

## All That Was Lost. German Life in Kafka's Prague Before World War I, During the War, and At Its End

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### Abstract

In this paper I want to trace briefly how Franz Kafka reacted to some salient cultural features of his time. I will select segments of his writings which I believe reflect his view, or even his characterization of the three main historical periods he lived through: pre-World War I, the war years 1914 to 1918, and five and one half of the postwar years. Of course, this is by no means a complete, thorough discussion of those periods and his works that I mention.

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### Keywords

Modern, Technology, Bureaucracy, War

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In Franz Kafka's teenage years in the Old City Gymnasium in Prague, his student days and the first seven years (until 1914) in his job at the Workers' Accident Insurance Company (*Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt*) the world around him was going through radical changes. With ever more belligerent, strident nationalism western superpowers vied with one another for hegemony in the world, for colonies and for domination of the high seas. Yet while this nationalistic competition was going on and grabbing the headlines of newspapers, the populations of those western countries, many of them autocratic empires or kingdoms, embraced an internationalism. Of course, one might immediately think of the international socialist movement; however, using Kafka's Prague as an example, I would like to focus away from the political field on the internationalism which often manifested itself in many areas of daily life and culture, an internationalism which was very open and also – in some ways and sometimes – provided liberals a way of presenting a culture counter to government sponsored nationalism.

Women around the world demanded to be heard and advocated for changing the unequal status-quo between the sexes. In the Bohemian capital the «Prague Women's Newspaper» («Prager Frauen-Zeitung»), a supplement to the Prague daily the «Deutsche Zeitung Bohemia» came into existence. Among other things it discussed the improvement world-wide of women's rights and their increased participation in politics (Northey, *Die Prager Frauen-Zeitung*). And three women's organizations in Prague, the *Women's Organization Progress* (*Verein Frauenfortschritt*), the *Club of German Women Writers* (*Klub deutscher Schriftstellerinnen*), and *Club of German Women Artists* (*Klub deutscher Künstlerinnen*) took on great significance in the city's cultural life. The international star phenomenon intensified and resulted in more appearances of a number of internationally renowned actors, actresses, recitationists, literary and cultural figures in the Bohemian capital: Sarah Bernhard, the Russian dancer Eugenie Eduardova, the Swedish women's

rights leader Ellen Key, the French recitationist Richepin, Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Kafka attended performances of a few of these stars. And if one could not afford the more expensive ticket to performances of well-known world stars there was always the Theater Variété (plus a number of other music halls, night clubs, bars and *chantants*) which provided entertainment from all over the world, be they Japanese ladder acrobats (whom Kafka sketched) or an English song and dance troupe «The Rocking Girls» whom he mentions in his diary, of course, also French chanteuses, all sorts of animal acts, South American tango dancers, and song and dance from Afro-Americans, the early stages of ragtime and jazz, whom a composer like Debussy characterized in his piano works.

At the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth centuries the western world experienced an (until then) unprecedented acceleration in technology. Electrification of cities became evermore widespread. Telephones, mostly in business, but also some private, made their appearance. One remembers that the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison was given a hero's welcome in Prague and had a café named after him. Rather than being bowled over by a modern Picasso or Braque painting – you were more likely to be run down or run over on a street or road by a newfangled electric streetcar, by a bicycle, a motorcycle or an automobile. In short order the public in rural areas were using busses and increasingly goods and mail were delivered locally by trucks.

Sports took on an international dimension. Britain and America were especially identified with sports and sportsmanship. The public became much more familiar with new or relatively new types of sports: tennis, ice hockey, skiing, bobsledding, roller skating, push ball, bicycle and motorcycle racing, automobile racing, or automobile rallies and overland endurance tests. And too, sports got wider newspaper coverage: sports events in Europe and America, visiting foreign teams, the Olympic Games, and international sports stars. In Prague German newspapers it started in the mid-1890s with an occasional half-column and increased to a number of columns or even a page after the turn of the century.

Franz Kafka showed enthusiasm for the modern technology of his times. He was an avid visitor to the Jubilee Exhibition in Prague in the spring, summer, and fall of 1908 which besides a hall with big industrial machinery featured new inventions like an incubator for premature babies, wireless telegraphy, a *troittoir roulant*, an American cinema with early attempts at voice and sound-dubbing, and a massive nightly electrical illumination of the exhibition grounds (Northey, *Ewald Příbram*). Kafka also believed in a healthy lifestyle which included a vegetarian diet, daily calisthenics in a room with open windows, plenty of walks and hikes, and a number of sports: swimming, rowing, bicycling among others, and he even rode his Uncle Siegfried Löwy's motorcycle in Triesch in August of 1908.

Two of his relatives were also prominent enthusiasts for modern technology. A rich cousin of the author's mother Julie Löwy, Eduard Löwy, who changed his name to Lanner, was the president of the Puch Stock Company in Vienna, probably the largest producer of motorcycles in Austro-Hungary and (at that time) automobiles and busses (a company renowned for motorcycles into the 1980s). And Oskar Kafka, a cousin, the son Franz's rich godfather, the wine & spirits manufacturer and distributor Angelus Kafka, was a well-known sportsman in Prague, first a bicycle racer, then a motorcycle racer on the team of the Bohemian automotive company Laurin & Klement and participated at the 1905 Coupe de Monde in southern France. He was also an avid automobilist and car dealer. It was perhaps not pure coincidence that the insurance for automobiles was

entrusted to Franz Kafka by his employer the Workers' Accident Insurance Company. A degree of playful irony might have had its part in the assignment. («Give that task to Kafka. He has a relative who's an automobile-fanatic») (Northey, *Der Motorradrennfahrer, Automobilist und Aviatiker Oskar Kafka*).

One must remember that up until that time the horse was still the primary means of conveying people and goods locally. And just as important was its continued symbolic value for the aristocracy. Hunting on horseback, horse racing, and horse breeding were precincts of the nobility. (One has only to think of the Hapsburgs' Lippizaner). With the advent of the internal combustion engine anyone from any class – one should say anyone, of course, who could afford it – could command the power of 8, 10, 20, 40 horses. A sense of the wild feeling of exuberance and exhilaration this new power of speed in an automobile engendered can be had by reading Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's introduction to his Futurist Manifesto (1908). Next came the frontier of aviation, not the already familiar lumbering balloons and dirigibles, but the new airplanes which used even greater dashing speed than automobiles to rise into the sky and stay there. And indeed it represented an accomplishment of the bourgeoisie alone. In 1909-1910 when the new aviation frenzy reached its peak, especially after Blériot's channel crossing, Cousin Oskar Kafka, too, attempted to become the first citizen of Bohemia to fly an airplane, a Blériot monoplane which he and members of the Velox Motor Company, in which he had invested his inheritance, built – as the local newspaper Bohemia reported – from the ground up with materials solely from Bohemia (Northey, *Kafka und das moderne, international ausgerichtete Prag seiner Zeit*; Northey, *Der Motorradrennfahrer*).

In short, deft strokes of his short feuilleton *The Aeroplanes at Brescia* which he apparently enjoyed writing and immediately agreed to have published Kafka – undoubtedly inspired in large part by his sportsman-relative, Oskar – portrays against the backdrop of the old world of horses and horse-drawn conveyances, the newer one of trains, and automobiles, and, of course, the newest airplanes (in addition to another modern phenomenon: the anonymous flashy haute couture model of new glossy fashion magazine photography). Above all he contrasts the withered old elites, aristocracy and famous artists, with the new elites, the fliers and their families, who on the ground appear as a dull-witted, mercenary bourgeoisie. In fact the uneven stop-and-go pace of modernism is characterized ironically: in a fever of expectation everyone rushes out to the field in Montichiari, only to watch and wait in boredom most of the morning and afternoon while the pilots tinker with their planes. Wild excitement and enthusiasm then suddenly returns when the planes rise into the air and the fliers – stodgy and bourgeois on the ground – become super heroes. One should say, though, that by the time Kafka started writing his novel *Amerika* (*Der Verschollene*, *The One Who Disappeared*) his enthusiasm for technology had been dampened but nonetheless it still remains awe-inspiring for the protagonist, Karl Rossmann.

These then were the prominent areas of daily life that between about 1895 and 1914 gave hope for a liberal future, shared by the world (at least the western world). Perhaps one should just add the further realm of fads and fashions which – like the enthusiasm for bicycles and airplanes – spread like wildfire: the *jupe culotte*, the pants-skirt, which caused a sensation or scandal when women wore them at the Longchamps racetrack and women in other countries (also as a form of provocative protest) eagerly adopted the fashion - in Bohemia too. Or the tango which in 1913 travelled from Argentina, again via Paris throughout the western world. Kaiser Wilhelm forbade the dance at court and his officers from dancing it in uniform (Feldman). And probably many an upright and

uptight conservative mind believed all the world had gone mad over women's rights, pants-skirts, fast cars, and the tango and what was needed was a quick little war to bring everyone back to their senses.

They soon got their war. And with it many of those new areas of internationalism in daily life came to an abrupt end and/or underwent a negative change. Stage actors (theater, music, variety hall), lecturers and recitationists or sports teams from foreign countries in Europe or overseas could not travel across war zones. Many of the males were called up for military duty; many came from enemy countries anyway. The women's movement dried up, at least temporarily. (Although ironically women during the war then did realize greater job opportunities). In the German Reich and in Austro-Hungary fashion no longer emanated from Paris but from Berlin and Vienna and because of the privations of a war economy was called upon to assume an unadorned plainness. And, of course, technology showed its ugly side on the battlefield.

When the war broke out Kafka was preoccupied with the break-up of his engagement with Felice Bauer which ultimately resulted from his realization that new responsibilities of marriage, added to the distracting demands of his job, would rob him of time and concentration for writing. In the novel *The Trial* his protagonist Josef K. succumbs to the ever increasing weight of bureaucratic interference in his life. A motivating spark for this idea can also be found in an incident at the beginning of the war heralding a new era of bureaucracy. After the sudden shut-down of public trains due to the necessity of troop- and equipment-transport and due to the restrictions placed on the use of automobiles both «Prager Tagblatt» and «Bohemia» reported on August 10th that many citizens had resorted to using their bicycles and were being warned by military authorities, who now had a greater say in everyday life, that they could be asked by military patrols to legitimize themselves with the mandatory licenses for bicyclists. This entered Kafka's novel (Northey, *Die geringfügige Radfabrlegitimation* 52). Readers probably remember that right after his arrest at the beginning of the first chapter Josef K. lights on the idea of legitimizing himself to the warders Franz and Willem thereby forcing them to produce identification and an arrest warrant. All he can find in his desk, however, is his bicyclist's license which he rejects as too insignificant, too trivial (Kafka, *Der Prozess* 4). The real-life occurrence used in the novel gives more illumination than one might at first think since it not only confirms a date after which the novel was begun (around August 8 to 10, 1914), but, more importantly, suggests the timely symbolism Kafka saw in this early wartime incident: after a number of years of expansive world-wide liberalism an era of (military) bureaucratic triviality, of pedantic constraint was announcing its return at the beginning of this war. And the novel itself is about someone who cannot free himself from the grip and gray pall of a dingy, sleazy bureaucratic system. The court seems more an atmosphere that Josef K. cannot shake off rather than an active judicial body.

In 1975 the publishing house of Klaus Wagenbach republished Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* with the subtitle «A Story from 1914». Perhaps he should have said more explicitly «Story from the First World War» because in it we are introduced to the one salient feature of the war: technology turned ugly. Octave Mirbeau's *Garden of Tortures* is correctly seen as having in part inspired *In the Penal Colony*. Maintaining that, like in any other fine craft, «science, variety, elegance and inventive spirit» is required in putting a person to death, the Chinese executioner in the torture garden, Patapuff, laments that western foppery (or superficiality) has introduced the modern expediency of ironclad ships, rapid-fire canons, long range rifles, electricity, explosives to kill en masse. «All that makes death so common (ordinary)», he says, and continues, «It leads death onto the

scene by the bureaucratic route, by means of subaltern service» (Mirbeau, *Der Garten der Qualen* 195; my translation). In other words the intervention of a machine takes over the executioner's personal art and makes death impersonal. Yet Kafka cleverly combines the two antipodes of killing. The condemned are put to death by a machine, yet individually and with special treatment, with a text supposedly tailored to each one's sentence. And, it should not be forgotten, it writes, indeed it etches the sentence onto the condemned man's body. In the life of Kafka one can think of various meanings for the word *writing*: his own fictional writing or his letters to his bride Felice Bauer in which he often comments that he is torturing her. Or closer to Patapuff's statement about the bureaucratic nature of modern mechanized death, one could see Kafka's execution-machine which depends on writing as a heavy criticism of the bureaucrat's job, Kafka's job, which consisted of turning out reams of meaningless written documents or perhaps the whole bureaucratic system. In both *The Trial* and especially *The Castle* the reader rarely views the text of a document, but is more likely to encounter the result of meaningless, useless writing: stacks of files or files being piled up, or carted about – just a burden of paper, masses of dead weight. Kafka, always ready to deprecate his «scribbling», suggests that his writing (fiction, letters, job-related) whose edification only exists unproven in the officer's words.

Sophisticated communication sets humans apart from other living beings and written (precise, lasting) communication represents a further pinnacle of civilization. To the traveler's question whether the condemned man has been told his sentence the slightly bewildered officer replies that this would be useless, that he indeed will experience it on his body. The brain's intellectual function has been replaced by a sensory experience via the machine, which – according to the officer – brings about a profounder enlightenment. Yet the observing traveler (and the reader, too) only has his description as proof of this enlightenment, in the same way the friend in Russia in *The Judgment* never appears but only exists within Georg Bendemann's thoughts or his father's words and Gregor Samsa's life of sacrifice for his family before his metamorphosis is only reviewed in his perhaps deceptive thoughts. And likewise at the end of *In the Penal Colony* the traveler, whom the officer is trying to convince of the execution machine's worth, only gets to see his brutal death and its surreal self-destruction.

One feature in this wartime novella Kafka appears to have reprised from *The Aeroplanes at Brescia*. In the latter he describes the airfield at Montichiari in this sentence: «An artificial desert has been created here in an almost tropical countryside, and the nobility of Italy, dazzling ladies from Paris, and thousands of others are all together here, to gaze with narrowed eyes for several hours into this sunny desert». Of course this open expanse of desert is needed for the exciting new machines of the future to take off into a limitless sky. The venue for the machine of execution in the penal colony is also in the tropics with a hot sun, like the one in Brescia, beating down, but it is hemmed in in a desolate sandy valley – no wide open field of opportunity for technical marvels – and the audience has vanished, the fashionable ladies in particular.

As we know Kafka dedicated his anthology *A Country Doctor* (*Ein Landarzt*), which appeared somewhat belatedly in bookstores in May 1920, to his father. It had been meant as a present for Hermann Kafka's 65th birthday in September 1919 and perhaps more importantly on the occasion of his retirement from his (now) precarious wholesale business in fancy goods (*Galanteriewaren*): buttons, lace, ribbons, belt buckles, parasols, etc., components of attractive fashionable dress which because of wartime austerity measures were less available and even frowned upon (Northey, *Die Erzählensammlung Ein*

*Landarzt*).

As befits a birthday-retirement present, the son was – in the first instance – speaking to the father personally. The texts comprising the book were meant to throw light on various aspects of their relationship, some with very specific family references. To Hermann Kafka the title of the whole anthology, of course, *A Country Doctor*, could only suggest the country doctor in the family, his younger brother-in-law Dr. Siegfried Löwy in the small town of Triesch in Moravia. The title-story sums up a career in the events of one night. The fictional doctor, perhaps the real one too, sacrifices a normal life and dedicates himself to patients, who don't understand him, whom he can't cure and about whom he complains. The figure of the doctor suggests Hermann Kafka. Hermann wasn't a physician, didn't have patients and certainly was not inclined toward humankind generally, but he did dedicate himself to his family and tried to dictate their lives, and complained about them. And Franz can be detected not only in the patient with the disgusting, incurable wound but also in the country doctor. After all who answered the sound of the night bell more than anyone else, sacrificing himself for a lost cause?

Some of the pieces like *Up in the Gallery* with its two impossible scenarios, one black, one white, or *An Imperial Message* with its intentionally sentimental ending present and explain to the father perceptual and emotional states of a youthful son. And in the short introductory text *The New Advocate* Kafka, referring to the classic war hero Alexander the Great, introduces a nostalgia for the past, «the good old days», better, genuine heroic times, standing in contrast to «this unfortunate age» cursed by the country doctor: «Today – that no one can deny – there is no great Alexander» (by the way, also a personal reference to his relative Bruno Alexander Kafka, well know professor of law and society figure and even to Bruno's son Alexander born about two weeks before this piece was written).

In this nostalgic vein the author chooses the circus and the variety theater as venues for two of the stories, two forms of entertainment that both father and son enjoyed and that had disappeared almost immediately when war was declared. But several of the texts of the collection *A Country Doctor* deal with phenomena of the war years. The story *A Fratricide* features constantly changing perspectives, uncharacteristic for Kafka: from opening police report, to the murderer Schmar lying in wait and sharpening his knife, to the distraught wife of the victim, Wese, then to Wese himself, leaving his shop. The rapid switch from one scene to the next (again, very uncharacteristic for Kafka) suggests a silent film scenario. The more economical film had almost replaced other forms of theater during the war which lacked interesting acts from abroad. What film hinges on is action and the more sensational the action – here murder – the better. There is little room for the static, there has to be motion. In stressing the multitude of action-scenes in this short text Kafka was quite prescient. (From our vantage point today we know what extremes film has reached in providing this commodity). And ironically the slaughter on the battlefields, much of it man against technology, provided a backdrop of macabre action.

The few spoken lines in *A Fratricide*, like inter-titles of silent films, are steeped in histrionic pathos punctuated with exclamation marks: «Wese! In vain Julia waits!» Undoubtedly Kafka was referencing a sentimental pathos which, after the initial period of war when the frontlines became static, had long since replaced the early belligerent enthusiasm. In a short conversation with Anna Lichtenstern in a Prague lending library in 1918 about the decline in literature of the day Kafka spoke of the unwritten but severe command in the air to circulate false pathos. In fact he might have remembered an

article by Anton Kuh in the «Prager Tagblatt» in 1915 on this very topic entitled *The Courage for Pathos* (*Der Mut zum Pathos*) in which – after having given a short history of pathos on stage and his criticism of the cold condescension that intellectuals harbored towards it – Kuh calls upon readers to embrace a «genuine» pathos:

Let us instead truly gather the courage for this pathos. The war has created noise, in which the shame of blind captivation and pompous ceremoniousness is overwhelmed. On the contrary: the thunder of cannons, the screaming of grenades, the unfettered unleashing of anger – and power, the unchecked surging din all around us drags our captured breath along with it. But we still do not dare to venture out. [...] Let yourselves be guided by the moment! Don't be ashamed to shout «hurrah!» when no one else is doing so, do not be ashamed to utter phrases that you believe in or wish to believe in, don't be ashamed of the gestures, even if you should see them in a mirror and do not be ashamed of the subjective rhythm too!» (Kuh 3).

In 1915, at the stage of the war when the rapid German advances had been stopped and a war of attrition settled in, the words of the journalist Kuh were, of course, meant to rekindle the fervor of the early days of quick advance and victory. If Kafka read them – and it is likely he came across this article in his daily newspaper reading – he must have shuddered.

*An Old Manuscript* deals with another phenomenon of the war. The story seems to describe an invasion of a city in a far-eastern setting by nomads. (Indeed this story was meant to be part of the Chinese Wall-anthology). We might think of invading hordes of a Genghis Khan, who lay waste to the city. However, these invading nomads, one notices, do not murder, rape, pillage, and set fire as one would expect of invaders. When towards the end of the story one reads that they all speak like the jackdaw bird (*Doble* in German, *kavka* in Czech) we see where Franz Kafka is going with this nomadic invasion. The seemingly far-eastern setting camouflages an actual wartime experience: the sudden influx, an invasion, of Jewish refugees from the east, often more aggressively orthodox than assimilated Jews in Prague and more ostentatious about their Jewishness. The Yiddish actors, Jizchak Löwy among them, had been a precursor of the wave of Jews from the east. In this birthday present for his father, the author is portraying Hermann Kafka in the person of the shopkeeper confronting his origins, the invasion of «Kafkas» from the shtetl. The anxiety they engender in the shopkeeper is the social anxiety the assimilated Hermann Kafka must have felt initially when these refugees descended on Prague (with «smooth pushing impatience» as Stefan Zweig characterized them).

When Kafka encountered the troupe of Yiddish actors in 1911 he not only found a missing part of his European Jewish heritage, he felt a kinship with their position as outsiders, with their vulnerability as a group on the fringe, barely tolerated. The wartime migrants from the east presented him with a much more self-assured, almost aggressive Jewishness. When the war forced people to draw away from internationalism back to nationalism one was obliged to decide to which national group one belonged. For instance, Bruno Kafka, mentioned above, unequivocally declared himself German. Franz Kafka, drawn to Jewish nationality even before the war, showed increasing interest in Zionism – yet not without his usual critical distance. His father Hermann Kafka, a believer in the status quo, probably looked askance at his son's Zionist leanings.

Another story, *Jackals and Arabs*, deals with Palestine – the title alone connotes a middle-east setting. Arabs appear primarily in the speaking role of the Arab caravan leader. The jackals with their curious views on purity are literary stand-ins for a certain type of Jew: the coffee house Zionist, of which there were a sizeable number in Prague – Kafka among them, half committed, half observer. A few had been in Palestine, but all of them came out at dusk – like the jackals in the story – to spend hours in cafés discussing the colonization effort especially during the time of the Great War when it became apparent that a number of national boundaries were likely to be re-drawn. Hermann Kafka, a believer in the status quo, was probably as much convinced of the success of the Zionists' plans as he had been a few years before of the financial viability and worth of the Yiddish theater group. To the father his son's mere attendance at the late-night sessions of these coffee house Zionists, undoubtedly meant that he had to be considered sympathetic to their cause or indeed one of their number.

However, in the story Franz himself seems to express his own doubt about these homeland enthusiasts. They importune the Northern European to help rid them of the Arabs (as they importune every European visitor, according to the caravan leader), perhaps Kafka's allusion to the help the Zionists expected from the European powers to carve out a new Jewish state in Palestinian territory. The small rusty sewing scissors the jackals offer to the foreigner as a weapon provide the humorously ironic clue to Kafka's true view. «Sewing scissors» are, of course, a useful tool from a mother's sewing basket, but hardly a weapon. Going even further, the practical scissors are perhaps meant to suggest that these intellectual colonizers, who, in the heat of argument, vociferously insisted that they were ready to emigrate to Palestine, to become farmers and to till the soil of a new nation with their own hands, were not even up to the practical task of sewing a button on their own middle-class European business suits.

And one can, of course, take the Arabs in the title quite literally as the predominant population of Palestine at Kafka's time. In the story their chief representative is the caravan leader who shows a healthy contempt for the jackals. There is even a touch of Nietzsche about him when he says of the jackals: «Fools, true fools they are. We love them for it; they are our dogs; prettier than yours». One is reminded of the words the birds of prey utter in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (especially their tone): «We don't bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them: nothing is tastier than a tender lamb»<sup>1</sup> (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 28). So perhaps the Arab here goes beyond just representing an ethnic group; he is more the prototype of a robust nature – no nonsense, down to earth, in charge – much like the nature Kafka's father showed. In other words, Kafka was complimenting Hermann: if any colonization was to occur in Palestine, it needed his cold-nosed practicality, not ineffectual coffeehouse intellectuality. The caravan leader's mention of dogs could certainly have a personal meaning between Franz and his father too. Commenting on his son's acquaintance with the Yiddish actor Jizchak Löwy he made the deprecatory comment about lying down with dogs and getting up with flees. The coffeehouse riff-raff had in his opinion just succeeded the Yiddish actor.

At the end of the war not much was left of that pre-war excitement of internationalism in Kafka's Prague and elsewhere in the world I briefly sketched at the opening. It reappeared later in Europe as a wilder hedonism of the «roaring 20's», but

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<sup>1</sup> «Wir sind ihnen gar nicht gram, diesen guten Lämmern, wir lieben sie sogar: nichts ist schmackhafter als ein zartes Lamm».

not as an oppositional movement running parallel to a conservative mind-set of empires and kingdoms some of them centuries old – and particularly not in the new Republic of Czechoslovakia where the culture of the Czech majority naturally had gained power. Franz Kafka was left with what he thought the major failing of modern western culture was: the new caste of white-collar bureaucrats, he being one of their chief representatives.

This came out clearly in his relationship with two women: Julie Wohryzek and Milena Jesenská Pollak. In his choice of women friends and fiancées Franz Kafka was usually consistently conservative, that is, they were non-academic Jewish girls from middle to lower middle-class families, much like his own sisters, passably educated, from the legions of «Comptoiristinnen», that is, of mid- to low-level clerks. Each woman in her own way, however, developed an independence (and not thanks to Kafka).

The daughter of a shammes, the caretaker of a synagogue in Königliche Weinberge, Julie Wohryzek was the person he in fact described as coming from the legions of «Comptoiristinnen» (Kafka. *Briefe 1918-1920*: 71; Northey, *Julie Wohryzek, Franz Kafkas zweite Verlobte* and *Julie Wohryzek, Franz Kafka's Second Fiancée*).

Coming from a lower social stratum she would have been «marrying up» as one says and that, of course, drew his father's immediate disapproval. (Julie did in the end, however, marry a bank executive and apparently showed great courage during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia for which she paid with her life). Although Kafka reproached his father for the rather nasty confrontation he had with him over his planned marriage he certainly must have been aware that Hermann Kafka's objections did indeed have some justification even though his depiction of how Julie must have enticed his son into proposing marriage to her was crude and hurtful. And then there were, of course, Franz's usual doubts about his suitability for marriage or for any kind of relationship with women.

In his letter to Käthe Nettel, Julie's sister, explaining why he did not go through with the wedding, he works himself into a very emotional state where he begins to address himself and gives a concise definition of himself as a bureaucrat:

But you are no farmer, whose farmland feeds his children and descending down to the lowest rung, not even a merchant (businessman), I mean by inner inclination, but more likely the dregs of the European white collar workers, a functionary, and alongside that overly nervous, deeply lost to all the dangers of literature, of weak lungs, tiredly trying to duck the paltry scribble-work in the office. (*Kafka-Symposium* 50).

In the end he did imply that they might live together the way they had – out of wedlock, a suggestion that would have been less possible in the old Hapsburg monarchy, but more acceptable in the budding post-war liberality (52-53).

Milena Jesenská came from a completely different milieu from Kafka's other fiancées: from an upper class Czech Christian background. She had a good finishing school education, was intellectual, and endowed with a rebelliousness that made her flout the *mores* and reject the advantages of her upper-class origins. Her initiative in translating some of Kafka's works into Czech gave proof before she even made his personal acquaintance that she felt the significance of his writing – a unique flattery that none of the other women had provided or perhaps even could provide for lack of a more finely honed intellect to appreciate them. Milena stood completely outside of conventionality, and although younger than Kafka, appeared to have played the more decisive leading role in their affair that evolved out of a long-distance correspondence.

Not only did dissolution of all ties with Julie Wohryzek weigh on their relationship, but also the suicide of Josef Reiner which offered a painful comparison (Kafka, *Briefe 1918-1920*. 179, 222, 230, 234, 255, 272, 304). Milena had a friend Jarmila Ambrožová who was slavishly devoted to her to the point of imitating her in all things. Like her friend Jarmila married a young Jewish man, Josef Reiner who was employed in the editorial department of the newspaper «Tribuna» (Northey, *Franz Kafkas Selbstmörder*). She subsequently became acquainted and then enamored with Willy Haas. (The same Willy Haas who had organized an evening of readings of works by Prague authors, among them Kafka, in December 1912). It is said that on the evening of February 8, 1920, Jarmila sought out her husband in the newspaper office and told him offhandedly that she was starting an affair with Haas, whereupon the distraught young man committed suicide that same night by taking an overdose of morphine. Kafka tells Milena the whole story as he heard it in a letter Max Brod wrote him and comes back to the suicide numerous times afterwards in letters to her, showing that it had disturbed him deeply. Of course, he too was involved in two love triangles. In the one with Milena and her husband, Ernst Pollak, where Kafka was given the part of Haas, suicide was less likely. (Pollak had neglected his wife). The similarities between the Ambrožová-Reiner-Haas love triangle and – by his abandonment of Julie – the assumption of Jarmila Ambrožová's unenviable role, must have struck him more acutely. Julie, like Josef Reiner, suffered the loss with great anguish (she did not look healthy and was «distraught beyond all measure») which led to her humiliating herself in one of the last meetings with her fiancé:

For many long minutes she stood next me on the Karlsplatz, her whole body trembling. [...] She put her final question to me against which I have always been defenseless, that is: «I cannot leave, if you send me away, I'll leave. Are you sending me away?» [...] I answered «Yes». Then she: «I can't go after all». (Kafka. *Briefe 1918-1920*. 202, 207-208).

Even her suicide perhaps seemed an imminent possibility.

With Milena too his involuntary commitment to his bureaucratic existence which he so hated, was put to the test when she wanted to arrange a meeting which would have meant inventing an excuse to free himself from work. In a letter to her dated July 31, 1920, he describes his acquired bureaucratic nature which only allowed him to lie in the office on the spur of the moment, within the bureaucratic context. But then in the same letter he actually personifies his bureaucratic office along with other institutions and even his family, saying:

[...] to me the office is - and so was elementary school, high school, university, family, everything - a living person, who, wherever I might be, looks at me with his eyes full of innocence, a person with whom I have in some way or other unknown to me been connected, in spite of the fact that he is stranger to me than the people I now hear driving across the Old Town Square in their automobile. (*Briefe 1918-1920* 268-269).

Irony of ironies, he tries to imbue bureaucracy with innocent humanity, that he finds lacking in himself.

Although cloaked in a sometimes drab, somber atmosphere the novel *The Castle* must on the whole be seen as a humorous parody of the bureaucratic caste, Kafka's reckoning with a group of individuals who controlled everyday life yet were themselves out of

control. The group is seen from the outside, from the view of K., who arrives in the village at the novel's beginning, or from the vantage point of town-folk, who for the most part have had limited contact with officials. The author has just accentuated the difference in the rather medieval setting: castle, by tradition the seat of the born rulers, the village: the homes, in some instances hovels of the ruled, the commoners (and where, contrary to the novel's title, most of the action takes place). K., the protagonist, seems at first almost a prefiguration of the cinematic hero of a western film, the mysterious stranger who shows up in town to clean it up, to restore law and order. Just when we, the readers, have been prepared for a mighty antagonist with stature, we find out that the inhabitants of the castle are a bunch of older, weakling bureaucrats, self-indulgent, pampered, spoiled prima donnas.<sup>2</sup> K., of course, also changes from a putative reformer to someone who wishes to insinuate himself on this privileged club.

Olga's description of her sister Amalia's encounter with Sortini is filled with awe, reverence and understanding for the tender feelings of bureaucrats. Amalia at the fire department gathering, decked out in her Bohemian garnet necklace appears in her words almost as a sacrificial lamb that quite naturally has to be offered up to lecherous officials. That is an exaggerated rendition of the attitude Julie Wohryzek and her family might have had of her vis-a-vis the suitor Franz Kafka. It was the rare opportunity of a lifetime for her to advance socially which had to be realized at all costs. Amalia's fierce indignant defiance smacks more of Milena's rejection of the conventional female docility her father's world expected of her. Of course, like Amalia, she paid for her decision to opt out of a conventional woman's role by being forced into menial jobs. In any case, the Olga-Amalia-chapters in Kafka's novel represent a new direction for his writing because, contrary to the sometimes negligible, one dimensional roles women play in his previous work, here they are given a voice to explain their position in a man's world.

The story *A Hunger Artist*, which appeared in the journal «Die neue Rundschau» and at the same time in several newspapers in the late fall of 1922, should also be read in the post-war context (Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. 436-4). In this story the protagonist makes a show of starving himself, an image of Kafka's own present wasting body due to tuberculosis, but perhaps more a representation of his minimalist, anemic life and art. Repeatedly the hunger artist tries to prove that he does not cheat. Yet in the end before he withers away and dies he has to confess that depriving himself of food needed no special fortitude or talent since he was only following his natural inclination to reject food. What remains unstated – and what the reader must read between the lines – is a basic question at least one Prague newspaper playfully intimated in the spring of 1906 when it reported on the real life-model for Kafka's protagonist, the hunger artist Riccardo Sacco appearing in Prague's Hofbräu-cellar. It is the question that is provoked by the combination of the two words «hunger» and «artist»: Can starving yourself be called an art? (Northey, *Ricardo Sacco, et al.*)

Now in addition one should keep in mind that in 1922 Kafka was setting two past realities side by side. The story's first sentence reads: «In recent decades the interest in hunger artists has greatly receded» (Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 333; my translation). That, to say the least, was a wry understatement. Hunger artists had undoubtedly been completely forgotten. What most of the German-speaking readers certainly remembered, however, was the more recent hunger experienced by many during the war years. Against these

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<sup>2</sup> Early in the novel a central antagonist-figure inhabiting the castle is suggested by the mention of a Count Westwest, but he never appears and there is no further reference to him.

thousands, if not millions, of involuntary hunger artists as an obvious backdrop outside the story, Kafka appears to trivialize, – deliberately trivialize, – this singular, self-centered masochistic performance. He characterizes it as a curious, quirky variety-hall-entertainment from a bygone era. The panther who in the end takes his place in the cage is, of course, a much more contemporary, aggressively life-affirming attraction.

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