Chapter 1

Life

Recent years have seen the publication of two illuminating Kafka biographies. Both Peter-André Alt and Reiner Stach defy the cliché of Kafka as an unrecognized genius whose works bore little connection to his age.[1] Although Kafka's life was externally uneventful, it was shaped, at decisive points, by the political events of his time, which left traces in his writings, and he was a close observer of cultural developments and debates. What is more, Kafka was far from isolated. In Prague he was part of a tight-knit group of writers and intellectuals, and he was also well travelled. While only a fraction of his work was published during his lifetime, and he was certainly no bestselling author, Kafka was held in high esteem by leading writers and publishers of his day.

1883–1912: childhood, youth and first employment

Franz Kafka was born in Prague on 3 July 1883 as the oldest child of Hermann Kafka (1852–1931) and his wife, Julie, née Löwy (1856–1934). Hermann was the son of a Jewish butcher; one of six children, he grew up in great poverty in a small south Bohemian village. Julie's parents, in contrast, were well-off, and counted doctors, merchants and Talmudic scholars among their ancestors. Kafka's parents were very different in terms of their social background and character, but both were hardworking and ambitious. They had moved to Prague in the 1870s, and their economic success enabled them to have a comfortable lifestyle. Like many Jews of their generation, they were assimilated into mainstream society, adopting its liberal bourgeois values, which in turn distanced them from their religious roots and traditions.

Following Franz's birth in 1883, the Kafkas had two further sons, Georg and Heinrich, who both died in infancy (in 1886 and 1888); their deaths must have cast a shadow over Franz's early childhood. The Kafkas then had three daughters: Gabriele ('Elli', 1889–1942), Valerie ('Valli', 1890–1942) and Ottilie ('Ottla', 1892–1943), to whom Kafka was later particularly close. Hermann Kafka ran a haberdashery shop in central Prague. He was a successful but dominant businessman, whose choleric disposition affected his relations with his employees and his family. Franz, a quiet, sensitive child, found his father's temper hard to stomach. Materially, Franz had a comfortable childhood, but since his mother was busy helping his father in the shop, he was looked after mostly by a succession of nannies and later a French-speaking governess. Between 1895 and 1907 the family moved seven times, reflecting their growing prosperity.

The Kafkas brought their children up to speak German, the language of the aspirational Jewish middle classes. At school, Kafka was also taught French, Czech, Latin and Greek. In 1901, he matriculated at the Charles University in Prague to study chemistry. After just two weeks, he switched to law, a move no doubt intended to please his parents, but this subject did not really chime with his interests either. In the following semester, Kafka attended lectures on German literature and art history, and even considered studying literature in Munich. In the end, he unenthusiastically continued with his law degree, looking for intellectual stimulation outside his studies. At the talks, debates and readings arranged by the German student organisation he got to know his lifelong friend Max Brod, a fellow law student and budding writer. Brod introduced him to the blind writer Oskar Baum and the philosophy student Felix Weltsch; together they formed a reading group, the nucleus of what Brod would later call the 'Prague circle'. Between 1909 and 1911, Kafka went on journeys, mostly with Brod, which took him to Switzerland, Italy and Paris, to Weimar, Leipzig and Berlin.

Having struggled through his law exams, Kafka was awarded the doctorate in law with the lowest pass mark in 1906. His first post, after a year of gaining professional experience in the Prague courts, was with the Prague branch of a Trieste-based insurance company. Frustrated with the long hours and menial pay, however, Kafka moved to the state-run Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in 1908, where he would remain until his early retirement in 1922. In his new role he processed insurance claims and was involved in accident prevention by inspecting working conditions on-site. Among the main attractions of the new post were its hours. Kafka had to work from only 8 am to 2 pm, leaving him time to pursue his literary ambitions, although he still regarded his insurance post as a great distraction from writing. His at times humorous, at times desperate complaints about his day job are a

recurring theme in his letters and diaries – and yet Kafka was a dedicated and able employee. The articles and reports he wrote for the Institute show his stylistic flair, as well as his expert knowledge and passionate commitment to workers' safety. Indeed, Kafka was greatly valued by both the Austrian and the subsequent Czech directorship. He started off in a modest position but quickly rose through the ranks and was treated with respect and generosity by his superiors, particularly during his later illness.

1912–1917: breakthrough, intimacy and crisis

By 1912, Kafka's professional career was well established. He still lived with his parents, as was customary for unmarried sons and daughters at the time, and although he had indulged in a few romantic dalliances and the occasional brothel visit – a common pastime for young men of his class – he had not been in a serious relationship. Encouraged by Brod, Kafka kept a diary, which was meant to give him regular writing practice, as well as fuel for his literary imagination. He had written two novel fragments and had published a few short stories in newspapers and magazines. Upon Brod's introduction, Kafka met the Leipzig-based publisher Kurt Wolff, who agreed to publish a volume of his short stories, *Meditation*. In August 1912, while putting the finishing touches to *Meditation*, Kafka met Felice Bauer, a successful career woman from Berlin, who worked in a firm making office equipment. It took Kafka over a month to write to Felice, but once the correspondence was underway, it quickly became more intimate. Kafka and Felice exchanged hundreds of letters, though only Kafka's side of the correspondence has survived. During the five years of their relationship, they met infrequently and, given Kafka's work commitments, often for just a few hours, although in 1916 they spent a few precious days alone together in the spa town of Marienbad.

Kafka's initial elation soon gave way to growing doubt – doubt about Felice's ability to understand his literary vocation, but also about his own suitability for married life. In tortured, self-accusing letters he tried to convince her that he would not make a suitable husband. In one famous letter he outlines his ideal mode of existence, which would be to sit 'in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp' (14–15 January 1913; *LF* 156/*B2* 40); only in such complete isolation, he believed, would he be able to realize his creative potential. Initially, Felice was undeterred by Kafka's self-imposed asceticism, and in May 1914 they got engaged in Berlin; only two months later, however, she dissolved the engagement. A few months later Kafka and Felice resumed contact, and in August 1917 they renewed their engagement (see Fig. 1).

1 Kafka and Felice Bauer in Budapest (July 1917)

Shortly afterwards Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis and ended the engagement for good.

The relationship with Felice was Kafka's most difficult, but also his most formative, in both personal and creative terms. The day after he sent off his first letter to Berlin, he wrote the short story 'The Judgement', his literary breakthrough. In the five years between 1912 and 1917, Kafka produced two novels, as well as some of his most famous short stories. A close comparison between these prose works and Kafka's letters reveals many cross-connections; the extensive correspondence with Felice, which shared the same nocturnal space as his creative writing, was a source of inspiration and a space for self-reflection.

When the First World War broke out in August 1914, Kafka wrote in his diary, 'Germany has declared war on Russia. – Swimming in the afternoon' (2 August 1914; *D* 301/*TB* 543). This laconic entry is often cited as evidence of Kafka's political indifference, but it conceals a more complex story. That summer, Kafka had been preparing to radically change his life; he wanted to leave his insurance post and move to Berlin or Munich as a freelance writer. The war put an end to this plan. Although Kafka was put off by the military parades and patriotic speeches, in 1916 he made a determined effort to enlist, which was thwarted by his boss at the Insurance Institute, who insisted that he was indispensable at work. Kafka was furious and even threatened to resign; in a letter to Felice, he wrote that 'it would be my good fortune to become a soldier' (3 May 1915; *LF* 493/*B1* 133). Through the first-hand accounts of eastern Jewish refugees, his brothers-in-law and the many injured soldiers who descended on the Insurance Institute, Kafka must have had a clear sense of the gruesome reality of the war. So why was he so keen to enlist? As Kafka's biographer, Reiner Stach, argues, his desire to become a soldier was driven not by naïve patriotism but by a more basic motive – his urge to escape from the deadening routine of daily life, at whatever cost.[2]

1917–1924: illness, reflection, late happiness

Another major turning point in Kafka's life was the outbreak of the illness that would eventually kill him. In August 1917, he suffered a nocturnal haemorrhage; although he immediately suspected the worst, it took several months until he was formally diagnosed with tuberculosis. Faced with this situation, Kafka made some radical changes. Not only did he end the relationship with Felice Bauer, but he took a six-month break from work, during which he lived with his sister Ottla in the north Bohemian village of Zürau. During this time,

he produced the so-called Zürau aphorisms – short, reflective pieces which marked a shift away from narrative fiction.

In the summer of 1919, Kafka got engaged again, this time to the twenty-seven-year-old Julie Wohryzek, the daughter of a Czech-Jewish synagogue servant. Kafka's parents tried to sabotage the match by hiring a private detective, who uncovered compromising stories about Julie's past, but in the end their marriage plans fell through for a more trivial reason: two days before the wedding, they failed to secure a joint flat and decided to postpone the wedding. Their relationship then became less close and eventually fell apart when, in the spring of 1920, Kafka met the Czech journalist and translator Milena Jesenská. Milena, who lived in Vienna, had translated Kafka's 'The Stoker' into Czech. She had married the Jewish literary critic Ernst Pollack against her father's will, but the marriage was on shaky grounds, and soon she and Kafka entered into an intense and passionate correspondence. On his way back from a spa break in Meran, Kafka spent four happy days with Milena in Vienna. She told her husband about the affair, but Kafka soon grew distant, seeing no future for the relationship.

Kafka's final – and arguably happiest – relationship was with the twenty-five-year-old Dora Diamant, whom he met in the summer of 1923 while on holiday in Müritz on the Baltic coast. Dora, who had broken away from her ultra-orthodox Hasidic family in Poland, worked for a Jewish holiday camp and was a member of a Zionist organization promoting the Hebrew language. She became Kafka's companion during the final stages of his illness. In the autumn of 1923, Kafka took the momentous step of moving away from Prague to live with Dora in Berlin. It was a happy and productive time, although high inflation devalued Kafka's pension and made their financial situation extremely strained. They relied on food parcels from Prague, and because of his declining health Kafka was increasingly tied to their flat. In March 1924, he was forced to leave Berlin and return home. At a clinic in Vienna it was confirmed that his tuberculosis had spread to the larynx.

Kafka spent his final weeks first in a sanatorium in Ortmann in Lower Austria and then in the quiet village of Kierling near Klosterneuburg. There he was initially able to undertake some excursions, but then his health quickly deteriorated. Talking, swallowing and breathing became a torture that was alleviated only by morphine injections. Kafka had been instructed not to talk (a common but pointless therapeutic measure at the time) and thus communicated with Dora and his friend Robert Klopstock in writing. In a letter, he asked Dora's father for permission to marry her, which was declined. He received visits from Max Brod, his sister Ottla, his brother-in-law Karl Hermann and his uncle Siegfried Löwy. In a poignantly optimistic letter written on the day before his death, he asked his parents to postpone their

visit; its last sentence reads: 'So shall we not let it ride for the present, dear parents?' (2 June 1924; *LFFE* 415/*BE* 82). On 3 June, Kafka's breathing became so laboured that he asked Klopstock, a medicine student, for an overdose of morphine, allegedly saying to him: 'Kill me or else you're a murderer.' Kafka died on 3 June 1924 at around midday, with Dora by his side. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Straschnitz near Prague.

Chapter 2

Contexts

Like any writer, Kafka was influenced by his cultural, intellectual and political context. In his diaries and letters he often reflects on events and encounters; the resonances of these experiences in the fiction are subtler and less direct, which has led to the persistent cliché of Kafka as a solipsistic writer whose works bear little relation to their historical context. In the sections that follow, I will single out three configurations which shaped Kafka's life and times, outlining both the general situation and their specific, personal implications.

The modern city: avant-garde, mass culture, pathology

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid social change, technological modernization and artistic innovation. There was an unprecedented explosion of literary movements, and 'modernism' is at best an umbrella term for a variety of co-existing avant-garde movements. Expressionism, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Dadaism and Futurism pursued contrasting and often conflicting agendas, but they all marked a move away from the tenets of realism and Naturalism, which had dominated the literature of the nineteenth century. Now the focus was no longer on the close, quasi-scientific observation of outside reality but on the depiction of inner states and psychological processes, of fantasies, dreams and desires. At the same time, the texts written around 1900 express a deep sense of crisis – the crisis of the individual lost in an increasingly complex, fragmented world, but also a crisis of language. Many modernist writers and thinkers, including the Austrian authors Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Robert Musil, questioned the ability of language – which by its nature is bound by conventions – to express authentic feelings

and experiences. This led to a revived interest in mysticism as a way of overcoming the boundaries of the self and the rational limitations of human existence.

At the other end of the spectrum, the early twentieth century saw the emergence of urban mass culture: of music halls, variety theatres and, most importantly, of the cinema. Writing in the 1920s, German critic Siegfried Kracauer described these places of mass entertainment as 'temples of distraction', where office workers sought escape from the monotony of their daily lives as well as from a more existential sense of spiritual homelessness.

As Kracauer's comment implies, city life had its critics as well as its advocates. The many people who flocked to the city from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards were attracted primarily by its economic opportunities. Cities were great melting pots, facilitating social mobility and a gradual move towards greater equality in terms of class, gender and religion. In the early 1900s, women started to take up paid employment in larger numbers, particularly in offices. This brought with it more liberal attitudes towards sexual relationships, although bourgeois family structures generally remained intact, as did traditional moral values.

Compared with life in a village or small town, however, where the individual is part of a tight-knit community, cities are crowded, sprawling and anonymous; and often anonymity goes hand in hand with a lack of privacy, with a sense of exposure to the intrusive gaze of others. Many people found the thrill of the city irresistible, and many writers were inspired by the speed and excitement of urban life, but this aspect was also criticized and even pathologized. One of the buzzwords of the period was neurasthenia, a term coined by the American psychiatrist George M. Beard in his book *American Nervousness* (1880). Neurasthenia denotes a kind of nervous weakness, which manifests itself as general listlessness but also as a heightened, pathological sensitivity towards (urban) stimuli and impressions.

However, not everyone saw these developments as intrinsically negative. One of the first critics to analyse the social and psychological repercussions of the city was the German sociologist Georg Simmel. In his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', he argues that the 'swift and continuous shift and external and internal stimuli' brings about an 'intensification of mental life', training the city-dweller to interact with people and things in a purely rational manner untainted by emotion.[1] Simmel praises this shift as an opportunity to break away from old modes of experience and adapt to the demands of the modern 'money economy', an abstract system of circulation and exchange. His findings are echoed, in more negative terms, by Max Weber, another founding

father of modern sociology. Weber describes modern society as 'disenchanted' and dominated by the principles of rationality and efficiency. In his seminal study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), Weber argues that modern capitalism is in fact infused with Protestant values, which require individuals to forsake all worldly pleasures in order to dedicate themselves to economic success – a sign of God's grace. In modern capitalism, this Protestant concern for material wealth has turned into a 'shell as hard as steel' without a spiritual core.[2] Unlike his Protestant predecessor, modern 'bureaucratic man' lacks an inner sense of moral guidance and is hence solely dependent on the rules provided from the outside, by political institutions and other organisations.

Kafka's writings echo the sociological theories of the time. Many of his texts, such as *The Man who Disappeared*, revel in the fast pace of the city while also illustrating the danger of sensory overload, of the endless succession of disparate stimuli, which cannot be processed or unified. Josef K., in *The Trial*, embodies the ruthless striving for economic success described by Weber, which comes to supplant all other (moral) concerns. However, in his personal life Kafka sought to distance himself from the strains of modernity. Although he enjoyed city life – he was an enthusiastic cinema-goer – he was deeply attracted to the idea of a simpler, rural life. He intermittently did gardening work in a nursery outside Prague, and in 1917–18 he spent several months with his sister Ottla, who ran a farm in the Bohemian village of Zürau. As a reaction to the pressures of city life and industrialization, various alternative health movements emerged in the early twentieth century, ranging from vegetarianism and naturism to the promotion of looser, healthier clothing (especially for women) and different exercise regimes. Kafka was a vegetarian and followed a particular eating method known as Fletcherizing, whereby each mouthful was to be chewed thirty-two times. In addition, he rowed and swam and kept up a daily routine of gymnastic exercises. This healthy lifestyle notwithstanding, Kafka suffered from states of nervous exhaustion for most of his adult life, and long before he was diagnosed with tuberculosis he spent his vacations in sanatoriums, seeking to restore his strength.

Psychoanalysis and intergenerational conflict

Sociology was one of the formative discourses around 1900; another was psychoanalysis. Its founder, the Viennese doctor Sigmund Freud, set out to explore psychological processes and dynamics and the way the psyche is in turn shaped by external, familial and societal structures.