

Keeping the public register

How did Mike Orlov come to be in charge of the National Register of Public Service Interpreters? Bulletin editor Radhika Holmström talked to him



Radhika Holmström has been the editor of *ITI Bulletin* since the May-June 2018 issue. She has been a freelance journalist for around 20 years now, following a first career running press offices in the voluntary sector. She has written for a wide range of publications, including national newspapers, trade journals and women's glossy magazines, and has also worked as health editor on several monthly titles and lectured in journalism at Middlesex University and Goldsmiths. Radhika co-wrote *Understanding family diversity and home-school relations* (Routledge). She can be reached at editor@iti.org.uk and by tweeting @ITIBulletin.

Mike Orlov is the first person to admit that the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) was not top of his list when he first started looking for a job after over 11 years out of the UK. 'On paper, it would seem I certainly wasn't right – I'd never worked for a not-for-profit organisation, or in the language community as such; so I couldn't understand why I kept thinking about the executive director role after I'd seen it advertised. Then eventually I realised why.'

Post-war public provision

The reason lay in his own family history. Orlov's parents originally arrived in Britain in the late 1940s, not speaking a word of English between them. 'Without professional interpreters, they would have had a terrible time dealing with the police, with the NHS – with all the authorities. They were very fortunate, because the post-war Attlee Labour government provided excellent services for the influx of people coming into the country following the devastation of the Second World War. My parents had nothing but praise for the way the UK helped them settle and feel safe, compared to the life they had led before. And a big part of this was they had professional interpreters to help them.'

Once settled, his parents brought up Mike and his sister in Bradford. After leaving a large comprehensive school with a cluster of O and A levels, Orlov went to London University and took a degree in history, studying at King's, the UCL

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, and Royal Holloway College. 'After leaving university I fell into the world of media. I started working for Haymarket Publishing before moving to Reed Elsevier's travel group, where I ran travel magazines, and from there into the world of newspapers. That was the period, between 1999 and 2006, which was the beginning of the digitally led transformational era in the media industry. Effectively, the shifts in

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technology – away from conventional print into digital online publications – and the subsequent assault on the industry meant people like me were managing businesses in decline. I was very excited by the new digital developments but found it very hard to work in such a defensive climate. Then the opportunity came to go to Dubai to manage a new business, which was particularly stimulating because the media industry in the Middle East was years behind the West, which meant print media might be able to learn lessons from Europe and the US, and avoid some of the traps.'

To Bahrain and back

'After a few years I was headhunted to work in Bahrain, working across the Middle East, dragging a 19th-century media operation into the 21st century; and then I took on a management consultancy role at another Bahrain-based company. So for nearly 11 years I was working constantly in the Middle East. In 2018 I conducted some pro bono consultancy roles in the UK, and realised it was time to come back... so the issue was where I would go and what I would do. And as I was scouring for possible roles, up came this enterprise.'

There was another reason why he felt he had to apply, in addition to his parents' experiences. 'When you are working in the Middle East, the language of business is English because there are so many people from different parts of the world who gather there. I once ran management training for 24 senior professionals from the same company, not one of whom spoke the same first language. It was a vivid example of getting communication right – and, of course, even more crucial in a public service setting like a custody room, court room or consulting room. I wanted to take all the knowledge and the skills I had gleaned in the commercial world and bring them to this not-for-profit organisation.'

Passionate at a pivotal time

It's now a few months since Orlov started in post, and he is very enthusiastic and passionate about it. 'We're living through a pivotal time in public service interpreting. It's increasingly vital to stress the need for quality and standards over price. Every individual, without fear or favour, should be represented before the police or the courts; that is in law. When it comes to health services, a poor-quality interpreter can, at worst, mean a patient dies.'

'The register ensures public service clients know they can find interpreters who are well qualified, experienced, have the necessary clearances and have been checked by a regulatory body. And if you are a public service interpreter, you should be registered with a high-quality body, which protects all the parties involved: both from the point of view



of the code of conduct and for your own protection.’

However, at the moment membership of the register is voluntary – and so is using it. Orlov would like to see it made mandatory for both parties: public services using interpreters and interpreters wishing to work in the public service arena. ‘The mandate of our national register is very clear: statutory regulation status for public service interpreting. At present, a high proportion of public service interpreters are members of the register, but not all. And certainly there are big variations in the way the public service organisations use it. On the one hand you have a body like the Metropolitan Police Service, which has a list of NRPSI-registered interpreters to whom it turns. The first hurdle for getting onto the Met list is that you have to be a member of the register; the second is you have to have passed the police vetting. And this means every custody sergeant is assured everyone who walks in is qualified and experienced and understands the processes involved in their custody suite. On the other hand you can have, say, an NHS trust where the procurement management can turn to someone who has an A level qualification in the language – just not well qualified for the task in hand.’

To this end, he says, he and his colleagues are delighted to be working with a lot of other professionals within the community to be lobbying police forces, the courts and NHS trusts. ‘There are some really positive things going ahead, including the new framework

whereby suppliers will have to comply in such a way that there is a guarantee of professionalism in working with the police on a national basis. The police outside the Met are recognising circumstances have to change. And the agencies to which they outsource services have to stop squeezing resources for profit if this leads to damaging delivery for the public and for public service organisations. So often, private companies involved in public processes are driven purely by this need for profit; their job is to increase the profitability of their organisation, and this isn’t always in the best interest of the client – or of the interpreters, whose remuneration gets reduced. We need them to outsource to ethically bound private organisations committed to long-term sustainability. We want to ensure a highly qualified interpreter is sitting in the custody suite, the

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court room or the consulting room, conducting a thoroughly professional job for the person and for the public service organisation. And alongside that, part of our mandate is to ensure that those interpreters who have registered are treated fairly and have the right levels of remuneration for their expert work.’

Translation on the agenda

One big thing on the NRPSI’s agenda is also a register of public service translators to go with the interpreter one. ‘Interpreters already transcribe documentation, written witness statements and so on; but clearly there is a lot of translation work beyond this: documents, police documents, a whole gamut of work goes on from English into different languages and back into English. Any doctor’s surgery has a huge amount of translation, not all of it of a high standard. We have to make

sure every individual who is living in this country is treated fairly. A voluntary register for public service translators is a natural corollary of the work we do, and there is certainly a need for it. It’s being researched and there is a lot of work going on in terms of defining qualifications and experience – not just the number of words someone has been translating, but also the quality of that work. Our aim is to have the register launched by the end of this year.’

Cross-sector collaboration

Finally, Orlov is as enthusiastic as his other colleagues in the sector about the value of collaboration and working together to promote the translation and interpreting sector more broadly. ‘I’m delighted to have been invited to the Association of Translation Companies’ conference in September. Each organisation has its own agenda, and that’s right; but within each of the agendas there is a common coming together. We need to work together to define and protect standards. Where the register stands out is it isn’t a membership organisation – it is there to check qualifications and experience, with a voluntary code of conduct and a voluntary disciplinary procedure if things go wrong. We’re very happy to work alongside the other associations and organisations to ensure and protect standards within our language community.’

The National Register explained

The NRPSI regulates the public service interpreting profession in the UK. It is a voluntary public interest body, and its primary role is to protect the public. It does this by ensuring interpreters working in a variety of public service environments meet the standards required of these exacting roles.

The core duties are the following:

- assessing and determining the standards required for registration
- ensuring registered interpreters meet the standards for professional conduct and practice
- maintaining the national register, providing a free online resource, accessible to all
- recognising the qualifications needed to become a professional interpreter
- investigating complaints about a registered interpreter’s conduct or competence through a transparent process
- promoting the role of the regulator and the importance of registration to ensure both the profession and society more widely understand their value.