

Josette Baer

The Green Butterfly

Hana Ponická (1922–2007), Slovak Writer, Poetess, and Dissident

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This study is dedicated to my dear colleague Jozef Žatkuliak (1954–2017), a member of the Department of History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (HÚ SAV) and specialist in Slovakia's political history in the post-Dubček years. He was the first to mention Hana Ponická to me and kindly provided me with online sources back in 2014. Sadly, Jozef is no longer with us, but thanks to him, I began to read Ponická's texts. I would have loved to discuss her life and political activities with him.

My biography is also dedicated to Helena and Ivan Klíma in Prague, who were so kind to Hana Ponická, supporting their fellow intellectual during her hardest times.

The Green Butterfly.

Hana Ponická (1922–2007). Slovak Writer, Poetess and Dissident

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Foreword

The intellectual in the two totalitarian systems and in democracy

From afar, the story of Hana Ponická's life does not deal solely with her person and personality, but also has wider historical implications and goals that originate in her life, namely, her crucial ethical legacy, which is valid to this day.

We can thus, with an eye on the greater and lesser details, generalize about the turbulent fate of this admirable representative of Slovak cultural life in the second half of the 20th century, because it applies to the whole of the political, societal, and cultural development of Czechoslovakia, thence also of Slovakia in the Cold War.

From the 1940s onwards, the years when the heroine of our story stepped into public life, until the first decade of the 21st century, when she died, Slovakia experienced a very dramatic and at times contradictory development. The country went through several fundamental changes with regard to the constitution and governmental politics. People judged the phases and the goals, remembering their own times, now rejecting and condemning them. This prompted the repeated interruption of the continuity of how people were understanding historical developments in Slovakia, which also mirrored their historical consciousness, referring to how they were perceiving society's collective historical memory.

A sensitive barometer and basic mirror of the situation back then were the reactions of the members of the artistic and scientific, indeed the entire cultural community, who were addressing the most important political and societal issues of Slovak public life. Through her professional activities, but also because of her private life and family background, Hana Ponická had been moving in the circles of the Slovak cultural and intellectual elite since her early youth. She became a natural and very important part of the elite, albeit not always a typical one; more than once, she found herself in the role of an *enfant terrible*, a role which she did not choose herself; external conditions out of her reach and influence pushed her into that role. The principles of democracy, humanism and tolerance formed her thinking and actions, that is, the essential elements of an intellectual.

One cannot, however, precisely define the characteristics of an intellectual because they do not exist. The concept of an 'intellectual' does not have distinctive features of general validity, nor strictly drawn defining borders. The concept is determined by the present times, the geopolitical status of a country and its political system. Paraphrasing the eminent Slovak literatus Rudolf Chmel: an intellectual is a widely talented, critical, and educated person who thinks along non-conformist lines. In a given situation and when the times demand it, the intellectual is capable of overcoming the boundaries of his area of professional expertise and interests by consulting his own experiences and opinions, his moral integrity but also the personal and moral courage that he needs to make a decision.

As the authentic bearer of that concept, the intellectual thus has the ambition to voice his opinions and activities to the wider public, or, at least, to those groups of citizens from which he expects consent and proportionate responses to his suggestions, considerations, or plans. He is aware of the risk of not being understood, rejected by public opinion, as expressed by most of the citizenry, and, on top of that, the risk of discriminatory and persecutory measures issued against him by the government.

Certainly, the practices mentioned were and still are being followed by totalitarian regimes, but there are also democratic states that cannot always resist their lure, even if their attacks on 'indecent' citizens—i.e. free-thinkers and non-conformists—are more sophisticated and appear to be milder. Against the risks mentioned, the intellectual, equipped with his scientific, journalistic, or organisational acumen, actively steps into the events of public life, and engages in them. Sometimes, as if through a 'back entry', and generally not very successfully at that, he finds himself in an environment alien to him: the arena of mindless political fights, for which he is not prepared in mental terms. As an exception, and as distinct from professional politicians, he is not interested in power or money. In the pragmatic—or rather, cynical—environment of everyday politics, the authentic intellectual does not fit in; he is not welcomed and cannot be indoctrinated because of his critical mind, incorruptible ethical position and moral grounding.

Professional politicians certainly are using and abusing, to their benefit, popular persons and outstanding members

of public life who enjoy considerable authority. However, the moment when the intellectual perceives any critique or disagreement from them, he quickly disengages, rids himself of the politicians, and if he has any power or means at his disposal, he subsequently condemns and ostracizes them. As a result, intellectuals—like most leading personalities—leave practical politics, feeling hurt, disappointed and disgusted.

Yet, this does not mean that all of them automatically give up on the essential elements of democracy, tolerance, humanism, or general human decency. They still have the ambition to act in the public sphere, yet not in politics, limited by ideology, but in the informal and non-official civic sphere. They want to engage in a continuous dialogue with the citizens, initiate and ask uncomfortable questions and, together with the discussants, look for answers, which are, however, rarely comfortable, or acceptable to the powers that be. That is why in totalitarian regimes, oppression, discriminatory observation, and direct persecution are established and organized very quickly.

In this environment, the intellectual cannot work in his profession, nor engage openly and freely in public. The brutal monitoring affects those who disseminate non-conformist thinking; it prompts damaging, but not always direct, or visible consequences for the whole of society and its moral profile. It is a characteristic element of the totalitarian government that it first deliberately targets its victims among the most eloquent and creative personalities of the artistic and scientific circles of the nation.

Even sadder is the understanding that many (the majority?) members of the cultural community, among them also intellectuals, are capitulating to the overbearing pressure from the regime, due to fear and opportunism, but also calculation. They turn away from their close and not so close colleagues and friends, who knew how to stand up against that pressure. In the best case, they tell them in private about their personal and moral solidarity or try to support them materially.

All the above-mentioned events and characteristics directly limited and influenced the professional and private life of Hana Ponická. She spent most of her adult life surviving two totalitarian regimes, which she came into personal and professional conflict with. In the first case, and as a university student, she joined the anti-Fascist resistance. After the Communist seizure of power in 1948 and the establishing of the second, this time the 'red totalitarianism', the regime painfully infringed on her artistic freedom and scientific research. Back then, some members of the cultural community were beginning to understand the moral duty of a citizen, artist and intellectual, engaging in public life also outside of their professional interests. This happened after the harsh sobering up and disappointment of the post-war pseudo-revolutionary illusions, and the daily experience of the anti-democratic and anti-humanitarian character of the totalitarian regime.

The first time that disappointment was clearly visible was in the year 1956. Back then, the regime oppressed the quiet attempts at a true civic engagement in public. The process

leading to demands for basic social reforms, voiced most often by Czech and Slovak scientists, writers, and other artists, was unstoppable. It peaked in the famous events of the so-called Spring of Prague; it lasted several months more, even after the brutal suppression of the reform process by Soviet tanks in August 1968.

In those months of an extraordinary spiritual and moral elation in all parts of Czechoslovak society, Hana Ponická's public engagement and focus on civic duties began to become visible. They were apparent in her texts that she was still allowed to publish. She was not alone in her activities, and she was never a 'fighter on the barricades'. Calmly, she explained to the readers, and the radio and television audience the convincing evidence of her view of the events, not only in the fight for democracy and human rights, but also about aspects related to solutions of actual and constitutional problems, which were fervently catching the attention of the wounded conscience of the Slovak public, humiliated by the occupation of the alleged allies. She excelled in her extraordinary argumentation, which was rationally formulated, bearing a touch of female sensitivity.

For two more decades, the re-established totalitarian system of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', referred to as 'Normalization', was again oppressing not only artistic and scientific freedom, but also the civil and human rights of the people—much as if the wheels of history were turning backwards. A society, which is again shocked by fear, apathy and indifference towards public issues falls into lethargy. Certainly, the regime did not take up the drastic measures of

persecution it had used in the first years of being in power, but went against its critics, mainly members of the cultural community, with the refined method of 'carrot and stick'.

The government was trying to terrorize and silence its opponents not only by monitoring them with the police, state administration and the judicial system, but also with the offer of cooperation and most importantly, the promise to be allowed to publish again and return to public life, naturally under the condition that they give up their independent civil activities, and, humiliating themselves in public, revoke and regret their earlier texts, or other 'damaging' expressions and opinions. The 'sorting of the souls' began again in both nations' communities of culture, art and literature, and in wider society; this process had repeated itself several times in modern Slovak history.

The decisive boundary of that sorting or selection was the moral integrity of a person, determined not only by an individual's character, but also fear, courage or cowardice, and the understandable wish to continue the forbidden artistic work, yet sometimes also promoted by careerism and the willingness to openly collaborate with the totalitarian regime. In that complicated and psychologically challenging process, Hana Ponická prevailed with honour. Because she repeatedly refused to publicly revoke her opinions, the state security service monitored her, harassing her with various oppressive schemes.

The harassment did not break her, on the contrary: it reinforced her national and civil focus. She belonged to a small group of Slovak intellectuals and dissidents, who risked their

personal freedom participating in various activities, for example, showing solidarity with *Charter 77*, signing the petition *A Few Sentences* and engaging in the independent movement for civic freedom; they criticized the totalitarian regime and its rule. She never underwent the humiliation of publicly revoking her opinions, positions, and activities, albeit the authorities tried to press her into it several times—in exchange for the possibility to publish again and return to public life.

The writer, journalist, translator and organizer of cultural events, the tireless propagator of Slovak culture abroad, withstood every pressure and also the tawdry offers of ‘liberating self-criticism’. Because she was getting into an unwanted professional and more often also personal isolation from her terrorized and opportunistic writer friends, she desperately tried one more time to speak up in public, that is, at the congress of the Writers’ Union. In her speech, which she was not allowed to present, she protested against the anti-democratic methods of the government in cultural policy and immediately became the outcast of the officially acknowledged community of writers.

Yet, she knew that her attempt to speak up was not her swansong in the official framework of the Slovak Writer’s Union; she knew that, by trying to have her speech published in the minutes of the Congress of the Writers’ Union, she would have to face persecution by the government. Back then, fear dominated the Writer’s Union; attempting to show courage by supporting a female colleague was a no-go, and not one of the then influential *literati* supported her in public, alt-

though they had at their disposal her courageous text. Her influential speech was made public in full in the foreign press, where it was dubbed the Slovak *Charter 77*.

After the fall of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia, the dissident and authentic intellectual Hana Ponická returned to public life, with her honest publicistic and organizational work, and without celebratory fanfares. She did not wish for a political career but dedicated herself to artistic work and activities in the framework of civil organizations. She continued to maintain her critical and constructive comments about public, mainly cultural events.

Perhaps this is a cynical statement, but fate was kind and forgiving to Hana Ponická, because she did not live long enough to witness the increasing devaluation of the principles of the Velvet Revolution, the brutalization of society, the growing hatred in the political struggle, nor the steady ongoing harsh commercialization of the cultural space. She would have protested against them in the name of the ideals of democracy, humanism, decency and true cultural values, for which she fought tirelessly throughout her life.

Ivan Kamenec, Bratislava,
December 2021