

# **“Looking for Jewish Content in Award-Winning Translated Children’s Books”**

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## **SLIDE 1 - TITLE**

Thank you, Suzi, for the kind introduction. I’m very happy to be here with you all today to share what I’ve learned while looking for Jewish content in award-winning translated children’s books.

## **SLIDE 2 – THIS TALK WILL...**

My research explores how editors decide to select and publish children’s and young adult books from other countries to translate into English for the US market. For this presentation I’ve taken what I learned and applied it to books of Jewish interest. I’ll discuss the Batchelder award, which focuses on translated books, and the Outstanding International Books list, which includes both translations and English-language imports. I was on the 2008 Batchelder committee as a member, and chaired the 2010 committee. I was also on the OIB committee for two years, for the 2010 and 2011 lists, so these are awards I know very well. Of course there are also Judaica awards, such as Sydney Taylor and the National Jewish Book Award for which translations are eligible. [Addition: Translations are also eligible for the Wiesenthal Center’s Once Upon a World Children’s Book Award.] However, I will focus on awards given to international books, many of which are award-winners in their own countries before they get translated into English, rather than awards that you know well. Who is familiar with the Batchelder? The OIB? Both awards are not as well known as they should be. The resulting numbered booklist (your handout) includes mostly the books I found by checking the Batchelder and OIB, plus a few others recognized by the Sydney Taylor or National Jewish Book Award. In this presentation I put the emphasis on “looking” for translations with Jewish content, in other words, the search strategy – because there isn’t that much to find. My talk is about why so few translations are available and

also about how valuable they are – it’s worth the trouble to track them down. So most of my presentation will set the stage for the modest list of translations on your handout.

### **SLIDE 3 – DEFINING INTERNATIONAL BOOKS**

I first want to explain what I mean by “international books.” It’s all about location. I’m talking about those books first published outside of one’s own country, in our case, the US. For us, international books are English-language imports as well as books first published elsewhere and translated into English for publication here. I’m not talking about domestic translations, such as *Clifford the Big Red Dog* translated into Spanish. Multicultural and international are terms that are often conflated in the literature. They’re not the same thing, but have much in common. Again, it’s a matter of location. A multicultural book can be about a different country or culture, but (for us) is first published in the US. Finally, there are other terms often used to describe international books: global literature, world literature, and sometimes transcultural literature.

### **SLIDE 4 – WHY READ INTERNATIONAL BOOKS**

Jella Lepman was a German Jew who, after World War II, founded the International Youth Library in Munich and IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, in Switzerland. She wanted German children to have real books, not propaganda. She probably said it best in the title of her memoir, *A Bridge of Children’s Books*, itself a translation from the German. She saw books as a bridge to tolerance, a way for children to connect with children in other countries and circumstances, and this is the mission of IBBY and its US chapter, USBBY. She is one of the key figures in the international children’s literature movement. We all know about the children’s classics from other countries, *Pinocchio*, *Pippi Longstocking*, etc. that give us a shared heritage – the republic of childhood-- but contemporary books can also provide insight into others’ lives. In terms of the curriculum, there is an obvious place for translations in social studies but with a little creativity they can fit in many more places as well. I think it is particularly important that they can help fight ethnocentrism.

### **SLIDE 5 – ISSUES IN PUBLISHING TRANSLATIONS**

There are lots of issues that make publishing translations problematic; hence the dearth of translations. Only about 2% of children's books published in the US are translations, and this includes all kinds of translations. They can be expensive to translate if they are very long. People don't clamor for translations. Children want a good story but don't require that it come from another country. It isn't something that most people think about much. We have a very large publishing industry and access to an awful lot right here, so there isn't a perceived need for books from abroad. Some readers can feel uncomfortable with books that are not presented in a familiar way. There is much to be gained, of course, from being open to a different way of looking at the world. But it can also be harder to read, at least at first.

#### **SLIDE 6 – “FOUND IN TRANSLATION” OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTION**

Culturally conscious children's books are those books that appear to present an authentic sense of the culture from an insider's point of view. I've borrowed the term from Rudine Sims Bishop's book, *Shadows and Substance*, which is about the history and development of African-American children's literature. I mean it to describe books with cultural content – not, for example, a generic book about shapes, for example, that could have come from any country.

Books first written in a foreign language in a foreign country are books that are aimed at children who, of course, live elsewhere. This is important. Translations allow our children to read books which, unusually, are not about them. My study focused on books of substantial length for readers 8-14 – those books eligible for the Mildred L. Batchelder Award for the most outstanding children's book translation in the US. I wanted to discover how we get the books that are eligible for the Batchelder, and thereby consider how we could get more of them.

#### **SLIDE 7 – RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS**

The three sub-questions address the overall question by looking at the barriers editors encounter, the resources they see as available, and their motivations for publishing translations.

#### **SLIDE 8 – THEORY AND METHOD**

I thought of this as a sense-making problem – how do editors make sense of the task of publishing translations? – and so drew on the work of Brenda Dervin and Karl Weick. My study began with a 77-question web-based survey of 93 children’s book editors. After analyzing the survey data I identified ten editors whose responses deviated considerably from the middle to interview for an hour by phone. Talking to them helped fill in the picture.

## **SLIDE 9 – SURVEY SAMPLE DESCRIPTION**

Though the sample was not randomly drawn, it does present an accurate picture; the predominantly female workplace is representative of the children’s publishing industry. The mean number of years in the sample is 12, so most editors have not been in children’s book publishing for all that long. Just over a third can evaluate a manuscript in another language, a point to which I will return later. Editors come from all sizes of publishing houses. Half of the firms are multinationals.

## **SLIDE 10 – KEY FINDINGS: BARRIERS**

In the survey editors were asked to rank their top 3 barriers, resources, and motivations. Looking at the rankings, you can see that editorial barriers are more important than financial ones, which is not what would be expected from the literature. Not being able to read the text directly – and remember that only about a third of the sample can evaluate a book in a language other than English – is really anathema for an editor. (As one editor said about not being able to read the book herself, “It can feel like gambling.”) Financial considerations did come next. The data were collected before the recession which is why I think there wasn’t more emphasis on the cost of publishing translations. Perhaps editors don’t worry that much about possible controversial content because they expect to make changes, including Americanization, that would deal with the problem. Or, on the other hand, the editors who publish edgier books might expect and even welcome controversy. Sales and marketing problems were identified too. Bookstore sales were more of a problem than library sales. Editors were uncomfortable with not having an English-speaking author to tour. However, it is now possible to have a blog tour or otherwise use social network technology to get around this barrier.

## **SLIDE 11 – KEY FINDINGS: RESOURCES**

The top-ranked resource, going to a book fair, is a well-established and familiar way for editors to find manuscripts. However, going to Italy for the Bologna Book Fair is still a big financial commitment. Having a connection with agents ranked second. (As one editor said, “It’s a very relationship-based industry to start with...”) Award winners in other countries was a surprising resource to be ranked third because editors say this is an important resource yet it is clear that they know little about it. Only 1 of the 93 editors surveyed claimed to stay on top of award winners, and organizations such as IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, and its journal, Bookbird, were under-utilized. There is a serious dearth of training opportunities. Though publishing follows the apprenticeship model, few editors have been mentored into publishing translations. Serendipity is important -- chance encounters such as getting stuck in an elevator with someone at a conference, can result in a purchase.

#### **SLIDE 12 – KEY FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS**

The top-ranked motivation for publishing translations was a positive personal response to the book (Said one editor, “If you like the book, you like the book, I think that’s what it should come down to.”) The positive personal response is an editorial consideration that would be essential for any acquisition. After that came the desire to broaden the perspectives of young readers in the U.S. This factor falls under what I call a “books as bridges” approach, which refers to Jella Lepman and the international children’s literature movement’s belief that reading books from other countries can help children build bridges of understanding.

#### **SLIDE 13 – KEY FINDINGS: PROPENSITY TO PUBLISH**

Having facility in ANY language other than English -- it didn’t even have to be the language of the book to be translated -- made editors more open personally to publishing translations. (One editor said: “I mean if you’re living in a monocultural, monolingual place, you’re going to have a hard time, I think, seeing that broader perspective.”)

Those who thought the industry climate overall was conducive to this type of publishing also were more open personally to publishing translations. Even though it would be reasonable to assume that years of experience did matter, there was no correlation between number of years in children’s publishing and individual propensity to publish translations; perhaps with the new

technology editors are able to develop relationships with industry colleagues more quickly than in the past.

Also, there was no correlation between size of the firm and propensity to publish. The interview data suggested that a larger firm was better equipped to provide needed resources AND that smaller firms were more likely to publish translations. In fact, both large and small firms publish translations, so the evidence here is inconclusive.

#### **SLIDE 14 - LIMITATIONS**

The sample drawn is substantial, but not as good as getting everyone. Using the Children's Book Council list meant I did not include all publishers who might publish a children's book, just the ones who were most likely to. For example, VIZ Media, the publisher of the 2008 Batchelder winner from Japan, *Brave Story*, is better known for their videos and graphic novels, and at the time was not a member of the CBC. I conducted the study in the spring of 2008, shortly after editors returned from Bologna, when the dollar was very low and there was much grumbling about how expensive it was to buy books in Euros. But the recession had not really hit yet. As for politics, one editor predicted that if Obama became President, there might be more interest from the U.S. in the rest of the world and that would trickle down to publishing translations from abroad. So it would be fascinating to replicate the study to see how the current conditions affect how editors feel about publishing translations.

#### **SLIDE 15 – MILDRED L. BATCHELDER AWARD**

So, with that background, let's look at the Batchelder and Outstanding International Books Award. The Batchelder Award is for an outstanding translation.

#### **SLIDE 16 – HISTORY AND IMPORTANCE OF AWARD**

The Award is administered by ALSC, the Association for Library Services to Children, a division of the American Library Association. Mildred Batchelder was a pioneering children's librarian who did a great deal to bring international books to children in the U.S. Though this award is not as well known as the Newbery or Caldecott, I think it is just as important because it

nurtures international understanding by giving children in different countries access to the same books – and not just classics, but contemporary books too.

### **SLIDE 17 – ELIGIBILITY – FOR CHILDREN 0-14 YEARS**

Though an award for children aged 0-14, picture books are seldom chosen because they have to have a substantial text. What constitutes “substantial” is up to the discretion of the committee. At the upper end of the age range, I think there is a temptation to include books that are perhaps more young adult than children’s because there is no comparable YA award.

### **SLIDE 18 – LANGUAGES OF ORIGIN**

Where do the books come from? This list shows all of the languages from which Batchelder books have been translated. You’ll note that the languages are mainly those spoken in Western Europe, where there is an established publishing industry and people like Mildred Batchelder forged strong connections.

### **SLIDE 19 – TRANSLATORS & TRANSLATING**

In translation studies, scholars talk about the continuum between adequacy and acceptability, that is, between fidelity to the original and accessibility for the reader of the translated version. Most translators aim for something in the middle. Of course the reputation of the translator counts for quite a lot. Anthea Bell is probably the best-known children’s book translator in the English-speaking world. She translates from French, German, and (I think) Dutch into English, is very prolific and has won many awards for her work. You know Hillel Halkin as Uri Orlev’s translator, and they have worked as a team for many years. The publisher’s name is also an indication of the quality of the book.

### **SLIDE 20 – SELECTED PUBLISHERS OF TRANSLATIONS**

Scan the names of publishers on your handout to get an idea of which ones are good at this type of publishing. The ones I’ve listed on the slide have done Judaica translations too. As I learned from my research, it’s the acquiring editor (who may also be the publisher) who is passionate about publishing translations who really drives the process. Publisher Simon Boughton and

editor Neal Porter at Roaring Brook; Stephen Roxburgh at Front Street and Namelos (and all the places he worked before he founded Front St., including Farrar Straus and Giroux); Arthur Levine at his own imprint at Scholastic; and certainly Françoise Bui at Random House and Walter Lorraine at Houghton Mifflin -- without these people, and other editors ready to take on the artistic and financial risk of publishing translations, I think we would see far fewer translations published for the US market, and, as you know, there aren't that many to begin with. If you think translations are important, you might want to drop by the publisher's booth at your next conference or drop them an email to thank them for their work and encourage them to continue. And make sure to buy their books. They need to know there is a market.

### **SLIDE 21 – IDENTIFYING JUDAIC TRANSLATIONS**

Your handout would be longer if I had included all the questionable titles. For example, I didn't include picture books with minimal text, a book of tales that seemed to be a retelling rather than a translation, or allegorical stories or WWII books that could be applied to Holocaust studies but had no overt Jewish content. There were also English-language imports, like Morris Gleitzman's *Once* and its sequels, published by Holt; and Judie Oron's *Cry of the Giraffe*, published by Annick. Not translations, but of course wonderful international books.

### **SLIDE 22 – BATCHELDER JUDAIC TRANSLATIONS**

This table shows books with Jewish content that have been Batchelder winners or honor books. There are 14 in all. 1996 was a good year for Holocaust books, and the third Batchelder book for that year was also a WWII book that I didn't include because it wasn't Jewish.

### **SLIDE 23 – USBBY OUTSTANDING INTERNATIONAL BOOKS COMMITTEE**

The International Board on Books for Young People – IBBY – is a worldwide organization that works to increase intercultural understanding through children's books. The founder, Jella Lepman's, autobiography, *A Bridge of Children's Books*, is a fascinating read, by the way. USBBY is the US chapter of IBBY. The Outstanding International Books include fiction and nonfiction, K-12, translations and English-language imports, so there are a lot of submissions!

### **SLIDE 24 – OIB CRITERIA**



The important point here is that there are lots of criteria the committee uses in choosing outstanding international books, but it's the rare book that will satisfy every single one. So it's acceptable to meet just some of the criteria.

### **SLIDE 25 – HOW THE OIB COMMITTEE WORKS**

The Outstanding International Books Committee consists of 9 people including the chair. Every year half of the members are replaced so there is always continuity. Committee members are divided into reading pairs so they read everything in their section of the alphabet (I read authors G-L) plus as much as they can of the other books regularly arriving on the doorstep. Individually, members suggest books they think should be considered by everyone. In November they hold a straw poll to reduce the list to a manageable number. At the two-day selection meeting in December, they each present titles to the committee with a justification for wanting them on the list. Then the final selection is made.

### **SLIDE 26 –THE FINAL LIST**

The final list consists of English-language books and translations first published in many different countries. Not surprisingly, the English-language imports always outnumber the translations. USBBY always has a session at ALA and it is well worth attending. One year at the Midwinter conference we literally unveiled the list – we had covered the book display with tablecloths! In February *School Library Journal* publishes the titles in an article with an introduction by the Chair, and annotations written by the committee. Those articles are available from the website. You can also print off the bookmarks. The articles are an excellent collection development tool.

### **SLIDE 27 –OIB AWARD BOOKS VS. SUBMISSIONS**

The award is only seven years old; the 2006 list was the first to appear. On average there are about 40 books per annual list for books published in the previous year. Submissions were fairly low the first year – only 196 -- but as the award became better known, submissions increased. When I was on the committee, the 2010 and 2011 award years, with roughly 300 submissions a year, it seemed like books were arriving almost every day! You see a downturn for 2012 in particular, probably due to the poor economic climate.

## **SLIDE 28 – OUTSTANDING INTERNATIONAL BOOKS – JUDAIC TRANSLATIONS**

Of the 40-odd titles that make the OIB list every year, a handful are translations. The best year for translations was 2007, when 15 made the cut. The 2012 list included only four translations. On average the OIBC chooses 1 Judaic translation a year. As you can see, there are three years: 2009, 2011, and 2012, with no Judaic translations at all.

## **SLIDE 29 - ABOUT THE BIBLIOGRAPHY**

The subject matter tends to be Holocaust or influenced by the Holocaust, and contemporary life in Israel, with a little non-Holocaust historical fiction. Most of the fiction is based on real-life people and events.

Sequels of an award-winning book will often be winners too.

- 19. Thor, *A Faraway Island* (Batchelder Honor and OIB). 20. *The Lily Pond* made Batchelder but not OIB. Watch for next two books in the quartet. They have already been published in Sweden. I believe that Random House will continue translating the series but of course good sales will help.

Also watch for more than one book by an award-winning author

- #26. Zenatti, *When I Was a Soldier* – memoir (Batchelder Honor and OIB). #25. *Bottle in the Gaza Sea* (Bloomsbury, 2008) also known as *Message in a Bottle* – a novel about how two teens navigate the Israeli/Palestinian divide. (though it didn't make either the Batchelder or OIB awards, it won the Sydney Taylor Book Award in the teen readers category)
- #10-13. As a four-time winner of the Batchelder, Orlev is unique. He is quite prolific and of course well-known for his Holocaust books. I understand that he has also written a lot of science fiction in Hebrew that has not been translated into English. As I've said, we really only get a smattering of books from other countries because so much does not get translated.

As I mentioned at the outset, using these two awards is only a starting point, but an important one. Of course you will also want to check Sydney Taylor books and National Jewish Book Award winners that have been translated [and the Wiesenthal Center Once Upon a Time Children's Book Award]. There is some overlap among the awards, as you can see from your copy of the bibliography.

### **SLIDE 30 – PRINT RESOURCES**

To conclude, I brought a few international youth literature professional books that I wanted to share with you. This series of annotated bibliographies with the quintessential IBBY name, *Bridges to Understanding*, is an important reference. They are companion books and in addition to the annotations, contain useful essays and lists. I am very excited to be editing the next volume in the series. The other two books, *Global Perspectives in Children's Literature and Reading Globally, K-8*, are full of practical ways of using international books with students. They are geared to the school library and classroom but many of the ideas can be used in other settings as well.

### **SLIDE 31—ORGANIZATIONS AND WEB SITES**

I also wanted to share these non-print resources with you. All of these sites are excellent resources for international youth literature: USBBY for their conferences and publications – if you're interested this is really the organization to join ; the International Children's Digital Library for free online access to books for children 3-13; the International Youth Library in Munich but with some resources available online; the *Looking Glass*, an international youth literature journal for which I was the founding editor – it's free as well; and an excellent site called WOW: World of Words, with access to lots of resources including the *WOW Review*.

### **SLIDE 32 – ACTIVITIES WITH TRANSLATED BOOKS**

Here are a few ideas for how to use translations with children and young adults. I know you will add your own.

**SLIDE 33 – THANKS**

And that's it! Thank you for your attention.