

Open Door Mission Trip to Slovakia June 2002

Report by Tim Cimbura



How do you sum up two weeks of intense experiences in a few paragraphs? I think the answer is "You don't." This report is long...but feel free to stop anywhere you want along the way.

I just got back and so I'm still processing what I learned. I'm also under the influence of jet lag. It's hard readjusting to the reality of working in an office every day. It's difficult thinking that what I do sitting in front of a computer has real value in comparison to directly impacting kids lives.

Our team of twelve people from Church of the Open Door worked together in amazing ways. We cooperated and each did our part in making the mission a reality. It was a pleasure and privilege to work with such a talented, dedicated, and fun team.

Overall, seeing God work in various experiences and building relationships with the children (ages 11-16) and teachers was the best part of the trip. The worst part of the trip was saying good-bye. It was really difficult to leave and at times tearful. Kids begged me to return next year or sooner. The reality is that I don't know when I will go back and so our friendships are being interrupted. I miss being present with them and sharing good times together. Fortunately, we can maintain some contact via e-mail. I'll wait to see what God has planned for me regarding my next trip.

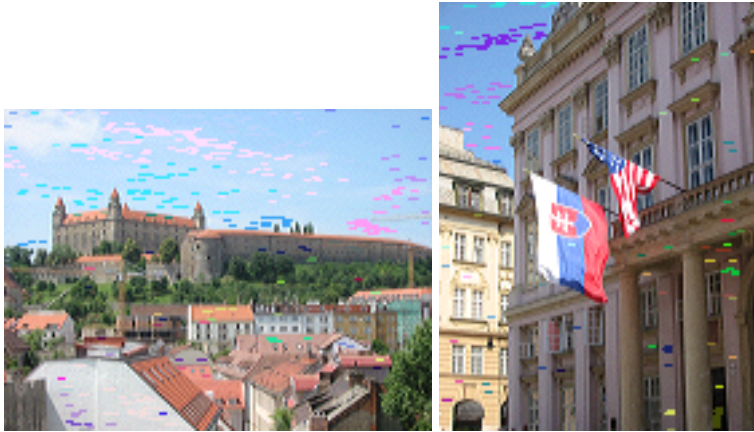
One kid commented about our team "We've heard about Jesus before...but never like you told it." I think that says a lot. Thanks to everyone for your financial and prayer support! It was strong. Appropriate words came to us for each situation and we were able to take risks we might not always take.

The Trip There

Before leaving, I strained my back lugging one of our awkward and heavy bags with sports equipment for the school in it. Fortunately, I was still able to do most activities and it got better as the week went on. Most of us had good health and strength even while operating on very little sleep. I recovered quickly from jet lag and only got a cold on the return flight.

Our trip began with a two-hour plane delay in Minneapolis due to mechanical problems. Eventually, we changed planes and set off. Since we had a seven-hour layover in Amsterdam, we still made our connecting flight to Vienna. We spent a couple hours in Amsterdam where some

of the team visited the Anne Frank house and others of us walked to a park searching for bikes and then back through the city on foot after failing to find a rental shop.



After arriving in Bratislava we took some time to orient ourselves with the capital city. We met with the teachers from the school that would participate at the camp.

The Camp



The following morning we traveled by bus to the camp while the children went by train and made it there before us. The first night at the camp we introduced our team, learned the kids names, and I did a fun magic and juggling program just to say hello. Even though the kids all spoke some English we had interpreters that helped the younger children especially.

This is the first time that Open Door has partnered to do this type of a camp in Slovakia. We weren't sure what to expect or how things we prepared would go over. In [Ginny Owens](#) song "I Am" there are protests from biblical characters such as Moses when God asks them to do something for Him they didn't feel capable of doing. God's response to them is simply "That's not YOUR problem." I think that's a good thought concerning how this trip went. We did our preparation as best we could and then turned it over to God. We just needed to show up and then He used each one of us to do whatever we do best that He gave us to do.



We had chapel times scheduled in the morning and evening throughout the camp. I began the first morning of the camp by demonstrating various deceptions through magic tricks and explaining some of the things we must look out for. It was interesting to hear the kids identifying good and bad deceptions throughout the week. That evening our team did a dance number to American music and I did a program for “American Day” (at their request) that included some patriotic illusions.

The next day I spoke about truth and light. Other topics during the week were love, freedom, peer pressure, friends, and diversity. The last day of the camp I did a finale show that ended with juggling fire torches. I also did a show for the entire school the following morning. I included positive and encouraging messages in the shows as well as making it clear that I was a Christian performing simple tricks...while Jesus does real miracles. Tom Johnson preached at the church on Sunday, and he had me do an illusion as an illustration of how easy it is for us to be deceived.



We divided the kids into groups based on countries (Cuba, Vietnam, China, India, Argentina, and South Africa) so that they could learn something about them while having fun in competitions. I co-led the South Africa team. The kids really got into their team spirit after we watched a video, read some magazines, made our own flag, and designed T-shirts. We also had groups separated by boys and girls based on grade level that we used for small group discussions after chapel

times. Harry, my room mate for the trip, led the kids with art projects like fish prints, drawing classes, and did face painting. They also made mosaic frames with Polaroid photos of them with their friends.

We had several silly competitions that included a baby bottle drink off for the tough guys, shooting Q-tips at duct tape, making a sculpture from chewing gum, a scavenger hunt, and country-based cheers and skits. There was an Olympic competition with a water balloon sling shot launcher, water gun shooting, relay races, and other fun events. We provided games and activities for the kids like bingo, a dance, etc. I taught some juggling and basic magic tricks to several students and some teachers. The kids got quite creative and started inventing their own tricks and showing them to me with enthusiasm. One of the most powerful skits was India's that portrayed an "untouchable" becoming king...true story. My South Africa kids colored their bodies black with charcoal from the campfire the night before and did a cool African dance.



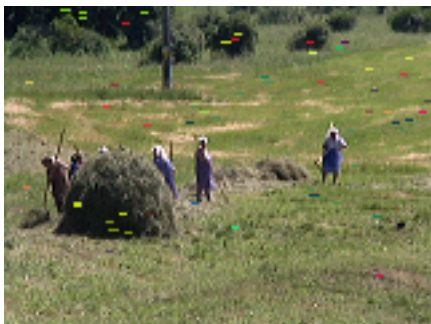
There were sports like volleyball, kickball, football, bocce ball, and kick-boxing aerobics. I got the chance to coach football and volleyball and see kids ability and confidence increase. I never realized how complex football was until I had to explain it in simple English. It was a special moment to see a girl catching her first touchdown pass or hiking the football...after not knowing how to play only moments earlier. Many girls said that American football was their favorite game now. There were smiles from cheek to cheek when some kids were afraid and then served their first volleyball. One girl wanted to serve on every rotation after that!

We had to make due with the facilities we had. There were no basketball courts, only a gravel football field, and the uneven and grassy "ball fields" were filled with cows (and cow pie land mines) at times. A highlight for everyone was the big floor hockey game at the gymnasium (no air-conditioning) with the USA leaders vs. the Slovak students. We played really hard but Slovakia won (mainly due to their excellent goalies). Fortunately, no one died from heat exhaustion. It was a priceless moment to see the kids so proud of their country and singing their national anthem.



The big finale of the week of team competitions was a water balloon fight where the winners tossed over 200 water balloons at all the teachers and leaders as well as the losing teams. Everyone got wet.

I woke up one morning to the sound of a lawn mower around 4 AM. The proprietor of the camp had mowed the entire field with an electric push mower and a mile of extension cords! We saw a major contrast in life as old women worked in the field the following day raking hay into piles in scorching heat. We brought them water that they accepted with some protests but gratefulness.



At the beginning of the week, I felt disconnected from the kids. I thought they saw me as a performer and not a person they could relate to. I prayed about it and God answered my prayer almost immediately. At breakfast the following morning, I was asked by one of the Slovak teachers to lead a small group of 9th grade boys. Soon many of the kids began to talk with me more. Many good questions were raised and discussed in small group settings. They asked me lots of tough questions. The impact on individual lives is not measurable...but I believe it was a significant positive event.



We tried to provide practical answers to questions the kids asked. We looked for ways to make God relevant in their lives. We were open, honest, vulnerable, and real in sharing our personal testimonies with them. I shared my testimony about growing up and played the song “I’m Not Cool” by [Scott Krippayne](#). (The song talks about getting your value in life not from what you do or how you dress but because God loves you and finds you precious in His sight.) Kids were singing along in English even after only hearing it only once. Later on, I shared more of my story about going through a painful divorce and what good has come out of difficult times. Marnie, Doris, Jenny, and Patrick also shared their powerful stories throughout the week.

We found that some of our assumptions about the kids were not true (or not so important) and so we modified our message and program to address their needs. A few of the kids had read “Lord of the Rings” and so we were able to use that illustration of the gospel in some ways.

The Slovak students and teachers organized “Slovak Day” that included a hike in the beautiful high Tatra mountains, visiting a cave, a Slovak history museum (similar in style to Fort Snelling), some skits showing their history, and time to shop and connect with the kids in the scenic city of Poprad. We also played capture the flag, made forest sculptures, decorated eggs, and had egg relay races.



Some other interesting moments and highlights:

- One day we had hot dogs for breakfast, fried cheese for lunch, and donuts for dinner. Another day, what looked like gravy and potatoes actually tasted like donuts with syrup...surprise!
- Expressions of kids when they saw something magical, unbelievable, or amazing. Bright eyes, smiles, wonder, laughter when sharing magic and juggling with kids.
- It was cool to let the kids teach me stuff I didn’t know...like a card trick, how to play a game, Slovak tongue twisters, etc.
- Seeing teachers and students move out of their comfort zone, take risks, and cut loose.



- Hearing worship songs sung by kids in Slovak and led by Kveto -- the Dan Adler worship leader of Slovakia.
- Water balloons that never broke...even after bouncing on gravel.
- Speaking with the team in goofy southern accents. Saying Slovak tongue twisters. "Everybody dance now" music heard over and over!
- Seeing the kids creativity and cooperation in skits and art projects.
- Taking the mandatory shot of Slivovitz plum brandy that is their national drink...just like taking Ny-Quil! We also sampled Medovina made from honey.



I met a girl named Julia who was especially interested (and talented) with juggling and magic. I spent time teaching her some new stuff and she showed me where the magic store was in Bratislava that had recently opened in February. Maybe she'll do the camp shows next year!

Returning to Bratislava



Taking the train together with the kids back to Bratislava was an awesome time to connect again with the kids for the last time. The following day a few of the children even met up with us for some time together the final day before we returned.

The scenery in the mountains was beautiful, but each one of the children we became friends with was way more beautiful. Each of the children touched my life in some special way. I could see parts of myself reflected in them. For a week, my life intersected with kids from a different nation and culture. Their laughter and bright smiles lit up those days. You could see they had genuine fun. I took time to listen and affirm the kids as well as speak to them. There was enough time where they could get to know me...my good times and some hard experiences. We found God making circumstances work out in incredible ways. We learned to walk in God's strength and take some risks.

I know that God used us to reach people in a positive way...even beyond the people we met in Slovakia. Why can't we always live this way? Life is much like a short-term mission trip. We are foreigners in a strange land. We are here for a purpose and God works in it but we know it is not our home. (1 Peter 2:11; Php 3:20-21)

The church associated with the school in Bratislava has the opportunity to influence the country of Slovakia in good ways. Several influential people attend the church and these kids are the next generation. We showed them authentic ways that God has worked in our lives and they are old enough that they will remember this camp. They loved us because they knew that we loved them.

About My Magic and Juggling

I packed about 150 illusions into one carry-on bag so that they wouldn't get lost in baggage. I knew it would be easier to replace my shorts and T-shirts than expensive magic equipment. The key was to pack small things that look big when performed...like cards, ropes, handkerchiefs, etc. I had to be very careful to not include sharp metal objects such as scissors or knives. I wondered if the juggling torches would make it past airport security so I checked them in.

I had an outline of what I planned to do in Slovakia, but most presentations were written the night before I did them. This is unlike me. I usually prepare far in advance for a speech. In the past, I've done plenty of 40 minute programs at churches and events, but this was the first time I did a week long camp with segments once or twice a day. I split up the best parts of my act into smaller pieces so there was stuff to look forward to at the end of the week...like juggling flaming torches. It took a long time to find the right fuel for my torches when trying to read bottles in Slovak. Several fuels didn't work at all.

I found "shows" were easier with an interpreter. It gave me more time to think about the next sentence and keep things simple for the kids. Also, I didn't have a need for a wireless microphone. As long as I spoke loud enough for the interpreter, the interpreter could speak into a handheld mic and be my voice. There was a special (joking) request from the students: "Make our teachers disappear." I didn't help them with that.

I had heard that there might be an aversion to card tricks in eastern Europe and so I planned on the possibility that I had to eliminate them totally. In Slovakia, it was not a problem. Sometimes people are scared of magic because they don't understand it. When used and explained correctly it can be a powerful teaching tool as with any other art form. I even did an illusion during the church service.

It's interesting that the favorite trick that most people commented about was one that I almost didn't bring along. You never know. Of course, everyone enjoyed the fire juggling. People seem to like it when I endanger my life. Hmm...

I chose to perform in whatever outfit I happened to be wearing for the day...shorts and a T-shirt mostly. This made the shows more casual and the kids could relate to me more. Also, I think it made the magic more amazing. I got several comments about lacking sleeves. It was also easier to travel without any special costume to pack and keep clean and pressed.

Another situation presented by this type of camp is different than my usual shows. Usually, I do the show and leave shortly after...not seeing many of the people again. Since I continued being with the kids for the entire week, I got many more questions about how I did many of the tricks...to the point that some kids were begging me for the secrets. It's difficult not to reveal the secrets, especially to people who become your close friends. I dealt with this in several ways: First, I explained that the magician's code of ethics maintains that the secrets must remain secrets. If everyone knew how the tricks were done it wouldn't be fun anymore...kind of like telling your friend about his own surprise birthday party. Second, I diverted the question at times by promising to teach them some tricks that they can do themselves...which I did do. Third, I explained that you learn the secrets of magic by putting in the effort of reading books or watching videos and demonstrating to other magicians that you are serious about the art of magic by learning some tricks well and performing them. As you progress, you may learn the more difficult and carefully guarded secrets to bigger illusions. Magicians tend to frown on people who just want to know how it's done to satisfy their curiosity. That's just the way it is.

At one time, I saw the fact that I would not reveal the secret as a road block in my small group. They were more interested in the magic than talking about spiritual questions that evening and so I made the decision to reveal one of the secrets to them with their promised confidence about the whole deal. I did this and made an exception to the code of ethics for magicians because (1) I wanted to prove to them that it WAS a trick (it was so good they weren't sure), (2) I wanted to remove the road block in our conversation, and (3) I wanted to gain their confidence so we could talk about deeper things. Like most magic tricks, when they knew the secret they were somewhat disappointed that it was so stupid. I think it helped to illustrate again how easily we are fooled.

Juggling doesn't present the same problems in this regard as magic...because it is so obviously a display of pure skill (or lack of it at times).

I hope these few notes might help other people that may want to use the art of magic or juggling to serve God in a Christian camp setting.