



The First Sunday in Advent, 1997
Bratislava, Slovakia

Seasons Greetings,

For the first time in several years we're in a place that celebrates Advent. Church bells announce the season. This weekend Bratislava's historic market square is a market once more as stalls sell creches, confections and crafts. There are plenty of outdoor grog shops to fortify the most reluctant shopper, and we enjoy free concerts in front of the old town hall in this lovely ancient city.

Last year we dropped into Christmas cold. One day we were in Moslem Albania, the next in the middle of the season with only hours to prepare. Christmas in Sitka with friends and family gave us the reserves we needed for the year that followed. We've never held with the Chinese curse "May you live in interesting times." We've sought interesting times; but even by our standards 1997 was our "year of living interestingly."

In early January we traveled to Serbia. The government refused to recognize local elections held in November and by January there were daily demonstrations with tens of thousands of people. At the center of the demonstrations were two low powered radio stations, B92 and Radio Index, the only electronic media reporting the demonstrations. When the government shut them down international pressure got them back on the air. We went to see what the U.S. could do to help the stations.

Every day we had to walk through the demonstrations to get from the venerable Hotel Moskva to B92. Every day the demonstrations got more creative. There was pet day, the Miss Protest Pageant, "Shed blood for democracy" day where the red cross set up a blood bank right on the police line, and there was the day when women got on their gloppiest lipstick and left lip prints on the clear plastic police riot shields. By our second week the protests went all night too, with ten thousand cheering at dawn when the street lights went out. It was exhausting and exhilarating. We thought that this had to be the most interesting two weeks of our lives, but 1997 had just started.

The Belgrade demonstrations set an example for the region. In Bulgaria daily demonstrations brought down the government after an economic crisis. In Croatia the state shut down of Radio 101 became the issue that brought 140 thousand into the streets, and from Albania the world's TV screens showed a country gone mad. In some way were part of all these events.

In Albania the collapse of the pyramid investment schemes, where citizens lost 2 billion in savings, led to the collapse of the government and nearly the collapse of society. For 5 weeks in January and February we watched it unravel. On our last full day in Albania, March 1, Rich was at the demonstrations, monitoring to see that journalists were not beaten. He watched the demonstrations turn into street fighting. By the end of the day the Prime Minister had resigned and the following morning the President declared a state of emergency.

March 2 we left for Bulgaria to report on radio's role there. We each had a carry-on bag and planned to be back in less than two weeks. Eight months and seventeen countries later, after the emergency was

lifted, we returned to Albania for our belongings. In our travel we saw unforgettable things, like the burned out Moslem villages near Srebrenica in Bosnia, where a pretty new onion domed orthodox church rose obscenely above the ashes. There was Dubrovnik. In 10 years, when the shrapnel marks fade and gutted buildings are restored, the scars will become a tourist attraction as guides tell of the siege of 1991. We visited Sventi Stefan, just across the border in Montenegro, a short drive from Dubrovnik, but now to get there we go through Vienna. We met people trying to grasp what happened, some examining their responsibility, others hiding from it in a shell of nationalism. Then there are the journalists, some co-conspirators in the carnage and some who tried to tell the truth.



One particular memory was of Independence Day. Radio KL in Split, Croatia, had been shut down. (It's back on now.) KL is a thorn in the government's paw. We went there to document what happened. Vedran, the manager, asked "What is today?"

"July 4th."

"This is your holiday. Why are you working?" Rich said he could think of no better way to celebrate Mr. Jefferson's revolution than to be with Radio KL. Vedran asked, "how do Americans celebrate?"

"We drink beer and go to the beach."

"We can do that!" He pushed us out the door, grabbing a CD as we went. At the local pub he popped it into the player, bought us each a beer, announced "this is American Independence Day" and punched the button. We all sang "Living in America" and spent the rest of the day at the beach.



During the summer we had a ten week "rest." We visited Brian in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he was working at the Shakespeare Festival; Kevin in Winnipeg, where he was working at the folk festival; and Suzi's folks in Minnesota. We took Rich's mom to central Europe for two weeks and settled into Sitka for a month. Kevin joined us before returning for his junior year at St. Olaf and Brian, who had resumed his regular job as road technician for pianist George Winston, even got home for two days when Winston did a concert in Sitka.

In September our employer, IREX/ProMedia, decided we needed a less exciting posting, so now we're living in Bratislava, Slovakia, Mitteleuropa, 40 miles from Vienna. Within a month of arriving the government shut down three radio stations. Slovakia has elections next fall. 1998 may be another interesting year. We hope it brings the best to you and your loved ones.



Take Care, and Merry Christmas,

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