

NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: SWEDEN

A long and sometimes bumpy road

Swedish literary translators from 1893 to the present day

Lena Jonsson

Since 1893, literary translators in Sweden have been organised in union-like associations together with literary and scientific writers. The first organisation of this kind, the Swedish Association of Authors, was open to all writers and took a very active stance on copyright issues on behalf of its members. Among other things, the association played an important part in the work leading up to the [Berne Convention](#) for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, completed in 1896. The first collective contract for writers was written in 1925, and Public Lending Rights were established in the 1930s. However, in the same decade, the association's bylaws were changed so that translators were more or less excluded, and it wasn't until 1954 that the first association exclusively for translators was founded. Nowadays, we are a part of the Swedish Writers' Union under the name [Översättarsektionen](#), "The Translators' Section".

Our aims and connections

The aim of the Section is to strengthen translators as a group, both in society in general and in the publishing industry.

This includes providing assistance to translators with regards to negotiation and interpretation of contracts, both individually and collectively, taking measures to enhance the visibility of translators, and lobbying government agencies and politicians concerning e.g. copyright law, legislation on taxation and social security. The Section also arranges seminars and social activities for translators on a regular basis. For many of these activities, we receive financial and staff support from the Union.

Furthermore, the Section works to strengthen translators as a group within the Union, where we are a minority: approximately 1 in 5 is a literary translator. The success varies, depending to a large degree on the current leadership of the Union. But over the last ten years we have managed to secure the hiring of one officer who works solely with translators' issues, albeit part-time. However, we do in general get good support from the Union's office.

Swedish translators were present when CEATL was founded in 1993, and the

Section has been a member ever since, sending delegates to every Annual General Meeting. In 2008, we took an active part in arranging **WALTIC**, the Writers' and Literary Translators' International Congress, in Stockholm, a very successful conference for writers, translators and scholars from all over the world, and that same week the CEATL AGM was held in Stockholm. Through the Union we are also represented on the European Writers' Council, and through the Norne network we work to maintain links between the Nordic countries. Nationally, we are represented in many forums dedicated to translation and translators' issues, including the **Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators** in Visby, Gotland.

Boycotting works!

One of the Section's main concerns during the past five years has been negotiating the renewal of our Standard or Model Contract. For a very long time,

the Union and the Swedish Publishers' Association had an agreed Standard Contract and both parties loyally stood by it. But in 2017, the agreement was unilaterally terminated by the publishers during renewal negotiations. Sweden's largest publishing house, Bonnier, presented a new model. Their suggested contract included a great deal of changes for the worse for translators – the new model for remuneration would in effect result in lower fees, the Publisher would be granted the "Last Word" on the wording of the translation, and the Publisher would acquire all rights to the translation for a period of 30 years. And so on.

Renowned translators who were offered commissions on these terms refused to agree to these provisions. The Union and the Section recommended that their members didn't sign Bonnier model contracts. The **boycott** made headlines in daily newspapers, TV



*Translation from left to right: 'Who has written this beautiful text?' 'Me!' 'Me!'
Cartoon by Sven Nordqvist*



Lena Jonsson, literary translator and legal bureaucrat (why choose?). She mainly translates YA fiction, most notably *The Hunger Games* trilogy and several novels by Ursula K. Le Guin. She has been on the Board of the Section and a delegate to CEATL since 2016.

Lena Jonsson
Photo: Private Archive

and radio, was much quoted on social media, and also received support from colleagues abroad. And it worked! With the aid of the Union officers our selected committee managed subsequently to negotiate a much-improved contract and the boycott was lifted.

Currently the most important issues for the Section are:

- We are re-negotiating the Bonnier contract for translation commissions that has been in effect for two years. Together with a couple of other publishers we are trying to negotiate a contract model suitable and acceptable to both parties.
- We are looking into the practices of two or three smaller publishers to decide whether or not to dissuade our members from taking commissions from them. The terms in their contracts are simply far below all reasonable standards.
- In cooperation with our colleagues in the translators' organisations **SKTL** and **KAOS** in Finland, we were planning for the CEATL AGM in Åland in 2021.
- Finally, we are considering how to plan members' activities in COVID-times, including everything

from public prize ceremonies and seminars to monthly pub meets.

The Swedish Writers' Union

The Union has approx. 3000 members and of those, approx. 600 are literary translators. The association works to safeguard the economic and moral interests of all members by defending freedom of expression and of the press, and by keeping up to date with copyright stipulations and laws regulating copyright.

All members may consult the office for individual help with interpretation and negotiation of contracts, and with agreements and disputes over such, as well as get tax counselling and other legal assistance. These services are free of charge. In principally important cases, e.g. concerning freedom of expression, the Union may absorb litigation costs for members. And finally, the association assists members in collective bargaining measures.