



## It all began in Nuremberg...

**On August 8th, 1945, three months after the allied victory over Nazi Germany, the four victorious great powers signed an agreement in London. The major war criminals would be tried and punished.**

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In the autumn, the International Military Tribunal met for the first time in Nuremberg, the city of Nazism's early triumphs, now reduced to rubble and ashes. The trial lasted from November 20th 1945 to the 1st of October 1946, held 402 sessions and judged 22 defendants responsible for the cold-blooded extermination of more than 10 million men, women and children. These were the major war criminals; those lower down the Nazi hierarchy, the less prestigious defendants, would be tried later.

At the Tribunal, guarded by American Military Police in their impeccable uniforms, iron discipline was the order of the day. The four allied powers, The United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union, still united by their victorious campaign; four public prosecution services; the Nazis on the defendants' benches; four working languages.

How could all these protagonists communicate with each other?

Colonel Léon Dostert, former interpreter to General Eisenhower, was entrusted with solving the language problem. Perfect bilingual he may have been, but he had no experience and no precedents to draw on.

And in 1945 of course, simultaneous interpretation was in its infancy. André Kaminker, one of the great and rare interpreters of the interwar years, had invented the system of "simultaneous translation" when he interpreted, for French radio in 1934, Hitler's first big speech – also in Nuremberg!

During the 1930s The International Labour Organization had experimented with a rudimentary system of "telephonic simultaneous" which did not however appear very promising. After the war, there was a big increase in the number of working languages and the first major congress in Europe, the World Trade Union Conference in 1945, demonstrated almost *ad absurdum*, the difficulties of relying solely on consecutive interpretation in a multilingual conference.

Dostert therefore had no choice. Simultaneous was an absolute necessity, calling for innovation, improvisation and creativity.

The hearings followed the same unchanging ritual, presided over by the distinguished Lord Geoffrey Lawrence, wearing his headphones like a wig. The defendants in the dock aroused curiosity, even if, with the exception of Goering, the Nazi leaders like Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler had not fallen into the hands of the allies. Very close to them was the interpreters' "aquarium". Dostert had instinctively understood that it was essential for the interpreters to see

those whose words they were interpreting; we were on the same level as the defendants. How closely we observed them and how familiar we became with them! Goering's clothes hung loosely on him as he had lost a lot of weight, but he still maintained his martial bearing; Hess was so wracked by nervous twitches and sudden pains that he often had to leave the courtroom, escorted by two military policemen; Kaltenbrunner (Himmler's deputy) had stitches all over his face as he had attempted suicide by throwing himself against the wall of his cell; Streicher, the vile "jew baiter" insulted the tribunal in such vulgar terms that his words had to be deleted from the court record. ... Dostert had also understood that if the interpreters were to do their job effectively, they had to attend the whole of the hearing and also have time off. The interpreters' work schedule was as regular as clockwork: three teams A, B and C, each with 12 interpreters; four booths, English, Russian, German and French; three interpreters in each booth, each of them interpreting into their native tongue from one of the three other working languages. The schedule of a typical day: morning, team A for 45 minutes, during which team B was listening in from Room 606 behind the courtroom. Half way through the morning teams A and B changed places. The session adjourned at 12h00 and the same schedule was repeated in the afternoon. On that day, team C was off. Every day therefore, two of the three teams were working, which meant that each interpreter had one or two days off every week, not counting weekends. In addition, some interpreters, not necessarily members of the simultaneous teams, were required to help with the questioning of the defendants outside of the Tribunal's regular sessions.

The big problem was of course training - or rather the lack of it. I take this opportunity to give the example of the booth I am most familiar with, the French booth, whose head was Jean Meyer. Most of its members had some training in consecutive or a little practical experience, again only in consecutive, sometimes both. As far as I was concerned, I had graduated from the Geneva School for Interpreters in March 1944 and had worked at two short conferences and spent a month with the French occupying forces in Berlin. I had never worked in simultaneous. Engaged as an interpreter for the trial, I arrived in Nuremberg in January 1946 and worked in the translation department for several weeks. In addition, instructed get as much practice in simultaneous as possible, I interpreted the sessions to myself in simultaneous, either in the courtroom or the public gallery and participated in specific exercises in simultaneous outside the courtroom. After about two months, I found myself in the booth, interpreting for real.

The interpreters were therefore beginners in simultaneous. The quality of their work improved as they gained experience. But it was also a great help to work at the orderly and measured pace of the sessions, presided over by Lord Justice Lawrence. Needless to say, the faithful interpretation of everything that was said was, quite literally, a matter of life or death for the defendants!

As a footnote to all this, before I returned to Paris, I wrote an article for "L'INTERPRETE"<sup>[1]</sup> urging that simultaneous be taught in interpreting schools. A little later, it was formally added to the curriculum of the Geneva School.

Nuremberg was a truly historic trial that stood out like a beacon in the surrealist atmosphere of post-war Nuremberg, a prosperous international enclave amidst the rubble. The victors were euphoric, the vanquished wretched and the evening parties at the Press Camp high-spirited affairs where everyone could let their hair down after the horrors heard in court. The dignity and the discipline imposed on the Tribunal and particularly on the interpreting service undoubtedly played their part. They enhanced the prestige of a first ever, legally vulnerable construct that was subject to strong political and personal pressures. Colonel Léon Dostert deserves a warm tribute for his not inconsiderable contribution to its success.

**[1] The quarterly journal of the Geneva school alumni association (AIT). A full set is being compiled at AICC Head Office in Geneva.**

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