



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

He was a baker and a survivor, and he understood the power both of withholding bread and of sharing it.

Fading fast, her father rallies enough to say, “Bebbski, you still want the challah recipe? Write it down ... I can’t bake one, but I can bake ten dozen. Take a sack of flour, two dozen eggs, about this much yeast ...”

With this parting gift from her father, Deb goes to Berlin to perform her show. She adds the story about her father baking bread with the German prisoners to the scenario. Still the show feels incomplete. On a break, she enters a German bakery, smells the aroma of freshly baked bread, hears her father’s voice, and has a flash of inspiration: she will bake a loaf of bread during the show. “How many cups are there in a sack of flour?” she asks the German baker. This initiates a process in which she adjusts her father’s recipe

to make it her own, laboriously making the translation from ten dozen to one.

On stage, Deb achieves the perfect loaf, which finishes baking just as her monologue comes to a close. The aroma of the challah fills the hall. The performance is a triumph. She is satisfied: “One bite of bread, and I’m full.”

She invites the audience to share in the loaf. Somehow, there is enough for everyone in the audience to have a taste. The audience members move from their seats to the front of the theater, and in so doing move from being spectators to participants in a ritual that is both theater and tradition. Bread has become a means of connection, rather than a temptation that must be resisted.

In the space and time of the performance, Deb Filler completes the challah, and she completes a version of her self which, like the challah, satisfies.

## NOTES

Photo on page 170 by Gunter Kravis.

1. Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 21.

NAOMI SEIDMAN

*Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation*

(University of Chicago Press, 2006)

**Laura Levitt**, Reviewer

Naomi Seidman opens her unusually lucid and compelling scholarly book, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation*, by telling a story about her father when he was a postwar translator. Through his labors as a kind of “double agent” working between the newly liberated French authorities and displaced European Jews who found themselves in France, his

story, retold here, comes to enact the broader argument of the book. What Seidman argues here and throughout the book is that translation narratives should be “read not as transparent truth but rather as ideologically marked ‘emplotment’” (p. 3). She does this by focusing on the relationship between Jews and Christians, from the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible,

to the Holocaust and beyond. In a sense, this longer history comes to flesh out the riddle that is her father's postwar story.

In what follows, I want to share the bare outline of this family history in order to show how Seidman draws readers in, through the telling of this and other stories. What is striking is that the relationship between this Jewish feminist daughter, Naomi Seidman, and her father is so central to this important scholarly work. Thus I begin with the story.

In her introduction, "The Translator as Double Agent," Seidman explains that her Polish Jewish father grew up in an affluent Hasidic home and studied French history as a Ph.D. student in Warsaw before the Second World War. Given this unusual background, he was uniquely suited to take on the role of unofficial liaison between the French authorities and the Jewish refugee community in Paris after the war. As she tells us,

One morning, my father was called to the Gare de l'Est, where the police were holding a group of Jewish refugees who had managed to cross three or four borders without proper documents. The scene in the train station was chaotic, the refugees were upset and exhausted, and my father asked the police if he could speak with the group.

pp. 1-2

Seidman goes on to explain that her father spoke to the refugees in Yiddish, telling them not to be afraid. He also made it clear to them that, while the French authorities were not Jews, they were not Nazis either, and would not mistreat them. He further assured them that the local Jewish community would help get them released. Of course after this long discussion in Yiddish the French police wanted to know what he had said to calm down the situation. In response, Seidman explains,

Thinking fast, and thinking in French, my father "translated" his Yiddish words for the policemen: "I quoted them the words of a great Frenchman: 'Every free man has two homelands—his own, and France.' I assured them that they, who had suffered so much, had arrived at a safe haven, the birthplace of human liberty." As my father told it, the *gendarmes* wiped away patriotic tears at his speech.

pp. 1-2

This ability to assess the situation and know what these different audiences needed to hear to make sure that everyone would emerge safely from what was already a charged and dangerous situation is the kind of political savvy Naomi Seidman sees at the heart of the labor of translation. This savvy is crucial to appreciating the role of translation in the long history of Jewish and Christian relations; in the rest of her book Seidman discusses how attention to the politics of translation itself becomes a mark of Jewish translation practices.

As Seidman explains, acts of translation are bound up with whole sets of cultural and theological assumptions. This is especially so in the case of biblical translations. Here the notion of the spirit versus the letter of the law is played out in the very act of translation, with Christian commitments to the spirit and not the letter of the text. As Seidman shows, this very Christian preference for the spirit of the text marks even the broader field of contemporary translation studies. In other words, Seidman makes explicit the Christian roots of these practices, including among them secular scholars of translation. More than this, she challenges the presumed superiority of those translations that best preserve the spirit of the original text over its literal meaning. Among other things, Seidman asks, in the case of biblical translations, what it might mean to see

such translations not so much as texts in and of themselves, but as aids to better being able to read, comprehend, and appreciate the original text. These are some of the questions at stake in this fascinating study.

For Seidman, the history of these tensions reveals all kinds of ironies. Thus this book purposely moves from the mythic origin story of the Septuagint, a Jewish text that is now widely recognized as canonical by most Christian communities, to the Holocaust and its aftermath. In both instances, as Seidman makes clear, what were once exclusively Jewish stories became presumably universal. Late in the book, just as we think we have forgotten everything that came before, Seidman compels us to see the connections between her opening chapter and more contemporary moves to universalize the Holocaust. In this case, we are reminded that that first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was the very text that brought us the term “Holocaust” in the first place. In retelling stories about Jewish and Christian acts of translation, Seidman reminds us of these connections. In the case of the term “Holocaust,” she does this over and against many contemporary scholars of Jewish Studies who try to distinguish what is and is not Jewish about these tragic events by using the Hebrew term “Shoah” or the Yiddish “khurbn.” As she explains:

It is nonetheless worth remembering that the Septuagint was as “authentic” a Jewish cultural production as the retranslations that followed. So, too, is the term “Holocaust,” to which this Greek Bible gave rise. Moreover, it was the “universalist” Holocaust discourse of the 1950s that brought the Jewish genocide not only to world consciousness, but also to the consciousness of the world’s Jews. Like the Jews of Alexandria, the Jews of America

received the Torah primarily in translation. In our disdain for the unseemly operations of translation, its complicity with the forces of assimilation and the marketplace, we are forgetting its power to communicate experience and forge identities—indeed rejecting the very cultural ground on which we stand  
(p. 216).

This is the history that Seidman traces out in her various chapters, each a meditation on a particular constellation of cultural events, texts, and narratives that illustrate and illuminate these tensions and possibilities. She includes a chapter on the ancient history of translation, another on Jerome and Luther that gets at the relationship between the work of translation and that of conversion, and yet another on the remarkable German biblical translation project of the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Following this discussion, in her next chapter on the Holocaust, she turns to the work of Eli Wiesel to make her case about the transformation of the genocide of European Jews into a universal story of human devastation. This chapter expands and nuances Seidman’s earlier powerful (and, for some, controversial) essay about the creation of Eli Wiesel’s classic tale of survival, *Night*. In that first essay, and now in expanded form in this new work, Seidman contrasts this originally French text with the earlier and angrier version Wiesel wrote in Yiddish. It is here that Seidman insists on the power of translation to communicate experience and forge identities—not least by not ending with the Holocaust. In her final chapter she turns to the issues of assimilation and transformation in America, focusing on the Yiddish works of I.B. Singer and their English translations to argue that translation is not the end of secular Yiddish literature, but rather a powerful part of its future.

Seidman ends her book with an epilogue, her own translator's note. As in her introduction, here too she tells a story. A senior colleague and friend suggested that she call her book "*Endecktes Judentum* (Judaism Unmasked), the title of Johann Andreas Eisenmenger's notorious tract exposing the anti-Christian attitudes of the Talmud and other Jewish works" (p. 277). Here Seidman reflects back on what it has meant for her to reveal the "'hidden transcript' of the Jews" to public scrutiny throughout her book. She notes the discomfiting connection between her efforts and those of the infamous Eisenmenger, as well as the differences. Part of the difference, she confesses, is about audience; her audience, unlike Eisenmenger's, is not

the Church. Seidman writes for other Jews and "those we count as friends (including those we count as friends in the contemporary churches!)"—that is, for whom we do not have to edit our words" (p. 277). For Seidman, the ability to tell these stories in English to a broader audience of Christians and Jews, among others, is itself a radical departure from much of the history she tells. This is a hopeful and affirming message. Not only is the daughter in on her father's jokes, but we, too, are invited in. The daughter's wager is that more than just Jewish readers can be trusted to appreciate and relish her father's tale as well as these other Jewish stories. Through her deft telling, this just may be the case. I certainly hope so.