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Two stories

Kundera and the conclusion of the Velvet Revolution

The reaction to the Kundera allegations in the Czech Republic was largely one of doubt. Unlike during the 1990s, when "Cibulka's lists" prompted a witch-hunt against informers, today the need to lay blame has receded. Miroslav Balastík wonders whether the incident signifies the end of a phase of post-communism in the Czech Republic.

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What an incredible irony of history. A writer who strived to disappear behind his work, so that his biography would not diminish the life of his characters, is suddenly dragged into a story that he probably never would have been able to invent himself.

Iva Militká has felt guilty throughout her life: she thinks that it was because of her and her husband Miroslav Dlask that the young Miroslav Dvořáček was arrested and sentenced to many years in prison in the early 1950s. Her relative, the young historian Adam Hradílek, is asked to delve into this story from the past. While looking through old papers, he finds a document saying that the "rat" was neither Militká nor her deceased husband Miroslav Dlask, but an unknown student, the now famous writer Milan Kundera. A breathtaking discovery. The shadow of guilt that until now had fallen across Hradílek's family and relations disappears, and, what's more, the young researcher holds a key that will change history. He is fascinated by his discovery yet not experienced enough to question its relevance. So he passes a judgement upon history — and living people. A campaigner for justice: Adam Hradílek.

The article breaks in the Czech and international media and sweeps away the accused man's life. Astounded, he flatly denies any involvement in the cause and it soon becomes clear that the evidence does not stand up. Kundera's signature is missing, as is his ID number; strange is also the fact that none of the participants — Militká, Dlask or Kundera — were ever interrogated by the police. All is crowned by a trustworthy witness, the literary historian Zdenek Pesat, who declares that Dlask confessed to him that he had reported Dvořáček to the police. As an epilogue, it is confirmed that Dlask had contact with the secret police. For the majority of the Czech public and media this means that Kundera is freed of any suspicion.

What was our history?

We will never find out what really happened at the students' residence of Kolonka in 1950. The scandal in the media is fading, but the story remains. And it is more tragic than ever before. Iva Militká, who tried to wash away the guilt from herself and her husband, may have cast an even darker shadow upon her family. A keen young researcher has lost his credibility in professional circles and the weekly *Respekt* its good journalistic repute. The story has turned against its characters. A writer who has so brilliantly uncovered the mechanisms of history in his novels has now himself become a victim of history. A very Kunderaesque ending.

However the case has another level. What is at issue are not the facts but their interpretation. Historians, writers and journalists have condemned the article because of its portrayal of the case as a mythical clash between good and evil. Miroslav Dvorník was declared a hero, a fighter for freedom, while Kundera was cast as a villainous lackey of the totalitarian regime. Characteristic of this was also the fax sent by *Respekt* to Kundera, in which he was asked to make a personal statement. The questions were formulated in a very general way and the article they were preparing was not even mentioned, let alone the accusation. But the fax got lost or did not reach its recipient and the authors attempted no further contact. They had a reason for that. For them, Kundera's silence confirmed his guilt. They were not seeking truth, but a culprit.

This atmosphere of good versus evil, so typical for the post-revolutionary phase of dealing with the communist past, was rejected by Czech society. Most commentators were quick to point out that whoever it was that informed the police about Dvorník, in context of the early 1950s it cannot be considered a moral failure. What's more, the police were informed only that a stranger had left his luggage at the halls of residence: the fact that the person was a secret agent first arose during the subsequent investigation. Even this was misinterpreted by the authors, since it would have made the clash between the good and evil less emphatic. However, this approach has finally backfired. The question asked by Czech society today about the communist past has developed since the 1990s. Now it is not, "Who is guilty?", but rather, "What was our history?"

"We are not like them"

A similar case took place soon after the Velvet Revolution. The victim was also alleged to have been an informer and, moreover, was a writer: Zdena Salivarová, the wife of Josef Skvorecky. After emigrating to Canada in 1968, they founded the publishing house 68 Publishers, so important for independent Czech culture. However, the case of Zdena Salivarová also differs from that of Milan Kundera, and this is what seems significant. In order to understand that, we have to go back to November 1989.

"We are not like them" was the motto of the demonstrations against the Communist regime. It implied general willingness to proceed without violence and tolerantly: to forgive and to forget. It was by no means clear, however, who were "us" and who were "them".

While the normalization period of the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovak society did not bring violent oppression or material destitution, it left deep traces at the moral level. After the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968, it was beyond doubt that the time of illusions and ideals connected to communism was over. For this reason, the communist regime, enthroned and controlled by the Kremlin, came to an unwritten agreement with the

population. Citizens were to show a certain extent of formal engagement, from putting up Soviet flags at important anniversaries, through membership in different organizations, to participation in strictly controlled elections. In return, they would receive good posts, schooling for their children, and summer holidays in Yugoslavia. The regime, wholeheartedly rejected by most of society, was formally supported by this trade-off. It brought about certain moral dilemmas: people were ashamed within themselves. It was precisely this shame which made it possible for the regime to survive. Filled with distrust towards themselves and towards one another, people were isolated. "We" were to a certain degree "them".

In 1989, the communist government was deposed by people who no longer wanted to sully themselves with such a deal. Hence, the "Velvet Revolution" was also a clash of generations, in which children revolted against their ashamed fathers. The transfer of power in November '89 took place in a non-violent, "velvet" way, with typical Czech grotesqueness: Václav Havel, who a year earlier had still been in prison, was unanimously elected president by a wholly communist parliament. On the other hand, the representatives of the fallen regime either avoided trial entirely or had their cases abandoned after several years of stalemate. The communist party itself was not banned, nor even forced to change its name.

Cibulka's lists

Because of that, however, the problem of historical responsibility appeared to be very complicated after the November changeover. It was even more difficult to find the culprits. In the eyes of the population, the moral culprits were not those who had been showing off their immorality but those who had been concealing it. It was not the communist bosses, not the real scoundrels who were to face the moral tribunals (they were "just carrying out their duties"), but those who had been much lower down the chain of moral culpability: the informants. The rats.

In 1992, the ferocious anti-communist activist Petr Cibulka published lists of the StB's secret agents and informants, featuring thousands and thousands of names, cover names, and dates of birth. "Cibulka's lists" immediately became a best-seller. It suddenly became clear who "us" was and who "them". Although nobody knew how the lists had been compiled, their authenticity was not challenged by any official representative. A hunt for the culprits could start. Among the alleged "rats" were many famous names: popular actors, intellectuals, clergymen, and prominent dissidents. A rat-mania seized society. Luckily enough, popular justice never took form of lynch mobbing — after all, we are not like them. Nevertheless, those whose names had appeared on the lists soon found out that this fact bordered on social assassination. They lost friends and prestige, sometimes even employment. On the other hand, many did not have the faintest idea why their names featured on the lists.

It soon emerged that besides real "rats", the lists also included those who had merely been mentioned as possible future informers (without, of course, being told about this). And that was not all. A good number of those who were forced to co-operate by extortion, by psychological or by material pressure never denounced anybody. But the lists did not get down to this kind of nitty-gritty. It was impossible to gain justice. The lists were not official and there was no one to sue (at the time, the ministry of interior refused to provide access to the StB archives, in which all individual cases are documented). The "tarnished" had to conduct their own defence, yet nobody believed their

explanation. The lists pointed at a culprit and nobody cared about the stories in the background.

Here was where the tragedy of the writer and publisher Zdena Salivarová-Skvorecká began. Her return from exile to her recently freed fatherland (whose cultural continuity she had played a crucial role in maintaining) was initially triumphal. The Skvoreckys were among the first to be awarded the highest state decoration — the Order of the White Lion — by President Václav Havel. Society's gratefulness did not last long, however. To be precise, it lasted until 1992, when Salivarová's name was found on Cibulka's lists. Although she denied any guilt, nobody cared much about her explanation. Nobody came to the writer's defence publicly and nobody questioned the lists' credibility. Her relationship with her home country cooled and her life was tainted for good.

Two years after the publication of Cibulka's lists, 68 Publishers published its last title. It was called *Osocení* ("The Tarnished"): in it, Zdena Salivarová-Skvorecká collected the stories of those who — like her — had appeared on the lists. A sorry end to a legendary publishing house. All the more so because the book passed almost unnoticed. As distinct from the names on the lists.

Milan Kundera features on no list. His name only appeared, almost inexplicably, in a police report. But it was enough for the weekly *Respekt* to accuse him of informing. But times have changed: what would have been quietly and with certain satisfaction accepted in the early 1990s was now loudly rejected by the bulk of Czech society. Czech society's reaction has shown that it is no longer looking for culprits. It is no longer inclined to judge, but to doubt. It does not want to name culprits, but to understand their stories.

It is quite possible that this story will close one phase of Czech post-communist history, that this story represents the conclusion of the revolution. It is also possible that we will start to read Kundera's work more attentively than before. Not in order to decipher his biography, but to learn about history's mechanisms. In order to understand that we cannot get even with history or revenge ourselves upon it. History never was, but always is, and the only thing we can do is to try to understand it.

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