



Samuel Abrahám

A trace of metaphysics?

On the allegations against Milan Kundera

On 13 October, the Czech weekly *Respekt* released details of former police records appearing to prove that in 1950 Milan Kundera denounced a man suspected of spying. Since then, more details of the case have come to light that cast doubt upon Kundera's involvement. Whatever the outcome, writes Samuel Abrahám, the manner in which the allegations have been made represents a failure of journalistic decency.

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However much we are inundated with bad news, it never ceases to surprise us. This time it came with the Czech weekly *Respekt*, which reported that in 1950 Milan Kundera informed the police on a person who was later sentenced to 22 years in prison. It came as a shock to me not because — like so many others — I admire Kundera as an author of novels and essays; I also know him personally. I have corresponded with him for several years on the subject of publishing Slovak translations of his French books. Respecting Kundera's privacy, up until now I have been discrete about our correspondence and personal contact. The events of the last days have changed my position on this.

The way the affair has been presented to the world public is mind-boggling. The fact that Kundera himself learned about the allegations from the press is another great failure of journalistic decency. The insensitivity and arrogance of the authors of the article that provoked the scandal left me horrified. They start dramatically: "Milan Kundera has always carefully covered his tracks. He has given no interviews for the past quarter of a century. He visits his native country only incognito."¹ The most likely reason, we are asked to believe, is a dark story from the past that they have just uncovered. If they would just read Kundera's essays, they would learn why he does not give interviews, does not go to conferences, does not collect prizes, did not return to his homeland and why he is appalled by the state of the media today.

Respekt, the magazine in which the article was published, reproduced a facsimile of a police document from 1950. To assure the public that neither the story nor the document was a matter of speculation by the authors, the editor-in-chief, Martin Simecka, wrote in the editorial of the same issue of the journal: "We did not search for it, it was revealed to us for reasons that can only be of a metaphysical nature."² Who cares about facts, logic, motivation or what the accused has to say? The journalists do not doubt the "holy writ" of the

communist police from the 1950s. Kundera can say whatever he likes, deny the accusations a thousand times, but it will not take away the stigma of guilt.

I wrote to Milan Kundera, after some hesitation, because at difficult times it may be better to leave a person to his privacy. I must admit that I was prompted more by my anger about the witch-hunt than by compassion towards Kundera, who does not need or want that.

"I am utterly shocked by the events concerning your person in the Czech media. I have generally regarded the magazine *Respekt* as a trustworthy journal, but the article written by Hradilek and Tresnak belongs to the worst of tabloid journalism. Everything that bothered them about you and your success is distilled in their article. They entertain no doubts about the allegations, they promptly translated the whole article into English to generate maximum impact abroad, because that is their desired audience. And the fact that the editor-in-chief, Martin M. Simecka (son of the late dissident and philosopher Milan Simecka), did not do all he could to contact you and give you time to react is his personal and professional failing."

Kundera answered immediately and wrote among other things: "I did not think it was possible to start such an international persecution on the basis of a single lie."

What is there to add? The deed is done, the newspapers have their scoop. The international media have covered the story and most have accepted the arguments of *Respekt*. Like with the many who have been accused of similar offences before, anything the accused now says will only increase his "guilt". The vast majority of readers will remember the first slander of Kundera and not the subsequent analysis, new findings or possible exoneration.

Just a few days after the accusation of Kundera, new information emerged that seems to be a turning point in the case. According to a testimony by Zdenek Pesat,³ a student communist leader at the time, Miroslav Dlak came to tell him back in 1950 that he had informed the police about a person staying in his girlfriend's room whom he thought might be a spy. That person was the same that Kundera allegedly reported, thereby throwing into doubt the very matter of who the informer was.

Respekt did not question the authenticity of the police document nor submit it to independent forensic analysis. It is also significant that one of the authors of the incriminating article, Adam Hradilek, is a relative of Dlak's widow. Could the denunciation of Kundera be an attempt to absolve the guilt of the journalist's long dead relative?

Whatever the further developments, the manner of reporting this tragic case represent another substantial drop in the level of decency and professionalism in journalism. Infamy is good for sales, sure. No doubt there's a trace of metaphysics in that, too.

¹ Adam Hradilek and Petr Tresnak, "Milan Kundera's denunciation", in [respekt.cz,
http://English.respekt.cz/Milan-Kunderas-denunciation-2742.html](http://English.respekt.cz/Milan-Kunderas-denunciation-2742.html). Czech original first published in *Respekt*, 42/2008.

² *Respekt*, 42/2008.

³ To Czech news agency CTK on 15 October 2008.

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