

Each place, each smile, each tear – holy ground

Sara Ann (Sally) Rude, RSCJ

My three years in Hungary passed so quickly. In the twenty years since I left Grand Coteau, I have served in very diverse places – Rome, Uganda, Wales, Chicago, Indonesia, Hungary and now Joigny, France. Each has added its own color and depth to the heart I take to the next place.

First, a little about Hungary. This land of the Magyars is east of Austria in the Carpathian Basin; it is now about the size of Indiana, with a population of just under ten million. Hungarians know and share their long history as though all happened yesterday. Although the Communist era ended more than twenty years ago, its influence lingers in ugly apartment blocks in poor repair, abandoned factories, crumbling buildings, stalled economic recovery, fragile hope. Yet Budapest on the Danube is beautiful still, as are the resort areas around Lake Balaton, the flower-filled villages, onion-domed churches, monasteries, castles, vistas of plains and mountains. Hungarians are a warm, cultured, gracious people who love music, literature, family and their traditions.

In 2009 I was asked to join three Hungarian RSCJ as we began work in the Fenyi Gyula Jesuit school (grades 5-12) in Miskolc in northeastern Hungary, the only Jesuit school of its kind in the country. As I said goodbye in early September to eleven English classes I had taught – about 200 students –

several asked what I loved most in Hungary. I could truthfully answer that I loved my experience with them, the students, the most. Of course I also loved the food, the wine, the music, the dancing, the colorful crafts, the people who were so gracious to me, the fine school, our community, the view from our home of the Bukk Mountains that in winter reminded me of a Breugel painting, and more. But I loved most being with these talented young people who are the hope of Hungary. Their discussions were often insightful and deep. So often our conversations went far beyond whatever the topic of the day might be.

I am deeply grateful for their trust and their openness as they shared heart stories, what they loved, their dreams, their families. One student began our tutorial sessions wanting to discuss assigned topics that would be on the national English exam. His favorite was the section on weather, although his own interest is mainly history. The suggested questions were quite uninteresting, so we would quickly veer off into other subjects. At the end he would thank me for our “weather discussion,” which was rarely about weather. He did very well on his national English exam anyway.



At a recent meeting with another graduate, we both recalled our first tutorial session three years ago when he asked a question that I couldn't answer, so I suggested we look it up on the Internet and talk about it next time. With a smile, this then fifteen-year-old said in good English, "Sister Sally, an old Greek once said that it's a wise person that knows what he doesn't know." I responded that I thought that old Greek's name was Socrates. Last Christmas he gave me a small book in Hungarian of charming short stories related to biblical texts. He, my classes, and my Hungarian teacher have helped me translate them into English, and of course there's been much discussion. After a summer working with a microfinancing project in India, he left in late September to study economics and management at a British university.

Five bright 11th and 12th grade women are on exchange in Sacred Heart schools in the U.S. for the beginning of this school year. One thanked me for our tutorial sessions and "life and God talks" by giving me twenty-seven of her favorite Bible quotations. Another bright young friend gave me John Grisham novels when he finished reading them – in English! He began doing this when he came in Year 9. Discussion of novels led easily and naturally to deeper discussions as well. So many conversations were truly "dialogue toward communion." Small wonder that these young people were what I loved most about Hungary. Some will stay in touch, most will not, but all touched me deeply.

I regret that I never learned Hungarian well, a loved treasure in this country where many speak more than one language. I listened to a great deal of Hungarian that I did not understand: lunch table conversations, movies, evening news, homilies, random conversations on the street, in buses, in shops. Over time I learned to be comfortable with this, and it carved a kind of receptive silence in me. So many made the effort to speak English with me, especially my community and colleagues,

and, of course, my students. It is right and just that in France I make the same effort to speak a language not my own, well beyond my own comfort zone.

I know more deeply now that language is far more than grammar and vocabulary. We say things differently because we think differently in subtle but real ways: the obligatory initial greeting in Uganda, the always capitalized "Anda" "You" in Bahasa Indonesia, the grammatical and phonetic precision of the unique and musical Hungarian language. Our cultures and histories highlight different facets of our common human experience and values, and our languages reflect this. I'm beginning to develop a sensitivity to this. I am reluctant to say easily that I understand, but I know I want to be open to what the other wants to share. That does make a difference.

There is a symmetry in setting forth from the land of Philippine in Louisiana, and now, after quite a journey, being in Sophie's home in Joigny, "far beyond anything I could ask for or imagine." I have experienced a God-consciousness expressed in culturally unique ways during these twenty years in Africa, Asia, America and Europe. The people of each place, in their own way, let me walk with them as they shared their daily lives, their joys and their sorrows, their selves. Truly, the Lord was in each place, each smile, each tear – holy ground indeed. "This is My Body. Amen." ❖



Sara Ann (Sally) Rude, RSCJ, recently moved to Joigny, France to serve at the spirituality center and welcome pilgrims to St. Madeleine Sophie's home. She has also served in Hungary, Uganda/Kenya, Indonesia and Rome. Her most recent ministries in the United States were at Josephinum Academy and the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau. Earlier in her ministry, she also served at the Convent of the Sacred Heart (91st Street), and Schools of the Sacred Heart (Atherton).

Landscape of Lake Balaton, Tihany, Hungary.

