

THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR

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Slovakia’s 10 largest family firms



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THE
SLOVAK SPECTATOR

EK WE ABIDE BY THE CODE
OF JOURNALISTIC ETHICS



Ivan Kmotřík is the man behind GGT, the biggest family business in Slovakia and one of the companies in his Grafobal Group.

Slovakia's largest family businesses

COMPREHENSIVE DATA FROM MORE THAN 500 COMPANIES

Text: Jana Liptáková and Ján Pallo • Photo: Lukáš Klčo, The Hossa Family, Sme – Jozef Jakubčo and Marko Erd

The Slovak Spectator, in cooperation with FinStat and the Institute of Family Business, has collected data from more than 500 local family businesses with total revenues in Slovakia in 2023 exceeding €10 billion. As well as featuring the largest players, smaller companies are also included.

The data shows that most family businesses in Slovakia are involved in wholesale and retail (28.3 percent by total number and 50.8 percent by revenues). Other popular sectors based on revenues are industry (13.6 percent) and food processing (12.3 percent). The latter includes producers who managed to maintain the tradition of their family firms during communism,

when private business was banned. There are also a number of smaller family firms in real estate, tourism and gastronomy.

Some are still managed by their founders while in others members of the third, or even fourth, generations have already taken over at the managerial helm.

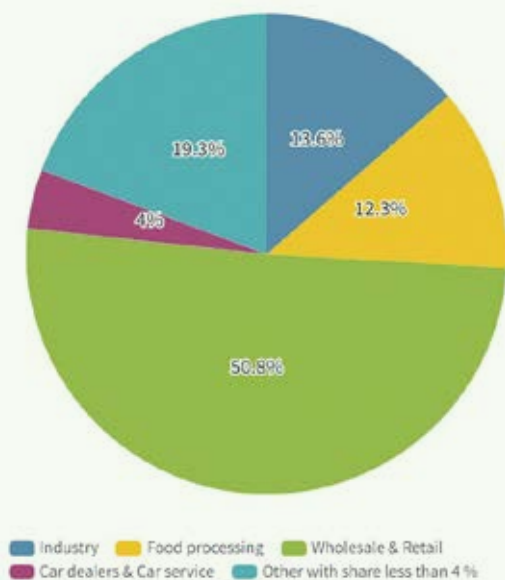
Bratislava Region far exceeds all others in terms of the number of companies which are family businesses (31.6 percent), and in terms of their total revenues, amounting to €3.6 billion (36 percent). The largest companies run by Slovak families are predominantly in western Slovakia, while Košice and Prešov Regions together have a share of total revenues of around 12 percent.

AND THE WINNER IS...

10 LARGEST FAMILY BUSINESSES IN SLOVAKIA

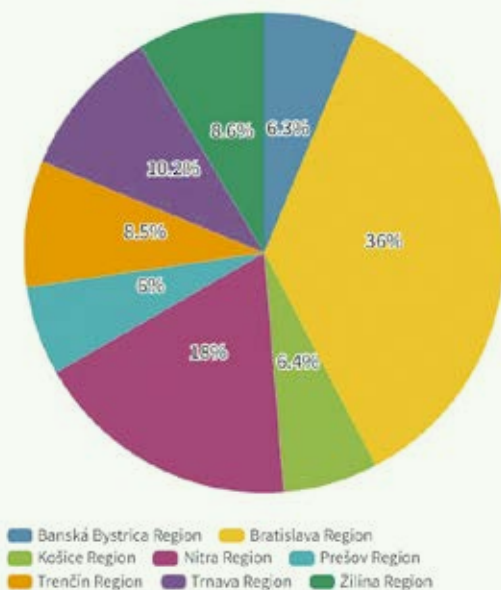
1.	GGT
2.	MED – ART
3.	LABAŠ
4.	T a M trans pediton
5.	Raven
6.	N I K É
7.	Energie2
8.	Arimex Bratislava
9.	I.D.C. Holding
10.	Domäsko

Sectors of family business in Slovakia (based on revenues)



Source: FinStat, The Slovak Spectator

Family businesses by region (based on revenues)



Source: FinStat, The Slovak Spectator

The biggest family business in Slovakia, GGT, is led by Ivan Kmotrík, who regularly appears in rankings of the wealthiest Slovaks; it is one of the companies in his Grafobal Group.

GGT is Kmotrík's largest company. It includes the retail chain Tabak Press. Most of its €800 million revenues come from the wholesale of cigarettes and tobacco products. He also owns the Slovan Bratislava football club. This season the club will play in the UEFA Champions League for the first time in its history.

Outside Slovakia, Grafobal Group is active in the Czech Republic and other countries. These operations account for about half of its total revenues of €2.2 billion, but only data for its entities operating in Slovakia were used in this analysis.

The 65-year-old entrepreneur has already appointed his children – Ivan, Linda and Tomáš – as well as his wife, Timea, to the management or supervisory boards of a number of companies in Grafobal Group's portfolio. Altogether, 11 family members are active across all the companies owned by Kmotrík.

The Top 10 ranking contains an interesting mix of companies, both in terms of their location and the sector in which they operate.

MED-ART, a Nitra-based wholesale distributor of drugs and medical devices, was second in the ranking with revenues of €522 million. Established in 1991, it provides services from four distribution centres, in Bratislava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica and Prešov. The company is owned by Ján Holec and Hilda Némethová. Several family members are on the statutory board of the company.

In third place is Košice-based Labaš, with revenues of €406 million. It is the biggest local food wholesaler in Slovakia. In addition to wholesale, the company, which is named after its founder Miroslav Labaš, operates a retail network under the Fresh brand in eastern Slovakia. The firm's beginnings go back to 1992, when Labaš started trading various food products literally out of his parents' garage. Six members of the extended Labaš family, including his two sons Richard and Miroslav, are active in the family business.

Also featured in the Top10 ranking is Bratislava-based Niké, the biggest privately owned betting company in Slovakia, with revenues of €221 million. Otto Berger and his son Roman hold a 51-percent share in the company which was, when it was established in 1991, the first of its kind in Slovakia. The firm offers a wide range of betting

Definition of a family business

A family business is a company in which at least two representatives of the same family are active and the family owns more than 50 percent of the company and participates in its management.

Family members are defined as: spouses, immediate relatives (e.g. children), siblings and persons related to each other up to the fourth degree, and their spouses

services, including betting on various sports events, online casino games and lottery products.

I.D.C. Holding, producer of iconic sweet wafer snacks like Horalka and Mila, with €163 million in revenues, also makes the Top 10. Its exclusive owner, Pavol Jakubec, an architect by education, is one of the richest Slovaks. Apart from the food sector, he is also active in real estate, catering and the rubber industry. In August, Jakubec signed a contract to sell I.D.C. Holding to Ireland's Valeo Foods Group. The transaction is expected to be completed by the end of 2024.

In the 1990s, he and his former boss, Štefan Kassay, bought the sweet producers Pečivárne Sereď and Figaro



Ferroalloy producer OFZ is the fifth largest in the Žilina Region.

Trnava. In the food production sector, Jakubec and Kassay remained virtually on their own as domestic investors, while other larger confectionery and sweets producers were bought up by foreign competitors. Jakubec bought Kassay's share in the company in 2021. One of his daughters, Paulina, has become increasingly active in the family business in recent years.

WHOLESALE DOMINATES IN BRATISLAVA REGION

10 LARGEST IN BRATISLAVA REGION

1.	GGT
2.	N I K É
3.	Energie2
4.	Arimex Bratislava
5.	I.D.C. Holding
6.	ENCINGER SK
7.	PPA CONTROL
8.	HYDROTOUR
9.	SATUR TRAVEL
10.	MUZIKER

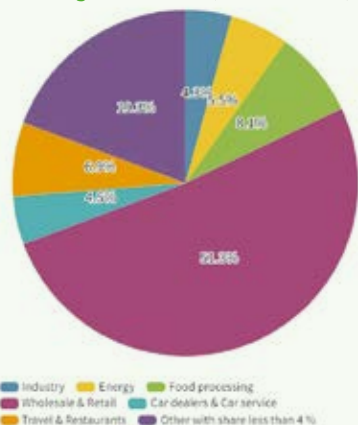
Perhaps unsurprisingly, as it includes the capital city, Bratislava Region features the highest number of family businesses. They also share the highest total revenues, at €3.6 billion. Retail and wholesale dominate, both in terms of the number of companies as well as revenues. Of the 54 companies in total, 32 are active in wholesale. Their total revenues for 2023 amounted to €1.9 billion, of which wholesale

made up €1.6 billion. GGT is followed by Arimex Bratislava, with revenues of €181 million. Launched in 1992 by Jozef and Erika Rebro, it buys and sells agricultural crop production and by-products from the industrial processing of crops. The biggest retailer is Muziker, which is run by Dušan Karlik and his wife Zuzana. They began by selling musical instruments but later branched out into other segments. The food industry, with an 8.1-percent share of total revenues, is the second biggest. Its largest representative, the sweet wafer-producer I.D.C. Holding, highlights how firms in Bratislava accumulate revenues through activities in other regions – its factory is located in Sered' (Trnava Region), but its headquarters is in Bratislava.

Encinger placed second in the food industry sector, with revenues of €101 million, producing dried fruits and nuts as well as the legendary pink chewing gum brand Pedro. The sector also included a number of family wine producers, the largest of which is Víno Matyšák, established by Peter Matyšák in 1991.

The third strongest sector, with a 6.9-percent share of total revenues, is travel and gastronomy. These firms were led by the travel agencies Hydrotour, run by the Milko family, and Satur Travel led by two sisters, Eleonóra Fedorová and Ľudmila Masariková. The third largest is the restaurant chain Medusa. Most of its restaurants, including Klubovňa, Primi, and Mint, are in Bratislava. It is also active in the Czech Republic, Austria and the United Arab Emirates.

Bratislava Region: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Source: EY Bratislava, The Slovak Spectator

In terms of the number of companies, construction and real estate (11 percent) as well as law, consulting and accounting (8.5 percent) are other sectors with a strong family firm presence.

STRONG POSITION OF INDUSTRIAL MANUFACTURING IN WESTERN SLOVAKIA

5 LARGEST IN TRNAVA REGION

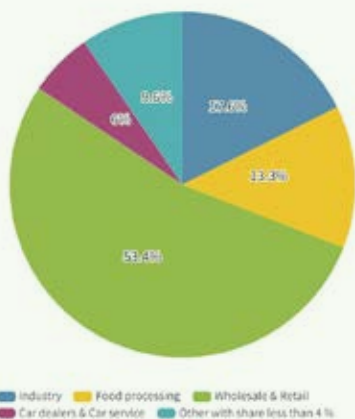
1.	ŽOS Trnava
2.	101 Drogeria
3.	GRAFOBAL
4.	ISTERMEAT
5.	HÍLEK

Companies from Trnava Region included in this analysis have total revenues of €1 billion.

The wholesale and retail sector leads the way, accounting for 30.9 percent (€317 million) of the region's revenue. 101 Drogeria, which operates a retail chain of 245 drugstores, tops the retail list with revenues of €83.6 million. The company last year underwent a generational change when Matej Krajčík, son of founder Emil Krajčík, became the new CEO.

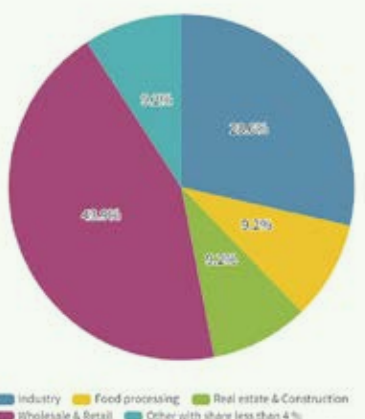
The second strongest sector is industrial manufacturing, with a 24.7-percent share (€253 million in revenue) led by the largest family business in the region, ŽOS Trnava. The company has revenues of €130 million. The largest railway carriage repair workshop in central Europe, it is co-owned by Vladimír Poór. A privatiser from

Western Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



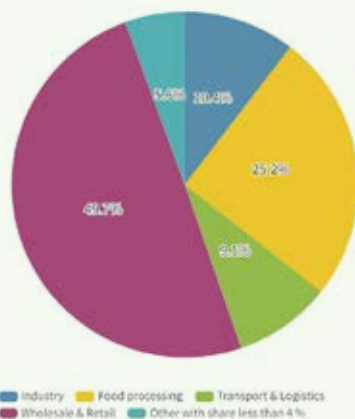
Source: FICITat, The Slovak Spectator

Central Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Source: FICITat, The Slovak Spectator

Eastern Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Source: FICITat, The Slovak Spectator

the period of Vladimír Mečiar-led governments in the 1990s, Poór was a patron of the Smer party and is one of the richest Slovaks. The company manufactures new freight railway cars, carries out repairs, and refurbishes and manufactures new wheel-sets.

Kmotrík, a native of the town of Skalica in western Slovakia, built his wealth primarily through various ventures in media when he acquired the Skalica-based packaging producer Grafobal during the 1990s. This company later became the flagship of his business empire.

The third is the food industry, making up 18.7 percent (€192 million). The meat processing company Istermeat, with €62 million in revenues is one of the flagships of the Világi family. Meanwhile, Minit Slovakia, manufacturer of frozen bakery products, was launched by František Ambrovics and his brother Juraj but is now led by their sons Ladislav and Zoltán. The company has €59 million in revenue.

5 LARGEST IN TRENČÍN REGION

1. **Raven**
2. **KJG**
3. **MIKONA**
4. **MEDEKO CAST**
5. **MATADOR Automation**

Retail and wholesale dominate Trenčín Region too, making up 43.6 percent (€373 million in revenue) of the region's revenues.

Raven, active in the wholesale of hard-

ware, plumbing and heating equipment and supplies, makes up the dominant share of the revenues with €270 million. Launched by Ľubomír Harvánek in 1993, several representatives of the family now work in the Raven group which has activities in Slovakia as well as across the Visegrad Group region.

KJG, with revenues of €65 million, is the leader in the second strongest sector by revenues in the region – industrial manufacturing. Founded by Eduard Kollár, a native of Čachtice, it tops the metalworking and metallurgy sub-sector, accounting for 11.1 percent of revenues (€95 million). Today it is one of the largest companies in the production of guttering and roofing systems in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Míkona, active in the sale and maintenance of motor vehicles, is the third largest, with revenues of €64.8 million. Founded in 1992, it has a roughly 20-percent market share in the tyre segment and the largest network of shops and tyre service centres in Slovakia.

Medeko Cast, which produces non-ferrous metal alloys, solders, semi-finished products and finished castings, has revenues of €49.4 million – making it a successful company in the industrial manufacturing sector, which accounts for 37.2 percent of all revenues (€318.9 million). This family business, founded by Pavol Demáček and his spouse Anna 20 years ago in Považská Bystrica, is today led by one of their daughters, Kristína Lang, in tandem with manager Peter Huljak.

The fifth in the regional ranking, Matador Automation, is one of more than 30 companies in the Rosina family's Matador Group holding. With revenues of €44.8 million, it is the fourth largest firm in the industrial manufacturing sector. Other companies in the group which operate in the same sector include Matador Industries and Matador Tools. Its automotive division is already part of the Portuguese firm Sodectia Automotive.

5 LARGEST IN NITRA REGION

1. **MED – ART**
2. **T a M trans Spedition**
3. **REAL – K**
4. **GAMEX TRADING**
5. **AGRO TAMI**

While Nitra Region features only 58 family companies in the analysis, their total revenues of €1.8 billion are the second greatest after those in Bratislava Region.

The retail and wholesale sector accounts for the largest share in terms of revenues – 70.9 percent, or €1.3 billion. Wholesale dominates, accounting for 60.9 percent or €1.1 billion. MED-ART, the Nitra-based wholesale distributor of drugs and medical devices, tops the ranking with €522 million in revenues, followed by T a M Trans Spedition with €286 million. The latter, which is active in logistics and motor fuels, was launched by Timea and Marian Tóth in 1996. They started in cargo transport and later expanded



Armenian businessman Artur Gevorkyan focuses on powder metallurgy.

their business to include maintenance of trucks and operation of self-service petrol stations under the trademark Autohof – Férové Pumpy.

REAL – K, with €101 million, and Gamex Trading with €94.5 million in revenues, follow. The latter focuses on the supply of chemicals and seeds and the purchase of crops and is part of a consortium of companies launched by Jozef Öszi. He died in 2021, but his daughter Ester had begun to take over the running of this business empire from him before his death.

With revenues of €93.8 million, Agro Tami is the biggest family company in the second strongest sector in the region – food production – with total revenues of €265 million or 14.7 percent. It is part of the Tami Group, belonging to Mikuláš Bobák. The group also includes dairies in Kežmarok and Senica. His son Lukáš has already joined the family business and Dominika Bobáková is on the supervisory board of Agro Tami.

FOOD PROCESSING MAKES ITS MARK IN CENTRAL SLOVAKIA

5 LARGEST IN ŽILINA REGION

1.	MTS
2.	Ryba Žilina
3.	LIBEX
4.	KORUNA
5.	OFZ

Out of the two central Slovak regions, the Žilina Region features a higher

number of family businesses: 61, with total revenues of €858 million.

The largest sector is retail and wholesale, accounting for 44.7 percent or €383.7 million. This is dominated by wholesale, which accounts for 25.3 percent (€217 million), and features three out of the five largest family businesses in the region. Ryba Žilina is the largest, with revenues of €86.8 million. Part of Jozef Antošík's Preto group, its core business is the production of an iconic cod-in-mayonnaise (Treska v majonéze) salad which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year.

Libex, launched by Helena and Peter Cvach and focused on food wholesaling, has revenues of €86.8 million. The family business has been in operation since 1994 and the couple have gradually expanded it into rental and real estate operations, creating a network of 130 retail outlets under the Koruna brand. The group now competes with the largest grocery chains in northern and central Slovakia.

MTS, the largest company in the region as well as in the industrial manufacturing sector (32.6 percent, or €280 million) with revenues of €98.4 million, specialises in the introduction of automation in production plants. It was founded by Juraj Habovštiak in 1996 with two partners in a boiler room in his hometown after he left Tesla Orava. Ferroalloy producer OFZ is the second largest in this sector, with revenues of €74.9 million. Vladimír Klocok owns a 50.5 percent stake in the company, whose beginnings date to 1952. His nephew Branislav is now chairman of the board of directors

Details of the analysis

This analysis of family business in Slovakia was prepared by The Slovak Spectator in cooperation with the FinStat data company. Where families have several companies in their portfolio, each of these companies is presented separately in the overview.

The analysis also provides an overview of the strongest players in the regions and a list of sectors in which family businesses generate the largest revenues.

More than 500 companies were included in the assessment and financial data for them was provided by FinStat. Detailed questionnaires were completed by 62 families out of all those surveyed. This resulted in a supplementary list of companies where at least three generations have worked, as well as a list of companies where more than five family members are currently employed.

In addition to the largest companies, companies recommended by the Family Business Institute were also included in the analysis.

and manager of the factory, while he has moved to be head of the supervisory board. The family also owns the Kubínska Hoľa ski resort – the 6th largest ski resort in the country.

5 LARGEST IN BANSKÁ BYSTRICA REGION

1.	Domäsko
2.	GEVORKYAN
3.	KOLIBA
4.	ALFA BIO
5.	Mäspoma

Banská Bystrica Region reports 54 family businesses, with total revenues of €628 million. The retail sector leads, contributing 36.6 percent (€218.9 million) of regional revenue. Domäsko, specialising in poultry farming and operating 90 butchers' shops, tops the list with €153.9 million in revenues.

Industrial manufacturing follows, making up 24.3 percent (€145.5 million) of revenues. The sector's leader, Gevorkyan, founded by Armenian businessman Artur Gevorkyan, focuses on powder metallurgy. It reported revenues of €76.5 million. Another well-known firm is Lubomír Očenáš's Lukamasiv. A three-generation furniture company, it is a supplier to Ikea and last year won a Felix award for Exceptional Family Business.

The food production industry ranks third, making up 19 percent (€114 million). Koliba, a cheese producer and



Former hockey player Marián Hossa went into the frozen food sector.



Ján Kolesár Jr. is taking over the Mäspoma company from his father, Ján Kolesár Sr.



Pavol Jakubec is in the process of selling his company I.D.C. Holding

dairy operator, leads with revenues of €36 million, followed by Alfa Bio, Slovakia's largest tofu and plant-based food producer, generating €35.4 million in revenues. Launched by Ján Lunter and now managed by the next generation of the family, it sells its products under the trademark Lunter. Next is spice producer Mäspoma, which registered revenues of €33.4 million. Ján Kolesár established the company and his children are now active in its management.

FOOD AND TRANSPORT DOMINATE IN EASTERN SLOVAKIA

5 LARGEST IN KOŠICE REGION

1.	LABAŠ
2.	DeutschMann Internationale Spedition
3.	SLOVAKIA TREND EXPORT – IMPORT
4.	VAMEX
5.	SWIDA Innovative

In Košice Region, which includes Slovakia's second-largest city, the wholesale sector dominates, with 76.1 percent of total revenues, amounting to €475.2 million. Labaš, the biggest local food wholesaler in Slovakia, leads with €406 million in revenues. The company operates a retail network under the Fresh brand in eastern Slovakia. The second-largest wholesale company is Slovakia Trend Export – Import, based in Sobrance, with nearly €48

million in revenues last year. Kimex, a major coal importer from Russia, follows with €15.6 million.

In the transport and logistics sector, which accounts for 11.5 percent of revenues, DeutschMann Internationale Spedition leads the way with revenues of €45.8 million, followed by Swida Innovative with €28 million. The latter specialises in express road transport and the former is a global express transport company owned by Miriam Poništová and her husband Jozef.

In food production, Vamex, the largest bakery in Slovakia, comes top with revenues of €27.3 million. In the hands of the Gumán family, its second generation is active in the firm's management. Viktor Gumán is CEO and his wife Zuzana is chairman of the board and personnel director. GreenPharm is second largest in the sector in Košice Region with revenues of €19 million. Three members of the family are active in its operations, manufacturing food supplements ranging from collagen drinks to organic products.

5 LARGEST IN PREŠOV REGION

1.	Tatranská mliekareň
2.	LUNYS
3.	Hossa family
4.	D.P. EKOPLAST
5.	Baliarne obchodu

Prešov Region is the only one of Slovakia's eight regions where retail and

wholesale do not dominate. Instead, the food production industry leads, contributing 44.6 percent, or €266.5 million, to the region's total revenues. The largest company is Tatranská Mliekareň in Kežmarok, part of the Tami group under Mikuláš Bobák, with €121 million in revenues. The Hossa Family, which produces frozen dumplings and which was founded by former hockey player Marián Hossa, follows with revenues of €64.5 million. Baliarne Obchodu, a major coffee and tea producer, had revenues of €33 million. The Poprad company is in the hands of several families, led by the Matušek family. Its most popular products are Popradská Káva coffee and Popradský Čaj and Mistral teas. Wholesale is the second-largest sector, contributing 23.9 percent or €142 million. Lunys, a fruit and vegetable trader, dominates with revenues of €103.8 million, with Karloff, the producer of Tatra Tea liquor, following with €14.5 million. Five members of the Semaňák family are active in the latter firm.

Industrial manufacturing ranks third, making up 19.4 percent or €142 million in revenues. D.P. Eko-plast, a chemical company producing shrink film, leads with revenues of €52.6 million, followed by machine engineering firm Tomark (€32.6 million), which is active in machine engineering.

The region is also home to Agrokarpáty, Slovakia's largest medicinal plant producer, which last year had revenues of €2.3 million.



Expertise about how to make Tokay wine has been passed from generation to generation at the Tokaj Macik Winery.

Passing knowledge from generation to generation

FAMILY BUSINESSES BUILD UP THEIR KNOW-HOW

Text: Jana Liptáková • **Photo:** Tokaj Macik Winery, Lukáš Klíčo, Sme – Jozef Ryník, Sme – Jozef Jakubčo

The large white house outside the town of Veľatý in eastern Slovakia, surrounded by a small forest, fields and a recently repaired first-class road, is more special than it seems at first glance. The house, Aqua Maria, is a guesthouse, or pension. It belongs to the Rusňák family, who are proud of their long-running business that goes back to communist times.

At first, Slavomír Rusňák's grandfather, Jozef, ran a motel here. At that time, it was owned by the Jednota co-operative. Later, Jozef's son and Slavomír's father, Štefan, built a motor camping site with 15 cabins in the area. In 1994, five years after the fall of communism, the family bought the motel from Jednota and turned the place into a high-class resort with somewhat tropical vibes.

The place is an excellent gateway to

the famous Tokay wine region, which spreads across the border between Slovakia and Hungary. Here, generations of winemakers have been making legendary Tokay wine, which is matured in century-old volcanic tuff cellars.

PASSING ON KNOW-HOW

Wine production is one of the few areas where the communist regime did not completely interrupt the passing on of know-how and expertise from one generation to the next. Family businesses were not allowed to operate during the communist regime, i.e. from the late 1940s until 1989, when the totalitarian regime was toppled, because private entrepreneurship was not allowed under communism. Small craft-people, like farmers, wine makers and beekeepers, were allowed to produce fruits and vegetables, wine and honey, but only for their own consump-

tion. They were allowed, officially, to sell only "surpluses", i.e. what they did not consume. Nevertheless, this was enough to allow the transfer of know-how from one generation to another.

One such example is the Tokaj Macik Winery, a small family winery, which has had wine in its blood for four generations. Wine production in the Macik family dates back to 1920. It resumed wine production in 1995 when Mária Maciková, one of the main fighters to save the Tokaj brand for Slovakia, attracted her son Jaroslav Macik to winemaking. That year they launched the Tokaj Macik Winery. Already two generations of family members, totalling three people, have worked at the winery.

A nice story also lies behind the Anton Uhnák family winery in the southern Slovak village of Čajkov. Anton Uhlák, Jr. belongs to the 13th generation of his



The Macik winemaking family.

family to live in this village, but his great-grandfather was the first family member to become involved in wine-making. He owned a pub in the 1930s but found that he did not have enough wine to offer there. So, in 1932 he built his first wine cellar. It still stands today, and the family brings visitors to taste their vintage wines there.

AGRICULTURE, PRINTING AS WELL AS TOOTHPASTE PRODUCTION

In total, there are six family businesses featured in the survey, with three generations involved in the operation of their family company, operating in various sectors.

The JTF Partnership family business was launched in 1990 as a trade and production company based in the glassmaking village of Lednické Rovne in western Slovakia. The six stars in its logo represent the number of family members and the unsealed semicircle symbolises a place for offspring. It sells goods for gastronomic facilities, where in addition to the branded crystal glass of leading European brands, it also offers a complete range of kitchen utensils. As the family honours local glassmaking art, the company creates a variety of glass decors. The Mačaj family has maintained a tradition in crop cultivation for at least six



Elektro-Haramia manufactures compact electrical substations and transformer stations.

generations, working their way up to become one of the biggest agricultural family firms in Slovakia. Through their Agromačaj company, headquartered in Kráľová pri Senci in western Slovakia, and its subsidiaries, they manage almost 5,000 hectares of arable land. They mainly target the cultivation of onions, cabbage, garlic and potatoes, which they supply to most of the country's supermarket chains. The founder of the present-day farming group is Juraj Mačaj, Sr., who has gradually handed over management to the next generation. In total, four members of three generations are working in the company. Today, seven family members work in the company; in all, a total of three generations have been involved.

Cofin, operating in the media and advertising sector, was launched in 1994 and today is one of the most progressive printing companies in Prešov Region, eastern Slovakia. František Olša launched the company alongside his brother in 1994. Their clients include Coca-Cola, Tipos, Ševt and Heineken. Behind the name Slovak Nature, launched in 2016, is the company of the Sirotiak and Škorňa families, which produce and sell homemade jams, syrups, chocolate spreads, flower honey, dried bee pollen and dried herbs under the Sladký Košík (Sweet Basket) brand. The company's managing director,

Elena Škorňová, believes that quality and natural ingredients are the basis for creating truly delicious products. Its philosophy is that sweets should not only be tasty, but also healthy.

Biela Perla has been producing toothpastes in Kežmarok, eastern Slovakia, for more than 20 years. Ján Jurík, who was behind its launch, is no longer involved in the running of the company. His son Zlatko took over with his wife Antonia and daughter Inés. Jurík Jr. is the company head and oversees everything, while his wife takes care of the products, packaging and recipes, and his daughter handles marketing.

The Poradca Podnikateľa family company in Žilina has been helping businesses to comprehend Slovak business legislation for more than 30 years. The company was launched by lawyer Maximilián Málík in 1990, when he was already 60 years old. Its current owner is his son Juraj Málík; the founder's grandchildren are also active in business. Their main task is to be a reliable shortcut to information and solutions for their clients, so that they can win their day-to-day struggles to keep their businesses running smoothly.

MORE FAMILY MEMBERS IN BUSINESS

"I don't know what could be a higher guarantee of quality than the name of



Slavomír Rusňák enriched his pension with wellness and a sandy beach.



Ján and Martin Kadlec from the OIL JPM company, which stands behind the Wywar brewery.

a particular person or the family itself. In our case, it is the names of several dozen people,” founder Marek Rakoš writes on the website of his family company, Rakystav.

More than half of the 75 workers in his company are members of his extended family or very good friends, including his father and mother, his wife, brother, uncles, cousins, brothers-in-law, godparents, neighbours and a few classmates.

Then there are interesting stories of companies with more than five relatives involved in the family business.

The Grafobal Group of Ivan Kmotřík has a wide area of business ranging from the production of packaging, print, the distribution of print and tobacco products, healthcare, sports, real estate and media. This is also reflected in the high number of family members from two generations involved in its management and operation – 11, including his daughter and son. This is the highest number within families that shared details about their business in the survey.

The main activity of Hotis Recycling Slovakia from Pezinok, one of the biggest waste management companies in Slovakia, is the collection, purchase, separation and processing of ferrous and non-ferrous metals. It has been operating on the market since 2004, and is owned by the siblings Fedor Hotový and Natália Nemcová. It has operations in Bratislava, Pezinok, Martin and Vrábce. Its clients include Volkswa-

gen Slovakia and ŽSR as well as several important customers from Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Slovenia. Out of two generations, as many as seven members work in the company.

Elektro-Haramia, from Lozorno in western Slovakia, nominated for the FéliX Business Award in the Exceptional Family Business category, has manufactured compact kiosk electrical substations and transformer stations for nearly three decades. Already members of two generations of the Haramia family have worked in the company, initially the father Ján and his sons Ján and Jozef. Ján Haramia, Jr. has already taken over the top post from his father. His sister Zuzana is helping to manage finances and administration. In total, seven family members work at the company.

The Košice-based Labaš company is the biggest local food wholesaler in Slovakia. In addition to wholesale, the company, named after its founder Miroslav Labaš, operates a retail network under the Fresh brand in eastern Slovakia. The company dates back to 1992, when Miroslav Labaš started trading in various food products from his parents' garage. Altogether, six members of the extended Labaš family, including his two sons Richard and Miroslav, are active in the family business.

Oil JPM, most known for the operation of four petrol stations in the Záhorie region, has extended its business with the construction of rental apartments, a restaurant, a biofarm, and a winery as well as a distillery. But the company's flagship, behind which stands the Kadlec family, is the Wywar craft brewery. The management has already been passed on from Ján Kadlec to his three sons – Ján, Peter and Martin – whose initials are also in the company's name. In total, six family members work at the company.

Other companies with six members of two generations working for their family companies are the Bratislava-based Triton Digital, which provides satellite and IP technology, and Bricol in Horné Srnie, western Slovakia. Owned by Peter Dobeš, the latter sells bottles for wine, spirits and beer, preserving glass, caps, lids and other glass products. The bottles they have on offer are imported from all over the world, but they make some from their own moulds in glassworks.

HAUERLAND: Bringing Your Brand to Life with Promotional Products

Hauerland, a Slovak family-owned business, has been a prominent player in the advertising products industry for 33 years. Founded by Anita and Eugen Hauerland, the company has grown from a small venture into a well-established family enterprise with deep-rooted traditions and extensive expertise in the import, production, and branding of promotional items.

With an impressive catalog of over 70,000 products, Hauerland ranks among the leading suppliers of promotional items in Slovakia and Central Europe. We specialize in helping companies enhance their brand presence through promotional items that not only attract new clients but also strengthen relationships with colleagues and business partners.

EXTENSIVE RANGE OF PROMOTIONAL ITEMS

Our wide selection of promotional products is designed to meet the needs of even the most discerning clients. Key categories include advertising items, printed textiles, calendars and diaries, Christmas products, signmaking, rollups, and more. All products are available in our user-friendly e-shop, where you can easily find and order exactly what you need.

„Today’s promotional items are sophisticated gifts that embrace sustainability, digitalization, and creativity,” says Diana Hauerland, CEO and second-generation leader of the Hauerland family business. Our modern, eco-friendly, and technologically advanced promotional items are highly sought after by companies year-round.

ADVERTISING TEXTILES AND PERSONALIZED PRODUCTS

One of our specialties is printed advertising textiles. Hauerland offers a wide range of customizable apparel, including t-shirts, hoodies, caps, and more, all featuring high-quality printing. These personalized products can significantly boost your brand’s visibility and presence.

CALENDARS AND DIARIES

Calendars and diaries are essential tools for corporate and personal planning. We offer a variety of customizable options, from elegant leather diaries to practical wall calendars, ensuring that you find the perfect solution for your needs.

CHRISTMAS PRODUCTS AND PROMOTIONAL GIFTS

As the holiday season approaches, our selection of Christmas products and



promotional gifts becomes particularly relevant. We continually expand our offerings to include a variety of gift items, sets, and products tailored to your needs.

„Our Christmas catalog is a highlight, featuring a curated selection of top products,” says Diana Hauerland. „It’s the perfect resource for selecting gifts and promotional items to thank your business partners, suppliers, colleagues, employees, and their families. We also emphasize supporting Slovak brands and promoting local products.”

SIGNMAKING AND ROLLUPS

Hauerland also excels in signmaking and rollup production, offering ideal solutions for presentations, exhibitions, and other events. Our high-quality, professionally crafted rollups with your branding make a lasting impression on every visitor. Additionally, we offer a range of corporate stationery, including business cards, notepads, and folders, all customizable with your logo.

COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

At Hauerland, we are committed to social responsibility. We partner with a sheltered workshop to provide employment opportunities for individuals with various health challenges. This collaboration allows us to offer alternative

performance solutions to our clients, helping them meet legal obligations related to employing disabled persons.

FAST DELIVERY AND EXPERT ADVICE

A key advantage of partnering with Hauerland Ltd. is our fast delivery service, often within 24 hours. We pride ourselves on offering exceptional personal service and expert advice. Our sales team is always ready to assist you in selecting the perfect gift set, drawing on their experience, current trends, and budget considerations. „Price is always a critical factor, which is why our offerings are segmented into various price ranges, ensuring that everyone can find something suitable,” adds Diana Hauerland.

CUSTOM-MADE SOLUTIONS

For clients seeking something truly unique, Hauerland offers bespoke solutions tailored to your specific ideas and requirements. Our team of experts is dedicated to creating custom products that perfectly align with your brand’s needs.

Hauerland Ltd. is a trusted partner for any company looking to enhance its visibility and strengthen its image through high-quality promotional products. With our extensive product range, fast delivery, and professional approach, our family-owned company is the ideal choice for effective and original advertising solutions.

CLIENT SUCCESS STORIES

What truly brings us joy is when our clients thank us for the success their promotional items have brought them. Their satisfaction is a testament to the impact of our products and services.

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Four brothers are the sixth generation of their family to run the business

Emanuele Preve:

A different way of doing business

THE SIXTH GENERATION OF THE FAMILY TO RUN RICE-PRODUCER RISO GALLO TOOK ON AN EXTERNAL CEO TO HELP MAKE DECISIONS – AND IT WORKED

Text: Jana Liptáková • **Photo:** Riso Gallo

As a member of the sixth generation of a family business, Emanuele Preve sees the Riso Gallo company as more than just something that provides him with an income.

"Its profitability isn't high and sometimes you think, well are there more profitable businesses? But on the other hand, money isn't everything," Preve, CFO and board member at Italian rice-producer Riso Gallo, told The Slovak Spectator.

What he and his brothers are trying to do, he explained, is to build up their company so that they can pass it on to the next generation in a better condition than when they took the reins themselves.

The Slovak Spectator spoke with Preve about what it means to be part of the sixth generation to manage a family business, why they hired an external CEO, and why, as an angel investor, he has invested in startups.

Do you still hold to the values the founders of the company had?

I don't know what values the founders had. The first document related to their business is from 1856. Since my grandfather managed the company, the values he left us are to adhere primarily to tradition and quality. My brothers and I are the sixth generation to run our family business. In terms of quality, my grandfather was the first to sell the same kind of rice in the north and the south of Italy. Before him, the rice sent to central and south Italy was of worse quality and was sold at a higher price. This

was very important for the company because people still remember this and thanks to this we have a good market share there, around 40 percent. We also keep a close eye on the quality of our sustainable rice. Two years ago, there was a drought which resulted in there being more cadmium in rice. There was a lot of fraud because a lot of companies were selling the rice even if its cadmium content was above the threshold set by law. After an analysis made by a newspaper, the results were that we and just one other company in all Europe were the only ones who did not have issues

with rice. The other thing is innovation. We have been bringing in new products, for example rice which is ready to eat in two minutes.

What is it like to be part of the sixth generation in charge of a family business?

Not easy. There is one thing that I remember that my brothers said after they returned from their university studies: that the company is not our possession, but has been given to us from our parents and that we should pass it on to our sons. It is not something that we really own, but something that we

Emanuele Preve

After obtaining a degree in Management Engineering at the Polytechnic University of Milan, he spent three years in Europe working and learning languages (Polaroid in Spain, Pirelli in the UK and Credit Agricole in France). Back in Italy, he worked at BMW in Network Development and later in Management, and in Administration and Controlling in IsapOmv (Verona), Riello Elettronica (Verona) and Giostyle (Bergamo).

In 2008 he joined Unicredit Corporate Banking in the CFO Department in Credit Evaluation (NPL) and subsequently became Vice-President of the Debt-to-Equity office of the Restructuring Department.

In 2013 he joined the family business of the Risogallo Group as Managing Director at its headquarters in Switzerland (Lugano), which oversees the Group's global activities, and as CFO of the Group.

He is a business angel for startups, and has made more than 40 investments.

He will be one of the speakers at the International Congress of Family Business in Chateau Béla, southern Slovakia, on September 19 and 20.

have to, hopefully, pass on in a better condition to the next generation.

Have you ever considered a different career?

I am 50 now, but I joined the company just 10 years ago when my father asked me to join, to improve the company's financial accounting department. Until then I had worked outside our family business, for BMW and then for Unicredit, for example. I considered continuing my career outside the family business, but in the end I decided it was something that was ours, and it would be better to try it. It was an interesting period to join. I have four sons – we are four brothers and together we have 11 nephews – that cannot rely on being able to work in the family business because one of our rules is that only one member of each branch of the family can work in the company and as long we have only one business – rice – we cannot have too many people from the family working there.

Do your brothers work at the company too?

The oldest one is head of commercial and marketing. I'm the middle child and I am in finance and accounting. The third of us is head of operations, and the fourth is president of the board, but has a non-executive function – he works outside the company. Our father passed away a year ago.

How do you take decisions when you cannot reach a consensus?

This is why we took on an external CEO, because we were not able to take some decisions. One of the things that my father wanted, after the problems he had with his brothers, was for us to not fight between each other about any decision. The problem was that there was always someone who didn't support some decisions and so we postponed them. The risk was that in the end some decisions could have been taken based more on emotions than business. At one point we said, well, we cannot continue like this because the company has to take a decision and so we hired an external CEO. With him, making decisions becomes more of a business issue, with the emotions removed. This person is quite good at managing all these things. This helps us to grow.

Does your company have a succession plan or a family codex?

There are some rules that we have put into our bylaws. For example, you have to work at least three years outside the company and you have to speak at least four languages. And the role that you take on when you join the company is a role that is needed by the company. It's not a situation where, for instance, I've studied engineering, but I like marketing, so I go and do marketing. When it comes to the next generation we will probably have to make some rules, like set up a committee to evaluate each person. That's something that we will probably have to manage in the future.

What do you get out of working for a family business?

We, my brothers and I, have always said that Riso Gallo is like a fifth brother. As I said before, it is not something that we just have to manage – we have to pass it on in a better condition. This is stimulating. We also take a longer-term view of it – what needs to be done in the next five or ten years, not just in the next

Riso Gallo

One of the oldest rice-producing companies in Italy. Founded in 1856 by Giobatta Preve, it initially traded grains between Argentina and Italy; soon after, a factory was opened in Argentina to meet demand in the South American market.

Its success and growing experience led the company to concentrate on Italian crops, and so in 1926 the Genoa factory was transferred to Robbio Lomellina in the heart of the province of Pavia, a well-known rice-growing region.

In the 1940s, the company's rooster symbol was created. Since illiteracy was still widespread in Argentina, the company decided to identify the different varieties of rice by using images of animals. The rooster ('gallo' in Italian), which marked the best risotto variety, soon became the company's symbol and synonymous with the high quality of its products. At the same time, the firm began to sell rice in retail packets.

Until the fifth generation, the company was in the hands of two families and was called Frugone & Preve. The Preve family then bought out the Frugone family's share and renamed the company Riso Gallo.

quarter, or year. It's a different way of looking at a business.

Why did you decide to invest in startups?

Ten years ago, when I joined the family business, my idea was to invest part of the family business's liquidity in a new business related to rice, because it was a chance to give the next generation some different opportunities. But at the time the rest of the family didn't have the same ideas and also the liquidity wasn't so high. So I decided to do it myself, to give this opportunity to my family, and I've invested in startups. In the last years we began to invest also as a company, we invested in four startups related to our business. Generally it's very good because on one hand you speak with a person that is knowledgeable in many fields, so it's very stimulating and interesting, and you work with young people. At the same time, you help them grow while helping them to manage their cash, contacts and so on.

Managing Family Property: When

Efficient family wealth management is provided through holding and (trust) fund structures. The standard in developed countries in the West is the management of family property through trusts, which are markedly absent in the Slovak Republic. However, the effective management of family property can still be achieved by a suitably set holding structure, which includes implemented instruments from abroad. Several foreign instruments are available, such as the Liechtenstein family foundation or Anglo-Saxon family trusts. In this article, we will present two main instruments from the Czech Republic – trust and endowment funds – which are sought after by Slovak families because of their geographical proximity, lack of language barriers, historical affinity, and comparable costs of living.

In the Czech Republic, the recodification of civil law introduced trusts and endowment funds to promote more successful management of family property. In the Slovak Republic, efforts were made to introduce similar instruments in 2023, but the proposed changes were not adopted by parliament. For this reason, many Slovak family businesses are implementing Czech instruments into their holding structure and are thus able to benefit from the synergy of both legislations.

AN APPROPRIATE LEGAL ENTITY FOR THE HOLDING

In Slovakia, the suitable legal forms for a holding's parent company are a limited liability company, a joint-stock company, or a simple joint-stock company. With

in all three companies, it is possible to achieve a modification of the shares so that a primary voting or profit right is associated with a particular share. The Slovak law provides for a relatively wide possibility of the modification of rights and obligations.

A simple joint-stock company has the most flexible regulation of modification of rights and obligations. This is because it can exclude some rights associated with shares completely, can issue several types of shares with special rights, and can issue so-called employee shares (also for sole traders under certain conditions). It is also possible to limit or exclude the transferability of shares. Shareholders may also hold more than one type of share within a joint-stock company and a simple joint-stock company. Thus, for example, if one of the siblings is active in the company, they may hold shares that carry voting rights in addition to a share in the profits.

Unlike a joint-stock company, a shareholder in a limited liability company cannot hold multiple shares. If the rights and obligations, with respect to the shares, are to be modified in the future, the entire wording of the articles of association will have to be amended with the consent of all shareholders concerned. Therefore, with an unprofessional structure, a problem may arise in more or less anticipated situations in the future that will require a new arrangement of the relationships within the company.

As indicated in the introduction, despite the above-mentioned possibility of the modification of business shares and the issuance of



JUDr. Jakub Hollmann, Ph.D.,
Owner at PORTOS, Law Firm and CCS PREMIUM TRUST

several types of shares, Slovak legislation does not regulate instruments that explicitly serve the management of family property. This makes them insufficient in certain situations, mainly when there are issues with establishing interrelationships within the family. On account of these issues, it is advisable to incorporate Czech trust and endowment funds into the holding structure, within which family relationships are set up. This is especially useful for making decisions on the management of the family business. At the same time, they offer a wide degree of freedom. This eases the setting of various conditions and restrictions, un-

der which all members will benefit from the proceeds of family assets, even if they have not actively participated in its management.

THE USE OF CZECH TRUST/ENDOWMENT FUNDS FOR SLOVAK FAMILIES

As aforementioned, the Czech legal system offers two variants, namely trusts and endowment funds. Different assets can be placed in both legal forms, spanning from real estate and financial resources to family businesses, patents, or copyright income. These assets, which are highly valuable to the family, can be professionally managed, protected, effectively used, and preserved for future generations.

Slovak Legislation is Not Enough



JUDr. Ján Falath,
Owner at FALATH & PARTNERS, Law Firm

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TRUST AND AN ENDOWMENT FUND?

In the Czech legal system, following the example of legislation in Quebec and Lichtenstein, trusts are characterized by the absence of legal subjectivity. Endowment funds, on the other hand, function as legal entities with legal subjectivity. Endowment funds, which were originally aimed at supporting charitable and public benefit activities, have been increasingly used in recent years to manage family and business assets. Both entities allow similar objectives to be achieved and offer a high degree of flexibility. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details, which is why

the choice of the optimal structure and its internal set-up must always be tailored to the client's needs.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF SETTING UP A TRUST, AND WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

The whole process of setting up an entity starts with an individual consultation, during which the client's intentions and ideas are discussed in detail. Based on the information gathered from the consultation, an assessment of selected areas is conducted to identify the most appropriate form of entity. In addition to setting up the entity, a proposed timetable for the contribution of assets is also presented. When initiating the process, it is crucial to

examine it comprehensively and take into consideration all legal, tax, and accounting aspects. This is especially true for Slovak families.

Once the proposed option is approved, the implementation phase follows, during which the incorporation documentation is created to achieve the objectives set by the client. Detailed documentation is then drafted that covers the maximum possible range of life situations and contains the key to their solution. However, cooperation with the client does not end after the successful creation of the entity. Further professional advice follows, including, for example, the preparation or revision of contractual documentation, professional supervision of the entity's operation, and other related services to ensure its smooth operation and the realization of all asset deposits.

ADVANTAGES OF OFFSHORE ASSET MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

There are several key reasons why Slovak families should think about setting up a trust/fund structure. Among them are:

- the diversification of risks at an international level, allowing risks to be spread across different geographic areas and economic systems;
- the protection of the privacy of the family and future generations;
- streamlining the management of the asset portfolio by exploiting the maximum possible degree of asset synergy;
- protecting assets from external influences or business failures of future generations.

When the optimal setup is achieved, the benefits achieved overlap, and the client is not faced with having to choose whether to protect their family or increase the business' efficiency. Another advantage for Slovak families is the diversification of risks related to the geopolitical situation.

CONCLUSION

Even though Slovak legislation does not offer the instruments to ensure effective intergenerational transfer and preservation of assets across generations, Slovak families need not despair. Czech trusts or endowment funds are the instruments that can be implemented and will protect the family and their assets from (potential) risks and ensure unity in the future. Both instruments are characterized by their considerable flexibility and, if set up optimally, can help achieve a variety of objectives. However, nothing should be rushed. The detailed set-up of the founding documentation must be given due attention in terms of legal, tax, and accounting aspects. It is, therefore, advisable to cooperate with experts with the necessary experience and qualities.



FALATH
& PARTNERS



They thought the email from the FT was spam

THE GARDEON BUSINESS OF THE CHOLEVA BROTHERS IS A EUROPEAN LEADER

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klčo



Marek and Martin Choleva from the Gardeon company.

Gardeon, a family-owned company from Turčiansky Ľub in northern Slovakia, has achieved notable success in the European market, earning recognition by its inclusion on The Financial Times' list of the thousand fastest-growing companies in Europe. With revenue growth of 60 percent between 2019 and 2022, Gardeon ranked 510th on the list.

Founded by brothers Marek and Martin Choleva, Gardeon specialises in prefabricated garages, garden sheds,

and carports.

"We didn't invent rocket science," says Martin Choleva. "We sell useful products. People will need them today, tomorrow, even a hundred years from now."

HOME-TOWN ENTREPRENEURS

The business has humble origins, tracing back to 1994 when their father, Marián Choleva, started a car repair shop in a small home garage. The Choleva brothers began their entrepreneurial journey in 2007, exper-

imenting with various ventures like selling donuts and running an online bike shop. Their breakthrough came in 2010 after discovering prefabricated garages at a German trade fair. They quickly recognised the potential of these structures, which were relatively unknown in Slovakia.

Gardeon's growth was slow at first, with only 10 garages sold in their first year. The brothers handled all operations from their family home, learning valuable lessons along the way.

"The essence of business is in constantly solving problems. Once you solve one, another pops up," says Marek Choleva.

Their dedication paid off as they transitioned from a small, self-employment business to a limited liability company, eventually rebranding as Gardeon.

One key to their success has been their innovative use of technology. They developed a web configurator that allows customers to customise their garages and sheds online, which gave them a competitive edge. They have also expanded their operations internationally, entering markets in Austria and the Czech Republic. Austria alone accounts for about €2 million in sales, approximately one-fifth of their total revenue.

The pandemic further accelerated Gardeon's growth, as people invested more in home improvements. However, the company faced challenges like longer delivery times from its Polish supplier, requiring Gardeon to hire additional staff and optimise its processes. To maintain momentum, it is now focusing on two strategic plans: establishing a foothold in Germany and further expanding into the Benelux countries, and launching an online store with ready-to-ship products, similar to a car dealership model.

The FéliX Business Award

The Gardeon company has been nominated, along with the companies Tomark, Elektro-Haramia and Telegrafia, for the fourth FéliX Business Award in the category of Exceptional Family Business.

The FéliX Business Award is a business award given out by Index magazine and Slovenská Sporiteľňa bank in cooperation with partners. It is awarded to inspiring and socially responsible companies and municipalities for activities that contribute to the prosperity and modernity of Slovakia. The winners will be announced in Bratislava on October 24.

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PRESSBURG MINT'S UNIQUE PRODUCTION CAPTIVATES AMERICA

The family-owned Pressburg Mint has gained international recognition for its unique designs, pioneering innovations, and cutting-edge technologies. A prime example of this success was seen at the World's Fair of Money in Chicago, where both industry professionals and the general public were captivated by their groundbreaking use of 3D metal printing technology, with precious metals. Pressburg Mint has made history as the first mint in the world to use 3D printing in the production of silver items.



Innovation is at the heart of Pressburg Mint's identity. Following last year's release of the first AI-designed coin, this private Slovak mint has once again pushed the boundaries of what is possible by showcasing their latest advancement—3D metal printing. This state-of-the-art technology, developed over several years in collaboration with experts from leading European and American scientific institutes, has enabled the creation of silver coins, statuettes, and jewelry using a proprietary metallurgical process exclusive to Pressburg Mint.

„Our goal is to be instantly recognizable. When someone sees our iconic design series such as Chronos or Vivat Humanitas coins, they immediately know it's our work. Beyond our established reputation in the production of silver and gold coins and bars, we aim to demonstrate that Pressburg Mint is a leader in innovation. That's why we introduced revolutionary 3D metal printing, which allows us to create high-relief coins with unique shapes, as well as statuettes, jewelry, and personalized precious metals items for both individual customers and businesses,” says Alan Behul, General Manager of Pressburg Mint.

This groundbreaking technology was showcased by the Slovakian company at the World's Fair of

Money in Chicago this past August. Their next showcase will be at the World Money Fair in Berlin, scheduled for January 30 to February 1, 2025.

„The fair is an opportunity to present our unique design series to the public, along with the innovations and cutting-edge technologies we are developing. It also serves as a platform for businesses to discover the benefits of investing in silver and gold through our investment coins and bars. Additionally, we offer personalized coins that make for beautiful mementos of special anniversaries, awards, or celebrations,” Behul adds.

Pressburg Mint is a private Slovak mint that has revived the centuries-old tradition of minting in Bratislava, after more than 300 years. As one of the few private mints in the world, it serves clients globally, with a strong presence in the USA, Western Europe, and East Asia. In addition to producing its own product lines, Pressburg Mint has been creating items for other mints for several years. While honoring historical traditions, the mint utilizes the latest technology and innovative design to produce coins that not only serve as valuable investments



but also as works of art with significant collector value. The recent fair in the USA highlighted the popularity of Pressburg Mint's collections, particularly the Maltese Cross done in cooperation with the Central Bank of Malta, ICON, CHRONOS, VIVAT HUMANITAS, and EQUILIBRIUM series, as well as the AI COIN series, which has garnered global interest and secured the Slovak Mint's leading position in the industry.

For more information, visit
[www.pressburgmint.com]
(<https://.pressburgmint.com>).



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Chassis for Germany and planes for the entire world

TOMARK, A FAMILY BUSINESS FROM PREŠOV, HAS MADE ITS MARK ON THE MARKET

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klčo

Tomark, a Prešov-based engineering company, is a respected player in Slovakia's industrial sector, largely due to its resilience during the 2008-09 economic crisis. Founded by Daniel Tomko Sr. and his son, Daniel Tomko Jr., the family business faced severe challenges, including layoffs, dwindling orders, and lack of bank support. This difficult period pushed the Tomkos to rethink their strategy, leading to investments in modern technologies and innovative products. They also ventured into aeroplane production, a segment so successful that demand now exceeds their capacity. Despite branching into aviation, Tomark's core business remains in traditional engineering, particularly in producing welded parts. The company has been a key supplier of chassis and frames for Krone truck trailers for nearly 30 years. This partnership began in the 1990s when Tomko Sr. worked as a production director

at Strojstav, which collaborated with Krone. After Strojstav's privatisation, Tomko Sr. swiftly established Tomark, offering Krone a new factory and a steady supply of parts. Today, Tomark produces 850 chassis per month, with fully loaded trucks regularly dispatched to Germany.

CYCLICAL SECTOR

However, this success comes with risks. The truck chassis sector is highly cyclical, and closely tied to the German economy. During the 2008-09 crisis, Krone provided Tomark with long-term orders, helping them weather the downturn. Last year, Tomark faced a similar slowdown due to a technical recession in Germany, coupled with rising energy costs and the uncertainty of the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, signs of recovery are emerging. "It seems that the German economy has bounced from the bottom," says Tomko Jr., who is optimistic about renewed growth.

SUCCESSFUL AVIATION BUSINESS

Tomko Jr. took over the family business in 2020, smoothly transitioning after working for over 20 years in various roles. His father, who is now less involved in daily operations, enjoys flying, a passion that led to the creation of Tomark Aero in 2009. This subsidiary focuses on developing and producing light aircraft like the Viper SD4 and Skyper GT9. While aviation remains a smaller part of Tomark's business, it has garnered significant interest, especially in Europe and the USA. The company even plans to expand its production capacity to meet growing demand, with orders booked until mid-2026.

Tomark is also exploring new opportunities, such as developing a vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft powered by hydrogen, aligning with the European Union's green initiatives. The project, supported by the European Commission, is expected to take six years to develop, marking another innovative step for the company.

© TSS



Daniel Tomko Jr. with his father Daniel Tomko from Tomark.



The head of the company Ján Haramia Jr., founder Ján Haramia and sister Zuzana Bystroňová, from left.

How a company from Záhorie built a successful business

THE GENERATIONAL EXCHANGE AT ELEKTRO-HARAMIA WENT SMOOTHLY

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klčo

Before constructing a block of flats, a logistics park or a shopping centre, electricity must be brought to the plot. This is the point when small houses made of concrete, or kiosk transformer stations, appear at the construction site. For nearly three decades, these have been the speciality of the family company Elektro-Haramia from Lozorno in the Záhorie region, not far from Bratislava.

“During these years, we have become something like a Mercedes in the segment,” said Ján Haramia Jr, the company’s CEO. “We don’t have any sales department; the business works on references, but we aren’t short of new orders.”

The core of its business lies in its founders’ family, who managed to turn it into one of the biggest players on the market thanks to their own skills. Meanwhile, the company employs about a dozen family members.

THREE GENERATIONS

The Haramia family’s expertise in electrical work spans three genera-

tions, beginning with Ján Haramia Sr., who worked as a power engineer during the communist era. After the regime’s fall, his sons Ján and Jozef launched their own business, initially focusing on electrical installations and repairs. A significant turning point came in 1997, when they decided to produce their own transformer stations, meeting the rising demand driven by Slovakia’s booming construction industry.

Their business expanded rapidly, moving from garage operations to a dedicated facility in Lozorno. Today, Elektro-Haramia is the only licensed partner of Schneider Electric in Slovakia, supplying high-voltage switchboards and other essential components.

The growing demand for electrification, driven by the rise of electric vehicles and renewable energy sources, has ensured a steady stream of orders. The company’s transformer stations can be found across Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well as in Hungary, the Netherlands, and beyond. They have worked on significant projects like the Kia car plant near Žilina and

the residential development project Slnecnice in Bratislava.

In early 2020, a smooth generational transition saw Ján Haramia Jr. take over the business from his father, who now enjoys his retirement, focusing on his vintage car museum. The company continues to thrive under Ján Jr.’s leadership, with his sister Zuzana managing finances and administration. About a dozen family members are actively involved in the business, alongside 60 full-time employees.

A RECORD-HIGH INVESTMENT

Recognising the need for expansion, Ján Jr. initiated a record €7-million investment in a new, state-of-the-art production hall in Zohor, western Slovakia. This 5,000-square-metre facility will feature an in-house concrete plant and increased automation, allowing for year-round production. The expansion marks a significant milestone for Elektro-Haramia, positioning the company to meet growing demand while maintaining its high standards of quality and innovation.

© TSS

How two Košice brothers made it to the top

TELEGRAFIA ALARM SYSTEMS WARN PEOPLE OF FLOODS AND EARTHQUAKES

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klčo

Telegrafia, a family-owned company from Košice, Eastern Slovakia, is a global leader in developing voice sirens for alert systems. These systems are crucial for warning people about critical situations in both municipalities and industrial settings. Founded by brothers Peter and Štefan Marčák, the company focuses primarily on international markets, with its sirens deployed in 96 countries, including the USA, India and various European nations.

"We supply big alert systems with dozens to hundreds of sirens, but we also have small projects where their number is in single digits," said CEO Peter Marčák.

GABČÍKOVO AS A GAME CHANGER

The company's turning point came in 2006 when it won a public procurement contract for the Gabčíkovo dam's alert system. This project marked Telegrafia's entry into the alert systems market. Initially, they imported sirens from Germany, but soon began producing their

own, leveraging their experience in radio controls and electronics.

Telegrafia's sirens consist of two main components: the horn, usually installed on rooftops or columns, and the siren box, which houses electronic modules responsible for the siren's operation. The electronics are developed in Košice, while production is outsourced to suppliers, including CRT Electronics in Orava, Slovakia.

The company's sirens serve a wide range of applications, from natural disaster warnings like tsunamis and floods to industrial alerts in airports, quarries and mines. Latin America is their largest market, driven by stringent new safety regulations following disasters in Brazil, such as the 2019 Brumadinho dam collapse that claimed 270 lives.

These incidents led Brazil to mandate the installation of reliable alert systems in mining operations, providing significant business opportunities for Telegrafia.

"Sometimes, big projects in India pop up, and other times it's Germany or other parts of the world," noted Štefan Marčák, who handles the company's business ac-

tivities. Telegrafia often acts as a subcontractor in large-scale international projects, working through local business partners who are familiar with the markets. The company's alert systems can be remotely serviced or repaired by these partners, which is essential for global operations.

"If we were the only ones able to repair them, we could only offer them within a few hundred kilometres from Košice, not the entire world," said Štefan.

In 2022, Telegrafia's revenue reached €21 million, with a significant profit of €3.2 million.

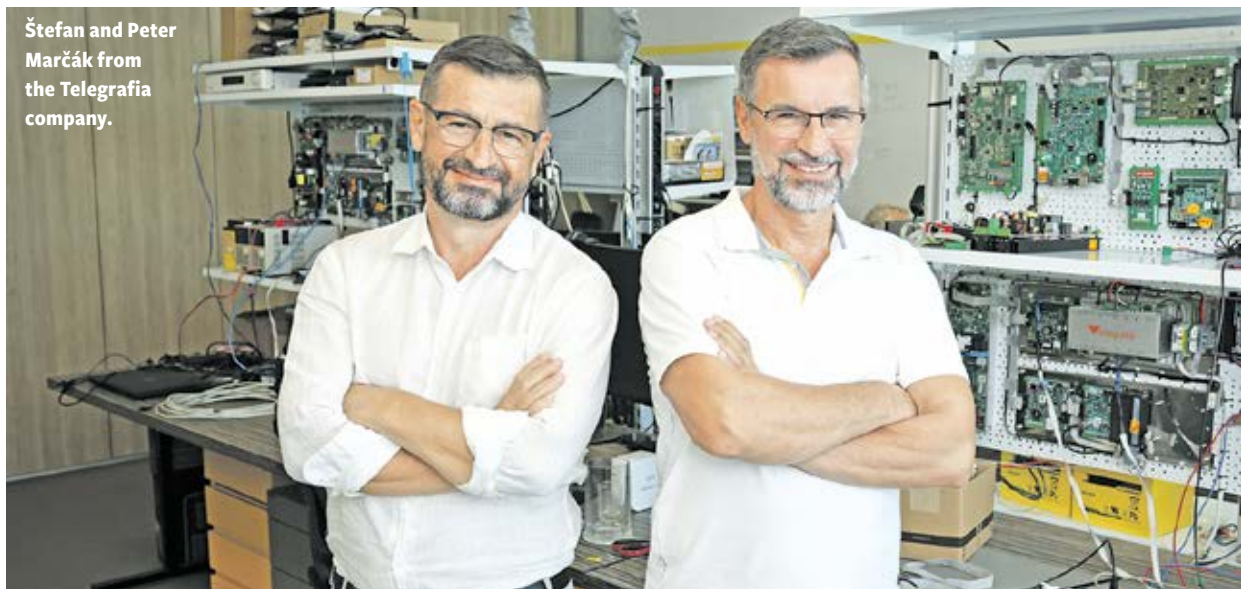
GLOBAL RESEARCH

Its strategic global expansion began 15 years ago with an internal project, which involved researching potential markets with the help of international students.

As the company grows, the Marčák brothers are considering a generational transition in management.

"We haven't finalised it yet, and we'll see whether someone from the family or people from within the company will be our successors," Štefan concluded. **© TSS**

Štefan and Peter Marčák from the Telegrafia company.



Atypical bottles reflect the character of business's owner

Bricol, a family firm, has been serving big and small clients alike for 34 years



Skalická Rotunda is a bottle shaped like the iconic St. George's Rotunda of Skalica, a symbol of the historical western Slovak town that is also known for its traditional trdelník pastry. It goes well with the local Skalický Rubín ("Skalica's Ruby") wine. Bricol, a company with over three decades of experience, designed the striking bottle to celebrate the wine's local heritage, leaving no doubt about where it originates from.

"Skalická Rotunda is one of our proudest bottle designs. Created especially for winemaker Alojz Masaryk, it perfectly embodies the spirit of Skalica," says Peter Dobeš, co-founder of Bricol.

Bricol, founded by Dobeš and his wife Zuzana, has been serving clients with innovative glass packaging solutions for 34 years. Glass is infinitely recyclable, making it the ideal material for those seeking both sustainability and luxury. It also allows for the creation of bespoke, uniquely shaped bottles that reflect the personality and vision of their owners.

"Whether you need a single bottle or thousands, we are here to meet your needs," Peter Dobeš emphasises. Bricol's comprehensive service, offering custom designs and in-stock items, has been key to their success.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: FROM GARAGE TO GLASS EMPIRE

Bricol started in 1991, out of a garage, initially selling clothes and later wine. While sourcing wine from small winemakers, Peter Dobeš noticed a growing demand for bottles. With both his parents having worked in the glassworks at Nemošová, near Trenčín, he saw an opportunity. At first, they traded by buying bottles at the glassworks and taking them to customers. As

demand grew, they expanded into a warehouse to meet the needs of a growing clientele. They gradually extended their range by the addition of atypical bottles and glass containers of all kinds. They looked at different manufacturers in Austria and Germany, and later in Italy. Then they purchased a new warehouse and moved in. Later they refurbished and extended it.

Today, the company, which operates in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia, stocks more than 2,000 types of bottles and jars for immediate delivery to customers.

They cater to large companies as well as small businesses and individuals, even offering individual bottles for those who need just a few.

From uniquely-shaped bottles to dark glass containers designed to preserve herbal remedies, Bricol's offerings are vast. One standout is their honey jar, designed with straight sides for easy extraction and featuring a honeycomb motif on the base, complete with a bee emblem.

"Our biggest advantage is having products in stock, ready for immediate purchase. What customers see in our store, they can buy right away," Peter Dobeš explains.

TAILORED SOLUTIONS FOR EVERY CUSTOMER

Bricol has taken customisation to the next level, offering tailored advice and design services. Whether it is a special surface treatment – paint, matte finish, or unique motifs – they meet the specific needs of gardeners, hunters, fishermen and other niche markets. Custom logo-engraved bottles are especially popular for corporate gifts and presentations.

For those seeking something truly unique,

Bricol collaborates with designers to create custom bottles at select glassworks, ensuring each customer's vision becomes a reality.

"Such a bottle is hard to miss on the shelf," says Peter Dobeš.

MILESTONES

- 1991** – business launches
- 1993** – rental of first warehouse
- 1993** – launch of the Czech arm, Bricol-M, in Valtice
- 1997** – purchase of the warehouse
- 1998** – launch of tailored bottle designs for clients
- 2010** – office building is constructed

BRICOL

Established in 1991

Offices in Slovakia: **Horné Srnie**

Employees: **20 in Slovakia, up to 20 in the Czech Republic**

Revenues (2023): **€8.2 million**

Range of services: **sale of bottles for wine, spirits, beer, preserving glass, caps, lids, sales from one piece to full production in the glassworks**



Dolinská 27/7, 914 42 Horné Srnie, Slovakia
+421 32 65 88 328 | bricol@bricol.sk
www.bricol.sk

A photograph of Martina Šimkovičová and Lukáš Machal at a press conference. Martina Šimkovičová, on the right, is a blonde woman with long hair, wearing a colorful patterned blouse and multiple bracelets, smiling and touching her hair. Lukáš Machal, on the left, is a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and tie, looking towards the camera. They are standing in front of a backdrop with logos and text.

**Martina Šimkovičová
and Lukáš Machal
hold a press
conference in
Bratislava on August
15, 2024.**

Relentless purges: **A tumultuous summer for Slovak culture**

*THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP OF THE CULTURE MINISTRY
IS WAGING WAR ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE – TO ‘SAVE’
SLOVAK CULTURE, THEY CLAIM*

Text: Peter Dlhopolec • Photo: Sme – Marko Erd

Two days after a second petition demanding the dismissal of Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová garnered 125,000 signatures in just 48 hours in August, she received an unexpected show of support – a song.

Posted by a disinformation site and shared on Šimkovičová's own disinformation Facebook page, the tune opens with the phrase, “Martina is a minister, still protecting culture”. The page is co-managed with her close ally, Peter Kotlár, a nationalist MP and vocal anti-vaccine advocate who chairs the commission tasked with investigating the previous administration's alleged mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. For the past 11 months, resistance to the minister has steadily mounted after she dismissed several directors of cultural institutions under her ministry, as well

as ministry employees, without any clear justification. The ministry has also taken control of independent cultural funds, and criticised and threatened artists, all in an effort to implement a vision outlined by the minister last November.

“Slovak culture must be Slovak and nothing else. We tolerate other cultures, but ours is not a mixture of others,” Šimkovičová said, overlooking the fact that Slovak culture has been shaped by other influences for centuries.

The song on Facebook was not the only sign of support Šimkovičová appeared to garner. On August 20, a week after mass public protests erupted in mid-August against the minister and her pro-Putin chief of staff, Lukáš Machala – who is also a chemtrails conspiracy theorist and is open to the idea that the Earth may be flat – cardboard post-

ers appeared in the windows of the Culture Ministry in central Bratislava. The posters, emblazoned with the message “We support Minister M. Šimkovičová and L. Machala,” were purportedly signed by ministry employees. However, according to the Denník N daily, the posters were actually placed there by Machala himself, along with Peter Grutka, a senior official within the ministry, without employees' knowledge. Grutka also serves on the board of the Slovak Arts Council, a public body that was once independent but is now under the control of the ministry. It is responsible for distributing funding for cultural projects. The posters coincided with a then ongoing relay protest against the minister and Machala by artists outside the Culture Ministry, dubbed the Slovak Cultural Uprising – a nod to the 1944 anti-Nazi Slovak National Upris-

ing (SNP), commemorated annually on August 29.

“When those posters appeared in the window, my colleagues and I had already been fired,” an unnamed former ministry employee told Denník N. On the day the posters appeared, the ministry reportedly dismissed several employees.

PURGES AT THE CULTURE MINISTRY

Nearly half of the staff at Slovakia's Culture Ministry are estimated to have been dismissed in recent months. On August 20, for instance, the Otvorená Kultúra (Open Culture) initiative reported that 30 experts had been fired in the course of just two days.

More recently, on September 1, the ministry dissolved its creativity and education department, laying off the staff without providing any explanation – an action it currently has the authority to take. On the same day, it also shuttered the Cultural Policy Institute, its analytical centre, mirroring similar “cost-cutting moves” by other ministries. Yet, according to Marcel Čas, the former head of the now-abolished institute, the closure wasn't solely about saving money. He told the *Sme* daily that Machala has plans to conduct analyses “differently”. “The Culture Ministry is entering a state of crisis,” warned Marek Maďarič, a former culture minister for the Smer party who served under Prime Minister Robert Fico, during a recent debate.

Trade union members within the ministry have expressed outrage at the dismissals, accusing the leadership of ousting experts and analysts for personal reasons, as noted in an August letter to Machala. “You are proposing to terminate the contracts of professionals who reported issues of harassment or inefficient management to their superiors,” they wrote. They also criticised the ministry for poor communication. Machala had threatened to fire anyone who would go against him or the minister. According to Čas and other former employees, the fear of dismissal still looms large, paralysing standard processes within the ministry.

“No one makes autonomous decisions anymore because everyone is afraid of how one person [i.e. Machala – Ed.] will wake up feeling,” he told Denník N, describing Machala as a person who has the final say in everything at the ministry.

Minister Šimkovičová, a notorious homophobe with anti-migrant views, appears unfazed. As her ministry was dismantling departments, she was focused on realising her central vision: the promotion and protection of traditional Slovak culture. She marked the Slovak Day of Kroj, an event celebrating traditional folk costumes, on the first day of September.

“I am immensely proud of our traditions and culture, which are the pillars of our national identity,” she said.

DEMOLITION, YET AGAIN

Minister Šimkovičová and her right-hand man, Machala, often appear as an inseparable duo at occasional press conferences where no questions are allowed, a pattern echoed in the disinformation media. After dismissing the directors of the national library and the Bibiana gallery for children's art – the latter is now headed by Šimkovičová's friend, Petra Flach, following a non-public selection process – they turned their sights over the summer upon two of Slovakia's flagship cultural institutions: the Slovak National Theatre (SND) and the Slovak National Gallery (SNG). Šimkovičová removed her critics Matej Drlička, the theatre's director, and Alexandra Kusá, the gallery's head. “This is not about personnel changes,” Machala said in August, framing the conflict in broader terms. “The essence of this battle, which we've been fighting since the start of our mission, is about the future of Slovak culture.” He criticised liberalism and progressivism, which he views as threats. “We see ourselves as Slovaks, but also as Europeans. However, we will protect our traditional values and steer back towards normalcy. We will not support anything that strays from that norm.”

Šimkovičová, who over the summer accused the LGBT+ community of contributing to Europe's decline, and Machala defended their decisions to dismiss the two directors, citing alleged managerial failures. Drlička, who had compared the pair to “two runaway train cars”, was blamed for the collapse of a chandelier onto the national theatre stage and the dismissal of the national ballet director, Nina Poláková, whom employees had accused of bullying. In Kusá's case, the pair cited her alleged neglect of Slovak artists, the absence of a Slovak flag on the gallery building,

and a supposed conflict of interest in the gallery's renovation, which had involved her father's architectural firm. Previous culture ministers had found no conflict of interest, as the renovation contract had been signed by Kusá's predecessor.

“The reasons given by the ministry for my dismissal insult not only me but all those who have worked to advance the gallery,” Kusá said.

Despite seizing control of independent cultural funds, purging cultural institutions, accusing artists of political activism, and attacking an NGO promoting democracy and multiculturalism – targeted for its activities and because it carries the name of opposition leader Michal Šimečka's grandfather – Šimkovičová and Machala weathered summer protests and two parliamentary attempts to remove them. Prime Minister Robert Fico is standing by Šimkovičová, defending her support for Slovak national culture, “not the culture of transsexuals, perversions and vulgarity”, as he described it. He referred to the latest dismissals as routine managerial decisions.

What unfolded over the summer is not unprecedented. In summer 1996, the then culture minister Ivan Hudec, a former communist, similarly dismissed the director of the national theatre, among other things. Artists protested and thousands rallied, yet Hudec remained in office.

Today, the cultural sector also remains resolute. On September 5, the Open Culture initiative declared a “cultural strike” in response to actions by the ministry in recent months. Participating organisations have entered a state of alert and have not ruled out the possibility of a full-scale strike.

Former Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová recently likened the current situation in the cultural sector to “demolition”. Rumours persist that more directors of cultural institutions will be ousted for holding views at odds with those of Machala and Šimkovičová. Others fear censorship in the national gallery or the national theatre's drama department. Former culture minister Maďarič warns that Šimkovičová and Machala won't back down until they've won.

“It's their desire to win a battle they've declared against contemporary culture, which they see as the enemy,” Maďarič said.

Shadow culture minister: **Even coalition MPs say Šimkovičová is terrible**

*REMOVING THE CULTURE MINISTER WILL BE TRICKY,
NOTES LIBERAL MP ZORA JAUROVÁ*

Text: Oscar Brophy • Photo: TASR, Sme – Jozef Jakubčo



A protest march in SNP Square in Bratislava on August 12. Protesters demanded the resignation or dismissal of Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová (an SNS nominee) and her chief of staff, Lukáš Machala.

Zora Jaurová, the shadow culture minister and Progressive Slovakia MP, has been involved in Slovak culture for more than two decades. Today, with the Culture Ministry headed by Martina Šimkovičová, a prominent figure in Slovakia's disinformation media scene as well as a former TV news and sports anchor, Jaurová does not hold back in her criticism.

What is your response to what's going on at the Culture Ministry and what

is happening in Slovak culture, including apparent purges at some of the major cultural institutions?

Well, the short answer is that the situation is terrible. The longer answer is that, having followed the Slovak cultural sector and its policies for over 20 years, I can say it has faced severe challenges over the decades. However, the current state of despair and incompetence in the sector seems unprecedented, even compared to the Vladimír Mečiar era in the nineties. It strikes me as both arrogant and cynical that the

Slovak National Party [SNS] appointed Martina Šimkovičová to the Culture Ministry, given her evident lack of capability for the role. Just three months after her appointment, a petition with 189,000 signatures was launched calling for her dismissal. Now, 11 months into her tenure, the damage is substantial. The cultural sector is in complete disarray, which is detrimental not only to the country and the sector itself, but also to the voters of the governing party who are cultural workers or audiences. We'll see what happens in the autumn,

but I find it hard to believe that she can remain in this position for another three years.

There was an extraordinary August session of parliament that was called by your party, Progressive Slovakia, to try and call a vote of no confidence in the minister, but the government parties Smer, SNS and Hlas didn't show up to the session.

Some MPs from Hlas did show up, but they did not participate in the vote. A few were present in the auditorium, which seems to signal something interesting about the current government dynamics.

So some Hlas MPs are more sympathetic to the view that Šimkovičová should be removed?

When we talk to MPs from the ruling coalition, they all say she's horrible. It's like nobody who sees things really as they are in reality can say she is doing well. However, there are a lot of political reasons why it is difficult to remove her.

Have you met her?

We've never been formally introduced or had any meetings. I've only seen her in parliament, but we've never had a conversation. She avoids any media confrontations, and despite being invited to TV debates with her 20–30 times, she has never attended. She consistently avoids debates when facing an opponent.

One might expect that she'd have more confidence in herself and be willing to stand up for her statements.

She's not capable of effectively governing the ministry or its agenda. However, there is a very strange person named Lukáš Machala, who is the administrative head of the ministry. In fact, he is the real power behind the scenes, making all the decisions. As the administrative head, his role is to oversee technical support for the ministry, manage staff, and handle similar tasks. Yet he accompanies her to the media, speaks at press conferences, and performs roles that are highly non-standard. This situation is quite unusual, and we are currently analysing it from a legal perspective, as we believe it may be in violation of state civil service legislation. As a civil servant, he is supposed to be non-political, but



Progressive Slovakia MP Zora Jaurová.

his public performance is highly political.

The minister has been speaking negatively about you online, claiming that you are narrow-minded and that you worked at the Slovak Arts Council (FPÚ), the state fund responsible for distributing artistic grants. She implied that you are still employed there. Yes, but that was a bunch of lies. I was one of the initiators of that fund. I worked with the former culture minister, Marek Maďarič, to establish the fund and was involved from the beginning. I was even a member of the fund's board. However, when I entered politics, I resigned from the board. Nonetheless, I remained in a pool of potential candidates from which members for the committees were chosen. The system operates such that the board of the fund approves a list of people eligible to be selected for the decision committee.

Have you decided on any projects since you became a lawmaker?

Since I was an expert, I was on the list for two committees. In principle, even as an MP, I can be on those committees because there is no law prohibiting it, and many other MPs serve on similar committees at the municipal or regional levels. However, since I was elected to parliament I have not been involved in any committee. I don't have the time for it.

Why would Šimkovičová lie about you?

It's actually quite desperate because they couldn't find anything to use against me or the chair of Progressive Slovakia, Michal Šimečka. As a result, they are now openly lying at press conferences, making claims that can be disproven with just a couple of clicks.

Šimkovičová and Machala, who is pro-Putin and spreads disinformation, have once again attacked the Milan Šimečka Foundation because it receives funds from the state, among other sources, to organise events that promote tolerance, diversity and democracy. Then, Prime Minister Robert Fico (Smer) criticised your party leader, alleging that the money the foundation receives goes to the Šimečka family. What is going on?

Milan Šimečka was a dissident during communism, a well-known philosopher, and writer. The foundation named after him was actually the first foundation established in Slovakia, in 1990. It's similar to the Royal Shakespeare Company; it doesn't mean that when they make money, the descendants of William Shakespeare receive any of it. They are just trying to manipulate the public debate with this kind of misinformation. They accuse Michal Šimečka of being involved in the foundation and profiting from it, but that's not true.

Culture hadn't been prominently featured in the media before Martina Šimkovičová's arrival. Do you see any positives in this situation?

That's the paradoxical effect of this situation. For my entire career, my mission has been to talk to politicians and explain that culture is a much more significant public policy issue than they realise. I have long advocated for recognising the important role of culture in society and focusing more on cultural policies. To be honest, I don't recall a time when culture was so prominently featured in public debate as it is now. We're discussing culture extensively in parliament and the media, though unfortunately due to the incompetence of the current minister. On the positive side, this heightened attention might finally bring the topic of culture into Slovak public debate. Given that Slovak society and community are still relatively young in terms of identity, this debate is perhaps necessary. It's important for us to address questions about how much culture we need, what kind of culture is important, and why culture matters. Facing the reality that this seemingly non-essential and obvious culture is in danger might help us understand its true significance.



Vivat Slovakia's producer
Roman Lipka.

'Slovak GTA' game developer: 90s Bratislava surpasses any fictional story

VIVAT SLOVAKIA PLANS TO LAUNCH
A RANGE OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGE PACKS

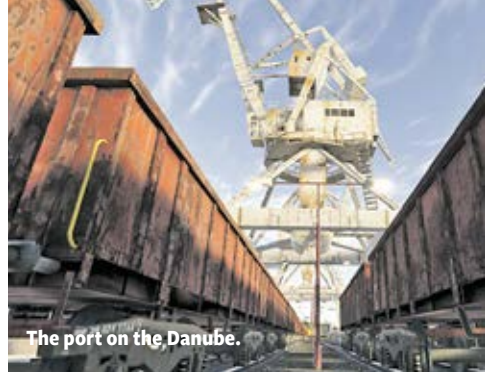
Text: Matúš Beňo • Photo: Team Vivat

While the neighbouring countries have already had one or more big videogame hits, Slovakia cannot say the same – for now. But with game development gaining attention and importance, this might change soon. One such game could be Vivat Slovakia, an open-world game made by the small Bratislava-based developers Team Vivat. Many have compared it to the (in)famous Grand Theft Auto series. The Slovak Spectator talked to Roman Lipka, the producer of the game, about its development, what inspired the team members to make it, and why Slovakia still lacks a big gaming hit.

When the film adaptation of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* was being made, one of the major mafia families initially didn't like the idea, because they were afraid of stereotypes. But in the end, an agreement was reached. Did your team encounter something similar?

People involved in organised crime during Slovakia's wild 90s are more or less proud of their past. Many years ago, during the early stages of script-writing, gathering information was relatively easy for us. Criminals who are now free or alive mostly work as taxi drivers, driving drunk youngsters home from clubs, or as security

guards. They like to reminisce about that period because it was the peak of their lives. Our unnamed consultants were big mafia figures' drivers and bodyguards. But in reality, they were just big hulking guys, who knew each other from the neighbourhood, the gym, the parks where they grew up. They were simply lucky that after the fall of the communist regime and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia the state was in such chaos that even the police didn't really know what they could or couldn't do. So, no one dared to challenge them back then – and everyone loves to talk about such times.



The game is often referred to as the Slovak GTA. How accurate is that?

GTA, an abbreviation for the Grand Theft Auto series, is considered a genre in itself today; more specifically, an open-world action-adventure. Vivat Slovakia is a game set in the open world of a real city, Bratislava. The player can run around, drive, shoot, complete missions and do as they please. So yes, in terms of setting, Vivat Slovakia is the Slovak, or maybe Eastern European GTA. However, since our entire game budget was probably equivalent to the one-month burn rate of big studios like Rockstar Games [creators of the GTA series], in terms of technology and content we cannot compete. If GTA5 is a Bentley, Vivat Slovakia is a Lada. [Ed. note: Lada is a Russian automotive brand known for producing affordable and durable vehicles.] But even our Lada has its clientele, one that has been unserved until now.

Where did the idea for the game come from?

Most of the original members of Team Vivat used to be involved in the modelling scene, especially the older GTA games. To do something like that, you need to understand how the game engine [Ed. note: the set of tools used to create a game] works so that the game doesn't crash after modifications. The Czech-Slovak community centred around these games was very strong. We got to know each other at forums and created new content for both countries, such as signs that we see on Slovak and Czech streets, or translating textures from NO PARKING to NEPARKOVAŤ. For players from large countries, where games are localised, this is hard to explain. Just the fact that Mafia: City of Lost Heaven [Ed. note: Another major game series, developed in large part by Czech programmers] had Czech dubbing left an indelible mark on an entire generation of Slovaks and Czechs. Both of these things fuelled our hopes

and childhood dreams that one day, we would have our own GTA or our own Mafia. Many of us never gave up on this childhood dream and decided to try to create it ourselves.

The Mafia and GTA games tell a fictional story. Why did you decide to set the game in a real period and base it on real events? How much did the facts influence the fictional story?

This might sound exaggerated, but we stand by the claim that the real events of the 1990s Slovakia far surpass many fictional stories. We read books, watched documentary series, or heard stories from former criminals and then essentially gamified them. What kind of country uses its secret service to kidnap its president's son; where does an allied mafia get a tip to rob a bank; where do journalists writing about the scandals of a democratically elected government get beaten up or killed? If you start digging into what was happening in Slovakia back then, it makes for a script for an action flick or video game. After completing a mission in Vivat Slovakia, a text explanation of what happened and what the player just played through appears. It's a wake-up call, reminding you that you're playing something based on real events and not just another Fast and Furious rip-off.

Is Bratislava in the game true to the Bratislava of the 90s, or did you take some liberties in its depiction?

The map of Bratislava in Vivat Slovakia covers 10 square kilometres, which is quite an ambitious undertaking for an indie studio such as ours. The fact that we managed to fill the game world with thousands of custom models is an incredible achievement. It's really satisfying to see YouTubers and streamers realising they don't need a map to find their way around. We used every resource available to maintain the authenticity of the in-game Bratislava, including period photos and old maps. However,

from the start, the map was prototyped as a scaled-down version. We removed boring side streets, shortened the bridges, and even shrunk the Danube River. Vivat Slovakia isn't a city simulator after all; it's a video game designed for fun, as an escape from reality.

Did you aim for a more realistic visual style in the game?

Going with different graphic stylizations might have been technically easier for us, but we chose a realistic or rather cinematic approach. Honestly, the graphics in Vivat Slovakia might be considered a bit below-standard, the visuals probably won't win us any awards, but it's the best we could achieve with the time and financial constraints we had. It's our first big game, and we've learned an incredible amount from the development. Our future projects will be better for it, but I don't think we have anything to be ashamed of.

How did you finance the development of the game?

Our main sources of funding were state grants and crowdfunding. Without the support of players and the interest of the Slovak public, you wouldn't be reading these words right now. The Slovak gaming industry is just beginning to wake up, but compared to our neighbours like Poland, Czechia, or even Ukraine, we're years behind them. Most of the games made here are mobile games for foreign markets, or contract work on assets for large international games. Until recently, it was normal for Slovak-made games to lack the Slovak language. But the Slovak Arts Council took a chance with us, and we believe that Vivat Slovakia has contributed its share to the development of art in the Slovak gaming industry.

Some well-known Slovak actors provided voice-overs. How did you manage to get actors to lend their voices?



The Slavín WWII memorial.

Slovakia's most popular film and TV actors have never really been involved in video games. As I mentioned, Slovak language in games is uncommon, let alone Slovak voice acting. I think this was one of the reasons why A-list actors agreed to lend their voices and names to a project like ours. Since we had to invest all our funds into game development, the budget for voice acting had to be kept to a minimum. We are incredibly grateful to every voice actor and actress who understood our situation and didn't charge us the standard rates that TV production companies typically pay.

Are you planning to add English voice acting later, or will you focus solely on the Slovak market?

English voice acting and bringing Vivat Slovakia to the international market is our current goal. Vivat Slovakia is currently in the Early Access phase, so we're collecting all the feedback from players and significantly improving the game both content – and performance-wise. We're working with the dubbing studio Beep, which is responsible for the voice work in the upcoming Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2, and we're adding more language packs to Vivat Slovakia. Once we release the finished version, we'll launch the game globally as well. We're confident that the idea of an Eastern European GTA will appeal to players abroad, but the product's quality needs to be higher to meet the expectations of the international market, as it's more demanding.

Could the game's setting in Bratislava be a disadvantage?

Bratislava as a game map won't be a problem on the international market, but at the same time, we can't rely

on it as a selling point. The squatting Slavs memes and the overall gritty atmosphere of Eastern Europe has been quite popular in various films. Major movie studios are discovering Bratislava more and more, with its unique mix of post-communist style, a mediaeval castle, and oddly mismatched modern business buildings. The architectural collage of the city is so distinctive that we once read about "some indie attempt at GTA set in the fictional city of Bratislava". When my parents first took me to the US as a kid, I felt like I was in GTA San Andreas. I recognised a building, then another one. It was a powerful experience. Maybe one day, a Vivat Slovakia player from the US will visit Bratislava and be shocked to find that the UFO above the Most SNP bridge is actually real.

Did you hide any Easter eggs in the game?

Of course! Easter eggs are a huge joy for players, but even more so for game developers. During the monotonous work of endless modelling or texturing, every developer needs to vent a bit by adding some funny references to their work. Even as the producer, I don't know every nook and cranny of the game map, but I already know that the Team Vivat crew has peppered the game's version of Bratislava with various mini-stories. What makes it even more interesting is that as part of our crowdfunding rewards, we gave our players the chance to insert their own Easter eggs into the game. For example, in the cemetery you can find the names of deceased pets, NPCs modelled after real residents roam the streets, and there are graffiti messages on walls that players left for their girlfriends.

The Czechs boast of Mafia, the Poles have The Witcher, and the Ukrainians have the Metro and Stalker series.

It's no denying there are talented game developers in Slovakia, but it seems like they haven't been able to break through in the "big" game market.

Why do you think that is?

The exact reason why Slovakia hasn't produced its big hit with a global impact is still a mystery to me. We have highly skilled people, and video gaming is hugely popular, but it seems like everyone in Slovakia is playing it safe. Game studios like Pixel Federation or PowerPlay Studio, which develop mobile games, generate huge profits. We have several studios creating game assets for series like Call of Duty. Another example is the highly successful rhythm game Beat Saber, which was originally created by Slovaks but published in the Czech Republic. So why hasn't anyone tried to create their own AAA game? Making such games is extremely expensive, and a potential failure could severely damage even large studios. But I think it's just a matter of time, and I hope that time comes soon. In recent years, faculties and entire schools dedicated to game development have been established. Game development is being talked about more and more in Slovak media every year. We have the state-funded Slovak Arts Council, which provides a financial boost to startup game studios without which some projects would never see the light of day. From time to time, we even see promising games like Way of The Hunter, Workers & Resources: Soviet Republic, or The House of Da Vinci. All of this creates a very strong basis, boosting other enthusiasts and proving that investing in game development in Slovakia makes sense.

A growing social media group is bringing Slovak-Americans together

MICHAEL MEEHAN STARTED AN ONLINE COMMUNITY TO HELP PEOPLE RECONNECT WITH THEIR ANCESTRAL HERITAGE

Text: Peter Dlhopolec • Photo: Archive of M. M.



One of Michael Meehan's photographs, shared with The Slovak Spectator

Having spent much of his childhood in a town where ethnicity played a central role in community life, when Michael John Meehan moved from western Pennsylvania to Philadelphia he found himself missing the Slovak traditions that had permeated his upbringing.

So he decided to found a small Facebook group dedicated to Slovak ancestry, Slovak Heritage in the US, hoping to share memories and traditions with a few like-minded people. His expectations were not great – he doubted he would get much of a response. Instead, the tiny online gathering he anticipat-

ed gradually grew into a vibrant community of nearly 23,000 members.

"I really just started it on a whim," Meehan, 48, tells The Slovak Spectator. "At first, it was maybe 15 of us, and we'd share stories and memories about our families and traditions, like Christmas Eve dinners or Easter baskets. But then it just kept growing. Now, we've got people from all over, even some of my own relatives who I didn't know were on Facebook."

The group, which Meehan founded in the early 2010s, taps into a broader trend among Americans seeking to reconnect with their ancestral heritage. In Meehan's case, his Slovak ancestry

had deep roots in western Pennsylvania, a region that saw waves of immigrants arrive from eastern Europe in the early 20th century. But when he moved to Philadelphia, where he works as a speech-language pathologist at a local hospital, he found the Slovak community much smaller and less visible.

"There's a lot of Polish and Ukrainian culture here, but not so many Slovaks," he explains.

Meehan grew up near Erie, north of Pittsburgh, but his mother's family lived in the town of Mount Pleasant, where they ran a farm. As a result, Meehan's family frequently visited the



A church in Pol'anova, eastern Slovakia.

farm. Located outside Pittsburgh, the town was once a patchwork of ethnic enclaves, each group carving out its own space.

"Mount Pleasant had four Catholic churches," Meehan recalls with a laugh. "There was the Irish church, the Italian church, the Polish church, and the Slovak church. My mum's family went all the way across town to the Slovak church even though they lived right next to the Polish one."

At the Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, where hymns are now sung in English, the Slovak inscriptions etched into the stained-glass remain untouched, quietly preserving the immigrant legacy of its founders – miners and farmers from the territory of what is today Slovakia. Meehan's sister, who still lives in Mount Pleasant, along with most of Meehan's family, continues to attend the church.

"There are still people in that town who can speak Slovak," he adds. "The traditions haven't completely faded."

GRANDPARENTS' FARM

All four of Meehan's great-grandparents on his mother's side – Mary Elizabeth Centko, John Jablunovsky, Michael John Polanovsky, and Maria Laclav (all the names are Americanised – Ed.) – were born in Slovakia, in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They journeyed to America from the eastern Slovak villages of Markušovce, Bertotovce, Polanovce

and Hrušov. While his grandparents and mother, Catherine Polanovsky Meehan, spoke Slovak fluently, the language was not passed down to Meehan and his siblings – he has two sisters and one brother – even though he fondly recalls summers on his grandparents' farm where Slovak was spoken all the time. He also remembers his mother sharing stories of her own upbringing, during which her Slovak-speaking grandparents would converse with her in their native tongue, and she, as a second-generation American, responded in English and Slovak.

"My siblings and I grew up speaking only English, and we learned our heritage through traditions rather than words," Meehan, who is half-Irish, says.

Reflecting briefly on his Irish heritage, he recalls how his Slovak-speaking grandfather's stern disapproval of his mother's marriage to an American of Irish ancestry in 1960 became a recurring story in their family lore.

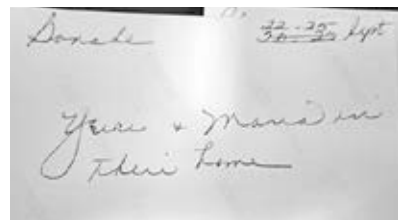
"It was a big issue because he wasn't Slovak," Meehan notes.

In Erie, unlike on the farm, Meehan's mother seldom spoke Slovak. Opportunities were rare – except for the occasional conversation with an elderly Slovak woman who lived next door. "I wish I had learned the language," he reflects wistfully.

Although he does not speak Slovak, he is determined in his desire to preserve the heritage and traditions of his moth-



Another of Meehan's photos, taken in Slovakia in 1992.



er's family and to not let them fade as they have on his father's side.

MUSHROOM SOUP

Spending holidays on the family farm and in the Slovak church, Meehan was steeped in the rituals of his Slovak heritage – grand Christmas feasts and the blessing of hundreds of baskets by a priest at Easter.

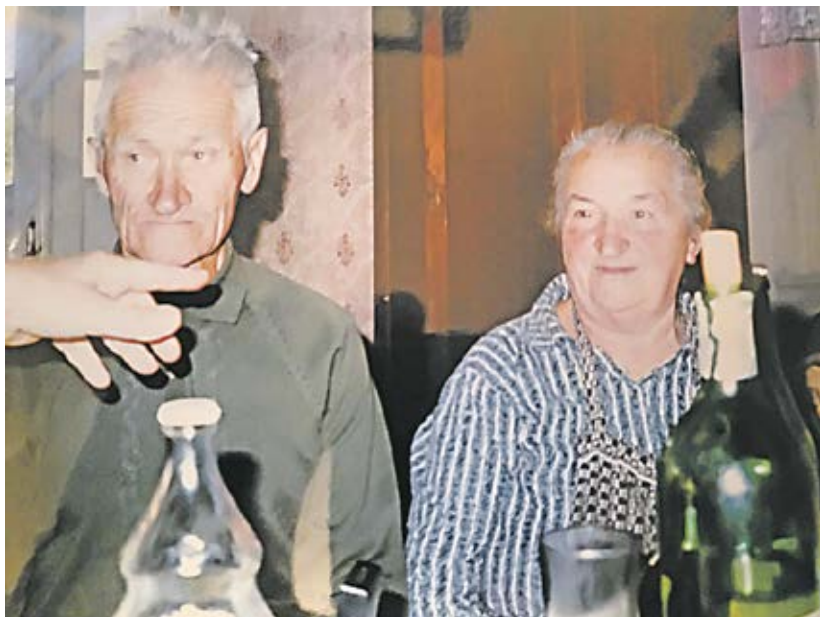
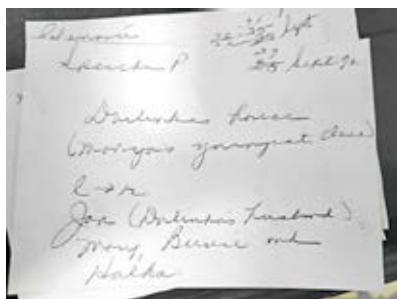
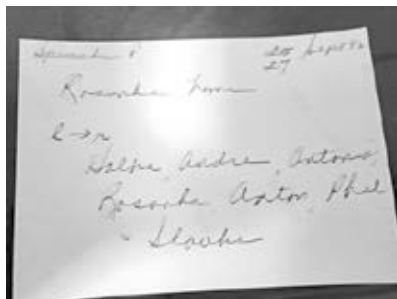
"I was drawn to it for a while," he reflects. "Then, I drifted away. But eventually, I realised I didn't want it to die out altogether."

The legacy of these traditions remains intact in Meehan's hands, quite literally: cherished recipes, carefully transcribed by his grandmother from her own, form an unbroken link to his ancestry. Though Slovak wasn't spoken in his childhood home in Erie, the spirit of the culture was alive in every meal his mother cooked.

"As you can see, I'm not exactly slim," Meehan quips with a smile. "She cooked Slovak food all the time."

Though he does not speak the language, he still easily recalls certain Slovak words he vividly remembers his mother, a nurse by profession, peppering their conversations with. "'Give me the ucírka (dishcloth/tea towel),' she'd say," Meehan remembers. "And somehow, I always knew what she meant."

Today, Meehan continues the tradition of his family's Slovak heritage by turning to his family's cookbook. For Christmas Eve, when his sisters gath-



Yuri and Maria in their home in (Banské?) in September 1992.

er, he always prepares the mushroom soup, a meal so familiar to him that he no longer needs the recipe. He also makes halušky, though he admits to some level of cheating in this case – unlike his mother, who made it without shortcuts.

“She would grind the potatoes herself, and in Western Pennsylvania, you could find sheep cheese (bryndza) at local markets,” he remembers.

His mother also taught him how to prepare hrudka, the Slovak egg cheese, each Easter.

This culinary connection is just one facet of his heritage that he has carefully preserved; he also still has a book of Slovak fairy tales packed away in a box in the attic.

TRACING THEIR FAMILY IN SLOVAKIA

As we speak on Zoom, Meehan, who is named after one of his great-grandfathers, also recounts how his great-aunts Bernadette Jablunovsky and Mary Jablunovsky Turify and his great-uncle Phillip Jablunovsky, travelled to Slovakia – then still part of Czechoslovakia – in 1992, seeking their Slovak relatives.

While they found them, neither Meehan nor his mother have any information on them.

“I have some photos from that trip,” Meehan says, showing the pictures to the camera. In one of the photos, a couple proudly displays the mushrooms

they have picked. “They show a town and people in Slovakia, but unfortunately, there are no full names on the back, so I don’t know who they are.”

Though Meehan is aware that some relatives remain in eastern Slovakia, he is uncertain whether his great-aunts left any information about them within the family. What he does know is that his great-aunts once brought a cousin from Slovakia to live with them in the United States, a visit that included attending Meehan’s brother’s wedding.

“One [relative] played the organ at the local church in Slovakia,” Meehan recalls, “I remember hearing that story.” Meehan and his siblings have yet to set foot in Slovakia, though their desire to visit runs deep.

“We’ll take that journey one day and see the place our great-grandparents once called home.” But, as Meehan admits, life has a way of postponing such plans. “Somehow, we never quite get there. But one of these days – one of these days, we will.”

REPOSITORY OF STORIES

For Meehan, his thriving Facebook group dedicated to Slovak traditions and culture serves as a vital link to a heritage he is eager to explore. Through the posts of other members, Meehan has discovered new things, such as the Easter Monday tradition of women being doused with water and the fact that hrudka can also be known as syrek.

“Even though Slovakia is a small coun-

try, I’m learning that its regions each have their own distinct customs, foods and sights,” Meehan observes.

The group is a repository of shared stories, vintage photographs, and ancestral names, allowing members to delve deeper into their family histories. The diverse membership includes both Americans who speak some Slovak and native Slovaks, fostering a cross-cultural exchange where queries about Slovakia are readily addressed.

While many members of the Facebook group might have pursued Slovak citizenship by now, drawn by the benefits of an EU passport or a deeper connection to their heritage, Meehan has not considered applying for Slovak or Irish citizenship. He remains content with his cultural exploration through the group rather than seeking formal nationality.

“If I had Slovak citizenship, it would place me in a role that doesn’t quite fit,” he says. “I’m of Slovak heritage, but I’m not Slovak. I don’t live there.”

Meehan acknowledges that pursuing Slovak citizenship would make sense if he were fluent in Slovak, spent time living in Slovakia, and engaged with daily life there. But, he says, he finds his connection to Slovakia sufficiently strong through social media and the internet. “It’s amazing,” he says. “Who would have imagined I’d be having a conversation with someone in Bratislava on a Thursday night here? It’s truly amazing to me.”



Slovak Matters: Do you drive a 613 or a bugatka?

A LITANY OF CAR EXPRESSIONS TO WOW YOUR FRIENDS WITH

Text: Tom Nicholson • Photo: Adobe Stock

North Americans aren't made for pre-2002 Slovak cars. Just look at them: the half-pint Fiats, the match-box Trabants. Even if you're lucky enough to get the front seat, you still find your knees buckling the glove box, your back deeply indented with seat springs.

The tiny car – auto, or rather autíčko – you're wedged in is known in these parts as a bugatka or a prdítko ('little farter'). That doesn't have to mean it's a lemon (haraburda) or a wreck (kraksňa, rachotina), but it's unlikely to be a hot-rod (tátoš, meaning 'wild horse', or fáro, from the German fahren, to drive).

Beware of insulting someone's voz, however ('to je môj voz' is equivalent to 'these are my wheels', or 'this is my ride', so says the dictionary). Even if it's not an Audina (Audi), Méďo (Mercedes) or Bé-Em-Wé (BMW), even if it's just a plain Škodovka (Ško-

da) banger, it's someone's pride and joy (pýcha a potešenie).

Before we get into the technical stuff, it's worth noting the odd voids in Slovak car slang. There's no equivalent for the North American 'boat', the 1971 Lincoln Continental that you could pitch a tent in. The closest we get is the '613', or šestotrinástka, the model number of the Tatra, the only larger home-grown vehicle the country knew under communism.

There's also no cool way to say 'souped up', as in an Austin Mini with 'mag' wheels, turbo engine, hood spoiler, black lights and purple pimp stripes. YOU know. In Slovak there's only the dry as dust 'vylepšil si auto', 'he improved his car'.

In other driving matters, however, Slovak is every bit as rich as English. Let's say you're sitting at an intersection and the car in front of you seems to be ignoring the green light. As you give them a horn blast (zatrúbiš), you

might say 'brzda, spojka, plyn a ideš' ('brake, clutch, gas and off you go'). You might ask 'čo, čakáš na inú farbu?' ('what, are you waiting for another colour?'). You might observe 'jasné, žena za volantom' ('of course, a woman driver'). 'Dupni/Šliapni na to!' – 'Step on it!'

Actually, the Slovak staff at The Slovak Spectator say they have never heard anyone using these expressions, but the dictionary seems convinced, and I guess it's still theoretically possible they might still be in currency.

While not many people may in fact use such phrases, if you do hear someone saying 'dupni na to' you can be sure you're driving with a 'pirát ciest', or 'king of the road'. "Jazdiš ako blázon!" you might tell him: "You drive like a madman!"

But whether he drives like a blázon or a slimák (snail), just remember: Don't diss the voz, man (človeče, nehejtuj môj voz').

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