

4 – SLOVAKIA

Monday, 16 September

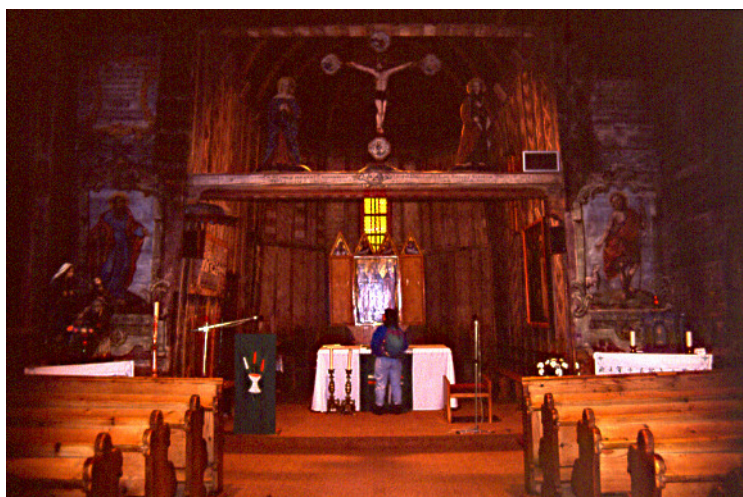
After a very good night's sleep I woke at 7.15, before Karen's alarm clock went off. Although it was a dark, wet morning, we decided to stick to our plans and visit some of the local churches. We packed what we needed for the day, paid for another night and walked to the nearby bus station, stopping en route at a supermarket to buy some food. We started our makeshift breakfast of jam rolls and biscuits as we made our way to the correct stop and waited for the 8.20 bus for Hervator, which soon arrived.

We drove out of the city and into the countryside, passing through at least one small village, and finally reached our destination. It was a typical village of modern concrete and traditional wooden houses, with a narrow rough main street; here and there we saw old women dressed in what appeared to be local traditional costume. We walked a short distance and soon arrived at the impressive Roman Catholic church that we had come to see. Constructed of dark, weathered wood (possibly red spruce), this was the church of Saint Francis of Assisi. Built in about 1500, it was believed to be the oldest in Slovakia. Its unusually-shaped bell tower looked very impressive.



Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, Hervator, Slovakia

As the door was locked, I volunteered to go looking for the key. I asked a lady nearby and she told me to go to house number 22. As I had discovered that the Slovak language was much closer to Russian, I found it easier to understand what was being said to me, and also the local people could work out what I was trying to say. I found the house and, after a good deal of knocking and shouting, a man finally came out with the key. He put on a pair of shoes, which were outside the door, and we walked back to the church. As Karen was nowhere to be seen, I shouted and she appeared.



Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, Hervator, Slovakia

We then entered the fascinating little church and the man turned on the lights. After we had signed our names in the visitors' book, he gave us some explanatory text printed in English, which Karen read aloud. We examined everything carefully and I took some photographs. The crude local art, depicting various saints, was quite interesting; everything had a homely and rather chunky feel about it. I really liked the place and so did Karen.

When we finished looking around, we left a contribution in the offertory box, thanked the man and said goodbye. We wandered back towards the bus stop and wondered what to do as no bus was due to return to Bardejov for several hours. We

started walking and after a few minutes I managed to stop a car in which there were two young men. They dropped us off on the main road to the town, where we tried to hitch a lift, but no cars would stop for us. We waited at a bus stop and soon a bus came along; although the driver was not officially on duty, he gave us a 'lift' to the Bardejov bus station. I gave him 10 Kčs for his kindness.

As we had some time before catching a bus to Jedlinka at 11.40, we went to the nearby post office, where Karen bought some stamps and succeeded in telephoning her mother at home in Australia. Back in the bus station we went to the café, where we had a hearty mid-morning meal of goulash and rice for me and goulash and dumplings for Karen. The place was grim, dirty and noisy.

After our meal we set off in the bus for Jedlinka. As it had turned very close, the bus was stuffy. I was inclined to doze but forced myself to stay awake and note where we were, for Karen had fallen asleep. We passed through Zborov, one of the oldest settlements in the region – now a bland large village. To our right was a ruined castle on a hill; I had seen a photograph of it in the book that I had bought.



Uniate church, Jedlinka

After a pleasant journey across some gently rolling countryside we arrived in Jedlinka: it was an old-world village in the middle of nowhere, where time stood still. We had no trouble finding the tiny Uniate church that had been built in 1763. As expected, the door was locked and once again I went off in search of somebody who had a key. I approached an elderly lady who was pushing a handcart along the road and she told me to follow her. We went into a local shop and she called out somebody's name. A man responded; he, like the old lady, proved to be very friendly and chatty. He told me that he would go off on his motorbike with his shopping and return with the key.

I then ambled back towards the church and the man came back, key in hand, and let us in. The place was tiny but fascinating; as in all Orthodox churches, a high

iconostasis separated the body of the church from the sacred area around the altar. Some of the icons had been taken from an older iconostasis dating from 1744. I was allowed to photograph the interior and we were brought to the area behind the altar, but not in front of it. When we were about to leave and I left some money on the offertory plate, the man indicated that he would appreciate a tip. I gave him 10 Kčs and he thanked us before saying goodbye.



A detail of the iconostasis in the Uniate church, Jedlinka

We now returned to the bus stop and waited for the bus back to Bardejov at 1.14 p.m. While we waited, the man returned in a car with his son and grandson; his son spoke to us in a mixture of Slovak and English.

We then caught our bus and returned to Bardejov. At the bus station I joined a slow-moving queue at the ticket office and bought two tickets to Žilina for early on the following morning, at 6.47. I then joined Karen, who had returned to our hotel room, and we both went out together. First of all we went to the Čedok office in the main square, where Karen got some money changed, and then walked to a nearby photographic shop, where she bought some films. Afterwards we went off in search of some local linen but, having found none for sale, made for the Jewish quarter. We found it, but the old synagogue and nearby buildings were all derelict.

Afterwards we returned to the hotel, left some of our things in our room and went out again in search of food, despite the fact that it was only about 4.30 p.m. We ended up in the Bistro again, where we found several people already eating. Karen ordered fried cheese with chips and, because of a misunderstanding, we both ended up with the same dish. As it was not particularly filling, we ordered some more food afterwards. We delayed some time here as it was pouring with rain outside by now.

Later we returned to the hotel and went up to our room. I had a good warm shower and afterwards settled down to write up my diary. As we would be up early tomorrow morning, I got things ready and went to bed at a sensible hour. I read for a while and then went to sleep.

Tuesday, 17 September

I was awake when Karen's alarm clock went off at 5.30 a.m. Although it was dark and very misty outside, the rain had stopped. We left the hotel shortly after six o'clock and walked to the bus station. En route, we popped into the supermarket, where we bought some poppy seed bread and two bottles of mineral water. We waited at the station and boarded a bus bound for Žilina at about 6.50. Our luggage was put in the underneath compartment and we had to pay a small charge for its storage. As our numbered seats had been taken, we made ourselves comfortable on the back seat.



We set off a little later than scheduled and drove towards Poprad. The mist slowly cleared and after a while the sky turned blue and the sun shone. As the bus stopped for twenty minutes in the city, we went to the station café and drank a cup of tea.

As we travelled away from Poprad, we could see the High Tatras appearing through the mist and soon we were approaching them. Although the mountains were high and dramatic, there seemed to be no snow or ice on their peaks. At the foothills we passed an electric railway that served the area, and we stopped at several very touristy and crowded holiday resorts. As it all looked far too commercialized, I was glad that we had not bothered to visit this area in earnest!

Soon we descended from the mountains and, after a while, the good weather began to disintegrate. It turned grey and misty once again and the scenery was not up to much. As we passed through various featureless concrete villages and stopped at some grim-looking towns, we soon lost interest and fell asleep.

At midday we stopped at a town and the driver announced that we would have a twenty-five minute stop. We went into a railway station restaurant and had a lunch of goulash and dumplings, which we washed down with glasses of lemonade. Back on the bus we set off for our destination, Žilina, and fell asleep once again. We woke when we approached the horrible sprawling city and discovered that it was raining. We arrived at a big bus station soon after one o'clock and thought about what we should do next, bearing in mind that the weather was so bad. As neither of us was keen to go to another city, we decided to try the 'Slovak village *par excellence*': Čičmany. I went off to get information about bus times; as the next bus would depart at 2.25, we decided to take it. It quickly filled up with people until it was packed, and for most of the journey we passed through some rather dull scenery that we glimpsed through the misted windows.

As we neared our destination, the bus began to empty and at last we could see clearly where we were going. The ugly concrete buildings began to disappear and we found ourselves in a pleasant valley, skirting the Rajčanka river, which turned out to be more like a small stream. At last, after a journey of about one hour and ten minutes, we finally reached the village of Čičmany, where we could see some of the pretty painted wooden houses of the region.



Čičmany village, Slovakia

When we got off the bus and retrieved our luggage, we asked for directions to the local hotel. As its name was not displayed outside, we walked past it and had to go back in order to find it. When we eventually did, we had to search for the very elusive reception area. Having not found it at ground level, I climbed a staircase and met a good-looking girl wearing a mini-skirt who spoke English. She told us that a room would cost us 300 Kčs, and gave me a key. I rejoined Karen, and we brought our luggage upstairs, where we were shown into a very pleasant and spacious room containing three beds, two of which were ready for use. The room also had an en suite bathroom, which seemed something of a luxury in this region. It was certainly an impressive hotel for such a small village.

Delighted with our new accommodation, we put our bags to one side and sat down to relax. We poured the remainder of our mineral water into glasses and I

began to write my diary. Karen stretched herself out on her bed, read for a while and, as she had developed a headache by now, fell asleep.



Traditional house, Čičmany village, Slovakia

Later, when the rain stopped, we wandered outside to have a look at the place. We ambled down to the traditional painted wooden houses, which featured white geometric designs on a black background, and started to photograph them. While we were doing this, a man appeared and asked Karen to follow him; she gathered that he was about to get the key for the local museum. We were invited into the man's house, where we found his wife working on a piece of embroidery. The man showed us another example of his wife's work and tried to persuade us to buy it, but we thanked him and said no.

We left together and walked to the nearby museum, where we were looked after by a kind lady. As the display of local fabrics was quite interesting, we decided to buy a few items. I bought a couple of nice bookmarks and a small tablecloth, and Karen bought a very nice large tablecloth. The lady played a taped English-language introduction to the village and museum, and afterwards we looked around rooms

that contained examples of local costumes, artefacts made in the region, old photographs, and various other items.

The lady then brought us across the road to a wooden house where the rooms were furnished in traditional style. We were told that four families had once lived in the house. There were two stoves in the kitchen, two large living rooms that also served as bedrooms and, upstairs, four tiny rooms built into the attic. I found it all quite fascinating.

We finally thanked the lady, left and wandered around a little more, took a few more photos and returned to the hotel. We left our cameras and purchases in our room and went down to the restaurant for dinner. We had an excellent meal that began with a main course consisting of chicken, ham, vegetables, and potatoes cooked with apple. Dessert consisted of ice cream with fruit and a piece of chocolate biscuit. We asked for soft drinks with our two main courses, then drank tea and coffee afterwards. When we had finished all this, Karen decided to have another coffee and another ice cream. When I ordered this and told the waiter that the ice cream was particularly good, he smiled. At the end of our meal I asked for the bill, which came to a mere 136 Kčs – about £2.80. Karen wanted to pay me half the amount but, as I knew that she had enjoyed the meal so much, I refused to accept any money from her. She seemed to appreciate this little gesture.

We then returned to our room and shortly afterwards I went out for a very pleasant brisk walk, the likes of which I had not managed to enjoy since leaving Ireland. It was now great to be out in the countryside and to breathe fresh air. The little village, apart from the hotel bar and a restaurant down the road, was completely silent due to a complete lack of traffic – and it was only 8.30 in the evening!

Shortly afterwards I turned back and headed up to the other end of the village, crossed the main road and followed a rough trail up towards the mountains. By now the moon was shining brightly and stars were beginning to twinkle in the sky. I could have gone on for hours but decided not to go too far as I could see lightning flashes ahead. After a while I returned to the old section of the village, where I had a good look at some of the traditional painted houses.

I then footed it back to the hotel and found it locked, even though it was just gone nine o'clock. I went into the bar and a young man shouted upstairs. The girl in the mini-skirt came down, apologized and opened up. I joined Karen, who had softened considerably this evening and had almost become amorous towards me, and set about writing my diary. Later I prepared for bed. This village had proved to be a pleasant discovery: it was interesting, peaceful, had an excellent hotel and a superb restaurant – this evening's meal was certainly the best that we had eaten in Czechoslovakia. It had been so much better than staying in another large town or city.

Wednesday, 18 September

The alarm clock rang at 7.30 this morning, but once again I had woken much earlier. We got up and, while Karen was getting ready, I went downstairs to pay for the room and retrieve our passports. We then had breakfast in the restaurant and chose what we supposed were traditional dishes. I was given a bowl of savoury porridge containing various unidentified ingredients, which was served with bread,

and Karen had a dish that included cheese, which she could not finish as it was too salty.

After breakfast we returned to our room, got ready and caught the nine o'clock bus back to Žilina. As the weather was poor this morning, the journey was uneventful. We arrived at the city an hour later and walked to the train station, where I bought two tickets to Prague. We killed time in the station and finally boarded a train that left for the capital at about 11.30.



This journey, which was long, was also uneventful. We shared a compartment with a man and spent the time reading, dozing, looking out of the window, and nibbling food from time to time. We polished off the poppy-seed bread and two bottles of lemonade during the morning. Later we had a fairly reasonable lunch in the restaurant car. This train was not as impressive as the one in which we had travelled from Prague. When we returned to our compartment after lunch, we were joined by two ladies and a girl. The girl, a blonde, had an irritating habit of constantly adjusting her hair and blouse. Fortunately they did not stay too long with us but got off at one of the stops. The scenery was disappointing for most of the time because of the dull light outside. We passed mountains, fields, forests, and endless ugly villages and towns. There were electric pylons and cables everywhere, as well as ugly factories dotted about the countryside.

We finally returned to Prague at 5.30 p.m. and stepped off the train. Although we had had an enjoyable time in Slovakia, we were glad to be back.