

“Unitarians in Transylvania” (reading)

The story of Unitarians in Transylvania begins in 1566, when Francis David (David Ferenc) began to proclaim an extension of the protestant reformation in Kolozsvár. He caught the attention of John Sigismund, the Prince of Transylvania. Sigismund was drawn by David's central tenet that rejected the dogma of the Trinity and asserted the oneness of God.

In 1568, Sigismund presented the Diet at Torda his proposition to allow religious freedom and give four religions complete equality – Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism, though the term “Unitarian” was not used in Transylvania until 1600. The Diet accepted the Prince's proposition and proclaimed: “In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation likes it, good; if not, no one shall compel them, but they shall keep the preachers whose doctrine they approve. Therefore, none of the Superintendents or others shall annoy or abuse the preachers on account of their religion, according to the previous constitutions, or allow any to be imprisoned or punished by removal from his post on account of his teachings, for faith is the gift of God.”

This was the first declaration of religious freedom in any European country.

Later that year, the Prince sponsored a General Synod at the palace to discuss questions of religion, which he enjoyed. These were as popular then as sports events or rock concerts are today. The debate lasted 10 days, beginning at 5 am each day. The debate was conducted in Hungarian so the populace could understand it. The general belief was that David had won, though the Trinitarians claimed victory. Sigismund himself joined David's movement.

When David returned to Kolozsvár, he was greeted by great throngs of people. Tradition states that he mounted a large boulder on the street and proclaimed “Egy az Isten”, “God is One”. It is said he preached so powerfully that the entire city joined his congregation.

When Sigismund died in 1571, a Catholic prince became ruler. The religious freedom decrees were rescinded. The churches that had been “Unitarian” became Catholic and its followers persecuted. (Even the church where Sigismund and his mother are buried is now a Catholic church.) David was condemned in 1579 and sentenced to life imprisonment, where he died in the Deva Citadel later that year.

The struggles have continued up and down through the years, first with the annexation of Transylvania with Hungary to Austria and the Catholic Hapsburg Empire. Fortunes continued to fluctuate through the World Wars, the transfer of Transylvania to Romania, the Nazi's, the Communists. Even after the overthrow of communism, the struggles continue as the Unitarians to reclaim seized property, teach children in Hungarian schools, and maintain ethnic solidarity.

The Hungarian minority in Romania has joined together in their struggle, so Catholics, Reformed, and Unitarians are all working together to improve conditions for the Hungarians in a country where strong prejudices still must be overcome from the Romanian Orthodox majority.

Conditions are changing slowly. We actually attended an opera in Kolozsvár written by a Hungarian composer and sung in Hungarian. This could not have happened as recently as 5 years ago.

The Partner Church Program in the US, of which we are a part, is another effort to help the Unitarians, a minority within the Hungarian minority, restore and conserve their historic religious roots. As their bishop has stated, "In America, Unitarianism is a movement; in Transylvania, it is a tradition.

REFLECTIONS

"Lupeny and Koppandi Zoltan" by Bill Suiter

When the tall thin young man walked into the hotel lobby in Budapest at the appointed time, I knew it must be Koppandi Zoltan, as he would be addressed in Hungarian, or Zoli as we grew to know him over the two weeks we traveled together.

Zoli is the young minister sent on his first assignment to our Lupeny Partner Church in the coal region of southern Transylvania. There he serves a small church that sits high on a hill overlooking the coal-mining town. The church once belonged to another Protestant sect but was bought for the Unitarians. It is quite a hike up the hill to reach the church, particularly for most of the members who are elderly. But he loves the people and they love him. He chose to stay in Lupeny after his probationary period when he could have asked to be reassigned.

He and his family have been provided with a parish house where they live on the 2nd floor. This building was once a police station during the Communist era. It was given to the church to replace one seized and torn down under the Communists to enlarge the road for coal trucks. Much of the funds our Burlington church has provided our partner have gone into renovating this old building to make it useful and comfortable as a home and congregational meeting place on the first floor. However, lots of work still needs to be done.

In addition to Lupeny, Zoli also serves several other churches, including Deva, about 50 miles away, which is partnered with Appleton, WI. He has another small congregation that meets in a house in Vulcan, close by Lupeny, and a small congregation in Vadjahunyad, near Deva. Recently, he has had the Petrosany church added (we hope temporarily) after his minister friend there was transferred. (We visited that church for the minister's wedding, which Zoli officiated.)

I think I can speak for all of us travelers, or Pilgrims as we were called, that we became very fond of Zoli and his family, Ildiko his wife, who teaches art in a Deva school 2 days a week, and Guszti, his energetic 6 year old son. We all stayed in their home and Ildiko and Guszti traveled with us at different stages of our trip.

Zoli has long ties to Unitarianism. His grandfather was a Unitarian minister whose daughter, Zoli's mother, works in the Bishop's office in Kolozsvár. His brother Boti is also a Unitarian minister in another south Transylvanian church. His father is a retired pathologist. We met all of his family, plus his uncle and family who operated one of the pensiones where we stayed. Our travel and stay with this wonderful family has to be the highlight of the trip for me. When Zoli traveled with us by himself, I even shared a

room with him.

This was my 2nd trip to Hungary and Transylvania and the experience strongly reinforced my own connection to Unitarianism and makes me realize that I am a part of a long historical tradition!

“Impressions of Transylvania” by Bill Klock

Approximately seven hours into our journey from Budapest the train rounded a curve, bursting into what seemed to be an enclosed landscape of lumpy rolling hills, deep valleys, and mountains in the distance. People were working in the fields waving. Leaning from the train window, I was transfixed as the dream scape became reality. The human scale of everything, small houses each with its' orchard, gardens, hayfields (studded with haystacks) being managed by manual labor and the occasional horse, no farm machinery.

Throughout my stay in Transylvania my attention repeatedly returned to the landscape and architecture. In the rural villages particularly, fences and gates defined each house. Many gates were beautifully carved holding birdhouses on top.

Unitarian churches are very much like synagogues, simple and rather austere, expressing an architectural attitude of an "economy of means".

My impression of the cities was that they were well cared for, with beautiful parks; the rural villages were likewise and very much in tune with the landscape.

The "in-between" I call them, for example Lupeny, are in a state of depression, obviously the aftermath of the dark side of communism. Social confusion in Lupeny is revealed by a crumbling infrastructure. High-rise buildings, roads, sidewalks, etc. are in a condition of disrepair. However, the people work around this brokenness and seem to be proud and hopeful.

Although physical contrasts between the cities and the countryside are quite sharp, there were constant reminders of Unitarian influence and presence. Zoli told us about the mutual interfaith respect amongst Catholics, Calvinists and Unitarians.

After 48 years a Unitarian, the Transylvanian journey reinforced my open faith. I witnessed Unitarian history first hand and its' effect on our active religious respect for diversity.

My eyes will never forget Transylvania as a land of enchantment with its' harsh realities and the people who shared so much with us although they had so few creature comforts.

“Transylvanian Memories” by Helen Douglas

As we traveled in our van driven by Tom, a Romanian, wagons pulled by one horse would be bringing hay in for the winter. We would see a shepherd taking cows or goats to pasture. He would pick up one or two from many families in the village in the morning.

After grazing all day in the field, he would return them to the owners each evening.

In the flooded areas, we came across temporary bridges and saw whole bridges that had been taken out by the high water. The original bridge had dropped down and could not be used. The UU villages were very thankful for the contributions by our Society toward the flood relief.

One of my favorite places was a hillside where every year there is gathering of Transylvanian UU's, including youth. At the top is a kopjafa, a pole carved in ancient picture symbols, at the grave of a famous Hungarian. Beautiful carved ceremonial gates are placed down the hillside. The top gates are several hundred years old and as you descend the hill, the gates are newer. It was a damp, rainy day when we were there, but the gates seemed very impressive to me as peace arches. This native woodwork survived the Communists because it was in a remote rural area.

Many homes in the villages we visited had wooden fences with beautiful hand carved Sukler gates. Our slides, photos, and postcard have some examples.

I would like to introduce Eva Diner, who made our trip really special by sharing her family experiences growing up in the area and sharing her language translation. Thank you Eva!

“My Impressions of Our Partner Church Visit” by Eva Diner

It was with great joy and trepidation that I started out on our trip to Lupeny. In 1940, when I was a small child, we lived in Kolozsvar for about six months. I remember only short instances of life there because we left before my fifth birthday. What I remember most was the day the Hungarian Army marched through the city. We watched from the windows of the Hungarian Consulate. The sun was shining and there were countless people on the street, many with Hungarian flags. The soldiers marched between the trucks. People ran up to them and they hugged each other; some were singing, some were crying. Then two soldiers came to the window and one reached up and took me in his arms. The other took my toddler brother and we all marched along in the middle of the street for a short time. A few days later, our family moved back to Hungary.

In late November of that year, we moved to Arad, still under the Romanian government, and lived there until September of 1944. I remember much more from that stay. I went to the Hungarian convent school from kindergarten through second grade. My Mother explained to us, as we got older, that we now lived in Romania, but before this, it was part of our country. My Father worked at the Hungarian Consulate, and on our national holidays we had a big Hungarian flag above the front door. Many people came to walk by and look at the flag. In general, the Romanians did not enforce the rule that only Romanian could be spoken in the streets. We children lived a rather sheltered life. In Arad, it was hard for the Hungarians, but I found this out later, when I was older and my Mother told me about it.

By the summer of 1944, the Americans were bombing cities, so we all went to the country. The villages we passed through were clean, they had sidewalks, and both the Hungarians and Romanians seemed prosperous.

In August 1944 the Hungarian Army arrived in Arad and, my father was recalled to

Hungary. Within a few weeks, we were packed and waiting for a train. Before we could leave, we heard cannons and knew the Russian Army was approaching. That afternoon, my father came home and we children were told to come inside and change our clothes as we were going away for the night to a safer place. My mother quickly packed a few suitcases, took items out of packed boxes, and sent the maid to buy a salami and bread. A man came with a big pushcart to take our luggage. We said goodbye to our maid who left for her village that afternoon. We left that afternoon never to return.

Now, last fall, after 61 years, I had a chance to go back to Transylvania. When Zoli wrote and included the names of the places we were going to visit, I was overjoyed.

Fortunately Zoli came to Budapest and was our guide. We could not have managed without him. I was watching the countryside avidly as I looked out the train window. The contrast between Hungary and Transylvania was quite visible as we crossed the border. I have heard a great deal about the difficulties and hardships that people have undergone in Transylvania, and not just the Hungarians, but the Romanians as well.

In Kolozsvár our driver and a minivan quickly took us to a nearby village where we stayed. On our way to Lupeny, a 1,000 km trip, I saw more of the devastation of the country: the bad roads, the stray dogs in the streets in smaller communities, the gypsy beggars and the many houses needing repair were quite different from what the country was 61 years ago.

Once in Lupeny, we went to the church and met many of the parishioners on Saturday afternoon. What a welcome! We were treated like long lost relatives. We were asked questions, we were hugged and kissed, and refreshments were served. I mentioned that my mother's side of my family was Transylvanian and that my mother was born in Szekelykeresztúr, and my great grandfather was from Simenfalva. Several of the parishioners told me that they were from those places as well.

The next day, Sunday, we had Thanksgiving. I am a humanist, and to me the Lord's Supper has no meaning. Yet we decided that even those of us who did not believe in it would partake of the bread and wine. Zoli spoke in Hungarian and English. Then it was time for the sharing of the bread and wine. First the men went up and were served by Zoli while the women sang a hymn. Then it was the women's turn. The men started to sing, the women stood in a semi circle up front, and Zoli came with the bread and wine. Suddenly everything changed: I felt very moved. I could feel the good will of all the people there. I felt tears in my eyes. I was one of them; we were all one.

That afternoon we went to Vulkan, which is the partner church of Lupeny. As in Lupeny, there are not too many young people. There are about thirty parishioners in Vulkan, most of them older. Again we were welcomed and after the service we talked. One of the women, older than I, said that the Romanians there were quite spiteful and mean in their treatments of Hungarians. Of course, there are very few Hungarians in Vulkan, and even in Lupeny they are a minority.

Being there with my group made me feel that we belonged with the members of our partner church and with all the other Unitarians in a way that I never felt before. My family came from there, they lived there for many hundreds of years, I was at home.

I am so glad that I had this opportunity to be there. We are going to keep in touch and

forge a strong relationship with the people of our partner church.

“My Transylvania Experience” Anna Klock

My visit to Transylvania with the group from our church was more than I ever imagined. To visit our partner church, meet with the people, witness their love and dedication to their Unitarian religion, and listen to the men and women’s voices in song was a memorable experience.

As we entered the city of Deva on our way to Lupeny, I was especially moved by our visit that day to Francis David’s monument in the dungeon of the Deva Citadel. Taking a funicular up the mountain slope and then a short climb up to the remains of the fallen fortress, we entered the spot where Francis David died. As we all held hands in a circle around the large stone, Bill Suiter said a prayer in English and then Zoli sang a prayer in Hungarian. It was a very humbling experience. Paying tribute to someone who was at the foundation of Unitarianism in the 16th century reinforced my roots in the Unitarian faith.

Once settled in Lupeny, where one still sees evidence of the many years of oppression, another memorable experience for me was being entertained by the Lupeny church members at a party in the Parish House. We passed around photos of our individual families and communicated as best we could. A lot of body language was exchanged with one another, and, gratefully, Eva always came to our rescue to translate what the people were saying. We were served drinks and homemade kurtos kolacs, a rolled sugar-coated pastry. Afterward, we were given homemade gifts. The women then began singing childhood songs to the men, and the men sang back to the woman. The men’s voices were quite beautiful.

The thing that impressed me was not just the fellowship we shared that evening, but I had the feeling of people reaching out to us, and we, from a distant world, traveling this long distance, reaching out to them to show that we care and are there to support and build a stronger partner church relationship.

I would urge all of you to take time in your lives to travel to Transylvania and see how important it is to be an active partner church member.