



Dear Friends,

Saturday, April 3, 2010

Happy Easter to you all. It is the day before Easter in Bratislava and we are getting ready by buying spring flowers for the altar, cooking dishes for the Easter brunch after our worship service tomorrow, and preparing the Paschal Candle. It is a sunny day with a high in the 60's. Tomorrow is supposed to be similar, but perhaps with a few more clouds.

Since we wrote to you at Christmas time there have been several highlights for our family. One was a winter with lots of snow. The previous two winters we had almost no snow in Bratislava. This year we had several inches that stayed for quite some time. There was also snow in the mountains in the Eastern Alps across the border in Austria so, as in the previous two years, we took our youth group on a ski trip at the end of January. We had 11 youth and 6 adult chaperones and at the end of the day there were no skiing accidents, although we nearly missed the train back to Bratislava...arriving at the depot only 90 seconds before the train departed.

February's highlight was watching Slovakia's hockey team play in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. To the surprise of many, they ended up as one of the final four teams competing. Sadly, they lost the game for the bronze medal to Finland. We were hoping for a match-up between Slovakia and the U.S. It would have been difficult to know whom to cheer for, however.

In March there were numerous fundraisers around Bratislava to support the victims of the earthquake in Haiti. The devastation and lost lives made a big impression on people here. The two largest international schools in the city held a joint benefit concert called "Hearts for Haiti." The U.S. Embassy and the American Chamber of Commerce organized a fundraising reception and silent auction. And our oldest son, Vitali, organized a house concert to raise money for victims of the earthquake in Haiti. He, his brother Alexei, and other classmates performed on violin, trumpet, piano and Scottish bagpipes.

Also in March, our congregation celebrated St. Patrick's Day. We were fortunate to have the participation of a group of pipers and drummers from Limerick, Ireland. Perhaps the most meaningful moment of all was when they played *Amazing Grace* on the bagpipes, while the congregation sang.

The Curragour Pipers in the sanctuary playing Highland Cathedral



The Pipers and Drummers from Limerick in the street outside church.



Tuesday, April 6, 2010

One last note on events this spring in Slovakia. Here is today's headline news:

## Russian President Medvedev visits Slovakia today

6 Apr 2010 Flash News

*Russian President Medvedev will arrive today for a two-day official visit to Slovakia on Tuesday and Wednesday, April 6 and 7, Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič's office informed the TASR newswire on April 5. During Medvedev's visit, the two heads of*

*state are slated to sign a joint declaration, marking the 65th anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe and Slovak-Russian friendly relations. From Bratislava, he will leave for the Czech Republic for a summit with U.S. President Barack Obama, at which they will sign a new treaty on the reduction of strategic nuclear arsenals of their countries.*

Best wishes for a blessed spring.....

Janna

Easter Monday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Most Europeans celebrate Easter Monday as a holiday. It is no exception, here in Slovakia. Today we are enjoying a quiet, rainy day after a beautiful Easter weekend. Our worship service at the Little Church in Bratislava was filled with music, and was followed by an international Easter brunch.

Although the Bratislava International Church has been serving the expatriate community in Slovakia for over 15 years, there was little "formal structure." The congregation has always been transient. The financial crisis has forced the congregation to look at its own future. So this past January, we appointed the first Church Council and approved a set of By-Laws for the congregation. We also began to look at our various missions and ministries. It has been a good challenge because it is forcing us all to look at such important issues as hospitality, stewardship and social ministry. For years, the congregation worked in the refugee camps, and many of our long time members were former political refugees. Today, we are looking at new possibilities for ministries. We have been working together with the American Embassy to provide English language teachers to a Roma (Gypsy) camp. We have also visited a homeless shelter run by the DePaul Society that serves over 180 clients a night to discuss providing financial support and volunteers. This renewed sense of outreach has been important to the congregation.

Pastoral ministry at the Bratislava International Church, however, has limited my travels this year. I was present for the consecration of the Presiding Bishop in Warsaw, Poland, the installation of the Pastor of the International Church in Copenhagen, and the welcoming service for a new ELCA Representative in Wittenberg, Germany. I have also visited the ELCA pastors and lay volunteers across Europe, especially the teachers working in the Lutheran high schools in Slovakia and Poland. I continue to receive requests from new schools in the region who would like ELCA volunteers to begin work in their schools.

In March, I had the opportunity to travel with the Lower Michigan Synod ELCA Synod in Latvia. It was good to see old friends in Riga. This is where Janna and I began our international ministry 18 years ago. But it was also painful to see

firsthand the fallout of the world economic crises. Latvia is the hardest hit European country with over 20 percent unemployment. Storefronts are boarded up, and newly built apartment buildings have been left empty. Even the church has been hit. In a television report broadcast my first evening in Riga, it was announced that the Latvian Lutheran Church was bankrupt and would begin to lay off its church workers. Pastors would lose half of their financial support in April, and the rest of their support in September. The Lutheran Church in Latvia may still be one of the largest land owners, but at the present time, there are no buyers. For many Latvians, there is a deep sense of frustration and hopelessness. The people frequently make comparisons and lament that there was more security in the years of the Soviet Union.

The financial crisis continues to plague much of Central Europe. The Slovaks believe that their entrance into the Euro zone a year ago has given the nation an advantage over their neighbors. Unemployment is lower here than in other countries, but there is still high unemployment among university graduates. The Slovak car industry with its production of Fords, Kia and Hyundai, has also been affected by the crisis. But there are glimmers of economic recovery and resilience. This past weekend, a beautiful new shopping mall named Eurovea opened along the banks of the Danube River. It offers views onto the river that were missing in other places in the city. I don't need the shopping, but I love to look out on the waters of the Danube.

We are thankful again this Easter for your continued prayers and financial support. We recognize that these are difficult financial times, but your gifts continue to nurture relationships and possibilities for mission throughout Europe.

Christ has risen...he has risen indeed

*Arden*

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