“The interpreter of horrors”: The interpreter Wera Kapkajew at the First Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–1965)

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Abstract
The three trials of SS camp personnel, held in Frankfurt am Main in the mid-1960s, represent a key moment in the development of public awareness of and attitudes towards the Holocaust in West and East Germany. The involvement of several hundred witnesses, many of whom were survivors, from across the world and collectively speaking 11 different languages, brought home the international scale of the genocide and drew attention to the individual quality of the witnesses’ voices as they told their stories. The only interpreter at the trial who attracted public attention for her work and who left a substantial trace in the archival record was the Polish-Russian-German interpreter Wera Kapkajew, who also accompanied the court on its visit to the Auschwitz complex. In contrast to the other interpreters, her work and biography attracted journalistic interest and she was singled out for praise by court personnel and witnesses: in particular, she is praised for conveying the nuances of the witness’ voices, rather than just the content of their testimony. This article explores Kapkajew’s contribution to the trial proceedings and what happens when an interpreter’s work becomes visible in a Holocaust trial.

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Introduction
Of all the translators and interpreters who were employed by the court during the three trials of Auschwitz personnel in Frankfurt in the mid-1960s, only one has left any substantial trace in the archival record. Wera Kapkajew, who translated and interpreted between German, Russian, and Polish, attained minor celebrity among observers of the trial and journalists who were searching for interesting background stories and personalities to write about. For the most part, the 16 interpreters who translated between the 11 different languages in which witness statements were given were effectively invisible: there is no commentary on their work unless something is perceived to have gone wrong, and the official transcripts of the trial and records of pre-trial interrogations barely acknowledge their presence. They are also largely absent from the extensive press commentary on the trial.

This is perhaps surprising given that in the courtroom the interpreters were not hidden away in a booth or a separate room, heard only via headphones, as they had been at Nuremberg or the Eichmann trial, but sat directly next to the witness in open court, visible and audible to everyone. What this does show is how little attention is paid to questions of translating and interpreting, even when it is happening right before our eyes. In the case of Kapkajew, however, we are able to follow the interpreter’s work as recordings of much of the trial testimony are available. The recordings have made audible the voices of many of the participants in the first trial, in all their immediacy and linguistic variety: they are a largely untapped source of linguistic data about how the witnesses, defendants, interpreters, and other trial participants performed their roles and interacted. Preserved and curated by the Fritz Bauer Institut, Frankfurt, the recordings form part of the extensive archive of the trial, which was awarded UNESCO status in 2017. The archive has been digitised via the Hessian State Archive, and the many hours of taped testimony are freely available through the website of the Fritz Bauer Institut (see Renz, 2009).

As evidenced in the archival record, Kapkajew was the only interpreter who attracted public attention. But what kind of attention was it? In January 1965, the Frankfurter Rundschau published a substantial interview with her by Uwe-Jens Petersen, which talks about her work and comments on her celebrity:

Wer vor bald einem Jahr [. . .] die ersten polnischen Zeugen des Auschwitz-Prozesses vors Schwurgericht treten sah, dem mochte wohl eine Frau aufgefallen sein, die da, zierlich im schwarzen Kostüm, daherkam. Die Zeugen aber und die Frau mußten Namen, Herkunft und Beruf angeben, und wir erfahren, „sie” heißt Wera Kapkajew, ist Dolmetscherin und wohnt in Frankfurt. Inzwischen wurde die Zahl der polnischen, aber auch russischen Zeugen Legion— und Frau Kapkajew verdichtete wortgewandt, damit in unserer Sprache das lebendig wurde, was in fremden Lauten gesprochen wurde: die Angst, die tausendfache, das Grauen. Der von nackten Backsteinwänden widerhallende Entsetzensschrei Auschwitz. Wera Kapkajew übersetzt nicht nur Wort für Wort, sondern auch die Stimmungen. Bis hinan zum Zorn. Bis hinab zu den Tränen. (Petersen, 1965, p. 264)
[Anyone who a year ago [. . .] watched the first Polish witnesses in the Auschwitz Trial appearing before the court may well have noticed a woman coming in, delicate in a black outfit. The witnesses and the woman had to state their name, place of origin and profession, and we learned that “she” is Wera Kapkajew, an interpreter, resident in Frankfurt. Since then the number of Polish as well as Russian witnesses has become legion—and Frau Kapkajew translated articulately into German, so that the words spoken in foreign sounds came to life in our language: the fear, a thousand times over, the horror. Auschwitz, the cry of terror echoing from naked brick walls. Wera Kapkajew not only translates word for word, but also the moods. All the way up to anger. All the way down to tears.]

The headline dubs her “die Dolmetscherin des Grauens” [the interpreter of horrors], identifying her person clearly not with the court or the legal system, but with the material she has to translate and the experiences of the witnesses. There is more to her role here than simply translating evidence: also she mediates the experience of Auschwitz and the feelings connected with it to an audience well beyond the courtroom.

It is also clear that her professional activity had a significant effect on the proceedings themselves, beyond the role of a neutral servant of the court. The archival record shows that the court initially struggled to find interpreters who were able to deal with the demands of the material and who had appropriate professional training: at one point, the prosecution counsel Georg Friedrich Vogel complained that they had tried out six Czech interpreters before they found one who they could work with (Vernehmung des Zeugen Alexander Princz, 1964).

Although Kapkajew was not the only Polish-German interpreter employed by the court, she established herself quickly as the interpreter of choice for both Polish- and Russian-speaking witnesses, and whose work was respected by both prosecution and defence in the highly charged atmosphere of a trial with far-reaching political implications. For example, presiding judge Hans Hofmeyer asked for her by name when things went awry with the interpreting during the questioning of the survivor Simon Gotland—“Wäre vielleicht die Frau Kapkajew zu erreichen?” [Is Frau Kapkajew perhaps available?]—indicating that she has attained a specific status in the courtroom (Vernehmung des Zeugen Simon Gotland, 1964).

The archival record of the trial contains a long sequence of correspondence (Kostenband für Frau Kapkajew) concerning Kapkajew’s rate of hourly pay for interpreting: she was paid significantly more than the other interpreters. The record (Kostenband, p. 37) documents Hofmeyer’s support for this pay differential: “The work of the trial would have been in doubt without her participation.” The handwritten draft of this statement starts with the word “Tätigkeit” [activity], which is crossed through and replaced with “Mitwirkung” [collaboration, participation, contribution] acknowledging a level of co-responsibility for making the trial possible, which is unusual for an interpreter (Kostenband, p. 38). I discuss these documents in more detail below, as they provide important insights into the status of interpreting at the trial.

The comments are a strange mixture of acknowledging her professionalism and expertise and characterising her as a focus for the emotional experience of listening to a witness’ voice. Once an interpreter becomes visible, then much discursive energy needs to be expended on making her transparent: this explains the emphasis on her ability to imitate the witnesses so that her voice merges with theirs. This enables listeners to
establish a direct, authentic, and emotional connection with the witnesses, without worrying about complex questions of mediation or the construction of sources.

Within the developing research literature on interpreting in concentration camps and post-Nazi trials (see Gaiba, 1998; Tryuk, 2015; Wolf, 2016), Tryuk (2015) has proposed a useful model for interpreting analysis that foregrounds the interpreter’s need to establish and maintain trust within a complex system of power dynamics, potentially clashing demands and constant monitoring. This article explores how these issues are negotiated in evaluative discourses about interpreting within and beyond the trial, and aims to prompt further research on the connection between such evaluative discourses and interpreters’ actual practice.

I explore a range of commentaries on Kapkajew’s professional activity at the First Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–1965), with a view to understanding how her practice as interpreter was viewed by the trial personnel, witnesses, and external commentators. I show how the interpreter negotiated competing pressures at a time of intense public interest in the voices of Holocaust survivors. A full analysis of her interpreting practice using the recordings of the trial testimony is beyond the scope of this essay; instead, I explore how Kapkajew skilfully exploited her own status at the Frankfurt Trial to promote and defend her professional practice. This will lay the groundwork for further investigation of interpreting at the trial.

**Interpreting context: The trial**

The First Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, which ran from 20 December 1963 to 19 August 1965, was the largest criminal trial in the history of the Federal Republic, with 22 former SS camp personnel and one former prisoner functionary on the stand. Of the 418 witnesses called, including 249 former prisoners, many travelled from the United States, Israel, and other European countries to give testimony. The sheer number of survivor-witnesses, the emotional authenticity of their speech and the direct dramatic confrontation of survivors with the accused drew attention to the individual voices and experiences of the survivors in a way that was new for the West German context. There is a significant body of historical and juridical research literature on the trial, including on the experiences of the witnesses (Braese, 2004; Gross et al., 2013; Horn, 2009; Pendas, 2006; Wittmann, 2005; Wojak, 2001), but there has as yet been no research on the translators and interpreters, despite their defining role in the formulation and mediation of witness testimony.

The Frankfurt trials were held at a time of intensifying attention to the quality of witness voices as a source of understanding in their own right beyond law or historiography (both of which, for different reasons, tended at the time to employ rules of evidence that treated victim testimony with suspicion). The strategy of the prosecution, as formulated by the head public prosecutor of the state of Hessen, Fritz Bauer, went beyond attaining concrete convictions, but also thought of the trial as an opportunity for public education about the Holocaust through direct encounters with the voices of the witnesses in confrontation with the perpetrators. The victim-witnesses themselves often had similar wishes, not only to speak to the court and obtain justice, but also a political desire to speak to a broader public, to pay tribute to dead family members and comrades, or simply to publicly express their own grief or suffering.
The court requires translators and interpreters to do its work, but it also requires translation to be invisible. Through the oath that they swear, the interpreters take it upon themselves to guarantee that the translated text has the status of an original utterance in accordance with the court’s rules and practice. This implies that the interpreter’s oath is as an institutionally sanctioned guarantee that translation is nothing to worry about, that product is everything, and process is of no interest. Those interested in the effect of witness’ voices beyond the concrete needs of the justice system shared with the court an interest in interpreting as an unproblematic process of transferring utterances from one language to another, but with a significant difference: interpreting is viewed as a direct, embodied voicing or channelling of the witness, a means of accessing specific qualities of voice and physical presence.

A total of 16 interpreters were used, interpreting from 10 different languages into German. The extensive archive of the First Frankfurt Trial, which includes correspondence about rates of pay and other relevant details, allows us to reconstruct the trial as a workplace for interpreters and translators, and to investigate the relationship between translation, interpreting, and witnessing in a concrete context. This is not the purpose of the archive, of course, and much translation and interpreting work is silenced or hidden beneath official stamps or approved translations of witness statements and other materials: as only spoken and written material in German counted as evidence, the translators’ and interpreters’ job was to make their own work disappear.

This had consequences for the evaluation of Kapkajew’s work: the institutional evaluation of her performance was based on her interpreting into German, although all the interpreting at the trial was bidirectional. This indicates that the interpreters’ role was viewed as assisting the court, rather than as supporting the witnesses. Witness’ accounts of Kapkajew’s performance provide a different standpoint on quality, which goes beyond linguistic competence, as I show below.

The interpreters were subject to a range of conflicting pressures: demonstrating their professionalism in conditions of precarious employment and uncertainty about qualifications and training; ensuring that they are seen to work in a way that supports the legitimacy of the trial and the institutions of justice; the responsibility of knowing that their voices were heard well beyond the walls of the courtroom; and an ethical responsibility towards the victim-witnesses who, in many cases, may not be able to communicate well with anyone else in the room. The interpreters must find ways of negotiating these pressures while translating material that is at times emotionally demanding, recounted by witnesses who may be disorientated, distressed, and on occasion incoherent.

The interpreter: Kapkajew’s trajectory and work

Wera Kapkajew (née Mirmann) was born in Poland to a Russian émigré family on 22 November 1918, 11 days after the founding of the Second Polish Republic. Having studied Law in Wilna/Vilnius (since 1922 part of Poland), Kapkajew ended up in Frankfurt after 1945, becoming a sworn translator and interpreter for the state of Hessen. There are significant gaps in what we know of her biography, which can be pieced together from obituaries published on her death in July 1984 (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung [FAZ], 1984; Kamiński et al., 1984; Kapkajew, 1984). In particular, details of how and when she
arrived in Germany are vague: her anti-Soviet background makes it likely that she and her family fled before the advancing Red Army. Oleg Bayda and Igor Petrov (2017) hint at a connection through her husband with Russian collaborators who fought alongside the Wehrmacht, eventually being absorbed into the Waffen-SS. There is more work to do in securing the evidence here, but it is clear why this connection would have been obfuscated after 1945. She has obviously had professional training in interpreting: her professional background in both Law and interpreting mark her out from the other interpreters at the trial.

After the first of the three Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, Kapkajew continued to translate and interpret for the Frankfurt court, working for the subsequent Auschwitz trials, as well as for the Central Office of the Land Judicial Authorities for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes. Her most significant translation project in the field of Holocaust testimony was Wieslaw Kielar’s important Polish text *Anus Mundi*, which she translated into German in 1979 (Kielar, 1979). Kielar had given testimony at the Third Frankfurt trial in 1968, so Kapkajew may have met him then.²

Kapkajew’s unusual status at the trial meant that she left a substantial trace in the archive: her work disrupted institutional assumptions about interpreters’ expertise, and so effort needed to be expended to re-establish institutional order. The most telling source is the individual register of expenses (*Kostenband*) for Kapkajew. This folder records her work from 10 April 1964, including translation, translation certification, and interpreting assignments and expenses from the court’s visit to the Auschwitz complex in December 1964. This material allowed me to reconstruct a full picture of her work and status within the economic and institutional structures of the trial, for which she worked until the final witnesses had been questioned. Especially valuable is the documentation of the internal discussion concerning her hourly rates, with correspondence between the trial Judge Hans Hofmeyer and the Frankfurt district auditor (Bezirksrevisor), which includes Kapkajew’s letter in support of her pay. This volume is a key source as it shows how discourses about interpreting interact with institutional structures and the economic value placed on professional interpreting activity. It also shows how Kapkajew was able to intervene in these structures, using her knowledge about them to influence them in her favour. It gives us fascinating insights into how interpreters’ work was assessed in relation to the voices of the witnesses in the trial and what difficulties were seen to be associated with conveying these individuals’ experiences.

Kapkajew’s exceptional status at the trial means that we are able to put together a more comprehensive picture of her professional activities than for the other translators and interpreters. She did work for the court during the pre-trial investigation, although it is not always possible to identify which translators and interpreters had been employed at this stage, including during the initial questioning of witnesses. Most of the Polish-German interpreting work at this preparatory stage of interviewing witnesses is done by another interpreter, Elisabeth Grimmeisen. In his introduction to the documentation of the trial, Hermann Langbein (1995, p. 16) suggests that the court initially had poor experiences with interpreters: “Die ersten Erfahrungen, die mit den Dolmetschern gemacht wurden, waren schlimm” [The initial experiences of working with interpreters were poor]. This suggests that Kapkajew and other more professional individuals were not always present from the beginning. Kapkajew’s name appears for the first time in the
trial archive on the pre-trial statement of the witness Leon Czechalski, who was interviewed on 16 May 1960 (Aussage des Zeugen Leon Czekalski). Her signature and stamp under the German transcript of his statement indicate her responsibility for the accuracy of the translation: as these pre-trial interviews were not recorded, there is no trace of Czechalski’s original speech in Polish.

The first mention of her name during the main public phase of the trial (Hauptverhandlung) comes during the reading on 13 March 1964 of the verdict of a Soviet tribunal against one of the accused, Oswald Kaduk. It is possible that this is the first time that she has been involved in the main proceedings, as her name is not generally known (Verlesung des Urteils zu Oswald Kaduk, 1964). The next time we can be sure that she was working for the trial is in April 1964, when she interprets the testimony of the survivor Stefan Boratyński. Although there is no recording of this testimony, her work with this witness is mentioned in the memoir of the East German prosecution counsel Friedrich Karl Kaul. I discuss his comments in the following section.

The earliest audio recording of her work is the recording of the testimony of Tadeusz Paczuła, on 30 April 1964. After this she appears regularly in support of testimonies by Polish- and Russian-speaking witnesses. The last Polish witness whose testimony she interpreted was Edward Burakowsky, on 26 April 1965; the last Soviet witness, for whom we have evidence of her work, was Pawel Stjenkin,3 on 2 November 1964, though she may also have interpreted for the final Soviet witness, Nikolaj Alexejew, 3 days later.

There are useful sources for her work accompanying the court’s trip to Auschwitz in December 1964. The trip is well documented in the archive (Lokaltermin in Auschwitz), and important historical research on the court’s visit gives us a fuller picture (Pendas, 2006, pp. 178–182; Steinbacher, 2001). As most of the Polish participants could speak German, she may have played only a supporting role in most cases. There is also evidence that she worked with the group of volunteers led by Emmi Bonhoeffer, who supported non-German witnesses during their time in Frankfurt.

In the following section, I read some of these sources alongside other texts that provide insights into the discourses about interpreting circulating within and beyond the institution of the court, to show how Kapkajew’s person took on a significance well beyond her role as language professional.

Public commentary on kapkajew’s work

Anthony Pym (1999) has suggested that theories of translation that circulate within and around the courtroom not only reflect interpretations and descriptions of practice, but also produce the reality of translation practice in this setting. This would be a useful subject for further research for this trial, given that we have an unusual amount of data at our disposal, and we can trace both pay structures and the real-time comments of trial personnel about the work of the interpreters and translators. My aim here is instead to show how attitudes towards interpreting and the interpreter intersect with thinking about Holocaust witnessing and the responsibilities of the listener: what does the person of the interpreter come to represent in this situation? And how can the interpreter work within and against these discourses to establish trust and justify her own professional practice?
I begin by looking at some of the public commentary on her work, as well as Kapkajew’s own public self-positioning. This is followed by comments on the court’s internal discussion of translation and interpreting and the ambivalent status of the translator/interpreter as “Sachverständige/r” [expert witness], concluding with an account of how Kapkajew exploited her status to justify a higher rate of pay.

One thing that commentators on Kapkajew’s work agree on is that she voices the witnesses, rather than simply translating the content of their words. Hermann Langbein (1995, pp. 16–17), the Austrian General Secretary of the International Auschwitz Committee, whose efforts were instrumental in locating many of the witnesses and persuading them to testify, comments on what he views as Kapkajew’s uncanny ability to inhabit the voices of the witnesses:

_Frau Kapkajew hat nicht nur sehr korrekt und fließend übersetzt, sie besitzt auch die Gabe, Ton und Nuancen in einer Weise wiederzugeben, die dem Zuhörer den Eindruck vermittelt, den Zeugen selbst sprechen zu hören. Der Vorsitzende hat ihr nach der Vernehmung des letzten polnischen Zeugen mit warmen Worten für ihre Hilfe gedankt._

[Frau Kapkajew’s translations were very accurate and fluent, but not only that, she has the gift of reproducing the tone of voice and nuances in a way that gives the listener the impression of hearing the witness himself speak. After the last Polish witness had been questioned, the Presiding Judge gave her warm words of thanks for her assistance.]

A commentator for the Dutch news programme, _Achter het Nieuws_ (Wage, 1965), formulates it like this: “The survivors were able to relate all these terrible things thanks to the interpreter Wera Kapkajew, who slipped into the skin of 80 Polish witnesses.” The last surviving member of the prosecution team, Gerhard Wiese, remembered Kapkajew in an interview he gave to Polish journalists in 2019:

_Świadkowie, obojętnie czy z Polski, Rosji lub Izraela, znaleźli się po raz pierwszy w Niemczech, słyszeli język niemiecki, a to, o czym chcieli zapomnieć, musieli ożywić w swoich zeznaniach. Ich reakcje były różne. Jedni mówili krótko i zwięźle, jak wcześniej do protokołu, inni nie mogli powstrzymać szlochu, musieliśmy przerywać rozprawy. Pomocna była tłumaczka z języka polskiego i rosyjskiego, Wera Kapkajew. Nie tylko tłumaczyła wypowiedzi, ale dopasowywała swój głos, by jak najlepiej oddać to, co powiedział świadek._ (Domagała-Pereira & Dudek, 2019)

[The witnesses, whether from Poland, Russia, or Israel, found themselves in Germany for the first time, heard the German language, and had to revive in their testimony things that they had wanted to forget. Their reactions varied. Some spoke briefly and concisely, as they had when giving previous statements, others could not hold back their sobbing, and we had to interrupt the hearing. A translator from Polish and Russian, Wera Kapkajew, was helpful. She not only translated the statements but adjusted her voice to best reflect what the witness said.]

Here, Wiese clearly connects Kapkajew’s skills to the difficulties that the witnesses experienced arriving in Germany and reliving their trauma: her perceived ability to ventriloquise is a solution to this problem, enabling the court to understand what the witnesses are expressing in their testimony. She conveys both the difficulty of giving
testimony and the factual content of the statement. It is notable that Wiese views the process of giving testimony as "reviving" (ożywić) the experience, a view that has consequences for the role and ethical responsibilities of the interpreter, as well as the listener: if an interpreter imitates the voice and manner of the witness, then we as listeners are able to share the experience.

The most dramatic example of this view of interpreting comes in the interview with Kapkajew by Uwe-Jens Petersen that I cited at the outset. Kapkajew here becomes a proxy for the experience of listening to the witness: the listener’s feelings about what he is hearing are projected onto her voice and body. Petersen’s emotional response to the testimony comes at the expense of listening to the content of the statements: Kapkajew translates “moods” (Stimmungen) and is able to transmit a sense of the impossibility of speech. Despite Petersen’s obvious political sympathy for the witnesses, the view of language and testifying on display here is problematic: the witnesses speak “in foreign/strange/alien sounds’ (“in fremden Lauten”), which gives the impression of an alien world. The witnesses’ experiences “come alive” “in our language”: languages represent different worlds of experience, rather than potentially overlapping or shared areas of contact and communication. The interpreter, then, bridges an otherwise unbridgeable gap between the experience and the listener.

The emotional language and emphasis on experience and voicing serve to reassure us that translation is not a problem to be concerned about: Petersen preserves the sense of the gap between the listener’s understanding and the witnesses’ experience while positioning the interpreter as an assurance that the listener can still access the experience. Her voice and body short-circuit the gap, meaning that concrete issues of translation, expression, and professional practice need not disturb the listener’s impression of authenticity and immediacy.

Other detailed accounts were written by journalists such as Bernd Naumann of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, who accompanied the process throughout, publishing articles that documented direct exchanges written up from his stenographic notes (Naumann, 2013). Interpreting is not mentioned in the collected documentation of his trial reports, first published in 1965, but Naumann lavished praise on Kapkajew in a separate article from November 1964, though his aim seems to be directed more at criticising the quality of the Czech interpreters than at discussing Kapkajew’s practice specifically:

Am nächsten Zeugen [. . .] erweist sich, welch glänzende Rolle die Dolmetscherin für Polnisch und Russisch Frau Kapkajew in diesem Prozeß spielt. Ihre schnelle und auch längere Passagen virtuos meisternde Übersetzungskunst wird immer dann so ganz deutlich, wenn andere Dolmetscher die tschechoslowakischen Zeugen interpretieren. Bisher jedenfalls hat noch kein einziger tschechischer Dolmetscher Frau Kapkajew auch nur annähernd erreicht und es war doch immerhin an diesem Tag der Lektor einer Universität tätig. (Naumann, 1964, p. 19)

[The next witness statement [. . .] showed what an outstanding role was being played by the Polish and Russian interpreter Frau Kapkajew. Her translation skills, rapid and able to deal in a virtuosic way with long passages, become all the more obvious when compared to other interpreters who translate for the Czechoslovak witnesses. Up to now, there has been no Czech interpreter who even approaches Frau Kapkajew’s ability, despite the fact that one of them was a university language specialist.]
Naumann here participates in another of the discourses of interpreting that accompanied the trial, namely, the question of the training, qualifications, and status of trial interpreters: in such an unusually public arena for a trial, with so many witnesses speaking such a range of languages, this becomes an urgent issue. It is likely that many of the interpreters at the trial—especially those who interpreted between German and Czech, Hungarian or Romanian—were post-war refugees or expellees from German-speaking populations, who may not have had formal qualifications in interpreting or a legal background. There is archival evidence that the West-German judicial authorities considered the problem of interpreting seriously in the 1960s, especially given the need to provide interpreting services for labour migrants. Although beyond the scope of the present article, the link between the trial, labour migration, mass expulsion, and attitudes towards translation and interpreting is envisaged as an area for further investigation.5

One commentary that does look beyond either vague comments on “skill” or “fluency” or ideas of voicing or emotional identification comes from the East-German prosecutor, Friedrich Karl Kaul. The prosecution team, though based in the West-German state of Hessen, included representation from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as counsel for the Nebenkläger (plaintiffs) resident in the GDR. Kaul was a well-known personality in both German states: a Jewish lawyer who had fled the Third Reich after being interned in a concentration camp in 1935, Kaul had joined the KPD in 1945, settling in East Berlin, but had succeeded in being admitted to legal practice in both East and West. He participated in a number of high-profile political trials in West Germany, ensuring that they could be instrumentalised for propaganda purposes by the East German government.

In his memoir of the trial, Kaul provides a rare description of the dynamics of the interpreting situation, acknowledging that the witnesses’ words are not heard directly: his depiction of the interaction between the participants during the testimony of the Polish witness Stefan Boratyński creates a sense of the human drama of the situation. He even acknowledges—with a certain sense of irony—her justification in interrupting him when he is in full flow: “Die wendige Dolmetscherin unterbricht mich durch ein Zeichen ihrer erhobenen Hand. Flink, ohne die geringste Stoppung, übersetzt sie, was ich gesagt habe” [The nimble interpreter interrupts me with a sign of her raised hand. Deftly, and without the slightest hesitation, she translates what I have been saying].

Kaul uses vocabulary suggesting quick-wittedness and flexibility (“flink,” “gewandt,” “wendig,” suggesting deftness, skill, agility, nimbleness, versatility) and often shows how the instructions of the court to the witness are transmitted through her: “Die Dolmetscherin unterrichtet den Zeugen, was von ihm verlangt wird” [The interpreter instructs the witness in what is required of him]. In one dramatic sequence, she is shown to follow the witness towards the defendants, where he is to identify Robert Mulka, the former adjutant of the camp commander Rudolf Höss:

Plötzlich geht es wie ein Ruck durch Boratynskis [sic] schlanken Körper. Vor dem Angeklagten Mulka bleibt er stehen, deutet auf ihn, spricht einige polnische Worte. Die Dolmetscherin, die ihm gefolgt war, dreht sich zum Richtertisch und übersetzt: ‘Dies hier ist der Adjutant des Kommandanten Höß.’ (Dobrawa, 2013, pp. 77–78)
[Suddenly, Boratyński’s slim body jerks. He stops before the accused Mulka, points at him, speaks some Polish words. The interpreter, who had followed him, turns to the judges’ desk and translates: “This is the adjutant of Commandant Höss.”]

Here, the key moment of eyewitness identification is relayed through the interpreter: Boratyński speaks incomprehensibly while looking at the accused, and it is Kapkajew who relays the information to the court. In other words, she acts as a mediator between the worlds of the witness and the court, and also as a person who makes the testimony possible in the first place. It is notable that Kaul has no compunction in drawing attention to the role of the interpreter in determining the pace and structure of the testimony: here, interpreting is in the service of factual truth rather than emotional experience, and so the interpreter’s structuring role can be acknowledged.

In these commentaries, Kapkajew often becomes a focus for ways of thinking about the emotional experience of listening to victim testimony; there is a sense of fascination with her art and skill, and the way she performs the role, but without questioning the possibility of accessing the experience of the witness. The witnesses are viewed as fundamentally passive or inarticulate, and she enables the testimony to take place, thereby bridging a gap that is not just linguistic.

**Witnesses’ commentaries on Kapkajew’s work**

The few trial witnesses who have spoken about the experience of having their words interpreted describe the process in a different way: they have the active role, and they exploit the situation of being interpreted to their own advantage. They describe their role as testifying in the trial, as well as testifying to the Holocaust. They are not helpless and inarticulate, but know exactly what they are doing (see Von Plato, 2001). In interviews with the historian Dagi Knellesen, the survivors and former Frankfurt witnesses Anna Palarczyk and Ignacy Golik mention Kapkajew in their memories of the experience of testifying. Golik (2005) uses Kapkajew to structure a story of being surprised by his own agency: he remembers her doing the interpreting and had always assumed he was speaking Polish. When he finally heard the recording of the testimony, he was surprised to discover that he had spoken German most of the time:

*Menschenskind, dass hat der Golik in Deutsch erzählt vor dem Gericht. No, das hab ich vergessen! Ich dachte, das war damals, bei mir war ganze Zeit war die, die Dame, die Wera Kapkajew und dachte, dass sie das übersetzt hatte. Und jetzt sehe ich, dass ich da, fast drei Viertel hab ich Deutsch.*

[Good heavens, and Golik told this whole story to the court in German. Well, I have forgotten that! I thought, that was back then, next to me the whole time was the, the lady, Wera Kapkajew, and I thought that she had translated it. And now I see that I, almost three quarters of it was me (speaking) German.]

His memory of the situation had focused his emotions—perhaps anxiety or a sense of loss of control—onto the memorable person of the interpreter and had erased his agency...
at the time: there is a pleasing sense of pride in discovering his achievement in speaking German in the courtroom. One could speculate that the public portrayal of the witnesses as passive and helpless influenced this distorted memory: in her function as helper and enabler, the interpreter also stands for this definition of the role of witness as passive and inarticulate.

Anna Palarczyk (2005) remembers Kapkajew well, mentioning her in the context of feeling nervous about her testimony; Kapkajew is described as tidying up the testimony of the nervous witnesses:

> Und bei dem Tisch saß eine wunderbare Dolmetscherin, Wera Kapkajewa [sic], eine Frau, die ich nie vergessen werde. Die hat besser, besser übersetzt, als das gesprochen war. Obzwar das wahr war. Alles war wahr.

> Alles war richtig [. . .] Ich wurde und andere Zeuge, wir waren nervöser [. . .] Das was wir gesagt hat, haben, war, no, nicht gut! Und sie hat das alles schnell, sehr schnell in Ordnung gemacht und gut.

> Und es klang viel, viel besser gesagt, als von Autor gemacht.

[And at the table sat a wonderful interpreter, Wera Kapkajewa [sic], a woman who I will never forget. She translated better, better than it had been spoken. Although it was all true. All of it was true.

All was correct [. . .] I became—and other witnesses—we were nervous [. . .] What we said was, well, not good! And she quickly, very quickly put it all in order and well.

And it sounded much, much better than how the author had done it.]

Kapkajew is a reassuring presence, ensuring that the witnesses are able to communicate what they mean. For Palarczyk and the other witnesses for whom she speaks, their inarticulacy and difficulty in talking about their experiences is not the key. Their testimony is not “unspeakable”: they know what they want to say, but have difficulty saying it, and the interpreter speaks for them and makes it “better.”

Palarczyk also describes how she used the presence of the interpreter as a way of taking control of the situation and giving herself time to gather her thoughts. She tells the judge that she wants to speak Polish: she understands the German questions, but allowing the interpreter to translate gives her more time to consider the answer: “Und das war gute Methode. Ich hab’ etwas Zeit bekommen” (And that was a good method. I gained some time).

In both these cases, the witnesses stress their own agency and ability to exercise some control over the situation. They are active participants in the testimony situation, with their own goals, strategies, and pride in their achievements, whether it is speaking directly to the German audience in their own language or finding cunning ways to gain a small advantage in the questioning. Kapkajew plays an important role, but it is very different from that which she plays in the commentaries of the listeners to the testimonies.

Finally, memory of Kapkajew’s work plays a structuring role in the memoir of the former Soviet prisoner of war (POW) Andrei Pogozhev (2007, p. 157), who gave
evidence at the trial about the treatment of POWs at Auschwitz. Pogozhev structures his memoir of the camp around the experience of giving testimony at the trial, presenting his interpreter Kapkajew as both a guide and an emotional focus for the difficulty of speaking at the trial: “The face of the interpreter, Vera [sic], is the most animated. She’s nervous and taking it hard. Questions and answers find eloquent reflection on her face: expressing joy, indignation, anger, contempt, by turns.” His written testimony is unusual in that it is framed by an account of the trial, which triggers the memory of his experiences at Auschwitz; it is also unusual in that it focuses on translator-figures, such as Kapkajew in Frankfurt or the Russian-speaking Kapos who terrorise the Soviet prisoners in Auschwitz. All of these figures are anti-Bolshevik Nazi collaborators and traitors, but Pogozhev’s account performs a reconciliation with the émigré Kapkajew by describing her as a Soviet patriot abroad, and showing how she supports his testimony:

Vera loves the Motherland of her ancestors and feels keenly the tragic fate of those Russians killed in the concentration camp [. . .] She was firmly confident that we would speak up more strongly than previous witnesses; that our testimonies would be more convincing. (p. 158)

This is a way of talking indirectly about his own experiences as a returning POW himself persecuted as a traitor under Stalin, and foregrounding his own credentials as a fighter against fascism, both in the camp and in the courtroom.

Interestingly, none of these witness accounts places any emphasis on Kapkajew’s linguistic ability or professional skill; instead, a memory of her as a striking presence at the trial allows them, in their different ways, to reflect on questions of agency, communication, and the meaning of their act of witnessing. Far from portraying themselves as passive or helpless, reflection on the situation of working with an interpreter has allowed them to present themselves—at least in retrospect—as active participants in the trial, in control of their own testimony.

Institutional views of Kapkajew’s practice

Throughout the proceedings, there were regular challenges to the interpreters’ work (as in the case of the Czech interpreters), though there were no direct allegations of bias during the testimony. Instead, the competence of interpreters was challenged by both defence and prosecution at times. In other words, both sides shared an understanding of the difficulty of the work, and demonstrated a lack of trust in some of the interpreters, especially where members of the prosecution or defence teams could speak (or believed they could speak) the language concerned. Kapkajew’s work is occasionally challenged, but is for the most part treated with respect. Unlike some of the other interpreters, she displays a confidence in her ability to respond to any challenges that arise, and to correct herself where necessary: this demonstrates a sense of security in her own status and also indispensability within the institution, which is reflected in the higher rate of pay that she had negotiated.

There is one moment in the documentation in which a member of the defence team hints at bias, in an attempt to undermine trust in Kapkajew’s work. In his final plea on behalf of the defendant Emil Hantl, Herbert Naumann raises the issue of trust in interpreting: as only the translated text may count as evidence, any possibility of translation
errors must lead to the testimony being discounted. Naumann justifies his attempt to undermine trust with an anecdote from the court’s trip to Poland, rather than with a concrete example:

*Other sources of error, which may lead to inaccurate conclusions, must be taken into account. Consider also possible translation errors. If, arising from a reason like this, there is the slightest doubt about a statement, then it may not be used in evidence [. . .] Permit me to recall that the otherwise excellent Polish interpreter is not entirely free from error. During the opening session in Auschwitz, she had to be corrected by Professor Sehn. The interpreter had translated the utterance of Professor Sehn referring to legal precedents in this way: “And some also show the correct way.” Professor Sehn corrected this immediately. He had said, “And some also show the way.” That is something different.*

The actual sense and context of this translation problem is somewhat obscure, and it has not been possible to corroborate it with other documentation: the obscurity is a deliberate strategy on Naumann’s part to make an insinuation about the unreliability of the evidence. It is clearly a small issue, with Jan Sehn, a fluent German speaker who had led the interrogation of the former commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, during his trial in Poland, making a correction to avoid a legal problem. Nevertheless, Naumann uses this anecdote—which is beyond the main proceedings of the trial and therefore irrelevant—to question Kapkajew’s competence in translating legal terminology. As it happens, Kapkajew herself seems to have thought that Sehn was a secret police informer (Pendas, 2006, p. 178).

Urgent issues of institutional trust become clear when we examine the way that Kapkajew’s work is viewed and valued by the court, and the reasons given for her superior institutional status when compared with the other interpreters. The pay and institutional status of court interpreters were regulated by the law governing the remuneration of witnesses and “Sachverständige” [expert witnesses], the Gesetz über die Entschädigung von Zeugen und Sachverständigen (ZuSEG, 1957). The Frankfurt trial made extensive use of the testimony of historians as expert witnesses, in particular in drawing up the indictment. As this material, representing alongside the extensive judgements a thorough account of the history and functioning of the Auschwitz complex, was to be published, the prosecution hoped that it would serve as a source of public education beyond its purely judicial function (Gross et al., 2013; Wojak, 1999).

In certain defined contexts the work of expert witnesses can be counted as evidence at trial. The ambiguous status of translators and interpreters within this system arises from the fact that their work does not count as evidence, even though their employment
is governed by the same law. However, the first time that Kapkajew’s name is mentioned during the court proceedings comes in a discussion drawing on her linguistic and legal expertise in translating and, significantly, correctly understanding the previous verdict of a Soviet military tribunal. This calls into question a strict distinction between translators/interpreters and other expert witnesses (Verlesung des Urteils zu Oswald Kaduk, 1964).

The ZuSEG (§16 [3]) set rates for written translation per line and allowed for a higher rate for specialist technical or medical texts or “for other especially difficult translations”; it determined the hourly rate for interpreters in line with the rate for expert witnesses. However, the phrase “[i]nterpreters are paid in line with expert witnesses” (§16 [2]) makes clear that they are not viewed as expert witnesses themselves. The hourly rate was set between DM7.50 and DM15 per hour, depending on the “level of specific expertise” or “difficulty of the task” (§3 [2]). The precise rate of pay is set by the court, but the expert witness and the state have a right to appeal (§16).

The only circumstances in which these rates can be exceeded is when it can be shown that the individual has suffered an unreasonable (“nicht zumutbar”) loss of earnings owing to the duration of the work, or has had to spend a significant amount of time engaging with scientific or scholarly material (§3 [3]). Qualifications or experience do not play a role in determining the rate of pay, and emotional stress or other potential psychological effects are not mentioned explicitly.

Kapkajew’s Kostenband reveals something intriguing in this context. Her work for the court in April and May 1964 began at the highest rate of DM15 per hour (plus standard sums for travel and other expenses), but from June she was paid DM20 per hour, a sum that was not allowed for in the law, and that exceeded what the other interpreters received. The other registers of expenses for the trial (HHStAW, Abt. 461, Nr. 37638/190–211) show that all the other interpreters were paid between DM7.50 and DM15. There is no indication of the reasons for this difference, although it may have to do with perceptions of the “difficulty” of the language or the specific loss of earnings calculated for that individual. There is unfortunately no documentation of the thinking behind the court’s decision to raise the hourly rate to DM20: it was clearly taken very quickly, once Kapkajew’s expertise and value to the court became clear. However, once the trial was over, the Bezirksrevisor (district auditor) wrote to the court on 29 September 1966 with an objection to the unusual hourly rate. This correspondence is very revealing for what it says about specific language ideologies and views of the professional status of interpreters and what their work actually involved. The auditor writes that the highest rate of DM15 is allowable because of the difficulty and rarity of Polish, as well as the specialist knowledge required for the work, but that the law does not allow a higher rate (Kostenband, p. 36).

In his handwritten draft reply of 15 November, Judge Hofmeyer gives a detailed and sympathetic account of the professional difficulty of the work and the extent of Kapkajew’s contribution to the trial and shows an awareness of the linguistic complexity of many of the witness statements. Hofmeyer begins by noting that Kapkajew’s work for the court meant that she had been unable to pursue her usual employment for many months. He continues,
Zum übrigen [sic] ging die Leistung der Dolm. weit über das normale Mass hinaus. Sie musste dem Gericht den wahren Inhalt von Aussagen übermitteln, die oft in Dialekten und von Menschen vorgebracht wurden, die auch der poln. Sprache kaum mächtig waren [jiddisch]. Die Dolm. hat aber auch auf Grund ihrer jurist. Vorbildung die Bedeutung und Zielrichtung der Fragen nicht nur verstanden, sondern auch den Verhörpersonen entsprechend erklären können, wodurch sie dem Gericht einen nicht hoch genug zu wertenden Dienst erwiesen hat. Ihre Leistung und der Wert ihrer Tätigkeit für das Gericht sind nach § 3 Abs. III Ziff. a ZuSEG einzustufen, da ohne ihre Tätigkeit [crossed out in original] Mitwirkung das Verfahren in Frage gestellt gewesen wäre, wie die Erfahrungen mit anderen Dolm. erwiesen haben. (Kostenband, pp. 37–38)

[Beyond this, the quality of the interp.'s work far exceeded the normal extent. She had to convey the true sense of statements that were often in dialect or given by (Yiddish-speaking) people who were barely able to speak Polish. Because of her previous legal training, the interp. not only understood the meaning and intention of the questions, but was also able to explain them to the person being questioned, in so doing providing an invaluable service to the court. The quality and value of her work for the court thus fall under the provisions of § 3 Abs. III Ziff. a ZuSEG, as without her activity [crossed out in original] participation the work of the trial would have been in doubt, as was shown by experiences with other interps.]

Hofmeyer draws attention to the linguistic difficulty of the work, with the interpreter having to deal with witnesses who could or would not express themselves in a particular language, or in standard linguistic variants. This statement simplifies the complex situation in which the witnesses found themselves: the way they speak is seen as a sign of linguistic deficit for which the interpreter must compensate. In particular, the dismissive view of Yiddish as a sign of linguistic confusion or deficit tells us a lot about the language ideologies that characterised the court’s work.

Hofmeyer also draws attention to Kapkajew’s legal training, which set her apart from the other interpreters. Qualifications and training are not mentioned in the regulations as grounds for elevated rates of pay, but Hofmeyer’s letter contains an implicit critique of this absence: only her legal training enabled her to perform as required in the role. Hofmeyer’s letter demonstrates a genuine appreciation of the skill of a good interpreter, although it is notable that the responsibility of unsuccessful interpreting lies clearly with the interpreter: the court requires smoothly operating communication of a particular kind, and is not prepared to consider that its own communication practices, and in particular its attitudes towards witnesses who are victims of genocide, may be part of the problem. The interpreter’s job is to deal with the linguistic deficit of the witness and to convey the “den wahren Inhalt von Aussagen” [the true sense of statements]. This statement makes clear that the court placed no value on the tone of voice or manner of speech of the witness, and on the interpreter’s skill in conveying this. The potential emotional load on the interpreter is also not mentioned here, as “the difficulty of the task” (ZuSEG §3 [2]) seems to refer only to technical, rather than emotional difficulty.

As the District Auditor does not seem to have accepted the court’s arguments, Kapkajew herself was required to write in support of her case. The letter, which I discuss below, shows her skilful self-positioning within and against the current institutional view of interpreting.
Kapkajew on her interpreting practice

As far as can be established, Kapkajew was the only interpreter who left public comments on her work, in interviews and correspondence. By contrast, the other interpreters leave traces of their thinking about their work only in the courtroom recordings, when they are responding to challenges or problems, but have left no other traces beyond these courtroom recordings. In this section, I delve into three examples, to show how Kapkajew positioned herself within the contrasting views of interpreting that I set out above: her interview with Uwe-Jens Petersen of the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper, her interview for a Dutch television documentary, and her letter to the District Auditor in support of her higher rate of pay.

In Petersen’s interview (1965, p. 265), Kapkajew is quoted in support of her dramatic understanding of interpreting:

“Die vielen polnischen Zeugen,” bedenke ich noch, “da wird doch auch Ihre Arbeit Routine.” ‘Nein,’ meint Deutschlands derzeit wohl prominenteste Dolmetscherin nachdenklich, ‘nein, ich habe bei jedem neuen Zeugen Angst, ob ich den Ton seiner Stimme richtig treffe.”

[“With all the many Polish witnesses,” I reflect, “your work must just become routine.” ‘No,’ says Germany’s currently most famous interpreter thoughtfully, “no, I worry with every new witness about whether I catch the tone of his voice correctly.”]

It is notable that she is far more cautious in her description of her practice than the author, but situates herself within a discourse about interpreting that stresses imitation, as well as anxiety about success. It is not clear here why she should need to catch the tone of voice, given that the court does not work with this requirement.

She takes this view of interpreting the witness further in her German-language interview for the Dutch news programme Achter het Nieuws, broadcast on 19 August 1965 (Wage, 1965), while Judge Hofmeyer was still summing up his verdicts—the trial closed the following day. She talks about the necessity to preserve a professional distance while working, and the resulting psychological and physical exhaustion:

Am Abend, wenn Sie nach Hause kommen, wenn Sie acht Stunden dolmetschen, wenn Sie ein bestimmtes Schicksal mit erleben, und wiedergeben, in dem Moment spüren Sie nichts, Sie sind doch der Mensch, der das tut, also Sie erleben das und geben wieder [. . .] Und dann kommt man nach Hause, und schaltet ab, und da ist man wie eine ausgepresste Zitrone, es gibt keinen anderen Ausdruck dafür.

[In the evening, when you come home, when you are interpreting for eight hours, when you experience a particular person’s fate with them, and convey it, at that moment you feel nothing. You are the person who is doing that, so you experience it and convey it [. . .] And then one comes home and switches off, and then one feels like a squeezed lemon, there is no other way of saying it.]

Aside from the physical exhaustion of 8-hr shifts, her choice of words to describe the psychological effects of interpreting is telling: the repetition of “erleben” [experience] shows an understanding of her work as sharing an experience with the witness. There is
also a telling switch between “Sie” [you] and “man” [one] in her story, suggesting complex processes of distancing and self-observation. She imitates the vocal performance of the witness, a process that is only possible if she is able to “get under their skin” and become the witness:

*Muss musste mit den Zeugen—sich nicht mit den Zeugen identifizieren, ist es vielleicht zu viel, aber in den Zeugen hineinschlüpfen, und um möglichst ganz der Zeuge zu sein, mit seinen Worten wiedergeben, genau so wie er; genau wie er bestimmte Ausdrücke wählen, mit Spott in der Stimme oder mit Ablehnung in der Stimme, mit Leidenschaft oder umgekehrt mit einer sehr großen Distance [sic].*

[With the witnesses, one had to—not to identify with them, that is probably going too far, but to slip into [the skin of] the witness, and to completely become the witness as much as possible, to convey everything with his words, exactly as he does, choosing particular expressions exactly as he does, with derision in the voice or disapproval in the voice, with passion or the opposite, with a very great distance.]

She is careful to avoid the idea of “identifying with the witnesses,” an understandable caution when thinking about people whose experiences we cannot really share. Her answers show that she has ethical doubts about the temptation to claim the position of the victim to talk about oneself. Nevertheless, her words show a tension between this ethical uncertainty and a view of professional practice that goes beyond simply imitating the manner of the witness. She tells a remarkable story about developing sympathetic symptoms, which may give us an idea of the psychological pressure of the work, or how she interpreted symptoms of stress or sickness:

*Und sind Sie vielleicht auch krank geworden?*

*[Pause] Ja, und das war eine merkwürdige Geschichte gewesen, die ich ja . . . muss ja, ich muss diese Geschichte mit dem Prozess irgendwie in Verbindung setzen, weil ich mitten in der Arbeit eine Phlegmone bekam—eine Krankheit, die typisch ist für das Konzentrationslagerleben. Alle Zeugen berichteten, mal mehr oder weniger, über Phlegmonefälle, darüber dass sie krank waren, oder dass der andere daran starb. Irgendwie war immer von Phlegmone die Rede, und ich bekam 1964, ohne ein Konzentrationslager hinter mir zu haben und ohne in einem Lager zu sein, plötzlich 42 Fieber, so am Arm Blutvergiftung und 4 Wochen Krankenhaus.*

*[Pause] Yes, and that was a remarkable story, that I—have to, I have to connect it in some way with the trial, because while I was working I developed a phlegmon—a condition that is typical for life in the concentration camps. All of the witnesses reported, some more and some less, about cases of phlegmon, that they were sick, or that someone else died of it. In some way there was always talk of phlegmon, and in 1964, without having been through a concentration camp or being in a camp, I suddenly developed a 42-degree fever, blood poisoning in my arm, and was in hospital for 4 weeks.]

Responding to this story, the interviewer presses her on the question of identification:
Und so haben Sie sich mit diesen Leuten identifiziert, nicht?

Um Ihre erste Frage zu beantworten, so habe ich den Prozess mit... mit den Zeugen miterlebt und durchlebt.

[And in this way you identified with them, not so?]

To answer your first question, that was how I experienced and lived through the trial with the witnesses.]

The interviewer is clearly working towards a desire for identification with the witnesses, but Kapkajew carefully evades the question. It is not exactly clear which question she is referring to here (perhaps it has been edited out), but her insistence on words in the field “erleben/miterleben/durchleben” [experience/share an experience/live through] is striking: the interpreter vicariously experiences and lives through the trial with and for the witnesses. Perhaps this is the ethical core: it is not a question of claiming an illegitimate position as victim or being able to identify with the experience of Auschwitz, but instead sharing the experience of giving testimony as a form of solidarity. Avoiding the term “identification” used by the interviewer also shows a sensitivity to potential accusations of bias. In discussing her practice, she does not talk about her professional responsibility to the court, but instead positions herself within a broader social discourse about authenticity and the voice of the witness, with an accompanying sense of how problematic this is.

Her self-positioning is different in her response to the District Auditor’s objection to her rate of pay: here, she shows herself able to negotiate the internal, administrative discourses of the legal system as well as public interest in the witnesses. Her letter on 12 December 1966 is a masterpiece of rhetoric and legal positioning, and is also very revealing about her view of the value of the interpreter’s work and how it should be formulated in this specific context. She sets out several reasons: loss of earnings owing to the unusual length of the trial; the psychological strain of the work; the linguistic and legal problems requiring a high degree of professional competence and specific expertise; and the need to satisfy the requirements of the court when dealing with unusually difficult material:

Meine fast zwei Jahre dauernde Tätigkeit als Dolmetscherin im Prozeß gegen Mulka und andere wegen Mordes [. . .] hat mich verständlicherweise so sehr in Anspruch genommen, daß ich meine andere Arbeit als Übersetzerin und Dolmetscherin erheblich einschränken, bezw. überhaupt aufgeben musste.

Abgesehen von der besonders schweren und psychisch belastenden Materie, die den ständigen Gegenstand meiner Dolmetscherität bildete, musste ich in der Lage sein, viele Dialekte der polnischen Sprache zu beherrschen, mich sofort in sie hineinzufühlen und entsprechend in der deutschen Sprache wiedzugeben. Ich glaube, daß es wohl kaum ein zweiter [sic!] Prozeß bis jetzt gab, im Verlauf dessen so hohe Anforderungen an einen Dolmetscher gestellt wurden. Ich musste an manchen Tagen drei bis vier Zeugen verschiedener Bildungsstufe, verschiedener Dialekte, verschiedener Temperaments so nuanciert und so wortgetreu wiedergeben, daß keiner der scharf beobachtenden Prozeßbeteiligten einen Grund zu irgendwelcher Beanstandung hatte. Ganz abgesehen davon, daß man von einem Dolmetscher in diesem
Prozeß erwartete; daß er sämtliche Ausdrücke des Lagerlebens kennt und sie sowohl in Polnisch als auch in Russisch genau versteht und wiedergibt. (Kostenband, p. 41)

[My work as interpreter in the proceedings against Mulka and others for murder [the official name of the Frankfurt trial], which lasted nearly two years, was understandably so demanding that I had to severely limit or give up completely my other work as translator and interpreter.

Besides the especially difficult and psychologically demanding material that I was translating continually, I had to master many Polish dialects, feel my way into what was said and convey it in German. I believe that there has never been another trial where such demands have been made of an interpreter. On some days, I had to convey the words of three or four witnesses of different levels of education, speaking different dialects and with different personalities, in such a nuanced and accurate way that none of the closely observing court officials had any grounds to object. Quite apart from the fact that an interpreter at this trial was expected to know all the specific language of camp life and understand and convey them accurately in both Polish and Russian.]

Here, she does not argue that she had to imitate the witnesses, or empathise with them, but that she has to deal with specific linguistic problems, including dialects and non-standard sociolects, and interpret them correctly, under constant observation. Thus, trust is created and defended through professional expertise and specialist historical and linguistic knowledge, and by responding to instances of control and checking which potentially threaten her professional status. She does mention—but only in passing—the psychological strain of the work, but this cannot be centred in this letter as it does not feature in the criteria justifying differential rates of pay. By contrast with the description of her work in the interview, Kapkajew’s letter argues for trust on the basis of expertise, rather than on ethical commitment: here, she presents herself as taking the side of the court, rather than the witness.

The rate of DM20 per hour is finally confirmed on 9 January 1967, in a document (Kostenband, pp. 46–50) that takes up almost verbatim the arguments of Hofmeyer and Kapkajew. It makes no reference to the psychological strain of the work, which is not relevant to the regulations, but confirms the other grounds: unusually high workload leading to loss of earnings, the difficulty of the linguistic problems, and her specialist legal expertise. It also adds new grounds, namely that she carried out tasks above and beyond her contracted hours, for example, helping the Polish, Czech, and Russian witnesses with their paperwork. We are given the impression of an indispensable and ever-present employee of the court, whose energy and expertise are barely compensated by the unusually high rate of hourly pay.

Conclusion

The extensive archive of the First Frankfurt Auschwitz trial offers us the opportunity to reconstruct a workplace for interpreters and translators at a watershed moment in the development of public attitudes towards the testimony of victim-witnesses. We are able to investigate the connection between interpreting practice, professional status, discourses about interpreting, and institutional and public views of the survivor-witnesses. The evidence reveals discussion about the professional practice of interpreters within the
institution and beyond, creating a field of tension between different views of their work and of the witness–interpreter relationship. Kapkajew is able to navigate these different views in defending her practice and establishing both her professionalism and her indispensability.

The evidence also makes clear that one cannot separate views of interpreting from discourse around survivor testimony: from an interpreting history perspective, it is expected that further analysis of the recordings of interpreting work at the trial will allow us to investigate the effects of interpreting on testimony in this context, to explore the interpreters’ decision-making from an ethical perspective, and to compare public and institutional discourse about interpreting with the interpreters’ actual practice.

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Notes
1. All translations from German and Polish are my own.
2. Kapkajew’s German translation forms the basis of the English version of Kielar’s (1982) text.
3. I have used the German transliteration of Russian names, as used in the trial archive.
4. The presiding judge’s words of thanks are not recorded directly.
5. See, for example, HHStAW, Abt. 507 Nr. 7670b Niederschrift über die erste Sitzung der Arbeitsgemeinschaft “ausländische Arbeitskräfte” des Hessischen Instituts für Betriebswirtschaft e.V. der Industrie- und Handelskammern des Landes Hessen am 27.2.1961 in Frankfurt a.M.
6. This situation was reformed in 2004, though issues remained (Balaei, 2004).

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**Biography**

Peter Davies is Professor of Modern German Studies at the University of Edinburgh, UK. He has published widely on the translation of Holocaust testimonies and is the author of *Witness between languages: The translation of Holocaust testimony in context* (Boydell & Brewer, 2018). He is currently researching the work of translators and interpreters at post-Holocaust trials in Germany.