

You Are the Knife I Turn Inside Myself: Kafka and Milena

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*Moreover, perhaps it isn't love when I say you are what I love
the most – you are the knife I turn inside myself; this is love¹*

Franz Kafka and Milena Jesenská began corresponding in 1919 when Milena's husband Ernst Pollak introduced her to Kafka's writing. Milena wrote to Kafka and asked his permission to translate "*The Stoker*" from German to Czech. An intensive correspondence between them began.

Kafka wrote in German, requesting Milena to reply in Czech for "the entire Milena" to emerge. She became his official translator, a role he quickly embraced, resenting any other woman's unauthorized attempts as "meddling in our affairs." Milena and Kafka met twice: they spent four days in Vienna together and later a day in Gmünd.

Milena suffered from a lung disease and felt lonely and estranged in Vienna, unable to leave her husband, despite his polygamous lifestyle. Kafka was battling tuberculosis, and his health was steadily deteriorating. Of their correspondence, only Kafka's letters to Milena remain.

Their relationship and almost daily communication developed at an explosive pace, and ended around the end of 1920.² On December 2, 1920, Kafka wrote: "How could I begin to explain why this is so; I can't even explain it to myself. But even this is not the main thing; the main thing is obvious: it is impossible to live like a human being around me; you see this and yet don't want to believe it?"³

Towards the end of his life Kafka turned over his diaries to Milena.⁴

Milena's father, an authoritarian and well-known figure in Czech society, had a hedonistic lifestyle, while Milena had to take care of her sick mother. At 17, after her mother's death, Milena rebelled against her father. Her behavior, including love affairs, led to a pregnancy and a subsequent abortion at his expense. At 20, Milena's father confined her to a psychiatric institution, diagnosed with "pathological deficiency of moral concepts and feelings" when she wanted to marry Pollack, whom she eventually married after her release.⁵

Kafka and Milena shared much in common; a love for writing, a feeling of strangeness in the world and a profound pressure imposed on them by their fathers and societal expectations, including marriage.

Love was marked by pain and tragedy, yet their shared passion for writing transcended it. Kafka wrote from a singular and unique subjectivity that resists psychological interpretation⁶ and

¹ Kafka, F., *Letters to Milena*, Schocken/ Knopf Doubleday, 2015, p. 201. Kafka's letter to Milena, September 15, 1920.

² They exchanged a few more letters in 1922 and 1923.

³ Kafka's Letter to Milena, December 2, 1920.

⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milena_Jesensk%C3%A1#cite_note-4

⁵ Kafka, F., *Letters to Milena*, op. cit., p. 325.

⁶ Miller, J.-A., *Le Neveu de Lacan*, Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2003.

Milena, a significant figure in Czech literature and journalism, is increasingly recognized worldwide for her contributions to social issues, women's rights, politics, culture.

Their shared passion for literature may have been their unique way of engaging with reality and handling the symbolic order of their time, allowing each to deal with one's real. For a certain time, their correspondence was a way to "*make jouissance enter into resonance with language*".⁷

⁷ Bosquin - Caroz, P., "Painful Loves", NLS Congress Argument. Available at:
<https://www.nlscongress2025.amp-nls.org/nls-congress/2019/1/4/the-argument-f9m84-j29wf-cxnty-nr5k6-6d4wr-68sd3-kbtpg-salss-sajl7-c7n7m-pt22g>