

THE TELEGRAM

By **Thomas Prestopnik**

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The Little Falls-Myjava connection

In June of this year I visited Myjava, Slovakia, as an unofficial representative of the City of Little Falls. For those of you unfamiliar with Myjava, I suggest that you read the excellent article Louis Baum had published in the May 19 edition of the Times Telegram. In the article, Baum introduced and explained the historical importance Myjava has had on Little Falls.

With the recent introduction and effort of Peter Adasek, the cities of Little Falls and Myjava have partnered in Sister City status. Peter and I grew up in Little Falls and have since moved away; Peter lives in Colorado and I live in Florida. Adasek, as a representative of the Little Falls Historic Society, travelled to Slovakia and met with the Myjava primator to obtain the documents which were hand carried to former Mayor Robert Peters. Through the official efforts of Peters and current Mayor Mark Blask and the Little Falls Historic Society, Sister City status was established in 2014.

Peter's and my grandparents were among the thousand or so Myjava immigrants who left a Europe in chaos just before, during, and after World War I and travelled to Little Falls looking for a better future.

I visited Myjava once in the summer of 2000 and Peter has been there many times, so he was my tour guide. The city of Myjava has a population of about 13,000, but covers an area smaller than Little Falls. Many high rise apartments, most built during the 1950s communist era, dot the landscape and are known as concrete boxes, panel houses or rabbit hutches. At one time, Czechoslovak President Vaslav Havel said something to the effect that "We live in houses like rabbits." In the past they were all gray and covered with graffiti, but now sport new pastel and bright colors. The town is basically their main street with a Catholic Church at one end and a Lutheran Church at the other end with several blocks of shops in between. We stayed at the Hotel Stefanik, which was modern and clean and up to date by any standards. We could have been in any large city in the civilized world.

Myjava was celebrating its annual International Folk Dance Festival the weekend we were there and we were given VIP wrist bands which allowed us into the fest for all three days and also into the VIP/Press area for food and drink and to meet and greet the local dignitaries and dancers. We met with Primator Pavel Halabrin and were introduced by one of his staff through a translator. Immediately we were presented with a toast of slivovitz (plum brandy with 52 percent alcohol, for those of you not of Eastern or Central European heritage). One shot is never enough and more followed. After a few, Peter and I said that we had had enough for now and the primator, as he raised his glass and handed more to us, said "To Little Falls!" Not wanting to offend the mayor and possibly create an international incident, we obliged and had another couple of shots of slivovitz.

Myjava has a small museum and historical society, similar to the one in Little Falls. We visited one day and got the grand tour. At different times they feature the history of Little Falls, but this summer the artifacts, memorabilia and history were all stored away in the warehouse. Instead we learned about the Gypsy influence on the Myjava region.

The folk festival featured singers, dancers and instrumentalist from seven countries including, Croatia, Egypt, Namibia, Peru, India, the Czech Republic and of course the home team Myjava, Slovakia. The outdoor arena seated 5,000 people and was filled for each day with guests from around the world. It was estimated there were 40,000 people total in the three-day event. There was a small "village" with little huts each featuring some local traditional food such as klobasa (sausage) and bryndzove halusky (small dumplings with sheep cheese), roasted chicken, Slovak pizza, many kinds of pivo (beer), numerous Slovak and Czech pastries, honey mead and more. No one went home hungry or thirsty.

Another area was also set up with booths selling souvenirs from Slovakia and from other countries that were participating in the event. Small ceramic plates were available, plus native dolls, toys, baskets, hats and clothing. We didn't see anything made in China.

On Saturday morning there was a parade down the main street in town with the primator riding in a horse drawn cart wearing native costume. The parade delivered him to a stage area where about 2,000 people were waiting for his welcoming speech. Peter and I were on stage with him and I introduced myself to the audience and through a translator related to the crowd how happy I was to be there and how I had been warmly received by the townspeople and the primator. Peter, well versed in Slovak, delivered a hand written speech that was understood by all in attendance. All except me. I presented the primator with an American flag lapel pin and a satin purple and white golf jacket from the Little Falls High School golf team, courtesy of my brother John Prestopnik, retired golf coach. The mayor beamed and put the jacket on over his Slovak costume. Handshakes all around and smiles and good wishes and we were through with the morning festivities.

At noon we were back to Hotel Stefanik where we were interviewed by a reporter for the Czech National Public Radio. He asked us about our ties to Little Falls and Myjava and if we were involved with the folk festival. Of course my answers were translated for the listening audience. Not speaking Slovak or Czech, I really had no idea what was the tone of the interview. The interview was scheduled to be broadcast later that week.

On Sunday morning we didn't set the clock so missed the church service that we had intended to attend. Being hungry, we headed up Main Street to look for a restaurant. We counted eight cafes or restaurants in town and all were closed Sunday at lunch time. We found a grocery store open and settled on some ham



From left are Peter Adasek, Myjava Primator Pavel Halabrin wearing a Little Falls High School Golf jacket and Tom Prestopnik. PHOTO COURTESY/TOM PRESTOPNIK

and cheese, rolls and mustard for our lunch back at the hotel. The main street in town was devoid of automobiles or pedestrians. It was almost like a ghost town. It was much different from the day before when booths selling food and souvenirs lined both sides of the main street and thousands of people were enjoying the festivities.

Peter had visited Myjava several times when it was part of Czechoslovakia, including twice during the Communist era. At that time, he noticed many of the buildings were in very poor condition and crumbling. The tenants were not land owners because the government owned everything so the people had no desire or incentive to fix up their homes. It was the government's responsibility and the government never seemed to get around to repairing anything owned by the average citizen. At one time, Peter wanted to purchase a Slovak-English dictionary. He went to many different book stores and could not find any for sale. Upon inquiring, he was told they are available, just not in the book stores. They were all in the Prague warehouses awaiting transport. Under Socialism, the book sellers and warehouse employees were all getting a set salary whether they sold any books or not, so there was no incentive to request that the books be delivered. To me these are two pretty good examples why Socialism doesn't work.

Czechoslovakia became free of the Soviet Communist dictatorship in 1989 and was a democratic country once more. The event was called the Velvet Revolution because it occurred without war. Then in 1993 the Czech and Slovak Republics (the latter also known as Slovakia) split peacefully and that was known as the Velvet Divorce.

On the last day in Myjava we went to the primator's office to say good bye and pick up a few small gifts from him. He offered us coffee and the mandatory slivovitz. It was 8:30 in the morning and again hard to say no to the mayor. "To Little Falls!" We left that morning with promises to write and come back for a visit. We were asked to have our Little Falls mayor visit Myjava and we also got promises from Primator Halabrin that he would come to Little Falls to make an official visit. I hope that I'll be visiting Little Falls when the time comes and I can offer him some slivovitz. "To Myjava!"

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