THROUGH ONE IMMIGRANT’S EYES: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A SLOVAK WOMAN LIVING IN NORTH AMERICA

By

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Introduction

You’d want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of it. You’d write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours. You’d want them to experience the experience you’re writing about (Ellis in “Heartful Ethnography”, 674).

In this project, my goal is to connect my experience with the theory of ethnography, autoethnography, and immigrant studies. As an immigrant woman living in the United States for almost ten years, I am able to connect to what ethnography and autoethnography authors write in their texts. I can bond with characters in those texts, and through my memory and experience construct a truthful and interesting project. Even though it is difficult to remember all the facts after many years, I feel confident relying on Carolyn Ellis’ words that meaning is more significant than facts. Ellis recommends telling “a story that readers could enter and feel a part of it” and prefers concentrating “on the meanings rather than facts” (in “Heartful Ethnography”, 674).

This project will present memories of my home country, Slovakia, and my attachment to it. I will describe my arrival in the United States and my life here, touching, in particular, on its medical, education, community and religion aspects. Many readings that I have selected for the final project serve as an excellent source on writing about one’s life in a new country. I decided to choose this topic
because I want to share my experience with other immigrants and I want to
challenge other immigrants and encourage them to tell their stories and to write
about their arrivals and adjustments to new environments. All our stories carry a
special message; no two immigrants share the same story. As Janice Kulyk
Keefer notes, it is not appropriate “to preface this phrase [immigrant experience]
by the definite article. I am uncomfortable with the universalizing ring ‘the
immigrant experience’ conveys, as if there were only one kind of immigrant, one
narrative of experience to be told” (97). Keefer clearly opposes marking
immigrants’ experiences with a general term since everybody has a different
experience despite sharing the attribute ‘immigrant’.

Ethnography and autoethnography differ in their focus, but both consider
feelings, beliefs, desires, joy, suffering, and needs of people. Ethnographers
concentrate on interviewing and recording other people’s beliefs, experiences,
and daily lives in different cultural communities. Autoethnographers, conversely,
describe their own lives in a certain group or community. Both writings can bring
people together, inform about other people’s lives, and remind them of their own
past and ongoing experiences. In immigrant writings, authors share their life
stories as they describe the motivation to emigrate and assimilation to new
environments, cultures, and customs. Ethnography, autoethnography and
ethnoautobiography, and immigrant studies are directly connected because they
all introduce stories of a person or a group of people of different cultures,
languages, or beliefs. They do not mark that certain group as less important than
majority groups. The fields of ethnography, autoethnography, and immigrant studies unite the characters with their readers; these fields unite the personal, cultural, and social.

As an immigrant woman, I will reserve a place for a few female immigrant authors and briefly analyze some of their literary works. However, my own story will be the main part of the project.

The majority of definitions explain ethnography as an observation of people in their groups and cultures, and autoethnography as a researcher’s observation and experience in a specific culture. In general, autoethnography can be viewed as observing other and/or different people’s lives while engaging one’s self in the process. Ethnography is closely linked to history, literature, sociology, and even psychology. Because of its close connection to other fields, ethnography minimizes distinction and its personal component unites with culture and society. Distinctions are blurred.

The authors selected for this project offer various definitions on ethnography, autoethnography and ethnoautobiography. Ethnography is a process involving a person’s observation of other people while utilizing his or her own feelings. In addition, as Thomas A. Schwandt states in his text “Textual Gymnastics, Ethics, and Angst”, ethnography is “a kind of factual description of other’s lived reality” (307). And John Fiske reminds us of ‘an empirical feature’ of ethnography and “data that has a material existence in the social world” (89).

Ethnography focuses on other people’s stories; however, as demonstrated
earlier, there are traces of personal in ethnographic writing. As Charlotte A. Davies approaches ethnography in her book *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, she uses Rosaldo’s thoughts that ethnography, despite its focus on other people, has some features of autobiography. Rosaldo argues that “ethnographic understanding often requires the personal involvement of the ethnographer” (179). Ethnography and autoethnography are thus linked through personal connections between people. As Joseph Pivato believes, applying personal into ethnography “gives the illusion of power and control over one’s life, a sense of self-determination that never existed in the real experience of dislocation” (159). Moreover, Pivato gives credit to “this biographical dimension” since it “increases rather than diminishes the literary value of their work”. Readers want to empathize with the author; they want to submerge into his life.

Autobiography can be used “in terms of past experience and experiences during fieldwork, in the analysis of data and reporting of findings, [and as] a part of the research process” (Davies, 189). Davies continues in stating that there is autobiography in ethnography and is “in part a product of the social situation of ethnographers and … must be acknowledged and its significance addressed” (179). According to Fiske, “The ethnographer [often] becomes part of the community of viewers or readers, participates in some of their cultural experiences and thus begins to include her own experience” (91). It again indicates the bond between the personal, social, and cultural. A supporting
statement from Susanne Gannon explains that “theory might ‘dance’ with the personal in autoethnographic writing that is powerful, evocative, and theoretically sophisticated” (476). These reports clearly maintain the idea that the personal contributes to ethnographic writing.

In her careful examination, Kim Etherington sees autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research” (139). Jürgen Kremer, in addition, sees the field “as creative self-exploratory writing (or oral presentation) that grounds itself in the ethnic, cultural, historical, ecological, and gender background of the author” (9). In other words, an autoethnographer is welcome to share his beliefs, customs and life experiences with his readers. Moreover, Kremer adds that in ethnoautobiography, “the self discovers its native freedom to tell stories in community that provoke the extensions of place, history, and spirits into the self” (6). It addresses issues such as race and multiculturalism and literary criticism. In “Heartful Ethnography”, Ellis emphasizes “social and cultural aspects of their [autoethnographers’] personal experience” (673). In the same text and in Ellis and Bochner’s “Autoethnography, Personal narrative, Reflexivity”, the authors perceive autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739). Moreover, they stress the importance of people connecting together as “coparticipants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (745). Reed-Danahay also views autoethnography as a blend of the personal and the cultural in the social.
Susanne Gannon in her article “The (Im) Possibilities of Writing the Self-Writing” praises autoethnographic writing as “the most developed form of experimental ethnographic writing” (475). Her simple explanation presents the process of autoethnography as “just ‘me’ here writing ‘my story’ in my particular complex everyday”. Denzin, who calls these stories “mystories”, sees them as “reflexive, critical, multimedia tales and tellings” (475). In autoethnography, as Fiske notes, “ethnographer is both producer and product” (90) as he or she writes about a personal experience. My experience as an immigrant in North America allows me to observe and compare American and Slovak cultures and lifestyles while writing about my own absorbance of the new life.

Autoethnography can be found in various forms. These include “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (Etherington, 140). These forms of writing include emotions, actions, and spirituality that are connected to a person’s history, culture and society (Ellis and Brochner, 739). Moreover, the field of ethnography has become more creative since it employs the use of art, photography, audio and visual means. These are “performed through poetics, stories, theatrical and dramatic presentations” (Etherington, 140).

Despite the fact that autoethnographic writing brings together the personal cultural, and social, many critics disapprove of the field. They claim that autoethnography lacks an academic theoretical and methodological base.
Gannon writes, “Yet autoethnography has also been criticized for abandoning theory. Probyn, for example, suggests that this leads to texts where ‘the force of the ontological is impoverished … through an insistence on the researcher’s self’ (476).

By using ‘self’ as the main source, critics see the field as too individualistic. Etherington views autoethnography as “self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized the focus of biography, putting ‘self’ –personal experience on pedestal separated from other discourses in their contexts” (141). Besides, Janice Morse states:

With due respect to autoethnography, I usually discourage students from writing about their experience. There are many reasons for this. First, the narrative is rarely their own. It includes information about others, who are, by association, recognizable, even if their names have been changed. As such, writing about others violates anonymity. If these ‘others’ do not know about the article, it still violates their rights, for they have not given their permission (141).

Davies agrees with Morse when he argues, echoing Rosaldo’s statement: “Any heavily autobiographical research seems to be vulnerable to two charges: first, that it is self-indulgent and narcissistic, telling us about the ethnographer, not about the social and cultural phenomena” (179). However, this ‘biographical burden’ as many critics see it, encourages the readers of ethnography and gives
them hope. The readers can relate to the writer and reminisce on their own experience.

Despite the criticism, many scholars still see the benefits of autoethnography and ethnoautobiography and encourage others to participate in writing and studying it. Etherington strongly believes that the way ethnoautobiography has been treated is highly unjustified since people’s writing about themselves has “a healing endeavour that strengthens our connections with our body, mind and spirit through sharing our experiences and newly discovered self-knowledge” (145). In addition, the effects are beneficial for our physical health. Etherington adds, “In telling our stories we are also re-affirming and re-educating ourselves, our experiences and our lives and creating new stories’ (146). In writing, we can remember and recollect, Etherington urges.

Moreover, In “Hearful Autoethnography”, Ellis does not see autoethnography as an egotistic selfish way of interpreting one’s background and culture. The field in fact “‘gazes inward for a story of self, but ultimately [interprets culture]’” (Neuman, 132). Even though there are “fears, self-doubts and emotional pain” (672), the positive sides of autoethnography, according to Ellis, include understanding self and others along with “doing something meaningful for [one]self and the world” (672).

In his article, Kremer calls for remembering the history, identity, and ethnicity, a significant function of ethnoautobiography (6). Furthermore, Kremer opposes the critics who see ethnoautobiography as narcissistic when he
argues that ethnoautobiography is beneficial for society since it “facilitates the demise of narcissistic individualism, the emergent modern form, and resolutions of antagonistic constructions of individual and community” (6). In addition, Etherington argues, “autoethnography does not merely require us to explore the interface between culture and self; it requires us to write about ourselves” (140).

The personal and cultural meet in autoethnography because, as Etherington reflects Rossiman and Sallis’ statement, this interaction is “the complex interplay of our own personal biography, power and status, interactions with participants, and written word” (141).

Ellis in “Heartful Ethnography” discusses several issues in autoethnography. They include validity, generalizability, and reliability. For Ellis, “validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evoked in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible” (674). She stresses the meaning of the story. When she writes about reliability, Ellis argues, “there’s no such thing as orthodox reliability in autoethnographic research. However, we can do reliability checks” (674). We can ask other people for their comments and add materials. Ellis also writes about generalizability: “A story’s generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they ask if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know” (674).

Because I am speaking about people living in different cultures, speaking different languages, and interpreting their beliefs and customs, it is relevant to briefly analyze the subject of multiculturalism. A general definition of
multiculturalism explains it in terms of racial, ethnic cultural diversity in a certain group or community. Siemerling states that multiculturalism arrived “later in the United States than in Canada and has been from the beginning a more activist yet usually surprisingly monolingual agenda” (327). The issue of multiculturalism requires a definition of culture. In his book *Theories of Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors sees culture as “nothing but a way it describes human behavior, it would follow that there are discrete groups of people, i.e. ethnic units, to correspond to each culture” (294). Evelyn B. Higginbotham recognizes it as “a set of behaviors and ‘ideological frame of reference through which people attempt to deal with circumstances in which they find themselves’” (xi). Stephanie Coontz adds, “Too often, multicultural studies serve up a buffet of different family arrangements and values without specifying the relationships and struggles among different groups” (xi).

One of the main issues in multiculturalism is “the drama in American culture between consent and descent” (Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity*, 6). Sollors explains:

Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of ‘substance’ (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of ‘law’ or ‘marriage’. Descent languages emphasizes our position as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities … modern, democratic political and family relations are described in terms of the consent of the governed, the age of consent, or consenting adults (6).

Sollors further writes that we can learn about ‘Americanness’ through “the
writings of and about people who were descended from diverse backgrounds” (Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity*, 7). As we read works by ethnic writers, we can see those works “as expressions of mediation between cultures [and] as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness” (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 7).

Multiculturalism is closely linked to immigration studies. People emigrate for various reasons; however, the major one appears to be a financial need. A general definition describes immigrant as “a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence” (*Merriam-Webster*). In the United States, the issue of immigration has been widely discussed and analyzed, and has divided people into two groups: those who approve of immigrants and those who refuse immigrants in their country.

Immigrants may never become true Americans, but they form America and they assimilate into the environment. In order to do that, they often move to a lower class or two to make a living. As Enrid Pajo notes, “Contemporary migration involves a dramatic paradox” (1). People end up “at the bottom social ranks” (1) in new countries. Doctors, teachers or managers from Eastern Europe work as assistants or clean stores; women become housekeepers and nannies. Since their degrees earned in Europe are not always accepted in America, these people have to work in blue-collar jobs to earn money for their families. In addition, if they decide to complete a university degree in a new country, they need to work even harder to pay for it. Many immigrants do not seek medical assistance because they cannot afford insurance or they don’t want to spend
money on doctors. Pajo adds that economists and ethnographers see the problem of immigration differently. There are economic issues and there are human issues in immigration studies.

It takes many sacrifices for immigrants to adjust to a new place. Keefer stresses the importance of “losses as well as the gains one makes – that ‘better life’ you promise your children, sacrificing your own happiness for theirs” (102). Even though immigrants seek America to improve their financial situation, some of them “perceive the United States to be a dangerous and undesirable place to raise a family, one where their children will be exposed to drugs, violence, … and social norms that contest parental authority” (Hondegneu – Sotelo, 14). This generally occurs without the support of the extended family that they left behind.

Immigrants build America and make the country diverse. Werner Sollors expresses their importance in America, concurring with Caroline Ware’s argument that “‘Immigrants and the children of immigrants are the American people: Their culture is American culture, not merely a contributor to American culture’” (8). Sollors also mentions Oscar Handlin who writes, “Once I thought to write a history of immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history” (8). Moreover, Keefer suggests to explore the term ‘immigrant and not to forget it because “the term is a far more flexible, capacious, [and] ramiferous” (99); she considers all people immigrants. She sees children of immigrants as immigrants, too. Kids have ‘immigrant blood’; they can be named
immigrants.

Keefer argues that every immigrant has a unique experience. Every immigrant experiences different conditions and sets different goals in a new country. Pivato admits that when he listens to other voices, these other voices are “not strange, but echoes of [his] voice; in fact, echoes of our voices as the sons and daughters of immigrants. [Pivato] discovered that the other was [him]”. (in Echo, 29). Pivato sees himself in other immigrants and their literary works. The topics of otherness and language of minority and dominant groups are tackled in Pivato’s book Echo. Immigrants represent minority and thus are marked as ‘other’ in a new country. Pivato testifies that immigrants’ “sense of otherness causes them to have not only identity problems but feelings of self-hatred” (Pivato, 51). The characters in his stories suffer from “self-hatred [as] one of the markers of characters in ethnic minority writing” (166) and “among people of minority groups” (176) and guilt, “common among the generation born in the old country but raised in the new” (172). However, the negative impact of otherness on immigrants in a new country can be positively applied to the relationship between immigrants. Moreover, Edward Said asks, “How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the ‘other’) (325).

The matter of language is particularly important. As immigrants change their
lives in the process of immigration, they also change their language, sometimes learning a new language. Pivato explains how immigrants use their new language to tell stories about their homes; using a new language, however, does not mean that they have forgotten about their origins. He clarifies, “They [immigrants] have not left their communities to speak about them from a distance and in a foreign language”, but use those languages to “speak about their communities because these languages come from the immediate experience of these people” (153). These new languages are used “to define a specific cultural identity” and to confirm the relationship “between word and world” (Pivato in “The Shirt and the Happy Man”, par. 27). Magdalena Zaborowska presents an interesting point when she calls the connection between cultures as “The cultural ‘bridge of understanding’ connecting East Europe and the United States … based on two seemingly mutually exclusive approaches in valuing the newcomer and the dominant culture to their respective others” (14).

Being a female immigrant myself, I find immigrant women’s writing particularly beneficial and encouraging. In their writings, I am able to relate to these women and learn from their stories. A number of issues presented in this project touch immigrant women even more. The concept of otherness in immigrant writing is particularly significant in female immigrants’ lives. They experience double otherness; they are discriminated against, first, as women and then, as immigrants. Zaborowska recognizes this “double ‘otherness’” – as marginalized ethnics desiring inclusion and as the ‘other’ gender-foreign women
– which confronts patriarchal oppression both in the Old and the New Worlds” (14). Immigrant women are often the only ones to keep their family emotionally stabilized, yet they are subordinate to their husbands. Immigrant women describe their stories in the writings, which are “diverse, ranging from oral histories, … , short autobiographical essays, to ‘ethnographic self-portraits’, fictionalized memoirs, spiritual autobiographies, and extremely sophisticated, highly self-conscious autobiographical metafiction” (Karpinski, 111).

Coontz’s book American Families: A Multicultural Reader presents the topic of female immigrants and their families. The authors in her book explore “the impact of class, race, and ethnicity on family forms, values, and definitions, as well as on the relations between men and women, parents and children” (x). She considers various family structures, race, ethnicity, class, and makes connection to “the context of long-standing differences in the power, resources, status and the culture of various class and racial –ethnic groups” (x).

Women have been marginalized just for being women. They have been discriminated not only for their gender but also for their otherness. Coontz focuses on women of color and “survival, power, and identity shape motherhood for all women” (212). Feminist theories of motherhood are thus valid as partial perspectives, but cannot be seen as theories of motherhood generalized to all women” (Coontz, 213). Pivato, too, studies and compares Italian immigrant mothers, daughters, and wives noting that Italian women are mother-centered women with a strong attachment to their men and children. These women are
often alone in the house because their husbands are working. They may feel lonely and trapped.

Ethnography and autoethnography show similar features in describing one’s culture, beliefs, and feelings. They both concentrate on human beings and their stories. These two fields are also closely linked to immigration writing since immigrants represent a special group of people with diverse backgrounds and traditions. These three fields connect the personal, the cultural, and the social, and thus connect people and their stories. In their writings, immigrants revisit their homelands, “the places where they can never truly return” (Zaborowska, x). Immigrants are as newcomers, ” the ‘other’ for the dominant culture, which alternately accepts and rejects [them]” (Zaborowska, x). This remembering of one’s background is very important. Several writers in this paper, for example, Pivato, Kremer, and Verduyn, call for identification with one’s own culture and history and not forgetting about it. Despite the feeling of otherness, immigrants and other minorities “are all valuable acts for the development of individual cultures and for broader civilizations” (Pivato in Echo, 202).

My story will present most of the issues analyzed in this paper. As an immigrant, I will look at my background and culture and connect them to a current stage of my personal development in this new culture and society.
Through One Immigrant’s Eyes: An Autoethnography of A Slovak Female Immigrant Living in North America

I have always wanted to write a book. As I recall one social studies lesson in high school when we were asked to say what we would like to leave behind one day, I remember saying, “A book. I would like to write a book one day”. And I meant autobiography. Now writing my autoethnography fulfils at least part of my dream.

In the beginning, I questioned my ability to share my story as an immigrant woman, so others besides me could benefit from it. Later, I realized that everyone has a unique experience and story to tell. Before I proceeded with the actual writing, I thought that there was nothing easier than writing about myself, but Dr. Redl’s warning that the process could be emotional and difficult at times proved true. Returning to my childhood, teenage years, departure from Slovakia, and subsequently arrival in the United States has been a difficult task. I tried to remember the facts quickly, but later understood the importance to remember the story, emotions and thoughts, and something I could offer to my readers who might relate to me. I recalled Ellis’ recommendation to concentrate on the meanings of one’s story. To show my perspective as an immigrant living in North America, I have decided to focus on my immigration from Slovakia and my life here, touching, in particular, on its medical, education, religious and community aspects.

Writing has always been my passion, though it has been hard to devote
myself to the process, lately. My position as a wife, parent, and student requires a lot of time. I live in North America, in New York State with my new family, my husband and our two children. My parents, siblings and other members are not here with me. I have to rely on my husband and myself to organize our lives without outside help. My daughter is almost nine years old and my son is six. They are presently in elementary school and I am working towards my master’s degree. I do not work. My husband and I have decided that I would stay home and take care of our children. I do shopping and schoolwork with my children. Since I am at home, I have time to study while the children are at school. My husband has his own business; he employs several people, and thus he can provide for the family. He supports me financially in pursuing a graduate degree. As a mother and wife, I make important decisions and choices. Doing many things alone makes me stronger, more confident, and knowledgeable. On the other hand, I have become more emotional and more attached to my husband and children. I am quite overprotective and vigilant, and that sometimes makes my life harder because I worry. I feel very lucky to have my two wonderful children whom I love dearly. I fell in love with them before they were born and the bond is incredible. As they progress in their development, they show different opinions and moods, and I sometimes wonder about the years that passed so quickly.

Although I have lived in North America for one decade, recollections of my arrival are still relatively fresh. Yet, I believe that recollections I have from the
transition are fully matured for my autoethnography. Now I can recognize most of contributing factors influencing me at every step along the way to making the transition to life in America. I am thankful to have this opportunity to let people know how immigrating has affected my life. I am struggling, however, to write because I feel that my story can be told in one paragraph.

Ten years after immigrating, one husband and two children later, I am reviewing my transition from my original home in Slovakia to my new home in the United States. The transition involved leaving single life and becoming a wife and mother as well as moving from one geographical location to another.

My goal in this autoethnography is to describe and compare my life in the two countries: Slovakia and the United States. I do not intend to criticize because nothing and nobody is perfect. I just want to offer my perspective, my feelings, and thoughts that are a consequence of this change in my life. All our stories carry a special message, no two people, and no two immigrants share the same story.

1999 was quite an active year for me. I was in my third year of a master’s degree program in the University of Presov, while teaching at a local high school in my hometown, Giraltovce. Submerging into this normal, forever-being-like-that life, I could not predict my future. I never planned to come to the States, never dreamt about it really. I never thought I would move away from my family and friends to whom I was very attached. At twenty-one years of age, I was a graduate student in one of the eastern cities in the Slovak republic. The distance
from my hometown to the university was only a few miles, but that was far enough for me, since I was quite resistant to changes at that time.

The stories about people from my hometown who immigrated to North America depicted the United States as an exciting country. We imagined the people living in big houses and driving great cars. To many, America seemed like a dreamland. In the course of familiarizing myself with the English language in elementary and high school, I learnt about many American states, cities, and sights, but it never occurred to me that one day I might actually see some of them. The change in my life came as a surprise to many, particularly to my family members and friends.

I grew up in a two-family house with my parents, two siblings, and my father’s parents. My parents had a strong influence on me. I always considered their advice and recommendations, and I sought their support and encouragement. I relied on their help and even though I felt certain pressure from them when it came to education and my social role, so to speak, I was glad to have them around despite occasional disagreements. I enjoyed being at home and hardly rebelled against a limited exposure to new places. I felt safe at home and wanted to be like my mom. My mom says that I inherited her sensitivity and my father’s unique sense of humor.

My grandparents who lived with us in the house had a strong spiritual influence on me. My grandmother always reminded us to go to the church in our town and pray. She taught us many religious songs, and I enjoyed going to
church with her when I was little. I went to church mostly with my grandmother. My parents never pushed us into going to church, although I have to say that my mom prayed with us often. Before the Velvet revolution in 1989, teachers, doctors, and officials avoided going to church so we almost never spent Sunday mornings in church with our parents because of their positions. Both are well known in the town, my mom is a member of a pedagogical staff in a local elementary school, and my dad has a degree in economy. My parents would go to church in other towns, but only occasionally. They never went to the church in our town because they were afraid to lose their jobs. I even had my first communion in a different town, so nobody would know about it. After the Velvet revolution, I started to see teachers and doctors from our town in the church. When I was in high school, teachers would talk to us about our religion, and nobody was afraid anymore. Religious education classes started, too. Priests would come to elementary and high schools and teach students there. When I got older, I understood my religion better. As a Roman Catholic, I made confirmation when I was fifteen and took vows at church when I got married. I used to pray daily even though the prayers were quite brief. I would pray mostly before tests or during difficult times.

The gap I felt when looking at other families was filled with my grandparents’ presence. My mom’s parents lived several miles from us, but they encouraged us to pray as well. Despite occasional moments when I wished to have parents working in less obvious departments that would allow us to go to church as a
family, I always felt love and faith in our house.

During the initial visit to church in the United States, I noticed many differences between Slovak and American customs. In Slovakia, I always watched what I wore to church. Sunday masses were not the place for shorts or sneakers, and it was not the place to laugh or talk. As a child, I remember older women in the front rows reminding the kids to stay quiet and warning them to tell the priest if they misbehaved. I also recall one of our priests commenting on fashion and loud music in the bars, boys smoking outside the church, and people coming late to the mass, all unacceptable and often criticized by churchgoers. The conservative style of my experiences in Slovakia did not allow me immediately to assimilate into a different style in the United States.

People clapped during the mass and laughed. In the liberal American church, many of people arrived to the mass late. The priest performed his functions and never addressed any of the disturbances. It took me about two years to get used to seeing women wearing shorts, tank tops, and flip-flops to church. I resisted clapping at first, but then realized that replying to the priest’s jokes or sharing something pleasant is appropriate. One decade in America emboldened me to let my children draw and have a snack at church, if necessary. Pancake breakfasts, sports, and dancing did not occur in Slovak churches.

I am open to more possibilities when it comes to church customs, but I still watch my appearance when I go to church. I have a need to show my respect no
matter what century or lifestyle it is. I am proud to teach my children about our religion. My oldest child takes her first communion this year and she will continue to take religious education classes along with my youngest child. During one of my graduate courses, I underwent self-experiment about the effect of prayer on my mood. I was keeping a diary and graph and noticed a big improvement in my mood over the time. The more I prayed, went to church, or read the Bible, the calmer and more positive I was. I was and continue to be eager to strengthen my faith.

I pride myself for being a very respectful person. I got it naturally with due respect to my parents for their good example. It is my understanding that we are all obliged to say please and thank you, to greet people, and to wish them good luck. I feel that Americans are very cheerful people and communicate a lot with each other. They greet others on the street even if they are strangers, behavior that I find incredibly positive.

I was one of three children in our home in Slovakia. I have two younger siblings, a sister and a brother. My relationship with my siblings is very good. My sister is about two years younger than me, so we were able to do many things together during our teenage years. Still, I was a bit more curious than she was and wanted to go places and meet people, while my sister preferred to stay at home. She has always been a very giving person, and I could always rely on her. She would do things for me and chores that I was supposed to do, my sister handled easily. She always looked up to me and saw me as her example, a
position that I found very appealing. My sister puts other people’s needs before her own. When I left Slovakia, she was a graduate student at the same university as me at that time. I called her very often after I arrived in North America and she wrote to me frequently. After she graduated with a master’s degree, she found a teaching job, but she did not like it at all. She found her students disrespectful, and finally realized that nobody appreciated her hard work. The salary was too low for the job she did. My sister is now married and expecting her first child. I am very proud of her and cannot wait to share motherhood experiences with her.

Because there is a four-year age difference between my brother and me, our relationship is different from my relationship with my sister due to our contrasting ages and genders. He is the youngest and we have always considered him the baby of the family. As he became a teenager, our relationship improved and we were able to engage in more meaningful debates. With my departure, the relationship changed and the actual distance affected our bonding. I don’t talk to him often, and it is hard for me to accept that he is a grown man now, ready for marriage and fatherhood. My brother still lives with our parents; my sister and I have moved away. Our steps in engaging in new lives in an unfamiliar place with new responsibilities bring my sister and I even closer.

My parents always had big plans for me. I knew they wanted me to study and have a comfortable life afterwards. My mom has always been my close friend. We have always been able to talk about anything. She adjusted slowly to my leaving and my new life in America, and even though we are still very close
despite the physical distance, I can feel a slight detachment.

My father is a strict man and expects his children to follow his rules and seek his improvement. As a child and teenager, I could hardly talk to him about anything, particularly, when it came to relationships with my friends and boyfriends. He did not want me to date when I was in high school and protested when he saw me holding hands with one of my boyfriends. I watched my actions and tried not to upset him. He let us know very early that he is the head of the family and we need to listen to him. Despite many disagreements about many issues, I am glad he acted that way. I managed to avoid the troubles that are often present among teenagers. Even now, when I am a married woman and parent, I still wonder if my father would approve the things that I do. He wanted me to finish my master’s degree, which I am now accomplishing and he has recently told me how proud he is of me. That makes me feel good. Obviously, I still care about my parents’ opinions. I believe that my father’s authoritarian parenting changed once he became a grandfather. I think that having grandchildren has made him softer and gentler. He adores his grandchildren; he is proud of them and enjoys talking to them. Perhaps the most proud moment for him is when I tell him that my children look and act like him sometimes. He sees himself in them and I believe that the love he has for my siblings and me has doubled since then.

When I was little, my parents and grandparents constantly reminded me that school is essential. They hoped I would become a doctor whereas I wanted to be
a teacher. I rarely played with dolls, not like my sister who was constantly around dolls and babies, and later, ironically, became almost resistant to motherhood. Over the years, I created a teacher model for myself through observing my teachers in all levels of education. I knew what kind of teacher I wanted to be. During the third year of a master’s program in Slovakia, I was asked to work as a high school teacher in my hometown. This was proposed to me because the school lacked language teachers. I taught only for one year, but that was one of my best experiences in spite of the dual demands of school and work. I loved working with my students, and, I believe, my students liked me, too. Teaching was my passion. It is still my passion and my only dream job. I think teaching may be in my genes.

I was afraid that my mom’s attachment to me would prevent me from leaving Slovakia. I knew that I had a journey ahead of me. As I mentioned before, I never thought about moving. My boyfriend came to North America before me. We were not really in a boyfriend girlfriend relationship when he left, but the relationship changed later. He would call me frequently and we exchanged several letters. When I started my master’s degree, I started feeling like an outsider at school. I did not feel comfortable in school and I felt that something was missing. In my third year of the program, my boyfriend suggested that I should come to New York to see him. I started to think about it, and even though I felt excitement, I was not sure about the idea. Firstly, I did not know if it would work out with him. Secondly, I did not know what to do with my school, and lastly,
I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. I was hesitant to discuss it with my dad, but after I talked to my mom, who supported me, my dad did not protest. However, he told me to finish my studies because that was the priority. My parents’ approval was the first key to my transition. We all knew that getting the visas would be a challenging task. In 1999, Slovaks and eastern Europeans in general sought ways to get to North America. They wanted to earn money and support their families. Back then, dollars were attractive to people in Eastern Europe. Many people tried to come to the United States and find jobs to improve their financial situations in Slovakia. Years ago, many Slovaks came here, helped their families at home, and helped others to come to North America. After the Velvet revolution, there was a great demand for the English language. Many students wanted to improve their language skills abroad.

Back then, Slovaks needed working and tourist visas to the United States. They had to travel to the capital city of Slovakia and explain the reason for traveling. Since November 17, 2008, Slovaks may travel to the United States on the Visa Waiver Program; they still need an electronic travel authorization and the trip could not exceed 90 days.

I knew that I didn’t have a chance to get the visas as a tourist. At the embassy, young people were not trusted very much because most of them stayed in the States illegally. As a student, I had a better chance to get here. I traveled to America to improve my English vocabulary as a student of the English language in Slovakia. I have claimed for many years that there’s no better way to
succeed in learning or teaching a foreign language than to visit foreign countries and live abroad for a while. My husband paid some of my expenses, and with confirmation letter from the school, I traveled to the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava to get my visas. The fee was about one hundred dollars at that time. I waited in front of the embassy since five o’clock in the morning. When it finally opened, I waited to explain my visit to New York to the consul. I spoke in English and explained the need to improve my English as a graduate student. After the interview that lasted about seven minutes, I was told to come back at four o’clock to pick up my passport. I was so relieved to hear that. There were tens of people waiting outside and many of them were coming back in weeks ahead.

My family did not have a lot of money even though the whole town thought so. My parents could not afford to pay for a plane ticket, but my mom’s aunt who was living alone and never had children offered help. She gave me the money just like she used to every time we visited her or when she came to our house.

When I got my visas that summer before leaving, I was still unsure about my moving to North America. Everything felt so weird to me, unreal, unimaginable. I was taking a huge step in my life. What kept me thinking about staying in Slovakia was the past and memories I cherished. I knew I would miss talks with my mom and sister, Friday nights with my friends, and the gossip and stories about people that made me laugh. I would miss the people and mere simplicity of our town. I knew I would miss it a lot. I was also unsure about my attraction to North America, about my confidence in a new country, and about living with a
man. Although I was excited to start this new chapter in my life, I felt sadness, and perhaps disappointment with myself because I was leaving the university and I knew that I might never come back to finish my studies in Slovakia. I was basically running away from the university and from the educational system I hated so much. I never saw myself graduating in Slovakia; that was not my destiny at that time. I think I reached the point where I could no longer be around people who were strangers to me. I hated to compete with them. I was a graduate student, but many of my fellow students behaved like fifth graders.

As the day of my departure arrived, I became more and more emotional. I entered my room, looked out the window and tried to capture the moment. I looked around the room, smiled to myself as I was trying to catch the smell of my desk and books on it. The sudden appreciation for my things that I considered unimportant before assured me that I would definitely miss my home.

As I was leaving my hometown at midnight, the town seemed even smaller to me and even closer to my heart than I might have experienced during daylight. I was very sad to leave at that moment, but I knew that if I had stayed I would have regretted not trying something new, and I did not want to lose the opportunity to see America.

I was scheduled to take a plane from Poland, because none of the airports in Slovakia offered a direct flight from Slovakia to North America. Most of Slovaks travel to Prague, but I drove with my parents to the airport in Krakow, Poland. We arrived early in the morning, and waited for check-in. That would be my first
experience with flying. Everybody around me was crying, people were saying goodbyes. It was all quite chaotic and in a way very helpful because I had something else to focus on rather than crying. My only worry during the flight was getting sick, which eventually happened. I was nauseous and dizzy. I do not know how my husband could walk towards me, hug me and kiss me. If I were him, I would have run away. I was a mess.

I arrived at the JFK airport in New York on a warm September afternoon. The first thing I noticed was the English language. I was suddenly lost and needed translation. All I ever learnt in English classes was gone. I did understand some phrases, but the speed of words flowing from those American mouths was not to be handled by me at that moment.

My husband lived about twenty miles from the city in a small apartment. While we were driving there, I had the first opportunity to observe. I was surprised with traffic and as we were entering the village, I noticed that most of the houses had no fences. That was something new for me. In Slovakia, people separate their properties from their neighbors by building fences and they don’t keep cars outside on the streets. The neighborhood looked different in many ways; the houses looked different. When I got inside the apartment, I had to familiarize myself with electrical switches because even those were different from switches in Slovakia.

I wanted to see America immediately. During the first two weeks, my husband took me to several restaurants and shopping malls, something that I did
not experience much in Slovakia. We always cooked at home and visits to restaurants were occasional. I slowly adjusted to grocery stores as I searched for familiar ingredients. Not everything tasted the same as in Slovakia, but I managed to find alternatives, and finally assimilated to new sources. I had trouble finding right flour. The flour in the States comes in several different packaging, but most of the substance looks and tastes the same so I was not able to bake what I wanted. If I did bake, the result was not great. I finally found a Polish store selling products from Slovakia and Poland. At home, we often used farmer cheese and, after some time, I succeeded in finding it in an American store, too. Despite the similarity in its appearance, the taste was slightly different. The coffee was different, too. We never used a coffee maker in our house and most people in Slovakia did not as well. I was first buying melting coffee, but quickly adjusted to the regular one. In the beginning, I cooked many Slovak meals. After my children were born, I started to introduce some American meals. The kids became familiar with macaroni and cheese, and peanut butter sandwiches at school, so I made those occasionally in my house.

Every Thanksgiving, I slowly took steps to prepare a classical Thanksgiving dinner. For Christmas, however, I still stick to a traditional Slovak meal that does not include turkey. We prepare a soup made from sauerkraut and mushrooms, and we have garlic and honey on the table. The most important part of the Christmas Eve dinner is fish and potato salad. On Christmas day, I prepare pork chops and I make a beef or chicken soup. I will always keep these traditions. The
Easter season in Slovakia is also slightly different from Easter in North America. Americans and Slovaks share decorating eggs and preparing ham, but Slovaks also serve cheese prepared from eggs and milk. An important part of the Easter meal is sausages and potato salad. We also serve many vegetables and cakes. Since I am not pleased with my children’s school lunches and I am not a big fan of peanut butter sandwiches and hamburgers, I cook warm lunches and dinners almost every day. Growing up in Slovakia, all our school cafeterias offered warm lunches consisting of a soup and main course. I introduce the same routine to my children. I miss that part of my childhood; I always wanted the same for my children. On the other hand, I am very grateful for the opportunity to try different cuisines. Now I can enjoy seafood, something that I could not experience in landlocked Slovakia, and I love Italian and Chinese food, too. I like varieties and I have choices now. My observation of different, perhaps in some ways more comfortable life teaches me about options and challenges people have nowadays. People in Slovakia start to experience different cuisines, too. They have choices in Chinese and Italian food, and many luxury restaurants and hotel offer a wide selection of international specialties.

The choices I have now do not end with the food. In my hometown in Slovakia, the store selection was not great when I left, and unless I knew somebody working in the store, the good stuff was gone quickly. Moreover, there was minimal selection of colors and sizes. I could easily recognize a person being from a bigger town just by looking at their clothes. In America, I suddenly
had a choice in colors, sizes and styles. When my husband took me to New York City, I was reminded of all the movies and sitcoms with a New York City setting that I had seen in the past. Walking the streets of Manhattan, I was impressed with the buildings, overwhelmed with different fashions, and overall 'cool' look of New Yorkers. Despite the traffic and frightening appearance of bridges, the smog and smell of hot dogs, I feel excited every time I visit the city.

One month after my arrival, my husband took me to Hawaii for twelve days. We flew from New York to Los Angeles, California. Then we flew to Honolulu. During the vacation, we changed locations and visited two other islands of Hawaii. Honolulu was an amazing city and I could feel the warmth not just in the air but also from the local people. Our hotel was located on the Waikiki Beach. Within two months of my arrival, I saw perhaps one of the most beautiful places on the earth. I could dream about Hawaii in Slovakia, but I never thought I would actually touch the Hawaiian sand. I was speechless and very fortunate because everything I imagined would be a perfect vacation truly happened.

Vacations that I spent as a child and teenager included my stays in summer camps. I did not travel much as a teenager and young adult. When I was in elementary school, I spent several weeks in summer camps. When I was in the first grade, I went to the camp in Slovakia that was located very close to my hometown. Three years later, my sister and I traveled to the Czech Republic and spent two weeks there in the camp. A year after that, I traveled to the former Yugoslavia and spent two weeks there as well. Then two years later, I went to
Hungary with my sister. The summers in camp were always fun. We met many new children from the whole country. As I got older, I became more comfortable and less interested in spending time away from home. Perhaps the pressure I felt at school was too exhausting and I just could not wait to be at home and spend time with my family. Some of my friends would work during summer, but I was discouraged by my parents. My mom was happier and less worried when we stayed at home. She always told us that one day we would work, so why hurry. Apparently, I inherited a similar need of protecting my children from the outside world.

Single life was great, but I soon decided to get married. The wedding was in the States without my family present, which eventually crushed my early dreams of my perfect wedding. I used to imagine myself having a traditional Slovak wedding with all the customs surrounding the event. There are certain rituals or practices during the Slovak wedding and as I was dreaming about my own wedding, I could not leave those out. There is quite a difference between a traditional Slovak and American wedding. Even though I did not have a classic Slovak or American wedding, I attended some in America. Rituals in the typical Slovak wedding start as the bride and groom kneel in front of their parents and ask for forgiveness as parents and grandparents give them blessings. This usually occurs in the bride’s house because the groom comes to the bride’s house to ask for her from her parents. The couple and the whole procession usually go to the church for the ceremony. The service is very similar to the one
in North America. However, some popular North American customs are strange to Slovaks. These include reading one’s own vows, leaving for the honeymoon on the morning after the wedding, and bridesmaids in matching dresses. The priest usually awaits the couple, welcomes them outside the church, and walks them out after the service. In Slovakia, when the couple and guests arrive at the place of reception, a dish is broken and the groom is asked to clean it up and carry the bride to her seat. The bride and the groom dance together, and then they dance with their parents. At midnight, there is a special wedding dance. The bride leaves the reception and changes into different clothes, often a traditional folklore costume often in red or pink color. When she returns to the room with her maid of honor, members of the couple’s family and friends dance with the bride and each contribute a monetary gift. The last person to dance with the bride is the groom. Another tradition is stealing the bride from the party. Men from the bridal party often take the bride to a close-by town or a few buildings from the place of the wedding. The groom has to look for her. The wedding does not usually end at midnight. Guests and the married couple dance until four or five o’clock in the morning. After the party, guests leave with cakes and bottles of alcohol.

These activities were not part of my wedding because to have a wedding of that range requires people and planning. We had a very simple and small ceremony followed by lunch and stay in the hotel. Since my husband is Slovak, my integration into American culture was postponed. We started to engage in a
more American lifestyle after our first child was born. We started going to the restaurants more often, we started to take trips and meet Americans. I was in love and I am in love with my husband just as much as I was before we got married. After nine years, I don’t really see cooling of a super hot relationship because we have always had one of those normal not madly in love relationships and thus we love each other the same way, if not more. My husband sees me as a great partner and mother to our children and that makes our relationship stronger. Sure, we have our differences and disagreements over silly things; sure, he leaves parts of his clothes around the house; and yes, he drives me crazy on some occasions, but I love him. He has shown me a kind of living that I was not used to in Slovakia. Around him, I became a mother. He encouraged me to continue in my studies. He supports me spiritually and financially, and he is my best friend.

My husband is one of the strongest people I know. He came to America with nothing and succeeded to the point that I respect him unconditionally. He works hard every day and adores his family. My husband, despite my objections in the beginning, taught me to be tough and introduced me to a previously unknown lifestyle. I was very reluctant to many things after my arrival to America, in particular, driving. Moreover, I was rather shy and not confident enough. Living in Slovakia, in a small town, everything was in a relatively short walking distance. A car was rather an accessory, especially for a young girl, or women in general. Women, not to mention teenagers, were not driving. I did not feel a need to drive
because we had an unattractive car and I was in no mood to drive it.

In America, I quickly got used to seeing at least two cars in every driveway. I was surprised to see women, young girls, and even older people behind the wheels. I did not even try to get a driver's license in Slovakia. I had always some excuses and I was busy with school, or just lazy? It had never crossed my mind that I would be living in the United States. Here, driving is necessary.

As I think about my life back in Slovakia as presented in this autoethnography, I missed learning many things. During the studies, I was dating and I was comfortable with my life; I was not seeking adventure. Well, now I see that the mentality of people in my family and town affected me a lot. Until this day, I can see that things I need in my life and interest in things I have now mean very little to some people in Slovakia. The passiveness is still present there and I am wondering if it will ever change. That used to be me. Those used to be my thoughts about many things, including driving. We used to have one car for five family members, including my father's parents. The fact is that we used the car only occasionally because our schools, stores, and doctors were located in the same town within a relatively short walking distance. Only the rich ones could afford more than one car. That was the situation in Slovakia ten years ago and that is the situation in Slovakia now.

In America, I struggled at first, but then I understood that there was no other choice. The driving test was, according to my knowledge, much easier than the one in Slovakia. Students in Slovakia study tens of pages and are required to
know technical terms to fix the problem in case of emergency. In Slovakia, during a driving test, the student drives in the car with his instructor and one police officer. I think this is better than in New York State. During the test, my instructor had to wait outside, while a stranger got into the car with me. After the test, it was her word against mine. On the other hand, in the States, I answered only about two pages of questions, and the driving test took me about ten minutes. The license granted me mobility and expanded freedom.

As an immigrant, I faced many issues in the beginning, and one of them was the feeling of shyness and uncertainty that I still feel occasionally these days. I cannot explain what exactly it is. I sometimes simply feel ashamed of my language and of being an immigrant, but on the other hand, I feel proud to speak and understand more than one language. In elementary and high school, I learnt English, Russian, German, and I understand and speak conversational Polish and Czech. I guess the feeling of shame represents marginality and difference. In the beginning, I thought that being an immigrant is one of my weaknesses. Now I see it as my strength because I can compare cultures, history, languages, lifestyles, and I get to know more people and make more friends.

The feelings I just described also reflect my position as an outsider in language. I always thought that my English was good and I felt confident as I was on my way to New York. A sudden exposure to the English language made me realize that my English was far from good. The speedy flow of words, mimics and gestures were overwhelming. I had a hard time understanding people around me
because they talked too fast and used slang. Many English phrases don’t make sense to English learners who have never visited an English speaking country or lived with people who speak the language, so I struggled in the beginning. Now I am more confident because I find the language less challenging, and I use those idioms frequently.

I had to learn a lot during the first years in the States as a patient and student. When I was expecting my first child, I spent a lot of time reading and understanding the terms and conditions related to pregnancy. I got quite educated and used this knowledge during my second pregnancy. Some of my friends who live in America don’t spend much time improving their English and often ask for my help and advice. It feels good to see benefits of my learning not just for myself. I fell in love with the English language when I was still in elementary school, but the relationship got serious during the first years of living and studying in the United States and Canada. Watching American news, sitcoms, and movies in English is a great first-hand experience. It is hard for me to imagine watching them in Slovak or Czech. The English language has so many unique phrases that simply do not translate into other languages.

Learning new languages was prestigious when I was a child in Slovakia. Therefore, my parents and I appreciated the opportunity to learn first English words in elementary school. In Slovakia, education is very important to people. Parents encourage their children to learn as much as they can whether it is a new language or other skill. The motivation that runs in families influences young
people to enter colleges and universities. My own experience with elementary
and high school in Slovakia was great and I did not know that school system
could be any different from the one I experienced. Well, I realized that after being
 glued to the TV screen during the Beverly Hills 902 10 episodes in 90s. The
students in the show had their own cars, had parties and expensive clothes. The
only thing I could do was to dream about such affluence.

I come from a small Slovak town where I attended preschool, elementary
and high school. I was always a good student, worked hard and showed interest
in literature and poetry writing. When I was in the fifth grade, I started to write
more poetry and my language and literature teacher noticed a talent. I won
several writing contests throughout the years, but later I became more obsessed
with the English language. I learnt the first English phrases in the fifth grade,
continued in high school and university. Along with English, I learnt some
German and Russian and even though the learning was rather overwhelming, I
appreciated the opportunity to study them for years. As I was paying attention to
various languages and literatures, I was less successful in other subjects. I was
not a fan of chemistry, math, or physics. We had to pass those subjects in
elementary and high school. I did not really have an option to choose subjects in
high school, except for additional Slovak and English classes that would prepare
me for my further studies.

In high school, I was not excellent in every subject, but just like in
elementary school, I enjoyed literature, languages, and later philosophy and
sociology. I was an A and B+ student. I have always been more of an artistic soul. Even now, I forward my children’s questions about science and technology to my husband. After graduating from high school, I had no other option than pursuing a college or university degree. When I was a student in Slovakia, students were admitted to a five-year university program and were able to finish the program within those five years without completing an undergraduate program resulting in a bachelor’s degree. I applied to the closest university, closest to my hometown and I was accepted. My major was English literature and Aesthetics. I was thrilled and excited.

I could not live on campus because the distance from my hometown to the university was less than one hour, which was about twenty kilometers. Every day I rode a bus for almost two hours (one hour there and one hour back), which was extremely tiring and deprived me of passion for learning. My enthusiasm was gone and not to be found anytime soon. In addition, I struggled at school because I did not feel qualified to be there. Even though the entry exam covered grammar and general literature questions, and we all had an equal chance to succeed in the program, the program was very hard. My classmates had a much better English vocabulary since they attended language schools and some of them even studied abroad for a while. I possessed none of those bonuses. It was a hard time for me. I still made many friends, but felt great competition. Moreover, I sensed unfairness from several professors. They had a tendency to treat us as little kids and showed us their power rather than a helping hand. Most
of teachers made us feel inferior, and I felt uncomfortable and afraid. After completing three years of my studies, I left. I do not regret leaving and trying a different system.

In the United States, I completed two courses in the local college just to test my English and ability to study abroad. I was very pleased with my grades and convinced myself to continue in studying, hoping to transfer credits from the university in Slovakia. I waited several years, three to be exact before I sent my application to the Athabasca University. After my second child was born, I realized that I was ready. I applied to complete a bachelor's degree and right after the successful completion, I was accepted to a graduate program. Yes, I struggled a bit in the beginning. Nevertheless, having excellent tutors made me stronger and comfortable in the language. I took many literature courses and completed many assignments. My grammar improved and my vocabulary greatly expanded to the point that I started getting A's. I was so proud of myself. At Athabasca University, I was able to see an actual progress. I never had such a good feeling in Slovakia. In addition, I wrote several articles from an immigrant point of view for the Voice magazine to share my perception of the new culture.

A rather new culture was partially brought to Slovakia after the Velvet revolution in November 1989. The revolution brought many changes into the lives of Czechoslovaks. The style of living got a new face. We were allowed to do previously forbidden activities such as exposure to sex, music, and movies. Nowadays, there is the Internet and through the World Wide Web, adults and
kids have an access to everything, good and bad. I am afraid that morality and ethnics have fled. Slovaks, Americans, and the rest of the world share the issue of violence against humans and animals. Years ago, people who lived in America were seen as different from Slovaks. Now, as I read the Slovak and Czech newspapers, I watch their television, I see so much English in their movies, news and shows. The eastern show business copies the West; they borrow the titles for their shows; they copy fashion. There were never “Sale” notices in the stores or commercials in the English language before. Since Slovakia has become a member of European Union, the English language started to appear everywhere. Sometimes I feel that the only difference between America and Slovakia is location.

While I was completing a bachelor’s degree, I took several courses in nutrition and women’s studies. These courses opened a new horizon to me. When I lived in Slovakia, my knowledge about medicine included basic facts. I knew about general medical conditions and I did not ask the rest. In America, as soon as I got my computer and the Internet, I read more, I asked more, and I consequently started to worry more. I feel that I know probably more than should. On the other hand, I am confident and still eager to learn more. I was born with a condition similar to pneumonia and was immediately transferred to the intensive care unit. My mom stayed in one hospital and I was moved to another. This first encounter with medical assistance was the beginning of my relationship with doctors and hospitals. During elementary and high school years, I often
complained of sore throats and headaches. When I was thirteen, my tonsils were removed and despite that, I have always struggled with sore throats. On the day of my seventeenth birthday, I was diagnosed with kidney stones. In Slovakia, I was later hospitalized due to the condition, but I was never properly treated.

In the United States, when I got pregnant, my first experience with a gynecologist showed me a new image of clinics. I was impressed with the setting and overall treatment. In Slovakia, the conditions in clinics and hospitals are not great. Patients need to bring toilet paper to the hospital with them. It is hard to believe that people in the twenty-first century still lag behind others. Slovakia has great medical personnel, and doctors who are willing to learn, and work hard. However, because they are not valued for their work, many good professionals leave the country.

I had several experiences with Slovak doctors, nurses, and hospitals. I did not know, however, how much I could ask my doctors, what my rights were, and what as a patient I really deserved. In America, I delivered two children by caesarean section. I have many girlfriends in Slovakia who are mothers and delivered their children there. Most of them describe the process as humiliating, and the doctors and nurses’ assistance as inappropriate. In America, I was very impressed with doctors’ attitudes toward me as a patient and immigrant. I asked more because I was not familiar with many medical terms and procedures, and everybody was kind to me. In Slovakia, after delivering a child, a woman stays in the hospital at least for a week. Here, I was surprised to know that a woman
usually leaves hospital on the second or third day, and that maternity leave lasts only six weeks.

The first three months of my first pregnancy in America were very difficult because I experienced a morning or rather a whole day sickness. I was struggling to get up from the bed, I was not gaining any weight, and I was not excited about anything. During the second trimester, morning sickness stopped and I finally felt like a pregnant woman. My appetite returned and despite occasional pregnancy related problems, I was normal. By the end of the last trimester, I was heavy, almost immobile, and ready to deliver. With the first labor pain, I regretted everything bad I had ever done and I was convinced that the pain would eventually kill me. Nothing that I planned for, like pushing with other women on TV shows and breathing techniques worked at that moment. I was, as my husband claims, very cruel to him during the labor, and blamed him for all the pain, but eventually, the misery stopped. My first child, a daughter, was born by C-section. She weighed almost ten pounds so I guess that explains my immobility and prolonged pushing. She was a cranky baby and kept me up at night. My second child, a son, was born just like my doctor and I planned. He scheduled a C-section and everything went smoothly. This time I had no pain before the procedure. My son was a bit lighter than my daughter was, but still considerably heavy compared to the average American newborn. I stayed in the same hospital after both surgeries and I was extremely satisfied with the service there. I was able to sleep at night and eat normally. I recovered very quickly.
My visits to the hospital did not start nor stop with deliveries. I have suffered from kidney stones for fourteen years, and several of those attacks are hard to forget. Many visits to the emergency room, fighting the pain from stones and urinary infections finally resulted in lithotripsy in 2000. The situation, however, did not improve and I am still struggling with kidney stones. My urologist works closely with me and I have regular checkups. I am glad to have a health insurance especially now in these hard times and I have doctors who know me well. I have regular blood tests and ultrasounds. I am more responsible than I used to be back in Slovakia. In Slovakia, I went to the doctor’s only when I was sick. Now, I have annual checkups, and I try to stay informed. In America, the more I know, the more vigilant I become, and the more concerned as well. Being a student makes me look for new information, although it often makes my life complicated as I think about various situations.

My experience with a dental care in the States is incomparably better than the one I had in Slovakia. Back in Slovakia, I did not have a choice in dentists since I lived in a small town. When I was about eleven years old, a dentist tried to pull one of my teeth without local anesthesia. While I cried and fought the pain, the doctor criticized my behavior. I ended up in the hospital following the incident. I had an infection and I could not move my mouth. As I got older, I changed dentists because of their attitude towards me and other patients. I did meet better dentists, yet the experience I got in the United States taught me that there were much better professionals and medical environments. The procedures I had done
in the States included root canals and a wisdom tooth extraction. Both experiences were great because I was free of pain, and even though the procedures were expensive, the dental work was excellent. I sometimes wonder how many people in Slovakia would afford such expensive dental services as people in the United States face.

I like my life in North America, but sometimes I wonder if the time to go home, to move back to Slovakia, has come. At the same time, I experience something that drives me back from that idea. I often feel that people in Slovakia don’t have an interest in things, and even though they have opportunities to do many things, they stay away from them. I have been living in the States for ten years. I experience moments of sadness, homesickness, but I also desire to be in Slovakia, to work there and to continue in what I left there ten years ago. In contrast, I also feel that Slovakia has become a partial stranger to me. I see what I was not able to see before. Looking at people and places, listening to what they have to say from a distance is not the same as being around them.

I am in a very close contact with my family and friends. I call my parents and siblings every week, we exchange emails and communicate via Skype; I can see and hear my family and friends whenever I want. I send pictures and they are very involved in my children’s lives. I certainly miss them, but I eventually got used to being here without them. Having my own family, husband and children, changes the situation because I am busy as a wife and mother, and I don’t become homesick often. However, I become a bit emotional during holidays or
weddings that I cannot attend, or sometimes I just miss Sunday afternoons at home, having coffee with my sister and mom, and shopping with my friends.

The emotions I feel for my loved ones are evident around other people, too. I have always been very sensitive. Even as a child, I had a hard time watching sad movies and ads about people and animals who suffer, and I always wanted to help. My intention and desire to help others finally resulted in actual helping. Two years ago, my husband and I decided to sponsor two children from Africa. I contacted an organization that provided us with pictures and information about the children. The two girls we help financially and spiritually are part of our family. We keep their photos and pictures they draw for us. We feel extremely lucky to have them in our lives and we are grateful and honored to help them.

My life in America has changed my attitude toward living in general. I am eager to do more things and I am not afraid to ask what I don’t know and demand what I deserve. I am more open to challenges and I do not hide from tasks. It surprises me how comfortable and confident I have become in many areas of living and surviving. In the beginning, I felt inferior and less confident than I am now. I guess I experienced feelings of shame and guilt without any obvious reasons. Just the fact that I was not born here made me feel different.

I see this autoethnography as a special summary of my transition from the life in Slovakia to my new life in the United States, and I see myself as the ethnographer. John Fiske notes, “ethnographer is both producer and product” (90) as he or she writes about their own experience. These past ten years have
been very challenging and exciting. I have learnt and experienced a lot during that period. Even though I currently live on a different continent than my family does, I carry with me what I have obtained from them. I can see that I react a lot like my mom, especially in my role as a wife and mother. As I often recall episodes from my childhood and teenage years, I notice similarities between mom’s and mine reactions. On the other hand, I often react in my own way, other than my family and friends would expect from me because this new environment and society taught me differently.

Not having other family members and friends with me increases a chance of my return to Slovakia. As I watch my children grow up, I am aware of their perception of what home means. This is their home and the only one they know. I want to make a right decision; I want them to be happy. Who knows, maybe one day I will write about returning to Slovakia, about changes and differences I might observe there. As I am completing this autoethnography as a requirement for a master’s degree, I am not reluctant to grasp new opportunities in the future.
Conclusion

This project presented the fields of ethnography and autoethnography and analyzed the questions and issues rising from the two fields. My autoethnography introduced my moving from Slovakia to the United States, compared my experience in the both countries, and reflected many issues analyzed in the theory section of this project. My autoethnography described my arrival in the United States and my life here, touching, in particular, on its medical, educational, community, and religion aspects.

In the beginning, I acknowledged that every person, every immigrant has a unique life story. This uniqueness is evident in Keefer’s appreciation of an immigrant experience. She does not mark immigrants’ experience with the definite article because there is not only one immigrant story or one immigrant life experience. When I compare my experience with other immigrants’ stories, I see many differences and many similarities, too. However, I perceive my account as unique and with a little resemblance to other immigrants’ stories. Most of immigrant women from Slovakia who are at my age do not attend universities. Many of them work as housekeepers and babysitters; those who received better education in Slovakia and earned some certificates in North America work as accountants, and medical or teacher assistants. Since I do not work, our stories differ even more. I don’t know how it feels to have American co-workers even though I have many friends among Americans.
In the first part of the project, I explained the difference between ethnography and autoethnography using definitions and clarifications from several scholars. The two fields differ in their focuses. Ethnography writers capture lives of other people in certain groups and communities, whereas autoethnography writers describe their own lives in cultural groups and communities. In addition, ethnographers interview other people, record their stories, and present those people's beliefs and experiences. Most scholars agree that ethnography involves observing other people while it utilizes the ethnographer’s feelings and thoughts because, clearly, there is autobiography in ethnography. During his or her observation, the ethnographer becomes involved in participants’ lives. Richardson and Thomas emphasize “human perception” (Richardson, 962) of “other’s lived reality” (Thomas, 307).

Writers of autoethnography, on the other hand, share their own feelings and stories. Autoethnography is seen as “autobiographical genre of writing and research” (Etherington, 139). Furthermore, Kremer defines ethnoautobiography as “an imaginative and decolonizing form of inquiry dedicated to the remembrance of sovereignty as motion and transmotion among people of Eurocentered minds, whatever their ethnic roots” (12). Ellis and Bochner add that autoethnography “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (739). Other critics like Reed-Danahay and Gannon concur that the personal, cultural, social and theoretical, dance together.

My story as an immigrant woman falls into the category of autoethnography.
I immigrated to North America from Slovakia in 1999. In my autoethnography, I share with the readers my needs and accomplishments, and my concerns and hopes I have in the United States. In the description of my life in North America, I considered its medical, educational, and social aspects.

The content of the definitions of autoethnography reflect my observation of my integration as an immigrant in North America. I see my autoethnography as a special summary of my transition from the life in Slovakia to my new life in the United States, and I observe my integration and perception of the lifestyle, culture, and customs of Americans. Moreover, I examine my own thoughts and feelings associated with this assimilation.

My goal in this autoethnography is to describe and compare my life in the two countries: Slovakia and the United States. I do not intend to criticize because nothing and nobody is perfect. I just want to offer my perspective, my feelings, and thoughts that are a consequence of this change in my life (21).

My own story, my own autoethnography and the process of writing it involved studying and researching my immigrating from Slovakia to North America. The process of writing was challenging as well. Dr. Redl offered me many comments and notes to improve my writing. Moreover, I found the process of writing my autoethnography as “creative” and “self-exploratory” grounded on my “cultural, historical, and gender background” (Kremer, 9). I explored my status as a spouse, parent, patient, and student. In sharing my nationality and religion, I opened myself to readers. Strong traditions and common customs in Slovakia...
affected my acceptance of the new ones in North America. In the beginning, I felt
the urge to keep Slovak traditions in my new life in the United States. When I got
married, I realized that I did not need those traditions as much as I thought
before.

There are certain rituals or practices during the Slovak wedding and as I was
dreaming about my own wedding, I could not leave those out. There is quite a
difference between a traditional Slovak and American wedding (37).

In my autoethnography, I marked my personal connection to the customs
and traditions I experienced in Slovakia, and I recognized and learnt the new
ones in North America. These included new recipes and socializing with people
from my neighborhood and church.

After my children were born, I started to introduce some American meals. Every
Thanksgiving, I slowly took steps to prepare a classical Thanksgiving dinner. For
Christmas, however, I still stick to a traditional Slovak meal. It took me about two
years to get used to seeing women wearing shorts, tank tops, and flip-flops to
church. I resisted clapping at first, but then realized that replying to the priest’s
jokes or sharing something pleasant is appropriate (34).

I think I was more conservative when I lived in Slovakia. The mentality of people
there had a great effect on me at that time. I am not yet open to everything, but I
changed a lot since my arrival in the United States. My inborn characteristics of a
conservative woman with traditional female roles reflect my attitudes to many
activities, in particular, driving.
Living in Slovakia, in a small town, everything was in a relatively short walking distance. I did not feel a need to drive because we had an unattractive car and I was in no mood to drive it. The license granted me mobility and expanded my freedom (40).

As I reviewed my story and then my autoethnography, I understood that these were “mystories, reflexive, critical, … tellings” (Denzin in Gannon, 475). For the ethnographer, the involvement of personal is significant. However, some critics disapprove of autobiographical features in autoethnography. Morse and Davies claim that the focus of autoethnography is on the personal and not on the cultural. I avoided providing heavy autoethnography; rather, included in it the details related to my personal experience with “social and cultural aspects”. I sufficiently introduced my life and described my childhood, teenage school years, my departure from Slovakia, and my new life in North America so my readers could understand connections. In my autoethnography, I connected myself to the culture and society in Slovakia, my perception of them, and later my understanding of the new and different environment in North America. I returned to my childhood highlighting the visits to the church in my hometown. I remembered praying with my grandmother. I described my relationship with my parents and siblings, and finally, I recalled my school years and personal struggles in the university in Slovakia.

The process of unfolding my life as an immigrant woman taught me about myself and revealed hidden messages that I could not find for a long time. During
writing, I realized the reasons for my immigrating, I answered the questions about my assimilation to the new world, and I re-entered my life through disclosing my experience. Etherington notes that writing autoethnography, in addition, “strengthens our connection with our body, mind and spirit through sharing our experience and newly discovered self-knowledge” (145). Moreover, Kremer sees remembering history and identity as significant. I noticed that in writing I could remember and recollect. As I recalled the relationship with my parents, I understood my father’s authoritarian parenting. As a parent, I related to my mom and dad and understood their need for me to study and to be kind and polite. I pride myself for being a respectful person. I got it naturally with due respect to my parents for their good example (24).

Autoethnography and ethnoautobiography are targeted for lack of reliability and validity. Morse criticizes the writers of autoethnography for using other people’s stories; she further does not see autoethnography as unique piece of writing. Davies sees the process of writing autoethnography as “vulnerable” (179) that informs about the writer instead of his community and culture. However, this negative feature was beneficial to me. Many scholars agree that in the process of remembering and recollecting one’s own experience, the ethnographer heals himself. Nevertheless, in recollecting my experience, I struggled emotionally. But because autoethnography, according to Ellis, includes understanding self and others along with “doing something meaningful for [one]self and the world (672), the negative aspects of autoethnography, “fears,
self-doubts and emotional pain” (672) overshadowed the negative sides of autoethnography. I understood the emotional struggle right from the beginning as I slowly returned to my life in Slovakia. Through my autoethnography, I emotionally reconnected to people and things in Slovakia after ten years of living in the United States.

Three other issues question the quality and ability of autoethnography to present likeable and believable picture of the personal and cultural. Ellis analyzes three features of autoethnography: validity, reliability, and generalizability. I tried to make my autoethnography likeable, believable, and credible. I understand now why it is necessary to include precise details. I checked for reliability with my husband, but I remembered most of the events clearly. For instance, my autoethnography clearly explained my reasons for leaving Slovakia. I was basically running away from the university and from the education system I hated so much. I think I reached the point where I could no longer be around people who were strangers to me (31).

In the description of my marriage and motherhood, I allowed readers to see my devotion to my husband and children.

… I love him. He has shown me a kind of living that I was not used to in Slovakia. Around him, I became a mother. He encouraged me to continue in my studies. He supports me spiritually and financially, and he is my best friend (39).

I feel very lucky to have my two wonderful children whom I love dearly. I fell in love with them before they were born and the bond is incredible (19).
Besides the issues in ethnography and autoethnography, I approached the subject of immigration studies. I defined the term immigrant and illustrated the number of issues immigrants face in North America. Several scholars, Pivato, Coontz, and Zaborowska recognize the feelings of otherness, self-hatred, and guilt. Zaborowska identifies ‘double otherness’ when she writes about immigrant women and Pivato adds the feeling of loneliness and entrapment female immigrants often experience. Coontz, in addition, pays attention to women of color and joins them with other women in their survival. Moreover, Keefer adds the immigrant’s losses and gains as he or she tries to live the American dream.

After ten years of living in the United States, I still see myself as a newcomer. When I came to North America, I knew that I would not be able to work in the field of my interest and specialization that I had in Slovakia during the studies. Without proper education, I could work as a babysitter, housekeeper, or perhaps as an office helper. It is hard for immigrants to compare with Americans. Even though I technically came here with a Slovak bachelor’s degree, I had to redo many courses.

*After my second child was born, I realized that I was ready [to study again]. I applied to complete a bachelor’s degree and right after the completion, I was accepted to a graduate program (46).*

Studying in North America is very expensive. Unless one has a solid financial support, it is very hard to complete a program. My own experience proves that without my husband’s financial help, I wouldn’t probably be able to
start or finish my studies.

For immigrants, adjusting to a new place is also very challenging. Keefer stresses the importance of “losses as well as the gains one makes – that ‘better life’ you promise your children, sacrificing your own happiness for theirs” (102).

As I watch my children grow up, I am aware of their perception of what home means. This is their home and the only one they know. I want to make a right decision; I want them to be happy (54).

I live in North America with my husband and children. I came here single and alone, without any of my family members. The loss of their presence made me sad and vulnerable during the first years in the United States. I still miss my family; I miss face-to-face talks with my parents, siblings, and friends. Even though I did not completely remove myself from their lives, I limited the contact with them to telephone calls. When I came to the United States, I felt like I lost my identity. I was a stranger to a new country, and later, I partially became an outsider in my home country. I had to work hard to establish my new identity and connect to new customs in North America. I reshaped my attitudes, became more liberal, and started to think as an American. My husband and I work hard to save extra money for one or two vacations a year rather than use the money for material things. Most people in eastern Slovakia spend extra money on new roofs and remodeling of their houses. They don’t think about vacations.

In establishing my identity as a spouse and parent, I face many challenges. Before the arrival, my vision of the life in North America combined the two main
views. North America meant the West to me with all its privileges and advantages, which included fashion, music, movies, and freedom. On the other hand, I saw North America as the place where freedom made people violent and dangerous to society. Even though immigrants seek America to improve their financial situation, some of them “perceive the United States to be a dangerous and undesirable place to raise a family, one where their children will be exposed to drugs, violence, … and social norms that contest parental authority” (Hondegneu-Sotelo, 14). Sometimes, I am scared, too. I remember 9/11 as a very sad day followed by stress and uncertainty among people. With the arrival of western culture to Eastern Europe about one decade ago, the atmosphere there changed, too.

_A rather new culture was partially brought to Slovakia after the Velvet revolution in November 1989. The revolution brought many changes into the lives of Czechoslovaks. I am afraid that morality and ethnics have fled. Slovaks, Americans, and the rest of the world share the issue of violence against humans and animals (46)._ 

In my project, I also discussed the issue of otherness. Immigrants represent minority and thus are marked as ‘other’ in a new country. Pivato sees otherness as the cause for identity problems, guilt, and negative feelings about oneself. He further claims that many immigrants experience “self-hatred [which is] one of the markers of characters in ethnic minority writing” (Pivato in Echo, 166) and “among people of minority groups’ and guilt, “common among the generation
born in the old country but raised in the new” (Echo, 172). I believe that my position as an immigrant woman helped me understand other female immigrants and our double otherness. Moreover, descent and consent relations are an important part in the discussion about guilt. Sollors defines descent relations as “blood or nature relations”, whereas consent relations are “those of law or marriage”.

Sometimes I feel that I do not stick to Slovak traditions as much as I should because I became more liberal in the last couple of years. As an immigrant, I experience guilt for being different, for having a different blood, and for speaking other languages even though it is definitely a plus. First, I felt guilty for leaving my family in Slovakia. Now I feel guilty for missing them less since I have my new family in North America.

The sense of guilt is often linked to the feeling of worthlessness. Pivato studies and compares Italian mothers, daughters, and wives noting that Italian women are mother-centered women with their attachment to their children. The lives of Italian women are similar to the lives of Slovak women. Women who are often alone in the house because their husbands are working may feel lonely and trapped. Because I do not work, I sometimes feel trapped, too. My husband goes to work, my children go to school, and I am alone in the house. I am not bored, but I occasionally experience worthlessness. I know I am a good wife and parent; however, I want to do more. My hope is that my university degree will allow me to follow my needs and dreams.
My autoethnography and its connection to the theory of ethnography and autoethnography show remarkable images. The theory supports my story and my story reflects what the theorists analyze in their works. My autoethnography and the theory taught me about myself and allowed me to learn about other immigrants. In the readings about them, I tried to find myself and I tried to connect my life to their lives. My autoethnography, I hope, will allow others to see and appreciate hard lives of immigrants, and our desire to live the American dream.
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