
Žo Langerová: VTEDY V BRATISLAVE: MÔJ ŽIVOT S OSKAROM L . (At that Time in Bratislava: My life with Oskar L .)s

Blanka Soukupová

A memoir of extraordinarily high literary quality by Žo Langerová (1912 Budapest–1990 Uppsala, Sweden), born to a well-off assimilated Hungarian Jewish family and married in 1932 to Communist intellectual Oskar Langer (1907–1966 Bratislava), can be read for many reasons and in many ways. Thus, in Žo's fate are reflected all of the hopes, disappointments and paradoxes of the stormy 20th century experienced in traditionally nationalistically and politically exposed Central Europe. Žo Langerová was emancipated, educated, talented in sports and, above all, an immensely politically naïve girl from a middle-class Budapest family. She became an enthusiastic pupil and, later, also the wife of a young Slovak clerk inclined toward the left. Along with him, she experienced the atmosphere of multiethnic, trilingual Bratislava in the mid-1930s. She was not very conscious of her Jewishness, and she took the numerous *clausus* (restricted number) in interwar Hungary to be just some sort of data. Her Jewish identity came out only after World War II from negative experiences: the Shoah, political trials with anti-Semitic sub-texts although, in 1938, she had already become a Jewish refugee and had had to start a new home and new work in the United States of America. There she changed as a mother, as the assistant to the manager of a bookstore, and as the main bread-winner in her family. However, before that, she worked as a door-to-door sales representative and a waitress, while her linguistically untalented husband turned to political activity among the Slovak Communists. In 1946, on an invitation from the Communist Party of Slovakia, the family returned home and Oskar made a career as a member of the Central Committee of the Party. Žo worked in a branch of an export firm, where, for the first time, after the February Revolution, she encountered the absurdity of Socialist planning and the all-mighty "personnel officer." During

that period, Oskar was arrested (1951). From a relatively privileged business representative of the Ligna commercial society, Žo and her two daughters became unwanted persons practically overnight. They were evacuated to a worse apartment and Žo had to step in as a production worker. Only later was she employed as an editor and clerk. In November 1952, after the news that her husband had been convicted, she was let go at work. Destalinization, during which her husband was rehabilitated (he was freed in May 1960 and rehabilitated in 1962) brought relatively better times to the family. Even before Oskar's return, the family, at that time already extensive, bought a beautiful apartment and later Žo obtained a practically unobtainable automobile. Oskar and other comrades, including those who had his imprisonment on their consciences, began to work on political change. As I have already said, Žo Langerová's honest confession and perceptive observations regarding the political situation, interlarded humor and self-irony can be read in many ways. A historian mainly appreciates their painful attempts at rehabilitation of her husband, repeated meetings with Party officials, attempts at intercession with an influential left-oriented cousin — the French actress Simone Signoret — as well as portrayals of conditions in Communist prison and the mechanism of interrogations and confessions. A political scientist will read the book as a very precise analysis of the mechanisms of power in a totalitarian system. For a psychologist, paramount will be Žo Langerová's psyche as a lonely woman who vacillates between unconditional loyalty to an unjustly imprisoned husband and the longing for happiness at the side of a sensitive man who would devote himself to his family and not to Party work. Very absorbing will be the description of her childhood with an authoritative mother and a loving, but passive father. Similarly interesting, of course, will be Oskar's psyche. A convinced Communist never admits that the foundation of the totalitarian system capsized; he feels that the Party only made certain errors. Using the example of her older daughter, Žo also analyzed relatively precisely the brainwashing of children's minds by the new regime. Also very stimulating is her portrayal of the way of thinking of the working class, which she calls small-town mentality (p. 86). In the pages of *Urban People*, however, we mention the book for two main reasons: it captures very well the atmosphere

of Bratislava from 1946 until August 1968, when Žo, along with her daughters, one of whom was a successful singer, decided to emigrate after the Soviet invasion. Postwar Bratislava is, in Langerová's memory, connected with apartment shortages, insufficient food, furniture, endless lines and a wave of dangerous nationalization. In view of the fact that Žo herself did not know enough Slovak at that time, she completely felt like a foreigner. After February 1948, a privileged layer came into being in the city. The Communist Party prepared Action B, the regime's eviction from Bratislava of members of the opposition (1952-1953). The displacement of Žo and her daughters to a Hungarian village, however, preceded her being let go from her job, the necessity of buying on the black market (only working people received food tickets), and, finally, the fear that reigned over Bratislava. In Tvrdošovce, the monetary reform (1953) also caught her. Another Langerová picture of Bratislava caught the city in the mid-1950s, when she returned to the Bratislava suburbs. Bratislava offered the possibility of employment (translations, typing and, later, work as a clerk and editor). Žo also painted well her new environment of continual housing shortages, as many inhabitants of the city gladly exchanged their small apartments for spacious and heated coffee houses. (The favorite retreat of Žo and her younger daughter was the Savoy.) First and foremost, however, was the lessening of fear in society. The hopeful period around the Prague Spring, which, however, Žo, as a consequence of her experiences in life, perceived with skepticism, ended with the Soviet invasion. After 1989, literature devoted to political trials of the Communist era began to accumulate. Works by K. Kaplan and P. Paleček, O. Liška, and M. Pučil, memoirs of H. Kovályová, A. G. London, J. Slánská and others were published. Still, however, Langerová's memoirs are unique, and their way to Slovak readers was indirect, as the epilog shows: Žo Langerová, a great fighter against a hostile fate created by the regime, became capable of making a very precise analysis of totalitarianism in postwar Czechoslovakia.

Blanka Soukupová