

The Origin and Challenges of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial Experience

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EDITOR'S NOTES: The following is based on the special lecture given by Mr. Siegfried Ramler on February 18, 2006, at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, under the sponsorship of the Japan Association for Interpretation Studies. We express our heartfelt appreciation to Mr. Ramler for kindly giving us permission to reprint the entire lecture in this Journal.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you. My current association with Hawaii's East-West Center brings me into frequent contact with Japan – with Japanese schools, universities and students, as well as with many colleagues and friends. Hawaii, with its geographical location and its multi-ethnic population and culture, functions as a bridge between the United States and the Asia-Pacific region. I feel privileged to contribute as a small link in strengthening that important bridge.

Today I welcome the opportunity to share with you my experiences at the Nuremberg trials, more than 50 years ago, and particularly to discuss with you some of the challenges we faced as pioneers of simultaneous interpreting. In addition, I'll deal in a general way with the impact of the Nuremberg trials –with the meaning of the trials for Germany, for the international community, and for the imperative of establishing a global rule of law – still an elusive aim in the 21st century world. The twentieth century represents a milestone in international law. Nuremberg formed the

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Nuremberg trials, considered the most significant international legal event in the precedent for the Tokyo trials which followed, as well as laid the foundation for the international court at the Hague and the recently established International Criminal Court.

1. Autobiographical Comments – How I Came to Nuremberg

First, some autobiographical comments to illustrate how I came to the Nuremberg trials: I was born in Vienna, Austria – with relatives both in Austria and England. After primary and secondary studies in Vienna, I moved to England where I lived with family members and continued my studies.

I was in England in 1939 when World War II broke out, continuing with my studies and experiencing the bombardment of London – the so-called London “blitz”. When the fighting on the European fronts came to an end in 1945, with the allied forces advancing in to Germany, there was an urgent need for linguists, fluent in German and English, to assist with logistical support for the allied troops in Germany, with disarmament procedures, and with interrogations.

In response to a call for linguists, I took a test in London, and was immediately accepted and assigned to an American Mobile Battalion. I served with that battalion as interpreter when the war ended with Germany’s capitulation. My battalion was in the vicinity of Nuremberg when I heard that this city was to be the site of the trials of the leaders of Germany who had been arrested and gathered at the Nuremberg Palace of Justice. Motivated by interest and curiosity, I took a jeep, drove to Nuremberg, and presented myself at the administrative offices for the trial. The preparations were just beginning and after a short interview I was asked to join the Nuremberg staff as quickly as possible.

2. Condition of Nuremberg and Post-war Germany

Just a word about the condition of Nuremberg at that time. The old part of the city was destroyed by allied bombing, as were many other key cities in Germany. The infrastructure of Germany had totally collapsed, and a military government and occupation by four allied nations – USA, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and France was in force. Nuremberg was located in the United States zone of occupation.

3. The Pre-trial Interrogation Phase – Consecutive Interpreting

Assigned to the language division, my first duties were to act as one of several interpreters during the pre-trial interrogation phase, working principally with the

American legal staff.

Under the charter establishing the basis and framework for the trials, the tribunal consisted of judges representing the four allied nations – USA, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union – and prosecuting teams representing the same nations. German defense counsel, distinguished German lawyers chosen by the defendants, were involved from the very beginning.

The interpretation during the pre-trial interrogation phase was consecutive, mostly German-English, with the accused brought up to the interrogation room by a guard, with the interrogation conducted by allied legal counsel and with the interpreter and court reporter- stenotypist or stenographer – present in the room. We were working extremely hard during that phase – from morning to late in the evening.

4. Uniqueness of Pre-trial Interrogation: “Autopsy” of a Defeated Nation

In some respects this was the most interesting and memorable phase of the trials because it was the very first time at the end of the war that the leaders of a defeated nation were asked to comment on their role in the war and on the period leading up to it. I was involved in the interrogations of such key leaders as Hermann Goering, second to Hitler, the leaders of the armed forces, foreign minister, and others. It was a slice of fresh and authentic history, a kind of autopsy of a nation in ruins. The testimony given at that time was not yet filtered and shaped by the defense strategy and by the structure of the formal trial to follow.

5. The Concept of Simultaneous Interpreting to Cope With Four Working Languages

As preparations for the opening of the international trial were being made, the language challenge had to be addressed and solved. While it was essential that the trial be conducted in four working languages – German, English, French and Russian – consecutive interpretation was not a reasonable option. It would have been a tedious and laborious procedure to deal with four languages consecutively, not to mention the unacceptable increase in the length of the trial. Beyond Germany, the trial attracted world attention with media from all over covering Nuremberg and requiring language access. At the League of Nations in Geneva before the war only French and English were the working languages; French was considered to be the key diplomatic language and the principal international communication tool in the 19th and early 20th century.

In this way the concept and practice of simultaneous interpretation came about.

It brings to mind the proverb: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” There had been some sporadic attempts at simultaneous interpretation at the League of Nations with two languages – French and English – but Nuremberg launched the first comprehensive and large scale practice of simultaneous interpreting using multi-language teams. As you can imagine, there were skeptics at this early stage who predicted failure, but our early preparation indicated that we could be successful. A former professor of French language at Georgetown University, U.S. Army Colonel Leon Dostert, who had been General Eisenhower’s interpreter, was the leading individual in the planning and launching of this effort.

6. Technical Support – Language Channels

As is obvious to us now, there are two fundamental elements in simultaneous interpretation: the human element – the skills needed to perform effectively as a simultaneous interpreter – and the technical element – to make the procedure work.

For technical support we had the help of the IBM Corporation who installed the system of language channels, earphones and switch boxes, a system which would seem very primitive by today’s standards but was quite innovative at the time.

7. Recruiting and Testing Candidates for Simultaneous Interpreting

The human element represented a formidable challenge. Where and how to find candidates for this task, and how to judge their ability to perform this function?

We turned first to the consecutive interpreters already in Nuremberg and to the pool of linguists working as document translators and researchers who were preparing the documentary evidence for the trial. When we tested them to explore their potential as simultaneous interpreters, we found that many of them, while possessing language mastery and good academic credentials, tended to be perfectionists and froze at the microphone when the right word did not come to mind immediately.

We were looking for candidates with language agility, with ability to find instantaneously the second or third choice of a word in the target language if the best word did not come to mind, so that the pace and flow of interpretation could be maintained. Obviously we tried to select individuals with a broad educational background and a wide range of vocabulary.

There were also recruiting trips to Switzerland, to Paris and to London, until finally 36 individuals – three teams of 12 simultaneous interpreters were gathered.

8. Characteristics of Successful Candidates

The most promising candidates were usually individuals who had spent substantial portions of their life in the countries of both target languages. In my case, for example, my childhood and early adolescence was in the country of my birth – Austria – with German as my mother tongue, followed by study, work and some professional experience in my second country – Great Britain.

In the selection process we recognized that perfect bilingualism is a rare phenomenon and that there was usually some differential, even if slight, between skills in one language and another. Somewhat greater speaking facility was required for interpreting into a language than interpreting from a language. Generally a consistent and recent experience with the language was required for the active, speaking role on the microphone. Recent experience of living in the country of the target language was required to produce the needed ability to cope with idioms, regional accents and technical vocabulary.

During the pre-trial phase we practiced with the equipment and set up mock trials to test candidates and train ourselves. Keep in mind that we had no standard by which to measure ourselves, so we had to rely on instinct in developing techniques.

9. Logistics of Courtroom installation for Simultaneous Interpreting

Three teams of 12 interpreters were needed for the 4 working languages. The glass booth in the courtroom was divided into 4 language sections or channels to serve the working languages of the international trial: English, German, French and Russian. Three interpreters were sitting at the desk in each section. In this way, for example, the English desk with its microphone would have three interpreters sitting side by side: one from German into English (This was my station), one from French into English, and one from Russian into English.

The same applied to the German, French, and Russian channels. One channel was the original or “verbatim” channel which transmitted the language spoken in the courtroom at any given time. If the language spoken was Russian, for example, the interpreters in the Russian booth would be silent, while the other booths would be active. All the seats in the courtroom for judges, counsel, defendants, witnesses and observers were equipped with a dial box that could be switched to the desired language channel.

As in traffic, we developed a system of orange and red lights which would be flashed by a monitor, signaling judges and counsel. On frequent occasions, especially during the subsequent trials after the main trial, I acted as monitor. The

yellow light was a signal to slow down and to prevent two parties from speaking at the same time. The red light, used sparingly – only in the case of a mechanical or human breakdown – was a sign to the presiding judge to declare a short recess to deal with the problem.

10. Linguistic Challenges

Let me briefly discuss some of the linguistic challenges we faced.

1) Language Structure – Anticipating the German Verb: Anticipating the German verb in the German language structure where the verb is placed at the end of a subordinate clause. As you know, in English the verb must be placed immediately after the noun. If the interpreter waits to hear the German verb, he or she would fall far behind and the simultaneous system would break down. How to solve this problem? Sometimes the context allows the interpreter to anticipate the verb correctly before it is heard, but often that is impossible. It is also risky and irresponsible to guess at a verb when so much is at stake during a trial. We developed a special technique to cope with that problem by forming short segments using parts of the sentence which precede the verb. This sounds complicated, but actually it worked quite well.

2) Dialects and Technical Terms: Another challenge was dealing with technical terms, with military terminology, with governmental and military ranks, and with bureaucratic terms. We prepared ourselves as best as we could with glossaries, lists and other helpful sources.

In one of the subsequent Nuremberg trials, where the accused were German medical doctors who performed medical experiments on concentration camp inmates, our challenge was to cope with the extensive medical terminology. In such cases the Latin roots of many medical terms could be transposed into other languages, with only a change in pronunciation. This allowed the interpreter to cope with such terms, even if he did not himself understand their meaning.

3) Language Ambiguities: There were German language ambiguities, used deliberately in documents and reports by the Nazi leadership to camouflage the meaning and impact of an expression. Let me give you an example which I faced in the courtroom: The German verb “Erfassen” has two possible English translations: one is “seize” physically, a word which has an aggressive connotation and the other is

“register” which is harmless, as in the sentence “The Jewish population was “seized” or the Jewish population was “registered”. When I interpreted with the verb “seized”, consistent with the context of the testimony, there was an objection by the defense, taking issue with my interpretation of that word. Here I found myself in the odd situation of having to interpret an objection to the accuracy of my interpretation! There were other similar examples.

4) Documentation and Briefing for Interpreters: Another challenge for interpreters related to reading from documents. It was essential for interpreters to have the document at hand if they were to keep up effectively with the reader of the document. If the document was not made available, the interpreter would be under great stress. As you well know, there is a substantial difference between interpreting extemporaneous and conversational dialogue and dealing with documents and written material.

5) Emotional Impact on Interpreters: I am often asked how the interpreters coped with the graphic testimony of brutality in concentration camps, of torture, of medical experiments on prisoners, and how this affected them. Keep in mind that we were focused on the linguistic challenge, on the importance to do our job effectively. In my case it was only later in my life that I reflected on the substance and impact of the trials, and wrote and spoke about the meaning and impact of Nuremberg.

6) Recording, Editing and Transcripts: It was essential for the key participants in the trial – judges, prosecutors and defense counsel to receive an accurate and complete transcript of each day’s proceedings in four languages – German, English, French and Russian as quickly as possible in order to review the conduct of the cases. It was also essential to review the accuracy of the record in the four languages before the print-out.

This presented a challenge, but was handled quite efficiently. It was a three-step procedure: the proceedings were recorded with wire recording devices – this was before the use of tape recording. The recording was made of the original language, as spoken in the courtroom. A team of four court reporters – stenotypists or stenographers, listening to the proceedings through their earphones in English, German, French and Russian, were in the courtroom for approximately 20 minutes when they were relieved by another team. Each team of court reporters would then go to their office and transcribe their segment in their respective language.

The interpreters, at the end of their session in the courtroom, would then review the transcription of their interpretation by comparing it with the original wire recording. This would be a check of accuracy – there was no time for editing or polishing language. In this manner the transcript was available in four languages at the end of the trial day.

11. Simultaneous Interpreting After Nuremberg

Simultaneous interpreting grew after Nuremberg. It is practiced at the United Nations, at international conferences, and at venues around the world. As you well know, it is now an academic subject at universities and training institutions in many parts of the world, as here at your institution.

With today's population mobility and travel, as well as study abroad programs, there is now a much larger pool of individuals with potential for simultaneous interpretation – in contrast to 1945 when it was difficult to find qualified individuals.

12. Milestone in International Law – Key Legal Principles and Precedents

Let me briefly discuss the impact of Nuremberg trials: Nuremberg is a milestone in international law, setting the precedent for trials to follow, such as the Tokyo trials; the trials at the Hague in Holland dealing with former Yugoslavia and Rwanda; and the recently constituted International Criminal Court.

Nuremberg established aggressive war as a crime. This was one of the key legal issues at the trial, challenged by the defense as an “ex post facto” law. (“Ex post facto” meaning the accusation of committing a crime for which no established statute or legal code exists.) In response the prosecution argued that “natural” law underlies “codified” law as its basis. Was the first man who committed murder any less of a murderer because the crime of murder was not yet in law books codified as a crime? Nuremberg established that superior orders cannot be used to justify criminal acts. Nuremberg established that even if domestic law does not impose a penalty for an act, there is still responsibility under international law.

13. Patterns of Defense

War conditions and the survival of the nation required unusual measures. Many of the accused claimed that they had no knowledge of atrocities, of the holocaust, that they were not involved and not responsible.

The “you also” defense came up frequently – meaning that “you also” committed such acts – particularly directed at the Soviet Union. The tribunal ruled that this

defense as not admissible, since the German leadership was on trial and not the Soviet Union or any other nations.

14. Impact on Germany

It wrote the record of events leading up to and during World War II – the writing of the record was more important than the conviction and sentencing of individual Nazi leaders.

The Nuremberg trials were an essential element for Germany in drawing a line behind the past, transforming itself with a democratic constitution, and becoming a key member of the European Union. Nuremberg represented a repudiation of extreme and radical nationalism.

Nuremberg avoided attribution of collective guilt by placing responsibility on individual leaders. The evidence of aggression, of human rights abuses, the testimony of witnesses, the documentary evidence of conspiracy, all prevented Nazi leaders to be seen as martyrs by the German population.

15. Criticism of Nuremberg Trials – “Victor’s Justice” and Response

Victor’s justice – a trial conducted by the victors in the war over the defeated. But what was the alternative?

Civilized society could not ignore acts of aggression and massive crimes against humanity. The millions of victims could not be denied the process of law in bringing perpetrators to justice. Germans or Japanese sitting as judges was not a reasonable alternative in 1945. They would have lacked credibility. United Nations not yet established.

16. Comparison with Tokyo Trials and Comparison between Post-war evolution of Germany and Japan

Let me bring up some differences between Germany and Japan: how the impact of the two trials can be seen in those two nations, how they dealt with their past, and how they evolved after the end of World War II.

The Tokyo trials were also international, but the U.S. took the initiative. The chief prosecutor was an American, and the chief judge an Australian. The trials were conducted in English and Japanese only. The Emperor system continued – the Showa Emperor was not indicted in the interest of social stability and historical continuity of Japan (despite objections by the Soviet Union). The basic infrastructure of Japan remained intact – unlike Germany where there was a complete breakdown and

destruction. Consequently there was more continuity in the case of Japan between pre and post-war periods. Many politicians and industrial leaders returned to positions of power and influence.

17. Contemporary issues pertaining to Memory and Reconciliation – Contrasts between Germany and Japan

This explains differences in attitudes which are still at issue today and where there are key differences between Japan and Germany. Examples: the Japanese textbook issue – conservative/nationalistic stance, causing tensions in Asia, Yasukuni Shrine visit by Prime Minister, apology issue.

In Germany the Nazi period and the holocaust is a key part of the social studies curriculum in the schools. School children are taken to visit concentration camps.

All this raises fundamental questions about memory and reconciliation. Let me draw a contrast between the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Memorials, depicting the horror of the atomic attack, but at the same time holding out the hope for reconciliation and peace, and the Nanjing Massacre Museum in China, severe in its condemnation, but not offering a path towards reconciliation.

18. Establishment of the International Criminal Court – Rationale and Opposition

As we consider the legacy and impact of Nuremberg, let us review contemporary initiatives for the exercise of international law in response to aggression and human rights abuses.

The tribunals at the Hague under the umbrella of the United Nations were established to deal with crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Keep in mind that these are not permanent, but ad-hoc tribunals established in response to international violations.

In 1998 at an international conference in Rome a charter for a permanent International Criminal Court (ICC) was proposed and has since been instituted at the Hague with 139 nations who have signed in and 76 who have ratified it. Rationale of ICC: Permanent court to end impunity for international crimes, to function as a deterrent and to provide redress for victims.

Japan is in favor but has not yet ratified, pending domestic legislation. Japan here acts in step with the United States who so far refuses to sign on.

Why is the United States opposed? Reluctance to give up sovereignty to an international court; with concerns that U.S. military and civilians abroad might be targeted for politically motivated reasons.

However, adequate safeguards against such use by the ICC exist – there are checks and balances: court will prosecute only when a country is without the means to bring criminals to justice on its own.

19. The Quest for a Global Rule of Law for a Civilized International Community in the 21st Century

When we look at the global community at the beginning of the 21st century, when we consider the global interdependence – economically, politically and culturally – and when we also consider the instability and the threats in danger areas around the world, it is clear that a global rule of law is imperative for human stability – indeed for survival. This quest for a global rule of law continues to be a work in progress. It is an essential basis for a harmonious world in the 21st century. I am confident that eventually human goodness in human understanding will prevail. Thank you very much.

SIEGFRIED RAMLER is currently a Senior Adjunct Fellow at Hawaii's East-West Center, a key research and training institution in Honolulu. He was born in Austria in 1924, received his early education in Vienna, moving to London after the Anschluss where he continued his secondary and beginning university studies. After his service at Nuremberg, Ramler obtained graduate degrees at the University of Paris and, moving to the Pacific, at the University of Hawaii. He is past president of the Japan-America Society of Hawaii and founding member and Vice Chair of the Crown Prince Akihito Scholarship Foundation. The government of Japan awarded Ramler the Imperial Order of the Sacred Treasure, the government of France named him *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Acadmiques* and awarded him the *Ordre National du Mrite*.

Reference

Gaiba, F. (1998). *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial*. University of Ottawa Press.

日本通訳学会主催 特別講演会の報告

2006年2月18日(土) 世界初の同時通訳が行われたニュルンベルク裁判の同時通訳者であるジークフリート・ラムラー氏を招き、“The Origin and Challenges of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial Experience”と題した講演会を開催しました。講演会は、同時通訳の技術的な内容から、言語学、国際社会と多岐にわたり、200名近い参加者はラムラー氏の講演に深く聞き入っていました。また、大学院生による同時通訳も円滑に進み、講演会は成功に終わりました。(鶴田記)

2006年2月19日(日) ラムラー氏の講演会は日本通訳学会主催で関西でも開催されました(会場：神戸女学院大学講堂)。講演会には、学会会員だけではなく、広範囲の分野から、また、遠方からの参加者もあり、準備した150個の同時通訳用イヤフォンがほとんど出払いました。東京と同じく内容の濃い、聴衆を惹きつける講演で、津田守会員、水野真木子会員のコメント、会場からの質問も続き、充実した2時間でした。また、夕刻からの懇親会には24名の参加があり、ラムラー氏の気さくで誠実で温かいお人柄に触れながら、楽しいひと時を過ごしました。(船山記)

【編集註】神戸女学院大学におけるラムラー氏講演の講演全文録(翻訳付き)がエンタイトル出版から出版されています。書誌情報は以下のとおりです。

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