



# From the Office

By Daniel D. Skwire

His complaints about his duties were epic, but Kafka clearly drew satisfaction from working his day job at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague.

**L**ITTLE KNOWN DURING HIS LIFETIME, Franz Kafka has come to be recognized as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. His works include some of the most disturbing and enduring images of modern fiction. The hero of *The Metamorphosis*, for example, awakens one morning to find he has been transformed into a giant insect. Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony" features an officer in a prison camp who maintains a

ghastly machine to torture and execute his prisoners. And in *The Trial*, a man must defend himself in court without being informed of the crime he has been accused of committing. These portraits of disillusionment, anxiety, and despair anticipate the subsequent horrors of mid-20th-century war and inhumanity.

Many of the details of Kafka's own life are scarcely more cheerful. A sickly individual, he struggled with tuberculosis and other illnesses before dying at the age of 40. His relationships

# of Franz Kafka



Kafka's desk at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague

with women were unsuccessful, and he never married despite being engaged on several occasions. He lived with his parents for most of his life and complained bitterly that his work in the insurance profession kept him from his true calling of writing—a calling that, yes, offered its own special torments.

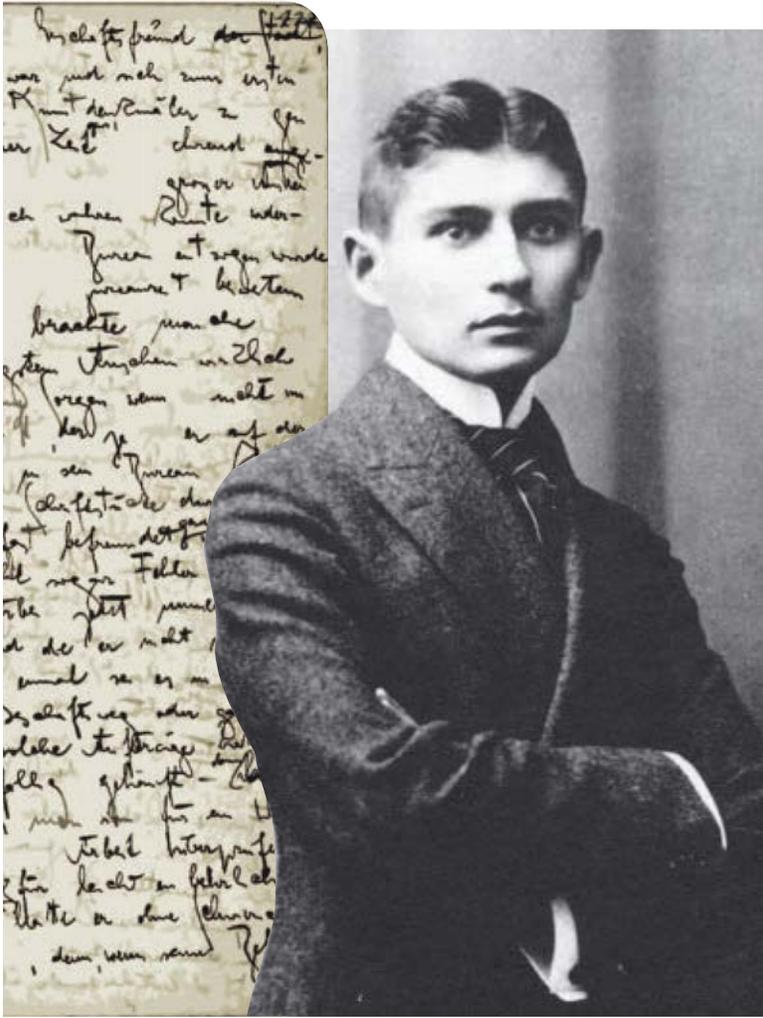
In studying Kafka's life, however, and particularly his insurance career, one quickly learns that not all of his complaints can be taken at face value—and that the common perception of Kafka as a tortured genius held back by the need to earn a living at an office job is not entirely accurate. The demands of his office work may have frustrated him, but he was quite successful at it, and his letters, diaries, and fiction show a particular fascination with all forms of work and the attitudes people take toward

their occupations. An examination of Kafka's insurance career humanizes him and sheds light on his writing by showing his dedication, accomplishments, and sense of humor alongside his many frustrations.

## Early Days

Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague, where he was to live his entire life. At that time, Prague was the capital of Bohemia, which was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Kafkas were middle-class, German-speaking Jews, and Franz attended a series of German-language schools.

According to biographer Ernst Pawel, young Franz was a successful student, at least in subjects other than math. Kafka



Kafka during his last year at the German University in Prague

Shortly thereafter, he was hired by the Prague branch of the Assicurazioni Generali, a multiline Italian insurance company.

Despite his conceptual interest in insurance, Kafka found the realities of office work at Generali to be unpleasant. He was particularly troubled by the long workday (“an infinite eight to nine hours of work”), which left him little time for life outside the office. He immediately began searching for other work, eyeing a government job since the workday was only six hours, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

It wasn’t easy for Jews to find government jobs in those days, but Kafka was fortunate in that the father of one of his childhood friends was the chairman of the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague. This impressively named organization was a government-run insurer that provided compulsory insurance for workplace accidents—the equivalent of modern-day workers’ compensation coverage. With the help of his friend’s father, Kafka was hired by the institute in 1908 as a deputy clerk.

### The Institute

Kafka began his new job at an interesting and important time in the history of the institute. A collection of documents from his work there has been edited recently and published under the title of *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*. For many years prior to Kafka’s employment, the institute had been poorly run, losing vast amounts of money. With imagery worthy of his later fiction, Kafka described the situation in a 1911 article:

We gladly admit that until 1909, the annual reports of the Institute, with their figures documenting a deficit that seemed to spread almost like a living organism, offered little encouragement to feel excitement. Instead, these reports succeeded in damping all the Institute’s hopes for the future; the Institute seemed simply to be a corpse, whose only living element was its growing deficit.

The problems the institute faced were wide ranging. Employers tended to lie about the numbers of covered employees and their salaries, thus reducing the premiums they were required to pay. The government trade inspectors, who were independent of the institute, were at best ineffective, more often corrupt, and as a result were unwilling or unable to enforce the compulsory insurance laws. In addition, the structure of premium rates charged by the institute was highly arbitrary, with little basis in statistics or actuarial science. This situation changed when Robert Marschner was hired as the new director, in 1909. He immediately introduced a new, statistically based, risk classification system that charged higher rates to employers with a greater risk of occupational accidents. This new system was implemented in 1910.

That same year, Kafka was promoted to the position of law

did not particularly enjoy his school days, however, and a 1910 diary entry is remarkable for the range of people he blamed for this unhappiness:

My education has done me great harm in some ways. This reproach is directed against a multitude of people... Among them are my parents, several relatives, several teachers, a certain particular cook, several girls at dancing school, several visitors to our house in earlier times, several writers, a swimming teacher, a ticket-seller, a school inspector, then some people that I met only once on the street, and others that I just cannot recall and those whom I shall never again recall. . .

This pattern of accomplishment accompanied by lavish complaining would be repeated throughout Kafka’s professional career.

From 1901 to 1906, Kafka attended the German University in Prague. After trying various subjects, including chemistry, he eventually settled on law. He graduated in 1906 with a Doctor of Law degree and began to look for work, focusing on the insurance industry.

“I am staying in Prague,” he wrote to a friend in September 1907, “and within a few weeks will in all probability obtain a position with an insurance company. These next weeks I shall have to study insurance incessantly, but it is highly interesting.”

clerk and awarded civil service tenure. In his new role, he was responsible for dealing with the flood of appeals the institute received from employers who were unhappy with the new risk classification system. A weaving mill, for example, protested its classification as a weaver of cotton rather than wool (with a resulting higher risk factor due to the high-speed looms used for cotton). An association of toy manufacturers was unhappy with being classified as carpenters and users of heavy machinery when most of its work involved painting and less risky labor performed in rooms separate from the machinery.

Kafka's talent for writing appears to have been identified early in his career. He made frequent contributions to the institute's annual reports. One report featured a particularly notable article by Kafka, "Measures for Preventing Accidents from Wood-Planing Machines," that provided a detailed discussion of wood-planing equipment, comparing the relative safety of planers with square and cylindrical shafts. Accompanying the article were detailed diagrams of the machines and gruesome drawings of hands with amputated fingers (from square shafts) and less severe abrasions (from cylindrical shafts).

Other articles by Kafka were more theoretical in nature, defending the need to cover all employees within a group of builders to achieve a spread of risk consistent with the schedule of premium rates or describing the financial differences between the pay-as-you-go German accident insurance program and the fully funded Austrian program to which the institute belonged.

Kafka also participated in occasional legal cases, one of which involved a charge against Josef Renelt, a quarry and orchard owner, for withholding insurance fees due to the institute. Renelt employed the same workers in both the quarry and the orchard but insisted that their compensation pertained only to their orchard work, thus exempting them from the mandatory coverage for industrial workers. Kafka represented the institute in its claim that the workers should be covered and premiums paid. The dispute lasted nine years before ultimately being settled in 1913 in Renelt's favor, much to the frustration of Kafka and the institute. It may not be a coincidence that Kafka began his novel *The Trial* the next year.

Later in his career, Kafka became involved with accident prevention, writing several articles for the institute on the topic, including the lavishly illustrated "Accident Prevention in Quarries" in 1914 and "Risk Classification and Accident Prevention in Wartime" in 1915. The latter work addressed insurance-related complexities arising from Austrian involvement in World War I, such as the appropriate risk classification for a factory that once produced metal buttons but had converted part of its facility to the manufacture of detonators for grenades. In a 1916 article, also addressing wartime issues, Kafka argued for the creation of a public psychiatric hospital to treat shellshocked soldiers.

## The Office as Obstacle

Kafka was clearly a successful and valued employee at the institute. He received regular raises and promotions, being named vice secretary in 1913, secretary in 1919, and chief secretary in 1922. During the war, the institute successfully argued that his work was essential to the nation, sparing him from the military draft.

Throughout his employment at the institute, which lasted until he was forced to retire on disability shortly before his death, Kafka was engaged in a second career as well. Each night, following his shift, a nap, and a meal, he would sit down to write. It was a schedule he found difficult and exhausting—about which he complained endlessly in his letters and diaries—and he often dreamed of quitting the work entirely.

"That I, so long as I am not freed of my office, am simply lost, this is clearer to me more than anything else, it is just a matter, as long as possible, of holding my head high so that I do not drown," Kafka wrote in his diary in 1910.

Four years later, his view had not changed much. "The office is a great nuisance to me, and often unbearable, but basically easy," he wrote his parents in July 1914. "I will continue to climb the salary ladder. For what purpose? This work is not right for me, and if it does not even bring me independence as a reward, why don't I throw it up?"

Though he complained about the demands his office life put on him, and how it interfered with his writing, a diary entry from February 1911 shows that Kafka also realized the demands were not inherently unreasonable. He simply would rather not have been forced to work in order to support himself financially:

"I am completely overworked. Not by the office but by my other work. The office has an innocent share in it only to the extent that, if I did not have to go there, I could live calmly for my own work and should not have to waste these six hours a day which have tormented me to a degree that you cannot imagine. . . . In the final analysis, I know, that is just talk, the fault is mine and the office has a right to make the most definite and justified demands on me. But for me in particular it is a horrible double life from which there is probably no escape but insanity."

Largely on the basis of this evidence, Kafka's biographers generally have treated his profession as an obstacle to his literary efforts. Max Brod, Kafka's friend, literary champion, and first biographer, referred to Kafka's six-hour workday as "tragic," for example, and blamed his job for harming his productivity as a writer and leading him to a life of "vegetating."

Ernst Pawel, an otherwise excellent biographer, makes little effort to hide his contempt for Kafka's insurance work, going so far as to blame him for taking the job seriously in the first place. "He was constitutionally incapable of tackling any task,

Kafka and his  
sometime fiancée,  
Felice Bauer



no matter how trivial, with the indifference and contempt it deserved,” Pawel writes of Kafka’s time at the institute.

Even the editors of the recent volume of Kafka’s office writings, who have considerable knowledge and expertise regarding the technical aspects of his insurance work, occasionally reveal their biases. They refer to the appeal of the mill that objected to its classification as a manufacturer of cotton rather than woolen cloth, for example, as a “Kafkaesque process,” which is clearly inappropriate. The appeal, after all, did not disappear into a faceless bureaucracy. It received timely and thorough responses (from Kafka himself, in fact, on behalf of the institute) and was ultimately successful in its outcome.

Compare this to the truly Kafkaesque ordeal of Josef K. in *The Trial*, or Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. Neither finds an explanation of any kind for his predicament, let alone has any chance at negotiating a successful resolution to his troubles. The editors’ assumption seems to be that insurance is necessarily an impenetrable and senseless bureaucracy, though their own evidence—drawn largely from Kafka’s own words—shows otherwise.

### A Fuller Picture

Kafka’s attitude toward work was more complex than his biographers have acknowledged or than a quick reading of his diaries might suggest. His voluminous correspondence with his sometime fiancée Felice Bauer provides considerable insight into his views of his own work as well as that of his friends and family. He conveys frustration, to be sure, but also enthusiasm, curiosity, and humor.

Kafka met Bauer in 1912 through Max Brod. It didn’t take them long to fall in love, and they had a steady but difficult relationship for the next five years, twice becoming engaged before ultimately separating. Kafka wrote her often and at great length, on all aspects of his life. He frequently sent letters from work, sometimes using the institute’s letterhead. He shared details of his own work and demanded stories about her job in return.

In a letter from November 1912, he favorably compared his position at the Institute with his prior work at Generali:

There was a certain place in a narrow passage leading to my office [at Generali] where almost every morning I used to be overcome with such despair that a stronger, more consistent character than mine might have committed suicide quite cheerfully. Needless to say, things are much better now; I am even treated with undeserved kindness. Especially by my top director. The

other day in his office we read together from a book of poems by Heine, while in the anteroom messengers, department heads, and clients—possibly with urgent business—waited impatiently to see him.

The following month, he wrote Bauer with joking pride about his work for the annual reports. “Am I to get the pictures of the office? If so, you will get something like our Institute’s annual report with an article by me on cylindrical safety shafts! With illustrations! Or even an article on workshop insurance! Or one about safety heads! Dearest, there are many pleasures in store for you.” Kafka

included copies of the reports with the letter, promising more once Bauer had learned them by heart.

Kafka often wrote of his business trips representing the institute in legal proceedings or visiting employers with disputes or questions about their insurance premiums. At other times, he shared more offbeat office stories, such as a tale about his typist, who once ate 25 hard-boiled eggs in a single sitting.

Bauer was gainfully employed herself, in a firm that manufactured Parlographs, a form of dictating machine. Kafka seemed fascinated by this business and wrote her a lengthy letter in January 1913 with a list of ideas for expanding the market for Parlographs—by installing them in hotels and post offices, for example, or by developing a coin-operated version or a version that could take dictation by phone. He seemed disappointed the next month when his suggestions appeared not to have elicited a response:

Dearest, don’t you have any faith whatever in my business ability? Don’t you expect anything to come of my suggestions concerning the Parlograph? You actually haven’t said a word in reply to what I wrote you about it. Can’t you see how this humiliates me? It’s almost as though the moment you had assigned me a place in your office, you decided to throw me out again.

In 1912, the same year he met Bauer, Kafka embarked on his first truly productive period of writing. He wrote a story called “The Judgment” in a single night and began work on his novel *Amerika* shortly thereafter. Toward the end of the year, he finished *The Metamorphosis*, his best-known work today. In a fascinating letter from Dec. 3, 1912, he expresses concern that his writing has begun to affect his office work—the opposite of his more usual worries:

It is not so long since I started writing regularly and continuously, but since then I have turned from a by no means exemplary, but in some ways rather useful

*Never mind the surrealist existentialism—  
The Metamorphosis may be the greatest story  
ever written on the subject of sick leave!*

employee . . . into a nightmare to my chief. . . . Sometimes I think I can almost hear myself being ground down, by my writing on the one hand, by the office on the other. At other times I keep them both reasonably well balanced, especially when my writing at home has gone badly, but this ability (not the ability to write badly) is, I'm afraid, gradually declining. Sometimes I look around the office with an expression that no one would have ever believed possible in an office. At such moments my typist is the only person who can still gently wake me.

Whatever his frustrations about the competing demands of office work and writing, it is clear that Kafka cared deeply about the quality of his office work. He may have viewed fiction writing as his true calling, but he took his professional writing seriously as well, proudly sharing it with Bauer only two months after they became acquainted. And even his eventual success at writing was tempered by the concern that it was affecting his professional obligations.

### Work and Fiction

In many ways, Kafka appears to have identified with the characters in his fictional works. Their names are often similar—the heroes of *The Trial* and *The Castle* are named Josef K. and K., respectively. And they, like him, battle anxiety and despair, often becoming overwhelmed and tormented by the world around them.

The same characters also reveal a commitment to their jobs that echoes Kafka's own commitment to his insurance work—and that contradicts the perception that work was solely a source of misery for Kafka.

Consider the unfortunate Gregor Samsa, transformed into a bug in *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor is a commercial trader, traveling from one town to the next to sell his wares. Upon discovering his plight, he almost immediately fears the potential consequence of calling in sick:

Well, supposing he were to say he was sick? But that would be most unpleasant and would look suspicious, since during his five years' employment he had not been ill once. The chief himself would be sure to come with the sick-insurance doctor, would reproach his parents with their son's laziness, and would cut all excuses short by referring to the insurance doctor, who of course regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers. And would he be so far wrong on this occasion?

Gregor wants nothing more than to return to his job, which is clearly an impossibility, and his fears are realized when

the chief clerk of the firm visits his office and accuses him of neglecting his duties. When it becomes clear that Gregor's transformation is permanent, his parents and sisters are forced to find work of their own, and Kafka provides the details of their labor in sewing, retail, and food service. When Gregor eventually dies, his family knows just how to relax:

They decided to spend this day in resting and going for a stroll; they had not only deserved such a respite from work, but absolutely needed it. And so they sat down at the table and wrote three notes of excuse, Mr. Samsa to his board of management, Mrs. Samsa to her employer, and Grete to the head of her firm.

Whereas Gregor resisted the impulse to leave work despite his extraordinary condition, his family members have no compunction about taking leave despite their good health. Never mind the surrealist existentialism—*The Metamorphosis* may be the greatest story ever written on the subject of sick leave!

In fact, most of Kafka's best-known works feature protagonists who are completely committed to their professions, despite extraordinary challenges. *The Trial* is the story of Josef K., a bank clerk who is arrested one day and must face a trial without being informed of the nature of his crime. Josef K., among his other challenges, is troubled by how the trial interferes with his work. He is forced to draft his plea at night and fears having to request a leave to do so.

In a passage reminiscent of Kafka's Dec. 3, 1912, letter to Bauer, Josef K. regrets his lack of productivity as the result of all the writing he must now do in the evening. "Every hour that he spent away from the Bank was a trial to him; true, he was by no means able to make the best use of his office hours as he had once done, he wasted much time in the merest pretense of doing real work, but that only made him worry the more when he was not at his desk."

Even greater professional frustration—if one can imagine—is experienced by K., the main character of *The Castle*, a novel begun in 1922 and left unfinished at Kafka's death. K. is a land surveyor who is summoned to work in a small town. The town is governed by officials who reside in a nearby castle. When K. arrives, however, he is informed that there is no work for him. He repeatedly attempts to contact officials in the castle to understand or resolve the situation, but with no success. The novel is, at its core, the story of a man who wishes solely to perform his job but is prevented from doing so by an incomprehensible bureaucracy to which he has no access or recourse.

A much darker variation on this theme of occupational duty occurs in the story "In the Penal Colony," which features an

unnamed officer in a prison camp who maintains an elaborate machine that tortures and executes prisoners by carving commandments onto their backs. The machine has fallen out of favor with the commandant who runs the camp, but the officer defends its use to a visiting explorer and shares complaints about the difficulty of keeping it in working order. Obsessed with the details of finding spare parts, for example, the officer is blind to the underlying horror of the work he unquestioningly performs. Misguided though he may be, the officer clearly believes in the importance of his work, and he ultimately sacrifices himself to it.

All of these characters, like Kafka, are committed to their work and believe deeply in its importance. While Kafka ultimately achieved success both as a lawyer and a writer, despite struggling with the demands both occupations placed on him, his characters are frustrated in their professional goals. Three of the four die as the direct or indirect result of their work, and the other may have survived only because the novel itself was unfinished.

### An Unhappy Ending

Kafka's fictional works aren't known for their happy endings, and this was the case for his life as well. In 1917, around the time of his final split with Bauer, Kafka suffered a pulmonary hemorrhage and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His condition deteriorated slowly but steadily in the years ahead.

Kafka continued to work at the institute until 1922, surviving a series of important changes after World War I as Bohemia became part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia and the language of business at the institute was changed from German to Czech. He took a series of increasingly lengthy sick leaves (the subject of extensive correspondence with his employer), returning to work after each one, before finally retiring late in 1922. He died on June 3, 1924.

Kafka left his unpublished writings to his friend Max Brod, with the instruction that they be destroyed unread. Fortunately for the world, Brod ignored this request and began a decades-long project of reviewing and editing this wealth of material, which included the manuscripts for all three of Kafka's novels: *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*.

Kafka scholars long have studied his life for clues to interpreting his works—and rightly so. In the process, however, many have been too quick to regard his insurance work either as an obstacle to his writing career or as an example of the faceless and incomprehensible bureaucracy he portrayed in *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Kafka's own words tell a different story.

It is inarguable that the demands of his job tormented him. But so did his romantic relationships, his family, his writing, his health, and just about every other aspect of his life. The man liked to complain.

But Kafka also liked to work—despite his complaints—and he did it well. He understood the intricacies of all aspects of the accident insurance business, from risk management to law and finance. He took great care with his reports for the institute, producing comprehensively well-written and illustrated documents that were both technical and accessible. They still make insightful reading a century after they were written. Kafka often may have lamented the hours he spent in the office, but he made the most of his time there, and his letters to Bauer convey the satisfaction he got from this work.

It is fair to assume that Kafka's recognition of the importance of his insurance work and the obligation he felt to perform it well informed the attitudes of his fictional characters toward their professions. Facing far greater obstacles than their creator, they are unsuccessful in their professional objectives, but none of them loses the desire to carry on. Their work provides the only potential solace in the face of surreal and incomprehensible challenges. □

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