



READING GROUP GUIDE

The Ghetto Swinger: A Berlin Jazz-Legend Remembers
By Coco Schumann

Introduction

Coco Schumann's career as a jazz and swing musician spans more than seventy years and is replete with honors. But for decades Schumann bore his wartime experiences as a Holocaust survivor in silence, with only the pleasure of composing music and performing for live audiences to ease the burden of his most haunting memories. In his memoir, Schumann recounts the vibrant underground club scenes of Berlin in the years surrounding World War II as well as providing backstage glimpses into Berlin's famous nightlife, where he shared the stage with such jazz notables as Helmut Zacharias, Tullio Mobiglia, Toots Thielemans, and American visitors like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Ella Fitzgerald.

At the same time, *The Ghetto Swinger* offers Schumann's harrowing testimony from 1943–1945 about daily life inside Theresienstadt (Terezín) and Auschwitz, and provides readers with the important perspective of a Jewish Holocaust survivor who remained in Germany after the war.

In his home country, Schumann is a celebrated personality. But until now, his life story hasn't been accessible to English-speaking audiences.

Featuring rare photographs and an Afterword by Weimar- and Nazi-era culture scholar Michael H. Kater, *The Ghetto Swinger* is an engrossing historical document as much as it is a heartwarming memoir.



REVIEWS

"Hackl's use of emotional triggers related to injustice and redemption are both subtle and commanding. In the same way that we relate to injustice of the oppressed, this author delivers stunning situations in which innocent families and characters are destroyed by an unjust rule of law. Yet the ultimate value of a book like this lies in the author's delivery of life between the lines, beyond the vagaries of a reader's sentient ability to comprehend. Here, Hackl elicits his best and most enduring success."

– Charles S. Weinblatt, *New York Journal of Books*

"Highly recommended ... a haunting book."

— Samuel Moser, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

"Hackl's narrative is masterful and compelling."

– *Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin

"Erich Hackl's concise and hauntingly dense works of prose have gained him a huge audience and great success. At the bottom of his efforts are usually some forgotten beings, victims of our century's cruel history, with their authentic albeit not exactly remembered biographies. Here Hackl, the Austrian author, overly sensitized perhaps because of his own country's extreme insensitivities, steps in and tries to bring about an act of belated justice and redemption. This obviates the question whether Hackl is a fiction writer or a historian, a lawyer of the 'small people' or a missionary voice of human dignity: he is all of these."

– Erich Wolfgang Skwara, *World Literature Today*



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. The author uses language to portray photographs in detail for readers without providing corresponding visuals. How does this omission strengthen the way he presents photographs as living history rather than as a static image? How does this affect any expectations you have of the book as biographical?
2. In “The Klagsbrunn Family,” what are Victor and Marta’s motivations for seeking asylum in Germany? Marta remarks that they had “lost everything.” In your opinion, is their move an ending or beginning?
3. In what ways does responsibility to family manifest itself in the lives of the characters in any of the three stories? In what ways does it hinder or motivate them? How does this sense of responsibility relate to Hackl’s overall investigations into the personal histories of these characters?
4. What were some instances in which stories or memories passed down to the next generation provided strong leads in piecing together a larger story?
5. All three stories illustrate how imprisonment—and in some cases, torture—are powerful tools used by fascist regimes to silence dissent. Can you draw any parallels to current events?
6. In “The Photographer of Auschwitz,” Wilhelm Brasse relies on small gestures, such as giving starving prisoners bread, in order to cope with his situation. In what other ways, mentally and physically, does Brasse help prisoners? What were his personal motivations for assisting the resistance network?
7. The photographer Brasse’s photograph of the civil wedding of his friend Rudi Friemel to Margarita Ferrer reveals Hackl’s mastery in his investigative methods. How do the extensive threads that helped Hackl uncover the name of the photographer make both the photographer and his friend Rudi seem more real, rather than just historical figures?



8. In “Tschofenig: The Name Behind the Street,” Hackl presents various letters written by Gisela from the concentration camp to her family that do not mention the hardships she endured under the Nazis. How do Hackl’s writings and research go beyond these letters and highlight her role in the resistance while delineating her personal story?

9. Hackl describes two photographs with Gisela and Pepe Tschofenig: the photo of them in the Carnic Alps in 1933, and their wedding photo in 1944 from Dachau. How do his descriptions of these photographs serve as a literary device that allows him to discuss their histories? Does understanding the history behind these photographs transcend the still moment captured in the photograph and enrich your understanding of the Tschofenigs?

10. Considering their histories under oppressive regimes, discuss the social responsibilities, if any, of the many photographers throughout these stories (Wilhelm Brasse, Marta Saavedra dos Anjos, Kurt Klagsbrunn...) in capturing and revealing injustice. What was the motivation for each of them in choosing photography as a practice?

11. Are there moments in the book that connect to the perception of news media today? Does the current attack on the legitimacy of investigative journalism evoke elements of fascism?

12. In German, the word "Geschichte" encompasses both the past and the fictional. In reflecting on the three stories, why do you think translator Mike Mitchell decided to translate this word to “histories”? Discuss the differences across generation, location, and circumstances of the central characters that may have influenced this decision.



Erich Hackl is an award-winning Austrian author and translator. He has been a regular contributor to the *Wiener Tagebuch*, editor of the *Aurora-Library*, a book series of international poetry, and he is a regular contributor to the *WochenZeitung* in Zürich. He has published numerous Hispanic literature anthologies, and is recipient of over a dozen literature and translation prizes, including the Premio Hidalgo, the Solothurner Literaturpreis, the Literature Prize of the City of Vienna, and the Austrian Prize for Literary Translation. Two of his books have been adapted to film and his work has been published in 26 languages.



Photo: Pedro Timón Solinís

A masterful and authoritative chronicler.

– Michael Opitz, *Deutschlandradio Kultur*

The name Erich Hackl has become a trademark for wonderfully sensitive real-life stories, unique in contemporary German literature.

– Tobias Becker, *Kulturspiegel*, Hamburg

A compulsive researcher on the border between literature and literary-historical reportage.

– *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Mike Mitchell is an award-winning translator of French and German. He is the recipient of the Schlegel-Tieck Prize for translations of German works published in Britain and has won the British Comparative Literature Association translation competition twice for translations from German. He has been shortlisted for many awards including the Weidenfeld prize, the Aristeion prize, and the Kurt Wolff prize. In 2012 the Austrian Ministry of Education, Art and Culture awarded him a lifetime achievement award as a translator of literary works.



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