

Journey To Transylvania

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Transylvania is a real place, not one of those made up kingdoms which provided a colorful local for a rollicking operetta, but a real place. Surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains and the Transylvanian Alps, Transylvania is a region about two-thirds the size of the state of Maine. It has had a long and colorful history. When Rome ruled the east, Transylvania was know as the province of Dacia. When the Roman legions withdrew, Transylvania became a route of invasion from the east as, over the centuries the Goths, the Huns, the Gepidae, the Avars, the Lombards, the Magyars, the Tartars and the Turks invaded the region and ravaged the land. At one time or another, the country was dominated by the Germans of the Holy Roman Empire, the Hungarians, the Turks. But for one brief moment, in the middle of the sixteenth century, Transylvania experienced a time of political independence.

That time of independence coincided with the coming of the Protestant Reformation, and it was in this ancient land, in this brief moment of opportunity, that Unitarianism, as an organized religious movement, came into being. Under the influence of the court preacher, Francis David, King John Sigismund embraced Unitarianism, as did most of the nobility and the majority of the common-folk of the land. It was here that we were first called Unitarians, and this was the only time or place in our entire history, when we constituted a majority.

It is to the ever-lasting credit of those early Unitarians that when they found themselves possessed of power, the King and the Diet promulgated the Edit of Torda, guaranteeing freedom of conscience and tolerance throughout the region. At a time when Protestants and Catholics throughout Europe were torturing and murdering each other over religious differences, Transylvanian Unitarians insisted that no one's conscience should be coerced, that preachers should be free to speak the truth as they understood it, and people should be free to support those preachers whose vision of truth they shared.

This golden age of Unitarianism was very brief. King John Sigismund was succeeded by rulers not sympathetic to the tolerance of openness to truth which characterized Unitarians. Soon the Unitarians found themselves subjected to intense pressure and persecution. Francis David was imprisoned, and died in the Dungeon at Deva. Before long the political independence of Transylvania evaporated. Over the centuries, Transylvania has been part of the Holy Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and since the end of the First World War, most of the area has been part of Rumania. None of these powers has been sympathetic to the Unitarian vision. But through centuries of unremitting hostility, the Unitarian churches in Transylvania have survived and still cling to life to this day. The oldest Unitarian Churches in the world are to be found not in

Boston, nor in England, but in that fabled land ensorcelled by the Carpathian Mountains and the Transylvanian Alps.

A few weeks ago, Ruth Vogler traveled to Transylvania, to visit our sister congregation in Barot. I have asked her to share with us, this morning some of her impressions of the land and the people and those Unitarian churches which embody the most ancient expression of our tradition.

RUTH, WHEN WERE YOU IN TRANSYLVANIA, AND WHY WERE YOU THERE?

WHAT ARE YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF THE LAND?

AND WHAT OF THE PEOPLE? WHAT ARE THEY LIKE AND WHAT IS THEIR LIFE LIKE?

YOU VISITED OUR SISTER CHURCH IN BAROT. WHAT ARE YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF UNITARIANISM IN TRANSYLVANIA TODAY? WHAT IS THE CONDITION OF UNITARIANISM IN TRANSYLVANIA TODAY? HOW ARE TRANSYLVANIAN UNITARIANS SIMILAR TO US AND HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

HOW MUCH MONEY HAVE WE SEND TO OUR SISTER CHURCH IN TRANSYLVANIA THIS PAST YEAR, AND HOW HAS THAT MONEY BEEN USED?

IN A COUNTRY FACING RUN-AWAY INFLATION AND SOCIAL DISLOCATION AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY, WHY IS OUR SISTER CHURCH SPENDING ITS RESOURCES BUILDING A NEW BUILDING?

FOR MORE THAN FOUR CENTURIES, THE UNITARIAN CHURCH IN TRANSYLVANIA EXISTED UNDER A POLITICAL REPRESSION WHICH INSISTED THAT THERE COULD BE NO CHANGES OR INNOVATIONS IN THE BELIEFS, THE PRACTICES, THE FORMS OF THE CHURCH. WHAT WAS PERMITTED WAS UNITARIANISM AS IT EXISTED UNDER KING JOHN SIGISMUND IN THE MID-SIXTEENTH CENTURY. DID YOU SEE ANY EVIDENCE THAT TRANSYLVANIAN UNITARIANS HAVE BEGUN TO THROW OFF THOSE ANCIENT RESTRICTIONS AND EMBRACE NEW IDEAS AND PRACTICES?

OBVIOUSLY, THE PLIGHT OF TRANSYLVANIAN UNITARIANS IS A MATTER OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO YOU. WHY DOES IT MATTER SO MUCH WHETHER UNITARIANISM SURVIVES IN THE LAND OF ITS BIRTH?

WHAT DO THE UNITARIANS IN TRANSYLVANIA NEED MOST FROM US

AS THEY STRUGGLE INTO A STRANGE AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE UNITARIANS IN TRANSYLVANIA?

DO YOU HAVE ANY FINAL IMPRESSIONS FROM YOUR VISIT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH US?

What does it matter whether we attend to the needs of our co-religionists in Transylvania? A village preacher explained to one of my colleagues why it matters. The future, he said is uncertain. After all these centuries, it is not clear that we shall survive. But we find that there is some comfort in the knowing that you are watching, and that if we disappear, our disappearance will not go unnoticed; someone will know and someone will care.

I have been asked why we should spend so much time and energy and resources on the problems of Transylvanian Unitarians, when there are so many pressing problems in our own country--only a few miles from our own front door. I can only say that empathy with human suffering anywhere increases our ability to respond to suffering everywhere. I do not believe that the altruistic response is a limited, finite resource. I believe that human caring generates human caring, just as love generates love. The more we care, the more we are able to care and the broader are our sympathies and the deeper are our responses. Transylvanian Unitarians are not in competition with the homeless of Union County or the the students in the Newark school system. Rather, each represents an opportunity to express our solidarity with our brothers and sisters who need to know that someone in the world cares.

The Unitarians in Transylvania represent a very special opportunity for us. They are the people who gave shape and substance to our religious tradition. Earl Morse Wilbur, the author of the definitive history of Unitarianism, has insisted that ours is not a movement based on theology, on having the right answers to questions about the nature of ultimate reality. Under pressure, over the centuries, we have sometimes had to define ourselves in terms of other peoples categories. But when we have been granted a time when we need not defend ourselves, Unitarians have abandoned theology and reverted to the basis of our movement, which has to do with a religious method. We are the people, says Wilbur, whose religion is based on the practice of reason, freedom and tolerance. Whether we are talking about Unitarians in Transylvania, or in England, or in New England or in New Jersey; whether we are talking about Unitarians in the sixteenth century, or the eighteenth century, or at the end of the twentieth century, that is our distinguishing mark--not the answers we give, from time to time, to theological conundrum, but the style of our religious life, a fierce and abiding commitment to reason and to freedom and to tolerance. And that religious style, which is our hallmark, was created and crafted in Transylvania over four centuries ago, and is still cherished there by people who have suffered for their faith more than we can imagine.

Someone needs to witness their struggle, and care about its outcome. If not we, who have inherited their religious method, then who? And if not now, when?

