

P R O L O G U E

The Ants of Prague

IN THE GEOGRAPHICAL HEART OF THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT LIES a forested region, far from the oceans and seas, with an unwelcoming climate and no natural resources to speak of. Repeatedly devastated by wars and epidemics, and fragmented over the centuries into politically insignificant parcels of land, it is a poor, empty center.

Rarely, and for only brief periods of time, the force field of power extended beyond its own borders. Decisions had always been handed down from elsewhere regarding the resources of the world, as had new, more efficient forms of economy and political rule. Even so, the residents of this region were able within a few generations to attain a level of wealth that was well above average for the scale of the world economy. At the threshold of the twentieth century, after a phase of hectic industrialization, the German Reich and Austria-Hungary were prosperous states with oversized armies, which trumpeted their newfound self-confidence. It took these parvenus a long time to realize that such a rapid upsurge would upset the global balance and exact a political price.

Suddenly they were encircled and threatened by covetous and malevolent neighbors. The leaders in Germany and Austria took too long to recognize that the older, most established Great Powers were using their edge in diplomatic skill and had no intention of standing aside in silence. They had likely already reached an agreement to

2 occupy and exploit the emergent center together—and the evidence to justify this suspicion kept mounting. In the East, Russia, a volatile colossus, prepared to send millions upon millions of slaves into a war of conquest. In the West, an envious France and British profiteers extolled the virtues of civilization while looking out for their bottom lines. And in the South, an opportunistic Italy, an ambitious satellite state, which despite its repeated promises to form alliances would clearly side with the majority. The circle was virtually closed; it was a strangulation that August 1, 1914, finally brought to a halt. That is how it was reported in the press, anyway. Within days, all those in the center wrapped their minds around a new, interesting-sounding notion: *world war*.

Dr. Kafka, a thirty-two-year-old unmarried Jewish official at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, had yet to set eyes on the war a year later. A tall, slender, lanky man, who despite his youthful appearance was plagued by nervousness, headaches, and insomnia but was deemed fit for military service; back in June 1915, his fitness had been certified after a brief physical. But the insurance institute—most likely his superiors, Pfohl and Marschner, who were kindly disposed toward him—claimed that he had indispensable legal expertise, and the military authorities granted their petition. Kafka's name was entered onto the muster roll of some auxiliary unit pro forma, but with a stipulation that the man in question was "excused indefinitely."

Not long before, when the war was still young, yet the patriotic fervor had already faded, Dr. Kafka took a brief trip to Hungary and the supply center of the Carpathian front. There were officers in German uniforms, field chaplains, Red Cross nurses, hospital trains, cannons ready for shipment in accordance with regulations, and, above all, refugees—whole columns of ragged refugees from Poland and Galicia who had just escaped from the advancing Russians and were now streaming toward the visitor. He observed the preparations for events of enormous proportion that loomed ahead, and he saw where they would lead. But what about the essence, the great battle, the great liberation? The movies and newsreels tilted their coverage away from the wretched, mundane details.

Kafka was not alone with his doubts. People back home learned from newspapers and a limited number of silent and unrevealing newsreel images about the exciting, adventurous dynamic of the war, the use of the latest technology, the camaraderie, and the impressive ability of the troops to hold their ground. In their own everyday lives, civilians experienced a scarcity of food—and what little could be had was of poor quality—and a lack of heat in their homes. There was also rampant inflation, censorship, harassment from the authorities, and militarization yet neglect of the public space. The press called this area the “home front,” but the lie of this concept was all too apparent, and no one took it seriously. Only those on the *actual* front experienced anything, while people back home were condemned to passive endurance, the origin and meaning of which they had to infer from overblown military progress reports. The yawning abyss between these reports and the situation at home made for a potentially perilous discontent.

Presentation was one of the modern and still-unfamiliar pressing issues facing politicians as the war dragged on: if it could not be won soon, it would have to be “sold” more effectively. It was thus a welcome, if somewhat obvious and propagandistic, idea to give the civilian population a taste of the real war, so as to bring them into close fellowship with the troops. The idea was to replicate the war at home, but not in the form of those unspeakable exhibits of weapons and flags that mummified the battles of the nineteenth century and put historical showpieces on a par with antiquated natural history collections. Instead, urban dwellers—even with their dulled senses—would be offered something they could ponder and tell stories about for a long time to come.

Just after the onset of the war, seized weapons were paraded through the cities in triumph, and the much-vaunted Leipzig International Trade Fair for Books and Graphic Arts (which Dr. Kafka, who was interested in literature, had of course already seen) opened its own war division featuring a cheap thrill that was gratefully embraced by the public: four wax enemy soldiers brandishing weapons and staring down visitors. Back in the fall of 1914, no one had come up with the idea that people could actually reenact the war instead of remaining mere spectators from afar. War was pictured as an extensive, explosive,

4 and expansive movement incapable of replication. It was only when the war got bogged down that the key role of the trenches—long predicted by military experts—opened up the possibility of actually playing at war. Burrowing in the earth could be done anywhere, so why not at Reichskanzlerplatz in the west end of Berlin? In the summer of 1915, the inquisitive got a chance to climb into a dry, clean-swept, wood-paneled “model trench.”¹

It is difficult to understand today why these archaic-looking, purely defensive trenches were being put on display as though they were technical wonders, and why they so quickly became all the rage with the masses and were soon duplicated in other cities. Hiding under the earth like moles and spending weeks or even months lying in wait for the opponent was not the virile, gallant battle that people had painted in glowing colors, and the promised quick victory certainly could not be achieved with means like these. But the propaganda and the physicality of the presentation gradually persuaded people that they were part of a grand scheme. They learned about complex meandering or zigzagging trench systems that were equipped with inhabitable dug-outs, listening-post passageways, telephones, wire obstacles, and steps to repel future assaults. All of that could be experienced up close or viewed on newsreels. High-society ladies decked out in fashionable hats and floor-length gowns and escorted by uniformed gentlemen could be seen climbing down into the trench to gain some impression of the war.

Naturally people wanted to see something like that in Prague, as well, and an unused area accessible by public transportation was quickly identified: the long and narrow Kaiserinsel, which divided the river for miles in the north of the city and the tip of which was located across from Stromovka Park, a spacious park noted for its trees and flowers. In the summer, this was the recreational area for the people of Prague who could not afford country retreats of their own, and it was easy to see why adding a trench replica to the outdoor cafés, playgrounds, and sunbathing lawns would offer a most welcome new form of entertainment.

The project was a spectacular success. Although it began to pour just after the trench’s opening ceremonies, and the sun did not peek out for weeks to come, the Number 3 streetcar could barely accommodate the

crush of visitors. On September 28 alone—the Bohemian legal holiday of St. Wenceslas Day—ten thousand people crowded through the turnstiles of the model trench, while beer barrels rolled next door and the Imperial Infantry Regiment No. 51 Band braved the squalls of rain to perform for the crowds. This was no longer a supplement to Střomovka Park; this was a fairground in its own right. And the nicest part was that one could enjoy oneself here with a clear conscience; the admission fee went to benefit “our wounded warriors.” Even the Prague suffragan bishop donated fifty kronen to support the show.

The *Prager Tagblatt* assured its readers that “neither wind nor inclement weather could cause the least damage to any part of the grounds,” but this claim did not hold up. Pelting rain made the Vltava River rise so rapidly that it inundated the island, and with it the trench that had been so painstakingly constructed. It took weeks to clear out the mud and debris. But eventually, in early November, came the proud announcement that the people of Prague would be offered an improved version: in addition to the newly reinforced trench there was a covered refreshment area featuring Pilsener beer and sausages, and military marches would be played every Sunday.

Kafka may not have been musically inclined, but he *was* curious. He almost missed out on this sensation because he was dog-tired, his temples were pounding, and he had no desire to stand in line dodging dripping umbrellas and whining children. A film of the opening ceremony had already been shown in Prague, picture postcards were selling briskly, and every elementary school child was talking about the trench. There was no need for him to subject himself to all this bother to keep informed. But maybe now was just the right time to take a closer look. A good deal was now being said about the war once again, reports of victory had come to dominate the headlines day after day following a long silence, and for the first time in months, discussions at the office and on the street began to focus on how things would proceed when it was all over.

Kafka, who in his civil service capacity sidestepped political discussions whenever he could, got caught up in an unaccustomed, almost disturbing state of excitement. Of course, he had plans. He wanted to get away from Prague, and longed for the Western urbanity he had come to know in Paris and Berlin, which made the old Prague, his home-

6 town, seem suffocatingly provincial. His parents, sisters, and friends knew of his longing—although he rarely spoke of it—but no one took it very seriously. It was a pipe dream that failed to mask the increasingly wretched daily reality and pervasive sense of dread. Kafka had two brothers-in-law at the front. If they eventually came home alive, he might be able to think about Berlin.

But it was the state itself that was now highlighting the question of the future. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy offered its populace a wager: if you bet on victory and won, you would get 5½ percent annual interest and a subsequent return of principal; if you lost, you would lose it all. Of course, it would have been unseemly to make explicit mention of a wager and the possibility of a military defeat; that topic that was taboo even for the technocrats of the war. The wager took the form of “war bonds.” The purchaser lent the state money so that the state could continue the war and make a big haul, and a certain percentage of this net profit would be distributed among the millions of creditors. Everyone would emerge from the war a winner. From this perspective, the transaction seemed far more appealing. And since no one could imagine that there might not be a bond issuer left when the bonds matured, two rounds of donations had already poured in. The success of the most recent issue, the “3rd Austro-Hungarian war bond,” wound up surpassing even the most optimistic predictions. More than five billion kronen were exchanged for scrip adorned with double eagles, Jugendstil ornaments, official seals, and signatures, promising the moon and an ironclad guarantee until 1930.

Kafka found the idea of high long-term interest rates enticing as well, especially when he pondered his plans for Berlin. He had no more doubts about the integrity of the offer than his colleagues at work had; after all, even the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute considered it an act of patriotism to invest a substantial portion of its precious reserve funds—six million kronen to date—in war bonds. Nevertheless, Kafka hesitated for quite some time, understanding full well the consequences of his decision. In order to make his dream of breaking away from his profession, his parents, and Prague a reality, he had to count on the two annual salaries he had now saved up, about six thousand kronen, being available at the crucial moment. Then again, the

interest rate might one day yield the extra income he would need to feed a family.

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Kafka made his way to the registration office. It was Friday, November 5, 1915; he was running out of time because the next day at noon the counter would close and his chance to invest would slip away. He had just read in the *Prager Tagblatt*, “Everyone should ponder the question of what assets have ever achieved such a high yield. Use the final remaining hours to complete the purchasing formalities.” That sounded reasonable, but how much should he wager? Kafka stood in front of the office, turned on his heel and strode home, turned around again and headed back to the registration office frantically, but he could not bring himself to enter this time either. Once he was back home and realized that he had frittered away the afternoon, his only option was to ask his mother to complete the purchase because he had to work on Saturday morning and could not run around town. He instructed her to invest one thousand kronen in his name. No, maybe that was too cautious—make it two thousand kronen.

On the afternoon of the following day—his savings now in the best of hands²—Kafka decided he would finally have a look at the trench on the Kaiserinsel in Prague. Why now? Did he sense a connection? Did he feel a sense of responsibility because of his financial stake in the war? His one rather odd remark about this experience provides no clue: “*Sight of the people swarming like ants in front of and inside the trench.*” A hollow in the ground with many living creatures squeezed together was really all that could be seen.

Kafka joined the swarm, then headed back to the city to visit the family of Oskar Pollak, a childhood friend with whom he had exchanged almost intimate letters more than ten years earlier. Pollak had been a supporter of the war right from the start and, five months ago, had become a casualty at the Isonzo while serving as an officer cadet. The time for Kafka to express his condolences was long past, and today he would do so, on the way home from the trench, nearly too late, as always.