More and more interpreters discover in themselves that they have a gift for being able to conduct successful conference interpreting. It is only natural that they would begin to wonder if the pioneers in this field encountered some of the things that they experience. A particularly riveting work on conference interpreting is reviewed here by Kornelia DeKorne, who serves on ATA’s Dictionary Review Committee.

—Peter A. Gergay

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón’s From Paris to Nuremberg: The Birth of Conference Interpreting is a painstakingly researched book that traces the dawn and coming of age of conference interpreting. Chapters are structured as in a textbook, with bulleted subsections and short summaries at the end of each, and they are bulging with footnotes. Apart from continuing the arguments presented in the main text, these footnotes also serve as the author’s asides, supplying dramatic tension to otherwise seemingly dry data, such as explanations of administrative structures or who’s-who-style biographies of interpreters whose names are only familiar to a small circle of aficionados.

Baigorri-Jalón has dug deep into memoirs, monographs, and unpublished archives, in addition to drawing on his own interviews with Nuremberg interpreters, to reconstruct the story of the larger-than-life feats of people who invented the conference interpreting profession in a baptism by fire. Witnessing the battles for recognition of those who came before us is liberating, reading their candid expressions is cathartic, and their opinions, from their own mouths and pens, about what makes a good interpreter are invaluable to professionals following in their footsteps today.

These figures of the heyday of consecutive interpreting played surprisingly consequential roles of diplomacy that we, their descendants by vocation, could never dream of. They were at liberty to summarize, emphasize, and at times tone down the rhetoric of the statesmen they shadowed. Against the tapestry of geopolitical maneuvering and practical demands imposed by an accelerating, multipolar world, many of our professional forebears were thrust into their roles solely by virtue of being multilingual, making up the rules as they went along while accomplishing stupendous feats. This history shows us that without their interpreters, the movers and shakers of the newly global world of the 20th century would not have been able to accomplish their great deeds.

Conference interpreting, a young profession even by New World standards, hastened the end of an era when diplomatic relations were dominated by a single language, and played a critical role in the birth of a new multilingual model of diplomacy that continues to this day. In five chapters, Baigorri-Jalón details how this very modern profession was born in the crucible of history at the dawn of the 20th century. He traces its roots back to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, subsequently following it through its development at the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization, its use by the Allied and Axis powers as they decided the fate of nations in the years prior to and during World War II, all the way to the debut of simultaneous interpreting on the world stage in 1945 at the Nuremberg Trials.

Emergence

Chapter 1 deals with the begin-
nings of the profession: the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. It includes a short introduction to the historical background and outcome of the conference, the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent ancillary treaties. It then discusses general procedural aspects, such as the touchy question, in light of geopolitical sensibilities, of what the language(s) of diplomacy should be (at that time, English or French).

Baigorri-Jalón discusses how the need for spontaneous interpreters arose during World War I. We learn that in the absence of formal training, their educational and cultural backgrounds aided people like Paul Mantoux, Gustave Camerlynck, Stephen Bonsal, and numerous others in rising to the challenge of becoming the first professionals of this new métier.

The insightful bios of these figures are followed by a discussion of their interpreting methods, such as providing consecutive summaries (with or without note-taking) of speeches short and long delivered before plenary sessions. (They also had to dictate them into the record with the help of their notes.) We also learn about whispered interpreting or chuchotage in committee settings. Baigorri-Jalón touches upon the arduous requirements of working in both directions between the two adopted official languages for long stretches of time. We get a sense of the diplomatic significance of, and trust placed in, these first, and very visible, personages who were bona fide actors on the international stage along with the principals whose communications they were facilitating.

The Heroic Age of Consecutive

Chapter 2 covers the interwar period and the coming of age of consecutive interpreting, revisiting the uneasy question of official languages that at times sharpened into a battle as more and more countries demanded to be heard. (At one point, Esperanto was proposed as a neutral solution, but it did not pan out.) During this time, the selection, testing, and evaluation of interpreters became increasingly concrete, summarized here in a listing of the aptitudes needed in a good interpreter: good health, a balanced nervous system, good breathing, good eyesight, a musical ear to modulate delivery, intuition, quick association of ideas, the ability to resist distractions, poise, dignity, discretion, the creative ability to make repairs, and the courage to interrupt in the event of detecting a misunderstanding. This section is a goldmine of insight for today’s students of the profession. The qualities listed are worth emulating no matter the historical moment, for they describe well-rounded, compassionate, and excellent human beings capable of living up to the task of fostering understanding in any age of the world. Striving for this ideal eminently fulfills the definition of rightful employment.

The problems inherent in consecutive interpreting are also discussed at length. Such challenges included acoustics, difficult accents, and lengthy meetings where delegates had to sit through long speeches or their recapitulations in languages they did not understand, giving rise to unrest and side conversations that made the job of interpreters more difficult. Having to wait for speeches to be understood by a segment of the audience often resulted in delayed reactions that sometimes caused pique in diplomats when their bons mots were not applauded at the time they themselves delivered them. Interpreters also had to deal with interference by diplomats with good enough language skills to criticize an interpreter’s rendering, but not necessarily good enough to be actually correct about it. The chapter also touches upon scapegoating, posturing, excesses, sexism, labor disputes—the whole glorious mess of a heroic age.

Experiments with “Telephonic” Interpreting: The Birth of Simultaneous

Chapter 3 recounts how the issues associated with consecutive interpreting (e.g., the inordinate length of sessions) led enterprising figures like Edward Filene, a Boston businessman, and British electrical engineer A. Gordon-Finlay to envision and put together a new telephonic system for conveying information in different languages along many channels, simultaneously with speeches as they were being given. We are treated to a detailed description of the technical ins and outs of the system, and to the story of how it met resistance from interpreters at the League of Nations. Fortunately, the new technology was greeted with a more enterprising spirit by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which led to tests at its conferences, beginning in 1925. The chapter details the formation of a school for interpreters, the selection of candidates, the methods applied in the first training course in 1928, followed by the first full-scale test of the simultaneous equipment at the 1928 ILO Conference. Finding themselves in situations no doubt familiar to many conference interpreters today, our valiant colleagues of the day had to work under the gun, with everything coming together at the last minute.

Since simultaneous interpreters worked more in the background, the need for adequate preparation material, rates of speech that could be reasonably followed, physical conditions that excluded noise or other distractions, as well as being placed close enough to the speakers to allow interpreters to see body language, would not necessarily be apparent to those who demanded so much of them. The issue of the interpreter’s own ability to speak, and at times whisper, articulately and with good diction also emerged as a key factor necessary for good results. The quotes illuminating various reactions to the introduction of simultaneous interpreting from both the receiving and the delivering end provide much interesting food for thought.

Interpreters of the Dictators

Chapter 4 stands out by providing glimpses into the more secretive back-room diplomacy, with its concomitant ethical dilemmas for
the interpreters whose undefined roles flowed freely between those of technician, confidant, and occasionally even parlor maid. Surprising snapshots of historical figures, taken from their interpreters’ unique points of view, reveal flavors of humanity. For example, we learn:

• How Mussolini spoke French, English, and German and even acted as interpreter despite his variable levels of expertise.

• How a considerate Stalin chunked his utterances to make it easier on his interpreter.

• How Churchill would press his interpreter, who had the daunting task of reflecting his highly architectural oratory: “And did you tell him this? Did you tell him that?”

We get a first-row look at the grueling schedules to which these personal secretary-style interpreters were subjected. We get peppered with anecdotes of how colloquialisms and humor can cause awkward moments. In a vivid scene, for example, after Churchill expresses some trepidation about perhaps having said something compromising during the previous night of drinking, Stalin tells him not to worry because he had the interpreter shot. Compared to more technical sections of the book, this most entertaining chapter broadens the book’s appeal to historically-minded readers.

Nuremberg

The final chapter recounts the vindication of simultaneous interpreting, which presented a perfect solution to the temporal challenges of facilitating intercommunication in all directions among the languages of the Allies and of the defeated Axis powers that consecutive would never have been able to tackle. The chapter also paints the backdrop to this dramatic moment constituted by the judicial challenges that the various legal systems of the participating countries posed. We also(err) get a sense of the pressures imposed by the scrutiny of the press and the public, which inevitably speeded up the pace of producing publication-ready versions of everything that was being uttered and interpreted.

Reading this section we find out that the ranks of the interpreters at Nuremberg came not from the already-ensconced professionals of the League of Nations, who were reluctant to suspend their safe positions of prestige for a passing gig, however glamorous, but from a new generation of young people displaced by the upheavals of the two world wars and the Russian Revolution. Many of these individuals did not go on to become professional interpreters, despite their heroic performance during the year-long proceedings. We also get a good idea of the conditions under which they had to work after very little preparation. For instance, interpreters frequently had to share microphones and work in booths that were not completely sound-proof and from where they often could not see the witness stand. In one account, we learn how a Holocaust-survivor-turned-interpreter was subjected to the shock of having to render the words of those responsible for the deaths of members of her family.

This chapter also covers ingenious safety mechanisms introduced, such as a monitor who would signal speakers when their interpreters lost the thread of their too-rapid speeches. The takeaway from this chapter is that the gravitas of the occasion was duly met by the interpreters called to serve.

Overall Evaluation

There is no question that this well-researched and valuable book will prove to be an excellent guide for new generations of interpreters (and translators) by bringing to life, through the words of the participants themselves, this historical moment when their specializations were not yet demarcated so clearly.

One criticism that could be raised is that sometimes relevant information is provided in footnotes where it is liable to be overlooked (e.g., the quick comparison of British common law and European civil law that presented an issue for designing the Nuremberg Trials). The translators’ introduction states that they chose to present the contents of some of the footnotes in brackets in the main text, in an attempt at simplification, highlighting how daunting it must have been to process the bountiful source material. The translators’ work, by the way, is impeccable, reflecting their respect for the author’s achievement that is well deserved. The wording of Baigorri-Jalón’s reflections is at times less clear or skillful than one would desire but such small flaws are eminently forgivable in light of how he brings to life this complex period for us.

Though this volume is a bit pricey, it is a worthwhile investment for lovers of language, communication, and history. It is especially recommended for conference interpreters, but its appeal extends to anyone interested in how we can find our way through crisis to cooperation and peaceful coexistence by skillfully entwining the diverse threads of language.