

The Train Stopped at Krompachy

By Peter McFadden

Me and my big mouth. The trouble it gets me into...

I was living in Kosice, Slovakia at the time, where I was chairman of a civic group trying to whip up local pride. The city's population had long suffered, first under Nazi domination, then during four decades of Soviet rule, and finally from their own disappointed expectations of the good life the Velvet Revolution would bring.

It was my mission in Kosice to "change the psychology of the people," a good people who had grown deeply pessimistic over the many unfortunate years of their history. I wanted to show my fellow Kosicans, who had been taught to be passive for so long, that "positive, collective action can be taken." I was in desperate search for "a dramatic local success story that can inspire and show the way for others across the nation."

And, one day, walking through the city's beautiful old town square, I hit upon the idea that I hoped would do all this.

I was on my way to my English conversation class at a local high school, where the following week I would share this big idea with my largely listless students: we were going to break the Guinness Record for World's Largest Dance, whatever that record might be.

From whence comes such whimsy?

As I was walking on the square that day, my mind had wandered back to a moment at my students' "stuzkova," or prom, when the song, the Macarena, aired. I remembered how the students had jumped out of their seats to dance to this hit. It was in that flicker of time that I first realized it was possible to inspire them.

As my mind ambled back to the historic, and spacious, promenade before me, I asked myself, "wouldn't it be funny to see this whole square filled with young people dancing the macarena" and then I thought "why not?"

Soon enough I discovered we would need 48,000 revelers to set the record, a tall order in a city of only 250,000 people. I would have to be an unusually relentless salesman if we were to have a chance at success.

We did our best within the city of Kosice to generate the necessary excitement. We enlisted the support of radio and television stations, a local newspaper, and the city's transportation authority. We wrote letters to every school and large company.

But one day I found myself with an unexpected opportunity to promote our big dance to an even wider audience. I had been asked to sit as a judge in a regional

English language olympiad, an annual competition that drew top students from all over Eastern Slovakia.

If I could convince these kids to bring along their families, friends, and neighbors, we would be well on our way to amassing the required crowd. So I seized the moment during a break in the competition, and asked the students for their help. Could they each bring hundreds from their cities, towns, and villages?

Now, by this time, I had become well versed in the Slovak mentality, so I told them, "Now, I know you will find some problem that will prevent you from coming. You'll discover, for example, that there are no trains or buses to take you back home...but let me tell you what I believe, to every problem there is a solution!" I exhorted them not to give up at the first obstacle encountered and to help us make history later in May.

Not long after, a young lady from the small town of Krompachy called me, and this is what she had to say: "Mr. McFadden, remember how you told us to every problem there is a solution?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, I have a problem. I have persuaded my whole school of 300 students to come to your dance, but there is no train or bus that can take us back to Krompachy. Can you find a solution for us?"

As I said, me and my big mouth...

I immediately thought to charter buses for them, but then I thought we would need six. Where would we get these buses from? And, how would we pay for them? We had no money.

And there was a bigger problem. If others discovered we were chartering six buses for Krompachy, soon we would have requests for dozens, if not hundreds, of such charters. Where would we even park all those buses, assuming we could find them and pay for them in the first place?

I thought to reserve a train that could make many stops along the way, but the cost of this also immediately appeared too great to me.

What to do? A friend of mine and I in college had a phrase we used to tell each other all the time: "There's no such thing as it can't be done, there's only we haven't yet thought of a way!"

So, I thought and I thought. I did not want to let this young lady down. I didn't want her to think there are such things in life as problems without solutions.

And, one day, soon enough, the answer to this particular problem did come my way. While no trains departing Kosice after 6:00 pm stopped at Krompachy, the bi-hourly express train to Bratislava did pass through. Why not ask to have one of these “fast trains,” on this special occasion, make the extra stop?

I eagerly arrived at the office the next day and asked my staff to make the call to Slovak Railways. I was surprised when they refused to do so. “Why not?” I wondered.

“They would never agree to such a request,” I was told. My staff was too embarrassed even to ask.

I insisted. “The worst thing is that we will be told no...but they will say yes.” I couldn’t imagine rejection of such a reasonable request for such an appropriate cause.

My staff only made the call after I threatened to attempt it, with my mangled Slovak, myself.

And...Slovak Railways said “yes.” We had to send in a formal, written request and pay a small administrative fee amounting to a few dollars, but they would make the stop.

I called the young lady from Krompachy and passed along to her the good news, and directed my thoughts onward to greater challenges.

That wonderful evening in May, as the crowd gathered on the square for our “SuperMacarena,” I was happy to look out from the podium and see that young lady arrive with her Krompachy contingent. We exchanged waves...and went on to enjoy the night of our lives.

The finally tally, after all reports had been compiled from our 29 checkpoints, was 67,156. We had shattered the established world record.

The next day, I called the young lady to find out if the train had in fact made the stop. It had. I was pleased and relieved but not surprised.

She told me how she had stood by the train as people were boarding and how she was asked countless times if the train really would stop. She told me how she reassured everyone even though she herself was not so sure.

She happily told me how she saw so many get off the train in her hometown. She had made their night possible with her call to me.

I passed along this little tale to a friend who happened to be a journalist. I myself was more impressed by the

huge turnout, our good luck with the weather, and the fact that 500 Kosicans had volunteered to make the dance such a brilliant success, than with the news that a train passing through a small town had made an unscheduled stop so hundreds could get off.

So you can imagine my surprise when I picked up the city’s paper the next day and read this front-page headline...

“The Train Stopped at Krompachy.”

Could it really have been such a significant event?

Kosice was Slovakia’s “second” city in everyone’s mind but our own. I proudly called up my friends in the nation’s capital, Bratislava, to tell them of our success. Many reluctantly admitted they now had to consider Kosice the better, more spirited town.

But I will never forget what one American friend in Bratislava told me. He happened to be an advisor to Slovakia’s president, Michal Kovac, and had attended a dinner with the president and a distinguished group of visitors just days after our dance.

In Slovakia’s convoluted political system, the president was the leader of the democratic forces challenging the autocratic prime minister’s government. This democratic opposition had organized numerous rallies, but could lure only a few thousand citizens each time. At the dinner, the talk focused on how was it possible I could be so successful drawing people out when they had failed so pitifully and so consistently in attempting to do the same?

I was certainly proud to hear that my achievement had been a prominent topic of discussion at a presidential dinner, and I did receive a visit from a group of democratic activists days later hoping to obtain some helpful advice, but the remark from that dinner I never will forget was this: my friend reported that as surprised as the diners were about our huge turnout, what the president and his guests simply could not believe was that...

“The train stopped at Krompachy!”

Peter McFadden served as president of the Central Europe Institute from 1990 through 1998. His big dance ultimately did not make it into the Guinness Book, as another edged it out by five thousand people, but the spirit of that night—“the night that people’s dreams came true”—lives on.