

Translated excerpt

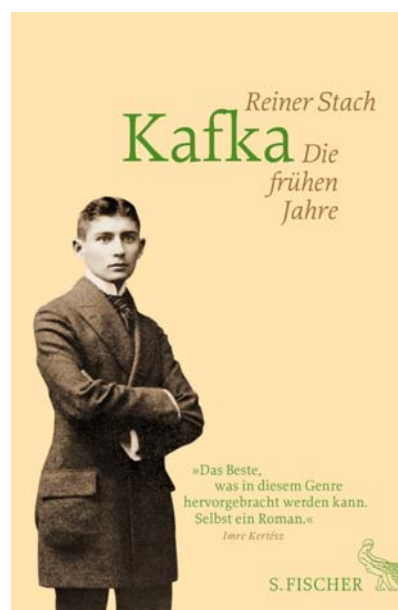
Reiner Stach
Kafka. Die frühen Jahre

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Reiner Stach
Kafka. The early days

Translated by David Brenner



[Chapter 1:] Nothing Happening in Prague

Think you heard this all before,
Now you're gonna hear some more.

(Devo, "Going Under")

July 3, 1883 is a friendly, clear summer day. The air sweeps weakly through the narrow streets of the Old Town in Prague, where it has already reached 30 degrees Celsius by noontime. Fortunately, it's not a humid heat; the few clouds that come up in the afternoon are harmless. And so thousands of Prague residents can look forward to a balmy evening in one of the many outdoor cafés, accompanied by beer, wine, and brass bands. Today is Tuesday, and there are a number of "military concerts." In the sprawling beer garden on the Sophieninsel, the revelry has already begun at four p.m. This is when the evening starts for tourists, students, and the lower middle-class pensioners. For the workday lasts of course a few hours longer, and the less enviable citizens who earn their wages in some kind of shop won't be able to enjoy the music until after sunset. Even going to a theater performance at times depends on the good-natured permission of the boss. Playing for Czechs now is *Fedora*, the latest melodrama by the bestselling French writer Victorien Sardou. The Germans, however, can attend a popular drama, Johannes Nestroy's *Einen Jux will er sich machen*. Or, if that is too demanding, one can still walk over to "Wanda's Revue Hall," where Miss Mirzl Lehner, known as "the dashing Viennese" accompanied by additional "newly engaged artists" is presenting her "amusing and decidedly proper program." For the approximately 160,000 urban residents, these offerings appear to suffice.

Prague in the summer, Prague in peacetime. The hours pass by, the stock market fluctuates slightly (but it's been doing that for ten years now). Life here seems weary. Even the news is better than usual. There are none of the reports which [now Page 10] readers of the *Prague Daily* and *Bohemia* are eager to absorb--about con men, suicides, and embezzlers. At the "Civic Swimming School," a public river bath, a toddler falls into the Vltava River and is rescued by a 13-year-old boy. It's the only misfortune deemed newsworthy on this July 3rd, apart from the natural deaths reported in such a tiny font that you have to be looking out for them. In the Hibernergasse, a frail 18-day-old infant named Augustin has died, and a two-year girl called Amalia has succumbed to tuberculosis. But that's not what people want to read about.

And yet this day will go down in the annals of the city of Prague and for two reasons, one of them publicly visible, the other as yet concealed. This city is undergoing a political and mental shock this day. As of yet, only a few

are truly informed. But in the coffeehouses, the extraordinary news is getting around, more quickly than even the press can react to it. For on this day elections to the Bohemian State Parliament are taking place, by order of the emperor himself, and—what’s disastrous about it—under completely new conditions. Since there have been parliaments, the only subjects who were entitled to vote in these parts have been males who pay a certain minimum amount of annual taxes. This threshold has now been unexpectedly halved by the Austrian Government, with imperial approval and to the horror of a small yet significant part of the population. The consequences of this decision are easy enough to guess, even by politically clueless folks. It means that more people will be eligible to vote—meaning more Czechs. And that’s exactly what has hit home today, and quickly. For the Czechs now outnumber the Germans in the provincial parliament. They have a solid majority for the first time, and most likely henceforth. After all, who’s going to dare to touch this new electoral law? In fact, the large landowners are voting predominantly Czech, as are the chambers of commerce and several well-to-do Jews, too. In the commercial district around the Old Town Square, the Germans are grasping their heads: even their immediate neighbors, the inhabitants of the “Josefstadt,” the old Prague ghetto, have mostly voted Czech. And as if to mock them even more, the idea gets around that it was Jewish butchers who were probably the deciding factor--people who previously hadn’t been allowed to vote . . .

Only a minority of the population of Prague is clearly interested in the goings-on of the Bohemian State Parliament, and even [now Page 11] among educated middle-class speakers of German and Czech, only the most hardnosed//dedicated newspaper readers are truly informed about what this parliament actually does and how it impacts German-Czech everyday life. Nonetheless, it’s a symbolic victory for the Czechs, the most important one thus far. Everyone gets that, which is why it qualifies as “historic.” The losers see it that way, too, and their tone is muted. The local German press shows restraint. It doesn’t want to irritate the Czechs, with whom German-speakers live in close contact in nearly every district of Prague. Nor does the newspaper wish to stir up its subscribers. Only the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna says what it’s thinking. As the heart-and-soul newspaper of liberals in the empire, it can afford to engage in straight talk. And as a daily paper that can be read everywhere in Prague, it’s where the citizens of Bohemia find out that they may be hastening the end of Western civilization by having voted so foolishly: “Should it truly come to pass that Prague too will hopelessly be submerged in the Slavic deluge?” No, not now or ever. “The German parliamentarians may disappear from the offices of this state, but the people who fill these streets and houses will remain until the day finally comes that ends this Slavic counter-reformation, and Prague returns to what it once was: a center of humane, German culture.”¹

Those are strong words, too strong in fact for the state censors in Vienna, who will impound the newspaper a few days later. However, the chauvinistically aggressive tone reveals just how much Austro-Hungarians have understood the epochal significance of this day. It has always been an elite that concentrated power in its hands. But from this point on the majority will rule, legitimated by simple demographics that in Prague stand—and nothing's going to change it—at 4 to 1, in favor of the Czechs. What if this principle of majority rule were to prevail throughout the empire? Then the Bohemians would be blamed for being the weakest link in the chain, a chain broken in their capital city, precisely on July 3, 1883.

Not everyone in Prague is registering the landslide in the Bohemian State Parliament, by no means. Real life is taking place elsewhere. And for those who have lost the life of a little child, whether it's named Augustin or Amalia, nothing political is going to matter for a long time to come. However, the same is true for those who [now Page 12] are welcoming a newborn into the world. They too have crossed a historic threshold. They too are experiencing the dawn of a new era. There is no turning back, and the rest of the world fades away amid the warm physical presence of an infant.

This is just what's happening this day in a house right next to the St. Nicholas Church, at the corner of Maiselgasse and Karpfengasse, the residence of the Kafkas, a Jewish couple who've been married only for ten months. It is not a particularly great address; the house has surely seen better days. At one time it was the prelatore of the famous Strachov monastery. Yet, apart from its Baroque façade, not much remains of its former splendor; the building has long served as an ordinary residential home. The neighborhood is hardly prestigious and not especially suited for making new acquaintances. On the one side is a church where Russian Orthodox Christians have for some time held their gloomy worship services. On the other, there are a number of suspicious-looking dives and even brothels, practically an extension of the Josefstadt, a rundown neighborhood that, one hears, will soon be razed.

It goes without saying that the Kafkas don't plan to stay here long. But for the time being, they need to save money. All of their assets—especially Julie's dowry--have been invested in a newly established shop dealing in cotton and thread and awaiting customers on the north side of the Old Town Square, just a few steps away from their home. The sole proprietor is thirty-year-old Hermann. Yet his wife, three years younger, also has to work there fulltime; otherwise, the business won't survive. The two of them have little free time; they've even done without a honeymoon so nothing in Prague gets past them. A pregnancy is not exactly favorable for the just opened shop, and they will now need to hire a wet nurse and a nanny.

But the child's a boy, and in a patriarchal world--Hermann and Julie don't know any other—a male child is a pledge for the future, the next link in a chain of generations that guides one's actions, giving them a sense of permanence. Until the point the Kafkas have only known that they want to advance socially. Now they feel that this goal will extend beyond their own time on earth, something that will be unassailable. The newborn is an "heir" even before he takes his first steps [now page 13], and not at all just in the eyes of his parents. To their relatives, employees, and customers, the social position of the Kafkas has changed from one day to the next. It's like being promoted and, even more, their new status is permanent—unless the child precedes them in death. Yet no one's contemplating such things right now. The little one is "a gentle but healthy child," as his mother will observe a long time hence.² He will not die; he'll become the heir. It's him we're making these sacrifices for. It's for him that we're now part of something bigger. It's only right, then, that he be given the name of our emperor. Yes, we'll name him *Franz*.

A hundred years hence, the world knows that all this turned out very differently from the way the Kafkas dreamt it. At the site of their first family home, there'll be a plaque not referring to a prosperous businessman but to a writer instead. The linear succession of generations that is supposed to rejuvenate families, anchoring them in the world, will prove just as ephemeral and vulnerable as the isolated existence of the individual. Hundreds of thousands of such family lines will be terminated, even violently extinguished, before Franz Kafka's parents pass away. Yet that date of July 3, 1883--which for so many in Prague was a day of irrevocable disappointment but for the Kafkas one of pride and joy--that date will take on a new and different meaning.

Kafka's namesake, the 52-year-old emperor Franz Joseph I, is also in excellent spirits that day. He's been in Graz, finishing up a customary program of visits: mass in the cathedral, an exhibition of regional culture, a tour of the fire department and military hospital, the greeting of deputations and local nobles, and extended dinners. In between he catches up on new telegrams, including a few from Prague where the Czechs--as anticipated—are finally getting their way. That irritation, however, is soon minimized by cheers from the assembled population of Graz as well as other more enjoyable duties that restore his good spirits. Such as when he receives the Styrian marksmen, those most loyal of the loyal. This isn't his first official visit to the State Shooting Range, which is decked out in flowers and flags. [now page 14] The marksmen are a bit overeager today. With unceasing gun salutes, they have even spooked the horses of the emperor's traveling coach, forcing him to say something about it. Still, the reception he gets at the shooting range is an overwhelming one: the local women are dressed in traditional costume, and stylish girls present him with bouquets. The

marksmen, however, don't just want to hear gracious words from their highest lord. No, today he must lend a hand. The Emperor himself should fire a few shots to open this general festival of marksmanship. He is ceremoniously led over to the pre-loaded rifles, and the spectators wait with bated breath for him to shoot. Twice he takes the moving target in his sights, and then he fires, hitting the rings and scoring a "one." Gun salutes resound so that the entire city knows, followed by the cheering of a crowd of hundreds. Endless cheering.

* * *

[Chapter 6] "Kafka Franz": Model Student

All ports
were most pleasing at the hoisting
of the anchors
(Dagmar Nick, "Schattengespräche")

Once upon a time, there was a *jackdaw* that was named *Kafka* because it was from Bohemia, even though it repeatedly protested against this name. "I don't want to be called *Kafka*," it said, "because all the names ending in 'a' are girl's names--*Maria, Anna, Johanna, Amalia* . . . But I'm a man, and a very clever one at that, and you should thus call me *Kafkus*, as is fitting for a learned gentleman. It's also silly that people call me *jackdaw* but call my cousin *Krah* a *raven*, a word used for both men and girls. But I won't stand for that! My name's *Kafkus*! And basta!" Yet he didn't say *basta*, but *Kaf-Kaf* or actually *ca-ca* . . .

The creator of this fairy tale, Prague gynecologist and poet Hugo Salus, knew whereof he spoke.³ He himself had a grandfather named *Kafka*, a rabbi and respected scholar who'd lived together in the same house with Franz Kafka's great-grandfather in Wosek before he embarked on his career; Hugo and Franz were thus clearly relatives. To children, last names don't matter much and aren't something they learn until later. Nonetheless, even the youngest ones know what *ca-ca* means, and there's little doubt that Salus wasn't only inventing but also recalling the negative reputation that the (self-insulting) jackdaw had unknowingly given itself.

Getting teased or even attacked by complete strangers, without any higher authority to protect you, is one of the main surprises awaiting every child as soon as he or she enters the social realm of the classroom. [now page 91] Franz Kafka was a sheltered child who'd spent his first six years in

the roomy equivalent of a cage. Here, too, there were foes to deal with, but some kind of mediating authority was always within earshot, and there was ample opportunity to protest or have one's tears dried. On his first day of school, however, September 15, 1889, he dove into a horde of comrades in suffering, most of whom were louder and stronger, some perhaps more shrewd and others better dressed. The shock was at best lessened by the few faces familiar to him. Almost all the boys in Kafka's class lived near the Old Town Square, the majority of them Jews whose first language was German. You'd see their families at the square or even at your father's shop, and there were also personal acquaintances, made at Jewish communal events or the Jewish Women's Association. Hugo Bergmann and Hugo Hecht, who decades later put in writing their memories of their school days with Kafka, had probably even met him earlier. One of them even remembered the toys they played with.

Things like that of course didn't mean much on the hard benches of the "German Citizens' Elementary School of Prague I." No one was asked whom he wanted to sit next to. The smaller children to the front, taller ones in the back—those were the strict instructions to follow. Additionally intimidating was that from this point on you were not simply called *Franz* but identified by your complete first and last name, as the grown-ups already did. The first day went like this: the teacher, Herr Markert, read out the names of the newbies in alphabetical order, with each pupil having to confirm his presence loudly: "Kafka Franz?" "Here!" Moments later it turned out that there was also a "Kafka Karl" in attendance, though that wasn't all too surprising in Prague.⁴ And then the teacher declared some of the rules of play accompanied by the usual warnings, and that was it for day one. Meanwhile, outside in the hall sat his very pregnant mother along with Frau Hecht, who was waiting for her Hugo. Then, the four of them walked home together.

It was not very impressive, this new, austere, four-story school building located on the Fleischmarkt. The equipment was modest and the courtyard far too small to be used during breaks [now page 92]. But did the Kafkas have any other choice? The people who were more refined--or those who wanted to be like them--naturally didn't send their sons to public elementary schools but to private ones such the Piarist School. That's precisely what Max Brod and Franz Werfel's fathers did, the one an aspiring bank official, the other a manufacturer. Nonetheless, the Piarists were handsomely paid for their reputation as educators. Classes there were dominated by sons of the German-Jewish middle class residing in the Prague Neustadt [New Town] (all of whom dutifully recited the Catholic morning prayers). Sitting between these boys in posh sailor-suits, there'd be the son of an Old Town shopkeeper who wouldn't even be able to provide his family with the obligatory summer vacation. That boy surely felt out of place. It was also well-known that the Piarist teachers liked to sweeten their salaries with

private tutoring. That fee (among others), a kind of informal protection money, had considerable influence on the marks that pupils received; it was something the Kafkas really couldn't afford. When Egon Erwin Kisch later complained how it was for him as an Old Town underdog at the Piarist School – and his family at least owned its own house—Kafka must have relieved that he'd been spared such embarrassment.⁵

The only decision the Kafkas still had to make was whether little Franz would be taught in German or in Czech—a most delicate question. The pros and cons of needed to be carefully weighed. Per the state constitution, the two languages had to be treated with scrupulous equality in public life, as well as in schools. No child could be forced to learn a second language in order to keep up in school, a legal safeguard that led to the development of two completely parallel school systems throughout Bohemia.⁶ Czech was the language favored in Prague, however, and the city government didn't hesitate to make parents Czechize whenever possible. If an aspiring Jewish businessman were trying to advance his integration within Prague's established order, he was well-advised to present himself as a loyal Czech. It was thus a certainty that Hermann Kafka would designate his “vernacular” as Czech in the 1890 census. He could do so in good conscience since the majority of his customers (as well as his staff) were actually Czechs, and if he had insisted on distinguishing himself as “German” or even “German Jewish” [now page 93], it wouldn't have taken long at all to feel the economic pressure.

German, for its part, was still regarded as the traditional language of education. Even in provincial backwaters and in entirely Czech villages, it had been customary for centuries that Jews sent their children to Germanophone teachers—as had been Hermann's experience as well. Moreover, German was the language of power, the language of Vienna, and training at German schools was thus deemed indispensable for a becoming a professional or any other “better career.” If Hermann thought beyond his current social status also—and he was certain his son would leave this status far behind--a Germanophone education offered clearly better opportunities. It was also an environment where the children of German-Jewish businessmen were formed a majority and where anti-Semitism was not a worry. One just had to make sure that Franz didn't neglect learning Czech so that he was optimally prepared for his future clientele.

Did the six-year-old have any idea that these two languages, which he switched between several times daily, represented two increasingly hostile cultures? It's hard to believe it. Certainly he'd noticed that all of the subordinate activities in his small circle were carried out by people who only knew Czech. But they weren't at all enemies. Quite the opposite: you lived *with* them. As agents who presided over you, they partook of your father's power, and a few of them were treated by your mother as though they were family. Beyond this familial domestic sphere, however, there was the world

of the street or, as it was called in Prague, *die Gasse*. Here the rules were very different, as Franz was soon to learn. A few steps away from his German school was a building, at the entrance of which stood a bust of the educator Jan Komensky (Comenius), and right under him his (apparently) unequivocal demand: "A Czech child belongs in a Czech school!" It too, then, was an elementary school and, as it turned out, the *competition*--a school that was impossible to ignore in the winding streets of the Old Town. Among the youngest pupils, here and at Kafka's school, there were already nationalistic ruffians, [now page 94] so from this time on, one had to expect to be involved in scuffles with "the Czechs."

Kafka's parents were certainly aware of the danger. When they thought about their son's build, which was anything but robust and was now to be exposed daily to the trials of the street, they were hardly inclined to relax their (to this point) constant monitoring of the boy. They decided--or more likely Kafka's *mother* decided—to have little Franz escorted to and from school by their servants. This was an extremely typical measure for Kafka's parents, as benevolent as it was blind (developmentally speaking). After just a few days, then, Franz was the only one in his class still being accompanied on the way to school, a road that was both short and safe (considering the traffic), the only one still not allowed to run around, for at least a couple of minutes, in the passageways and hidden courtyards of the Fleischmarkt, situated next to the school. What was normal at the Piarist School – where class conceit dictated that children be chaperoned to school by family employees—seemed too pretentious at the regular elementary school, branding the all-too-sheltered Franz an outsider and mother's boy.

Decades later on, Kafka recalled the walk to grade school as highly distressing. It was yet another case where parental concern only helped to close the final gap between the domestic hierarchy of power (where Franz was the lowest on the totem pole) and the equally hierarchical realm of school. It was as if private and public authority were merging together without the intervening (if rather thin) leeway other children had. And this state of affairs would abide for some time, consistent with the wishes of both his parents and the Czech servant Františka, who exercised her temporary rule over her boss's son with (what seemed to be) an agonizing composure:

Every morning I was led to school by our cook--a small, dry thin person with a pointed nose and hollow cheeks, yellowish but firm, energetic and superior. We lived in the house which separates the Kleiner Ring from the Grosser Ring. Thus, we walked first across the Ring, then into Teingasse, then through a kind of archway into the Fleischmarktgasse down to the Fleischmarkt. And every morning for about a year the same thing was repeated. While leaving the house, the cook said she'd tell the teacher how naughty I'd been at home. As a matter of fact, I probably [now Page 95] wasn't very naughty but rather stubborn, useless, sad, bad-tempered, and out of all this she

could probably concoct some nice story for the teacher. I knew this, so I didn't take the cook's threats too lightly. At the same time, since the road to school was incredibly long, I first assumed that something else would happen on the way there. (It's from such apparent childish light-heartedness, because the roads are not so incredibly long, that such anxiousness and dead-eyed seriousness can gradually ensue). I was also very much in doubt, at least while still on the Old Town Square, whether the cook, though a person commanding respect (if only in domestic quarters) would dare to speak to the teacher, who commanded respect (in the world outside). Perhaps I even said something to that effect, at which point the cook would usually answer curtly, with her thin merciless lips, that I didn't have to believe it but speak to him she would. Somewhere near the entrance to the Fleischmarktgasse [...] the fear of her threat got the upper hand of me. School itself was already enough of a horror, and now the cook wanted to make it even worse. I began to plead; she shook her head. The more I pleaded, the more precious my request seemed to me, and the more dangerous her threat. I stood still and begged for forgiveness; she dragged me along. I threatened her that my parents would retaliate; she laughed; here she was all-powerful. I held on to shop doors, to the cornerstones, and refused to go any further until she had forgiven me. I pulled her back by the skirt (she didn't have it easy, either). Yet she kept dragging me along, promising to tell the teacher about this, too. It was getting late, the clock on the Jacob's Church now struck 8 a.m.; the school bells could be heard; other children began to run. I always had the greatest terror of being late: now we too had to run. And all the time I'm thinking, "She'll tell; she won't tell." Well, she never did tell, but she always had the option to, an option which appeared increasingly possible ("I didn't tell yesterday but I'll certainly tell today") and which she would never relinquish.⁷

Can we take such anecdotes at their word? Are Kafka's letters a reliable source on such matters? There is no mistaking the epic shaping that he subjects his memories to: He wants to narrate them, to make them spellbinding. But it is surely thanks to his literary instinct that he doesn't just string together or visualize these remembered impressions. Rather, he returns them instantly to their biographical core, a core formed by his experience of power and submission. Here he particularly emphasizes two methods of exercising power, techniques of access he will adapt variously as central motifs in his literary oeuvre. One of these is a recurrent blurring of boundaries between private and public [now page 96]. With depressing inevitability, the teacher and--along with him--the entire school as institution are regarded as an extended arm in the familial chain of command (and not just his father's). To Franz, it thus seems utterly plausible that Herr Markert

would be very interested to know more about his naughtiness at home. A second motif is the constant backdrop of threats that confine the delinquent, threats that subject him to an orgy of punitive fantasies. What concrete steps will the teacher take if he finds out there's a six-year criminal sitting in his class? ... The unyielding Františka doesn't need to visualize it for the wrongdoer, for his own imaginary scenario keeps him thoroughly under its spell. And because it never gets to the point of being decisively tested, he's unable to even experience the moral "breather" that the (discharged) punishment would unquestionably provide. "The threat is more effective than its implementation" was a simple maxim of the "black pedagogy" popular among the 19th-century bourgeoisie and practiced successfully in the Kafka household, as the servants had clearly observed up close. Many years later Kafka was harboring such resentment against these power games disguised as "upbringing" that he flatly refused to meet one of his former nannies. "Why did she raise me so poorly?" he wrote. "I was obedient; she says so herself. . . . I was well-behaved and had a peaceful disposition. Why didn't she make the most of that to prepare me for a better future?"⁸

The paralyzing power of a guilty conscience (which Kafka described with such prosecutorial eloquence in his "Letter to My Father") and the unending mountain of moral indebtedness to his parents (and ultimately to the entire world)—both were likely part of a later stage of development, a sublimated expression of a much deeper anxiety. What the six-year-old felt wasn't primarily blame but downright fear--the fear of being hit, of being yelled at by his physically larger father, of being rejected by his mother, of being alone. Early on, Kafka learned that a situation that produces fear generally doesn't end well. Either the dreaded blow would come down on him, though [now page 97] physical attacks were quite rare in the Kafka home, or he would be pardoned, though only temporarily under the threat of future punishment. Fully absent from this force field of distress was an experience of success, of a felicitous way to cope, of *acquittal*—not only because his father never praised him but also because his sense of duty, always fulfilled (or fraught) with anxiety, wasn't seen as his own achievement, as something he could be proud of.

The six-year-old now introduced this fear into his schooling--something initially encouraged by the cook who made the teacher into his father's deputy and then by the quarterly act of assigning grades directed at the parents over the heads of the pupils. This never really changed during his entire schooling: Kafka couldn't understand that the institution of the school wasn't at all grading or recording a person's value but only certain specialized skills, employing other criteria for success or failure than his family did. But what his father had decreed was a perpetual grade of "unsatisfactory," meaning that he'd have to experience the same thing at school. Because if education is essentially a "conspiracy of adults" -- as Kafka later labelled the experience--then he couldn't conceive of any real

disagreement between his father and his teacher.⁹ Kafka could hope for no more than that all those bad things visible to his divine-like father might remain hidden to his teacher for a bit, and it was this final hope that the cook sought to destroy with her malicious knowledge of where he was most sensitive. In the face of that, what significance might grades, commendations, or moving up a grade have?

I never thought that I'd pass the first grade of elementary school, but I succeeded and even won a prize. But then I thought I'd never pass the entrance exam for the *Gymnasium*, but I succeeded there too. But then I was sure I'd fail the first grade of *Gymnasium*, but no, I didn't fail and continued to succeed. In the end, however, I wasn't confident. Instead, I was always convinced—and your ominous expression was for me the proof of it—that the more success I had, the worse the final outcome would be. In my mind's eye, I often saw the terrible assembly of masters (the *Gymnasium* was merely a uniform example of everything else all around me), the faculty that met when I'd passed the first grade of *Gymnasium*, and then when I'd passed the second one, and then in the third, and so forth. The teachers were conferring to examine this unique, outrageous case, to figure out how I--the most incapable and certainly the most ignorant pupil--had managed to sneak into the next grade. Now that all were paying attention, they'd certainly spew me right out, to the cheers of all the virtuous students exempted from such a nightmare. To live with these fantasies is not easy for a child. Why under those circumstances should I have cared about my classes? Who was capable of getting any genuine response from me? The lessons, and not only them but everything around me, interested me at that crucial age about as much as a embezzling bank clerk—who is still on the job but trembling at the thought of being found out—is interested in the small ongoing bank business that he is officially required to perform. Everything else was so remote and inconsequential when compared with the main issue.¹⁰ FN.8/10

Had Hermann Kafka actually been able to read this late confession addressed to him, it would have so blatantly contradicted his own memories that he probably wouldn't have even recognized the child being discussed there. For Franz, from the first grade on, had been an accommodating child, willing to learn and well-liked by his teachers, a "model student." His marks were above average, and there was never a question that he wouldn't move up to the next grade every year.¹¹ He received top marks in reading, writing, arithmetic, object lessons, religion, singing, and gymnastics, not to mention diligence and moral conduct; his only "B" was in drawing. All this can be found in his first year's report card. The servants responsible for supervising the boy until his parents returned home from work in the evening also had only positive things to report. His efforts were remarkable: so much energy in such a delicate body. Yet Hermann and Julie could have easily observed

that he was learning more out of fear than curiosity or initiative. All the same, it's doubtful that they were truly troubled by it. For, as the 19th-century bourgeoisie understood things, raising children was primarily an act of forming and controlling them; to love one's children was commendable but not necessary.

It must have been a relief to the six-year-old that his first public appearance took place in a familiar and homogeneous milieu. Nearly two-thirds of his [now page 99] fellow sufferers were also sons of German-Jewish businesspeople, almost all of whom lived in the Old Town and were bilingual. In Franz's class, there wasn't a single child who was from the working class, the ghetto, or the nobility.¹² However, deciding on a German-language school also meant making sacrifices, as the Kafkas must have figured out by the first parents' evening: this school didn't even have a principal because it lacked the funding. Public Germanophone schools were maintained reluctantly by the Czech-dominated city government, and plans for expansion were repeatedly sabotaged, a state of affairs that was inconsistent with the Imperial Education Act as well as the pedagogical and hygienic standards of the time. To be sure, even children in middle-class settings were (still) used to sharing relatively small spaces with others. Still, the refusal of the city to create new posts for German teachers sometimes made instruction a torture//agony for an educator. Between eighty and ninety boys were initially packed into Kafka's class. After his third year that number exceeded one-hundred and the pupils had to be divided into parallel classes, sometimes even in the same room. In addition, it wasn't possible on truly frigid days it to keep the windows continually shut when it was so crowded. Time and again, the children were left to complete tasks on their own, because the teacher had to work with another class--in the same room. Even as a first-grader, Franz had to attend school several times a week in the afternoon. While that wasn't (technically) permitted, it was unavoidable due to the shortage of teaching staff. And there were always more subjects being added: grammar and spelling in the second year, natural history and geography in the third, and lastly optional lessons in Czech. According to the will of his parents, Franz wasn't allowed to miss that class (in which he consistently made top marks) even though it was also held afternoons. In the end, he was spending twenty-seven hours a week (corresponding today to thirty-six school periods) sitting in a crowded classroom. When he was finally dismissed after four o'clock--at times it was already dark outside--he didn't have time for recreation or companionship. Rather, there was homework to be done at dining room table.

Kafka didn't leave behind any recollections of his school days on the Fleischmarkt. [now page 100] Yet it's not hard to imagine how knowledge was conveyed under such external conditions: learning was by rote, and assessment was limited to perfunctory question-and-answer. The lessons

were dreary even measured by the pedagogical guidelines of the day. But how and when were the overburdened teachers in such cramped classrooms supposed to tailor their lessons to individual pupils, both gifted and weak? On an annual basis, that meant precisely eight minutes per student in each subject. Reduced by the time needed for grading, that left about two minutes per pupil each year. These shocking statistics were calculated//, for a German-language exposé of 1896, one unmistakably compiled//assembled by jurists.¹³ Although the report was somewhat exaggerated, it didn't omit the main point. The range of subjects, the overcrowded classes, and the constant grade reporting truly produced an unremitting stress—what was basically a permanent testing situation. Thus emerged that authoritative pressure chamber that already evinced fear in the six-year-old each morning on his way to school, indeed probably whenever he caught sight of the building from afar. It was the first time in his life, but not the last, in which social reality and his imagination came together ominously, confirming and intensifying each other by turns. Here were indeed the roots of Kafka's later perception that the imagined world is not merely a realm of shadows but an entire cosmos in its own right, the earliest collision with the wider world that only seems to corroborate his imaginary terror.

The only opportunity for any real relaxation came once a year, during the long summer vacation from early July to mid-September. We know that in later years, during the hottest weeks of the summer, the Kafkas preferred to rent a place at a simple resort near Prague. That saved on costs while also enabling them to return regularly to the city to keep an eye on their "street shop," which undoubtedly remained open. The rhythm of the family's life most likely looked the same throughout Kafka's early school years. A different environment close to nature still allowed one certain freedoms even though it may not have been so thrilling. Yet it was exclusively something to be enjoyed in the summer while the rest of the year never deviated from the pattern. Even on Sundays [now page 101], Franz's parents might spend hours at their business, so it was an unusual event to go to the public baths together with his father, who didn't know how to swim and who really only wanted to drink beer there.

Education as the formation of resistant material: no one would ever have envisioned there being an alternative, neither the father nor his son. His mother's relative tolerance was likely deemed more an impediment than an education. It wasn't until he was in school that Kafka learned there were also types of masculine authority that are compatible with a quite different, more human face--at a point in time when it was doubtless too late for him.

In the third and fourth grades, his teacher was a slightly greying fellow named Mathias Beck, a highly committed Jewish pedagogue who ran a small boardinghouse for pupils of "Mosaic faith" on the side.¹⁴ The usual program

of rote learning was predictably typical in his classes as well. Yet Beck demonstrated interest in the children as human beings, observing their development, speaking to them outside of class--at the time quite unusual--and advising their parents. For all the demands on his time, Beck knew how to maintain personal relationships and how to turn his students' affection into motivation. Just before they finished elementary school, for instance, he invited them to visit him at home the following year in order to show him their first secondary school report cards—certainly instructive for him, as far as his pedagogical prognoses went, but yet another incentive for the students. Kafka in fact accepted the invitation along with his friend Hugo Bergmann. Their grades were good enough to venture into the inner sanctum, the private sphere of an authority figure. Beck's influence, though, wasn't sufficient to somehow cause Kafka to question his hierarchical view of the world or the fear it instilled in him. At the age of ten, Kafka already grasped that adaptation and avoidance were quite viable strategies for surviving. He'd already gotten away with them and, in any case, there weren't teachers like Beck at his high school. [page 102 now]

Beck was presumably relieved that "Kafka Franz" had made the jump to the next level of school without suffering harm. Although he couldn't have been more gratified by the boy's academic performance, he'd observed that Kafka was more vulnerable and less assertive than his peers as well as a late bloomer physically. He'd been absent from school for more than the usual number of days even in the early grades when enduring the usual childhood maladies, and he remained the "delicate child" that his mother remembered years later. Would he be able to cope with the stepped-up pressure to perform? Four years of primary school plus one year of *Bürgerschule* (a type of public secondary school) were the normal pathway to *Gymnasium* (an academically-oriented high school).¹⁵ Anyone wanting to be admitted to a *Gymnasium* after four years could only do so by passing an entrance exam. "Let him go to fifth grade [at the *Bürgerschule*]," Beck told Kafka's parents. "He's too weak; being in such a hurry will come back to haunt him."¹⁶ Clearly, he was only wasting his breath. No one in Kafka's extended family would have understood: was a model student supposed to willingly sit around with all those less gifted children for another year, something that anyhow would have caused unnecessary expense? And what would the two Hugos, Bergmann and Hecht, have said about that? Their parents were in a hurry, too. No, it was out of the question. Religion, arithmetic, and German were the subjects on the entrance exam, and it wasn't considered particularly difficult. For these three boys, it wasn't a real hurdle--even if at least one of them was terrified.

Decades later, when Kafka recalled Herr Beck's perceptive advice, he had to admit the teacher had been right. All that haste had come back to haunt him, he thought, but in a rather different, more serious way than Beck had meant it at the time. It wasn't just a physical hounding but a mental one

that made his internal and external time drift apart gradually or his school years fly by like a dream. It would've been impossible for the best, most empathic educator to have foreseen something like this. Rather, what happened was that Beck had issued a fatal prediction without realizing it. It would be dubbed//labelled a "prophetic joke" by his former pupil, who in the meantime had passed many more exams and who was now addressed as "Herr Doktor." But by that point, his teacher was dead and buried.

NOTES

¹ *Neue Freie Presse*, Vienna (3 July 1883): 1. The *Landstube* was the assembly hall of the Bohemian estates in the Prague Castle (also known as the *Hradschin*).

² Information directly quoted from Julie Kafka about her family derived from a short autobiographical report that she composed two or three years before her death. The incompletely transmitted account is reprinted in Alena Wagnerova, "*Im Hauptquartier des Lärms*": *Die Familie Kafka aus Prag*, 44-47. The handwritten original can be found in the Helene Zylberberg *Nachlass* at the German Literature Archive, in Marbach am Neckar.

³ Hugo Salus, "Freund Kafkas. Eine Kindergeschichte," in *Neue Freie Presse* (19 April 1908): 101 – 104.

⁴ The Prague police registry documents more than fifty persons born in the 19th century who were named "Franz Kafka" and were at least temporary residents of Prague.

⁵ Egon Erwin Kisch, *Aus Prager Gassen und Nächten* (Berlin/Weimar, 1980), 362 ff. and 509.

⁶ See the Cisleithanian State Constitution (21 December 1867), article 19, section 3.

⁷ Letter to Milena Jesenska, 21 June 1920.

⁸ *Diaries*, 21 November 1911.

⁹ *Diaries*, 8 October 1916.

¹⁰ "Brief an den Vater," in: *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main 1992), 196f. On the genesis of this "Letter to My Father," see the chapter "The Unposted Letter to Hermann Kafka" in Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, trans. Shelley Frisch, 287ff.

¹¹ For detailed information on Kafka's performance and the teachers in his primary school, see Hartmut Binder, "Kindheit in Prag. Kafkas Volksschuljahre" in: *Humanismen som salt & styrka. Bilder & betraktelser, tillagnade Harry Jarv* [Acta Bibliothecae Regiae Stockholmiensis, vol. 45] (Stockholm 1987): 63-115.

¹² For comprehensive statistical material on the schools that Kafka attended, particularly their linguistic and religious characteristics, see Ingrid Stohr, *Zweisprachigkeit in Böhmen. Deutsche Volksschulen und Gymnasien im Prag der Kafka-Zeit* (Cologne, 2010). According to

this study (335 ff.), almost 90 percent of Kafka's first-grade schoolmates spoke both German and Czech, while in the same period only 60 percent did so at the private elementary school of the Piarists—a clear indication that well-to-do German-Jewish families could better afford to set themselves apart nationally than those in Kafka's social milieu. And that divide grew increasingly larger: while the nearly complete bilingualism at Kafka's elementary school in the Old Town continued in the following decade, the proportion of bilingual students at the Piarist School dropped to 12 percent.

¹³ *Die Verhältnisse an den öffentlichen Prager deutschen Volks und Bürgerschulen und Vorschläge zu deren Verbesserung. Denkschrift des deutschen Vereins für städtische Angelegenheiten in Prag* [1896]. The Prague Municipal Council, as already noted at the start of this pamphlet (3), was leading a virtual “war of extermination” against the German school system. Even making allowances for its heated nationalist rhetoric, the class sizes it catalogues of up to 140 pupils in a room fulfilled the evidentiary standard for physical injury; the conditions had been only slightly more favorable three years before Kafka started the fourth grade. For a somewhat more objective portrayal, one which nonetheless criticizes this negligence, see the indispensable monograph of liberal historian and schoolteacher Gustav Strakosch-Grasmann, *Geschichte des österreichischen Unterrichtswesens* (Vienna 1905): 334-337. What Strakosch-Grasmann clearly doesn't mention is that the pupils of Czech-speaking schools in the German-dominated areas of Bohemia were treated just as ruthlessly; on this issue, see Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachgerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867-1918* (Vienna 1995): 104 f.

¹⁴ Since elementary schools in rural areas of Bohemia usually only had four classes, eleven-year-olds often had to migrate to the cities, residing with host families or in boarding houses, in order to fulfill their compulsory schooling requirements.

¹⁵ Whoever didn't transfer to *Gymnasium* (something that was out of the question for Franz) only had to complete two years of *Bürgerschule*, meaning only fifth and sixth grades. In 1883, Kafka's birth year, compulsory education in Austria-Hungary was reduced from eight to six years under pressure from employers. Attending seventh or eighth grade thus remained voluntary until the end of the monarchy; it only became mandatory again after 1918.

¹⁶ *Diaries*, 11 December 1919.