



# The Final Journey of Franz Kafka's Sisters

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Through me into the city full of woe;  
Through me the message of eternal pain;  
Through me the passage where the lost souls go

Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*<sup>1</sup>

Magic Prague, esoteric Prague, Golden Prague<sup>2</sup>. The capital of the Czech Republic bears those names and nicknames not without reason. It is a truly extraordinary and fascinating city. A cultural palimpsest of texts written through the ages, texts that have been magnificently preserved until our times. "An old in folio of stone pages", as V. Nezval wrote<sup>3</sup>. A Slavic city with over

<sup>1</sup> Fragment of an inscription at the gates of hell which begins the third canto of the *Divine Comedy* [transl. C. Carson]. This quote was used as a motto in the novel *Krutá léta* (1963, *The Cruel Years*) by František Kafka, a Czech writer and literary scholar. I will speak more of him and his novel in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Among numerous books dealing with the cultural and artistic history of this city, see, for example, K. Krejčí, *Praga. Legenda i rzeczywistość*, Warsaw 1974, trans. from Czech by C. Dmochowska; A.M. Ripellino, *Praga magiczna*, Warsaw 1997, trans. from Czech by H. Krallowa; J. Kuchař, *Praha esoterická*, Praha 2000.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ripellino, op. cit., p. 11.

a thousand years of history, but a city which at the same time, due to historical conditions, belongs rather to the culture of the West. The capital of the Czechs, where, however, an important part has always been played by foreign ethnic communities. But this article is no place to present historical panoramas and details. Our subject matter goes back to the turn of the 20th century, so let us stop at that.



Franz Kafka and his sisters: Gabriele (Ellii) Hermann, Valerie (Valli) Pollak i Ottlie (Ottla) David

The biography and works of Franz Kafka constitute an important plot in the complicated story of the culture of Prague. Born in Prague (in the very heart of the city, in the house at 9 Mikulašska St., nowadays: 5 U radnice), he was buried (on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1924) in Prague Jewish cemetery at the Žižkov (Nový židovský hřbitov, 1 Jzraelská St.). Kafka, in most reference books called a German or an Austrian writer<sup>4</sup>, spent all his life with his family in this Czech city (when he was not traveling, of course). In a letter to Oskar Pollak Kafka even wrote: “Prague won’t let go. It won’t let go of the both of us. The little mother has got claws (...) We ought to set fire in two places, in Vyszehrad and Hradczany, because we would thus free ourselves”<sup>5</sup>. The future author of *The Process*, now considered one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is thus just as much a German writer, as he is a Czech and a Jewish artist — because those three cultures and three traditions contributed to the uniqueness of his work. In fact, knowing his biography, his studies and fascinations, his friends, his knowledge of Czech and Yiddish, one does not have to prove the above. It stands out most clearly in the books of his friend, and after 1924 the world promoter of his work, namely Max Brod (born 27 May 1884 in Prague, died 20 December 1968 in Tel Aviv,

<sup>4</sup> E.g. in a lexicon *Pisarze niemieckojęzyczni XX wieku*, ed. M. Zybura, Warsaw-Wrocław 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from 20 December 1902. Quotation after Ripellino, *op.cit.*, pp. 10–11.

where he was buried<sup>6</sup>), the author of Kafka's biography (published in 1937), a historical and literary study called *Der Prager Kreis* (1966; *The Prague Circle*)<sup>7</sup> and an autobiography *Streitbares Leben* (1960, *Brave Life*).

So, when in Prague one can hardly fail to follow the landmarks of Franz Kafka's life: his private residences (beginning with the aforementioned Mikulašska, through 22 Golden Street to Schönborn Palace at 15 Tržistě Square at the Mala Strana), his father's shops, school buildings and offices including the Assicurazioni Generali building at Václavské náměstí<sup>8</sup>, where he worked briefly. One can also try to reconstruct the places in which the action of Kafka's prose takes place, though this is not so easy since the world he created in fact "exists" beyond the real space-time continuum. However, both the aforementioned Krejčí and Ripellino trace the route to death of Joseph K. whom two hangmen lead to the quarries in Strachow via Karl's bridge (with the island of Kampa below, according to Ripellino), or the Legion bridge (with Marksman Island below), and further up along Holečka street to the Hřebenka quarries (according to Krejčí).

Visiting Prague, one can hardly miss the cemetery in Žižkov and Kafka's grave. The tomb is modest, decorated with a high cubist polyhedron (designed by the architect Leopold Ehrmann who also renovated the synagogue in Smichov). Franz's name can be seen in front and below it are written the names of his parents: his father, Hermann, and his mother, Julia. At the very bottom of the granite stone, on a separate marble plaque, there is an inscription which reads "Na paměť sester významného pražského, židovského spisovatele Franza Kafky zahynulých za nacistické okupace v letech 1942–1943" (To the memory of the sisters of the renowned Prague Jewish writer Franz Kafka, murdered during the Nazi occupation in 1942–1943). The names of the three sisters and their birth dates follow: Gabriela Hermannová, Valeria Pollaková and Ottilia Davidová. And it is here that this article really begins, because I have decided to explain and analyze this laconic and dramatic inscription in more detail.

The story of the Kafka (on his father's, Hermann's side) and the Löwy families (on his mother's, Julia's side), as far as it can be reconstructed, goes back to the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its 19<sup>th</sup> century history was more or less accurately presented by Max Brod according to the family tradition in the writer's biography, published in 1937<sup>9</sup>. Members of those families, living for many years in Prague and other small Czech towns, included a rabbi, an accountant, a country doctor, a traveller, a butcher, a member of the Czech parliament

<sup>6</sup> I stress this because of the often false information given about his grave in Žižkov in Prague, next to Kafka's tomb. See, for example, *Praga. Przewodnik Pascala*, Bielsko-Biała 2001, 3rd ed., which, by the way, contains many mistakes (factual and linguistic regarding both artistic and literary issues) that were probably transferred thoughtlessly from the French original. In the cemetery in Prague, not far from the tomb of the Kafka family, there is only a memorial plaque on the cemetery wall, founded by the Jewish community in Prague, devoted to Brod as an inhabitant of Prague and a friend of the great writer.

<sup>7</sup> See the entries "Kraž praski" (Prague circle) and "Realizm magiczny" (Magical realism) in my *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX wieku*, Warsaw 2000. See also: M. Pazi, *Fünf Autoren des Prager Kreises*, Frankfurt am Main, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> For details and other addresses, see e.g. G. Salfiellnier, *Franz Kafka i Praga*, Praha 2000. Also K. Wagenbach, *Kafkas Prag. Ein Reisebuch*, Berlin 1993.

<sup>9</sup> See K. Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1964; *Franz Kafka. Eine Biographie seiner Jugend 1883–1912*, Bern 1958; *Franz Kafka. Bilder aus seinem Leben*, Berlin 1983; A. Northey, *Kafkas Mischpoche*, Berlin 1988 (I also used the Czech translation of this book by A. Kusák, *Mišpoche Franze Kafky*, Praha 1997; I would like to acknowledge Dr. Leszek Engelking's help in locating this book for me).

and even a president of the Spanish Railways who was awarded many medals and orders. Franz's father owned a wholesale haberdasher's shop. His mother took care of the house and unrelentingly helped her husband in his trade. Franz, born on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1883 (in the house in 9 Mikulašska St., today 5 U radnice St., on the northeastern side of the Old Town Market) was their first child. Two of his younger brothers, Georg (1885–1887) and Heinrich (1887–1888) died in infancy. Later, in an old, partly gothic, partly renaissance house U Minuty in the Old Town Market (the Kafka family lived there from June 1889 until September 1896) three sisters were born: Gabriela, or as the family shortened her name, Elli (September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1889), Valeria, or Valli (September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1890), and Ottilia, or Ottla (October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1892).

As the parents were busy with daily work, the children were brought up by a cook and a nanny, and later by governesses. One of the latter, coming from a mixed Czech-Jewish family, Marie Wernerova, called Slečna (Miss), who spoke only Czech, remained in the Kafka household until her death in 1918 and played an especially important part in the raising of the four children. She was their sensitive confidant and a kind guardian, which in a house dominated by an authoritarian father gave their everyday life more of a family atmosphere. As Brod (who probably based his judgment on the conversations with the writer's mother) writes, "Franz played little with his sisters, the age difference was too great, and sometimes contributed to quarrels between the children on some family occasions. Only on his parent's birthday did little Franz compose theatrical scenes for the sisters. They were presented to the family and this custom was observed until they all grew up; many of these plays and poems were remembered by the sisters for a long time afterwards. (...) Franz himself never played in them; he was only the author and the director. Later he suggested to his sisters that instead of his scenes they might put on short plays by Hans Sachs<sup>10</sup> which he also directed"<sup>11</sup>.

However, in his years at school and university, Franz never shared any personal problems with his sisters. His childhood and maturity passed under the influence of friendships and contacts with his peers (some of these friendships survived for many long years), or of lonely observation and reflection. From a later, fully mature perspective revealed in *Letter to Father (Brief an den Vater)*, November 1919) we can see clearly that Franz painfully and dramatically relived — so to speak — his family psychological drama "directed" by his father, a drama of which he and his sisters were the subjects. "My sisters were only partly with me. The happiest one in her relation to you was Valli. Being closest to Mother, she obeyed you in a similar way, without much effort or suffering too much harm. But you accepted her also in a friendlier way, simply because she reminded you of Mother despite there being little of the Kafka material<sup>12</sup> in her. But perhaps this was precisely what you wanted; where there was nothing of the Kafka element, not even you could ask for anything of the sort; nor did you have the feeling, as did the rest of us, that something was getting lost here and had to be saved by force. Besides, you may have never really liked the Kafka element as it expressed itself in women"<sup>13</sup>. And later: "Elli is

<sup>10</sup> Hans Sachs (1494–1576), from Nürnberg, a playwright and author of poetic plays, comic and satirical sketches (called Schwank), but also of tragedies and dramas referring to the Bible and Greek classics. Between 1870 and 1908, his *Werke* appeared in 26 volumes.

<sup>11</sup> M. Brod, *Franz Kafka, eine Biographie*, 1937 (*Franz Kafka. Opowieść biograficzna*, Warsaw 1982, p. 28, trans. from the Czech by T. Zabłudowski).

<sup>12</sup> The author refers to the fact that Kafka's father constantly set the positive features of the Kafka family against the negative features of the Löwy family on his wife's side.

<sup>13</sup> F. Kafka, *Letter to Father*, Praha 1999, pp. 37–38.

the only example of someone almost completely successful in breaking out of your orbit. I expected it from her the least when she was a child. She was such a clumsy, tired, timid, morose, guilt-ridden, overly humble, malicious, lazy, greedy, stingy child I could hardly look at her, certainly not speak to her, so much did she remind me of myself, so very similarly was she under the same spell of our upbringing”<sup>14</sup>.

In this truly psychoanalytical vivisection Franz devotes the most attention to Ottilia, because his youngest sister became in the writer's adult life his closest friend, an empathic witness to his feelings and emotions, provident and practical in financial matters<sup>15</sup>. In *Letter to Father* Franz describes her as follows: “About Ottilia I hardly dare to write; I know that by doing so I'm jeopardizing the entire hoped-for effect of this letter. Under normal circumstances, that is, if she is not in any particular need or danger, you feel only hatred for her; you even admitted to me that, in your opinion, she intentionally causes you constant suffering and annoyance and while you are suffering because of her, she is satisfied and content. A kind of devil, then. (...) You do see us together often, (...) whispering and laughing, now and then you hear your name mentioned, you get the impression of impudent conspirators. (...) But we truly do not sit together to plot against you, but rather to discuss with all our might, in fun, in seriousness, in love, defiance, rage, disgust, surrender, feelings of guilt, with all the strength of our heads and hearts, this terrible trial which hangs between us and you, in all its details, from all sides, on all occasions...”<sup>16</sup>.

Relations between Franz, Gabriela and Valeria changed when the sisters established their own families and freed themselves from their father's authoritarian rule. One could say that although these contacts were conventionally bourgeois, they were characterized by mutual solidarity and aid in the difficult moments of life. The eldest sister, Gabriela, married (on 27 November 1910) Karl Hermann, one year her junior, from Sîřem (Zürau in German), a small town lying about 100 km to the west of Prague on the river Blšanka<sup>17</sup>. As Franz presented her transformed personality in *Letter to Father*: “But this all changed when at a young age — this is the main thing — she left home, married, had children, became cheerful, carefree, brave, generous, unselfish, hopeful”<sup>18</sup>.

Valeria got engaged to Josef Pollak (born 1882) on 15 September 1912, and their wedding took place a few months later, on 12 January 1913. The biggest problem for the family was Ottilia, who fell in love with Josef David, a doctor of law (like Franz), a Czech Catholic and nationalist. The family long tried to talk the girl out of this marriage and in this case Ottilia could count only on the approval of her brother (since even Brod found the idea doubtful)<sup>19</sup>. All in all, the wedding finally took place on 15 July 1920, and the Davids' first child, Vera, was born nine months later, on 27 March of the next year.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 38. In this merciless characteristic, also for himself, Franz seems to measure his sister according to his father's criteria. His father humiliated Gabriela whenever he could.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, H. Binder, “Kafka und seine Schwester Ottilia“, *Schiller-Jahrbuch* 12, 1968; *Briefe an Ottilia und die Familie*, ed. H. Binder und K. Wagenbach, Frankfurt am Main, 1974.

<sup>16</sup> *Letter to Father*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.

<sup>17</sup> A year later Karl founded an asbestos factory in Žižkov, Prager Asbestwerke Hermann&Co (Pražská továrna na osinkové zboží), and Franz became a shareholder with his father's money. See R. Hayman, *Kafka. Seine Leben, seine Welt, sein Werk*, Bern-München 1983; R. Robertsson, *Kafka. Judentum, Gesellschaft, Literatur*, Stuttgart 1988.

<sup>18</sup> *Letter to Father*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> See *Briefe an Ottilia*, op. cit.; also M. Brod, *F. Kafka, Přátelství. Korespondence*, ed. M. Pasley (Praha 1998, trans. into Czech H. Žantovská).