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Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. In search of identity – Franz Kafka*

Abstract

Franz Kafka's life and work have been the subject of many research papers. While the interpreters of his works knew that he was a Jew, they did not always fully realize the significance of this fact. Some would treat this issue as a marginal one, failing to see that it was the pivot of his existence and work. Kafka kept wandering about in search of his own identity. As a lost agnostic who "lapsed" from the hand of God, lived without Him in the darkness of atheism and tried to discern His light, Franz Kafka was not really dependent on any specific religious denomination. However, Judaism is so strongly related to the Mosaic revelation – like Christianity is related to Christ's Revelation – that it cannot be here omitted or forgotten, as this would result in some misunderstandings. In a sense it is impossible to separate the fact of being Jewish from the religion. Kafka's life, as well as his writing, resulted from his continual reference to the Absolute. There are two worlds far removed from each other: the world of spirit and the world of man. Kafka believed that there is a world of that which is spiritual, absolute, pure, true, unchanging and indestructible – the world devoid of sin, but full of perfection; therefore, there exists that which man tends to encapsulate in the concept of God.

Keywords

Franz Kafka, Judaism, God, Atheism, Jewish thinkers, Philosophy.

* The text is a revised and adaptation of the article, which appeared in Polish in: "Studia Redemptorystowskie" 2 (2004).

Apparently, there is some kind of “Jewish wonder,” identified not with Israel or Zionism, but understood as the intellectual genius of the nation scattered all over the world – the nation with a strange fate and destiny. Jewish thinkers’ contribution to world philosophy is hard to evaluate. Many of them became perfectly assimilated, adjusting their mentality to the mentality of the countries they lived in. It is enough to mention Henri Bergson, Léon Brunschvicq, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Wahl or Vladimir Jankélévitch. The abiding glory of Israel has been aided by the works of such thinkers as: Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Lévinas, Abraham Heschel and others. However, there is also another group of Jews: agnostics and atheists, who desperately seek salvation, struggle to discover their own identities, and are shattered by the Shoah.

1. Biographical details

Franz Kafka’s life and work have been the subject of many research papers. While the interpreters of his works knew that he was a Jew, they did not always fully realize the significance of this fact. Some would treat this issue as a marginal one, failing to see that it was the pivot of his existence and work. Failure to discern Kafka’s Jewish roots entails the risk of misunderstanding his writings. There is no doubt that he lived and thought within the Jewish tradition. Many elements in his books are derived from this tradition. A great deal of passages in his diaries serve as clear evidence that he knew the Talmud. The books he read, which are mentioned in his diaries and letters, and which today are listed in an incomplete catalogue of his private library prove Kafka’s abiding interest in the Jewish issues, Yiddish literature, Jewish religion, as well as works on history and philosophy of religion in general. When Kafka writes about the law, he most often means the Torah. Even his simple, emphatic and terse language is evocative of ancient Hebraic texts. As we, however, prove Kafka’s Jewish tradition and mindset, we cannot go to the other extreme by tying him to this tradition only.

Franz Kafka lived a little less than forty-one years. Prague, where he was born on 3 July 1883, where he worked and wrote, was the place of intersecting elements of the Czech, German, Austrian and Jewish cultures. He was born into a Jewish family that had practically lost its faith and observed only some of the Jewish feasts. It all goes to show that Kafka too, according to custom, would visit the synagogue on such feast days. As he himself, however, reminisces, he found religious rites unimportant, boring and even ridiculous, and the religious education

he received at school was so inadequate that it stifled any interest in Judaism that he might develop. Already as an adult, he was sceptical about the mystical snobbery of his milieu, and his opposition to manifold pseudo-religious varieties serves as an explanation of his later interest in the much more “lively” religion of the Jews of the East.

In order to understand Franz Kafka’s aversion to, and a certain grudge against the formal and sluggish Judaism practised in Prague, one can read his shocking *Letter to His Father*,¹ in which he writes about his childhood in Prague and complains about his inadequate religious upbringing. It was his father’s insincerity that was the cause of Kafka’s withered religiousness limited to rituals only. He was formed in the atmosphere of artificial, formalistic religion, which made him quickly give up observing its rites. He would boast about his atheism to others. His manner of doing that was so unambiguous that his school friend Hugo Bergmann, who later on became a Zionist thinker, feared that he himself might succumb to a temptation like this.

In his youth Franz Kafka hated the degenerate Judaism of the Jews of the West (*Westjuden*). However, his religious indifference came to a breaking point in the years 1911–1912. Kafka’s reflection on Zionism and his own Jewish identity was inspired first by Martin Buber’s famous lectures that he delivered in the years 1909–1911 in Prague, and then by the first meeting and the subsequent close relations with a theatre company that was giving guest performances at the Café Savoy in Prague, staging plays in Yiddish. The notes in *The Diaries*² which Kafka began writing at that time serve as evidence of his lively interest in the company headed by Yitzhak Levi from Warsaw. It is with painstaking accuracy worthy of an etymologist that Kafka describes the comedians and their playing, summarizing the Hasidic stories making up the core of the performances. He did not evaluate them as works of art, but rather treated as an expression of the Jewish life. He valued them highly, because they imparted to him a sense of being Jewish and did not cause him the embarrassment that he felt during political events. After his encounter with the Yiddish actors, whom he viewed as ambassadors of the Promised Land, he saw Judaism as divided into the Jews of the East and the Jews of the West. Thanks to this theatre company he got to know better the lifestyle and customs of the Jews of the East. He was content

¹ F. Kafka, *Dociekania psa; List do ojca; Proces; Zamek* [trans. from the German], Warsaw 1994.

² F. Kafka, *The Diaries 1910–1923*, trans. from the German by Joseph Kresh, Schocken Books Inc., New York 1949.

to face the vibrant Judaism which came from afar, and which was remarkably warm and enthusiastic. For Kafka it was a poignant experience, but it did not result in his radical conversion. The echoes of this experience can be found in his autobiographical short story entitled *Investigations of a Dog*.³

In 1917, during the First World War, Kafka again established some new and significant closeness to Judaism. He had a very specific encounter with the religion and culture of the Jews of the East, who were fleeing Galicia and other Eastern European countries, and kept flowing to Prague. It was also in those days that Kafka's long-standing engagement to Felice Bauer was broken off as well as his tuberculosis set in, which could be considered as the alibi for abandoning the decision to get married, which he had so long been looking for. Of some relevance for Kafka's renewed interest in Judaism was undoubtedly his friendship with Max Brod,⁴ who eagerly set about discovering his own identity too. Kafka would read Søren Kierkegaard, Jewish philosophers, Martin Buber and Leo Tolstoy, the latter of whom he found very close. He had religious reflections about the *Book of Genesis*.

But it was not only his reading of the Bible that was instrumental in his return to his own roots. Other writings too played a role here. Already in 1911, Kafka read a classic entitled *History of the Jews* by Heinrich Graetz, as well as other works on the history of the Jewish nation. The growth of his interest in Judaism, which took place during the war, came to be expressed, both in the case of Kafka and Max Brod, in the desire to study the Hebrew language. In his learning, which was quite trying, he was tremendously helped by his friend Friedrich Thieberger, an expert in the ancient Hebrew language. Jiří Langer, having visited Jews in Galicia, was also trying to help Kafka by introducing him into the world of Hasidism and Kabbalah. However, the effects of all these endeavours were not entirely satisfactory, which is evidenced by the 1922 short story *Investigations of a Dog*, which expresses a certain unwillingness to deal with Judaism.

The last two years of Kafka's life were filled with studies of the Hebrew language. Apart from the handbook by Moses Roth, Kafka was using the Menorah

³ *Investigations of a Dog*, in: F. Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir Schocken Books, New York 1971.

⁴ Max Brod (1884–1968) a German writer, essayist, musician and Zionist. He was born in Prague, where he studied law. Subsequently, he took up residence in Tel Aviv, where he acted as an artistic adviser to the *Habima*, the best Hebrew theatre company. Kafka handed his literary legacy over to Brod, instructing him to destroy unpublished manuscripts, but Brod did not act upon his instruction, and got down to editing, interpreting and publishing them. For 40 years, in series of lectures he popularized the life and work of his late friend.

Dictionary (1920) by S. Grünberg and A. M. Silbermann. Puah Ben Tovim, who had arrived from Palestine, also offered him some help. This brave and generous woman was trying to study and live in Prague, but fell victim to the exploitation by the Jewish community. She gave lessons in Hebrew, which was her mother tongue, and during various meetings she taught Jewish songs. Helmut Binder suggested that Puah might be the prototype of Josephine, the singing mouse in Kafka's last story (*Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*). Puah taught Kafka for several months, in the time when he was already debilitated. Around 1923 she moved to Berlin in search of greater independence. After several more meetings she severed all contact with Kafka. In the summer of 1923 Kafka met Dora Diamant, a young woman from an orthodox Hasidic family which had escaped from Poland to Germany. She was very supportive of Kafka's interest in Judaism. She was a brilliant Hebraist. Thanks to her, Kafka improved his knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish. Besides, he attended the College for the Study of Judaism ("Hochschule für das Judentum") in Berlin. They were both thinking of emigrating to Palestine, but eventually gave up on the idea on account of Kafka's ill health.

The older Kafka grew, the more he enjoyed studying the history of his nation. This is evidenced by the above-mentioned story *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, a profound allegory of a nation which used to be able to sing but has preserved songs that no one understands any more. That is the theme that bothered Kafka all his life. He died in a sanatorium in Kierling on 3 June 1924, and on 11 June he was buried in the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague.

2. Interpretations

Kafka lived in a stifling world, the traces of which can be clearly seen in his writings full of imagery and parables. Despite the ambiguity of the diaries and the works subjected to frequent revisions, let us try and use them to understand the mystery of this complicated individualist. From birth Kafka was an outcast who tried to save himself through his own works. He actually never managed to do that. The tragedy of Kafka's situation resulted from several elements: his ancestral uprootedness, the feeling of alienation,⁵ anxiety and the permanent

⁵ Awareness of the Jewish identity, both individual and collective, was present in Kafka's world. He saw himself as a member of a Jewish minority living among Christians, and precisely among Czech Christians. He had a liking for the Czechs but did not feel he was one of them. He felt he was neither German nor Austrian. With Germans, if they were not Jewish,

malaise as experienced by the inhabitant of Prague the “city-hell.” And all this was compounded by Kafka’s unusual sensitivity, his morbid and inexplicable inability to relate to other people, and to find order in his own life.

Kafka was internally blocked, self-conscious, abnormal; he was unable to overcome his internal infantile conflicts that came to the surface in the form of fear of his father, and sexual disgust. Kafka’s mature and challenging sensitivity went hand in hand with his sexual immaturity. However, he did not turn his loneliness and alienation from the world into a prison; rather, he lived in a sense straddling the line between loneliness and contact with people. Arguably, he had to grapple with life hardships more than others. Still, he managed to preserve his personality, till the very end trying to break free from that which was strange; he was extremely scrupulous and even pedantic about his everyday duties. He was a type of very punctual functionary, or a clerk (Beamter). He acted through the agency of dreams and vision of some imaginary world that he painted in great detail. He appeared to be obedient to strange forces, some higher Powers. It is on these aspects of Kafka’s personality that a number of interpretations focus, as they do not essentially separate the author from this work.

In keeping with the above, it seems obvious that any adequate interpretation of Kafka’s work should be existential, or even existentialist. Indeed, the world of Kafka, discovered and described in the 1930s, revealed the “loneliness” and “oblivion” of Heidegger’s philosophy,⁶ the “brokenness” of Jaspers, the “nausea” of Sartre, and above all the “absurdity” of Camus. Kafka came to be reckoned among the knights of Nothingness, which is what happens, for instance, in Maurice Blanchot’s or Claude-Edmonde Magny’s essays. The atmosphere of Kafka’s short stories and novels (*The Trial*, *The Castle*, *America*, *Metamorphosis*) is unique and exceptional. The compass of existential literature is too constricting for Kafka, or Kafka is too constricting for existentialism. He is a writer without “spiritual states,” pathos, sighs and lament. Hence, it is difficult to place him next to Kierkegaard. If we were to find some analogies or genealogy for Kafka, we would have to look in the Austrian decadence of Otto Weininger, Karl Kraus and Robert Musil, where the prevalent features were analysis, splendour,

he maintained only professional relations, and yet he was a representative of German literature. At any rate, he wrote in German. One might, therefore, say that he was a Jewish writer who wrote in German, but lived among the Czechs.

⁶ “Even the forgetting of something, in which every relationship of Being towards what one formerly knew has seemingly been obliterated, must be conceived as a modification of the primordial Being-in.” M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 90.

a lack of harmony, pessimism and elegance, a taste of suicide, the kinship between writing and death. There is also some similarity between Kafka and the German Jews of the so-called “*belle époque*,” such as the above-mentioned Walter Benjamin and Joseph Roth.⁷ Therefore, the existential legacy does not have to be the only canon applicable to the interpretation of Kafka’s writings. When analysing his works, one needs to refer to biography and psychology (taking into account the “social-asocial” dimension), as well as to speculative thinking and theological elements.⁸

As a lost agnostic who “lapsed” from the hand of God, lived without Him in the darkness of atheism and tried to discern His light, Franz Kafka was not really dependent on any specific religious denomination. However, Judaism is so strongly related to the Mosaic revelation – like Christianity is related to Christ’s Revelation – that it cannot be here omitted or forgotten, as this would result in some misunderstandings. In a sense it is impossible to separate the fact of being Jewish from the religion. What does it mean to be Hebrew after you have removed the religion? Does it make sense to call oneself a Jew without the religion? In a case like this, making references to the racial or rather national affiliation is insufficient and, in a way, artificial. One might say that it is a problem of lay Zionism: “outside of God” Jews are a people like any other; they are no longer a chosen people blessed by God, they are not a guardian of monotheism, rich in promises, scattered among other peoples. Kafka’s case is special. Apparently, none of the explications can be accepted as definitive. His Jewish awareness is acute and deep; it is like a mark impressed on him. As we take into account the fact that his religious sentiments are hardly outlined, and his connections with the synagogue are very weak, it seems legitimate to advance the following thesis: Kafka appears to be a theologian of Jewish being, or rather Jewish existence without faith in God; it is like the mystery of Israel seen in a fogged-up mirror, speaking in a muffled voice. Kafka said the following about himself: “I wasn’t

⁷ Joseph Roth (1894–1939), an Austrian writer. Since 1933 in exile in France. Publication of his books was prohibited in the Third Reich under Hitler. He came from a small-town Jewish environment in Eastern Galicia, which he portrayed in his works.

⁸ However, in the end, in many cases we are dealing with a description rather than an interpretation (e.g. as regards Kafka’s attitude to his father and his fiancée). In the present reflections we need to focus on the “Jewish” interpretation of Kafka which was originated outlined above all by Günter Anders. Unlike Anders, however, we do not wish to completely depart from theological interpretation (Max Brod, Martin Buber), though the latter might in a sense be detached from the Hebrew reference.

called into life, like Kierkegaard, by Christianity's hand that begins to fall heavy, nor did I grab hold of the last tassel of the disappearing Jewish prayer shawl, like the Zionists do. I am the end or the beginning."⁹

3. Judaism

The Jewish moment may not be central to the writings of a writer so introverted and so committed to his works as Kafka. However, as mentioned before, it is an aspect that cannot be omitted, as it is inextricably linked with all the other aspects of his life and writing. There are more and more studies that list Kafka among other Jewish thinkers (e.g. studies by such authors as Marthe Robert, Walter Jens, Hannah Arendt and Ritche Robertson). He nevertheless defies classification, remaining *sui generis*.

Kafka's works still need to be viewed against the backdrop of his environment and the social relations within which he lived, bearing in mind that it was only gradually that he was trying to realize the fact that he was Jewish. "A new acquisition," and not "a natural and obvious property" – such might be the motto according to which Kafka's attitude to Judaism should be studied. Below we will take a closer look at his relationship with Hasidism, the Bible, various religious writings and religious forms, as well as the eternal destiny.

3.1. Oriental Hebraism and Hasidism

Kafka's family lived in the Prague ghetto. Actually, Kafka never left the ghetto, *his own* ghetto. As mentioned before, his Hebrew awareness was first awoken when he met Yitzhak Levi and his fellow actors.¹⁰ The diary entries at that time contain vital Judaic information: synopses of the Yiddish theatre plays,

⁹ As cited in: E. Pawel, *Franz Kafka. Koszmar rozumu*, trans. Irena Stapor, Warszawa 2003, p. 456.

¹⁰ "(...) Yitzhak Levi (alias Jizchak, Isaac, and later Djak Löwy as transcribed in German by Kafka), the manager, founder and the driving spirit of the whole company, and Franz hit it off almost immediately. Their friendship was difficult, but it was very satisfying." E. Pawel, *Franz Kafka*, p. 304.

deliberations, Hasidic anecdotes.¹¹ More than one hundred pages in *The Diaries* are concerned with the Yiddish theatre. Thanks to this contact Kafka gained insight into the lives of ordinary Jews from Eastern Europe. The observations he made were in contrast with the ambiguity of his own sources. In a letter to Milena Jesenská he wrote: “if someone had told me last night, I could be whatever I wanted, I would have chosen to be a small Jewish boy from the East, standing there in the corner without a trace of worry.”¹² Kafka, who was almost always clean and neat, would rather be a dirty and slovenly emigrant!

Hasidism, which Kafka encountered thanks to Levi's theatre company, became a springboard for him to look for some affiliation. Every Hasidic group was characterized by a joyful, serene and lively piety, medieval *Debekuth* (mystical *Gelassenheit*), leading a simple and festive communal life. It operated under the guidance of a holy man called tzadik (*Tsaddik*). Hasidim's spiritual treasures often included anecdotes, cheerful stories, reminiscences, conversations held by the most popular tzadiks, beginning with the founder Baal Shem Tov. The atmosphere of Galician Hasidism was full of joy and humour; Hasidim valued their jokers and mockers. According to mystical teachings they were the righteous.

It appears to be a strange and surprising thing that Kafka became fascinated, and in a sense, let himself be enchanted by precisely this form of Judaism which was absolutely at odds with his withdrawn and lost personality. Apparently, people with characters opposite to his own were attractive to him and so he was drawn to them. Therefore, Kafka was not a completely fossilized loner. Nor was he an asocial man, but he craved a community and fraternity. There was no way he could get rid of the hope of Canaan.

Undoubtedly, his encounter with the religious world of devout Eastern European Jews was extremely ambivalent. He envied their simple-mindedness, although he sometimes ridiculed and parodied it. He valued the authenticity of their religious community capable of true faith in God and was disgusted by his own social group of assimilated Jews of the West, whom he saw as the personification of existence devoid of community spirit, tradition and future.

¹¹ “The actors by their presence always convince me to my horror that most of what I've written about them until now is false. It is false because I write about them with steadfast love (even now, while I write it down, this too becomes false) but varying ability, and this varying ability does not hit off the real actors loudly and correctly but loses itself dully in this love that will never be satisfied with the ability and therefore thinks it is protecting the actors by preventing this ability from exercising itself.” F. Kafka, *The Diaries 1910–1923*, pp. 78–79.

¹² F. Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. Philip Boehm, Schocken Books, New York 1990, p. 190.

In his opinion they severed the ties that had once connected them with the Jewish community but were not accepted by the European community. Thus, they were cut off from the law and so could not find a place for themselves anywhere. Kafka would refer to such a state as a lack of “Jewish solid ground.” He himself suffered because of this, and many a time he expressed this in his letters and notes. The longer he studied the Judaism of the East, the greater aversion he had to the world that defined, and at the same time, limited his own cultural identification. Even though he regarded the Jews of the East as the paradigm of the original and living Judaism, faithful to tradition, his own mindset was rather one of Western Judaism. Even if his connections with Hasidism awoke Kafka and somehow liberated him from his “clumsy, awkward and cumbersome Hebraism,” he came to understand that he was not one for the joyful simplicity of the students of Baal Shem. Unfortunately, the things that immensely weighed down on him were the power of the Law and the obsessive sense of inevitable and unbreakable Norms. The Hasidic life was a fragment of a paradisaical dream which Kafka could not realize.

3.2. Kafka's contact with the Bible

Kafka's texts, and especially his diary entries and aphorisms show that his Judaic knowledge was not only a product of his contact with friends and family, or of his observations of the life of the Prague Jews, but that it was also acquired by reading. He knew the Bible, the Law and the prophets; he was well-versed in Hebrew literature and Yiddish. His contact with the Bible was personal and suffused with mysteriousness. Kafka was not a devout Jew poring over the Holy Scriptures. He studied Hebrew for practical reasons, and not because he was passionate about it. He found time to reflect on the Bible during his stay in the village of Zürau. Specifically, he provided reflections on certain short passages in the *Book of Genesis*, and particularly on the passage concerned with the original sin. Kafka considered himself to be an expert on this subject. Of particular interest and significance is his opinion expressed thus: “We are sinful not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. The state in which we are is sinful, irrespective of guilt.”¹³ Here, Kafka is trying to distinguish between the concept of guilt and

¹³ F. Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, trans. Michael Hofmann, Harvill Secker, London 2006, p. 82.

the concept of defect and deficiency. Hence, a lack of fruits of life is veritable misery for him. One might, therefore, conclude that even as he was in a state of innocence, man was never perfectly happy. On the other hand, the original sin is not an unmitigated disaster, complete failure, destruction and misery. Kafka cushions the effects of the fall, and even implies – in the Hegelian fashion – that the knowledge of good and evil is of some benefit, because it allows us to get to know our weaknesses, as well as tasks and obligations. In his opinion, the expulsion from paradise was in a sense a stroke of fortune: if man had not been expelled, the paradise would have to be destroyed.¹⁴ As man was expelled from paradise, he was condemned to banishment. It is a horrible thing that the guilt definitively rids us of the fruits of the tree of life, and the banishment is an eternal banishment forever. It is, however, only the banishment that can fix reminiscence. In these views of his, Kafka sometimes appears to refer to thinkers radically different from himself, e.g. Paul Claudel (*L'exil enseigne la patrie*) and Marcel Proust (*Les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus*). Even if we are alienated, the paradise remains unchanged, which means that it remains to be a paradise, though we are not there.

Elsewhere Kafka writes: “Why do we harp on about Original Sin? It wasn't on its account that we were expelled from Paradise, but because of the Tree of Life, lest we eat of its fruit.”¹⁵ Kafka is trying to acquit the guilty. For him the curse has its origin in the ban introduced without any satisfactory explanation. Kafka goes as far as to double the separation that has arisen. We appear to be in a sense doubly separated from God: the original sin separates us from Him, and the Tree of Life separates Him from us. Sometimes, Kafka's inclination to relativize the guilt becomes visible. In a sense, he reproaches God's and the snake's prophecies with a lack of precision. According to God's prophecy, Adam should have died after eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and according to the snake's prophecy he should have become like God. But Kafka writes: “Men did not die, but became mortal, they did not become like God, but received an indispensable capacity to become so. [...] It was not man that died, but paradisaical man, he did not become God, but knowledge of the Divine.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser & Eithne Wilkins, Secker and Warburg, London 1954, p. 97.

¹⁵ F. Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, p. 81.

¹⁶ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser & Eithne Wilkins, Secker and Warburg, London 1954, p. 97.

In his reflections Kafka remains aware of the permanence of the Garden of Eden. He concludes that “almost right to the end of the account of the Fall it remains possible that the Garden of Eden will be cursed together with mankind – Only mankind is accursed, the Garden of Eden is not.”¹⁷ Elsewhere he adds: There were three possible ways of punishing man for the Fall: the mildest was the way actually used, expulsion from Paradise, the second was destruction of Paradise, the third – and this would have been the most terrible punishment of all – was the cutting off of life everlasting and leaving everything else as it was.¹⁸ Paradise continues and mankind remains outside of it for ever, *in aeternum*. That is “the eternity of the process.” The permanence of Paradise dialectically reverses alienation – the way it happens in the life of Kafka, the alienated thinker. “Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal – that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world is unavoidable, the eternity of the process (or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process) nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not.”¹⁹

We are residents of a non-existent paradise, forlorn and absent guests, “abonnés absents.” The state of banishment, even if it is irreparable, offers some measure of bliss, or at least a possibility of coming closer to the Tree of Life. Thus emerges a theory of eternal, continual beginning anew: we keep leaving Paradise, but our feet get firmly planted on the threshold. At this point we touch upon an aspect of Kafka’s thinking that slightly tones down the image of his pessimism: with no hope of return to be up there like Jews, wanderers in the spiritual world. “There is nothing besides a spiritual world, what we call the world of the senses is the Evil in the spiritual world,”²⁰ writes Kafka. To the sad aspect that reveals the Tree of Life only as an intuitive moment Kafka opposes the positive aspect: “For us there exist two kinds of truth, as they are represented by the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. [...] In the first, Good separates itself off from Evil, the second is nothing but Good itself, knowing neither of Good nor of Evil. The first truth is given to us really, the second only intuitively. That is what it is so sad to see. The cheerful thing is that the first truth pertains to the

¹⁷ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*..., p. 97.

¹⁸ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*..., p. 99.

¹⁹ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*..., p. 45.

²⁰ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*..., p. 43.

fleeting moment, the second to eternity, and that too is why the first truth fades out in the light of the second.”²¹ The following question arises: why does the Tree of Life disappear from our horizon forever? There is a vicious circle of failure: while the Tree of Knowledge banishes us from Paradise, there is the Tree of Life: disobedience closed Paradise to us, but it changed neither its own nor our destiny.

One of the effects of Kafka’s deliberation on the biblical texts is an interesting reflection on the Tower of Babel. In his opinion we are constructing not the tower, but the pit of Babel. The note is short and it is arguably difficult to come up with an appropriate commentary. The theme of an underground structure brings to mind many images from Kafka’s works, depicting slaves and buried people that need to be snatched out of labyrinths, for instance the unfinished short story entitled *The Burrow* (1923). Unlike the biblical one, the Kafkaesque tower of Babel has nothing that would suggest man’s fanatical pride: it is buried, depressed, stifled, and it resembles Cain’s underground, where he wanted to flee and stay away from the face of God.

One of the biblical figures that Kafka reflects on is Abraham. The reflections were provoked not so much by the study of the Bible as his thoughts about Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Their echoes can be found in *Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope and the True Way*, aphorisms and notes collected in *The Zürau Aphorisms*, as well as many jottings in *The Diaries* and letters. Abraham the “Knight of Faith” is not to Kafka’s liking. He decides to emigrate with “the transient world” into eternity, but the thing is that he cannot get through the gate with his “furniture wagon.” Abraham puts the blame on the weakness of his voice uttering the commands. That is the agony and anguish of his life. He protests and laments the monotony of this world – it is a symbol of his own insufficiency. He would like to find a springboard into the world. There is an element of “enchantment” in his argument. Kafka does not find the figure of Abraham high in the clouds convincing. He accuses him (and by extension Kierkegaard) of excessive spirituality. “He has too much mind, and by means of that mind he travels across the earth as upon a magic chariot, going even where there are no roads. And he cannot find out from himself that there are no roads there. In this way his humble plea to be followed turns into tyranny, and his honest belief that he is «on the road» into arrogance.”²²

²¹ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country...*, pp. 103–104.

²² Letter to Robert Klopstock of June 1921. F. Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 1975.

The biblical figure that fascinated Kafka was Moses. Some critics can even see some analogies with Freud here. They point to the painter Titorelli in Chapter 7 of *The Trial*. The character was supposedly inspired by Michelangelo's *Moses*, also admired by Freud. Kafka's Moses returns from Mount Sinai without any experience. Kafka mentions Moses' predicament at least twice. First in a short text included in his posthumous legacy, from the years 1917–1918.²³ The second time is in an entry made in *The Diaries* and dated 19 October 1921. In the first one of the above-mentioned texts Kafka likens Moses to someone in a state of suspended animation. Someone like this can say many things about the experience, but he cannot say what it is really like after death. In fact, he has gone through something special that made his ordinary life more precious. The same happens to everyone who has experienced something extraordinary. In Kafka's opinion Moses experienced something extraordinary on Mount Sinai. However, instead of submitting to this extraordinariness "he fled down the mountain and, of course, had valuable things to tell and loved, even more than before, the people to whom he had fled and then sacrificed his life for them, one might say in gratitude. From both, however, from those who have returned from a state of suspended animation and from Moses, who returned, one can learn a great deal, but the decisive thing cannot be discovered from them, for they themselves have not discovered [it]. If they had discovered it, they would not have come back at all."²⁴ Kafka returns to the experience of suspended animation and Moses in the above-mentioned entry in *The Diaries*. He mentions him as a man leading his people along the way with a shred of consciousness of what is happening. He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life, incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life is too short but because it is a human life."²⁵ Moses is this incomplete moment of human life, because like someone who has experienced suspended animation, to himself and the people he has created he is dead. Both – writes Kafka – have in fact experienced death. Both have returned as living men whose experience consisted in not experiencing the extraordinary – the only, decisive, and really important.

²³ The text meant here is *Wer einmal scheintot gewesen ist*.

²⁴ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*..., pp. 429–430.

²⁵ F. Kafka, *The Diaries 1910–1923*, p. 378.

The central thought of Judaism is waiting for the Messiah. In this respect one needs to regard Kafka as undoubtedly a Jewish believer. The way he sees it, the world is unredeemed, plunged into darkness even greater than the darkness presented by rabbis. It can be redeemed in no other way than one involving the coming of the Messiah. However, Kafka modified the Messianic faith in his own individual fashion. His texts in a way emanate the premonition that the coming of the messianic has become inconceivable and indiscernible. Man has no solid ground under his feet, he can rely on no one and nothing, and often-times he becomes an object. Showing the world as a God-forsaken place plunged into nothingness, dark and tormented by suffering is essentially nothing else but an expression of Franz Kafka's messianic longing. His messianic hope appears to be very faint, because as his note dated 4 December 1917 reads: "The messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only one day after his arrival, he will not come on the last day, but on the last day of all."²⁶ In *The Diaries* under 25 February 1912 he noted down: "Write regularly! Don't surrender! Even if no salvation should come, I want to be worthy of it at every moment."²⁷ As a Jew Kafka rejected the Christian doctrine of the Saviour—"Intermediary." He was convinced that salvation had to take place without any mediation between God and mankind. However, he had the courage, like his friend Robert Klopstock, to try and come closer to Christ. In a longer conversation recorded in a book entitled *Conversations with Kafka* Gustav Janouch asked the writer about his opinion on Christ. The author answered: "He is an abyss filled with light. One must close one's eyes if one is not to fall into it."²⁸ Elsewhere in his notes Kafka evinces a Paul-like moment: "We too must suffer all the suffering around us. Christ suffered for mankind, but mankind must suffer for Christ."²⁹

Kafka's life as well as his writing resulted from his continual reference to the Absolute. Max Brod, the writer's friend and one of the greatest experts on him, would often say that in order to avoid a one-sided interpretation, one needs to recognize the two main currents that converge into one in Kafka. There are two worlds far removed from each other: the world of spirit and the world of man. Kafka believed that there is a world of that which is spiritual, absolute,

²⁶ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*, p. 88.

²⁷ F. Kafka, *The Diaries* 1910–1923, p. 171.

²⁸ G. Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka. Notes and Reminiscences by Gustav Janouch*, trans. Goronwy Rees, Derek Verschoyle Limited, London 1953, p. 93.

²⁹ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*, pp. 51, 112.

pure, true, unchanging and indestructible – the world devoid of sin, but full of perfection; therefore, there exists that which man tends to encapsulate in the concept of God. There was nothing that Kafka desired more than becoming unified with this world of purity and divinity. One of his aphorisms reads as follows: “Man cannot live without a permanent trust in something indestructible in himself, though both the indestructible element and the trust may remain permanently hidden from him. One of the ways in which this hiddenness can express itself is faith in a personal God.”³⁰ For Kafka faith is about discovering and releasing in oneself that which is indestructible, and being indestructible. Kafka believes in the world of the Absolute. But he is aware of the unbridgeable gap between God and man. Even though the world of God is not completely closed, it remains inaccessible to man. This is because God as “completely Other” cannot be compared with man. However, the existing gap is not only conditional upon God’s matchless grandeur, but also upon the weakness of man, who has lost contact with the indestructible. His faith has been destroyed, and that is why he is forever lost. The world of God has become distant, because man has lost the right path leading to perfect life.

As one analyses the above-mentioned aspects, it is difficult to identify Kafka’s distinct idea and understanding of religion. He is too mysterious, too inner-oriented and distanced from all matters and people, including religion. In the opinion of, inter alia, Walter Benjamin, Kafka holds that the Jewish religion is only a specific element, a certain period, and perhaps even merely a marginal aspect of the Jewish nation’s eternal destiny. Kafka’s life appears to be burdened with the complex of the Wandering Jew (Ahasuerus³¹), who cannot return home. As in his *Letter to His Father* Kafka writes that he is the beginning or the end, he understands himself, on the one hand, as a certain result, an ending containing and leaving behind all history, and on the other hand as the beginning that combines with the beginnings of the earth as yet unformed and empty.

Kafka kept wandering about in search of his own identity. Hasidism and the Bible did not bring answers to all the questions that bothered him, even though he drew many elements from them. Thanks to contact with Hasidim and the Prague Jews, he got to know the Hasidic and Kabbalistic tradition that

³⁰ F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*, p. 43.

³¹ *Homo viator* and *Ahasuerus* are two symbols, two “road signs.” The former concept was demystified by Gabriel Marcel, the latter one by Pär Lagerkvist. The man on the road and the man on an endless journey. Lagerkvist’s *Ahasuerus* is a man “fugitive” from God. He cannot rest, because he did not let a Passer-by who was walking past his home rest.

he could find in the short stories and tales of wonder that he read. For such an allegorical writer as Kafka they were a real treasure trove. It was probably the Hasidic legends that inspired him to come up with his own interpretation of the original sin as impatience. Arguably, in his writings one can also find connections with the Kabbalistic thought. However, he did not unquestioningly adopt the Judaic-Kabbalistic vision of the world, but he combined it in his own manner with the new and contemporary thinking. It was from the Kabbalah that he drew the quest for the two worlds – the upper and lower one, the visible and invisible one. Evil is just an optical illusion, a perception defect, or a shadow of the upper world; after all, it is only the spiritual world that is real. The vague *universum* is like a sunspot.

Although Kafka drew his thoughts from many sources, it is difficult to connect them with familiar forms of Judaism. In Kafka such central themes of the Hebrew religiousness as the law, guilt, fear and divine judgement become secularized, mythologized, and appear as inexplicable elements. Thus, all believing gets rejected, and the remaining things are Hebrew existence and infinite destiny that is eternal, with no beginning or end, marked by nostalgia and fear. Perhaps there is another Judaism in Kafka's writings, but it has never been clearly defined. This is because Kafka's Judaism grew along with his disease and trouble, and so is sometimes in a way meaningless. His Judaism is completely different from that of Martin Buber's; it is a Judaism that pulls back and becomes reduced to consciousness tormented by strange, higher and indomitable forces.

4. Reflections on the work

It is not easy to fully comprehend Franz Kafka's work. One can analyse it from different angles and come to disparate interpretations. In order to understand and appreciate that which is seemingly absurd, one needs to know the writer's special life circumstances: the situation of the Jew, the son of Jews who had long settled into the German atmosphere of Prague, which made them loosen their ties with the Jewish tradition, even though they were not fully accepted by the new environment. One needs to take into account everything that profoundly influenced the writer's life: his father's personality, professional life experiences full of suffering, the arduous struggle for the marriage or against it, as well as the fatal disease. It is even more important to understand Kafka's personal attitude

to reality. That which determined his uniqueness and gave rise to his works was his brilliant writing talent and originality. In essence, he wrote for himself, not for the reader. That is why he asked Max Brod to burn all his unpublished manuscripts after his death.

The central theme of Kafka's prose is alienation, a lack of rootedness, loneliness and the isolation of the individual, which all result from a specific social reality. Kafka keeps confronting his characters with anonymous authority bodies that are not clearly defined or named but are characterized by many elements typical of power structures in contemporary society: bureaucracy, judiciary, violence, pressure exerted on the individual and family, all manner of dictatorship relationships. A theme that is in a sense "hidden" in Kafka's works is his tremendously split relationship with Judaism. While the word "Jew" does not appear in his novels and short stories, the suffering of the Jews is continually presented. Kafka wanted to show, above all, patterns of certain situations, conflicts and complexes that were experienced by the Jews in the "non-Jewish" world. In a way he lived a double life: while, on a daily basis, he was a staunch Jew, always looking for his own roots, the world of his forefathers was completely absent from his own works. In the time when other writers, who were less conscious of their Jewishness, wrote the so-called "Jewish" books (e.g. *The Jews of Zirndorf* by Jakob Wassermann, *The Road into the Open* by Arthur Schnitzler, *Jeremiah* by Stefan Zweig), Kafka did not include in his works any Jewish characters or overtly Jewish references. It was only in the subsequent years that the tragedy of Jewry shown by Kafka was read as an extreme example of man's existence in general. His works were globally successful several dozen years later, when it turned out that they present the situation of people living in the contemporary world. This might not have been the writer's intention. The situation of a Jewish person is one of a man falsely accused, persecuted for no reason and found guilty without a fair trial, but this also serves as an extreme example of a situation that is often experienced by contemporary man.

Franz Kafka's letter to Oskar Pollak dated 1903 reads as follows: "We are as forlorn as children lost in the woods. When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours? And if I were to cast myself down before you and weep and tell you, what more would you know about me than you know about Hell when someone tells you it is hot and dreadful? For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would

before the entrance to Hell.”³² Kafka’s works are full of illusions, references, signs, allegories, personal revolutions which are at the same time reflections on his own being a Jew, a man with no nation or motherland, a man who has been sorely tried by life. We have already mentioned some traces of such trials in Kafka’s works. It may well be an exaggeration to discern in his works some kind of inscrutable anxiety, never-ending fear experienced by a Jew who is forever persecuted, followed and hunted. In fact, the tragedy of a Jewish person in Kafka is – as mentioned above – not so much a tragedy of one’s own people as a tragedy of the individual with no roots and in a sense terrorized, also suffering because of the demise of the entire Central Europe. It is a tragedy of the individual who belongs to the decadence generation of Thomas Mann, Otto Weininger, Franz Werfl and Stefan Zweig; of the individual tempted by suicide, afflicted with disease and profligacy. The case appears to be that it is Kafka who depicts **being Jewish** rather than **being Jewish** defines himself.

Frequent animal motifs are characteristic of Kafka’s texts. In a sense, the writer shifts the worlds of humans and animals around, transferring animal characteristics to humans and vice versa. The animal and the human appear to interpenetrate. Such interpenetration of the two natures is aimed at producing the effect of uncanniness, which makes it more possible to identify and enhance issues concerned with human nature. Kafka’s obsession with animal life and his frequent use of animal elements need to be associated with his willingness to show the human race as full of humility, tame, in a sense living underground, and afraid of light. This may be illustrated with nocturnal life in the short story *The Burrow*, which above all presents Kafka’s loneliness in the face of impending disease. *The Investigations of a Dog* is full of animal-human elements, and like most of Kafka’s texts, this one combines autobiographical and universal aspects. These are, in the opinion of many critics, of a Judaic character as well. In this short story, Kafka writes: All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog. If one could but realize this knowledge, if one could but bring it into the light of day [...] The great choir of dogdom will join in as if it had been waiting for you. Then you will have clarity, truth, avowal, as much of them as you desire. The roof of this wretched life, of which you say so many hard things, will burst open, and all of us, shoulder to shoulder, will ascend into the lofty realm of freedom. [...] I [...] am flesh of their flesh, of their miserable, ever-renewed, ever-desirous flesh. But it is not merely flesh

³² F. Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924*.

and blood that we have in common, but knowledge also, and not only knowledge, but the key to it as well.”³³ The atmosphere of the short story appears to be marked by some kind of fatality: it is somewhat suggestive of a Talmudic treatise spelling the time of a cosmic disaster, when human faces will become similar to dog muzzles. The Jewish tradition does not view the dog favourably, treating it as a pestering animal that wants to sniff and foul everything. For Jews the dog is an embodiment of a deplorable life. Most probably, Kafka was familiar with this tradition, so whenever a dog appears in his texts, it always embodies something miserable.³⁴

It is highly probable that *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, Kafka’s last short story dated March 1924, full of irony and melancholy, is, more or less, connected with the existence of the Jewish Diaspora. The sad story of Josephine, a singing or rather squeaking and piping mouse, is not a clear or comprehensible allegory. In a detached and ironical manner, it shows above all the artist’s unenviable situation, and therefore in a sense the fate of Kafka himself. On the one hand, thanks to Josephine the Mouse, Kafka practises self-irony, and on the other hand, he makes her a symbolic representative of the Jewish nation, the prima donna of a grey choir of mice. The following is a passage from this parable: “unconditional devotion is hardly known among us; ours are people who love slyness beyond everything, without any malice, to be sure, and childish whispering and chatter, innocent, superficial chatter, to be sure, but people of such a kind cannot go in for unconditional devotion, [...] it is easy to stage oneself as a savior of our people, inured as they are to suffering, not sparing themselves, swift in decision, well acquainted with death, timorous only to the eye in the atmosphere of reckless daring which they constantly breathe, and as prolific besides as they are bold [...] who have always somehow managed to save themselves. [...] A kind of unexpended, ineradicable childishness pervades our people; in direct opposition to what is best in us, our infallible practical common sense, we often behave with the utmost foolishness, [...] We have no youth, we are all at once grown-up, and then we stay grown-up too long, a certain weariness and hopelessness spreading from that leaves a broad trail through our people’s nature, tough and strong in hope [...] we are too old for

³³ F. Kafka, *Investigations of a Dog*, pp. 189, 190, 191.

³⁴ E.g. when Josef K., the protagonist of *The Trial*, dies having been stabbed with a knife, he says the following words: “Like a dog!” Cf. F. Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 165.

music, [...] Josephine [...] will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are no historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers.”³⁵ In these words written several weeks before his death, in a sense Kafka ponders his own passing away. He shows it as writing off and removing from memory his own nation and humanity.

Franz Kafka was a type of character that Jews often personated in their own history or general history – a type of prophet. Even though he tried, in many different ways, to come closer to the roots of Judaism, which he had almost entirely forfeited, it appears that he was never able to recover the faith of his forefathers. Judaism left its mark on him, but while his fellow believers might have recognized his genuine interest, they still considered him to be an outsider, weirdo and misfit. In spite of this, or maybe because of this, he became one of the central and most representative figures in German and world literature.

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³⁵ F. Kafka, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, in: *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, Schocken Books, New York 1971, pp. 365, 369, 376.