

THE AD HOC TRIBUNALS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

An Interview with

Alexandra Tomic

International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life

Brandeis University

2016

Interviewee: Alexandra Tomic

Location: The Hague, Netherlands

Interviewers: David P. Briand (Q1) and
Leigh Swigart (Q2)

Date: 25 May 2015

Q1: This is an interview with Alexandra Tomic for the Ad Hoc Tribunals Oral History Project at Brandeis University's International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. The interview takes place at the International Criminal Court [ICC] in The Hague, Netherlands, on May 25, 2015. The interviewers are Leigh Swigart and David Briand.

Q2: We're particularly interested in talking to people who have been in language services because it's so clear that nothing was going to work at the ICTY [International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia] or the ICTR [International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda] without this massive work by the people who were translating and interpreting. So we're very pleased to be able to talk to you about your work at the ICTY, and later at the ICC. Why don't we start with where you were when things were really heating up in the Balkans?

Tomic: I was living in England, in Cambridge. We were quite unaware of this, as you can imagine. Because I wasn't living in Belgrade at the time, I did not know how bad things had become. Of course we read the newspapers, but this was before the web, so of course you didn't have all the information.

Q2: And you are from what is now Serbia.

Tomic: I am from Serbia, that's right—from Belgrade. I went to live in England; that was two years before. Croatia declared independence—or rather Slovenia first, sorry. Then there were instances of occupation of the Yugoslav people's army barracks. It looked a little bit out of hand, but it didn't look too bad. Then of course we all knew that Croatia would be a disaster because of the large numbers of Serbs living in Croatia. We never really thought about it before; this is not something that I had ever considered important while I lived in the former Yugoslavia, but some people clearly did. So that was 1991. The few people from the former Yugoslavia whom I knew were Croats, and Bosnians, so we actually got together every now and then—had lunch or we'd meet at parties—and they were just as astounded as I was because, of course, they'd been living in England as well. Also they did not share any of the high emotions that were happening.

It got progressively worse, as we all know, and in 1992 when it became terrible, what happened is we moved [to the Netherlands] in 1992, and as we moved I immediately went to the Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland [Dutch Council for Refugees], which is the refugees' council in Holland, because I thought they must have refugees, they must need people, and I started working there.

Q2: As an interpreter?

Tomic: As an interpreter, as whatever they asked me because they were absolutely desperate. I didn't have any Dutch at the time, but the coordinator's English was excellent. I went summer of 1992 and immediately all the Bosnian refugees started coming; these

were already asylum seekers, or rather they were already refugees so their status was recognized. That was really good for me because I had felt a huge amount of guilt that I wasn't doing anything, that I wasn't there. I had some exchanges with my friends, some of the friends from Belgrade who were very anti-Croat or anti-Bosnian, so I didn't feel I could tell them what I really thought because they would tell me, "You don't know this because you are abroad."

I wanted to do something practical and I thought, I'm not deciding here who's what, I'm just dealing with what needs to be done. I thought that was much better, and I felt much better, although the stories were horrific because these are exactly the stories that we heard on the news, that we read in the papers. This was eastern Bosnia. These people were very quickly processed. These were people from Zvornik, so this is exactly the border between Serbia and Bosnia. Mali Zvornik, "Little Zvornik" is in Serbia, and just Zvornik is on the Bosnian side.

These were wonderful people. These were whole families with already practically grown-up children. I would interpret these talks, facilitating talks. These were people who were so traumatized, and that was just horrendous. In fact, all of my people were always Bosnians. Now we will say Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks. They were all really happy to see me. My accent would betray me—I'm from Belgrade—and they'd always say, "Oh, it's so nice to meet you," because in fact they were relieved to see somebody normal who was not the bad guy.

This was not professional interpreting, but I was still doing the job. That I did for a little while, and then in 1993, I think, was the resolution by the Security Council on establishment of the Tribunal. I was still working for them [Vluchtelingenwerk] whenever they needed me. Occasionally the Vluchtelingenwerk would ask me to translate some article that they needed for their work, presumably for the case files or something.

Q2: I know that you'd studied English and French at university, but had you ever had any interpreting or translating experienced before?

Tomic: Only informally. There wasn't anything that I'd done. Rather, I was doing translation for private clients, but there were very few at the time. This is quite funny—in 1989, so we're talking end of the Cold War, I did have a diploma and I had some translating experience which I had done also for clients in Belgrade, and somebody told me the British army is often looking for strange languages. Serbo-Croat, as then it was called, because it is a strange language, so I said, "Okay, fine." I found a contact, wrote to the Education Training Center somewhere in England and I said, "I can teach this," or whatever, because I know that their intelligence officers need that. They replied to me with a letter to say that they could foresee no need for this language. This was exactly two years before one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe.

Q1: Oh, wow.

Tomic: I wish I had kept the letter because I think that just sums it up, doesn't it? This would be the same thing—I'm sure that there was somebody receiving a letter like that offering to teach Arabic in 2000. [Laughs]

Q1: Right, right.

Tomic: I was listening to BBC World Service, and there was the deputy prosecutor's voice, for the first time I heard it—Graham Blewitt—saying, "I have got the funds, I've got the budget, I'm gathering my staff, and I'm asking for people to apply—" I heard that at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning on BBC News World.

Q1: On the radio.

Tomic: The next day I called the ICJ [International Court of Justice] because I did not know the difference between ICJ or anything else, and I said, "Could I apply?" They said, "Yes, yes. We are temporarily here, but we will move soon. We will send you a form." They never did, so I phoned again after a week, and then I got a form, filled in a form. This was 1994, and I got a reply in end of July, "Come for an interview."

I was tested and interviewed by the person who was going to become my boss later, who became the Chief of Conference and Language Services section. We met, we liked each other immediately; it was a kind of click. She asked me—one of the questions I remember was, "What would you say if somebody told you, how can you, a Serb, be

interpreting and translating?" That was the key. I said, "I can because it has nothing to do with me. I'm a professional doing my job," and she said, "Okay, that's the correct answer," or words to that effect. About three weeks later I got a call from the chief of investigations, and I came to sign my first contract, which was a few days, and then a few days, and for the next nine months I had temporary contracts.

Q2: And this was now document translation, or it was interpretation?

Tomic: It was translation, and then occasionally they would have somebody either to speak to in person or to speak to on the phone. There were little things like that, but it was all terribly improvised. Imagine that my first contract was two days, and then it was four days, and then it was two days. It was like that for nine months.

Q1: What year was it that you started?

Tomic: That was 1994.

Q1: Okay, right at the beginning.

Tomic: So, August 1994 was my first contract—the second part of August, I think.

Q2: And were you living in The Hague then?

Tomic: No, I was living in a place near Leiden.

Q1: Yes.

Tomic: That was the beginning. I started in document translation. One of my first documents I remember was the rules of detention, and I had no clue, because of course I had always done a lot more into English, and I hadn't read anything in Serbo-Croat for many years. I had only read newspapers and magazines, but I hadn't really read books. That shows that within a year you lose the fluidity of written language. I remember that [my boss] came into my office and she said, "You did it all wrong."

I said, "Really?"

She said, "Yes, do it again." I remember that as being so genuine—this is feedback, and I'm going to remedy what's wrong.

Q2: Management skills.

Tomic: Exactly. But in fact this was just perfect.

Q2: Was it specialized terminology that was the problem, or was it—?

Tomic: I think at the time we were not quite sure what we wanted to do, how we were going to cope with this Frankenstein-y type of term, BCS [Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian].

Q2: Yes, I wanted to ask you about the creation of this.

Tomic: Very soon we realized we couldn't call it Serbo-Croat, we couldn't call it Serbian, we couldn't call it Croatian. We also realized that we could not do what they did at peace conferences over the years, which is to have three booths. You know that they had three booths in Brussels.

Q2: I didn't know that.

Tomic: They had three booths. They had the [Franjo] Tuđman booth, the [Alija] Izetbegović booth, and the [Slobodan] Milošević booth. It's completely insane, everybody travelling with their own team. Of course we knew we couldn't do it because that would be just giving in to stupidity. One of the first things that [our boss] did was to request—I think that was her—an affidavit by Morton Benson [professor of Slavic languages at University of Pennsylvania] and somebody else—these people were authors of a dictionary—to say that Serbian and Croatian and Bosnian are just one and the same languages; they're mutually intelligible and the only difference was lexical.

Q2: And that's true, that it's only lexical and phonological?

Tomic: It's only lexical, but you will hear this denied. So it was just a little bit awkward when we started gathering staff, more and more people, this is when we started gathering the team.

Q2: And your boss was from where?

Tomic: From Zagreb.

Q2: From Zagreb, okay.

Tomic: She was an interpreter. So she was getting people from all over a little bit. Then we sort of started. Over the years, I can say, there was no real tension between the nationalities inside the service. There was always more tension within the nationalities. I was always great friends with a number of people from Zagreb, and from Sarajevo, or Tuzla or wherever. I didn't have a problem. But for me, Belgrade—I knew Belgrade. I knew where which street was, and if somebody told me that they lived in that street and went to that school I was like, "Ah, yeah, loser." [Laughter] While of course about Zagreb and Sarajevo I had no prejudices, so they were just people to me. It's just funny how that works out.

Q2: It's like the way the British are sorting by their class—

Tomic: Exactly, exactly.

Q2: —and by accent all the time.

Tomic: Yes, yes. "Oh, you're from Oxford?" [Makes disapproving sound] "Goodbye." So that's exactly—it was almost that. At first I think we mingled a lot. We were a lot together, because we re-created—and it's true—we re-created a little Yugoslavia in CLSS [Conference and Language Services Section]. We did—with all its faults, unfortunately.

Q2: And this service was inside the Registry?

Tomic: This was inside the Registry, although we serviced the Office of the Prosecutor [OTP] as well, and Chambers, so it was a lot different from what it is here.

Q1: And CLSS is?

Tomic: Conference and Language Services Section. Because there were not many hearings, of course everything was translation first, and I never thought I would want to do interpretation, except on missions. Very early on, the first missions started going to interview. First there was a mission close by in Europe. I remember I went there—this was the last Belgian army barracks in Germany, in Cologne. Imagine—there were still Belgian troops in Germany. The general had been a UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] commander in Sarajevo and I remember going there with a New Zealand investigator and a French investigator, and this was one of my first missions. I'm

not sure if it was the first one, but I remember that I was a rookie. I thought, I'm just going to follow what happens.

I got briefed, and I was just to interpret French/English, English/French. I was interpreting back and forth. It wasn't really high pressure. It was very high up in terms of hierarchy, he was a brigadier general or something, and it was fantastic. I thought to myself, if this is what a mission is like—it was in fabulous Belgian barracks with the most amazing restaurant on the lake. This is also when I realized, oh, interpreters don't have time to eat, right.

I also remember the wonderful French investigator; he wasn't paid on time for the mission. There was an issue with us getting advances. At the time, remember, there was no European currency. There was no euro, so we also had to be issued cash for each country, by cashier, in advance. He didn't get that money so we ended up paying for him, and I thought, this is so not how it's supposed to be. But it was wonderful. I learned a lot and I also realized I can do English/French. My French had been very good then. It's still okay, but I'm not sure I could do this now. At the time I realized, it's good, it's okay, I can do it. Into French it's of course harder, but in consecutive it's not so bad, because I have time to think and you can take notes. After that I did a lot of little phone calls, and then some missions to the field to Bosnia. I did not go in the war; I went right after Dayton [Dayton Peace Accords] was signed in 1995. We actually went two days or something after Dayton was signed, so that was pretty soon after.

Q2: What was that like for you to go back? You hadn't been back for a long time.

Tomic: I hadn't been. It was very, very strange. I went with two completely different people—an extraordinary woman, amazing trial attorney—and then there was a complete maverick of a French investigator from the south of France who had been in the anti-terrorist squads. He never thought we should follow the same route home.

Q1: Very careful, yes. Where were you with them?

Tomic: We actually went to Sarajevo. We had to go to Zagreb first, so I went to Zagreb just after Dayton was signed. I could not imitate the Zagreb accent—to pretend that I'm from Zagreb. You just can't.

Q2: Is this a very different accent?

Tomic: It's just a question of accent, and I would sound ridiculous, so I just spoke my broader Serbian in Zagreb. Nobody batted an eyelid. All capital cities are actually a lot more tolerant than the provinces, and I was fine. Then we went to—I can't even remember who we went to see, but we ended up going across the barricades and going with a British army officer [from UNPROFOR]. Actually, I'm mistaken, it had already become IFOR, Implementation Force. This was the implementation force for Dayton, after which it turned into SFOR, the Stabilization Force. Throughout all of the missions

that I ever did—and I went to many, many missions—we always had NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] support.

Q2: When you were on those missions, were you translating between the French speakers and English speakers as well as the—?

Tomic: Oh, it was just horrendous, while the French investigator understood English, he understood what he wanted to understand. [The attorney] didn't speak any French, so before I was to say anything to the Republika Srpska—i.e. Bosnian Serb officials—I had to wait for them to have an argument, which they then had in half broken English, French, and me trying to sort it out. It was one of those crazy things, but I did see the funny side of it. I thought, I will look back at this as saying this is completely crazy.

Q2: What was it like for you to see your—?

Tomic: I saw the devastation. I think the devastation was quite clear. I think nobody goes there and remains unaffected. This is incredible—you saw a building that is only operational up to four floors and the rest is destroyed. When we went with the chief of investigations later—that was a couple of years later. These were a series of investigations, and speaking to high officials from Republika Srpska.

Q2: Was there any sense when you were actually in the field that your Serbian connection made a difference to people you were interpreting for?

Tomic: I had one very unpleasant moment that was with [the trial attorney] when we went to the court in Sarajevo. I can't remember which court it was. She wanted some specific documents which related to certain events in Sarajevo. Obviously all sides kept prisoners, all sides behaved terribly—some people more than others to larger or lesser extent and so on—so this was exactly what the Tribunal's work was about. This is how I saw it. The judge who saw us, he was the president of the court. I started to interpret what [the attorney] was saying, and he interrupted me, and said, "Where are you from?" We are not supposed to react to this. We're not supposed to have a direct conversation with a person. I'm supposed to interpret to her, but I got caught unawares because I was already feeling a little bit uneasy. This was right after Dayton, so the cease-fire was what, a week old? You could still hear gunfire.

I said, "I'm from Belgrade," and he just went, "You scum!" And I started to stammer, and I felt a massive slap on my thigh from [the attorney]—"Interpret to me!" Of course, she brought me back to my senses, so I just interpreted. She says, "You are not to talk to him." She gave a little speech, which I then interpreted, and then he calmed down. I remember being under a terrible cloud for the rest of the day, to such an extent that that totally marked my whole day there. It was only weeks later that I actually remembered that just after the whole interview, after we were given access to some archives, he came and apologized to me. But I had blocked it out for weeks because the first shock was so great.

Q1: So traumatic. When you were on these field missions, were you speaking with potential witnesses for the courts?

Tomic: These were all kinds. I had suspects, witnesses, eyewitnesses, experts, officials of all sides. Some sensitive sources. Clearly that was real—for me the Tribunal really tried. I know because I was there. Of course, all the accusations from all the sides are easy to make because they don't know, and of course we cannot say, "Well, actually, we spoke to this person, this person, this person," but I know that if I went eleven, twelve times, on a mission [with the same purpose]—.

In 1996 I went to a mission in [REDACTED] because the then rump Yugoslavia government refused to accept jurisdiction of the Tribunal. [REDACTED] accepted to let us go to their territory to interview witnesses about this.

Q1: These were people who had fled the region into [REDACTED]?

Tomic: No, not at all. They were actually bussed in from Belgrade, but we couldn't work on the Serbian/Yugoslav territory.

Q1: Oh, I see.

Tomic: So a lot of people came, and since I was the only one from the Tribunal, I took charge of the other interpreters who were freelancers. Then we made teams. There was a

lot of sexual abuse that was going on in that camp, so we decided to make teams, woman/woman teams, interpreter/investigator, woman/man team, man/woman, and then two men, so that there would be every permutation for people. We would actually say, "Who would like to—?" so that the witnesses would feel more at ease. I worked with a female investigator.

We spoke with many sexual assault victims, but it's strange that you actually brace yourself and then you just say, "Okay, this is it, and it's horrible, but I'm going to get through it," and we did. We did and we processed a lot of them. Some we managed to get proper statements from; others we knew they had been abused but they wouldn't tell us. You know when you see a woman who is looking so depressed, and there's just nothing in the world—and I keep waiting, because we didn't have time to process everybody's statements that were written, given to the police.

I remember this one particular one and thought, "Oh, God, I hope they didn't do anything to her children." I was waiting to hear who was killed. Every witness is a horrible story. Sometimes you get to read the statement beforehand, sometimes you don't. You know there's a village, you know that on the morning of the twenty-second of April, twenty-fourth of April—usually it was April, May—there was an attack, and you know what weapons were involved, you knew which unit, so this was all familiar, so all you're hearing is who's going to be killed.

I remember thinking, why is this woman so depressed? The investigator kept asking her questions, and nobody from the immediate family was killed. Okay, she had witnessed horrible things, and she was in the camp. Nobody was killed, so something must have happened in the camp. We actually broke the interview to have a break. So we spoke to the leader of the group, and said, "Yes, she was raped, and she doesn't want to talk about it, and that's it." Of course, we asked several times. She just bent her head, wouldn't talk, shook her head, that was it. We don't know whether that would have helped her or not.

Q2: Did you get the sense that sometimes when people recounted their experiences that they did feel better? Or was it hard to know?

Tomic: It's very hard to know, very hard to know. Sometimes, yes, but it's all so wretched. It's actually just a history of misery, and it's so unnecessary. Who needed all this? I think that sense of futility of broken lives, of broken childhoods, or devastated landscapes, villages burned, mosques—for what? So yes, very difficult.

Q2: When did you transition into being a simultaneous interpreter?

Tomic: I had one false start when [my boss] suggested it, and she said, "Go into the BCS booth." And BCS—we decided that it would be all varieties in the booth, but for written translation we decided it would be separate when indictments had to be served so that we wouldn't give to a Croat a fully Serbian—that would also be difficult, so in that sense—

Q2: And again, it's mostly lexical differences.

Tomic: They're lexical differences but they're differences, so you would recognize. That was really hard for proofreading. I think proofreading was murder because you would have the same things but just with some differences. I remember once we were translating an indictment—I can't remember for who it was—and we had to have it in Serbian for him. We had a Bosnian one for the Bosnian authorities, and then we had some other versions. So we were proofreading like crazy—"Is this correct? This is correct"—and just as we were about to give it we then realized we'd forgotten to—we'd actually left the English word "indictment" because we were so frantic. There were silly things happening like that.

Q2: You mean you hadn't even done the English version?

Tomic: No, no, the English version existed, but because to keep the format, the easiest is just to type across the English version, but we hadn't looked at it all—so we forgot the title.

Q2: Oh, you hadn't saved the—. [Laughs]

Tomic: Strange. So that was that. [My boss] put me in the BCS booth, and I did a few tryouts, and I found it extremely difficult. I just did not have the BCS. My BCS wasn't rich enough. I wasn't reading—all my readings were with witness statements.

Q1: A big difference from the law aspect of it.

Tomic: I couldn't do legal argument, never in a million years. Maybe I could manage witness statements, but then I didn't need to do witness statements because witness statements had been given in the testimonies in Bosnian/Croatian /Serbian in court, so I would never have to do that. So I thought, you know what, I'm not going to do this now. A lot of the interpreters were coming from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia so they were truly qualified, huge experience. So to them we were like, you know, amateurs. But I felt I knew everything about what happened from the beginning of the investigation to the end. So after going on many more missions, I was seconded to an investigation team for three years, that was very good. We were working specifically on two investigations—that's nice because then you get into one particular area. Then I said to [my boss], "Look, I think I'd like to go the English booth." She said, "Alright, let's try you out," and I did pass the sort of test.

Q2: So you were going from BCS into English?

Tomic: And French into English.

Q2: And French into English, okay.

Tomic: The reason why they allowed me is because I had French and they needed more people.

Q2: Yes, but that's interesting because I know normally you translate towards your native language, right?

Tomic: Completely, so I was doing it in my "B," so I was going with my "A" and my "C" into my "B," which is really not done—but a lot of things were possible because they needed it.

Q2: But did you have formal training then?

Tomic: We did have training. We had a lot. It was done there. It was between six weeks and three months, I think. Then they let us go—as the third in the booth, so it will be like one person goes for half an hour, another person goes, and then I would take it. It was okay. I felt there was a huge amount of relaxation that you could learn about being in a space and there's nothing; there's just a microphone, and you're there, and it's your voice and your intellect and you have to defend yourself. [Laughs] I thought that was very Zen experience. I actually found it not stressful, strangely enough. I also realized, because I had gone to so many missions, that people face to face are a lot more stressful than a courtroom, because you're behind the glass. The glass is usually tinted.

Q1: Now were you completely in the booth at that point? You weren't doing any more field operations?

Tomic: I did a lot of interpreting in the detention center. I like to say that I spent as much time in the detention center as if I had committed several small misdemeanors. [Laughter] It's just soul-destroying, just going there, having to wait. The metal detector is extremely sensitive, much more sensitive than here. And then you wait, and they come and pick you up, and then they pick you up, and then—it's a prison, I mean.

Q2: And this is when you were interpreting for the defense counsel?

Tomic: I was both translating/interpreting also for a formal suspect and accused interviews After I started working regularly in the booth—because we had morning and afternoon sessions, so sometimes we had morning, sometimes we'd have afternoon—we would call a special number and we would listen to the message, "You are in courtroom one." Then I decided I needed transport—I got a car so that I could drive myself at odd times. I remember if I had an afternoon session in particular, it would go until 7:00-7:15 in the evening. I would drive myself. I remember because I was still living in the same place near Leiden—I remember going home, arriving home and then having no recollection of how I got there. It's quite a feat that I actually got there every time.

Q2: Was it difficult to compartmentalize your life as a mother and a partner with your professional life?

Tomic: Mother was okay, because I thought, okay, I have perspective. The kids reminded you all the time of their presence. Now they're grown and they remember that I was away, but it was really hard in my private life.

Q2: Was there no counseling? Was there no—?

Tomic: No, there wasn't anything.

Q2: Is there here at the ICC?

Tomic: Yes, that's something we did very early on.

Q2: So you were at the ICTY until 2003?

Tomic: Yes.

Q2: And what was your impetus then? Did you come directly to the ICC?

Tomic: I came directly to the ICC, and I would say that my main motivation for applying was that spending so much time in the detention. Nine years [at the ICTY] [was] enough.

Q2: And then the ICC had been established.

Tomic: Yes, and I applied, and there were some vacancies—one coordinator, one head. In the end I got this job. I applied for a couple of things, and I got a position of a non-existent section, to put it together, and that's how I started.

Q2: So you came in to actually head the Language and Translation Services.

Tomic: Yes, and it didn't exist. I had to get people and write the jobs.

Q1: You got to build it.

Tomic: I get to build it, and of course I built it all on my own experience. Also I had very little experience of management.

Q2: So was this exciting, or challenging, or scary? What was that like?

Tomic: It was pretty terrible. It's so much easier to just go in a room and interpret. That's just so much easier. One of the things in interpreting, which I always loved, was that you were there but you were not there. You were participating but you were on the edge. You would be part of it but you were not asked your opinion. I would go into a meeting and I would know immediately who had the power in that room, because I started analyzing it a lot. That person you could tell there was that, so I was able to have multiple layers of

discourse in my mind while interpreting. When I got very good at consecutive—which is really difficult. Much harder than simultaneous.

Q2: Really?

Tomic: Much harder.

Q2: Just because you have to retain what has been said?

Tomic: Also because there's a lot more going on. In simultaneous you're kind of in a cocoon. You're focusing. I also learned to relax. I had a very good senior colleague who taught me to sit up; you need your lungs so you have to sit straight. Don't ever run to the booth because you don't want to get there out of breath. Prepare thoroughly—all of these things—and if you cannot do something and you realize it, get your colleague to take over. Don't be an ego and think, I can do it. So this was all good advice, but I came into it from a completely different angle. I knew I wasn't a conference interpreter. I was somebody who could do court interpreting in court simultaneously because I knew everything inside-out in that court. But don't ask me to be in a diplomatic conference because I will get everybody's title wrong, which incidentally I did.

This also is something that has to be learned. You have to know the titles. I wasn't really fantastic at it. One of the things I really liked was being able—and then I knew—when you know you're in flow, you're interpreting, you're taking notes, you're doing it and then

a lady comes and says, "Would you like some coffee?" and I say, "Yes, please. No sugar," and then I continue the sentence, and I thought, this is it. This is the height of what I can do, but just don't ask me to do it with prime ministers. I could do it in the field, I could do it as long as it was nitty-gritty, but empty sentences, I found that impossible. I just didn't have enough patience.

Q2: So at the ICC you have never done any courtroom work?

Tomic: I did once when a Serbian delegation came for the first president so I did the entire meeting for an hour interpreting both ways. I thought, this is the last time I'm going to do this. There were a lot of speeches, so that was not for me. I think a couple of times I did something into English from French as a translation because there was nobody else to do it, but I really don't—of course I don't do it. This was an exception.

Q2: What have been the challenges here? What have you brought from the ICTY and what has been hard—? What were the challenges when you came in?

Tomic: I always believed that the reason why it was hard at the ICTY was because we all came from that region. There were people who were absolutely traumatized. In any case, it's always hard when the personal and the political get together.

Q2: And now you have interpreters from all over the place.

Tomic: All over the place. I've decided it is not national; it is language related. It is a professional deformation where we think we're making big literature, and not court orders. All the interpreters will say, "Oh, I absolutely did a wonderful rendition." We are not there to be brilliant for the sake of being brilliant; we are there to provide language services to court officials. I've tried to get that across.

Q2: Do you think that interpreters feel unappreciated essentially?

Tomic: Language services everywhere think they know everything. It's a professional deformation that you only understand when you become a manager.

Q2: I've heard translators say that the weakness of a legal argument really becomes apparent when it has to be translated.

Tomic: True.

Q2: So that in some ways the translators do sort of see—

Tomic: Yes, it's true, but we are here for that. That is the weakness, but don't use that weakness as—that weakness you can identify doesn't make you the best in the world, which is what they all think just because they picked up on the weakness. Of course, one of the things that all the translators will say is that if they do—and that I know this from the ICTY as well—if we notice some discrepancy, something that's wrong, and we write

to the author or the judge or the court officer or whatever, and they say it doesn't matter, that is as if you told them it's the end of the world. Because of course it matters.

Everything matters.

Q2: So you're translating all the judgments, all the—

Tomic: The judgments, the decisions, resolving fundamental issues. Some motions, not all of them, and all rulings, so if there is a ruling on the interlocutory appeals—

Q2: But the OTP still has its own—

Tomic: It has its own service for operational reasons, but none of it is official translation.

Q2: So that's just their internal translation?

Tomic: It's internal.

Q2: This comes from my own background, but I'm interested in the kind of challenges that have come up when you're working with a whole group of unfamiliar languages, many of which are not habitually written. What are the special kinds of problems you run into?

Tomic: From the beginning it was—the first language was Acholi, from northern Uganda. That was hard because we didn't know anything about it, and it just turned out—everything came from northern Uganda. The first case—the first situation I should say.

Q2: Now you have Ongwen.

Tomic: Now we have it as a case. If any of these people come to be represented, or to appear before the court, they'll need this interpretation. Well, it is done for Kinyarwanda, so we're going to do it for—. We did an interview with [the ICTR chief of languages], who was the one who did the training at ICTR. We had some experience of that. Of course, BCS cannot be compared because you had so many people.

Then we found out that one of the things—if I look at Acholi, and even the Swahili—Swahili's DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] variant and standard Swahili—and then later on, Zaghawa from Darfur is an unwritten language, what we found out, if I can have one sort of broad generalization, is that we needed to go to older people for more experience.

I think the point is never to feel something cannot be done. Anything can be done. I think that was one thing that I feel that we've accomplished here—we've done, and we can do, any language. We know that. If we did have a chance to do Zaghawa, we would do it. It wouldn't be perfect, but we would do it through Arabic, and the accused would have a

fair interpretation and fair representation at trial, I have no doubt about it. One of the things that I was reminded of recently is that in fact you can do anything, and I think in these circumstances when you have apparently impossible languages, apparently impossible things to reconcile—I'm doing a PhD in—

Q2: Yes, in military studies?

Tomic: I'm doing history and memory now. My Master's was in military studies. One of the extraordinary people that I've come across is a British woman called Flora Sands. She was the only British woman to have served in the Serbian army in World War I. She actually went with the Red Cross in 1914, and then went back to get some more supplies for the Serbs, and then went back in 1915 as Serbia was being attacked from all sides. An extraordinary person. People said to her, "You can't, because you're cut off. You're cut off by the Bulgarians. From this side you're cut off by the Germans." She wrote in her book, "People love to tell you you can't do things," and I thought, that is really it. I guess that's a suitable ending.

Q1: That's perfect. Thank you very much.

Tomic: You're welcome. It was a pleasure.

Q2: Thank you for a wonderful, wonderful interview.

Q1: It was really great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Benson, Morton	8
Blewitt, Graham	5
Conference and Language Services Section [CLSS], ICTY	10
Dayton Peace Accords	11, 12, 14
Implementation Force [IFOR]	12
International Court of Justice	5
International Criminal Court [ICC]	1, 22, 25
Izetbegović, Alija	8
Language and Translation Services, ICC	23
Milošević, Slobodan	8
North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]	13
Office of the Prosecutor [OTP], ICC	27
Office of the Prosecutor [OTP], ICTY	10
Registry, ICTY	10
Stabilization Force [SFOR]	12

Tudman, Franjo	8
United Nations Protection Force [UNPROFOR]	10
Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland [Dutch Council for Refugees]	2, 4