

# *Lessons from the East*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

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In the autumn of 1962, I was spending my third year of seminary education serving my internship at the First Unitarian Church of Toledo, Ohio. My supervising minister was a fascinating man, deeply respected throughout the denomination; the church he served was one of the largest in the association at that time. However, neither he nor I nor anyone else seemed to have much experience with or insight into what would make an effective and successful internship program. I remember walking into the minister's office that September and introducing myself. He welcomed me and then, after an awkward moment, asked, "Well, what are you supposed to be doing here this year?" I replied, "You mean they didn't tell you, either?" He shook his head, and from that moment on, we improvised.

He began by looking for a room I could use as an office. Clearly there was no space near his study or the church office. He led me down a long corridor which ran behind the sanctuary and into the Religious Education wing, down a flight of stairs and along another corridor to a room next to the restrooms. This, he suggested, would be my office. He would have a desk moved in as soon as he could find one. Of course, I would have to share the space with a church school class on Sunday mornings.

For the next few weeks, I found myself sitting alone, down there in the nether regions, with little to do. I pulled out my copy of Earl Morse Wilbur's history of Unitarianism and began to read through it. I had had encounters with Unitarian history in seminary classes, but this was the first time I had had the leisure to linger over the story of our emergence as a religious movement in Eastern Europe in the 16th century. As I read Wilbur's account of the heroic struggle for freedom, reason and tolerance -- those values which have been the hallmark of our movement from the very beginnings in Poland and Transylvania -- I began to understand in a very real way how great a debt we, in this generation, owe to the courage and the integrity of those who preceded us in this movement.

In Poland, our Unitarian forebears sought to establish a religion of deed, not of creed, insisting that how one lived in this world was infinitely more important than what one happened to believe about disputed doctrines and complex creeds. Always a minority, they worked to build a vital community of women and men whose lives were their witness. And their efforts were hugely successful; but, after only a century, the enemies of free religion drove them from their homes and forced them into brutal, perpetual exile and ultimate oblivion.

In Transylvania, their co-religionists were more successful. In the middle of the 16th century, the Unitarians constituted a majority in that distant, fabled land. The king and his counselors and most of the parliament were Unitarian in their sympathies. And there, in control of a government for the only time in our history, the Unitarians issued a decree of religious toleration -- the first in the history of modern Europe.

The golden age of Transylvanian Unitarianism was short-lived. Upon the death of King John Sigismund, the throne fell to men who were less sympathetic to the religion of freedom, reason and tolerance and Unitarianism entered upon long centuries of oppression and repression in the land of its birth. Unlike their Polish brethren, the Transylvanian Unitarians were not driven into exile and their churches survive to this day, but at the price of terrible suffering inflicted upon them over the centuries by Catholics and Protestants and, more recently, Nazis and Communists.

Sitting alone in my impromptu office, I immersed myself in the early history of this movement, and I came away from the experience deeply moved and profoundly changed. Like many people who come to this movement from another religious tradition, I had been only vaguely aware of the richness of our journey through time. After a few weeks in the basement of the First Unitarian Church in Toledo, Ohio, I had become a missionary, intent upon sharing this little-known story of our beginnings. I created a course in Unitarian history during my year as an intern, and Beverly and I developed a special service drawn from original sources for a Sunday morning worship.

And over the years, my commitment to share the story continued to grow. I thought of myself as something of an expert on early Unitarianism -- not a scholar, to be sure, but someone deeply familiar with the tale the scholars tell. And so it is surprising, in retrospect, that years later, here in Summit, when May Daniels and Ruth Vogler both expressed interest in establishing a partner relationship with a congregation in Transylvania, I was not filled with great enthusiasm. Transylvania, in my mind, was a source of rich inspiration because of its history. But its present reality was beyond my ability to understand or affect, and we had enough problems of our own without taking on the problems of people half a world away. I did not oppose the project, but neither did I expect much from it.

You see, when I came to the Summit, over 10 years ago, this church was like most I had served throughout my career. It had a modest budget which was never quite adequate to its needs -- a budget supported by an annual pledge drive which always was a little more successful than the previous year, but never quite reached the goal. For years we struggled to finance a modest program and it was hard to envision any other future. We were full of abundant good will, but our institutional resources were slender and always stretched to the limit. Serving our own institutional needs commanded most of our attention.

And so, it is not surprising that when Ruth Vogler urged that we should enter into a serious partnership with a congregation in Transylvania, the immediate response to her suggestion was politely negative. After all, we said, we have so much we need to do here

and cannot afford; and, we said, it would be unkind to make promises to Transylvanians and then not be able to keep them; besides, we said, why should we worry about Transylvania when there is so much to be done in Newark? But those of you who know Ruth know she is a determined woman. She planted her dream wherever she found a thimbleful of fertile soil, and she nurtured it and she tended it.

More than this, she took on our doubts and fears. She pointed out politely but firmly that as a people we are wealthy enough to do whatever we really want to do; that of course we would not make promises to our friends in Transylvania and fail to keep them -- we are not that kind of people; and yes, there is much to be done in Newark, but the needs of Transylvania are not invalidated by the needs of Newark, and besides, in case no one had noticed, we weren't doing anything in Newark anyway.

You remember what happened. Over the course of time, her dream took root. The partnership was established. We raised enough money to pay for the heating plant in the church in Barot; to purchase some chairs; to obtain a car for the minister; to subsidize the needy in the parish, to buy a bell for the tower, and to bring the minister, Alpar Kiss, his wife, Aranka, and their daughter, Abigel, to the United States to visit with us. And in addition, support of the Unitarian Church in Barot became a part of our annual budget. There is no question that we met our obligation and that our brothers and sisters in Transylvania gained from the relationship. But I am increasingly convinced what we gained out of the relationship was immeasurable -- nothing less than a new vision of ourselves and what is possible for us.

To begin with, a number of us have had the opportunity to visit Transylvania and to see for ourselves that fabled land and its people. Beverly and I traveled across the Carpathian mountains for the dedication of Barot's new church. During that trip, we had the opportunity to stand in the church in Torda where the edict of religious toleration was proclaimed. We stood before the rock upon which the great Unitarian leader Francis David had stood to preach Unitarianism to the citizens of Kolosvar in 1568. We saw with our own eyes the fortress of Deva, where, deep in the dungeon, Francis David died, paying the ultimate price for his faith. But more than this, we saw with our own eyes the incredibly beautiful land, the beautiful people, the churches they had maintained over centuries, the churches which had sustained them in times of terrible suffering and uncertainty. And we talked with ministers and lay people and church officials, and suddenly it was clear to me that Unitarianism in Transylvania had much to teach me about my own faith as a living force.

This I have learned from my encounter with Transylvania Unitarians: First, I have discovered that the core of our faith, as Earl Morse Wilbur rightly observed, is not a matter of theology. It is true that our name implies a theological stance -- an ancient Christian heresy denying the deity of Jesus and an ancient Christian heresy denying the existence of hell. But what has defined us throughout our history -- in Poland, in Transylvania, in England, in the United States -- is not what we believe about what others think is important -- the Bible, Jesus, the soul, immortality. Historically Unitarians and Universalists have been all over the map on these issues. What defines us is *how* we

believe. We are convinced that effective religion must focus on this world, on how we live with our neighbors and especially those who are least like us. And consistently, Unitarianism and Universalism have insisted that the way of true religion is freedom and reason and tolerance and love.

My brothers and sisters in Transylvania are far more Christian than I am or ever will be in their forms and their usages. But what we share is a commitment to a religion which is relevant to this world and this life. I watched and listened as my Transylvanian colleagues struggled to understand what freedom and reason and tolerance and love implied in responding to oppressed and marginalized groups -- women, Gypsies, Jews, gays -- and in listening, I recognized the common threads which bind me to these people and bind us all back to those courageous ancestors who lived and died more than four centuries ago.

Secondly, I learned that religious institutions cannot allow themselves to be defined by their limitations or their fears. Churches must live by the courage of their dreams if they are to fulfill their role in human society. By all odds, the Unitarians should have vanished from Transylvania, just as they vanished from Poland. Over long centuries, they have lived under a level of oppression which few of us can understand. And yet they survived. More than this, they endured, precisely because they defined themselves in terms of their dreams rather than their limitations.

At the time when the Romanian government was pursuing policies which, if successful, would have destroyed the very base of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania, at a time when the countryside was on the verge of revolution and everything seemed about to collapse, the Unitarian Church in Barot, a group of 400 in a small mining town, decided to build a new building -- the first new Unitarian church building in this century. They had little money; they could not be certain the government would allow the building; they could not even know who the government would be from day to day. But they found an architect, they collected what resources they could, they pleaded with outside groups for assistance and set to work on a new building which would symbolize the new Transylvanian Unitarianism -- rooted in a proud history, but looking to the future. When the government of Romania fell, and the president was executed and all was in turmoil, the Unitarians in Barot offered to buy the marble that the late president had intended to use in building a hunting lodge, and the new church building went forth, with that marble as the floor of the new sanctuary. And with our help, and the help of British Unitarians and friends in Switzerland and the heroic sacrifices of its own members, the church was completed. My brothers and sisters in Transylvania taught me that churches must live by their dreams or they will be strangled by their fears.

And finally, they reminded me that ultimately the strength of a religious movement is to be measured not in dollars but in the commitment, the determination, the steadfastness of its people. In Transylvania I saw very clearly that the power of the Unitarian movement was to be found in its people. Stubborn, proud, knowing who they are and what they believe and why it matters what they believe, they have withstood centuries of oppression and have grown a peculiar strength and beauty as a people. Observers who are not

Unitarians have commented upon the importance of this religious community. In the midst of constant ethnic tension and conflict, the Unitarians of Transylvania, staunch defenders of their faith and their Hungarian roots, are accounted the most peaceful of the religious denominations in that storied land, the ancient and eternal champions of freedom and reason and tolerance.

These are the lessons which came to us from our religious family in Eastern Europe. And those lessons, even without our knowing it, have seeped into and transformed our life as an institution. It was Julia Miller who persuaded us to apply this learning to our own church. Several years ago, as chair of the fund drive, she insisted that churches do not grow out of fear or need or guilt. They grow in response to a dream, a vision, a new understanding of who they are and what they might become. She urged us to focus on our dreams, our values, our mission, and she promised that the money would follow.

Some of us weren't at all sure about it. Our reserves were and remain perilously slender. We worried about the number of people whose support has never been more than minimal at best. But Transylvania had prepared some of us for a new understanding of the nature of religious institutions. Hard as it is to accept, the purpose of a religious institution is not to build reserves, not to embrace security, but to spend itself in service to a vision. And when we were able to focus on our dreams, the effect was to transform us as an institution, encouraging us to act out of a culture of abundance, which is a more accurate description of reality than the culture of artificial scarcity we had created for ourselves and which had dominated our existence for so many years and which defines the life of too many of our churches. The result was that we have been empowered to embrace our responsibility as a religious community and to become the people we dreamed of being.

Our pledges began to increase significantly. In one year the social action budget went from \$300 to \$13,000. And all of a sudden we were doing more than talking about the needs of the communities around us; we were actually responding. The Transylvania partner church became a regular part of our budget. We painted the sanctuary; we renovated the organ; we built the handicapped access ramp; we added professional and support staff; we entered into a covenant with two other congregations to establish a new Unitarian Universalist church in the area; and we built an endowment fund for the first time in the history of the church. As a congregation we began to realize our potential. And now, we have embraced the challenge to build our own building and thus strengthen our community and its impact upon the world. Can we raise over a million dollars for such a project? Nobody knows, but we do know that the dream is worth the effort.

I began my journey to Transylvania in the autumn of 1962, sitting alone in a basement room of the First Unitarian Church in Toledo, reading the proud history of my unknown Eastern European family. It was completed over 30 years later when I made the trip to Transylvania and the written history became a living reality. After a few weeks in the basement of the Toledo church, I began a campaign to rearrange the church offices so there would be room for the intern's office up where the action was. By midyear I had succeeded, and in the process I learned a great deal about church politics and decision

making and all the rest. I did not know it at the time, but the most important learning in all that year occurred in those first few weeks when I spent my time exploring the Eastern European roots.

For me, at least, the encounter with our sisters and brothers in Transylvania has been transforming. They have reminded me of the essence of our faith, the core around which we have orbited for all these long centuries -- not creed but deed, not agreement on points of doctrine but a commitment to the dignity and worth of each human being. They have reminded me that churches are incarnated dreams and can only survive as they serve their dreams. They have reminded me that the life of the church expresses itself in the lives of its people, in the courage, the integrity, the compassion with which they live their lives. And in that reminder, they transformed my ministry and this church which together we serve.

When we first came to Summit, a member of the search committee told me that his dream for this congregation was that it become the flagship church for Unitarian Universalism in New Jersey, the place to which others look for leadership and inspiration. In many ways, that dream has come true -- perhaps more completely than you realize. This is a church we can be proud of, both for its involvement in the community and its loyalty to its vision and the tradition we serve. And in ways we may not always realize, we owe a debt of gratitude to our brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe for encouraging us to dream and to be defined by our dreams. In ways we may not always realize, it was they who helped us embrace our potential and begin to be the people we are called to be.