Hana Ponická's Appeal Letter and the Politics of Exclusion

Vanda Koniarová – Barbora Vinczeová
Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6489-9785
vanda.koniarova@umb.sk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3411-6699
barbora.vinczeova@umb.sk

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Introduction

Hana Ponická was a well-known Slovak translator from French, Italian, and Hungarian, a writer, an editor and a journalist (Kovačičová – Kusá, 2017). She is famous for her acts of dissent, as she stood against the Communist regime, refusing to be intimidated by threats against her and her career. In the end, her dissent resulted in the loss of her career until 1989, when, along with other writers, she was rehabilitated (Anonymous, 1994; Šrank, 2021).

Ponická was born on July 15, 1922 in Halič, in Central Slovakia. Her father, Július Ponický, was a judge whom Baer (2022) and Součková (2025) list as an influence on her strong moral values. Nosková (2012) also states that he instilled in her a sense for objectivity, justice, critical thinking, determination and a sense of duty.

Ponická studied in Košice, Martin, and Bratislava, where she graduated high school (Hanulová, 2012). While studying in Martin, Ponická met important figures of the Slovak feminist movement, writers Elena Maróthy-Šoltésová and Zora Jesenská (Hanulová, 2012). It was in this period that she started writing and her work appeared in journals such as *Národné listy*, *Živena* and *Cesta* (Nosková, 2012).

She continued her studies at a university in Bratislava, where she studied medicine. As part of her medical practice, she took care of prisoners returning from Nazi camps and after this experience, decided not to finish her studies (Nosková, 2012).

Ponická was married to the writer Štefan Žáry, with whom she had three children, she later married the poet Ján Kostra and, finally, the historian Jaroslav Šolc. She started writing in 1954, her first work, a collection of short stories *Ikarov palác (Icarus' Palace)* having been banned from publication, because it did not reflect the socialist writing style (Nosková, 2012). Already in 1956 she endorsed the views of Jaroslav Seifert, František Hrubín or Dominik Tatarka, all of whom expressed them at the Second Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union (Součková, 2025).

From 1968 she worked as an editor of the *Smena* journal (Sunday edition), however, in 1972 she lost her position because she did not agree with the 1968 occupation (Kovačičová – Kusá, 2017).

A significant year in her life was the year 1977, her *annus horribilis* (Baer, 2022; Stanková, 2024), when she was expelled from the Slovak Writers' Union for disagreeing with the repressive practices of the communist regime against writers (Dubovský, 2017). She had refused to sign the so-called *Anticharter*, condemning the *Charter 77,* reasoning she had not read it, which, however, did not stop other writers from signing it (Součková, 2025). Until 1989 she was not allowed to write or publish, and in the same year, she became one of the *Bratislava Five,* a group of arrested intellectuals who condemned the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia (Marušiak, 2003; Jašek, 2020).

Ponická is often quoted to be the First Lady of Slovak Literature, or the Lady of November (Nosková, 2012). The information available about her is, unfortunately, fragmented and few complex works exist illustrating her life and work. One of the most notable ones is *Lukavické zápisky*, her autobiography describing the turbulent year 1977. It was first published in exile [Canada], later, only after the revolution, by Atlantis in the Czech Republic, and after that in Slovakia (Hrínová, 2025). Unlike archival correspondence or official institutional documents, *Lukavické zápisky* offers a distinctly literary testimony. The text combines diary writing, autobiographical reflection, and social observation, moving between private experience and commentary on public life. This form is significant because it allows Ponická not only to document the events of 1977 but also to interpret them as part of a wider crisis affecting literature and civic freedom. Josette Baer's *The Green Butterfly* (2022) also maps Ponická's life, focusing mainly on the information from *Lukavické zápisky*. Several academic and non-academic articles on her life and work exist, as well as bibliographies, such as those by Nosková (2012), Marušiak (2003), Jašek (2020), Dubovský (2017), Hanulová (2012), or Stanková (2024). A continued interest in Ponická can be seen also when accessing radio and television archive material about the author (radio, e.g., *Rubikon*, 2024, 2023; *Fakty*, 2024; *Po stopách pamäti,* 2022, *Naša zabudnutá klasika*, 2022, *Ars litera,* 2019; television, e.g. *Večera s Havranom,* 2024) and the reedition of *Lukavické zápisky* by Literárna bašta publishing house in 2025.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the fragmented view of Ponická's life, since a complex, all-encompassing narrative would be beyond the scope of one article and would possibly need a team of authors. Combining historical and literary research, archival material – Ponická's appeal letter – is used as the basis for the paper, discussing Ponická's reaction to her expulsion from the Slovak Writers' Union in 1977. The aforementioned *annus horribilis* is therefore the focus of this paper. First, the socio-historical background is explained in detail, focusing on the political situation in Czechoslovakia. Then, Ponická's personal situation is discussed. Lastly, her letter of appeal is analysed, highlighting her moral values and strength in the face of oppression and persecution.

1 Social-historical background in 1977 Czechoslovakia

The subsequent chapter delves more profoundly into the position of Slovak writers under normalisation, exploring the mechanisms that determined who was permitted to write, publish, and engage in official literary life.

In the first half of the 1970s, the profession of writer was not a free intellectual activity. The situation in which writers found themselves was a direct consequence of normalisation, which aimed to restore the totalitarian control of the Communist Party over society (Marušiak, 2003). The Slovak Writers' Union acted as a link between the state authorities and artists. The union ensured compliance with established doctrines and rewarded loyal members (Passia, 2021). The writer's position depended on their willingness to accept socialist realism, understood both as a literary method and as an expression of the political project of socialism and communism (Zajac, 2013). The author's status was no longer determined within the literary field, but it was decided administratively, through the mechanisms of power applied at the Second Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union. This resulted in the rejection of alternative conceptions of the role of the writer, with the prevailing normative model permitting only individual variations within a framework characterised by ideological constraints (Barborík, 2021).

This situation did not remain without response. However, it should be noted that not all writers were willing to submit to the ideological demands of the normalisation regime or to internalise the prescribed model of artistic and civic conformity (Zajac, 2013). A significant

number of authors exhibited resistance to these constraints, either by openly rejecting the official doctrine or by refusing to cooperate with institutions. Consequently, a significant number of individuals was marginalised within official literary circles, facing impediments to publication, and subjected to various forms of professional and personal persecution, or compelled to seek exile. Certain individuals persisted in their endeavours in unofficial capacities, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of alternative literary practices that lay beyond the confines of the state-controlled cultural system (Marušiak, 2003; Cabadaj, 2022).

The civic initiative known as *Charter 77*, which had been signed in the preceding weeks, was publicly released in Prague on 6–7 January 1977. The objective of the initiative was to facilitate the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which had recently been incorporated into domestic law. However, the State Security initiated an operation against the signatories of *Charter 77*.

A series of raids was conducted on residential properties, resulting in violations of fundamental human rights, as articulated in a text written on 6 January 1977 by Ján Patočka (Císařovská – Prečan, 2007). The regime's response took the form of a repressive document, the *Anticharter*, which was used to target members and supporters of *The Plastic People of the Universe* and *DG 307*, and, subsequently, the civic initiative *Charter 77*. This exemplifies the regime's strategy of criminalising cultural nonconformity and extending repression from the cultural underground to broader civic dissent (Karlík – Pokorná, 2002).

In March 1977, the Third Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union took place in Bratislava under conditions of heightened political pressure following the publication of *Charter 77* and the subsequent campaign against its signatories. The congress was carefully prepared by Communist Party structures within the Slovak Writers' Union and functioned as an institutional response to the ideological directives of the Communist Party, reaffirming the leading role of the Party in cultural production and the binding status of socialist realism. With the active participation of representatives of the Slovak Communist Party leadership, the congress symbolically and practically consolidated the normalisation framework, presenting literary production as experiencing a "remarkable expansion" precisely due to ideological discipline and loyalty (Dubovský, 2017).

After 1968, Slovak literary life was reorganised through a differentiated system of control that determined who could publish, under what conditions, and at what cost. As Perstická and Přerostová (1991) emphasize, normalisation subjected writers to a decisive test that resulted in the expulsion of numerous authors from official structures, the silencing of others, and the forced emigration of many. The closure of key literary platforms *Kultúrny život* in 1968 and *Mladá tvorba* in 1970 symbolised the dismantling of the pluralistic literary public sphere. At the same time, the regime constructed a new hierarchy of authorship based on political loyalty, adaptability, and usefulness to power (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991; Marušiak, 2003). Within this framework, Slovak writers and translators can be analytically grouped according to the reasons for their inclusion or exclusion from official literary life.

A significant segment of the literary intelligentsia retained access to publication and institutional influence by aligning themselves with the normalisation regime. Sikora (2008) remarks that this group consisted largely of former collaborators of Gustáv Husák from the 1960s, including Vladimír Mináč, Alexander Matuška, Miroslav Válek, Ladislav Novomeský, and Vojtech Mihálik. Although many of them had previously criticized Antonín Novotný's policies and condemned the Soviet invasion of 1968, they ultimately chose cooperation with the regime (Sikora, 2008). As Perstická and Přerostová (1991) argue, the Communist Party relied on these figures not only to control literary production but to co-opt authors themselves

through material benefits, symbolic authority, and institutional power, thereby masking coercion behind outward consent.

Another group consisted of writers excluded primarily because of their open political opposition, anti-communist attitudes, or condemnation of the Soviet occupation. Their exclusion typically involved expulsion from the Slovak Writers' Union, publication bans, and withdrawal of their works from circulation. The term *banned writers* refers to a diverse group of authors who were prevented from publishing freely in official Czechoslovak publishing houses because they refused to comply with ideological demands. Their exclusion most often stemmed from political attitudes related to the Prague Spring, opposition to the 1968 occupation, or emigration, and only rarely from the poetics of their work (Šidáková Fialová, 2021). This group included Pavel Hrúz, expelled in 1972 and officially labelled an "undesirable writer"; Ladislav Ján Kalina, expelled in 1971 for "incorrect political views" and contacts with like-minded authors; and Ladislav Mňačko, expelled already in 1969 for "betrayal of socialist writers" and political adventurism, who subsequently emigrated and returned only after 1989.

A central figure of this category was Dominik Tatarka, expelled from the Slovak Writers' Union in 1971, banned from publishing, erased from textbooks, and later active almost exclusively in samizdat. Tatarka became the most prominent symbol of Slovak literary dissent (Cabadaj, 2022; Perstická – Přerostová, 1991). A distinct subgroup of political dissent emerged around the Prague-based *Charter 77* movement. Writers associated with *Charter 77* were not merely excluded from publication but criminalised as threats to the state. This group included Martin M. Šimečka, a *Charter 77* signatory charged with subversion of the republic and involved in samizdat publishing; Miroslav Kusý; Ivan Kadlečík; Hana Ponická, alongside Tatarka and Hrúz. Their activities placed them entirely outside the official literary system (Cabadaj, 2022).

An example of overt resistance to the regime was Hana Ponická, who prepared a discussion paper for the Third Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union in which she openly defended her colleagues who had been expelled from the union. However, she was not permitted to deliver this contribution at the congress (Ponická 2025; Dubovský, 2017). The text nevertheless circulated beyond the boundaries of the state-controlled literary sphere and was published in 1977 in the French daily *Le Monde*, thereby gaining international visibility and underscoring the existence of dissenting voices within Slovak literary culture during the normalisation period (Ponická 2025; Stanková, 2024; Perstická – Přerostová, 1991; Hrínová, 2025).

Among others were Jozef Bžoch, prohibited from publishing or translating from 1971 onward due to his political views; Fedor Cádra, expelled in 1971 from the Communist Party and the Journalist Union, with his membership in the Slovak Writers' Union suspended for three years; Ctibor Štítnický, excluded from Slovak literary life for two decades; and Július Vanovič, whose manuscripts were systematically withdrawn, returned, or left unpublished throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991; Marušiak, 2003).

Normalisation repression extended beyond literature to encompass authors whose broader cultural roles were perceived as ideologically dangerous. This group included Zora Jesenská, punished for her public defence of freedom and democracy in 1968, erased from reference works, and banned from publication; Peter Karvaš, whose plays were banned from theatres, radio, and television; and Albert Marenčin, dismissed from the state film enterprise in 1972 for supporting "anti-socialist films" and expelled from the Slovak Writers' Union (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991). Normalisation repressions also targeted authors whose actions represented ethical or symbolic resistance rather than organised political opposition. Zlata Solivajsová was persecuted after appealing in 1968 to the Slovak Writers' Union for solidarity with excluded authors. Her 1971 book *Kľúč od každých dverí*, conveying a pacifist message,

was destroyed; she was dismissed from employment, her family harassed, and she was expelled from the Slovak Writers' Union (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991).

The last category consisted of writers who continued their literary activity in exile, forming an alternative Slovak literary canon beyond the socialist state. Among poets, the most prominent figure was Rudolf Dilong, who published more than thirty books in exile. Karol Strmeň played a crucial role not only as a poet but as a translator of major world authors such as Dante, Claudel, Petrarch, and T. S. Eliot. Other notable émigré writers included Jozef Cíger-Hronský, Pavol Hrtus Jurina, and Gorazd Zvonický (Perstická– Přerostová, 1991).

2 Hana Ponická in 1977

This part of the paper situates Ponická's appeal letter within her *annus horribilis*, 1977, which marked the end of her writing career until 1989. The previous chapter addressed the political and historical situation in Czechoslovakia, which, for Ponická, became unbearable, resulting in serious state-led repercussions. Ponická had documented this year in her publication *Lukavické zápisky*, originally published in dissent (Canada) in 1989.

Ponická had, from 1972, lived in Lukavica, a village near Banská Bystrica. Prior to 1972, she had worked as an editor of *Smena* – specifically, its Sunday attachment (Hanulová, 2012). However, her disagreement with normalisation (after 1968) led to her departure both from work and from Bratislava (Stanková, 2023). Stanková (2023) lists Ponická's inability and unwillingness to contribute to the political pressure to fulfil her norm of the articles about "the Soviet brotherly help" (Stanková, 2023).

After her move to Lukavica, she and her husband bought and renovated an old mill, where they had lived. Having spent five years in Lukavica, Ponická had not expected major changes in 1977. The elections were over, the situation was relatively stable and her hope for a less strict regime began to fade. As mentioned earlier, *Charter 77* was published on January 6 and 7 of the same year in the international press: "But the Chartists had already arranged for publication of their manifesto in the Western press, where the Charter was featured in major articles on January 7, 1977 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Corriere della Sera, The Times of London,* and *Le Monde.*" (Savranskaya – Blanton, 2007, p. 1).

Ponická was under pressure to sign the so-called *Anticharter*, although she thought that her withdrawal from the hub of political activity might save her from it (Ponická, 2025). It did not, as she received letters and phone calls to sign the document (Hrínová, 2025). Artists were pressured to sign the *Anticharter* right away and the massive anti-Charter 77 campaign only fuelled the support for *Charter 77* (Stanková, 2024).

The political situation in Czechoslovakia was therefore tense. On March 2, the Third Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union was to take place. Ponická, as one of more than 250 members, planned to attend it in Bratislava. Writers and artists did not escape persecution in the previous years while the Slovak Writers' Union was only established in 1969, in 1971, 36 members were expelled (Dubovský, 2017), with more to follow.

Ponická had prepared herself for the Third Congress and wrote a contribution she had planned to read aloud. Writers were allowed to join the general discussion after indicating the wish to do so in writing (Dubovský, 2017) and submitting their materials. However, although Ponická's colleagues read her contribution, she was not allowed to read it aloud and was not allowed to join the discussion. Her contribution was the only one that was against the Union's ideological line of thought (Dubovský, 2017), because she openly criticised the practice of banning authors from publishing their works; she named these authors and criticised the lack of freedom and restriction in art and society. The immediate consequences of this intervention are also reflected in *Lukavické Zápisky*, Ponická's autobiographical record. The text captures the shift from public disagreement to everyday experience under pressure, documenting

surveillance uncertainty and the growing intrusion of state power into private life. Its significance lies in the way it connects personal experience with the broader political climate of normalisation. Therefore, *Lukavické zápisky* complements documentation by preserving the lived and emotional dimension of repression.

The reaction to her, although unpublished, contribution was immediate and it significantly affected her life and career. A film based on her short story stopped shooting; the publishing house cancelled her contracts for two children's books; an interview with her was not broadcast (Stanková, 2023). Ponická's contribution was published in an exile journal *Listy* in July (in Rome), was read in Belgrade at a conference on fulfilling the Helsinki Final Act and added to *Charter 77* as an attachment on Slovakia's part, and was published in *Le Monde* in France in May causing France to withdraw from a contract about cultural cooperation with the Union (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991). On June 20, she was expelled from the Slovak Writers' Union and until 1989, her works were only self-published, published in exile or published as samizdats (Hrúzová, 2002). She had appealed the expulsion in a letter dated August 29, 1977, which is the subject of this paper's analysis. She received a reply dated September 29, 1977 rejecting her appeal, stating that her activities are against the Union's policies (Anonymous, 1994).

The expulsion from public life affected Ponická economically. She was 55 at the time, and since her contracts were cancelled, she decided to officially retire. Her meagre retirement required that she submit contracts and documents proving her income (Ponická, 2025), which proved difficult because the institutions responsible for archiving them refused to cooperate. This was, however, not the end of the process that marked the entire year 1977. Ponická was not only followed and watched by the secret police, but her home was bugged and she was repeatedly cross-examined, including a strip search (Ponická, 2025). Her name was repeatedly smeared in the press (Stanková, 2023), with authorities calling her merely a translator, not an author (Anonymous, 1994; Ponická, 2025).

3 The Politics Of Exclusion

This paper aims to present, analyse, and evaluate Ponická's appeal letter from August 1977, gauging her reaction to the expulsion from the ranks of the Slovak Writers' Union, and critically judge the measures she had at her disposal and had resorted to. The limitations and restrictions she had faced were already presented. However, she had not given up without a fight and appealed her expulsion in a long letter, claiming it was contrary to the Union's regulations.

The appeal letter was accessed in the archives of the Slovak National Library in Martin, containing the original of the letter. The letter is dated August 29, 1977, signed by Ponická, with an addition "written on the 33rd anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising". The letter is 12 A4 pages long, and addressed to the Slovak Writers' Union's chairman, Andrej Plávka, and the Union's board members.

From the onset of the correspondence, Ponická employs a strategy of legalistic resistance. Rather than resorting to an emotional appeal, she employs a systematic critique, addressing the Union's deviation from its own internal governance procedures not only in the decision to expel her because it is both unjust and legally void, as it bypasses the procedures and regulations established in the Union's Statutes (Stanovy), but also in the Third Congress having taken place earlier, where all writers' interests were disregarded by ignoring the Debate Protocol (Rokovací poriadok).

The absurdity of the expulsion process is further underscored by a formal error in the official document Ponická received. The Union's board justified the expulsion by reference to "Chapter VIII" of the Statutes. However, Ponická, with her characteristic attention to detail,

discovered that the Union's Statutes consisted of only five chapters. In the second page of the appeal, the author provides a detailed account of her attempts to ascertain the truth:

"Na všetky tieto skutočnosti som Vás chcela upozorniť v rámci svojho odvolania sa proti Vášmu rozhodnutiu o mojom vylúčení, no natrafila som na takú nejasnosť, že Rokovací poriadok 3. zjazdu ZSS sa odvoláva na VIII. hlavu Stanôv [sic!] *Zväzu slov. spisovateľov, a Stanovy ZSS majú v skutočnosti len V. hláv."* ["In my appeal against your decision to expel me, I wanted to draw your attention to all these facts, but I came across an ambiguity: the Debate Protocol of the Third Congress of the SWU refers to Chapter VIII of the statutes of the Slovak Writers' Union, but the Statutes of the SWU have only five chapters."] (Ponická, 1977, p. 2).

In her pursuit of the missing Chapter VIII, Ponická sought clarification from the head of the central Slovakia branch of the SWU, Dr Ivan Plintovič, in Banská Bystrica. As described in her appeal, this encounter serves as an example of the administrative status of authors' marginalisation during normalisation (Barborík, 2021). Rather than engaging in professional dialogue about the Statutes or legal grounds of her expulsion, Plintovič met Ponická with open hostility and dismissed legal frameworks. She notes that Plintovič explicitly told her that he did not need to know any Statutes, and that, as an expelled member, she had no remaining rights. He also called her a "zero" (Ponická, 1977, p. 2). As she writes on the second page of her letter: *"Na moje prekvapenie mi Dr. Ivan Plintovič povedal, že on ani nevie, či nejaké Stanovy vôbec má, a keby aj mal, kde ležia založené, lebo on vraj Stanovy nikdy ani nečítal, nepozná ich. Namietla som, že je predsa členom Výboru Zväzu slovenských spisovateľov, a ako taký má i podľa IV. B hlavy Stanôv ZSS prednostnú povinnosť Stanovy ZSS poznať a nimi sa riadiť. Na to on, že nie je nijaký právnik, byrokrat, že on nepotrebuje poznať Stanovy, lebo že on aj bez Stanôv vie, čo má robiť, a tak vedel i to, že má ako člen Výboru ZSS aj on hlasovať za moje vylúčenie zo ZSS a zvýšeným hlasom tam na chodbe Pedagogickej fakulty mi hovoril, že ja už nemám právo absolútne na nič, som vylúčená a hotovo.*" ["To my surprise, Dr Ivan Plintovič told me that he did not know if he had any Statutes and, if he did, he did not know where they were filed because he had never read or known them. I pointed out that, as a member of the Slovak Writers' Union Committee, he had a primary duty to know and abide by the SWU Statutes, according to Chapter IV.B. He replied that he was neither a lawyer nor a bureaucrat, and that he did not need to know the Statutes because he knew what to do without them. He said that, as a member of the SWU Committee, he had to vote for my expulsion from the SWU. In a raised voice, he told me in the hallway of the Faculty of Education that I no longer had any rights, that I was expelled."][1] (Ponická, 1977, p. 4).

This interaction exemplifies how the Slovak Writers' Union functioned not as a professional guild, but as a link for ideological control (Passia, 2021). Plintovič's assertion that he "does not need the statutes" and his subsequent claim that Ponická "has no rights" confirms that the regime has replaced legal transparency with raw intimidation. Plintovič resorted to calling Ponická an anti-state element in lieu with "bands of Vaculíks, Kohouts, and Kunderas"[2] (Ponická, 1977, p. 3). This encounter confirms the idea of normalisation as a tool for totalitarian control, where an individual's rights were erased the moment they ceased to be convenient for the Party and regime (Marušiak, 2003).

After failing to learn about the current Statutes, Ponická resorts to relying on those which are known to her (from 1971, which the Union members received by post), and to the Debate Protocol (Rokovací poriadok) from 1977, which the Union members also received by post in advance of the Third Congress.

[1] Excerpts from Ponická's letters were translated for the purposes of this paper by the authors.
[2] Dissident writers.

The appeal has two main lines of argumentation – personal and general. The former argues against Ponická's expulsion, and the latter against disregarding the Statutes at and after the Third Congress. Ponická therefore fought not only for herself, but for the writers' community as well.

The personal line of argumentation stresses that Ponická's expulsion did not meet the expulsion criteria, that is, neglecting her duties. It also underlines the Union's failure to invite her to discuss her expulsion, its failure to fully inform her about her expulsion, and its failure to adhere to the Statutes. All four points were part of the 1971 Statutes (Ponická, 1977, p. 4) and form the basis of Ponická's personal line of argumentation, backed up by repeated attempts to clarify her position by talking to Plintovič or another Union official, Dr Libor Knězek (1977, p. 5). This encounter exposes the manipulative nature of the normalisation apparatus, which often preferred "quiet details" to public confrontations. Knězek suggested to Ponická that it would be "výhodnejšie a rozumnejšie" (more advantageous and reasonable) for her if she were to retract her discussion contribution from the Third Congress. By using the word "výhodnejšie" (more advantageous), Knězek reduced the matter of moral principle to transactional exchange. Ponická notes his argument:

"Dr. L. Knězek, ktorý ma mal či chcel presvedčiť o tom, že bude 'rozumnejšie a výhodnejšie' pre mňa, ak nebudem trvať na zaprotokolovaní svojho nepredneseného, ale mnou na 3. zjazde Zväzu slov. spisovateľov k zaprotokolovaniu odovzdaného diskusného príspevku." ["Dr L. Knězek, who was supposed to convince me that it would be 'more reasonable and advantageous' for me not to insist on having my unpresented discussion contribution, which I had submitted for recording at the Third Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union, recorded."] (Ponická, 1977, p. 5). This incident directly connects to the normative model of civic conformity (Zajac, 2013). The regime's goal was not to change Ponická's mind, but to force her into a public act of submission. Knězek's "friendly advice" was, in reality, a veiled threat or an ultimatum that if she refused to be "reasonable", she would face the professional liquidation she eventually suffered.

Ponická's refusal to accept this "bargain" highlights her rejection of socialist realism as a political power (Zajac, 2013). For her, the truth about the silenced writers was not a commodity to be traded for professional stability. This part of the letter serves as crucial evidence, showing that her expulsion was not a result of a rule violation but a direct consequence of her refusal to participate in this moral compromise. It relates to the discrepancy between the Union's official justification and the actual political reasons for her persecution. She argues that the Slovak Writers' Union deliberately obscures the true cause of her expulsion, which was her discussion paper at the Third Congress, and instead hides behind vague, administrative pretexts.

Ponická points out that the regime's hostility towards her intensified precisely because she refused to retract her statements, even when subjected to intense psychological pressure. She exposes the Union's strategy as an attempt to "conceal the real cause" (zakryť pravú príčinu). By doing so, she challenges the official narrative of the normalisation period, which often framed the silencing of intellectuals as disciplinary measures rather than acts of political censorship:

"Ak som bola vylúčená za to, že som napísala svoj diskusný príspevok k 3. zjazdu Zväzu slovenských spisovateľov, že sa rozhodujúcim ľuďom nepáčil obsah príspevku, že som napokon ani pod psychologickým nátlakom tento príspevok neodvolala a trvala na jeho zaprotokolovaní, mali ste mi to v oznámení o vylúčení presne oznámiť. No Vy, teda Výbor Zväzu slovenských spisovateľov, zrejme rozhodol na onom zasadnutí nielen o tom, že ma treba vylúčiť zo ZSS, ale aj o tom, že sa má zakryť pravá príčina môjho vylúčenia, ktorá v skutočnosti je sama proti Stanovám, nepresnou a bezobsažnou, dôkazmi nepodobretou formuláciou."["If I

was expelled for writing my discussion contribution for the Third Congress of the Slovak Writers' Union because the leadership disapproved of its content, and because I refused to retract it even under psychological pressure, insisting instead on its inclusion in the official minutes, you should have stated this clearly in the notice of expulsion. However, the Committee apparently decided at that meeting not only to expel me from the SWU but also to conceal the real reason for my expulsion which is, in fact, contrary to the Statutes behind an inaccurate and meaningless formulation unsupported by evidence."] (Ponická, 1977, p. 6).

The Union could not officially admit that it was punishing a writer for defending her colleagues, as that would expose the lack of artistic freedom. Therefore, it resorted to what Ponická calls a camouflage (Dubovský, 2017).

The second part of Ponická's appeal is general, that is, not linked only to her own person, but to the Union's functioning and duties. She criticises that the Union's biennial Congresses did not take place every two years as per the Statutes, but there were five years between the 1972 and 1977 Congresses. This might be an attempt of the regime to take over any organisation that did not adhere to the state's ideology, as the most important intervention into the natural cultural development was its thorough and all-around politicization (Londáková, 1998). Ponická asserts that since no regular meetings take place, writers cannot discuss current problems and that these meetings cannot be substituted by occasional debates or other events (Ponická, 1977, p. 7).

Another issue that Ponická raises is the right to participate in the Congress's debate, which all members have and which was, in her case, violated, since she was not allowed to read her contribution, and the applications indicating the wish to join the debate, were submitted a day ahead of the Congress, again in violation of the Statutes. Ponická also states that the Union's duty is to provide its members with a background supporting creativity and to help them put their professional and social rights into practice. Here, Ponická quotes the practice of withdrawing writings from print, naming Tatarka, Ťažký and also herself (Ponická, 1977, p. 8). The communist practice of censorship or forcing people into auto-censorship is well-known and was also applied in this case (Strečanský, 2020), when Ponická's contracts were nullified. These practices correspond to the term "expulsion from history" used by Ján Rozner, the husband of the persecuted translator Zora Jesenská (Passia, 2025). She quotes the Union's selective approach giving publication opportunities to selected writers (Ponická, 1977, p. 9), which is consistent with the state's effort to award ideological conformity with status, see e.g. the poet Miroslav Válek becoming minister of culture (Dubovský, 2017).

"*Výbor ZSS Zväz slovenských spisovateľov, nerealizujú profesionálne a sociálne práva všetkých slovenských spisovateľov, literárnych pracovníkov, ale realizujú takéto práva iba čiastočne, tojest len u časti literárnych pracovníkov, početne síce veľkej, ale v kvalite oslabenej práve chýbaním viacerých vynikajúcich autorov*." [The Committee of the Slovak Writers' Union does not fully uphold the professional and social rights of all Slovak writers and literary workers; instead, it enforces these rights only partially – that is, only for a segment of literary workers which, although large, is weakened in quality precisely by the absence of several outstanding authors.] (Ponická, 1977, pp. 8–9).

Ponická had voiced these concerns in her unpublished contribution, and repeated them in her appeal letter, questioning the morality of staying silent or voicing her concerns. The requests to "withdraw her contribution and [...] be reasonable" (Ponická, 1977, p. 10) are correctly identified as coercion typical for totalitarian states. Ponická, however, chooses to be reasonable on her own terms:

"*Volila som rozumnosť. Neodvolala som svoje svedectvo o skutočnosti, ktorá ďalej trvá a ktorú treba napraviť. A lokomotíva postihov sa rozjachala naplno. [...] Áno, stratila som všeličo, ale hádam predsa len nie to, bez čoho nemôže pociťovať plnú hodnotu svojho bytia*

nielen spisovateľ, ale vôbec človek akýkoľvek kdekoľvek kedykoľvek na svete." ["I chose reason. I did not withdraw my testimony about a reality that continues to exist and that must be put right. And the locomotive of reprisals gathered full speed. […] Yes, I lost many things, but perhaps not the one without which not only a writer, but any human being anywhere in the world, at any time, cannot feel the full value of their own existence."] (Ponická, 1977, p. 10).

It is quite clear that Ponická fully realises the consequences of her actions, and despite having plenty of opportunity to withdraw her contribution, pacify the regime and play the part of an ideologically conforming writer, she repeatedly refuses. This refusal is in line with her strong moral stance and had a significant, dramatic effect, since Ponická herself was first not censored; and lived to see repercussions only after speaking on behalf of her repressed colleagues (Dvořáková, 2025).

The conclusion of the letter focuses on the hope that Ponická's expulsion should be revoked, that the next Congress should take place in better conditions, fostering literature, and that criticism will be encouraged, not suppressed and penalized:

"Je už najvyšší čas, aby už ani spisovateľské zväzové orgány neboli schvaľovateľmi najrozličnejších represálií, deformácií, ani ich priamymi účastníkmi, ani tobôž ich priamymi vykonávateľmi." ["It is already high time that even the writers' union bodies should no longer be approvers of various repressions and distortions, nor their direct participants, let alone their direct executors."] (Ponická, 1977, p. 12).

Ponická would have to wait more than a decade for this wish to come true. Her refusal to yield to psychological pressure marks her as a figure of symbolic resistance (Perstická – Přerostová, 1991). In the context of 1977, when most writers chose compliance, Ponická's insistence on the truth and her exposure of the Union's deception transformed her appeal from a personal defence into a political indictment of the entire normalisation system.

Conclusion

Ponická's appeal letter not only hints at, but directly shows the author's conviction, moral strength and integrity. These values are scientifically difficult to measure; however, considering that Ponická's revolt practically cost her own career, they can be deemed quite significant.

After 1977, Ponická's publication history in Slovakia is sparse. She published *Dymy* as *samizdat* in 1979, her *Lukavické zápisky* were published in Prague in 1985, and later in exile in Toronto in 1989. All articles or papers she had published were *samizdats,* except for a few 1977–78 columns related to Ponická's contribution at the Third Congress of SWU. These were published in exile in the *Lidové noviny* (1988), *Listy* (1987, 1988), *Proměny* (1987). Her contribution from the SWU's Third Congress was published in *Le Monde* in 1977 (Hrúzová, 2002). No translations of hers were published between 1977 and 1989, and no other prose appeared in print. In this period, she was surveilled by the State Security, which led an operation "MILL" (MLYN) (Pastierová – Jašek, 2023) to watch and tap her.

The paradox of Ponická's story persists in that the regime's endeavours to oppress her ultimately resulted in the precise antithesis of their intended outcome. The repressive apparatus and surveillance of Operation "MILL" proved unsuccessful in eradicating her from the literary context; in the eyes of the domestic and international public, they transformed her from a persecuted author into an unquestionable moral authority. Her enforced entry into literary obscurity did not mark the end of her career, but rather the beginning of her legacy as a symbol of resilience.

Ponická's appeal letter is well-structured into two parts: personal and general. Each part consists of several points, which she relates to the Statutes, an official document for the SWU.

Her claims are therefore anchored in text, which should have worked as guidelines for the SWU, and its blank disregard by officials gives Ponická's appeal letter solid ground.

Her tone of voice is matter-of-fact, clear and direct, however, Ponická's anger at the unfairness of the situation seeps through into the letter in the form of irony:

"Keď som dňa 24. júna t. r. obdržala poštou ze Sekretariátu Zväzu slovenských spisovateľov – z literárneho odboru – listovné oznámenie s nasledujúcim textom, – citujem doslovne i s malými písmenkami, kde nemajú byť, –" [When on June 24 of this year I received by post from the Secretariat of the Slovak Writers' Union – from the literary department – a letter of notification with the following text, I quote verbatim, including the lowercase letters where they should not be –,] (Ponická, 1977, p.1).

This subtle use of irony functions as more than just a vent for frustration; it serves as a tool of intellectual subversion. By pointing out clerical errors and lowercase letters, Ponická highlights the mediocrity and lack of professionalism within the very institution that claimed the authority to discipline her, but not on the basis of literary merit, but as a punitive response to her refusal to conform to the regime's ideological demands. Ultimately, Ponická's appeal letter remains a testament to the fact that while a regime can seize an author's career, it cannot confiscate their integrity. Her revolt proved that a single, well-reasoned voice, anchored in truth and irony, can effectively dismantle an apparatus of its perceived moral authority.

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Summary

This paper examines the political and moral stance of the Slovak writer, translator, dissident and activist Hana Ponická through an analysis of her appeal letter (August 29, 1977) written after a key act of

repression: her expulsion from the Slovak Writers' Union (SWU) (June 22, 1977). The primary aim is to contextualize this document as a form of civic resistance and self-articulation within the framework of communist cultural control in Czechoslovakia. Using a historical-literary analysis, the study situates Ponická's complaint within broader mechanisms of institutional exclusion, surveillance, and punishment directed at nonconforming intellectuals. The article draws on accessible archival materials, including previously unpublished correspondence and official records, which allow for a more nuanced reconstruction of the events and their aftermath. By foregrounding Ponická's own voice, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of dissent, gendered authorship, and ethical responsibility in Slovak literary history. The paper also contextualizes Ponická's translations before and after the 1977 "annus horribilis", highlighting the devastating impact her non-conforming activities had on her writing and translation.

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