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2006-2007 Fulbright Program Experience

How Long Should One Wait?

I waited fifty-four years for the best year of my life, but it was worth it.

In May of 2006, I graduated from Northern Illinois University with a M.Ed. Degree in English as a Second Language (ESL) from the Literacy Education Department. Four months later, I began a most extraordinary journey teaching outside the United States as part of the J. William Fulbright Program.

It was October of 2005. Because I was graduating from N.I.U in the spring, I began searching for jobs to teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language) abroad. I knew that finding a position with a reputable company would not be easy. I had read stories posted by EFL teachers who found themselves stranded in miserable jobs with dishonorable companies who had been less than straightforward about the terms and conditions of the position. A colleague encouraged me to apply for a “Fulbright.” I was familiar with this program because my older daughter had been a Fulbright student in Croatia in the late ‘90s. Applying for this program was a good choice for me. If I were selected to work in Slovakia, my chosen country, I felt I would not have to be concerned about the quality of the program because it was affiliated with the U.S. Department of State.

Completing the application form, writing the essays, and obtaining references were time consuming and stressful but helped me consolidate my feelings about why I had wanted to teach abroad all my life. Once I submitted the application packet, I waited for my interview date. It came, and I survived that round. Next, my application was sent to the national office for their approval—or not. Again, I was recommended and my application was sent to the Fulbright Office in Bratislava, Slovakia. Then, on April 3rd, 2006, I received an email from the Fulbright executive director in Slovakia informing me I had been selected as a teaching assistant. I was overjoyed with this life-changing news.

In September 2006, I arrived in Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak Republic, to teach at Comenius University, a highly regarded university. As a foreign lecturer, I was assigned to teach four classes each semester in the English Language and Literature Department. My classes were electives, taught to both “undergrad” (years 1-3) and “graduate” (years 4 and 5) students. There were no prior curricula for these classes, therefore, I spent a considerable amount of time researching materials and preparing lesson plans. Writing curriculum at the university level was something I had not done before, but something that certainly broadened my experiences.

The year I spent in Slovakia was more fun than I could ever have imagined. My fellow university colleagues and students were friendly and helpful as I navigated all the unfamiliar aspects of teaching and living in a foreign country. I admired those professors who taught an impossible number of classes each semester and were paid only $700 a month. There were also students who took anywhere from 12-14 different classes a week. I had no idea how they managed.

A totally unexpected highlight of my year in Bratislava was my friendship circle. There were ten Fulbrighters assigned to Slovakia. Seven of us were in Bratislava, three more in other cities. There was a group of “older” Fulbrighters (45-65) and a group of “younger” Fulbrighters, (23-30). On occasion the two groups mingled, but we “older” ones often spent time together in Old Town attending plays, the opera, the symphony, dining in restaurants, eating hot chocolate at our favorite café “Chocolate Under the Michael,”
worshiping together at an English speaking church, watching movies in our homes, plus traveling as often as possible. I visited Vienna several times due to its close proximity to Bratislava, one hour west by train. I traveled to Budapest, Krakow, Auschwitz, Prague, Vienna, and other Slovak towns with my new “best friends.” We went to the Cabbage Festival in Stupava, a Wine Festival in Modra, and a Hungarian festival in the Slovak city of Komarno, on the Slovak-Hungarian border. The make-up of the Fulbright group changed throughout the year. There was a core group who were present the whole academic year, but, as the months progressed, there were others who came as well. The Fulbright Program has short-term programs for a semester, three months, even six weeks or less that I had not known existed. A photographer came to document the Roma in three different communities in Slovakia. A retired political science professor taught classes in a new private liberal arts college. A Wheaton College special education professor taught classes for a semester. As it turned out, he and I were both from the same neighborhood in Sycamore, Illinois, but had never met before.

Living in Central Europe last year gave me an appreciation of how history has played out in that region throughout the centuries. We Americans have no concept of what it was like to be a part of multiple empires or kingdoms. The country we now call Slovakia was invaded time and time again over the centuries. Their independence in 1993 was the Slovak Republic’s first chance to govern itself. The last 17 years have been filled with times of jubilation as well as great consternation over the direction the country has taken. Not everyone is happy about the “velvet divorce” that split Czechoslovakia. There also are those who felt a great loss in no longer being part of a communist society. I would not have understood this viewpoint had I not lived in Slovakia.

Last year I traveled to more locations, visited more castles, and ate more cabbage than I have in my whole life. I loved everything about my life in Central Europe. I was fortunate to share my new world with some of my family and friends who came to Slovakia to visit me. I e-mailed regularly those who were not able to visit so they could live vicariously through my travels. I wish I could have stayed another year, but the Fulbright Program is limited to only one year. I knew I had to say goodbye to everything and everyone I had come to enjoy so much.

Although I have four grown children and two step-grandchildren in the U.S., I knew I was not ready to return home yet. I had sold my house and my car and had placed all my belongings in storage. If I were going to keep traveling and working abroad, this was the time to do it. Consequently, I applied to the English Language Fellow Program, another Department of State program which places EFL teachers throughout the world. I was offered a position in Lankaran, Azerbaijan, a rural southern city on the Caspian Sea, thirty miles from the Iran border. I have been here since September 2007. I am currently teaching at a university as well as helping establish a branch of the Azerbaijan English Teachers’ Association in this region. My life here could not be more different than that in Bratislava, but it is still very satisfying in many ways. I believe I would not have this job had I not been a Fulbright teaching assistant last year. That experience gave me the international exposure, confidence, and initial experience that I needed in order to be qualified to obtain this job.

My 2006-2007 year in Slovakia was the culmination of a lifelong dream. Through the Fulbright Program, I was given the opportunity to live the life and work in the position I had always yearned for. I will always be indebted to the J. William Fulbright Commission for an extraordinary experience, one that provided me a springboard to chase new and bigger dreams.