

The First Sunday in Advent, 1998
Bratislava, Slovakia

Dear Friends,

We know Christmas is coming because tall women, ranging from a Pizza Hut waitress to a foundation program officer, ask us if Brian and Kevin are coming home to Bratislava for Christmas. To their dismay and our delight we tell them we will spend Christmas in Alaska with the boys. We four greeted the start of 1998 together with fireworks in the snow at the Grand Hotel Praha in the High Tatra Mountains along the Slovak-Polish border

Bratislava is beginning to feel more like our small town home. Yesterday in the Christmas Market in the old town square a man in one of the booths stuck his hand holding a mobile phone across the counter and said "Rich, it's for you." And it was.

We both continue to work for IREX, the International Research and Exchanges Board, on a U.S. government "Democracy Building" project. We train journalists and work to develop independent media in former Communist Europe on the premise that a better informed public can more fully participate in decision making in an emerging civil society. (If that sounds bureaucratic, it is.)

In last year's letter we said that 1997 was our "year of lining interestingly," a reference to both the Chinese curse "may you live in interesting times" and an early Mel Gibson movie. While 1998 was not 1997, it was still pretty interesting. For instance, we participated in our second evacuation in 18 months.

Highlights of the year included trips that took us across Europe with several working visits to the republics of former Yugoslavia. We spend about a quarter of our time there. We always seem to be in the Balkans when things get interesting. In January we were in Vukovar, Croatia as UN troops withdrew and the Croats took over. Vukovar was the most destroyed city in the Yugoslav wars and people were living in buildings that were largely ruined six years before. Our mission was to help the Serb stations stay on the air after the UN left and assist the Croat station to re-establish itself. It was part of the UN plan to help re-establish a multi-ethnic society in the Danube region. The tension we saw as Croats returned made us wonder.

In June we spent our 30th anniversary on the Montenegrin coast. We arrived as Montenegro, Serbia's smaller partner in what is left of Yugoslavia, was electing a new president who opposes Yugoslav President Milosevic, and as NATO warplanes conducted "Operation Determined Falcon" flying along Kosovo's border. We attended a demonstration of women standing at the gates of the ancient city of Kotor. They were protesting the war in Kosovo. One man came up to the women and said; "I'm a veteran of the war in Croatia." We all thought there would be a confrontation until he said; "Where were you when we needed you then?"

In October our final trip to Yugoslavia was cut short. We were conducting a workshop with Serb, Montenegrin and Albanian reporters, working together. It was one of the most satisfying things we had done all year. We were first advised by the embassy to leave, then urged to leave. When we asked a U.S. official what he meant by "urge" he said "If you don't want to see the nose end of a cruise missile, get out." We stayed until we got a direct order from Washington to evacuate and ended up, after a rough crossing of the Adriatic, drinking cappuccino on a mountaintop in the sovereign republic of San Marino, thankful that there were no cruise missiles.

While Serbia descended further into war and dictatorship (with media we worked with shut down and a friend arrested, one Serb friend said that Yugoslavia opted to join the “Evil Empire” after it went out of business.) Slovakia may have become Europe’s newest democracy. September’s election led to a peaceful change of government as young people in large numbers voted to throw out a populist authoritarian. The final “Rock the Vote” rally brought out tens of thousands of first time voters vowing to vote, and they did. Non-government organizations, NGOs, from Unions to non-partisan educational associations, worked against tremendous government pressure to assure a high turnout.

We spent July in North America. Both boys joined us at the Winnipeg Folk Festival. We spent two weeks home in Alaska and had a chance to visit Suzi’s family in Minnesota and Rich’s mother in New Jersey. We will see family again this holiday season when we will spend six weeks in the States, and that makes us joyful.

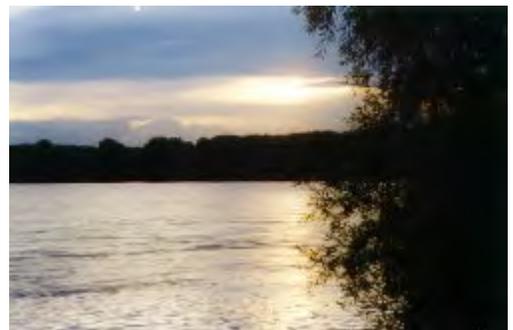
We hope your holiday is peaceful and joyful too.



June, 1998 Kotor Bay, Montenegro, Yugoslavia and June 1968 Bergenfjord, Norway. Thirty years and we still enjoy boating together in what others might consider strange places



Brian (now 25 and technical director of a Minneapolis theater) in Vienna and Kevin (21 and still a student) at work (or is it play? On the computer over the holiday in Bratislava.



The Danube River, just upstream from Bratislava, and maybe five miles from our apartment. The Danube has been omnipresent in our lives in the past two years. This is the "Bluest" picture we've managed... It's more often grey and industrial than beautiful. But it has its moments.

Take Care,

Rich and Suzi McClear