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SLOVAK LUTHERANS FIND THEMSELVES IN A NEW COUNTRY

by Bill Yoder

Not all of Bratislava's citizens are elated by the division of Czechoslovakia. Pavel Uhorskai, Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Slovakia, remains troubled by the creation of a separate Slovak state: "We accept it as a given fact," he stated in resignation. Other Lutheran officials are more enthusiastic. Professor Dusan Ondrejovic, head of Bratislava's Protestant theological faculty, believes Slovak Lutherans always have been major supporters of the independence movement. "In the last century, all of our authors--and 90% of them were Lutherans--promoted the creation of a Slovak state," he assured. "It wasn't until World War I that one struck upon the idea of creating a new state together with the Czechs." The professor's wife, Milada Ondrejovicova, is a member of parliament and the HZDS party, which is headed by the Slovak prime minister, Vladimir Meciar. His party has been a driving force behind the division of the country.

Slovak Lutherans now expect the cultural blossoming of their country. Their hymnal, which was created in the 1840s, will be replaced by a strictly Slovak hymnal this year. Eighty percent of the hymns in the old songbook are in Czech. Slovak culture has not always had a strong following: the first Slovak translation of the entire Bible was not published until 1978. But Slovak optimism is coupled with tinges of fear: History does not prove that the Catholic majority can peacefully coexist with the 330,000 Lutherans and the 100,000 Reformed. According to Kenneth Zindle, Bishop of the ELCA's "Slovak Zion Synod," the relationships between Catholics and Protestants are "as bad as one can find anywhere else. They have had bad relations with Roman Catholics as recently as World War II. They are afraid of a return to the bad old days." During that war, Slovakia had been a separate state ruled by a pro-fascist Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso.

Bishop Zindle is hopeful about relations with the new Catholic cardinal, Korec, whom he met last fall. "When he was imprisoned by the communists, his cellmate was a Lutheran pastor," Zindle explained. "So some of his attitude comes from that." Jan Steklac, a theology student in Bratislava, is less optimistic. "Korec wants a Catholic state," he persisted. "Only his public statements are ecumenical." The splitting of Czechoslovakia aids the cause of
radical, pro-Catholic nationalism. David H. Nelson of the ELCA's "Division for Global Mission" claimed: "The dangers of nationalism are much greater when there is a Slovak state instead of a Czechoslovak federation." In history, the Slovak state has only existed as a monotone, Catholic state. Professor Ondrejovic admitted that the secular, pluralistic Czechoslovak tradition of the 1920s has vanished: "All government measures must now first of all pass through the halls of the Catholic church."

Slovaks do not hide their reserve regarding Czechs and Hungarians. Slovaks assume that Hungary attempts to assimilate all minorities living within its borders. "In Hungary, Slovaks are experiencing cultural and intellectual genocide," Ondrejovic maintained. Until recent times the Church of the Bohemian Brethren had mediated between Slovak Lutherans and the Reformed Hungarians living in Slovakia. Suddenly though the Bohemian Brethren are located in a foreign country. Hopes to retain an Ecumenical Council for the churches of both states have been dashed. Slovaks have felt discriminated against even in minor matters. One leader saw a cause of the Council's split in the fact that Slovak pastors had received less access to spa retreats in Switzerland than had their Czech colleagues. According to Professor Ondrejovic handbooks on the churches of Czechoslovakia regularly gave the Slovak ones short shrift. Fresh faces will be needing to guide Slovak Lutheranism through the present period of uncertainty. The Communist-era church regime was brought to an abrupt halt three years ago. The hunger strike of an active layperson forced the resignation of Bishop Jan Michalko, who is now deceased. The Rev. Pavel Uhorskai, who was then 71 years old, suddenly found himself catapulted from an organ stool into the Bishop's chair.

New faces have caused uneasiness among old-time church leaders: Laypersons obtained positions which had earlier been held solely by clergy. The new General-Secretary, Peter Kroslak, for example, is an Oxford-trained engineer. Uhorskai, an ordained theologian and missionary, was imprisoned in 1951. For nearly four decades thereafter, he was forced to earn his keep as a blue-collar worker and as a church cantor. Rev. Ondrejovic, who belongs to the church's "old guard," concluded: "It's noticeable that the Bishop has not kept abreast of theological developments. I don't recognize any theological progression on his part." Undoubtedly the present conservative Bishop is more a man of deeds, than of theory. He believes mighty foes are blocking the progress of the church. In an interview he cited Communism, Catholicism, liberalism, and feminism. Professor Ondrejovic theorized that Uhorskai's reservations regarding Slovak independence are fueled by the fact that the governing party, the HZDS, consists primarily of former Communists.

Bishop Uhorskai does not regard himself to be a comfortable, middle-class retiree. He intends to regain the church's lost terrain. Three flourishing high schools are already in operation and should restart the traditional involvement of Slovak Lutheranism in education and culture. Only 6.2% of Slovakia's citizens are Lutherans, yet Uhorskai is determined to
maintain the legal equality of all major denominations. In November 1992 he was pleased to officiate at the funeral of Slovakia’s beloved Alexander Dubcek. The reform Communist’s son, Pavel, is a member of the church council in a Lutheran congregation in Peterzalka, a suburb of Bratislava. The attempt to regain old heights has demanded the aid of foreign allies. Reinforcements are arriving not only from the Slovak Zion Synod. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) is also heavily involved. The LCMS bears a troubled history in Slovakia. Between the World Wars it had seen itself in competition with the established Slovak church and formed three congregations of its own. But now the Slovaks believe the LCMS has experienced an internal transformation. "Today, the Missouri Synod is evangelizing in cooperation with us," the Bishop insisted, "it no longer intends to form its own congregations here." On at least one occasion, the representatives of both American churches, David Nelson and Daniel Madsen, paid the Slovak Bishop a joint visit. American support for the Slovak church goes beyond the financial. Sixteen teachers, five of whom are from the Missouri Synod, are teaching at Lutheran high schools there.

So much rapport has raised temperatures in North America. Bishop Uhorskai believes the Slovak Zion Synod’s periodical, The Zion, is foiling attempts to strengthen the ties of his church to North America. "The Zion Synod is very jealous," the Bishop concluded. According to him a Slovak pastor now residing in the U.S. and helping to edit the periodical "smears our church. She demands we break off all ties with the Missouri Synod because it does not support the ordination of women. But we already have women pastors."

Professor Ondrejovic appeals for theological dialogue on this matter also. "We do not know what Missouri Synod stands for today," he explained. "Maybe they have an incorrect view of us. It would be good for both sides if a dialogue could begin."