

The Magical World of Ján Uličiansky: Personal Reminiscences of a Translator and Friend
By Charles Sabatos

I first met the author Ján Uličiansky in 2005, during my year-long stay in Bratislava as a Fulbright scholar at Comenius University. Having recently completed my dissertation on Central European (mainly Czech) literature, I was motivated to explore contemporary Slovak writing and culture, of which I knew relatively little apart from the work of Pavel Vilikovský, which I had already translated. Ján and I started meeting to practice English, a common way for foreigners in any country to enter new social circles. However, since I was also interested in improving my Slovak, our conversations naturally shifted more into that language, Ján correcting my grammatical errors with his characteristic subtlety and patience. He was both amused and seemingly impressed that I had translated the first canto of Ján Botto's 19th-century poem "Smrť Jánošíkova" ("The Death of Jánošík.") We also began to discuss Ján's own work, which was often inspired by classic works of children's literature, but his playful, ironic humor was quite contemporary and from my point of view, very Central European.

Ján's current project at that time was *Kocúr na kolieskových korčuliach*, an updated version of "Puss in Boots" who prefers rollerblades, written as a weekly series for Slovak Radio, where he served for years as head of the children's programming division. Knowing of my previous experience in translation, Ján suggested that I translate the forthcoming book-length version, which I entitled *Puss on Skates*, rather than the more literal translation of "Cat (or tomcat) on Roller Skates (or Rollerblades)," because I felt the old-fashioned "Puss" was needed to keep the title as close to the traditional one as possible. The chapters of *Puss on Skates* are only loosely connected, due to their origin as separate radio episodes, but they all feature a cat who befriends a lonely young boy named Martin, and each one is based on a classic children's story featuring animal characters, from the Wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" to the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The Slovak section of IBBY (the International Board on Books for Young People) selected *Puss on Skates* as the best book of 2006 and nominated Ján as the Slovak candidate for the international Hans Christian Andersen Award the following year. I translated nine of the book's thirteen chapters, but unfortunately, we did not find a publisher for

the English version and only the first chapter was published, as an illustrated promotional brochure by the Literary Information Center.

Ján and I stayed in touch after I returned to the US for a postdoctoral teaching fellowship, and he offered me another translation project: the script of his earliest and longest-running play, *Tik Tak* (1978); my English version *Tic Tok* was used as subtitles on a CD-ROM recording sent to foreign drama critics. After I settled in Istanbul (only a two-hour flight away from Vienna/Bratislava), my collaboration with Ján intensified, turning into a sincere friendship as well. In 2008, Ján adapted *Puss on Skates* into a musical play. In this version, most of the characters were given different last names which refer to animals, allowing for additional wordplay. My translation of the script was used as supertitles for an international performance at the National Theater in Bratislava, which I was able to attend and where I met many of Ján's friends and colleagues from the theater world.

The high point of my collaboration with Ján came in 2009 when he wrote his book *Štyria škriatkovia a víla* (*The Four Elves and the Fairy*). This tale of four brother elves who play a magical music box to change the seasons, their friend Viva the fairy, and the evil tree frog Futura, was a fully original story with an underlying message about protecting the environment. It was partly inspired by Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," which he made use of in the theatrical adaptation he directed himself in Košice. It became my favorite of his books, and by a chance set of circumstances it was the only one that was published in English. That year, Slovakia was the guest country at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, the most important annual event in this field anywhere in Europe, and the publishers wanted to have Ján's work available in both English and Italian translations. In Italian, they chose one of his earlier books, *Máme Emu* (*We Have Ema*), but in English they decided on *The Four Elves and the Fairy*, which Ján requested me to translate (he also generously allowed me to dedicate my version to my two eldest nephews as well as a then newborn niece.) It was released simultaneously in the original and in my translation, in a nearly identical edition illustrated by the artist Peter Uchnár, and both were displayed at the Slovak stand of the Bologna fair, which Ján attended in person (if I recall his later account of events correctly, even Umberto Eco stopped by to have a look.) Unfortunately, although the English edition was just as beautifully produced as the Slovak original, the

publisher never distributed it outside of Slovakia, although I did donate one of my own copies to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, so it would be theoretically available for future researchers of international children's literature.

As my academic workload increased as a full-time assistant professor, I had less time to dedicate to translation. Ján's following book, *Malá princezná* (*The Little Princess*, loosely inspired by Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*) was released in an interactive ebook version along with an English version, but after completing two chapters I could not commit to the rest and it was apparently translated by someone else (but never released in a hard copy version.)

Nonetheless, whenever I traveled to Bratislava, a visit felt incomplete without seeing Ján, his sister Zuzana, and his partner Pavel, and I had an annual tradition of meeting them at the Christmas market in the Old Town. On occasion I visited them at their peaceful weekend house in Banská Štiavnica, and we even met once in Prague and another time in Istanbul, although we were never able to arrange a meeting in the US, which I would have enjoyed as well. Aside from the pleasure of his company and his always stimulating conversation, becoming friends with Ján was like the fulfillment of a childhood dream of getting to know my favorite authors in person, although in this case it was a writer in a language I had only begun to speak in my early twenties. In 2016, I was back in Bratislava for another extended research stay, which also gave me the chance for one more collaboration with Ján, this time as an active participant in his creative process. He had created a new children's program, *Trpaslíci* (*Dwarves*), whose characters lived inside a cell phone and took their names from "smiley" emoticons, and he decided to include a new character named "Mr. And" who would explain common English sayings. My task was to come up with a phrase that was related to the general theme of the episode (health, courage, gifts, etc.), could be explained in a relatively simple way, and was theoretically easy enough for children to remember. As part of my role as professional language consultant, I was also on set for two days during filming. While it was an entirely different experience from my previous joint projects with Ján, which mostly involved solitary hours of translation with occasional communication with him, it gave me a new perspective on his widespread influence on children's entertainment in Slovakia.

Outside of Bratislava, Ján also worked closely with colleagues in the spa town of Piešťany, particularly the children's division of the City Library, where he helped to found the Zázračný oriešok (Magical Nut) festival of children's books and radio plays. The 2016 edition of the festival was held toward the end of my stay there, so Ján invited me to attend with a group of other friends. It was a particularly significant year to be there, since Ján was awarded a special prize from the Literary Information Center for lifelong achievement in children's literature. My last visit to Bratislava before the COVID-19 pandemic was in February 2020, after which I could not travel to Europe for over two years. In August 2023, however, I was given a one-month residency in Banská Štiavnica as part of the "Trojica Air" program to work on a translation project. Ján and Pavel were spending much of the summer in their weekend house, just up the hill from my temporary accommodation, and although Ján was in fragile health, they frequently invited me up for dinner in their lovely back garden. As Ján had so often done in Bratislava, he introduced me to friends and neighbors in the town, which enriched my month-long stay enormously, and to entertain them I even recited my translation of "The Death of Jánošík" at a neighborhood barbecue.

Sadly, Ján's health (which had not been strong for over a decade) declined even further over the next several months, and by this past spring it was difficult for him even to leave home. In early April, I had a short spring break trip to Paris and arranged my return travel with a stopover in Vienna, leaving the possibility of a quick visit to Bratislava if Ján's condition allowed it. As it turned out, I was able to stop by and see him briefly, and even though he was recovering from medical treatment earlier that day and unable even to sit up in bed, he had retained a glimmer of his typical humor. Trying to keep a relatively light tone under the grave circumstances, I told him that I had stopped by this time because I was on vacation, and he replied ruefully, alluding to his housebound circumstances, "I'm also on vacation." Exactly three weeks later, on May 3, I received the news that Ján had passed away; my feeling of loss was at least partially offset by the knowledge that I'd been able to properly say farewell. The memories of him from friends and colleagues that I read in various publications and heard on Slovak Radio confirmed that he was not only widely respected but remembered with affection and love.

Knowing Ján Uličiansky, first as a translator and then as a friend, was both personally and professionally my most significant encounter with Slovak culture. I regret not having the time, energy, and connections to better promote his writing in English and help it reach the readers outside Slovakia that it richly deserves. Yet I remain thankful for his kindness and generosity in opening up the magical world of his imagination to a visitor from abroad, allowing me an insider's perspective toward one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Slovak literature.

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