ARNOLD J. BAND

Kafka and the Beiliss Affair

FEW YEARS in Franz Kafka's life have attracted as much attention as 1912, the year his art advanced from uncertain groping to structured composition. In the fall of 1912, he wrote "Das Urteil," "Die Verwandlung," and the initial chapters of the novel *Der Verschollene* (later called *Amerika*), whose first chapter was for years considered a separate story under the name "Der Heizer." Even though Max Brod maintained in 1907 that Kafka was one of the great German writers of his generation, it is doubtful whether we would remember him today if he had ceased writing before 1912. A series of accomplished works such as these indicates a substantial turn in Kafka's life and presents critics with a tempting opportunity to solve some mysteries in his fiction. It is common knowledge that Kafka's style manipulates realistic conventions and approaches parable, thus raising many problems of hermeneutics. When a work abounds with polysemous statements, *erlebte Rede*, and flagrant narrative unreliability, interpretive possibilities multiply and it is difficult to determine the range of legitimate readings. It is logical that critics are attracted to these stories of fall 1912 in the hope of finding within them or in the events of that year keys to the author's works in general. Intrinsic criticism by itself yields, however, so many varied meanings that we must search for any information which might contribute to the stabilization of "the text," the object of our hermeneutic endeavors. At times, carefully sifted shards might yield information of great heuristic value.

Klaus Wagenbach's first biographical book on Kafka (1958),[1] the publication of Kafka's letters to his first fiancée Felice Bauer (1964) and to his sister Ottla,[2] and Evelyn Torton Beck's book on Kafka and

[1] *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend, 1883-1912* (Bern, 1958).

[2] *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus Verlobungszeit* (Frankfurt,

the Yiddish theater (1971)[3] all aspire to discover thematic parallels between events in Kafka's life and his works. Unlike Max Brod, who relied primarily on his memory and private archives, Wagenbach collected data from various sources and verified them, and his work is consequently more reliable. Though in his first book Wagenbach mentions the Yiddish theater troupe which visited Prague in 1911-12, he has yet to discover the identity of the initials F. B. In the second, however, Wagenbach declares that F. B. is Felice Bauer and attributes great importance both to the engagement and to the appearance of the Yiddish theater troupe in Prague for the formation of Kafka's literary imagination during 1912-13.[4]

About two years after the first appearance of the *Briefe an Felice*, a book on them by Elias Canetti reinforced the opinion long held by critics that this first love affair, involving two formal betrothals and their dissolution, had a crucial effect on Kafka, spurred his writing, and nourished his imagination.[5] Heinz Politzer, for instance, associates "Das Urteil" with Kafka's first meeting with Felice in August 1912.[6] His reasons are twofold. Kafka stated in a letter to Felice that this story was hers but added no explanation, and Kafka made use of the word *Urteil* both when he made entries about Felice in his diary and when he titled the story (the parallel will be developed below). Canetti went even further and called his book *Kafka's Other Trial*, the first trial being the novel *The Trial* and the second the stormy love affair with Felice. Canetti relies partly on philological evidence, pointing out that Kafka called the meeting place with the Bauer family in 1914 "Der Gerichtshof" ("the courthouse").[7] Before that meeting, Kafka had broken his formal engagement to Felice for the second time. It is convenient, therefore, for critics to connect this intensive correspondence with his prolific writing during this period. And yet, despite the undeniable fact that Felice played a central role in Kafka's life during these years, it does not necessarily follow that his obsession with such dominant themes as guilt, defendants, trials, the accused, judges, verdicts, and the like is a direct result of the Felice affair. Since the philological evidence is rather

1967); *Briefe an Ottla und die Familie*, ed. Hartmut Binder and Klaus Wagenbach (Frankfurt, 1974). The collection *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1977), is an expansion of *Briefe, 1902-1924*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1958).

[3] *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater* (Madison, 1971).

[4] *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Hamburg, 1964); also, see n. 1.

[5] *Der andere Prozeß: Kafkas Briefe an Felice* (Munich, 1969).

[6] *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca, 1962), pp. 48-49.

[7] Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher, 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York, 1949), p. 407.

shaky and the internal analogies unconvincing, the relationship between Felice and the works of this period is not sufficient to explain the overwhelming obsession with trials.

Evelyn Beck develops in greater detail an argument presented by Wagenbach in 1958 and Binder in 1966.[8] Between October 1911 and February 1912, the Yiddish theater troupe under the direction of Isaac Löwy presented in Prague a complete repertoire of Yiddish plays. Kafka saw most if not all of the performances accompanied by his friend Max Brod, befriended the actors (especially Löwy), and entered in his diary more than a hundred pages of detailed comments about these productions. As a result of this encounter with the Judaism of Eastern Europe, which seemed to him more natural than that of his own immediate surroundings in Prague, Kafka began to reacquaint himself with Jewish problems after a long period of estrangement. Evidence of this change appears in his diary and letters and in statements by his friends, especially Max Brod. Beck, going further than Wagenbach or Binder, maintains that this encounter stimulated him to write and shaped the development of his art. Beck collected and analyzed almost all the plays mentioned in the diaries, but the analogies she draws between the plays and the stories are often forced. Just as it is not possible to attribute Kafka's literary development specifically to the Felice affair, it is unlikely that exposure to the Yiddish theater was its only cause. The two experiences made a deep impression on Kafka, but they do not explain the obsession with guilt and trials in so many of his stories written between 1912 and 1915.

To move beyond these suggestions, it suffices to ask a rather obvious question: Was there during this period a trial in Kafka's world which could have deeply impressed a sensitive writer of Jewish origin, himself a lawyer by profession? The answer is readily available, though I have yet to see it mentioned among Kafka scholars, even Wagenbach and Binder. It is the famous trial of Mendel Beiliss, who was imprisoned in Kiev on March 20, 1911, and finally brought to trial after two years on October 25-28, 1913. The Beiliss affair was a traditional blood libel: Beiliss was accused of killing a Christian child before Passover in order to use his blood in the preparation of unleavened bread for the holiday. Associated in the mind of the Christian populace with the passion of Christ, the blood libel inevitably led to anti-Jewish riots. This particular blood libel shook the entire Jewish world because the Czar's government supported the prosecution and took advantage of the incident to fan the flames of anti-Semitism in Russia, resulting in familiar consequences, from scurrilous accusations to pogroms. As in the Dreyfus affair some

[8] Hartmut Binder, *Motiv und Gestaltung bei Franz Kafka* (Bonn, 1966).

fifteen years earlier, echoes of the trial reached all corners of the world. Besides threatening the security of Jewish communities, the Beiliss affair implanted in the mind of the observer a basic structure: a powerless man, innocent of any crime, stands alone before an awesome state tribunal whose sole aim is to convict him. Justice is perverted and subordinated to political or private interests which have nothing to do with the defendant and which he cannot comprehend. The cynical perversion of the truth, the mass hysteria, the eruption of the repressed primitive instincts and fears—all called into question the validity of rational consciousness, particularly as it manifested itself in language. The threat to the ideological assumptions and physical well-being of the Jewish bourgeoisie, to which Kafka and all his friends belonged, evoked both feelings of insecurity and demands by the militant Jewish leadership upon the loyalty of every Jew. A young Jewish writer with Flaubertian artistic ideals would find his moral position severely challenged. A sensitive artist whose relationship with his father was one of conflict might suffer a radical exacerbation of these personal tensions.

Was Kafka aware of the Beiliss affair or trial (*der Beilis Prozeß*)? If so, why have critics overlooked this connection? Both direct and indirect evidence attests to Kafka's awareness. Max Brod testified that Dora Dymant, Kafka's last love, burned at his request and before his very eyes several notebooks of works that were never published, and that among these was a story on Mendel Beiliss. This testimony has eluded scholars because it first appeared in the expanded 1954 edition of Brod's biography.[9] (It is mentioned elsewhere that Dora Dymant burned these notebooks but their content is not described.[10]) Brod learned this either from Dora Dymant herself, when she visited Israel in the early 1950s, or from Felix Weltsch, who interviewed her. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this testimony since Dora Dymant was the daughter of the sexton of the Rebbe of Ger, knew Hebrew well, and was fully acquainted with the customs of East European Jews. She must have been familiar with the name Mendel Beiliss.

[9] Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt, 1954): "Unter den verbrannten Schriften befand sich laut Doras Angabe auch eine Erzählung Kafkas, die den Odessär (!) Ritualmordprozeß gegen Beilis zum Gegenstand hatte, ferner auch ein Drama unbekannten Inhalts" (p. 248).

[10] See J. P. Hodin, "Memories of Franz Kafka," *Horizon*, 17 (1948), 39, and "Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka," *Der Monat*, 1, Nos. 8-9 (1949), 89-96. In his letter to Buber on January 25, 1927, Brod wrote that the notebooks had been burned but that he did not know what was in them: "Wissen Sie, daß er im letzten Lebensjahr an 20 dicke Hefte durch seine Freundin [Dora Dymant] hat in den Ofen werfen lassen? Er lag zu Bett und sah zu, wie die Manuskripte verbrannten" (in Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, II, Heidelberg, 1973, p. 278). Only Chris Bezzel refers to a play and a story in his *Kafka-Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk* (Munich, 1975).

It is well known that Kafka lived with her during the last year of his life (1923-24) and wanted to marry her, but on the Rebbe's advice her father dissuaded her from doing so.

Kafka, it is true, makes no mention of the Beiliss affair either in literary works (in which Jewish matters occupy no explicit place) or in his diaries and letters (in which Jewish matters are constantly mentioned). Still, Kafka leaves unmentioned many significant things discovered by Brod, Gustav Janouch,[11] and Wagenbach. A master of alienation whose narrative technique is energized, according to Sokel, by what the protagonist's consciousness hides from itself,[12] Kafka masked much in his letters and diaries and above all in his literary works.

Even if Brod's biography did not establish that Kafka wrote a story about Mendel Beiliss, we could show that Kafka was aware of the trial. Several facts indicate that Kafka was aware of Jewish problems.[13]

(1) In Prague, one of the major cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the latter part of the nineteenth century, each national minority was aware of its status. The majority of the population was Czech, and the small German minority consisted of Austrian officials,

[11] Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka: Erinnerungen und Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt, 1951).

[12] Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie: Zur Struktur seiner Kunst* (Munich, 1964) and *Franz Kafka* (New York, 1966). The paradoxes inherent in Kafka's style and characterization have also been dealt with at length by Binder, Emrich, and Politzer, among others. Binder's *Kafka in neuer Sicht: Mimik, Gestik und Personengefüge als Darstellungsformen des Autobiographischen* (Stuttgart, 1976) and *Kafka-Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich, 1975) are particularly helpful.

[13] In this survey I rely on the following: Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater*; Bezzel, *Kafka-Chronik*; Hartmut Binder, "Franz Kafka und die Wochenschrift 'Selbstwehr,'" *DVLG*, 41 (1967), 283-304, abridged as "Franz Kafka and the Weekly Paper 'Selbstwehr,'" in *Publications of the Leo Baeck Institute: Year Book XII* (London, 1967), 135-48; Hartmut Binder, "Kafkas Hebräischstudien: Ein Biographisch-interpretatorischer Versuch," *JDSG*, 11 (1967), 527-56, and *Motiv und Gestaltung*; Jürgen Born, "Vom 'Urteil' zum 'Prozeß': Zu Kafkas Leben und Schaffen in den Jahren 1912-1914," *ZDP*, 86 (1967), 186-96; Brod, *Franz Kafka*; Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka* and *The Jews of Czechoslovakia: Historical Studies and Surveys* (Philadelphia, 1968); Kafka, *Tagebücher, 1910-1923*, ed. Brod; Paul Eisner, *Franz Kafka and Prague*, trans. Lowry Nelson and René Wellek (New York, 1950); Wilhelm Emrich, *Franz Kafka* (Bonn, 1958); Rita Falke, "Biographisch-literarische Hintergründe von Kafkas 'Urteil,'" *GRM*, NS 10 (1960), 164-80; Hodin, "Memories of Kafka" and "Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka"; Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*; Marthe Robert, "Dora Dymants Erinnerungen an Kafka," *Merkur*, 7, No. 9 (1953), 848-51; *Selbstwehr: Unabhängige jüdische Wochenschrift* (Prague, 1907-39); Sokel, *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie*; Hans Tramer, "Prague—City of Three Peoples," in *Publications of the Leo Baeck Institute: Year Book IX* (1964), 305-39; Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie* and *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen*; Felix Weltsch, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish-German Symbiosis: The Case of Franz Kafka," in *Publications of the Leo Baeck Institute: Year Book I* (1956), 255-76.

Sudeten farmers who had migrated to the city, and Jews. The Jews, therefore, were a minority within a minority and belonged to the middle class. Most of Kafka's friends in elementary and high school and at the university were German-speaking Jews. Anyone whose friends included Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Oskar Pollack, and Hugo Bergmann could not have been radically alienated from the Jewish community in Prague (considered as a social class rather than as an official institution).

(2) Kafka's parents were among the many Jews who migrated from provincial towns to urban areas at the end of the nineteenth century. They settled in Prague, a city whose population quadrupled between the years 1850 and 1900. Many Jews felt that their status in the towns was disintegrating with the rise of Czech nationalist aspirations and German or Russian anti-Semitism. Hermann Kafka, Franz's father, had been a Jewish peddler in Bohemian towns. He arrived in Prague in 1881; within ten years he achieved middle-class status and all that pertains to it: pride in his achievements, fear of bankruptcy, and a great desire to see his eldest child become a rich merchant or high official.

(3) Kafka was close to his family and knew its history. He knew that his grandfather had been prohibited by anti-Jewish legislation from marrying because he was not the eldest son, and had married only in 1848 when that prohibition was repealed. He could relate that his mother's maternal grandfather, after whom he was named (Amshil), was a learned rabbi who conducted circumcisions. His mother (about whom he wrote very little) also told him about various Jewish customs.

(4) Kafka lived most of his life in the central district of the city, where most of the population was Jewish. Moreover, in his youth during the 1890s, the ghetto which had for a long time been deteriorating into a slum was razed, and in its place rose new apartment houses. The disappearance of the ghetto was, therefore, a fact of life for Kafka, not merely a metaphor for the fate of Western Jewry.

(5) His religious education was like that of other members of his class: routine visits to the synagogue, usually during the High Holy Days; a certain preparation for the Bar Mitzvah in a modern temple; and instruction in religion for two hours every week in the German *Gymnasium* where most of the students were Jewish. During these hours Kafka read from a translation of the Old Testament and passages from rabbinic literature and Jewish history—the history of the Jews in Prague, in particular. According to Wagenbach, the strongest personality among those teaching these sessions was Nathan Grün, the Jewish community librarian, who was well versed in the history of the community.[14] Despite the fact that Kafka always belittled this aspect of his

[14] Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie*, pp. 40-41.

education, it cannot be assumed that he reached adulthood totally devoid of Jewish consciousness.

(6) As stated earlier, Kafka frequented performances of the Yiddish theater. Furthermore, he volunteered his services to Isaac Löwy, its director, distributed advertising for its performances, and sold tickets. He even organized a concert of dramatic readings in 1912, at which he lectured in German about the history of the Yiddish language.[15] During that year he began reading Grätz's history of the Jews and (in French) M. A. Pines's history of Jewish literature, and participated in debates with Hugo Bergmann at meetings of the local Zionist organization, Bar Kochba. In September 1913 he visited the Eleventh Zionist Congress in Vienna and wrote an account of his disappointment with it. After 1917 he began to take private lessons in Hebrew.

(7) With the exception of Milena Jesenská (who was married to a Jew and was killed during the Holocaust), all of Kafka's intimate women friends we know of were Jewish and aware of their Jewish background: Felice Bauer (active in welfare programs for Jews during World War I), Grete Bloch (Felice's friend and as active as she), Julie Wohryzek (a synagogue sexton's daughter), and Dora Dymant (the daughter of the synagogue sexton of the Rebbe of Ger).

(8) The summer resorts in which Kafka spent his vacations were, generally speaking, typical of those frequented by Prague Jews: Schelessen, Zürau, Marienbad, Müritz on the Baltic seashore.

(9) Kafka read two Prague newspapers. The first, *Das Prager Tagblatt,* was a liberal newspaper whose editors were Jews, most of whom Kafka knew from meetings in the city. Many of its readers were well-to-do Jewish merchants like those in the families of Kafka's friends. Jewish concerns were mentioned, if only indirectly, in the paper. More important for our discussion is the national Jewish weekly of Bohemian Jewry, *Selbstwehr,*[16] which became the formal organ of the Zionist organization after 1912. According to Binder, in all of Kafka's writing no book or newspaper is mentioned as often as this one. The paper's editors were among Kafka's friends; he often participated in their meetings, requested that the newspaper be sent to his summer residence at various resorts, and even contributed some stories to it. Each week the newspaper related all that occurred in the Jewish world, both in Prague (the performances of the Yiddish theater troupe, for example)[17] and

[15] Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß* (1953; rpt. New York, 1966), pp. 421-26; hereafter cited in the text.

[16] See note 13.

[17] Several articles on the theater have been noted by Beck and Binder. In the appendix of her book, on pages 224-26, Beck provides an English translation of these articles.

elsewhere (settlements in Israel, the Zionist Congress, Jewish suffrage in Russia, and the Beiliss affair).

(10) The blood libel against Mendel Beiliss was not the only one which affected Jews in Europe during Kafka's lifetime. It is worth mentioning those which might have had an impact on the consciousness of the Jewish community in Prague:

(a) *The blood libel at Tisza Eszlar (1882)*. An entire Jewish congregation in Hungary was accused of murdering a young Christian woman as a result of false testimony the sons of its sexton were forced to give. The prosecution relied primarily on the fantastic story of Moritz Schwartz, the sexton's son, who claimed he saw his father and three butchers slicing the girl's flesh and pouring her blood into a vessel. When the corpse, bearing no signs of ritual murder, was eventually found in the river, witnesses were bribed to deny its identity. During the entire summer of 1882 newspapers gave extensive coverage to this affair; the riots which erupted in Hungary in its wake caused the government to declare a state of emergency. Only after a lengthy appeal was the corpse examined: no signs of ritual homicide were found and the corpse was identified as the body of the missing girl. Though the accused were acquitted, the entire affair and the distorted court proceedings, especially the false testimony given by the boy Moritz, generated deep anxiety among Jews of the Austrian empire who were also acutely aware of the pogroms across the border in southern Russia. During these years Hermann Kafka first arrived in Prague, married Julie Löwy, and begat his son Franz.[18]

(b) *The Dreyfus affair (1894-99)*. During Kafka's childhood years, the news concerning the Dreyfus affair reached Prague as well as Vienna, where Theodor Herzl resided. And though this plot did not involve the assassination of a Christian child, the accusation of spying and subversion of the law sufficed to provoke anti-Semitic reaction and undermine the security of the Jewish community. Once again a relatively unimportant, innocent Jew became the pawn in a political struggle. Dreyfus spent many years imprisoned on an isolated island (see "In der Strafkolonie," written by Kafka in 1914) and was partially acquitted only after a widely publicized protest. During this prolonged affair Franz Kafka was a high school and university student.

(c) *The blood libel at Polna, or the* Hilsner Prozeß *(1899-1900)*. In 1899 Leopold Hilsner, a Jew, was convicted of murdering a young Christian woman in Polna, Bohemia, and sentenced to be hanged. Even before the verdict was brought in, rumors were spread by the country's

[18] Referring to this affair, Arnold Zweig wrote his play *Die Sendung Semaels*, whose original name was, however, *Ritualmord in Ungarn* (Leipzig, 1918).

anti-Semitic newspapers that the murder was a ritual one, despite the fact that the prosecutor's dossier contained no mention of such a crime. The Hilsner trial became the Austro-Hungarian Dreyfus affair. Thomas G. Masaryk, as is well known, composed a pamphlet against this subversion of justice, and its circulation was forbidden by the authorities. Czech students attacked Jews; in Vienna, Prague, and other cities Jews held rallies protesting the anti-Semitic provocation. In the Reichsrat in Vienna, several anti-Semitic speeches were delivered on December 12, 1899. Hilsner was acquitted after the faculty of medicine in Prague determined that the original medical testimony was erroneous. Hilsner was convicted again and sentenced to death in a second trial, though his sentence was commuted by Franz Joseph in 1901 to life imprisonment. This affair, which lasted about a year and a half, undoubtedly caused the most bitter anti-Semitic repercussions to which the Jews of Prague were exposed during Kafka's youth.

(d) *The trial of David Blondes (1900-02)*. Even before the Hilsner affair was over, a Vilna barber, David Blondes, was accused on December 2, 1900, of plotting to kill his Christian maid. He won his case after extensive and complicated court proceedings in the court of appeals. Oskar Gruzenberg, defense counsel, was the same attorney who defended Beiliss in Kiev in 1913.

(e) When the Beiliss affair erupted, it revitalized all the blood libel experiences of Kafka's youth. Though its reverberations in the Jewish world have been well documented, the impression it made on Prague Jewry is worth mentioning here. *Selbstwehr* was obsessed with the affair from its very inception. It reported, for example, that on December 21, 1911, as a result of riots in Kiev, 1800 Jewish students were prevented from attending their occupational high schools. In 1912 alone, twenty-two articles were devoted to the Beiliss trial, and by the end of the summer of 1913, the trial had become so notorious that the name of the accused, Mendel Beiliss, was often deleted and the trial was simply called "Der Prozeß," a generic term with all the cosmic power of Kafka's generic titles of his stories.

No article in *Selbstwehr* sums up the emotions of the period as pointedly and passionately as the editorial of April 12, 1912, entitled "*Kiew.*" The reader familiar with Kafka's vocabulary will recognize here some of the terms that haunted his early stories.

KIEW

Es ist wie damals, als Dreyfus' Name in aller Mund war und die Juden allüberal sich auf der Anklagebank glaubten. Diesmal heißt er Beilis und ist vom Kiewer Staatsanwalt angeklagt, den Knaben Justezynski "in qualvoller Weise" gemordet zu haben. In qualvoller Weise! Hinterlistig und heimtückisch umschreibt die Anklage jene Vorstellung, die der Klang des Wortes Ritualmord erwecken soll.

Und zynisch und rücksichtslos geht die russische Justiz zu Werke, um nur ja die Verurteilung des beschuldigten Juden zu erzielen. Die unzähligen von der Verteidigung vorgeladenen Entlastungszeugen werden abgelehnt, der Verteidigung wird es unmöglich gemacht, ihre Aufgabe zu erfüllen. Die russischen antisemitischen Zeitungen strotzen von hetzerischen Brandartikeln, alle rohen Instinkte werden aufgepeitscht, um alle besseren Stimmen zu übertönen: denn der Jude Beilis muß verurteilt werden.

Nun ist er ja noch nicht verurteilt. Noch ist der Prozeß im Gange, noch ist das Urteil nicht erfolgt, noch könnten Ereignisse eintreten, die das Schlimmste abwenden.

Denn was geschehen wird, wenn Beilis der Jude der "qualvollen Ermordung" des Christenknaben schuldig gesprochen wird—das wagen die Kenner der russischen Verhältnisse heute kaum anzudeuten. Wissen sie doch, daß diese Verurteilung das Zeichen eines legalisierten Sturmes auf die Juden sein soll. Wissen sie doch, daß von Kiew aus die blutige Losung wieder einmal durch das Zarenreich fliegen soll.

Und während das Gefürchtete noch nicht zum Ereignis geworden ist, soll in letzter Stunde gefragt sein: Ist alles geschehen, um in Russland die Stimmen der Gerechtigkeit zu stärken? Haben die Juden auch bei uns alle ihre Kräfte aufgeboten, allen ihren Einfluß aufgewendet, um den Drohungen der zügellosen Scharen drohende Abwehr entgegenzusetzen? Wir wollen und wir können es hier nicht untersuchen. Wir können nur der Befürchtung Ausdruck geben, die einflußreichen Kreise hätten sich aus ihrer Behaglichkeit nicht aufschrecken lassen, weil der ganze Fall schließlich doch nur jene russischen Juden angehe, mit denen die gebildeten Westeuropäer nichts zu schaffen hätten. Jeder, der von dem Kiewer Ritualmordprozeß liest, prüfe sich, wie stark sein Solidaritätsempfinden ist. Und wer um jenes unsäglichen Schimpfes, gegen den uns keine erfolgreiche Abwehr gegönnt ist, wer um jener unentrinnbaren Drohung willen sein Herz erschaudern fühlt, der tue das Seine dazu, daß unserem Volke ein freieres Los werde, nicht nur für heute und morgen, da das Urteil noch nicht gesprochen ist, das in dem Kiewer Juden wieder einmal unser ganzes Volk zu verdammen gedenkt. Arbeiten wir dafür, daß unser Volk endlich einmal zur Freiheit erwache, aus dem schmerzensreichen Leide des tausendjährigen Galuth.

A close analysis of this impassioned plea—which Kafka certainly read—reveals much more than the model of an innocent man falsely accused by a malicious government. From the initial reference to the Dreyfus affair to the closing mention of *Galuth*, the framework is that of Jewish alienation in a hostile Gentile world; the assumptions and much of the language are those of classical Zionism, as befits such a newspaper. Just as Jewish history is viewed as a continuum, the Jewish people are assumed to be an indivisible whole with a common destiny and thus with obligations of solidarity. When Dreyfus or Beiliss is accused, all Jews are in the prisoner's dock and, though some might resist this conclusion, the facts are inescapable. The author calls attention to the perversion of language in the cunning and malicious accusation and to the concomitant threat to all Jews. When primitive instincts are unleashed, the truth is subverted in the name of truth. The three

words—*verurteilt*, *Urteil*, and *Prozeß*—which appear together in the second paragraph are key terms in Kafka's vocabulary, and many of the basic notions of the editorial are familiar to any reader of his fiction. Absent from the editorial, however, is the preoccupation with the ruminations of the protagonist, his adoption of the guilt laid upon him, his struggle to present a portrait of reality which masks his own consciousness—which are found in rudimentary form in Kafka's work before 1912. (These motifs, we should remember, were also evident before Kafka met Felice Bauer or Isaac Löwy.)

While it would be rash to argue that Kafka would not have written his trial- and guilt-ridden stories of 1912-14 if the Beiliss affair had not occurred, it is highly improbable that he was unaffected by the claims the trial made upon his allegiance or the moral lesson it suggested. It is also possible that the prolonged pressures of the Beiliss affair enabled him to universalize and objectify certain emotions which had hitherto seemed private, even solipsistic. Even though the reader might claim that my argument is *ex silentio*, hence speculative, since no direct reference has yet been found to the Beiliss affair in Kafka's extant diaries or letters, it must be granted that Kafka's silence is both characteristic and revelatory. Perhaps his silence on this particular topic is related to the almost total absence of Jewish motifs in his fiction, since his diaries and letters often mention Jewish events. As for speculation per se, Kafka criticism is perforce so speculative that my speculations are no more flagrant than most. Avowedly pragmatic, my speculation attempts to answer two questions: (1) Are elements of the Beiliss affair reflected in Kafka's stories? (2) How might these elements fuse with other concerns which obsessed Kafka during this period? Since they overlap, both questions will be answered jointly.

Strong support for my contention that the Beiliss trial made a definite impression on Kafka can be found in the short story "Das Urteil," written in a single night (September 22-23, 1912); in it, Kafka broke away from the norms of the fragmentary sketch. The story begins with the hero, Georg Bendemann, ruminating about his upcoming marriage to Frieda Brandenfeld, and his hesitation to write about it to his friend who works in St. Petersburg. In the course of the story there is a clash between father and son, and after a violent quarrel the father condemns his son to death by drowning. Bound by this injunction, Georg jumps off the bridge near their apartment.

The story has been subjected to various interpretations—psychoanalytic, sociological, and metaphysical—and sometimes a combination of all three. The threatening father is compared to Hermann Kafka (Franz's father) and perhaps to God. Frieda Brandenfeld represents,

in the view of most critics, Felice Bauer, with whom Kafka began to exchange letters only days before the story was written. The hero's love for his bride is construed by the father as a betrayal either of the mother who had recently died or of the family in general. The friend in St. Petersburg represents a character who mediates between the father and the son, or an alter ego of the hero, or even (according to Evelyn Beck) Isaac Löwy, an archetype of the East European Jew. Many critics argue that the story deals with the guilt feelings the hero harbors for having committed some crime against himself or his family and with the punishment he voluntarily suffers by carrying out the brutal sentence imposed upon him by his father.

Despite the various illuminating interpretations of the story, several mysteries remain. Why, for instance, does the friend wander about in Russia, a land described as foreign and hostile? Why was the son sentenced to such an unnatural death by drowning? And what is the implication of the apparently unspecific title "Das Urteil"?

In reference to the friend in Russia, it is worth citing a paragraph from the story itself. Georg Bendemann quarrels with his father over several things, but especially over the friend in Russia. At one point the father doubts the very existence of the friend. Georg protests by saying that the friend paid them a visit and in fact recounted several bizarre stories which interested the father. "Er erzählte damals unglaubliche Geschichten von der russischen Revolution. Wie er z. B. auf einer Geschäftsreise in Kiew bei einem Tumult einen Geistlichen auf einem Balkon gesehen hatte, der sich ein breites Blutkreuz in die flache Hand schnitt, diese Hand erhob und die Menge anrief. Du hast ja selbst diese Geschichte hie und da wiedererzählt."[19]

On various occasions in the story the friend is referred to as the friend from St. Petersburg since that is where he resides. However, in the passage just quoted, the priest's appeal to the mob occurs in Kiev, the city where Beiliss was tried. The reference to the revolution (apparently that of 1905) could be a convenient ploy.

A page later, the father changes his line of argument and shouts: "Wohl kenne ich deinen Freund. Er wäre ein Sohn nach meinem Herzen. Darum hast du ihn auch betrogen die ganzen Jahre lang" (p. 63). And in that horrendous moment when Georg's very personality is challenged, he reflects on his friend in Russia. "Georg sah zum Schreckbild seines Vaters auf. Der Petersburger Freund, den der Vater plötzlich so gut kannte, ergriff ihn, wie noch nie. Verloren im weiten Rußland sah er ihn. Zwischen den Trümmern der Regale, den zerfetzten Waren, den

[19] References to "Das Urteil" are from Franz Kafka, *Erzählungen und kleine Prosa* (1939; rpt. New York, 1946), p. 62; hereafter cited in the text.

fallenden Gasarmen stand er gerade noch. Warum hatte er so weit wegfahren müssen!" (p. 64). Evelyn Beck is correct in comparing this description with the accounts of pogroms which Kafka encountered in *Selbstwehr*; however, she does not connect them with the Beiliss trial.[20]

Though these two passages are among the most dramatic in the story, their position in a plot dealing with the relationship between a father and his son is not patently motivated. The motivation becomes clear when Georg's orderly and rational world falls apart, and he is beset by images associated with disintegration and terror: Kiev, blatant religious provocations, pogroms, and the like. Though it is impossible to establish that the friend in Russia is Mendel Beiliss or Isaac Löwy or for that matter any other personage, it is plausible that the image of Beiliss, the wretched accused, played a role in the formation of the character of the friend in Russia as well as in the various passages cited above. Since this friend is linked psychologically to the hero, the reference to a barbaric environment across the border cannot be without significance.

The hero's death by drowning prompted Erwin Steinberg to connect this short story with "Who by water" of the "Nethaneh Tokef" prayer of the Jewish High Holy Days.[21] Steinberg's original suggestion tying death by drowning to "Who by water" is both interesting and plausible; however, he fails to support and develop it. He checked the date on which Yom Kippur fell in the year 1912 and concluded that it must have been September 22 (actually, it was September 21), and consequently conjectures that the story "Das Urteil" was written at the end of the day of Yom Kippur and expresses Kafka's guilt for having alienated himself from the synagogue. Steinberg assumes that since the diaries tell about Kafka's visiting the synagogue on Yom Kippur in 1911 but not about the days that follow, Kafka must have regretted his behavior. This is the reason, according to Steinberg, that the story says Georg Bendemann "had not entered his father's room for several months."

This inference, like Steinberg's other inferences, is without foundation. Kafka did not frequent a synagogue, not even after 1917 when he was studying among Jews who kept the commandments, such as Friedrich Thieberger and Georg Langer, or when he lived with Dora Dymant, the daughter of a Hasid.

Had Steinberg been more careful, he would have been more convincing—and would have discovered more. Overtones of "Nethaneh Tokef," for example, are not proof of a visit to the synagogue on Yom Kippur since the prayer is also said on Rosh Hashanah; and since it

[20] Beck, p. 118, n. 121.
[21] Erwin R. Steinberg, "The Judgment in Kafka's 'The Judgment,'" *MFS*, 8 (1962), 23-30.

was well known and characterized the mood of the High Holy Days, it was printed in many newspapers and textbooks. Kafka might have learned it in his religion classes in high school. In his article, Steinberg relied on the English translation of an American mahzor (*High Holy Day Prayerbook*) published fifteen years after Kafka's death. The mahzor customarily used in Prague in 1911 was either in Hebrew alone or in Hebrew with German translation. It is impossible to determine with certainty in which mahzor Kafka read the translation of the prayer, or which mahzor was the source for the translation he used (Kafka knew little Hebrew during this period). However, since he did not visit the synagogue often and was acquainted primarily with upper middle-class Jews, it may be assumed that he examined the liberal mahzor which was published in Hamburg and translated in a free, psychological style.

In the 1904 edition of the *Gebetbuch* of the Jewish Reform Temple of Hamburg, we find the following translation:

Unethanneh. So wollen wir Dir unsere Huldigung darbringen und Dich preisen als Weltenkönig. Laßt uns künden des Tages Macht und seine heilige Bedeutung. Sein Weckruf durchzittert, erschüttert unsere Herzen, und unsere Seelen erbeben im Bewußtsein ihrer Schuld, in dem Gedanken an Dein Weltgericht. Du bist der allwissende Richter, vor Dir ist keine Tat verborgen, kein Gedanke verhüllt. Was wir längst vergessen wähnten, steht in flammenden Lettern vor Deinem allsehenden Auge verzeichnet. Und wenn sonst die Stimme des Gewissens im Lärm des Alltags verhallt, heute spricht sie und wir müssen lauschen, heute quält uns die Erinnerung an unsere Sünde, und wir erkennen und bekennen, daß wir gefrevelt haben; und die Gottesstimmen klagen uns an und zitternd, harrend auf Deine Gnade, stehen wir vor Dir. Wer ist schuldlos vor Dir? Selbst Engel müssten erröten vor Deiner Heiligkeit am Tage des Gerichts! Nun ziehen alle Staubgeborenen vor Deinem Richterthron vorüber, und Du verhängst nach Deiner göttlichen Weisheit jedem sein Urteil.[22]

This passage is comprised of the same notions which inform Kafka's "Das Urteil": the trembling of the soul; the consciousness of guilt; the recognition of God's eternal judgment (or the father's judgment); an omniscient judge; man's inability to hide from him, though he might attempt to do so; the begging for forgiveness; every man's sinfulness; and above all, the final sentence containing the translation of the Hebrew expression *Gezar Hadin* as *Urteil* (and not as *Geschick* or *Verhängnis*, which appear in other mahzorim).

The noun *Urteil* and the verbs derived from it (*beurteilen, verurteilen*) with all the sundry implications deriving therefrom (such as the sentence, a trial, the judge's relationship to the accused and that of the accused to the judge) comprise the focus of Kafka's thoughts during the decisive years 1912-15, during which he wrote "Das Urteil," "Die

[22] *Gebetbuch*, ed. Israelitischer Tempelverband (Hamburg, 1904), pp. 354-55.

Verwandlung," "Der Heizer," "In der Strafkolonie," and *Der Prozeß*. These terms occur in many contexts in all of these works and should be subjected to intensive investigation. Toward the end of "Das Urteil" the father pronounces the following sentence in a loud voice: "Jetzt weißt du also, was es noch außer dir gab, bisher wußtest du nur von dir! Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch! — Und darum wisse: Ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des Ertrinkens!" (p. 67). In this passage, the father's sentence appears to be closely associated with man's basic sense of identity and his self-perception. In the eyes of the judging father, the son is a demonic human being—a perception of himself which the son might have banished from his consciousness until forced to accept it because of his father's indictment.

Years later when Kafka wrote the "Brief an den Vater" (1919), he was still under the influence of this complex of terms and ideas: "Für mich als Kind war aber alles, was Du mir zuriefst, geradezu Himmelsgebot, ich vergaß es nie, es blieb mir das wichtigste Mittel zur Beurteilung der Welt, vor allem zur Beurteilung Deiner selbst, und da versagtest Du vollständig" (*Hochzeitsvorbereitung*, p. 172). The father stands for God, His reprimands and commandments; by these commandments the son assessed the world and by this assessment the father failed abjectly.

Likewise with family relationships in general: "Diesen schrecklichen Prozeß, der zwischen uns und Dir schwebt, in allen Einzelheiten, von allen Seiten, bei allen Anlässen, von fern und nah gemeinsam durchzusprechen, diesen Prozeß, in dem Du immerfort Richter zu sein behauptest, während Du, wenigstens zum größten Teil (hier lasse ich die Tür allen Irrtümern offen, die mir natürlich begegnen können) ebenso schwache und verblendete Partei bist wie wir" (p. 193).

The similarities in terminology and ambience among the four items I have adduced—the Beiliss affair, "Das Urteil," the "Nethaneh Tokef" prayer of the Day of Atonement, and Kafka's description of his relations with his father—yield a structural pattern worth noting:

Protagonist	*Nexus*	*Foil*
the citizen	*Urteil*	society
man	*Urteil*	God
the son	*Urteil*	the father

In all these cases, the relationship between the protagonist and the foil (a term justified by Kafka's unremitting concentration on the protagonist) is not one of mutuality and fulfillment but of contention, of *Urteil*. The figures are adversaries in the legal sense. This structure, like all structures, is obviously reductionist and simplistic, but it helps us un-

cover Kafka's unique linguistic and situational strategies.

A court scene, for instance, is a staple of narrative fiction, particularly the detective story, since it allows for economical, dramatic concentration of conflict, manipulation, and evasion. Though we find court scenes in *Der Prozeß*, we are less interested here in actual court scenes than in the courtroom atmosphere where there are set rules which often defy commonsense logic, where every word is meaningful and must be recorded, where one constantly resorts to situational and linguistic strategies to make a point, where one's motives are constantly probed and one's identity repeatedly called into question. Kafka's use of the trial atmosphere is the opposite of that in the standard detective story. In the latter the trial scene is convergent and centripetal, pulling things together and thus arriving at a plausible solution. In Kafka, the trial atmosphere is divergent and centrifugal, tearing the fabric of normal existence asunder and thus arriving at a solution which is either ambiguous or puzzling. (The post-Kafka example of Robbe-Grillet is illuminating.) For Kafka, the structural energy of *Urteil* both unifies his fiction and tears it apart.

While it would be foolish to attribute the peculiarity of Kafka's artistic obsessions and strategies to any specific personality trait or experience, it would be no less foolish to eliminate from our consideration of his fiction either his immediate family background or so central an event in the life of Prague Jewry as the Beiliss affair. Identification with Mendel Beiliss, or even a more remote though prolonged observation of his plight, could have provided Kafka with the necessary validation of his own feelings of insecurity and loneliness, an expansion and objectification of his Oedipal torment, corroboration of his doubts about the validity and viability of language, and a moral justification for the bewildering dialectic between self-corrosive guilt and subtle imposture which marks so many of his protagonists.

University of California, Los Angeles

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