



# SLOVAK AMERICAN SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DC

## NEWSLETTER

May 2012

[www.dcslovaks.org](http://www.dcslovaks.org)

### *The SASW Speakers' Series and the Friends of Slovakia present*

A Talk by Former Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik

#### **"REFLECTIONS ON MY TIME AS AMBASSADOR TO SLOVAKIA, AND SLOVAKIA TODAY"**

Sunday, June 3, 2012, 2:00pm

Where: Second-Floor Meeting Room, Arlington Central Library, 1015 N. Quincy St., Arlington, VA (located midway between the Virginia Square-GMU and Ballston-MU Metro stations) . Parking is available at the library.

Admission: Free, **but an RSVP is required, as space is limited. Please RSVP to SASW by the end of Friday, June 1, either via [dcslovaks@yahoo.com](mailto:dcslovaks@yahoo.com) or at (571) 265-4436.**

Former U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia Vincent Obsitnik will discuss his personal and professional experiences, and the current state of affairs in Slovakia and Europe.

**Vincent Obsitnik** was born in Slovakia and is the first Slovak-American to serve as U.S. ambassador to the Slovak Republic. He emigrated to the United States with his parents, prior to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany. His father first worked as a coal miner in Pennsylvania and eventually the family moved to New Jersey, where Ambassador Obsitnik grew up. After graduating from the Naval Academy with honors, Ambassador Obsitnik served as an officer in the U.S. Navy for five years. An MBA degree from American University led to a highly successful business career that included joint projects between the U.S. and Central Europe. Ambassador Obsitnik was also appointed by President George W. Bush to the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, during which time he worked to bring international attention to the plight of the 17th- and 18th-century Greek Catholic wooden churches of Slovakia. This led to the restoration of two of the most endangered churches. Ambassador Obsitnik is fluent in the Slovak language.

\* \* \*

## **New Slovak Government Formed**

### ***Ambassador Burian Awarded Key Post---Washington says 'Dovidenia'***

Following the decisive victory of the SMER party in the March 10 Slovak parliamentary elections, Mr. Robert Fico has again assumed the role of prime minister and has formed a new government. SMER garnered over 44% of the vote and was able to form a parliamentary majority with 82 seats (76 seats are necessary for a majority in the 150-member parliament), thus giving Slovakia the first single-party majority in its history as an independent country. In the election, a collection of five center-right parties (including the prior four coalition partners) received just 36% of the vote, with the Christian Democrats (KDH) and a new party, OLaNO (Ordinary People and Independents), each receiving just under 9%. SDKU, the party of former PM Dzurinda, and Richard Sulik's SaS (Freedom and Solidarity) suffered the most as a result of the "Gorilla" political scandal and other factors, with each party receiving only around 6%--barely more than the 5% threshold to enter parliament. With the center-right parties in disarray, PM Fico will be firmly in charge of government policy as Slovakia navigates its way forward.

In forming a new cabinet, Mr. Fico has somewhat surprised political analysts. While a number of former SMER deputies have been appointed, Fico has selected several independent figures for key posts in Justice, Finance, and the Foreign Ministry. The foreign ministry post was awarded to Miroslav Lajcak, who is considered more non-partisan politically. Moreover, a subsequent appointment has affected us here in Washington: Ambassador Peter Burian was chosen to be one of two state secretaries of the foreign ministry. This post is essentially that of "second-in-command," and is thus a recognition of Mr. Burian's credentials and leadership abilities.

Farewell events were held recently in honor of Mr. Burian's time in Washington. On May 4<sup>th</sup> a farewell dinner was held by the Friends of Slovakia at the Washington Golf & Country Club in Arlington. SASW was well represented by Board President Jerry Rich, Vice-President Ken Bombara, and board member Helen Fedor. In addition, past president Kathryn Tatko and several other SASW members attended. On behalf of SASW, Jerry Rich gave the Burians a beautifully photographed book on the Library of Congress and extended our congratulations to Peter and Nina. They have a long history in Washington and were much admired by the SASW and Washington-area Slovak community. We wish them all the best in the future.

## **Millie Schoepe-Evans awarded Slovak Ambassador's Medal of Honor**

On April 26, at a dinner at the ambassador's residence, Ambassador Peter Burian awarded the Slovak Ambassador's Medal of Honor to Mrs. Millie Schoepe-Evans, a founder and long-time member of the Slovak American Society of Washington, D.C. and a life-time supporter of friendship and fellowship between Slovaks and Americans. Ambassador Burian and his wife Nina Burianova graciously hosted an elegant formal dinner for the grand prize winners of the SASW-sponsored raffle to raise funds for much needed scholarships for students attending City University in Slovakia. Attending the dinner and the award presentation were Nicole Beyer, Natalia Woodroffe, Steve Matula, Marie Parker, Jerry and Shirley Rich, Anthony Costigan, and Phyllis Locklear, along with the honoree, Millie Schoepe-Evans.

We would also like to recognize the additional generosity of Millie. On May 18, at a farewell reception for the Burians at the Embassy of the Slovak Republic, Millie presented a check for \$3,000 to Ambassador and Mrs. Burian for their Roma Student Leadership Scholarship. Peter and Nina Burian founded and sponsor this scholarship fund in cooperation with the Slovak Honorary Consuls in the United States. In her remarks at the check presentation, Millie urged everyone with a love for Slovakia and its future to consider contributing generously to this Scholarship Fund. For further information, please contact Dr. Jerry Rich at [drjerryrich1@verizon.net](mailto:drjerryrich1@verizon.net) or Ms. Maria Vidova at [maria.vidova@mzv.sk](mailto:maria.vidova@mzv.sk).

## Talk by Mark Wansa a Big Success

On March 17, a program in the SASW Speakers' Series was jointly sponsored by the National Capital Chapter of the Carpatho-Rusyn Society and featured Mark Wansa, author of the novel *The Linden and the Oak*. The book is about two Carpatho-Rusyn families in a village of northeastern Slovakia, caught up in the tidal waves of World War I, revolution, and emigration from the Old Country to America. Wansa discussed his use of genealogy and family memories in writing the historical novel. The co-sponsored event was held in the conference room of the Braddock District (Fairfax County) Supervisor's office in Burke, VA. It was very well attended, including an appearance by former Pennsylvania governor and former Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge, who is of Carpatho-Rusyn background.

The following review of Wansa's novel was graciously contributed by long-time SASW member Michelle Prokopchak. The review was first published by the World Academy of Rusyn Culture, Toronto, in 2009 and is reprinted here. We hope you find it of interest.

### **Book Review of Mark Wansa's *The Linden and the Oak* by Michele Prokopchak**

If you want to know the history of your Carpatho-Rusyn heritage, *The Linden and the Oak* by Mark Wansa is your novel. Its locale is the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe from which Rusyns immigrated to America. The area has variously been, and remains, part of Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Mr. Wansa did much research to make his novel factually correct; it occurs during the ethnic upheaval in Europe and the fall of the Empire. These societal changes which happened in Europe spawned the final, great migration of European peasants desiring freedom and new opportunity.

This book tries to capture the social, economic, and political conditions which inspired the Rusyn departure. However, Mark's novel is a romanticized look of life at that time. The true harsh physical, economic, and social conditions are only hinted at. The author, however, does present an excellent account of the horrors of the Great War's eastern front—a part of the war mostly forgotten, with the emphasis given to the Western front fought by France, Britain, and America. His research and understanding shine in this part of his opus and is the most satisfying part of his story.

The primitiveness of housing, farming methods, commerce, and other facets of daily life which contrasted greatly with the relatively "modern" Western European and American cultures at the time could have been made more real, more stark. The bleakness, especially for women, is only hinted at. The backbreaking, physical harshness of farming and daily activity lacks detail. The reality of a truly backward society 100 years after the industrial revolution would provide an understanding for readers as to why the East remained so backward even after World War II. The unfinished beginnings of the modernization of Eastern Europe occurred at the time of the novel and perhaps the migration Mark describes helped contribute to the halt in development.

Why so many chose to leave for an unknown future is left somewhat a question since the novel's main character, Vasyl, had emigrated but returned home. Some problems found in the 1920s remained in Eastern Slovakia, and the Ukraine, the Rusyn homeland, even into the early 1990s. They were still in an earlier part of the 20th century physically, culturally, and, most importantly, psychologically. Much of this was due to the Soviet era, but that still-unfinished revolution finds its beginnings and shortcomings during this novel's timeframe. Thankfully, during the last 20 years, the 21st century has started coming to the area.

Mr. Wansa's understanding of his cultural heritage seems to be from study and others' descriptions rather than direct contact growing up with the culture and customs, on a frequent basis, albeit in the world where the novel's real-life characters finally settled in America; the world of our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Mark grew up in California, out of the mainstream of the eastern or midwestern U.S., where ethnic pockets of Rusyn culture were re-located and are still found today. This may explain his stylized, romantic understanding of the heritage.

Even with the shortcomings, however, Mark's novel is a welcome addition to sources about this heritage and will lead to additional study by others of Rusyns and their homeland, and encourage travel to an interesting, historic place of our past. His depiction creates a basis to find those villages again—many of which still exist. Even the "modernized" places retain a special character as described in *The Linden and the Oak*, and can still evoke that time and place, most especially the churches still standing under the lindens and the oaks.

## **SASW News and Notes**

**Date of SASW Picnic Changed** -- Details for this year's SASW Membership Picnic are still being worked out, but you should mark your calendar for the **new date: September 16, 2012**. Final details, time, and location will be provided via dcslovaks email and posted on the SASW website < [www.dcslovaks.org](http://www.dcslovaks.org) > as soon as they are settled.

**VSM/City U. scholarships** -- At the SASW Board meeting on May 2, the Board voted to donate two \$500 scholarships to VSM/City University in Slovakia. One scholarship, contributed by Millie Schoepe-Evans, will be dedicated in memory of her recently deceased husband, Jim Evans. The other scholarship, funded by general fundraising, will be given in honor of Millie for her many years of support and efforts on behalf of the Society. The Board had previously agreed to dedicate one of its general scholarships to Millie each year for five consecutive years.

**Film Showing at the Slovak Embassy** -- The Embassies of the 'Visegrad Group (V4)' (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are cooperating on a film project, "Humor as Resistance: Life Behind the Iron Curtain." Each embassy is presenting a film that uses humor, shaped by the cultural and political elements of the country's history, as a form of expression. Each film depicts characters yearning to break out of the mundane, find love, and realize their dreams. However, the watchful eye of the communists looms in the background.... Two films have already been shown, but the Embassy of Poland will show "Kingsize" (Kingsajz) at 7pm on Thursday, May 31 (RSVP: < [washington.culture@msz.gov.pl](mailto:washington.culture@msz.gov.pl) >), and the **Slovak Embassy will show *Music (Muzika)* at 7pm on Thursday, June 7** (RSVP: < [emb.washington@mzv.sk](mailto:emb.washington@mzv.sk) >).

**Concert at Slovak Embassy** -- The 2012 tour of contemporary music artist Miro (Meky) Zbirka will take place in June, with a stop at the **Slovak Embassy in Washington on Tuesday, June 12, at 8pm**. For more information, check out the website < <http://www.zbirka.cz> >. Tickets start at \$30 and can be obtained at < <http://www.cskstore.com> > or by calling 347-537-6854.

**"Nicky's Family" to be shown at Avalon Theater** -- The acclaimed Czech film, "Nicky's Family" (Nickyho rodina) will be shown on **Wednesday, June 13, at 8pm, at the Avalon Theater** (5612 Connecticut Ave. NW) as part of the 'Lions of Czech Film' series co-sponsored by the Avalon and the Czech Embassy. The film depicts the story of Nicholas Winston, who was responsible for transporting 669 Prague children through Hitler's Germany to safety in Great Britain in 1939. Tickets are available at the Avalon box office or at < [www.theavalon.org](http://www.theavalon.org) >.

**Slovak League to Hold Convention** -- The Slovak League of America will host its 55<sup>th</sup> Congress on Friday, June 8, and Saturday, June 9, at the Holiday Inn in Bridgeport, CT. If you are interested in attending or supporting this event, write to: Slovak League of America, 205 Madison St., Passaic, N.J. 07055.

**New Czech/Slovak Restaurant in D.C** -- A new Czech/Slovak restaurant has recently opened in Washington, D.C. Bistro Bohem is located at 600 Florida Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001. Phone: 202-735-5895. < <http://www.bistrobohem.com/menu/> >. We haven't checked it out yet, but if you go, let us know what you think—send an email to < [dcslovaks@yahoo.com](mailto:dcslovaks@yahoo.com) >.

**New Book on Czechoslovakia** -- A new book dealing with post-WWII Czechoslovakia and the Cold War was published this month. *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague*, by Igor Lukes, is available at < [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) >.

**NCSML** -- The Grand Opening of the rebuilt National Czech & Slovak Museum and Library, in Cedar Rapids, IA, will take place July 14-15. More details are now available about the two-day festival planned for the weekend. For information, go to < [www.NCSML.org](http://www.NCSML.org) >.

**2012 Membership Renewals** -- If you have not yet sent in your SASW membership renewal for 2012 please do so by using the form in this newsletter. Your support is very important to continuing and expanding our programs and activities. If you have questions, drop an email to < [dc Slovaks@yahoo.com](mailto:dc Slovaks@yahoo.com) > or send a note to Tonya Harmon at the address on the membership form. Also, thanks to all those who have already renewed.

**+Brooks McClure** -- We were saddened to learn of the passing of another figure in the Washington area Slovak-American community, Mr. Brooks McClure. Brooks became a part of the community through his Slovak-American spouse, Olga Gallik McClure, who passed away in 2010. Olga and Brooks generously supported Slovak-related organizations, including SASW, and attended many activities and events. Brooks had a varied and interesting career. His obituary appeared in the May 15 edition of the *Washington Post*. You can also go to < [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) >, click on 'obituaries' and then enter his name to view the obituary.

**Slovak hockey team does well** -- Each year the IIHF World Hockey Championship is held in Europe in the major hockey nations. Last year, Slovakia hosted the tournament but had a disappointing showing, not making it out of the preliminary round to the medal round. This year, the tournament was hosted by Sweden and Finland. After early losses to Finland and Canada, the Slovaks got going and won several matches, including a defeat of the U.S., making it into the medal round. In the quarterfinal, they surprised the strong Canadian team, 4-3, and then moved on to the semi-finals, where they beat their rival the Czech Republic 3-1. Alas, in the final they were soundly defeated by the Russians, 6-2, thus earning the silver medal. The Russians had an undefeated 10-0 record in the tournament. It was Slovakia's best showing since they won the tournament and gold medal in 2002. Despite the disappointment of the loss, the Slovaks' strong showing was impressive, and has returned a large measure of pride to Slovak hockey.

During the silver medal presentation, as a memorial, Slovak defenseman Zdeno Chara donned a special jersey that bore the name and number 38 of Pavol Demitra. The great Slovak and NHL forward, who captained the national team in 2011 in Bratislava, passed away last year in the tragic Lokomotiv Yaroslavl plane crash, in which members of that Russian league team were killed.

The **Slovak-American Society of Washington** is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. [Contributions and membership dues are tax-deductible.](#)

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SLOVAK-AMERICAN SOCIETY  
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**SLOVAK-AMERICAN SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DC**  
**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL/DONATION FORM**  
 New or renewing annual membership runs thru December 31, 2012.

Individual membership (\$25/year) \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Family membership (\$35/year) \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Optional tax-deductible donation:  
     VSM/City U. scholarship fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
     SASW General Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$** \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to:  
 Slovak American Society of Washington, D.C.  
**MAIL THIS FORM TO:**  
**SASW—Tonya Harmon**  
**606 Kentland Drive**  
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\_\_\_ Please do NOT include my phone number in the Annual Membership Directory  
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