Jewish, German, Czech, born a subject of the Habsburgs at ‘the heart of Europe’ in Bohemian Prague in 1883, died a citizen of Czechoslovakia on the outskirts of Vienna forty-one years later; a speaker of French and Italian in addition to his native German, Czech, and Yiddish, which he learnt as an adult; steeped in both Jewish lore and German literature and surrounded by the sound of Czech for most of his life, Franz Kafka was first and foremost an internationalist and a European. Since his death he has been claimed as one of the foremost Jewish authors of his age, as the greatest modernist prose writer in the German language, and – at least after 1945 – as an icon of both German and Austrian literature. More recently, though with less enthusiasm, he has been hailed in his homeland as a Czech, where his memory helped inspire resistance to Soviet dominance in the 1960s. One thing is certain: in his affiliations and the resonance of his writings Kafka is the most cosmopolitan of all German-language writers.

Yet the Europe which moulded this internationalism has been lost; it was torn at the seams by the First World War and the Versailles settlement which concluded it and then shredded by Hitler. Today Jewish Europe barely exists in the lands Kafka knew and the multilingual Habsburg Europe of Austria–Hungary long ago gave way to largely monolingual nation states. After the Second World War and the Holocaust, which claimed Kafka’s three sisters and many of his surviving friends, Prague fell behind the Iron Curtain and Kafka’s books were banned not celebrated. After the extermination of the European Jews came the expulsion of the Czech Germans in 1945. The tensions and communal anxieties which fuelled this destruction already shaped Kafka’s fiction and autobiographical writing. Establishing Kafka’s Europe cannot thus be an act of cultural resuscitation; it is a matter of historical and imaginative reconstruction. But this does not mean that our twenty-first-century world is not linked to his. His images of anxiety and cultural dislocation, his multilayered prose which partakes of a multitude of discourses simultaneously, and his ignorance of ultimate answers still speak to
us directly. Indeed, the secret of Kafka’s continued appeal is that he has all this time kept so many of his secrets.

Kafka’s education at one of Prague’s German Grammar Schools, attended principally by German-speaking Jews, followed the classical syllabus whose roots lay in the European Renaissance of the sixteenth century. He learnt Latin and Greek as a matter of course, though not necessarily with joy, which meant he could read his favourite classical authors in the original. He read the German and Austrian classics (Goethe, Kleist, Grillparzer) as part of a cultural canon which was at once his own (as a German) and not his own (as a Jew). The European greats of the nineteenth century belonged indisputably to his understanding of his own modern tradition: Dostoevsky among the Russians; Flaubert from the French; and Dickens from the English. There is no sense in which he read them to savour foreign style or experience; he regarded them as fellow Europeans in a way which is rarer three-quarters of a century after his death.

Prodigious as his linguistic accomplishments may seem to us now, they were not unusual; his supposedly uncultivated father was more or less trilingual. While Kafka’s first language and first cultural tradition were German, Hermann Kafka had been brought up speaking Czech at home and German at school. As his own father had not married until the Habsburg laws restricting Jewish marriage had been lifted in 1849, Hermann was a second-generation Jewish migrant. When the family moved from country to city, they transformed themselves from unemancipated, second-class Jewish subjects of the emperor to semi-assimilated bourgeois businessmen. The changes had been rapid and the emerging social and cultural formations which generated identity and underpinned relations within society proved fragile. As the Italian Prague historian, Angelo Maria Ripellino, comments: ‘in this tottering boarding house of nationalities Jews were always the most isolated . . . no less alien to the Germans than to the Czechs’. Kafka’s diary comments from Christmas 1911 on the status of ‘minor literatures’, by which he meant specifically Yiddish but also Czech and the other non-German languages of the empire, show how his own sensitivity extended to the collective, cultural sphere. The comments inspired a once fashionable book and in the era of identity politics have lost none of their urgency or incisiveness. Everything in Kafka’s Europe appeared in flux and – as history was to show with a barbarism none could have foreseen – consequently under threat. His images of fractured perception, his figures’ search for wholeness, and their experience of authority divorced from responsibility are modernist images of Europe on the brink of its most awful hour.

Kafka’s Europe extended beyond the borders of the Austro-Hungarian empire of the Habsburgs. As a cultural territory it stretched from the western
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Ukraine, home of the Yiddish Theatre Troupe which so impressed him in 1911, to the German coasts of the North Sea and the Baltic where he spent his holidays, to Paris, which he visited twice and where two of his uncles had settled, to Switzerland and northern Italy, which he toured in the company of his friend, Max Brod. When Kafka went to Germany he followed a route through Dresden to Berlin, stopping at Leipzig or Weimar. Vienna, where he attended a Zionist congress in 1913, and Berlin, home of Felice Bauer, are the two other points of his Central European cultural triangle after Prague. His Europe is demarcated too by the locations of the sanatoria and health resorts he visited from his early twenties and where he spent increasing lengths of time in his last five years: Jungborn in the German Harz, where he enjoyed gymnastic exercises *au naturel*; Zuckmantel in Silesia (then Germany, now Poland); Meran, which became Italian Merano in 1918; and Matliary just over the Hungarian border in Slovakia. His natural hinterland, however, was Czech-speaking rural Bohemia, a fact again brought out by the locations where he was sent to convalesce in his last years: Zürau, where he stayed with his sister Otla after first contracting tuberculosis; or Schelesen, where he wrote his ‘Letter to his Father’.

Apart from his first novel, *The Man who Disappeared*, which he set in an imaginary USA he had learnt about from books and lectures (though it was home to some of his relatives), Kafka rarely specified where his fictions took place, but that does not make them place-less, let alone time-less. When he mentions real places in his early stories and sketches (Berlin, Constantinople, St Petersburg) he does not do so for the sake of realism. The Traveller is one of his favourite figures (one thinks of K. from *The Castle*) along with the Stranger or Foreigner, like Karl Roßmann from *The Man who Disappeared* or even Josef K. from *The Trial*, a stranger in his own city. But they are metaphorical itinerants who have ventured out from home into a threatening and puzzling environment. The chapters in the Companion devoted to the three novels bring out these qualities in different but related ways, suggesting not only the unity of the novels but showing too how Kafka was preoccupied by the theme of belonging and non-belonging. Symbolically Russia was one of his most evocative locations, suggesting both personal loneliness in its immense open spaces and the threat of barbarism. ‘An Old Manuscript’ (‘Ein altes Blatt’), a short tale of two pages written during the First World War, narrates the invasion ‘from the North’ (*EL*: 208) of brutish nomads, who communicate with one another in animal-like noises and who devour flesh from living beasts – even their horses are carnivores. It emerges in the last few lines that the fate of the narrator’s unsuspecting and unprepared civilisation is in his own hands and those of his fellow craftsmen and shopkeepers. But they are clearly not up to defending their *Vaterland* against the dreadful force...
which has erupted in their midst. While Rolf Goebel identifies this short text as one of Kafka’s ‘Chinese tales’, its exposed, land-locked territory could be that of Central Europe.¹

This was a Europe whose values had been shaken by the writings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, whose revolutions in thought left their mark on Kafka’s work. Fin-de-siècle decadence and dandyish aestheticism, as discussed by Dagmar Lorenz and Rolf Goebel respectively, German Expressionism, the turn-of-the-century Sprachkrise (‘crisis of language’) articulated by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his ‘Letter to Lord Chandos’, as well as nudism, Rudolf Steiner’s theosophy, and the cult of Teutonic authenticity in the back-to-nature handicrafts and Heimat movement are all contemporary cultural and artistic trends, apparently contradictory expressions of the spirit of the age. In politics this is not only the period of the rise of the ‘little nations’, the Czechs, the Poles, the Hungarians, the South Slavs of Yugoslavia, all of whom resented rule from the imperial centre of Vienna. It also witnessed the rise of international social democracy, the failed revolution in Russia in 1905 and the Bolshevik takeover in Moscow in 1917, the aborted German revolution in 1918–19 and a similar uprising in Budapest. Of most concern to Kafka was the rise of anti-Semitism and the burgeoning Zionist movement in which he took a great interest. The age was marked by technological innovation, which both fascinated and repelled him, and rapid industrialisation, particularly in Bohemia, the industrial powerhouse of the empire. It is not often appreciated that Kafka worked at the cutting edge of a new industry, workers’ accident insurance. Technology and industrial relations, how one set of people – employers – dealt with another set – their employees – were quite literally his bread and butter. His first fiancée, Felice Bauer, worked for a high-tech firm, one powerful reason for his initial attraction to her.

In addition to industrialisation and urban migration, changing cultural identities and class conflict, Kafka witnessed great changes in the status of women during his life time. He liked strong, independent women: Bauer was a pioneer in her profession; Milena Jesenská, his second great correspondent, an alumnus of the famed Minerva Girls High School in Prague, the first Gymnasium in Central Europe to teach girls the classical humanist syllabus and one of the first to grant them equality with boys by awarding them the Abitur. Kafka supported his younger sister Ottla in her bid to ‘marry out’ and defy the wishes of their parents. It is little wonder that identity and cultural dislocation, gender and politics feature so strongly in many of the chapters to follow in the Companion.

If Kafka does not name places in his fiction, his rootedness, if that is the right expression, in Central Europe becomes clearer in his correspondence and diaries, which record his journeys. His correspondents’ places of origin
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and residence help define the boundaries and internal borders of this cultural region. Their places of death, often hundreds or thousands of miles away, point to the relationship between geography and history in this region at this time. Felice Bauer was an assimilated Berlin Jew, who fled Hitler to the United States where she died in 1960; her friend Grete Bloch shared her background and profession and perished in the Holocaust after emigrating as far as Italy. Milena Jesenská was a Christian Czech who died in 1944 in the concentration camp at Ravensbrück, persecuted by the Nazis for her politics. Dora Diamant, whom Kafka met in the last summer before his death, was the daughter of orthodox East European Jews. She fled Hitler to die in London in 1953. Kafka’s other great love and second fiancée after Felice, Julie Wohryzek, came from a modest Czech Jewish background of the type Kafka’s father had escaped through enterprise and hard work. Male and female friends or fiancées thus have much in common, both with each other and with Kafka himself. But if one looks closely there are differences, subtle but significant variations in the nature of their Jewish origins, their attitude to their own Jewishness, or, in Jesenská’s case, their straddling of two cultures. Does it seem that in his great affairs of the mind and the heart Kafka was trying out identities or testing himself against them?

The origins and fate of his male friends complement this picture. They were all Jewish, at least by background. Max Brod eluded the Nazis to reach Palestine where he died in 1968; Robert Klopstock, a Hungarian medic from Budapest, died in New York in 1972. Kafka recommended him as a translator of his stories to his publisher, Kurt Wolff, who was also to flee to the US. But two schoolfriends, Paul Kisch and Oskar Pollak, with both of whom he conducted a correspondence which has survived, show possibilities for Kafka himself. Both, in different but related ways, more than flirted with German nationalism: Pollak introduced Kafka to the ideas of the Kunstwart journal, an aesthetic but decidedly Teutonic publication. On the outbreak of the First World War he volunteered for the Austrian army and was killed in action on the Italian front in 1915. In the case of Kisch, the brutal ineluctability of ethnic identity becomes clearer. Despite repudiating his Jewishness and signing up completely to the nationalist cause, he perished in Auschwitz.4

Migration makes it difficult to disentangle geography and history, as those who move on progress through time as well as space, as Kafka explains in his ‘Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language’, which he delivered in February 1912 to introduce a performance of the Yiddish players from Lemberg he had befriended the previous autumn: ‘the historical development of Yiddish could have been traced horizontally in the present almost as well as it can be traced vertically through history’ (BK: 152).5 The emancipated Western
Jews who comprised his audience had left behind the milieu of the East European ghetto, still home to the Ostjuden (‘Eastern Jews’) on the north-eastern periphery of Austria–Hungary and, moving further eastwards, in darkest Tsarist Russia. Discovering his parental and ancestral cultural roots, Kafka articulates his own sense of European cultural identity most fully in this short lecture. He presents the subject through a series of antitheses; first he opposes Western Europe, where he and his audience live, and Yiddish, which he calls ‘the youngest European language, only four hundred years old’ (BK: 149), and which originates in the East. With arch irony he declares Western Europe to be ‘ordered’ and the people, that is its Jewish inhabitants, to ‘live in contented harmony’, which is why they have little interest in the language of their forebears. Yiddish is the opposite of ordered and harmonious because in its ever-changing variety it has not been rationalised on the printed page; it belongs to the people as a spoken language and the people will not let the grammarians, those repressed codifiers, get their hands on it. In turn, this is a metaphor for the fluidity of Jewish identity. A yet more remarkable facet of Yiddish is that ‘it consists only of loan words’ (Fremdwörter), apparently possessing no identity of its own, as these words remain part of their original languages (‘German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavic, Dutch, Romanian, even Latin’) which somehow still all exist independently in Yiddish: ‘it takes a great deal of effort to keep these languages together in this state’ (BK: 150). All of Europe seems to be Yiddish and Yiddish all of Europe, united by linguistic difference. As usual with Kafka we have to peel away the textual layers to get at what he is really talking about. Here he is constructing a series of images of what it is like to be a Central European Jew. In his concluding remarks he taunts his audience to admit that they can understand Yiddish after all, even though they think they cannot, because ‘in you knowledge and energies and traces of energies are active which enable you to understand Yiddish with your feelings’ (BK: 152). In short, they will recognise themselves in the exotic performances, which they are about to see and hear from the Yiddish players. Once Yiddish has taken hold of them, they will not be able to understand their earlier contentedness; they will be afraid, not of Yiddish, but of themselves.

There is something of a paradox inherent in this definition of Jewish identity, as Jewishness could also be – and was more often – suffocating in its restrictiveness. If there was one thing which Kafka grew to hate more and more, it was the provincial, the narrowness of family and cultural background. He advises the young Minze Eisner to escape her background: ‘the world, the spiritual world above all, is much bigger than the accursed triangle, Teplitz–Karlsbad–Prague’ (Nov./Dec. 1920; B1: 281). This is why he sometimes hated his own Jewishness; it was stifling because all-encompassing. Against
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this was a sense of his own family’s internationalism, as through his relatives he was connected with much of the rest of the world. His mother’s brothers Joseph and Alfred Loewy had worked in Panama and the Congo, China and Canada, before settling in Paris; Alfred worked in Madrid as director of a railway company. As Anthony Northey has argued: ‘Both... offer classic examples of how Jews from modest backgrounds were able to advance themselves at the time of the great capitalist, colonial expansion.’

Where did Kafka himself fit in? He once said he was Chinese and also asked rhetorically what he should have in common with the Jews when he didn’t even have anything in common with himself. Karl Roßmann in The Man who Disappeared reflects on the question of his origins, comparing his new American environment with his Heimat or homeland more frequently than any other of Kafka’s characters. In the present context it is fascinating that he introduces himself as ‘a German from Bohemia’ (rather than an Austrian) but that he never refers to ‘Germany’, instead saying ‘Europe’ when meaning home. In the United States he is frequently thrown together with his fellow Europeans, including some from the empire, Austrians, Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians, and others from beyond, French, Italians, and Irish, whose untrustworthiness he has been warned about. While they are clearly distinguished from one another, their shared foreignness in the New World, that is their common cultural experience as Europeans, binds them together.

The Europe which Kafka knew changed once more in 1989 with the fall of Soviet Communism, precipitated in Czechoslovakia by the Velvet Revolution, which in turn led to the split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These great upheavals provide one reason for another book about Kafka, the greatest Czech author who did not write Czech. With the end of the Cold War ideologies are said to be in retreat, illustrated by Bill Dodd’s tentative considerations of Kafka’s own politics in chapter 8. Another reason to consider Kafka afresh is the new critical edition in German which has been appearing since the early 1980s and which has led already to new translations of the novels and short fiction – hence Osman Durrani’s chapter on the history of Kafka editions and translations. The chapters on film and popular culture testify to Kafka’s living legacy as his works and life are recreated and reinvented in a variety of media. While Anthony Northey debunks some of the myths surrounding perceptions of his life, he shows too what a potent icon or legend Kafka remains. But what I hope the following chapters show is that no justification for yet another book on Kafka is necessary because each new generation will always have something new to say about him. New light is cast on his texts by new trends in literary and cultural theory, just as new research continues to shed more light on his contexts. Kafka proves not only to have something to say on contemporary debates on gender and
identity, for instance, but to have already engaged with such questions in ways we are only beginning to appreciate.

NOTES

1. Magic Prague, pp. 20–1.

FURTHER READING

It is not always helpful to know what a writer thinks about the vocation and the act of writing, but in Kafka’s case it may be. It may help us to read him better. In letters and diaries he says many things about writing in general and about his own in particular which, illuminating in themselves, may also do a real service. They may alert us to the peculiarity of his novels and stories, and so to how we might best try to read them. Certainly, there is no key to Kafka, but just as certainly there are better and worse ways of reading him. Had I needed a motto, I could have looked to some bleakly courageous little sentences in Beckett’s *Worstward Ho*. They are: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’ They seem to me a noble epitaph for Kafka’s writing and a good injunction for our reading.

**Writing**

The premise is necessity. Writers have to write. They are not necessarily people to whom writing comes more easily than to others nor do they necessarily enjoy writing, in any usual sense of the word ‘enjoy’. They are people who have to write. Friedrich Hölderlin’s friend Christian Neuffer, who certainly thought of himself as a poet and wrote a great deal of verse, all of it bad, told Hölderlin one day that he was taking a break from poetry for a while – ‘hanging my harp up on the wall’ was his actual phrase. Hölderlin replied: ‘And that is fine, if you can do it without pangs of conscience. Your sense of yourself is founded on other worthwhile activities too, and so you are not annihilated if you are not a poet.’ Hölderlin knew he was ‘annihilated’ – *vernichtet*, made nothing – if he could not write poetry. And Tasso (Goethe’s at least) said:

> If I am not to ponder things and write poetry
> Then life to me will not be life at all.3

He compared himself to the silkworm, spinning the stuff out of his own body, and having no option, even if it killed him. Kafka’s was an extreme
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version of that necessity. And he further developed, to an extreme degree, the unhappy possibility contained in the image of the silkworm: that though life without writing was no life at all – he was vernichtet (annihilated) if he could not write – life with writing, in writing, was fatal also.

The premise is: Kafka had to write. And it is important to understand at the outset that the premise is thoroughly paradoxical. For the sake of his very life he had to do something harmful, possibly fatal to his life.

Along with necessity comes bad conscience. But why should you feel bad – blameworthy, guilty – about something you have to do? And yet very often and certainly in Kafka’s case writing brings bad conscience with it like its shadow.

There are two main reasons for Kafka’s bad conscience about his writing. The first is that whatever he writes and however well he writes it he feels that it could have come out better. He feels he is to blame that it didn’t come out better. And the second reason for his bad conscience lies in his always asking himself the question: however good the writing is, what good is it anyway? That question is fundamental. What justifies the activity which for him is a necessity? Being necessary doesn’t of itself amount to a justification.

Take the second reason first: Kafka has a bad conscience about his writing, however well he does it, he asks what good it is, because in his eyes much more apparent than any good is an immense harm, to himself and to anyone in close dealings with him. Kafka’s diaries and letters document ad nauseam the harm his writing does. He observes with morbid satisfaction the terrible specialization that, for him, being a writer entails: ‘Everything that isn’t litter-ature bores me and I hate it because it disturbs me or holds me up’ (TB2: 193). His personality has impoverished itself, to serve one purpose: writing:

It is easy to recognise in me a concentration on writing. When it became clear in the organism of myself that writing was the most fruitful direction my being could take then everything ran to that point and all my other capabilities, at first directed towards the pleasures of sex, drinking, philosophy, music, they were all left empty. In all those directions I became emaciated. That was necessary, because my powers in their sum total were so slight that only when gathered together could they even half serve the purpose of writing. (5.1.12; TB1: 264)

It is like the monstrous hypertrophy of one organ. I leave aside the question – though it needs asking – whether in Kafka it really was that bad and whether he appeared so deformed to other people. The diaries and letters are a sort of trying out the worst about himself, perhaps to exorcise it or as an act of apotropaic magic. But in that version of himself he is a person specialised to the point of deformity and incurable damage by his vocation. And his doubts and bad conscience about that vocation are inevitably nourished by