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GAY & LESBIAN

Profile

The German and the Jew

A forbidden love story is recalled in *Aimée & Jaguar* By **Beth Greenfield**

For Lilly Wust, past is present. And it's that philosophy that's saved her. "For almost 30 years, I didn't have a life," she says in German, through an interpreter. Wust is referring to the first three decades she spent mourning her lover, Felice Schragenheim. The women fell in love in Berlin, in 1943, and the taboo relationship—Wust was an upper-class wife of a Nazi party member and mother of three young sons, and Schragenheim, a member of the underground resistance who hid her Jewish identity—ended a year later when the Gestapo hauled Schragenheim off to a concentration camp. Wust, now 87, never saw her again. But she's spent many years since carrying on her legacy.

"I wanted to build a monument to Felice. I didn't want her to disappear with the millions who perished, so I've come out with the story," says Wust. That tribute was in the form of a 1994 book titled *Aimée & Jaguar*, a best-seller in Germany that was eventually translated into 11 languages and made into a feature film, which opens this week in New York. (The movie was also shown here in June as part of the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.)

Settled into the couch in her Mayflower Hotel suite on Central Park West, the octogenarian is tiny and frail, her hands alternately resting in her lap or lighting a cigarette or clutching at the cane she must use to get around. But her eyes are piercing and youthful despite the obvious sadness they hold, and her wit is occasionally, unexpectedly blithe. ("I'm very experienced at this now," she says of dealing with the media, smiling like an impish girl who's playing movie star for a day.) She still seems love struck

after all these years, holding up a finger to show off her gold "wedding" band that dates back to her World War II amour. "Felice was not replaceable. I live with her, and I die with her," vows Wust, explaining why she's never had another love. "And I didn't want to have the responsibility for someone else."

In fact, the burden of responsibility and guilt over Felice's death was nearly overwhelming. In 1949, after searching for Felice when the war ended, Wust tried to kill herself. She then moved in with her parents, collected and organized all the letters and poems that she and her lover had written each other (under the pseudonyms "Aimée" and "Jaguar"), and shut the door on the relationship—or so she thought. But as much as she tried to convince herself that she could move on, she could not, and she suffered for years from depression. It was only when she made the decision to tell the world about her love for Felice that Lilly started to live again.

Wust, who over the years has immersed herself in Jewish culture (her son Eberhard converted to Judaism and now lives in Israel), first told her story in 1994 to journalist Erica Fischer. At first, she thought she'd leave out the lesbian aspect of their relationship and tell the story as if they were just friends, but Eberhard, who slowly realized the nature of the relationship, encouraged her to be truthful. "He

END OF THE AFFAIR Blond-haired Juliane Köhler as Aimée and Maria Schrader as Jaguar cuddle and dance; below, 87-year-old Lilly Wust today.

told me, 'Mom, if you want to tell the story, you have to tell the full story.'" She did, and Fischer produced the memoir, which led to the movie. Although watching her life unfold on-screen was painful, says Wust, it also provided extreme satisfaction. "Certain details were wrong, but it wasn't important to me. The real story shines through."

The romance blossomed at the height of World War II, when Wust first met Schragenheim. (Schragenheim was friends with Wust's maid.) After Wust divorced her husband, the two women pledged their lifelong love for each other in a ceremony of marriage, raised Wust's children and hobnobbed around Berlin with an eclectic collection of radical women, whom they re-

lied on for mutual protection and support. "We'd use code words," recalls Wust. "'It's quite cool today' would mean 'deportations are going on.'" But their life together ended one day in 1944, when they returned home to find

members of the Gestapo waiting. (It is believed Schragenheim was betrayed by a woman who knew them.) The men forcefully dragged Schragenheim off to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp, in what is now the Czech Republic. Wust, in denial about



what had happened, took off days later for the camp to visit her lover.

It's a journey she recalls with exacting detail. "I took the train. Only my parents knew. I arrived at 5am among the Czechs, and I felt the hate they had for the Germans. I walked very far with a heavy suitcase, which I eventually left in a restaurant. Then, I met a woman and asked for directions, and she told me to turn back, that I was crazy." But she kept on until she reached the camp, where the guards brought her to the commandant's house. "He was up in arms when he heard someone had come to visit a Jewish woman, and he started giving me the third degree about our relationship." She was turned away without ever seeing Felice.

Today, Wust still lives in Berlin, which, she says, has changed completely during her lifetime. "I lived through the golden '20s," she says. "What's missing now is the richness of the literary and cultural life, the brains. It's very hectic, but maybe I'm too old." It's been a haunted city for her, as well—taunting her with memories of her life with Felice. "There are bad memories, and I've thought about leaving. Sometimes, I think of closing the door and having my own peace," she says. But peace, she has learned, comes only through remembering.

Aimée & Jaguar opens Friday 11. See Film for information.

