

## **Some interpreters I have known<sup>1</sup>**

Peter Bowbrick

When you are working abroad, you are very dependent on your interpreter. Some I have worked with have raised unexpected problems.

The first time I worked in Russia, my interpreter was Boris, a man of about 65 who looked like one of the villains in a Bond movie. His career had started when he did his national service at a spy school. He must have been politically OK, because he got an officer's pay and lived in Moscow, while his schoolmates were privates in some Siberian army camp. After this, he became an interpreter, translating for visiting businesspeople and Intourist tours. Then he went to India for two years with a construction company, which confirms that he was one of the party faithful. I do not know if he remained a KGB officer, but he did tell me that he had to debrief to the KGB every day, telling them who his clients had met and what they had discussed.

I met him in 1992, just after Perestroika. By then everybody knew about the gulags and everybody, including Boris, disapproved. But the truth was still coming out.

'Yes,' he said, 'It is still a surprise to me. Last year there was the story about the secret cities in Siberia that nobody knew existed. I thought it was just Western propaganda. Of course, the Soviet regime could keep it out of the newspapers and off the radio. But I would certainly know, because I worked in the industry and I knew all the managers. It is true though. There is one near Cheliabinsk, about 100km away.'

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I wondered how much it was that he was not exposed to the facts, and how much it was that he had taken the decision, time and time again, not to hear what was said, not to see what was before his eyes. It was the safe option. Something he said seemed to confirm it.

‘The big change now is that we do not worry. For sure, there is not enough food and we are hungry. For sure, there is no money and many people do not have a job. But we know that we will not be arrested tonight. In those days, it was always possible. Perhaps you had done something; perhaps someone told the police you had done something; perhaps they just arrest you. Then you were in prison for two years, even ten years. The Russian courts do not know about sending you to prison for months. For having a Beatles record they sent people to prison for four years.’

Boris was surprisingly shy for an ex-KGB officer. He was happy enough to talk to managing directors, but, outside that, he was useless. I wanted to talk to the market women in the retail food markets. They are the same in Russia as anywhere else, large, loud, with a good line in backchat and a raucous laugh. Boris flatly refused to talk to them. I do not know what worried him: was he afraid of being chased out of the market by women throwing rotten cabbages at him? Or was he shocked at their coarse humour?

He was also terrified of using the telephone. The only way we could get him to phone for an appointment was for two of us to hold him next to the telephone.

Like many Russians, he had an alcohol problem. He was very disciplined about it though. He stayed moderately sober throughout the interminable banquets, translating the incoherent mumbles of both sides. His downfall was our team leader who was an out and out alcoholic. They started out by drinking toasts together at dinner. They would clink glasses and throw back the vodka. Fifteen minutes later there was another toast. As the evening progressed there would be shorter intervals. Then they started drinking toasts

at breakfast, with the result that the team leader was incapable by lunchtime. Boris only got that bad once, then exercised his mighty willpower, and never got more than drunk again. Even when very drunk he managed to get me on to my plane, then find somewhere for us to stay at the next stop.

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My next interpreter in Moscow was completely different in every way. Tanya was 35, she was sober, willing to talk to anyone, and not afraid of the telephone. She was also half-gypsy and stunningly beautiful.

When she first came to the Aerostar hotel, I took her up to my room and explained what I was doing, so she could explain it to the businesspeople and officials I was going to talk to. Then I went through the specialist vocabulary I was going to use. It was the meat industry on that day. She looked up some of the words, but most of it was done by me pointing to pictures of animals and carcasses in a picture book and saying the English words. By the time we went off to the first appointment, she could understand my accent, she could hear my voice clearly and she knew the specialist vocabulary. The meetings went very well.

Next morning we spent another hour learning the vocabulary for another industry, and she telephoned for appointments.

We got on very well together – you always do get very close to your interpreter. I confess that I was more than a little attracted to her. In fact, I found it very difficult to concentrate on business when we spent our hour or two each morning in a hotel bedroom.

I did nothing about it of course. I was paying her salary, so making a pass at her would be harassment. Still, it did occur to me that when the job was over at the end of the week, I would no longer be her employer and it would not be harassment.

On Friday afternoon I paid her. She took the money, then stepped up to me and looked me in the eye.

‘Peter,’ she said, in her husky voice. ‘I want to tell you that I would always do anything you ask me to.’

‘Here it is!’ I thought to myself.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘I know that you would never ask me to do anything wrong.’

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Of course, nothing like that could happen in the Islamic world. Working in Egypt, I was very careful to avoid any such situations.

Fatima was my interpreter in Cairo, a very pretty, unmarried, woman of about 22. At least, what I could see of here was pretty: she was wearing the veil over her hair, and a cloak over her clothes. We worked well together, and there were no problems at all in Cairo.

Then, one day I hired a taxi to take us down to the delta for a day trip. Everything went well: we arrived on time, met the officials and the chamber of commerce.

We finished a series of interviews in a market, and went back to where we had left the driver. The driver and car had vanished. We waited for an hour, but the driver did not turn up.

Fatima was desperately trying to hide how worried she was. I do not know if she thought that the wicked Englishman had engineered this to work his wicked way on her. She was certainly worrying about how she was going to explain to her family why she stayed away from home with me overnight.

I calmed her by telling her that I had enough cash on me to hire a taxi back to Cairo. I did not mention that I could also afford a hotel.

She remained nervous until the taxi arrived, two hours late. The driver had decided to get the car serviced.

After this, I did not even suggest that she joined me on my trip to Alexandria. I arranged to get a local interpreter instead.

I was surprised to see, on our visits, how many senior officials, Directors even, were women. One woman, a Director in the Ministry of the Interior, was dressed in orthodox Islamic style, veiled and robed. She spoke sharply to Fatima when we went in, asking her all about the project. She then demanded to know where she lived and what her telephone number was. She wrote down the answers. I assumed that the questions were something to do with Egypt's troubled political state. She wanted to know what the strange foreigner was up to. No doubt the secret police would check up on me, and on Fatima, later. Never mind; I was clean.

But next morning Fatima had a different story.

'The Director telephoned my mother last night. She has a son who needs a wife, and she thinks I will do.

'I will have to meet him, I think. My family does not have arranged marriages, but it is not easy to meet suitable men from good families.'

\* \* \*

There are other ways but marriage to lose your interpreter. Maria, in Romania, was too young to have participated in the communist regime, but she had felt the effects. It had affected her family life. I did not find out the details, but I gathered that she had had an unhappy upbringing, including a couple of years in an orphanage. She was still living with her family at the age of 25 in spite of constant fights with her father – she came in with a black eye one day. The

trouble was that there were not enough houses or flats, so people had to live with their families until they married.

It had also affected her education. She was not from a peasant family, so she was not considered politically reliable, and this meant that she was not allowed to do an English degree. She had found a way around that though. She had signed up for the much less popular Chinese degree, and had done English as a subsidiary subject.

I lent her Olivia Manning's novel about being in Romania in 1939. It would give her a non-communist view of history, I thought. Certainly it would show that, whatever were the faults of communism, the people were a lot better off now than then. However, she gave it back to me the next day, saying that she had not read beyond Chapter 1.

'That woman does not write grammatical English.'

So much for Eng. Lit.

We went up to the north of the country for a couple of days. I was greeted with great interest because I was the first westerner they had seen here since the end of the war.

I took the opportunity to visit a fifth century Byzantine church, with paintings of the fall of Constantinople on the outside. I was drinking in the atmosphere when a nun came up and spoke to Maria. We were invited to meet the mother superior of the convent attached to the church.

We went in to the refectory and I felt an instant peace. It was a high vaulted room, with gentle window arches in its thick walls. The walls and roof were whitewashed, the refectory table black oak.

I drank a glass of wine while the nuns, watching their first foreigner curiously, sipped their water.

The Mother Superior felt that with the fall of the Ceaucescu regime she could say what she really felt about communism.

## Interpreters

“They were terrible. They had no respect for religion. They confiscated nearly all our land, leaving us with just 50 hectares. It is hardly enough to keep us alive. What is it like in England?”

I explained that Henry VIII had done a much more thorough job on the convents and monasteries five hundred years ago. Then we switched to safer subjects.

A bell rang, and the nuns started slipping out, evidently for a service, so we said our goodbyes.

I saw Maria was in tears.

“It is so beautiful, so peaceful! I want to stay and be a nun.”

I grabbed her quickly and pushed her into the car. I did not want to be left in a remote Romanian village without an interpreter.

2004 words