

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC JANUARY 1987 MEDICAL VISION CALIFORNIA DESERT ICE GALLOPING GLACIERS SLOVAKIA

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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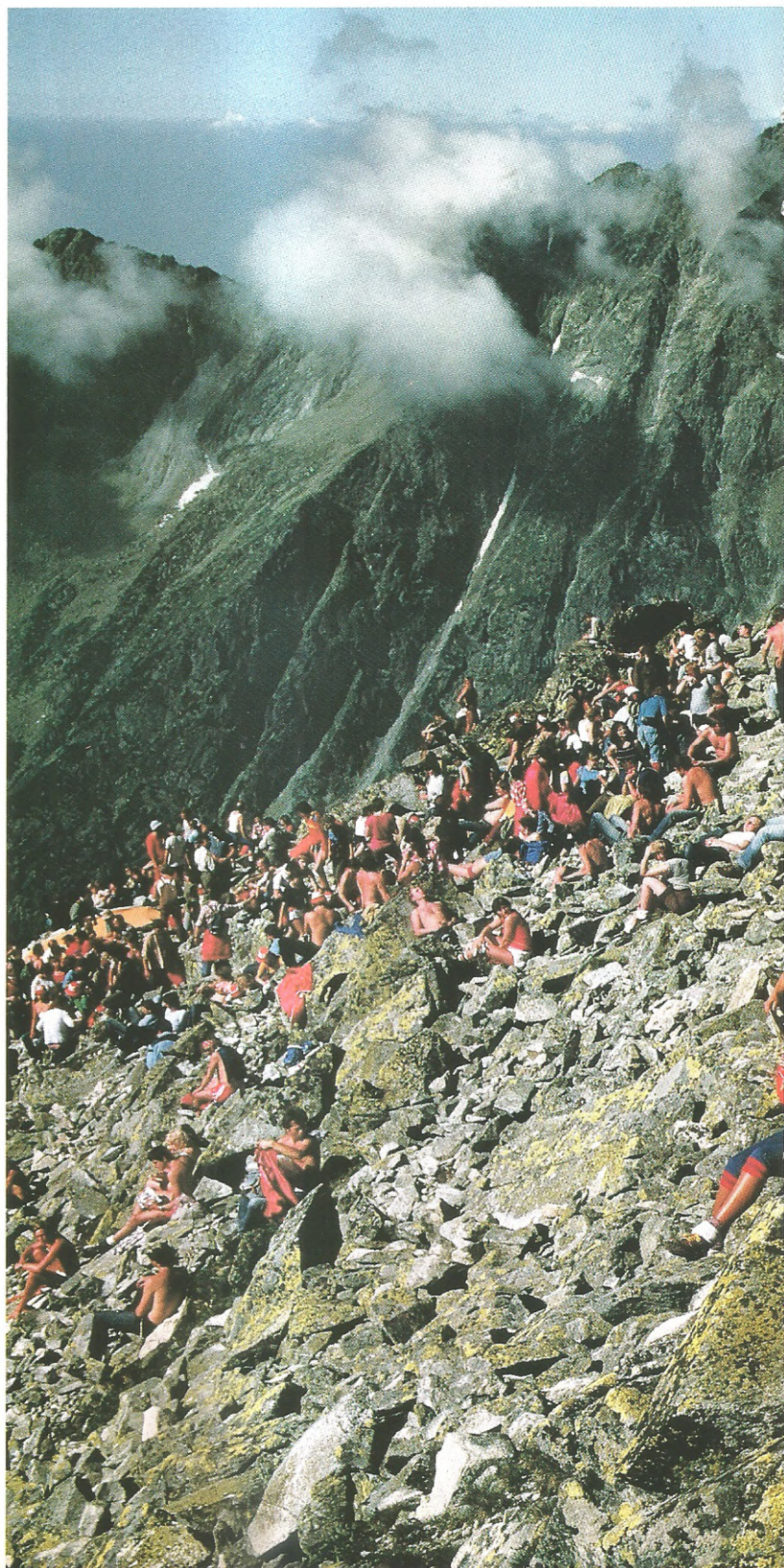
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Slovakia's Spirit

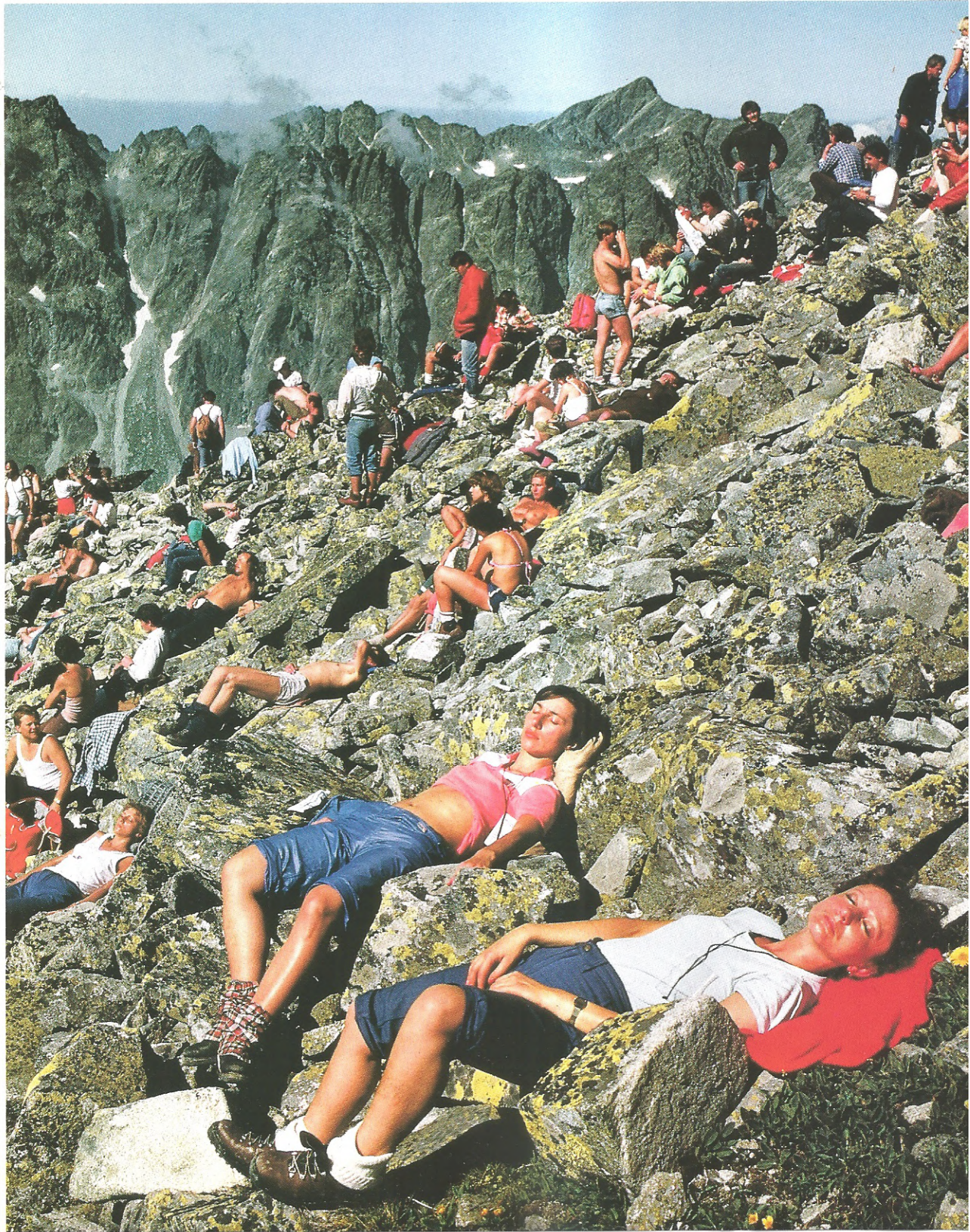
Following in Lenin's footsteps, thousands of young Communists climb Rysy peak in the High Tatras of Slovakia, an annual pilgrimage commemorating his ascent in 1913. When the throngs depart and peace returns to the mountains, the music of past ages still echoes through the valleys.

Surviving centuries of foreign rule, Slovakia has never surrendered its cultural heritage. Since 1968, when Soviet tanks arrived in Czechoslovakia to quell "socialism with a human face," the Slovaks have practiced compliance in pursuit of increased prosperity, while preserving the language and spirit of their ancestors.



of Survival

Article and photographs
by YVA MOMATIUK
and JOHN EASTCOTT





No one goes hungry in rural Slovakia. Villagers like Katarína Mišurová of Párnica raise livestock and vegetables to augment erratically



available store foods. Home produce, preserved for winter, supplements abundant potatoes and dairy products.

"URAJ JÁNOŠÍK was one hell of a man." The tired voice trailed off.

Then Vincent Patrnčiak, an old fiddle player from Terchová, a mountain village in Slovakia, one of Czechoslovakia's two republics, told me about Terchová's legendary hero, whose short and stormy life inspired the saddest mountain tunes. The story unfolded slowly, tattered memories that have survived more than 200 years.

"Jánošík was born here. Handsome and clever he was. He studied to be a priest. One day Jánošík's mother died. Her husband, Jánošík's father, buried her. But the *gróf*—people worked for big landlords in Slovakia—the *gróf* demanded to know why he wasn't at work. Burying his wife? That wasn't an excuse. And the *gróf* ordered the old man beaten. Four hundred lashes. . . ."

I listened intently. To my Polish ear the melodious Slovak language was familiar yet oddly archaic, springing from the ancient font of all Slavic tongues. Vincent went on:

"Jánošík saw his father's lifeless body. He told the *gróf*: 'I swear I will burn your castle down,' and he did. After that nothing could stop him. He plundered the rich and gave to the poor. People loved Jánošík. They prayed to him.

"One day a traitor gave him out. The captors put an iron hook between his ribs, hung him over a fire. Jánošík dangled there, smoking his pipe, swearing. At last he yelled, 'Now that you've cooked me, eat me!' and died. Even the mountains cried."

Vincent added sarcastically, "And now they say Jánošík fought for Communism."

During our months in Slovakia we found such pointed remarks rare. Fearful of the consequences, people seldom criticize Czechoslovakia's Communist system. While there are dissident groups in the large cities of Prague, Brno, and Bratislava, in the hills and mountains of rural Slovakia the lack of anonymity makes such groups virtually nonexistent. Most Slovaks resign themselves to the pursuit of safe, personal goals.

Others cherish the material improvements of the past 40 years and accept the regime that, although oppressively rigid by Western democratic standards, they believe has brought prosperity to once impoverished Slovakia.

Leaving the old musician, I followed a path made by generations of feet between Terchová's blossoming orchards, looking for my husband, John, and Tara, our five-year-old daughter. They were watching Gypsies erect a shooting arcade and a merry-go-round.

Along Terchová's main street, banners heralded Jánošík Days. Loudspeakers, omnipresent in Czechoslovakia's towns and villages, blared folk music. A festive crowd marched toward Vrátna Valley's amphitheater, several miles away. John ran ahead. I followed with Tara in tow.

Suddenly a dusty bus puffed up behind me. "Get in!" said the driver. Helping hands grabbed my aluminum case and tapped it curiously. "Electronic equipment?"

"*Nie*," I said. "*Aparaty fotograficzne*."

"Ah, a Polish journalist! You must be spying for Jaruzelski." Loud laughter greeted this reference to Poland's leader.

"I live in the United States," I explained.

"Aha! Then you must be spying for Reagan." Even Tara joined in the laughter. Flushed and happy, she was already sitting in somebody's lap, her hands sticky with chocolate.

The Slovaks apologized for their jokes. How did I like their country? Wasn't Vrátna the most beautiful valley I had ever seen? Where was my man? A pretty woman should not run around alone.

"There he is, I see him!" our driver yelled. High on the slope was John, his cameras

This is the sixth NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC assignment for author-photographer team Yva Moma-tiuk and John Eastcott, also wife and husband. Their subjects have included Canada's Inuit, New Zealand's Maoris, and Poland's mountain people. They live in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

Once upon a time the fairy-tale towers of Bojnice Castle, dating from the 1100s, housed Hungarian nobility. Now a museum to Slovakia's past, the castle forms a spectacular backdrop to bathers enjoying the mineral waters at Bojnice Spa. Other popular outdoor activities include hiking, skiing, climbing, and tennis.





Workers unite to celebrate harvest's end on Cooperative Day in Liptovská Osada, where lengthy speeches finally give way to music, food, and dancing. Acceptance of the socialist land reforms of 1948 has grown with the improved standard of living. All houses now have electricity, and most have a TV and refrigerator.

shining. "That's strange. He isn't fat. He isn't even old," the driver mused.

"What does he mean?" I asked my neighbor. She giggled. "When a Slovak girl marries an American, we suspect he must not only be rich but also old and fat. Is he an American?"

"No," I answered, "he's from New Zealand," and we both laughed.

At the Vrátna amphitheater we watched folk dancers from throughout Slovakia thundering on stage. Tense, light-footed

steps followed masterful jumps. Native wind instruments joined violins, cymbals, and high-pitched voices. Yet amid rainbows of costumes the songs lamented.

I THOUGHT of the history of the Slovak people, as woeful as these songs. Their ancestors had migrated to this mountainous, landlocked heart of Europe more than 1,500 years ago. Invaded in turn by Avars, Magyars, Tatars, and Turks, they paid in blood to hold on to their lands. In the ninth century they were briefly part of the Great Moravian Empire, but the Magyar invasion resulted in a thousand years of Hungarian rule.

Incredibly, the Slovaks kept their identity. Schools taught them in Hungarian; churches saved their souls in Latin, Czech, and German. Their own language, not recorded in writing until the late 1700s, survived in the hills and mourned in songs:

*Feed us, God, feed us,
In these hard, hard times,
Or we will perish. . . .*

And many did perish.

After the First World War, independence returned. The new democratic Czechoslovak Republic united the agricultural, often impoverished Slovaks and the industrial, prosperous Czechs.

Soon came the tragic Hitler years, the partition of Czechoslovakia, and liberation by the Soviet Army. By 1948 the postwar coalition government succumbed to the country's militant Communist Party, which was aided by the Soviet Union; the U.S.S.R. thus gained one of its staunchest allies. Czechoslovakia's industry was completely nationalized, cooperative farms established, a new constitution adopted, and opposition silenced.

Today Czechs and Slovaks elect an equal number of deputies to the House of Nations in the Federal Assembly of Czechoslovakia. The Communist Party stresses harmony and brotherhood between both peoples. Yet Czechs often dismiss Slovaks as hillbillies, lacking culture, while many Slovaks perceive Czechs as cold and conceited.

Cradled inside the great arch of the Carpathians, Slovakia unfolds gracefully, rolling from wild peaks in the north to the



Seeking the heart of the Slovak Socialist Republic, the authors threaded the mountain valleys that rib eastern Czechoslovakia. Celtic tribes, then Slavs settled the fertile plain fed by the Danube. Slovakia was invaded by Avars, Tatars, and Turks and ruled by Hungary for a thousand years. Briefly a democratic republic, then controlled by Hitler, it fell to Communists in 1948.

NGS CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION DESIGN: NANCY SCHWEICKART; RESEARCH: DAVID B. MILLER, MARGUERITE B. HUNSIKER; PRODUCTION: MARYANNE BREITHAUP

fertile plains of the Danube basin in the southwest. Medieval castles cast elegant shadows on wheat fields. Names of rivers—Váh, Hron, Cirocha, Hornád—tickle the throat with their harsh *r*'s and *h*'s.

New industrial plants dot the valleys, producing machines, engineering and transportation equipment, robots, pharmaceuticals, textiles, shoes, and beer. Domestic coal, nuclear and hydroelectric power, and Soviet oil and gas provide energy.

Not until the 1960s did the number of Slovaks working in industry approach the total of those in agriculture. Today only 15 percent till the land. With its five million citizens the Slovak Socialist Republic earns about 30 percent of the national income in a country of 15 million. Nearly every family owns a refrigerator, washing machine, and television; every third family, a car.

SLOVAKS COMPLAIN that the changing life-style has made people hurried, aloof; among the young, the divorce rate has soared.

A geologist said: "When I was young, the teacher spanked me, the priest spanked me, my father spanked me. Three big men tried to make a good citizen out of one little boy. Today they don't spank in school, the priest is less visible, and parents are busy working. Whom do we breed? Hooligans?"

Among family and friends, Slovaks are warm, generous, upholding old-fashioned courtesies of the rural communities from which many have stemmed.

Yet in casual encounters the very same people can be abrupt and rude. Store clerks, officials, repairmen, and waiters often treat customers with impatient indifference. A teacher told us: "We don't like this behavior



Dwarfed by towering mountains, high rises mushroom in the old town of Poprad, part of an effort to meet housing needs of nearby



factories. Garden plots with storage sheds, foreground, allow apartment dwellers to grow their own produce and enjoy fresh air.



any more than you do. But since almost everybody works for the state, people aren't worried about being fired, even for incompetence or rudeness."

People *can* be fired, however, for not adhering to the ruling Communist Party line, or—if they are teachers, police, or party members—for attending church services. For others, churchgoing can be detrimental to career advancement. On Sundays many people drive to distant village churches, hoping to worship in anonymity. Slovaks joke that if gasoline becomes rationed, party members will get double coupons. Why?

Because they have farther to go to church.

One day we met a funeral procession. An old woman dressed in black took my hand. "Your legs are younger, dear," she said, leaning on me. In the cemetery she introduced me serenely to sunken tombstones. Here lay her parents, her sister, a baby daughter. "God gives, God takes away," she said simply.

The minister intoned over an open grave: "Through me the deceased says to his widow: 'Forgive me, darling, for not being able to cherish you one more day.'" Women wept. A soft breeze stirred white lilies.



Political survivor once imprisoned by his own party, Czechoslovakia's President Gustáv Husák (above) was selected in 1969 to restore law and order, Soviet style, after Alexander Dubček's attempt at liberalization. Husák has since made an unspoken bargain with his people—docility in return for increased material comforts. Party member Veronika Goliánová watches her friend Marta Rybárová (left) embroider a tablecloth for the local priest. Husák received a similar present from both women on his 70th birthday in 1983.

"Now you can see that the church is alive here," the minister told us later. "Remember, Slovakia is a mosaic of nationalities: Czechs, Hungarians, Russians, Germans, Poles, Gypsies, and others. We have Catholics, Lutherans, and members of the Reformed and Orthodox Churches."

In Czechoslovakia, clergymen are civil servants, receiving salaries and funds to maintain their churches. They may not participate in political life or seek to motivate their followers politically.

"I am told that teachers cannot attend services," I said to him. He was suddenly ill at

ease. "I understand that if you are a Communist, you can't teach in West Germany," he retorted.

COOOPERATIVES, called *družstvá*, have changed the Slovak landscape even more than new industrial plants. The hills, once a bright patchwork of private plots, are now cultivated in multiacre sections. Quaint wooden farm buildings have been replaced with large družstvo compounds, their offices, barns, combines, and tractors protected by fences and armed guards.

The farms produce basic crops—grain, potatoes, fodder. Some add sugar beets, hops, fruits, and vegetables, or breed livestock. Thanks to machinery and fertilizers, one Slovak farm worker now feeds 15 people; his father might have fed three.

At the village of Liptovská Osada in central Slovakia, the director of the local cooperative told us that the farm's steep land supports 300,000 chickens, 50,000 geese, 12,000 sheep, 2,500 cattle, 2,000 pigs, and 45 horses. The cooperative also operates a vegetable store and a cheese factory, distills fiery plum brandy, sells carnations, and owns a tourist hotel.

"We employ 1,000 workers and earn about 180 million Czechoslovak crowns, or 30 million dollars annually," said Dr. Milan Paučula. Urbane and gentle, with degrees in law and agriculture, he oversees the farm.

"Wouldn't people prefer to own the land, the way their fathers did?" asked John.

Dr. Paučula laughed heartily at this. "Their fathers tell them how they had to get up at 3 a.m., work on a plot too small to feed them, rush to their factory job, then return to their field, often after dark."

IF YOU ASK about the Communist land reform of 1948, you will be told that farmers then considered it robbery. Today many have accepted it.

"When the official ordered me to sign our fields over to the družstvo," Mária Bartková-Mandačka told us in the village of Východná, "I grabbed a pot of boiling water to scald him, as if he were the devil. They ordered my husband home from work: 'You sit there till she signs.' After three weeks I gave up. We didn't get a penny! The other day the same man asked me: 'Mária, are you hurting?' And I said, 'Not at all!'"

Mária found her niche in the system. She proudly showed me medals awarded for her achievements.

She hopes to have 36 grandchildren: "Multiply my six children by six. What do you get?"

But, I protested, most women today work outside their homes.

"At home they used to toil all day and nobody was even grateful," she replied. "Now women have their own money, friends, and children too." The government grants a working mother maternity leave for six months, including benefits amounting to 90 percent of her salary. Day-care centers charge five crowns, or 85 cents, a day.

But often in the morning

I saw weary women on their way to the day-care center, carrying babies, urging on sleepy toddlers.

"I hate these superwomen who tell the government how they love to work full-time, rear children, and take care of the house," complained a mother of three. "Even our husbands expect us to work an 80-hour week and smile too."

The lure of industrial employment includes a salary averaging 3,000 crowns



Slovak cowboy Ján Záhorec (above) serves as caretaker of brood mares at the internationally renowned stud farm in Topolčianky. Exported for breeding, Thoroughbreds, Arabians, and Lipizzaners boost the economy with much needed hard currency.

Taking a break from a hot anvil, the ranch's blacksmith (**facing page**) offers typical Slovak hospitality, sharing his lunch with the authors.





(\$500) a month, as much as four weeks of paid vacation a year, and retirement between 53 and 60, with pension benefits up to 75 percent of pay. Workers have their own sports and recreation facilities.

We were told, however, that a quiet revolution is sweeping the factories, that hand-operated machines are being replaced by robots and computerized assembly lines.

Engineer Anton Kolenička, a balding veteran of 45 years in the steel industry, directs Slovakia's oldest ironworks, located in Podbrezová in central Slovakia. He considers himself lucky. "Automation! My successors will take it for granted. They won't see, as I did, the change it created in work psychology. People took it hard at first. About 15 years ago, nearly all they knew had become obsolete. They had to adapt, and I was privileged to witness this change."

Hard hats firmly on, we walked under red smoke from open-hearth furnaces, which

are now being replaced by electric arc furnaces. Heaped beside the Hron River, rusty pyramids of scrap metal waited to be melted, pulled, and rounded into pipes of all sizes and many destinations: the Middle East, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the U.S.S.R.

Engineer Milan Pivovarči, a fourth-generation man of iron, took us through the works. They were no longer a man's world. Women were operating cranes and pipe-sorting machines. My ears tingled; the noise reached a deafening 90 decibels.

Outside, Milan told us: "The old workers marvel at our progress. Work is still hard, but the salaries we get are second only to what miners are paid, and average 3,550 crowns a month. We retire at 55." He laughed. "But these old crows just want to keep on working."

SUCH ZEST for the job is rare in Slovakia. Even during regular work hours shops are full of customers. People play hooky to visit a hairdresser, repair a car, or speed off to their summer cottage. Many feather their nests with illegally obtained building materials or quietly subcontract a state-owned bulldozer to do a bit of excavating for their new house. The government seems to be saying: "Keep your political profile low, and we won't interfere."

Restaurants employ a maximum number of workers and frequently offer minimum service. One person brings a menu, another takes your order, another delivers drinks, another serves the food. Money is handled by an elusive "cashier" waiter.

Rather than waiting for the missing links in this human chain, we learned to send Tara to fetch menus and summon waiters. Slovaks love children and indulge them shamelessly. Tara was often invited to the kitchen to watch the chef prepare monumental desserts of fruit, nuts, and *zmrzlina*—ice cream.

On the road, away from petty annoyances, we traveled freely. Women in smocks and gum boots wielded scythes with fluid grace, trimming roadside ditches. Vacationing Slovaks searched for mushrooms and berries. Children splashed in warm streams, naked, light-headed from laughter.

IN SLOVAKIA the upbeat image of a happy society is cultivated by the government-controlled media. Posters advertise sunny holidays and bright prospects. Red banners praise the leadership of the proletariat. Slogans read: Long Live the Soviet Union! Communism Means Peace! Down With Imperialism!

The system guarantees jobs, housing, education, health services, and pensions, but the aspirations of the individual are mired by a political doctrine that relies on bureaucratic regulations to ensure loyalty.

Since the rise and fall of Poland's Solidarity trade union, neither Slovaks nor Poles can easily cross their joint border.

Slovaks show little interest in the political upheaval in Poland. "Frankly, we don't know what's happening in Poland," a forester explained to us. "People have learned not to touch matters they can't influence. They keep their heads down. They had their lesson in 1968."

That year a Slovak, Alexander Dubček, Czechoslovakia's Communist Party general secretary, aided by party members and ordinary citizens, sanctioned an unprecedented drive toward liberalization. His attempt to create "socialism with a human face" shook the country, ending abruptly with the Soviet-led invasion of Warsaw Pact troops. The "Prague Spring" of 1968 was discredited as an attempt to disrupt the very foundation of socialist order. Disgraced, Dubček was forced to resign.

One day we found Dubček's signature in a hotel scrapbook. "Did Dubček come here often?" I asked the receptionist. No, she said, only once, with friends.

I looked at her. Was there nothing to say about that springtime of hope? Her eyes flashed a message: "This topic is off-limits."

Yet Slovaks remember only too well. They are careful in their personal contacts.



Raising a child need not conflict with a job for Slovakia's mothers. The Tesla-Orava TV factory in Nižná runs a day-care center (facing page) staffed by professionals and catering to several hundred children. In spite of excellent standards in widespread state nurseries, some parents prefer the family touch. Retired grandparents provide willing help: Mária Námesná (above), from Žiar nad Hronom, mirrors her five-month-old granddaughter's winning smile. Working mothers may retire early based on how many children they have.



Prayers but not politics are permitted in Slovak churches, where state-licensed priests receive government paychecks. Morning mass at the baroque church in Spišská Stará Ves (**right**) draws a large congregation. Policemen, teachers, and party members tend to worship far from home, to avoid recognition and potential harassment. At Levoča's School for the Blind, a kindergartener pupil (**left**) will be guaranteed a full education and, later, specialized vocational training.

half the fruit and vegetables in the republic.

The average new house rises three stories above a full basement. Often the pastel stucco walls are adorned with small mirror chips. Such houses contain some 3,000 square feet and cost about 350,000 crowns, or \$60,000. Proud owners frequently reside in the basement, venturing upstairs only for ceremonial occasions. Do-it-yourself building abounds, and since mortgage rates are 1.5 to 2.7 percent, a house is an excellent tangible investment.

These giant saltboxes are alien to the traditional Slovak design that once graced everything from decorated beehives to some of the world's finest Gothic wooden altars.

"After the war cultural values changed," declared Pavol Repka, an architect from Tatranská Lomnica. "Cosmopolitan styles, such as Tirolean villas and Italian neoclassic facades, were discredited as bourgeois. Our indigenous wooden architecture was denounced as primitive. Villages were to catch up with towns. We tore down what we could and moved into stone and brick boxes. Contractors encourage uniformity. It costs less. So we drown in mediocrity."

Pavol looked toward cloudy peaks: "Once I spent five days alone, snowed in on Mont Blanc in the French Alps. I decided that if I survived I'd search our past for what makes us tick, and build an honest Slovak house." His new house, an honest Slovak one, was rising just beside us.

ON WEEKENDS Slovaks flock to the country to swim, shoot rapids, fish, ski, windsurf, hike, even fly. We rode with a hang-gliding club into the hills above Banská Bystrica, capital of the Central Slovak Region. The

"It saddens me that most of us who used to press for political reforms no longer see one another," a retired schoolteacher told us in Levoča, a small history-rich town in the central part of Slovakia. "We withdrew into our shells, as if fearful of guilt by association. We pursue only tangible goals: a new car, a new house."

Indeed, boxlike houses were going up everywhere. "How many families live in each one of these?" wondered John, pointing to huge concrete villas. We asked around.

"Just one," a woman, busily washing her windows, informed us. "Families build for themselves. Grown children stay with them for a while, till they can afford their own."

"But can they?"

"Sure they can. They work for it too. They want that third bathroom, a large TV set. I ask my daughter: 'Do you have to get everything in such a hurry?' and she says, 'Maminka, everybody does.'"

Factory work often ends at 2 p.m., leaving plenty of time for moonlighting. Enterprising Slovaks make souvenirs, rent rooms to holidaymakers, and cultivate *záhrady*, small plots allocated outside villages and towns. The lush gardens produce more than



QUI VENIT ET ABIECIUM
ADHUC? Luc. XII. 8.

KTOMAS USI NA POCHOPNU
SEHU POCITAT IABUS.

PO TVOJEJ PRAVICI
PANE STOI
KRALOVNA
ODDOBENA ZLATOM

KTOMAS USI NA POCHOPNU
SEHU POCITAT IABUS.



valley below us simmered in dusty heat; up on the ridge strong updrafts cooled the skin.

Out came picnic baskets. Men unfolded homemade gliders. Mike Harger, an American who is now a legend, brought one to Slovakia nine years ago, and they copied it.

Carefully checking the wind, the glider pilots joked with a 55-year-old grandfather and helped fasten his harness. Then they were off with a rustle of wings, soaring suspended under fragile canopies of Dacron.

"After my first flight I couldn't sleep," Jozef Čiliak, a truck driver, told us later over mugs of beer. "But up in the air it's all beauty and peace. Birds follow you, you join them. Man has wings at last."

FOUNDED IN 1255, Banská Bystrica, "pearl on the Hron River," was renowned in medieval Europe for copper and silver mines. Wealth created exquisite Gothic and Renaissance houses; power built the massive castle; faith erected lofty church spires.

Today in Red Army Square private gardeners dispense free medical advice to fruit buyers: "Black currants, good for your kidneys. . . ." Other entrepreneurs sell embroidered Slovak blouses, woodcrafts, and Western imports: T-shirts, jeans.

Banská Bystrica spills upward from its crowded historical center into hilly satellite suburbs. Rows of high-rise buildings or *paneláky*, as Slovaks call this prefabricated sameness, absorb a population that since 1945 has increased sixfold, to 76,000 people.

Banská Bystrica is a political town. Throughout the year busloads of delegations and tourists come to pay homage to SNP, the Slovak National Uprising. In the monument-museum, trained guides relate how in the bleak days of August 1944 the people, led by Slovak Communists, fought the Nazis to defeat; how the partisans joined the victorious Red Army and helped to establish a Communist regime after the war.

Wedding guests dance the night away in the village of Lendak (below), where the revelry will last several days. The bride and groom (facing page), in traditional embroidered costumes, take turns bidding their parents a moving farewell before going to church. Old-time customs and crafts, now encouraged by the state, still survive in pockets of Slovakia, which sponsors many folklore festivals.



In August, preparations for the 40th anniversary of SNP swept the country. All shopkeepers were ordered to display SNP emblems. In Banská Bystrica houses were painted, flowers planted, new monuments erected, pineapples and bananas from Cuba delivered to grocery stores.

The big day came. Streets blossomed with summer dresses. Old peasant women cried out "Sweetheart! Beloved!" as they waved to small, white-haired Gustáv Husák. The president of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (C.S.S.R.) and general secretary of the Communist Party, himself a Slovak, waved back with a grandfatherly smile. He walked arm in arm with a Soviet marshal.

Under huge portraits of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, 100,000 Slovaks gathered. Speakers recalled the martyrdom of fallen partisans, praised the country's socialist order, and called for peaceful coexistence.

Yet the applause was lukewarm, the



March of the matriarchs: Shouldering the bride's belongings, married women of Lendak proceed to the groom's house. Village



matchmakers keep energetic vigil, believing no young woman should remain single lest she "turn to vinegar."

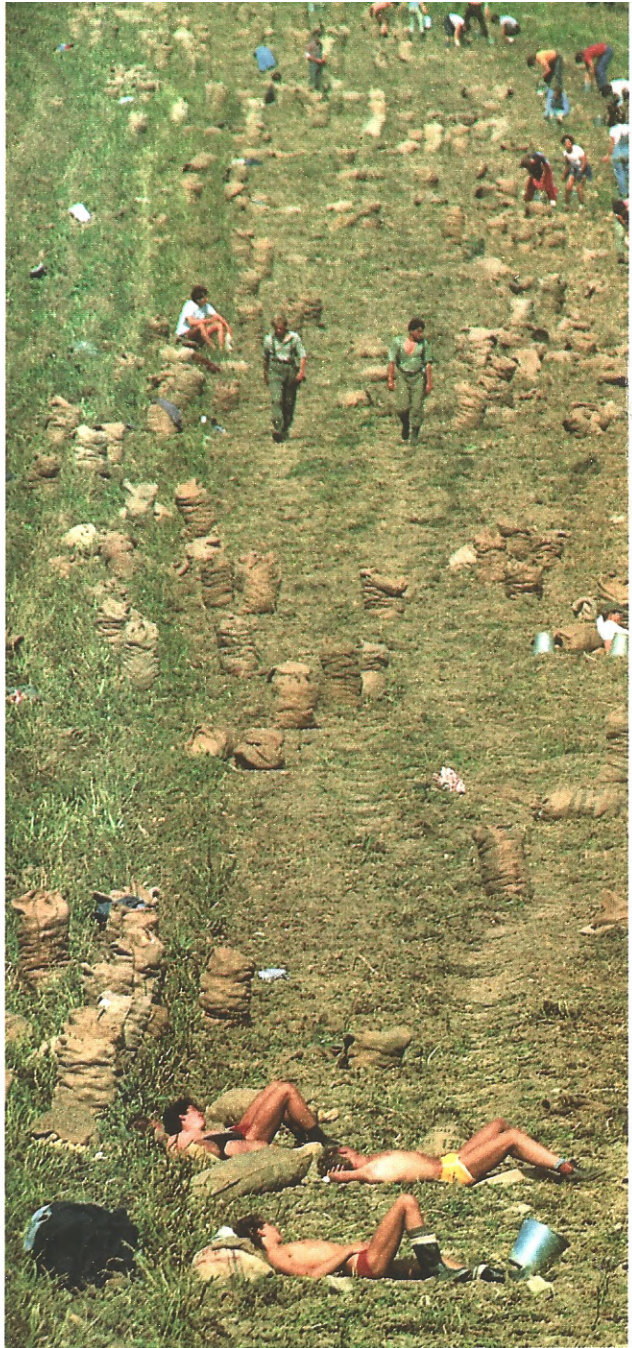
Architects of the future, on loan from a university in Bratislava, travel 200 miles to join the September potato campaign (right) on a cooperative farm near the Dunajec River. For two weeks a year the state recruits high-school and college students as well as factory and office workers to help harvest this important crop, providing board, lodging, and minimal wages in return. Some students



enjoy the break; others attempt to opt out with a doctor's note. Co-op members (above) distribute hefty 220-pound sacks to fellow workers, pausing at every house for a shot or two of vodka and a chat. Each Slovak family consumes some 700 pounds of potatoes annually, carefully storing supplies in cool cellars or in grass-covered shelters in the hills.

boredom evident: People had heard all this before. For the majority, attendance was compulsory. "Unless I present a doctor's statement that my boys are sick, I have to be here," a mother of two small children explained. She waited until the ceremonies ended and quickly walked away.

EAGER TO ESCAPE the heat and the bustle of Banská Bystrica, we headed north to Tatra National Park. Wild mountain peaks soared suddenly above the surrounding flatness, peaks now



brilliant in the sun, now sooty in a storm.

Gold-seekers, hunters, naturalists discovered the beauty of the Tatras in the 16th century. Today six million visitors a year come to hike, climb, and ski in the most spectacular alpine range in the 900-mile bow of the Carpathians.

Juraj Turošík has been director of Tatra National Park since 1961. "In the past 20 years," he told us, "the number of visitors has increased six times, an incredible strain. People dig out our alpine flowers and chase our marmots and chamois. The forests wilt,



poisoned by exhaust fumes. We limit access to certain areas and by 1990 hope to introduce electric trolleys, banning all cars."

Around the park, hotels, campgrounds, and private rooms are filled. In the once isolated village of Ždiar, now called the "largest hotel in C.S.S.R.," villagers offer up to 4,000 beds, mainly to East Germans. Having lost direct access to the Alps, they visit the Tatras in astonishing numbers.

The visitors also come to shop. In addition to the East Germans, Russians and Hungarians throng the local stores, buying

everything from peaches to children's toys.

Among Eastern European countries, Czechoslovakia boasts one of the highest standards of living. Availability of goods, however, does not guarantee quality. Years ago Škoda cars sold well in international markets; today even the government Prago-car rental agency considers Škodas unreliable. Western imports are few and usually can be purchased only for hard currency—dollars, marks, francs—through special government-owned stores. Here a bottle of good Scotch costs only \$3.50. And Ford

Clearly an optimist, Mária Chlebovcová (right) weaves a runner for her 18-year-old son's dowry, undeterred by his lack of a girlfriend. Her sister-in-law, at left, lends a hand; in mourning for her father, she will wear black for at least a year. In sickness and in health, family and neighbors look after each other, with state nursing homes used as a last resort. Everyone pitches in (left) at a christening party. Frequent family celebrations ritually call for vast quantities of food, free-flowing wine, and spirited singing.

Two of them got stuck in the door. Too many skirts or dumplings, who could tell?

They dressed the girl in silence. In her hand-pleated skirt, richly embroidered corset, and pearl-studded maiden crown she seemed a painted doll. Women slipped hundred-crown notes into her shoes as tokens of prosperity, a sprig of myrtle inside her blouse as a charm against sinister forces.

After the wedding, at the feast, the sight of sausage sent the maids of honor into giggles. Men ladled beer from tin buckets hour after hour. Matrons carried the bride's bedding to the groom's house (pages 140-41). They tossed a child onto the marriage bed as a symbol of procreation.

Night came. Surrounded by her maiden friends, the bride danced slowly, embracing them for the last time. In a dim corner a fiddle, clarinet, bass, and accordion played on.

SLOVAKS BELIEVE that music and mountains restore their spirit. To cure their ailing bodies, they visit the province's famous spas. We traveled from Lendak to the modern health complex of Piešťany, an ancient spa still using nature's gifts to heal the sick.

This grandest of Slovakia's spas once tended the rheumatic pains of European monarchs. Now it treats nearly 40,000 patients a year, including Americans, Arabs, and West Europeans.

I love mud, its sticky, oozing texture, and in Piešťany I got my wish: a pack of thermal, sulfurous goo filtered from the bottom of the Váh River. The heat slowly penetrated my body. Repeated applications promote gradual absorption of the sulfur into cartilage

Escort cars from West Germany, priced at \$6,000, sell readily.

The hard currency comes from relatives abroad, but demand exceeds supply. Few foreign tourists escape whispered inquiries: "A *doláry máte?*—Do you have dollars?"

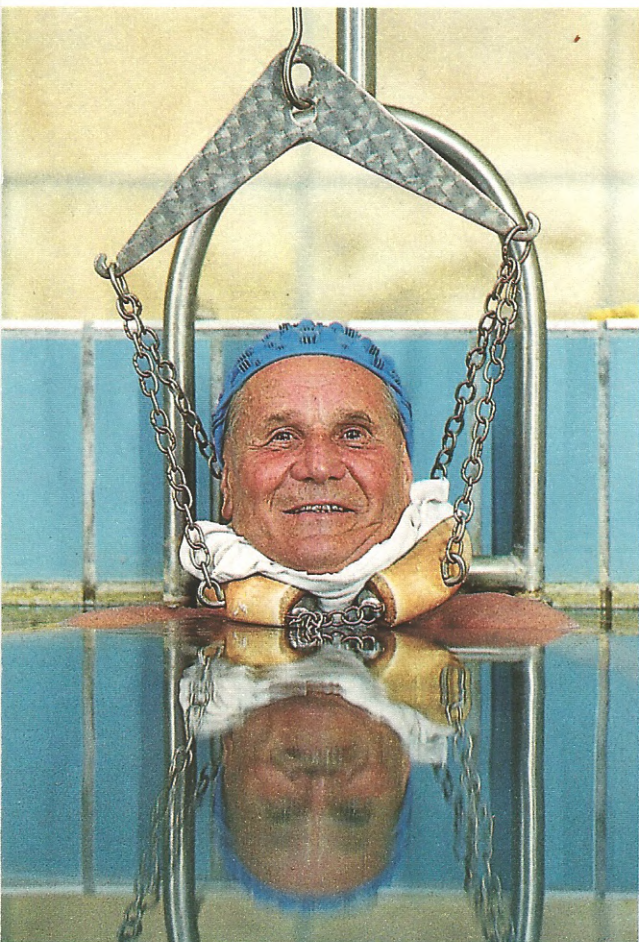
In spite of the crush of tourists in Tatra National Park, folk traditions have survived the longest in the villages surrounding it. In the old, wooden village of Lendak we saw rituals preserved and folk costumes worn daily. Artificial flowers and holy pictures decorated TV sets, making them look like miniature altars.

To help assure the marital bliss of their children, Lendak families may spend as much as 100,000 crowns. A dowry may include a car, furniture, rugs, money.

One morning our phone rang. "Get up! We're going to a wedding," ordered Dr. Ján Olejník, the park's ethnographer.

To the bride's house came married women resplendent in voluminous costumes.





Crowned heads of state, maharajas, and sheikhs have all basked in the sulfurous waters of Slovakia's famed Piešťany Spa. Workers can receive free treatment for ailments such as rheumatism or nervous disorders. This patient combines spinal traction with a thermal bath.

and heal troubled joints, explained Dr. Oldřich Bláha, the spa's chief physician.

Foreigners pay about \$50 a day; this includes necessary medical care and even tickets to cultural events. For C.S.S.R. patients spas, hospitals, and prescription drugs are free.

But some drugs are hard to find. When John became ill, we spent a day trying to fill his prescription, to no avail.

A Slovak friend ridiculed our naïveté. "What do you expect, miracles? This is an imported drug. If a pharmacy has it, it is most likely put aside for friends and relatives. Let me try." He procured it from the

same pharmacy we had tried earlier. In Slovakia it helps to know the right people.

NO CONNECTIONS are needed to find Veronika Goliánova, a grand old woman who for 30 years ran the village of Detva's famous singing-and-dancing folk ensemble. Villagers readily point out her whitewashed house, with its traditional flower designs.

Inside, Veronika served *halušky s bryndzou*, tiny dumplings sprinkled with sheep cheese. By the window her granddaughter nursed a newborn son.

As a barefoot child Veronika, youngest of six, had to shine the shoes of the landlady. After the war, impressed by socialist ideals of equality, she embraced the new order. Convinced that Detva's heritage must be preserved from the onslaught of modernization, she organized cultural events and an artisans cooperative. Her embroidery decorated a lavish velvet tablecloth, given to President Husák for his 70th birthday.

Later she opened chests full of embroidered costumes she had rescued when people threw them out in favor of factory-made fashions. She carefully unfolded a blouse that was a hundred years old.

"We have a saying: 'From anything old a new sapling must grow.' That's what happened after the war. Fascism rotted away, and on its ruins we built socialism, such as it is. It could be better if people were better. Bad often tries to destroy the good."

"Are you a Communist?" I asked.

"Yes. But I go to church too. I argue with the priest. I also tell party officials what I think is wrong. I have hope. Because of the mistakes we've made, something new and better must be born one day."

Veronika gently stroked the upturned face of her great-grandson. "Who knows? Don't ask me what. I'm just an old woman with eight grades of village school."

We drove away slowly. Autumn was advancing steadily, wrapping river valleys in fog and turning beech trees copper. We reflected on the future of the Slovaks, who are historically so well versed in the art of survival. They seem to believe that change for the better must come slowly, from within the system. The times of Juraj Jánošík, the times of lonely battles, are over for now. □