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Teaching the Intersections of Self and Society through Austrian Literature: Erich Hackl’s *Abschied von Sidonie* and Elisabeth Reichart’s *Februarschatten*

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The twentieth-century Austrian author Ingeborg Bachmann asked a provocative question in her unfinished novel *Der Fall Franza* (ca. 1966) about the relationship of an individual to history. In Bachmann’s novel, the emotionally and psychologically shattered Franza finds herself destroyed by her sadistic husband and doomed by what she calls the "murderous society" of post-World War II Austria. Her unanswered question: "Meine Geschichte und die Geschichten aller, die doch die große Geschichte ausmachen, wo kommen die mit der großen zusammen?" In questioning the intersection of an individual's personal story with the larger story, or history, Bachmann applies the term "Geschichte" in its double meaning of "history" and "story." This critical question about how an individual
history is shaped and valued in society, as well as how its influence might alter society, surfaces again decades later in two other important works of Austrian literature. Erich Hackl's 1989 narrative *Abschied von Sidonie: Erzählung* and Elisabeth Reichart’s 1984 novel *Februarschatten* offer an answer to this question. Their contributions offer valuable insights for the teaching and understanding of literature, history, and culture captured in the German language.

My presentation explains the incorporation of Hackl and Reichart’s literary works in a fourth-year undergraduate German literature and film course. It also provides selected contextual and bibliographic information for readers unfamiliar with Hackl and Reichart’s narratives.

**Course Design and Format**

The lecture-discussion course I teach meets twice weekly, for one hour and fifty minute sessions, over a 14-week semester. The broader catalogue title under which the course was developed is “German Contemporary Film Seminar,” and the broad description provides me with flexibility in selecting appropriate topics, texts, and films. In selecting materials each time I give such a course, I also consider the strengths and interests of my limited pool of German majors (approximately five a year). Since all fourth-year German majors will have studied abroad in a German-speaking country, I also do my best to tailor the course so that students are not repeating material from their study-abroad semester. Of my four students in the 2006 Spring Semester, for example, three had studied abroad with IES Freiburg and had taken various courses that discussed the Holocaust. A fourth student had lived in Germany as a child and had been exposed to discussions about the Holocaust and war at her elementary school.

My Spring 2006 version of the course was entitled “Roman und Film: Bildliche Geschichte.” It was taught entirely in German, with a selection of post-World-War-II narratives and films focusing on German-speaking culture and history in Austria and Germany during and after World War II. The texts were also chosen to push students to consider personal and social responsibility. For this reason, several challenging texts were prominently featured in the course design: Inge Scholl’s *Die weisse Rose* (1955), Hackl’s *Abschied von Sidonie*, and text selections from memoirs and fiction concerning the Rosenstrasse events, including Walter Laqueur, *Jahre auf Abruf* (1982), Peter Edel, *Wenn es ans Leben geht* (1979), and Reichart’s *Februarschatten*.

Throughout the semester, to complement the reading material, students also screened the following films as “texts”: Michael Verhoeven’s 1982 *Die weisse Rose*, Percy Adlon’s 1981 *Five Last Days*, Karin Brandauer’s 1990
Sidonie, and Andreas Gruber’s 1994 Hasenjagd. In planning my course, I also considered two recent movies related to our readings on World War II and German resistance: Margarethe von Trotta’s 2003 Rosenstrasse and Marc Rothemund’s 2005 Sophie Scholl - Die letzten Tage. Sophie Scholl had only come out in larger US cities and was unavailable for classroom use, but Rosenstrasse was available on DVD with subtitles before the semester started. My students were ultimately only able to read the reviews and on-line commentary for Sophie Scholl.

Goals of the course included learning how to read, understand and discuss literary texts in German with a greater sense of cultural and historical understanding, exploring a variety of interpretive techniques with which to read narratives, and examining German-speaking culture within its historical and political context. In addition, viewing films as “texts,” the course considered was also able to address issues of narrative processes, representational modalities, and the language of film (cinematographic techniques and devices).

These goals had to be set within practical limits. Students read approximately 5-10 pages of text while answering pre-reading and reading questions for each class meeting. While I was able to assign one chapter per meeting from Abschied von Sidonie, I had to combine some shorter chapters as assignments for Februarschatten, such as chapters 1, 2/3, 4, 5, 6/7, 8, 9/10, 11/12, 13/14. I also gave slightly longer readings over weekends. Students broadened their vocabulary, improved their analytical and writing skills by completing bi-weekly response essays to texts and films and preparing a 10-12-page final research paper in German. To make this feasible for the students, I framed writing as a process, with the revision process taken into consideration when determining the final grade. I thus edited essay responses and first drafts of the final paper which students then corrected and revised.

I also built in specific attention to other language skills. They sharpened their presentation and technological skills by preparing one 15-minute multi-media project for class at the beginning of the semester and presenting their final paper in a shortened oral presentation at the end of the semester. Students also completed a take-home midterm with essay questions related to texts, films, and class discussions. Grade determination of the course was as follows: 15% two oral presentations, 20% essay responses, 25% class participation, 20% take-home midterm, 20% final paper.

At least one hour of preparation time went into each class period to prepare pre-reading and text/discussion questions for the course assignments. These questions gave the course focus and allowed students to prepare in-depth answers they contributed to discussions. Questions such as “Warum erzählt Hackl die Geschichte aus der Perspektive des Freundes Georg Fink”? (Chapter
9), and “Warum erzählt Hackl die Geschichte von Margit? Welche Funktion hat diese kleine Geschichte für diesen Roman?” (Chapter 11) prompted students to consider the text's narrative devices. To alternate focuses and expand their critical thinking, I also asked questions that demanded well-crafted personal answers while preparing students for discussions about works such as Brandauer’s film: “Wenn Du einen Film über das Leben von Sidonie drehen würdest, mit welcher Szene würdest Du anfangen? Würdest Du ein bestimmtes Motif betonen? Warum?” Such questions move the students from what might be a more passive recounting into more sophisticated thinking, and to more complex language situations — note that the latter question probably requires subjunctive in its answer. Topics of discussion about novels and films included otherness and diversity in German-speaking cultures, war and its consequences, resistance movements in Austria and Germany, victimhood, childhood and war, Sinti and Roma cultures in German-speaking cultures, parent-child relationships, and xenophobia.5

Each class period paid overt attention to language acquisition, as well. Some assigned reading questions also addressed German vocabulary, as well as Austrian regional words and expressions unfamiliar to students, such as Schilling, Dirndl, and Gendarm. When each class discussion brought up new vocabulary, I wrote it on the board and expected students to include it in their essays and final research paper where appropriate. During the teaching segment of Abtschied von Sidonie, I had an outside source for assignments, a selection of worksheets and writing exercises in class and as homework drawn from Eva-Maria Jenkins’ teaching materials, available in the volume Didaktische Bearbeitung für den Unterricht Deutsch als Fremdsprache from 1998 (see the Appendix for order details). Jenkins also offers a volume with a shortened and edited version of Abtschied von Sidonie that would be useful for a course that has less time to spend on the original novel, or for an intermediate, third-year, German literature course (to order, also see below). Her materials help to design assignments that attend to both language and historical-cultural issues.

Building the Content Area: Historical Challenges to US Students

As many of us know, teaching twentieth-century German-speaking history through literature and film to American undergraduate students is challenging
because of the heavy burden that German-speaking language and culture carry after the events of the Third Reich, the Holocaust and World War II. It is still surprising to me how little many American students learn about these events in High School, and often, how they do not often associate historical and political events when learning the basics of German language for their college course requirements.

Some students come to the German language with misconceptions about the culture and history of German-speaking countries: on the one hand, they envision jolly, polka-dancing men and women in Lederhosen and low-cut Dirndl taking swigs of beer under the billowing tents of the Oktoberfest. On the other hand, they envision barbaric Nazis from B-rated war movies, wearing shiny black boots, shouting incomprehensible, guttural orders. Stereotypical visions of Austria, if there are any, also include The Sound of Music. And yet, despite these superficial and conflicting images of German-speaking culture, many students continue beyond the basics of the German language to study its literature and film in upper level courses, often motivated not only by how the language instructor can give meaning and purpose to the language in a larger context, but also by how the language fits into the context of their larger studies in the curriculum, such as art history, history, philosophy, and religion.

In their study on German programs, Margit Sinka and Reinhard Zachau state that “culture and literature courses should not isolate content from the language in which it is embedded, just as language activities on the introductory and intermediate levels should not be divorced from meaningful content.”6 They also cite Heidi Byrnes, who recommends “a new positioning of German,” one accomplished through outreach programs and curricular reform at all levels of instruction in which German is connected to other areas of study.7 Like most instructors of undergraduate German language and literature, I believe that language, literature and film cannot be taught outside of a cultural and socio-historical context. Thus in my course, Hackl and Reichart’s narratives serve as important tools for teaching about the history of Austria, German-speaking culture, humanity, and how literature can be powerful as well as empower, more specifically, to teach of personal and social responsibility.

The critical first move in teaching this kind of cultural literacy is picking a starting point that students can understand straightforwardly. I began the semester with Inge Scholl’s account of the student resistance movement “Die weisse Rose,” because I hoped that students would relate to the German students and their actions. My students did in fact become very interested in the subject matter and felt empowered by the resistance movements in Austria and Germany. From there we moved to the texts and film of “Rosenstrasse,” where the focus was also on resistance and empowerment. Our final two narratives, Abschied von Sidonie and Februarschatten, focused on the interplay of fact and
fiction, history and the narration of historical events, as well as personal and social responsibility. Students related to Hackl’s Sidonie as a victim, and, in *Februarschatten*, to the daughter-author protagonist, as well as to the younger Hilde.

Although students shared with me that at times they were deeply shocked and depressed about the readings, I felt that, by the end of the semester, they had matured as readers, as students, and as individuals. They seemed empowered by what they had read, especially since all narrative and film texts focused largely on the lives and fates of individuals resisting National Socialism and oppression. My students enhanced their vocabulary, improved their writing, speaking, and presentation skills. Their final research papers incorporated new vocabulary and ideas, addressing topics such as “das Andere” (otherness) in *Abschied von Sidonie* or “die Rolle der ‘weißen Rose’ heute.” Because we had discussed historical events in both Austria and Germany, before, during, and after World War II, students were offered a broader, albeit more complex, picture of German-speaking culture and history.

By encouraging students to explore the role of personal and social responsibility in the readings in this framing, I hoped to accomplish some of the goals of a liberal arts education: to mold community leaders and world citizens. Audrone Willeke supports the notion of teaching students about their role in the world: “German educators concerned with preparing students for living in a pluralistic, multi-racial society and an interdependent world can contribute a global perspective to these issues through the teaching of German culture and literature. We have the opportunity to play an active role in fostering the appreciation of diversity, in confronting stereotypes, and enriching on-going campus dialogues on racism and prejudice.” Furthermore Willeke discusses that students “reflect upon their own society and draw informed and critical conclusions. Such an approach to German literature fosters critical thinking, ethical reflection, and understanding of contexts- intellectual practices appropriate to a cosmopolitan individual. These desired outcomes are precisely the goals of a liberal education.”

Such as straightforward narration of my classroom goals, however, does not entirely do justice to another factor in designing a class that seeks to reach such goals. Let me now turn in more detail to how these texts actually played out in my classroom, to show what roles I as instructor took on, and which, I believe, other instructors will confront in presenting such materials to their students.

**Understanding Others: Sidonie and Februarschatten**

Erich Hackl’s 1989 novel tells in a succinct and unemotional language the true story of the young Austrian-Roma “Gypsy” girl Sidonie and her Austrian
foster parents Hans and Josefa Breirather within the larger context and story of Austrian history. Karin Brandauer's 1990 film *Sidonie* offers a visual counterpart to the novel that emphasizes issues of race, personal responsibility and the consequences of intolerance.\(^{10}\) It is Sidonie's individual story that not only meets up with the larger history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, but, more importantly, it becomes clear to the reader of the novel and viewer of the film that her story is one of innumerable stories that make up this larger history.

Elisabeth Reichart's 1984 *Februarschatten* tells the stories of a mother and daughter, the elder trying to forget her memories of the "Mühlviertler Hasenjagd," the younger trying to get to the root of her mother’s silence by writing a novel. The so-called "Hasenjagd" is a horrific historical event that took place on February 2, 1945, in which approximately 500 or the 750 interned Russian prisoners, many Russian officers, escaped the concentration camp Mauthausen. National Socialists and so-called "apolitical" civilians of Mühlviertel murdered all but 17 survivors. Andreas Gruber's 1994 film *Hasenjagd* tells this event from the perspective of a farming family who resists the community's pressure to murder the escaped soldiers by secretly saving two Russian officers.

Before I begin discussing the novel and film about the Austrian "Gypsy" Roma girl Sidonie, I would like to address some questions raised by my students after I first assigned *Abschied von Sidonie*. Students asked questions such as: "I've heard of Gypsies, but who are they exactly?," "Where do they come from?," and "Are there Gypsies in Austria and Germany?" Like most students who have taken a few German literature and film courses, and perhaps even studied abroad for a semester or two in a German-speaking country, my students also had a fair general knowledge about the Holocaust. They were aware of historical data such as "6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust" or able to name concentration camps such as "Auschwitz." They had also learned that Gypsies, homosexuals, and intellectuals had been persecuted, but had never read much beyond that. All the while we were working on these materials, it nonetheless seemed to me that I had to nuance their understanding of, and hence their ability to come to terms with, the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust. For many, murdered individuals were lumped together in a meaningless sum; their individual stories were lost in these numbers; it was a history devoid of faces and names, one that seemed to miss the point.

With this in mind, I asked them each to create a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation for the class that involved historical research: they were to gather and share information about the historical context of the readings. One presentation on Roma "Gypsies" helped students put Sidonie's "Geschichte," or story, in the larger context of "Geschichte," or history. "Gypsy" and "Zigeuner" are considered derogatory to the Roma, who call themselves "Sinti" in German-
speaking cultures. It is not known precisely where the Roma migrated from, although most sources cite India as their place of origin.\textsuperscript{11}

Other materials helped to provide background. The history of the Austrian Roma and Sinti culture is detailed in the 1998 catalog of the exhibit 1938: NS Herrschaft in Österreich.\textsuperscript{12} There, students can find out that 11,000 "Gypsies" had lived in Austria before 1938, in more than one group. That population was comprised of the Burgenland- Roma, the German and Austrian Sinti, and other splinter groups, such as the Lovara and Kalderash. Whereas some of these "Gypsy" cultures were nomadic, as popular stereotypes would have it, others had integrated and settled in Austria as tradesmen, craftsmen, or musicians.

In 1938 in Burgenland, the National Socialist Tobias Portschy wrote a racist and condemning pamphlet, "Die Zigeunerfrage," or "The Gypsy Question," with the result that Roma and Sinti were no longer able to vote, attend school, or work in Burgenland. Records from March 1938 show that "Gypsies" in Austria were deported to concentration camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, and Ravensbrück, and that, in 1939, those remaining were deported to labor camps set up in Austria. Although no exact statistics exist about the extermination of Austrian Roma and Sinti, it is known that at least two thirds of the populations were murdered during the National Socialist Regime. Hackl's novel alludes to this when he recounts that Sidonie died in March 1943 in Auschwitz, of neglect, starvation, and despair.

After World War II, the Roma received little or no reparations from any government for their suffering and losses, either from Austria or from Germany. Roma call the Holocaust the "Porrajmos" ("paw-RYE-mos"), or "the devouring." Recognition of the Roma persecution by the Nazis is only slowly being acknowledged and accepted.\textsuperscript{13} However, persecution and expulsion are still suffered by the Roma and Sinti in the present day. In 1992, for example, Germany paid more than a hundred million Deutschmarks to Romania – a country that enslaved Roma until the mid-nineteenth century – so that this country would accept the bulk of Germany's Roma population, which to date has apparently expelled more than 20,000 Roma in this resettlement program. According to reports, the Roma live in fear of their lives due to a growing Romanian fascist movement.\textsuperscript{14}

Hackl's novel shows both how and why Sidonie became a victim of the "Porrajmos." The novel concludes with the author's speculations of how it could have been possible to spare Sidonie from being deported and murdered. The author, or "chronicler," as Hackl call himself, concludes his novel by documenting the true story of another Austrian-Roma foster child, Margit, who was saved by her town of Pölfing-Brunn in the Steiermark and who in 1989 turned 55 years of age. As Hackl bitterly writes: "und kein Buch muß an ihr Schicksal erinnern, weil
Throughout the novel, Hackl's tone becomes increasingly angry and frustrated, until his fury bursts forth from his narration: "Das ist die Stelle, an der sich der Chronist nicht länger hinter Fakten und Mutmaßungen verbergen kann. An der er seine ohnmächtige Wut hinausschreien möchte. Sidonie's Ahnunglosigkeit."  

An interesting pedagogical moment emerges when the novel is compared with the film. Whereas Hackl's novel exposes people's intolerance, weakness, and cowardly behavior that enables Sidonie's death, Brandauer allows the actions and non-actions of her film characters to speak for themselves. Brandauer's film frames Sidonie's life and death with the aging father Hans taking the train in the present, imagining Sidonie's face in a cattle car; the traumatic past of losing his daughter is bound to his present just as Brandauer's film haunt its viewers.

Where the film highlights the father's role, the novel highlights the mother's role in acculturation. While Sidonie grew up isolated from the Roma culture into which she was born and was then forced to join during the deportation of the Austrian Roma, Hackl's novel shows that Sidonie's biological mother cared so much for daughter's safety that she wanted her to be raised by non-Roma Austrians who would protect her. The novel documents in italicized print that her mother Anna Adlersburg or Berger tried to elude Austrian authorities for years in order to keep Sidonie safe from persecution. Despite her secrecy, she was arrested in March 1943, brought together with Sidonie, and deported during one of the last transports to Auschwitz with the other arrested Roma people.

Brandauer's film adds another dimension to Hackl's images of persecution, when he addresses the issue of racism in more general terms. Sidonie is repeatedly confronted with her Roma heritage by being called a "Negerkind," or "ein Zigeunermädl," which she vehemently denies. Instead, she identifies herself with the traditional non-Roma culture of her Austrian parents. When, in the novel and film, Sidonie is called a "Zigeunerin" by her classmates, she tries desperately to wash off her darker skin color at the school wash basin. 17 When, at one of the most climactic moments of Brandauer's film, Sidonie's brother Manfred plays her the song "die schwarze Zigeunerin" on his violin, she retorts: "Ich bin genauso wie Du," and runs to her father's workshop to cover up her dark skin with white plaster. Brandauer is thus able to take excerpts of Hackl's novel and emphasize them with visual imagery.

The contrast of Sidonie's dark skin and the white plaster becomes a pivotal moment of the film in that she is confronted with her "otherness," one that others force upon her. When Sidonie is given the blond, blue-eyed doll for her communion, the camera focuses on the fair-skinned doll next to the dark-skinned girl. As Sidonie is later pushed onto the cattle car, the viewer sees the limp doll
lying next to the train tracks - the blond doll will not join Sidonie on her deportation to Auschwitz. Brandauer makes use of the visual text of the film in this way to address issues of skin color and racism which are more difficult to portray in Hackl's novel.

To emphasize further the absurdity of racial stereotyping, Brandauer shows the Breirather's neighbor complaining about the "Negermusik," while referring to Manfred's violin playing. While Sidonie is ridiculed as "a Gypsy girl," Brandauer also shows how her parents, Josefa and Hans Breirather, are marginalized, ostracized, and even imprisoned during this period of Austrian history for not following the social norms of that time. Hans, for example, is imprisoned for his communist activities, and the children Sidonie and her brother Manfred are shunned at school as "Heidenkinder" because their parents were not married in church. Both novel and film strongly criticize the role of the Catholic Church during the Third Reich, as well.

Such details can be highlighted by the teacher as they are noticed by the students, in order to help build a larger picture of German and Austrian political life on the day-to-day level. An article by Erika Weinzierl, "Kirche und Nationalsozialismus," provides some background information to illuminate these issues in the Austrian context. Reinforcing that point in another way, the Breirathers are forced to comply with the norms of traditional Austrian culture by marrying in church, as a means of shortening Hans' time in prison. Yet it become clear that Sidonie's "otherness" will neither be tolerated nor protected by that church.

Aspects of "otherness" abound in Reichart's novel, as well. Dichotomies and contrasts provide discussion points as the mother Hilde and her daughter Erika grapple with their relationship and the legacy of war and National Socialism in their personal lives. While Hilde attempts to forget ("Vergiß!") Erika is writing a book about her mother's experiences during the "Hasenjagd." Like the novel being penned by the fictional Erika, Reichart's novel is a "working through" of Austrian history and humanity in the twentieth century. The idea of personal guilt ("Schuld"), shame, and forgiveness, the acts of forgetting and remembering, silence and telling a story, being excluded and included, are all tension points throughout the novel. The narrative voice shifts continuously between mother and daughter, something my students found challenging.

How literature can work to highlight some of these issues emerges clearly in these historical discussion. The title's concept of shadows, "Schatten," mark where silence counters any "coming to terms with the past" for the mother Hilde, as she states: "Alle SCHULD ist schon lange in mir. Ist in den Schatten." Such shadows are part of her family's legacy. As a child, her brother had helped hide
an escaped Russian officer in his closet and was murdered by his community for resisting the National Socialists in his community.

Like Hackl, Reichart grounds her fictional novel in the historical events of the "Mühlviertler Hasenjagd" and the concentration camp of Mauthausen, detailed in a statement following her novel, where she also states that her characters are fictional. Although fictional, Reichart’s novel emphasizes that both a work of fiction and the retelling of historical facts are elusive since they are filtered through a subjective entity. The goal for instructors and students, then, should be to make what they read meaningful, and to observe how such stories and histories inform and impact their own lives. In my classroom, these texts helped students to engage that process of critical remembering.

Some Conclusions

In using fictional texts such as Abschied von Sidonie and Februarschatten as tools for teaching about Austrian and German history, questions arise concerning the validity of texts and films as representations of historical events. Scholars such as James Young and Berel Lang, for instance, have discussed the problematic nature of fiction based on historical events, especially the Holocaust. Young cautions that not only writing about the Holocaust, but interpreting these narratives, threatens to "supplant the horrible events at the heart of our inquiry." He goes on to illustrate problems created by fictionalizing the Holocaust in particular by stating that "[...] the problem with this and other "documentary fictions" of the Holocaust is that by mixing actual events with completely fictional characters, a writer simultaneously relieves himself of an obligation to historical accuracy (invoking poetic license), even as he imbues his fiction with the historical authority of real events." However, he implores readers to explore both the plurality of meanings that these texts generate, as well as the actions that issue from these meanings outside these texts.

Although fictionalizing the Holocaust is problematic to him, Young recognizes that "literary and historical truths of the Holocaust may not be entirely separable." Young’s own scholarly work shows how the Holocaust has affected and informed writers and how they have come to perceive their world and society after these events. His discussion of the representation of the Holocaust in fiction can be applied to Hackl and Reichart’s narratives, as well, and I used them to guide my students’ engagement with these texts. Young states that readers might look at poetry and fiction "for the ways the Holocaust has entered public consciousness as a trope, and how it informs both the poet’s view of the world." In this sense, in reading the literary works of Hackl and Reichart, students are asked to both identify how these narratives inform the author’s point of view, as well as how these works have informed the students’ own world views.
The scholar Berel Lang raises the important question whether the "enormity of the Holocaust" is "at all capable of literary representation." Lang writes that fictional narratives about the Holocaust often presuppose a definition of the historical or moral uniqueness of the Holocaust when that definition is still in question. Secondly, generalizations about the Holocaust, reflecting traditional artistic, critical or ethical themes in the narrative, diminish or obscure the moral significance of the event. Finally, Lang fears that, in writing about this event, many readers will be distanced from the subject of the Holocaust itself.

In the end, however, both Young and Lang believe that the act of writing works against a threatening silence, one that would deny the existence of the Holocaust. I believe that reading Hackl and Reichart's narratives allows readers the opportunity to engage in the heart of that discussion, as they observe how and why the events and actions culminate in tragic events such as the real Sidonie’s and the fictional Hannes’ murder.

Although one author can neither represent the Holocaust and all of its diverse groups of victims, nor represent the life and suffering of each individual, Hackl's narrative and Brandauer's filmic portrait of Sidonie show that it is possible to represent the life and suffering of one individual, thus making the Holocaust and human suffering more tangible for readers. Reichart's novel and Gruber's Hasenjagd focus on life on the home front and on the horrific events of war as consequences of National Socialism that affect one community directly. Although Reichart’s novel is fictional, it nonetheless represents how the events of World War II have informed the author and her work.

One of the most important aspects of Hackl and Reichart's narratives as well as the related films, for their appeal to students, is that they emphasize that even small gestures and actions can impact larger history. Many times students feel hopeless in a world in which they are bombarded with horrifying information, and they feel powerless in their ability to shape the future in a positive way. By reading novels such as Hackl and Reichart’s I believe they can follow the fate of one person and learn that even small actions can and do affect the life of an individual and in that sense the larger history.

In teaching this literature, then, I guide students toward an understanding that their own story can make a difference for the larger history, that “Geschichte” truly embodies this double meaning. For instance, Abschied von Sidonie is a historical document; it is a memorial to a girl betrayed by her community. It is also a memorial for all individuals murdered, people with an individual history or story just like Sidonie. It is also a reminder that each individual story creates what, in looking back, is defined as history. Reichart’s novel, even though a fictional working-through of an historical event, shows what did happen, what
might have happened, and what should not have happened. The conclusion of Reichart’s novel, when mother and daughter drive away together, demonstrates that working through the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) is difficult and even traumatic but that it is the only way to heal past wounds and move forward.

Other kinds of cultural literacy can be highlighted in the classroom by using such texts, as well. Including narratives by Austrian writers with a focus on Austrian history in a German literature and film course provides students with a broader perspective of German-speaking cultures and history. On an individual level, students learn the importance of personal responsibility while building vocabulary, exercising their writing and communication skills in the target language, and improving their technological and presentation skills. When students are given an interdisciplinary approach to literature, one that puts fictional and historically-based novels in their context, I have seen their language-learning become infused with meaning -- history becomes a correlate with their lived experience.

Here I return to discussions of humanistic education. Most language majors at our institutions will contribute to society in positive ways and take on leadership positions in their communities. My teaching hopes to fulfill the liberal arts college credo of encouraging students to obtain a well-rounded education and to develop a sense of community and social responsibility. Of course, I hope that they will retain and make use of their knowledge of advanced vocabulary, the names and works of well-known German-speaking authors, sentence structure and grammar, but I will be prouder still to find that the readings discussed in the coursework of their undergraduate German major had inspired and empowered them.

2 Gesa Zinn demonstrates that integrating film into an upper-division German course “combines language development, the exploration of related topics that lead to ‘multiple intelligences,” and media literacy, a key element in academic literacy in our twenty-first century society’ (“Bridging the Gap between Upper-Division Writing and German Studies Courses with Katja von Garnier’s Bandits,” Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German. 37.2 [Fall 2004]: 125).
3 Essay questions included: “Gibt es heute wichtige Themen, für die du kämpfen/Widerstand leisten würdest?” and “Hätte Sidonie überleben können?”
4 The 15-minute PowerPoint presentations (using materials from the library reference section and on-line library resources, encyclopedies, journal articles, etc. and appropriate websites of academic nature) were supposed to focus on topics such as “Roma und Sinti während des zweiten Weltkrieges (Deutschland und Österreich),” “Die Mühltviertler Hasenjagd,” “Die weisse Rose,” “Sophie Scholl,” and other topics suggested by students. These short presentations were presented in German (after I edited the PowerPoint presentation pages for vocabulary and content) during the second week, so
that students would have a socio-historical context for the readings from the beginning. Since my current course had four students I steered them to present on “Roma and Sinti Culture in German-Speaking Cultures,” “Rosenstrasse,” “Die weisse Rose,” and “Das Konzentrationslager Mauthausen und die Mülviertler Hasenjagd,” whereby I filled in additional historical contextual information in discussions. Students were moved and motivated to read the texts, given the nature and the actuality of the topics. 

Gesa Zinn points out that “German language classes can become more diverse and less myopic in their treatment of German culture by incorporating the experiences of minorities in unified Germany. These classes present a realistic picture of Germany today - a country struggling with multiculturalism following the immigration of peoples from war-torn areas and economically developing countries.” The same can be said for German-speaking cultures everywhere, especially of contemporary Austria. Zinn wants her students to “recognize that issues such as Germans and minorities are vital to understanding German culture, though many Germans and even more Americans do not seem to share this view” (“Germany’s other Others: Teaching about Kurds, Roma, and Sinti in an Upper-Division Culture Class,” Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German 33.2 [Fall 2000]: 106).


Sinka and Zachau also suggest that the program director, in such cases often (as in my case) also the German instructor, plays a crucial role in “shaping and maintaining a well-articulated language curriculum,” that is to “create a well-sequenced, task-based curriculum at the introductory and intermediate levels that spirals language and content, paves the way to successful vertical articulation, and links to other disciplines such as history, cultural studies, and literature” (Sinka and Zachau 106).

Audrone B. Willeke, “Discussing Diversity: What a Course on German Literature Can Contribute to a Liberal Arts Education” (Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German, 34.1 [Spring 2001]: 27).

Willeke, 31.


The European Roma have been persecuted for their traditionally nomadic and migratory lifestyle for hundreds of years. Historical documents show that a series of expulsion laws were enacted in France as early as 1510. The Roma were driven from England beginning in the sixteenth century and later were sent to Barbados, Australia and North America as cheap sources of labor. In what is now considered present day Romania, the Roma were forced into slavery and serfdom, a practice continued until
around 1864. Switzerland allowed "Gypsy" hunts in the sixteenth century, as did Holland in the eighteenth century. The reign of terror against the Roma in Europe continued in Germany's Third Reich. Already in 1927, all Roma in Germany had to carry identification cards and be registered with the police. One document stated that an estimated 34,000 Roma were living in Germany before 1938. The "Central Office for the Fight Against the Gypsies in Germany" was established in Munich in 1929, and in 1933 the Roma were stripped of all civil rights. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 against Jews were modified to add the Roma in 1937, upon which they were forced into concentration camps. Roma were also forced to undergo sterilization as early as 1933. By February, 1943, round-ups of Roma in Germany forced 10,000 Roma to be murdered in death camps. The concentration camp Auschwitz held 16,000 Roma at one point. By August 1944 only four thousand Roma had survived. This information is taken from Ian Hancock's "The Genocide of the Roma" and Myriam Novitch's "The Gypsy Genocide," Patrin Web Journal, 8 July 2006, available at <http://www.geocities.com/~patrin/holocaust.htm> (accessed December 2006).


13 Tanner, 1-4.


16 Hackl, Abschied von Sidonie, 100.

17 Hackl, Abschied von Sidonie, 74.


20 Again, details about Mauthausen can be found in the resource catalogue 1938. NS-Herrschaft in Österreich. See Florian Freund and Bertrand Perz, "Das Konzentrationslager Mauthausen," 1938 NS-Herrschaft in Österreich, 32.

21 James Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 3.


23 Young, "Holocaust Documentary Fiction," 4.

24 Young, "Holocaust Documentary Fiction," 1.

25 Young, "Holocaust Documentary Fiction," 132.

26 Berel Lang, "Introduction," Writing and the Holocaust, 2.

27 Berel Lang, "Introduction," Writing and the Holocaust, 2.

28 That Hackl and Brandauer address the Holocaust in their creative works not based on personal experiences may seem problematic to some readers. In fact, an author's imagination and its confrontation with actual history can be overwhelming and lead to a kind of "helplessness," as the scholar Irving Howe describes: "[...] Holocaust writings often reveal the helplessness of the mind before an evil that cannot quite be imagined, or the helplessness of the imagination before an evil that cannot quite be understood" ("Writing and the Holocaust," in Lang, ed., Writing and the Holocaust, 182).
APPENDIX

I. Selected materials on Februarschatten


In English translation:


Webpage references:

Selected literature on the Mühlviertler Hasenjagd and Mauthausen:
Films on the Mühlviertler Hasenjagd:
ISBN: 3-89848-082-8; EAN: 4-021308-880824

II. Selected materials on Abschied von Sidonie


To order contact: E.-M. Jenkins, Mariahilferstr. 88a/1/6/, A-1070 Vienna, Austria, Fax: 011-43-1-523 54 48, or <http://www.univie.ac.at/Germanistik/personen/jenkins.htm>.

To order contact: E.-M. Jenkins, Mariahilferstr. 88a/1/6/, A-1070 Vienna, Austria, Fax: 011-43-1-523 54 48, or <http://www.univie.ac.at/Germanistik/personen/jenkins.htm>.


III. Selected webpage references on Roma and Sinti culture (sites last viewed January 22, 2007)


Rombase. Didactically edited information on Roma (German and English): <http://romani.uni-graz.at/rombase/ped/index.de.html>.
Selected literature on Roma and Sinti (German): <http://www.romahistory.com/>.


Website links on United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website (English): <http://www.ushmm.org> (In Search area type in: “Web pages” and “Gypsies”).

IV. Selected literature on Roma and Sinti culture


V. A selection of available films on Roma and Sinti culture

Gadjo dilo - Geliebter Fremder (1997) (amazon.de; 7.99 Euros)

Sidonie (1991) VHS, 90 min. (To order, see information below)

Time of the Gypsies (1990) (available at amazon.com)

Verfolgt und vergessen (1985) VHS; documentary film. in German (contact: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Adenauerallee 86, 53113 Bonn. Tel. (011) 49-1888-5150; Email: info@bpb.de)

To order film Sidonie:
Due to copyright laws the video of Sidonie can only be distributed to schools and educational institutions within Austria at a price of 10.90 Euros. I suggest that instructors in the US might contact a colleague in Austria to buy/borrow the video for classroom use (suggestion per email on 7/6/2006 with Walter Olensky of the Bundesministerium für Unterricht und kulturelle Angelegenheiten in Vienna (Email: Walter.Olensky@bmbwk.gv.at).

Austrian schools and educational institutions can order film through:
AMEDIA GesnbR
Sturzgasse 1a
1141 Vienna, Austria
Tel.: (011)-1-982 13 22-310
Fax: (011)-1-982 13 22-311
Email:office@amedia.co.at

For further information contact:
Bundesministerium für Unterricht und kulturelle Angelegenheiten. Abteilung V/12
Plunkergasse 3-5, A-1150 Vienna, Austria.
Tel. (From US) 011-43-222-531 20-4864
Fax (From US) 011-43-222-531 20-4848

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