

FOOTSTEPS | PRAGUE

On the Trail of Kafka's Legacy

Looking to uncover the inspiration behind one of the writer's greatest works.

By DAVID FARLEY

When I awoke one recent morning in Prague from unsettling dreams, I found myself changed into a tourist on a mission. Changed, anyway, from the traveler I had been when I lived in Prague for three years in the 1990s. Back then, whatever associations I had between the city and the writer Franz Kafka, a native son, were negative. I loathed the commercialization of Kafka, his face scrawled across coffee mugs and T-shirts in souvenir shops, his name emblazoned on awnings of Old Town cafes and restaurants.

Yet there was always something nagging at me about never having explored the Kafka trail in Prague, an integral part of the city's cultural history. On top of that, Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis," in which the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, finds himself transformed into a bug, was first published in book form this month a century ago.

And so, I thought, what better time to finally explore the writer and the city with which he is inextricably intertwined. In doing so I'd talk to a fairly diverse group of people about how this city may have influenced his most famous piece of writing — and how it may have shaped the famously tortured writer himself.

Once while standing at a window at the Oppelt House at Old Town Square 5, Kafka looked out at the square and said, "This narrow circle encompasses my entire life." He wasn't exaggerating, as I found out on a tour I'd booked through the Franz Kafka Society. The guide, Ondrej Skrabal, a 23-year-old law student, showed me the building where Kafka was born (or, rather, the building that replaced it), and from there we hit what felt like a dozen other places he had resided — so much so that it became overwhelming. "That far left window on the third floor," Mr. Skrabal said, pointing to another building on Old Town Square and pausing. "Yes, Kafka lived there too."

We passed by a shop his father owned and stopped to take in the intriguing Franz Kafka Monument (where Dusni and Vezenska Streets meet in Old Town), a 12-foot-high bronze statue of an upright empty suit with a smaller man — bearing the resemblance of Kafka — riding on his shoulders. It's a popular photo op among tourists, and a 12-inch version of it is the literary award that the Franz Kafka Society gives to winners of the annual Kafka Prize.

Aside from the statue, my Kafka tour wasn't proving to be particularly memorable. But then we got to Kamzikova 6, a building in a small hidden alley located just off Old Town Square. The building housed a restaurant called U Cerveného Pava, At the Red Peacock, and a Segway rental shop aimed at Russian tourists. "Here," Mr. Skrabal said, pointing to the door, "was a high-class brothel and Kafka regularly came here to chat with the girls."

"You mean 'chat'?" I said, using air quotes. "No, really, Kafka was interested in all types of people, and he really did come here to have philosophical discussions with the prostitutes."

The one Kafka home Mr. Skrabal didn't take me to was Parizska 30, where the writer lived when he wrote "The Metamorphosis" — that building was destroyed in 1945; today, an InterContinental Hotel stands in its place. "The Metamorphosis" takes place entirely in an apartment and Kafka scholars have said the writer used his fourth-floor apartment at the time as a model for the one in the story.

I wasn't staying at the hotel, so I took the elevator to the rooftop restaurant, Zlata Praha. From the outdoor terrace, with the Gothic and Baroque spires of Old Town at my back, I looked down at Svatopluk Cech Bridge, an Art Nouveau span that would have been only a few years old when the writer lived there. This was, more or less, Kafka's view from 1907 to 1913. In a letter to a friend, he wrote about the then-new bridge, saying that this part of the Vltava River had been popular for suicide attempts: "It will always be more pleasant to walk across the bridge up to the Belvedere than through the river to Heaven."

Another important Kafka site that is now a hotel is the erstwhile insurance office where Kafka worked from 1908 to 1922; he complained in his diary that a company business trip was the reason the ending of "The Metamorphosis" was so unsatisfying. Today the neo-Baroque building is the Hotel Century Old Town Prague, which has some not-so-subtle Kafka references: a bust of the writer in the lobby; a restaurant named after one of his fiancées, Felice; and, just outside of Room 214, a photo of the writer and a plaque indicating it had once been his office.

I had hoped to stay in Kafka's former office, but it was booked. So I went with plan B: sneak up to the second floor to get a peek at the room. I got to the door and saw the plaque and photo; I considered knocking on the door, but it was 8 a.m. and I didn't want to disturb its occupants.

I stopped into the Franz Kafka Museum, in the Mala Strana neighborhood, hoping to find a treasure trove of "Metamorphosis" artifacts and information. The self-guided tour provided an entertaining and educational hour on the writer, but there wasn't much about his most famous story.

A couple of days later I turned to the Franz Kafka Society Center, situated behind the Franz Kafka Bookstore in Josefov. "Many Czechs were unfamiliar with Kafka until recently," Marketa Malisova, the center's director, said, explaining that his writing was banned during the German occupation of World War II and then became unpopular after the war because of anti-German sentiment (Kafka was a Czech Jew who wrote in German). "And then there's the Communist period," she said. "Because he foretold the tyranny that was to come, the Communist regime didn't exactly promote his writing."

It wasn't until after the 1989 Velvet Revolu-



Franz Kafka
The author and his city were in inextricably intertwined.



Clockwise from top left: Red-tiled houses line a canal in the city; view that Kafka used to have from his old apartment (the building was destroyed in 1945), now the InterContinental Hotel; another view Kafka would have had, of the Svatopluk Cech Bridge. The Franz Kafka Bookstore. Jaroslav Rona's Franz Kafka Monument. The building on the site where Franz Kafka was born. David Cerny's sculpture of Kafka's head.

IF YOU GO

WHAT TO SEE

Located in Mala Strana, the **Franz Kafka Museum** (Cihelna 2b; 420-257-535-373; kfkamuseum.cz) is a good primer for those not familiar with the author and his work.

The **Franz Kafka Society** (Siroka 14, 420-224-227-452; www.franzkafka-soc.cz) is a bookstore and center dedicated to the writer. You can also book private Kafka-themed tours through them.

JayWay Travel (jaywaytravel.com) offers tours of Kafka's Prague, taking literary travelers from his birthplace to his grave site and everywhere else in between.

Founded in 2001 by artist David Cerny, the **MeetFactory** (Ke Sklarne 3213/15; 420-251-551-796; meetfactory.cz/en) is a complex that puts on live concerts and art exhibitions.

Mr. Cerny's Kafka art installation is behind the Tesco department store at the intersection of Narodni Trida and Spalena streets.

Jaroslav Rona's Franz Kafka Memorial statue sits in Prague's Old Town at the intersection of Dusni and Vezenska streets.

WHERE TO STAY

The **InterContinental Prague** (Parizska 30; 420-296-631-111; icprague.com) is centrally located and offers nice views of Old Town and Prague Castle.

In the erstwhile Workers Accident Insurance Institute of Kingdom of Bohemia, where Kafka worked, the **Hotel Century Old Town** (Na Porici 7; 420-221-800-800; centuryoldtown.com) is situated just outside of Old Town.

WHERE TO EAT

A former Kafka hangout, **Café Louvre** (Narodni 22, 420-224-930-949; cafeLouvre.cz) has been serving up coffee and cake for over a century.

tion when tourists from Western Europe and the United States began turning up wanting to see the Kafka-related sites that Czechs recognized the writer's importance. "I met a local guy here in Prague in the early '90s," Ms. Malisova said, "who asked, 'Who is this Kafka guy? Is he American? I only see American tourists with Kafka T-shirts.'"

Just before I said goodbye to Ms. Malisova, she pulled out a book in a plastic container. It was a first printing of "The Metamorphosis"; on its cover was the image of an open bedroom door, a man looking away and covering his face in horror.

Kafka was quite vague about what kind of insect or beast Gregor Samsa had metamorphosed into. He specifically used the phrase "ungeheuren Ungeziefer," a "monstrous vermin," as some of his English-language translators have interpreted it.

"Not that, please, not that!" he wrote in a letter to his Leipzig-based publisher in 1915, reacting to a potential cover to the book's very first edition. "The insect itself cannot be drawn. It cannot even be shown at a distance."

That hasn't stopped readers from conjuring up images of the protagonist as a beetle or cockroach. This includes the infamous Czech artist David Cerny. I met him one day at the MeetFactory, an art center in the Smi-

chov district where he has his studio. Prague is sprinkled with provocative pieces by Mr. Cerny — a sculpture of a urinating man (directly in front of the Franz Kafka Museum), a statue of the Czech patron saint King Wenceslas sitting on an upside down dead horse. His most recent installation in Prague is a sculpture of Kafka's head, set behind the Tesco department store in the center of town. The 36-foot-high head is made up of 42 moving chrome-plated layers, which move both in synchronicity and in opposing directions.

Mr. Cerny's original idea was a fountain featuring three figures: a robot, referencing the Czech-language writer Karel Capek, who coined the term; a Golem, representing the Yiddish language; and Kafka's beetle, referring to the German language. "I wanted to remind people that Prague was once a city of three languages," Mr. Cerny said. Unfortunately, city water regulations prevented him from placing a fountain there, so instead he came up with the huge reflecting Kafka head, which is based on similar work of his on display in Charlotte, N.C., called "Metamorphosis."

"I loved the irony that this sculpture faces a city government building in Prague," he said. "Imagine you're angry because the clerks are doing nothing, only saying for you to go to another office and then another

office and another until finally you hear, 'This office is closed.' And then you walk out of the building, and there's the huge head of Kafka looking at you, reminding you of the irony."

A similar irony is not lost on Jachym Topol, the author of five novels and a political dissident in the 1970s and '80s. I briefly met up with him at a literary festival in Prague and when I mentioned Kafka, he was happy to talk up what Kafka means today. "During the Communist regime we used to make samizdat copies of Kafka's works such as 'The Metamorphosis,'" he said. "And now, along with the Charles Bridge and the castle, Kafka has become a part of Prague kitsch. He's everywhere and he's for sale everywhere. It's his last joke."

Latent jokes seemed to come up with nearly everyone I talked to about the writer, including Jaroslav Rona, the artist who created the Franz Kafka Monument — the statue of the writer riding atop an empty suit — at Café Louvre, an attractive high-ceilinged second-floor spot where Kafka would hang out with his writer friend Max Brod.

Mr. Rona's first attempt at creating a sculpture for the competition to win the right to design the memorial was, naturally, a beetle. The final concept was inspired by a Kafka short story called "Description of a Struggle" — though it turns out that he inserted quasi-hidden references to "Metamorphosis" as well.

"All the other pieces in the competition were basically Kafka on a pedestal. But what I did was, after reading 'The Metamorphosis,' I realized something about Kafka's thinking: I love art where it isn't obvious what the artist is thinking," he said. "And I think this was Kafka's philosophy too — not only in 'The Metamorphosis,' but in a lot of his writing. So I used that same type of thinking to create the monument to Kafka."

I asked about possible "Metamorphosis" allusions. He smiled playfully and glanced down at his cappuccino. "I couldn't imagine making a monument to Kafka without some kind of reference to 'The Metamorphosis,'" he said. "So I planted a somewhat secret reference to it."

After our meeting, I walked to the statue and took a closer look at the base of the statue. And there, as I stood among the photosnapping tourists, I saw on the sidewalk around the base the outline of a beetle.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ILVY NJOKIKTIJEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES