

LANGEROVÁ, Žo: *Žila jsem s oddaným komunistou. Československo – můj osud 1934–1968 / My Life With A Good Communist. Czechoslovakia – My Fate 1934–1968*/. Prostor, Prague 2017, 242 pages

When Zsófia (Žo) Bein (1912–1990), the Budapest-born daughter of a sugar refinery owner, married Oskar Langer, an economist, left-wing intellectual and member of the Communist Party from Příbovec near Martin in 1934, she was 22 years old and he was five months her senior. They lived together in Bratislava, where their daughter Zuzana was born in 1936. But at the end of 1938, they were forced as Jews to flee Czechoslovakia and emigrate to the United States, where they lived until 1946. Oskar never succeeded in understanding America, but his wife soon found a job and her language skills helped her settle into the life of an émigré. They were granted U.S. citizenship, but at the urging of Langer's comrades they returned to Slovakia in 1946. For two years, Oskar worked for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia, then as a deputy to the Commissioner for Nutrition (a post filled at the time by Michal Chudík, to be followed by Jozef Šoltész). In 1948, their daughter Táňa was born, and Žo was working in the foreign trade company Ligna. On a business trip to Prague in August 1951, she learned of her husband's arrest. Overnight, the entire family's life changed. For three weeks they had no information about the fate of Žo's husband and the girls' father, and what's more, Žo was thrown out of her job and the family was later evicted from their apartment. After contacting his friends, she realised that her husband's situation was hopeless, but she was still shocked by his role as a witness in the trial of an alleged treasonous conspiracy headed by Rudolf Slánský. Oskar Langer was himself sentenced to 22 years in prison and his wife and daughters were "relocated" to the village of Tvrdošovce in the district of Nové Zámky. She did not give up, and in order to be close to her older daughter Zuzana, who had just begun a singing career (she had begun as an amateur before turning professional in 1954),¹ she sublet an expensive apartment in Bratislava. In 1956, she managed to find a job in the media, working first for the Bratislava daily *Večerník* (Evening paper) and then for the magazine *Príroda a spoločnosť* (Nature and Society), where she stayed until her retirement.

Oskar Langer tried to address Communist Party leaders from prison, with a letter drawing attention to the practices of the investigators – the cruel interrogations and forced confessions – but to no avail. He was not released until the amnesty of 1960 and, still a convinced Communist, returned home to three women who had fought hard against the Communist regime. After two years he was rehabilitated. He then worked as a clerk until his untimely death in 1966 – no doubt brought on at least in part by the effects on his health of imprisonment.

1 Zuzana Langerová (appearing under the professional name Zuzana Lonská), released over twenty singles as well as an LP in 1969. She performed with Bratislava orchestras and ensembles, performed among others in the Tatra Revue, on the radio, on television and toured in many European countries. She was one of Czechoslovakia's leading jazz singers.

In 1968, their elder daughter was performing in Sweden with her husband, the musician Zdeněk Kratochvíl (1925–1984). On the fifth day of the Soviet-led occupation, Žo Langerová fled by car for Austria with Táňa, her younger daughter. Táňa later travelled to London, where she worked as an au-pair and studied, while Žo went on to Sweden. Ultimately all three of them – Žo, Zuzana with her family and Táňa – made Sweden their home. Žo managed to add Swedish to her many languages, and worked in the public administration.

In 1979, her memoirs were published in London,² most of which had been written in Czechoslovakia, and merely completed in Sweden. She incorporated in them passages from the diary that she had kept all her life.³ Langerová's contact with the publishing house was mediated by the family for whom her daughter Táňa daughter worked as an au-pair.⁴

In her book, she gives a perspective – engagingly, cleverly and with a sense of humanist values⁵ – of her life and the life of her family. She portrayed the contemporary atmosphere of a regime which liquidated people both physically and mentally, killing both thoughts and souls. It is a story of an internally strong, brave woman who had reached the bottom but managed to get up again to become the keystone of her family. The author maintains her dispassionate tone and is not afraid of (self) irony even in passages that are emotionally tense. It is up to the reader to contemplate how he or she would have dealt with the same situation...

The book was a great success and is available in libraries around the world. Two years later, a French edition was published.⁶ It was translated by the famous French actress Simone Signoret (1921–1985), wife of Yves Montand (1921–1991) and

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- 2 LANGER, Jo: *Convictions. Memories of a Life Shared with a Good Communist*. Andre Deutsch, London 1979. A book with the subtitle *My Life with a Good Communist* was later published by Granta Books in 2011. Both publications, including various translations, have been widely reviewed. The different views of reviewers are also interesting; some compare her book to the works of Franz Kafka or Edgar Allan Poe, and appreciate, in addition to its literary qualities, the danger of romantic infatuation with the idea of Communism. The editions which appeared in Spain and Belarus are pirated, according to what her daughters told the audience at the Pod Palmovkou Theatre on 29 October 2017.
- 3 In America, she wrote a diary for her daughter Zuzka in English, which has been preserved, as opposed to her diary in Hungarian of which only the passages preserved in her memoirs have survived. When she emigrated she tore out a few sheets of paper, as her daughters said in an interview with the script advisor after the performance of *Back Then In Bratislava*: [...] *even as a little girl she dreamed of being a writer. Life and fate intervened, and in the end she only wrote one book. But what a book!* See MICHNOVÁ, Monika (ed.): *Bulletin k inscenácii Vtedy v Bratislave* / Bulletin on the production of *Back then in Bratislava*. Slovak Chamber Theatre, Martin 2015 – see http://www.skdmartin.sk/files/pdf/1380-web_bulletin_vvba.pdf (quoted version dated 22. 7. 2019).
- 4 KALINOVÁ, Agneša: O knihe a jej osudoch. Doslov /About the book and its fate. Epilogue/. In: LANGEROVÁ, Žo: *Vtedy v Bratislave. Můj život s Oskarom L.* /Back Then In Bratislava. My Life With Oskar L./. Marenčin PT, Bratislava 2007, pp. 333–334.
- 5 [...] *she never disowned – though she tried sincerely to do so – the fact that deep down she was a Jewish girl from a good Budapest family, and hence neither did she disown her intellect and bourgeois education based on humanist values*, as Ján Štrasser adds in his review of the first Slovak edition of *O neživote v čase nášho stalinizmu* /A Non-Life at the Time of Our Stalinism/ in the newspaper *Sme* published on 6 September 2007 – see <https://www.sme.sk/c/3472660/o-nezivote-v-casenasho-stalinizmu.html> (quoted version dated 22. 7. 2019).
- 6 LANGER, Jo: *Une saison à Bratislava*. Seuil, Paris 1981.

Žo's cousin. The occupation of Czechoslovakia, a meeting with Artur London (1915–1986), who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in the trial of Rudolf Slánský and who had moved to France in 1963, and the couple's roles in the film *L'Aveu* (The Confession)⁷ by Costa-Gavras (born 1933), “cured” them of their Communist ideals. The reason for Simone's decision to translate Žo's memoirs into French was her guilt at having failed to help her Bratislava cousin in 1957. On a visit to Prague she had refused to come to Žo's aid and intervene on behalf of her husband, as she mentions in her memoirs published twenty years ago, also in Czech.⁸

Langerová's book later caught the eye of editors at a Swedish publishing house.⁹ They were surprised to learn that the author had been a Swedish citizen for more than a decade. They added a second subtitle to the book – *Prisoner of My Own Conscience*.

Žo Langerová also wanted her memoirs to be published in Slovak (her daughters claimed that Hungarian remained her mother tongue throughout her life, although she spoke Slovak to them). Ludmila Ďurovičová (1923–2010), the former editor of the weekly *Slovenka*, who had been living in Sweden since 1968, was tasked with doing the translation. In the mid-1980s, chapters of the book were read out on air on Radio Free Europe, in a programme dedicated to “censorship-free literature” presented by the historian, librarian and editor, Jozef Špetko (1932–2006); the radio adaptation was entitled *Strane verte, súdružka* (Faithful to the Party, Comrade).¹⁰ Ďurovičová's translation was eventually used for the Slovak edition, which was published in 2007, but it was so successful that in 2010 there was a second edition, followed by a third five years later. By July 2010, more than 5,000 copies had been sold.¹¹

The response to the book led to the creation of a documentary entitled *Vtedy v Bratislave* (Back then in Bratislava)¹², which was released on DVD as a supplement to the magazine *Kinečko* (Small cinema).¹³ Work was also under way to bring it to the theatre. It was adapted for the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin by Peter Pavlac¹⁴, known for his

7 LONDON, Artur: *Doznání /Confession/*. Československý spisovatel, Prague 1969 (published one year earlier by the Paris publishers Gallimard). The film version, released in France as *L'aveu*, premiered on 29 April 1970 and received nomination for the Golden Globe for the best foreign language film.

8 SIGNORETOVÁ, Simone: *Nostalgie už není, čím bývala /Nostalgia Isn't What It Used To Be/*. JEVA – Papyrus, Rudná u Prahy – Vimperk 1997. The original *La nostalgie n'est plus ce qu'elle était* was published in 1978 by the Paris publishers Seuil.

9 LANGER, Jo: *Även på svenska. Fången i sin övertygelse. Minnen från ett liv tillsammans med en god kommunist*. Askild & Kärnekull, Stockholm 1981.

10 ŠPETKO, Jozef: *Líšky kontra ježe. Slovenská politická emigrácia 1948–1989. Analýzy a dokumenty /Foxes Against Hedgehogs. Slovak Political Emigration 1948–1989. Analyses and Documents/*. Kalligram, Bratislava 2002, p. 190; KALINOVÁ, Agneša: *O knibe a jej osudoch. Doslov*, p. 338

11 ČOBEJOVÁ, Eva – GÁLIS, Tomáš: *Odmietané bestsellery /Rejected Bestsellers/*. *Týždeň*, 1 August 2010 – see <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/7117/odmietane-bestsellery/> (quoted version dated 22. 7. 2019).

12 Tereza Križkova's graduation film (VŠMU Film Faculty, Bratislava 2015).

13 *Kinečko*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 24 (February – March).

14 Peter Pavlac (born 1976), playwright, script editor, teacher and one of the youngest professors in Slovakia. He tried – unsuccessfully – to stage the play in 2007 at the Slovak National Theatre, and in 2013 produced a radio version for Slovak Radio with director Patrik Lančarič. After meeting the daughters of Žo Langerová they found the key for the stage adaptation lay in linking the book with dialogue

detailed study of sources for his theatrical adaptations and texts on historical themes.¹⁵ The premiere, directed by Patrik Lančarič¹⁶, took place on 6 November 2015. The production was successful not just in Martin, but also in a number of Slovak theatres. There were several performances in the Czech Republic too, most recently – unfortunately the last – on 29 October 2017 in Prague’s Divadlo pod Palmovkou theatre as part of the Palm Off Visegrad Four theatre festival. The audience was treated to an accurate yet impressive performance that reinforced the power of the literary text and was based on the fascinating performance of Jana Olhová. The performance was followed by a discussion with the author of the stage adaptation, the director, the actors and Žo Langerová’s two daughters – Zuzana and Táňa. Unfortunately, neither Slovak Radio nor Slovak Television recorded the stage adaptation...

The above should serve as a sufficient incentive to read this extraordinary book, written by a rare, intelligent and funny woman. Many readers have had a similar experience as Milan Lasica, who wrote the following dedication on the sleeve of the Slovak edition: *I haven’t read a book in one go for ages. Try it, you won’t regret it.*

◆ **Josef Halla**

between the author/mother and her daughters... The main role in the radio version was played by Jana Olhová. See MICHNOVÁ, Monika (ed.): *Bulletin k inscenácii Vtedy v Bratislave*.

- 15 Let us mention his next project at the Martin theatre, *Sedem dní do pobrehu* /Seven Days To The Funeral/, premiere on 25 May 2012, based on the book of the same name by Ján Rozner (1922–2006), depicting the week since the death of his wife, the writer, translator and literary historian Zora Jesenská (1909–1972) or, for instance, *Slovo Váškovo* /Válek’s Word/, premiere on 31 March 2015 in the Blue Lounge of the Slovak National Theatre, depicting a meeting between the Minister of Culture Miroslav Válek (1927–1991) and a technician working for the secret police who is in charge of a communication link with police headquarters during a candlelit demonstration on 25 March, 1988, and fiercely discusses his poetic composition *Slovo* /The Word/ with the poet as well as the contradictions between his work and political engagement. These pieces, too, are no longer being performed.
- 16 Director Patrik Lančarič (born 1972) worked with Petr Pavlac on most of his plays and adaptations. He currently works at Zlín Municipal Theatre.