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Christopher P. Ball is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe.

An Introduction to Székelyudvarhely: Part Two

BUDAPEST, Hungary

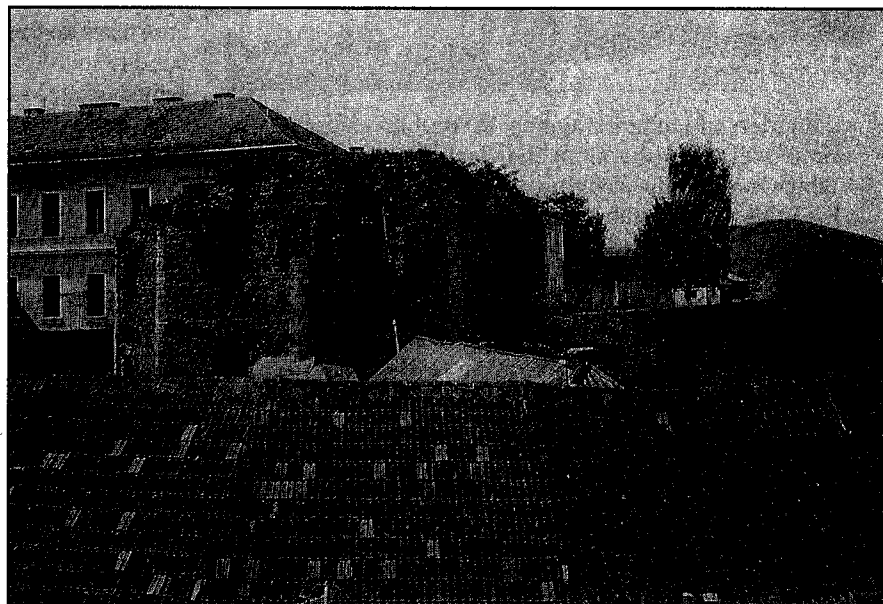
June 1998

By Christopher P. Ball

THE SZÉKELYS ATTACK

In Székelyudvarhely the foundation of an interesting fortress still remains. It is interesting in its own right as a piece of local history, but would normally not warrant a separate section of my report on this town since little of the fortress actually remains and it plays only a minor role in the town today. Nevertheless, I will briefly retell the story of the fortress, named the "Székely Attack Fortress" because it highlights the difference between the Hungarians and the Székelys, a difference westerners usually overlook.

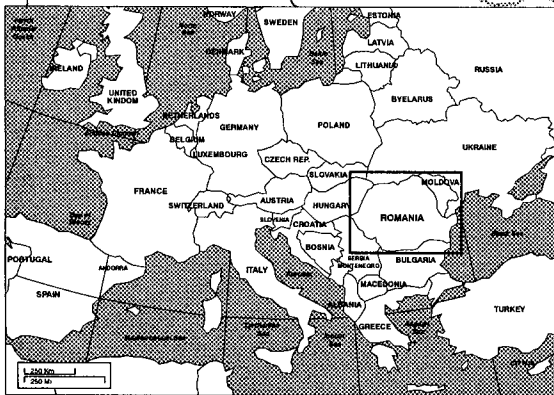
"While centuries of development had produced a feudal system in the surrounding communities, as late as the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Székelys still preserved their ancient rights."¹ One of these rights was total administrative and financial freedom,² in exchange for military service. Because the Székelys were such excellent warriors the Hungarian Kings and the Princes of Transylvania often used them in battle and valued them highly as the Eastern



The ruins of the "Székely Attack Fortress"

¹ Köpeczi, Béla. *The History of Transylvania*. Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest. 1994. p. 282.

² For example, they paid no taxes to the Hungarian King.



defenders of Hungary against foreign invasion. At that time Székelyföld was in the Carpathian Mountains, which marked the easternmost border of Hungary.³ The Székelys' special status began to change, however, in the 15th and 16th centuries, for two reasons. First, the development of a money economy and the growing scarcity of land forced Székely commoners to work for (Hungarian) nobles in the region. Second, the bad financial situation of the Hungarian administration (especially after the Hungarians' defeat at the hands of Turkish invaders at

Mohács in 1526; see CPB-4) led them to impose a feudalistic structure on the Székelys to collect more taxes for the Hungarian kingdom.

Naturally, the Székelys did not take well to the Hungarian King's attempts to strip away their ancient rights and privileges. In 1506 efforts by King Wladislaw II (1490-1516) to impose taxes on the Székelys drove them to revolt against the nobility in the Peasant Uprising of 1514, led by a Székely named Görgy Makfalvi Dózsa. The uprising was stopped that same year when its leader was captured and put to death in Timisoara. The Székely supporters of the uprising were still alive and restless, however.

After the Defeat of Mohács in 1526, the situation worsened for the Székelys. With the Defeat, the Hungarian Kingdom was split into three parts (one falling under Turkish control, one part remaining Hungarian and the third part forming the semi-independent Principality of Transylvania,⁴ containing Székelyföld). Turk forces continued to attack the area,

³ Székelyföld hasn't moved, but the Hungarian border moved westward in 1920 where it has since stayed with the exception of a few years during WWII when Hungary, with Hitler's help, regained Transylvania.

⁴ The precise status of Transylvania is never really made clear in history and often flip-flops between being very independent of the Hungarian crown and, at other times, being just another territory in Hungary. Part of the Roman province of Dacia, the region became part of the kingdom of Hungary in 1003. In 1562, Transylvania became a separate principality under the protection of the Turkish sultan. It had its first separate governor, Friar George, in 1541, and became a Principality in 1570 under the Speyer Accord. The Principality, its role and the jurisdiction of its rulers and diets, though, were only decided gradually over many years. Austria, which has previously claimed Transylvania, obtained possession of the region by the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, which concluded war between Austria and Turkey. The rulers of Transylvania bore either the title of Prince or, according to the old Hungarian legal system, *voivode*.

keeping the Hungarians on perpetual guard. Financially in shambles, strapped for further revenue and under constant threat, the Hungarians imposed a feudal society and system on the Székelys.

Starting with Hungary's King John I (1526-1540), the traditional rights and privileges of the Székelys were stripped away: the Székelys had to pay taxes on cattle and were subjected to general taxation; the Székely court of appeals (in Székelyudvarhely) was suspended; commoners (which meant most Székelys) could no longer serve as jurors in courts of law; their local military and legal offices were taken over by the King's Chief of Justice; the mining and sale of salt (one of the major sources of trade for the Székelys) was made into a Hungarian state monopoly; and the list goes on.⁵

Much of the legal basis for all this was put in place at the Diet of Sigisoara in 1562 by Hungarian King John II (1540-1558). "Of much greater consequence, although not set down in law, was the measure by which foot soldiers were no longer [considered to be] under compulsory military service. With this the Székelys lost the justification for the legal liberties they had traditionally claimed."⁶ King John knew well that imposing the feudal order on the Székelys and stripping them of their rights would not be an easy task. Therefore he built two castles from which he could keep an eye on them and enforce the new system. One of these he built in Székelyudvarhely.

King John was right to worry. The disgruntled Székelys gathered together supporters and (unsuccessfully) attacked the fortress twice, in 1571 and 1575. They attacked and finally destroyed the fortress in 1599 (thus its name "Székelys Attack Fortress"), gaining them some concessions with respect to their land rights and taxation. Nevertheless, the transformation of the Székely society into a largely feudal one was nearly complete. The Székely liberties and ancient rights were never forgotten (not even today), but neither were they ever again fully regained.

After the concessions, the Székelys rebuilt the fortress for their own use. It was still a respectable fortress in the middle of the 17th century, but at the end of the century

it was destroyed once and for all to keep it from falling into the hands of foreign invaders. The ruins, foundation and internal temple remained largely intact for centuries to come, reminding the locals of their proud, rebellious past. The town of Székelyudvarhely bought the ruins from a royal family in 1852. Unfortunately, in 1891 they decided to build a school on the site of the old fortress, thereby destroying the last remnants of the temple. What was left, the foundation and pieces of some of the walls, can still be seen today.

The story of the "Székely Attack Fortress" is not only of interest because it is a part of Székelyudvarhely's history, but also because it shows well the historical and self-identified difference between Székelys and Hungarians; a difference that still exists today. The difference goes back to the early history of the 1st century when the Hungarians first came into the region now called Hungary (and Romanian Transylvania). Where they and the Székelys came from is not fully known. One theory claims, however, that when the Hungarians moved into the area they found the Hungarian-speaking Székelys already settled there. How and when the Székelys actually arrived will probably never be known, leaving them with only legends and myths to explain their origins.⁷

The Hungarians and the Székelys consider themselves related, but the dominant belief since the 13th century has been that the Székelys were the descendants of the invading hordes of Attila the Hun, who settled in Transylvania.⁸ This belief gave the Székelys great pride and the conviction that it was they who maintained the military traditions of the Hun-Hungarians and entitled them to privileges as a special warrior class.

ORBÁN BALÁZS: THE GREATEST SZÉKELY

When one begins to study the Székelys in depth, the name Balázs Orbán⁹ will surface numerous times within only a few days. He is widely acknowledged to be "The Greatest Székely" to have ever lived. He died in 1890 and his reputation has only grown since. He is so well known and respected that many streets and schools are named after him in Székelyföld and his numerous books line the shelves of every good Székely home. In Székelyudvarhely's town square they

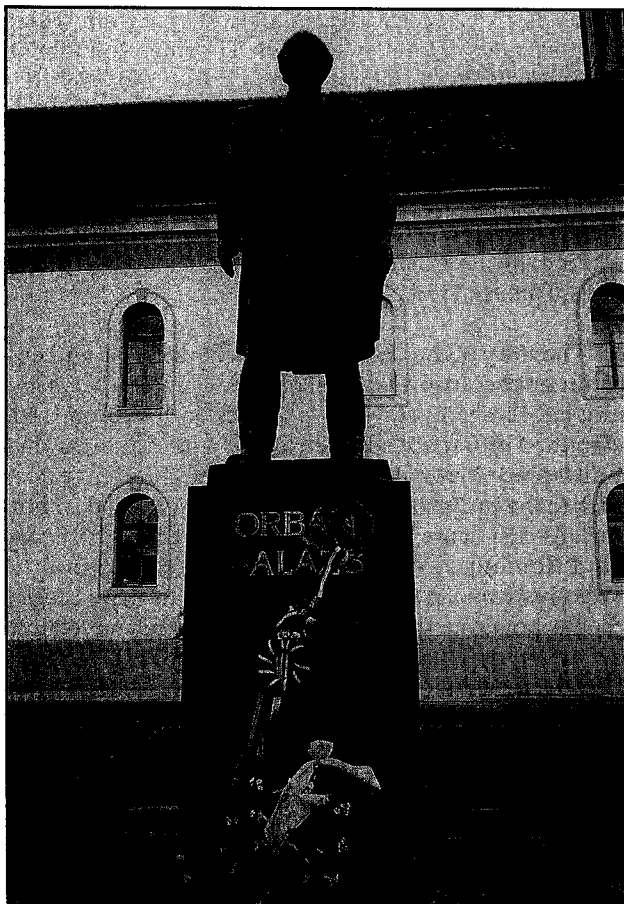
⁵ Köpeczi, Béla. *The History of Transylvania*. Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest. 1994. pp. 235-284.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 284.

⁷ Note: This partially answers the question as to why the Romanians (mostly Romanian nationalists) tried to trace their roots back to the Romans. Neither the Hungarians (including Székelys) nor the Romanians know exactly where they came from or when they came from there. The Hungarians have no real way of finding out since they probably migrated from North Asia somewhere, a path not traceable today. If the Romanians could trace their roots back to the Romans, who were definitely in the region before the Hungarians, then they could not only prove prior right to Transylvania, but also trace their cultural roots back to the Roman Empire. In the framework of Central European logic knowledge of an ethnic group's exact origin and showing that it is great in some way makes that group somehow superior to those who can't define their origin and attribute their greatness.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 237.

⁹ The alert reader will notice that in the heading to this section the names are switched around. Hungarians always put the family name first and the Christian name second. My name would then be Ball Chris. I have left his name in its "proper" form for the heading, but switch to the English word order for the remainder of this report.



The Balázs Orbán statue in town square. Wreaths in the colors of the Hungarian national flag (green, red and white), decorate the statue

have even raised a statue to him.

To be known as the greatest anything is quite an honor. Aside from being at least a great Székely, I think he would have made a great ICWA fellow as well. I consider myself to be at least an average ICWA fellow, but even if I could claim to be a great ICWA fellow, I don't think my hometown of Huntsville, Alabama would be erecting any statues of me. So what made him so great to the Székelys?

In a town on the outskirts of Székelyudvarhely, named Lengyelfalva, Balázs Orbán was born on February 3, 1829. His parents were both aristocrats, his father a baron and a Hungarian Hussar Captain and his mother a baroness. In addition, his mother was of mixed ethnic origin. She was half Hungarian and half Greek, a fact that becomes relevant below.

Young Balázs soon set himself off from his family by rejecting his aristocratic title. He was close to the commoners in spirit and chose to remain there. Even today he is known, as he was 100 years ago, as the "poor baron." He attended school in Székelyudvarhely at the Reformed

Church's school. His studies and time in the town made him identify with it to the point that he considered Székelyudvarhely to be his home and spiritual birthplace. He remained there studying from 1839 to 1844. In 1846, however, he left the region upon receiving an invitation from his Greek grandmother to visit her in Constantinople. During the trip his grandmother died, however. The Church of Islam seized her property. Naturally, the family went to court to get the property returned, a process that lasted for 17 years. Of those 17 years, Balázs spent 12 away from his home in Székelyföld.

Balázs was an adventurous soul. He spent his time abroad well. He traveled extensively through Turkey, Greece and Asia Minor, and visited Palestine, Syria and Egypt. Being a natural-born ICWA-fellow-type person, he kept a journal and later wrote about the region in a six-volume set of books entitled "Travels in the East" (1861).

During his stay abroad, the 1848 revolution broke out in Europe. Young Balázs was unable to return for various reasons and contented his sense of patriotism by helping Hungarian emigrants in Turkey.

He left for London in 1852, then a 23-year-old young man. There he worked at the British Museum and learned to be a watchmaker. He must not have felt content in London because he soon moved off to the Channel Isles of Jersey and Guernsey, where he met and befriended Victor Hugo. Balázs spent several years with his friend and was asked to speak at Victor Hugo's graveside in 1888.

In 1855 Balázs finally returned to his parents in Constantinople where they were in the eighth year of the property trial. Balázs spent a few more years there before returning home to Székelyföld. When he arrived he was 30 years old, had become more politically minded, and began working on a plan with local leaders to free Transylvania (of which Székelyföld was a part) from the Austrian Empire. He also began work on "Travels in the East."

The writer Balázs spent the next 11 years of his life outside political life — except for the minor job of town clerk for Székelyudvarhely. This was perhaps his most fruitful time as a writer. The work he did then established his fame.

HIS FELLOWSHIP

After publishing "Travels in the East," Balázs immediately translated and published "The Fairyworld of the East, or Sultan Saif Zueliazam" (1864), a legend he translated from Arabic.¹⁰ He then embarked on a very ICWA-like adventure, resulting in the writing of his most famous work, "A Description of Székelyföld from a

¹⁰ It is clear that Balázs spoke many foreign languages (like all good ICWA fellows), but I could find no list of which or how many languages he spoke.

Historical, Archeological, Natural Geographical and Ethnographic Point of View." To write this he spent six years traveling throughout Székelyföld by foot and horse-drawn cart with only a backpack. He visited over 500 Székely settlements during this time, got to know the people and their legends, and drew or photographed many of the important landmarks of the region (both natural and man-made). This work was published in six massive volumes over the next 21 years. The last volume was published in 1889, only one year before his death (and one year after Victor Hugo's).

This six-volume set is what Balázs is most remembered for. It reads in many ways like an excellent ICWA report. The history is there, the facts and pictures are

there, and so are the legends, people's beliefs and customs and all the beauty of life in the region. Balázs took time to deal with his subject matter in an elegant manner just shy of verbosity. The result is a rich, six-volume set that contains in many ways the soul of Székelyföld and its people.

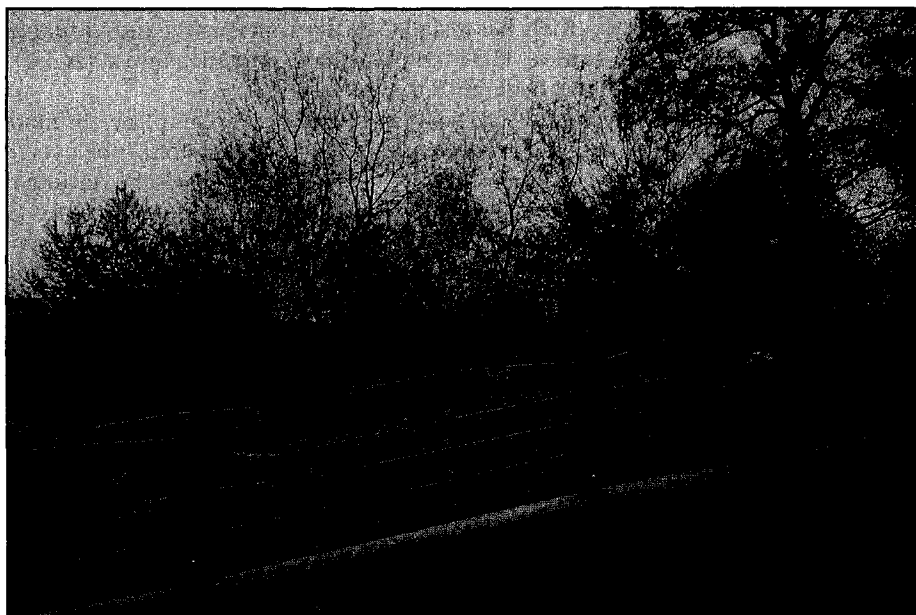
HIS REMAINING YEARS

Balázs Orbán spent the final years of his life in Székelyföld and Hungary, working and editing his books for publication. He was a member of the Hungarian Parliament, a frequent political speaker in Transylvania, a member of the Hungarian Academy of Science and periodically published political essays. When he died he had

Balázs Orbán's house in the town of his birth, Lengyelfalva (by car, 20 minutes south of Székelyudvarhely).



Orbán's grave site, recently beautified. It is a ten-minute walk from his house.





Line of Székely entrance gates built in memory of Balázs Orbán (also at Szejkefürdő). Such gates are frequently found in front of Székely homes.

no children and thus no heirs. Just prior to his death he wrote: "Not having a family, I consider the Hungarian people my family, and it is my intention to make them my main heirs." And through his works, he did just that.

Balázs Orbán, "the Greatest Székely", died in 1890 and was buried in Szejkefürdő, a small town just outside his birthplace.

Today his writings have again become popular in Székelyföld and other regions of Transylvanian. During the Romanian Communist years his works were banned. The idea that an ethnically-unique people would read and learn a history different from that of the official Romanian Communist history (which traces ethnic Romanians back to the Roman Empire) was apparently unacceptable. Only after the changes of 1989 were his books again bought and sold freely in his birthplace. Since the changes, Székelyudvarhely has installed Balázs Orbán's statue in the town square. His birthplace has been renovated, a memorial has been built to him just outside of Székelyudvarhely and his gravesite has been beautified with small memorials and a wooden fence, setting it off from the field where he lies.

CLOSE

Rather than close this report with personal comments on the beauty of Székelyudvarhely and its people, I give the last word to the Greatest Székely, Balázs Orbán. While I, at the end of my fellowship, am now leaving the town, Orbán describes his return to Székelyudvarhely at the

end of his six years of travel. His sentiments upon arrival (especially in the second paragraph), however, are very similar to mine upon departure.

"We have arrived at the most interesting, most classic place in Székelyföld, its center, the mother-town of the mother-seat. It is three times a mother to me as it is also my sweet motherland. Who hasn't felt the warm feeling that surprises every innocent soul when approaching this place where he has seen light for the first time. And be this place ugly or empty it will still be the most loved place on earth, often being the point from where a life full of suffering and struggle starts, yet always remains appealing and beloved since the innocent joys of starting life, the sweet memories of childhood, make it look beautiful and ornate. I could fear a man who does not rejoice, enthuse when seeing his motherland, because all affection and every ounce of patriotism has left that man. This makes the individual leave his path of human vocation and turn into a devil.

"This place, the mother-town of my beautiful country Székelyföld, is beloved to me because this is where I studied. This is the starting point of the formation of my soul, the awakening of my spirit. This is where I was imbued with the burning affection that we call love for the motherland, the most illustrious guiding idea of the soul. This is where I learned about the past of the land, learned about its fascinating and wonderful history. This is where the glorious feeling of love for my country and for freedom, determining the path of my life, was conceived together with my awakening."¹¹ □

¹¹Balázs, Orbán. *A Székelyföld. Válogatás*. Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó. 1982. pp. 31-32. Translation by Crane-Fellow Ball, and his wife, since July 25, 1998, Emese Gáll.



*Close-up of the last gate, made by Orbán. The carving reads,
"With the help of the one true God, built in March 24, 1888 by Balás Orbán."*

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Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle [THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and

Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Jean Benoit Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoit studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. [THE AMERICAS]

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. [THE AMERICAS]

Daniel B. Wright A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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