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Translated from German, Erich Hackl’s novel, *The Wedding in Auschwitz*, is a mixture of fantasy and reality, fiction and fact. The *hors-texte* suggests that the words of this story are true as there is a sepia-toned photograph of a couple getting married on the front cover taken by Wilhelm Brasse (a prisoner of Auschwitz who worked in the picture department of the SS), a picture of the couple with their son on the inside cover, a “greeting card from the detainees of Auschwitz to the happy couple” on the inside back cover and finally, a profile and frontal picture of Rudi Friemel on the back cover. While the authenticity of this story seems to be visually imposed upon the reader, the full veracity of the tale is immediately called into question as is indicated by the preface; a poem entitled “Bakunin’s Son.” Written by Sergio Atzeni, these words alert the reader that this story is composed of fragments:

*I don’t know the truth – to the extent that it exists at all. Perhaps one of the storytellers was lying. The opposite is also possible: that they all just said, what they thought was true... Or we may suppose that the haze of remembering is settling on the facts and gradually distorting, transforming, condensing the accounts of the eyewitnesses as much as the conclusions of the historians.*

Erich Hackl tries to piece together a cacophony of voices and memories in an attempt to present a clearer image of Rudi Friemel’s life. Divided into seven chapters, the novel explores various aspects of Rudi Friemel’s being as his personality and character traits are discussed, debated, and ultimately recorded. By using an array of voices to piece together this man’s tumultuous life, complex relationships are explored. His son Norbert, his sister-in-law Marina, his wife Margarita, other fighters in the International Brigades are only some of the characters who share recollections of themselves and of Rudi. This fragmentary technique allows the reader to glimpse into the lives of the other individuals who were affected by the war.

Little is known about Rudi Friemel. An Austrian by birth, Friemel’s mother, we are told, died in a concentration camp and his father was a Nazi. He was married yet separated, had a son, and gone to Spain to fight Franco. Yet, even these basic facts regarding his life remain murky. As one voice says, “Yes, that’s what you said, Rudi. I heard you say so myself. Or did my sister tell me? Did I dream it?” (23-24) It was there, in Spain, that he met and fell in love with Margarita. Captured by the French, and then by the Germans, Friemel returned to Austria and was imprisoned. Or so, one version of the story goes. Eventually, he ended up in Auschwitz as a political prisoner. There, he was allowed to marry his sweetheart; an event documented by the
wedding entry and the photographs. He was later killed with several other inmates as their planned escape failed.

While the first chapter provides background information and establishes who the main characters of the novel are, the later chapters examine the complexities of experience. When actual events and facts are unknown, voices fill in the void with probabilities. As one prisoner of Dachau says,

> When he was locked up there, I already had Dachau behind me. They put him in Cell 78a, which was on the fourth floor, and a couple of weeks before they had taken me out of 44a, on the second floor. I assume that his cell was more or less identical to mine… (52-53)

Thus, the novel is both factual and fictional. Often lyrical and sometimes grotesque, horror and hope are poignantly and at times jarringly juxtaposed. Marriage is placed in direct opposition to death, love is contrasted with despair. And perhaps, that is the most important message of this novel – that in the midst of complete misery, love - and by extension - humanity not only exist but, for a few seemingly surreal moments, flourish. As one camp inmate recalls,

> [W]e shared in his love and were soon likewise in love. Rudi was fighting for the trust of his wife, perhaps it was that that overwhelmed us, in the middle of dying all around and the death lists, which were more than we could cope with, and the certainty that, the death clerks, would not survive. That was clear to us, Kristan and the others didn’t even need to drum it into us: At best you’ll die of old age here. But if you ever do get out, no one will believe you. (83-84)

While the first part of the book deals with love and war and the fate of Rudi Friemel, as a political prisoner in Auschwitz, the novel also explores the aftermath of war. The livings then speak not only to the reader but also to the dead. The departed are given both a voice and a presence. Some survivors continue to do just that, survive. In the heartbreaking aftermath of World War II, family relations become disjointed and humanity forever tainted as a survivor explains, “[a]nynyone who was in Auschwitz has a callus on his soul for the rest of his life” (148).

The overall stylistic technique of short, fragmentary reflections may represent the numerous lives, which were broken, disturbed, troubled, and traumatized by war, by death, and by betrayal. So many individual stories are told in a puzzle-like way. However, this type of non-linear narrative can become quite confusing as the reader is at times left wondering who the speaker really is. Furthermore, though it is unclear what motivated the Nazis to allow this official marriage to take place, many suppositions are given. Whatever the real reason, historical records indicate that a wedding in Auschwitz had indeed occurred. Ultimately, while The Wedding in

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Auschwitz is not a work of history, historical truths can be found by sifting through the shifting narrative voices.