

## Kafka in Prague

Foreign tourists who visit Prague would be forgiven for thinking that the city's literary tradition starts and ends with Franz Kafka. His image is everywhere, from T-shirts and mugs to statues and plaques outside the numerous places he lived in or frequented – and there are two museums dedicated to him, too. Kafka was born on July 3 1883 in Josefov, the former Jewish ghetto, in a house on the corner of Kaprova and Maiselova, a stone's throw from the Old Town Square. His parents were German-speaking Jews; they sent young Franz to be educated in the German-speaking gymnasium that occupied the Kinský Palace on the Old Town Square. Kafka's father maintained a haberdashery shop on the ground floor of the same building, with a jackdaw painted next to his name, a sly reference to the word "Kavka" meaning "jackdaw" in Czech – although Kafka's surname is in fact a Hebrew or Yiddish version of "son of James" and is not derived from a Czech word. Kafka later studied in the German medium part of the Charles University – first chemistry, and then law – and it was while studying at the university that he met his future editor and biographer Max Brod. After graduating as a Doctor of Law Kafka found work as a clerk at the Workers' Accident Insurance Company, which occupied a neo-Baroque pile at the corner of Wenceslas Square and Jindřišská (the firm's name remains above the entrance to this day).

During his fifteen years working in insurance Kafka began publishing short stories in the periodical *Hyperion*. Later on in 1912 he wrote *Metamorphosis*, and two years later he began work on his famous novel *The Trial*. During this time Kafka frequented cafés in the Lesser Quarter and salons in the Old Town (in one of which, the White Unicorn, he once heard Einstein speak) and lived for a time in the Golden Lane (Zlatá ulička) within the walls of Prague Castle, which was at that time a slum but which is now a kitsch row of cottage-like souvenir shops. He also rented an apartment in a building in the Lesser Quarter that is now the US embassy, where he went down with the first bout of the tuberculosis that was eventually to kill him. In 1922 ill health forced him to resign from his job in insurance and he began moving between the spa towns of Europe seeking a cure for his condition. He died two years later at the age of forty in a sanatorium near Vienna and is buried in the New Jewish Cemetery in the Prague suburb of Žižkov. Kafka left Max Brod instructions to burn his papers after his death – which Brod disobeyed, preserving a mass of letters, drawings and other works that have been poured over by scholars ever since.

Kafka was a German speaker amongst Czechs and a Jew amongst Catholics, and perhaps it comes as no surprise that the theme of alienation runs through his work: it is of course most clearly seen in *Metamorphosis*, in which the salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find that he "had been transformed in his bed into an enormous insect". Kafka's most famous works, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, provide a portrayal of an individual alienated not because he has turned into an insect but because he has become trapped within a pernicious, secretive and persecuting bureaucracy. (These books in particular made for unsettling reading for both the Nazi and the Communist authorities, and were banned by both regimes.) In *The Trial* the protagonist Josef K is arrested for no apparent reason and plunged into a nightmare world where he is hopelessly subordinated to the workings of a legal machine of which he has no understanding. In *The Castle* an individual turns up in a

village to take up a post as a land surveyor – yet no land needs to be surveyed, no-one can explain to him what he is there to do, and none of his questions are answered.

Although Kafka's name is indissolubly bound up with Prague it is hard to find much more than oblique references to the city in his fiction; the closest he comes to actually setting a work in Prague is a little-known story entitled *Description of a Struggle*. However in *The Trial* there are plenty of sly allusions to a city and setting that might be Prague. The building where Josef K works is probably the Workers' Accident Insurance Building, and the bridge that he crosses on his way to his execution bears a passing resemblance to the Charles Bridge. The novel is set, too, partly amidst "uphill streets" (of the Lesser Quarter, perhaps) and a section takes place in a cathedral (St Vitus') where the "silver statue of a saint" might well be the tomb of St John of Nepomuk. The "huddle of village houses" in the Castle of the novel also bears a striking resemblance to the houses along the Golden Lane. For a more overt account of Prague one has to turn to Kafka's letters and diaries rather than his novels. He clearly had an ambivalent relationship with the city, although he wrote to one friend that his flat above the Old Town Square provided "the most beautiful setting that has ever been seen on this earth."

Of the two Kafka museums in Prague the one in the house of his birth is the smallest – consisting of just a single room – but a more elaborate museum has also been established in the Lesser Quarter, beside the river. Both suffer from the fact that Kafka left very few artefacts behind, and even the letters and other documents on show in the museums are facsimiles, as the originals tend to be held by specialist libraries. As a result both museums essentially provide portraits of Prague during Kafka's lifetime, and struggle to find anything substantial to say about the man himself. The one in the Lesser Quarter tries hard, though, and is full of winding passageways of indeterminate direction, giving visitors a sense of being trapped within one of the famously oppressive settings of the writer's novels.

