

Footless giant

A visit to Kafka's Prague

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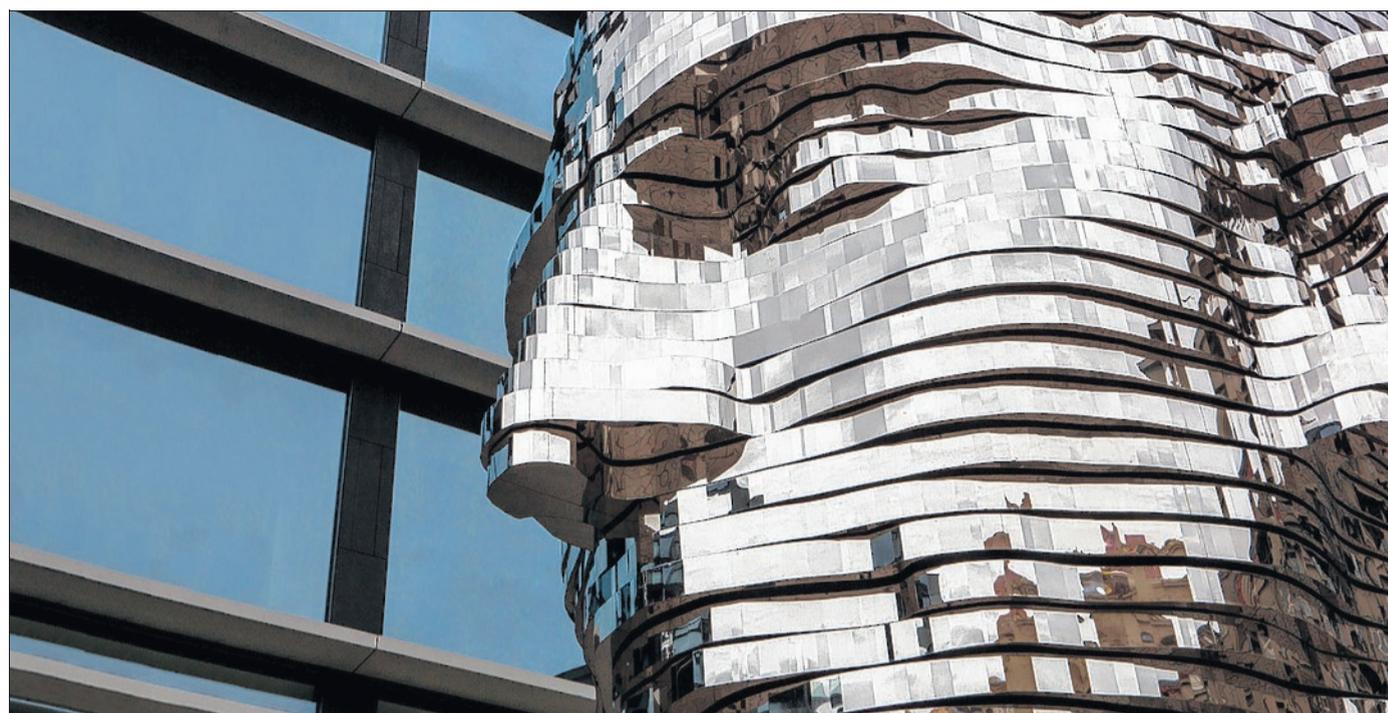
I'M ON A FLYING VISIT to Prague. I have been to Prague before, but over twenty years ago, and I'd forgotten how beautiful and unspoilt the place is. And, of course, it being Prague, my thoughts turn almost instantly to Franz Kafka. This powerful association between city and writer is reinforced when I open the hotel minibar and in it find a kind of circular biscuit, a chocolate-covered hazelnut-brittle wafer (yours for 60 crowns, about £2) emblazoned with the writer's soulful, big-eyed face in tasteful sepia contrasted with the black and gold of the wrapping. "Prague Kafka Oblaten" it says.

This type of immediate connection applies to other writers and other cities, naturally. Dublin and James Joyce; Bath and Jane Austen, Buenos Aires and Jorge Luis Borges, Chicago and Saul Bellow come to mind. As a notional parlour-game one can posit other less obvious ones: Lyme Regis and John Fowles; St Petersburg and Andrei Bely; Trieste and Istvan Szabo. Or would that be Trieste and Joyce? Or Trieste and Richard Burton? Or Trieste and Rilke? It could be an extension of the game to pitch writers against each other to see who gets to stake the literary claim. What about Edinburgh? Walter Scott or Ian Rankin? Or Robert Louis Stevenson? Or Muriel Spark? - though the last two hightailed it out of their city as soon as was feasible. And who would claim Oxford? Evelyn Waugh? P. D. James? Max Beerbohm? Or New York. Or London. Or Key West. Hours of harmless fun on offer.

When it comes to Prague, however, Kafka rules. The Czech artist David Černý has created a gigantic stainless-steel head of Kafka, eleven metres high and weighing 45 tons, possibly rivalling the Scott Monument in Edinburgh as the biggest ever construction dedicated to a writer. It is situated across from Prague City Hall not far from the office building where Kafka used to work as an insurance clerk. Černý's vast silver bust is sliced into horizontal discs that revolve, the head breaking up and becoming formless as the discs slowly spin, before seemingly miraculously reconstituting itself as the gleaming head again. It is mesmerizing, but one wonders if such a massive monument is really right for Kafka, the great poet of minutiae, the banal and the everyday. After looking at it, I happened to walk past another Kafka statue, this time in bronze, made by Jaroslav Róna, also large, almost four metres high. It depicts Kafka riding on the shoulders of a headless, handless, footless giant (taken from his story "Description of a Struggle"). This one seems more spookily apt.

However, I've picked a bad day for my Kafka perambulations. There's an England v Czech Republic football international on in the evening, and the usual tribal baying of "Engerland, Engerland, Engerland" can be heard emanating from Staroměstské Namesti as the lads admire the astronomical clock while they hang out in the bars waiting for the game to start. I steer away from the tourist zones. Prague is cursed with the phenomenon of global mass tourism, like Venice and Barcelona. There are just too many people trying to see too few sights.

To compound matters, as well as the football match, there is also a quasi-state funeral taking place, of Karel Gott, who died in October, aged eighty. Gott was a much-loved figure, someone who, unusually, flourished both in the communist and the post-Velvet Revolution eras. He was known as the "Frank Sinatra of Eastern Europe" and "The



Golden Voice of Prague". The concierge of my hotel tells me that 300,000 mourners are expected in Prague (he was well-known in Germany and Austria, too), to file past the casket and sign the book of remembrance. Throw in a few Extinction Rebellion stunts going on in the city and something called the Signal Festival (historic buildings amazingly illuminated) and it's clear my timing is awry, not to say foolish. The city is at breaking point.

When I last came to Prague, in 1995, I was a beneficiary of the cultural explosion that followed the 1989 revolution. Suddenly all my novels were translated into Czech and my publisher, Mustang, invited me to the city to do publicity and participate in an arts festival in Pilsen. I remember Prague as essentially quiet. I crossed Charles Bridge with only a few other sightseers as company. Now it's virtually impassable. But the city itself is carefully restored, primped and buffed-up, giving every sign of prosperous civic pride in its unspoilt streets and monuments and, if you can avoid English football supporters, tens of thousands of mourners and vast herds of tourists, is still relatively easy to get around.

As it happens, I'm not here as a tourist but "on business", so to speak. A six-hour Cold War spy thriller I've written, called *Spy City*, is being filmed in Prague and I'm visiting to see how the shoot is going. The thriller is set in Berlin, in fact, during the summer months of 1961 before the Berlin Wall went up and the city was suddenly divided on a balmy Sunday morning on August 13. But you can't film 1960s Berlin in Berlin, any more (or at least it's highly complicated), so Prague tends to double for Berlin - a tribute to its thoughtful restoration. From what I have seen of the rushes the effect is uncanny.

Today's action is being filmed in a bookshop where a beautiful member of the French SCEDE (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage) is clandestinely meeting her KGB contact in the *französisch Literatur* section of a second-hand bookshop. The actual bookshop is in Prague 2, a book-hunter's dream called Antikvariát, with high bookshelves forming a small labyrinth through which to wander and browse. This book-hunter, alas, fails to turn up any rare Mustang editions of his Czech back catalogue. No matter: for a writer, hanging out on a film set of a film that he or she has written, the emotions are worth savouring. All these people labouring to make those pages live and breathe. And over there is a flesh and blood human being playing a creature of your imagination. Worth savouring for a while because, for the writer, a sense of redundancy slowly begins to take over. Your work is done, complete. The crew is sort of pleased to see you - you chat to the director and the cast, you're introduced to various key heads of department - they're polite and they smile but they're busy people working to a demanding schedule. After a spot of lunch, it seems wiser to slip away. But what to do in Prague, on this particular Friday, crammed with more people than the city can cope

A statue of Franz Kafka sculpted by David Černý, Prague

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with? Visit the Kafka Museum, of course.

The Kafka Museum is surprisingly quiet, paradoxically. And very dark. It's possibly the darkest museum I've ever been in but one's eye swiftly becomes accustomed to the spotlight exhibits and display vitrines as they loom out of the shadows. There are cases with reproductions of manuscripts, many photographs and books, but what is most beguiling are the screens showing newsreels of Prague in Kafka's life and time, images of the very streets that I have just been wandering along. Monochrome newsreels are misleading time capsules to a certain extent because the world is not monochrome, but the city that Kafka knew was clearly a far more ramshackle, grimier, soot-smirched place, with crumbling plaster walls and gimcrack wooden scaffolding teetering in almost every shot. One wonders what his shade would make of this solidly refurbished and revitalized twenty-first-century version of Prague, with its litter-free streets and immaculate stucco in all manner of tasteful pastel shades.

In the gift shop I buy the familiar moody postcard images of the man himself. If you didn't know who he was, what would one make of this young man with shadowed eyes and a thin sallow face above the super-neat pinned collar and tie, the thick dark hair with a perfectly scored middle parting like a firebreak in a forest? The posthumous reputation adds all manner of significance and inference.

W. H. Auden wrote in *The Dyer's Hand* that, "Nobody ever met a Kafka character. On the other hand, one can have experiences that one recognizes as Kafkaesque, while one would never call an experience of one's own Dickensian or Shakespearean." Leaving the museum, I wander down an alleyway and emerge to find myself by a cobbled slipway in a small patch of greenery, right by the waters of the wide Vltava river. About 200 large swans, starkly white, are gathered here and, weirdly, three sets of brides and grooms in full wedding rigout with attendant photographers. Obviously, this is an in-demand wedding photograph venue, where the newly marrieds, picturesquely surrounded by swans, can be snapped with Charles Bridge, St Vitus Cathedral and the Prague castle complex dominating the background. There are many multi-lingual signs placed here and there advising people not to touch the swans.

An impeccable, tiny Japanese bride and her groom take up their position. He is in a tuxedo, she in a full-length lacy white wedding dress. The photographer snaps away while the swans mill around. The bride extends one hand in a fetching pose. A big swan waddles up thinking she's offering food. Unthinkingly, she goes to stroke its head. The swan snaps, the bride screams, the swans scatter. It's an extraordinary tableau to have seen, for which the word "surreal" doesn't seem sufficiently resonant. Luckily, unsurprisingly, an adjective immediately comes to mind that would do the experience I've just witnessed true justice. It begins with a K. ■