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The Final Journey of Franz Kafka's Sisters

*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*¹

Magic Prague, esoteric Prague, Golden Prague.² 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.³ A Slavic city with over 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 in which, 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.

¹ Fragment of an inscription at the gates of hell which begins the third canto of the *Divine Comedy* (trans. C. Carson). This quote was used as a motto in the novel *Kruta leta* (1963, *The Cruel Years*) by Frantisek Kafka, a Czech writer and literary scholar. I will speak more of him and his novel in this article.

² Among numerous books dealing with the cultural and artistic history of this city, see, for example, K. Krejci, *Praga. Legenda i rzeczywistość*, Warszawa 1974, trans. from the Czech by C. Dmochowska; A. M. Ripellino, *Praga magiczna*, Warszawa 1997, trans. from the Czech by H. Krallowa; J. Kuchar, *Praha esotericka*, Praha 2000.

³ According to Ripellino, op. cit., p. 11.

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 Mikulasska St., nowadays: 5 U radnice), in Prague Jewish cemetery at the Zizkov (Novy zidovsky hrbítov, 1 Jzraelska St.) he was buried (on 11 June 1924). Kafka, called a German or an Austrian writer in most reference books,⁴ 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".⁵ The future author of *The Process*, now considered one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, is thus just as much a German writer, as he is a Czech and Jewish artist - because it is these three cultures and three traditions that made for 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 also 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, where he was buried⁶), the author of Kafka's biography (published in 1937), a historical and literary study called *Der Prager Kreis* (1966, *The Prague Circle*)⁷ 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 Mikulasska, through 22 Golden Street to Schönborn Palace at 15

⁴ E.g. in a lexicon *Pisarze niemieckojęzyczni XX wieku*, ed. M. Zybura, Warszawa-Wrocław 1996.

⁵ Letter of 20 December 1902. Quotation after Ripellino, op. cit, pp. 10-11.

⁶ I stress this because of the often false information given about his grave in Zizkov 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.

⁷ See the entries "Krag praski" (Prague circle) and "Realizm magiczny" (Magical realism) in G. Gazda, *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX wieku*, Warszawa 2000. See also M. Pazi, *Fünf Autoren des Prager Kreises*, Frankfurt am Main 1976.

Trziste Square at the Mala Strana), his father's shops, school buildings and offices including the Assicurazioni Generali building at Vaclavskie Namesti,⁸ where he worked briefly. One can also try to reconstruct the places where the action of Kafka's prose is set, though this is not so easy since the world he created in fact "exists" beyond the real space-time continuum. However, both the aforementioned Krejci 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 farther, up along Holecka street to the Hrebenka quarries (according to Krejci).

Visiting Prague one can hardly not visit the cemetery in Zizkov 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 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 pamet' sester vyznamneho prazskeho, zidovskeho spisovatele Franza Kafki zahynulych za nacisticke 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 Hermannova, Valeria Pollakova and Ottilia Davidova. 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 Lowy families (on his mother's, Julia's side), at least as it may be reconstructed, goes back to the second half of the 18th century. Its 19th century history was more or less accurately presented by Max Brod according to the family tradition, in the writer's biography published in 1937.⁹ Members of those families, living for many years in Prague and other small Czech towns, included a rabbi, an accountant, a country doctor, a traveler,

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

⁹ 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. Kusak, *Mispoche Franze Kafky*, Praha 1997; I would like to acknowledge Dr. Leszek Engelking's help in locating this book for me).

a butcher, a member of the Czech parliament 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 3 July 1883 (in the house in 9 Mikulasska 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 Elli as the family shortened her name (22 September 1889), Valeria, or Valli (25 September 1890), and Ottilia, or Ottla (29 October 1892).

As the parents were busy with daily work, the children were brought up by a cook and nanny, and later by governesses. One of the latter, coming from a mixed Czech-Jewish family, Marie Wernerova, called Slecna (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 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, "with sisters Franz played little, 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 the sisters remembered 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 Sachs¹⁰ which he also directed".¹¹

However, in his years at school and university, Franz never shared any personal problems with his sisters. His childhood and maturity

¹⁰ Hans Sachs (1494-1576), from Nurnberg, 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.

¹¹ M. Brod, *Franz Kafka, eine Biographie, 1937* {*Franz Kafka. Opowieść biograficzna*, Warszawa 1982, p. 28, trans. from the Czech by T. Zabłudowski).

passed under the influence of friendships and contacts with his peers (some of these friendships survived for many years), or of lonely observation and reflection. From a later, fully mature perspective revealed in *Letter to Father* (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. Happiest 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 material¹² 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 which had to be saved by force. Besides, you may never really have liked the Kafka element as it expressed itself in women".¹³ And later: "Elli is the only example of someone almost completely successful in breaking out of your orbit. I expected it of 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".¹⁴

Franz devoted the most attention in this truly psychoanalytical vivisection to Ottilia, because his youngest sister became in the writer's mature life his closest friend, an empathic witness to his feelings and emotions, provident and practical in financial matters.¹⁵ In *Letter to Father* Franz describes her thus: "About Ottla 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

¹² 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.

¹³ F. Kafka, *Letter to Father*, Prague 1999, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ See, for example, H. Binder, "Kafka und seine Schwester Ottla", *Schiller-Jahrbuch* 12, 1968; *Briefe an Ottla und die Familie*, ed. H. Binder und K. Wagenbach, Frankfurt am Main 1974.

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..."¹⁶

Relations between Franz, Gabriela and Valeria changed when the sisters established their own families and escaped 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 Sirem (Zürau in German), a small town lying about 100 km to the west of Prague on the river Blsanka.¹⁷ As Franz presented her transformed personality in *Letter to Father*: "But this all changes when at a young age - this is the main thing - she left home, married, had children, became cheerful, carefree, brave, generous, unselfish, hopeful."¹⁸

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 Ottla, 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 Ottla could count only on the approval of her brother (since even Brod found the idea doubtful).¹⁹ 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.

¹⁶ *Letter to Father*, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

¹⁷ A year later Karl founded an asbestos factory in Zizkov, 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.

¹⁸ *Letter to Father*, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁹ See *Briefe an Ottla*, op. cit.; also M. Brod, *F. Kafka, Pratelstvi. Korespondence*, ed. M. Pasley (Praha 1998, trans. into Czech by H. Zantovska).

Meanwhile, the Kafkas' family life went on as usual. The sisters took care of their own families and problems, and they bore children. The Hermanns had a son, Felix (born 8 December 1911) and two daughters: Gerti (born 1912) and Hanne (born 1920). The Pollaks also had two daughters: Marianne (born 19 September 1913) and Lotte (born 1914), while the Davids had another daughter, Helene (born 1923), after Vera.²⁰ When Franz moved out of his parents' house (he stayed for a while at Valli's and Elli's when they traveled, and later he finally started living on his own in Bilkova 10, for a short time in 1915, later for two years in Dlouha 15, still later in 22 Golden Street and ultimately, in March 1917, he moved to an apartment in the Schonborn palace) his attitude towards family problems probably became more distanced and rationalized. When necessary, however, he supported his sisters and tried to help them. For example, during World War I, when both of his brothers-in-law were at the front, Franz (who volunteered but was rejected by the army because of poor health) accompanied Ella when she went to Hungary to Nagy Mihaly to visit her husband who had been wounded in battle. He also helped (though very reluctantly, which we know from his letters to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, and from his journals) to manage Karl Hermann's factory. He supported Elli in her attempts to help a Jewish association for the aid of the poor in Germany. From his letters and journals we can gather that he was most sympathetic towards his nieces and nephew. But he remained in closest contact with Ottla. He took every opportunity to spend time in her company. He spent time with her (since September 1917) in Sirem, where Ottla ran the Hermanns' country farm.²¹ He also accompanied her in Zelizy (1919) and in Plane upon Luznica (1922). When Franz discovered his illness (the first dangerous hemorrhage occurred in August 1917), the friendship and spiritual kinship with his youngest sister allowed him to live through the most difficult moments. Her company also gave him hope (even as late as 1922 doctor Otto Herrmann believed it possible for Franz to be cured).²² When his health deteriorated, he was placed first in a sanatorium in Wiener Wald and later in Kierling near Vienna, where he died. Not counting his fiancée Dora

²⁰ Dates partly according to Northey, *op. cit.*

²¹ See. E. Pawel, *Das Leben Franz Kafkas. Eine Biographie*, München-Wien 1986.

²² See *Brod, Kafka, Pratelstvi*, *op. cit.*

Diamant (Dymant),²³ whom he had met during the summer in Miiritz on the Baltic coast (July 1923), and doctor Robert Klopstock, who both took care of Franz in his final days, on 3 June 1924, early in the morning, Elli, too, appeared at her dying brother's side and his last words were addressed to her.²⁴

Franz Kafka's funeral took place on June 11 in the afternoon according to the Jewish tradition. Over a hundred people took part in the ceremony: his parents, the sisters with their husbands, Dora Diamant, who wept loudly and had to be supported over the grave by Max Brod,²⁵ his closest friends from a literary group later called Prager Kreis,²⁶ teachers, journalists and the inhabitants of Prague. At this time no one, not even Brod realized that he was partaking in a farewell to one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. This realization came later and was confirmed through the years, in fact, thanks to Brod, who did not respect his friend's "will" and not only did he not burn his manuscripts but published them persistently and obstinately. Before 1939 almost all of Franz's literary works had appeared in print: *The Process* in 1925, *The Castle* in 1926 and *America* in 1927, while *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Works)* in six volumes were published between 1935 and 1937, as was the author's

²³ Bora in Poland, in Pabianice near Łódź in 1898 (in Kafka's biographies 1900 or 1902 is given as her birth date). Her parents, Hersz Aron and Frajda Frid, were in the weaving business (biographies tell us that Dora was a daughter of an orthodox rabbi from Poland). They lived in 19 Poludniowa Street. Dora had four brothers (Dawid, Jakub, Abram, Ajze), and a sister (Nacha). In the early twenties Dora left for Berlin. In the summer of 1923 she met Franz Kafka and set up residence with him in Berlin. She died in London, where she lived with her daughter Marianne, on 15 August 1952. Dora's husband perished as a victim of the Holocaust. Details of his death remain unknown. Her daughter died in 1982. The above biography has been reconstructed in detail by Kathi Diamant, a professor of San Diego State University (College of Arts and Letters), based on Dora's memoirs, recovered in Paris, according to the Gestapo documents in Berlin and to documents preserved in the Museum of the City of Pabianice in Poland, which Kathi Diamant visited on 21 May 2001. See also R. Adamek, "Wielka miłość Franza Kafki", *Nowe Życie Pabianic*, 21, 2001. Kathi Diamant, who has studied the Holocaust, became interested in Dora because they both had the same surname. She is working on a voluminous book *Kafka's Last Love: The Mystery of Dora*, Seeker & Warburg, 2003.

²⁴ Brod, *Franz Kafka*, op. cit., p. 280.

²⁵ See Salfiellnier, loc. cit.

²⁶ See M. Brod, *Der Prager Kreis*, 1966 (*Pražský kruh*, Praha 1993, Czech trans, from the German by I. Vizdalova). See also the quoted "Kraž praski" entry in G. Gazda, *Słownik europejskich kierunków...*, op. cit.

biography (1937). However, only the post-war decades truly revealed Kafka's unquestionable greatness. The key here was not only his parabolic art of letters but also his biography, gradually uncovered in the writer's journals as well as in his numerous letters. This observation may be also confirmed by many works which came into being as a result of their authors' fascination with Kafka and his literature.²⁷

The fate of the Kafka family after Franz's death is little known. The parents died, Franz's father first, in 1931, his mother three years later. In 1931 Lotte died, Valeria's daughter, and in 1939 Gabriela's husband, Karl²⁸ Then 1939 came and World War II broke out.

Many critics discovered *ex post* in Kafka's works a parabolic prophecy of all the tragedies caused by the war: criminal nazism, death camps, the martyrdom of millions of people, the Holocaust. These tragedies also befell the Jews from Prague who perished by the thousands in Terezin (Theresienstadt), in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and in other concentration camps. Neither did fate spare Franz Kafka's friends. Greta Bloch (1892-1944), possibly the writer's son's mother²⁹ was murdered by a German soldier who crushed her skull with a rifle butt. Milena Jesenska died in Ravensbrück (10 August 1896- 15 May 1944).

His three sisters, as the inscription on Kafka's family tombstone proves, also perished in the Holocaust. However, the information on the subject not only differs in details, but is contradictory as to the dates and

²⁷ Not counting the better or worse theatrical adaptations (e.g. M. Brod's of *The Castle*, A. Gide's (1947) and P. Weiss's (1982) of *The Process*, see K. Prykowska, *Adaptacje sceniczne "Procesu" Franza Kafki*, Łódź 1998, typescript at the Institute of the Theory of Literature, Theatre and Audiovisual Arts at the University of Łódź) as well as film adaptations (like *The Process* directed by O. Welles, 1963); one might mention the particularly worthwhile films by Z. Rybczyński (1991) and S. Soderbergh (1991), both entitled *Kafka*. They treat the writer's life and works as a whole. We might also add an interesting epistolary novel by Anna Bolecka, *Kochany Franz*, Warszawa 1999, and paintings by a Russian painter living in Prague, A. Prostow-Pokrowski. See *Franz Kafka in Bildern des Malers*, Praha 2001. G. Janouch's *Gesprache mit Kafka*, translated into Polish by J. Borysiak and E. Dyczek and published in Warsaw in 1993, seems to be an apocryphal work, although Brod and Dora Diamant never questioned the validity of Janouch's notes. See Brod, *Franz Kafka*, op. cit., p. 287.

²⁸ I refer to the information from the book (quoted above) by Northey, although, for example, in the Czech translation of this volume of letters of Brod and Kafka (ed. Malcolm Pasley, see also note 17) the notes contain a different date of Karl's death, namely 1942. I believe it rather to be 1939, which seems to be confirmed by the rest of this article.

²⁹ See Brod, *Franz Kafka*, op. cit., pp. 316-319.

places of their deaths. Most often we are told that they all died in German death camps³⁰ but we can also learn that all three perished in the Łódź ghetto.³¹ Elsewhere we read that the war separated the three sisters and that Ottla died in Auschwitz, while Valeria and Gabriela passed away in Łódź. The dates of their deaths are also different: 1941,³² 1942, 1943.

The last date, 1944, is given in the first post-war text containing information about Kafka's sisters. It was a five-paragraph note by H. Zylberberg entitled *The Tragic End of Franz Kafka's Three Sisters*³³ published in an ephemeral magazine at the beginning of 1947. The author must have known the Kafka family, because he begins with a detailed characteristic of the sisters: "Franz Kafka's three sisters, Elly, Vally and Ottla were all very different but in each of their personalities their brother's traits of character could be seen. Elly, the eldest, was extremely timid. She suffered from an almost morbid taciturnity, like a teenage girl, even when she became the mother of two grown children. She was aware of this weakness and treated it as an infirmity; like Franz she was very self-demanding. Her adult son perished in a concentration camp in France,"³⁴ writes Zylberberg. About the middle sister the author

³⁰ Such news ("they perished somewhere in Poland in the gas chambers") was conveyed to Brod by the eldest daughter of Gabriela and Karl Hermann, Gerti, who survived the war and wrote to him as Greta Kaufmann (which means she married) from London, right before leaving for Canada, on 27 August 1947. The letter was devoted solely to her uncle, Franz Kafka, described from the point of view of a young child's memories (Gerti was born in 1912) and family tradition. See Brod, *Pražsky kruh*, op. cit., pp. 109-111.

³¹ See the notes to the Polish edition of *Briefe an Felice*, ed. M. Brod, 1967 (*Listy do Felicji*, trans. from the German by I. Krońska, Warszawa 1976, vol. II, p. 360).

³² See the Kafkas family tree (as no other details are available) in Northey's *Mischpoche Kafkas*, op. cit. The author devoted much space to the writer's uncles and ancestors, omitting any account of the fate of the sisters and their children.

³³ H. Zylberberg, "Das tragische Ende der drei Schwestern Kafkas", *Wort und Tat* 1946/1947, Heft 2.1 actually came upon this text at the end of my research. However, it seems a valuable supplement to the rest of the documentation. I kindly thank Dr. Johann Biedermann from the University of Giessen and Dr. Małgorzata Leyko from the Institute of the Theory of Literature, Theatre and Audiovisual Arts of the University of Łódź, who helped me to access this article and its contents.

³⁴ The author speaks of Felix, the favorite of the whole family, especially his grandfather, Hermann Kafka - he was the only male descendant in the family! This very inexact piece of information (a concentration camp in France?) was the only data I could find on him (in the family tree Northey, op. cit., gives the year 1940 as the year of Felix's death). The grandfather's great love for his grandson is mentioned by Franz in *Letter to Father*.

writes in brief ("resembled her brother through her noble character, inborn elegance, desire for perfection and youthfulness"), in order to devote more space to Kafka's youngest sister: "Ottla was handsome, of dark complexion, an imposing frame and piercing look; her steps were steady and certain. She introduced her two daughters to me, showed me her vegetarian recipes, told me about how she visited the poor and how many beggars she knew. She never accepted the fact that Kafka's works had been published as the result of someone's indiscretion. Franz had left a will and his deepest and most sacred wish that all he had written should be burned ought to have been obeyed. For this reason she was angry at Max Brod. Ottla was devoid of any literary sensitivity, she actually did not have time to read, but all she did and said possessed its own deep, almost metaphysical justification. She noticed the value of even the most trivial deeds and constantly wondered about their moral values. These three sisters are no longer with us: they died in Nazi ghettos".

About Ottla's fate Zylberberg writes as follows: "She found herself in the Terezin ghetto. One day a transport of Jewish children arrived who reacted with hostility to all attempts to keep them quiet. Ottla and a few doctors gained the children's confidence - in their eyes one could see fear caused by the torture that their parents had been subjected to. They were very distrustful. The Nazis came up with a devilish idea: they informed the worried guardians that they would organize a special transport in order to send these orphans and their guardians abroad; a plan of the expedition was agreed to, the children were given new clothes and cared for with great care. Hopeful Ottla wrote her husband that she was happy because she could help these orphans who needed kindness so much; and that she would go with them to Sweden and Denmark. However, we know that prisoners from this transport were not given freedom but went to Auschwitz, no farther than the crematoriums..." This fragment demands a few additional details. Ottla divorced her husband when the persecution of Jews started in order that he "would not have to share the suffering of her people". In Terezin she volunteered as a guardian of the children from the transport. According to *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*³⁵ on 7 October 1943, a transport from Terezin arrived at Auschwitz; it consisted of 1260 children and 53 guardians. On that same day all prisoners from the transport were murdered in the gas chambers

³⁵ D. Czech, *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*, Oświęcim 1992, p. 534. In the archives of the camp a list with the names of the guardians was preserved.

of the camp. Thus, we can say with certainty that the final journey of Franz Kafka's youngest sister ended on 7 October in Auschwitz...

In the aforementioned novel, Anna Bolecka in an apocryphal post-war letter from Brod to Dora Diamant (could it have been modeled on an authentic letter of a family member or one of the friends of the Kafka family to Brod?³⁶) gives some additional information about Ottla's daughters who survived the war. I cannot add anything more. I do not know whether they established families, lived in the Czech Republic or moved to the West (like Gerti, Gabriela's daughter, who died in Canada in 1972³⁷), and whether they are still alive, which is not so improbable.³⁸ Vera would be 81 today, Helene 79. Also the Pollaks' elder daughter, Marianne, survived; her fate remains unknown. She would be 90 years old today.³⁹

Of the two remaining sisters Zylberberg writes: "...they were taken to the ghetto in Łódź and were never heard from since. They immediately disappeared in the general liquidation in August and September of 1944 when all the Jews from ghettos in Poland and other countries were sent to crematoriums".⁴⁰ This final sentence must be verified in detail.

The history of the Łódź ghetto (Litzmannstadt Getto) has been described in many books, memoirs, journals, novels and theatre plays,⁴¹ but it remains incomplete and insufficient. Post-war history was the reason why only recently numerous historical works, memoirs and notes have begun to appear.⁴² Work on the complete edition of *Kronika*

³⁶ The abovementioned letter from Gerti to Brod informs about the fate of her mother and her mother's sisters in one sentence only.

³⁷ Year of death according to Northey.

³⁸ Northey does not know either. In the Kafka family tree, the names of Ottla's daughters are given with question marks.

³⁹ The fate of the Hermanns' elder daughter, Hanna, has still to be revealed as well.

⁴⁰ All quotations from Zylberberg's article translated by M. Leyko.

⁴¹ Like E. and H. Lieberman's play *Throne of Straw* (1989), where the main characters are Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, appointed by the Germans as the Eldest of the Jews (Der Alteste der Juden) in the ghetto, and Hans Biebow, the head of the German Ghetto Administration (Getto-Verwaltung). I was informed about the play and its contents by Malgorzata Leyko.

⁴² E.g. J. Poznański, *Dziennik z łódzkiego getta*, Warszawa 2002 (the first, incomplete edition was published in 1960); O. Singer, *Przemierzając szybkim krokiem getto... Reportaże i eseje z getta łódzkiego*, Łódź 2002, trans. from the German by K. Radziszewska (the German version of the book appeared in Berlin in 2002); J. Wajsbłat et G. Lambert, *Le témoin imprevu*, Paris 2001; J. Baranowski, *The Łódź Ghetto, 1940-1944/Łódzkie getto 1940-1944*, Łódź 1999; *Łódź Ghetto. Inside a Community*

getta łódzkiego,⁴³ an unprecedented document in the history of WWII, written in the ghetto, is coming to an end. A book on the fate of the Prague Jews and the ghetto has also been published.⁴⁴ Photographs from the ghetto found not long ago served as the source of a documentary film *Fotoamator* (1998, dir. Dariusz Jabłoński)⁴⁵ which attracted attention and gained worldwide recognition.

The ghetto in Łódź was established as one of the Nazi links in the chain that served as the "final solution to the Jewish question" (Endlösung der Judenfrage). It was established in Łódź, because Jews represented more than 30% of the population of the city - there were 230,000 of them living there - and it would have been difficult to deport them quickly from the Reich into which, under the name of Litzmannstadt, Łódź had been incorporated. Its central geographical position was the reason why the ghetto, established at the beginning of 1940 (in the northern, poorest district, covering little more than 4 square kilometers) began to play the part of a temporary concentration camp for the Jews (and Gypsies) not only from the vicinity of Łódź but also from the so-called Warta Country (Warthegau), as well as from western and southern Europe. The population of the ghetto never exceeded 170,000, which proves that when the ghetto was still in existence (until August 1944) transports to Łódź and further deportations must have taken place incessantly. We must also take into account that the number of prisoners kept decreasing because of death from exhaustion, starvation and diseases, as well as due to executions and suicides committed in the ghetto.

Five thousand Jews were also deported to Łódź straight from Prague, without stopping at a temporary facility for the deported from the Czech

under Siege, eds. A. Adelson, R. Lapidés, New York, 1989. Earlier Polish works on the subject include R. Bonisławski, "Bibliografia polska dotycząca zagłady Żydów z getta łódzkiego" in: *Judaica łódzkie*, ed. M. Budziarek, Lodz 1994.

⁴³ The incomplete edition: *Kronika getta łódzkiego*, eds. D. Dąbrowska, L. Dobroszycki, Łódź 1965, vols. 1-2 (abridged edition in English: *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto*, ed. L. Dobroszycki, New Haven 1984).

⁴⁴ *Ghetto Litzmannstadt 1941-1944. Dokumenty a vypovedi o zivote ceskych zidu v lodzkem ghettu*, ed. R. Seemann, Praha 2000. I hereby thank journalist Janusz Kozłowski, who was an invaluable source of information on the affairs of Łódź, as well as lending me this book and generally assisting in finding other resources for this essay.

⁴⁵ Colored and thus somehow idealized photographs of the ghetto were confronted in this film with a mercilessly realistic and verifying commentary by Arnold Mostowicz (1914-2002), a prisoner of the ghetto and an eyewitness. See also his memoirs *Żółta gwiazda i czerwony krzyż*, Warszawa 1988.

and Moravian Protectorate in Theresienstadt. Inhabitants of Prague, who had been notified in their homes in writing that they would be deported, were assembled with their luggage in Holesovice in Veletrni Palace that had served before the war as an exhibition pavilion. It is from there, from the railway station in Holesovice, that the transports left for Łódź. The details of this journey have been related by eyewitnesses who survived the Holocaust (of the 5000 people deported from Prague only 277 survived) and whose reports have been completed and confirmed by historians.⁴⁶ To illustrate those events I shall quote fragments of the aforementioned novel by Frantisek Kafka (born 5 December 1909 - died 22 November 1991; unrelated to Franz Kafka in spite of the same last name: "Kafka" is quite a popular name in the Czech Republic), who in his fiction recreated the fate of the Jews deported from Prague and participated in the drama himself as he arrived in Łódź on one of the deportation trains in October:

"They were finally assembled in groups of a hundred people each and they were escorted from the wooden buildings of the exhibition pavilion on Veletrzná Street. Those three days of idleness and waiting at the assembly point had been unbearable. People dragged out of their homes wandered around the exhibition cabins aimlessly and hopelessly (...) One cloudy morning their doorbells rang sharply and their uncertainty came to an end. (...) They were to prepare for a journey in three days' time. (...) They heard consolations that they would be back by Christmas. (...) They had to cling to some hope. (...) A week before no one had known whether the transports would travel to the Pyrenees or to Poland. But after three days at the assembly point they all felt certain that they would travel east".⁴⁷

Between October and November of 1941 five such transports left Holesovice in Prague, each numbering a thousand prisoners (the journey through Wrocław alone took over 30 hours). Every prisoner was given a number... The list of the second transport (A) (which arrived in Łódź on 17 October, early in the afternoon, at the Radogoszcz train station, north of the Łódź ghetto) contains the name of Gabriela Hermannova⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Most of all the abovementioned *Getto Litzmannstadt*; see also note 43.

⁴⁷ F. Kafka, *Krutá leta*, 1963 (*Okrutné lata*, Łódź 1966, trans. into Polish by H. Gruszczyńska-Debska, pp. 17-18).

⁴⁸ Lists of the deported do not mention the name of Gabriela's husband, Karl (the name Karel Herrmann appears thrice, spelled with a double "r", but with birth dates different from the birth date of Kafka's brother-in-law), so (see also note 28) Northey is probably right.

(the author of *The Cruel Years* also traveled on this train, so we might claim that this fictional document describes, in a sense, also Gabriela's experiences and emotions). The Pollaks - Valeria and her husband Josef - arrived in Łódź with the fourth (D) transport, which pulled up at the Radogoszcz train station on November 1, at half past four in the afternoon.⁴⁹

Let me quote from the novel again:

"German commands drove the people out of the carriages in a small station among the fields in a snowstorm which covered their faces with wet flakes and blinded them, making it difficult to move.

"Jewish B transport from Prague. Nine hundred and ninety eight people, one died on the way, one was shot when trying to escape!" (...)

People with hand luggage walked in pairs or in threes arm in arm, passing snowy piles growing on both sides of the road which led through the snow-covered fields and seemed endless. The old and weak, burdened with children, lagged behind. On the horizon low houses with little gardens appeared. They marched through the fields again and in half an hour's time found themselves in a derelict housing district".⁵⁰

The deported Jews from the second transport were first accommodated in a building in 37 Łagiewnicka (Hanseatstrasse) Street, and later transferred to more spacious rooms in interconnected houses in 13/15 Franciszkańska (Franzstrasse) St. The fourth transport was quartered in a former school in 29 Franciszkańska St. (all these buildings have survived to this day). Those, then, were the first Łódź addresses of Gabriela Hermann, as well as Valeria and Josef Pollak.

The rooms of "the collectives", as they were called, though renovated before the arrival of the Prague Jews and partly furnished with beds of boards and mattresses, were not at all able to ensure passable living conditions. It was incredibly crowded, a few dozen people lived on a few square meters devoid of any privacy or intimacy. All available rooms played the domestic roles of kitchens and bedrooms. Let us refer to the novel yet again:

⁴⁹ See also lists of the deported in the supplements to Seemann's *Getto Liztmanstadt*, op. cit., pp. 267 and 292. The book does not mention Gabriela and Valeria at all, which is somewhat curious, all the more so that the editors reached many people from those transports who survived the war and perhaps could have given some information about Kafka's sisters.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 35-37.

"The second Prague transport was quartered in two buildings in Franciszkańskanow, close to the barbed wire guarded by German guards; the houses were connected by specially constructed passages and enveloped in darkness, so it was hard to find your way around and find this or that room. People slept on rough beds of boards with bags under their heads instead of pillows; there was not enough room, so one could hardly move".⁵¹

In November 1941, right after the transports from Prague arrived, *Kronika getta łódzkiego* reports the following:

"During the first days of November the temperature dropped a few degrees below zero; the next ten days were rainy and sleety; in the middle of the month the temperature dropped sharply (...) 914 people died in the ghetto in November and 29 (13 boys and 16 girls) births were registered. The Chronicles of the Jewish Order Service noted nine suicides in November (...) On the 16th of November a shocking catastrophe occurred in the ghetto (...) On that critical day through a breach in the wall a roll-balance heavily laden with vegetables rolled into the yard (...) and crashed into the wall. As a result of the crash a 2 meter high concrete slab, weighing a hundred kilos, came down, burying 10 people standing in a queue to a soup kitchen (...) An even more terrible disaster occurred on the night of the 2nd and 3rd of November. Late in the evening a gable wall, dividing the two buildings, came down. Both these houses were really crowded".⁵² A few dozen victims perished in this accident. The Order Service also noted that in November seven people were shot at the wire surrounding the ghetto, including two new arrivals from Prague. But the names of Valeria and Gabriela are not in *Kronika*.

We do not know how the two sisters managed in the ghetto. Did they find jobs? It was hard to survive without a job. On the other hand, they may have had some goods that they could sell in order to buy food. The new arrivals from Western Europe were treated rather well in Łódź, though at the same time many ghetto dwellers were hostile towards them because they were wealthier - a fact easy to establish just by looking at their clothes and luggage.⁵³ Jakub Poznański (born 26 July 26 1890 in

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 160-161.

⁵² *Kronika getta łódzkiego*, op. cit, vol. 1, pp. 266-268.

⁵³ A probing analysis of the relations between local Jews and the new arrivals was presented in a series of texts by Oskar Singer (born 24 February 1893 - died ? August 1944 in Birkenau), a writer, journalist and columnist from Prague who arrived in the Łódź ghetto with the third transport. Presumably because of his profession, he was almost

Łódź - died 11 August 1959), a prisoner in the ghetto, saw these relations in a different light and described the arrival of the Jews from Western Europe thus:

"As I had said before, in late fall Jews resettled from Germany and the Czech Republic began to flow in to our ghetto. Altogether there were 23,000 such Jews. Some of them, from Prague, Frankfurt on Main etc. could bring very much with them, others, like those from Berlin, could bring almost nothing. Officially they could not have any money, but some transports had been allowed to take 100 marks per person. They were well received here and with proper hospitality. There were full blooded Jews among them, half-breeds, full blooded Jews but born as Christians, etc. They were all treated equally. The transports were given accommodation in offices and other similar buildings. At first they slept on the floors, but later beds of boards were constructed for them. They were also given food, at first very primitive, later of somewhat better quality".⁵⁴

Not counting such general information about the new arrivals I have not found anything more about the two sisters in any publication. One could say that they were anonymous in the ghetto like thousands of other Jews from Prague who fought for survival every day. In spite of many long hours spent over the archives of "The Eldest of the Jews 1939-1944" preserved in the National Archives in Łódź (and it is general knowledge that the documents from the Statistics Department, saved by Nachman Zonabend, were divided and only a part of them can be found in Łódź⁵⁵), I have not managed to encounter the names of Gabriela Hermannova or Valeria and Josef Pollak. But perhaps among the thousands of surviving documents (2500 file units, i.e., 50 running meters of papers!)⁵⁶ some trace of their written requests, letters or applications to the ghetto authorities was, nevertheless, saved (many examples of

immediately after his arrival assigned a flat outside "the collective" and offered a job at the Statistics Department, initially as a co-author of *Kronika getta łódzkiego*, and later as its main editor and the director of the department. See his essays *Z problematyki Wschodu i Zachodu*, written in the ghetto and published recently in *Przemierzając szybkim krokiem...*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Poznański, *Dziennik...*, op. cit., p. 42.

⁵⁵ The rest of the documents can be found at YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research) in New York City, in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and near Haifa.

⁵⁶ See J. Baranowski, "Materiały źródłowe do Zagłady Żydów z łódzkiego getta w Archiwum Państwowym w Łodzi" in: *Judaica łódzkie*, op. cit.

such correspondence can be found in the archives). However, this is doubtful. Both sisters stayed in the ghetto for too short a time, not even eleven months, so there was no time for them to leave a trace of life in the documentation from the individual ghetto "departments".⁵⁷ Though there is one extremely important exception: the registration and departure cards of both sisters and Josef Pollak have been preserved and proper entries in the registration books can also be found.

In the spring of 1942 the authorities began to transfer the tenants of the Prague "collectives" to emptied flats in the ghetto. From Valeria's Registration Card (Anmeldung), issued 12 March 1942, we learn that along with three people (including her husband Josef, since it was he who filled and signed the Card) she received a place in a one-room flat number 23 at 67 Franciszkańska St. However, the Registration Book of this street does not confirm the above address, which may be the result of a mistake because of the great shifts in the ghetto population at this time (suffice it to say that in 1941 and 1942 due to starvation and various diseases more than thirty thousand people died). From Gabriela's Card (dated 5 May and signed by her) we know that beginning 15 April she and seven other people could occupy a single room in a house in Gnieźnieńska Street (Gnesnerstrasse) 1/a. And this time the Registration Book confirms the address because Gabriela Hermann's name appears under this address in flat no. 4/a.

Resettlements (which is a euphemism because these actions ought to be called simply "death transports") from the ghetto were intensified in the beginning of 1942. They included mainly Jews from Western Europe. On May 1 there had still been as many as 4578 Prague Jews in the ghetto, whereas a month later their number was reduced by more than two thousand people, transported mostly to the death camp in Chelmno upon Ner.⁵⁸ The authorities kept the inhabitants of the ghetto in ignorance of where and why the transports with the resettled prisoners were going. Jakub Poznański observed in his journal as late as 1943:

"On Monday a group of a thousand people was deported; seemingly some of them were sent to forced labor, while others were meant for resettlement. Is it really true that those sentenced to deportation from the

⁵⁷ The Archives also contain many IDs, passports, various membership cards and private letters left behind by the resettled from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany and Luxembourg. It is possible that Gabriela's and Valeria's papers are to be found among the documents I have not seen.

⁵⁸ According to *Getto Litzmannstadt*, op. cit., p. 136.

ghetto are in reality sentenced to death by gassing? I don't want to and I don't believe in this mass, beastly murder of innocent people - even Jews, whom the national socialist party counts among its greatest enemies. Leaving the ghetto, these poor souls sang a Jewish prayer, Shma-Israel. Which goes to show their mood".⁵⁹

The first transport to the gas chambers of Chełmno was sent in January 1942. "The action lasted, with breaks, until 15 May 1942; 57,064 Jews from the Łódź ghetto, including 10,943 from Western Europe, were gassed in the Chełmno camp. (...) The deportations were carried out with extreme cruelty and terror, in an atmosphere of murder and assaults. Another tragedy occurred in 1942, between September 3 and 12. (...) The ghetto inhabitants called it "szpera", since the Germans had forbidden them to leave their flats (Allgemeine Gehsperr). (...) By the fall of 1942, 72,745 persons defined as "a dispensable non-working element" had been annihilated".⁶⁰

Departure Cards (Abmeldung) of the two sisters filled in *ex post* - Gabriela's on 18 October, Valeria's on 20 September - inform that the departure of both sisters from their flats took place on 10 September 1942. Under the column "new address" we read: "deportation". This is the last trace of Kafka's sisters. Looking through the lists of the resettled from the ghetto at this time I did not find their names. These lists, which are incomplete, sometimes handwritten, sometimes typed, sometimes set in alphabetical order and sometimes at random, cannot be treated as absolutely trustworthy documents. In any case, one can say that during the days of the criminal "szpera", Valeria's and Gabriela's doom was fulfilled. *Kronika getta łódzkiego* describes that week of 5-12 September 1942, as follows:

"The operation proceeded as follows - block after block was surrounded by the Jewish police and then each building surrounded by a host of police and Jewish firemen and entered by a representative of the authorities (Gestapo). A shot was fired as the signal to assemble, and then all the residents of a given building were assembled in the courtyard, arranged in two rows, and subjected to inspection by representatives of the authorities. (...) Those selected for resettlement were sent by wagon to the assembly points".⁶¹

⁵⁹ Poznański, *Dziennik...*, op. cit., p. 55.

⁶⁰ Baranowski, *Łódzkie getto 1940-1944*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁶¹ *Kronika getta łódzkiego*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 245.

The record from *Kronika*, as an official, i.e., censored text, is limited to the facts, neglecting their emotional context, i.e., the drama of those days of hopelessness and starvation, family tragedies, the atmosphere of fear and the struggle for survival, which we learn about, for example, from the moving memoirs of Dawid Sierakowiak.⁶²

The Jews deported from the Łódź ghetto were driven in lorries to Chełmno, a village upon the river Ner, on the borderline of Kolska Valley and Kłodawska Plain, where the Germans had set up a death camp in December 1941. Many years later, Frantisek Kafka provided a literary reconstruction of this eighty kilometer journey on the basis of historical evidence:

"Mrs. Horowitz stood next to Róża Bendlova in a lorry which drove them on a road through beautiful, woody landscapes. Behind them two more trucks followed. They carried all those who had left the assembly point at the central prison in the Lodz ghetto two days before. (...) The lorries were entering a small residence now, they slowed down and drove into the courtyard through a massive gate. Among the tall trees stood a one-story, spacious little palace (...).

"You have arrived in a labor camp," an SS officer turned to them. "You must now undergo disinfection. The lorry will drive you there (...)"

She found herself in a lorry with Róża Bendlova.

"Just like when we were leaving Prague on a train," Bendlova whispered.

They stood squeezed tightly together within the closed box of the lorry (...)

The car started. Mrs. Horowitz felt dizzy. She didn't know whether she felt sick because the car kept rocking or because of the heavy air inside.

"Exhaust fumes," she realized in terror, holding her breath. "Such is the end of transport number two, the end of our journey" (...).

A spasm rocked her body And she was left motionless among the other dead in the "soulperisher", in Chełmno upon Ner."⁶³

With a sequence of photographs of the woods near Chełmno Claude Lanzmann begins his magnificent film *Shoah* (1985). We know that out of 400,000 men, women and children transported here only two witnes-

⁶² D. Sierakowiak, *Dzienniki*, ed. L. Dobroszycki, Warszawa 1960.

⁶³ Kafka, *Kruta leta...*, op. cit, pp. 215-217. On 8 March 1998, the president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel visited the Łódź cemetery in Marysin and paid tribute to the martyrdom of the inhabitants of Prague. In October 2001, a memorial plaque was mounted in the wall of the cemetery, near the entrance, to commemorate the death of the Jews from Prague.

ses survived: Mordechai Podchlebnik and Szymon Srebnik. The latter says in the film:⁶⁴ "It's difficult to recognize, but it was here. People were burnt here. Many people were burnt. Yes, right here. No one could leave here. The gas lorries drove up... Two gigantic ovens stood there and the flames shot up high into the sky".⁶⁵

⁶⁴ C. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Koszalin 1993, trans, from the French by M. Bieńczyk, p. 17.

⁶⁵ I first presented the general theses of this article during a Polish-Czech conference in Łowicz (*Polish-Czech Relations in Comparative Perspective. Language-Literature-History*. September 26-28, 2002), organized by the Mazowsze Higher School of Humanities and Pedagogy and Vysoka Skola Karla Engliše from Brno. At the time I called my presentation "a text in progress" because I was counting on additional information. Here, at the end, in a footnote (in order not to disturb the main body of this article), as a supplement to my notes about Kafka's nieces, I might add that the elder Pollak, namely Marianne (born 19 November 1913) married George Steiner (in 1935; in 1938 their son, Michael, was born) and moved to London in 1939. She died there on 8 November 2000, at the age of 87 (according to the obituary in *The Times*, November 2000, of which I was kindly informed by Mr. Remigiusz Grzela - thank you). Ottla's both daughters have married and live in Prague: Vera Soudkova and Helene Rumpeldova (I also owe this information to Mr. Grzela who obtained it by letter from Hanna Greenfield, the daughter of one of the children's guardians who shared the fate of Ottla Davidova).