

János Ruttkay



I was talking with János Ruttkay a lot about the past 30-40 years in this profession, about what he experienced as a translator. "Everything was different back then...", he reflected. He started translating when there were no computers, no internet or no opportunity to save his work, leave it for a while, then continue it, or just to correct the text if there were any mistakes in it. I guess this is why it was much more difficult back then, but maybe this profession was much appreciated as well.

János Ruttkay did not choose to become a translator, he became one by chance. He wanted to be an electrical engineer. Thus after finishing technical school he went to the Technical University of Budapest, as BME (Budapest University of Technology and Economics) was called formerly. During his university studies he realised his fondness for foreign languages.

Russian was a compulsory subject in public education in Hungary before the fall of the communism, which meant that every student had to learn it, as did János Ruttkay. He was learning it for 10 years and said that it had been easy for him. Then he took the language exam, which at that time was not a prerequisite for a university degree, he thought that it could be useful sometime. He received an advanced level certificate at the first attempt. Back then, you could only take one type of language exam and the candidates were evaluated from basic to advanced level, depending on how well they performed.

It was different with English and French. János Ruttkay learnt these languages because he was interested in them. He was already working when he started learning English by reading on his own, especially the works of Somerset Maugham, who later became his favourite author. After that, he started to learn French at the fearsome "Rigó utca" (nowadays it's officially called the ORIGO language exam). He successfully reached the advanced level in both languages, here

as well at the first attempt. He mentioned that he had acquired some German knowledge which he had also obtained by reading, but he never took a German language exam.

But when did János Ruttkay find his calling to become a translator? He had already earned some "pocket money" - as he noted - during his academic studies by taking on translation assignments from the university's library, OMIKK (National Technical Information Centre and Library). Following graduation, he started working at a foreign trade company. Since he did not have much interest in the job, he left his post. It was in the year 1976 that he started his career as a professional translator in his next job at an instrumentation engineering company. At that time, he was only translating from Russian.

Then he tried himself in the construction industry, but he did not find any pleasure in the material he had to translate. After 6 years he started working at MATÁV (Hungarian Telecommunications Plc., today: Hungarian Telekom Telecommunications Plc.). He felt that this was the place he had been looking for: He liked the translations, the atmosphere and most of all that he could work from home, which combined the advantages of being a free-lancer and an employee. Unfortunately, privatisation ruined this great opportunity and he had to find out something to make ends meet. He founded a company with his ex-translator colleagues from MATÁV. Although, he enjoyed the privilege of being a freelancer, he had to face the fact that because of privatisation of technology the amount of work concerning the translations in mechanics had started to reduce. Nowadays, he does international press monitoring for the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH).

Besides translating mainly from Russian, then English and sometimes from French into Hungarian, János Ruttkay was asked to do some interpreting jobs. He told me he was not 'the type' to be an interpreter, he did not like it very much, but it was interesting and thanks to those job offers he was able to visit many countries, and see beautiful places which other people at that time had only heard of and did not have the opportunity to see. As he explained, he never interpreted to someone in a higher position, he just accompanied his colleagues to the meetings and when

they had to travel somewhere with the partners. In the meetings he had to interpret simultaneously from Russian into Hungarian. The company he worked for was dealing with Comecon standards and it was extremely hard to reach an agreement between the two parties taking the different aspects into consideration. Those journeys to the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and the GDR left him with unforgettable memories: Once they were in a Russian city where everything, from the statues to the people's clothes, was pale and grey, there were no shops in the streets, it was very gloomy. On another occasion, they stayed in a holiday resort in the middle of a birch forest. "The Russian landscape is beautiful, but the cities...I am happy that I was there, I am happy that I could see it, but it was a very odd experience.", remembers back János Ruttkay.

During these "missions" he had some unusual experiences. Once, while they were travelling from one airport to another by bus in Moscow, the hosts passed around 250 ml cups filled with some kind of brandy. The 2/3 of a cup was made of paper and only its bottom was coated, so you had to finish your drink quickly, unless you wanted to be wet. He drank it quickly and immediately afterwards, the hosts offered salty fish. Surprisingly, nobody got drunk, since the fish absorbed the liquid. So this is how you can survive a large amount of alcohol! Another story he shared with me happened in Hungary. It shows that an interpreter has to be ready for unexpected situations: he interpreted for the Maltese group at the World Archery Championships in Kecskemét. At the closing ceremony he was asked to interpret from Hungarian into English the greetings of Árpád Csanádi, who was the secretary-general of the MOB (Hungarian Olympic Committee) at that time, into the microphone. He had no forewarning and no time to prepare, moreover, it was known that Csanádi would be speaking each 5 languages of the UNO (Chinese, Russian, Spanish, English and French), so "it was a demanding work to interpret the words of such a polyglot person", adds János Ruttkay. But in the end everything worked out well.

I also asked him about how he sees the profession in the context of his life, his experiences. As a freelancer, or at least when working at home, when he was employed by MATÁV, he could enjoy the freedom of flexible working hours, that

he could work for several clients at the same time and could stay at home with his children, or go anywhere he wanted. On the contrary, he missed out on the daily chats with his colleagues, the personal relationships etc. Apart from this, he shared a very interesting thought with me that I did not even think about, that you can be in a situation when you actually speak very seldom. Sometimes when he says a word he feels that he made a mistake and has to correct himself immediately. As he told me, he is not sorry for choosing this path, it had some disadvantages of course, but mostly advantages and, most importantly, he was doing what he liked.

At the end of our talk, I was interested in getting to know how one should imagine being a translator 30-40 years ago? Back in those days, he just had to put the paper in the typewriter and started typing. He had to make six copies of his translation, one original and the rest in carbon copy. If he made a mistake, he could not correct it, if he did not know a term, he had to make a phone call or look it up in a printed dictionary or in a book specialising in the field. Still, he had to continue, he could not leave it there unfinished. Then came the era of word-processing machines and the Commodore. "It was a great invention", says János Ruttkay, because he could leave his translation for a while, correct a mistake, or even save the document. However, on Commodore you could not see some part of a line in a text on the screen, he would have to wait for the PC to see a page of a text as a whole.

The internet and the appearance of online dictionaries was really the turning point. János Ruttkay says that he agrees with Kató Lomb that a meaning of a word can only be understood from the context: that is, a word defined in a dictionary can bare a different meaning in a text, for this, the internet has become very useful. Moreover, you can find a little known term very quickly. On the other hand, since the translator can now work faster, the expectations have become more demanding, too. That is, he was expected to find every term and this opportunity was given to him because he had the internet. Then Trados arrived. János Ruttkay admits that he is happy that he did not have to work with it. He uses the metaphor of the "watch repairers", who learned the profession, but nowadays they just sit in a shop and change the battery or the strap. According to him, "granny's home-made »zserbó«

cake is much better than the one you can get in the shop, it is faster to buy it of course, but granny's is the real cake".

During our talk I listened to this interesting story about how he has found his path, the hardships and the positive aspects of being a professional translator. It was a very instructive and impressive journey he took me on. Through his story, I was given some insight into the past of this profession and I now understand that many things were different at that time. Moreover, I have now discovered how useful it is to know one or more foreign languages. I cannot and do not want to judge whether it was easier to be a translator or not in the past, but I am sure compared to other professions, it could have been very interesting and, at the same time, very stressful. But, above all, I was lucky to take a bite of "granny's zserbó" and I hope that it will always be appreciated.

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1 May 2016