

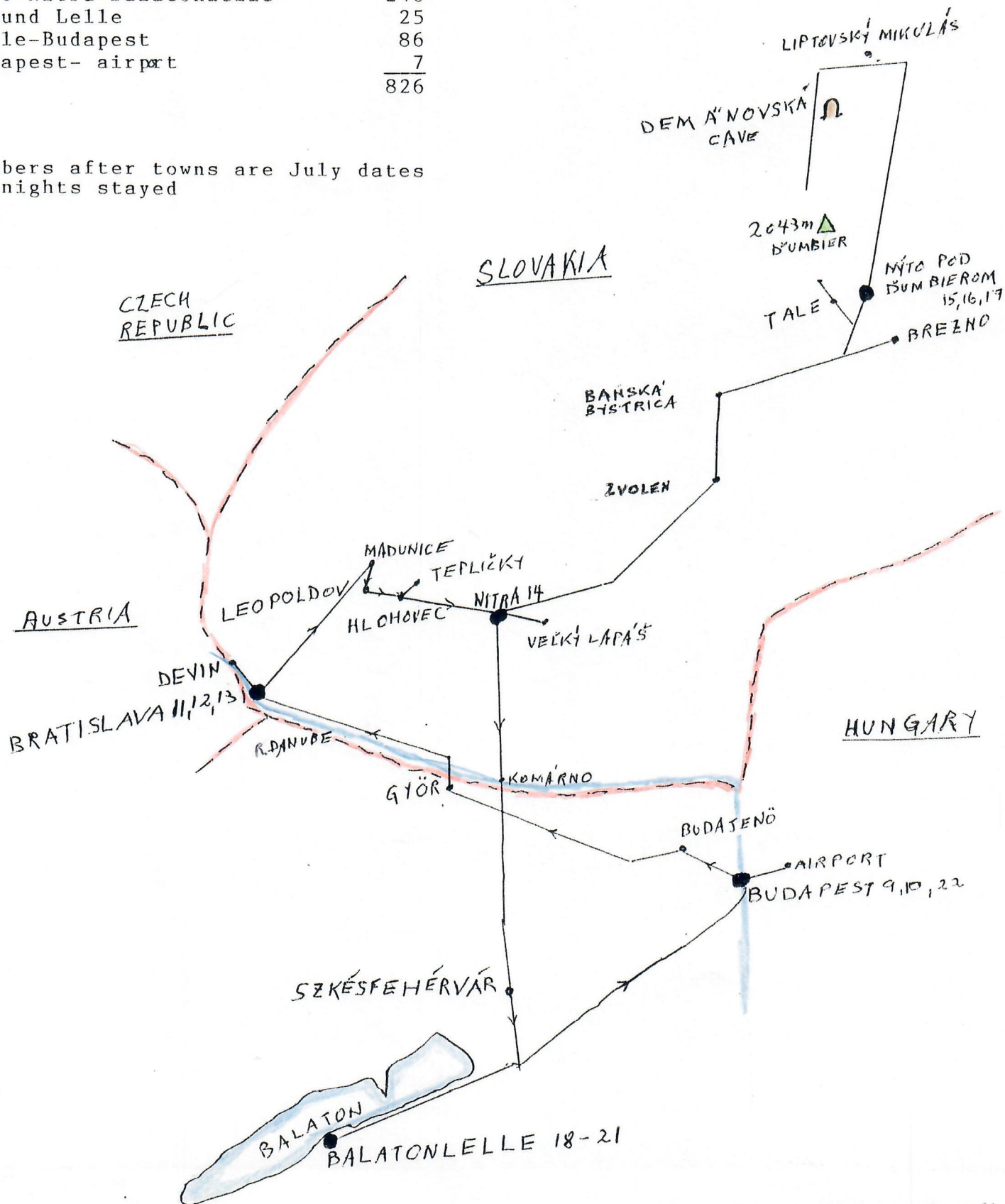
Approx milage

Airport - Budapest	7
Budapest-Budajenő (Csipi)	17
Budajenő - Bratislava	125
Bratislava-Madunice	40
Madunice-Leopoldov-Hlohovec-Teplicky-Nitra	40
Nitra-Lapaš	7
Lapaš-Banská Bystrica-Mýto	117
Mýto-Demänov valley-Mýto	83
Mýto-Tale-Brezno-Mýto	32
Mýto-Nitra-Balatonlelle	240
Around Lelle	25
Lelle-Budapest	86
Budapest- airport	7
	<u>826</u>

Numbers after towns are July dates of nights stayed

Trip to Hungary and Slovakia
from 9th to 23rd July 2000 by
Joan, Mat, Laura, Michael,
Susan and John

POLAND



DIARY OF A HOLIDAY IN SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY 9 - 23 July 2000

Sunday 9 July

At about a quarter to two on an overcast drizzly day, after our busy morning picking gooseberries and bottling them, interspersed with other last minute tasks, William and Edward called to take us to London Airport, at Heathrow. We drove through heavy traffic, but arrived in ample time to meet Laura, Mike, Susan and John on their arrival from Glasgow. We chatted over soft drinks and beverages in the restaurant above the crowded concourse of Terminal 1 until it was time for us to start the process of checking in, before the flight at 6 pm, and William and Edward to return home.

We had an uneventful journey and a safe arrival at Budapest where we were met by 'Ilonka' (Szemző, Ilona) at the barrier and outside by the rental people with our hired people-carrier, a new Fiat six-seater with Hungarian number-plate and "H" sticker.

Ilonka, with Joan as passenger, led the way in her own car through the dark streets (it was around 9 pm, local time, one hour ahead of Britain, and clear, with a half moon) and up to the leafy hills of Buda by narrow twisting lanes, to Ilonka's home.

Rooms assigned and essential unpacking done, we found a superb crème caramel (made by our hostess; with 12 eggs, she said casually), and a giant fruit salad, laid out for us to eat. We retired to bed at about midnight after exchanging family news, and slept till nearly 7 am.

Monday 10 July

A bright hot day. Joan, the first up, breakfasted on the balcony. After everyone had had food and drink we drove in two cars, Ilonka leading the way as before, to the block of flats right in town, near the Danube, where the Hajos family lives. They are distant cousins of Mat's on his mother's side, and direct descendants of the Scotsman who designed the chain bridge opened in 1849. When we sounded the intercom, Thomas Hajos came swiftly down the stairs to greet us. Ilonka, who had taken the day off work, left to go and meet an aunt from South America who had arrived on a package tour. The rest of us ascended the many steps to the Hajos flat on the top floor.

^{Sophie,}
The eldest girl still at home, was there with her mother Susanna and her brother Bence (who visited Britain last summer). We had cool drinks round the dining table, then went sight-seeing with Thomas and his son, except Mat who opted to stay behind and rest. We climbed via steep narrow streets and stone steps to the "Fisherman's Bastion", the wall high up on the east side of the Danube, by the statue of King Stephen and the Cathedral of St. Matthias. At the new Hilton Hotel nearby we changed English money into forints.

We returned to the Hajoses' flat and found 82-year-old Mrs Hajos senior (Thomas's mother) in lively conversation with Mat. We lunched round the big table: slabs of cheese in batter, deep-fried, with salads, then spaghetti milanese, and for pudding three different 'cheesecakes' (a kind of fruit blancmange, on a sponge) to choose from.

Thomas and his wife (known as Zsuzsa, like other Susannas we were to meet) escorted us on the metro to visit Parliament on the Pest side of the river. It was only one stop from the underground station near their home to the park round the huge gothic-style Parliament building, with its distinctive dome. At 5 pm, arranged by Thomas, we joined a small party of English-speakers, and were conducted round by a young woman guide, ending at the sumptuous circular room that is the Chamber of Deputies. Throughout the

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building is rich Byzantine-looking decoration, with gilding and deep colours and many carved and painted statues of historical figures. Under the dome the space reaches to the full height and there the ancient Hungarian crown is guarded by two uniformed soldiers.

The visit over, we returned to our car, parked outside the Hajoses' block, where our belongings were brought down to us. Thomas and Zsuzsa, with Joan, led the way back to Ilonka's flat in their own car, making very slow progress because of the combination of major road works in the centre of Budapest with rush hour traffic.

Ilonka's mother's sister had been duly met and was to stay overnight before returning to Uruguay; she spoke only Spanish and Hungarian, so our conversation consisted of friendly gestures. Two tables were already laid with the best china and white cloths, for the evening's guests. These were Rosa Nemenyi (daughter of the manager of the Polgar vineyards and now a specialist in dubbing foreign films), Fruzsina Szemző and her boy friend, tall handsome Miklos, Zsuzsa Bagameri (Czipi's former companion, a French teacher) and her daughter Zsofi (in shorts and coloured scarves, an art student and no longer the quiet schoolgirl in socks that we saw last year). Zsuzsa and Zsofi did not appear until after supper was over.

We had a copious meal, prepared by Ilonka's housekeeper Ilona, with raw vegetables and home-made dips to start with in the lounge area of Ilonka's huge living room, then at table stuffed pork, with Ilona's aubergine bake for the vegetarians, accompanied by cooked yellow peppers; a superb walnut and chocolate layer cake, from a specialist shop, rounded off the meal. We all sat round the coffee table till the party broke up at about 10.30 pm.

Tuesday 11 July

Cloudy and spotting with rain. We packed and set off for Czipi's soon after 10.30 am saying Goodbye to Auntie who was leaving too that day. Ilonka led the way through the leafy suburbs of Buda to the village on the north-west where the family lives. We got a warm welcome from the two dogs and their master and sat round the big 'farmhouse' kitchen table till it was time to stroll for lunch to a restaurant about 100 yards away. The interior is peasant style and the place is a mecca for city dwellers. Joan had fried mushrooms and cheese with salad and a glorious ice cream confection to follow.

We said Au revoir to Czipi and look forward to seeing his wife Bea and the three children next week when they have returned from a holiday by Lake Balaton. We drove off to Slovakia and torrential rain descended.

We motored many miles past huge fields of sunflowers and maize, and occasional small-holders' plots, through the town of Győr, to the border. We sailed past hundreds of parked lorries being inspected one by one (we were to discover) and joined a short queue of cars to the border point where an unsmiling small dark man examined our passports, telephoned a query and then released us. We drove on a few yards to the Slovak side where the controller was more relaxed. Soon we crossed the Danube and reached the outskirts of Bratislava. We saw a forest of industrial chimneys, one topped by a flame, the oil refinery.

In the centre of town, the one-way system defeated our driver (Mike)'s attempts to reach the Tatra Hotel, where we were booked in, until the navigator (Mat) tried another ploy: guiding us out of the centre so that an essential but so far prohibited left turn could at last be made, leading us to the street we sought. We registered our arrival, unpacked and had dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Wednesday 12 July

Steady rain, unfortunate on a day earmarked for seeing Grandad's old haunts - his schools, etc. We met soon after 8 in the busy hotel restaurant. After-

wards Juraj (George) Stupka (whose grandfather trained Cousin Snuki as a lawyer, and who was one of our house guests some years ago) came from his office at the Soros Foundation to meet us in the foyer. He had not expected an outdoor expedition but despite being clad in only pullover and slacks gallantly accompanied us on the walk. We set off in the drizzle, optimistically coatless but after about 100 yards all except Juraj felt obliged to don rainwear.

We passed the Presidential Palace, just round the corner from the hotel, and saw it was devoid of ceremonial guards as the President was not in residence. We went on to Mat's old grammar school, the 'Gymnasium'. Long ago this was converted to a sculpture college, but it now had scaffolding attached which had apparently been abandoned in the absence of further orders for re-furbishment. A wood carver at work there told us that the college itself had been closed. Mat also showed Susan and John his nearby primary school, a big square building several storeys high, then the houses where the family lived during his schooldays. One was a flat in a big house in the same street as the primary school, where he and his friend Peter used to send messages to each other on a string across the gap between their respective houses. The other was in a quiet street nearer the Castle, where Mat had to pass the Cemetery on his way home; the family had one of the two flats in the house, the other being the owner's, and a pretty flower garden (now partly taken over by garages) surrounded the building.

We took a short bus ride to Bratislava Castle, re-built by the Communist régime in the 1960s; in Mat's schooldays it was a ruin. We warmed up in the café adjacent to the Parliament building next door, having hot coffees and chocolate drinks. Mat thought the interior of the Castle would not be of great interest (it is largely government offices apart from a small museum), but we visited the two souvenir shops, partly to shelter from the heavy rain.

We descended by many stone steps, concentrating hard owing to the cascading water and the usual absence of hand rails, to the Old Town. We saw briefly part of the former Jewish quarter, unfortunately sliced off by the motorway leading out of the city on to the 1970s bridge over the Danube. Then we visited the Cathedral of St Martin, where the Kings of Hungary were once crowned; we entered but a service was in progress so we did not walk round. Then on to the Mayer Café, where we dried out and lunched, finishing with cakes from the famous assortment.

We emerged into Town Hall Square, with the Rupert Fountain and the wooden kiosks selling a variety of crafts and walked back to the hotel via the Cardinal's residence and St Michael's Tower which marks the old wall and one of the entrances to the old city.

A few minutes after we returned, Peter and Hanka and George Bielik arrived from Austria to meet us. We all gathered in the dining room for drinks. There was a rather laboured exchange of family news, the conversation being mostly in Slovak, and Mat having to translate everything for the rest of us. Hanka, from Moravia (Czech-speaking) said hardly a word but sat and smoked. In response to a polite enquiry about Peter's baby grandson, we were informed that Peter had no idea how the child was because he never sees his son. We were told however a little about Peter's diving holidays in Turkey.

After the Bieliks left Paul Szemző (great-nephew of Uncle Bela who was Ilonka's grandfather) arrived in his car to take us to his home. The males travelled with him, the females in a taxi. At his suburban house we were greeted by Paul's wife Ivana, Jurco (George) (9), and Ivanka (7). Susan and John disappeared to be entertained by the children. The grown-ups chatted over drinks and hors d'oeuvres, Paul denigrating the rather gloomy portraits in oils which he had inherited, and which hung above us.

We drove in two cars: Paul's containing himself and Ivana and the four young people and a taxi taking the other four grown-ups, to the chosen eating-place --

Leberfinger's on the Petrzalka side of the Danube, where we had gone last year with the Szemzoes, situated in the park bordering the river. We were shown into a small panelled side room which we had to ourselves. The food is deservedly renowned. Joan had Halušky, traditional pasta-like tiny dumplings with a milky sauce, and for dessert a huge ice cream. The conversation settled down to a monologue from Paul about Wolfgang, his mother's man friend.

We drove back to the Hotel Tatra and said Goodbye to Ivana and Paul.

Thursday 13 July

A bright day. The Skeltons and Joan were going to be without Mat's vital role in leading and interpreting. He was staying behind to meet an old friend from school (in his younger sister, Jean's, class), called Vera, for lunch. We others were going to Devin, the chief Slovak national heritage site.

We found a stationary No.29 bus bound for the Castle at the bus station under the motorway on to the bridge. We waited a few minutes then piled into the bus and managed to secure seats. The bus route follows the Danube to the small town of Devin and we got off at the terminus on the far side and walked down a side road to the castle entrance. For some reason the buses no longer go down to the big parking space where there are several open air cafés and a symbolic modern sculpture in steel put up in Communist times. From there we could see the storks' nest resting high up on one of the inaccessible fortifications that we had seen on our last visit in 1997.

Many new paths have been made in the three years and there are new, safer, steps on the ruins themselves. We explored the Castle precincts, went into the site museum to see the Celtic finds made by archaeologists, climbed both parts of the remaining buildings - the medieval royal castle and the Renaissance palace erected by a favoured rich clan, and enjoyed the view over the confluence of the majestic Danube and a smaller river, the Morava, that is only a few metres from the castle walls. We watched a huge coal barge struggling upstream against the powerful current, and smaller boats keeping to the side. It was very windy and the Skeltons wished they had brought jumpers.

We got a bus back and had lunch in a café in the old City with a good view of St Michael's tower up a pedestrianised street. Afterwards Laura bought an old print of Bratislava Castle in a second-hand bookshop near the café. We walked back to the hotel via the wooden kiosks in Town Hall Square and an indoor market in Obchodna Street.

The Skeltons were going to find their own eating place this evening as Mat and Joan had a dinner engagement. At 5.30 Joan joined Mat in the foyer to meet the Ovečkoví sisters, travel agents whose friendship dated from our visit to Slovakia with Veronica in 1991. Maria, the original contact, has dark hair; Jana, her sister, is blonde. We walked to busy Obchodna Street, where the trams run, to the Arts centre created from a long yard and there we had a meal in the same restaurant as last year. Joan had palaschinken (a pancake) with sauerkraut and salad.

For about $\frac{1}{2}$ of an hour we were joined by Mat's bookseller friend Zěmlička, who is diversifying into publishing and has the text of Mat's unpublished history of Slovakia. He took wine but no food and after discussions with Mat left to go home to his family on the Petrzalka estate of 1970s high rise blocks. After a leisurely meal we walked back to the hotel with Maria and Jana and kissed them Goodbye.

Friday 14 July

After a copious breakfast and having packed our bags we emerged into a slight

drizzle and went to the hotel car park to get in the car. Mat exchanged a few friendly words with the Hungarian attendant and then we set off as planned to Madunice, Mat's childhood home. We had big problems in finding the route out of Bratislava but we arrived between 10 am and 11 as promised. Josef Siska, grandson of the farm Bailiff, was waiting for us as arranged, and we parked there, outside the nearly completed grand new Town Hall for the village. Josef was delighted to meet the Skeltons (Laura he had met 3 years before), particularly John, round whose shoulder he put a friendly arm. A tall blonde smiling Lady Mayor, with young-looking male Deputy Mayor in attendance, met us on the steps, gracious in a grey patterned frock and matching jacket. Joan suddenly felt very crumpled and travel-worn.

The Mayor conducted us round her new domain: her offices (the 'cancellaria') where we met staff, and a small conference room with an extremely shiny walnut maroon-coloured table made in the village. Quietly, in a corridor, she announced to Mat that some people who had known Mat's parents were awaiting us. The result was a sudden uprush of emotion, and a difficulty on both our parts in holding back the tears.

We were shown into a large conference room with five older men lined up to shake hands with Mat and his family. An array of home-made pretzels, chocolate biscuits and other goodies were on the long table and a banquet of salamis and sliced cheese was arranged with mathematical precision on a buffet. Wine and soft drinks were poured out. The oldest man, late eighties, was very short with deeply lined features, his forehead resembling a severely raked centre parting; he remembered Mat as a boy, as his father was an occasional employee on the farm. The men sat on one side of the table, Mat and his English entourage on the other. Josef sat at the far end, facing the Lady Mayor, next to whom Mat was placed. Josef Siska's neighbour was one of the men, but far more talkative than the rest, and, Mat felt, far more intelligent. He was a retired lawyer and kept up a continual interrogation about the various stages of Mat's life since he had left Slovakia, in an animated conversation from one end of the table to the other. The men were very pleased when Mat remembered an individual who had worked for his father, the coachman whose two sons had emigrated to the United States. Photographs were taken, by Laura, by the Deputy Mayor and by the 'Chronicler', the retired village schoolmaster.

Toasts were drunk and a short speech made by the Mayor, saying how delightful it was to welcome back old residents, and replied to by Mat. She explained to him that a plaque (as he had suggested) at the entrance to the site of his house was out of the question - nothing remaining of a visible heritage, with the water pump a modern replacement. (Not quite true: the stone ball and gatepost are there, incorporated into the wall of the house next door, which is how we located the site of the farmyard entrance precisely when we explored in 1991.) She handed us a large book, blank except for previous commemorative entries, for us to sign, after two pages for her account of the day's proceedings. Mat presented her with a facsimile of a manuscript by the famous (in Slovakia) poet Jan Holly, who was born in Madunice and was its priest for 30 years, and also a packet of tea from England. She then gave him two bound volumes of Holly's verse and a book about Madunice written fairly recently. After these, our gifts seemed rather paltry.

The reception over, photographs were taken at the Holly statue next to the nearby parish church, and then we were escorted to the new Holly Museum across the road, which is one room in the former priest's house - where we were received in 1991 by the then incumbent (and shown the Baptismal Register with Mat's name and that of his parents and older sister inscribed and the other ledger containing the astonishing story of the family's conversion in 1919). The room is roughly draped with uniform strips of sacking to represent the oak tree under which Holly was wont to sit, and memorials of his life and letters adorn the walls. The Archivist is the Chronicler; a jovial fat man, he grabbed three volumes of Holly's poetry out of a handy trunk and thrust them in Mat's hands.

From there we walked to the former entrance to Mat's family's farm, noting the way one of the entrance pillars is built into the new building, now a pub, next door, even the football-sized stone globe on top. Then to the well-kept cemetery opposite, where Josef Siska pointed out his parents' graves; his grandfather's (the Schwitzer farm bailiff's) had already been re-cycled, as is the custom. Mat indicated the grave of the Schwitzers' faithful Cook, *Mariska*. We also saw the stone sheep from the farm entrance, discovered last year, and those from the other gatepost, peacefully grazing in someone's garden very near their original position.

We drove to Leopoldov, a planned settlement of one-story modern houses built on a grid pattern, where the Siskas live. After the feast at Madunice we were hardly hungry but we enjoyed the excellent meal put before us by Josef's wife, served with the aid of their daughter Lenka (21) and younger daughter Katerina (8): veal cutlets and French fries. Afterwards we went round the garden, which despite the urban nature of his job Josef cultivates in the traditional way, i.e. raising fruit and vegetables on nearly all of it, with never a weed to be seen, and leaving only a very small part near the house as grass for the family to sit on. A greenhouse was full of tomato and pepper plants.

Led by Josef and his daughters we drove to Hlohovec where we saw Grandfather Szilard's house opposite the church in the middle of town. The house where Mat's mother was staying at the end of 1944 had apparently been demolished.

We arrived at Teplicky at 3.15, within the time-scale envisaged, but without having been able to announce our imminent visit, Mat having tried in vain to contact the Mayor of the village by telephoning from the Siskas. He had telephoned the Mayor's home ten days before, from England, to say we were planning to come, and had spoken to the Mayor's wife but not to the man himself. On reaching our destination, there was no sign of the Mayor. But almost at once the old gravedigger, Mr *Fusko*, appeared. We went into his work-place which is also his home, and saw his newly re-furnished kitchen which was done by himself and his sons, all carpenters. We had a look at Grandfather Schwitzer's house, now partly used as the Mayor's Parlour and the village children's library, for which Laura had brought some books.

We visited the church, built by Mr *Fusko* and his sons, and showed the family mausoleum to Susan, John and Mike. The new gravedigger enquired whether there was any likelihood of Mat's coming back to live in Slovakia; this seemed to be *à propos* of using spare capacity in the vault below the mausoleum. We admired the view from the churchyard, which takes in the hollow that cradles Teplicky and extends up the hillside beyond to the long buildings of the co-operative farm and across the nearby 'barn' fields - strips of farmland attached to the villager's gardens. We said Goodbye to the Siskas, got in the Fiat and drove to Nitra.

Champagne was handed to us on our arrival in the foyer of the *Zlaty Kluchik* Hotel. A modern comfortable place to stay, it is situated high up overlooking the town, in a narrow country lane, and our friends the Stupkas live on the other side of the road, in an older bungalow surrounded by a huge traditional vegetable garden. (The connection between the two families is that Mat's deceased cousin Snuki, mother of the Bieliks, was trained as a lawyer by the grandfather.) We have stayed there several times.

We had supper with Kaya and Josef and Mrs Stupka senior. It was a cordon bleu meal - firm slices of a specially prepared beef with bread dumpling, sliced, and a creamy vegetable sauce, followed by ice cream log. We looked at Josef's drought-stricken garden, but saw the tomatoes were doing well and that the peaches were enormous. (He gave us some next day.)

We arranged to meet Josef before 8 am for a trip up the bell-tower in Nitra. Then bed, undisturbed by the Slovak national ice hockey team said to be staying in the hotel - and for whose anticipated carousings we had been allotted rooms in the annexe instead of in the main building, where they were.

Saturday 15 July

It was raining. We breakfasted soon after 7 (when the hotel restaurant opened) and met Josef Stupka and his daughter Maya who were waiting in their van in the annexe car park. The Stupkas took John as their passenger and led the way to the church with twin towers, topped by onion domes, in one of which is Grandfather Simon Schwitzer's bell. Father Kovacs, the priest we met last year, was away but a new young priest received us; he is one of the three teaching in the seminary for boys and girls based at the church. All of us except Mat and Laura climbed the wooden steps and inspected the three large bells in the bell chamber, noting particularly the date, 1928, embossed on Simon's. Then we crossed gaps in the flooring on planks laid two by two to get into the other tower to be able to climb higher up on comparatively safe steps. Even on a wet day the view over the city up to the archbishop's palace, from the tiny corner windows normally barred against pigeons, was splendid.

On our descent we were told that the church is dedicated to St Ladislav Borromeo who succeeded Stephen as King of Hungary and whose equestrian portrait hangs over the magnificent high altar with its six marble columns. Maya said the church is particularly venerated by the Hungarian minority. When we said our thank yous and farewells Mat gave the priest a packet of English tea and the Gregorian chant cassette we had selected to bring to Father Kovacs. Our new priest said he preferred rock-'n-roll and indeed we noticed subsequently on an information leaflet he gave us about the activities of the Piarists, who run the church and school, that there was a picture of him playing the guitar.

We drove to the centre of Nitra and looked at Grandfather's 'Queen Anne' style town house in the main street, with the old flour mill opposite, and then visited the open air market, held daily in a large courtyard off this same street, offering mainly clothing and foodstuffs. Laura bought a football shirt for John with RONALDO printed on the back ("best footballer in the world" said John) in lieu of the Slovak national team's colours which she sought in vain - and to the amusement of the stallholder. She paid the equivalent of £5. Equally good value were the three pairs of socks Joan bought for Mat @ 20 koruny a pair - total less than £1! On leaving the market we said Goodbye to the Stupkas. We visited the Art Gallery where there was a special exhibition of paintings by Maximilian Schurmann (1890 - 1960) who had in the 1920s painted portraits of Mat, his parents and his grandfather, all as separate canvases.

No sign of these pictures in the exhibition, but lots of other portraits, including one of the Czechoslovak President, T. Masaryk, and also landscapes. Mat resolved to write a letter of enquiry to the gallery director on our return home.

Then we set out for the Lower Tatras, but our first stop was to be Velký Ľapaš where Mat's father had farmed and lived during the Second World War. We went over the bridge crossing the River Nitra, Mat remembering when it was a wooden structure and he as a young man used to clatter over it into town in an open carriage drawn by two horses. We drove past fields which used to be the Schwitzers', along the road bordered by fruit trees, and arrived at the village outside the half acre of rough grass surrounding what is now the village school, the old house having burnt down and been re-built. The woman living next door came out to talk with Mat and then telephoned the schoolmaster to ask if we could have admittance to the property. Very soon a handsome young man with curly hair and blue eyes arrived and opened up for us *Mat's long-lost summertime place of residence.*

As it was the holidays no children were in school and the classrooms looked particularly bare. The teacher explained that normally there would have been art work displayed on the walls. Indeed, there were some pupils' essays pinned up in the corridor - luckily for us in English, which is now compulsory from age 10, the teacher said, but can be taken from age 8. The essays, on a 'typical day', mentioned rising at 6.30 am and school starting at 7.40. The teacher told us that the school day ends at 2 pm but on three afternoons the children return for sporting and other activities. (A football pitch is next to the school, the land incorporating the former Schwitzer garden.) Mat spoke about Laura's expertise in children's literature and gave the schoolmaster his card, suggesting that we might be able to supply some English books for the school.

We said Goodbye to our new friends and drove via the motorway up into the hills for our three-day stay. We passed a number of factories with tall smoking chimneys and a huge steel works, all built in comparatively remote places, presumably during the Cold War, when it was deemed important to shield industrial development in Iron Curtain countries from the prying eyes of the West.

On the way we stopped for lunch at a new service station equipped with a cafeteria and a toddlers' play area. The food was simple and wholesome, with service to match: sausages were weighed individually to determine the exact price. The total bill was about one-fifth of the equivalent charge in Britain.

The Hotel Mýto where we were booked in, turned out to be about half a mile outside the mountain village of Mýto pod Ľumbietom, a clean-looking new building in Scandinavian style with tennis courts and indoor swimming pool. All around were meadows and steeply ascending pine forests. Disappointingly, the temperature of the indoor pool was discovered to be only 20c. Joan, Laura, Mike, Susan and John got in with varying degrees of hesitation, Mike acquiring a headache in the process. We dined amply, however, in the hotel dining room which most of the time was empty apart from us. Was this hotel going to be just as unfrequented as the one Mat and Joan stayed in with Kuki the previous year?

Sunday 16 July

Joan woke early and decided to investigate the long balcony in front of our windows. The door opened on to strikingly cool air. Beyond, a misty drizzle.

We decided that as a walk seemed inadvisable in view of our lack of waterproof trousers etc, we should today visit (as Mat had already suggested) the famous ice caves at Demänovská jaskyna. We were to set out after breakfast.

We drove through a heavily forested area with rushing mountain streams and outcrops of limestone rocks. A circuitous route eventually brought us to the busy car park below the caves. All except Mat ascended the steep path to the cave entrance, getting our breath back at the information boards fixed at intervals on the way up. The boards, informing visitors about native animals, including bears, to be found in the vicinity, the flora, etc., were in English as well as in Slovak and German, but we spotted no other English-speakers among the hordes of Slovak families out for a Sunday treat in their bright anoraks and track wear. At 12 noon (tours being on every hour between 10 and 4) about a hundred of us were admitted to the huge caves.

Deposits of bear bones were pointed out. The caves were known for centuries but only apparently explored and recorded in detail in the eighteenth century. Our guide, a tall young girl with a resonant voice (or perhaps it was the perfect acoustics of the cave) conducted us through the immense dark caverns spotlighted by concealed electric lamps. Millions of small limestone stalactites hang from the roof and huge fat stalagmites rise up to meet them. The last complex we passed through, on wooden walkways, contained great sheets of ice and huge frozen waterfalls like translucent drapery. Banks of the glacier rose a foot or so above the level of the walkway on either side, so that, we surmised, the walkway must have been flooded during the warm months of May and June when the annual melting would have occurred. In other places concrete paths and steps have been constructed over the uneven rock surface and altogether there are over 600 steps in the area shown to tourists. As we emerged from the freezing dank air into the light, the woodland atmosphere felt like that of a warm jungle and everything seemed to be steaming gently in the rain.

We had lunch in a surprisingly sparsely patronised restaurant (apart from 'take-away' customers fetching small buckets of food) near the foot of the mountain where the walk to the caves began. Afterwards we bought souvenirs from a small nearby kiosk plentifully stocked with wooden toys and utensils and pottery and ornaments.

On our return to the hotel, Susan and John and Mike decided to make use of the sports facilities. They donned shorts and tried all the exercise machines and weight-training equipment in the gym. Laura, Joan and Susan later had a swim in the slightly warmer pool, where an electrical defect had apparently been mended in our absence.

We had dinner with only one other family (Hungarian) dining, on the far side of the room. We spent the rest of the evening in the hotel bar, playing billiards. A few tables were occupied.

Monday 17 July

It was still raining so we decided to explore the region by car.

We drove through 'our' village of Myto p.D. - a winding mile-long street with some of the houses built into the hillside. They are chalet-type, with decorative wooden balconies and overhanging roofs. Everywhere are neat stacks of wood for the winter. The houses are surrounded by vegetable gardens with a yard at the side of the house, in the East European manner, sometimes leading to livestock - we saw goats and chickens.

We stopped along the forest road at a huge memorial to the fallen Partisans of World War 2, topped by an effigy of guns and with wreaths of red poppies still in place. Then we drove up to the highest point attainable by car: Tale, which is the local cable car terminus. Our hopes of using it were soon dashed. It was closed, perhaps for the whole summer, and the nearby hotel looked derelict. Alpine meadows and soaring pine-clad peaks were all around but any attempt to promote summer tourism seemed to have been abandoned long ago. We ourselves could not even go for a walk as the hotel had been unable to supply local footpath maps. We had no fully waterproof clothing, either,

Mat suggested a trip to Brezno, a small town. This was a category of settlement so far not experienced on this trip, though we had been in the state capital (Bratislava), a big town (Nitra), and villages (Madunice, Teplicky, and Velky Lapas). Hlohovec hardly counted as we had been there for such a short time. But first we wanted some refreshment. We came, on the edge of a village, to the 'Grande Pensione' and stopped to investigate. It seemed at first like a lodging house with no facilities to offer casual callers, but Joan pushed her way through several doors and discovered a dining saloon in rustic style with no customers to be seen but two pretty girls in attendance. One was resting her head on a table. Enquiries as to the availability of coffee and / or soft drinks having elicited a positive response, we trooped in to this seemingly Wild West establishment, by that time staffed by no less than four girls. Coffee was of the 'presso' variety - small and strong and very good.

We parked in the almost empty main square of Brezno which has a huge fat bell tower at one end, aided by a friendly car park attendant whose ethnic minority status was demonstrated by the delight with which he responded to Mat's greetings in Hungarian. On three sides of the square are shops; on the fourth (long) side are a church, a small park and the town's museum. In front of the museum is the statue of a man in military dress; Mat explained its significance; the man was Milan Stefanik who was in the Benes government at the end of World War 1, the only Slovak minister, and was killed in a plane probably mistaken for an enemy aircraft and shot down outside Bratislava. The incident remains mysterious and Stefanik a Slovak hero.

The museum was due to shut in the early afternoon so we decided to postpone lunch and visit it. We saw an excellent collection of hand tools and artefacts appertaining to various folk arts and crafts: farming, forestry, weaving, cloth making and printing, ironwork, shoe-making, tailoring, etc.

We ate a late lunch in the Slovak Restaurant and then strolled around the shops. Laura bought T-shirts with the name and badge of Slovensko on the chest for Susan and John. The window displays, especially in the drapers' shops, with their hotch-potch of pinned up clothes and mixture of colours, smacked of England of 50 years ago. We saw several little old ladies in kerchiefs, dark dresses and thick stockings. Absolutely no other tourists to be seen, not even in the busy post office which Joan visited to buy stamps for post cards home.

We discovered another interesting monument, this time in front of the church, surmounted by the over-lifesize figure of a partisan wearing a greatcoat, gun and field glasses; the interest centered in the slab below, recording many names of people from this town caught up in the two world wars. The back of the slab bears the names of soldiers who died in World War 1 (i.e. fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army) and the front the soldiers killed in the course of the Second; to the side are Jews who were taken away (to concentration camps) including the names of several Schlesingers and a Ghejza Hujos (probably all relatives of Mat's), and opposite are the names of civilian men and women (presumably anti-fascist fighters) who were also killed. Mat remarked that Brezno saw some of the bitterest fighting of the War.

We drove back to Myto. At the hotel reception desk Joan secured permission for Susan and John to play tennis - though they had been told that the courts were booked. But in view of the frequent showers it had seemed unlikely that this booking would be taken up. Joan enquired the time for which the courts had been reserved, intending to suggest a maximum reservation period after which the courts would be open to all comers; but this expedient proved unnecessary. The receptionist evidently felt her bluff had been called and immediately produced both racquets and balls, and no more was heard of the 'booking'. (This young woman, strangely enough, bore a striking physical resemblance to Auntie Veronica.) Despite the recent heavy rain, the 'astroturf' surface of the courts provided the children with an hour's happy play.

Meanwhile Laura and Mike went for a walk round the village, Joan wrote cards

and Mat worked out tomorrow's route for going to Lake Balaton.

On Laura and Mike's return, all except the two men had a swim in the indoor pool, now a comfortable 24 degrees c., and we all met for supper after 8 pm.

Tuesday 18 July

IT IS NOT RAINING!

We packed, had breakfast, and left to start our 8-hour journey to Balaton. We headed for Nitra, retracing our earlier journey, and left the mountains behind as we followed the Hron valley where the river used to provide the means of transport for logs, lashed into great rafts, from the hill forests. Then we entered the Nitra valley. Before we got to the town itself we stopped at a brand new service station and shop, with building work still going on. The toilets had to be unlocked. But good strong coffee was obtained and wine was bought for the store of take-home presents. Along the motorway, as we drove through the flat agricultural land near the Hungarian border, were stalls selling watermelons and other local produce. From one stall, manned by someone in old army uniform with a dark-haired blue-eyed girl (his daughter?), we purchased two canteloupes, a large water melon, a kilo of greengages, and another of tomatoes, for 79 korány, i.e. little more than £1; Mat waived the change from a 100 k. note.

The sun was at last blazing down and we decided to have a picnic. At Hurbánovo Mat, Laura and the children went to buy meat, cheese and rolls. But where were we to stop? The roadside was uninviting, but Mat suggested pulling in at a concreted lay-by where a caravan was parked by some trees. There we discovered picnic seats and tables, somewhat vandalised but still usable. Behind the trees were orchards where peasants were picking apricots. The caravan moved off, passing traffic was negligible, and we had the place to ourselves.

We reached the frontier at Komarno, first crossing an arm of the Danube with a forest of cranes at the riverside, and went quickly through both passport checkpoints. Then we crossed the long steel bridge over the main river.

Many new buildings line the route to Balaton with countless houses offering accommodation to tourists, mostly in German ("Zimmer frei"). But in between the settlements are fields big and small with flourishing crops of maize, vines and other fruits. At about 5.30 pm we reached Balatonlelle, a collection of hotels, guest houses and hostels hugging part of the southern shore of the lake, with the road and adjacent railway running parallel behind. We found the Hotel Françoise, where Mat had booked rooms. It is a large house with a swimming pool and small car park taking up most of the surrounding garden. We were shown to our first floor three rooms and after unpacking we descended to explore.

We found that the lane running by the hotel down to the water's edge ended at a wooden gangway built over the lake, leading to a square of boards (about 15' x 15') reserved for our hotel, where a man was sitting with a fishing rod and from which steps descended into the water. No one else was there, but a few people were to be seen far out from the shore wading in waist-high water. This suggested other access points; the boards seemed only suitable for a quick early morning dip. So we set out to find the centre of the locality. We walked along the road by the railway until we came to an area leading towards the lake given over to open air restaurants, with music playing. A small well-worn park gave access to the water. The edge of the lake had been strengthened with a bank of small boulders (originally there was marsh and reeds) and over this, at intervals, were steps. Small pleasure boats were offered for hire. Nearby was a harbour with closely packed yachts at anchor. We resolved to try out the amenities tomorrow, weather still permitting.

We wended our way back, going to a restaurant in the main road that we had

earmarked earlier as a likely venue for our evening meal. We dined at one of the tables in a large garden shelter. We returned to the Hotel Françoise at about a quarter to ten, encountering many German holiday-makers along the way.

Wednesday 19 July

SUNSHINE!!

It was cool after the rain that had fallen in the night, but being outdoors was inviting; Mat and Joan had their breakfast in the large covered balcony that had been built to extend the dining room. Afterwards, on the south side (front) of the house, the sunshine was warm enough for them both to recline on sunlongers. Soon Joan was in the pool. Various German children appeared and joined her, as did Susan and John, with Laura. Mat moved to sit in the shade. It was after 10.30 before we all got in the car to go to the lake.

We parked and carried our bathing gear to the lawn near the boat hire place. Many families had already taken up positions on the waterside grass and nearly all the pleasure craft were in use. The few sailing boats available had all been taken out, but Mike reserved one for an hour from 12.15. We settled down to wait, the children with surprising trepidation; they seemed to fear that their sailing skills, learned in rough conditions on Loch Gair, would prove inadequate, despite the dead calm over the lake and the water being only waist deep. It was decided Mike would accompany them. They set out. We observed gentle control steering the vessel through the bathers and pedaloes and inflatable boats to a point far out on the lake. We watched the white sails until it was almost time for the boat to be back again.

Just before 1.15 Mat and Joan volunteered to go and buy lunch, and made a rendezvous in the park for a picnic. We found a small supermarket where we obtained salami, cheese, rolls and juice, and outside a fruit and veg stall where we bought tomatoes. Our purchases totalled about a quarter of the equivalent cost in Britain.

After our lunch in the park we discovered a lot of kiosks lining the main path to the lakeside. There Mat changed some old deutschmarks into forents and Joan bought some paprika for Barbara, in a pretty bag with a painted spoon.

From our base next to the water the Skeltons and Joan made an expedition on an orange plastic pedalo and we all took turns in pedalling. Laura was clothed but the other four, in swim suits, used the boat as a base, going down the chute which was part of the boat's construction.

During the warm afternoon the number of holiday-makers lounging on the grass or bathing thinned considerably. Laura and Susan went for a final swim and then we set off for the car, down the avenue of market stalls, wishing we had the space to bring home baskets and other bargains.

We decided to go to the circus we had seen advertised, provided it would not entail a rushed meal. Dinner had been ordered, at the management's request, the evening before, for 7 pm, but we discovered that we could in fact eat earlier. So at 6.30 we gathered in the dining room, saying our "Gut Abends" to the families already into their meal. After a rather plain supper of stuffed eggs, two kinds of casserole to choose from, followed by a dessert of fresh peaches, we set off for the Hungarian National Circus, encamped just outside Balatonlelle.

The red and white striped big top with its welcoming line of uniformed young circus men and the entrance tent where candy floss and other fairground refreshments were on offer, immediately put everyone in a mood of happy expectation.

A six-piece brass band played musical hits till it was time for the show to begin and then provided the appropriate (and almost deafening) fanfares and background music.

The show that followed was a masterpiece of the circus art. We saw camels and zebras thundering round the ring then stopping suddenly to a crack of the ringmaster's whip, amazing feats of horsemanship such as turning somersaults in the air from a standing position on a galloping horse's back and even transferring from one horse to another in the same manner, an elephant perched on a small box, performing dogs, a girl gymnast showing her skills atop a pole balanced on a man's forehead, and many other wonders. The climax of the first half of the evening was a display of gymnastics by two little boys aged about nine on top of their fathers riding upside down on motor cycles. The finale of the whole show was a 'wall-of-death' performance by two motorcyclists inside a globe of steel latticework. We thought that the strange lights we had seen in the night sky the evening before moving in a circle may have been from this brilliant display.

The children were too dazed by the experience to speak, and we retired to bed with an overpowering impression of the magnificent and undying art of the circus.

Thursday 20 July

Between 6 am when Joan's alarm clock sounded as usual and breakfast time at 8, the weather looked fairly promising, though there had been a heavy shower of rain on our return from the circus. After writing her diary and reading yesterday's account to Mat, Joan donned a swimsuit and had a dip in the hotel pool. She was soon joined by Susan who had seen her from her room. But the bright promise of morning was not maintained; Laura and John had discovered, from a pre-breakfast walk down the lane to the lake, that on Balaton a cool wind was whipping the water into waves. So it was decided, after breakfast at 8.30, to take the 10.50 boat to the north side of the lake, carrying bathing gear in case the weather improved.

Many holiday-makers had the same idea. The lawns round the bathing area were deserted but a huge throng surged on to the "Gulacs", the ferry boat. We found outside seats in the bows with difficulty. We called at Balaton Boglar and then crossed the choppy waters to Badacsony. Vine-clad hills rose up behind the harbour and marina. Round the concrete jetties were thick clumps of the native reeds which once covered the area, and many swans and ducks. We did not look for a bathing place or picnic area, as the wind was strong. But we agreed to look for a lunch venue.

Facing us as we walked off the jetty was a huge market, selling mainly clothes and household linens. We strolled through, keeping a lookout for possible gifts. Raucous music came from a funfair. Mat's agenda was to find the fish restaurant which offered, he had learned from an advertisement, a 10% discount to patrons coming by the ferry boat. At the top of the street, there it was.

The restaurant was new and spacious, its roofs thatched with reeds. A three-man gypsy band of fiddles, double bass and zimbalon was playing Viennese music. The grown-ups all opted for fish soup which made its appearance as a spicy paprika red liquid containing large pieces of zander, the local fish, served in individual black cauldrons swinging on stands. Mat tipped the promenading orchestra to play traditional Hungarian folk tunes, which they did with great readiness. On our leaving the establishment, Mat received expressions of the utmost cordiality and obedience from the maitre d'hotel.

We explored the market more thoroughly, and Joan, having changed some English money on disembarking, bought cards and stamps and then a pair of winter slippers for herself from the sheepskin stall, for 2200 forints; with an exchange rate of around 400 forints to the pound sterling, that makes about £5.50!

People were already queueing up for the return journey, but on the arrival of the Gulacs and another ferry the crowd was divided into those bound (like us) for Balatonlelle and those for Boglar. The crossing went quickly, but on arrival the Skeltons, who had all optimistically worn shorts, declined to stop in the park to eat melon and in fact rejected any further delay in getting back to the hotel and some warmer clothes.

At 6.30 a rather dull supper was put before us: 'vegetable pâté' (thick savoury custard embedded with peas), bland stuffed (with rice) peppers, and dry Swiss roll. Susan and John played table tennis in the garden. They were joined by Joan and later by Mike. Three young German girls staying in the hotel were contestants for the bats and ball; we reprimanded them for vandalising one end of the table, but darkness put an end to further play. John and Grandad went indoors to play chess (a game which John eventually won) and everyone retired to bed at about a quarter to ten.

Friday 21 July

6 am - a lovely blue sky. But alas! our last day by Balaton.

At 8 o'clock the gardener was still cleaning the bottom of the pool with a special mop, so Joan had to postpone her early morning swim, but at 9, after breakfast, the job had been finished, with all pipes and hose adjusted, so Joan and Susan entered the pool and then dried off in the hot sun, while Joan began a sketch of her grand-daughter.

At about 10.30 we all went to the lakeside but to a larger public area beyond the yacht basin. We spent a happy day sunbathing, swimming and, for the children, going in kayaks ("snukis"), with a picnic lunch.

We left about 5 pm to make an expedition by car to the countryside to see a village where there was a castle. The usual inaccuracy of the local mapping meant that finding Lengyelő proved difficult. The castle turned out to be a large country house, now a school. Along the village street huge wooden barrels stood in the yards of houses where wine was offered for sale. Other houses displayed trays of peaches and watermelons, priced at a few pence. The country, with gently undulating fields and flat expanses of reeds, yielded a few surprises. Horses and carts were still in use on the roads and Mat was surprised to see the prevalence of vineyards over other crops compared with what was grown pre-War.

We motored back to Lelle on the near-empty roads, following the railway and lakeside through Balaton Boglar, arriving at the hotel at about 7. On the way back we saw a huge latticework ball on a hillside and recognised it as something we had seen depicted on a postcard; it offered at last the explanation of the mysterious lights in the night sky.

We had decided the day before to give the hotel dinner a miss and dine elsewhere. But Laura had a bad headache after a day under the hot sun, so she took medicine and we waited till she felt sufficiently rested to get up. We sauntered to the restaurant where we had dined the first evening by Balaton. Everyone enjoyed their meal. Joan had a self-chosen salad and a tasty broth 'mit ei' (i.e. with a raw yolk of egg added) and a beer, the children huge plates of spaghetti, and the men goulash. Laura had only soup and mineral water.

Saturday 22 July

A cloudy sky but with blue patches. No rain. We had to leave the hotel by the set time of 10 am. Mat and Mike settled the bill, which despite the presence of a computer entailed lengthy and detailed calculations as regards various taxes on the part of the receptionist. At last we were able to pack our belongings into the car.

We decided to enjoy a last morning by the lake before setting off for Budapest in the early afternoon. We made for the same area we had been in on Wednesday, since it had public benches near the water for Mat to sit on. The sky was overcast but the air was warm and the water absolutely still. But in the absence of sunshine not a single bather was in the water, only a half dozen windsurfers under instruction from the young man from the boat hire place. Laura and Mike had a swim together - the only people to venture in - and later Joan. We picknicked on food obtained by Laura and Mike from the supermarket discovered by Mat and Joan, finishing with a coffee in one of the nearby restaurants, just as the sun came out giving a signal to people starting to stroll once more towards the lakeside.

The journey to Budapest went quickly. We arrived on the Buda side of the Danube at about 4 o'clock and made our way unexpectedly easily up the hill to Ilonka's residence. There we met the other Ilona, our Ilonka's housekeeper, once more, and presented the Skeltons to her. Dinner was already laid on two tables decked with embroidered cloths and candles. The two Ilonas were at work in the kitchen while we settled into our rooms.

Csiki's wife Bea arrived with Aaron (9) and Rebecca (7), bearing four-months-old Simon in a 'chariot'. The baby closely resembles his father, with a wide turned up nose, like his sister, too. John and Aaron played with a construction kit Ilonka had bought. Ilona went home, her jobs done. Then we all had a meal: prosciutto con melone, then chicken pieces or a choice of vegetarian dishes, and a huge fruit salad to follow.

After Bea and the children had gone home and Susan and John retired to their room, Ilonka and her four visitors sat in the candlelit lounge relating and discussing holiday experiences in Slovakia and moving on to the state of Eastern Europe and of the world.

Sunday 23 July

We were up at 6 to finish packing for the return home. The hire car people arrived to guide us to the airport and we said Goodbye to Ilonka in her pink dressing gown. We went swiftly through the light Sunday morning traffic, sailing through Adam Clark's tunnel under the Royal Palace and on to his bridge. Having crossed the Danube to Pest we drove past the high rise blocks in the suburbs and into the open country and the airport.

We had an easy flight to Heathrow, leaving punctually at 9.20 am and landing earlier than the scheduled arrival time of 11 am. The flight took 2½ hours, but was reduced to an apparent 1½ due to the time in England being 1 hour behind the official time in Hungary.

Mat and Joan said Goodbye to Laura, Mike, Susan and John whose flight to Glasgow was not due to leave until more than two hours later, and took a taxi home, feeling happy and relaxed after a wonderful holiday.

Typed, with revisions, from the original notebook MS, August 2000.

Joan Schwitzer.