Joachim Schlör

“Da wär’s halt gut, wenn man Englisch könnt!”

Robert Gilbert, Hermann Leopoldi and the Role of Languages between Exile and Return

**Abstract**

Robert Gilbert (b. Robert David Winterfeld, 1899-1978) was one of Germany’s most successful writers of popular songs, many of them made famous by operettas and movies in the late years of the Weimar Republic (“Ein Freund, ein guter Freund”; “Liebling, mein Herz läßt Dich grüßen”; “Was kann der Sigismund dafür?”). In 1933, Gilbert emigrated to Vienna and later moved on to Paris, 1938, and New York, 1939. After his return to Europe in 1951, Gilbert started a second, again very successful career as translator of American Musical Comedies, from “My Fair Lady” (1951) via “Oklahoma” or “Annie get your gun” to “Cabaret” (1970). During his years in New York, he had acquired the English language he needed for this new activity. Recently discovered documents – manuscripts donated to the Vienna City Library by the Leopoldi family – give an insight into his transitory workshop and into the conditions of his exile: Gilbert, together with the piano artist Hermann Leopoldi (1888-1959), produced a large number of songs, many of which were written in a mixture of German and English and make language (problems) their subject. The paper traces Gilbert’s life and work, his translations, and his own thoughts on translation. It discusses these sources in the context of the role of returning exiles as mediating agents and cultural translators between American (popular) culture and post-War Germany and Austria.

**Key words:** Robert Gilbert, Hermann Leopoldi, German-Jewish emigration, „Little Vienna” in New York, *My Fair Lady*

**Introduction**

This paper results from two different areas of research. The first is my own interest in Robert Gilbert’s work and in the different cultural milieus where his lyrics and songs have been written: late Weimar Berlin as a centre of avant-garde popular culture, Vienna before the *Anschluss* of 1938, Paris as a place of temporary refuge in 1938-39, New York as a place of exile after 1939, and finally Munich and Zurich as places of remigration (see Schlör 2012). The second research area has been developed by members of the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish relations at the University of Southampton within a project under the working title “Jewish Places as Arenas for Translation and Transfer in Jewish/non-Jewish Relations”, which tries to connect notions of “place” with the idea of “translation” and transfer in order to combine elements of the “spatial turn” and the “translational turn” in search for answers to two questions: what *makes* a place?; how does place-making work through language and translation? More precisely, the project asks: how have “Jewish” places been constructed and negotiated, and what was the role of languages and of translations in these processes?[[1]](#footnote-2) David Roskies has described the relationship between Jews and non-Jews as a “market place of voices” (2004: 270). Trying to make sense of the discourses acted out in such places, the project aims to: demonstrate the strategic importance of translation and transfer in Jewish/non-Jewish relations across the ages; consider the significance of “place” in such relations from a geographical, historical, and cultural point of view; address questions of authenticity and appropriation in acts of cultural transfer and translation; describe how the various places can be understood as places of translation and transfer.

Research into migration and displacement, that is, the study of migration experiences which contain both the memory of a lost home and the need – and ability – to (re)construct new centres of creativity, cannot be separated from research into integration and place-identity, i.e., the study of the relationship between different Jewish communities and the place(s) relevant to them. Studying translation as a form of exchange and of “co-construction” (Biale 1994) can provide us with the opportunity to link these areas. Translation is a method of crossing boundaries. Translation and transfer (of languages but also of values, beliefs, histories and narratives from past to present; of ideas from one culture into another, or from one medium into another) can be regarded as a central link between the experiences of displacement and the adventure of integration and settlement. Translation provides actors with a chance to re-invent themselves; it is relational, interactive and process-oriented, to use notions developed by proponents of a *histoire croisée* (Werner and Zimmerman 2006). Translation has a potential for “performing” identity, which has allowed Jews to exist in bi- or even multicultural communities of discourse and often bestowed on them the function of bridge-building. Translation and transfer as cultural practices are of specific importance in places of emigration, where the experience of rupture and interruption requires new forms of interaction and communication.

Such places – Berlin shortly before the Nazi’s rise to power, Vienna between 1933 and 1938, Paris before the outbreak of World War II, New York during the war years, but also the cities of post-War Europe – can be regarded as very specific *arenas*, or locales where boundaries are challenged and crossed, where a link can be made between agents and processes of translation and transfer.

**“Berlin ade”[[2]](#footnote-3)**

The first task of this paper will be to make readers familiar with some people whose names might mean nothing to them, although many will surely be able to sing or hum some of the songs they wrote. Werner Richard Heymann, the composer who cooperated with Robert Gilbert on many occasions both before and after the war, put that very fittingly into words which can be found today on a commemoration plaque on his former house (built by Erich Mendelsohn) on Karolinger Platz 5 in Berlin-Westend: “You might not know me, but you have heard a lot from me” [*Sie kennen mich nicht, aber Sie haben schon viel von mir gehört*]. The very fact that their names are forgotten is due to the political circumstances: the Nazi’s rise to power in Germany, the persecution of Jews and political opponents after March 1933 – and their emigration from Germany. In some ways, one could say, this emigration is not yet over, and although both Heymann and Gilbert (and Leopoldi) did indeed come back to Europe in the early 1950s, it is safe to say that none of them did really “settle” or “make their home” here anymore. Instead they lived, to use a notion that has become very popular in recent years, transnational and transcontinental lives.

Robert David Winterfeld was born in the poor eastern part of Berlin (Warschauer Strasse, “above the horse stables”) in 1899 (Gilbert R. 1972: 103). He was the son of Max Winterfeld, a circus orchestra conductor and composer, who already had changed his name to Jean Gilbert, in a city that aspired to become a European metropolis and, in those years, saw Paris as its role model. With one successful operetta (*Die keusche Susanne*, 1912), containing the *Schlager* “Puppchen, Du bist mein Augenstern”, Jean Gilbert managed to fulfil the “Berlin dream” of moving westward into a villa on the Wannsee Lake shore. Today the place belongs to a divers’ club, after having hosted an Institute for Silviculture under the Nazis and well into the post-war period, thus no traces of its former owner can be found. After fighting in World War I, Robert returned a pacifist and a socialist. He had inherited his father’s musical talent and hoped to put it to use supporting the political left in Weimar Germany. His song “Stempellied,” composed by Hanns Eisler and interpreted by Ernst Busch, the “Barrikaden-Tauber”, was an indictment of the capitalist system, and of “those above” (“die da oben”) for sending the unemployed masses into misery and despair; it became an icon for Germany’s worker’s movement.[[3]](#footnote-4) Gilbert collaborated with Hanns Eisler and performed at festivals for “New Music,” for example in Baden-Baden 1927. During these years he also established a life-long friendship with the philosopher Heinrich Blücher. When he married and felt the need to earn serious money, Gilbert started to work for movies and operettas; within a very short time he became Germany’s most prolific and highest-earning songwriter.[[4]](#footnote-5) With Werner Richard Heymann (1896-1961), Gilbert wrote the songs for *Die drei von der Tankstelle* (“Ein Freund, ein guter Freund” and “Liebling, mein Herz lässt Dich grüßen”),[[5]](#footnote-6) for *Der Kongreß tanzt* (“Das gibt’s nur einmal” and “Das muß ein Stück vom Himmel sein”);[[6]](#footnote-7) for Ralph Benatzky’s operetta *Im weißen Rössl*[[7]](#footnote-8) he wrote the songs that made the play so successful: „Im weißen Rössel am Wolfgangsee“, “Im Salzkammergut, da kammer gut lustig sein” and “Was kann der Sigismund dafür, dass er so schön ist”. In the period that ended abruptly in 1933, Gilbert was a major actor in, and contributor to, Germany’s popular music industry.

Hermann Leopoldi, whose life and work has been researched by Georg Traska and Christoph Lind (2012), was born as Hersch Kohn on August 15, 1888, in Gaudenzdorf, Meidling, which is today a part of the city of Vienna. His father Leopold Kohn – who changed the family name to Leopoldi in 1911 – was a musician and taught his sons to play the piano. In 1904, at the age of 16, Hermann got his first job as a piano accompanist; in 1916 he had his first solo appearance in the Viennese establishment Ronacher. After the war, together with his brother Ferdinand and Fritz Wiesenthal, Leopoldi founded a cabaret called “L.W.” in Vienna’s first district. Among the artists who performed there were Charlotte Waldow, Franzi Ressel, Armin Berg, Hans Moser, Szöke Szakall, Max Hansen, Fritz Grünbaum, Karl Valentin, Raoul Aslan, and Otto Tressler. Some of them stayed behind in Vienna after 1938, others met again in different circumstances during their emigration to the Americas. The cabaret was closed in 1925, but by then Leopoldi had acquired fame as one of the most popular composers and presenters of Austrian, and especially Viennese, folklore – if that is the right word. The “Wienerlied” is a very specific, very urban, cultural genre, part of Vienna’s popular culture in the same way as the coffeehouse or the “Heuriger”. Leopoldi called himself a “Klavierkünstler”. More than a pianist, he was a storyteller, a comedian, a coiner of words and phrases. He travelled all over Europe and performed, often together with Betja Milskaja, in Berlin, Paris, Prague, or Budapest.

In the spring of 1933, under the new rulings set by the Reich Chamber of Culture, most—though indeed not all—of the German artists connected to the movies and shows quoted above emigrated, initially (with a hope of return) to neighbouring countries (Dahm 1986). Vienna provided Robert Gilbert and other expellees with venues for performances and with colleagues—such as Hermann Leopoldi and Rudolf Weys (1898-1978)—to collaborate, as well as a related language for the writing of songs. This period between 1933 and 1938 – when, according to Karl Kraus, “the rats were entering the sinking ship” (in Spiel 1994: 233) – was marked by fruitful collaborations and successful performances, but the lyrics of the songs, and the poems Gilbert wrote, were clearly influenced and overshadowed by what was to come: the civil war and Hitler’s entry into Austria. The lighter muse of the Berlin years made place for sarcasm and dark humour; at the same time it is fascinating to see how Gilbert picked up the Viennese dialect – a first lesson, one might say, in cultural transfer. While Gilbert, whose *Fremdenpolizei* file shows more than 30 different addresses during these five years, managed to escape and reunite with his wife and daughter in Paris, Leopoldi was refused entrance to Czechoslovakia, sent back to Vienna, arrested on April 26, 1938, and brought to a concentration camp, first to Dachau and later, in September of the same year, to Buchenwald. There he wrote the music for the *Buchenwald-Lied*, with lyrics by Fritz Löhner-Beda (who, hoping in vain for an intervention by his friend Franz Lehár, was murdered in the camp). Leopoldi’s wife and parents, who had already emigrated to the United States, secured an affidavit and thus managed to organise his release. Via Hamburg he came to New York where his family and journalists waited for him – the picture of Leopoldi kissing the American ground in New York’s harbour has become famous. To quote Einzi Stolz, Leopoldi “was for all of us like a creature from another planet: thanks to a rescue campaign that bordered on a miracle, he survived the horror of the camps in Buchenwald and Dachau. He has always kept the faith in the good in humans and remained an optimist, sharing his courage and confidence in those hard times” (in Leopoldi and Möslein 1992). The awareness of the new European reality, with the occupation of neighbouring (once so familiar) countries and the persecution of Jews and political opponents, brought the emigrants in New York closer together.

Among the people Leopoldi met there was Robert Gilbert. In Paris Gilbert, who had reunited with his wife Elke and daughter Marianne, met up with Heinrich Blücher (and his new partner, Hannah Arendt) again, and managed to gather all the documents needed to board the ship “Aquitania” on March 25, 1939, from Cherbourg to New York. The family settled in the Bronx and for the next twelve years, 51 West 236th Street in Riverdale became a home away from home. While his daughter’s memoirs—published in English as *Memoirs of a Mischling: Becoming an American* (2002) and translated into German under the title *Das gab’s nur einmal. Verloren zwischen New York und Berlin* (2007)—give the impression that only she, Marianne (Gilbert Finnegan), managed to “become an American” whereas her parents, especially her father, remained stuck in exile circles, Robert Gilbert’s letters to Rudolf Weys and papers documenting the collaboration with Hermann Leopoldi in New York tell a slightly different story. But before we get there, one more development needs to be mentioned.

Recent research has shown that a musical dialogue and exchange between Europe and the United States, which had taken place in the early decades of the 20th century, partly replaced Berlin’s love-affair with Paris and everything Parisian. While shows and plays on Broadway had drawn from the European (especially Austrian) operetta, the new American musical innovations in turn influenced and inspired this short-lived but intense heyday of ambitious and sophisticated German popular and entertaining culture. A two-way traffic of transatlantic contact and exchange has already been open. Erik Charell, the director of *Im weißen Rössl*, had visited the United States in the 1920s, where he saw the “Ziegfeld Follies” on Broadway and imported the ideas of big revues, chorus lines, and dancing troops back to Germany (Clarke 2007).[[8]](#footnote-9) As Francois Genton remarked, “[a]round 1930, a popular culture emerged in Germany which was modern, part of the avant-garde, but at the same time conscious of tradition, and leading the field in Europe. Many of the protagonists of this culture were educated and qualified German Jews” (2012: 325). It is hard to say, in hindsight, if this engagement with the lighter muses conflicted with Gilbert’s left-wing political attitudes. In any case, Gilbert managed to add a number of provocative and ironic elements to Benatzky’s show, for example, the competition between a Jewish and a non-Jewish producer (of male under-garments) who both spend their holidays in Kaiser Franz Josef’s Austria.

The experience of emigration in the year following Austria’s 1938 *Anschluss* was marked by the searching for jobs and accommodation, applying for visa and affidavits, and the loss of German citizenship. Transitioning one’s career to another country, across the Atlantic, was a task fraught with challenges. “It’s a damn tough country”, Gilbert writes to Rudolf Weys on June 24, 1939 (Gilbert R. 1939). Some of his former colleagues, among them the emigrated members of “Die Leute vom Naschmarkt,” a Viennese musical comedy ensemble founded by Weys in 1933, seemed to have some success—he adds with a sceptical tone—by performing their old sketches in English. But this success, he felt, would not last. European topics, and European rhythms, had become either suspicious or at least removed from the taste of the American public. The need to learn the new language was as obvious as the need to develop new topics and adopt a new style in the writing of songs and of music.

**“Refugee heißt Nebbich”: Robert Gilbert and Hermann Leopoldi exiled in New York**

The second task of this paper is to reconstruct the cultural situation of those emigrants in the New York of 1939. In some ways, the ground for their cultural activities had already been prepared. New York obviously has emerged and developed through immigration. And the *landsmanshaftn,* associations for the mutual support of immigrants who came from the same cities, or regions, had already provided millions of Jews from Eastern Europe with the opportunity to start their American lives, supported by a familiar environment (Soyer 2001). But in Robert Gilbert’s case, things were not that easy. The flat the family could afford was far up north in Riverdale, and Gilbert’s wife, Elke, earned the money they needed as a beautician and dressmaker in Lower Manhattan. Robert was often alone at home, trying to write lyrics and music, and the old piano wore the many cigarette burns as a symbol of little success. This is, at least, how his daughter, Marianne, remembers the story. The crucial problem for the writer was the language. Marianne acquired American English easily (“Marianne spricht schon Englisch wie ein altes Mayflower-Girl”: Gilbert R. 1939) and began to forget her German. Gilbert later recollected: “I have lived in America for ten years, it was, for me, a very, very good time. I came with three hundred dollars, lent from somebody, and landed in a horrible apartment under awful circumstances trying to earn a living. How could I do that? My English was not as good as that of somebody who had grown up on these streets. I grew up on the streets of Berlin, my knowledge of Shakespeare hasn’t helped me here at all. I had to learn the slang” (Gilbert R. 1939).

The Gilberts received U.S. citizenship in 1944 and, from the few letters of the period that I could find, I have got the impression that they intended to stay and not return to Europe. The problem they faced was how to make a living. Gilbert’s letters to Weys, as well as later letters to Blücher, in which he recalls the time in New York, are full of projects and dreams, many of which were never realised. But most of them deal with the topic of language – and of translation. Gilbert wrote poetry in German and performed, sometimes for a public of two- or three hundred fellow émigrés who were able to understand him. He also worked for small fees as an accompanist for other artists: “I would recite my Berlin poems to those who could understand them and accompanied European artists: the fees were minimal” (Pacher 1979: 10). The only publication of the period is *Meine Reime, Deine Reime*, which appeared in a German publishing house based in New York and for which Hannah Arendt, in her “Menschen in finsteren Zeiten,” called Gilbert “the successor [Heinrich] Heine never had” (Arendt 1989: 291). But he also tried to translate his own – as well as other authors’ – texts into English.

Leopoldi seems to have been more successful at the start, since he did not hesitate to use the existing network of Austrian and Austrian-Jewish immigrants. He soon started to perform in “Eberhardt’s Café Grinzing” in Manhattan, where he also met his partner (for the stage and for life), Helly Möslein. Kurt Robitschek, Arthur Berger, Armin and Jimmy Berg, and Helly herself helped him to adapt his repertoire to the English language. They created a new – urban – form of play, the “Short Operetta”, they set up an authentic Grinzing wine bar and served “liver soup, schnitzel with a salad, plum dumplings and coffee with whipped cream” together with their music (Klösch, Thumser, 2002: 34). With songs such as *I am a quiet Drinker* or *A Little Café Down the Street* they celebrated their arrival in “Exilcafés”, for example the “Old Vienna” or the “Viennese Lantern”.[[9]](#footnote-10) Songs about wine and coffeehouses or about the beautiful girls of Vienna seemed to touch the heart of the American public, whereas the harder, more serious, more political traditions that “Berlin” brought to New York remained within the circle of German-Jewish immigrants – or travelled further on to Los Angeles, where Werner Richard Heymann was quite successfully writing music for movies, such as *To Be Or Not To Be* directed by Ernst Lubitsch. I do not know, and I have not found any hint in the correspondence, even between Heymann and Gilbert, as to why Gilbert never made his way to Hollywood. He sat in New York, complained about the summer heat, wrote poems and satirical texts for the German language emigré paper *Aufbau*, participated in a competition for the best German-language exile song – and won it, with a political song, with Paul Dessau’s music, that had the very symbolic title “Höre uns, Deutschland!” He also participated in the Austrian cultural programmes, for example in a (re)-staging of “Das weiße Rössel am Central Park”, where he collaborated with Robert Stolz, one of the very few non-Jewish artists who decided to leave their native Austria. He also participated in tributes to European artists—among them Robert’s father, Jean Gilbert, who had become the conductor of a radio orchestra in Buenos Aires and died there in 1942, a fact that Robert only learned from newspapers.

Most importantly, however, he began to work with Hermann Leopoldi. The song “Da wär’s halt gut, wenn man Englisch könnt’” (It would be good if one spoke English), which Gilbert and Leopoldi wrote together in 1942/43, captures everyday situations, such as meeting people, dating a girl, or trying to find a job, in which it would be good to know the English language. The lyrics are basically German, but in this song, and in many others that followed, English idioms and phrases find their way into the text—as they did into the lives of these émigrés.

This is the point – in time and space – where all the threads and topics I have mentioned so far come together. The best decision the artist can take is to make the very problem he faces – the lack of fluency in the new language the main topic of his work. Given that his English is not good enough to write poetry or lyrics for music, he writes a song about his English not being good enough. For the researcher of such stories, it is fascinating to “see” artists at work. Gilbert writes the lyrics, his attention is on the words. He sends them to Leopoldi, whose focus is on the music. Leopoldi alters not words or phrases, but rhythm, he is looking for dramatic moments in the text so that he will be able to perform it. And he sends the whole thing back to Gilbert, who adds a line, or a rhyme, to accommodate Leopoldi’s wishes. Georg Traska and Christoph Lind in Vienna have found a file containing some 80 pages that document this collaboration. Poems, short dialogues and whole scenes for a play, “Heimat im Koffer”, that was never to be written or performed; drafts, written over, amended, typed up again, set to music, rejected, finally accepted and – at least in some cases – also performed and published.

Die Sprache, die ich früher sprach, die konnt ich fließend sprechen

doch English language, Schreck loss noch, do hob i holt no Schwächen.

Mit evening school, do fing es an, ich nahm a English lesson

Doch hab ich, was ich evening’s kann, beim breakfast schon vergessen

Man merkt mir an am Dialekt, - wann ich Amerika entdeckt.

Jo do wärs halt guat, wenn ma Englisch kennt, a bissl mehr als nur how do you do

Doch so long ma nur sogt: I can’t understand, do ghört man net really dazua.

Und solang ma ned waß, dass a brush is a Bürstl ,

A dog is a Hund, und d’Hot dog san d’Würstl

So long bleibt ma das, wos ma greenhorn nennt

Jo do wär’s halt guad, wenn ma Englisch könnt (Leopoldi H. 2011)[[10]](#footnote-11)

As Europe became more and more cut-off from America during the war, Gilbert strove to make the United States his new home. Hisunpublished poems and songs show an effort to integrate American culture, and to “become an American.” In Gilbert’s own view, this attempt has worked quite well; in a February 1951 letter he writes: “I have been living in New York since 1939, and I became a permanent resident here after I had turned, as I like to say, not just into an American but almost an (American) Indian” (Gilbert R. 1951). Based on the few letters and documents kept today in Berlin’s Academy of the Arts, Gilbert’s feeling of having “arrived” reflects his personal and family situation much more than his professional career. He did not, namely, manage to integrate into the American musical industry. Europe under Nazi occupation, on the other hand, seemed very far away in these years. It was nearly impossible to receive news from friends or relatives, as the whole continent turned into a black hole that had destroyed the flourishing culture of the past, unless it had, in tiny trickles, escaped to so many places of exile.

**Bridge-builder and border-crosser**

Gilbert made the journey back across the Atlantic, mainly for financial reasons, only four years after the end of World War II. He left the United States in 1949, at first only with the intention to find work in Europe and to remain an U.S. citizen and a resident of New York. In his letters to Rudolf Weys he presents himself as a kind of American uncle who sends parcels to friends and inquires about the situation “over there.” Between the lines, though, the urgent need to reconnect can be felt. Whereas Hermann Leopoldi returned to Vienna and was celebrated there (although the story of his persecution was rarely mentioned), Gilbert kept his distance. He stayed first in Munich, writing lyrics and poetry for Erich Kästner’s cabaret “Kleine Freiheit,” and slowly built up new networks of contact and collaboration both in the theatre and in the emerging post-War German film industry. Towards the end of the 1950s, a new area of work opened up quite unexpectedly. Frederic Loewe, formerly Friedrich Löwe, (1901-1988), the author of the musical *My Fair Lady*, asked Gilbert to produce a German translation of the play’s libretto (Loewe 1958a). Finally the songwriter’s transnational and translational experience started to pay off: the English language that he never mastered well enough to write became a tool of transmission and bridge-building. In the years that followed, Gilbert—now based in Minusio, Ticino (Switzerland) and very decidedly not in Germany again—translated around twenty popular American musical comedies into German. With his moderation of a dialogue between the English and German languages, in plays such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma*, and especially *Cabaret*, his last translation (in 1970), Gilbert helped to bring American popular culture (back?) to Europe and to make it accessible to an audience he once knew – and did not know anymore (and was quite doubtful about), at the same time.

A file of letters, kept today in the archive of Berlin’s Academy of Arts, containing the correspondence between Frederic Loewe and Robert Gilbert, documents – quite similarly to Gilbert’s and Leopoldi’s collaboration in New York – the ongoing dialogue between the creator of the play and the words Alan J. Lerner made so famous, on the one hand, and Gilbert, who was tasked with translating into German famous lines like: “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain”. On November 20, 1958, Frederick Loewe (Lerner & Loewe, 120 East 56th Street, New York, NY) writes a letter to Robert Gilbert, Villa La Mirandola, Minusio bei Locarno, Switzerland.

My dear Robert,

I am sorry not to have written to you before. Number one, this work is not of immediate pressure. Number two, I have been too busy with other things and number three, I don’t know exactly what to tell you.

WITH A LITTLE BIT OF LUCK (Mit ‘nem Fingerhut voll Glück), I like the best of the three so far. I COULD HAVE DANCED ALL NIGHT (Haett’ gern die Nacht durchtanzt), still hasn’t found my full enthusiasm. I suppose it has to do with the weakness of the first line of the refrain [gap]. Now, the second version of it, I like, of course, much better, with the exception of the first line, which again is very weak (Ich hätt’ am liebsten heut’). ON THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE is, of course, very nice but again fails to excite me. It is unnecessary at this point to tell you they are all excellent lyrics and my admiration for you remains undiminished. It just isn’t quite right for MY FAIR LADY. […]

Dear Robert, I know that this is going to be tough work but we must not forget that it is MY FAIR LADY, which means it must be perfect and that there is no time limit on this. Please be not disappointed and keep on trying.

As to your question about which dialect to use in German – I would suggest that you look up and see what they did in the German ‘Pygmalion’ versions previously, for as you know it was done in German (Vienna).

Much love,

[handwritten] Fritz (Loewe 1958b)

Two Germans communicating in English (and how German this English is!) give us an amazing insight into their workshop. Today we know, because we have heard it and seen it on the stage so often, that it reads “Mit ‘nem klein’ bißchen Glück” and “Ich hätt’ getanzt heut Nacht”, and somehow we see the translator sweating at his desk. On January 21st, 1959, Gilbert sends a letter to Heinrich Blücher “Workwise, I spend a lot of time in Munich. Or Vienna, as it comes. Now I am translating *My Fair Lady* into German—a tough cookie since it is so matted, or felted (“verfilzt”) with the English language and purely English associations (“Bezüglichkeiten”) (Gilbert R. 1959). Fritz, the old friend, is quite demanding, and the famous wording “Es grünt so grün” had not at all been there from the start, but had been worked out, sentence by sentence, verse by verse. It had not even been clear from the start that the German play would use the Berlin dialect. There is a Viennese version as well, in fact, there are dozens of versions in so many languages, but for us, I would maintain, Eliza Dolittle could only “berlinern”: “Nur een Ssimmerchen irjendwo”. How else should that sound? But it has not fallen from the skies, it has been compiled and developed and discussed between 56th Street in New York and Villa La Mirandola in Minusio.

Recent research in Translation Studies has developed new questions in the context of *cultural translation*. As the organizers of a recent conference at the University of Graz in Austria postulated, these new approaches

abolish the dichotomist or binary conceptions that are still omnipresent even in the research on cultural transfer (for example by means of the more or less implicit normative notions, such as source culture or target culture). The attention now turns to places of contact and fault lines, zones of transition, displacements, and forms of intermediation in the processes of cultural exchange, but also to those differences that evade translatability or are indeed not translatable (Steiner 2010).

That might be a little too sophisticated for *My Fair Lady*, but Robert Gilbert, in his own – and much more beautiful – language puts it quite similarly. Transition, displacement, intermediation, and exchange form important elements in a life trajectory characterised by ruptures, wanderings, and relations between different worlds. It is the notion, and the practice of translation, which brings these elements together. This is how he expresses it himself:

Between two languages, there are delicate and fragile bridges – above an abyss of misunderstandings. Should it happen that one of them (be it idiom or dialect, slang, jargon, lingo, literary or spoken language) wants to get to the other and that they meet on this eternally swaying surface and exchange a greeting, then we can never be sure if they both mean the same, even with the simplest “How do you do” or “Guten Morgen”. Often therefore they pass each other silently, or even worse: they talk at cross purposes (Gilbert R. 1951–1961).[[11]](#footnote-12)

This is Robert Gilbert speaking, in a text that I first discovered in the archive but then also found printed in a paperback edition of *My Fair Lady*. The difficult business obviously has challenged him to try and write down his thoughts about the newly acquired, or required, form of art:

And then there comes the adventurous border crosser, also known as a translator, who tries to create a connection, between those two conflicting tongues – a reasonably sustainable connection – which means he endeavours, honestly and literally in the sweat of his brow to make a halfway meeting possible and to prevent, on the one hand, the emergence of a space of banality within which the simplest ‘Yes’ or ‘Ja’ will be rolled out into platitude, and, on the other hand, to prevent them from landing in the abyss of misunderstandings – from where no bridge-wanderer will ever return (Gilbert R. 1951–1961).[[12]](#footnote-13)

A bridge wanderer, a border crosser – these seem to be apt descriptions for the role of a translator. Like others before him, Gilbert also uses an image which makes sense only in German. The “*Übersetzer*” has the task of “ferrying over” (“*über zu setzen*”), like an old ferryman. He walks between the colours of the rainbow, thinking in terms of siltation or dilution, of ballast and babble, or splashing, of maelstrom and recess, and he names the two claims made on him from the left and from the right: fidelity, where the foreign original is concerned, and loyalty in regard of “his own tribe”, namely the German language. He sees himself swinging to and fro, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, or balancing on the very thin thread of synonyms, juggling seventeen dictionaries on the tip of his nose. “Only the self-evident becomes evident to others” would be the fitting motto for him who calls himself a mere “echo”, a mediator or middleman with only one hope: that he will be perceived of as close as possible to the homely and neighbourly voice from next door: *wahrgenommen beinahe für die allen so traute und nachbarliche Stimme von nebenan*.

So many of these notions seem to deserve elaboration and discussion – but surely “homely”, *traut*, and “neighbourly”, *nachbarlich*, immediately remind us of their contrary, the experience of being made “foreign” by the power of Nazi law. *Cabaret*, more than any other play, brings this experience back to Gilbert’s mind – the play is set in Berlin, and its plot unfolds against the background of the Nazis’ rise to power. In a letter to Friedrich Torberg, Gilbert confirms that his own experience, the fact that he had been an eye-witness, qualified him for the translation of *Cabaret*: “I lived there. I know the time, the language, the silence. Who is going to tell me what and how used to be said and sung there?” (Gilbert R: 1969). The authenticity of his translation has been emphasised by Tatyana Shestakov in her analysis of *Cabaret*:

A Musical like *Cabaret*, with its linguistic and cultural duality, which seems logical considering the history of the play and the genre, requires a translator who would to some extent have the same “split personality”, or rather “split nationality” that the original play has. Robert Gilbert was the perfect interpreter who, as a German and a man of the theatre, operetta, cabaret, and himself the author of cabaret texts as well as soldier of the First World War, could become Christopher Isherword’s and Joe Masteroff’s German-language voice ( 2003).

The quality of the translation, she continues, can be seen in the fact that “no recent re-translations of *Cabaret* have been needed.” Only Gilbert had “the profound knowledge of the political, social and historical aspects of the source and target societies, as well as that of the world of theatre” (Shestakov 2003).

**Conclusion**

In recent years, some authors in the areas of Cultural Studies, Diaspora Studies, or post-Colonial Studies have celebrated, if this is the right word, (symbolic) “homelessness” and cosmopolitanism as the only possible form of existence in modern times.[[13]](#footnote-14) With this case-study in mind, I cannot agree. Gilbert’s life and work in translation may reflect, in some ways, a general experience of mankind in the 20th century, but it is also a very specific experience, and a very specific *Jewish* experience, which cannot easily be translated into a kind of role-model for other migrant groups or indeed for the exiled situation of modern man (and woman) today. Two important contexts need to be made visible: first, the emergence of a cultural exchange between, for example, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles, and Munich, that began long before the Nazis’ rise to power in Germany, and continued after the liberation in 1945; second, the transnational network created, out of sheer necessity and despair, by those German and Austrian Jews who emigrated from Nazi Germany after 1933. American musicians and composers visited Europe and the centres of musical activity, such as Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, and many other places, already during the second half of nineteenth century, but more and more during the *fin-de-siècle* and the inter-war years. From there they brought to the United States ideas, melodies, stage design, and many more aspects of the European opera, operetta, and other genres. European musicians, composers, directors, and performing artists – at the very same time – visited the Americas and brought experiences from there back home. It is therefore impossible to say that one area “influenced” or “guided” the other. Rather, we have to imagine a constant dialogue and exchange, a kind of cultural third space (Bhabha 1995), which is neither “European” nor “American”, but which is constructed through exchange: through visits, travels, performances, discussions, reviews, letters, and – in many cases – even musical cooperation. While much of this exchange has taken place in relatively quiet years and voluntarily, one very important period has been marked by the experience and the consequence of forced emigration – when European artists, mainly but not exclusively Jews, had to leave Germany and later Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries under Nazi domination or occupation, and most of them, after shorter stays in European places of exile, arrived in the Americas, in Buenos Aires, in Mexico City, in New York, or in Los Angeles. Partly they could build up contacts through an already existing network.

From 1933 on, under growing pressure of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, German Jews saw themselves confronted with the need to leave Germany – the country that had been their *Heimat* for centuries. One half of Germany’s Jews, ca. 280,000 out of 500,000, emigrated to various destinations around the world, at first to neighbouring countries (Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain), later to places as far away as Argentina, China, or Australia. The two major countries of immigration – each one of them a possible new *Heimat* – were the United States and Palestine, then under British administration. While the (cultural) history of these emigrants can be studied in the larger context of Jewish migrations from Eastern and Central Europe after 1880-81, it is important to note that many of these German-Jewish emigrants, wherever they went, retained some aspects of their German identity and culture, their language, their love for books and education, for music and many other aspects of their former life, which they did not want to be taken away by the Nazis. What has initially been described as a failure – in Israel, to fulfil completely all Zionist requirements of equality and a break with Diaspora traditions; or in the United States, to assimilate completely with American culture – can now be regarded as quite a successful story of integration without complete assimilation.

Finding a job, mastering a new language, adjusting to the climate, thinking about Germany and the loss of friends and family – these were universal experiences made by German Jews all over the world. But in order to find out *how* they coped with these challenges and to learn which strategies they developed – including the one our protagonists chose: a return to Europe and, partly, even to Germany – we need to look at the individual experiences. While the cultural history of this migratory experience and the emerging transnational network of contact and communication has been partly written (see Krohn et al 1998), an overview, a “map”, of this global and yet, at the same time, very individual narrative will be hard, maybe even impossible, to achieve. It might be more important to collect and study individual life stories – such as the one presented here.

Heinrich Blücher writes a wonderful letter in 1960 (which might never have been sent): “I try to imitate you. I try to use German as a literary language in such a way that it is determined by an inner Berliner diction.” Gilbert’s poems, Blücher says, have managed this challenge. The German language, he says, has been too complacent, even submissive, to the Nazi conquest. If there is resistance, if there is love and “real nourishment”, it needs to be re-discovered in the language of the city.

Ich schrieb Dir vor Jahren meinen Wunsch, mich philosophisch auf Berlinisch ausdruecken zu koennen. Das habe ich gemeint und versuche es. Obgleich ich mich bemuehe, die englische Sprache besser und reiner zu sprechen, glauben doch viele meiner besseren Studenten und ein paar mir nahestehende Kollegen, etwas Berlinisches, Pariserisches oder New Yorkerisches herauszuhoeren: eine Art Rhythmus einer anderen Realität, der sie manchmal fuehlen macht, sie seien nicht im Klassenzimmer, sondern auf der Strasse, bei dem Eckensteher (Blücher 1960).[[14]](#footnote-15)

I find it very difficult to translate this passage, and a discussion of this declaration of love to urban culture and the language of the street might lead us too far away from the topic of translation. Still, we can say that the (lost) arena of Berlin has been the foundation of something to which the newly acquired (but never completely inhabited) arena of New York, even under the circumstances of emigration and exile, has added another something. What this “something” might be – especially in the context of translation – seems quite hard to define. I can only advise the German speakers among the readers to have a look at Robert Gilbert’s “Leierkastenodyssee”, which, in Hannah Arendt’s words, has given Berlin, and Berlin’s “Mund- und Denkart” – vernacular *and* mind-set – a place in world poetry. While the vernacular faced problems in exile and partly got lost, the mind-set survived.

*Det Jeschäft is’ richtig* – “that’s a good deal”, to offer something approaching a translation – was one of the key sentences in *Im weißen Rössel*, regularly uttered by one of its protagonists, fashion manufacturer Wilhelm Giesecke, the typical “Berliner” out of his place in Austria. And “det Jeschäft is’ richtig writes Gilbert in a letter from January 21st, 1962, to Blücher in New York: about *My Fair Lady* which runs successfully in Berlin, “no street girl ever had such a run” (Gilbert R. 1962). Here he indeed meets himself (or rather his former self), on a wobbly bridge, and they both have changed. Remaining in close touch with his friends who decided to stay in the United States, especially Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, he led a life of cultural in-between-ness and constant translation. The former arenas where his poetical and musical talent had developed, Berlin in those fruitful and dangerous years before 1933, Vienna as a first place of exile and later Paris and New York, have indeed provided him with the opportunity to acquire enough of the new language to be able to participate actively in the transfer of American post-War popular culture to Europe, and to contribute to the return of modern, avant-garde culture once driven out, together with him, from Germany.

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1. The project application has been led by my colleague Dr Andrea Reiter at Southampton. For a discussion of the “turns” in the Humanities, see Bachmann-Medick 2006, and recently *American Historical Review*, Forum titled ‘Historiographic “Turns” in Critical Perspective’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. It is the title of Gilbert’s 1933 poem in which he reflects about his own emigration from Berlin and Germany. The poem juxtaposes the titles and themes of German popular songs with the new reality the emigrant faces: not being part of this culture anymore and yet being challenged to keep this tradition among the cultural baggage he takes into exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Stempellied (Lied der Arbeitslosen), Text: David Weber (= Robert Gilbert), Musik: Hanns Eisler. See Erinnerungsort.de – Materialien zur Kulturgeschichte, <http://erinnerungsort.de/stempellied--28lied-der-arbeitslosen-29-_171.html> [accessed August 5, 2013]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This is documented in a file archived at the State Reparation Office (Landesamt für Entschädigung) in Berlin; Gilbert’s application for material compensation of losses suffered on the grounds of Nazi persecution has been successful. Landesamt für Entschädigung Berlin, Akte Robert Gilbert, 50836, M5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Germany 1930, Director Wilhelm Thiele. See: *Die Drei von der Tankstelle*. Ufa-Magazin Nr. 9 (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Germany 1931, Director Erik Charell. See: Reichow 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Premiered on 8 November 1930 in Berlin‘s Großes Schauspielhaus, directed by Erik Charell, starring Max Hansen and Camilla Spira. See Peter and Clarke 2007; Tadday 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For Charell’s American experience with the Ziegfeld shows see <http://www.ralph-benatzky.de/main.php?cat=6&sub_cat=16&task=3&art_id=000330> (August 28, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. It would be interesting to discuss at some point why the Austrian popular culture, especially the “Wiener Lied”, found access to the American – and British, if we think of Richard Tauber – public much more easily than the musical and lyrical tradition from Berlin, Robert Gilbert’s home and place of reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See also the CD “Hermann Leopoldi im Amerika” which, for some reason, does not contain this crucial song. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. In the German original: “Zwischen zwei Sprachen gibt es zierliche, zerbrechliche Brücken – über einem Abgrund von Mißverständnissen. Will die eine zur anderen, und kommt es zufällig vor, daß die beiden – jeweils Idiom, Mundart, Dialekt, Slang, Jargon, Lingo, Schrift- oder Umgangssprache genannt – auf ewig schwankender Unterlage einander begegnen und einen Gruß austauschen, dann kann man nie ganz sicher sein, ob sie auch beide dasselbe meinen, und sei es nur mit dem simpelsten ‚How do you do’ oder ‚Guten Morgen’. Oft gehen sie deshalb stumm aneinander vorbei. Oder noch schlimmer: Sie reden aneinander vorbei” (trans. J.S.). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. In the German original: “Da erscheint dann gewöhnlich ein abenteuernder Grenzgänger, gemeinhin Übersetzer genannt, der die Verbindung zwischen den zwiespältigen Zungen herzustellen versucht – eine halbwegs haltbare Verbindung –, das heißt, er bemüht sich im redlichen, ja buchstäblichen Schweiß seines Angesichts darum, daß die beiden sich möglichst auf halbem Wege treffen und letzten Endes nur ja nicht auf einem Gemeinplatz landen, auf dem selbst ein lapidares ‚Ja’ oder ‚Yes’ zu einer asthmatischen Plattitüde ausgewalzt wird – und andererseits nur ja nicht dort, wovon kein Brückenwanderer je verlautbar wiederkehrt, nämlich im besagten Abgrund der Mißverständnisse.” (trans. J.S.). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. For a critical assessment see Sznajder 2008, 2011. See also Cathy Gelbin’s and Sander Gilman’s AHRC-funded research project “Cosmopolitanism and the Jews”: <http://personalpages.manchester.ac.uk/staff/Cathy.Gelbin/Cosmopolitanism_and_the_Jews.html> (15.2.2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. “I wrote to you many years ago about my dream to be able to express myself philosophically in the Berlin dialect. I meant it and I am trying to achieve it. No matter how hard I try to speak English in a better and more perfect way, many of my best students and close colleagues believe to hear something Berlin-ish, Parisian, or New-York-ish: a rhythm of another reality transports them out of the classroom into a street full of loafers.” (trans. J.S.) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)