

This is Not a Minacazine #100

from Richard Lynch • June 2000 • for SFPA 216 • jophan@zdnetwork.com

The Great Train Robbery and Other Adventures (A 6th Postcard Diary of Eastern Europe)

A Note of Explanation:

This is the sixth in a continuing series of my (highly unofficial) trip reports about my travels in Eastern Europe. Those of you who have read the other five Postcard Diaries know that I work for an agency of the U.S. Government; part of my job is international trade promotion-related activities in support of small business. It's a fairly proactive program without much in the way of resources to work with, and whenever there's a success, you get the feeling you can actually make a difference in the world. Eastern Europe is where this seems to work best (I won't bother you with details why that's so), and I've traveled there many times in the past decade. But it's hard to keep in touch with the outside world when I'm there; it costs just too much to telephone North America from Europe (especially from hotels) and I can't afford the cost of daily phone calls (Agency rules limit reimbursement to the equivalent of only about three minutes per week). So instead, I send out one postcard every day whenever I'm on the road, and I try to pack as much information on them as possible – I want each one to be not only a stand-alone essay, but also a chapter of an overall larger diary of that trip that would give the reader a vicarious experience of what it's like to work and travel in Eastern Europe. So there's the challenge: be interesting, be entertaining, but above all, *be brief!* Not always easy, but most every day I was able to find one or two things interesting enough to build a short essay around, even if after a long day, composing that essay wasn't something that I much looked forward to.

After reading through this new assembled collection of cards, I've once again added some comments between the postcards for continuity and transition, and to expand on some things where just wasn't enough room in a postcard. And once again, I hope you enjoy reading about my adventures (and misadventures).

Sunday, May 7, 2000 (Katowice, Poland)

I wish I could say that this trip has gotten off to a good start. Just a few hours ago, as I was boarding the train to Katowice at the Warsaw Central Station, two guys jostled me while I was struggling to get settled in the railcar compartment and got away with my wallet. The monetary loss (about US\$150) was significant but not major. What *really* hurt was that all my credit cards were in the wallet, including my ATM card. Recovery is already underway, and I think I will be OK; I just need to make sure I can get replacements by week's end or I may run out of money. There are several lessons for me from this near disaster, for sure. And I guess some of the more important lessons in life are those you don't get in the classroom!

the nasty old Warsaw Central Train Station



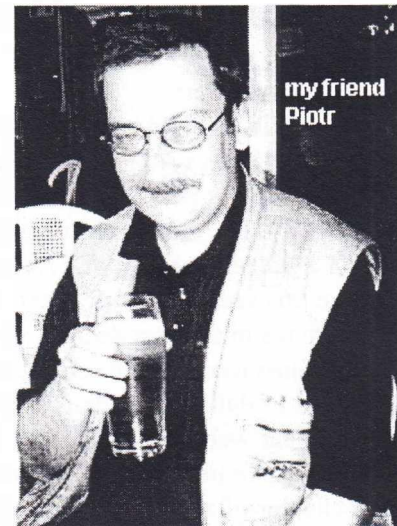
Looking back at what happened, I can see now that I had been targeted. And they were very, very good; I was plainly not their first victim. There were some obvious mistakes I'd made; I'd drawn attention to

myself by neglecting to remove the white airline routing identifier strips from my luggage. I'd forgotten that the Polish train system still does not accept credit cards, so I'd not bothered to put my credit card (or my ATM card, which I'd used to get about US\$100 in Polish zloties at the airport) into my money belt. I'd brought a nice slim wallet that was too easy to remove from a pocket. And worst of all, I'd had a short lapse in paying attention to what was going on around me. It didn't take long; less than thirty seconds and they were gone. I found they had also tried to unzip some of my luggage, but they didn't find anything immediately very interesting. But they had known enough to reach into my front pants pocket (I never keep the wallet in my hip pocket), and they were slick enough to create enough confusion for me not to even notice I was being robbed.

Monday, May 8, 2000 (Katowice)

It's the last night of my short two-day stay in Katowice. The business meeting here was a good one for my trade initiative; I think I've located a good ally in the Energoprojekt engineering company here. I'm still on the road to recovery from the problems I had yesterday; I've been promised a replacement for one of my credit cards possibly by tomorrow, though I'll probably have to do without an ATM card for the rest of the trip. Katowice itself is beginning to turn into a pleasant place to visit – outdoor cafés now abound in the downtown area, and they are good places to kick back with a beer and watch the world go by for an hour or so. The city will get better yet as time goes by. I hope this trip does, too!

The people at Energoprojekt are not only good business allies, they are also good friends. Once they found out I had some problems to overcome, they helped me out in every way they could. My friend, Piotr, who works at Energoprojekt, had met me at the Katowice train station on Sunday night; he immediately provided me unlimited use of his mobile phone to call back to the United States to cancel the stolen credit cards and arrange for replacements. He vouched for me at the hotel so I could check in without a credit card. And even treated me to dinner at one of the many pleasant sidewalk restaurants. I'm in debt to him more than I'll ever be able to repay. But I hope he's never in such a similar situation where he'll need it!



Tuesday, May 9, 2000 (Warsaw, Poland)

I'm back in Warsaw, and the good news is that my money troubles look to be almost over. The credit card company has assured me that the replacement for one of the cards stolen from me on Sunday will be in my hands tomorrow, and the cash transfer via Western Union worked just fine! I passed through the Warsaw train station again today, at the end of my train ride back from Katowice. I have to admit I was a bit paranoid after what had happened on Sunday, which probably made *me* the most suspicious-looking character in the station!

I wish all my money trouble could have been solved as quickly as it took to wire me money through Western Union. I took the necessary information to the Polish bank that was one of WU's representatives in Warsaw, and ten minutes later I was 3,600 zloties (about US\$800) richer. And the next day, as promised, not one but two credit cards appeared – one of them was hand-delivered by someone from work who was attending the same conference as me. Afterwards I felt like a great load had been lifted from my shoulders. Or, on the other hand, with all the business gifts I'd made in Katowice and Warsaw, maybe it was just my luggage getting lighter!

Wednesday, May 10, 2000 (Warsaw)

I'm beginning to think I'm becoming a Pole, or at least, assimilating into the Polish culture. Lately I've noticed I'm using Polish words almost exclusively whenever I buy food or souvenirs or other things. I only revert to English when the shopkeeper demonstrates that his/her knowledge of English is better than my meager command of Polish (fairly often, in other words). Today I was able to purchase a one-way second-class train ticket to Košice, Slovakia, at the Central Train Station, with no real problems, totally in Polish, without even using a phrase book or dictionary for assistance! I'm still an illiterate dunce when compared to the average Polish schoolchild, but at least I'm a *smarter* dunce than I used to be!



One of the shops in Warsaw where I can revert to English is my favorite place to buy amber jewelry in the city. Readers of my previous postcard diaries know that I usually buy an assortment of amber pendants, necklaces, and earrings for family and friends whenever I'm in Poland (I usually have some standing orders for these, in fact). The local Polish artisans are skilled at taking a piece of amber and incorporating it into a silver setting to where it's as much a work of art as it is a piece of jewelry. The shop that seems to have the best overall selection is not far from Warsaw's Old Town

Square, and I've been there often enough over the past few years that the proprietors now recognize me when I come in there. Part of it, I'm sure, is that I spend about US\$100 every time I'm there, a large-enough sum where I'm one of their better customers. My visit there this trip brought a warm greeting and a 10% discount! It's as if we're old friends, which I guess in a way is true!

Thursday, May 11, 2000 (Warsaw)

Today was the start of the Climate Technology Initiative conference here in Warsaw, the 'official' reason I'm here in Poland at all this trip. I presented a paper on how to locate investment opportunities in Poland and neighboring countries, which was reasonably well received from the number of questions that were asked and the number of business cards exchanged. The *real* highlight of the day, though, happened in an unlikely place – the mens room around the corner from the main meeting hall. Unlike ladies, we men have the option of emptying our bladders standing up at wall-mounted urinals. The urinal in that mens room had an electronic proximity sensor that not only flushed it, but also caused it to play an electronic tune to entertain you while you were using it. And the choice of the music was amusing, as well as appropriate: "I Did It My Way".



The conference turned out useful for me to attend, not so much for its technical content as for the opportunity to network. In a conference like that, the really important discussions happen in the margins – at lunch breaks or during the dinner buffets. I'm beginning to thrive in that kind of environment, at least as much as possible for somebody who doesn't have a lot of resources to work with. At any rate, if you don't count the mens room urinal, the first musical event of the trip took place at one of the conference buffet dinners. But the pianist, talented as he was, only had a clunky out-of-tune old upright piano to use,

so some of the Chopin he played was a bit painful to listen to. He looked very embarrassed every time the music sounded sour, but on the other hand, he was being paid and was performing before an audience. Anyway, it certainly wasn't nearly one of the better performances I'd ever heard, but it *was* one of the more courageous!

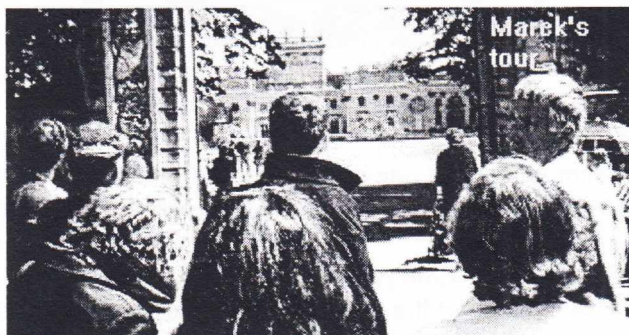
Friday, May 12, 2000 (Warsaw)

I didn't have another presentation today, but several of the day's presenters referred to the paper I gave yesterday in their speeches. (Each time it happened, it was enough to jolt me back to attention.) Actually, though, I was surprised at how interesting the conference was, content-wise. And during the breaks, I guess I was surprised by the number of people who wanted to talk to me about my paper. The ultimate egoboo, however, was how quickly my stack of preprints disappeared. By lunch time, they were all gone. And soon after that, so was I. It was a good conference.

I have to admire the two ladies who put the conference together. They had only about three months notice, and not all that much of a budget. They were able to use a large meeting room in one of the government buildings of the Polish housing authority, which saved a bunch of money from not having to rent space at a large hotel like the Marriott. And they saved additional money by having all the food functions (two lunches and two dinners) as stand-up-and-mingle buffets. The informality that resulted was pretty refreshing compared to some of the other more pretentious conferences I've been to. And they even had enough money left over to provide a small cultural event the next day for those of us who stayed over to the weekend.

Saturday, May 13, 2000 (Warsaw)

It's my last day in Poland for this trip, and it was time to kick back for a much lower intensity day, for a change. The organizers of the conference set up a guided tour of some of Warsaw's scenic and historical places, and I spent an enjoyable four hours with the stragglers from the conference who hadn't yet left town. The guide for the tour was an older man named Marek who had a dry sense of humor as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of Warsaw's history. But it also turned out he was the cousin of the owners of my favorite amber jewelry shop in Warsaw! Just another demonstration of how small the world really is.



Another indication of how small the world is becoming for me is the number of friends I have, not only in Poland, but in other countries in the region. Before 1990, I barely had any contacts of any kind in all of Europe; in just a decade I've developed dozens of friendships across the continent. On my last evening in Poland, I had a pleasant dinner with one such friend, an expatriot Polish lady named Maryla whom I'd met back in 1992 on a flight from Poland to Germany. She and her husband had been living in the United States then (her home in Douglass, Wyoming, had gotten the nickname of the 'Polish Embassy of Wyoming' from the American and Polish flags they flew in front of the house), but she moved back to northeast Poland after her husband became sick

and died a few years back. We'd become friends on that short flight, and at her request, I'd sent her picture postcards over the years from my travels. I hear back from her from time to time, usually wondering if I'm making any progress in my (still meager) knowledge of the Polish language. I suppose the odds were astronomical against us happening to sit next to each other on that airplane flight so long ago – of all the days to travel we had picked that one, of all the flights we had picked that one, of all the seats in the plane we had picked those two. Of such happenstance are friendships born.

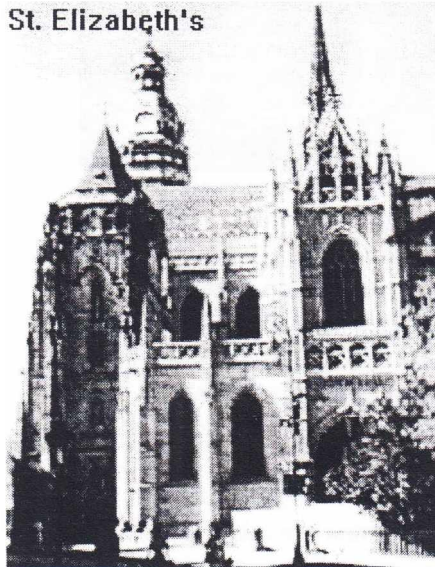
Sunday, May 14, 2000 (Košice, Slovakia)

It's nice to be back in Slovakia again. I arrived in Košice this afternoon after a long but scenic nine-hour train ride from Warsaw, past low mountains and wild rivers. Košice has changed a lot from the last time I was here a few years ago. The city centrum has undergone quite a transformation, in fact, with bright new facades on buildings and lots of new sidewalk cafés. It's a very pleasant place to spend an evening, especially after a long, long day.



Košice is the second-largest city in Slovakia, so maybe it's no surprise that the rejuvenation I'd noticed in Bratislava in my two previous trips is also happening there. The layout of Košice's old town is different from either Bratislava's or Warsaw's; there's no well-defined old town square – instead, a wide

St. Elizabeth's



avenue passing through the oldest part of the city broadens to become a large plaza. Right in the middle of the plaza is one of the finer old churches in Central Europe, the neo-gothic St. Elizabeth's Cathedral, which dates back to the 1300s. On the other hand, immediately adjacent to the cathedral is the 'musical fountain', which dates back only a year or two. During the re-hab of Košice's old town, the area in the plaza just north of the cathedral was made into a small green space with a pool as its dominant feature. And in the pool are devices that can shoot jets of water high into the air, some of them as high as 25 meters. It's all programmed to music, so the fountain is, in effect, a dynamic sculpture, with spray patterns dependent on the music being played. The old town square has come alive after its re-hab: even relatively late on a Sunday night, most of the sidewalk cafés were still open and doing reasonably good business. Of course, some of this was probably in celebration of Slovakia's success at the World Ice Hockey Championships (in St. Petersburg, Russia), which had ended that same day. Slovakia had made it to the championship game where they had lost to their

neighbor and nemesis, the Czech Republic. Even so, the beer was flowing and many of the young men in the city were having a very good time; parts of the old town actually seemed more like New Orleans than Košice. I can only wonder what it would have been like had Slovakia won!

Monday evening, May 15, 2000 (Humenné, Slovakia)

I'm in Humenné tonight, a little town of about 30,000 not too far from the Ukraine border in eastern Slovakia. There are some interesting things to see here, including a *kastiel* manor house that's been turned into a regional history museum, but this one-day visit here won't be the time to check them out. I arrived here in the early evening after a long afternoon business meeting in Košice, and went immediately into another long business meeting, this time over dinner. We finally stopped after about three-

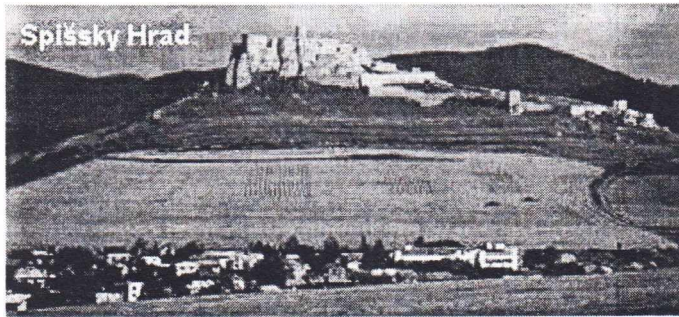
and-a-half hours straight. The only reason the meeting didn't last longer is that the hotel restaurant people were on the verge of bodily evicting us!

Actually, the day's business meetings had more in common than just their intensity. One of the earlier meetings, in Košice, was also held over a meal (lunch); from my experience, business meetings over meals in Slovakia are fairly commonplace. One other thing in common between the two 'meal' meetings of the day was that the host brought out the slivovitz, and we proceeded to make a toast and knock one back. Slivovitz is a very potent plum brandy, about 55% alcohol and *very* smooth going down. (Not only that, the more you drink, the better it gets.) I've been in meetings where there was toast after toast, each time followed by a deciliter of slivovitz. When that happens, any useful business needs to be done with in a hurry!

Tuesday night, May 16, 2000 (Žilina, Slovakia)

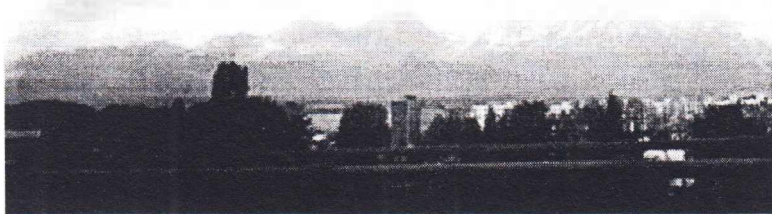
Day three of my odyssey across Slovakia has brought me to Žilina, a city of about 90,000 in the north central part of the country. Tomorrow I'll be meeting with the Central Slovakia Electricity Company, which has its headquarters here, but this evening was mostly spent at a sidewalk restaurant in the city's old town square, sharing pleasant conversation with my in-country hosts and watching the full moon rise over the city. It was a nice, restful way to end a long day of meetings and travel.

The trip west across Slovakia from Humenne to Žilina took me and my Slovak hosts past some of the most scenic and historic areas of the country. For instance, Spišský Hrad, the largest castle ruins in Slovakia, lies only about one kilometer from the highway. A bit farther along is the walled medieval city of Levoča, one of the sites in the UNESCO registry of world cultural and historical places. The cathedral in the center of the city contains the tallest altar in the world, an ornate work of the 17th century craftsman known as Master Paul. And when the word 'tall' is mentioned in Slovakia, the High Tatra Mountains, northwest of Levoča, usually come to mind. These are actually a 50-kilometer section of the Carpathian range, caused by some strange geologic uplift long ago. The High Tatras are very Alpine in nature (unlike the other Appalachian-like mountains elsewhere in the country) with peaks reaching altitudes of more than 2,700 meters above sea level. They are such an amazing sight that the mind refuses to accept they really exist; it's almost as if a huge matte painting of rugged snow-



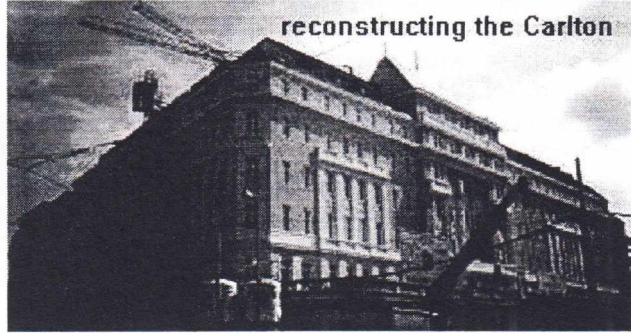
capped mountains has been inserted into the rolling hills and farmlands of the region. And finally, just before reaching Žilina, there's the 'Grand Canyon of Slovakia' where the Vah River passes through a valley overlooked by 1,000 meter tall mountains with the ruins of two old castles tossed in just for good measure. At work, there are people who think I'm crazy for wanting to spend so much time as I have in such a small off-the-beaten-track country. If they could only see what I've seen and experienced what I've done they would think I'd be crazy if I *didn't* want to.

High Tatras from the highway

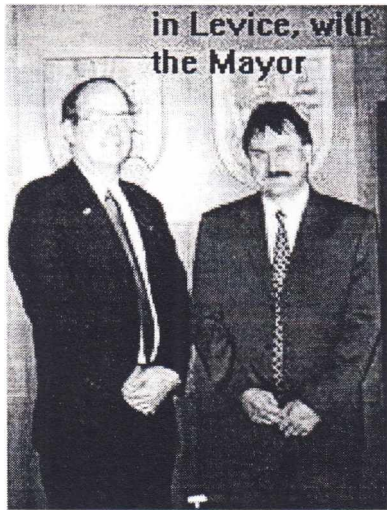


Wednesday night, May 17, 2000 (Bratislava, Slovakia)

The cross-country odyssey across Slovakia is over. I arrived here in Bratislava this afternoon, and it feels good to know that I don't have to change hotels again until I go to Bulgaria next week. In the five months since I was here last, there has been some noticeable change as rehabilitation of the old town area continues. The old Carlton Hotel will be finished soon; it has been fascinating to see it brought back from the abandoned shell of a building it was just two years ago. I can hardly wait to see what the city will be like in *another* two years.



The changes have become less dramatic over the past few years. My first trip to Bratislava was in March 1995, and there wasn't much to see or do. The old town mostly consisted of abandoned buildings with missing or broken windows and crumbling masonry. Even as recent as a year-and-a-half ago, there were still some buildings on some of the outlying areas of the old town that were that way. Now, the whole area has become valuable, and all the years of neglect have mostly been swept away. Almost every street has shops and restaurants, and many countries have relocated their embassies there. Bratislava's old town is now a place that's full of life, something I would have thought impossible after my first visit only a half decade ago.



Thursday, May 18, 2000 (Bratislava)

The halfway point of this three-week trip has come and gone. Two more days here in Slovakia and then it's on to Bulgaria. Today's activity was a day trip to the city of Levice in the southwest part of the country, where we met with the Mayor and his energy distribution people about his city's district heating needs. There's a small but significant business opportunity there, and the power developer's representative who was in Slovakia with me seems upbeat about it. At the end of the meeting I presented the Mayor with a souvenir book about Washington, D.C. – the third such book (all different, of course) he's received from me over the past couple of years. If I make many more trips to Levice, he'll have a large enough library that he'll know more about Washington than the people who live there!

On the way back from the meeting we stopped for lunch in Nitra, a city of about 100,000 people. There's an impressive castle there (which is really more of a small walled community since there's a cathedral within the castle walls) but the place that was of most interest to Diana, our translator, was the Bonsai Shop. She went in there to buy some specialty teas, but what grabbed my attention were the bonsai itself – miniature trees as an artform. There were dozens of them for sale in there (none very cheap, even for Slovakia), each one perhaps destined for the office or study of some businessman or entrepreneur who could afford them. And then it struck me – none of those little trees were meant for me, not for me nor any other tourist or businessperson from out-of-country; they were only intended for native Slovaks! Because of strict agriculture quarantine regulations in the United States and the European Union, there is no way for a tourist to bring a bonsai out of Slovakia. It's a sign that the Slovak economy is continuing to improve that shops like this are now possible.

Friday afternoon, May 19, 2000 (Bratislava)

As they say in the movies, "My work here is done." The last business meetings were earlier today, and now it's time for what seems to have become a tradition in my trips to Slovakia, the pub crawl. My 'guides' are the guys who work at the Power Research Institute (which hosts my trips here), and I've no doubt we'll try to break last December's personal record of seven different *pivarens* (beer halls) and about three liters of beer. I'd heard earlier in the week that I should drink some beer with my meals – I was told I needed to make sure I stayed in practice!



Well, I guess I should be grateful that it wasn't nearly as much an adventure as I'd expected – we only went to three places (all in the old town) and I only about equaled my Previous Best in amount of beer consumed (I lost count near the end of the night). It was a pretty nice evening, actually; there was pleasant and amusing conversation as we all attempted to bridge the language barrier. The last place we visited was actually a pretty good little restaurant not far from the Michael's Tower, my favorite building in the city and an amazing, stunning sight in the early evening against a deep blue twilight. It turns out that you can go up to the 'balcony', about halfway up the tower (which I did the next day), and from there you can get a bird's eye view of the old town streets below you and beyond that.

the view from the Tower



Bratislava's fortress castle on the hill that guards over the city. It's just another example of how nice a city and how interesting Bratislava has become. I doubt I'll ever get tired of going there.

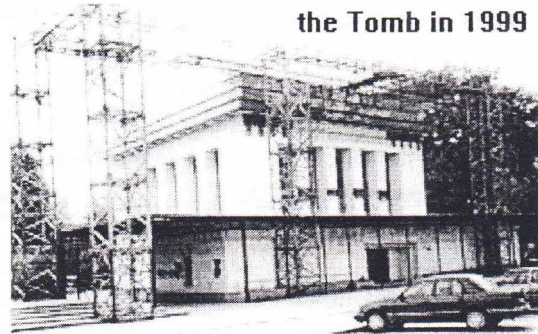
Saturday, May 20, 2000 (Bratislava)

It's my last day in Slovakia, and I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't attend a single music event in my week's stay here. When I was in Košice at the beginning of the week, the Slovakia Philharmonic was playing here in Bratislava, and there will be more symphony programs here not long after I leave. About the closest I've come to a musical event was talking to my Slovak counterpart, who is the great-grand-nephew (or something like that) to the great Czech composer Antonin Dvořak. He's got his mobile phone programmed so that when it rings, it plays Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." Sometimes you just have to make do, I guess.

It turned out that there *had* been a symphony concert on Thursday night, after all – the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra featured a program that included Kachaturian's Violin Concerto and also one of my favorite orchestral works, Dvořak's 9th "New World" Symphony. I'd checked all the 'upcoming events' posters near the Filharmonia Hall, but this concert was elsewhere in the city. There was just a single poster advertising it in the Old Town Square that I'd missed seeing until Saturday afternoon. I was disappointed not to have found out about the concert until it was too late, but I *wasn't* disappointed about how my week in Slovakia had come out. The power developer's representative was very encouraged by what he saw, and all five opportunities he investigated are (for now, at least) worth pursuing – a total worth of about US\$80 million for the five combined. It was a *very* successful week, and made me look forward to the last leg of my trip, to Bulgaria...

Sunday evening, May 21, 2000 (Sofia, Bulgaria)

Well, I made it to Sofia without any difficulties and the city is pretty much the same as I remember it from a year ago. But maybe that's not so good as there's a lot of reconstruction and rehabilitation that needs to happen here. One thing that *is* different is that Bulgaria's equivalent of Lenin's Tomb is gone. It was a long, squat, ugly rectangular building in one of the city squares that was the final resting place/ memorial to Bulgaria's first communist leader. They removed the body after the 1989 revolution that brought democracy to the country, but the building remained. The previous time I was here, a year ago, there was graffiti all over it and some scaffolding around it. I'd thought they were going to re-hab it, but it turns out they were only getting ready to dynamite it to clear it out of there. The problem was, it had been built to survive the end of the world, just about, and so it took them five attempts to get the job done!



the Tomb in 1999

And then there was the Hotel Lulin (I'm sparing you the Cyrillic Bulgarian spellings here; all names and places are the Roman alphabet spellings instead), which by the time I left it I was nearly ready to nominate for another such dynamite job. I'd originally picked it mostly because of its low room rate (about US\$35 per night), a case of frugality overruling common sense. This trip started out about US\$1,000



over budget from the get-go because our new travel agent didn't look very hard for reasonably-priced airline tickets, so I'd been trying to cut costs wherever possible to make up for it. At any rate, the hotel was clean enough, but at US\$35 per night I wasn't surprised by the lack of luxuries such as air conditioning. I *was* surprised, though, by the lack of non-luxuries like a shower, for instance – the bathroom had a shower head and controls, but they were mounted on the wall of the bathroom and all the water went down a floor drain in front of the commode. My stay at the Lulin was the first (and hopefully only) time I've ever been able to take a shower while sitting on the toilet. Besides that, there was the telephone, a clunky old dial unit which didn't work at much of the time; the one night it did, if you didn't complete dialing the number you were calling within about ten seconds, you'd get an intermittent beep dial-error sound. No coat hangers there, either, so the back of a chair had to suffice. And the lift wasn't working either, even though they had promised

me it would be back in service "soon" (three weeks was probably a better estimate, from its state of deconstruction) – my room was a long four flights up the stairs. But the funkiest thing about the Lulin was the room numbering system – my room, 404, was right next to room 42. Room 41 was across the hall, and the other rooms on the floor were numbered consecutively from 403 to 413 – rooms 401 and 402 didn't exist. Anyway, two days of the Hotel Lulin was as much as I could stand, and I checked into a much nicer, though more expensive place to stay – I decided that maybe the travel budget wasn't in such bad shape, after all!

Monday night, May 22, 2000 (Sofia)

It was a busy and eventful day today from a business perspective; there were several useful meetings, and one of them resulted in discovery of a business opportunity worth about US\$50 million, if I can interest the right private power developer company to pursue it. But the most interesting meeting of the day didn't have anything at all to do with business – I was invited to attend a meeting of the local Sofia science fiction and fantasy fans. They meet weekly, on Monday nights, at a public school not far from the centrum of the city. I'd heard they were interested in meeting me, but I didn't expect them to practically worship me like a celebrity. I wasn't altogether comfortable with it, but that's what winning an award will do for you, I guess.

In all there were about 15-20 people at the meeting (many who spoke passable English), including two of Bulgaria's science fiction writers (they each autographed one of their books for me). Even though I'm not a fiction writer, I was still asked my opinion of the status of science fiction and fantasy today. Is cyberpunk evolving? (Yes, the latest 'hot button' seems to be nanotechnology; virtual reality and AI are becoming passé.) Did I know any science fiction writers? (Yes, many. Mike Resnick, Jack Chalker, Greg Benford, Alexis Gilliland, Allen Steele, and S.N. Dyer are personal friends, in fact.)



What are some of my favorite stories? (Too many to catalog, actually, but "The Sentinel" by Arthur Clarke, "Remembering Siri" by Dan Simmons, and "Population Implosion" by Andrew Offutt are definitely in my Top Five.) I mentioned that I do a bit of traveling, so they asked me for a funny travel story (I told them a story from one of my previous Postcard Diaries, about almost having my briefcase stolen in Budapest, and how it led to a bargain price for a watercolor painting I'd been wanting). It went on and on, and much sooner than I expected, it was ten o'clock and people started drifting away to go home. But before I left, the club presented me with a copy of their publication, signed and personalized by everybody who had attended. It was as if they were signing a high school yearbook! I was a bit overwhelmed by their show of friendship, but now I'm going to have to learn to read Bulgarian to figure out what they all wrote!

Tuesday night, May 23, 2000 (Sofia)

This trip isn't going to be quite as big an adventure as I'd originally expected it would be. I had thought I would be going as far as the shore of the Black Sea, or at least as far as the city of Plovdiv with its extensive Roman ruins, but it now looks as if I'm not going to get very far outside of Sofia. There was a short day trip today to the nearby town of Pernik and on Thursday I'm supposed to go to Belovo, about 100 kilometers from here, but that's it. My schedule has been changing not only day-to-day, but at times even hour-to-hour. It pays to be flexible with your plans when you come to Bulgaria, I guess!

the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral



My ever-evolving day's schedule for Tuesday included an early evening meeting with a power developer company's in-country representative (over a beer, of course), and then an hour-and-a-half at a local Internet café to catch up on a few days of unread e-mail. The way back to the hotel took me first through the plaza where the wonderful Alexander Nevsky Cathedral resides (it's an even better sight lit up at night than it is during the day) and then through a pedestrian subway where there were still a few small convenience kiosks open. When I stopped at one to buy a snack, the two

young guys who were manning the shop immediately 'made' me as an American (I'm always puzzled at how they can do that when I don't say anything) and began trying out their English on me. Turns out one of them had recently graduated from college with a degree in Chemistry, and due to the high unemployment rate, this was the best he'd been able to do for himself so far. We talked about what the future might hold for Bulgaria (at least five years of reconstructing the country, which has already started); we

talked about the steadily improving economy and how it would eventually lead to a better job for him (I told him not to lose his self-confidence and sense of self-worth – those were his most valuable assets). He mentioned he wanted to come to North America someday, but didn't know if he would ever be able to afford it; I told him I was 40 years old before I managed my first trip to Europe, and that he still had a lot of living to do. He seemed to take heart in that, and said he would remember. I eventually looked at my watch and saw I'd been talking to him for more than an hour, so we said good-bye and I walked back to my hotel, glad that I'd seemed to make at least a small difference in his outlook for the future. Thinking back over the day's events, I'd had what I'd considered several important meetings. But maybe, in the long run, this last one was maybe the most important of all.

Wednesday, May 24, 2000 (Sofia)

There's a national holiday here today in celebration of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the originators of the Cyrillic alphabet that makes Bulgaria one of the more challenging places for westerners like me to do business. I've got a very welcome day off that will maybe help me to shake off a head cold I've been fighting for the past few days. This seems to be a very popular holiday; there's music and parades and a big celebration in the plaza in front of the National Theater. There are also many groups of young people, each carrying an identifying sign; I'm guessing they're using the holiday to celebrate their upcoming high school graduation. Or, because of the cold winters here, maybe it's just that Spring Break week for students happens later in the year in Bulgaria!

the celebration at the National Theater



the "Russian Church"

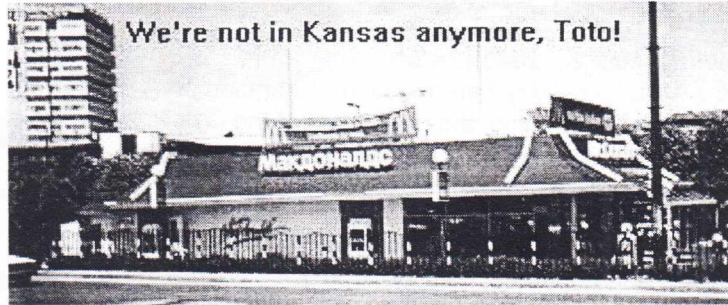
Another of the congregating points for the celebration was the plaza surrounding the Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky, the building that's probably the 'signature' image most visitors to Sofia come away with. My favorite building in the city, though, is the so-called 'Russian Church', which is less impressive in size than the Nevsky cathedral but much more elegant and beautiful. I only much later found out that the actual name for the Russian Church is the Church of St. Nicholas. But when I told the lady at my hotel's registration desk that I thought the St. Nicholas church was nicer, actually, than the Nevsky Cathedral, she shrugged and conceded that it *did* have a reasonable amount of elegance – for a *Russian* church! I guess the Soviet-style communism that ended over a decade ago is still pretty fresh in people's memories!

Thursday, May 25, 2000 (Sofia)

There are some tall mountains in Bulgaria! Today was my last long automobile ride of this business trip, to the southeast of Sofia for about 100 kilometers to the small town of Belovo. A paper products company is there that probably needs a newer and cheaper source of electricity and steam for its operations, and I've already started to promote this opportunity to whom I think is an interested and very capable power developer company. But we were just barely outside of Sofia when I saw the summits of some magnificent snow-capped Alpine-like mountains poking above the tops of a much

closer and lower Appalachian-like range. The tall ones looked pretty rugged and wild; I guess that explains why there aren't any towns or cities showing in that part of the road map!

The tall Alpine-like mountains are called the 'Rila', and while they're no match in size to the real Alps, the tallest of them still extend up to over 2,900 meters – taller than the highest peak in Slovakia's High Tatras. It seems to take me about a week to get used to the Cyrillic alphabet used by the Bulgarian language each time I'm in the country, so by the time the day for the road trip arrived, reading the road map wasn't all that much of a challenge. Actually, Bulgarian might be the easiest of all the Slavic-type languages to learn, once you do get used to the alphabet. For instance, I've picked up a reasonable Slovak vocabulary in all the times I've been there, but my grammar is horrible because nouns, adjectives and verbs all decline in Slovak – a different spelling is used depending on context. I'm told that Bulgarian isn't like that – it's similar to English in that only the verbs decline (as in 'I am', 'you are', 'he is', etc.). I've also seen that many Bulgarian words, once you transcribe to Roman alphabet spellings, are very similar to English ones. All this prompted me to make the rather arrogant statement in a meeting on my next-to-last day in Sofia that if I were there for six months, I could become fluent. What's surprising is that the other people in the meeting believed me, I think!



Friday night, May 26, 2000 (Sofia)

After nearly three weeks on the road, and on my very last business day of this long trip, I have heard the Voice of God. And it was good! No, I haven't undergone a religious enlightenment of any kind, but tonight I *did* finally get to attend a live symphony orchestra performance of the grand "Organ" (or, as it's sometimes known, the "Voice of God") symphony of Camille Saint-Saëns. There's a two-week international classical music festival going on here in Sofia, and tonight was a concert by the Bulgarian State Radio Symphony Orchestra of works by French composers, which also featured lesser-known compositions by Ravel and Debussy. I'd known about it for several days, so my expectations were high – the Saint-Saëns symphony is one of my favorites. For that reason, maybe, I felt just a tiny bit let down – the performance just didn't seem to 'sparkle', to elevate itself to greatness in my memory. And I'm not sure why – perhaps I was expecting to be blown out the back of the concert hall by the force of the organ when it made its appearance in the 4th movement. Instead, all I got was my bones rattled!

It really *was* a very good performance, though, and as the days went on I started to think better and better of it. You really can feel the organ's presence with more than just your sense of hearing, and that's something you can't experience by listening to a recording of that symphony. I think I see more classical music performed on my infrequent business trips to Europe than during the entire rest of the year in the United States. Part of the reason is cost – events like a symphony concert are much, much less expensive in Bulgaria (the ticket cost was 5 lev, or less than US\$2.50), and another part is that my evenings on the road are more available for events like that than when I'm home. But I also think the overall culture in Europe is more attuned to evening events like concerts, or classical music in general. For instance, there's a cable television channel from France called 'Muzzik' that I could watch at my hotel. It featured commercial-free classical music, jazz, opera, and ballet; I was pleased to find a series of recitals of some of Beethoven's more famous piano sonatas by a talented pianist named Georges Plundermacher. The Muzzik channel was as if our Public Broadcasting System had begun an all-music format service, which isn't a bad idea, come to think of it. I know *I'd* be an avid viewer!

Saturday night, May 27, 2000 (Sofia)

And so this trip comes to an end; this is my last full day here. Today was very low key – some walking around the city to take a few last looks at some of the nice churches here, a couple of hours at the Internet café to catch up on correspondence and news, and a pleasant evening dinner with one of my business contacts here. Turns out that both he and I have had some surreal travel experiences. We traded some amusing stories about Hungary and Romania and Russia and Zimbabwe, and eventually the topic came around to what, of all the places we've ever been, was the one we liked best. On this we were in complete agreement – our favorite destination was a place called 'home'.

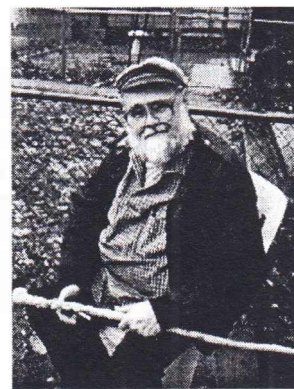
Epilogue

There was a series of television commercials for the upcoming Sydney Summer Olympics that was being aired on CNN International while I was in Bulgaria, each showing some memorable Olympic event that transcended sport, such as a runner who went down with a severe leg injury but still got to his feet and attempted to complete the race. At its end, each commercial urged us to “celebrate humanity,” so maybe this is a good place to try to do that. Back on my very first day in Poland, at the start of that train ride from Warsaw to Katowice, all I knew was that I was in big trouble – it would be three hours before I even arrived in Katowice and I'd not planned on meeting my friend Piotr (or anybody else, for that matter) at the train station. And the thieves had that three hours head start with my credit cards before I could even *start* to look for a way out of the mess I was in. But it turned out that the man sitting across the cubicle from me (who luckily spoke some English) saw what had happened and wanted to do something to help. So he took out his mobile phone (everybody seemed to have one in Poland) and called ahead to his wife, who found Piotr's listing in the telephone directory. We then called Piotr directly from the train and got confirmation he would be at the Katowice station; after that, I started feeling a bit better about things. But there's more – after talking to his wife (and not knowing that the thieves hadn't gotten away with all of my cash), the man told me that he and his wife wanted to *loan me some money!* He didn't even know my name, or anything about me except that I was a foreigner in need, and he was going to provide me money. He had his wallet out and was starting to pull out some cash before I stopped him. It was maybe the defining moment of the entire trip, and it happened on the very first day; what had been a nightmarish experience was transformed, right then and there, into something positive and memorable. After that, I was certain some good things would happen the rest of the way, and I was pretty much right. There were a lot of people who played a large part in making those good things happen, some of whom I meet every time I'm in Europe and some (like that man) I'll never see again. I can't thank him in person; I can only thank him here. There's a lot to experience in the countries I visit in Central and Eastern Europe, and one of the purposes of these travel diaries is to try to let the readers vicariously see the region alongside me. But this trip showed me once again that maybe the best thing to celebrate about the region is the people who live there. I think that, as much as any other reason, is why I look forward to going back there again.



Joe

Today is Saturday, June 10th, as I'm typing this, and I just received the news of the death of my friend Joe Mayhew. For those who don't know him or haven't heard of him, Joe was a member of the local fan club, the Washington Science Fiction Association, and was a very prolific fan artist – his cartoons were a feature in many fanzines, including *Mimosa*; he had been nominated for the 'Best Fan Artist' Hugo Award four times (including this year) and had won the award once, in 1998. Joe was also a fan historian of sorts – his fan activity dated back to the 1960s, and he was always willing to talk about events long past and people now mostly forgotten. (He'd written an article for us featured in the most recent *Mimosa*, "My Own Personal First Fandom," that we'd hoped would be the first in a series about BaltWash fandom.) Joe was opinionated, but polite about any disagreements he might have with you. He could be irascible and annoying at times, but never so much that you could stay angry at him, or he at you, for very long. He was one of the rocks of Washington fandom, someone who you looked forward to seeing at club meetings or at conventions.



Joe became ill a little more than a month ago and had been in decline ever since. I'd heard, while I was in Europe, that he'd first showed outward signs at Balticon on Easter weekend of the illness that would soon kill him. By the time I returned home, he'd been hospitalized and was rapidly losing higher brain functions. I visited him in the hospital at the end of May, and he was only able to speak a few words, though he showed some recognition of the all the people who had come to see him. The next time I visited, two days later, he'd lost even that ability. The final time I visited him, two days ago, he'd lapsed into a coma. Joe had plenty of visitors throughout his hospitalization, though at the end it had pretty much turned into a vigil. We'd all realized long before than that Joe wasn't going to get better, even though the doctors hadn't yet found out what the cause of his decline was.

When Joe first became ill he had started behaving a bit erratically, so it was assumed that he'd had a stroke. When that was ruled out, the doctors had thought there might be some kind of tumor that was affecting his central nervous system, or perhaps a virus of some kind that was causing a form of encephalitis that was resulting in his dementia. The cause of the illness wasn't determined until a few days before Joe died, after a brain biopsy was done on him – it was Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, a relatively rare form of spongiform encephalopathy that causes rapid and irreversible deterioration of the brain.

Joe was one of the first fans Nicki and I met after we moved to Maryland at the end of 1988, and one of the first friends we made here after the move. It wasn't pleasant to see him just before he died, but as another of his friends said then, that wasn't really Joe at all; the real Joe had already left the building by then. My memories of Joe will be of happier times. One of them is his visit to our house on a Thursday evening in early March, just three months before he died; in response to our request for help he made the long drive from Greenbelt where he lived around the Beltway and up I-270 to Gaithersburg to do some last-minute illustrations so that we could get *Mimosa* 25 to the printers on schedule. There was lots of pleasant conversation and a nice dinner expedition. Hard to believe he's gone.

Addendum to the Postcard Diary

When you do a trip report that's mostly confined to a series of postcards, there's always a risk of oversimplifying something, and after re-reading the Postcard Diary, I see that I've done just that. There were other people besides my friend Piotr who helped me the first few days of my trip when I was trying to recover from the train robbery and deserve some thanks. The people at the U.S. Commercial Service, for instance, also let me use their telephone to call back to the U.S.A. several times once I'd gotten back to Warsaw, and recommended a good bank for making the wire transfer. One of the people from work who came to Poland for the conference brought me one of my replacement credit cards. The person who deserves the most thanks, though, is Nicki, who spent much time on the phone to credit card companies and helping to arrange the wire transfer from her side of the Atlantic. Without her help, I might still be stranded in Warsaw. (Thanks, sweets!)

Some Recent Evening Events: Rock and Rach

Washington, to me, is like two different cities depending on the time of day – the city at night is much more serene without all the commuters and tourists who jam up the streets during the day and a lot quieter without most of the traffic. Many of the buildings take on a different look at night, too; the softer illumination than bright daylight (and from the ground rather than from above) produces a different pattern of shadows that allow even some of the more mundane buildings to take on an entirely different character than they do during the day. It's kind of fun to walk around parts of the city at night, but since I commute back to Maryland I don't get the chance too often.

There was an Exhibition Opening at the Corcoran Gallery on Wednesday, June 14th, so Nicki and I had a chance to see a bit of the pleasant nighttime Washington on our walk down 17th Street after dark, from the Metrorail station past the Old Executive Office Building (one of my two favorite buildings in the city) to the museum. The event that brought us to the Corcoran was the Norman Rockwell exhibit, which featured dozens of his paintings and a complete retrospective of all his covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* (it's definitely worth seeing, if it makes an appearance at a gallery or museum near you). The Opening was being sponsored by the Ford Motor Company; their spokeswoman said that Fords were frequently shown in Rockwell's paintings over the years. Ford even underwrote publication of a nice coffee table book about Rockwell which featured full color reproductions of many paintings; everyone who was at the opening got a copy, free. And there was food! Salmon cakes, salads of all types, lots and lots of desserts, a free bar...

It really was a nice evening, but one of the things we couldn't understand was why there were so few people there; there weren't nearly as many as there were for the Annie Leibowitz opening several months earlier. Corcoran Openings are free for their members; Nicki and I aren't members, but we know somebody who is, and he got us an invitation. So we were surprised that he wasn't there for the Rockwell opening. When I called him the *next day* to find out why, he told me he was indeed going and he'd "*see me there tonight.*" Turns out that both Nicki and I had mis-read the invitation; it was indeed for Thursday, June 15th, and we had inadvertently crashed a special VIP event for their more generous contributors. They had let us in, because we were both

dressed for it, and it looked like we belonged. There was a reception desk where they were checking off invitee names, and I remember saying something to the effect I didn't think our names were on their list; they must have interpreted that as meaning 'he must be a late addition' so they just pencilled in my name on the bottom. I'm guessing we could get away with this again some other time, but I'm not sure we would dare!

It's a good thing we got to the Rockwell Opening on June 14th, because we had another event to go to on the 15th – the National Symphony Orchestra at Wolf Trap for an evening of 'Russian Fireworks'. There were five works performed, including shorter pieces by Glinka, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov; the featured works were Rachmaninoff's 2nd Piano Concerto (which I really wanted to see) and Tchaikovsky's "Overture 1812" complete with 'live' cannon fire (which Nicki was looking forward to), but the *real* fireworks was the raging thunderstorm that charged through the Washington area that evening. The concert venue, Wolf Trap's Filene Center, is semi-open to the outdoors (and if you have lawn seats, even more so than that), and most of the evening there were lightning flashes and the occasional roll of thunder, not to mention torrents of rain. It adversely affected the more delicate Rachmaninoff concerto, but it kind of complimented the Tchaikovsky "1812". All in all it was an interesting evening (though many of the people out on the lawn probably didn't think so) but I'd really like to hear the Rachmaninoff again in a less meteorologically-challenged setting.

Obligatory Classical Music Section

Speaking of the Rach2 Piano Concerto, I should mention that I have several recordings of it. Seems like every pianist has his or her own slightly different interpretation of it. It's also popular enough (and difficult enough) where most of the classical pianists now performing include it in their repertoire. This is one of my favorite works of classical music, and I've heard enough recordings of it where I can tell you which ones I like best. One of them by Vladimir Ashkenazy with the London Symphony Orchestra (London 444 839-2) which is actually a double CD of all four of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos. I like it because the sound seems richer than in other recordings (perhaps because of quality of the recording) and because of Ashkenazy's interpretation of the piece. The Rach2 has many faces – a raging tiger in some places, a thing of beauty in others; Ashkenazy is very good at knowing how to emphasize these aspects without going so far as to make the piece (in effect) a parody of itself. I also like his interpretation of the more demanding Rach3, which seems to require more of a contest of wills between the performer and the music. These are very, very good.

A more budget-minded version of the Rach2 (and also the "Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini," which is also a piano concerto in all but name) is by Andrei Gavrilov with the Philadelphia Orchestra (EMI Red Line 7243 5 69829 2 5). I'm not sure why I like this one so much over many of the others, but in spite of the inexpensive price (less than \$10) it's a quality recording, and has a slightly nicer arrangement (in my opinion) than most other versions, especially the ending of the concerto. Both the Rach2 and the Paganini Rhapsody have sections that most likely will be familiar to you; the middle section of the Rach2 was used by Eric Carmen in a song "All By Myself," while one of the segments of the Paganini Rhapsody has appeared in several films, including *Groundhog Day* and *Somewhere in Time*.

One other (inexpensive) version of the Rach2 that's worth listening to is the recording done by the Philadelphia Orchestra with Sergei Rachmaninoff himself as the pianist (Naxos 8.110601) way back in 1929 (the Rach3 is also on that same disk, but it was recorded a decade later than the Rach2). The sound quality isn't nearly as good as modern day recordings and its value is mostly as historical perspective, but it's interesting to see how Rachmaninoff interpreted his own composition. For the price of the CD (less than \$7), it's a worthwhile addition to any collection of classical piano recordings.

Mailing Comments on SFPA 215

Toni/OE

On the proposed SFPA website: "Suggestion for links?" To members' websites, for sure, and maybe email links as well. The WSFA website (<http://www.wsfa.org>) has a page listing active members, if you'd like to see how they do it.

This obviously would be a good place for an online version of your SFPA handbook (can't remember the title), and also Guy's history of SFPA that was published a long time ago. Anything to do with the history of SFPA would be worth having available online (though I'm only too aware of the amount of effort needed to put publications like that on the web).

Ned Brooks

On email addresses: "You change e-mail addresses at a dizzying pace, the one in [*Mimosa* 25] is apparently already obsolete." No, it's still valid. The one I have listed on the SFPA OO is a different one, also valid. To summarize:

fiawol@cpcug.org – email valid for *both* Nicki and me; listed in *Mimosa*

jophan@zdnetwork.com – email *only* for me

trad_quilter@yahoo.com – email *only* for Nicki

lynch@digex.net – previous/discontinued email address for us; no longer valid

On comic strips: "The local paper is still running *Peanuts* – most of them seem to be dated 1974." The *Washington Post* carries it too under the title *Classic Peanuts*, and there are no plans on discontinuing it. Now if they'd only start a *Classic Calvin and Hobbes*. With the recent death of Jeff MacNelly, I'm afraid we'll see the end of *Shoe* soon, but the strip has been around long enough where they could do a 'classic' series of that, too.

Shiela Strickland

On procrastination: "It's been almost 30 years since I became aware of fandom and this is my first zine." But not your first written fanac, because I remember getting letters of comment from you long ago, I think about *Mimosa*. I don't think I've met you in person, though, unless it was very briefly at the 1980 Worldcon or at a DeepSouthCon. Perhaps I'll see you at Chicon?

On the cost of classical music concerts: "I don't get many opportunities to hear [classical music] live; most of the available concerts are at LSU, and out of my price range." The ones here are pretty expensive, too. The NSO at Wolfrap event I described earlier cost about \$70 for the two tickets, and those were by no means the best seats available. Most of the live events I've

attended have been in Eastern Europe on business trips, where the ticket prices are much, much lower.

Tom Feller

On computer viruses: "I learned that a computer virus had infected our corporate email system, which uses Outlook, Microsoft's email program. ... I later discovered that it was the Love Bug Virus." It hit our system too; I think I had 40 messages from people telling me they loved me. Annoying, but not disruptive, as I knew better than to open the attachment. Obviously, some people didn't.

On Springsteen in concert: "I'm glad Anita paid for the tickets. I'll waste my money elsewhere." I've seen Bruce in concert only once, back in the mid 1980s during his 'Born in the U.S.A.' tour, and I thought he more than lived up to his billing as one of the best live music acts. Amazing that tickets were so readily available. Springsteen concerts sell out in hours here; there's no hope for tickets unless you're willing to pay large amounts to a ticket broker. Kind of surprising his concert didn't sell out where you are; if his fans from Jersey had found out, they would undoubtedly have flown down there to scarf them up, like they do for other venues where tickets are available.

George Wells

On movies: "If *The Matrix* was your favorite movie of the year I wonder if you have seen, by now, *The Thirteenth Floor* and *ExistenZ*. All three complement each other philosophically." No, not yet, but I don't get to all that many first run movies any more. I'll look for them on cable TV. (Last minute addendum: Saw *The Thirteenth Floor* on HBO earlier this week. An OK, but by no means great movie – *The Matrix* was much better, though also much more violent.)

Eve Ackerman

On travel plans: "While I'm not sorry I'm missing D.C. in July, I will miss seeing you guys." You're right that the weather in D.C. in July can be a bit oppressive, and we'll miss seeing you too. Next year in Philadelphia?

Liz Copeland

On the WSFS Constitution: "Is there anything in the WSFS rules about who on the committee can know about the Hugo results in advance? We didn't tell anyone when we did them in Atlanta." Nope, it's not covered. Usually, the Worldcon Chairman appoints a Hugo Subcommittee (which sometimes includes the Chairman) that has total autonomy in conducting Hugo balloting; this has the purpose of building a firewall from the rest of the committee and its assorted helpers so that some of them gets nominated they do not have to resign their positions due to the appearance of a conflict of interest. In 1988, for example, Guy Lillian, who was in charge of NolaCon Publications, did not have to quit the NolaCon committee after he had been nominated for a 'Best Fan Writer' Hugo Award because of this kind of firewall. (This is more for the benefit of other readers as you already know this.)

On moving damages: "What kind of fight did the insurance people put up over paying for Nicki's quilts that were mildewed?" At first we thought there would be no problem; Nicki asked

for about \$7,000 and they countered with an offer in the mid \$5,000 range which she grudgingly accepted. Afterwards, though, we started getting letters from them that seemed to indicate that they wanted off the hook, as it was their incompetent subcontractors that had caused the problem, and asked us to sign off on something that seemed to clear them. We refused. Then they started to drag their feet about reimbursements for other things that were damaged or lost. We got our homeowners insurance to cover most of it (the worst was the bed mattress and box springs, which somebody or some creature had obviously urinated on, from the smell, and the deep gouge across the top of our oak dining room table, which the insurance company hired an expert furniture refinisher to repair). Eventually we settled for another \$1,000 or so for things that were lost, such as kitchenware. It all took much longer than it should have before we finally got the reimbursement.

Guy Lillian

Congratulations once again on your Hugo nomination! I think it's inevitable you will win sooner or later, though first-time nominees in this category historically haven't been victorious very often (the most recent time was in 1986). I do think *Challenger* will do well in the balloting this year whether or not it wins.

On job security: "A female judge in Jefferson is effecting a Huey Long-style power play. Chopping Drug Court was a way of demonstrating power." If you say so, but I'm not sure what eliminating a court of law is supposed to demonstrate.

On perennial Hugo winners: "I haven't complained about Charlie Brown winning all the Hugos [for *Locus*] for semiprozine because I think that entire category is a shuck. It was only created to get *Locus* out of the fanzine listings. ... I never vote for *Locus* because (1) it's been honored enough and (2) there are more interesting contenders." Lots to comment about in that short excerpt. First of all, this still doesn't explain why you're not doing your 'Langford should withdraw' polemic against, say, Bob Eggleton in the 'Best Professional Artist' category or Gardner Dozois in the 'Best Professional Editor' category. There are other people besides Dave Langford who seem to be shoo-ins for the award, but you're giving them a pass. Secondly, I somewhat agree that the 'Semiprozine' category is a bit thin, with perhaps fewer possible nominees than most if not all other categories (not to mention the concept of a semiprozine in the first place - a better title might be 'Limited Circulation Magazine'). But the WSFS Constitution isn't carved in stone, you know; it can be changed by amending it, and that happens all the time. As for *Locus* once being defined as a 'fanzine', you may be again partly right that the category was created to put it up against a different set of contenders. Gary Farber and Marty Cantor were the architects of that move, back in the early 1980s; the 'Best Fanzine' category had once been called 'Best Amateur Publication' and the presence of *Locus*, with its paid staff and numerous paid adverts, was clearly inappropriate. But as for "it's been honored enough," I guess I disagree. The purpose of the balloting, after all, is to select what is supposedly the 'best' of the year; eligibility under that criterion should not depend on what has or hasn't been accomplished in previous years.

Janice Gelb

On technogizmos: "I realized that mostly what I do with photos nowadays is scan them and

put them up on the web. So I decided to buy a digital camera." I'm waiting until they become a bit more affordable; it's cheaper to buy a really good 35mm camera and a HP flatbed scanner. On the other hand, my brother has one and it was really easy to use. Except that you really need to bring a notebook computer with you on trips so you can download the photos to hard disk storage before the camera's memory fills up. Are you going to start including digital photos in your SFPazines?

On baseball: "[The new] Pac Bell Park [in San Francisco] is just as fabulous as it looks on television." I'm looking forward to going there some day, but I have to admit I'll miss old Candlestick Park. With its passing, that makes six now-extinct major league ballparks I've attended regular-season games at. I feel old.

Richard Dengrove

On cat care: "Can you still deposit your cats with Sheryl Birkhead [our vet] while she's in the process of moving?" No need to do that, as she comes here to take care of them while we're away. (One of her perks here is Internet access.) Our cats are lucky – they haven't been boarded in years and years because of Sheryl.

On classical music: "I have mostly sated my desire for classical music by listening to WGMS [which] I gather [is] one of the few *commercial* classical stations in the country." Yes, there is only one or two others. I find I'm listening to WGMS even more than WETA recently; they are a bit constrained by having to air commercials at regular intervals but they still find room for the longer symphonies and concertos. Every work day, I check the web sites of both WETA and WGMS to see if any favorites are scheduled.

Randy Cleary

On worst nightmares: "Yes, it sounds absurd to think in modern times that our Government could become a tyranny, but history has shown again and again the folly of buying into the it-can't-happen-here belief. As such, individual arms ownership is a protection from the State... [etc. etc. etc.]" This is your big argument on why we all ought to be packing a piece?? Because you think we're possibly in danger of becoming a police state?? No disrespect intended, but this sounds like way-over-the-top paranoia to me. Please excuse me if I don't take you very seriously.

David Schlosser

On alternatives to packing a piece: "I'd ... be curious if the type of violent crime that ... honest poor people need to defend themselves against might not be better protected against with other methods (loud whistles, pepper sprays, etc.) that could be used more quickly and with less chance of errant effects." Well, that's what the police recommend, anyway. And the various police are about as conservative an organization as there is.

Gary Robe

On travel adventures: "My trip to Brazil and Argentina was one of the few travel fubars I've had to endure." Happens to me too, once in a while. On one of my trips a few years ago, I was to be met by my Slovak hosts at the Vienna airport. Problem was, the non-stop Austrian Air

flight from Dulles Airport near Washington had been delayed by about 9 hours (they had to fly over a replacement plane for one that had a mechanical problem of some kind). There was no way to contact the Slovaks (it was a Saturday night), but luckily there was an Air France flight via Paris that got me to Vienna only an hour or so later than I had originally planned. I'd expected the Slovaks would have given up on me by then, but when I cleared customs they were still there.

On automotive sound systems: "It was interesting to see that a CD player is now [a] cheaper option [than] a cassette player." Glad to hear that. My aging Corolla is a 1992 (we'd only gotten it a month earlier than our trip to the Orlando worldcon that year), and I'll maybe keep it another year or so at most. I haven't got very many cassettes of classical music, but I've got lots of CDs.

On self defense: "Our instructor [in Hapkido] tells us that if we are ever in this situation [a knife attack] the best thing to do is run." Agreed; I was told that in Karate class (a long, long time ago) too. What did he say to do if your assailants have guns instead of knives?

On Forry Ackerman's lawsuit: "Has there been a resolution to the case?" Yes, Forry won and was awarded about three-quarters of a million dollars (though the loser, Ray Ferry, will appeal). It was written-up in the new (July) issue of *File 770*. I found it interesting that there were a number of celebrities who testified during the trial - John Landis and Ray Bradbury for Ackerman and Harlan Ellison for Ferry. I'm guessing they were mostly just character witnesses; I know Landis is a fan of Forry's and has given him cameo appearances in some of his movies, and that there has been bad feelings between Ackerman and Ellison for quite some time.

Gary Brown

Amusing cover! I haven't met any of the Apollo 8 astronauts, or know anyone who has, but recently I did meet (sort of) Buzz Aldrin from the Apollo 11 crew. He's been collaborating with John Barnes to write futuristic novels (which seem closer to Tom Clancy or Dean Koontz than to science fiction) and he recently had a book signing for their new novel *The Return* at the Pentagon Book Store (the only bookstore I've ever been to where you need a badged escort to get in). I thought I'd be able to talk to him for a few seconds while he personalized my copy, or at least get to shake his hand, but he never even looked up. He was signing store copies for later sale in between the copies people in line had bought, and it was just one signature after another. I had to retrieve my copy from the stack he'd signed, in fact.

On baseball: "So, is the ball juiced or not?" If it is, not by much. The likely culprit for all the home runs we're seeing, in my opinion, is the Personal Trainer. Instead of drinking beer and lounging around during the off-season, players are using some of their big money salaries to hire a personal trainer to keep in shape and to add muscle. Look how much bigger players are today than they were in the 1960s.

Toni Weisskopf

On DSC: Nice DSC report; I was wondering how many would be in the mailing as you were accepting SFPazines at the convention. And congrats on winning the Rebel Award! Once again, I wish we could have been there.

On fan funds: "I thought TAFF was started to bring Walt Willis to the Chicago worldcon [of 1952], or rather emerged from a one-time fan fund to achieve that end." Not exactly; TAFF

originated in 1954, two years after the "WAW With the Crew in '52" fund brought Willis to Chicon II. TAFF's origin was surely influenced by the Willis fund (just as the Willis fund may have been influenced by the 1949 Big Pond Fund), but it was more like an idea whose time had arrived.

On packing a piece for self defense: "I want to be able to protect me and mine. ... [If] someone was assaulting me, I could turn and run - but what if I have Katie with me?" That would be a tough situation, agreed. But if they had guns, do you really think you could grab your's out of your purse (or wherever you were carrying it) and turn the tables on the muggers before they could open up on you? That would seem to be a very dangerous thing to try; you might as well be carrying a squirt gun for the good it would do you. My youngest sister also owns a handgun, and couldn't give me a credible answer when I asked her that question.

On staying in SFPA: "I finally did hear from the Gilbreaths ... The interest to stay in SFPA was there, but their jobs [had gotten] real crazy, and the time just wasn't [there]." Sorry to hear they're too busy, but on the other hand, many of us are, too, and we're still here. I hope they do return some day, but I do not think that just being busy is a sufficient justification for an exemption from minac. Hope that Guy realizes this by now, and that it usually does no good to campaign for (or to grant) such an exemption

Great three-page Hank parody, by the way. I was entertained.

Jeff Copeland

Concerning proposed modification to SFPA Constitution: "Many of us - and I hold myself up as a prime example - are often in gray areas [concerning use of copyrighted material in SFPAzines]." Your proposal to modify the SFPA Constitution, adding a disclaimer that could protect the SFPA OE, seems sensible, but wouldn't it be easier for the OE to just include some kind of disclaimer in each OO? The Constitution only sees print once a year, where there are six SFPA distributions each year; if an OE is looking for protection against copyright infringement lawsuits, just changing the Constitution wouldn't be enough. That said, I'll support your proposed changes.

Closing Comments

Time to close this down. The 50th anniversary Midwestcon was last weekend (as I write this) and it was a fun convention, with one of the best convention bid parties (by the Boston in 2004 group) that I've ever attended (thanks largely to Naomi Fisher). The only other SFPAn I saw there were Irvin (who ran a bid party of his own) and Gary. I remember that back when Nicki and I lived in Tennessee, it wasn't unusual to go to as many as ten conventions per year. Here it is, halfway through 2000, and Midwestcon is our first convention of the year. We're getting older. Anyway, next month is the final Rivercon, and we'll be there. I hope to see a few others of you there, too!