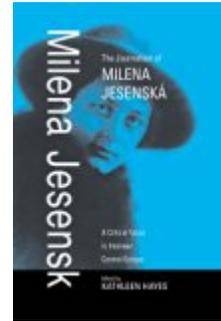


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen Hayes, ed. *The Journalism of Milena Jesenska: A Critical Voice in Interwar Central Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2003. vi + 232 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-560-6.

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## The Entanglement of Old and New in One Woman's Interwar World

Milena Jesenska is best known as Franz Kafka's great love. Still, as the work under review shows, this woman living in interwar Central Europe—a world of tradition and modernity—accomplished more than capturing the attention of the mysterious Prague German-Jewish author. Jesenska was born in Prague in 1896, the only child of a Czech professor of dentistry and an ailing mother who died when her daughter was sixteen. Being a smart child from an affluent family helped secure her enrollment in the Minerva, the first Czech all-girls gymnasium founded in 1890 with a reputation for excellent academics. She was a rebellious child and regularly acted against the wishes of her father, who had her committed to a psychiatric clinic in 1917. She stole, stayed out all night, experimented with drugs and, in 1918 (causing her anti-Semitic father tremendous rage), married a Jew. Together, Jesenska and her (first) husband, the writer Ernst Pollak, moved to Vienna, where she stayed until their divorce in 1925.

The life that Jesenska and Pollak shared was difficult. He was repeatedly unfaithful and his earnings were insufficient to support the pair in Vienna's war-torn economy. Like so many married women in interwar Central Europe, Jesenska had to work in order to supplement their household income. She began sending translations and articles to the Czech press in Prague and thus started what became a prolific career in journalism. This career continued after her divorce from Pollak in 1925, at which time she returned to Prague and became associated with the Czech avant-garde. Despite childbirth, an accident, illness, a morphine addiction, and a second divorce, she

was still pursuing her journalism career in 1939, when Nazi Germany took over Czechoslovakia. In that year the Nazis arrested her for participating in underground resistance activities, and she was sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she died in 1944. From the time of her arrest and for many years afterward, her only child, a girl named Honza (the equivalent of John), was cared for by Jesenska's father. Honza's own father was Jaromir Krejcar, a leading Czech functionalist architect, and Jesenska's second husband from 1927 to 1934.

This volume contains thirty-eight articles written by Jesenska during the first decade (1920-29) and last two years (1938-39) of her journalistic career. All of them appeared in leading Czech publications. The editor, Kathleen Hayes, has done an excellent job of translating the articles from their original Czech and giving them a forty-one-page introduction. Photographs help embody these interesting writings. The articles are arranged chronologically, according to three different time periods. The periods are divided according to the Czech publications for which Jesenska wrote (1920 to 1922 for *Tri-buna*; 1922 to 1929 for *Narodni listy* and *Lidove noviny*; 1938 to 1939 for *Pritomnost*). Hayes does not make it entirely clear why articles from 1929 to 1938 are absent from the volume. Jesenska did write during those years, but perhaps not as much and not as provocatively because of the many personal challenges she faced then.

Articles from the first two periods discuss everyday-life matters, including food, furniture, fashion, children, and marriage. They reveal information about the mate-

rial hardships that people faced after World War I and, more importantly, the psychological impact of that hardship. Further, articles from these periods shed light on the advances of modern consumer culture in interwar Central Europe. In Jesenska's descriptions, these new advances appear to have been slow in Prague, and entangled with traditional values and practices. In "Shop-Windows" she wants her readers to be excited about how display windows are attire for streets and advertisements for businesses. However, she laments that in Prague shop-windows were disappointing, because their displays were infrequently changed (pp. 70-72). In "The Household and Overalls," she urges Czech housewives to continue their attention to housekeeping, but to be less sentimental about it and wear "tasteful and neat" overalls when cleaning, rather than unattractive underskirts and "mules" (p. 73-75).

Articles from the last time period are concerned with the increasing persecution of Jews in Central Europe following the Nazi rise to power in Germany and Austria, the dark realities of the Soviet Communist Party, and the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia. Here Jesenska reveals that she was more than a fashion or entertainment editor; she also had a keen ability to observe and analyze political developments. In addition, here she provides further insight into the entanglement of old and new in Central Europe, although her primary goal is often to encourage Czechs to think about the content of their national values. In "Am I, First and Foremost, Czech?," she writes, "We do not want to return to the past, but we do want to maintain our traditional character" (p. 216). In "Soldaten wohnen auf den Kanonen" she states, "All over the Czech Lands, people work according to the old traditions and tradition is 'a beautiful thing, but sometimes it is a monster that binds the ankles with a ball and chain'" (p. 222).

There is a significant contrast between the subject matter that Jesenska treats in the first and the last years of her career and yet, as Hayes states in her introduction, a continuity runs through all of that time. This continuity is Jesenska's unwavering compassion for powerless people—the poor, children, Jews—suffering due to the excesses of those with power. For those who have some means with which to help themselves, there is advice on self-improvement and admonitions for social responsibility. Women in Jesenska's articles appear as people who can help themselves, and she fills many of her pieces with advice on how women can improve their lives and, thereby, better help others—their husbands and children, and also Jews and anyone persecuted by the Nazis.

Women have special strengths and capabilities according to Jesenska while men, she writes more than once, are "children" (pp. 118, 122). Still, by no means is she a champion of equal rights. Her thoughts about women's powers are entangled with tradition. In her article "A Few Old-Fashioned Comments about Women's Emancipation," she argues that biology makes it impossible to talk about the equality of men and women (pp. 115-119). "If it had ever been possible to speak about likeness and equality, the body of a woman would not have to differ so much from the body of a man, or the bodily functions of a woman to resemble those of a man so little," she writes (p. 116). Her main argument in this piece is that women's work in the household, including child-raising, is underrated and belittled. She wants her readers to recognize "what tremendous sacrifices, self-denial, labour and strength are required for such an achievement" (p. 117). Women can work jobs outside of the household; "she can run factories, drive automobiles and trains, she can study, she can hold official posts, she can fight courageously for her life" (p. 118). However, Jesenska adds, "all of these jobs will never be more than jobs; none will become a calling—for a true woman. At the bottom of her heart a woman remains what God created her: a woman and a mother" (p. 118).

Jesenska anticipates protest against her ideas about the essentialist nature of women and concludes this article, "I inform all those who are of the opinion that I deserve a beating for these paltry lines that I am usually at home on Saturdays from 2.00 until 5.00 p.m." (pp. 118-119). I was left wondering how a rebellious daughter intimately tied to Central European modernism through Kafka and the Czech avant-garde through Jaromír Krejcar could be so traditional. Furthermore, I was left wondering just what broad response to her argument she received. Was she flying against powerful alternative views of women in interwar Prague, or was she stating an opinion that many Czechs and other Central Europeans shared?

One cannot answer these questions based on Hayes's introduction, the lengthiest section of which focuses on Jesenska's relationship with Kafka. Nor do the small number of footnotes, explaining points of fact in the articles, help (most of these treat large political events or introduce locations in Prague). There are many areas where the book lacks contextual substance, and I will mention three. It does not treat the new citizens' rights of women in interwar Czechoslovakia when, for the first time, they had the right to vote and participate in parliamentary politics.[1] It fails to discuss the activi-

ties and ideas of leading Czech women, including Eliska Krasnohorska who struggled to found the excellent first gymnasium for girls where Jesenska studied, and Bozena Vitkova-Kuneticka, the first woman in Central Europe to be elected to a parliamentary seat (she won this seat in 1912, but was not allowed to serve in parliament until after World War I).[2] It contains no discussion of women and resistance to the Nazis.[3]

Granted much contextual information on women in interwar Central Europe still needs to be researched, including the role of women in modernism and the avant-garde. Still, there does exist a useful body of literature that Hayes could have mined, especially with her admirable Czech-language skills.[4] Bringing this contextual information into dialogue with Jesenska's articles could have allowed Hayes to suggest substantive, scholarly points of significance raised in Jesenska's work and help liberate this female journalist and her world from Kafka's shadow. Nonetheless, we are indebted to Hayes for making Jesenska's writings available to a wider audience and helping others to consider more the history of Central European women.

#### Notes

[1]. Melissa Feinberg, "Democracy and Its Limits: Gender and Rights in the Czech Lands, 1918-1938," *Nationalities Papers* 30 (December 2002): pp. 553-570.

[2]. Katherine David, "Czech Feminists and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy: 'The First in Austria,'" *Journal of Women's History* 3 (1991): pp. 26-45.

[3]. Nancy Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., *Gendering the Front: War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (unpublished manuscript).

[4]. Non-English studies of Czech women include Jana Buresova, *Promeny spolecenskeho postaveni ceskych zen v prvni polovine 20. stoleti* (Olomouc: Katedra historie, Univerzita Palackého, 2001); and Helene Volet-Jeanerret, *Le femme bourgeoisie a Prague, 1860-1895: De la philanthropie a la emancipation* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1988). See also Wilma A. Iggers, *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995).

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