

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#79 • Season 3 • Episode 18

1/14/2026

"Prague, by the numbers"

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

"Prague, by the numbers"

#79 - Season 3; Episode 18

1/14/2026

Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim. Guests: Lillian and Larry

Prague, the City of 100 Spires, and the starting point for Lillian, Larry, Jan, & Rob's 2nd Viking River Cruise through Central Europe. Our hosts and guests recount their most significant memories of their trip, with advice on how to prioritize this vast and rich city.

[Music]

JIM (voice-over): This is "Prague, by the numbers." Famous as "The City of 100 Spires," though most counts put it at well over 500. City of thousands of years of history. City of hundreds of years of architecture. City straddling two sides of the Vltava River. City that is the setting for over 80 movies such as Amadeus, Mission Impossible, SpiderMan; Far From Home, The Bourne Identity, and Casino Royale. That one's for Deanna. She knows why. As we make our way, listen for the numbers our guests relate. They tell a story all their own. And our four travelers, Lillian, Larry, Jan, and Rob, have just two days and three nights to explore as much as they can, and less than 25 minutes to tell us all about it. So let's get started.

[Music]

JIM (voice-over): Lillian and Larry joined us by way of video conference.

JIM: When we had Jan and Robb's brother-in-law Russ Dobney with us, he told us a way to calculate people's age. And he said the longer the cruise, the older the clientele. So I would never do anything so gauche as to ask you your ages, but I will ask you, how long was this tour?

LARRY: We were eight days on the Viking boat.

JIM: Okay, so that's middle age. Good.

LARRY: And we were four days pre and two days post.

JIM: That's pushing retirement age. Okay, we're there. What did you do ahead of time to get yourself ready for Prague?

LILLIAN: First thing is, when you're looking at a pre-extension, that's a good idea to do because if your flight is late or you have any issues, uh, you've got that pre-extension; you don't worry about missing your ship. Then when you're looking at those pre-extensions, you'll see in very tiny little letters "fully guided" on some of them. And that "fully guided" means that you have someone that is with you every step of the way. So that being said, "fully guided," you still want to know—you pay a lot of money for these things, so you still want to know, "What, what are we going to do when we get there? And what are we going to do in our free time." So number one, I watched a lot of videos. For example, there's somebody called "The Honest Tour Guide." Very interesting. Rick Steves. And you know

when you watch these videos, then you get a feel for where you're going and you have a sense of familiarity with the area. And then different guides. stress different, for lack of a better word, attractions. So things that I learned from this what to avoid at night where not to be what areas. There's a guide that talks about the beer and the food and the and the culture and you know what to eat, which food is actually touristy, which walk-up stands not to go to, the best treats in Prague, the best cafes, places that Rick Steve's ate. Even though you have an excursion to the Castle District in Prague, to go into the castle ,or to go into Saint Vetus [VEE-tus]? Vitus [VYE-tus]?...

ROB: Vitus [VEE-tus], yeah.

LILLIAN: ...Cathedral, you have to have tickets. So these are things you learn ahead of time. There are walking tours out there that you can look at that will show you the best way to get around. I looked at what trams to take. 22 and 23, to get you from where the hotel was to Castle District or back. Different ways of walking through the city. Another thing I look at is - I always say this - when is the full moon? Some of the most beautiful things I remember is traveling and looking out at a full moon. Funicular in Prague, but it was closed. You learn this up front, so you're not walking over to something and then finding out, "Oh, it's closed. We've walked a mile." No. So this is why you do this research. The Strahov Monastery has a little restaurant, beautiful gallery, and museum. And it's all walkable. Petřín Hill, that whole area is very walkable. But you learn that before you go, you know, and you're not wasting time trying to figure out, "Well, now what are we gonna do? We got an hour."

ROB: Right.

LILLIAN: We don't roll that way. We make sure that we have more to do than we can possibly do.

ROB: You approach it like, "Well, this is the only time we're gonna be here, like it's a one-time deal, and we want to do as much as we can, see as many of the sites as possible, and you can't do that if you don't know where you're going once you get there. And I know Lil and Jan did a lot of the legwork on this one.

JAN: I don't have the color-coded map that Lil has, but I tried to get extra pens, but I failed. For instance, when we were in Prague, one of the places we went on a tour was up to the Castle Mount. Lil made a really important point that we are up there, we're seeing these things, but going into them wasn't part of the tour. Like, you have to look for the small print. Like, I wanted to go into that cathedral or I wanted to go into the monastery. They weren't part of the tour, just walking by or seeing them from afar. So we were able to get the tickets that we needed or plan to go to the monastery. One of my favorite ways to know what to do when you go someplace is, when somebody else has been there and they talk about it, that kind of lights a fire in me. So Jim and Dee had been to Prague. They loved that city. And they stayed at that monastery that we got to go see, and they brought me back a t-shirt with a picture of the library. So, if I have a chance, I'm gonna go see that library. The libraries and cathedrals are the things that I'm interested in for both the architecture and the history of the place. So, Prague is a city that is simply beautiful. Beautiful in the day, beautiful at night, the architecture. A special thing we did there was, we both knew Einstein had spent time in that city, as had other—Mozart, there were other people there, but Einstein ate at this one cafe, and apparently he was like a repeat customer. So as we researched that cafe and found out that actually they had good food. It wasn't just that

Einstein had walked through the door, we knew we wanted to get to that cafe and that's the place we went to eat. You know, they had signs up about when Einstein had been there. So what a cool thing to be able to go into a place have a great meal and know Einstein used to eat here and gather with friends. It was just, um, those are the kind of experiences that we share with Lil and Larry that make it—they enrich the trip.

LARRY: We need more days in Prague or we have to go back.

ROB: Yeah, that's true.

LILLIAN: [...] that I was hoping that at Café Louvre that there was something in the food that boosted Einstein's brain power, and that was—'cause I thought I might come out a genius. Wouldn't that be great?

DEE: I have a question about Prague. Was the opera house operating at the time you were there?

ROB: I don't remember...

DEE: Okay.

ROB: ...except that we did not go in. I know that.

DEE: Right. That's—I want us to go back to Prague to see an opera in the Estates Theater. I think that would be so cool.

JAN: All right. So we went by the theater on the tour. They noted that Don Giovanni had been performed there, that Mozart had been there. So yeah, it was cool to go by and see it.

LARRY: We did as much as we could possibly do. And then we ran out of time in Prague, two and a half days. And so that's why you need to go back and there's more to see.

LILLIAN: We never have a moment where we say, "Gosh, what are we gonna do now?" It's never—that never happens.

ROB: No, that's true. One of the things that I enjoy about spending multiple days in a place is you get to see the city at night. That first day we got there, after our little orientation meeting with Martin, he took us right out. We went to Wenceslas Square, which was real close to the hotel, and just walking around at night, lots of people out, people going to eat, people just walking the streets. I enjoy the nighttime. Cities are lit up. Budapest is gorgeous at night with the buildings lit up the way they are. So I enjoy the nighttime, being able to just, you know, wander at night.

LILLIAN: That's one of the benefits of going in November, December. You have shorter days. So you do experience the nighttime. without having to be out extremely late.

ROB: Yes.

LILLIAN: With as much as we do. Actually walked, I believe...

LARRY: 69 miles.

LILLIAN: ...69 miles. You know, with as much as what we do, you can still experience the nighttime and the beauty of the city at night without being out super late.

JAN: Yeah.

LILLIAN: So that's just the benefits of traveling in the winter or late fall.

ROBB: Yeah.

JAN: Those cities are alive at night. There are all kinds of people, all ages, out and about the city. So obviously we're in a central area. I never felt unsafe. I felt like Life was happening in the streets and that's where you wanted to be. So that part of the experience to me is pretty rich.

ROB: Yeah. Yeah. The next day, the first full day that we had in Prague, we went to the Old Town and then across the Charles Bridge. And then up to the Castle Mount. And we did all that with the guide. But when we got up to the Castle Mount, we separated ourselves because we wanted to go to the Strahov monastery and library, which they never got to in that part of the tour. So we left them and we did that on our own. You know, most of the places if you want to go in and it's a charge for it, you can do that online. So I had gotten the tickets for the monastery and for the library. So we went there and then we stopped and had a drink at the brewery that's part of the little restaurant that was part of that. Then we walked back to the hotel. We walk a lot.

JAN: Go ahead, Larry. You were going to say something about walkin'.

LARRY: You see more when you're walking than you do on a bus. This trip in particular, we actually used the Viking buses as transportation to get us, where we wanted to go, and then we would just tell the guide we're breaking away.

ROB: And there's no pushback ever. I mean they're fine with that. And they will also something for people to know, if in any way you're slowed down, you're just not capable of doing all the walking and everything, they'll accommodate that. They'll provide a tour for you that's a slower pace. You'll maybe get a ride further to where you're going to go or a ride back for people that need that.

JIM: The four of you, do you have an image that says, "This is what I'll always remember about Prague?" Not photographs you've taken so much, but just experience, place, time of day, full moon? What comes to mind that says, "That is the heart and soul of what we did here in Prague?"

LARRY: It's amazing because on my iPhone, every day it'll say, "Here's where you were a month ago," or whatever. "Here's an experience." And we'll—so for the Grand European, I was getting pictures of the four of us in different places. Well, this time I started getting them and I'm like, "Is that from the a year ago?" And then they'll say November 2025. We do take pictures of all of us together, and those are really special to me.

LILLIAN: There's a picture of the four of us before we walk the Charles Bridge...

JAN: Yeah.

LARRY: Yes.

LILLIAN: Looking toward Castle Hill.

ROB: Mm-Hmm.

LILLIAN: You know, the views of the city from Castle Hill are amazing. But that picture of us getting ready to walk across the bridge, that's what I remember of Prague. It's just—it's stunning, you know.

JAN: It was the place. It is the Charles Bridge. And it is that we did it with them. We could stand on that Castle Mount and look at the city by ourselves. But the experience of Prague was about the people we were with. I love that picture of the four of us, the image that'll probably stay with me. That and the Kafka turning head will stay with me.

ROB: Yeah.

[laughter]

LARRY: That view from when we started down the steps from up at the Castle Hill area. And you can see the entire And every turn, it's a different look of the city. I mean, it's just beautiful, magnificent.

JAN: You know, so one of the things we did was we went to see the astronomical clock. That is a tourist attraction that is fascinating. There's nothing you can't determine from looking at that clock if you know how to look at it. Which is beyond my knowledge. But it was great to go see y it's like you have to go see it because it's a big deal to see it. And it is fascinating. But that's not the image that'll stay with me from the city. That's just something we got to do and it was fascinating. It's gonna be those views like we had, you know, that first day that are kind of locked in my head.

ROB: For me, I think it's the walks at night on Wenceslaus Square, just up and down that—I mean it's weird. It's not a square. It's a long street, you know, kind of, but it's all pedestrian and it was, you know, it was a fall brisk night. The building at the end was all lit up and there's a statue of I think it's Wenceslasu on the horse there. And there was a full moon.

JAN: It was a full moon, Lil.

ROB: It was a full moon. And yeah, I just I really enjoyed that area.

LILLIAN: By the way, I checked back through my notes on that first day where we did the walk through Old Town and then up to Castle Hill and then back down and it says, "And we went, we took a fifteen minute bathroom break and then we went to dinner." So that's how busy that day was. So.

ROB: Yeah, that was a busy day.

JAN: That was crazy. We do count on Lil's journaling to remember certain things, names of people, stuff like that.

JIM: You mentioned something about a Kafka head. What was that?

ROB: There's an artist who has created this um—First of all, Kafka is a big deal in the Czech Republic, in Prague in particular. There are a couple of different statues of him that we saw, but this is a, this is a head that's made of, uh, how do you describe it? It's layered.

JAN: Sections, like.

ROB: Sections, and each section rotates individually.

JIM: It's like a stack of pancakes.

ROB: Exactly. And it spins around. So, you know, it's this face facing you, and then all of a sudden it starts to turn and then slowly the face turns a quarter turn or a half turn and then it comes back and then sometimes it rotates from the top and the bottom. It's just fascinating to watch. And then there's light displayed on it, so it changes color all the time. And we actually I don't know. Did we know about that beforehand? Was that something we knew beforehand, Lil?

JAN: Yeah, Lil knew.

LARRY: We knew about it, but we stumbled upon it.

LILLIAN: It's one of those things, we don't know how to get to it from here, but somehow, we knew we wanted to see it, but we weren't sure exactly. And we just stumbled on it.

LARRY: What happened was, we were walking back from Café Louvre. After our first night there, it was actually our first night in Prague. And we passed this alley. And the wind coming from the alley was so cold that I turned to see what it was, and it looked like there was a festival or a carnival or something down there at the end of the alley. And Rob and I were looking like, "What is that?" Because it was moving at the time

JAN: You know, it's interesting. One of his main works is a book called—First of all, he wrote a lot of dark, surreal literature, none of which I've read, because I don't go into the dark and surreal literature. But he wrote one of his famous works is called Metamorphosis, and as I've thought about it, I've thought that head kind of captures what metamorphosis would be. It's that change that takes place. Lil, you must have thought of this, too, because you're smiling.

LILLIAN: Well, I know you can't see my phone, but I pulled it up and, yeah, it's a book about a man that wakes up and finds himself somehow transformed into an insect. And it the book is about him trying to adapt to this new body. So that whole sculpture is sort of—It's called "Metamorphosis" and it's sort of a, I don't know, a nod to this book.

JAN: Yeah. Yeah.

JIM: Oh, is it called "Metamorphosis"?

ROB: Not that...

LILLIAN: Yes.

ROB: ...but there's another one that is called that.

JIM: Okay.

ROB: The the one of him with the hole. And remember she said, "Can you find the—can you find the insect?"

JAN: Oh right.

ROB: And it was in the base...

JAN: I forgot about that.

ROB: ...of the thing. Yeah.

JAN: Anyway, art in any city like that is fascinating. And...

LARRY: The upside down horse.

JAN: The upside down horse.

ROB: That was—that—I didn't know about that one. That one was very dark. King Wenceslas riding an upside down dead horse. It was kind of weird.

LILLIAN: A lot of people will meet and say, okay, we'll meet under the upside down horse, I guess, you know. Actually Rick Steves, it's in Rick Steve's video, as I recall.

JAN: Yes.

JIM: We did the whole thing on foot, didn't we?

DEE: Yeah. We would walk from the monastery. They had that little exit that took us down the hill where the vineyard was.

JIM: Mm-Hmm.

DEE: And we would go into the city that way.

JIM: Yeah.

DEE: From the monastery you could look out and see the entire city.

ROB: Yes.

DEE: Yeah.

ROB: Yeah. That's a great view.

LILLIAN: See some great views of like Petřín Tower.

ROB: I read the, uh, I read the latest Dan Brown book, which is said in Prague.

DEE: Is it good?

ROB: Yeah, it's Dan Brown.

DEE: Yeah, okay.

ROB: But a lot of the places you know, that tower is one of the one of the focal points in the story. The American Embassy is one of the focal points in the story, which you can see from the from the castle. The Charles Bridge, all of that. Yeah. Very interesting.

JIM: So if you went back to Prague, what would take you back there?

LARRY: Well, we missed like the tunnel of books.

JAN: Yes. Thank you, Larry.

LARRY: And we also did not, we were so squeezed on time that we missed the castle, inside the castle. But we did get the cathedral and we got the monastery.

ROB: The castle's interesting because it's not a single building. We're told it's the largest castle complex in the world. There are lots of separate buildings in it. We didn't get to go in

the one where they did the jousting, indoor jousting with the horses. There was a great big building up there, beautiful, gorgeous building that, was a Starbucks.

DEE: Oh, *[laughing]*

ROB: Yeah. I could—It was a, I mean, it's like, so out of place, but it's—there it was. In the old town square, there were a lot of other things we could have done. We saw the clock. But we didn't go in Saint Nicholas Church. We didn't go—there was another church.

JAN: [Church of our Lady before] Tyn ["tin"].

ROB: The Tyn ["tin"] or Tyne [TINE] or whatever it is. We didn't go in there, which I'd like to do. And there was. some another building about Einstein.

JAN: There was another it was that—I don't know what it was. There was a café on the first floor, but it was that white building with the black trim. That was an Einstein site, too.

JIM: You said something about a tunnel of books, or something like that?

LARRY: Jan will know more about that.

JIM: What's the tunnel of books?

JAN: The public library in Prague has this big, uh, tower that's made of books and it's got an opening in it, opening in the tower and you can go and look in and through mirrors they've created this eternal tunnel down that you can look down and see books forever. I love seeing a line of people in a library. You know, that's a cool thing to me. So amazingly there were so many people lined up, and they were taking so long to take their pictures that we didn't get to go and look down in that. I mean, we had other things that we had to do. So Lil and I went in so we could see it from outside, but we never got to look through and look down this image of all these books that go on forever. It's one of those "if you're in Prague, go see this Tower of Books," and we tried, but we just couldn't get our heads in the hole, so to speak.

JIM: What's the number one thing to eat in Prague?

JAN: Well, it's known for it it's beer.

ROB: Yeah, well it's beer, yes.

JAN: You can see American food in every major city. We didn't waste any time with that. We went toward the things we knew were local to that area, food from that area. Which is why, truth be told, you know, you do try the beer in Prague because that's what they do. So.

LILLIAN: When you talk about Prague, though, we can't not talk about the second day in Prague when we went to the Jewish Quarter.

ROB: Yes.

LILLIAN: And how uh moving that was to go to the Spanish synagogue where the Nazis stored all of the valuables that they took from the Jewish people. The old new synagogue or new old synagogue where there's 77,000 names etched on the walls.

ROB: The old new synagogue was the one where they've been worshipping for 700 years.

JAN: The Pinkas Synagogue.

ROB: The Pinkas Synagogue is where the names were on the wall. Yeah. 80,000.

LARRY: Was that where the drawings were from the little kids?

ROB: Yeah.

JAN: Yes.

LARRY: Emotional and feel like you're getting beat up when you—that part of history and you're, like, don't understand how this...

LILLIAN: Yeah, the graveyards where, the well the one graveyard in in the Jewish Quarter where the bodies are buried six or seven deep, is it seven? The tombstones are all leaning one on another because they don't have, they didn't have the room. And so they stacked, they stacked the bodies in there.

LARRY: It was ironic because our guide got emotional at one point during that tour and it was—She started tearing up and then we're like...

LILLIAN: And and so there's quite a history there in Prague that is something that probably all should know.

JAN: One of the great things I think about the places that we've gone on both of these tours is there's been a focus of the Jewish people in every community. We've been very impacted by being able to go and see those places as opposed to learning about them from the States. When you're looking at history and you're looking across at, say, Germany and what happened during World War II, you have a certain view of it. There's a different view when you're walking the streets of where people lived and you recognize how many people—like the walls that Lil is talking about with all the names, and you stand there and you look at these Almost 80,000 names of people from the Czech Republic who were killed during World War II. And Larry mentioned the children's art. There's an art display there of children who were in a concentration camp. And there's this one, I only took one picture, but it was a picture of kids playing in a playground, color picture, that they had drawn and then there's just this black crayon mark that went through all of it. And I'm thinking, "What is a child experiencing that that's their view of life at that moment?" So All of those things enrich my understanding of history and also my understanding of that place where a whole population of people were, um, I don't know the word.

ROB: Exterminated.

JAN: Well, there's that word. Yeah.

LILLIAN: There was a woman artist, an art teacher. She was, she volunteered, obviously, to help the children with art. And so all these different works of art she managed to save or she left there. And she left there to join who her husband, who she knew was going to be killed. And so because she didn't want to go on without him.

JIM (voice-over): We heard Lillian mention an art teacher. Her name was Frederica Dicker-Brandeis. She liked to be called Friedl. It is a name well worth noting. Friedl helped organize clandestine art classes for the children of the ghetto at Terezin using art supplies she smuggled in. As we've heard, some of the children's art is preserved today in Prague's

Jewish Museum. Of the 660 child artists represented there, 550 were murdered by the Holocaust. Lillian noted that when Friedl's husband Pavel Brandeis was taken to Auschwitz to face extermination, Friedl volunteered for the next transport so that she could be with him there. But before boarding, she left two suitcases containing 4,500 of the children's drawings to the care of the Girls' Home, where they were hidden in an attic until after the war. Friedl arrived at Auschwitz on October 8, 1944. She was murdered there the next day. Her husband Pavel survived the Holocaust, living until 1971.

Next week, Lillian, Larry, Jan, and Rob revisit Nuremberg. After his first visit, Larry said he would like to give Nuremberg a second chance, which they all did. And what they found this time around was a very different experience. So I'm calling next week's episode "A Tale of Two Cities."

Thank you for your company today. We hope you'll join us again as we are making our way. Until next time