Invited to the Slaughter in Šurany, Slovakia

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"Ahoj, my Canadian friend. Would you join us next weekend in Šurany? My family and I have a special event planned for you! We are going to kill a pig!"

It was late February, 2006 when my friend, Ján Kováč, rang me on the phone with this unique invitation. At the time, I was teaching English at a high school in Trnava, Slovakia, and Ján was eager to involve me in what used to be a common Slovak tradition: the late-winter practice of butchering a pig. The thought of butchering a pig, or any animal for that matter, gave me a queasy feeling. But as a guest in their country, and not being someone who passes up new cultural experiences, with some reluctance I accepted Ján's invitation.

Slovakia calls itself "the heart of Europe," and it is a fitting description. If one looks quickly at a map of modern Europe, and imagines where the heart of the continent should be, then you should easily spot Slovakia. It has been some 17 years since the peaceful break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1992 and the official formation of the fully autonomous nations of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in January, 1993, but a good number of North Americans are only vaguely aware of this fact. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact we always referred to Czechoslovaks as "Czechs," even before the break-up, and not too many of us are old enough to remember when the two republics existed as sovereign states in the early part of the twentieth century. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, and the subsequent fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, Czechs and Slovaks came to imagine separate futures. Although they share a similar history, Czechs and Slovaks are two distinct peoples after all, and their languages are also similar, yet different. Since 1993, the Czech Republic has blossomed, and Prague has become one of the most visited cities in the world. Slovakia, on the other hand, initially struggled as a sovereign state, with an insular government and a low international profile. But in 2004, when the European Union expanded, Slovakia joined alongside the Czech Republic. Even though it has historically been overlooked as the Czech Republic's "little sister," Slovakia has in recent years (at least, until the recent global economic downturn) been known as the economic "tiger" of new Europe. A small country, in population and geography, Slovakia has much to offer tourists as well - from plains and agricultural fields in the west, to the High Tatra mountains in the north, numerous natural spas, hundreds of ancient castles and castle ruins; and an emerging world class capital in Bratislava. I have worked and travelled in Slovakia seven times now, spending more than a year of my life in this friendly and interesting hidden gem of central Europe. As a new member of the EU, Slovaks are keen to show Europe and the world what they are made of - determined to correct the negative stereotypes of a backward, poor, and dirty nation perpetuated by Hollywood films like EuroTrip and Hostel. With a history closely tied to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovaks have always considered themselves to be a part of Europe, but development and tourism suffered under Communist rule. With new EU money, the country is now busy upgrading its transportation systems and focussing on drawing new tourism to the region. The Slovak people are generally very welcoming and accommodating, particularly to English speakers. English, of course, is the official language of business in the EU, so most Slovaks are keen to learn or practise the language.

And it was through my status as a native English speaker that I came to experience a traditional Slovak pig slaughter in late winter, 2006. Now, before you form an image of a group of peasants in the backcountry somewhere, crudely killing and carving up a poor pig, let me begin by saying that my hosts for this event were a typical upper-middle-class family. The Kováč family resided in the small city of Šurany, in south central Slovakia. Ján Kováč, and his twin teenage daughters, Iveta and Zita, had been students of mine at a summer language school several months earlier, so it was with mixed emotions that I accepted their invitation to the slaughter - on one hand I very much wanted to see them again, but I was apprehensive about the idea of attending the killing and slaughter of a pig. Growing up in relatively urban late-twentieth century Canada, I had never before been a witness or actor in the killing and cleaning of my own food, aside from catching and cleaning the occasional fish, and hobby gardening. Far removed from the actual processes of raising and producing my own food, my imagined ideas of what a pig slaughter would entail made me more than a little unsure of what I might be getting myself into.

I need not have worried. Ján had been the manager of an Austrian metal parts company in Šurany for several years, and the family had recently built a lovely house with an outdoor swimming pool - a luxury to most Slovaks, many of whom...
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still live in blocks of flats that were built en masse during the Communist era. A single family house alone is still a luxury in Slovakia — and a house with a swimming pool is all the more uncommon. The traditional Slovak pig slaughter was a common practice only a few years ago, particularly when food costs were high and selection was limited under Communist rule. But today, under a fast growing capitalist democracy, a fast dwindling number of Slovak families still bother to raise and produce their own foodstuffs. An era of hypermarkets and box stores has emerged in Slovakia too — for better or for worse — so in truth I think Ján had arranged the pig slaughter partially for my benefit. In years past, several families would pool their resources together to buy a pig, raise it, and slaughter it in the winter. In doing so, all families involved would be stocked with pork for several months (pork is one of the staples of Slovak cuisine). The Kovács, of course, did not need to do this — the time and effort involved in a traditional slaughter can now be easily skirted with convenient trips to the local hypermarket — but I am grateful that they did. It was an experience in both culture and good cuisine.

Ján and I rose at 5am on a Saturday to prepare for the slaughter. His teenage daughters showed little interest in participating in this event, so they did not get up from their beds until several hours later. Ján’s son and wife reluctantly woke to assist us. The slaughter, after all, was going to be an all-day event, and we needed a chauffer to the house of “Ivan the Butcher,” where our unsuspecting pig had been living comfortably for the past months. You see, as with most things “traditional” in Slovak culture, the slaughter also included the consumption of a fair amount of homemade spirits. The evening before, Ján had taken me to the home of a friend who had a small cellar under his garage, to select some wine for the event (the wine also served as a part of Ivan’s payment). With several litres of white wine in tow, we arrived at Ivan the Butcher’s house a little after 6am. Ivan also lived in Surany, in a slightly less modern family house, and he and his wife were in their early sixties. The walk-in basement at Ivan’s house was already prepared with the butcher’s tools of the trade, and his wife was busy attending to two huge cauldrons warming on some old outdoor woodstoves.

I was a little horrified when I realized the pig we were slaughtering was still very much alive — somehow I had imagined that the butcher had taken care of this small detail. But before the deed was done, I was told we had some traditional Slovak business to take care of. Out of an old cupboard in the cellar, Ivan withdrew a dusty bottle of what looked to be vodka or gin. But I am told this spirit was called pivovica, and after two shots each (at only 6:45 am), we were ready to begin.

I will spare readers the bulk of the details in the actual killing and slaughter, but I must emphasise that I never once quaggy, despite my earlier feelings of misgiving. The pig itself (weighing more than 130 kg) never had any notion of its fate (it died a quick, clean death), and nothing was wasted — and I mean nothing. Ivan was a true professional — and he should be; he told me he had slaughtered sixty pigs a year for the last forty years. And although we stayed warm all day with occasional sips of warm white wine (boiled with figs and water), we never became intoxicated. The business of the slaughter was, in fact, rather official business. By 10am we tasted the first fruits of our labours, as the men’s wives had quickly taken the liver after it was removed (and weighed) and returned an hour or two later with a delicious breakfast. Speaking as someone who has never particularly had a taste for liver, I can say in all honesty that this dish was simply delectable. Steaming hot and tender, served with shredded cabbage and bread, I had never eaten liver so tasty — my palate was no doubt positively influenced by my having witnessed and played a small part in the preparation of this dish. At the end of the day — more than ten hours later — the Kovács were supplied with enough sausages, steaks, and fat for cooking, to last several months. And all of this pork, I can safely and honestly say, was the finest I have ever tasted, before or since.

Iveta and Zita, Ján’s twin teenage daughters, never did make an appearance that day. Later, Iveta told me that she does not even like the taste of pork, but that her father insisted the family do this — perhaps for the last time. The Kovács sent me back home to my little rented room in the city of Bratislava with two large grocery bags packed with various pork specialties. Having observed and played a small part at every step of the slaughter, I could personally vouch for the meat’s quality and manner of preparation — I would not be consuming any mystery meat in the days to come. I was so pleased that the Kovács had shared so much of their pork bounty with me that I neglected to mention to them that I had no fridge in my small flat.

Still being late winter, my lack of a fridge did not cause me any worry. What I did not give away the next day to friends in Bratislava, I carefully positioned on my outside windowsill. I intended to eat nothing but pork for the next week and would have eaten every last morsel if not for a late-night thief three days after my return. Living only on the ground floor, my windowsill was unfortunately still within reach of an apparently tall (and observant) scavenger. I heard my thief that night, but by the time I got up from bed and to the window, they had safely made their getaway.
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At first I was angered - I still had a good three or four meals worth of the finest tasting pork ever.... But after a few minutes I came to my senses. Clearly whoever stole from my windowsill was in some kind of need, and they likely had no idea of the kind of bounty they were snapping at the time. Although Slovakia has never been immune to degrees of poverty within society, the gap between the rich and the poor is certainly greater today - twenty years after transitioning to a capitalist democracy - than it was under the Communist regime. As Slovaks continue to emulate American consumer culture, focusing less on the collective and more and more on the individual, and on the convenience of shopping for their food rather than playing an active role in producing it themselves, the gap between the poor and rich only continues to widen. Ján and his family could easily afford to buy all of their food at any one of Šarany’s hypermarkets (Tesco, Terno, or Lidl, for example), but they still made an effort to participate in the traditional practice of “killing a pig.” Even if only for the benefit of his North American guest, Ján’s act of performing this element of Slovak culinary tradition was at once a subtle display of resistance to consumerism and an act demonstrating that what was good from the collective Slovak past is not yet forgotten. And although I can only guess what the socio-economic circumstances of my pork thief were, I only hope that he/she took that tasty and carefully prepared pork home to a hungry family and had a small party in celebration of the fine food they had happened upon.

Alice Driver

An In-Between Place:
To Tokelau by Boat

36 hours to nowhere. 36 hours to nowhere. Not but a dot on the map, not but sandy beach and a few palm trees surrounded by the vast ocean. The Japanese dreamed, green with envy, of the fat yellow tuna that populated the waters of Tokelau. I imagined feasts of coconuts and roasted pigs as I boarded the Tokelau 223 with 49 other passengers. Imposing islander bodies were scattered over two decks, most of them lying on foam mattresses in order to claim their sleeping spots. I kept staring at their toes, each one as fat as a hotdog, spilling out of their sandals and onto the deck. Their toes and their necks, linebacker necks, rugby player necks - men and women alike. I was overwhelmed by their corporeality: even their shadows had a certain weight that engulfed me, pressing down on my lungs and making me disappear. At first, my husband, Isaac, and I sat on the lower deck, but we quickly realized that although it was protected from potential rain, there was no airflow. The smell of damp, slightly rotting vegetables became noticeable. On the upper deck, I looked out upon a sky dark and pregnant with rain, and watched as veterans of the voyage lay out plastic tarps below their bedding. I was sitting on a bench trying to claim our sleeping space, but when Isaac left to go to the bathroom a huge Samoan man with fleshy arms and multiple tattoos sat down in his place. I looked at him warily, wondering if he wanted to take my spot. The tattoos curled off his arm and wove themselves into my hair; their geometric shapes left us bound together, my pale body pressed against his brown corpulence.