

# *Felice Bauer* by Magdaléna Platzová

## summary

*"If only we knew then what fate had in store for us, and how precious what we were experiencing was, we would have appreciated it more. All we can do now is fish for the pieces of a sunken ship."*

Who was Kafka's fiancée Felice Bauer, a woman known to generations of Kafka fans only as a lover of meaty dishes, heavy furniture, and precise watches? Who was the woman hiding behind poised nature and hearty laughter? And what was the reach of Kafka's shadow in her life? She has never been deemed worthy of independent study by literary scholars, and little is known about her life after her breakup with the Prague writer. The author began her search for traces of Felice in the United States, where she found Felice's son and his family. Out of the meeting came a book that is not only about Kafka's fiancée, but also about other people who were close to Kafka: Grete Bloch, Ernst Weiss, Max Brod, and Salman Schocken.

The story begins in 1935. Felice has just fled from Hitler's Berlin to Geneva along with her husband, a private banker, and their two children. They are soon to continue on to America. A visit from Grete Bloch, who has also left Germany for good, becomes an excuse to throw a farewell party. We are guided through the story by Felice's fifteen-year-old son Joachim, one of the book's main characters. Now it is the autumn of 1938, and we find ourselves in Paris, after the conclusion of the Munich Agreement but before the events of Kristallnacht. Felice arrives from Los Angeles to collect her husband, who suffered a heart attack in the French capital following his last attempt to enter the world of finance. The episode leaves him disabled for the remainder of his life, and until his death in 1950, Felice takes on a familiar role, one she knew in her youth: that of a working woman who supports her entire family. Paris is teeming with Jews on the run and the situation is dire. This is Felice's last visit to Europe.

We are thrust into 1944 Italy and the town of San Donato val di Comino. Grete Bloch celebrates her fifty-first birthday. She is interned in the mountain town with a group of German, Czechoslovak and Austrian Jews. She only has two months left to live, but she is determined to survive and believes she will succeed, perhaps with the use of deception. Grete's fate and her mysteriously disappeared luggage, which is said to contain evidence that she was the mother of Kafka's son, is investigated with the help of contemporary documents and the only living expert on the fate of Jews interned in Italy, Anna Pizzuti.

The summer of 1944, Long Island. Joachim, now an army doctor, trains to become a military psychiatrist. He works in a military hospital for war veterans. Alongside him, we get to experience his first love and marriage, which ends in divorce, as well as post-war New York, its wild energy, and parties where Kafka is a rising celebrity – there, his books are “quoted by the bartenders.”

Six years later, Joachim is an established pediatric psychiatrist with a practice in Manhattan, a wife and two children. One day, a mysterious man appears in his office, introducing himself as the son of Grete Bloch and Franz Kafka. This sets off his ‘hunt’ for Kafka’s letters and the drama that becomes the central neuralgic point of the book.

After the death of her husband and sister, Felice slowly grows old alone in L.A. as she runs her own knitting and haberdashery store. Her quiet life is disturbed when Max Brod writes her a letter from Tel Aviv: he wants her to sell Kafka’s letters to publisher Salman Schocken. *Letters to Milena* has just been published and Kafkomania is at its peak. Max is convinced the world shouldn’t be deprived of such an important literary legacy.

Schocken then reaches and offers Felice a good sum for the letters. Joachim later also gets involved – he wants his mother to sell the letters as she is sick and in need of money. “Kafka’s son” makes a reappearance, staking a claim to the letters.

Felice refuses to sell her correspondence with Kafka – it is private, and she would be betraying him if she gave it away. She reads through the letters for the first time in years and recounts her relationship with Kafka.

She wants to destroy the letters but is unable to do so. She finally concedes and sells them. Salman Schocken arrives in Los Angeles in a triumphant mood to collect his winnings. In Tel Aviv, Max Brod celebrates as well.

Schocken, nicknamed “Bismarck,” does not live to see the publication of *Letters to Felice*, which by contract cannot be published until five years after Felice’s death. He dies of heart failure in the summer of 1958 after going to Pontresina in the Swiss Alps to write his memoirs.

Felice passes away soon after following a series of strokes and long suffering in 1960 in Rye, New York.

The story ends in New York’s Central Park in 2000. Two old men meet: the self-proclaimed son of Franz Kafka and the son of Felice Bauer.

It's a peaceful moment, one of looking back. Now that all the storms are a thing of the past, only the most important thing remains: the memory of Felice's scent, her caress. And a prayer to something "infinitely high or deep," as Franz Kafka calls it in one of his letters to Felice.

*Life After Kafka* is about a capable and unassuming woman and her world, which gets turned upside down by World War II. It is about the magic and poison of memories, about what we cling to and what constitutes our identity. It is about literary fame, about how the most important things in life can hinge on timing, and how we can miss them if our timing is off. But most of all, it is about bravery. Not the kind needed on the battlefield, but the everyday, subtle kind that shows itself mainly through patient perseverance.

**Magdaléna Platzová**