

DOMINIKA RAFALSKA

The Accused K.

KEY WORDS

Milan Kundera, denunciation, Communist secret police, the Czech Republic, Stalinism

ABSTRACT

The article discusses Polish press reaction to the October 2008 Czech weekly “Respekt’s” announcement of Milan Kundera denouncing in the 1950s to the Czech secret police a young man, a counter-intelligence agent working for the Americans. The victim was sentenced to long years of hard prison and barely escaped death. The case was first publicized in the Czech Republic and, as a result of the writer’s famous name, it quickly became a sensation also abroad. “Respekt’s” publication was based on only one note found in secret police archives in which Kundera’s name was mentioned. The goal of this article was not to investigate whether the writer was guilty or not, but to show how Polish press wrote about accusations against Kundera. How was “Respekt’s” publication commented on? Was anything controversial noticed? What reflections did journalists commenting on the “Kundera case” arrive at?

The announcement by the Czech weekly “Respekt” that in 1950 Milan Kundera made a denunciation as a result of which an innocent man’s life was ruined resulted in media reporting on the matter worldwide. How was the issue commented on by Polish media?

On October 13, 2008, the weekly “Respekt”¹ published an article entitled *Milan Kundera’s denunciation*². Its authors, a historian from The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes

¹ “Respekt” was established in 1989 by journalists supporting dissidents from Charter 77. It is considered to be one of the best independent weeklies of opinion in the Czech Republic.

² P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Udání Milana Kundery*, “Respekt” 2008, No. 42. The denunciation was the main topic in issue No. 42. On the cover, there is caricature of Kundera with a pencil behind his ear. It also includes a sub headline explaining the sensational discovery, *Story of man who spent 14 years in prison as a result of denunciation from 1950 by a famous writer*. The text was also available on the weekly’s website: <http://respekt.ihned.cz/c1-36370990-udani-milana-kundery> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

(USTR)³ Adam Hradilek and journalist Petr Třešňák stated that in 1950 Milan Kundera, a renowned Czech writer, then a student at the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU)⁴ denounced pilot Miroslav Dvořáček, an American counter intelligence military agent (Counter Intelligence Corps – CIC). As a result, Dvořáček was arrested, accused of desertion, espionage and state treason. During the trial, the prosecutor asked for the death penalty. In the end, he was sentenced to 22 years of hard prison, a 10 000 crown fine, confiscation of property, loss of civic rights for ten years and was ordered to work in a uranium mine. He was set free 14 years later, in 1963.

The day before the press publication, the article also appeared on the weekly's website in Czech and, what is imperative, also in English⁵. The publication of *Milan Kundera's denunciation* resulted in a worldwide press campaign against the writer, at times with elements of defense based on the wishful thinking that "Milan couldn't have done something like this"⁶. The writer himself, avoiding contacts with the press, only issued a short statement, "I am completely shocked by something that I would have never expected, by what I have never heard of before and what has never happened. Without doubt, I do not even know Dvořáček"⁷.

The goal of this article is not to determine whether the writer was guilty or not. The article is of interest with regard to its aftermath. It should be noted that it was written subjectively, based on only one short note found in Czech security forces archives, the "Czech IPN". It read, "Today, at 4 pm came to the police station Milan Kundera, born on 01.04.1929 in Brno, resident of Prague VII, student living in Dormitory at Aleja krále Jiřího VI and testified that in the above mentioned dormitory lives a student by the name Iva Militká who told Dlask (also a student from the dormitory) that she met with Miroslav Dvořáček at Klárově. Dvořáček left one case in her room and promised to come back for it in the afternoon. [...] Dvořáček is suspected of desertion and alleged to have been in Germany

³ USTR – Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – equivalent to Polish The Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN).

⁴ FAMU – Filmová a televizní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze.

⁵ P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Milan Kundera's denunciation*, <http://respekt.ihned.cz/respekt-in-english/c1-36380440-milan-kundera-s-denunciation> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁶ In Kundera's defense there were numerous Czech intellectuals, politicians and writers, including those who have polemicized with him in the past. Among them was Vaclav Havel who a letter to Kundera, published in „Respekt” and reprinted in „Gazeta Wyborcza”: V. Havel, *Havel o sprawie Kundery*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75515,5862994,Havel_o_sprawie_Kundery.html [accessed: 12.01.2011]. Among those on his side there were, among others: Ivan Klíma, Milan Uhde, Pavel Kohout as well as numerous outstanding non-Czech writers such as John Maxwell Coetzee, Gabriel García Márquez, Orhan Pamuk, Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes.

⁷ Statement for the Czech press agency CTK. Cited from „Gazeta Wyborcza”: *bm, Czeski tygodnik oskarża Kunderę o współpracę z bezpieką*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5807140,Czeski_tygodnik_oskarza_Kunderę_o_wspolpracę_z_bezpieką.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

probably since spring of last year, where he went illegally”⁸. The note is not signed by whoever testified and there were no other documents found.

What is of interest is how Polish press reported on the accusations against Kundera. How was “Respekt’s” article commented on? Was anything controversial about it noticed? Were journalists interested in researching the issue in more depth or did they limit themselves to paraphrasing what was reported by the Czechs? Did various newspapers write about the issue in different ways? And if so, what influenced that? Who commented on this difficult issue?

Before we discuss Polish press reactions to the article, we should examine the article itself in some detail. What is it characterized by that after it world public opinion found out that, “Kundera destroyed the life of an innocent man”?

The article, *Milan Kundera’s denunciation*, was definitely written competently. Being thirteen pages long, it is not boring and keeps the reader in suspense. Its authors made a lot of effort to create in it the atmosphere of secrecy, suspense and spy like intrigue, “Kundera always covered up his tracks. He has not given interviews for over 40 years. He visits his homeland incognito and stays in hotels under a false name. He even made his friends keep his secrets as they never speak to journalists about the kind of man he was and is. Now, as a result of an unexpected turn of events, from his past emerges a dark and tangled matter which perhaps was caused by circumstances we had no idea about”⁹ – it states.

In Kundera’s ‘mysterious’ behaviour, authors of the text wish to find some kind of double meaning. In the latter part of the article, they attempt to convince readers that perhaps Kundera is not who people take him for¹⁰.

On the one hand, *Milan Kundera’s denunciation* includes a good dose of factual information on Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. At the same time, the article raises a lot of theses which can not be considered anything else other than speculation. The authors assumed that a

⁸ P. Třešňák, A. Hradilek, *Donos Milana Kundery*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2008, No. 4, http://publica.pl/media/archiwum/Pages_from_194-14.pdf [accessed: 14.01.2011] (Polish translation).

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Kundera is a controversial person in his home country. He has been living in Paris since 1975 and possesses French citizenship. He writes solely in French. In some lexicons, he is considered to be “a French writer of Czech origin”. Many of his countrymen resent Kundera for the fact that for a long time he did not allow his works to be translated into Czech. For example, his most famous book, *Unbearable lightness of being* was first published in the Czech Republic in 2007. The Czechs consider his attitude to be offensive and this is visible in the article. All in all, recently the Czechs did acknowledge his accomplishments as he was awarded the Jaroslav Seifert Prize (1994), Czech Medal of Merit (1995), Ladislav Fuks Award (2006) and Brno’s honorary citizenship (2009).

single document found in archives determines the writer's guilt. Based on a police note several hundred words long, Hradilek and Třešňák elaborately recreate the "course of events" from over 60 years ago¹¹. They manage to create a narrative that intertwines facts with speculation and perhaps even fiction. They write a story which despite being not well documented, draws in as it reads well. One could say, after Kurt Vonnegut, "all this happened more or less for real"¹². Frankly speaking, the average reader (someone who had no contact with historical documents from the communist era, or someone who is not professionally engaged in the analysis of press content or construction of literary texts) will not be able to pin point the dubious tricks used in the article.

The article describes the fate of the two men. The first is a pilot Miroslav Dvořáček (born 1928) who after graduating from lower secondary school in 1947 joined the Military Aviation Academy in Hradec Králové. Soon after that, after the February coup (1948), he became a victim of army purges which were taking place¹³. As a result, he decided to escape to the West and join the air force there. There, in a refugee camp in Munich, he was recruited by American counterintelligence.

"At the same time, in the same country, Milan Kundera is experiencing something completely different – write Třešňák and Hradilek. – He is growing up surrounded by books in the family of well-known intellectual, a Brno musicologist and musician Ludvík Kundera." We are dealing with a young man from a so called 'good family' who becomes deceived by utopia. In 1948, Kundera joins the ranks of the Communist Party. Another writer Ivan Klíma comments, "For a generation which grew up during the war, it was very difficult to resist this [communist party – author, D.R.] illusion". Hradilek and Třešňák state that Klíma himself experienced the fascination with communism but – they add with a certain reproach – "unlike Kundera, he was willing to talk about his mistakes". Throughout the text, they suggest that Kundera is secretive, avoids, refuses, or does not even dare to talk about his past¹⁴.

¹¹ In the same issue, there was also a commentary by the "Respekt's" chief editor Martin M. Šimečka who said that they made the issue public for imperative reasons – in order to evoke a national *catharsis*. This commentary was also included on the weekly's website in the English version. See M.M. Šimečka, *The Owner of the Key*, <http://respekt.ihned.cz/respekt-in-english/c1-36380420-the-owner-of-the-key> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

¹² K. Vonnegut Jr, *Rzeźnia numer pięć [Slaughterhouse- five, or The children's crusade]*, Warszawa 1994.

¹³ The purges in the army affected the airforce in particular, in which 40 per cent of the officers served in British RAF during WWII. Many pilots were deported to gulags for being 'hostile towards socialism'.

¹⁴ Authors seem to not take into account that Kundera 'settled accounts' with communism and his 'faults' in his works, at least those written in Czech such as *Žert [The Joke]* (1970), *Život je jinde [Life is Elsewhere]* (1988; 1990), *Valčík na rozloučenou [The Farewell Party]* (1983; 1990), *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění [The Book of Laughter and Forgetting]* (1984; 1993) and most famous *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí [Unbearable Lightness of Being]* (1984; 1996). The dates in brackets indicate Polish translations (underground and official).

In *Milan Kundera's denunciation*, we have two different portraits, of two young people or peers who have made extreme choices in their lives – Milan Kundera, a young communist and Miroslav Dvořáček who did not accept the postwar order in Central and Eastern Europe. On March 13, 1950, Dvořáček arrives in Prague where he has to recruit a certain engineer for cooperation with the Americans. By chance, he meets on the street his old friend Iva Militká. He visits her in the dormitory and leaves a suitcase there. When he goes back in the evening, he is arrested. It is clear that someone had reported him and Dvořáček always thought it was Iva Militká. According to the note, however, supposedly she told her boyfriend (future husband) Miroslav Dlask about Dvořáček who passed it on to his friend Milan Kundera. Why? It is not known. The key question is why would Kundera go with these revelations the police station? To this question, there is no clear answer.

A summary of the entire article is not necessary for the purposes of this paper. It is worth to discuss, however, the journalist techniques applied in it by the authors.

Firstly, it is hard to determine what journalist genre this article can be classified in. In the text, Hradilek and Třešňák mix in several writing genres. Was that a mistake? If the matter wasn't so serious, this kind of approach could even be considered interesting. We need to keep in mind, though, that this was the first article on the issue. It would be good if it could be classified as an informative article (including verified sources), a commentary, a journalistic text or a report.

Secondly, the article was structured in such a way that it can not be read without emotion as journalists 'reconstruct' events that happened then, in the darkness of Stalinist night. The question is whether in fact we are dealing with factual events rather than suppositions? Since the only source of information on the matter is the unconfirmed note found in security forces' archives, we should at least expect the conditional mood. Meanwhile, in the article we read such sentences as: "After Iva Militká put her guest up in her room, she went to lunch with a friend Dlask. She mentioned the unexpected visitor [...] and asked him not to come this evening as Mirek would probably spend the night with her. Dlask then passed on the news to his friend Milan Kundera who later went to the police station in the District of Prague to report the matter". Or, "Before we describe the consequences of Kundera's actions, we should ask what his motives were. Why did he report on a man he did not know". Or: "The answer to the question as to why Kundera had acted in this manner is not so obvious. It is true that he was an avowed Communist and it seems possible that he decided to destroy a human life for purely ideological reasons". Finally, "What exactly happened that day and why did he [Kundera] decide to go to the station and denounce someone he did not

know remains a mystery. The weight of what he has been hiding for 58 years is heavy. After all, Dvořáček was nearly sentenced to death.”

Thirdly, the authors present an oversimplified, black and white picture of the world. There is the good patriot Dvořáček and the evil and perhaps even cynical Kundera. They state, “On March 14, 1950, for the first and last time crossed the fates of two young people, Miroslav Dvořáček and Milan Kundera. The first barely escaped the death penalty and spent long years in prisons and labor camps. The latter soon became a rising star of socialist-realist literature, one of the most important Czech intellectuals of the 1960s and a world-famous writer”. Or: “He [Dvořáček] left the camp in late 1963, after almost 14 years of imprisonment. On the shelves of bookstores then laid the newly released novel *Laughable Loves* by Milan Kundera¹⁵, which was widely discussed by the entire Czech cultural elite”. Finally, “While prisoner number A0-3016 slaved in uranium mines, his informer was climbing the career ladder. First a virtually unknown student, avid to build a better tomorrow, he then became a respected socialist-realist poet”. Třešňák and Hradilek had to be aware of what effect such phrases would have on the audience. It is hard to imagine a reader who would be indifferent to the fate patriot and hero Dvořáček and who would not condemn ‘the cynic and liar’ Kundera. Milan Kundera is the villain in this story, someone who was is always dodging because he has something on his conscience. In this story, there are no shades of grey.

Fourthly, the authors of the text draw quick conclusions. One example is the passage in which cited is Prokop Tomek from the Military Historical Institute who states that between 1948–1956 security forces arrested about 500 couriers (also called pedestrian agents), later sentenced to anywhere from 12 years of imprisonment to life sentences. More than 20 couriers were executed. Třešňák and Hradilek comment, “Based on archival documents and interviews, we can fairly accurately reconstruct the consequences of Kundera’s denunciation. And it is not easy reading. With regard to couriers who had the courage to engage in anti-communist resistance movement, the regime applied the highest punishment”. Thus, ‘Kundera’s guilt’ is not only pronounced but also, as we learn, he is indirectly responsible for the fate of several hundreds patriots.

Another example – Třešňák and Hradilek mention that in 1949 Kundera corresponded with a friend Jaroslav Dewetter. In one letter, they criticized a communist activist¹⁶. These letters were later intercepted by the security forces. As punishment, Dewetter was expelled from the party and the university (he then had to work as a tractor driver), while Milan

¹⁵ By the way – the Milan Kundera’s book *Směšné lásky* [*Laughable Loves*] is a collection of stories, not a novel.

¹⁶ *Notabene*, these events inspired Kundera to write *Žert* [*The Joke*].

Kundera was only relegated from the party (he could continue his studies and later also do academic work)¹⁷. Hradilek and Třešňák wonder, “Was this denunciation an attempt to redeem his earlier offense against the party? The archives do not give us an answer to this question”.

Finally, the authors make new interpretations of Kundera’s works. More specifically, they try to find in his books autobiographical themes. “Knowledge of the past allows us to look at Kundera’s writing from a different perspective. He made sure that interpreters of his work did not mix literary fiction with real life but there are some parallels that come to mind. In 1962, published was Kundera’s play *Keys (Majitelé klíčů)* taking place during World War II. The main character, Jiří, lives with his wife in his in-laws’ house. One day, his former girlfriend Vera appears running away from the Gestapo. She asks him to hide her. Jiří is faced with a dilemma – whether to help his sweetheart and put his family’s life in danger. In the end, he helps her but one of his family members finds out and wants to report on them. Of course, we can only speculate what was his inspiration for this play, it does, however, include some parallels to the events from 1950.”

Hradilek and Třešňák can make such statements with impunity because:

- Miroslav Džal, Iva Militká’s husband whom she supposedly told about Dvořáček’s visit, is dead. “Before he died in the 1990s, he did recall mentioning the conversation to Kundera”, write the journalists and we have to take their word.
- Miroslav Dvořáček, now well advanced in age, lives in Sweden, he has undergone a stroke and cannot presently comment on the case;
- Kundera does not comment as well.

‘Kundera’s case’ was widely reported on by Polish newspapers and magazines. The majority of materials on this topic appeared in October and November of 2008. It would seem that a turning point in the matter would be a statement issued in October 2008 by Zdenek Pešat, a literary historian who in the 1950s was part of the Communist Party Committee at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Charles University. Pešat stated therein that in the spring of 1950, Miroslav Džal informed him of Dvořáček’s presence in the dorm and the fact that he had already

¹⁷ In the 1960s he taught literature history at FAMU. Agnieszka Holland was one of his students.

reported this in person to the security forces. The press mentions this statement¹⁸, however, it is too late, the beans have spilled and Kundera is pinned the patch of an informer and traitor.

Gradually, the issue ceased to make headlines, only to return again in six months and one year after “Respekt’s” publication. Anniversary texts are interesting as they highlight that no further documents were found against Kundera. On the contrary, there is, for example Katarzyna Zuchowicz’s article, *Is Kundera innocent*¹⁹ in “Rzeczpospolita’s” publication from October 2009. She discusses a new document found in the archives. It is a bulletin from 1952 which contains a lecture by the deputy head of communist security services Jaroslav Jerm, on Czech cooperation with security forces. It mentions, among other matters, Miroslav Dvořáček. Supposedly, his denouncer is only known as “M. K.”. There is no mention of Dlask and the student from the dormitory is “M.E.”. According to Petr Koura, a historian from Charles University commenting on the issue for “Rzeczpospolita”, the document reveals that it was a woman with “M.E.” initials²⁰ who informed the police that Dvořáček was a Western agent. Hence, a year after the sensational publication and dozens of articles commenting the issue, we can only say that it was some “M.K.” who told the police about Dvořáček’s presence in the dorm. All other trails put forward by the press have amounted to nothing.

How was the matter reported on by Polish media? After reading publications on this issue, the conclusion is that journalists all too often made hasty conclusions, mixed information with commentary and were predominantly looking for sensation. The biggest weakness of these publications is their superficiality and lack of reflection. Virtually no one questioned the controversial style of “Respekt’s” article. No attempts were made to keep appropriate distance to the matter, especially since it was a delicate, controversial and a multi-thread issue. Let us discuss them by examples.

■ “Milan Kundera the rat” [sensational theme]

Headlines of articles say a lot about the level of discussion on the ‘Kundera scandal’. Generally, there were two types of headlines. The first were sensational in character (tabloid

¹⁸ Cf.: bm, *Vaclav Havel broní Milana Kundery*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5831830,Vaclav_Havel_broni_Milana_Kundery.html; T. Vrba, *Oskarżony Milan Kundera*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75515,5862989,Oskarzony_Milan_Kundera.html; T. Maćkowiak, *Teczka Milana*, <http://archiwum.polityka.pl/art/teczka-milana,354936.html> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

¹⁹ K. Zuchowicz, *Czy Milan Kundera jest niewinny*, www.rp.pl/arttykul/381170.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁰ Cf. K. Šafaříková, *Milan Kundera’s Denunciation, part II*, <http://respekt.ihned.cz/check-the-czechs/c1-38753700-milan-kundera-s-denunciation-part-two> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

like) including “Dziennik”: *Czech scandal. Famous writer a secret police denouncer*²¹; “Rzeczpospolita”: *Kundera a secret police denouncer*²²; portal Niezależna.pl: *Milan Kundera the rat*²³; “Tygodnik Powszechny”: *Czechs in shock*²⁴, “Gazeta Wyborcza”: *Kundera ceases to be God*²⁵, *Kundera’s lost chance*²⁶, *The Accused Milan Kundera*²⁷.

It should be noted that some of these are evaluative in character (headlines “with a thesis”) even though they are supposed to be informative in character daily press articles. The second group are headlines paraphrasing titles of Kundera’s works (predominantly *Unbearable lightness of being*) – “Rzeczpospolita” and “Tygodnik Powszechny”: *Unbearable weight of treason*²⁸; “Wprost”: *Unbearable lightness of the past*²⁹; “Polityka”: *Metaphysical lightness of accusations*³⁰. These metaphorical poetic headlines were mostly used by magazines. As described below, for the majority, this issue was a good starting point to a general discussion on history and the weaknesses of human nature.

We can also analyse the leads of the above mentioned articles in which accusations and sensation are dominant. Let us take, for example, “Dziennik’s” lead, “The past has finally caught up to him. One of the most outstanding writers, Czech candidate for the Nobel Prize, Milan Kundera was a communist security forces informer. Because of him, Miroslav Dvořáček was sentenced to 22 years of hard prison for being a Western agent, states the Czech IPN. The writer denies the accusations”³¹. Aside from a tabloid like headline and lead, the editors over interpret the facts. “Respekt” reported that one document was found which would indicate that Kundera made a denunciation while “Dziennik” states that Kundera “was a secret police informer” and concludes that “the past finally caught up to him”.

■ “Kundera was behind the denunciation” [pronouncement of guilt]

It seems that Polish press when writing about “Respekt’s” report did so without reflection. Similarly to Czech press, in the majority of Polish press articles we read about “Kundera’s deed” written in the indicative mode.

²¹ www.dziennik.pl/swiat/article250925/Slynnny_pisarz_donosil_bezpiece.html [accessed: 8.11.2009].

²² www.rp.pl/artykul/204070.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²³ http://niezalezna.pl/artykul/milan_kundera_kapusiem/9378/1 [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁴ <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/31,0,15759,2,artykul.html> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁵ http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5811376,Kundera_przestal_byc_bogiem.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁶ http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5811375,Stracona_szansa_Kundery.html [dostęp: 12.01.2011].

²⁷ http://wyborcza.pl/1,75515,5862989,Oskarzony_Milan_Kundera.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁸ www.rp.pl/artykul/204481.html; http://tygodnik.onet.pl/35,0,16077,nieznosny_ciezar_zdrady,artykul.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

²⁹ www.wprost.pl/ar/141912/Nieznosna-lekkosc-przeszlosci/ [accessed: 12.01.2011].

³⁰ www.polityka.pl/swiat/analizy/271656,1,kundera-donosicielem.read [accessed: 12.01.2011].

³¹ www.dziennik.pl/swiat/article250925/Slynnny_pisarz_donosil_bezpiece.html [accessed: 8.11.2009].

“Gazeta Wyborcza”: “After Militká told her boyfriend about Dvořáček, he repeated the news to his friend Kundera who then went straight to the police which arrested the pilot several hours later”³². The article also includes the information that Dvořáček always thought that it was Militká who reported him to the police. Conclusion, “Nobody expected Kundera to be behind the denunciation”.

We can then read about three hypotheses regarding Kundera going to the police (these will be repeated in nearly all of the analysed publications). One states ideological reasons, “since in the 1950s he was an avid communist”. The second is jealousy, as Dłask could have been jealous of his girlfriend, “according to this hypothesis, Dłask asked Kundera to go to the police. But why did he not go himself?”. The third is that he wished to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the party after the incident with the letter to a friend in 1949 for which he was “only” expelled from the party.

The author of the article repeats the theses after “Respekt”, the controversial Czech article is basically summarized but no comments were made on the matter.

“Dziennik” writes about the events in a similar manner. We find out that, “It turned out that Milan Kundera was the informer [...]. Iva told her future husband about the meeting who then told Kundera about it. The future writer went straight to the police”³³.

On October 13th, “Rzeczpospolita’s” website published an article, *Kundera denounced an acquaintance to the communist security forces*, reporting from Czech TV³⁴ that Kundera denounced Miroslav Dvořáček³⁵. Despite such an explicit headlines, the article is written rather carefully (information on Kundera’s denunciation is cited from sources). The next day, the daily printed an article, *Unbearable weight of treason* from which we find out that, “after Kundera’s denunciation, Dvořáček was arrested and sentenced to 22 years in prison” and that, “the writer never called him to apologize”³⁶. In this case, author cites the Czech weekly “Respekt” and summarizes Hradilek and Tresnak’s article and their hypotheses.

³² bm, *Czeski tygodnik...*

³³ *Słynny pisarz donosił bezpiece*, www.dziennik.pl/swiat/article250925/Slynnny_pisarz_donosil_bezpiece.html [accessed: 8.11.2009].

³⁴ On October 12, 2008, Czech public TV broadcasted on the evening news programme a report on the article about the discovery of the document from the archive. The commentary did not question the article’s theses and said that the documents is against Kundera.

³⁵ amk, *Kundera wydał znajomego komunistycznej bezpiece*, www.rp.pl/artukul/204070.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

³⁶ B. Sierszuła, P. Zychowicz, *Nieznośny ciężar zdrady*, www.rp.pl/artukul/204481.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

The same day, the Niezalezna.pl portal presented information *Kundera's secret*. "In 1950, the renowned Czech writer Milan Kundera wrote a denunciation. His victim spent long years in prison"³⁷, the lead states.

The material presented in the article showed only one side of the story. It is worth noting, for example, that all the statements cited put Kundera in negative light. No one defends writer, no one questions whether the document found is a credible source, "The magazine editor in which the material appeared ["Respekt"], wrote that Kundera lost his chance to tell his story, as recently did the German writer Günter Grass. Czech TV correspondent in Poland Miroslav Karas said that the information about Kundera's denunciation shocked everyone in his country. He adds that the Czechs are outraged while the writer's friends, including other Czech writers, are stunned".

A similar mechanism can be found in the presented in the following paragraph Kundera's biographical note. It is written superficially and selectively (presenting only the facts related to his fascination with communism and his subsequent emigration interpreted as an escape from his homeland), "Kundera joined the Czech Communist Party in 1948, when he was 19 years old. In 1968, he received the Czechoslovak State Prize. In 1975, he emigrated to France and began to write in French. He distanced himself from Czech literature and culture and does not allow his French books to be translated into his native tongue".

First of all, the cited above fragment includes many inaccuracies. It was imprecise to state that after emigrating Kundera "distanced himself from Czech literature and culture". It would be worth to take a look at his essays and novels which, although written in French, include numerous references to Czech history, culture and literature, as well as topics related to emigration and writing in a non-native language³⁸. For Kundera, these are still very important topics.

Secondly, if the author points out that Kundera joined the party, it should also be mentioned that he was expelled from it and that he criticized the Communist system in his works. It seems that selectivity in the selection of information is just what was intended. The resulting text is a neat puzzle with a ready thesis.

Information about Kundera's alleged denunciation that appeared on the Internet was usually in the form of slightly edited press agency reports. Very often they simultaneously appear on different websites in almost the same form. For example, on October 13, 2008, the

³⁷ wg, IAR, *Tajemnica Kundery*, http://niezalezna.pl/arttykul/tajemnica_kundery/9409/1 [accessed: 12.01.2011].

³⁸ For example, there are Kundera's books such as *Art du roman* [*Art of the Novel*] (1991), *L'ignorance* [*Ignorance*] (2003), *Le rideau. Essai en sept parties* [*The Curtain. An Essay in Seven Parts*] (2006), *Une rencontre* [*The Encounter*] (2009) [in brackets dates of Polish translations].

news which appeared on the Onet.pl site, *Czech Republic – Milan Kundera was an informer*³⁹ was found in the “Entertainment” section! In it, we read that the news of Kundera denouncing a friend of a friend to the security police electrified the Czech media. The following paragraphs contain information about Miroslav Dvořáček (who he was and what happened to him) and “revelations” from “Respekt” and Czech TV, “it recently came to light that Dvořáček’s denunciation was by [. ..] Kundera”. This information, cited by CTK agency, is commented on by Vojtěch Ripka, a USTR historian who says: “It is very likely that Dvořáček was arrested based on information provided by Milan Kundera”. The final paragraph includes Kundera’s brief biography. In the conclusion it says, “His works, although considered to be difficult, are popular around the world and are very highly regarded by critics”.

Similar in content text can be found on the Niezależna.pl portal. The article *Milan Kundera the rat*⁴⁰ is constructed the same way; it differs from the above only in headline and lead which reads, “In the 1950s, famous Czech writer Milan Kundera denounced to the security police a friend of a friend”. Information that this is what Czech media reported was included in the first paragraph of the text (in contrast to Onet.pl) which makes it even more sensational and accusatory.

What we are dealing with is journalism without reflection, limited to editing press agency materials, just as dozen of others publishers do around the country. It should also be noted, based on the cited above fragments, how easy it is to distort the presented issue. An average person who, as we know, reads rather carelessly, would just remember one thing from the articles – that Kundera was an informer.

■ **Where was Kundera expelled from?** [imprecise information]

What is striking in these descriptions of the matter is how negligent the media are in reporting background events. When reading press information on the issue from the same day but from different sources (or from the same source several days in a row), we can find various mutually exclusive events, that is impossible from a chronological point of view. The following are examples:

³⁹ PAP/ab, *Czechy – Milan Kundera donosil*, <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/rozrywka/czechy-milan-kundera-donosil,1,3485532,wiadomosc.html> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁴⁰ *Milan Kundera kapusiem*, http://niezalezna.pl/artukul/milan_kundera_kapusiem/9378/1 [accessed: 12.01.2011]. Article not signed (Onet.pl cited as source).

Firstly, what was Kundera's punishment for his correspondence with Dewetter? Was he expelled from university and the party or only from the party?⁴¹ Let us compare two articles by "Rzeczpospolita" on the matter:

1. "The third hypothesis is that Kundera's denunciation was supposed to improve his tarnished reputation in the eyes of communists. It was successful. Somewhat earlier, he and his two friends published a 'dissenting story'. As a result, while his two friends were thrown out of the party and university, he was only expelled from the party. He could continue studying and publishing".⁴² By the way, as explained above, it was not with regard to the 'dissenting story' but his correspondence.

2. "Czech government wants to pay out compensation to those who in Stalinist times were expelled from universities for political reasons. This was the case with Milan Kundera. [...] For 'agitating against' the authorities in the 1950s, the most famous Czech writer was relegated from university. Recently he has been accused of denouncing Miroslav Dvořáček, a friend of a friend. Expulsion from university inspired him to write *The Joke* as story in which the protagonist is thrown out of university for a political joke and ends up in a penal company digging coal."⁴³

Secondly, when was Kundera expelled from the party? According to the media, was the denunciation a way to save his reputation in the eyes of communists or as we find out from "Rzeczpospolita", "thanks to the denunciation, he was able to avoid more serious consequences of his actions"⁴⁴?

Thirdly, did Kundera meet Dvořáček? There are also inaccuracies regarding reporting the events from March 14, 1950. Some newspapers report that Kundera never met with Dvořáček while other say that he did.

"Rzeczpospolita": "Kundera, then a student of the Prague Film Academy, met Dvořáček while visiting a friend in a dormitory". He denounced him when, "he found out that he's recently returned from West Germany and temporarily left a suitcase in the dorm"⁴⁵. The 'perpetrator' met his 'victim' then and maybe even talked to him?

⁴¹ It should be noted that there is (not in Polish language) no biography of Milan Kundera with which one could compare basic facts from the author's life. In a short biography by dr. Jan Čulík from Glasgow University (published on the Web in English) we find out that in 1950 Kundera was suspended in his studies for political reasons and that the same he and another Czech writer Jan Trefulka were expelled from the Party for "anti-party activity". Cf. J. Čulík, *Biography of Milan Kundera*, www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Kundera.htm [accessed: 14.01.2011]. Among Polish Internet sites, the biggest one is www.milankundera.webpark.pl.

⁴² B. Sierszuła, P. Zychowicz, *Nieznośny ciężar...*

⁴³ M. Szymaniak, *Poszkodowany Kundera*, www.rp.pl/arttykul/208293.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁴⁴ B. Sierszuła, P. Zychowicz, *Nieznośny ciężar...*

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

“Gazeta Wyborcza”: “On this mission, on the street Dvořáček met his old friend Iva Militká with whom he left his baggage. A while later, Militká told her boyfriend about the meeting who then told the story to his friend Milan Kundera. Kundera then went straight to the police station and several hours later Dvořáček was arrested”⁴⁶.

Fourthly, where did the denunciation take place? Did the informant go to a regular police station or to the security forces?

“Rzeczpospolita”: “When Kundera found out about a visitor from West Germany who left a suitcase at his friend’s, he went straight to the security forces”⁴⁷.

“Dziennik”: “After meeting in Prague his friend Iva Militká, Dvořáček could enjoy his freedom for only several more hours. He left a suitcase in her dorm room and when he returned to get it, the police were waiting for him. It turned out that earlier Iva told her future husband about the meeting who then related the information to Milan Kundera who told the police”⁴⁸. All in all, it is imperative where the denunciation took place. Some commentators say that at the time Kundera was the head of the student committee⁴⁹. Somebody like that was responsible for order in the dormitory and that is why he went to the police. Denunciation of this kind to the security forces would have definitely been considered zealotry.

Fifthly, where was Dvořáček recruited? In Munich or in West Berlin?

“Rzeczpospolita”: “Dvořáček opposed the communist regime. In 1948, he escaped to West Berlin. There, he was trained by the Americans and returned to Czechoslovakia to join the opposition movement”⁵⁰.

“Gazeta Wyborcza”: “In a refugee camp in Munich, he was recruited by the American counterintelligence and then sent to Prague to recruit an engineer working for a chemical plant”⁵¹.

Additionally, mentioned can be numerous errors in citing names (spelling) and confusing the names of the main characters in the story.

■ “Unbearably light” journalism [easy subject for opinion press]

Articles in opinion press on the ‘Kundera case’ are perhaps slightly less sensational than those in the daily press. Dominant here are balanced opinions, however, we can easily get the

⁴⁶ bm, *Czeski tygodnik ...*

⁴⁷ B. Sierszuła, P. Zychowicz, *Nieznośny ciężar...*

⁴⁸ *Słynny pisarz...*

⁴⁹ Cf. A. Kaczorowski, *Spóźniony zarzut*, www.newsweek.pl/artykuly/sekcje/swiat/spozniony-zarzut,31962,1 [accessed: 14.01.2011]; T. Mačkowiak, *Teczka Milana...*

⁵⁰ B. Sierszuła, P. Zychowicz, *Nieznośny ciężar...*

⁵¹ bm, *Czeski tygodnik...*

impression that this matter is predominantly a pretext to further divagations on modern history on the one hand and on the frailty of human nature.

The 'Kundera case' includes everything – a tragic story, a vile act, a perpetrator, a victim, literary fiction (or, as the press suggests, not just fiction) and hard reality. It contains stark contrast, there is world class literature and a brutal police note. Is it possible that the same man could be responsible for both? A renowned writer? This seems to be the question which journalists are interested in most.

“Polityka”: “Kundera’s *Unbearable lightness of being* and *The Joke* say a great deal about Czech communism and how the socialist revolution destroyed the lives of many. Now, this writer is accused of cooperation with the communist system. Could the same man simultaneously be a critic and a supporter of the regime? In this case, there are multiple questions and very few answers. Just like in his books”⁵².

“Tygodnik Powszechny”: “There is no answer to the most important question – what led one young man to go to the security forces and denounce another, one he did not even know? And we will not find the answer to this question in the archives or in his works”⁵³.

“Rzeczpospolita”: “Kundera’s case is specific and exceptional, made even more dramatic by the fact that supposedly the writer denounced his acquaintance in Stalinist times. Can the life of an author be separated from his works? Does anyone these days have the right to judge the choices people living in those times had to make? These are not easy questions. However, without moral assessment of treason we will not go far. Disregarding facts from long ago can lead future generations to easily choose the path of wickedness. And writers especially, those who deal with notions of good and evil, they should not evade judgment of their own deeds”⁵⁴.

Kundera’s alleged denunciation resulted in numerous new attempts of interpreting his works which are full of tragic characters, broken lives and dubious behaviour set against the backdrop of Czechoslovakia under communist rule. That seems to be enough for many to ask whether perhaps the writer’s own life was the inspiration for his works.

“Tygodnik Powszechny”: “It is said now that ‘Dvořáček’s case’ will not only change the way we view Kundera but also his works. The issue gives us another key to new interpretations of his books”⁵⁵.

⁵² J. Kubiak, *Metafizyczna lekkość oskarżeń*, www.polityka.pl/swiat/analizy/271656,1,kundera-donosicielem.read [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁵³ P. Bukalska, *Czesi w szoku*, <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/31,0,15759,2,artykul.html> [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁵⁴ P. Semka, *Milan Kundera – kłopoty z przeszłością*, www.rp.pl/artykul/204381.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁵⁵ P. Bukalska, *Czesi w szoku...*

“Rzeczpospolita”: “As usual with writers and their works, a new biographical fact from the author’s life makes people want to re-interpret his writing. Anyone who has read *The Joke* has got to ask himself whether the author when writing about a victim of Stalinist prisons was thinking of the victim of his own denunciation”⁵⁶.

“Tygodnik Powszechny”: “The question is, how do we separate the author’s life from his writing, especially since treason was such an important subject in Kundera’s works? Can we find traces of that event in his writing”⁵⁷.

In analysis of this issue, it should be pointed out that Polish press often published reprints of Czech press articles⁵⁸, of various quality. Some newspapers focused on reporting Czech reactions to “Respekt’s” article⁵⁹ while others either defended or criticized the writer. Two examples of ardent one sided defenses appeared in “Res Publica Nowa” (in the same issue which included a reprint of *Milan Kundera’s denunciation*).

Samuel Abrahám in his article, *Accusations against Kundera*⁶⁰ points out the hopelessness of the writer’s situation. The article *Milan Kundera’s denunciation* automatically made the novelist guilty. “The deed is done, the newspaper has a story. International media find out and in most cases they accept »Respekt’s« arguments. Just the same as in many similar such cases, whatever the victim says will just multiply his guilt. A large majority of readers will only remember the accusation and not the subsequent analyses, new evidence or even the victim’s exoneration.”

Miroslav Balašík in his article, *Two stories. Kundera and Velvet Revolution conclusion*⁶¹ is even more blunt. He criticizes Hradilek’s competences. He calls him ‘justice warrior’ fascinated by his discovery but not experienced enough to question it. “He judged history and people still living.” Balašík notes that the article, discussed further on by various press, was destroying the novelist’s life. And all this was going on when the evidence against him was rather weak. He adds that Kundera not commenting on the issue was only to

⁵⁶ P. Semka, *Milan Kundera...*

⁵⁷ P. Bukalska, *Nieznośny ciężar zdrady*, http://tygodnik.onet.pl/35,0,16077,nieznośny_ciezar_zdrady,artykul.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁵⁸ Among the main ones there were: L. Palata, *Kundera przestał być bogiem*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5811376,Kundera_przestal_byc_bogiem.html; *Stracona szansa Kundery* – Marcin Wojciechowski’s interview with Jan Urban, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5811375,Stracona_szansa_Kundery.html; J. Třešňák, *Nieznośna lekkość przeszłości*, www.wprost.pl/ar/141912/Nieznośna-lekkosc-przeszlosci/; V. Havel’s statements in Kundera’s defence cited by “Gazeta Wyborcza”; V. Havel, *Havel o sprawie...*; T. Vrba, *Oskarżony Milan...*; M.M. Šimečka, *Pokolenie mojego taty*, http://tygodnik.onet.pl/35,0,19709,pokolenie_mojego_taty,artykul.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁵⁹ For example – T. Vrba, *Oskarżony...*

⁶⁰ S. Abrahám, *O zarzutach wobec Kundery*, „Res Publica Nowa” 2008, No. 4. The text first appeared on www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-02-26-abraham-pl.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁶¹ M. Balašík, *Dwie historie. Kundera i wniosek z aksamitnej rewolucji*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2008, No. 4. The text first appeared on www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-02-26-balastik-pl.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

“Respekt’s” advantage, “Kundera’s silence was understood as admitting guilt. They were not looking for the truth but to find the guilty”.

On the other side of the spectrum is Piotr Semka’s interview with Czech journalist Adam Drda⁶², published seven months after “Respekt’s” article, with the goal, as it seems, “to authenticate Kundera’s guilt”⁶³.

In his interview, Semka asks a series of simple, even naïve, questions (i.e. “Is Dvořáček alive?”, “Were any other documents found against Kundera?”, “What was Vaclav Havel’s stance on the issue?”). What he does not ask about is the most important – the reliability of the document found in the archives. He assumes that it is enough and asks “whether it should be his works or biography that count”. Semka’s interviewer, clearly against Kundera, comments, “What bothers me in this case is Kundera’s behaviour now, after these facts came to life. This is a man who does not want to admit that his activities were the logical consequence of his choices; that he took part in the building of a totalitarian system in Czechoslovakia. Naturally, in a limited way, as he was young student then. Now, he does not want to take responsibility for the past, for his life. [...] From a moral point of view, this is not someone who deserves admiration or respect”.

Martin M. Šimečka, the chief editor of “Respekt” wrote a bitter article entitled *My father’s generation*⁶⁴, published by “Tygodnik Powszechny”. In it, he said that Czechs seem to be incapable of discussing their past. They see it and talk about it only in esthetic categories, through the prism of great works and not ‘primitive denunciations’ which are a legacy of the Communist era, “Kundera’s case was a bomb because it destroyed the safely guarded dominance of literature which was to explain the past more legitimately than real life with its difficult and mundane truth, embodied in a primitive archival document. The fact that Kundera denounced Dvořáček. Literary fiction has successfully replaced real memories of the past which no one wanted to remember. It was predominantly Kundera’s works which have successfully replaced those memories”. Šimečka explains that by publishing Milan Kundera’s denunciation, “in a logical way he referred to his own experiences from the 1970s and 1980s when there occurred a separation of reality from literary fiction”.

⁶² *Milczenie Milana Kundery* – Piotr Semka’s interview with Adam Drda, www.rp.pl/arttykul/73290,302609_Milczenie_Milana_Kundery.html [accessed: 12.01.2011].

⁶³ Another example is the interview with Jan Urban, *Stracona szansa...*

⁶⁴ M.M. Šimečka, *Pokolenie...* Martin M. Šimečka is Milan Simečka’s son, a famous Czech dissident, an advocate of communism in the 1950s.

All in all, it is difficult to criticize such a stance. However, it is evident that this whole issue is about something else. Kundera's defense, by his friends, publicists and historians (including the Czech Academy of Science)⁶⁵ did not question the necessity of discussing the past or rediscovering its disgraced face. No one sensible raised any absurd arguments such as "Kundera as a writer is allowed more" or that "he will still remain a great author". It is about "Respekt" drawing too hasty conclusions, presenting unverified facts and writing about guilt which was never proved. The truth is that Kundera, as a writer, creator, humanist and a moral authority to thousands, is allowed less than the average man. Denunciation in Stalinist times, regardless of reasons, has to be deemed an act morally unacceptable. The question is, why did Hradilek and Tresnak write their article in such a way? A controversial police note, questioned by many historians⁶⁶ was used by the journalists in order to create a subjective and sensational accusative article, in which fiction, conjectures and circumstantial evidence are mixed with facts. And the worst thing is that this article was accepted without question by the majority of press. At least in Poland.

After analysis of the most important publications on the matter by Polish press, the conclusions are, one – that our journalists are not prepared for work with historical sources (did not question the archive note, did not try to find other documents, did not write the proper background) and two – that Polish press is undergoing major transformations and these are not changes for the better. Based on this example, we can observe trends such as lack of reflection, oversimplifying matters, going after sensation, making judgments based on unreliable data, presenting the world in only black and white, demagoguery and tendencies to provide simple answers to difficult questions while avoiding questions that should be asked.

It can be said that Polish journalists and publicists did not find anything controversial in "Respekt's" article. Nobody questioned its form or content. Polish press limited itself to reporting or repeating the news from the Czech Republic without any reflection. This regards daily press, which based its information on adapting press agency materials without any additional thought or information, as well as opinion press which did not go into a discussion on the matter. This issue particularly deserved extra attention and further deliberation. And it should not have been a discussion on whether Kundera made the denunciation or not but about professionalism and credibility of modern journalism.

⁶⁵ Cf. T. Vrba, *Oskarżony Milan...*

⁶⁶ Many pointed out its numerous shortcomings such as lack of denouncer's signature, lack of Identity Card number, lack of other documents or traces indicating that it would be Kundera and lack of his testimony during Dvoracek's trial, etc. Technically, when there is only one such document, it is uncertain whether 'that' Kundera was 'this' Kundera or maybe someone impersonated him.

