

NEW FEMALE PRESPECTIVES ON EVERYDAY LIFE
AND RESISTANCE IN LATE SOCIALIST SLOVAKIA

The past decade has seen steadily growing scholarly and public interest in chronicling women in resistance during the communist era in East-Central Europe: Apart from monographs and memoirs, there have also been documentaries, films and podcasts as well as many news articles.¹ A new book edited by Oľga Gyarfášová contributes significantly to this strand of scholarly knowledge and public memory, but it also stands out in several ways.² Both the title *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie* (How we lived in the years of normalisation) and the subtitle “Interviews with female actors of social resistance” hint at the fact that this volume is more than a compilation of stories of dissidents’ wives; more than another instance of bringing to light the previously invisible work (as it is considered almost by default) of women in dissent. Gyarfášová’s book goes far beyond simple acknowledgement of the long hours spent rearing children, baking, and transcribing samizdat, as is often the case in public attempts to appreciate women in the hitherto dominant memories of dissent – or more broadly, of independent activism. The accounts narrated by ten women who lived through late socialism in Bratislava’s independent milieu do not merely add another layer of chronicles, another layer of details to the cultural history of resistance. Rather, the sheer complexity of these stories offers insights that help to clarify and perhaps even adapt the definitions, chronologies and geographies of normalisation as well as shedding a broader light on the discrimination of women, especially those from East-Central Europe.

¹ For the newest scholarship, see e.g. *Maďarová*, Zuzana: *Ako odvrávať novembri 1989. Rodové aspekty pamäti* [How to resist November 1989. Gender aspects of memory]. Bratislava 2019; *Pebe*, Veronika: *Did Women’s Rights Have a Place in Eastern European Human Rights Dissent? The Case of Charter 77 and Czechoslovakia, 1977-1992*. Contemporary European History online edition (2025) 1, 1-16, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777324000493> (last accessed: 14.05.2025); for media coverage, see Soňa Gyarfášová’s documentary: Kyra Matuščík. *Neskrotná* (Charta 77-signatári zo Slovenska) [Kyra Matuščík. *Untamed* (Charta 77-signatories from Slovakia)]. RTVS, 2023; *Redakce Heroine*: *Hlavně neukázat strach. Čtyři příběhy žen z disentu nás učí, jak žít nezávisle a neohnout hřbet* [Most importantly, don’t show fear. Four stories of women in dissent teach us how to live independently and not turn our backs]. Heroine, 17 November 2022. URL: <https://www.heroine.cz/zena-a-svet/11079-hlavne-neukazat-strach-ctyri-pribehy-zen-z-disentu-nas-uci-jak-zit-nezavisle-a-neohnout-hrbet> (last accessed: 15.04.2025).

² *Gyarfášová*, Oľga (ed.): *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie. Rozhovory s aktérkami spoločenského vzdoru* [How we lived in the years of normalisation. Interviews with female actors of social resistance] (Tamara Archlebová, Marta Botta, Anna Budajová, Jolana Kusá, Gabriela Langošová, Ľuba Lesná, Ľudmila Pastierová, Júlia Sherwood, Marta Šimečková, Dorota Šimečková). Bratislava 2024.

The limited scope of this literature report allows for discussing only a few select stories, but I believe that these accounts best exhibit the various facets of discrimination experienced by women in dissent. They show how discrimination came not only (although mainly) from the communist state itself, and how it may make sense to view these women as experiencing intersectionality, with various forms of inequality and discrimination compounding – though not all of them can be seen only as a result of ideologically based suppression by the communist state. Similarly, the women's resistance and resilience can hardly be considered only in ideological terms.

The goal of the editor and lead interviewer, sociologist Oľga Gyarfášová, is twofold – to provide room for women from this small independent community to tell their stories of navigating late socialism (or normalisation, as they generally refer to the period from the 1970s to the end of the 1980s in Czechoslovakia), and to carve out a space for them in the public memory of that period. By asking open-ended questions and consistently remaining in the background, Gyarfášová foregrounds the voices of the interviewees, leaving the reader to follow their first-hand experiences of living in normalisation. Ten women were interviewed in total: art critic Tamara Archlebová, social scientist Marta Botta, therapist Anna Budajová, psychologist and marriage counsellor Jolana Kusá, therapist and caretaker Gabriela Langošová, journalist and writer Ľuba Lesná, writer and translator Julia Sherwood, educator and writer Marta Šimečková, and finally activist Dorota Šimeková and the editor of illegal publications Ľudmila Pastierová. The relatively moderate number of interviews allows both Gyarfášová and her interviewees to dig deep. Importantly, the women also belonged to slightly different age cohorts during the normalisation period; by listening to members of different generations, the book shows how dissent was experienced by female teenagers as well as mature women.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Bratislava independent space accommodated “several parallel informal and alternative groups – Gorazdova [street], painters who could not exhibit, people around Ján Budaj, musicians and concerts – for instance at the amphitheatre in Pezinok” (p. 117). The accounts in the book reveal how the women in these communities navigated their personal and professional lives, pregnancies and their loss, jobs and joblessness, present and absent partners, friendships and betrayals, child rearing, and running households that were simultaneously secluded from the outside world, closely monitored by the secret police, and open to typically unannounced visitors from the underground. But above all, the texts document and illustrate the everydayness and processual nature of dissidence, to use humanities jargon. Yet this focus on the mundane does not equate to erasing these women's moral agency – nor does it mean diluting the normative appeal of dissidence. Rather, by detailing the day-to-day experience, the moral grounding of resistance (both male and female) is made much more palpable.

As mentioned above, by giving the women a voice along with narrative space interspersed with non-disruptive questions, these interviews not only accord agency to the interlocutors themselves but also offer opportunity to broaden the very definition of female agency under authoritarian regimes. Most of the interviewees split their public engagement between full-scale dissident work on the one hand and their professional occupation on the other. Their sense of agency and fulfilment came

from both planes; quite typically, the lack of agency in dissident circles was effectively supplemented by fulfilment in professional work (even if we can hardly speak of careers, especially when we consider the term to mean steady promotion). The story of Gabriela Langošová is a case in point.

Dissidence and Marginalisation

Gabriela Langošová specialised in therapeutic pedagogy and psychology. She first worked at a paediatric oncology unit and later in marriage counselling in Bratislava. During and in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution, she worked at a psychological support centre operated by Public Against Violence, the leading political force in the time of the 1989 revolution and beyond, as well as for Václav Havel. She was married to the late dissident Ján Langoš, with whom she organised philosophical and political meetings with dissidents in Slovakia and Czechia as well as producing samizdat journals (*Bratislavské Listy*, *Altamira*, *Fragment K*). The Langoš family was intensively monitored by the Czechoslovak Secret Police (the ŠtB). They were friends with the rising composer Marián Varga, joining him at concerts that were not “allowed” but also not sanctioned. During the 1980s, the family had small children and little money, and Gabriela Langošová worked as caretaker and teacher at a paediatric oncology unit in Bratislava, where “there was no ŠtB to be found”. As she recalls, “nobody cared about these kids who, back then, had to be hospitalised without their parents” (p. 118). For Langošová, it was a profession as well as a vocation. Asked by Gyárfášová what parallel independent groups in Bratislava meant to her, she states that it was her job that actually “fulfilled” her: “I saw it as deeply meaningful. It was very difficult for me when some of those kids left us – in those moments, the ŠtB threats seemed insignificant” (p. 118).

Being on the margins had its advantages: Like other interviewees who worked in similar professions (Anna Budajová and Jolana Kusá), Langošová often mentions that she did not detest menial tasks. As she recalls, “I was often afraid, but we had a great advantage: We did not fear losing our jobs” (p. 120). The regime not taking interest in their work cast a long shadow on these women’s future social security, however, as dissidents (whether male or female) were not entitled to any promotions. For Tamara Archlebová, this meant the same wages for almost two decades while she worked for the magazine *Výtvarný Život* – a form of repression whose impact persists until now, since low pay during late socialism translated into a low pension, as Archlebová points out. Various forms of discrimination thus merged and lasted beyond 1989. Nonetheless, at the time, these women’s professions – unlike the notoriously unfulfilling jobs of their better-known male counterparts – were not only personally but also communally meaningful.

For Langošová as well as other interlocutors, profession was not simply an outlet from dissidence into a real world. Rather, it allowed them to create another layer of communal life and provided a further source of moral purpose amidst late socialism. Around Langošová’s profession, seemingly unrelated to the core dissident community, other independent groups formed: In her case, it was the community of therapists and psychologists and their families. In her words, “samizdats were political”

whereas “in my circles, we worked on translating psychology literature” (p. 119). The therapy training held importance for her in terms of creating community as well as in terms of finding personal fulfilment. Perhaps one of the most revealing statements is her reply to Gyarfášová’s inquiry about how women, wives, mothers and partners remembered politically motivated repression. Once again, Langošová refers to her work: “You know, I had my vocation and that had always been about introspection – I knew what I wanted. [...] We lived it (the independent life) and I cannot imagine [living without] meeting these people and not working” (p. 124). Indeed, this independent activity continued after 1989 and provided a head start to psychology publishing after 1989.

While performing often invisible work within the dissenting community in Bratislava, the women interviewed by Gyarfášová worked to make other communities visible – like those of prohibited artists, child cancer patients, or people with disabilities. Some of these communities were suppressed, while some were simply considered unimportant (e.g., cancer patients). The latter remained invisible even after the fall of state socialism, and the work and agenda of the respective women activists was thus not disrupted, nor did it lose its meaning after 1989 (unlike that of professional dissidents).

This virtually therapeutic effect of professional life for some women suggests that profession could be an escape from a closely monitored private life. Indeed, the surveillance and suppression tactics of the party state could be deeply disruptive to private life: Apart from regular “visits” from the Secret Police in private flats, they left many other marks on personal relations as well. This, too, is documented in great detail and complexity in the interviews, and Tamara Archlebová’s story is illustrative in this regard.

Dissidence and the Mundane

Tamara Archlebová (born in 1951) is an expert in art theory as well as a curator, journalist, and translator. She engaged in these professional activities to increase the visibility of officially prohibited painters and contemporary visual artists (conceptual, non-figural and op-art) including Mária Bartusová, one of the most acclaimed Slovak sculptors today. Perceiving late socialism as an era of “forced optimism”, uniformity and hypocrisy, Archlebová and her peers could not and did not want to fit in. Where hippies in the West first embraced and then struggled with drug addictions, Czechoslovak “hippies” doused themselves with alcohol, as Archlebová discusses (p. 49). Her memories are by no means an instance of retrospective heroisation, as she openly talks about her own husband’s struggle with alcoholism as well. However, in late socialist Czechoslovakia, drinking problems could have their own tragic reasons – as was in fact the case with Archlebová’s husband: His alcohol abuse was partly a reaction to the deaths (most likely at the hands of the ŠtB) of his two closest friends. Besides disturbing her marital life, the regime also disrupted her family relations: Her father was a high-ranking Communist Party functionary.

In addition to shattering the romanticising image of heroic dissidence, Archlebová reveals almost comical aspects of rebelling against the regime. One day, the ŠtB seized her passport in retaliation for her ex-husband’s emigration; however, she was

able to regain her passport and expose a hole in the system by remarrying and adopting her new husband's surname. Archlebová's go-to strategy for subverting the regime's policing practices was humour, an approach mentioned in other interviews as well (e.g. Jolana Kusá). But humour is by no means an indication of the absence of grave difficulties – in fact, it is perhaps the opposite.

Dissidence and Marginalisation across Borders

The story of Marta Botta is simultaneously among the most striking and fascinating. Her account as well as the memories of Julia Sherwood – who, like Botta, left Czechoslovakia for the West (first to Sweden, then eventually settling in Australia) – contribute, each in its own way, to diversifying the experience of leaving Czechoslovakia and settling in the West. Born into a working-class family, Botta did not possess the cultural capital available to nearly all the other interlocutors. Discriminated and subjected to palpable orientalised (in Sherwood's case, by left-wing students in Munich; in Botta's, for her and her partner's supposedly Palestinian and, in the eyes of the Swedish border guards, by extension terrorist appearance), one of both women's first experiences after emigration was that of not being accepted. I wonder if it would be an overreach to consider this a case of intersectionality straddling the iron curtain? Moreover, these two stories illustrate the toll emigration and integration can take on the bodies and minds of women: Botta decided to end two of her pregnancies, seeing no viable way to raise a child while simultaneously trying to finish school under such difficult circumstances. Sherwood was struck by profound sadness from leaving her friends behind. She continued to maintain brisk correspondence with them until the ŠtB escalated to a new level of disrupting her privacy, with an agent attempting to contact her and exploit her vulnerability.

Botta's emigration is also the story of a personal relationship that helped her to navigate dissidence (marriage as a way of escaping compulsory yet dull employment) as well as the first years of expatriation, but was eventually cut short by divergent experiences of living away from home. In this story, Botta's partner Emil Míkle, an aspiring artist, figures as an actor who takes on the stereotypically female roles of support and sacrifice.

In addition, the account of Botta's attempted return to Slovakia after 1989 is likewise unique in that it documents the lack of understanding and intellectual space for genuinely left-wing visions for post-1989 Czechoslovakia. By including Botta's story, Gyarfášová enables the reader to look and think beyond the Bratislava bubble. Indeed, this is one of the strengths of the entire book: It does not attempt to force a dominant narrative across all the women's stories, instead allowing each of them to weave its own.

In sum, the volume represents an essential read for students and scholars of late socialism in general, and of gender in late socialist Eastern-Central Europe in particular. Despite focusing on women, it also offers valuable material for reflection on male dissidents. The book joins a growing list of accounts of women in independent (or outright oppositional) communities, opening windows to several important layers of this experience that are either overlooked or simply not present in similar sto-

ries documented in the existing corpus of texts. The most notable of such works in the history of late socialism in Czechoslovakia so far is *Bytová revolta. Jak ženy dělaly dissent?* (Flat revolt. How women made dissent?).³ Reading *Bytová revolta* together with *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie* creates an interesting topography of women in dissident or independent circles, as well as an excellent source for broadening the taxonomy of dissenting – and even the definition of dissent as such – in the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia.

³ Linková, Marcela/Straková, Naďa (eds.): *Bytová Revolta. Jak ženy dělaly dissent?* [Flat revolt. How women made dissent]. Praha 2017.