

Portrait

Zoltán Kramár, PhD
By: Márta Boros Horváth



The soft-spoken, congenial professor emeritus, Zoltán Kramár, and his wife, Mária, received me in their lovely Queen Anne condo overlooking Seattle's bay. The view from the apartment couldn't have been lovelier on this sunny April afternoon.

Professor Kramár is well known in our community for many years, even though he spent his working years as an

educator at Central Washington University in Ellensburg. For many years he and his wife were only visitors to Seattle. Retirement changed this routine. Since then they have become part-time Seattle residents, commuting between their family home in Ellensburg and the Seattle condo.

"I no longer have to steer my car, it knows the way by itself, we travel the hour-and-a-half-long trip so often," says Zoltán. It will be difficult for Mária to keep on running two households for years, so eventually they will have to sell the Ellensburg home. They are partial to Seattle because of the many cultural opportunities and their extensive circle of friends here.

Zoltán Kramár was born in Budapest, though his family lived in Szeged. "Everybody was a doctor in our family, only I wanted to be something else, I was the odd man," he remarks. His sister, Piroska, was also an ophthalmologist in Seattle.

His parents, to avoid the Russian occupation of Hungary during Christmas of 1944, fled to Germany with their two children. Thus Zoltán's Hungarian education ended at age 11. In Germany he attended middle school and learned not only German but English as well. In 1950 his family moved to the U.S. Zoltán, skipping the last years of high school, was accepted by the Jesuits' Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. He earned his BA here. He was drafted into the army for two years, 18 months of which was spent in Germany. After the army he continued his studies and earned his masters degree, then he went on to do his doctoral research in Vienna, Austria. The material needed for his research (on the conciliation of Austria and Hungary) was accessible in the archives there. He received his doctorate from the University of Nebraska.

While working on his research in Vienna he met his future wife, Mária, at a Cserkész (Hungarian Boy Scout/Girl Scout) jamboree in Germany. They were both Cserkész leaders. Their first daughter, Kinga, was 7 months old when they moved to the U.S. to lay the foundation for Zoltán's career and their family's future. Their second daughter, Enikő, was born here in 1964.

Zoltán received his first teaching position in Ellensburg in 1963 at Central Washington University, and 33 years later he retired from the same place as a professor of the History Department. As a testament to a successful career he also filled the post of Dean from 1976 to 1980 in the Arts and Humanities Department. Even though he was invited to Ellensburg to teach Greek and Roman history, his specialty through the years turned out to be modern military history, and he offered many popular courses in this subject. Within the University he also

taught at the prestigious Douglas Honors College for 14 years.

He's a born teacher who has enjoyed his profession, loved his work with his students and always felt comfortable in the classroom. As an educator his aim was that his students recognize the connection and background of historical events instead of learning mere numbers and names. Thus, he wished to help his pupils develop independent and critical thinking.

Our Association, HAAW, has often been the beneficiary of Zoltán's expert historical knowledge. He was the featured speaker a number of times at our commemorations of the 1848 and 1956 revolutions. In 1986, the year of the 30th anniversary of the 1956 revolution, Dr. Kramár, along with Helen Szablya, gave lectures through the Inquiring Mind speaking engagements throughout the State of Washington. Currently, requested by HAAW, he will give a series of talks on "The Twentieth Century: Decisive Dates in Hungarian History." We

look forward to it with great interest.

Mária has been the devoted leader of the Seattle-Pécs Sister City Association for the last 10 years, and Pécs put its stamp on their life and home. Every year the Krámars host a student from Pécs within the cultural and education exchange program. They have formed lasting friendships with these former students who have had a chance to experience American life and people first hand.

Since his retirement in 1996 Professor Kramár was invited six times by the University of Pécs to be a guest professor of the History Department and the English Language Literature and

Cultures Department. He lectured in both Hungarian and English. He did not accept any compensation for his services, saying that this was his way of paying his debt to his fatherland. Namely, the comment had been made by friends and relatives in Hungary that "it was easy for you all in the West."

While Zoltán and Mária were raising their children, true to Cserkész traditions, they hiked the nearby mountains during school breaks. They tried to take their daughters every three years to Hungary to visit Mária's parents. These visits eventually cured Zoltán of his initial homesickness because he and his family were faced with the Hungarian realities of the Communist era.

Despite all, Zoltán says, "Politically I am a U.S. citizen, culturally I am European, but my nationality is Hungarian." Unlike many people without roots, regardless of whether he travels to Hungary or back to the U.S., he says he is always at home. Can an immigrant Hungarian have a more pleasant and satisfying state of mind than that?

