

CEATL – as necessary as ever

Shaun Whiteside

Time sometimes creeps up on you: my first visit to a CEATL AGM was as a guest to the one in Oslo in 2009 – 10 years! Seriously? – before joining officially the following year as a successor to the outgoing Chair and **TA** delegate, Ros Schwartz. 2009 was the year when Turkish ÇEVBiR and Flemish VAV's applications for membership were accepted, bringing the total number of member associations to 27. Items on the agenda that year included an appraisal of the results of the **survey of working conditions** for literary translators in Europe, published the previous December; relations with other organizations (**EWC**, **CAE**, **HALMA**, **FIT** and **RECIT**); and the revision of what was then the Decalogue, the much-debated set of ten sacred rules for translators' associations. Martin de Haan, speaking for the Dutch association, was concerned about an ageing (and hence diminishing) population of translators. The Finnish association was leading a campaign to enhance the visibility of our profession, and CEATL's Working Conditions survey was being discussed in the Finnish media. Of course, CEATL had been around for

a quarter of a century by the time I arrived, but this was my introduction to it, and a fascinating introduction it was too. Here was a group of individuals representing the interests of thousands of literary translators across Europe and, even though the discussions could sometimes become heated, making common cause. (We also, it should be said, had a lovely boat-trip up the fjord, and the weather was splendid.)

Aside from warmth, erudition, commitment and a considerable sense of fun, it was clear that CEATL's work was, and still is, characterized by a powerful sense of solidarity and an intense engagement with the institutions of the European Union. All of these factors remain the case, but we might need to explore some of them if we want to examine the question of what CEATL is for, exactly, and how it might evolve into the future.

Solidarity

So do we need CEATL? Well of course we do. First of all, it's an opportunity for member associations to network and exchange advice on the topics that



A spooky stroll through Norwich with CEATL delegates, May 2019

Photo: Shaun Whiteside

concern them, as when, for example, CEATL backed the Turkish association ÇEVİBİR in advising the Turkish government not to introduce a system of certification for literary translators.

Moreover, a pan-European umbrella organization obviously carries much more weight than any number of small associations when it comes to lobbying the European Parliament on questions such as the Copyright Directive or working conditions, or indeed participating in the first **PETRA** conference in Brussels in 2011 and subsequent meetings of the same organization. There's strength in numbers, naturally, but there's also strength in the pooling of experience and expertise and in the ability to pull together. CEATL carries weight on the international stage and, perhaps most importantly, to stand together against unfair practices by monolithic private global companies – Amazon being a case in point – particularly when such enterprises are increasingly

operating in an international arena.

Fresh approaches

And how has the organization changed since I've been a member? In the obvious sense that it's considerably larger now than it was ten years ago, thanks to the gradual accession of member associations from the former Eastern Bloc. Not only is the geographical scope of CEATL enlarged, it also means that it is turning from a North-West European institution into one that is properly pan-European. One unexpected consequence of that change has been the gradual decline of the use of the French language in the everyday business of the organization, although of course it lives on in the translation of documents and this very e-zine. Conversely, fresh ideas and approaches are pouring in from newer associations, such as those in Romania, Serbia and Macedonia, to complement and perhaps shake up more established perspectives. As to how I see things going: there's a lot of energy coming from the working



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groups – Best Practices (of which I’m a member) is coming up with useful and exciting ideas for the boosting of new associations in terms of networking, visibility, lobbying and finance; the Working Conditions group is back with a vengeance, and with access to new technology that wasn’t around when the original survey was carried out over ten years ago. Visibility, which went briefly into abeyance, has bounced back with the e-zine that you’re reading right now.

If I’m right, and my crystal ball is in some kind of working order, a lot more energy is going to be coming from the working groups in future; or, to put it another way, the organization of CEATL is going to be less top-down than it has perhaps sometimes been in the past. And current state of our finances, as long as they are used judiciously (speaking with my Treasurer’s hat on) means that there should be plenty of resources for the working groups to have all the meetings they need.

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From a personal perspective, and writing at a time when my own country seems to be going through some kind of self-destructive mental breakdown, the confident sense of solidarity shown by CEATL acts as a kind of beacon, and a lifeline. It’s enormously important for us to know that we still have allies on the continent, and thanks to our connections the UK Translators Association is able to remain part of an international community, even when our political masters seem to have given up on the idea. In that context it was particularly important to be able to hold the 2019 AGM in Norwich. We’re with you, CEATL!