

Elfriede Jelinek's Family Business: Pre-conditions for Literary Production

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For a successful writing career in the past, three basic necessities had to be met besides having talent and ambition: the writer had to have domestic support—traditionally rendered by a wife; spiritual/emotional support—often fulfilled by a “muse”; and business support—usually provided by friends and societal networks. An academic research branch called Sociology of Literature focuses on the individual production process within the writing profession.¹ At the time when Jelinek had her first literary successes, one scholar theorized the possibility of such socio-literary approach:

The obvious discrepancy between perceived and actual working conditions of authors in the ‘traditional image of the profession’ is still generally valid, but at the same time a notable change in production conditions can be observed that has taken place through ‘behavioral patterns related to the media.’²

No update on traditional domestic support is mentioned even in a more recent publication (Bittner, *Beruf: Schriftsteller. Was man wissen muss, wenn man vom Schreiben leben will*)³ nor in a study from 2005 on the post-modern author.⁴ Bittner notes only in passing that a would-be writer has to watch out when selecting a life partner. The basic preconditions for a writing career, often intertwined, have rarely existed for prospective women writers. No husbands are known to me who supplied full domestic services for their wives, as promising as they might have been as authors. Also, male muses were rarely available to swoon over the attention of female writers or devote themselves to their work. Only recently women have been able to connect to networks that would promote their publications, but they still struggle to manage their business in a predominant male publishing world.

Nevertheless, in the past there were a few women writers who did well in their careers because they had domestic support even though it was not their spouses who provided the service. For instance, Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer—famous for her one hundred often performed theater plays in the mid-19th century—and dramatist Elsa Bernstein—known for her literary salon at the fin-de-siècle—had unmarried sisters who took on housewifely functions. And of course, Elfriede Jelinek had her mother.

Jelinek's life-style, which impacted her literary production, was in one aspect similar to Franz Kafka's, whom she greatly admired. They both continued to live in the comfort of their parents' home after they had become adults. Both found the arrangement at the same time oppressive and made attempts to break away; yet both returned. While Kafka had left when he died, Jelinek went the whole mile; she lived at home in Vienna with

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Ilona Jelinek until her mother died in the year 2000 at the age of 96. And although Jelinek became the wife of Gottfried Hüngsborg in 1975 and is still married to him, she did not move in with him. He remained living in Munich, and her visits were limited to a few days per month. In an interview with *Cosmopolitan* in 1985—when she had been married for ten years—Jelinek remarked that the only practical way for her to conduct a marriage was to be economically independent from her partner, and to have neither service obligations connected with a household nor care giving duties. Her husband was emancipated enough that he, too, would not expect such services from her.⁵

In order to illustrate Jelinek's attitude toward the traditional roles within a marriage or their reversal, I will present a few enlightening and at the same time hilarious excerpts from an interview conducted in June 1976 during the first German TV talkshow called "Je später der Abend", where she and the football world champion Uli Hoeneß (today the famous manager of the football club Bayern München) were the guests. As the interview reveals, Hoeneß's traditional understanding of a woman's service role in a marriage with a prominent career professional is based on his assumption that this is what women want. Jelinek's iconoclastic answers in refuting him show a very funny and ironic side of the writer.

Moderator: I would like to introduce my second guest, Ms. Jelinek. ... She is from Munich and from Vienna.

Jelinek: I am only from Vienna.

Moderator: Why do you live in both cities?

Jelinek: Because my mother and my dog are in one city and my husband in the other city.

Moderator: Ladies and gentlemen, this is Elfriede Jelinek. She is a writer, she writes radio plays and does not like to be a housewife.

Jelinek: Right, not at all.

Moderator: Well, who is doing the housework in your place?

Jelinek: Actually, we are not cleaning at all. It's incredibly dirty everywhere.

Moderator: It's your (first) wedding anniversary today.

Jelinek: We remembered it at the train station, as the train left.

Moderator: And what happened then?

Jelinek: We embraced tenderly, and then we missed the train

...

Moderator: My next guest in the studio is Uli Hoeneß. His wedding anniversary is next Saturday. You know him all; he is world champion, winner of the Europe Cup (in soccer).

....

Moderator: Mrs. Jelinek, how was getting married in your case?

Jelinek: We did it in the legally shortest form...

Moderator: Was anybody else there?

Jelinek: My mother was a witness.

....

Moderator: Why DID you get married, why so sudden?

Jelinek: ... [W]e married because we enjoyed the absurdity of it. And we try to have a marriage in which no one is dependant on the other, be it in an economical sense or otherwise. We each are doing our own thing, and are together by absolutely free choice.

....

Moderator: I have read your last novel *The Lovers, Die Liebhaberinnen*, in which marriage is simply a means for social advancement. Do you consider marriage as something that should be continued at all in our society?

Jelinek: I don't think it can be discarded. ... In my book it was important to me to show that love does not happen simply but that economic matters play a role. ... As long as women do not get the same professional education as men, marriage is simply one means for social advancement.

Moderator: Mr. Hoeneß, I could imagine that you don't quite share Mrs. Jelinek's opinion.

Hoeneß: No, I am surely not of her opinion. I once heard in an Interview with you ... that your husband would laugh at the idea of your washing his socks.

Jelinek: (laughs shyly) Both of us would be rolling on the floor laughing.

Hoeneß: That's one thing I could not abide with. ... [T]here are certain things in a marriage which the one partner takes care of and other things that the other partner one does. Washing socks, for example is part of it.

Jelinek: Your wife must do that?

Hoeneß: She MUST not do this. I have never ordered my wife to wash my socks. But before she takes them to the cleaners, she rather does it herself. I am just of the opinion that a football player who is traveling as much as I am, needs a certain secure resting point. And contrary to Mrs. Jelinek, I would like to find an exceptionally clean home when I return. ...

Jelinek: Did your wife ever work in a profession?

Hoeneß: Yes, she was a dentist's assistant and worked in her profession as long as she chose to. And one day, when it simply was too much for her—since we have a relative large house, a ten month-old daughter and a dog—she said that she wanted to leave her job. Of course, I agreed to it right away. Therefore, she feels as good today as if she were working.

Moderator: You just mentioned the dog in one breath with the child.

Hoeneß: Yes... The dog was there first, and I believe that the dog does not have to play a role that is less important. ... I want to divide our family into four.

Moderator: But you don't intend to start a movement for the emancipation of dogs?

Hoeneß: No.⁶

This is the end of the interview which, as a text, is highly complex and reveals unintended social significance related to expectations of professional people toward their spouses. Although Hoeneß never says so: he expects his wife to keep his house clean, while her potential career is insignificant to him. The remark on the emancipation of dogs carries the unspoken question about the emancipation of women. The role of the dog is clear, the role of the woman and a general attitude toward women writers as well. Jelinek's comment about the dirty apartment is less a factual statement than a metaphor for her rejection of housewifely duties. Jelinek's significance is reduced from the outset as she is introduced as a writer of radio plays—something women were known to dabble in—although she had just published a major novel. She appears like a freak in “presuming” to be a writer. The interview makes it clear that Jelinek would not accept from her partner in marriage similar support as Hoeneß does from his wife for the daily necessities of life. From her point of view, the football player is the freak. But it is clear that she sympathizes with his wife, a woman who—as a dentist's assistant—had a pretty dreary work life anyone would be happy to escape from. In her novel *Liebhaberinnen (Women as Lovers)* Jelinek lays out why women marry men like Hoeneß. Since few will ever be financial self-sufficient, they offer themselves and their services to “buy” security. Such a relationship, the novel shows, makes for a bad marriage. Jelinek on the other hand receives from her own husband emotional support and a stable intimate relationship, as evidenced by the “close embrace” (*innige Umarmung*) mentioned in the interview and the fact that her atypical marriage by now has lasted for more than thirty years.

Can Jelinek's unusual husband then be called a muse? Not in a traditional sense. The excellent biography by Verena Mayer and Roland Koberg published in 2006 implies that Jelinek had an open marriage; the couple never visited each other without prior notice. In a way Gottfried Hüngsberg was a business partner. He used to live together and work with the film team around Fassbinder in his early years (he was the sound man for some of the films and was cast in few small roles), and in time built up his own computer software design company. He established and manages Jelinek's online website, with which she could break into a new medium and improve visibility. It is one of the best and most complete writers' websites and includes roughly 1700 pages of text and 750 images. From 1998 to December 2006 it had approximately 450,000 visitors.

The concept of "the muse" could be stretched by counting the men who inspired Jelinek and/or with whom the writer had intimate relationships. Nevertheless, she surely was inspired by her earlier boy-friends who all were artists. Her earliest known friend was Wilhelm Zobl, with whom she was together in the late sixties. She had met him at the Innsbrucker Kulturwoche in 1967. He was three years younger, a composer and musicologist. As her biographers note, he stimulated Jelinek with his boisterous radicalism and his vehemence and liveliness. He had a fascinating habit of making up his own biography, claiming to be of Jewish descent and having grown up in Brazil while in fact he came from a petit bourgeois background in Vienna. His story inspired Jelinek for her first novel, *Bucolit*, 1968. Later she tried out a *Wohngemeinschaft*, a communal living arrangement with a group of male artists in Vienna. There she paired up with the painter Leander Kaiser. In this group, to which also the writer Robert Schindel belonged, she developed her political radicalism, and she adopted through them the rebellious attitude of the Wiener Gruppe (a loose literary group) against a political exploitation of language and literary form. In 1972 she moved to Berlin and lived together for a year with the writer Gert Loschütz, but he broke off their relationship when he received a stipend for the Villa Massimo in Rome. Her life with him and the other artists had been full of literary, emotional, as well as sexual experiences but also of turmoil. Now she chose a stable although totally unconventional marriage to Gottfried Hüngsberg, a man who importantly was not an artist. Without going into the significance of difficult and self-centered artistic temperaments, one might speculate that Jelinek was probably too similar to her artist-friends to remain close to them. She did not need their influence any more, she had found her own artistic voice. When Jelinek was about to marry, she wrote to her friends,

thank goodness, no artist (NEVER again!), but a scientist (electronic) who is also producing electronic music, not for artistic purposes, but for practical use (film, TV, radio play, etc.). That is very pleasant. A man from Munich, so I share my time between Vienna and Munich. It's not very far; it could have been someone from Hamburg.⁷

Since she spent only a few days per month in Munich, she needed domestic support for her Viennese home. This was provided by her mother. I quote from the biography:

Elfriede worked, her mother relieved her from daily tasks. Ilona Jelinek cooked, cleaned, went shopping, and took Elfriede's dogs Witzl and Floppy for their walks. She accepted telephone calls, copied manuscripts, took letters to the post office, received guests and provided them with refreshments after which she withdrew like a house keeper.⁸ (EJ 111)

The relationship between Elfriede and her mother was extremely deep, complex, and contradictory. Ilona Jelinek provided housewifely services, body-comfort and much more. In fact, Jelinek's talent was discovered and developed by her mother. The writer states ambiguously: "Whatever was inside me as art, my mother took it out, piano, ballet, violin, cello, composition."²⁹ It is widely known that Ilona Jelinek wanted to make a famous artist out of her daughter. Born in 1904, she was an unusual person for a woman of her generation. Since her husband Friedrich was half-Jewish and both lived a life of uncertainty during Fascism, the couple waited to have a child until after WW II, when they had already been married for 17 years and Ilona was 42 years old. As competent and ambitious as she was, she became the bread-winner during the Nazi era, which allowed her husband to study electrical engineering, a safe niche for a Jew. Ilona had started as a book keeper but rose quickly to become personnel director at Siemens Company. Before she focused on her daughter's career, she had managed her husband's affairs with a strong hand. After the war she urged him to get his Ph.D., which he accomplished when he was already in his fifties. However, when Friedrich Jelinek became mentally ill and died in 1969, Ilona Jelinek quickly shifted her full attention to the advancement of her daughter's career. Envisioning a famous concert pianist in her family, she had already prescribed rigorous piano exercises when Elfriede was a small child. The pressure of such regimen and a repressive catholic elementary school environment soon sent the child into psychiatric care because she did not sit still enough. Later she developed serious long lasting anxiety attacks, and in her late teens was unable to leave the house for a whole year. The two Jelinek women continued to live in the family home built on the hills at the periphery of Vienna, the mother one floor above her daughter.

For Ilona, Elfriede was "child, friend, patient, boss, and life partner" (EJ 113). When the fragile health of the teenage girl prevented her from pursuing a career as concert pianist, Ilona saw to it that literary magazines received the poems, which Elfriede had written as therapy during her confinement at home. Much like a manager, she accompanied her reluctant daughter to the 18th Oesterreichische Kulturwoche in 1967, and to other literary events. When Jelinek's book *Die Ausgesperrten (Wonderful, Wonderful Times)*¹⁰ had a chance to be turned into a film, the project was made possible by Ilona who supported it with 35,000 Shilling.

After her mother's death Jelinek suggested during an interview in 2004 that her co-dependency made her a writer: "I believe, language has saved my life against a mentally deranged motherly authority."¹¹ She needed her mother though, as she noted in another interview: "I rather need someone who takes me by the hand and leads me through life."¹² Ilona Jelinek has done this from the beginning. I quote from the biography by Mayer/Koberg:

Until old age Ilona Jelinek knew everything about the life of her child... Outsiders describe the relationship as a mixture of total appropriation and unconditional adoration. This mother-daughter relationship includes the silent agreement, to be united against the rest of the world. From early childhood on Elfriede Jelinek was for her mother an equal partner. Their ties became closer as she went through her anxiety attacks. At an age, when one usually cuts ties with one's parents, Elfriede Jelinek was as dependent on her mother as a small child. She stayed decade after decade with her mother, forming a "double creature", two women, who, symbiotically depended on each other, lived side by side, and through each other. (EJ 112)

Based on her conflicted mother-daughter experience, Jelinek first created such a “double creature” in her play *Krankheit oder moderne Frauen*, (Sickness or Modern Women, 1984). Restrictive societal circumstances, she suggests, cause autonomous women to be sick in our society in a way she saw herself and her mother. The lingering question is: Why did Jelinek paint such a negative picture of her supportive mother in her novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*)? Her biographers offer the following suggestion: She was sure she was not offending her mother, since she dedicated the first copy of this novel “to my dear mother” (EJ 127). The mother mentioned that she had been worried at first about what the people might think of her. Yet soon thereafter, when questioned, she would say: this book made my daughter famous, and that was all I ever cared for (EJ 127). Thus the mother seems to have understood that the novel *Die Klavierspielerin* boldly goes beyond the personal, autobiographical and aims at addressing the problems of those who left their traditional roles.

Eventually Jelinek extended her professional network on her own, and she managed superbly in stylizing herself for public media recognition. She drew attention by dressing in rather flashy clothes, often purposely in an inappropriate manner. Together with her provocative statements, she attracted intense media interest that is so important for success in the writing profession. Despite her agoraphobia there were innumerable interviews and public appearances. Most of the time Jelinek's verbal irritations as well as her provocative publications encountered a strongly negative reception. Nevertheless, she must have done something right, because or despite her public and literary image and her political incorrectness—i.e. being a member of the Communist Party until 1991—she received critical acclaim, and her books sold well.

Jelinek's literary production mode, which brought her the Nobel Prize, exemplifies that writers still need at the home front a devoted wife or a female relative. A different support system of other women writers—i.e. of Marlene Streeruwitz, who raised two daughters as a single mother, or Christa Wolf who had two daughters and a husband—might provide other models worthwhile to be looked at in order to find out how women can become successful writers without traditional assistance at home.

Notes

All translations of German quotations by Helga W. Kraft.

¹ See: Horst Knospe: Literatursoziologie. In: *Wörterbuch der Soziologie*. Ed. Wilhelm Bernsdorf. Bd. II. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer-Taschenbuch 1972, 505, or: Alphons Silbermann: Empirische Kunstsoziologie. Eine Einführung mit kommentierter Bibliographie. Stuttgart: Enke 1973.

² Wilhelm Voßkamp. „Methoden und Probleme der Romansoziologie. Über Möglichkeiten einer Romansoziologie als Gattungssoziologie.“ *IASL* 3 (1978), 1–37 IASL Online Archiv. Viewed 10. Juli 2006.

³ Bittner, Wolfgang. *Beruf: Schriftsteller. Was man wissen muss, wenn man vom Schreiben leben will* (Profession: Writer. What you need to know if you want to live from your writing). Reinsbek: Rowohlt, 2002.

⁴ Pfister, Andreas. „Der Autor in der Postmoderne. Mit einer Fallstudie zu Patrick Süskind.“

⁵ Interview with Elfriede Jelinek in *Cosmopolitan* 5/1985. See also EJ 145.

⁶ „Streit um Socken: Hoeneß trifft auf Jelinek,“ Interview with Uli Hoeneß and Elfriede Jelinek in the Talkshow “Je später der Abend” on June 12, 1976. <http://netzzeitung.de/voiceofgermany/404617.html>.

⁷ Mayer/Koberg ZEIT Jan. 06.

⁸ Citation from Mayer and Koberg's Jelinek Biography are quoted in this article as EJ.

⁹ Quoted from Gudrun Rothaug. „Lektüre auch für intolerante Jelinek-Hasser,“ *Buchmesse.hr-online.de* 08.27.2006. http://www.hr-online.de/website/specials/buchmesse/index.jsp?rubrik=18696&key=standard_document_25418252.

¹⁰ The film *Die Ausgesperrten* (Locked Out) was made in 1982.

¹¹ Quoted in Mayer/Kobert (124). Original quotation: „Jelinek im Gespräch mit Heinrichs.“ *Sinn und Form* 6 (2004) 783.

¹² Loeffler, Sigrid. „Herrin der Unholde und Gespenster.“ *Literaturen*, December 12, 2004.

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