

## The History of the Slovak Garden

### THE HISTORY OF THE SLOVAK GARDEN 1952 - 2002

by Frank Rudzik, President of the Slovak Garden, Inc.



Outdoor Slovak Day Celebration before the Social Hall was built



The inside of the Social Hall during construction in 1965



Slovak Garden Social Hall today, March 2002



Small Social Hall under construction during 1998



Small Social Hall after completion of

Slovak Americans had discussed creating a Slovak religious, charitable, literary, and housing and retirement community as early as 1906, at the 10th National Slovak Society Convention in Connersville, Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the idea was constantly shuttled to the side. The idea did not become a reality until the late John and Maria Jerga, successful Slovak immigrants from Detroit, Michigan, decided to establish the Slovak Garden community.

The seed was sown on November 10, 1939, as the Živena Beneficial Society Branch 163 celebrated its 25th anniversary. During the program at the celebration, Mr. and Mrs. John Jerga presented a check in the amount of ten thousand dollars toward building the Slovak Garden for Slovak Americans. Mr. John Jerga, ailing for years, had visited Florida frequently and often remarked how ideal it would be to have a retirement community for Slovak Americans somewhere in Central Florida, near Orlando.

John Jerga was born on October 1, 1884 in a little village called Barca in eastern Slovakia located on the outskirts of the city Košice. He came to America in 1905 at the age of twenty-one and settled in Detroit, Michigan. Shortly thereafter, he became a successful businessman and a community leader. He soon married Maria Strapec. In the beginning, they made frequent visits to Florida for vacations, but as time progressed, their motivation shifted to searching for a suitable location for a Slovak American retirement community. On February 23rd, 1941 John Jerga made his last trip to Florida, where he suddenly died in West Palm Beach at the age of 52. Jergo Road, serving as the dividing line between the Slovak Garden and Slovak Village in Winter Park, Florida, was dedicated in his memory, honoring John and his wife Maria for their generous donation of ten thousand dollars to the Slovak Garden, and the many charitable projects they funded and supported. On August 1, 1941, a trust agreement was made between the widow, Maria Jerga, and Živena Beneficial Society to retain the donation of ten thousand dollars in escrow until a suitable place could be found to establish the proposed Slovak community.

The plan of creating this Slovak community in Florida took on a new image and began to gain momentum when Karol Belohlavek became a great promoter of the idea. He published numerous articles in Slovak newspapers and solicited financial support from Slovak fraternal organizations and affluent individuals to finance

construction in the fall of 1998



Mrs. Durcak, one of the oldest Slovak Garden members in the Orlando area, is seen enjoying coffee and cake with her daughter, Martha Volosin, treasurer of the SG, and Helen Rudzik



The area before commencement of the parking and Orava Lane project January 5, 2000



After the completion of the paved parking project February 15, 2000



and promote the Slovak community. Karol and Maria Jergo Belohlavek made several trips to Florida searching for an ideal location to establish the proposed Slovak community. The famous article Karol Belohlavek published in various Slovak newspapers under the heading "From Detroit to Florida" generated much new interest and enthusiasm among Slovak Americans.

Finally, they succeeded in finding a forty-acre farm containing many acres of citrus groves, wooded areas and an old-fashioned two-bedroom house. The farm was located on Howell Branch Road near Winter Park, Florida, and only 12 miles east of the city of Orlando. On February 5, 1949 an agreement was reached with the owner, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and The Land Searching Committee, to purchase the farm for \$ 13,750.00. The committee met in Pittsburgh, Pa. at the office of the Živena Beneficial Society, and its 13 members reached an agreement on the following topics:

1. The name would be "Slovak Garden."
2. The organizations temporary directors
3. All fraternal organizations were invited to participate
4. Appeals were made to all nationality groups to take active part in the organization
5. Election of the officers for next two years

The officers elected including: Andrew Gabor, President; Paul Blazek, Secretary; Mary Belohlavek, Treasurer; S. Kusy, Donations Receiver; Karol Belohlavek Publicity/Manager; Anna Blazek, Member; and Suzanne Gabor, Member. On May 22, 1949, a special celebration was held at the Slovak Home in Detroit, Michigan; the donor, Mrs. Mary Belohlavek, announced "The Slovak Garden" as being a part and parcel of all Slovaks, marking this as a significant milestone in the progression of Slovak Americans. Over three-hundred members from many national and local organizations were represented, including one from Windsor, Canada. A resolution was adopted thanking the donor for this wonderful gift to the Slovak people. The Slovak organizations also began to respond with contributions. Publicity continued, as did the contributions.

The early fifty's was a pioneering period for the organization. The Slovak Garden began to take on a new look. Builder Juraj Jakubčín completed the first apartment for four thousand dollars in 1950. The addition of the new building and the clearing of the orange groves and land, brought the property value up to forty thousand dollars. Finally, on February 22, 1952, a charter was applied for and accepted by the Slovak Garden, officially establishing "The



Jan Dvorecky,  
Director of the  
Slovak Garden  
welcomes guests at  
the 47th Slovak Day

Slovak Garden, A Home for American Slovaks, Inc." The first meeting was held on March 7, 1952 and the elected officers included: J. Kacir, President; Mary Warren, Vice-president; Emme Yaros, Secretary; Mary Belohlavek, Treasurer; Karol Belohlavek, Manager, Publisher of Floridský Slovák; Joseph Pollay, Director; Johanna Novak, Director; and Stephen Magyar, Attorney/Legal Advisor.

The First Floridský Slovák was published on October 1952. The following year, the first Slovak Day was celebrated at the Slovak Garden on Sunday, February 22, 1953. It was a greater success than anybody had anticipated. For this special occasion, Karol Belohlavek published a forty-eight page Jubilee Book. After the incorporation was established, the first substantial donation came from Mr. & Mrs. Paul and Mary Ranyak in the amount of \$2,500.00.



From the left: Anna Dvorecky, she bakes pastries best, Martha Volosin and Irene Murphy are helping in the kitchen .

During the fifties, life at the Slovak Garden was quite active, with most of the labor being donated by Slovak volunteers. The Floridský Slovák, published by Karol Belohlavek, promoted the Slovak Garden to a wide Slovak community throughout the United States. The Second Slovak Day was held on February 14, 1953, and again it was very successful. That same year, the duplex by Howell Branch Rd. was completed in November. The cost of the duplex was over fifteen thousand dollars. Mary Belohlavek generously donated two thousand dollars to help fund the project; this was one of many donations she had made to the Slovak Garden during her lifetime. The following year, a third building and a carport were completed.



From left: Helen Rudzik, Nick Badida, Sisa Sklovska, a popular Slovak singer visiting SG, Jerry J. Krupa, SG Director and Maria Krupa SG Office Secretary

The fourth Slovak Day was celebrated on February 12, 1956. It was a momentous event, having the Supreme Justice of Florida, Campbell Thoral as the main speaker. That same year, the funding for six apartments was arranged by contributions from Paul & Mary Ranyak of Centerline Michigan, John & Mary Mravec of Chicago, Illinois, John Lietava Zvolensky of Highstown, N.J., Maria Belohlavek of Maitland, Florida, and Anna Kubik from Grosse Pointe, Michigan. In 1956, the Slovak Garden also printed its first post card. By December of that same year, the fifth building, an Apartment Complex on Jergo Rd., was completed. The following year's Slovak Day on February 21, 1957 was one of the greatest to this day. More than one thousand guests attended the event at the Slovak Garden. Arrangements with five local motels were necessary to house the attendees. During the Fifth Annual Convention, an official announcement was made commending Mrs. Mary Belohlavek, the mother of The Slovak Garden, Inc., on



Our popular singer, Ms. Maria Kupcik, with "Lučina" group from Cleveland during the performance at the 47th Slovak Day

her twenty-five thousand dollar donation during her lifetime.

The building on Howell Branch Road, consisting of six apartments, was finished by the end of 1960. During the ninth Annual Convention on February 6, 1961, Jan H. Pankuch spoke on behalf of the NSS and donated a plaque celebrating the completion of the new apartment building in memory of P. V. Rovnianek, a founder of NSS. The annual convention also elected G. Hodak as the new Slovak Garden president. The Vice-president Maria Stefan and Secretary K. Belohlavek were also elected on that day. During the next few years, the southern duplex was completed. In 1965, construction on the Slovak Garden Social Hall was completed. This marked a period of tremendous achievement for the Slovak Garden. The west building apartments were completed in the early eighties.



"Technik" from Bratislava during a performance at the Slovak Garden

The Slovak Garden, as many other Slovak organizations in America, experienced growing pains over the years filled with successes and failures. Thanks to the many devoted individuals, such as Karol Belohlavek, Mr. and Mrs. Zary, Mr. and Mrs. Kacir, Gus and Agnes Hodak, Mr. and Mrs. John Cibula, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Steffel and many others the concept of the Slovak Garden became reality.



Mrs. Agnes Hodak receiving the award of "Women Of The Year". She is our resident and former secretary of the Slovak Garden during the sixties.

Between the years of 1980 and 1984, the Slovak Garden experienced extremely difficult times, having to fight daily for its survival. Andrew F. Hudak Jr. became the president in 1983 and began creating stability within the Slovak Garden. In the late seventies, Mrs. Frances Smrcek bequeathed almost ninety two thousand dollars to the Slovak Garden. Unfortunately, a lengthy lawsuit ensued over the funds. Finally, on October 23, 1986, in the final settlement, The Slovak Garden, Inc. received \$59,486.97 from her estate. To honor her memory, the swimming pool was built. A memorial plaque commending her commitment to the Slovak Garden is located by the pool. The Gazebo and shuffle board court were also built during the same period and are available for use by all the tenants. In 1985 the east building apartments on Jergo Rd. were expanded and completely remodeled. During the second half of the eighties, the library and museum also become a reality. Mr. & Mrs. Kucej made a very generous donation to the library fund and many other Slovak individuals contributed books, magazines, postal stamps, kroje, and various Slovak artifacts. During the late eighties, the Slovak Garden also built two modern duplexes on Jergo Rd.



From left: Milan Dvorecky, Mrs. Maria Kupcik and Jan Dvorecky

On August 31, 1997, Andrew F. Hudak, Jr., resigned as the

president of the Slovak Garden. The board of directors accepted the resignation and I, Frank Rudzik, being the incumbent vice-president, assumed the position of the president of The Slovak Garden, Inc. on September 1, 1997. During the Annual Convention in March 1999, I was re-elected as the president for the next three year term.

In 1998 we setup a computerized system of record keeping, creating efficiency within the organization and improving its day-to-day operations. The computer allowed for the in-house publishing of the Floridský Slovák, reducing the cost of the newsletter. The cost of yearly publishing is around five thousand dollars, saving the organization thousands of dollars. In the past, the cost of publishing the newsletter ranged between eight to eleven thousand dollars. The Floridský Slovák is one of the first Slovak magazines to be in color. It has many pictures and articles related to life at the Slovak Garden.

We developed a new budgeting process and business plan within the organization. We focused funds on improving the exterior look of the Slovak Garden. Before we implemented the new plan, the income from the apartments was very low, as a result of the high vacancy rate. A majority of the apartments needed serious remodeling and modernization. Some of the buildings also had extensive termite damage.

During 1998, a group of devoted people, Jan Dvorecky, Peter Kucera, Peter Salling, John Murza, Alojz Tomas, Milan Dvorecky, Nick Badida and Marcel Pechan, remodeled the storage building and converted it into the Small Social Hall. The hall is approximately 800 sq. ft. and has an attached patio of about 500 sq. ft. The room has a hot water heater, refrigerator, and central air-conditioning. The interior walls were decorated with beautiful hand painted Slovak city seals by Milan Dvorecky. We are very proud of what we have created from two obsolete storage rooms filled with unnecessary material. The room is great for smaller social events throughout the year.

. On January 13, 1999, a crucial mediation meeting took place between the Slovak Garden and Seminole County representatives to negotiate the settlement regarding the land purchased by the government in order to expand Howell Branch Road. I attended the meeting with Vice-President, Jan Dvorecky, Secretary, Lukas Pituch, and legal advisor, Hugh Palmer. Our persistence and conviction in making sure the organization received just compensation for our inconveniences positively influenced the

decisions that were made at the mediation meetings. The problem with not having an option to turn left at the main entrance of the Slovak Garden was also presented at the mediation meeting. We proposed a new private road on the back of our property, providing a safe exit. As a result of our negotiations, the Slovak Garden received \$252,000 from the county to compensate the organization for the necessary restructuring.

During 1999, many exciting things happened at the Slovak Garden. We hosted some of the top Slovak actors from the National Theater in Bratislava. They performed comedy plays to an over-anticipated crowd. That year we began organizing breakfasts for the tenants. Their purpose was to celebrate different holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. It was a great time to share our thoughts, suggestions and future plans.

In December, the City of Orlando organized a show called "International Christmas Holidays." Many different nationalities participated: the Slovak Garden represented our homeland, Slovakia. Our room was called The Slovak Family at Christmas Eve and contained original traditional Slovak decorations. I was happy that we had the opportunity to promote the Slovak culture, tradition, as well as the Slovak Garden to people in the Orlando area. Many other accomplishments have been reached. A group of devoted people within our organization united to facilitate progress. We contributed many hours, our skill and labor to the Slovak Garden. I would like to take you through a walk of all the extensive progress that took place within the last three years.

A beautiful new social hall and patio was completed, and many activities were organized for the Slovak Garden tenants and members in the new Social Hall. We also added a new Kenmore side-by-side refrigerator and a new sound system. Cracks in the walls, damaged soffits and the roof were repaired in Apartments 9 & 10. Many of the problems on this building were related to the recent road construction and the aging of the building itself. The whole Duplex also has new exterior paint. We completely remodeled many apartments. New kitchen cabinets, appliances, lighting and flooring were installed in 4, 10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23 and 27. Apartments received new stoves, refrigerators and bathroom upgrades.

In the great social hall, a bad underground water leak was fixed. and a portion of the concrete floor was removed in the men's restroom. The bathroom plumbing was repaired, and the exterior walls were repainted. During the last months of 1999, we also

finished the complete remodeling of both offices and the museum. All walls were painted and a decorative texture finish was applied. The AC unit duct work was repaired and modified, and a new ceiling was installed. The carpet and furniture were also upgraded in both offices. New vinyl windows and carpet were installed in the gazebo thanks to a generous donation from Mr. & Mrs. Justin Vesniak and the president of the National Slovak Society, Mr. David Blazek.

During January and February of 2000, construction of the new road, Orava lane, and the paved parking areas was completed. The developed areas gave the Garden a new look. More than thirty exterior low energy lights were also installed throughout the Slovak Garden. This series of sidewalks, parking lots, roads, and exterior lighting throughout our property positively changed the overall image of the Slovak Garden. Our residents can walk around the garden and enjoy their stay here. The last several dry years have forced the Garden to continue with the expansion of the irrigation system. Today, we have five sprinkler systems with a total of 37 zones. Most of the common areas are now watered regularly.

I can proudly say that we volunteered a total of three thousand six-hundred labor hours on various projects at the Slovak Garden, saving the Garden approximately twenty-five thousand dollars. The Old House, garage and the Small Social Hall have all been improved with new windows and exterior doors. All the buildings within the Garden also have new exterior paint. Hopefully, they will stay in good condition for many years to come. Two buildings had new plastic soffit installed and twenty four of the apartments also have a new coat of interior paint.

We also improved the landscape of the Garden by planting many trees and shrubs, giving the grounds a revitalized look. In the improved areas, we installed sprinkler systems, lighting, and electrical wiring for the speaker controls.

During the 1992 Annual Convention, all members approved a pay of eighty-five dollars for the Board of Directors for attending any meetings. The president's monthly salary was approved by the convention at one thousand seven-hundred dollars plus a free maintenance fee valued at seventy dollars. During the Board of Directors' meeting in September 1997, the board and I took it upon ourselves, with a strong conviction, to improve the financial strength of the Slovak Garden by lowering our pay. The directors voluntarily accepted pay cuts of thirty-five dollars for each meeting during the last three years. The presidents salary was also

voluntarily reduced to one thousand Dollars. With this act, the board members and president saved the Slovak Garden more than forty-six thousand dollars between September 1997 and December 2001.

We can be really proud of the job that we have performed over the past several years. Besides the significant improvements that we accomplished on our property, we also donated a large part of our salaries back to the Slovak Garden. The higher salaries were approved during the National Slovak Garden Annual Convention by the members in attendance. We chose to receive less than the approved amount. The board of Directors' accepted temporary pay cuts for a few years to strengthen the financial situation of the Slovak Garden. Large portions of our expenses were paid as a result of the money we saved the Slovak Garden through our voluntary pay cuts. As a result of these changes, the Asset and Liability values contained in our balance sheet, as well as our gains as expressed in the income statement, clearly reflect the strength of the Slovak Garden, Inc. As a direct consequence, our association reserve has continued to increase on a yearly basis.

Unfortunately, during 2000 we experienced a few important changes within our organization. Due to the fact that only three residents are qualified to receive a tax benefit from the government, the Seminole County Tax assessor imposed a property tax for the apartments. During my meetings with the County Tax Assessor, I was advised that the material I provided regarding purpose and history of the Slovak Garden was prepared well and sufficient for tax exemption for everything except the apartments.

State laws clearly define conditions and requirements for a tax-exempt apartment complex. I will mention a few of them. The persons must be 62 years of age or older and must submit to the county a proof of yearly income; this minimum yearly income amount is set by the state. The apartment must also be his or her primary residence, and he or she cannot own another house nor have a second residence. These and many more strict conditions are simply impossible for the Slovak Garden to adhere to. We only have three residents at the Garden that qualify under the current laws. In order to maintain financial stability and continue to exist, the Slovak Garden has opened its doors to all Slovaks. Over the last three years, we have occupied virtually every apartment and, as a result, produced strong cash flows over the last few years.

We recently also had the privilege, among other Slovak organizations, to host the Slovak Republic Ministry of Defense

Delegates. They met with a group of our members and answered many questions that we had to offer. It was my honor to receive a beautiful plaque on behalf of the Slovak Garden from the Minister of Defense, Pavol Kanis. It is now on display in the Slovak Garden Museum.

On September 9, 2000, we hosted a folk dance group called, "Technik" from Bratislava, Slovakia. The group visited the Slovak Garden and performed dances from many regions of Slovakia. They also performed at the Walt Disney World EPCOT theme park on several occasions. It was a great promotion for the Slovak nation and Slovak culture. Perhaps the group provided inspiration for the formation of our own ensemble. Soon after their visit, we formed the Tatra folk assembly group sponsored by the Slovak Garden. The Members of Tatra include: Jerry J. Krupa, manager, Milan Dvorecky, musical conductor, Alojz Thomas keyboard, and singers Jan Dvorecky, Martha Volosin, Helen Rudzik, Maria Krupa, Eva Rudzik, and Peter Salling. Since 2000, the group has performed several times on various occasions at the Slovak Garden and other festivals in the Orlando area. During the first weekend in October, we organized the second Slovakfest. It was a great party event though a hurricane discouraged some fellow Slovaks from attending.

Many Slovaks from various parts of the world enjoy gracious living at the Slovak Garden. What was once a farm in Central Florida is now a complete Slovak cultural, housing and retirement community. Slovaks should memorialize the founders and benefactors who made this dream a reality for Slovak Americans. The Slovak Garden has twenty-six apartments, two social centers, a library and museum. The Slovak Garden publishes up to 1500 quarterly copies of the newspaper "The Floridian Slovak" informing its members, residents, and Slovak communities worldwide of the enviable life and opportunities in Florida. Membership in the Slovak Garden varies between 450 and 700 individuals.

As the only Slovak non-profit religious, charitable and educational institution in the state of Florida, it will remain the property of Slovak Americans forever; but it will only sustain itself if all of us are willing to support, contribute to and defend our organization. One practical way to do so is to visit us when you visit Florida and see for yourselves the wonderful work that is being done here. The Slovak Garden promotes Slovak culture, heritage, music, and language, as well as provides modest accommodations to Slovak Americans. The apartments rent from \$300.00 to \$625.00 per

month, depending on the size of the unit, plus any utility charges. The Slovak Garden apartments consist of efficiency, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units. Residents of The Slovak Garden have an option to rent any apartment of their choice, under the terms and conditions approved by the rental committee and the Slovak Garden Board of Directors. Residents of the Slovak Garden must be of Slovak descent; in case of marriage, at least one partner must be of Slovak heritage.

The membership committee and the Slovak Garden National Convention approve membership fees at the Slovak Garden; currently the fee is ten dollars annually per member. The fee includes a subscription to "The Floridian Slovak", Slovak Garden's newspaper. Residents must also be members of the Slovak Garden to reside in its residential community.

The Slovak Garden looks forward to the twenty-first century to serve the needs, as a cultural and housing community of many more Slovak Americans. The Slovak Cultural Center will continue to promote the educational and cultural aspects of the Slovak Nation for Slovak Americans through its many activities. It operates a full time library and museum that is open daily (from 9:30 A.M. until 5:00 P.M) to the public and free of charge. This is the only Slovak-American library and museum in the Southeastern United States. The Slovak Garden Publishes, "Floridský Slovák," a quarterly 16 page bilingual (Slovak and English) newspaper. It informs Slovak Americans of their culture, life in Florida, and promotes Slovak music and heritage among its members. Many copies of the newspaper are sent to the Slovak cultural institutions in Slovakia and throughout the world.

The quarterly publication is sent to all members of the Slovak Garden informing them of the Slovak Garden's activities and daily life in Florida. Since 1952, the Slovak Garden has sponsored an annual "Slovak Day." In 1998 we also began an annual SlovakFest at the Slovak Garden Cultural Center. On Slovak Day attendance varies from 300 to 1000 people, depending largely on the weather conditions in Florida and other parts of the country. Those in attendance are provided with an authentic Slovak dinner, Slovak music and a cultural program.

During the program, one distinguished member or a prominent Slovak American figure is honored as the "Slovak Man/Woman of the Year" and awarded an honorary plaque in recognition of his or her life long dedication to the Slovak culture and heritage in America. Attendants of the "Slovak Day" come from all parts of

the United States, Canada and Slovakia. Fellowship dinners are sponsored throughout the year to commemorate various dates and holidays providing traditional Slovak foods, dance music and sing-a-long sessions. Special days, such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, Easter, and the Harvest are celebrated at the Slovak Garden. Attendance at the events varies from sixty to one-hundred fifty people, depending mostly on the feast being celebrated and the time of the year.

We maintain close contact with numerous Slovak-American newspapers and periodicals. The Slovak Garden also collaborates with Slovak radio programs in the United States and around the world by mailing and faxing them general information on the Slovak life, culture, tourism and activities in Florida and the United States. We have developed strong relations with the American Embassy in Slovakia and The Slovak Embassy in Washington, D.C., consisting of the Ministries of Culture, Foreign Affairs and Tourism of the Republic of Slovakia. We continuously furnish these organizations with information about Slovak life and activities in America.

Our organization assists Slovak groups and individuals such as students, business persons, government officials and professors visiting the Florida and the United States. The Slovak Garden has established an annual scholarship program awarding three students that compose an exemplary essay about Slovak history, heritage and culture. We encourage Slovak residents of the United States to be moral, loyal and dedicated citizens. The Slovak Garden also assists Slovak individuals in filing essential documents. We also encourage travelers to understand their Slovak heritage and those of non-Slovak heritage to become better acquainted with Slovakia. We translate documents and letters for those who have difficulty with either the Slovak or English language. Our "Floridský Slovák" and other publications are offered for sale in the library/museum during the Slovak Day celebration, the Fellowship Dinners and other events related to Slovak culture and heritage. We also maintain files on prominent Slovak personalities who perpetuated their Slovak heritage and played an important role in the development of the United States.

The Slovak Garden supports various Slovak non-profit organizations, such as Slovak newspapers, periodicals, radio programs and calendars with modest financial assistance to further promote Slovak culture and heritage. We also regularly furnish articles and news worthy items related to the Slovak Garden, Slovak culture and heritage, and the conditions in Florida. Our

organization is committed to providing modest low cost housing for Slovak Americans who are compelled by various reasons to relocate to Florida, but are financially unable to purchase their own home. We also maintain strong contact with various Slovak-American fraternal, social and cultural organizations in America to support their establishment of branches in Florida. We continue our commitment to exchange books, bulletins and artifacts with various organizations to perpetuate our cause.

Our future will continue with further development of the Slovak Garden through various large projects. We look forward to building an even stronger future. Our goal is to continue promoting Slovak language, culture and heritage, as well as maintaining the financial health of our organization.