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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Erich Hackl. *Narratives of Loving Resistance: Two Stories.* Larkin. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2006. 106 pp. $13.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-138-8.

Peter Truschner. *Serpent's Child.* Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2005. 160 pp. $17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-136-4.

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Memory, Love, and Resistance

In an online dossier published by the Goethe-Institut in May 2006, journalist Eugen Emmerling noted that more German books were translated into Chinese (10 percent) and Korean (7.5 percent) than into English (6.7 percent) or French (5.9 percent) in 2004.[1] It is therefore fascinating to track which books are translated, and to what extent the Swiss and Austrian markets are represented. Ariadne Press, an American company, publishes exclusively works on "Austrian Studies, Culture and Thought."[2] The volumes are usually translated by experts from the field of German and Austrian Studies and provided with an afterword and notes. While this publisher features famous authors like Nobel prize-winning Elfriede Jelinek, it also draws attention to authors otherwise unknown in the English-speaking world. Two such lesser-known writers, Erich Hackl and Peter Truschner, recently published captivating and moving memory works that benefit from side-by-side reading. Translators Edward T. Larkin and Michael Winkler, respectively, render the style of these authors beautifully and ensure an exciting reading experience. Both books are compelling, disturbing accounts of the past that will

attract both the general reader and lovers of Austrian literature.

The texts link memory to the issue of love. While the times and people they depict could not be more different, they both raise the question of what drives human beings. Furthermore, the contrasting narrative styles reveal the narrative wealth with which writers can seek to capture a life. Hackl chronicles the life of real people who not only fought and suffered in the Spanish Civil War and in concentration camps during the 1930s and 1940s, but who also gained strength from the love of their families. In contrast, Truschner's novel tells the story of a childhood and adolescence in an Austrian village during the 1970s. The book earned him both the Austrian Chancellery's prize for literary debuts in 2001 and the annual scholarship of the Austrian Literatur-Mechana in 2002. Truschner's novel uses the first-person perspective, while Hackl's short stories present narrators who reveal themselves as strangers and admirers of the protagonists.

As its title indicates, Hackl's book contains two short stories. The first of these, "Love at First Sight. A Recollection," tells the story of a love that was hindered, but not extinguished, by circumstance. Hackl learned the story of the Spaniard Herminia RoudiÃ¨re PerpiÃ±Ã¡ and the Austrian Karl Sequens from their daughter Rosa MarÃa, as Edward T. Larkin explains in the afterword (p. 93). Supporting the memoir with police registration documents, the accounts of Hans Landauer, archival records and Karl's letters to Herminia, Hackl reconstructs how Sequens and PerpiÃ±Ã¡ met in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, quickly married and were subsequently separated for nearly their entire marriage. Herminia managed to survive the Spanish Civil War and Second World War, while Karl was imprisoned and died during the transport from Auschwitz to Sangerhausen in January 1945. The war led Herminia and her daughter to France and later to Germany, although the two wanted to fulfill Karl's dream and live in his native Vienna. The story focuses on individual struggle, social injustice and magnificent love, using a simple language that sketches hardship while leaving the pain to the reader's imagination. The desire to live a financially independent life in Vienna as well as bureaucratic obstacles–Herminia was a Spanish citizen and refugee–complicated her move to Austria's capital. The result was a postwar life in Bavaria, because Herminia fell ill and died just after finally receiving permission to move to Vienna (p. 46).

Hackl's sketch leaves many questions unanswered. For example, the chronicler writes that the GDR invited Herminia and Rosa to live there after Bavarian authorities declined their request for financial compensation. How did the East German government hear about the women's situation? Did Herminia write to them? If so, why did she decline the offer? If not, why was her case interesting to the officials on the socialist side of Germany? No documents are cited here; the focus remains on Herminia and Rosa's struggle to make a living, rather than on the larger political dimension of their struggles.

The second story in the book, "History of a Promise," is also a family history, yet, due to the stream-of-consciousness narrative style, it is less straightforward than "Love at First Sight." The story switches between the memory flashbacks of Willi Gubi and his reflections on later times up to the present day. This story remarkably reduces experiences to their bare essentials, omitting adjectives, metaphors or other images. The terror of Willi's youth is tersely described in three sentences: "Willi was thirteen when he got on the transport. He was fourteen when he was transferred from Buchenwald to Dachau. Sixteen and seventeen at Birkenau, seventeen-and-a-half in Auschwitz, eighteen in Warsaw and during the death march from Warsaw to Dachau, and nineteen in Kaufering" (p. 61). Willi grew up in a poor family in Vienna until he, like the rest of his family, was deported. Life before his deportation was already marked by poverty and hunger, which led the boy not only to steal but even to kill a man (p. 58). The story implies, however, that this survival instinct, alongside his physical strength, kept Willi alive in the various concentration camps. Towards the end of the war he promised a dying woman that he would take care of her daughter who was hidden in a cloister in France (p. 79). Willi adopts this child as his own after the war, telling no one, including her, that she is not his real daughter. While waiting for her release from the monastery, he meets a woman whom he later marries. He alters his own past so that the child Elena can believe in him and adopt the identity he creates for her, because "life with her was a kind of healing" (p. 82).

Maurice Halbwachs, the "father" of the idea of "collective memory," wrote that society forces humans at times not only to reproduce their past but also to "reshape it."[3] Hackl's story illustrates how such a reshaping can be crucial for one's survival. The true names of Willi and Elena "shall remain a secret" (p. 55), just as the "real" past will remain only with Willi in his dreams and nightmares. The horror of the concentration camps instilled a sense of responsibility in him that he did not have as a

boy, even when he killed a man because he did not want to get caught stealing (p. 58). Reshaping history is necessary for his healing after the war. The "truth" would implant the parents' trauma into his child, but Willi wanted to ensure that "Elena did not suffer" (p. 85).

Larkin calls Hackl "one of Austria's most significant contemporary authors" (p. 89), an author who has made his name as a chronicler of authentic life. Hackl embeds these real life stories in narratives that do not pretend to know everything about their protagonists. Gaps in memory are just as important as remembered events. Fact and imagination merge, focusing on the individuals' struggles to survive in hostile surroundings and to act ethically and lovingly despite their experiences.

Truschner's memory project differs vastly from Hackl's stories in style and approach. In his novel, the autobiographical first-person narrator describes the dynamics of his dysfunctional family in a detached fashion. Following the tradition of Peter Handke's "Wunschloses UnglÃ¼ck" (1972) or Thomas Bernhard's "Frost" (1963), this novel situates the childhood memoir in rural Austria and depicts the region and its inhabitants as poor and narrow-minded. The title "Serpent's Child" refers to the first-person narrator, who has to endure the poison of hatred that both his grandfather and mother dispense, while learning to become flexible enough to stay out of their fights. He describes how he spends the first part of his childhood on the run-down farm of his grandparents, until his mother decides that she earns enough money to take him with her to the city of Salzburg. The boy regards the fights between his mother and his grandfather as duels, in which each side scores points and from which he learns his own fighting tactics (pp. 18-24). The hateful connection between mother and grandfather repeats itself in the relationship between the narrator and his mother, although, or rather, because his life centers mainly on her.

While Hackl's language is as bare as the skeleton of life that he presents, Truschner embraces metaphors and similes to contrast the forced objectivity the narrator seeks to expose. He writes, for example, about the only person who showed her love for him and whom he loved without resistance, his grandmother: "Did she live her life with the contentedness of a cat, far away from doubt and forever closed off from the ability to imagine a different life, an existence in the skin of some other being? Or had she, perhaps as a baby, suckled on the serpent's milk of irredeemable bitterness so that one should rather have been searching for signs of some rare sparks of joy in her life and then paint them like stars into a farm woman's cloud-covered sky?" (p. 27). His grandmother suffered from the grandfather's violence just as the mother, but she found new meaning in her grandson, the narrator. Yet, with her death after a long and painful hospitalization, during which she lay in her own excrement for days on end, neglected by nurses and relatives alike, the narrator feels the guilt of having abandoned his grandmother, who ended her life screaming for him (p. 32). Her death marks the gap in the narrator's life that he can never fill again because his grandmother served as a counterbalance to his mother and grandfather. Without her, he has to endure his mother's amorous affairs and grow up in spite of her. Indeed, he is the serpent's child who has tasted the bitterness his grandmother silently endured, but finally gained the elegance and suppleness to slither away.

Hence, this memory novel also thematizes love and resistance, themes that Hackl's stories foreground. Yet the resistance in Truschner's novel is emotional rather than political. Here love is not the bond that allows people to survive. Love is the missing link that could heal a family in which everybody tries to manipulate the others' weak spots. However, the mother's many relationships as well as the son's first attempts to be with a girl illustrate that they cannot share what they never received. Only when he sleeps with a girl whom he cares for in front of his mother can he end his obsession with, fascination for, and hatred of his mother.

The translations of both books are very successful in that they capture the flavor of the original as closely as possible. Winkler even integrates some passages in German, written in a rural Austrian dialect, and renders them in English afterwards. While this disrupts the flow of the English text, it provides the reader of German with a taste of the original. Perhaps the inclusion of these passages in footnotes would have served the book's purpose even better. Larkin points out in the afterword that Hackl's style is at times ungrammatical; his personal pronouns often lack clear referents, for example. Larkin follows the original here, yet manages to elucidate whom the narrator is talking about and accentuate historical documents by using italics.

Hackl's and Truschner's texts reveal the interplay of memory, imagination and emotion. While Hackl leaves it to the reader to fill in the gap of how his protagonists may have felt, Truschner's metaphors paint a dark picture of the seventies in rural Austria. At times, the latter text recalls the anti-*Heimat* films of that era, in which ro-

manticism was replaced with hatred and disgust. Both texts also fall into the category of memory and family history literature, a genre that has grown steadily over the past ten years. Their inclusion in Ariadne's program nicely opens the spectrum of translated memory literature, which received recent international notice when another Austrian, Arno Geiger, won the German Book Prize of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005. Erich Hackl and Peter Truschner may not yet be well known in the English-speaking world, but the accessibility of their works in English and the brevity of the texts make them very attractive for both a general audience and the classroom. The synthesis of memory, history and ethics in these texts contributes to recent debates about family histories and adds the dimension of human emotion that has often been overlooked in such discussions.

Notes

[1]. Eugen Emmerling, "The German Book Market - Gutenberg's Heirs Survive Media Competition" (May 2006), at `http://www.goethe.de/wis/buv/dos/dbb2/en122050.htm` (Accessed January 4, 2007).

[2]. Ariadne Press website: `http://www.ariadnebooks.com/` (Accessed January 4, 2007).

[3]. Maurice Halbwachs, *Das GedÃ¤chtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), p. 162.