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After the Empire Falls: Concordia Professor Brandt Helps Slovakian School Rebuild

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What motivates a college professor to paint, scrape windows, and scoop dirt, not merely for free, but at his own expense? Why would anyone pay to do physical (and sometimes mundane) work?

Concordia College professor Dwaine Brandt helped restore a Slovakian “Evanjelicke Gymnazium” (or Lutheran high school) this past summer—for free. Brandt and other Portland Lutherans traveled to Tisovic, Slovakia at their own expense to work for free.

Tisovic is a European town described by International Volunteer Services (IVS) as “nestled within the foothills of the lower Tatra mountains.” This quiet setting hides a past of confrontation, as IVS says: “The Lutheran high school was established in 1928 and gained a national reputation for school and used the building for other purposes. With the collapse of the Soviet system, the building lay empty, and was gutted by vandals... In 1993, the Slovak Lutheran Church regained possession of the old gymnasium building and began restoration efforts. Townspeople, parents, and almost two hundred volunteers have joined hands in readying the facility for the 1994-95 school year.”

Historian Brandt explained the origin of the town’s name: “I can tell you where it comes from. ’Tis,’ in Slovak, is a yew tree. The area was known for its yew trees.”

Brandt’s said significant involvement with the restoration effort began with another group: “Lutheran Hour Ministries, which is the former Lutheran Hour, has projects in Eastern Europe—it’s rather exciting I think. Right now they have about three projects going in Eastern Europe... One southwest of St. Petersburg, where they are renovating a... new church, and one in Guben... in the former East Germany—it’s right on the Polish border... and then the third at Tisovec in Slovakia.”

Brandt noted that the dominance and decline of the Soviet Union is reflected in the history of the Evanjelicke Gymnaziun: “It was a building built in the 1920s... it was a Lutheran high school in part of its history. When the Communists came, they took the building over. Now they are returning it [following] the fall of the Soviet empire. The government is slowly returning certain churches and buildings and properties to the church. One of them happens to be in this school.”

Lutheran Hour Ministries was able to help the Slovakian high school renovate in vital ways, according to Brandt: “They [the Slovakian Lutherans] are a poor people—-they got the building, but they didn’t have the money to office in... the capitol of Slovakia in the southwestern edge of Slovakia—decided to ask for financial help. Lutheran Hour Ministries made a [financial] contribution... There is now—as of September, 1994- almost finished inside.”

Brandt first became interested in helping the Slovakian school through volunteer recruitment advertisements: “I saw it publicized that they needed volunteers. There’s a program called ‘Servants for Slovakia,’ run out of St. Louis under the leadership of a man by the name of Rudy Shaser... I contacted him. And also, [Concordiapromoter] Patty Schlimpert has been working with in international relations of the school. [She] tried to get some students from Concordia to go. She asked me if I wouldn’t be interested in taking over some students... I tried to recruit students. One student did [go]. Nine students expressed a lot of interest [but did not go]. The people in this volunteer program have to pay their own way, which is tough for a student. It’s paying to work, so some of the students simply could not afford to go.”

Brandt went with a group of five people from the Pacific Northwest: “There have been volunteers going to Tisovic for approximately two years... most all of them...
from the Midwest. I’m kind of happy that the Northwest got involved in this program; I hope that the future will lead to more people going over.”

The purpose behind using professors, pastors, students, and retired people for manual labor is simple--sparking the Slovakian Lutheran school some expenses: “In Slovakia, things are labor-intensive. They needed a lot of this work done, and it would have cost them too much to have professionals take time to do these jobs...painting, washing windows, painting fences, and moving dirt--There’s not a lot of equipment in Slovakia.”

Although Brandt had been to Slovakia before, he said this particular trip had special meaning, since the group was able to stay in one place for a longer time and stay in the homes of the people: “A much different experience of traveling--getting to know an area rather well in a small community--a village of five thousand people--wonderful people, very gracious, very sharing. They are poor people...They have no money. They raise all their food--and we ate like kings!”

When asked about the religious climate of present-day Slovakia, Brandt pointed to the impact of the country’s history: “Having been under Communism for forty or fifty years, there is a vacuum in the sense of church values. On the other hand, it’s obvious [that] all through the [years of the] Communist regime the people managed to hold on to their Christianity...one reason that American Christians needed to go over was that the Slovaks needed to see dedicated Christian people [who] were interested in them...to help strengthen their faith--as well as their [faith] strengthen ours. There were many very pious people.”

The future for the Church in Slovakia, while uncertain, is brighter, Brandt said: “What I am excited about is that the Church is alive--if not totally well. The future looks bright. Perhaps with this school and new youth coming up, I’m hoping that a Slovak Lutheran student will be able to come to Concordia--perhaps a pre-ministerial or a pre-teacher student--and be exposed to the outside world.”

Slovakia’s exposure to modern technology has been limited by a focus on military armaments: “You don’t see cars...you see old vintage tractors. They have a long way to go in terms of what we would call technology. People walk to get[to] places...The technology of this area, believe it or not, prior to the fall of Communism, [was limited to] T-62 tanks. Now those are modern tanks. The big factories [were built] to produce weapons of war. There was [a factory] right in Tisovic. Today that factory is producing back-hoes.”

So why do students, pastors, retirees, and professors of history invest time working in a “low-tech” country, working for nothing? Brandt’s answer seems simple and to the point: “I want to support the Church where there’s need.”

Building up from the rubble of a fallen empire—that’s an ancient and honorable tradition for the Christian Church, a tradition which includes in its ranks Dr. Dwaine Brandt.