

Hungarians Everywhere

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In the following essay, I will write about the personal experiences I had in Canton, MI in the United States. I think I was lucky to meet a number of Hungarian people or at least people with traces of Hungarian roots. It was absolutely surprising that so many people were connected to Hungary in that small American town near Detroit. I am glad that I was able develop very personal connections with some of these people. The programs they organized especially for me made my five-month stay very exciting and interesting. These also contributed significantly to my comfort level, and I found myself very proud of being a Hungarian citizen there. It also had a meaningful impact on how I see the lives of American people today. I am sure that I will remember those great days throughout my life. More than a year after my arrival I still keep in touch with those who were very close to me from the very beginning of my stay in the States.

1. Karen Ludema

She was my exchange partner. She looks like a typical Dutch lady: fair hair, blue eyes, and a pale complexion. In her high school she teaches Pre-Calculus, but she graduated from college as an engineer. She was the first of the American people I met during my scholarship who was really connected to Hungary. In the early 1990's she had lived and worked for two years in our country. She taught mathematics in the bilingual

grammar school in Sárospatak. She could remember several Hungarian words, and she also had Hungarian friends in Szeged from her time there. At first, I felt very fortunate to have someone as an exchange partner who had some sort of picture about life and education in Hungary. After a while, though, I realized that she had lived in Hungary under totally different circumstances. This became a source of problems later.

2. Plymouth High School

My host school was part of the Plymouth-Canton Educational Park (P-CEP), whose campus is the home to three accredited, comprehensive high schools, namely Canton, Plymouth and Salem High Schools. Plymouth is the youngest, only five years old. It has a very modern two-story building with modest equipment. Of course, it does have a Hungarian connection. On the wall near the entrance there is a shiny board with the names of the founders. One of them is Mr. Horvath, although no one in the school knew that he had a Hungarian name and so must be of Hungarian origin.

If you visit the official website of the school or the P-CEP, you can find other Hungarian names (e.g. Konyha, Nagy, and Kormos) among the staff members. I happen to know two of them.

3. Kim Kormos

She was also a math teacher, but in Salem High School, we shared the same subject (AGS2 – the second course for Algebra, Geometry and Statistics as an Integrated Curriculum). She was very helpful with

me from the very first moment that she heard I came from Hungary. She offered me all her teaching materials, and she allowed me to observe her classes at any time. I could always turn to her for help. She sometimes recalled Hungarian words, names of towns, food, and many other experiences from her childhood.

4. Lucy Nagy

Although her name is absolutely Hungarian, she is not Hungarian. Originally, her husband was Hungarian. They visited Hungarian relatives on several occasions, and she likes our country very much. She teaches English Language in Plymouth High School. I got to know her during the Parent-Teacher Conferences.

5. Students

In the very first week that I was there, the whole staff at the Educational Park was supposed to take part in a training program related to a new curriculum in one of the elementary schools. I was walking in the hallway, where I could have a look at the names of Students of Honor, and I found the name Toth on the list.

My mentor taught a student who had Gyorgy as a family name. I can just guess that he was of Hungarian origin.

I had a student named Alex Kiss, who had a Hungarian background.

When I was in Minneapolis, a group of international teachers visited one of the high schools. I met a student named Katie, whose babysitter was from Hungary, so she had learned many Hungarian words and expressions during her childhood.

6. Joe and his family

One day, before the academic year started, a mother and her daughter, Julie, who was a senior at the high school, appeared in my classroom and greeted me by saying, 'Szia'. It was a surprise for me. They came to me because, earlier, the school had informed the parents and the students about my arrival. Also, I was to teach the mother's son, Joe, a freshman (grade 9), in one of my classes. He was a very smart boy, and he showed a real interest in mathematics. Ava, the mother, was Hungarian and was originally called Eva. Now, she is a kindergarten teacher.

She was very kind and welcoming. We exchanged addresses and telephone numbers at once. She phoned me a couple of times and was interested about my stay and my life. She invited me to her home to have Thanksgiving dinner with her and her family. She had a large family: I met her grandparents, her brother and his family, and her husband and three children. It was pleasing that I could speak to the members of the family in Hungarian. There was a little girl, Annie, only two years of age, and she was speaking Hungarian correctly and fluently with me. I felt that we had already been acquainted with each other for a long time. On the very last day of my stay, Ava, Julie, and Joe all said goodbye to me and surprised me again with a box of presents. We still keep in touch.

7. Zoltán Meskó

Karen's parents invited me to an American football game at the University of Michigan. I was escorted by one of their

friend's daughters. While we were walking towards the stadium at the university, I could see everybody in the street wearing at least one piece of clothing colored blue and yellow. In fact, the whole stadium was dressed in these two particular colors. I was not really interested in the game itself, but I paid close attention whenever they announced the name of Zoltán Meskó, the hero of that day. He played a great game, and his achievements were celebrated later that day. As I knew from my guide, he originally came from Romania (Transylvania). Nowadays, the students make a special sign 'Z' formed by both of their hands. Watching the marching band, the orchestra, and the cheerleaders, I enjoyed the feeling of being there as a supporter of the university team. On another day I visited the campus of the university in Ann Arbor, which was not far from my host city, and I found more Hungarian names there, as well.

8. Linda and Jóska Enyedi

Linda is a wonderful lady. Her friend is the secretary to the Assistant Principal at Canton High School, so she knew that I was coming and then kindly sent me an email introducing herself some days before my departure from Hungary. She was keen on meeting me and having me as a special guest in her home for a gathering of Hungarian friends. There were ten of us all together, and we had a picnic with typical Hungarian food just like 'kolbász' or 'szalonna'. Her husband, Jóska, and their friends told me stories about their lives in Hungary and wanted to know the latest first hand news about their home

country from me. Linda and I became friends, and we are still writing to each other on a regular basis.

9. The Hungarian group

Linda was a great organizer, too. She was the soul of the Hungarian-American Cultural Centre near Detroit. It is a small building on the outskirts of the city where Hungarian people from neighboring towns come together each week and learn Hungarian. These people were middle-aged people who did not want to forget their mother tongue; one or two people were there to discover Hungarian just for fun. There were two groups: beginner and intermediate. When Rita, the teacher of the beginner's group, left for Hungary for a couple of weeks, Linda asked me if I would teach them Hungarian. Of course, I said 'yes', even though it was voluntary work. I had only three Hungarian classes, but I taught them a lot of things. In the end, they said that they enjoyed my classes because I could explain grammar in English and because they understood the material better than with Rita, who was not a teacher at all. They asked a lot of questions, and I gave them some useful expressions in case they visit Hungary. They brought food and beverages every week, and they shared all kind of things connected with Hungary. During the very last week of my stay, they invited me to their Christmas Party. My group gave a performance, singing Hungarian Christmas songs. Everyone brought something to eat or drink. I made some very thin pancakes and filled them with jam. We had great fun together. There

is a nice custom in the Cultural Centre that some women make and sell typical Hungarian cakes ('beigli', for example) for those who cannot come.

10. The waiter

When the Orientation Week took place, in Washington, D.C., a waiter named Joseph (József) could hear that there were some Hungarians among the grantees. That made him happy because he was Hungarian. We spoke Hungarian with him, and he made recommendations about what we should have for dinner.

11. The guard

My exchange partner's friend, Nancy, invited me to visit the Henry Ford Museum. I could choose between looking at the collection of automobiles or an interesting exhibition demonstrating life in different perspectives (e.g. houses, art, vehicles, and inventions). The weather was sunny and warm, so the latter option sounded much more exciting to me. One small building was a very old courthouse with a female guard who was not only a guard but also a guide. Nancy was talking to her about the courts in general and mentioned that I came from Hungary. Surprise, surprise, this guard came to the States from our country as well.

12. The hairdresser

One day, when I needed a haircut, my mentor, Karen Pakula, offered to drive me to her hairdresser. She introduced me to Cathy, the hairdresser, who then started a conversation with me about Hungary and her memories of Hungarian food

and towns, because she also came from Hungary. I visited her two more times, and every time she gave me the haircut I really wanted.

13. The physical therapist

Because of the stress, for a couple of days I felt pain in my back, and I could not really move my neck. Every movement I made was painful. So, I went to visit a physical therapist, who was originally from the Philippines. With her husband, who was also a doctor, she had attended a conference in Hungary some years ago. They liked Budapest, and they had a very nice time there. She remembered a doll she saw in the village of Hollókő.

14. The girlfriend

The Claeys, a nice elderly couple whose condominium I lived in, are very good at playing golf. Their golf partner has a son, Tom, who has a Hungarian girlfriend, Andrea. One weekend, the Claeys took me to have dinner at the home of their golf partner, so that I could meet someone else from my home country. It was strange to meet and talk to another Hungarian citizen who is not American. When I was talking to Andrea in Hungarian, Tom could understand most of the things we said because he had been to Hungary three or four times. He liked the language and had learned how to speak it. After a

short time we switched to English because the rest of the group could not follow our conversation.

15. Éva Szabó

She is the 'odd-man-out' on my list because she was a former English teacher of mine from grammar school. She left Hungary after I finished secondary school. She works for the U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Institute, in Washington, D.C. as a language training specialist. She is the author of several textbooks on teaching Hungarian as a foreign language that are in use at the Foreign Service Institute.

During the Orientation, I met with her and talked to her a lot. We had a tasty dinner in Alexandria, and she drove me around Washington, D.C. She took me to see the Pentagon and the memorials by night.

So, that was it. As you can see from the list above, I was able to meet and find Hungarian connections wherever I went in the United States. These connections meant a lot to me during my stay overseas. They always assured me that I must be proud of being Hungarian outside my home country. I hope that everyone who lives and/or works abroad can have the same feeling.

