



FRANZ KAFKA'S PRAGUE

Let us ditch the romantic notion that nineteenth-century Prague was a quaint provincial city in the backwaters of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Since the Middle Ages, it had been a cultural and political powerhouse whose influence was felt far beyond Bohemia's national borders. The city took centre stage in European history on more than one occasion, acting as the continent's intellectual hub. Being located at the crossroads of major trade routes, Prague was of considerable strategic importance; it was both a bridge to the East, which it has remained to this day, and a political and cultural link between Old Austria and the up-and-coming metropolis of Berlin. Prussia and Austria had thrashed out their roles in the future Europe on the battlefield of Königgrätz in 1866 and the outcome of that conflict was codified in the deeply symbolic Peace of Prague.

While Prague has been the spiritual capital of the Czechs since the ninth century, it gained extra significance as the heart of thriving German Bohemia that surrounded the predominantly Slavic core of Inner Bohemia. The capital linked such disparate regions as the barren Giant Mountains, the industrial landscapes of northern Bohemia, the agricultural Egerland [Chebsko] and the idyllic Bohemian forests, home to the author Adalbert Stifter.

Despite this clear bridging role, Prague had been forced to cede precedence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century central European politics and diplomacy to imperial Vienna. During Kafka's lifetime (1883–1924), however, these relationships were shaken up. Almost every area of urban life saw rapid development, while old parts of town and new suburbs alike were in a state of ferment. The population grew rapidly and the city soon spread beyond its historical boundaries.

The patrician Germans living in the city's better areas found themselves standing uneasily face-to-face



The Prague Coat of Arms.

Everything by way of songs and legends that arose in this city is steeped in the longing for the day, foretold in prophecy, when the city will be dashed to pieces by five blows in quick succession from a massive fist. This is why a fist is included in the coat of arms.

Franz Kafka, *The City Coat of Arms*

Left: Franz Kafka outside the Oppelt House on the Old Town Square (1922).

THE CHARLES BRIDGE Karlův most

The Gothic Charles Bridge is probably the most beautiful monument to medieval engineering in Bohemia and has spanned the Vltava since the fourteenth century. When its twelfth-century predecessor, the stone Judith Bridge, fell victim to massive ice floes in 1342, a new bridge was needed. The first task fell to the court astrologers: they were to divine the most propitious date on which to start building work. Thus, Emperor Charles IV laid the foundation stone on the ninth day of the seventh month of the year 1357, at 5:31 a.m. Architect Peter Parler from Schwäbisch Gmünd got straight down to work, yet construction dragged on into the sixteenth century. The results were impressive all the same, and the sixteen-arch bridge remained the only link between the Old Town and the Lesser Town for a good half-millennium. Despite its legendary strength, the Charles

View from Franzensquai [Smetanovo nábřeží] of the Charles Bridge, the Old Town mills (right) and the Castle (in the background).



On the Charles Bridge, with the Lesser Town Bridge Towers in the background (circa 1910).



Bridge did once collapse, while Kafka was at primary school. On 4 September 1890, the sixth and seventh arches proved unequal to the weight of the flood waters and flotsam – statues fell into the depths, and two pedestrians drowned in the floods. Prague's most important bridge remained closed to general traffic for two years.

The noteworthy events that have played out on the Charles Bridge include the defence of the Old Town from Swedish invaders during the Thirty Years' War. After much of the decorative façade on the bridge tower had been destroyed by Swedish artillery, the Nordic mercenaries were forced to beat a retreat to the Lesser Town, just a few metres short of the bridgehead.

The bridge features thirty statues in total, the earliest of which was the cast iron crucifix, erected in 1657, with a Hebrew inscription added in 1696. The second statue was the bronze figure of St John of Nepomuk cast in Nuremberg in 1683. The cult of Prague's patron saint of bridges soon spread from here across the whole of Europe. Since then, countless statues and portraits of the saint have watched over bridges and crossings, as a reminder of the Bohemian saint and his martyrdom on the bridge in Prague.

Twenty-eight further statues and groups of figures followed, even into the twentieth century. Consequently,



THE HOUSE AT THE SHIP, THEN ON NIKLASSTRASSE
Pařížská 36 (I-883), Staré Město (a new building is
now on the site)

In June 1907, the Kafka family moved from the medieval House Of the Three Kings to sophisticated Niklasstraße [St Nicholas Street, now Pařížská]. Their flat here was the scene for a turning point in Franz Kafka's literary career.

Tenants in the palatial apartment building known as At the Ship were primarily middle class and, although it was owned by a Czech jeweller named Alfred Nikodém, the majority of them were German. Like Hermann Kafka, Nikodém had a shop on Zeltnergasse. Besides the middle-class merchants living on the mezzanine, first, second and third floors, a student rented the mansard room; two sales assistants, a tanner's assistant and his wife lived in the attic; while the caretaker and his family lived on the ground floor. Once the building had been locked up at ten p.m., the caretaker was owed a *Sperrsechserl* [latch coin] from anyone who wished to get back in.

From his flat, Kafka could look down on the end of Niklasstraße, which led to the new Svatopluk-Čech Bridge, where a toll collector worked. A unique panorama unfurled across the Vltava, from the viewpoint tower on Petřín Hill on the left, to the towers of the Premonstratensian Strahov Monastery, the steeple of St Vitus' Cathedral and Prague Castle, Queen Anne's Summer Palace, the green slopes of the Belvedere Heights (Letná) and the Hanau Pavilion. Kafka could also look across the river, past the anglers adrift in their rowing boats, to the Civilian Swimming School, a public swimming area on the river, which he liked to visit on hot summer days.



Above: Title page illustration for the story *The Metamorphosis* featuring the famous drawing by Ottomar Starke.

Left: View of Niklasstraße and the Old Town from the Belvedere Heights (circa 1910). Visible in the foreground are two pillars of the Čech Bridge; the corner building behind them is the House At the Ship. The Kafka family's flat was on the topmost complete floor, while Franz's room was to the left of the balcony door.



cost six crowns. Meanwhile those with rank or appearances to preserve might shell out a whole twenty-four crowns for a box in the dress circle.

The New German Theatre was designed by the Viennese theatrical architects Hermann Helmer and Ferdinand Fellner on behalf of the German Theatre Society, and funded by private endowments and donations. The tympanum of the Classicistic façade features the chariots of Dionysus and Thalia; busts of Mozart, Goethe, and Schiller stood beneath the gable until the Second World War. The interior of the theatre, and especially the two-thousand-seater auditorium, rank among the most beautiful opera houses in Europe.

Top left: Advertisement for Wagner's Opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* to mark the grand opening of the New German Theatre on 5 January 1888.

Top right: Angelo Neumann, the New German Theatre's legendary director (circa 1890).

Above: The auditorium of the New German Theatre (2022).

It opened on 5 January 1888 with a performance of Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* [The Mastersingers of Nuremberg] and within a few years, the theatre had become a launchpad for the careers of Austrian and German-Bohemian actors and singers. Opera producer Angelo Neumann, who came to Prague – an already Czech-majority city – from Bremen, was an early and ardent admirer of Wagner; he established a German-language theatre there, whose influence was felt well beyond Bohemia. Renowned soloists, conductors and composers made an outstanding contribution to the opera house over the years; these included Leo Blech, Alexander

Zemlinsky, Leo Slezak, Richard Tauber, Lotte Lehmann and Maria Jeritzka.

The *Maifestspiele* created by Neumann in 1899 represented the first theatrical festival to be staged in Prague, a kind of Bohemian Bayreuth featuring beloved stage stars and great singers such as Enrico Caruso. This May Festival was intended to counteract the doldrums of the summer season – a plan that worked out. The programme boasted Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler and the latest compositions by Verdi, plus – of course – Richard Wagner, who had a cult following in Prague in those days. The director knew his stuff and had an equal gift for self-promotion. As Egon Erwin Kisch put it: “Angelo Neumann’s director’s box was a stage in itself. He appeared there every evening on the dot of seven, a *père noble*, with jet-black, dyed hair and moustache, black suit and black tie; standing erect, he favoured the audience with a long, lingering stare, measuring them up from

The café in the German Theatre Garden at the New German Theatre.



I went in the opposite direction from usual, namely the Chain Footbridge, Castle, Charles Bridge. I usually literally tumble down this path, today, coming

from the opposite direction, I picked myself up a little.”

Later, a walk with Ottla, Miss Taussig, the Baums and Pick, Elisabeth Bridge, Quay, Lesser Town, Radetzky Café, Stone Bridge, Karlsgasse. I just about had a good mood in prospect so that there was not much fault to be found with me just then.

Entry from Kafka's diary
(3 March 1912)

The Belvedere Heights (Letná) were a set of gardens and parks offering magnificent views, which were particularly popular with keen walkers. They were also home to the Crown Prince Rudolph Park. From Letná Park, it was only a few hundred metres further to another popular destination for the people of Prague: the Royal Arboretum with its avenues, park benches, meadows, and manicured promenades. Once a game enclosure, its present appearance dates to the early nineteenth century, when it was transformed into one of the most charming public gardens in central Europe. Weather permitting, elegant Prague society mingled in the well-run café or enjoyed picnics and dashing open-air concerts. The gentlemen amused themselves watching beautiful women and girls in their enormous,

Left: Nerudagasse (1906).

Right: Restaurant garden on the Belvedere Heights in around 1911.



Top: Garden dining area of the restaurant Zur Quelle at the Arboretum [Stromovka].

Above: Paths and pond in the Arboretum.



ostrich-feathered hats or straw boaters as they sat on park benches or quilted blankets in the shade of exotic trees. In Kafka's day, there were over a hundred species of tree, still labelled with little plaques in Latin, Czech, and German.

The Jubilee Exhibition was held in the east of the park in 1891, and the halls and pavilions built at that time are still used for trade fairs and exhibitions today. Kafka could also visit a modern art gallery with works by contemporary Czech and German-Bohemian artists: “Monday, a public holiday in the Arboretum, in the restaurant, in the gallery. Sorrow and joy, guilt and innocence like two inextricably intertwined hands, one would have to cut through them, through flesh, blood, and bone.”

In April 1914, Kafka wrote to his fiancée Felice about a walk he had taken with Ottla and a female cousin, promising that he had only ever thought of her: “for the whole walk, in the tram, in the Arboretum, at the pond, during the music, while eating bread and butter (even ate a bite of bread and butter in the afternoon, one monstrosity after another!), on the way home, only ever you, only ever you on my mind”.