Languages go to war

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Citer cet article
et de là-haut
Cette goutte de sang
des mers,
qui leur ont échappé
à la lumière,

Va-t-on à ce désert
rassoyable,
à quai.

Les jetsés par les eaux;
ardemment,
la nuit
sauret-il

Que je faisais travail d'artiste: je
passionnément, que je me livrais à
esse, d'accord international, un roman
traducteurs, vous ferez, essentiellement sera sans doute vrai, que la
être, mais, en tout cas, elle s'en
vérifiera qui situe le travail du tra-
duction relève de la philosophie, en
oup plus vaste, qui est celui de la
ses amis, que voir dans la traduction
ou du milieu, c'est singulièrement
ment, par exemple, parce que l'on
ait étendre le marché d'un produit
n'est pas une
les mots que je voudrais conclure,
est son épanouissement et, à plus
de pérennité de la pensée humaine.

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Languages go to war

Anne D'HALEWYN

"Join the Army and see the
World!" — Did anyone ever think
of the linguistic aspect of this slogan? Because one serves with people
of one's own Country it does not
necessarily mean that the same language is used by all. This is par-
ticularly true of the Canadian Army
where English and French Canadians
are in constant relationship.

In 1942, I joined the Royal Cana-
dian Army Medical Corps as a
Nursing Sister. I was posted to an
almost all French-speaking unit.
There, I was well able to judge how
unhappy were the few members of
that hospital staff who could not
speak French and how useful it was
for the French-speaking ones to be
able of conversing with their
English-speaking co-workers. Our
army training (what there was of it)
took place in Kingston, Ontario, and
there, those who could not speak
English had quite a time with the
lectures and a worse experience still
with the examinations.

Once in England, two-thirds of our
patients being English-speaking, it be-
came not only important but essential
to know English. It is bad enough to
be sick or wounded without having to
struggle to make oneself understood.

Of course in England, a great many
of the educated people speak French
and very good French, but not the old
lady on the street, not the friendly
policeman on the corner who are
going to give you the information you
require, not the verger who is going
to show you through the ancient ca-
thedral, not the bus driver, not the
ticket agent at the railroad station.
So, for those who did not speak the
language of the British Isles, it was
pretty hard to get along. I remember
one of our Nursing Sisters who once
went to London to meet a cousin
whom she had not seen for three
years. She came back in the evening
feeling very low. "Je ne sais pas
assez l'anglais pour me hasarder à
demander mon chemin et je n'ai pu
me rendre où nous devions nous ren-
contrent." And the tears came rolling
down her cheeks. That is only one
of the many instances of that kind
I could relate here.

In certain units courses were orga-
nized, but they did not prove very
satisfactory because of the many
changes and transfers that took place.
I am talking about the Medical
Corps only. I can recall starting German
and after five classes being trans-
ferred to another hospital where
French was being taught.

Then a group of us left for Italy.
A fourteen-day trip on a Dutch boat.
The crew was all-Dutch but the offi-
cers spoke English. One evening the
Master of the ship gave us a most
interesting lecture on Java in perfect
English which he spoke without any
foreign accent. On the first day, six
of us were chosen to sit at the Cap-
tain's table for the evening meals.
I had the bad luck to be placed
between the Officer Commanding Troops
and the Chief Engineer. When I say
bad luck, I really mean it because
the first was a British army man of
the old school who was a women-hater and had no use for Colonials, so there was no conversation possible on my left-hand side. On my right, fate had wished on me the ship’s only officer who could not speak English! So, knowing only two words of Dutch, (one of them is *verboden* i.e. forbidden), I sadly retreated into food. I am sure I must have gained weight during that crossing, for I ate everything in sight at those fourteen meals, just for the sake of passing time! The consequences of not knowing a language!

Italy... Naples... Ortona... the Cassino push... Rome... the Vatican... the Pope... Memories...

Somehow, it soon leaked out that I could speak Italian and I had not been settled more than a few days when I became unofficially interpreter for the Nursing Sisters and for the Matron. At that time we employed Italian domestic help. I shall never forget the unpleasant tasks my knowledge of Italian brought on to me. "Tell them they make too much noise, the floors are not clean, the dishes are not properly washed, etc., etc." Never anything nice to tell the poor people! There was the time when the maids asked me to write a card to go with some flowers they were offering the Matron and naturally, I wrote the note of thanks for the Matron and how much closer he can get to people when he can address them in their mother tongue!

There was also the case of the old French missionary we brought back from the Far-East. This was on a hospital ship. Five of us on the boat could speak French, but with a thousand patients and a small staff, there was no time left for anything that was not work, food or sleep. Fortunately, we had with us a Canadian Intelligence Officer who was not quite so busy as we all were. Noticing that feeble, depressed, old priest, he made up his mind that he could be of some assistance to him. Alas! He could not speak French and the missionary could not speak English. But they had one language in common, Japanese! The patient had been months a prisoner of war and he needed more companionship than real medical care. Each day the two had lengthy conversations and each day the old missionary’s health was improving. He gradually came out of his shell, and when we docked at Vancouver, he was again on his feet, not strong yet, but smiling and happy. Another miracle performed by language!

Others have had many more and more vivid experiences than I have had during the 2nd World War. What about those who went to France, Belgium, Holland and Germany? Nevertheless, may this help to prove once again the value of knowledge of languages.

Tous ceux qui ont vécu dans les petits pays dont la langue n’est pas répandue dans le monde : Hollande, Norvège, Turquie, Hongrie, reçoivent l’immense importance que prend l’interprète, le traducteur.

On a besoin de lui pour le marché, la plus simple renseignement. On est même souvent dans l’impos­sibilité de lire les affiches ou les égues, les alphabets étant différents : Grèce, pays arabes, pays slaves.

Si l’interprète est utile au simple voyageur, à plus forte raison le aux journalistes et dans les services diplomatiques. Là s’ouvre pour l’interprète un domaine qui demande seulement les qualités communément requises de connaissances, de beaucoup de précision, de doux compréhension.

C’est par le truchement du traducteur que ces pays se mettent en contact avec le monde étranger, faise connaître leur coutumes, leur progrès, pour expliquer le pour ou la contre certaines mesures, pour que ou conserver la compréhension de l’estime.

Les services de presse des grandes puissances transmettent à leurs correspondants les résumés d’articles, politiques ou autres, parus dans la presse...