

## Pete Semanick's Trip to Slovakia

### Part I

by, Pete Semanick

My thanks to members of Adult 8 Sunday School Department, Del Norte Baptist Church for their many prayers before and during my journey. With your prayers I was able to accomplish all my goals and to have a wonderful visit to the home of my ancestors.

I left home at 02:30 on 29 July 1998, going to the greyhound bus station for a 03:15 department to El Paso, Texas. From there I caught the Amtrak train to Gulf Port, Mississippi. I met with a retired air force friend whom I had not seen since 1950. We were stationed at a small air force base called Tulin Flugplatz near Vienna, Austria. I then rode greyhound buses to Charleston, South Carolina where I was able to arrange for a free airplane flight with the air force to Ramstein, Germany.

I spent a few days in Germany visiting Trier, the oldest Roman City in Europe. Brenda and Tamera, our daughters, were born there and I wanted to visit their relatives. I was able to find the home of their birth parents but found that both had died prior to my visit. The mother had died from a heart attack on 14 May 1998. I was able to visit in the homes of the girl's older brother and older sister. Neither spoke English so I had to speak in German and had a difficult time telling them about their sisters here in the states. We exchanged addresses and E-mail for the computer and the girls will stay in contact with their relatives in Germany.

I then started my journey toward Slovakia. The bus and train systems in Europe are fabulous for traveling. Always on time and so easy to make transfers from bus to bus or train to train. I had very little difficulty in planning and scheduling my itinerary. The countryside throughout Europe is absolutely wonderful. Sights to observe are; flowing fields of crops, forests, mountains, rivers, lakes and homes with beautiful flowers and vegetation. Most railroad lines by-pass the towns and cities therefore one sees the full beauty of the landscape.

I went from the area of Frankfurt Germany, to Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, Heidelberg, Landau, Ulm, Munich and across the border into Austria. Starting at Salzburg, Wels, Linz, into Vienna. My visit in Vienna allowed me to see famous sights such as St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna Woods and the Prater (an amusement center) where the largest ferris wheel in the world is located. It is 195 feet high with cars the size of railroad cars. It towers over the city where one can see for miles and miles. I was able to visit the Tulln Flugplatz, where I was stationed from 1949 to 1952. My English-speaking guide gave me a two-hour tour of the base, which is now under the control of the Austrian Air Force. My escort for that day was a 78 year old lady who had worked for the US Air Force in 1945- 1955 at Tulin and then for the US Embassy in Vienna until she retired. She spoke good English and was so eager to help me. I saw my old fire station, the dining hall where I had my meals, the dormitory where I lived, the chapel where I attended church, the flight line where I worked. What great memories I relived during that day.

The following day I caught a train from Vienna to Bratislava Slovakia. Leaving Bratislava for the far eastern part of Slovakia was a thrill since I knew that my forefathers must have traveled this same route on their way to immigrate to the USA. The farther I went I noticed less industry and more farming. This part of Slovakia is "real" country with fewer large towns and more small rural villages. Farm lands everywhere. People were in the fields, harvesting their crops the same way harvesting was done in the 1800's. Hand scythes, wooden rakes, horse drawn wagons with young and old, men and women working the harvest. I saw no modern machinery working the fields. Rivers and lakes were in great numbers and I so wanted to fish in each of them. In many places I observed people fishing from the shore as well as in small boats.

On 10 August I arrived at the city of Levoca and stayed in a beautiful hotel. This was only 20 miles from the village where my grand parents had lived and I was anxious to arrange for an English-speaking guide to take me to the church archives and start my search for relatives. I made arrangements with Vladimer Flak who took me by car to a small town where the archives were kept for my village. Luck was with me during my search for relatives. We visited one archive that had closed the day before as the attendant took two weeks vacation. That didn't discourage Vlado, he said that we would visit another archive for a local area, which had data on Olsov. We arrived at the office and a young girl greeted us with a big smile. Vlado told her that we needed information on Baltasar and Anna Semancik who had been residents of Olsov in 1930. She went to the filing cabinet and brought out a ledger and opened to the "5" page and sure enough, there it was, an entry for their wedding, showing not only their names but also an entry showing the names of their parents with entries showing their death dates.

After we had been there for about fifteen minutes, another lady came in and the young girl told her why we were there. The lady went to her desk and picked up a sheet of paper with the same information that Vlado and the young girl had looked up. She stated that someone about three weeks before had called her and asked that the information be researched because an American would be visiting seeking information on the Semancik family from Olsov. Needless to say Vlado and I were quite shocked at this statement.

The older lady typed up an official copy of the marriage certificate and also copies of the death certificates. Vlado had his stamps affixed to the certificates and then they were authenticated. We thanked them and left for Olsov, which was only two miles away. When we arrived on the outskirts of Olsov I started taking pictures, which included a group of gypsies walking along the road, the Village of Olsov road sign, the village in the distance, the narrow one lane road, farmers in the fields, children playing along the road within the village, two farmers returning home from the fields, various houses, the cemetery (a tombstone showing the Semancikova and Semancik names), the small stream running through the village, the church, and last, a lady rinsing her clothes in the stream.

Vlado in the meantime had parked and turned me loose while he visited the home of the mayor. The mayor was working in the back yard and told Vlado that he would have to clean up before coming to the mayor's office. After about fifteen minutes, the mayor came to the office where we were waiting in the company of the secretary. We were introduced and Vlado explained why we were there. We were offered drinks but accepted mineral water rather than alcohol, since neither Vlado nor I drank alcohol. I had several documents with me, such as copies of the 1930 passports of great-uncle Balthasar and great-aunt Anna. I even had copies of 5 pictures of each of them and their three children.

When the mayor saw the passport of great-aunt Anna, his eyes lit up like fire. He said to Vlado in an excited voice, "Butcko, Butcko" and pointed to himself. It seems his name and my great-aunts maiden name were the same. After reading some of the other information on documents of a land sale which great-aunt Anna had made of land in Olsov to a family in Ohio, it was determined that the mayor and I were indeed related through Anna. His grandfather was Anna's brother. What a joy to find out that the first person we met in the village was my relative.

Vlado explained that something unusual had happened when we were visiting the archive in the other village. He told him about the lady having the paper with the information on Baltasar and Anna and the information on the deaths of their parents. The mayor stated that he had called the lady at the archives because he had received a call from a man in a nearby village called Hertig stating that an American would be visiting soon and would be seeking information on the Semancik family from Olsov.

It so happened that I have been writing to Anton Semanik in Wisconsin for over two years. Even though we are not related, he has always been very helpful to me in my research endeavors. It seems he has a cousin in Hertig and the cousin had called the mayor telling him about my upcoming visit to Slovakia. In fact I had received a letter from Anton about two months before my trip and he had provided me with the name of the mayor. I had a

copy of the letter with me but had completely forgotten about it. I went through my briefcase and found the letter and showed it to Vlado who told the mayor about it. We all had a big laugh about the coincidence.

Shortly thereafter, we went up the street to a house of an 87-year-old man who did odds and ends for a lady in the village named Semancikova. It seems that this man remembered my great-uncle and aunt, as well as the three children, leaving Olsov for America in 1930. He looked at the passport pictures and with a big smile said, "Cyril, Cyril", pointing to the picture of Cyril. The youngest son, Cyril Semancik and this man (who was 10 years old at that time) were playmates back in the 30's. He said that he remembers when the family left for America and that he was very sad at the time since he would be losing his playmate.

Later in the day, the mayor took us to the home of his brother and tried to find some pictures of the folks from the days prior to 1930. We went through stacks of pictures but none had any names and none looked like any of the family. We chatted awhile and the mayor said we should visit the home of his sister in a nearby village and maybe she would have some pictures. We did this but the sister stated that she didn't have any pictures from that time. Since it was getting late and Vlado and I had to go the Spisska Nova yes for the night, we said our farewells with reluctance.

So you can see my search for relatives was a success. Like so many of those before me, I wished I had more time for further searching but I had to get on my way to return home. Perhaps one of these days I'll return.

Prior to our leaving the mayor's office, I was given several copies of a plastic card showing the coat-of arms and flag of the village, also several copies of the mayor's plastic business card. He also gave me a copy of the history of the village of Olsov, which is in Slovak.

I am sharing all this information, pictures and copies of the plastic cards with the many newly found relatives I have here in the states. In fact two of these are direct descendants, son and grandson of Baltasar and Anna. They can't believe that I had such good luck in finding the village and relatives still residing there.

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## **Pete Semanick's Trip to Slovakia**

### **Part II**

**by, Pete Semanick**

I should at this time pass on to you my thoughts about the Greyhound Bus transit system. I will never again take a trip by Greyhound bus. The deplorable time I spent aboard several buses cannot be fully explained without being "Un-Christian". Our bus system in the United States is undoubtedly the worst in the world. I say this with deep regret, but believe me I have experienced this first hand. Bus stations are located in the poorest part of towns and very few facilities are habitable for human beings. Bus attendants are rude, inconsiderate and do not make an attempt to be helpful to customers.

In contrast, the buses in Europe are a great means of transportation. Routes are established to make it convenient and easy for customers. Drivers are very considerate and will go out of their way to be helpful. Most buses I traveled on were very comfortable and very inexpensive. People were very friendly, courteous and were eager to try out their school learned English. The trains were even better as a means of transportation. The majority of buses and trains were always on schedule.

On my first trip on a train in Germany, I met a young lady who had been an exchange student from Luxembourg to the USA and had studied in Louisiana for two years. She was so eager to hear about the news from the states. We talked about two hours and exchanged computer E-mail addresses.

The next day I met an exchange student from Germany who had been in Riverside, California. Again he was very eager to hear about the news in the USA.

On the train from Salzburg to Vienna, I talked to a young man who was a representative for Zurich Insurance and lived in Vienna. I explained that I would be meeting an elderly lady in Vienna who would be taking me to my old air base outside of the city. I told him that I was a couple of days ahead of my schedule and she would be surprised when I showed up early. He took out his cell phone and asked if I had her telephone number. I gave it to him and he dialed the number and I was able to talk to Frau Scheed telling her that I was about two hours away from Vienna. What a gesture of good will from this man who was just eager to help someone.

While waiting for a train at Bratislava, capital of Slovak Republic, I spoke to an 11 year old girl who was with her grand parents and parents. She wore braces and had a big smile. I asked her if she spoke English and she nodded "Yes". I spoke to her slowly, explaining why I was there. She translated everything to her parents and they said I was the first American they ever talked to. She was so eager to speak English and very happy that my journey had brought me to her country. I showed them some of my papers, which were in the Slovak language, and they were so thrilled to read the papers. They even told me they knew where the village was that I would be visiting. Since it only had 400 population I was surprised that they knew where it was.

Later, on the train, I was in a compartment with 5 other people. Two boys, 11 and 12 years old, who were with their grandmother and mother. I asked the older boy if he spoke English and he nodded "Yes", then I asked the other boy and he said "No". I asked if he spoke German and he nodded "Yes". I then started talking to each of them very slowly. They were a little shy at first but eventually opened up and we spoke about their country and America. They each had taken the language of their choice in school and were very excited to speak for the first time to an American. I had kept a hand written journal of my travels since leaving the states, so I asked the boy who spoke English if he would like to read my journal. He smiled as if I had given him a lot of money. I gave him the book and he would read a little and smile, then he would translate what he had read to the others. This went on for over an hour. When he finished reading the book, I gave each of the boys a quarter, a nickel and a penny. I explained what the front and back of each coin meant. They were very thrilled to receive the money and I told them to use the coins as "show and tell" in their schoolwork. I took their pictures and got their addresses, telling them that I would write and send them a copy of the pictures.

At the train station in Levoca, I put my 2 suitcases on a bench near the rest room. I noticed two policemen standing in the lobby so I felt safe in leaving my bags there. I went into the rest room and returned to the lobby. One of the policemen hand-motioned to me that leaving my bags was not good and someone could run off with them. He shook his head several times and I smiled and showed that I understood.

Another time I was at a train station waiting for a train to "Presov", when a teenage boy and girl approached me and asked if I needed help in finding my train. They spoke good English and I saw they were eager to try out their second language. I got on the train with them and we sat in the same compartment. We talked about my journey and about America. The boy was from the Netherlands and the girl was from Presov. He was visiting with her family. When we arrived at the station they made sure I found my way to the outside of the station and directed me to the town center. We said good-bye and about an hour later while I walking in the town, I was approached by the couple and her father was with them. She had a big smile and introduced me to her father. She translated for me and I told him of my journey. He was really pleased to meet an American.

Once, while on the train from Sabinov to Kysak, I met a man on the train who looked just like one of my deceased uncles. I spoke to him in English and he said he was from Kysak and would help me get off at the correct station. We talked awhile and he was very eager to speak English. He explained how hard it was, while under the Communist rule. After walking in the town sightseeing, I returned to the train station for my return trip to Levoca. The stationmaster and his friend spoke to me in broken English and directed me to the correct gate and track. They were very impressed with my cowboy hat so I placed it on the stationmaster's head and took his picture. They were thrilled at this gesture. A couple of days later, I saw this same man with his two

children at another train station. He was going on vacation and stopped to speak to me. I put my hat on the head of his little boy and took their picture. He gave me his address and I promised to send him the pictures I had taken. I also gave each of the children some loose Slovak coins I had left over so they could have some spending money. While there, I met an 87-year-old woman who spoke 7 languages. She was waiting on the same train I was to take. I asked her if she spoke English and she said yes, but since she had not spoken English since 1943 she would have difficulty. I spoke slowly to her and after about 30 minutes she was almost fluent with her English. She said that I was the first American she had ever spoken to. She gave me her address and I took her picture and promised to send her a letter and the picture. While we were talking, a young man sat down and started speaking in English with us. He had been an exchange student the year before in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He had been able to see a Green Bay football game while in America. We boarded the train together and talked for two hours. When we arrived at Bratislava he made sure I was able to get the correct train to Vienna and exchange my money from Slovak to Austrian.

I found that throughout my travel most people were very friendly and were very eager to speak to an American visitor in their country. I felt safe at all times and never worried about any type of danger. Not once did I observe unruly people such as the "skin-heads" you read about in America, England or Germany. It was a very pleasant trip in all respects.

Living standards in the eastern part of Slovakia seemed to be good. I saw no poorly dressed people, nor did I see any beggars. The gypsies were in most villages and the average Slovak did not associate with them. The gypsies usually walked in groups of four or five and talked very loudly. Their clothing was very colorful, with bright red, yellow and orange as well as large flower and other eye-catching designs. Even the gypsies were well dressed. In the smaller villages I observed many older women and men in their old fashioned clothes. Men wore coats with ties and women wore long flowing skirts covered with aprons, full sleeved blouses, and with headscarves. Most of their clothing was dark in color and not flashy.

On Sundays, I noticed that many of the sidewalk vendors were selling all types of flowers. The flowers there are the same types that we have in America. The people love their flowers. Many people bought flowers to take to the cemetery. I visited several cemeteries and each had beautiful headstones on the gravesites with flowers, candles and pictures on most graves. The people take great pride in respecting their dead relatives. I visited one graveyard that was dated 1713 - 1837 and even though it was closed to the public, it was still well maintained.

Another high light of my journey was going to a village called Torysa. I was fortunate to attend a Greek Orthodox Church service and also to see a performance of Slovak musicians, singers and dancers. What a thrill seeing and hearing something like this from the Old World. Both activities lasted three and one half-hours.