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Visiting Professors See Turmoil in Eastern Europe

During the spring semester, UB Law students gained a personal perspective on the tumultuous changes in Eastern Europe through the eyes of two visiting professors.

Andras Sajo, of Hungary, and Krzysztof Palecki, of Poland, both brought their legal insights and their intellectual, social and political observations into the classrooms of O'Brian Hall. Each has experienced firsthand the birthpangs of nations learning to embrace the idea and the practice of democracy.

For Andras Sajo, the semester's end meant a return to his native Budapest and a renewed campaign on behalf of a proposed new constitution for Hungary. In company with a group of fellow scholars, he served as a member of the Constitution Drafting Committee which wrote the proposed constitution — because, he said, the current document is technically deficient.

"It's frustrating to see these political difficulties in the country because there is no proper constitution," Sajo said. "I know these problems can be solved."

The constitutional debate is a major issue among the Hungarian people, the professor said. "There was a major debate on prime-time television, and there was huge press coverage.

"Many people believe we have an act of Parliament and we have a constitution -- so everything's fine.

But that's not enough. We need a stronger belief in the rule of law."

Sajo's teaching at UB included a course in public international law and a seminar in comparative environmental law. He is a professor of Comparative and International Business Law at the School of Economics in Budapest, and a Scientific Counsellor at the Institute of Legal and Political Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

He is also active in restructuring the Hungarian economy as the deputy chair of the National Deregulation Board.

"It's a nice intellectual atmosphere here," he said. "There are a lot of people who have advanced degrees in other areas, which makes for a nice cross-fertilization."

The international law course brought home to students the reality of the soon-to-be-unified European Community.

"It seems to me," Sajo said, "that Americans are still reluctant to understand the implications of the European Community. This will be an entity with more power, more influence than even the United States has.

"You automatically believe that now that the Soviet Union has fallen apart, the United States is No. 1. That's going to last just two more years," he predicted.

Sajo, who polished his excellent command of English by working as a tour guide in Budapest in his youth, said he found "some pretty nice

surprises" in Western New York during his semester here. He spoke highly of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and of the intellectual climate of the University as a whole. "Interesting people come here to speak," he said.

But he left with a marginal assessment of the job American elementary and high schools are doing. "They just don't require the students to work hard," he said. In his international law course, he found that "people have no idea of American history, no idea of geography. This is not just in Buffalo, this is everywhere."

For Krzysztof Palecki, of Poland, the trip to Buffalo was part of a major scholarly exchange agreement between the State University of New York and Jagiellonian University in Krakow, where he is director of the Institute for Political Sciences. At UB, in addition to teaching, Palecki worked to coordinate and expand the program's scope among SUNY faculty and students.

The exchange program — which focuses on the social sciences, law and the humanities — is intended to explore the theory of political transition in the context of both the United States and Poland. Palecki was the third Jagiellonian professor to teach at UB.

The agreement, Palecki said, is "so wide, so rich, that it's almost unprecedented. It looks very promising."

The seminar Palecki taught at UB Law, "The Theory of Law and State," dealt less with nuts-and-bolts lawyering than with the philosophy that undergirds our legal process: the legitimacy of law and state, the problem of bureaucracy and political power.

Such an approach, he said, is somewhat unusual in this country. "We have a much stronger tradition of this kind of legal study in Europe, especially in the older universities," he explained. "In American schools of law, it's a very pragmatic approach, and theory is something that would be on the margin of interest.

"But there is a new model of lawyer — a lawyer who is not just a specialist in rules and procedures, but

who is also a kind of social worker, well-oriented in the economy, with some grounding in social issues.

"We can have legal technicians, and we can have lawyers. I think we need lawyers."

As an administrator, Palecki has found much to be enthusiastic about in the cultural exchanges he is helping to arrange. At the same time, he remains essentially a teacher and a scholar. "All the time, I am negotiating and bargaining, which I like to do," he said. "My spirit is that of a scientist — not an administrator."

Of primary interest to all concerned, of course, is the promising democratization of his native land.

"What is going on now in Poland is extremely exciting," Palecki said.

"The scale of changes is enormous. But it is a long process, a chain of events, and I took part in many of these events. I feel a little alienated (because of the distance), but it is so exciting to be here, too.

"Don't forget, I was here during the Iraq war. The revival of national pride, national identity for some people, even, is very interesting to me.

"I think quite honestly that I understand much better some of America's problems than before. The personal touch with things and matters is always best."

In Buffalo, Palecki has felt "a kind of tension" among recession-wary residents. "People are afraid," he said. "People are nervous about many things."

But he also sees the University as an institution with the potential to become the engine driving Western New York's economic recovery.

"The role of the University is incomparable," he said. "The University is the stimulator of all kinds of social activity. Here, it's really the center of life.

"So maybe the future for Buffalo, I wish, will be intellectual prosperity. It could be a center for international exchange and scientific studies. I think what really can save Buffalo is science."

During the summer, his wife and teen-age daughter flew from Krakow to join him for a taste of the real America.

"The best souvenir," he said, "was putting my wife and daughter in a car and touring the country...just to build some kind of image of America, different from what we know of it from television and the movies.

"It is always better for people if they know the truth." ■



Professor Krzysztof Palecki, of Poland.