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commentary

The View from My Family Tree: Reflections on Communism and Democracy in Slovakia

—**Laura Smetana** (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

Growing up the daughter of a man who immigrated to the United States in 1968 to find a better life than he had in communist Czechoslovakia, my curiosity about the “old country” began at an early age. I was barely two-years-old when I made my first voyage overseas with my Slovak father and American mother to visit our family in Slovakia. We continued to go on a regular basis every three to four years, staying two months at a time in the old farm house where my dad grew up.



The author, Laura Smetana, stands in front of the 200+ year old house that has been occupied by members of her extended family for generations, including her father who was born and raised there. During her research experience Laura resided in this house.

Being over 200-years-old, the house was not equipped with many modern amenities. For a child it was an adventure. My sister and I slept on straw mattresses with huge feather-pillow comforters that were hand made by my grandmother. Each day we had to heat the water for a bath by burning wood we found outside, and although we had electricity, there were no telephones or toilets.

Since my sister and I don't speak Slovak, we spent all of our time together just trying to have as many adventures as possible in the foreign land that housed so many of our friends and relatives. Not being able to verbally communicate with words and share stories, we communicated with our relatives by sharing food. Accepting another serving showed that we liked the food and consequently that we liked them; because we couldn't verbalize such things, refusing seconds was taken negatively.

My understanding of Slovakia was almost mythical in nature. The old house, the stories about the war, communism, the invasion and the fall of communism—all of this sounded exciting, just like a movie. Being a child educated in the United States who learned from an early age that communism was about the worst thing that could happen to a country, it seemed to me that democracy was a breath of fresh air for the country that had seen so much hardship. Just sharing food and not understanding what the adults were talking about left me to make my own conclusions from my observations. Even though I heard about some negative aspects of post-communist Slovakia, I always believed that Slovakia's transition from communism to democracy had been great. *Way to go! You've got democracy now!*

However, as I got older, I realized that although I had visited Slovakia four times, I had never really heard my family's perspectives on the events that shaped their lives and that eventually split their country into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I realized how much I wanted to hear their stories and discover the truth for myself.

People were getting older and memories getting foggier, and I wasn't sure how much time some of my relatives had left. Considering I had already lost my grandparents, a great uncle, and an uncle, I decided there was no time to lose. The scariest thought for me was that somebody who had lived through so much could pass away with their stories going untold, so I decided to apply for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF).



The town of Myjava, taken from the bell tower of the local Lutheran church.

In the summer of 2006, I traveled to Slovakia where I researched effects of the transition from communism to democracy and capitalism. I did so by collecting oral histories from twenty-four people ranging from eighteen to eighty-years-old, with the help of my father who served as my translator. Most of my time was spent conducting interviews in the town of Myjava, where my extended family has been situated for hundreds of years. However, it had been six years since my last visit to Slovakia and this time it felt much different. As I recalled in my journal,

"Life seems different here than I remembered it from my previous visits. People seem weary, tired, and worn but not in a hectic sense of being occupied by too many things to do. There is weariness in people's eyes, as if each day is a struggle and one does not rush to the next because it is unknown what awaits them there. People stroll, with purpose but not quickly. Colors are faded as their lives seem to be. They are emerging from a past of black and white and grey to color and are stuck somewhere in-between. Slovakia has emerged into the Western world but many do not yet feel a part of that world."

Through the interviews I was able to ask questions about past events that had so clearly influenced the present situation. However, conducting the interviews was harder than expected. Some people refused on the grounds that they never spoke during communism and didn't want to start now; others were suspicious of the reasons why an American university would fund a research project that focused on listening to what they, *ordinary people*, had to say.

In the end, the group of interviewees consisted of people of various ages and backgrounds, including a doctor, entrepreneurs, and several who were jailed during communism. In addition, I interviewed some people who participated as students in the 1989 Velvet Revolution, an event which marked the end of communism in what was then Czechoslovakia, as well as some current students who have no memories of communism. Other interviews were conducted with retired military personnel who were in service during World War II or after the 1968 Soviet invasion. I also interviewed a former neighbor of Alexander Dubček, the 1968 Communist Party leader. Dubček initiated the period of political and social liberalization called Prague Spring (often referred to as "socialism with a human face"), which resulted in the August 21, 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion led by the Soviet Union (Henderson, 22).

It is the 1968 Soviet invasion that creates the rough line that separates the older from the younger generation. The older generation remembers the Soviet invasion while the younger generation does not. However, those who were young children at the time of the invasion fall somewhere in-between. Nearly everyone who remembered the invasion could remember exactly where they were when it happened and their age at the time. For those who were children, the event's magnitude and implications were not fully understood at the time.

Within both generations, their age during the invasion and the 1989 Velvet Revolution had a noticeable effect on individual recollections. For example, those who remember communism are able to make comparisons between the two governmental systems based on personal experiences, while those who were too young to remember communism must rely on what they learned in school and what they heard from friends and relatives. In general, the older generation tends to be more nostalgic for the social benefits of the communist era, while the younger generation seems to be more focused on the future and less awash with memories and recollections of the past.

Although all those interviewed were born and raised in Slovakia, and have lived, for the most part, in the same town, the window through which each sees the world varies significantly. Their recollections of events and viewpoints on the same topics can be, at times, strikingly different. For some, the connection to communism runs deep; for others, "Iron Curtain" is just a phrase from history class. (To read actual quotes from my relatives, [please see my timeline.](#))

Before conducting this research I never truly believed that I would find such mixed sentiments about the fall of communism. For most of the people I interviewed, there exists good and bad in both systems. Some long for the social securities and stability of the communist era; some never believed they would live to see the fall of communism and now have regrets; and others waited their entire lives to see the fall of communism. However, even for those who waited, the present situation can be at times bittersweet.

Bittersweet—that is the best way I can describe the general sentiments I heard during my stay in Slovakia. Although the fall of communism brought many positive changes, some negative impacts have awakened nostalgia for the past era and inspired the bittersweet feelings held by many. For those who are retired or near the age of retirement, the rising cost of living, the increasing gap between rich and poor, and the reduction in social securities represent some of the negative aspects of the present day reforms. Many reflected that during communism "everybody had a job and a place to live," but today life is full of uncertainties, such as unemployment, which can come as a crushing blow to those who never believed that they could one day be unemployed. The transition from communism to democracy and capitalism is slow and often painful and difficult for those who must live through the changes, even though most of those interviewed remain optimistic about the future.

For me, the research I conducted in Slovakia reveals just the tip of the iceberg. I believe that the many avenues I researched could be explored more deeply by interviewing people from other regions. Doing so would allow me to observe any differences or similarities in perspectives, and to determine the extent to which age plays a role in attitudes and perceptions of the current situation. From what I gather, the members of the older generation whom I interviewed feel more nostalgic for the securities of the communist era because they are currently facing retirement and the increasing costs of living. What was once given for free under communism now costs money; many do not have adequate pensions, while others are worried about how they will survive

retirement. Many of those I interviewed say that they believe the younger generation will benefit most from democracy because they have the opportunities to learn languages, travel freely, and work abroad. For the younger generation the future lies ahead, while many of those in the older generation feel there is not much they can do to change the course of their lives.

As a result of my summer research experience I will spend the 2007 spring semester studying abroad in Prague, the former capitol of Czechoslovakia and the current capitol of the Czech Republic. Being there will provide a unique opportunity to compare Slovakia and the Czech Republic and possibly their citizens' differing perspectives on the same issues. While there I will begin learning the language and I hope to gain more insight into the events that shaped the histories of the two countries.

To provide closure to my research in Slovakia, each interview will serve as the basis for individual stories that will be compiled into a hand-sewn book. The book and accompanying photographs of each person interviewed will highlight the different perspectives regarding Slovakia in the past and present. I plan to begin sewing the book this summer, after which I plan on presenting it at the Undergraduate Research Conference at UNH in April, 2008.

I would like to extend many thanks to all of those who made this experience possible including the Center for Undergraduate Research staff and donors, Professor Lawrence Reardon, Professor Ronald LeBlanc, my father Branislav Smetana for agreeing to accompany me as translator, and Carrie Sherman for her encouragement to pursue this project from the beginning. But I would especially like to thank all of those who shared their stories with me.

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Author Bio

Laura Smetana, from Downers Grove, Illinois, is pursuing a dual major in political science and international affairs. With funding obtained through a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), she traveled to Slovakia in 2006 to interview members of her extended family about the country's transition from communism to democracy. The interviews, which were done with the assistance of a translator, were more difficult to carry out than she anticipated: "I always listened intently to what the interviewees said in response to my question, but not knowing what they were saying when they were saying it made me feel like I was in a shadow until the translator revealed what had been said." However, she did find the environment in which she held most of the interviews to be beneficial: "It often involved dinner or lunch at an interviewee's house... I found that this usually helped all of us become more relaxed. It was almost as if I was one of those people who collects sea shells on a voyage but instead of collecting sea shells, I collected stories. Every day it was an adventure to see what kind of story would turn up next." Currently Laura is studying in Prague. She will graduate in May 2008, after which she hopes to once again travel abroad to teach English or conduct further research.

Mentor Bio

Dr. Lawrence C. Reardon is an associate professor of political science who has taught at the University of New Hampshire since 1991. A frequent mentor to IROP, McNair, and SURF students, he also serves as Laura's advisor. "I was especially happy that she could take advantage of her family connections to investigate life under the communist regime," he said. "Interviews with family members can oftentimes be more revealing." Dr. Reardon specializes in international relations and international political economy.