



Newsletter

Sofia 1000, Al. Stamboliiski blvd., tel. (359 2) 981 85 67, 980 82 12, 981 68 30; fax (359 2) 988 45 17; E-mail: fulbright@fulbright.bg; Internet: www.fulbright.bg, www.fisi-bg.info

BULGARIAN FULBRIGHT GRANTEES PREPARING TO GO TO THE UNITED STATES

BULGARIAN FULBRIGHT GRANTEES IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2006-07

SENIOR SCHOLARS



David Siefkin, PAO, Embassy of the United States in Bulgaria, talking to the new group of Bulgarian Fulbright grantees at the one-day orientation.

On June 28, 2006 the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission held a one-day orientation program for the 15 new Bulgarian grantees. Recipients of Fulbright grants for AY 2006-2007 are 6 senior scholars, 2 teachers, and 7 graduate students. The Fulbright Commission is grateful for the assistance and cooperation of the U.S. Embassy in Sofia, the U.S. Fulbrighters in Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian Fulbright alumni who took part in the orientation program with comments and practical advice.

We wish all grantees a very successful and rewarding stay in the U.S.

1. Christo Kyuchukov

Field: education

Host institution in the U.S.: Smith College – Northampton, MA

2. Stelian Dimitrov

Field: geography

Host institution in the U.S.: Indiana University of Pennsylvania

3. Boyan Dobrev

Field: multimedia

Host institution in the U.S.: California Institute of Arts, Valencia

4. Lyubima Dimitrova

Field: E-medicine

Host institution in the U.S.: University of Illinois at Chicago

5. Diana Petkova

Field: cultural studies

Host institution in the U.S.: University of Massachusetts – Amherst

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6. Tamara Todorova

Field: economics

Host institution in the U.S.: University of California – Berkeley

3. Elena Atanassova

Field: law (human rights)

Degree: LL.M.

Institution in the U.S.: Columbia University – NYC

TEACHERS

1. Vesselina Ivanova

Field: English Language

Host institution in the U.S.: Falls Church High School, Falls Church, VA

4. Ivan Shumkov

Field: architecture

Degree: MA

Institution in the U.S.: Harvard University – Cambridge, MA

2. Mariana Gerova

Field: English Language

Host institution in the U.S.: Vanguard High School, NYC

5. Olga Shishkova

Field: law (communication and info technologies)

Degree: LL.M.

Institution in the U.S.: Stanford University – Stanford, CA

GRADUATE STUDENTS

1. Lilyana Vulcheva

Field: business administration

Degree: MBA

Institution in the U.S.: University of Rochester Simon School of Business, Rochester, NY

6. Valentina Nikolova

Field: public policy

Degree: MA

Institution in the U.S.: Duke University – Durham, NC

2. Nikolay Bebov

Field: law (corporate law)

Degree: LL.M.

Institution in the U.S.: Columbia University – NYC

7. Ivan Dimitrov

Field: business administration

Degree: MBA

Institution in the U.S.: University of Oklahoma Price College – Norman, OK

BULGARIAN FULBRIGHT ALUMNI ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP FORM

Full name

Home address

Field, Academic Rank and Degree

Present Place and Address of

Employment

Phone, Fax

Type, Year and Duration of Grant

Place and Name of Host Institution

Please complete and return to the Fulbright commission office address.

EDUCATION, CULTURE, LEADERSHIP AND FULBRIGHT TODAY AND TOMORROW

SEVENTH FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE Dedicated to the 60th Anniversary of the Fulbright Program Sofia, May 12-13, 2006



On May 12-13, 2005, the Commission held its 7th international conference on "Culture, Education and Leadership Today and

Tomorrow" dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the Fulbright program. There were 83 participants from Bulgaria and US who discussed a wide variety of issues related to the main theme in panel sessions, round tables and informal discussions. The conference was opened by the US Ambassador to the Republic of Bulgaria John Byerley. The members of the Commission Board were also actively involved in the event as moderators and presenters. An integral part of the conference was a two-day orientation program for departing Fulbright teachers from Central and Eastern Europe. It was conducted by representatives of the Fulbright Teacher Exchange program at ECA and USDA. The workshop was attended by 35 participants from 12 countries.

OPENING ADDRESS

Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director

*Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Participants and Colleagues,*

Today is a holiday for the Fulbright program in Bulgaria and we plan to have fun by working hard for the benefit of education, culture and Bulgarian-American relations. The 7th Fulbright conference is about to begin. Similarly to earlier conferences, the seventh one symbolizes the stability and sustainable growth of the Fulbright program and its representative institution in Bulgaria – the Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange. Coincidentally or not,



Opening Session. From left to right: Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director; Ekaterina Vitkova, Deputy Minister of Education and Science; John Byerley, Ambassador of the U.S. to Bulgaria.

our biennial conferences have always been associated with some other important contemporaneous events or concluding activities. What makes the 7th conference special is not only the sacred power of the number 7 but also and above all the fact that it is happening in the year of the 60th anniversary of the Fulbright program worldwide. This is a remarkable jubilee of one of the greatest, noblest and most vital ideas of the 20th century launched by Senator J.W. Fulbright. The Fulbright idea is about constantly allocating funds – government, non-government, private and personal – to maintain global peace, to promote understanding and dialogue among different people, communities and cultures through exchange of education, culture, civilization and morality despite inclemencies of political climate, conflicts and differences. Thus over the last 60 years an army of over 250,000 cultural heroes was gathered from 140 countries. They embarked on unique journeys into the unknown to collect precious knowledge about the others and themselves and returned to their homelands to tell their stories, share their experience and teach their fellow-countrymen.

In 2006 the Bulgarian-American Fulbright community is 797 strong: 425 Bulgarians and 372 Americans. It won't be an exaggeration to say that in their overwhelming majority the Fulbright alumni are key agents of the positive, long-term changes and transformations in their countries' cultural, public and political life.

Only a few days ago we completed the placement of the Fulbright grantees in AY 06-07. These are 17 Bulgarian and 18 American lecturers, researchers, graduate students and

high school teachers who are going to work at prestigious Bulgarian and American universities and educational institutions. The Bulgarian winners are going to places like Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, Duke, Smith College, the University of Rochester, the California Art Institute, the University of Chicago etc. We are proud of them and expect them to be worthy ambassadors of Bulgaria to the US.

The American Fulbrighters will teach and study in the University of Sofia, the University of Veliko Turnovo, New Bulgarian University, the American University in Bulgaria, the National Academy of Drama and Theatre, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Fine Arts, foreign language high schools, government and non-government organizations. We will spare no efforts to make their stay in Bulgaria most productive and enjoyable. We also expect them to give their best to us.

Today and tomorrow we will be talking about education, culture and leadership *today and tomorrow*. We will be talking about the kind of education we have but which is not worth having; the education that we do not have but should have; the right kind of education that exists somewhere and we need to find it and bring it here. We will also discuss international education that is now steadily turning into a separate hybrid field with its own discourse and infrastructure intersecting theory and practice. International education is complex, difficult, dynamic and always forward-looking. It is something between ethnocentrism and ethno-relativism, diversity and homogenization. It is a movement of culture towards otherness, similitude and difference, towards new modes of communication and survival.

International education is a means of cultural exchange, of transformation, self-reflection and ultimately leads to knowledge of a higher and finer order for all those involved in the process – learners, teachers, researchers and theorists.

The other key word in this conference is „culture“. There are many definitions of culture and as many attempts to monopolize its interpretation. Some scholars approach culture as a bundle of ideas, values, practices, mindsets, a static framework, a fixed and indisputable reality that one should study, adjust to or use it as a justification for one's actions and reactions. For a long time culture has been viewed as a product of an intellectual and artistic elite. Such an approach could be dangerous because it may be used and misused for political and ideological purposes, for all sorts of centrism. It seems much more appropriate and up-to-date to look at culture as something fluid, heterogeneous, dynamically changing, a process, a cognitive map that helps people find their way about or make sense of their experience and environment.

It is in a similar dynamic context that we should talk about leadership, about the leader of today and tomorrow: a person with substantial knowledge and competence but also constantly learning and evolving, flexible, open-minded, empathetic, having multicultural competence and a vision for the future. I have no doubt that the Fulbright opportunity can and does transform its recipients into high-carat individuals and leaders for the 21st century.

The key words in the conference theme reflect issues that are by far not easy to resolve. However, looking at the list of participants and the faces of those present, I am convinced that the 7th Fulbright conference does have the intellectual resources to tackle them effectively and creatively. Among the participants are Fulbright representatives of 12 US universities who are currently Fulbright grantees in Bulgaria, Sweden, Finland and Hungary. On the Bulgarian sides there are Fulbright grantees and alumni from Sofia University, University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, New Bulgarian University, the Academy of Fine Arts, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Plovdiv University, University of Veliko Turnovo, the Medical University, University of Food Technologies in Plovdiv, the American University in Bulgaria, South-Western University in Blagoevgrad, Trakia University in Stara Zagora, the University of Shumen, Burgas Free University, high schools etc. We are honored to have top-level participants from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Bulgarian Parliament, the US Embassy and the Embassy of the Republic of Ireland, the Fulbright Commission Board. I also am pleased to inform you that taking part in our conference will be 32 Fulbright high school teachers from 11 European countries, including Bulgaria and the US.

I wish all participants in the 7th international Fulbright conference on Education, Culture and Leadership Today and Tomorrow productive work and enjoyable time in Sofia. Thank you.



SEVENTH FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME – A FOOTNOTE
IN FULBRIGHT HISTORY*
Geoffrey Keating



Geoffrey Keating is currently Ambassador of the Republic of Ireland to Bulgaria. Between 1992 and 2001 he was Executive Director of the Irish-U.S. Fulbright Commission.

The first Bulgarian person I ever met was Julia Stefanova. It is now over ten years ago and we were both attending a training course in Brussels for new directors of Fulbright commissions. Most of the participants on that course were from new Commissions established in central and Eastern Europe. You might think it odd that Ireland's Fulbright commission was only established in 1991. But the story of the Fulbright program in Ireland is a strange one.

Like other countries in Western Europe, after the Second World War Ireland received Marshall aid to help to reconstruct its economy. As part of this process, it had to set aside matching funds, known as Grant Counterpart funds. However, the US Mutual Security Act of 1951 tied such aid programs to military cooperation. Ireland, as a neutral

country, felt it could not accept the terms of the Act and so in 1952 the US stopped its aid to Ireland.

There was a problem, however. In the Central Bank of Ireland, sitting in the American Grant Counterpart Special Account was over £6 million of unspent Irish matching funds. Under the terms of the agreement, not only did the Irish and US administrations have to agree on how this money was to be spent, the proposals had to get congressional approval also.

By August 1953, US and Irish officials had agreed a list of 12 projects, all with an economic focus. Some of them sound rather quaint today: the improvement of public roads to peat bogs and coal mines; cold storage and quick freezing facilities for poultry, rabbits and eggs; the purchase of

**I am grateful to Carmel Coyle, Executive Director of the Irish-US Fulbright Commission, for her assistance in preparing these remarks and for bringing my attention to two articles on the history of the Fulbright Program in Ireland, J.W. Fulbright and the Fulbright Program in Ireland, Joseph Patrick O'Reilly (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 47, 1988) and An Essay on Ireland and J. William Fulbright's Educational Vision, by Bernadette Whelan (Eire/Ireland, Journal of the Irish American Cultural Institute, xxi, 1997)*

equipment for production and the cooking of potatoes. In April 1954 the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee approved the proposals and ten days later on April 19 the matter went to the U.S. Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. The committee was not well-attended that day but, by chance, Senator Fulbright was there and strongly argued for an educational exchange program. As a result, the proposals were sent back for further consideration by the US and Irish authorities.

Over the coming months, behind the scenes, negotiations were carried out. Senator Fulbright, who had started by asking that at least one quarter to one third of the funds be spent on educational exchange, raised the stakes by insisting that all 6 million be devoted to education. The Irish side responded by saying that they did not see how more than 200,000 pounds could be spent on educational exchanges. There was some justification for this view if you think that total spending by the Irish government on the entire university sector was a just over 900,000 pounds in 1954. Other objections were raised within the Irish administration: one official claimed that „the Department of Education did not care for such schemes because they only introduced foreigners with immoral habits into Ireland and led Irish people into immoral ways abroad.“

Eventually, the Irish side has agreed to raise the figure for educational exchange to 500,000 pounds. In a further complication, in July 1954, Senator Fulbright asked for assurances that the exchange would be operated on similar lines to the Fulbright Scholarship Scheme. Anxious to secure the deal, the Irish side conceded this point and

in August 1954, President Eisenhower signed the legislation which included the Irish-American grant agreement.

The Irish legislation, the Scholarship Exchange Act, setting up the exchange programmed was not passed for another three years and the result was different to the standard model of binational Fulbright Commissions and, I am sure, different to what Senator Fulbright had intended. As the US Ambassador in Dublin, William Taft, accurately predicted: „If I know my Ireland, and government civil servants generally, this will take time. The Board will be essentially Irish in make-up, and ultimate responsibility will not belong to the Embassy.“

The Irish view was that the funds made available were essentially Irish money and that control of them would remain in Irish hands. The name of the body established to administer the funds was called, in English the Scholarship Exchange Board, but on the Board's letterhead appeared the Irish version, An Bord Scolaíreachtaí Comhalairte - baffling even for speakers of Irish. The Board consisted of seven members, four Irish appointed by the Irish Minister for External Affairs, and three American appointed by the US Ambassador. The Chairman was also appointed by the Minister for External Affairs. The offices and administration of the Board were provided by the Minister and, in effect, this meant the administration of the scheme was handled by the Cultural Section of Ireland's foreign ministry.

Although on the US side the exchanges were handled as part of the Fulbright Program, many of the grantees were not aware that they were Fulbright Scholars until they reached the States, and the

Fulbright Program did not develop the recognition and prestige in Ireland that it enjoyed in other countries.

In 1984, President Reagan visited Ireland and during his visit it was agreed to intensify educational exchanges. Again after a long and slow negotiation, agreement was reached in 1988 to replace the Scholarship Exchange Board with something more in line with arrangements in other countries. In 1991 the legislation establishing the Ireland-United States Commission for Educational Exchange was passed by the Irish parliament.

In early 1992 I was transferred to the Cultural Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs and one of my duties was to oversee the winding up of the old Scholarship Exchange Board and the setting-up of the new Commission. While for the next ten years the Commission continued to be administered by the Cultural Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs, in 2001 a full-time director was appointed and the Commission now has its own independent offices.

One of the first projects we started was the establishment of a Fulbright alumni group and in this we received strong support from Jean Kennedy Smith, the sister of John F. Kennedy and the then US Ambassador to Ireland. When we dusted off the files of former grantees, of whom there were several hundred, we discovered that many of them had gone on to become leading figures in Irish life, whether in administration, in academia, in the arts or in the media. Some of

them were surprised to learn that they were Fulbright scholars. My own father-in-law, who had received a travel grant from the Scholarship Exchange Board to go to the States in 1960s, was most surprised to get a letter from his son-in-law inviting him to a reunion of Fulbright alumni and rang me to ask if I had made a mistake.

There is today, I am happy to say, a thriving Fulbright alumni association in Ireland. I have no doubt that the alumni have a more informed and sympathetic view of the United States from living in America and I equally have no doubt of the personal enrichment and professional development gained from their experience as Fulbright Scholars.

There are some observations I would make about this story. It is striking how within the Irish administration at the time, few saw the benefits of educational exchange. Today, we see the internationalization of education and research as key for our economic development and success, and the Fulbright Program continues to play a role in this process. What impresses me most about this story, however, is the personal involvement of Senator Fulbright and his determination to realize his vision. Even if, in the case of Ireland with the establishment of the Scholarship Exchange Board/An Bord Scolaireachtaí Comhalairte, that vision was not at first realized as he had intended, we see the success of his ideas in the alumni who were to become leading figures in Irish life. To quote Shakespeare: What's in a name? That which we call a rose would by any other name smell as sweet.



Fulbright Office News

NAFSA 2006 Annual Conference & Expo Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 21-26

Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director of the Fulbright Commission, participated in the annual NAFSA conference on "Advancing Our International Commitment" held in Montreal, Canada, on May 21-26, 2006. On May 23 she took part in a one-day Executive Directors' meeting organized by the Canadian Fulbright Commission. Prior to NAFSA the Executive Director visited Washington D.C. where she met with officers from ECA, CIES, IIE and reported on the activities of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission at a meeting of the Fulbright Scholarship Board. Dr. Stefanova also had a meeting with Elena Todorova, Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to the US.



БЪЛГАРО-АМЕРИКАНСКА КОМИСИЯ ЗА ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЕН ОБМЕН

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To Chicago and Back

THREE STORIES ABOUT U.S. STUDENT LIFE

Radoslava Leseva

Fulbright graduate student at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
 AY 2005-2006 Major: Computer Graphics, non-degree program

„We train so as to be able to withstand a longer and harder warm-up.“
British rowing coach

My American Fulbright experience started with running around, throwing objects at people, shouting and being shouted at, building towers out of cardboard boxes and tearing them down... While my jet-lagged mind was trying to catch up with what my body was doing, other sixty or more people, wearing blue or white t-shirts were doing the same, teams were winning and losing, cheering on either occasion...

I was on a team too! Blue team, division number 6, called „Six Brighters“. We had a name, a sign and a mascot, even special t-shirts – we were matchless!

„Give the team a unique identity that sets it apart from everyone else“ is one of the ten steps to building a high performance team we were told during the August gateway orientation in New York, which is where the running around and object throwing took place.

And a high performance team we were! We rope-walked, wrote poetry (within a twelve-minute time limit and with fairly short inspiration notice), we even performed on the stage at the end (scary, scary!).

The team building training was lead by Daniel Lyons – an Olympian and world champion rower with fascinating stories about narrow victories and the suffered road to them.

I wasn't quite aware at the time that I was to put almost everything learnt into effect only a couple of



dayslater, when Iarrived in West Lafayette, Indiana.

As a result of my housing hunt on the Internet before my arrival, I had found an apartment, shared by three German students in want for a fourth flat mate. The setup was slightly complicated, as the apartment itself wasn't going to be available for the first couple of weeks of our stay, so we ended up spending our first days with other four German students, eight people total in another apartment – taking turns to sleep on the floor, planning the shopping, arranging cooking and dish-washing rotations... in other words, team-building.

It was on the second day, on our way to the grocery store, when Monica, Anja and I spotted a sofa, left out on the sidewalk with a „Free“ sign on it. Every student in the US has to go through the process of finding a place to live, and, unless it is a dorm or a rich aunt's hacienda, they also get

familiar with the concept of furniture chase (long live Wal-Mart and the big discounts!). It didn't take long to get the teamwork started:

„Paint a verbal picture of what the future might look like...“

... brief exchange of looks, nodding and „Do you think we can do it?“.

„Communicate the vision, mission and goals to team members...“

... sprinting back home to talk the others into the job...

„Create a sense of mission“

„OK, it's a no more than fifty meter walk...“

„Recruit talent. Assign talent according to the abilities, needs, and desires of the individual“

...“Could you please hold the back end, we'll need another strong one at the front and the others can support the sides...“

„Define your goals, concentrate your power, and take care of your people!“

... the sofa wasn't light and was somewhat temperamental – whenever you picked up the back, a panel at the front would shoot itself out, kicking the carrier's shoulder. Due to excellent leadership (can't remember whose, but am working on it), the carrier happened to be me, so the fifty-meter walk back home felt like a quarter marathon. The achievement, however, was going to be rewarding, so an occasional hit in the shoulder was nothing!

I so much wished our gateway coaches had been there to see me working with the others on taking the sofa down the staircase (an operation of fine character), then on turning it around (even a more precise one) and aiming for the door... at which point it became evident that our picture of the future did not quite fit in the present reality.

After the two mathematicians on the team (recruited otherwise for their muscles) had proved, theoretically too, the infeasibility of our plan, we got on with reforming the team for carrying the sofa back up the stairs and all the way where it came from and leaving it intact, with its „Free“ sign on top of it for someone else with more luck.

With accommodation sorted and lessons learnt the school year started.

A wonderful bit of the American student life are the numerous clubs one can join for training,

skill-development, additional studies or just for having fun.

I was on my way to gym one day during the club callouts („Come join Eta Sigma Phi – Wednesday 7 PM, Math building, free pizza!“), when I happened to walk past a long boat on display and a strongly built girl stopped me, asking „Have you ever considered rowing?“

I had been recently converted into indoor rowing and was headed for the gym for another half hour of it, so admitted that, yeah, I was actually heavily contemplating this very topic at the moment.

„Fill this out and come to the callout on Thursday“ – I was handed a crew application form, enquiring about athletic achievements.

The image was very tempting – me on a boat with seasoned rowers, overtaking another boat... Then I pictured the boat turning over and came back to reality.

„Erm, is it indoor or mostly outdoor rowing you're doing?“ I asked to make sure.

„It's outdoor, of course, but we are on the ergs in the winter.“

„Ahh, ok, then, thank you very much. Unfortunately I can't swim.“ I turned around in an attempt to walk away, but wasn't fast enough.

„Sure we can do something, let me talk to my colleague.“

I got dragged to one of the guys who were sitting around the shiny boat.

„Can't you swim just a little bit?“ he asked me in turn and I confirmed that no, I couldn't swim at all, not even to save my own life, I swear.

„Hmm, let me talk to my boss...“ – we went to a stern-looking man.

„This young lady here is eager to join us, but is unable to swim...“

I had a *deja vu*, in which the crew's boss enquired about my swimming abilities, then explained to me that it may be legally complicated, but if I insisted, he could talk to his boss...

I thanked him very much and made a final, this time successful, attempt to escape and head to the gym.

Needless to say, I fled out and didn't turn up at the crew's callout that Thursday.

Joined the Social Ballroom Dancing Club instead, convinced that stepping on other people's

toes is a fairly safer activity.

The first semester went pretty much like a school year in Hogwarts. If not for the presence of magic, at least for the need of Hermione Granger's Time Turner, so the two times per week dance class was a good deal of the fun I had time for.

A wonderful thing about time management is that the more duties you get engaged with, the more you can take...

I'll never forget the first meeting with my independent study supervisor.

„How long are you here for? A year?? That's not enough to take on serious research. I worked with a boy, an excellent programmer, who did coding for two or three hours every day and it still took him two years to complete a project.“

Me „Erm, I'm used to doing programming up to twelve hours a day...“

„How many classes are you taking? Four?? You won't be able to manage your time with another project on your hands!“

... some thinking was made by both sides, then he concluded:

„I'll give you some papers to read and you'll have three days before we meet again. If you want to work with me, you should know that the moment you slow down, you can count me out.“

With head heavy with thoughts, I headed home and set teeth into the reading I had to do...

Today, after the goals set for the first semester's work on the project have been achieved, I think I'd add another point to „The eight secrets of inspirational leadership“ (which may already be there, somewhere in the fine print): „Let your people set goals for themselves and aim high, stress and desire to prove one's skills are a great motivator.“ Much like with indoor rowing, aiming for a „personal best attempt“ is an exiting thing to make a plan for, is fun to begin working on, starts hurting when you get to the middle and leaves you out of breath as you watch the meters rolling before the finish. Then, when you roll out of the seat and onto the floor, waiting for the world to slow down its spin, you feel rewarded.

Again like with rowing, while pulling your way to the goal, you get blind and deaf for the world around you and its minor distractions (like

earthquakes or tornadoes...). I had been long looking forward to the Fulbright enrichment seminars for 2006 to be announced, but when I received the letter, prompting me to apply, I was so buried in course and project work, that I only made a mental note of the deadline mentioned – the 28th of November, 2005, and left it aside to be taken care of later. On the evening of November 27th, after the Thanksgiving break, dedicated to work, resulted in a working project, I rubbed my hands and got on with filling out my seminar application... only to find out that the online form said „deadline: November 23rd“... I couldn't do much, but kick myself for confusing „3“ with „8“, and fill out the form anyway, for the record...

One of the things I won't forget from my gateway orientation was a cross-cultural workshop, which started with a powerful lecture given by Professor Gary Weaver. Among the things he mentioned was „Much as you learn about the life in the USA, more you will discover about yourself during your stay here“. A personal realization I made for myself in one of my classes was that I was a visual thinker and thus dyslexic, so decided to put my number misreading down to that and forget about going to a Fulbright seminar as soon as I could.

Something one has been looking forward to is not that easy to forget, though. Especially not when the other Fulbrighters start discussing their seminar invitations in the online forum. Sad as I was, I had another look at the letter, prompting for seminar application, wishing I had read it carefully on time... What a surprise, it did point out November 28th as the deadline! Maybe I wasn't so bad a dyslexic after all! I tried not to raise my hopes too much, but when I received an invitation for a seminar in San Francisco, it was still great joy.

My warm-up year is still in progress and it feels like good training for the next big warm-up (changing career direction towards Computer Graphics). Meanwhile I'm looking forward to the seminar in San Francisco next week and am busying myself with tax form filling out, having been burnt by „last moment“ form filling experience already.



Out of America

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Kathryn Portle

Fulbright Exchange Teacher in AY 2005-2006

Foreign Language High School „Joan Ekzarh“, Vratsa, Bulgaria

Kathryn Portle has taught languages for many years in the Boston Public Schools. She holds a M.A. in French from Boston College and a M.Ed. in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) from Boston University. This academic year she teaches English as a Fulbright exchange teacher at Joan Ekzarh Foreign Language High School in Vratsa, Bulgaria. Her previous Fulbright Teacher Exchange experiences were in Morocco and Brazil.



Although we teachers reported to school on September 1st and attended every day for faculty meetings, and giving and correcting make up exams, today, September 15th, was the first day of school for students in Vratsa, Bulgaria. It was quite different from the Boston public schools.

The day began at 10:00 a.m. with the opening of school ceremony. Students assembled in the schoolyard and the faculty and administration faced them from a stone landing decorated with bunches of colorful balloons. Students raised the Bulgarian flag and the national anthem was played. After that came the speeches, one of which was from me! The headmaster had asked me to give a short speech to the student body of approximately 800. Thanks to a Bulgarian English teacher as interpreter, it came off beautifully.

It was impossible to ignore all the students holding single, beautifully wrapped flowers as well as small bouquets. I soon learned that according to tradition, students offered them to their teachers on the first day of school. One of the speakers, a member of the regional parliament gave me a beautiful bouquet of lilies, another student speaker offered me a lovely rose and still another teacher gave me a small bouquet. Wow! What a welcome! It was very touching to see husky teenage boys bringing flowers to their teachers on the first day of classes. My Bulgarian colleagues mentioned though, that there are many fewer flowers these days compared to "the old days". It reminded me of our quaint and sweet tradition of "an apple for the teacher". When was the last time you received an apple from a student? The ceremony continued with female students singing pop songs in Bulgarian, both boys and

girls giving poetry recitations, and the final number (in my opinion the best) a group of eight girls who flawlessly performed an Irish folkdance!

"The language school" as it is called in English, includes grades 8 through 12. When the entertainment was over, it was time for the 8th graders to line up and file into the school for the very first time. Everyone clapped for them! They looked so cute, both boys and girls holding their flowers, beginning their high school career with the support and applause of the older students and the teachers.

Later, back in the teachers' room, it was time for another faculty meeting and another speech from me. Thank goodness for the excellent English teachers at the school, always ready to interpret for me. Once the meeting finished, it was time for refreshments. Naturally... it was then lunch time. People enjoyed chocolates, peanuts, delicious cookies, coca-cola, scotch, vodka and whiskey. American par excellence, I stuck with the coke.

LIVING IN BULGARIA

Adjusting to a new country, workplace, language and alphabet provides a daily and almost indescribable challenge. It would be impossible to cope, much less succeed, without my wonderful colleagues, challenging but great students and the lovely Bulgarian people.

I live in the large town of Vratsa where I walk absolutely everywhere. It is nestled at the base of a striking and rugged mountain range which juts dramatically from the outskirts of town. The mountain side has already been covered with snow some mornings. An everyday and all day occurrence is hearing "clip clop, clip clop": This is a Bulgarian peasant or gypsy family coming to town in their horse drawn cart. I have also seen goatherds with a couple of dozen goats within the town limits, near the hills and streams.

The biggest news in Vratsa right now is the November 3rd opening of "Billa". Billa = Shaw's; yes, the first supermarket in town! Typically, a shopper like me goes into a store (the town is chock full of small shops and cafes) and asks for items which are located behind the counter. The shopkeeper gets what I need from the shelf behind him or from a separate refrigerated room. All of this is a bit frustrating and stressful for someone struggling with the Bulgarian language! Billa, besides being new, bright and clean, also has a pharmacy, small cafe and play area for the kids. For me, though, it is linguistic heaven; I can take my time to read labels in the cyrillic alphabet, make my selections, and then queue up at one of the five check outs.

It is pretty easy to find English in Sofia, the capital (a two hour train ride away) but here in Vratsa it is mostly the English teachers at work and my students who speak English with me. Of course I am studying Bulgarian, but my goodness, progress is slow. I suppose that means I need to spend more time on homework!

There is a francophile group here in Vratsa who meets every Monday at 5:30 p.m. at a local restaurant. About a dozen Bulgarians and now me meet to discuss everything and anything as long as it's in French.

Apparently the local television station is interested in interviewing me. The filming will take place later this month; I hope that the questions won't be too hard!

Another special November event is Thanksgiving. The Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission has already invited us to a Thanksgiving party on turkey day! By the way, we are ten Fulbrighters here in Bulgaria: two high school teachers, three university professors and five researchers. It will be fun to reunite with an American group on such a meaningful day.

TEACHING IN BULGARIA

The high school where I teach includes grades eight through twelve. Groups of twenty-six are formed in grade eight and these students remain together, 100% of the time, in the same classroom, for the next five years. What is the criterion for grouping? It is the languages that they have chosen to study. In my school, The Joan Ekzarh Language School, all students study two modern languages in addition to Bulgarian. They may choose from English, German, French and Spanish. Throughout grade eight, they study their first foreign language, let's say it is English, for eighteen hours every week. In grade nine, they continue with the first foreign language, English for example, for six hours per week and also take on the second language which could be German, French or Spanish. They will study this second language five hours per week. And so it goes until graduation: about six hours per week for the first foreign language and about five hours for the second. As you can imagine, English is the most popular "first" foreign language; many students, some of whom began English lessons at the age of six or eight, have an impressive command of it. I know it is strange to imagine, but very often I feel as though I am talking to a native speaker with an exotic accent!

In Vratsa, there are two exam schools: mine, which is the language school, and the math-science school. In addition to some comprehensive high schools, there are other non-exam schools which offer a specialty: the music and art school, the culinary school, the sports school, the economics school, the tourism school, and the fashion and design school.

Unlike in the USA, where teachers usually "own" the classroom and decorate it according to the courses they teach, here the students have an undecorated room of their own, with a radio. My colleagues and I travel from classroom to classroom, depending on which

group of students we are teaching. By the way, when the teacher arrives at the doorway, the students stand up beside their chairs until the teacher invites them to be seated. If a student happens to arrive to class late, which is rare in my school, he or she remains in the threshold until the teacher gives permission to join the class. From time to time, the class begins in a delightful way. If a student has a birthday, he or she brings in chocolates for classmates and teachers alike. Sometimes there are two birthdays on the same day...yummy! Incidentally, teachers follow the same tradition of offering chocolates to their colleagues on their birthday, name day or even for the birth of a grandchild.

There are two academic sessions at my school of approximately 800 students: morning classes begin at 7:30 A.M and end at 1:15 P.M., and afternoon classes begin at 1:30 P.M. and finish at 7:15 P.M. I teach grades 9, 10, and 11 in both morning and afternoon sessions, and have nine different groups of kids; that makes about 225 students in total. Believe me, learning the names in September was a difficult and embarrassing chore! Some names, like Ivan, Boris or Violeta, are easy to pronounce, but others like Zaharinka, Nedyalko, Tsvetoslava, Ivailo, Tsvetelin, Iskren, Snejinka, Ognyan, Ralitsa, Perunika, Tsvetomila, are not! My students were very patient with me, though, and let me change for example, Svetoslav to Steve, Stoyan to Stu, Tstanoslav to Stan and Tsvetomir to Sly.

Grading! Very different. The grades can only be 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, with 6 being the highest and 2 being the lowest. No decimals. The class group itself has its own book called a register, and this is where all their teachers write their grades and class attendance. Grades are calculated only twice a year, in late January and in late June, and each teacher must have a minimum of six marks for each student. In other words, from the first day of school in September to the last day of the semester,

(February 1st this year) a teacher needs at least six marks for each student he teaches. We may have more than six grades, but there is limited space for recording them in the official class register, and this is the only document that counts. If one of these registers were ever lost or misplaced, it surely would be a disaster. Students who finish the semester with only 5's and 6's are awarded a modest sum of money by the Town Council of Vratsa. Bulgaria, a former Soviet block country, is currently suffering tremendously and in numerous ways as a result of its transition from Communism to Democracy. My students tell me that under the Communist Regime, the financial rewards for excellent grades were much more generous!

Lesson Plans! Very different. No one has ever asked to see my plan book, but every teacher after every class writes a summary of the content of his lesson in a Gargantuan book which lives in the teachers' room. This book has a small square for every lesson of every class group for every day of the school year. If ever you neglect to write in your squares (as I did on Thanksgiving Day), someone will want to know the reason why!

Teaching Materials and Ambiance! Very different. There is no technology, no Public Address System, no paper, no pencils, no notebooks, no binders, no xerox, no fax, no

regularly decorated bulletin boards celebrating student work, and no Friday breakfast. There is chalk and talk. And as a language teacher, I have a cassette recorder. My students must purchase their own pens, pencils, notebooks, class cassette recorder and English textbook, a product linked to Cambridge University. Yes, the teaching materials that I use are British! Theoretically, all of the English language students in my school are preparing for the difficult and prestigious Cambridge Proficiency Examination of English. Passing this high caliber test would truly be a feather in their caps...but I worry about their success. Although these students are wonderfully polite and quite intelligent, an alarming number of them are also surprisingly lazy and excessively absent. Time will tell.

Lunch! Very different. There is no specific lunch period, but between classes there are breaks of five, ten and one of twenty minutes. During this time frame, a student can visit the very well stocked snack bar for all kinds of drinks, candy, pastry, and sandwiches. Luckily, teachers can too.

As we step into the second semester, I feel as though I have found my stride in this very different professional setting. Of course the Bulgarian language still remains a puzzle; it probably always will!





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Please send contributions and comments to:
Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission
17, Al. Stamboliiski Blvd. • Sofia 1000, Bulgaria
tel: +359 (2) 981 85 67 • fax: +359 (2) 988 45 17
e-mail: fulbright@fulbright.bg • www.fulbright.bg