

LUDVÍK KUNDERA**Translating German Literature into Czech*****JITKA KOLÁŘOVÁ**

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ABSTRACT

Ludvík Kundera, a significant Czech translator, had been systematically working on Czech translations of German literature in the second half of the 20th century. The communist regime in former Czechoslovakia made his work complicated, for example by censorship and publication bans. Many translations carried out by Kundera were indeed published, although they were “covered” by another translator, or, they were published without stating any translator’s name at all. Some translations by Kundera were published in samizdat. Furthermore, the social and political situation in the “source country” was rather difficult. At that time, Germany was split into two states: Western *Federal Republic of Germany*, and Eastern *German Democratic Republic*. Therefore, what is today understood as German literature of the second half of the 20th century are literatures of two countries in fact: the literature of West Germany and the literature of East Germany. In my contribution, I will focus on detailed characteristics of the translation work of Ludvík Kundera.

Ludvík Kundera was the nine year older cousin of Milan Kundera, the famous French writer of Czech origin, who has been living in exile in France since 1975, where he became a naturalized citizen. He is best known as the author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*), and *The Joke* (*Žert*). Five years before Milan Kundera’s novel *The Joke* was published, Ludvík Kundera wrote a play called *The Non-Joke* (*Nežert*).

On Monday, October 12, the eighty-nine-year-old poet, playwright, editor and translator, Ludvík Kundera, received the 2009 Jaroslav Seifert Prize for his lifetime literary work. The prize, named after Jaroslav Seifert (1901–1986), the Czech 1984 Nobel Literature Prize winner, has been awarded by Charter 77 since 1986 – first in Stockholm and since 1990 in Prague. Its winner is announced every year on September 22, the eve of Seifert’s birthday. Ludvík’s cousin Milan Kundera was awarded the prize in 1994.

As the comparative facts I have just provided suggest, Ludvík Kundera was not only a translator; he originally established his career as a poet and a writer, as well as an editor of culture magazines. He started publishing in 1938, in a high-school

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magazine called *Young Culture (Mladá kultura)*. During World War II, he published unofficially the so-called “black prints”, illegally distributed books with anywhere from four to forty-five copies. His first officially published book, the poem *Živly v nás*, appeared in 1946 and described his war experience. Within only three years, until 1948, Kundera published five books as well as his first translation from German: *Die andere Seite* by Alfred Kubin, in Czech as *Země snivců*.

Kundera’s literary work is closely connected with avantgarde schools – surrealism, poetism, and dadaism. The communist regime in former Czechoslovakia, however, put obstacles on his writing in the form of censorship and publication bans. After 1948, he could no longer publish his surrealist books; many of the art groups he was connected with, e.g. the surrealist *Skupina Ra (Ra Group)*, were banned, the cultural life stifled. In the decade following World War II, Kundera worked as an editor in Brno: in the *Blok* literary review (1946–1949), the *Rovnost* daily (1950–1952), and the *Host do domu* art and literature magazine (1953–1955).

For political reasons, he decided in 1955 to give up any occupation in institutions directed or controlled by the government and became a freelance author and translator. In his view, the most important part of his work – which included prose, poems, more than thirty dramatic works and over a hundred translations – is his poetry. Even in his old age, he still kept writing, following the Latin saying *Nulla dies sine linea* – no day without a line.

As he was not allowed to publish his own work, he focused on translations. He translated from many languages, e.g. French, Bulgarian, Slovak, Serbian, or Russian; to some extent, he also used interlinear translations. Nevertheless, it is his translation work in the German-Czech language pair that is most extensive and has had the biggest intercultural impact.

Kundera’s mother came from Austria and spoke German; her son was born in the independent Czechoslovakia and spoke Czech at school, however, it could be said that he grew up bilingual. His first attempts at translation came rather early: at the age of sixteen, he attempted to translate some poems by Heinrich Heine and Nikolaus Lenau, and at seventeen, he translated the lyric narration *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke (Píseň o lásce a smrti korneta Kryštofa Rilka)*, which is now available in nine Czech versions. Kundera’s translation was published in 1958 as a “new-year print” in the *Naše vojsko* publishing house.

In 1944, Kundera discovered for himself Christian Morgenstern and Hans Arp, both great language experimentalists and excellent poets. He had been working on Morgenstern’s texts for more than fifty years. His first official translation of *Palmström*, a part of *Galgenlieder (Šibeniční písně)*, appeared only in 2001; as a typescript, however, he published a translation of *Ginganz – Šeldocele* already in 1944, in a total of six copies. As for Hans Arp, Kundera found his book of poetry *Weisst du schwarz du* so inspiring that he finished his translation called *Černé býlí* within a week, and four bibliophile editions with an original drawing by Josef Istler were published within just a month, as one of the already mentioned “black prints”. His translations were legally published in 1988 in a selection of Arp’s poetry called *Na jedné noze*. The original title *Černé býlí* was not allowed because of the connotation with the Chernobyl disaster.

In 1946, while visiting Paris, Kundera happened to meet Hans Arp at an exhibition, and they stayed in contact for another twenty years – when the censorship allowed it – until Arp’s death.

The first legally published translation by Ludvík Kundera was a fantastic novel by the Austrian author Alfred Kubin. I have already mentioned the title *Země snivců – Die andere Seite* in German. Kundera got his first contract for this book; it was in 1944 and stated: “Five thousand Czech crowns once forever.” As far as I know, the translation has appeared under this title four times: in 1947, 1997 and 2009 in Czechoslovakia, or in the Czech Republic, and in 1981 in exile, in Zürich, Switzerland.

Shortly after World War II, Kundera translated several poems by the Austrian expressionist Georg Trakl. It was a different kind of work because Trakl’s poetry had been already translated into Czech before him, by the poet Bohuslav Reynek. Also, the Czech translation was the very first Trakl translation, as it appeared in 1917, just four years after the first German edition. Kundera was thus Trakl’s second, let us say, “interpreter” into Czech. Today there is another one, Radek Malý, a representative of the younger generation; he published his translation in 2005 and in his dissertation, he focused on the reflections of Trakl’s poetry in Czech literature. Of course, there have been many others who translated at least some of Trakl’s poetry as it is considered a sort of “challenge” among major poets. But back to Kundera: he published all his translations of Trakl in a book named simply *Básně (Poems)* first in 1965. A selection of twelve poems was then printed in 1987 to mark the one hundred year anniversary of Trakl’s birth. Finally, Kundera revised his work and published more than three hundred pages of his translations in 1995, including a detailed postface and pictures, in a book called *Šebestián ve snu*. A year later, in 1996, he was awarded the State Translation Prize for both his translations of Georg Trakl and Gottfried Benn, and in recognition of his lifetime translation work.

Speaking about expressionism, I would like to mention another work of excellence by Kundera, namely the anthology of expressionism called *Haló, je tady vichřice!*, which was published after the Prague Spring in 1969 in the Československý spisovatel state publishing house. He selected all the texts, translated them, prepared a pictorial documentation and wrote the introductory essay. The title of the anthology is actually a line from the poem “Storm” by Alfred Lichtenstein, a Berlin poet who died in 1914 in the Battle of the Somme.

At about the same time as in the case of Trakl, Kundera carried out his first translations of Bertolt Brecht’s poems. In 1955, two years before Brecht died, Kundera met him in a theatre in Berlin after a rehearsal. Consequently, Kundera, together with Rudolf Vápeník, was given the exclusive copyright by Brecht to translate his work into Czech. They both edited and translated Brecht’s literary works, Kundera mainly the poetry and lines in Brecht’s plays, altogether thirty-five of them. Brecht’s collected writings in Czech – eight books overall – were published over a period of thirty years, from 1959 to 1989. In the 1970s and 1980s, Kundera was a prohibited author and he could not be even mentioned as the translator in the seventh volume of Brecht’s *Works*¹;

¹ Brecht, Bertolt. *Krejcarový román. Obchody pana Julia Caesara: Prózy*, Vol. 7, Praha: Odeon, 1973.

instead, there is only the following arrogant statement in the imprint: “Translated from original German scripts.” And one could find many other examples of this practice, that is eliminating the author’s name.

Ludvík Kundera masked his works by pseudonyms as well, e.g. Fernand Gromaire, a fictitious French poet whose “name” Kundera used in order to get his own poems published in the Meander magazine in 1968–1969 as well as in other media, presenting them as translations.

In other cases, Kundera made use of another widespread socially-political phenomenon called “covering” (*pokryvání*). To explain this: non-prohibited, usually less known authors or scholars “covered” with their names the work of prohibited authors or translators, who were often their friends. Ludvík Kundera thus “borrowed” the following names:

Milada Blekastadová, a nordist, for the adaptation of a drama by Erik Krag, *Balada o Hilébiu*, published in 1972;

Josef B. Michl, a nordist, for the translation of poems by J. R. Becher, *Bílý zážrak*, published in 1973;

Zdena Lacinová, the wife of visual artist Bohdan Lacina, for the translation of short fiction by Franz Fühmann, *Žonglér v kině* and *Dvaadvacet dní aneb půle života*, published in 1974 and 1979;

Vladimír Mikeš, a translator, for a drama adaptation from Spanish by Jacinto Benavente, *Vzbuzené zájmy*, first performed on stage in Brno in 1977;

Valerie Sochorovská, an employee of the Dilia copyright agency, for the translation of a play by J. N. Nestroy, *Dům temperamentů*, published in 1973;

Josef Suchý, a poet, for the translation of lines published in Richard Friedenthal’s monography about J. W. Goethe, *Goethe a jeho život*, published in 1973;

František Tenčík, a literary historiographer, for the literary lexicon *Slovníček literárních pojmů*, published in 1976;

Evžen Turnovský, a theatre scientist, for Kundera’s theatrolological papers;

Evžen Sokolovský, a film director, for Kundera’s TV adaptation of *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*, broadcast in 1978;

Evžen Němec, a film director, for Kundera’s television play *Vrtkavý král*, broadcast in 1975;

and Jan Hanzálek, the chief librarian in Znojmo, for the publication *Sto let české knihovny ve Znojmě*, published in 1978.

In this connection, I would like to draw your attention to a book called *Zamlčovaní překladatelé – The Unmentionables: Banned Translators, 1948–1989*, a reference manual listing the real authors of 662 literary translations carried out in former Czechoslovakia, which was initiated and produced in 1992 by the Czech Literary Translators’ Guild.

You may have noticed that all the “covered” titles mentioned above appeared in the 1970s. The period of the 1970s and 1980s, so-called “normalization”, was extremely hard for Ludvík Kundera. In fact, his publication ban was partially caused by the

emigration of his cousin Milan Kundera to France in 1975. Fortunately, Ludvík Kundera was provided great support in these difficult times by his German friends who helped him to publish in Germany, strictly speaking in the German Democratic Republic.

In 1949, Germany split into two states: the Western *Federal Republic of Germany*, and the Eastern *German Democratic Republic*. Therefore, what is today understood as German literature of the second half of the 20th century are in fact two literatures: that of West Germany and that of East Germany. There are actually still some voices declaring that the schism of German literature was not overcome by the political reunion in 1990. In any case, everything was doubled during the forty years of the division into the two countries: two national bibliographies; two book fairs, one traditionally in Leipzig in the spring and another one in Frankfurt am Main in the autumn; two central libraries; and two Publishers and Booksellers Associations – more than thirty publishing houses operated under the same name in West Germany as well as in the GDR.

Ludvík Kundera, living and working in Czechoslovakia, which was as “democratic” as the GDR, kept correspondence as well as personal contacts with GDR authors. He first visited the GDR in 1954; however, his first stay in Germany was during WWII, in 1943, as he was in “totaleinsatz”, working in an ammunition depot near Berlin.

The first study stay in the GDR in 1954 was followed by another one just a year later when Kundera met Brecht, and since then, he went abroad regularly. In 1967, he received a fellowship which enabled him to come for another visit to the Federal Republic of Germany. During his tours, he established contacts with many East German authors, especially poets, who became his friends, e.g. Franz Fühmann, Peter Huchel, Wulf Kirsten, Günter Kunert, Reiner Kunze and others; he remembers them in his memoirs called *Různá řečiště*. There are at least two reasons why Kundera stayed in touch especially with lyric poets – lyrics were close to his heart, but even more, lyrics and accenting privacy was the field where censorship – but not the quality of the literary works – was rather weak.

Kundera translated the lyrics of his German friends into Czech. Let me give you some examples:

From the quite extensive work of Franz Fühmann, the story writer, essayist, author of children’s books as well as translator, born in Rokytnice nad Jizerou, Czechoslovakia, Kundera translated e.g. the novella *Kameraden*, in Czech *Pohraniční stanice* (1961), the short stories *König Ödipus* and *Der Jongleur im Kino oder Die Insel der Träume*, in Czech as *Žonglér v kině* (1974), as well as the diary *Zweiundzwanzig Tage oder Die Hälfte des Lebens*, in Czech *Dvaadvacet dní aneb Půle života* (1979). Kundera translated also Peter Huchel’s poems, under the titles *Dvanáct nocí* (1958) and *Silnice, silnice* (1964); Kirsten’s poems as *Odkudkam* (2003); Kunze’s as *Věnování* (1964). I am mentioning only book translations here, i.e. no translations published in magazines, etc.

These contacts became extremely important in the 1970s and 1980s when Kundera was banned. To give you just one example: a couple of years after their jointly edited anthology of Czech 20th century poetry called *Die Glasträne*, Franz Fühmann suggested another one, an anthology of Czech lyrics covering eleven centuries, which

was published in 1987 under the title *Die Sonnenuhr*. Ludvík Kundera prepared the whole concept, selected the poems, wrote essays providing a literary and historic background for each period, and himself carried out about twenty-five translations. Shortly he was given a work contract by Reclam, a German publishing house.

However, the situation was even more complex. Together with Franz Fühmann and Louis Fürnberg, Kundera worked on a collection of poetry by the Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval. The book was ready for printing at the beginning of the 1970s. However, the publication ban in Czechoslovakia caused trouble in the GDR as well. In Franz Fühmann's correspondence, one can find a letter addressed to Hans Marquardt, the director of the GDR publishing house Reclam Leipzig, suggesting to name Kundera under a pseudonym Ludwig Dera or Ludwig Kuhn. It was, however, only in 1978 that the book was published including Ludvík Kundera's name.

In 2002, Kundera was awarded the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding for his contribution to the mediation of Czech and German literature. In his acceptance speech, he went through the six decades of his translation work and noticed that his translations were often linked to his own life stories. His own journey led from Alfred Kubin to Franz Kafka and the expressionists as well as to Gottfried Benn, from Hans Arp to the dadaists, from Peter Huchel to Georg Heym, from Erich Arendt to Georg Büchner, Hans Christian Grabbe and Andreas Gryphius. His bibliography reveals even more such links.

To sum up, I can only quote Jiří Munzar, Professor of Germanic Studies:

Given his focus on the German cultural area, Ludvík Kundera can be considered rather an exception among our poets-translators. Nobody has done more to introduce German poetry into Czech culture than he has. One could possibly compare his contribution only to that of Otokar Fischer, who however concentrated more on older literature.

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