

MOON OVER SASOVA

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MOON OVER SASOVA:

One American's
Experience
Teaching in
Post-Cold War
Slovakia

Christopher Shaffer

Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon

For my wife, Amber, who has listened to my stories about Slovakia far more than anyone should have to, and my mother, Jane Shaffer Elliott, for introducing me to travel in Europe, thus ensuring that I would forever be in debt.

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INTRODUCTION

A Sign on a Pole

I OWE MY SLOVAKIA EXPERIENCE largely to serendipity. As I neared the end of Spring Quarter at Auburn University in 1991, I needed eight elective credit hours to graduate. I had taken two years of German, and at the prodding of my favorite professor, Dr. Tom Nadar, I signed up for the University's study abroad program in Mannheim, Germany. It was worth ten credit hours, and it cost only \$300 more to spend the summer in Germany as opposed to Auburn. As a side note, Auburn happens to be one of the hottest places imaginable during the summer months; thus, two months in Germany seemed like a good plan. It would also allow me to declare German as my minor, and practice my language skills in a real-world setting.

When I arrived in Germany, *Frommer's Guide* in hand, I was ready to study some, but travel more. We had afternoons and weekends free. Afternoons found me exploring towns near Mannheim; everyone in the program got free travel on area transit, so long as the destination was within a sixty-kilometer radius of the city. On weekends I picked farther off places to

visit. One of those weekends I decided to go to Prague. I knew very little about the city, but having lived the first nineteen years of my life under the construct that was the Cold War, I was curious to see a city that had been behind the Iron Curtain, and everyone I talked to seemed to think it was the most beautiful and charming city they had ever visited. Prague had largely escaped damage during both World Wars, which added authenticity and original charm to its beauty. Some cities, such as Warsaw, Poland were so devastated during World War II that they can seem hollow, bland recreations of their former glorious selves.

Another student in the program and I made the train trip to what was then Czechoslovakia on a Friday night. Neither of us knew what to expect, and we were both surprised at the green countryside. Everything I thought I knew from the evening news about the Eastern Bloc portrayed the place as grey and drab with no shortage of what I like to call Stalinist Towers throughout the region. We were surprised that a large percentage of the country is protected as national forest, which made for some beautiful scenery. Another surprise came at the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia. This excursion was not like the weekend trip to France a week prior. Czechoslovak soldiers with assault rifles strapped to their shoulders boarded the train when we arrived at the border. Everyone in the compartments was ordered out into the corridor, while everything was searched. After about forty-five minutes we were back on our way, but it was clear that the transition from an authoritarian to a free society would not be happening overnight.

Walking out of the main train station, the first thing I encountered was a stand selling hamburgers and Pepsi. Both items seemed somewhat out of context. The burger as it turned out was made of ground pork, which wasn't much of a surprise.

Pepsi being available was somewhat more of a surprise. Going forward, I noticed that Pepsi was everywhere, but Coca Cola was nowhere to be found. I would later learn that Pepsi was one of the first soft drink companies allowed into the former Soviet Union. In another twist, the Ruble was not an exportable currency, so the good people at Pepsico had to figure out how to get their profits back to the United States. Ultimately, they began exporting Stolichnaya vodka from the USSR to the U.S., allowing them to turn a profit in dollars.

Prague was more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. The architecture can best be described as Gothic on steroids. With only a day and a half to see the city, I made a commitment to myself to return to Prague after my studies were complete. I was already planning a two-week Eurail trip with my friend David after the semester. In the meantime, I took advantage of as many of the sites as possible, and that night discovered something that I decided was a budget traveler's best friend—goulash. Goulash soup at its best is prepared Hungarian style with a lot of paprika. The meat can vary—beef, pork, and venison seemed to be the most common choices. To this is added potatoes, beef broth, and tomato sauce. Served with dumplings it makes a hearty meal. It also tastes wonderful, fills the stomach, and is cheap. Plus, because it is so spicy, it is a great excuse to drink a few of the world's best beers. If there was a negative to ordering goulash, it was the perpetual look of disappointment that the request would leave on waiters' faces. Generally, an American entering a restaurant in Eastern Europe leads to expectations of a lot of money being spent. The waiters were always saddened to realize I was a student on a budget and would be ordering the cheapest thing on the menu!

I only saw the highlights of Prague during this visit. Walking

from the train station, I quickly found myself at the top of Wenceslas Square and in front of the National Museum, a gigantic neo-renaissance building. Wenceslas Square is the Prague version of the Champs-Élysée, and not that long ago had been filled with Czechs who successfully called for an end to communism in their country. Walking away from the museum and down the square there are several narrow streets that lead to the Old Town (*Staré Město*). The Old Town is where several architectural gems reside, perhaps most notably the astronomical clock tower where crowds gather a little before the beginning of each hour to watch a mechanical skeleton ring the bells while a rotation of saints make appearances. Across the square from the clock tower is the Gothic-styled church Our Lady before Týn, with its towering spires. Continuing onward one comes to the Charles Bridge, which leads to Castle Hill (*Hradčany*) and St. Vitus Cathedral.

As I explored, I was amazed at the feeling of optimism that seemed to be omnipresent. Vaclav Havel had just been elected president, and it seemed everywhere I looked there were signs with his photograph and a caption that read *Havel na Hrad* (Havel to the castle), the president's residence. However, the dichotomy of lingering totalitarianism amid newly found freedoms was everywhere. Access to the Charles Bridge was hampered by a busy street. Pedestrian access was limited by a traffic light that definitely favored keeping automobile traffic flowing over allowing the many people who were on foot to cross. Tourists—most of them Western—began jaywalking when they felt they could make it across the street in spite of the traffic. Largely unnoticed were soldiers standing on an island in the street's center. Suddenly, one of them lowered his rifle and pointed it at the crowd. All of us hopped backward onto the sidewalk.

Once across the street, it was possible to access the pedes-

trian-only Charles Bridge that stretched across the Vltava River, and then lead to the base of Castle Hill. On the bridge, lined with statues of a myriad of saints on both sides, a variety of vendors were selling art, jewelry, and small puppets. I would later find out that Prague was known for its puppet makers. Also, on the bridge—much to my surprise—were quite a few people smoking marijuana, something that was still illegal in Czechoslovakia. No one seemed to be particularly worried about the police doing anything to them; I rarely saw a policeman on the bridge, and I don't remember ever seeing a soldier. To this day, I am not clear on how law enforcement was so obsessed with jaywalking, but not particularly concerned with individuals flagrantly flaunting their drug laws. In the name of full disclosure, I have always believed marijuana should be legal, I just had no interest in being shot by a Czechoslovak soldier, or experiencing what life was like in one of their prisons.

The far side of the Charles Bridge gives way to the base of Castle Hill. As I made the climb upward, I would frequently turn around so I could get increasingly better panoramic views of the city. This journey culminates with St. Vitus Cathedral, an architectural wonder that is Gothic to the max, complete with gargoyles, spires, flying buttresses, and beautiful stained glass, most notably the art nouveau series of panels by Alphonse Mucha.

As planned, I stayed on in Europe at the conclusion of my studies. The choice was to return home for graduation, or spend two weeks riding the rails. After mulling this conundrum for at least five seconds, I decided to stay. I bought a second-hand (technically third-hand) Eurail pass for twenty-five Marks. I was told that after the passes were initiated, conductors rarely checked the holder's passport. If the story that was related to me was true, the original owner, Warren W. of Ontario, Canada

(to whom I am forever grateful), lost his ninety-day Flexipass on about day eighty-eight or so of his travels. Out of money, he went to a Eurail office in Italy for assistance. In the confusion, they ended up issuing him a brand new pass. At this point, he had free train rides, but no funds for food or places to sleep. Since there was no way for him to continue his travels, he sold it to a mutual acquaintance, who then passed it on to me. Anytime I think about the expense of travel, I try to remember that I did travel by train for free for two weeks in 1991.

David and I visited our German professor, Tom, and two of his friends in Bonn before heading to Munich; then to Venice where I treated myself to a birthday present of Jack Daniels and Coke on the Piazza San Marco. Celebrating age twenty-one with a drink in Venice seemed the most sophisticated thing any human could ever do. Vienna was next, and where we split up, and I traveled onward to Prague.

I did learn one piece of valuable information on the train ride from Venice to Vienna. Trains in Europe will sometimes separate on long trips, and the two parts will then go to completely different destinations. David and I were actually supposed to be traveling to Salzburg rather than Vienna. In the middle of the night I woke up, and for whatever reason, something felt wrong. I stopped a conductor, and in my weak German, I tried to figure out if we were headed to the correct destination.

“Enschuldigung, bitte,” I stammered. *“Wann kommen wir nach Salzburg?”*

He looked perplexed, and said, *“Salzburg? Wir fahren nicht nach Salzburg.”*

Not sure what to say, I replied, *“Wo the fuck fahren wir?”*

And that is the story of how I got to see Vienna for the first time. We stayed in a youth hostel, and the next day I put David, not the fan of backpacking in Europe that he expected to be, on

a train back to Mannheim, where he would recuperate for a few days before we both reconnected and flew home out of Frankfurt. That afternoon, I would continue onward to Prague, after exploring some of the beautiful Viennese sights.

On the train trip to Prague I learned something new: traveling alone can be a good thing. You meet people. It just happens naturally. If you are with someone else, or a group, you focus on each other. Conversely, other people feel they are interrupting a couple or group by engaging with them, but are comfortable starting a conversation with a solo traveler. I found myself in a compartment with three other people. Each spoke a different language, but all of us spoke one language in common with at least one other person. We talked for a couple of hours, with each of us translating for the others as necessary until two of the passengers reached their towns, which left me and the gentleman across from me alone in the compartment on the way to Prague. His name was Milan.

When the train stopped at the Czech border, he looked at me and said, "*Ich habe hunger, und sie haben hunger*" (I am hungry and you are hungry). He got off and then returned shortly with an apple, a bag of pretzels, and a beer for each of us.

He looked at me and said, "*Ein Geschenk aus mein Herz, und die Herzen von die Tschechoslovaki Leute*" (a present from my heart and the hearts of the Czechoslovak people).

We continued to talk, and as we were pulling into the main train station in Prague, he asked me where I was staying. When I told him that for the first night I was going to stay in the train station, he was horrified, and said that due to crime in the station, that could not be an option. We walked to the state travel agency, Cedok, and arranged for me to rent an apartment for a few nights. Then, worried I would not be able to follow the di-

rections, he walked me from the train station, and down the grand boulevard that is Wenceslas Square. The apartment was off a side street about halfway down the square. He made sure I was safely inside before dashing off to catch the last subway of the night home. This was my first introduction to Czechoslovak hospitality, and it would definitely not be the last.

I spent three nights in Prague before returning to Germany to catch a flight back to the United States. While walking to a restaurant one night I noticed a flyer posted on a telephone pole, an ad looking for Americans to come teach in Czechoslovakia, with telephone numbers that could be torn off. I ripped one off and tucked it in my book bag, thinking to myself, *You never know*. I then hurried onward for a heart healthy meal of goulash, dumplings, and beer in a cellar restaurant that I had come to like on Wenceslas Square. A much fancier sister restaurant inhabited the upstairs, but I preferred the downstairs prices. I also preferred eating with the Proletariat. It was more touristy upstairs, and the people in the more modestly priced restaurant seemed more authentically local.

When I got home, I found the telephone number, and called it. At the time, I hadn't noticed, but it was an Alabama area code. I had literally traveled to Czechoslovakia from Alabama to find an ad by Alabamians asking for people to come to Czechoslovakia! The odds of that happening certainly seemed slim, and, though I had never been a particular fan of John Calvin, it also made the whole affair seem quite predestined. The group recruiting teachers was named Education for Democracy (EFD). It was founded by a Canadian soldier, Major John Hasek. Ann Gardner, from the University of South Alabama, partnered with the Czechoslovak government to run that part of the organization.

Before I could go anywhere to teach, I needed to complete

my certification. My BA is in history, and job opportunities were scarce. I received a letter in October 1992 from EFD indicating they had accepted my application, and I completed my studies in December. On January 14, 1993, I found myself headed to a new country, as the Slovaks had officially given the Czechs their ring back two weeks prior in what came to be known as the Velvet Divorce.

Disentanglements

THERE WERE A FEW OBSTACLES in my path as I prepared to leave the country. During my final quarter in school as I worked toward completing my teacher certification, I met a young woman and we began dating. It was an unexpected and pleasant surprise. My plane ticket was purchased though, and I was headed to Slovakia. For almost a year, I had been focused on making this adventure a reality. It also made a difference (in my mind) that the adventure was temporary, and that I would be coming back to “the real world” in six months. In my twenty-two-year-old head, everything made perfectly logical sense. I would take a brief break from the relationship and go to Slovakia. During my stay in Slovakia, we would both be completely faithful to one another, and then a half-year later, everything would return to normal. Amazingly, things largely worked out as I had hoped. About three months after I returned from Slovakia we resumed seeing each other.

On the family front, everyone had been supportive of my little adventure. This included my grandmother, who was in

her mid-eighties. I had expected her to resist the idea of my going to some far off place by myself, but she was surprisingly supportive. In December, I found out that she had been bluffing. She called me with a multitude of grave concerns.

“Christopher,” she said, “I have been reading a lot about Czechoslovakia.”

“It is actually about to be Slovakia,” I replied.

“I know. They are having a revolution!” she exclaimed.

“No they are not,” I explained. “They just have decided to go their separate ways. There has been no fighting.”

Trying another tack, she said, “They’re Communists!”

I persisted with my current events lesson, “No they are not. They just got rid of the Communists.”

“If you won’t go, I will pay you back for your plane ticket, and give you an extra \$1,000,” she offered.

Capitalist that I am, I did pause for a second before declining. “This is important to me, and I really want to go. I think it will be good for me, an adventure, and I may never again have a chance to do something like this.”

All that the poor woman had left was a Hail Mary pass. “Christopher, do you realize that a lot of the streets over there are cobblestone? Do you realize what that could do to your feet? I admit that I had not considered the podiatry-related implications of this journey. Ultimately of course, I decided to live life on the edge, and go anyway.

My grandmother was one of several faithful letter writers who corresponded with me while I lived in Slovakia. It is funny how different communication is today. Without email and cell phones, receiving mail elicited excitement on the level created by Corporal Radar O’Reilly on *M*A*S*H** when he would deliver letters to the doctors. I would receive—almost weekly—a

letter from my grandmother on onion-skinned paper in a light-weight envelope used for airmail. She might have resisted my leaving, but once the decision was final, she became one of my most ardent supporters. There were advantages to not having these modern-day communications devices though. It forced independence and meant that I would not be able to fall back on my known world back home. Instead, I had to fully get out of my comfort zone and explore and meet people; which is the point of any immersion experience. Upon reflection, there was so much more depth in the letters I wrote and received while in Slovakia than in the emailed communication of today that in a weird way I may have been better tuned into my friends and families lives than if I had had today's modern conveniences.

EFD Orientation

SET A PERSONAL RECORD on the trip to Stupova, Slovakia, where the EFD orientation took place. I was awake for thirty-one straight hours traveling. The flight out of Atlanta was smooth but cramped. The good news though, was that I had pleasant people around me, including a sixteen-year-old exchange student from Bremen, Germany named Miriam. Miriam's story demonstrated some of the things that could go wrong when people move to other countries. She had signed up for a year's exchange program in the United States but had an unpleasant time with her host family. She had hoped to see as much of the United States as possible, but got to go nowhere, and was largely ignored by the family. Consequently, she was returning to Germany a half year early. In hindsight, I have wondered if there was some cultural misunderstanding involved in her experience. Over the years while backpacking in Europe, I have found it commonplace to meet young teenagers who are traveling together and staying in youth hostels. Americans, on the other hand, rarely would give a child that age so much

freedom. Either way, I was sorry she had such a bad experience, and hoped I would fare far better on my own adventure. We landed in Frankfurt with no problems.

During a layover in Frankfurt, I started talking with a man named Jim, who was en route to Moscow, as part of a group named Friendship Force, a non-profit organization with a mission to improve intercultural relations. It still exists today. Jim and I had an immediate rapport, and we started talking about where we had been and where we hoped to one day go. He started traveling late in life. Never having been out of the country, he called Delta on a whim when he was forty-five years old and asked how much it would cost to go to Mexico. He never looked back and had been on the move ever since. He asked me if I wanted to have a beer, and when I said that it was 9:00 a.m., he pointed out that we were in Germany, where the societal rules governing beer consumption were not that strict. We drank and talked for two hours, celebrating our arrival in Europe, after which I caught my connecting flight to Vienna, Austria.

In Vienna I was immediately met by representatives from EFD, and we waited for the rest of the new English teachers to arrive. Once we had all assembled, it only took about an hour to reach our destination of Stupova, Slovakia. En route, we went through Bratislava, which many would quickly start referring to as Blava. I had heard that it was a depressing city to see, and it lived up to my minimalistic expectations. Much of the historic old town was destroyed in the name of progress; a major highway was constructed. Only a few city blocks of Bratislava's former glory were preserved. We were also introduced—mercifully in passing—to the largest housing development in Slovakia, which was named Petržalka. Every building was exactly the same height and color, and the development just went on as far as our eyes

could see. At one point I was told that Petrzalka had the highest suicide rate of any group of apartment blocks in Europe. I never have found out if that was true or not, but if there were ever a contest for such a thing, I can understand why they might be competitive.

Our hotel in Stupova was nice by the standards of any country. I had been unsure of what to expect. That night I started meeting some of the other English teachers, or lecturers as the Slovaks would call us. One of them, Merrill, who was from Denver, Colorado, overheard where I was from and asked me if it was true that everyone from Alabama was inbred? *Nice guy*, I thought to myself. Merrill and I, as well as five other people, were all being placed in a town named Banska Bystrica.

The next morning several of us went to see what would be the first of many castles visited while in Slovakia. Pajstun Castle is actually a ruin of the original built in the 13th century and destroyed by fire 500 years later. It was a steep walk to the top, but the views were spectacular once there. Slovaks love what they refer to as “the nature,” and venues such as Pajstun Castle are popular with young and old alike, although not necessarily in January. Even as cold as it was that day, it was a good way to get an introduction as to how old Slovakia’s culture was compared to my relatively young United States.

One of the more interesting aspects of our group was its age diversity. The majority of us were fresh out of college, but then there were people who were retired, or just taking a year off. Gloria was a feisty sixty-seven-year-old with a short haircut. We started talking while walking around the castle ruins, and came back down the hill together. Gloria was in front, and I was behind her. The first stretch going downhill was particularly steep, and she slipped and fell. In a flash I wondered how I would get this

elderly woman down the mountainside. Almost before I could process the thought, Gloria hopped back up and said she was fine.

“How did you get up so quickly?” I asked, realizing that I would have probably taken more time to collect myself than she did.

Gloria’s reply was direct, “When you decide to do something like this at my age, you want everyone to be able to see that you really can do it.”

I could tell that Gloria was a bit of a bad ass. I knew immediately that I liked her, and would want to spend more time talking to her in the coming months.

I finished the night in the hotel bar and wrote in my journal about my adventures to that point. In the background was Barry Manilow’s *Could It Be Magic* set to disco music. The bar had a disco ball, and I would come to learn that the Slovaks loved disco music. Over the course of the next half year, I would develop a theory that at the close of the 1970s every disco ball in the United States was boxed and sent to Slovakia. The ubiquitous disco ball could be found in almost every bar I went to over the next half year.

Dinner that night had been odd, I thought. Instead of Slovak fare, the hotel served something that was similar to an Indian dish. It tasted a bit off, but I was hungry, and apparently not very smart. As a result, in a few hours I got to experience food poisoning and its effects. The vomiting and diarrhea lasted for 30 hours. About ten other people were taken ill, and apparently the rest had iron stomachs. The next evening, I was able to go downstairs for about an hour and see people at the party that was taking place our final night in Stupova. The following day we would all be scattered to the Slovak winds and taken to the various towns that would be our new homes.

Pan Biel

MONDAY MORNING, FEELING BETTER YET weak, I headed to the lobby of the hotel to meet the people who would be driving me to Banska Bystrica. Once downstairs I found out that I would be sharing a flat with Merrill. We quickly put questions of inbreeding aside and became good friends. Besides, it was us against the Commies! I will point out now, that in hindsight I believe we were both lucky to become roommates. Although I do believe in the value of traveling alone, this situation wasn't travel, but rather a long-term living situation. It was good to be able to have someone to compare notes with, give and receive encouragement and advice, and also just speak English with. Merrill also turned out to have a remarkably high language factor, which was very useful. He quickly developed a functional knowledge of the language, and by the end of his stay he was almost fluent in Slovak. I would end up relying on my three years of German, which was commonly spoken as a second language by the Slovaks, as well as by developing a vocabulary of what I

considered essential Slovak words that I spoke with a hybrid Alabamian/John Wayne accent. Although my Southern tongue never could quite wrap itself around spoken Slovak, my “essential vocabulary” theory worked reasonably well. The Slovaks tend to rely on a relatively small set of words, so if a visitor can learn the words for numbers, colors, foods and drinks, key phrases and greetings, he can get by fairly effectively. It probably also helped that it was a good time to be an American in Eastern Europe. We were still a mystery to the Slovaks, and almost everyone was eager to meet us and to be helpful.

We were met by Pan (Mr.) Biel, whose apartment we would be renting in a suburb of Banska Bystrica named Sasova. He was an older man, short, bald, with round glasses and a kind face. Accompanying him were his son and daughter. The five of us would soon get to know each other well. All of us, plus Merrill’s and my luggage were crammed into an early 1970s Fiat Uno that would take us on the three-and-a-half-hour trip. Before leaving Bratislava though, we went to Mr. Biel’s other daughter’s house for an early lunch. It was good and involved lots of potatoes (*zemiacky*). We would quickly learn that we were now residing in a nation of people that loved their carbs.

The trip actually took six hours. The temperatures were well below freezing. The roads were icy, and it was snowing. I am from a place where if snow is predicted the entire state shuts down, so this was a new experience. Early in the journey we happened upon the aftermath of what must have been a horrific bus accident. The body of the vehicle was singed all over, and part of the roof looked as though it had been ripped off. Merrill and I shared a look that indicated we both had concerns about surviving this ride.

Every ten minutes or so, the Fiat would die. Sometimes we

got lucky and Pan Biel could coast to the side of the road. Other times, we all got out and pushed while Pan Biel steered. Once safely off the road, Pan Biel popped the hood, and dried off a bunch of cables. The car would start again, and we continued moving at a snail's pace through the tundra. South of Banska Bystrica, I kept noticing this bizarre looking land mass. I still don't know quite how to describe it, but it was similar to a field with oddly shaped formations coming out of it. I asked Mr. Biel's daughter, Claudia, what it was. She replied, "Is River Hron." I had just seen my first frozen river. This place was cold.

We arrived at our new dwelling cramped and ready to stand. Sasova was a development of perhaps seventy-five identical blocks of flats. They were as dingy on the outside as the current weather. Our address was Tatranska 5, and we were on the fifth floor of that building. We went up in the tiny elevator in three waves. As we started to go inside the apartment, we were immediately stopped by Pan Biel, who mimed that we were to take off our shoes. It is a logical thing to do in a country where the outside is covered in slush for a large percentage of the year, but I never did get entirely used to the custom. When visiting people, not unlike in Japanese homes, they almost always have sandals in some sort of a cubby that guests can wear.

The flat was minimalistic, but the heat worked. There were two bedrooms, separated by a hallway, a den with two chairs and a coffee table, a kitchen without a refrigerator, a bathroom that also housed the most bizarrely primitive clothes washer I have ever seen, and a separate room for a toilet. It always seemed so strange to have people say, "Where is your toilet?" Americans are invariably so delicate about this question. We always call it a restroom, as though we are excusing ourselves to take a nap. The beds were about three-quarters the size of an American

twin bed, but they were firm and comfortable. The kitchen was minimally stocked with one large pot, a few forks, knives, and spoons, plates, cups, and mugs (four of each), and a corkscrew with a bottle opener (no doubt a Slovak kitchen essential). For the next six months, this would be home.