

## Easter by the Quiet Stream

*The villagers of Tichy Potok welcome the opportunity to celebrate Easter in a free, independent Slovakia.*

*text and photographs by Jacqueline Ruyak*

Ruthenian Greek Catholics, some dressed in traditional national costume, celebrate the paschal mystery.

It is Good Friday and my interpreter Blanka Sperkova and I are standing with Mayor Lubica Dzuganova outside her office in Tichy Potok, a Ruthenian village in eastern Slovakia. A band of young boys runs by, twirling the wooden ratchet noisemakers used instead of church bells on this day. I ask the mayor about the crest on the wall of the village hall, which shows a pelican piercing its own breast to feed its young.

“The people of Tichy Potok are said to be like this pelican: they will sacrifice of themselves, yet give you everything,” explains Ms. Dzuganova, an open-faced woman in her early thirties.

“People here have always been known for their generosity. This has been the village crest for centuries, even though pelicans are not found in the region.”

Ruthenian Greek Catholics celebrate the paschal mystery.

Tichy Potok is located on the upper reaches of the Torysa River, in the foothills of the scenic Levoca Mountains. The first written mention of the village, colonized by Germans then settled by Ruthenians from what is now Ukraine, dates to 1427. The village was originally named Stillbach (Quiet Stream), which was later Slavicized to Stelbach. Early settlers made their living as shepherds, but by the 16th century most residents were farmers and cattle breeders who relied on lumber from the surrounding forests to supplement their livelihoods.

In 1890, the population of Tichy Potok peaked at almost 800 inhabitants. That number declined sharply after 1954, when the Czechoslovak government announced plans to build a dam just upriver from the village, renamed Tichy Potok in 1948. Village development was in effect blighted for the next 40 years while the government vacillated over the proposal, which called for the forced evacuation of Tichy Potok and five other villages in the area.

With the arrival of a democratic and independent Slovakia in the 1990's, however, locals dared to organize a highly visible grassroots opposition campaign, led by a dedicated nongovernmental organization, People and Water. This, their first-ever

exercise in community action and democratic policy-making, was successful and in 1996 the Slovak government dropped the dam project. By then, however, population in the region had dwindled from about 6,000 to 1,500.

Today Tichy Potok has a population of 397; of those, 120 are 60 or older and 117 are 18 or younger. During the decades in limbo, new housing was not permitted and most young people left for security elsewhere. Forestry remains the main source of income. More than 70 percent of the village is Greek Catholic; most are Ruthenian.

Paschal bread, fresh from the oven.

Mayor Dzuganova has arranged for us to have lunch with Anna Kiktava, a village elder and weaver. Anna's daughter, who is home for the holidays, joins us and we are served by Anna's visiting granddaughter, who studies hotel service. Anna sits at the table with an empty plate. Following Greek Catholic custom, she eats only bread and water. For the rest of us, the delicious vegetarian lunch includes onion soup with potatoes and chives, potato pancakes flavored with garlic and marjoram, walnut kiffles, poppyseed and jam crescents and mint tea.

First, though, the Mayor says the Lord's Prayer; talk then turns to food and village matters. Long mistrustful of bureaucratic decrees, Anna half-fears that one day the government will have its way. Years before, her family had ignored the prohibition on new housing and built a house. For that, they were fined 10 percent of their income for three months. She believes, though, that the proposed dam was just one factor in the building prohibition. More important, she says, was the desire to expand the army training ground that now isolates Tichy Potok from other villages in the region. The installation of that training ground in the 1970's forced the evacuation of what was once the adjacent village of Blazov.

Mayor Dzuganova agrees that the training ground has isolated Tichy Potok. But it is just one of many problems she has tackled since her election in 1994, when at age 25 she became the youngest mayor in Slovakia. With the dam shelved, the focus has shifted to village revitalization and rural development. Much-needed water management, sewage and gas line installation as well as educational and cultural programs vie for priority. Despite assistance from domestic and international nongovernmental organizations, financial resources remain limited. As a result, unemployment and alcoholism are chronic in the region.

"Little problems can become big ones," says the Mayor.

On the way to lunch, we walk along the river, glinting golden in the sunlight. Not always quiet, the river floods periodically. In 1997, flooding swept away a bridge and funds tagged for other projects had to be used to replace it.

Father Jaroslav blesses a collage of Easter baskets filled with eggs, meats and breads.

After lunch Anna shows us her loom, while the Mayor hurries to church to arrange the Easter flowers. Anna and other villagers are involved in an ambitious, new Slovak-Polish project to revive the traditional arts and crafts of three sub-Carpathian regions, with the goal of making handwork economically viable for future artisans. To encourage interest, a small museum of traditional craft items, including textiles, folk costumes, baskets and furniture, has been opened in a traditional village house.

The Church of the Dormition of the Virgin stands on a small knoll in the heart of Tichy Potok. A modest but pleasing structure, it was built in 1861 on the site of the original 15th-century Gothic church, which was destroyed by fire in 1682. For the Good Friday liturgy, women fill the pews on the left, children the benches on the right while the men gather in the back and choir loft. As the liturgy ends, the serious young priest, holding aloft a simple cloth that features an icon of the dead Christ, leads his parishioners outside into the soft spring air and processes around the church three times before placing the cloth on a table in the darkened church.

Afterward we join the villagers around Father Jaroslav Matolak, who was ordained in 1998. Tichy Potok is his first assignment; he also serves another village 15 miles away. Doubly busy with Holy Week duties, he nonetheless makes time to talk later.

Mayor Dzuganova points out the new rectory under construction near the church. Assigning a priest to the village was a problem, she explains, because there was no rectory. Now villagers are hopeful that the new building will be a home to their priest and to his family. Another reason for hope is the small primary school nearby, reopened in 1998 with the help of a German Catholic organization. At one time, village students had to travel several miles to attend school; today there are enough children for a primary school.

We spend the evening talking in the kitchen of the Bilek family: Grandmother Maria, son Jozef, his wife, Lubomira, and their four sons, who range in age from one month to 18 years. Holding baby Jaroslav, Jozef jokes about a recent headline in a local paper: "High Unemployment Sparks Increased Birthrate."

Lubomira serves homemade cheese pastries and coffee, followed by curdled milk, a tasty country treat something like yogurt in texture and taste, made with milk from the Bileks' cows. Jozef notes that with a nursing mother, a sick man and guests present, we have a dispensation from fasting. Vials of Interferon line one shelf of the refrigerator; these are for Jozef, who has a blood disease and receives worker's compensation. A skilled woodworker, he now makes reproductions of traditional cradles, tables and other furniture.

Holy Saturday morning, too, finds us in the kitchen, first at breakfast with the Mayor at her grandmother's old home, then watching Maria Hromjakova, a 73-year-old widow with a 1,000-watt smile, bake paschal bread. Round, oval, square and braided

loaves – seven in all – are taken from the embers of her old-fashioned, tiled wood stove. For us she also has baked a cocoa roll, which she learned to make when she started baking at age 12, and delicious buns with farmer’s cheese.

Later we visit Father Jaroslav Matolak and his wife, Adriana, in their temporary rectory. Father Jaroslav, who studied in Presov, is from a larger Ruthenian village northwest of Tichy Potok. Adriana, a doctoral candidate in post-modern Slovak literature, teaches high school Slovak and English in Presov during the week. I wonder aloud what it is like to be a priest in a village as small as this one.

“The people here have taken me in,” answers Father Jaroslav. “That’s the most a priest can expect from his people.”

A Ruthenian villager in traditional dress received the Eucharist on Easter morning.

Whenever possible, Father Jaroslav celebrates daily liturgy. As in all Greek Catholic churches, the liturgy is sung; because the village was without a priest and cantor for so long, however, he still cues parishioners during special liturgies. More often, though, the old women lead the worshippers.

Father Jaroslav also teaches four hours a week at the primary school, in addition to teaching catechism. One of his concerns is the village youth. “Other than the church there are few opportunities here for them. There are no jobs and no places to gather. That’s why young people go to the pubs to hang out with each other.”

“In other villages people have it easier,” Adriana adds. “Here they have to work very hard – and have to be the best – to do other things. And they do. Lots of professionals in Presov are from Tichy Potok.”

Father Jaroslav speaks Ruthenian, his mother tongue, with the villagers. He uses Slovak in church because people from outside the village also attend liturgy, and he admits that sometimes he has to search for the right expression in that language. Because few people understand the traditional Church Slavonic used in liturgies, Slovak liturgies are more common. And there are Greek Catholics, like Adriana, who speak only Slovak.

Although Presov radio offers a daily Ruthenian program, says Father Jaroslav, the language is becoming Slovakized. Some Ruthenian parents now speak only Slovak at home to avoid problems for their children later in school. And when the Matolaks have children? “Slovak will be their mother tongue,” answers Adriana, as her husband gives her a fond smile.

Villagers of Tichy Potok gather at the cemetery for Easter prayers.

It is three in the morning on Easter Day. Light spills from the church as the last villagers hurry in, carrying their baskets. Blanka and I thread our way through the overflowing crowd as the congregation starts to sing. Once inside, we are both momentarily stunned. The benches on the right side of the church are gone and the floor there is chock-a-block with baskets in all shapes and sizes, all filled with bread, eggs, butter, salt, sausages, ham, cheese and sweets to be blessed. The smells are tantalizing and I am unable to resist stealing peeks at this paschal collage of baskets.

The blessing and liturgy finished, the baskets seem to melt away as the villagers pounce on theirs and carry them into the night. Hours later at breakfast, we learn the reason for the rush: local custom dictates that the faster you make it home with your basket, the faster you will finish your work all year long.

We enjoy Easter breakfast at the one-room museum with some village women, who bring homemade bread, butter, ham, sausages and cheese, plus eggs, salt and cognac. When we stand for grace, two of the women, recently widowed, fight back tears. After a toast with cognac, one of the women nicks each side of the bread loaf, then slices it. This ensures that there will be bread all year. She also makes a cross on the butter. Everyone then takes a pinch of salt and rubs it on her eyebrows to stay healthy. They show me the red-and-white striped, woven cloth to carry the paschal bread and other food for blessing, used in the days when people had big families and still made large loaves of bread.

Despite the early morning chill and fog, the day turns bright and glorious. By late morning, one corner of the churchyard, crowded with baby carriages and parents, has become a nursery *al fresco*. All, even the babies, are dressed in their finest for the Easter Divine Liturgy.

After the liturgy, the parishioners file through the left arch of the iconostasis, where the priest uses myrrh to make the sign of the Cross on their foreheads. Then an altar boy places tiny cubes of blessed bread into their hands as they exit.



An Easter procession in the village.

Our pew is last when Adriana invites us to join her in receiving a blessing from her priest husband. Outside parishioners mill about, exchanging Easter greetings – “*Christos voskrese! Voistinu voskrese!*” – and bread, a token that all will meet again in heaven. There are Jozef, Lubomira and shy Slavko, Anna and Maria and the mayor’s secretary and other villagers whom we have met during the weekend.

There is more, though. Led by young men and women carrying banners and icons, everyone files through the village to the cemetery. There the priest, handsome in white silks, offers prayers at a central cross. Below, the village lies in sunshine, the river a glittering thread. Pastures, still empty, reach up the mountainsides just turning green with the spring. And just like that it is time to say good-bye to Tichy Potok and its generous people, who have made this a memorable Easter.

*Freelance writer Jacqueline Ruyak is a frequent traveler in “our world.”*