

## ITINARY: FROM CAIRO TO NEW YORK

Sam Berner interviews UN translator & interpreter, and AUSIT member Riham Youssef

I heard Riham for the first time on SBS, and became an instant fan. But although I am a great admirer of this feisty young Egyptian, Riham and I never met in person, although we intended to. By the time I had organized myself, Riham was back in Cairo and on her way to where her heart has always wanted to take her: New York, and the UN. I was lucky, however, to be able to maintain contact with her online, and this interview took place fully on Facebook, where we are both members.

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*SB: Riham, it is often said that people come to translating - or that translating comes to people - in amazingly different and fascinating ways. What got you into it?*

Riham: It was all a happy coincidence. My background was actually in Tourism at the Guidance Department of the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management.

Soon after my graduation in 1994, the Cairo Opera House put an announcement asking for ushers from among our students/alumni to travel to Luxor and assist in the production of the Opera Aida. Being an opera lover, I decided to volunteer, just to have access to the performances for free.

During the interview, the famous Egyptian tenor (turned actor) Hassan Kamy was the production manager. He noticed that I had all it took to be his personal assistant!!! So I was "promoted" on the spot. One of the main tasks he entrusted me with was translating the official catalogue of the opera from and into the 5 languages I speak. (As proud as I am of this book today, and of my name on its cover, I wish I had the chance to redo it today, after having gained much more experience!) This experience made me fall in love with translation. Thus I decided to make it my career. So I enrolled in the translation and interpretation programme offered at the American University in Cairo (AUC), in which I studied 42 specialised subjects of translation/interpretation. This program made me familiar with interpretation, too, and I realised I have a passion for it as well, but that's another story.

*SB: There is a trend among many translators that theory is not a necessity for making or breaking a good translator. You yourself decided that it was a good idea to do a course. What were your experiences than, and do you think you could have been as good a translator as you are now without the AUC course?*

Riham: Absolutely not. I believe a good translator is a combination of theory and practice.

The course I did at AUC, the BA in Translation and Literature I completed at Cairo University, and the MA in Translation and Linguistics I completed at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), have all given me a very solid foundation I have been building on throughout my career. And a tall building cannot rise without such solid foundation.

However, I don't think that good courses alone make good translators/ interpreters. On the contrary, a good T&I is very rare to find. He/she is born with it, as people are born with all sort of abilities, e.g. being athletic, having an ear for music, etc. You either have it or not, and courses don't do miracles. I've had so many students in our AUC program whom we could not help, as they simply did not have what it takes.

*SB: You have gone through the three stages of amateur, student and teacher. If you could go back now to stage one, the Aida catalogue, and start anew, what would be the one major thing that you would change?*

Riham Translating from and into languages I'm not sufficiently proficient in, i.e. French and Italian. Specialisation is vital in translation, and merely speaking a language isn't at all enough to translate from it, let alone into it.

*SB: Lets put your teacher's hat on: what do you see as the main problem faced by majority of young people undertaking the course? And what would be your advice to anyone thinking of doing, say, a BA in translation?*

Riham: I would mention the following,

- That they believe that their (often partial) proficiency in English is enough to make them good T&Is.

- That they are often not proficient in their own LOTE (in my case Arabic). They make embarrassing mistakes in Arabic, in terms of grammar, word choices, sentence structures, punctuation, etc. I had to teach them basic grammar rules in class to mend this deficiency.

- As conference interpreting is a lucrative, glamorous career that involves traveling around the world and often meeting with celebrities and dignitaries, it has attracted many young people who are only after what they believe is easy money earned in a fun job.

That's why I advise anyone who wishes to become a T&I and embark on studying it to think of it as a profession that requires a lot of skills and hard, ongoing work. So they have to be honest with themselves and decide whether they really have what is needed, and whether they are ready for all the hard work and stress this job entails. They have to love it, otherwise they will never succeed in it.

*SB: Speaking of lack of proficiency in their own language, do you see this as a global issue? Does it in some way, in your opinion, tie up with the fact that the younger generation does not read enough, or does it have something to do with the education they receive prior to their university careers?*

Riham: I think it IS a global issue, though I can only speak with certainty about my part of the world, i.e. the Arab world. You are right.; the young generation in general reads much less, and books have generally taken a back seat in the age of modern technology. Everything moves at a much quicker pace, so activities that by nature are known to take time and require patience in developing, such as mastering a language, be it a foreign one or your own, are no longer this interesting.

Young people are always in a rush. They want to send their messages across quickly, not eloquently. They aim to make people understand what they want to say, rather than be impressed by their style. They choose to use a language full of cool jargon, not giving much attention to all the linguistic rules they are thereby breaking.

And you are right about the second part of your question, too, because school and tertiary education in the Arab world is declining at an alarming rate, too. Many school teachers and even university professors lack the basics of Classical Arabic. So how do you expect those to impart knowledge they don't even possess?

*Sam: You are both a translator and an interpreter - which one gives you more satisfaction? Why?*

Riham: I personally find much more satisfaction in interpretation. To me, it's much more interactive and lively. Interpretation, and conference interpretation in particular, takes you to the most interesting places, be they in your country or overseas. It introduces you to new people, many of whom you would otherwise only know through the media. Interpretation makes you feel you're part of the action... You're inside of it and not just watching from a distance as is the case with translation.

And the actual process of interpretation itself is something I enjoy a lot, too: all the instant decisions you need to make as to what to keep and what to drop (yes, in conference interpretation you do sacrifice some non-essential words and fillers for the sake of keeping up with the speaker's pace and delivering all the essentials!)... the fact that you have to be 100% alert and cannot afford to be distracted even for a split-second... the way you cope with speed, poor command of English on the part of the speaker... thick accents... bad acoustics... interruptions... all that adrenalin rush... all the excitement!

As much as I enjoy translating, I find it to be quite lonely and isolated in comparison, especially as I'm not a conformist... not a nine-to-five person. Thus conference interpretation is definitely the job for me.

*Sam: What skills would you say are transferable between the two - translating and interpreting - and which do you find is harder to do?*

Riham: This question is a bit hard, but I'll try to give it my best shot:

Both translators and interpreters have to be highly proficient in their mother tongue and at least one foreign language. They both have to love what they are doing and be ready to make use of any opportunity to develop themselves professionally and acquaint themselves with whatever knowledge necessary to make them do a better job, be it specialized terminology, additional information about certain disciplines, modern concepts, etc. They have to accept that it's a lifelong learning process, and not just a course to complete or an exam to pass.

I believe conference interpretation is harder than translation, due to the many skills that need to be readily available, all at the same time and almost subconsciously. It requires, inter alia, an enormous amount of concentration, an alert mind, a quick response, sound diction, a perfect command especially of the target language, good sentence structures and an excellent knowledge of the TL grammar, so as to produce grammatically correct sentences in no time.

*SB: So where does Australia fit into your translating journey?*

Riham: It's due to my association with Rotary. Initially, I've always had Germany in mind. This is until I went on 6-week a Rotary Group Study Exchange (GSE) trip to Australia in 1998. I was hosted by 9 senior Rotarian families in 9 cities and towns, all in NSW. This is when I saw that moving to Australia would be a better idea.

And two years later, I went to Sydney on a "fact-finding" trip, to see how things are and if there would be a chance for me. This is when I was told about NAATI. So I went and sat all 3 NAATI level 3 exams in two days.

So when they mailed me my certificates to Egypt a few weeks later, and when I found that I passed with flying colours in all three of them, I realized that I probably have what it takes to work in the Australian T&I market.

*SB: How does the translation/interpreting scene differ between Cairo and Sydney?*

Riham: In Egypt, the vast majority of interpretation functions are between English and Arabic, rarely in any third language. I was qualified to work in German, too, but it was a skill I rarely used.

There's much more conference interpreting there than there is in Australia, probably owing to the central geographic location Egypt is endowed with.

As Egypt is a developing country, there are numerous development projects taking place there, which is a goldmine for translators and interpreters: endless reports, case studies, recommendations, etc. to be translated... and endless workshops, training sessions, lectures, meetings between Egyptians and non-Egyptians, etc. to be interpreted.

We also do a lot of chuchoutage in functions where there is only one or two non-Egyptians present. It happens a lot that an event is sponsored by a foreign agency/ development programme. So someone from that body, usually its resident representatives or a senior staff member, attends at least one day of the event, where he/she gives an opening remark (to be consecutively interpreted). Then he/she sits back and seeks the assistance of the interpreter to whisper into his/her ear what is being said at the function.

Community interpreting doesn't exist in Egypt. Translators, and especially interpreters, are held in very high esteem and are very well paid, especially as compared to the low average incomes in Egypt.

As much as I love Australia and the Australian lifestyle, I have always felt professionally frustrated. Although I am highly qualified and well trained in translation/ interpretation, I never found what I was looking for. Throughout my 4-year stay in Australia, I did not interpret at a single conference, whereas conferences had almost been the order of the day for me in Egypt.

I even had to plan my holidays back to Egypt around times where I could interpret at a conference or two, just to maintain my skills at least partially. I kept myself busy with other jobs and activities, e.g. SBS subtitling, working as a journalist/ broadcaster for SBS Radio, and teaching/ marking at NAATI, but I have still always missed conferences and the substantial translation work I have been doing.

SB: *And then came the UN, like a knight on a white horse?*

Riham: Sort of. I was glad to hear that the UN was having a competitive exam for Arabic translators. I applied, and was subsequently convoked to sit their (full-day long, highly technical) exam at the closest examination station, which was Bangkok, Thailand.

A few months later I received an email saying that I passed the exam, and am now convoked to an interview, this time in Cairo. A panel of four scrutinized me, and a few weeks later I was advised that I passed and that my name was placed on their roster for future vacancies.

And this future vacancy presented itself around 8 months later, and here I am, a permanent staff member at the Arabic Translation Service (ATS) of the UN's Department of the General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM).

Meanwhile, I have gone through this same process with interpretation (but at least this one did not involve any travel, for I sat both the exam and the interview at the UN headquarters, where I work). I am now on their roster, too, and within a few months, I will be moving there permanently.

Worth mentioning is that UN exams are only offered between English and the five other official languages of the UN: Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish.

SB: *Just to wrap up, where do you see yourself professionally in 5 years?*

Riham: Having a full-time job at the moment, I don't think I can make a relevant answer to this question. In 5 years, I will be working here (and hopefully till my retirement age at 62). Nothing else!

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