



From Stage to Page: An Interview With Zuzana Cigánová

interview and translation by Magdalena Mullek, PhD

Editor's note: We were fortunate enough to be connected to acclaimed Slovak author and actress Zuzana Cigánová by CSAGSI friend and translator Dr. Magdalena Mullek. Dr. Mullek has recently completed the first English



Accomplished actress and author, Zuzana Cigánová

translation of Zuzana's novel Vanity Unfair, a review of which will be featured in the Summer issue of the Koreny. Dr. Mullek graciously offered to translate our interview questions for Zuzana and we are very grateful to her for that work!

MM: Can you tell our readers a little bit about you, your background, and your family?

ZC: I'm a Bratislava native, but my grandparents were from the region under the Tatras. My grandmother was from Svätý Ján and my grandfather was from Kežmarok, my mother was born in Kežmarok and my aunt in Liptovský Mikuláš. When my grandfather came of age, as a landowner's son he was sent to study, but there wasn't anywhere to study

law in Slovakia, so they sent him to Vienna. However, he got enchanted by women, so his father went to get him and brought him home. He went on to study in Budapest, and ended up finishing a law degree both in Budapest and in Vienna. After that he settled in Bratislava, which is where we were born.

MM: Did you always know that you wanted to be a writer?

ZC: I never wanted to be a writer! It had never occurred to me. When I was 13 years old, 12 actually, I did my first movie, *Malá Manekýnka* (*The Little Model*, 1960), and this set me on a path. Before going to university I did *Romance pro křídlovku* (*Romance for Bugle*, 1966) with the director Otakar Vávra in Prague. One thing led to another, and it turned out that I was going to be an actress. I went on to study at the Academy of Performing Arts, and after graduation I started performing at the Slovak National Theater where I stayed for more than forty years.

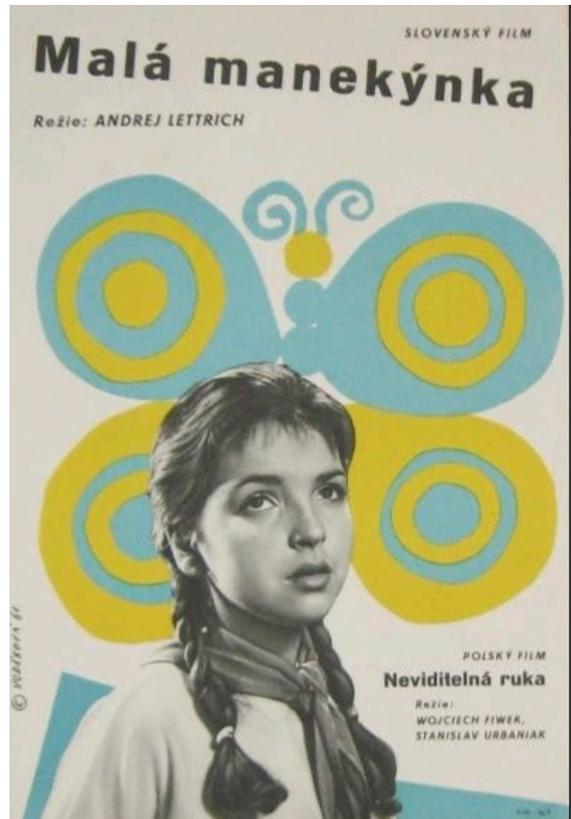
MM: So how did you write your first book?

ZC: One summer Jiří Stöhr invited me and my daughter to join part of the Tatra Around the World Expedition, and we spent two months driving through South America. I felt like I couldn't possibly remember everything I saw, all of the amazing things, so I started to write them down. That turned into the travelogue *Kúsok cesty okolo sveta* (*A Little Ways Around the World*, 1991).

MM: Did you have any trouble getting it published? ZC: Not at all, it was very easy. I walked into a regular publisher's office in Bratislava and they published the book. Maybe it was because I'm an actress, I don't know, but they just published it.

MM: How does your training and skill as an actor impact your writing?

ZC: I think it's the same thing, it doesn't matter whether you're acting or writing. It's a way of looking at the world. There is no difference whether you act it or write it down. It's a way of looking at people, at what's going on around you, and from that you figure out what the person you're writing about is supposed to be like. That goes for everything, head to toe, how the person moves, thinks, speaks, and I repeat, it's really the same thing whether you act it or write it down.



Movie poster from Suzana's first film 'The Little Model' 1961.

MM: Where does the inspiration for your work come from?

ZC: I don't know. An idea just occurs to me. I wrote my last book about old people, because the topic of aging came to my mind, not that I feel old, mind you, not at all, but you observe these issues around you, so I wrote about that.

MM: This is a difficult question but what is your favorite novel?

ZC: I have many favorites. I enjoy reading sci-fi, my brother had gotten me into it, I like that way of looking at the world.

But there really are many books I like. Recently I've enjoyed reading *The Egyptologists* by Robert Conquest. I've enjoyed reading ever since I learned to read, during Socialism we read all the time, and I still read a lot now.

MM: Tell us about writing *Špaky v trní (Vanity Unfair)*.

ZC: *Špaky v trní (Vanity Unfair)* was a very, very pleasant book to write. I'd say I was in love with it when I wrote it.

"In the lives of good people, bad people are the deciding factor. That's just how it goes. In the lives of the bad, the good ones disappear. They don't even notice them." Simply, it was a book about life, about how to live. But I wasn't thinking about it back then, I just wanted to write about someone not completely dissimilar from me, though

I wasn't writing about myself, I just wanted to write about her, about her loves. It was a book about our lives, completely specific, but not about me. It's thinking about how to live, who to be friends with, it's a book about how to get through life.

MM: Do you have any advice for our readers who might be aspiring authors?

ZC: Keep your eyes open, and when something catches your attention that you think is worth remembering, write it down. Take notes, and later they may turn into something. ♦



The cover of *Vanity Unfair*

In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Literary Translator Dr. Magdalena Mullek

Interview by: Elizabeth Stigler, PhD

ES: Can you please tell our readers a little bit about you and your background and where your family is from?

MM: I was born in Košice, Slovakia (back then Czechoslovakia), and when I was 14 I moved to Atlanta, Georgia with my mother, who was a research scientist. Nowadays I live in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico with my husband and daughter, but we spend our summers in Poprad, Slovakia, hiking all of the beautiful mountain ranges, gorges, and planes that Slovakia has to offer.

ES: How did you decide to become a literary translator and what has that work been like?

MM: While I was studying Slavic Languages and Literatures at Indiana University, I started to explore my interest in literary translation. I took a number of translation workshops with Prof. Bill Johnston, an award-winning translator from Polish. He encouraged my translation efforts, and guided me toward my first conference, readings, and publications in literary journals. I really enjoyed literary translation, so I kept translating and publishing excerpts in journals, and then the Slovak Literary Information Center invited me to be part of the *Dedalus Book of Slovak Literature*. I followed that up with *Into the Spotlight: New Writing from Slovakia*, and I've been translating different Slovak authors ever since.

ES: What's the most interesting part of your work as a literary translator?

MM: Getting to find a voice for different authors in English.

Each author has his or her own way of using language, which is distinctive from other authors. I love being able to recreate that experience for English-language readers.

ES: How did you get connected to Zuzana Cigánová and what was the process of translating her novel like?

MM: As we were making selections for *Into the Spotlight*, Zuzana Cigánová kept coming up as a recommendation over and over again. I got in touch with her publisher, read a number of her books, and we decided to include her in the anthology. At that point I reached out to her to get her permission to publish an excerpt, and she was thrilled to be part of the project. We've been friends since.

Translating Zuzana's novel was an absolute delight. Her language is playful and inventive, her images are vivid, and she's an excellent observer of the minutiae of human interactions. There were times when I would think about a little rhyme, ditty, or just a particular line for days, trying to find something equally funny or poignant in English, and then it would suddenly hit me. I'd say it was a full immersion experience with the text.

ES: This might be an unfair question but what is your favorite Czech or Slovak novel and why?

MM: I really don't have one favorite, but there are a few books and authors that I keep going back to. I love Dušan Mitana's short stories for their boldness and strength of writing, František Švantner's *Nevesta hól'* for its emotional resonance, and of course, Zuzana Cigánová's books for the playfulness of their language.

ES: What Czech or Slovak novel would you recommend to our Koreny readers?

MM: That depends on whether they want to read in Slovak, or whether they'd prefer an English translation. In Slovak I would highly recommend *Prvá a posledná láska* by Pavel Vilikovský.

In English translation I'd say, of course, that they need to read *Vanity Unfair*.

ES: Can you share any details about your next project or what you're currently working on with us?

MM: So this is when you'll accuse me of only translating my favorites.

I'm actually putting the finishing touches on a book of short stories by Dušan Mitana. The author and

I made the selections for this book shortly before he died, and I think they represent the best of his

writing. They will be published by Seagull Books in 2024.

The project I will be starting on this fall is the translation of František Švantner's *Nevesta hôľ* (*Bride of the Mountains*) for Karolinum Press and their Modern Slovak Classics series. The book is considered the pinnacle of Slovak naturalist writing, and I'd argue that it is also an excellent Slovak representative of magical realism. I'm already gathering materials for this project, and this summer I will hike and visit the various locations in the book. ♦



Dr. Magdalena Mullek (courtesy of her LinkedIn profile)