

Fulbright Commission Activities in 2008

During 2008 the Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange continued to work for the realization of the goals of the Fulbright program defined in the 1961 Fulbright-Hays Act and the 2003 agreement between the US Government and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria. Its activities aimed to implement the specific objectives outlined in the 2007 program proposal:

- Support long-term and short-term academic exchanges in all fields, especially the social sciences, the humanities, and American and Bulgarian studies.
- Extend outreach to BG universities, schools and other educational institutions to provide a higher number and greater diversity of applicants in the context of increasing competition from European universities and decreasing number of eligible candidates.
- Promote the Fulbright program in Bulgaria in US universities and educational institutions to increase the number of US applicants in all categories.
- Facilitate other programs in furtherance of the Fulbright program.
 - Continue to support the local Fulbright info-centers.
 - Expand language training services and upgrade facilities at the Fulbright language center and local info-centers.
 - Continue to provide testing services, including iBT TOEFL, GRE, SAT, LSAT, CFA etc.
 - Continue to offer the Fulbright International Summer Institute.
- Support the Bulgarian American Association.
- Mark the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Ful-



*Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director
Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange*

bright Commission in Bulgaria

- Continue to offer educational advising to promote the Fulbright program in Bulgaria and educational opportunities in the US.
- Maintain high standards of program administration on the basis of bi-nationalism, peer review and academic and professional excellence.

The year 2008 marked the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange. It will be no exaggeration to say that thanks to the support of the US and Bulgarian governments and the selfless efforts of the members of the Board and staff during a dramatic period in Bulgarian history, the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission has become an authoritative and widely recognized binational institution of academic and cultural exchange. It has been actively and effectively involved in the Bulgarian educational reform and the global process of internationalization of education. Most importantly, it has substantially contributed to the good relations between Bulgaria and the US by promoting the Fulbright goals, the US educational system and opportunities and by creating a positive image of Bulgaria making known its rich cultural traditions, beautiful nature and the impressive intellectual resources of its people.

Since 1993 the US Government has invested about USD 14mln in the Fulbright program in Bulgaria. The contribution of the Bulgarian government amounts to \$ 230,000. Prior to 2003,

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the Bulgarian government provided in-kind support to the program and the Commission. Today the Bulgarian-American Fulbright community has 882 members – 458 Bulgarian and 424 American alumni. Along with the Fulbright exchange, the Commission has developed a number of supplemental activities, e.g. advising, language training, testing, summer schools, conferences etc. Since 1993 we have provided advising services to 216,480 Bulgarian citizens, we have trained 7,615 Bulgarian students in English, and have administered TOEFL, SAT, GRE, GMAT, CFA and EPSO to 40,592 testees. The Fulbright International Summer Institute created in 2002 has now 289 alumni from 27 countries, including Bulgaria and the US.

The Fulbright Commission has opened local info-centers in eleven cities in Bulgaria. They assist the Fulbright exchange, provide advising and English language training to the local communities. Since 1994 the Commission has held eight international conferences on a variety of topics relating to international education, civil society, cultural differences and the role of the Fulbright program in the global cultural process.

US Grantees in AY 07-08 and AY 08-09

In AY 07-08 the number of US grantees was 35: 6 lecturers, 3 graduate students, 2 English teaching assistants, 2 teachers, 1 school administrator, 5 senior specialists and 16 participants in the Fulbright-Hays Summer seminar. The lecturers came from the following fields: US studies, business administration, journalism, law, computer science, and art. They were assigned to Sofia University, Plovdiv University, the American University in Blagoevgrad, and the National Academy of Arts. The senior specialists were hosted by New Bulgarian University, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia University, and the Technical University in Varna.

In accordance with the policy of the Fulbright Commission, arrangements were made for the US lecturers to visit universities outside of the city of their assignment. Thus two of them gave lectures at Sofia University and the New Bulgarian University and participated in the annual conference of the Bulgarian American Studies Association.

The final reports of the US lecturers and the evaluations of the partner institutions indicate that both sides were satisfied with the exchange and would like to continue the established relationships.

There were also three US graduate students in archaeology, modern history and Bulgarian folk singing. Depending on their projects, they were placed in appropriate educational institutions, such as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, and the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv. The interim and final reports of the students, the evaluations of their local advisors and the regular communication we maintained with the grantees throughout the academic year indicate that they completed their projects successfully. One student attended the Berlin Seminar in Germany, another toured Bulgaria with

the Phillipopoly Folk Choir and performed folk songs for a Bulgarian movie. The third student was awarded a UNESCO scholarship after she completed her Fulbright project in Bulgaria.

For a second year running the English Teaching Assistantship Program was a success for students and hosts alike. One teaching assistant worked at the Sofia Mathematical School, and the other taught at the English Language High School in Burgas. The survey we conducted at other high schools demonstrates great interest in the program. In the current academic year, there are two teaching assistants already working at very good language high schools in Sofia and Plovdiv.

To help the US grantees adjust more easily to the new cultural and academic environment, the Commission staff invited them to attend the two-week Fulbright International Summer Institute in August 2007. At the end of September 2007 the Commission organized a two-day orientation with presentations, discussions, briefing from the US Embassy and a welcome reception attended by the US Ambassador. The cultural enrichment program that followed covered the whole academic year and included trips to historic and natural sights, concerts and opera performances and informal meetings with Fulbright staff and Bulgarian alumni.

In AY 07-08 five American senior specialists visited Bulgarian universities (Sofia University, New Bulgarian University, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and the Technical University of Varna) to deliver lectures, participate in seminars and conferences, teach graduate and undergraduate courses, and help with curriculum development in the following areas: social work, economics, business administration, education, and information technologies. Everywhere, the Senior Specialist Program again proved its usefulness and effectiveness. The Commission staff will continue to work for popularizing it in more Bulgarian universities and educational institutions.

Under the Fulbright Teacher Exchange, two U.S. grantees taught English language and literature at high schools in Vidin and Vratsa. Both of them completed their assignments successfully and our feedback from their respective schools is very positive. The school in Vidin formally requested to continue the cooperation under the Teacher Exchange or the English Teaching Assistantship Programs.

There was one participant in the school administrators' program who worked with the principal of the Aprilov National High School in Gabrovo. The exchange provoked interest in the American school system and was covered in local newspapers.

The AY 08-09 competition resulted in the selection of 14 US grantees, most of whom are already working in Bulgaria. In the senior scholar category, there are 6 lecturers in education, cultural studies, U.S. studies, business administration, theatre/costume design, and computer science. There are four students in modern history, urban development, and jazz and installation art. Two more students were selected under the English Language Teaching Assistantship Program. One works at the First English Language High School in Sofia

and the other - at the Foreign Language High School in Plovdiv.

Two high school teachers share their experience and expertise in English language and American literature at the Bertolt Brecht Foreign Language High School in Pazardzhik and 81st Victor Hugo High School in Sofia.

Bulgarian Grantees in AY 07-08 and AY 08-09

In the academic year under review there were 20 Bulgarian grantees in the following categories and fields: 6 scholars in cultural studies, law, mathematics, geology, philosophy and economics; 9 students in media and communication studies, law, international relations, business administration and cultural anthropology; one H. Humphrey Fellow in public policy; one New Century Scholar in the field of sociology; two teachers in English language and American literature; one school administrator.

The scholars were awarded 5-month grants. All scholars returned home on time. Their final reports are very positive and express great satisfaction with the Fulbright experience.

The higher number of graduate students in AY 07-08 resulted from the high competitiveness of our candidates and cost-sharing under the joint scholarships with the Thanks to Scandinavia Institute and Michael Price College of Business at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Of the 9 students, four have returned to Bulgaria, having successfully completed one-year LLM programs. The others are still studying in the US. According to the periodic reports from IIE, they are doing well and we have every reason to believe that they will finish their studies successfully.

Our New Century scholar, Prof. Pepka Boyadjieva, finished her program successfully in April 2008. She was the keynote speaker at the 8th Fulbright International Conference on Education and Society. Her lecture was entitled "Social Equity in Higher Education-Mission (Im) possible" and reflected her research under the New Century Scholar Program.

The Hubert Humphrey fellow, a youth program coordinator at UNICEF, Bulgaria, also completed her program in public policy in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She seems highly motivated to use the newly acquired knowledge to tackle the local challenges.

The two Bulgarian teachers returned to Bulgaria and reported good results from the Fulbright exchange. One of them taught English and English literature in Portland, Oregon, and the other – in Livingston, Montana.

The school administrator, principal of the oldest Bulgarian secular school in Gabrovo, made an exchange visit to a charter school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The Fulbright competition for AY 08-09 grants resulted in 19 more Bulgarian nominees that were approved by FSB. Six scholars

were selected in the following fields: lexicography, social psychology/mass media, chemical engineering, Slavic studies, linguistics and geology. Three of them have already started their projects at prestigious US universities: University of California, Ohio State University, Miami University, OH. Three scholars started their programs in January, February and March, 2008. Their host institutions are Long Island University, University of Pittsburgh, and Ohio State University.

In the student category, 7 students were approved and are currently enrolled in master's programs in creative writing, business administration, organizational psychology, finances, East Asian studies and sound engineering. The graduate students are all very strong and highly motivated and it is not surprising that they were admitted to prestigious universities with financial support: University of Houston, Emory University, Milano – The New School for Management and Urban Policy, University of Michigan, New York University, Columbia University, Purdue University Indianapolis.

The joint scholarship with *Thanks to Scandinavia* Institute was awarded for a second consecutive year. The grantee is enrolled in a master's program in creative writing at Houston University, Texas.

The recipient of the 2008 Science and Technology Ph. D. Award started her program in the field of molecular biology at the University of Florida.

This year both our principal and alternate nominees for Hubert Humphrey fellowships were approved and are now working on their projects in journalism and public policy in the University of Maryland and Washington University, respectively.

The Commission also nominated two Bulgarian high school teachers that were approved by FSB. They are currently teaching English and American literature at high schools in Pocatello, Idaho, and Woodbridge, Virginia.

On June 21-22, 2008, the Fulbright Commission hosted a pre-departure orientation for 25 Fulbright Exchange Teachers from Bulgaria, Turkey, Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The program was conducted by representatives of USDA. It met its goals and we hope that it will help all exchange teachers to accomplish their mission in the US successfully.

In March 2008, a new joint scholarship was established between the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe and the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission. The first approved grantee is a representative of an ecological NGO. He has been invited to work on his project in Cope Environmental Center, Centerville, Indiana.

Grantee Accomplishments in AY 07-08

The U.S. Embassy in Sofia's Public Affairs Section, in conjunction with the Fulbright Commission in Bulgaria, hosted an exhibit of

textile design patterns created by the students of Fulbright grantee Michelle Hill. The exhibit provoked a great interest in the Fulbright Program and allowed students to show their works in front of a wider audience. It was followed by an exhibition of the works of Michelle Hill created during her stay in Bulgaria and inspired by her interest in Orpheus and his possible birth place in the Rhodope Mountains.

U.S. graduate student Jennifer Cimaglia was approved for the UNESCO Fulbright Internship Program. She started work in the World Heritage section in Paris in January 2008.

Nikolai Yanev, a graduate student at the Columbia University Law School and recipient of the Fulbright-Thanks to Scandinavia scholarship conducted a workshop about Bulgaria in a Bronx high school under the Global Classroom Initiative.

Non-Grant Activities

During the period under review educational advising continued to play a central part in the Commission's non-grant activities. The results are quite encouraging, although competition from Europe is intensifying and the pool of potential candidates for Fulbright scholarships is shrinking.

In 2008, thirty-one of the regular visitors of the Fulbright advising center, have been accepted to universities and colleges in the U.S. with a total scholarship amount of \$4,109,024. 65% of all accepted students were granted full scholarships and 35% of the students received some financial aid. Among the schools where our advisees are continuing their education are Princeton University, NJ; Stanford University, CT; Colgate University, NY; Smith College, MA; Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI); Tufts University, MA; Mount Holyoke College, MA; DePauw University, IN; Ohio Wesleyan University, OH; Bryn Mawr College, PA; Bard College, NY; Duke University, NC; St. Lawrence University, NY; Connecticut College, CT; St. John's University, NY; Vassar College, NY; Seton Hill University, PA; Columbia College, MO; St. Peter's College, NJ; Providence College, RI; Lynn University, FL; Stetson University, FL; Radford University, VA; AUBG in Bulgaria.

During AY 07-08 the Commission continued to expand outreach all across Bulgaria and especially in the underserved regions. The Fulbright advising center submitted a proposal for expanding outreach activities which was supported by ECA. Thanks to the additional \$ 6,200 EducationUSA Europe Regional Funds, the Commission received, the objectives of the project were successfully implemented. Our attention was focused on three target audiences: university students, high school students and representatives of ethnic minorities. The visible result of this activity is the dramatic increase in the number of contacts with institutions and individuals.

Worth mention is our regular participation and involvement in national and international educational exhibitions and fairs. A notable example is the 2008 QS World MBA Fair in Sofia in which prestigious business schools from the US, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria,

France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK promoted their programs. In March 2008 we participated in the Exhibition of Public Schools held in Sofia where over 300 visitors stopped at the Fulbright booth. In March-April, the Commission was involved in the 2008 Career Fairs in the cities of Sofia, Varna, Blagoevgrad, Rousse, Svishtov, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Veliko Turnovo. The events presented a great opportunity for over 1,000 students, scholars, parents, educators, international relations officers, scholarship administrators, career officers, and others interested in international education professionals to find out more about studying in the US.

Outreach activities also included meetings of educational adviser Snezhana Teneva with over 240 students at "Geo Milev" English Language High School in Bourgas, "Leonardo Da Vinci" Foreign Language High School in Dobrich, and "Prof. Vassil Zlatarski" Private School in Sofia, as well as training for new Fulbright coordinators in Bourgas, Varna and Dobrich.

During the International Education week (November 12-16, 2007) a number of useful activities were carried out attracting the attention of students, professors, high-school teachers, educators and parents. The highlight of the IEW was the Professional Development Seminar on "Trends in Transatlantic Exchange: Global Resources for Local Universities and Trends in EducationUSA Advising". Participating in it were 35 students, Vice Rectors and Deans for International Cooperation, International Relations Office Directors, Scholarship Administrators, Career Officers, Fulbright Coordinators, etc. They came from 22 educational institutions in Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Turnovo, Rousse, Shumen, Stara Zagora, Varna, Blagoevgrad, Vidin, Sliven, Madan and Kardzhali.

During and around IEW, the Fulbright advising center in Sofia was visited by representatives of four U.S. institutions of higher education: Hawai'i Pacific University; Kenyon College, OH; St. John's University, NY, and the University of Indianapolis. They presented their institutions and the American educational system to interested students, parents, school principals and teachers.

The centerpiece of IEW 2007 was the second United States Achievers Program (USAP) competition which resulted in the selection of eleven junior high school students out of forty seven candidates representing diverse social groups and 25 high schools from 19 cities in Bulgaria. The Commission organized a series of training activities for the students: workshops, meetings, specific instructions on the application process, work with Internet information etc. We hope that the USAP students have benefited from the Commission assistance and their applications to US universities this fall will be successful.

The academic year 2007-2008 was particularly rich in events organized to raise the profile of the program in Bulgaria and the US and sustain interest in the many opportunities it offers.

On December 1-2, 2007 the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission co-

organized, jointly with the Bulgarian American Studies Association, an international conference on "The Study of America and American Studies in the 21st Century". The conference took place at Sofia University attracting fifty participants from seven countries. All US grantees in Bulgaria were involved in the conference sessions.

To continue the tradition of biennial conferences, the Commission held its 8th conference on "Education and Society: Problems, Prospects, and Prognoses". It took place on April 11-12 at Sofia University. The conference was dedicated to the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Fulbright Commission and the 120th anniversary of the founding of Sofia University. There were 101 participants from Bulgaria and the US. Most of them were US and Bulgarian grantees and alumni. The conference was opened by US Ambassador John Byerle and Deputy Minister of Education and Science Ekaterina Vitkova, member of the Fulbright Commission Board

From June 18 to July 6 the Fulbright Commission conducted its fourth Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar jointly with the Greek Fulbright Commission. The theme of the Seminar was "Bulgaria and Greece: A Shared Past and a Common Future". The aim of the program was to introduce the US participants to Bulgaria, its past and present, its culture and its people in the context of the country's recent accession to EU, its socio-political and cultural role in the South-East Europe and the Balkans. The participants were sixteen high school teachers, community college and university faculty and librarians from 10 US states: New York, New Hampshire Massachusetts, Illinois, Montana, California, Hawaii, Texas, Georgia, and Utah. The first nine days were devoted to presentations and discussions on key topics, such as ancient civilizations in the region, Bulgarian history and culture from the Middle Ages to the present, Bulgaria, EU and the transatlantic community, social and ethnic issues, Bulgarian education, art, music, folklore. The academic portion included meetings with Bulgarian academics, teachers, educators, artists etc. During the second week of the Seminar the participants visited places of historical and tourist interest all over Bulgaria. They also had meetings with colleagues at local universities and high schools.

A special highlight of the Fulbright summer was the 7th Fulbright International Summer Institute (FISI). It took place on August 11-23 in the historic town of Tryavna. The Commission received a total of 104 applications from 24 countries. Forty-six students from 15 countries were admitted (Bulgaria, USA, Albania, Azerbaijan, Canada, China, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Lebanon, Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine). The participants were offered ten interdisciplinary courses in political science, social and cultural studies, business, journalism, and art. The team of 15 instructors included distinguished university lecturers from Bulgaria, Europe and the US. Most of them were Fulbright alumni. For the first time, FISI students had a chance to enrol in courses that are part of a regular M.A. program. Based on special agreements between the Fulbright Commission and Sofia University, and New Bulgarian University, two courses brought credits to the students. FISI 2008 was another huge success. It

also offered a great opportunity for the new US Fulbrighters to adjust to the new educational and cultural environment and meet a wonderfully diverse group of highly motivated students from three continents.

General Factors Impacting the Program

The factors that impacted the Fulbright program last year continued to affect it in FY 2008 and AY 07-08 as well. This is because all of them relate to substantial and long-term changes in the Bulgarian society and educational system.

Accession to the European Union

During the second year of Bulgaria's accession to the European Union the adjustment to EU standards and requirements continued and the transition is likely to take a long time before the positive results become tangible. The negative effects are still more visible, especially in the economic sphere: continuing increase of the cost of living, poverty, low productivity, high emigration rate, low birth rate, high corruption rate, lack of strong government control over organized crime, general disillusionment with the political class and the state institutions, decline and commercialization of culture and education.

Ongoing reform in BG education

Similarly to last year, the educational system is still going through structural changes and transformations aimed at harmonization with the existing EU standards and new requirements. They are part of the Bologna Process that Bulgaria joined in 1999: introduction of the Diploma supplement, two-tier university education (Bachelor's and Master's level), introduction of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and the Diploma Supplement, integration of curricula, assessment systems, quality assurance and accreditation methodology, increase of student and faculty mobility etc. The government funds for education are still low (4, 2% of the GDP) and this is an additional factor blocking the educational reform. Although the salaries of teachers (especially after the national strike in the fall of 2007) and university faculty have been raised, there is a general dissatisfaction with education policies.

The economic difficulties are affecting the quality of education at all levels by eroding academic standards and de-motivating faculty to upgrade their professional and teaching expertise. This is the major reason why a great number of students and professors seek educational and professional opportunities abroad.

Educational opportunities in Europe

European education continues to be a great attraction for Bulgarian undergraduate and graduate students. Their number is over 50,000. Germany (over 12,000), UK (about 900), and most recently Denmark remain the prime destinations mainly because of low tuition fees and opportunities to work part-time. France, Austria, Spain also at-

tract Bulgarian students. More competition comes from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. European colleges and universities continue to most actively advertise their programs through periodic educational fairs, visits of their representatives, extensive Internet information. Other factors are: geographic proximity, inexpensive travel, no visa problems, allegedly good prospects for professional realization in the future, and a heightened sense of cultural belonging to Europe.

Demographic issues

The number of potential Fulbright candidates tends to drop because of still low birth rate (despite a recent positive trend), decrease in the number of school kids and an increase in the number of undergraduate students who continue their education abroad.

English language proficiency

The level of English language proficiency is a real problem and a financial challenge, especially the rising fees for preparatory courses and computerized tests (TOEFL, GRE, and GMAT).

High cost of education in the U.S., visa restrictions

The high tuition in many U.S. universities, reduction of financial aid (fewer and smaller scholarships), together with some visa restrictions, are strong factors diverting Bulgarian students from applying to U.S. universities in favor of European institutions.

In the relatively unfavorable situation in which the Fulbright program has operated in the last couple of years, it is curious to note that the number of applicants from the US has tended to rise.

Whereas with the Bulgarian candidates the decrease is most visible in the graduate student category and the increase is in the senior scholar category, with the US applicants the trend is just the opposite: there is an increase of interest among US students, whereas the senior scholar group remains relatively stable. The overall number of Bulgarian candidates is almost the same as that of American graduate students and scholars who are interested in coming to Bulgaria.

The Commission will continue to take measures to counteract the negative trends by improving and expanding Internet resources and communication; extending outreach, especially in underserved regions; offering English language training; identifying possibilities for more direct partnerships with US universities and institutions; using the Fulbright Summer Institute for promoting the Fulbright opportunity; diversifying the menu of Fulbright grants; encouraging alumni to get more actively involved in the promotion of the Fulbright program and US education; reaching BG students studying in Europe; creating short-term grant opportunities, especially for experts in business, finance, management, and NGO officers.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Board and staff of the Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange for their great support, commitment, competence and creativity that guaranteed another successful year for the Fulbright program in Bulgaria in the context of dynamic changes and diverse trends.

I would also like to wish all members of the Bulgarian-American Fulbright community lots of good health, good spirits and creative energy in the New Year 2009.

Dr. Julia Stefanova
Executive Director



БЪЛГАРО-АМЕРИКАНСКА КОМИСИЯ ЗА ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЕН ОБМЕН

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www.fulbright.bg

Fulbright Office News

A Fulbright Scholar Wins The 120 Years Sofia University Chemistry Department Award



Prof. James Hollenbeck

Fulbright lecturer James Hollenbeck received the Award of Sofia University Chemistry Department during the celebrations of Sofia University's 120th anniversary.



120 years Sofia University Award

Cultural Enrichment Activities for U.S. Fulbright Grantees



Trip to Melnik, February, 2009

Orpheus Re-membered: A Lyric Drama

Poetry by Robert Louis Chianese
Bulgarian Translation by Bogdan Atanasov

Dr. Robert Louis Chianese, Emeritus Professor of English at California State University, Northridge and Fulbright lecturer at Plovdiv University in AY 2004-2005 recently published a book entitled *Orpheus Re-Membered: A Lyric Drama* (Bulgarian translation by Bogdan Atanasov). In it the author wants to draw contemporary poetry to more public utterances about society, the environment, and the state of the world by giving the most ancient of western poets a rebirth and a remake as an eco-poet, and a celebrant of nature undisturbed.



ORPHEUS RE-MEMBERED: A LYRIC DRAMA
Poetry by Robert Louis Chianese
Copyright © 2008 by Robert Louis Chianese, Bepress.com

The book can be purchased from www.IslandViewMedia.com.

Fulbright Office News

Extending Outreach of The Fulbright Program in Bulgaria

A notable example of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission's outreach activities was our participation in a number of national and international educational exhibitions and fairs: the QS World MBA Fair in Sofia, the International Educational Fair in Plovdiv, the Private/Public Education Fairs in Sofia, the Career Fairs in the cities of Sofia, Bourgas, Blagoevgrad, Svishtov, Plovdiv, and Veliko Turnovo. The events presented a great opportunity for over 1,500 students, scholars, parents, educators, international relations officers, scholarship administrators, career officers, and others interested in international education professionals to find out more about the Fulbright Program and study opportunities in the U.S.

Outreach activities also included visits of EducationUSA advisor Snezhana Teneva and Katrin Krieger, Director of International Relations at Johnson & Wales University, RI to four high schools in Sofia on February 24-25, 2009. Over 200 students from William Shakespeare English Language High School, Prof. Vassil Zlatarski Private High School, the High School for Culinary Arts and Hospitality, and Ivan Vazov Language School for Management learned about U.S. education and Johnson & Wales University's undergraduate programs. Over 100 more university students from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia met with educational advisor on March 5, 2009.



International Education Fair in Plovdiv



Ivan Vazov Language School for Management in Sofia

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.

FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL SUMMER INSTITUTE 2009

August 10-22, Tryavna, Bulgaria

The **Fulbright International Summer Institute (FISI)** is an academic and cultural program created by the Bulgarian - American Fulbright Commission in 2002.

FISI offers one- or two-week intensive courses in a wide variety of subject areas: politics and international relations; business and economics; law, communication, education, science, social studies, art, culture and Bulgarian studies. All courses are taught in English by distinguished Bulgarian, European and American professors, most of whom are Fulbright grantees or alumni.

The FISI courses are addressed to undergraduate and graduate students, university faculty and professionals.

This year FISI is scheduled to take place from August 10 to August 22 in Tryavna. Prospective participants have the unique opportunity to form the final program by selecting courses that fit their interests. A tentative program with brief course descriptions and biographical notes for the lecturers will be posted on FISI website (www.fisi-bg.info) in late March, 2009. Only courses that have adequate enrollment (at least 6-7 students) will be finally offered. Along with the academic program, FISI offers a rich cultural program and opportunities for intercultural communication.

FISI is open to applicants from any country. Applicants can be undergraduate or post-graduate students, teachers, lecturers or professionals. They will be considered without regard to race, religion, sex and/or physical impairment. A complete application must contain:

- A completed application form
- Diploma for completed higher education or an academic transcript
- CV
- Two references from university faculty or employer

Participation in the Fulbright International Summer Institute is paid.

- Participation fee is 600 euro for two weeks (300 euro per week).
- For Bulgarian citizens participation fee is 600 leva for two weeks (300 leva per week)

Participation fee paid to the Fulbright Commission in Bulgaria includes tuition, meals, accommodation, and cultural enrichment program. A limited number of merit-based grants will be awarded to Bulgarian and non-EU citizens.

The Fulbright International Summer Institute reaffirms the validity and potential of the Fulbright idea of building mutual understanding through exchange of knowledge and cultural values. It provides a wonderful opportunity for students and faculty to demonstrate and share their knowledge, professional expertise, teaching and learning skills, enthusiasm and good will.

If you want to participate in this event, please visit www.fisi-bg.info for practical information and application forms. You can also obtain general information from:

Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange

17, Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd.; Sofia 1000, Bulgaria, Tel.: +359 2 980 82 12; E-mail: rkaneva@fulbright.bg



BULGARIAN-AMERICAN COMMISSION FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE 2010 - 2011 FULBRIGHT GRANTS COMPETITION

**The Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange
is pleased to announce the 2010-2011 competition for:**

- Fulbright Senior Scholar Grants – 3-5 months for research and lecturing
- Fulbright Graduate Study Grants – up to 10 months for non-degree and degree (Masters' and Ph.D.) programs
- International Fulbright Science and Technology Ph.D. Awards – 5 years for doctoral programs
- Fulbright – University of Oklahoma Grant – 2 years for an MBA program
- Fulbright - Thanks to Scandinavia Institute Grant – 10 months for a Master's program
- Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowships – 10 months for mid-career professional development
- Research Scholarship for the Study of Civil Society – 3-5 months for research and study

University professors, researchers, university graduates and mid-career professionals are invited to compete for the respective programs.

All candidates will be considered without regard to race, color, religion, and sex.

Deadline for Fulbright and Hubert Humphrey Grants: September 7, 2009

Deadline for Science and Technology Ph.D Awards: May 30, 2009

More information can be obtained at www.fulbright.bg

and at the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission

Sofia 1000, 17, Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd., 1st floor, Rooms #9, #15, tel. 980 8212 or 981 6830,

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To Chicago and Back

Impressions from Idaho

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thing immediately capture your attention. Everything that you see is large – buildings, airports, roads, cars and all these is completely the opposite of what your eyes are used to seeing in Europe, where everything is smaller and more compact.

We stayed in Washington, D.C. for five days and there we attended another Orientation Program. Not only did we receive more and valuable and useful information and help regarding all aspects of our stay in the USA, but we also had the opportunity to go sightseeing and see the White House, The Congress, Lincoln Memorial, the historical parts of the town. And then I was so excited and happy to meet my exchange partner- Mrs. Keezer.



On the 8th of August we all departed to the places where we are going to live and work during our ten-month stay. I am very grateful to Helen that she arrived together with us and helped us settle in the new place.

The Town of Pocatello and Century High School

The town of Pocatello is situated in the skirts of the Rocky Mountains, in the state of Idaho. Although for the Americans it is a small town, I was struck by the big size of the town (it is not what we call a small town). The town is spread-out and the architecture is one or two-level buildings and it is typical of both the architecture of private houses and administrative buildings. I was also impressed by the wide roads. There is heavy traffic but there are no traffic jams and all drivers are calm and patient and observe the rules. All stores are very huge and the parking lot is of the size of a football pitch. The people in the town are smiling, extremely calm and polite, always ready to help everybody in need of help or information.

Century High School is situated in the southern part of the town

It all started in January, 2008 when I learned about the teacher exchange program run by Fulbright Commission giving teachers the opportunity to work in the USA. Wow! What a chance! To be able to gain first hand experience in the country whose language and culture I have been teaching for 13 years. A competition was held and I was one of the luckiest (together with my colleague from Sofia Velina Draganova) to be chosen to participate in the program. My exchange partner is Mrs. Helen Keezer – a teacher from Century High School in the town of Pocatello, in the state of Idaho. We exchanged a lot of information regarding the educational work process, the differences between the school systems, conditions of living, transportation, communication. So, my preparation for my ten-month stay started. Fulbright Commission in Sofia also organized two orientation seminars and we received very useful information concerning the differences of culture, secondary education requirements and curriculum, students' motivation and teachers' expectations.

So, finally on the 4th of August my daughter Victoria and I arrived in the capital of the USA – Washington, D.C.

My First Impressions

My first impressions when we arrived in the USA in no way differ from the impressions of each European citizen, setting foot for the first time on American land. The vast space and the big size of every-

with a magnificent view to the mountain and the hills. The building of the school is big and modern, with a lot of facilities. There is a big auditorium for school performances and celebrations, a big gym, a big cafeteria, play grounds, a concert hall. All rooms are equipped with all pieces of technology necessary to have a lesson according to the ideas promoted by modern educational methodology. Lessons are organized according to one very interesting in my opinion approach. The students have only six lessons during the day and they choose what to study. Some subjects are compulsory – like English, government. But maybe the advantage of this approach is that students choose the subject relevant to their future plans – what to study, in which field to develop a career. In each lesson the students are with different other students and there is no such thing as a fixed class or class schedule. The school day is very long – it starts at 8:35 a.m. and finishes at 3:30 p.m. And every day the students have one and the same schedule. When a teacher is absent, there is a substitute teacher, so that the students will never have a free period. When the lessons finish most students are involved in extra-curriculum activities – sports, drama, art, choir, band, cheer-leaders. In this way they develop their interests and talents. A big emphasis is laid on sports. A lot of activities are organized to promote team spirit, to raise money for different causes that help people in need and club activities.



The students should have several grades on writing assignments during the week, which is an advantage because it motivates them to be prepared and work hard.

Another big advantage is the electronic system of entering the grades and the whole school information. This provides parents with access to the work process and in this way they are always aware of their child's performance at school and when it is necessary to take measures they can easily contact the teacher.

Social Environment

As I have already said my impressions regarding the Americans are that they are very friendly and polite people always ready to help everybody. The fact that they address each other by their first names, no matter what their position in the administrative hierarchy is, is indicative of their friendly attitude towards each other and the wish to work in mutual cooperation.

I am very grateful to all my colleagues from the English department and especially my mentor teacher, Jill Pixton, who helped me a lot to get adjusted to the American way of living, teaching and



settling in the country, Ann Adams, who helped learn to drive a car and get a driving license, my good friend Dan Macdonald who took us on several trips

round the state and showed us the beauty of nature in this part of the world and another good friend, Brenda Trymane, who always gives me her support in difficult moments.

The most memorable trip I have had so far is our trip to Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton and Jackson – together with Dan Macdonald. These places capture the traveler with their splendour, majesty and magnetism.



Yellowstone National Park is a treasure that inspires awe in travelers from around the world. At the heart of Yellowstone's past, present, and future lies volcanism. About 2 million years ago, the 1.3 million years ago, and again 640,000 years ago, huge volcanic eruptions occurred here. The magmatic heat powering those eruptions still powers the park's geysers, hot springs, fumaroles, and mudpots. Rugged mountains flank the park's volcanic plateau, rewarding both eye and spirit. Yellowstone's wildlife includes bison (buffalo), elk, grizzly and black bears, trumpeter swans, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Yellowstone would be a premier national park for its scenery or wildlife, but its history abounds in colorful tales, too, of fur trappers – Jim Bridger and Osborne Russell – and explorers, surveyors, photographers, and artists. William Henry Jackson's photographs and Thomas Moran's sketches influenced the Congress to establish Yellowstone as the world's first national park in 1872.



Having been here for five months, in the beautiful and peaceful American West, among the majesty of the Rocky Mountains I can definitely say that my impressions of everything I have seen and experienced are extremely positive. I am very grateful to Fulbright Commission for the opportunity to participate in the teacher exchange program and widen my knowledge and experience.

To Chicago and Back

United States - Still the Melting Pot of the World?

Svetlozar Kirilov

Svetlozar Kirilov teaches sociology at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications of Sofia University. His major research interests relate to immigration and racial, ethnic and religious conflicts. He also serves as a Media Expert at the Council of Europe. Currently, Svetlozar Kirilov is a Hubert Humphrey Fellow at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA.

“You come to the unknown, you have to survive. You are like a child who begins to walk – somebody has to help you, to feed you. It can take years...” This is how Miguel Arbenz, a Guatemalan immigrant in his 50s, describes his first and most stressing days in the United States. He lives in Langley Park, predominantly immigrant neighborhood in suburban Washington, DC – Maryland area, not far from University of Maryland, where I have spent my fellowship year focusing mainly on immigration.

For Miguel it all began in 1986, when he fled Guatemala to escape from the atrocities of the civil war that devastated his small motherland in Central America. Instead of completing college degree in economics in his home country, Miguel gained first-hand experience in the U.S. immigrant labor market – cleaning, washing trucks, “do this, do that”. After twenty three years of uneasy immigrant life, he now owns a bakery that supplies cleaners and construction workers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico with their favorite Latino corn bread and cookies.

“If we accept Latinos in our country, we import poverty. Do you want more poverty in Bulgaria?” The voice of the old White woman, a member of immigration-reduction organization the American Council for Immigration Reform, based in Northern Virginia, raises and clearly indicates that not everyone is happy with the presence of immigrants in Langley Park and elsewhere in the United States. The immigration debate is one of the hottest issues in America and its spin is so unpredictable that both Obama and McCain avoided it during the election campaign.

The pro-immigration camp believes that immigrants con-



Svetlozar Kirilov at the Headquarters of the World Bank Washington DC

tribute to the American economy providing both skilled and unskilled labor and paying taxes. Immigrants from Mexico, India, Taiwan or Jamaica bring their music, cuisine, festivals and dances, which increases cultural diversity and makes American life more colorful. The United States also views itself as lending a hand to people that are poor or persecuted.

By contrast, the opponents of immigration argue that newcomers consume more in terms of welfare benefits as compared to what they produce, some of immigrants are involved in crimes and cultural diversity is not quite good thing since it tends to undermine national identity. To whom are immigrants loyal - to the United States or to their native country? Immigrants are also considered as threat for native workers, with whom they compete for jobs, scarce resource in times of economic uncertainty.

Surveys demonstrate that a significant proportion of African Americans are anxious about Latin American immigration. Blacks very often compete with Latino immigrants for the same low-paying manual jobs in cleaning, construction and services. Tony Whitehead, a Professor of Anthropology at University of Maryland, whose course I attended, focuses his research on racialized urban ghettos with high level of poverty, crime and drugs. On the basis of his studies on predominantly Black neighborhoods in Baltimore and South-East DC, beyond the Anacostia River, he estimates that a half of young Black males are either incarcerated, on parole, on probation or looked for by the police and about 60 percent of Black households with children are female-headed, with no husband present at home.

There is a trend in recent years immigrants to avoid states such as California, Texas or New York with huge immigrant population and instead head to places such as Washington, DC, which had not been exposed so much to immigration. That creates ethnic enclaves in the capital metropolitan area such as Langley Park (72 percent immigrants, mostly Latinos), where Spanish is so universally spoken that many stores do not even bother to place customer information in English.

The economic crises has harsh impact on immigrants – parking lots around huge stores at Langley Park Plaza are full with Spanish-speaking men apparently without jobs who just hang out, lay on the grass and drink beer. Dr Judith Freidenberg who teaches course on ethnology of immigrant life at University of Maryland emphasizes that many of immigrants are employed at the secondary labor market that provides no job security and benefits.

At weekends, streets and cafes in Langley Park are full with men and very little women, which rightly reflects the gender structure of the neighborhood – roughly 9,000 men versus 7,000 women. Central American immigrants are mostly males and in Guatemala it is possible to see whole villages with almost female population, as Luisa Fernanda Rodriguez, a Guatemalan journalist and my colleague at the Hubert Humphrey Program explains. One of the consequences might be that “Ritmo Latino”, a music store that sells albums of Latino stars of salsa, merengue and rumba, offers also DVDs with porno movies (you can get “Cheating Hispanic Wives” or “Horny Latinas” for around \$12 each).

La Union, the hub of social and community life in Langley Park, has more cultured air. Its huge three-floor building hosts restaurants, stores, churches and a fitness center. Internal decoration is of several large colorful murals in Diego Rivera style – the Guatemalan quetzal, Mayan pyramidal temples, Incan ruins.

“Casa Farabundo Marti” store sells not only cakes and clothes but also t-shirts and cups with symbols of the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front, a left-wing revolutionary organization, that waged guerrilla against the Salvadorian regime in the 1980’s. Another store provides pink and white dresses for initiation ceremony of girls at the age of 15, an old Latin American tradition.

When it gets dark, groups of Latino men in Langley Park become more numerous, when those who are back from work join unemployed who hang out from day time. Bottles of alcohol serve as social lubricant for those gathered behind a bus stop. Unexpectedly, a Spanish-speaking man bursts in anger and attacks one of his companions. Other Latino men immediately interfere and break the fight. Black man waiting at the stop is scared. “What is the problem with that guy?”, says he when boards on his bus. The bus leaves Langley Park with its Mexican grills, Guatemalan bakeries, Salvadoran music and lonely men drinking beer on the streets – a small piece of Latin America only ten minutes drive from the national capital.

Diversity of races, cultures and ethnicities has been long ago a hallmark of the US society. Why is this country still magnet for immigrants? Why do millions of people still attempt to land at New York, Chicago or San Francisco and to start a new life? Why cannot they succeed in their countries?

An important difference between Europe and the United States is that European societies are still not quite welcoming to foreigners and immigrants, while in the US natives in their everyday behavior and attitudes do not distance themselves from strangers. This does not mean that there are no anti-immigrant organizations or feelings, especially in times of economic uncertainty. Yet, European societies tend to isolate foreigners and immigrants, who might experience periods of alienation and loneliness, which is the case of some Bulgarian immigrants in Austria or Britain.

The United States still attracts immigrants because of the enormous economic opportunities of the largest world economy, broad range of both skilled and unskilled jobs, open system in which it is relatively easy to do business, effective organization of society with high quality of services and relaxed attitudes of natives toward immigrants. Above all, natives themselves are descendants of immigrants who came from Ireland, Germany, Italy or Poland and a lot of them are prone to think that the new immigrants from El Salvador, China or Bulgaria are like the old ones – they just have come later. Will it be possible for Bulgarians to think in the same manner about people from Moldova, Ukraine, China or Iraq, who would want to settle in our country?

Out of America

Helen Keezer

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One short year ago, I knew that Bulgaria was a new member of the European Union and was located north of Greece—not exactly an encyclopedic amount of information! I have now lived in Bulgaria for four months as a Fulbright teacher of English and though I have much more to learn, my experiences in this fascinating country have taught me much about Bulgaria, Bulgarians, and myself.

Bulgaria is an amazing vision in contrast: expensive Mercedes Benz's and BMW's compete with horse drawn carts for precious road space. Shepherds stand in remote fields minding their flocks while talking on their mobile phones. Grannies in sturdy shoes share seats on the trolley with scantily clad young women in six inch stiletto heels. Modern apartments with terra cotta terraces appear in the shadows of tall, shabby socialist buildings. It seems that as much as Bulgaria changes, it stays the same.

As a Fulbright teacher, I was assigned to Bertolt Brecht Language School in Pazardzhik, Bulgaria. Of course, I searched all the travel books I could find to learn more about my new home town. What I read was not encouraging. Thomas Cook says, "The town has become inextricably linked throughout Bulgaria with thievery and scams." The Rough Guide to Bulgaria warns that the city has a reputation of being "full of criminals, and its motorists as the worst drivers in the country." They go on to say, "pickpockets are a definite hazard here." The Lonely Planet follows Thumper's rule and says nothing at

all about Pazardzhik. With these less than encouraging words, I arrived in Pazardzhik in August to start my year-long adventure.

The travel books couldn't have been more inaccurate. My hometown of 100,000 people is very safe and easy to navigate. I can walk anywhere in the city in less than thirty minutes. If I am running late or it is too cold for walking, I can catch a trolley near my flat and be in the city center in fifteen minutes. In the center, I find an open market with fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowers; shops selling everything from clothes to appliances to health care; parks, fountains, and plazas; and most importantly, people! If I am feeling lonely, I assuage it by walking to the center and watching young mothers strolling with their babies, friends meeting in coffee shops, and shoppers hurrying in and out of the shops. I do keep my purse tightly on my shoulder, but I have never felt threatened or concerned that thieves were just waiting for an opportunity to relieve me of my possessions.

Of course, I went through an adjustment period when I first arrived in Bulgaria. Thankfully, the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission invited all Fulbrighters for 2008-2009 to attend the Fulbright International Summer Institute (FISI) which was held in Tryavna this year. FISI was an amazing two week program which brought together young people from Albania, Azerbaijan, Canada, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Italy, Lebanon, Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States to further the Fulbright goal of promoting global peace and understanding through academic exchange. At FISI, I was housed in a fabulous hotel, served amazing traditional Bulgarian food, shown important historical sights, and introduced to the American Fulbrighters who would serve as my support from home throughout my stay. Most importantly, I met and became friends with the members of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission who would serve as my hosts for sight seeing trips and my guides through the maze of Bulgarian bureaucracy.

Though I was only able to attend FISI for the second week, I left the beautiful, historic town of Tryavna with an address book full of new friends, a basic understanding of Bulgarian cuisine, a fine introduction to Bulgarian history and culture, and a working knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet. Armed with these tools, I faced the challenge of living on my own in Pazardzhik despite not being able to speak a word of Bulgarian! Americans have become used to meeting those who speak English no matter where they travel. Pazardzhik is an exception. No one on the trolley, in the shops, or at my apartment building could speak or understand English. Thankfully,

I love charades, and I found that I could communicate most of my needs through much gesturing and pointing.

Finally, after two weeks of planning and teachers' meetings, September 15th arrived! All Bulgarian schools start on September 15th with a very interesting opening ceremony. The students all gather outside in the school yard and are welcomed with a program including songs by students and speeches from both student leaders and school administrators. The program concludes with the 12th graders each taking a new 8th grader by the hand and leading him/her into the school. These new little "rabbits" are pelted with carrots, a ritual which the students all accept as good fun, but which frightened me just a bit. The most touching part of the day was seeing the students present their teachers with flowers as tokens of their esteem.

Though I didn't get to teach on that first day, I was introduced to each of my classes: two groups each of 9th, 10th and 11th graders, approximately 160 students total. I would see the 11th graders for American and British Literature four forty minute periods a week, the 10th graders for speaking and writing three forty minute periods a week, and the 9th graders for vocabulary, speaking, and writing two forty minute periods a week. My classes would be Monday through Thursday, and when I didn't have class, I didn't have to be at school. This was quite a pleasant change from my forty hour work week in Idaho.

Now, four months later, those new, nameless Bulgarian students are my family and friends, my support in times of loneliness and my translators when charades fail. We have laughed together about my difficulty in learning Bulgarian. We have puzzled together about British English and its vagaries. We have grown closer as they have learned to speak for themselves, freely and confidently in English.



I've made the transition from A's and B's to 6's and 5's. I've learned to sign the class book every day and include the numbers of the missing students. I've hand-written every students' grade in the class book and then initialed every students' individual grade book. I've even adjusted to writing in the huge book in the teachers' room every day after I finish teaching. I don't know what will happen to me if I don't write in the square next to my name exactly what I taught that day, and I really don't want to find out because my mentor was adamant that I not forget.

Since that first frightening day in September, my 11th graders and I have read and discussed Beowulf together. They have written their own version of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Pazardzhik Tales. In heroic couplets, they described the class beauty queen, mutri, chalg singers, teachers, and corrupt politicians among other characters that populate their life in Bulgaria. They have never shirked from an assignment I have given them. And they surprised both themselves and me when they performed Hamlet in full costume, lines memorized, and emotion in their voices.

If I had any doubts about whether taking on the challenge of a Fulbright Exchange in Bulgaria was a wise thing to do, those doubts vanished on Thanksgiving Day. The Fulbright Commission and American Ambassador Nancy McEldowney and her husband Tim Hayes invited the 2008 Fulbright participants to a sit down, Thanksgiving dinner on the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving at the Ambassador's private residence. It was definitely the fanciest Thanksgiving I've ever experienced, and the food was amazing. Evidently, American Ambassador's have connections, and she had no problem flying in cranberries and sweet potatoes for the occasion. As if the food wasn't enough, Ambassador McEldowney had invited prominent Bulgarians who had participated in Fulbright exchanges in America. Consequently, we were honored with the presence of The Minister of Education, two members of Parliament, a Supreme Court Justice, and other highly successful business men and women. The conversation around the table was almost as rich as the pumpkin cheese cake we had for dessert.

I spent Wednesday night after the big dinner in Sofia and returned by train to Pazardzhik on Thanksgiving day accompanied by my Fulbright friend Michele. Because of the special evening at the Ambassador's home and Michele's companionship, I wasn't feeling homesick, but it seemed a bit strange to have to teach my 11th grade literature class on Thanksgiving. When Michele and I approached my classroom, one of my students stopped us at the door and said, "Desi is changing in there, so we have to wait for a little bit before we can go in." That seemed strange, but the week before, all the girls changed into their Hamlet costumes in the classroom, so I just said, "Okay, I'll go sign the big book in the teachers' room."

A few minutes later, Michele and I entered my classroom to a huge surprise! My 11th grade students, with the help of their mothers, had prepared an entire Thanksgiving dinner. A large roasted turkey, stuffed with rice dressing was the center piece of the table. It was surrounded by roasted potatoes. Two pans of delicious bread were next to the turkey. Both were traditional Bulgarian breads; one was a sweet bread and the other was salty. They were both delicious. They had Coke for them and Coca Cola Light for me. They had yummy powdered sugared cookies for dessert. There was enough food for the entire class of twenty-seven, Michele, and me to eat and eat! Best of all, one of my students stood up and said, "We knew that Thanksgiving was a holiday all about family and since you are so far away from your family, we wanted to be your family." I hadn't felt like crying all day, but when she said that, I had to fight back the tears.

It is amazing how quickly I went from knowing next to nothing about Bulgaria to having an entire family in Bulgaria. But then Fulbright is like that.

Out of America

Dramatic Bulgaria

Susan E. Picinich

Susan Picinich is a Fulbright lecturer at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria for AY 2008-2009. She is a professor of Theatre at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine, and a professional costume designer.

Before arriving in Sofia, I already knew there were a number of professional theatres so I hoped to find an exciting and vibrant theatre community. The city has exceeded my expectations. My Fulbright assignment involves teaching at Sofia's National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (abbreviated in Bulgarian as NATFIZ), and in particular lecturing on American Musical Theatre and giving workshops on hat-making.

Meanwhile, I have toured the facilities at NATFIZ and been to the theatre both alone and with colleagues. I have also spent time with a colleague from the Art Academy in Sofia, who like me teaches theatre design. Together we have visited studios in the Art Academy, the national library, and several galleries. She and my hosts at NATFIZ have given me great insight into how the professional theatre is organized in Bulgaria and how theatre designers work here.

So far in eight weeks, I have seen seven plays at four different theatres. My goal while in Sofia is to see one show each week. Of course, understanding the dialogue in Bulgarian presents quite a challenge, to say the least, but the language course at Sofia University's Institute for Foreign Students is a big help, and I am continuing to take a second session. I am far from proficient in Bulgarian, but I have gone from knowing absolutely nothing to acquiring the most rudimentary knowledge, which makes this experience much more worthwhile for me.

Theatre scene

When I encounter new people and situations while traveling, I enjoy looking for parallels with my previous experiences. So I am not surprised to find a number of ways in which the theatre scene in Bulgaria is a lot like home. Actors, directors, and designers strike me as universal types, audiences are alike everywhere, and the overall feeling is comfortably akin to my experiences in the United States and France, the only other European country where I have much theatre-going expertise. I also try my best to avoid quick judgments and sweeping generalizations, so it will be a long time, if ever, before I come to conclusions about theatre in Bulgaria. However, there are a few items which begin to shape my views of theatre here.



In the big picture view, there is the repertory system as practiced in Bulgaria. Theatres here generally have a number of productions in the repertory, performing a different show every night of the week during the season. Many theatres have a regular company of actors who perform in more than one of the shows, some of which stay in the repertory for years. The economic realities of this system, and government support for the arts, result in actors' living full-time in the city where they perform. This in turn allows for larger casts than American regional theatres can afford. In the U.S. almost all professional actors are based in large cities, especially New York, and when rehearsing and performing "out-of-town" must be housed at the expense of the theatre company. There is essentially no public funding for the arts, so production costs must be met by ticket sales and private philanthropy. Each production has a limited run of the same play every night for two to four weeks, after which the actors leave town, the set is dismantled, and the next production opens for a similar short run. These practices put tremendous pressure on regional theatres to limit cast size and influence contemporary playwrights to focus on small-cast plays. What about Broadway you ask? Those shows run for years, right? True, but not in repertory. *Phantom of the Opera* is the same show every time, eight shows a week, playing to hundreds every time. How does it work? Tourists! So the productions are lavish to appeal to the broadest possible audience. That makes tickets expensive and the productions so huge they basically take over their theatre. If successful, the show becomes an institution; if not, it loses money and closes to make room for the next.

In the small picture view there are also some differences. As you can imagine, I go to the theatre a lot and the experience is predictable in most venues. In Bulgaria things are mostly similar, although the coat check and the playbills surprised me a bit.

Since I arrived on February 1st I have had ample opportunity to observe theatre-goers with heavy outerwear. In each theatre I have attended, the system of checking one's coat is a well-choreographed process. Almost everyone leaves their coat with the attendants in the lobby, in exchange for a numbered tag. I didn't do this the first time, because I really wasn't prepared for the system. Now I use it happily and am glad not to have to sit on my coat, or stuff it under my seat. Rarely is a coat check provided in the U.S., never at any of my regular venues. And even if it were, I'm not sure it would be anywhere near as effective and efficient as what I have seen here. Also, if there were a coat check, there would certainly be a "tips" jar, which I have never seen in Bulgaria. There are also a few differences in the playbills I have seen. First, they are not free of charge but cost 1 or 2 leva. Second, they are brief with no actors' biographies or detailed lists of technical staff. Third, back to economics, there are no advertisements. Not every American theatre has paid ads in the playbill, but most do, often as a way to cover the printing cost.

The plays

The seven plays I have seen so far have been at four different theatres: the National Theatre "Ivan Vazov", the Bulgarian Army Theatre, Sofia Theatre, and the Dramatic Theatre "Konstantin Belichkov" in Pazardzhik. I have liked everything I have seen but most enjoyed *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Don Juan*, probably because these two productions had the most action and visual richness.

Favorites

The first production my husband and I saw in Bulgaria was Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* or *Mnogo Shoum za Nishto* at the Bulgarian Army Theatre. (Seen here is a photo of the curtain call.) It was in Bulgarian, of course, but since it was an excellent and well-acted production it was mostly possible to follow who was who and what was going on.



The house was very full and included a number of high school age folks as well as a wide range of others young and old. The production was well received by everyone. Dogberry and his henchmen were real crowd pleasers. One mesmerized me for an entire scene as he fixated on his own thumb, stuck in his jacket button hole. I really couldn't stop watching him. A very handsome Benedict captured hearts as well.



As I understand it, this production has been in the repertory for a number of years, and this month marked the introduction of a new cast of actors in the roles of the two young couples, Beatrice and Benedict & Hero and Claudio. I do know that on the night we were there, there was quite a bit of excitement during the curtain call, with flowers and champagne, speeches and many, many bows. Was it the opening night of the new cast? We couldn't tell, but the sense of some momentous event was unmistakable.

Moliere's *Don Juan* is playing at the National Theatre. For the first time I bought a ticket by myself, and for 15 leva (about \$10) I chose — via computer screen at the box office — an excellent orchestra seat about six rows from the stage.

This is definitely a luxury venue! The exterior of the building is gorgeous, as everyone in Sofia already knows. Lobby areas and the auditorium are in beautiful condition. The second floor lobby, with portraits of company members past and present, is impressive. Built in 1907, it seats about 750 in a very traditional proscenium set-up with two levels of horse-shoe shaped balconies and a large, raked orchestra section.

The production, with a cast of 19, was hugely entertaining. Don Juan's "levée," including an onstage bathtub and lots of water, was the first taste of the fun to come. The audience broke into spontaneous applause during the underwater scene in which Don Juan and Sganarelle were rescued from drowning. The simple, and often used, device of stretching fabric across the stage to create "waves" felt brand new as performed by the really charming peasant women with their laundry. And the raising and lowering of the "waves" to indicate the varied depth of the water made everyone laugh out loud.

The scenery was inventive but not complex; the costumes were effective and flattering. A two-story unit on casters was particularly well used by the peasant women, Don Juan, and especially by my favorites Charlotta and Pietro, who played their delightfully wacky scene (the beginning of Moliere's Act II) sitting on the upper level

with their legs dangling and making hats out of plastic bags. Trying to escape from the women he had tricked, Don Juan stood atop the platform as two actors spun it at what seemed an amazing pace.

Two other shows at the Bulgarian Army Theatre

For *Game of Love and Chance* by Mariveaux I had a box seat, at the front of the first balcony. In this show I particularly liked the women's incredible patterned tights, as well as the large, built-in projection screen above the actors' head height. The video projections included an underwater "aquarium" and a great segment of hot air balloons moving through a captivating landscape.



Chekhov's *The Seagull* was another great treat. I know the play well and enjoyed listening for favorite lines as spoken in Bulgarian. In the opening scene I understood enough to hear Masha explain her constant black attire by saying "I'm in mourning for my life," and in Act IV I heard Nina say "I am seagull," instead of "I am the seagull," contradicting Michael Frayn's insertion of the definite article in his 1988 English language translation. Madame Arkadina was another delight with fantastic costumes and amazing hats. The second act has a wonderful scene when no one moves or speaks but each character sits, smokes, and ponders – a truly Chekhovian interlude.

A very special event

When I was offered a ticket for *Princess Turandot*, I thought at first I was going to the opera. It turns out the play by Gozzi, written in 1762, provided source material for Puccini's opera. The production at Sofia Theatre recreates the famous 1922 Russian production by Evgenei Vakhtangov at the Moscow Art Theatre.

The show, with a cast of 13 principals and a few supernumeraries (students from NATFIZ), was excellent. The four commedia types (Truffaldino, Pantalone, Brighella, and Tartaglia – seen here in an image from the program) provided a through line for the action and were particularly charming. The scenery was based on the 1920's era renderings by Ignaty Nivinsky (also reproduced in the program).

Sofia Theatre is a large, mid-to late-20th century building, with a sixties-seventies vibe. The sightlines are great, the seats are comfortable, and as usual the audience was large, diverse, and enthusiastic. It has no balcony and no center aisle, but instead doorways along the sidewalls of the house and side aisles to access each row.

Many high schoolers were in attendance, along with their teachers. Their willingness to get into the spirit of the evening greatly impressed me.

Two farces

The middle of March was a time to see wacky comedies. Probably a good idea since winter was hanging on and everyone needed a laugh.

First, we went to a premiere at the Dramatic Theatre "Konstantin Belichkov" in Pazardzhik. The play was *Poor France* by Jean Cau, a really broad farce about a father discovering that his adult son is gay. To an American viewer the shock value of this subject has already been largely defused by television shows like *Will & Grace* (American sitcom 1998-2006). The Bulgarian script is based on a French adaptation of the 1970 American play *Norman is that you?* Audience members laughed good naturedly at the stereotypical set up and the gay characters were played in a fairly positive and sympathetic way. Afterward, we were invited to a reception which was precisely like those in the United States. Theatre people really are much the same wherever I go. The actors were aglow with first night success, and audience members at the reception seemed eager to hob-nob with the stars and bask in their reflected glory.

Fools is a Neil Simon farce at Sofia Theatre with scenography by Vladimir Slavov, a former student of my Art Academy colleague. *Fools*, a very silly play with hilarious costumes, is set in a mythical Russian village. Afterwards the scenographer explained that to stretch his small budget he used costumes from stock, adding all kinds of fake fur collars, cuffs, hats, and boots. Count Gregor Yousekevitch's huge white fur collar is quite hysterical.



Travels

Meanwhile, my husband and I are trying to see as much of this beautiful country as we can, while I make sure to visit important theatre sites. With this in mind, we visited Plovdiv, where we toured that city's most amazing antiquities, including its ancient theatre. We also took a weekend trip to Blagoevgrad, Rila Monastery, Sandanski, and Bansko. No theatre visits while there, but plenty of scenery and history. Next was a trip to Vidin for fortresses, a cave, mountains, and the Danube!

We went by train to Plovdiv. It had been snowing for the previous day or so, and we arrived to find the city covered in about 30 centimeters of new snow, beautiful but somewhat obstructing the



view. Nevertheless, we got a clear idea of the city's layout and size. Most impressive was the Roman Theatre from the 2nd century A. D., pictured here. As you can imagine, we climbed around to see it from every angle. We even found our way "backstage" as best we could. We'll have to go back in warmer weather to see a show!

Of course we visited the other ancient sites, including the partially excavated stadium, the forum, and several other unnamed but intriguing digs. It was hard to make out all the details through the snow, but that leaves more for a follow-up trip.

What a great experience to see an example from theatre history class come to life.

Film Crew in Sofia

Just another lazy Sunday in Sofia, so we decided to get out of the house and head to the city center, stopping in the Russian Church for a quick look around. As we emerged a line of cars came whizzing around the corner, down the block toward the Presidency. All of a sudden what clearly sounded like automatic gunfire erupted! I have to admit to being a little freaked out. Some other bystanders appeared ruffled too, but many folks seemed remarkably calm, as if this were just one of those things that can happen. I admit to being new to Bulgaria, but still there must be more to the story, right?

Not trusting my knowledge of (or knowing enough) Bulgarian, I urged my husband to ask someone what was happening. "They're filming a movie," the man told us. Wow, big relief to know the world had not turned sinister and dangerous with no warning. Now the blocked off street and cluster of people and trucks in the distance made perfect sense. Turns out we and many others had stumbled upon a film crew working on action shots with civilian and military cars, gunfire, and at least one bullet-ridden costume with blood. A

member of the crowd, who may have been part of the crew, told us they were making "Universal Soldier," although none of the big stars was on location today. Later the ticket seller at the Ethnographic Museum, backdrop to much of the action and the site of our planned destination to begin with, told us that it was a Jean Claude Van Damme movie.

We joined the crowd watching them set up the next shot, got shoed back out of harm's way numerous times, and did see one more exciting take with the gunfire ringing out. In the meantime we chatted with one of the actors, watched the crew get multiple cameras rigged into an SUV, including one held-held by a guy strapped to the roof, and generally took in the movie-making magic. With my costume background, I enjoyed watching the wardrobe person on set using a public telephone for her costume rack and helping the actor in the bullet-ridden jacket make a nice, smooth pony tail — just another day at the office. While in the museum we heard the shots again, but by now we were old hands on the set so we took little notice.



Back home I googled the movie title and Jean Claude Van Damme, only to discover that this was at least the third in a series of "Universal Soldier" movies and much anticipated by fans. The actor we talked to was Andrei "The Pit Bull" Arlovski. What fun to be there. I only hope Sofia doesn't end up on the cutting room floor!

Next

I am not yet halfway through my time in Bulgaria and already concerned by how swiftly the time is passing. I still have Musical Theatre lectures to give, hat making workshops to lead, and plays to see. Next up will be *Cats* and *Wonderful Boys (The Full Monty)* to satisfy my curiosity about the musical theatre form as staged in Bulgaria. I can't wait.