#### Professional profile: Kovács László

As many languages you know as many   
times you are a human being

Choosing a subject for my professional profile was not a difficult task for me, since my father, László Kovács, had been working both as a translator and an interpreter. Besides this, many other factors encouraged me to choose him as the subject of my study. Since he is already a pensioner, I thought he had enough experience, so that I can learn many things from him and I can even draw lessons from his experiences. The case of László Kovács is unique and extraordinary also because of the fact that he has always been living in Slovakia. Thus, during his professional career he could use Hungarian, which as a matter of fact is his mother tongue, as a foreign language. And if that alone should not be enough, he speaks altogether 14 languages. This, let’s admit it, is a quite good performance. Among many other things, I asked him how he managed to learn such a big number of languages and what encouraged him to do that. Actually, it was he who motivated me to learn languages, to put my heart and soul into my work. It was he who taught me the principle: *As many languages you know as many times you are a human being*. Of course, he did not mean that those who speak only one or two languages would worth less. He rather wanted to say that by expressing ourselves in more languages at the same time we can be able to get in touch with more cultures, therefore, we can become more open-minded as well. Most of us know very well how it feels like to think or express ourselves in a foreign language. In my case it is as if I had various personalities connected to every foreign language I speak. László was trying to say something like this, too.

#### The earlier phase of his life

László Kovács was born on 27th November 1951 in Losonc, a Slovak town. As a matter of fact, all the members of his family lived their lives as Slovak Hungarians; most of them had been working there, too. All in all, one could say that he came from a family of medical workers, since his father worked as a local doctor, her mother as a nurse and two of his siblings also chose a career in medicine. He started his elementary school, which was naturally Slovak, in Kőhegy, however, his last 4-5 years he finished in Feled. Then, having been graduated from a Slovak high school in Rimaszombat, he was admitted to the Latin-English department of the Comenius University in Bratislava.

It was already during his high school years when he began to show an increased interest in foreign languages, that he had the opportunity to learn Russian, Latin, German, English and even Spanish. In his university years, besides Latin, he began to learn Ancient Greek, French, Italian and Modern Greek. Beside the foreign languages, he has always been fond of music, geography and literature, too. Actually, at the university he was prepared to become a teacher. His intention was to work at the Comenius University, he would have been happy to teach there even until the end of his life, but because of certain political reasons it was not possible.

#### As a translator

Since he was not able to realize his dreams as a teacher, from 1977 until his retirement, he had been working as a desk officer, an editor, a translator and, to a much smaller degree, even as an interpreter in a rather big number of Slovak offices. He did all this without having a qualification as a translator or an interpreter. Although he was not in possession of a qualification, he learned a number of languages in high school, as well as at university. Thus, his knowledge was adequate and sufficient enough to try his luck as a translator. Since he had a linguistic degree in Latin-English, this made him competent enough for this job. During his professional career László was employed in quite a big number of institutions, mainly in Bratislava, where the topic of the translation was related to the nature of the workplace. Just to mention some of his jobs:

* Výskumný ústav hygieny (a medical research institute specialized in hygiene), Bratislava
* The international editorial of the Czech News Agency (ČTK), Prague
* Pragoinvest, an enterprise specialized in export, Prague
* Výskumný ústav prefabrikácie (research institute of prefabrications, Bratislava
* TIP , a weekly sport newspaper, specialized in football and ice hockey, Bratislava
* Ústav cestného hospodárstva a dopravy (institute of traffic and road management), Bratislava
* The High School of L. Sára (Slovak), Bratislava
* The experimental Hungarian section of the Pedagogical Institute in Nitra
* Stredná zdravotnícka škola (medical high school), Bratislava
* The national headquarter of Coexistence (political party)
* The international desk of News Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR), Bratislava

In the majority of the above mentioned jobs he made a good use especially of the English, German, Italian, Spanish, French and Hungarian languages. In many cases he translated from foreign languages into Slovak, sometimes even from Hungarian, which was of course considered a foreign language in the eyes of the Slovaks. Beside the above mentioned jobs he had been working for the supplying company called Ekotrans in Bratislava, as a part-time German and Italian translator, interpreter for 4-5 years. This company cooperated mainly with Austrian and Italian companies. The hourly wage there was much more favourable than that of his chief “bread-giving” institute, the TASR. Moreover, there he got his wage mainly in Austrian shillings, which considerably contributed to the family budget. Beside this he had been working for another firm in Bratislava called Kontakt Plus for three years, where he translated a very detailed world atlas, furnished with many supplementary texts, from Hungarian into German. When I asked László about the average wages for translators, he shared with me that they were not outstanding at all (neither before, nor after 1989). In those times there was a noticeably big competition among English and German translators. However, due to the communist, obligatory teaching of Russian, the number of people speaking exotic languages like French, Italian and Spanish was relatively low. Therefore, there were available jobs in these languages even for people like László, who were not in possession of an official qualification. Regarding qualification and official papers László underlined that in part-time jobs and in certain private works they did not count at all, the clients were interested rather in the practical knowledge. However, in the case of the full-time jobs the qualification meant a plus, it made the salary higher. Since his retirement László has not made any official, paid translations, he mostly exercises this former profession as a hobby.

#### As a language genius

As I have mentioned it, one of the factors which encouraged me to make this interview with László was that he speaks 14 languages. People around me who heard about this did not want to believe me, they were really surprised. I have raised doubts about this, too, since we who are working with languages are well aware of the fact that it is even difficult to maintain our skills of one or two languages, not to speak about 14. László is currently speaking English, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, Swedish, Turkish, Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, Latin, Russian, as well as naturally Hungarian, Czech and Slovak. He says that both in their written and oral form he understands these languages to 90-95 per cent. Nowadays he mostly uses them as a hobby, especially for reading (mainly classical literature). His favourite authors are Cervantes, Selma Lagerlöf and Plutarch. Since internet was not available yet when László was younger, he did not have many opportunities to make use of his wide knowledge of languages by listening to records and videos, as well as by reading books in those languages. Therefore, the revolutionary appearance of the internet was a real gift for him. His goal was to benefit from the internet to 100 per cent. His favourites are the audiobooks, which enable him to understand the spoken language better. His most favourite languages are Latin and Ancient Greek. He holds these two languages in high regard, since he thinks that they contribute to our cultural knowledge to a great extent. I myself studied Latin in high school, even graduated in it, and I can wholly agree with László. If you read in a dead language you are suddenly transferred to another dimension where instead of being motivated by the profit you do it only for pleasure. During his professional career László mostly made use of English, German, Italian, French, Spanish and Hungarian. Maybe the only languages from which he did not work at all are Portuguese, Swedish and Modern Greek. He also admitted that he can speak fluently only English, German, Spanish, French and Italian. The active oral use of his other languages is not that good. For László the most ideal way of communication would be if a Turkish, Swedish or a Portuguese person spoke to him in his mother tongue and he could answer the well understood phrases in English, German, etc.

#### As an interpreter

During the interview László said that he has never been a big fan of interpretation. He did it only out of necessity, when the situation required it. In spite of the fact that translation was less paid than interpretation, translation made him happier. In the institutions listed above, where László was mainly a translator, from time to time an interpreter was needed and László always undertook a task like this, too. During his career as an interpreter he had no need of the Swedish, Portuguese, Turkish, Modern Greek and Russian languages. In the case of Russian there was a big competition, since due to the communist regime almost everybody spoke it. In the institutions mentioned above, where the topics were related to the nature of the institution, László did only consecutive interpreting; however, he was not very fond of it. He made it only in order to earn a living.

#### What does László advise to the young generation?

It is important to work for money, but at the same time we should dedicate time to unpaid spiritual activities, too. We should not learn foreign languages for a possible material profit; we should do it because we like to do it, taking delight in the whole process of learning. Since, if we are fond of doing something, we will probably do it well, and if we do something well, we will sooner or later be paid for it, too. László never liked wasting his time on grammar books; he never liked learning a foreign language according to a definite scheme. The best learning method for him was to translate immediately any Spanish, German or other text that he met into Slovak or Hungarian and afterwards to translate that text back into Spanish, German or another foreign language. All translators and interpreters probably know what it feels like when their brain is translating a foreign language text, or even a Hungarian one, reflexively.

The interview made with László was really instructive and interesting. I have always enjoyed asking other generations about their experiences and adventures, because this way I can learn and draw lessons, too. Although László did not manage to make his dream come true –to become a teacher of Latin and English–, due to his enthusiasm for languages he made his way as a translator. László can be a role model for us if we take into consideration that he speaks 14 foreign languages, since this learning process required tremendous patience and endurance. He managed to learn all these languages mainly because he was driven by the process of learning itself, that he took delight in it, not by greed. László is a good example to prove that you do not have to be in possession of a qualification in order to be a good translator. As a Slovak Hungarian he even had an advantage, because during his career as a translator he could make a good use of Hungarian as a foreign language. I still try to live according to László’s motto called *As many languages you know as many times you are a human being* , because I feel that thanks to this kind of open-mindedness towards other cultures I can become a more precious, more empathetic  person. On my bucket list I have a great number of other languages I would like to learn, but let it remain my secret which ones. Who knows, maybe I will manage to catch up with my father, I am only 23 years old, I still have enough time for it.