

By David McLean  
Spectacular Slovakia 2005

## Living history in the Valley of Death

*By David McLean*

Anna Maššová is reading the Bible in her kitchen when we arrive at her house in Kapišová, a village in northeast Slovakia. It is a lovely sunny afternoon in late March. Patches of snow still dot the land but spring has clearly arrived. We stroll in without knocking, the way family members are allowed to, and Anna rises from her seat as she sets the Bible aside.



Photo: David McLean

The kitchen table is scattered with freshly-made pirohy (pirogies). Anna greets us warmly and immediately sets to work at the stove with an energy that belies her 92 years.

Anna is my wife's grandmother, and a lifelong resident of Kapišová, the first village you encounter as you head into the Údolie Smrti, or Valley of Death, north of Svidník. The largest tank battle on Czechoslovak soil took place here in October 1944 as the Soviet Red Army broke through the Carpathian Mountains at the Dukla Pass, just a few kilometres to the north.

When I first came to Kapišová back in 2002 I was standing outside on a cold spring day, peering into an old root cellar when Anna suddenly appeared and said, "There were Germans in there during the war. They had a phone."

You can read history books and you can visit memorials, but nothing beats having the past walk up behind you and tap you on the shoulder.

On August 29, 1944, the Slovak National Uprising, or SNP, began and the German army immediately began occupying Slovakia to put down the rebellion. Days later a German aircraft swooped over Anna's home. She and her husband had four children, aged 21 months to 10 years old. "We ran to the forest," Anna says. "We lay down in a creek bottom and covered ourselves up like this." She ducks her head towards the table and covers it with her arms. "Then we waited."

"When we returned, there were Germans everywhere! They were moving into the root cellar. One soldier said 'where have you been, you partisans?' but then another, who spoke Polish, said, 'What's your name?' and I said 'Anna' and he said, 'Anna, don't be afraid. You'll be all right.' He took a cross from around his neck and showed it to me." Anna is a devout Greek Catholic and this gesture is remembered fondly. "He was a farár," she says, using the Slovak word for pastor or parish priest. She then tells how the Germans set up the telephone and how life on the farm went on as normal, though with an occupying army living alongside.

They weren't there for long, however. The Dukla operation, which had originally been planned to coincide with the SNP, began on September 9 in Poland and by early October the Soviet Red Army and Czechoslovak brigades had reached the Slovak border.

One day, the Germans waved Anna over to the root cellar and handed her the telephone. "All I could hear were shooting and explosions," she says. The battle to the north had begun in earnest and was growing nearer. Another day, the Germans went up the valley to join the fight but didn't return. "We had seven cows," Anna says, "and in the morning I got up to milk them. Then I saw the farár come out of the woods. His clothes were torn and he was all scratched up. They had crawled on hands and knees back along the creek. They asked me for the milk I had just taken from the cows and I gave it to them. Then the farár passed around his hat and insisted on paying me for the milk. 'It's time for you to leave,' he said. 'The battle is getting too near.'"

Around the first of October the family buried stores of grain, honey and tvaroh cheese for future use and headed south to a farm near Chmelovo, on the road to Prešov. Days later, on

October 6, the Soviet and Czechoslovak brigades launched an attack over the border into Czechoslovakia. The battle, now commemorated with a large memorial at the Dukla Pass, was a slow and deadly grind. More than 100,000 soldiers died, and many are still buried in the area. The Dukla memorial alone holds some 8,000 graves. A cemetery in nearby Hunkovce holds the bodies of around 2,000 German soldiers.

Among the dead of Hunkovce was Anna's mother. "We don't know how she died," Anna says. "Maybe the Germans shot her or maybe the Russians. Maybe she was just killed in the shelling. But she died in the forest and because of the fighting and the winter no one could retrieve her body. In the spring my brothers went to find it. They wrapped her in a sheet and buried her in a bomb crater," she says, still grieving 60 years later.

The Mašša family returned to Kapišová in early April 1945. "It was terrible," Anna says. "My brother warned me not to go, but we wanted to go home. The snow had melted and there were dead bodies everywhere! All over the valley! Russians, Germans, horses, cows. Everything was dead, just lying there. It smelled terrible. There were broken tanks all over. We found only seven houses left standing in the village and one of them was ours."

When they reached home, they found six Russian soldiers living there and 20 housed at the neighbour's place next door. They had been left behind to repair the damaged tanks. She also found that everything the family had owned was piled in the yard, broken and destroyed, and all the food they had buried had been discovered, except for a single store of corn.

"The Russians used our house as a kitchen," she says. "The chief cook was named Vasil. He made the blackest bread I've ever seen. A heavy snow fell in April, cutting the Russians off from their supplies, which they got from somewhere near Krakow. They went hungry for days," Anna says. "Then one day they found a rucksack full of raw wheat that had been hidden. Vasil just threw it into a vat of water and I said, 'but that wheat hasn't been cleaned' and he said 'it doesn't matter' and he threw in some šmalec, [pork maso, or grease]. Twelve hours after they ate it, they were all sick and vomiting."

The Russians did not stay long. A few weeks later, as the war in Europe was winding down, they moved on to Bardejov. The war ended on May 8 and the people of Kapišová, like people all over Europe, began putting their lives back together.

After listening to Anna, the phrase "Valley of Death" takes on a new meaning. It must have been a spring day much like today that Anna returned home to find only bodies and rubble. The Dukla memorial comes alive in a way that contrasts greatly with its current decrepit and deserted state. Built in 1949, it is an honourable and well-made memorial to the soldiers who died liberating Czechoslovakia from fascism. During Communist times, Dukla was a destination for school trips and much socialist-style ceremony. Thousands came every day and even now, nearly every town in Slovakia has a street named Heroes of Dukla.

Maybe it is a natural reaction against the previous regime, but the Dukla Pass memorial, all but forgotten, now seems to be more truck stop than war memorial. The observation tower stands quiet, its visitor's decks closed to the public. A huge parking lot waits for buses that no longer arrive.

But history still lives here, as sure as the coming of each spring.