

Patricia Krafcik
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Fiksdal: I am interviewing Pat Krafcik for her oral interview with me, Susan Fiksdal, on September 7, 2021. Pat, I just want to start at the very beginning. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the culture and your family life as you grew up.

Krafcik: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland, as you know, just like Chicago, New York, and other Eastern cities was very much a kind of what we would call ethnic city, ethnic in the sense of those immigrants who arrived in North America at the very end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. My grandparents arrived just on the threshold of World War I. They came from a place that, in a way, no longer exists, and that was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Specifically, they came from what is today's eastern Slovakia. They were peasants. My maternal grandmother did not know how to read or write. My maternal grandfather did. On my dad's side, they also came from eastern Slovakia. I think there's a possibility that those grandparents were both literate to some extent. But these were people largely of peasant background and from villages.

For me, as I was growing up, that identity was really crucial in shaping my own identity; when my people came to America, they were, as new immigrants, the lowest of the low. It's interesting, Susan, that I was able to explore this a little bit in a program in 2019 with Brad Proctor and Sean Williams. That was in the program called "Not a Melting Pot: American Identities, Migrations, and Places." I was looking for a program to participate in because the Russia program had been deleted from our curriculum at that point, something we can talk about later.

Fiksdal: Yes, I want to talk about that. I didn't know that. And 2019 is quite a long time to wait to explore your identity.

Krafcik: I had explored plenty on my own and in other ways, but this was a moment and a time and a context in which I could really contribute something to that program. Initially Brad and Sean had not incorporated anything on immigration from Eastern Europe. They had a beautiful program in place already, but they welcomed me and my contribution to the program. It was in that context that I was able to bring in front of students something of my own ethnic background.

To go back to that, that Slavic peasant origin, the village origin, impoverished in so many ways, which drove my grandparents and thousands and thousands of other East Europeans to seek a better life--that particular phenomenon really did shape my early youth. Even in my childhood, I was aware of this history, though not in its entirety, and it was a factor that inspired me to want to study Slavic languages. I wanted also very much to make contact with family, whom I knew that my mom was writing to, but she herself had never met. That “grandparent origin” as immigrants, that mentality and the culture that they brought had shaped my parents and, in turn, me. My parents, dad born in 1920 and mom in 1923, grew up bilingually. Dad spoke an eastern Slovak dialect and Mom spoke a Rusyn dialect. They understood each other because, as you know, Slavic languages are close to each other, and certainly these two were very close. They used their languages as a cryptic tongue that they could speak in front of us kids (my two brothers and me) without us understanding because they did not expect that this would be important in our “American” life. As I gradually over time learned Russian, I was able to understand what they were saying, so that this became a moot issue.

Fiksdal: That’s great. And you were studying Russian in high school?

Krafcik: I grew up in the Orthodox church in a parish in Cleveland, Ohio, that called itself a Russian Orthodox church, and that’s where I, still in elementary school, had my first Russian-language lessons. There is, of course, a very complex cultural story here. The bottom line is that the parishioners of this church were not actually Russians, but Carpatho-Rusyns. However, many of them believed that they were part of a larger Rus’ culture and thought that they spoke a kind of “low Russian.” This misunderstanding was also significant for me as I continued later to study Russian and Slavic culture and languages.

When I was about maybe seven or eight, my mom started taking us to what was called Russian School— “Russkaya shkola”—at the church. The priest and the main cantor taught this class. I remember sitting in the church basement of the old St. Michael’s Russian Orthodox Church on Union Avenue in Cleveland. We studied from an actual Russian textbook for kids, a primer for kids. I just ate it up. I was so excited. My brother John was a little bit less excited than I, but I was over the moon about this. We were learning Russian, how to write, how to speak! That lasted for a while.

Fiksdal: You learned to write in Russian when you were ages seven to eight?

Krafcik: Yes, not perfectly, but it was fun to draw the Cyrillic letters.

Fiksdal: But still, you were just learning to write in English. Amazing.

Krafcik: For me, that was really exciting.

Fiksdal: And you were attracted to that alphabet. That is so interesting.

Krafcik: The funny thing about this, too, is that later, when I was in junior high school, eighth grade, I was given the opportunity to study Russian. We were the “Sputnik generation” and so it was considered crucial that we learn languages such as Russian. I began comparing what I had learned in school to what I had learned in “Russian school” at the church, and I realized that there was a difference. The difference was not very big, but it was a difference. That made me wonder, are we Russian? I started asking my mom that question, because I knew that my dad was Slovak. My mom said, “Yes, we’re Russian, but we’re not “high Russians.” We’re “low Russians.” “What do you mean, Mom?”

Fiksdal: I have never heard that term.

Krafcik: “What language are you speaking, Mom?” Again, “It’s Russian, but it’s not “hard Russian. It’s soft Russian.” Meanwhile, there was another church in Cleveland, St. Theodosius, a Russian Orthodox church where there actually were Russians. The priest there was Russian and part Georgian, and had gone to a seminary with Stalin. They spoke what I was learning in school.

Fiksdal: With Stalin? What a claim to fame!

Krafcik: Yes. There I was, putting this all together, as you can imagine, and trying to figure it out. What was my mom’s actual background? That set me on a trajectory of learning about who we were. It clearly was not Russian. I majored in Russian in college at Indiana University in Bloomington, but was not really able to pursue research on mom’s background very much until I got to graduate school. But I guess what I want to stress here is that what set me off on that trajectory that became a crucial part of my life’s path and work was the search for what kind of Slavic identity was ours, and wanting to know language, wanting to know something more about that culture. Our family’s cuisine was very much Slavic. The church holidays, for instance, were the same church holidays that were celebrated in the old country. My maternal grandmother who lived with us until she passed away when I was eight, and all the elderly people with whom we were close, spoke Rusyn and “broken English,” that is, English with a strong Slavic accent—and this felt right to me. I recall meeting a fellow classmate’s grandmother while in elementary school, and their grandmother spoke regular unaccented English, and there I was thinking “is that a real grandmother? Grandmothers always have an accent!”

Fiksdal: That’s really quite a good story.

Krafcik: You can see how all of that experience was shaping my identity and my outlook, and again, inspired me to study, so that finally, when eighth grade came around and Russian was available to me, I knew I would pursue it. My teacher was an American who had had really great training in Russian language. Many years later, when I was studying in the Soviet Union, I visited him at our US consulate in Leningrad.

Fiksdal: Wow!

Krafcik: I studied Russian through the end of high school, really loving it, wanting it so much, and that would shape the further trajectory of my studies and my interests beyond just language.

Fiksdal: Can I ask you, did your parents go to college?

Krafcik: No.

Fiksdal: How do you think you got the idea of going to college?

Krafcik: My parents were always very supportive. There was no question about me pursuing higher education. I was a very serious student. It became pretty clear to me early on that I wanted to be a scholar. I wanted to study. I wanted to learn. But the twist in all of this is that from very early on in my life, it was clear to me that I was inherently a musician. I recall that when I was in first grade, second grade, we would do some music, playing plastic flutophones. It was so easy for me, so easy. Some of the kids struggled with it, and I just thought, why are they having so much difficulty? This is so easy. I think it's because I was a musician already. My dad went ahead and bought an old upright piano, one that had been a player piano—and he put it into our basement. He had it tuned up and he completely redid the outside of it, and then he sat down and he played. I was just drawn to it. He started teaching me some chords and so on. I loved it! This became for me yet another parallel trajectory to the scholarly Russian/Slavic studies. I studied piano, later flute, and then very seriously violin. While I was in junior high school and into high school, there were then these, in a sense, two competing tracks which I was able to maintain during high school--serious music and serious Russian.

What won out at first was music. When I first went off to Indiana University, I studied at the Conservatory with the great master, Josef Gingold, who had himself an extraordinary history of being in a concentration camp and surviving the war as a child. He was a wonderful teacher. But, as I studied there at the Conservatory during my first year, I was also deeply involved in Russian and had tested into the third level of language because I'd had so much of it in high school along with some private tutoring. That's when the competition between those two disciplines, two tracks, became intense. That was a moment of crisis in my life because I somehow recognized that I did not want to pursue music professionally. But there I was, studying with a master at one of the best conservatories in the country, so I had to make a difficult decision. I remember going to Gingold and telling him this. He was such a wise man. He said, "Do this: if you had another life to live right now, what would you do?" I said, "I would study Russian. I would study Russian language, culture, literature." He said, "Do that now."

Fiksdal: His field was piano or flute?

Krafcik: No, violin. He was a great violinist, one of the great violin players and also master teachers. And his advice to me was, “You must do for your life what is wisest.” It was golden advice. So, that’s what I did. I shifted my path over to Russian, and then I just threw myself into that. And that’s what I ended up majoring in and going on with it to graduate school at Columbia University for a master’s degree and a PhD. I had fortunately also been able to get what was called a Danforth Fellowship which supported me through all my graduate school years. I was so grateful to that program and the great education at Columbia. And grateful for my parents’ support.

Going back to my parents just briefly, my dad had done a few different jobs in his life, and I think we were, at best, on the lower end of middle class. My dad worked for the Cleveland Police, for instance. As a former Marine from World War II serving in the South Pacific, that was a natural thing to look into, but not his favorite work. He also did some construction work and working for the US Postal Service. But he pursued, all those years, what I believe was his greatest calling, and that was as an upholsterer. He was an absolute master upholsterer. He had studied under some upholsterers in Cleveland, the son (like my dad) of immigrants—in this case Jewish immigrants--and they generously taught him everything he needed to know about upholstery. He was close friends with them, as well, and they gave him the tools, the skills, to pursue this creative craft.

I remember in my childhood that my dad had set up in the garage—a little garage next to our house—a workshop, or he’d work in the basement of our house. He had joined the military before finishing high school, but when he came back from the Marines—he had been in the South Pacific, a very tough place to be—he finished his high school education with a GED. Mom also finished high school. They never had the chance to pursue higher education officially, but, again, they were very supportive of whatever I wanted to do.

Now I have been doing music very seriously, especially in the past 10-15 years, playing in the South Puget Sound Community Orchestra and with a stint in the Olympia Chamber Orchestra.

Fiksdal: Oh, I didn’t know that. That’s fabulous. Your skills must have been incredibly well grounded for you to be able to take them up again.

Krafcik: Growing up I had fine teachers both in piano and in violin. I think that I was able to go back, revisit and hear the “recordings” of my music teachers in my head as I worked by myself to get my playing up to speed. I’ve had to work very, very hard, but the solid musical training from the past has helped. I will never bring back exactly what I had at age 17 or 18, but I’ve been able to bring back enough to play competently in a good orchestra, and to absolutely love it. That has been so fulfilling in my life now, so in retirement, I will be doing a lot of that.

Fiksdal: I think that's wonderful that you can carry something through, and it's a great love of your life. I'm just so struck. I also studied piano, only until I was 16, unfortunately. I had a tough teacher and I decided I wanted an easy one, and when I got my easy teacher, I slipped in my discipline towards piano, so I did drop it. But one result, I think, of studying music that I think did us both well has been that discipline of study every day. No matter what, you must do it. Then recitals, where you've got to perform, and where you're never quite good enough according to yourself, but other people might give you praise. Little do they know all the errors you made or the touches you didn't quite put in. I think also for me—and I'm wondering if this might be for you, too—the music that fills your ears, I think we're just naturally attuned to other languages, and to language itself. What do you think?

Krafcik: I would agree with you completely. I think that everybody has potential in all different kinds of areas, but if you are doing music, if you're pretty good at music, you must have a good ear. You are listening to elements like pitch and intonation. This also helps with language learning. I remember that while I was at Indiana University, I was recruited by a graduate student who was doing a project with Czech language. Czech is a very intonational language. Slovak is, too, but Czech really is. He wanted me to find the tones of Czech and to try to outline certain words in sentences.

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh! This was early on, trying to figure out intonation. Fabulous!

Krafcik: It's really kind of amusing to me because we would now use computers to do this, but there were no computers available to us in 1971-72. But that really drove home the fact that I could hear these tones. I could find them on the piano. I could write this out for him as musical notes. Yes, we are somehow attuned to language. Like math, music is a language. So, indeed, that may have come together and mutually helped us both, Susan.

Fiksdal: Let's pause for just a moment here.

Okay, I'm back with Pat Krafcik. We're now on the topic of graduate school. I was just wondering, Pat, if there were some moments that you particularly remember in graduate school, either good or bad. It's always a tough time. You think you know what you're doing, but writing a dissertation is not always easy, and you have to find the right mentors and all of that sort of thing.

Krafcik: I spent the entire last spring semester of my undergraduate education in the Soviet Union. That was pretty interesting because that launched me into graduate study. I entered Columbia University in the fall of 1971, and I graduated with a PhD in 1980. I was hired at the University of Pittsburgh for my first job starting in September 1979.

Fiksdal: You were hired as an assistant professor. That's a lot of responsibility.

Krafcik: It was a lot, and when I look back at that time, I think that I was naïve about a lot of things. I had so much to learn about teaching. In graduate school, we don't really learn much about teaching. At Columbia, in my last few years, I had been teaching Russian language, so I was getting good with that, and I loved it. And I ran the summer school language study there one particular summer and taught. But teaching in other disciplines, such literature—that was something that I really had to learn over time. I had to learn how to put a course together. When we complete graduate studies and are “released” into the world, there still is so much learning to be done if we want to become really good teachers and mentors.

During graduate school, I found Columbia University to be great. There were wonderful faculty there in Russian, in Russian literature in particular, and that was what I was going for. I did a couple of years there, and then I spent a year in the Soviet Union in 1973-74 as an assistant director to a language program sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange, or CIEE. It had a great program at Leningrad State University. I was an assistant on that program in which I had myself been a student in in the spring semester of 1971, that last semester in undergraduate studies at Indiana University. After that year abroad, I returned to Columbia to complete my Ph.D.

Fiksdal: Did you go to the Soviet Union because you needed to refine your skills, or you just were tempted to spend more time there?

Krafcik: I recall that I was asked by CIEE if I might be interested in doing that job during the academic year '73-'74, and I was of course interested. It was a good time to take a natural break. Of course, I knew that it would be great for language and culture and history and all of the rest that you imbibe when you're in the culture.

Fiksdal: What about your students there? Did they expect you to be a Russian native-born speaker? They were okay with having someone who maybe understood their culture better, but who wasn't native-born?

Krafcik: When I participated in that program, Susan, it was for American students studying there. As an assistant director, I worked with the director on all the organizing and complications surrounding the program, so I didn't actually do any kind of teaching.

Fiksdal: Oh, I see.

Krafcik: I helped run the program. We had a big group of students living in a dorm with Russian roommates. There was always something to deal with, visiting their classes, going on excursions with them, solving problems, and so on. In the Soviet Union, there was always an additional layer of difficulty to everything. I learned so much from that experience. I was really able then, when I returned and

finished graduate studies and then went into my teaching, to bring that experience into my work with students. And, of course, to transfer it all to Evergreen when I came here.

Fiksdal: No students crossed the line? You didn't have anyone doing things they shouldn't do and have the state come down on them? This was a very tricky time, really.

Krafcik: A very tricky time. But in some ways, I must say, I never really felt afraid personally there. There were always a lot of police around! At least I think that if one didn't do anything wrong and pretty much was careful, then it was not bad. There were always cases where people had problems, but somehow, I think, we didn't have any completely insurmountable problems. There were always things like, for instance, the water in Leningrad. It was terrible. There was a lot of what was called Giardia lamblia lurking in the water. It was a parasite. We begged our students, "Don't ever drink the water. You're going to get sick." Some of them simply ignored us, and they got sick. They in fact had to be hospitalized. The Soviet doctors claimed that we brought sick students to the Soviet Union so they could be cured, but, in fact, it was the Leningrad Giardia lamblia in the water that was at fault. The kids would start losing weight. They became very thin. They had to be nursed back to health in the hospitals. They were quarantined in the hospitals, although they didn't have to be, but that's how things were handled in the Soviet hospital.

Fiksdal: Just a different system, and I think that would be so hard, especially with medical issues. You're always, as a student especially, much more comfortable being with people who can speak your language and, I don't know, probably not with people wearing white coats and things.

Krafcik: Yes, the upshot was that the students and we ourselves learned a great deal from these experiences. We also along the way had a student who had, I think, a kind of a mental breakdown, so she was taken off to an asylum for a while.

Fiksdal: In Russia? The USSR at that time.

Krafcik: Yes, and there were some special issues around that situation, but in the end, everyone survived, and we never left anybody behind.

Fiksdal: But getting her out. This sounds very tricky. Something like this happened to me in Mexico and getting them in safe custody is one thing; getting them out, you just never know.

Krafcik: Somehow we managed to extract her, and I think that she was sent home.

Fiksdal: Wow! That's an adventure, Pat.

Krafcik: That all was an extraordinary adventure. Meanwhile, I had also made some study tours from Indiana University—two tours, in fact—to the former Yugoslavia. This was another strong interest of mine, really always looking at the broader Slavic world, not just at Russia. Even though South Slavic

culture was not the ethnic Slavic culture with which I identified, it was so fascinating, because the territory had been occupied by the Ottoman Turks for hundreds of years, so Turkish culture was deeply embedded in South Slavic culture, and it produced this extraordinary folk culture—which, of course, I was able to draw on many times teaching at Evergreen especially. That acquaintance with South Slavic culture in these study tours was as crucial to me as going to the Soviet Union, so I'm so grateful for the opportunities I had to live and study abroad in those years, and that definitely influenced my teaching.

Subsequently, over the past several decades, I have been able to turn my attention to my own roots, my own ethnic roots, and so have spent the equivalent of some few full years in Slovakia—first, in Czechoslovakia, and then, when Slovakia and the Czech Republic broke into two sovereign nations in 1993, I was able to throw myself into Carpatho-Rusyn and Slovak studies. I had had an IREX-Fulbright to Czechoslovakia to do research into the folklore brigand tradition during the academic year 1983-84, and subsequently had Fulbright Specialist grants to Slovakia at Comenius University in Bratislava which enormously strengthened my Slovak language.

Fiksdal: To go back a bit: What was your dissertation about?

Krafcik: I had, from early on, a fascination with Robin Hood. I am sure that part of that was a couple of different series that were on TV of Robin Hood, including *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. *Robin in the Greenwood*. And in my junior high, I played flute in the band, and we were called the Yeomen. We had green capes, and we wore Robin Hood hats, and we would march in parades.

Fiksdal: Interesting. This did not affect my life in the same way it affected yours. I don't remember even watching TV.

Krafcik: Somehow, the Robin Hood phenomenon really stood out to me. I always was always really fascinated with the idea of a brigand enacting true justice.

Fiksdal: And redistribution of wealth.

Krafcik: Redistribution of wealth and justice. These ideas came through in the Robin Hood ballads and in the replaying of these ballads in story form in these series, and all this just absolutely fascinated me. As in my study of Russian folklore and Russian history, I came across these Cossack heroes who led uprisings, and one of them just caught my attention. His name was Stepan Razin. He and his band of Cossacks operated on the Volga River on the 17th century as pirates. They would rob rich merchants. There was this wealth of legend and song that came out of that historical phenomenon from a few years of Razin's activities. I was utterly fascinated. As I read what were called historical songs, I started seeing the Robin Hood archetype everywhere in the Razin legend. That's what I wrote my dissertation about!

Fiksdal: I was thinking the same thing. There must be an archetype.

Krafcik: There is, and again that is what I then focused on for my dissertation.

Fiksdal: Interesting.

Krafcik: That work would then send me in the direction of looking at some other figures in Slavic culture who had similar archetypal features, the most magnificent one being a Slovak hero called Juraj Jánošík. He absolutely was Robin Hood. There were differences in elements of the story, but the archetype shone through. When I finally finished the dissertation, defended it, and was into teaching at the University of Pittsburgh, my first job, I had the time and energy to start looking at my own ethnic background. I had already begun doing that in graduate school, but now I had a chance to actually study in what was Czechoslovakia at that time. We had a Fulbright teacher at the University of Pittsburgh who came to teach Slovak. Perfect place to teach Slovak because Pittsburgh was a totally Slavic ethnic city, with lots of Slavic groups represented by immigrants and their descendants—Ukrainians, Poles, Slovaks, Carpatho-Rusyns.

Fiksdal: I wonder why they were attracted to this one place? I didn't know that.

Krafcik: The steel industry and mining. Just like before them, the Welsh had come and others. They flocked to Pennsylvania. I think when my grandparents arrived, they came through New Jersey, through Pennsylvania, and finally to Cleveland, Ohio. Pittsburgh was a great place for all this Slavic ethnic activity and still is, and through that particular Fulbright teacher from Slovakia, a few of us were able to participate in a program in Bratislava called Studia Academica Slovaca, which was a summer school, one month of Slovak study, there in Bratislava, plus excursions. The first year I did that was 1981. That's where I met Dan, my husband, so much more came out of that study for my life than just the study of language. Part of what was wonderful was that this was still socialist times, and so we had great opportunities to observe and "live" that world firsthand.

Fiksdal: You were behind the Iron Curtain.

Krafcik: Czechoslovakia was, indeed behind the Iron Curtain. You could go out of Bratislava a little bit, up along the Danube River, which flows right by Bratislava. There was this magnificent site which still is there, of course, called Devin. Devin was an ancient site where there had been Celts, then the Romans, and finally the Slavs. It was an extraordinary archeological site. But the point is that Devin was the place where Austria was accessible just across the Danube. At that location, you could look down from the high hill to the river below, and there was barbed wire. There were soldiers with machine guns and German shepherd dogs supposedly preventing invasion from outside. But the reality was that we, inside the country, were inside of a prison, in a sense, and that was really driven home to us in 1981 and all the way up to the Revolutions of 1989 in eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall fell and everything changed.

Prior to the revolutions, though, it was very interesting, fascinating, for me, who had done so much study in the Soviet Union to be in one of the so-called satellite countries, and to see everything from the perspective of those people who were not within the boundaries of the Soviet Union, but were held hostage under the power of Big Brother.

Fiksdal: Held hostage. They could see their situation.

Krafcik: It was fascinating. All of that also, of course, ultimately, and not unexpectedly, has played an enormous role in my teaching, especially at Evergreen. I'm so grateful for those experiences because without them, I would not be who I am. I could not have given to my students what I gave to them. I was able to give them the real feel of what it was like to be there, to live there for months. When I had the Fulbright IREX grant in 1983-84, Dan and I went back, and we spent a year in Czechoslovakia. We lived in a small apartment, and I researched the topic of that Slovak brigand from the 18th century, Jánošík.

Fiksdal: Were you in Bratislava as well?

Krafcik: We were in Bratislava.

Fiksdal: Not Prague.

Krafcik: That's right.

Fiksdal: Because most people have only heard of Prague.

Krafcik: Prague is in the Czech lands, now called Czechia, and Czechia and Slovakia are related but different cultures. Historically, there are reasons why Slovakia is very different from Czechia although the two were put together after World War I as a single country. In the end, there was in 1993 what they called the "velvet divorce." As I mentioned before, they separated into two sovereign nations.

Fiksdal: First, there was the Velvet Revolution and then there was the velvet divorce? That's very interesting.

Krafcik: No bloodshed, fortunately, unlike in the former Yugoslavia.

Fiksdal: I wonder why they chose that word velvet, or if it's even the right word?

Krafcik: It's not, but what the original word means is "soft" or "tender." Not like the bloody breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

Fiksdal: Thank goodness.

Fiksdal: I did travel—just because I wanted to—with my husband through Eastern Europe when it was the Iron Curtain, behind the Iron Curtain, in 1974. We went camping, because it was cheap and easy. Somehow, I had written to all these countries because you needed visas at the time, and you had to wait and mail and things like that. No one understands that anymore either. We had maps, and we

somehow had lists of campgrounds, I guess. We must have gotten those because otherwise, how would we know? We went and camped all over.

Krafcik: Where?

Fiksdal: We started in Yugoslavia, and we went through Bulgaria and Romania. This was in 1974. I have incredible pictures. We rented a car. There are just so many things to say, but in a car, you have to be so careful as you're driving through these countries in that time because there were hardly any other cars, and there were oxen. If you come upon oxen in the road, you have to just screech to a halt, because they are very slow, as you can imagine. We went from the eastern part of Yugoslavia to Bulgaria. Bulgaria seemed like it had been devastated. In my meager understanding of history, it had just been wiped out by just about every civilization that had come along. They had passed through Bulgaria. It was flat and ruined and with horrible Soviet architecture. We got to Romania, and it was lively and colorful, and there were horses. The borders really mattered. Now, when you're talking about the barbed wire—we didn't encounter that, or I just don't remember it—of course, there was a lot of control. I do remember such differences between those countries, so I can understand a little bit what you're talking about.

Krafcik: I'm sure that there wasn't barbed wire absolutely everywhere, but at certain strategic places there was.

Fiksdal: Near a river, the Danube, where you could get out.

Krafcik: Yes. In the Slovak part—Slovakia, eastern Slovakia—my maternal grandparents' villages are right on the border with Poland, in northeast Slovakia, and there was no barbed wire there, but it was still an international boundary—border—and there was a small creek separating Slovakia and Poland. In 1984, when Dan and I were still there with the Fulbright IREX exchange, we made trips out east. It was during that year that I was really able to get to know my mother's family.

Fiksdal: That's when you finally went and visited.

Krafcik: Yes. I had already made contact with them during my first study of Slovakia in August, '81, but it was really during that full year—'83-'84—where we were able to make multiple trips up to the villages. That was amazing, of course.

Fiksdal: I just can't imagine. I've always wanted to be able to go to a village and find my ancestors.

Krafcik: It was really, really wonderful, so moving.

Fiksdal: But you could speak with them.

Krafcik: I could, but my language has improved since I first met them. My ability with Slovak, a little bit with Rusyn, but certainly with Slovak has improved quite a bit over the years. But I was able to do

enough between that and Russian to speak with them. I remember during the spring of '84, when we were still there, my mother and my two brothers came to visit. For my mother, this was unbelievable because she had been so close to her immigrant mother. Her mother had grown up in this little village Ruska Volya, and for my mother to go back to her mother's village with my help was like the absolutely 100 percent pure good thing in my life that I ever helped to organize--one hundred percent pure! She was so moved to go to her mother's village. And my mom could speak Rusyn—that cryptic language she used when we were kids—which she spoke very well, and, of course, she spoke to everyone there in Rusyn.

Fiksdal: It must have changed.

Krafcik: As a linguist, you know, she was speaking Rusyn from the turn of the century, the 19th century into the 20th. She was dressed like an American, short hair, casual slacks. I have a photograph of her standing in the road, the one road in Ruska Volya--and she is standing there surrounded by village women who had their scarves on, work boots, skirt and aprons, some in black.

Fiksdal: Still! And black.

Krafcik: Oh, yes, black, because some of them were widows.

Fiksdal: They were widows, yes.

Krafcik: Or in dark clothes. Very modest.

Fiksdal: Oh, my goodness. And those horrible tights.

Krafcik: Yes, yeah! Exactly!

Fiksdal: Terrible shoes.

Krafcik: Precisely. That was all they could get their hands on. So, there she is, standing talking with them, and they're saying to her, "How come we don't know you? When did you leave the village?" She just absolutely loved it. During that visit, my brother Jim who was adventurous, went to that creek, which was the official border between Czechoslovakia and Poland in that region, and he put one foot on one side and one foot on the other. He stood in both countries at once, and sure enough, somehow a border officer encountered us on that little road and he said, "You're not supposed to do that. You're not supposed to do that." That was all. An apology from us was sufficient.

Fiksdal: And your brother got called out for that.

Krafcik: Yes.

Fiksdal: It was a creek.

Krafcik: It was a creek, and the creek—the little *potok* is still there, and I have made many visits since that time. The border is completely open now since 1989, and the Poles come into Slovakia to buy

alcohol, and the Slovaks go into Poland—right across the border—to all the little shops to buy meat. It's a nice symbiotic relationship.

Fiksdal: I love it! Let's pause here.

Krafcik: Okay.