

Interview: Agnes Niemetz

by Katie Spillane

With more than 20 years of experience in the industry, Hungarian translator and interpreter Agnes Niemetz has much to show and tell when it comes to translation and interpretation. *The Gotham Translator* recently carved a slice out of Agnes's busy schedule to ask her a few questions about her journey to becoming the language service provider she is today.

Like many language service providers, she began her career as a writer and journalist. Working first in Hungary and later in the U.S., Agnes gradually shifted from writing in her own language to translating. When asked about shifting the balance between journalism and translation early on in her career, she responded:

When the political system changed in Hungary at the very end of the 80s, I felt it was time for me "to cover America." I pulled out my journalism degree from the bottom of a dusty drawer, and reconnected with old friends and experts in the field, offering the writing skills and journalistic experience I acquired in the U.S. Over a period of about ten years I covered many issues and events, and traveled extensively while simultaneously improving my translation skills. It was challenging to constantly keep in mind that Hungary had been isolated behind walls for two

generations. Freedom of press had been grotesquely inverted in Hungary; lacking tradition and funds for quality training, journalists tend to construe this concept to mean that they can write anything that "pops into their heads." Consequently, the Hungarian media is generally infused with poor journalism, especially with respect to political issues. I was frustrated: I slowly shifted towards translation. Even so, I never lost touch with journalism and keenly follow its progress in Hungary.

Agnes is candid about the flexibility, creativity and tenacity that are so important to those starting out in the profession.

Life experiences and interest intertwined to create the translator in me. I built things up step by step: I educated myself about the profession, developed relationships, joined organizations, and most importantly changed my reading habits. I have translated everything that has come along—from baby formula instructions to New York Times articles. I worked from home at first, and eventually registered Hungarian Translation Services as a small business. My advertisements in Hungarian-American papers were efficient in the beginning, and I figured out soon enough that being active with Hungarian communities in the U.S. at every level has benefits. The demand for Hungarian is weak, and therefore one needs to stand on many legs (language providers, govern-

ment agencies, Hungarian foreign representations, non-profits, etc.).

Now an accomplished veteran of the industry, Agnes remains a woman on the move. Six years ago, determined to take her business to the next level, she decided to rent an office space in midtown Manhattan. Agnes is overwhelmingly positive about the experience and explains how this bold move helped her to take her career in new directions.

Suddenly I gained a whole new perspective! New channels opened up: interpreting kicked in as the most challenging one. The State Department language services invited me to take their consecutive and then simultaneous courses; Homeland Security's language unit also tested my language proficiency level. Similar offers followed from the Immigration Court of the Justice Department. I now accept translations in four languages, and I also share editing jobs (like a poetry translation just last month) with some expert freelancer colleagues.

The traits of independence and determination shine through when Agnes is asked why she chose to open her own agency rather than joining a large translation company.

continued on page 15

continued from page 4

Other than a few years of teaching and being an editor in Hungary, I have never worked for anyone in my life! I never even considered it as an option. To leave communist Hungary was the most liberating experience in my life. The last thing I wanted was a boss telling me what to do. The free spirit of this country drove me to discover my creativity, and break out of the pitiful category we call "average."

This independence seems to be something she expects and respects, from others. When I asked whether she was interested in changing her business model to include other employees she responded.

I do not have employees, and I am not planning to radically change my business enterprise; I think it would kill my interest. The market has indeed changed. The demand for interpreting is growing faster than for translating. As a result of strict regulations (for example, in the area of interpreting for healthcare providers) the need for quality language services has witnessed tremendous growth in the U.S.

Agnes has a deep and unmistakable commitment to the Hungarian language.

As a linguist my main goal is to provide "quality translation with no compromise," to protect the beauty of my mother tongue. I appreciate that this is challenging in the constantly changing political and economic environment, but consistency and persistence precede success.

She further explained how her mission to guarantee quality helps to position her as a guardian of her language and our profes-

sion as a whole.

"Translators are modest and underpaid," said Günter Grass in a recent NPR broadcast. He is right. There are two reasons for low pay: the quality of the final product is dreadful, or the translator cannot negotiate well enough to receive a competitive price for his work. What damage does the first do? Cheap work yields cheap results: the quality of the Hungarian language is declining and poor translations play a significant part in this unfortunate process. Hungary is a new democracy with no commercialized language culture. The influx of avoidable foreign phrases and false expressions floods the media, product instructions, and everyday life. I hold large language providers responsible for this! (When a major bank sends out a letter to thousands of pensioners with the descriptor "haszonhúzó," that is, "beneficiary" incorrectly translated from the English, causing diplomatic turbulence, you know there's a problem.) The other reason for low pay is that some (mostly novice) freelance translators have difficulties negotiating and the corporate world takes advantage of them. It is also important that we translators and interpreters educate the public about the nature and technicalities of our work. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie Spillane is a Chinese to English translator and cultural consultant. Like Agnes, Katie is deeply committed to building bridges between cultures and has enjoyed working with the Chinese community in New York. Her recent assignments have taken her further afield providing cultural awareness training for heli-skiing guides in British Columbia and editorial services to the People's Medical Publishing House.

continued from page 3

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Last but not least, the final speaker, Barbara Harshav, gave a rousing talk on the importance of quality in translation, including many striking examples cited from her vast experience as a translator of literary and scholarly works from French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish.

The panel ended with a long Q&A session, which elicited further discussion and advice from the panelists on a wide variety of issues ranging from resources and grants to how to deal with authors and publishers. On the whole, the event was well worth attending. The panelists showed deep knowledge, great commitment to the subject and a willingness to share their experience with the audience. ■



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