

CHURCH DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

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HARBOR UU CONGREGATION

In January of 2002 I traveled to Transylvania, now part of Romania, and the homeland of Unitarianism. Due to the generosity of this church, I was taking a three month sabbatical. I wanted to interview the ministers who had served our Unitarian churches there during the Communist era. Theoretically, communists were atheists, and decried all forms of religion. I knew that practically, Unitarians were only part of a complex religious landscape in Romania.

Traditional Romanian Orthodox churches were, and are supported by the government. There are Roman Catholic churches, Reformed churches, and, increasingly, Pentecostal churches today.

However, the Unitarian churches are peopled by Hungarian speakers—they are a religious minority within a language minority. During the rule of the communists in Romania, they were singled out for persecution, and still are in some ways. It was not until 1989, and the collapse of the Empire of the Red Bear, that we westerners were able to contact them. We learned that their churches had survived, even though their ministers were mistreated and people discouraged from supporting the churches in all the ways a tyrant has to discourage such things.

I wanted to know how this could happen. I learned that no one had studied this. No one had interviewed the ministers. No one had studied the records. By 2002 I was convinced that this country was headed for difficult times. I wondered if the Transylvanian Unitarians could teach us anything.

Thus, for three months, January through March, 2002, I lived in Transylvania. I had an apartment in Koloscvár, and traveled by train, or occasionally with others in a car, to towns and villages in Transylvania, where I stayed with ministers and spent some time accompanying them as they served their congregants. And I interviewed about 20 of them. I have now transcribed some of their stories, and will share two with you today. I'll also draw some conclusions from their experiences that may be of help to us, in this *land of the free and the brave*, as we face the 21st Century.

The first story is that of Józef Baro.

"If I had it to do over again, I would still be a Unitarian minister," said Józef. Considering the story I had just heard, this was a remarkable statement. Józef was the minister of Székelykeresztúr, a lovely small village in the Hómoród Valley, a garden jewel in the center of Transylvania, a region of Romania. He had just told me of his treatment at the hands of "The Romanians." He meant the police in that region, who were all of Romanian heritage.

Báró Józef was one of the first ministers I interviewed. He was then 79 years old and still active in ministry. His father had been an Unitarian minister, his son was a Unitarian minister.

When his father was on his deathbed he said, "I am happy now. I can die, for my son is becoming a minister."

Józef graduated in 1953, the year that another Joseph died. When Stalin expired, the balance of power in Romania shifted to a local tyrant, Nicolae Ceausescu. While he did not kill as many of his own people as did Stalin, Ceausescu attempted to control as much of their lives as possible, especially those of non-Romanian ancestry. And since Communism denigrated religion, non-Romanian ministers and their churches were especially targeted.

Józef scheduled his installation as the new minister in his village, shortly after his wedding. The Bishop was invited, and all the ministers and church leaders in the surrounding area. Traditionally, such a celebration was an all-day affair, with music and dancing, feasting and downing of palinka, the fiery plum brandy all Hungarians drink. The Communists ordered them to work in the fields as usual, and refused to give them time off even though it was Sunday. They told them not to play music, nor gather in the church.

The Unitarians gathered anyway, bringing their traditional musical instruments, and celebrated Józef's installation as the new minister in Szekelykerstür. After the celebrants left, the police came and seized Józef.

"They beat me," he said, "for three days. Finally they took me home and dumped me inside my front door. My wife screamed when she saw me. I could not even get my clothes off for five days. That was 45 years ago, and I have been in pain from that day forward." He stood and pulled up his pant leg to show me the deep scars on his leg. They crisscrossed deeply into his skin, looking as though some flesh had been removed in the beating. My stomach clenched, and eyes filled with tears.

Józef's story was not yet finished. Like all the ministers of the Reformed tradition, Józef farmed the church property as part of his pay. One day he was out with his horse-drawn wagon, bringing in some hay. On that day the police were ordered to do a sweep of the Unitarian ministers and bring them in for "questioning." Józef was unaware of this, so when his horse bolted and ran into a pond, he was very upset.

It took him hours to calm the horse, free the wagon after unloading the hay, reload the hay and drive home. His wife was frightened and weeping, for she was sure that he was again undergoing beating. He reassured her, and although the police did bring him in, they were no longer beating as viciously as earlier. "I only got a small beating that day," he said. "I pray for that horse for many days!"

And, he concluded his story with these words: "If I had it to do again, I would still be a Unitarian minister. And it is a great joy that my son is following in my footsteps."

Jozef was one of the first ministers I inter-viewed. His story made a huge impression on me.

It was a story of devotion and bravery and determination that would be repeated in varying ways during my interviews.

You may be saying to yourself—“But it could not happen here, Nana’.” Hmmmmmm. Think about this. Do we have persecuted minorities? Do we have minorities that speak different languages, and people who resent that? Do we have minority religions that represent a threat to the traditional self-defined “normative” faith? Has that faith tried to make their religious beliefs the law of the land? Have many of our cities developed paramilitary police units that violate human rights with disturbing frequency?

I think the answer is yes. I think our human rights are disappearing with disturbing rapidity, and that we, who are a religious minority must pay attention. For we know that when we work together, we can do remarkable things—witness the recent development of marriage rights for LGBTQ people, and this church’s part in that drama. (I celebrate you!)

Let me share the second story with you—different, but similar in some ways.

“She’s got to interview Ferribocci,” said the young interpreter my host had produced. “Yes,” said my host, his eyes lighting up, and smiled in a way I found difficult to interpret. I was amenable to almost any suggestion as to a way to proceed on my project of interviewing Unitarian ministers who served during the communist years in Transylvania. However, I had a few questions.

What did *Ferribocci* mean? Although my Hungarian was very sketchy, I had paid attention to names and their structure. I knew that, unlike English, the family name was placed first, followed by the person’s given name. That is, my name, Nana’ Kratochvil, would be written Kratochvil Nana’ in Hungarian. But *Ferribocci* did not sound like any name I had heard of thus far.

“Who is—Ferribocci?” I asked. The gentlemen discerned my difficulty. “His name is Nagy Ferenc,” explained my host, the minister in Segesvár, the first city on my tour of Transylvanian towns with Unitarian churches. “Bocci is an honorific we give older ministers we like. It means “Uncle”, and Ferri is from Ferenc, his name. I think you’ll like him.”

This conversation was conducted in English with frequent references to a Hungarian/English dictionary my host carried with him, as well as consultations with the translator.

And I did like Nagy Ferenc, or Ferribocci. He was 86 years old, and had been a minister for 65 years—and counting. He was still serving a small village, Sárd, at the time of our interview. Ferribocci loved to talk, especially with Americans, and (I got the impression) especially with women. He was the incarnation of the old-fashioned European gentlemen, so prevalent in our American literature. He was also a very thoughtful intellectual, with strong opinions, that he expressed in his British-accented English.

I discovered that he had studied in England, as had some of his colleagues, prior to World War II. The ministers who served following that time were tied to Russia, thus, their language was Russian, in addition to their native Hungarian, Romanian and German. We have a lot to learn from other nations about language and its learning. Younger ministers often had studied in the

United States, so they spoke American English.

He began by giving me a history of Transylvania and its religious development. I am sure that you know this history, so I am going to skip this part of his interview.

Ferribocci was a good teacher for this novice researcher. He not only shared history, but told me that the “young Unitarians” in America needed to revive the faith. The “old Unitarians” in Transylvania were weary. He showed no sign of this declared weariness. As he told me his personal story of ministry I was amazed at the energy and determination he possessed.

Segesvár was his home. His father had been the first minister there, served them for many years and it was there that he grew up. They built the house in 1937, the same year he started theological school. When his father retired at age 85, Ferribocci was called to serve the church in 1953. He decided they needed a bell for the church, “but first,” he said, “you need a steeple. And so we did it.”¹

It must have been a very difficult enterprise. At approximately the same time the communist regime rented out their home to other people. Ferribocci gestured to the roomy meeting room in which we talked. “This room”, he said, “had a family of 10 children. In the other room we had another family, and we must use the kitchen and bath commonly. When my family came here with four children, we had only two rooms and half a kitchen. We had to live like that for many years, until we could escape from all the inhabitants.”*

Like most ministers, Ferribocci counted numbers. “When I came here,” he said, there were only 300 people, and they increased to 700. Many of them immigrated to Hungary (during the changes following WWII). So, I started with 300 souls, but increased them by about 50 per year.”

Ferribocci was also given the care of Sárd, a small village a few kilometers away. One got there by walking 3 km (a little over 1 ½ miles) to the train, then riding 10 km, then walking 3 km to the village. When I asked him what the name, Sárd, meant, he said “muddy.” So, Küküllösárd, (the official name of the village) means muddy village on the Küküllö river.

Our interpreter interrupted to tell a story about Ferribocci, one that I think shows why he is so deeply respected and loved. “A few years ago,” he said, “Ferribocci prepared for his monthly visit to Sárd. He was a little late, and the train was pulling out of the station. Ferri chased after it, waving his briefcase, caught up and pulled himself aboard. He was not going to miss his ministry.” Earlier Ferribocci told me that “he got nothing from Sárd. (He was not paid.) But they need ministry.”

Ferribocci had a unique take on the effect of the communists on his church. “Communism,” he said, “was good for us. It constrained us to be more free with each other. Even for Unitarians it was an opportunity to be less individualistic and take more care of each other. All the churches were more united. We are very ecumenical.”

¹When quoting the ministers I interviewed, all language is preserved as it appears on the audio tapes.

However he also said that the 50 years Hungarian-speaking Romanians endured the communist rule “was a very difficult time.” He knew that “the communists needed an enemy to fight.” So the Romanian leaders followed the lead of Marx and Engels in fighting the churches, especially those that showed independence. Ferribocci said, “We had our freedom in our church, but had to think very seriously about what to preach—not against the state. We had to be very politic.” “The people,” he added, “were generally with us.

The government was trying to slowly close the churches. One of their weapons was to severely limit the number of students who could attend theological school. The inevitable result was that some churches, more and more as the 50 years dragged on, had no ministers. In addition the “regime” often jailed ministers for up to 25 years. In response more ministers served two, sometimes three churches. And Ferribocci and his colleagues crafted sermons, copied them, and gave them to churches who had no minister.

“This helped the people to be strong,” he said, “to have support. The church was a savior for our people. They were very loyal to our church, and the church was very loyal to (them). We could comfort them, and make them more steady. It helped them survive this period. It was a very hard time.”

One of the hallmarks of every Unitarian church in Transylvania is the motto, “Edg az Ishten” (God is One) visible at the entrance of the sanctuary. It may be crafted of wood or engraved in stone, but it is there. Despite this Ferribocci’s theology is based in humanism.

“No one can see God,” he said, “but all can see the laws of the Universe. This is our God, these laws. ...It is not for our brain, to capture the Unity.” And he quoted Kant, “Two things amaze me, high up the stars and the law in my heart.” (sic) “The laws dominate the Creation, and more than that the process of going forward. All people should be attending to the law without and the law within, your conscience.”

He closed his theology lesson with these words: “There is a saying in Hungarian: a good minister is learning all his life—even so he dies very stupid. It is for all people, not just ministers. We must continue studying the Universe, because if your horizons are broad, there remains more to be seen. If your horizon is very weak, you are content with miracles. You must force God to make exceptions for you. Men want exceptions, to be served by God, instead of serving God. I am very liberal, rational, like Americans.”

I will never forget Ferribocci, and the lessons he taught. There were others from whom I learned also. There were younger ministers, who came into the ministry after the worst of the beatings were over.

They tell different stories. They tell of outwitting the “Romanians”, of pulling them into their soccer games, of quoting Hungarian poetry in church, knowing the watchers sent by the authorities could not understand the metaphors even if they understand the literal meaning of the words. They tell of more subtle means of persecution; such as devising ways of encouraging the Unitarians to distrust each other, or breaking up families.

They all persevered.

They knew that the religious community was necessary for their people to survive, and so they persevered. For 50 years they persevered. For 50 years they taught their people to love one another, to hang onto their liberal religious beliefs, to continue making beautiful needlework to adorn their churches, to continue planting flowers as well as food, to pray together, to share, to help the poor and the orphaned. They were faithful, and they survived.

“God is One,” they said. And, “Jesus the prophet said, Love one another.” Not a bad theology—a theology that brought them through the difficult times, and might, just might, be of help to us.

Shalom and Salaat;
Blessed Be and Amen.