

Meet Your Committee

Herbert Eppel



1) Herbert – many of our readers will know you as our new Treasurer and an active member of the German Network over the past 3 years. Your career to date has been an interesting one. You first came to England as a building physics student on a six month placement with the prestigious firm Arup in London. What were your first impressions of the differences between the UK and German lifestyles?

My first impressions of England actually date back to a school trip to London in 1977 in the context of the English 'Leistungskurs' at the 'Gymnasium' I attended in Heidelberg. It was fantastic to see all these famous buildings one had heard about as a child and at school! And of course there was an air of grandness, with big expensive cars in certain areas. I don't think I had ever seen a Rolls Royce before, and our group was so fascinated by it all that someone (not me!) set off the alarm by touching the mascot on the radiator. In stark contrast, some parts of London were rather less grand and certainly less clean.

Another clear difference that still prevails today is terraced housing – the typical British form of terrace is virtually unknown in Germany. The more I think about it, the more I feel that the concept is quite ingenious and has a lot to offer in terms of environmental benefits and (perhaps at first glance somewhat paradoxically) in terms of privacy (provided the issue of sound insulation between adjacent houses is addressed properly, of course). The concept is certainly better than the 'Legoland' approach adopted by many developers these days, with (more or less) 'executive' detached houses placed at more or less random angles on greenfield sites and (often vain) attempts to create privacy through ugly wooden fences or walls, often featuring environmentally unacceptable heated (or worse: air-conditioned) conservatories!

After this introduction to the English way of life, in the autumn of 1984 I arrived back in London in a rather old VW beetle to start my placement at Ove Arup & Partners. What

followed was an astonishing variety of impressions and experiences, both in a work context and outside work. Some of the things that clearly stuck in my mind are a two-week stint at the Lloyds Building site, and a lecture by Ove Arup himself, who was already in his 90s then and possibly one of the most charismatic figures I have ever experienced.

2) If this is not too personal a question what was it that attracted you to come back and live in the UK?

After obtaining my Building Physics degree from 'Fachhochschule für Technik' in Stuttgart (now known as University of Applied Sciences), I had two clear choices: either start a career as a consulting engineer as a partner in "Bauphysik 5", which was set up in rudimentary form by four of my fellow students and myself during the final year of the degree course and is now well established, or take up a post as a junior research fellow at the then Leicester Polytechnic. I chose the latter, not least for personal reasons, and the rest is history, as they say. I was glad to leave behind the proverbial German bureaucracy, although somewhat alarmingly I sometimes feel that Britain is well on the way of overtaking Germany in this respect, and the attractive concept of 'reasonableness' seems to have been lost in many cases. However, in retrospect and after almost 20 years in the UK, it was clearly an excellent decision, because I am married, well settled, and very happy here.

3) You have been in the UK since 1988 – in that time there have been many changes in both the UK and in your native Germany – as a keen observer of both countries how do you feel that they are adapting to the challenges they face in the 21st century?

That's quite a big question, and I'm not sure I can do it justice without taking up the whole of the Netzblatt! I think there can be little doubt that the most momentous and unexpected change was the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it was interesting to watch from a distance how Germany handled the opportunities and immense challenges arising from it. I suspect many issues are still in the process of being resolved, but on the whole (and from an outsider's perspective) I was amazed about how smoothly the transition seemed to progress. Two of the key issues for the 21st century are probably the environment and international stability. I'm afraid that regarding both aspects Britain seems to come off rather worse than Germany! When it comes to the environment I have always felt that Germany was perhaps, say, 10 years ahead of Britain. Over the last 20 years or so there have indeed been many changes in both countries as you say, but overall I think my assessment hasn't changed, although it was satisfying to observe rapid progress in some areas, such as recycling, in Britain over recent years. When it comes to international stability, the Iraq issue speaks for itself. Come to think of it, I actually feel quite strongly about this, and when Britain went to war in Iraq despite massive public opposition while Germany categorically ruled out any involvement, it was the first time that I actually felt proud to be German. Somewhat ironically, I applied for British citizenship at the time and I now have dual nationality, which means that, in addition to local elections and my local (non-party-based) involvement as a parish councillor, I can vote in the next general election, which neatly brings me to one of my biggest wishes for this country, i.e. electoral reform. What kind of democracy is it where a party can have a massive majority in parliament based on significantly less than 40% of the votes and then has a more or less free reign for 10 years or more, often rushing through ill-conceived changes or making major decisions without proper public backing, and often based on pseudo-consultation? Notwithstanding widespread propaganda against proportional representation I

feel that the German system works very well indeed, and the sooner a similar system is introduced here, the better.

4) Your career in engineering took you into academic life as Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Energy and Sustainable Development at De Montfort University, Leicester. What do you understand by the term "sustainable development"?

There are probably dozens, if not hundreds of definitions of sustainable development, but I think the one provided in the 1987 UN Brundtland Report known as *Our Common Future* is still as valid today as it was then, i.e. *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. Sadly, the term now often seems to be thrown around without much reflection on what it actually means or (mis)used as a marketing tool or 'greenwash' by companies and public bodies (including governments) alike. For environmentalists this can be quite depressing at times. The latest examples include the misguided attempt to rush through new nuclear power stations in this country, or the Government's foolish and impertinent U-turn on transport policy, culminating in plans to waste billions of taxpayers' money on futile attempts to resolve traffic chaos by motorway widening. Hopefully more enlightened sustainable development strategies will prevail.

5) Herbert, you moved from lecturing and research into translation. How did you find the transition from academic life to running your own business?

The main reason I started to look for alternatives outside university was that I had come to the conclusion that I'm not really an academic! The transition was in fact fairly painless because I was able to continue half-time at university while at the same time finding my feet in the world of translation. Work quickly began to pick up, although the real boost, both in terms of productivity and job satisfaction, came once I had discovered and got the hang of Déjà Vu. It quickly became clear that something had to give, and since then I have been working full (and frequently over!) time on a freelance basis. I greatly enjoy being my own boss and not having to commute, and (most of the time) I even enjoy the inevitable challenges of being my own IT system administrator.

6) As a technical translator with a wide client base – and a conscience – do you sometimes find that there is a conflict of interest between your ethics and what you are asked to translate? If so, how do you resolve this conflict?

Yes, the conflict of interest question does indeed crop up on a more or less regular basis. One blatant example is nuclear power. I have been vehemently opposed to nuclear power (for numerous and well-documented reasons) for many years, dating back to my days as Energy Campaigner for Leicester Friends of the Earth in the early 1990s. So when I'm asked to translate material for major power companies there can be a clear conflict, since it would no doubt be unreasonable to ask them to have any nuclear sections translated by someone else! I'm still working on refining my strategy for such situations, but basically I think I have resolved it by accepting texts that are merely descriptive or 'statistical', but I would rule out translating a specification for a new nuclear plant or working for BNFL, for example.

7) One issue addressed by translators is specialisation. As a specialised technical translator – what in your opinion are the pros and cons of specialisation?

As it happens, last year I submitted a reader letter to the ITI bulletin under the heading "Specialisation = demonstration of confidence?", which I think was overtaken by other events and never published, so this seems a good opportunity to resurrect it!

I found Michael Benis' specialisation article in the May-June 2006 issue of the ITI bulletin, Philip Slotkin's interesting response in the July-August issue and Michael's reply in the same issue rather intriguing. I wonder whether in the end it all boils down to the definition of specialisation? For example, I tend to tell people that I specialise in technical translations. I suppose Michael Benis (for whom I have great respect, incidentally, not least because he offered me invaluable advice during the very early stages of my career as a translator) would probably find such a statement quite ridiculous! I'm not the most confident person in the world, but on this occasion I can categorically say that the fact that I don't really want to take specialisation much further is a matter of personal choice, not lack of confidence. From my perspective, one important aspect that wasn't mentioned is that of job satisfaction. While familiarising oneself with new subject areas can be time-consuming, I actually enjoy this kind of challenge, and it can lead to – sometimes widely off-topic, but nevertheless often interesting – discussions on the GerNet e-mail list, for example. Conversely, I know a translator (not a GerNet member, I hasten to add!) who almost exclusively works for a particular company from a rather narrow industrial sector. Personally I would find this level of specialisation unbearably boring.

8) One final question – given your varied and highly interesting "bilingual" career to date – what do you feel is your next challenge?

I don't actually envisage any major challenges or changes in the foreseeable future, i.e. I'm basically quite happy as things are! However, my workload and the number of enquiries from potential new clients has been increasing rapidly over the last couple of years – no doubt my ITI membership played a significant part in this development. This is good news, of course, but it has also led to too many 14-hour (or more!) working days, and the situation clearly needs addressing. One way of dealing with it is to become more selective in the work one takes on, and this process of elimination can in fact be quite satisfying. In addition, I have been subcontracting work on and off for a number of years now, with a recent sharp increase in the amount of subcontracted work. Collaboration with good and reliable subcontractors is an enjoyable aspect of my work, but I deliberately don't want to become an agency. A more gradual and continuing development has been a shift from agency clients towards direct clients, and I feel that the balance is probably almost right now. In summary, I think the main challenge over the next few years is perhaps to find a way to develop my business further while at the same time shifting the work-life balance slightly towards the latter!