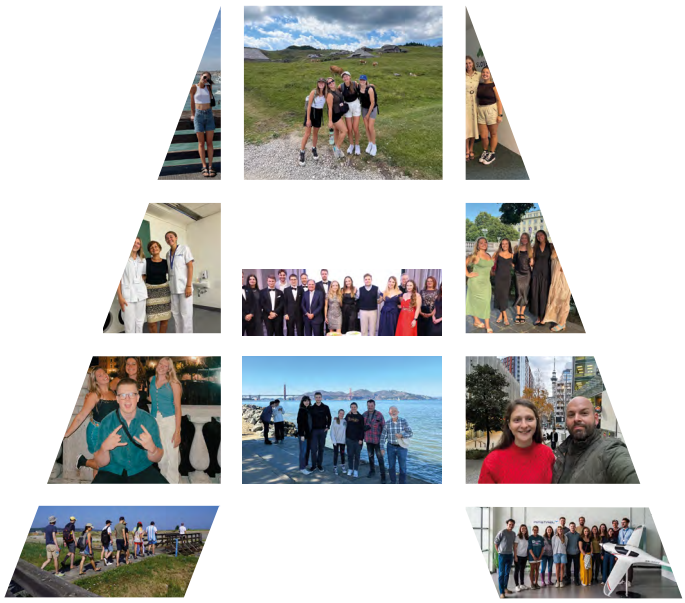
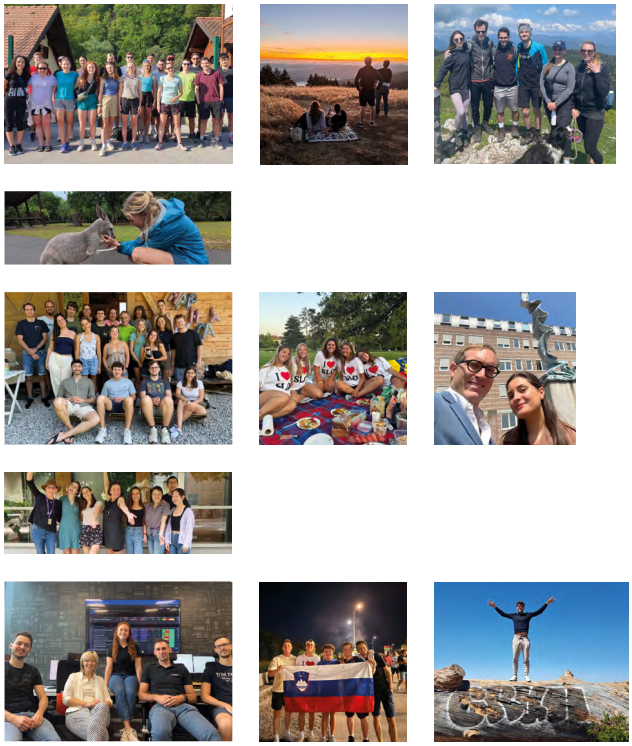
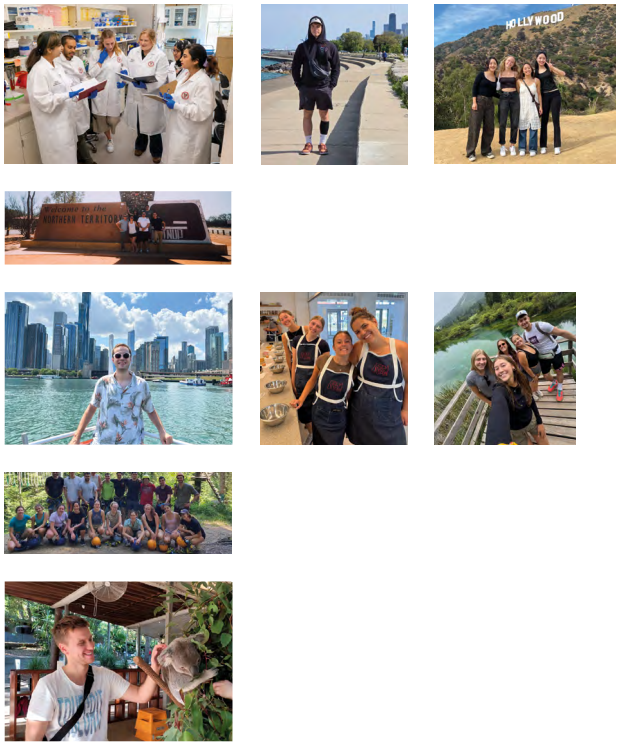






2025 YEARBOOK

GROWING IN KNOWLEDGE. LEADING WITH CHARACTER. GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY.

ASEF

AMERICAN SLOVENIAN
EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Table of contents

Prof. Jure Leskovec

Esteemed Readers, Dear Friends, Supporters, and Members of the ASEF Family,

A little more than ten years have passed since we first built a bridge between Slovenian talents and the world, and since we created a non-profit organization based on a simple yet powerful idea: that knowledge is the most valuable currency and that the young people who carry it within them are our greatest investment.

In this endeavor, we have always relied on three fundamental values: academic excellence, character development, and devoted service. These values are the driving force behind the immense goodwill and energy that surrounds ASEF. Through them, we are creating not only exceptional researchers but also responsible individuals who believe in the power of collaboration and contributing to society.

When I co-founded ASEF in 2014, together with Fr. Dr. Peter Rožič SJ and Slovenians in California, our goal was clear: to create and strengthen connections in the fields of education, research, and innovation between Slovenians around the world and in the homeland, with a special concern for Slovenian heritage. Through our activities, we connect Slovenians at home and abroad, enable young people to acquire new knowledge and experiences that are not accessible to them at home, popularize science, and actively research it.

Photo: Jure Leskovec's personal archive

This mission has not merely remained on paper. Over the last decade, we have built a community that strives for excellence and growth – not as an institution, but as a family. Today, looking back, I am immensely proud of everything we have achieved together. We have connected more than 260 ASEF Fellows with over fifty mentors at leading universities worldwide. We have created exceptional opportunities through our two scholarship programs: Research Abroad for Slovenian students and Visiting Slovenia for foreign students with Slovenian roots. We have organized more than 200 events for our scholars and six scientific

symposia, while also enabling our scholars to stay with more than ten host families.

I am especially proud of the ASEF Tutoring program, where, following the examples of Oxford and Harvard, but in a uniquely Slovenian way, we foster intellectual and personal growth in small groups.

All of this would not be possible without the extraordinary network of mentors and volunteers who are the driving force of our story. I am delighted to emphasize that this community relies entirely on goodwill and selfless energy. Professors at leading universities abroad gladly accept and mentor our students. Slovenian families abroad selflessly host ASEF Fellows, just as tutors and mentors in Slovenia always gladly dedicate their time and energy to them on a voluntary basis. Our only "payment" is the opened horizons and the acceleration on the life paths of the members of the ASEF community.

Our fellows and alumni are innovators who are pushing boundaries in the fields of artificial intelligence, medicine, technology, humanities, social sciences, arts, and natural sciences. They are the fresh faces of Slovenian science and economy, who through their work prove that Slovenian minds are among the best in the world.

The foundation of our work is selfless help and giving. Because our scholars today receive support from ASEF, alumni, and mentors, we encourage them to take on this role in the future and selflessly contribute to the community themselves. It is precisely the long-term commitment to strengthening the bridge between Slovenian minds and the world that is our shared vision. This yearbook is more than just a collection of memories of past successes. It is a living confirmation that our vision has truly come to life. We are aware that our joint journey is only at the beginning, but the yearbook before you is a tribute to everyone who is part of ASEF: our exceptional scholars, dedicated mentors, tireless team, all supporters, and donors. In the future, we will not only renew the bridge we have already managed to build together, but we will also expand it.

We will continue to enable life-changing experiences for young people. We will expand the network of cooperating institutions at home and around the world, upgrade programs for working with scholars after their research visits, and connect Slovenian scientists abroad, thereby continuing to strengthen science for the benefit and prosperity of all.

Thank you for believing in ASEF and for being a part of this incredible story. May the future be even more inspiring.

Sincerely,

Jure Leskovec,
Co-founder of the ASEF Foundation

Rok Sekirnik

Photo: Rok Sekirnik's personal archive

Dear ASEF Supporters,

It is a great honor to be able to present the many activities of ASEF over the past year. Last year, I took over the role of Director of ASEF Institute from the exceptional Slovenian professor of computer sciences at Harvard University and the first-generation ASEF Fellow, Dr. Marinka Žitnik. On behalf of the ASEF community, I sincerely thank her for all her work, as she has helped build an organization that enables young talents to bring a fresh wind, new approaches, and above all, new opportunities into the Slovenian educational space. I am proud of the ASEF Institute team, particularly Kaja Cunk and Iris Brili, who have been working tirelessly for several years, and Kaja Ravnak, who joined us this year and is responsible for communications. We also owe her thanks for producing this beautiful publication.

With youthful energy, ASEF connects global Slovenian knowledge. It provides a path for young people towards research growth and the transfer of knowledge to the domestic environment, and it ensures contact and a return to the homeland for experienced Slovenian scientists. Our organization significantly enriches the Slovenian academic space, as we cooperate closely with relevant ministries and universities in a strategic partnership to create opportunities for students. In doing so, we ensure that our work is an enriching complement to existing opportunities available to students, and that we co-create an inspiring environment for budding Slovenian scientists.

Our flagship fellowship programs, Research Abroad and Visiting Slovenia, have so far onboarded more than 260 fellows. The Research Abroad program offers the opportunity for a research visit to leading universities worldwide under the mentorship of Slovenian professors. As part of the Visit Slovenia program, Fellows of Slovenian descent from abroad get the chance to experience the beauty and richness of Slovenian culture. At the same time, they grow professionally by working in organizations

aligned with their field of expertise. Every year, we welcome new mentors and companies into our mentorship network who selflessly share with us the vision of connecting Slovenian knowledge and culture. This way, we put a smile on the faces of our fellows, who return home enriched with an unforgettable experience and forge new connections between Slovenia and countries worldwide.

In addition to fellowship programs, we enable our fellows and the wider public to participate in complementary educational programs such as Tutoring, Young Minds, Speaker Series, ASEF Podcast, BioX Reading Circles, and many workshops. Within the Tutoring program, we have already published the fourth collection of assays and the second scientific article. Annually, we organize around ten lectures giving the fellows a chance to present their research work across Slovenia. As part of the Speaker Series, we host recognized domestic and foreign lecturers, and with the ASEF Podcast, we present the stories of fellows, mentors, and partners. In reading circles, we develop critical thinking and interdisciplinary understanding, and through workshops, we strengthen practical knowledge in the fields of public speaking, scientific communication, and career development.

The year was marked by the ASEF Symposium on the theme Between the Natural and the Artificial, which brought together mentors, fellows, and supporters at the Grand Hotel Union in Ljubljana for a discussion on the balance between artificial intelligence and human creativity. The event was an opportunity to intertwine ideas, experiences, and perspectives on the future. At the Gala Dinner that followed, we celebrated the visible connectedness of the ASEF community in a relaxed atmosphere. The fact that ASEF plays a significant role in the education and upbringing of leading young talents was further highlighted in November by the first Slovenian selection of Forbes 30 Under 30, among whom as many as were five ASEF Fellows. We step into the new year of operation with joy and optimism, and we look forward to continuing to enable life-changing experiences for young people together with you. Your support – from donations and opening the doors for our fellows around the world to connecting with mentors and spreading the word about ASEF – is crucial to our mission.

Sincere thanks for your trust, cooperation, and co-creation of a community that inspires.

Rok Sekirnik,
Director of the ASEF Institute

Lena Kogoj during her research visit with Dr. Jernej Murn at the University of California, Riverside, 2024. Photo: ASEF archive

Research Abroad

The Research Abroad Fellowship Program is a two-year transformative opportunity that connects global Slovenian knowledge with youthful energy, enabling talented students to fully realize their potential. The program provides a 10-week, fully covered research stay at leading universities worldwide, where fellows work under the mentorship of esteemed Slovenian experts. However, the true testament to the impact of this fellowship program lies in personal experiences. Presented before you are the transformative stories and proof of the enduring power of the community that our fellows created during their unforgettable research visits.

Vid Kocijan

We Solve Global Problems Where Large Language Models Are Powerless

Vid Kocijan, a key engineer and team lead at the innovative company Kumo AI, is a former competitor in the International Olympiad in Informatics and holds a PhD from the University of Oxford. His career path, marked by critical decisions and a deep understanding of technological shifts, has led him to create solutions in the field of graph learning that surpass the capabilities of Large Language Models (LLMs).

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

While preparing for your interview, I read in the newspaper Delo that you were willing to give up playing in a heavy metal band for computers in your childhood. What about computers fascinated you so much that you pursue them professionally today?

At the time, it was simply about deciding what I was good at. I realized that if I wanted to be truly good at something, I had to dedicate my full attention to it. I was excellent at computing at the time, specifically preparing for the International Olympiad in Informatics. I believe the decision was right, as I won a silver medal.

Congratulations on that! What was the key factor that led you from academic research at Oxford to the industry, specifically to Kumo AI?

Those who did a PhD might understand: towards the end of my doctorate, I experienced a minor identity crisis, or perhaps 'identity crisis' is too strong an expression, but a preparation for the decision on my next steps. I assessed that I truly enjoy research, and still do, but the specific field I was doing my PhD in – Natural Language Processing (NLP) – was changing tremendously at the time. This was relatively shortly before ChatGPT came out. Given that we all know what NLP and ChatGPT are today, these two things sufficiently demonstrate my correct prediction that tremendous changes were happening in this field faster than ever before. I assessed that the bulk of the research in my area of expertise would shift to the industry.

There were probably very few academic artificial intelligence labs at the time.

There were certainly not a few labs. But there were very few top-tier labs that could compete, and still compete, with industrial labs. At the time, I felt I would suffocate in the flood of mediocre research resulting from the

Photo: Vid Kocijan's personal archive

rapid progress in the field. I decided that since AI, in general, was developing in the industry, I would rather go to the industry, where, as we see now, the biggest breakthroughs are happening and where entire teams, not individuals, work on research.

How did your doctoral dissertation influence your current thinking and work? Were these insights transferred into industrial innovations?

I thoroughly enjoyed my doctorate. How did it influence my understanding? In several ways. Strictly professionally, it gave me a better understanding of the field and how to lead a research project. In terms of work style, it gave me the ability to look one step deeper than if you never engaged in research. What a good PhD must teach you is to ask not only what needs to be done, but why something needs to be done and why it is important. We often find that in research or engineering projects, we put too much effort into things that don't actually solve our critical problem because we fail to ask why it is important in the first place.

You also touched upon the social impact of artificial intelligence. Did you research and study the ethical dimensions during your doctorate as well?

Yes, throughout my PhD, I gradually also dealt with the social impacts of artificial intelligence. I worked on understanding pronoun resolution, where grammatical gender is a significant factor. We were identifying biases or strange model behaviors where the models upheld stereotypes, even when they led to incorrect conclusions. This forced me to step back and ask why this research was important at all. This gave me a more in-depth study of current problems, from unfairness to the future development of artificial intelligence.

And what about after you entered the Kumo AI environment? Did your understanding and approach to problem-solving change?

At Kumo AI, I trained, or am still acquiring skills, more as an engineer and also as a team lead. I wouldn't say I've gained as much intense technical knowledge now as during my PhD, but I've gained the ability not only to work but also to lead a team. Most importantly, building a larger product, not just smaller projects, as in academia. These are things that every software developer should generally know, but you simply don't accumulate them during individual research work. Knowing and doing are two different things.

What is it that ensures innovation at Kumo AI compared to the fast-growing competition?

At Kumo AI, we make predictions on relational databases. This is similar work to what data scientists do, but we do it much faster and more accurately using modern methods. What we do differently at Kumo AI is that we solve problems in a way that currently no other company in the world knows how to. We use technology that other companies not only do not use, but most of them are incapable of using. This simply requires sufficiently specific knowledge. It involves working with Graph Neural Networks or graph learning. This field is not as easily accessible as Natural Language Processing has become now with huge language models that practically anyone can call up without AI knowledge. In the field we work in, the entry level is demanding enough that companies without extremely good AI knowledge are incapable of

developing this themselves. Consequently, we don't feel the danger of being replaced by some cheap alternative. The second important thing is that we solve a problem that is important and that current generative AI solutions do not solve. Business databases often contain terabytes of data. Analyzing them with huge language models would require an impractical amount of time and money. Not only that, these models are not built for predicting the future, and consequently, they create flawed predictions even in smaller cases where we can use them.

How effective are your methods then?

With our methods, we overcome not only language models but also classical machine learning methods, such as decision trees, which are still used in the industry and require months and months of manual labor. With our methods, we say: "Give us the whole database, we will predict this," and typically within a day or two, we have a better model, without manual labor. For now, we are the only ones capable of doing this, which is where our actual value lies.

What is your impact on global processes – put simply, where can we see your influence and work?

We are used by a large social network as part of serving recommendations to users on their profiles. We are used by one of the larger food suppliers for recommendations on what else their customers might be interested in based on past orders. In the US, a major veterinary association uses us to predict hospital load, and another American hospital uses us to predict potential complications during procedures. Our solutions are also used for predicting fraud on the Bitcoin network. This shows that we are solving concrete, real problems across quite diverse fields and in very competitive environments.

You mentioned the interdisciplinarity of clients. I believe that a company like Kumo AI also requires a team of interdisciplinary experts.

That's true. We have a team of engineers who work with clients and are experts in certain fields. I would say I work more in the background, on the engineering team that develops our models and logic. I wouldn't describe myself and the team as all-round experts, because we have a very specific focus. However, we can be described as all-round experts in artificial intelligence.

You emphasize the importance of versatility and knowledge. How did the ASEF scholarship influence your decision to study and work abroad?

It was quite critical. I went on the ASEF research visit at the

Vid Kocijan, determined to leave his comfort zone, proves that the future of artificial intelligence lies in solving problems that exceed the capabilities of conventional solutions. His journey, from academic research at Oxford and timely recognition of the shift of AI development to the industry, to joining Kumo AI, illustrates a key lesson for future engineers. Invest in the specific knowledge the market needs, do not be afraid of a critical perspective and the answer to the question: why is something important? Actively seek opportunities that expose you to different cultures and work environments. This is the only way to solve diverse global problems in a collaborative spirit.

Photo: Aleš Rosa

end of my second year of the interdisciplinary Computer Science and Mathematics undergraduate program at the Faculty of Computer and Information Science at the University of Ljubljana. To simply say that studying abroad was something I was only thinking about, ASEF was a very convenient stepping stone. It gave me my first taste of what it's like to go somewhere in a foreign country where they don't speak your native language, live on your own, and work in a foreign research environment. I also got the impression that it wasn't that difficult, that it wasn't unattainable. It turned out that it wasn't some completely incomprehensible thing that wasn't accessible to an arrival. When I returned from the ASEF research visit, I started thinking more actively about enrolling in postgraduate studies abroad. It helped that my girlfriend at the time, now wife, was also enrolling at Oxford. My family still doesn't believe I enrolled at Oxford for academic reasons (laughter).

Some time ago, you gave a statement for the Slovenian newspaper Delo that Slovenia is for a comfortable life, while abroad is for a career. Do you still agree with this?

In principle, I still agree. However, this statement is a bit superficial. Of course, one can also build a great career in Slovenia. But this statement implies that I invested blood and sweat abroad to have a truly strong career, yet in doing so, you also achieve a comfortable life and thus perhaps don't suffer from unfulfilled potential. At the same time, just because you stayed in Slovenia doesn't mean it's a comfortable life. This statement minimizes the effort that many Slovenians who stay in Slovenia also put into their work.

If someone wants to follow in your footsteps, but is only at the beginning of their studies or career – what would you advise them?

Above all, I would tell people to try as many things as possible. Not just because sometimes the best opportunities are outside of an established study procedure – ASEF is one such activity that can lead to exceptional opportunities. But also because the best way to find out what genuinely interests you is by trying things. Sometimes, at the beginning of your studies, you can have a wrong impression solely due to not knowing what you want to do or what interests you, what all exists, and how things work in practice. My advice is: try as many different things as possible.

Lara Jerman

Persistence is the Algorithm for Breakthrough in Bioinformatics

The ASEF Junior Fellow Generation 2019, who uses bioinformatics to uncover the decades-long evolution of cancer, discusses the importance of interdisciplinarity and international experience.

Dr. Lara Jerman is an expert in the field of bioinformatics, focusing primarily on cancer research. Her journey began with mathematics Olympiads, leading her to prestigious international institutions in England and France. We spoke with Lara about how she redirected her career path from a biochemical lab to the world of algorithms, why persistence is paramount in science, and what groundbreaking insights into cancer development her work provides.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Your journey in science began with mathematics and linguistics competitions, followed by biochemistry studies at the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Technology in Ljubljana, as you envisioned yourself working in a lab. How did these disciplines intertwine and lead you to research in the field of bioinformatics today?

It is true; initially, I imagined working in a lab. However, quite quickly, while taking elective courses at the Faculty of Computer and Information Science, I realized I preferred working with computers. My goal was to transfer this knowledge to the biomedical field, which directed me towards bioinformatics during my undergraduate studies. The experience from the mathematics Olympiads proved crucial in this, as they helped me develop the ability to solve complex problems. This assisted me in successfully transitioning to a Master's in Mathematics and Computer Science and later securing my first bioinformatics internships, despite the lack of a formal study background in the field.

You started international internships early. First, you collaborated on a research project at the European Bioinformatics Institute (EMBL-EBI) in Cambridge, and then you completed an ASEF Research Abroad visit with Prof. Dr. Mateja Jamnik. Where did you draw the motivation for a doctorate abroad?

The greatest encouragement for me was the visit with Prof. Dr. Mateja Jamnik as part of the ASEF Research Abroad Fellowship program. For those ten weeks, from autumn until December,

Photo: Lara Jerman's personal archive

I was truly immersed in research and university life, which strongly motivated me to pursue a PhD abroad. Unfortunately, Brexit closed the doors for funding in the UK; I faced numerous email rejections, saying they couldn't fund my research, or that a project had received an enormous number of applicants, and I, unfortunately, wasn't selected. So, I started looking for opportunities across Europe and eventually landed in Paris.

You successfully completed your doctorate in bioinformatics at Sorbonne University in Paris. What did you focus on there, and where have your postdoctoral research efforts led you?

In Paris, I focused on more methodological research, developing new algorithms and cell atlases, mostly in the field of cancer. After my doctorate, I took a short break. This year, on September 1st, I started a new, six-month position in the research department of a Parisian hospital. I am currently analyzing data for an immunology project related to blood cell development and predisposition to blood cancers.

Your two-month contribution at the European Bioinformatics Institute was part of the large international consortium PCAWG, or Pan-Cancer Analysis of Whole Genomes, which resulted in several publications in Nature magazine, for which you were also selected as the 'Name of the Week' on Val 202 five years ago. I must emphasize that this is a truly high-profile international study on cancer genetics. What role did you have in this project, and what did it bring you?

In modern science, especially in domains with massive amounts of generated data, such as ours was, truly enormous group projects like PCAWG are very common and necessary. I was lucky to even get into the right lab. During that period, I sent countless emails to professors and researchers and was persistent until I received confirmation that I could join the PCAWG project. The key step here was, again, my persistence. My project, completed in two months of work, was a smaller part of the overall consortium. The contribution was included in the so-called consortium articles, where all collaborators are listed. This was an exceptional experience for me, showing me early in my career how work is done at a top international research level.

In your research, you emphasize that cancer develops gradually, possibly decades before the actual diagnosis. What is the key challenge you are trying to solve with your analyses, from the perspective of clinical practice?

The transformation of a healthy cell into a cancerous focus can be a very gradual and long-lasting process. It can start long, long before cancer is diagnosed. The key question is: How do we monitor development in a way that allows us to detect cancer early, when the probability of successful treatment is much higher, and at the same time know when it is truly meaningful for doctors to intervene? On the other hand, we have cases like prostate cancer, where we know we diagnose it too often and too quickly. This happens because some cancerous foci in people never develop into a serious, clinically significant problem. In such cases, treatment is unnecessary. My research is therefore aimed at better understanding cancer evolution and developing more effective and cheaper methods for early detection in hospitals, using computer

data analysis – so we really catch those cancers that need intervention.

Your research deals with the mixture of cancer cells and surrounding cells. What does this mean in practice and how do your algorithms influence precision or personalized medicine?

We must imagine a tumor as a complex ecosystem, not just a uniform cluster of cancer cells. It is a mixture of cancer cells, stromal cells, and immune cells – and this precise composition is crucial, as it determines how the tumor should be treated. In my doctorate, I focused on developing algorithms for analysis using data on the gene activity of this tumor mixture. I developed tools that allow us to isolate a very clean and precise signal even from complex samples, such as those obtained with advanced spatial transcriptomics, where we know where a certain gene is expressed in the tissue. With this, I can help find specific marker genes that reveal the tumor's composition. The goal is to simplify this finding, translate it into routine clinical practice, and enable the doctor to know exactly which therapy will work for a particular patient. This is the essence of personalized medicine.

Your research focuses on a very serious topic. Can studying cancer also be emotionally taxing? How do you cope with the sad side of this disease that you deal with every day, and what still drives you forward?

For me, given my role, this topic is not emotionally taxing, as I work with abstract data on a computer and have no contact with patients. What drives me forward in my work is that my result is not too abstract, but has a real goal that impacts clinical practice. I am motivated by the fact that my colleagues and I are trying to understand which patient will benefit from a certain treatment or where the treatment will be harmful. In this, I see meaning and the potential to truly contribute to the improvement of treatment for this disease.

You have lived in Cambridge, currently in Paris. What advice would you give to young researchers considering an international career, and what do you consider essential for a breakthrough in science?

I would primarily advise young people to do what interests them, as the will to succeed will follow. But persistence is key to everything. In science, there are more things that do not work than things that do. When a challenge arises, you must not give up, as other solutions unexpectedly appear if you persist. For me, it was also crucial to meet people in the ASEF community who are at different points in their careers. This gave me a broader picture of the research environment and also a very good encouragement for the future.

Do you think research will still be something you see yourself doing in the future?

For now, I see myself in Research & Development (R&D), perhaps also in the industry, as I am interested in work that is not too abstract. Since I took time to reflect after my doctorate, I feel that I will most easily figure out what truly interests me during the work itself and not just by thinking. I am keeping my options open.

Lara Jerman has proven with her career path and breakthrough research that interdisciplinary approaches and international networking, also encouraged by ASEF, are crucial for pushing the boundaries of science. Her persistence and focus on finding key signals in data promise significant progress in understanding cancer and developing personalized medicine.

Tine Starič, Microsoft MVP

The Greatest Value in the Age of AI is Not Writing Code, but Strategic Thinking

From an ASEF Junior Fellow preparing for a research visit to Australia before the COVID-19 epidemic, to a Lead Software Architect at a global IT company currently based in Vilnius—Tine Starič discusses why self-initiative is crucial in programming, how AI is changing Business Central, and why embracing an international experience was the catalyst for his professional development.

Software Architect Tine Starič is known in the technology community for his active involvement, presentations, and knowledge sharing. His career path, marked by a constant search for new challenges, led him to Lithuania, where he explores the boundaries of software development. We spoke with him about how the planned ASEF visit, despite being prevented by COVID-19, encouraged him to take the first step in seeking a job abroad, why he bakes bread in his free time, and what advice he has for young software developers starting their journey.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

As an ASEF Junior Fellow from the 2020 generation, despite the cancellation of your research visit to Australia due to the pandemic, you described your involvement in the ASEF community as crucial for your later decision to move to Lithuania, where you currently live. How did the ASEF experience influence you?

Joining ASEF was a kind of trigger for me. It gave me enough courage to even decide to move to Lithuania. I had to mentally prepare myself for the trip to Australia at the time, thinking about how I would even manage it. When I later decided on Lithuania, it was much easier because I was already mentally prepared to go. I told myself: 'Well, I was supposed to go to Australia anyway; I'm just going somewhere else, to Europe, a little further north.' The involvement in the ASEF community can best be described as being surrounded by people who find it completely normal to have ideas like: 'let's do something bigger' and 'let's go outside of Slovenia to try something new.' I feel that my mentality changed quite a bit with my involvement in

Photo: Tine Starič's personal archive

this program, but in a good way.

You are now a Software Architect at Companial, a company involved in the development and support of business software, such as Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central. They recently added another title to your position.

The Slovenian translation of my new function would be Technology Strategist. The promotion happened very quickly after the previous one, and I haven't managed to update the title on my LinkedIn profile yet (laughter). I tell everyone that I am now a Lead Software Architect. This role also includes opportunities to travel the world and bring ideas that I gain and hear at international conferences back to the company. So, I would say that I am not just ticking boxes on a to-do list; my work is much more dynamic.

I imagine, then, that your workdays are also highly varied.

That's true; the work I do varies with the seasons. When I have conferences, I dedicate a huge amount of my time to preparing content and presentations. I work on PowerPoint and write posts for LinkedIn. On the other hand, my days in winter are more monotonous – I mainly focus on developing software solutions. I spend less time actually writing code. Lately, I've been dealing a lot with software architecture. Currently, in the age of artificial intelligence, I enjoy thinking about how to integrate AI into our processes and how our developers could be more productive using all the tools available to us. I play around with ideas a bit and think a lot about how using AI tools could achieve a broader impact than an employee could on their own.

Does this mean you focus on automating monotonous development tasks to boost creativity and deliver higher value in software architecture development?

Yes, and what actually allows developers to do more creative things? I would say that a lot of this space for creativity started showing up for me when I stopped focusing on how I could improve only myself. What do I mean by that? If I finish one task, I will simply get the next one, and that loop generally never ends. But when I started looking broader – what can I solve so that others can continue, or what can I do to speed up the entire team – I feel that a lot more time started remaining for creative things.

Your answer sounds like your role is strongly connected to a broader impact on the team and the technological community. What is it that drives you to contribute so actively to this community?

Essentially, the feedback. When I write a blog or do a webinar, I publish it, and people are genuinely grateful afterward. They write to me: 'Wow, that was really good; we used it, and now we are doing much better because of it.' Similar to how our generation chases likes on Instagram, I enjoy this real impact in everything I do.

Your desire for active community contribution, which is also an ASEF value, has spurred many attendances at major international technology conferences. Which one was the most rewarding or pivotal for you?

The pivotal one was definitely my very first one. It was a very interesting and engaging story. I tried to get into the Directions EMEA conference in Hamburg, but all my topics were rejected at the time. Then, another software architect in the company had two topics accepted, and my manager

Tine Starič has proven with his career path that international mobility and self-initiative are crucial for technological progress. His story, driven by the initial challenge of the ASEF Research Abroad Fellowship program and the desire to operate in the global IT community, illustrates that continuous growth requires courage and strategic thinking. As a recognized Microsoft MVP, he emphasizes that the greatest value in the age of artificial intelligence does not lie in writing code, but in the ability to simplify complex concepts, contribute to the community, and take a broader view of the entire team's well-being. After four years in Lithuania, his story also proves that even the biggest global visionaries sometimes feel the call of the Slovenian mountains and the native tongue.

wrote to me: 'Hey, you know, he won't be able to take both, would you take one?' Of course, I said I would. I received a warning: 'Pull yourself together; you don't even know what the topic is.' When he told me, I said I would take it, no problem. In a few weeks, I trained myself and figured out what this topic even was and how I would present it. That was my first presentation; I had to prepare for it in two days, and that opened the way forward for me.

This active contribution to the community probably also led to your Microsoft MVP (Most Valuable Professional) title. What does this title even mean in the technology community?

MVP is a recognition that the things you do are good for the community. It doesn't mean you are the best in your field or write the best code. But it means that the things you do, you do for this community. Things somehow started piling up; I wrote a blog, I did a presentation. At some point, Microsoft told me: 'Hey, what you have been doing for the last 12 months is cool. Here is your MVP recognition.' With this recognition, you also get certain perks; for example, I get various Microsoft product licenses for free.

The main added value that I see in this is being part of a WhatsApp group where all Microsoft MVPs are present. It's suddenly like a little family, where we are all united by the same passion for technology. Now I know people from all over the world, and when I go to conferences, it's always like a family reunion. If I am really honest, the day I found out I was an MVP is still my favorite day in my career. Something interesting that a friend who received the MVP title before me described very well: 'Look, the first time you wake up as an MVP, it's a very good feeling. But then you also wake up as an MVP on the second day, and the third day.' The main added value for me is not having the title, but being recognized as part of the technology community and having someone as big as Microsoft say: 'Hey, what you are doing, we think it's cool.' That is truly a great satisfaction.

With all the achievements mentioned and the integration of artificial intelligence and tools like GitHub Copilot into work processes, you naturally face many challenges. What is it that most often fills your thoughts with worry?

I don't know. One of those challenges is that you never know if you are doing enough, especially concerning artificial intelligence. At one point, you think: 'Wow, we are already using this artificial intelligence really well.' Two days later, you think: 'Yes, this is moving so fast; am I even following all the trends?' I feel that the speed of development has accelerated so much that sometimes you

have to stop and accept that you simply cannot follow all these things – that you just cannot always be up to date. I feel that is one of those eternal challenges.

The challenges brought by the rapid pace and constant learning ... What advice would you give to someone who is just starting on your career path?

That's an interesting question. I am currently building a presentation for a conference on this very topic. I would say it's perfectly fine if people only want to work their eight hours and then go home and live their lives. But there is also nothing wrong with still being driven by a desire to research and program extra after work. This self-initiative is very welcome if you can carry it through, of course. What I would emphasize here is that many people put too little 'pressure' on their managers. If you are willing to research and do something extra, talk to your manager about it, and have them give you time for it, have them support you. I think that is a very important aspect – that you don't have to do everything alone, especially because the company always benefits greatly from this self-initiative. The second thing I would emphasize is that it's good to find a mentor. I have had five different mentors in the last decade, and each one helped me overcome career hurdles in a different way. I think that is great advice on how to get to the next level or simply how to understand the same situation anew with a different perspective.

Who, then, is your biggest source of inspiration?

This has changed quite a bit over the years. When I started getting to know the programming community, I met a huge number of speakers at conferences, all of whom share the same passion for programming, and that somehow drew me in. It would be difficult to single out one person, as so many have emerged in recent years.

Have you ever considered what you would do if you weren't programming? What makes you truly feel relaxed?

In the last two years, I sometimes wondered what if I became a baker, but I don't know if that would be a completely realistic profession for me. What I sometimes thought I would do is be a professor. I feel that this touch of teaching has somehow already transferred into all these lectures and conferences. It has kind of merged. As for hobbies, the most interesting hobby I have gained since moving to Lithuania is baking. I don't know exactly how or when it started, but now I knead bread and braid loaves. I find that very fun and relaxing. Otherwise, there is, of course, sports, especially volleyball, which acts as a good valve for me.

Thinking about what you would do if you weren't programming, and perhaps also a potential baking career – you are extremely successful, so this question might sound ridiculous, but what would be your biggest career mistake?

That's very hard to say. If I were to look back at the last ten years, what often comes to mind is that before I started studying Accounting and Auditing at the Faculty of Economics, I studied at the Faculty of Mathematics and failed the first year there. On one hand, I somehow lost a year. I sometimes thought that was a mistake. But, you know. With everything you look back on, it's like this: if that hadn't happened, it wouldn't have led me to this point where I am now. So, it's hard to say that it was truly a failure. I think everything somehow directed me to be where I am today.

For the purpose of this interview, I called you in Lithuania via video call. Do you wish to stay there?

When I spoke with the HR manager right at the beginning of my move to Lithuania, we agreed that I would stay in Lithuania for three years. That is enough to kind of see how things are going, where to go next, whether to go to another country, or stay here. This is now the fourth year of my stay here, and I notice that I could easily do my job, at least the position I currently hold, from Slovenia as well. From there, I can still fly to conferences, give lectures, and collaborate with the team. I somehow realized that Lithuania is still not a country where I would want to stay long-term. Some Slovenian small things convinced me of this. I really like that we have mountains in Slovenia and that I can speak Slovenian. Although I would say that I manage English quite well, talking on the street in English is not the same as doing it in Slovenian, which I much prefer. A certain honest moment happens; I can't quite describe it. A big plus I see in Slovenia is also that I have my family and friends closer to me. All these reasons came together, and I told myself: 'This four-year adventure was awesome, but let's slowly wrap it up and try to lead a new adventure from Slovenia.'

Tanja Janko

If one door closes, a new window always opens

ASEF fellow of the 2019 generation, who combined an interdisciplinary Master's degree in Chemistry, Astronomy, and Astrobiology at the University of Zurich with lab experiences in Gambia and Chicago. With broad technical knowledge in chemistry, molecular biology, and microbiology, Tanja combines expertise with critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. She discusses why proactivity is the most important virtue of a young researcher and how working on ineffective medicines in developing countries led her to study public health in London.

Tanja Janko is a graduate chemical engineer and researcher who began her scientific journey in Ljubljana and continued with an exceptionally broad multidisciplinary Master's degree in Switzerland. She completed her ASEF research visit as part of the Research Abroad Fellowship program at Northwestern University in Chicago under the mentorship of Professor Dimitri Krainc. Her curiosity and passion for problem-solving have led her all the way to London, where she will continue her studies in public health.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

In Switzerland, you completed an interdisciplinary Master's degree in Chemical Technology, Astronomy, and Astrobiology. Before that, you studied Chemical Technology in Ljubljana, but even as an undergraduate, you actively sought international opportunities. What was the driving force behind your exceptional proactivity that pushed you beyond the borders of a single discipline?

Already in the second year of my undergraduate studies, I knew I wouldn't stay only in the Slovenian sphere. I wanted to experience something else. First, I decided to seek out a research internship on my own. And I did so with great persistence! I sent over 50 emails to various institutes and to the addresses of many professors. Only one person replied, and that was the professor who offered me an internship in Milan, at the Mario Negri Research Institute. Looking back, that one single affirmative answer, "Yes," actually outweighed all the rejections I had received.

Such persistence certainly paid off with ASEF as well. You were a fellow of the

Photo: Tanja Janko's personal archive

2019 generation and visited Northwestern University in Chicago. How do you view the role of that experience in your career path today?

ASEF was a ticket into the academic world and a source of contacts for me. I worked in Chicago with Professor Dimitri Krainc, which gave me insight into the operations of top American universities. But at the same time, ASEF is a truly wonderful academic Slovenian community. What is the real and long-term value of the ASEF Institute is definitely the new acquaintances and friends I have and maintain to this day.

Your decision to intertwine disciplines that may not seem to have much in common is interesting. Why such breadth, and how did this interdisciplinarity enrich your perspective on problem-solving?

I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as possible and interweave knowledge. This breadth gave me a wider view of the world and of research. My interest was interwoven between laboratory work and seeking answers to philosophical life questions.

However, despite everything, you ultimately decided not to stay in the laboratory. This shift is linked to your Master's thesis on lead detoxification and field experience.

Exactly. While writing my Master's thesis on lead detoxification, I realized that this is a truly major public health problem. The topic absorbed me. While I was doing research in the lab, I also read a lot about what was actually happening around the world.

West Africa has a problem with high lead concentrations. In Gambia, for example, imported paints contain shockingly high lead levels, leading to poisonings. You had a harrowing one-month work experience in Gambia. What were the moments that definitively steered you toward public health?

It was a cultural and work shock. In our laboratories, we have orderly and safe conditions. In Gambia, we worked with blood samples on a surface that was not adequate. Power outages occurred up to five times a day. But the most disturbing thing was that this was a hospital for people who could afford to pay for it at all. I don't even want to think about the residents who cannot secure healthcare. That opened my eyes. It was then that it became clear to me that my work was not solving one problem in a lab, but solving systemic problems in the field.

These practical experiences then led you to the non-profit organization Chemists Without Borders, with which you collaborated and researched the active ingredients of medicines in developing countries.

Yes, exactly. That drove me forward. I helped investigate whether medicines actually contained active ingredients. WHO statistics state that one in ten medicines in these third-world countries actually does not contain active ingredients. This statistic finally convinced me that I no longer saw myself in the lab and that I wanted to help on a broader, public health level. I decided to study Public Health at the University of London and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. In the future, I want to direct my career activity towards public health.

We spoke about ineffective medicines in the third world, and you studied at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, a country that

The story of Tanja Janko is a living confirmation that a scientific career knows no bounds, neither geographical nor disciplinary. Her story highlights that proactivity is the key currency for a breakthrough. The shift from chemistry, astronomy, and astrobiology to public health, motivated by the shock of systemic deficiencies in Gambia and the problem of ineffective medicines, proves that the goal of top-tier research is solving problems in the field, not just in the laboratory.

is the flagship of the global pharmaceutical industry and drug development. Where do you see the key advantages of the Swiss research environment, and what can we learn from it in Slovenia?

The main difference is that Switzerland invests significantly more in research, and it truly shows. Not only in finances, but also in the infrastructure, which is world-class. In addition, professors are much more international, which immediately opens up the world. All Master's programs are in English, which is fundamental. But what I find really crucial is that universities strongly encourage start-up companies. There is an entire culture present there that pushes you to think about how to transfer an idea from the lab to the market. This is an environment that generates and nurtures ideas.

Such top-tier science and the research of new paths, regardless of whether it concerns space or pharmaceuticals, are probably full of challenges. In science, it is inevitable that moments arise when you hit a wall. How do you overcome demotivation when research stalls?

Whenever I lack motivation for one thing, I somehow retreat to another, because I also have many different hobbies. This method of 'jumping' always pays off for me. When I'm working on something else, I find the solution to the original problem quite spontaneously. I always say that if one door closes, a new window always opens. I adhere to this saying in everything in life.

With what do you recharge your batteries, and what are the areas outside the academic world you turn to when you run out of solutions?

For the last year, I've been training Muay Thai (Thai boxing). I engage in a lot of sports. Then there's reading; my goal is to read 40 books a year, which I have already achieved this year. And yes, sometimes I also like to create and occupy myself with handicrafts.

Congratulations, at this pace of fast living, it's probably not easy to make time to read 40 books annually. Which author currently inspires you the most?

If I have to single out a Slovenian, I would say Slavoj Žižek.

Your path, from astrobiology, studying harmful lead, ineffective medicines, to Muay Thai and an impressive reading quota, paints you as an exceptionally self-motivated person. What advice would you give to all young researchers and future ASEF Fellows who stand at the beginning of their journey?

Truly, as much self-initiative as possible. That is key. Try to find various internships, seek out a topic that excites you, and be proactive. ASEF is an excellent springboard for anyone interested in research. Seize the opportunity!

ASEF Visit Slovenia and Research Abroad Junior Fellows during a visit to the Dolenjska region. July 2025. Photo: ASEF archive

Visit Slovenia

The Visiting Slovenia Fellowship Program is a central pillar of ASEF's efforts to reconnect talented young individuals abroad with Slovenian roots to their homeland. Our goal is to enrich their academic and professional knowledge and deepen their understanding of Slovenian culture, language, and customs. We enable selected young people to undertake a 10-week work or research visit in Slovenia, where they gain experience at reputable institutions. Furthermore, Visiting Slovenia fellows actively collaborate with Research Abroad fellows. In this way, we build a community of young people, contribute to society, and give back to the community, as our fellows exchange views, experiences, and knowledge long after their research visits are completed. The program's goal is the successful harmonization of professional growth with an enhanced awareness of Slovenian identity. To confirm the significance and success of this program, read the exceptional stories and experiences of some former Visiting Slovenia fellows below.

Stefanía Leber

The Borders of the Homeland Are Not the Borders of the Heart

Usually, we begin journalistic stories with our own words and insights to seemingly transport the readers into the world of the interviewee unfolding before us. But sometimes, the testimony of the person we are writing about is so powerful, sincere, and articulate that any journalistic introduction would only dilute it ...

"First, I want to introduce myself, as I believe it is crucial to understand where I come from to understand where I am today. I am Stefanía Leber – or, more briefly: Štefi. I was born in 1991 in Buenos Aires as the granddaughter of four proud Slovenian grandparents. My parents were also born in Argentina, but all our lives we have been active members of the Slovenian community, especially at the Slovenian Home in San Martín.

I attended the Dr. Gregorij Rožman Slovenian Primary School and the Director Marko Bajuk high school course. I was president of the Slovenian Girls' Organization in our home twice. In 2017, I graduated in Dental Medicine from the University del Salvador. During my studies, I first heard about the ASEF Fellowship, but at the time, I did not want to interrupt my studies.

The turning point was 2020. At that time, I was dealing with the temporomandibular joint and chronic oral-facial pain. I was accepted at UKC Ljubljana, and in July 2021, I began my rotation at their Clinical Department of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery. I assisted in a large operating room for the first time, saw the anatomy of the joints, and met the team with whom we still socialize and share memories today.

When I received the invitation to share how ASEF impacted my life, I recalled the three pillars of the scholarship: academic excellence, character building, and giving back to the community – all with a focus on preserving Slovenian heritage. Connecting with Slovenes around the world is priceless. Slovene identity is not just citizenship or place of birth: it is the smell of potica, an evening prayer, songs at a grandparent's knee. These are emotions deeply rooted in the heart. 'The borders of the homeland are not the borders of the heart' – as the Slovenian music group Fed Horses sings in their song 'Argentina'. Slovenia was within me long before I ever set foot on its soil.

After the scholarship, my husband and I decided to stay in Slovenia. If it hadn't been for ASEF, I wouldn't have realized that a home exists on two continents, I wouldn't have had the courage to start over at thirty, I wouldn't have found a professional environment where I combine my Argentine experience with Slovenian knowledge. And my first child wouldn't be playing in the meadows where my ancestors once played."

Photo: Aleš Rosa

Thus, at this year's ASEF Gala Dinner, Dr. Stefanía Leber moved the audience gathered in the hall of the Grand Hotel Union with her speech.

Stefanía is a dentist, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, who came to Slovenia in 2021 as an ASEF Fellowship recipient through the Visit Slovenia program and ultimately found her professional and personal happiness in the homeland of her ancestors. Her story is not just a narrative about the successful nostrification of her Argentine degree in Dental Medicine and working at UKC Ljubljana – it is primarily a tale of roots, courage, and immense love for the Slovenian identity she inherited from her grandparents. Her speech is the emotional anchor of the entire experience and the key to understanding why she decided to build her new home and the future of her family right here in Slovenia.

Your childhood was heavily intertwined with the Slovenian community in Argentina. How does this environment influence the formation of Slovenian identity when you live on another continent?

My grandparents moved to Buenos Aires after the war and built Slovenian homes there. Being active members of the community meant that the Slovenian language, customs, and values were imprinted on life very early on – through Slovenian school, activities, and family gatherings. It is not just citizenship; it is a holistic experience. We were raised with the understanding that the borders of the heart are wider than the borders of the country.

When did you first come to Slovenia yourself?

I first came in 2009 for a month to get to know Slovenia and the family, then more than a decade passed. The opportunity to visit again was made possible by the ASEF Fellowship, which I first heard about during my studies but only applied for in 2020, after completing my studies in Dental Medicine, which was a pivotal moment. The scholarship allowed me to experience Slovenia not only personally but also professionally, to connect with the profession and with Slovenes around the world. This professional and personal experience was so powerful that my partner and I decided to stay and begin the diploma nostrification process to build a home in Slovenia.

The rotation at UKC Ljubljana and the nostrification of your diploma in Slovenian were major professional challenges for you. How did you cope with this?

The first few months were challenging. Working at the Clinical Department of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery was intense, and all in Slovenian! Additionally, there was the nostrification, as the fields of medicine and dental medicine are

Photo: Stefanía Leber's personal archive

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Stefanía Leber's story is proof that Slovenian heritage, nurtured within the community, creates a deeper bond than citizenship or place of birth. Belonging is a feeling transmitted through the smell of potica and songs – and that is a universal currency. Her courage to start over at thirty tells us that the homeland is not only where we were born but where we decide to build our future.

regulated and require full nostrification and a high level of professional Slovenian language proficiency. Fortunately, I already knew the language, but professional terminology was something else entirely. Meeting people was important – mentors and colleagues who become a new family when you are far from home, and who helped me with the adaptation.

You and your husband, who also comes from Argentina and is an architect, decided to exchange your permanent address for a Slovenian one. What does life between two continents mean to you?

It's a daily balance between the Argentine and Slovenian ways of life. We have the opportunity to create a home where we feel a sense of belonging to both cultures. Slovenia is my professional and personal home today, and Argentina is the place where my family roots are. The ASEF Fellowship allowed me to combine both. If it weren't for this opportunity, I wouldn't have had the courage to start over at thirty. As you may have noticed (laughs), I am expecting a child in two months (editor's note: the conversation took place in September 2025). The decision for her was a major and intentional one. Our little girl, Mila, will grow up where my ancestors once played, which is the most beautiful thing and, at the same time, represents a very powerful conclusion to the entire cycle. My husband and I even looked for a name for her that would sound nice in both Slovenian and Spanish. We always say that we never know if we will stay here forever, so everything must be neutral and adaptable so that our daughter feels a sense of belonging to both cultures. My husband and I always joke that we are kind of homeless since we are always a bit mixed. For now, Slovenia is home. The fact that we decided to start a family here says a lot.

Do you also have an Argentine community in Slovenia?

Before moving, I heard that about 600 Argentines live in Slovenia. Now, more than 20 of us meet regularly, and when you are far from home, such a community becomes a new family, which is priceless. The plan is to visit the Argentine family and our parents, who are now grandparents to their first granddaughter, more often.

How do you see the Slovenian community in Argentina today and the role of ASEF for future generations?

The Slovenian community is still active, but it is changing generationally. In Buenos Aires, the homes are still centers for socializing, but maintaining the tradition requires a lot of effort. The younger generations need support to stay connected to the culture. This is where the role of ASEF is crucial. It is not just a scholarship; it is an opportunity for personal growth, professional development, and connecting with the global Slovenian community. When you seize it, you understand that Slovenia is not just a country, but a feeling that accompanies you wherever you are.

Matías Juhant

Field Ornithologist Unveiling the Hidden Migrations of South American Raptors

The 2023 ASEF Junior Fellow, who began fieldwork at the age of seventeen, is now aiming to write an ambitious book for Princeton University Press. In this interview, he talks about field identification of all South American raptor species and how to determine their age class through direct observation.

Dr. Matías Alejandro Juhant is a Doctor of Biology and an ornithologist who views fieldwork in the impenetrable regions of South America, including the Amazon lowlands and the high Andes, as the fuel and driving force of his existence. His work combines traditional, physically demanding field research with modern ecological informatics. We spoke with Matías about how he discovered his passion for birdwatching at the age of nine, the real challenges of spending more than a month alone in a nearly impassable, isolated area, and the far-reaching impact the ASEF scholarship has on solving global environmental problems.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

You developed an extraordinary passion for birds very early on: you became interested in them at the age of nine, and started doing fieldwork at seventeen. What attracted you so strongly to the world of ornithology, and what remains your greatest inspiration for fieldwork today?

That is a very deep and difficult question. The older I get, the stronger this desire to study birds becomes. I cannot precisely explain what drives me. There is something in my body that compels me to learn and observe which species of birds live in different environments. I think this is related to genetics. My grandparents were from Slovenia; they had a farm and gardens. This connection to the environment is probably rooted somewhere in my genetic code. Since I was little, I have always found it fascinating to observe birds and animals.

You describe yourself as a person with a lot of energy who constantly seeks challenges. We could also say you are ambitious. What is your driving force in science?

I am indeed ambitious, although I sometimes

Photo: Matías Juhant's personal archive

use the word cautiously due to potential negative connotations. But the essence is this: too many negative things are happening around the world, and very few people are actively working to preserve nature and the environment we live in. My main driving force is the desire that I simply must and want to do something in this field. For me, this is like gasoline for a car. It drives me forward and gives me energy.

You regularly go on multi-week expeditions to remote areas of South America, from the high plateaus of the Andes, such as the Puna, to the lowlands of the Amazon rainforest. Many would probably imagine your fieldwork as disappearing into the wilderness for several months. What does your life during research actually look like, and what extreme challenges do you face when cut off from civilization for an extended period?

These are truly proper expeditions. I take a backpack with food and everything I need for survival, and I am alone for up to a month. The biggest challenges are survival-related, especially conserving water and food. In winter, I have to break the ice to get liquid water. In summer, I face extreme temperatures that can exceed 40 degrees Celsius, for example in Gran Chaco, as well as drought, mosquitoes, and ants. Due to the extreme conditions, I keep a long beard, which serves as natural protection against insect bites, cold, and heat, and also protects me from sunburn. In general, the locations vary greatly. Last year, I spent a month in Calilegua National Park in northern Argentina. Although access there is easy, once you are alone, it is genuinely difficult. The Amazon also offers real, dense forests, which is great. So, my fieldwork is broad, as I go from very difficult, isolated points cut off from civilization to somewhat more accessible areas, but all of them are full of different types of forests and landscapes.

Presumably, not only the temperatures but also the animals that approach you are dangerous?

Of course. At night, I have to be very careful because of animals like rats and mice that try to enter the tent because they smell food. They usually dig holes, so I have to scare them away. Snakes and various insects are also a constant danger. For example, in Brazil, I was stung by bees, and if I had been allergic, it could have been fatal for me, and we wouldn't be talking now. Since there is no phone signal in most locations and no nearby hospital, a serious danger can arise in case of an accident. Despite all these challenges and risks, it is precisely this intertwining of adventure and science that drives me forward. All the data I acquire this way is new to science and forms the basis for my scientific articles.

In your article, where you reveal the migration patterns of raptors, you mention using data collected from field surveys and data from citizen science repositories such as eBird and WikiAves Brasil. How has the technological advancement of the last 20 years changed and facilitated your research work?

In terms of data collection, there has been truly enormous progress in the last two decades. The biggest breakthrough is so-called citizen science. People in the field photograph and upload their observations to the online platforms you mention. I can then analyze these vast amounts of data from home, which allows me to remotely study the seasonal phenomena of species across the entire region. This combination of my own, physically demanding fieldwork, for instance, counting from a car

or at specific points, and data from citizen science creates an extremely powerful and comprehensive picture for my studies.

What about the financial side of research with high-tech equipment?

Camera technology has improved; we now have better lenses. But expensive high-tech devices, such as GPS trackers, are a significant financial challenge. We are talking about a cost of around 3,000 US dollars per device, plus an annual subscription for the data. This means that such devices are difficult for researchers in South America or Africa to access. Consequently, we are often dependent on funding from Europe or North America. This is a major challenge that limits the scope of our research.

One of your latest groundbreaking discoveries concerns the migration patterns of raptors, about which very little is known; especially the species Rufous-thighed Kite (Harpagus diodon), where you refuted the claims of English researchers about the species' endemism in Brazil.

English researchers claimed that this raptor species only breeds in a specific area in Brazil and is endemic there. My colleague and I found that this is simply not true. By increasing the field data base and with the help of citizen science, which is increasingly widespread here in Argentina, I documented that this species also migrates and reproduces in northwestern Argentina and Bolivia. This proves that the species is not endemic to Brazil and that its migratory and reproductive patterns are significantly wider than experts previously assumed. This finding is crucial for a more effective international nature conservation strategy. I must also thank all the people who go into nature, photograph raptors, and publish the data on online platforms. This is a huge step forward. If I were, for example, collecting data alone on rare species like the Crested Eagle (Morphnus guianensis), which we call a ghost in English because it is so difficult to spot, I would not be able to get a strong enough sample. But with a combination of field expeditions, fieldwork by car, and citizen science data, I can get a very powerful data base. This makes it easier for me to strive for publications in better journals.

In connection with your research on the Rufous-thighed Kite and similar raptor species in South America, you have pointed out the long and frustrating process of publishing in scientific journals, which are often controlled by European and North American funding. You face article rejections where reviewers criticize you for too small a data sample.

Unfortunately, that is the case. Sometimes I receive a response that they cannot accept the article due to a small data sample. They do not understand that this is the best possible data that can be obtained in South America with limited resources. But well, we try to make progress even if we do not have such strong databases as elsewhere. Over time, I have learned that I must transform negative energy into something positive. Negative responses give me additional energy

Matías Juhant, with his immense willpower and fieldwork, proves that passion, persistence, and academic resourcefulness enable research breakthroughs. His research work not only contributes to a better understanding of the South American fauna but also provides crucial data for nature conservation that can directly influence local environmental awareness.

to move forward. When you see how long the whole process takes – for example, I submitted the article on May 18th, and now, as we are talking, it is September 15th, and I am still waiting for a decision – this process is incredibly lengthy. However, this frustration, this personal struggle for publication, becomes the will for further research.

One of the articles was also created during your ASEF Fellowship Visit Slovenia. In it, you reveal a high rate of bird injuries in Patagonia. What kind of injuries are these, and why is this data important?

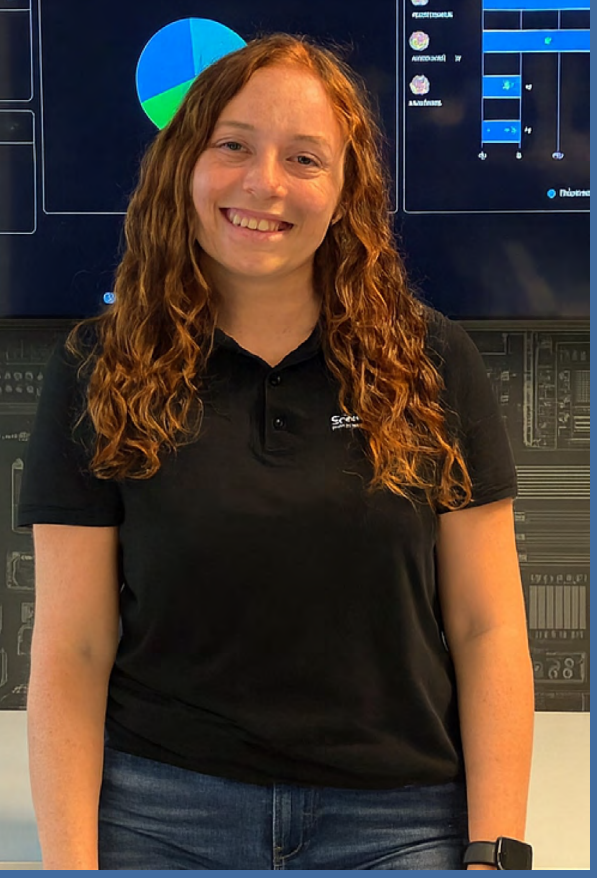
This is important data from a nature conservation perspective. As part of this research, which I hope will be published soon, I studied a certain number of birds and found that almost a quarter of the sample was injured. This number refers to the so-called prevalence of wounds. This means that out of a little over 400 birds studied, a quarter had injuries, which are mostly the result of baiting in steel-jawed leg-hold traps with a carcass and electrocution. Since this is a huge number, and only at the two points where I studied the species myself, we can imagine the extent of injuries in the entire Patagonia region. My goal is to use the publication of this data to raise awareness and make a difference. When people in Patagonia who study or live in this area get this data and see what is happening in their region, I hope they will try harder and take better care of the environment. A single article cannot do anything, but together with other articles dealing with other animal species, this data becomes part of a powerful argument that a certain environment needs to be protected.

Matías, your ASEF Fellowship was, as you say, extremely important for your academic development. Looking back, how has this experience influenced your career path, and what are the key achievements that have grown out of this collaboration?

The ASEF Fellowship came at a crucial time and is truly the foundation that led me to my current ambitions. It enabled me to work on two important articles – the one published last year and the one about injured birds in Patagonia – thereby directly complementing my doctoral dissertation. These concrete achievements gave me the strength and confidence to transition to the next research level. At the same time, I successfully established valuable contacts

Photo: Matías Juhant's personal archive

in Slovenia with researchers in Maribor and Ljubljana and with the DOPPS society. This networking is extremely important for us in South America. All these achievements, which were born during and after the ASEF Visit Slovenia scholarship program, gave me a strong foundation and visible results, with which I can now seriously approach my next major project: a comprehensive book about the raptors of South America (Raptors of South America) with Princeton University Press. This five-year undertaking, which includes a plan for two books with a general guide and more than 5,000 high-quality photographs of 100 raptor species, requires extensive travel across the Amazon and the entirety of South America, as well as securing funding. Since I want to use my youth and energy for fieldwork and writing, ASEF was a truly important stone in this mosaic that enabled me to take such an independent research path. Teaching, however, may be part of my future.



Sophia Jarc

"Be Confident" is the Most Important Advice for Young Female Engineers

Sophia Jarc is an Industrial Engineering student at Purdue University. She shared with us her experience as an ASEF Visit Slovenia Junior Fellow in 2024, where she worked on an international project at the company Dewesoft. Her unique combination of technical and social skills was described by her mentors as a "one-of-a-kind combination" in engineering. Sophia is dedicated to the empowerment of women in STEM. In this interview, she highlights the power of mentorship and reveals how living in Trbovlje deepened her connection to her Slovenian heritage.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Before we delve into your research visit to Slovenia and your work for Dewesoft, what is it that calms you down in the hustle and bustle of everyday life?

In my free time, I enjoy fitness and physical exercise. I also enjoy watching and attending sporting events. At the university, I dedicate my free time to working in the Women in Engineering program, where I help inspire young girls to study engineering at Purdue. Working with women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) is a really great passion of mine.

Your mentors at Dewesoft, Dominika Oblak and Darja Jerič, emphasized that your background in industrial engineering and your love for problem-solving are a unique combination. How does this unique blend of technical and social skills help you with complex projects?

I believe we gain technical expertise at university. However, the social aspect is something they don't teach us; we have to acquire it, learn it, and grow with it through experience. Especially in such a technical field as mine, it is difficult to find people who are capable of both. I think communication and the ability to lead a team or collaborate with one are crucial for effective work and problem-solving. The ability to communicate and socialize effectively seems very important to me. As part of the ASEF research visit, I learned that this is even more crucial because of language barriers. I was working on an international project with different people, where not everyone spoke English, or they understood me in different ways. Therefore, clearly communicating what we wanted to achieve was very important.

Photo: Sophia Jarc's personal archive

You are a proud member of Purdue's Women in Engineering program, which helps increase the percentage of women in engineering programs. What motivated you to participate in such initiatives?

I think engineering is not a field where you see many girls. I was very worried myself when I was deciding on it, as there is a stereotype about how engineers should look and behave. When I was looking for a university, I met girls from the Women in Engineering program at Purdue. Interacting with them and realizing that there were successful people who looked and behaved like me really motivated me. I wanted to give girls, future female engineers, the same feeling – that they don't have to fit the stereotype of an engineer and that they are capable of achieving their dreams in this still predominantly male niche.

Who is your biggest inspiration, both professionally and personally, and how has that person influenced your personal growth?

I have this answer, without hesitation (laughter). One hundred percent, my grandmother. She moved from Slovenia at the age of 21 or 22, the same age I am now, to marry my grandfather. They met in their native village in Slovenia; their families knew each other from the church in Dobrnič, and then my grandfather moved to America. They got married there very young and soon had twins. They had very little money, and my grandmother didn't speak English. She is an extremely strong woman who has gone through many trials. Despite all the obstacles and barriers life put in front of her, she always put our family first. She is definitely my biggest inspiration.

During your ASEF Visit Slovenia Fellowship, you were able to combine your interests in engineering and project management, which you demonstrated in co-organizing Dewesoft's summer camp.

I definitely learned how to work with different cultures. An internship in the United States usually doesn't offer that, as you are only surrounded by Americans. The opportunity to get to know different cultures and their ways of collaboration was truly valuable. Furthermore, a lot of the work that Dewesoft does directly relates to the subjects I have at university. It was very good that I could gain these practical experiences live, not just read about them in textbooks.

What would you identify as the most important professional lesson you took away from Dewesoft?

That would be communication, as I already mentioned, and also the importance of gaining the trust of the team and the people you work with. This was particularly difficult for me because I don't speak Slovenian fluently. Of course, they spoke English in all the business meetings, but at coffee breaks and lunches, they spoke Slovenian. At times, it was difficult for me to establish personal contact with the team because of this – for them to truly get to know me and entrust me with more responsibility. It took me some time to overcome this obstacle and earn their trust. In all my subsequent professional experiences, I find it easier because everyone speaks English. The language barrier was a challenge in its own way for me, but it only made me grow even more.

In your opinion, what role does mentorship play in empowering the next generation of women in engineering and leadership?

Mentorship plays an extremely large role. The best example I can give is the ASEF Fellowship program itself, as I was mentored by two extremely strong and inspiring women: Dominika Oblak for project management and Darja Jerič for project content. Observing how they dealt with demanding situations and daily tasks, and the fact of how successful they were and how much their colleagues respected them, gave me invaluable lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my career.

What was the most surprising or unexpected thing you learned about yourself while staying in Slovenia?

I learned how much I was surrounded exclusively by American culture and the American-Slovenian culture in which I grew up with my grandparents and parents. And that Slovenian culture I was raised in is very different from how I then experienced Slovenia myself. That surprised me a lot. I learned much more about the culture as it truly is today, and not just what it was like when my grandmother lived in Slovenia many years ago.

How did your stay in Slovenia through ASEF deepen your connection to your Slovenian roots?

Immensely. I really had time to visit and get to know my Slovenian family. Usually, when I visited them, it was for a quick ten days, where you are basically in the role of a tourist. This time, I could sit quietly on the terrace, play cards, and talk with them. This allowed me to get to know them on a deeper level and build a stronger bridge between my American and Slovenian families. We still communicate regularly with each other. The second thing was my life in Trbovlje. Initially, I was nervous because all the other Fellows lived in Ljubljana. It was as if I asked myself: 'Why did I need this?' However, it turned out to be the best experience. In Trbovlje, you are truly isolated, surrounded by mountains and valleys. Not everyone speaks English there; people live an authentic Slovenian life. This forced me to leave my comfort zone and learn Slovenian better so that I could buy food, get to the train station, and communicate in restaurants. This allowed me to live like a real Slovenian for the whole summer, not just as a tourist. Last but not least, my relationship with my colleagues at Dewesoft contributed greatly to my connection with Slovenia. We still hear from each other often, including both my mentors. It's incredible to have such support literally across the ocean, in Slovenia. It really makes the world smaller.

Photo: Sophia Jarc's personal archive

Sophia Jarc proves that the future of STEM fields lies in transcending mere technical knowledge. Her story, from her decision to pursue engineering that defies stereotypes, to stepping outside her comfort zone in Trbovlje and finally returning to Crowe, emphasizes a crucial lesson for young professionals: don't be afraid to be different, seek out unique international experiences that set you apart, and most importantly – cultivate the confidence to make your voice heard in any environment. Success lies not in knowing all the answers, but in the abilities of effective communication, building trust, and empowering oneself and others.

How has your career developed from the ASEF period until today?

ASEF really helped me with employment opportunities. The summer after ASEF, I got an internship at a company that is quite selective in hiring. The thing that made me stand out at the career fair – where I waited in line for more than an hour – was ASEF on my resume. No one else had that kind of experience. It is true that employers look for technical skills, but even more, they look for someone who is willing to leave their comfort zone and communicate effectively. ASEF gave me the tools to show this in interviews and on my resume. I am currently in my final year of university, but after graduation, I will return to the company Crowe, where I will take on a consulting role in the implementation of Microsoft ERP systems. This is a leading international company that offers services in auditing, tax consulting, and business consulting. They specialize in helping companies optimize operations, manage risks, and achieve growth.

Given that you are starting your career in an extremely technical and consulting company where it is often important for your voice to be heard, what advice would you give to other young women considering a career like yours?

The most important advice is to be confident and not let your voice go unheard. Many people will try to talk over them; they will think they are smarter. However, there is a good balance between working on a team and standing up for yourself. That's why I say: don't be afraid to be vocal and be confident, because you deserve to be there just as much as everyone else.

Joseph Mezner

I Saw Them Pour Diesel on the Forest and Then Burn It

From a finance graduate at Boise State University and an ASEF Visit Slovenia research visit at Generali Investments in Ljubljana to founding his own environmental consulting firm, Three Oaks Carbon, in the US. Former ASEF Junior Fellow Joseph Mezner discusses why carbon credits entrepreneurship is crucial for preserving America's urban forests.

Joseph Mezner, an ASEF Junior Fellow from the 2022 generation, decided to embark on his career path by leaping from the traditional world of finance to entrepreneurship focused on carbon credits and sustainability. He conceived the idea during his research visit to Slovenia, where he intensively dedicated himself to ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) initiatives and sustainability, while also working on real estate funds and creating economic models. We spoke with him about why he described his first trip to Slovenia as pivotal, why it is sometimes difficult for Slovenian entrepreneurs to take risks, and how his company is fighting against the uncontrolled bulldozing of forests in the US.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

You visited Slovenia for the first time three years ago. Since then, you have returned practically every summer, and we caught you now during your fourth visit. You describe this trip to your relatives' homeland three years ago as pivotal. Setting aside professional development, what else did this experience bring you?

I don't want it to sound too dramatic, but that word really holds true. ASEF was pivotal for me. The reason is not hidden in a single memory, but in the entire experience. It was an opportunity to meet all the other Fellows and socialize at events that brought me friendships for life. I remember traveling around the country – we went to Celje, to the pristine Logar Valley, and, not to forget, we even visited a wine cellar near Novo Mesto, where the mayor gifted us bottles of wine. This is a very unique, one-of-a-kind experience that you simply cannot have in the US. In Slovenia, I made invaluable friendships, met incredible people, and gained extremely useful guidance and ideas for work.

During your ASEF Visit Slovenia Fellowship to Generali Investments, despite having a degree in finance, you dedicated

Photo: Joseph Mezner's personal archive

a large part of your time to ESG initiatives, sustainability, and carbon credits. Did this particular experience with your mentor, Sašo Šmigić, prove to be the key turning point that led you to decide to take a risk and found your own company, Three Oaks Carbon, instead of pursuing a classic financial career?

Absolutely, the internship had a very significant impact. Of course, I had a background in finance, which I studied, but the experience at Generali completely introduced me to and allowed me to delve deeper into sustainability – specifically ESG and carbon credit markets. Clearly, the European Union deals with this much more comprehensively than the US. I learned a huge amount, and after the internship ended, I simply continued researching and told myself I had to put all my efforts into the Three Oaks Carbon idea. This new direction completely captivated me.

You modeled your environmental consulting company after European guidelines, but you operate predominantly in the US. What are the main differences in the approach to sustainability that you must consider in the American market?

The main difference is the regulatory framework. In Europe, this is governed by regulation and a governmental framework, while in the US, it is more about initiatives led by private individuals and the industry. My time at Generali, where I worked in a very non-hierarchical organization and saw all aspects of management. That gave me a crucial insight. It helped me become adaptable, as now at Three Oaks Carbon, I perform various tasks and must quickly adjust to diverse roles.

To summarize, in the US, you need to be more proactive and seek market opportunities within this free-market environment. Since you and your company, Three Oaks Carbon, must constantly adapt: what exactly is your company's goal, and why is preserving urban forests through carbon credits such an important niche in this voluntary carbon market in the US?

The goal of Three Oaks Carbon is to preserve urban forests, which are extremely exposed to the risk of uncontrolled development in the US. This is a big problem because cities are expanding outward, and hired developers are constantly bulldozing forests to make way for parking lots, houses, and new settlements. This is the difference between us and others: while most of the competition creates carbon credits merely by less extensive harvesting of commercial logging forests, we want to protect these forests from destruction. With our carbon finance model, we are creating the conditions for future parks, something comparable to Ljubljana's Tivoli or Golovec, which are still preserved in the middle of the urban environment.

You spoke about carbon finance as the key to forest preservation, but here you encounter a genuine ethical

Joseph Mezner, with his venture, the founding of Three Oaks Carbon, has proven that the risk of ethically-driven entrepreneurship is crucial for opening new paths in sustainability. His story, the transition from traditional finance to carbon finance, encouraged by European perspectives, illustrates that through a proactive approach and the pursuit of tangible impact, we can prevent the uncontrolled destruction of the environment and create solutions where regulation fails.

dilemma. Forest owners are often families who have owned the properties for 100 years, they do not want to sell them, but they are under pressure because typical tax breaks do not help them enough. How does your model help them preserve this family legacy from being sold to real estate investors?

Exactly. This is a big challenge. A property is worth millions to a development investor, but if you are an average owner, you only get tax breaks that do not justify that financial decision. Selling is essentially selling the family legacy. With this carbon finance, we offer them money that is less than what an investor would pay, but we still allow the owners to remain owners and receive a financial incentive for their decision for permanent preservation. Fortunately, it is precisely because of this dilemma that many of these owners contact us directly.

This mission, which saves family legacies and the environment, is probably especially strong given certain visual shocks you experience in the field. Your project on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi is a drastic example.

Photo: ASEF archive

You are right; this is a very powerful, direct example. Where we operate, there is a crazy population growth, but at the same time, very little regulation, which leads to uncontrolled development. I actually witnessed the destruction and have pictures of how neighboring properties were bulldozed, all the trees piled up, poured over with diesel, and burned. This area has already been hit by Hurricane Katrina, and now it is being destroyed by building expansion without limits. I find this insane. This sight only solidified my mission to preserve these forests.

Given this intense motivation, but also the challenge, as you are in a niche where no one else is doing what you are doing ... What was the biggest challenge you encountered when establishing Three Oaks Carbon?

I would say it was the constant headaches and

challenges because I had to start everything from scratch. This has become a passion for me: I want to preserve these forests because bulldozing deserts, farms, and forests just for more parking lots or new settlements is simply stupid. If there is already some money in this carbon credit business, why shouldn't we have a bigger and more tangible impact on our cities and our communities?

Given that you really took a risk and started from scratch, and because you had the opportunity to meet Slovenian entrepreneurs in Slovenia – what advice would you give to young people who have excellent ideas but hesitate to take that leap into the unknown?

I think there is a tendency in Slovenia for young people to be very negative about their ideas from the outset and to overthink all the difficulties, instead of just starting. In the US, those who succeed often simply say, "Ah, let's give it a try!" I suggest you try it with the minimal amount of money required to test the idea, and simply implement it.

Your message aligns well with the ASEF vision, creating bridges and connections between the Slovenian academic community abroad and Slovenia, with an emphasis on joint development and mentorship. How are these values reflected in your professional and personal life, and what advice would you give to future ASEF Fellows in conclusion?

I believe that no one can achieve all their set goals alone. This applies to both business and personal life. You need to exchange ideas and meet the right people for the opportunities presented to you. You never know how things will turn out. I certainly have some potential projects that could happen here in Slovenia. This would not have occurred if I hadn't met certain people during the ASEF Visit Slovenia and hadn't established lasting contacts. Therefore, my advice is clear: ASEF is great, do not delay applying! Make good and truly personal connections, be a good person, and look beyond the obvious. Different opportunities will find their way to you in mysterious ways.

Genevieve Gregorich

Forget Pancakes, It's All About 'Palačinka' – and the Strategy of Breaking Mental Blocks

Genevieve Gregorich, a Ph.D. Candidate in Strategy and Organizational Behavior at Columbia Business School in New York, embodies a multifaceted approach to life and research. Her journey – from the Federal Reserve to her doctoral studies, culminating in an ASEF Visit Slovenia 2025 Junior Fellowship – reflects a deep commitment to exploring social dynamics, human potential, and the evolving role of business in society.

Her academic trajectory, which she describes as a "very layered approach to thinking about social dynamics," began with economics, but her time at Columbia introduced her to psychology and sociology. This blending of disciplines fueled her strategy research, which focuses on why organizations and their leaders engage with socio-political issues, a research calling that crystallized during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Furthermore, through her own entrepreneurial work, she is developing a method to help people realize their personal and collective dreams by breaking through mental limitations – a profound perspective shift that she is now eager to blend with her academic focus on organizational behavior. During her ASEF Fellowship, Genevieve researched Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), mentored by Prof. Dr. Tomaž Čater, and explored her Slovenian heritage, finding both academic and personal connection in the process.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Your journey has taken you from the Federal Reserve to a Ph.D. at Columbia Business School. How has this diverse experience of yours shaped your professional identity and your approach to research till today?

I think the thing that stands out is it's definitely given me a very layered approach to thinking about social dynamics in the social world. Starting at Macalester College and the Federal Reserve, I did a lot of economics. When I moved to Columbia, it brought in a lot more psychology and sociology to how I thought about things in organizations and in broader society. And then, in my entrepreneurial endeavor, I even think about things from a more mystical or metaphysical perspective,

Photo: ASEF archive

which adds yet another layer to that. I hope that in the future this will be the most revealing way to do research.

You've developed a method to help people realize their personal and collective dreams. Can you share a specific story that connects to your research on the role of business?

One thing that comes up over and over that's at the core of the system to help people achieve their dreams is how profound perspective shifts can be in how you perceive the world. I noticed one challenge I had was setting boundaries with people. I realized my brain was somehow saying that the negative cost of setting a boundary outweighed the benefit. So I played with: 'What if that's not true? These are just my perceptions. What if, when you set a boundary, it leaves this energetic imprint on the universe that makes everything good come back to you because you're more aligned with this energy?' Our minds can start to actually make sense of the ideas we mull over. This led to me changing my behavior and setting a strong boundary with a person who was draining my energy. I actually felt that surge of energy somehow. That's just one example of how we often don't act in the way that we really want, and being able to explore these underlying mental models is key for both individuals and organizations.

Your dissertation focuses on why organizations and their leaders engage with socio-political issues. What was the biggest inspiration for your desire to research this complex topic?

Going back to my undergraduate studies in economics, I've always been thinking about what the role of business in society is. But right when I was starting my Ph.D. was 2020, the time of the pandemic and the massive Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. I saw business leaders and influencers grappling with how to show authentic support for the cause and how to navigate expressing that support, or if there needed to be something more substantive behind it. I felt like we were all feeling it so deeply, and I just thought, 'How deeply we all felt that showed how important of a topic it was.'

How do you plan to blend this unique work on breaking through mental limitations with your academic research in organizational behavior?

Right now, they're kind of separate, but they are starting to inform one another in two ways. Firstly, understanding more about human potential has huge implications for organizations, which are just collections of people. I'm excited to explore organizational potential from a similar place, starting at the individual and aggregating up to what teams and organizations are capable of. Secondly, I'd love to put some of the interventions we're creating for people to conquer limitations to an empirical test to understand why certain things work. This fits nicely in organizational behavior. This desire to integrate my research with real-world experience, and to gain a new perspective on my academic work, actually ties directly into my decision to come here to Slovenia.

What was your main motivation to apply for the ASEF Fellowship?

It was kind of a no-brainer: go to Slovenia for free for three months! I knew everything else was going to work itself out. I've always been proud of my heritage and my Slovenian family. This opportunity arising was like, 'Okay, everything else will fall into place,' academically and all that, that I was going to make space for this.

What has been the most unexpected thing you've noticed about Slovenia?

I was most shocked to see wild bear on the menu! It was at a small restaurant – just a cabin in the forest near Mount Snežnik. We tried some, and that was definitely shocking.

If you had to use one photograph to tell the story of your Slovenian experience, what would that photo be?

The sunrise from almost the top of Mount Triglav. A sunrise is a kind of new beginning, a fresh day, and that's what this trip and this experience felt like for me. Plus, it puts this magical pink and orange glow over the landscape, which is kind of how this experience felt. And then, there is the perspective of being on top of a mountain and just being able to look at life back home from a bird's-eye view, getting to just zoom out for a second on everything.

What is the most valuable cultural shift you experienced in Slovenia that you hope to introduce into the high-pressure environment of Columbia Business School?

I think in New York and the Columbia environment, we all need to relax a little bit more. I've learned that Europeans are a little bit better at that. It's not that they let work slack; there's still a very strong intention for excellence and achievement here. But there's also that balance of wanting to just experience life that was really helpful for me. I think it even improved my work while I was over here, so I'm hopefully trying to bring that energy back to the U.S. I am incredibly passionate about the ASEF mission. Having experienced the transformative power of this fellowship first-hand, I definitely hope to become a mentor for future fellows. I want to give back and help the next generation of Slovenian students realize their full potential, just as my own mentor did for me.

How has being both an American and a person with Slovenian roots influenced the way you see the world?

One thing that comes to mind, both for my work and personally, is my grandfather's experience. He talked about Yugoslavia and how Slovenia was before he left, and he personally really saw the faults in the communist system. So, I started thinking very early on about the differences in these economic and social systems and how they affect people's lives. It also made me incredibly grateful for him, for the courage in leaving his home to start in a brand new country and find his way there. I've always had a lot of gratitude for that and I'm trying to live the happiest life I can because of those sacrifices. I remember my grandfather taught me to play Tarok (a card game) when I was about 10. I remember realizing at that moment, for whatever reason, how much I wanted

Genevieve Gregorich's journey underscores the immense power of perspective and integration. Whether scaling Triglav with her father to gain a bird's-eye view on life, blending economics with metaphysics, or merging American innovation with Slovenian craftsmanship, her core message is that true achievement – in life and in organizations – comes from trusting your curiosity, challenging existing mental models, and embracing the energy of new beginnings. Her work is a testament to the belief that profound potential is unleashed when we dare to look beyond the strategic and allow for the "layering" of diverse human experiences.

to be like him. I guess him absolutely winning at a card game was all that it took for me (laughter)!

As a Ph.D. Candidate at Columbia Business School, you are deeply rooted in one of the world's most dynamic academic environments. In your view, given these differences in professional cultures, what would the Slovenian academic space learn from the American, and the other way around?

In the American academic space at Columbia, there is immense value in diverse ideas, high energy, and constant conversation, which makes you a stronger thinker. On the other hand, if I could highlight one thing about Slovenian businesses and academia, it's the attention to craftsmanship and detail and doing things traditionally, which preserves the core value of a product. Merging those two – the American focus on reinvention and the Slovenian focus on quality and tradition – is really powerful.

Given your family's love for Slovenian culture, and we hear you've developed quite an appreciation for local cuisine, what is your favorite Slovenian word?

Palačinka! I'm never going to call pancakes or crepes by their English names again. All of my American friends will now know them as Palačinke.

José Ignacio Scasserra

Philosophy Is Not a Priority for Authoritarian Governments

José Ignacio Scasserra, an Argentinian philosopher and award-winning writer, extended his academic work in philosophy and ethics at the University of Buenos Aires, focusing on the thought of Michel Foucault. With a strong emphasis on ethical reasoning and the capacity to seek community, his award-winning novel Sleeping St. Joseph proved how literary creation can surpass an academic career. After an authoritarian government separated him from his academic work, he shifted the priorities of his literary creation, proving that proactivity is the best defense against cultural cuts, as it allows powerful creative opportunities to emerge even in the most difficult moments.

In 2020, ASEF Fellowship recipient José Ignacio Scasserra came to Slovenia as part of the Visit Slovenia scholarship program, where he was mentored by Dr. Vojko Strahovnik, with whom he explored the bridges between philosophical traditions in Kant's ethics. Later, in 2023, he successfully applied for the Research Abroad Fellowship Program in the Netherlands, where he was mentored by Dr. Peter J. Verovšek. These two ASEF experiences not only allowed him to solidify his international academic career but also offered him the opportunity to revive the 80-year-old refugee journey of his Slovenian family – by personally following in his ancestors' footsteps.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

You could be described as a philosopher by profession and a writer at heart. Have you ever encountered a creative block?

Not really, I'm not afraid of blocks because I know myself very well. For quality writing, I need solitude, good music, and no mobile phone nearby. That is the writer's worst enemy. I start with a warm-up, jotting down my thoughts for about five minutes, and only then do I move on to the main project.

Since you are professionally involved in a creative profession, you probably have to maintain a good separation between the discipline of your job and the discipline of writing.

Photo: José Ignacio Scasserra's personal archive

For a very long time, I had that clearly divided. Philosophy was my job. I had a schedule and tasks, and I always dedicated a certain number of hours a day to research work. Literature, however, was my hobby – my greatest interest, which I pursued in my free time, usually in the late hours of the day. This allows me to maintain the rigor that philosophy demands while giving wings to my literary interest.

This structure recently collapsed dramatically (editor's note: we spoke in early October 2025). And you, as you mentioned, expected this collapse. What happened?

In August, I was dismissed from the public research institution where I was employed due to budget cuts. I always like to tell the truth, so I'll tell you the truth. It was not a budgetary problem, but a cultural divergence. The government in Argentina believes that, for ideological reasons, it must wage a kind of war against universities. When this government came to power, I knew that philosophy would not be a priority. It never is in authoritarian regimes. That is obvious.

How did this loss then affect your work? Did it force you to dedicate yourself entirely to literary creation?

That is true. I was prepared for the fact that I would most likely lose my job. Literature has become my full-time activity. I am trying to make the most of this strange and unusual situation. Now I'm writing screenplays, promoting my book. Since no one in Argentina lives solely from book sales, I realized I have to take on even more additional literary projects. During my stay in Ljubljana, I wrote a fictional diary about my journey, combining my personal story with the journey of my grandparents when they were fleeing Slovenia. That writing was more for fun, quickly published online, without a critical process. However, I am finding that the history of my grandparents that I researched at the time is an exceptional thematic source. Now I am intensively reviewing that raw material with the aim of creating my second novel from it—a novel about a family saga touching on war and refuge.

Your relatives were silent about parts of this family history for a long time.

That's true. My grandfather, who fled to Argentina, experienced something terrible. He had a brother who was a Partisan. They fought, brother against brother, on opposite sides of the war. My grandfather's brother, who fought as a partisan, died, while my grandfather, who lost the war and had to flee, survived. This is a tragedy that says a lot about human nature and history.

Your life story is deeply marked by conflict and the search for home amidst opposing forces. It seems you addressed this theme philosophically and literally in your debut, which was selected among eight finalists out of a thousand submissions and awarded first prize by the radio station Futurock FM. The title Sleeping St. Joseph (San José dormido) is very insightful. What does the figure of the protector who is always asleep represent in your story about a gay couple locked in a monastery with nuns?

The novel is about the possibility of creating a community with someone who doesn't think or live as you do. The quarantine was merely a dramatic excuse to lock these two seemingly opposing worlds together. Throughout the text, I focus on how these different

worlds try to understand each other, even though it's really difficult at first. The figure of Sleeping St. Joseph was the perfect metaphor for this ethical dilemma. Remember: the Virgin Mary was a pregnant single teenager who would have been rejected by society if it hadn't been for Joseph. Joseph offered her a home and protection, despite all social norms. Similarly, this gay couple, rejected by society, still finds a kind of home and protection with the nuns. This is a key ethical point that is deeply connected to my philosophical foundation, as the novel asks: Can you still create a home with someone who is completely different? And that's a question that has also become important to me in light of an authoritarian regime that wants to prevent such a community.

Slovenia also served as inspiration for your literary writing during your ASEF research visit. You are the author of the short story Godoveč, which was selected from 3,400 manuscripts for the Argentinian National Literary Prize of the Fundación la Balandra and included in the foundation's annual anthology.

The story of José Ignacio Scasserra is proof that authoritarian regimes and cultural cuts cannot suppress the creative spirit, but rather transform it into a force for proactive action. His award-winning novel Sleeping St. Joseph and research into Foucault's ethics reflect the key theme of his work: the possibility of creating community between seemingly opposing worlds. His two ASEF Fellowships not only strengthened his international academic career but also enabled him to revive the 80-year-old refugee journey of his Slovenian ancestors, proving that proactivity is the best defense against cultural cuts and that powerful creative and personal opportunities are hidden within the most difficult moments.

The story is about a young Argentinian man of Slovenian descent traveling through Slovenia, and it was created directly during my scholarship visit to Ljubljana. I used all the material I gathered while observing and researching how Slovenia works, which served as the framework for the entire story. This story proves that I was taking literature seriously even then (laughter). I hope Godoveč will one day be part of a broader book of short stories.

You mentioned that Slovenia served as the inspiration for this story. You are the first recipient of both ASEF Fellowships – first the Visit Slovenia Fellowship in Ljubljana and three years later the Research Abroad Fellowship. How have these two opportunities affected your career?

For me, the ASEF Fellowships were a springboard in my life, equivalent to a literary prize. It was the first time that a previously unknown, external institution confirmed interest in my work, which meant a lot to me, as work in philosophy and literature can be frustrating. The research with Dr. Strahovnik in Ljubljana was incredible. Despite our different philosophical traditions – mine in continental philosophy, his in analytical ethics – we found a wonderful bridge in talking about Kant's ethics. I am also very grateful to him for the opportunity to teach his students. I have to admit that I was very provocative when teaching Nietzsche, but I managed to stimulate discussion with it. I must also mention Dr. Verovšek in the Netherlands: this second scholarship, which was a huge recognition from ASEF,

finally allowed me to attend his lectures live, without pandemic restrictions, which was key to my research. I must also mention that I attended the Slovene Language Autumn School and learned a lot!

You were not the only one teaching philosophy at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana.

I discovered incredible things. My grandfather, Dušan Lenščak, was a professor of philosophy at the University of Ljubljana in the mid-1940s when he fled to Argentina with my grandmother. I mean, if I put that in a novel, people would say, 'That can't be true.' Well, it is! You know, I was in the room where he taught, and my grandmother, Ludmila Kalim, studied pedagogy, which is also at the Faculty of Arts! In Slovenia, I visited the church where they got married and the house where they lived.

An incredible intertwining of history. Besides the academic world, faith and your novel Sleeping St. Joseph also connected you with your ancestors.

That's true. My grandmother was Slovenian, and I always keep the statue of Mary Help of Christians next to the statue of St. Joseph (he points with his gaze to a statue visible in the background of the video call screen). For me, this is not just faith, but the preservation of history and family heritage.

Your name is therefore strongly connected with St. Joseph. In Argentina, people often call you Pepe. What does this nickname mean?

That's a fun question. The nickname Pepe is very common in Argentina for men named José and comes from Christian tradition. It's an abbreviation for Padre Putativo (foster father), which is another name for St. Joseph. So, he really is present in my life all the time!

At the end of your visit to Slovenia, a kind of historical repetition seemed to be present as well.

Completely. My return flight was rerouted to Venice due to the pandemic. The bus route was exactly the same path that my grandparents had traveled 80 years ago when they fled from Slovenia to Argentina. I had their notes. Instead of sightseeing, I followed their footsteps for a month – to the train station in Udine, where they randomly met again, and to the refugee camp in Treviso. Eighty years later, I was talking to their 'ghosts.' This was an incredibly moving experience that proves that ASEF not only enables academic excellence but also allows all these other incredible things to happen.

Magdalena Eciolaza

From the Pier to Pomol, My Family Built a Bridge Between Argentina and Slovenia

Argentinian biologist Magdalena Eciolaza, a master's student at the National University of Mar del Plata, recently completed a research visit in Slovenia as part of the ASEF Junior Fellowship 2025. Guided by her fascination with nature and a deep connection to her Slovenian heritage, Magdalena's fellowship became both a scientific and personal journey, bridging Argentina and Slovenia.

As an ASEF Junior Fellow, she came to Slovenia to conduct research on the olm (Proteus anguinus), the enigmatic cave-dwelling amphibian found in the Dinaric karst. Under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Peter Trontelj at the National Institute of Biology in Ljubljana, her project focused on biodiversity conservation and speleobiology. Her visit also became a personal journey: reconnecting with her Slovenian family, rediscovering her heritage, and envisioning new forms of collaboration between Argentina and Slovenia.

Growing up between Argentina and Slovenia gives you a unique perspective. How has navigating these two worlds influenced your outlook on life and culture?

Living in two such different countries, even though Argentina has strong European influences, fundamentally shaped my perspective. The blend of Latin culture and my Slovenian roots made me incredibly open-minded and curious. Since childhood, I was drawn to traveling and learning languages, and seeing so many different identities in my own home really shaped who I am.

Visiting Slovenia allowed you to meet family you hadn't known well. How did these connections shape your sense of identity?

Meeting family in Maribor, Ljubljana, and nearby areas was one of the most wonderful parts of my trip. They welcomed me as if we were already very close. Seeing where my family comes from filled in missing pieces of my identity.

Are there particular childhood traditions or memories that anchor you to your Slovenian heritage?

Easter stands out. In Argentina, Easter is usually just chocolate and a simple gathering. But my family

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Photo: ASEF archive

celebrated it fully with traditions and traditional dishes. I loved it because it felt so different and special. It's definitely the best memory I have of my heritage.

Reflecting on your family history, which values or stories are most important for you to carry forward?

My family taught me the importance of hard work, humility, and respect for immigrants and other cultures. My grandparents embodied these values: my grandmother was known for her kindness, and my grandfather for his dedication and perseverance. These traits are central to who I am and what I hope to honor.

Experiencing Slovenia in its natural and linguistic environment must have been unique. How did it feel to be surrounded by a language you grew up hearing but never fully mastered?

It was fascinating. I understood some words, but hearing the language spoken naturally was different. It was especially impressive seeing young people and children speak Slovenian fluently. My grandmother's brother was thrilled when I understood a few words and tried to chat. It really helped me connect the dots of my heritage.

Your path in biology seems deeply intertwined with a love for nature. Was there a defining moment that steered you toward this field?

I've always been connected to nature; through my grandparents' garden, the beach, and forests. The defining moment came at 17, reading about a scientist exploring the ocean from a submarine. I realized, "Oh, you can actually work as a scientist and study nature." From that moment, choosing biology felt natural.

You've worked across marine, molecular, and ecological biology. How have these varied experiences shaped the way you approach scientific questions?

Exploring different areas helped me find my preferences but also gave me a holistic understanding of science. Seeing how various fields operate allows me to approach problems comparatively, connecting ideas across disciplines.

Conducting molecular research can be challenging. What lessons did you take away from your work in Argentina?

Molecular biology taught me a lot about frustration. Experiments don't always work; sometimes you get no results. It's hard work, and you learn that results aren't easy. They require patience, resilience, and careful analysis.

The ASEF Fellowship took you to Slovenia. What motivated you to apply, and what did you hope to achieve?

It was a perfect mix of interests and goals. My mother encouraged me, knowing my love for travel and biology. Most importantly, it offered the chance to reconnect with my Slovenian roots, meet my family, and explore the country firsthand: doing what I love while visiting my family's homeland.

Your research focused on the olm, a species few people encounter. How did you adapt to such an unusual environment?

I had no prior experience with amphibians or speleobiology, so going into caves and adapting to the environment was a huge challenge. Fieldwork required crawling or wading through waist-deep water

in cold, moist caves. We used overalls, boots, helmets with lights, fleeces, and took gear for weighing, measuring, DNA sampling, and photography. Despite the challenges, I loved it. It allowed me to see parts of Slovenia few people experience.

What role did your mentor Prof. Dr. Peter Trontelj and lab colleagues play in your fellowship experience?

Magdalena Eciolaza's story shows how personal heritage and scientific curiosity can intertwine. Through her ASEF Junior Fellowship, she explored caves, studied the olm, reconnected with her Slovenian family, and envisioned future collaborations between Argentina and Slovenia, proving that science and culture together can build bridges across continents.

My mentor and everyone in the lab were incredible. I had freedom to choose my focus, molecular, ecological, or fieldwork, and they encouraged my love for fieldwork. Their support made the fellowship extremely rewarding.

Beyond your research, what experiences in Slovenia left a lasting impression on you?

Visiting my grandmother's hometown, Studenec na Blokah, and seeing the lush greenery everywhere was unforgettable. My grandmother always said green was her favorite color. I was also impressed by the warmth of Slovenian people, and had little surprises, like realizing chocolate potica isn't as common as I thought (laughter).

How do you continue to engage with Slovenian culture back home in Argentina?

My family is very involved with the Slovenian community in Miramar. I help with social media, flyers, and workshops. We organize food workshops, language courses, and participate in the annual Diversity Day. It's rewarding to help younger generations stay connected to Slovenian culture.

Looking forward, how do you envision fostering collaboration between Argentina and Slovenia in science?

I'd love to help connect research communities between the two countries, facilitating collaboration even if I'm not directly conducting the research myself.

For future ASEF Fellows, what guidance would you offer to make the most of their experience?

Be open. Make new friendships, absorb knowledge from everyone, and embrace the mix of cultures and experiences you'll encounter in Slovenia.

Slovenia left you with musical, culinary, and cultural impressions. Which ones stood out most?

My favorite song is Ljubim te, Slovenija zelena from The New Swing Quartet. It felt deeply personal. I also loved traditional dishes like žlikrofi, my grandmother's hometown Nova Vas, and even simple words like "dober tek" that carry the culture.

Your family brought Slovenian culture to Argentina in a special way. More precisely, you could say they carried it on the waves of the ocean. How did that journey unfold?

My grandmother's brother, Jože Žurga, came to Miramar from Studenec na Blokah when he was just 17. He knew how to ski, and after seeing a movie about surfing, he and his friends built

the town's first surfboard. He became a local surfing champion and a true legend. One of the local surfing spots, originally called "the pier," is now known as Pomol, the Slovenian word he taught his friends. There's even a monument dedicated to this story, and his original surfboard and photos are displayed in Studena Gora. This story beautifully illustrates how our family carried Slovenian culture and spirit to Argentina, creating a tangible bridge between the two countries.

ASEF Mentors

Map of the ASEF mentoring network for the Research Abroad program

The successes and breakthrough stories of our fellows are inseparably linked to the commitment of the exceptional network of ASEF mentors. These leading Slovenian experts, working at the world's most prestigious universities and institutions, selflessly share the vision of connecting Slovenian science with the world. Through their expertise and personal guidance, ASEF fellows are not only enabled to have world-class research experiences but also to establish lasting contacts that direct their future career paths. Mentors are the key actors who bring a new dynamism into the Slovenian academic space, ensuring that the transfer of global knowledge is both effective and inspiring. This very collaboration confirms why investing in young Slovenian talents is essential for our global scientific future.

Dr. Kaja Antlej

I Nurture Fellows Who Know How to Connect Different Worlds

Digital heritage, virtual and augmented reality technologies, and support for isolated groups. We spoke with an ASEF mentor and pioneer of industrial design and museum and heritage science.

Dr. Kaja Antlej is a Senior Lecturer in Industrial Design and a researcher in the field of museums and heritage at Deakin University in Australia. As the first woman in Slovenia to earn a PhD in Heritology and the co-founder of the Slovenian-Australian Academic Association (SAAA), she is a key link in connecting the Slovenian academic community with the world. In her research, she focuses on the innovative use of immersive augmented reality and artificial intelligence to improve the well-being of people in isolation – from the elderly and patients to astronauts on long-duration space missions. In this interview, we asked her about her vision for a future where digital technology supports human well-being and creativity. Acknowledged for contributing significantly to the Slovenian community in Australia and for many years of leading the SAAA, she was recently honored with an award from Minister Matej Arčon, Office for Slovenians Abroad, Republic of Slovenia.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

You have been closely connected with the activities and networking of the Slovenian academic community in Australia since the very beginning. You were also the president of the Slovenian-Australian Academic Association. Given this role, what was your main motivation for joining ASEF as a mentor, and what was your first impression?

It is an honor and a source of pride that ASEF decided to include Australian academics in its mentor network. I think this is very important. I realized that a quarter of all Slovenes live abroad. This represents a large social capital of truly creative people. We definitely need to connect more with each other. Being a part of this is very important for the circulation of brains, which is also emphasized by the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenes Abroad.

You expand industrial design and connect it with other sciences, which points to a distinct interdisciplinarity. You also interweave this in your mentoring work, as you mentor students from various fields. What do

Photo: Kaja Antlej's personal archive

you think it means to be an effective mentor?

This mentor-fellow relationship was very strong in our field. My professor in industrial design studies always nurtured us in the sense that he shared not only professional but also life advice. In design, it is important to take different perspectives into account. Therefore, I think it is important to point out the following: When we mentor ASEF Fellows, we mentor them for life. We give them life, professional, and career advice. It's not just about professional knowledge, but about the experiences you have gained and that you share with them. Young people need different types of mentorship, so it is important to talk to them about their goals and not just lock them in a lab.

You emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary, intercultural, and transcultural cooperation. You pointed out that in the 21st century, it is essential to connect specific knowledge from different professions.

Definitely. We need people who are specialized, but at the same time, we must also allow for those who will connect this specific knowledge. If we want to solve the complex problems of the 21st century, we must nurture young people who will be able to bridge the barriers between different professional fields, which are still too separated today. Such mentorships or such experiences that you gain in ASEF, when you go to another culture, get to know other universities, and have the opportunity to meet people from other sectors, seem very important to me.

Last year, you mentored an interesting interdisciplinary research project by the ASEF Fellow Jaka Godejša about virtual cycling across the Karst region, where you combined your passion for virtual reality technologies and isolation with Jaka's background in tourism studies. In addition to virtual reality, you also added an artificial intelligence component to measure users' emotions. What were you investigating, and what was your research purpose?

Jaka and I successfully combined our research interests. I was interested in how astronauts in isolation maintain physical fitness on a stationary bike, and Jaka developed the idea of investigating the actual effect of a virtual destination on the user while cycling at home and how this influences their interest in visiting that same physical location in the future. We were interested in whether it helps more if you already know the destination or if you don't. We divided users into two groups: Slovenes from Australia and those who had no experience with Slovenia. Jaka filmed four different videos related to happy (here we showed them footage of Lipica), calming (here we showed them footage of Slovenian nature), sad (here we showed them footage of recent fires in

Dr. Kaja Antlej emphasizes that the key to solving the complex problems of the 21st century is to overcome barriers between professions. Mentorship and interdisciplinary experiences are important not only for the transfer of professional knowledge but also for the circulation of brains and for nurturing young people who will know how to be empathetic with their users. Her research work with new technologies shows that the primary goal of innovation is to create digital experiences to promote the well-being and creativity of people in extreme conditions – on Earth and in space – something that makes us human.

Photo: Kaja Antlej's personal archive

the Karst region), and angry emotions (here we showed them footage related to the Second World War). Together with a questionnaire and physiological data such as heart rate and sweating, we measured emotional responses. We want to develop an artificial intelligence system that could dynamically adjust the virtual reality content based on the user's needs and emotional state in the future, based on the collected physiological data and emotional responses. Our goal is not to create a platform that works solely on dopamine but to find ways to help people achieve and maintain well-being using technology.

In your research work, you focus on supporting isolated populations, in addition to those mentioned, also patients in intensive care units, miners, etc. When can we expect your solutions to be used in practice?

I am currently developing two virtual reality experiences. I am developing the first one together with ASEF Fellow Tjaša Šavorič, who was also on a research visit with me a few years ago. In the project, we are dealing with intensive care in hospitals in the UK and Australia. In the second current project, my team and I are researching how important cultural adaptations of content are, for example, for Indian students in Australia. The next step in development is testing. We would like to first test all these virtual experiences on analog astronaut missions that take place all over the world (in deserts, in Iceland). Once they are tested and validated there, we would like to be able to test them in microgravity on a space station.

It is interesting how closely your academic background in museum and heritage sciences is intertwined with industrial design and new technologies in your research. Do you think that nowadays, when museums are opening up to the world, virtual reality will take over the primary role of communicating heritage?

Museums are developing ways for collections to reach the public who cannot afford a physical visit. Technologies allow cultural and natural heritage to reach people who are isolated – the elderly, patients, astronauts. All research results in this area actually show that the more digital content museums have, the greater the actual museum attendance. Virtual reality may not be the primary form of communication for mass users, but it is definitely important for a specific type of users who otherwise would not have access to certain content.

With all these digital experiences, we must not neglect the physical, tangible component. Given that you come from industrial design, I am interested in how you incorporate interaction with physical materials and prototypes into your work to bridge the gap between the digital and physical worlds?

Industrial design helps in understanding the user's interaction with the experience. Today, we talk more and more about experiences and less about physical objects. Industrial designers are somehow the connectors between engineers who develop solutions and understand the market and user needs. We never develop things that are an end in themselves, but always with the user in mind. On the other hand, every digital experience also has a physical component: virtual reality glasses, phones, screens. Therefore, we must understand the users' interaction with the physical interface. For example, when developing experiences for hospitals, hygiene is extremely important, as is how someone will use the experience in a lying position or if they cannot use their hands, which is then solved with the help of eye tracking. As designers, we are trained to empathize with users and ask ourselves about all possible scenarios for our future service.

We are talking about the future and accessibility. Where do you expect the greatest transformation in the field of augmented reality and 3D technologies in the next ten years?

I expect big changes in two segments. The first is the design of 3D environments with artificial intelligence. Today, this is a time-consuming and complex process, but artificial intelligence will greatly accelerate it. When this speeds up, it becomes cheaper and thus increases accessibility, which is crucial for areas with limited funding. The second component is hardware. Physical devices, which are still cumbersome for now, will shrink, the weight will decrease, and they will become more intuitive. As academics, we must look to the future, as we are not researching for today, but for the coming years when these types of technologies will be much more accessible.

You are researching for the future – what is your long-term research goal for your academic career?

To develop experiences and solutions to support various users, especially those who cannot have a physical experience. I am particularly interested in how these experiences can help people – not just on Earth, but also those who may live on the Moon, on Mars, or work in Antarctica in the future. I want to continue creating digital experiences that promote the well-being, inspiration, and creativity of people in isolation. This is exactly what makes us human.

Dr. Luka Počivavšek

The True Value of Science Lies in Solving Problems, Not Chasing Awards

"Science is not about awards or titles... the strength of any good science is going to be: did you actually create any new knowledge?"

With these words, Dr. Luka Počivavšek, Slovenian-American vascular surgeon and researcher at the University of Chicago, distills his philosophy of medicine, science, and mentorship. Having charted an unusual path from a PhD in physical chemistry to a career in surgery, he embodies the power of interdisciplinary thinking.Today, his work spans cutting-edge surgical research, the challenges of translating innovation into business through the co-founding of a medical startup, and nurturing the next generation of Slovenian talent through ASEF mentorship. As the American-Slovenian Educational Foundation celebrates its ten-year anniversary, Dr. Počivavšek discusses the need to push beyond standard solutions, the tough reality of balancing entrepreneurship with a demanding medical career, and why he believes the true value of science lies in solving problems, not collecting awards.

Interview by: Nika Burja

Dr. Počivavšek, your career journey has taken an unusual route. You began in chemistry at Duke University, went on to pursue a PhD in physical chemistry, and then committed to the long training of general and vascular surgery. Surgery is often described as one of the most demanding medical disciplines. Could you take us back to the beginning and share what initially drew you to medicine, and how you ultimately decided on surgery?

I knew from fairly early on that I wanted to pursue medicine, though I didn't yet know what specialty. At Duke, I studied chemistry and followed the pre-med track, but research quickly became a significant part of my undergraduate years as well, which ultimately drew me toward the MD/PhD path. In the United States, this program is distinctive; unlike in Europe, where medical PhDs are often awarded within medicine itself, here the doctorate must be in one of the core sciences. In 2003, I entered the University of Chicago's Medical Scientist Training Program, where I pursued a PhD in physical chemistry under an applied

Photo: Luka Počivavšek's personal archive

physicist Ka Yee Lee whose focus was on explaining biological systems through the lens of physical principles and exploring how those principles could be harnessed for therapeutic purposes. My own research examined lung surfactant – the thin layer that reduces surface tension in the lungs and makes breathing possible – and it introduced me to the ways in which physics and biology intersect.

The structure of the training itself reinforced this dual perspective: two years of medical coursework, followed by an extended period of doctoral research, and then a return to clinical rotations. When I came back to my third year of medical school, fresh from completing the PhD, I found myself uninspired by most of the rotations. Surgery came last, and that changed everything. The surgical rotation immediately captured my interest in a way nothing else had, and that discovery set the course for the next decade of my life: seven years of general surgery residency in Pittsburgh, followed by a two-year vascular surgery fellowship back in Chicago.

Your academic and professional path has woven together physical chemistry, research, engineering principles, and clinical practice. Few people bring such a diverse background to medicine. How has this shaped your outlook, and what do you see as the value of an interdisciplinary approach in terms of combining research with clinical practice?

Medicine, and surgery in particular, is often taught as a craft. There are established paradigms and techniques, and you are trained to master them and apply them consistently. That structure is necessary; it's how we achieve standardization and ensure safety for the majority of patients. But if we only ever repeated what was in the textbooks, we would never progress. That is where research becomes essential. It gives you permission to question. You see, for example, that when you apply a standard approach to ten patients, it may work perfectly for seven, but not for three. And that naturally raises the question: is there an alternative solution that might help those three? For me, that is what is inspiring – the ability to move beyond memorization and pattern recognition, and instead try to generate new knowledge that pushes the field forward. My scientific background has always shaped that perspective. Having trained as a physicist and chemist, I approach problems with an analytical framework. When that framework meets clinical practice, it creates a dialogue between disciplines. That tension – between the standardized craft of surgery and the open-ended inquiry of science – is what drives innovation.

You have published widely and been recognized within various research circles. What do you see as the true measure of meaningful science?

I'm proud of every publication we put out, but for me the point has never been recognition. Science is not about awards or titles. The strength of any good science is going to be: did you actually create any new knowledge? And did the people working in that same area think that knowledge was valuable? That's the test.

You can publish in a very high-profile journal and generate buzz, and sometimes those papers don't lead anywhere, and, unfortunately, some turn out to be wrong. On the other hand, you can publish purely on open-access repositories and be truly revolutionary

in how a field thinks about a problem. A famous example is the Russian mathematician who solved one of the Poincaré conjectures, won the Fields Medal, and refused to accept it. He had no academic appointment, published online, and still changed the field. That illustrates the point: it isn't about the prize; it's about whether you've advanced understanding.

So my philosophy is to focus on solving problems. If we make a concrete step forward on a problem, even a small one, and it influences how others work, that matters more to me than any external badge. Of course, translating knowledge so that it helps patients is an even harder step. That's where science runs into regulation, business realities, and a whole set of challenges beyond the laboratory. I learned that very directly with Aruga Technologies. The motivation might be to help the "three out of ten" for whom the standard approach doesn't work, but to actually move from an idea to something that reaches patients requires skills and systems that are different from doing science. That doesn't lessen the value of creating new knowledge; it just reminds you how many steps it takes before knowledge becomes a therapy or a product.

In addition to your clinical and research career, you co-founded a startup, Aruga Technologies. Many young researchers and physicians dream of turning their ideas into innovations that benefit patients. Could you walk us through how the idea developed, and what you discovered about the realities of health-tech entrepreneurship?

The company began while I was still in residency, and in many ways it grew out of a kind of inexperience regarding the true difficulty of this path. My research at the time was focused on elastic instabilities of surfaces and membranes, a line of inquiry that had interested me since graduate school. When you examine arteries, you notice they are not always smooth on the inside. They sometimes form wrinkles, and these wrinkles are not static. With every heartbeat, the geometry of the arterial wall changes.

That phenomenon was the starting point. We approached it in two ways. The first was through the lens of physics, which is where my training lies. From that perspective we were able to make a real step forward in understanding the problem. The second came from working in an environment like Pittsburgh, which has a large engineering school. Engineers naturally want to take ideas and see whether they can be turned into something tangible. Working with them, we began developing prototypes and testing them, and at a certain point we thought: perhaps this could even serve as an artificial artery.

Once that thought entered the picture, the process moved quickly. If you have a prototype, the next step is to file an invention

In medicine, research, and even entrepreneurship, Dr. Luka Počivavšek reminds us that success cannot be measured by titles or accolades, but by whether one has moved the field forward. His career, bridging physics, research, surgery, and mentorship, demonstrates that the deepest progress comes when we dare to question standard approaches and seek solutions for those whom established methods leave behind. That kind of progress is sustained through exchanges that bridge disciplines, generations, and borders, turning individual effort into collective growth.

disclosure. If you file an invention disclosure, the next step seems to be forming a company. It all advanced much faster than we were actually ready for. And that was where the challenges became clear. We had an idea that worked in principle, and we could demonstrate it in the laboratory. But the materials we used were appropriate for experiments, not for implanting into humans. To move forward, we would have needed to redesign the material entirely, and that would have required a different kind of expertise. For example, transitioning from silicone to polyurethane chemistry would have meant recruiting a specialist, which in turn requires significant funding. At that point, the problem ceases to be a purely scientific one and becomes a business challenge.

That was my first real lesson in entrepreneurship. It is an entirely different skill set. Writing papers and conducting experiments are one thing; building a product that is safe, effective, and commercially viable is another. And I realized very quickly that this is not an expertise I had.

Many people might assume that pursuing a demanding medical career and launching a startup could complement each other – that progress in one field might naturally fuel success in the other. From your own experience, how realistic is it to try to balance these two worlds, and what did the journey with Aruga ultimately teach you about that challenge?

I co-founded the company with my postdoctoral researcher Joe Pugar, and together we received coaching from Tony Torres, who had decades of business experience at Dow Chemicals. He shared with us one of the most memorable lessons I've learned: starting a company is like making breakfast. The chicken contributes eggs day after day, while the pig gives its life for the bacon. A business requires the commitment of the pig, not the chicken. In other words, unless you are one hundred percent devoted to the startup, it is unlikely to succeed. You cannot be one hundred percent in both worlds at the same time, and investors see this immediately. They don't want to hear science talk about how the field will have a better understanding of grafts in five years. What they want to know is how their million-dollar investment today will turn into a million and a half tomorrow.

My experience with Aruga has taught me that translating innovation into practice is far harder than it seems from the outside. It is not simply about having a good idea. It is about clarity of intent – knowing whether you want to solve a scientific problem, care for patients, or build a company. For me, that was clarifying. I love surgery and I love science, and I was not willing to give them up. Which meant I could not give 100 percent to a startup. That experience gave me a deeper appreciation for the role of partnerships. Academics are not trained businesspeople. To bring innovations forward, we need collaboration with those who understand the business side. Without that, the gap between discovery and product is extremely difficult to bridge.

You emphasize how essential it is to be clear about one's intent when choosing a path. For young people standing at the crossroads of medicine, science, or even entrepreneurship, what guidance would you offer about how to think about motivation and purpose in their careers?

I think the key is that you have to love what you're doing. If you want to make

money, which is a perfectly legitimate goal, then business is where that focus belongs. Medicine and science can provide a good living, but you should not enter either field with the goal of optimizing income. In science, you have to love solving problems, especially the hard ones where the solution is uncertain. In medicine, you also have to enjoy solving puzzles, but there is another essential dimension: the human connection. You have to genuinely want to help people.

Every great scientist I've known - and by "great" I mean people who are very good at solving problems, not necessarily those with big titles - shares that same drive. They love the process of problem-solving with whatever tools they have. In medicine, pattern recognition is different from scientific discovery, but the mindset of tackling puzzles is still there, and the motivation to help people has to be real. If those motivations are missing, you should think seriously about whether these careers are right for you, because otherwise you will be unhappy.

For entrepreneurship within healthcare, clarity of intent becomes even more important. My intent with Aruga was not to become wealthy; it was to try to meet an unmet need for patients. What I learned very quickly is that to truly do that, you have to give the venture your full commitment. In my case, that would have meant stepping away from clinical work and from science, which I was not willing to do because I love my core job. It is very hard to be fully invested in a startup and simultaneously be fully invested in surgery and research.

One of ASEF's defining strengths is how it creates bridges between Slovenian talent abroad and mentors in the United States, often sparking relationships that last beyond the initial exchange. Could you share what stands out to you about your experience as a mentor?

Over the years, I've had two mentees: Žiga Donik and Luka Petravić. Both were excellent, though in different ways. With Žiga, the mentorship turned into a true long-term academic and institutional collaboration. He has returned several times, and together with his University of Maribor PhD advisor, Janez Kramberger, we co-mentored his work and published two papers. That kind of outcome is the ideal: an exchange that grows into a sustained collaboration and produces tangible academic results. Luka's path was different. As a medical student, we didn't form an institutional partnership, but we stayed in touch, and I've continued to advise and mentor him. Both experiences were extremely positive, and I've been very happy with the opportunities ASEF created.That raises a broader point: ASEF doesn't need every mentorship to result in a long-term institutional collaboration. Sometimes the value is in creating that initial point of contact and opportunities for students, whether or not they develop into larger projects. Both outcomes are worthwhile.

On a personal level, ASEF has also given me a stronger connection to Slovenia. I moved to the U.S. when I was eight, back when it was still Yugoslavia, and while I've never lived in Slovenia, my family has always maintained close ties. For me, ASEF created a more formal point of connection. I entered into it without specific expectations, but both mentorships turned out to be wonderful experiences.

Mentorship is rarely one-size-fits-all, and your two mentees came from very different backgrounds – one a PhD student in engineering, the other a

medical student. What did these contrasting experiences teach you about the opportunities and limitations of international exchanges through ASEF?

The collaboration with Žiga worked so well because his skills as a mechanical engineer aligned perfectly with the computational work in our lab. I knew exactly how to integrate him into our pipeline, and everything clicked. With Luka, the path was different. As a medical student, the scope of his involvement was naturally more limited so we involved him in research. That contrast highlights the differences between PhD students and medical students. A senior PhD candidate like Žiga already brings a high level of expertise and independence, and I can easily integrate them into our lab's structure. A medical student, on the other hand, is usually closer to the shadowing stage – they can't clinically participate, so their role is different. That made me realize how important it is to clarify expectations: what does a student actually want from the exchange?

Photo: Luka Počivavšek's personal archive

At the University of Chicago, our department frequently hosts international clinical visitors, and those visits are usually observerships. They function more like short clinical rotations, where students shadow in the operating room and observe procedures rather than conduct research. That model has value, but it also comes with challenges, particularly financial ones. Research internships are easier to justify because students contribute directly to ongoing projects, whereas clinical observerships are typically fully self-financed.

ASEF has primarily focused on student exchanges, yet your reflections suggest there may also be room to think about other types of collaboration. From your perspective, what kinds of opportunities exist for building bridges beyond the student level, and how do you see those possibilities fitting into ASEF's broader mission?

ASEF might, in the future, consider expanding its scope to more professional exchanges. There is real value in connecting with more experienced professionals. On the academic side, the model already exists through sabbaticals, where universities provide partial salary support and host institutions contribute additional funding. I've hosted sabbatical professors before, and those arrangements can be a powerful way to connect Slovenian faculty with American-Slovenian colleagues and create lasting institutional ties.

For example, Slovenia actually has a long tradition of clinical exchanges. In the 1970s and 1980s, vascular surgeons at Klinični Center Ljubljana built strong relationships with surgeons working with Michael DeBakey in Texas, and these ties created real opportunities. But that type of exchange goes somewhat beyond ASEF's current framework. Medical students can observe, but there is only so much they can do clinically. Residents or junior faculty members, by contrast, could engage in a much deeper professional exchange.

Dr. Saša Čaval

Archaeology as a Bridge Between Cultures, Generations, and Geographies

"Today, we often assume that borders as we know them today have always existed and that people never crossed them, but in reality, everything has always been much more intertwined and connected."

Dr. Saša Čaval, archaeologist, researcher, and lecturer at Stanford University, reminds us that the true power of archaeology lies in its message of interconnectedness. At the heart of her research are medieval tombstones known as stećci, found throughout the Western Balkans. These stone monuments were not symbols of division but evidence of shared life among people of different faiths and backgrounds. In her view, archaeology challenges the modern idea of borders as fixed or impenetrable. The material evidence shows something very different: throughout history, human paths, cultures, and experiences have continually intertwined. At a time when today's societies often emphasize differences, archaeology reminds us that beneath it all we share the same fundamental human needs: survival, community, and the search for meaning.

Interview by: Nika Burja

How did your path in archaeology begin, and when did you realize it was the field you wanted to dedicate yourself to?

My path was a bit unconventional. I first attended a vocational high school for civil engineering and was part of the very first generation to have the final matura exam reintroduced – no one really knew what to expect back then. While I found the school interesting, I felt something was missing – a broader social and human perspective. I had always been drawn to both history and biology. Growing up in Novo Mesto, a town literally built on a prehistoric settlement, I was surrounded by archaeology from an early age. At the time, Ljubljanska Banka was using images of archaeological finds in its promotional materials, including photos of artifacts from excavations in Novo Mesto on its debit and credit cards. That fascinated me even more.

It was our famous archaeologist Borut Križ, who first invited me to join an excavation, and that's where I fell in love with archaeology. I realized the discipline combines

Photo: Saša Čaval's personal archive

everything I am interested in: biology, history, the social dimension, and practical work. It is a very dynamic field of science. Although I initially approached my studies rather casually, once I started working in field excavations – especially those for the new National University Library (NUK) or highway construction – I was utterly captivated. Fieldwork was demanding, but also deeply inspiring; long days in the dirt and dust revealed fragments of forgotten lives. That's when I discovered a real passion for archaeology, and from then on, I took part in every excavation I possibly could.

You specialize in the archaeology of religion. Why do you believe it is important, and what can it reveal to us?

I believe that archaeology, as a discipline, is profoundly important for our modern society. If policymakers listened to archaeologists – and understood that we do not study the past for its own sake, but to learn from it for the present – we could avoid many mistakes. Through archaeology, we can see what worked in history, what did not, and why. In this way, it offers insight into how we can act more responsibly today, both socially and environmentally.

When we speak about the archaeology of religion, people often think too narrowly, assuming it deals only with institutional religions such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. In reality, it encompasses a much broader range of beliefs and ideologies, including those that were never formally recognized but were vital to the communities that held them. It explores how people found meaning and how they connected to the world around them in a non-material way. All these belief systems involved certain rituals, symbols and were deeply tied to spiritual well-being. Ancient animistic beliefs, for example, are based on the idea that everything, whether natural or man-made, has its own spirit, force, or presence that governs it. The word "governs" is a Western concept but this worldview is not about domination; it would be more accurate to speak of stewardship – not merely protection, but an active, reciprocal relationship, of both care and responsibility toward the world and everything that surrounds us. Religion, in the archaeological sense, and I believe in every other sense, encompasses all of this.

In your doctoral research, you focused on archaeoastronomy – a field that combines archaeology, astronomy, and the study of humanity's relationship to the sky and sacred space. How did this line of research develop, and what did you discover?

For my PhD, I studied Cultural Astronomy, inspired by Professor Ivan Šprajc's pioneering work on Maya civilization. I applied a similar methodology to Romanesque churches in Slovenia, exploring how their orientation reflects celestial movements. I focused on the Middle Ages, particularly the period of the Romanesque art style, as this is the first time that Europe, as we know it today, is united. Despite regional differences and the use of different materials, it turned out that many churches, much like other significant or sacred structures of most periods and almost every culture around the world, were built in relation to the cyclical movement of celestial bodies. This wasn't random; it reflected a deep connection between human ritual and the cosmos.

In the Christian context, a church's axis often aligns with the point on the horizon where the sun rises on a

particular day. The meaning of that specific day is what defines the purpose of the sacred structure. It could be a feast day of the patron saint, or a natural feast day, like solstice or equinox, or some other. The orientation of a medieval church could also depend on which ecclesiastical authority the church belonged to – for instance, for the territory of medieval Slovenia, this would be either the Archdiocese of Salzburg or the Patriarchate of Aquileia, resulting in either a more Central European or Mediterranean type of Christianity. The differences lie in the architectural plans of a church or the specific patron saints it worships, and such similar aspects. Such patterns are not unique to Europe; they are found across cultures, from Stonehenge to the Egyptian pyramids. This shows that throughout history and across the world, people have sought connection with something greater than themselves. And that shared search for harmony between heaven and earth, body and spirit, connects humanity across time and geography.

Your ERC project Unde venis? marks an important milestone in your research career, as it earned you one of the most prestigious European research grants.

Through her work, Dr. Saša Čaval reveals that archaeology is not merely a science of the past but a mirror of the present. Her research reminds us that borders are fluid and that, despite our differences, we are united by the same human experiences – life, death, community, and the search for meaning. The true power of archaeology lies in understanding these shared roots, reminding us how similar we have always been. It connects us not only to the past but to one another - across cultures, continents and generations.

The project focuses on studying stećci – medieval tombstones found across the Western Balkans. These monuments have long been examined primarily from a historical perspective. Why is it important to approach them archaeologically as well?

At the heart of my research, funded by the European Research Council, are stećci – stone tombstones from the 12th and 16th centuries, characteristic of the period before the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in the western Balkans. Until a few years ago, very little research had been done, mainly because there are simply so many of them. The new technologies - high-resolution mapping, 3D modelling, and advanced dating - allow us to better handle such a large-scale study and approach it in a much more advanced way. An archaeological approach is essential, as it allows us to understand these monuments not only as historical records or artistic forms but as direct insights into the lives, beliefs, and relationships of the people of that time. The project opens up many new perspectives and reveals social dimensions that have often been overlooked.

Today, more than 70,000 stećci and around 3,300 sites have been documented, and new ones continue to emerge. They can be found throughout the Western Balkans – in eastern and southern Croatia, almost the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina, western Serbia, and Montenegro. They appear along roads, rivers, in settlements, and in the mountains – essentially everywhere people once lived. For that reason, stećci are an extraordinary source for understanding social relations and everyday life in the medieval period.

There are six basic forms: stelae and slabs, sarcophagi,

gabled, cross-shaped, and pillar monuments, with variations within each type. Each of these tombstones tells a human story - about love, loss, memory, and community. They raise broader questions about how societies perceive death: whether it is viewed as an end or as a transition to another dimension. They show how medieval people lived with their dead, how they remembered their deceased, and how they found comfort in shared rituals. In this sense, stećci are not relics of division, but monuments of coexistence and resilience.

Does your research on stećci in the Balkans also carry a broader message about human connectedness?

Absolutely. Just as today, this region has been a crossroad of faiths, languages, ethnic and religious groups. The Drina River, for instance, was already a border in Roman times. In the 4th century it divided the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, and by the 11th century it marked the line between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Churches. So this area has always been both a meeting point and a dividing line, depending on one's perspective. Personally, I prefer to see it in a more positive light: as a space that brought people together, where coexistence was not only possible but necessary.

In the Middle Ages people faced disease, hunger (due to the Little Ice Age), and invasions frequently. The basic human need was survival, and to survive, people relied on one another and cooperated, regardless of faith or ethnicity. It didn't matter what someone looked like, how they dressed, or what religion they followed. What mattered was that the community endured. This is reflected in the stećci themselves. This material culture did not divide people but united them. They appear everywhere, near Orthodox and Catholic churches, and even alongside the early traces of Islam in the region. What the archaeological record shows is not separation, but constant exchange.

Most inscriptions on the stećci are written in bosančica, a now extinct variant of Cyrillic, while some appear in Latin script. The language, however, is always local. This shows that the region was once much more interconnected than we tend to imagine today. Today, we often assume that borders as we know them today have always existed and that people never crossed them, but in reality, everything has always been much more intertwined and connected. Ethnic identities as we know them only began to take shape in the second half of the 19th century. Earlier people did not identify by their ethnicity but rather by their place of origin (village, town), their given name, or their father's name, from which surnames later developed. All of this confirms that the Western Balkans - although before Ottoman times this area was known as Haemus – was historically dynamic and fluid, with constant movement and exchange among people.

I find this project especially meaningful today, in the 21st century, when divisions between ethnic groups remain so visible. Yet these divisions exist only because people themselves created them. If we look more closely, how different are our languages really? How different is our food, or our way of living, our values? What kinds of houses do we build, what materials do we use? In truth, these similarities connect us more than they divide us. They remind us that there have never been clear or absolute lines between people, especially not in the Balkans. And when someone insists

too strongly on emphasizing differences and boundaries, there are often other motives behind it.

Your research spans several continents, from the Balkans to North Africa, Latin America, and the Indian Ocean. These are very different environments, with distinct religions and traditions. What, in your view, connects them? Is there a common thread that runs through your work across these worlds?

Yes, at first glance, these places are very different. At the heart of all my research lies curiosity about human culture, the desire to understand how people lived, how they expressed their beliefs, found their meaning, built a life of dignity and how their surroundings shaped them. When you are a student or a young researcher, you naturally want to explore something new, to see how people live elsewhere, today and in the past. I felt the same. I wanted to experience that diversity, for example, through excavations in Egypt, where history permeates everything. I worked in Deir el-Bahari, between the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, with the Temple of Hatshepsut. Everywhere you turn, there are traces of human presence, ancient tombs that were centuries later used in a completely different way, mostly as stables or part of dwellings. You can literally see how spaces change through time, yet human presence remains constant.

Photo: Saša Čaval's personal archive

It was the same in the jungles of the Yucatán, where I worked with Prof. Šprajc's team searching for lost Maya cities, and in Mauritius, where everything is again completely different, yet the essential questions remain the same. Eventually, everywhere it comes down to this: people seek to survive and to build a life with as little suffering as possible, considering their time and circumstances. The environment guides this process, where some societies built pyramids, others large square temples, and others humble homes from wood and stone.

A person is born into a particular society and landscape, and then spends a lifetime searching, creating, and shaping a path toward the life that allows them to belong and to leave traces for those who come after.

If we move from these broader reflections to your experience with ASEF, mentorship is often described as a two-way process. What have you learned from your ASEF fellows that you perhaps did not expect?

Mentorship, I've learned, is never one-directional – it's a conversation across generations. Working as an ASEF mentor reminds me how diverse and inspiring young minds can be. Every person has their own perspective on the world and their own way of thinking. I have learned that as a mentor, you are not only an academic guide but also a personal support. When a young person arrives in a new environment, you feel a sense of responsibility to help them, guide them, and stand by their side. This relationship broadens your horizons. You encounter different generations of people, different ways of thinking, and often different values. For me, it is precisely this personal dimension that

enriches mentorship the most. It is also important to understand the context, as the approach to studying and working abroad is very different from what students are used to at home, as is the pace of life. Fellows have to adjust to a new environment, a new language, and a new daily rhythm, and on top of their academic pursuit that is no small challenge. These are very different experiences from what one sees in popular culture, whether it's films, TV series, social media, YouTube videos etc. Their curiosity and courage to leave the comfortable settings at home renew my own sense of purpose. They remind me that education is not about transferring knowledge, especially not in fixed hours between 9 and 5. It is about awakening the curiosity that leads a student to learn from everyone, everywhere and all the time. It is not as exhausting as it sounds – it's like sport – the more you practice it, the more inspired you become.

Since ASEF mentorship connects Slovenians abroad, how does this influence your own identity as a Slovenian? Would you say it gives you a special connection to Slovenia when you are not there?

Yes, absolutely. It gives me that sense of belonging. When I mentor a Slovenian student abroad, I feel as though I am helping extend a bridge between home and the wider world. When you are helping "your own," you naturally put in even more effort and care. Of course, you know that everyone has to learn from their own mistakes, but sometimes you do say, "Listen, this might not work out well in this environment, try this way." You simply give more of yourself because you care. For me, being able to speak Slovenian is already something special, since I rarely get the chance to do that here. I also love that my children practice the language through these interactions, and those topics of conversation are vastly different to what one speaks to their parents about. It helps them deepen their understanding of Slovenia, the language and culture in the most joyful way. The ASEF mentorship has truly enriched my life, not only academically but also personally.

Dr. Andrej Košmrlj

Mentors Are Key to Life, Not Just For Academic Knowledge

A Princeton professor discusses the crucial role of mentors, interdisciplinary breakthroughs, and why marathon perseverance brings success in both science and running.

Dr. Andrej Košmrlj is an ASEF mentor and an Associate Professor in the Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at Princeton University in the USA. With his research group, he works at the intersection of physics, mechanics, and bioengineering, where he investigates how mechanical and physical principles aid in the development of organs, such as lungs in embryos. His work is a classic example of seeking new breakthroughs at the junction of different fields. iskanja novih prebojev na spoju različnih ved.

Interview by: Kaja Ravnak

Elementary school students usually choose physical education as their favorite subject, but physics has always been extremely dear to you.

That's true; I've always been interested in numbers and mathematics. As for physics, we had a very good teacher in elementary school, Andrej Hvalica, who completely inspired me. He showed me with various examples from everyday life that physics is all around us. That insight guided me through gymnasium and has actually stuck with me to this day.

In your opinion, how important is it for a mentor to give a student that little something extra, whether it's sometimes just listening or perhaps guiding them onto the right path?

I believe that for almost every person who looks back, it's very often their parents, teachers, or mentors who played a key role in inspiring them about something – especially in the initial phase. Of course, there must also be some internal motivation present, which drives them forward even when they encounter obstacles. Mentors are very important for guiding you through this process. Now, as I mentor undergraduate and graduate students, we choose research topics through conversations that will excite the students. This way, the students are much more motivated and enthusiastic about tackling the work, and they are also more productive. Even at public events, I always try to inspire people about science. Although my work is often theoretical and computational, you have to be aware of how to make it appealing and understandable to everyone.

Scientific research is teamwork. Your research group at Princeton is highly interdisciplinary, and you collaborate with many experimental groups. Why is this collaboration crucial for

Photo: Andrej Košmrlj's personal archive

breakthroughs in science?

Interdisciplinarity is very important because many new breakthroughs happen precisely at the junction between different fields. Of course, breakthroughs also occur within specific disciplines, but a lot of new things are happening right at the intersection. My education is in physics, and during my Ph.D. studies, I became fascinated by biophysics and mechanics. Since then, I have collaborated extensively with biologists and bioengineers. Currently, for example, we are investigating how lungs develop in the embryos of different organisms – such as mice and reptiles. We found that smooth muscles help sculpt the epithelial tissue that forms the branched lungs. Based on what we have learned, we are now trying to create lung organoids from human or mouse cells in the lab. The idea is to 3D-print muscle cells onto the epithelial tissue, and then activate and contract these muscles using optogenetics. The muscle contraction will thus reshape the epithelial tissue into the desired form. The goal is to be able to test drugs and therapies on these organoids that could help premature babies who do not have fully developed lungs and often have respiratory problems as a result.

In your work, you often transition between basic and applied research. Where do you see the boundary between them?

Even though projects like lung organoids sound ambitious and directly applicable, we are still quite far from the final goal. We are moving towards it slowly, with the help of basic research. I myself am very passionate about basic science. Of course, if our findings turn out to be useful someday, that will be great, but that is not my primary motivation. However, there are also researchers who are interested exclusively in applied things, and that is perfectly fine too. Here at Princeton, there is a very strong emphasis on basic science, although we also encourage applied work and the development of startup companies.

In Slovenia, the term "popularization of science" has been very popular in recent years. Why is it crucial that science does not remain closed only within academic circles?

The popularization of science is very important, and the foundations that fund projects are aware of this. When we apply for a new project, in addition to the scientific contribution, we must also describe the broader impact of our research. This doesn't just mean on science, but also on the general public and the training of the next generation of students. This encourages us to be active teachers: for example, creating new courses at universities and new topics for high school subjects, organizing events for the general public, and including high school and undergraduate students in research groups. Universities already have staff profiles dedicated exclusively to the popularization of science, and they organize many events. That way, I don't have to create everything from scratch and can join established events. For instance, Science Day at the public library is very popular here, where researchers present their studies and more general science. Children and even older people go from table to table, trying to get excited about science through demonstrations and visualizations.

How do you prepare your students to present their own complex projects in an interesting and understandable way?

As part of my graduate course, I dedicate an entire class to discussing with

students how to present their work to experts or to the general public. It is certainly not easy for students to package a complex project into a 10-minute presentation at a conference. It is very important that the project is presented in the context of the broader research field and that the subject of study and the significance of our findings are defined very clearly. In addition to the technical part of the presentation, visual elements and sometimes presentations using practical aids are very useful here. It is also very important to adapt the communication principle when talking to the general public. We often use analogies from everyday life here, which is very useful for approximating complex concepts and ideas. Presentations are a very important skill that we all must develop.

With this skill of effective communication and connection, you are also creating a "brain circulation." You yourself are part of the highly educated diaspora. In your opinion, what would be the cost, what would the price be, if these connections built by ASEF did not exist?

Science is global, so this interconnectedness is key. Most of us involved in ASEF grew up in Slovenia and deeply value the influence of our mentors. We, therefore, want to help future generations succeed ourselves. Slovenian students who come to us abroad see different research approaches, are exposed to a new perspective on the scientific and research world, and gain important contacts. If they return to Slovenia, they bring back new knowledge that can lead to new scientific collaborations between researchers abroad and in Slovenia. If they decide to develop their careers abroad, ASEF can be a good stepping stone for them. It is also an important life experience, as some are abroad for an extended period for the first time. This also gives them a different perspective on migration and people moving to Slovenia. We all must work together and strive to make our community better.

Working on such complex projects and the role of a mentor surely require marathon energy. You were also a marathon runner, accustomed to physical and mental exertion. What do you do to maintain a balance between the abstract world of science and the everyday life that awaits you at home?

I've been passionate about sports since I was little, so I still enjoy doing it, just to switch off my mind and relax a bit. New ideas and solutions often emerge during a run, precisely when I'm thinking about them the least. I think the work-life balance is very important. Sports have always been key for me. When I was doing my Ph.D. in Boston, I also wanted to run the famous Boston Marathon, which is highly recognized. That was a great mental and physical effort. It's always the same in science – it's always a marathon, not a sprint. That's why I suggest to my students that they find a hobby that brings them joy, and they will be able to overcome crises and obstacles in their research more easily. I certainly still enjoy sports. I haven't run a marathon in ten years, but I run for my own well-being and try to stay physically active, even while running after my children (laughter).

Dr. Andrej Košmrlj emphasizes that enthusiasm and mentorship are key in the initial phase of any academic path. His work proves that the greatest breakthroughs in science occur at the intersection of different fields. At the same time, for the progress and support of scientific projects, it is essential that scientists actively serve as communicators. The popularization of science is thus crucial for the broader impact of research and serves as a foundation for educating the next generation, which will be capable of thinking globally and interdisciplinarily.

Highlight from the first ASEF Tutoring roundtable of the 2024/25 generation. March 2025 (from left to right: moderator Petra Jerič, guests ASEF Fellows Martin Jurkovič, Lana Nastja Anžur, Jernej Birk, Črt Rozman). Photo: ASEF archive

The Tutoring Program

Photo: ASEF archive

By:
Jože Rožanec,
Director of the ASEF Tutoring Program

The ASEF Community is characterized by three core values: academic excellence, character formation, and giving back to the community. Academic excellence is expressed in a commitment to superior standards in teaching, learning, creativity, and scientific work. Through character formation, we strive to mold individuals distinguished by intellectual and moral excellence and the ability to build community according to the highest ethical principles. Therefore, formed character is expressed in devoted service to others, where members of the ASEF community use their knowledge and abilities to champion the well-being of humanity and contribute to the vitality of society in all areas, with a special emphasis on society's most vulnerable members. Within this framework, the ASEF Tutoring Program is a crucial part of ASEF and essential for realizing these values.

The tutorial method, which has evolved over many generations at the University of Oxford, uses the Socratic method of learning. The tutor, often a leading academic in a specific field, regularly meets with the students (tutees) in small groups of two or three members. Small groups allow the tutor to fully dedicate themselves to the tutees. For these meetings, tutees write essays, which help them delve into a specific topic and develop their thoughts, as well as a sense of autonomy and responsibility in learning. Through conversations with the mentor, they then practice expressing and justifying their views, thereby developing the capacity for critical thinking and confronting different perspectives and constructive criticism.

ASEF Tutoring introduces this method to the Slovenian context. Every person is valuable, and we want them to flourish in all their capabilities. To enable this kind of development, it is essential that the tutee cultivates an intellectual culture within themselves, which requires consistently investing significant effort over several years. ASEF Tutoring thus works complementarily to the existing educational system and provides the tutoring experience to promising and talented students who have become ASEF Fellows.

The program was also designed based on ASEF's values. The involvement of leading academics and the best students who become ASEF Scholars expresses a commitment to the values of academic excellence. An integral part of the tutoring program is delving into a topic of social significance, so as not only to cultivate the scholars' professional competence but also a sense of co-responsibility for the global challenges facing humanity. Each scholar contributes their own perspectives and potential solutions to these challenges. Over the years, we have therefore chosen various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as proposed by the United Nations, as the overarching theme for the tutoring groups' work. These help us to actively shape the participants' character during the tutoring sessions and simultaneously educate them for dedicated service to others. ASEF Tutoring also provides for the organization of

regular roundtable discussions, through which we want to enable our scholars to present their views to the broader public and, at the same time, gain experience in public speaking. The roundtables also help to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation, through which we aim to broaden the scholars' frame of thinking and their ability to collaborate across various disciplines.

In ASEF Tutoring 2023/2024, the fellows delved into the opportunities and challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The scholars' research touched upon the use of AI in cancer treatment, neurology, regenerative medicine and tissue engineering, as well as in development and production processes within the pharmaceutical industry. The Computer Science group developed predictive models for flood forecasting in Slovenia, whose quality is comparable to or even better than the systems currently used by the Slovenian Environment Agency (ARSO). The scholars presented their insights at roundtable discussions, and their essays were published in an edited volume. In the current academic year, scholars will address the ninth Sustainable Development Goal: "Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure," where they will confront the challenges of how to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation. We are convinced that this topic is essential for Slovenia: the new wave of industrialization (Industry 4.0/Industry 5.0) will likely define the competitiveness of our nation and state, and consequently, its potential for advancement on the global scale of developed countries.

A look at the path traveled since 2020, when we began implementing the ASEF Tutoring Program, fills us with gratitude: to the ASEF Tutors, who generously accepted the challenge and unselfishly shared their experience and knowledge with the ASEF Fellows; to the ASEF Fellows, who invested their time and talents; and to everyone who helped implement and improve the program year after year. Like every seed, ASEF Tutoring sprouts slowly but surely. In the hope that it will grow into a mighty tree, we proclaim: To many more years!

Photo: Aleš Rosa

We thank the tutors who participated in the program between 2020-2025:

Dr. Denis Arčon, Institute Jožef Stefan and Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Ivan Bratko, Faculty of Computer and Information Science, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Zdenko Časar, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Ljubljana (UL), and Head of Early Development at Lek d. d.

Dr. Tomaž Deželan, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Robert Dolinar, Graduate Architect, Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Aleksandra Gregorič, Copenhagen Business School (CBS)

Dr. Sašo Grozdanov, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Miha Humar, Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Alen Krajnc, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Ana Ramovš, M.D., PhD, University Medical Centre Ljubljana (UMC Ljubljana)

Dr. Anamarija Šporčič, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Tamara Pavasović Trošt, School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Dr. Petra Weingerl, Faculty of Law, University of Maribor (UM)

Dr. Primož Ziherl, Jožef Stefan Institute

Dr. Matjaž Zwitter, Faculty of Medicine, University of Maribor (UM)

Dr. Janez Žibert, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ljubljana (UL)

Recording of the final episode of Season 4 of the ASEF Podcast – live from Križanke. September 2025 (from left to right: moderator Martin Jurkovič, guests ASEF Fellows Milena Zupanc, Jaka Godejša, Domen Škerlep, Zala Perko). Photo: ASEF archive

Science Popularization Program

The Science Popularization Program comprehensively addresses the Slovenian and international public and strengthens the connection between science, youth, and the diaspora. The following activities are carried out within the program: Young Minds are designed for ASEF Fellows who conduct lectures and workshops in Slovenia for elementary and high school students, thereby presenting their international research experiences; the Speaker Series includes a series of lectures and conversations with distinguished researchers and experts from the Slovenian scientific diaspora and the home country, bringing current topics closer to the wider public; The ASEF Story systematically collects and publishes the personal and professional stories of scholars and all members of the ASEF network, thereby emphasizing the importance of networking and knowledge transfer; ASEF Podcast offers audio interviews with researchers and scholars who present their professional fields and the impact of science on society in an accessible and engaging way; BioX Reading Circles encourage mutual learning and in-depth discussions about scientific and professional works with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity; the Scientific Symposium is the central annual event that brings together scholars, mentors, and the entire network, offering a platform for presentations of research achievements and networking; we have joined the POP Science Project with the goal of reducing brain drain and strengthening the scientific culture in Slovenia, collaborating as a partner in connecting researchers and youth; and finally, with the Dr. Uroš Seljak Awards, in cooperation with the University of Ljubljana, we recognize and reward exceptional individuals for their achievements and contributions in the field of science and education, thereby promoting excellence among researchers.

Young Minds

By Iris Brili

The ASEF Young Minds program enables ASEF Fellows, who participated in the ASEF Research Abroad program with Slovenian professors at renowned universities and institutes worldwide, to present their research achievements to the broader public in their home environment upon return. Lectures take place in various locations across Slovenia and allow top-tier research to be brought closer to the people, while also strengthening the ties between science and the community.

The lectures within the ASEF Young Minds program are not merely a transfer of knowledge, but a space for meeting and dialogue. They are intended for discussing current topics, encouraging curiosity, and building connections between the ASEF Fellows and the local community. It is this very connection between science and community that gives the program its special significance, as it allows innovative research to become accessible and understandable to the wider public.

The initiative began in 2020 as a response to the need to establish a space where promising young individuals who received the ASEF Fellowship could present their work, contribute to the discussion, and foster new approaches and ideas. In a few years, the program has established itself as an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between young researchers and local communities, as it allows experiences gained abroad to become accessible and inspiring to the wider public.

Lectures are free and open to all interested parties. To date, dozens of ASEF Fellows from the most diverse fields – from natural

sciences, medicine, and engineering to humanities and arts – have presented at the events. It is this diversity of topics that contributes to the meetings being interesting for a wide range of people and simultaneously proves how rich and multifaceted the ASEF community is. The ASEF Young Minds program thus not

Young Minds. Inspiring young generations to embark on a research path.

Photo: ASEF archive

only presents research achievements but also serves as an inspiration to young generations to embark on a research path and an opportunity for the wider public to enter the world of science and meet the faces who co-create it. With this, ASEF fulfills its mission: connecting young talents, bringing them back to the home environment, and building a community where knowledge and ideas are freely exchanged.

Leading into the 5th Season of the ASEF Podcast

Photo: personal archives of the ASEF Podcast creators

The ASEF Podcast was created in 2021 as an initiative by ASEF Fellows Tanja Janko and Jože Rožanec, who wanted to bring the work of ASEF Mentors closer to the general public. From the beginning, it was envisioned as a space where researchers, professors, business people, and scholars working in Slovenia and around the world meet and share their work, best practices, and vision for the future. Although the first episodes focused primarily on ASEF Mentors abroad, the podcast quickly evolved into a sustained activity that transcends the original idea. Today, it represents a space for exploration, inspiration, and open conversation.

A distinctive feature of the ASEF Podcast is that it is not only intended to present the foundation's activities and its network but has also become an opportunity for us to actively engage in public discourse. The podcast allows us to enter into dialogue with guests who inspire us and to explore topics that personally interest us. Thus, we combine two dimensions—the broader mission of ASEF, which is to connect Slovenians around the world and at home, and the personal curiosity that guides us as hosts and creators.

In Season 4, the episodes were hosted by:

Frenk Dragar

Tanja Janko

Martin Jurkovič

Luka Petravić

By The ASEF Podcast Team

Over the years, the content has naturally been divided into several thematic verticals that allow listeners easier orientation:

Science – The vertical led by Tanja explores questions of modern science and philosophy of mind in the latest season. Conversations touch upon consciousness, illusions of the self, animal dreams, and other scientific and philosophical dilemmas that reveal how interdisciplinary and personal the discussion about man and the world can be.
Healthcare and Digitalization – Luka directs conversations about the future of healthcare systems and digital transformation. Guests reflect on how technology is shaping healthcare, what opportunities digitalization brings, and how we can face the ethical and organizational challenges.

Entrepreneurship and Technology **– Frenk focuses on the startup ecosystem, the** development of new technologies, and innovation. The focus is on the experiences of researchers, entrepreneurs, and creators who prove that Slovenian knowledge and ideas can compete on the global market.

Meet the Fellows – A vertical where ASEF Fellows share their personal and academic stories. Young researchers and students bring their projects, life at foreign universities during the ASEF fellowship program, and experiences gained while abroad closer to the listeners. The goal is to inspire the next generation and show how important it is to build bridges between Slovenia and the world.

Photo: ASEF archive

The response from listeners shows that the podcast gains recognition and reach every season. Especially in the last year, we have noticed a significant growth in listenership, confirming that the topics we open up are relevant for the Slovenian community at home as well as for listeners abroad. The bilingual concept also plays an important role: some episodes are in Slovenian and some in English, allowing us to simultaneously maintain contact with the local environment and address a global audience. In this year's Season 4, 2041 people downloaded the episodes from January to the end of September 2025, which is almost 600 more than last year. We are very pleased that 25 % of listeners originate outside the European Union. The three most listened-to new episodes this year were with Tadej Maligoj, Marko Grobelnik, and Janez Žibert, who is also an ASEF Tutoring mentor.

In Season 5, we are expanding the team with three new hosts, ASEF Research Abroad 2025 Fellows: **Zara Bunc, Gal Gantar,** and **Polona Zabret,** which will allow for even greater diversity of topics and perspectives. With new voices, the podcast will gain additional freshness, while remaining true to its fundamental mission: to open up a space for in-depth conversations about science, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and life stories in Slovenia and worldwide.

In the upcoming season, the creators will continue with scientific topics, digitalization of healthcare, and "Meet the Fellows" episodes. The thematic framework will be expanded with the themes of sustainability and historical discovery.

All episodes from past seasons can be found on your favorite podcast platforms. We invite you to listen!

The ASEF Podcast is an opportunity to actively participate in public discourse and enter into a dialogue with guests who inspire us.

ASEF Symposium 2025: Between the Artificial and the Natural – Challenges Defining Our Future

Ljubljana, June 23, 2025 – We successfully held the central event of the year, the ASEF Symposium 2025 titled Between the Artificial and the Natural, in the White Hall of the Grand Hotel Union. This central event brought together top scientists, renowned experts, and young talents from the Slovenian academic sphere and abroad in one place. Through an interdisciplinary program, we discussed with the participants the ethical, legal, technological, and scientific questions that directly mark our future.

The Director of ASEF, **Rok Sekirnik**, emphasized in his address that the foundation's main mission remains connecting Slovenian students and researchers with the global scientific community and encouraging their active involvement in the development of Slovenia. The importance of this global integration was also confirmed by **Dr. Jure Gašparič**, State Secretary at the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation.

The Intertwining of Artificial Intelligence and Nature

The Symposium was enriched with lectures by former Judge of the EU General Court and ASEF mentor **Dr. Verica Trstenjak**, Head of the research program in the Laboratory of Biocybernetics at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, UL, **Dr. Damijan Miklavčič**, and Architect **Robert Dolinar,** who illuminated the intertwining of the artificial and the natural in various disciplines. We concluded the event with a lively panel discussion by ASEF Fellows on the challenges and opportunities of sustainable food systems. The roundtable included **Adrian Mladenić Grobelnik** (Computer Science; tutor Dr. Ivan Bratko), **Jaka Godejša** (Environmental Protection and Tourism; tutor Dr. Miha Humar), **Vesna Jurjevič** (Medicine; tutor Dr. Janez Žibert), and **Gregor Puhar** (Biochemistry and Chemistry; tutor Dr. Alen Krajnc). The entire symposium was moderated by RTV Slovenia journalist **Petra Jerič.**

At the central event of 2025, top experts illuminated the intertwining of the artificial and the natural in various disciplines.

Solemn Gala Evening and Presentation of the ASEF ZGLED Award to Prof. Dr. Ivan Bratko

The solemn Gala Evening began with a video address by **Prof. Jure Leskovec**, co-founder of ASEF, Full Professor at Stanford, and one of the most prominent Slovenian scientists in Silicon Valley. Prof. Leskovec addressed the gathered guests and thanked them for all their contribution to the growing ASEF community. This was followed by a review of the institute's activities, where ASEF Institute Director **Rok Sekirnik** emphasized:

"In ten years of operation, ASEF has grown into a community that strives for excellence in knowledge, character formation, and giving back to the community."

Inspiring stories, anecdotes, and the significance of collaboration with ASEF were shared by ASEF mentors **Dr. Andrej Prša** from Villanova University, physical therapist **Maja Marija Potočnik** from UKC Ljubljana, and entrepreneur **Gorazd Lampič** (then still with ELAPHE company), who emphasized the most important shared goal of supporting young people. Personal experiences in the scholarship program were presented by **Stefanía Leber,** a scholar from the Visit Slovenia Program 2021, who moved all those gathered in the solemn hall with a story about homelands on two continents. This was followed by the experience of **Frenk Dragar,** an ASEF Research Abroad 2023 Fellow and co-founder of the company Epistemy, who spoke about top-level research work.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation of the **ASEF ZGLED Award** to **Dr. Ivan Bratko**, which he received for his exceptional contribution and example to the community, having marked the field of artificial intelligence and generations of Slovenian researchers immeasurably over decades of work. The award was presented to him on behalf of Jure Leskovec, who unfortunately could not attend the event, by **Nina Leskovec**, former Director of the ASEF Institute, and he was also honored on stage by his scholars from the ASEF Tutoring Program. The event was accompanied until the end by the musical and vocal performance of ASEF Research Abroad 2022 Fellow **Jakob Kobal** and Slovenian singer **Veronika Strnad**, in a relaxed atmosphere and with an excellent menu of top Slovenian dishes prepared by Chef **Janez Dolšak**. The Gala Evening was hosted by **Lana Nastja Anžur** and **Martin Jurkovič**, ASEF Fellows from the 2024 generation.

Photo: Aleš Rosa

POP Science Project: Popularization of Science for Reducing Brain Drain

The POP Science Project: Popularization of Science for Reducing Brain Drain in Slovenia officially began in February 2025. Its fundamental task is to reduce brain drain and strengthen the scientific culture in the country. The project is financed by the Ministry of Public Administration of the Republic of Slovenia within the Public Tender for the Development and Professionalization of Non-Governmental Organizations and Volunteerism 2024. Over the next two years, it unites key organizations to improve the accessibility of scientific content, connect researchers, youth, and industry, and contribute to an innovative environment. Key activities include establishing a digital portal for easier cooperation, implementing educational activities (workshops, mentoring), and organizing the National Science Festival. The target groups are primarily young people (pupils, high school students, university students) and researchers.

POP Science Project Partners

We collaborate on the project with three important organizations operating in the field of science, education, and technology:

- **European Cultural and Technological Centre Maribor (EKTC Maribor), co. op.,**
- **Slovenian Artificial Intelligence Society (SLAIS),**
- **Slovenian Society of Informatics (SDI).**

Partner Events for Science Popularization

American-Slovenian Educational Foundation (ASEF)

ASEF, in cooperation with the University of Ljubljana (UL), co-organized and executed the presentation of the **Dr. Uroš Seljak Awards** for 2025. With this event, we reward achievements in the field of science and education and promote the early entry of students into academic research. We are proud that Dr. Uroš Seljak is also an ASEF mentor, who has hosted ASEF Research Abroad Scholars for many years at the University of California, Berkeley.

European Cultural and Technological Centre Maribor (EKTC Maribor)

EKTC Maribor organized the **6th Maribor Science Festival 2025**, which took place on October 22, 2025, and was attended by around 415 visitors. The event was primarily intended for young pupils, high school students, and university students. At interactive stations, visitors learned about topics ranging from robotic football, optical illusions, and glass materials to the development of unmanned aerial vehicles and the student formula car. Several organizations participated, such as the Society of Medical Students Maribor (ŠUS), the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering (UL). The festival was free and

With the POP Science project, we are building a future where science in Slovenia will be more accessible, more attractive, and more connected with youth and industry.

proved to young people that science is accessible, fun, and inspiring.

Slovenian Artificial Intelligence Society (SLAIS)

SLAIS was the co-organizer of the international conference **AI for Science,** which took place between September 22 and 26, 2025, at UL FRI. The conference, which attracted over 300 participants from across Europe and other countries (including the USA, Japan, New Zealand), brought together experts who use artificial intelligence to solve demanding scientific and technological challenges. Topics included the use of AI in medicine, physics, materials science, environment, and digital humanities. Two public panels were also held within the framework of the conference: AI for science: Strategies, Policies, Resources and Responsible AI.

Slovenian Society of Informatics (SDI)

SDI organized the student **HackathON: Soar into the Future with Open Science and Supercomputing.** The event, held in two rounds (the first round on March 12 at UL FRI, the second round on April 15, 2025, as part of the Slovenian Informatics Days conference), focused on the practical application of science, supercomputers, and open data to address at least one of the 17 UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals. 119 students, or 29 teams, participated. Competitors solved challenges in the fields of Health and Well-being, Space Challenge, and General Challenge. The winning Team42 proposed the use of digital twins to optimize the production of biological medicines, thereby addressing the challenge of health and well-being.

Photo: ASEF archive

Connecting Talents and the Vision of Science: Dr. Uroš Seljak Awards Strengthen the Bridge between Diaspora and Home Country

In cooperation with the University of Ljubljana (UL), for the fourth consecutive year, we presented the Dr. Uroš Seljak Awards and Commendations for the best scientific publications by undergraduate and master's students in Slovenia. The award remains a key mechanism for promoting the early involvement of young people in research work and fostering scientific excellence.

The Gruber Prize for the Benefit of Slovenian Science

The awards are an expression of the exceptional philanthropic gesture of **Dr. Uroš Seljak,** an ASEF mentor and distinguished professor of astrophysics at the University of California, UC Berkeley, where he directs the center for astrophysics and studies the evolution of the universe. Dr. Seljak established the award fund with a portion of the monetary prize he received from the prestigious Gruber Prize from Yale University in 2021 for his crucial contribution to research in cosmology. With this, he established a charitable fund that annually supports the best scientific publications of Slovenian students with the amount of **10,000 US dollars.**

By doing so, Dr. Seljak not only encourages young researchers but also strengthens the bond between the Slovenian scientific diaspora and the domestic research environment, which was also recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation on the first National Science Day on November 10, 2025, when they presented Dr. Seljak with the high state honor of Science Ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia.

Personal Journey and the Fight Against the Denial of Science

Seljak's exceptional journey into the world of top science began with a bachelor's and master's degree at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Technology in Ljubljana, followed by a doctorate at MIT in Boston. He built his professional career at prestigious American universities (Princeton, Harvard) and international institutions, such as the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste and the University of Zurich. This awareness of the importance of connection is the key motif of his awards today.

During the award ceremony, Dr. Seljak also highlighted a broader social concern

regarding current trends: "Various forces and pressures have contributed to science not being valued among people and sometimes being literally denied. We must fight against these trends." The award is conceived as a symbolic act of resistance, emphasizing that "thinking with your own head and using scientific methods is the only way for things to move forward and for development to occur."

Exceptional Quality and the 2025 Award Recipients

The expert commission, chaired by Prof. Dr. Simon Horvat (UL Biotechnical Faculty) and including prominent Slovenian scientists from home and abroad, received 12 applications this year, of which as many as eight were female candidates. This confirms the constant growth and exceptional quality of the young scientific workforce in Slovenia.

Dr. Uroš Seljak on the fourth award presentation:
"We must fight against the denial of science. Thinking with your own head is the only way for development."

The Dr. Uroš Seljak Award in 2025 was received by:

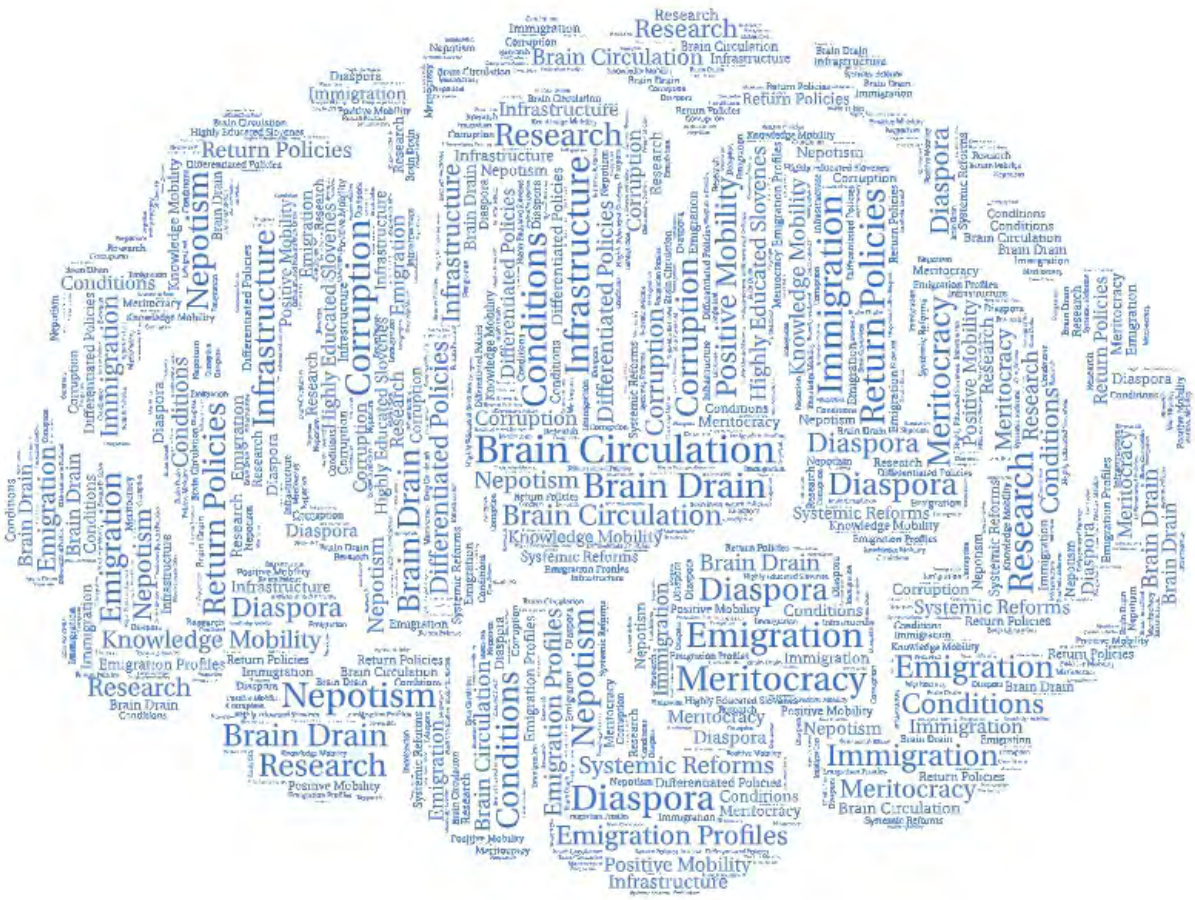
- **Jovana Videnović** (UL Faculty of Computer and Information Science)
- **Martin Justin** (UL Faculty of Arts and UM Faculty of Arts)

Commendations were also awarded to: **Tina Šaula** (UL Biotechnical Faculty), **Vita Movrin** (IJS), and **Vladimir Smrkolj** and **Aljoša Škorjanc** (UL Faculty of Medicine).

Photo: Boštjan Podlogar/STA

The Dr. Uroš Seljak Awards are key proof of the scientific excellence of Slovenian students and the strong support that ASEF, together with the University of Ljubljana, provides for connecting Slovenian science with the international sphere.

ASEF Research Program



The ASEF Research Program represents a strategically focused initiative aimed at analyzing and understanding key social challenges related to the mobility and integration of Slovenian talent. We are involved in research, education projects, consulting, and publishing, primarily in the fields of social sciences and humanities. Through the CRP project "Analytical Model for Evaluating Policy Measures for the Return of Educated Slovenians," which was successfully concluded in 2025, we obtained key data for formulating effective policies for the return of human capital. Simultaneously, with the acquisition of the new CRP project "Analysis of the Entrepreneurial Diaspora and the Development of a Support Ecosystem for Slovenian Entrepreneurs in the USA" in 2025, we opened the way for an in-depth analysis of the economic potential of the Slovenian diaspora and opportunities to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Furthermore, with the help of bilateral projects, we explore complex topics such as "The Impact of Urban Planning of Local Communities on the Preservation/Disappearance of Slovenian Emigrant Cultural Heritage in the USA" and analyze the Fulbright Program and its advantages, opportunities, and risks within the framework of talent mobility, titled "Between Brain Drain and Brain Circulation." With this program, ASEF solidifies its role as an active partner in creating data-driven solutions for talent mobility challenges and strengthening the global Slovenian community.

CRP Project: Analytical Model for Evaluating Policy Measures for the Return of Educated Slovenians

In a globalized society, where knowledge and talent represent a key competitive advantage, the question of the return of highly educated individuals is becoming one of the core strategic priorities for countries. Slovenia is no exception – after gaining independence, the mobility of Slovenian experts increased significantly, thereby enriching international connections but simultaneously raising the question of how to re-integrate this human capital into the domestic environment.

By Kaja Cunk

In a globalized society where knowledge and talent represent a crucial competitive advantage, the issue of the return of highly educated individuals is becoming one of the central strategic priorities for countries. Slovenia is no exception – since independence, the mobility of Slovenian experts has significantly increased, which has enriched international connections but simultaneously raised the question of how to reintegrate this human capital into the domestic environment.

The CRP project "Analytical Model for Evaluating Policy Measures for the Return of Educated Slovenians" (2023–2025), led by the ASEF Institute for Education and Research, provided an important scientific and applied framework for understanding the mechanisms behind the return of educated Slovenians. The research team developed a methodological and predictive model for return using data analytics and formulated recommendations for more effective public policies.

Slovenia suffers not only from brain drain but from a deficit in its ability to retain and integrate its own human capital.

The project findings reveal that Slovenia suffers not only from "brain drain" but primarily from a deficit in its ability to retain and integrate its own human capital. At the same time, the results show an optimistic picture – almost half of educated Slovenians abroad could return under certain conditions, which opens up space for developing the concept of brain circulation. The key factors influencing the decision to return are not merely economic conditions, but also trust in the domestic environment, meritocracy, the quality of research infrastructure, and the social climate. The project demonstrated that return is primarily a social process that requires transparent institutions, a supportive academic environment, and a sense of belonging.

You can read the full project report on the ASEF website.

For easier self-reflection, we invite you to take the quiz "Where Do Your Brains Lead You?" (Note: This quiz is available exclusively in Slovenian). This will help you discover whether you think similarly to those who leave the homeland, or if your values and desires keep you closer to your home regions.

A memory from the summer trip to the Dolenjska region. July 2025. Photo: ASEF archive

ASEF Fellows - Research Abroad Program

Generation 2025

Zara Bunc, Francis Crick Institute, University of London (UK),
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Marko Fišer, Iowa State University (USA),
Mentor: Alenka Poplin, PhD

Gal Gantar, University of California, Berkeley (USA),
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Valter Hudovernik, Stanford University (USA),
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Martin Jazbec, Deakin University (Australia),
Mentor: Dr. Kaja Antlej

Tomaž Jurkovič, Princeton University (USA),
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Maša Karčovnik, University of Queensland (Australia),
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Tina Košuta, University of Edinburgh (Scotland),
Mentor: Dr. Gregor Gorjanc

Tara Miler, University of Groningen (Netherlands),
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Teja Pelko, University of Queensland (Australia),
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Nikiša Plešec, University of Cincinnati (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Jure Zupan

Hana Podjed, University of Groningen (Netherlands),
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Luka Jože Pušlar, University of Cincinnati (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Jure Zupan

Duška Stopar, Virginia Commonwealth University (USA),
Mentor: Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S.

Polona Zabret, TAuckland University of Technology (New Zealand),
Mentor: Dr. Matevž Rašković

Mark Žnidar, Stanford University (USA),
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Generation 2024

Lana Nastja Anžur,
Mentor: Dr. Saša Čaval

Jernej Birk,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Veronika Bračič,
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Jaka Godejša,
Mentor: Dr. Kaja Antlej

Matej Igličar,
Mentor: Vera Trstenjak, PhD

Vesna Jurjevič,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Martin Jurkovič,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Lena Kogoj,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Jerneja Koren,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Adrian Mladenić Grobelnik,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Ema Odra Raščan,
Mentor: Alenka Poplin, PhD

Zala Perko,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Gregor Puhar,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Črt Rozman,
Mentor: Robert Jeraj, PhD

Miha Rožič,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Domen Škerlep,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Juš Žavbi,
Mentor: David Križaj, PhD

Generation 2023

Živa Alif,
Mentor: Sara Dolničar, PhD

Žana Brilej,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Frenk Dragar,
Mentor: Gašper Beguš, PhD

Simona Gričar,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Katja Hrovat,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Tina Logonder,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Luka Petravić,
Mentor: Luka Počivavšek, M.D., PhD

Leon Samotorčan,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

José Ignacio Scasserra,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Lara Snoj,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Tim Vidmar,
Mentor: Sergeja Slapničar, PhD

Ines Žabkar,
Mentor: Dimitri Krainc, M.D.

Generation 2022

Nuša Dijak,
Mentor: Dr. Kaja Antlej

Natan Dominko Kobilica,
Mentor: Uroš Seljak, PhD

Žiga Donik,
Mentor: Luka Počivavšek, M.D., PhD

Tadej Jerončič,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Timotej Klemenčič,
Mentor: Miloš Žefran, PhD

Jakob Kobal

Meta Kodrič,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Gregor Kržmanc,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Maruša Lekše,
Mentor: Dr. Mateja Šajna

Domen Mohorčič,
Mentor: Marinka Žitnik, PhD

David Nabergoj,
Mentor: Uroš Seljak, PhD

Matej Neumann,
Mentor: Dr. Bojan Mohar

Jona Novljan,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Sara Oblak,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Domen Pregeljc,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Jure Rebselj,
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Martin Rihtaršič,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Arjana Savarina,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Matej Škerlep,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Denis Štepihar,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Jakob Timotej Stojanov Konda,
Mentor: Dimitri Krainc, PhD

Beti Strgar

Anja Šurina,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Nastja Turkanović,
Mentor: Dimitri Krainc, PhD

Anja Zdovc,
Mentor: Gašper Beguš, PhD

Generation 2021

Špela Barbič,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Larsen Cundrič,
Mentor: Mateja Jamnik, PhD

Maruša Gorišek,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Gašper Grad,
Mentor: Sara Dolničar, PhD

Metod Jazbec,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Vid Keršič,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Rhea Nina Klanšek Božič,
Mentor: Domen Novak, PhD

Lea Knez,
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Špela Knez,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Ajda Krišelj,
Mentor: Gašper Beguš, PhD

Tadej Krivec,
Mentor: Dr. Gregor Verbič

Luka Kropivnik,
Mentor: Dr. Kaja Antlej

Tjaša Mlakar,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Dagmar Nared,
Mentor: Dr. Andreja Mesarec

Tijan Prijon,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Blaž Stojanovič,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Tine Šteger,
Mentor: Sara Dolničar, PhD

Tjaša Šavorič,
Mentor: Dr. Kaja Antlej

Sara Uhan,
Mentor: Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD

Uroš Vezonik,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Marko Zeman,
Mentor: Marinka Žitnik, PhD

Gregor Žunič,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Generation 2020

Matej Corn,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Karin Dobravc Škof,
Mentor: Dr. Gregor Gorjanc

Sara Ermenc,
Mentor: Urška Velikonja, PhD

Tina Fijavž,
Mentor: David Križaj, PhD

Tajda Klobučar,
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Sara Košenina,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Dafne Marko,
Mentor: Gašper Beguš, PhD

Vesna Marija van Midden,
Mentor: Dimitri Krainc, M.D., PhD

Gašper Podobnik,
Mentor: Mateja Jamnik, PhD

Ana Pintar,
Mentor: Dr. Nuša Fain

Pavlin Poličar,
Mentor: Marinka Žitnik, PhD

Tim Poštuvan,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Tim Prezelj,
Mentor: Mihaela Pavličev, PhD

Domen Ribnikar,
Mentor: Robert Jeraj, PhD

Mariana Rožanec,
Mentor: Dr. Matevž Rašković

Tadej Satle,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Krištof Skok,
Mentor: Dr. Andrej Prša

Tine Starič,
Mentor: Sergeja Slapničar, PhD

Blaž Škrlj,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Luka Školč,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Nejc Urankar,
Mentor: Ana Bračič, PhD

Nina Zupančič,
Mentor: Mihaela Pavličev, PhD

Generation 2019

Jaš Bensa,
Mentor: Kristjan Haule, PhD

Mariša Cvitanič,
Mentor: Jernej Ule, PhD

Klemen Drnovšek,
Mentor: Nives Dolšak, PhD

Marko Drobnjak,
Mentor: Gašper Beguš, PhD

Lara Dular,
Mentor: Sanja Fidler, PhD

Benjamin Fele,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Anžej Hladnik,
Mentor: Matija B. Peterlin, M.D., PhD

Tanja Janko,
Mentor: Dimitri Krainc, M.D., PhD

Lara Jerman,
Mentor: Mateja Jamnik, PhD

Domen Kanduti,
Mentor: Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S

Primož Kocbek,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Nejc Kosanič,
Mentor: Dr. Andrej Prša

Juš Kosmač,
Mentor: Jernej Barbič, PhD

Taja Ložar,
Mentor: Robert Jeraj, PhD

Urška Matjašec,
Mentor: Mateja Jamnik, PhD

Jakob Murko,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Pia Marija Oblak,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Jana Obšteter,
Mentor: Dr. Gregor Gorjanc

Andraž Oštrek,
Mentor: David Šarlah, PhD

Damjan Panić,
Mentor: Domen Novak, PhD

Uroš Prešern,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Lenart Škrjanc,
Mentor: Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S.

Aljaž Suhadolnik,
Mentor: Dr. Matevž Rašković

Anja Tušar,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Urša Uršič,
Mentor: Boštjan Kobe, PhD

Sabina Veršič,
Mentors: Tina Saksida, PhD and Dr. Nuša Fain

Generation 2018

Lucija Dežan,
Mentor: Ana Bračič, PhD

Lara Gubeljak,
Mentor: David Križaj, PhD

Barbara Ikica,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Erik Kristian Janežič,
Mentor: Sanja Fidler, PhD

Petra Janež,
Mentor: Urška Velikonja, PhD

Peter Kmecl,
Mentor: Domen Novak, PhD

Petra Kukanjac,
Mentor: Matija B. Peterlin, M.D., PhD

Luka Lapajne,
Mentor: David Križaj, PhD

Blaž Leban,
Mentor: Dr. Andrej Prša

Matevž Marinčič,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Nina Mrzelj,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Kristjan Nemac,
Mentor: Nives Dolšak, PhD

Ana Reberc,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Jakob Robnik,
Mentor: Uroš Seljak, PhD

Rok Razpotnik,
Mentor: Jernej Murn, PhD

Marko Rus,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Aleks Smolkovič,
Mentor: Dr. Jure Zupan

Anja Sotošek,
Mentor: Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S.

Jan Zavodnik,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Lojze Žust,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Generation 2017

Gorazd Čibej,
Mentor: Klemen Jaklič, PhD

Teja Golobič,
Mentor: John T. Plečnik, PhD

Žiga Gosar,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Kaj Jež,
Mentor: Nives Dolšak, PhD

Jaka Kukavica,
Mentor: Urška Velikonja, PhD

Urška Lampret,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Marija Lukič,
Mentor: Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S.

Tilen Marc,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Aleš Omerzel,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Ajda Rojc,
Mentor: Matija B. Peterlin, M.D., PhD

Luka Starčevič,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Robert Vidmar,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Angelika Vižintin,
Mentor: Mihaela Pavličev, PhD

Patrik Zajec,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Generation 2016

Veronika Cencen,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Aleksandar Dimitriev,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Vid Kocijan,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Neven Polajnar,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Jože Rožanec,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Jan Rozman,
Mentor: Andrej Košmrlj, PhD

Matej Srebre,
Mentor: Uroš Seljak, PhD

Kaja Travnik,
Mentor: Peter J. Verovšek, PhD

Matej Vizovišek,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Generation 2015

Aljaž Gaber,
Mentor: Andrej Šali, PhD

Andraž Hribernik,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Filip Kozarski,
Mentor: Uroš Seljak, PhD

Peter Us,
Mentor: Dawn Song, PhD

Generation 2014

Matej Cepin,
Mentor: Fr. Dr. Peter Rožič

Niko Colnerič,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

Marinka Žitnik,
Mentor: Jure Leskovec, PhD

ASEF Mentors - Research Abroad Program

Richard Aplenc, M.D., PhD, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

Dr. Kaja Antlej, Deakin University

Dr. Matjaž Barborič, University of Helsinki Faculty of Medicine

Jernej Barbič, PhD, University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Hana Beloglavec, PhD, Florida State University

Gašper Beguš, PhD, University of California, Berkeley

Ana Bračič, PhD, Michigan State University

Josip Car, M.D., PhD, King's College London

Dr. Saša Čaval, Stanford University

Tine Curk, PhD, Johns Hopkins University

Sara Dolničar, PhD, University of Queensland Business School

Nives Dolšak, PhD, University of Washington, Seattle

Andres Drenik, PhD, University of Texas

Sanja Fidler, PhD, University of Toronto

Veronika Fikfak, PhD, University College London

Klementina Fon Tacer, DVM, PhD, Texas Tech University School of Veterinary Medicine

Gregor Gorjanc, PhD, University of Edinburgh

Janina Golob Deeb, D.D.S., M.S., Virginia Commonwealth University

Kristjan Haule, PhD, Rutgers University

Mateja Jamnik, PhD, University of Cambridge

Dr. Robert Jeraj, University of Wisconsin

Jurij Karlovšek, PhD, University of Queensland

Boštjan Kobe, PhD, University of Queensland

Andrej Košmrlj, PhD, Princeton University

Dimitri Krainc, M.D., PhD, Northwestern University

David Križaj, PhD, University of Utah

Jure Leskovec, PhD, Stanford University

Meta Mazaj, PhD, University of Pennsylvania

Bojan Mohar, PhD, Simon Fraser University

Jernej Murn, PhD, University of California, Riverside

Greg Naterer, PhD, University of Prince Edward Island

Vesna Novak, PhD, University of Cincinnati

Timothy J. O'Donnell, PhD, McGill University, Montreal

Mihaela Pavličev, PhD, University of Vienna

Marko Peljhan, PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara

John Plečnik, PhD, Cleveland State University

Luka Počivavšek, M.D., PhD, University of Chicago

Alenka Poplin, PhD, Iowa State University

Teja Pristavec, PhD, Meta

Dr. Andrej Prša, Villanova University

Dr. Matevž Rašković, Auckland University of Technology

Mateja Šajna, PhD, University of Ottawa

Tina Saksida, PhD, University of Prince Edward Island

Andrej Šali, PhD, University of California, San Francisco

David Sarlah, PhD, Rice University, Texas

Uroš Seljak, PhD, University of California, Berkeley

Sergeja Slapničar, PhD, University of Queensland

Dawn Song, PhD, University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Verica Trstenjak, University of Vienna (LLM Program)

Mitja Trkov, PhD, Rowan University

Tatjana Trček, PhD, Johns Hopkins University

Jernej Ule, PhD, University College London & The Francis Crick Institute

Urška Velikonja, PhD, Georgetown University

Gregor Verbič, PhD, University of Sydney

Peter Verovšek, PhD, University of Groningen

Julija Zavadlav, PhD, Technical University of Munich (TUM)

Dr. Jure Zupan, University of Cincinnati

Miloš Žefran, PhD, University of Illinois at Chicago

Marinka Žitnik, PhD, Harvard University

ASEF Fellows - Visit Slovenia Program

Generation 2025

Caroline Cupar, Educational Research Institute,
Mentor: Dr. Ana Kozina

Magdalena Eciolaza, UL Biotechnical Faculty, SubBioLab,
Mentor: Dr. Peter Trontelj

Maria Futey, University Medical Centre Ljubljana (UMC Ljubljana),
Mentor: Maja Marija Potočnik, BSc in Physiotherapy

Genevieve Gregorich, School of Economics and Business,
Mentor: Dr. Tomaž Čater

Miranda Kreinbrink-Gačnik, Olympic Committee of Slovenia,
Mentors: Uroš Mohorič, Franjo Bobinac, Maja Mihalinec Zidar, Katarina Prešeren

Matthew Klepec, University Medical Centre Ljubljana (UMC Ljubljana),
Mentor: Dr. Robert Jeraj

Hayden Leach, PIPISTREL,
Mentor: Dr. Jernej Drofelnik

Elizabeth Stupica, University Medical Centre Ljubljana (UMC Ljubljana),
Mentor: Maja Marija Potočnik, BSc in Physiotherapy

Vincent Vombergar, ROG Centre,
Mentor: Maja Towndrow

Milena Zupanc, Institute of Oncology,
Mentors: Blaž Grošelj, M.D., PhD, Miladinka Matković, Grad. Nurse

Generation 2024

Alex Csaky (UK),
Mentor: Dr. Saša Poljak Istenič

Mariano Figueroa (ARG),
Mentor: Grega Kejžar

Meghan Hren (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Maša Čater

Nadia Jakos (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Matej Rovšek

Sophia Jarc (USA),
Mentors: Dominika Oblak and Darja Jerič

Janko Kalan (USA),
Mentor: Maja Marija Potočnik, BSc in Physiotherapy

Bautista Krasevec (ARG),
Mentor: Gorazd Lampič, M.Sc.

Caroline Morton (UK),
Mentor: Marinka Žitnik, PhD

Grace Simenc (USA),
Mentors: Dr. Žiga Špiclin and Dr. Žiga Bizjak

Maja Kosir (USA),
Mentors: Alma Tana Jakoš and Veronika Stepanova

Generation 2023

Amalia Blood (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Gorazd Meško

Pablo Matias Diaz Zakelj (ARG/ CAN),
Mentor: Dr. Vita Dolžan

Matías Alejandro Juhant (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Davorin Tome

Andrés Klemen (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Rok Andres

Daniel Leber (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Barbara Ivančič Kutin

Zarja Miovic (SLO/ USA),
Mentor: Ion Gutierrez Aguirre, PhD

Ariel Olivari Opeka (ARG),
Mentors: Dr. Mateja Drnovšek and Dr. Alenka Slavec Gomezel

Adrian Ruiz Mianovich (ARG),
Mentors: Dr. Joško Osredkar, Dr. Urška Čegovnik Primožič

Mije Von Merta-Sustarich (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Barbara Breznik

Aldana Silvero (ARG),
Mentor: Maja Marija Potočnik, BSc in Physiotherapy

Taylor Tutkaluke (CAN),
Mentor: Dr. Janez Vodničar

Alexandra Vombergar (USA),
Mentors: Lijana Zaletel Kragelj, M.D., Dr. and Dr. Andreja Kukec

Generation 2022

Carolina Casquil (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Rebeka Kunej

Maria Micaela Figueroa (ARG),
Mentor: Katja Somrak

Mayka María Reina Jacob (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Rebeka Kunej

Lucía Medina (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Žiga Vodovnik

Joseph Mezner (USA),
Mentor: Sašo Šmigić

Gabriel Julian Nemanič (ARG),
Mentor: Marko Pokorn, M.D., Dr.

Živa Perko (SLO/ BEL)

Ana Malvina Porcelo Zakelj (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Nataša Gliha Komac

Anna Shepard (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Mario Fafangel

Antonia Starc (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Tomaž Deželan

Nola Valerian (USA),
Mentor: Paolo Barbaresi

Generation 2021

Pablo David Arraigada (ARG),
Mentor: Miklavž Komelj

Dylan Gimpelj (CAN),
Mentors: Klemen Jaklič, PhD and Dr. Jože Ruparčič

Ren Gregorčič (AUT),
Mentor: Dr. Polona Tratnik

Milena Javeršek (GER),
Mentor: Jernej Letnar Černič, PhD

Sonja Košir (USA),
Mentors: Dr. Damijan Miklavčič and Angelika Vižintin, PhD

Stefanía Leber (ARG),
Mentor: Andrej Kansky, D.D.S., Dr.

Jillian Morrison (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Matej Avbelj

Micaela Resnik (ARG),
Mentor: Mitja Kumar

Daniela Selan (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Anton Velušček

Claire Nicole Staresinic (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Tanja Šraj Lebar

Agustin Stellatelli (ARG),
Mentor: Nejc Novak, LL.M.

Jana Maria Urbančič (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Denis Mancevič

Generation 2020

María Soledad Barrionuevo (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Igor Grdina

Dalma Lorena Grbec (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Boštjan Antončič

Mariana Cecilia Grohar (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Jernej Jogan

Nadia Magister (ARG),
Mentor: Theresa Plut, DMA

Julieta Puntin (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Barbara Fortuna

Jose Ignacio Scasserra (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Vojko Strahovnik

Mariela Belen Sebernich (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Jernej Markelj

David Turk (USA),
Mentor: Tadej Battelino, M.D., PhD

Natasha Ianina Urbancic (ARG),
Mentor: Maja Kunaver

Ana Vombergar (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Mojca Ilc Klun

Generation 2019

Dylan Ellis (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Gregor Kosec

Thomas Fitzsimmons (USA),
Mentor: David Siposh

Annika Rose Gačnik (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Tanja Kamin

Alexandra Helena Klesin (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Valentina Hlebec

Rachel Krevh (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Marina Klemenčič

Robert Lunka (USA),
Mentor: Ksenija Rener-Sitar, D.D.S., Dr.

Tatiana Marušič (ARG),
Mentors: Tadej Battelino, M.D., PhD and Urh Grošelj, M.D., Dr.

Thomas McDonald (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Igor Grdina

Tina Rozman (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Biljana Vojvodič

Sean Voelk (USA),
Mentor: Marko Kocjan – Emkej

Generation 2018

Martín Hernán Di Marco (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Tit Albreht

Matthew Fitzsimmons (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Franc Kosem

Michaela Gačnik (USA),
Mentors: Nina Leskovec and Barbara Osredkar

Alenka Lucesole Šinkec (ARG),
Mentor: Dr. Jože Korelc

Sebastian Peterlin (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Marko Grobelnik

Maria Shepard (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Vita Godec

Cecilia Urbancic (ARG),
Mentor: Andraž Tori

Lacey Viano (USA),
Mentor: Dr. Tanja Pajk Žontat

Generation 2017

Ryan Loncar (USA),
Mentor: Borut Škodlar, M.D., Dr.

ASEF Mentors - Visit Slovenia Program

Dr. Tit Albreht, National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ)

Dr. Rok Andres, Šentjakob Theatre

Dr. Boštjan Antončič, UL School of Economics and Business

Dr. Matej Avbelj, New University European Faculty of Law

Paolo Barbaresi, Studio Barbaresi

Tadej Battelino, M.D., PhD., UL Faculty of Medicine

Dr. Žiga Bizjak, UL Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Laboratory for Imaging Technologies

Franjo Bobinac, Olympic Committee of Slovenia

Alen Brajnik, TRUD Tourist Agency

Dr. Barbara Breznik, National Institute of Biology (NIB)

Dr. Maša Čater, UL Biotechnical Faculty

Dr. Tomaž Čater, UL School of Economics and Business

Dr. Urška Čegovnik Primožič, UMC Ljubljana, Institute of Clinical Chemistry and Biochemistry

Dr. Tomaž Deželan, UL Faculty of Social Sciences

Vita Dolžan, M.D., Dr., UL Faculty of Medicine, Institute of Biochemistry and Molecular Genetics

Dr. Mateja Drnovšek, UL School of Economics and Business

Dr. Jernej Drofelnik, PIPISTREL

Dr. Mario Fafangel, National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ)

Dr. Barbara Fortuna, Erudio Secondary School

Dr. Nataša Gliha Komac, ZRC SAZU

Dr. Vita Godec, LENIS farmacevtika d.o.o.

Dr. Igor Grdina, ZRC SAZU Institute of Cultural History

Dr. Marko Grobelnik, Jožef Stefan Institute (IJS)

Blaž Grošelj, M.D., Dr., UMC Ljubljana Institute of Oncology

Urh Grošelj, M.D., Dr., UL Faculty of Medicine

Ion Gutierrez Aguirre, PhD, National Institute of Biology (NIB)

Dr. Valentina Hlebec, UL Faculty of Social Sciences (FDV)

Dr. Mojca Ilc Klun, UL Faculty of Arts

Dr. Barbara Ivančič Kutin, ZRC SAZU

Alma Tana Jakoš Djorjevič, Better Care

Klemen Jaklič, PhD, New University European Faculty of Law

Dr. Primož Jamšek, Slovenian Philanthropy, Association for the Promotion of Volunteering

Darja Jerič, Dewesoft

Dr. Robert Jeraj, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics (FMF)

Dr. Jernej Jogan, UL Biotechnical Faculty

Dr. Tanja Kamin, UL Faculty of Social Sciences (FDV)

Andrej Kansky, D.D.S., Dr., UMC Ljubljana, Clinical Department of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery

Dr. Grega Kejžar, Tosidos

Dr. Marina Klemenčič, UL Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Technology (FKKT)

Marko Kocjan – Emkej, Wudisban Records

Miklavž Komelj, Poet, Writer, and Art Historian

Dr. Gregor Kosec, Acies Bio

Dr. Franc Kosem, UL Academy of Music and Slovenian Philharmonic

Dr. Jože Korelc, UL Faculty of Civil and Geodetic Engineering (FGG)

Dr. Ana Kozina, Educational Research Institute

Dr. Andreja Kukec, UL Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health

Mitja Kumar, Deloitte

Dr. Rebeka Kunej, ZRC SAZU

Maja Kunaver, Kindergarten Principal, Dr. France Prešeren Kindergarten

Gorazd Lampič, M.Sc., ELAPHE

Nina Leskovec, M.A., ASEF

Jernej Letnar Černič, PhD, New University European Faculty of Law

Dr. Tamara Lipičar, Janez Levec Centre Ljubljana

Dr. Denis Mancevič, Herman & partnerji d.o.o.

Dr. Jernej Markelj, Architectural Studio JM+

Miladinka Matković, Grad. Nurse, UMC Ljubljana Institute of Oncology

Dr. Gorazd Meško, UM Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security

Maja Mihalinec Zidar, Olympic Committee of Slovenia

Dr. Damijan Miklavčič, UL Faculty of Electrical Engineering

Uroš Mohorič, Olympic Committee of Slovenia

Nejc Novak, LL.M., Novak Law Firm

Dominika Oblak, Dewesoft

Dr. Joško Osredkar, UL Faculty of Pharmacy

Dr. Tanja Pajk Žontat, UL Biotechnical Faculty

David Siposh, Siposh Studio

Theresa Plut, DMA, UL Academy of Music and Slovenian Philharmonic

Marko Pokorn, M.D., Dr., UMC Ljubljana Paediatric Clinic

Dr. Saša Poljak Istenič, ZRC SAZU

Maja Marija Potočnik, BSc in Physiotherapy, UMC Ljubljana

Katarina Prešeren, Olympic Committee of Slovenia

Ksenija Rener-Sitar, D.D.S., Dr., UL Faculty of Medicine

Dr. Matej Rovšek, Janez Levec Centre Ljubljana

Dr. Jože Ruparčič, New University European Faculty of Law

Dr. Alenka Slavec Gomezel, UL School of Economics and Business

Katja Somrak, Ljubljana Dance Theatre

Dr. Veronika Stepanova, Better Care

Dr. Andrej Steyer, National Institute of Public Health, Centre for Infectious Diseases

Dr. Vojko Strahovnik, UL Faculty of Arts and UL Faculty of Theology

Sašo Šmigić, Generali Investments

Dr. Žiga Špiclin, UL Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Laboratory for Imaging Technologies

Dr. Tanja Šraj Lebar, UL Faculty of Arts

Dr. Davorin Tome, National Institute of Biology (NIB)

Andraž Tori, Teads

Maja Towndrow, ROG Centre

Dr. Polona Tratnik, New University Faculty of Slovenian and International Studies

Dr. Peter Trontelj, UL Biotechnical Faculty, SubBioLab

Dr. Anton Velušček, ZRC SAZU, Institute of Archaeology

Angelika Vižintin, PhD, UL Faculty of Electrical Engineering

Dr. Žiga Vodovnik, UL Faculty of Social Sciences

Dr. Janez Vodničar, UL Faculty of Sport

Dr. Biljana Vojvodič, DEOS Senior Centre

Lijana Zaletel Kragelj, M.D., Dr., UL Faculty of Medicine, Department of Public Health

Dr. Renata Zemida, ROG Centre
Marinka Žitnik, PhD, ASEF

2024/2025 ASEF Supporters and Donors

All our actions, the entire execution of our programs, and the achievement of our set, long-term goals are inextricably linked to the selfless and loyal support of our exceptional community of donors. Every contribution you make, whether a drop or a stream, is more than just a financial act; it is a direct investment in the future of Slovenian science and education, a visionary commitment to strengthening the invaluable ties between the homeland and the global Slovenian community.
Your generosity enables talented students, researchers, and professors to connect, exchange knowledge, and create a global network that will contribute to the long-term development of Slovenian society and economy.

2024-2025 Donors

AmCham
Bart Stare in Angela Z. Percic
Dea Fackovic Volcanjk
David Hrovatin
Diana Gremett
Gaja Đukanović Babič
Gary Bukovnik
Gary Lekan
Helena Pechaver Starc
Jillian Morrison
Jure in Nina Leskovec
Margaret Schmidt
Matej Drev
Michelle Von Merta-Sustarich
N. in M. N. Simenc
Peter Orazem
Rok Sosič
Saša Čaval
Stephan Wallace
Teads Ljubljana
Thomas J. Brandi

2025 Financiers

U.S. Embassy in Ljubljana
ARIS – Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency
Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport
Ministry of Public Administration
Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation
Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth
Office of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenians Abroad

2025 Supporters

Center ROG
UL Faculty of Economics
UL Faculty of Mathematics and Physics
Slovenian Olympic Committee
Ljubljana Institute of Oncology
Educational Research Institute
PIPISTREL
SubBioLab
University Medical Centre Ljubljana

ASEF Visit Slovenia Junior Fellows 2025, from left to right: Miranda Kreinbrink-Gačnik, Elizabeth Stupica, Genevieve Gregorich, Maria Futey, and Magdalena Eciolaza. Summer 2025. Photo: ASEF archive

We sincerely and wholeheartedly thank everyone who makes our work possible!

ASEF Foundation Supporters Through the Years

The Antolin and Wilczek Families
Jožef Antolin
Michael Antolin
Stane Antolin
Vida Antolin Jenkins
Kristina Arko
Aubrey Ardema
Ronald Artac
Babak Hamadani
Bach Consort
Saša Bajt Henry
The Bajuk Family
Jernej Barbič
Gašper Beguš
Andrej Drejči Bevec
Michael Biggins
Mark E. Blanchard
Julia Borden
Ana Bračič
Dennis E. and Diane Brahney
Tomaž J. and Carol S. Brandi
Celtra Inc.
Paul Colfer
Culkar, DJ
Victor and Annabelle Der
Lina Dmitrovič
Ivo Dodič
Terrence Dragovan
Dylan Ellis
Anna Eshoo
Exelon Foundation
Bojana Fazarinc and Mark Morgenthaler
Zvonko and Draga Fazarinc
Dorothy and Bradley J. Flynn
Franciscan Fathers
The Fuisz Family
Alice Gosak Gary and Norm Gary
The Gary Family
Emil Gaspari
Danny Golob
The Gordon and McShane Families
The Gorjanc Family
Anton Gosar and Carole R. Poirier
Joseph F. and Margaret Govednik
Philip and Mary Grasser
Andraž Hribernik
The Hocevar Family
Robert and Jerry Hopkins
The Hutar Family
Rex R. Inglis
Ferdo Ivanek
Željko Ivanek
Rudy Ivancic
Lara Jerman
Dorothy Jerneycic
Urša Jerše
Martin Junkar
Tom and Katy Kelly
Blair Kilpatrick
Demijan Klinc
William Knaus
Bev and Bob Kochmann
Arnold J. and Jean J. Koci
The Koci Family
Kenneth and Teresa Koci
Andrej Košmrlj
Kotar Industries
David Križaj
Petra Kukanja
Thomas and Gaither Kyhos
Eric Leake
Jeremiah D and Mary P Lehane
Jure and Nina Leskovec
Lodge 304 SNPJ
The Lyons Family
Žiga Mahkovec
Sean Mahon
Lisa Mammel
Anastassios P. and Maya Margaronis
Maya Margaronis
David Marn
Tom Martin
Anton and Martina Mavretic
Molly McDonald
Klemen Mesarec
Ana Mihelich
Petra Mitchell
Frederick Mlakar
Nina Mrzelj
Jakob Murko
Boris Music and Hansa Brewery
National Realty Development Corporation
The Novak Family
The Ocepek Family
Metod Ogorevc
Suzana Ograjenšek
Dušan Omerčevič
Anja Page
Barbara Palmer
Bart State and Angela Percic
Lee B. Peterlin
Matija Peterlin
Ana and Tony Pirc
Branko and Sylvia Pisorn
Frank and Joži Plut
Tony Pogorelc
Michael and JoAnne Polutnik
Nadine Prah
Nevio Prosen
Anthony Ravnik
The Ravnik Family
John Ravnik
Mirjam S. Ravnik
Valentin Ribič
Atlas Foundation and Ribnikar Fund
M. Rihtar
The Rode Family
Mia Rode
Fr. Dr. Peter Rožič
Jože Rožanec
Mark E. Ryavec
Gregory Sadlek
Jonathan Saginaw
Santa Clara University and Santa Clara Jesuit Community
Steven and Rebekah Saum Boyd
Bojan Šavrič
Security Benefit Life Ins. (Co.)
Rok and Angelina Sekirnik
Robert Shaw and Maureen McLaughlin
Christopher Shobar
Martin Simenc
Studio Siposh, David Sipoš
Nadja Skale
F. Duncan M. Haldane Nobel Prize Fund (ali Fund for F. Duncan M. Haldane's Nobel Prize)
Sergeja Slapničar
Slovene National Benefit Society
Slovenian American Times
Slovenian Genealogy Society International, Inc.
Slovenian Museum and Archives
Slovenian Progressive Home
Slovenian Union of America
Slowind
Virginia Snyder
Sofitel San Francisco Bay
The Sosič Family
Tom and Sheliga Drug, Inc. Srsen
Josef Starc
Mariam Starc
The Stare Family
Louis and Maria Stalcar
The Stewart Family
Aleš Štrancar
The Taylor and Gonella Families
Peter Us
The Vavpotič Family
Lucky and Audrey Vidmar
Robert Vidmar
M. Vidergar, Mary Lou and F. M. Vidergar and L. V. Lucas
Mark Vlasic
Mary Ann Vogel
Mark and Drew Vranicar
Eugenie M. Watson
Marguerite Whitmore
Donna L. Whitney
M. Wilkens, Sandra P.
Patrick Wolfe
Johnny Young
Karen Zuga
Miloš Žefran