Chapter 37
Slovakia 2013



Journal: Bratislava, Slovakia, and its neighbors

Monday, December 9, 2013, DL 249, AMS-DTW

I had no chance to write while I was on this trip, as I was kept busy most of the time and needed to use what time I had to grade the papers that my Trade Policy students had turned in the day I left. I've just finished that and am only halfway across the Atlantic, so I'll see what I get written now.

I was attending and speaking at a conference at the University of Bratislava, in Bratislava, Slovakia. This came about last winter when I got an e-mail from Martin Grancay asking if I would sponsor him through the Weiser Center at U of M for a visit to Ann Arbor. I'd not normally be interested in doing that for someone I knew nothing about, but he explained his research interest, which was about the history of the concept of comparative advantage, and that got my interest. I agreed, he got the funding, and he spent three weeks with us. Toward the end of his visit, in our final conversation, I was wondering how I might get him to invite me to Slovakia, since I'd never been there. But before I could say anything myself, he asked if by any chance I'd be willing to visit in December and speak at a conference. It seems that his university has this conference every December on international economics and international relations. He had just been appointed Vice Dean and had responsibility for it. I jumped at the chance.

Martin is very young to be a Vice Dean. He's just 29, and still an Assistant Professor. Now that I've learned more about him, I think I can understand both why they might offer him the position – because he's one of their best faculty – and why he would take it – it releases him from some teaching and doesn't take a huge amount of time.

Martin arranged my visit, including a couple of extra days after the conference to see the sights. He met my flight to Vienna (there were no flights on Delta to Bratislava, but it is just an hour's drive from Vienna), and he drove me to the place I would be staying most nights. It was a large old house next to a student dormitory, owned and staffed by the university and used for visitors like me. It was not particularly plush or even comfortable, but it was elegant. Mine was one of only 5 guest rooms that I could see, and it was reached by a wide dark wood staircase that was beautiful. Martin said that a member of the staff would be there 24 hours a day to let me in, but it was clear that the several people who served in that role spoke no English. It was fortunate that I always had Martin with me when I came and went.

He asked what I'd like to do, and I opted for a nap, as I hadn't slept as well as I'd like on the flights. Then at 5:00, he collected me, and we walked to a restaurant for dinner. I had a rooster soup (how that is different from chicken, I don't know), and a Slovak specialty that was described on the menu as bags of dough containing cheese. These were like ravioli, only plumper. Martin insisted that this cheese was not really cheese, but that it was impossible to explain why. He has since told me the name of the dish, pirohi, which is apparently their version of pierogi. The cheese that is not cheese is called bryndza. It tasted like cheese, and it was delicious. Martin ordered fried cheese, and I learned that cheese is a major part of the diet here, and quiet often it is sheep cheese.

I had a good night's sleep followed by a shower and breakfast in the morning. The short hall that was the entrance to my room had doors on both sides, one to a small room with a toilet and sink, the other to a small room with a shower and sink. The shower stall was very small and had a hand-held sprayer instead of a faucet or shower nozzle. I turned on the water without thinking, and of course the sprayer, which was lying on its side, sprayed out the door of the shower into the room. That's the last time I made that mistake, but I've somehow managed to flood the room anyway each time I've showered, and I have not always known how I did it.

The conference was to run from 9:00 Thursday morning until early afternoon on Friday. But Martin said he would pick me up at 10:00. He'd explained that the conference was in a castle an hour's drive from there. So clearly, I'd not be attending the morning sessions. Indeed, we got there just a little before lunch.

It was both Martin and his fiancé, Nora, who picked me up. Nora is also an Assistant Professor at the university, and both have their PhDs in economics from that university as well. Both of them are very attractive and full of interest and energy, and I like them a lot.

To my surprise, since it was Martin who had driven me from the airport the day before, it was Nora who did all the rest of the driving during my visit. The reason is that their car is a manual transmission, and Martin doesn't know how to drive it. He had driven me from the airport in his father's car, which was an automatic. Why doesn't he learn? I'm sure he could, but they seem to have a division of labor that works for them. She drives,



Nora and Martin, from trip

and he directs. He's very good at that, and she seems happy to rely on him. He's like a GPS that doesn't just talk but also points. And can speak loudly and correct you when you turn the wrong direction, which Nora does because she is somewhat directionally challenged.

It turns out that she has a good reason, I guess, for confusing right and left. In addition to working as a professor (which pays poorly in Europe and especially so in a country as poor as Slovakia), she also works as a tour guide. As she explained, most of the time when she is directing people's attention to right or left, she is walking backwards.

These two have both done a huge amount of travel. Nora has spent several long stays in China, where she speaks Mandarin in addition to Slovak, English, German, and several other languages. Martin has spent time in many countries as well – he counts 54, which was the number I'd been to myself until this trip. And since they've been together, they travel together to many places as well.

Nora explained how she happened to become a tour guide. At some point she learned about a course that she could take that would qualify her for that job, and she took it for what she would learn, not because she wanted the job. But before she'd even quite finished, she was getting requests to serve as a guide, apparently because her instructor had spoken of her to others. That's when she discovered that she could earn much more

money as a guide than as a professor. Now she continues to do it for that reason. She can't afford not to. And the money she earns allows the two of them to travel even more.

I can easily believe that she's a very good tour guide, as she was one for me. That came later, but she was my guide both in Bratislava and in Vienna. Martin was with us, of course, but he claimed to be learning from her just as much as I was.


Smolenice Castle, from trip.

She drove us to the Smolenice Castle, near the town of Smolenice, Slovakia. There are lots of castles and palaces in this region, though some are ruins. This one belongs to the Slovak Academy of Science, has been beautifully restored, and is apparently available for rent by other organizations. The university has been renting it for this conference every December for many years.

All the conference participants were staying Thursday night in the castle, but most had to share a room. I, as their main speaker and from abroad, had my own room – a suite – with a fine view of the countryside and beautiful furniture. The bathroom here was a single room with both toilet and bathtub. But the tub was in the corner, aligned diagonally, with the back side scooped out as a seat. This, Martin tells me, is a very common design. It does not include any way to erect a shower curtain, or to mount a shower nozzle, so you sit on the seat and use the hand-held sprayer to wash yourself. I found that unpleasant and ended up standing in the middle of the tub, holding the sprayer over my head. I loved the room, but I was glad to get back to the tiny shower in the house at the university, where at least I could put the sprayer into its bracket.

We had a delicious lunch with all the hundred or so conference participants in the castle. I've forgotten now what we ate, but I know it was good. I do remember the dessert, which was next to each plate when we sat down. It was a chocolate-covered sort of soft cylinder, standing on end like – very much like – an erect penis. I wasn't going to try it because of my need to avoid sugar, but they explained that this was another Slovak specialty and was filled with a sort of custard. I had a couple of bites, and it was wonderful.

The afternoon plenary session, from 1 to 3, was when I spoke. There was first an introduction by the Dean, then a talk about Taiwan because they get funding from that country, and finally me. My talk, "Plusses and Perils of Globalization for a Small Country," was well received. At one point, as I showed a diagram on the screen and

wondered if anybody there would appreciate it, a young woman in the audience smiled so broadly that I interrupted myself to comment on how much she seemed to like it. Later, when my talk was done and there was time for questions, she was the first to ask one, and in it she showed good understanding of what I'd been talking about and raised a good issue that I hadn't thought of. When the whole session was over, I meant to seek her out and talk with her more about it, but I didn't need to, as she came to me. We talked more then, and the next day at lunch and over coffee. I believe I have now promised that I'd be willing to sponsor her for a visit to Michigan with the Weiser Center, same as I did for Martin. However, she's a grad student, not faculty, so I'm not sure that is possible.

This was the sort of conference in which there are multiple sessions simultaneously, except for the plenary session. I had looked at the program with Martin and tried to get a sense of which, if any, of the papers would be given in English. He assured me that all these people could speak English and would be glad to do so, if I was in the room. So I went to the session that afternoon in which Nora would be presenting her work, along with several others. She, of course, did speak English, and Martin managed to press one other to do so, though it was clear that he'd have preferred not to. The rest of the speakers spoke Slovak. Martin leaned over and told me every now and then what they were talking about, and sometimes their slides were self-explanatory. But for the most part I did e-mail on my iPhone.

But not during Nora's talk. Hers was about the extent to which the Chinese are buying up the natural resources of Africa, specifically the crucial minerals that most of us haven't heard of that are important for modern devices like smart phones. As she explained, she hadn't really done much with this topic except to dig out the facts of Chinese investment, but I found it very interesting and told her so.

After that session, I decided to skip the last session of the day and just hide out and catch up on work. I figured that with multiple sessions, everyone could assume that I'd been attending a different one than they were in. I'd forgotten that Martin would be presenting his work in one of the next sessions, so I later had to apologize for having missed it. Really not a good move when he was being such a wonderful host.

That evening there was a conference dinner there in the castle. It took place in three rooms, end-to-end. In the first, a band had set itself up, and early on there was nobody there. In the second room was a long table filled with food. For some reason, as I started at one end, I assumed that the same dishes would be provided at each end, and since I found my favorite wiener schnitzel there as well as a sort of spinach pie and one or two other yummy things, I filled my plate. Only when I walked to the other end, past numerous salads and desserts, did I find that the other end had a completely different selection of dishes.

I went into the third room where people were sitting at tables and found a table with a man and a woman who looked like they needed company. These turned out to be a foreign officer from the embassy of Taiwan and his wife, attending because they had funded the conference. One other person joined us who had an interest in Taiwan, and

the four of us had a good conversation about all manner of things, Taiwan-related and otherwise. When I finished my plate of food, I went back for another full plate from the other end of the long table and continued the conversation.

After that I was ready to turn in for the night, but I was told that the band was playing, so I thought I should check that out. I went into the first room, which was lined with chairs along the walls but with open space for dancing, and I found the band playing to an audience of one. Over on the left, in the shadows, there was a woman whom I couldn't make out. I took a seat myself on my side of the room and looked and listened to the music. In addition to playing and singing, the band had multiple devices that sprayed light around the room, triggered somehow by the music. It was quite a show, and I liked most of the music.

I eventually decided I'd had enough, and I went back into the room with the long table. By now all the dishes that I'd enjoyed on my first plate were gone and had been replaced by a pig. Yes, a whole pig had been roasted somehow and was splayed out on a huge platter. I was already full, as I supposed most people must be, so I just walked on by. But when I ran into Martin and commented on the pig, he said yes, of course, there's always a pig eventually. It is so good that I must have some. I went back, asked the man who was carving it to give me just a small piece (which he didn't), and returned to the music room to listen more and eat. It was good, certainly, but not something I couldn't have done without.

On Friday morning there was breakfast in one of those rooms, followed again by multiple simultaneous sessions. This time I picked one that had the most papers with titles in English and attended it with Martin sitting next to me to translate. That was needed, because neither of the English-titled paper givers showed up.

At the end of the session, Martin led me to woman in the corner who apparently had told him she wanted to talk with me. He left me with her, and we talked. I never quite figured out what her story was. I believe that she mentioned being a student, but she looked to be quite a bit older than Martin. She asked me if I agreed that there are increasing numbers of paradoxes in the world. I didn't really understand what she meant, but I was pretty sure that I did not agree with her, and that I don't think that in the world of economics, there are true paradoxes, even though we've given that name to some things. We call them paradoxes usually when the world does not behave according to our theories, rather than accepting that there is something wrong with our theories.

Anyhow, as nearly as I could tell, she was hoping that I would not only agree that there are a growing number of paradoxes, but that I would also give her some guidance towards resolving them. Her purpose, she said, was that she someday hopes to win the Nobel Prize in economics. I wished her well. Pity I didn't get her name, to recognize it when she wins. But I'll probably be dead.

The conference ended after lunch, Nora drove us back to the university, and I moved back into my room there. After a short time to recoup, they picked me up to go into

downtown Bratislava for dinner, some sightseeing, and a concert. I had supposed we'd drive, but instead we walked to a bus stop and took the bus.

We had a very pleasant evening, as Nora showed us the palaces and government buildings in the city. She also explained far more about the history in the region than I ever knew, even though much of it I should have. It seems that this part of the world was ruled by the Hapsburgs and was called the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bratislava was part of that and is just a short distance from both Austria and Hungary today. In fact, the rulers of this empire, although they lived in Budapest, Hungary, would have their coronations here in Bratislava. Some of the old buildings are very old, and there are many very elegant and beautiful buildings from the 17th century. According to Nora, the Hapsburgs at one point ruled about half the world, including much of South America. They achieved this not by military conquest, but by marriage.

We ate dinner in a restaurant that neither of them had been to before, but I guess there are so many good choices that they didn't feel the need to select one that they knew. (Or maybe they only rarely dine out.) We went into the restaurant and downstairs into a basement that was full of atmosphere, and I thought it would be great. Turns out it was also full of smoke, as this was the smoking section of the restaurant, and to reach the non-smoking section we needed to climb back up, cross a walkway, and descend again. I hadn't noticed the smoke, and probably wouldn't have minded if I had, but Nora especially didn't like it.

I've mentioned all those stairs, and this is a good place to mention that for several weeks, including on this trip, I've been having a hard time going downstairs. Something was wrong with my left knee, and so I'd been descending stairs, both at home and here, slowly, stepping down with my left foot only. I'd apologized to them for my slowness, when they were walking with me, and of course that led to their apologizing to me every time we had to use stairs. They were very apologetic about this restaurant.

Anyhow, we all ate garlic soup, which is another standard here in Bratislava, and which was very good. Then I ordered one of several varieties of fried cheese from the menu, since Martin raves about it. Later, while he was gone to the restroom, I mentioned that it was fine but not as good as the pirohi from before. She said yes, she agreed, but Martin was speaking so highly of it that she didn't want to contradict him. I thought that was adorable. I'm probably not a good judge of these things, but I have the impression that they are very much in love. They'll be marrying next summer and then honeymooning in Australia.

After dinner we went to the concert. This was in the Philharmonic Hall, a concert hall that was built in the style of the 18th century but was rather new. We had good seats that Martin had purchased, and we enjoyed a program the first half of which was Mozart and the second some Czech composer, much more modern. The main piece from Mozart was one of his clarinet concerti that I listen to all the time on my iPod. The soloist played a clarinet such as I've never seen before. It was longer and I suppose deeper toned than normal. But I couldn't notice any difference in the sound.



Philharmonic Hall,
from Wikipedia 2025

During the intermission, we stepped out into the lobby and chatted. What was noticeable was that most people were drinking glasses of wine. There was a long bar at the side of the room where you could buy wine. I gather that is standard in Europe.

As the orchestra assembled for the second half, it was joined first by many more instrumentalists, and then by a choir that numbered even more. Nora speculated that there were more people on the stage than there were in the auditorium, and she may have been right.

But most of our attention was on a single instrument that had been brought in, the top of which could be seen above the heads of the orchestra. It was propped against some sort of metal stand, as it looked to be too heavy to carry for long. It was an inverted U-shaped tube of wood, with bits of hardware on it. Nora said it looked like a vacuum cleaner. It seemed to be in the row next to the bassoons, so I figured it must be some sort of bassoon. I've since learned, from Wikipedia, that is a contrabassoon.

Eventually a man came in and sat next to it, and through the rest of the concert I was focused on him to see if and when he would play it. The others did the same, and we all agreed, after the concert, that he had played it only for a very short passage in the middle of the piece. We're also sure that he never played any other instrument. He just sat there, looking straight ahead, for the whole thing.

That would seem a waste, but not as much as two of the three vocal soloists who also came onto the stage at the start. They were positioned in chairs on either side of the conductor, and they would stand up when their part called for them to sing. The tenor did so repeatedly and at length, the baritone did so only once and briefly, and the soprano did so only once also, even more briefly. We were all economists, of course, but we wondered how much they were paid for that.



Contrabassoon
from Web 2025

On Saturday we went to Vienna, first by local bus to the train station, then by train to downtown Vienna. We spent several hours walking around that splendid city. I'd originally told Martin that, since I'd been to Vienna both as a student and later with Pat, I didn't need to see it. But they persuaded me that this is the absolute best time to visit Vienna because of the Christmas markets, and so we did. Perhaps it is needless to say, but I certainly did not recall seeing anything there before. Its palaces are out of this world.

The Christmas markets were certainly a phenomenon, but not one that I'd feel compelled to see again. I gather that for a long time, perhaps centuries, this part of Europe has had this tradition. The city owns a huge number of very sturdy small wooden buildings, and these are brought to various squares in the city and positioned in long rows. Merchants then fill these with things to sell, and the crowds pour in to buy. Much of it is Christmas ornaments, but there is lots of other tasteful merchandise as well. It reminded me a bit of our art fair, but with much more solid structures and much more merchandise to sell. Just where all these people are the rest of the year, I can't imagine.

It had snowed in Bratislava the night before, and getting to the bus was slightly treacherous, as I had not thought to bring anything appropriate to wear. Fortunately, there had not been snow in Vienna, so I had no difficulty there, and it had melted in Bratislava by the time we returned. I suspect that both Vienna itself and these Christmas markets would have been stunningly beautiful if they were covered with snow.

At least one of the squares had a large ice rink, with lots of people skating on it. Each square also had a giant Christmas tree. When we saw the first of these, I remarked what a beautiful tree it was to be growing right in front of the palace. Martin assured me that it had not grown there but had been brought it. The trunk of the tree was not anchored in any kind of base. It just extended down into the ground. He said it was placed in a very deep hole, deep enough to keep it secure in the wind, usually, although he recalled one time when one of these fell over.

I'm afraid that my favorite thing in Vienna was the coffee truck. At the edge of one of the squares, there was a black truck, labeled Espresso Mobil. The side of it was open and outfitted with everything you'd find in a Starbucks. I bought a cappuccino.



Espresso Mobil, from trip.

On Sunday, Martin and Nora were to pick me up at noon to take me to their flat for the afternoon. They live in Hungary. I intended to get up just a bit late and get some work done, but I slept longer than I meant, spent more time eating breakfast than I meant, and then did e-mail. I got none of the papers graded.

At noon they came, and we drove first into downtown Bratislava because I'd asked to be able to get a photo of a bridge there. I'd seen it on Friday evening, but in the dark. It's very modern, and its single pylon (if that's the word) from which cables extend to support the bridge, is topped by a flat round restaurant that looks like a flying saucer. Because it is so modern, I had supposed it was built after the fall of communism, but no, it was built by the Soviets. In fact, it is the second oldest of four bridges across the Danube in Bratislava. The oldest bridge, which I also saw, is nothing to look at, and is in the process of being replaced. When that's done, the Soviet bridge, which will continue to be called the New Bridge undoubtedly, will be the oldest in town. And the replaced bridge, which will be the newest, will probably continue to be called the Old Bridge.



Bridge over Danube, from Web 2025

From there we drove perhaps half an hour to reach their home. It's in a complex of four-story apartment buildings that is not particularly close to other buildings, and so it feels like it is in the country, though it's probably not. Their apartment, which they bought a year ago when the building was being built, is on the top floor and has a terrace – which they explained is like a balcony, except that it's on the roof of the apartment below and is more spacious. Inside, I learned, everything was built to their specification, so what I was seeing was their own creation. Martin assured me that it was really Nora's creation, and I believe him. The first thing I was struck by was a marvelous bookcase that filled one wall of the living room. All the shelves were at 45-degree angles, so that each shelf is diamond shaped, and you lay the books in them resting on one another. I asked where they got it, and they explained that they hired someone to build it, and Nora designed it.

The whole apartment is modern, of course, with the kitchen so clean and sparse that it hardly looks like a kitchen. The oven and microwave are built in and visible. The fridge is built in and not visible, just behind a door that looks like one of the cupboards. On an island in the middle is the range, one of those where the heating elements are concealed below the hard surface. And there's a small sink in the island where they do the dishes. They have no interest in having a dishwasher. Nor any interest in a garbage disposal.

Off in a corner of the living room, next to the medium-large-screen TV that they hardly ever watch, was what looked to me like a round ottoman with a large cheese on top. The ottoman itself was two round ottomans, one on top of the other, and the cheese was a third. They had traveled to Morocco, they said, specifically to buy these. They love Ikea

and pointed out several things from there. But their major furniture had clearly not come from Ikea.

We spent the afternoon first nibbling on Bratislava rolls, which looked like u-shaped pretzels but were soft and filled with a paste of poppy seeds, really good. Then a dinner of salmon and rice that Nora prepared, and later a plate of their favorite cheese, also a sheep cheese called parenica, that starts as a roundish ball and then peels into curved slices almost like an onion. I'll have to look for it at home or online.

Of course we talked. They were interested in how academics works in the US, and I was interested in how it works here. There were many other topics that I've forgotten.

I had brought along my Mac, because it seems I don't have many pictures anymore on my phone. At their request, I showed them many photos, of family, dogs, friends, and just a little from countries, since they've been to most of them. I'd forgotten, too, that I have all the photos from the Festchrift. As economists, and Martin a trade economist, they were very interested in that. Martin had not long ago found the photo of the big group on the Rackham stairs and showed it to Nora, but he couldn't blow that up well enough to recognize people. On my Mac we could, so well that he could often read their nametags. It was fun.



Festschrift photo, from my Mac

That's really about all. They returned me to my room a little before 7:00, and since I'd be getting up at 3:00, I went right to bed. They spent the night at Martin's parents in Bratislava, not far from where I was staying, and the plan had been that they would pick me up at 3:30 and drive me to a bus that would take me directly to the Vienna airport. They did pick me up, but I soon realized that they had driven through the city and were on the road to Vienna. They had decided to take me all the way, Nora driving and Martin pointing the way.

We didn't take a divided highway and hadn't when Martin brought me from the airport on Wednesday. Those are toll roads, apparently, but a different sort than ours. You pay for a sticker on your car, and you can't drive on them without that. Since they would not need that often, they stick to the back roads.

I'll close with a few photos from the trip. I don't know why I don't have more.



From trip.



With Martin, from trip



With Nora, from trip