

KAFKA AND JUDAISM.

" I was not brought into life by the heavy down-sinking hand of Christianity like Kierkegaard was, and I have not caught the remotest tab of the prayer mantle, floating away, like the Zionists have. I am the end or the beginning. "

(Franz Kafka)

The family Kafka was not religiously strictly practicing Jews. It was a divided family: the father was the Western Jew, secular, "Viertagejude" – i.e., he visited the synagogue the required four times per year - while his mother came from a Eastern Jewish sphere with more traditional Jewish values, which however never became predominant at all. The Kafka's were simply mainly bourgeois. Kafka had experienced - if not in person - the persecution and harassment of Jews in Prague. He could see from a window rioting directed against the Jews could read about lawsuits against people who murdered Jews. Comrades to him, like Oscar Baum, were beaten up in the streets by Czechs just because they were Jewish boys. His father's shop had escaped looting; only the mob did not believe that his father Herman's shop was actually Jewish, because it carried a Czech bird name. Kafka could also not have failed to be influenced by anti-Jewish trials like the French Dreyfus process and even more upset over some other processes with Jews as protagonists, including the utterly tragic Tisza-Eszlár affair 1882 in Hungary and the Hilsner trial, which concerned the ritual murder in 1899 of a Christian woman, Agnes Hurza. Both of these trials touched Kafka, as they did many, very strong. Many thoughts by FK emanates from the fact that he was a Jew, but his upbringing and schooling and socializing was strongly influenced by the German bourgeoisie, and a secular

German classical tradition. There are very few traces from the works of FK that leads to the *Torah*. One might track the rabbinical - sometimes, but then in what seems to me to as parodies, parodies for instance of rabbinical iterations, in Kafka's thinking, as well as in his letters, and parodies of Jewish reasoning and Jewish folklore in different passages in his works. One might also imagine that more than a "Jewish" homelessness syndrome, a rootlessness is displayed, which might refer more to his position of an existential outsider. It can't be ruled out that it has been a necessary but not sufficient condition for many of the world's important innovators, that they belonged to a traditionally educated and sometimes vulnerable minority. But equally obvious is thus, in terms of the Jewish, that one can assert that Jewishness, being Jewish, was not at all a determinant factor regarding the uniqueness of Franz Kafka's works. Kafka's relationship to the Jewish was – judging from what we know of him - rather distanced, even frivolous, and often very ambivalent. One may here, for example, read Binder's extensive *Kafka-Handbuch II*, to make oneself clear of the comprehensive documentation of Kafka's irreligiousness and his lack of interest in Jewish studies, etc. That he towards the end of his life got increasingly interested in the Hebrew language, and that he occasionally discussed a possible emigration to Palestine, is a fact. He put forward a proposal to go to Palestine to Felice, at the first meeting, but many have regarded this more as a greeting phrase, He came up with this idea on their first meeting, at Brod's and never discussed it again at great length. Kafka asked Dora to go to Paris, to settle there. Berlin, Munich, Paris o. Palestine, were possible places for settlement, considered by FK. Kafka was not very fond of Prague.

"/ ... / I admire Zionism and am disgusted by it."

(Kafka)

Many Kafkaists have highlighted the similarity between Kafka's short stories and the Jewish storytelling tradition. And the truth is that Kafka's head seems to have been full of parables of the kind often found in the Jewish tradition and Jewish penmanship. His attitude to this tradition seems to have been complicated. Zimmermann's reasonable conclusion regarding Kafka's relationship to the Jewish is:

"Kafka is a heretic, as Scholem writes, a heretic who does not adhere to any creed: he is an individualist who educates his own beliefs."

Kafka's knowledge of Jewish religious tradition and Jewish mystique was very limited. He was not a "schooled mystic". Least of all, I dare say. Zimmermann's view also is, like that of many other Kafka scholars, (it is now a very well-researched fact), that Kafka was never a Zionist. It would thus be wrong to say about Kafka, that he was a Jewish author, because he does not at all write in the tradition of Jewish authors, but shapes his own style all from the beginning. Zimmermann, like Heller and Adorno, is very skeptical of Brod's try to claim Kafka as a religious writer, but he nevertheless concludes that FK is something of a mystic. Franz Kafka was basically an almost constitutional skeptic. He was never religious, and never an explicit political writer either. The Jewish holocaust historian Friedländer asserts that there is no influence from the Jewish kabbalah on Kafka. That Kafka occasionally seems to portray the Jewish people does not mean that the Jewish are the premise for his uniqueness as a writer. He himself would not have liked to be defined as a "Jewish writer", in the sense that what he writes mainly ought to be seen in light of the Jewish tradition or the 'Jewish cause'. History has shown that Kafka is appreciated by a majority of the world's readers. He has got a universal appraisal. Kafka, and numerous other Jews in Prague at that time, had become much too assimilated to secular Western culture to feel themselves residents of Judaism. They perhaps found no affiliation anywhere.

Many argue that *The Trial* and *Before the Law* are religious allegories as they claim that *The Castle* is, too, - not necessarily Jewish - and that Joseph K. is on the way to paradise! Death is, they say, equal to the heavenly light streaming towards Joseph K.. There is a glimmer of light in the parable, when the man is looking into "the law", where it flows out from the gate that now should be closed. The light halo is indeed a universal symbol of something sacred. But that which shines from the inside through the opening might, ironically, be nothingness. In the centre of the law, beyond the commentators, it might like with the centre of the ancient Hellenistic Pythagorean mysteries, which in fact consisted of nothing at all! (Just the Pythagorean priests knew about this.)

Significant to Kafka's way of writing parables and parable-like tales is no doubt the connection to the Jewish tradition, but in his treatment of this tradition he is almost harassing it. His parables most often are anti-parables, impossible to interpret. The traditional Jewish parable is didactic and used mainly as commentary of authority and it represents a tradition which in turn has become an authority in itself when is an

not solely an intellectual pun or a Jewish joke. When Kafka uses the parable he refuses to be part of any tradition, or to transmit "truths" or even give any clue about the "proper interpretations". He simply ridicules the parable as well as every authority... We might here think of Montaigne's words on commentaries as well as Kafka's own treatment of the Prometheus myth and of the comments which has been the result of his change of this myth.

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