

Presented at the 17th Annual NETA Conference
Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center
May 4, 2013

Translation and Identity / Translation as identity

Thank you, Maiyim, for your very kind introduction. I'm really pleased to be here. I've been a member of NETA since 1997, and attended a lot of conferences in that time. NETA really feels like home to me. But thinking back on those years, I'm all too aware of how fast translation is changing, and—for good or ill—dragging us along with it.

Over my twenty-some years as a translator, the landscape of the work has been transformed by new technologies, new economic realities, and new expectations. A field that once welcomed people for their curious and independent minds as well as for their special linguistic skills is now an industry more concerned with standardization and the bottom line than with creativity.

We find ourselves thinking: “If only I could master this CAT tool or this platform, I'd be more competitive.” “If only I had specialized in finance or patents or medicine, I'd make more money.” “If only I felt more confident and professional.” “If only I had more LinkedIn connections.” “If only I were better at selling myself.” “If only I could raise my rates without losing clients.” The “if onlys” pile up endlessly.

And it's true that the environment in which we work is much more difficult than it was. Most of us gathered here today, including me, work part- or fulltime for corporations, either directly or through agencies. Most of us feel increasing pressure to subordinate ourselves to the technologies and “productivity tools” that boost corporate profits but ultimately will do little to improve our financial standing. Recent studies by [Common Sense Advisory](#) have shown that the average translator now earns just over \$43,000 a year—and that's without benefits! And as CSA notes, translation rates are dropping. Just to maintain our incomes at a decent level virtually requires us to use productivity tools. And it is not at all clear that translators are the biggest beneficiaries of the money saved by those gains in productivity. Meanwhile, the larger translation agencies have sales in the tens and even *hundreds* of millions of dollars—with astounding profit margins of

30% not at all uncommon. This consolidation of wealth in the hands of the few is consistent with the changes that have occurred throughout the economy as a whole since the 1970s and 1980s, not just in translation. It is also consistent with globalization, which in its current form enriches the few at the expense of the many, yet which, we must acknowledge, is the source of much of our work. Globalization depends on our services.

By the nature of our work, we translators are auxiliaries. We enable other people's purposes and profits. And therein lies a dilemma. On the one hand, if we are to earn our livings, we *must* come to terms with the demands of the corporate environment. On the other hand, if we conform too much, we risk losing our sense of ourselves as people with legitimate needs and unique gifts. And when we do, our translation suffers; a language technician is not a translator. There is a loss of quality.

This is because the best translators bring something essential and vital to translation—ourselves. This crucial reality of translation is given very short shrift nowadays, and that's why I want to talk about it here. Unless we are willing to accept ourselves as mere tools—either in our dealings with our corporate employers, or worse, in how we think of ourselves—we need to appreciate more fully how our work selves connect with our personal histories—where we come from, the circumstances of our upbringings, and all of the particulars that make us who we are. That work of appreciation expands us and changes our relationship to translation. It makes us better translators, and at the same time makes it less likely that we will allow ourselves and the important work we do to be devalued. Paying attention to what we bring individually to our translations—and conversely to what our work in translation gives us—doesn't resolve all the inequalities in the translation marketplace. But it does help us to see ourselves not as isolated and interchangeable pieceworkers, but as a community of unusual and creative intellectuals capable of coming together to act in our own interests.

These matters were going through my mind when I learned that the subject of Gene Bell's keynote today would be [“third culture kids.”](#) At first I was perplexed. I mean, what the heck are they? And what do they have to do with translation? But a little bit of research changed my tune. I realized that I was a third culture kid myself. And that recognition brought a lot of issues into focus for me. I could see how profoundly the

particulars of my TCK-hood had influenced my work, my becoming a translator in the first place, the types of documents I am drawn to, and what I do with them. Third culture kids are border-crossers, and so are translators. Negotiating borders is what we do for a living. And we learn to do that out of the particularity of our own backgrounds and life experience. Yet it's precisely that particularity that gets bleached out in the false equation between standardization and productivity, and quality in translation.

Border-crossing can take many forms, and the TCK phenomenon is only one of them. Maybe you weren't a TCK, but you came to this country as an adult from somewhere else and had to find a way to integrate your established identity and culture with the very different culture you found here. You couldn't ever take being "American" for granted—you had to work your way into it. On the other hand, you may well have felt your "home" culture and language receding over the years here until you couldn't quite take that culture for granted either. Whatever particular solution you forged, it was a complex identity, a hybrid of your own devising.

Maybe you're an American-born translator who did grow up in the US. Maybe you spent considerable time studying or living abroad, absorbing another culture and really burrowing into it. Maybe you divide your life between here and there, wherever "there" may be. However a person's identity was formed, by the time their border-crossing begins, long years of navigating along a cultural and linguistic interface is always a formative experience. It challenges the innocence of our cultural identifications, making it more difficult to belong naively to any culture again.

This is the "third culture" that Gene talks about. It is sometimes a burden and sometimes an opportunity, but it is always an interface. Translation lives at that interface, and the work of translation can help us to knit together or bridge the disparate parts of our complex identities. That's one of the ways that it enriches us. And it's also how our personal complexity enriches the translation work that we choose to do.

I know that under the pressures of deadlines, recessions, downsizing, and all the other financial stresses of the day, it may seem like a useless abstraction to think about the interplay between our personalities and our work. And yet I believe that is exactly what we need to be thinking about. The more we appreciate our own individuality, the more

expert guides we become to the borders that we are employed to navigate—and the more alert to the aspects of the border that we want to explore for ourselves. This awareness will enable us to be better translators. We will be more able to recognize the kinds of work that really satisfy us, and more likely to discover ways to make that work part of our livelihoods. And we will develop the confidence that allows us to stand up more compellingly for appropriate recognition and fair compensation in whatever work we do.

Let me describe briefly how this process has worked in my life—not because my life is a particular benchmark, but because it's the only life I'm halfway qualified to talk about. Your lives will be different, and I'm hoping that this brief glimpse into some of my formative experiences will call back to awareness similar experiences of your own.

My parents fled Germany in 1938. They found their way to the United States through several other countries; if things had worked out a little differently, I would have been born and raised in Colombia. So contingent on circumstance are our lives.

In 1951, with four-year-old me in tow, my parents returned to Germany for a year to press their case for reparations. The story goes that I was virtually mute for about six months, and then began speaking completely age-appropriate German. I forgot my German when we returned to the States, but when I was 12 my mother took me back to Europe—this time to Switzerland, to a school run by anti-Nazi German expatriates. I spent my adolescent years there, from 1959 to 1965.

Back in the US at 18, I experienced many of the problems of reentry that Gene has touched on. I was in culture shock. I couldn't relate to anything, including myself, and that, compounded by family circumstances, is undoubtedly one reason why I never completed college.

In fact, I didn't feel comfortable with much of anything I did —until I began translating in the late 1980s. Starting from scratch was hard. It wasn't easy finding translation work in the days before the Internet, and I would never have thought of looking for a group like NETA. Occasionally I landed a small job from a local agency, but it wasn't enough to rely on, so for a long time I made my living driving a taxi. Eventually work started to pick up. It was miscellaneous stuff that didn't mean anything to me, but that's what there was, and I did it.

In the mid-1990s, I began translating German documents relating to my family—entirely for myself. And in early March 1996, I mounted the translations on my new Web site, which I started out of desperation to attract work. Within months this led to my first book translation. It never got published, but it was the first really interesting translation—about countering Holocaust denial—that I got paid for, and it happened because the German publisher that wanted it translated saw in my background something that made me the “right” translator for the job.

After I had been translating for a while I began for the first time to be able to recognize my cultural self, and to recognize myself as an Americanized German Jew. And I realized at the same time that while I am in fact all of these identities, I am also none of them. I’m certainly not naively American; I had a terrible time adjusting to the United States when I got back. My parents were German, but I never learned the ropes there—I’m not culturally German, either. I went to school in Switzerland, but only for six years. And though I’m Jewish by family, I’m an atheist, so there are many who don’t consider me properly Jewish either. I’m an amalgam—a complex identity created out of disparate, even contradictory, parts. But I’m not alone in that. My guess is that more than a few of you will see something of yourselves in this brief account. We are all full of contradictions in our thinking and identities, but we rarely take note of that fact. *Why?* This is something that every translator, TCK or not, would do well to ponder.

I put up little posters with tear sheets at local universities. Soon I got a call from a woman at Harvard Law School: would I be interested in translating immigrant letters in her family’s possession? Those translated letters became the meat of my first published book. They also led to an ongoing relationship with her father, an elderly industrialist who as a young man had fought in the Wehrmacht.

He was the first person with whom I discussed my complex issues with identity. He never missed a beat: “*Amerikanizierter deutscher Jude*; that’s exactly what you are.” Though our relationship was occasionally contentious, we respected each other, and I saw my private struggles and my professional development beginning to coalesce.

Let me say again that I tell these stories not because my story is so special, but because my life is the only one I know well enough to use to illustrate my *certainty* that

translation and life are inseparable. I hope my stories will inspire you to look for your own corresponding ones. And let me say, too, that that book did not free me from commercial work—I still earned my living translating whatever came in. But this “other work,” which was increasingly important to me, kept me from identifying myself in corporate terms, that is, as a linguistic means to someone else’s end.

I know now that translation was crucial in resolving my identity issues. Not deliberately. It wasn’t as though I decided to make myself into something and then chose to translate the material that would get me there. But there were certain kinds of documents I was drawn to—especially nineteenth- and early twentieth-century handwritten diaries and letters. They engaged me. They drew me in at a basic level. I found myself looking for context, studying German and Jewish history, and even dreaming about the process of integration that translation was fostering in me. An identity was taking shape without my willing it. In one frequent dream image from that period my mouth was full of manure and straw. And as I fished around trying to dislodge the manure, I saw that the straw consisted of fragments of German words. That was one way, I know now, that my new-found relationship to language and translation was doing something to me, creating a reliable internal compass that at last let me understand who I was and where I was going.

That structure was a long time in the making. But the results have been wonderful. Here’s one example:

In 2009, I began translating for Harvard University Press a book by a priest and church historian named Hubert Wolf. It was called *Pope and Devil*, and it was an analysis of material recently released from the Secret Vatican Archive. The author was interested in the effect that being papal emissary, or *nuncio*, to Germany between 1917 and 1929 had had on Eugenio Pacelli, who later, as Pius XII, was pope during World War II.

For me, the most interesting chapter concerned a movement called the Amici Israel (or Friends of Israel) that formed within the Catholic Church between 1926 and 1928. Its main aim was to reform the Good Friday prayer, which since the 16th century had included highly prejudicial language meant to draw attention to the supposed role of the

Jews in murdering Christ. The Amici movement grew to include more than 3000 priests, archbishops, and cardinals.

Now, on the surface it seems like a laudable aim to purge the liturgy of catchphrases like “Jewish perfidy” and “treacherous Jews.” And indeed, at first Wolf characterized the Amici as intending “to bring about Jewish-Catholic reconciliation,” which implies a meeting of equals. But in the close reading demanded by translation, I became aware of a troubling subtext. The intended reforms and modifications of the liturgy had a hidden purpose: to facilitate the conversion of Jews to Catholicism. In other words, the Amici movement was aimed not so much at a rapprochement between two co-equal but estranged cultures, but at the absorption of one by the other. Wolf never appeared to recognize the paradox that seemed so clear to me—that the only possible metric of success of this “philosemitic” group, as Wolf called it, would have been the extent to which Judaism—and with it Jewishness—disappeared.

This was all of great interest to me, given the intersection of my own family history with what happened in Germany a few years later. I detailed my concerns in a lengthy e-mail to Wolf, but he never responded. As it happened, in the real world the issue turned out to be moot. The Amici Israel movement was brought before the Grand Inquisition by an ultraconservative and anti-Semitic Cardinal Secretary of State, and dissolved in 1928 as doctrinally unsound. I continued to wonder what would have happened in Europe if the Amici Israel had flourished into the fateful 1930s, and their reforms implemented. But as a translator, all I could do was to render Wolf’s ideas as cleanly and precisely as possible, and that is what I did, consoling myself with the knowledge that through my translation the book would enter a larger world of scholarly discourse, in which concerns such as mine might yet be addressed. But one way it joined the scholarly discourse was a complete surprise to me.

My next project, for Stanford University Press, was titled [*No Justice in Germany: The Breslau Diaries*](#). In these diaries, a German-Jewish teacher and scholar named Willy Cohn chronicled the progressive constriction of Jewish life in Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) under the Nazis between 1933, when Hitler was appointed chancellor, and 1941,

when Cohn, his wife, and two youngest daughters were herded onto a train, taken to Kaunas, Lithuania, and shot.

As a teacher, Cohn was well liked and respected, but after Hitler came to power, his professional opportunities dried up one by one. He lost his job at a local *Gymnasium*. Informal lecturing gigs became fewer and fewer as Jews fled Germany and the Nazi regime shut down Jewish institutions. Cohn and his wife managed to get their three oldest children safely out of the country, and he was forced to eke out a living on a meager pension, his savings, and a small inheritance.

Cohn was a scholar as well as a teacher, and so access to libraries was important to him. The banning of Jews from public libraries in January 1939 was a major blow. But by late May he had sought and received permission from the local Catholic Diocese to work in the archive of Breslau Cathedral. He soon became a regular there, and was actively sought out for his knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish history. He became fast friends with a number of the priests and archivists, among them a young priest named Hubert Jedin, who later made his mark at the Vatican as an important church historian.

Jedin, by the way, was another man knitting together a complex identity: German, Catholic, Jewish. As Cohn noted in his diary on June 12, 1939, Jedin was part Jewish, and that circumstance very much affected his life. Among other things, the Nazis stripped him of his right to teach in Germany, but in England he was denied a position because he was considered German. Jedin relocated to the Vatican later that summer. After the Nazis occupied northern Italy in 1943, Jedin never left the Vatican grounds. He was on a list to be rounded up and deported, and he knew what to expect if that happened.

On March 22, 1940 Cohn wrote in his diary:

Today is Good Friday. During the Middle Ages, Jews were generally not allowed to go out on this day; the Good Friday liturgy still prays for the *perfidii Judaei*, a passage that as a rule is translated as “faithless.” However, a comparison with other passages makes it clear that this can refer only to unbelieving Jews. I discussed this matter with Dr. Jedin, who at first disagreed, but was then won over to my interpretation.

Cohn and Jedin, in other words, were corresponding about issues very similar to those that had preoccupied the Amici Israel more than a decade earlier. I wrote to Norbert Conrads, who had transcribed Cohn's diaries in their entirety, and asked whether Cohn had ever mentioned the Amici Israel between 1926 and 1928. No, Norbert wrote. But he would discuss the matter over the weekend with a church historian friend.

On Monday morning my inbox contained the following note: "Dear Ken, I have to admit that I had never heard of the Amici Israel before you mentioned it, and my friend knew of it only from Wolf's book, the one you translated." A chill went down my spine. All of a sudden, two books that I had translated were talking to each other. Not just in my own head, but across the ocean. In a small way I had entered into the larger discourse I had envisioned for Wolf's book. I have to tell you, for someone who never graduated from college, it was an extraordinary thing. For a translator of my stripe it doesn't get better than that. And whatever my issues with Wolf's analysis, it was the availability of the raw material that mattered, because without it, such discourse cannot take place at all.

OK, you may be thinking, but what does this complicated story have to do with me? And what does it have to do with translation, in particular that boring stack of medical records on my plate? What it has to do with, I hope, is how profound a two-way relationship there is between the way we shape our work and the way it shapes us. This is how my work shaped me, in ways that I could never have anticipated or planned for twenty years ago. Yours will shape you differently, but it will shape and transform you—if you let it.

My engagement in endeavors like these deepened and enriched me, and deepened my understanding of a particular area of scholarship that was important to me. Over time it also gave me unexpected standing in a scholarly process, which has proven highly desirable to some of those who use my services—university presses, for example. And I can point to these translations when potential clients consider me for the translation of privately-held diaries and letters. Your engagement in the process of translation will undoubtedly take you in directions different from mine, but that doesn't matter, as long as they are the directions that *you* want to go. One way or another our work deepens and enriches us. The people who use our services will be the better for that, and if we require

them to recognize it, they will have reason to seek us out, and to make it worth our while to hold ourselves available to them. These are the byproducts of translation that can tell us that we are translating the right stuff. They fundamentally change the translator's relationship to the act of translation, and to those for whom we translate.

We all come from somewhere, and we all live within a historical context that shapes our identities. We bring these contexts to our work, and we must not allow anyone to convince us that they are not a valuable—indeed an invaluable—part of our skill. The minute we start to think *that* way, we are giving part of ourselves away. On the other hand, a work of translation that uses all of our skills is a gift to *us*—a gift that can help us to explore our complex identities and to create something new from them. Translation is a perpetual opportunity to explore the borders along which we live.

Of course translation isn't the only kind of transformational endeavor. Gene talked about how integrative it was for him to write about his experience of being a TCK. I found his memoir, [*Overseas American*](#), deeply moving, and I recommend it. And recently I came across an interview with a woman, the daughter of an American Jewish father and an Italian mother, who grew up in Berlin. She discussed how cooking integrated her various parts. What was striking to me was how conscious both she and Gene have become of the transformational character of what they do. We should all strive for that.

I call this attitude “being one's own end user.” Once it is well established, we find ourselves approaching translation differently, at least some of the time. I know I'm not the only translator who looks for texts that speak to me personally and open me up to the larger world I inhabit, and I also know that we don't all look for the same thing. Some of us may relate to literary or historical texts, some of us to old family correspondences or children's stories. Some of us are fascinated by the vicissitudes of money, or an interesting technology, or a piece of genetic research. Anything can do it, as long as it gives us clues to, and a deepening understanding of, ourselves and allows us to pose questions. How to ferret them out? You might ask what attracted you to translation in the first place. It was probably not the prospect of translating standard operating procedures,

as necessary as those may be to the livings we make. Perhaps you had dreams of becoming a literary translator. You may have abandoned that dream for financial reasons, but don't dismiss your youthful enthusiasms altogether; the impulses they conceal may provide you with real direction. For me, one way was through old, un-copyrighted material. I especially like second-rate literature for this purpose, because it makes no pretense at universality and so is often bald in betraying the underlying programs and assumptions of the cultures it depicts.

Sometimes we'll be paid for this work. I know from experience that sometimes we won't. But I also know that work that I've done on my own time and on my own dime, and then mounted on my website, has turned out to be the best bait for "catching" the kind of paying work that I want to do, diaries and letters in particular. It has led to new projects, and also to more satisfaction and deeper engagement in familiar work. I chose my example of the two translations that talked to each other to show what is possible, and how the work we do can create an ever-expanding circle of possibilities.

Of course, this relationship to translation is very different from the technical vision that corporate employment encourages, and unfortunately it is impossible for most of us, including me, to neglect the commercial opportunities that allow us to make a living. But even with those, we can learn to engage thoughtfully and on our own terms. Several years ago, I spoke here about the danger of losing our voices in a corporate translation environment. Translation memory and other productivity tools standardize translators' work, making it interchangeable. The logic of corporatism is to convert us into linguistic appliances, and we must resist this at all cost lest *we* become interchangeable as well. We are more than commercial expedients, and we must not allow ourselves to be defined as such. We each need to define our own relationship to translation, and then to let it grow and develop, as we do the other relationships in our lives that matter to us. We need to find ways to remind ourselves, as individuals and as a profession, that it's not just our words, but our relationship to those words, that gives our work its excellence. And although it is probably true that in the profit-driven corporate world we will always be seen as interchangeable, as long as we cherish translation as a route to internal growth, on

a personal level we will be building for ourselves a platform from which we can seize other, non-corporate, opportunities when they come along. The personal is the only arena where the individual is never interchangeable.

I spoke earlier about trends in the translation business that need attention. One ominous one is that many agencies (not to mention corporations in general) are making massive profits, while translator earnings stagnate or decrease. I probably don't need to point out that their profits depend in part on our low earnings. In a week and a half, the [Association of Language Companies](#) will be meeting here in Boston. The ALC is a national trade association representing businesses “that provide translation, interpretation, localization, and language training services.” Its mission is to “promote the professional stature and economic position of its US-based member language companies.” According to the 2013 conference program, it will be all about leveraging technology, boosting profits, and vendor management (vendors being you and me). Why do I doubt that they plan to devote much time to our well-being?

The ALC will do what it does. We need to do what *we* can. Cultivating a personal relationship with translation can help us begin to advocate collectively and effectively for *our* economic position. As long as we are kept scattered and isolated by our status as independent contractors and scare stories about antitrust suits, we can't build solidarity. We end up having to negotiate rates alone, facing the market in a very unequal power relationship. I suspect that this method of negotiation—which too often is no negotiation at all—will become increasingly untenable for all but a few.

It is my hope that we can begin to discuss ways of working in concert to change this power dynamic. NETA's support for the court interpreters, who were the subject of Leonor Figueroa's panel, was one small step toward such solidarity [[see pages 8-9](#)]. I'm not sure how we should proceed from here; the old trade union model of my activist days may not precisely apply to us as independent contractors—that's undoubtedly one reason that corporations prefer to hire us on those terms. But I came here today, and told my stories, as a way of opening up the discussion. Perhaps an independent group like NETA could become one locus of such solidarity. Certainly we have to be realistic about what we're up against, and we need to learn everything we can about how the “industry”

works. But that doesn't mean we can't stand up for ourselves, and to do that we have to understand fully the importance of what we give. We've learned from the great social and political waves of our times that the individual work of consciousness-raising—changes in how people think about themselves, their worth, and their position in the world—is the seed from which successful social movements grow; and solidarity develops out of a shared understanding of what we are about.

I have touched today on two different but I think complementary ways of resisting the corrosive effects of the corporate mindset on translation: engaging with our work on our own terms, and making common cause with our colleagues. Both are necessary. I have tried to make clear as well that it is neither pointless nor selfish to seek to rebuild our profession in a different image. It is in everyone's interest to insist on a more accurate view of the translation process—not only our interest, but also the interest of those who employ us, however slow they may be to acknowledge this with more than lip service. But we will have to enlist in our service both the internal compass of identity, and the social power of solidarity. Good translation reflects us—where we come from, and who we are becoming. We cannot forget that, and we should not let anyone else forget it either.

Thank you for your attention.

By Kenneth Kronenberg

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