

Diana's visit: Prague fascinated her as a city. In Bratislava, she was enchanted by the people

On her visit to the Slovak capital 30 years ago, Princess Diana opened a section for the visually handicapped at a local library.



Princess Diana cuts a ribbon at Bratislava Municipal Library on May 8, 1991. (Source: Bratislava Municipal Library)

For many Bratislavans, May 8, 1991 was a truly royal day. Princess Diana paid a visit to the Slovak capital for the first and the last time, living up to her reputation as the “queen of people’s hearts”.

With the world marking what would have been Princess Diana’s 60th birthday this July 1, people in Slovakia recall the short visit from 30 years ago, during which the princess made an impact by opening a section for the visually handicapped at Bratislava Municipal Library.

“She was very relaxed,” Eleonóra Klepáčová told *The Slovak Spectator*. Klepáčová was the wife of then deputy chair of the Slovak National Council, who accompanied the princess to all the prearranged places around the city.

Vividly remembering his meeting with the Princess of Wales, President of the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union, Branislav Mamojka, said: “She grabbed my hand and held it for about 30 minutes as I showed her around the new section.”

He was not the only one to meet and interact with Princess Diana, despite high security measures.



Princess Diana talks to Bratislava residents during her visit to the city. (Source: TASR)

As she was walking in a square, an older lady waved at her and the princess approached her to listen to what that lady had to say, despite security guards pulling the princess away. She also came and listened to a group of high school students who were singing the Scottish folk song *My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean*.

Although the trip lasted only five hours, making up just a small part of a few days' visit to Czechoslovakia upon invitation from President Václav Havel, the 29-year-old princess found herself at the centre of a few amusing incidents and, according to Klepáčová, fell in love with Bratislava's people.

Princess Diana's expensive gift

The Princess of Wales must have particularly enjoyed her visit to the library, as suggested by a letter written by her Lady-in-Waiting Anne Beckwith-Smith right after the visit.

“The Princess was very pleased to meet some of the people who use the Centre and was most touched by the warmth of her reception throughout the visit.”

The preparations to open the new library section took several months. Excited about the idea, people from the British embassy in Prague – there was no embassy in Bratislava 30 years ago – and from the princess’ team visited the library several times to see if everything would be ready by early May.

“To this day, I remember how concentrated I was, hoping that nothing would go wrong,” former municipal library head Elena Veľasová said about the big day. “Everything was planned in detail.”

Still, a small incident happened right at the beginning of Diana’s arrival.

A tile in the toilet fell off the wall right after the princess ran in. Veľasová’s nose soon wrinkled up.

Paying no attention to the tile, Princess Diana went on to sign a charter, which can be seen in the library, and open the new section on Klariská Street. She also donated an expensive Voyager electronic visual aid to the library.

Diana’s honest conversations

The Princess of Wales then grabbed Mamojka, who introduced her to other visually handicapped library patrons.

He told *The Slovak Spectator* the whole event was somewhat staged, including the selection of visually handicapped people allowed in the library, due to the protection of Diana.

“She understood the situation,” Mamojka said. “She knew those people came because of her either way.”

Though nobody was allowed to ask her a question, it did not matter as she had plenty on her lips, asking the visually handicapped how and when they lost their sight, what their profession was, or what books they were reading.

“She also stopped by a library patron who was listening to music, and she herself wanted to identify the artist. She managed to recognise Peter Dvorský,” the *Práca* newspaper wrote on May 21, 1991.

Being the patron of the Royal School for the Blind in the UK, Diana’s interest in the stories of visually handicapped people in Bratislava was not surprising. However, this cannot be claimed

about her straightforward questions posed in the conversations with these people, some of which touched on taboo subjects, or at least seen as taboo in this part of Europe.

“She wanted to know the things that we would not have asked if we had felt they would make people uncomfortable,” Klepáčová said. “But she went on.”

Diana was supposed to spend 25 minutes in the library, but she talked to the visually handicapped for an hour. People approached by The Slovak Spectator said she was very compassionate, kind and made the patrons feel important.

“It did not appear to me that she was bothered by protocol. She was spontaneous,” Mamojka said, emphasising that the princess knew a lot about the problems of visually handicapped people.

Diana’s autograph

The Princess of Wales had visited Bratislava Castle prior to her arrival to the library, where she had inspected the Treasury Museum exhibiting the country’s most exciting artefacts, including the Venus of Moravany – a tiny figure of a nude female carved from a mammoth tusk 25,000 years old.

When [one of the Slovak dailies](#) approached Klepáčová 14 years ago asking her about Diana’s visit, she mentioned how the princess had leaned against a display case with the precious figure, which nearly fell.

“She reacted with a disarming smile, just like any normal person,” Klepáčová then recalled.

The princess received several gifts while in Bratislava, such as books from the library and a replica of the Venus. And Klepáčová managed to get a gift for her daughter – Diana’s autograph.

“We asked her for an autograph during lunch at the Government’s Office, which she agreed to,” Klepáčová told The Slovak Spectator. She added that a bodyguard first confiscated the autograph, but the guard soon had to return it to Klepáčová’s husband following Diana’s intervention.

Shivering princess in a cheap coat

After the lunch with politicians, the princess and her husband, Prince Charles, ended their trip at another castle in the Slovak capital, Devín Castle, where historian Štefan Holčík awaited them.

Although it was May, the afternoon in Devín was blustery. As soon as Klepáčová saw the princess wearing only a thin pink-purple outfit, she said to herself that Diana must have liked cold weather.

“Holčík took off his overcoat and put it around her,” she said. “Everyone froze at what they were witnessing but Diana gladly accepted the overcoat.”

The historian declined to comment on this memory and the meeting with the royal couple. However, years ago, on the fifth anniversary of the visit, he told the *Nedel'na Pravda* newspaper that the Princess of Wales was really bright, referring to her qualified reactions to his lecture on the Celts living in the Middle Danube area. And he returned to the “coat scandal” as well.

“As we were leaving the castle, many English journalists who were eager to learn the brand of my overcoat pounced on me.”

Little did they know that Holčík had bought his beige overcoat, made in the Vzorodev cooperative in Stará Ľubovňa, eastern Slovakia, in a cheap clothing shop, the *Národná Obroda* newspaper reported on May 10, 1991.



The iconic moment: Historian Štefan Holčík puts his overcoat around Princess Diana as she freezes at Devín Castle. (Source: TASR)

Enchanted by Bratislavans

Thirty years after the royal tour, detailed memories of those who met Princess Diana are fading although the most powerful ones have remained.

“We spoke about children,” Klepáčová said. “Diana herself told me that she missed her boys and that she had been gone for so long and wished to be with them.” She was one of the few people

who could actually ask the princess questions even though it was hard to get close to her: “Diana was very well-protected.”

Yet, Klepáčová did not need to ask the princess about her eating disorder. Everywhere we arrived, she said, Diana went to the toilet first. And what about the problems in her marriage? Former library head Veřasová said that the princess had been witty and enjoyed herself during the visit but, simultaneously, appeared sad.

“I did not see a divorce coming. They played it well,” Klepáčová said. Charles and Diana separated in 1992. They finally divorced four years later.

What the Princess of Wales could not pretend was her easygoingness, her human approach, and the art of diplomacy, which she proved when she confessed that Prague fascinated her as a city but in Bratislava she was enchanted by people.

“She did not act like a royal,” Veřasová concluded. “It was not her style.”

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