

# September's Slovakia Heritage Tour Reconnects Families

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Finding lost relatives in Slovakia often depends on careful genealogical research as well as a hardy dose of good luck.

When Ken Petrus signed on to this past September's Slovakia Heritage Tour in July he knew there wasn't much time for a full search for his mother's and father's families. Preliminary research failed to show up any living relatives in Smilno, a small town near Bardejov, that his father, Joseph, left in 1921 to work in the mines and steel mills of western Pennsylvania. Joseph was the only one of six brothers who emigrated to the United States. One of Joseph's two sisters, Susan (Baran), emigrated later. His family had lost contact with the Smilno family when Ken's mother died in 2000 soon followed by the death of his aunt.

Ken started the Slovakia Heritage Tour knowing that he would visit his cousins, the children of his mother's sisters, in Hazin (Zemplin region) whom the researcher had located. He had little hope of finding his father's relatives but planned to take a couple of hours to visit the village, church and cemetery, and pay his respects to the family graves.

This is where luck intervened. Slovakia Heritage Tours arranged for Ken and his wife Sue to have a driver/translator take him to Smilno while the rest of the group visited Bardejov sites. I volunteered to go along so I was there as the late afternoon sun sent a golden light across the valley to the cemetery hill and a small miracle happened.

Ken and Sue quickly found the graves of Ken's great-grandfather, grandparents, and two uncles. All of this would have been enough for Ken but as the afternoon light faded, our good fortune brightened. We hadn't figured in our visit that this was September 15, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, a Slovak national holiday.

In the late afternoon, people began streaming into the cemetery returning from a pilgrimage to a shrine in the forest outside of town. Pretty soon we were surrounded by villagers curious about these strangers in the cemetery. Instantly we were engaged in lively conversations: one person was related to the Quartek family who Ken knew from his Pennsylvania childhood; another knew his Petrus family well. Pretty soon someone was offering to run back to the village and return with his car to lead Ken to the home of one of his first cousins. Within twenty minutes Ken was embracing Helena Petrusova, his first cousin, and the tears were flowing.

Soon, we were sitting in Helena's living room pouring over family photos. Even though the visit was completely unannounced, Slovakia hospitality dictates that within minutes we were sipping coffee, toasting with "palenky", and munching on baked goods. Before we returned to Bardejov that evening, Helena led Ken and Sue to the homes of two more cousins.

## CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS AS WELL AS FAMILY

While reconnecting with ancestral villages and family is an important part of returning to Slovakia, a heritage tour is also a chance to reconnect with the fond memories we have of growing up with our Slovak grandparents and families: the food, the music, the language, the folk arts, as well as the traditional customs.

Since music and food have the power to instantly transport us back to early memories, this September, our Slovakia Heritage Tour added a few musical events, encouraged by one of our travelers, Dale Olsen, a Florida ethnomusicologist. The haunting music of the fujara as Dale joined noted fujara artist Dušan Holik carried us back to the shepherds and mountain people who developed the fujara. (See the Slovakia Heritage Tour Facebook page for a video: <https://www.facebook.com/Slovakia-Heritage-Tour-174098635947952/?fref=ts>) After a visit to the spectacular Orava Castle, a family from Orava entertained us with lively dance music from the region. In the Šariš region, we explored traditional songs in the village of Tichý Potok, as well as, in Sabinov, Czardas and polka dance music that we remembered from the Slovak weddings of our childhood.

Although Slovakia today has a wide range of fine restaurants, meal time often took us back to our grandmothers' kitchens with a chance to order: pirohgi; halušky; chicken or garlic soup; palacinky, and other favorite foods. While in the mountains, we all joined in for a cooking class to prepare Bryndzove Halušky.

And a heritage tour is also a good way to better understand the historical and political struggles and events that drove our grandparents to leave the beautiful Slovak countryside, the lives they knew and their beloved families for uncertain futures in the United States. As we traveled in the bus or walked the country and village paths, we tried to make sense of the



A visit to Košice's St. Elizabeth's Cathedral was one highlight of the 2015 Slovak Heritage Tour.

difficult and complicated history of the region that led so many of our ancestors to leave their families and country: the 800 years of Hungarian repression; the two World Wars; as well as the Soviet Era which held our Slovak relatives captive in their own country for almost 45 years. We also reflected on how far Slovakia has come today as an independent country, and member of the European Union.

Most travelers on our September tour, returned to the States, making plans to return to Slovakia to visit their newly discovered relatives and enjoy their beautiful native homeland.

## 6th Slovakia Heritage Tour September 9-18, 2016

Our 6th Slovakia Heritage small group tour will be September 9-18, 2016 next year. We can also arrange private family tours for small groups at any time during the year. For more information visit the Slovakia Heritage Tours web site: [www.slovakiaheritage.com](http://www.slovakiaheritage.com) or contact Judy Northup-Bennett directly at 978-544-5144 or [slovakiaheritagetours@gmail.com](mailto:slovakiaheritagetours@gmail.com).



Ken Olsen, of Tallahassee, FL, plays a duet with noted fujara player Dušan Holik.

Starting off on a small hike through the charming, old mining town, Spania Dolina.



The 2015 Slovakia Heritage Tour group poses with the Oravan musical family.



Dolores and Andy Mirolsky learning how to make halušky.