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1

Kafkárna

But as long as we are not quite so perfect, as long as the statement alone does not suffice for faith and understanding, as long as we must place our fingers in the wounds, like Thomas, we have the right to convince ourselves the wounds exist, and that they are deep.

—MILENA JESENSKÁ¹

Love Letters

“She is a living fire, of a kind I have never seen before,” Franz Kafka wrote to his friend Max Brod early in May 1920, “yet at the same time she is extremely tender, courageous, bright.”² Milena Jesenská is best known to English-language readers—if she is known at all—as the recipient of Kafka’s *Briefe an Milena* (*Letters to Milena*), first published in German by Willi Haas in 1952 and translated into English the next year. Milena gave Willi the letters for safekeeping after Hitler’s Wehrmacht occupied Prague in March 1939. Haas had neither Jesenská’s nor Kafka’s permission to publish them, and Milena’s daughter Jana Černá insists that both would have wanted the correspondence to be kept private.³ But it wasn’t, so we can place our fingers in the wounds like Doubting Thomas and convince ourselves that they are deep. Milena’s letters to Franz have not survived, so we see her here entirely through Kafka’s eyes. Franz’s lanky shadow continues to loom over most of the secondary literature on Jesenská available in English, too. Margarete Buber-Neumann’s memoir-cum-biography *Milena, Kafkas Freundin* (Milena, Kafka’s lover) was first translated as *Mistress to Kafka: The Life and Death of Milena*, a title that was a titillating travesty of both Jesenská’s relationship to Kafka and Buber-Neumann’s book.

It was later republished as *Milena: The Tragic Story of Kafka's Great Love*. Jana Černá's reminiscences of her mother, titled in Czech *Adresát Milena Jesenská* (The addressee Milena Jesenská), became *Kafka's Milena*. Mary Hockaday promises to flesh out "Kafka's muse"—a description Milena scarcely merits, given the brevity of their affair—as "a radical-thinking, thoroughly independent woman and journalist in her own right," but her biography is titled *Kafka, Love and Courage*.⁴ Somehow the subject of the book gets relegated to the subtitle: *The Life of Milena Jesenská*.

Despite her clickbait title, Hockaday devotes just two and a half chapters out of twelve to Jesenská's involvement with Kafka. This is probably about right, considering that, for all its intensity, Franz and Milena's "dream-like amorous association," as Jana Černá describes it, was short-lived, mostly epistolary, and likely not consummated.⁵ When the correspondence began, Franz was engaged to his second fiancée Julie Wohryzek in Prague, and Milena was unhappily married to her first husband Ernst Pollak in Vienna. Franz would soon dump Julie (in the late afternoon of 5 July 1920 on Charles Square), but Milena proved incapable of leaving Ernst. "In spite of everything," Kafka lamented, her "fire . . . burns only for him."⁶ The Pollaks had a fashionably modern open marriage, an arrangement that Milena accepted with reluctance. Ernst at one point installed his supposedly beautiful but brainless lover Mizzi Beer in their apartment in a ménage à trois,⁷ while Milena had liaisons of her own with the writer Hermann Broch and the aristocratic Austrian communist Franz Xaver Schaffgotsch. It was Schaffgotsch who introduced her to the writings of Rosa Luxemburg, the communist leader murdered in Berlin by Freikorps thugs during the Spartacist Uprising of January 1919. Milena would later translate Luxemburg's *Letters from Prison* into Czech.⁸ Kafka wrote the bulk of his letters to Milena over an eight-month period between April and November 1920. During this time they met just twice, for four days in Vienna at the end of June (according to Franz, "the first was unsure, the second was oversure, the third day was full of regret, and the fourth was the good one")⁹ and for a mutually unsatisfying one-day tryst in the little Czechoslovak-Austrian border town of Gmünd in late August. Franz tried to break off the correspondence in November, telling her, "What you are for me, Milena, beyond the whole world we inhabit, cannot be found in all the daily scraps of paper which I have sent you . . . these letters are pure anguish, *they are caused by incurable anguish and they cause incurable anguish*."¹⁰ Milena continued her lovelorn visits to the post office until January 1921,¹¹ when she received a letter from the High Tatra mountains where Franz was being treated

for tuberculosis. “Make it impossible for us to meet, and do not write,” he implored; “please fulfill my request in silence, it is the only thing that can enable me to go on living, everything else causes further destruction.”¹² They did meet a few times after that in Prague, but no longer as lovers. Kafka described Milena’s visits as “kind and noble” but “somewhat forced, too, like the visits one pays an invalid.”¹³ Franz entrusted Milena with his diaries, dating back to 1910, in October 1921. When he next wrote, at the end of March 1922, he addressed her as Frau Milena, using the formal *Sie*.¹⁴ They saw each other for the last time in June 1923.

Milena Jesenská was more than just *Kafka's Freundin*, and their affair was but one episode, albeit a significant one, in her eventful life. That said, these letters provide as good a way as any into the convolutions of Prague at the beginning of the end of history. Whether in the intimacy of love letters or in the cockpit of the public sphere, it was a time and place where the implications of language for identity could not be avoided. Early in the correspondence, when their connection was still that of author to translator (Milena’s Czech translation of Kafka’s story “The Stoker” appeared in the communist poet S. K. Neumann’s magazine *Kmen* [Stem] in April 1920), Franz asked Milena if she could write to him in Czech rather than German. “Of course I understand Czech,” he explained. “I’ve meant to ask you several times already why you never write in Czech. Not to imply that your command of German leaves anything to be desired . . . I wanted to read you in Czech because, after all, you do belong to that language, because only there can Milena be found in her entirety.”¹⁵ By her own account, Milena “did not know a word of German” when she arrived in Vienna in March 1918 as a “young girl” (*malá holka*). This may have been an exaggeration, but Franz Schaffgotsch recalled that she still spoke German badly two years later.¹⁶ Max Brod, too, described Milena’s German at the time as “imperfect.”¹⁷ But it is not linguistic competence that is at issue here. “If I write in German,” Milena told her friend Willi Schlamm in 1938, “I only say half of what I have to say . . . I am controlled, caustic, good-humored. In Czech I am sentimental and ‘abominably fond of truth.’ What do you prefer?”¹⁸ By that date there can be no doubt of Milena’s capabilities in German, but she is speaking of the ineffable connections between language and being. So was Kafka. “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*,” wrote their Viennese contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a work he completed during a leave from the Austrian army in the summer of 1918.¹⁹ In Prague, Wittgenstein’s celebrated dictum was no more than a simple description of everyday realities. Franz and Milena were both

dyed-in-the-wool Praguers, but even as they walked the same streets they inhabited different worlds.

Besides, Kafka was Jewish. He was sharply reminded of that fact at dinner one evening in the Pension Ottoburg in Merano, where he was convalescing (and “making plans day and night—against my own clear will—about how I could seduce the chambermaid”) when he began his correspondence with Milena.²⁰ “The company in my present pension,” he wrote to Max Brod, “are all German and Christian.” Usually Franz ate at a small table by himself:

But today when I went into the dining room the colonel (the general was not there yet) invited me so cordially to the common table that I had to give in. So now the thing took its course. After the first few words it came out that I was from Prague. Both of them—the general, who sat opposite me, and the colonel—were acquainted with Prague. Was I Czech? No. So now explain to those true German military eyes what you really are. Someone else suggested “German-Bohemian,” someone else “Little Quarter” [*Kleinseite*, in Czech *Malá Strana*, the Lesser Town]. Then the subject was dropped and people went on eating, but the general, with his sharp ears linguistically schooled in the Austrian army, was not satisfied. After we had eaten, he once more began to wonder about the sound of my German, perhaps more bothered by what he saw than what he heard. At that point I tried to explain that by my being Jewish. At this his scientific curiosity, to be sure, was satisfied, but not his human feelings. At the same moment, probably by sheer chance, for all the others could not have heard our conversation, but perhaps there was some connection after all, the whole company rose to leave (though yesterday they lingered on together for a long while; I heard that, since my door is adjacent to the dining room).²¹

Explain what you really are. For Prague Jews of Kafka’s generation, that was a tall order.

Ratcatcher’s Beauties

Franz Kafka was born on 3 July 1883 in a baroque house on the corner of Maiselova and Kaprova Streets, just off the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí). Only the portal survives today. The rest of the building was demolished during the slum clearance initiated by the Prague City Council in 1894, which razed the centuries-old Jewish ghetto and replaced it with upscale apartment houses in a hodgepodge of historicist and art nouveau styles, leaving

only a scattering of synagogues, the Old Jewish Cemetery, and the Jewish Town Hall with its backward-turning clock as mementos. In Czech the clearance was known as the *asanace*, from the Latin *sanitas*, the root of the terms *sanity*, *sanitation*, and *cordon sanitaire*. The little plaza where the house stood is now called Franz Kafka Square (náměstí Franze Kafky). It acquired the name only in 2000; for much of the latter half of the twentieth century Prague's most famous writer was officially forgotten in his homeland, having been doubly othered as "a Prague-Jewish author writing in German."²² The Kafka family lived for years on Pařížská (then called Mikulášská) Street, the main thoroughfare of the new quarter, in an apartment house on the corner of the embankment opposite the newly built Svatopluk Čech Bridge (Čechův most) from 1907 and in the Oppelt House on the corner of the Old Town Square from 1913. If the "shy young poet Gustav Janouch, who worshipped Kafka, brought him his first poems, [and] engaged him in discussions," is to be believed, the ghetto remained a constant presence in Kafka's world long after it had gone.²³ "I came when it had already disappeared," Franz supposedly told the boy, who was the son of one of his colleagues at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia:

But . . . In us all it still lives—the dark corners, the secret alleys, shuttered windows, squalid courtyards, rowdy pubs, and sinister inns. We walk through the broad streets of the newly built town. But our steps and our glances are uncertain. Inside we tremble just as before in the ancient streets of our misery. Our heart knows nothing of the slum clearance which has been achieved. The unhealthy old Jewish town within us is far more real than the new hygienic town around us. With our eyes open we walk through a dream: ourselves only a ghost of a vanished age.²⁴

Janouch is too delicate to mention the Fifth Quarter's numerous brothels, which made the district as notorious as its appalling mortality statistics.²⁵ U Denice, which the journalist and playwright Karel Ladislav Kukla described as "the eldorado of . . . Prague street girls,"²⁶ stood a couple doors down from the Jewish Town Hall and the Old-New Synagogue on Rabínská (today Maiselova) Street. Kukla's two-volume *Konec bahna Prahy* (The end of the Prague cesspit, 1927), "an illustrated review of real stories, dramas, and humorous sketches from the darkest as well as the most wonderful havens of moral squalor, despair, darkness, gallows humor, prostitution, and crime in the saloons, bars, alleyways, pubs, hospitals, lunatic asylums, dives, and gutters of Greater Prague"—which seems to cover all the bases—affectionately gathered

the city's *fleurs du mal*.²⁷ With *Ze všech koutů Prahy* (From all corners of Prague, 1894), *Noční Prahou* (Prague by night, 1905), and *Podzemní Praha* (Underground Prague, 1920), *Konec bahna Prahy* completed what Kukla proudly called his “Unknown Prague” tetralogy. One of his sources was Paul Leppin, a literary connoisseur of the “ratcatcher’s beauty” of the city’s underworld whom Max Brod dubbed the “chosen bard of the painfully disappearing old Prague.”²⁸ At the Salon Aaron on Cikánská (Gypsy, today Eliška Krásnohorská) Street, wrote Leppin, “satisfied, voluptuous prostitutes flaunted themselves in flowing silk gowns . . . [and] the laughter fluttered within like a captive bird in a cage.” The pride of the house was the strawberry-blonde Jana, who was more desired than her companions because she “gave to each man from the tensile, agonizing, restless sweetness that imbued her.”²⁹ Leppin tells her story—or, rather, a heavily mythologized version of it—in his tale “The Ghost of the Jewish Ghetto,” published in *Das Paradies der Andern* (*Others’ Paradise*, 1920). The action climaxes with Jana (Johanna in Leppin’s German) escaping the public hospital where she had been taken during an epidemic and making her way back to the Salon Aaron, only to find that it had been torn down. “A troop of drunken soldiers was passing by. . . . Amid the debris of the gutted bordellos, Johanna gave herself to the men whom chance had placed in her path.” The sex trade survived the *asanace*, as it would everything else modernity threw at it, and the whores moved on. “Clacking in high-heeled shoes, depravity fled to the outer edge of the suburbs. A city for the rich and fashionable rose up in the old squares.”³⁰

Kafka was not unmarked by this environment. “I passed by the brothel as by the house of a beloved,” he recorded in his diary in the spring of 1910. Is it beside the point to note that the Czech word *nevěstka* (prostitute) is a diminutive of *nevěsta* (bride)? The female sex was clearly on Franz’s mind, as it often was; a couple lines later he floats an image of “the seamstresses in the downpour of rain” apropos nothing at all.³¹ When not sampling the bordellos of Paris and Milan (as they did while on vacation in 1911),³² Franz and Max patronized the whorehouses at home. Brod, Leppin, and their fellow writers Egon Erwin Kisch and Franz Werfel were regulars at the Salon Gogo in the House of the Red Peacock on Kamzíkova Street, where the young Werfel charmed the ladies by impersonating Caruso with his beautiful tenor renditions of operatic arias. Opened by Abraham Goldschmidt around 1865, the Gogo was the most luxurious of Prague’s houses of pleasure. Gustav Mahler was a frequent customer during his tenure as resident conductor a few steps away at the Estates Theater in 1885–1886, though he reputedly didn’t like being



FIGURE 1.1. Hansi Szokoll and Franz Kafka, c. 1907. Photographer unknown.
Photograph © Archiv Klaus Wagenbach.

disturbed by the girls when composing at the piano in the yellow Japanese room on the second floor. Visits from Otto von Bismarck and the future (and last) Habsburg emperor Karl I lent further distinction to the establishment.³³ In 1908 Kafka fell in love with a twenty-one-year-old wine bar waitress named Hansi Szokoll, with whom he was photographed wearing a bowler hat like Sabina in Milan Kundera's *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984), accompanied by a dog. The photo is famous. Hansi is not. Sometimes she is cropped out of the picture; she seldom merits more than a paragraph or two in Kafka biographies. But Franz spent a very satisfying Sunday evening in June "in the dusk on the sofa beside dear H.'s bed while she pummeled [*schlug*] her boyish body under the red blanket." What Hansi was up to is anyone's guess, but this was the selfsame body that Kafka told Brod "entire cavalry regiments had ridden across."³⁴ The next month Franz took an aging streetwalker to a hotel. She complained that "people aren't as sweet to whores as they are to lovers. I didn't comfort her," he wrote Max, "because she didn't comfort me either."³⁵ This wasn't just a passing youthful phase. "I intentionally walk through the streets where there are whores," reads an entry in Kafka's diary five years later. "Walking past them excites me, the remote but nevertheless existent possibility of going with one. Is that grossness? But I

know no better, and doing this seems basically innocent to me and causes me almost no regret.”³⁶

If Franz lived in truth, it was a down-and-dirty, pornographic, unvarnished truth. But this was not, or at least not until recent scholarship began to unpick the Kafka myth,³⁷ the authorized version. Max Brod began Kafka’s unlikely transubstantiation into a latter-day prophet of all modern ills when he fictionalized his friend as the saintly Richard Garta in his roman à clef *Zauberreich der Liebe* (The enchanted kingdom of love, 1926), which appeared just two years after Franz’s death. “Kafka is more than any other modern writer,” Brod claimed later, “he is the 20th-century Job.”³⁸ When Max published Kafka’s diaries in 1948 he laundered the sacred text, omitting “things that were too intimate.”³⁹ Take, for example, this passage from October 1911, in which Brod excised all the words in angle brackets:⁴⁰

<In Suha [*sic*] b[rothel]> the day before the day before yesterday. The one, a Jewish girl with a narrow face, or rather, a face that tapers down to a narrow chin, but is widened out by an expansive, wavy hairdo. The three small doors that lead from the inside of the building into the salon. The guests as though in a guardroom on the stage, drinks on the table are barely touched. <The flat-faced girl in an angular dress that does not begin to move until way down at the hemline.> Several girls here dressed like the marionettes for children’s theatres that are sold in the Christmas market, that is, with ruching and gold stuck on and loosely sewn so that one can rip them with one pull and they then fall apart in one’s fingers.⁴¹

The precision of Kafka’s prose is unnerving—especially if you happen to know the Christmas market that still takes place every year in the Old Town Square. So is the precision of Brod’s scalpel. His suppression of the fact that this entire scene is set in a brothel—Šuha on the corner of Benediktská and Dlouhá Streets, a more down-home Prague cathouse than the Gogo—takes the sting out of the marionette analogy and obscures its point, while lending the passage an air of inexplicable “Kafkaesque” mystery. In sanitizing Kafka’s life, argues Milan Kundera, Brod censored the essence of Kafka’s art. For “at the root of Kafka’s novels . . . [lies] a profound antiromanticism; it shows up everywhere: in the way Kafka sees society as well as in the way he constructs a sentence; but its origin may lie in Kafka’s vision of sex.” Kundera instances K’s ecstatic coitus with Frieda “among the beer puddles and the other filth covering the floor” in *The Castle*, a congress that is made all the more grotesque because, unknown to the lovers, “above them, on the bar counter, sit the two

assistants: they were watching the couple the whole time.”⁴² Ratcatcher’s beauty is right. Not for nothing did André Breton include an excerpt from Kafka’s novella “The Metamorphosis” in his *Anthology of Black Humor*.⁴³

Kafka likely would have agreed—a little ruefully, perhaps—with the young Czech psychoanalytic theorist Bohuslav Brouk, who wrote in his afterword to Jindřich Štyrský’s *Emilie přichází ke mně ve snu* (*Emily Comes to Me in a Dream*, 1933) that “there is nothing as intensely dispiriting for those who have sublimated the substance of the body than their animality spontaneously making its presence felt. Just consider how the signs of uncontrollable shifts deject the hero during a triumphal campaign, or how painfully the nabobs bear their sexual appetites towards their despised inferiors.”⁴⁴ Comprising a dream narrative and ten pornographic photomontages, *Emily* was first produced in a private limited edition of sixty-nine copies to avoid the censor. It was the last of six volumes in Štyrský’s *Edice 69* (Edition 69, 1931–1933), a series of “works of outstanding literary merit and . . . graphic art that will have long-lasting artistic value” but whose “print-runs [were] kept to a minimum by the exclusively erotic nature of the work.”⁴⁵ Earlier publications in the series included the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (illustrated by Toyen, née Marie Čermínová) and Vítězslav Nezval’s autobiographical coming-of-age novella *Sexuální nocturno* (*Sexual Nocturne*, illustrated by Štyrský). Nezval, Štyrský, Toyen, and Brouk were founding members of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group in March 1934. The Czech art historian Karel Šrp finds it “almost unbelievable that one of the most important books in twentieth-century Czech art reaches the hands of a broader public” for the first time only in 2001, when *Emily* was reprinted in facsimile, but it rather proves Brouk’s point.⁴⁶

Pornography is a mirror in which decent folks don’t like to see themselves reflected. For the surrealists, the erotic was a methodology for unveiling discomfiting truths. Franz Kafka is not the first or the last man or woman to be possessed by undignified desires that cannot be sanitized or romanticized away, and Prague is not the first or the last modern city to clean up the ancient dens of iniquity blighting its center only to have the whores and their johns resurface elsewhere. “The body will continue to demonstrate mortality as the fate of all humans,” Brouk continues. “It is for this reason that any reference to human animality so gravely affects those who dream of its antithesis. They take offense not only at any mention of animality in life, but in science, literature, and the arts as well, as this would disturb their reveries by undermining their rationalist airs and social pretensions. By imposing

acts both sexual and excremental on their perception, their superhuman fantasies are destroyed, laying bare the vanity of their efforts to free themselves from the power of nature, which has, in assuming mortality, equipped them with a sex and an irrepressible need to satisfy its hunger.”⁴⁷ *Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*.

Language Games

Kafka’s biographer Reiner Stach suggests that while Franz’s sisters Valli (Valerie), Elli (Gabriele), and Ottla (Ottilie) might have been shocked by their big brother’s visits to prostitutes, his parents were more likely reassured of his masculine normality.⁴⁸ His father Hermann, after all, once offered to accompany Franz to a brothel where he could ease his bodily urges rather than see him marry Julie Wohryzek, a mere cobbler’s daughter (“If you’re scared of that sort of place, I’ll come with you”).⁴⁹ The Kafkas were respectable people with solid bourgeois values. Franz’s mother Julie, née Löwy, came from a merchant and brewing family in Poděbrady in eastern Bohemia. The Löwys moved to Prague when Julie was twenty and lived on the Old Town Square in a house where Bedřich Smetana once ran a music school. Like most upper-middle-class Bohemian Jews, they spoke German. Hermann Kafka came from humbler stock. He was raised in the village of Osek near Strakonice in southern Bohemia, where his father Jakob was a kosher butcher. The 1890 census recorded 381 inhabitants in Osek, all of whom declared Czech to be their “language of everyday use.”⁵⁰ An 1852 census listed twenty Jewish families living in the village, enough to sustain a synagogue.⁵¹ The language of instruction during Hermann’s scant few years at the Jewish elementary school in Osek was German, though postcards written in his hand suggest that his grasp of formal German was poor. But he possessed “the Kafka will to life, business, and conquest” in abundance and was amply blessed with “strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance, presence of mind, knowledge of human nature, [and] a certain way of doing things on a grand scale” (I quote Franz).⁵² Like hundreds of thousands of other immigrants from the Czech-speaking countryside, Hermann found his way to Prague, where he arranged his marriage through a Jewish matchmaker. With the aid of Julie’s dowry he opened a shop on Celetná Street in 1882, selling “linen, fashionable knitted ware, sunshades and umbrellas, walking sticks and cotton goods.”⁵³ On his letterhead Hermann styled himself Heřman Kafka, using the Czech rather than the German spelling of his name.⁵⁴ This may have

saved the store from damage during the language riots of November 1897, sparked by the fall of Count Kazimir Badeni's government in Vienna following Bohemian-German protests against his decree that all civil servants in Bohemia be bilingual by 1901. Hermann's business prospered, and in 1912 he moved his shop to the corner of the Kinský Palace in the Old Town Square.

During Franz's childhood the family moved several times before settling into the House at the Minute (Dům U Minuty) beside the Old Town Hall in June 1889. The renaissance sgraffiti that are such a striking feature of the façade today were only uncovered in 1919. The Kafkas lived there for seven years before relocating in September 1896 to a larger apartment across the square at 3 Celetná Street, in the same building as Hermann's shop. By that time Franz had acquired his three sisters and lost two brothers. Busy with the business, where they both worked six and a half days a week, Hermann and Julie left Franz's care largely to the domestic staff, including the cook Františka Nedvěďová, the maid Marie Zemanová, and the nurse Anna Čukalová, all of whom were Czech Catholics.⁵⁵ Franz told his first fiancée Felice Bauer that in his early years he "lived alone for a very long time, battling with nurses, old nannies, spiteful cooks, unhappy governesses, since my parents were always at the shop."⁵⁶ Nedvěďová, he later wrote to Milena, was "a small dry thin person with a pointed nose, hollow cheeks, somewhat jaundiced but firm, energetic, and superior," who tormented him as she walked him to school with threats that she would tell the teacher how naughty he had been at home.⁵⁷ Housekeeper Marie Wernerová, who initially arrived as a governess for Kafka's sisters around 1910 and eventually moved in for good, was a Czech Jewish country girl who spoke little or no German.⁵⁸ Franz was still exchanging Christmas presents and corresponding with Slečna (Miss),⁵⁹ as Wernerová was known in the family, at the end of his life.⁶⁰ Kafka was proud of his proficiency in Czech, but in a characteristically self-mocking way ("I apologize for my mistakes with particular elegance").⁶¹ He appreciated the "linguistic music" of Božena Němcová's beloved novel *Babička* (*The Grandmother*, 1855),⁶² a foundation of modern Czech literature, and admired "the vitality of spoken Czech."⁶³ But it was in German that Franz learned his lessons at the German Boys Elementary School on the Meat Market (Masná ulice), the Old Town Gymnasium (located on the second floor of the Kinský Palace), and the Karl-Ferdinand German University of Prague, where he received his doctorate in law in 1906.⁶⁴ Prague University, founded by Charles IV in 1349 and the oldest in Central Europe, had fractured into separate Czech and German institutions in 1882.

"I have never lived among Germans," Franz told Milena after she complied with his request to write to him in Czech. "German is my mother tongue and as such more natural to me," he explained, "but I consider Czech much more affectionate, which is why your letter removes several uncertainties; I see you more clearly, the movements of your body, your hands, so quick, so resolute, it's almost like a meeting."⁶⁵ But when Milena asked him a few days later, "Are you a Jew?" (*Jste žid?*), he responds with a harsher corporeal metaphor: "Don't you see how the fist is pulled back in the word '*jste*' so as to gain muscle power? And then in the word '*žid*' the happy blow, flying unerringly forward. The Czech language often produces such strange effects on the German ear." The word *nechápu* (I don't comprehend), he continues, is "a strange word in Czech and even in your mouth it is so severe, so callous, cold-eyed, stingy . . . [that it] prohibits the other person from expressing anything to the contrary."⁶⁶ Remarking on some "perfectly good German" phrases in his sister Ottla's letters that "did not express what they were intended to say," he observes that "these are, of course, translations from the Czech . . . which German refuses to assimilate, at least as far as I, a half-German, can judge."⁶⁷ A year later Ottla would marry a Czech Catholic, Josef David, against her parents' will but with Franz's strong support. The linguistic estrangement was still worse with Franz's mother. "Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could," he noted in his diary in October 1911, "only because the German language prevented it. . . . 'Mutter' is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendor, Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called 'Mutter' therefore becomes not only comic but strange."⁶⁸ A month earlier, following his visit to a Milanese brothel, Kafka recorded in his diary, "At home it was with the German bordello girls that one lost a sense of one's nationality for a moment, here it was with the French girls."⁶⁹ A decade later Franz told Max Brod that, in the Yiddish-German of central European Jews, the verb *mauscheln* "consists of a bumptious, tacit, or self-pitying appropriation of someone else's property, something not earned, but stolen by means of a relatively casual gesture. Yet it remains someone else's property, even though there is no evidence of a single solecism."⁷⁰ The root of the word *mauscheln* is the name Moshe (Moses); the Langenscheidt German dictionary lists among its meanings "to talk Yiddish," "to mumble," "to mutter," and "to cheat," and it gives *tricksen*, *mogeln*, *täuschen*, *schummeln*, and *schwindeln* as synonyms. Franz's world was *unheimlich* (uncanny) to its core.⁷¹

"The people who understand Czech best (apart from Czech Jews, of course), are the gentlemen from *Naše řeč* [Our language], second best are the

readers of that journal, third best the subscribers—of which I am one,” he joked with Milena.⁷² *Naše řeč* still exists and is nowadays published under the auspices of the Czech Academy of Sciences Institute for the Czech Language. It celebrated its hundredth birthday in 2017. Franz might have been amused by an article on a common but untranslatable Czech word that appeared in 2009:

There is also a special expression associated with the Prague socio-cultural context—*kafkárna*. This word that remains difficult to interpret, let alone translate, denotes an absurd feeling of hopelessness, disarray, and dislocation that is typical of Franz Kafka’s work. . . . Most commonly, the word *kafkárna* is used to describe a nonsensical, logically inexplicable, chaotic, ridiculous, or hopeless **situation, state and feeling** to which one gradually resigns oneself, although one does not identify with it and it escapes one’s conscious understanding. . . . The word may also describe a place that is peculiar, strange, out of the ordinary in a negative sense, a place governed by absurd laws.⁷³

And what of those languages with which Kafka might have identified as a Jew? When Emperor Joseph II “emancipated” Jews in the 1780s, his aim was to make them “more useful and serviceable to the State.”⁷⁴ It was a Faustian bargain. Joseph’s reforms gave Jews substantial civil rights (though not full civic equality) while curtailing their communal autonomy and banning the continued use of Yiddish or Hebrew in community record keeping. German became the language of instruction in all Jewish elementary schools. By the time Kafka introduced a recital of Yiddish poetry by the Warsaw-born actor Isaac Meir Levi (alias Yitzhak Löwy/Jacques Levi/Jack Lewi) at the Jewish Town Hall on 11 February 1912, Prague Jews had long since lost any language of their own. Franz began his talk with the observation that “many of you are so frightened of Yiddish that one can almost see it in your faces.” It frightened them because, like the demolished ghetto, it represented a past they thought they had left behind. Franz assured his audience that “once Yiddish has taken hold of you and moved you—and Yiddish is everything, the words, the Chasidic melody, and the essential character of this Eastern European Jewish actor himself . . . you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you, yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves.”⁷⁵ Fascinated by the Yiddish theater of eastern Europe, Kafka attended performances at the Café Savoy by Löwy’s players from Lviv at least twenty times in 1911.⁷⁶ But deep down he knew there was no place in that true unity for him. “Both the intention and the implementation of everything

Löwy does is childlike and absurd,” he wrote a year or so later, disillusioned.⁷⁷ Neither Prague nor Kafka belonged to eastern Europe.

Franz was not convinced by Zionist promises of a New Jerusalem either. He made some serious attempts to learn Hebrew, most desperately during the last year of his life when he was living in Berlin with his last lover, Dora Diamant, a runaway seamstress from a Hassidic family in Poland. But unlike Max Brod, whose Zionist ardor dated from Martin Buber’s 1909 lectures to Bar Kochba (the Association of Jewish University Students of Prague), Kafka remained skeptical about a Jewish national renaissance—or at least his place in it. He found Buber “dreary. No matter what he says,” he confessed to Felice Bauer in January 1913, “there is always something missing.”⁷⁸ Later that year, since he happened to be in town for a conference in connection with his job at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia, he dropped in on the eleventh Zionist World Congress in Vienna. “I sat in . . . as if it were an event totally alien to me,” he reported to Brod, “and if I didn’t quite throw spitballs at the delegates, as did a girl in the opposite gallery, I was bored enough to.”⁷⁹ “What have I in common with Jews?” Kafka asked in his diary in January 1914, famously responding: “I have hardly anything in common with myself.”⁸⁰ “We both know numerous typical examples of the Western Jew,” he wrote to Milena in a fit of lacerating clarity in November 1920. “As far as I am concerned I’m the most Western-Jewish of them all . . . nothing has been granted me, everything must be earned, not only the present and future, but the past as well”:

It’s a little as if instead of just having to wash up, comb one’s hair, etc., before every walk—which is difficult enough—a person is constantly missing everything he needs to take with him, and so each time he has to sew his clothes, make his boots, manufacture his hat, cut his walking stick, etc. Of course it’s impossible to do all of that well; it may hold up for a few blocks, but then suddenly, at the Graben [Na Příkopě], for example, everything falls apart and he’s left standing there naked with rags and pieces. And now the torture of running back to the Altstädter Ring [Old Town Square]! And in the end he runs into an angry mob on the Eisengasse [Železná Street], hot in pursuit of Jews.

Don’t misunderstand me, Milena. I’m not saying such a man is lost, not at all, but he is lost the minute he goes to the Graben where he is a disgrace to himself and the world.⁸¹

A few days previously Czech mobs had occupied the offices of the Bohemian-German newspaper the *Prager Tagblatt* (Prague daily) and trashed

the archives in the Jewish Town Hall. The rioters on Železná Street may have been on their way to the Estates Theater, Prague's oldest, which is best remembered today for staging the world première of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in 1787. To the chagrin of Czech nationalists, the Estates had stopped offering Czech plays and had become an exclusively German-language venue nearly sixty years earlier, after the Provisional Theater, predecessor of the volubly Czech National Theater, opened in 1862.⁸² Yelling "The Estates to the Nation!" the Czechs forcibly expelled the German players. The National Theater took over the premises and performed Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*, 1866) that same night. Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, supposedly refused to set foot in the building ever again. By then, *The Bartered Bride*—a jolly rural romp wherein the comely Mařenka and her resourceful suitor Jeník outwit her scheming parents and the buffo marriage broker Kecal to the accompaniment of Czech peasant dances and lusty male choruses serenading good Czech beer—had become *the* Czech national opera, a status it retains to the present day. "I've been spending every afternoon outside on the streets, bathing in anti-Semitic hate," Franz wrote to Milena. "Isn't it natural to leave a place where one is so hated? (Zionism or national feeling isn't needed for this at all.) The heroism of staying on," he added, "is nonetheless merely the heroism of cockroaches which cannot be exterminated, even from the bathroom."⁸³ Coming from the author of "The Metamorphosis," the cockroach image is devastating. That story begins: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect [the word Kafka uses is *Ungeziefer*, or vermin]."⁸⁴ Franz ended his correspondence with Milena a couple weeks later. The timing may have been sheer chance, but perhaps there was some connection after all.

Kafka was neither saint nor prophet. But he *was* blessed—or cursed—with what Milena, writing to Max Brod a few months later, described as "terrible clairvoyance." By this she meant exceptional insight, rather than the faculty of perceiving future events. Franz did not "foresee the Holocaust" (or the gulag or the Moscow trials),⁸⁵ but this is not to say that his writings do not illuminate the roots of such obscenities in the everyday life of the modern world. "At one time or another we have all taken refuge in a lie, in blindness, enthusiasm, optimism, a conviction, pessimism, or something else," Milena continued. "But [Kafka] has never fled to any refuge, not one. He is absolutely incapable of lying, just as he is incapable of getting drunk." That is why "Frank [as she always called him] is unable to live. Frank is incapable of living. Frank will never recover. Frank will soon die."⁸⁶ Kafka died of tuberculosis in an Austrian

sanitarium in the summer of 1924. He was forty years old. Given what happened subsequently, he was perhaps better off being out of it. In her obituary for the *Národní listy* (National paper), Milena quoted one of his letters from memory: “When heart and soul can’t bear it any longer, the lung takes on half the burden.”⁸⁷ But she found universal significance in Kafka’s “moving, pure naïveté”—or at least in the body of work to which it gave rise:

He has written the most significant books of modern German literature, books that embody the struggle of today’s generation throughout the world—while refraining from all tendentiousness. They are true, stark, and painful, to the point of being naturalistic even where they are symbolic. They are full of dry scorn and the sensitive perspective of a man who saw the world so clearly that he couldn’t bear it, a man who was bound to die since he refused to make concessions or take refuge, as others do, in various fallacies of reason, or the unconscious. . . . All of his books paint the horror of secret misunderstandings, of innocent guilt between people. He was an artist and a man of such anxious conscience he could hear even where others, deaf, felt themselves secure.⁸⁸

German Prague!

When Max Brod described “old Austrian Prague” as a “city of three nationalities,”⁸⁹ it seemed a self-evidently accurate portrayal of the city in which he was raised. But a century earlier that would not have been true. Nations are not timeless. Czech and German speakers and Jewish believers had lived side by side in the Bohemian lands for more than a millennium, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes not. The social significance of language shifted back and forth over the course of time. A case can be made for the existence of a strong sense of language-based Czech identity during the Middle Ages, which manifested itself most forcefully during the fifteenth-century Hussite Wars.⁹⁰ But with the absorption of the Kingdom of Bohemia into the Austrian Empire after the crown passed to the Habsburgs in 1526, and especially after the Rising of the Bohemian Estates was defeated at the Battle of the White Mountain on the western outskirts of Prague in 1620, language came to divide social strata rather than ethnic groups. German became the language of state, literature, and learning, the lingua franca of the upper classes, while Czech was reduced to the vulgar tongue of the common folk. As a written language, Czech went into seemingly terminal decline. The transformation of linguistic differences

into bases for *national* communities was a more recent development, bound up with other social changes associated with the onset of modernity. Czech speakers were welded into a coherent nation only in the nineteenth century, during what the Czechs call their national revival (*národní obrození*). This Slavic “insurgency” left non-Czech speakers with little choice but to redefine themselves in ethnic terms too.⁹¹ In fact, the term *revival* (*obrození*) is a misnomer. The process is better understood as a new imagining of community and inventing of tradition, even if some of the raw materials out of which they were fabricated were of undeniably ancient provenance.

The revival began in the 1780s with a small coterie of scholarly awakeners (*buditelé*) who occupied themselves with Czech language, literature, legend, history, and folklore under the patronage of German-speaking aristocrats whose loyalties were to the land of Bohemia rather than to the Czech (or German) nation. The awakeners’ labors had little popular impact until after 1850, when the growth of modern industry brought a flood of Czech-speaking country folk to the cities. Which language was used in state and municipal offices, courts, schools, colleges and universities, and other arenas of everyday life suddenly became a fraught political issue. I have told this story at length in *The Coasts of Bohemia*.⁹² Suffice it to say here that after Czechs gained a majority on the Prague City Council and elected the first modern Czech mayor in 1861, they never looked back. By the end of the century Prague was demographically and otherwise “a Czech city, so Czech, that it was perhaps more Czech only during the Hussite times and the times that immediately followed,” when “Prague Germans . . . were violently expelled from the city.”⁹³ Here I quote from *Ottův slovník naučný* (*Otto’s Encyclopedia*, 1888–1909), a magnificent twenty-eight-volume work produced with the participation of much of the faculty at the Czech University and rivaled in size and scholarship only by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. By this time the Hussite Wars loomed large in the Czech imagination as an era of past glory when, in the words of historian and “father of the nation” (*Otec národa*) František Palacký, “a nation not great in numbers . . . stood up in arms against all the immense forces and powers through which the temporal and spiritual authorities of the age governed throughout the whole of Christendom.”⁹⁴ The image of Czechs standing up “against all” (*proti všem*) had an obvious contemporary resonance.

It is impossible to give precise figures for this “second Czechicization of Prague.”⁹⁵ The boundaries within which censuses were undertaken and the criteria they employed to establish (or obfuscate) nationality changed over the period. Further complicating matters, once national affiliation became a

political hot potato, many people responded to census questions strategically. Jews shifted their declared “language of everyday use,” which was taken as a proxy for nationality, with the prevailing political wind. *Otto’s Encyclopedia* demanded in 1903 that “Prague Jewry, who were mostly born in Czech regions, would at long last stop seeing material advantage in declaring their language of everyday use to be German upon moving to Prague.”⁹⁶ In fact, the proportion of Prague Jews declaring their language to be German fell from 74 percent in the 1890 census to 45 percent in 1900. This change is only partially explained by fresh Jewish immigration from Czech-speaking rural areas. The *Svůj k svému!* (Each to his own!) business boycott of 1892, the anti-Semitism in Czech newspaper coverage of the conflict over the replacement of bilingual street signs by Czech-only signs in 1893, and the 1897 language riots (during which Czech mobs smashed synagogue windows in Smíchov and Žižkov) were persuasive reasons for Jews to think twice about identifying as German. Hermann Kafka declared Czech to be the everyday language of his household in the 1890, 1900, and 1910 censuses, as did all other members of the family—except for Franz, who in 1910 recorded his language of everyday use as German.⁹⁷

Whatever the difficulties in interpreting the statistics, the overall pattern is clear. A less than accurate census of 1851 broke down Prague’s population as 53 percent Czech, 33 percent German, and 11 percent Jewish (of which 8 percent spoke German and 3 percent Czech). A city census of 1869 divided the population into 80.5 percent Czech and 17.9 percent German, which was probably closer to the mark. Jews were included in these numbers; when residents were identified by religion, Jews accounted for 8.28 percent of Prague’s inhabitants.⁹⁸ These figures relate to the four historical towns of the city center and the former Jewish ghetto, known since 1850 as Josefov (after Joseph II). In 1890 German speakers made up 18.7 percent of the inhabitants in the Old Town (Staré Město), 16.2 percent in the New Town (Nové Město), 17.4 percent in the Lesser Town (Malá Strana), 8.2 percent in Hradčany, and 23.5 percent in Josefov.⁹⁹ Vyšehrad, Holešovice-Bubny, and Libeň, which were incorporated into the city between 1883 and 1901, were overwhelmingly Czech speaking. So were the contiguous towns of Karlín, Smíchov, Vinohrady, and Žižkov, which remained legally independent until they were annexed to Greater Prague (Hlavní město Praha) in 1922. The suburban population surpassed that of the historical center by 1890. In 1900 the Prague conurbation was 93.1 percent Czech speaking and 6.7 percent German speaking. In the 1921 census, when the new Czechoslovak state allowed people to define their own nationality for

the first time, self-declared Germans constituted just 4.6 percent of the city's inhabitants.¹⁰⁰ During the seventy years in which Prague grew from a provincial town of 150,000 people to a 625,000-strong national capital, the proportion of the population self-identifying as German (speaking) had fallen to barely a tenth of what it had been.

Prague Germans did not just disappear into a sea of Czechs, as these raw numbers might lead us to expect. "The twenty-five thousand Germans, who constituted only 5 percent of the population of Prague at the time," recalled Egon Erwin Kisch in his memoir *Marktplatz der Sensationen* (*Sensation Fair*, 1942), "possessed two magnificent theaters [the Estates Theater, built in 1783, and the New German Theater, opened in 1888], a huge concert hall [the Rudolfinum, built in 1876–1884], two colleges [German University and German Polytechnic], five high schools, and four advanced vocational institutes, two newspapers with a morning and an evening edition each [*Bohemia* and *Prager Tagblatt*], large meeting halls, and a lively social life."¹⁰¹ Albert Einstein, who took up what turned out to be a short-lived position as a professor at the German University of Prague in April 1911, had mixed first impressions of the city. "It is different here than in Zurich," he wrote. "The air is full of soot, the water is life-threatening, the people are superficial, shallow, and uncouth, if also, as it seems, in general good-hearted." But, as he happily noted, "I have a spacious institute with a magnificent library and I don't have to struggle with the difficulties of the language, which with my awful ponderousness in learning languages comes heavily into consideration for me!" He could live, and live well, entirely in German, including playing his violin and debating Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at Berta Fanta's renowned salon held at the Unicorn Apothecary House on the Old Town Square.¹⁰²

"If you didn't have a title or weren't rich," Kisch observed, "you just didn't belong." Even if, he might have added, German was your language of everyday use. German Prague was an "almost exclusively . . . upper middle class" enclave of mine owners, industrial magnates, wealthy merchants, and bank directors who rubbed shoulders with high-ranking military officers, state officials, and university professors. Kisch bluntly asserts that "There was no German proletariat."¹⁰³ This was only half true. Although language had long divided social classes, by the end of the century the commanding heights of the economy were no longer exclusively in German hands. Osvald Polívka's Land Bank building, replete with patriotic frescoes by Mikoláš Aleš, opened its doors in 1895 on Na Příkopě—the Graben where Franz Kafka disgraced himself and the world—next door to the German Casino, which had been the center of

Prague-German social life since 1862. Working-class Germans didn't hang out at the casino.¹⁰⁴ They lived in the cheaper, mostly Czech areas of the city and were more likely to intermarry with Czechs. In this way, Prague Germans' self-perception as elites may have inadvertently hastened their demographic decline.

The greater irony, in retrospect, is that a large number of Prague's Germans—almost half in 1900—were Jews. Anti-Semitism was on the rise across the empire as pan-Austrian liberalism, with which Prague's Jews had strongly identified since 1848, gave way to rival ethnic nationalisms. Karl Lueger, the rabidly anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna from 1897 to 1910, had his Czech counterpart in Karel Baxa, who served as mayor of Prague from 1919 to 1937. Baxa had first made his name in 1899 during the Hilsner trial, which split opinion in Austria-Hungary much as the Dreyfus case had in France. A Jewish vagrant, Leopold Hilsner, was convicted on the flimsiest of evidence of the alleged “ritual murder” of a nineteen-year-old Czech girl, Anežka Hružová, in Polná in southeastern Bohemia. Tomáš Masaryk intervened on behalf of the defendant, penning the Czech equivalent of Émile Zola's *J'accuse!* It did not make him popular among many of his compatriots. Baxa acted pro bono for the victim's family and had no qualms about playing the blood libel card. “‘You Hilsner!’ was the cry that greeted Jewish children on their way to school,” according to Kisch, “accompanied by the significant gesture of a finger being drawn across the bare neck. This was supposed to depict the characteristic cut that played a role in the trial.”¹⁰⁵

Twenty years later Kafka angrily alluded to the case in one of his letters to Milena: “I don't understand how whole nations of people could ever have thought of ritual murder before these recent events (at most they may have felt general fear and jealousy, but here there is no question, we see ‘Hilsner’ committing the crime step by step . . .).” The context for his outburst was Czech reaction to the suicide of Josef Reiner, the Christian editor of the liberal Prague newspaper *Tribuna*, following the discovery of his wife's affair with Willi Haas, a Jew. This is the same *Tribuna* that had recently begun to carry Milena's writings and the same Willi Haas who later published *Letters to Milena*. As it happens, the woman in question, who subsequently married Haas, was Milena's close friend Jarmila Ambrožová. “First of all what most terrifies me about the story is the conviction that the Jews are necessarily bound to fall upon you Christians,” Franz explained to Milena, “just as predatory animals are bound to murder. . . . It is impossible for you to imagine this in all its fullness and power, even if you understand everything else in the story better than I do.”¹⁰⁶ He

could have cited a long history of Czech anti-Semitism to underline his point. Jan Neruda, author of the Czech classic *Malostranské povídky* (Tales from the Lesser Town, 1878, published in English as *Prague Tales*), called for “emancipation from the Jews” in his pamphlet *Pro strach židovský* (The Jewish fear, 1869), while the liberal Czech journalist and “martyr” of the 1848 revolution Karel Havlíček Borovský characterized the Jewish population as “a separate, Semitic nation that lives only incidentally in our midst and sometimes understands or knows our language.” Havlíček (as he is generally known) had no doubt that “he who wants to be a Czech must cease to be a Jew.”¹⁰⁷

Less than a fifth of Prague Jews identified themselves as Jewish by nationality when given the opportunity to do so for the first time in the 1921 census. More than half gave their nationality as Czechoslovak—prudently, perhaps, given the atmosphere of the times. But nearly a quarter of the city’s self-declared German minority still identified their religion as Judaism.¹⁰⁸ That identity was no doubt as conflicted as Kafka’s, but there is no reason to question that they *felt* more German than Czech—even if only “half German”—and, like the majority of Prague Jews at the time, did not experience Jewishness as a *nationality* at all. Hugo Bergmann, Kafka’s classmate through elementary and high school and a mainstay at Berta Fanta’s salon, was a deeply committed Zionist. He nevertheless wrote: “My mother tongue is German, I attended only German schools, speak and think in German. These are in general the signposts by which in this country one judges membership to the German people or the Czech people. By these criteria I am thus German as much as anybody else.”¹⁰⁹ Max Brod—who was instrumental in persuading Tomáš Masaryk to recognize Jews as a national minority in the new state—was more nuanced, describing himself as “a Jewish writer of the German tongue.” He claimed a “distant love” (*Distanzliebe*) for the German culture that was and wasn’t his:

I do not feel myself to be a member of the German people, but am a friend of Germanness and also, by language and education . . . culturally related to Germanness. I am a friend of Czechness, yet am in essential ways . . . detached from Czechness. I cannot find a simpler formulation for an existence in the Jewish diaspora of a nationally divided city.¹¹⁰

But Brod was adamant that “for me Prague is home. And I do not have another real home. My family has lived in Prague as far back as I can trace it on my father’s side. And Prague is the main setting not just in some but in *all* of my novels. In the 46 years of my life I have never been away from Prague for more than a few weeks.”¹¹¹ Max championed the composer Leoš Janáček, the

expressionist artists of *Osmá* (The Eight),¹¹² and Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (The fortunes of the good soldier Švejk in the world war, to give *The Good Soldier Švejk* its full title), when none of them found much support in Czech cultural circles. The critic F. X. Šalda captured something important when he wrote that Brod's *Tycho Brahes Weg zu Gott* (Tycho Brahe's path to God)—an "old-Prague" historical novel set "in a time when the old is not true any more and the new is not true yet"—was "not a German novel, it is a Jewish novel. . . . And this most characteristic Jewishness is so beautiful in Brod's book, and when all is said and done it is very close and comprehensible to genuine Czech national feeling [česství]." ¹¹³

Two years younger than Kafka, Egon Erwin Kisch was another bright Jewish boy with literary ambitions. The raging reporter, as he called himself,¹¹⁴ started his career in 1906 writing about Prague's underworld of crime and prostitution for the German-language daily *Bohemia*. Kisch fought in the Austrian army in World War I, was radicalized by the Russian Revolution, took part in the Vienna Uprising of November 1918, and joined the newly founded Austrian Communist Party in June 1919. Back in Prague after the war he collaborated with Jaroslav Hašek and others at the *Revoluční scéna* (Revolutionary stage) cabaret theater, which staged its anarchic sketches in the basement of the Hotel Adria on Wenceslas Square. He reportedly danced the first tango in Prague with Emča Revoluce (Ema of the Revolution, née Ema Czadská) at one of Hašek's favorite watering holes, the Montmartre Café on Řetězová Street in the Old Town. The bohemian haunt, which opened its doors nightly when everywhere else was closing, had recently been remodeled in Czech cubist style by the young architect and set designer Jiří Kroha, who covered the walls with murals "manifesting the opposition of youth against every sort of official line."¹¹⁵ Egon moved on to Berlin in 1921 and made that city his base until Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933. Kisch has a legitimate claim to be the inventor of modern reportage. A counterpart of the photomontages of John Heartfield or the paintings of George Grosz and Otto Dix, his articles reflected the Weimar Republic's *neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) aesthetic, eschewing expressionist soul-searching for hard-edged engagement with contemporary life. In the late 1920s Kisch became a publicist for the Comintern, publishing collections based on his travels through Soviet Russia (*Zaren, Popen, Bolschewiken* [Tsars, priests, and Bolsheviks], 1927), North Africa (*Wagnisse in aller Welt* [Worldwide exploits], 1927), the United States (*Paradies Amerika* [Paradise America], 1930), Soviet Central Asia (*Asien gründlich verändert* [Changing Asia], 1932), and China (*China geheim* [Secret China], 1933). He was

arrested the day after the Reichstag fire in 1933 and was briefly imprisoned before being escorted over the Czechoslovak border. More foreign adventures followed, including a trip to Australia during which he jumped ship (literally) in Melbourne, breaking his leg when he landed hard on the dock. He successfully fought the Australian government's attempt to deport him as an undesirable agitator. Like André Malraux, Arthur Koestler, Ilya Ehrenburg, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and photojournalists Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and David Seymour, Egon made his way to Spain in 1937–1938. He spent World War II in Mexico City, where he wrote *Sensation Fair*.

No doubt by then Kisch's portrayal of the fin de siècle Prague of his youth was colored by geographic and temporal distance, but the absurdities ring true. He recalled the city's "national ghettos" with retrospective incredulity. "What was obvious to any Czech," he wrote, "must have seemed unbelievable to anyone not from Prague." The segregated worlds of his hometown were every bit as surreal as any other place his travels had taken him:

The Prague German had nothing to do with the city's half million Czechs except what related to business. He never lit his cigar with a match from the Czech School Fund, any more than a Czech would light his with a match from the little box of the German School Association. No German ever set foot in the Czech Citizens' Club [Měšt'anská beseda], and no Czech ever deigned to visit the German Casino. Even the instrumental concerts were monolingual, and the same for the swimming pools, the parks, the playgrounds, most restaurants, coffee-houses, and stores. The promenade of the Czechs was Ferdinandstrasse [today's Národní Avenue], whereas the Germans preferred the Graben. . . . The Germans had their own churches, and the Czechs theirs. The German and Czech universities, and the Czech and German technical institutes, were as remote from one another as if one were located on the North Pole and the other on the South Pole. . . . For the botanical garden of one university a plant was ordered from the South Seas that could be seen blossoming in the garden of the other university had a wall not stood in the way.¹¹⁶

A Little Bit of Sulfur, a Little Bit of Hell

Kisch fails to mention one exception to this linguistic apartheid—though it is the exception that proves the rule. Prague-German bachelors of Kisch's and Kafka's generation were happy to amuse themselves in the arms of Czech



FIGURE 1.2. Milena Jesenská, c. 1920. Photographer unknown. From Jaroslava Vondráčková, *Kolem Mileny Jesenské*, Prague, 1991.

servants, shop assistants, factory girls, and barmaids, who gained the reputation for uninhibited hotness that is common to young women in such situations the world over. James Hawes points out that “Kafka’s powerful sexual imagination seems to have been forever haunted by poor young servant-girl figures”—the housemaid whose seduction of sixteen-year-old Karl Rossmann triggers the action in *Amerika*; Josef K’s typist, washerwoman, and lawyer’s maid in *The Trial*; the barmaid Frieda in *The Castle*—while George Gibian argues that Milena Jesenská “stood for the very essence of what [Kafka] romanticized and thirsted for, such as closeness to the earth, directness—Czech attitudes, Czech health.”¹¹⁷ This erotic mobilization of the nature-culture opposition is familiar from other colonial contexts. Max Brod sentimentalized

this “theater of Germanic sexual imperialism,” where (as Hawes puts it) “the sweet girls and their well-off beaux, when not speaking the international language of sex and money, quite literally *spoke different languages*,”¹¹⁸ in his novel *Das Tschechische Dienstmädchen* (The Czech maidservant, 1909). “The young author appears to believe that national issues can be resolved in bed,” snorted Leo Herrmann in the Zionist weekly *Selbstwehr* (Self-defense).¹¹⁹ Quite how is unclear, since the heroine Pepí Vlková ends up like Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary and drowns herself in the Vltava. The book was generally well received in the Czech press. Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, a leading light of the “decadent” group that formed around the journal *Moderní revue* (Modern review) in the 1890s, was “surprised by the author’s lack of prejudice—no diatribes against Czechs.”¹²⁰

Kafka told Milena about one such amorous encounter that took place when he was twenty, still living with his parents above the shop in Celetná Street, and studying for the state law exams. One summer night he was distracted from the rigors of Roman law by a shopgirl standing in the doorway of the clothing store below, directly opposite his bedroom window. They soon “came to an understanding using sign language,” and he followed her home. The girl (Franz never names her) got rid of another admirer, and they ended up in a hotel in the Lesser Town. “It was all enticing, exciting, and disgusting,” Franz wrote, “and as we walked home over the Karlsbrücke [Charles Bridge] toward morning—it was still hot and beautiful—I was actually happy.” Franz met the girl again for an encore before going to the country for his summer holiday, where he “played around a bit with another girl, and could no longer bear the sight of the shopgirl from Prague.” It was one of those moments of terrible clairvoyance when the little obscenities of sex turned into metaphors for the larger *kafkárna* of the world:

She kept on following me with her uncomprehending eyes. And although the girl had done something slightly disgusting in the hotel (not worth mentioning), had said something slightly obscene (not worth mentioning), I don’t mean to say this was the sole reason for my animosity (in fact, I’m sure it wasn’t); nonetheless the memory remained. I knew then and there that I would never forget it and at the same time I knew—or thought I knew—that deep down, this disgust and filth were a necessary part of the whole, and it was precisely this (which she had indicated to me by one slight action, one small word), which had drawn me with such amazing force into this hotel, which otherwise I would have avoided with all my remaining strength.

And it's stayed that way ever since. My body, often quiet for years, would then again be shaken by this longing for some very particular, trivial, disgusting thing, something slightly repulsive, embarrassing, obscene, which I always found even in the best cases—some insignificant odor, a little bit of sulfur, a little bit of hell. This urge had something of the eternal Jew—senselessly being drawn along, senselessly wandering through a senselessly obscene world.¹²¹

In November 1911, as part of the arrangements surrounding his sister Elli's marriage to the young businessman Karl Herrmann, Kafka became an unlikely partner in Prague's first asbestos factory, which was located in the proletarian suburb of Žižkov. Hermann Kafka was still trying to make a practical man out of his only surviving son and heir. Contrary to popular belief, Franz's day job as a senior civil servant writing legal briefs at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia was a cushy position that paid him well, secured him a pension, and got him exempted from military service during World War I. It required his presence in the office only six hours a day. Nevertheless, finding that the combination of his job and his afternoon visits to the factory left him with little time to pursue what he saw as his true vocation, writing,¹²² Franz bailed and the asbestos company eventually went bust. This did nothing to improve his relationship with his father, who had sunk considerable capital into the enterprise. The impressions Franz jotted down in his diary of a Prague with which he had hitherto had little contact were probably the only positive things that came from this venture. As usual, they were remarkably sharp, though what they mostly showed was the cavernous gulf between the old, painfully disappearing Prague, whose underbelly Paul Leppin and other fin de siècle writers so lovingly caressed in both Czech and German, and the prosaic modern surroundings in which most Praguers lived and worked.

"Yesterday in the factory," Franz writes: "The girls, in their unbearably dirty and untidy clothes, their hair disheveled as though they had just got up, the expressions on their faces fixed by the incessant noise of the transmission belts and by the individual machines . . . they aren't people, you don't greet them, you don't apologize when you bump into them . . . they stand there in petticoats, they are at the mercy of the pettiest power." But after six o'clock, when the machines stopped and the workers had cleaned themselves up as best they could, "then at last they are women again, despite pallor and bad teeth they can smile . . . and you do not know how to behave when one of them holds

your winter coat for you to put on.”¹²³ Nothing in this passage lets on that Franz is describing *his* factory, *his* employees, and *his* power; the metamorphosis of helpless hands in petticoats into women becomes just another metaphor for the impersonal, dehumanizing machinery of modernity. Perhaps because the only Czech winner of the Nobel Prize in literature to date also hailed from Žižkov, Kafka’s ruminations remind me of the alternating currents in one of Jaroslav Seifert’s best-loved poems, the sweetly vicious “Píseň o dívkách” (Song about girls, 1923). The poem has two stanzas: the first ends, “and every one is different”; the second ends, “and all of them are the same.”¹²⁴ Seifert too sought his sentimental education in Prague’s brothels, even if his first sight of “a girl’s naked breasts” led him to “beat a fearful retreat” from Břetislavova Street in the Lesser Town back to Žižkov.¹²⁵ That encounter, which the poet described tenderly and hilariously sixty years later in his memoir *Všecky krásy světa* (All the beauties of the world, 1981), took place during the last month of World War I. K. L. Kukla tells us that Břetislavova Street had by then displaced the alleys of the Fifth Quarter as “the most shameful street in Prague.”¹²⁶

The journey home provided Kafka with ample food for thought on the psychogeography of his native city. The tram passed “people outside, lights in stores, walls of viaducts . . . backs and faces over and over again, a highway leading from the business street of the suburb with nothing human on it save people going home, the glaring electric lights of the railway station burned into the darkness, the low, tapering chimneys of a gasworks.” A poster advertising an upcoming performance by a singer “gropes its way along the walls as far as an alley near the cemeteries”—presumably the Christian cemeteries at Olšany, which border the New Jewish Cemetery where Franz would eventually be buried—“from where it then returned to me out of the cold of the fields into the livable warmth of the city.” Though we accept foreign cities as a fact, he muses, “the suburbs of our native city . . . are also foreign to us.” There, people live “partly within our city, partly on the miserable, dark edge of the city that is furrowed like a great ditch, although they all have an area of interest in common with us that is greater than any other group of people outside the city.” Franz enters and leaves Prague’s suburbs, he says, “with a weak mixed feeling of anxiety, of abandonment, of sympathy, of curiosity, of conceit, of joy in traveling, of fortitude, and return with pleasure, seriousness, and calm, especially from Žižkov.”¹²⁷

We could be reading the testimony of a brave white New Yorker venturing into Harlem before it got gentrified or a Parisian flâneur who strays beyond the Boulevard Périphérique into the dark continent of the *banlieues*. Otto’s

Encyclopedia paints a rather different picture of life on the other side of the tracks—as it literally was: Žižkov is separated from the Old Town and the New Town by the railroad tracks leading to what are today the Masaryk and Main Stations. With more than seventy-two thousand people living there at the time Kafka was writing, “almost all Czech and of the Catholic religion,” Žižkov was Prague’s most populous suburb and the third largest city in Bohemia. Most of its inhabitants were manual workers employed in the large Prague and Karlín factories or in the many smaller workshops in Žižkov itself, like Herrmann & Co.’s asbestos factory. The area’s streets, which “bear the names of leading men of the Czech nation as well as memorable places in Czech history, mainly from the Hussite times,” were “very lively and busy, especially during mornings, afternoons, and evening.” Recognized as a municipality in 1881, Žižkov takes its name from the Hussite commander Jan Žižka of Trocnov, whose peasant army defeated the crusading forces of Emperor Sigismund at the Battle of Vítkov Hill on 14 July 1420. As for Kafka’s “miserable, dark edge of the city,” Žižkov prided itself on being “lit by electric light.” It was “among the first Czech towns to install such lighting (in 1889),” *Otto’s Encyclopedia* boasted, “much earlier than Prague.”¹²⁸

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