

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 20 of compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Are you afraid of starting from zero while on the road? In this episode Martina Russo and I talk about that and more in our discussion on her path to becoming a translator. Martina, welcome to the show.

Martina: Thank you for having me.

Kathryn: I like to start with your early life to see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Martina: I honestly have no idea. I never, I never knew what I wanted to be and what I am now just kind of unfolded naturally and just gradually by itself. I have never have had any idea what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Kathryn: Had you gotten some idea by the time you were in high school or were you still searching?

Martina: I just realized, so when I was in middle school I was really good with language, meaning I'm Italian, so I was really good with all the stuff like grammar and I really actually enjoyed that part of my classes. So I thought when I went to high school I wanted to do something that was very focused on language and that was ancient Greek and ancient Latin and all that kind of stuff. But it turned out it was way too much. I did not enjoy having to study. There was a lot of studying involved. And then I realized that I was really good at English. I started studying English much later than all my peers and I was, within a couple of years I spoke much better than them. So I thought maybe that's something that I could do. And then from there I switched to a high school where we studied modern languages. So I did English, German, and Spanish in high school. And then from that, from there, it kind of like took off by itself.

Kathryn: And did you pursue college?

Martina: So after high school, I was always a little bit of a rebellious girl in school, so I didn't really want to study any longer. I was always very good at learning, but not very keen to study. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's how I always felt. So after high school I didn't really know what to do with my life. So I just moved up to Germany for the first time when I was 18, I think. And I thought I was just going to get a job there. But then a few months later I came back to Italy, and got a job as an airline, um, staff. And then at the same time I found out that there was this university, that had translation degrees. I had no idea that I could even do that. And so then I just enrolled in the course without really thinking about it too much. And then I just did a three years degree in translation studies.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Martina: So when I first moved out and I was um, 18 or something and I went to Germany and then I came back. And then I kind of never really got an office job because I had to pay for my uni, for my university myself. And it was expensive because it was a private one.

So I started getting, at some point I had like three jobs and it was not enough to pay for my university. Um, so at that point, one and a half years into it, I think, I was supposed to have to be in the school to be able to pass it. But then I went to and spoke to the management and said, look, if I'm here, I can afford to pay for it. So I need to go abroad and look for a job abroad. And then I would just come back and take my, do my, you know, exams and everything. My tests, sorry, when, whenever I have the time. So in the end I did that. And so then I went back to Germany again when I was, I think 21 and then I moved to Switzerland.

Martina: So throughout the whole thing I started traveling, kind of moving around to get jobs to pay off my university. Um, cause we don't really get debt like you guys in the US or the UK do, I think. I just, if I wanted to attend, I had to pay for it. So, and then throughout all of this mess, at some point when I was still working at the airport, I was talking to, one of my passengers who was flying, was German basically. And he was asking me some questions, bla bla? So I told him that I was actually studying translation and just out of the blue he went like, "Oh really? Cause I run this business and they need translations on a regular basis." And he handed me his business card. So a couple of months later I started doing this on the side as I was doing my jobs in Germany and Switzerland, whatever.

Martina: And it was just, it was there and on the side and that's, that's kind of what got me started into online work. Although I was working at restaurants, I didn't have much time for it, but basically that was what, um, laid the groundwork for me to be independent. And so at some point I did all my tests at university, I was very close to graduating. And I had this crazy boyfriend who was always traveling around. And at some point we wanted to go to Southeast Asia, I think. So I just thought, okay, whatever. I just have to take one last test at university. And I, we try and I just dropped everything else, like restaurant jobs and I would just try and work on my laptop. So I did that. It was a very bad idea because I was not making enough at all. I struggled a lot, but because I only had that, um, gig going on then I started really, really spending a lot of time like most of my day researching how to do online work. How to, I started looking how to set up my website and everything else from um, a bungalow in Thailand had a really bad connection, basically. Uh, it was not fun to be honest, but that was also 10 years ago or something. Maybe last, eight years ago when there was not nearly as much information online is we do have now. So took a lot, but then gradually we started picking up very slowly, but it did.

Kathryn: How do you describe your job to people when they're just being polite?

Martina: Over the years I've realized that a lot of people don't really know what a translator is and so they might associate the word translator to, I'm a freelancer on Fiverr. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, but just, just, it's just not what I do. So I realized that I cannot just say, oh, I'm a freelance translator, cause it just gives out the wrong impression. So it just, depending on who I'm talking to, I'm just, I'm going, I'm just, uh, just drop a couple of lines. Like, Oh, I'm, I run a translation business and I have, I work with clients, with companies in, in marketing and some, something like that basically. So I'd just, you know, a couple of lines to explain what I do rather than just dropping like, oh yeah, I'm a translator.

Kathryn: And when you're talking with someone who really wants to know some more details, what do you say?

Martina: Um, I just give the full, the full spectrum of it, which is I run a translation business. Actually two, one is specialized in marketing translations for mid-sized companies, um, in the tech, digital, and media spaces and the other one is specialized in, I do specialized translations for the action sports industry.

Kathryn: And you told us a little bit about how you got started online, how did you get focused on the two translation fields that you use now?

Martina: So parts of my first university degree, because then I also enrolled in a masters, um, was marketing and communications. So it's always something that I studied, although back then it was not, it was not that much of that online world that we know now. So it was more, you know, the Four P kind of stuff, more traditional marketing. But it got me started definitely. And then I realized I did not like legal, I did not like medical, I did not like anything else really. I really enjoyed marketing because it's creative and I really liked the possibility of transforming that message from my source language. So that was my, my thing really. And I realized that's what I want it to do. So I went into that direction. And then the second one is actually a spin off, because I do action sports. Uh, basically maybe 90% of my free time I do snowboarding, skiing, rock climbing, trying to surf.

Martina: And whenever I looked up translation, I mean I looked up a product or information online, I realized it was a huge gap in the market. Cause translations in that space are usually done internally, by the companies themselves or they might lack the skills, linguistic skills or they are assigned to translation agencies who do not have the expertise. So then I put together a team of people. We're all specialized in the sports. So everyone does the sport they actually translate about. And then, yeah, and then it just went into that direction.

Kathryn: And how do you find clients?

Martina: So I started off applying at agencies when I was, um, at the beginning of my career. And then, um, I gradually downsized my agency pool, agency client pool, and then went into direct client work. So direct clients, I usually, now, nowadays I do a bit of many things. So one is, uh, get a lot of, um, referrals, referrals, word from other, from colleagues who know what I specialize in. I also don't have any issues with Swiss Italian, by the way. That's, that's a big thing. And then I do a little bit of, I don't really do content marketing in that I don't have a blog or anything. I do a lot of LinkedIn works. I do a lot of content marketing on LinkedIn. And then I do, that's, that's geared to where my marketing client space. And then I also use Instagram for my action sports client space. Uh, what else? And then sometimes there is a company that I really want to work with and I will just get in touch with them and hopefully that we will, we will work out. But also there are some things like some weird things that I do that get me work.

Martina: So for example, once I, when I actually started the spinoff in action sports translations, I set up this website and I wanted to get some new content that I could display for

portfolio samples. So I went after this company that I realized I didn't have good translations and I said, look, this is your issue. If you'll allow me to do your transitions for free, just a very set amount of content and let me use it on my sample, as a sample on my website. I just do this for free and they would say, "Yeah. Okay, sure." And then after a while they realized that it was actually getting good work and then they said, look, what about I pay you and you start working for me in a regular basis. So that happened. And now that's a client that I have. Or, well to make a long story short, I put up a blog just a couple of weeks ago actually to talk about traveling with cats as a digital nomad.

Martina: And literally, I dunno how, but somebody found it and then they got in touch with me and they were like, "Hey, I'm actually looking for the translators, uh, into Italian for our website, which is about rescue pets and strays and traveling with pets. Would you like to work with us?" And I'm like, okay, sure. Just because I put up the blog. So it's kind of always coming to me in some weird ways. And then there's one thing that I do as well. I actually also have a side business, which is, I make laptop kind of stickers, but it's decals really, for freelancers. So we basically just take, um, this decal on your laptop and it says something like Professional Translator, Are You Looking for a Professional Translator, Would You Like to Have, you know, Let's Have a Chat or just Translator at Work, you just stick to it. And whenever you work from a coffee shop or something, then people actually walking past you and they see it and that might generate business or just contacts. And that's worked actually quite well at conferences, for example.

Kathryn: Tell us about your first major struggle.

Martina: I mean, except for obviously when I was starting out and I had no client base and I was just in Thailand by myself and the boyfriend, uh, which, so then I guess the first major struggle was to actually get it up and running. Uh, the second major struggle I guess was when a client didn't pay me. So I did all this work and then they ghosted me, I think the only like \$2000 or yeah or something. And obviously, especially when you're starting out, it's not fun at all. So I basically stalked the CEO because no one in the company, they would just keep telling me people are not in house. The person who is responsible is not in house. And every single time I called or sent an email. So at that point I was furious and I just tracked down the CEO and I sent this email where I literally threatened them of exposing them everywhere that I can, I could think of, um, within two hours of receiving my email I got my payment basically.

Martina: So, and then that letter actually somehow got a little viral within my industry and I'm really happy because it helped, it helped more people get paid. So I guess that went quite nicely. Um, and then maybe the very first major struggle was in 2016, well '15 actually, cause I was, I was living abroad and then I had to come back to Italy because my grandpa had a tumor. So, obviously it was deteriorating, but within the same month my dad had a motorbike accident and ended up completely paralyzed and it was a very complicated situation. You know, I never had a good relationship with my dad in the first place and I was suddenly with him in that situation 24/7. I had no idea how to cope. It really threw me off. I could not, it basically put me off work for six months just because I completely lost the site for anything. Um, so yeah, that was, that was a big issue, big struggle.

Kathryn: And how about your first major success?

Martina: I don't know because I think I've really always cherished every single small success so probably, I don't even know if I can pinpoint one. They just success one that I could think of is maybe one of the first, the first clients that really, um, actually accepted my highest rate. It felt like, wow, I can actually charge that much money, that's good. And then all my work paid off just recently actually I got a really, really big client on board that I was always, always looked up to when starting my marketing stuff. So I felt like that was really, if I told you his name, which I'm not because I'm still working with him right now, you probably be like, wow. So yeah, that was a big success.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today knowing everything you already know, is there anything you'd do differently?

Martina: Maybe not on the side of building the business. Cause I really like what I've done up until today. Obviously with some ups and downs. But one thing that I would definitely do differently would be manage my money and organize my business. And that's because in Italy you always go from job to job and it's, you never know if you have, you're going to have stability. And then I went from having from earning five euros per hour to earning a lot more than that and I was not very diligent, diligent with organizing my money at first and I wish had done that because then it would have saved a lot of headache down the line. And also start from, from the very beginning, um, with organizing my leads and you know, having everything set up like with systems, which I've always been a little a little, a little bit messy about that.

Kathryn: You probably don't really have a typical day. Do you want to give us what a random day look like?

Martina: Well, my days are definitely quite random also because I've been in, all of these have been moving around a lot and they think of, you know, for the past 10 years of lived everywhere basically. And so right now I have spent my winter season in the Alps in the Italian Alps. So, well now the season is over, but until a couple of weeks ago, what I would do I wake up really early because my cats wake me up at five, get in a few hours of work, then go up to the mountains, snowboard a little bit and come back down the little work and then go down to the gym, rock climbing and then maybe do a little more work in evening or something. Um, yeah. And when I'm going to do, now I'm going to be actually moving to Spain and traveling around in a van for a few months, rock climbing. So what I'm going to do now is I'm going to be just waking up, doing work, going into the crag, rock climbing the whole day and then coming back and working in the evening. That's pretty much it's going to look like.

Kathryn: And as far as the process of doing translation, how does that work? You sit down with a document and once you start, what does that look like?

Martina: So let's say I wake up and I check my emails and then depending on the, what I, what I have to do, I usually have um, short term assignments because marketing is usually very fast paced. So I have maybe maximum 10 days to get my stuff done. So, I just get my

new projects, put them in my um, kind of CRM project management system. If it's a project, project that's for multiple languages, then I will assign them to the different translators that I work with. And then if I have to do something myself into my own language, I have to actually work on a document myself. I just sit down depending on what my deadline is. And just usually if it's a short document I just read the whole thing and then I start working on it, very, it usually involves a lot of research, a lot of creative thinking. So it really depends on what the project is.

Martina: Like for example, today I just worked on two articles. It's kind of marketing kind of stuff. It's like the Swiss Amazon and they do a lot of blog content. So I always translate their stuff into Swiss Italian. So I don't, I tend not to not read the whole thing beforehand because it might, you know, take a little bit cause it's usually long articles. So I read paragraph and then I start working on it. I do the first draft and then I go over it again and then it makes more sense because I already know, you know, obviously what's coming next from the beginning. So I fix it and then I do the final reading and that's how I tackle that. And if it's a small thing, usually it's usually more creative. So I just take more time on every single bit of the text and then read it a hundred times and then I let it rest and I get back to it. With a fresh mind later on.

Kathryn: Is there any kind of licensing you need?

Martina: Well not really. You could be a translator even without a license. It just really helps in terms of credibility, especially because the markets, markets 'cause there are many markets, okay. Different macro segments are, could be saturated. Um, so if you're trying to get up from the lower paying segments and get to the higher paying segments, then it might make sense because then it really gives you good credibility.

Kathryn: Do you keep up with any kinds of continuing education, formal or informal?

Martina: Well, yeah, I mean mostly informal I guess. I do a lot of, I keep learning every day. I think half of my day is actually, my working day, is actually spent on researching. So I do, I do read a lot of marketing related stuff, I do read a lot of copywriting, you know, that's, that's what I do basically. So, not so much about translation itself because it's something I do on the job every single day. So I kind of just work on it as I go. But because my craft includes, I mean involves writing copy, then I do a lot of stuff on that side. And I'm actually doing a masters degree right now, everything online. I love my own world and freedom. And it's actually on audio-visual translation, which includes anything which is on website apps, software, all that stuff. So that's there in the background as well.

Kathryn: So what are you excited about in the translation field right now?

Martina: I guess in my line of work I am quite excited about the fact that I've really gotten to a point where I can work less and make more and choose projects that I'd like to work on and choose the clients, which is a big thing for me. I really work with like I clients, I'm sorry. I work with clients that I really like, and really aligned with them. Um, I just ditched a client last week and it felt so good. I actually never do that, but that had to be done. So I'm really excited about the point that I've reached and also the fact that I am

at a point, I never thought about coaching people or mentoring people. But I do share a lot in a lot of Facebook groups for example, from just a viewpoint of things that have worked for me and I like to share them because I'd like other people to be able to use the same strategies that I use when they work for me.

Martina: And so I get asked all the time to participate in Webinars, podcasts and stuff like that. I'm really, really happy, happy than I'm actually having an impact on other people's lives and livelihoods. And then being excited in his industry as a whole, I think there's a lot of networking happening right now. Lots of people stepping up and realizing what their full potential is rather than, cause there was a lot of complaining in the translation industry. If any of the people listening to this episode today, um, our translators, obviously they will know what I mean. Um, so it's just very exciting that there is a lot of, you know, new information and new and kind of people encouraging other people just coming up all the time.

Kathryn: Now it's time to get into the numbers. What would you say your salary range is and how long have you been doing this?

Martina: I started out very little, like, I don't know, maybe the first couple of years for around 15 grand or something, but I was also doing a little bit part of that and stuff. And then now I actually make around €70,000 maybe last year and this year is looking like it's probably gonna be quite a higher up problem. Is that because of Italian laws, I can't really exceed that sum. So I'm trying to keep it under that €70,000 threshold because otherwise I have, that I end up having to pay much more in tax, which is why I'm actually, my plan for next year is to move the business elsewhere because I like to, you know, double on that and expand on that. But right now my range is about that.

Kathryn: And that's in euros?

Martina: Yeah, sorry that's euros.

Kathryn: Okay. And what would you say the beginning salary range would be?

Martina: Uh, it really depends cause it doesn't have to be, you know, just because I or other people started out low, it doesn't mean that everybody else does. If you starting out and you managed to price yourself and position yourself in good segments, you can still get good results from the very beginning. But I would guess that the way that I began, it would be reasonable to be within €15,000 and €20,000 maybe. It really depends. And so there's no, it depends on your language language combination, your clients or market segment. There's no set way of figuring that out I guess.

Kathryn: Okay. And is there a good way to research market segments and possibly even language combinations if you're just looking into it at the beginning?

Martina: I guess obviously if you're a translator you only translate into your native language. That's like a professional standard that everyone usually does and should abide by. Um, then as your source language, I guess it depends on what, uh, I don't know what

language you can already speak. Um, but if you could pick one, yeah, maybe you could go for like the more rare ones, like Japanese or whatever. I don't even know. Cause that tends to be less saturated as a market as a whole. And then for market segments you, I mean, it's just like, uh, you know, just like a restaurant industry. So you go from the McDonald's all the way up to the five star Michelin restaurant, kind of restaurant. So, um, it all depends on what kind of companies you work with. So for example, I know that my kind of clients have to be companies that make mid size, so they make, um, \$2 MM to, you know, whatever \$8 MM per year so they can actually afford my services.

Martina: And I know exactly which country, uh, which countries I want to work with. So for obvious reasons, I'm not going to work with companies from India for example, cause they would never have the budget that I want to charge. Uh, whereas I dunno The US or Scandinavian countries or uh, Switzerland, they do have the budget that I want to charge. So you need to do like laser focused work on what kind of companies you want to work with. And also, does my client have a budget but not care about having good translation quality on their website. So that's all stuff that you need to take into account. I actually, when I started out, had no idea what I was doing. I just tried working, you know, whatever came in. My first few jobs were like a nightmare, for example. But then as I, as I grew professionally, I also at some point a few years ago I did the branding, uh, branding work with, actually with a girl from the group, the Digital Nomad Girls group Millie [inaudible].

Martina: Um, she's very good. And after working with her, I realize exactly what I was after and then that was a bit of a game changer actually.

Kathryn: What would you say the top salary range would be?

Martina: I have no idea. I would say that a good salary would be over a hundred thousand, but I don't know. There are some that earn that much. Um, I mean I'm aiming at that and more hopefully, but there might be, people will do even more. So usually that's the kind of threshold that people mention when they talk about high salary translators.

Kathryn: So, how do you decide what to charge?

Martina: Many factors, many factors. So one thing is my productivity. I know how many words, I would probably be able to do in one hour for, you know, for each kind of project. Um, and I know how much I want to charge by hour because I know, um, at the end of the day I know how much, how many expenses I have, which by the way, the expenses tend to grow as, as your salary grows. So, um, but I know how many expenses I have, what kind of lifestyle I want to afford and stuff like that. So I take everything into account and then I, I end up in a number like that. So right now I charge, I'm very transparent about my rates, which you will find is not usually the case in this industry, but I don't care because I think we should all be transparent about what we charge just to help other people out as well.

Martina: So if I worked with an agency as a middleman, I would charge €60 per hour. And if I work for a direct client, that varies, but right now it's between €90 and €120 per hour. So that's where I'm at right now.

Kathryn: As entrepreneurs we often have feast or famine cycles. What do you do to keep your income stable?

Martina: I try, sometimes I fail because I tend not to be very consistent. And if I were, that's what I would keep doing. Um, on keeping my work up on linkedin especially cause it's a massive platform for inbound marketing and leads. When I do that, I get a constant stream of leads. That's my main thing I guess. And then I just try to, you know, once in a while, I just research companies that I like and just send out a little email and then maybe once a month later that they might contact me. So that's what I do right now. I'm sure that it is more efficient ways of doing that. I think LinkedIn for me is what works best.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to become translators?

Martina: My number one tip, that's a good one. I would say do not get discouraged by what you read online in other groups. Because it's probably you're going to go up in, you know, a group and say "Hi, I'd like to start out" and this and this and that, and a lot of the times there is a lot of negativity around just work a lot on your branding before you really get into it. Work a lot on your branding, on um, position yourself and which market you want to work on, which clients want to work with and start from there and be confident that you can do it. Because if you just start out and kind of randomly take whatever comes in, you're probably going to take ages to get to a point where you can sustain yourself and obviously hone your skills and you need to be good at what you do. I know that sounds strange, but I do a lot of proofreading and there is a lot of crap quality out there. So be good at what you do. Be yourself, be confident you can do it, do a lot of research and you know, reach out if, to people who are doing it, if you have any questions,

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Martina: Right now I have, I have started to spin off with translations and action sports industry, quite recently actually. So my next step is to focus a lot more on that cause I really enjoy that. And in the near future I'd like to do more. So when I move my business abroad, so I cannot really do that right now, but next year I would like to make a few more teams, multilingual teams that I can work with clients. So I do more management and also translation. But I also always like to keep it very small and personal, not turning into an agency of some sorts, just a very small group of um, team of really good translation professionals and um, and just grow vertically, in that sense, in that direction.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Martina: I am pretty much everywhere. So you, um, my translate, marketing translation website is movingwordstranslations.com. Then, if you want to check out what we do there, then

the action sports one is theactionsportstranslator.com. And then you will find on both websites all the links to all the social media basically, which is Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Then I have this, um, if you want to check out the, the stickers that you can use for your marketing on your laptop, that's freelanceratwork.co. You can also find Freelancer at Work on Instagram and Facebook. And then if you're interested in digital nomading with your cats, you can follow the nomad cats on Instagram and thenomadcats.com on the blog. A month ago, I teamed up with about 15 other professional translators who are all, have been all in the industry for quite a few years.

Martina: And we put together all about, um, all of our expertise and experience in the field. And we had the two days on marketing summit, so kind of Webinar and conference for translators. And there's a lot of really valuable content. I personally talk about LinkedIn and marketing in general because um, that's what I do. I do a lot of LinkedIn marketing work and I've been kind of teaching other translators how to make it work for them, because it just is, it's just an amazing platform. So it is currently online and if you want to check it out, you will find a lot of really, really valuable content for, um, starting out. But even if you're already in business for awhile and like some new content, I mean, there were some really big names. They're like Corrine McKay and Tess Whitty. If you don't know them, you need to go and check them out because they are very big names in industry and it's available I think around \$99 right now. So, and you get just literally two full days of content. Um, and you can re watch it whenever you want. So if you want to check that out, it's called Marketing Success for Translators.

Kathryn: Okay. And we will get all of that information in the show notes. Martina, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Martina: Thank you for having me.

Kathryn: Thank you for listening to Compass. You can find today's show notes at compasspod.com/020, that's compasspod.com/020. Next week we'll be talking with Julia Taylor, developer.