



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH Honors College

Newsletter FALL 2012

The Fulbright Experience By KAREN MELIS

Pittsburgh native Karen A. Melis is no stranger to Pitt classrooms, having graduated with a BS in Biological Sciences in 1979 and BS in Chemical Engineering in 1985. After raising a family in Butler and working as an engineer for over 20 years, Karen chose to fulfill a long curiosity about her Slovak ancestors and their migration to Pittsburgh. The details she had access to were limited and stereotyped, and the available academic literature was typically in Slovak. The necessary data could only be found in the villages themselves. A research project was born! Karen returned to the classroom to study Slovak and began graduate-level courses in the History Department. Seven short trips to the border villages of eastern Slovakia and southern Poland yielded preliminary records and documents. Upon her analysis, Karen noticed migration patterns between the villages and certain cities within the US. The project was further enhanced by adding a geographic DNA study to understand the long-term migration patterns in settling the region. In March 2011, Karen secured a Fulbright Research Scholarship to Slovakia—one of only two awarded to study in Slovakia that year. Beginning in September 2011, Karen began a 10-month period gathering data, interviewing people, living in the archives—a researcher's dream come true. Karen looks to formalize the academic study in a Pitt master's degree program.

The exchange of ideas, concerns, beliefs, laughter, stories, and even tears while living in my new environment was the most important part of this personal journey.

It is hard to believe that at this time last year, I found myself living abroad in Eastern Slovakia, settling into a new apartment, connecting to the Internet, renting a car, and anticipating what the next ten months would bring. As a University of Pittsburgh Fulbright awardee, my research involved locating primary sources to better

understand the context in which Slovaks decided to emigrate between the years 1870 and 1918. My study focused on Spiš County, the region from which many Slovaks migrated to Pittsburgh.

I began my experience by observing local Slovaks to learn how things were done—socially, culturally, and professionally. I scouted out the shops, grocery stores, bakeries, a great coffee shop, and other places I could routinely visit.

By putting myself into various daily interactions, I had the opportunity to show respect by using the Slovak language and participating in many social and cultural activities. People became curious, asking what I had learned that day or which village I was traveling to tomorrow. However, it was not all about the research. I went anywhere that people invited me: on hikes, to

the local theater and festivals, or to a neighbor's home to plant flowers. As I shared these simple experiences over time, people came to know me as an individual rather than as a typical American.

This personal approach helped me make strides in my professional work, gaining credibility with new colleagues and opening doors to other resources, such as the archival staff at the Spišská Kapitula Bishporic. The staff there is passionate about preserving Spiš history for future generations through their precious archival materials. Embracing my project, they introduced me and mentioned my work to contacts who might facilitate my research while in Slovakia. Their simple invitation to "have some tea" typically led to wonderful, long discussions on regional history and background never to be found in any textbook. These sessions deepened my understanding and provided key elements of the

very context I came to find—all over a cup of tea.

These ten months opened my eyes to both how Americans are perceived in this one part of the world and how simple, everyday interactions can have such an impact on altering those perceptions. The exchange of ideas, concerns, beliefs, laughter, stories, and even tears while living in my new environment was the most important part of this personal journey. I can only hope that I have touched others in some small way, as they have touched me.



Karen Melis in Spisska Nova Ves, Slovakia during part of her Fulbright research. The Blessed Virgin Mary Assumption RC Church is visible behind her.

IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 3: Who Are Medical Schools Looking For?

PAGE 6: Dean's Message

PAGE 4: Considering a Career in Development?

PAGE 10: Honors College Wyoming Field Studies