The key to the city

Michael Ivory reviews Prague in Danger, the latest book by Professor Demetz

The name of Yale Professor Peter Demetz will be familiar to the readers of *Prague in Black and Gold*. In this acclaimed historical account of the Bohemian capital he traced its evolution and the doings of its inhabitants from mythical beginnings to the era of Masaryk.

His account is characterised by scholarly thoroughness; a real relish in delving into the archives; by dry humour; and by a deep affection for the city of his youth. The disappointment felt by some that the story came to a halt when it did has been assuaged by the publication of this, his latest work, *Prague in Danger*, in which not only the archives but the author himself is an important source.

Dealing with the years of Nazi occupation, *Prague in Danger* has an unusual structure, interweaving an acute analysis of the politics, personalities and culture of the Protectorate period with the writer's own experiences.

The official status of "Half-Jew" bestowed on him by the Nazis hardly did him justice. As a dandyish young intellectual of considerable openness and unusually mixed ethnicity, he was one of relatively few who straddled the invisible boundaries separating the capital's Czech, German and Jewish inhabitants.

The paternal line of the Demetz family came originally from the now Italian South Tyrol, their German-looking name disguising their origin in one of the province's remote, Ladin-speaking backwaters (De Mezz meaning "from the middle of the valley"). Once north of the Alps, most of the family perforce abandoned their Ladin ways, although Demetz's grandmother continued to speak this variety of the Romansch tongue throughout her time in Prague.

The maternal side of the family were Czech-speaking Jews, escaping rural anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the Hilsner case by moving to the city. Demetz himself spent his earliest years in Brno, though the family moved to Prague in time for the 15-year-old to witness Masaryk's funeral procession from the Adria Palace on Národní třída.

Politically aware at an early age, he leapt to the defence of the threatened republic in 1938 by donning the shabby uniform of the National Guard and brandishing a Czarist-era bayonet in front of astonished classmates.

While his Jewish mother perished in Terezín, Demetz managed temporarily to escape the attention of the authorities by working in a German *Antikvariát* on Vodicková, its site occupied post-1989 by an upmarket baguetterie. Here, great perceptiveness was required in recognising in an instant whether a customer was trustworthy enough to be shown the banned books on their hidden shelves.

Eventually arrested, Demetz saw Auschwitz from the outside and Pankrác and the *Peckárna* from the inside, before spending the last months of the war in a North Bohemian logging camp, then helping to "liberate" the nearby little town from its depleted garrison of pot-bellied German policemen. Like other episodes in his anabasis, this is recounted with in a wry and self-deprecating tone and with a sense of the absurd worthy of Hrabal.

Demetz's personal story takes up only part of this 270-page book, the bulk of which consists of the most fascinating and evocative account of wider events of the Protectorate period. In a series of pithy portraits, with a sure eye for significant detail, all the main actors are given their due: from the sad figure of Hácha, a "gentleman of the old school", who once translated *Three Men in a Boat*, to the turncoat Moravec, the most ardent defender of the Republic before its fall; from the inadequate, old-fashioned first *Reichsprotektor* von Neurath to the demonic Heydrich; from the tragic Jirí Orten, dying after being refused entry to an "Aryan" hospital, to the courageous Milena Jesenská smuggling refugees over the Polish border.

All this against a sometimes surreal background of everyday life, where Nazi terror coexisted with generous rations for factory workers, where cinema and theatre attendances burgeoned and where the young danced to the swing band of Karel Vlach, Prague's answer to Benny Goodman.

Demetz's book is written in English. The title of its German translation, *Mein Prag* might be thought to better evoke the author's deep attachment to his subject, an attachment interrupted, physically at least, when he fled Czechoslovakia in 1948. His flight followed a second attempt, a decade on from the first, to defend the state which, as he saw it, incorporated the humanist values of its first president: hoping to stiffen Benes's resolve to defy the Communist coup d'état, he was one of the two thousand students who marched up steep and narrow Nerudová, only to be caught between the security police and the People's Militia.

Peter Demetz is now in his eighties and although poor health has prevented him accepting the BCSA's invitation to talk this September about the years between 1938 and 1948, it is hoped to welcome him to London at some future date.

JAMES HAWES
Excavating Kafka
Quercus, London 2008
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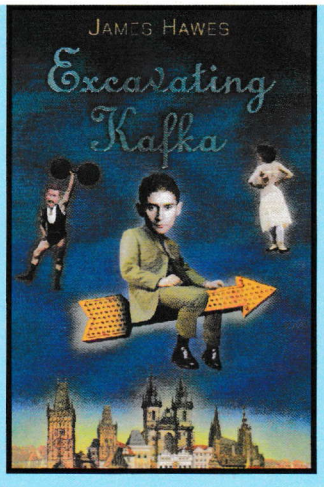

In Prague Kafka is now a permanent fixture of the tourist industry and it is an appropriate place to read James Hawes' book, *writes Angela Spindler-Brown.*

He is presented to tourists through the photo of a tragic tubercular author. So Hawes' broadside against this exploitation of Kafka forms the first part of this droll book and is more than justified. He also takes aim at academics who have made Kafka into a mysterious writer who foresaw the Holocaust yet was never published in his life time.

Hawes, a product of Oxford knows his Kafka, Nietzsche and Goethe and more. He spent years studying these topics when writing his PhD. But his *Excavating Kafka* is in fact, Kafka-lite. And Hawes knows how to get publicity for his books.

His claim that Kafka had a penchant for pornography generated a great deal of interest in Britain but also in Germany where the German speaking world of Kafka scholars hit out over his claims. (Czech academics weren't bothered, the sexual transgressions of living politicians hardly raise anybody's eyebrows, a dead white author's visits to brothels and a subscription to a porn magazine aren't considered big deal.) And one has to ask whether learning about Kafka's sexual interests and proclivities adds to the sum of our knowledge about this writer.

There are more interesting aspects to Kafka as the book reveals. Unlike other biographies, Hawes paints Dr Franz Kafka as a highly qualified professional, earning a huge salary. For most of his life, before he contracted tuberculosis, he was a rich, carefree bachelor. Hawes' Dr Kafka is a much more robust and determined man than we usually imagine.

Kafka was driven to write and publish. And he was widely read and appreciated as a German language author during his life time. Hawes shows how Kafka knew how to deal with publishers unlike young women with whom he was involved. Even his relationship with Milena Jesenska, a determined, courageous and vivacious twenty three year old Czech journalist, with whom he was head over heels in love, foundered.

But for me the strength of the book lies in Hawes' de-mystifying Kafka's stories and his supposed message. He argues that Kafka offers no salvation in his stories. People get what they get. Kafka's characters and we, his readers, "think that a world is run on ground of morality and rationality, a world where there is some connection between what we deserve and what we get." In Kafka's world that's never the case.