



2025 History Essay Contest

Homeschool 6th Grade Winner

A Land of Castles and Cottages: Slovenia

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Out of all the many countries in the world, one that I definitely want to visit is Slovenia. In addition to holding picturesque landscapes, crumbling castles, and charming country villages, Slovenia is also the homeland of my ancestors. My great-great grandparents and their daughter Emiljia, my great grandmother, lived there before immigrating to America to escape worsening conditions under the communist government of what was then the country of Yugoslavia. While Slovenia may not be one of the most common European travel destinations, that only makes visiting it quieter and more memorable, with fewer crowds and less hurrying. The two places which interest me most in Slovenia are Predjamski Grad Castle, a castle constructed inside of a cave, and the town of Visnja Gora, where my ancestors lived.

The most recognizable feature of Predjamski Grad Castle is its position. Built into a cave halfway up a steep and treacherous cliff 127- meters tall, the imposing fortress struck terror in the hearts of its attackers. Like many medieval castles, Predjamski Grad Castle was not built all at once, but was constructed slowly over the centuries. Historians have no doubt that some parts of the castle date back to the 12th century, but some parts could be even older. Construction slowly progressed until 1583, when Count Ivan Koblenzl added the entrance tower, enlarging the castle to its present size. The castle was designed for safety first, and thus, living there was not very comfortable. Habitants were subject to frequent spells of cold, dampness, and draught. The small windows let in little light. But the many

hardships proved to be worthwhile for one medieval baron called Erazem, who resisted a siege there for over a year, thanks to the ultimate security of cave and cliff. As the years rolled by, Predjamski Grad began to be used mainly in warmer months, eventually being converted into a hunting lodge by its last owners, the Windischgratz family. The castle still stands today, in excellent condition compared to other castles of its age. One can still walk its halls and climb its numerous stairs just as many have done for hundreds of years. There it stands, for such a towering structure could not be said to lie, unchanged through the ages – the same dusty beige stones in the wall, the same peaked roof, the same enveloping blue sky above.

The second place I would visit is the town of Visnja Gora, a small town, perhaps only twenty houses, two churches, a school, and a town hall, but a special place for me. On a hill just above the town is a little cottage. That cottage was my great grandma's first home. She was baptized, went to Mass, and rode her horse to school in Visnja Gora for the first six years of her life. Afterwards, she immigrated to America with most of her family, arriving at Ellis Island the day the stock market crashed. If they had come a day later, they would not have been able to enter the country. Another thing about Visnja Gora that intrigues me is its name, which translates to "Cherry Tree Mountain." One can be sure a town with a name like that would be lovely!

The area around Visnja Gora has been settled by humans for thousands of years, beginning with the ancient Illyrians and Celts. Many artifacts have been found in the surrounding area that are now kept in the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana. The Romans built a military outpost called Magnisa on the area presently occupied by the city. It was not until 1269, however, that any written mention of the actual town of Visnja Gora was made. In the year 1444, the Emperor Frederick III pronounced the village a market town, which made it necessary to move to higher grounds and build walls for protection from frequent Turkish attacks. About thirty years later, Frederick III granted Visnja Gora city rights. The city has an unusual symbol which is found all over the village: a snail. According to the legend, Sophia Visnjegorska, a daughter of the count of Visnja Gora, found the Venetian Doge's son, who had been severely wounded in battle, and she decided to care for him. No one else thought the knight would survive, but after a tedious recovery, he lived. In thanksgiving, the queen of the Venetian Republic sent a dazzling snail shell, nearly six inches in diameter and studded with diamonds, to Visnja Gora, where it

was kept for a while, but later lost. Visiting Visnja Gora today, I would see the majestic grassy hills surrounding the city and the two-story, pale-yellow school building where my great grandma began her education. I would admire the beauty of St. Ann's Church in which she prayed. As you can now see, my two Slovenian destinations are surely both wonderful places. Both

Predjamski Grad Castle and Visnja Gora have roots deep in the past. And, like a strong tree, both have weathered good times and bad times, pushing through them, enduring through the ages. From the most imposing castles, to the humblest cottage, to the most awe-inspiring landscapes, Slovenia is full of exquisite beauty and fascinating history.



My Great Grandma's House in Visnja Gora

Bibliography

“History of the Castle.” Travel Brochure from my grandparents’ trip to Slovenia in 2024.

“Visnja Gora.” <https://www.travel-slovenia.si/location/visnjagora/>. Accessed 17 March 2025.