

TACnology Corner

**ASTRID JOHANSON
1926-1989**

In the early morning of Wednesday, February 15, Astrid Johanson, much-loved long-time member of ATA, died at home in her sleep of heart failure. Although she had been having trouble with her ulcer "Fernando," her death was sudden and came as a tragic shock to her family and friends. In recognition of Astrid's very important contribution in the area of translation and computers, TACnology Corner is devoting this month's column to tributes to her memory.

"Deadpan humor and a lovely personality," they had said, persuading me

that my first U.S. trip should be to her TAC/MT session at the ATA's 1984 convention. And sure enough, Astrid Johanson could not have given me a happier introduction to what she termed, to a British visitor, "The Colonies." She was open to new ideas, thoughtful, surprising, and fun--things that made her work for ATA (often inconspicuous) effective and influential.

But that was not all. Astrid had an answer for everything, and it was, "I'm sorry, I can't help it. You see, I'm Estonian." As a young girl, her father taken away, she had fended for herself and her mother. Later, separated in the confusion of the final retreat, they had ended up in different countries before being reunited and coming to America. "After World War II you can survive anything," she would say.

So in the 1980s she was still skating at Rockefeller Center, to the dismay of her contemporaries, and walking in inner city streets. She was continually pushing out the boundaries of her work, offering her clients in AT&T Bell Labs not only translation but abstracting, international protocol, on-line information retrieval, current awareness bulletins. At the end she was retiring from AT&T, after 35 years, to start her own business in multilingual on-line searching and translation. When we spoke just before she died, she was looking forward eagerly to her new career.

The 15th floor apartment in Hoboken had books, fine needlework, pictures of her grandson, and a stunning view of the Twin Towers. Manhattan was her spiritual home: museums, art, all the cultural life. "An old battle-ax" was what she claimed to be, but we knew her to be warm and generous. She couldn't help it: she was Estonian.

— Veronica Lawson

Astrid Johanson knew all her life about hard work, persistence, and making the best of a tough situation.

Astrid was born on October 27,

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1926, in Tallinn, capital of the newly independent free Republic of Estonia. She lost her father when she was very young. As a child she attended English primary school, where the language became second nature to her, and at home she spoke German and Russian as well as her native Estonian.

She had just finished high school when the Soviet invasion of 1940 brought an end to 20 years of fragile nationhood. For the next 12 months Astrid constantly feared for her survival as she saw more than 60,000 of her countrymen either deported or killed. In 1941 the Germans attacked, and Estonia was subjected to a three-year Nazi occupation as war continued to rage in the nearby countries of Europe. The threat of a second Russian invasion drew increasingly imminent, and Astrid attended classes day and night at the University of Tartu, working feverishly to complete her education while it was still possible for her to do so. By early 1944 the Russians were massed at the border, and Estonians were escaping by the tens of thousands. With the same perseverance that was to characterize everything she did in life, Astrid managed to finish her degree in math and physics. Immediately afterwards she and her mother fled the country.

The two women were headed for Czechoslovakia, but they encountered war and confusion at every turn. Mother and daughter were separated. Eventually they found each other again in Kempten, Germany, where they settled down and Astrid landed a job with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. She worked with UNRAA as a secretary and interpreter from 1945 to 1948, helping to find homes for displaced persons.

While in Germany Astrid met and married a sergeant in the U.S. Army. In 1949 she followed her husband to Columbus, Georgia. Before long, however, she found herself alone and pregnant. Her daughter Linda was born, and she became a single parent with child and mother to support--plus the

dog she had brought with her from Germany.

The small family moved on to New York in 1951; Astrid figured that there she could make better use of her education and language background. Her first job was with a law firm on Wall Street, where she worked as a secretary and also translated legal documents. In 1954 her eye caught an ad in the classifieds for a translator, and she went to work with Bell Labs at their West Street offices. She remained with Bell Labs after they moved to Murray Hill in the 1960s, and by the time she retired from AT&T last month she had logged 35 years of service with the company. Always at the forefront and eager to approach new tasks, she spent her last years training and becoming highly proficient in on-line searching. "Her expertise, professionalism, and willingness to learn," writes one of her supervisors, "made her a model for others." Another colleague cites the fondness that young people had for her at AT&T as "testimony to her young spirit."

Astrid was never daunted by anything, and nothing ever got her down. She embraced challenges. Instead of resisting the "invasion" of computers, she took to them like a duck to water and became one of the first translators to actively support machine translation. As chair of ATA's Committee on Translation and Computers, she carried the banner for four years and provided leadership in this area at a crucial time, bringing experts to the annual conference from around the world and seeing to it that members got the straight scoop.

Her retirement from AT&T was greeted by several bids for her services: opportunities awaited her both in machine translation and information processing. Her admirers knew that she offered a wealth of experience coupled with qualities of determination, enthusiasm, and keen intelligence.

She was a truly remarkable woman.

Astrid leaves her daughter Linda, who provided the material for this tribute, her son-in-law Johannes Raudsep (also an Estonian), and her grandson Erik, age 10. Their address is 58 Aron Drive, Bohemia, New York 11716.

— Muriel Vasconcellos