

CHAPTER I

Nothing Happening in Prague

*Think you heard this all before,
Now you're gonna hear some more.*

—Devo, “Going Under”

JULY 3, 1883, WAS A CLEAR, PLEASANT SUMMER'S DAY, WITH A GENTLE breeze wafting through the narrow streets of the Old Town in Prague, where the temperature had risen to 30 degrees Celsius by noon. Fortunately it was not a muggy heat; the few clouds that appeared in the afternoon were not threatening, and thousands of people in Prague were looking forward to a mild evening in one of the countless open-air restaurants, enjoying pilsner, wine, and brass band music. Today was a Tuesday, which meant that there were a good many “military concerts” in store. In the spacious beer garden on the Sophieninsel, the hoopla started up at four in the afternoon for tourists, students, and retirees. Most people still had a few more hours of work ahead of them, and those unlucky souls who earned their living in a shop had to wait until after sundown to join the festivities. Getting there even in time to attend a theater performance could depend on the boss's goodwill. For the Czechs, that day's schedule featured *Fedora*, the latest melodrama by the best-selling French author Victorien Sardou, while the

- 2 Germans could see Johann Nestroy's musical *He Will Go on a Spree* (which later became the basis of *Hello, Dolly!*). Anyone who found that too highbrow could head into Wanda's Musical Comedy Hall, where Fräulein Mirzl Lehner, "the snazzy lady from Vienna," presented her "amusing and very proper show," together with other "newly hired artists." A well-organized set of offerings for the nearly 160,000 residents of Prague.

Prague in the summer, Prague in peacetime. The hours went by, the stock market ticked up and down ever so slightly (as it had been doing for the past ten years), and life seemed to lack verve. Even the usual reports about con artists, women committing suicide, and embezzling and absconding bank tellers, which readers of the *Prager Tagblatt* and the *Bohemia* soaked up eagerly, were absent from the newspapers. At the Civilian Swimming School, the river bathing area open to the public, a toddler fell into the Vltava and was saved by a thirteen-year-old boy. That was the only newsworthy calamity on this third of July, apart from the natural fatalities reported in impossibly tiny print. On Hibernergasse, a frail eighteen-day-old infant named Augustin died, and two-year-old Amalia succumbed to tuberculosis. But who wanted news like that?

And yet this day would go down in the annals of the city of Prague for two reasons, one instantly in the public eye and the other of no consequence to anyone but the Kafkas until much later. A political and mental shock rocked the city on this day. At first, very few people knew about an unthinkable new development, but in the coffeehouses, word soon got around, even before the press had a chance to react. Elections for the Bohemian parliament were now taking place, by order of the kaiser himself, under entirely new circumstances. Ever since there were parliaments, the only people eligible to vote were men who paid a certain sum of money in annual taxes. Now the Austrian government suddenly cut this sum in half, with the approval of the kaiser, and to the horror of a small, but significant segment of the population. Even the most politically naive among them could clearly see the consequences of this decision: more eligible voters meant more Czech voters. The upshot was instantaneous on this day: the Czechs outnumbered the Germans and had a solid majority, for the first time and quite likely forever; after all, who would ever dare to infringe on

the new right to vote? Most of the large landowners voted Czech, as did the chambers of commerce, and quite a few well-to-do Jews followed suit. The Germans in the downtown area around Altstädter Ring shook their heads in disbelief: even their immediate neighbors, the residents of Josefov, the old Prague ghetto, generally voted Czech, and as if to add insult to injury, word got around that the Jewish butchers—who had never been allowed to cast a vote in the past—were probably the deciding factor.

Most people in Prague had little interest in the workings of the Bohemian parliament, and even among educated speakers of both languages, only the most avid readers of newspapers gleaned the authority this parliament actually had and could gauge its impact on everyday German and Czech life. But it was a symbolic victory for the Czechs, the most important one thus far, as everyone understood, and so it was deemed “historic.” Even the losers saw it that way. Their tone was muted. The German-speaking newspapers held back, not wanting to inflame the Czechs, with whom the German populace lived in close proximity in all parts of the city, nor did they wish to incite their own subscribers. Only the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna gave a frank assessment of the situation; this liberal newspaper of record, on display throughout Prague, could afford to do so. Here the Bohemians were told that the foolish way they had voted might spell the end of the West: “Will it really get to the point that Prague drowns in the Slavic inundation?” Absolutely not, the paper insisted. “The German delegates of the capital may disappear from the *Landstube*, but the people in the streets and houses will remain until the day finally comes that puts an end to the Slavic counter-reformation and Prague will again become what it was, a center of human culture, that is to say German culture.”¹

This blunt wording was too strong even for the government censors in Vienna, who confiscated the paper a few days later. However, the aggressive tone and chauvinistic clamor reveal that the momentous nature of this day had been grasped. An elite had always concentrated the power in its hands, but from now on, the majority would rule, legitimated by simple demographics, which in Prague was, inevitably, four to one in favor of the Czechs. What if this principle of majority rule were to prevail throughout the monarchy? The Bohemians would be

- 4 blamed for having been the weakest link in the chain, a chain broken in their capital city, on this very day of July 3, 1883.

Not everyone in Prague took note of the landslide in the Bohemian parliament. Real life was happening elsewhere, and for anyone who had lost a small child, an Augustin or an Amalia, everything political stopped mattering for a long time to come. The same was true of those welcoming a newborn into the world. They, too, were crossing the threshold of a new epoch and experiencing the dawn of a new era from which there was no turning back. In the warm physical presence of their child, the rest of the world faded away.

This is exactly what was happening in a building right next to St. Nicholas Church on the corner of Maiselgasse and Karpfengasse, the residence of the Kafkas, a Jewish couple married only ten months. The building had seen better days and had once been the prelatore of the famous Strahov Monastery, but apart from the Baroque facade, not much remained of its former glory. The building had served as an ordinary apartment house for quite some time, and the neighborhood was unimpressive and ill-suited to making new acquaintances: on the one side the church, in which the Russian Orthodox Christians held their somber services, on the other several dubious-looking dives and even brothels, almost an extension of Josefov, a tumbledown part of town rumored to be slated for demolition.

The Kafkas would not be staying here for long, but for the time being they needed to scrimp, because they had put all their savings—consisting mainly of wife Julie's dowry—into a new business selling thread and cotton, just steps away at the north side of Altstädter Ring. The sole proprietor was thirty-year-old Hermann, but his wife, who was three years younger, had to work here full time for the shop to survive. The two of them had little time for themselves; they even forwent a honeymoon so that they would not neglect their duties in Prague, and a pregnancy did not align with their vision for launching the new store, let alone with paying a nurse and nanny.

But the baby was a boy, and in a patriarchal world—Hermann and Julie's—the male child was the guarantor of the future, the next link in the generational chain that preserved and guided the individual

and conveyed a sense of permanence. Up to this point, the Kafkas knew that they wanted to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but now they also felt that this goal would extend beyond their own time on earth and thus become unassailable. The newborn was an “heir” in the eyes of his parents and in the world around him, before he even took his first steps. The Kafkas’ relatives, employees, and customers also revised their view of Hermann and Julie from one day to the next; it was like a promotion, yet even better, because the new status was enduring unless this child were to die. But no one wanted to think in those terms right now. The boy was “a delicate, but healthy child,” as his mother would later note²; he would surely survive and be the heir for whom they would sacrifice themselves and for whose sake they would now be part of the world at large. And so it was only right and proper for him to bear the name of their kaiser. Yes, indeed: they would name him Franz.

As the world would know a century later, Franz’s future turned out altogether differently from the way the Kafkas imagined it. A plaque would mark the first home the Kafkas shared, commemorating not a successful shopkeeper, but a writer. The linear generational succession, which rejuvenates the family and anchors it in the world, would prove just as vulnerable and ephemeral as the isolated existence of the individual. Hundreds of thousands of such lines would be broken off and even violently extinguished while Franz Kafka’s parents were still alive. But July 3, 1883, which for so many people in Prague was a day of profound disillusionment and for the Kafkas a day of pride and joy, would acquire a new and distinctive significance.

Franz Joseph I, the fifty-two-year-old kaiser whose first name Kafka bore, also spent this day in a cheerful mood. He was in Graz, Austria, making the standard round of visits: mass in the cathedral, opening day of a regional exhibition, looking in on the fire department and the military hospital, receiving delegates and high-ranking individuals, and attending formal dinners. He also read a series of dispatches, including several from Prague, where the Czechs—as anticipated—had finally gotten their way. But this annoyance was instantaneously overshadowed by the cheers of the population of Graz, who all turned

6 out for this occasion, and by more pleasurable duties, which buoyed the kaiser's spirits once again. One highlight was a repeat visit to the fiercely loyal Styrian riflemen in the shooting range, bedecked with flags and flowers. The endless gun salutes of the overzealous riflemen made the horses of the imperial state coach skittish, and Franz Joseph had to call a halt to this activity. But he enjoyed seeing the women in traditional costume, and receiving bouquets of flowers from fetching girls. The riflemen wanted him to go beyond fine speeches, and urged him to try his hand at the shooting range to start the gala display of marksmanship. He was ceremoniously led to the loaded rifles, while the spectators waited with bated breath. Twice he took aim at the moving target—and once he hit the rings, scoring a “one.” Gun salutes rang out to inform the entire city, accompanied by a never-ending roar from a crowd of thousands.