

# American Fulbright Alumni Stories

## Richard J. Gladon

Professor at the Department of Horticulture, Iowa State University  
2002-2003 U.S. Fulbright Scholar at the National Agricultural University of Ukraine  
Research Field: Agriculture  
Project Title: "Improving the Quality of Horticultural Crops in Ukraine"

### Communicating with Students, When You Don't Speak the Language

During fall semester, 2002, my Fulbright focused on teaching three courses at the National Agricultural University of Ukraine (NAUU), in Kyiv. The language to be used was English, and therefore, I felt I could teach three separate courses because I would not have to go through a translator/interpreter. But when I arrived at NAUU, I found that only a few students could speak English. Approximately 70% of the students at NAUU come from villages where there is minimal exposure to English during primary and secondary school. In addition, many students could not read English, and the course textbooks I purchased were not really usable.

Plan B had to be developed and implemented immediately, as there were only four working days before classes started. I requested office space so that students could talk to me about class material but there simply was no office space available for me. I was, moreover, informed that students could not spend very many hours in

my classes because they already had a nearly full load. Changes in the curriculum could not be made.

My wife, Donna, and I discussed what could be done to increase communication between the students and me since students were hesitant to ask questions. As the semester proceeded, the students simply came to Nastia, my translator and interpreter, when they had questions. Even if I were standing next to Nastia, they would ask her the questions, and not address me. After a while, Nastia started to answer the questions without even asking me, and this became a point of contention between Nastia and me. Later, I found out that the students were quite shy about their ability to speak in English, but that was not the only problem. There also seemed to be this image in the mind of the students that a professor does not care about students and does not want to be approached by a student.

After several weeks of hearing me complain about this lack of communication, Donna, being a mother, said students always are hungry, so why not take them to McDonalds, or some place like that, for a meal, and let us see if we can get them to talk. This idea of taking the students out for a meal in small groups received, at best, lukewarm reception because that type of thing had been done before.

But Donna and I decided we would do it anyway. If indeed, the students became cool or even hostile, we simply could stop the free meals because we were paying for them anyway. We felt that during and after the meal, both the students and we could get to know one another better as we discussed our areas of interests, and professional goals. We settled on groups of three to four students. This worked extremely well. The total group size, however, was six or seven because we had the three or four students, Nastia to do the translating and interpreting, and us. I also felt that it was better, and almost necessary, for me to have Donna present because she probably could develop a rapport with the female students much more quickly than I could.

Some national law that mandates a minimum amount of time for dinner must govern Ukrainian dinners with guests, because they always seem to



last at least three hours, no matter how many people are there and what are the topics of discussion.

The meals were a really big hit with the students. Donna was right — they were always hungry whether they needed food or not. We thought the students really wanted to learn more about us as Americans, but in the end, we really think they wanted to interact with and learn from exposure to adults other than their parents. The students enjoyed their meals, but we also learned another important part of the culture of Ukrainian students. Few of them had eaten at a restaurant before, and most of them did not know how to go through a cafeteria line and select their food, where to get their flatware, how to get their beverage, etc. Thus, we had learning experiences on almost all possible levels.

During the meals, several major changes occurred. At our first dinner engagement, one student was so nervous he could only eat bread and drink tea. Donna just happened to have a few photographs with her, and these included pictures of our family, including our dog, and the students who have lived with us over the past few years. These photographs were a big hit with the students, and after another meal or two, the students began to bring photographs of their family and friends. Gradually, the students opened up more and more, and each succeeding group opened up faster because the groups that already ate with us told the next group that it was a nice time.

Students dreamed about what they wanted to do with their professional lives but

often their defeatist attitude set in, and they could not translate their dreams into professional goals or objectives. Almost all students talked about how difficult it is to get a job because they did not know someone who would “give” them a job in their professional area. They were interested in the highly competitive system of obtaining a professional position that American students must traverse. These students needed more mentoring for their professional development, as an adjunct to their academic advising, as compared to the mentoring available to students at American universities. This may be a throwback to the former Soviet system where you were told what job you would do as your contribution to the good of the state, and there were no other options.

Although this mechanism for reaching the students cost us some money, it was not really all that much. The meals were about three to four dollars per person, which was much lower than we ever could have spent for a similar quality meal in the United States. In addition, there was a time commitment that Donna and I had to make, along with that of Nastia, our interpreter and translator. However, what we gained in my ability to talk to the students and mentor them about professional development and get them to understand that professors really are interested in them and their professional development far and away offset this expense.

I strongly recommend this type of interaction for any Fulbrighter interested in the professional development of the students they are teaching, but I especially recommend it

when language is a barrier to direct communication. One student even remarked that this was the first time in his five years of college that he had an opportunity to sit and visit with a professor on nearly a one-on-one basis. It has allowed me, as the instructor/mentor, to get through to the mentee(s) much more quickly and directly than other methods may offer. As an example of another positive that came from these gatherings, I found that one student had interned at a very large vegetable greenhouse, and he was able to arrange for me to tour the greenhouse complex and visit with the head grower. Due to this exposure, I was able to arrange a tour of these facilities as part of an agricultural travel course that enrolled 24 students from Iowa State University. The American students were flabbergasted at the sight of the greenhouse complex and the enormity of the entire operation. Fulbrighters may find that students in their university might not be getting enough mentoring help with their professional development and career counseling, and this may be a vehicle for helping those students develop more solid professional careers.

# American Fulbright Alumni Stories

## David Kent Robinson

Professor of History at Truman State University,  
2000-2001 American Fulbright Scholar at Kherson State Pedagogical University:

### After the Fulbright: Continuing Work in Ukraine

When I was the Fulbrighter in Ukraine, 2000-2001, I fear I was something between a betennoir and a cause-celebre. I was assigned to the regional university (at my own request, actually), and my reports and communications were a litany of complaints about poor planning and poor organization at my host institution, lack of student response, etc. I had arrived in Ukraine, hoping to teach American history in English to the advanced foreign-language students in my host university. As it turned out I was able to help only a few with their English, and I complained bitterly about the obstacles in my way.

At the end of my Fulbright year, the director in Kyiv asked me to come to Washington to speak to the next group of Fulbrighters, about to leave for Ukraine. I supposed that she wanted me to provide "shock treatment" to shake any illusions they might have about how smoothly things would go. The incoming Fulbrighters were surprised at my approach; after my fairly devastating review, very critical from the point of view of all the things that we normally evaluate in programs of higher education, one asked me bluntly, "Wasn't there anything that you liked about your Fulbright year in Ukraine?" I answered, to their amazement, "Only that it was the best year of my life, the peak of my career to this point." I tried to explain about the joys of finding the few capable and productive people trying to work

the transition in the corrupt and dying system; about the few extraordinary students who did take advantage of what Fulbrighters offered them; about the pure satisfaction of knowing that one is making a contribution, no matter the problems. I thought I did the pretty good job of saving myself and maybe of easing the director's doubts about her orientation.

Now I realize that the director was thinking in the different direction altogether when she invited me to the orientation. I think she understood that my willingness to wrestle with difficult matters was the sign of my commitment. At the conference, she really made no substantive comment about my presentation. "You will write about your work in Ukraine and about the history of Ukraine," she predicted, although I had no plans to do so. She wanted me at the orientation, I think, because she knew that my work in Ukraine was only beginning; for some Fulbrighters, the end of the term marks the real beginning. As impressive as the Fulbright experience can be, the bigger story may well be the contacts that continue, the work that gets published (on both sides), the other programs that are tapped by U.S. and Ukrainian scholars who first met under Fulbright's auspices, and the gradual strengthening of ties between groups of scholars isolated from one another for so long by global politics.

Since I left Ukraine in July 2001, my connections have been more personal than before. Lately, however, professional projects keep popping up and the opportunities in those directions have been increasing.

The first "extension" of my Fulbright involved the academic career of one of my Ukrainian students. At the end of my Fulbright year, I served on the interview committee that chose the first group of Fulbright graduate students from Ukraine. To my delight, the student from my host institution was one of the successful candidates. I have been able to follow her progress closely, and it has been good progress, soon to end in the U.S. master's degree. I visit her when I am in her part of the U.S., and I call her, at least monthly, just to talk. We really did not know each other very well before, but because I have worked in Ukraine, she can talk to me about things that she cannot easily explain to her friends and supporters who have never been there - for example, how it is possible to be so homesick for your poor native land while in the Land of Plenty, how one has feelings of guilt vis-a-vis family and friends who do not have such an opportunity and may never have it, how to find one's place and plan one's future amidst the dizzying intellectual/academic buzz of the American university. As someone who worked in Ukraine, I can connect to those feelings, which remain mystery to her other



friends in America. I can also take great satisfaction in my association with an extraordinary young scholar whose intellectual prowess, impressive as it is, is even surpassed by her strength of character and personal resolve. As a historian I like to think about the type of people who are needed in the developing country, to bring it more prosperity. So my association with this graduate student is connected to my professional and scholarly interests, the business of higher education.

I attempted the more direct engagement with Ukraine by sponsoring the college education of the Ukrainian in the U.S., although that project quickly fell through. One of the young men who translated for us had fallen through the cracks in the Ukrainian system and was unable to begin his university education. His language skills equipped him for education in the U.S., so I offered to sponsor him as the foreign student at my university. It was a large financial commitment, likely one that few Fulbrighters could make. In the process of preparing for his departure, I learned how difficult it can be for Ukrainians to obtain visas to the U.S., even when all the requirements have been met. I saw first-hand how humiliating it is to be denied the request for the visa, which we obtained only after appeals and extra trips to Kyiv. At my home university this student made all A's in his first semester, but then during the holiday trip home he decided not to come back to the U.S. In part, his decision was connected to his unpleasant experiences during the visa process in the U.S. consulate in Kyiv; those experiences were then unfortunately coupled with fears faced by for-

eign students in the U.S. after the events of 9-11-01, which cast the pall on his very first month at my university. In the intervening year, this young man found a place for himself in Western Europe. Though I no longer support him financially, I email him regularly, occasionally telephone him, and even visited him once to see how things are going. To my great satisfaction, things are going very well. On my return to my host city, his parents hosted me for the dinner, and I presented them with the photo album of their son in his new life. I did my best to answer their many questions about his life there, and I think I have been able to serve as the very important link in their difficult separation.

Things often do not turn out the way one plans, in the post-Fulbright experience. Things can actually turn out even better than the plan, with new, more interesting developments. Although I was disappointed with my courses in English language, I had better luck in my own field: with the help of translators, my work in the History Faculty was very satisfying. The students were interested in the topics that we discussed, and in the different approaches to historical analysis. Their papers, in Ukrainian and Russian, showed that my course was quite successful.

Through the History Faculty I connected the like-minded spirit in my own field of research, and this person lives quite far from my host institution. The Fulbright brought us together, quite incidentally. Near the beginning of my Fulbright year, I attended the conference celebrating five years of an independent History Faculty at my host university. I had great difficulty understand-

ing the lectures at that conference. The keynote was in Ukrainian, the language that I could not understand at all until I had been living there for several months. The most entertaining talk, from the evidence of the audience laughter, was by a Jewish historian from Odesa. He spoke using Russian words that I knew, but I could not follow the way he was using them. Later, we were all on the tour in the Ukrainian wine country, where I sat at lunch with the keynote speaker and the Dean of the History Faculty at Kharkiv University. Suddenly I found myself immersed in discussions of historiography, comparing approaches in the U.S. and Ukraine, as well as comparisons of the work of our respective history departments and their curricula. It was the wonderful exchange of ideas, the kind of thing I had always hoped for on the Fulbright. At the end of the meal, I was invited to a conference the following June, right at the end of my term in Ukraine.

I attended the Kharkiv conference on historiography, and I gave the talk that periodized European history according to tendencies to unite or disintegrate the political structure of Europe. That talk was later published, in English, in the journal of the Kharkiv History Faculty.

On my return trip to Ukraine, two years after I left my Fulbright post, I first spent some time in Kyiv, in the Fulbright Office, where they were planning the conference on "The Idea of the University." Then I went directly to Kharkiv, where I was the guest in the home of the Dean of the History Faculty. I learned that his scholarly work concentrated on the history of higher education in Imperial Russia and the

# American Fulbright Alumni Stories

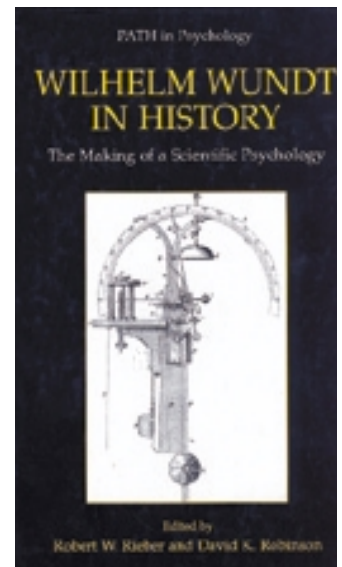
early Soviet period. My own research also centers on problems of higher education in Europe during that same period. I brought him article I published on Wilhelm Humboldt. Before my weekend in Kharkiv was over, the Dean made me promise not only to publish the translation of the Humboldt article in the university journal, but also to attend his conference next June, ready with the talk and an additional article on relationships between the universities of Germany and Russia before 1939.

There were more unexpected developments during my "grand return." One of my first and best students from my home university now teaches in Istanbul. He insisted that I fly down there for the weekend, and I did. I was very pleased to see him working successfully in the university there, and to meet his lovely Turkish wife, and I was astounded by his ability to speak freely in Turkish after only two years.

Back at the university that had hosted me, I find that they do not resent, or even remember, my earlier complaints and problems. They are making some fine progress, and they recall that I tried to help. They are glad that I am "still aboard," still interested in what they are doing. And I have met another young Ukrainian, falling through the cracks in the education system, who is ready to work toward an education. I will be trying my hand as sponsor once again.

And so I will be back in Ukraine, next year, to participate in the conference in Kharkiv and again to visit my friends in my host city. The consular official who is chief liaison to the Ukrainian

Fulbright program has told me, "There are some difficulties for Americans here, of course, but Ukraine seems to get to people when they come; it grabs their hearts and does not let go." She did not tell me why she thinks this is true, but I can venture an explanation based on my experience. Ukraine is an interesting, even a very beautiful country. But what grabbed me and would not let me go was the opportunity to work with the kind of people who want to do something about Ukraine's serious problems, especially to explore how higher education might provide some avenues of alleviating some of those problems. Such people want to build the better life for Ukrainians, and they also want to increase Ukraine's role in worldwide networks of education and culture. I was very privileged to be able to participate in this process as the Fulbrighter in Ukraine, but I could not stop just because my Fulbright term was over. I had to continue with the work. A person can search for a long time for a place that fits that person's talents and interests. I have found the place. I see no need to look further. In the world of Fulbright experiences, I wonder if mine is unusual. I suspect that others can tell similar stories.



## Bibliography

- "Integration and Disintegration of Europe: Problems of Periodization", *Problemy periodyzatsiyi istoriyi ta istoriohrafichnogo protsesu, Kharkivskiy istoriohrafichnyy zbirnyk, Vypusk 5* (Kharkiv, 2002), pp. 45-50.
- "Poľskilemky i karpato-slov'iany: Narody, shcho zahubylysia v tsentri Evropy "Lemkos of Poland and Carpatho-Slavs: Lost Peoples from the Center of Europe," book review of *The Lemkos of Poland: Articles and Essays*, ed. Paul Best and Jaroslav Moklak (Cracow and New Haven: Carpatho-Slavic Studies Group 2000), in *Ukrainskyi humanitarnyi ohliad, Vypusk 5* (2001), pp. 293-294; translated into Ukrainian by Yaroslav Andreev and Natalia Parfonova.
- "Europe-Unity, Divisions, and Dynamism" in *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats' "Pivdennyi Kharkhiv"* (Istorychni nauky), Vypusk 4 (Kherson, 2001), CACA. 5-10.
- "Scheduling Fulbright Courses in Ukraine", *Fulbright Newsletter*, No. 6 (May 2001), published by the Fulbright Program in Ukraine, pp. 11-12.
- "Computerization and the Professor: Teaching, Scholarship and Service", in *Informatsiina infrastruktura vyshchyykh zakladiv osvity, Zbirnyk prats' mizhnarodnoi naukovoï konferentsii, Tom 1* (Kherson State Pedagogical University, 2000), pp. 273-276.
- "Wilhelm von Humboldt and the German University," in *PP Pictorial History of Psychology*, ed. Wolfgang G. Bringmann et al. (Chicago: Quintessence Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 85-89.