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Commemorative naming – Austrian experiences

A diploma student of mine (Marlene KRAPP) found by her diploma work that except Vienna Austrian cities and communes have no detailed regulations as regards commemorative naming, although naming of urban features after persons and events is a widespread practice. In the best case they proceed according to the Viennese model.

This was a reason for the Austrian Board on Geographical Names [Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kartographische Ortsnamenkunde, AKO] to develop recommendations. So far they exist just as a draft and have not yet been agreed upon finally. We consult them also within the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [Ständiger Ausschuss für Geographische Namen, StAGN], the coordinating place-name body for all German-speaking countries, and they may finally become a common StAGN recommendation.

When we started drafting them, we looked of course first of all at UN Resolution VIII/2 and took it as a starting point. This Resolution is a strong argument and for this reason very supportive for national standardization, but goes not very much into details. We looked also for models in other countries and found them especially in Sweden, Finland and Canada. Also Staffan NYSTRÖM's and Mats WAHLBERG's articles in the recently published book "Place-Name Changes" (NYSTRÖM 2016, WAHLBERG 2016) were very helpful.

What found consensus in our consultations was that

- well-established names should not be changed without good reasons;
- commemorative names should be applied with caution and care;
- a name should not be repeated within a municipality, and also names easily to be mixed up (if only by pronunciation) should be avoided;
- commercial names, i.e. names of companies and their products, are to be avoided;
- names of persons are not to be applied during their lifetime. A break of at least five years would be appropriate;
- naming after females is to be supported due to the fact that for historical reasons an asymmetry between male and female names exists.

An intensive discussion developed, however, over the following two issues of the draft recommendation:

- With names of persons, Christian as well as family name are to be displayed.
- The person after whom the feature is named, should have had a relation to the place.

In the first case the following counter-arguments were brought forward:

- The name gets too long and complicated.
- The name will in practical use be abbreviated resulting in two or more versions.
- The name cannot be converted from male to female. (In Vienna, e.g., in some instances street names after males have been converted into names after females, when a female person with the same family name and some merits could be found. This was done to increase the share of female street names.)

Arguments in favor of adding the Christian name were:

- The gender has clearly to be indicated.
- Only the complete name clearly identifies the name giver and corresponds to the principal purpose of commemorative naming. A name like *Bach Street* could remind

of a brook (*Bach* in German) that was earlier flowing there, of Johann Sebastian Bach or some other member of this musicians' family or of a prime minister of the Habsburg Empire.

- When a Christian name functions as a family name (e.g. *Heinrich* 'Henry'), only the complete name makes clear that it is a family name.
- When a family name equals the name of a (former) profession (e.g. *Schuster* 'shoemaker'), only the complete name makes clear that it is a family name.
- A frequent family name (e.g. *Müller* 'Miller') plus a Christian name can be used for several features within a municipality, while without a Christian name it can be used only once.

Related to the recommendation "The person after whom the feature is named should have had a relation to the place" the question arose: What is *relation to place*? Has the person to be born or to have worked there? Can Goethe or Schiller just be name givers for streets and squares in Weimar?

The answer was: The importance of persons (and events) can be classified into several levels:

- Persons (events) of global or international importance like Bach or Mozart. They are part of our universal culture and our global cultural heritage and their name can therefore be assigned to any place of the world.
- Persons (events) of national importance. Their name can be assigned to any place in the corresponding country.
- Persons (events) of regional importance. Their name can be assigned to any place in the corresponding region.
- Persons (events) of local importance. Their name can be assigned to any place in the corresponding municipality. It would, however, be preferable to name after them urban features corresponding to their birthplace, to where they lived or worked or exerted a public function.

Naming after ambivalent figures

A special problem is naming after persons, who are after some time conceived as ambivalent, i.e. as having their merits, but also some dark sides.

In Vienna and some other Austrian cities a commission of historians evaluated existing names of urban features and found some critical cases. After some initial place-name changes that were not always favorably received by the wider public and resulted in fact in the simultaneous use of two names (along the lines older/younger, insider/outsider and divergent by political attitudes) it was decided to preserve these names, but to supplement them by additional plates explaining, who this person was, recognizing his/her merits, but also hinting at his/her dark sides.

This is certainly not possible with obviously and totally negative figures like Hitler or Stalin, but can have an educative function in many other cases conveying the idea that not all is bright in our history, that even outstanding personalities made their mistakes and it is wise to be a critical citizen.

New regulations of the city of Vienna

New regulations of the city of Vienna, passed in February 2016, include some specifics:

- Urban features may not be cut into pieces (e.g., a street into sections) just because a feature is needed for a name.
- Names are to be short and easy to be remembered, digits are to be avoided.
- Names for new urban features (e.g. new urban developments in the outskirts of a city) should rather remind of local historical features (e.g., old field names) or former natural conditions (e.g., a river or brook now canalized, or a wood) than of persons.
- No Christian names are to accompany family names, if they are not necessary for distinction from persons with the same family name.
- No titles are to be added to the name.
- The name giver should have had a relation to Vienna, but not necessarily to the exact place, where the feature is located.
- The name giver must not be a living person, but one year after his/her death his/her name can be used.

Obviously, these regulations deviate in some aspects from the recommendations under elaboration by the Austrian Board on Geographical Names, since they have been elaborated earlier and independently from our Board. Taking into account that the Vienna Place-Name Commission is – after a phase of absence – again represented in the Austrian Board, a gradual convergence can be expected.

References

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