

## THEY DON'T BRAKE FOR LAMBS IN SANTA ROSA

The traffic here is murder. Literally. There were more people run down and killed in crosswalks last year in the city of Santa Rosa (seven) than there were victims of homicide (six). And the back roads in Sonoma County are even more dangerous than the main streets of Santa Rosa. We saw the would-be poofie on the corner in their Bulls and Raiders jackets trying desperately to "hook L.A." who came the hell out of me. We farmers in their pickups going sixty miles an hour five feet from my rear bumper.

These guys don't care if it is lambing season and the fields along Highway 116 are full of adorable baby ones. They couldn't be less interested in the magnificent red-collared hawk sitting on the fence post on Union Road or the huge rubber volcano rising over the vineyards run by Farnsworth. They've seen all that. What they know is that anyone driving less than sixty miles an hour and looking at lambs has to be from L.A.

The influence of Southern California—Los Angeles in particular—is self-evident to people here. Sonoma County, in which Santa Rosa is the largest city (population: 116,000 and growing), last year received 67 new mostly suburban no less than 1,600 new residents from Los Angeles.

Sonoma County is, and has always been, primarily agricultural. On a hot summer day you can smell the cow shit from Babcock Park to Cloverdale. Luckier Babcock, the great horticulturalist, lived here and declared it "the chosen spot of all this Earth." He must not have been around in August. Alfred Hitchcock shot *Shadow of a Doubt* with Joseph Cotten and Tanya Wright here in 1942, and today the downtown center of the city is still low-rise, compact, and easy to walk around in. Though it has been a long time since they graded the city park, Santa Rosa and a number of other towns in Sonoma County still retain a kind of provincial charm that sets L.A. visitors to giggling.

Consider the following items, gleaned from the *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*:

**SEBASTOPOLE**—Councilwoman Lynn Hamilton is a candidate at the end of a city council meeting in honor of two railroad men that were killed because they were doing "if you could dream," inspired the councilwoman, "to see to it that we could do peacefully again."

**PHILO**—Jim Blinn, a local landowner, reported the old Philo school, housing 34 million and creating a \$100,000 monthly payroll only to have a bad and brutal fire storm, a victory, and a minor operator complaint about the noise. "We live where we live because we enjoy the peace and quiet of the



BRATISLAVA

## FREE AT LAST IN NEW SLOVAKIA

My friend Maria can't understand why I always stay at the Hotel Carlton when I visit Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. Maria, who works in one of the city's tourist offices, usually refers Western visitors to modern establishments like the Forum or the Kijev. It's true that the Carlton has seen better days, but that's why I like it. Its peeling wallpaper and disreputable clientele give me an idea of what the Bristol or the Imperial in Vienna would be like if they had been left untouched for the past hundred years.

I made my first visit to Bratislava during a side trip from Vienna six months before the 1989 Velvet Revolution freed the Czechs and Slovaks from the absurdities of Communist rule. Vaclav Havel was still in jail, and Alexander Dubcek—the leader of the 1968 Prague Spring and one of the few Slovaks ever to gain international fame—remained under house arrest in his apartment near the town center. Although Bratislava is only thirty-five miles downstream from Vienna on the Danube, the bus

trip took two hours, at least half of which was spent at the frontier under the suspicious eyes of Czechoslovak border guards.

When I wandered into the tourist office looking for a map of the city, the English-speaking member of the staff was out on an errand.

"Français?" I asked. A pretty, dark-haired young woman looked up from her desk and smiled at me. Maria spoke fluent French, even though she had only been to France once in her life. I went back to see her two or three times during that visit. At first our conversations were short and businesslike, although I wanted to ask her more and I felt she wanted to say more. But I was worried that one of her colleagues might also speak French, and when Maria made a cryptic comment about how bad things were in her country, I didn't pursue it.

I returned to Bratislava in 1990, a few months after the revolution. The city was plastered with the blue and red posters of Public Against Violence, the Slovak counterpart to Havel's Prague-based Civic Forum. The Cafe Lyra, across the street from the Academia Istropolitana, was so packed with student activists that I couldn't find an empty seat.

I walked into Maria's office and found her sitting at her desk. She was surprised and happy to see me. "A lot has changed since the last time I was here," I said. "Are you happy?"

"Of course," she said, beaming with the satisfaction of someone who at last has been allowed to tell



a great secret. We became friends from that moment.

The next day I took Maria to lunch at the Hotel Forum. She is a proud and spirited young woman, and apologized profusely because she couldn't afford to pay for her share of the meal. I told her not to worry about it, and as she relaxed, she began to tell me her story. She was born in 1964 and grew up in the spa town of Piešťany, about an hour's bus ride from Bratislava. Her father had spent two years in prison during the 1950s for helping a friend escape to the United States.

"My earliest memory is from 1968," Maria said as she relished a Slovak canapé. "My mother came home crying and said that we had to stock up on food, because 70,000 Soviet troops had just marched into Bratislava and taken over all the shops."

Not surprisingly, Maria was rabidly anticommunist. A bit too much, I thought. At one point I suggested that there were some features of socialism that might be—

"Like what?" she demanded, glaring at me. I realized that my position was precarious. Here I was, having lunch in the plush-est hotel in Bratislava, about to defend socialism to someone who had lived under Stalinism all her life.

During my most recent visit, on the eve of the elections that would bring the nationalist Vladimir Meciar to power in Slovakia and lead to the breakup with the Czechs, I found Maria in the middle of a crisis. She had just been thrown out of her apart-

ment, even though she had signed a lease and had paid six months' rent in advance—all of her savings. Like a lot of people in Slovakia these days, her landlady apparently thought that capitalism means "anything goes": Yes, she had rented the apartment to Maria; no, Maria could not stay, because now Ms. Landlady wanted it back. Yes, she had taken Maria's money; no, Maria couldn't have it back, because she "didn't have it anymore."

Maria didn't know what her rights were, so she gathered up her possessions and moved in with a friend. At my urging, she went to see a lawyer, who laughed and said that he had seen much worse cases. Nevertheless, he agreed to help her...for a stiff fee.

Meanwhile, an executive from a Belgian manufacturing firm was pestering Maria to quit her job at the tourist office and go to work as the company's representative in Slovakia. She was sorely tempted. While a lot of former Communists were becoming wealthy by using their connections to buy up Bratislava's shops and businesses, three years after the revolution Maria was still making only about \$100 per month—just slightly more than her salary under the *ancien régime*. The Belgian was offering her four times that. It was a pitiful sum by Western standards, but it could make a big difference in Maria's life. Yet if she gave up her job and later things didn't work out with her new boss, she would join the ranks of the half-million Slovaks already thrown out of work by



**Maria: Does capitalism really mean 'anything goes'?**

the closing of unprofitable factories and businesses.

Despite her troubles, Maria was still able to laugh and have a good time. She had been a free spirit under the Communists, and she was determined to remain so under the capitalists. "If things get too bad, at least I'm free to kill myself," she said gaily. We made our customary rounds of Bratislava's cafés and restaurants, which have much improved with the free market. One night we went to an excellent new Italian restaurant where, Maria told me in shocked tones, you actually had to make a reservation to get in.

On my last evening in the city, I took Maria to see a local production of *Death of a Salesman*. It was in Slovak, but as she knew the language and I knew the play, we were both able to make sense

of it. Arthur Miller's fable about Willy Loman, the traveling salesman who buys into the American dream only to be tossed onto the rubbish heap, is such a chestnut of the American theater that I was a little taken aback by the audience's reaction. Long before the final curtain, a lot of people had begun to cry, and when Willy's wife uttered the play's final lines at her husband's funeral—"We're free, we're free, we're free"—someone in the front row broke into loud sobs.

As we left the theater, Maria took my arm. "If I take this job with the Belgian, do you think I could end up like Willy Loman?" she asked. She was smiling, but her eyes were serious.

"No, Maria," I said, smiling back at her. "Not you."

—Michael Balter