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# Teacher taps into Croatian heritage

## Visit a revelation

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**HEBRON** - In 1906, 24-year-old Croatian carpenter Ivan Halusek emigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Northern Kentucky.

One hundred years later, his great granddaughter, Renae Rao, an English teacher at Connor High School, went to Croatia to learn about its teaching methods and her heritage.

The September trip was the culmination of work Rao has been doing for the past few years. During her regular classes, students learn about other cultures by writing to English students in her great-grandfather's small hometown of Podravske Sesvete.

"They seemed to have similar techniques as us, some lecture, some group work, student projects," said Rao. "Something I did like is the availability of foreign language at a young age - at a time when the potential for language acquisition is at its peak."

The 12-year-old daughter of the teacher Rao's class writes to served as her translator.

Because of the town's small size, students attend classes in shifts. In the mornings, fifth- through eighth-graders attend. First through fourth grade are instructed for four hours in the afternoon. High school classes are taught at a nearby town.

"I did not observe as much straight instruction as I would have liked to because everything seemed to stop when I entered a classroom - they were very interested in hearing about my students and the U.S.A.," said Rao.

"People were very interested in not only hearing about 'Amerike,' but about our impressions of the village of Podravske Sesvete as well," said Rao. "Many of the young people spoke English, as it was the only foreign language class offered in the village schools."

The small Croatian village of about 1,800 people has a Web site and has posted a report of Rao's visit. It stated, "On 29th of September we had the most interesting visit in our school. Real American professor Mrs. Jennifer Renae Roa came all the way from Hebron, Kentucky, USA to our little village. We were so happy and excited that children could even hardly speak to her. She was very warm and little by little we made a good connection. Children wanted to know about life in the U.S.A. and differences between our and their schools."

Rao made the 11-hour trip with her grandmother, Dorothy Halusek Rhorer, and great uncle, Melvin Halusek, who was visiting their father's country for the first time.

The village priest showed them a book containing the Halusek family records. On a page from 100 years ago, fourth line from the top, is an entry that states, Ivan Halusek went to "Amerike."

"Walking the streets that my great-grandfather walked 100 years ago and seeing his name in the book was surreal," said Rao. "I remember thinking about the significance of individual decisions. Had my great grandfather, Ivan, not come to America, so many things would be different - I would not be. I could see the emotion on my grandmother's face as she touched the book - and I was happy that we could be there together."

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