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## **How did Milan Kundera become a 'denouncer' and what came of it?**

### **Abstract**

In 2008, the Czech weekly 'Respekt' accused the writer Milan Kundera (1929–2023) of having denounced Miroslav Dvořáček, a young collaborator of American counterintelligence, to the Czechoslovak security services in the 1950s. The victim of the denunciation was sentenced to years of heavy imprisonment but miraculously avoided death. The publication, which unequivocally proclaimed the writer's guilt, was based on a single police memo found in the archives of the USTR (the Czech equivalent of the Polish Institute of Remembrance – IPN), in which Milan Kundera's name was mentioned. The media widely covered the case in the Czech Republic and internationally. A storm was also unleashed in Poland. Today, as the world bids farewell to Milan Kundera, it is worth revisiting that publication, looking at its form, language and stylistic procedures, which strongly undermined the reputation of the famous writer. In the end, nothing was proved against Milan Kundera, and the writer himself issued only a laconic statement in which he denied everything.

This article focuses on the 2008 'Respekt' publication itself – its form and the reliability of its coverage. What image, what reality have the authors of that text managed to create? This article attempts to look at the events of 2008 from today's perspective. An important question seems to be: should accountability texts be published in the press at all or should they better be the subject of research and academic publications only? If the public should learn about similar issues from the daily press, what basic standards should it meet?

**Keywords:** Milan Kundera, denunciation, manipulation, journalistic integrity, reckoning with the past.

### **Introduction**

On 11 July 2023, news of the death of one of the most eminent Czech (although he would perhaps say 'Central European' about himself) writers, Milan Kundera, circulated the world. He had lived and worked in France for 48 years, wrote exclusively in French and did not allow his books to be translated into Czech. He did not contact the media or give interviews. Kundera's life was accompanied by an aura of mystery and silence, which he consciously chose.

The death of the aged writer triggered an avalanche of memories and tributes. The Polish press, too, bade farewell to Milan Kundera. Did it deem it appropriate to address the most serious blemish on his image – the accusation made in 2008 in the Czech weekly *Respekt* that in 1950 he had denounced and destroyed the life of an innocent man: the hero and patriot Miroslav Dvořáček?

Today it is worth recalling that text, so widely and unfortunately unreflectively discussed by the Polish press at the time. What was the mechanism of its creation? Why was it controversial? What were its consequences<sup>1</sup>? That publication and the debate may be today a model example of a circumstantial narrative, in which, although there is not much evidence, there is no voice of the other side, but there is a journalist's "light touch" and a well-known name of the protagonist, which guarantee that the text "reads". And it "clicks".

It also seems interesting to trace whether the publication of 'Respekt' still resonates. How does the Polish press report on Kundera's life and character today? Does it address the theme of "denunciation", or did the sensational publication turn out to be a storm in a teacup and will remain at most (until?) an example of not very reliable journalism? What position do those accusations have in the writer's biography today?

It is worth asking how contemporary journalists and historians come to terms with the past. Should texts such as *Milan Kundera's Donos* be produced or not? Does such material do more good or harm – not only to the protagonists of the story, but also to the recent history of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to our memory of those times and to the consciousness of young generations who learn history from such publications?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limited space on the pages of *Media Business Culture*, the reaction of the Polish press to the Czech *Respekt* reports in 2008 will only be hinted at here.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the themes raised in this text were included in my other work. See D. Rafalska, *Oskarżony K.*, "Studia Medioznawcze" 2011, no. 2. Today, as the world bids farewell to Milan Kundera, I found it worthwhile to return to the discussion on his alleged collaboration with the Czechoslovak secret services, or rather his denunciation of the hero and patriot Miroslav Dvořáček in 1950. One of the things I was interested in was whether traces of that heated and emotional discussion 15 years ago can be seen in today's memories of the writer. Did the article *Milan Kundera's Donos*, discussed so widely here, and the press discussion that followed, turn out to be a real stain on the writer's honour? Will he be remembered as an outstanding writer, or also, however, as an 'alleged informer'? Or perhaps just an 'informer'? These questions seem important because, as demonstrated in the text, both the original text from the weekly *Respekt* and the voices in the discussion about Kundera leave many questions about the fairness and maturity of the discussion and the creation of reality on the basis of fragile evidence. This is not even about the accusation itself, but about the form in which these accusations were made. In a word: how did Milan Kundera become an 'informer' and what was the result?

## 2008: Words have power

On 13 October 2008, the Czech weekly magazine “Respekt”<sup>3</sup> published the article *Milan Kundera’s Donos*<sup>4</sup>. Its authors: the historian of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Systems (USTR)<sup>5</sup> Adam Hradilek and the journalist Petr Třešňák stated that in 1950 Milan Kundera (1929–2023), then a student at the Prague Film School (FAMU)<sup>6</sup> denounced Miroslav Dvořáček (1928–2012), a pilot and collaborator of the US Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC). As a result, Dvořáček was arrested and charged with desertion, espionage and high treason. The prosecutor requested the death penalty for him. He was sentenced to 22 years of heavy imprisonment, a fine of 10,000 crowns, confiscation of property and loss of civil rights for 10 years. Among other things, he worked in a uranium mine. He was released in 1963.

A day before the paper edition of Respekt, the article appeared on the weekly’s website – in Czech and English<sup>7</sup>. In this way, it was seen by the whole world. The publication of *Milan Kundera’s Donos* gave rise to an international press campaign, also in Poland. Today it can serve as an interesting example for journalism students and media scholars to analyse. The writer himself, already avoiding any contact with the press for many years at the time, issued only a brief statement: “I am completely shocked by something I would never have expected, which I did not know about until yesterday and which has never happened. I absolutely do not know Dvořáček”<sup>8</sup>. He never commented on the case again. Milan Kundera was never proven guilty. However, the writer was not rehabilitated. His opponents continued to be annoyed by his silence.

*Milan Kundera’s denunciation* is noteworthy primarily for its form. This article, written in an extremely suggestive manner, was formulated on the basis of a single short police note found in the archives of the “Czech IPN”, which reads:

Today, at 4.00 p.m., Milan Kundera, a student, born 01.04.1929 in Brno, who lives in Prague VII, University House, King Jiří VI Avenue, appeared at the police station and testified that the student Iva Militká lives in the above-mentioned dormitory and told the student

<sup>3</sup> “Respekt” was founded in 1989. The paper was founded by a group of journalists supporting Charter 77 dissidents and is regarded as one of the best independent opinion weeklies in the Czech Republic.

<sup>4</sup> P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Udání Milana Kundera*, “Respekt” 2008, no. 42. The text can also be found on the weekly’s website: <http://respekt.ihned.cz/c1-36370990-udani-milana-kundery> (accessed 12.01.2021)

<sup>5</sup> USTR – Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Systems) – the equivalent of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance.

<sup>6</sup> FAMU – Filmová a televizní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze.

<sup>7</sup> P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Milan Kundera’s denunciation*, <http://respekt.ihned.cz/respekt-in-english/c1-36380440-milan-kundera-s-denunciation>, (accessed 6.08.2023).

<sup>8</sup> Statement for the Czech news agency ČTK. Quoted after Gazeta Wyborcza: *bm, Czech weekly accuses Kundera of collaboration with the security services*, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5807140,Czesk\\_i\\_tygodnik\\_oskarza\\_Kundera\\_o\\_ustupowprace\\_z\\_bezpieka.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5807140,Czesk_i_tygodnik_oskarza_Kundera_o_ustupowprace_z_bezpieka.html), (accessed 12.01.2011).

Dlask, who lives in the same dormitory, that on that day she met an acquaintance, Miroslav Dvořáček, in Prague Klárov. The latter reportedly allowed himself to leave 1 suitcase with her, which he promised to come back for in the afternoon. [...] Dvořáček is suspected of desertion and has probably been in Germany since last spring, where he illegally left<sup>9</sup>.

What is the nature of an article after reading which the whole world learned that 'Milan Kundera broke the life of an innocent man'? *The case of the* publication of 'Respekt' is an interesting case, from a media studies point of view, of a text written in an extremely skilful manner, on the basis of 'evidence', which, however, will only seem insufficient to a seasoned reader (with appropriate media studies and/or historical training).

*Milan Kundera's Donos* convincingly demonstrates how events that could at best be the subject of further research can be given the status of fact by means of a skilful narrative. The mythology of the story is based on the 'authentication' of circumstantial evidence. This is served by a well-conducted narrative in which the authors link together events from long ago. This is fine in a novel, but is it also fine in journalistic material? In addition, in a text on such a serious topic? After all, this is not a discussion, a question. The very title of the text indicates that "everything is clear" from the start.

The authors use simple slogans. They are also surely aware of the impact on the reader of the way the story is conducted and constructed: the silence, the withholding of information and even the loss of clues accompanying Kundera's entire life as a writer. The authors 'expose' this, leaving the reader with a question (or rather a suggestion): is there a second bottom to this story?

The text is undoubtedly well written. The material, which takes up several pages of standardised typescript, is gripping. The authors put a lot of effort into creating a special atmosphere – a mystery, even a spy intrigue. The *lede* reads:

Milan Kundera has always precisely covered his tracks. He has not given interviews for the fourth consecutive decade, he visits his homeland only *incognito*, and he reports to hotels under a false name. He has bound his Czech friends to a vow of silence – even they do not want to talk to journalists about who Milan Kundera was and is. Now, as a result of a bizarre coincidence, a dark, convoluted story is coming to the surface from the past of the most famous Czech writer, proving that his secretiveness may be caused by reasons we have not known about so far<sup>10</sup>.

In the rest of the article, the authors will try to convince us that perhaps Kundera is not what he is used to be: "After his emigration to France, Kundera's effort to keep his own life secret turned almost into an obsession," we read. The question of why this happened hides a basically ready answer, or at least a suggestion.

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<sup>9</sup> P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Milan Kundera's Donos*, "Res Publica Nowa" 2008, no. 4, pp. 96–106, reprint of an article from the weekly magazine "Respekt", translated by Patrycja Krauze. Further quotations from *Milan Kundera's Donos* in Polish are taken from this very translation.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

One cannot deny this material a large factual load showing the reality of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. At the same time, however, the article puts forward a number of theses that cannot be called anything other than speculation. For the authors assume that a single document they found in the archives prejudices the writer's guilt.

At this point, let us add: the signature of the person who made the denunciation does not appear under the said protocol. Other relevant identification data are also missing: for example, the identity card number of the informer, which could, after all, theoretically raise the question of whether someone was impersonating Kundera. Other documents have not been found. All this somewhat detracts from the value of the said note as a historical source.

Meanwhile, on its basis, Hradilek and Třešňák intricately reconstruct the 'course of events' of nearly sixty years ago. On the basis of a document of a few hundred words, they succeed in creating a narrative in which facts interweave with conjecture and perhaps even with fiction. They create a story which, although not well documented, is engaging and a good read<sup>11</sup>.

*Milan Kundera's Donos* describes the fate of two protagonists. The first of these is pilot Miroslav Dvořáček. After finishing grammar school, he entered the Military Aviation Academy in Hradec Králové in 1947, where he was soon – after the February Coup (1948) – affected by purges in the army. These particularly affected the air force, where 40% of the officers were former British RAF Air Force servicemen. Many pilots were sent to the gulags as individuals 'hostile to socialism'. It was then that Dvořáček decided to escape to the West and join the Air Force there. In a refugee camp in Munich, he was recruited by American counterintelligence.

"At the same time, in the same country, Milan Kundera experiences something completely different," write Třešňák and Hradilek, "he grows up surrounded by books in the family of a well-known intellectual, the Brno musicologist and musician Ludvík Kundera. So we are dealing with a child from a so-called good home, a young man who is about to be fooled by utopia – in 1948 Kundera will join the ranks of the Communist Party. Let us add: just like many of his contemporaries both in Czechoslovakia and in other countries of the bloc, who believed in socialism after the war and later experienced its painful disillusionment. Kundera's fate here resembles that of the 'ZMP generation' in People's Poland<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> To quote Kurt Vonnegut: 'It all happened more or less really.' See K. Vonnegut Jr, *Slaughterhouse Number Five*, transl. L. Jęczyńsk, Da Capo, Warsaw 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to analyse the biographies of the protagonists of, for example, the "Solidarity Encyclopaedia", which contains information on many people of merit for the opposition, who, however, belonged to the communist party just after the war and even cooperated with the security organs. Cf. e.g. *Encyclopaedia of Solidarity. Opozycja w PRL 1976–1989*, vol. 4, Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation – Pokolenie Association, Warsaw-Katowice 2020; D. Rafalska, "ZMP Generation. Born in the 1930s – their vision of socialism in the weekly magazine "Po Prostu" [in:] "You are our great opportunity". *Młodzież na rozstajach komunizmu 1944–1989*, eds. P. Ceranka, S. Stepień, Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, Warsaw 2009, pp. 79–96; D. Rafalska, *Between Dreams and Reality. Tygodnik*

Kundera gave expression to this disillusionment many times in his books, including those written while he was still in Czechoslovakia<sup>13</sup>.

In *Milan Kundera's Donos* we have two protagonists – two young people, peers who have made extreme life choices: the young communist Milan Kundera and Miroslav Dvořáček, who does not recognise the post-war order in Central and Eastern Europe. The latter arrives in Prague on 13 March 1950 to recruit an engineer to work with the Americans. By chance, he meets his former colleague Iva Militka on the street, whom he visits in the dormitory and leaves a suitcase with her. He is told to return in the evening and spend the night. However, when he reappears at the student house, he is arrested. It is clear that someone snitched on him and Dvořáček has been certain all his life that it was Iva Militká. However, this woman, according to a document that has been found, was supposed to have told her boyfriend (her future husband) Miroslav Dlásk about Dvořáček, and he was supposed to have told his colleague Milan Kundera. Why? We do not know. However, the most important question in this case is another – why would Milan Kundera go to the police station with these revelations? And it too remains without a clear answer.

It is difficult to determine to which genre of journalistic expression *Milan Kundera's Donos* belongs. Hradilek and Třešňák mix at least several forms of expression in their text. This is not a very fortunate procedure, given the sensitivity of the issue and the fact that this is the first article ever published on the subject. The text is structured in such a way that it cannot be read without emotion – in the darkness of the Stalinist night, the events that the journalists 'reconstruct' take place.

The question is whether we are really dealing here with events and their reconstruction, or rather with conjecture? Since the only source is the aforementioned police memo, we might expect at least the suppositional mode. Meanwhile, in the article we can read:

- "When Iva Militká located the guest in her room, she went down to dinner with her friend Dlásek. She mentioned the unexpected visit to him [...] and asked him not to come that evening, as Mirek would probably stay the night with her. A little later, Dlásk reported the fresh news to his friend Milan Kundera. The latter went to report it to the district police station in Prague".
- "Before describing the consequences of Kundera's act, it is necessary to ask what his motives were. For what reason did he denounce a man he did not know".

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"*Po Prostu*" wobec najważniejszych problemów społecznych i politycznych Polski w latach 1955–1957, Neriton Publishing House, Warsaw 2008; M. Hirszowicz, *Pułapki zaangażowania. Intellectuals in the service of communism*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2001; H. Arendt, *Korzenie totalitaryzmu*, transl. D. Grinberg, M. Szawiel, Świat Książki, Warsaw 1993.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: M. Kundera, *Joke*, transl. E. Witwicka, W.A.B., Warsaw 2003, 1st ed. 1967; M. Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere*, transl. J. Illg, W.A.B., Warsaw 1990, 1st ed. 1973; M. Kundera, *Farewell Waltz*, transl. P. Godlewski W.A.B., Warsaw 2001, 1st ed. 1976; M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, transl. P. Godlewski, A.S. Jagodziński, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 2001, wyd. 1 1978; M. Kundera, *Nieznośna lekkość bytu*, transl. A. Holland, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 2002, wyd. 1 1984.

- “The answer to the question: why Kundera acted in this way is not so obvious. Admittedly, he was a declared communist and it seems possible that he decided to destroy human life for purely ideological reasons.”
- “What exactly played out that day, and why he [Kundera – note D.R.] decided to go to the police station and denounce someone he did not know at all, remains a mystery. The burden of what he has been hiding for 58 years is not small. Dvořáček narrowly missed being sentenced to death.”

The authors build a zero-one, black-and-white picture of the world. They contrast the heroic patriot Dvořáček with the evil, perhaps even cynical Kundera:

- “It was on 14 March 1950 that the fates of two young people – Miroslav Dvořáček and Milan Kundera – intersected for the first and last time. The former barely escaped the death penalty and spent long years in prisons and labour camps. The latter soon became a rising star of socialist realist literature<sup>14</sup>, and later one of the most important Czech intellectuals of the 1960s and an internationally renowned writer”.
- “[Dvořáček – note D.R.] left the camp at the end of 1963, almost after 14 years. On the shelves of the bookstore at the time was a newly published novel, which the entire Czech cultural scene was discussing with great agitation: Milan Kundera’s *Funny Loves*”<sup>15</sup>.
- “While prisoner number A0-3016 was toiling in the uranium mines, his informer was climbing the career ladder. He went from being a virtually unknown student, passionate about building a better tomorrow, to becoming a respected Socialist Realist poet.”

Hradilek and Třešňák must have been aware of the impression such a distribution of accents would make on their audience. It is difficult to imagine a reader who would be indifferent to the fate of Dvořáček’s patriot and hero, and who would not condemn Kundera’s “cynic and liar” in his mind. The authors also point out that the denouncer, in enacting his cruel act, could not have been unaware of what the consequences would be: “It is enough to mention that on the day of the denunciation, the most important party magazine published an article about two young Czech employees of the American embassy sentenced to a death sentence and 15 years of heavy imprisonment,” they read.

In the text, the authors outline the reality of Stalinist Czechoslovakia, citing frightening data: people are dying in prisons, the system is breaking the lives of innocent people and their families: ‘It is the fourteenth of March in 1950. Two years have just passed since the communist putsch. Stalin’s fight against the class enemy is reaching its apogee. Milada Horáková has been interrogated and tortured in Prague’s Ruzyna prison for six months. In a month’s time she faces trial; in three months, along with the other convicts, she will be executed. Interrogations have begun at several Prague police

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<sup>14</sup> Referring to Milan Kundera as a ‘rising star of socialist realist literature’ also seems an abuse and a rhetorical figure. The very juxtaposition of the words ‘star of socialist realist literature’ seems abusive.

<sup>15</sup> For the record: *Funny Love* is a collection of short stories, not a novel.

stations for the ten hockey world champions, arrested the day before at the U Herlíků restaurant on charges of “public incitement against the republic”. Those accused of high treason will receive long sentences, which they will partially atone for in the uranium mines in Jáchymov. There are already more than 10,000 internees in the camps there.”

The authors contrast the world of young people: full of ideals and dreams of living in a normal world, and the brutal reality. Iva Militka, one of the main characters in the drama, quoted in the text, recalls: “Prague was like a window to the world. [...] I was accommodated in the Kolonka dormitory, I had a small single room, with cherry blossoms outside the window. It was there that I experienced the most beautiful moments of my entire life”. *Incidentally*, a similar description can be found in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*, where one of the characters describes her youth in a small provincial town and her entry into the “big world” of Prague:

[...] real life was somewhere beyond the seven mountains, when I came to Prague in the forty-ninth year, it was an epiphany, it was such happiness that I will never forget it, therefore I will never be able to erase Paul from my heart either, although I no longer love him [...] <sup>16</sup>

The fiction of the novel and the real-life account of a witness to events will intertwine many more times in this text for one reason – Kundera describes in his books the experiences of his generation, real people, their dreams and longings. There seems to be nothing mystical about this.

During this time, the young Milan Kundera joins the party and “writes poems and song lyrics in the spirit of the then widespread admiration for socialism”<sup>17</sup>. But he was not the only one. Iva Militka also recalls that time: “Today I don’t think anyone will understand it anymore, but I remember such a walk with a certain colleague in Petřín. [...] We stopped, looked at each other for a long time, and he dreamt of how one day Czechoslovakia would become one of the republics of the USSR”. – we read in *Milan Kundera’s Donos*.

The authors often use contemporary codes and phrases in their story: was Milan Kundera a ‘star’? Can his writing be spoken of in terms of a ‘career’? These seem to be deliberate procedures aimed at juxtaposing two worlds and further emphasising the injustice of fates: the broken life of Dvořáček and the success of Kundera. Milan Kundera is the villain in this story; there are no shades of grey here.

The reader’s attention is drawn to the very vivid, detailed descriptions – characteristic of reportage. Among other things, they make the reader identify with the protagonist’s fate:

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<sup>16</sup> M. Kundera, *Joke...*, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> In 1955, Milan Kundera’s poems were awarded at the International Literary Competition as part of the World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship in Warsaw. See M. Fik, *Polish Culture after Yalta. A chronicle of the years 1944–1989*, Polonia Book Fund, London 1989, p. 216.



At the beginning of March 1952, after a stay at Pankrac, Bory and other Czech prisons, Miroslav Dvořáček was transferred to the Vojna labour camp near Příbrami (Vojna u Příbrami), one of the most terrible places of the communist repression system. After an initial examination, he was given the number A0-3016 and, as part of his camp assignment, he was given brown prison clothes made of thick canvas, underwear, a towel, two menstrual cups, a spoon, a lid, work boots, boots with uppers and a fusillade jacket. Underwear and a towel were changed once every 14 days. Outer clothing was worn until it came off. In the early years of the camp, only one piece of clothing was allocated. Dirty and often wet, the prisoners had to spend all their time in one garment after working in the uranium mines.

And Kundera? Kundera is the guardian of the 'terrible secret' in this text:

Of the narrow circle of actors in the drama unfolding at the time, for the next fifty-eight years Milan Kundera was probably the only one who knew what happened at that time in the Kolonka dormitory on Prague's Letna Hill. [...] Milan Kundera remained silent about the dark sides of his past, and no one else (presumably except Miroslav Dlásek) had a key to it.

The question is how the authors know that Kundera had such dark pages in his biography. "Is this obfuscation a natural need of the world-famous writer, who has always been an introvert, or is there an attempt to hide an uncomfortable past lurking behind it? We can only speculate. The owner of the keys to the truth is none other than Milan Kundera".

Finally, it is worth adding that the attempt to influence readers' emotions in this text is also in the visual sphere. The article was the main theme of the 42nd issue of *Respekt*. The cover of the magazine featured a caricature of Milan Kundera. His face contorted in a cynical grimace and a pencil behind his ear do not evoke positive feelings, but rather repulsive ones. The headline completes the picture: *Milan Kundera's denunciation*, which dispels any possible doubts as to which character we are dealing with: the unpleasant, wrinkled, devious face is certainly not the image of a prominent and adored writer, the voice of a generation, an intellectual. Particularly as there is an additional explanation next to the caricature regarding the text to which it refers: "The story of a man who was put in prison for 14 years by a famous writer in 1950".

Also a large part of the article is taken up by a photograph of Milan Kundera, taken on a Parisian street. Although it must have been taken much later than the events described (after 1975) its message is also eloquent: Milan Kundera has experienced the good life, living and creating in Paris, while his supposed victim (patriot, hero) suffered in a communist prison.

Třešňák and Hradilek were free to use the procedures described because:

- Miroslav Dlásek, Iva Militka's husband, to whom she was supposed to have told about Dvořáček's visit, is dead. "Before he died in the 1990s, he revealed only that he had mentioned their conversation to Kundera," write Třešňák and Hradilek, and we must take their word for it.

- Miroslav Dvořáček died in 2012 in Goteborg. He had suffered a stroke a few years before the publication of 'Respekt' and was no longer able to comment on the case in question.
- Milan Kundera issued only the aforementioned laconic statement<sup>18</sup>. Their voices were definitely missing from this article.

## 2008–2023: Storm and mention in biography

The case of Milan Kundera was extensively covered by the Polish press. Hundreds of texts appeared in newspapers and weeklies, sensationally and often unreflectively reproducing the theses of 'Respekt' and quoting him extensively. However, as history shows, the media campaign concerning the 'Kundera affair' turned out to be the proverbial storm in a teacup. Nothing has been proved against the writer. He himself did not take legal action against the authors of the text in "Respekta", which may, of course, be the starting point for further doubts of the genre that he apparently had something on his conscience after all. Kundera chose the most proven method in his case – silence.

As Poland, today, bids farewell to Kundera, one searches in vain for traces of the discussion or sensationalism of 15 years ago in the press publications. All the memoirs, apart from the most personal ones written by Kundera's friends or experts on his work or Czech literature, have been cut in the same fashion.

The very theme of "Kundera's denunciation" still seems to be of interest to the Polish press, but rather in a "chronicling" sense. Virtually all memoirs about the writer, news reports and press dispatches mention that towards the end of his life he had to face serious allegations from a prestigious Czech weekly. However, the press does not expand on this narrative, blow it out of proportion or drone on about it:

- "Rzeczpospolita": "Milan Kundera's biggest problem was that towards the end of his life he had to contend with allegations of collaboration with the Czechoslovak security services"<sup>19</sup>.
- Dzieje.pl: "The writer and his wife Viera were deeply affected by the 2008 publication in the Czech weekly Respekt that in 1950 Kundera denounced Miroslav Dvořáček, who was involved in illegally transporting people across the border and who later spent 14 years in prisons and labour camps. The credibility of the police report in which Kundera appears as an informer was confirmed by the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Systems (USTR). Kundera denied it and announced a lawsuit, but eventually abandoned the legal route."<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> See also J. Češka, *The process which turned Milan Kundera into an informer*, <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/47276.html>, (accessed 4.08.2023).

<sup>19</sup> J. Cieslak, *Milan Kundera: the end of a life with vetting in the background...*, <https://www.rp.pl/literatura/art38728211-milan-kundera-koniec-zycia-z-lustracja-w-tle>(accessed 4.08.2023).

<sup>20</sup> A. Kruszyńska, *Milan Kundera – author of 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', Nobel candidate*, <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/milan-kundera-autor-nieznosnej-lekkosci-bytu-kandydat-do-nobla>, (accessed 4.08.2023).

- “Politics”, reporting on its earlier publications on Kundera, said: “Later on it was even worse. “Time and again, the writer landed on the political altar in the role of a scapegoat, meant to personify the unaccounted for communist past,” writes Kaczorowski, recalling perhaps the biggest scandal after the publication of Prague’s *Respekt* revealing Kundera’s alleged denunciation in 2008. According to the weekly, in 1950 the writer allegedly denounced [...] Miroslav Dvořáček, a fugitive from the army or a courier of the anti-communist underground, as a result of which the 22-year-old was tortured and sentenced to 14 years of hard labour in a uranium mine. The evidence was a police memo. As Tomasz Maćkowiak wrote in our text *Teczka Milana*, it turned out that the accusations were more than dubious and were reported by another student”<sup>21</sup>.

This is followed mostly by a brief factual description of the 2008 text, or rather the accusations hurled by ‘*Respekt*’. However, the press does not continue this thread, concentrating rather on mentioning the work and life of the late Czech writer. At the same time, no one actually mentions, and certainly does not accentuate, the fact that the accusations turned out to be insufficient and that nothing was proven against the writer.

What, then, does the press emphasise? First and foremost on Kundera’s legacy, the value of his works: “Milan Kundera was a multiple candidate for the Nobel Prize, more worthy than many laureates,” reads the *Rzeczpospolita*<sup>22</sup>.

The articles appear factual, informative and concise. One looks in vain here for sensational headlines or thought-provoking paraphrases. Among the rare ones are those referring to the titles of his books such as *The Unbearable Burden of Death. Milan Kundera has died*<sup>23</sup>. Rather, titles from the informative genre dominate:

- ‘To the point’: *Milan Kundera dead, writer was 94*<sup>24</sup> ;
- TVP Info: *The writer Milan Kundera is dead*<sup>25</sup> ;
- ‘On topic’: *Milan Kundera is dead. The author of ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’ was 94 years old*<sup>26</sup> ;
- ‘Wprost’: *The writer Milan Kundera is dead*<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> A.S. Kowalska, *Milan Kundera has died. The author of ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’ was 94 years old*, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/2219542,1,zmarl-milan-kundera-autor-nieznosnej-lekkosci-bytu-mial-94-lata.read>, (accessed 6.08.2023).

<sup>22</sup> J. Cieslak, *The unbearable burden of death. Milan Kundera has died*, <https://www.rp.pl/literatura/art38731171-nieznosny-ciezar-smierci-zmarl-milan-kundera>, (accessed 4.08.2023).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> [no author signature], *Milan Kundera dead, writer was 94*, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kultura/460167/wieku-94-lat-zmarl-autor-nieznosnej-lekkosci-bytu-milan-kundera.html>, (accessed 5.08.2023).

<sup>25</sup> FA, ME, *The writer Milan Kundera is dead*, <https://www.tvp.info/71238671/milan-kundera-nie-zyje-pisarz-mial-94-lata-autor-ksiazki-nieznosna-lekkosc-bytu>, (accessed 5.08.2023).

<sup>26</sup> B. Godziński, *Milan Kundera is dead. The author of ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’ was 94 years old*, <https://natemat.pl/498440,milan-kundera-nie-zyje-autor-nieznosnej-lekkosci-bytu-mial-94-lata>(accessed 5.08.2023).

<sup>27</sup> [no author signature], *The writer Milan Kundera is dead*, <https://www.wprost.pl/swiat/11303791/nie-zyje-pisarz-milan-kundera.html>, (accessed 5.08.2023).

As can be seen, these are calm, factual titles of a purely informative nature. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of magazines and media, which have a particularly sensitive approach to the subject of 'socialist realist art', communism, party membership or accusations of collaboration with the communist regime.

Interestingly, both the aforementioned 'Do rzeczy' publication and the TVP info portal do not even mention the 'unlucky' 2008 'Respekt' publication. It is also missing from the official statement of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage – Piotr Gliński. The message The departed **prominent Czech writer Milan Kundera** on the government's website simply reads: “ “ Milan Kundera has passed away – an outstanding Czech writer, very important, formative for my generation. He was able to brilliantly express in his works his personal experiences with communist totalitarianism in our part of Europe. His masterful novels brought him worldwide fame and secured his place among the most outstanding writers of the 20th and 21st centuries. May he rest in peace,” with these words the then Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Prof. Piotr Gliniski, bid farewell to the late Milan Kundera on social media. The outstanding writer died at the age of 94”<sup>28</sup>.

A thread about a 'historically entangled writer' appears in a publication on the pages of Polskie Radio. It is already announced by the title: *Milan Kundera is dead. "He was a writer entangled in history"*<sup>29</sup> – at which it is worth noting that this phrase has been put in inverted commas as a quote. And, as we learn from the text, it is again not about recalling the accusations made against Milan Kundera fifteen years ago.

Also in this material there is no reference to that discussion. No mention of the accusations. Instead, 'Entanglement in History' itself is the story of how the times in which Kundera lived left their mark on his fate, his work, his literature, his life choices: “”Kundera, like probably no one else, told the story of a generational experience of involvement in communism and of the great disillusionment and failure of the left-wing project, of which he was a participant, a follower, and in some sense a victim “ – said the translator and essayist Aleksander Kaczorowski on Polish Radio,” reads the material<sup>30</sup>. Would Kundera have been a novelist at all if he had not been born then and there? – such are the reflections of Kaczorowski cited by the Polish Radio service. The editors recall in this context that his place among the most outstanding Czech writers was secured by his novel *The Joke*, in which he came to terms with Czechoslovak Stalinism and the period of “mistakes and distortions”: “Since then, the mechanisms of politics – the mechanisms of history – have become a permanently present element in his work”.

<sup>28</sup> [no author signature], Prominent Czech writer Milan Kundera has passed away, <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/odszedl-wybitny-czeski-pisarz-milan-kundera>, (accessed 5.08.2023).

<sup>29</sup> Jp/mc, *Milan Kundera dead. 'He was a writer caught up in history'*, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/Artykul/3199131,Rysowalem-mapy-idealnego-kraju-Czeslaw-Milosz-o-swoim-dziecinstwie>, (accessed 5.08.2023).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The subsequent narrative of the writer's entanglement in history is kept in a similar vein: Kundera as a rebellious writer, the ban on publication in Czechoslovakia, emigration, revocation of citizenship, silence... And even in this text there is no mention of the 'denunciation of Milan Kundera' and the 2008 accusations.

Thus, the 'affair' related to the 'denunciation of Milan Kundera' goes down in history as an insignificant, though certainly painful, mention in the writer's biography.

## Summary

Does this mean that a text like *Milan Kundera's Donos* should not have been written? On the contrary, it seems to have been very much needed, as was the debate about the recent history of today's Czech Republic. Throughout history, however, there have been too many question marks, shades of grey, too few documents and clear evidence. Anyone who has worked in the archives at least once or looked through the materials of the security service knows this. They are full of circumstantial evidence, unclear to the average reader. It is not uncommon to need in-depth studies, analyses, comparisons, interviews with witnesses, research, criticism of sources in order to reconstruct a true picture of events. Creating reality on the basis of such vague premises is risky and simply unreliable, falsifying history.

If *Milan Kundera's Denunciation had been* a text reporting that a document had been found in the USTR archives that contained a record of Milan Kundera reporting to the station, if it had been based only on what had actually been found, the text could have become a starting point for further reliable analysis, discussion, research. In this case, however, it seems to have become fodder, the subject of speculation, reproduced by thousands of titles in the Czech Republic and abroad. The result is an extremely colourful, suggestive, emotional article built on a single piece of information and a mass of conjecture, circumstantial evidence, assumptions, simplifications. This is dangerous because, as we know, the media influence our attitudes, consciousness, views and decisions<sup>31</sup>.

This is a sad but necessary reflection. The example of this material shows how, in the name of readership (clickability?), the principles of a journalist's workshop are becoming unimportant: responsibility for the word, reliable presentation of facts, separating information from opinion, confrontation with witnesses, investigation of the truth, delving into the subject, searching for answers to one of the basic questions of the journalistic canon: why? The mission of journalists is to describe reality, not

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<sup>31</sup> E. Aronson, *Man the social being*, transl. J. Radzicki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 1999; E. Aronson, A. Pratkanis, *The Age of Propaganda*, transl. J. Radzicki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2003; M. Karwat, *Teoria prowokacji*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2007; *Manipulacja w mediach. Media about manipulation*, ed. T. Gackowski, J. Dziedzic, Institute of Journalism, University of Warsaw, Warsaw 2011; G. Bohner, M. Wanke, *Attitudes and Change of Attitudes*, transl. J. Radzicki, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2004.

to create it. Writing about an alleged blot on the biography of a well-known writer does not authorise the treatment applied in this text and in the subsequent discussion about it in other newspapers. This is not a novel, where one can freely construct the plot or use stylistic devices aimed at creating an appropriate mood or atmosphere: horror, mystery, understatement... In the press, referring to the title of Mariusz Szczygieł's book, "facts must dance"<sup>32</sup>. Otherwise, the consequences could be lamentable. Someone ruined Miroslav Dvořáček's life, but the press and the ensuing publicity may have destroyed it for Milan Kundera as well.

Today we know that history has come full circle, and that the press 'affair' associated with Milan Kundera's name is just a mention in his thankfully rich and impressive biography. It is a short succinct entry starting mostly with the words: "in 2008, the Czech weekly Respekt accused Kundera of" ... Briefly, laconically, as in that unfortunate police note: "Today, at 4 p.m., a student Milan Kundera appeared at the local police station" ... And we will probably never know if it was really him.

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<sup>32</sup> M. Szczygieł, *Facts must dance*, Dowody na Istnienie, Warsaw 2022.

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