# Kafka as a Jew

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WITH A SINGLE EXCEPTION, there are no overt references to Jews and Jewishness in Kafka's entire oeuvre. The conclusion one might draw from that is that Jewishness did not matter to him fundamentally, and at any rate had no import for his writing.

But such a view would miss an essential dimension. We know from his biography, and his life documents—diaries, letters, reflections in aphoristic form—that, although he was indeed indifferent to it in his youth, Jewishness and Judaism began to matter very much to him from 1911 on, when Kafka was twenty-eight. From that time on, he began to be intensely occupied with Jewish history, Jewish tradition, Jewish lore, and Jewish culture—an interest which was not only sustained but constantly grew until his death in 1924 at the age of forty. It is significant for his writing that Kafka's turn to Judaism preceded by less than one year what he called his breakthrough to the work of his maturity, to the kind of writing that established his posthumous fame and for which the adjective kafkaesque has been coined. As I shall try to show, there exists a connection between the peculiar nature of Kafka's mature writing and his discovery of what he considered to be authentic Judaism, which he regretted bitterly not having known until then.

To do justice to the relationship between Kafka's discovery of Judaism and the structure of his writing, it will be helpful to provide some historical background on the situation and self-understanding of the Jews of Prague in Kafka's time, because this, as I shall try to show, has an important bearing on the topic.

Franz Kafka was born in 1883, in Prague, then the capital of the province of Bohemia of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Kafka was the eldest and only surviving son, and for several years the only child—later several girls were born—of an upwardly mobile bourgeois couple of minimally observant German-speaking Jews. His father, Herrmann Kafka, son of a kosher butcher in a rural south Bohemian ghetto, was a hard-working, self-made man who like so many other Jews had come to the capital to rise in the world. He acquired a dry goods store in the center of old Prague which became highly successful and which his energetic wife Julie, née Löwy, helped to run. The Kafkas were in many ways a

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typical Jewish couple of their region of the world in their time. They reflected the situation of the strenuously assimilating, but not yet fully assimilated, rising Jewish bourgeoisie, frantically trying to advance economically, which for them also meant socially, in an environment which provided a deceptive appearance of equality, prosperity, and security, a false picture of social integration which in actuality they did not enjoy. What the shy, delicate, and deeply introverted child and adolescent Franz Kafka sensed, without as yet being explicitly aware of, was a profound discrepancy between the appearance of solidity and a reality of alienation and vague but persistent menace. He felt a hopeless split between what seemed to be solid ground under his feet and the suspicion that things were really not holding together very well and might fly apart at any moment. But he also felt that he alone was cursed to feel this, while all others, and his parents above all, could blithely ignore all threats. In the first story preserved among his writings, "Description of a Struggle," written at the age of twenty-one, he gave striking expression to this feeling. One of the narrators exclaims:

> Oh, what dreadful days I have to live through! Why is everything so badly built that high houses collapse every now and again for no apparent reason? On these occasions I clamber over the rubble, asking everyone I meet: 'How could this have happened? In our town—a new house—how many does that make today?—Just think of it!' And no one can give me an answer.
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> "Frequently people fall in the street and lie there dead. Whereupon all the shop people open their doors laden with wares, hurry busily out, cart the dead into a house, come out again all smiles, then the chatter begins: "Good morning,—it's a dull day . . . ." I rush into the house . . . I finally knock on the janitor's little window: 'Good morning,' 'I say, I understand a dead man was carried in here just now. Would you be kind enough to let me see him?' . . . 'Out with you!' he shouts. . . . 'There's no dead man here. Maybe next door.' I raise my hat and go."[1]

Corpses repressed and denied. Kafka's text has an amazingly prophetic ring.

What does this sense of repressed knowledge of catastrophe have to do with Kafka's Jewishness? In order to answer that question we will have to go beyond Kafka's personal life and see in what ways this life was an indicator—and Kafka, like other great writers, can be considered a first-rate seismograph of his place and time, which indicated the future because it sounded the depth hidden in the present—in what ways this life was an indicator of the situation and condition of Central European Jews, especially in Prague, in his time.

Despite rapid industrialization and the spread of capitalism—especially in Bohemia, which became the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's only

truly industrial region—Austria-Hungary remained basically a semifeudal, bureaucratically governed monarchy living an uneasy compromise with parliamentary and bourgeois modernity. It constituted an anachronism in the swiftly modernizing Europe of the turn of the century, since it was still founded on dynastic principles that antedate the modern national state. It was a multinational state, consisting of numerous, mutually antagonistic ethnic groups, all of which wanted to get away from an empire held together by dynasty, army, bureaucracy, the Church, and last—but not necessarily least—its Jews.

Habsburg policy toward the Jews had changed with the ascension of Emperor Franz Josef to the throne after the revolution of 1848. In regard to the Jews, the then young emperor responded effectively and affirmatively to the challenge of the modern age. Before Franz Josef, Jews in the fiercely Catholic and anti-Jewish empire had been severely restricted. Their places of residence were in most cases confined to the ghetto. They had to pay special taxes. They had no freedom of residence, and only the oldest son in a Jewish family was permitted to get married—a law designed to keep the Jewish population within limits. Kafka's paternal grandfather, the kosher butcher Jakob Kafka, had to wait for the revolution of 1848 before, at age thirty-one, he could get married.

Franz Josef changed all that. He gave the Jews equality before the law and complete freedom of movement. Although personally no friend of the Jews by any means, he saw the enormous advantages of utilizing their talents, their resources, their international connections, and above all, their exclusion from any of the ethnic groups, for the purpose of modernizing and unifying the empire. The Jews could help him to keep the empire together as well as carry it forward into the age of capitalism. His policy toward the Jews might be aptly expressed with the French bourgeois king Louis-Phillipe's famous motto: "*Enrichissez-vous*" (Enrich yourselves!). For if through hard work and ingenuity subjects can enrich themselves, they will also enrich the state.

As was to be expected, the Jews responded enthusiastically to this call. They left the rural ghettos and streamed into the cities. Prague especially received an enormous increase in its Jewish population. The first generation of officially emancipated immigrant Jews in Prague, to which Kafka's robust father Herrmann belonged, went into business with a passion. Since German was the language of the government and of the upper crust of society, they embraced German as their language and abandoned the Yiddish idiom they had spoken for centuries and which had united all Jews of Ashkenasi Europe, even if they, like Kafka's father, came from predominantly Czech areas and bore Czech names. (The name Kafka is both Hebrew, from *Jakov-Jacob*, and Czech. *Kavka*, spelled

with v, is the Czech word for black bird.) The Jews' gratitude to the Emperor was enormous and their loyalty to Habsburg intense. Kafka's first name offers a good example. His parents named him Franz, token of their affection for Franz Josef.

But the liberation of the Jews, though impressive and certainly constituting a giant step forward, had nonetheless something deceptive and illusory about it. First of all, it was woefully incomplete. Jewish equality was indeed guaranteed on paper, but it did not exist in actuality. A solid and deep-seated prejudice against Jews remained largely intact. All the higher ranks of the officer corps and the entire bureaucracy, as well as the judiciary, were closed to Jews. Exclusion of Jews was a law, unwritten yet in full force. Franz Kafka himself was an exception. He obtained a position in the bureaucracy of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Company of the Kingdom of Bohemia, a state agency, which he retained until his early retirement for reasons of health. But he was the only Jew in the whole statewide bureau. He owed the job to the intervention of a converted Jew, the father of a school friend, who happened to serve on the Board of Supervisors of the Bureau. Kafka himself had to say to a friend who inquired about getting a relative into the bureau that it was utterly impossible because the company was unattainable to Jews, and Kafka described his own presence there as a miracle.

What made matters much worse, however, was the fact that this exclusion of the Jews from above was not a relic of bygone times. On the contrary, the anti-Judaism of the government was surpassed and left behind by the much more radical, virulent, and rapidly growing anti-Semitism of the middle and lower classes—both German and Czech—who regarded the Jews as an odious obstacle to their own advance.

The Germans of Bohemia, the so-called Sudeten Germans, belonged to the vanguard of the gathering ultranationalist and racist ideology which was steadily advancing in Germany itself and even more so in Austria, eventually to culminate in the founding of the Nazi party. In fact the term "National Socialist" was first used by a Bohemian party at the turn of the century. Even before that, the most important student fraternity of St. Charles University, the German University of Prague, where Kafka received his law degree in 1906, had excluded all Jews, including converted or so-called racial Jews, from its ranks, whereupon some of the Jewish students responded by founding the Zionist fraternity Bar Kochba. There was, of course, no socializing between Germans and Jews. They lived in separate universes.

But the Jews in Prague at the turn of the century, and in the first decades of the twentieth, lived under a dual threat. For they had to reckon not only with a solid German, but also with an even more violent

Czech anti-Semitism. The Germans and Czechs of Bohemia fought each other bitterly, but were united against a common enemy in the Jews. In fact, at one time, an association of Germans, Czechs, and Hungarians was formed with a single platform: fight against the Jews. Anti-Semitism was an issue the various ethnicities could agree on. What is forgotten today is that in Kafka's time, and for Kafka personally, Czech anti-Judaism loomed as an even larger threat than the German one, which prided itself on its more "civilized" and "scientific" character, disdaining the pogrom-addicted mob violence of the "uncivilized Slavs." Kafka lived through two extremely violent pogroms by the Czech populace in Prague—one in 1897 when he was an impressionable fourteen-year-old, and one in 1920, which was all the more disturbing in view of the fact that the very liberal Czechoslovak Republic had already been formed. In both cases, the Jewish population had to be protected by the authorities—police and army—a fact which Kafka found particularly shameful. "The disgusting shame of perennially living under protection," he wrote to his non-Jewish lover, Milena Jesenka-Pollak, at the time of the pogrom. He had watched from his window mounted police shielding Jews from enraged masses. "Is it not self-evident that one should leave where one is hated so much? (Zionism or ethnic feeling is not even needed here.) The heroism of staying under these conditions is that of cockroaches in the bathroom one cannot get rid of."[2] Ironically, the Czechs' anger vented itself against the Jews mainly because they were considered to be Germans, speakers of the German language and devotees of German culture. In Prague especially, the Czechs perceived the Jews to be the main representatives and agents of the centuries-old oppression of the Czechs by the Germans.

Living under the double threat of German racism and Czech pogromic populism, the Jews of Prague lived with an undertow of anxiety, a siege mentality of which, even though few admitted it, Kafka's nightmare fiction has become the eloquent testimonial.

The other side of this siege mentality was the early readiness of the young Jewish intelligentsia of Prague to embrace the cause of Zionism. Zionism found many more and much earlier converts in Prague than anywhere else among the assimilated Jews of Central and Western Europe. Kafka's close friend, literary executor and editor Max Brod, was one of those pioneering, firmly committed Zionists. So was Kafka's earliest friend and Gymnasium classmate, Hugo Bergmann, one of the earliest Zionists of Europe, later rector of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and founder of Israel's national library. Kafka, however, for a very long time kept aloof from Zionism and never became involved in it politically.

Despite the various areas of exclusion Kafka's parents and their

generation still suffered from, and ignoring or belittling the gathering storm clouds of mass hostility, the Jews of the Austro-Hungarian Empire took full advantage of the economic opportunities opened to them. They concentrated on their economic advance, and threw themselves into business ventures and into the free professions. Financial success and prosperity were substitutes for lost roots and traditions, compensation for a language, culture, and religious faith that had sustained their ancestors in centuries of persecution, and compensation as well for the lack of that full civic participation which gentile society increasingly withheld from them. Not yet aware of the gigantic threat that lay ahead, the generation of Kafka's parents had learned to make do with half-measures and compromise. Jews celebrated the birthday of an emperor who would not deign to receive them at his court. They made up for the fact that so many careers would forever be closed to them by redoubling their exertions in the ones that were within their reach. Their single-minded devotion to business not infrequently spawned a crass materialism and an almost comical conventionality. Kafka's father was an example of this. In their fanatical devotion to their store, the Kafkas were, from all we can gather, not atypical. They ignored the emotional needs of their delicate, highly sensitive, and complicated child. There was literally no time for love and play, for tender attention to and nurturing care of their son's psychic, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Anxious and nervous by his constitution, Franz was left to himself or to nannies and governesses, who showed little understanding. Kafka's mother, who was on all accounts an efficient, utterly devoted, and ideal helpmate to her husband and who proved indispensable in his business, had, for all her genuine affection, quite literally no time for her son. Frightened by his father's giant strength and irascible temper, Franz craved, but never received, tenderness and attention from his mother. Starved for love and recognition, the lonely child developed that insatiable hunger for community, for natural warmth, affection, bonds of closeness, that goes a very long way toward explaining the overwhelming attention the Yiddish-speaking community acquired for him, when he encountered it years later in the Lvov Yiddish Theater's guest performances in Prague.

The so-called Jewishness of the father only completed and radicalized young Franz's sense of alienation. To him his father's residual Jewishness was a parody of religion and a mockery of the kind of community Kafka longed for. Herrmann Kafka, as Franz saw him, was the epitome of a Yom Kippur Jew, that is, the incarnation of half-heartedness, hypocrisy, and self-deceiving compromise. His Judaism appeared a hollow ritualism which enshrined pretense in the place of faith and mistook self-regarding conventionality for a sense of community and tradition. Franz

was a keenly observant child and perceived his father's Jewishness as the effort to be seen by the right people—namely Jewish millionaires—in the right places—namely the temple on High Holidays. He was, however, proud to be able to follow the Hebrew prayers and point out to his son the passage in the prayer book that was just being recited. "You," Kafka addressed him in the lengthy letter that turned into a kind of autobiography and has become known as "The Letter to His Father,"

> You still brought along, from your small ghetto-like village, a tiny bit of Jewishness. It was not much and some of it got lost in the army and when you came to the city. Still those impressions and memories of your youth sufficed for a bare minimum of a Jewish life, especially for you who are of a robust endowment and did not need much by way of spiritual sustenance and were left cold by religious need if it did not merge with social status. The faith that guided your life basically amounted to faith in the absolute correctness of the opinions of a certain Jewish social class, and since those views formed part of your own mentality, what your faith ultimately boiled down to was faith in yourself.[3]

That remnant of Judaism which defined itself as going to the synagogue on Rosh Ha-shonah and Yom Kippur and mechanically staging the ritual of the first Seder—and only the first—was not enough to be transmitted to his son. Franz was thoroughly alienated from this parody of religion. He recounts how abysmally bored he was in the religious services. "I yawned and dozed through those many hours (I have been as bored only in dancing school), and I tried to derive some enjoyment from the few small diversions which could be had there. For instance, when the Thorah was taken out I was always reminded of a shooting gallery where, when you hit the bull's eye, a similar little door of a box opened up" (155). His father, whom Kafka saw as typifying his whole generation and social class, was already too deficient in Jewish substance to be able to give his son the example of a truly Jewish life. Thus Franz was lost to Judaism in his formative years and had to recover it for himself at the end of his youth.

To the young Kafka, Jewishness manifested itself as a double negative. Jews were Jews because they were not like others, because they were different from everyone else. And it also manifested itself as a guilt feeling in reaction to his father's constant accusations of Franz's indifference, his apostasy, his refusal to conform to the rituals to which his father clung, partly for sentimental and partly for social reasons. But what Kafka held particularly against his father's residual Judaism was its total insufficiency for himself. Bored by the ritual of the temple, which remained empty of meaning for him because it remained unmediated, and consequently devoid of sense, young Kafka became an atheist, toyed

with Socialism, and for a time turned to German culture as his refuge and gate to freedom.

What business and economic advance had been for their fathers, German culture was for their sons. It was the entrance to Europe; and with the long-lived memories of the German Enlightenment and the legendary symbiosis of the German and Jewish spirit, embodied in the archetypal eighteenth-century friendship of the German Gotthold Lessing and the Jew Moses Mendelssohn, German culture had always been a focal point of fascination for Central and East European Jews—a tragically one-sided love affair, left unrequited by latter-day Germans. But the Jewish flight to German culture was still strong in turn-of-the-century Prague. This flight to German culture expressed itself above all in the ambition of many sons of Jewish bourgeois families to become writers, which meant, of course, writers in German. (I say "sons" advisedly, for, on the whole, in Kafka's generation women were not yet admitted to culture to the degree they should have been and shortly after the turn of the century began to be.) To be a writer was Kafka's spiritual and existential ambition from the very beginning. "My talent for representing my dream-like inner life has made everything else [in me] unimportant," he said of himself at one point, and this statement was basically valid throughout his life.[4]

Since German was his language, literature meant above all literature mediated to him through German. For a while, under the influence of his friend Oskar Pollak, Kafka came under the spell of Germanic ideology. He was a subscriber to a cultural journal of German nationalist leanings, *Der Kunstwart.* He adopted, for a while, a preciously old-fashioned, Germanically Romantic style, reminiscent of fairy tales, and he was also an avid reader of Nietzsche. Max Brod relates that, at their first meeting, Kafka ardently attacked him for having made derogatory comments about Nietzsche. For a brief period, Kafka even enrolled in the department of German literature at Charles University before he switched to law, disillusioned by the racist lectures of his professor.

The German culture to which Kafka tried to flee did not accept him and his kind. It had become thoroughly impregnated with a nationalist and racist ideology, a substitute religion, in which anti-Semitism played a dominant part. Kafka found that his flight from his Jewish family to German culture was a flight from one alienation to another even worse.

Years later he formulated this insight to Max Brod in a striking metaphor. Asking why Jews wanted to be German writers, he answered himself: "To get away from the Jewishness of their fathers, usually with the confused consent of their fathers (and this confusion, this lack of clarity, was the really outrageous thing about it)—so they wanted to write in German; but with their little hind legs they remained stuck in the

Jewishness of their fathers and with their little front legs they were finding no new ground. The despair over that was their (inspiration)."[5] With this metaphor of the insect wriggling in suspension between what it wanted to leave and what if failed to arrive at, Kafka characterized his own work as inspired by total alienation. However, after Kafka had discovered a living Jewish culture in his encounter with the Yiddish theater, the place he wanted to arrive at, but could not, was no longer German culture, but Judaism.

And it was this substitution of Jewish for German that, as I shall try to show, contributed decisively to Kafka's finding the form, the structure, and the themes that made him in his thirtieth year the writer he was to be. What he had written before then had, despite glimpses of a striking originality and passages of genius, fallen far short of that sustained level of greatness that was to mark his writing beginning with his breakthrough to *The Judgment* in September 1912. It was closely preceded by his discovery of the Yiddish theater.

The Yiddish theater group from Poland gave guest performances in a Prague café from the autumn of 1911 to the spring of 1912. The experience of this small, rather shabby group of actors and actresses who performed plays of the Yiddish repertoire by Goldfaden, Feinman, Latteyner, and Gordin, came to Kafka as a revelation and prepared him for the breakthrough in his writing.

That encounter affected both his life and his work. It acted as a conversion to Judaism, to Judaic culture. Kafka, who hardly missed a performance by the group, fell in love with one of the actresses, and, more importantly in the long run, developed a close friendship with the leader and soul of the group, a young Jew—four years younger than Kafka—from a pious Hassidic family in Warsaw, who had broken away from his home at an early age, traveled all over Europe trying his hands at all kinds of jobs, and finally joined the Yiddish theater movement in which he became a leading force. His name was Yitzhak Löwy or Levi. An eloquent and vivacious storyteller, he introduced Kafka to a world of Jewish culture and lore, partly or mainly mediated through the tales of his own life and that of this family and ancestors. A whole world was opened to Kafka of which he had no inkling. It changed his life. He immediately began to study the history of Judaism, read about and in the Talmud and later the Kabbalah; in fact, near the end of his life he called "this whole literature," by which he meant mainly his own writings, "potentially a new . . . kabbalah," "an assault on the frontier" (*T* 553). With a series of teachers he took up the consistent study of Hebrew. He subscribed to the Zionist journal, *Selbstwehr* or *Self-Defense*, and he published two of his stories in *Der Jude* (*The Jew*), a Zionist journal edited by Martin Buber. Although aloof from any political involvement

in Zionism, Kafka began to toy with the idea of emigrating to Palestine and working on a kibbutz. He indulged his penchant for manual labor—carpeting and gardening—partly at least with a view to using these skills in Palestine. During World War I he took an active interest in educational efforts for the masses of Galician refugees who, fleeing the advance of the Russian armies, had streamed into Prague. At that time, Kafka struck up a friendship with another Hassid, Mordechai—originally Georg—Langer, who, in contrast to Yitzhak Levi, was not an ex-Hassid, but a recent convert to Hassidism who had broken away from his assimilated bourgeois family. Langer was an ardent follower of the Belzer rebbe with whom he returned to Prague, where he introduced Kafka to the world of Hassidism and Jewish mysticism. These influences left an imprint on Kafka's later work, particularly the aphoristic reflections he composed in his mid- and late thirties, which deal with philosophical and religious themes, frequently circling around *The Book of Genesis.*

Near the end of his life, after three disastrous engagements to two Westernized Jewish women, and one intense but tortured love affair with a non-Jewish woman, Milena, Kafka found the one single happy love relationship of his life with a Galician girl from a Hassidic family, Dora Dymant, twenty-one years his junior, who, like Yitzhak Levi, had broken away from her rigid Orthodox family and was trying to make it on her own as a social worker and children's counselor in Berlin. She and Kafka lived together in Berlin, which was to be their way station to Palestine. They playfully discussed the plan of opening a Jewish restaurant in Tel Aviv, where Dora would cook and Kafka be the waiter. His rapidly deteriorating health—tuberculosis had spread from his lungs to his larynx—made such plans, of course, utterly impossible. Max Brod reports that Kafka wrote to Dora's father, presenting himself as a Jew not yet believing, but in a repentant quest, and formally asked for Dora's hand in marriage even though she herself, an independent-minded young woman, had been against his writing this letter. Dora's father is supposed to have shown the letter to the Gerer rebbe, God's personal representative for him. The rebbe read it, shook his head, and said: "No." This final rejection must have been perceived by Kafka symbolically as the final confirmation of that negative judgment of his existence which he himself had pronounced all his life. Did he see, at that final point, a parallel to Moses, who had been allowed to see the Promised Land, but not to enter it? In any case, shortly thereafter, Kafka became too sick to stay with Dora in inflation-plagued and hungry Berlin. He had to go back to his family in Prague, and soon after that to the sanatorium near Vienna where he died, one month before his forty-first birthday.

The effect of the Yiddish theater experience on Kafka's work is not

found in the influences of plays from the repertoire, as Evelyn Beck in her otherwise highly informative book, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater*, has unsuccessfully tried to show.[6] But it can be seen in a much larger, more complex, and indirect link, which Kafka's encounter with Yiddish was to have with the structure of the works he was to write soon thereafter. This link is apparent in *The Metamorphosis*, one of the first works he wrote after his discovery of the Yiddish Theater.

One of the immediate effects the Yiddish Theater had on Kafka was his critique of the negative and condescending attitude toward Yiddish which the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie, including the Zionists, consistently demonstrated. Kafka sought to effect a break with this attitude. He succeeded in persuading the Zionist student fraternity Bar Kochba to sponsor an evening of Yiddish songs and recitations by his friend Yitzhak Levi at the Jewish Town Hall in Prague. He introduced Levi with a talk in which he tried to acquaint this audience with the nature of Yiddish, or "the jargon" as German-speaking Jews sneeringly called it.

Kafka began by pointing out two factors about his assimilated German-speaking audience's relationship to Yiddish. First of all, that they were afraid of it. "Your fear," he said, "is written all over your faces."[7] And secondly that Yiddish was much closer to them than they knew.

> Active within you, in addition to knowledge are forces and junctures of forces that enable you to feel yourself into an understanding of Yiddish . . . and you understand far more Yiddish than you think. And once Yiddish has taken hold of you—and Yiddish is everything: word, Hasidic melody, and the very essence of this Eastern Jewish actor [meaning Levi] himself—(once Yiddish has taken hold of you) you will no longer recognize your former complacency. At that point you will so powerfully feel the unity of Yiddish [with you] as to make you afraid—not of Yiddish any longer but of yourselves.[8]

Kafka tells his audience that the hitherto unsuspected closeness to Yiddish will heighten their fear. First it was the fear of Yiddish, and now it will be fear of themselves. Why? Why will they be afraid when they discover their kinship with the despised jargon? Because they will be ashamed. Having wanted to put an unbridgeable distance between themselves and their Yiddish past, now they will discover they cannot. And that will come as a shock to them. Yiddish has remained a part of themselves, after all, even though they have wished nothing more intensely than to deny that kinship. What they have looked down upon as something belonging only to those benighted strangers from the East with whom they thought they had nothing in common whatsoever turns out to slumber deep within themselves. What they are ashamed of is their Jewishness, their Jewish heritage that is a burden to them they had thought they had put behind them. But the shock of discovering that

they can understand Yiddish instantaneously shows them that they have not been able to free themselves of the past from which they sprang and of which they are ashamed. Though repressed for so long, it turns out to be part of their innermost selves.

Kafka goes on to encourage them to face this past openly, to acknowledge it as their own, to reconnect with it. That, he tells them, will have a therapeutic effect. It will give them self-confidence and make them lose their fear, for then they will have no reason to be afraid of themselves any more.

Not long before he gave this speech on the Yiddish language, Kafka had written an interesting observation in his diary which forms a remarkable parallel to the idea expressed in the speech.

> Yesterday it occurred to me that if I have not always loved my mother as she deserved, and as I was capable, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no Mutter; the term Mutter makes her a little comical. . . . To a Jew, 'Mutter' sounds particularly German, it unconsciously conveys, together with Christian splendor, Christian coldness. The Jewish woman called Mutter thus appears not merely comical, but alien. . . . I believe that only memories of the ghetto preserve the Jewish family, for even the word 'Vater' does not even remotely signify the Jewish father. (*T* 115–16)

Even more drastically than in his speech on the Yiddish language, Kafka observes here a split between the official, assimilated, Germanized surface consciousness and the true but merged psyche of Westernized Jews to which he and his family belong. The submerged Jewish self, though buried and over-laid by German, is still strong enough to unmask the German surface consciousness as a distorting, falsifying agency. Kafka sees language as both representative and formative of levels of the psyche and the mind. If the language of communication, and thus of everyday waking consciousness, is out of sync with the emotional reality of human beings, their whole life become false, inauthentic. By adopting German and repressing Yiddish as their speech, assimilated Jews have saddled themselves with a false consciousness. Consciousness no longer agrees with the deeper self. Assimilation, symbolized by the shift in idiom from Yiddish to High German, twists personality and intimate relationships. Since emotional reality can no longer find expression in speech, it is stifled and condemned to wither. The access of the emotions to consciousness is blocked. As a consequence, conscious life is denuded of its true emotional content. It becomes desiccated, frozen by "Christian coldness," formal, false.

At the time, when Kafka wrote *The Trial*, he noted a similar relationship between surface consciousness and submerged Jewish past, this time expressed in terms of cityscape rather than of language. Kafka's

family lived in the district of the former ghetto which had still been there when Kafka was born. It was a teeming, dirty, unsavory place of crooked alleyways, disreputable dives, criminality, and prostitution. In Kafka's later childhood, the ghetto was torn down and the district called *Josefstadt* was completely rebuilt, modernized, sanitized, transformed into a clean bourgeois city with broad sunny streets and modern apartment buildings. But, as Kafka writes, while we walk the bright broad modern boulevards, the dank gloomy alleyways of the old ghetto still live on deep within us. We think we inhabit a hygienic modern town, but within us we continue to dwell in the dark foul-smelling ghetto of our past. Modern Western Jews are split between their emancipated rational façade, their official self that they show to the world, and their hidden ghetto past, their truth, which they do not acknowledge, but which still rules them.

This division of the self constitutes a dominant structural principle of Kafka's three tales of punishment, the most widely read of his works—*The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *The Trial*. In all three works, the effect of the fantastic, which has come to be known as kafkaesque, derives from that strange discrepancy between the explicit perspective of the narrative, which is the protagonist's consciousness, and a reality that erupts from within him and overwhelms and destroys him. The travelling salesman Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis is the most famous example of this structure.

Gregor's consciousness is that of a dutiful son and family member, an ordinary hardworking salesman. But his reality, into which he wakes after a night of restless dreams, is that of a giant species of vermin, an unspecified combination of bed bug and cockroach perhaps. The cool, objective narration provides no explanation. But in reading the text carefully, we note that Gregor's verminous condition functions as the alienated and disgusted perspective with which Gregor's dutiful bourgeois consciousness views his rebellious desire for liberation from his salesman's existence of routinized drudgery. Gregor has had to repress this rebellious urge in order to remain the conscientious breadwinner of his family who depends on him. But his urge can be seen erupting in a form that absolves him of responsibility. He changes literally into the parasite, turning tables on his family. His transformation frees him from his hateful bondage in fact, without, however, involving his con-scious mind in his actual refusal to work.

Now you might say: All right, we do see a split in Gregor's person. We see an alienation between consciousness and being. But what on earth does Gregor's transformation have to do with Jewishness? Unless, you might continue, unless one were to read Kafka's story as equating Gregor's conscious self with assimilation and his repressed urge, that

erupts in this disgusting form, with authentic Jewishness. But, my dear Walter Sokel, such a reading we cannot believe. We just won't buy it, not even from you.

Yes, I would answer, it is hard to believe. And yet, it is a reading that is consistent with Kafka's own reading of the so-called assimilated Jewish psyche.

Let me remind you of Kafka's letter to Max Brod cited before, in which Kafka compares the young Jews who seek to make their way as German writers to insects stuck with their hind legs in the Judaism of their fathers but finding no new ground for their front legs. I also remind you of Kafka's letter to his non-Jewish lover, Milena Jesenska, in which he compares Jews, insisting on living in an environment that hates them, with cockroaches one cannot get rid of.

In linking *The Metamorphosis* to Kafka's view of Jewishness, we should consider two factors. One is the disdainful and frequently disgusted perspective from which assimilated Central European Jews looked down upon their co-religionists from Eastern Europe. The latter's Yiddish-speaking Jewishness reminded Central European Jews too embarrassingly of their own, or their parents', recent past. It had not been so long ago that they themselves had escaped the condition, universally despised by the gentile world, which Yiddish symbolized. They wanted nothing more than to forget and wipe out all associations that could implicate them in those despised and therefore odious origins. In the implicitly and explicitly anti-Semitic environment in which they had to make their way, they desperately wanted to preclude any reminder of the state from which they came. With a scorn bred from near panic they rejected anything that, or anyone who, would threaten to direct attention to their and their families' past.

Kafka's father Herrmann was a particularly crude example of Jewish self-contempt projected onto fellow Jews less assimilated than himself and thus a potential source of painful embarrassment. A few months before he wrote *The Metamorphosis*, Franz brought his disreputable Yiddish-speaking friend from Warsaw, Yitzhak Levi, to the apartment where he lived with his parents. Kafka senior did not conceal his deep annoyance. Within hearing of his son's guest, he made sneering comments about him. For Kafka senior, his son's friend did not count as a human being with a right to have his feeling considered. No, he was only an Eastern Yid, not really human. He made him a dog—several years later Kafka was to write a dog story in which allusions to Judaism can be found—a dog and a carrier of vermin. Vermin was what one had to expect when associating with an Eastern Jew. And vermin, of course, is what Gregor becomes when he ceases to earn money and support his family. Such a son is vermin in his father's eyes, and having thoroughly

internalized his father's bourgeois perspective, Gregor sees himself as vermin as soon as he ceases to go to work.

There is a second factor of crucial importance to be considered when linking *Metamorphosis* to the meaning authentic Jewish life had for Kafka. Judaism for Kafka meant more than a return to one's roots. It also signified a liberation, that is, the possibility of breaking out from stifling, oppressive, and deeply flawed patriarchal tyranny. All the Jewish figures that were to recall Kafka to Judaism were rebels with the courage to defy their fathers, to break away from stifling surroundings, and to follow their urge to independence. His encounter with authentic Jewishness was for Kafka not nostalgia, but discovery. Authentic Jewishness offered Kafka the vision of his own liberation from his family and its spiritual emptiness and hypocritical conventionality. A middle ground between outright desertion and authenticity, his family's Jewishness appeared hopelessly compromised to him. Genuine Judaism held forth the promise of escape from that compromise which he saw poisoning all authentic emotion and relationships. Judaism seemed to offer the integrity he longed for—in his case, the integrity of following his own deepest bent, to live a life of literature. It was a freedom he encircled with his thoughts, but he never dared to grasp for himself.

Rebels and bohemians all, the young Eastern Jews whom Kafka admired were for him exemplary figures of successful revolt. Ironically, it was *they* who embodied emancipation whereas *he* was the one who, from an anxious need for security, shied away from freeing himself from the stranglehold of his bourgeois family. Yitzhak Levi and the men and women of this group had achieved what he himself could not. They dared to make a living from art. They were examples that shamed him.

*The Metamorphosis* is also a tale of shame incarnate. The verminous hulk of the traveling salesman is a figure of shame, shame of a dual nature. That is, it presents itself from two opposite perspectives. As seen from the bourgeois perspective of his family and firm, which is also, at least in the beginning, the perspective of Gregor's conscious self, his ceasing to work has made him a figure of shame and disgust. He who does not go after his commercial job is a parasite no better than vermin. The victim of the system has internalized its perspective. It is his own.

But Gregor appears shameful from an opposite perspective as well. He appears shameful for not having had the courage to defy his family and openly break out of a world that confines him. He appears shameful for his failure to fulfill his secret craving for freedom. One might say that Gregor's metamorphosis represents Kafka's life as seen from an internalized Yitzhak Levi's perspective—the perspective of that part of his self that accused and condemned the half-hearted and self-divided existence of the Westernized bourgeois Jew.

Let me forestall misunderstanding. I am not claiming that *The Metamorphosis* is only an allegory of Kafka's view as an assimilated or half-assimilated Jew. That would be a gross simplification. What I am trying to point out is the striking resemblance of structure between Kafka's representation of fictional characters with his presentation of the relationship between use of the German language and Jewish being. This parallelism of structure applies not only to *Metamorphosis.* An even stronger resemblance can be seen in *The Judgment* and *The Trial.*

In both Kafka's narratives and his observations on the Jewish and German elements in the psyche of his class and generation of Jews, we can discern structurally the dichotomous coexistence of everyday consciousness with a repressed reality which is repressed because it is considered shameful. This inner division brings an element of profound wrongness into the lives of those whom Kafka describes, whether they are fictional or actual characters.

What he said to his audience in the Jewish Town Hall of Prague might, one is tempted to say, also apply to the fictional protagonists of his fantastic tales of punishment, provided we substitute for the word "Yiddish" a term like "submerged being." I shall repeat the passage from Kafka's address: "And once Yiddish has taken hold of you . . . you will no longer recognize your former complacency. [Your former self we might add.] At that point you will so powerfully feel the true unity of Yiddish [with yourself] as to make you afraid—not of Yiddish any longer, but of yourselves." That is, when this submerged part of our being comes into sight, becomes evident, and confronts consciousness, we can and will no longer be as we seemed to be before. We will be changed. We will, Kafka adds, have to "bear the burden of our fear."

In his speech to his fellow Jews, Kafka does not stop at this point, and this marks the difference from his fiction. Kafka goes on, offering a redeeming side of this self-confrontation that he denies to his fictional heroes and largely to himself as well. In his address, he puts the unbearable burden of fear in the conditional subjunctive: "You would not be able to bear the burden of this fear alone, if"—and this "if" is decisive—"if, at the same time, Yiddish did not also endow you with a self-confidence that resists this fear and is even stronger." It was Kafka's goal to make available to others this self-confidence, which would arise from open acknowledgment of and reconnecting with the past, and he even sought to make it available to himself. But he never really believed he could succeed in that task. And this profound belief in the impossibility of reconnecting is what he imparted to his fiction.

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## NOTES

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2 Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, ed. Willy Haas (New York, 1952), p. 240; in English as Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, tr. updated and rev. Philip Boehm (New York, 1990); my translation.
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4 Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher. 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1948, 1949), p. 420; in English as Franz Kafka, *The Diaries 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod, tr. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg with the cooperation of Hannah Arendt (New York, 1948, 1949); my translation; hereafter cited in text as *T.*
5 Franz Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1958), pp. 336–37; my translation.
6 Evelyn Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater, Its Impact on His Work* (Madison, 1971).
7 Quoted by Ernst Pawel, *The Nighmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York, 1984), p. 248.
8 Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlass Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1953), p. 426; my translation.