

Don't Cry for Them

Argentine Translation Conference features Nobel Prizewinning Speaker, draws record crowd

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Excited applause greeted Portuguese Nobel prizewinning author José Saramago as he stepped up to the podium to give the keynote speech at the Fourth Latin American Conference on Translation and Interpretation held in Buenos Aires, Argentina on May 1, 2003. Without translators, he told the spillover audience of over 1,400 linguists, writers could never get international recognition.

How could a translator association in a country just barely peeking out from under the worst economic crisis in its history get such a distinguished speaker and such a huge turnout? It was no accident. The Colegio de Traductores Públicos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires [Buenos Aires City Association of Sworn Translators] (CTPCBA) spent two years planning the conference and many months reaching out to prospective speakers and attendees. It paid special attention to students as the next generation of translators and to the media to get coverage of the event and consequently more exposure for the profession.

Crisis? What crisis?

That the Argentines would even consider organizing a conference in the midst of the devastating economic turmoil prompted disbelief, admiration and an outpouring of support from the out-of-town guest speakers. All of them promptly accepted the invitation, and many even found alternative sources of financing for their trips from other Latin American countries, Europe and the United States.

"Some of my colleagues couldn't understand why there would be a conference in Argentina now," said Josep Peñarroja Fa, President of the Catalan Association of Sworn Translators and Interpreters, quoted in the April/May issue of the CTPCBA journal. "The conference is a way of saying: we translators were here, are still here, and will stay here."

Conference Organizing Committee member Laura Ojeda was thrilled with the response from abroad. "With the crisis, we can't afford to travel anymore," she noted, "so it's important for us to get international speakers." The audacious idea of inviting Saramago to speak at the conference occurred to Gabriela González, also a Committee member, when she first learned that the writer would be in Buenos Aires during the event. "We thought

she was crazy," said CTPCBA President Beatriz Rodríguez. But Gabriela persisted, and Saramago - a translator himself, who also happens to be married to a translator - gladly accepted, even waiving his fee. The organizers were extremely gratified to see all their hard work pay off: "When I finally saw the program on the [CTPCBA] website," said Committee member Cristina Madden, "I got all choked up."

The Next Generation

To attract students to the conference, CTPCBA members visited all five universities in Buenos Aires that have translation programs to publicize the meeting. For the more far-flung provinces, they held meetings with program directors from throughout the country.

The Organizing Committee also reached out to translators and translator associations outside of Argentina. Its members scoured the Internet to build up a database and then sent a mass mailing to the 13,000 e-mail addresses they had gleaned.

Media Outreach

Early on, the CTPCBA decided to hire a professional to get media coverage of the conference and the association's many other activities. According to press agent Miriam Simcovich, the key to coverage was to build ongoing personal contacts with reporters. First she launched a small publicity campaign, for instance for International Translators Day on September 30. She carefully targeted the publications, such as student papers to inform students. A former reporter herself, Miriam knows how to package information to make a journalist's job easier.

For conference publicity, she placed notices in major Argentine newspapers and magazines, including the Buenos Aires Herald, an English-language publication, and the German community weekly *Argentinisches Tageblatt*.

"A Magical Conference"

Beatriz, the association President, credits the CTPCBA Board's hands-on approach to conference organization with its success. "For the previous conference, we had hired an outside organizer, and frankly it didn't work out," she admitted.

As they say in Argentina, *El ojo del amo engorda el ganado* ("the farmer's watchful care fattens the cow"); in other words, they had to look out for their own interests.

Besides the splendid coup of getting a Nobel prizewinning speaker, the conference had two other big draws, Beatriz noted. First, a Regional Center for Latin America, under the umbrella of the International Federation of Translators (FIT), was formally established during the event. Representatives of translator associations from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Peru and Uruguay held a panel discussion during the conference to report on the initiative.

According to Beatriz, the Regional Center plans to carry out a comparative analysis of the status of translators and interpreters in all the member countries and then recommend guidelines. At the same time, it will organize professional development events in different member countries, which will rotate on the Board. Argentina will chair the Board for the first two-year term.

Secondly, the recently established Argentine Federation of Sworn Translator Associations held a meeting at the conference. Because Buenos Aires is the political and business capital of the country, the CTPCBA dwarfs existing regional associations. The federation is designed to bring them all together for joint activities so that the provincial associations can have a voice.

Beatriz highlighted the emphasis on the regions and countries rather than the individuals representing them. This focus on what unites us rather than what divides us created a sunny "microclimate" in the storm of the crisis, she said, concluding that "it was a magical conference."

Setting a New Standard

The Argentines have shown us all how, with a little creativity, good will and plenty of hard work, you can create something very positive out of a terribly negative-even devastating-situation. No translator could have witnessed the standing ovation for Saramago by hundreds and hundreds of fellow translators during the opening session of the Buenos Aires conference without feeling inspired by the Argentine example of overcoming adversity.