



# How it all started: thoughts for the opening of the AIIC Assembly in Nice

According to the programme, I am supposed to speak on behalf of the founders of AIIC. Needless to say, I hold no mandate for such an exercise, not even from Ruth Hall who is also here today. Fortunately when the President invited me to say a few words, he added: "A reminder of how it all started would do no harm".

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Christopher THIERY.

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Rest assured, I shall not go back to the Flood: the Paris conference at the close of the First World War with the end of the monopoly of French as the sole language of diplomacy, the beginnings of consecutive interpretation, the League of Nations, Jean Herbert, André Kaminker, Hans Jacob, Nuremberg and the first systematic use of simultaneous interpretation, the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, the Specialised Agencies... it would take too long. Simply bear in mind that in the early fifties more and more interpreters were appearing on the scene, and there was a growing sense that we needed to *organise the profession*.

True, in London there was LACI (London Association of Conference Interpreters), with Thadé Pilley and Ruth Hall playing prominent roles, and in Geneva FLIG (Free Lance Interpreters Geneva), but nothing yet encompassed the whole of the budding profession. Then one day Constantin Andronkof (chief interpreter of OEEC, later to become OECD) had lunch with André Kaminker (chief interpreter of the Council of Europe) and Hans Jacob (chief interpreter of UNESCO), and succeeded in convincing them that it would be a good idea to take advantage of the presence of UN staff interpreters in Paris in 1953 to set up a new association, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC).

The Constituent Assembly took place on November 11, 1953, and elected André Kaminker president. A second Assembly was held in 1955, during which Hans Jacob was elected president. At the same time intense efforts were being made to bring on board the London and Geneva colleagues. Wadi Keiser in particular played a key role in what was known as "the gentleman's agreement", and in 1956 the third assembly was held in Geneva with a new Bureau being elected. President: Constantin Andronikof, Vice-president: Wadi Keiser, Treasurer: Zoran Seleskovitch, and Executive secretary: yours truly. (In those days the executive secretary was one of the three "bodies" of the Association and was supposed to counterbalance the Council should it overreach itself. The case never arose.). Then the drafting of basic texts began, a lengthy and painstaking business which I shall spare you.

Having set the historical scene, I would like to give you an idea of what our elders, the founding fathers, particularly Constantin Andronikof, had in mind.

- AIIC was supposed to **define** and lay the foundations of the profession.

- The goal was a worldwide organisation, but membership would remain **direct and individual**. In other words, it was not to be a federation of national bodies. (Hence AIIC's great caution in matters of *national* recognition of the profession). This was an original choice: very few international professions were so organised - the only ones mentioned at the time were the psychoanalysts and IATA.
- AIIC was to include both **freelance and staff interpreters**: they do the same job, whether paid on a monthly or a daily basis.
- Competition among interpreters was only natural, but it had to be based on **quality, not on price**.
- Was AIIC to be a professional association or a trade union? From the outset the answer was "both" - association **and** union. Yet another original approach.

### **AIIC is professional association.**

A professional association establishes compulsory rules of ethics. For AIIC the fundamental rule on which everything else is based is the **obligation to respect the utmost secrecy**. Such a requirement has lost nothing of its significance, as we shall see in the discussion to be held during this assembly. I shall therefore not dwell on this vital issue now. The Code of Professional Ethics was the first basic document to be drawn up and it included other obligations customary for a "liberal" profession, such as not deriving personal gain from confidential information obtained during conferences, showing solidarity towards colleagues, and refraining from advertising.

AIIC guaranteed the **professional quality** of its members, or at least attested to them being professionals. But in what languages? In the early days, members just indicated their language combination, a not entirely reliable way of proceeding. You can be a very good interpreter in one language combination, and a bad one in a language you are not so good at. I still remember a distinguished colleague (I have fortunately completely forgotten his name) who once said to me, "You don't have to know Spanish very well, because nothing of any importance is ever said in that language!" But one day a major conference on the Law of the Sea was organised and a number of Latin American countries had some very important things to say, and it was found that interpretation from Spanish was not always accurate. Hence the idea of a language classification for AIIC, the *A-B-C system* you are familiar with. Two problems had to be solved. First the actual structure itself. Over the years a number of refinements were proposed, with the addition of sub-categories, but we always came back to the original three categories, if only because each new one involved new borderlines and that is where the difficulties lie. The biggest problem, however, was what to do about the *existing* members - how could one apply the new criteria to them? You can imagine the quandary... All the gifts of persuasion of Danica Seleskovitch, the Executive Secretary at the time, were required to carry out such a perilous exercise, but she succeeded and the A-B-C system was introduced.

Another issue was that interpreters did not want to suffer the same fate as translators and be exploited by agencies. Working for agencies was therefore banned from the start, and a **direct contract** between client and interpreter soon became compulsory. The fact is that when the chips are down, the interests of the agency and the interpreter (the "raw material") inevitably conflict. This is also true of consultant interpreters when they behave like an agency.

The obligation of **solidarity** applies to both a professional association and a trade union. And here I should like to tell you how our Solidarity Fund started. In the middle of the 50s Irene Testot-Ferry, whom you are about to make an Honorary Member and who had planned to come to Nice but alas died too soon, had a terrible car accident. She survived, but with innumerable broken bones. She was a widow with five teenage children. There was a spontaneous movement of solidarity among AIIC members, who sent in money to help her to hold out. After several operations, showing fantastic courage she soon started working again. And she made it a point of honour to pay back to AIIC the

money people had sent. The donors then decided to leave the money with the association for the creation of a solidarity fund.

### **AIIC is also a trade union**

The first step toward acting as a union was the drafting of a Professional Code laying down binding working conditions and a scale of fees. These were not standard but rather **minimum rates**. (I know times are altered: the FTC took an interest in us, and in the name of the sacrosanct principle of free competition the rules devised to break up Standard Oil's monopoly were applied to interpreters; some see signs, however, that the wind may be beginning to change).

The Code embodied a number of important principles that today seem obvious, but which at the time did not: the obligation to have a **professional domicile**, and one only (some colleagues were tempted to go to South America on holiday, doing a few conferences on the spot to offset their travelling costs); when recruited as an interpreter, one should refuse to do the work of **translators**, if only for their sake; if a conference was **cancelled**, we had to insist on being paid - this was a thorny question, because it was too easy for staff interpreters doing a bit of moonlighting to go back to their lawful occupation if the meeting was cancelled and not insist on being paid; the rule that all members of a team should receive the **same remuneration**. It was the experienced colleagues who insisted on this, the idea being that the interpreter was always on his own, without a reviser (like in translation) to help him in case of difficulty, and therefore all should be paid equally, whether you were an old hand or fresh out of school. We were to find that this helped us considerably in our contacts with employers, who were always attempting to divide us. Unfortunately, we were not able to prevent the introduction, first by the United Nations, of a beginners' rate. It is vital to make sure it is not abused or extended unduly.

AIIC's first truly trade union action was in **1958**. The large team daily rate had remained at **\$25** since the end of the war, and Constantin and I asked for an appointment with UNESCO to discuss the possibility of an increase to **\$30**. We received no answer, but the authorities made their view known: "We don't talk to a bunch of crooks". The Council therefore suggested that colleagues contacted for several large conferences in the summer/autumn of 1958 answer "Yes, I am free, but at \$30". Most of them did so and the Organisations gave in. And all of a sudden we had become very respectable people -as our requests had been granted they must have been reasonable, which by extension meant that we were too. All this taught us two things. First, that you do not need 100% support for that kind of action to succeed; once a critical mass has been achieved, the day is won. Secondly, it isn't merely by being polite that one earns respect; it is by being determined and united.

The other major trade union action I would like to mention concerns the **five-year agreements** with the three large families of organisations, the United Nations, the European Communities and the Coordinated organisations. Zoran Seleskovitch argued that the international organisations, which in their own interest employed freelance interpreters year in year out, had a social security obligation towards them (e.g. retirement benefits). It was on those grounds that in 1967 we asked for and obtained the opening of negotiations with the employers - negotiations that soon would extend to indexation of remuneration based on staff interpreters' rates of pay, and working conditions. The first agreements came into force in 1969 and are one of AIIC's major achievements.

AIIC waged other minor trade union battles, such as the boycott around 1964 of a conference room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of a Paris building with booths in the basement facing a **TV screen**.

This brings me to my conclusion. AIIC is our home, our common abode. It may be a rather unusual one, but it is one we ourselves designed and built to suit our particular needs. As is the case with any home, it requires maintenance and from time to time improving and refurbishing - new windows and roofing adapted to climate changes. But if you have ever tried altering a building, you will know

that you can pull down partitions, but that you have to be very careful with load-bearing walls... Let us never forget that AIIC is **our** home, our **only** home, and when all is said and done, not such a bad home either.

Thank you.

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