

Dear Friends and Family,

After last year's focus on islands and seas of Europe my recent travels have turned inland – to a capital (Berlin) I had never visited and two landlocked countries – Kosovo and Slovakia. Although probably not technically considered land locked as they do have borders with navigable rivers.

Berlin was the first visit and I had the great good fortune to stay in a friend's apartment in the Schoneberg neighborhood which is lively with excellent restaurants, all forms of public transport and a lovely mix of buildings pre-dating WWII and new ones filling in the holes left from Allied bombing. Berlin is very different from Paris with very wide streets! The John F Kennedy plaza on the site of his famous Ich bin ein Berliner speech is quite close to where we were staying, but is under reconstruction.



Although Berlin is by many considered the current European capital of creativity – especially music, performing and visual art, I didn't spend enough time to delve into these aspects. Perhaps another time.

I was especially interested in the built environment difference post WWII between East Berlin (the Stalin controlled sector) and the British/American/French sectors of "West" Berlin.

The impressive 2.3 km long Karl Marx Allee (previously Stalinstrasse) was built rapidly in Soviet style beginning in 1951. A plan was drawn up and the future street divided into zones with various architectural teams invited to submit their proposals for the sections. Thus you find different architectural styles as you move from sector to sector but clearly within a prescribed envelope (i.e. height and setbacks). The architects were sent out to visit the Russian cities of



Moscow, Stalingrad, Kiev and Leningrad so that the design objectives would be clear to them. The buildings were primarily residential with commercial uses at the ground floor as part of the plan to provide a home for every East German resident.

As the project continued, by 1955, “panel” (precast concrete construction) was used in order to meet timetables and save costs. This became common and I encountered it again outside Bratislava in Slovakia where perhaps the largest “panel” city of the former eastern bloc countries exists.



A huge amount of effort was initially required to clear the rubble of bombing which was mostly accomplished by women (75% of the population at the time) called trummerfrau (rubble women) who volunteered for the work in addition to their other work. Posters advertised the opportunity/need for people to help the post-war rebuilding effort and 45,000 people contributed their efforts as volunteers.



Meantime the Wall was built with progressively stronger re-enforcements against departure. I had forgotten the siege that Stalin imposed upon West Berlin when he blocked all supply routes into this “island” in East Germany in 1948. The resulting airlift delivered 23 million tons of food, fuel and medical supplies into two newly-built airports in the U.S. and French sectors to keep the population alive during the course of a year.

The very moving Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is made up of 2711 concrete slabs which when viewed from the air form a maze. Nearby is the bunker (now filled in) 25 feet below ground in which Hitler spent the last four months of his life before committing suicide. You also find plaques set in the sidewalks outside residences bringing the reality of the holocaust down to individual people.



Berlin is essentially built on a swamp which the river Spree's name means, derived from the Slavs' word (they were the first settlers here). So throughout its history dealing with construction in such conditions has been a major issue and they imported Dutch engineers who were highly experienced with high water tables. Today with all the rebuilding in Berlin you see these elevated pipes (sometimes light blue or pale pink) which are transporting pumped water from construction sites to the canals and river. There are construction cranes everywhere and people ask "When will Berlin be finished?" and the answer is "Never".



Berlin has a nice series of waterways so it was natural to do a boat tour. This allowed me to see the new government complex with its handsome modern architecture built on a bend in the river Spree with pedestrian overpasses connecting the various administrative and legislative



functions. The nearby cultural center, nicknamed the "pregnant oyster", was also impressive as



well as the main train station Haupt Bahnhof. Berlin is not without homeless people.

Another interesting sight was the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church which has partial ruins remaining with fabulous mosaics and a very unusual modern church attached.



A day trip to adjacent Potsdam was worthwhile. This had historically been a military city so a substantial proportion is barracks-style buildings often now converted into chic apartments.



A former palace houses the university. The huge Sanssouci Park is worth wandering. There are lots of lakes and waterways and one of the bridges was the crossing point from East Germany to the American Sector of Berlin. In fact Potsdam is an island. The entire spy apparatus of the GDR (Communist) era was located in a walled off neighborhood and they had not entirely departed until 1995. Gradually, families have returned and reclaimed and rehabbed their houses.

Another neighborhood of interest is Alexandrowka, 12 Russian-style log houses built for Russian soldiers on loan to Prussia, which reminded me of those I saw in Ulan Ude in Siberia. Also the Dutch quarter. King Frederick William I of Prussia had two things in mind when he ordered its development.



Foremost, the Dutch had the reputation of being Europe's most modern and industrious nation of the time, 1730's, and the King wanted to attract Dutch artisans to relocate to Prussia. Although the houses ended up primarily occupied by Prussian and French merchants, each occupant was required to house one of the Potsdam Giant (minimum height 6'2") soldiers in an upstairs room. With more than 150 brick buildings it is the largest neighborhood of its type outside the Netherlands.



This Berlin visit being so brief I didn't visit museums and in fact many are under re-development. I did an organized walking tour my first day and was most touched by the Neue Wache, today the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Victims of War and Tyranny. The neo-classical building, designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, one of the principal architects of Berlin in that era (1818) served as a guard house for the Royal Palace until after WWI and the fall of the German monarchy. It has had two prior incarnations as a Memorial first to the victims of WWI, and then under the Communists in 1960 as Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and

Militarism. Today's interior contains only an enlarged casting of the artist Kathe Kollwitz's sculpture "Mother with Dead Son". So the only exhibition/museum I visited was hers on a street of handsome residences in Charlottenburg near the Savigny plaza. She lost her only son in WWI and her artistic career was primarily spent in crusading against war.



Which is an interesting segue to the next visit which was to Kosovo, the "heart" of the Balkans but so consumed by wars that it was never an independent country until 2008 after nine years as a U.N. protectorate. I had no idea what to expect in this Muslim majority country, the only Balkan country I hadn't visited two years ago on my trip to all the ex-Yugoslavia countries. What I found was a small country, very proud to be independent and eager to modernize. They make a strong statement that although Albanian is the majority language, Serbian second and



both are official languages (signs are in both languages), that they are not Albanians. During the Balkan wars the Serbians wanted to export all Muslim Kosovans to Albania. An example of how strongly they feel was when I was in a taxi. A young street boy came to wash the windows and ask for money when we were stopped at a traffic light. I asked the driver if the boy was Roma (gypsy) and the driver said NO, Albanian, NOT KOSOVAN!

English has been the second language for over 50 years and almost everyone speaks a little. EZ- Jet flies to

Pristina from Berlin.

There isn't a tourism office in Pristina, the capital, but it is a small city and with the basic map my hotel gave me I managed. I only had three days (I wish I had allowed another) so I only visited Pristina and Prizren, where much more history is visible. I would have liked to do another day trip to Peja where, ironically, the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church is located. It is also the name of a very popular, and good, local beer.

A surprise is that Pristina has a very active jazz culture with 4 clubs presenting live music nightly (which I learned about from an article in the EZ Jet in flight magazine)! However, live music didn't start until midnight which was too late for me, but the bar/restaurant Soma Book Station had live music from 9 pm and the night I was there it was excellent rock and roll.



It reminded me a bit of a Russian library themed bar/restaurant in

Chisinau, Moldova. Food and wine are good and inexpensive and Pristina feels very safe and young as there is a large



university.

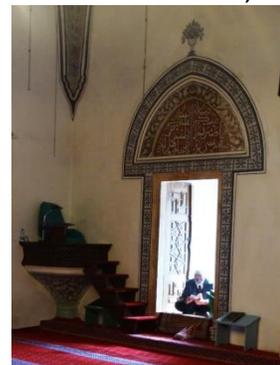
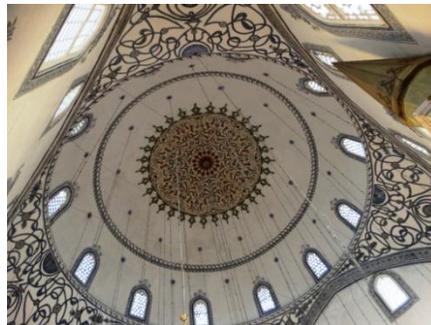
I was also struck by a building that looks like the shopping mall in Yerevan, Armenia which is shaped to look like the holy Mt Arafat, now located in Turkey. In front of the building in Pristina



is an art work called “Newborn” referring to Kosovo as the youngest country in Europe. When originally unveiled it was covered with the flags of all the nations that recognized the country’s independence. Later it was painted pale yellow to allow people to place their thoughts about independence and now serves the same function on a pale blue background.



Although many of the significant attractions in Pristina are undergoing restoration I was able to visit the beautifully restored Sultan Mehmet al-Fatih (Grand) mosque near the clock tower,



both dating from Ottoman times. There is a very good ethnographic museum which displays clothing, musical instruments and other cultural items of the many ethnic groups that constitute this region. The curator gave me a personal tour. Impressive were a skirt that weighs 14 kg, the scarf 12 meters long that men wrapped around a felt hat and also used as a burial shroud, and that this middle class family (the museum is contained in several buildings of a former family compound of the 18th century) had an indoor shower room. Beautifully carved wood decorations were another feature of the house and the jewelry often remarkably resembled that of the Berbers of North Africa. A child’s wheeled seat reminiscent of those we

have today and the variety of traditional women's clothing were also fascinating.



On the walk from my hotel to the center I was in a district of wedding gown shops which had a variety of styles and colors from Western to Turkish.



The

pedestrian street at the heart of Prizren is full of merchants.



President Bill Clinton has both a major avenue named for him (misspelled Klinton) and a statue of him not far from an under-construction (since 2007) cathedral dedicated to Mother Theresa, who was born in nearby Macedonia but isn't substantially honored there.



Prizren is a two hour bus ride from Pristina. There were snow covered mountains on view to the southwest (this is April), the Albanian Alps. Kosova is largely surrounded by mountains which is why historically it had a somewhat separate identity from

its surrounding Balkan neighbors.

The city is overlooked by a high castle dating back to the Byzantine period. A picturesque bridge spans the Bistrica River close to the main square, Shadervan.



The Ottoman heritage is much more evident here with mosques and minarets (of the Turkish type, a pencil point at the top) always evident in the view. Cafes and restaurants abound and there are excellent hiking and park areas close by. The Sinan Pasha Mosque has been restored with funding assistance from Turkey and a church was also under restoration.



My next trip was to Slovakia, the country that used to be part of Czecho-Slovakia (until 1993 when apparently the political leaders decided to turn it into two countries without asking the people). This was only three years after the fall of the Communist government (CzechoSlovakia was never part of the USSR, just in its orbit). It is now part of the EU and the Euro Zone. To get there you fly to Vienna or Prague or Budapest and then take surface transport. I decided to go via Budapest since it is my favorite of those three cities in case I would get stranded. Then I took a train to the southeast corner of Slovakia, Kosice. In total I spent nine days in the country and thoroughly enjoyed the towns, the countryside and the people. One of my objectives was to visit wooden churches which exist for many Christian religions. Because they tend to be in more rural areas it was easier to do with a driver/guide, although they can be reached by local buses if you have the time.

Kosice is a University town with a population of about 250,000 (compared to Bratislava, the capital with 500,000 and a total country of 5.5 million). It has a nice variety of architecture situated around a large central square, which seemed to be the case in almost every town I



visited. What were most interesting were the many small “alleys” radiating off the main streets where one found artisans, restaurants, small offices, pubs and galleries. When traveling in this part of the world one finds both Holocaust memorials and memorials to Russian soldiers who died during WWII.



The Kosice train station is very modern with a grocery store and ticket agents who speak English. By contrast, many of the villages where the churches are located have a population of

about 100 people! And there are loud speakers in each village to make announcements, such as that someone is in town to sell goats, etc.

English language study is now compulsory beginning in the first grade and while education is free through the university level, most classes are still rote learning without analytics, except that the technical schools are very good (according to my guide). Education is mandatory for ten years. Main industries in the country are autos and electronics although wood processing is still very big and I can see many clear cut areas in the forests (the country is about 40% forest by area).

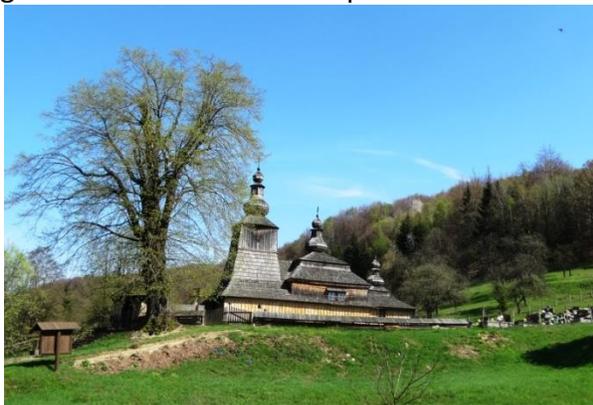
When driving around the countryside one of the most fun sights was an occupied storks' nest in almost every town. However, these nests were not on top of roofs or chimneys, but on purpose built poles! The storks return every year to the same nest and it looks as if they are spaced to provide adequate feeding territory. In one village they had to move the nest but the storks found it and accepted it.



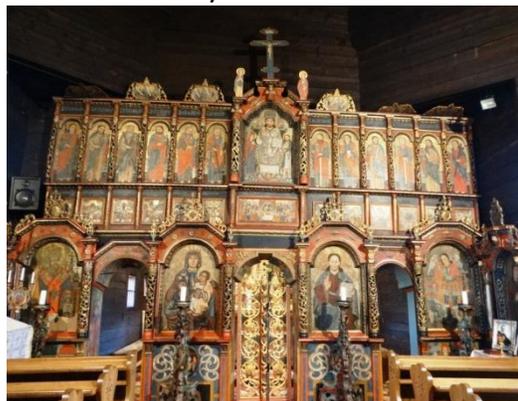
On the first day when we are 3 km from the border with Ukraine we see many fighter planes and border patrols. In the far northeast of the country is Poloniny, a beautiful national forest that is partly also in Poland and Ukraine. As it was early spring it was especially beautiful since each species was just returning to life in a different shade of green, plus flowering ones. And suddenly I realized I was seeing larches in their very pale green that I had last seen in their fall gold in Siberia.



The wooden churches have an interesting history. When the Roman Catholic Hapsburgs came to the throne they forced everyone to convert (the country was previously 90% Protestant). Later on they allowed protestant churches, the so-called “Articles” churches because the rules were: build their churches out of wood (no nails), outside the boundary of the village, no steeple, door can’t face the street, must be completed within one year and the King would choose the site. About 40 wooden churches remain, 8 are UNESCO heritage sites. Some have alternated among being Protestant or Roman Catholic or Greek Catholic. In each village my guide had to call a contact person to come with a key and the people were as interesting as the



churches! Some churches have amazing frescos on the interior, others iconostasis as in the Orthodox church. This was my first exposure to the religion called “Greek Catholic” which reports to the Pope in Rome but has a liturgy (and iconostasis) very “eastern rite” with priests who are married. The iconostasis always has the same levels telling the stories of the Bible since people were Catholic an ethnic group northeastern whose language is Slovakian actively works to linguistic heritage.



illiterate. Many of the Greek communities are comprised of called Rusyns, native to the Carpathian mountains and recognized officially by the government. This ethnic group preserve their cultural and

Reverence for family and ancestors is very evident in the cemeteries and November 1, All Soul's Day is a big holiday when everyone is on the move to their family's graveyard where they do a



major cleaning and have a feast.



We often passed crosses by the side of the road. At first I thought they were marking graves but in fact they are for travelers to have a place to pray. Slovakia is definitely a Christian country with only perhaps 2000 Muslims and about the same number of Jews (since WWII) and are refusing to accept any non-Christian refugees. The level of religiosity contrasts substantially with the Czech Republic next door which is widely perceived to be very non-religious.

Bardejov is a walled town (population 33,000) and here I had the good fortune to chance upon a wedding. Everyone was lining up to congratulate the bride and groom and give them flowers while a traditional band played. Then the band, wedding party and guests marched around the



church and off to their reception. The Basilica of St Giles on the main square dates from the 13th Century and is famous for its eleven "winged" altars dating from the 15th Century.



There is a holocaust memorial to the 3700 Bardejov citizens deported to the death camps from the former enclosed Jewish community built around a synagogue just outside the walls from the second half of the 19th C. There is also a synagogue just off the main square.



Continuing westerly on my counter-clockwise tour of the country I can see the Greater Tatra snow-capped mountains in the distance, part of the Carpathian range. I visited Spiis Castle, first built in the 12th C. It was defensive only with a dry moat. The most recent part was built in the 15th C, and largely burned down after the owners moved to town in the 18th C. It is gradually being restored.





The next village is Zehra with the wooden Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Spirit and amazing frescoes from the 13th to 15thC restored. (I was not supposed to take any

photos).



Interestingly this village is majority gypsy and has a gypsy mayor. The “white” residents petitioned to divide the village into two but failed because no new towns can be created without a population of at least 3500. Gypsy children were scouting the cemetery outside the church.

I spent the night in Levoca, which also retained some of its 13th Century walls and character due to being bypassed by the railroad. The main sight here is St James church with the tallest wooden altar in the world (18.62m). The former city hall, now a museum, has some lovely murals, and a “cage of shame” where women were put for “conduct” offenses.



En route to Banska Stiavnica we drove through forest to Vlkolinec, a traditional town protected by UNESCO since 1993. The 55 log houses used to be all blue but are now multicolored. The oldest structure is a bell tower dating from 1770. There are 19 permanent residents plus others who come in the summer. The town was considerably larger before the Nazi's destroyed a substantial part during their occupation of Slovakia from 1939 to 1945. It is the best preserved example of folk architecture in Slovakia and is set amidst forested hills with terraced farming





fields. Wood carving is a traditional activity here.

We also stopped in Banska Bystrica for lunch with a friend of a friend and saw the Museum of Slovak National Uprising whose design symbolizes a world split in two after WWII. The museum

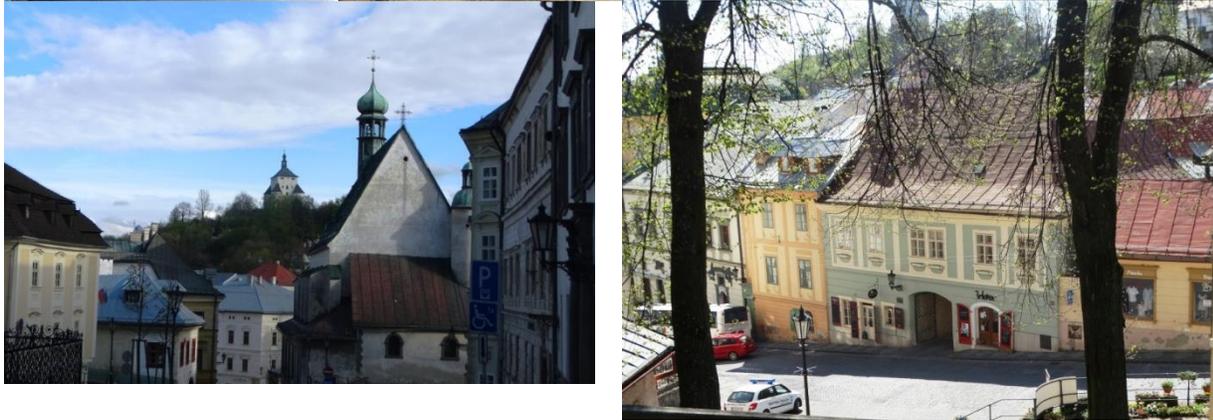


was built in 1969, 25 years after WWII ended.

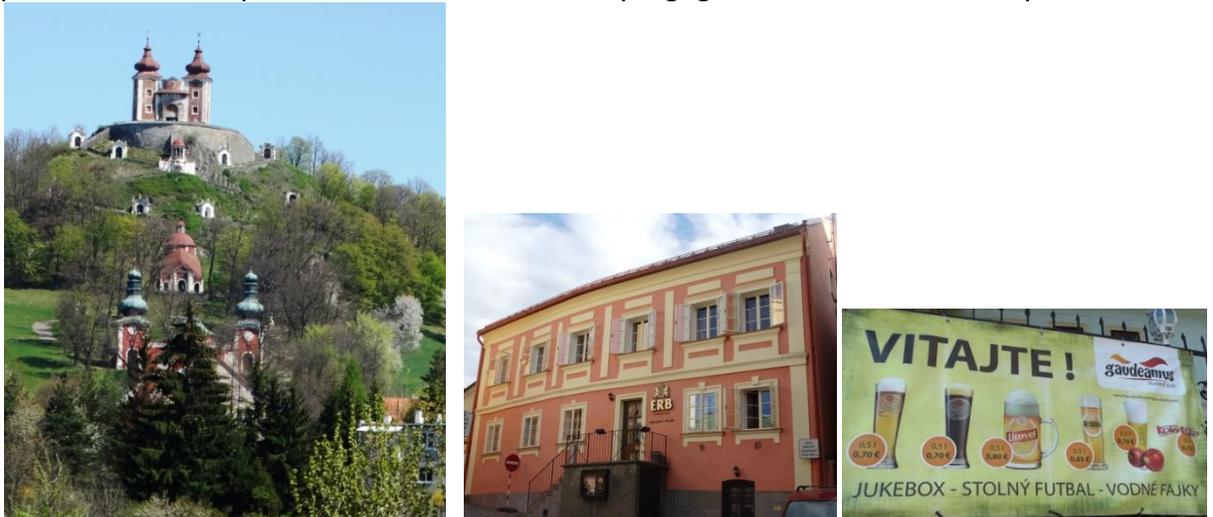
The final church I visited in Hronsek is quite large, seats 1100 people. The site was a wetland and the King hoped the church would sink. But the parishioners planted linden trees which absorb a lot of water so they are as old as the church – 300 years! This Lutheran church is in the shape of a cross and the men sat upstairs – you can see the hooks for their hats. Everything is made of wood even the things that look metal such as the candelabra and “marble” on the altar. They went to Scandinavia to learn from boat builders how to build the vaulted roof.



I spent two nights in hillside Banska Stiavnica, a former silver mining town, oldest in Slovakia dating from the 12th C, which produced wealth for the Austro-Hungarian Empire that built palaces in Vienna and Budapest and financed wars. This was the first place that gunpowder was used to blast the rock for mining and Queen Maria Theresa established the first technical university in the world. I had a good day visiting a mining museum, Old and New Castles, botanical garden dating from 1857, and walking out of town to the Calvary pilgrimage site which is under restoration with its 22 chapels working their way up the hill to three Baroque



churches, originally established by the Jesuits in 1774. ERB is a quality beer made locally, with part of the brewery housed in a former Jewish synagogue. The Jewish cemetery still exists



quite close to the “new” castle. Other than premium brands, such as ERB, beer is quite cheap!



The departure from town by train is also very interesting as this single line railroad, known as the Youth Train, was built by volunteer youth (including some from France and Bulgaria) in the 1950's. It must have been an interesting (dangerous) project, as in many areas of its 20 km length it is literally hanging on the side of a mountain. The scenery was beautiful!



The remaining train connections to Bratislava, the capital where I spent my final two nights were uneventful.

This is a lovely city with a wide variety of cuisines and a very pleasant old town. I enjoyed a variety of mostly humorous sculpture, plus some left over from Communist times.



Since I had done so much touring I decided that my main objective was the (relatively) new modern art museum Danubiana located outside of town on an island in the Danube River. I managed to get quite lost on my bus connections so walked a few kilometers along roads bordered by farmland but the resulting museum experience, including its outdoor sculpture garden, was well worth the time invested.





Finding an early morning breakfast (since I wanted to take an early bus) proved to be a challenge, with a McDonalds on one side of Old Town (near the U.S. Embassy) and a good bakery on the other side of town the only things open before 9 or 10 am!

All in all, an instructive and pleasant interlude in the more easterly parts of Europe. Next up will be some small tastes in westerly Europe, Amsterdam, Scottish Highlands and London.