
TAPON, Francis

Slovakia – for the Mountain Lovers

Since the July-September 2010 issue we published excerpts from the book *The Hidden Europe: What Eastern Europeans Can Teach Us*. This piece is the last one we publish. We think that we gave a good taste of what this book is about. There is so much more available in this enjoyable volume that we encourage all of you to purchase it and read it. And recommend it to your friends too. By this you not only treat yourself with an interesting travelogue but you also support Francis on his next great adventure: *a 3 years tour of Africa*. In fact this next adventure will commence in less than 30 days. We agreed with Francis that we would publish pieces of his travel diary in Africa in the coming issues. Stay tuned...

Editors

Why Slovaks and Hungarians don't get along

Hungarians and Slovaks have been having some problems recently. And by "recently," I mean for the last 140 years. Whenever I asked Hungarians to rank their seven neighboring countries in order of a positive relationship, Slovakia was always dead-last. Slovaks aren't too fond of Hungarians either. Ján Slota, chairman of a major Slovak government party, summed up the sentiments of Slovak extremists when he said, "Hungarians are a tumor on the body of the Slovak nation that needs to be removed without delay."

How did these neighbors get into such a mess? History explains it all. We'll examine Hungary's history more closely later, but for now it's only important to understand that for about 1,000 years, Hungarians ruled (among other places) what is now called Slovakia. Depending on who you ask, life under Hungarian rule was either fabulous, crappy, or somewhere in between. One thing is fairly clear: for most of those 1,000 years, Hungarians let the Slovaks (and other non-Hungarian ethnicities) keep their language and culture.

However, that loose grip began to tighten 140 years ago, when Hungary started to *Hungarianize* its citizens. For example, Hungary forced Slovaks to speak Hungarian in official business, converted about 70 percent of the Slovak elementary schools into Hungarian ones, closed nearly all Slovak secondary schools, gave the right to vote to only the top 5.9 percent of the population (effectively silencing the Slovak political voice), and encouraged Slovaks to change their names into Hungarian-sounding ones. As one Encyclopedia states, "Under Hungarian rule, Slovaks were pressured to give up their language and cultural identity and become Hungarian. Mainly rural, landless peasants, the Slovaks had little economic status and virtually no role in the political life of Hungary."¹ Therefore, by the time Hungary lost WWI, Slovaks were happy to end 1,000 years of Hungarian rule.

¹ Wolchik, Sharon L. "Slovakia." *Microsoft® Encarta® 2006 [DVD]*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005.

After you manage a territory for 1,000 years, it's hard to let it go. Therefore, when Hitler offered Hungary one-third of Slovakia's land, Hungary couldn't resist, especially since it was land where the majority of the inhabitants were ethnically Hungarian. To thank Hitler for returning Hungary some of its former territory, the Hungarian Army fought side by side with the Nazis as far east as Stalingrad and sent hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths.

When Hungarians lost WWII, they had to face the furious Slovaks, who viewed the Hungarians as Nazi collaborators. This accusation was wildly hypocritical, since the Slovak government and military were also allied with the Nazis! Slovaks may argue that Hitler forced Slovakia to join the Axis, but they forget that Hitler twisted Hungary's arm too. Consider that when German troops began crossing Hungary to attack Yugoslavia, Hungary's Prime Minister committed suicide. He wrote on his suicide note, "I have allowed our nation's honor to be lost. The Yugoslav nation was our friend. . . . But now, out of cowardice, we have allied ourselves with scoundrels."

Slovaks are right to say that, under Hitler, Hungary got a better deal than Slovakia: Hungary's territory increased, whereas Slovakia's decreased. One reason Hitler favored Hungary is that, in his warped mind, Hungarians were better than Slovaks because they weren't Slavic. Nevertheless, Slovakia sent thousands of Jews to their deaths and its army fought alongside the Nazis until it was clear that Germany would lose the war, which is when the Slovaks finally mounted an effective uprising. Although Slovakia had an anti-Nazi government in exile, plenty of Hungarians were also against the fascists. In conclusion, although Hungary was a stronger and more passionate Nazi supporter than Slovakia, Slovakia was hardly anti-Nazi.

When WWII ended, Slovaks conveniently forgot these details. They just remembered Hungary conspiring with Hitler to take one-third of Slovakia's land. Edvard Beneš, Czechoslovakia's President after WWII, summed up Slovakia's sentiments when he said, "After punishing all the delinquents who committed crimes against the state, the overwhelming majority of the Germans and Hungarians must leave Czechoslovakia. . . . Our people cannot live with the Germans and Hungarians in our fatherland."

Thus, Hungarians (and Germans) living in Czechoslovakia were slapped with the Beneš Decrees, which allowed Slovaks to confiscate Hungarian property and force Hungarian families to move. Czechoslovakia deported 90 percent of its Germans, but the Allies told them that they had to treat Hungarians differently. To kick a Hungarian out, Czechoslovakia had to let Hungary kick a Czechoslovak out. About 73,000 Hungarians and Slovaks, many who had lived for many generations in their homes, were forced to move. Zsuzsa Rodgers, a Hungarian, told me, "Very large numbers of Hungarians were murdered, and others, luckier ones, like my grandparents, were relocated to Hungary, but their lands and wealth confiscated, and all connections to relatives severed."

What Hungarians often forget is that Hungarians deported and mistreated many Slovaks (and Germans) in Hungary. Hungarians will say that they didn't *want* to kick the Slovaks out—they were just doing it because the Allies told them to do the population exchange. Besides, compared to the Slovaks, the Hungarians are convinced that they were far nicer when it came to confiscating property and deporting people.

Adults acting like children

In 2007, Slovakia's parliament reconfirmed the Beneš Decrees, using the stupid excuse that if they didn't, then would be admitting guilt and would have to compensate the victims. Meanwhile, Hungarians are equally ridiculous about the Beneš Decrees, acting like they are still being enforced. This is absurd because Hungarians in Slovakia aren't being deported or having their property stolen. The right thing to do would be for the Slovaks to repeal the Beneš Decrees and for the Hungarians to ignore them if they don't.

Instead, both sides continue to argue like brats. In 2009, Pál Csáky, the leader of the Hungarian political party in Slovakia's Parliament, said that Ján Slotá (the Slovakia National Party leader) and the Beneš Decrees are "Slovakia's shame." Slotá replied, "If I am considered to be the shame for Slovakia, then he is a vomit, a rotten piece of shit."²

Slotá's beliefs are so extreme, it's comical. He said, "If the Slovak National Party is extremist, then Hungarians are radioactive extremists—they radiate more than Chernobyl. The best solution would be back-fill them with concrete." His solution with dealing with the Roma (gypsies) is "a long whip and a small yard." He drew a connection between the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Hitler when he compared her to "that little mustached person in a Munich cellar. He had the same rhetoric as this woman. Perhaps her mustache is also starting to grow." In addition, he's called the Hungarian Turul (the mythical Hungarian falcon) an "ugly parrot" and Saint Stephen, the first King of Hungary, "a clown on a horse."³

Although Slotá's fiery tongue represents the lunatic fringe of Slovakia, the fact that many Slovaks voted for his nationalist party worries Hungarians. It's just one more indication of just how lousy Hungary-Slovakia relations are. Indeed, Hungarians and Slovaks will bicker about almost anything. For example, in 1977, their communist governments (Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia at the time) agreed to build the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam next to the Danube River. Hungary illegally canceled the agreement, citing environmental concerns. Meanwhile, Czechoslovakia illegally went ahead with the river diversion without Hungary's approval. In 1997, the International Court in the Hague found both Hungary and Slovakia at fault and ordered them to compensate each other—they still haven't.

Elsewhere, a Hungarian student alleged Slovaks assaulted her, writing anti-Hungarian insults on her clothing. The Slovak police said she was lying and accused her of perjury. In another incident, Slovak police beat up Hungarians during a soccer game, even though the Hungarians were allegedly not doing anything that warranted an assault. Meanwhile, in Hungary's capital, two Molotov cocktails landed (but didn't detonate) next to the Slovak embassy.

² <http://www.mkp.sk/eng/images/pdf/MINORITY%20REPORT%20-%20OCTOBER.pdf>, which cites a phone interview on September 24, 2007.

³ Ibid. Also, many of his statements have been documented on Wikipedia.org, just search for *Ján Slotá*, who is the leader Slovak National Party (SNS).

Slovakia's Language Law

In 2010, the latest idiotic fight was over Slovakia's Language Law. The law gives Slovak priority over other languages in road signs, ads, and government affairs (such as contracts, postal services, police, and fire departments). The law does not apply in communities where minority language speakers (like Hungarians) make up over 20 percent of the population. For instance, if you live somewhere where only 10 percent of the population is Hungarian, then you must speak Slovak in the post office, unless, of course, you don't know any Slovak. On the street, in restaurants, and bars you're free to talk in Hungarian, Japanese, or Swahili.

The law seems pretty harmless, except that after a written warning, violators could be fined up to 5,000 euros (\$7,500 dollars). Although Slovaks aren't enforcing the law (nobody has been fined), Hungarians are so hysterical over it that they're distorting reality. For example, several Hungarians (who don't live in Slovakia) assured me that "in Slovakia, it's illegal to speak Hungarian in public. Slovaks will beat you up if they hear you speaking it." Hoping to start a fight when I was roaming the streets of Slovakia, I merrily yelled out "*köszönöm*" ("thank you" in Hungarian), but nobody cared.

Hungarians are right that Slovakia's Language Law is asinine. Slovaks should re-write the law to match the standard language laws that several EU countries have. Thanks to EU pressure, Slovakia's Prime Minister took the teeth out of the law when he promised that "no individual will be fined in Slovakia for using their own language."⁴ It's a pity that Slovaks are so insecure about their language that they feel they even need such a law. If their language could survive 1,000 years of Hungarian rule, it will do just fine in their independent country without any silly Language Law. In fact, it should be even easier now to keep their language since there are fewer Hungarians than ever. In 1910, the Kingdom of Hungary estimated that about 30 percent of those who live in what is now Slovakia were Hungarian. Over the last 100 years, that number has eroded to less than 10 percent today.

Krisztina Szirmai, a well-traveled Hungarian, told me that "to introduce a fair and inclusive language and minority policy, you need to be confident in yourself, your history and so on. It's not enough to have a language, traditions, and folk songs that are 1,000 years old, you must have a stable state, a long-existing constitution, a long history of literature and others. Slovakia lacks these things. It's quite usual that when a new country is being born, having nothing to hold into, can only find itself in abusing other nationalities, especially the ones that previously had control over it."

Yet another immature fight broke out in 2010, when Hungary offered citizenship to all Hungarians, even if they live in other countries. Slovakia saw the move as a jab and promptly made dual citizenship illegal for its citizens. These two EU countries continue their race to the bottom for the grand prize of who is the biggest baby.

What's the root cause behind these petty fights?

Part of the Slovak's anti-Hungarian mentality is rooted in vengeance. During the communist era, Hungary banned the Slovak and German languages. Before that, as we saw, Hungary was trying to

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/8248097.stm>

Hungarianize Slovaks. Therefore, for Slovaks, it's payback time, especially since there are a few diehard Hungarians who believe that Slovakia belongs under Hungary. They refuse to call it *Szlovákia*, and instead use the name it had under the Kingdom of Hungary: *Felvidék* (Upper Hungary).

Indeed, these passionate Hungarians feel that everything about Slovakia is artificial. László Marác called Czechoslovakia a "completely artificial creation."⁵ One Hungarian woman wrote to me, "The Beneš Decrees were created to exterminate Hungarian and German populations in the newly born, artificial country of Slovakia." Another Hungarian, who also wished to go unnamed, expressed a similar idea when he wrote to me, "Slovak is an artificial language to give identity to a never-existed country, Slovakia. It was during the nineteenth century that the *tót* (that's their real name) identity (*Slovakia* and the word *Slovak* appeared, to my knowledge, only after 1920) strengthened, along with their wonderful buildings and richness built by Hungarians."

Imagine you're a Slovak and you hear Hungarians saying your country and language are "artificial" and that even the name of your nationality is wrong ("Dude, you're not a *Slovak*, you're a *Tót!*"). At some point, you too might support an ultra-nationalist like Ján Slota who once promised that if Hungarians keep trying to teach Slovaks the Lord's Prayer in Hungarian, he would send tanks to "flatten Budapest."

Hungary and Slovakia ought to copy Czechia and Germany by issuing a joint apology for past misdeeds. However, in 2009, instead of saying *mea culpa*, Hungary's President tried to unveil a statue of Saint Stephen, Hungary's first king, *in Slovakia*. That's not exactly a good way to kiss and make up. Slovakia responded by not letting him in the country – which raised eyebrows in the EU since EU citizens are allowed to travel across borders freely. To apologize, you need courage and an ability to not take yourself too seriously. Hungary and Slovakia aren't there yet.

Anyone who takes himself too seriously always runs the risk of looking ridiculous; anyone who can consistently laugh at himself does not. — Václav Havel

There's hope

There's a happy ending to this Hungary-Slovakia debacle: it's not as bad as it seems. Talk to the average Slovak (or ethnic Hungarian living in Slovakia) and they probably won't bring up the issue, because it's really not that big of a deal. I only learned about it at the end of my second trip to Slovakia. And the only reason I discovered it was that I love asking provocative questions; otherwise, I would be oblivious to the tension. In fact, for many years in America, my doubles volleyball partner was a Slovak, yet he never once mentioned anything about Hungarians. In 2011, Zuzana Sedlackova, a Slovak, summed it up well in an email:

Politicians make it sound like it's the worst relationship on earth, just to build up some reputation and dramatize the situation. Let's face it, people love dramatic situations and they rather read horrible news than good ones.

⁵ László Marác, *Hungarian Revival: Political Reflections on Central Europe* (The Hague: Mikes International), p. 63.

I don't think relationship between those two countries is dramatic; on the contrary, I think people in general really do not care and live their life together without any issues (look at the history of Slovaks, have we ever been aggressive nation?). According to the news (if we can trust them) there has been one attack on some Hungarian girl in Slovakia—and it became international issue.

Of course in every country (including Slovakia or Hungary) you have many “ultra-nationalists” who are out of their minds, but I think you can find them more in Germany or even UK . . . and they don't make it such an issue out of it.

Now there is an issue about Hungarian language to be used as an official language in Slovakia. What an issue and lovely game for politicians AGAIN! I believe that people should speak Slovak in Slovak bureaucracy; however, I don't see a reason why Hungarians could not speak Hungarian to the person if the clerk speaks Hungarian as well. Just like when an English person comes to our offices and speaks in English—if you speak the language, you explain it in his language to make it easier and understandable for him. As Slovakia is in the EU, we should have all official documents available in all EU languages. What's important is that if you are Slovak in Slovakia you should not have problem with your mother-tongue in your own country.

I deeply believe it is only a political issue. They are just playing dirty games and do not communicate on professional political level. Unfortunately it is our (Slovaks and also Hungarians) problem that we have voted those people to be in the government.

In short, Hungarians and Slovaks coexist everyday with no more trouble than you might find anywhere else. There's even a Facebook group called “Slovakia + Hungary = Peace, Love & Empathy” that has over 16,000 members—far more than all the anti-Hungary or anti-Slovak Facebook groups combined. In 2010, Ján Slota's radical political party lost over half their seats in parliament as Slovaks rejected his abrasive tactics. In conclusion, a few politicians and their followers create most of drama because it's more fun for them to stir up trouble than to do any real work.

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Francis Tapon's mother is from Chile and his father is from France. They met in San Francisco thanks to a slow elevator. His brother, Philippe Tapon, is the author of two novels. His family spoke Spanish at home, unless an English swear word was necessary.

Francis was born in San Francisco, California where he attended the French American International School for 12 years. Native French teachers convinced him that France is the coolest country in the universe. He is fluent in English, French, and Spanish. He struggles with Italian, Portuguese, Slovenian, and Russian. If you point a gun to his head, he'll start speaking other languages too.

He earned a Religion Degree with honors from Amherst College. He also has an MBA from Harvard Business School. After Harvard, he co-founded a robotic vision company in Silicon Valley. Then he decided to change his life forever.

In 2001, he sold the little he had to hike the 3,000 km Appalachian Trail. Then, after consulting for Hitachi, he visited all 25 countries in Eastern Europe in 2004. He consulted at Microsoft before hiking the

4,200 km Pacific Crest Trail in 2006. In 2007, he became the first person to do a round-trip on the Continental Divide Trail—a seven-month journey spanning 9,000 km. In 2008-2011, he visited over 40 European countries, but focused on revisiting all the Eastern European ones. In 2009, he climbed up Mont Blanc and walked across Spain twice (once by traversing the Pyrenees from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, and then by hiking El Camino Santiago). He’s backpacked over 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles) and traveled to over 80 countries.

He is the author of *Hike Your Own Hike: 7 Life Lessons from Backpacking Across America*. This book can be also ordered at: <http://francistapon.com/shop>. He is donating half of his book royalty to America’s three major scenic trails.

The Hidden Europe: What Eastern Europeans Can Teach Us is his second book of his WanderLearn Series, was published as ebook on December 12, 2011, and as hardcover on March 4, 2012.

In 2012-2015, he plans to visit every country in Africa and write a book about that in 2016. His goal is to wander to all 193 countries of the world, see what we can learn from them, and share it with everyone.

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