



by Reinhard Kleist
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Fiction



The Goethe-Institut
supported the English
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The Boxer: The True Story of Hertzko Haft

Der Boxer: Die wahre Geschichte des Hertzko Haft

review

The Boxer is a graphic novel which tells the life story of Holocaust survivor Hertzko Haft. This latest novel confirms Reinhard Kleist's position at the forefront of the new wave of German author-illustrators who are gathering an increasing international following.

The story starts with Hertzko's teenage years in the Polish town of Belchatow, growing up with seven siblings. When the Nazis occupy the country in 1939, Hertzko is fourteen years old. He joins his brothers and friends in smuggling food across the border of the occupied zone, where his impressive physical strength soon becomes evident. He falls in love with Leah, a friend's sister, and they decide to marry. But fate intervenes: Hertzko is captured by the Nazis and transported to a labour camp without being able to say goodbye. He passes through a series of camps, gradually realising the full horror of what happens there. The language is sparse, reflecting Hertzko's near-illiteracy. Throughout the story the drawings give a sense of what happened whenever words fail, depicting Leah and Hertzko's devotion to one another through silent scenes on a riverside, as well as corpses being loaded into incinerators.

Hertzko manages to survive through a combination of his resilience and ability to secure protection from Nazi officers, who spare him the worst tasks in exchange for favours such as collecting jewels from

corpses. The thought of seeing Leah again gives him courage. One day his 'protector' suggests that he participate in a boxing match for the entertainment of the officers, and Hertzko proves to be a formidable fighter. He escapes from the camps during a death march and goes on to compete in more boxing matches after the war, always hoping to encounter Leah. Eventually he decides to try his luck in America where he fights the titans of the time, including the infamous Rocky Marciano. After his defeat against Marciano he opens a shop and settles down with the girl from across the road. Years later he tracks down Leah, only to discover that she is dying. Their reunion after decades in America is one of the book's wordless scenes, with Leah and Hertzko walking in her garden, silently clutching each other's hands.

Kleist's most compelling graphic novel to date is not to be missed. It will inevitably draw comparisons with Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and forms an insightful and moving contribution to the literature of the Holocaust.

press quotes

'In the most terrible moments of the story, black areas wildly torn apart [...] cover parts of individual images in such a discomfiting way that the reader's imagination reaches fever pitch. The indescribable finds its expression.' – *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

'Others cannot achieve the effect that Kleist creates with his black and white illustrations even when using colours. His language, plot structure and layout are equally accomplished. A book like a perfect advertisement for graphic novels.' – *Darmstädter Echo*

'He devotes his artistic talent entirely to the incredible story. Thrilling.' – *Müncher Merkur, five-star review*

about the author

Reinhard Kleist was born in 1970 and studied Graphic Arts and Design. Since 1996 he has been living in Berlin, where he shares his studio with other comic book artists. His comic books have won several awards, including the most prestigious prize for German comic publications, the Max und Moritz award, for *Cash*.

Previous works include:

Cash – I see a Darkness (2006); *Havanna* (2008); *Castro* (2010)

rights information

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