

Guliya ABITOVA from Kyrgyzstan took part in the International CIF exchange program 2009 in Austria.

REPORT by Guliya ABITOVA, Kyrgyzstan

16 May-17 April, 2009 I participated in the professional and cultural exchange program in Austria and the Czech Republic, run by the Council of International Fellowship.

First a few words about this program:

CIF is an international organization with branches in many countries. It is an exchange program where social workers from different countries get together to share ideas, values and experiences related to social work.

The CIF objectives are:

- to increase professional knowledge in the field of social work
- to increase the understanding of world's diverse cultures through contact among the participants themselves

The program started in Austria and continued in the Czech Republic.

During my staying there I had 5 host families. Living with host families was an essential part of the program. It was a good way of learning about family life, its culture. They were really kind and friendly with me and we got along well. Every family was different in itself with its own way of life.

There were 7 participants of us from different countries: I, Anna and Varvara from Russia,

Kriton from Greece, Mone and Snigda from India, Ferusan from Turkey.

The first weekend we spent with the whole group and members of CIF program in the countryside near Vienna in a lovely old farmhouse. It was a chance for us to get to know each other and to get their first impression of Austrian life and culture.

I was impressed by the beautiful nature of the surrounding area. The landscape was beautiful, with green hills and fantastic flora.



In the farmhouse we got the introduction and information on Austria's historical, demographic and social background. After this weekend we continued with sightseeing in Vienna and I got a lot of impressions by historical monuments and buildings.

About the program itself: First we had a general program for the whole group and then an individual one. Every day we had 2-3 meetings visiting social institutions and projects. The visits

had been very interesting; we visited social agencies working with different target groups of clients: children, women, homeless men, and elderly people. We could observe closely how social workers carry out their professional activities. The most important thing I learnt about the role of social workers in the life of people. I haven't had any idea before that social workers could play a great role in the life of people. They are like social advocates; they know all social laws and help people to apply for benefits.

The individual program depended on the topic of the work the participant had. As I was the only person from the group whose topic of work were elderly people I had to visit social institutions working with older people on my own. I wasn't sorry about it because all attention was brought only to me.



My first visit was to the residential home "Neubau". The first thing which caught my eye was the cleanliness and perfect order. I was very astonished by the conditions the older people had there. Every old person had his own flat, 32 square meters, well furnished and with all conveniences. Couples could have double rooms. Living in the residential home costs 1.350 EUR. If your pension is 723 EUR, the state pays the rest of money.

With a feeling of bitter taste I recalled our visit to the Nijnya Serafimovka's Home for elderly people in Kyrgyzstan. What poor conditions our older people had there! I felt very sorry for our people because they deserve a better life and dignity in ageing, too.

I also visited other social institutions working for older people such as day centers, Caritas (home mobile service), counseling and active centers, council of senior citizens. The social welfare system in Austria is great and well functioning. Social institutions collaborate with each other, they don't duplicate their activities. They have shared computerized system which allows them to work closely.

I'd like to highlight the role the government has in caring for older people. The government is supporting elderly people in such a way that they can enjoy their life in old age, lead active, healthy, and dignified lives. The government funds not only state social institutions but non governmental organizations implementing projects in the social sphere.

Our government also supports older people but the support is not enough and many of our older people feel themselves vulnerable and disadvantaged. They became painfully aware of the fact that nothing was going to be changed.

It's good that we have international programs and projects which are aimed at supporting elderly people in our country.

Visiting social institutions I was interested in how older people access information about services. It turned out that there are a lot of ways of getting information for older people, such as mass media, internet (they have a special website about social services), social hotline, and counseling centers. Older people in Austria don't have any problems with access to information.

I had a meeting with the representative of the senior council under the city administration of Vienna. I liked the idea of their council to post birthday's greeting cards to the older people who are 70 years old with a signature of the mayor. They attached the information sheet with all services provided by social institutions to older people. It is a good possibility to contact people, to reach the most vulnerable ones. Unfortunately this system of disseminating information is not

adaptable in our country because printing and posting cards cost a lot of money, but I liked this idea very much. I think it's good for older people to receive such cards for birthday and with important information attached. In this case they won't feel themselves forgotten and being isolated.

The most important thing I'd like to point out is about the Residential Advocacy Service. It's a new service in the Austrian social system. Legal residential advocates control residential homes, nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals. There is a special Residential Stay Law aimed at protecting residents in nursing homes and other institutions for handicapped persons against limitations of the free movement. Any violations against older people staying in these institutions have to be brought to the attention of residential advocates. For example bad care from nurses or exceeding restrained measures. I think it's a very important and significant service for older people. Because the residential advocacy service let older people feel themselves legally protected.

During this program I also visited Intervention Center against Domestic Violence which works with victims of domestic violence: children, women, and elderly people. The Intervention Centers are officially authorized services for the protection of victims and provide counseling and support. You can also get there information about the rights and about the support facilities available. They work closely with the police. If you became a victim of any type of violence you can turn to these centers for counseling, call an emergency hotline or turn directly to the police for immediate assistance and protection. In Austria there is legislation on the protection of victims of domestic violence which works perfectly. For example the Act on Protection against Violence is a very effective instrument for the police to protect you from a perpetrator immediately. Social workers will teach you how to apply complaints.

After three weeks spent in Austria we set off to Prague to continue our program. We spent there one week visiting social institutions targeted on different clients.

What I'd like to point out is that older people in the Czech Republic also have similar problems, like in our country: inadequate pension, adapting to new economic conditions, poor quality of services, high rent for housing, lack of access to information.

At the end of this program there was an international farewell party where we had lots of music, dancing, food. Every participant was awarded with a certificate of participation in this program. It was difficult to say goodbye to each other. We really had a good time there. It goes without saying that this program will be unforgettable for everyone from our group.

First of all we had a great opportunity to widen our experience and knowledge, gain new skills; we could share ideas and experiences with each other. I think most important for me was to meet other people doing the same work as you do or in the other fields of social work. I made out new friends.

It was my first trip abroad. I had a great opportunity to see the world with my own eyes. You can't imagine the kind of state I was in when I first arrived in Austria. I had to get through some difficulties like getting used to a new country, new people, their way of life, food. I had a poor sense of orientation and coordination and couldn't read a map, that's why I had so many times feeling of mixed up about which way to turn in the underground station. But now I can say that I'm good at doing these things. I became more confident, independent, and responsible.

Austrian punctuality and discipline taught me plan my time and my own capabilities, to control myself. I improved my communications skills through meetings with different people. I became more tolerant, caring and respectful to all people.