



KUNDERA IN SLOVAK – ALMOST

Samuel Abrahám

The second excerpt is also from Kundera's book Betrayed Testaments (1992) written in French, but never translated into Slovak or Czech. However, he himself has chosen and translated one chapter into Czech from this book, published by *Atlantis*, a publishing house based in Brno. The same house published all his books written in Czech, from Laughable Loves to Immortality, as well as seven little books containing chapters chosen and translated by Kundera from his various collections of essays.

At first, Kundera allowed me to translate the excerpts from French, but then I realized that this particular part was translated under the title of “Nechovajte sa tu jako doma, přáteli” into Czech. We of course republish here his Czech translation.

Besides Betrayed Testaments, Kundera wrote in French an additional three books of essays and his last four novels. As he explained to me, he alone can translate his own text into Czech, for he cannot imagine someone else doing it. He added with some regret that translation costs him plenty of energy and time is getting short.... And so his books were translated from French into many languages, but not into his native Czech. After our first meeting in Paris in 2003, an idea came to mind that, if his book was translated into Serbian, Romanian, Korean, or English etc., why could it not be translated into Slovak and published in *Kritika & Kontext* as its first book titles?

I wrote to Kundera and I also argued that while our generations read Czech or Slovak interchangeably, for the young generation of Slovaks, who might watch TV and movies in Czech, literary Czech is getting more challenging. First he liked the idea, and agreed to the plan the details of which I was already arranging with his wife, Věra—the sequence of publishing the books, translators—but then, a few weeks later, I received a fax that he was sorry, he thought about it deeply, but he could not give me permission to publish them. Among other things, he mentioned that his Moravian friends would not forgive him if he had the books come out in Slovak before Czech. Since 2003, we went through this process of translating and publishing his books three times, obviously with the same result. And so we have to read Kundera's latest essays and novels, including his brilliant latest novel, The Festival of Insignificance, in languages other than

his native Czech or in Slovak.

I am sorry we did not succeed in our endeavor. On the other hand, meeting and corresponding with him is ample compensation. As opposed to many other authors, Kundera's humour, sense of irony, and sagacity are all present when you talk to him, the same characteristics we know from his books.

AT STAKE IS THE SURVIVAL OF THE INDIVIDUAL

For this issue, I selected a text that is serious and, unfortunately, fully relevant today. Kundera describes human privacy, which is for him a sacred matter. He offers an example from the beginning of the so-called 'normalization period' after the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the suppression of any reform process by the Soviet leadership. The secret police published secretly taped, friendly, at times uncouth, conversations between the Czech writer Jan Procházka and the literary historian Václav Černý in order to compromise them. Indeed, the traumatized Procházka died soon afterwards, at just 42, while Professor Černý, the more resilient of the two, embarked on writing three magisterial volumes of memoirs with devastating attacks on the communist regime and the people who served it.

If Kundera's stress on the protection of privacy in the early 1990s could seem overly cautious, today his words sound almost prophetic. Technology, the thing that Heidegger warns against, currently surrounds us everywhere and, thanks to its capacity, the state, tabloid newspapers, or voyeurs of all sorts can enter our private correspondence or conversations, disclose and misuse what was supposed to be private between those who said it and those who were addressed.

The publication of private correspondence is not only despicable and demeaning for the victim but, as we can see from the past several months, also politically dangerous. Gradually, it becomes clear how the disclosure of private conversations and emails alters the results of elections, how technological parasites or intelligence services managed to influence the results of the referendum in the UK and presidential elections in the USA. In fact, the fate of Europe in next few months and years can be influenced by the misuse of private information. Indeed, the future of democracy in Europe might be similar to the bullied Jan Procházka in 1971.

We witness today the same appalling violation of the privacy of the individual as described by Kundera. The only difference is that, thanks to these technological capabilities, this violation of privacy is taking place on a large scale.

As Kundera writes: "[The] private and public are two essentially different worlds and that respect for that difference is the indispensable condition, the sine qua non, for a man to live free; that the curtain separating these two worlds is not to be tampered with, and that curtain-rippers are criminals... [W]hen it becomes the custom and the rule to divulge another person's private life, we are entering a time when the highest stake is the survival or the disappearance of the individual."

After reading these lines and the rest of the book, the Czech pseudo-intellectual paparazzi did not change their minds and humiliated Kundera a few years ago. However, they could hardly write the drivel that Kundera is protecting his privacy because he hides something secretive from his past. He is not hiding; he protects his privacy on principle because he does not want to expose and display it publicly. Everything that Kundera wishes to say in public is contained in his oeuvre. For example, another book of essays has a symp-

tomatic name *Le Rideau* (2005), that is, a curtain or screen, and, behind that, “You’re not in your own house, my dear fellow...”

YOU’RE NOT IN YOUR OWN HOUSE HERE, MY DEAR FELLOW¹ | Excerpt

Milan Kundera

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I am looking at a window across the way. Toward evening the light goes on. A man enters the room. Head lowered, he paces back and forth; from time to time he runs his hand through his hair. Then, suddenly, he realizes that the lights are on and he can be seen. Abruptly, he pulls the curtain. Yet he wasn’t counterfeiting money in there; he had nothing to hide but himself, the way he walked around the room, the sloppy way he was dressed, the way he stroked his hair. His well-being depended on his freedom from being seen.

Shame is one of the key notions of the Modern Era, the individualistic period that is imperceptibly receding from us these days; shame: an epidermal instinct to defend one’s personal life; to require a curtain over the window; to insist that a letter addressed to A not be read by B. One of the elementary situations in the passage to adulthood, one of the prime conflicts with parents, is the claim to a drawer for letters and notebooks, the claim to a drawer with a key; we enter adulthood through *the rebellion of shame*.

An old revolutionary Utopia, whether fascist or communist: life without secrets, where public life and private life are one and the same. The surrealist dream André Breton loved: the glass house, a house without curtains where man lives in full view of the world. Ah, the beauty of transparency! The only successful realization of this dream: a society totally monitored by the police.

I wrote about this in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Jan Procházka, an important figure of the Prague Spring, came under heavy surveillance after the Russian invasion of 1968. At the time, he saw a good deal of another great opposition figure, Professor Václav Černý, with whom he liked to drink and talk. All their conversations were secretly recorded, and I suspect the two friends knew it and didn’t give a damn. But one day in 1970 or 1971, with the intent to discredit Procházka, the police began to broadcast these conversations as a radio serial. For the police it was an audacious, unprecedented act. And, surprisingly: it nearly succeeded; instantly Procházka was discredited: because in private, a person says all sorts of things, slurs friends, uses coarse language, acts silly, tells dirty jokes, repeats himself, makes a companion

¹ An excerpt from Part Nine of Milan Kundera’s *Testaments Betrayed* (1992, Faber and Faber, London) pp. 259-262; pp. 274-280.

laugh by shocking him with outrageous talk, floats heretical ideas he'd never admit in public, and so forth. Of course, we all act like Procházka, in private we bad-mouth our friends and use coarse language; that we act different in private than in public is everyone's most conspicuous experience, it is the very ground of the life of the individual; curiously, this obvious fact remains unconscious, unacknowledged, forever obscured by lyrical dreams of the transparent glass house, it is rarely understood to be the value one must defend beyond all others. Thus only gradually did people realize (though their rage was all the greater) that the real scandal was not Procházka's daring talk but the rape of his life; they realized (as if by electric shock) that private and public are two essentially different worlds and that respect for that difference is the indispensable condition, the *sine qua non*, for a man to live free; that the curtain separating these two worlds is not to be tampered with, and that curtain-rippers are criminals. And because the curtain-rippers were serving a hated regime, they were unanimously held to be particularly contemptible criminals.

When I arrived in France from that Czechoslovakia bristling with microphones, I saw on a magazine cover a large photo of Jacques Brel hiding his face from the photographers who had tracked him down in front of the hospital where he was being treated for his already advanced cancer. And suddenly I felt I was encountering the very same evil that had made me flee my country; broadcasting Procházka's conversations and photographing a dying singer hiding his face seemed to belong to the same world; I said to myself that *when it becomes the custom and the rule* to divulge another person's private life, we are entering a time when the highest stake is the survival or the disappearance of the individual.

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Kafka sent the manuscript of *The Metamorphosis* to a magazine whose editor, Robert Musil, was prepared to publish it on the condition that the author shorten it. (Ah, sorry encounters between great writers!) Kafka's reaction was as glacial and as categoric as Stravinsky's to Ansermet. He could bear the idea of not being published at all, but the idea of being published and mutilated he found unbearable. His concept of authorship was as absolute as Stravinsky's or Beckett's, but whereas they more or less succeeded in imposing theirs, he failed to do so. This failure is a turning point in the history of authors' rights.

In 1925, when Brod published the two letters known as Kafka's testament in his "Postscript to the First Edition" of *The Trial*, he explained that Kafka knew full well that his wishes would not be fulfilled. Let us assume that Brod was telling the truth, that those two letters were indeed only expressing a bad mood, and that on the subject of any eventual (very improbable) posthumous publication of Kafka's writings, everything had been fully understood between the two friends; in that case, Brod, the executor, could take full responsibility upon himself and publish whatever he thought best; in that case, he had no moral obligation to inform us of Kafka's wishes, which, according to Brod, were not valid or were so no longer.

Yet he hastened to publish these "testamentary" letters and to give them as much impact as possible; actually, he had already begun to create the greatest work of his life, his myth of Kafka, one of whose crucial components is precisely that wish, unique in all of history—the wish of an author who would annihilate all his work. And thus is

Kafka engraved on the public's memory. In accordance with what Brod gives us to believe in his mythographic novel, where, with no nuance whatever, Garta/Kafka would destroy *everything* he has written; because he is dissatisfied with it artistically? ah no, Brod's Kafka is a religious thinker; remember: wanting not to proclaim but "to live his faith," Garta granted no great importance to his writings, "mere rungs to help him climb to the heights." His friend, Nowy/Brod, refuses to obey him because even though what Garta wrote was "mere sketches," they could help "wandering humanity" in its quest for the path of righteousness to "something irreplaceable."

With Kafka's "testament," the great legend of Saint Kafka/Garta is born, and along with it a littler legend—of Brod his prophet, who with touching earnestness makes public his friend's last wish even as he confesses why, in the name of very lofty principles, he decided not to obey him. The great mythographer won his bet. His act was elevated to the rank of a great gesture worthy of emulation. For who could doubt Brod's loyalty to his friend? And who would dare doubt the value of every sentence, every word, every single syllable Kafka left to humanity?

And thus did Brod create the model for disobedience to dead friends; a judicial precedent for those who would circumvent an author's last wish or divulge his most intimate secrets.

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With regard to the unfinished stories and novels, I readily concede that they would put any executor in a very uncomfortable situation. For among these writings of varying significance are the three novels; and Kafka wrote nothing greater than these. Yet it is not at all abnormal that because they were unfinished he ranked them among his failures; an author has trouble believing that the value of a work he has not seen through to the end might already be almost fully discernible, before it is done. But what an author is incapable of seeing may be clear to the eyes of an outsider. Yes, because of these three novels I admire boundlessly, I would not have found the strength to carry out fully Kafka's "testament."

Who could have confirmed me in that position?

Our greatest Master. Let's open *Don Quixote*, Part One, Chapters Twelve, Thirteen, Fourteen: Don Quixote and Sancho are in the mountains, where they learn the story of Grisostómo, a young poet in love with a shepherdess. To be near her, he himself becomes a shepherd; but she doesn't love him, and Grisóstomo ends his life. Don Quixote decides to attend the burial. Ambrosio, a friend of the poet, conducts the modest ceremony. Beside the flower-covered body there are notebooks and sheets of poems. Ambrosio tells the gathering that Grisóstomo requested that they be burned.

At that moment a gentleman who has joined the mourners out of curiosity, Señor Vivaldo, intervenes: he disputes the idea that burning the poetry truly answers to the dead man's wish, for a wish must make sense and this one does not. It would therefore be better to give his poetry to other people, that it might bring them pleasure, wisdom, experience. And without waiting for Ambrosio's response, he bends down and takes a few of the pages nearest to him. Ambrosio says to him: "Out of courtesy, sir, I will permit you to keep those that you have taken; but it is futile to think that I will refrain from burning the rest."

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“Out of courtesy, I will permit you”; meaning that even though a dead friend’s wish has for me the force of law, I am not a lackey to the laws, I respect them as a free being who is not blind to other values, values that may stand opposed to the law, such as, for instance, courtesy or the love of art. That is why “I will permit you to keep those that you have taken,” while hoping that my friend will forgive me. Still in making this exception I have violated his wish, which for me is law; I have done so on my own responsibility, at my own risk, and I’ve done so as a *violation of a law*, not as a denial and nullification of it; that is why “it is futile to think that I will refrain from burning the rest.”

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A television broadcast: three famous and admired women collectively propose that women too should have the right to be buried in the Pantheon. It’s important, they say, to consider the symbolic significance of this act. And they immediately suggest the names of some great dead women who, in their opinion, could be moved there.

A fair demand, certainly; yet something about it troubles me: these dead women who could be moved right over to the Pantheon, aren’t they now lying beside their husbands? Certainly; and they wanted it so. What then are we to do with the husbands? Move them too? That would be hard; not being important enough, they must stay where they are, and the wives that have been moved out will spend their eternity in widows’ solitude.

Then I say to myself: and what about the men already in the Pantheon? Yes, the men! Are they perchance in the Pantheon of their own will? It was after they died, without asking their opinion, and certainly contrary to their last wishes, that it was decided to turn them into symbols and separate them from their wives.

After Chopin’s death, Polish patriots cut up his body to take out his heart. They nationalized this poor muscle and buried it in Poland.

A dead person is treated either as trash or as a symbol. Either way, it’s the same disrespect to his vanished individuality.

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Ah, it’s so easy to disobey a dead person. If, nonetheless, we sometimes submit to his wishes, it is not out of fear, out of duress, but because we love him and refuse to believe him dead. If an old peasant on his deathbed begs his son not to cut down the old pear tree outside the window, the pear tree will not be cut down for as long as the son remembers his father with love.

This has little to do with any religious belief in the eternal life of the soul. It’s simply that a dead person I love will never be dead for me. I can’t even say: “I loved him”; no, it’s: “I love him.” And my refusing to speak of my love for him in the past tense means that the dead person *is*. That may be the seat of man’s religious dimension. Indeed, obedience to a last wish is mysterious: it goes beyond all practical and rational thought: the old peasant will never know, in his grave, if the pear tree has been cut down or not; yet for the son who loves him, it is impossible to not obey him.

Long ago I was moved (I still am) by the end of Faulkner’s novel *Wild Palms*. The woman dies of a botched abortion, the man is in prison under a ten-year sentence;

a white tablet, poison, is brought to him in his cell; but he quickly dismisses the idea of suicide, because his only way of prolonging the life of the beloved woman is to preserve her in his memory.

“... so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be.—Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief.”

Later on, writing *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, I immersed myself in the character Tamina, who has lost her husband and is trying desperately to recover, to gather, scattered memories so as to reconstruct a person who has disappeared, a bygone past; it was then that I began to understand that a memory doesn't give us back the dead person's *presence*; memories are only confirmation of his absence; in memories the dead person is only a past that is fading, receding, inaccessible.

Yet if it is impossible for me ever to regard as dead the being I love, how will his presence be manifested?

In his wishes, which I know and with which I will keep faith. I think of the old pear tree that will stand outside the window for as long as the peasant's son shall live.