

Erasmus in Poprad

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-So, you say you went on Erasmus, but aren't you a bit old to go on an Erasmus? Isn't this a programme for university students? Didn't you graduate in 1989?

-Yes, I did indeed complete my university studies then, back in the previous millennium, but what I got now was an Erasmus+ educational mobility grant, which, from this academic year onwards, can be applied for by students from EU adult education institutions participating in the programme can apply for.

-And you also say that you went to Slovakia to learn English. Did you say Slovakia? Did I understand correctly?

-You understood perfectly well. I study English at the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, which gave me this support thanks to its accreditation Learning Intercultural Values at the EOILPGC through Erasmus+. My school reached a cooperation agreement with the Jazyková škola Poprad, the Poprad Language School, where, together with Cristina, a fellow student who also received this grant, I received intensive English classes from 20 to 31 March. In addition, we enjoyed a rich programme of cultural activities in English accompanied by teachers and students. It should be noted that only twelve language schools in the whole of Spain have offered such type of mobility this year. A luxury.

-So, I assume that you have returned to Las Palmas speaking more English?

-Yes [**in English in the original**].

Well, having made the introduction, I would now like to say this: the trip has been an incredible cultural immersion for us. A priceless opportunity to rethink ourselves as Europeans, because, in order to get to know Europe, it is not enough to visit its major capitals, its most famous city-museums and, in general, its main tourist destinations. A stay in a small town like Poprad, with 50.000 inhabitants, in the north-east of a small EU country, Slovakia, which is little frequented by foreigners apart from the Czech, Polish and Hungarian neighbours who come to ski in the High Tatras, at the foothills of which Poprad lies, is a real eye-opener.

Arriving the night before from Krakow, where we arrived on a direct flight from Gran Canaria, at midday I go out for a drink in a bar near my flat. It is my first contact with the city. I order a typical dish. They bring me a dessert, which I did not order, and a coffee, which I did order. When I go to pay, they insist on inviting me for dessert and coffee, and they do so with a magnificent smile. Cristina, who is staying in another part of the city, tells me that the same thing happened to her in another restaurant and that, like me, they spoke to her in English. Enraptured by Poprad, back in Las Palmas, we continue feeling this way.

Next, we have our first meeting with the English teachers from the Jazyková škola. Excellent teachers, impeccable hosts. Let me name them out of gratitude: Renata, the director; Tibor, our tutor, also a Spanish teacher; Andrea, Ivanka, Monika, Dagmar, Eva. Later on, we will also meet Marta, a Slovak teacher, whose classes we attend with other foreign students, predominantly Vietnamese and Ukrainian refugees. The war in Ukraine, which borders Slovakia, is present in everyday life in the country and comes up from time to time in our conversations. Otherwise, with the little Slovak we learn, we manage to say a few polite words, such as *ďakujem* (thank you) to Marta, the woman in charge of the porter's lodge, and Jana, the cleaner.

Poprad, which became densely populated during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with the development in 1871 of the railway linking eastern Slovakia with what is now the

Czech Republic, has a beautiful historic centre which we walk through in the company of Renata's students. They take turns explaining the urban fabric and monuments such as the Church of the Holy Trinity, St. Egidius Church and the square of the same name, as well as the very interesting Podtatranské múzeum, with fascinating collections of archaeology, history, ethnography and natural history.

On the first day of class, I notice that the teachers walk around the centre in slippers or sandals, while the students wear blue plastic bags to cover their shoes. There is no snow or mud on the street, but they still do so to keep the ground clean. Not to be outdone, I then ask where we can buy blue foot bags, and I am told that, as we are guests, we are exempted from wearing them. When they go outside, the teachers put their shoes back on. I am equally surprised that the students stand up when they enter the classroom, and yet they are able to follow the lectures while drinking coffee or soft drinks.

As we have been asked to do, both in the English sessions and in the Spanish sessions, in which we participate as speakers, we talk about the Canary Islands. The students and teachers have a tremendous thirst to know everything about our islands. In return, they also tell us about Poprad. They tell us about its attractions, but they also tell us that this is where the deportation of Slovak Jews to Auschwitz began, and they also inform us about the devastating effects of deforestation and climate change in the area.

On up to three occasions, we will climb the High Tatras, part of the Carpathian Mountains, on different routes in the company of Ivanka, Tibor and Monika, the latter with her students. Covered with snow, these mountains are beautiful. For me, who until then had only seen skiers on television, the spectacle of ski lifts, mountain resorts and people coming to glide on their long skates is exotic.

In the Dobré Časy brewery, the nerve centre of Poprad, where we go some evenings in the company of Andrea, Ivanka, Tibor and Tibor's wife Jana, we recap what our days have been like and what we can do on the remaining days. If memory serves me correctly, it was on one of these evenings that we planned with Tibor to visit the Važec cave. In this large cave, full of stalactites, stalagmites and «estalagnatos» (a Spanish word that, with the help of my hosts and the Google translator, I learn underground), the remains of bears and even a Pleistocene rhinoceros are preserved. Good chemistry with the guide, Milan, who retires the day after our visit and who tells me that in the communist era he was hooked on *Curro Jiménez*, which was shown in Slovak on official television.

To indicate that they do not understand anything, Slovaks, Tibor explains, colloquially use the expression "I feel like I'm in a Spanish village" in their language. And that is exactly what "in a Spanish village" feels like on more than one occasion in this, for me, remote part of Europe, where I would probably never have come to had it not been for this Erasmus. For example, when, on a hike in the Tatras, in the company of Monika and her students, we ended up dancing frantically in a mountain station to the rhythm of some rockers and a guy dressed as a bear. Also when one night, lost in Poprad, during which I discover the river that runs through the city, I pass the Tatranská Gallery four times, an active cultural centre, by the way, which I always think I have left behind. I am one of the few people wandering the streets at this time of day, so when I see a girl and decide to ask her for directions to my flat, I am delighted, for not only do I not intimidate her, but, on the contrary, with extraordinary kindness, she gives me precise instructions in perfect English that allow me to return home.

We visit several historic sites, such as Spišská Sobota, on the outskirts of Poprad, and Levoča, a World Heritage Site, which, with more space, would merit a detailed commentary. No ancient place, in any case, can compare for me to the town of Kežmarok, founded in the 13th century, where Monika teaches us at the Jazyková škola. Before that, we visit the castle, a church built on the plan of a Turkish mosque, whose bell tower looks like a minaret, and the impressive library of the Evangelical Lyceum, with first editions of

Luther and Melanchthon, old copies of Don Quixote in different languages and other bookish delicacies. In my memory, however, the main sites of Kežmarok will always be its Evangelical Articulated Church, an astonishing wooden construction, and the Boss restaurant, which I recommend, where, after another talk about the Canary Islands, we enjoy the exquisite dinner prepared for us by the owner, Iveta, a student of Monika. At the end, the teacher and her students give us, among other things, a book in English about Kežmarok, a key ring with our name embossed in leather, some macramé pendants made by Monika and a pen in the shape of an axe.

I find Slovak cuisine succulent, although to digest it properly I would have to walk up and down the Tatra Mountains every day. The farewell lunch at the Salaš Veľký Slavkov restaurant, to which we are invited by professors and administrative staff, is particularly delicious, with Renata's words of joy, gratitude and melancholy. The next morning we catch a train to Budapest, which has a direct flight to Gran Canaria. I conclude: when George Bernard Shaw was asked for his opinion on the Turkish, the great Irish writer replied: "I wouldn't know what to say. I don't know them all". I did not know all the Slovaks either, and so I would not know what to say if someone asked me for my opinion on all of them. What I can say is that I found the ones I met in Poprad to be generous, welcoming, interesting and great fun to be with.