

July 1999

Cheryll and I were standing in the main square in Krakow, Poland. There was a group of three street musicians playing a decent rendition of "Proud Mary", albeit with Polish accents. There was a crowd of around a hundred onlookers enjoying the show and dropping coins in their hat. A young 30ish man and woman, perhaps brother and sister, with accordions slung across their backs joined the crowd to see what all the excitement was about. After watching for a few minutes, they exchanged a look that transcended all languages. The look said; "What's wrong? We played our accordions in the square all day and we never attracted a crowd this big. We played well, just the way dad taught us. But these guys are playing American music and everybody wants to hear. Were we led down the wrong path? What should we do?" It was sad to watch them as they walked away looking dejected. For Cheryll and I this incident came to symbolize the changes we observed in Eastern Europe as the former Communist nations struggle to embrace capitalism and enjoy a standard of living more consistent with the rest of Europe.

Cheryll and I left Detroit on Friday, June 25th and flew non-stop to Frankfurt, Germany. There we rented a car and spent the weekend driving along the Rhine River. I got excited when the rental car lady asked if I would like to try a Mercedes A-Class instead of the mid-size car that I had reserved. My enthusiasm quickly waned when I learned that the new Mercedes A-class is basically an econo-box with an under-powered four-cylinder engine which assured that I would never fully appreciate the autobahn and its lack of speed limits on the rural sections. The drive along the river was gorgeous. There was a castle on a bluff around every turn as the river winds from Mainz to Koblenz. We had lunch at a restaurant overlooking the river while hang gliders descended into the valley below and spent the night in a small hotel in a village nearby. On Sunday we explored the cities of Mainz, Wiesbaden and Frankfurt and then returned the rental car before joining the rest of our tour group.

We were pleasantly surprised to find out that there were only 22 people in our group. Globus tours normally operate with around 40. Apparently, with the war in Serbia, Eastern Europe was not high on this year's travel list and tourism was light along our entire route. The group departed on Monday for Berlin. When we crossed into what was once East Germany, the road quality degraded to the point of making Michigan roads look good. Before long, we encountered the first of endless construction zones. Following reunification ten years ago, the Germans are pouring money into Eastern Germany to take care of fifty years of Soviet style maintenance. We stayed in downtown East Berlin and enjoyed the next day of sightseeing. This city has had an incredible experience over the last 60 years. It felt weird to stand in the square where Hitler once rallied the citizens, to see the remaining section of the Berlin Wall and to walk through cathedrals and museums once leveled by Allied bombers.

The next day several large storks greeted us from their giant nests high on top of the concrete power poles as we crossed the border into Poland and the prices took a dive. GM has a new plant where the workers are paid \$310/month. We stayed at the Holiday Inn in downtown Warsaw. Everything was incredibly cheap. The Poles are really struggling with capitalism. Until ten years ago, the only second language taught in the public schools was Russian. Everybody was assured a job and initiative and entrepreneurship were discouraged. Now the people have to learn marketing skills, how to take calculated risks and other business skills that were unnecessary under Communism. This is going to take some time. This theme was repeated again and again in Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Cheryll and I enjoyed a recital of the music of Poland's favorite composer, Frederic Chopin. The next day we stopped at the sites of the former concentration camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau. There is a rather somber museum of artifacts from the holocaust. Our hotel that evening was across the river from the former Jewish Ghetto in Krakow where much of "Schindler's List" was filmed. Krakow was our favorite city. The old town has been beautifully restored. The castle sits high on a hill overlooking the river. We also rode a bus to the nearby town of Wielezcka and toured a salt mine that has been in operation for hundreds of years.

We drove through the hills of Slovakia into Hungary, and on into Budapest on the Danube river. Our hotel was a 35-cent subway ride from the beautiful city center. It was the Fourth of July and we took an evening cruise on the Danube. As the boat was docking we were treated to a fireworks display over the river sponsored by some American expatriates. The Hungarians have a fashion sense which is, to say the least, rather immodest. Hundreds of young Hungarian ladies were sighted wearing six-inch heels and translucent dresses which left no doubt as to what little they wore underneath. In the country outside Budapest we visited a Hungarian horse farm. We were greeted with a "moonshine" toast and a fine Hungarian delicacy; bread spread with lard and sprinkled with onions and paprika. The cowboys did a show which largely consisted of balancing on their horses in various positions while the horses stood still in spite of the fact that the cowboys were cracking their whips inches from the horse's faces. We were given a nice lunch of Hungarian goulash while a band played local tunes

We spent the next two nights in Vienna and when we crossed the border into Austria the prices and standard of living immediately increased. We explored the city, had lunch at an overlook of the city, and attended a Mozart and Strauss concert at the Schonbrunner Palace after strolling the amazing gardens.

The next stop was back in the former Eastern Bloc in Prague, in the Czech Republic. Prague was a beautiful city, having avoided destruction during WWII, but we found it over-touristed compared to our other stops. In the evening we attended a unique Czech performance; black light theater. The art form is

difficult to describe, but the special effects were great and I was left asking, "How'd they do that?" again and again.

We returned to Frankfurt via the medieval walled town of Rothenburg which was also crawling with tourists. It was a fascinating tour, and we enjoyed it thoroughly. The contrast between the former Soviet countries and Germany and Austria is stark. I can only hope that the struggling accordion players in Krakow will come to grips with the changes and adapt to a new economy; a new time; a new reality.

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