

## NOTES FROM AROUND EUROPE: GERMANY

# Remuneration remains a delicate issue

*Andreas G. Förster  
& Claudia Steinitz*

At 67, the German Literary Translators' Association, **VdÜ**, founded in 1954, is far from retiring. Its official name is almost as long as its history, though most of the 1,400 members would have difficulty reciting it in full. Luckily, most of them are young and have better ideas about what to do for the guild than memorizing that name: *Verband deutschsprachiger Übersetzer/innen literarischer und wissenschaftlicher Werke / Bundessparte Übersetzer innen* within the *Verband deutscher Schriftstellerinnen und Schriftsteller* within the United Services Trade Union *ver.di*\*.

To become a member of the VdÜ, translators have to present at least one published literary translation or an equivalent work. For the last 15 years we have offered candidate status to aspiring translators – they have access to the same information as members as well as individual mentoring for up to two years. However, the German translators' industry is neither a closed shop nor is a special diploma required to translate literature. As a result, there are no exact figures on how many people

form that army of “nameless samurai” (Marcus Ingendaay), but there are about 10,200 books translated every year.

The first and foremost goal for the VdÜ as a professional association and as part of a labour union, is to implement a fair remuneration policy for all literary translators, as well as representing translators' interests whenever necessary. One example of recent achievements was when a new Copyright Act was being discussed in 2001, VdÜ members ‘landed’ near the Reichstag with a boat full of translated books for every deputy and handed them over to Wolfgang Thierse, the then President of Parliament. The new law was passed but did not include the option for collective lawsuits. Thus, some courageous colleagues took individual legal action against their publishers to enforce this law. Up until now, the option for collective lawsuits is also missing in the current national implementation of the European Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, an issue that has been keeping our boards busy for some years.

In 2014, after several years of negotiation, a joint agreement on fees and royalties for literary translations was signed with a particular group of publishers. However, the hoped-for knock-on effect with other publishers did not materialize. In 2020, the VdÜ board and its negotiating committee agreed a new standard contract with the publishers' association which recommended best practices such as naming translators and reconfirming the standard page norm (of 30 lines max. with 60 characters max.). The new standard contract does not specify any fees though neither did the 1982 contract. Translators have to rely on their individual negotiating skills. Remuneration remains a delicate issue.



**Boat full of translated books lands at Reichstag**  
**Photo: Guido Notermans**

### Knowledge is power

Even though financial malaise is alleviated by the Artists' Social Insurance Scheme, established in the early 80s, which our Writers' Union fought for, the average income of literary translators in Germany is presently 19,000 euros a year. Since 2017, the VdÜ has offered its members contract advice, both from experienced colleagues and from a specialised lawyer. Any changes in income are monitored very closely using regular surveys.

*Scientia potentia est* – 'knowledge is power'. This is the reason why the VdÜ keeps their members and non-members up to date on political, professional, and cultural developments. This is achieved through the association's biannual print magazine, *Übersetzen* ('Translating'), and the association's publicly accessible website, with daily updates and legal information too. A landmark feature of the association has always been continuous professional development. In fact, VdÜ members themselves have set up independent associations dedicated to particular aspects of translation, the best example being the *Europäische Übersetzer-Kollegium*, which stands out as the first and largest international centre for translators of literature and non-fiction, inspiring similar institutions all over the world.

Part and parcel of VdÜ's activities are networking and influencing public discourse. Back in 1966, translators founded the *Freundeskreis* ('circle of friends promoting literary translations'), which established the tradition of awards for literary translators in Germany. The latest brainchild is the *Rebekka* award for translators of light fiction.





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Unfortunately, light fiction reviews are rarely included in the press or book reviews despite being a major source of revenue for publishers and book stores. Since 2004, the *Übersetzerbarke* ('translators' boat') is awarded to translator-friendly publishers, journalists, booksellers or librarians. Three years later, VdÜ started presenting a wide range of discussions and talks at the Frankfurt and Leipzig book fairs. Our latest contribution was a panel discussion on "Gendering in the European Context" at the virtual Frankfurt Book fair 2020. There is also a network of outreach associations, such as the *Weltlesebühne* ('World Reading Stage'), founded by VdÜ members in 2008, to bring translators on stage. It ensures that they are paid a decent fee for their performances and increases translators' visibility.

A very special moment for us all was in 1997 when, after several years of intense lobbying, the renowned translator from Russian, Rosemarie Tietze, set up the *Deutscher Übersetzerfonds (dÜf)*.

This translators' fund awards several hundred thousands of euros in subsidies and offers residencies every year. The *dÜf* model recently inspired Italian colleagues in *Strade* to ask for a similar fund. Furthermore, the *dÜf* developed an Academy of the Art of Translation with a wide range of seminars and workshops, e.g. the 'vice-versa' seminars which bring together translators from one pair of languages. Further training and qualifications remain a vital component to strengthening our professionalism. For more than 50 years, VdÜ has been organising an annual meeting for up to 250 participants. Since 2004, we have been meeting in Wolfenbüttel for three days of workshops, readings, and parties.

Wir übersetzen Literatur





**Claudia Steinitz** has been translating literature from French to German for 30 years. She was one of the founders of **Weltlesebühne e.V.**, an association which brings translators onto the world stage and promotes their public recognition. She was awarded the Jane-Scatcherd-Prize for translation in 2020. Claudia lives in Berlin and is the CEATL delegate of the German association **VdÜ**.

**Claudia Steinitz**

**Photo: Guido Notermans**

In almost seven decades, our association has made numerous improvements for literary translators. We have come a long way from being those unknown and almost invisible ghosts, hardly receiving a mention in publications, to becoming self-confident co-authors claiming their rights to being named on the cover, or at the very least on the inner front page. Active members have helped transform solitary freelancers into a strong association and a negotiating partner with publishers and politicians.



**Andreas G. Förster** is literary translator for political and historical books, and union member for grassroots power. He has been VdÜ's online editor since 2019 and was elected to the VdÜ Board in 2021.

**Andreas G. Förster**

**Photo: María Porciel Crosa**

*\*Association of German-Language Translators of Literary and Scientific Works / Federal Branch, Translators' within the Association of German Authors within the United Services Trade Union*