

Slovakia Journal, June 2-8, 2004

Tuesday: Leaving Vermont

The Discovery Channel crew had been here over the weekend, interviewing me and filming the rehearsal of a scene, “Sing to me.” It was composed for the documentary. This scene was very good, and will appear in my upcoming opera *Erzsébet*. The documentary series is tentatively entitled “Poisonous Women,” and profiles 12 female serial killers. It will be shown in the U.S., Europe and Australia next winter. Chris Thorburn is the producer from Beyond Productions in Australia; his director of photography is Max Polley, and his sound engineer is Anthony Smith (known as Trixie). This trip is a result of the Discovery project.



We have a few days’ respite before leaving, but still pack at the last minute—most of it Monday night, but the rest when we arise at 5am. After a cross-check and a reassuring petting of the fretting cats, we’re off to Lebanon to catch the Dartmouth Coach to Boston. (If we never drive to Boston again, I’ll be happy. The bus is a pleasure.) Showing on the bus is the movie “Something’s Gotta Give,” a gentle comedy starring Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton (and funny roles by Keanu Reeves and Frances Macdormand). It is a good decompression before a long flight.



In Boston, we check in and have a quick dinner at Legal Seafood while waiting for the flight. Security is uneventful, and the flight is brief; we transfer to the US Airways international flight in Charlotte. Pasta accompanies the movie starring Albert Finney, “Big Fish,” another comedy with some marvelously warm moments. I watch it, then fall soundly asleep, despite the screaming baby a few rows back. Stevie stays wide awake.



Wednesday: Frankfurt to Waldsassen

We land at Frankfurt Flughafen at 7am local time; biologically it’s still the wee hours of the morning for us. We collect bags, and the car rental (a Ford Smart ForFour) and the cell phone rental go quickly. I, however, cannot make the car go forward. After backing up into the rental lot exit lane, I become technologically stuck. Many honks and bad faces are behind me; no one can help. I finally discover the secret of the “Smart” transmission—the shift must be in neutral, foot brake engaged, with a one-second pause before actuating. Maybe not so smart for experienced drivers.



We leave on the motorway, but quickly depart from roaring traffic at Karlstadt to drive east, following small roads through tiny towns, many





quite beautiful. Vines are growing on walls, flowerboxes adorn windows everywhere, murals and mosaics illuminate outside facades. We pass Arnstein, Werneck, Schweinfurt, Gerolzhofen, Neuses. We pause for lunch along way in Ebrach, a town with a café (Gasthof Steigerwald), roses, a cloister, and lots of sun. I have a coiled pastry of some sort, Stevie a croissant, and coffee. Stevie happily suns.



We drive past Bamberg and get lost near Heiligenstadt, and follow the tiniest roads toward Bayreuth. One of the roads takes us toward Hollfeld, a lightly mountainous area with huge exposed expanses of bare rock, with castle-like buildings embedded high on them. We pause and walk around for photos. Poppies begin to appear along the roadsides, apparently growing wild.



Then we are caught in the traffic tangle in Bayreuth, searching for Wagner’s great Festspielhaus. He designed the Festspielhaus for his own operas—part of his “complete artwork of the future,” the building joined the music, libretti, costumes, set designs, and mechanical details that he alone created. It is a remarkable achievement of genius, skill, and ego. Yet instead of creating the way toward the future, it *concluded* an era...an enormous irony. We arrive to find the Festspielhaus closed for the season; we are later told that being admitted other than for performances is nearly impossible. So we play in the lovely gardens, have our photos taken by another tourist, and Stevie shoots me in the pretense of paying homage to the massive, overbearing bust of Wagner.



It’s getting toward dinner after we leave Bayreuth, so we search for a stopping place as we drive onward through smaller and smaller towns. The first substantial stop before the Czech border is Waldsassen, where we pull into Gasthof Schmidt. It is a nice spot, but Waldsassen itself is an empty town, its “porzellan” factories closed and only a few beleaguered stores still open. We first sit at an open-air café near a maypole topped with an evergreen—we learn there are maypoles in other towns, too, high up and visible from far away. The café sits on a cobblestoned plaza, the first of the cobblestones we’ll soon see everywhere, with their identical curved interlocked arching patterns.

Dinner in Waldsassen is at Restaurant Dubrovnik. I have a tasty special Croatian meat mix (pork, pork, beef, pork and potatoes), and Stevie has an entire fish, grilled to perfection. The food is excellent, and the walls are covered with Croatia travel posters. So we are wondering how this Croatian restaurant came to be here in rural Germany.

We walk a while in the deserted town, looking for a few travel provisions in the supermarket, ultimately buying a bottle of juice and turning in at the pension.

Thursday: Waldsassen to Prague

We are up late at Gasthof Schmidt. The dining rooms are peculiar. There are many culinary awards accompanied by skulls and antlers, all since 1996 (the awards, not the antlers). We eat a filling breakfast of breads and cheeses and meats and coffee among the animal heads. After a question about the quietness of the town, the pleasant innkeeper tells us that it is between seasons—Mayday celebrations have come and gone, and the summer tourism time has not yet begun. We say goodbye to the innkeeper and his almost stereotypical chubby German frau, give some Vermont maple syrup to them, and turn in the direction of Cheb, the Czech border town.

We change money at a Wechselstube—25.3 Kčs to one U.S. dollar, almost the same as it was in 1992, 1999 and 2001. Vaclav Havel's linking of the koruna to the dollar more than a decade ago brought stability and even wealth to the Czech Republic. Now they are new members of the European Union (just a month now) and the currency will soon change to the Euro—accepted already in some larger Prague businesses.

And speaking of wealth, we receive a faux “speeding” ticket in Řevničov, where German cars appear to be milked for 1,000 Kčs each as they travel eastward. We call Martin Cikánek, our friend in Prague, who helps the officer understand that we are American, not German, and should just be given a receipt. He is not making any money anyway and other cars are passing, so he writes the receipt. By the time we leave, the officer is almost smiling. He's lost his drinking money, though.

There is a marked change in architecture as we drive from Germany through the Czech Republic. The tidy homes become more colorful, tile roofs predominate, and there is an energy and freshness as old buildings are being remade. We pass fields of barley, and hops growing on strings. Yes, it's certainly beer country.

Our route takes us through Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad), an old resort town, and toward Prague through a dozen villages. Once we hit Prague, chaos





prevails. Our map, even though it is only a few years old, contains neither all the new streets nor even the old ones—it’s not hard to get lost when a street is no longer called “Leninová”. We are lost several times before finding our pension on Jenečstrá, hidden just beyond a railroad overpass and sandwiched between two facing do-not-enter signs.

We ring the bell at the Pelisek bed and breakfast, and The Girl from Kansas answers. She is subbing for the owners, who are in England (which explains why our call for directions goes unanswered—they have their cell phone with them). It feels somehow surreal to come thousands of miles to hear a homespun American accent. She seems also a bit spacey, as if running a bed and breakfast wasn’t what she had in mind while house-sitting in Prague. So we drop our goods, call Martin Cikánek, and take the tram to Karluv Most (Charles Bridge) to meet Martin. The tram winds down the long hill toward the river, and we find ourselves among thousands of tourists that make the lonely town we first met in 1992 look like the commercial Kalverstraat in Amsterdam.

At the charming restaurant and student-populated “vinárna” U Vladaře, we have beers and talk. Since we last saw him when he was translating for us during the premiere of *Zonule Glaes* at the Mánes Museum in 1999, Martin has been studying in Prague and in Finland, and has been producing Latin music and opera festivals at home. And yes, he will produce the *Erzsébet* opera and seek European Union funding. Martin is smiling, something he did not do five years ago. So it is a good talk, albeit brief—he has final exams for his masters in music administration, and must leave.

We walk with him back to Karluv Most, say our goodbyes, and grab the tram back up to hill to see pianist and composer Patricia Goodson. Patricia had been on the Kalvos & Damian interview list for a number of years, and we just missed having her at the Ought-One Festival when she came down with tendonitis.

She is welcoming and very funny. Her home is lovely, with piano and keyboard and many books. We sit at a comfortably sunny table and talk as the recorder runs. The conversation moves from music to geography and back, on how she chose to move from Virginia to Massachusetts to Prague. (Stevie sees on the table a horse book about the Kladruby Stud. Patricia has left it there deliberately. It will have implications.) We talk about music and notation and manuscripts and composers and teachers—it is a wide-ranging conversation that just seems to be getting started when Ivan calls. She is late for dinner, and he is waiting at the toy shop. Toy shop? Toy shop!

We drive to the shop in Patricia’s vehicle. The shop is in what might be a pretentious arcade in America, but is instead an old neighborhood of homes and shops that was probably the same a hundred or two years ago when

silver or imported spices were sold there. Ivan's doors are open, and we see every space in the store covered with toys, from metal windup models to handmade wooden animals, from small trucks to puzzles, from simple tops to a complicated self-winding funicular railway.

And there follows a Grandma Stevie explosion in toy buying, including the railway. Korunas fly like wooden birds.

The shopping bag fills, and then we all walk to dinner at Mala Buddha. Stevie and Patricia have pho (pronounced like a nose-clearing 'fuh'), a huge bowl of vegetables with tofu. Ivan eats a dish called 'golden mushrooms', and I have crab spring rolls and chopped vegetable and sauce accoutrements. Delicious. Ah, and I also am offered an "improve your male essence" tea. It is fragrant, though its essential qualities are elusive.

After dinner, we walk past old statues, a modern art project of cows, and the door that was Mozart's home in the film *Amadeus*. Onward we walk, up Petrin Hill in Prague. It is a beautiful park now, full of flower gardens and walkways and benches, but centuries ago it was the site of a peculiar scheme of exploitation and beneficence. In the mid-14th century, fortifications were built on the orders of Charles IV—the Hunger Wall (Hladová Zed). Its building had the aim of giving employment to the poor during a period of famine or, by other descriptions, the aim of expropriating Jewish property.

We stroll through a gate in the wall, and notice it has been restored even since our last visit there in 1999. Capitalism as well as the European Union have been good for this wondrous city, at least so far. At the top of the hill we reach the Eiffel Tower, a miniature version of the Paris landmark. The tower is about to close, but Ivan talks the old ladies that guard it into taking us up on the elevator. We look out at the city, amazed at its renewed brightness. The palace is lit in color, and we are overcome by a gentleness in the night. The city is glowing now, even the little station where we get tickets and board the funicular cablecar down to the bottom of the hill.

In patches of shadow and streams of light, we continue to walk around the old city, up & down its lovely places and ancient stone steps and into one of the oldest parts of town. And we are now in search of ice cream. We walk from restaurant to café (as well as passing a wretched American folk singer in a poorly populated tent performance), and every spot is either full or has no ice cream. The closest we find to ice cream is an advertisement made of chocolate. We continue along the river, find the brass plaque high above our heads that marks the flood of two years ago that devastated the old city, and take in the renewed beauty of Prague at night, once again "The Paris of the East".

Patricia and Ivan drive us back to Jenečstrá, where we quickly fall asleep.





Friday: Prague to Vienna

We awake late in the Prague pension with The Girl from Kansas. Breakfast is cheese, nutella, coffee, and a basket of breads. We pay our bill (1008 Kčs, about \$40 in this major world city), pack, and head for the highway—with no directional errors this time. We run along the ring road in heavy traffic, and head west toward Kladrubby. Yes, the book on Patricia’s table has worked its magic, and Stevie wants to see the equine national treasure of the Czech Republic.



It is a long winding journey, with traffic jammed back for miles. Eventually the way clears, and we follow the turns off the main highway toward Kladrubby—but oh no! There are no Kladrubies! Only a Kláster and dumpy “pony farm” greet us. Stevie inquires in the Kláster, and discovers that the Kladrubby Stud has been moved north of Prague, whence we’ve just come. But now our schedule says it’s time to go south, so there will be no Kladrubby horses on this trip. Instead we continue to pass grains we cannot identify, plus barley, hops and great fields of bright yellow mustard. The previously frequent poppies are now growing profusely everywhere on the roadsides and in fields and even in piles of sand and on work debris.



Lunch beckons in Stod, at a small café. We turn around at the end of town as Stevie recalls seeing umbrellas outside—she loves the sun, and umbrellas mean I can sit in the shade with her. At the café we watch a Skoda being packed for a family picnic with their barking dog and trailer full of culverts. Pivo and coffee begin the snack. I have the pork special with sauce, plus brambory and salad. Stevie enjoys a salmon steak and brambory. I conclude with dessert—the ice cream at last!—a flavorful lemon ice with whipped cream, a cookie, and an incongruous blue pinwheel. I love Art, and take a photo of it.



We also photograph the ‘eyebrow’ vents in a roof—a feature of the tile roofs of barns and other buildings, including some homes. The tiles rise and fall in a slight ripple, under which is a vent or window. The overhanging tiles keep out rain, let in light, and provide aeration in the simplest possible manner.



The destination is Vienna to meet the Discovery team, first stopping when we see a colorful church in Preštice. We peer through the window (it is locked) and wonder at this renewed building with bright pink and yellow paint on a main street. What was this town like 20 years ago? Was it a dreadful Communist outpost, or a surviving place of its own integrity? We move along.



The border lies south of Česke Budějovice, home of the original Budweiser—a trademark that the brewery will recover due to the harmonization rules of the European Union. There is much traffic—despite public transportation, the automobile and especially trucks clog the larger

towns—but it thins out toward the border. The differences between the still-poor Czech Republic and the intensely wealthy Austria immediately become apparent. Even the border crossing shows a sharp distinction—the Czech building humble and small, the Austrian structure full of a lavish and wealthy officialdom. Across the border, we buy a map of Vienna. We have learned the value of maps, and our car is already full of those we brought with us from home.

There are no flowers spilling from gardens onto the sidewalk in Austria. It is a tidy country, we recall from our 1992 visit. We didn't like it then either.

Meeting the Discovery crew becomes an unwelcome adventure. I have forgotten the reservation sheet, so I have no information on the hotel or the location, nor a cell phone number for Chris or his colleagues. Was it a Holiday Inn? I think so, but am not certain. Soon every hotel chain sounds like the right one. Was it on Margaretenstraße? That sounds right, but Erzsébet also had a place there. Or was it Augustinianstraße? I am working from memory, and it seems to be failing.

In the meantime, we decide to find Margaretenstraße anyway. We can panic if I'm wrong, but not yet. Stevie writes directions in the journal: "A22 → A23, süd-ost tangenta to Wien across Praterbrücke, to Lausstraßergürtel=Wiednergürtel=Margaretengürtel, turn right onto Margaretenstraße." We get there—but not so fast! There's no right turn! It's one way! And like every old European town, it is not based on a grid, so four turns doesn't bring us home. We search and search, turning around many times. We consult the map often. We get beeped at. Sped past. We stop, start, and try calling Siobhan Mackellar, our single contact at Beyond Productions in Australia. It's Saturday there. No one answers.

We reach the very last block we haven't yet been on, and there indeed is a Holiday Inn. Could it be? Stevie waits as I walk in and ask if I am registered. The receptionist says yes, sir, and your friends are waiting at the pizzeria two doors down. It is 9pm, precisely the time we were to meet at the hotel. We park in the garage below.

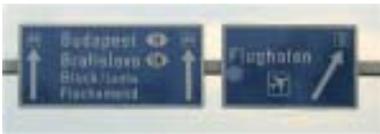
Our room is luxurious, but it's just a gear-drop for now. We splash our faces, take the lift to the ground floor, and walk to the pizzeria where greetings are exchanged—Chris looks different here, like we've never met—and much wine and beer are consumed. Stevie chooses the first wine from a short and dreary list, Max the second. Neither is interesting; they are marginally acceptable as accompaniments to basic Italian food, and there is no more driving to be done. I eat a whole pizza myself (several cheeses and anchovies), and Stevie has pasta with pesto. We stay up late for chat, food, and several bottles of wine, followed up by a whiskey ordered in my increasingly non-monosyllabic German. Max tells us about being on the road with a 12-week-old at home, and talks with Stevie about birth





practices. Then Max and Trix leave, and we sit with Chris for another hour as he regales us with accounts of the delicate nature of interviews, and how people will open up and tell stories they have kept to themselves for decades.

The night is completed by a lush sleep in the huge bed.



Saturday: Vienna to Čachtice



Breakfast at the Holiday Inn is average for me (nutella on a roll) because I am distracted with the upcoming day, but there's plenty of coffee. For Stevie, breakfast is excellent—smoked salmon, melon, eggs and local bacon, brie, blue cheese, and so on.



We pack—our luggage gets smaller and more efficient with each trip—and follow Chris and crew en route to Čachtice via Bratislava. They take the wrong route a few times, and at the border we go ahead so as not to get caught in border bureaucracy with the equipment they are carrying, as did the London Weekend Television team in 2001. I pull off the road to wait, right into a truck scale filled with water. As I'm wondering what to do, another car pulls behind me. There's no backing up, and who knows how deep the murky water is for our little Smarty.



Max arrives with the Discovery van, and they decide to venture through the water first—perhaps less than a foot of it in the end. We follow, feeling reassured, but the directional tangle gets especially confusing in Bratislava, where the highways are torn up with construction, signs tossed on the ground, and no indications (not even Slovak ones) appear to suggest the route.



At last the highway opens up, and we're headed toward Nove Mesto. We gas up near Nove Mesto where we are pointed in the correct direction, but it seems they have moved Čachtice. Signs vanish, and we appear to be circling around the hills where it should be. We stop few times to ask using my elementary Czech ("Prosím, kde Čachtice? Kilometers?"). Finally we have good directions, find a Čachtice sign (7 kilometers; *everything* is 7 kilometers away, it seems), and it's up the hill, past the cemetery, and through the stone arch into town.



Vitek Šírek—fixer, translator, and former student in New Zealand—is waiting.

Vit leads us to the Mayor's office, where Anna Ištoková greets us with great hugs and handshakes. (A "new" westerner, Anna is also the only stylish one among us.) The town offices were renovated and modernized with EU funds, including a curved glass block wall that virtually glowed in the sunlight. In her office, she pours a Slivovice toast—Stevie's first of

these single-quaff moments—and shows us pictures from my last visit. Chris compulsively does paperwork, including the offering of film releases for the town and individuals. Papers are filled out and stamped by the mayor (Chris says, “Our lawyers love stamps”), and, with an array of cellphones and paper pads, schedules are set up for the day to come.

Vit, himself from Prague but armed with a local map, leads us back to Hotel Diana, where we dump gear, change clothes, and turn back to Čachtice for our first day of shooting at Hrad Cséjthe. The road up the hill is narrow and unimproved; our ForFour hits bottom a few times before we reach the muddy tracks that open onto a castle view.

The castle itself continues to crumble. The clear outlines of the tower are eroded since our first visit in 1992, and even the tower floor—entered through a crawlspace—has more soil filling in, spilling from upper ground level.

Chris had arranged for several kinds of shots, but even he finds the castle a far more interesting and provocative space than he had anticipated. There are so many visually commanding locations that the shoot is extended with shots of me walking up paths and across between ruins, with a few different cutaways of each. Chris asks questions—where were the girls buried? How does being here affect your opera? How could she have escaped prosecution? How did she kill her victims?—and asks variants on them in order to have material for shots from different angles. In Vermont, I had already answered these questions at length, when Chris quietly complained I was being too wordy; he was looking for more than sound bytes, but less than a lecture. This time, I try to be succinct. He seems satisfied.



In the meantime, Stevie is taking pictures, documenting the shoot and also capturing some of the wonderful clouds and expanses of ground and foliage that frame

us. Our video camera is also running, catching the documentary and also being seen in Max’s shots to show me in the role of a modern visitor. (I keep my own camera running in these scenes, hoping to be able to edit the shots into a coherent story when we return home.) Trix complains that even here, high on a hill, the surrounding noises—airplanes headed for Bratislava, a two-car train-or-is-it-tram in the valley, and even dogs barking far below in Višňove—intrude on the atmosphere. The wind picks up and more distinct clouds roll in. Visitors walk into shots, and Vitek translates as Max asks for them to move briefly.





Max appears happy that the interview scenes are complete, because he now can move to gather more interesting views of the castle, private places, and vistas. Stevie finds huge snails and luminous poppies, and also a battlement that is now so overgrown as to become an enchanting private space of windows that look down on the valley, with light streaming in upon the greenery. In times past, this enclosure was behind a high wall where archers could keep enemies at bay; now it is a magical garden close opening out to a gentle hill and green falloff that overlooks Višňove's tile-roof homes, church, roads, and railroad tracks.

Meanwhile, I have gone inside the tower to attempt to video the looming qualities. It is unsuccessful; the tower resists, and the camera cannot grab this character. Max has been reluctant to go into the tower, perhaps because he would have to drag his camera through the crawlspace. But he is unable to turn aside the lure (or the witchcraft) of this remaining place of horror, now overgrown with innocent flowers. He succumbs.

We all spend the afternoon discovering private spaces. Stevie and I exchange cameras several times to document the shoot as well as capture something of the mystery of the manifold arches and doorways now half-buried in soil. The castle fell from the Báthory family, changed hands, was burned during a French attack in the 19th century, and eventually fell into the private sector. The centuries have added layers of dirt, to which erosion and rot have contributed. Anna later tells us that a German family named Springer bought three-quarters of the castle in the early 20th century, but that they disappeared sometime during either the Nazi or Communist eras. Though the town tends to it today, the castle's true ownership is as clouded as its history.

Walking on the castle grounds is like walking halfway through the air; overhead arches are now crawlspaces, most filled in and appearing as little more than small caves in the ground instead of grand rooms overhead. More clouds roll in and the afternoon darkens.

Time passes, and we are late for our appointment at the town Múzeum. The Múzeum has been expanded since my last visit, with a new room of portraits. The EU is being good to Slovakia, it seems, and the exhibits are being restored with great care. The new rooms almost glow with curtains hazing the sun on the shiny floors.

Chris meanwhile is bothered that copies of the portraits have replaced originals; he worries about restored copyrights and other paperwork questions. He eventually decides to shoot in front of the odder and least characteristic of the Erzsébet portraits, the one with a very eastern feel and painted in more lustrous deep reds that show the Countess in colorful clothing rather than in white décor in a swallowing darkness.



Questions are asked, responses offered, and cutaways filmed. The crew removes pictures that are not allowed in the scene, opens cases, and lights from several angles. Chris likes the István Csók lithograph of a fictional Countess in her chair commanding the death of young girls before an audience, despite its romantic excess.

While Chris rewrites his story, I slip off to photograph some pictures I have missed before, including a century-old photograph of a denuded hillside with grazing sheep. It is in this photograph—and the one taken after the French burned the castle—that the modern viewer can understand how dominant this structure was in its day, the sight of this center of power unimpeded by mere forests and

flowers. Now they have taken back the castle.

The scenes shot and the crew satisfied, we drive downhill to the incongruously named Pizzeria Bathory for dinner. The pizzeria is filled with Erzsébet (Alžbeta in Slovak) artifacts, including a new and harsher portrait of a mad countess, and etchings of young girls being taken to their deaths. For a modern restaurant, it is a discomfiting theme—particularly as the restaurant itself is a refitting of a private home, now gutted for commerce.



Stevie and I both have asparagus soup (Stevie thinks it's packaged), then rotini pasta and cheese. Also there wine and pivo—three bottles of local white wines, all quite good, fruity, and dry.

When we learn Vitek has gone to school in New Zealand, we ask him about how the world has changed for him and others since the fall of the Communist system. He explains that these new times are very different for the three generations. The

older folks, accustomed to a system of full employment and secure benefits, are confounded by the instability they now feel. Even where health benefits and pensions are maintained, the loss of a full safety net in their old age is frightening. For Vitek and the one generation older who remember the Communist era, the changes are still felt as rich and rewarding, with





opportunities for travel and trade opened up where they were impossible before. Security is not an issue, and Vitěk instead remembers hours-long lines to be able to buy in shops with few goods. For him, there is a consciousness of the metamorphosis that is entirely absent for the generation now coming of age. Those arriving at universities now cannot remember a time before free speech, full shops, open travel, cell phones, and the Internet. What was once a hope of previous generations is now the normal way of life. As we sit in a privately owned restaurant, full menus at our elbows, we cannot help but remember a dozen years ago when our own first visit included but simple soup served in a dark café—it's still there, by the way—and a plate of goulash and potatoes. There were no shops, the museum was shuttered, motorways did not exist, and placing a phone call out of the country could take an hour...if it could be done at all on a given day.



The meal finishes for me with chocolate palačinky. I think I'm alone for the dessert course, and feel subdued with the nature of my privilege.

We drive back to the hotel, where intense negotiations involving passports are going on between Vit and the receptionist. The combination of British, Czech, Australian and U.S. passports has created a paperwork nightmare in the not-too-far-post-Communist hotel bureaucracy. Eventually we get a key, and then park our cars in a tiny garage, for Nove Mesto is a town that suggests our cars may disappear if left in the open. Teenagers race by screaming at each other. The traffic in and out of the Hotel Diana disco is continuous.



Even from the outside, the disco is so loud that the building is vibrating. The lights dim with each bass note. Softer to us now, the receptionist offers to exchange our rooms so we may have one with the double bed. We accept.

I ask Vit if he will translate a short presentation speech for me. He is happy to do it, but can only translate into proper Czech, not Slovak. It is good that the languages are mutually understood. I read aloud the translation to him, and he deems the pronunciation understandable. He says goodnight, Stevie watches a show on Kladruby horses (they are following us, it seems; I wonder what the next trip will bring?), and I practice the speech with its sounds absent from English. Eventually I am satisfied that I can read it (or read it no better), and fall asleep to a combination of disco bass and a televised Brahms *First Symphony*.



Sunday: Nove Mesto to Bučovice

It is morning at the Hotel Diana. “Two stars” reports the sign pasted onto the former Communist shopping center. In the daylight, we can see that it is all in disrepair except the hotel itself. The stairs are crumbling outside, but inside they have been rebuilt with fresh tiles. The lions guarding the entrance are resting on their sides, wrapped up to protect them during the building’s restoration.

Those lions are not the only animals at Hotel Diana. The “Hotel of Death” Chris calls it because of the countless skulls with antlers and other enormous decapitated dead beasts mounted everywhere in the hallways and public rooms. Living in an area where the public display of hunting kill has slowly faded, we find this spectacle of skulls and bear rugs and stuffed heads to be bizarre—and the sheer quantity is staggering. Max poses under one of them, but in the main we avoid the carcasses.

The oddities continue in the room itself. The shower stall walls are clear glass looking onto the bed. What kind of hotel is this, really?

I am nervous about the luncheon and presentation, so I am not especially hungry for breakfast, and have white bread and nutella. Stevie takes the poached egg (!) and cheese.

It is also Stevie’s day to visit the hospital in Trenčín to ask about birthing practices, so Stevie and Vitek meet Anna Ištoková and mayor Bublavý Dušan of the neighboring village Častkovce at the hotel, and depart for the Medical Center at Trenčín.

I struggle with extricating Smarty from the tiny garage, after which Chris navigates the crew (with me following) until we are thoroughly lost. He breaks down (or perhaps there’s an argument in the van) and finally buys a map. Yes, Stevie has Vitek *and* his map. It’s curious to note at this point that none of the crew has attempted to learn even the simplest phrases—not even please and thank you—in the local languages. Is this because they travel to so many countries? Or is it something typical of all English speakers? Or is it simply the pressure and distraction of enormous work?

Map in hand, we easily find our way back to Čachtice, have a re-orientation on the ground, and then drive to Višňove for long shots—following a narrow, single-lane road for several miles through dense forest. Interestingly, the same couple with their hand cart that appeared in the 2001 documentary are there by the roadside gathering thatch again.

The tiny village of Višňove—store, town office, church, several homes, and rail station—has the best view of the castle in its entirety. We set up in the enclosed courtyard near the town offices. I take some video, and also catch the two-car train-or-is-it-tram as it stops in town and passes through





the road crossing with a shaky, limping bell. Max begins a time-lapse segment that includes rolling clouds. Chris plays the opera scene on the car's CD player. We must appear very peculiar to the old gentleman peeking out the entire time from his window.



On the way back from Višňove, Max accompanies me and takes setup shots of the road, the foliage, and me. His camera is too big for the Smarty, and we have to keep the window open. Back in Čachtice, they set up a driving shot through the town arch—at which point there is a sudden outflux of penitents from church and an oncoming bus, followed by a screaming ambulance. It make a bizarre shot.



Townsfolk are gathering at Pizzeria Bathory for our return to Čachtice. Historian Vladimír Ammer (just 'Ammer' to everyone, it seems) is there. Ammer immediately exclaims in German, "Your beard got gray!" I should have kept my face smooth, for I now look like an old-school leftist comrade. Ammer continues to tell stories in a combination of German and Slovak; I can follow enough to find out he is 90, and that he has some old photos for me.



The Burgermeister of the next town is there, as is the entire town council from Čachtice—an honor, as Sunday in Slovakia is a day spent with the family. Stevie, Anna, Bublavý and Vitek soon return from Trenčín. Chris sets up scene shots, asks questions, and films cutaways. After a half hour's conversation, we finally sit down at table and it is time for introductions and the Becherovka toast. I read what Vit has translated for me:



Dobrý den Dámi Ištoková, Pani Ammer, Dámy a Pánové: Dnes na sobě nemám nic černého, tedy barvu noci. Dnes na sobě nemám ani nic červeného, tedy barvu krve. Dnes na sobě totiž mám fialovou, tedy barvu uzdravení. My členové rodiny Báhory doufáme v napravení, a proto nabízíme omluvu za to, co bylo spácháno Hraběnkou před čtyřmi stovkami let. Proto nám dovoďte prostřednictvím hudby znovu vytvořit přátelství, dnes i do budoucna.

(Good day Madame Ištoková, Mr. Ammer, Ladies and Gentlemen: Today I do not wear black, the color of night. Today I do not wear red, the color of blood. Today I wear violet, the color of healing. We who are members of the Báhory family hope for healing, by offering our apology for what was done by the Countess 400 years ago. Let music and new friendship bring us together now and in the future.)



It almost goes smoothly, except that in my nervousness I manage to call Anna "Mister" Ištoková. The Burgermeister behind me chuckles, but everyone seems to understand and hide their amusement.

In response to a set of questions by Chris (who continues to stage little commentary moments), I am asked to ask Anna about the town's feelings

today about the Blood Countess. She extends her arms to indicate the town around her, and voices the most prescient comment of the trip about Erzsébet: “*She is ours now.*” I immediately realize it will become an important feature of the opera website, and perhaps fit into a mysterious flash-forward in the opera itself.

Lunch is served—packaged chicken soup, then a rollup of chicken and cheese and ham, a scoop of small-grain rice, three huge grapes, shredded carrots and shredded cabbage, and lettuce. I chat more with the Burgermeister in German, and with others as they come by. Ammer relates the new theories about Erzsébet (that the entire story of her behavior is a myth) and gives me the name of the book that proposes it: *Alžbeta Báthoryová pani z Čachtice*, by Petra Kovačik and Tünde Lengyelová. I promise to look it up.

Stevie talks with the pediatrician. The translation is through Vitek, who was hired as a general translator and so struggles with the technical terms. Stevie learns that babies and mothers stay in the hospital for four days, and babies receive tuberculosis vaccine on day four. The breastfeeding rate is 50% and increasing.

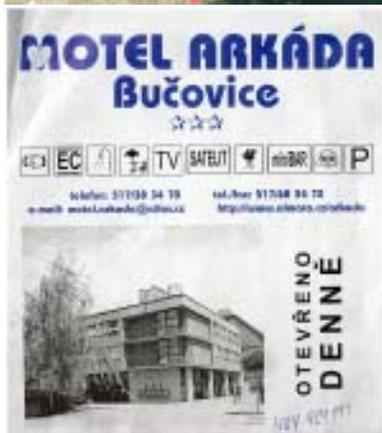
Now it is time for one of the dramatic effects that Chris wanted. His special, although on ‘poisonous women’, is also a Discovery Channel presentation. Science must be included, so this segment deals with blood. He wanted to film me giving blood in Vermont, but I suggested that I ‘give back’ some blood in Čachtice. He loved the idea, and Stevie has brought along a disposable blood kit in case the local equipment posed a risk.

We drive to the local nursing home—a new one, built with Anna’s support—for the blood drawing. The cameras and sound are set up, but the young nurse is wary and shy. She is shown how to use the disposable equipment, and warms to the camera. Eventually the setup is finished and the shot done... with Trix, blood-shy, yawning to keep from falling faint as the blood shoots from my arm and pours onto my pants leg. It is a marvelous moment, and Max appears thrilled by the visuals, as am I—and I hope Chris can slip me a copy of this take.

Stevie in the meantime meets two of the residents through Anna. One is bedridden and one is in a chair, but both look open and friendly. She makes some lovely portraits of them, and promises to send them to Anna. (I should note that the night before I changed the microdrive in the digital camera as it looked like the new one was failing—filled with more than 600 pictures. At home a few days later, I manage to recover the images and return the otherwise brand new drive for replacement.)

At last it is time for photos and goodbyes all around. Vitek heads back to Prague, Anna to her office, the crew south toward Bratislava, Vienna, and London for their next segment. We follow them out of town and find





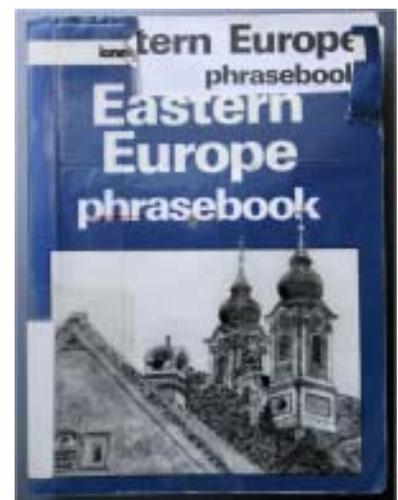
ourselves going the wrong way. Not far from Hrádok we stop to reconnoiter, and have water, juice, and pivo. I photograph some simple barns with their slanted overhanging eaves. As we turn back north, we also pass and photograph Hrad Beckov, one of Elizabeth’s other castles—this one lower, but on a more commanding sheer rock face. The tension gone, I breathe easier.

We cross uneventfully into the Czech Republic at Drietoma, but are faced with many delays for road construction—as before, some ten minutes long. The scenery is gentle still as we are in the countryside and rising over the softly rolling Čírby mountain range, again with fields of mustard and barley.

Late in the afternoon, en route to Brno and eventually Frankfurt, we reach the town of Bucovice. Short on korunas, I hope to find a ‘bankomat’ in this larger town with its wide cobblestoned village square. I ask a passerby, he leads me to the machine, I collect some cash, and we drive out of town. Looking at the map, we decide that perhaps we should turn back and stay in Bucovice. There are a few pensions—one looks dreary, the other we can’t find—and so we look for the reportedly three-star Motel Arkáda announced on billboards. At first we pull into the parking lot for a large building, but the wash hanging on the lines suggests it might be public housing. We continue down the road (Stevie hopes this is not another Hotel Flora experience, where we followed hotel signs in Hradec Kralové well out of town, ending up at a tiny Stalinist concrete inn), but quickly find the lodging just off the town square. A night’s stay is 750 Kčs—about \$32.

We are tired, and ordering dinner is full of lightheaded hoots. The menu we are offered has a Czech section of several pages, and a German page with just a few expensive dishes. We struggle with the Czech but cannot reliably decipher it, even with help from our Eastern European phrase book. The waiter cannot translate and stands patiently by, increasingly amused. The other tables are laughing aloud.

Stevie finally settles on kachna (duck, she thinks correctly). But after about 20 minutes, of course, the waiter returns and gestures “finished” or “none today.” Stevie again opens the phrase book and chooses beef (hovězí maso). The waiter returns instead with a slice of pork and says *this* will be the dinner—not beef. Stevie looks perplexed. The waiter then resorts to pig snorts to make the point. Hopelessly laughing, we put our heads down on the table in defeat. I order kraibó



maso (crabmeat with sauce, which turns out to be surimi) and brambory. At last dinner arrives and it is very good.

At dinner's end, a tall gentleman comes up to us and asks, "Are you English-speaking?" He was born in Czechoslovakia, went to South Africa, and has visited his children in Los Angeles. He speaks several languages, including a heavily Afrikaans-accented English, and tells us the story of his travel to America to see his doctor and computer-programmer children. As with the Croatian restaurateur, we think, "why is he here?"

Afterwards, we walk around the square. It is made of cobblestones with the same interlocked arching pattern we have seen throughout our travels. In the windows are kitchen tools and books and plumbing and shoes and clothes; the day-to-day goods are inexpensive, the hardware—especially the stoves—costly.

As the light dims, we return to the Arkáda, a simple hotel with a comfortable bed and a television. We watch the weather and quickly fall asleep.

Monday: Bučovice to Marktheidenfeld

We wake up early at Arkáda; Stevie finds coffee and then goes to an open-air market—"a stupid one," she calls it. She buys shoes and a souvenir or two. But she is captivated by a stunning wood stove with brown ceramic tile and nickel fittings, beautifully crafted. She wonders what shipping would cost for this stove, already priced at the equivalent of \$750. She looks in hardware stores, and is amazed by the hundreds of cookie cutters and pastry molds priced for pennies. But she brings back shoes.

We leave Bučovice heading towards Brno, and turn north after Stevie telephones a shiatsu birthing practitioner in Kutná Hora—a friend of the Arnowitz-Reids named Michal Pobar. Again we travel little roads, and face extensive construction, one-way zones, and traffic lights with long, ten-minute waits.

We are to meet in front of the museum, where Michal will be waiting for us. Unfortunately, we choose the wrong museum, make another call, and are directed to go down a street. It's one way, alas, and we instead make a long loop around the outside of town to find the right museum—the *Alchemy* Museum, of which he is curator. In the museum we find Michal and his little dog at the front desk. Work set aside for the moment, Michal and Stevie talk about his practices as we sit in a small café on the wide, cobblestoned (yes, the same pattern) town square. Michal is interested in an international midwifery project, and will help research birth clinics in the Czech Republic. Stevie and Michal will be in touch via email in order to plan a visit and intensive training program for the Central Vermont Medical Center personnel.





Michal has a class to conduct through the Alchemy Museum, so we leave Kutná Hora for the long ride west—past purple fields, more effusive poppies, small towns, and beautiful landscapes of grains we cannot identify.



At Stžibo, we stop for a late lunch, only to discover every restaurant in town closed in the mid-afternoon. We ask at five, and the sixth is not exactly tasteful to Stevie, with its grim proprietor sitting astride the doorway. Pulling down a small side road, we do find a tiny bar and café called Il Fiolu. Stevie has a huge (and incomprehensibly named) plate of pork, bacon, mushroom sauce, brambory, and salad; I simply order kureci slát—a bowl with chicken, fresh red peppers, tomatoes, corn, cucumbers and light sauce. It is a delightful repast for a pittance.



We stop on the outskirts of town for souvenirs, at a regular supermarket. Stevie likes to shop at local places because they reflect what the population actually buys, but here Stevie sees little on the shelves, and the tone is shabby. She comes out with a few jams—but most important, a package of the magical ingredient to create the Czech spinach we have been trying to duplicate at home since we first had it in Prague five years ago.



Stžibo (7 km from Kladruby—but still no ponies!) falls behind, and we drive quickly west, about to depart the Czech Republic for Germany. After some flailing of documents at the border, we learn that we must have transport coupons to drive on the motorways. It is another one of the little extortions like our earlier “speeding” ticket. It is either a 150 Kčs coupon or a 15,000 Kčs fine! So we turn around, buy the \$7 coupon—but cannot return to the exit from that direction. Instead, we travel a 15-minute loop. After a long day and further to go, Stevie has a kind of outburst... fortunately out of range of the border guards.



Then it is west through Germany—and through enormous freeway construction, diversions, and stops as we head toward Frankfurt.



As darkness falls and the speed limits don't (at 95mph we are easily passed in a rush of wind), we stop off the road just past Würzburg in the small town of Marktheidenfeld. From the road and the map it looks like a rural village, but as we approach we see it's a lightly touristic town on the river. We take a room—expensive now in Germany—in Hotel Schönen Aussicht. Even with the kitchen closed, big beers (in steins) and even bigger salads are brought for our dinner.



The hotel itself is beautiful and beautifully appointed, with many old Romanian or Bohemian carved pine armoires. Stevie says it feels great to have a luxurious hotel for our last night, and we both fall asleep immediately in the vast field of bed.

Tuesday: Marktheidenfeld to Frankfurt to Vermont

Even though we are a mere 60km from Frankfurt, we awaken at 5am so we can survive rush hour, return our car and phone, make it through security, and meet our 11:45 flight in time. We pack, return 7km to the motorway, slide into traffic toward Frankfurt—which is *still* traveling past us at high speed as we ourselves push 150kph.

The rental return is quick (though poorly marked), but the cell phone return is not marked at all, and the information booths are unable to provide functioning directions. Luggage cart overflowing, we find ourselves in a pre-customs area, begging our way out. We return the phone, and Stevie picks up some supplementary souvenirs.

On the plane, I sleep and, typically, Stevie cannot. We arrive in Philadelphia and quickly pass through the passport check, agricultural inspection, and customs. And then the bureaucracy becomes absurd as we try to change planes. We have to proceed through security a *second* time (the sign points left, but the security guard is yelling in impenetrable English to go right against the wall), as if Frankfurt's inspection couldn't be up to American standards. As we grumble, a snippy conservative young woman in a suit lectures us that it's better than terrorists. We restrain ourselves in the presence of the Bush Troopers.

My pack, as usual full of audio and video stuff and homemade gizmos, immediately triggers the dim-bulb what-is-this alarm. So Number One says to Number Two, "Check this bag." Number Two says to Number One, pointing to my bag, "This one?" Number One responds, "Yeah." Number Two then grabs the bag *after* mine—mine is a gray backpack, the one behind is a black purse, so they must be indistinguishable. Without comment I shoulder my backpack and walk quietly away. Number Two is searching through stuffed teddy bears while I'm taking my "dangerous" pack toward the waiting plane. Stevie says, "Gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling, doesn't it?"

The flight to Boston was entirely uneventful until the landing, when our all-elbows seatmate Rob Gould decides to make a succession of cell phone calls, each one louder than the previous. After a few minutes of the fourth earsplitting conversation, I begin imitating the voice and the volume of this self-important lawyer: "Hi. I'm just here trying to cause some cell phone rage. Yup, I don't have a schedule and this call is really meaningless, but I'll tell you that loudly anyway. Did I tell you I don't have my schedule with me?" I start to play to the other seats, mimicking Gould's tone and rhythm, saying "I'm Rob Gould, but I bet you knew that. If you didn't, I'll say it again." Stevie tries to shush me, but in a few minutes she and all the seats around are shaking with laughter. Gould finally has to end his call and demands, "Are you always such an asshole?" I shrug and humbly admit to it. Later in the arrivals area, we get the thumbs-up from some of the other passengers.

The baggage retrieval is quick, and the bus comes by in a half hour. The movie is "Paycheck," a weak science fiction thriller with Ben Affleck. Stevie sleeps fitfully. The car is waiting there in Lebanon. We drive the hour home, look for the resentful cats, and fall quickly asleep. The cats arrive yowling, "We found you!" about three o'clock. We pet them.

