

## Kafka's Hand

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Summer in Berlin was nearing its peak, and I had almost wandered past the fine Martin-Gropius-Bau when I caught sight of a familiar pair of eyes on the canvas banners out front. **Franz Kafka. Der ganze Prozess.** The exhibition promised the handwritten manuscript of *The Trial*. I'd seen an ad for it in a *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* magazine (for students of German), and thought I could spare the five euros—and myself from the tourist-parade outside.

The hall upstairs was duskily lit and the only sound was from Orson Welles' film adaptation playing quietly in a side room. Lining the walls were photographs of the author and acquaintances, some of them well-circulated images, found on the cover of every biography. They were smaller than I expected; many could fit in the palm.

I went and hunched over the low, glowing vitrine containing rows of sheets. There it was: black on white, all spindly legs and thick crossbars. The uppercase K's were caricatures; the lowercase, like a dented loop of wire. One could nearly hear the scratch of the pen and see the ink as it spread then dried. One could imagine the author hovering inches above.

The semester before my travels I'd been honored to have a seat in the seminar "Kafka and his Readers" (whether I was ready for it or not) where each week, some text and a good deal of secondary material were handed down for exegesis. So by the time I entered this exhibition, I had already been wading through a century's worth of discourse—but with those pages before me, I felt the long-forgotten, singular feeling of being a reader alone with a text.

This experience helped shape what I came to adopt as the purpose of travel: first-hand experience, self-directed and unclouded. Views that had only been plates in *Bildbänden* came to life, and I walked the streets and hopped the trams that had only been lines on a map. I spent a weekend in the splendid *Havelland*, an area near Brandenburg with which I was intimately familiar thanks to a previous semester's translation project. Forty years after the text was put to print, the river is still stunning and apple cultivation still stands at the center of life, and the people still speak with the same pleasant monotone I imagined as I read.

With the start of my semester at the University of Graz, I became even more deeply entrenched in new experiences and challenges. I could step out of architecture class and enjoy a personal walking tour of the *Altstadt*. I took classes in semantics, discourse analysis, language contact—and found small demonstrations appearing here and there as I went through my day. The language of the Austrians was no longer a lexicon of peculiarities and variations, nor a list of phonological rules written down in IPA. It became the language of daily life—if I couldn't say it in the local tongue, I decided, it would go unsaid. With practice, I found that there was little I couldn't somehow express.

My adventures in Europe enriched and invigorated me in ways I can only begin to list. I carry with me diverse memories and impressions and the deep gratitude that I had had those opportunities before me. Without having studied abroad, I would not consider my education complete!