering.

Huge respect to interpreters, then – an intimidatingly proficient group of professionals.

And so, interestingly, to the present day and the UK. AIIC campaigns for the safety and welfare of interpreters, as well as accrediting their standards and promoting codes relating to translators’ professionalism and treatment.

The plight of court interpreters here has caught the attention of AIIC, and president Linda Fitchett
used her own speech to criticise the dramatic cuts to interpreters’ fees for UK court work and the disruptive award of the courts interpreter contract to Capita.

Keeping in mind the point that a translation reliant on an interpreter’s work is itself evidence, this would seem to say something disturbing about the tangible damage done to the rule of law by the way services were outsourced.

Viewed through the prism of the Nuremberg trials, it’s a serious point.

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