

Interview with Camilla Fassbender
November 23, 2014
Negaunee, MI
Interview by Monsignor Peter Oberto

(SIDE A)

Monsignor Peter Oberto: This is Monsignor Peter Oberto. I'm at the rectory, my house, at Saint Paul Parish in Negaunee, and this is November 23rd, 2014, and I am interviewing Cami Fassbender from –

Camilla Fassbender: Slovakia.

PO: Well, you're from Marquette now, but you're from Slovakia. Ok. Ok, but you were born, you weren't born in Slovakia, but it was at that time –

CF: Czechoslovakia.

PO: Czechoslovakia.

CF: The Czechoslovak Socialistic Republic. [laughs]

PO: Socialistic Republic

CF: Yeah.

PO: So it was Communist.

CF: It was.

PO: Ok. And when were you born, what date were you born on?

CF: I was born April 2nd, 1980.

PO: ...second, 1980.

CF: In Kosice, in former Czechoslovakia.

PO: And what was the town?

CF: Kosice.

PO: How do you spell that?

CF: K-O-S-I-C-E. We have 43 letters in our alphabet so the "S" has a little V hook over the top.

PO: Ok.

CF: Which makes it sound "SH", Kosice.

PO: Ok, how big is that town?

CF: It's about quarter of a million people.

PO: Quarter of a million?

CF: Yeah.

PO: Oh wow, I thought... That's a big town. Ok. How close is it to the capital, um, Bratislava?

CF: Bratislava is the capital.

PO: Ok.

CF: Kosice is the second-largest city, it's the biggest city in eastern Slovakia.

PO: So it's in the east. Ok.

CF: Yeah, if you were to take a train, it's about 6 hours, 5-6 hour train ride.

PO: So is it close to the Ukrainian, is it - ?

CF: It's about an hour from the Ukraine. Half hour from Hungary, an hour and a half, two hours from Poland.

PO: Ok. That's good. That's good. Ok, what age were you when you first came to America?

CF: I was 16.

PO: 16. Ok. That's young.

CF: That's young.

PO: And what happened at 16, I mean, what brought you over at the age of 16?

CF: I entered a contest to win a scholarship to be an exchange student.

PO: Oh, ok.

CF: So I was one of a hundred students selected out of over a thousand kids, and I was placed in Chicago for six months, because Naperville and Nitra, Slovakia are sister cities, so the Open Society Fund was looking for students to be placed in that area to help mayors communicate and kind of help with the international relations and...

PO: I see, I see.

CF: It was an education opportunity that I probably wouldn't have had otherwise.

PO: So you really went to that high school for that year.

CF: Just for six months.

PO: Oh, just for six months. What was the name of the high school?

CF: Downers Grove North.

PO: Downers Grove North. That's a suburb, I know –

CF: It is a suburb.

PO: I know where Downers Grove is, yeah.

CF: Western suburb.

PO: Ok. And then after that you went back to Czechoslovakia.

CF: I did.

PO: And you completed your education there?

CF: I completed high school, and for the remainder my high school I'd been coming back to Marquette with a family I met from Chicago, who asked me to come back and help watch their two little girls, I was like a nanny for July and August.

PO: Ok. So what was it, like back and forth?

CF: It was back and forth.

PO: You would come here for two months?

CF: Two months, then go back.

PO: And then go back.

CF: Go to school.

PO: And go to school there.

CF: And I came back for three summers.

PO: To do that. To be a nanny?

CF: Mmhmm.

PO: Ok. And did you do anything else other than that? Did you work over in Czechoslovakia?

CF: Students in Slovakia don't really work. Not even throughout college, it's not very common. It's more a rare thing that somebody would hold a job, and definitely not in high school.

PO: Ok. Did you go to a college over there?

CF: I did, after high school I was accepted to study finance at a university in Slovakia.

PO: Where?

CF: In Banska Bystrica. [Both laugh] There's a real tongue twister.

PO: How do you spell that?

CF: B-A-N-S-K-A. Bystrica is another word. B-Y-S-T-R-I-C-A. And it's right in the middle, right in the center of Slovakia.

PO: And that's where the university is?

CF: That's right, yeah. We have several universities, the one that I applied to had finance and foreign languages, so I _____.

PO: Ok. So you studied foreign languages, too?

CF: I studied finance, but I had a bilingual study in French and I had German and -

PO: So you studied French. Did you study anything else, uh, language wise?

CF: English and German.

PO: English and German. But they didn't make you study Russian?

CF: I took a year of Russian and a year of Hungarian.

PO: Oh, wow.

CF: In high school, just for fun.

PO: Just for fun.

CF: Yeah. In Kosice, where I went to high school, there's a high Hungarian population, so a lot of the people and families are bilingual.

PO: Ok. But, so what languages do you speak? I mean you speak -

CF: English and Slovak.

PO: Slovak, ok, that's what you're more comfortable with. Ok, ok. And how was your life in the home country, when you were growing up there under Communism.

CF: Under Communism...

PO: How was that life?

CF: I was a young child, so it's hard for me to remember the finer details. My dad was a music teacher, and he always kept saying that because of our great-grandfather living in Canada we were under a watch because we had a connection overseas and were potential for, to be _____, so he, a little bit, kind of paranoia that somebody's watching him.

PO: Ok.

CF: I don't know how true that was or not.

PO: Well, there were people, you know, that had that paranoia, they were fearful, I agree with that.

CF: But as a child we had a good life. My dad was a single dad, my mom died when I was a year and a half old, we it was him and my grandma raising us and -

PO: What was your mother's name?

CF: Darina.

PO: D - ?

CF: D-A-R-I-N-A.

PO: And your grandmother's name?

CF: Margita. M-A-R-G-I-T-A.

PO: And did you mention your father's name?

CF: Juraj. J-U-R-A-J.

PO: And then you have brother.

CF: My brother's name is Branislav. B-R-A-N-I-S-L-A-V.

PO: And that's it. Do you have any more brothers and sisters?

CF: I have a step-sister.

PO: Ok, step-sister.

CF: Step-sister Beata.

PO: B - ?

CF: B-E-A-T-A.

PO: Ok.

CF: But life was easy, we went to school in the morning, or in the afternoon – we had an over-crowded elementary school one year so we had to do the double session, half the kids went to school in the morning, half in the afternoon. We came home, we played, I took music lessons, my dad was a teacher in the afternoon because the musical arts school education happens after your primary education, it's an optional thing. On the weekends we went to Grandma's house and took care of the apple orchard and the grapes, and –

PO: And you ate?

CF: We ate.

PO: What foods did you eat?

CF: Slovaks eat a lot meat and potatoes in a lot of our dishes.

PO: What kind of meat, beef?

CF: I'd say beef and pork.

PO: Beef and pork, ok.

CF: I know there's people that go fishing, too, but we're a landlocked country, so they just catch the, um –

PO: The small fish.

CF: The small fish, and my family was not big of a fish-eater.

PO: Sure, sure, sure. Any clubs you belonged to back then?

CF: In high school I joined the mountaineering club, but it was against my father's wishes.
[laughs]

PO: So you climb mountains?

CF: Yeah.

PO: Ok.

CF: If you go anywhere in the mountains in Slovakia you see people really enjoy hiking and every trail is packed.

PO: Ok. Let's see... Any sports, did you do any sports when you were in school?

CF: Um, no, the schools don't have sports like they do here. If you choose to do a sport you have to do it outside.

PO: Outside, yeah.

CF: My dad was a music teacher, so any sport activity seemed like a threat to playing music, like I wanted to play volleyball but I couldn't because he thought if I injured my fingers I couldn't play the flute, so he chose not to have us involved in sports.

PO: I see. Did you own your own house?

CF: My grandma had a house, where my great-grandma was born, my grandma was born, my dad was born, where we went on the weekends, but my dad was a teacher in a different town so he had an apartment in the other town, and then –

PO: Ok. Where basically, and you lived with your, in your grandma's house?

CF: Um, my great-grandma lived in that house until she was 90, and then when she got older she came to live in the apartment with us, so we had a small apartment and my grandma, great-grandma, my dad, my brother, and I all lived in there.

PO: Sure. And that was pretty much the way it was in the town, a lot of people owned their homes or rented?

CF: There's a few people that own homes, most people, I would say, live in the apartment buildings, Slovakia's very crowded compared to the U.P. Right now it seems like there's a push to living in the suburbs or out in the village, versus being in the apartment.

PO: Ok, I see. Ok, oh, yes, and your dad and your brother, when you said you were going to come over here, you know, to live, what did they think?

CF: My dad thought it was too far. But I never came with the intention to stay, I came for school and then just the way it turned out I ended up staying.

PO: From school and then two months of being a nanny and really, so, you just went back and forth but you had no desire, or you didn't think you were going to stay at all. But he thought it was too far, what about your brother?

CF: Um, my brother would like to come and live here right now because it's just the two of us left, my dad passed five years ago, and my brother's there, I'm here, it's hard to visit.

PO: Well, I mean, how, can he come? What does he do there?

CF: He goes to school right now, he's in college, trying to get a degree in management.

PO: So he's younger than you?

CF: He's older than me.

PO: Oh, he's older than you, ok.

CF: He worked for a few years and now he's trying to go back and get a university degree.

PO: Is there a way for him to come, I mean, what do you know about that?

CF: He can, as a student he could come here kind of on a culture exchange program, kind of get a summer job and go back to school if he was to apply for, like, a green card resident status with me being his sister, it take years.

PO: It takes years.

CF: Yeah.

PO: Do you know how many years?

CF: I heard about 20 or 30 years.

PO: 20 or 30 years? Really? Oh, I don't know. That seems to be a – are you sure?

CF: That's what the immigration attorney told me.

PO: Oh yeah, the immigration – oh.

CF: Because I'm not a U.S. citizen, I'm a resident, it would maybe be different if I became a citizen and applied for him.

PO: I see.

CF: But because I'm not a –

PO: You're not a U.S. citizen, you're a resident alien.

CF: I am an alien. [laughs]

PO: With a green card.

CF: Yeah, that explains it, huh?

PO: Yeah, ok, ok, that's interesting. So what, uh, so what really interests you in this country, it's called, what do you call, push-pull factors, what, so what pulled you to this country was what?

CF: It was the chance to have a full-ride scholarship to study in high school. When I was in fifth grade, it was 25 years ago, we had the Velvet Revolution, the Berlin Wall fell, the Communism fell, then the country split up and my dad, as a single dad, probably could have never afforded a study abroad program for me.

PO: Yeah, so where were you with this Velvet Revo– I remember that, I remember when that happened, I read, you know, I read on that, on what was happening, of course then the – who was it, was it the Russians that came in or the - ?

CF: The Russians came in in '68. And they forgot to leave.

PO: Yeah, they sort of, um, put down, uh, what was his name, the president at that - ?

CF: D_____?

PO: D_____, yeah, yeah, there was the Velvet, um, - can you remember that? No.

CF: Velvet, I was nine years old when the Velvet Revolution happened, I remember watching things on TV.

PO: And how did you feel?

CF: As a nine-year-old I had no idea what was going on.

PO: You didn't know what was going on.

CF: No. From the talk of the older people I'm sure there were a lot of people who were afraid to talk about it, even when it was happening, it was just a long time under Communism and oppression, so it was hard to believe -

PO: People were really afraid, yeah, afraid because, uh, if there were talk about it, what, the secret police would come and bring them to jail?

CF: Well, to Russian work camp and you would never be heard of again. Gulag.

PO: Oh. And that happened? Do you know if that happened?

CF: Not to anybody I know, but that's what my dad was afraid of. My dad was afraid that somebody was going to show up, middle of the night, and we'll never see him again.

PO: Oh sure, sure, sure, sure. And then of course you remember when the Berlin Wall went down.

CF: Yeah, it's when I was about nine, and I remember just seeing people on the streets, there was a student who burned himself to death in Prague, and then the demonstrations, and people

bringing their keys, _____ you know, they promised to only speak truth and, it was very peaceful.

PO: Oh it was very peaceful then, yeah, ok.

CF: After a few not-so-peaceful moments in, they call it the Velvet Divorce –

PO: Oh, the Velvet Divorce.

CF: Instead of the Velvet Revolution.

PO: Ok. So, your immigration experience. Of course you came on the student visa, but coming back this time what was your experiences with travel and customs and the immigration process?

CF: I had a very good experience, I got my J1 visa when I came to high school, then I came a couple summers and then I ended up getting a, like a frequent flier visa for 10 years so I could come back and forth whenever I wanted to. I think the immigration office saw that I had no intention of staying, that I was just visiting, so I don't know how but I got the diplomacy, whatever, 10-year visa.

PO: Sure.

CF: But then I was trying to bring a friend with me the last summer, and she got denied and, for no reason, she was an English teacher, it would have greatly benefited her in her future career, and the immigration officer just said, "No, I don't see why you should go."

PO: And so she had to get on the plane and go back.

CF: Well, you apply for a visa beforehand.

PO: Oh, and the, in Czecho –

CF: In Bratislava.

PO: In Bratislava, so they, they basically said no there, ok.

CF: They turned her down, same thing with my brother, he had a sister he wanted to visit, they said "no, you're not coming."

PO: Oh, I see.

CF: So it makes it hard for family to see family when you have one here, there, and then some office worker deciding who you're going to see.

PO: Ok, your brother's sister was – ?

CF: My brother was trying to see me.

PO: Oh, was trying to see you. He was trying to come over here to see you and they said no.

CF: They said no.

PO: How did that make you feel?

CF: It was not good, we knew we'd try again, you know, I suppose it depends on the office worker –

PO: Must be frustrating, you know, get a little bit upset, you know.

CF: Then they started doing the biometric passports, and a new way of tracking travelers after 9/11, so he was able to come four years ago and spend a few weeks with us.

PO: I see, what year was that?

CF: Um, I can't remember the year he got denied, but he was here in 2010.

PO: 2010, oh, that's not too far, that's about four years.

CF: Four years, yeah. So I'm glad that process has improved.

PO: Yeah.

CF: And as far as immigration on this side, we applied, we had an attorney but we really weren't worried that I would not be able to get my green card because we didn't make up this relationship, I hear that happens sometimes.

PO: Make up the relationship, what do you mean?

CF: I hear there's marriage fraud because of the –

PO: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

CF: That was not our case, though.

PO: No, no, people, yeah, people will get married to be eligible for citizenship, U.S. citizenship, and then when that happens they divorce and go their separate ways, but yeah, I know.

CF: We had some crazy rock climbing pictures and we showed them to immigration officer in Detroit, they were like, ok, you can go.

PO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, oh yeah.

CF: At the immigration office in Detroit I needed to show up multiple times for permission to work, for permission to travel, you have to get fingerprinted, and it seems like you get a notice in the mail that you have to be fingerprinted in Sault and as soon as you come home you get another notice in the mail saying you have to show up for an interview for a work permit and then you come home and you get another piece of the mail saying next week you have to be back.

PO: And that was all in Detroit?

CF: Well, fingerprints were in Sault, interviews were in Detroit.

PO: So you had to just, the letter would come and you had to run down to Detroit –

CF: Yup, "next week you're going to Detroit"

PO: Or run to the Sault, and if you didn't do that then you'd probably be deported –

CF: They'd throw you out.

PO: Boy, I tell you, that's interesting.

CF: It seems that back then they should have got it all online or get it online now. But it was good.

PO: What helped you in your transition into the United States?

CF: In Chicago?

PO: Chicago? What helped you? It must have been a shock, you're coming from Czechoslovakia and you, you know, you fly into what, O'Hare?

CF: O'Hare.

PO: And then these people pick you up, these strangers?

CF: And I was going to live with an Indian family who were immigrants from India, and my high school, which was a Lutheran high school, had a hard time letting me go into a Hindu family, and my dad had a little ethnic bias against Hindus, so...

PO: Your dad, ok, were you Lutheran?

CF: I'm Lutheran.

PO: Oh, you are?

CF: I am. [Both laugh] Still a sinner.

PO: Oh, no, no, no. [Both laugh]

CF: Just kidding.

PO: You're, I've known you for, how long have I known you now?

CF: 15 years.

PO: 15 years and I didn't quite know if you were a Lutheran or a Catholic, but, uh, you know, it's -

CF: It doesn't matter.

PO: Oh, no, I believe that people have to follow their, what they are, you know, where they're most happiest, you know, so, ok –

CF: But anyway, what did you –

PO: You still consider yourself a Lutheran?

CF: A Christian, how about that?

PO: A Christian, ok, ok, that's fine.

CF: When I came to Chicago we had a really good group of exchange students from, there were kids from Germany and Brazil and we really got along well, so I think even having that international good group made it easier to _____. And we had a really counselor. And then coming to Marquette I just met really nice people and it's so much different than the big city I had a much easier time adjusting and making friends in Marquette than I did in Chicago.

PO: You say you were up here, yeah, because the cities are like that, yeah. So who were you nanny for here in Marquette?

CF: The family was actually from Chicago.

PO: Oh, they were from Chicago?

CF: Mmhm. The dad worked for Sprint and he would travel a lot, so the mom would pack up the kids for the summer and come up to Marquette because it was cooler and she didn't really have to, have a job to attend to and she liked spending summers up here.

PO: And it was while you were up here that you met Donald.

CF: Yeah.

PO: Oh, I see.

CF: The last year, when I said I'd had enough here, I'm not going to ever come back because I've got the rest of the world to see, I ran into him and –

PO: Oh.

CF: There we are.

PO: Everything changed. Of course.

CF: Yeah, it was kind of unintentional immigration on my part.

PO: Ok, so. Let's see. Is there, do you know anybody, like, right now from Slovakia that you communicate with?

CF: Living in town or overseas?

PO: Well, here or in Chicago or elsewhere?

CF: Ok. I have a couple of classmates who live in Chicago who are my university classmates and I saw them just recently last month. There's nobody in Marquette that's from Slovakia that I know of.

PO: No, maybe not.

CF: There's two girls from the Czech Republic which I'm in contact with.

PO: Oh, ok. Here in Marquette?

CF: In Marquette, yeah.

PO: Oh, there is, ok.

CF: Yup. One is Alexandra, she's actually an artist, saw her at the holiday art show yesterday, she's a yoga teacher. And another one is Irena, she's an OBGYN doctor and she lives right across from my work so I run into her every once in a while.

PO: Ok. And you work where? At the –

CF: At the county court house in the treasurer's office.

PO: At the courthouse, at the treasurer's? So you know the Honorable Jennifer, uh –

CF: Mazzuchi?

PO: Mazzuchi.

CF: I know who she is.

PO: You know who she is, but does she know who you are?

CF: Probably not.

PO: Probably not, no, no. That's higher up.

CF: She's too busy in her courtroom, I try to not to know too much, not to find out too much about the court system around here.

PO: I see, I see. So you work in the finance of – what does that mean, you take care of fines or what?

CF: We take care of delinquent property taxes and sell dog licenses.

PO: Oh. Oh really? That's interesting, ok. Dog licenses, ok. Have you joined any clubs or organizations here in Marquette?

CF: Not up here, no.

PO: No. You're busy with your daughter.

CF: I'm busy with my daughter, she's got my 100% attention it seems.

PO: Ah, I see, ok.

CF: After I lost my dad and had cancer I decided I'm going to focus my attention on her so if I'm not here one day that she can appreciate the years we've spent.

PO: Sure, sure. So other than being a nanny and your job now, was there any other jobs you had in the U.S.?

CF: Oh, I had lots of jobs.

PO: Lots of jobs, like what?

CF: Oh, I worked at the climbing wall in college and I baked bread at the Donut Hole while I was going to university and I worked at a gym and I worked for a not-for-profit organization after I graduated and I worked for a CPA firm, and back in Slovakia I was an English and a German teacher _____

PO: Oh, English and German teacher?

CF: Yeah. I think I had more jobs in ten years than my husband had in 30. He doesn't like to change jobs.

PO: Oh, I see, I see. Ok. Have you encountered any immigration discrimination? Have you been discriminated against?

CF: I can't say I have, no.

PO: Have you heard any stories on – have people told you, have people ever told you about, that they have been discriminated against?

CF: As far as immigration or just in general or...?

PO: In general, let's say.

CF: I have a friend who actually immigrated to India, but because she's a white female she's being discriminated, but how do you say it, it's in her favor.

PO: Oh.

CF: Yeah, it's not the opposite way, which is kind of interesting, I've never heard of that.

PO: Discrimination in her favor.

CF: Yeah.

PO: Like how in her favor?

CF: Like, it's easier for her to get a management position or she gets higher paid than other women her age in the same position, just because she's of European descent.

PO: So people from India are basically discriminating against themselves? They prefer your friend because she's white. That's interesting, I wonder why.

CF: I don't know.

PO: You don't know. Any other, uh... So you have never, never, yeah, well, ok. That's interesting. So. We talked about the citizenship process, can you add anything more to that?

CF: I never applied for a citizenship, I just didn't feel it was necessary for me, the only difference is I can't vote which is a big deal, but there's nothing else that you can't do, and I guess I'm still a proud 100% Slovakian so that's one thing that...

PO: Ok, that's –

CF: And with all the conflict in the world I sometimes feel it's better to have a European Union passport than have an American passport in travel, not that I've done many adventurous travels but that's one factor that I have considered.

PO: Why, why? It's better to have the European Union passport?

CF: It just, I, people think that the U.S. tries to be a world cop and gets involved in countries that they shouldn't and they should keep their nose to their own things, so I just don't want to give up my passport.

PO: Ok, I understand. You think Donald would go back with you if that were ever to happen?

CF: I don't think so, he's got deep family roots here and with Donald his son would never get on a plane and we wouldn't just leave him behind, so that's another reason why we've stayed here versus moving overseas.

PO: Yeah, yeah, I understand, yeah. Ok. So you're sort of compelled to stay here and so forth. Ok, let's see... Let's see. But you feel you're accepted here?

CF: I think so. I have my friends, I have my job, everybody carries on their normal life and I'm happy, I'm happy in small town America.

PO: Small town America. And I imagine, you know, being accepted is because you learned English.

CF: Yeah, I don't –

PO: Where did you learn English, I mean, it didn't just, you had to learn it where?

CF: My dad was a big fan of learning foreign languages, he said every time you learn a new language you become a new person, so he had this immense library about art and architecture and history and history of art and history of everything

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PO: That you learned English –

CF: Oh, now it starts.

PO: Oh.

CF: There's a piece of blank tape before.

PO: Oh, ok, ok, I'm glad you caught that.

CF: Now they're on. I've seen one of those before.

PO: Oh, well I had one of these tape recorders years ago and, you know, I just don't know what happened to it, I probably left it in some rectory or something.

CF: The children would never know if you asked them "what is this?"

PO: Yeah, what is this, we don't know what this is, you know?

CF: "How does this work?"

PO: So your father had books that had translation of four –

CF: Yeah.

PO: And so you, that's how you learned?

CF: He signed us up for language courses when we went into first grade, I remember going to the language school and learning English, and even in Slovakia nowadays foreign languages are really stressed because you have such a small geographic area, so a half hour here or there, my friend that we visited, I'll give you an example, her six-year-old daughter is fluent in Slovak and Hungarian because her grandparents speak Hungarian and her mom's been teaching her English for at least the last two years.

PO: Oh, I see, oh yeah.

CF: So they pick up a foreign language to _____ in the first grade, then they pick up another language in third grade and fifth grade, so the time they're done with elementary school they're probably fluent in two language – well, maybe not fluent, but they've been exposed.

PO: Are you doing that with your daughter?

CF: I tried when she was little, there were some words that she could only say in Slovak and not in English and then the more she was thrown into the school system and daycares, the harder it has become.

PO: Sure. I mean, when I was five years old in Ironwood, I lived in _____, I _____ who only spoke Italian, see, at least that's what my cousin tells me, so yes, you get into the school and are speaking English and, but uh, that's good, she should learn Slovak. Or a language while she's – how old is she?

CF: She turned six yesterday.

PO: And her name is what?

CF: Nina.

PO: N?

CF: N-I-N-A.

PO: N-A. Nina. Ok.

CF: We went with Nina because Nina seems to appear in every language, it's a Native American name, it's Spanish, it's Russian, it's Slovak, it's...

PO: And she goes to the Catholic school?

CF: She does go to Father Marquette.

PO: Father Marquette School.

CF: She loves it.

PO: That's good.

CF: Yeah. And when we went to Europe last month my, we left dad at home so that she could be exposed to more Slovak and she couldn't rely on him as a crutch and mission accomplished, we came home and she's singing Slovak songs and she's using "please" and "thank you" more and...

PO: Sure, sure. Well sure, sure, that's important, yeah.

CF: It was a hard decision to make but it was very good for her bilingual abilities.

PO: You were, so you were saying before, your grandmother was born in 19-

CF: '03.

PO: '03.

CF: She was born in the U.S.

PO: She was born in the U.S.?

CF: Yeah.

PO: You're – you're - where in the U.S.?

CF: Somewhere in Kirk, USA.

PO: Kirk? Well what's Kirk?

CF: K-I-R-K. I haven't done my research but I'm being told it's somewhere in Pennsylvania.

PO: Oh, ok. Pennsylvania. Oh, so they were immigrants?

CF: They, I don't know what the family was doing in Pennsylvania but I'm being told at like three years of age, so maybe 1906, they returned back to Slovakia and then she lived there, she married a man who went for a little bit for work to Canada, and then he came back home and asked her to move to Canada with him and she didn't want to go so he left in 1929 and never came back.

PO: Oh, so that would be your grandfather?

CF: My great-grandfather.

PO: Your great-grandfather never, he went back to Canada and never came back.

CF: Yeah.

PO: And left her alone.

CF: Left her alone.

PO: Boy, I tell you, eh?

CF: Yeah.

PO: Life, eh, yeah, everybody has a history, you know, everybody has a history. Isn't that something?

CF: And he's the reason why my dad was paranoid about the secret police and, because he was living in Canada and...

PO: So they must have had it hard in those days, I mean, your grandmother, or was it her dad that?

CF: That was my grandmother's father, yeah.

PO: Yeah, that must have been hard for them. Or, gee, for anybody.

CF: Yeah, I imagine my grandmother, his daughter would have been three years old when he left and then she never saw her dad again and I don't know the real reasons, like you said you wish she could have asked.

PO: Yeah, exactly, exactly, exactly, I agree, yeah.

CF: Not find out now...

PO: Ok. Have you noticed any, since you've been in the country, any social changes, let's say, in the country?

CF: In Slovakia?

PO: No, here, here, here.

CF: Oh, here. Social...

PO: What about Slovakia? Yeah, that's a good place to go, when you go back now what do you notice Slo-slo-slo-slo-slovakia, uh, socially?

CF: Socially?

PO: I got a cold, so, you know.

CF: Oh, ok. Um, we spent 12 days in October in Slovakia and spent time with three, four different families, and it seems that the prices are really high, people are still earning minimum, or that there's a big disparity between the prices and....

PO: Sure.

CF: The cost of living has increased and people are telling me that you're luckier living abroad because the corruption and the lies and the politics, everybody just gets in and tunnels out as much money as they can then they leave, and it's getting really bad and they're –

PO: Where do you think they go, they leave, or, where?

CF: They, I don't know if they just leave the political scene or if they leave actually the country and take their money, it just seems like there's a lot of corruption going on.

PO: In the - with the politicians?

CF: With the politicians.

PO: I see.

CF: I don't follow it very closely, but there seems to be a big dissatisfaction with the political scene and it seems the living conditions are getting harder for just the middle-level person trying to maintain a living.

PO: I see. So the middle class is sort of getting squashed?

CF: Mmhmm. Pushed down.

PO: Ok. Is there still elements of, say, communism? Or has that pretty well died?

CF: I think that's died, yeah. Back when I left I remember, even when communism fell, everybody used the expression that they just turned their coats over, that they were staying people stayed in the garb and they just now claimed something else.

PO: Changed their stripes.

CF: Yeah, they've changed their stripes.

PO: But what about over here now? Has there been any social changes that you notice over here?

CF: Since I've been here?

PO: Yeah.

CF: Uh, 2001 to now...? I can't say anything that's impacted me, I mean people are still complaining about president no matter who he is. [Both laugh]

PO: Oh yeah, that's a hard job, you know. Everybody complains.

CF: Yeah. Thus far I'm quite dissatisfied with the health insurance situation and the health – well, I'm happy with the health care but dissatisfied with how much people have to incur.

PO: Are you _____?

CF: I am.

PO: The county now, did they take away your health?

CF: Uh, no, the county had a health insurance when the everyday employees contributed a certain amount to health insurance and we'd get a significant pay increase, they were asked to pay so much more for health insurance, and now on top of that you pay all your other pocket expenses so it seems it's hard to keep up with that. And this year the premiums went up, we're going to pay more, it's two whole months left until the end of the year and we still don't know how much we're going to pay, so for somebody who's incurring medical expenses like our family it just makes it hard to...

PO: Yeah. So it's not that you have to, uh, it's not, it's not going on Obamacare, let's say?

CF: No.

PO: No. It's provided by the county, the county government, ok. What about the economic situation here in the country, what do you think about that?

CF: I think the U.S. is doing good, I mean, everybody talks about the big debt and all these programs and credits and stimulus for the economy, there's a tax burden on the tax payers but I still think the living conditions for a lot of people in this country are so much better than I would have had in Slovakia.

PO: In Slovakia, sure, yeah. And political, of course you can't vote.

CF: I can't vote, and I don't like to follow politics, I just have a mistrust in politics, I don't know if it's growing up, or –

PO: You have a distrust in politics maybe because of your experiences, let's say, in Slovakia.

CF: Maybe I do, and it just seems that people who get into politics because they were _____ and so them I don't see as good role models for the common people. [laughs]

PO: I see, yeah.

CF: I'd rather not be in politics and be a good citizen than try to claim a political role and pretend how good I am.

PO: Is there anything in the United States that reminds you of your home country? [Long pause] Maybe not? Maybe everything is new.

CF: It is much different, I don't know what reminds me of home country. Um... I like the neighborhoods, like the street that I live on the neighbors are good friends and we visit each other and we're out in the street, but that's not very typical for the U.S. way of life.

PO: Well, especially big cities, in the big cities you don't know your next door neighbor.

CF: But that's why I love Marquette, because it's a small town, people are friendly, and I think that kids have a wonderful neighborhood to grow up in, and it take a village to raise a child, I think they're brought up good from having that relationship with parents and neighbors and....

PO: Sure, sure.

CF: And I'm glad it's safe.

PO: And you're glad it's safe, yes, yes. Chicago is not, certain parts of Chicago are not safe.

CF: And even in Slovakia you hear a lot about crime and mafias and shooting in bars and cars being stolen, even my next door neighbor's car was stolen right from the parking lot behind the apartment building where she lived. My dad had an alarm system on his 30-year-old L_____ because he was afraid it was going to get stolen so, I really like that safety aspect here.

PO: Ok. That's good, that's good. Ok. So you think the police are doing a good job here.

CF: They are doing a wonderful job.

PO: Ok.

CF: They're friends, they're not enemies, and I wish the whole country saw it.

PO: Ok. Let's see. Uniqueness, now, um, is there, like, you know, sports, there's a difference. What do they play in Slovakia?

CF: Slovakia is big on soccer and hockey. There's other sports, we have good Olympic whitewater kayakers and swimmers and tennis players and, every village has a church, has a bar, and has a soccer field, wherever you go.

PO: Church, bar, and soccer field.

CF: Yup. And when you drive through the country there's always out somebody playing soccer and...

PO: Is there any unique sport here, in the U.S.?

CF: In the U.S., the unique part about the U.S. is that people are active and they do get out walking and running and it seems like the whole nation is running right now and has that awareness that being active will prolong your life. In Slovakia I don't think that's the case.

PO: Ok.

CF: Yeah. And nobody says "hi" like they do around here, that's still the same, hasn't changed in 15 years since I first came here.

PO: So they're what, they're more friendly here?

CF: They are more friendly here.

PO: Than Slovakia?

CF: Yeah.

PO: I wonder why.

CF: I mean, I can't say that people are not friendly back home, but they are more private, you are not going to just walk through town and expect to strike up a random conversation with somebody sitting by –

PO: Yeah, I sort of, I sort of understand that, when I was, when I go to Italy you know, I remember I took my mother to Italy and there was some, some people were a little bit, you know, they looked at you in a very shy way, or they were afraid to come out of their shell or something for some reasons, but...

CF: But once you're introduced or you meet somebody through a friend they will not let you leave.

PO: Yeah there's a change, yeah. So, of course, do you find the political system here in the United States strange?

CF: No.

PO: No.

CF: No, no, democracy it's same.

PO: What about social habits?

CF: Social habits?

PO: Social habits, yeah.

CF: Can you give me an example?

PO: Oh boy, social habits...

CF: The Halloween social habits are totally awkward and weird. [Laughs]

PO: Ok. Yeah, Halloween is, there's no Halloween in Slovakia.

CF: There is a dress-up party similar to Halloween but only for children, not for adults.

PO: Not for adults, ok.

CF: I have never seen an adult dress-up costume party. We would go to opera and we would go to a concert and we would go to a bar, but we'd never, maybe they're becoming more common, I don't think so.

PO: Ok, what about, this might be sensitive, but you know you can speak freely because I'm a priest but, you know, how about religion?

CF: Religion, Slovakia is predominately Roman Catholic, the eastern part of where I am from has some Greek Orthodox, the tiny little wooden churches are just beautiful to visit if you're ever in the area.

PO: Ok. So why, if Slovakia is mostly Catholic, how did you become Lutheran?

CF: I don't know, my family's always been Lutheran.

PO: Your family has always been Lutheran, your grandma?

CF: Yeah, we, the village where we lived, where my great-grandma lived, only had a Lutheran church.

PO: Oh, ok. Oh.

CF: So I don't know if it depends –

PO: No, I think, no, I think the history, I know after the Reformation or during the Reformation, I know, like in Prague there were followers of John Calvin, they were Calvinistic, and I'm pretty sure that in some spots over there that Lutheranism came into those areas, so if your village, your little village?

CF: It was 200 people that lived there.

PO: And what village was that?

CF: Rankovce. R-A-N-K-O-V-C-E. And even people from neighboring villages would come to our church, so...

PO: Ok. So that area must have been Lutheran and that's why you're Lutheran.

CF: That's why, and there's another where my friend lives and she's called a reformed church but, that had a big German influence because of the mining industry, so I can see where the Lutheran church would have _____ there.

PO: Ok, so then there was Germans that came into the, that migrated over from Germany. Ok. That can happen, ok.

CF: But most of Slovakia is predominantly Roman Catholic.

PO: And now of course you're married to a Catholic.

CF: Yeah.

PO: Is your daughter Catholic?

CF: She is.

PO: Ok. Is there any problems, I mean, you know?

CF: There's no problems. My mother-in-law is a big Catholic and I didn't want to cause any family _____ [both laugh]

PO: Yeah, yeah, no, that I know, that I know.

CF: As long as she knows there's one God and she's got faith I'm ok with her being Catholic.

PO: Ok. So, you, of course you maintain contact with your family over in Slovakia, you flew over there recently. Do you write letters?

CF: We write emails.

PO: Emails?

CF: I still write letters to my aunts that don't work with computers very much or are older, I send Christmas cards and...

PO: Do you call them on the phone?

CF: No, that's gotten kind of expensive.

PO: What about, um, Skype or...

CF: Um, with the time zones Skyping is hard.

PO: Ok, that's right, yeah, the time zones.

CF: Yeah, it's six hour difference so it just doesn't work very well.

PO: Sure, sure, yeah you sort of have to be, do it at 2 o'clock in the morning or something, you know and that's, but yeah, I agree. Ok. So, this experience of immigration has been ok?

CF: It's been very good for me.

PO: But positive?

CF: Very positive.

PO: No regrets?

CF: Being so far away is the only regret, I guess. It just makes it really hard to visit, it's very costly and takes a long time and, yeah, I wish I didn't have to wait five years to go visit my family and friends but it just worked out like that, so...

PO: You had to wait five years? Well, why?

CF: It just, five years went by like that and –

PO: Oh, I see. There was no restrictions, like say, the government didn't say you've got to wait five years to leave the country.

CF: No, there was no restriction, just always something came in, Don had an ankle-knee surgery, Nina had her tonsils out...

PO: Sure, sure, and it's expensive, I agree.

CF: It's very expensive, yeah.

PO: Even when I fly now it's, I couldn't pay a couple hundred dollars more.

CF: Yeah. My old job would allow me two weeks of vacation a year, which is much different from Europe, where I hear your starting vacation is six weeks a year, so, I mean, two weeks –

PO: So they get more vacation over there.

CF: And with a child you know, you use up your two weeks of vacation just on doctor's visits and school holidays and, it just happened that way.

PO: So what do you miss most about not being over there? What do you miss?

CF: I just miss seeing my friends, that's most, you miss the people that you grew up with, people, you know, to just be able to just go visit for a weekend or go hiking or...

PO: Did you see them when you were over there?

CF: We visited a few of my high school and college classmates, and I visited my mom's friend from college, who told me a lot about my mom since I never knew her. I miss being able to go hiking in the mountains, our mountains are beautiful.

PO: Sure, sure.

CF: We have no mountains around here.

PO: Uh, yeah, not like I imagine over there.

CF: The Carpathian Mountains...

PO: The Carpathian Mountains.

CF: Yeah. The Tetras.

PO: And they're quite high?

CF: They are, about 8,000 feet in elevation, but it's just beautiful when you hike up on top and the clouds are below you and you see the little twinkling lights at night of the villages down below and...

PO: Oh wow, yeah, I mean, when I go to Italy, my people came from a plateau, and when you make your descent down to the, you know, like Venice or something, you can see way up, you can see all these, especially at night, you know.

CF: _____ -

PO: Oh, and the snow on the tops, you know, they're very, very nice.

CF: Yeah. I miss the thin air.

PO: So there's a lot in the United States going on with immigration. You know, right now the president has signed an executive order letting, you know, people, giving them an amnesty, like, if you have your relatives, you know, I guess if you're, the way I understand it if you're brought into this country as a child and now you can, your mother and dad can come in, you know, they have an advantage, and then there's the children that came over the border, I imagine some of them can come in and, what do you feel about that? I mean you did it the right way.

CF: I hope I did it the right way.

PO: Yeah, you did it the right way!

CF: I didn't try to break any laws.

PO: Yeah, you didn't come in as an illegal undocumented immigrant, you know, and all these other ones are coming in now and they're getting a break, you know. How do you feel about that?

CF: I believe in the goodness of people and I hope everybody would come to this country trying to make a better living than they could, because who doesn't want to make a better living for their family, so they could accept the immigrants with a good heart, but how do you take those away from the people who just want to live off the social security system and get the benefits. There was a similar problem in Slovakia with an ethnic group of Gypsies.

PO: I remember Gypsies, yeah.

CF: They say they were persecuted and they're discriminated and Slovakia wants to get rid of them, but they'll go to Belgium or Great Britain and apply for asylum and three months later they get three months' worth of benefits and they come back home to Slovakia and live off of it for two years. So I –

PO: They go back and forth, collecting money, yeah.

CF: I wish that they could have a, a screening that the people who really keep a job and just want to raise their family in better conditions that you could make it possible and make it legal and obtainable for them versus somebody who's dealing drugs and –

PO: Or, yeah, working the system –

CF: Getting into crimes and working the system just abusing powers that, how do you make a clear cut and pass a law that doesn't discriminate?

PO: It's a difficulty, yeah, yeah. Yeah, we're not, I mean, we're, you know, everybody, you know, wants the American dream, and they want to be there and of course America is good, I mean, I know at the turn of the century, in 1900 let's say, you know, people came and we were happy to help them, but yeah, we know people that are here just to get a meal ticket, you know, and that's exactly –

CF: During my immigration they warned my husband that if I get a green card through him and then I apply for benefits that's it actually going to come out of his pocket because he kind of sponsored me, but it never even occurred to me that I'm going to have to rely on the benefits system ever, because I just want to support myself and my family.

PO: Sure, you came over here, you wanted a job, you wanted to –

CF: Unless something bad happens I hope I don't have to.

PO: That's true, something bad can happen, yes, that's what it's for, when a person is in need, of course.

CF: And I have friends on the East Coast whose parents came over and they were supposed to stay a few weeks and then they sent an email back home saying we're going to come back when we run out of money, and it's been 15 years and they haven't run out of money.

PO: They haven't run out of money yet so they're still here.

CF: They're still here.

PO: Isn't that something.

CF: My friend's a nurse and I don't know what her husband does but they have two children, they make a living for their family and they're not breaking any laws, well, I hope they're not.

PO: Sure.

CF: So I wish the country could support the people who are good citizens, and make this country a better country for everybody else, the whole community.

PO: Sure. Oh sure, yeah, exactly. Do you have anything else that you would like to say?

CF: Um...I just love the small town America.

PO: Small town America.

CF: I hope we can find a solution to the immigration situation and the healthcare situation and keep making it a good place for the neighborhoods.

PO: The neighborhoods, yeah.

CF: I think it's the small neighborhoods that make a big difference.

PO: Ah, yes, yes. The rat race is not like the big city sort of _____. Nice to visit big cities, though. And you may wish you had all this activity there and so forth but then you, you know, realize that the small town isn't bad at all _____. All kinds of things to do, ok. Well thank you very, very much, very much.

CF: No, thank you!

PO: And we can shut this off now.