

# Editorial

Issue 21 of *The Interpreters' Newsletter* is dedicated to the history of interpreting, a field of Interpreting Studies gaining increasing attention in recent years, testifying, therefore, to a renewed interest in how interpreting developed, in the role it played in the past and in particular the contribution interpreters gave to the evolution of intercultural encounters and exchanges. The positive and sometimes negative role interpreters played in historic circumstances may induce a more comprehensive reflection on the role interpreters may play nowadays.

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón's contribution opens this collection of papers on interpreting history and centers on Georges Rabinovitch, UN chief interpreter from 1947. His research is based on conventional historical records (digital or physical), personal interviews and photographic image-analysis. In giving his personal interpretation of the sources, the author focuses at the same time on methodological aspects to show the importance of private archives for historical research on interpreting. Less conventional materials, such as photographs, oral testimonies, interviews and photo elicitation can contribute effectively to this kind of research, as records of interpreters at work are sparse and difficult to retrieve. In reconstructing the Rabinovitch family of interpreters' saga, the author adds elements to the character's life-story, hence expanding the socio-biography of the early stages of conference interpreting.

Karin Sibul's paper examines the use of conference interpreting in Estonia at the time of the Soviet occupation (1944-1991). Her aim is to investigate whether interpreting was used to facilitate communication between Russian and Estonian communities and whether the introduction of Russian as a language

of international communication in Estonia could be seen as a tool to enhance socio-political cohesion in Soviet society. Her research is based on film footage from film archives, photos from the National Archives of Estonia and Tartu University Photo Collection and a Digitised Photo Database, as well as interviews with interpreters and people who worked with interpreters. The evolution of conference interpreting not only from and into Russian and Estonian, but also from Estonian or Russian and a foreign language other than Russian, is traced thanks to the sources consulted. Furthermore, the author has discovered some very interesting findings such as the earliest evidence of simultaneous interpretation from Estonian into Russian in 1940 and 1944 and also what interviewees labelled as a 'soapbox', an early example of listener headset, part of simultaneous interpreting equipment designed and made at Tartu University and previously mistakenly identified as a 'wire-tapping device' and not as an early example of headset.

Charlotte Kieslich's contribution is a microhistory case study investigating the assignment and working conditions of professional interpreters at the Eleventh International Penal and Penitentiary Congress held in Berlin in August 1935. The study is based on historical material from the Reich's Ministry of Justice collected at the Federal Archives in Berlin, thanks to which it was possible to reconstruct in detail how recruitment, preparation and the general organisation of interpreter assignments was dealt with. The historical background of National Socialist Germany gives readers the opportunity to better understand how the Nazi leadership used such events to promote parts of their political agenda at international level, for example their compulsory sterilisation agenda. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the existence of professional full-time freelance conference interpreters in the Third Reich and how professional their approach was as early as in the 1930s.

The paper by Garry Mullender deals with interpreters and interpreting during the Portuguese voyages of discovery and in Portuguese India. His sources are royal chronicles, coeval histories of the Portuguese presence during the sixteenth century, but also seafarer first-hand accounts of encounters between the Portuguese crews and native peoples. Mullender's contribution shows how two very diversified groups of interpreters were used for linguistic mediation at the time under investigation. The first group consisted in either convicts or slaves forced into the interpreter role for dangerous tasks, who had to develop survival skills and often were looked upon with suspicion. Besides linguistic mediation, they would provide additional services such as commercial brokerage and intelligence. The other group of interpreters was composed of people sought out by missionaries to aid them in their conversion efforts. Missionaries were more demanding of the technical dimension and would therefore train their own mediators who were "Christians of good moral standing who were willing to forego personal gain or interests" (p. 54).

The roles of interpreters regarding the relations among Indians and English-speaking European-Americans in the nineteenth century, with special reference to interpreting during negotiations with the Sioux Indian tribe, is the topic of Emanuele Brambilla's contribution. It is based on selected essays and papers on the history of North American Indians. The importance assigned to interpreters in Indian-white relations is proven by the increasing number of white interpreters employed in land transactions and treaty negotiations compared to the early

colonial period, when Indians dominated the scene. The interpreter became a figure in high demand playing an important role as agent of government. It was a role that has often been misused, a prestigious job but also “a cover for business and corruption” (p. 69) as Brambilla illustrates with the help of two prominent personalities. One is Charles Picotte, who worked as an interpreter during the treaty negotiations and is often quoted in historical reports of Indian-white relations, while the other interpreter is Reverend Samuel Hinman. Both characters proved not always trustworthy, cheating Indians during the negotiations for their own or the government’s sake and contributing to the bad reputation of the interpreting profession at the time.

Anne Leahy’s contribution centers on signed language interpreting in a legal setting. The author analyses the proceedings of the so-called “Ruston’s case” which took place in the London Central Criminal Court in 1786. The focus is placed on the procedural hurdles concerning the possibility for John Ruston, a young deaf man, to testify in a larceny trial thanks to his sister’s interpreting between English and signed language. Martha Ruston’s determination in letting her brother contribute to the unfolding of the trial and the support of the sitting justice, stemmed the aggressive flow of the defense counsel. This case study gives a very interesting insight into the first steps towards a full-fledged recognition and participation of deaf people in the social community (at legal level) and the fact that the case is known through the witness’ name instead of that of the defendant’s, proves the pivotal nature of Ruston’s case.

Sign language interpreting is also the subject of Cynthia Kellett’s paper. The author outlines the relationship between signed language and education, highlighting the beginning of the use of signed language in the education of deaf pupils, placing the focus on the hurdles deaf people had to overcome after the adoption of oralism and the rejection of signs after 1880. Poorer education and the subsequent economic and social marginalisation of deaf people were the unavoidable consequences of such a decision. Sign language interpreting had no better destiny. It began to be recognised as a profession only in the 1960s and when research helped raise awareness about deaf people’s rights. The historical framework depicted represents a unifying overview of a presently widespread and manifold research field of Interpreting Studies.

The seven contributions making up this issue of *The Interpreters’ Newsletter* are followed by some concluding notes on interpreters in ancient Egypt. A leap backwards in the advancing time line of history which seems to strengthen a twofold remark: an interdisciplinary approach is the appropriate one in research on the history of interpreting and interpreters; every interpretation of historical facts is temporary and relatively subjective because new research on historical documentation may modify our knowledge of past events in the history of interpreting and interpreters.

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