

# MILAN KUNDERA, THE TRANSLATOR

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Translating activity has been a part of Milan Kundera's output since his entering into the literature. I am going to concentrate myself on the period of the first decade after February 1948. This contribution doesn't want to be anything else than an attempt to implement the consciousness of the beginnings of Milan Kundera's production in order the view of his creation could be as complete as possible.

During the period from 1948 to 1957, we may find Milan Kundera's name under the translations from Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish. Of course, this doesn't mean that Kundera would have translated indeed from those languages, though it is written under particular poems. That is to say, those were also translations from the Russian translations of foreign originals (and that sometimes also in case of Ukrainian or in case of Nazim Hikmet), or versification and adaptation of translations from a foreign language into Czech (namely from Spanish and Portuguese), that is so called interlinear translations.

But among of all, Kundera translated during the first after – February decade from Russian and Ukrainian. We may find, among the translations in 1949, a chapter named *Picture, a particular artistic form of reflection of reality* which was a part of lecture named *Leninist theory of reflection and art* by **Alexandr Ivanovič Sobolev** (published in the magazine Blok 3, 1948 – 49, No. 5, page 209 - 211). This Kundera's translation proves his interest in theoretical questions which came from the Leninist theory, which is for Kundera's beginnings obvious. (Complete book was issued two times consecutively in translation of Ludvík Svoboda: in 1949 and 1950).

In the same year, **Vladimir Majakovskij's** poem *Rozloučení* (*Valediction*; in the newspaper Lidové noviny, 29 November, 1949, page 1) was issued in Kundera's translation, expressing love for Soviet Union and Moscow. The poem, as well as the complete cycle Paris, was translated by the most often Czech translator of Majakovskij, Jiří Taufer. Comparison of both of translations shows that Kundera surprisingly chose a greater extent of admiration for Moscow than Taufer. „*Would like to live / and even die / in Paris, - / if only there were not / Moscow / in such a splendid country.*“ (Translation of Kundera.) „*I would like / to live and die / in Paris / if such country were not - / Moscow.*“ (Translation of Taufer.) Original is: „*Jesli b' něbylo takoj zemi – Moskva.*“ During the period we observe it was issued another poem by Majakovskij in Kundera's translation – *Odpověď imperialistům* (*Reply to imperialists*; Tvorba 18, 1949, No. 17, page 388, and in the Memorial volume Mír zvítězí nad válkou. Prague, Mladá fronta 1951, page 57 - 58). The author here answered to

the conflict at the Near east. Western imperialist wanted, according to the soviet version, to occupie this territory: „*Incendiaries of wars / are playing guns. / They produce soldiers / from pupils. / They send slave after slave / ahead on protruded bayonets. (...) therefore only, / the imperialist convoys / could float on the Boporus. / (...) Who inspires the incendiaries of the wars - / freedom ? / God ? / oh, to hell: capital!*“ Other Majakovskij’s poem *O městě Kužněchostroji* (*On the city of Kužněchostroj*; was issued, in Kundera’s translation, in the magazine *Studentský předvoj* 2, 1948, No. 7, page 4). Kundera’s translation of Majakovskij’s poetry was used, for example, also by Vladimír Dostál in his preface to two Majakovskij’s articles from the periodical *Žurnalist* (in the magazine *Var* 4, 1951 – 53, No. 19 – 20, page 612 – 613).

Kundera translated works of this poet already in 1945, e.g. Majakovskij’s poem *Vezmem zbrusu nové kvéry* (*We Take Brandnew Rifles*) was printed in Kundera’s translation in the magazine *Čin* 27 May 1945 (page 3) which was a periodical of the Social-democratic party.

Another poet, whose poem was translated by Kundera, was **Stepan Ščipačev**. This is not love lyrics, that Kundera chose, but the poem *Mičurin*. This was issued in Kundera’s translation also twice (in the newspaper *Lidové noviny*, 14 January 1950, page 1, and in the Memorial volume *Mladá vesnice*, Prague, *Mladá fronta* 1951, page 25). The same poem was translated also by Michal Sedloň, there is not a significant ideological difference between both of translations. Despite Ščipačev’s schematic usage of Mičurin’s emblem as a creator and governor of the nature in his verse (Kundera in his interpretation, this time unlike Sedloň, again more contributes to emphasis of this emblem), here sounds sorrow at the old age, at elapsing time. But it seems that this sorrow flows rather from the consciousness of the fact that Mičurin didn’t contrive to fulfil his task: though a resonance of Mičurin’s approaching death sounds here, which helps to achieve the impression of (the question is, if intended) the meaningful contradiction: Mičurin is a governor of the nature and its creator, who must submit to the object of his activity.

One-sided propagandistic are poems of other two authors, who were translated by Milan Kundera: *Nesmrtelný Lenin* (*Immortal Lenin*) by **Maxim Rylskij** (in the magazine *Československý voják* 1, 1952, No. 2, page 4) and *Je to taková strana!* (*There is Such a Party!*) by **Semjon Botvinnik** (in the Memorial volume *Mládí světa*. Prague, Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy 1953, page 100 – 101, and in the magazine *Svět sovětů* even two times: 15, 1952, No. 40, page 20, ibidem 19, 1956, No. 7, page 20). The Ukrainian poet Rylskij – double laureat of the Stalin’s prize, during the war the chairman of the Ukrainian Writers Union, having been in 1946 two times in Prague – fights in his poem against all „enemies“ of the Soviet Union and glorifies Lenin and „great Stalin“, his continuator: „*He erected / tremendously glorious party of Bolsheviks / in our country. / And our nation follows this party, / the nation of fighters. (...) Hold a light for mankind, Lenin! / We are close to dream-*

*distance, / where great Stalin / is guiding us along your path.*“ Botvinnik’s poem is an ode on „Communist Party of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: „*Only one is such party, / one only, / which covers the Earth with one march: / only this one inflames sparkling conflagration of the great October, / which will then illuminate the wide world (...) No, nothing can sweep of / such a party. / And at every place / where people are fighting // for life, for peace, / for their honour – / such a party exists!*“

The author, whom Kundera that time from Russian and Ukrainian mostly translated, was the Ukrainian poet **Pavlo Tyčyna**. He is a poet, who had been to Czechoslovakia already in 1925 as the first guest of the newly established Society for Cultural Connections with the U.S.S.R. Tyčyna was the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukraine S.S.R., the deputy chairman of the leadership of the Writers Union of the U.S.S.R., the deputy chairman of the Soviet of Nations and a member of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., a member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the prizewinner of Lenin’s Decoration and Stalin’s Prize of 1941. In Czech, there was issued the anthology named *Vítr z Ukrajiny (Wind from Ukraine, 1929)*, the anthology of Ukrainian poetry *Vítězit a žít (Conquer and Live, 1951)* contains thirteen his poems, and Milan Kundera arranged the anthology of Tyčyna’s poetry *Ocel a něha (Steel and Tenderness, Prague, Československý spisovatel 1953)*, he wrote the preface (the author of the epilogue and comments is Josef Rumler), and translated the great deal of poems for this anthology: from 40 poems contained in the book, 29 were translated by Kundera, other were translated by Jan Trefulka (6 poems), Kamil Bednář (4 poems) and František Hrubín together with Rudolf Hůlka (1 poem).

Tyčyna’s poems, translated by Kundera, were issued during the period from 1949 to 1955 also in periodicals *Lidové noviny*, *Literární noviny*, *Svět sovětů*, *Práce*, or in the Memorial volume *Bohatá úroda – trvalý mír (Prague, Mladá fronta 1951)*, in 1967 yet poem *Tam po návsi za kostelem (There Along the Village Green Behind the Church, in the Memorial volume Říjen 1917,67 (Prague, Československý spisovatel)*. How was Milan Kundera inspired by the poetry of Pavlo Tyčyna, I’ll try to explain later. Now it is to remind that Kundera translated poems which were created by Tyčyna about from 1914 to 1949. Those are poems, chanting the Ukrainian nature (*Ted’ mluví les / Forest is Speaking Now*), the October Revolution and struggle in Russia at the turn of the tens and twenties (*Oj, do sněhu bílého / Hey, into the Snow White, Železný žalm / Iron Psalm, V kosmickém orchestru / In the Cosmic Orchestra*), the events of 1941 – 45 (*Za sovětskou zemi / For the Soviet Country*), including enthroning of officially adopted heroes (*Píseň o Zoje Kosmoděmjanské / Song of Zoja Kosmodemjanskaja*), constructing of socialism and that not only in the U.S.S.R. but also in the East Europe (*V traktorovém závodě Ursus / In the Ursus Tractor Plant*), and naturally glorification of „the greatest celebrities“ of socialism: Lenin and Stalin (*O Stalinovi / About Stalin, Píseň o Kotovském / Song about Kotovskij*).

Further reprints of the identical poems of Pavel Tyčyna in Kundera's translation differ one from another insomuch that they had to be adapted by the translator; namely the most often reprinted Tyčyna's poem in Kundera's translation – *Hey, into the Snow White*. This new work with translations, their further adapting, make us believe that Kundera – despite his notorious sense of humour, having already in the fifties a form of some Marx-Leninist philosophy apocryphals – took this translating seriously and tried to fathom the best form.

We may find in Kundera's bibliography of translations also the name of Romanian poet **Mihai Beniuca**. Below his poems *Já, junák z bor* (*I, a Youth From Upland*, in the magazine *Dnešní Rumunsko* 4, 1955, No. 4, page 11, and in the newspaper *Literární noviny* 4, 1955, No. 34, page 1) and *Hlad* (*Hunger*, in the newspaper *Literární noviny* 6, 1957, No. 34, page 3), there is written: „Translation from Romanian into Czech by Milan Kundera.“ The question, how Kundera came to the Romanian poet, may be answered easily if we realize that Kundera was in the end of the year 1954 on study stay in Romania. He visited there, among others, so called school for young writers, the Institut Eminesca, where young authors, of course mostly coming from „the labour or rural milieu“, learned to become writers and poets (in the magazine *Host do domu* 2, 1955, No. 1, page 40 – 41). Kundera was probably inspired by his stay in Romania, which was shown not only by the choice of the above poet's poems (it is not clear if Kundera really translated his verse or if he only adapted their translation) but also by his proclamation on the elections to the National Assembly and Slovak National Committee: „Recently, our government has enabled me to realize a study visit to Romania. As well as in our country, I have met there many people from the West, persecuted for their progressive opinion, to whom the People's democracy granted political asylum and peace, necessary for creative work. It couldn't, nevertheless, bring back his mother country to a negro writer, it couldn't bring back to an English socialist-minded writer, who contrived to escape fast before his imprisonment, his wife and child, whom he had to leave in his homeland. This is the lot of the progressivists in the West. I vote in favour of the National Front also in the name of those my friends. Milan Kundera, the poet, Brno.“ (in the newspaper *Mladá fronta*, 27 November 1954, page 3). Besides, a Bolshevik tone is voiced also in Beniuca's verse.

A problem appears in translations from Bulgarian since here Milan Kundera is mistaken for Ludvík Kundera very often. In addition, both of them participated in other translations from Bulgarian: Milan Kundera in publication *Bulharské jaro* (arranged by Z. Hanzová and V. Maršiček, Prague, *Mladá fronta* 1957) and Ludvík Kundera in the Memorial volume *Bulharská lidová poesie* (Prague, Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění 1957). Miland

Kundera is only named as the translator of the poem *Jaro* (*Spring*, in the newspaper *Rudé právo*, 17 March 1957, page 4) by **Kliment Cačev**. In other cases it was always Ludvík Kundera.

The same problem appears in translations from German, although in case of the poem *Dvě Německa* (*Two Germanies*) by **J. R. Becher**, the name of Milan Kundera as the translator is probably correct, since this poem with thus indicated translator was imprinted twice, with the four-year lapse of time (in the Memorial volume *Mládí světa v boji za mír*, Prague *Mladá fronta* 1951, page 24 – 25, and in the magazine *Hlas revoluce* 8, 1955, No. 7, page 10). Of course, it is quite possible that the magazine *Hlas revoluce* could only repeat a four years old mistake. Nevertheless, Milan Kundera really translated from German later – the verse of Reiner Kunze. Ludvík Kundera translated Becher, indeed, but this poem, intended for Becher's anthology under the title of *Má dobo, čase můj* (*My Age, Time of Mine*, Prague, Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění 1956) wasn't translated by him but by František Vrba (under the title of *Kde bylo Německo.. / Where was Germany...*).

As to French authors, Milan Kundera chose a poet, who translated into French e.g. Otčenášek's work and namely Nezval's work (e.g. *Zpěv míru / Sing of Peace*), stayed also in Prague, where he translated Nezval's drama *Dnes ještě zapadá slunce nad Atlantidou* (*Sun Still Sets Today Upon Atlantis*). **François Kérel** won a golden medal at the International Festival of Youth in Warsaw in the year 1955. From the dialogue of Milan Kundera with Jiří Lederer for the newspaper *Večerní Praha* in 1958 it ensues that Kundera had a close relation to Kérel, there is a talk about „a joint friend“ (in the newspaper *Večerní Praha*, 24 May 1958). Kérel's poem *Za nic nestojí tvá láska* (*No Earthly Good is Your Love*, in the newspaper *Literární noviny* 4, 1955, No. 47, page 7) is a schematic text about struggle for equality and freedom of people, prisoners and workers: „*Jestli nejdeš do boje / s těmi, kteří trpí / jestli nejdeš do boje za svobodu, bratře / za nic nestojí tvá láska. // If you are not going to fight / together with those, who suffer / if you are not going to fight / for freedom, brother / no earthly good is your love. // In solitude / tenderness / dies!*“ Kérel later translated Kundera's books which were issued in France from the seventies to the nineties into French (e.g. *Valčík na rozloučenou*, the novel was issued by Gallimard and is dedicated to Kérel, or also by Gallimard issued *Směšné lásky*).

Choice of translation from Spanish and Portuguese (a talk about the poem *Prohlašuji / I Declare* by **Rymund Araújo**, the Brazilian poet, will be later) comes probably from the initiative of Adolf Kroupa. He is mostly indicated as a co-translator. There is probably most often represented the Cuban poet, **Nicolás Guillén**. It concerns poems *Píseň návratu* (*Song of Return*, dedicated to Jorge Amado, in the magazine *Nový život* 1953, No. 12, page 1411; it is written there: „Together with the author translated by Adolf Kroupa and Milan Kundera), and *Co*

*vyprávěla holubice o černochovi* (*What did Dove Narrate About Negro*, in the newspaper *Rudé právo*, 16 January 1955, page 4, translated by A. Kroupa and M. Kundera, also in the magazine *Host do domu* 2, 1955, No. 1, page 12, translated by A. Kroupa and M. Kundera with the language cooperation of Z. Hampejs). Milan Kundera participated in translation of other Guillén's poem, *Píseň na Stalina* (*Song on Stalin*), with the language cooperation of Zdeněk Hampejs (in the magazine *Nový život* 1953, No. 12, page 1409 – 1410). Those are the poems challenging to fight for peace, to national-liberation fight, to fight against the American imperialism, poems glorifying Stalin as a pilot of history – everything expressed by contemporary terminology. „*Staline, tys náš kapitán! / Kam ukážeš, lid světa půjde tam. Stalin, you are our captain! / Where you direct, the people of the world will go there.*“

**Nazim Hikmet**, the Turkish poet, is a similar case. His poem *Na tebe myslím* / *That's you who I'm thinking of* (in the Memorial volume *Mládí světa*, Prague, Státní nakladatelství dětské literatury 1953, page 107 – 110), from the Russian original translated by Adolf Kroupa and Milan Kundera. It is declaration of love to the Turkish Communist Party which is a brother of the party of Soviet communists, love to the U.S.S.R., Turkey, to workers, family. „*Na tebe myslím, / turecká strano komunistů, / má TKS. / Tys náš včerejšek, zítřek / ohnivé dnes, / tys naše umění, / největší ze všech, velkolepé, / tys naše srdce i rozum, / našeho boje pěst. // Nad zvuň není na světě slavnější rod: / Jsi mladší bratr VKS(b). (...) Má největší hrdost jsi ty / a právo jít v tvých řadách. (...) Na vás myslím, políčka, úbory zvadlé. (...) Nyní vás betonem Yankeeové zalili / a proměnili v aerodromy smrti. (...) Na tebe myslím, má země, / Turecko mé, na tebe myslím dnes. / Vlastně jsem ani na chvíli nepřestal na tebe myslet / a smutek po tobě bych nikdy neunes, / kdybych neměl to štěstí tady v Moskvě žít, / kdyby se každý na tebe neptal tady, / kdybych nemusel denně balíky dopisů otvírat, / kdyby tě tu, má země, neměli rádi, / tak jako já je mám rád.*“  
*It's you, / who I'm thinking of, / Turkish party of communists, / my Turkish Communist Party. / You are our yesterday, tomorrow, / flaming today, / you are our arts, / the greatest of all, grandious, / you are our heart and head, / our struggle's fist. // There is not more famous clan in the world: / you are the Great Communist Bolshevik Party's younger brother. (...) My greatest proud are you / and a right to march in your lines. (...) That's you, what I'm thinking of, croft, faded fallows. (...) Now theYankees have covered you with concrete / and transformed in aerodromes of death. (...) It's you, who I'm thinking of, my country, / my Turkey, today I'm thinking of you. / I've never stopped thinking of you, indeed, / and I'd never bear the sorrow at you, / if I hadn't the luck of living here, in Moscow, / if everybody wouldn't ask about you here, / if I didn't need to open bales of letter, / if they didn't love you, my country, / as I love them.*“

Direction of Kundera's translating interest gradually changed, and since the end of fifties, more exactly since the year 1958, these translations had been issued in periodicals. It is namely work of **Guillaume Apollinaire** (translations were issued in the periodicals *Literární noviny*,

Květen, Divadlo, Rudé právo, Host do domu, Kulturní tvorba, Československý voják and in the magazine Friendship, and that during the years 1958 - 69; we consider publishing of eight Apollinaire's poems in the magazine Květen No. 11, volume 3, 1957 – 58 to be very important, even the most important thing from journal publications of M. Kundera's translations in that time as it was printing of a great extent and in a periodical which was perceived as a generational one) and that of **Reiner Kunze** (in the periodicals Kultura, Literární noviny and Plamen, during the years 1962 – 64). It is necessary to add the printing of four poems, the author of which is **Tassos Georgiou**, the Greek poet (in the newspaper Kulturní tvorba 1964) and a reprint of the poem *Prohlašuji (I Declare)*, translated already at the beginning of the fifties, the author of which is Brazilian author **Rymundo Araújo** (in the newspaper Rudé právo, 24 May 1964). Translation of this poem from Portuguese, a joint work of M. Kundera and A. Kroupa, was published for the first time – together with some other poems under the title *Světů mír, válce boj (Peace to World, Fight to War)*, in the newspaper Literární noviny in the year 1953). Several verses from Araújo's poem may show that the publishing in 1964 was considerably archaic: „*Jsem Brazílec, ženat, komunista, básník. / Svůj zpěv hledám v hlase soudruhů, / kteří – palčivá sůl – ze země promluvili ke mně / a ze lnu, z oleje, z cementu, z obilí. / Mňoukání samotářské nechám těm, / kteří – šíří se slavičím zobákem - / mají na víčkách skelný prach / a v brdle mají rez. (...) Dejte mi traktor a z mlčenlivých kukuřic / nám rudé věže štěstí vystavím.*“ „*I'm Brazilian, married, communist, poet. / I'm seeking for my sing in voices of comrades, / who – biting salt – addressed me from the earth depth / and from flax, from oil, from cement, from corn. / I leave the lone miao to those, who – scorpions with a nightingale's pecker - / have a glass dust on their eyelids / and rust in their throats. (...) Give me a tractor and from the voiceless corn / I'll build up red towers of happiness for us.*“

In addition, a bookish anthology of Apollinaire's poetry under the title *Pásmo a jiné verše (Band and other verse, Prague, Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění)*, was issued in 1958. It was indited by M. Kundera together with Adolf Kroupa. They also translated some poems. As that anthology was issued in the same year, in which the first Kundera's translation of Apollinaire's poetry appeared in internal in the official press, we may suppose that Kundera had occupied himself with translating of Apollinaire before. In the year 1965 there was issued another anthology of Apollinaire's poetic production: *Alkoholy života (Drinks of the Life, Prague, Československý spisovatel)*, as a result of Kundera's and Kroupa's cooperation.

The verse which Kundera translated during the first after-February decade and which were issued in inland official periodicals, conformed with the contemporary feeling. They are not unusual, neither thematically, or formally. Kundera was doubtless inspired, in the time when he himself wrote poetry, by Tyčyna's accent on popular character, use of folk song ( this

expressed itself also in translations of Tyčyna's poems made by Jan Trefulka; Kamil Bednář concentrated namely on poems which glorified Stalin), melodiousness. Themes and processes of Tyčyna's poems *Ted' mluví les* (*Forest is Speaking Now*), *Harfami, barfami* (*With Harps, with Harps*), *Šla jsem lesem* (*I Was Walking Through the Forest*) or *Sbor lesních zvonků* (*Choir of Forest Bells*) sound in Kundera's poems *Vánoční vyznání* (*Christmass Confession*), *Zeleň mého domova* (*The Green of my Home*) or *Toho dne v Brně* (*On that day in Brno*). Similarly Tyčyna's poem *Pohřeb přítele* (*Friend's Burial*) which was much appreciated by Kundera in his preface to the anthology *Ocel a něha* (it is „one of the greatest poetic works brought forth by the socialist epoch“ for him), Kundera's verse *Ne, černý průvode* (*No, Black Procession*). Death for ideals of revolution, for equality of people and even death in the struggle against the Fascist is a path towards immortality (e.g. in Tyčyna's poem *Oj, do sněhu bílého* / *Hey, into the Snow White*, in Kundera's poem *Poprava v Kounicových kolejích* / *Execution at the Kounic College*), let us say by words of Kundera, „the path of the real, genuine optimism which doesn't shield its eyes against dark sides of life“.

Propensity to epic which is evident in some Kundera's poems (e.g. *Tři braši u pěti jabloní* / *Three fellows at five appletrees* or *To není láska* / *This is not love*), could be drawn also from the poetry of Tyčyna (e.g. *Ovanesovo dětství* / *Ovanes' Childhood* or *Pohřeb přítele* / *Friend's Burial*). It is similar with a dialogic form used by Tyčyna (e.g. in the poem *Fed'kovyč u zbojníka Kobylci* / *Fedkovych at Rebel Kobylca* or again in the poem *Ovanesovo dětství* / *Ovanes' Childhood*) and by Kundera, too (e.g. *Maminky* / *Mums*).

Of course, M. Kundera worked in his poetry also with emblems of so called Soviet poetry, as it is evident from the most common emblem of Stalin (a number of Tyčyna's poems, Kundera's poem *Italská* / *Italian*). Also Kundera combines the theme of home with the necessity of struggle for its protection (poem *Procházka Vysočinou* / *A Walk Through the Highlands*), similarly as Tyčyna (poem *Tam po návsi za kostelem* / *There along the Village Green Behind the Church*). Both of them perceive the role of the poet in society as a people's tribune, they find the sense of his creation in identification with the nation (Tyčyna in trilogy poem *Dopisy básníkovi* / *Letters to the Poet*, as well as Kundera in triplicate poem *Od obzoru jednoho k obzoru všech* / *From the Horizon of One to the Horizon of Everyone*).

The influence of the Russian and Ukrainian poetry on Kundera's poetic creation is provable and evident. Poems of so called progressive authors of Latin literature belong to the sphere which didn't influence the poet Kundera too much; the themes treated here were widespread in so far all over the countries of the Soviet (artistic) influence - Stalin, Lenin, so called national-liberation fight, fight against so-called imperialist America, the war in Korea and so on -, as it wouldn't be clear to deduce the influence on Kundera's work from them.

It is hard to say what motivated Kundera's choice of poems which he translated. Perhaps his desire for fame, perhaps his belief in the communist ideology, perhaps friendly relation to the authors of the verse. It could serve him as material for verifying his poetic capability. Also the relation to inland translators and friends probably was of some consequence: Adolf Kroupa in relation with the choice of texts from Spanish, or Jaroslav Hulák from Russian. Anyway, the translating activity of Milan Kundera from the period at the turn of the forties and fifties is a part of his artistic activity.