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## Prague writer Lenka Reinerova: Kafka's Last Living Heir

Gitta Honegger

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Prague writer Lenka Reinerová: Kafka's Last Living Heir

*Gitta Honegger (bio)*

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In her book *All the Colors of the Sun and the Night*, the Czech writer Lenka

Reinerová describes her fifteen-month incarceration, most of it in solitary confinement, in Prague's infamous Ruzyně prison, from where she was released without any further explanation when Stalin died in 1953. To keep herself occupied, she would pull out single strands of her hair and knot them into delicate chains. The guard, watching her from outside through the peephole in the door, would only discern the movement of her hands. Whenever he entered to find out what she had been doing, she would drop her miniature chains to the floor and her frustrated observer would storm out as dumbfounded as before. Similarly, her stories seem to be knotted from fine, elusive threads of memories, pulled from her head and quickly rendered invisible to the reader who wants to probe deeper, beyond the threshold of uncharted pain. Later, she picks them up again to weave them into yet another story. Together, they yield an intricate patchwork of dreamlike, sometimes ghostly images and patterns that map the movements of memory across time and space.<sup>1</sup>

I first met the eighty-nine-year-old writer on 15 October 2003 at Amherst College, where she was reading from her book. Though the blazing colors of the sun-drenched mid-October day and the crisp harvest-moon night seemed a perfect reflection of all the colors suggested in the title, the author's tumultuous biography couldn't have been further removed from the autumnal tranquility of the small New England campus. Born in Prague in 1916, Reinerová survived some of the nightmares mapped out in Franz Kafka's prescient scenarios. As a Jewish communist journalist, she was hunted first by the Gestapo, and **[End Page 659]** after her return home from Mexican exile, by the newly empowered Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia. Her family was wiped out by the Nazis while she was a political prisoner in Paris.

Reinerová writes in German. Treasured today as the last Czech German-language writer, she concludes the legacy of Prague's distinguished German-language writers including Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Franz Carl Weiskopf, Egon Erwin Kisch (the "raging reporter"), and, most prominently, Franz Kafka. Most of them were Jewish; quite a few were

communists; many were murdered and forgotten, among them her mentors, colleagues and lifelong friends.

As one of the last living *Zeitzeugen*—an eloquent witness to the utopias and cataclysms that shaped the last century—she has become a much sought-after public speaker, whose most recent engagements have taken her from the University of Dakar to Amherst and Mount Holyoke College to Luxemburg, Salzburg and Paris. There a French translation of *Journey to Swan Lake*, a collection of her stories, had just come out (it was followed by a Swedish publication). In between there have been countless readings and public appearances across Germany and, at long last, her books have also been translated into Czech. (Though she is bilingual, she doesn't translate her German originals into Czech.) The recent Czech and German publications of her latest work, *Närrisches Prag* (Crazy Prague) were published back to back in Prague and Berlin.<sup>2</sup> She has also been the subject of several documentaries. Her readings in Prague, where she has been declared an honorary citizen, are always packed. She is bemused by the turnout. Her publisher tells her, "They come to *you*, Lenka, not just for the book," she told me, shaking her head. "Why do you think that is?" I asked her. "My optimism," she replied dryly, adding after a beat, "it's pleasant." Reinerová grew up bilingual in a comfortably lived-in middle-class neighborhood, Karolinenstadt, which is now the industrialized district of Karlín. She was the middle child of three sisters in a family struggling to hold on to its *bürgerliche* tradition through the economic crisis after World War I. Her west Bohemian mother's language was German, her father—a native of Prague—spoke Czech. She attended German schools, and first became attracted to communism at the age of sixteen, when she had...

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