KAFKA

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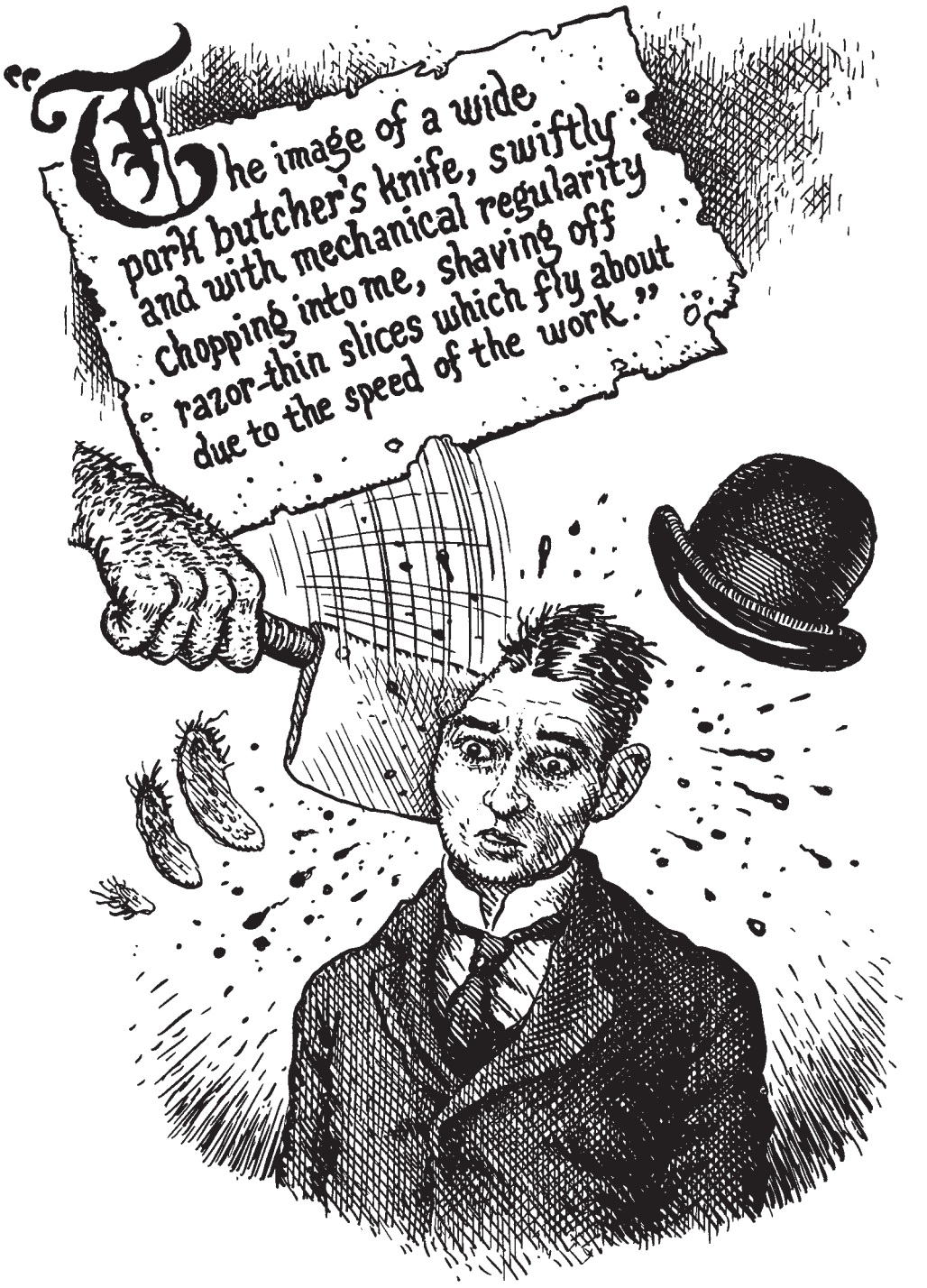
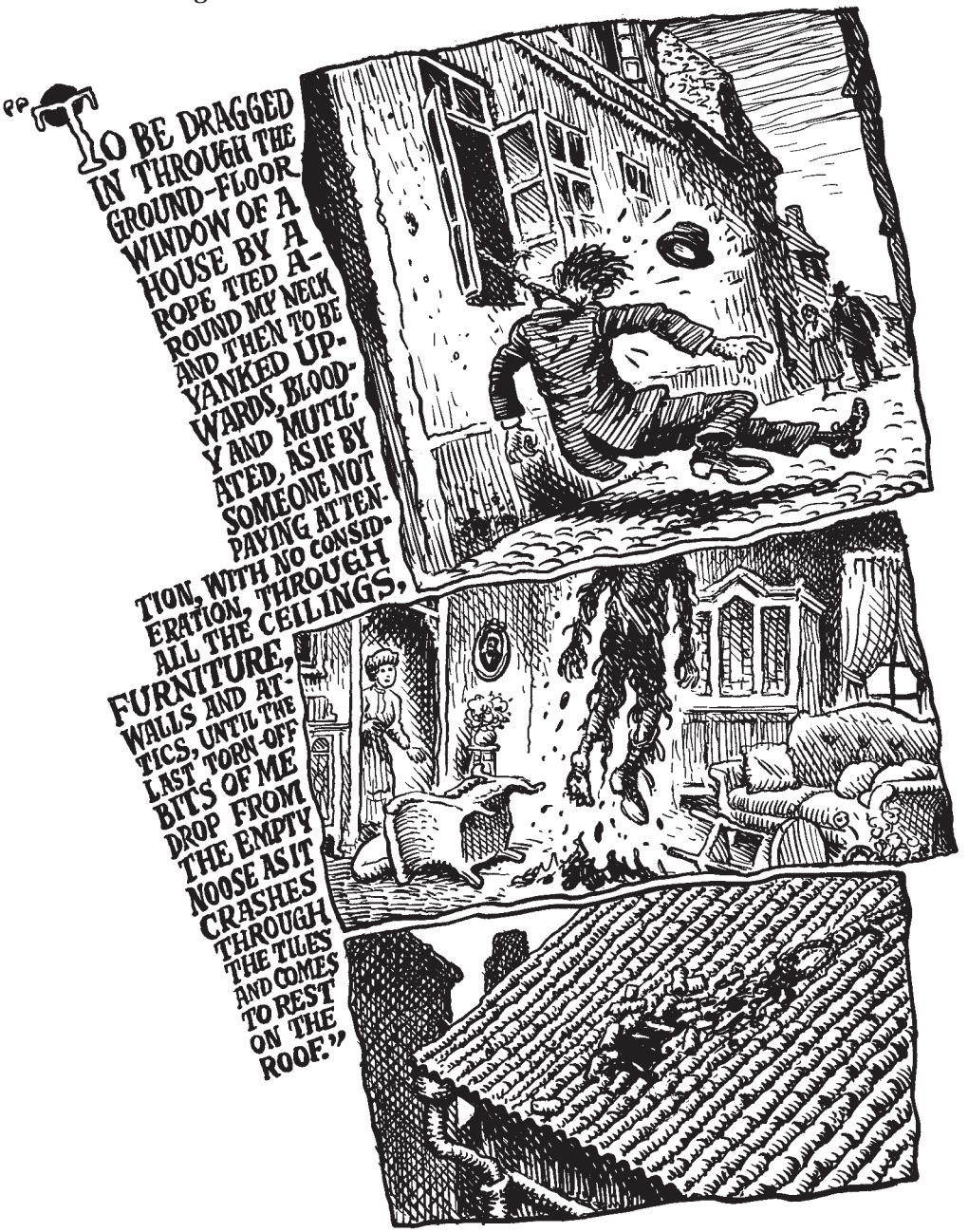

"The image of a wide pork butcher's knife, swiftly and with mechanical regularity chopping into me, shaving off razor-thin slices which fly about due to the speed of the work."

Throughout most of his life, Franz Kafka imagined his own extinction by dozens of carefully elaborated methods. Those set down in his diaries, amongst mundane complaints of constipation or migraine, are often the most striking:



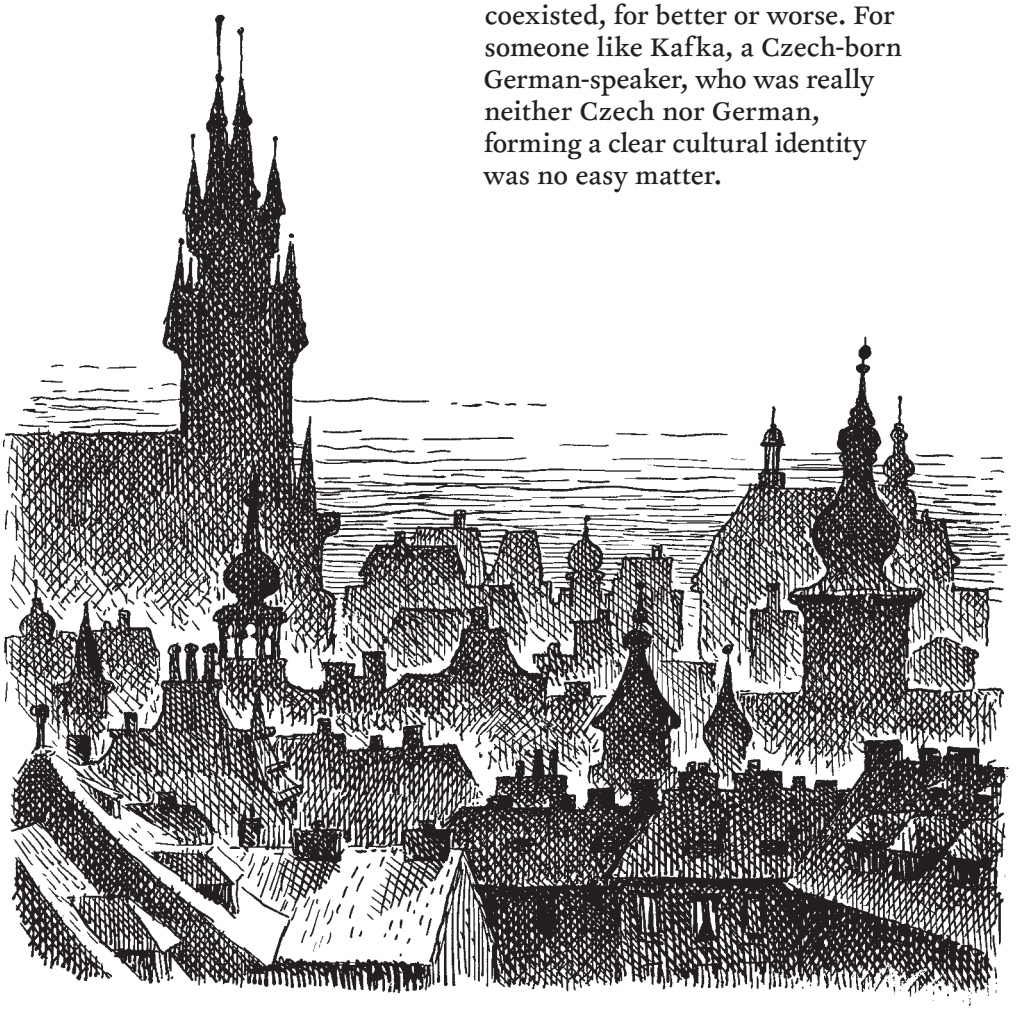
Kafka managed to turn this sometimes deliciously-evoked internal terror *inside-out* — with himself torn and mutilated at its center — as *storytelling*. He had no discernible world view to share in his work, no guiding philosophy, only dazzling tales to deliver out of an extraordinarily acute subconscious. At best, an identifiable *mood* pervades his work, mysterious and difficult to pinpoint. Which has allowed the "pork-butchers" of modern culture to turn him into an *Adjective*.

No writer of our time, and probably none since Shakespeare, has been so widely over-interpreted and pigeon-holed. Jean-Paul Sartre claimed him for Existentialism, Camus saw him as an Absurdist, his lifelong friend and editor, Max Brod, convinced several generations of scholars that his parables were part of an elaborate quest for an unreachable God.

Because his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* deal with the inaccessibility of higher authority, "Kafkaesque" has come to be associated with the faceless bureaucratic infrastructure which the highly efficient Austro-Hungarian Empire bequeathed the Western world. In any case, it is an adjective that takes on almost mythic proportions in our time, irrevocably tied to fantasies of doom and gloom, ignoring the intricate Jewish Joke that weaves itself through the bulk of Kafka's work.

Before ever becoming the *Adjective*, Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a Jew from Prague, born into its inescapable tradition of storytellers and fantasists, ghetto-dwellers and eternal refugees. His Prague, "a little mother" with "claws," was a place that suffocated him, but where he nonetheless chose to live all but the last eight months of his life.

Prague, at the time of Kafka's birth in 1883, was still part of the Hapsburg Empire in Bohemia, where numerous nationalities, languages and political and social orientations intermingled and coexisted, for better or worse. For someone like Kafka, a Czech-born German-speaker, who was really neither Czech nor German, forming a clear cultural identity was no easy matter.

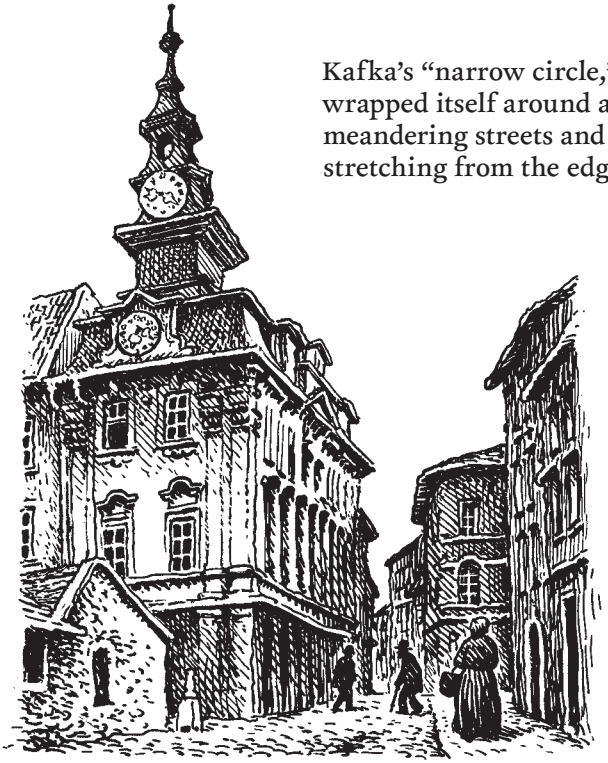


It goes without saying that for a Jew in this milieu, life was a delicate balancing act. You identified primarily with German culture, but lived among Czechs. You spoke German because it was close to Yiddish and was the Empire's official language. Czech nationalism was on the rise against German predominance, and the Germans generally treated the Czechs with contempt. And, of course, *everybody* hated the Jews.

Including, naturally, many "assimilated" Jews, who, like Kafka's father, didn't want to be reminded of their outsider status by their poorer cousins from Poland or Russia, the "*Ostjuden*." Many better-off Jews would later become Zionists and learn Hebrew, rejecting Yiddish as a bastard language.

The Zionist Movement, founded in 1897 by Theodor Herzl, held that Jews, dispersed around the globe, should reestablish their homeland in Palestine. In the midst of numerous nationalist movements and rampant anti-Semitism, this early Zionism played an essentially protective role, to which many of Kafka's contemporaries were drawn.

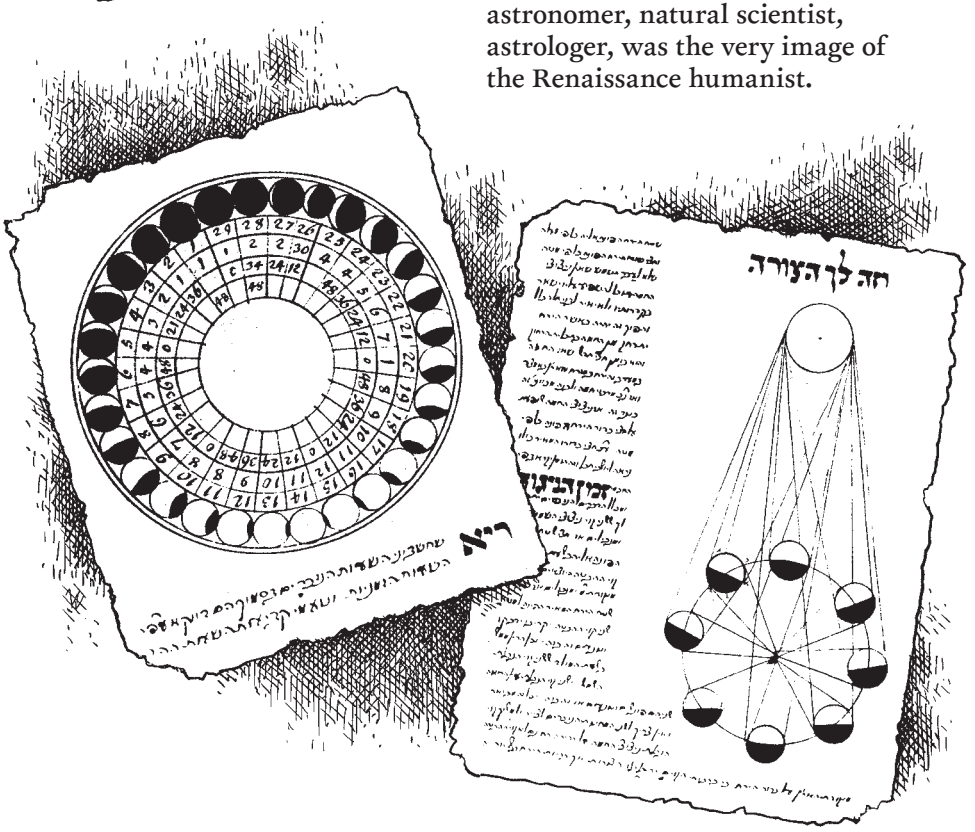
These struggles inside the Jewish community were daily fare for the young Kafka, growing up in the middle of one of Europe's oldest ghettos.



Kafka's "narrow circle," known as Josefov, wrapped itself around a complex of dark, meandering streets and alleyways (Judengassen) stretching from the edge of Prague's Old Town Square to the famous Charles Bridge on the Vltava (Moldau) river. In his youth, there were six synagogues in this crowded area, and beautiful Baroque buildings stared out onto rat-infested slums.

Under his feet as he walked were the bones and spirits of seven centuries of Jewish mystics, Hasidic scholars, secret Kabbalists, astronomers, astrologers, mad rabbis and other visionaries who, in their times, rarely had the right to live outside the Ghetto or ever to leave it.

This Prague had its own Talmudic saints, none more well known or revered than Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1512-1609) a.k.a. the *Maharal* (acronym for "most venerated teacher and rabbi"), who was the Ghetto's chief sage and spiritual leader at the end of the 16th century. Loew, philosopher, astronomer, natural scientist, astrologer, was the very image of the Renaissance humanist.

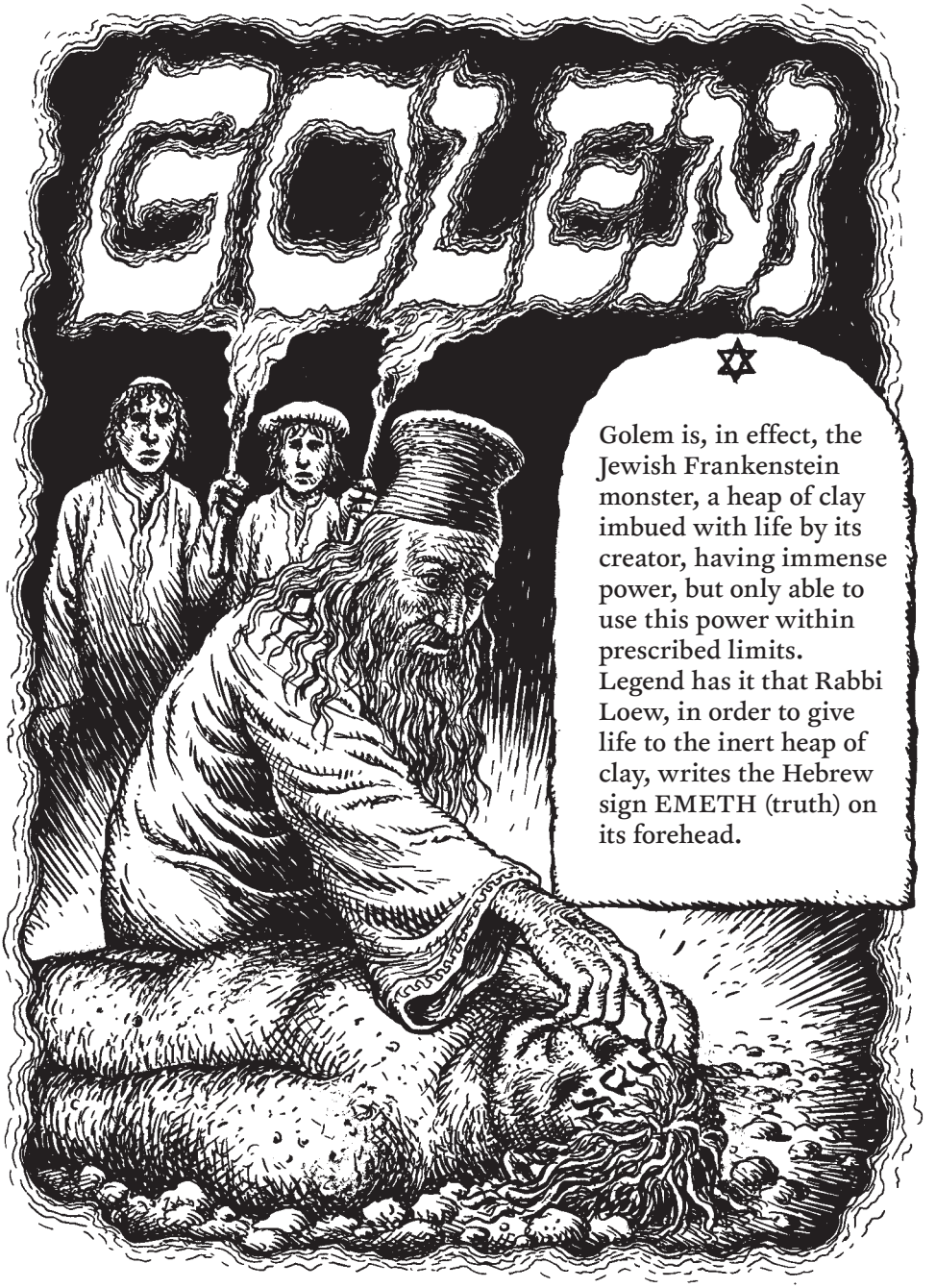


TITLE PAGE OF RABBI LOEW'S BOOK OF 1578

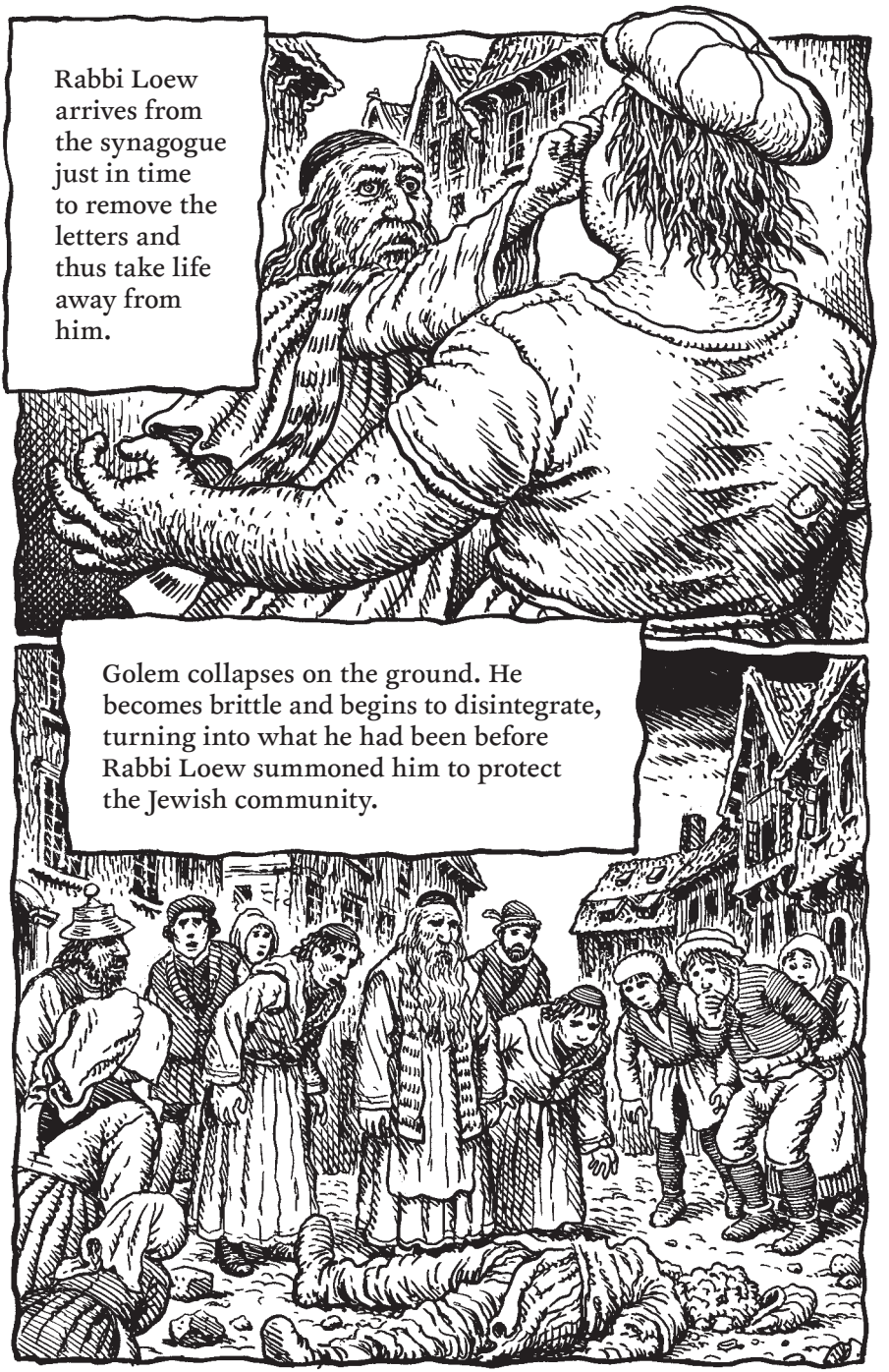
The Maharal held two contradictory principles, which he tried to reconcile: there was a "horizontal" or "human" power in the form of science, creativity, tolerance and doubt in confrontation with God's absolute "vertical" power, reducing man to dust and insignificance. Being a Jewish scholar, the questions he raised in regard to this contradiction could only lead to the raising of other questions, which is what Jewish Wisdom is all about.

It is also whispered that the Maharal played around with forbidden fruit, like the secret texts of the Kabbalah, which form the essence of Jewish mysticism, whose meanings are chiefly symbolic and only accessible (if at all) after years of scholarship. In the Kabbalah, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were imbued with magic powers. According to the Kabbalistic expert, Gershom Scholem, such mystical impulses have all but vanished, "but they still retain an enormous force in the books of Franz Kafka."

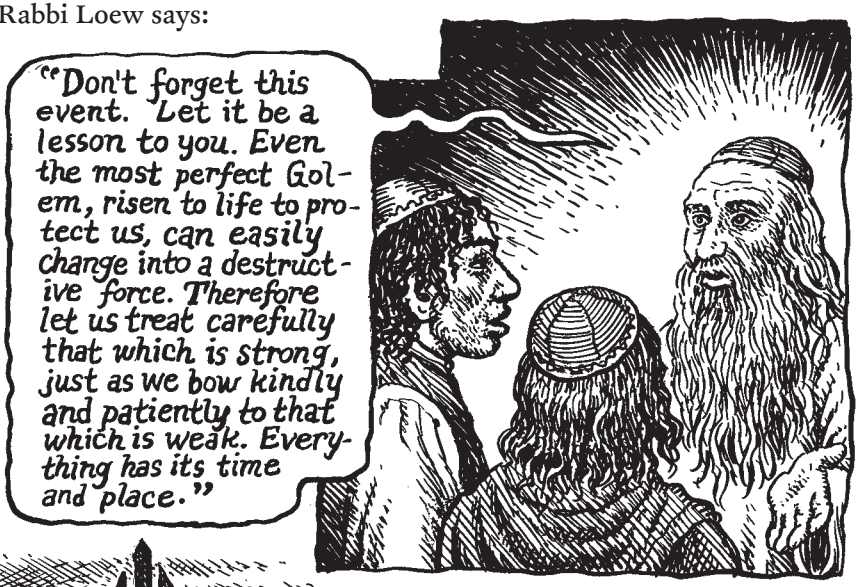
These forbidden scriptures figure in the most famous of all Prague legends, one firmly associated — rightly or wrongly — with Rabbi Loew…

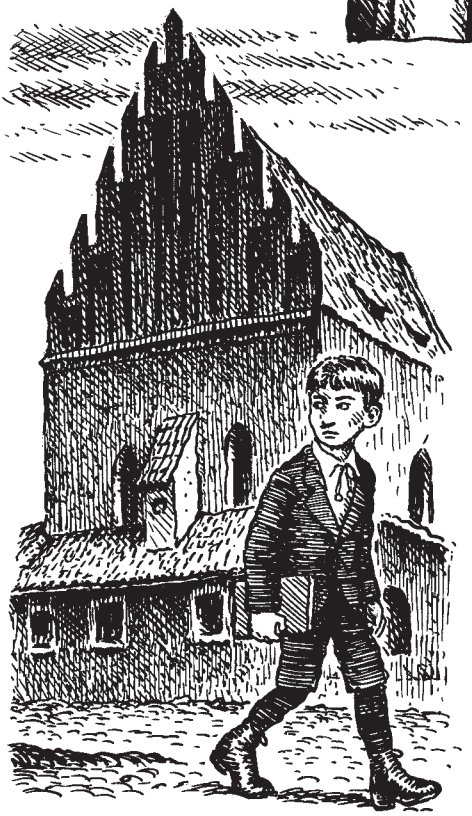



Golem then becomes a kind of servant and protector of the Ghetto. But, of course, he's not allowed to work on the Sabbath, so the Rabbi, every Friday night, is forced to erase the first letter, Aleph, leaving Mem and Taw which, together in Hebrew, spell out METH (Death). Then, on the one Saturday when the Maharal has forgotten to erase the first letter…


Rabbi Loew arrives from the synagogue just in time to remove the letters and thus take life away from him.
Golem collapses on the ground. He becomes brittle and begins to disintegrate, turning into what he had been before Rabbi Loew summoned him to protect the Jewish community.

Rabbi Loew says:





This was not the end of Golem. His remains were reportedly left in the attic of the Altneu (Old-New) Synagogue, one of the most sinister-looking buildings in the Prague Ghetto, where the defunct creature supposedly rests today, the entrance to his room sealed off for all eternity.

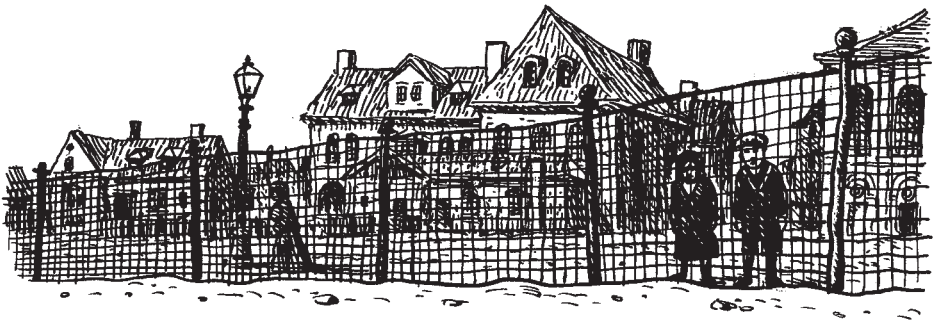
Never a practicing or religious Jew, and rarely mentioning the Ghetto legends in his works, Kafka would have had no way of avoiding their fantastical imprint on the social memory of a Jewish boy in his time and place.

Yet, despite the *adjective*'s connotations, it wasn't Kafka who gave the Prague Ghetto its literary "sinister" reputation, but rather a non-resident, non-Jew named Gustav Meyrink. Meyrink's melodramatic, hack novel, *The Golem* (1913), treats of murder and intrigue, dark musty alleyways, and the Golem is a figure of terror who appears every 33 years. "Lurking and waiting… waiting and lurking…the terrible perpetual motto of the Ghetto."

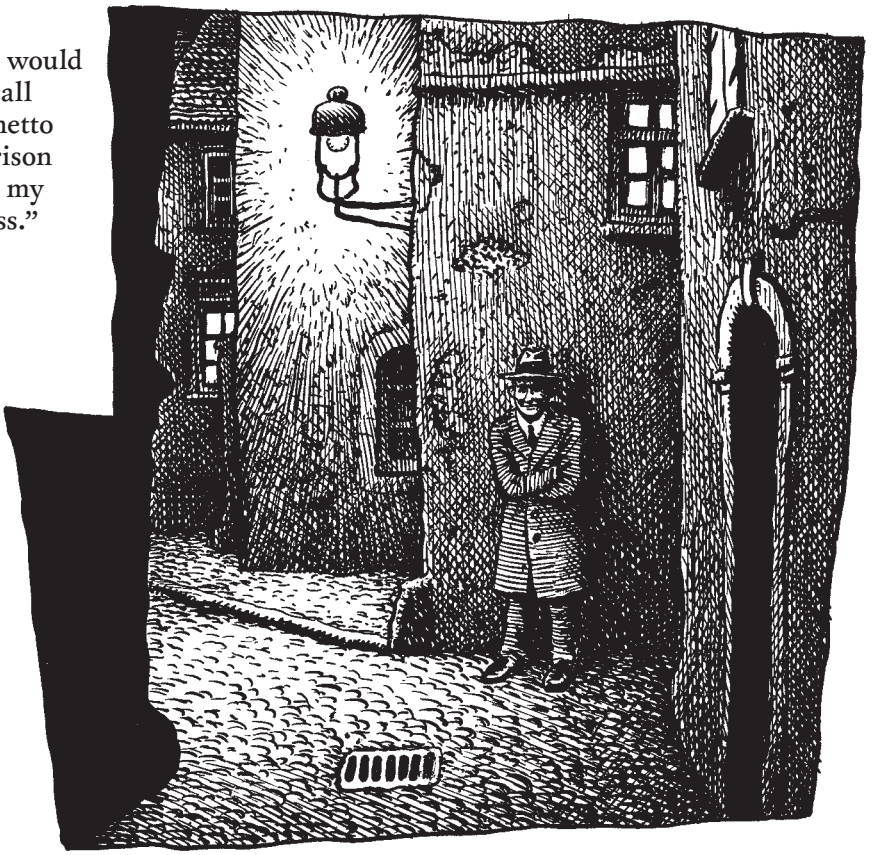
But what Meyrink also recorded, and what Kafka himself grew up with, was the demolition of part of the Ghetto in 1906.

For Meyrink, the Prague Ghetto had been a "demonic underworld, a place of anguish, a beggarly and phantasmagoric quarter whose eeriness seemed to have led to its demoralization."

Yet, once the "sanitary" clearance plan was under way, many of the poorer Jews refused to leave. As soon as the walls came tumbling down, they put up wire fences to replace them.

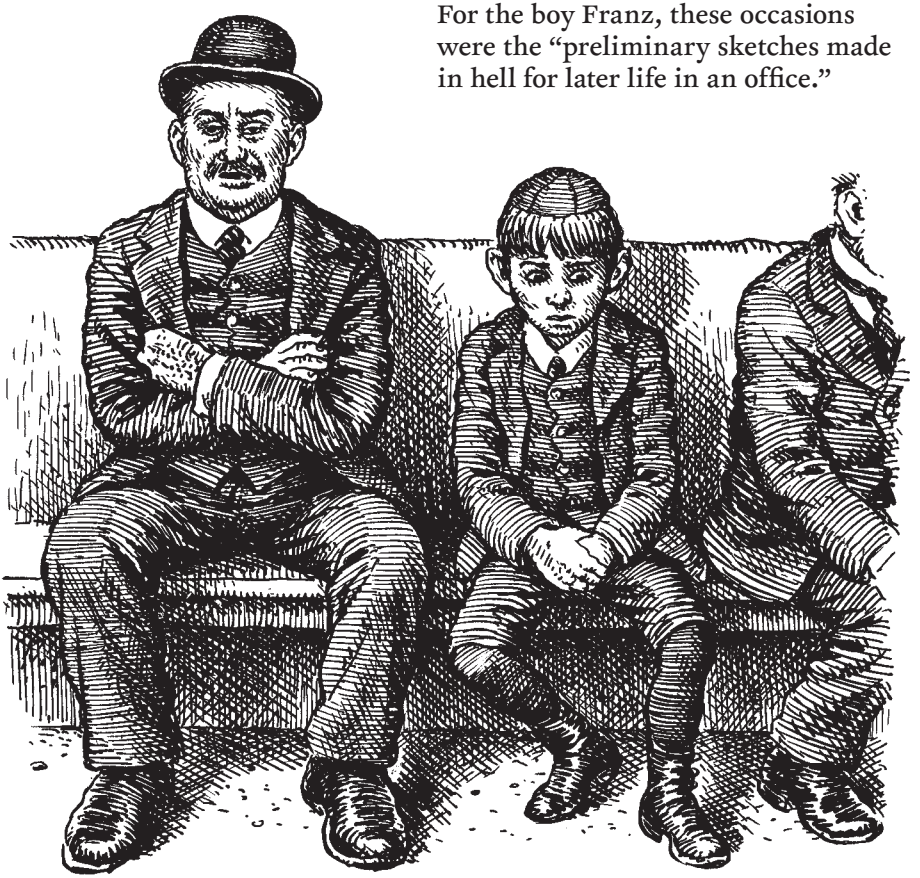


Kafka would later call the Ghetto "my prison cell — my fortress."



When Hermann Kafka set up his fancy goods shop in 1882, it was on Celetna Street, just outside the Ghetto precinct. A self-made man, up from dire poverty, he took some pains to distance himself from the Jewish community, even officially declaring his family as Czech. This did not stop him from having his son bar-mitzvahed or from dragging the boy along on his token outings to the synagogue, two or three times a year.

For the boy Franz, these occasions were the "preliminary sketches made in hell for later life in an office."



Kafka's relation to his Jewish origins remained ambiguous, except towards the end of his life, when he seriously dreamed of escaping to Palestine. He certainly showed little sign, as some critics say he did, of any interest in Judaism as a religion (or in religion itself, for that matter). He did, however, show a strong intellectual interest in Hasidism.

The modern Hasidic movement was founded in Poland in the 18th Century by Baal-Shem-Tov, who called for a spiritual renaissance, not merely through prayer, but also through singing, dancing and ecstatic joy.

What excited Kafka, and surely had an impact on his stories, was the mystical, anti-rational side of Hasidism, where earthly reality was continuous with unearthly reality, where mystical value was to be found in the details of everyday life, and where God was everywhere and easily contactable.

Kafka's stories contain few overt references to Judaism, and whatever effect his immediate surroundings had on him, he seems to have mostly kept to himself. But the arrival in Prague of a small Yiddish Theatre troupe from Poland was to influence him strongly.

Prague's "Westjuden" didn't want to know from such overblown *Schmalz* (Jewish melodramatic sentimentality — literally "grease" or "fat"), a stark reminder of ghetto life, and mostly ignored the Yiddish actors. Kafka not only went to see them nearly every night, but began to study their traditions and take an interest in Yiddish as a language. And if he could see right through the chicken fat of their plots, he was nonetheless attracted to the fairy-tale aspect of the plays and stories.