Au Pair

Zuzana Búriková & Daniel Miller

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ZB – To my grandmother
DM – To our au pairs (well, most of them)

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ZUZANA BÚRIKOVÁ AND DANIEL MILLER

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First published in 2010 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5011-1
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5012-8 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We cannot name our informants individually, either au pairs or host families, because that would breach our agreement with them to preserve anonymity. We hope this will not be taken in any way as a sign of our ingratitude. We are both hugely grateful to everyone who provided us with their time and their own insights. The generosity of the au pairs to Zuzana was remarkable. For her, this was never just an experience of collecting information. As in the true sense of participant observation, these are basically the stories of the friends with whom she spent a year, many of whom gave her unqualified trust and companionship. They may not agree with everything we have to say, but we hope that our mutual efforts will lead to better understanding and justice in the institution of the au pair.

We are also very grateful to the Leverhulme Foundation, which provided the essential funding of the project. Zuzana would like to express her gratitude to IWM in Vienna, where she prepared the project as a junior visiting fellow. Grant VEGA 1/0632/08 (*Sociologická a antropologická analýza spotreby produktov a voľnočasových aktivít na Slovensku*) enabled Zuzana to spend a month writing with Danny in London. Since completing fieldwork, she has been employed at the Institute of Ethnology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences and later also in the anthropology section of the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Masaryk University in Brno. She worked on this manuscript while employed at these institutions.

We are very indebted to the following people, who provided us with thoughtful comments on sections of the manuscript: Miloslav Bahna, Ivana Bajič-Hajdukovič, Danijela Djuršič, Martin Fotta, Nicky Gregson, Jan Grill, Ľubica Herzánová, Jana Levická, Deirdre

Mckay, Anna Pertierra, Ira Price, Michal Šípoš, Helena Tužinská and anonymous readers from Polity Press. This book was also fed by numerous discussions with colleagues and friends, including Bridget Anderson, Rosie Cox, Mirina Fornayová, Radovan Haluzík and Lenka Nahodilová.

Zuzana would like to thank to Ján Gregor, Jozef Gryga, Milka Pribišová, Helena Tužinská and Elena Želibabková for their friendship and trust during the project. Her sister, Petra Slamová, made her stay in London much more pleasant than it would have been otherwise. She is especially grateful to her granny and to her partner, Peter Sekerák, for all their love, support and encouragement during the years of writing. Without them it would have been much more difficult if not impossible to finish the book. Danny is particuarly indebted to his own family, to his wife, Rickie, and also to his children, Rachel and David, who, in retrospect, now appear as the subjects of his own early participant observation work on this institution. Finally we should like to thank John Thompson and Polity Press for their help and guidance through the process of publication.

PROLOGUE

This is a book about what it is like to be an au pair in a Western European city – not just working for a family, but the whole experience of deciding to become an au pair, seeing oneself as an au pair, and its longer-term consequences. It is based upon spending a year hanging out with au pairs and conducting an ethnography, the standard methodology used by anthropologists. We undertook this work because, as with most forms of domestic labour, we suspected that most people tend to take this institution for granted. They may use au pairs when they need to, but are somewhat embarrassed by their presence and even by the existence of the relationship involved. Yet we would hope that most of us would actually want to have some better sense of what the consequences of such an arrangement are for the people who make this journey and work in the somewhat strange situation of living with a family but not actually being part of that family.

For an academic book this work is quite unusual in containing almost no academic references within the main body of the text. So we are hoping that much of it is a good read, uncluttered with constant external referencing. Nevertheless we certainly also intend it to be viewed as an academic contribution, based on scholarship, original analysis and insight. To achieve this we have tried to experiment with several styles of writing, combining individual stories with more analytical chapters.

There was a second reason why we have left our engagement with the academic literature to an appendix and to differentiate our study from the mainstream academic research on domestic labour. That literature is concerned primarily to reveal the exploitation and inequality found in this form of work, and it is thereby directed to domestic

workers largely in their capacity as labourers. In this book, by contrast, our primary commitment to au pairs has been that of ethnographers. Au pairs may be concerned more about relationships with boyfriends or with London than with their host families. Many of the topics that we explore have to do with intimate issues of embarrassment, humiliation, mutual misunderstanding, and uncertainties that are not formally aspects of labour.

One of the strengths of an ethnographic approach is that it provides material to humanize its subjects – to treat them as just ordinary people, with their own foibles and imperfections, and not only as victims or perpetrators of a process. We do examine issues of exploitation, power and prejudice. But we could certainly imagine positions being reversed – how, given the opportunity, the au pairs would have behaved much like their hosts. There was racism, stereotyping and opportunism in exploiting the other on both sides. This is why we are also concerned in our concluding chapters to analyse the institution itself and see how it is often institutional structures that have fostered rather than prevented such exploitation.

In contrast to most forms of domestic labour studied by academics, the institution of the au pair did not arise out of the international division of labour or from a servant culture. It started from a more egalitarian tradition by which German and English middle-class families sent young women to spend time with French and Swiss families, largely to improve their French. This was a much more reciprocal sense of engagement that followed from exchanges of schoolchildren between families, and is mainly a reflection of the dominance of language. The official model is of a pseudo-family arrangement in which the au pair is supposed to be incorporated within the household more as a member than as a labourer.

We restricted ourselves to the study of Slovak au pairs in the London region. Slovaks may well be one of the largest groups of au pairs in London relative to population size. Our research took place at a time when the typical au pair was starting to come from locations such as Slovakia, Turkey or Croatia rather than from Paris or Stockholm and employers were beginning to extend from the first and second zones of the London underground to zones 5 and 6. We were concerned to investigate the degree to which this represented a change in the institution. Au pairs are now coming with different motivations, while families may not see Slovaks within the same egalitarian framework as they do Scandinavians. Our fieldwork also took place shortly after the time when Slovakia joined the EU. This meant that one of the main reasons people might choose to become an au pair

– to gain a visa to visit the UK – was no longer valid. Despite this, au pairing seems to have retained its central role for young Slovak women coming to London.

The project consisted of working with fifty au pairs, who, because they sometimes changed families, represented eighty-six host families. Zuzana recorded interviews with all fifty au pairs. But the primary methodology of anthropology consists of participant observation, which seeks the broadest possible engagement with every aspect of the lives of the people whom the anthropologist seeks to understand. In addition, we both work within a particular subdiscipline called material culture studies. So, as well as talking with au pairs and observing their lives, we paid particular attention to details of how exactly they decorate their rooms within the family house and their attitude to things such as cleaning materials, food and clothing.

Zuzana is herself a Slovak, from a region in which it was becoming increasingly common for young women to become au pairs. As an ethnographer she spent nearly every day of her year in London in the direct company of au pairs. Although she was very careful to ensure that the au pairs were aware that she was there in her capacity as academic researcher, generally this hardly constrained the development of friendship and companionship. In many ways these were ideal conditions for participant observation. Most of the au pairs spent the day in isolation looking after children and cleaning houses. Not surprisingly, they welcomed the presence of a fellow Slovak who could also assist in these tasks. Zuzana's study often developed into more general friendships in which she shared a wide variety of experiences and confidences.

Danny, by contrast, comes from a North London, middle-class Jewish milieu, the typical background for a household employing au pairs, and had himself employed sixteen au pairs from a range of different countries in raising his own children. He was well placed, then, to carry out a small complementary research project on those who employed au pairs. In some cases he worked with the same families that Zuzana was seeing from the other side and in others he used his own networks. Although there was a considerable imbalance in the time spent in fieldwork, in every other respect this is an entirely joint project. As well as working with host families, Zuzana introduced Danny to many of the au pairs and the places they frequented. The whole book has been written collaboratively, with each aspect of the material being discussed, much of it while sitting side by side at a computer, supplemented by rewriting exchanged through e-mails between London and Bratislava.

All the names that appear in the text are fictitious, and other minor changes have been made in order to ensure that we kept the promise made to all informants, to respect their anonymity. The same name always designates the same person. All descriptions are taken from actual observation or interviews, unless we specify otherwise. But in the interests of anonymity some details are switched between different persons. The chapter that is written as a day in the life of one au pair is built from many different days, and involves several au pairs. All participants were informed by us of our status as researchers who were intending to publish this material under conditions of anonymity.

Each chapter of this book is written in a different style. Chapter 1 consists simply of the story of four individuals, with a brief, more generalized conclusion, while chapter 2 is a more conventionally academic discussion based on material culture analysis of the relationship seen through rooms, cleaning and food. Chapter 3 uses a different genre – a day in the life – describing the work of an au pair, but this is followed by the completely different interpretation of the same relationship by a host mother.

Chapter 4 tackles one of the most difficult aspects of the encounter, which is that of racism, as seen on both sides of this relationship. The next two chapters move out of the house and examine the leisure activities of the au pairs and their relationship with men. Again we flow between more literary methods for conveying the stories of the place and individuals to more generalized academic descriptions. By chapter 7, however, we feel ready to move to a more academic analysis of the time spent in London, using the model of a *rite de passage*. This leads to the conclusion, where we felt we needed to take responsibility for making our own recommendations as to how to improve the current situation – recommendations that we believe would help curb the tendencies towards exploitation which we have uncovered, and thereby help families as well as au pairs. Finally the appendix provides both a brief immersion of our particular study within the larger comparative study of domestic labour and an effective reading list for those who want to learn more about these kinds of relationships.

— 1 —

WHY NOT?

Barbora

As with several other major decisions in her life, Barbora's decision to become an au pair was made while sitting in a shed surrounded by a circle of appreciative pigs. Actually people also appreciate Barbora, who is often seen as the life and soul of social gatherings, radiating warmth from smiles that arise from genuine generosity rather than any desire to be liked. A friend described her as looking like a small bird, though with disproportionally large attentive eyes and a contagious laugh. She is effervescent, though not particularly pretty, and her sparkle is balanced by the feeling of solid stability that speaks to her village background and seems to put people at their ease. Despite this, for Barbora herself, the only place that seemed completely calm and free of the stress that somehow attaches itself to all relationships with people was in her retreat at the pigsty. Pigs also seemed to sense that she is a village girl who has grown up knowing their ways, and were entirely at ease in her company. Yet it was her close relationship with pigs that ironically had become one of the reasons why she now had to escape from stress by becoming an au pair.

Barbora's detailed observations of pigs had led from an impoverished village upbringing to being within a few weeks of completing a PhD on critical factors in pigs relating body weight to reproduction. This was the reason she had visited this particular sty in southern Slovakia nearly every day for the last three years. But today (in early June 2004) she discovered for the third time that the department had failed to purchase the software required for her to complete her analysis. This failure had brought to the surface a truth she had tried to suppress for a very long time – that actually the potential career

that would have followed, had she been able to complete this work, had far more to do with her mother's ambition than her own.

The decision was not entirely of the moment. A week earlier, when she was already well aware that the departmental news might not be good, Barbora had been sitting with the pigs and calculating. While there were many things at that point in her life she did not want, her fantasies for the future all seemed to be focused around one thing, giving these pigs a proper home. Admittedly, in this farmstead of the future there was probably an adoring husband and many happy children, but they all seemed to come naturally as accoutrements to accommodation that after three years' research she knew would be absolutely perfect for the pigs. But this vision would cost money. The only way she could think of to raise the capital and at the same time to escape the combined stress of parents and academic frustration was to plan for a year as an au pair. Who knows, maybe this might be followed by an internship at an ecological pig farm she had read about somewhere in the British countryside. Perhaps the reason why in this vision of her future the pigs were in the foreground and a husband in the background was because she had also recently broken up with her boyfriend, who, in contrast, seemed quite clear about his academic ambitions – a single-mindedness that, she had felt, would very likely be to the detriment of whoever turned out to be his partner.

It wasn't really that becoming an au pair was such a positive choice; it was just that it formed in her head as something a bit more concrete when everything else was hazy. Barbora simply had no clear idea of what to do, and every other thought about the future would soon become crowded out by caveats and fears. If you were not sure about the direction of your career or education, where the next man might come from, or indeed whether there would be a next man, then the one great advantage of becoming an au pair was that it was bound to be temporary. It was less a decision and more a putting off of all other decisions. Surely if it seemed impossible to decide at this precise moment what to do next, in a year's time things might have straightened themselves out somewhat. Barbora might then have a better idea of who she was, and that seemed to be a precondition for knowing what she should become. It was impossible to take an equivalent childcare or cleaning job in the capital, Bratislava. Given her education, her parents would have been mortified, and the pay was dreadful. So becoming an au pair seemed more like a gap year. Furthermore, improving her English was the ideal skill to develop when she didn't know what she wanted to do, because it was likely to be useful in practically anything – even watching the television.

Cleaning a house was work, but of a kind that Barbora found relatively relaxing and quite compatible with having lots of time for contemplation about life and her future. Finally there was something about going to Britain. Just looking at a map and knowing there was that little bit of sea between her and her mother seemed an integral part of the plan. So why not go to Britain?

A week later Barbora was in such a state of frustration that she was desperate to get back to the pigsty. Whatever the failures and absurdities of the outside world, there was some kind of rational world and order that she associated with her pigs. By comparison this au pair business, after just one week, seemed like an absolute farce. For somebody who was used to the patient accumulation of knowledge, it seemed that arranging au pair work was based on the principle that nobody should know anything about anybody. This had started from the moment she had decided to prepare her documentation for e-mailing to the agency. Her friends had been horrified that she had intended an accurate self-portrayal, and she was even more horrified at the idea that she would have to falsify photographs and references. After reading six instruction guides from agencies, all of which stressed she had to supply a photo of herself smiling in the company of children, she remarked she had no children, but surely they could make do with one of dozens of photos that she did have of herself surrounded by happy pigs.

What really made this into a farce was the phone call she had just received from the agency. Having decided on this radical change in direction, she had thought she might as well make a complete break and, rather than stay with the countryside and farm life, opt for London itself. So in filling out her form she ignored all the options and boxes provided for her to state her preferences except those that specified that she did not want to be in the countryside and she did not want to be placed with a single father. Unbelievably, the agency just telephoned to report with great delight they had already found her a new home in England which turned out to be with a single father living in a village. As she remarked, it was just as well she had not specified that she did not want to be with a black man, because otherwise he undoubtedly would have been black as well. When she had remonstrated with the woman in the agency, the woman had said there were actually no homes in any town in England that were likely to be available, and that all families living in towns would want someone who could drive. She continued that Barbora was lucky to be working with such an efficient agency and, furthermore, that she herself had worked as an au pair with a single man and found it a

fantastic experience. In response Barbora had gently inquired as to just how many single men this woman thought would make for a perfect stay. The irony seemed to be lost on the agency woman. But by this point Barbora somehow felt that she had already surrendered herself to fate and that actually the agency's insistence that, if she did not take up this placement, there was no telling when the next possibility would emerge might actually be the case. The final, but to her essential, communication was the agency's assurance (though how did they know?) that the man in question had a girlfriend.

Barbora was becoming irritated by the medium as well as the message. Typically, the agency was Czech owned, and the woman had that condescending Czech manner which meant the only thing you could be sure of was that she was acting in her own interest – happy to talk and talk, but not actually to give out any of the information you really needed. Yes, this was typical of Czechs, Barbora thought. Finally the agency woman had told her that this single man would phone her on Tuesday afternoon. Barbora made sure she was ready and persuaded a friend with a better command of English to wait with her in order to avoid any misunderstandings. Her English was good enough to read agricultural literature, but the prospect of a phone call with a 'native speaker' whose language was likely to be very different from the usual Slovak high-school standard seemed quite daunting.

On the other hand, she didn't want to go quite as far as her friend Edita a couple of years before. Edita didn't speak a word of English and had persuaded a friend to do all the talking for her. This risked a rather less than favourable outcome when she arrived and the family found out the truth. For a while they thought she might be some kind of criminal; they even phoned the police. But, surprisingly perhaps, once they got over their shock and annoyance they actually paid for her to take a summer language course in Cambridge, and after two months of intensive English tuition she returned to them and stayed for a year. The family was happy they had ended up with an educated au pair, and dined out with many friends on the story of their domestic version of *My Fair Lady* crossed with *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In Barbora's case, however, although she stayed in that afternoon and all evening too, the man did not call. He phoned three days later, when Barbora did not expect it and there was no supportive friend present. She felt she had somehow coped by restricting her responses largely to yes and no. Somehow the two understood each other – at least she hoped so. They ended up having three phone discussions, in each case with the man phoning at some time other than what they

had previously agreed. What also seemed entirely unfair to Barbora was that he had all the information he could possibly want about her: her address, mobile phone number and e-mail, plus a smiling picture (with children), while the agency provided her with no information at all about him. Finally he did let her have his e-mail, as it was easier to write than to speak, but even a week before leaving home she still did not have the address where she was supposed to go to in England, so she couldn't even tell her relatives and friends where she would be. Typically the agency couldn't see anything at all untoward about this asymmetry of information.

Having accepted the placement, Barbora had a month to get ready. Actually, even a month was ridiculous: it would be be her first big farewell, as she had never previously left her family and friends for any extended period. Her circle of friends and relatives was enormous, and it was clear that most of her goodbyes would be hurried and entirely out of character for a proper farewell. There were some people she was never going to get round to see at all. It was an odd feeling that the first time she truly appreciated how many people cared for her was the very moment when she was preparing to leave them. But the thoughts about who she was leaving behind were soon crowded out by having to think about what she had to take with her. One soon became as personal as the other. First came her Bible. Barbora was a staunch member of the minority Protestant faith, and her friend Robo presented her with a special travel edition of the New Testament which he had inscribed with the words 'Never forget your friends, your language and your God'. Her supervisor presented her with a blue furry pig and a ruler on behalf of the department. Her best friend took her on one side and pointed to a bear. 'Since time began', she said, 'no Slovak au pair ever left home without a teddy bear. You might think you are no longer a teenager, but, believe me, a teddy bear lying on your bed is a wonderful talisman against bad sex.' Barbora had replied, 'Don't worry, you know I only like cute things, whether it is a teddy bear or a man.'

Having exhausted herself between goodbyes and shopping and the sheer stress of a very awkward parting from her parents, Barbora was just about ready. Then, two days before leaving, she heard from the agency that this single man, whom she had never seen, had had a heart attack and, as he had apparently put it, was now rather more in need of a nurse than an au pair. Oddly enough, the agency that had assured her that alternatives were so few and far between immediately came up with what sounded like an ideal family in a place called Beddlingham somewhere on the outskirts of London. There were

two children, perfectly positioned as neither toddlers nor teenagers. Barbora also felt positive on hearing that the family were religious Jews, which for her translated directly as the people of the Bible and therefore a family with whom she would feel comfortable, in a proper moral setting. This was particularly welcome as her friend Irena had just been teasing her with news of another au pair who had reported back that a man in the house where she lived sometimes walked around naked.

Having never flown before and feeling she didn't want too many new experiences at once, Barbora decided to travel by bus. One advantage was that this went through her local town of Liptovský Hrádok, so she wouldn't have to go first to the capital. Another advantage was that coaches had no weight limits for luggage. Before Slovakia joined the EU in 2004 the only option had been more expensive planes from Vienna, not the low-cost flights now available from Bratislava. At that time the au pair agencies used to run their own coaches, and before Christmas some eighty express buses a day would leave London for Slovakia to take au pairs home for the holidays. Barbora's cousin Júlia had told her many stories about these buses, for example the driver who used to start with a 'Welcome, ladies and gentlemen' in English, followed by a 'Hi girls' in Czech, interspersing the journey with supposedly funny short poems taken from TV cartoons. When they approached the English Channel he would tell them that, if any of them were stopped at the border because their invitation letters weren't in order, he would drop them off at the 24-hour supermarket in Calais and pick them up on the way back next day. In the event Barbora rather regretted her choice, since for half the journey she was sitting next to a Hungarian who spoke hardly any Slovak, and who, because she was instantly homesick, cried almost the entire way. Almost as disconcerting was the first question she was asked by the woman at the immigration desk, having sleepily trundled all her luggage there from the coach, which was whether she was coming to England to find a boyfriend. On the other hand, the coach provided a great opportunity to swap telephone numbers with others, and this gave her a sense of security in case no one was at all friendly when she arrived. In the event she never used any of these phone contacts.

Barbora regretted the bus even more when she arrived, as agreed with the Cowans, her new prospective family, at Victoria station. She had no idea that there could be Victoria stations for the train, the underground and, more problematically, something called the Green Line, which is where she was dropped, and which was different from the main coach station. Eventually someone who had better English

than herself had phoned on her behalf and managed to explain the mix-up. Still, she was rather more flustered than she had planned when she first met Mr Cowan. The rest of that day seemed like a blur. Everything seemed to happen so fast. Mr Cowan seemed to want to tell her about all the places they were passing, but there were so many of them and he spoke so fast that she simply couldn't take any of it in. The English she had learnt at school now seemed suited to another world, and certainly another accent from this new English she would have to get used to in London.

When Barbora arrived at the Cowans' home it was even more confusing. On the face of it the family seemed very friendly and warm and welcoming. They were constantly smiling at her, loved the presents she had brought, and were enthusiastically showing her not only her own room, but all sorts of things that the children had done to their own room or made at school. But at the same time it seemed very different from her own home. They all seemed somehow distracted, as though they were simultaneously showing her around but also busy with other things and somehow only half paying attention to her. It wasn't the simple patient sitting around together that she would have expected. There wasn't anything particularly lacking, it just seemed to happen too quickly to give her time to acclimatize either to the house or to the people. It was only later that Barbora came to appreciate that, since people usually have au pairs precisely to save rather than to spend time, they expect them to learn things quickly. In particular she found quite bewildering the number of rules she was told concerning what she should and should not do in the kitchen of religious Jews: different colour drying-up cloths for meat and for milk, something to do with blood in eggs – did eggs have blood? – and a real concern about foods that she must absolutely never bring into the house. At this point she was quite glad that the only little pig she had brought with her was blue and furry.

Jarmila

Jarmila managed to combine being an au pair with always looking like she was about to be discovered as a model. With her high-heel boots, skin-tight jeans, bare waist, shiny top, glossy lipstick, and long hair dyed blonde, she just seemed to be waiting to fulfil what was evidently her true vocation. She was one of those au pairs for whom the almost imperceptible differences between six pairs of Nike trainers were of profound significance – not least because none of them were

Adidas. The association with sports was for her an aspect of style rather than action. Jarmila did in fact go to the gym quite regularly, but only because it was an excellent excuse to get away from her boredom with the house and housework. Furthermore, the bar there sold her favourite chocolate, and there was something about men who had just finished working out.

While choosing to be an au pair was by now a very well-established option for women of Jarmila's age, it was still considered as one of several alternative forms of migration. One of Jarmila's married sisters, for example, had opted for another scheme which was becoming established through a local agency – that of looking after elderly Austrians. This was based on alternating 24-hour availability for two weeks, followed by two weeks' leisure time back home with her husband and child. It also involved her retired mother looking after the child while she was away. Jarmila's other married sister had tried to establish an ordinary home life but found it increasingly hard to earn a living, and more particularly to save the money required to construct their own family house. So she had eventually gone abroad to work as a nurse, while her husband had left to become a migrant labourer.

Jarmila, with her sense of style and fashion, simply knew that London was the place she had to come to, whatever the opportunities now becoming available in Austria. It wasn't just that English rather than German was going to be increasingly important to her future. It was equally that English was also associated with fashion, her favourite pop music, Lady Di, MTV, and really good accessories. In contrast, what was Germany associated with? Elderly tourists coming for walks in Slovak holiday resorts? Soviet films about Nazis and partisans? Techno? The Austrian countryside was fine for postcards, but London had an air of being in the middle of something and being a capital of cool. Basically Austria sounded disciplined and boring, while London just had to be fun. Jarmila already had heard many stories about clubbing in central London from former au pairs. The most famous Slovak groups played in London: one could really meet everybody from the whole world there. In her imagination of the world, there was this huge circle and right at its centre was London, the ultimate source of clubs and hedonism. Perhaps even more important for Jarmila personally was that she had been present when other au pairs returned with several suitcases of clothes. In Slovakia she could buy either the cheap Chinese imports or the expensive clothes in town, but London seemed to have everything that was in between, genuinely stylish but affordable.

It wasn't at all that Jarmila couldn't imagine an entirely different life, a stable life near her own small city of Gelnica. The problem was that she could imagine that only too well. This went to the heart of her decision to become an au pair. The future, far from looking uncertain, looked only too obvious. Both sides to her future, career and partner, were completely assured. Her parents had provided everything that was necessary for her career. Their garage, attached to their house, was converted into a small hair salon when Jarmila had finished her vocational training and she was already practising her craft there. However, the money she would earn as an au pair would certainly allow her to refurbish the room and make it into the kind of glamorous hairdressing suite that she had set her heart on.

Equally secure was her primary relationship. Jarmila didn't need to speculate about potential partners, because there was already Pavol, who was not just a boyfriend, but seemed like the kind of man with whom, for the first time in her life, she could imagine spending the rest of her life. He was twenty-seven, six years older than she was, and he wanted to marry her. And now she realized she wanted this too. So if Jarmila stayed she could so easily imagine that in the next year or two she would marry Pavol; they would settle down, build a house, have children and she would develop her hairdressing and grow her own potatoes in the yard. She liked this image of herself. It seemed comforting and proper. She really wanted to have children with Pavol, which seemed the natural culmination of what she thought of as her life of love, full of romance and companionship. Of course she also wanted a house, just as large as the one her sister's husband was building for his family. But for all these desires there was a caveat: just not immediately. There was something frightening in this stability, as if she was settling down because there was nothing else to do or, worse still, because she was not capable of doing anything else. She was still only twenty-one, and she could already foresee a life of hairdressing, domestic work, the annual cycle of Christmas and birthdays, without anything dramatic ever having happened to her. This future was only bearable if she could show herself and others that actually she was one of those who had the initiative to get out and see something of the world, even if this would be a lesson in dangers and suffering that would make her finally appreciate the peace and stability of her own city.

It was not that she did not love her boyfriend – the act of returning to him after seeing life elsewhere and his waiting for her would be real proof of their love. She had no doubts about this and actually thought it might secure their love. She had the image in her mind of