

# Profile of a linguist

by  
Geoffrey  
Kingscott

## Friedrich Krollmann



*President of the BDÜ, Editor of Lebende Sprachen, Former head of the applied linguistics division of the Federal Office for Languages (Bundessprachenamt).*

Friedrich Krollmann jokes that his long and distinguished career in languages began by accident. He never set out to be a linguist, and in fact began studying international economics. Then along came the second world war, and he was drafted into the German army. He was not a natural soldier, quite the reverse in fact, and the sergeant major did not appreciate the presence of this reluctant recruit in his ranks.

The day came when the sergeant major stood in front of the company and said, "Who speaks a foreign language?". No-one replied, because replying positively to this sort of question, in most of the armies at that time, was usually the prelude to being

assigned to potato peeling or piano moving, or something equally irrelevant and onerous. But this time the sergeant major was serious. He looked at Private Krollmann and said, "Well, you've got the *Abitur*" (German school leaving certificate), "so you should speak a foreign language. Off you go, report to the interpreters' company where they will test you, and *don't come back.*"

Private Krollmann duly sat the examination, with a teacher of English sitting on one side, and a teacher of English on the other. Scared at the thought of having to go back to the sergeant major, he copied from both of them. They failed the examination, and he passed; and so a distinguished career was started.

The German Army trained him as an interpreter and as a radio monitor, listening in to British and American military communications, and it was in radio monitoring that he spent most of the war. After the war he reported to the local employment office, and they assigned him to a seaside leave centre for British soldiers, where he was immediately put to work as an interpreter. He worked there for seven years, studying at Hamburg University during the slack winter period.

The next step was when he applied to the Federal Chancellor's Office, predecessor to the German Foreign Office, for a general job, and on the basis of his experience was assigned to the language service. Later, when the German defence ministry was re-established, he took charge of the translation and interpretation team in that ministry. He did a considerable amount of interpreting himself, working alongside many of the prominent statesmen of the age.

Convinced that interpreting was a young person's profession, and that age could affect powers of concentration and memory, Mr Krollmann decided that the time had come to move more into administration. He took over a rather large organisation of about 350 people, doing translations for all the German armed forces, an organisation which eventually became the applied linguistics division of the *Bundessprachenamt*.

Mr Krollmann's association with the prestigious journal *Lebende Sprachen* goes back to 1979, when he was approached by the publishers, Langenscheidt. Some 20 years earlier, he had had contact with Langenscheidt, when they published his

dictionary of military terms. In Germany there is a distinction between two editor roles, one being responsible for the written content of the journal (*Redaktion*), the other being responsible for the general housekeeping and legal obligations (*Herausgebung*). First Mr Krollmann became a *Redakteur* with general responsibility for foreign languages, but after some years also became *Herausgeber*.

In 1982 Mr Krollmann, then aged 62, retired from his post as head of the applied linguistics division of the *Bundessprachenamt*, and was approached by the then president of the German translators' association (*Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer — BDÜ*) Hans Thomas Schwarz, and invited to become vice-president. It had not been possible for him to play a role in the *BDÜ* earlier when he had been in a position where he might have to negotiate with them. When Mr Schwarz resigned from the presidency, Mr Krollmann succeeded him, and holds the position of *BDÜ* president to this day.

When he took over, he made it clear that he would fulfil the duties of presidency of the *BDÜ* in his own way. He took over exactly at the time of the reunification of Germany, so his first two years in office were mainly devoted to restructuring the profession in the former East Germany. The *BDÜ* is

itself a federal organisation, being essentially an umbrella body for active organisations in each *land*. Mr Krollmann is proud of the fact that the five *länder* from the east all now have their own *land* associations.

It was important to set up new associations from scratch, because the old East German translators' association had been a political body, and the *BDÜ* is strictly non-political. The method Mr Krollmann chose was to wait for new organisations in the new *länder* to form themselves, rather than to try to promote an organisation from the centre. Once such an organisation had been formed, Mr Krollmann went to address them, and explained how the *BDÜ* was constituted. Many of his hearers, accustomed in the past to their professional life being regulated from Berlin, listened open-mouthed when it was explained that not only was the *BDÜ* non-political, the *BDÜ* would not and could not give orders to the *land* organisations.

The *BDÜ* is now recognised as one of the strongest translation organisations in the world, and a pillar of the *Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT)*. Mr Krollmann is a vice-president of *FIT*, and one of his major current concerns is to bring into being a European regional organisation, corresponding to the successful *FIT* North American organisation.