

Translated excerpt

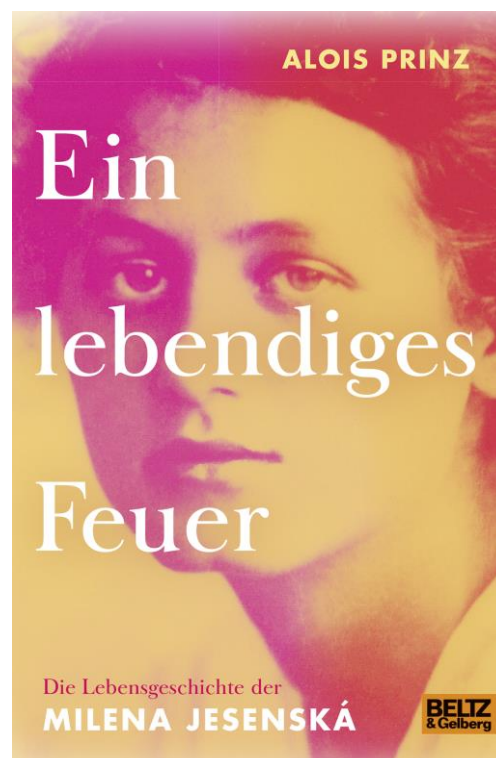
Alois Prinz
Ein lebendiges Feuer. Die Lebensgeschichte der Milena Jesenská

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Alois Prinz
A Living Fire: The Life Story of Milena Jesenská

Translated by David Burnett



PROLOGUE

MILENA FROM PRAGUE

Milena's head was one big chaos. It was three in the morning, May 1915. The next day was the first of her written school-leaving examinations at the all-girls "Minerva" gymnasium in Prague and she felt like she'd forgotten everything. For hours she'd been cramming history, and now everything she'd learned was gone. Things were no different with Latin and Greek. "I studied seven hours yesterday – tomorrow is the exam – and I don't know *anything*," she wrote to her teacher.¹ Her "Miss Professor," as she called Albína Honzáková, was the only teacher at the school she admired, the only one Milena could confide in. She wrote her letters that were very personal and wanted to talk with her about things that had nothing to do with class. And so she was disappointed when her favorite teacher told her to behave herself and act the way a schoolgirl should. She would act properly, Milena answered, "calm, polite and polished, just like Volejníková and the other model pupils. You know what – I didn't know that you *too* judged people *by that*."²

Instead of taking exams Milena just wanted to talk to somebody, about simple questions she'd never gotten an answer to. Her mother, the woman she could talk about anything with, had died years ago. And at home it was one "terrible scene" after the next with her father.³ Jan Jesenský, a successful dentist and university professor, barely recognized his daughter. Once an obedient and diligent girl, Milena seemed to have transformed into an unruly she-devil, one whose every move was intent on destroying his good reputation. She spent her father's money freely. She stole, took drugs, hung around with her girlfriends in shady places, and even had affairs with older men. Jan Jesenský had enough trouble as it was

just trying to distract attention from his daughter's escapades and ironing out the damages caused by her "intrigues." He had hoped that Milena would eventually come to her senses and follow the career he had in mind for her. He wanted her to study medicine and one day take over his flourishing practice.

Milena didn't know what to do with herself. She loved music, books and art with a passion that some found downright bewildering. It therefore hurt her deeply to be written off as an eccentric and "bluestocking." As far as she was concerned, all she wanted was to live a life "very close to the earth," as she once put it.⁴ To her this was not incompatible with being extravagant, even downright excessive in everything she did – in love, friendship and caring for others. Her exuberance and passion often met with little understanding. To many she was choleric, rash, unbearable, impetuous and licentious. Only her beloved teacher took her seriously, had never spoken to her in a demeaning or offensive tone. Milena thanked her for this, once she had passed her exams in July 2015 and her school days had come to an end. She even promised her teacher to "go far in life. *Very far.*"⁵

Twenty-five years after graduating from school, in October 1940, Milena Jesenská sat in a train that took her to Ravensbrück concentration camp for women. She had been accused of high treason in her hometown of Prague, now occupied by Hitler's soldiers, for collaborating on an illegal magazine. The Nazi courts had no case against her but still she was taken into protective custody.

Milena had a slight limp, a handicap from a knee operation. Her hands were also aching from her long pretrial detention in a cold, damp cell. She was given her camp uniform like all the other female inmates: gray pants, gray shirt, a striped work coat, blue apron, a headscarf and clunky wooden clogs. Sewn to the left sleeve of her dress was her prisoner's number, 4714, and above it a red triangle, indicating that she was there for political reasons.

There was a large Czech contingent at the camp that immediately accepted Milena among them. But these women soon backed away from her when they noticed that Milena didn't share their political views. She didn't believe that all would be well once Russian troops defeated Hitler's armies. To her, the Soviet dictator Stalin was no better than the Nazi Hitler. Milena made herself even more unpopular when she established contact with a German woman who had been in the Russian camps. Milena met Margarete Buber-Neumann one day when the prisoners were allowed to take a walk on the narrow path running between the wall and the back of the barracks. Though urged forward by the stream of women, the two stopped to talk. Margarete Buber was immediately taken with "Milena from Prague," as the latter introduced herself, was fascinated by her curiosity, her independent thinking, her smart questions and especially by her exceptional vitality.⁶

During subsequent walks along the "Wailing Wall," as Milena called the four-meter-high camp wall, and at secret nightly meetings in the barracks the two women recounted their life stories. Milena told her new friend about the early death of her mother, about her wild youthful years in Prague, and about the battle against her father, who even had her locked in a mental institution to prevent her – unsuccessfully – from marrying a Jewish man ten years her senior. She talked about her married years in Vienna, where, lonely and destitute, she worked as a porter at the train station, then about how she started writing, and how she gradually extricated herself from an unhappy marriage. She talked about her brief love affair with the writer Franz Kafka, about her returning to Prague, her success as a journalist, her second marriage, her daughter Jana, her sicknesses, defeats and happy days, and how she joined the political resistance.

Milena grew sad when she mentioned her daughter Jana, whom everyone referred to as Honza. Milena had only seen her once since being arrested. She'd been desperately trying to find out who was taking care of Jana and how her daughter was doing. The censored letters

she sent to Prague were at least a way to feel close to her child: “I have a girl who thinks, feels, grows, but I can’t be with her. I can only dream about her, think of her and pray for her. I can tell the clouds to give her my regards, God knows if they’ll be passed on. [...] I often think of you all, I send you my love, I will always be with you, all of you. I’m really doing well, I’m thankful for my work, am hale and hearty, just don’t forget me. Kisses, your Milena.”⁷

Milena was not doing well at all and she wasn’t hale and hearty either. Her hands and feet were swollen with rheumatism and she had severe kidney pains. But she didn’t complain, and remained uncompromising. To Margarete Buber-Neumann, Milena’s behavior was not very “camp-like.” “Milena’s mere appearance was a ceaseless protest against the camp regime,” she wrote in her memoirs. “She never marched properly in columns of five, she didn’t stand correctly at roll call, she was not in a hurry when ordered to be so, she was never fawning towards her superiors.”⁸

For many of her fellow campmates, Milena’s composure was a great relief and comfort. Some of them called her “tsareva,” sovereign, because she gave the appearance of being free and was able to preserve her dignity in this place of suffering, death and all manner of humiliation. Many who admired Milena’s strength did not suspect that throughout her lifetime Milena had struggled with rather contradictory impulses. She was always driven by powerful yearnings. On the other hand, she valued the ability to accept life the way it was. Milena was a “realistically thinking person” in the camp, according to the subsequent testimony of one fellow inmate, “but always a dreamer and poet too.”⁹ In Milena’s view, there were two ways to live one’s life. Either you accept your fate, with all of its joys and sorrows, and are prepared to pay for all of your errors and mistakes. Or you actively seek your fate. But this seeking costs you time and energy, and usually takes away more than it

gives you. The one who is always seeking is the poorer for it, according to Milena, he loses his “sure instinct for things” and ultimately the sense of his own value.¹⁰

Milena was a seeker and, more, a lover. Franz Kafka, with whom she had a brief love affair and who called her “a living fire,” was searching for human warmth in letters. Milena could understand Kafka’s fear of people, and yet still, for her, nothing topped living real life in the present. If she had stayed with Kafka, she never would have gone the path from being a self-involved femme fatale to becoming a political resistance fighter. One day of life was more important and precious to her than however many letters or books. She often expressed this conviction in her articles. In one of them she wrote: “I love life, magical, wonderful, radiant life in its entirety, in all of its manifestations, in all of its forms, the quotidian and the festive, on the surface and in its depths.”¹¹

At Ravensbrück concentration camp Milena was assigned a job as a nurse. From her workplace she could see the big iron door that separated her from freedom. On the wall she had hung a photo of Prague, next to it a calendar depicting a wide-open window looking out onto a mountain landscape. In Vienna she had written an article about windows. Windows had a special meaning to her. Not doors, but windows were the “gateway to freedom,” she wrote back then. The world starts outside your window. “For in the window,” she claimed, “lies every hope of light, the sunrise, the horizon. The window contains our yearnings and desires.”¹²

PATERNAL LOVE

“Thanks to my father I’m all but inured.”

The air was filled with eager anticipation outside the entrance of the “Minerva” private gymnasium on Vojteská Street in Prague. It was September 1907 and the first day of school. Proud mothers and fathers stood beside their spruced-up daughters. One couple in particular attracted attention: the well-known doctor and professor Jan Jesenský with his eleven-year-old daughter Milena. Dr. Jesenský cut a stately figure, big and broad-shouldered, in a knee-length coat and a short top hat, with a monocle in one eye. The tall and slender Milena looked delicate and fragile next to him. It was obvious to everyone that this father was very proud of his daughter and was concerned that she make a good impression right from the start. Milena had been fitted by a tailor specifically for the occasion. She wore an elegant gray suit, and atop her ample curly hair was a velour hat adorned with a colorful ribbon.¹

The girls had to pass a test in religion, Czech and math in order to be accepted at Minerva. For Jan Jesenský there was no question that his daughter would easily clear this hurdle. Indeed, his plans went even further. Milena was his only child. A son, named Jan, like him, born three years after Milena, had only lived a few months. In other words, Jan Jesenský had pinned all his hopes on his daughter. It was she who would follow in his footsteps and go on to study medicine – an unusual career for a woman in those days, higher education still being the reserve of men. A woman, no matter how talented and ambitious, rarely made it to university. Girls from middle-class families normally attended primary school then transferred after four or five years to a school for young ladies, the lyceum. There they would learn some Latin and French. A school like this, said Milena’s daughter Jana later, churned out “little dolls” who were suitable as trophy wives and model mothers and had just a veneer of education and culture. This situation was only gradually beginning to change around the turn of the century. In Austria-Hungary, where Prague was located, the clocks ticked even more slowly.



The Minerva girls' school was ahead of its time. When it was opened in 1890, at the stubborn insistence of the Minerva Women's Association, it was the first of its kind in Central Europe. The school was not allowed to issue diplomas at first, and had to finance itself through parent donations and contributions. Only in 1914 was Minerva absorbed by the Royal Capital of Prague and turned into a proper secondary school, a gymnasium. And only over the years did the share of female teachers grow. By the time Milena started school there, some of the teachers were former students. People considered them feminists, and counted them among the "most crazy" females in Prague.³

Minerva was not just a milestone in the emancipation of women, it was a political signal. Life in Prague was marked by tensions between a German-speaking minority and the Czech majority. The Czech population was fighting for more rights, and was eager to show that the Czechs were in no way inferior to the Germans. They had even trumped the culturally-minded Germans, creating a school that enabled women to earn a diploma, go on to college and start a career, and which not only imparted a classical education but also taught modern languages such as English and French alongside Latin and Greek. Thus, right from the very beginning the girls were given the feeling of being at a special school, of belonging to an elite.

Milena passed the entrance exam and entered class IA along with thirty-five other girls. She was now a Minervan, which was greeted in Prague with a mixture of admiration and skepticism. It says a lot about Jan Jesenský that he sent his daughter to this particular school. He wanted his only child to get the best education she could. And he wanted Milena to be raised in a Czech environment. He himself was a Czech with heart and soul, and had a strong aversion to Germans and Jews. Jan Jesenský was highly conscious of his origins and had proven that one could still go far as the member of a small, oppressed nation. Milena was expected to follow in his footsteps, and Minerva was the perfect opportunity to do so. That

the young women there were exposed to quite progressive, modern ideas that were hard to square with his own conservative values was something he would have to put up with.

The school's director, Josef Grim, had expected his new pupils to be accompanied by their parents on their first day of school. Milena showed up with only her father. Her mother had stayed home; she was under the weather and needed rest. Apart from which the Jesenský's marriage was not going well at all. Husband and wife had irreconcilable differences. On the one side there was the ambitious father, brimming with vitality and bursting with health; on the other the delicate, ever-ailing mother. All that seemed to bind this couple was their shared concern for their gifted daughter. Milena was wedged between them, as it were, between two completely different worlds. And now her entering Minerva opened up a whole new world, one where she could develop her own personality.

Jan Jesenský had grown up with seven siblings, mostly girls, in the Prague neighborhood of Malá Strana, the Lesser Town west of the river Vltava, beneath the famous castle. His father, who bore the very same name, was good with his hands and had an artistic vein; he dreamed all his life of getting rich and living in a mansion with his family. But whatever Jan Jesenský senior undertook, nothing brought the success he craved. He failed with a printing press as well as with a business for construction materials. His plans to open up a truck farm and supply Prague's public parks with an unheard-of variety of flowers never even got off the ground. He ultimately had to feed his family by working as a traveling salesman, giving up his dream of a carefree life and a fancy home.⁴

Jan junior, who was born on March 5, 1870, presumably did not think much of his father and had no intention of ending up poor and ineffectual like him. But his father did enable him to attend a gymnasium and complete his schooling. His son seemed intent from early on to not stake all his hopes on dubious business ventures. He wanted to get a good

education instead and pursue a respectable, lucrative career. He decided on medicine. Unable to expect much support from his family, he had to find a way to earn money on the side while still pursuing his studies. He ended up working as a private tutor and, since he was musical and a decent violinist, also performed as an entertainer in the bars and restaurants of Prague. He supposedly worked as a porter too, lugging heavy suitcases at the train station.

With unflagging diligence and an iron will, Jan Jesenský managed to complete his studies in the shortest possible time and wanted to do his advanced training in dentistry and oral surgery. This required more schooling, however, and even a period of residence abroad. All of this was costly, and the money he earned by playing the fiddle and lugging suitcases would not be nearly enough. Was it financial necessity and the fear of a faltering career that prompted Jan Jesenský to look for a wife? Admittedly, these were entirely normal and acceptable reasons back then for wanting to get married. Ambitious but impecunious young men could often only get ahead by finding the right partner. The father of Franz Kafka, Hermann Kafka, had opened up a haberdashery in Prague not long before, which had only been possible by marrying Julie Löwy, the daughter of a well-to-do family. The marriage enabled this poor Jewish son of a butcher from the countryside to climb the social and professional ladder.

Hermann Kafka, eighteen years Jan Jesenský's elder, had found his wife through a marriage broker. There's no record of how Jan Jesenský met his wife Milena Hejzlarová. She was the daughter of an affluent provincial school inspector, who had relocated with his family to Prague just a few years earlier. Milena Hejzlarová was young and beautiful and, perhaps more importantly, brought a considerable dowry into the marriage. The couple moved into an apartment in Žižkov, which had once been a village and was now a borough of Prague, inhabited mainly by workers and where rents were relatively cheap. In the first year of his marriage, Jan Jesenský left his wife behind to continue his studies in Paris. Later, when

she became pregnant, she had to spend weeks or even months alone or rely on the help of her parents, since her husband was too busy broadening his skills with a famous professor in Berlin. Their child was born on August 10, 1896. Had it been a boy, it would have been named Jan. It turned out to be a girl, however, and so it was named after the mother, Milena, meaning “loving one” or “beloved.”

Milena, or “Milka” as some people called her, was indeed much loved by her parents – albeit in different ways. With her mother she lived in peaceful, intimate harmony, her father occasionally intervening for educational purposes. Milena used the formal address with him and received him with a kiss on the hand. There is little doubt that Milena was fearful of this imposing man, whose style of child-rearing included corporal punishment. But her father’s manner had certain qualities which, though perhaps eluding her grasp at the time, turned out to have a lasting impact on her and generated a kind of affection that was different than what she felt for her mother. Later, as a grown woman, Milena recalled a scene that occurred once when she was about three years old. She was sitting alone in a room with her mother when her father suddenly barged in and told her to leave the room; he had something to discuss with her mother that she wasn’t supposed to hear. Milena obeyed immediately. But when she closed the door behind her and headed to the kitchen, the door was suddenly yanked open again.



Her father had suspected her of eavesdropping at the door. When he saw that he'd been mistaken, and saw Milena cowering on the floor in fear, he did something totally unexpected. "I understood that he'd been suspicious, and something painful and devastating began to weigh on my heart. Father understood that I felt that way, and realized he had to say or do something, so he did something very courageous. He approached me with big, solemn strides, gave me his hand and said, 'Please forgive me, I won't ever be suspicious of you again.' My tormented heart was suddenly proud and free; my father stood there, honorable and just, having taught me valuable things at that moment."⁵

It must have been around this time that the family had another child. Little Jan was the son and heir that Jan Jesenský had always wanted. If he hadn't died so young, it is certain that this male offspring would have ousted Milena and won his father's undivided affection. The child's death is mysterious. Milena's daughter Jana later claimed that her grandfather's unrelenting severity was to blame for the death of his son.⁶ His wife couldn't breastfeed the child and Jan Jesenský supposedly forbid her from hiring a wet nurse. He wanted his son to show that he was capable of surviving without it. He wasn't. A maid did her best to take care of the child before it died. Is it possible that Jan Jesenský's principles were more important to him than the life of his only son, however frail? In any case, little Milena was spared the fate of becoming her more favored brother's keeper. Her life would have surely been different. As it was, she remained an only child, and thus the burden of her father's expectations was something she had to bear alone.

Jan Jesenský had finished his training and was now a doctor of medicine. He worked as a university assistant to begin with, with the prospect of one day becoming a professor. But this wasn't good enough for him. He wanted to use the money from his marriage to open a practice of his own as a dentist, preferably well-located in the center of Prague. His family needed a new home too, one that befit their future social standing. Their apartment in a building named "At the Black Eagle," located on Železná Street, was merely a temporary solution. The location was good, close to the university, but there wasn't space for a dentist's office. Nearby on Ovocná Street, though, just off of Wenceslas Square, a big new building was being erected with space not only for a medical practice but apartments for discriminating tastes as well. In 1902, after just one year on Železná Street, Jan Jesenský moved his family to Ovocná Street, to a five-story Art Nouveau building with a giant entrance hall, stained-glass windows, a wood-paneled stairway and marble-lined walls. Dr.

Jesenský's dentist office was set up on the first floor. The family occupied a spacious apartment on the fifth.

The building on Ovocná Street was located at the junction of the city's main thoroughfares, the Graben (Na příkopě) and Wenceslas Square – at a point where the worlds of different nationalities were divided by an invisible boundary line. Wenceslas Square was traditionally claimed by the Czechs, whereas the Graben was the center of German social life, to which the Jews belonged as well. The Graben was home to the restaurants, cafés, bookstores and hotels preferred by German-Jewish society. This is where the “corso” took place each Sunday afternoon, a ritual promenade following a rigid set of rules that reflected the social standing and private means of its participants. How much someone doffed their hat in greeting or at what distance the gesture began said a lot about the status of the recipient of this greeting. The Czechs were no different on Wenceslas Square, where they had their own businesses, wine bars and coffeehouses. Assicurazioni Generali, the insurance company where the newly graduated doctor of law Franz Kafka began working in the fall of 1907, was also located on Wenceslas Square, not far from Ovocná Street. Looking out the window of her parents' apartment, Milena may have seen the young Dr. Kafka rushing to his work at eight in the morning or, if it happened to be his day off, coming out of “Eldorado,” a wine bar on the ground floor of a palace on Ovocná Street.