

Building Bridges

by Sam Berner

"I always thought that [building] bridges is the best job there is because roads go over bridges, and without roads we'd still be like savages. In short, bridges are like the opposite of borders, and borders are where wars start." --Primo Levi, 'La chiave a stella' (The Wrench)

I heard her described as "militant". But the modest, bespectacled academic with a refreshing sense of humour who sat across me nibbling at the kifte and baba ghanouj was anything but that. It might have been as well, though, because the disappointment was mutual – she had thought I would be a 70-years old Yiddish-speaking male, and a former Bund member!

The dinner, which was supposed to be a quick "Lets meet, I am in Sydney" affair, ended up being a 5-hour talkfest, with the happy restaurateur heaping additions on the table. The result is yet another interview, which I hope the readers will enjoy!

S.B.: *I know you used to teach Italian Literature at Monash for quite some time, so this is where we are going to start our "free associations" – with the word "literature". What comes to mind?*

Dr. Cicioni: I come from a family where nobody read anything other than the daily paper. As a child, I read adventure books and identified with either the male heroes or with those of the female heroes who were fearless warriors. As a teenager, I read John Steinbeck and William Faulkner.

I did a degree in English and German without really discovering that literary criticism was a serious discipline. This discovery came later, when I started working as a language assistant in a British university.

Literature remained mainly a pleasure until I was in my late thirties - I did an M. Phil. and a PhD in sociolinguistics and taught mainly subjects connected with Italian linguistics and Italian women. For a couple of years, because the department of Italian where I was working did not have a Renaissance expert, I taught Ludovico Ariosto's 16th-century epic/ ironic/ courtly poem *Orlando Furioso*. I did it extremely badly from a scholarly point of view, but passed on my "great fun" view of the poem to two lots of unsuspecting students, who never found out about Renaissance culture but really enjoyed themselves.

S.B. *I think one of the main attractions for me was you mentioning that you had to add a second level to house your books – I had to move to a larger house and we are running out of space already, so I fully empathize with this. What would you say is the role books play in your life, and how have they influenced you from the linguistic point of view? What about the writer who affected your choice of career most?*

Dr. Cicioni: It is very difficult to tease out specific strands when it comes to books in my life. I do read all the time - on the tram going to interpreting jobs, in the parked car when I

am waiting for a health professional doing a "home visit". But my reading is usually limited to two kinds of books. The first kind is connected with my research: right now I am working on an article about the Italian writer Clara Sereni and on a paper about possible queer readings of Italian Westerns. The second lot is light reading - thrillers, science fiction, fantasy. In order to read texts which are not Italian or escapist, I have joined an Australian women's book club, which reads one serious work of fiction a month.

From the linguistic point of view - the first book I read in English, at 15 or 16, was a POW story which was fairly well-known in the 1960s, Eric Williams' *The Wooden Horse*. So I thought expressions like "browned off" and "goons" were the bee's knees. The first book I read in German (it took me absolute ages, I don't think I ever actually finished it) was a Western by an early 20th-century writer called Karl May. Books I love leave linguistic traces in the way I articulate experiences: I tend to sound a little like whoever it is I read last. Or like the characters of whichever television programme I am interested in at the moment. I am sure this is not at all uncommon, especially in the case of second-language use.

Other authors? Brecht's poems. How I'd love it if on my grave they wrote the Italian equivalent of "She made suggestions, we carried them out." The poem "In Praise of Doubt" has been stuck on my fridge for twenty years, every time it becomes too greasy and illegible I make another photocopy and replace it. The science-fiction writer Ursula Le Guin. Heinrich Böll. Clara Sereni. Colette - just to mention a few.

Writers who affected my choice of career - no easy cause-and-effect there. In the late 1960s, I was deeply struck by a history of post-unification Italian language, which made one point which I have been relentlessly stressing to my students when I was teaching: Italians never actually *spoke* Italian until the twentieth century. This was partly for political reasons (Italy became a unified country only in 1860) and partly for a variety of cultural reasons (the language of the Catholic liturgy was Latin until Vatican II in the early 1960s; "Italian" was a written language, modelled on written literary Tuscan, and used for literary and cultural communication; at the time of unification nearly 80% of the Italian population was illiterate). This initial understanding of the links between language and history/ politics instantly drew me towards sociolinguistics (correlations between language use and age / gender / geography/ education etc.)

The works of Primo Levi were a similar eye-opener from a literary and human point of view. Not just his works of Holocaust testimony, with their passionate humanism and the scientist's effort not just to bear witness, but to analyse, to be able to make general statements, to find what can be learned from the death camps. Also his masterpiece, *The Periodic Table*, where you find observations about the language spoken in the Jewish communities in Piedmont, and literary quotes, and the passion (that word again) for laboratory research, the testing of hypotheses, the lessons learned from one's mistakes. "That's why we're in the world for," he writes, "to make mistakes and learn from them." I hope that's what I do in my own life as well. And his essays about insects and chess players and children's nursery rhymes and learning how to use an Apple Mac: the need to be curious about everything.

S.B.: *Primo Levi plays a very important part in your life?*

Dr. Cicioni: At nineteen, I read Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and it changed my life, because I started seeing "literature" as something that "informs" more directly, and more effectively, than history books.

While working on my PhD thesis, I decided that when I grew up I wanted to be a person who mediated between Italian Jewish writers and English-speaking readers. So one week after submitting the thesis I started writing my book - a straightforward, quite readable introduction to Primo Levi for English-speaking readers*. I am working on another book, a study of autobiography and humour in the works of four post-WWII Italian Jewish writers. Primo Levi as a humorist? YES, without a doubt.

S.B. *I can understand a young heart falling in love with literature – kind of “was there, done that”. But you actually got out of the comfort zone of doing it solely in your native Italian, and went on to do English and German at the University..*

Dr. Cicioni: Because my parents, who had to pay the university fees (not all that high in Italy, but still) thought that law or political science (which were the areas I was more interested in) would not lead to a Real (i.e. remunerated) Job. They also thought that languages would be easy for me because I already spoke fluent English, having been an exchange student in Lincoln, Nebraska, USA for a year. German I started from scratch at university. I have had a one-sided love affair with the German language for almost four decades - I love it, but have never managed to make the quality leap from Mittelstufe Zwei (can make self understood on a variety of topics, reasonably intelligently, with several syntactic mistakes and lexical inaccuracies) to Oberstufe (is actually FLUENT).

I also did one year of French and one year of Norwegian - the latter because there were only 9 enrolled students and the Norwegian govt. had offered two 2-month scholarships to Oslo. I won one scholarship, had a great time in Oslo, learned to make myself understood in Norwegian, and within a year promptly forgot every word I ever knew.

My life's dream: to be able to speak 4 or 5 languages badly but comprehensibly. I get an almost physical thrill when I can put together a sentence that a speaker of the relevant language actually understands.

S.B.: *Is that what led you to picking up interpreting?*

Dr. Cicioni: Not quite. My first full-time job after my first degree was at the University of Salford (UK), where since the mid-60s they had had courses in what they called Liaison Interpreting. As a language assistant, I helped out writing and acting out dialogues, and picked up a few tips. Then, in the mid-to-late 70s, I was still in the UK, earning my keep with a variety of jobs, and although totally unqualified, I was signed up by a Manchester translation/interpreting agency. I did some interpreting jobs and enjoyed them. Then I migrated to Australia, where I had a demanding full-time academic job between the end of 1979 and the beginning of 2006. When I started thinking about early retirement, I thought that part-time interpreting, if I could get into it, would be socially useful, as well as being linguistically and socially interesting. I was right. I wish that the work was better paid and better organised, but that's another story.

S.B. What do you find most difficult about it? And most exhilarating?

Dr. Cicioni: Most difficult: From a performance point of view, courtrooms where barristers mutter with their back to the interpreters and judges mutter away, quoting laws and decisions, without stopping to take a breath (or to let the interpreters do their job).

From a personal point of view - the devastating boredom of interpreting in exercise classes. Also trying to be at the same time polite and firm with relatives who resent interpreters and cast doubts on their skills.

Most exhilarating: Feeling stretched and miraculously finding the right expression. Or not finding the right expression, but coming up with something adequate all the same. Feeling useful if the professional has been able to gain a better understanding of the Italian speaker's / family's situation. Instant gratification, as opposed to the long-term perspective of my time as an academic: you leave the interpreting situation knowing that you have been useful to at least 2 people. When you write an article, or a book, you can just vaguely hope that someone, some time, somewhere, will learn something from it, or will feel strongly enough to argue against it.

The variety of people, dialects (I trained as a linguist and can understand Italian dialects), situations. Occasionally, a degree of human interaction with the Italian speaker; I wish I could give a few examples, obviously without revealing too much about the Italian speakers in question, but there is the issue of confidentiality.

S.B. You have been quite vocal about working conditions for interpreters. What do you see as the major issues apart from the pathetic pay?

Dr. Cicioni: The positive aspects are, as I said, using one's language skills; acquiring more knowledge and more skills; constantly learning more about how social services, the legal system and the various branches of the health systems work; getting to know our communities better. Another positive fact is that AUSIT is doing its best to make us visible and to encourage us to upgrade our skills. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a repeat of simultaneous interpreting courses?

However, I am glad my (bilingual) son does not contemplate interpreting as a career, because I would try to discourage him. If any of my former students ask me about interpreting as a life career, I tell them to think very carefully before they consider it. I cannot speak for translators, but as far as interpreters are concerned, I believe that we are caught in a cleft stick. On the one hand we are contractors. As our colleague John Gare pointed out, there has been no legal challenge to our status as contractors for ten years. Some of us, maybe most of us, see themselves as independent businesspeople or, as someone wittily said during an online discussion on unions, as trade unions with one member each. On the other hand, we (unlike other skilled freelance workers, such as architects, dentists, or plumbers and carpenters) do not set our own fees (based on experience, competence, client satisfaction): we have little alternative to accepting contracts from agencies which are in competition with one another and undercut one another. The result is that we, like plumbers, do not have any superannuation, holiday

pay, sick or maternity leave, and *at the same time* are underpaid and earn far less than plumbers (my plumber charges me between \$120 and \$250 for 90 minutes' work).

So what are the alternatives? Some interpreters set up their own agencies, in (potentially cut-throat) competition with other agencies. Other interpreters try, each on his/her own, to earn a decent living by picking, choosing and juggling a lot of underpaid agency jobs. National institutions such as Centrelink are notoriously poor employers. Ideally, I would like to see free-enterprise agencies coexisting with decently-paid part-time government contracts in various sectors. I don't know whether there has been any lobbying in this direction in the past, and would love to get involved in more lobbying, under the guidance of experienced people who have done it in the past. I fear that, as long as each interpreter sees himself/herself as a monad in competition with other monads, a few individuals will thrive, and the rest will struggle to keep their heads above water. Any hope for change for everybody depends on collective action.

Levi wrote a book that had very little to do with the death camps: *The Wrench* is a series of stories about human work. He says "To exalt labour, in official ceremonies an insidious rhetoric is displayed, based on the consideration that a eulogy or a medal costs much less than a pay raise [. . .] We can and must fight to see that the fruits of labour remain in the hands of those who work, and that work does not turn into punishment." But he also talks about "the pleasure of seeing your creature grow, beam after beam, bolt after bolt, solid, necessary, symmetrical, suited to its purpose; and when it's finished you look at it and you think that perhaps it will live longer than you, and perhaps it will be of use to someone you don't know, who doesn't know you." Every line of these statements represents what I believe about work – and my own work, past and present.

S.B. *So the question is...*

Dr. Cicioni: .. se non ora, quando?*

* Cicioni, M. (1995) *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge*, Oxford: Berg Publishers

** The title of Primo Levi's classic story follows a number of Jewish partisans and resistance fighters as they struggle to survive and sabotage the German war machine behind Nazi lines during World War II, starting in eastern Russia and ending in Milan.