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FEATUERS

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460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

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**Visit in a Slovak
Town of Yugoslavia**

EDITOR'S NOTE: The former assistant director of the Baptist Press, Theo Sommerkamp, gives this first-person account of visiting Baptist church in Yugoslavia. Sommerkamp is now with the European Baptist Press Services with offices in Ruschlikon-Zurich, Switzerland.

By Theo Sommerkamp
European Baptist Press

The bell of a nearby Lutheran church tolls to signal the worship hour, and the Baptist congregation assembles in a masonry building with a weatherbeaten lo k.

Down brick sidewalks and up streets with deep mud ruts, the Slovak-speaking Baptists come to worship.

Some ride bicycles. Mothers push their toddlers along in wooden strollers or perambulators.

Only one automobile drives up. In it are visitors from the cities and from abroad. Just a few Baptists in Yugoslavia are fortunate enough to own an automobile.

Only the two main streets are paved, and these are part of the national highway system. All other streets are deep mud ruts, down which horse-drawn carts struggle. Automobiles dare not attempt passage.

This is the scene in Petrovac, Yugoslavia---a large, village-like town, mainly of farm people. It is in the fertile Danube River Valley about 65 miles northwest of Belgrade.

Here is located the largest Baptist church in the entire country of Yugoslavia, with more than 200 members. The second and third largest Baptist churches are in major cities, Zagreb and Novi Sad.

As a Communist country, Yugoslavia is committedly anti-religious. Petrovac, however, is mainly Lutheran in religious affiliation.

Outside the Baptist church, a sign identifies the building. The churches are permitted to have identifying signs painted or mounted on the wall. Signs do not, however, extend out over the sidewalks.

About 200 attend the worship service. The Petrovac church has pews enough to accomodate the entire membership. Attendance does not always reach 200 but often goes beyond this number.

The style of church government and worship in Petrovac is unique.

The Slovak church has no pastor. It has one deacon---a young man of 38 who baptizes converts and administers the Lord's Supper. He may even conduct church weddings, although only the state ceremony is legally valid. Decisions by new converts are recommended to the church by a governing board of eight or ten much older men.

The Sunday service is started with a vacant pulpit. One of the elders calls out a number in the Slovak song book, which contains words but no music. A young man steps to the wooden pump organ and plays.

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The first song is "Bratská Laska," meaning "Brotherly Love." It is a hymn used chiefly to welcome the guests---a pastor, a layman, and two Americans, one they have known since 1938---John Allen Moore of the Baptist seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland. The other is Theo Sommerkamp, new representative of the European Baptist Press making his first visit to Yugoslavia.

After the special song expressing their feeling of Christian brotherhood toward their visitors, the Slovaks launched into song, this one a favorite throughout Europe, though little known in English-language hymnody, "God is With Us."

After a prayer, the young draftsman from Novi Sad speaks. Although a "visitor," this is his "home church," for his parents live in Petrovac.

A short series of prayers follow. First four men pray, then four women, at the request of one of the elders. Men always pray first in such circumstances.

The men's prayers are sincere but unemotional. The first woman prays louder, more fervently than any of the men. The next woman's prayer borders on the tearful. The third woman's is sincere and direct like the men's, and the final woman prays almost in a whisper. The draftsman closes the prayer period.

Next is one stanza only of another hymn. This in itself is unusual. The songs have six to ten stanzas and in many instances the congregation sings every one of them.

The visiting pastor of the Baptist church in Novi Sad interprets as Sommerkamp brings a devotional.

Then there is a choir number without the organ. There are more women than men in the choir.

The single teen-age girls wear western-type sweaters and skirts, while the married women wear long skirts with blue aprons, like costumes.

Married women are supposed to wear a scarf, usually black, to cover their heads at all times, inside their homes or away. Single girls may or may not wear a scarf, but most wear colorful ones resembling scarfs worn in any western country.

Slovak Baptist men do not as a rule wear ties. Neither men nor women wear jewelry. Men's hair is generally not more than half an inch long.

Customs, however, are changing, demonstrating the power of the fashions of the outside world.

One or two of the younger men wear ties to church without fear any more of having church fellowship withdrawn from them for doing so. Even the deacon received his leadership position after abandoning the custom of a close-shaven head.

Moore, the visitor, preaches the sermon of the morning in Serbian. Most of the people understand Serbian, the official language, almost as well as Slovak, but prefer to hear their own language.

A large banner, and smaller posters quoting scriptures are behind, beneath and to the sides of the pulpit. On the front of the pulpit is another, saying in Slovak, "Repent and believe the gospel."

After the sermon, there is another song. Then the deacon expresses pleasure with the visit of the Baptist friends from America.

The Novi Sad pastor leads the closing prayer, while the people kneel on boards attached to the pews as they do for every prayer. One more hymn, then two women visiting from another community bring greetings.

The clock indicates it is 10:55---time to leave. There is another service at 2 p. m., and a third one of the day at 8 p. m.

Worship in a Slovak church of Yugoslavia for a visiting American is truly a unique experience.