

## TOS INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY VISITS EASTERN EUROPE

*In August 2016, TOS International Secretary, Nancy Secrest, gave talks and TOS presentations and met with members of the Society and the TOS in Eastern Europe. In between presentations Nancy washed windows at the Blavatsky Museum in the Ukraine, visited a salt mine in her grandfather's village in Poland, met with leaders of the gypsy community with whom the TOS in Hungary works, climbed castle steps and attempted mountain trails in Slovenia.*

*The visit arose out of an invitation for Nancy to speak at a programme in the Ukraine celebrating the 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary of HPB's birth. The programme was held 12-13 August in the home of Blavatsky's birth, now the Museum of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and her Family, in Dnipro, Ukraine. It featured a number of speakers including Antonio Girardi, General Secretary of the Italian Section and Svitlana Gavrylenko, Organising Secretary of the TS in the Ukraine. Additional talks and meetings were held at the TS/TOS in Kiev the following day.*

*Not being one to waste an opportunity, Nancy made arrangements to visit with members of the TS/TOS in Hungary and with TS members in Slovenia as well.*

### Visiting TOS members and friends in Eastern Europe



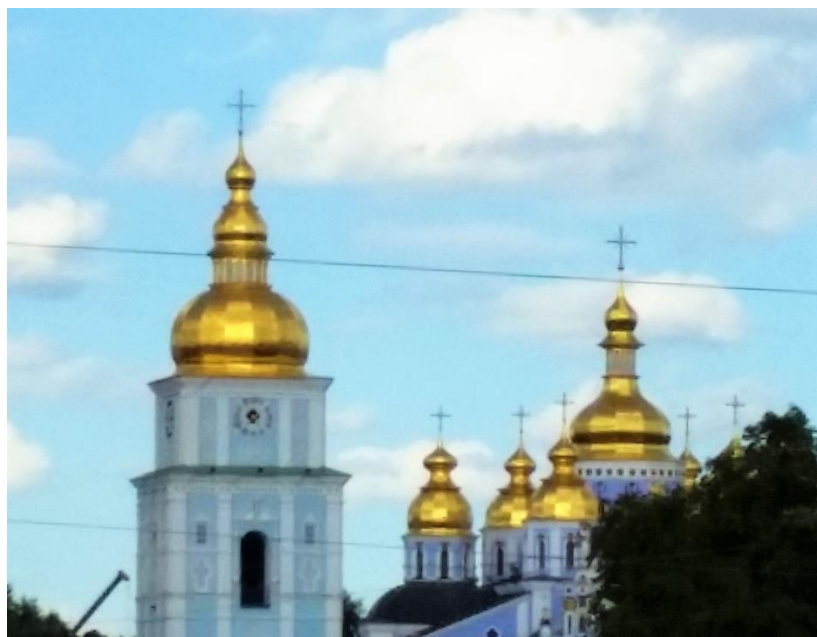
An invitation to speak at a programme in the Ukraine celebrating the 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary of HPB's birth AND being held in the home of her birth seemed to me something not to be missed. It also sent me to the map. What other TOS groups were nearby? The opportunity to visit Eastern Europe should be used as comprehensively as possible, I thought. Aha, the TOS groups in Hungary and Slovenia were close enough for this trip, and Poland, my maternal grandparents' country of origin was right next door. Perhaps a little personal adventure and family research was in order as well? After all, when would I get

another chance to visit there? The invitation was accepted, members in the other countries contacted and arrangements made.

A big part of my job as TOS International Secretary (TOS-IS) is acquainting Theosophical Society (TS) and Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) members, potential members and friends with the existence and work of the TOS. It's accomplished through the publication of our e-newsletter, *TOS In-Touch Online*, the use of our website, personal communications with TOS leaders and friends and by giving talks and presentations around the world.

The TOS session held at the Adyar Convention each year gives us our biggest opportunity to interact with international members as those from many countries attend. The 2014-15 convention that I attended shortly after being appointed TOS-IS was my first time at such an event. You can read an account of it on our website here: <http://international.theoservice.org/news/201503-latest.html>. In May 2015, my husband and I incorporated TOS work into a personal holiday by visiting the TS headquarters in The Netherlands, Belgium, France and England. I gave presentations during that trip at Naarden and in Brussels for the then fledgling TOS group in Belgium.

## Ukraine



I arrived in Kiev on a bright sunny afternoon, and was welcomed by Svitlana Gavrylenko, the Organising Secretary of the TS Regional Association in the Ukraine. As we drove through Kiev on the way to Svitlana's flat, she explained that the city was built on both sides of the Dnieper River. We were then on the left side which is more industrial and looked like many cities in the US. When we crossed to the other side, the gold, onion shaped

tops of the Eastern Orthodox churches and the ornamentation on other buildings left no doubt that we were in the Ukraine.

The next morning we travelled by train to Dnipro (formerly Dnipropetrovsk and, before that, Yekaterinoslav), HPB's birthplace. We saw farmlands and an occasional very small village always with a beautiful, gold topped church. We passed fields of sunflowers as far as the eye could see. Svitlana explained that sunflower oil is much loved in the Ukraine and pointed out that the blue sky and golden fields are echoed in the colours of the Ukrainian flag.



Upon arriving at the home of Blavatsky's birth, we stood outside reverently for a few minutes taking it in. Unbeknownst to the others, it was my birthday, and I took secret delight in this special gift of seeing HPB's birthplace for the first time on my own birthday. Inside people were working on windows, restoring them. Others worked in other rooms taking these last few days before the programme to get them ready. Members of the TS/TOS in the Ukraine and others have been working to restore

the house in which HPB was born, and her family estate, for a number of years now. Much work has been done, much more needs to be done. (You can read an account of the Museum Centre elsewhere in this newsletter).



***Many volunteers worked long and hard to get the Museum ready for the programme.***



Svitlana and I, along with Antonio Girardi, General Secretary, Patrizia Calvi, National Secretary and Sergio Calvi, National Treasurer of the Italian Section, joined in during the next few days washing windows and helping with painting the building's facade.



***Patrizia Calvi, Nancy Secrest and Svitlana Gavrylenko washed windows.***



***Antono Girardi, General Secretary of TS Italy helped to paint the façade as did Sergio Calvi (not shown).***



***Elena Alivantseva, scientific curator of the Museum, explains a display dedicated to HPB's mother pictured at the top.***

Elena Alivantseva, the scientific curator and one of the original people involved with the project, gave us a tour of the exhibits and outlined the progress made so far and their hopes and plans for the future.

The formal programme took place on 12-13 August in Dnipro and on 14 August in Kiev. Talks given by Antonio Girardi, Svitlana Gavrylenko, Yuliya Shabanova, Elena Alivantseva, myself and others filled the days. We also enjoyed listening to soothing sounds that emanated from a programme of Tibetan bowls, enjoyed a piano concert featuring the music of Schuman and Schubert and an original play, *Seeking Truth*, written by Kiev member Nikolai Shcherbina and put on by the Kiev branch – God and two angels watch the progress of a theosophist fighting against his lower self. The antics of the person playing the lower self were particularly hilarious.

An interview at a local TV studio proved that theosophists think alike. Svitlana, Yuliya, an author and professor of philosophy, and I were interviewed about the Museum Centre, Theosophy and Yuliya's latest book. At one point the MC asked me what I liked best about Theosophy. Svitlana translated. "The concepts of brotherhood and unity," I answered. He smiled broadly. It turned out that he had asked Svitlana the same thing, and when he had her ask me he said to her, "Let's see if the two of you agree". Happily, it turned out that we did.



***Nancy's talk given on 12 August, 2016 at HPB's birthplace in Dnipro, Ukraine was entitled "Self Knowledge is of Loving Deeds the Child."***

My visit included meetings with TS and TOS groups in Dnipro and Kiev. In Dnipro, both my report, a short PowerPoint presentation of current TOS activities around the world, and the presentation of the report from the Ukraine were followed by questions, answers and general group discussion about the TOS with discussion of TOS activities, the future of the Museum Centre and its various fund-raising possibilities. The next day saw an

informal round table discussion with questions and answers and impressions from the attendees. Questions concerned the preservation of the TS

archives, how to further the translation of the many articles written by HPB in Russian, their hopes, plans and need for help in the restoration of Blavatsky's birthplace and especially the desire to make the Museum Centre an international centre.

As with many of the world's cultures, much camaraderie centred around the dinner table. The food we sampled in the Ukraine was simple and delicious. I had borscht for the first time and Ukrainian varenyka, a boiled (and then sometimes fried) dumpling that can be filled with a variety of things such as potato, cottage cheese, sauerkraut, mushrooms or even fruit.

Our last day in the Ukraine proved a bit more laid back after window washing, painting and a rigorous programme of activity. In the morning, Svitlana took the Italians and me for a walk around her area of Kiev that contains many government buildings and a large and beautiful park. Later that day we visited a city gate dating from medieval times and the Santa Sophia temple. Its interior was beautiful, ornate and intricate with gold filigree everywhere. The walls were covered with pictures of angels, apostles and saints, many holding books that were



closed. This, we were told, signified that this was an esoteric temple.

There was nothing esoteric about the kindness, energy and enthusiasm of the Ukrainian members and friends who welcomed us so openly to their homes and meeting places and who are working so hard to further Theosophy and be of service to humanity.

## Hungary

I arrived in Hungary on a national holiday and, that evening, joined 200,000 others at a fireworks display on the banks of the Danube that celebrated the crowning of their first king, Stephen. In Hungary I stayed with Janos Szabari and his wife Adrienne Nagyiday, our TOS correspondent there. Janos's daughter Noémi, son-in-law Zoltan, their little daughter, Isabella and I walked to the fireworks. Zoltan, who acted as a translator much of the time throughout my visit, related the Hungarian history to me as the display went on. It had been set to music some years earlier. The fireworks, timed to the music, made for a spectacular and powerful display of this historical story.



I met with the TOS group in Hungary giving a presentation of TOS history and current activities to them and later to members of the TS in Hungary as well. Informal discussion groups were held after each of these presentations. Discussions with TOS members have proven pretty universal wherever I go. We talk about local activities, suggestions for other activities, fund-raising methods, the best use of funds raised and how to get members and others interested and involved in the TOS. TS members always have questions as well, and while I cannot speak to these issues with any official TS authority, I can, at least, let members know where to go to get their questions answered.





One general question all of us are all dealing with these days concerns Syrian refugees and how we as individuals, TS/TOS members and citizens of whatever country we happen to call home can respond to this crisis. This was of particular interest in Hungary due to the government's billboard campaign and an upcoming vote on the issue. We spent time, during the meeting with TS members, discussing our feelings and what impact various refugee intake scenarios might have on the country and the refugees themselves. Our little groups can solve nothing on their own when it comes to major global issues such as this, but talking them out in the light of brotherhood and unity as stated in the First Object of the TS, does help each of us when we come to approach these issues at the human level. Perhaps as a result we can make our voices heard as citizens of our respective countries and as members of the TS/TOS.

One of the major TOS activities in Hungary is their work with the gypsy population in the village of Tapiobicske. Adrienne, Noémi, little Isabella, another



member, Agnes Nagy, and I visited there and met with the leaders of this community. There I learned the story of how they realised a dream of having a place for the children. When gypsy community leaders, Endre and Marika, asked for help with their project, the Hungarian TOS, along with a local Hungarian Buddhist Mission, responded. Working together, they fixed up a

house and turned it into a supplemental school. A teacher from the local school comes to this place three times a week to work with the children. Elders from the gypsy community also teach sewing, dancing and other things to the children, giving the elders a sense of purpose and preserving their culture as well as training the children in useful skills and arts. With the help of the TOS, the Buddhist Mission and others, the gypsy community raised funds for the building, help local families with food and clothing and support a hospital in the village of Szepsi whose population is 100% gypsy. A special delight was meeting some of the children, Riki, Venessa, Natalia, Krisztin, Ricsi and Kitti. Fourteen-year-old Ricsi stuck out his hand to shake mine and said, in perfect English, "My name is Ricsi."





One of the altars at St. Stephen's features a painting of Saint Cecilia painted by a former president of the Hungarian TS.

One evening Adrienne, Janos's older daughter and I attended a concert of pipe organ music at St Stephen's basilica that included the music of Mozart, Bach, Rachmaninoff and others. There we sat for a time transported by the beauty of the music and the powerful sound produced by the huge pipe organ.



We also visited a basilica in Esztergom dedicated to the Ascension of the Virgin Mary. Another TOS member, Josef, who teaches history and philosophy, told us many facts about the place and its history. Of special interest was its red marble altar and its pipe organ.

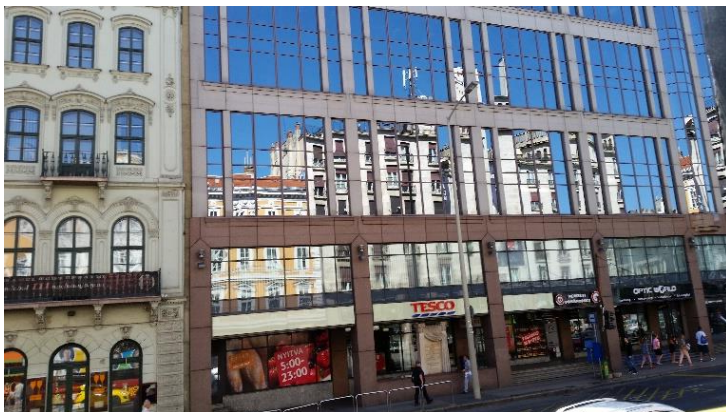




We saw the fortress in Visegrád that helped the Hungarians protect themselves from attack during the Middle Ages with its view of the curve in the Danube river.



We also visited the Citadel with its excellent views of the Danube, its traffic and Budapest. I took lots of pictures of the river and the many distinctive buildings and bridges in Budapest with their varying types of architecture.





Meeting and interacting with the TS/TOS members in Hungary was a warm and gratifying experience. I especially valued the opportunity to learn more about their project with the gypsy population and to have met the leaders of that community.

### **Slovenia**

My first glimpses of Slovenia were from the air, with the capital city of Ljubljana, little villages broken up by farmland and lots of trees. It's a pretty country that rivals Ireland for its greenness. I was hosted by a group of Theosophical Fellows at Large,



***Nancy Secrest spoke at the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana, Slovenia to an audience of TS members and the public.***



gathered around the Alma Maximiliana Karlin Theosophical Library, who are now directly attached to the Theosophical Society at Adyar. They share an interest in TOS work as well and many are already engaged in various service projects in small groups or independently. I presented a programme of TOS history and our work around the world at two public lectures. The talks took place at the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum in Ljubiana and at the Alma Maximiliana Karlin Theosophical Library in Celje. About 30 people attended each presentation. The Library houses a large meeting room and several rooms, ringed with books floor to ceiling, that are also suitable for smaller group meetings. I found it impressive with its collection of 11,000 books, conference room and office facilities. Some members stayed afterwards to enjoy treats and informal conversation just as TS members around the world often do.



***Participants at the Alma Maximiliana Karlin Theosophical Library in Celje, Slovenia after Nancy's presentation there.***



On my last day in Slovenia, we enjoyed the beautiful weather and met outside under a grape arbour to informally discuss various areas of service work those present are already involved in and possible directions in which to expand. A lively discussion was held and many good ideas presented.

My time in Slovenia also included a climb to the top of a castle with outstanding views of Ljubljana and the countryside beyond and a trip to the mountains.







***The Slovenian Alps***

The best thing wherever I went was the people, our warm and welcoming theosophical brothers and sisters. I enjoyed the many conversations with groups and individuals and learned so much about them, their countries and cultures and their hopes and aspirations for the Society and the TOS in their regions.

## **Poland**

My reasons for visiting Poland were personal, or so I thought, as there is no TS or TOS currently in Poland. Both my maternal grandparents were from towns not far from Krakow, Nowy Targ and Bochnia. I wanted to see what I could find out about my ancestors, and/or to see the places and the land they were from. Svitlana Gavrylenko kindly took time out from her significant workload as Organising Secretary of the Regional Association of the TS in Ukraine to accompany me. What a godsend! She spoke some Polish and it was fun to have a friend with whom to share the experience.

Svitlana had learned of a young woman, Karolina Hess, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on *The History of Theosophy in Poland*. Svitlana contacted Karolina. Karolina sent Svitlana a copy of her dissertation which we both read and I shared with TS International President, Tim Boyd. Since then, Karolina has received a scholarship with which to write a book on the topic. Her further research should prove helpful and interesting to the Society. It is my hope that it may help us to re-establish a theosophical connection in Poland.

Karolina offered to meet us in Krakow – another godsend. Not only did we spend several hours talking about her research and learning much about Theosophy in Poland, but she acted as our guide for two days and took the information I had about my ancestors, offering to find out what she could when she visited the towns they were from.



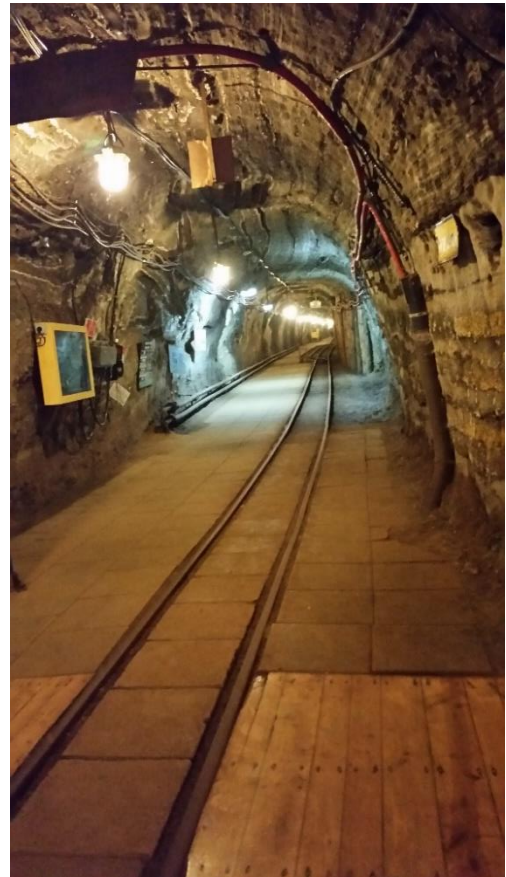
***Karolina Hess, Svitlana Gavrylenko and Nancy Secrest enjoying lunch at a restaurant in Krakow, Poland.***

Svitlana and I also visited my grandfather's village of Bochnia, which we found to be a picturesque medieval village abounding with trees, shrubs and flowers.



***Bochnia, Poland town square***

Bochnia is famous for its salt mine, the oldest in Europe. The salt mine is so large that it contains a cathedral, sports courts for soccer and basketball and an underground spa complete with a hotel for visitors, all far beneath the surface of the earth.



***Salt mine***



Later, while eating lunch as we waited for our train back to Krakow, I was struck by how international the world has become. There we sat, at a fast food place in Poland, eating Middle-Eastern falafel, while American rock and roll blasted from the restaurant's sound system.

The countries in Eastern Europe share a common bond. They were all members of the former Soviet Union where the practice of religion and participation in groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Theosophical Order of Service was suppressed. It has only been since 1989/1990 that the TS/TOS have again flourished in these countries. Talking with members about their histories helped me to better understand their cultures, their specific issues and to see and appreciate the love and compassion they have for their people that is apparent in their dedication to service.