

Eastern Europe: Poland, Czech Republic, Austria

by Dan Turner

On December 10, 1994, with the experiences of Auschwitz echoing in our hearts, we began the long *Pilgrimage for Peace and Life*. We walked through Poland, the Czech Republic and Austria down to Vienna. For most of the way we walked through snow, rain and fog, but did not encounter the bitter cold expected in this part of the world. We started out with over eighty pilgrims and many Polish people joined us. A good half dozen were incapacitated nearly every day—one woman fractured her ankle—and each day a few people dropped out. We were working out the stiffness and kinks of our bodies, moving into the smooth, distance-devouring pilgrim stride. Seven days of walking, followed by one day of rest, then seven days of walking again. We covered twelve to twenty miles a day, a pace we would maintained throughout most of the Pilgrimage.



Photo: Bill Ledger

We slept in many towns. In Poland there was Pszczyna, Bielsko Biala, Cieszyn; in the Czech Republic: Frydek Mistek, Novy Jicin, Hranice, Pferov, Kojetin, Vyskov, Rousinov, Brno, Pohorelice, Mikulov; in Austria: Poysdorf, Wolkersdorf, Vienna.

Everywhere we went our reception was overwhelming. People would wave and smile as we walked, drumming and

chanting along the roadways in these beautiful countries. When we entered a town square, the city officials and clergy gave us moving messages of peace and welcome. We were escorted to the local church where we held interfaith prayer and spoke of our Pilgrimage for peace. At one old town during the prayer service in the church, Reverend Sasamori and the monks offered a drumming prayer. Afterwards, the pilgrims and the townspeople sang traditional Catholic hymns. Each pilgrim was given a flower and a picture of the church. As we walked out after the service, the people in the congregation were crying and reaching to touch us. Tears streamed from our eyes, too. Seeing the reactions of the people in the towns and villages gave us



pilgrims a deeper understanding of the meaning of this Pilgrimage.

There is an ancient sense of pilgrimage in this old part of Europe. Even though the people in these small towns haven't seen a pilgrimage in several hundred years, it is a part of their history. It touches them deeply, and they responded to our presence with a generosity that stunned us. In Poland, we were put up in hotels—a dramatic departure from the floors and basements that we would grow accustomed to later in our journey. We were fed wonderful food. The faces of the townspeople reflected a deep concern for our welfare and a pride in hosting us. In the Czech Republic, we were given home stays in Vyskov and Brno, where each of us was embraced as part of the family. In the town of Novy Jicin, we were told that we would have a snack in the church hall before meeting with the mayor. The “snack” was laid out on two tables twenty feet long by five feet wide with over one hundred plates heaped with homemade pastries, and we were served by the bright-eyed grandmothers who made them. As we feasted on such undreamed-of delights, their young granddaughters sang songs for us. The next day, about ten girls and boys walked with us until our lunch break. Then, as we continued on, they waved us out of sight, tears streaming down their cheeks. I do not think that these children will ever forget the experience of being with pilgrims; I know the pilgrims will never forget the blessed hospitality that we received from them and their families.

Christmas was spent in Poysdorf, Austria—a snow covered town built on a hill. We stayed four days in Vienna, resting and preparing for our walk through the former Yugoslavia.