

Florian Illies

Love in a Time of Hate

to be published in October 2021

S. Fischer Hard Cover

A spectacular new account of the 1930s through the eyes of the greatest lovers of the time

While Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir eat cheesecake at the Kranzler Eck café in Berlin, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin are having wild nights in Paris, and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Frida Kahlo throw themselves headlong into passionate European affairs, Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel, and Thomas and Katia Mann flee into exile. All of this happens as the Nazis are seizing power in Germany, burning books and beginning their persecution of the Jews.

In 1933 the Roaring Twenties come to a screeching halt.

In his brilliant panorama of an époque, Florian Illies takes us back to a decade that was buckling under the pressure of political and cultural tensions. Love in a Time of Hate is an enthralling journey into the past that reads like a commentary on our own uncertain times.

translated by Simon Pare

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The moment young Jean-Paul Sartre first gazes into Simone de Beauvoir's eyes at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in the spring of 1929 is the only time he ever loses his mind. When he finally manages to arrange a date with her a few weeks later, at the start of June, she doesn't turn up. Sartre sits in a tearoom in Rue de Médicis and waits for her. In vain. Paris is lovely and warm that day, white clouds cavorting high in the deep-blue sky, and he has decided not to wear a tie as he plans to take her to the nearby Jardin du Luxembourg after tea and sail little boats on one of the pools. He has read somewhere that this is what people do. When he has almost finished his cup of tea, glanced at the clock for the fifteenth time and protractedly tamped and lit his pipe, a young blonde woman comes rushing up to his table. She says she's Simone's sister, Hélène de Beauvoir. Her sister can't make it today, sadly, and is very sorry. Sartre asks, 'But how did you recognize me so easily among all these people?' 'Simone told me you were short, wore glasses and were very ugly,' she explains.

Thus begins one of the twentieth century's greatest love stories.

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In late afternoon, when the sun peeks out again from under the low clouds and angles its oblique rays into Auguststrasse, Mascha Kaléko blinks and stops for a second, savouring the warmth on her skin.

She always knocks off at four on the dot and then runs down the stairs to the offices of the Jewish Organizations' Workers' Welfare Centre, where she has worked for the past five years. Mascha Kaléko, a natural born angel, pushes the door open and simply stands there. She lets the sunshine warm her, lets her thoughts run wild, hears the trams screeching in the distance, the beer delivery carts bumping along the streets, the shrieks of children running around the courtyards here in the Jewish quarter near Alexanderplatz and the cries of the paperboys advertising their wares at the tops of their voices. But then she closes her ears as well and just enjoys the sunlight's gentle warmth. The sun sinks behind the tall buildings around Friedrichstrasse, a few final rays catch the

golden dome of the synagogue in Oranienstrasse, and twilight finally comes. Yet 22-year-old Mascha Kaléko isn't ready to go home just yet and is drawn instead to the cafés in the west, usually to the Romanisches Café where she sits and debates in her wonderful Berlin patter and her ringing voice. Kurt Tucholsky, Joseph Roth, Ruth Landshoff and the others move their chairs closer when Mascha Kaléko arrives. They love her mop of curly brown hair, her knowing laugh, the benevolent wit that fills her eyes with a glint of exultation. They are often joined later at the Romanisches Café by her husband, quiet Saul, a scholar to the core who wears metal-rimmed spectacles and has thinning hair. This skinny man is a reporter for the *Jüdische Rundschau* and a lecturer in Hebrew; he's also madly in love. He sees the other men watching his impetuous young wife and he also sees how his wild Mascha relishes being watched, and from minute to minute, quiet Saul grows quieter and quieter still, and he orders some tea while the others start on their first bottle of wine. After a while he politely makes his excuses, puts on his hat, picks up his briefcase, bids them farewell and goes home. By the time Mascha gets back late to their flat on Hohenzollernkorso in Tempelhof, he is asleep. She gazes at him, as his earnest features softly rise and fall in time to his breathing. She goes over to the kitchen table, takes a sheet of paper and a pencil and writes him a short love poem — one of the most moving love poems ever written: 'The others are the boundless sea / You, though, are the harbour deep. / Believe me, you can quietly sleep / I'll always steer my way to thee.' She adds, 'For a man', places it on his breakfast plate and is soon snuggled up to him in bed. Tomorrow morning at six she will once more sail away to reach her offices on the other side of the big city on time. When Saul feels Mascha's body against his in the safety of her home port, he stirs briefly, reaches behind him and gently caresses her with great relief.

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No one in 1929 has yet invested any hope in the future, and no one wishes to be reminded of the past. Which explains why everyone is so recklessly absorbed with the present.

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‘Who would risk marrying a man for love? Not I,’ Marlene Dietrich states with conviction on the spring of 1929. She speaks these lines on the stage of the Komödie am Kurfürstendamm theatre in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Misalliance*, drawing luxuriantly on her cigarette and lowering her eyelids in a consummate display of languid elegance.

Then she drives home to the husband she didn’t marry for love — Rudolf Sieber. They perform *Misalliance* on a daily basis at home. She calls him ‘Daddy’, he calls her ‘Mummy’. Their daughter Maria is five. The nanny, Tamara, now shares their marital bed with Rudolf Sieber — much to Marlene Dietrich’s relief. At long last she doesn’t need to feel guilty about going out on pub crawls every night, touring the bars and negotiating the shifting sands of sexual identity. After her performances on stage or her film shoots at the UFA studios in Babelsberg, she will often come home first, take a short drive around the harbour, rearrange the flowers in the vase in the hallway, kiss sleeping Maria on the forehead, change, drink a glass of water, then a dash of fresh perfume and she floats out of the house on high heels with the first warm breath of night.

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Klaus Mann spends the 1920s adrift. Though only 23, still fresh as the morning dew, he often seems washed up. He’s desperate to be loved. But his father, stiff old Thomas Mann, can’t bring himself to forgive Klaus for living out his homosexuality so happily when he has spent his whole life so artfully suppressing his own, and so he leaves his son to wither on the vine of his outstretched arm. Once, back in 1920, he wrote that he was ‘in love’ with his son. Now, though, he hides this love from his son and sentences him instead to a life in the shadows. Later, in *Disorder and Early Sorrow*, Thomas Mann depicts his son as a ‘good-for-nothing and windbag’. Life can be one long process of withdrawal. Klaus writes a letter to his father, complaining that this mockery causes him ‘hurt’, but he isn’t brave enough to send it. His patricide is entirely literary. His novella *The Fifth Child* clearly depicts the Manns’ family life in Bad Tölz (it features all his brothers and sisters), the exception being the father, who has died a sad and premature death in the book. Of course, murder

does not heal the wounds of love withheld. In his autobiography Klaus writes of Thomas Mann: 'Of course I longed for no one's applause more than his.' But that applause never came. Thomas Mann never claps; he just clears his throat.

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Pablo Picasso paints his young lover Marie-Thérèse Walter once reclining, once standing and once seated. Then he starts all over again. He has rented a small flat at 11 Rue de Liège especially for her so that he can paint her in secret and make love to her in secret there. He kisses her and hurries home to his wife and child. No one has noticed yet, but his paintings will give him away one day. The paintbrush is a magic wand, the last means of enchantment in a disenchanted age.

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The twenties were a terrible decade for him. Everything in Berlin was too loud, too fast and too hedonistic for this lover of the half-light. He has moved into the graceless rooms of his surgery at Belle-Alliance-Strasse 12, first floor on the right, which he calls his 'retirement home'. Gottfried Benn is only forty-three at the time. Here he treats skin ailments and sexually transmitted diseases from eight in the morning to six o'clock at night, but barely any patients darken his door nowadays. 'Rarely does the doorbell interrupt my most welcome twilight,' he writes to a lover.

In the evenings he has a beer and a Kassel sausage at the Reichskanzler pub around the corner and occasionally he tries to write another poem. They never quite come together, though. The verses always have eight lines, but the words are irredeemably leaden and no publisher will print them now. At night he stands at the bedroom window, turns off the light and hopes for inspiration to return. He listens to the schmaltzy melodies coming from the music café with a terrace at the back of the courtyard. He hears couples laughing too loudly and too gratuitously, determined that tonight will end less desolately than last night. Benn tries to drink enough coffee to obtain a caffeine rush, goes two or three days without sleeping, takes cocaine: anything to arouse the primal forces of

poetry within. But they refuse to be lured out. His wife has died, he packed off his daughter to a childless relationship in Denmark and had to give up his enormous flat in Passauer Strasse, and his brother was sentenced to death for his part in an assassination; those were his ‘roaring’ twenties. Of course, he kept having affairs, usually with actresses or singers, with a preference for widows, but his rigid manner, his bouquets of violets, his refined military bearing and his reedy voice were not exactly attributes to make the wild young things at the Romanisches Café or in the bars of Schöneberg and the Kurfürstendamm swoon. He couldn’t help bowing whenever he entered and left again. Those who sought an ounce of solace — a physical or chemical narcotic — from the poet in the doctor’s coat and his unshakeable melancholia were always women in freefall, women searching for a way out, and in reality they were looking only for sympathy for the stagnant pools of their forlorn lives. Of course, his expressionist poems inspired by the pathology department and the ‘cancer huts’ had caused a furore before the war, but that was fifteen years ago. Now anyone and everyone talks of death and sex as casually as he did back in 1913. And so by 1929 Dr Gottfried Benn is a man of the past with hooded eyes; a ‘pioneer’.

On 1 February 1929 his surgery telephone rings, and on the other end of the line is Lili Breda, his current lover, an out-of-work actress and yet another falling woman, forty-one years old and drained by all her unfulfilled hopes in Benn and in life. She says she is about to kill herself and then sobs, quietly at first, then louder and louder, grief pouring out from deep inside. She hangs up. Benn runs out of his surgery and races to her flat in a taxi, but when he arrives, Lili Breda’s shattered body is lying in the street; she has jumped out of her fifth-floor bedroom window. Compassionate firemen are just laying a blanket over the dead body Benn has so recently caressed. He places a death announcement in the *Berliner Zeitung*. He organizes the funeral. None of the twenty mourners says a word as she is lowered into the cold earth of Stahnsdorf near Potsdam. Although it is only half past three, daylight is already on the wane. Benn addresses brief condolences to Elinor Büller, Lili’s best friend, then puts on his black hat, turns up the collar of his coat and trudges off with leaden steps through the light snow. He reaches the station far too early; the next train doesn’t leave for another hour. Back in his empty surgery in Berlin that evening, surrounded by the stench of formaldehyde and hopelessness, Benn realizes he has forgotten how to weep.

‘Of course,’ he writes to his close friend Sophie Wasmuth that night, ‘of course she died from or because of me, as the expression goes.’ That sobbing on the phone was the last sound he ever heard from her.

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But the next morning, after a dreamless night, Benn picks up the receiver and rings Elinor Büller, Lili’s friend, whose hand he briefly clasped by the graveside yesterday. They are on the phone for a long time. She talks, he listens; then they meet, two weeks later. They go to an exhibition on China and have a glass of wine at Café Josty. And afterwards they go to Benn’s place and become a couple. He simply can’t live ‘without it’, he says later. ‘The pinnacle of creation, the pig, the man’, as he once wrote in a poem.

They soon think about marriage — Elinor Büller for the fourth time, Benn for the second. She has some calling cards printed: ‘Elinor Benn, née Büller.’ She will never have the chance to use them, but for nine long years she remains Elinor Büller, Benn’s lover. ‘Dear child, let us not get married,’ he repeats again and again to appease her, for marriage is ‘an institution to paralyse the sex drive’. And surely that couldn’t be her aim?

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‘In many works of the Victorian era, not only in England,’ Adorno writes, ‘the force of sexuality and the sensuality related to it becomes even more palpable through its concealment. (...) there are passages of an overwhelming tenderness, such as could be expressed only by one who was deprived of it.’ The pleasure-loving son of a Frankfurt wine merchant, Adorno had almost everything he could possibly want at that time. As a student in Frankfurt, Vienna and Berlin in the twenties, he lived a life of plenty as far as his studies, his doctorate and his advancement towards professorship were concerned — and also in his relations with women. In his free time he composed and wrote music reviews. The woman he has really fallen for is the daughter of an industrialist from Berlin, Margarete Karplus, who has a PhD in Chemistry. Their fathers had made the match, as Adorno senior supplied the superfluous, heavy tannins from his winemaking to

Margarete's father, who used them to soften the gloves he produced in Berlin. Wonderfully symbolic, don't you think? Throughout her lifetime Margarete Karplus, later Gretel Adorno, would soften the heavy tannins in her husband's thought by challenging, improving and typing them up.

By 1929, however, things are far less straightforward, despite her engagement to Adorno the previous year. The tall, good-looking woman from an assimilated Jewish family has dark eyes and a mind of her own. She is close friends with Bertolt Brecht, László Moholy-Nagy, Siegfried Kracauer, Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya. Her heart is also torn between three geniuses: on the one hand the long-term, long-distance relationship with her fiancé Adorno in Frankfurt; on the other Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin in Berlin. With Bloch her relationship is also sexual, with Benjamin it is platonic and, as so often, it is the latter that sounds more like love in their correspondence.

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On 27 March 1929 Cole Porter first asks the big question: 'What is this thing called love?'

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At first Dietrich Bonhoeffer loved only God . . . and himself. Before the restless young theology student from a good Grunewald family takes up his first overseas post with Barcelona's protestant community, he writes to the pastor there, Fritz Olbricht, a tough old Bavarian, to ask how best to prepare. The preparations Bonhoeffer means relate to his wardrobe. He has heard that the weather in Barcelona is hot but changeable, which is why he is wondering what kind of suit and fabric Olbricht recommends. Does he need special sports clothes for the clubs? What suits and ties do men wear to dinner? Pastor Olbricht's anger at the vain young theologian in distant Berlin takes a full four weeks to subside. He replies to Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, regrettably, he is unable to resolve the younger man's clothing dilemmas, but being a vicar, it would certainly be useful for him to pack a cassock.

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It has been quite a spring for Bertolt Brecht. Easter Saturday saw the premiere at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm of his former lover Marieluise Fleisser's play *Pioneers in Ingolstadt*. In the programme he writes: 'This play allows us to examine specific atavistic and prehistoric emotions.'

Bertolt Brecht's prehistoric emotions, for example. In the play *Bertha*, the maid, discovers that her lover Korl not only has other women besides her, but is actually married and even has children. This was precisely the shock discovery that Marieluise Fleisser had once made regarding Brecht, and so she gives *Bertha* the following lament: 'We missed out something important. We missed out love.' Yet, shortly after the premiere, the atavistic and prehistoric Brecht moves on to his next act because, other than love, he doesn't intend to miss out on anything in life. On 10 April 1929 he weds Helene Weigel, with whom he already has a young son. He describes her as 'kind, gruff, brave and unpopular', to which one might add: the polar opposite of her husband in every respect. What does he do straight after saying yes at the registry office in Charlottenburg? He races to the station to pick up his lover. The only problem? He's still clutching the wedding bouquet – a bunch of tired daffodils. When he confesses to Carola Neher at Zoo station that he married Helene Weigel half an hour ago, an 'unavoidable' but in fact 'insignificant' act, she hurls the wilted flowers to the ground and turns furiously on her heel. She has travelled the whole way to Berlin from Davos, where she had been nursing her dying husband, the poet Klabund, only to find that Brecht has gone and got married again — and once again to someone other than her. The events of that spring come as an even greater shock to Elisabeth Hauptmann, Brecht's closest colleague and closest lover. Hearing the news of the whirlwind wedding, she tries to kill herself in her flat. Fear not, though. Six days later, as soon as she has recovered her health and her wits, she starts writing a new play and calls it — this is not a joke — *Happy End*.

She asks Brecht to write the songs for it; he'll get a third of the fee. He eventually has to call in Kurt Weill for the music, while he is happier making tweaks to the play itself with Elisabeth Hauptmann during their working holiday in Bavaria. When rehearsals for *Happy End* begin in July, Brecht provides his personal take on happy endings. The leading role in one lover's play is taken by

the other lover, Carola Neher, since she happens to be in Berlin, and his wife acts the secondary part of 'The Grey Woman' — a characterization that speaks volumes. The leading male part is played by Theo Lingen, the new partner of Brecht's ex-wife Marianne Zoff and stepfather to Brecht's daughter Hanne (I know, it isn't easy to keep track). Brecht's sadistic desire to see all his women suffering at once makes for good drama. It is now, of all times, that *Uhu* magazine chooses to ask him what he thinks about jealousy. A swaggering Brecht answers, 'The bourgeois are now the last representatives of what was once a tragic virtue.' He writes this and then smugly contemplates a plaster cast of his own face that he has positioned on his desk. If your whole world revolves around yourself, there's always a chance of getting whiplash. In Brecht's case, though, this only happens to all the other people who dare to disrupt his orbit.

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The nights he shared with Asja Lācis, the charmless Latvian communist he met on Capri, came to a most unsatisfactory ending for Walter Benjamin. As they lie there, eyes half open, still half asleep, he tries to tell her about his dreams that night. Asja Lācis 'didn't want to hear them and interrupted him, but he told them anyway.' She asks him instead finally to divorce Dora, his wife; that is her only dream. This was followed by breakfast where the mood was like a limp slice of bread.

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