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The Trademark of a Trend Setter: An Interview With Czech Feminist Writer And Environmentalist Eva Hauserová

By Madelaine Hron¹

I had long known of Eva Hauserová — major Czech feminist writer and founding figure of the Gender Studies Center in Prague. I met her personally for the first time at party she gave in Prague in spring 2001, certainly one of the most delightful get-togethers I enjoyed while I was there: it was a “kiddie” party, and we (a number of well known writers and scholars) were to dress up like kids, eat snacks and play children’s games. I was immediately enchanted by Eva’s wit, her artistic and literary talent, as well as her lucid understanding of Czech politics and society. It was not until this year that I resolved to interview this inspiring figure, first online and then face-to-face in Prague. Again I was charmed by her presence, above all in her modest appraisal of herself and her clever, insightful commentary on contemporary Czech issues. I begin with a brief biography.

Militant Czech Feminist or Keen Cultural Critic? A Biography of Eva Hauserová

“Eva Hauserová” is a household name in the Czech Republic, synonymous with the evolving Czech feminist movement, and now with a number of emerging environmentalist lobby groups. Outspoken, she is heard regularly on radio and television, and highly prolific, she has written numerous articles and books concerning women’s issues, environmental concerns and commentary on Czech politics. Hauserová is renown for her witty, ironic style, satirical and even acerbic at times, but always piercing, persuasive and to the point on crucial contemporary issues. The controversial handbook, *Příručka Militantního Feminismu*, 1999 (The Handbook of Militant Feminism: 101 Lies Men Tell Women And Why Women Believe Them), she wrote under a pseudonym, often cause Hauserová to be dismissed a “radical” feminist. However she should rather be considered for her powerful progressive fiction such as in *Cvokyně*, 1992 (Crazed) or her lucid, insightful journalism such as her articles collected in *Lapače času*, 2000 (Panting Time).

Born in Prague in 1956, Eva Hauserová studied biology at the Charles University and trained as a geneticist, and in the early 1980s, she became interested in creative writing and journalism. She soon became a leading figure in the Prague science fiction community writing such books as *Hostina mutagenů*. Hauserová also briefly worked as an advertising copywriter, then as editor for *Harlequin Books* and later, as editor for a science fiction publisher. In many ways, Hauserová’s literary career during the oppressive communist regime represents the path of many leading intellectuals – forced to embark in fields that were not threatening for the regime and when writing, becoming editors, typesetters, or camouflaging their ideas in politically correct genres. Now Hauserová is a full-fledged fiction writer, publishing more than a book a year, such as *Když se sudičky spletoú*, 2000 (When Fairies Err) or *Zrání Madly v sedmi krocích, aneb, Přitažlivost západních mužů*, 2000 (The Maturing of Madla in Seven Steps or The Appeal of Western Men).

Despite her literary accomplishments, Hauserová is still forced to supplement her income as a translator. She averages a book a month, ranging in versatility from Harlequin novels (such as Danielle Steel or Elizabeth Chadwick) to bestsellers (James Redfield's *Celestine Prophecy*) as well as psychology books by Erich Fromm. Again, this tendency points to the sad reality of Czech women writers in contemporary Czech society. Notwithstanding, Hauserová is also a leading member of the Czech Gender Studies Center in Prague, and her work has certainly influenced other Czech women writers such as Iva Pekarková and feminist intellectuals such as Jiřina Šiklova or Eva Kalivodová. Currently, she is very involved in the growing environmental problems arising in the Czech Republic, most notably an activist in the Czech women's group 'Zelený kruh' (The Green Circle), an umbrella organization of civic environmental initiatives. She has published several books on this topic recently as well, including *Růže mezi trnami*, 1996 (Rose among thorns) or *Kapesní průvodce ekofeminismem*, 1997 (The Pocket Guide To Ecofeminism).

Unfortunately, little of Hauserová's work has been translated into English, perhaps because her work is so charged with Czech politics and social-cultural pertinence, and displays an unsettling mixture of humor and satire. English translations of her earlier stories have appeared in *BBR*, *One Eye Open* and *The Thirteenth Moon*, English language journals from the Czech Republic, sadly all of them now defunct.

CER: You are one of the most famous Czech feminists – what does feminism mean for you?

EH: First I should mention that in the Czech Republic today there's a number of people who engage themselves with feminism on a serious academic, philosophical, sociological and political level -- I am not one of these. I'm simply a writer and publicist with feminist concerns, and that's why I write about these problems; whether I want to or not, they infiltrate my work. For me feminism means examining women and men's gender roles in society, and where they seem constraining and problematic to me, to put them into question and change them. I think that a patriarchal element pervades the public sphere and it's necessary to bring into it more of women's concerns.

CER: How has feminism changed after '89? Is feminism dead in post-communism? Are there any differences with the West?

EH: Before '89, feminism didn't exist at all. People associated feminism with communist quotas of the number of women in Parliament or the communist politics of employing all women in the social order, which of course, created a double burden for women. So right after '89, one might have said that feminism was dead; many women readily welcomed the opportunity to stay at home and take care of their kids. At the beginning of the '90s, the Czech media represented feminism rather negatively – like crazy American women who hate men and want revolution! But at the end of the nineties, there emerged, at least in more educated circles and higher-standard media sources, a turn for the better. Young people especially, recognized the need to protect women's rights and engage in feminist debates, lest their standard of life be threatened. In this way, I think we are growing closer to Western concerns. I believe that in some ten years, we might be at the level of Western countries.

CER: What are, according to you, the greatest problems facing women today?

EH: The most media attention and strident cries focus on the lower pay women receive in relation to men (about 30% less); women have greater difficulty in finding jobs or being admitted to top positions. This relates to women's role in the family enclave, which is in many ways very traditional, and thus limiting for women. Also there is increasing awareness of different types of violence against women, especially battery or spousal abuse, which, until recently was a taboo topic.

CER: What would you say are the positive advances for Czech women in post-'89 society?

EH: Freedom, above all. Women can ultimately choose what they want to do in life, though, in comparison to men, they have to battle against a lot of biases. You could also say that some of the remnants of communist legislation have had positive effects, such as maternity (more correctly 'family') leave which can last from 2-3 years, after which a woman should be taken back at her former site of employment. Also the child-care network. As well, the many communist safeguards to protect women, such as, that women should not lift more than 15kg (which of course is rarely observed). Women also generally retire earlier than men (which clearly disadvantages them as they often work part-time) but this will soon change.

CER: How do you express your feminism?

EH: I've written two books about feminism and then under a pseudonym, one I didn't mean quite seriously, called the Handbook for Militant Feminism. Sometimes I also publish newspaper and journal articles on this theme, be they humorous or serious.

CER: Why a pseudonym?

EH: I chose a pseudonym, Johana Suková, because I wanted to set the Handbook apart from my other books and articles, where I really focus on feminist issues and attempt to think them through. The Handbook is written as sort of a gamble – it is in fact an instruction book: something like “how to completely offend a man”!

CER: Yes, your novels are often very funny – what would you say about the humor in your books?

EH: I think that the humor in my texts in some way resembles the humor that Iva Pékarková uses in her texts; it isn't humor for the sake of humor, but rather a type of humor that arises because of an unusual perspectives on a given sign or situation, so that the text is then both funny and serious at the same time. Often I write for journals and magazines whose main aim is to be funny. But sometimes I also write something completely serious.

CER: What is “women's writing” for you? Do you write it?

EH: When I write a story or novel, I don't think about whether I'm writing as a woman or as a human being. Some people say I write like a man, meaning I guess, that I like to play in a grotesque way with ideas, and construct various sci-fi visions of the world; I absolutely abhor sentimentality and prefer irony. This is all unconscious for me and

therefore I don't feel particularly "unwomanly" because of it. Rather it just confirms for me that what's usually expected of women doesn't necessarily reflect reality, the way women really are.

CER: How has your writing changed after '89?

EH: Before '89, I wrote dark allegorical visions depicting the oppression of the communist regime. Now I write more playfully and freely. Aside from feminist elements, I bring a lot of environmental concerns into my work, because issues of a healthy living environment and ecology in fact interest me most, above all things.

CER: What would you say most influenced your writing?

EH: I studied biology and for a short while worked in genetic engineering, and this "environmental outlook" has accompanied me all my life; I guess that's why I'm interested in environmental questions. A second most important influence on me has been the experience of the totalitarian communist regime, above all the way in which it deformed (and continues to deform) people's psyche. I wasn't some kind of dissident, I lived in the so-called "gray zone" (that's a term coined by Jiřina Šiklová for people who didn't want to have conflicts with the regime so behaved more or less to conform, but on the other hand, never became part of the Party or actively supported communist politics). Most people lived like that and analyzing this phenomenon is really rather interesting. I think that in my novel *Cvokyně* I captured the mentality of these people in a rather evocative manner. The third element that influenced me is this feminism, which stems from my life experience: I was educated to become a woman scientist, or rather a scientist, without any gender connotation. Then, as an adolescent, I crashed head-on with the reality that something completely different was expected from girls. Another shock came with being a wife and mother. I should elaborate: motherhood for me was one of the most positive things in my life, but it was bring along many frustrations with the way in which our society is structured.

CER: Do you identify with the characters you describe? Which ones in particular? Are any, such as your male characters, alien to you? In all, how would you describe the heroes and heroines in your books?

EH: It is said that however many characters a writer creates, she always writes about herself, and this is definitively true in my case. I can easily become embodied as my characters, even into a male character, even a very unsympathetic male character (as you find is the case in the novella *Zrání Madly v sedmi krocích*) but I try not to enter into their way of viewing the world. In fact I cannot, or rather it would work out rather badly if I did. I guess of all my female characters, the one closest to me is the heroine of the novel *Cvokyně*, a crazy scientist, that travels through time and tries to change her own life. From my short stories I'd say it was probably the heroine of the story *Trabant*, who is a teenager with a lot of complexes, just like I was at one point, I guess. My heroines are -- how to say it? -- spontaneous feminists: most of the time they fight against a lot of assumptions and stereotypes that continue to confine women still today.

CER: You are also a translator, are you not?

EH: I translate exclusively for the money; what's more I choose to translate these light pulp women's novels. I'd never want to be serious translator of literary texts; I don't feel fastidious or qualified enough. Besides I don't have the right mindset: a translator is in fact a type of servant who should be in complete awe and respect for the author s/he is translating.

CER: Have any of your novels been translated into other languages?

EH: Unfortunately not, only some of my stories. I'm not famous enough for that.

CER: In sum what would you say is the "Eva Hauserová" trademark? How in a nutshell would you define yourself and your many talents?

EH: I think that I have a good feel for certain trends; I easily follow where the wind leads me, or set off into uncharted waters. Of course I don't follow in whatever waters trickle by; like Iva Pekarková (to mention her again), who rides the wave of multiculturalism, I ride the wave of feminism, environmentalism and some type of 'speculative prognostication'. Sometimes I realize that I've missed my calling: I should have been a fashion designer, so that I could fully live out my life mission -- trend-setting -- without packaging it or accounting for it somehow. At least then, no one would be accusing me of maneuvering some type of "social engineering"-- a crime that too many Czech feminists and ecologists are accused of around here!

A Brief Bibliography of Hauserova's Work

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