

# The lost case of women translators or: The case of the lost women translators?

*Elisabeth Gibbels*

In 2018, I published a lexicon of German women translators that contained short biographies of nearly 250 women. This had evolved from a small paper on the German translators of the penny dreadfuls that I gave for a conference in Istanbul. Many of these names came from deep digs into diverse sources, such as publishing house catalogues, women writers' lexicons, indices in translation anthologies or overview books on certain periods, for instance, the lives of nuns. Many were found by pure chance. What was striking then and now is how little these women are known and how little information can be gained from online resources like the German National Biography database ([ADB/NDB](#)). ADB/NDB, for example, lists thirteen women translators, but doesn't include Marie Herzfeld, the "ambassador for Scandinavian literature" (*Killy's Literary Lexicon*) or Else Otten, the namegiver of a translation award. Even the Germersheim online translators' lexicon, [UeLex](#), only lists six late 19th century

female translators. This contrasts sharply with my own findings. For Yiddish, Dutch, Scandinavian, Slavic and Baltic languages alone I have identified 115 women, all born between 1830 and 1875. Why are these women not known?

To illustrate the discrepancy between the achievements of women translators and their presence in cultural memory, I will focus on five: Helene Engelhardt-Pabst (1850-1910) (Russian and Latvian), Marie Herzfeld (1855-1940) (Swedish), Marie Franzos (1870-1941) (Swedish), Else Otten (1873-1931) (Dutch), and Bertha von Pappenheim (1859-1936) (Yiddish). This selection is the result of several considerations. Firstly, the translators cover a range of languages that are less prominent than English and French. Secondly, their cases make us aware of common phenomena, for example, how using a number of (pen) names obliterates part of the translator's oeuvre. Thirdly, their cases show how difficult the search for information about

their works and lives often is and how valuable information can be hidden in obscure sources. Finally, comparing translators of similar achievements and biographies may highlight mechanisms that contribute to their invisibility.

### Helene von Engelhardt-Pabst (1850-1910)

This translator's work and her biography are listed under two names in the same women writers' lexicon (Sophie Pataky's *Lexikon deutscher Frauen der Feder*, 1898). Furthermore, the latter name appears with two different spellings (Papst and Pabst). The ADB/NDB does list her, but as a poet and not as a translator. Her maiden name, Engelhardt-Schnellenstein, was also her pen name, as was common practice. Nevertheless, two main indices list her under two different names: Engelhardt-Pabst (ADB/NDB), Engelhardt-Schnellenstein (Pataky). Thus, the corpus of her German translations of Latvian folksongs and Russian authors is dispersed in four different name constellations. The most comprehensive overview is provided by [EEVA](#), a project on old Estonian literature.

### Marie Herzfeld (1855-1940)

Marie Anna Barbara Herzfeld published under the names H.M. Lyhne, Marianne Niederweelen, Marianne Niederweeven and Marianne Niederweiden; her first name is also given as Maria. Besides her numerous translations of Scandinavian literature, she was also active as a literary scholar who published articles on the authors she translated. The renowned German literary lexicon *Killy* called her the main "ambassador of Scandinavian literature" and the

"leading name in the rediscovery of Italian Renaissance literature".



**Marie Herzfeld**

**Photo: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv**

Furthermore, Herzfeld was vice-president of the Austrian Women Writers' Association and received the Bauernfeld Award for her literary work. All of this apparently did not suffice for her name to make the lists. Is it because she was Austrian? Is it because she translated from small languages? Let's contrast her case with that of a translator who shared much of her biography, down to her first name.

### Marie Franzos (1870-1941)

Just as Marie Herzfeld, Marie Franzos, too, published under various pseudonyms (Francis Maro, F. Maro, Fr. Maro, Francis Mauro; her first name appeared as Maria, Mizi, Mizzi, 'M.'). She, too, translated from Scandinavian languages and as with her published literary criticism, she received an award for her work. She lived in the same

period and in the same country as Marie Herzfeld. But while Herzfeld is invisible in translators' indices, Franzos is not.

One factor that could explain this is the existence of a famous male relative. Franzos' uncle was the well-known Austrian author Karl Emil Franzos; her father is often mentioned, too. This is referred to in many instances but the fact that her mother, Bertha Ostersetzer, had also been a translator, is left out except in UeLex and [BiografiA](#).

Other important information on Franzos' work and life has been omitted as well. Only [regiowiki.at](#) informs us of the date Franzos began to stop using her pseudonyms (1913); only UeLex mentions a first anonymous translation (1895). Hardly any sources mention that from 1938 onward Franzos published her translations under the names of friends. Only UeLex mentions that she did not just "pass away" but took her own life after having been refused a visa to Switzerland.



**Marie Franzos**

**Photo:** [Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv](#)

### **Else Otten (1873–1931)**

Neither Otten nor the translation prize named after her are included in resources such as Uelex. What we know about her, we owe to the scholar Jaap Grave (see *Übersetzen ist Liebeswerk*, 2003), who painstakingly went through archives searching for information. He found that Otten translated most of the late 19th and early 20th century Dutch avant-garde literature. She supported and promoted 'her' authors and published articles about them. In 2000, a translation award was named after her, the Dutch-German Else Otten Translation Prize, that has been awarded ever since. Then why does she not get more attention?



**Else Otten**

**Photo:** [Huygens Instituut](#)

Is it because Otten was born into a Dutch family? Is it that Dutch is not prestigious enough in Germany? Is it because she lived in a relationship with another woman, the renowned singer Helene Siegfried, a fact that is ignored in accounts of Siegfried's life? In fact, to what extent do biographical factors play a role in the selection of translators for an index?

### Bertha von Pappenheim (1859–1936)

Bertha von Pappenheim used the pseudonym P. Berthold or Paul Berthold. Some sources are uncertain about the correct form of her family name (Poppenheim). But that's only when she was indeed mentioned as a translator. In several cases she was simply ignored when books were published as "aus dem Jüdischen übers. und hrsg. von David Kaufmann (1896) and "aus dem Jiddischen übers. und hrsg. von Alfred Feilchenfeld (1913)" (translated from the Yiddish language and edited by ...).



**Bertha von Pappenheim**

**Photo:** Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv

In reality, Pappenheim was one of the very few translators from Yiddish. Moreover, her translation of *The Memoirs of Glucksel von Hameln*, an early Jewish businesswoman, was an important contribution to cultural memory. Pappenheim also translated Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the version used in the German second women's movement. Apart from this, Pappenheim was Sigmund Freud's Anna O., became the subject of a novel and a play, founded and managed a Jewish orphanage, wrote against the trafficking of Ukrainian

women and founded the Austrian Jewish Women's Association. All of this did not give her visibility. Why this should be so unclear: Is it because her translations appear to have been self-commissioned? Is it because she translated from Yiddish? Is it because she founded the 'wrong' women's association? Is it because her mental health issues somehow tarnished her name?

### Pen names

It was common in the 19th century for both men and women to write under pen names. However, the possibilities for names being confused in encyclopedia entries are greater for women than men as women took their husbands' family names when they married and then used their maiden name as their pen name. An encyclopedia might list women under their married name although their work might have been published under their pen/maiden name, as was the case for Engelhardt-Papbst-Schnellesstein.

### What should a translators' lexicon include?

UeLex includes the following information on Marie Franzos: language biography (how she learned the languages she translated from and what her competence in these languages was), agency as a translator (what decisions and impact she had on the translation and publication process), cultural capital (her interaction



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**Dr. Elisabeth Gibbels**  
**Photo: Private Archive**

with the authors, the award she received for her translation), genres translated, translation heritage (her mother's translation work). This comprehensive entry of her work and her background seems adequate. However, this is the exception rather than the rule.

**“The corpus of her translations is dispersed in four different name constellations”**

### Conclusion

The five women translators that I have chosen here stand for hundreds of German women translators who, like these, contributed immensely to cultural transfer in Germany. Their individual biographies and their translation work

deserve recognition and visibility. So what can be done to give them this visibility? Projects such as the Germersheimer lexicon, and similar translators' databases in other countries, contain clear and comprehensive information. This information is often gleaned from hard to access sources, such as journals, correspondence and publishing houses' archives. Even this information doesn't seem to impact on their inclusion in cultural memory.

However, in an age when girls and women are banned from higher education (Afghanistan) or discouraged from believing in themselves, showing past contributions is vital. Working on a women translators' lexicon is thus not only an act of reverence but also a tool of empowerment.

Therefore, even though the information we are able to find is fragmentary, retrieving the works and lives of women translators and recording their data is not a hopeless endeavour. Far from that: it offers an opportunity to change cultural memory.