



MIGRANTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT MEDIA AWARD

THIRD PLACE WINNER

My life – My story

(the story based on my stay as a foreign student in Slovakia since 2008)

by *Thanakon Tiwawong*

Hello! My name is Thanakon Tiwawong. I am from Thailand and study at the University of Economics in Bratislava, Slovakia. I can study here without any financial support from my parents thanks to a scholarship from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

When I spotted the application for the Slovak scholarship in the magazine, I decided to apply for it immediately. I thought to myself, "Have I lost my mind?", as I was already studying at one of the most prestigious universities in Thailand. Yes, all of my friends thought it was a joke, including my own parents. But they stopped laughing when I got an official letter that I was chosen to be the only scholarship holder from Thailand. My friends started worrying about me being an Asian student living in a post-communist country, which we hardly knew where it was. My mother cried a lot over my decision but she decided to let me go since I had already been in the Czech Republic for one year as an exchange student in 2004 and my father was unemployed at that time. I found this out after two years in Slovakia. According to Confucian tradition, children should not know the problems of their parents. My grandparents are immigrants themselves who emigrated from the South of China due to the poverty at that time. Consequently, my cultural background is influenced by both Thai and Chinese culture.

So on the 3rd of September 2008, I landed at the Schwechat airport in Vienna and took a bus to Bratislava where I arrived safely. I was very upset in the first three months and kept asking myself what it would have been like, if I had not chosen to come to Slovakia. However, at the same time, I was also very enthusiastic about experiencing the cold weather and trying to find a way to distinguish people because they all look quite similar. It is not easy for an Asian to do that. Well, each one has different hair color but they repeatedly dye their hair.

My very first way of integrating myself to Slovak society was to eat like Slovaks. I did not bring the rice cooker from Thailand like most Thais living abroad did. Why should I bother bringing that thing since I want to experience the lives of Slovaks? After one month, I realized that this attempt was a complete failure since my stomach cannot digest breads and heavy food like cheese or steak. I always had a stomach ache, and I lost weight because I had lost my appetite. I decided then to buy a rice cooker and to cook Thai rice every day. Well, some Slovaks do not eat bread, right? And I decided that what I eat has nothing to do with my integration in Slovakia.

My next attempt was to learn to speak Slovak. Thanks to the preparation course for foreign students at ILAP (Institute for Language and Academic Preparation), I had a chance to learn Slovak with other foreign students from all parts of the world. It was very interesting that I couldn't talk with



everyone at the beginning since not all of them speak English, but as months went by, we all spoke Slovak as the common language. I was very happy at that time except only one problem. It was unfortunately with the locals, "The Slovaks".

During my first year in Slovakia, I have to confess that I did not have any Slovak friends except our Slovak teachers at school. We spent most of our time with foreign students since there were only foreign students at school and all of us lived on the same floor at the same side in the dormitory. We only use Slovak with real Slovak people when we go shopping to the cashier saying "Dobry den (Hello)" and "Dakujem (Thanks)". I bet that if we made mistakes in saying these two words the employees would not mind correcting us. The closest contact we had with Slovaks were Slovak students who studied medicine at the opposite side of our rooms. Our communication was mostly limited to a few phrases like "Stop making noise." or "Do you know what time it is?". In most cases, they sent the Slovak receptionists to send these messages to us.

Because of this, I can say that most foreign students including myself in that year did not have a good impression of the Slovak people, including the fact that I was insulted by Slovak people on the street from time to time who said that I am a Vietnamese prostitute and should go back to my country. This made the topic of discussion about Slovak people the most popular one among us, and if I meet foreigners living in Slovakia with the same attitude, we feel somehow very connected and it is likely that we will have a long-term friendship in the future. In our discussions, "they" means all Slovaks and "we" means those that are not Slovaks. When I talked with Slovaks, I felt like there was a 'they-and-we' wall between us which didn't bother me at the time. I cannot remember now when was the time I gave up wanting to be a part of Slovak society.

I forgot about my integration process since I met the other Thai people who mostly work here as Thai masseurs. They complain constantly about their Slovak boss and local clients. I also worked as an interpreter of the Thai and Slovak languages, so I have chances to meet frustrating Slovak employers and Thai employees. Most of the Thais living here complain about the bad manner of Slovaks, like they do not respect women as much as they should, or they pull their face all the time. At that time, I totally agreed with them and further strengthened the wall between "we" and "they".

One Slovak teacher at school who had spent certain years in Vietnam seemed to realize this and told us that we should try being Slovak. She said that when you wake up in the morning, you should tell yourself that you are Slovak and try to see everything around you as normal. Most of us did not do it because at that time we did not want to be like one of them. We did not want to lose our identity. The reason for this activity is that if you live aboard as an immigrant or foreign student, you should not compare your country of origin to the host country. You will never feel satisfied in your life abroad. I realized this later.

Now I am wondering how could I know so much about the habit of Slovaks even though I hardly talked to them and got to know them in person. How could I neglect the fact that at least Slovak teachers at school are very tolerant and always willing to help us? How could I justify whether certain manners are good or not? The turning point of my life here was when I was contacted by the AFS organization, the non-governmental non-profit volunteer-based organization whose aim is to raise tolerance and awareness of people from different cultural backgrounds in the society, by organizing exchange programs for young students to more than 100 countries in the world.

I have been a volunteer for AFS since I came back from my exchange program in 2004 from the Czech Republic, but I was not a very active one when I was in Thailand. In 2009, AFS International organized a workshop in Croatia for the new AFS organizations in Balkan countries, as well as Poland and Slovakia. I was invited to attend this one-week workshop with the aim of initiating the AFS organization in Slovakia. I was given the task of encouraging Slovak students to have an exchange program abroad and to promote other students to come to Slovakia for a year as an exchange student. It was quite controversial, since I myself would rather not encourage anyone to spend a year in Slovakia at that time. As the travel and accommodation costs are covered by AFS, I decided to join it immediately.

In the workshop, I met another Slovak volunteer, Zora Loviskova. It was my first time getting to know a Slovak in person with whom I can also discuss seriously about the things foreigners had to deal with in Slovakia. This is because I usually say to other people that I really like living in Slovakia (of

course with a wide Thai smile) to avoid any further questions. The one who asks will be satisfied and the others who listen to our conversation will think that I am a nice person.

We agreed on many points that Slovakia is newly-established country and people are not accustomed to foreigners. That's one of the reason why I feel threatened when people stare at me on public transportation. During the workshop, which focused on integration and intercultural learning, I had a lot of time to reflect on myself and to realize that I cannot categorize all Slovaks in the same way. That I should change my point of view and try again to integrate into Slovak society.

And that was when I had to say goodbye to all my foreign friends and to start my first-year study at the university with Slovak students. I felt nervous at the beginning because I was the only Asian in the year and I did not understand anything at school. I had no idea why the others had so many notes. I got to know a lot of wonderful people who were willing to help me through difficult situations at school. I met students from all places from Slovakia and I lived with Slovaks who continually explained to me Slovak values and tradition. They are of course very different from those values of Slovakia we used to talk about with other foreigners. Gradually, the "wall" between me and the Slovaks began to shrink. Now I see each Slovak not as a Slovak but as an individual person. I learned to respect their culture and to adapt to some of it since I am here. For example I try to attend class on time like most students here do. I do not feel like I am losing my Thai identity, but I actually enrich it with different values. I am very satisfied with this process.

I am an active volunteer of AFS Slovakia, and I also joined AFS in the Czech Republic. As a volunteer, I can use this chance to spread my message and my experience to the wide public through various workshops about intercultural learning in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria. I am one of the main organizers of the workshop for Czech host families who have exchange students from Asia each year in Prague. I also present the topic of intercultural learning at various high schools and universities with other volunteers every year.

The question is "Do I consider myself completely integrated in Slovak community?" I could not really answer this question but I live in Slovakia alongside local and foreign people happily. I am the regular client of the Korean food shop and eat Thai rice every day, but I also enjoy having Slovak food with the others or having a beer with the others in the pub though just a mug of beer can already make me drunk. Of course, I am still harassed sometimes by the local people on the street, but most of them are drunk and due to the economic crisis and high rate of unemployment in Slovakia, it makes sense that foreigners are seen by some people as the scapegoat. I think the most important thing for people who are immigrants or those who live abroad is that we must not generalize people according to their nation or social background. We must fight against stereotypes that have firm roots in people's minds. And last but not least we should stay different and respect the differences of other people.