

# Kafka Kaleidoscope



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essays, poetry, drama and fiction  
inspired by, and in homage to, Franz Kafka

## Prague, 1974

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

**I**N FOUR LANGUAGES, the sign warned against passage beyond that point; it seemed, however, that even reading the sign was forbidden. I had not stood there for more than two minutes before two Jeeps from behind the barbed-wire barricade and one from the dead-end street had surrounded me. "Passport!" and "Verboten!" were the only two words any of the soldiers cared to speak while I pretended to understand nothing. That was my first day in East Berlin; by the third day I hardly had to pretend.

Transit from the forbidden island of West Berlin to East Berlin was easy. Even beginning swimmers can cope with all the red-cross-tape. But to travel from East Berlin to East Germany, the technology of scuba-divers and the authority of senior life-savers still proved useless against the vast sea of official indifference.

Three times I had gone to Alexanderplatz to procure a visa. The first morning the tourist office was closed for some unknown, undeclared reason. The next morning it was open, yet I was instructed to return tomorrow. The third morning I was granted a short interview and given an appointment for next week, and this with no assurance of immediate entrance into East Germany. I got the message: I was too young, too poor, and too threadbare. Weary of waiting, I laid aside all plans of visiting the other side until

I would be able to fulfill, someday, perhaps foolishly, their standard of the first-class hotel-sleeping and ten-course meal-eating affluent American tourist.

On the fourth morning, I crossed with long hair and dungarees from West Berlin to East for the last time, and then boarded a train bound for Prague: I had secured a five-day visa several months previously—and easily.

The journey across East Germany was uneventful except for two new transportation taxes I had never before heard anything about. I unhesitatingly paid, hoping to hear nothing about them again. Then at the Czech border I was searched. One soldier, who did not know what he was looking for, dumped out my backpack, while another, who did not know what he was reading, thumbed through my paperbacks. Since neither spoke English, the latter must have counted on the mere arrangement of unknown words to reveal some silent secret.

An hour past the border, the train arrived in Prague. I departed the station seeking someone to direct me in either German or English to the traveler's information office. Such a citizen was found in a young student of quiet demeanor and casual dress who politely instructed me in German. It was not far—for nothing in Prague is far, he said—and so I walked.

"Hello!" I greeted, entering the office. "I wish to book accommodations in the youth hostel for five days."

The young woman behind the counter, reacting with a strange, caged smile, told me that Prague's hostels were

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open only during the summer. This was October.

"How about a class C hotel?" I inquired, clutching my wallet.

Her smile curved still stranger as she straightened me out. I should have held onto my hat too: all hotels were full. A convention of some unspecified nature had brought thousands of visitors to the city, and no vacancies were expected for the next six days. Since no foreigner could remain legally unless registered at a hotel, new arrivals were being turned away. Having arrived at noon, I would be forced to flee by midnight.

I had now to accomplish in a few hours what I had intended to do in a few days: retrace the steps of Franz Kafka, who had lived his entire short life in this small city. As though seeking entrance into a castle to which no road led, I finally understood how my past three days were a realization of his writings. Thus my next few hours here slipped by like those for a reader finding a way through the remaining pages of a long and much-loved book.

By early evening, I was standing opposite the Tyn Cathedral and in front of Celetna 3 where Kafka had lived at the turn-of-the-century. The barricaded building, only a cobblestone's throw from the tourist office where I had initiated my quest, was in terminal stages of decay. Years had passed since anyone had entered—or, maybe, had left. I stared in anguish for several minutes, motionless, soundless, frozen, as though pondering over a passage in a book.

No solution to any riddle unveiled itself to me, so I

unfolded my map and by the fading light of approaching night strained my vision for hint of which way to turn. Slowly, out of the corner of my eye, I sensed someone standing beside me. But I did not bother to turn to the stranger, who could only be another black market money-changer attracted to my Levis like a fly to fruit. I heard a voice, in German, and familiar, too. "Do you need any help?"

Turning, I found the student from whom I had garnered directions earlier in the day. We talked.

We discovered we had been on the same train. Though Czech, he attended school in East Berlin and had come home for a holiday. Eventually our conversation centered on my mission to Prague, which I was at first reluctant to admit: Kafka was banned in his native Czechoslovakia and I meant to avoid political discussions of even the most obtuse nature. Yet, trusting in his youth, I told him.

I never before had met anyone who had read all of Kafka's works as I had done, yet here was such a person. He had read Kafka in East Berlin, in the original German, so his toils were far more demanding than mine. Our meeting and our mutual endeavors were a greater coincidence than could have been told in any novel, even that of Dickens', whom Kafka greatly admired. We spoke softly, almost silently: with so much to say we were confused just where to begin—so instead said almost nothing. Nevertheless our few words echoed beyond mere ears and filled an empty universe where they would wait to be heard for years.

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Frontier borders were overrun, language barriers overcome. Two separate solitaries enveloped each other for immeasurable minutes in the shadow of the very tenement where Kafka, whose writing had touched our lives, had lived and written some seventy-five years before. The building before us was an empty shell but we, from the outside, stirred life within its rotting walls. Kafka, the German-speaking Czech Jew, was now reawakened within a native Czech and an American Jew speaking in German about the writer of *Amerika* who had never been there.

Except for Kafka's 1924 gravesite, I had visited all I planned. But I was content not to visit the grave for I was thankful enough for the grave itself: had he not died so young, the author of "The Penal Colony" instead would have disappeared twenty years later—as did his three sisters and two of his three great loves—in one of Germany's many penal colonies. Yes, I was thankful he had died when he did, for I was grateful enough that he had lived.

Having found through a fellow reader the spirit of the writer whom I had sought, and having now no need to stay, I boarded the midnight train back to West Germany. After an uncomfortable sitting-car sleep, interrupted by conductors, money-changers, and border police, the next morning I arrived amid traffic turmoil of rush hour in Nuremberg, the city of trials and judgments, and lost myself in the crowd.

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KAFKA KALEIDOSCOPE, edited and with a foreword by Martin Wasserman, is a kaleidoscopic gathering of essays, poetry, drama and fiction inspired by, and in homage to, the great writer and mystic Franz Kafka, whose works and life have influenced millions in many different cultures around the world. From the Foreword: "Kafka's writings are so profound and multi-layered that they allow every reader to see in them a clear vision of their own varying reflections. This great variety of perspectives . . . demonstrates there is something in his writings which we experience as broadly meaningful and, perhaps, even useful in our shared modern predicament." Original wood engravings by Frank C. Eckmair. Letterpress softcover edition; \$17. ISBN: 0-913559-52-0. 104 pages.



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