Kafka and the doll

By Anthony Rudolf

Dora Dymant met Franz Kafka at Müritz on the Baltic coast of Germany in the summer of 1923. She was 19 and working there in the kitchens of a children's holiday camp run by the Jewish People's Home of Berlin. By coincidence, the home was where Kafka's first fiancée, Felice, had worked — encouraged by him — a few years earlier. Kafka happened to be on holiday in Müritz with his sister and her children. Dora first noticed him on the beach. A few days later, on July 13, ten days after his fortieth birthday, Kafka came with his sister for supper to the hostel. Dora had thought the couple on the beach were husband and wife. She was delighted when she learned the truth. Kafka continued visiting the camp — every evening for three weeks. Dora tells the story of the little boy who got up to leave the table one evening, and fell down, deeply embarrassed in front of his friends. Kafka said at once: "What a clever way to fall, and what a clever way to get up again." The child was the hero of the moment.

Kafka made a deep impression on Dora: his looks, his sensibility, his culture, his generous spirit. She was an Eastern Jewess with a Chasidic background — from the small town of Bendzhin near Katowice, not far from the Czechoslovak border. Dora's father was a follower of the Gerer Rebbe. Kafka, who rejected his parents' minimal "Western" Judaism, was facing East. Dora, who abandoned her father's Orthodoxy, was facing West. They found in each other not only personal happiness but a way of fulfilling their Jewish destiny. Yet their two-fold rejection was not absolute. Both knew that routes have their roots, destinies their origins. Dora and Franz completed each other.

After the holiday Kafka returned to Prague where he finally made the break with his parents — a real victory if we remember the "Letter to his Father." In September he went to Berlin where he set up home with Dora. It was the first time in his life that writing and a human relationship were not in total conflict.

In Berlin, they lived first in the suburb of Steglitz, later in Zehlendorf. Kafka did the shopping, identifying psychosomatically, to the detriment of his frail health, with the poorest victims of the inflation. He never tired of hearing Dora's Chasidic stories. She would sit with him while he wrote. All the time his health was worsening. He wrote a major text, "The Burrow", in one night. He never mentioned to Dora the books he had written in Prague. He would read her his favourite authors again and again: Kleist, Hebel, Goethe. Some see the couple as father and daughter, rather than companion/lovers. Others would read the relationship, especially the early weeks, differently. Either way, Dora "perfected" him (Brod's word). Released from his ghosts he was free to find himself, man, writer, Jew, through her.

They studied at the famous *Lehranstalt fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Dora, appropriately enough, was studying *Halacha* while Kafka, equally appropriately, was studying *Aggada*. They read Rashi at home, but mainly in order to improve Kafka's Hebrew in case they ever reached Palestine. Dora's Hebrew was excellent and she was a convinced Zionist. They also discussed the possibility of going East, that is to Poland where Kafka felt Jews were still authentic. Earlier in the year Kafka had been studying Hebrew with Puah Bentovim in Prague. Just before the official opening of the 1980 Kafka exhibition at the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel-Aviv, the Director Chaike Waijnberg was told there was a smart old lady outside, insisting she had known Kafka. She was invited in and made a speech. It was Puah.

Towards the end of the year Kafka caught pneumonia. He went back to Prague in March 1924, defeated. He went without Dora, whose presence in his parents' house, he felt, would be impossible. He wrote to her everyday. He left Prague for a sanatorium near Vienna where tuberculosis of the larynx was diagnosed. From there to a hospital and thence to another sanatorium where Dora, and Kafka's friend Dr Robert Klopstock, looked after him. Before he died he wrote to Dora's father for permission to marry her. Her father consulted the Gerer Rebbe, who said no. Dora and Franz, free and interdependent soulmates who have been living together still recognise the authority of the father. Is this a mystery or not?

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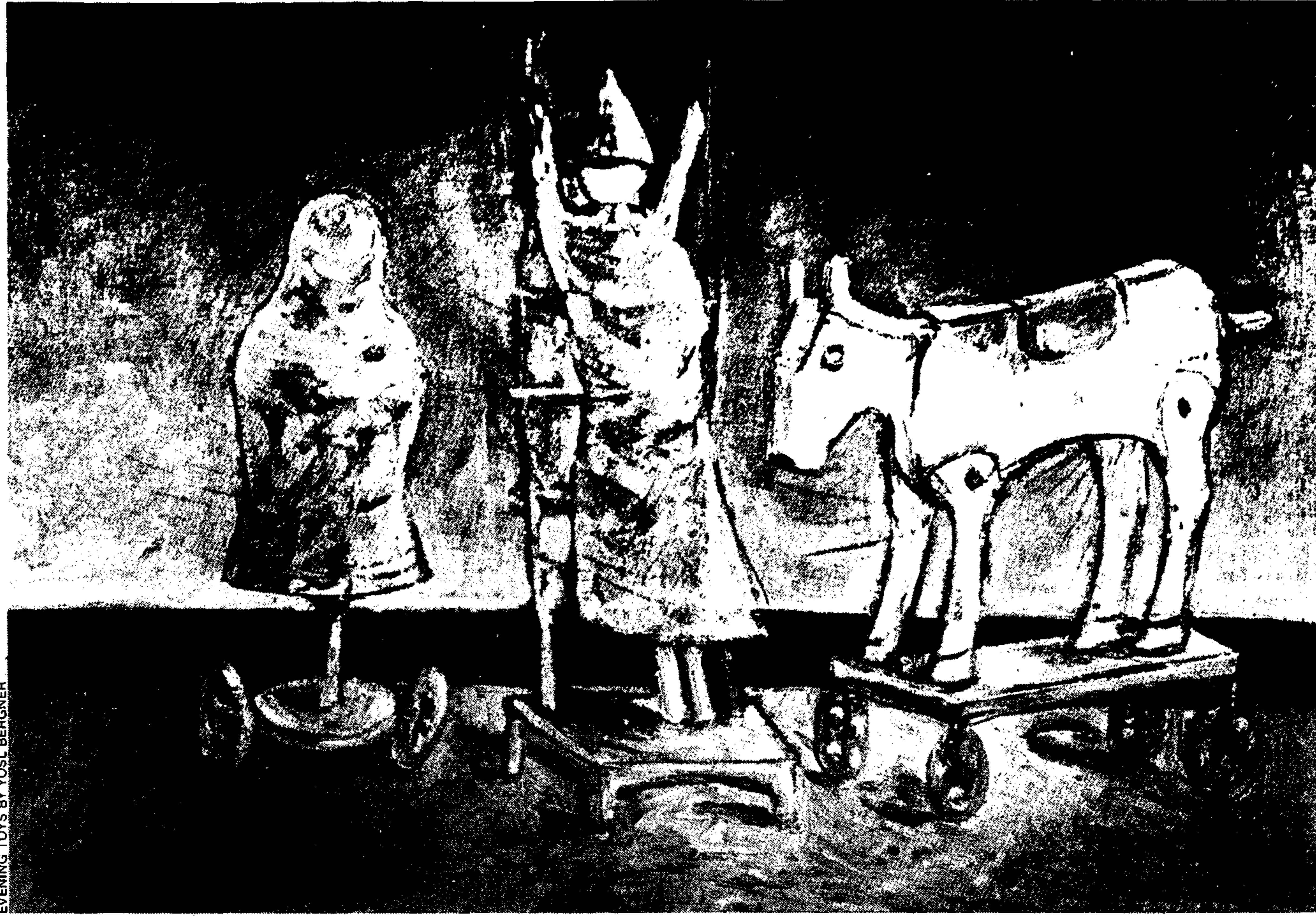

EVENING TOYS BY YOSL BERGNER

After Kafka's funeral on June 11, 1924 Dora lived for a few months in the house of Kafka's parents, where he could not take her in his lifetime. His mother, says Dora, "was an adorable woman, infinitely kind to me." In late 1924 Dora went to Dusseldorf where she lived for a number of years and studied drama. Kafka had encouraged her talents in this direction. At some point she married a German-Jewish communist called Fritz Lask. Their only child, Marianne, was born in 1934. Lask was imprisoned by the Nazis, then released. They went to Odessa. Again he was arrested, this time by the communists. Dora made her way with Marianne to Holland. Just before the German invasion of Holland she came to England. In May, 1940 she was interned on the Isle of Man for a year as an "enemy alien." Afterwards she lived mainly in the Swiss Cottage area but spent much of her time in the East End among Yiddish-speaking rather than German-speaking Jews.

Dora was a founder-member of the Friends of Yiddish and a close friend of A. N. Stencl. She was a tireless organiser of lectures, play readings, poetry readings, discussions — all in order to keep alive the Yiddish language and culture she loved. Though she had left Poland by choice, it had never left her, and now that its Jewish, its Yiddish dimension was dead, murdered, she worked with all her heart as a remembrancer. Yet her notes on literature and on Kafka were written in German "because you can only write about Franz in his own language." Dora was poor, She sowed and embroidered for a living. She visited Israel in 1949 where she found a long-lost sister, several old friends of Kafka including, of course, Max Brod, and renewed contact with her Chasidic origins. She had every intention of settling in Israel for good.

She was a friend of Edwin and Willa Muir — Kafka's pioneer translators — and may have stayed with them for a while in Scotland. Dora acknowledged their help during a difficult period. And she tells us Muir used to press her regularly concerning Kafka's religious views. Her other friends, in London, included Moishe Oyved of the rhapsodic prose and Cameo Corner fame, Joseph and Sala Leftwich, Marianna — Kafka's niece — and George Steiner, Hanni Lichtenstern and Ottilee McCrea with whom Dora lived in Glenloch Road while her bombed flat at 59 Broadhurst Gardens was being repaired. All speak of her depth of emotion, her dramatic and other talents, her spiritual strength, her generosity.

On August 15, 1952 she died, of a heart attack and was buried on August 18 at the United Synagogue Cemetery in Marlow Road. The day of her funeral was a wet day; many of *her* people from the East End were there.

I learned from the caretaker of Marlow Road that the permission of the United Synagogue is required to take a photo of a tombstone (to the amazement of the Office of the Chief Rabbi I might add). A couple of days later I learned by phone from a friend of Dora's that there is no tombstone. The next day, in best Kafka style, permission arrived to take the photograph.

In his penultimate letter to Milena — his Czech translator, and former lover — Kafka refers to the solution to the problem of living alone in Berlin: Dora. In his last letter to Milena, he writes: "I'm well and gently protected here to the limits of earthly possibilities."

Dora told the French translator of Kafka, Marthe Robert, a simple, perfect and true Kafka story about a doll. In it Kafka the man and Kafka the writer seem to merge joyously, in harmony, just as they merged tragically, in harmony, in his last days when forbidden to speak he communicated on slips of paper. Publication of the story in English can serve as a small tribute on the sixtieth anniversary of the death of a genius whose work, in its manifold configurations, anticipated the holocaust.

THE DOLL

While we were in Berlin Franz often went to our local park in Steglitz. Sometimes I went with him. One day we met a little girl. She was weeping and appeared to be in complete despair. We spoke to her, Franz questioned her, and we learned that she had lost her doll. At once he invented a sufficiently plausible story to explain the disappearance of the doll: "Your doll has simply gone on a journey — I know because she's written me a letter." The little girl was a bit suspicious: "Have you got it on you?" "No, I left it at home by mistake, but I'll bring it with me tomorrow." Intrigued, the child had already almost forgotten what had made her so upset in the first place. And Franz went home immediately to write the letter. He set to work with the same seriousness he displayed when composing one of his own works, and in the same state of tension he always inhabited at his table, even when writing a postcard. Besides it was a real labour, as essential as the others, since the child must at all costs not be cheated, but truly appeased, and since the lie must be transformed into the truth of reality by means of the truth of fiction. The next day he ran with the letter to the little girl who was waiting for him in the park. As she did not know how to read, he read the letter out to her. The doll declared that she was tired of living in the same family all the time, expressed her longing for a change of air, in a word to go a little way away from her — a little girl whom, indeed, she loved, but from whom she had no choice but to separate. She promised that she would write every day and, in fact, Kafka wrote a daily letter telling of new adventures, which evolved very rapidly, according to the special rhythm of the life of dolls. After a few days the child had forgotten the loss of her real toy and had no thought for anything but the fiction she had been offered in exchange. Franz wrote every sentence of the novel with an attention to minutiae, with a precision full of humour, which rendered the situation completely acceptable. The doll grew up, went to school, got to know other people. She continued to assure the child of her love but made allusions to the complexity of her life, to other obligations, to other interests which made it impossible, for the time being, to live with her. The little girl was invited to reflect upon this and was made ready for the inevitable renunciation. The game lasted at least three weeks. And Franz was in terrible distress at the thought of having to bring it to an end. For it was necessary that the end should be exactly right, that is to say capable of substituting order for the disorder brought about by the loss of the doll. He cast about for a long time and finally decided to marry off the doll. He described the young man, the engagement, the wedding preparations in the country, then, in great detail, the house of the young couple: "You yourself will understand, said the doll, we must give up seeing each other." Franz had resolved a child's conflict through art, the best method he possessed for bringing order into the world.

DREAM POSTSCRIPT

The year is 1969. I have spent much of it researching my anthology of 20th century Jewish poets. Several problems remain unresolved, among them: which poems of Isaac Rosenberg to include. We have been corresponding for months, I want to emphasise the poems written around the time of the War of Independence — his so-called Palmach phase — and of course the World War One masterpieces. *He* has a soft spot for the reconciled poems of his old age and the celebrated socialist poems excoriating the officer class which he wrote in the late 1920s. From his home just off Dizengoff (Gordon Street to be precise) he has written me a dozen letters. In October I decide to go to Israel for the first time, to see my relatives, and naturally I arrange to see Rosenberg too. He is 75. One of his friends is Dr Kafka, a very old man now, living with his wife Dora on Rambam in Jerusalem, not far from his childhood friend Shmuel Hugo Bergmann. In the last letter I receive before leaving London Rosenberg promises to introduce me to them. Though he and Kafka both speak Hebrew with their children and grandchildren they speak English with each other. Kafka likes to remind him that in Berlin there was a shop sign: H. UNGER. Is it a dream? Am I really in Kafka's flat? Dora offers me a glass of lemon tea and a piece of cake.

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