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Life After Kafka

by Magdaléna Platzová

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240 pages

A novel inspired by the fate of Kafka's fiancée Felice Bauer

Life After Kafka reimagines the life of Felice Bauer, Franz Kafka's former fiancée, focusing on her experiences after their relationship ended.

Set against the backdrop of 1935 Berlin, Felice flees with her children from the rise of Nazism, seeking refuge in the United States. The narrative delves into her personal yourney of survival, exile, and the complexities of memory, especially concerning the letters Kafka wrote to her.

While taking the measure of literary fame's long shadow, *Life After Kafka* depicts the magic and poison of memories, and what we cling to when all else is lost.

"Franz Kafka is a universe that resists any attempt at interpretation. Magdaléna Platzová's novel offers a new key to Kafka's world: we look at it through the tender and sorrowful gaze of the people whose fate had been marked by him personally. An utterly touching book!"

— Agnieszka Holland

"Striking... Incredibly evocative... ***Life After Kafka*****, with its mix of research and imagination, arrives at an auspicious moment."**

— *Words Without Borders*

Magdaléna Platzová (b. 1972) is the author of the novels *The Return of the Girlfriend* (2004), *Aaron's Leap* **(2014),** *The Anarchist* **(2013),** *The Other Side of Silence* **(2018), and the short story collections** *Salt, Sheep and Stones* **(2003), and** *The Recycled Man* (2008). She has also written two children's books. Platzová grew up in Prague, was educated in the United States and England, and holds a master's degree in philosophy from Charles University in Prague. She worked as an actress and translator, and later as an editor and journalist at the monthly Literární noviny and the weekly Respekt. From 2009 to 2012 she lived in New York, where she taught a course on Franz Kafka at New York University. She currently lives with her husband and three children in Lyon.

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English summary of the book

“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 fled from Hitler’s Berlin to Geneva with her husband, a private banker, and their two children. They are soon to continue 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 deception. Greta'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.

In 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 a letter from Tel Aviv: he wants her to sell Kafka's letters to publisher Salman Schocken. Letters to Milena have just been published, and Kafkomania is at its peak. Max is convinced the world shouldn't be deprived of such a significant literary legacy.

Schocken then reaches and offers Felice a reasonable sum for the letters. Joachim gets involved later – he wants his mother to sell the letters as she is sick and needs money. “Kafka’s son” reappears, staking a claim to the letters. Felice refuses to sell her correspondence with Kafka – it is private, and she would betray 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 triumphantly 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 died of heart failure in the summer of 1958 after going to Pontresina in the Swiss Alps to write his memoirs. Felice passed away 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, what we cling to and what constitutes our identity. It is about literary fame, 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

English sample of the book

1954: Los Angeles

Of the three Hanukkah blessings, she remembered two: “Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.” And “Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, she'asa nisim la'avoteinu ba'yamim ha'heim ba'z'man ha'ze.” She could also recall the first two verses of “Mighty rock of my salvation,” which they used to sing at home in German. She kept forgetting where she had put her medical bills, what groceries she was supposed to buy, and whether or not she had been outside that day. Yet she could recollect prayers in Hebrew that she had heard as a child.

The short circuit that had run through her brain—a minor cerebral event, the doctor said—had apparently revived some long-unused connections while knocking out or disabling others.

A spread of goodies sat waiting on the table, lids covered with dishtowels to make sure nothing got cold: roast beef, potatoes sautéed with onions (one of Joachim’s favorites), brussels sprouts sprinkled in bread crumbs; a platter covered with jelly doughnuts and a heap of almond cookies Felice had baked herself. Whatever was leftover she would pack in a box for Joachim to take back with him to New York, so the children would have something sweet for Christmas from her. She had also baked them a genuine German stollen with marzipan.

On the sideboard—all that was left of her lovely dining room in Berlin—the silver menorah she had inherited from her grandmother in Neustadt sat perched atop a lace-trimmed tablecloth. Her mother had taken it with her when the family had moved to Berlin, giving it a place of honor in the china cabinet. It was an antique, probably eighteenth-century.

Neustadt in Oberschlesien, the town where Felice grew up. Among locals, it was known by the nickname of Fränkelstadt, after Samuel Fränkel, founder of the textile factory there. Now the town was called Prudnik.

It was all coming back to her. The little sewing supplies shop she had been so fond of, with its cloying smell of cardboard boxes, buttons, and thread. The aroma of poppyseed pastries, lemon rind, and fresh bread in the bakery on the square; of pickles and roast coffee from the merchant next door, who everyone called lame Weisenstein to distinguish him from the other Weisenstein, who owned the funeral parlor. Everyone in the little town had their own nickname. And the sweet smell of cobblestones after a rain and of fallen leaves in the park. And of warm wax and oil in the synagogue where her mother brought her. And in the hallway of their building, the odor of stored potatoes and coal from the cellar, of roast meat, boiled cabbage, and apples. And of course the everpresent stench of smoke and the din from the Fränkel and Pinkus textile factory, with its giant steam-powered looms working day and night.

Supposedly all the Jews had disappeared from Neustadt in Oberschlesien, now known as Prudnik. That was what Sofi told her, who heard it from Max. Neustadt no longer existed. After the war, they even demolished Fränkel's synagogue, the town's showpiece, which the Nazis had burned down on Kristallnacht. It used to be pictured on postcards with the words Gruss aus Neustadt Ob. Schl. along with photos of the factory, the Marian column on the town square, and the fountain in the park. The synagogue was constructed in Moorish style, while the factory's architecture was neo-Gothic and mostly built of red brick.

The factory was still working as far as she had heard, although owned now by the Polish state. Nothing was returned to the original owners, who had built not only the largest textile factory in Europe but also most of the town, including the schools, the hospital, the bathhouse, the library, and the park.

Did the young people in Prudnik still take trips out to Castle Mountain on Saturday afternoons? Did people still go to the lakeside restaurant for trout? Did a brass band still play in the gazebo at the park on Sundays after lunch?

* * * * *

“Baruch atah Adonai Elohenu, melekh ha'olam, shehecheyanu vekiymanu vehigi'anu lazman hazeh.”

Joachim supplied the third blessing, pronounced before lighting the candle on the first night of Hanukkah.

He lit the shammash and then used it to light the first candle, reciting the prayer with no mistakes. After all these years, he still remembered it. But he didn’t join in on “Mighty rock of my salvation,” leaving Felice to intone it on her own.

They sat down across from each other at the festively set table and Joachim tucked into the food with relish. It always tasted better to him at his mother’s than anywhere else. Although Nina Perel tried her best, cooking from Felice’s recipes, it wasn’t the same. His mother must have added some special ingredient that she kept to herself.

“What do you think that Leo is up to? Weinberger, no? The one who went to Palestine. His father was a cantor. The two of you were best friends at one point. You were always running off to the Weinbergers’ place. Have you had any news from him? How is he doing?”

“I don’t know. He became some government big shot. I haven’t written him in ages. Anyway, he never forgave me for my ‘failure,’ as he put it. Though it wasn’t a failure to me. I grew out of my faith like a baby grows out of diapers, it was that simple.”

“I’ve started praying again before I go to bed,” said Felice. “It helps me fall asleep. Do you remember how I taught you and Lily the Sh'ma Yisrael? I would have taught you more, but your father wouldn’t hear of it. No child of his was being dragged back into the Middle Ages, he said. He was a German and a European, period.”

“He was right about that. Why tie yourself down when you can be free?”
“Freedom isn’t for everyone. You need something to hold on to.”
“How is Lily doing? We haven’t talked in a long time. She sent me a photo. That little girl of hers is growing into a real beauty. Who do you think she takes after?”
“She came here to see me. On her own. Said she wants to get a divorce, she can’t take it anymore. But of course she’s totally dependent on that husband of hers. She doesn’t

know how to do a thing! Didn't even finish school. Now she's got it into her head to go work in a shop or clean somewhere. She'll scrape by somehow, she said. Can you imagine?"
"Why not?"
"How long do you think she'll last?"
"You always managed to scrape by too, Mom. Remember what that was like? How old were you when you learned to do massage? Or when you opened your store? Lily is still young. She could learn how to do anything."
"But I've worked my whole life. Well, apart from those fifteen years when your father supported us. Lily has never worked. And she's never been interested in real life. It's all just a dream to her. She's always made it all up on her own and then been disappointed when things didn't work out. She's never listened to reason."
"I feel sorry for her."
"So do I. But I can't take her in."
"She asked if she could move in with you?"
"Her and the little one. She's too proud to ask him for anything. But tell me, where would I put them? I've got one room and a bedroom, and the kitchen is so tiny I can barely turn around. We would be crawling all over each other. And I don't have money either, all my savings have gone to doctors, I can barely get by on my own. I'm not complaining, mind you. I'm not asking anyone for anything. But I can't take care of her. Not anymore."
"Mom . . ."
"What is it now?"
Was he imagining it, or was there somebody else sitting with them at the table? The shadow of a bowed figure, rhythmically nodding its head as if it were reciting.
Joachim closed his eyes, and when he opened them again the shadow was gone.
Felice stared at her hands resting on the tablecloth.
"Let her chutzpadik husband take care of her. It's his responsibility. That's what I told her. And she got offended."
Felice rose from her chair and reached for Joachim's plate. "Here, let me clear that away for you."
He stood up to help, but she pushed him back down into his seat. "Pour yourself another glass of wine. No more for me, thanks. And smoke if you want. I'll air the place out afterwards."
She gathered up the rest of the dishes and vanished behind the curtain that separated the kitchenette from the main room. He noticed she had a slight limp, probably a

result of the stroke. He would have to ask her about it. Ever since Elsa had died and his mother had been on her own, she had aged visibly.
He heard the sound of clinking dishes and running water from the kitchen. He could tell she was upset and didn't want to talk, so he left her alone. The next few minutes he spent quietly smoking a cigarette while Felice remained silently on the other side of the curtain. Her voice sounded calm when she called out again.
"Will you have some coffee?"

* * * * *

He couldn't bring himself to say the reason for his visit.
His mother thought he had come because Hanukkah was starting and soon Christmas would be here. She had knitted new sweaters and bright-colored caps for Nina Perel and the children, as well as making a whole box of cookies and three jars of orange marmalade. It made her glad to know Joachim would deliver the gifts to them personally.
He didn't want to ruin her joy.
But when he sat down for breakfast on the day of his departure and Felice brought him a soft-boiled egg on toast, he knew he could no longer put it off.
"Before I forget, Mom. Schocken Books gave me a call."
"They called you up? Who gave them your number?"
"I'm in the phone book, Mom."
"Who was it who called?"
"Mr. Schocken."
"Hm."
"He said he actually wanted to speak to you, but he didn't want to disturb you. Since you gave him the brush-off once before, he asked me instead."
"The matter has been settled."
"Mom, hear me out."
"This has nothing to do with you. Or anyone but me. It's my personal business."
"Not entirely, Mom."
"What do you mean? They're my letters, aren't they? The person who wrote them trusted me. He certainly wouldn't have wanted them to be read by anyone else."
"But how can you be so sure? Mr. Schocken says—"
"I knew him. As far as I know, Mr. Schocken did not."
"How many letters do you have, anyway?"

Felice silently rose from the table and went to the sideboard. She bent down, opened it up, and pulled a large Bata shoebox out from one of the shelves. The table shook as she laid it down, abruptly, next to the butter and jar of preserves.
“Here they are. The famous letters. And here they will remain.”
“Mr. Schocken is offering quite a bit of money, Mom. Eight thousand dollars. He said he can afford it now that Germany is paying him restitution. Eight thousand dollars would come in handy now that you can’t work anymore. Think about it. It’s an opportunity. What are you going to do otherwise? Of course you can always come stay with us, but . . .”
“I’d rather not.”
“Then what are you going to do? I’m not in a position to send you money regularly, pay for your doctors or any of that. I have a mortgage, a family.”
“I’m not asking you to. I’ve never asked anyone for anything. And don’t shout at me.”
“Mom, please!” Now he really was almost shouting. Why was she so stubborn?

* * * * *

He hadn’t told her the whole truth about his dealings with Schocken. The reality was, the publisher had phoned him up and, addressing Joachim in his typical overbearing manner, had instructed Joachim to meet him for lunch the next day at the French restaurant Voisin on Park Avenue.
When Joachim showed up as agreed, at precisely half past twelve, the elderly gentleman was already there, seated at a table waiting, sipping a glass of water. He dominated the conversation through most of the meal. Each time Joachim attempted to say a few words, Schocken listened politely, but didn’t respond to what he had said. Maybe the old man was going deaf and didn’t want to let on.
Over Joachim’s order of steak frites and Schocken’s plate of trout with haricots verts (on his doctor’s advice he was eating light), the publisher related the full account of his campaign in beautiful, near-archaic German.
How at first he had assigned Max Brod, with whom he was in close contact, to write to Felice.
How then he, Schocken, had written Felice himself, and had spent more than two years now trying to convince her.
He couldn’t see why Joachim’s mother was so reluctant. The sale entailed no risk for her. She only stood to make money on it. All the terms were clearly spelled out in the contract he had offered. Felice would be paid in cash and the letters would be stored

in a safe deposit box, along with the other rare manuscripts, and wouldn't be published until five years after her death.
Once Schocken was through with the letters, he would donate them to the archive at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which he himself had helped found and still had a guiding hand in.
Isn't that what Kafka would have wanted?
During the two years Schocken had spent trying to win her over, Felice had answered him only once, briefly and dismissively. Kafka's letters were very personal, she said, and she didn't feel entitled to make them public. After that, she didn't respond.
Acquiring the correspondence was obviously very important to Schocken. His greatest fear, he told Joachim, was that Felice would destroy the letters before she died. What else could she have in mind for them? It would be a terrible, irreplaceable loss, not just for his publishing house but for literature as a whole. Who knew, she may have destroyed them already. He had to act, and quickly.
Furthermore, explained Schocken, there were all sorts of con men coming out of the woodwork now. One even trying to pass himself off as Kafka's son. An actor by the name of Appelbaum. He had been so bold as to turn up at the publishing house in person. Implausible as his story was, he was still capable of complicating the whole affair.
Salman Schocken rarely begged anyone for anything. But he would be truly grateful if Joachim could help. Would he fly out to Los Angeles and speak to his mother?
Naturally the publisher would cover the costs of the trip. This way Joachim could verify with his own eyes whether the letters still existed and how many there were. No one else had seen them after all, not even Max Brod.
It was an order, not a request, and Joachim obediently nodded his consent.

* * * * *

Now the Bata box rested on the table in between them. Joachim's stomach was tied in knots.
"May I have a look?"
"Why not?"
He carefully lifted the lid. There they were, along with the envelopes, all tied up in green ribbon. Two big bundles of letters.
He closed the box back up.
"What do you intend to do with them?"

“What do you think? I’m putting my things in order.”
“Are you planning to burn them?”
She lowered her graying head.
“Is that what you plan to do?”
“Let’s just drop it.”
“Because assuming you don’t burn them, I’m going to sell them once you’re gone. I don’t see any reason not to.”
She carefully wiped her hands on the cloth napkin in her lap and rose from her seat. Then picked up the box and carried it back to the sideboard. “Well. That’s that. Shall I make us some more tea?”
Joachim knew there was no point in pressing any further. She wasn’t going to discuss the matter with him anymore. He could only confirm to Schocken that the letters still existed.
Felice made him lunch and then drove him to the airport, with the cookies, preserves, and sweaters packed in wrapping paper.
Before he got out of the car, she thanked him for coming and said his visit had brought her great joy.
Joachim felt ashamed.
His mother had always avoided emotional displays, keeping her good-byes quick and to the point. So it was this time too. Instead of walking him into the terminal, she just stepped out of the car, gave him a hug, and kissed him on the cheek.
“God bless. Now off you go.”
Joachim took a few steps, then turned and looked back.
His mother hadn’t climbed back in the car and driven off as she usually did. Instead she just stood there, next to the old Ford, one hand tucked in the pocket of her blue jacket, the other raised in farewell. The ocean breeze swept the green silk scarf off her head, tousling her graying hair.

He waved to her and turned to continue on his way. To the plane home and his family’s house decorated in Christmas lights, and maybe with a dusting of snow, to Nina Perel and the children.
Then he stopped and turned around once more. She was still standing there. And all of a sudden he pictured her dead. Lying on her back, head turned to the right, eyes closed, a strand of gray hair over her mouth.

Alex Zucker

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