

Slovakia Full Circle

The Return Journey

1904-2001

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Version 1.6
September 5, 2001

Revisions

1.1	22 Aug 01	First Release
1.2	26 Aug 01	Release
1.3	26 Aug 01	Third Release
1.4	27 Aug 01	Fourth Release; add content
1.5	02 Sep 01	Fifth Revision, Photograph replacement, typos, notices
1.6	05 Sep 01	Typos corrected, Roma, Ilyko, church and burial.

NOTICE

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Preface

Never in my 46 years of living did I ever dream it possible to find my family in a Warsaw-Pact nation, live amongst its citizens, debate the pros and cons of Communism with a Party member, ask probing questions or snap photos of Nuclear facilities. All without the fear of arrest or retribution. And without any red tape or countless restrictions. I landed, met my relatives, went through customs with but a momentary glance at our papers and we were free as birds in Slovakia.

The journey was much more than I ever imagined it could be. I was immersed for two weeks into the Rusyn culture. I slept where they slept, ate what they ate, visited their families, sat at the kitchen table for hours discussing everything from the Nazi Holocaust to Russian children's cartoons. Most of the people we met had never met an American before. I found myself not only representing my family, but acting as an American ambassador as well. We all have misconceptions of each other and this journey allowed the intellectual walls to come tumbling down.

For most, this journey would be a trip of a lifetime. It's like being the recipient of a "Make a Wish" Foundation award. Nineteen years ago, I stood in Austria and gazed across to Czechoslovakia and said to myself, "So close, yet so far away."

So here I am, back in the United States, pinching myself, recalling that I *really* was there. It's the purpose of this narrative to help my family, others seeking their families and those who desire to know just what has changed and what has remained the same in a former Communist-block nation. I have taken several hundred photographs which illustrate this journey in much detail. I plan to have the best of these photographs available for public display on a web site shortly.

This document is interspersed with my commentary, perspective and biases. I hope that it will be most useful to those Americans who have little or no current knowledge of this area. The objective here is to take nothing for granted; I will present both high-level and nitty-gritty day-to-day observations of life in these lands. I hope you will enjoy reading this as much as I have enjoyed experiencing it.

Introduction

I have come full circle. I have returned to the land my grandparents left, to which they never returned. I will attempt to relate to you the places, peoples, events, cultures, organizations and politics of a land amazingly similar to what my grandparents left behind 97 years ago. My eyes view the journey as an American, who returns to find what he has lost and at least bring a piece of it back, to share with those who will listen. It is an indescribable story I will attempt to describe.

This whole adventure was prompted in large part by the death of my father, Michael Tarkulich, in July of 1989. After his death, I was left with nagging questions about where his parents came from, what was their ethnicity, what was their history? The lack of information was the result of two major issues. Firstly, my father was disinterested in family history and he made that fact plainly known. Before his death, I spent all of about 30 minutes asking him what he knew about where his parents came from and what he knew about the "old country."

[This trip was marked with one rather sad and tragic event about six weeks prior to our trip, the death of Michal Tarkulic' of Zboj. Michal was my father's first cousin: same name, nearly the same age, but an entirely different life. His health was failing, we all knew that, and this was the primary reason I accelerated date of the trip. Needless to say we were all quite saddened and disappointed.]

Secondly, my grandparents spoke very little about the old country. After my father's death, I began to inquire of my two remaining Aunts, Julia and Suzanne. They recalled small bits and pieces – nothing written, just words which they couldn't even spell, "Zboya," "Galicia," "Novo Seliczia," "Zemplinska Zupa, "we were from a small mountain village in the Karpatia." No one knew when they arrived or whom they lived with. So with this information, my quest began.

Genealogical Research

The following is a brief outline of the research steps which finally led to the discovery of our wonderful Tarkulic' relatives in Slovakia. At a later time I will expand this section.

1. Searching for a location
2. Seeking records – Social Security, INS
3. Internet Discussion Groups
4. Arrival of Phone books
5. The "Blind Letter"
6. Two replies and one e-mail address
7. Correspondence and continued research
8. Ellis Island Records
9. Trip Preparations

Travel

On 20 July 2001, my sister Lucy and I boarded a plane destined for Vienna. 10 hours later, after a brief layover in London, we arrived in Vienna. Janette, her husband Daniel Adamcik and Ladka Tarkulic'ova' met us at the airport in our rental automobile, a Czech-made Skoda.

We drove to Bratislava, with an uneventful border crossing from Austria into Slovakia. Not the "Iron Curtain" I recalled. We stayed in Janette and Daniel's flat on Krizna Street, about a 10-minute walk from the old center. Janette works at the Ministry of Finance, negotiating trade treaties with governments, primarily former eastern-block countries. Daniel is employed as a chemist at a company that is developing anti-cancer drugs. Ladka (her given name is 'Ladislava', named after her father, after three girls, enough is enough, I can relate!) is a Comenius University student.

We spent the first two days touring Bratislava and recuperating from jet lag, visiting the Old Town, Hrad, Slavin monument then moving further out to Devin and other castles beyond.

On the third day, we hopped back into the Skoda and began our journey eastward, to my grandparent's villages, what I had hoped would be the climax of the trip. It poured rain the entire first week, but at least it was temperate. We drove on the entire expressway/freeway infrastructure in Slovakia, a highway of about 50km in length. Someday, when it stretches across the country changes will come more rapidly to this land.

We traveled through many villages, only briefly stopping in Banska Bystrica to visit the SNP memorial, viewed the High Tatras, stopped to visit family in the Low Tatras, through Presov and Humenne and finally to our home for the next seven days in Ulic', in the easternmost reaches of Slovakia, only 2 KM from the Ukraine border. It was from Ulic' that we based many of our day trips to Humenne (more family), Dukla, the ancestral villages of Zboj and Nova Sedlica, other villages and also a challenging hike in the Carpathians.

As I had suspected and hoped, the Tarkulic' family began to appear everywhere. It was fun, exciting (for everyone) and exhausting.

After a difficult "goodbye" to our family in Ulic' and Zboj, we went to Kosice to visit more family and tour the town. We finally departed and took the southerly route back to Bratislava, experiencing the Hungarian (Magyar) influence on Slovakia.

The blue lines on the following maps generally illustrate the paths of our trip.



Map 1: Western Slovakia



Map 2: Eastern Slovakia

General Information

Young Versus Old

Slovakia today presents a dichotomy of two worlds, the young, and the not so young.

The Young

The young are many things: Educated, motivated, moving to the cities for work prospects. Interested in many things external to their own country and culture. The young see the English language and Western economy as the key to their success. Most young are in the process of learning English, either formally or informally, but most do not have much opportunity to utilize it. Most of these people are under 35 and did not come of age during the communist regime. As a result, they are more willing to step out, speak their opinion, take chances, ask questions and migrate to areas that in other times might have been considered risky. They take chances in selecting careers.

We saw many young faces in Bratislava. This is a very good barometer of the future. There is growth and rejuvenation. They are being exposed to many more ideas, peoples and cultures.

While the young have great potential, they also are faced with serious barriers to success: Education, Employment and Housing.

The Not-So-Young

Adults who came of ages before 1989 had a significantly different perspective on all of this. They tend to keep more to themselves and have a much more limited view of the world. Some of this can be attributed to just “getting set in one’s ways,” but we also must give significant credit to Stalinist propaganda with regard to the west (the evil “capitalist” imperialistic empire as we were called).

Until 1989, the Slovaks, Czechs and Rusyns were always dominated and controlled by a distant empire – Austrians from about 1200 to the mid 1800’s, Hungarians (Magyars) in the 1800’s, Nazis and finally Communists. They had a small bout of “freedom” from 1940 to 1943 as a Nazi puppet regime, but I wouldn’t call it independence. Helena Tarkulic’, an 80-year lifelong resident of Zboj, put it this way, “we just carried on, not involving ourselves with the politics of the times. We were poor. We were too concerned with eating and having shelter to worry about problems any bigger than that.” Indeed, throughout time this region was always a pawn in someone else’s struggle.

THE THREE DEADLY SINS

Education, employment and housing opportunities for all Slovak nationals remain troubled and are the lynchpins of future growth. Although this subject seems abstract, left better for macro-economists to discuss, it is relevant to this discussion and impacts their lives on a daily basis.

Education

The university system is underpowered and although a couple of top-tier universities do exist (mainly Comenius and the technical university, both in Bratislava), second-tier schools are very insufficient to handle demand, with many qualified applicants. Entrance exams are still required, but the state continues to pay for tuition. Bribery of University Professors is considered de-rigueur. The students must pay for their own housing expense, an expensive burden, especially since most Universities are located in cities, where costs are generally more expensive.

Employment

Secondly, the employment situation is experiencing radical changes in its move from a socialist to a free-market economy. Job losses are precipitously

mounting, as Communist-era factories fail to compete in a free-market economy. Their factories and businesses are endemically mediocre (a direct result of employment-for-all Communist philosophy) and produce goods that have little or no demand in the worldwide economy (These products were always purchased by Soviet-bloc countries in the past, with or without need). The national unemployment rate is now above 12%, and in some regions, particularly the east, it exceeds 20-30%. Clearly, this is in sharp contrast to the pre-1989 socialist construct of full employment for all.

Housing

During the Communist regime, property was collectivized, leaving property owners with little more than their houses and a small plot of land on which to garden. Under Stalinism, the government (they use the term 'State') became responsible for creating housing for the growing population. The State undertook an enormous program in the 1960's and '70's of building "apartments," large cinder-block buildings in villages, towns and cities to address this need. By western standards, we would refer to these units as "the projects." Having stayed in three (village and city) and visited five, I can attest that they are very similar to American "public housing," replete with the problems such units offered. Even under Communism, the demand far exceeded available housing stock, forcing its citizens to "bulk-up" with a very large number of inhabitants (again, by western standards). In most cases the lucky young who do acquire their own residence almost exclusively by inheritance.

Since 1989, there is nearly no new housing stock under construction in Slovakia. Lack of housing is a major inhibitor for the economy. The young cannot move to the cities to take on the new, more advanced work that pays so much better than wages in the country. Those companies that are expanding (even for unskilled labor), generally are located in or near large cities too. Living in cities by definition, require higher wages. Again, lack of housing prevents these businesses from growing.

Wages, Purchasing Power and the General Economic Condition

WAGES

Wages are quite low, compared to western standards. They are only 12 years out of socialism, and their wages in many cases are still set to the socialist economy, where many things were provided without cost, especially healthcare, utilities, spa vacations and so on. In the most rural of areas, factory wages may be as little as \$100 per month. The average national wage is presently \$200 per month. In private sector professional jobs in urban areas, wages of \$400 per month are common (but extremely rare).

PURCHASING POWER

For Americans traveling to Slovakia, the dollar is extremely strong. Lunch for five was US\$12. Local overnight accommodations can be had for US\$6. Western goods and services (Avis auto rentals, Hilton hotels, Coca-cola) are at western prices and are ill afforded by the locals. Consider a 2-week car rental; From Avis in Bratislava, it was US\$900. From a local Slovak-owned

agency in Bratislava, the same Skoda Octavia automobile, with better terms (unlimited mileage, inter-country travel) is US\$300. SK – Slovak Crown

Here are some other everyday metrics:

1. Postcard- SK 8, US\$ 0.16 (similar in US for \$0.25 to \$0.50)
2. T-shirt – SK199, US\$4.00 (Similar in US for \$8.00)
3. New Automobile, Skoda Felicia – US \$7,000
4. Topographical Map, - SK 89, - US\$1.80 (similar in US for \$10)
5. Slovak-English Dictionary, 17,000 words SK 220, US \$4.40
6. Designer dress, SK 5,000, US \$100 (same dress in US would be \$350)
7. Italian Briefcase, SK 8,000, US \$160 (in US, equivalent would sell for \$600) purchased in an exclusive store in Bratislava.
8. Skanzen (open-air museum) entrance fee: SK 80, US \$1.60 (in US, similar admission would be US\$5 to \$8.
9. 35 mm roll of Fuji film, 36 exposures, ASA 200, includes double print 1-hour processing, TESCO store, SK 169, US\$3.40. (In US, similar product and service would be about US\$10).
10. Rusyn Music Tapes, 102 to 220 SK, US\$ 2.04 to \$4.40. Similar in U.S. for \$8.00.
11. Petrol (gasoline), 30.7SK/Litre, US\$0.62/litre, US\$2.48/gallon (US comparable would be \$1.60/gallon. See, there is something more expensive!)
12. Fancy Kosice Cathedral picture book SK450, US\$9.00. Would cost US\$ 30 to \$40 in the U.S.
13. Modra vase, approx 6 inches tall, (traditional hand painted Slovak, purchase in Bratislava), SK 279, US\$5.60. Sells in United States import store for US\$23.00

EMPLOYMENT and INDUSTRIAL BASE

Unemployment levels in Slovakia are extremely high, approaching 20-30% in some rural regions. The national average is about 12%. With the dissolution of the Czechoslovak government in 1992, the newly formed Czech Republic ended up with most of the economic strength in established industries and the political power center in Prague.

Slovakia, on the flip side was left with lands of geographic beauty and unspoiled nature, but little else. The only economic base of significance is the second-largest city of Kosice, located in South Central Slovakia. A former communist steel mill, purchased in the year 2000 from the state-owned VSZ by the American concern, US Steel, has invigorated the city. The complex is dirty and ugly and located about 10 KM outside of Kosice center. See <http://www.uss-kosice.sk/> See also <http://www.slovensko.com/investor/us.htm>

With this tax base, the mayor embarked upon a major housecleaning of the old city center, arguing that a clean city is an attractive city. In our visit to Kosice, this certainly bears out. The old city has been converted to a pedestrian zone, the cathedral and National Theatre are glorious and shops, goods and services are aplenty. We probably spent most of our money there.

So Slovakia's greatest employee base is still primarily blue collar. The pre-1989 adults will probably remain blue collar, due to lack of education and job opportunity. Unless the University, jobs and housing situation is resolved, the younger workers may fall into the same blue-collar jobs their parents have.

Alternatively, the young are willing to move to other countries (as our grandparents did) if and when they are able. They are primarily seeking jobs in the Czech republic (which maintains relatively open economic and employment borders with Slovakia) and Germany. This behavior if allowed to continue, will result in a significant "brain-drain" to their economy, continuing to inhibit growth. Unfortunately, immigration quotas in America and other countries inhibit movement to more prosperous western countries. The young would move to western nations in a blink of the eye if they were able.

Entrance into the European Economic union should allow dissolution of economic and labor borders, allowing Slovak Republic citizens' greater employment opportunities. Entrance is still probably several years away.

Business Privatization

There is a general perception in the city and country alike that the last Communist officials in power looted the government's coffers and headed for the hills (including Argentina). A notion exists that they left the country in poor economic shape. While I will not deny that this may have taken place, I believe the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

One cannot flick the switch from a socialist to a free-market economy. The government must carefully control the transition, the sale of state assets and the removal of subsidies. Reports are widespread that officials sold off various businesses to friends and acquaintances for peanuts. Evidence also exists that many people "got rich quick" after the fall of Communism. On the outskirts of various cities such as Bratislava and Kosice one can find extremely opulent single-family residences recently built (or in the process thereof). This also has generated significant resentment on the part of the ordinary citizens. For the record, citizens in the U.S. have expressed similar sentiments for years.

What Are They Thinking?

Most western companies that came to Slovakia after 1989 to "expand their markets" have got it all wrong. They are consumer-goods companies attempting to sell their wares to Slovak Citizens who can ill-afford to purchase them. Buying Coca-Cola, Kit-Kat candy bars and Compaq Computers are plainly not on the average Slovakian's radar screen. Most of these purchases are going to westerners who come to visit, stay in American hotels and rent American cars.

What Slovakia needs today is investment in infrastructure – housing and jobs. Even providing rental apartments (flats) would be a tremendous boom to the economy. Funny thing is though, most foreign investors are still too nervous to make any investments in this country, and internal investors have no money to do the same.

European Economic Union

The government is aggressively taking steps to join the European Union. It sees this, as its "Ticket to the future." While this may be true in the long run, in the short term it is burdening them with many expensive mandates (such as providing housing, education and other assistance to Roma) of which they can ill-afford. Most of this macroeconomic activity is but an abstraction to the average citizen.

Cities, Villages & Places

General

Communist Artifacts

The following items struck me as significant events or things, which had a profound effect on the day-to-day lives of our ancestors.

“Freedom of Religion,” Albeit Only One

One of the saddest days was in 1947 when the Communists in their infinite wisdom declared a freedom of religion in their constitution, then defined it in a draconian style. I won't try to repeat what textbooks do a good job of explaining, but I will summarize it.

The net effect of all the restrictions was that there was only one permitted church, the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox priests were employees of the state and therefore did exactly as the state directed them to. Other priests, ministers and rabbis were rounded up, deported, imprisoned and murdered.

The property of all these “other” churches and temples became property of the state. Many were given to the Orthodox Church.

And don't expect to get a ‘good’ job if you continue to go to church. So many people stopped.

When communism fell apart, untangling a tangled web of returning property to its rightful owners began. In places like Zboj and Nova Sedlica, the Greek Catholic Churches had been moved to state-owned Skanzens, then replaced with “new” churches, occupied by the Orthodox, which the Orthodox have kept. In Ulic', the church which had been occupied by the Orthodox for 45 years was returned to the Greek Catholics while the Orthodox had to construct a new church nearby. Most of these returns have been affected.

Then came the task of minting new priests, ministers and rabbis, a process that began about five years ago. These priests are not surprisingly young and they have a lot of catching up to do.

People flocked back to the churches, which surprised me. I thought that 50 years without church; two generations worth, the desire and interest would have faded. It appears just the opposite has occurred.

Public Address Loudspeakers

One of the more odd artifacts that we noticed were the presence of public-address loudspeakers on nearly every electric pole in every village we visited. No house was out of earshot of these. One can but imagine what they must have been used for during the Communist regime. Today, Anna, who works for the village office, is the “announcer,” as the speakers are still in use and in good repair. However, they are now used for much more positive purposes, announcing good news, a vendor who may have come to town and the like.

Electrification, Television and Telephones

Electricity arrived as part of Stalin's modernization program during the 1950's. It struck me that wires were run with little regard for their

interruption of natural beauty. They stretch across bucolic farm fields and wind their way willy-nilly throughout towns.

Every home appears to have electricity. It appears to have been distributed using an older-fashioned method of white insulators that now are collector's items in America.

Interestingly, every home we visited had a television. National statistics suggest that 99% of all homes have television, but only about 20% have a telephone. One can but imagine the propaganda use of this tool.

Telephones remain under monopolistic control of Slovensko Telecommunications. It appears that this infrastructure remains under state control and subsidy. A call to the US on a US calling card costs \$2.50 a minute for ATT down to \$0.55 per minute for a discounter. In Slovakia, the same call costs nationals about US\$0.25 per minute.

As an aside, airline travel also appears to be under subsidy. A round trip to the US for a Slovak national is about US\$350. The same trip when booked by an American ranges from \$800 on upwards.

Flats in Every Village

With the advent of socialism around 1950, the state assumed responsibility for housing. Private housing remained, but no new private dwellings were permitted. The state addressed the issue of a burgeoning population by building cinder-block apartment buildings called "flats" in nearly every village and city in the country. They are surprisingly similar to public housing "projects" built in the United States, replete with all physical and social problems. Physically, most have a couple of windows per apartment and all have a very small balcony (perhaps 10'W x 4' deep). Balconies are used for storing items such as bicycles and for hanging laundry.

Frankly, while necessary, they are blight on the landscape. Firstly, they are always the tallest structure in each village and dominate the landscape. They range from 3 floors in the smallest villages, to over 20 floors in the largest cities such as Bratislava. Across the Danube from the Bratislava old town is the largest concentration of them in the country. Ladka's boyfriend Daniel is an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) for Bratislava city and takes regular trips to this sector. What he sees is similar to what occurs in American "projects."

A typical Flat consists of 1 or 2 bedrooms, a small kitchen (in American parlance, a "galley kitchen," a living space, a Water Closet (WC) which simply contains the toilet and is not much larger, a bathroom, consisting of a combination claw-foot style tub and an attached sink which shares the same plumbing/faucet. Finally, a small foyer, containing coat hooks and where outer footing is traditionally kept (it is traditional in Slovakia to remove one's shoes before entering a home). There are no closets in Slovak homes. The living space and bedroom usually contain freestanding wall units along one wall that contain all their earthly possessions. One shelf of the wall unit is usually closed in glass and contains china, porcelain and crystal decorative pieces. Each of the rooms is about 10' x 12' in size. In most living spaces, furniture enough to seat six generally makes walking about the room difficult at best.

Most homes and flats are without dishwasher, clothes washer or dryer. Clothes are washed in the tub or sink and hung to dry from the balcony. Imagine a large flat complex with thousands of balconies all with clothes

hung out. Most have a stove, refrigerator and sink. Refrigerators are small by US standards. There was no air conditioning to be seen in any flat. (Occasionally newer restaurants and shops contained air conditioning, but this was the exception)

Interior construction quality varied. In some of the more rural flats, the bathroom structures were tantamount to U.S. mobile home standards – thin walls made of synthetic materials.

In one 14 floor Flat high-rise, it was typical to find the unit serviced by one elevator, capacity 4 (while touching the other occupants). The elevator has no safety standards such as those found in the United States. On each floor, the elevator opens by means of a stationary hinged-door. Once inside the elevator, there is no inner protective door. As the elevator moves, the occupants can touch walls and doors as the elevator moves along.

Entryways are unattractive metal doors with utilitarian walls and floors, with rusting window frames and crumbling concrete. Last general maintenance appears to be several years old.

Flats are typically covered in white stucco, which presently is peeling and generally in disrepair. Most flats were built in the 1960's and 1970's and are showing their age. Since the downfall of Communism, I suspect many are also falling into disrepair due to a lack of maintenance.

In rural flats, heating, while centralized, appears to operate by means of a wood-fired boiler in the bottom floor. It is the resident's job to acquire wood and keep it stoked year-round.

Soviet War Memorials

War memorials, primarily focused on World War Two can be found throughout the region, with most located in eastern Slovakia, where fighting was most fierce. Most pay tribute to fallen Soviet soldiers. The Red Star and the hammer and sickle are still evident. Many monuments contain old Soviet military hardware, especially tanks and artillery. See the section on Dukla for information on a very large battlefield. No statues of Lenin appear to remain. Very few memorials to fallen Czechoslovak nationals can be found.

Bars in Every Village

Another interesting vestige of communism was the creation of bars in every village. Today they still remain in operation and are most often frequented by old men.

“Gardens” for Everyone

Most Slovak Republic residents who desire (and most must by necessity) are permitted small plots of land for garden purposes during the Communist Regime. Socialism plainly could not provide sufficient food or monies to purchase foods for their people. To this end, they had to carve up small plots of state-owned land to each family. You'll find these plots in small villages and large cities alike. The residents, especially in cities, the built small “tool sheds” (about 12x12 A-frame style buildings) on the garden property. In time, families used these “sheds” as vacation “homes,” where they typically crammed up to 10 individuals into this space in order to escape the noise, pollution and grit of the cities. See photos.

Nuclear Reactor at Jaslovske Bohunice

While traveling east, our eyes were drawn to an enormous nuclear power generating station at Jaslovske Bohunice. It supplies half of all electricity to this country. It was Soviet designed and put into operation 1981 and 1985. This operation contains four (4) reactors and eight (8) cooling towers, all in operation. "Giant" is the only words I can use to describe it. 12 years ago, I was informed by Daniel, would have been arrested for photographing it. (Note 3)

This is a good example of how government subsidies are being removed. Between 1998 and 2000 the price of electricity doubled as some of the subsidies are removed. Residential rates presently stand at US \$0.043 per **(\$/kWh)**.

Missiles in the Hills Near Devin

To the east of Hrad (Castle) Devin, a few kilometers north of Bratislava, Daniel pointed out the hills that once contained underground Soviet ballistic missiles pointed at the NATO countries during the "Cold War."

We also followed alongside the valley that contained the "Iron Curtain." Although the border infrastructure is now gone, it was quite amazing that to be standing on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Still today, I have to pinch myself not only that it is at all possible, but the speed in which the transition was effected. I remember a time in 1983 when I stood in Vienna, Austria, looked east and commented, "So close, and yet so far away."

Caves Where Tanks Were Built – Central Slovak Republic

Daniel also pointed out a hillside in North Central Slovakia that contained caves that once were used by the Soviets to produce military tanks.

Transportation

It needs to be recognized that under Communism an excellent inter-Warsaw pact transportation infrastructure (bus, tram and train) was developed.

City of Bratislava

Bratislava is another dichotomy. Its infrastructure is in poor shape, run down, yet the city is vibrant and full of life.

There is graffiti everywhere. The graffiti is primarily vandalism in nature, with no particular messages in evidence. I was advised that before 1989 this was absolutely not tolerated. Only in the old town were fastidious efforts made to eradicate the graffiti. There is a mix of two hundred year old stately buildings along with many Communist-era "flats" and government buildings, all equally deteriorating. It appears that after 1989, funding to maintain these structures diminished significantly. Internally, people do the best possible to make their flat their home. Certain people, who are doing financially, better than average are upgrading their flats, with new wood floors, new kitchen and bath fixtures, and new windows.

On the flip side, the young are everywhere. They are the future of this land. The universities are full and the youth are flocking to the city. Not always with a job, but nonetheless they are here.

In Bratislava it is said that you can purchase nearly anything. While I would agree, it is also true that very few people can afford to buy these items.

Most investment appears to be in the old center, in terms of improving the external attractiveness.

The “American Square” is quite nothing to speak of. It’s a small speck of land in the city, with overgrown bushes and shrubs.

On the outskirts of town, the factories and offices appear to be abandoned, by western standards. However, most are being used, albeit many are struggling.

The city awakes early. By 5:00 AM the trams (trolleys) are fully operational and full of workers. Factories begin work by 5:00 AM while office workers arrive by 6:00 or 7:00AM. By 3:00PM most offices and factories are closing.

The public transit infrastructure is excellent, albeit old. Trackless trolleys (electric buses) are pervasive. The trams are reminiscent of the 1950’s and 1960’s style subway cars found in Boston. We stayed in a flat on Krizna Street, just northeast of the old center. Trackless trolleys, cars and trams buzzed by incessantly all day and night. You’d think if you closed your eyes that you were in New York or Chicago.

Support for tourism is nearly non-existent. Although the city would like to provide more support, in terms of brochures, signage and information centers, the money is lacking.

The signature of the city, the Hrad (or Castle) sits profoundly on a hillside overlooking the Danube River and the Old town. A spectacular view of the Soviet housing across the river can be had, along with the modern SNP Bridge linking the two sections. You either love or hate this bridge. The haters disparage it for having been constructed through the old Jewish ghetto and ruining much of the old city. Within the castle is a vacant shell, with the castle being used primarily for government offices. It’s anticlimactic. There is a small museum in the castle that our hosts characterized as a waste of time. So we skipped it.

The cathedral was under restoration and its view was limited to the entryway. One could not walk around inside. Although it was beautiful, it was inaccessible to the tourist.

In front of the State Opera House, an archeological dig was in process, which we could not only observe, but also nearly fall into. An article in www.slovakspectator.sk in August 2001 nicely describes it.

New buildings are presently being constructed, mostly with western money, to western standards. New construction includes hotels, banks and offices.

Our hosts took us through some interesting nooks and crannies from medieval times.

Slavin Monument

This communist war memorial commemorates the thousands Russians who died fighting in World War II in and around Bratislava. I found I could not ignore such sites and in fact was drawn to them. Say what you may about Communism, but for every dead Russian, there was a mother, a family who grieved over the loss of a son in a distant land. I am grateful to them for their sacrifice that defeated Nazi Germany (although I hold Stalin and his successors in disdain for their own totalitarian oppression of their own people). Now, back to the monument.

The Devin monument sits on a hillside in the northeast section of the city. It is a large spire, with various dates engraved in it of the Russian liberation of various Slovak Republic cities and towns. In front of it are two massive terraces that contain mass graves of thousands of Russian soldiers. Certain hundreds of the soldiers, mostly officers are afforded their own stone monuments (akin to a tombstone), citing their name, rank and date of death) which surround the terraces.

Devin Castle

We made a day trip to the Devin castle, which sits directly on the Danube River. It is afforded beautiful vistas for kilometers in all directions. It was a significant, powerful force in medieval times and was destroyed by Napoleon. The castle is in ruins. It contains a small museum with interesting artifacts that have been recovered from the site. Tour and history books do a good job of describing this site, thus I will not attempt to describe its history. The most interesting remaining its artifact is that of the remaining castle water well. An attendant sits near the well with a bucket of water. He demonstrates the well's depth by dropping a ladle of water now into the open well. The water takes about seven (7) seconds to reach the bottom. It is hundreds of feet in depth (I did not record its depth).

Cerveny Kamen Castle

About 15 KM outside of Bratislava is the Hrad Cerveny Kamen (Castle of Red Stone). It is a well-preserved castle (actually much more interesting than the Bratislava Castle). We went on the guided tour (spoken only in Slovak, but they will provide an English-translation pamphlet on request, which does a good job of describing it). The Hrad was built by the landowners about 800 years ago to store the food harvest from the lands. The food storage areas are cavernous. It was also heavily fortified and repelled every attack made on the castle.

The residence buildings contain a plethora of well-preserved valuable antiquities. Of special interest are the tapestries, which are more than fifteen (15) feet in height. The living and bedroom furnishing are some of the finest I've ever seen. What made this hrad unique is that most of the original furnishings remained, so one can imagine what life would have been like during these times. All the items were in excellent shape, although there were no environmental controls. It always amazes me how much of this material remain lightly guarded, available to touch and walk up to. Such exhibits would be roped off, set back and guarded in the United States.

Portions of Kull the Conqueror (1997), Universal Pictures' fantasy action starring Kevin Sorbo (TV series Hercules) and Tia Carrere were filmed here.

Reference:

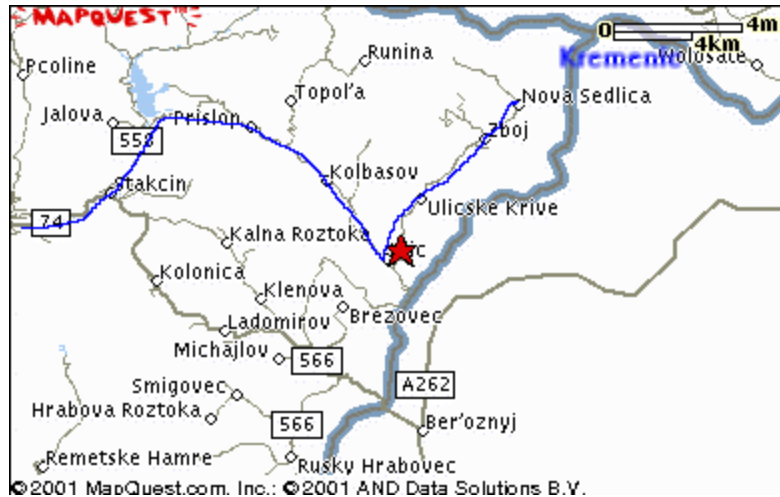
<http://www.bratislava.sk/ANGLICKY/VITAJTE/CERVENYK.HTM>

<http://www.slovensko.com/investor/film.htm>

<http://www.tccweb.org/odds&ends.htm>

THE VILLAGES

The primary villages we came to visit were Ulic' (see star on map), Zboj and Nova Sedlica. Secondly, you will see Ulic'ske Krive, Kolbasov and Stakcin. The blue line approximates the path of our journey.



Map 3: Northeastern Slovakia

Transportation

Public transportation is excellent by American standards. Trains depart several times a day from Stakcin for the western Slovakia and beyond. Most immigrants would have departed by train from this station. Stakcin is about 5 KM east of Snina, where most people travel to for goods and services. Within Ulic, Ulicske Krive, Zboj and Nova Sedlica, bus service can be had three times daily. Small sheds with benches alongside the road in each village are the bus stops.

Borders

Since these villages border Ukraine to the east and Poland to the north, military border guards are always present. They take the form of a couple of young conscripts in military camouflage and a radio, then take a roadside position, primarily inspecting vehicles as they travel the roads. They have no mechanized transport and typically walk these roads, along with everyone else. We were stopped several times, at all hours of the day and night. They ask to see the driver's papers and the automobile's papers. The whole process takes about five minutes. They don't radio into an office the way American police do. It looks to be a lonely, boring outpost for these kids.

Roads

The roads were in surprisingly good condition for such remote areas. All primary roads have pavement, although the road width and safety accoutrements did not compare to U.S. roads. Occasionally centerlines were painted. Most roads do not have names in the country villages; only in cities are roads named. It is common to see but one auto per hour in the roads from Ulic' to Nova Sedlica.

Gardens

Every villager has a subsistence garden. For many, their gardens are of insufficient size and they have made arrangement to have other plots of garden outside of the village proper. Potatoes and cabbage are most popular. Another popular pastime is foraging the local hills and woodlands for mushrooms and berries.

Village Topology

Villages are dense and compact. This is largely a relic of peasant days gone by (to peasant emancipation in the mid 1800's). In the days of serfdom, barons who lived in opulent mansions owned these vast tracts of land. The baron's primary concern was maximizing the production of crops and forests. He therefore provided only minimal space necessary for the peasants to live. Over much time and labor, the peasants were eventually able to purchase these small plots in which to live.

Climate

Similar to northeastern United States. 4 seasons.

See <http://www.fns.uniba.sk/zp/biosfera/brmabvku.htm>

Home Construction

Initially their homes were made of wood, with grass-thatched roofs. Grass roofs continued until about 1910-20 after which time, shingles came into use. Grass thatched roofs generally lasted 20-30 years, after which time, they eventually rotted away and collapsed. Farmers did their best to maintain them, but working from sunup to sundown left them little time to care for their own possessions. Many would attempt to patch these roofs, but their efforts were hit or miss. The roofs were generally impervious to rain, but many times succumbed to vermin and other pests. Skanzens (open air museums) in the area show the intricate weaving of the grass into the frame of the home. Most of these roofs were 10 to 12 inches deep. The homes were constructed with heavy timbers from the neighboring woods. A couple grass-thatched roofs remain in the villages.

In later times, the walls of the homes were made of bricks, fashioned from clay dug from the local hillsides and then baked. Most of these failings are whitewashed over, hiding these gaps. For many years these bricks were molded by hand, even as late as the 1960's. From there the homes exteriors were covered with whitewash stucco, which provided the wind barrier. Today, clay blocks are generally used for construction, though I observed that most these blocks suffered from a lack of consistency, resulting in many gaps and ill-fitted (by U.S. standards) walls. Most all home are one-storied, although many have basements. New single-family detached homes were disallowed after the communists came to power in 1948. Even in light of the 1989 revolution, there was no new construction to be seen. I'm certain this is a result of the economic conditions and the remoteness of this village.

Electricity came to the villages in the 1950's. Public water is also distributed to homes, though most appear to have some sort of septic system for waste disposal.

Most villages have a small store, tantamount to an American "convenience" store, although much smaller. It contains primarily packaged goods. There are no other stores. There are no petrol stations any where in the region. A communist-era "bar" can be found in most every village and Zboj is no exception. Now days these "bars" are frequented primarily by older men.

Each stand-alone home has an attached barn, which was used past and present for cows, goats, sheep, hens and the like. Hay is stacked into cone shape piles, about 10 feet in height, propped up by long branches and left in the field (still done by hand). The barn is too small and too valuable to store such large provisions.

Each home is surrounded by gardens and the most beautiful of flowers. These crops clearly receive a lot of tender loving care. The only “lawn” to be seen was that of the new Orthodox Church in Ulic’. A parishioner’s goats performed lawn maintenance. Of course, there were no lawn mowers.

Life and Work

Employment generally takes the form of farming or forestry work, of which the incomes are meager.

These folk are hardy and hard working. The day for most all begins about 5:00 AM. Many work a couple of hours and then eat breakfast. There is time for a large lunch and a small dinner. Lights-out by about 9:00 PM.

Most folk, regardless of age, walk everywhere. It is quite ordinary for an 80-year old Babka to walk 2 or 3 kilometers to visit a friend. It’s customary to just “stop by,” since most folk do not have telephones. My 20-year old cousin talked of bicycling the 6 km to see her Babka. Her biggest fear was that of black bears as she biked along through the wooded roads (though her fear was never met, they are quite common). It’s very common to see many people standing in the road conversing. Conversation will indeed halt and you will be given a thorough once-over as you pass by in your rental auto (don’t forget to wave!).

They wash their clothes and dishes by hand. Although only about 20% of the population has telephones, almost 100% have a television and VCR. The region was electrified in the 1950’s and it appears that indoor plumbing arrived in the 1960’s. However, old ways die hard and you’ll still see people using wells for water, cutting crops by hand and pulling their carts by hand. Much of this is also a result of their economic situation.

Deer are quite common and hunted for food. You can find many antlers in homes. It was a sometimes tradition to give a gift of antlers to the parents on the birth of a newborn child.

The forests north of Nova Sedlica have been designated protected natural areas, with no development allowed. This protection continues into the Beskid region of the Carpathians into Poland. These conditions have not changed in one hundred years. My grandparents would have been perfectly comfortable returning here.

Schools

Elementary education, from grades Kindergarten through Grade 5 are offered in the schools at Zboj and Ulic’. For further education, the children are sent off to boarding schools, as the distance is too great. Most of these schools are exam schools. My cousin and his wife went to a teacher’s school in Snina in the 1960’s. Of their children, one went to school in Snina and Banska **STIAVNICA**. Two went to Presov Economic High School, (which did not require exams before 1989 but now does).

Clothing

It is common to see younger people (under 50) wearing jeans and many western fashions.

Older women can still be seen wearing the shoulder to ankle “aprons”, a loose fitting used all day long, probably while working. Older women also wear babushka (a scarf wrapped around one’s head) and below-knee stockings. Older women also dress all in black for one year following the death of their spouse.

Men farmers tend to all wear a rather plain, style-less navy-blue pants and shirt combination, of mid-weight fabric.

Death and Burial

A couple of comments about the dying process, especially in the hill towns. First, the socialized medical care provided is substandard at best by American standards. The family must bring all the patient's own items, including sheets, blankets and food. In most cases no advanced medical care is provided. In the case of the dying, especially with elders, the cause may never be diagnosed. In most cases you are minimally afforded a doctor's review and sent back home.

After a loved one dies, typically at home, the wake is held at home. There are no undertakers, at least in the country. The loved ones prepare the body. A wooden box is made and the burial is simple. In some cases the grounds are dug by family, sometimes people are hired. The priest attends, of course. A simple wooden cross is placed at the head of the grave. The head of the body is toward the west in all the cemeteries I saw.

The traditional monument is a granite (or similar) headstone, coupled with a stone "platform" over the body. The platform may be solid or may be an outline such that greens and flowers may grow from it. For many, the 15,000SK cost of such a memorial is cost-prohibitive. An alternative is a less expensive iron cross.

Real Estate

You will not see American-styled Real Estate Brokers. Most property sales are handle privately. Only in the large cities are real estate brokers seen. This is an interesting aspect since it was only 10 years ago that property was restituted to its original landowners from the government.

Forests

A "Count Rudolph" owned the surrounding forests. What he did was "give" wood to the residents for heating fuel. In order to pay the Count back, they effectively became indentured to him for some period of time.

Many families made a living through forest work. When Helen was about 14 years old, about 65 years ago (1935) she planted many of the trees in the Carpathian Mountains, just north of Nova Sedlica.

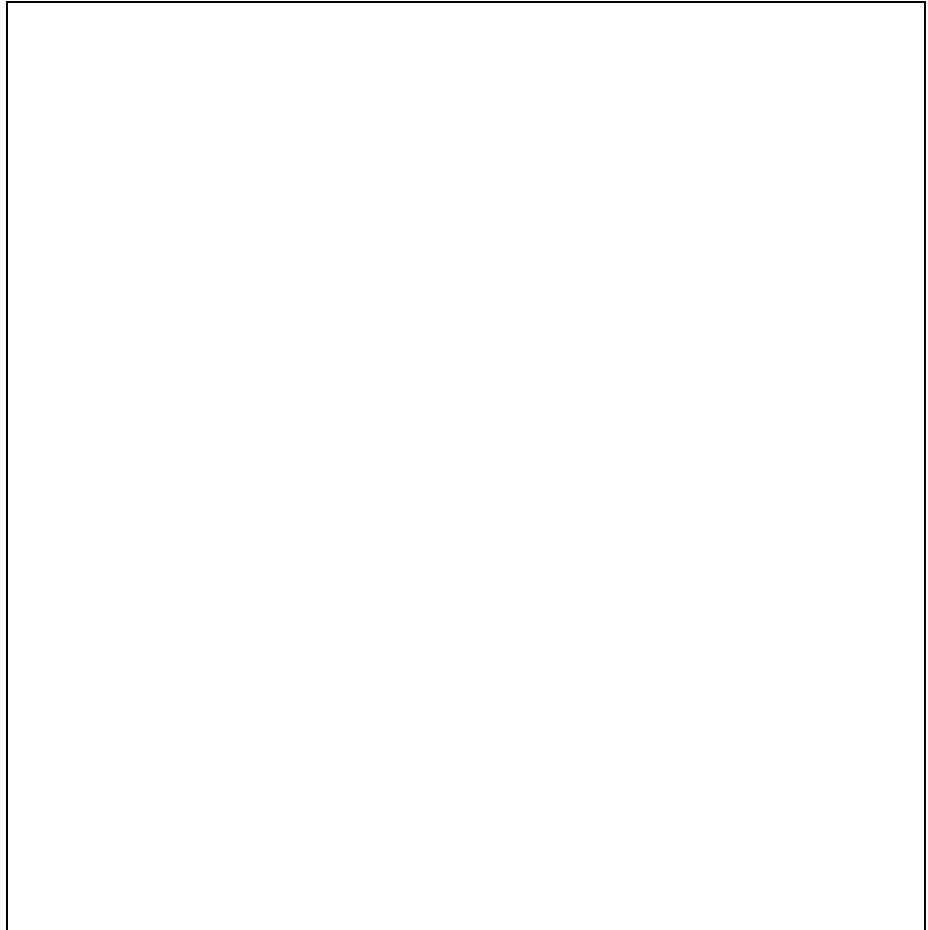
I plan to research at a later date land ownership. For now, I will simply speculate that the baron may have been from Humenne.

Lumbering Train to Ukraine

A train ran through the backyards of villages on the eastern side of the main road in Zboj (the rising still exists). It brought lumber from the mountains to the Ukraine. The train passed on to Ulic' and finally to Uzgorod (old-Hungary name Nagyberezna) in the Ukraine. It was a steam-powered, narrow-gauge railway. It began service in 1907 and had five locomotives. One train went from the region of Beskyd south to Nova Sedlica, Zboj and Ulic then to a line which went to Zabrod, present-day Ukraine. A second line went from region of Prikry across the Ukraine border to N. Stuzice, then onto a main line in Zahorb. The train service was discontinued in 1944. (Note 5)

There were three train services, with destinations to (all phonetic spellings, I have yet to ID where these place names are located.)

- ?? Bieszczady (Poland)
- ?? Bukovsky (Bukovské vrchy (Bukovske Hills) The border ridge with Poland, mostly along the Bukovske Hills. Meaning: The Beech Hills. Pictures here (Note 2) also of Nova Sedlica and pension.
- ?? Shishtsya Probably Stuzhytsia and Bukovets' - northeast of Ulych.



Source: <http://zeleznice.host.sk/arp/slovakia/history/h546.htm>

Storks

We were surprised to see many, many storks in the region. Their nests, about 4 feet in width could be found in nearly every village, atop telephone poles and chimneys. It seems as though they like to settle in the villages and apparently the villagers and the storks don't bother each other. (With all the storks, I thought I would see more babies, but I guess my childhood memories are a bit distorted!)

Village of Zboj

Zboj is the village of my TARKULIC' family, past and present. In many ways, this was the climax of my journey. I have returned home. My grandmother returned home here once in 1912, having married in Scranton, PA and returning to give birth to her first daughter, Anna. To the day she died, Anna was unaware where she was born. If I only could tell her.

Traveling into the village was also an emotional experience. We left Ulic' in the morning, went about 3 wooded kilometers through the village of Ulicske' Krive and another 3 km to the village of Zboj. The road follows the Zbojska Potok (Zboj Creek). It was so quiet and serene. No planes, trucks, cars or trains. No sounds of tractors or construction equipment. It was as if we were in the wilderness, in the middle of a village. In America we would call this the "boondocks."

Zboj is a small village in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Its citizens are primarily of Rusyn (Ruthenian) ethnicity and have lived in their village their entire lives. They are poor by western standards, but have everything they need. The village is about 20 kilometers to the nearest train station in Stakcin, keeping it fairly isolated from the world. The population is about 500 people, with about 200 homes evident. It is a compact village, on a road which "dead ends" one village to the North, about 3 KM to Nova Sedlica. Most people in this village appear to be over 40, as the young have generally migrated to larger Slovakian cities for employment.

People walk everywhere. It was quite common to see old men and women standing in the road talking. The majority of its citizens are older in age, the young having moved out. When we did meet younger folk, they were typically in their 40's and 50's and it was a bit of a shock.

The village has a two-storied (the largest structure in the village) elementary school, but with the numbers of children precipitously declining, it is considering consolidation with neighboring villages. Ulic' is the next largest village, which is not saying much. Ulic' has some local industry which provides a small amount of employment.

The word "Zboj" means "bandit."

There is one collective farm operation just south of the Zboj village, on the east side of the village.

About midway between Ulicske Krive and Zboj, is a roadside shrine that remembers the death of a soldier in the late 1940's.

When my cousin's Babka was young, they were shoeless (1920's – 30's). When Babka was in her 40's, (circa 1960) they built their first home. Clay was dug from the hillside and brought by horse and wagon to the house site. Here Babka worked from April to October, forming and firing 17,000 bricks for the walls. Her fingers are now permanently deformed as a result of this work.

When she was younger, they had cows, bulls, hens and pigs as their primary livestock. When the garden next to her home was not large enough, they arranged to have property on the outskirts of town for additional garden space. It was tended to daily.

Football (Soccer) Field and Church Lawn Maintenance

Football has found its way to the Slovakia scene. When Ladislav was younger (c. 1970) each village organized a Football team and played recreationally. Football fields were carved out of a small field in the village. There is one adjacent to Helena's home. I spent several moments watching a man maintain this field. He used a Scythe to cut by hand the large blades of grass and rake the cuttings to the side. Afterwards, he brought a cow to graze on the field for the 'finishing work'!

At the Orthodox Church in Ulic', I observed what looked to be the only lawn in the village. A parishioner was handling the lawn-cutting task by allowing three of his goats to trim the grass down to size.

New Church (1966) / Old Church 1706 (moved to Bardejov)

The original **1706** wooden church of Zboj is the “**Church of the Three Hierarchs.**” It was moved to the Skanzen (Open Air Museum) at Bardejovske Kupele (about 1 hour drive west.) in 1966. See <http://www.carpatho-rusyn.org/bard/> and <http://lemko.org/religion/perly/index.html>).

From their web page: “The whole structure is made of beams 52-58 by 12 centimeters. The fundamental base of the pile-construction tower rests on a timber choir above the entrance. All three spaces in the church are joined together and are constructed of timber. The nave has several levels, and each level has a corresponding roof, which spreads and graduates the material of the roof as well as of the whole structure. The original Baroque iconostasis has been restored from damage during a theft in 1933. It is the only original Rococo iconostasis in complete form in Slovakia. “

I have mixed feelings about this one. On one hand, the church building has been preserved. On the other hand, it is away from the people who built it and loved it.

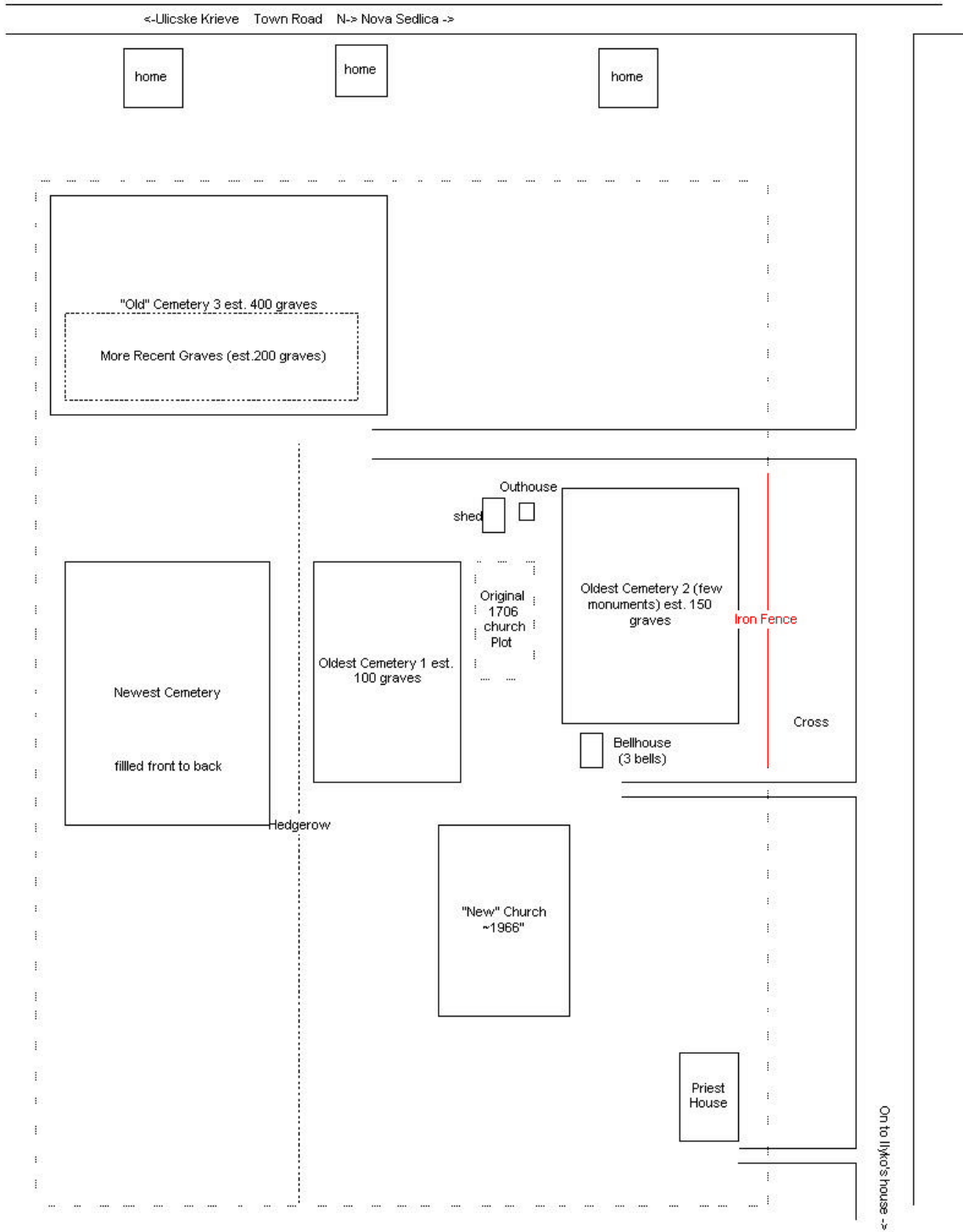
A new Orthodox church building was constructed after the original church was removed. The new building was sited about 100 feet behind the original structure. The perimeter of the original church has been encased in an iron fence. Since approximately 1950, the Orthodox parish has occupied the church.

There are four original **icons** from the original Zboj Greek Catholic Church remaining in new Zboj Orthodox Church. They are hidden behind the icon screen. The priest permitted me to view them and photograph them. They are in poor shape and in serious need of restoration or at least preservation. Three other original icons form the centerpieces for side altars.

Father Ladislav Revak, originally from Medzilaborce (north of Humenne, about 40 km away), is the pastor of the Zboj church and has his residence here. He has been resident for about 2 years and appears to be about 25 years of age. (Priests are mostly newly-minted and have only become a renewed fixture in the villages within the past five years. Father splits his time between services in Zboj and in Nova Sedlica, just as was done 200 years ago.

Father is rather skeptical about the authenticity of the new icon screen. It appears quite impressive and ornate. Father Revak points to the fact that none of the icons contain the artist’s signature, the sign of an authentic artwork.

Bell tower. There are three bells of varying size. The bells appear to have been made somewhere in Slovakia and dates are 1924/25. My notes are sketchy on this.



Drawing 1: Zboj Cemetery

Zboj Cemetery

The cemeteries of Zboj and Nova Sedlica tell a sad but compelling story of life throughout the ages. It is a story filled with poverty and loss and rejuvenation.

These villages were always quite poor. As such, little money was available to create long-lasting grave markers. Initially, most graves are marked with wooden Christian crosses, about two feet in height, with the name written usually on the horizontal piece. In time, if economics permit, it is replaced with a more permanent marker. These are usually either a simple crucifix (cross) made of iron, or a more formal, extensive monument, which includes a concrete structure placed over the entire plot. Most all people are buried in 'sequential' order. That is, in the order in which death occurs. There are no 'family plots'.

If the wooden marker remains, it tends to decay and collapse within about a ten-year period. In some cases these are replaced, in others any notation of the burial location is probably lost to time. For some period it may remain in the memory of loved ones, but in time, it is forgotten. There are no 'directories' as we find in larger, more organized cemeteries. As such, there are vast sections of the cemeteries with hundreds of unmarked graves. These sections contain rows of small 'hills' of earth, which are the only indication that there are graves in the area. As such, these large sections are essentially not maintained and therefore appear as fields of wildflowers, grass and weeds. To walk through them is difficult, as the underbrush is thick and full of prickly weeds, about 3 feet high. Occasionally one will find a wooden marker, probably placed there by a family sometime in the recent past.

Cemetery maintenance is essentially handled by loved ones, including weeding and grass removal.

The effects of the Communist regime on cemeteries cannot be ignored. During this period, the cemeteries were generally neglected. First, due to government dictate, these Greek Catholic churches were handed over to the Orthodox Church. Second, attending church, although legally sanctioned, essentially barred you from obtaining any desirable or worthwhile employment in the regime. Thirdly, poverty remained quite high during this period. All three of these dynamic contributed to the general neglect of the cemetery. One tragic decision that was made during this era (by whom we do not know) was that the tombstones had become rather bothersome to those who maintained the church property. A decision was made to remove and bulldoze the Zboj cemetery monuments. What happened to any tombstones remains a mystery to me.

Most monuments have been placed since 1989. Very few were placed (or remain) from 1950 to 1989.

Refer to Figure 1

The "footprint" of the original church is immediately in front of the new church. It is surrounded by a metal fence which outlines its' shape.

Old Cemetery 1 contains the graves of Ilyko (Elias) Tarkulic' (b 1889 d. 1955) and his wife Anna (Copak) Tarkulic'ova'. These are Ladislav's grandparents. Adjacent to Anna's grave is that of another unnamed Copak. These graves are marked with simple wooden crosses. Ladislav has promised to replace these with iron. Approximately 50 monuments of all styles can be seen. Most of these graves appear to be the first half of the 20th century.

Old Cemetery 2 Contains very few graves; it's mostly a mown area. Contains approximately 25 monuments.

Old Cemetery 3 Contains almost no grave markers and is not maintained at all. It is full of brush and bramble, about 3 feet in height and is difficult to walk in. It was impossible to determine the dates of burial in this area.

Old Cemetery 3 recent graves – contains about 200 graves, almost all with markers. Burials appear to be primarily from 1950 forward.

New Cemetery – Appears to be used from 1989 forward. 90% have monuments of some form. Only about 10% bear photographs of deceased. Contains grave of Michal Tarkulic

Markers found (Old cemetery 3):

- ?? Helen Copakova' 27.10.1881 – 23.10.67
- ?? Helena Petrokaova 10.4.1898 – 12.12.80
- ?? Maria Petrovkova' 1902-1981
- ?? Mikulas Tarkulic' 20.10.23 – 13.6.88
- ?? Mikulas Copak 3.8.1929 – 10.5.1989
- ?? Anna Copakova 16.3.29 – 18.4.87
- ?? Elias Legdan 22.7.1897 – 31.8.81
- ?? Stanislav Tarkulic' 5.10.09 – 26.6.72
- ?? Anna Tarkulic' 10-5-17 – 24.6.98 (wife of Stanislav)
- ?? Juraj Dzuba (new cemetery)

Ilyko Tarkulic' House

Still in original location, up a small hill, back about 400 yards from the main road, though rebuilt at least twice. I believe grass thatch roofs were last used circa 1920. Has a very old barn, looks to be 150 to 200 years old, made all of wood and branches. Met with present Tarkulic' family, though Ladislav did most of the talking. Took a few photos. A creek runs by the home. It has only been in the last few years that a bridge was constructed. Ilyko and Andreas were both born in this home.

During World War II, soldiers slept in this house. As the Russians passed through this region in 1944, this house was burned to the ground.

An interesting story has circulated in the family for years. Ilyko (Grandfather of Ladislav, father of Michal) went to America in 1914 to earn money. He was stuck in America until the end of World War One. He returned in 1918 with money to build a new house and a fancy new dress for his wife. He purchased land and built a new home. A few months later, she died. The superstitious family attributed the death to the dress.

Michal and Helena lived in new house for a time after they were married.

Andreas Tarkulic' house is adjacent to Ilyko's homestead.

Roma (Gypsies)

It is said that there are many Roma living in Zboj, but I only saw a couple.

Village of Nova Sedlica

The village of Nova Sedlica (New Settlement) is literally at the end of the road. To the north are the Carpathian Mountains. The village appears to be entirely residential. It has a population of about 330 souls.

There has been a recent flurry of television crews descending on the village due to its picturesque nature. As a result, the villagers become somewhat "gun-shy" whenever outsiders such as us appear, cameras at the ready. Cries of "Television! Television!" were heard each time we stopped to ask directions.

Another surprise to us all was the construction of a Pension (see note 2 for a photo.) It's apparent use is primarily for vacationers who like to spend their day's out-of-doors, in the nearby forests. It's pretty fancy. We also saw a couple of other, older pensions, near road's end. They all looked like they might have had about six to eight guest rooms.

New Church (Orthodox)

The "new" church again was built after the removal of the original wooden church to the Humenne Skanzen. This church continues to remain under Orthodox control. It is on a small plot of land, near the center of the village, with no associated cemetery. Father Revak pastors this church in addition to his responsibilities at the Zboj church.

Old Church (Greek Catholic) (Humenne)

Much less is known by me about the Church in Nova Sedlica. This is in large part due to my own lack of research. I believe this church has been returned to the Greek Catholics.

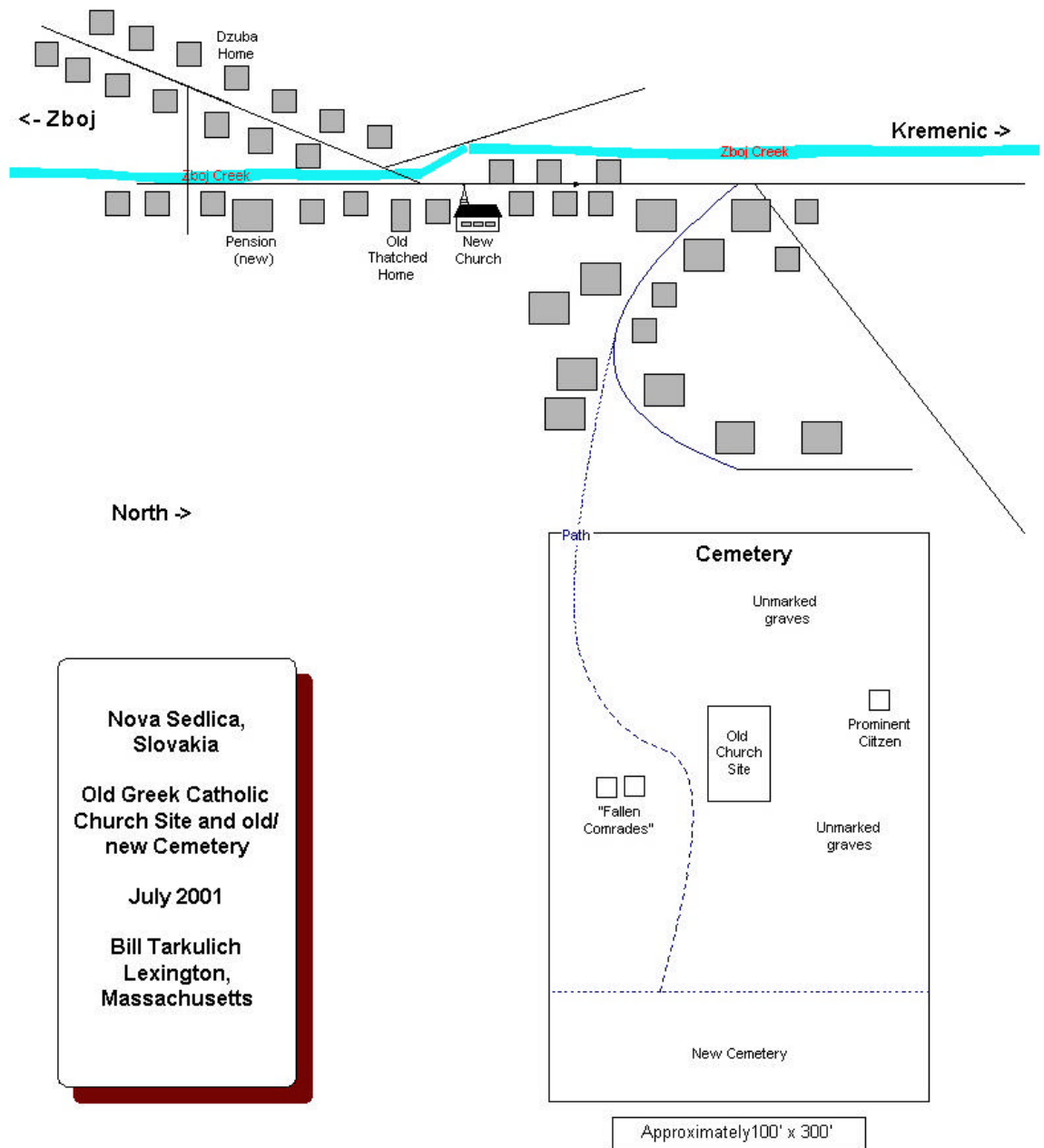
The original church, **St. Michael the Archangel** was built in 1754 and in 1977 relocated to the Skanzen in Humenne (see <http://www.culture.gov.sk/UVOD/WTS/interfolk.html> and <http://lemko.org/religion/perly/index.html>). It contains a Baroque 18th – century altar and a multistoried iconostasis. The 'new' church is located on the main village road, not within the property confines of the old church lot. We did not investigate this church due to its lack of historical significance. There was no cemetery in or adjacent to the church grounds.

The old church lot and cemetery are extremely difficult to find. It took three attempts, and three sets of directions from locals, before we located the lot. It was hidden behind some farm buildings on what appeared to be a private farm road. It was only accessible by foot. It appears that a vehicle could make its way up the grassy slope. The church plot was a beautiful setting, on a grassy slope. After some investigation (and inquiry to another local who had come to visit) that the old church building's placement is where a tall crucifix (cross) now stands. This church appears to face west, as does the Zboj church. The original church was removed to the Humenne Skanzen in the 1980's, when the museum opened in 1983.

Cemetery

The old grave section contained a couple of graves of significance. The first, appear to be a pair of communist party members who are buried circa 1947 after having given valiant efforts for the struggle. Also contained is a rather elaborate stone monument of another prominent individual. These graves are written in Ukrainian.

Old graves appear on all four sides of the old church site. Most are unmarked. Farther back, in an area that appears to be a recent addition, is a newer cemetery that includes about 200 graves from 1989 and later. No Dzuba were found in this cemetery.



Drawing 2: Nova Sedlica Cemetery

Across the Carpathian Mountains

My research has uncovered some interesting migration about the people on both sides of the Carpathian Mountains. During the early 1900's and late 1800's people from Zboj and Nova Sedlica worked in the forests to the north. Additionally, people from Wetlina, Poland (about 8km due north of Nova Sedlica) also worked in the forests. In time, these people worked together and

consequentially socialized. My great-grandfather Pal DZIUBA, born in Wetlina, married an Anna BRASKO and settled in Nova Sedlica. Much has been written about this in a 1990 Polish history book.

Village of Ulic'

Ulic is a relatively small village, set in a valley surrounded by woods, with a population of 1140, in about 300 houses; most of them are ethnically Rusyn. The village was founded in the year 1451. Rusyn language is primarily spoken here. Ulic is the administrative center for this small region and contains the post office and administrative offices for the region. There are two churches in the village. The Zboj creek (Zbojska Potok) runs through the center of the village, originating in the Carpathian mountains to the north, after traveling through Nova Sedlica, Zboj and Ulicske' Krive. The waters were quite high and rushing after a one-week period of nonstop rain. (The same rain caused much flooding throughout Slovakia). The closest medical care is in Snina, about 25 km away. There is no such thing as an ambulance or emergency medical technicians. Most citizens go by bus when they need to see a doctor.

Anna Tarkulic' discovered a pamphlet on the history of Ulic, from an 1996 anniversary of the founding of the church 525 years prior, in the year 1471. The document is written in Slovak and Ladka has promised to translate it for me.

Factories

Ulic contains a few factories – wood products and “Agro-business” (the result of Soviet farm collectivization in the 1950's). Most businesses are uncompetitive (price and quality), do not know how capably survive in a free-market economy and are in the throws of serious layoffs. For most living, this has been their source of hard cash and they are fearful of the future. There are no new public or private investments in the region. All of these firms had sold their goods to Russia, who during the Warsaw-pact times, guaranteed their purchase and thus the viability of these businesses was sustained. Today, most of these purchases have dried up, leaving an uncertain future for the villages.

Greek Catholic Church

The Greek Catholic Church appears to be less than 50 years old. I do not know the history of it, though I suspect that the Orthodox rebuilt it, after having acquired it by decree sometime after 1947. It has a single spire, sits on a hillside that has commanding views of the village. It has an extensive cemetery. Consistent with other cemeteries in the region, most monuments were erected after 1989. At the base of this church is a small Roma “ghetto” (as the locals call it).

Roma

A small Roma (gypsy) “ghetto” exists at the base of the Ulic' church. It is said that at one of my cousin's wedding two years ago, a Roma snuck into the reception and stole one of the several wedding cakes. It was my observation that most of the Roma behavior involved only petty crimes such as petty theft and squatting. More on Roma later.

Orthodox Church

The new Orthodox Church was built sometime after 1989 after the congregation was booted out of the Greek Catholic Church it occupied since 1947. It is contemporary in design, with a Byzantine style single-domed structure.

The most wonderful thing about staying in these villages is to be awakened in the morning by the sound of church bells. I cannot recall the last time I experienced this in America, it must be more than 20 years. The bells toll on Sunday (beginning at 6:30 am) to call all to church (everyone walks there). The bells also toll for memorials, weddings and the like. They are real bells too, pulled by hand.

General Comments

A small charcoal making operation was observed in operation. There were about 3 men working near the woods in a small shack, burning wood to make charcoal. In the U.S. operations such as this were discontinued 50 years ago as economically impractical. This poor-paying, dirty and difficult work demonstrates some of the economic challenges found in rural Slovakia.

The Post Office was quite informal, not much more than a counter and a lady at a desk behind the counter. There were about 20 wooden post boxes, about 6"x6" in place for customer's mail. It also appears that mail is delivered by hand to each residence.

Village of Ulicske Krive

Ulicske Krive (the locals refer to it simply as "Krive") is a picturesque Rusyn village on the road between Ulic' and Zboj, about 3 kilometers equidistance to each. The population is 280 persons in perhaps 100 homes. In my church record and village research, in 250 years, not a single Tarkulic' family ever moved to Ulicske Krive from Zboj, even though it was only 3 km away.

Greek Catholic Church

A rather well known, well-preserved Greek Catholic church exists in this village. We found the keys from a villager, who unlocked it for us. A plaque on the outside of the structure indicated its status as a National Cultural Monument. The icon screen inside was magnificent. In each of these churches one will find a "collage" of the Catholic "stations of the cross" – the major events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. It is usually painted on wood (everything is wood!) on an 8-foot high x 4-foot wide panel, and mounted on the left wall, immediately adjacent to the icon screen. All of these churches appeared capable of holding 50 to 70 worshipers, all standing for the two-hour service. Glass windows were far and few between (economic considerations again) and thus the church is quite dark inside. All of these churches have lightning rods and cables to protect them. As I considered this, it struck me that these country churches, all made of wood were extremely vulnerable to fire. No smoke detectors, no alarms, and no local fire service.

I will leave the detailed description of this church to the tour books, although I did take quite a few pictures.

Orthodox Church

As is the case in so many of these villages, an Orthodox Church now exists here.

Village of Stakcin

Stakcin is the end of the railroad line from the west. It is here, about 15km from my grandparent's villages that they would have traveled by horse and wagon, step on the train and begin their journey to America. We stopped briefly and took pictures on the day we too were leaving to return back to America. The station is relatively modern, as are the trains and the rails are well maintained. It was an emotional experience for me, for a reason understandable only by someone who has researched his or her family.

Stakcin contains a small Russian World War II memorial. It contains a Russian tank (pointing westward, with its gun raised high) and a monument containing the names of the fallen comrades. There is a 15-foot high spire with a red star atop. I wondered how long the red star would remain.

Village of Kolbasov

Kolbasov is a village on the way to Ulic' from Stakcin. We stopped there after being advised of the 1945 Jewish Massacre (see below). While inquiring of the locals, we were directed to an abandoned Jewish cemetery in a field, several hundred feet from town. It took a half hour of walking in the rain-soaked, muddied field before we discovered it. It is overgrown and obscure. There are no markers or directions to the plot. It was enough to make one cry. There are no loved ones left in this region to care for it any longer. We uncovered about 12 tombstones, all written in Hebrew, most of which were crumbling and barely readable. We photographed a number of them, and plan to have them translated.

See Appendix I for memorial details.

Town of Humenne

We visited this large town primarily to see another family member and view the Skanzen. These folks lived in a Soviet-era flat, about 6 floors in height. Economic conditions did not appear much different than in the rural villages.

Museum of Folk Architecture in Humenne / Skanzen – Old Nova Sedlica Church

We visited this Skanzen to see the church where my grandmother, Maria Dzuba and her brother, Michael were baptized. It was moved to this site from Nova Sedlica in 1972, according to the photographs found here. The name is the "Church of Archangel Michael." The Skanzen is well preserved and tended to. It is very typical of the dwellings found in a Rusyn village 100 years ago. The church is well kept and its icons and icon screen are exemplary. Houses and barns typical of the period, along with interior furnishings are well exhibited.



Photo 1: Original Nova Sedlica Church (now in Humenne Skanzen), built 1754

General Skanzen Information

One interesting invention is the hanging of a basket about 3 feet above the parent's bed. In this basket a baby would sleep. It served as a convenience to the parents, should they need to attend to the child during the night. Another interesting item were the dirt floors. The earth, when hard-packed is extremely rigid and solid – it is not loose and gives the appearance of being quite solid. I left with the impression that an earthen floor was not quite as bad as I first imagined.

Most tools were made of wood or iron.

The entrance to the museum is found behind a large palace to some land Barron, now offices. This is another place where directions for tourists would be helpful. At the Skanzen entrance is a life-size carving of a Babka and Detko (Grandma and Grandpa), sitting on a bench, in their traditional dress. I'd love to take a miniature version home! The open-air museum in Humenné was opened to the public in 1983.

From the web site, the following description was taken:

“Exterior: Exposition of folk architecture presents 15 objects from Upper Zemplín on an area of 2 hectares. The most important is timber St. Michael Archangel's church from Nová Sedlice that was built in 1754. The church has a tower, two copulas and two-stepped roof. The exposition displays timber dwellings, a smithy with equipment, cellars, granaries and a weigh beam well.

Interior: There is a Baroque 18th – century altar and a multi-storied iconostasis richly decorated in the church. “

Source: <http://www.culture.gov.sk/UVOD/WTS/interfolk.html>

City of Kosice

Our primary purpose in Kosice was to visit more relatives and friends and see the cathedral.

The family we resided with overnight lived on the 10th floor of a vast tract of 14 story communist-era flats (perhaps 40 towers). These flats were atypical of those we have seen throughout Slovakia. Two bedrooms, common room, galley kitchen with the added amenity of an eat-in area to seat six, a WC and bathroom. When company comes to visit, family members (and some guests) may also sleep with neighbors. The traditional welcome throughout the region was a kiss on each cheek (with women), for men a handshake and a shot of vodka for all.

Breakfast consists of traditional items, including fresh bread, sausages, cheese, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, tea or coffee.

The transportation system downtown would have been most efficient, but it was Sunday and there were no open offices to sell tram tickets, so we drove downtown, which took about 15 minutes. After we parked, just south of the pedestrian zone, we passed a Soviet war memorial, listing countless soldiers who perished nearby in World War II. Most notable was the hammer and sickle prominently on display and the Cyrillic text. I felt as if I was witnessing history and that in a few years, this memorial or at least the hammer and sickle would disappear. So I clicked away with the camera.

The Pedestrian Zone in old town was well done. It reminded me of very successful pedestrian zones in Vienna and various towns in Germany. This is apparently the result of a former mayor who believed that a physically attractive downtown would attract citizens and tourists. The result is one of the more tourist-capable areas. The cathedral was under external cleaning, but still magnificent. The shops were quite attractive and their merchandise was something for all.

Skansen at Bardejovske Kupele at the Town of Bardejov

The purpose of our visit to this town was to see my grandfather's church, removed from Zboj and placed in a Skansen here. Much to my disappointment, all but the topmost row of the icon screen had been removed to the Saris Museum in the nearby town of Bardejov. We did not have time to visit the museum, so I bought the book instead. We did get to the Skansen, the most important stop.

Open-air Museum / Skansen – Original Zboj Church

I do not have a clear answer on the name of this church. It is either the “**Church of Three Hierarchs**” or “**Church of Saint Michael Archangel.**” Based on maps I have seen of the region, I believe the name is the later. St. Michael the Archangel was very popular patron throughout the region. The church was moved from Zboj to Bardejovske Kupele in 1966-67.



Photo 2: Original Zboj Greek Catholic Church (presently at Bardejov Skanzen),
Built 1706

History: The construction of the museum was approved in 1961 and the facility was opened to the public in 1965.

“A second church or cerkev is also devoted to St. Nicolas, and is from the village of Zboj in the easternmost valley of northeastern Slovakia, on the Ukraine and Polish borders. This little church, also with, a very expressive tower, belongs structurally to the Boyko type. It was built in Zboj in **1706**, and after 260 years was transferred to the Museum in Bardejov Spa. The whole structure is made of beams 52-58 by 12 centimeters. The fundamental base of the pile-construction tower rests on a timber choir above the entrance. All three spaces in the church

are joined together and are constructed of timber. The nave has several levels, and each level has a corresponding roof, which spreads and graduates the material of the roof as well as of the whole structure. The original Baroque iconostasis has been restored from damage during a theft in 1933. It is the only original Rococo iconostasis in complete form in Slovakia.” Source: <http://www.carpatho-rusyn.org/bard/> .

The icon information is here <http://www.unipo.sk/IKONY/ikona2uk.htm> or <http://lemko.org/art/bardejov/ikona2.html> . The church info can be found at <http://lemko.org/religion/perly/index.html>

Here is what Helena Tarkulic'ova had to say about this church, which she was a lifelong attendee. “...The Liturgy was two hours in length any everyone stood for the entire service....The men were segregated to the upstairs balcony.....Although the church was dark, many candles were lit.... It was very hot, no air conditioning, but the people were used to it....Children always went to the entire service and they were always well-behaved”

Adventures

Hiking in the Carpathian Mountains - Kremenic

We spent one rainy weekday hiking to a Carpathian mountain peak called “Kremenic.” This is the point where the political boundaries of Slovakia, Poland and the Ukraine meet. It was a hike much like many I've made in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It is about 2,100 meters above sea level, which is about 4,300 feet. This is comparable to the White Mountains of New Hampshire or the Adirondack Mountains of New York State.

The trail begins just north of Nova Sedlica. The locals begin the hike in the village, but I suggested we travel further by auto, to the end of the maintained road, about 1.5 KM further. It was a good choice.

It was absolutely beautiful. It was so still and quiet. In America, it seems that no matter where I have hiked, including seemingly remote woods of Maine and Canada, civilization was never far away; I always at least encountered high-altitude aircraft. In the Carpathians, there was none of that. Stillness, mid-day silence predominated. How glorious.

The forests were much like those of the northeast. Softwoods: pine, fir, Hardwoods: beech, maple, birch, and oak. In the open areas, blueberries and blackberries. The ground was a bit different. It was rich soil, yet the rocks we trekked across easily crumbled.

Amazingly, though there were mosquitoes and common houseflies, they were quite disinterested in us Homo sapiens. This is in contrast to vociferous biting festivals encounters in northeast American forests. It was a pleasure to walk, stop, and relax.

Our hiking party consisted of natives in their 20's, who had much more, shall we say, 'horsepower' than us 40's Americans, used to sedentary lifestyles. These 'kids' thought nothing of running up such slopes. Even when I was in my hiking prime, carrying heavy backpacks weekly, I never could have kept up with these folk. Even their father, who is in his 50's, was out in the woods picking berries and mushrooms. Very impressive. Shows the strength of their stock. I kept going, although resting many more times than they did. I said to myself, “If my ancestors could do this, I could do it.”

We passed an old railroad bed through these mountains, which brought wood from these mountains. As mentioned elsewhere, this railroad took the forest lumber to the Ukraine, via Nova Sedlica, Zboj and Ulic until 1944.

It was mentioned that as a young girl more than 65 years ago, our companion's grandmother planted tree seedlings which now tower more than 60 feet in height. We passed through many groves of these trees.

I couldn't help but wonder about the nuclear fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine. I had studied a recent map showing that the effects of this accident were found well into this area. I was relieved that I did not find and two-headed frogs! I also noted that the citizens still seemed to be living full lives and not dying of cancers or befallen by mysterious illnesses. What a tragedy.

When we got to the top, it was pouring rain. It took us about 50% longer than the stated times (hiking signposts show times, not distances). It continued to pour rain. We took some quick pictures and it was back down before it became dark. I had no regrets, but I did have quite a few blisters and hobbled around with sore muscles for two days afterwards.

Dukla Pass (north of Svidnik)

In late 1944, the Russian Army continued its westward offensive into German occupied territory of Slovakia. It crossed into Czechoslovakia from the west from Ukraine and from the north from Poland, across the Carpathians. At the Dukla mountain pass (at the Polish border, near Svidnik, Slovakia), a particularly long and bloody battle occurred. Hitler positioned his crack SS troops to defend the land in Czechoslovakia. The Russians attacked and in a battle lasting almost two months, 85,000 Russian and several thousand Czechoslovakian troops perished.

After the war, the Soviets erected a massive memorial tower just south of the border in Slovakia. See Appendix III for details. It contains the names of several hundred Russian officers. We stopped and photographed this area. Further down the road is a much smaller German Cemetery. We did not stop here. Littered throughout the fields for several miles south of the border are abandoned planes, artillery and tanks, all of which we photographed. At one point, a road diverges northwestward towards the village of Kapisova. This area is referred to by the local signage as the "Valley of Death." At this intersection is a monument of two tanks, one German, one Soviet. The Soviet tank has been positioned such that it appears to be crushing downward the German tank. It is the only military equipment that has a formal memorial placard.

Throughout the region, live ammunition, shells and landmines continue to be found. Unfortunately, there continues to be annual reports of a couple of cows being killed or a farmer losing his legs in the field. It was as if the war ended and everyone left, just abandoning the carnage. I can imagine that the area was too remote to be concerned with and the locals were too poor, worrying about how to survive to be concerned with "cleaning things up." I did notice that in many farmyards, old military trucks could be found, used for a variety of farm purposes. Of all the military hardware we inspected, all the doors and panels had been welded shut, guns disabled and some equipment had been placed on concrete blocks.

In a large, rolling farmer's field at Kapisova we noticed an abandoned tank, sitting, rusting. Standing next to the tank was a cow grazing, oblivious to what had gone on before it. It seemed so innocent, tragically humorous and yet very sad. All of these lost lives had someone's mother grieving. We were told that

further down the road we could find gun emplacements, trenches and foxholes. But it rained harder at this point, so we turned back.

For fun, consider <http://www.pyrotechnics.sk/> where for a few bucks, you too can participate in “adventure tourism,” while equipped with a metal detector hunting for “treasures” that you can take home (as long as they are not explosive).

Southwest Slovakia

We drove from Kosice back to Bratislava, through the Southwest of Slovakia. It was a beeline trip; on local roads (very few controlled-access highways in Slovakia). The country was dominated by large agricultural acres of crops, wheat, oats, and sunflower. Thousands of acres of agro-business. Looks like a different land, very unlike the east of Slovakia. You’d think you are in a different country. Much more Hungarian influence, especially in regard to the home design.

Events

World War II & Afterwards

I am only beginning to piece together how the events of World War II and immediately thereafter affected this region. Here is a chronology of events, as I understand them.

Chronology

- ?? Before 1918 – Part of the Kingdom of Hungary
- ?? 1918 – Creation of Czechoslovakia, Hungary reformulated into a much smaller territory. Ostensibly a “Democracy” during this period.
- ?? 1938 – Invasion of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany. Hungary also participated in this invasion and occupied southern territory and parts of western Ukraine, which bordered today’s Slovakia (known then as Ruthenia)
- ?? 1938 Nov 2 – Vienna award – gave Hungary much of the territory it desired: “Southern Slovakia
- ?? (Like Kosice, etc.) And southern parts of Subcarpathian Rus’ (land near and including Uzhgorod, Mukachevo, etc.)” (Credit to Larry Krupnak)
- ?? 1939, March – Dissolution of Czechoslovakia; Czech lands assumed into “Greater Germany.” The puppet government of “Slovakia” was allowed to formulate.
- ?? 1939, March 23 – Hungary invades and annexes land east of Snina (Including Ulic’, Zboj and Nova Sedlica) and all of the Carpatho-Ukraine, as the Germans then called Ruthenia. Our villages were to remain in Hungarian control until the end of the war.
- ?? 1945 – End of World War II, reformulation of Czechoslovakia into the borders it held previously.
- ?? 1947 – Communist closure of all churches except Orthodox
- ?? 1950 – Communist collectivization of property

The Day They Came for the Jews

Helena Tarkulic’ova recalls the dreadful time in the fall of 1939 when the Hungarians came for the Jews of the Zboj. [Ed. Note: during this era, these

villages were controlled by Hungary under agreement with Nazi Germany] She recalls that they were all merchants, groceries and etcetera. There were 9 families: Velkus, Freuim ~, Sender, Jankel, Srulo, Verko, Lipko, Benci and Stouba. She watched as they were taken away. They were good people, many her friends. One family lived next door [Ed. Note: while she lived at Ilyko's house], and had three children. Nice people. They were only allowed to take their luggage with them and not told where they were going. The villagers of Zboj were only told that they were being segregated.

After the people departed, the Hungarian officials collected the Jews' belongings and sold them and their property to the villagers. Apparently there had been a brief burst of looting by the villagers, but Helena knows nothing more about it.

In Ulic'ske' Krive one Jewish woman who survived the Holocaust by hiding remains alive today. Helena believes that others ran away and hid, but does not know of their success.

Helena worked for many years at the Zboj primary school as a cleaner. About 20 years ago, all the staff was invited on a trip to Oswiecim, Poland (Auschwitz). It was here that Helena saw first hand what happened to her friends.

Fighting In Zboj

As the Russian offensive passed through the region, there was fighting in the villages. Many homes were burned, including that of Ilyko Tarkulic', where soldiers had at one time slept. After the home had burned down, they shared living in a house with 3 families, 10 people in 1 room. The residents all fled to the woods.

Afterwards, many Russian bodies were discovered in the wood. A local man stole their shoes. Many mines were in the fields and woods. As late as this summer, an artillery shell was found in the stream adjacent to Babka's. The police were called and the shell removed. The fighting concluded in the village by 4 August 1944.

Conscription into the Hungarian Army

My father's first cousin, Michal Tarkulic' was drafted into the Hungarian Army around 1939 or 1940. He spent three years serving on the Russian front. He served in the artillery/antiaircraft division and was also a cook. He was married while on leave. Near the war's end, he was captured by the Russians and spent 10 months in a work camp in Yugoslavia after the war.

People and Culture

General Comments

Keep also in mind that these folks were simple mountain people. They cared not for politics or government, but preferred to work their land. They were strong and hardy people who walked everywhere (animals were too valuable in the farms to be used for riding). It was nothing for these folks to walk 10 or 20 mile, or run to the top of the Carpathians (I witnessed this first-hand and I was unable to keep up with them).

This is a hard working lot of people. Most folk arise by 5:00 am. Factory workers typically begin their work at 5:00 am while office workers begin by 7:00 am. Factory and office workers usually are done by about 3:00. My one host was able to put in a half day of work and be home by 10:00 AM! Even those without jobs are up working in their gardens by 5:00 am. Their gardens are afforded

much tender loving care as they provide much of what they eat throughout the year.

By many standards, the Carpathians are quite small in stature. They are comparable in beauty to the Vermont Green Mountains, but are taller, typically in the 4,000-foot range.

Each village was like its own little country - one could be very different from the next; customs, traditions, religion. Therefore, moving to another village was a very brave, yet scary proposition. So while migration may be physically possible, there are cultural barriers to consider also.

The area is absolutely beautiful. Mountains tower to the north. It's isolated, though not difficult to reach. The village populations continue to decline as the young move to the city for work and a better standard of living. The area is poor, by American standards. Some homes are deserted, but the only crimes one sees are thefts made by Roma. However, the people seem happy, and work hard. Many are farmers, some work in the old soviet-era lumbering businesses. The train goes as far east as Stakcin. Many people in their 80's and they walk everywhere.

Meeting Americans

Many of the folks I met, particularly in the countryside, had never had the opportunity to meet an American. (As an aside, even many folk who live in Bratislava have never been to the airport – what reason?). So I began by asking them what they would like to know about Americans. Their first, and most startling of questions was: “Is it true that most Americans have their own personal psychologist?” Wow! After a couple of questions like that, I felt the need to put my American Ambassador hat on and explain a few things about life in America. I began by explaining that although some people most certainly do have psychologists, the majority does not.

It appears that much of this distorted thinking is the result of two dynamics: a) prior Communist-era propaganda about evil America and b) the recent influx of subtitled American TV shows, most especially situation-comedies (“Sit-Com”).

So I then continued the discussion to talk about American sit-coms. It seems that until 1989, the only TV shows available were on three channels, and they all originated from Russia. After the velvet revolutions, the airwaves somehow just broke free. They now view sit-coms from the 1950's right through to the present-day broadcasts. They have no context to put it in. So again, I spent time explaining that although SOME people are indeed as the shows portray, most are not.

Before I departed, I asked, “So, am I like the person you expected me to be?” They replied, “I was surprised that you are so nice.” I was wise enough to ask them to clarify. They thought I would be a “loud mouthed, arrogant, boisterous, pushy American.” They must see a lot of that on American sitcoms (I can't vouch for this, as I haven't watched these shows in over 30 years!).

On another occasion, I had to take out an old map that some family had of the United States and show them exactly where I lived (may I remind you, I was only pointing out major cities such as New York and Boston. Much to my surprise their communist-era map was quite accurate. I was also surprised to see how much the young knew about American history.

Food & Cooking

Here is a quick rundown on the cooking. Everything was always homemade.

1. Lunch or dinner always starts with soup. Christmas soup, Pirogues (sauerkraut, cheese or potato), chicken soup, vegetable soup.
2. For breakfast there was always bread, vegetables: tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, potatoes, cheese and sausages.
3. In Eastern Slovakia, hunting for Stag (deer) is common.
4. Picking berries and mushrooms.
5. Homemade wine and brandy.

A Wedding

While we were there, a knock came on the door, from a friend in town. She was inviting the family to their daughter's wedding. A wedding is a very important event in the village and invitations are presented personally.

We also had the opportunity to review a videotape of one of the cousin's Rusyn wedding in Ulic'. Although I was not there, I sat with the participants and asked many clarifying questions. I'll attempt to describe it to you.

Firstly, all guests prepare the food and decoration. Then, at the time of the wedding, everyone meets at the bride's home, and then walks to the church. The wedding was held in the Orthodox Church. From there, the party proceeds to a local public hall for the reception. There must have been at least 12 wedding cakes (they do not look like American wedding cakes). The dancing and partying goes on through the night and well into the next day. A longstanding tradition is for some of the guests to "steal" the bride away and the groom to come looking for her. Since the village was so small, hiding places were few, they took her to the local "bar," hung out for a while, having a few drinks. The groom knew just where to look for her when it was time, since the choices were few.

The wedding music was provided by a local Rusyn band, which played all night. It was a group of about five musicians.

Sometime the next day, the Roma snuck into the hall and stole away one of the cakes. The bride did not seem to be particularly upset by this; perhaps they already had their fill of cakes!

Language

Rusyn is the predominant language spoken in the village. During Communist times, Russian was also required in the schools. Nowadays, English or Slovak is taught. Therefore, it's fair to say that most people under 30 years of age know some English, while those over 30 likely do not.

One of my cousins married a man from western Slovakia, who spoke Slovak. When he first came to the village, he could not understand Rusyn. Now with time, he understands the language. This demonstrates how profound the language issues are, even within a small country such as Slovakia.

Bath, Shower, Wash, Kitchen

When the Soviets built housing, the word "utilitarian" comes to mind. Everything is based upon minimal functionality at minimal cost. A uniquely Soviet

contraption is the bathtub/sink combination, where the sink is somehow attached to the tub and shares its plumbing. It's a space saver for sure. Oh, and no standup showers. A simple showerhead on a flexible pipe will suffice.

One practical arrangement is that of the Water Closet, or "WC." It's essentially the outhouse brought inside. Just the toilet, in its own small room. Actually a very practical arrangement, allowing the facilities to be better shared.

Refrigerators are small, usually no more than about 4 feet in height. A separate freezer, about 3 feet high is sometimes found. No dishwashers or clothes washing machines, although Janette and Daniel had just taken the splurge and purchased an apartment-sized dishwasher and a 6' tall refrigerator for their flat in Bratislava.

In flats in the country, the boiler is wood fired. It is the responsibility of the tenants to provide wood and ensure it is stoked.

Teens on the Streets

We arrived home one evening in Ulic' after a particularly long travel day. It was about 9:00 pm and I was shocked to see dozens of teenagers milling about the unlit streets. In America, this would surely be cause for concern and may warrant the driver to seek an alternate route home. In these villages, these are good kids who plainly have nothing to do. My cousins told me of their teen years spending hours walking about the streets at night, doing nothing more than walking. No malicious behavior to be found here.

Meeting a Communist Party Member

Well, it had to happen. I met my one and only "Red Head," an individual who had joined the Communist Party just prior to 1989. Interestingly, his flat was one of the better decorated, with a recent renovation to match. I was unsurprised to learn that he was the biggest complainer of everyone we met; He indicated that things were better under Communism. To a moderate extent, I must agree with him. The transition to free-market economy is very difficult for the average citizen.

Vacationing in Bosnia

I was surprised to meet another man who had just returned from a two-week vacation in Bosnia, on the Adriatic Sea. Recall that Slovakia is a land-locked country and there are not many choices for a vacation by the shore. He reminded me that the fighting ceased five years ago and that you just had to look past the carnage as you traveled on your way to the Sea. Everything is relative.

Roma

A small Roma (gypsy) "ghetto" exists at the base of the Ulic' church. It is said that at one of my cousin's wedding two years ago, a Roma snuck into the reception and stole one of the several wedding cakes. It was my observation that most of the Roma behavior involved only petty crimes such as petty theft and squatting.

The majority of the citizens dislike the Roma (gypsies). They migrated from the country of India about 700 years ago and have wandered throughout the whole of Europe since that time. Roma are of their own race and maintain their own unique language and customs. They are largely perceived as societal leeches. They do in fact irritate the citizens by stealing from gardens, then standing

roadside offering these goods for sale. We observed Roma throughout the whole of Slovakia.

Romanian Refugees

While life in eastern Slovakia may seem poor by western standards, it is nothing compared with neighboring Ukraine and Romania. As we were driving in the Humenne area, we came upon a truck with a canvas covering over its back. I noticed several sets of fingers gripping the sides as the canvas flapped. After a minute or two following them, a breeze flapped the canvas back momentarily to reveal many nearly toothless faces staring at us. Our hosts informed us that these were Romanian refugees. Apparently they are smuggled by the driver, typically onwards to Poland. Seems greener grass is always relative to where you come from.

In a separate conversation, I was told by a friend who grew up in Poland that it was quite common, even during the Communist regime for these people to flee. Starvation is a great motivator.

Drivers

Generally speaking, the majority of Slovak Republic drivers were extremely poor in skill and judgment. It is as if there is little regard for human life, be it their own, their passengers or others on the road. It makes Boston drivers and those in other European nations look like the infirm. I know it's risky to make such generalizations, as I'm sure a percentage of drivers are good. I don't know if it's because they feel they don't have much to lose, that their life is not worth much, or perhaps driving an auto is such a novelty or what.

Education and Bribery

It has been written, especially in www.slovakspectator.com that it is commonplace to provide bribe monies to obtain various goods and services. While I was there, numerous citizens did complain that it is still necessary to provide monetary bribes in order to facilitate admission into even the most prestigious of Slovakia's universities.

Skoda Auto

Since Volkswagen purchased the Czech automaker (and former WW2 munitions supplier) SKODA, it's safe to say, "This isn't your father's Skoda!" The car that used to be small, shaky, and unreliable has been transformed into the image of a present-day VW. It has a radio (AM and FM, imagine that!), 5-speed manual transmission and comes in two models. We rented the larger of the two models, the Octavia. It is quite similar to the larger VW, in that it seats 3 people comfortably yet tightly in back, with room for luggage. Alas, windows are manual and don't look for air conditioning. Surprisingly, the car did come with an alarm (probably due to the high theft rate of new autos).

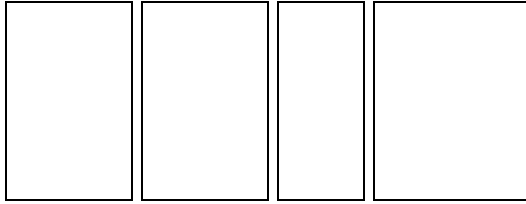
By the way, the purchase of a new automobile is out of the financial realm of most individuals. Most who can purchase a used auto and then keep it for 10 or 20 years, doing whatever repairs they need themselves.

See Appendix II for some Skoda humor.

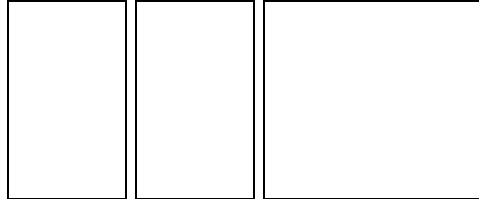
Ceramics and Folk Art

The village of Modra is well known throughout the region for its traditional Slovak and Czech ceramics. The work is beautiful. I brought back a few pieces, which

is quite inexpensive by Western standards. These pieces are traditional to the west:



While these pieces are traditional to the east:



If you're interested in seeing more or purchasing some, here is the web site of an American importer: <http://www.storksnestimports.com> These prices are several times what you would pay for them in Slovakia, but still won't break the bank.

The Insurgence of Western Culture

I remain stunned at how quickly western culture has permeated the area, especially in the west of Slovakia and especially in the cities. We saw it everywhere we went. Coca-cola billboards, Sony electronics, cell phones. Television is now dominated by sub-titled western sit-coms. They receive the BBC and CNN (It was only in 1987 when the Soviets finally stopped jamming western radio and television signals) "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" is offered now in dozens of different languages, one for each country. I listened to the radio at night and heard everything from Mariah Carey to Michael Jackson to the Beatles (English, of course). Interesting, it was weaved in with traditional music.

Hairstyles

Finally, what in the world is with this RED color? Middle-aged (and older) women, cut their hair relatively short, and then dye it red – the Lucille Ball color red. I saw this everywhere!

Conclusion

By definition, genealogists live in the past that is how this whole adventure began. While that is not bad, we miss out on an entire living, vibrant lifestyle that is directly related to our past.

Ulic', Zboj and Nova Sedlica are living communities that face an uncertain future. The traditions are strong and deeply rooted. I fear that many of the Rusyn villages will disappear within the next 50 years. I have no crystal ball to anticipate how life will change in these villages over time. Populations are declining and abandoned homes can be found throughout the region. Everyone was surprised to find the first pension for tourists built recently in Nova Sedlica. This may be a harbinger of things to come. Maybe the villages will begin to recognize income through tourism?

The country's future is its youth. The Slovak Republic Government believes that finally as an independent state, it must learn to cooperate with the west in order to succeed. To do this, they must at least learn how to deal with the west. Language is the major barrier remaining to this end. As the youth learn the western languages, opportunities will unfold

for themselves and their nation. Economic investment and entrepreneurship are also critically needed. Realistically, these improvements will take generations to accomplish, but must begin now.

In many ways, Slovakia living is comparable to western life. Smaller, more distant villages in America are equally faced with less earning power, less sophisticated jobs, restricted opportunity. Perhaps it will remain this way.

They are special people, many of who continue to live a life unadulterated by Socialism, Magyarism or Capitalism. In some ways I felt like I had been beamed back 90 years, with the only difference being bus service and electrification. Funny, how even with these services, many of these folk continue to perform their tasks with traditional methods. The Rusyn country folk we met are hard workers, with little time for recreation or play.

If and when you do go (and I hope you will), be cautioned not to try and impose western/American values on these wonderful folk. You are well advised to listen more than you speak. What may seem like a hardship to us – lack of air conditioning or an automobile or large, spacious rooms, is no big deal to them. If they were to come to America, most would be shocked by the speed of life and consumption and waste of goods.

I commend them one and all. They have survived countless rulers and atrocities. They have lived a poor life throughout all of time. Yet they are a happy lot. They value the land as much as my grandparents did – it feeds them, shelters them and provides a livelihood for them. Their respect for the land reminds me of the Native American Indian's respect – that they must share the land with the rest of nature and that it must be respected.

This was a trip of a lifetime. I was immersed in the Rusyn culture, embraced by its people and my relatives and left with the feeling of being connected, which will remain with me my lifetime. I was asked countless times when I would again return and all I could say was "soon." I will miss them all dearly. It was only two weeks, yet it felt as if I was born there, moving on after I grew up.

It's interesting and exciting to study genealogy and the connection to Europe. But once we find this connection and make this contact, the world has changed for us. We're not dealing with old church records or dusty passenger lists any more. This is real living. As it was once said "Life is not a rehearsal." It is our privilege to help Slovakia and its people and our families. We have so much in America and we have much we can share.

Recall that our ancestors traveled to this country to create a better life for themselves and their descendants, which includes me. Well, my grandparents accomplished that. As descendants of immigrants, we all have acknowledged our indebtedness to them. Now it's payback time. They are our family, past and present. Let's reach out.

Closing Thoughts

So now I've come full circle. Peter and Maria Tarkulic' left Zboj and Nova Sedlica 92 years ago. Times were entirely different. Starvation was rampant; The Austria-Hungary Empire was shaking and beginning to crumble. They worked hard in America during the 1910's and 1920's to make a new life. Just when they were "making it" in America, and could afford the return fare, the doors slammed shut in 1939, not to open again in their lifetimes. The letters from the homeland just ceased. My heart cries for them every time I think about never seeing your mother, father, sister, brothers, cousins, aunts or uncles ever again.

So we returned on their behalf. We searched for their family. We gazed at the hundreds of unmarked graves in the cemeteries. We knew they were here somewhere. We touched the soil and the church that were most precious things to them. We said a prayer for them.

Then something amazing happened. We found their living families. We are now entering a whole new phase of relationships. We have moved from tracing paper paths and gravestones to developing relationships with living, breathing relatives.

My wish for you is that you find your relatives too. It wasn't easy for me and it probably won't be easy for you. It's a lot of difficult work, with many dead ends. Persevere. Good things in life don't come easily. And if you don't find living relatives, make the connection with the village and villagers anyways. You will find a sense of attachment that is indescribable.

You owe it to yourself to come full circle.

Notes

1. Bratislava Old Town Archeological Dig – Slovak Spectator Article from August, 2001
2. <http://walrus.webzdarma.cz/galerie1.htm>
3. Slovakia Energy Sources <http://www.fe.doe.gov/international/slvkover.html>
4. Starina Reservoir info
http://www.irn.org/programs/review/submissions/sub_slovakDestruction.html and <http://www.tccweb.org/starina.htm>.
5. Logging Railways, discontinued. See
<http://zeleznice.host.sk/arp/slovakia/history/h546.htm>
<http://zeleznice.host.sk/arp/slovakia/history/histzsr3.htm#539>

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“The Czech and Slovak Republics, Nation Versus State” Carol Skalnik Leff, Westview Press, 1996, ISBN 0-8133-2921-3, ISBN 0-8133-2922-1. Nations of the World Series. Provides an excellent contemporary description of pre- and post- Communist issues at a national level.

“A History of Slovakia, The Struggle for Survival,” Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, 1995 St. Martin’s Press, ISBN0-312-16125-5.

“IKONY Sarisskeho Muzea V Bardejove / Icons of the Saris Museum at Bardejov”, Vladislav Greslik, 1994, ISBN 80 901 174-4-9, 1994, ARS Monument

“Kulturerbe der Slowakei Architektonische Denkmaler / Slovakia’s Cultural Heritage architectural monuments”, ARS Monument 1996, ISBN 80-901174-6-5

Appendix I – Kolbasov Jewish Memorial

There is a never-ending war of words in this region of the world over “who did what to whom”. Rather than offer my uninformed opinion, I will present herein two opposing points of view.

CITATION I

Reference:

PRAGUE (JTA) -- Jewish leaders unveiled a plaque recently in the Slovak town of Kolbasov in remembrance of 11 Jewish citizens who were killed there by Ukrainian nationalists in December 1945.

Speaking at an unveiling, Pavol Traubner, the honorary chairman of the Central Association of Slovak Jewish Communities, said Kolbasov was only one of many European towns with Jewish martyrs.

Condemning anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, he warned that other religious groups could be persecuted in the future the way Jews were in the past.

The Ukrainians who murdered the 11 Slovak Jews during World War II had been part of a nationalist unit known as the Banderites.

November 22, 1996

Source: <http://www.jewishsf.com/bk961122/iworld.htm>

CITATION II

This was excerpted from an e-mail received by the author shortly after the initial publication of this document.

From: Olga Kaczmar
Sent: Friday, August 24, 2001 6:23 PM
To: bill@iabsi.com
Subject: Killing of the Jews by Banderists

I wanted to comment also on the Banderists and the Russians. Many Russians and German soldiers killed many Jews and blamed it on the "bandits" Banderists who were hiding in the woods. The Banderists, of course, were not able to defend these accusations. I am very leary of believing that the Banderists killed the Jews in your story even though they got credit for it, since their history was not told--only the victor tells the history and that was Russia. So, Russian soldiers often blamed others for their atrocities as did the Nazis.

The reason I am skeptical is that the Banderists didn't have a real reason to kill the Jews, they had lived side by side (since Jews weren't allowed to live anywhere in Russia except the Pale of Settlement in Ukraine) and bickered with each other for ages. The Banderists /UPA were formed after Hitler did not give Ukraine the freedom it had promised the men if they would fight on Hitler's side. The Banderists then fought Hitler and Stalin equally. Maybe they were killed in the food gathering process. Who knows. I could ask my friend in Poland who was drafted by all three sides if he remembers the UPA slaughtering Jews.

Anyway, I would leave that out. The Jews weren't the only ones slaughtered, as my report shows that more Ukrainians were killed by Stalin and Hilter than were Jews and in the US all we ever hear about is the killing of the Jews. It makes me ill that the slaughter of Ukrainians is not acknowledged and here you write that Ukrainians were killing the Jews too. More Ukrainians hid the Jews from Hitler at their own peril.

It's the same with the Polish: the Polish slaughtered so many Ukrainians/Rusyns but all you ever hear about is Black Sunday when a Churchful of parisheners were locked in and set on fire. The Polish did this to many Greek Catholic churches because they themselves were Roman catholic and Greek Catholic was astrocized. This led to Black Sunday but why isn't any of this published. Why is there a statue commemorating the death of Polish soldiers sent in to evacuate the Rusyns in Operation Vistula and nothing said about the thousands (?) murdered or who died in the transit through starvation and hypothermia?

That's why I'm skeptical about anything that is officially written about the Banderists.

Appendix II – Skoda Humor

LOWLY SKODA REBORN AFTER THE END OF COMMUNISM

Published on 03/24/2001. Article 2 of 2 found.

SOURCE: By Brian Whitmore, Globe Correspondent MLADA BOLESLAV, Czech Republic - The reason a Skoda came equipped with a rear-window defroster, according to the old joke about Czechoslovakia's communist-era clunker, was so drivers could keep their hands warm while pushing it. Such quips were once commonplace. And while some still like to crack Skoda jokes for old-time's sake, few people are laughing anymore. These days, Skoda humor falls pretty flat.

- ?? Why do Skodas have a rear wash wipe ?.....To remove the flies that crash into them.
- ?? How do you double the value of a Skoda ? Fill the tank !
- ?? What do you call a Skoda full of food? A Lada! [Ed. Note: Lada is a Russian made auto]
- ?? What do you call a Skoda with a ladder on the roof? A wheelbarrow!
- ?? What do you call a Skoda driver who say's he has a speeding ticket???? A Dreamer.
- ?? Why do Skoda have a heated rear window? To keep your hands warm, while you push it.

Appendix III – Battle for Dukla Pass

[Ed. Note: This was written in pure Communist propaganda style.]

“CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The Soviets first engaged the Nazi German troops in Czechoslovakia on September 8, 1944. On October 6 the Soviet Union's 38th Army and the Czechoslovak Corps seized control of the Dukla mountain pass. Fighting went on from September 1944, to May 1945, between Soviet units, the 1st Czechoslovak Corps and Slovak, Czech and Soviet guerrilla forces, on the one hand, and Nazi German troops, on the other. It culminated in a Czech uprising against the Nazi invaders. Soviet tanks stormed the barricaded capital of Czechia, Prague. The Czechs and Slovaks have, since then, been celebrating May 9 as a national holiday. As many as 144,000 Soviet troops gave their lives for the liberation of the Czechs and Slovaks.

The grateful memory of the Czecha and Slovaks retains scenes of those days. Monuments to Soviet infantrymen and airmen, members of tank crews and sailors line the roads all over Czechia and Slovakia.

The Slovak mother hugs the Soviet soldier who saved her from slavery, at the Dukla pass. The monument was unveiled in 1960. It was made by sculptor Trizulyak, architect Svetlik and Slovak artists Snopek, Kosik, Kilikh, Bartfai, and Pribish. “

Source: http://www.vor.ru/55/Monument/Mon_eng.html

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