

Happy ending for Rumanian refugee, as choir tours homeland.

In 1984 after 9 years of struggling to gain refugee status during the horrific reign of Romania's Ceaucescu, Mihaly Peter escaped to Austria. Already a trained and experienced church musician, he was accepted 8 months later as a political refugee by Canada, arriving in Toronto in August, 1985. For 6 years he worked at all kinds of jobs trying to sponsor his wife and children for immigration, but with no success. While in Toronto, he was hit by a car and lay an invalid for 8 months, losing all hope for his future and for again seeing his family, who by this time thought he was dead. In time, he moved to Victoria and was encouraged by a friend to enroll in the School of Music at UVic in 1997. In 2000, revitalized by music and assisted by a number of Victoria institutions, notably the Victoria Catholic Diocese, Mihaly was able to return to his homeland Transylvania and be re-united with his family for Christmas holidays. He had joined the UVic Chamber Singers and dreamed of one day singing with them in his homeland. Upon graduation, and with a generous grant from UVic, he joined Prima Youth Choir on their concert tour of South East Asia. It was from this experience that the idea of a choir tour in 2004 to his homeland began to emerge. In 2003, Mihaly was accepted at the Pontifical Institution for Sacred Music at the Vatican and from there began the long international task of planning a tour.

After a year of intense organizing with Conductor Bruce More, Prima Youth Choir with guitarist Alexander Dunn has just completed the tour of Mihaly's dreams. Beginning in Budapest, Hungary on April 26 and traversing Romania & Bulgaria to end in Istanbul on May 9, the primarily Transylvania-focussed tour was, as Bruce describes it: "a magic carpet ride to some of the most beautiful country and exquisite cathedrals in the world." Far from the cloying tourist centers of Europe and the English language, the singers were treated to great hospitality and ecstatic audience reaction to their art by hosts ranging from local church parishes to civic and musical organizations of the cities and villages where they performed.

From the 15 concerts and over 5000 people who heard the choir, the most memorable include a service/concert at the parish church in Suseni, near Gheorgheni. This was a reunion with hundreds of former villagers who had fled Rumania during the communist years. Over 2000 people, many in traditional costume, came to celebrate this heartfelt homecoming. In Ispirih, Bulgaria, Prima shared a concert with local choirs and dancers including a world-class Bulgarian dance troupe. On the last night of the tour, sponsored by a major Turkish bank, the choir performed at a stunning cathedral in Istanbul to a large and enthusiastic audience, capping the tour with a promised DVD of the event. The standout location, however, was the visit to Mihaly's ancestral home in the tiny village of Godemesterhaza (Stinceni). Singing, dancing and a barbecue (including local caraway brandy!) with the villagers was a moving climax to Mihaly's homecoming.

Unfortunately there were some incidents of elaborate scams at restaurants, bazaars & elsewhere. For example, on arrival in Istanbul late at night, the bus was led in circles by a scam artist who wanted to transport the baggage to the hotel. The tour disaster was the theft of a wallet containing the passport of one of the singers, during a concert in Bulgaria. Through the extreme generosity of 2 attending US Peace Corps workers, she was taken to Sofia to get another passport, but it took an entire week (during which the rest of the choir was in Istanbul) before she was able to get the document and return home.

Of the many vistas and cities and villages, Oradea (Nagyvarod) stands out from the rest. It is a city of 200,000, formerly a very successful merchant center in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The architecture is uniquely "late Empire" with highly ornate buildings, ostensibly built by merchants in competition with each other. A beautiful river bisects the city, giving a sense of "Paris of Transylvania". A review of the Oradea concert highlighted the "extraordinarily diverse repertoire which was a great pleasure for everyone" and concurring with a previous reviewer's comment that "this is perfection". Of course the most exotic of all was Istanbul with its magnificent mosques, its bazaars and exquisite seaside setting: Eastern Europe on one bank and Asia on the other.

The tour was a lifetime experience for all of the 42 participants - thank you, Mihaly



Locked in a Turkish Bathroom

- By Marsha Minchenko

It was the end of our reception at the Bosphorus University cafeteria and as the group started to peter out the front doors, I thought that I would seize the moment and make a quick run to the washroom. I was glad to find normal, non squat-potty style toilets; but next thing I know, I'm sitting on the can and someone switches the lights off. I sort of yelled something in protest but was unheard and decided that it wouldn't be that bad if I just quickly finished up in the dark and then made my way to the rest of the group. I was glad to find that the bathroom door wasn't locking me in or anything like that and then as I walked out, the darkness and quiet that met me kind of brought a slight flusteredness with it. Then, the worst happened: I tried the exit doors -- all 4 -- and found them locked! No kidding! More anxious stomach feelings but I talked to myself, "Things will work out, there's got to be another door, someone is in here..." I started to yell, the empty foyer echoed nicely. I walked around still calling to some non-existent person, but there was no denying it, I was locked in the cafeteria building in some random University in Turkey!! I practically started to laugh at the craziness of the predicament that I'd found myself in; the thought that the building had food (in case I was there a while) also crossed my mind. I found an open window but came to it just to find that it was 2 stories up off the deserted cement ground below. Sick!!! What was I going to do? A couple of students walked by and I yelled to them fill they stopped. After I explained myself they laughed and then I had to wait as they went to get help (I correctly assumed that their leaving my view meant just that seeing as they hadn't said anything in English). Finally, I was out of the building and in the fresh air, alone and with no clue where the choir bus or the choir was. Sick again!!!! (The word actually did my stomach justice). Now what? I sort of scouted part of the perimeter of the university near where we were dropped off but to no avail. They must have left by now. I decided to take a taxi. The driver didn't understand a word and our hotel had to be in the most difficult location ever. I gave him our hotel map/location card and hoped for the best. We passed a street and I looked down it just to see the bus quite a ways down. It took too long to communicate stop or pull over to the driver but finally we had turned around and I was out on the street again. I started to run. I was almost at the bus and it started to drive away. AAAH! No worries, I was spotted, it was just turning around and I had made it on to tell my story. Craziness. Sick!!!