

REALLIFE



'Calling in sick'

My adventure in health care abroad

BY TRACI COX ('08)

(Above): Fulbright Award teacher Traci Cox ('08) near Stranik Mountain in the village of Zastranie in northwest Slovakia. "Slovaks are fond of the outdoors, and I spent many weekends hiking to castle ruins, churches and villages with friends," she says. (Inset): Cox has some fun with one of her third-year literature classes at the Sukromne Gymnasium in Zilina, Slovakia.

When I awoke one frigid November morning with an all-too-familiar tingling feeling in my lungs, I knew I was getting a cold. I didn't have time to be sick because it was the day I was to travel to Čičmany, a historic village in western Slovakia. I refused to let a little cough get in the way, because there were just too many things to do and see. The next day when I awoke trembling with a fever, I realized what a bad decision I had made the day before. I had pushed too hard and now I had no choice; I had to go to the doctor.

Never having been to a doctor outside the United States, I had no idea how the Slovakian health care system worked. So I called my Slovak friend and coworker, Janka, to find out where to go and how much it would cost. She assured me that since Slovakia has socialized health care and I had a limited medical plan under the Fulbright program, I would eventually be reimbursed for the health care services no matter what the costs were.

To be honest, I was a little reluctant to go to a Slovak doctor because I had questions about their qualifications. During the three months I had spent in Slovakia, if I felt ill my friends always

said to drink tea with rum ... headache, drink tea with rum, ... stomachache, drink tea with rum. I wondered if the doctor would also prescribe tea with rum.

The school custodian drove Janka and me to the clinic and on the way he told me, in Slovak, how he never gets sick. He said he had not been sick since he was a boy. "What makes you so healthy?" I asked him. "Slivovica," he replied. Slivovica is the national alcoholic drink of Slovakia and while the natives call it "plum brandy," I think it tastes more like gasoline. "Drink Slivovica every day, and it will burn all the germs out of you. You will live healthy forever; you will be strong like the Slovak peasants!" I was skeptical then, and I'm still not convinced. He told me that every day before he goes to work he takes a shot of Slivovica for breakfast.

When you visit a doctor in the states, you sign in with a friendly, smiling receptionist and wait in a comfortable lobby for a nurse to call your name and escort you to a private room. Well, it is not quite like that in Slovakia.

The clinic in my neighborhood was a labyrinth of dark hallways, closed doors and dead ends. Each doctor has his or her own office, so you just knock on a door and hope someone answers. If not, you move on. It was quite a process and it took more than 40 minutes.

About the Author Traci Cox ('08) earned a 2009 Fulbright Award to teach Slovakian teens to speak English and to help prepare them for college. Cox is an Honors Program graduate who majored in English and minored in anthropology. Following her 10-month Fulbright appointment she plans to attend graduate school and study creative writing.

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Janka would knock on a door and a frazzled-looking nurse would answer. My friend-turned-translator explained that I was an American living and working in Slovakia and that I needed to see a doctor. Intrigued by my nationality, the nurse would then open the door a bit further and poke her head out to see me. “Ohhh, an American.” Once she got a good look at me, she’d shake her head and reply, “*Nie, nie pomoc*,” which means “No, I can’t help you,” and then close the door. This happened three times. Exasperated and dizzy, I shuffled from office to office begging for someone to take me in. I felt like Joseph and Mary wandering around looking for a room at the inn, because, for reasons unfathomable to us, no one would examine me or treat me.

We were relieved when the fourth door opened and a nurse told us to wait while she consulted with the doctor about the *Američanka*. When my name was finally called, Janka accompanied me into the cluttered office where a nurse briskly pulled down my shirt and shoved a thermometer into my armpit. The nurse, who actually seemed disappointed when I didn’t have a temperature, then pushed me out of my chair and behind a tattered shower curtain where the doctor was waiting.

His office was a mess with empty boxes, eyedrops, files, lab coats and bits of loose paper covering his desk, cabinets and floor. I sat down in a ratty, brown ’70s-era chair while Janka explained my symptoms. They talked for about 10 minutes; however, they did not talk about how I was feeling. Instead they talked about Obama, Clinton, something about “fasts foods.” Then the doctor pulled a digital thermometer from under a pile of junk on his desk and said, “Look, American make.” I acknowledged the fancy thermometer with a nod and pretended to be impressed as he pulled down my shirt-sleeve and stuck it under my armpit.

After seeing that I still did not have a fever, he stopped all the political banter and resumed the examination. Now, this is where the real fun began. He pulled a tongue depressor from a jar, thought of something else to say to Janka, got distracted and put the tongue depressor in his briefcase. After realizing what he had done, he chuckled and grabbed another tongue depressor, got distracted again and put it on top of his computer. I watched with horror as tongue depressors began to accumulate around his desk.

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Finally he focused and asked me to open my mouth. I learned to open my mouth and say “ahh” at an early age, so that’s exactly what I did. I closed my eyes and stuck out my tongue as far as I could so he could get a good clear look at my swollen throat.

“What the hell is she doing?” he asked Janka in Slovak. “Tell her to put her tongue back in her mouth and stop making that noise.” Embarrassed, I did as I was told. As he shoved his ungloved hand into my mouth I thought, “This would never happen in America.” On my second attempt, the doctor began uttering a series of oohs and ahhs. He seemed surprised. I panicked; maybe my illness was worse than I thought.

Then when I heard Janka hysterically laughing behind me, I asked her what was wrong with me and what was wrong with the doctor. “He wants to examine your teeth. Is that OK?” What? My teeth? My teeth are fine; my teeth aren’t causing me chest pain. Defenseless and ailing, I gave him permission to tap my molars and poke my gums. “Wow, wow, you have the most beautiful teeth I’ve ever seen!” he said. “Perfectly straight and so white. You have great genes.” I thanked him and told him I’d tell my parents the good news.

In the states, medical personnel use those little handheld sanitized and partially disposable flashlights to examine a patient’s nose, ears and throat. In Slovakia, medical personnel use what I call a modified skylight to examine your sinuses. It is actually a lamp with a bulb about the size of a basketball placed about a foot away from your face; so, of course, you are immediately blinded for about 10 minutes. He didn’t examine my nose or ears, but he did listen to my lungs

for about 20 seconds. His diagnosis: bronchitis and sinus infection.

“Do you have a man here?” the doctor asked. I told him my boyfriend was in the United States. “But you need to be taken care of, and I can’t do it because I’m too old and I’m fat. Look at my belly! Look!” He wasn’t so fat, but he did remind me a little of Santa with his white beard and jolly demeanor. When he stood up to turn off the blinding light, I noticed his pants gathering around his ankles. “Hoopsies, hup, hup,” he said as he chuckled and leaned over his potbelly to pick up his trousers. “It was just lunchtime,” he said, and then explained his need to undo his belt every time he ate. Thankfully, Janka and I were spared because his lab coat covered up most of his legs, and when he bent down to adjust his buckle, a tongue depressor fell to the floor from somewhere inside his pants.

The “exam” took more than an hour, and when we came out, the school custodian-turned-chauffeur asked me if I had just had surgery or something. While he had been in practice for more than 40 years, my doctor had never examined a foreigner. I was something of a surprise to him, like a guinea pig or an experiment. He spoke no English, but then again, my Slovak isn’t that great either. I understood he had done me a favor by seeing me, and I shook his hand and thanked him for his hospitality. “All right! Good, good!” he said, chuckling again.

Janka took me to the pharmacy to fill my seven — yes, seven — prescriptions, which were not written on formal stationary but rather on a miniature neon blue Post-it note. I saved the note for my journal.

I feel that this was a unique cultural experience that I am now grateful to have had, albeit one that I hope not to repeat. I made a full recovery after two dull weeks of bed rest and no school, and I earnestly hope I never ever get sick in Slovakia again. ❧

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