

## **A New Frontier**

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Slovak Garden Scholarship Contestant

Throughout recent history, Slovaks have immigrated to America in search of freedom and a better life. The yoke of communism was so difficult to endure, that many families had no choice but to risk everything in order to rise above and escape. For most, it was not an easy task to accomplish. Many encountered endless struggles within themselves and their families, and had to return. For those who were determined to stay, a lifetime of hardship was ahead. It is from my own personal experiences that I base these remarks.

My struggles began before I even knew it. When I was three years old, my father along with his brother set out on a search for a better life. The Communist Party was very strict in allowing citizens to travel to capitalistic countries for fear of possible defection. At that time, Communism was prevailing in Slovakia, and it was impossible for the whole family to go. With a plan to reunite in a year or so in America, we bid farewell to each other. What was to be one year turned out to be seven. It took seven long years to get all the necessary papers in order to relocate to the United States legally. Receiving the paperwork was only one of the difficulties. Leaving family members and an accustomed lifestyle was another asperity altogether.

I was now ten years old and the thought of moving to America was so exciting to me as well as my friends. Everyone was so jealous, in my eyes and theirs, America was the "coolest" place to live. The obstacles which I would have to face never even crossed my mind. It was September 14th; the entire family was gathered at the airport, to send us off to an unknown place. Silence predominated throughout; all that was heard were faint good-byes and words of reassurance, that one day we would all come together again, this time in happiness. When boarding was announced we slowly gathered our belongings and turned back once more, only to see crimson faces and eyes filled with tears. I felt a sharp pain in my chest as the streams of tears poured down my face. We arrived in Vienna and made our connecting flight to New York without incident.

My earliest memory in America extends back when we left the terminal elevator with our suitcases. Suddenly my mother spotted

my father. As soon as their eyes met, they began to race towards each other. I along with my brother remained next to the luggage and looked on as my mother received a shower of hugs and kisses from an unfamiliar man. We just stood there, watching and wondering: who was this man? He made his way over to us and simultaneously, bestowed hugs and kisses upon us. My mother was so excited, so grateful, that we were all back together.

After we left the airport we were on our way to Florida. Once we arrived at our house in Orlando, we were overwhelmed by the size (compared to the average Slovakian apartment, it seemed like a royal mansion). A few days passed by, and we adjusted to our new surroundings quite well. We thought that since we were not able to speak English, it would be a few months before we would start attending school. However, two weeks later our parents announced that the sooner we started school, the quicker we would learn to speak English. This is when the serious problems began.

I started fifth grade without any knowledge of the English language, and school turned into one huge nightmare. My brother was in a higher grade level and therefore attended a different school. It happened to be the same school our cousin (who spoke Slovak and English fluently) attended, so the school arranged their schedules so that they could have all the classes together. I was not so fortunate. I remember crying every night, begging my mom not to make me go to school. Each day I just sat in the classroom. Although everyone was very friendly towards me, I felt completely secluded from the rest of the class. I rarely participated in the learning activities, since I could not understand what they were doing. I continually looked at the clock counting the minutes until I could go home. Learning to communicate and slowly learning to speak English was the hardest part not only for me, but also for my brother and my mother. I know that without the help of my classmates, who were so patient and understanding with my handicap, I would never have been able to grasp the English language so quickly. Not only do I now have the ability to speak and understand two languages, I also have the luxury of being able to experience two distinctly different cultures.

Many times I have laid in my bed and wondering why my dad put us through that incredibly strenuous change, however, I now understand. I once saw a documentary on President John F. Kennedy and the space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I remember a part in which he spoke about facing

seemingly insurmountable odds and defeating them. This is an excerpt from that speech which he gave at Rice University in 1962:

"Sir George Mallory, who was to die on Mt. Everest, was asked why he wanted to climb it. He said 'because it is there'. We choose to go to the moon in this decade not because it is easy, but because it is hard. Because the challenge will serve best to measure our strengths."

Six years later, I had the opportunity to return to Slovakia for a visit. When I compared my life to theirs, I realized that although I had to overcome numerous obstacles, the outcome has definitely been worthwhile. I did not realize this at the time, but what my father really wanted was not so much a better life for himself, but more for our sake. He wanted his children to have an opportunity to attend any school we wish, pursue any career that we desire. John F. Kennedy's speech summarizes that. Concentrate on the message and you will see why people like my father did what he did. He chose to flee Slovakia and settle a new frontier, knowing from the start that it would not be an easy task. He did it because it was a challenge. It tested the strength of all of us; individually and as a family.

I am currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in the College of Business Administration at the school of my choice, the University of Central Florida, and I work part time at a local restaurant. Today, I am very aware that if my dad had not immigrated to America, for whatever reason, I would not be where I am today. As I have shared my experiences with you I can attest that moving from one culture to another is not at all a simple effort, but if one is determined enough it can be accomplished.