



AND KAFKA  
AND PRAGUE

Wo also willst du weilen?  
Wo findest du die Statt?  
O Mensch, der nur zwei Fremden  
Und keine Heimat hat.

Franz Grillparzer

“Home” in quotation marks or



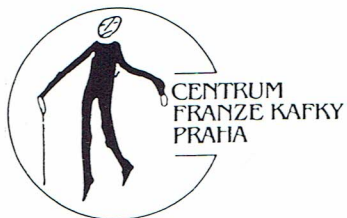


# AND KAFKA PRAGUE

Prague 1998

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Franz Kafka Publishers









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“Prag hat keine Realität,” said Franz Werfel . . . And he was right. It is a place expressing a strange state of mind, a place where in the accretion of the ages the incompatible becomes compatible, where the mysterious mixes with the grotesque, the mystical with the absurd, the physical with the metaphysical, a place of many paradoxes, that placed side by side Czechs, Germans and Jews and so gave rise to a unique culture and literature . . .





The emergence of Prague German literature from the decaying ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is one of the more remarkable cultural phenomena of the end of the 19th and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Although Austria had previously produced individual major writers, it was only with the empire's demise that Vienna and Prague witnessed the growth of traditions that gained international significance.

The mighty body of the empire was dying and gave out its best, as if it wanted to conquer lost terrain in the dominion of the mind, as if it wanted to say farewell by naming that best once and for all, labelling it as something important and unique, in which it succeeded. Of course the whole process began much earlier—with the enlightened philosophy of the Emperor Josef's time, which enabled the gradual liberation of the Slav cultures on Austro-Hungarian territory, and at the same time emancipated the German-speaking Jews in Prague. The unprecedented literary renaissance at the turn of the century might therefore be called the writing of emancipation; more precisely, a literature of emancipated writers. The fall of the monarchy did not greatly disturb it. The German majority and, not least, the Jews among them, tended and nurtured German culture in the capital of Czechoslovakia. This tiny group of a mere 42 000 German-speakers brought forth two of the century's greatest writers, Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka, and a whole galaxy of others, the Prague School.

One commonly finds the same biographical pattern among these authors. Whereas the grandparents still belonged entirely to the Jewish world of the ghetto, the fathers became successful businessmen, and the sons disavowed their parents' materialism and turned to art. On the one hand, such young men accommodated to German culture and the mechanisms of social life; on the other, they atavistically sought a way back to the spirituality of their grandparents, albeit by a secular route. Consequently, writers like Kafka focussed specifically on the limits of emancipation. More precisely, then, these writers were less concerned with freedom alone than with existence. Whether one recalls the hero's

isolation in Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* or Josef K.'s in Kafka's *Trial*, Prague German literature has persistently tackled borderline situations, existential dilemmas, isolation.

But why Prague? The competitive variety of the cultures thrown together in the Bohemian capital seems to have contributed to a sense of isolation at the edge of empire, and such marginality and alienation has been one of the dominant modern experiences. Prague contrastively juxtaposed Czechs, Germans and Jews, giving rise to a unique culture and literature, whether written in German



or Czech. But Prague also had its authentic radical tradition, that of Jan Hus. The Hussite belief in Truth united very different figures, giving Prague a dynamic continuity from Masaryk to Havel, but also embracing a man like Franz Kafka: they all share a belief in authenticity as the precondition of existence.

The fears of alienation and the quest for authenticity are two facets of the Prague experience, still evident today. Its origin can perhaps be sought in the change of the old periphery into the capital of a republic, the transformation of an imperial outpost into a focal centre. Geographically, Prague has always been at the heart of Europe, and after the fall of the monarchy it simply assumed its birthright, becoming, as the French Surrealist André Breton put it, „the secret capital of Europe“. The very position of Prague thus en-

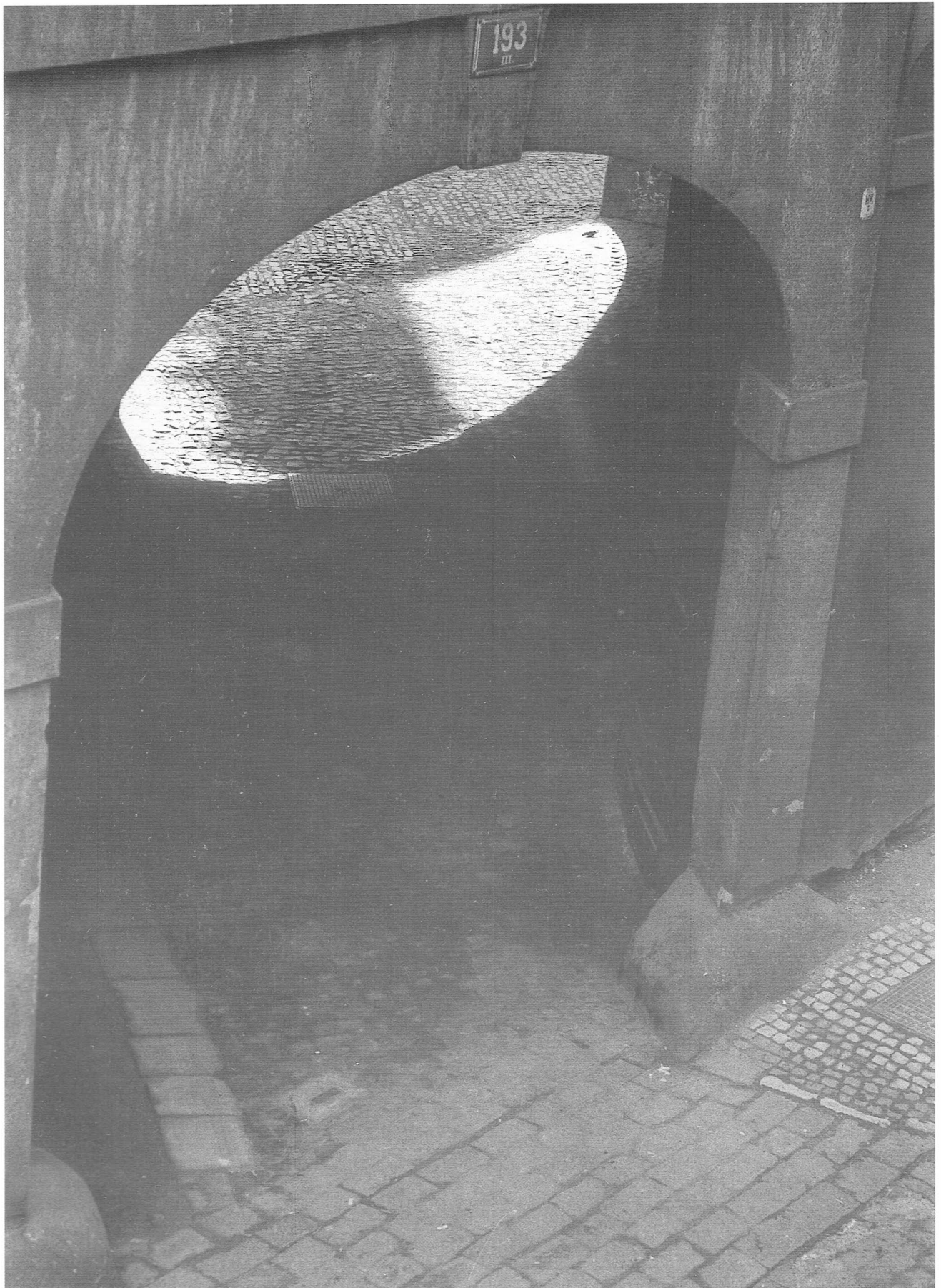
shrines a series of paradoxes which may have contributed to the existential basis of Prague German literature, and also Czech literature from Hašek to Hrabal. In future therefore, German and Czech writing from Prague will need to be seen as a single, symbiotic phenomenon, Bohemian Literature, as a distinctive literature coming from a single source, a many-layered Central European rarity.

Prague's location at the crossroads of Europe and the structure of the town are reflected in its literature and the very shape of its ideas. Other towns divide interior and exterior space. They separate houses, streets, avenues, squares and so on. But Prague combines public and private space by providing links and communication via innumerable passageways which run through the houses from one street to another. From such geography arises the world of the *Trial*, where the Law penetrates every part of the town and emerges unexpectedly in mysterious attics. Indeed, this structure reappears, mystically transfigured, in Rilke's idiosyncratic idea of a *Weltinnenraum*, a 'world inner space' that connects all things.

Even the homes in Prague seem different. Apartments are rarely divided up by corridors. Rather one room leads straight to another, as in the Samsa household in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa, the man turned beetle, is bound to his family and his home. Indeed, his unique dilemma may also serve as a symbol for the paradoxical character of Prague: both he and his society are a logically impossible hybrid, compounded from mutually exclusive existences. Thus, the entire habitat of Prague expresses a peculiar habit of mind. The physical merges with the metaphysical, and this can lead to mysticism, fear, or both, a mysterious mysticism of terror.

Attempts to define Prague literature often lead back to this same idea, to the mysterious and the grotesque, encapsulated in the term "magical Prague". Whether one thinks of Franz Werfel, who asserted that "Prag hat keine Realität", or Paul Kornfeld, who called the town a "metaphysical madhouse", one always meets a sense of the absurd, which outside Prague (and recently





in Prague itself) has come to be known as "Kafkaesque". But in Prague, the absurd is the paradoxical condition of human existence.

One of the absurdities which lies at the heart of the Prague experience is that, by the very variety of its cultures, it was a place of homelessness, which could never provide a clearly defined home for its writers. Rilke left its confines. Meyrink was driven out. Kafka, too, finally escaped. It was a Paradise which expelled its children in order to possess them.

Paul Kornfeld encapsulated this dilemma in a trenchant aphorism: "The gate through which Man was chased out of Paradise lead straight to a police-station." Expulsion and exile have indeed been a constant theme of Prague's literature: witness Rilke's *Prodigal Son in Malte*, or the deportation of Karl Rossmann in *Amerika*.

Finally, the metaphysical exile of Prague German literature was experienced as enforced exile by the last generation of Prague Jews, who es-

caped from fascism. "Thou shalt not dwell" is the new commandment in H. G. Adler's novel, *The Journey*, and the youngest Prague German poet, Franz Wurm, reiterates the agonizing problem: "We have no houses; no-one could be found to build them." Precisely because of its variegated history, Prague has often been both a lost hope and a promise, a dream, a future.

Jeremy Adler





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Undoubtedly the greatest and today the best known author from the sphere of Prague German literature is Franz Kafka.

Interest in this writer who, during his lifetime, was known as a writer only to a few of his closest friends, is not dying down with the passing years, rather the contrary.

Dozens of tourists undertake the long journey to Prague only to walk in places where K. walked.

A fashion? That as well.

But there are other reasons. For instance that not a single one of his works allows of an unambiguous explanation.

Every reader, every time he reads them, assimilates and experiences them as his own intimate affair, something of vital importance for him.

The places where K. walked are the scenes of people's conversations not only with Kafka, but mainly with themselves . . . Who was this K. really?





If we look at one of his portraits we see the face of a young man, a little childlike, a little asymmetrical, but a beautiful and interesting face. The man it belonged to was fairly tall, a good oarsman and swimmer, who loved making long trips and planning them in detail. We see a face that captures us at first sight with its inner vitality, its intensity of expression, so that in group photographs it seems to stand out from the picture and push the others back to the role of mere background. We see the face of a man who was considered a pleasant companion, entertaining with his wealth of ideas that were soberly and soon conveyed. He loved laughing, he loved making others laugh. For him nothing was ordinary or unnecessary, he took each involuntary movement or word as part of the general order and sense of things, he expressed his opinion on everything exactly and yet with a delightful naturalness . . .

That was the “daily” face of Franz Kafka, or more precisely his likeness as seen by the majority of his contemporaries. An exemplary clerk, a charming though rather taciturn man, always sympathetic, always showing a lively interest in inspiring ideas, thoughts, plans. Admirers who know him only from his books see him rather as a sorrowful figure, who even during his contact with people—who rather crush than interest him—is drowning in sadness and existential anxiety. The truth is that he did not confide his inner struggle and search to the public. This second face of Franz Kafka was known only to a few of his closest friends and then of course to his works.

Two strong poles were mingled in Kafka’s personality, two family traditions. From his father’s family he inherited toughness, a capacity for hard work, a sense of duty and responsibility, and from his mother perceptiveness, delicacy, a sense of justice and an inner restlessness. He was brought up in the patriarchal spirit; it’s hard to say whether discipline was harsher in his German secondary school, renowned for its severity, or in his own family.

Kafka would have liked to ingratiate himself with his father, fall in with his wishes, equal him. But that would have meant taking a step he was unable to take: it would have



meant changing his nature, denying everything he believed in, hoped for, considered important. And so he lived in a kind of constant vicious circle. His relationship to women—or more exactly to marriage—was equally complicated. He was not excessively shy, his Diaries show that he made intimate friends easily. But he could not make up his mind to get married. On the one hand he was convinced that a truly human life could only be fulfilled in the family:

“To marry, found a family, accept all the children that come, keep them in this uncertain world, and even guide them a little, is, I am convinced, the utmost that a man can achieve.” But there were other forces within him that battled with this reasonable knowledge: “I am mentally incapable of marrying,” he wrote in a forty-page Letter to his Father, never sent. “As soon as I decide to get married I cannot sleep, my head is on fire day and night, life can no longer be called life . . . Marriage is closed to me, because there you rule. I sometimes imagine a map of the world spread out, and you, lying diagonally across it.”

Of course it was not only the idea of that weighty patriarchal model that deterred Kafka from an unambiguous decision on the matter of marriage. Although he longed for a family and needed to find a natural background in it, at the same time he feared that it would make it impossible for him to write, as he could only write in complete seclusion. And so at the moment when marriage—as

one of the natural needs of life—stood opposed to writing—as a condition of existence—he chose the second. That is why his engagement to Felice Bauer twice came to grief, that is why he did not oppose his father, who considered the idea of his marriage to Julie Vohryzková a mésalliance, that is why he fled from a passionate relationship with Milena Jesenská. Only when he came to know Dora Dymant did all his former hesitation dissolve. But then less than a year of life was left to him . . .

The secondary school he attended boasted of the fact that only twenty-five per cent of the students ever reached the final examinations, so the very fact that Kafka completed his school education shows that he was a good student. Weak pupils did not study in the Kinský palace, which meant for Franz—besides no small psychic tension—that he entered a very select and in many ways inspiring company.

After graduation he could set out on an academic career. He knew what he wanted from his future employment: peace and quiet, together with a position that would not needlessly wound his self-respect. He tried chemistry, law, Germanic studies, finally to return to the Faculty of Law and complete his studies with success. His decision to read a branch that he had previously called “spiritual sawdust” was certainly motivated by a longing to gain what most graduates could boast of: independence of their families.

His complicated relationship with his father had a great influence on Kafka’s life and works. He shared some values and characteristics with him, but in everything else he was essentially different. He was not—as his father was—a self-centred personality, who determines the rules and subjects his surroundings. He did not want to be “a successor to the throne” in the family business, as his father wished, he did not feel the need to own, to govern, to organize things. But the explanations of experts about an entirely negative relationship, about paternal tyranny and Franz’s suffering, will not hold water. Franz was what is the most important of all in a Jewish family, the only son; it cannot be supposed that mutual lack of understanding did not worry his father too. Those two,







despite evident good will on both sides, simply missed each other, as only two beings of different character and opinions can.

It was the year when he first managed to escape his father's influence and the whole Prague environment, the year in which he celebrated his fortieth birthday. As if death, that liberates from all the bonds of life, loosened first the one that prevents life.

In 1923, in an advanced stage of tuberculosis, Kafka decided to enter the marital state with Dora Dymant, a girl from a Chasidaean family, twenty years younger than himself, started again to learn Hebrew and thought of their going together to Israel. The bride's father consulted a rabbi and he forbade the wedding. Only a few months of life were left to Kafka and Dora looked after him till the end . . .

Life is not a collection of biographical dates, facts and events. Kafka's passionate need to write, to create his own world, to search for the most truthful way of self-expression—these are more significant proofs of his human dimensions than any biographical facts. The decisive moments of Kafka's childhood, the problems of his relationship to his father and to women, like his relationship to his job and to society, formed a dynamic system in him, igniting a creative imagination and subjecting all observations and all experience to his own deep inner examination, that might appear externally to be suffering, scepticism or self-sacrifice, but was a natural part of his personality. That is why in Kafka's works strength and weakness are intertwined, rising and falling. Max Brod wrote that the one and only category according to which it was right to judge Kafka's life, and so too his works which are indivisible from him, was the category of holiness, or rather belief in the world of right. "In everything he came in contact with Kafka sought what was important, what came from the world of truth."

This longing is projected in his style. Beneath that crystal—clear, comprehensible and almost mathematically exact language float dreams, visions, immeasurable depths. "Reading a few of Kafka's sentences," writes Brod, "one feels

the language, feels a breath of sweetness never experienced before. The cadences, the parts of sentences seem to be ruled by mysterious laws, the little pauses between groups of words have their own architecture, melodies can be heard that are not of the stuff of this world. Kafka is perfection in motion, in current."

Absolute truthfulness was one of the most important signs of his character. Search, a passion for detail, specificity and genuineness were on the one hand a source of his spiritual torture, on the other that silent aura that he spread around himself in society and that Brod describes: "There was a great hopelessness in him and a will to build, and these did not cancel one another out, but ascended in immensely complicated forms."

Kafka's soul was made of delicate fibres and its movement was as sensitive as a chemist's scales, that distinguished and judged, made him a friend who could be turned to for advice and understanding, that taught him to sympathize even with ordinary people, without allowing him to submit to sentiment. And it was just this delicate and vulnerable mechanism that often prevented his making a fundamental, absolute decision. Kafka was always afraid that he might lose that inner tension, consciously formed by a dualistic conception of life, that drove him according to the autonomous laws of creation. And so in his job he took on clerical drudgery, to maintain literature pure, his prayer. And for a long time he understood his relationship to women in the same way. He promised himself to Felice Bauer, who could never understand him and represented for him only "an anchor to reality". The course of his gradual opening up towards womanhood seemed to go hand in hand with his being released, thanks to illness, from the bonds of his exhausting employment. His first real love affair is thought to have been his love for Milena Jesenská, who inspired him, though of course at the same time he was terrified by her, as he was terrified by chaos. His relationship with Dora Dymant, branded with the seal of death, is unique in that this girl was able to give him the spiritual life that he desperately needed. She took him back to

the roots of Jewish culture, and for the first time he felt firm ground beneath his feet . . .

But this help came too late for Kafka. Darkness was gathering both over him and over European Jewish culture. Soon men in tight-fitting black uniforms, with buckles, buttons and belts, closely resembling the two messengers in *The Trial*, were to enter unannounced all homes where Jews lived and take away their inhabitants to a trial that not even Kafka's immeasurable fantasy could invent . . .

So who was Franz Kafka?

We get closer to him through his works, which he wrote and later ordered to be burnt. We get closer to him through the memories of his friends, who understood him to a certain extent, but further, beyond this "extent" of theirs, did not comprehend him. We look at photographs, a face for ever petrified in front of the lens, and somewhere in our consciousness a ghost involuntarily emerges. We ask the ghost who he was, we try to apprehend him. But to apprehend such a man as Franz Kafka requires us to forget all the photographs and categories according to which we usually judge those around us, and to feel the dynamism of a consciousness stretched between the two poles of a contradictory human life.

Jan Hančič



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Kafka's life in his office is usually either pushed by his admirers somewhere into the background as something quite negligible, a necessary evil and needless waste of time, that kept the writer, for no good reason, from his creative work, or else, on the contrary it is exaggeratedly stressed as the reason for his anxieties and spiritual crises, and so the main source of his poetic inspiration. Even though he had a contradictory relationship to his work at the office, so that both these views are in a way true, Kafka was in the first place a naturally creative man, conscientious and responsible. Whatever he did, even if it was the most routine of clerical jobs, he saw to it that it should lead somewhere and have some sense. Despite the fact that it was certainly not his inner ambition, let alone the main aim of his life, he became an exemplary official, respected by all, and—however incredible it may sound—one of the important figures of the Czech insurance world.

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When at the age of twenty-three Kafka found himself in front of the Carolinum as a newly-fledged doctor of law, he considered the kind of job that would allow him to get his breath after the marathon of the examinations. He didn't have much choice, unpaid practice at court for a year was obligatory. This afforded him enough time to realise that a career as a lawyer did not, after all, attract him. But he did not for a moment consider going on studying and being supported by his parents. So on 1st October 1907 he started working at the Prague branch of the Assicurazioni Generali insurance company, which was a renowned aggressive firm with its headquarters in Trieste and branches in various parts of the world. He hoped that through this firm he would get to know the world. But the facts were quite different: bad pay, long working hours, unpaid hours overtime, learning Italian in the evenings and two weeks holiday in two years. He gave notice.

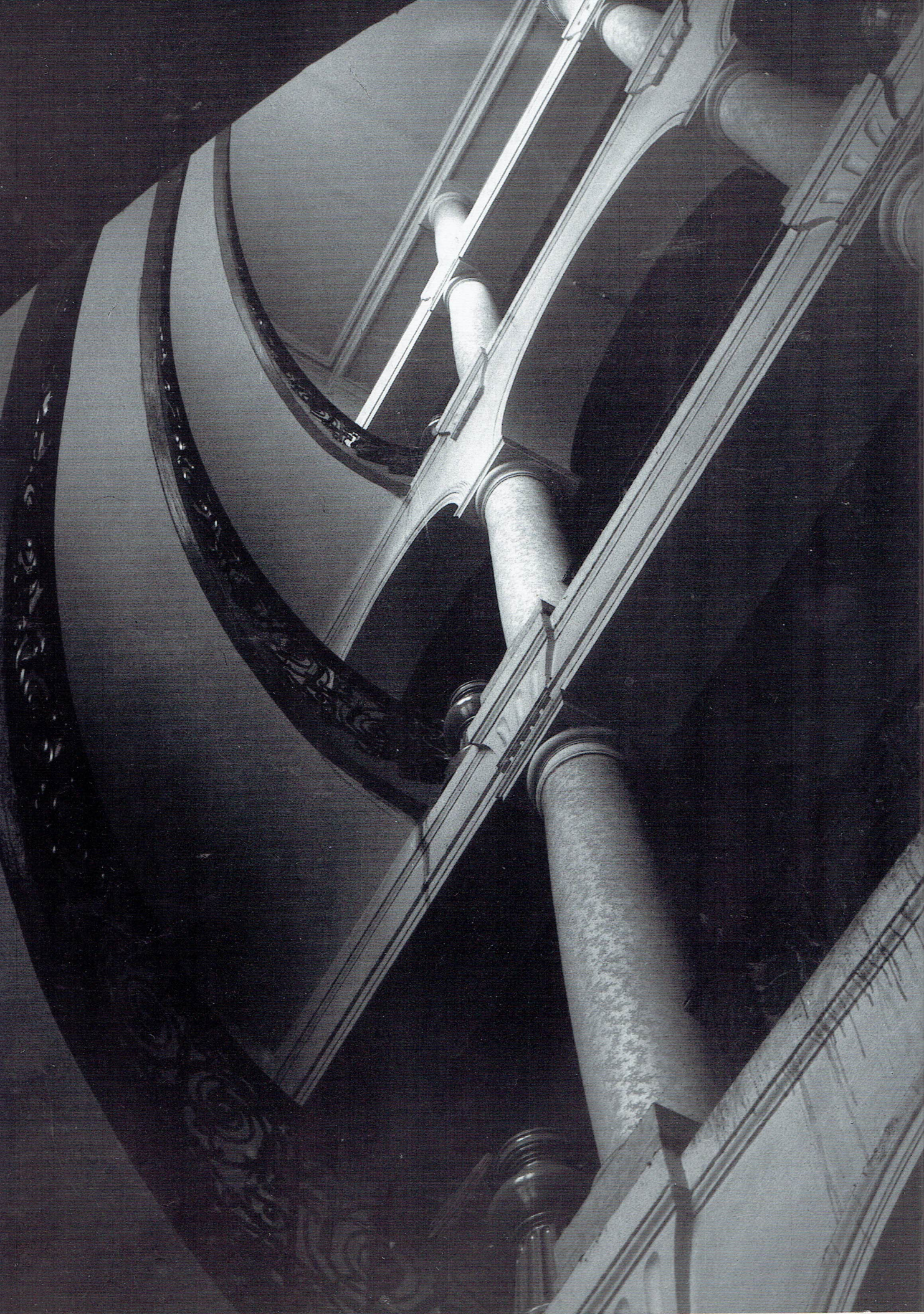


For some time he tried in vain to get a job with the Post Office, and then he was taken on as an assistant clerk by the Workers' Accident Insurance Company of the Kingdom

of Bohemia in Prague, with its headquarters in a magnificent building in the street called Na poříčí. As a Jew he would not have had much chance of being accepted, if it had not been for the father of his fellow-pupil Příbram, who put in a good word for him. (Only later he realized that he had served somebody as an alibi, and that this should not occur again.)

The insurance company that the young Kafka had joined was no fossilized bureaucratic colossus, rolling along the well-worn rails of official business. It was a lively and important institution that helped to solve the situation in which, with the growth of machine production, the accident rate was rapidly rising. Insuring workers was at that time a complicated legal, economic and, for Kafka, human problem. Much could be done there and Kafka's superiors were men who were keen on the cause, experts and educated people. His highest direct boss, Dr. Ró-







bert Marschner, was a cultured man who lectured at the German Technical University, an enthusiastic admirer of Goethe, also interested in Nietzsche. In one of his letters to Felice Bauer, Kafka recalls how he and Mr. Marschner read Heine's poems in the office while servants, heads of departments and applicants impatiently shuffled their feet in the ante-room.

Kafka was also on good terms with his other superiors, Eugene Pfohl, chief inspector and his direct boss, Dr. Fleischmann, an enthusiastic insurance expert, and with Dr. Příbram, already mentioned, the father of a former school-fellow, though with him he was always a bit embarrassed.

For these men insurance was a life-long interest and fulfilment. Not so for Kafka, who systematically divided his life between his employment, which was a means to cover his expenses, and literature, which was his mission and prayer. Despite this his job became one of his most important subjects, and on the other hand, he made use of his literary abilities in writing annual reports, drafting lectures and evaluations. Kafka, who wanted to avoid journalism because it was slavery, paradoxically returned to it through his arti-



cles "From the life of an insurance company".

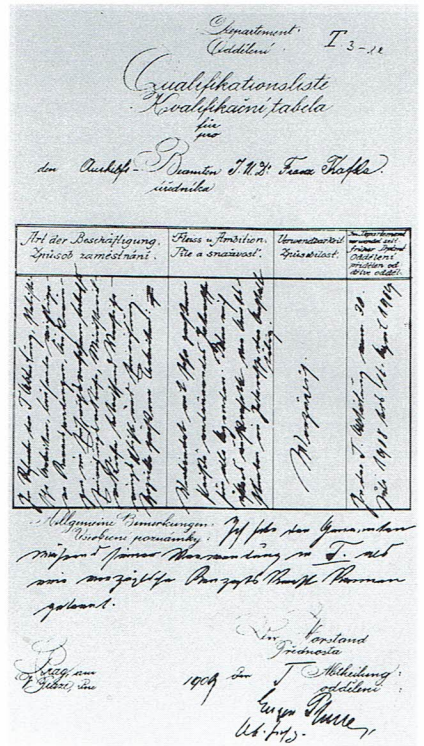
Once Kafka sent his excuses to Pfohl, saying that he couldn't come to work (he had been writing on the Friday and all night on Saturday), and he wrote that he expected to be fired for this lapse. But Pfohl showed understanding for him. He had discovered that he was an excellent hand at drafting letters etc., and it was probably he who arranged for Kafka to be promoted after a year, and again after another six months. They required perfect work of him and he wanted to hand in perfect work. He soon cultivated opinions and came to know his way about insurance problems. He was entrusted with a special duty, "accident prevention", which he set about with verve. His essay Measures for the Prevention of Accidents reflects a feeling for drama and existential involvement: "... the work was done in the knowledge of constant danger that could not be avoided. A supremely careful worker could perhaps see to it that one of his knuckles did not jump over the object he was machining during the work, but danger mocks all carefulness. Even the hand of the most careful of workers had to get into the gap between the knives when there was a slip or— which often used to happen—when the wood was thrown back ..."

It is a passionately involved style. As a sensitive man Kafka experienced the pain of human suffering,

even though it came to him as an insurance matter, and so he became one of the founders of initiatives for introducing protective measures. His social feeling can be seen even more clearly in a later article on work in quarries, which he sent his fiancée, Felice Bauer, as an important document. He writes there about alcoholism in the quarries, saying that the quarry owner is often also the owner of the local pub, where the workers spend a third of their wages, he writes of the demoralization and poverty of the workers' families.

In 1911 it became obligatory to submit information on wages to the insurance company, and this revealed that firms paid less than they should. Kafka wrote passionately about this in a series of articles for the Dčín newspaper Tetscher-Bodenbacher Zeitung. He believed that he would find the solution and contribute towards removing the resulting problems. Despite the fact that he was speaking in the name of his superiors and the institution he represented, these articles were his personal contribution and meant intervention into the economy, sociology and technology of that time.

The ideas in Kafka's official writings are always clearly arranged and his language shows an exact know-







ledge of the technical terminology of insurance. He always sees the problems he describes as solvable, sometimes he can regard the situation humorously. In one of his letters to Max Brod he wrote: "All the kinds of jobs I have to shoulder! In the four districts I lord it over—not to mention my other work—people fall drunkenly from scaffolding, into machines, all the beams collapse, all embankments crumble, all ladders crash to the ground, whatever is lifted up falls down, whatever is laid down on the ground people stumble over. And it makes one's head ache to think of all those young girls in china factories who keep on falling down the stairs with towers of dishes in their arms."

So not only was Franz Kafka successful in his work, but he became an outstanding personality of the Czech insurance world. Evidently this is a confirmation of the rule that a creative man is able to take an active share in and reshape any environment in which he finds himself.

But gradually the need became more urgent to fulfil himself in what Kafka considered his real profession. Writing became a vital necessity for him, and he felt ever more clearly the results of the dichotomy he had chosen. At that time he wrote to his friend Brod: "... I know that everything in me is ready for poetical

work, and that such work would be a heavenly exhilaration for me and true awakening to life, whereas here in the office I must, for some wretched document, deprive my body, capable of such bliss, of parts of its flesh."

When in March 1913 he was proposed for the position of secretary of the insurance company, he complained in a letter to Felice Bauer: "It serves me right... I have no plans, I just go rolling on." Here his working ambitions ended. He continued to fix everything carefully, sometimes he was even proud of the fact that he had everything in order, he wrote articles, but that was all. He worked like that—in an exemplary way but without enthusiasm—for several years. He was one of three deputies in a department with a staff of seventy and was responsible for the most complicated and most unpleasant matters.

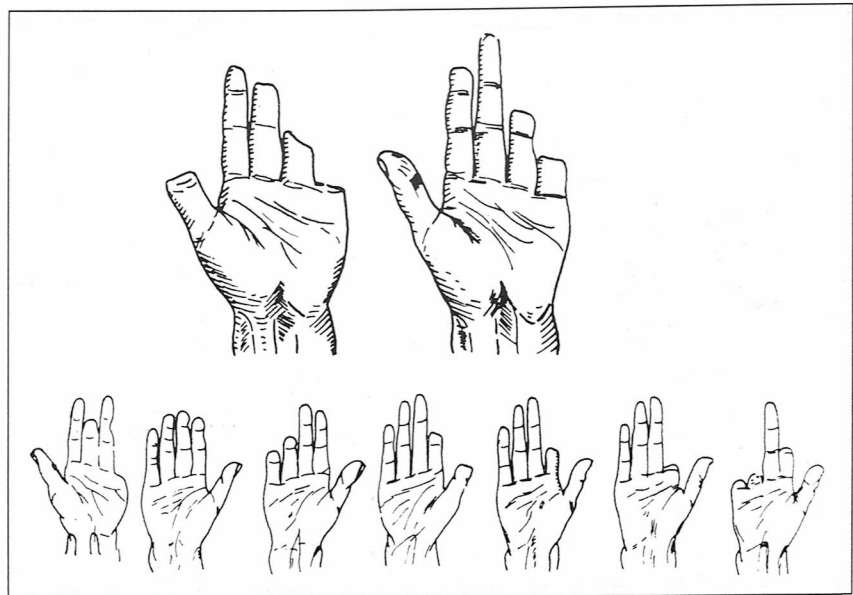
During the First World War Kafka's work increased and his working hours were prolonged till six in the evening. In addition he looked after those who had suffered war damage. He wrote the text of a proclamation for the founding of a German society for setting up a neurological sanatorium for soldiers and others. In 1916 he complained to Felice: "I am as desperate as an imprisoned rat. I can't sleep and my head aches." He wrote to his boss, who did not want to let him go, and then to the director. He asked for unpaid leave or



free time so that he could enlist in the army. On the basis of this request he was given three weeks special leave.

In 1917 the first unmistakable signs of pulmonary tuberculosis showed themselves. He wanted to retire, but was not allowed to. He became an official on holiday, and this stretched out till May 1918. After the declaration of the Czechoslovak Republic the management of the insurance company was taken over by Dr. Bedřich Ostrčil. Marschner and Pfohl were dismissed. Although Kafka was still appointed secretary on 19th December 1919, he could no longer work. He was pensioned off from 1st July 1922.

Despite the distaste that Kafka expressed for work in the insurance company, and which from a certain time he undoubtedly felt, he always

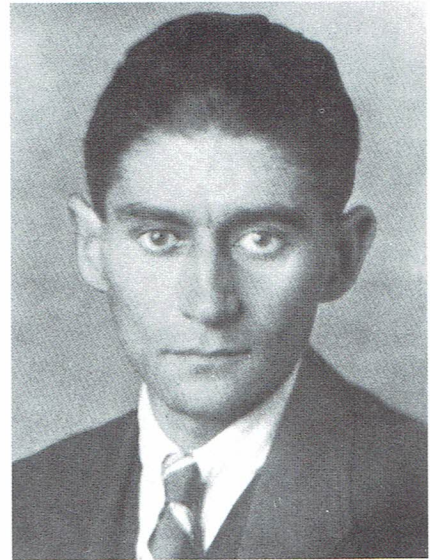




remained a very responsible worker. He had an unusual sense of order and work discipline. Also the insurance world undoubtedly stimulated his literary work all the time. From there he drew the knowledge of the self-motion and inertia of things, there signatures turned into mighty weights that determine fates, there, in files of unfinished business, lurked the ghosts of applicants. Kafka experienced the surrounding world intensively and so too the insurance world, his consciousness formed statistical indexes and phenomena into a whirlpool, he asked for the sense and examined the semantics of his office. The dichotomy of

the world of business and the world of literature, and his original premise that these two worlds were incompatible, led in the end to his office work becoming one of the peak inspirations for his creative work. Despite the fact that during the last years of his time there he hated his office, when he was ill he took it as part of his life and even had the feeling that he had achieved something there. And his assumption about those two worlds turned out to be right: it helped to create tension and a climate in which literature became a necessity.

Jan Hančil









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Kafka's name is connected with Prague in every possible way.  
Kafka and Prague are almost two inseparable ideas nowadays.

But what the poet's real relationship was to his native city,  
whether Prague was a mother to him, or more of a mother-in-law,  
a shelter or rather a snare, is a question few people ask.  
Yet the whole of Kafka's work tells that his attitude to Prague  
was always ambiguous, that he loved and hated her,  
that he spoke of her with tenderness and also with biting irony,  
that he saw her as his home and his prison,  
as a symbol of the human longing to break out of bonds,  
free ourselves from what attracts us most . . .





In the works of his highly respected fellow—countryman Adalbert Stifter, Franz Kafka would come across suggestive descriptions of a happy childhood spent in the free nature of south Bohemia. Perhaps clearest in his memory was a picture of lonely summer days spent in the ruins of a castle, to be found in Stifter's Forest. That delightful vision when one reads a favourite book, listens to the quiet rustle of the grass, looking now and then through the crumbling windows of the ruin at the blue sky and feeling the touches of the sun's rays.

These delights did not belong to Kafka's childhood world, and he called the happy being who had lived through such childhood days—evidently inspired by Stifter's poetical feeling for nature—a small inhabitant of a ruin. He contrasted this with "the world of the city": "... do you perhaps think I grew up in some sheltered place?" he wrote in his Diaries. "Not at all, I was brought up in the midst of a city, in its very heart... I should have been a small inhabitant of a ruin and listened to the cries of the ravens above me. I could have shivered with cold in the light of the moon, I could have been burnt by the sun..."

Even here there is an accusation of the city surroundings as the opposite of the dreamed-of, magical world of nature, an accusation that further deepens the conviction that the way he was brought up harmed him in many ways: "... There are my parents and relations. The fact that they harmed me out of love only increases their guilt, for how much they could have given me out of love." Of course other people have an influence on upbringing, not only parents and relations, and so this all-inclusive, universal accusation of Kafka's aimed at the "world of the city", is against a childhood world that is quite thickly populated: "and among them one quite particular cook... then the family doctor, a barber, a helmsman, one beggar woman, a stationer and a swimming instructor. Also strange ladies from the city park, of whom one would never have thought it... In fact there are so many of them that I must take care not to mention any one twice."

This universal accusation can apply to an arbitrary number of people



who somehow participated in the spiritual wounding of a man. "This accusation pierces the whole of society like a dagger," writes Kafka. This is undoubtedly the society of Prague at the turn of the century, as perceived by a child who came from the family of a country Jew and who, in surroundings that were becoming more and more Czech, was brought up in German; a child who was linked to this society by communal everyday events and yet not seldom met with various expressions of anti-German or anti-Jewish feeling. When Kafka expressed his "accusation" many years later he did so in the name of that child.



But it would not be he if he did not turn this accusation, that "pierced the whole of society like a dagger" against himself in a spiral of tangled logic: "But on top of it all it is I myself, I, who put down my pen to open the window, who is perhaps the best helper of those who attack me. Actually I underrate myself and so overrate others... When I am overcome by the pleasure of accusations I look out of the window... There is no doubt that the policeman, black from top to bottom, with the yellow glitter of a badge on his chest, recalls nothing so much as hell, and with similar thoughts to my own, he observes a fisherman who suddenly—is crying, has hallucinations or is his float bobbing?—he leant over the side of the boat." A single look from the window of the house At the Sign of the Ship down to the river Vltava and the Čech Bridge, at a fisherman and a policeman, shows Kafka that only in such a broadly conceived accusation, including even the guilt of his own doubts and underestimation of himself, does the form and dimension of the Prague climate acquire a clearer outline.

These and further entries in his diary express Kafka's contradictory attitude to his native city, an attitude that is usually called "hateful love". In a letter to Oskar Pollak, a school-fellow with whom he made friends before he got to know Max Brod, Kafka wrote: "Prague will not let us go. Not one of us. This dear mother has claws... We should set her on fire from both sides, from Vyšehrad and from Hradčany. Then perhaps we should be released from her."

The apparently paradoxical fact that the Czech "dear mother Prague" had, for so many of her German-Jewish sons, an embrace not only anxiously protective, but also clutching and imprisoning, that her pampering maternal arms ended in siren-like talons, left more than a trace on Kafka's work. This contradictory attitude and longing to escape from her embrace was strongest at the time of the pogromist mood against Germans and Jews in 1920, in which Masaryk's opponent, the then Mayor of Prague Bax had no small share. Kafka wrote about this to Milena Jesenská: "I now spend whole afternoons in the streets and am bathed









-looking people were chased through the streets. Kafka had been in Berlin only a few weeks. He tells his sister Ottla of these events, which he heard of from the newspapers: "If I had not gone away then, today I certainly wouldn't. Did I really go away at all?"

Yet despite all the "hateful love", Prague is present in the works and reflections of Franz Kafka more than in the works of many other authors who made use of Prague "material", either in the local patriotic or the visiting tourist sense. And few people, not excluding the young Rilke, could write of Prague with such tenderness and intimacy as Kafka did in one of his letters:

For Kafka the fist in the emblem becomes a symbol of self-destruction. "A German Prager who departed in time is quickly and radically expatriated," says Franz Werfel. But on the contrary in *The City Emblem* it says: "... yet the people were already too closely linked together to be able to leave the city."

For the liberal island of Prague Germanity, especially for its Jewish majority, the "prophesied day" of destruction came in 1938, with the disintegration of Czechoslovakia. Whoever did not "depart in time" fell into the hands of Hitler's agents and executioners. In October 1938, in the period between the Munich dictate and the occupation of

in anti-Jewish hatred. 'A scabby race' I heard Jews called one day lately. Doesn't it stand to reason that one leaves a place where one is so hated? ... The heroism that consists in enduring in a place at any price is the heroism of cockroaches, that won't be exterminated from the bathroom either ... I have just looked out of the window: mounted police, gendarmes with fixed bayonets, shouting, scattering the crowd, and up here the odious shame of living constantly under protection."

Perhaps it was just these experiences that led Kafka in 1922 to the ironic expression: "Prague, my 'homeland'." The inverted commas that he gave this phrase, which must have been just as shaming for him as for us, many of his successors, he certainly felt much earlier, in 1914, when he labelled Prague in his Diaries as "the greatest wrong that ever happened to me". And it was probably just these inverted commas that made him later, when he had decisively refused "Vienna, which I hate and where I would have to have been unhappy", seek a way out in Berlin, which offered the chance "to free all his energy".

But the curse that was one of the reasons for his leaving Prague followed on his heels. On the 5th and 6th November 1923, only a few days before Hitler's attempt at a putsch in Munich, a pogrom broke out in the capital of the Reich and Jewish-

Menschen, die über dunkle Brücken gehn,  
Vorüber an Heiligen  
Mit matten Lichtlein.

Wolken, die über grauen Himmeln ziehn  
Vorüber an Kirchen  
Mit verdämmernden Türmen.

Einer, der an der Quaderbrüstung lehnt  
Und in das Abendwasser schaut,  
Die Hände auf den alten Steinen.

In the late autumn of 1920, at the time of the unrest and expressions of anti-Jewish hatred in the Prague streets already mentioned, Kafka wrote his *City Emblem*, a parable ending with the words: "All the songs and sagas that originated in this city are filled with a longing for the prophesied day when the city will be destroyed by five successive blows with an enormous fist. And that too is why the city has a fist in its emblem."

The hand with the sword in the Prague city emblem, originally intended to be meant as a symbol of the successful defence of the city, was earlier too explained as a symbol of aggression—by Egon Erwin Kisch.

Prague, Berthold Viertel wrote a touching necrologue for this "world of yesterday". "... One part of ancient European culture is dying, yet another. Many talents came from this island of almost too liberal learning and morals. The eternal, unending magic of this irreplaceable little world, bigger than any blown-up megalomania could ever grasp, lives on in many of Rilke's poems and still more in the boyish verses of Franz Werfel. I think of the tragically touching figure of Franz Kafka, who walked here ... and who remains one of the deepest and most remarkable spirits of our time, a talent with Cassandra's abilities, a moral genius disturbed by ominous





forebodings. He did not experience the reality of the Third Reich. A premature death liberated him before the 'liberator' came, who would have driven him out."

It is one of the paradoxes of literary history that just Jaroslav Hašek and Franz Kafka, two contemporaries, who represent "Prague literature" to the world today, in the Czech and German form, were not taken seriously either by the literary avantgarde of that time, or by the literary experts of the inter-war peri-

od, nor even by the reading public. The Prague dramatist Jan Grossman writes: "Kafka meant a kind of curiosity, quite foreign to the pre-war avantgarde. The translation of *The Castle*, published in 1935 by Mánes—hardly in a large edition—lay on the shelves and was still sold with difficulty, even though then rather secretly, as late as during the war."

Today, when the public silencing of Franz Kafka has been ordered and enforced three times, and when

Prague again decorates itself with his name before the whole world, this should not happen without a truthful realisation and naming of the circumstances under which Franz Kafka, the man and the poet, lived here, without a knowledge of what he experienced in this city, what he felt for it and how hard it was for him to come to terms with his attitude towards it.

Kurt Krolop







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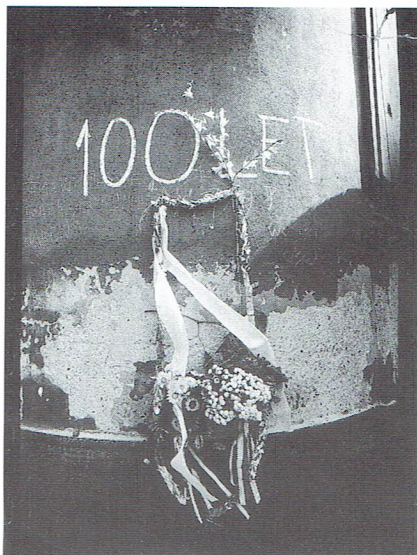
It is no chance that Prague has been called the heart of Europe, or even its intellectual capital. It is no chance that works of world importance have been created here, such as Kafka's *The Trial*. It is no chance that Czechoslovakia was the last oasis of humanity, where people from all over Europe sheltered from Hitler, and where many artists, for instance Thomas Mann, took state citizenship. The Central European cultural tradition, the tradition of humanism, tolerance and democracy, was formed here over many centuries. But then this territory was overrun by two totalitarian powers—Nazism and Communism. Renewing the former spiritual climate, linking onto the broken cultural continuity, means in the first place to remember the historical sources of Central Europeanism, to restore the cultural memory, violated for fifty years. That is what the Franz Kafka Society wants to contribute towards . . .





“The heart of Europe, for long transplanted elsewhere, is coming to life again. This mortgage, lasting for forty years, of course tore the natural capillary through which we had grown into the spiritual environment of Central Europe. We want again to be what we were predestined to be, not only by our geographical position but by the whole of our history, we want to become again the cultural and political crossroads of the continent. But the renewal of the natural Central European cultural ties is not easy. Their interruption began with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The history of Bohemia and Moravia and the history of Prague developed over long centuries in a complicated language and national climate: in a kind of cultural triangle, the tips of which were formed by Czech, German and Jewish cultures. A remarkable Central European culture flowered in our country from the tension between these three cultural entities. It partially survived the disintegration of the Danube empire, but then came the cruel blow of Nazism, driving Jewish culture behind the wires of Oswiecim. Almost no one came back . . . Then after the war the enforced transfer of the Germans definitely turned the original triangle into a single point. Without tension and confrontation literature dies, without reflection in a neighbour's mirror the national culture gazes, like Narcissus, only at itself.

Communist totalitarianism, so fond of explicitness and clarity, erased the German and Jewish cultures on our territory from the consciousness of several generations. Antisemitism, shown so often by the communist regime, and at the same time calculation with the skilfully maintained anti-German feeling, that then justified the historically illogical orientation of our country to the east, all helped to form a false idea in the consciousness of the rising generation of the solely Czech character of the history and culture of our country. The violent breaking-off of the unique cultural continuity, and so of the national memory, the denial of everything that was not connected with one artificially created historical line—the Czech one, which was declared the exclusive legitimate culture of Prague, Bohemia



and Moravia, had terrible results, not only in the cultural sphere, but also the social, psychological, political etc.

Only a few school-leavers today know that many great personalities of world culture are our fellow-countrymen—Gustav Mahler, Alfred Kubin, Karl Kraus, Max Brod, the scientists Ernest Mach, Johann Gregor Mendel, Sigmund Freud, Kurt Gödel, the philosophers Bernard Bolzano and Edmund Husserl. An average citizen knows next to nothing about that unique cultural phenomenon that the whole world calls “Prague German literature”, or of the fact that Prague gave the world a whole pleiad of great writers, not only Franz Kafka, but also Max Brod, R. M. Rilke and Franz Werfel, many of the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia have never heard these names. And in the same way many other facts were erased from the general consciousness. For example that Johannes Kepler worked here, that Albert Einstein was a professor at Prague's German University, that

52 Campden Hill Square London W8 7JR

14 June 1991

Ms. Marta Zelezna  
 Franz Kafka Society  
 Centrum Franze Kafky Praha  
 Staromestske Nam 17  
 110 01 Praha 1  
 Czechoslovakia

A wonderful venture! Good luck with it

Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter



Berta Fanta's Prague salon was one of the most important cultural focuses of Central Europe at the turn of the century, that German was a quite usual language in Prague, that the works of Jewish authors written in German belong to the most valuable heritage of human culture. A heritage that we have ceased to claim. If we do not recall it, we shall hardly succeed in linking onto the humanist tradition that today we recognize and call Central European culture..."

So far a fragment of the introductory declaration of the Franz Kafka Society, founded in Prague in the beginning of May 1990, the programme of which was approved by the general assembly on October 3rd the same year. The Society comprises more than eight hundred members both from the Czech Republic and abroad. Among their members there are important artists and scholars as well as students and individuals of various professions. All of them are bound together not only by their intimate affinity for Franz Kafka's works but also by their desire to contribute with their joint efforts to the renaissance of the Central European cultural heritage. One of the basic aims of the Society approved by the general assembly and supported by all Society's members is to build up a Franz Kafka Centre in Prague. The Centre should provide the platform and the means for developing a number of other cultural, educational and social events.

The activities of Franz Kafka Society are not confined only to the life and work of Franz Kafka, but to the broadest cultural and historical continuity of Central Europe. Kafka's name represents an important symbol: not only his person represents the above mentioned merging of cultures (he was a Jew, wrote in German and was integrated in the Czech cultural environment), but he was the man who marked the intellectual anxiety of this century in his work, who gave the name to the ghetto of human existence in which we have been staggering for several decades already.

The representatives of the Communist establishment always determined the official attitude towards Kafka's work even though they managed without reading not to say un-

derstanding his works. They however had a special instinct — not exclusively confined to Kafka — which enabled them to detect everything incompatible with their ideology. They felt, and they were not wrong, that Franz Kafka — in addition to being a writer of genius (who unfortunately did not produce anything to support their theories and precepts) — was a symbol of something contradictory to their philosophy, the symbol of hated individualism and of all hidden secrets of human mind, where they would have so gladly penetrated to master and manipulate it for ever.

Regardless of the fact that Kafka died more than 25 years before the Communist regime was established in Czechoslovakia and in spite of the circumstance that there is not a single word about Communism or against it in his work, his name used to be mentioned in the official speeches of Communist statesmen always in the very worst context. That is also why Franz Kafka Society could have been built in this country only after the political coup d'état in 1989, even though its sister organizations had been operating in various countries all over the world for many years. This is also the reason why so many people in Czech Republic today claim their affinity to Franz Kafka's legacy: in all those years it became self evident that the acknowledgement of Kafka was equivalent to denouncing Communism.

There is however one reason mo-

re why the Society with such a large and many-sided basis bears the name of Kafka although it could have borne the name the Central European Culture Club or Society for Central European Culture etc. Any other name is too general and therefore impersonal. But you cannot have an impersonal relation to Kafka. Kafka as a phenomenon determines our lives so strongly that a relationship to him by far and inevitably surpasses the dimension of common literary communication. Reading Kafka is an intimate and deeply individual affair. If the Society wanted to establish Franz Kafka Centre in the middle of Prague as a form of fulfilment of an intellectual dream, as a way of profession to the greatest poet ever born in this city, as a place where people can come with confidence, where they can fearlessly speak out their thoughts and inner doubts, if it wanted to contribute not only to uplifting culture and knowledge but also to the renaissance of a real social life in the spirit of the best humanistic traditions, it could not have done so without this personal affinity and commitment.

The Society, through the platform of its Centre, pays a consistent attention and care to Franz Kafka's work and tries with all its might to repay the debt that our country, due to the Communist totalitarianism, owes to this man of genius and at the same time it honours him as a symbol of specific culture and the commitment to the Central European spiritual heritage.





The ambition of Franz Kafka Society consists not only in documenting and preserving the spiritual traditions and values of the past, it wants to continue them, to search for the threads connecting them with the present, contribute to incorporating them as a living part of contemporary culture. Franz Kafka Centre therefore is not interested in show case presentation of the dead past, it is rather involved in many-sided cultural activity presenting a vivid picture of the Jewish cultural traditions, it facilitates the encounters with Prague German literature and at the same time it meets the needs of modern times. It is framed so as to provide the room for professional and educational activities as well as for cultural and social life in Prague, in order to be a platform both for learning and meeting people.

Considering the fact that Franz Kafka Society is a non-governmental, non-profit organization depending on gifts and contributions from sponsors and foundations, Franz

Kafka Centre had to be developed gradually, from one rented room at the beginning in 1990 to its present shape in the house on Staroměstské Sq. 22, where the management, office for the Society members, the publishing department, the gallery, the library, lecture hall and club café - Café Milena are situated.

As the constituent part of Franz Kafka Centre there are also two bookshops, both in the places closely connected with Kafka's life — in the Kinsky Palais, where former haberdasher's shop of Kafka's father Herrmann was situated and in the Golden Lane at the Prague Castle.

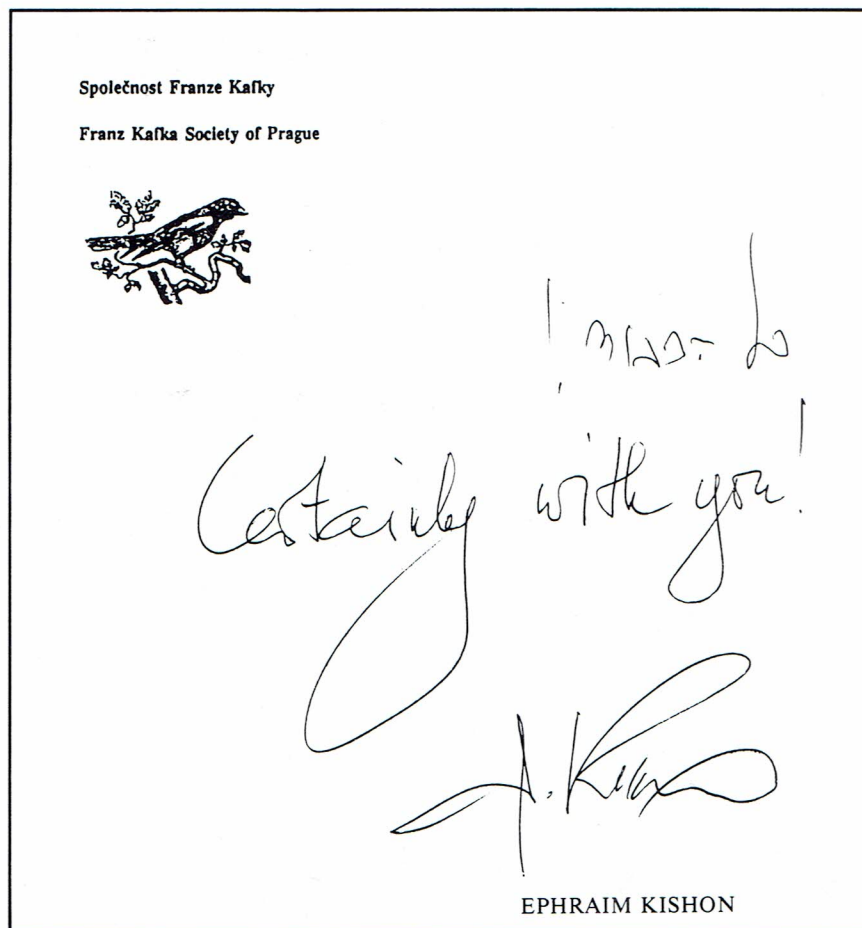
Within the five years of its existence the Centre organized several international and home seminars (the International Seminar on Anti-Semitism in Post-Totalitarian Europe, to name one of the many), about two dozen exhibitions (the exhibition of Yosl Bergner's Paintings to Kafka was so far the biggest exhibition of Israeli visual art in Prague), a number of literary evenings, lectures and

panel discussions and it published more than 30 books (its publishing house was awarded two prestigious awards — Czech Ministry of Culture Award and Czech Literary Fund Award.) The Centre also organizes student literary competitions, it gradually develops a library and it issues a quarterly bulletin for the members of the Society with the summary in four languages.

Through the interesting content and professional quality of its activities Franz Kafka Society managed to gain a good credit at home and abroad in a relatively short time. Its unknown cultural initiative which sprang out from the post-revolution enthusiasm is today acknowledged as a reputable organization which collaborates with long established renowned institutions, such as Karlova University, Ministry of Culture, Writer's Union, PEN, Goethe Institute, Austrian Institute for Culture, Deutsches Archiv in Marbach, Literaturhaus Berlin, Collegium Carolinum from Munich, American Franz Kafka Society, Österreichische Franz-Kafka-Gesellschaft, cultural departments of various embassies, the Austrian, Israeli, Hungarian, German to name just a few.

Among the members and friends of Franz Kafka Society you can find president Václav Havel, the Parliament Chairman Milan Uhde, Minister of Culture Pavel Tigrid, outstanding writers from Czech Republic and abroad, for instance the Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz, Amos Oz, Ephraim Kishon, Harold Pinter, Ilse Aichinger, Claudio Magris to name the few. The sympathy and support of notable personalities was of definite importance for the success of the project and developing Franz Kafka Centre as an independent Central European cultural institution. No less important — especially in the era of market economy — is the interest it provokes among students and wider cultural public.

Marta Železná







"Neříkám nic jiného a nic míň, než že  
v Kafkovi odvždycky nalézám velký kus  
své zkušenosti se světem, se sebou  
samým a se svým způsobem bytí na  
tomto světě."

Jeruzalém 26.dubna 1990

Podporuji myšlenku vzniku Centra společnosti Franze Kafky jako  
výrazného prostředku k rozvoji našeho středoevropanství.

Václav  
Havel

Popíeram ten projekt

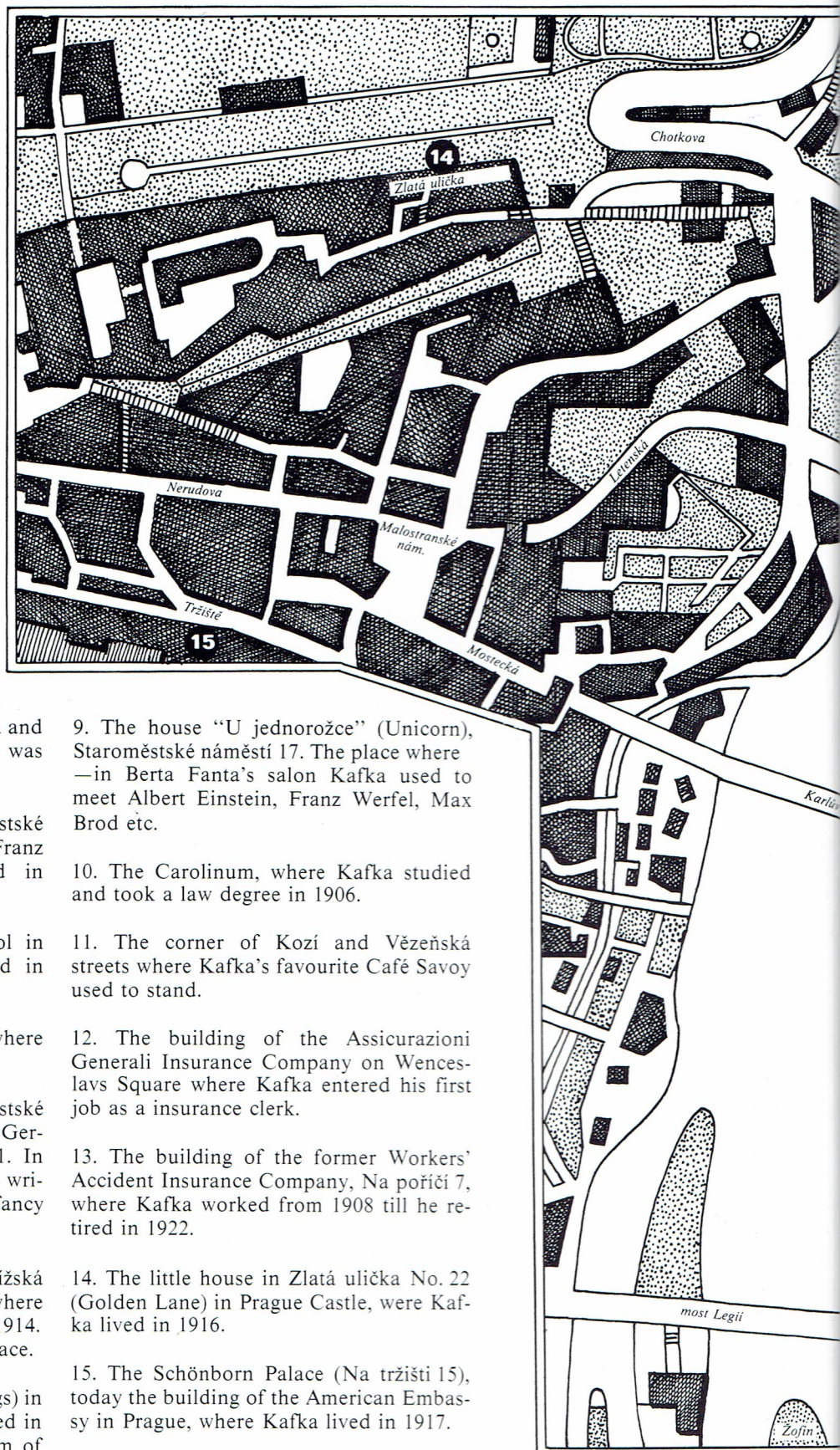
Czesław Miłosz

VÁCLAV HAVEL

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ



... and  
these are  
the places  
where K.  
walked.



1. The house at the corner of Maislova and U radnice streets, where Franz Kafka was born on 3rd July 1883.

2. The house "U minuty" on Staroměstské náměstí, (Old Town Square), where Franz Kafka lived during his childhood in 1889—1896.

3. Originally a German basic school in Masná street, which Kafka attended in 1889—1893.

4. Sixt's house in Celetná street, where Franz Kafka lived in 1888—1889.

5. The Kinský Palace on Staroměstské náměstí, where Kafka attended the German secondary school in 1893—1901. In the right part of the ground-floor the writer's father, Hermann Kafka, ran his fancy goods store.

7. Oppelt's House, the corner of Pařížská street and Staroměstské náměstí, where Kafka lived on the top floor in 1913—1914. Here the story Metamorphosis takes place.

6. The house "U tří králů" (Three Kings) in Celetná street No. 3, where Kafka lived in 1896—1907 and where he had a room of his own, looking out into Týn church.

8. The house in Dlouhá street No. 16., where Kafka lived in 1915—1917.

9. The house "U jednorožce" (Unicorn), Staroměstské náměstí 17. The place where—in Berta Fanta's salon Kafka used to meet Albert Einstein, Franz Werfel, Max Brod etc.

10. The Carolinum, where Kafka studied and took a law degree in 1906.

11. The corner of Kozí and Věžeňská streets where Kafka's favourite Café Savoy used to stand.

12. The building of the Assicurazioni Generali Insurance Company on Wenceslavs Square where Kafka entered his first job as a insurance clerk.

13. The building of the former Workers' Accident Insurance Company, Na poříčí 7, where Kafka worked from 1908 till he retired in 1922.

14. The little house in Zlatá ulička No. 22 (Golden Lane) in Prague Castle, where Kafka lived in 1916.

15. The Schönborn Palace (Na tržišti 15), today the building of the American Embassy in Prague, where Kafka lived in 1917.

16. The Old Jewish Cemetery, a place of Kafka's contemplation.







Editorial Note: All the quotations contained in this publication are free translations from the Czech, as the editor did not have access to the codified English edition of the works of Franz Kafka and Max Brod.

List of illustrations:

- Various corners of old Prague (Jan Pařík) — pp. 2, 4, 7, 8, 17  
Týn Lane, back part of the Kinsky Palace (Pavel Vácha) — p. 5  
The house “U minuty” (Pavel Vácha) — p. 6  
The house where Franz Kafka was born (Pavel Vácha) — p. 9  
School in Masná Street, attended by Kafka (Pavel Vácha) — p. 9  
Franz Kafka — p. 11  
Staircase in the insurance company (Jan Pařík) — p. 14  
The insurance company building (photograph from the period) — p. 15  
Kafka’s certificate of qualifications — p. 15  
Franz Kafka at the beginning of his insurance career — p. 15  
Dr. O. Příbram, one of Kafka’s superiors — p. 16  
The emblem of the Workers’ Accident Insurance Company — p. 16  
Drawings accompanying Kafka’s report on insurance events — p. 16  
Franz Kafka — p. 17  
Staircase (Jan Pařík) — p. 17  
One of the entrances to the Kinsky Palace (Jan Pařík) — p. 18  
Chotek Street, where Kafka liked taking walks (Pavel Vácha) — p. 19  
The house “U minuty” (Pavel Vácha) — p. 20  
The corner of Kozi and Věžeňská streets, where Kafka’s favourite coffee house—the Café Savoy—used to stand (Pavel Vácha) — p. 20  
The house “U jednorožce” (The Unicorn) (Pavel Vácha) — p. 21  
Oppelt’s house (Pavel Vácha) — p. 22  
The old Jewish cemetery (Jan Pařík) — p. 23  
Franz Kafka Centre, Staroměstské Square 22 (Bedřich Kaše) — p. 24  
Golden Lane at the Prague Castle (Pavel Vácha) — p. 25  
Celebration of the anniversary of Kafka’s birth in 1983 — p. 26  
The interior of Franz Kafka Bookshop, Kinsky Palais (Bedřich Kaše) — p. 27  
Kinsky Palais (Bedřich Kaše) — p. 29



# AND KAFKA PRAGUE

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