

Ambassadorial Experiences | part 6

Diplomatic language troubles | The next episode

by Colin A. Munro



East Germany

In January 1990 on the occasion of the belated visit to East Germany by Douglas Hurd (DH), Ambassador Broomfield and I told him that the GDR was finished. He said he would tell Mrs Thatcher she would just have to get used to it.

I was attached to DH for his day in Leipzig, known as the “Hauptstadt der Revolution” (the capital city of the revolution) and a packed series of meetings and interviews. For each of these I had provided DH with a speaking note that I would be confident of interpreting without hesitation. DH stuck to my scripts until the last meeting. This was in the Nikolaikirche. We were on a podium, live on British and German TV. DH began to speak, but not to my script. I felt my knees turn to jelly - the longest 20 seconds of life - until I realised two things. First that I could easily interpret what he was saying. Second, he would not know whether I had got it right. Apparently I did. He wrote me a very kind letter afterwards.

Bosnia

The second occasion was much less successful. In 2001, I was Wolfgang Petritsch's deputy (High Representative) in Mostar. By October I was public enemy number one for the Croats, and a hero for the Bosnjaks. I was invited to appear live on a Croat TV talk show.

My passive command of the local language (Bosnian Croatian or Serbian depending on ethnicity) was good. But I could not put across complicated political points. The format, so I had been told, would not be suitable for my interpreter. I would have to rely on them. All became clear when I entered the studio. I sat alone on a chair opposite my hosts. Above my hosts was a TV screen so that I could see myself. They could be heard but not seen. Above my head was a banner with the title of the 1966 Spaghetti western, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." I was Lee van Cleef, not merely bad as in the movie but Evil (Zlo). My answers were correctly translated, but always there was a comment that, as an evil person, I could not be expected to tell the truth. When I remonstrated on departure, that I might be bad but not evil, declining the offer of a post interview drink, they said. It was just our little joke.

Have you experienced something comparable? Please let us know! We are looking forward to receiving your comments!

About the author



Colin A. Munro is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and is a UK native. He attended the George Watson's College and the Edinburgh University and joined HM Diplomatic Service in 1969. During his career he held numerous positions in Berlin, Kuala Lumpur, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Zagreb and served as the Private Secretary to the Minister of State responsible for Central and Eastern Europe. His last posting in HM Diplomatic Service was as Ambassador to the OSCE. He chairs the UK Citizens in Austria and in the ABS he is also a member of the Expert Council.

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