

PRAGERISH ATMOSPHERE

By

Helena Karasova

German and Political Science
Senior Honors Project 2003

First reader: Dr. Silvia Anna Rode

Second reader: Dr. Keith Yanner

To my grandmother Vilma

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Senior Honors Project advisor, Dr. Silvia Rode, very much for inspiring me to work on this project. Dr. Rode was always eager to answer any of my questions and always showed a lot of enthusiasm while working with me on my thesis. I also thank my second reader, Dr. Keith Yanner, for all of his support and advice.

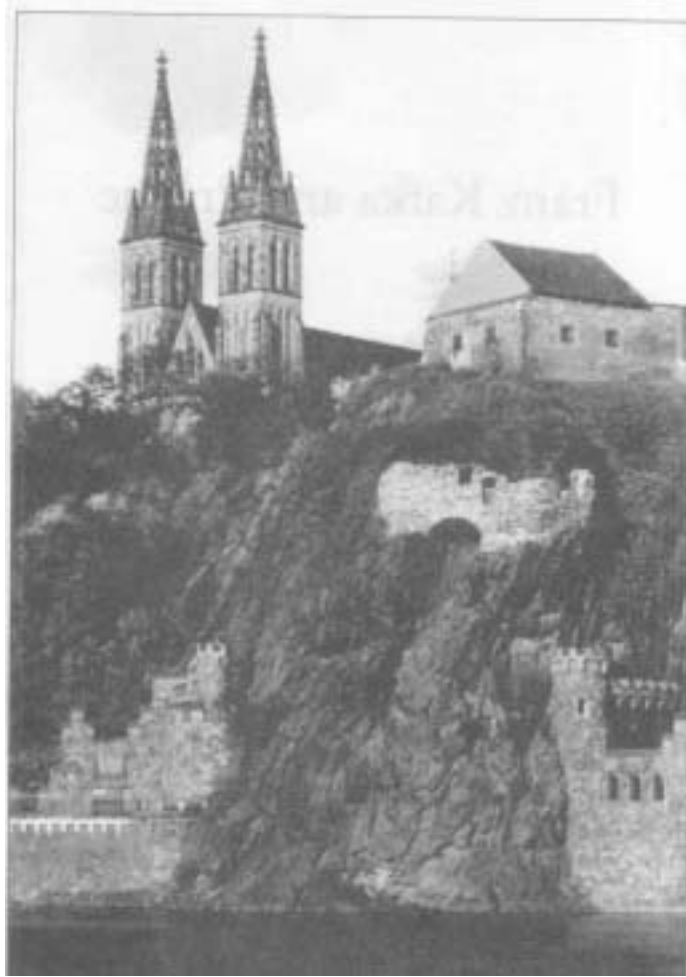
Many thanks go to Ms. Linda Blatt, the Director of the Central College Center of Academic Excellence, for spending a lot of time correcting my English grammar. Many thanks go also to Ms. Jan Webber for teaching me various erudite English terms I was able to use in my paper.

I also thank my dear friends, Amela Zdionica and Annalese Racheter, very much for all of their help. Both of them helped me retype my thesis after my computer decided to delete a large portion of it.

Lastly, I thank my Czech and my Californian family for all of their love and support. Both families always stand by me.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Pragerish Atmosphere	9
Pragerish Jew	27
Pragerish Cityscape	34
Conclusion	40
Works Cited	41



**“To get out of Prague. The most severe human injury that has ever befallen me, to act with the strongest antidote at my command.”
From Franz Kafka’s diaries (9.3.1914)**

INTRODUCTION

Prague does not let go. Neither of us. This mother has claws. One must get into line or-. We must set it on fire in two places, at Vysehrad and at the Castle, then we just might be able to get away. (Salflellner 4)

Prague, the capital of the current Czech Republic, my home country, truly possesses a magical power that catches the heart of anybody who has ever lived or visited there: this power has also caught me by its inimitable atmosphere. That explains why I decided to devote my senior honors thesis to Prague, the city which has always been very close to my heart.

Prague underwent many significant changes throughout its existence. Each political, social, cultural, and architectural change contributed to shaping its ambivalent atmosphere. One of the most ambivalent times throughout the existence of Prague was the time between 1890 and 1920. Those years represented an extremely exciting and controversial time characterized by the changeover of political power from the German-speaking Habsburg Monarchy to the Czech nationals.

Between 1620 and 1890, the Bohemian capital, Prague, represented one of the most important territories of the Habsburg Monarchy where every educated “Prager,” the members of the middle and upper strata, spoke German. During the 1890’s, the Czech nationals began protesting against the Habsburg rule. As the Czechs gained more political power, the power of the German-speaking elite was destabilized. At the same time, the Czech language, the language of the lower social class, won more prestige.

In 1918, Czechs became officially free from the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy’s rule and, suddenly, Prague was supposed to symbolize the purest form of what it meant to be “Czech.” But what did it mean for German-speaking Jewish intellectuals to live in

Prague between the 1890' and 1920's? Did these German-speaking Jewish intellectuals try to assimilate with the Czechs as they became stronger politically or did they consider themselves Germans because their mother tongue was German? How did these German-speaking Jewish intellectuals perceive the atmosphere of Prague?

In my paper, I argue that these questions can be answered by analyzing the “city picture” through the lenses of the literary work of the two most influential German-speaking Prague Jewish intellectuals, Franz Kafka and Franz Werfel. Why? Because both of them were children of the ambivalent atmosphere of Prague between 1890 and 1920: the city burgeoning as a result of technological progress, but also the city of bitter social and ethnic turmoil. Both of them grew up in Prague as German-speaking Jewish male intellectuals whose notions were shaped by the spirit of the Prague they knew. And it is these notions they revealed in their work.

While much research has been devoted primarily to studying psychoanalytical studies of Kafka's and Werfel's life experiences, my research will not focus on their biographies. Rather, I will use their fiction as the main source for limning the picture of the ambivalent atmosphere of Prague as both authors depicted it.

Specifically, I will use the following novels: Kafka's *The Castle* and Werfel's *The Pure in Heart*. Both novels will be used as a historical source of social and esthetic materials that reveal the essence of the ambivalent atmosphere of Prague between 1890 and 1920. In addition, I will draw on sources such as newspapers, photographs, and a personal interview with one of the “Kafkologs,” Dr. Josef Cermak (see Works Cited).

In other words, my research methodology will be based on the theory of *New Historicism* because

[I]t gives scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, politics, literature and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of non-interference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's practical lives—matters best left, prevailing wisdom went to experts who could be trusted to preserve orders and stability in our 'global' and intellectual domain. (Vesser ix)

Further, as Anton Kaes, one of the representatives of the *New Historicism*, states

[I]t is precisely the fictive, ... that follows for ambiguity, complexity and contradictions. Fiction can suggest, manipulate and toy with solutions that outside of the institution of literature would be dismissed as impractical, miraculous, criminal, or insane.

Literary works can thus be seen as social documents that intervene in the material world through their form; they display embody, and allegorize the social tensions of an historical moment in a polyphonic and contradictory way. They can invoke the spirit of subversion and rebellion only to contain it again in the end. (Kaes 213)

In accordance with Anton Kaes, in my paper, I will answer the following questions: What characterized the spirit of Prague's subversion and rebellion between 1890 and 1920?

What was the city like during that time?

PRAGERISH ATMOSPHERE

Once, it was a city that possessed three spirits. And it was these spirits that lived next to each other. And it was these spirits that fought and judged each other. And it was these spirits that lived together. And it was these spirits that enriched and fructified each others' lives. It was the Czech, German and Jewish spirits that represented the tangible embodiment of the ambivalence of the city of Prague. It was these three spirits that created an unholy trinity of the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the "Pragerish" atmosphere. What languages did the children of the "Pragerish" atmosphere, the Prague citizens, use? What role did the various languages play in their lives?

In order to comprehend the circumstances of the tensions among the Germans, Czechs, and Jews who lived in Prague between 1890 and 1920, one ought to be familiar with the basics of the history of the city. Prague, the Bohemian capital, belonged to one of the main political and cultural centers of the German-speaking Habsburg Monarchy, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, between 1620 and 1918. Consequently, the Prague intelligentsia, government employees, and all of the businessmen were identified as German, using the German language as their main communication device especially between 1620 and 1848 (Cohen 1-20).

During the years following 1848, Prague, an increasingly industrialized city, underwent a great influx of Czechs (Bohemians and Moravians), offering them better job opportunities than those in their home villages. Naturally, the Czechs did not bring with them only their food, music, and traditions, but also their own Slavic language, Czech.

As the number of Czech people living in Prague kept increasing, the sense of their ethnic identity grew as well. Suddenly, the Czechs wanted to see “their own” people among the “ruling strata.” By the 1880’s, one could not find one German among the members of the municipal government (Cohen 10). It was a time characterized by the gradual changeover of power from the German-speaking Habsburg Monarchy to the Czech-speaking nationals, as depicted in Cohen’s *The Politics of Ethnic Survival*:

Whoever has grown up in Prague and has memories will readily grant that this is a symptom of the general situation of the Germans in the Bohemian capital. Decades ago it was a German city, where only the lowest classes of the population dared express themselves in Czech... Now the times are long since gone when every educated Prager naturally spoke German, when it would have been unheard of for any army officer to speak in Czech.

While previously the great German capital was exclusively in the hands of the Germans, Czech banks have also come into existence in recent years. Whoever strolls through the streets of Prague with observant eyes will be able to confirm that elegance and taste are by no means a privilege of the German ladies, and there is already a *Czech jeunesse doree*... In short, one will see in general a prodigious growth of the Czech nation and the initiated will realize that it is not only prodigious but also powerful. (Cohen 3)

At that time, Prague’s urban population consisted of 90.7% Czechs and 9.3% Germans; in the suburbs, the population consisted of 93.1% Czechs and 6.9% Germans (Salfellner 13). Even though the German-speaking minority, many of them of Jewish descent, made up only a small part of Prague, culturally and economically they represented an indisputably important part of the city until the 1910’s. The German language permeated almost every Prager’s daily life as all of the newspapers of more than regional importance were published in German: the two dailies *Bohemia* and *Prager Blatt*, then the

Montagsblatt aus Böhmen. Even the Czech newspaper, *Die Union*, appeared in German (Salfellner 14).



The significance of the members of the German-speaking minority was also obvious from the fact that almost all of them belonged to the middle-class owners of the brown-coal pits; administrative officials of the Montan enterprises and the Škoda weapon factory; hops traders who traveled between Saaz and North America; sugar, textile, and paper manufacturers; as well as bank directors (Salfellner 13). “Such a thing as a German proletariat hardly existed” (Kish 13). On the contrary, Czechs usually worked as helpers in various factories or as domestic staff in the households of the richer German-speaking elite.

But to whom did the German- and Czech-speaking Jews, living in Prague in those days, belong? Did they belong to the Czechs who surrounded them everywhere as an unavoidable element of life, or to the Germans to whom a vast majority of the Jews belonged culturally and linguistically? In order to answer this inquiry, I will use the controversial experiences of the internal ethnic turmoil of two significant German-speaking Jewish authors, Franz Kafka and Franz Werfel. Both of them were children of

the ambivalent atmosphere of the Bohemian capital, the city burgeoning as a result of technological progress, but also the city of bitter social and ethnic struggles.

Franz Kafka, son of Hermann and Julie Kafka, was born in Prague, July 3, 1883.



FRANZ KAFKA DURING
HIS FIRST YEAR AT
SECONDARY SCHOOL

[Note: The family name

Kafka, a modification of the Czech word “kavka,” literally means “Jackdaw,” a bird with a big head and beautiful tail (Brod 3).] Franz’s father, Hermann, came from a poor Czech-speaking family from the South Bohemian village of Osek where he attended a typical Jewish elementary school: instruction was given in German (Pawel 12).

Hermann’s spoken German was very good but his writing skills were very poor.

Interestingly, expressing his thoughts in the Czech language seemed to be much more

natural to him throughout his life. At the age of 22 Hermann moved to Prague to take a bite of the “fruitful opportunities” the city promised.

At the age of 30, he married Julie Löwy, the daughter of a well-to-do brewery owner. Though not a part of the most respected city elite, obtaining some financial support from the Löwy family and being very industrious people, Hermann and Julie became a quite respectable family in Prague throughout the 1880’s and 1910’s.

The young Kafka couple understood that in order for their children to be accepted as a part of the “Pragerish” city elite, they needed to acquire their education at the old classical Prague German schools to learn to speak and write in “Hochdeutsch,” standard high-German. In other words, a sophisticated knowledge of the German language served as a key to opening the door to the most privileged strata of the Prague society, thereby ameliorating anybody’s living standards.

Kafka’s oldest child, Franz, first attended the German Elementary School for Boys, located in Old Prague. Then, he continued his education at the humanist state-run German-language secondary school in Old Town. The humanist education Kafka received there greatly increased his chances of gaining work in the hierarchy of the imperial and royal civil service (Salfellner 45-54).

Contrary to Franz Kafka’s family background, Franz Werfel was born to Rudolf and Albine Werfel, a rich German-speaking Jewish Prague family. Franz’s father grew up in Prague and was sent to a reputable boarding school in Bavaria. In 1882, at the age of twenty-five, he was able to open his first glove-manufacturing business,

which soon gained its reputation even far beyond the borders of the Austrian



Empire. In 1889, he married Albine Kussi, the nineteen-year-old daughter of a prosperous mill owner from Pilsen (Jungk 3).

As typical members of the most respected city elite, the Werfel couple spoke only German and regularly visited operas at the Neue Deutsche Theater and a five-week May Music Festival. May Festival, created by Angelo Neumann, one of Europe's most famous theater managers and opera impresarios, always presented the best singers and actors from the great cities of neighboring countries. These five weeks of great music embodied the "absolute high point of the year for cultured German-speaking citizens of Prague"(Jungk 8). Of course, Czechs never participated in any of these festivals, just as the German-speaking citizens of Prague would have never attended the Czech National Theatre.

Growing up in such a culture-oriented family had a great impact on little Franz Werfel, who developed a great passion for dramatic works and operas. Naturally, Franz always attended the most prestigious German schools in Prague at that time. Among those were the private elementary school of the Piarist order and the German and

Imperial Gymnasium. Both schools, German-culture enhancing institutions, were favored for sons of the wealthiest Jewish German-speaking elite.

Nevertheless, as a little boy Franz was exposed to the Czech culture directly in his own household through the Werfels' live-in cook, Barbara Šimůnkova. Barbara, a Czech woman in her mid-thirties, became a nursemaid to the newborn Franz, whose earliest memories were connected to her. When talking to little Franz, Barbara spoke in a dialect that was part German and part kitchen Czech (Jungk 4).

In other words, in terms of the “Pragerish” atmosphere of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Franz Kafka came from a low social level and Franz Werfel from the most respected social strata of the city of Prague. Notwithstanding, both of them grew up in Prague as Jewish German-speaking males whose notions and perceptions of “Pragerish” were shaped by the spirit of Prague in a similar way, as revealed in their works.

By reading Werfel's fictitious novel-- *The Pure in Heart (Barbara oder die Frömmigkeit)*, penetrated with many autobiographical elements--its reader is immersed in the life of its main character, Ferdinand R. It is a work that accurately illustrates life in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire from about 1890 to the 1920's.

Just like Werfel, Ferdinand is reared by his beloved Czech nanny Barbara whom he calls Babi. Just like Werfel, he spends his childhood as an only child of Prague's elite German-speaking family. Just like Werfel, he is stationed in Galicia at the Russian front during the First World War; and, just like Werfel, Ferdinand always finds real security in his Czech Babi. “According to Hans Hautmann, Ferdinand R. is a ‘fictionalized representation’ of Werfel himself” (Wagener 100).

At the beginning of the novel, which is divided into four “life fragments,” Ferdinand, the doctor on a luxurious ship cruising the Mediterranean, stands on the foredeck, throwing a white bag--filled with a number of gold coins given to him by his beloved Babi--into the sea. As he drops these into the water, his memory takes him back to the days of his childhood, the years spent at the university of Vienna, and the time spent in the Austrian army. Even though each of these main segments of his life is very different, in all of them, the personified embodiment of Czech culture, Ferdinand’s Bohemian nanny, Barbara, plays a significant role.

During his boyhood, as an only child of a high-ranking Austrian officer (Oberst und Kommandant k.u.k. Infanterieregiments), Ferdinand established a very close relationship with his nursery maid, Barbara. Any time Ferdinand was sick, it was his Czech Barbara who took care of him. Any time Ferdinand was hungry, it was his Czech Barbara who prepared delicious Czech meals for him. Any time Ferdinand needed a loving hug, it was his Czech Barbara who hugged him.

Ferdinand’s parents, members of Prague’s highest German-speaking social class, rarely spent a significant amount of time with their son. In Ferdinand’s eyes, his father symbolized a typical officer who devoted his life to the Austrian army and fervidly wished that his son would become a soldier one day as well. “The military life should have been absorbed by his entire body. That is why he took his boy along any time he was checking the barracks of his military unit” (Werfel 16).¹

Ferdinand’s mother, Olga, a beautiful woman from an old Hungarian aristocratic family, loved attending and preparing grandiose parties and wearing the most fashionable

¹ “Das militärische Leben sollte ihm in Fleisch und in Blut übergehen. So nahm er den vier- und fünfjährigen Knaben mit, wenn er die Kaserne und das Regiment inspektierte.”

clothes. The most important person in her life was herself. Even to her own son, Olga was a stranger who did not have much in common with her child. Little Ferdinand always preferred spending his time with Barbara rather than being with his own mother. His relationship with his mother is well illustrated in the story narrated in Chapter Three.

Ferdinand's mother asks Barbara, her Czech housemaid, to pick up her medicine at one of the nearby pharmacies. Hearing this order, little Ferdinand tries to reach his coat and prepare himself to accompany Babi. All of a sudden, his mother yells at him, "What are you doing with that coat, Bubi?" Full of sadness the little boy replies, "I want to go with Babi...with Babi... Ferdinand's response makes his mother angry, "You belong in the kitchen. All of you belong in the kitchen" (Werfel 26)!²

It is worthy noting that Olga's reaction to this minor conflict with her son conveys much more than just her temporary disappointment in her child. It also expresses Olga's perception of Czechs in general.

Often, it seemed to Ferdinand that his Czech Babi was the only person in his family who really loved him and cared about him. She truly symbolized the opposite of the boy's own mother. Babi never wore the most expensive clothes, never used the most expensive perfumes, and did not speak the standard high-German. Her jewelry and clothes, permeated with the smell of laundry or Czech meals, were very simple. Little Ferdinand never had to worry about touching her skirt or blouse when he wished to get closer to her. Ferdinand's Czech nanny offered him the freedom his German-culture oriented parents would never have given him. Their world was filled with rules and authoritative orders.

² Plötzlich schrie seine Mutter: "Bubi, was machst du mit deinem Mantel?" Der Kleine antwortete: "Ich will mit Babi gehn...mit Babi..." Ferdinads Mutter schimpfte: "Du gehörest in die Küche! Ihr alle gehört in die Küche!"

An unforgettable experience of such freedom was embodied in Ferdinand's trip to Barbara's home village in South Bohemia. Suddenly, this little wealthy German-speaking Prague boy appeared amid all these country people who used a strange language, the Czech language. In Prague, Ferdinand heard this language only among the housemaids. He knew the sound of Czech well, but did not understand it because his parents allowed him to speak only German in order to embed in him the sense of belonging to the German-oriented culture.

Ferdinand was introduced to Barbara's family. All of the members of her family were very nice and friendly to the boy and seemed to be very happy leading their simple country lives. For the first time in his life, Ferdinand saw little children running barefoot in the fields, wearing old shorts and shirts, and not being yelled at for laughing loudly or getting dirty while playing. There was nothing that Ferdinand longed for more than to be allowed to live his life as ebulliently as all these Czech children could. Here, in Barbara's home village, the little boy realized that this real happiness of these children emerged from knowing that they were in a warm and loving place; they were "at home."

At his home, Ferdinand would have been vilified by his parents for not dressing up and for trying to speak Czech, the language of the lower social class. At Ferdinand's home, authority was valued much more than affection and love. One always had to follow the rules, as any sophisticated German-culture oriented person ought to do. Was this really home? No, for Ferdinand his real home existed within his Czech nanny, Babi. Babi was the person Ferdinand always returned to. She was his home. Ferdinand could not even compare his life in Prague with what he experienced in Barbara's home village.

Even though there were some factual differences between Franz Werfel's and Ferdinand's childhood, both of them, Prague Jewish boys, underwent similar experiences. In Ferdinand's story, Werfel depicted the feelings that accompanied him, a German-speaking Jew from Prague, throughout his entire life.



FRANZ WERFEL IN 1908

Just as Franz Werfel was reared by his parents to become a member of the German elite, Ferdinand's parents exerted a lot of pressure on their little son to make him feel German. Ferdinand, just like little Franz Werfel, disliked this pressure, a factor

estranging both of them from their own parents. Both of them found real love, care, and security in their Czech nanny, Barbara.

The feeling of security was what Werfel longed for when, during the First World War, he was wounded. During that time, his mind took him back to the most favorite person of his childhood, his Czech Babi. Werfel depicted the atmosphere of those moments in the section of *The Pure in Heart* narrating the story of Ferdinand being wounded and placed in an Austrian hospital. Lying in his bed and thinking of dying soon, his thoughts always took Ferdinand, just like Werfel in his real life, to one of the closest persons to his heart, his Babi.

When Ferdinand's health worsened, he did not long for anything more than hearing the voice of his childhood again. At that time, he could feel that Barbara sensed his needs and would visit him soon. His entire body was telling him that she was on her way.

One day, as Ferdinand expected, Babi came. As usual, she appeared when he needed her the most. Just having her close calmed Ferdinand's mind tremendously. After many sleepless nights, he was able to fall asleep, getting the rest he needed to regain some strength. Spending the time with his Czech nanny, Barbara, made him feel safe, loved and cared about. All of a sudden, Ferdinand lost his fear of dying and looked forward to all the adventures his life was about to bring him.

Even in his own life, Werfel, an intellectual who always internally struggled with various political and social dilemmas, calmed himself down by awaking the spirit of a virtually non-existent figure, the idealized Barbara, the Czech nanny from his childhood (Steiman 54-55). The idealized Barbara was also somebody with whom he could

internally share his personal joys, as depicted in the last fragment of the *The Pure in Heart*.

In this section, whose content took place years later after Ferdinand's meeting with Barbara at the hospital, Ferdinand graduated as a medical doctor from the University of Vienna. Filled with deserved pride and happiness, he decided to visit his old substitute mother Barbara in her Bohemian home village to share his joy with her.

Ferdinand had not seen Babi for a long time. He did not even know whether she was still alive. As he approached her house, his heart beat faster. When Ferdinand entered Babi's kitchen, he saw a very old-looking woman. She could not hold her head straight up anymore and it was not easy for her to walk around. But Ferdinand recognized his Barbara right away. As soon as she heard him say, "Babi, it is me!" Barbara turned to him and, with eyes full of tears of happiness, opened her arms lovingly.

She still smelled the same. Her voice still sounded the same. Her love for him was as great as ever before. Ferdinand felt that he was at home wherever his Czech Babi was. They talked for a long time. Babi eagerly kept asking him questions about his life in Vienna. She wanted to know every single detail about "her son," as would be natural for any loving mother.

Full of excitement, Ferdinand announced to her that he just graduated as a medical doctor, and even though his financial situation was not the best, he truly enjoyed living in Vienna. Barbara paid very close attention to all of his words. After some time, Babi, as was typical for her, asked, "Bubi, aren't you hungry?" Not even waiting for Ferdinand's response, immediately she began to fix some of his favorite Czech meals.

For Ferdinand, there was nothing better in the whole world than being able to smell the air permeated with the delightful smell of Babi's dishes. Again, he realized that during his entire life, this now so-old-looking Czech woman symbolized the real maternal love his own biological mother never gave him.

Time went by quickly and Ferdinand was supposed to leave for Vienna. Saying "good bye" to his Babi filled him with indescribable sadness that brought many questions to his mind. Would he ever see her again? Would he ever feel her in his arms again? Would he ever feel as at home as when he was around his Czech Barbara?

A few days before Ferdinand's departure, she slipped a little bag with gold coins into his hand, saying, "This is what I have saved for you since your father died... Do not worry, I have what I need... This is just for you" (Werfel 600).³

Ferdinand stared at the bag incredulously. As usual, Barbara was giving him everything she had. She always knew when he needed her help. This Czech woman never failed to mollify the rough moments of his life. He, who was reared to become a German culture-oriented man, never had anybody nor anything closer to his heart than his Czech Babi, the embodiment of pure love and the atmosphere of his Bohemian home city, Prague.

Reading Kafka's unique novel *The Castle* casts more light on the "Pragerish atmosphere". As Thomas Mann stated in the foreword to this novel, "*The Castle* is through and through an autobiographical novel"(Mann xiv). Further, Max Brod, Kafka's close friend, shared his opinion with Mann. Brod believed that through *The Castle*, Kafka

³ "Ich hab's gespart genau von dem Tag an, an dem Herr Oberst gestorben ist...Mach dir keine Gedanken... Was ich brauch, habe ich...Ich hab's nur für dich gespart."

shared his great amount of knowledge of the world and of life, as well as his skeptical pessimism, which partially derived from his experiences in one of the insurance offices in Prague, the Worker's Accident Institute. In this office Kafka increasingly came into contact with workmen, of whom the vast majority were Czechs, suffering under the injustice caused by the rule of Prague's German-speaking elite. "Whole chapters of the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* derive their outer covers, their realistic wrappings, from the atmosphere Kafka breathed in the Worker's Accident Institute" (Brod 84).

Moreover, Brod stated that certain elements of *The Castle* are surprisingly similar to the elements of the Czech novel, *The Grandmother*, written by Czech novelist Božena Němcová. This novel made a profound impression upon Kafka. "The people in Němcová's *The Grandmother* live in their village and have no real access to their overlord in the castle. In the castle, German is spoken; in the village, Czech. That fact alone produces alienation" (Brod 252).

This type of alienation, the main characteristic of the "Pragerish atmosphere" during Kafka's life, is also revealed in *The Castle*. *The Castle* narrates a story about a man whose name is K. K. is invited by the overlord, who lives in the castle, to work at his castle and in his village as a surveyor. Throughout the entire story, K. unsuccessfully tries to contact the earl or highest administrator of the castle, Klamm, to obtain more detailed information about his work duties.

At the beginning of the novel, K. arrives at the village. Eager to start working, K. wants to meet the earl to discuss K.'s project. He spends most of the day trying to find the castle. Slowly it is getting dark and, frustrated, K. cannot find the way leading to the castle.

After a while, he decides to go to a local pub to ask the villagers for their help. As he enters the pub, the villagers become quiet, observing this stranger with a lot of suspicion. K. introduces himself as a surveyor whom the earl invited to work for him.

Breaking the quietness, K. asks the villagers about the directions to the castle and how he could speak to the inhabitants from the castle. The villagers seem to be very hesitant to talk to him about the people from the castle. They explain to K. that they never talk to the earl or any high-level castle administrator in person. The villagers must either speak to the spokespeople of the earl and the higher administration or phone the castle. In general, their communication with the castle bureaucracy represents a real challenge.

Interestingly, a similar atmosphere penetrated the everyday lives of the citizens of Prague during Kafka's life. The poor Czech-speaking strata found it very difficult to access the ruling German-speaking elite. Just as the villagers in *The Castle* were never able to deal with the ruling castle administration directly, Prague's Czechs were not enabled to be in contact with Prague's German culture-oriented elite. In both cases, the lower social class was alienated from the higher social class.

Various elements of the tangible representation of such social and cultural alienation is described in *The Castle* in many places. Just as *The Castle*'s villagers dress modestly, the Czechs could not afford to purchase more expensive clothes. Just as *The Castle*'s villagers sat separately from the castle administration when in a pub, the Czechs and Germans attended different cultural events and institutions. Just as *The Castle*'s people were divided into two different worlds, the world of villagers and castle people, Prague contained two main worlds, the world of Czechs and Germans.

But who did *The Castle*'s K. belong to? He came to the village on the castle's invitation, but never was able to enter the castle. Waiting for information from the authorities, K. spent most of his time among villagers. Nevertheless, the villagers never accepted him, which he sincerely hoped for, as a member of their community. Despite his striving to fit in, K. remained a stranger in the eyes of the villagers. They observed that any time K. phoned the castle, he was able to communicate with its bureaucracy effectively, understanding the meaning of the words they used. Notwithstanding, this skill of his never allowed him to engage in a real dialogue with the castle administration. In fact, it almost seemed that even though K. had a command of the castle's language, K. and the castle administration never talked to each other, but rather used a familiar language for talking at each other.

On the contrary, comprehending the language the castle administration used represented a real challenge for the villagers. To them it was a foreign language.

The questions that remain unanswered are, "Who was K. in the eyes of the villagers and the castle administrators? Why did these two groups ostracize him? Can one find a link between this conflict of these two groups and some other elements of the Pragerish atmosphere during Kafka's life?"



THE OLD CASTLE STAIRWAY (1895)

PRAGERISH JEW

According to Brod, the story of *The Castle*'s K. describes how a certain type of man deals with the world. It is a man who experiences a tremendous amount of loneliness. He is a good man who does not long for such loneliness, nor is he proud of it. Instead, he would prefer becoming an active member of "human society." As Brod states, such loneliness and striving for fitting in was experienced by the vast majority of Jews who lived in Prague between 1880 and 1920 (Brod 186). During that time, Prague's Czechs and Germans rejected the Jewish community more and more, creating a significant internal identity crisis within the Jewish people.



RELIEF ON THE COAT OF ARMS ON THE JEWISH TOWN HALL IN
PRAGUE

“The word Jew does not appear in *The Castle*. Yet, tangibly Kafka in *The Castle*, straight from his Jewish soul, in a simple story has said more about the situation of Jewry as a whole today than can be read in a hundred learned treaties” (Brod 187).

Brod gives several examples from *The Castle* confirming his theory. For instance, he points out the section describing K.’s meeting with an extremely unfriendly schoolmaster, a member of the village community. K. needs to discuss several issues with the schoolmaster in person. Willing to meet with the schoolmaster, K. asks whether he can come and see him sometime. The schoolmaster, who is not excited about having to deal with K., replies to K. in a very unfriendly matter, “I live on Swan Street at the butcher’s” (Brod 187). Brod comments, “That was, it is true, giving an address rather than an invitation. Nevertheless, K. confidently replies, ‘Very well, I shall come’” (Brod 187).

Further, Brod explains that often Prague’s Jews found themselves in a situation similar to K.’s conversation with the village schoolmaster, especially when they needed to deal with Prague’s Czechs.

Typically, Prague’s Czechs refused to be in direct contact with the Jews. This fact forced the Jews to develop obligatory friendliness, assertiveness, and indeed importunity in order to establish at least minimally effective communication with Prague’s Czech society between 1890 and 1920. Such behavior is clearly expressed in K.’s polite and confident response to the schoolmaster.

During the same time period, dealing with Prague’s German society became increasingly more challenging. As Brod notes, the atmosphere of this struggle is symbolically embodied in the way the castle administration deals with K.

Even though the members of the castle administration invited K. to work for them as a surveyor at the castle and in the village, they never supported him. Moreover, the castle barred itself against K. by requiring him to obtain permission from the castle, which would allow him to stay in the village. Interestingly, the castle never showed any intention of issuing this special permission for K.

Living in a community whose strata turned their backs on K. created a lot of pressure within him. The surveyor simply wanted to be able to carry out the work the castle requested. K. clearly believed that in order to survive this turmoil, he needed to assimilate with the villagers and, consequently, become indistinguishable from them. One assimilation strategy he used involved having a relationship with one of the village women, Frieda, who worked as a waitress in the local pub. K. assumed that being involved with a waitress, who constantly came into contact with the castle administration and the villagers, would ease his fitting in this society.

Despite all of K.'s endeavors, he was never able to truly assimilate with the villagers. In one section of *The Castle*, K. was verbally attacked by an older woman, the wife of the owner of the local pub, with a cruel statement, "You are not from the castle; you are not from the village; you are nothing. Unfortunately, you, actually, may be something. You are a stranger. You are the one who is always and everywhere in the way (Kafka 70)."⁴

What exactly did Brod mean by contending that K.'s story depicts the situation of Prague's Jewry as a whole during his and Kafka's life? In order to comprehend Brod's claim, one needs to be familiar with the social circumstances under which Prague's Jews

⁴ "Sie sind nicht aus dem Schloss, Sie sind nicht aus dem Dörfe, Sie sind nichts. Leider aber sind Sie doch doch etwas, ein Fremder, der überzählig und überall im Weg ist..."

lived between 1883 and 1924, the time of a plethora of critical changes experienced by the Jewish population.

The year 1893, the year of Kafka's birth, was especially permeated with many anti-Semitic movements, catalyzed mainly by the Czech lower social class. The Czechs believed that in order to become a truly pure and democratic nation, they not only had to free themselves from the rule of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, but also to eliminate the strongly German culture-oriented Jewish population, an important part of the wealthiest social strata of Prague (Stölzl 50).

During the spring of 1883, Prague was flooded with many Czech fliers full of anti-Semitic propaganda claiming:

God, there must be a great life in heaven because there are no Jews. But here, on Earth, there are more and more of them. So, all you who are men of integrity and honest people get your sticks and beat the Jews out. Real bliss will come to us only when there are no more Jews here. (Stölzl 53)⁵

This phenomenon of Jews being hated by many Czech people kept intensifying until World War I broke out in 1914. Czechs did not like the fact that the Jewish community owned a lot of assets and throughout the history of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, aimed to assimilate with the German-speaking bureaucracy. Why did the Jews want to belong to Germans? Such assimilation promised the Jews membership in a higher social class along with all the privileges such status carried with it.

However, after 1883, the year of the definite end of the domination of the German language as an official language in Czech Bohemia and Moravia, more and more fearful

⁵ “Bože v nebi, tam se žije, tam nejsou žide, zato tady na zemi je jich čím dal víc. Vy všichni, kdo jste poctivi a čestni, popadněte klacek a vymlat’te je, protože blaho může zavládnout, až když tu žádní žide nebudou.”

Jews started pretending to be pro-Czech. Since 1883, many Czechs had spied at the doors of their originally German culture-oriented Jewish neighbors to make sure that the Jews used the Czech language even when talking to each other in their homes. This movement brought many significant changes to the lives of the members of the Jewish minority (Stölzl 55).

In 1880, only one third of Prague's Jews reported they belonged to the Czech community. However, in 1900, more than 50% of all Jews living in Prague changed their nationality from German to Czech. Further, in 1890, 74% of Prague's Jews listed German as their native tongue, but by 1900, the statistics showed that only 45% of the Jewish population considered German their mother tongue. In what appears to be a contradiction, during that time, a vast majority of the Jewish businessmen requested having German newspapers, which they needed in order to obtain important information about the most current situation of the financial markets, mailed to their homes only in sealed envelopes.

Despite the increasing number of the Jews claiming they belonged to the Czech nationality, the numbers of Jewish students attending Prague's German schools did not decrease at all. As documented in 1900, 90% of the Czech Jews still sent their children to German schools (Stölzl 55). How can one explain the two-faced behavior of the Jewish community? There were two main reasons why the Jews were ambiguous about their national identity.

As the power of the Czech nationalists increased, the Jews feared the danger of physical violence towards their community by the Czechs. The latter were inclined to use violence as a tool to purify their nation from anything that reminded them of the German-oriented culture. The Jews believed that if they spoke Czech and registered

themselves as Czechs, their presence on the Czech territory would be more likely to be tolerated by the Czech community.

At the same time, the Jewish people did not intend to assimilate with the Czech culture totally. Understanding the economic advantage of establishing decent relationships with Prague's wealthy elite, whose majority was German culture-oriented, bolstered the interest of the Jewish community in learning German by attending German schools. Naturally, the Jews' attaining a good command of the German language led to easier communication between those two cultural groups.

Simply stated, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Czechs were gaining political power, but the Germans had a significant amount of financial resources. In order to survive, the Jews, the class of Prague's strangers, needed both. During that time, most Jews were experiencing the peak of their national identity crisis.

For Kafka, a member of Prague's Jewish community, observing such weakness of the character of his own people was not pleasant. He watched many Jews, Prague's strangers, supporting and joining some of the Czech demonstrations organized in Prague at the beginning of World War I one day; however, the next day, they were acting like Germans. In one of his diary entries, Kafka wrote, "These parades are one of the most disgusting side-effects of the war. Coming from the Jewish merchants who are at once German, at once Czech, and actually admit it, but have never allowed themselves to shout it out as loudly as they do now. Naturally, they drag along some others" (Salfellner 143).

After a careful analysis of the social circumstances under which Prague's Jews lived between 1883 and 1924, it is obvious why Brod contended that the story of *The Castle*'s main character, K., captures the situation of Prague's Jewry during that time.

Just as Prague's elite, oriented toward German culture, represented the main source of finances for the Jews, the castle's administration was supposed to provide K.'s salary, his "bread and butter." Just as the castle invites K. to the village, but never gives him permission to live there and complete his assignment, Prague's Germans never supported the Jews' endeavors.

Furthermore, one can observe another similarity between the atmosphere permeating people's lives in Prague around the turn of the 19th century and K.'s experiences by examining how Prague's Germans, Jews, and Czechs communicated among each other.

Logically, it was easier for the German-speaking Jews to communicate with the Germans than it was for the Czechs because the vast majority of the Jews attended German schools and thereby attained a superb command of the German language. On the contrary, a very small percentage of Czechs received their education at German schools, making it more difficult for them to truly learn the German language.

Naturally, such a situation enhanced the already existing cultural clashes among these three groups. Interestingly, a similar fluidity of communication is described in *The Castle*.

Just as K. was able to communicate with the castle administration, the German-speaking Jews found it relatively easy to communicate with Prague's elite. On the contrary, just as Prague's Czechs found the communication with the Germans extremely challenging, *The Castle*'s villagers were not able to converse with the castle administration easily.

Why did the Jews, the minority oppressed by the Czechs and Germans, stay in Prague at that time? What was so special and unique about Prague, the city full of extreme wealth and poverty, the city full of love and hate, the city full of severe struggles among its multinational and multilingual children, the capital of what one could have called the most typical ambivalent world?

PRAGERISH CITYSCAPE

“Prague does not let go. None of the two of us. This mother has claws. One has to submit to her or- .We would have to set a fire on two places, at Vysehrad and Hradschin. Only then, it would be possible to free ourselves” (Pawel 107).⁶ With these words, nineteen-year-old Kafka, in a letter to his close friend Otto Pollak, described the impossibility of leaving the Bohemian capital, Prague, behind.



MALA STRANA ROOFTOPS WITH THE PRAGUE CASTLE

Many literary analysts interpreted this quotation as a statement revealing Kafka's hatred of the city which nobody could ever escape. On the contrary, Čermak suggested

⁶“Prag lässt nicht los. Uns beide nicht. Dieses Mütterchen hat Krallen. Da muss man sich fügen oder -. An zwei Seiten müssten wir es anzünden, am Vyšehrad und am Hradschin, dann wäre es möglich, dass wir loskommen.”

that Kafka's words allow for the opposite interpretation, expressing Kafka's feeling of a very tight bond to the city. As Čermak said, "This magic power which binds Kafka to Prague would be destroyed only by setting the two most beautiful historical dominating features of the city, Vyšehrad and Hradšchin, on fire. Destroying these, both of which embody the tangible bridge connecting Kafka and the city, would enable him to escape Prague" (Čermak 167).

Further, according to Johannes Urzidil, "Kafka was Prague and Prague was Kafka. It was never so wholly and typically Prague, and would never again be as it was in Kafka's lifetime. And we, his friends, 'the happy few', ...we knew that this Prague is contained in the smallest quanta everywhere in his works" (Salfellner 194).

What did Prague look like during Kafka's lifetime? Where did he walk? Where did he rest? Where did he gather the inspiration for his work full of its many ambivalent themes? During Kafka's life, at the end of the 19th century, Prague was a city where various architectural styles were connected to each other, creating its own unique eclectic style, the Pragerish cityscape.

At that time, one found here the architectural imprint of the Medieval ages connected to those of the days of Renaissance and Baroque, to which the turn of the 19th century, the onset of the industrial age, added its flavor. These stamps--the cold-looking Gothic cathedrals, the large Baroque richly-ornamented palaces and churches, Prague's first industrial suburbs and a network of railway lines--all of these elements of the Pragerish cityscape accompanied Kafka on his numerous walks through the city (Borovička 289).

Kafka's steps usually led through the Old Town (Staroměstské náměstí) where he liked to stop for a moment to enjoy and absorb the beauty of this part of the town. In one of his diary entries, he referred to the Old Town, a major culmination of Renaissance buildings decorated with bright sgraffito facades, interesting silhouettes of gables and ostentatious arcades, as "the most beautiful decoration of the whole world" (Čermak 164). Often, Kafka spent hours sitting on the benches of Prague's verdant parks, his main source of natural energy, pacifying and recharging his body along with his mind.



THE OLD TOWN SQUARE

However, it needs to be emphasized that during Kafka's life Prague did not only contain the atmosphere of an old, calm and picturesque city. In fact, the contrary was true. Rather, during that period, Prague experienced a number of very fundamental changes in its landscape. For instance, around 1880, with the onset of the migration of affluent Jews into other city districts and the immigration of the penniless lower social class into Prague's Jewish ghetto, this part of the town increasingly degenerated into a

poor quarter in the heart of the city. It became a nest of crime, prostitution and various epidemics.



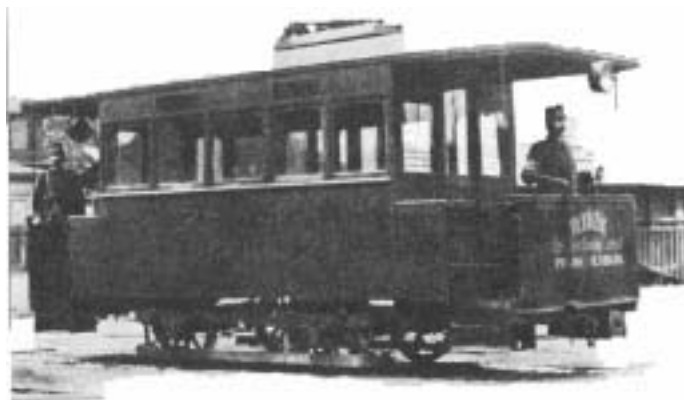
STREETS OF THE PRAGUE JEWISH GHETTO AROUND 1898

The more affluent inhabitants of the city were especially dissatisfied with such conditions and in the 1890's, initiated, after countless meetings, a clean-up of this neighborhood. Most of the historic buildings of the old Jewish ghetto were torn down. "In place of the dark and twisting streets of the poor now came the modern Art Nouveau palaces of the prosperous bourgeoisie" (Salfellner 16).

During Kafka's lifetime, Prague was anything but a sleepy provincial town. Just as the cityscape was being transformed significantly, the cultural life was becoming more and more vivid. More than 200 clubs nurtured an active social life in the German House. In 1898, the first significant *Jugendstil* (Art Nouveau) exhibitions took place in the Topic

Salon. Less than a decade later, the group *Osma* (The Eight), the first association of modern artists presented themselves to the public. “Czech Prague embraced everything from Munch to French cubism” (Salfellner 18).

The transformation of the city and its life progressed rapidly, affecting all essential spheres of Prague’s inhabitants’ life, including trade and industry. “Telephones began to replace obsolete communications technology, power stations made the operation of modern technical equipment possible, cable cars and the first automobiles heralded a future revolution in transportation” (Salfellner 19).



A WAGON FROM THE FIRST ELECTRIC STREET CAR IN PRAGUE,
THE 1890’S

This was the Prague Kafka lived in. Giving birth to the Pragerish ambivalent atmosphere around the turn of the 19th century, Prague was a city that united history with rapid industrialization. Kafka, who assumed he was not well-equipped for his life physically, tried to find those missing physical pieces of himself within the unity of Prague (Čermak 165). It was all of Prague’s unique streets, buildings, parks and all the

spheres of Prague's life that whispered into Kafka's ears the stories he shared with the rest of the world through his literary work.

Prague at the turn of the 19th century truly was a city with sharp claws. Just as these claws caught Franz Kafka, they also caught Franz Werfel, whom, as he stated, Prague bore. Even though Werfel spent most of his life outside Prague, his memories of his childhood often took him back to this city. It was especially memories of Prague's city park that he treasured dearly.

For Werfel, the City Park represented a place where he, as a child, learned to appreciate the morning dew, the flowerbeds, and the tree shade. It was also a place where he made his first friend. It was a place that brought many joys into his early childhood. And it was these joyful memories of Prague that lived within Werfel throughout his entire life (Jungk 4-5).

In other words, Prague did not let them ever go. Its claws caught both Kafka and Werfel.

CONCLUSION

As apparent, the significant political, cultural and social changes Prague underwent between 1890 and 1920 helped shape its ambivalent atmosphere, permeating the Bohemian capital during that time.

This ambivalence was reflected in the way Prague's citizens—the Germans, Czechs, and Jews—approached each other and in the way the city presented itself. It was a city full of extremes: a place where modern technology and luxury met with poverty; Slavic culture with the Germanic culture; and Christianity with Jewry.

This is the atmosphere that Prague's German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, Franz Kafka and Franz Werfel, absorbed and depicted in their literary work, the ambivalent atmosphere of Prague.

Works Cited

- Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka: A Biography*. New York: Schocken Books, 1960.
- Borovička, Blahomir and Jiří Hruža. *Praha: 1000 let stavby Prahy města*. Praha: Panorama, 1983.
- Cohen, Gary. *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.
- Čermak, Josef. *Češi a Němci: Dějiny-kultura-politika*. Praha: Paseka, 2002. 158-170.
- Jungk, Peter. *Franz Werfel: A Life in Prague, Vienna, and Hollywood*. Trans. Anselm Hollo. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987.
- Kaes, Anton. "New Historicism and the Study of German Literature." *The German Quaterly*. Vol. 62 (Spring 1989): 210-219.
- Kafka, Franz. *Das Schloss*. Berlin: Schocken Books, 1946.
- Kish, Egon E. *Franz Kafka and Prague*. Praha: Vitalis, 2002. 13.
- Mann, Thomas. Foreword. *The Castle*. By Franz Kafka. New York: Schocken Books, 1981.
- Pawel, Ernst. *Das Leben Franz Kafkas*. Trans. Michael Müller. Regensburg: E. Pustet, 1986.
- Salfellner, Harald. *Franz Kafka and Prague*. Praha: Vitallis, 2002.
- Steiman, Lionel B. *Franz Werfel-The Faith of an Exile: From Prague to Beverly Hills*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1985.

Stölzl, Christoph. *Kafkovy zle Čechy*. Jihlava: Ekon, 1997.

Veeser, Aram. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1989.

Wagener, Hans. *Understanding Franz Werfel*. Columbia: South Carolina UP, 1993.

Werfel, Franz. *Barbara oder Die Frömmigkeit*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988.