

Kundera. His Czech Life and Times by Jan Novák

Translated by Jan Novák

(structure of the biography with excerpts)

CONTENTS

Foreword

Prologue

In Kundera's writing since 1980's, the image of a biographer as a parasite keeps returning, a parasite that lives off the work of other artists, belaboring insignificant matters and completely missing all that is essential. Kundera scolds and mocks biographers, as if he wanted preventively to drive them away. In his view, all writers, composers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers should completely disappear behind their work and no one should explore how their experience shaped their art and how it is reflected in it.

In his second *Art of the Novel*, written in French and published in 1986 (very different from his first *Art of the Novel*, written in Czech and published in 1960) Kundera borrows „one metaphor from Kafka“, according to which „the novelist tears down the house of his life to build from its bricks a different house: the house of his novel“.¹ According to Kundera, the biographers knock down what the author has built to foolishly erect again what he had torn down.

The great pleasure which Kundera offers the reader in stories like *The Hitchhiking Game* and novels like *Life is Elsewhere*, engenders an interest in what part of his life their author had torn down and what did he build out of the material he obtained in the process. Did he tear down a castle to put up a shed in its place or was it the other way around? Did he obtain enough material from a dugout to build a skyscraper? Did he leave a large part of his spacious villa intact merely to construct a glass house behind it? Or a chapel? A brothel? A watch tower?

Kundera's experiences are not particularly wide-ranging; he is the only son of a school teacher and a music professor; the only job he ever performed was to teach literature in colleges, so it is no surprise that his basic approach to writing is explication, that he prefers to speak from a position of authority, to talk down from behind a lectern.

¹ Milan Kundera: Slova, in *Slova, pojmy, situace*, Brno, Atlantis 2014, p. 34 (revised version of *Soixante et onze mots* from *L'art du roman*, 1986).

In the first, „Czech“ phase of his life, Kundera had only a single employer, the Film Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, or FAMU. He began to teach „Soviet and modern Czech literature“ there in 1953, right after graduating with two years of movie directing and a year of screen-writing and dramaturgy under his belt. He took this job mainly to avoid military service, as will be shown later. He was fired from FAMU in 1972 for political reasons.

After a short marriage with an opera singer Olga Haasová, Kundera spent nearly two thirds of his life with his second wife, Věra Hrabánková, even though technically speaking she is not actually married to him; I will get to this strange aspect of their wedding in Luhačovice on September 29, 1962, later. Kundera's personal experiences, however, are very rich in another domain – in his middle age, the writer was a great seducer of women and erotic themes play a key role in his work.

As a writer, however, Kundera draws on his reading even more than on his erotic experiences, which brings me to the second reason why I decided to write this biography. All his life, Kundera extracts his literary reflections from biographies, diaries and letters of writers, composers, painters, philosophers as well as politicians: for instance, in his survey of Goethe's life, there is barely a glimpse of the great author's literary achievement. In his novels, essays, forewords and articles, Kundera examines the lives and letters of Janáček, Stravinsky, Flaubert, Kafka, Nezval, Hemingway, Gellner, Apollinaire or Stalin – while he loudly and anxiously demands that, in his case, all interest and attention be trained solely on his oeuvre, or rather on that part of his oeuvre that he has not yet rejected.

That brings me to the third reason for why I wrote this book. The more I learned about Kundera and his work, the more it seemed to me that his game of „biographical hide and seek“ is not a postulate of any esthetic or philosophical conception, rather it seems strictly defensive and calculated – Kundera does not like to look back on his life.

In 1967, he conducted an interview with A. J. Liehm, his colleague from a literary weekly called *Literární noviny*, with whom he shared the veneration of Stalin in the time of heightened class struggle in Czechoslovakia, when they were hanging people in Prague, nationalizing properties in the cities and collectivizing farms in the countryside. It is Kundera's least guarded interview. Unusually, he even declares himself the speaker of his „generation“ and says about himself as well as about Liehm: „We do not live in great harmony with ourselves.“ And then he adds: „For example, I don't like myself all that much.“²

In 1990's in Paris, on a machine borrowed from his publisher Gallimard, Kundera shredded all his manuscripts, unpublished writings, all the radio plays and television scripts (which he had sold under somebody's else name in Prague during the neo-Stalinist „normalization“ of the 1970's), all his note books and all his correspondence. This liquidation, to which he was fully entitled of course, was done mostly by his wife Věra who became his irreplaceable collaborator in France. She is his first reader as well as his secretary and his agent (until recently, the Kunderas handled their literary business all over the world by themselves). According to the testimony of one of her friends, this shredding was a traumatic experience for Věra Hrabánková-Kunderová.³

I am not surprised when I imagine what it must have been like: the office machine whirs and shreds pages densely covered with words into long, jagged strips of paper; white and yellowing sheets covered in fading ink disappear inside and vanishing with them are memories, thoughts, the mental beat of an entire life; it's all very aseptic, quiet, effective, the entire past is vanishing in the trash, no one will ever be able to glue it

² A. J. Liehm: *Generace*, Praha, Československý spisovatel 1990, p. 58.

³ Interview with Nora Obrtelová, 1. 5. 2016 in Café Blau in Brno.

back together from these scraps of paper, soon they fill several plastic bags, it's all light as foam, and suddenly that which was no longer is and for people who live off words it's the end, those serrated strips of paper will never make it possible to write any more books or essays, this is really an admission that death with its injection needle is already pacing up and down the hallway – Kundera had resolved a long time ago that he has to finish this shredding before she knocks on the door.

This gesture, this destruction of manuscripts, unpublished writings, archival material and letters has been foreshadowed in Kundera's novels several times. In his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in a chapter entitled *Lost Letters*,⁴ the narrator who is about to leave the country for good tries to retrieve his old letters and photographs from a lover from his youth, a figure who in my opinion has been inspired by Monika Gajdošová, a Slovak dramaturge and a fervent Communist, who was Kundera's first partner. The narrator of *Lost Letters* intends to erase his Stalinist lover from his past completely, but she refuses even to let him look at the letters, and it strikes the narrator as „unbearable that a piece of his life remains in her hands, and he feels an urge to bash her head in with a heavy glass ash tray which lay on the cafe table between them, and to grab his letters and carry them off. Instead, he kept explaining to her that he's been looking back and trying to understand where he came from.“ In reality, he is resolved to „stop by the nearest garbage can, pick up those letters with two fingers as if the paper were smeared with shit, and throw them into the trash“.⁵

In his novel *Immortality*, where French characters moved into the house of Kundera's prose for the first time, the novelist develops the same notion not only once, but twice. First, the father of the protagonist Agnes wants to completely erase himself from history: „In the years before his death, father was gradually destroying everything that was his: he didn't even leave any suits in the wardrobe, no manuscripts, no notes for his lectures, no letters. He kept wiping off the tracks behind him,“ probably because he is infuriated by the fact „that the moment he dies, the dead person loses [all human rights]. No law protects him from slander anymore, his privacy ceases to be private; not even the letters written to him by his lovers, not even the memory book given to him by his mother, nothing, nothing, nothing belongs to him any longer.“⁶ This traumatizing image has its precursor in Kundera's own behavior. He forbade the publishing of his poems, he proscribed the publication of the short stories he had stricken from his cycle of *Laughable Loves*, with a few exceptions he forbids the production of his plays, he categorically forbids any film adaptations of his novels, he forbids even some of the translations of the texts that he had not yet proscribed, he stopped giving interviews and he very adamantly forbids for anyone to photograph him.

Winding its way through *Immortality* is the story of a relationship between Johann Wolfgang Goethe and his „love“ Bettina Bretano-von Arnim who was forty six years younger than he was and who tried to feed off the great poet's fame. After Goethe's death, Bettina rewrites a part of their correspondence to put a little color into their beige relationship, to make it seem pink, if not red, and she actually manages to enter German literary history for an entire century. It doesn't occur to anyone to suspect her of imposture until the actual letters of Goethe and Armin turn up in 1929, which brings Kundera's narrator to a scream: „Oh, why didn't she burn them?“⁷

⁴ In the first Czech, exile edition (Toronto, Sixty-Eight Publishers 1981) the chapter was erroneously entitled *Clementis' Cap*.

⁵ Milan Kundera: *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, Brno, Atlantis 2017, p. 27–28 (Toronto, Sixty-Eight Publishers 1981, p. 24).

⁶ Milan Kundera: *Nesmrtelnost*, Brno, Atlantis 1993, p. 245.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

And immediately, he answers for Bettina with his customary psychological perceptiveness: „Put yourselves in her place: it isn't easy to burn intimate documents, which are dear to you; it's like admitting that you won't be here for much longer, that you're going to die tomorrow; and so day after day you put off the act of destruction and then one day, it's too late. Man recons with immortality and forgets to recon with death.“⁸

In this passage, Kundera is only concerned with the timing of the „act of destruction“, here the matter is starkly clear. Bettina had good reasons for burning the letters, with timely action she could have disguised her biographical fraud and forever rewritten „history“, with timely action she could have replaced the inconvenient facts of history with her self-centered romance.

Kundera himself avoided this mistake and shredded all his literary materials. He also began to collect his old letters from their addressees. Ivo Pondělíček, once one of Kundera's most intimate friends, received a letter from him in the 1960's which was a short novella. It had over twenty thousand words and Pondělíček described it in detail in his book *Confession of an Outsider*. In this autobiography, Pondělíček has a nickname for the indecisive Kundera, *Vahab*, or the Hesitator, and he deems the long letter to be „the most important letter I've ever received from Vahab – a veritable short novel, as if a forerunner of his later novels, for at that time Vahab hadn't started writing novels yet. It belongs among the greatest works to appear in modern times, being better than many things from anybody, or at least good enough to make Vančura, Čapek, Hrabal spin in their graves, and Flaubert, Kafka, Celine, Nabokov and I don't know who else too.“⁹

I will get around to a detailed description of this novella later. Pondělíček no longer has its original. Kundera had called him from Paris and asked him to return it along with any other correspondence he might have received from him, saying that an editor of a Brno literary magazine will stop by to retrieve all this stuff. Pondělíček had to conduct a small search of his apartment to find the novella, bundled a few letters with it and sent the package to Kundera „in order for Milan to get rid of them, I have no doubt“.¹⁰

The last items in Kundera's obsessive defense against those who would like to interpret his life differently from the way he wishes it to be viewed, are hoaxes, but hoaxes bereft of any artistic purpose, which can therefore be called what they really are – untruths. As a young Stalinist, he believed that lying is not a matter of morality, but of tactics. I don't know of any statement where he had disavowed this creed. And lying is a theme that Kundera examines through his characters ever since his „laughable“ stories *No one shall laugh* and *Eduard and God*. In an interview with Norman Biron, speaking for himself in 1979, Kundera even proclaims that speaking truth is in fact nonsensical: „Once you realize that the world around you does not deserve to be taken seriously, you come to dizzying conclusions. Truth-telling becomes absurd. Why should you be honest with someone who is really crazy, whom you can't take seriously? Why would you tell the truth? Why be virtuous? Why take your work seriously? And how could you take yourself seriously in this meaningless world – that would of course be the height of ridiculousness.“¹¹

Writing in French in *Le rideau* or *The Curtain* of 2005, Kundera recounts in his own voice how, in the early seventies, „the fact of being tailed and eavesdropped on by the secret police taught us the delectable art of the hoax. One of my friends swapped

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ivo Pondělíček: *Outsiderova zpověď*, Praha, Pragma 2007, p. 219.

¹⁰ Phone interview with Ivo Pondělíček, 30. 11. 2016.

¹¹ Normand Biron: Entretien avec Milan Kundera, in *Liberté*, 1979, # 121, January (translated by A. J. Liehm).

apartments with me, and names too; and this great seducer of women, who was indifferent to police microphones, then put on some of his greatest performances as a lover in my studio apartment. He welcomed my departure for exile, because the trickiest part of any amorous adventure is its termination: one lovely day, the girls and wives arrived at the door and found it locked and stripped of my name plate while I was mailing postcards from Paris to seven women I've never even laid my eyes on, saying goodbye to them and signing my own name."¹²

Leaving aside the mendacity of the assertion that Kundera has only learned the art of the hoax from the secret police (he has been entertaining himself that way since his youth), it is an indisputable fact that, in the early 1970's, the State Security kept him under close surveillance. They were bugging his telephone line as well as his studio apartment in Prague and, on July 31, 1974, they even broke in and photographed his bank books and a manuscript of an untitled theater play.¹³ The police microphones recorded all sorts of assignations in the small apartment on Prague's Bartolomějská Street while his wife lived with his mother in the family villa in distant Brno. Even after Kundera's officially sanctioned departure to France in the summer of 1975, the State Security went on intercepting the letters that Kundera was writing to his former lovers in the first years of his stay abroad.

How do we know this? Didn't Kundera in fact succeed in hoodwinking the State Security? Weren't these ladies actually the lovers of his lothario friend, as Kundera maintains in the *Curtain*? The StB file from March 11, 1974, refutes such a possibility. The police bugs recorded Kundera's wife calling him from Brno. She had just had an unpleasant conversation with a man who had introduced himself as the husband of M., a Prague librarian, with whom Kundera is having intimate relations. The report states that „Kundera reacted to this information with irritation“ and denied everything. Then he hung up, dialed librarian M. and immediately set up a date with her. She thus became a person of interest for the State Security, was identified and incorporated into Kundera's dossier, entitled „Elitář“, or „Elitist“.¹⁴

On June 10, 1976, the State Security invited the twenty six year old librarian for a coffee at Cafe Jadrán, which costs the Ministry of Interior 15 Czech crowns. She was interviewed there by major Šíma and lieutenant Kuzmík and spoke with them openly, even though „she was showing signs of great nervousness“. The parley focused on the last contact the librarian had had with Kundera. After he moved away to Paris, he mailed her „a book written in French by Françoise-Régis Bastide under the title of *La Fantásie du Voyageur*“, which the librarian readily handed over to the police, and „emphasized repeatedly that after getting this book, she sent Kundera a postcard from Karlovy Vary where she thanked him for the book and at the same time asked him not to send her anything else in the future, including any books“.¹⁵

This confab over a cup of coffee is not the librarian's first exposure to the State Security, for the police write-up also reports that the librarian „stated that she had informed only her husband about these contacts, and also told him she had turned in the book. The husband agreed with her actions.“¹⁶

The unnerved librarian promises the two plainclothesmen that she will promptly inform the „organs“ about any written or personal communication from Kundera and the

¹² Milan Kundera: *Die Weltliteratur*, in *The Curtain* [Le rideau, 2005], trans. Linda Asher, New York, Harper Perennial 2007, p. 54.

¹³ Folder 812924_MV_05_20, p. 33–36.

¹⁴ Folder 812924_MV_07_20, p. 81–82.

¹⁵ Folder 812924_MV_10_20, p. 85–87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

„organs“ coach her on what she is to tell Kundera in such a case. She should tell him „she had a lot of trouble with the appropriate state organs“. In the final „provision“, major Šíma recommends that the French book be returned to this particular person of interest.¹⁷

The only truthful thing in Kundera's essay in the *Curtain* is that he himself made that most difficult part of his erotic assignations, that is terminating them, easy on himself. When he departed for France, his mistresses really did end up standing before the locked door of Kundera's studio and staring at the name plate from which his name had been removed.¹⁸

In light of Kundera's proscriptions and shredding, his calculated hoaxes and wiping off the tracks behind him, the biographer has to draw on all the resources at his disposal, including the archives of the StB. I don't like to do it and I do so with distaste – in the years when he was under close surveillance by the State Security, Kundera was a real victim of the regime. However, it was a regime he himself had actively helped to set up, a regime about which he writes with a certain nostalgia to this day,¹⁹ even though, in the first half of 1970's, he did experience its overbearing brutality first-hand.

At the same time, it has to be said that the StB did not treat Kundera as viciously as it treated other writers. In their interviews with him, his „guiding organs“ are always careful to draw a distinction between those truly „antisocialist“ authors, such as Václav Havel and Ludvík Vaculík, and the „mised“ Kundera while Kundera himself also never misses a chance to point out he is not like some émigrés, the Radio Free Europe, the writers of petitions or any of the „elements hostile to socialism“. ²⁰ Neither did the StB ever use any of the rich material they had collected on Kundera to publically embarrass him, as they have done to writers like Ludvík Vaculík or Jan Procházka. With the aid of the police archives, one can put together a relatively coherent and authentic picture of at least a part of Kundera's life. It isn't complete, as I will show, the StB never found out about a great deal of what went on, yet their archives make it possible for me to draw some clear biographical contours.

The key question here is, how reliable and truthful are those StB records? The historians who have weighed in on this question rule out forgeries;²¹ the testimonies of former StB agents in contemporary courts need to be viewed critically, one has always to consider whose benefit they might serve, but all these men share the conviction that the StB archives are authentic.²² My own experience shows that the files in these archives reflect the limitations in the mental dexterity of the StB employees as well as their lack of education, yet they are at least as credible as archives of other institutions of a similar size. One has to read the reports by agents and the evaluations by their superiors critically, but I deem credible and reliable all the StB transcriptions of conversations and correspondence as well as all their reports on formal interviews.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Folder 812924_MV_11_20, p. 51.

¹⁹ See the character of witty and ingenious Stalin in Kundera's last novella, *Slavnost bezvýznamnosti*.

²⁰ Folder 812924_MV_02_20, p. 83–89, Folder 812924_MV_04_20, p. 11–17.

²¹ Petr Blažek: Historické dokumenty nejsou otázkou víry, in *Revolver Revue* 31, 2016, # 102, March, p. 177–189; prepared by Jaroslav Formánek.

²² For instance, StB major Jaromír Ulč, <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/ulc-jaromir-1950>.

Part One / Obedient Son (Brno)

April Fool

Belly Buttons

How to Listen to Music

„That Is Odd“

Ashes and Silence

Devoted Companion

Devoted Student

One Floor Higher

Quiet Time in Krpole

To Be Invisible

Buddies

Father-in-law

Führer's Gifts

In High School

Dreamer and Gym Coach

End of the War

School Mag

Young Translator

Scholar

Secret Communist

Marriage Proposal

Load

A Poet, Finally

Part Two/ Poet and Stalinist (Prague)

Revolutionary

In College

Charles University

First Explication

Volunteer Worker

„Hendrych Is Probably an Idiot“

Saboteur of Phrases

Socialist Love

Mailman of Bad Luck

Merchant in Literature

The Soviet Card

On a Bridge

Soldiers of Communism

Agent with a Suitcase

The Prague paths of the young men from Královo Pole split up for good in the middle of January, 1950, when Trefulka moved from the wooden barracks of the Kolonka dormitory in Letná to a private room in Smíchov.²³ At that time, they were each studying something else already and surveying different horizons. Kundera stayed at the Kolonka for the time being, even though living there offered no great luxury. There were drafts blowing through the wooden walls, each room was heated by its own stove and students were dragging buckets of coal down its hallways all winter long.

On the upside, Kolonka provided privacy with only one person to a room as well as a free-thinking atmosphere, because unusually for the time men and women were living under same roof there. In the early fifties, there were three hundred of them and no one could overlook the new student of German and Nordic studies. A blond with striking eyes who became pregnant as a freshman, Iva Militká, came from Kostelec nad Orlicí. In Prague, she immediately started going out with Miroslav Dlask, a student of esthetics and sociology, and they both knew Milan Kundera who would later give them his first collection of poems, *Člověk zahrada širá*, and inscribe a personal dedication into the thin paperback.²⁴

²³ Police registration card.

²⁴ Anne Dastakian: Milan Kundera. Une jeunesse tchèque, in *Marianne*, 18. 10. 2008.

At the time, Militká was undergoing a drastic mental transformation. Back in Kostelec, she had dated a young pilot by the name of Miroslav Juppa who was thrown out of the Military Air Academy after Communist revolution as politically unreliable and who, with her assistance, defected to the West. All this unfolded in the spring of 1949 and, back then, Militká had promised Juppa she would follow him to West Germany, but then she headed to the university in Prague, „where a new world opened up for me“. She wound up at the Kolonka, „I had a tiny room there, a cherry tree was blooming before my window. It's there that I'd had the most beautiful moments of my life.“ Playing the main role in them was a passionate young Communist whom she met at a volunteer summer *brigáda* in Ostrava. Under his influence, the potential émigré all but joined the Communist party, though she never did take that formal step: „Today, it's probably incomprehensible, but I recall a walk around the Petřín Park with a classmate of mine. We stopped to talk and he was dreaming out loud about how one day Czechoslovakia will be one of the republics in the Soviet Union.“²⁵

On Tuesday, March 14, 1950, Militká was crossing the Mánes Bridge in the center of Prague, walking from a lecture back to the dorm. It was shortly before lunch. A tram passed by and, at the stop down the street, a good-looking young man sprung out of it. He carried a suitcase and made straight for her. She recognized him immediately and “was overjoyed to see him“.²⁶

The chance encounter made the young man with the suitcase even happier. Miroslav Dvořáček was an agent of general Moravec and the American CIC who had clandestinely crossed the border from West Germany the day before. His assignment in Prague was to recruit a Chemapol engineer by the name of Václavík to become an informant for the CIC. And on that particular day, he had been walking around Prague with a suitcase, feeling very conspicuous, but now he saw his old acquaintance from Kostelec out of the tram window and felt that his luck was finally turning. She was the girlfriend of his best buddy Juppa, with whom he had learned to fly military planes and with whom he had defected. Militká looked fabulous and Dvořáček suddenly had a chance to get rid of the damn suitcase.

„I don't recall how he explained to me that he was in Prague,“ Militká-Dlasková recounted many years later. „I was quite naive back then and I didn't even think about that. I just wanted to know how Juppa was doing. He accompanied me to the Kolonka where he ditched his suitcase, telling me he had some things to take care of in Prague now and that he would come back for it in the afternoon.“²⁷

Dvořáček did not linger at the Kolonka for long. It wasn't even noon yet as he headed back downtown to search for engineer Václavík. Militká went to lunch with her boyfriend Dlask, told him she'd had an unexpected visitor and asked him not to come by her room that evening, because her friend Dvořáček would probably crash there for the night.²⁸

Dlask already knew from Militká not only about her former boyfriend Juppa, he knew about Dvořáček too, knew they had both defected, knew they were both class enemies and traitors, and now one of them wanted to sponge a night in his girl's room –

²⁵ Adam Hradilek – Petr Třešňák: Udání Milana Kundery, in *Respekt* 19, 2008, # 42, 13. 10., p. 40.

²⁶ Adam Hradilek – Martin Tichý: Osudová mise Moravcova kurýra. Příběh plukovníka letectva ve výslužbě Miroslava Dvořáčka, in *Paměť a dějiny* 3, 2009, # 1, p. 79.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Adam Hradilek – Petr Třešňák: Udání Milana Kundery, in *Respekt* 19, 2008, # 42, 13. 10., p. 42.

it is therefore a mystery why Dlask did not immediately turn Dvořáček in, but he did not. However, he was not as naive as Militká and immediately recognized that both he and his girlfriend were now in a precarious position: if anyone were to find out and report that Militká was in touch with a *diverzant*, that she was hiding things for him, much less letting him stay in her room overnight, both of them would immediately end up in prison. So even if this *diverzant* were to behave like a monk or a eunuch at night, even if he never bothered Militká at all, even if he were to vanish in the morning unnoticed, there still remained the danger he might be caught by the State Security and spill their names in the course of some rough interrogation.... With all this on his mind, Dlask approached Kundera and told him about the *diverzant*. It's not clear whether Dlask turned to this similarly zealous Communist for advice or whether he was reporting the situation to him, because Kundera was some sort of a dorm functionary. (Kundera's Czech publisher, the playwright Milan Uhde, alleges that Kundera held some position of responsibility at the dorm, but I was not able to confirm that Kundera ever served in any such capacity at the Kolonka. My own opinion is that given his solitary nature, he was not a natural for such duties.)²⁹

The moment Dlask informed Kundera about Dvořáček and his suitcase, he exposed him to the same risks that Militká had just visited on him. At the time, Kundera was still worrying about being thrown out of the Communist Party as well as his studies – by sheer coincidence, on that very same day, the local chapter of the Communist Party at the Philosophy Department of the Charles University was holding a disciplinary hearing with Trefulka and Dewetter. It would be very odd if Kundera hadn't known about this from his buddies, for this meeting was of paramount importance for all the participants in the Hendrych affair, and so the information about the *diverzant* with a suitcase had to be plucking on some very taunt nerves.

It is not known what exactly happened between Dlask and Kundera that afternoon, but at four o'clock in the afternoon of that day, according to the police ledger entry by chief sergeant Rosický, „there appeared at the OVNB 6 dept. II Prague 6 student Milan Kundera, born on April 1, 1929, residing at Prague VII, Student dormitory, Tř. Krále Jiřího VI, and stated that residing at the same dormitory is student Iva Militká who informed student Dlask from the same dormitory that, on this day, she met up in Prague Klárov with an acquaintance of hers, one Miroslav Dvořáček. The same was said to give her 1 suitcase for safekeeping with the provision that he would come back for it in the course of the afternoon of March 14, 1950. On the basis of this statement, chief stg. Rosický along with stg. Hanton went there and conducted a search of the suitcase, which contained 2 hats, 2 sets of gloves, 2 pairs of sun glasses and a can of cream. According to a statement by Militká, Dvořáček was supposed to have deserted from the military and was supposed to be in Germany perhaps since the spring of last year, where he had gone illegally. By perusing the book of searches, it was determined that the same is wanted by KVNB dept. IV in Pilsen to be arrested. On the basis of this determination, both law officers stayed in the college dormitory, keeping watch over the room of the above-mentioned Militká. Around 2000 hours, the said Dvořáček in fact appeared in this room and was arrested.“³⁰

At that time, Dewetter and Trefulka were already freshly expelled from the Communist Party.

²⁹ Milan Uhde: Na Kunderově místě bych to šel oznámit, in *Lidové noviny* 21, 2008, # 246, 18. 10., p. 11, prepared by Renata Kalenská.

³⁰ Ivana Koutská – Pavel Žáček: Rozbor dokumentů k zatčení „agenta-chodce“ Miroslava Dvořáčka, in *Paměť a dějiny* 2, 2008, # 4, p. 71.

Militká watched Dvořáček's arrest from one of the student rooms. She was held there by two students who had been waiting in the hallway for her to return to the dormitory: „They led me into an empty room and there they told me that the police has already come for the person that I'm waiting for and to be quiet and not to try to get away from there.“³¹ „Had I known beforehand that this would happen, I would have waited for him somewhere else and warned him.“³²

Through a crack in the door, Militká saw Dvořáček coming to the dormitory and almost immediately being led away by a pair of policemen. She never saw him again in her life, only in her dreams and nightmares where the image seen through the cracked door kept returning to her: „I've carried it inside me all my life, I don't know what had actually happened that time,“ said Militká, recalling that day many years later. „I feel guilty to this day on account of talking about him [Dvořáček] back then. I was still too naive. All my life I don't know what role Tása has played in it.“ Tása is what Militká called her husband Dlask who „refused to talk about the arrest with me, until years later, at the outset of the 1990's, I asked him again about it and that's when he told me that back then he had mentioned it to Kundera whom he was palling with.“³³

Kundera soon received a public commendation for the apprehension of the *diverzant* Dvořáček from Jaroslav Jerman the deputy interior minister. This comrade from Kladno, a gardener by profession, had been a member of the Communist Party since 1923 and, at the beginning of the 1950's, was in charge of party work at the Defense Ministry. In 1952, he gave a speech at the Marx-Leninism Council and Study, which was transcribed by a stenographer and published by the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party in Prague. His lecture, entitled *On Defense of the Country against Internal and External Enemies*, a mere pamphlet of twenty pages, came out in a print run of twenty thousand copies.³⁴

Jerman's lecture put the listeners to sleep with one cliché after another. The only thing raising it above the period newspeak is that he illustrates his thesis with concrete examples. The purpose of Jerman's talk is to praise the collaboration of citizens with the State Security in uncovering anti-state activity: „We have to do away with the way our people view their cooperation with the security forces. The way it's often talked about is as if this meant to rat on people. Under capitalism, during the German occupation, whoever collaborated with the police and the Gestapo, that was a rat. But today when the power is in the hands of the people, to report any suspicious activity or any criminal offense is not informing anymore. We have to keep convincing our people that this is our citizen's duty now, that this way you protect the state as well as yourself, your family and your children.“³⁵

Half way through his lecture, Jerman gets around to Kundera: „I will present a few instances of good collaboration when, thanks to the activity of our citizens, our

³¹ Adam Hradilek – Martin Tichý: Osudová mise Moravcova kurýra. Příběh plukovníka letectva ve výslužbě Miroslava Dvořáčka, in *Paměť a dějiny* 3, 2009, # 1, p. 80.

³² Adam Hradilek – Petr Třešňák: Udání Milana Kundery, in *Respekt* 19, 2008, # 42, 13. 10., p. 42.

³³ Adam Hradilek – Martin Tichý: Osudová mise Moravcova kurýra. Příběh plukovníka letectva ve výslužbě Miroslava Dvořáčka, in *Paměť a dějiny* 3, 2009, # 1, p. 80.

³⁴ Jan Kalous: K obsahu jedné přednášky. Jaroslav Jerman o Dvořáčkově případu, in *Paměť a dějiny* 3, 2009, # 4, p. 50.

³⁵ Jaroslav Jerman: *O obraně země proti vnitřním i vnějším nepřátelům*, Praha, Svoboda 1952 (Oddělení propagandy a agitace KV KSČ), p. 17.

enemies had been uncovered and it was possible to prevent their criminal activities. On March 14, 1950, a student M. K. presented himself to the district department of police in Prague 6 and reported that student M. E. (sic) stated to his colleague that in Klárov she met her acquaintance Miroslav Dvořáček who requested that she safekeep a suitcase for him.“ Jerman then evidently merely copies the police report of chief sergeant Rosický, which he lightly distorts several times, and ends his example by letting it be known that by thorough interrogation it was determined that Dvořáček „was sent to Czechoslovakia as an agent of CIC with the purpose of obtaining information about the military, chiefly Air Force installations, since Dvořáček had been released from the Air Academy“.³⁶

Jerman concludes his first example of citizen collaboration with the police and goes on to issue another public commendation: lieutenant Jan Červený of Prague turned in an army deserter, one Jiří Pánek, and even went as far as to accompany the police to the platform of the Smíchov train station and point his finger at the man who turned to be another CIC agent...³⁷

58 years later, a young historian Adam Hradilek will discover chief sergeant Rosický's report in police archives and Kundera will deny he had ever turned anybody in. He will say he never knew any Dvořáček and why would he turn in someone he didn't know? He will say he does not recall any woman by the name of Militká and surmise that this discovery in the police archives is some sort of a media assassination, an assassination timed to coincide with the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair...

I will come back to Kundera's reaction and its reverberations later, but in my opinion the event in question transpired in the way it had been described at the time by Rosický, Militká and Jerman. I hold this opinion, because in addition to the two reports from the fifties, Militká's testimony and Kundera's general untrustworthiness („to be truthful,“ as Kundera said to the Canadian journalist Biron, „in this meaningless world“ would be „the height of ridiculousness“), we also have the truth of one of Kundera's best novels, the truth of Proust's insight that „the writer's true self reveals itself *only* in books“,³⁸ the truth of the most suggestive scene in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*.

At long last, the young poet Jaromil has a girlfriend. She is not pretty, Jaromil is in fact slightly ashamed of her looks, but she has made a man out of the nervous virgin. And this girl tells him that her brother is preparing to defect. Jaromil the Stalinist orders her to go and report this incipient criminal act to the proper authorities and when the girl refuses to do so, he takes the task upon himself.

The girl doesn't want to report anything, because she has made the whole thing up. In reality, her brother does not intend to defect, this was only an excuse she had conjured up out of thin air, but in a typical Kunderian irony, Jaromil believes her invention. He prepares to serve the revolution and this fills him up with helium: „he got out of bed the way you rise up for a great and decisive day.“³⁹ He even rebels against his mother who has put out his clothes for the day on a chair, as she always does, and with his teeth tears up the beige briefs he hates, throws them on the floor where his mother cannot overlook them, and puts on yellow boxer briefs instead. He then dons a

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Milan Kundera: *Nechovejte se tu jako doma, přáteli*, in *Nechovejte se tu jako doma, přáteli*, Brno, Atlantis 2006, p. 63 (= *Là, vous n'êtes pas chez vous, mon cher*, in *Les testaments trahis*, 1993).

³⁹ Milan Kundera: *Život je jinde*, Brno, Atlantis 2016, p. 294.

jacket and a tie and heads to the “large house, where the Chapter of National Security is located”. He hands his Citizen’s ID to the door guard and walks up the stairs: „Look at him, how he strides up, how he measures every one of his steps! He is walking as if he were carrying his entire fate on his shoulders; he is stepping up the stairs as if he weren’t merely walking up to a higher floor of a building, but rather into a higher floor of his own life, from where he will see what he has never seen before.“⁴⁰

Jaromil is going to see his old schoolmate, the janitor’s son has joined the State Security, and sitting down in the man’s office, for the first time in his life, Jaromil feels that he „is sitting here as a man facing another man; as one equal facing another equal; as one tough guy facing another tough guy“. ⁴¹ Now comes that most glorious of moments, now Jaromil reports his girlfriend’s brother and the janitor’s son calls in another policeman, an older man, to write an official report about it. Jaromil informs both policemen that the brother of his girlfriend is „bound for life and death to people who are undermining our state; yes, he can say that with an absolute certainty, because his girl had reproduced the opinions of her brother to him very faithfully; he was willing to shoot Communists; Jaromil can easily imagine what the brother is going to do once he defects; Jaromil knows that he has only one passion, to annihilate socialism“. ⁴²

The janitor’s son then rushes off to arrange the “defector’s” arrest and the old policeman praises Jaromil for what he did, telling him that „if the entire nation were as vigilant as he is, our socialist motherland could never be conquered.“⁴³ He urges Jaromil to keep uncovering this vermin and coming by to report it, and the elated Jaromil looks into the man’s creased face and the face strikes him „as beautiful; it was etched with deep wrinkles and bore witness to a hard, manly life. Yes, he, Jaromil, too would be happy if this weren’t the last time they saw each other. There is nothing he wishes more; he knows where his place in the world is.“⁴⁴

Jaromil and the old cop shake hands and trade smiles. „With this smile in his soul (the wonderful wrinkled smile of a real man) Jaromil then strolls out of the police building“, the sun is shining and Jaromil inhales the cold air and feels himself „overflowing with masculinity, which is gushing out of him through every pore, and he wants to sing.“⁴⁵

An unwritten poem is soaring over the smokestacks of the city, but it is only a few days later that Jaromil manages to snatch this poem; he still needs to learn that the stepping stone to manhood is not love, but duty, and also he still needs to watch from a distance while plainclothesmen arrest his girl and realize how desperately he loves her and how, at that moment, he is experiencing “the only true tragedy of our time worthy of grand verse, worthy of a great poem!“ And so now he can finally sit down and write the best poem he has ever written: „It was an intoxicating evening, more intoxicating than any amorous evening he could imagine.“⁴⁶

Jaromil becomes aroused by the thought of his girl in prison being surrounded by men, men who can do to her whatever they want to, men who watch her as she urinates into a bucket in her prison cell, men who tear the clothes off her. For a disturbing moment, he is shocked that such images do not even make him jealous, but the moment

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 295.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 196.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 297.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 300 (Toronto, Sixty-Eight Publishers 1981, p. 302: „...hodnou veliké básně!“).

quickly passes and he comes to understand that he isn't feeling jealousy, because now the girl belongs to him more than she'd ever belonged to him, for it is he who had formed her fate, „it is his eye that is watching her piss into a bucket; it's his hands that touch her through the hands of the prison guards; she is his victim, she is his undertaking, she is his, his, his“. And then Jaromil finally falls asleep and sleeps „the sleep of men“.⁴⁷

When you look at the historical context in which Kundera turned in Dvořáček and if you assume that the student and the budding man of letters had informed the police out of fear, then his actions might even be somewhat understandable.

In the years following the Communist takeover, *Books of Visitors* were kept in the apartment houses of Prague and it was the job of every building trustee (one did not say concierge anymore, that appellation had gone out with the First Republic) to write down in their *Books of Visitors* all parties ever to lodge with any of the renters overnight.⁴⁸ At the same time, the State Security was staging police provocations on a large scale. Kundera already had the black mark of the *Hendrychiáda* on his record, though at the time he was still desperately trying to hang onto his membership in the Communist party, even writing poems about it, and on March 14, 1950, he might have had a reasonable suspicion that the whole thing is a provocation, that the party is testing him and that, if he doesn't report Dvořáček, the comrades might never again trust him or could even knock him all the way down to the *pétépáks*. Just as reasonably, he might have worried that, if he does nothing, the State Security would apprehend this *diverzant* somewhere anyway and then it would come out that Kundera knew about him and did nothing.

There is, however, still another interpretation to be considered here. All indications are that, at the time, young man Kundera really was a fervent Stalinist and, therefore, it's possible he took an enthusiastic part in the reporting and the neutralizing of a *diverzant*, that he was even proud of it, that turning in this class enemy pumped him up with testosterone just as it had his Jaromil, that Kundera too was soaring on the feeling he is serving the revolution in a real way at last, not in the flaccid way of a lyrical poet, but rather finally, finally, finally as a tough man of action.

Pilot

Kick

Film Student

Department Assistant

Pičulíková

Serving the Country

Transfusion

Song of Comradeship

Marketing

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 301.

⁴⁸ Interview with Vladimír Karfík, 23. 2. 2017 in Café Central in Prague.

Lady Guerilla

Letters to an Ugly Mistress

Man, a Wide Garden

Riding Tractors to the Altar

Poetry that Helps Us to Live

Poetry Almanac

Inventory

Pneuma

The Happy Monthly

A Pen and A Revolver

Sheet from a Romanian Diary

Literary Capacity of One Head

A Heartthrob, a Waiter and an SS-Man

Last Day of May

Laurels

--

Spiders of the Bourgeoisie

Vivisection by Own Hand

Vivisection for the Advanced

Gang

Roar

Best Man

Fidelity

Mother Caution

Scrivener and Graphomaniac

„This Is a Poet“

Stepmother Frustration

Petty Intrigues

White Spot

First Wife

Stalingrad and an Apple

Monologues

„Naked Flesh“

Lyrical Poet's Demise

Auto plagiarist

Essayist

Zone and Other Verses

„Poet“

Fraternity of the Lustful

Poet's Town

Almanac Official

Classmates

Bitter Grace

Last Poem

Part Three/ World-class Writer (Prague)

I, Mournful God

Castling Move

Questions in the Dark

Hoax

Reporter with Ideas

Incomprehensible Happiness

Art of the Novel I

„I Am Akin to a Sorority House“

Press Oversight

Cultural Patron

Theatre for the Atomic Age

„They Even Wanted to Abolish Money“

Associate Professor, Unanimously

Owners of the Keys

Marketing for the Advanced

End of the „Poet“

Prodigious Magician

Hoax for the Advanced

Sometime in the beginning of 1960's, Věra Hrabánková, the reciteress whom Kundera met at *Walker's Prostějov 58*, moved into the Kundera villa in Královo Pole. „That was at the instigation of the Mom, whom she knew how to handle splendidly, also on account of the fact that she understood all of the mother's psychic problems, which is something I'd warned Vahab about,“ recalled Ivo Pondělíček who was in close contact with Kundera in those years.

In Pondělíček's opinion, Hrabánková sets her sights on Kundera and fastened onto him. At first, she was commuting to Brno from distant Bruntál in a complicated way and then Mrs. Kunderová invited her to overnight at their place. And the girl from the border region brought her clothes to the villa in Královo Pole, then she found herself a job in Brno as a radio announcer, and finally she moved into the villa for good.⁴⁹

Kundera had a nickname for everybody and soon after he met Věra Hrabánková in Prostějov, he started calling her *Hrabidlo*, or „Rake“. „Milan had a need to discuss Hrabidlo, a need that was almost compulsive,“ Pondělíček told me. „He liked to confide in you. And at that time, he was in a mild depression and he was trying to get rid of Hrabánková somehow. He kept mulling over different ideas, but meanwhile the new renter was ganging up with the Mom... One time Vahab came and he had a different gait, it was like he had a spring in his shoes, he was floating and he told me almost joyously: ‚I finally got it! I sent Hrabidlo a letter.‘“

And he explained to Pondělíček that in this letter, addressed to his own house for Hrabánková, he quoted „Balzac who said: ‚Marriage is the death of every love.‘ And Vahab really thought that this will solve everything, that he will deter Hrabidlo this way“, Pondělíček recounted. „I was skeptical, I'm telling Milan: ‚This will take more than Balzac and a letter.‘“⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Interview with Ivo Pondělíčkem, 8. 4. 2018 in his apartment in Prague.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Sometime after that, Pondělíček's phone rang deep in the night „and it was Vahab. He would only call me at night when some woman told him she was pregnant by him, which never turned out to be the case in the end, or when he wanted to discuss Hrabidlo.“

This time Kundera was calling, because he had just received a letter from Hrabánková. She mailed to his Prague studio apartment and Kundera was quite upset as he started to read it to Pondělíček: „Milan, please, marry me,“ Hrabánková wrote. After that, Pondělíček only recalled that the letter continued with a string of banalities and that, when the unnerved Kundera finished reading the letter, he just sighed: „What a nightmare! Now what?“⁵¹

„Now you've got only one option: you have to break your mother's dependency on Hrabánková,“ the sleepy Pondělíček advised Kundera.⁵²

However, rattled by the prospect of another marriage, Kundera did not take his friend's advice. He sat down and wrote a totally different letter to „Hrabidlo“ instead.

Pondělíček only learned about this other letter thirty years later, in the early 1990's after the Velvet Revolution, and he learned about it in Paris where the Kunderas invited him to a fancy Vietnamese restaurant. It was a very strange evening, the lady owner of the restaurant was practically courting Pondělíček and he didn't comprehend why she would be paying so much more attention to him than to Kundera, her regular guest and a world famous author? The situation began to make sense to Pondělíček only after Kundera owned up to the fact that he'd told the Vietnamese lady that tonight he was bringing to dinner a famous surgeon who had devoted a ton of time and care to the children of Vietnamese émigrés, called the *boat people*... This was just another little knot of a hoax that was supposed to retie the connection between the old friends, so Pondělíček had a laugh over it and continued eyeing with interest what a harmonious couple the Kunderas had become over their years in emigration. Later however, out of the blue, the old tension between Hrabánková and Pondělíček flared up for a moment and Kundera released it by saying: „Come on, cut it out! Bury the battle axes, will you! I made up that whole letter about the psychological incompatibility myself.“

And so Pondělíček at last found out that, all those years ago in Prague, after the dead-of-night consultation with him, Kundera sat down and wrote a letter to „Hrabidlo“ in which he claimed that a friend of his, an experienced psychologist in whom he had a complete trust, has advised him not to marry her under any circumstances, because as personalities they are hopelessly mismatched, for their psychological profiles are totally disharmonious.⁵³

Věra Hrabánková, however, was not put off even by this last, and fairly naive, hoax, and so on Saturday September 29, 1962, another minimalist wedding took place, this time in the spa town of Luhačovice. At the city hall there, according to the register, Milan Kundera took Věra Hrabánková for his wife and Vojtěch Jestřáb was his best man.⁵⁴ In reality, right before the ceremony, Jestřáb and Kundera switched places and Věra Hrabánková married Vojtěch Jestřáb.

„They were joking around, trading places and laughing like crazy and, all of a sudden, the clerk got pissed and married them the way they were standing there at that moment,“ Hana Jestřábová recounted how her husband had described the whole situation to her in detail, then went on: „So I'm not Vojtěch's third wife, in reality I am his

⁵¹ Interview with Ivo Pondělíčkem, 1. 2. 2017 in his apartment in Prague.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Registry Book, Luhačovice, entry from 29. 9. 1962.

fourth wife and he was a bigamist... And Miss Věra has in fact been a widow since 2003 when Vojtěch passed away.“

Why did Jestřáb and Kundera do that? Where did they get the idea?

„Supposedly from Kundera, it was kind of like some sort of a protest against the institution of marriage, or some such thing...“⁵⁵ Jestřábová speculated.

Kundera was no bohemian, however, he had always been an institutional man, so I think that he simply did not want to get married, and that's why he in fact never did marry for the second time. And that perhaps, along with the narrator of his short story *No one shall be laughing*, he thought that through his wedding hoax, he was lying his way to a deeper truth, that he truly was the best man at his own wedding, that he did not pretend anything by means of this ruse, that in fact he was really telling the truth.

These days in Paris, after sixty years of a common-law union with Kundera, Věra Hrabánková-Kunderová entertains their friends with this hoax for the advanced,⁵⁶ but how did she feel back then in Luhačovice? Had she suspected anything beforehand? Was she aware of what Kundera and Jestřáb were about to do?

„She didn't, she stood there like she'd been scalded by boiling water,“ is how that moment was described to me by Nora Obrtelová in whom, in Paris in the 1990's, Hrabánková-Kunderová confided the details of her odd wedding. „It really happened that way. And Věra told me she had wanted to marry Milan for such a long time, she had longed for it so much, that she thought better of it than to say anything at that moment.“⁵⁷

Golden Apple of Eternal Desire

Speaker

Kunktátor

Rorschach in Brno

Laughable Loves

Nice girl

Wafts of Frankincense

Nobody Will Laugh

Defect of the Ego

Spell-binder

Antidogmatic

Fach-Idiot

„Enterprise“

⁵⁵ Interview with Hana Jestřábová, 30. 3. 2018 in her apartment in Prague.

⁵⁶ Interviews with Ladislav Smoček, Ivo Pondělíček, Miloš Forman and Nora Obrtelová.

⁵⁷ Interview with Nora Obrtelová, 1. 5. 2016 in Café Blau in Brno.

Translator

Second Book of Laughable Loves

At the Castle

Biting the Rim of the Whole Stein

Associate Professor at Work

The Joke

Jupiter and Luna

Crowd psychosis

Fantasist

The Main Maker

„*Erární Noviny*“

The Steering Wheel of History

„Poet II“

Nursery School

Between a Thought and Another Thought

Silent Study

Disobedient Son

Shooting *The Joke*

Between a Thought and Another Thought II

Hammer

„Poet III“

Brides

Der Scherz

La Plaisanterie

Third Book of Laughable Loves

The Czech Destiny

TV Announcer

The Blunder in Two Parts

At a Demonstration

End of *Literární noviny*

The Magnificent 262

Unshakeable Beacon

End of the Lecher

Last Editor-in-chief of the *Plamen*

Literature to Serve the People

The Joke

Sun is the Moon

Life is Elsewhere

Part Four/ „Elitář“ I (Prague)

Hostile Element, Second Tier

Clairvoyant

Jacob and his Master

Former People

EW

In the Stars

Zodiac

Rose and Cross

„Repugnant Time“

Petition

The Farewell Waltz

Window Washer

Little Hammer

Talk with a Violator of Press

In a Borrowed Apartment

American in Prague

Juro Jánošík

Government Matter

The Loveliest Woman of Paris

Night Train

Reconnaissance in Paris

Mind of Steel

Author of Life

„Visitor“

Closely Watched Party

Absolutely Unmanageable Language

„I'm an Idiot“

Husband

Under the Ear

Fuss with the Nobel Prize

Elitář II

Under the Ear II

Single Candle

Ambassador of the Lost Realm

50K Race

Bratislava Connection

Farewell, My Love

Shock in a Spa

Letter to an Imaginary Doctor

Books Are Burned

Falcon

Prior

Don Juan

Return Undesirable

Under the Ear III

Goodbye

„I Knew It“

Elitář I and II Heading Abroad

Inventory II

Departure Achieved

Epilogue