

Ivana Čeňková and Interpretation in the EU Institutions

On a dark, dank evening in December 1990, just over a year after the velvet revolution, I waited by the so-called Powder Tower in the centre of Prague. I was there as a representative of the SCIC, the interpretation service of the European Commission, and was waiting for a representative of Charles University, Prague. This was the first contact between the two institutions, the aim being to organise a project for cooperation in interpreter training under the TEMPUS programme of the European Commission. Just over a year after the fall of the Berlin wall it was obvious that the European Commission and other European institutions would require high quality interpreters for the languages of the former soviet satellite countries, and the best partners to turn to initially were the universities in Prague, Warsaw, Budapest and so on.

Punctually, the Charles University representative turned up. A friendly, energetic woman wrapped up in a heavy coat against the cold and damp, who greeted me in impeccable French and immediately invited me to dinner at a nearby Slovak restaurant: Ivana Čeňková. This was the beginning of a warm friendship which has lasted until today.

Throughout the 1990s and up until the accession of the Czech Republic to the EU in May 2004, I was one of the SCIC interpreters most involved in preparing interpretation services for that accession. And from spring 2005 to early 2017 I was the head of Czech interpretation in the European Commission. Over those years I learned to appreciate and greatly exploited! - Ivana's qualities in many areas: as an outstanding interpreter; as an interpreter trainer; as an academic capable of contributing not just to interpreter training, but to training of interpreter trainers, thanks to her theoretical insights; and as an administrator. Permit me to address those areas one after another.

Ivana was one of the first Czech interpreters to work as a freelance interpreter for the EU, well before 2004. During the long preliminary period leading up to the official negotiations on Czech accession she worked regularly for the European Commission. As the EU institutions at that time were almost totally dependent on *retour* for interpretation from Czech into the EU languages, Ivana's work into French in particular was highly appreciated. She was totally reliable, and her relay into French was exemplary, clear and easy to use. During the official accession negotiations the candidate countries' languages were in general not used, so Ivana was less involved as an interpreter at that stage, but after accession, while continuing her work at the university, she accepted to be one of the first Czech interpreter temporary agents in the Commission. (A temporary agent is a staff member but, unlike an official, has a limited duration contract, not tenure until retirement.) As such she provided invaluable service, not least leading by example for younger colleagues, many of them her former students, being a model for booth manners, meeting preparation and professional ethics.

A last memory of "Ivana as an interpreter". When the Czech Presidency of the EU in 2009 pushed strongly the Eastern partnership of the EU with a number of states formerly part of the Soviet Union, Russian was one of the languages used for communicating with those countries. As the Czech Republic held the presidency, Czech was a key language. Enter Ivana. With her ability to work into and out of three languages, Czech, French *and* Russian, she proved again to be an invaluable colleague.

The prime aim of the TEMPUS project referred to above was to ensure high levels of interpreter training in a number of former eastern bloc countries, including at that time Czechoslovakia. The assumption, on the side of the EU, was that assistance to the training courses in those countries would be required in order to bring them up to a sufficient, “western” standard. In the case of Charles University this turned out to be largely erroneous, as Ivana and her colleagues already ran a course which had little cause to envy universities in the then EU member states. The one major difference was that consecutive interpreting was taught differently, as the market requirements for it had been different for that interpreting mode in the eastern bloc. Charles University, like others in the region, had to adjust to this. But *qualitatively* it had little to learn from the EU. Time and again, as I was invited to teach in Prague or to sit on exam boards there, I witnessed how Ivana had everything carefully planned, the source materials for training were appropriate, the procedures for evaluating students’ work were well established and professional, and the feedback given to students to help them progress was targeted. Ivana was of course not the only staff member involved, but the high standards she set, her acuity and her ability to pinpoint the essentials and ignore secondary matters, made her stand out, particularly in teaching simultaneous interpreting.

The result of this was a regular output from the Masters programme of Charles University of highly competent interpreters working into and out of the languages of the EU, a significant number of whom went on to work for the EU institutions, just at the time when the said institutions most needed them. To this day many of the EU’s Czech interpreters are former students of Ivana.

As mentioned above, part of my remit in SCIC in the 1990s was to help universities in former eastern bloc countries, including all ten who joined between 2004 and 2007, prepare their own interpreter training to the highest possible level. This involved a range of activities, including notably training of trainers. I am not, and never have been, a theorist of interpretation. I am a mere practitioner working empirically. So for training of trainers seminars I relied on help from eminent theoreticians and trainers such as Barbara Moser-Mercer, then at Geneva, Philip Minns from ESIT, Paris, and Ivana Čeňková. She was crucial in this phase, as she had three key qualities. She had the academic and theoretical background to deal with the issues raised in training of trainers. She had literally decades of practical experience as a trainer herself. And she herself was from a former eastern bloc country. She could therefore relate better than western colleagues to the needs and feelings of the colleagues being trained at the seminars. With her there was no question of the condescending west laying down the law to the “poor relations” from further east. Her input was always precious and in this sense Ivana contributed significantly to preparation of EU enlargement, not just for the Czech Republic, but more broadly for a whole range of countries.

We participated together at a number of such seminars. One of the nicest compliments ever paid to me was at one such event, held in Riga. Ivana and I sat together, participating in discussions and role plays. During a break a Latvian friend and colleague came up to me and said, “It’s really funny watching you two together. You’re so close, so much on the same wavelength, that it’s like watching a brother and sister.” I couldn’t be more flattered.

Ivana is also, last but not least, a redoubtable administrator. Over the years I have known her she has been the main contact person for the SCIC at Charles University.

As the coordinator of courses which call upon assistance, including financial assistance, from the European Commission, she has to deal simultaneously with her own administration, i.e. that of the university, and the sometimes arcane singularities of EU bureaucracy. Her patience, energy and perseverance in this work are admirable. Many a time have I seen work e-mails from Ivana in my office in the morning, only to realise that it was sent at, say, 1 a.m. the same day. And she always seems to get what she wants, at the end of the day!

As an administrator Ivana has contributed not a little to the interests of the EU. In particular, since the inception of the EMCI (European Masters in Conference Interpreting) at the beginning of the century, Ivana has played an active role in it, and for four years was the coordinator of the entire consortium of universities involved, a massive workload on top of all of her other duties at Charles University.

As a former staff interpreter of the European Commission, and as someone who has cooperated with Ivana Čeňková in that connection, I have attempted to concentrate my few comments on Ivana's role in relation to the EU institutions. It is difficult to overstate the importance that she has had in forming the Czech interpreter corps which now serves the EU institutions, be it as staff interpreters or as freelancers. Without her, the EU institutions would not have the number of Czech interpreters available to them. And above all, they would not have Czech interpreters of such high calibre, be they in the SCIC, serving the European Commission, the European Council (heads of state and government), and the Council of Ministers, or be they at the European Parliament or at the Court of Justice. The EU interpretation services owe Ivana Čeňková a great deal.

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