

Calendar

Fast Footwork with Strudel

Czech and Slovak Lawn Party

I moved here from Chicago, which has as many Bohemian restaurants as San Diego has Mexican restaurants," says Mike Kravcar. "There's practically one on every corner, serving dumplings and sauerkraut. So coming here was culture shock. That's why I gravitated to this organization, which I found by accident in Balboa Park."

The organization is the House of Czech and Slovak Republics, headquartered in one of the International Cottages along Park Boulevard and President's Way. Founded in 1935 as the House of Czechoslovakia, it changed its name after the fall of Communism, when the independent Czech and

LOCAL EVENTS

Slovak Republics were created. For nearly 60 years, it

had promoted the diverse cultures of the whole region — their food, music, dances, and crafts — including those of Bohemia and Moravia. And it saw no reason to discontinue, even after the faraway political events.

"It would have been silly to split ourselves up," says Kravcar, who is the group's events coordinator. "Many people have been members for years; two have been members for 45 years." Besides, everyone is intertwined if not through marriage then friendship.

So they merely replaced their old-name plaque and hung pictures of both countries' presidents on the wall.

Kravcar, whose mother is Czech, says he was surprised to find here "a big base" of immigrant Czechs and Slovaks, along with their first- and second-generation progeny. One of those American-born is Daniele Rusnak Laman, artistic director of the Devin Slovak Heritage Dancers.

Laman started the dance group 17 years ago with her brothers and sisters. Since then, they and their successors have performed in venues from Palm Springs to the Poconos, as well as in Europe. Current performers include Laman's children: 17-year-old Stephanie, 16-year-old Andrew, 15-year-old Matthew, and her youngest, Georgette, who turns 13 on the day of their next engagement — the annual



Frank Pokorny in authentic Czech outfit

lawn party of the House of Czech and Slovak Republics.

The Devin dancers' repertoire has been meticulously researched. Laman and others have made three study trips to Slovakia and twice hosted Slovak instructors in San Diego. "The dances from central Slovakia have very fast footwork," she says, "sort of like Slovak rock 'n' roll. The western Slovak style of dance that Andrew and Georgette do is a lifting dance. It's for a little bitty girl and a big husky boy. Throughout it he's always lifting and bouncing her. It reminds me of 1950s swing dancing,

when the girl is tossed all around."

Laman says that the costumes Slovak dancers ordinarily wear are made of linen and wool, but she has taken the liberty of translating them into cotton for the sake of the California climate. "There's no snow here like there is in Slovakia."

The dance group is named after Devin Castle near Bratislava, Slovakia's capital. "We were christened with that name by the gentleman who first came out to San Diego to teach us dances," she says. "Ah, Devin. That's a good name for you," he said. Devin happens

to be in ruins, but it is a national monument, right on the Danube River. That was one place my kids and I got to see when we were there in 1992, right before the split. By then, it was already a free country, and my dad was able to go back for the first time since the second world war. That last trip was very emotional. My dad's mother was killed by shrapnel, and he actually found her grave. It was my mom's first time visiting the country. And it was the first time I took my children there. So it was kind of a culmination."

Dancing with Laman's children and others this weekend will be Brother Francisco. "I don't even know his last name," Laman says. "He's a monk from Tijuana who comes to our church [Holy Angels Byzantine Catholic Church]. He's in his late 20s or early 30s, very religious, and happens to love folk dancing. He used to be a dancer in his teenage years. Anybody who wants to dance with us is welcome. We've had Ukrainians, Polish, and combination Mexican-Germans. Brother Francisco is Mexican and knows Mexican folk dances. He saw us dance, and said, 'Hey! I can do that!' And we said, 'Well, why don't you?'"

Czech dancing is part of the lawn program, too, performed by the Balboa Park Dancers. Music will be played by the Accordion Lovers' Ensemble; traditional sausage dishes and strudels are for sale; and tours of the cottage exhibits are available throughout the day. "You'll see cut crystal from Bohemia, decorated eggs from Slovakia, antique dolls with porcelain heads," boasts Mike Kravcar, who considers them all "indicators" of the rich pre-Communist folkways of the region.

— Jeanne Schinto

Annual Lawn Party
Sunday, October 15,
The House of Czech and
Slovak Republics
Balboa Park
Cottage tours and food
11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.
Songs, music, and dance onstage
at the Organ Pavilion:
2:00-3:00 p.m.
Admission and parking: Free
Info: 619-236-9616

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