

# International Certification Study: Austria

By Jiri Stejskal

In the March issue we took a closer look at the Canadian Translators and Interpreters Council and the Society of Translators & Interpreters of British Columbia, and I promised to explore the certification procedures for translators and interpreters in Austria. The following information was gleaned from the website of the Austrian Association of Court Interpreters (Österreichischer Verband der allgemein beeideten und gerichtlich zertifizierten Dolmetscher, ÖVGD). I am also indebted to Dipl. Dolm. Christine Springer and Dipl. Dolm. Liese Katschinka (president and vice-president of the ÖVGD, respectively), and to Dipl. Dolm. Erika Obermayer (president of the Austrian Association of Translators and Interpreters, UNIVERSITAS) for their guidance and additional support.

The ÖVGD is a nonpolitical, non-profit organization that has been in existence for more than 75 years with the declared objective of furthering the professional and business interests of sworn and certified court interpreters in Austria. At present, the association has approximately 600 members. As the association's name and objective suggest, its members consist of only certified court interpreters. Being a certified court interpreter, however, is also the sole vehicle for providing certified translations.

In Austria, certification is the responsibility of accredited certifying bodies. A special federal law regulates the accreditation of certifying bodies that certify companies, institutes, etc. (for example, under ISO or CEN standards). As no standards comparable to the ISO 9000 series are available for expert witnesses and court interpreters, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Justice launched an initiative for the certification of expert witnesses and court interpreters several years ago.

The relevant law stipulates that the certification procedures be handled by a board consisting of, among others, a representative of the judiciary (since the certification primarily serves the courts) and a representative of the respective professional association. Therefore, the association does not carry out any certification proceedings itself. Rather, only certified court interpreters can become members. In other words, the certification precedes the application for ÖVGD membership.

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The certification procedure is uniform throughout Austria for all languages and follows the same procedure used for expert witnesses (court interpreters and expert witnesses fall under the same legislative category in Austria). The law requires candidates to apply to their domestic court if they want to become certified court interpreters. They must either have completed a university training course for interpreters and translators and have acquired two years of experience as interpreters and/or translators, or, if no university training was obtained (which applies primarily to "exotic" languages), they must give proof of five years of professional experience as translators and/or interpreters. All candidates must document their office facilities (dictionaries, computer equipment, etc.) and be familiar with

the legal system of Austria and that of the applicant's foreign language(s). Applicants need to fulfill these requirements before being admitted to sit for a written and oral examination before a board that comprises a member of the judiciary, a member of ÖVGD, a chairperson, and two language experts (one for the relative language and the other an expert in translatology, both to be named by the ÖVGD). The certification is granted for 10 years and can be renewed upon providing proof of work done in the courts during the certification period. Proof of further training obtained during that period is also required. The certified court interpreter must be available at all times, and at short notice, for the courts and authorities. Repeatedly declining to answer a summons or prepare a translation could lead to the interpreter's name being deleted from the List of Sworn and Certified Court Interpreters.

The certified court interpreter ("*Allgemein beeideter und gerichtlich zertifizierter Dolmetscher*," or "sworn and certified court interpreter") is an interpreter/translator who is available specifically for the courts and authorities (federal and rural police, customs officials, authorities granting asylum, etc.) who must command the required specific knowledge. The swearing in and certification are part of a judicial administrative procedure that applies strict selection criteria. "Sworn" means that the interpreter is permanently under oath for all proceedings he or she takes part in (as opposed to the mere "ad hoc" recruitment of an interpreter, who is put under oath only in exceptional cases for specific proceedings). The Amendment of January 1, 1999, to the Court Experts and Interpreters Act, introduced "judicial certification" in addition to the swearing process. This was done in

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order to implement the concept of quality assurance in interpreting and translating. The designation “certified” clearly shows that the interpreter/translator is continuously subjected to a quality assurance procedure, specifically with a view to his or her work in the Austrian courts. For the purpose of improved quality assurance, the personal requirements for registration in the List of Sworn and Certified Court Interpreters were expanded. The registration procedure was regulated in greater detail by laying down legal rules for the Selection Commission, and a periodic review of the prerequisites of registration was introduced. The title “*Allgemein beeideter und gerichtlich zertifizierter Dolmetscher*” is legally protected. An action for an injunction may be filed against any person unlawfully using this title.

The certified court interpreter may also be employed outside the public sector and by private persons (i.e., for notarial documents, marriages, arbitration proceedings, translations of contracts, official documents, etc.). The activities of certified court interpreters are regulated by the “Federal Act of February 19, 1975, Federal Gazette 137, as amended in Federal Gazette 168/98, concerning Sworn and Certified Court Experts and Interpreters” and, for the certification of translations, by the “Imperial Patent of August 9, 1854, Imperial Gazette 208, concerning Non-Contentious Civil Proceedings.”

Owing to the strict selection criteria, the certified court interpreter is highly qualified, and specific legal provisions make him or her particularly trustworthy (e.g., the law imposes the obligation of secrecy upon the interpreter). The certified translations prepared by them are official and public documents, and the interpreter is liable for their correctness. A certified translation

includes the clause: “I hereby certify under my oath the full conformity of the above translation with the original/transcript/photocopy—attached/seen by me.” A round seal, which only the certified court interpreter may use, is then affixed to the document and is certified by the interpreter’s signature.

The Application for Registration in the List of Sworn and Certified Court Interpreters, including the applicant’s regular residence or place of professional activity (center of economic interests), must first be submitted to the president of the court in the district. In the course of the registration proceedings, the president responsible for the registration (certifying authority) will charge a commission when preparing an expert opinion on whether the registration requirements (qualifications) have been fulfilled.

The work of a certified court interpreter not only calls for an impeccable command of German and the foreign language(s), but also requires knowledge of the principles of Austrian legal and court procedures and of the legal and court procedures of the country/countries where the chosen language(s) is/are the official language(s). It also requires extensive knowledge of the terminology of law and commerce, both in German and the foreign language(s). In addition, a thorough knowledge of the terminologies of other fields such as medicine, technology, etc., is required. Every year, the association organizes several full-day introductory seminars for applicants, where an expert in law explains the necessary basic requirements for work as a certified court interpreter.

Translators must be experts in translation from both German into the foreign language(s) and from the

foreign language(s) into German. Similar to the new system implemented in the Czech Republic (see the November/December issue), a restriction to work only in one direction is not possible. As far as written expression is concerned, a faultless mastery of German and the foreign language(s) regarding grammar, syntax, and spelling are basic requirements. Thoroughness, accuracy, and correctness of the translation are of extreme importance, since a certified court interpreter is a certifying officer who affixes an official seal onto translations. If certified translations are incorrect, an action for damages may be filed. Further information on ÖVGD is available from [www.gerichtsdolmetscher.at](http://www.gerichtsdolmetscher.at) (both in German and in English). You may also contact the association at [oevgd@via.at](mailto:oevgd@via.at).

Several years ago, the Austrian Association of Translators and Interpreters (Österreichischer Übersetzer- und Dolmetscherverband), also called UNIVERSITAS, approached the Austrian Standards Institute in connection with the German standard DIN 2345 to inquire about whether this could also become an Austrian standard. The Austrian Standards Institute suggested taking DIN 2345 one step further and invited all interested parties (representatives of professional associations, translation companies, freelance interpreters and translators, and customers of translators and/or interpreters) to develop more detailed standards for translating and interpreting services and for the respective contractual relations between service providers and clients. The result are the Austrian Standards ÖNORM D1200 and D1201 (for translations), as well as ÖNORM D1202 and D1203 (for interpreting services). Work on ➡

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## International Certification Study: Austria Continued

certification procedures based on these standards is about to begin. For further information, please visit the homepage of the Austrian Standards Institute ([www.oenorm.at](http://www.oenorm.at)). The two standards on translation are also available in English. For further information about UNIVERSITAS, please contact the association's president, Dipl. Dolm. Erika Obermayer ([obermayer@netway.at](mailto:obermayer@netway.at)), or visit the UNIVERSITAS website at [www.universitas.org](http://www.universitas.org) (German only, although an English version is reportedly coming soon).

Another Austrian organization active in the T&I field is the Translators Association (Übersetzergemeinschaft, [www.translators.at](http://www.translators.at)), which focuses on literary translations. Translators and interpreters can train at three Austrian universities in Vienna, Graz, and Innsbruck. Information on training at the Institute for Translators and Interpreters of the University of Vienna is available at [www.univie.ac.at/transvienna/](http://www.univie.ac.at/transvienna/).

In the next issue, we will take a look at the status of certification in the U.K. and Ireland. As the editor of this series, I encourage readers to submit any relevant information concerning non-U.S. certification or similar programs, as well as comments on the information published in this series, to my e-mail address at [jiri@cetra.com](mailto:jiri@cetra.com).

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