

"Waiting longingly ..." Love Letters in World War I - A Plea for a Broader Genre Concept

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In literary, linguistic, and cultural studies, love letters, to which the example above might also belong, are usually elevated to be an own genre. Yet their history is located in a particular area of tension: on the one hand, we have to consider the strong normative character of such a genre, which until well into the 20th century seems to be governed by literary and aesthetic guidelines and conventions. On the other hand, the analysis of these letters must also take into account the many historically growing practices of the written form. In the research, which for a long time focused primarily on contexts of the educated middle-class and related traditions of the love letter, the first-mentioned dimension was mainly emphasized: namely that love letters are to be defined as "special aesthetic forms of communication",[1] as "cultural artifact" or as "highly coded forms." [2]

Thereby particular reference is made to the cultural imprint through specific manuals - universal and love letter manuals with many samples - which have an effect on the letter, from the salutation to the final sequence and from the prescribed external formalities to the codes of love. In the modern age, these are in turn closely linked to literary conventions of the Romantic and the concept of romantic love, which for their part - not less normative - cultivated exactly the "self" or the "individual," and thereby also the "true" preservation or "authentic" expression of emotion.

Against this backdrop, the love letter is seen as the "most intimate variety" of the private letter, which became established in the 18th century, and which had the tendency "to offer the most space to the whole of personal intimate self-expression, to manifest the self so exposed to the loved partner as in no other letter style". [3] Or the love letter is generally defined as "writing about love in a medium dedicated to love" [4]

All of this is only partly true regarding the letter quoted here from the train conductor Franz Kundera, born on 22 August 1896 in Kwitkowitz in the former borough *Ungarisch Hradisch* in Moravia (today Czech Republic). This letter indeed contains a quite explicit declaration of love, which is not the case in his previously-written letters to the then just 17-year-old Anna Mitterhoffer. The author even apostrophized the common metaphors of a "broken", "cool" or "hot heart"; because a recently received message, that his pen pal, with whom he corresponded since March 1917, was "going steady" with their mutual friend Hansl from the same village, prompted him to declare his love despite the geographic distance. The situation also brought him to write straight away in ink and perfect handwriting two small-sized sheets of paper. [5] The first - not without dispensing with the accustomed preamble - served his declaration of love and expression of his emotion and the second continued with the guiding themes of this previous correspondence. This, similar to most of the letters written after the example presented here, had revolved in particular around his work as a train conductor and - very important - sent cigarettes and the mail, which was often long awaited. Furthermore themes of mutual well-being and sleep, free time, news about acquaintances, the prospects of leave and the repeated shattering of these hopes were frequent topics of this letters. In addition, they naturally often contain references to the content of the not preserved writing of the addressee, who thus could be at least indirectly accessed. The opening and closing sequences remain almost monotonously stereotypical, only an increasing use of love formulations in the salutation ("dearest Annerl") and the farewell ("your faithful Franz greets and kisses you") and in the expression of homesickness are observable.

By majority, Franz Kundera thus wrote *no* love letters in the above sense, even if his first letters in some respects prepared the quoted letter, for example in the following ways: "Had myself photographed yesterday in Krakow and will receive the photos on 3/IV. When I get'm I will immediately send you a photo." (25 March 1917). "It pleases me much that you write me so diligently because no one writes me like you do dear Annerl. Many thanks for the cigarettes you sent me..." (26 May 1917) In their entirety, this not very elaborate style and narrative structure points, however, to a large range and diversity, a smooth transition between different forms of expression and contents of the writing on love in the medium of a letter, which also includes the exchange of everyday occurrences and things. The "low level of aestheticization" is - also according to Eva Lia Wyss, who as a linguist has engaged with romantic correspondence in the 19th and 20th centuries - no reason to exclude these letters from the genre, even if long and efficacious premises from the educated middle class remained decisive for its definition. [6] The example here, which is representative of numerous other similar letters, should in fact prompt a critical reflection about what a love letter is and how, on the basis of an open concept of the genre, its practices in popular writing could be utilized in emotion-historical approaches. [7]

A closer look at the time of the First World War, from which the handed-down correspondence of Franz Kundera comes, makes that obvious. These catastrophic years brought about, like never before, the more or



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less abrupt separation of so many people - a separation that could be "bridged," if at all, only by means of billions of sent letters, cards and packets.[8] In light of the dissolution of the familial relationships, connections, and intimacies, of the many separating (violent) experiences, the First World War thus led to a real explosion of "private" writing in the form of postal "signs of life" and "proof of love". Due to an extensive enforcement of compulsory education in the previous decades, this on the one hand was based on curriculum lessons of studied epistemological norms, which also coded the expression of emotions.[9] On the other hand, the war situation itself functioned as a catalyst for writing in countries or regions, which back then had a high rate of illiteracy in the population.[10] The correspondence here, as everywhere, was subjected to different censorship systems, above all if it traveled with the military postal service from the front to back home. The censors were primarily interested in the transmission of information about the place of deployment and the course of the war or criticisms of the military, and not in central themes of such letters and cards - namely love, family, and relatives, or friends, everyday occurrences and well-being, etc.; all topics that Franz Kundera also wrote about in the year 1917.

His example also shows, that it is not only about a written continuation of established "civil" identities and bonds; love letters - whether written in peacetime or in war - furthermore have another important function. They want to cause something, meaning either initiate a romantic relationship or continue to build, consolidate, change or even negotiate it anew. In the research hitherto, such functions were discussed foremost using the example of engagement correspondence, which was highly conventionalized up to the 1960s.[11] Therefore the writing of (love) letters, like that of personal accounts in general, is also always a performative act. In such testimonials feelings, here love and other associated emotions like caring, trust, desire, jealousy or pain and anger, are not only formulated or expressed and disclosed to oneself and others. Rather, the writing represents an act, the "doing" of emotion - motivated by desire, to initiate something upon the recipient of the letter. A (love) letter aims, metaphorically speaking, for the heart of the other, to ignite and initiate feelings there. In fact, after his explicitly formulated confession of love, Franz Kundera was successful in "winning" his pen-pal Anna. To this end, he did not even need the longed-for reunion during a visit back home, but rather "only" the letter, including his strongly formalized orientation, characterized by salutation rituals, gratitude and courtesies.

Under the auspices of the long separation because of the war, the previously mentioned performance of the love letters is therefore particularly evident. This performance requires the medium, not the longed-for physical, "real" presence, from whose absence moreover could be distracted by the fetishist character of such letters: "My only joy is when I get done with duty and see a letter from you. I always read it 5-6 times and in doing so think of you and the beautiful home." (15 June 1917) Because of such reasons his correspondence also resulted in a "getting together" and even ultimately in marriage: At the end of 1917, when the peace agreement between Austria-Hungary and the newly formed Soviet Republic was already foreseeable, Franz Kundera was finally relieved of duty from his location in Poldz-Plaszow near Krakau. He returned to Kritzendorf near Vienna, where he and Anna Mitterhofer lived. During the last year of war in 1918, he was probably allowed to be stationed as a railway employee and thus did not have to be directly enlisted in the military. The "marriage license" shows, that the pair married on 27 September 1919; Franz Kundera is indicated here as a "temporary train conductor".[12]

Also in other respects his writing from this time seems to be characteristic for questions about the context of love and war - even if they cannot be defined as field post in the strictest sense, as the author was not deployed in combat where he would have had to fear for his life, but rather worked for the railroad, which according to the War Benefits Act of 1912 (*Kriegsleistungsgesetz*) was appropriated for military purposes. Presumably for this reason he was not drafted - but only repeatedly feared "that we will soon be drafted" (7 September 1917, 12 September 1917). He was nonetheless stationed in one of the areas damaged early on by war and mandated by military jurisdiction as well as by "domestic letter censorship": in the year 1917, when Kundera wrote his first conveyed letter to "Annerl" shortly after the Russian February Revolution and the forced abdication of Tsar Nicholas II on 22 March, the war had already "raged" for a long time around the fortified city of Krakau. Galicia was, like Bukovina, already in the summer of 1914 "[converted] from a settlement area and granary of Austria to a deployment area".[13] Consequently, entire villages and cities were destroyed and occupied, there were violent emergency and (forced) evacuation drives among the civilians, who only partially returned in the course of the year 1917, directly after the recapture of other areas by the Central Powers as part of the failed Kerenski-Offensive—in a region where around 70,000 square kilometers were devastated and around 7 million people were "affected by the devastation".[14]

Of this Franz Kundera wrote virtually nothing. Although he was surely confronted by such outcomes - not least of which being as a train conductor from Krakow he, for example, drove multiple times through the directly affected cities Lviv and Przemysl - in his letters the war remains a marginal topic. The war intrudes - very rarely - only when Kundera receives, like the quoted example shows, news about the wounding of a mutual acquaintance, and otherwise only vaguely and only in the form of an improper, metaphorical way of speaking: primarily as something, that affected his vacation or redeployment wishes and therefore also led to a worsening of the situation at his location: "One must just be patient. The war will also someday come to an end then it will become better again. With going home I do not know anymore when it will happen..." (21 May 1917); "In the beginning we at least had food now it is becoming much worse as in Vienna." (24 November 1917) "The Krampus[15] will have no need to come for us anymore I think because if it keeps going like this the devil will definitely soon get us all." (5 December 1917)

Focusing on the analysis of processing methods of experienced or at least observed war violence and

destruction in such correspondence would, however, mean mistaking their primary roles, which are particularly insightful for emotion-historical questions: such letters and cards served above all the purpose of bridging relationships that were pulled apart due to war, to replace the everyday dialogue, including any redundancies, and to establish the "private" rooted emotions between the loving couples, mothers and sons, or other forms of (loving) relationships. Consequently, it is not only the many emotive phrases, expressions of longing and expressions of love - however rudimentary or unpracticed they were formulated - that had meaning, but also the linguistic varieties of the meta- or paraphrasing and of the euphemisms, which must not be a primary expression of an "outer" or also self-imposed "inner" censorship. The expressions could just as well be understood as part of a continuously attempted "doing emotion", which overall aims to make the situation in war at least endurable. Looked at it this way, writing in war functionally served the "needs" of the time also in an emotional perspective, especially because love - by disregarding other topics (including that of sexual infidelity) - could be enhanced. For the Second World War, Martin Humburg pointedly described this "cathartic" and "compensating" meaning from war correspondence as a tendency, by means of which "love [was] so to speak purified from the confrontations, which normally shape the daily interaction between people. Love becomes a pure place and in ever day life during war also becomes a source of strength and at the least psychological recovery".[16]

Certainly there were many adversities, especially in the situation of a war, which ran counter to the attempt of the writers to conjure up a written cosmos of romantic love. That is also an implied and important topic in the addressed letter from Franz Kundera as in many other letters by him: when he notes that he is not "angry" because "Annerl" has not written him for a longer time, he again establishes the "epistolary pact" that is necessary for (love-) correspondence to work.[17] This includes the tacit consent to reply to the received letters promptly, at least in the same detail or length, while respecting certain writing practices - which was often not always possible in the First World War or was frequently disturbed, as this last example jeopardizing the rising love of Franz Kundera and Anna Mitterhofer demonstrates: "Dear Annerl you must have very little time or you are maybe angry because you are not writing a response? I have written you two times and still no response. Wrote you 3 weeks ago and I received a letter from you if I am angry with you because I do not write..."(7 April 1917)

In the presented source of letters, such exclamations are extremely frequent and indicate that the postal system in the First World War more often than not did not function well. This evoked protest and reinforced the efforts of the authorities as well as the war propaganda to influence the contents of the letters for the purposes of essential war morale and the corresponding emotion regimes. The many postal service disruptions or the fact that letters, packages, and cards often were delayed for weeks or did not arrive at all, meant for those affected that in their "work" on the emotion of love experienced recurring collapse and could therefore also always fail. It made the "epistolary pact" - essential for them - fragile and evoked uncertainty, fear, doubt ... thus emotions, whose relation to the history of love in war could therefore be explored with such sources. They would also show that feelings are always contextual and could be re/constructed through different methods and means; the love letter - here open and fluidly defined - is culturally strongly anchored and therefore also in the time of the First World War a more or less effective possibility for doing so.

Further Literature

- Martha Hanna, "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I," *American Historical Review* 108 (December 2003): 1338-61.
- Eva Illouz, *Der Konsum der Romantik. Liebe und die kulturellen Widersprüche des Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007).
- Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle. Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).
- Ingrid Bauer and Christa Hämmerle (eds.), *Romantische Liebe*. Special Issue of *L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 24, no. 1 (2013).
- Renate Stauf, Anette Simonis, and Jörg Paulus (eds.), *Der Liebesbrief. Schriftkultur und Medienwechsel vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008).
- Eva Lia Wyss, *Leidenschaftlich eingeschrieben. Schweizer Liebesbriefe* (München/Wien: Verlag Nagel & Kimche AG, 2006).

[1] Renate Stauf, Anette Simonis, and Jörg Paulus, *Der Liebesbrief. Schriftkultur und Medienwechsel vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 2, 6

[2] Martyn Lyons, "Love Letters and Writing Practices: On *Écritures Intimes* in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 24, No. 2 (April 1999): 232-39, here 232, 233.

[3] Reinhard M. G. Nikisch, *Brief* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1991) 43, 15.

[4] Bettina Marxer, "Liebesbriefe, und was nun einmal so genannt wird". *Korrespondenzen zwischen Arthur Schnitzler, Olga Waissnix und Marie Reinhard: Eine literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Lektüre* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 2.

- [5] From the 44 remaining preserved letters of Franz Kundera, dated from 22 March 1917 to 15 December 1917, almost all are in pencil and composed on a four-sided sheet of paper. They are today archived as NL 75/I in the "Sammlung Frauennachlässe" (Collection of Women's Personal Papers) at the Department of History at the University of Vienna; cf. www.univie.ac.at/geschichte/sfn.
- [6] Evy L. Wyss, "From the Bridal letter to Online Flirting. Changes in Text Type from the Nineteenth Century to the Internet Era," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 9, no. 2 (2008): 225-254, hier 232.
- [7] These are posed questions from funded projects of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) "(Über) Liebe schreiben? Historische Analysen zum Verhandeln von Geschlechterbeziehungen und -positionen in Paarkorrespondenzen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts", managed by Ingrid Bauer und Christa Hämmerle, from which the available sources of analyzed letters originate.
- [8] In the German Empire alone there were up to 28,7 billion pieces of mail in circulation in World War I, in France there was apparently 10 billion, this means 4 million daily.
- [9] For example in France Martha Hanna pointed out in "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France During World War I," *American Historical Review* 108 (December 2003): 1338-61, esp. 1343-48.
- [10] For Italy Marco Mondini, "Papierhelden. Briefe von der Front während des Ersten Weltkrieges in Italien und die Schaffung eines männlich-kriegerischen Bildes," in *Schreiben im Krieg – Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, Veit Didczuneit, Jens Ebert, and Thomas Jander, eds. (Essen: Klartext Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011), 185-92.
- [11] Cf. for example Wyss, "From the Bridal Letter".
- [12] Facsimile of the marriage certificate, issued by Pfarre Kritzendorf, district Tulln, marriage register Tom. L. Fol 135, 29 September 1919, kindly forwarded by Roman Stani-Fertl.
- [13] Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914-1918* (Wien: Böhlau, 2013), 836.
- [14] Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 849.
- [15] A beast-like creature, common folklore in Alpine countries, who comes to punish children during Christmas.
- [16] Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtsoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941-1944* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), 62.
- [17] Cécile Dauphin, Pézzerat Pierrette, and Danièle Poublan (éds.), *Ces Bonnes Lettres. Une correspondance familiale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), developed from Philippe Lejeunes concept of the "autobiographic pact".

Citation

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