

## Petrzalka Woman Escapes Abusive Relationship

**A**t the beginning, Juraj was so wonderful,” Tamara recalls, shaking her head. “He was always bringing me presents—chocolates, flowers, and little things he knew I would enjoy. He was the first man who ever treated me like I was beautiful and special,” the 25-year-old native of Petrzalka, Slovakia, explains. “That’s why I was so confused when he first started to become aggressive after we had been together for about three months.”

It started one night at the apartment Juraj shared with his parents and brother. Tamara had spent the evening and was preparing to leave when, as she opened the door to go, he grabbed her arm and swung her back into the room, refusing to let her go. “First, he only grabbed me, but, over the course of the next three months, he started to slap me,” she says, her jaw stiffening at the memory. “Then the abuse really escalated and he would punch me or drag me around by the hair whenever he flew into a rage. Anything could trigger his anger—if I spoke to another man, if I was running late, even if I left him to go to work.”

The cycle was always the same, Tamara notes. Juraj would become violent, then contrite. “He never gave me any sort of explanation for why he hit me, but he would always meditate afterwards, saying aloud over and over again how much he loved me and that, if his love was not so pure, he would not beat me. That these beatings were the ultimate expression of his love.”

Like so many victims of abuse, Tamara blamed herself. “At first, I felt guilty and ashamed. I thought I had done something wrong to provoke him. Then I began to think that this sort of thing was normal. Juraj’s family knew he hit me,” she states, noting that his mother’s only concern was that others would hear the young couple’s battles. “She told us that we could both beat each other all we wanted as long as we did it someplace else, so she wouldn’t have to be embarrassed when she saw her neighbors. I suspect that her husband treated her the same way, so she thought this kind of behavior was perfectly normal.”

It wasn’t until an exceptionally violent episode that Tamara finally decided to break



PHOTO: KATHRYN UTAN

Thanks to the support and friendship she found at Hope Center, Tamara has put her abusive relationship behind her and started to rebuild her life.

free. “He had beat me badly, scratching me, punching me, even biting my nose, clubbing me in the head with a bat, and stabbing me in the arm with a pair of scissors. That was when I knew I had to get away from him.” She left him the next day, hiding out at her aunt’s apartment for nearly a month. During that time, she filed a police report and had photos taken to document her injuries.

“But, then I went out one day to visit the doctor and I saw Juraj. He came up to me, crying and shaking, telling me how much he loved me and how he wanted to start all over again. He said he forgave me for reporting him to the police and that we should give our relationship a second try. Even after everything he had done, I still loved him, so I took him back,” Tamara says, explaining how she was convinced that things would be different this time, so she decided to withdraw her complaint.

“When I went to the police station, they showed me photos of corpses—all women who had been killed by their husbands or boyfriends. They asked me if I wanted to end up the same way,” Tamara recalls. “I was

Intimate partner violence—the physical, mental, or sexual abuse of women by an intimate partner or ex-partner—is the most pervasive form of violence against women worldwide. This form of abuse transcends all ethnic, cultural, religious, educational, and socio-economic boundaries, and involves the systematic use of force, threats, and intimidation intended to subordinate one partner to the other. This is the story of one victim of abuse who turned for help to Hope Center, a facility established through the efforts of AIHA’s Petrzalka/Kansas City partners; the story of the woman who counseled her is on the other side.

so frightened and alone. I told them I had no place to go. That’s when they brought me to Hope Center.”

There, counselor Hanka Konecna helped Tamara find a place to live and worked to rebuild the abused woman’s sense of self-worth. “She asked me if I was really serious about leaving Juraj and told me that I was the only one who could take the first step toward breaking the cycle of violence that I had been caught up in,” Tamara says.

Slowly, through individual counseling and group sessions, Tamara regained some semblance of a normal life. Both staff and clients at Hope Center are a constant support. “I am not as frightened as I was when I first came here. I have a job now and can walk down the street without always looking over my shoulder to see if Juraj is around. Any progress I’ve made over the past few months, I owe to Hope Center. The strength I have now, I would like to share with other women who are in abusive situations. I want them to know that their only option is to break free. It is either that, or to suffer and finally waste away.”

For more information on AIHA, visit [www.aiha.com](http://www.aiha.com).



## Giving Women the Strength to Break the Cycle of Violence

**S**o many of the women who call us say that they have been carrying our number around for six months or even a year, but they were afraid to call,” says Hanka Konecna, a psychologist at Hope Center, a crisis center for victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Petržalka, Slovakia. That’s the nature of IPV, she continues, noting that the many myths that cloak abuse may keep victims away from the help they so desperately need.

“The situation in Slovakia is similar to other countries in the region. People tend to believe that family problems should stay in the family, not be aired in public. Prevailing attitudes also place blame for the abuse on the victim—she must have done something to provoke it. Even the women themselves often think they deserve such treatment, that it is normal,” the 22-year-old Konecna explains, her eyes flashing angrily as she

dismisses these age-old myths as the nonsense they are. “Things are slowly starting to change, though, because we are getting more and more calls from friends, family, and neighbors of women who are being abused. They all want to know what they can do to help.”

Established in 1998 by AIHA’s Petržalka/Kansas City partners to provide assistance to women who are victims of IPV, as well as support services for their children, Hope Center has approximately 300 women each year who come in for counseling or other services at least three times. The hotline operated by Center staff gets nearly 800 calls annually— not just from Petržalka, a sprawling concrete jungle just across the Danube from Bratislava, but from all over the country. “We have a total of 30 volunteers; half of that number come in at least once a week,” Konecna explains, noting that in addition to counselors and

psychology students from local universities, other volunteers include healthcare workers, legal professionals, and teachers.

“We offer social, legal, and psychological counseling, as well as a self-help group that meets twice each month and, although we don’t yet have a crisis center of our own, we do cooperate with other groups throughout the area that have secret houses that provide shelter to women in critical situations,”



PHOTO: KATHRYN UTMAN

Psychologist Hanka Konecna (center) with two women—Hela (left) and Tamara (right)—who turned to Hope Center for help as they worked to extricate themselves from abusive relationships.

Konecna states. “We often help our clients find permanent housing and try to place them in jobs if need be, so they can be more self-sufficient.”

Because so many victims of abuse have grown used to the indifferent—or even hostile—attitudes of family, healthcare professionals, police, and others they may have turned to for help, they are often surprised to find people willing to do whatever it takes to get them away from their abuser, Konecna says. “An abused woman is so confused and alone. The abusive partner works hard to cut her off from people who could help, and her feelings of shame and worthlessness further isolate her. But, by the time she calls or comes into the Center, she has already begun to question her situation. She is curious about whether the violence is normal and wants to know what her options are.”

This little crack in the brittle wall that

AIHA’s Healthy Communities Program moves partners outside hospital walls and into the heart of the populations they are seeking to serve by helping them link stakeholders—from teachers and religious leaders to business owners and government officials—in an effort to address the issues of greatest concern to their citizens. In a suburb of the Slovakian capital of Bratislava, AIHA’s Petržalka/Kansas City partners established Hope Center, a crisis center for victims of intimate partner violence, to shine a spotlight on the problem and help women break free from their abusive relationships. This is the story of one of Hope Center’s counselors; the story of a woman she helped is on the other side.

victims of IPV erect around themselves is what Konecna and her colleagues at Hope Center need. It is how they gain the access necessary to make these women realize that their situation is anything but normal. “Of course, each woman is different, but they all want to find their way out of the cycle of violence. We work with them, attempting to make them see that men who are abusive seldom change. Through a combination of individual and group therapy sessions, we try to make them see that other women have gone through similar circumstances and survived,” she says.

Even with all of the counseling and support available at the Center, about 10 percent of the women they see wind up going back to their abusers. “Many women think that even an abusive man is better than no man at all, so it can be a struggle to build up what IPV has stripped away. That’s why I feel good when I am able to help someone like Tamara,” Konecna concludes. “She survived so much and still has such a kind, good heart. It’s not an easy thing for her to cut herself off from the man who abused her; she still loves him. But, now she loves herself more and that is the first step.”

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