

A Trip to Transylvania

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Introduction. *Don Smith and I traveled to Árkos in early October where we met Sztranyicki Zsofia. We all stayed with Székely János, the Unitarian minister, and his wife, Enikő. The trip had originally been planned in early 2007 when Cathy Cordes of the UUAs Partner Church Council, came to Houston to talk about their program. Cathy invited Don and I to accompany her on a trip to Transylvania she was planning for September. We said we'd be glad to go if we could be of real use and if we could visit Árkos. As September approached it looked like Cathy wouldn't have enough work to keep us busy and Don and I considered calling off the trip. Then, at dinner one night after a few drinks, we came up with the idea that there might be a project that we could work on together with the folks in Árkos, maybe something that would involve some of our young people and theirs. We wrote to Enikő to see if she had any ideas and she said no but invited us to visit. So at a time acceptable to all we headed off to Transylvania. This is a report on some of the things we did and learned and talked about on that trip.*

Water Project. We met with Árpád Máthe, the Mayor, to discuss the water project. This had been identified as the number one project by the village in a Needs Assessment conducted in Árkos in 2004 by Dick Ford of the Partner Church Council and a team which included 6 First UU Church of Houston members, the first such assessment done in Transylvania. The feasibility study for the project was completed in December 2006 and we have a copy. It's written in Romanian but a lot of the numbers are translatable. Here are some highlights converted to English:

- Average daily flow = 73,800 gallons (as there are ~1,000 people in the village [~500 homes], this works out to 74 gallons per person per day, somewhat less than the 100 gallons we use for design in the US)
- Maximum daily flow = 103,000 gallons (this is sufficient for 40% growth)
- Maximum one-hour flow rate = 154 gallons per minute
- Required pipe:
 - 12,100' @ 5"
 - 3,800' @ 4"

- 11,300' @ 2½" - 3½"
 - Total 17.3 inch-miles (hold this thought!) and most of this pipe has already been purchased.
- An additional 3,900' @ 2½" will be required to connect all households to the system but this cost will be borne by each household. It will cost each household ~\$150 to connect their home to the system.
- Costs:
 - Feasibility study = \$28,000
 - Total project = \$1,000,000 (this works out to ~\$59,000 per inch-mile, about what it would cost in the US)
 - Local portion = \$72,000 (7.2%)
- Project completion:
 - Best case = 2008
 - Most likely case = 2009

Although Árkos was slated to be the first of the 15 villages which were to become part of the Szentgyörgy water and sewer system, there was some delay owing to their being unable to acquire the land upon which to construct the sewage treatment plant. Part of the project is construction of a secondary sewage treatment plant at Árkos which will feed the tertiary plant at Szentgyörgy. This requires ~0.4 acre and the large land owner in Árkos, the former *apparatchik* Rétyi Ödön, was unwilling to sell the village the necessary parcel. (He was, however, willing to allow easements so that the pipelines can eventually be constructed through his land.) The village just recently purchased this small parcel of land from another land owner and the project is back on track. Árkos still needs some federal and state permits before construction can begin.

We remarked to the Mayor as to the activity around the village: new houses are being built, old houses are being renovated. We characterized this as a sign of prosperity. He agreed but also said it was a sign of hope. I hadn't thought of it that way at first but, upon reflection, I had to agree. People definitely seem to be much more hopeful than they were when we first visited in 2003. It's an indication of a difference in our worldviews. I saw the new activity strictly in material terms. The mayor added a spiritual aspect. We've got much to learn!

We also visited Kőkös, the village where János served before coming to Árkos and which was one of the original 15 villages which were slated to be included in the water system. Their main pipes are installed but the households have not yet been hooked up.

Sunday Service. We went to the service on Sunday. As usual, the women entered first and sat at one end of the church, followed by the men who sat at the other. We sat in the middle and sang all the hymns which were led by Márk Attila, the new cantor (whose duties include playing the organ and teaching Sunday School). Attila and his wife, Tünde, will be moving to Árkos when the renovation of the cantor's house is completed (more on this later). The organ sounded worse than ever. (This might be a project we can help out with at a later date. Attila is going to get an acquaintance to give an estimate of what it will cost to tune the organ and convert it [if possible] from a manual pump to an electric pump.) János' sermon was based on the text "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." Beside the odd "*Isten*" I didn't understand a word but I could sense János' authority and conviction. I've heard János preach before and his style, no doubt, stems in part from his training and experience, but his quiet intensity seems to come from his heart and this is something I feel we've been missing in our own church for some time.

After the sermon János introduced us and, with Zsofi translating, Don and I told the congregation what brought us to Árkos and about First Church's scholarship program and about the Women's Conference to be held in Houston in early 2009. Attila finished the service by singing 3 songs he had written accompanying himself on the guitar. He is quite an excellent musician and he has released a number of CDs and has performed throughout Europe. The lyrics were well-known works by Hungarian poets. I couldn't help but notice that he had to occasionally slip in a few extra syllables. I remember the difficulty we had trying to get the hymn "*Gather the Spirit*" translated into Hungarian – so many syllables, so little space to fit them in! (As this is one of my favorite hymns, I haven't yet abandoned this project!)

Sunday dinner. Zsuzsa, the new President's wife, brought over home made *kürtőskalács* for dinner but we didn't wait for dinner before we started eating them and they appeared again on the table as an appetizer (dessert before dinner – yum!) She is an excellent baker. On our first morning in Árkos she had brought over two large loaves of fresh baked bread which we gobbled up in short order (János and I competed for the heel at several meals!)

That evening we had grilled pork and miccs. Enikő and János' eldest son Ede was the chef and he spent a good part of the afternoon getting the fire just right before

grilling the meat. Kisgyörgy Layos, the son of the past President of the church, and his wife, Ágnes, who are good friends of Enikő and János, and whom we've spent time with on our previous trips to Árkos joined us for dinner. On one of our walks around the village we visited their home. Layos was still at work but Ágnes invited us in and offered us delicious home-baked cookies and vodka. (She would have offered us *pálinka* had she any and I'll get back to this thought later.) Then she showed us the house they were building for themselves at the back of their lot. The house has a deep basement which I recall was being dug with help from some of the young men in the village when we visited on our last choir tour. I remember that Etele, János' younger son, was helping with the digging. They will give the old house to one of their children when the new house is completed. The new house is roofed but the walls and interior are not done. I asked Layos at dinner when the house would be complete and he said, with Zsofi translating, in a couple of years. I asked why and, with his palm upraised, he rubbed his thumb over his fingers. Even I understood the universal sign language for money. It seems they have a child in college and money will be in short supply for a few years. We can certainly sympathize with that.

Ördög Zoltán, the new President, and Zsuzsa also joined us for dinner. We ate and the food was wonderful. As we've noticed before, the Hungarians selected the fattiest pieces of pork, the pieces we typically eschew. This is not a demonstration of company manners but an expression of culture and taste and, most likely, wisdom. These folks are farmers and we've certainly heard tales of good years and lean. And they've lived under Communist rule and we've all heard about the privations they suffered during those years. There's a lot of energy stored up in those fatty pieces of meat and, if you've grown up with your next meal being something less than a certainty, I believe you'd be wise to put a little something away for the lean times, even if it's an accumulation of fat cells. And, besides, if truth be told, that piece of grilled or smoked fat is pretty tasty! We've been indoctrinated to think that ingestion of a little piece of pork fat is an invitation to a cardiac infarction but it's undoubtedly a whole lot more complicated than that.

The next morning, while paging through my rudimentary Hungarian-English dictionary, I came across the word *szalonnasütés*, which was translated as *barbecue*. I asked János if what we had last night was *szalonnasütés* and he said no (actually he said *nem*) and went into the pantry and brought out a piece of the fatty bacon that he likes for breakfast. This is a dish I am familiar with as my maternal grandparents,

who were Germans who emigrated from an area of Austria Hungary known as Vojvodina and who lived to be 90 years old, often kept a piece of what they called *papriká speck* (speck is not a Hungarian word) in the freezer. This looks like pure white fat covered in red but when I got a little older and a little bolder I found it to be quite tasty. I even managed to impress some Czechs I met on a visit to Prague when I not only knew the name for the stuff but gobbled it down without a second thought which, in their eyes at least, meant I was not a typical American. Anyway, János cut off a slice of the *szalonna*, ie, the bacon, and made some cuts along one edge so that when bent it resembled a cockscomb. If you then skewer this slice on a stick, cook it over an open fire making sure you catch all the fat dripping off the bacon on a piece of bread, you're enjoying Hungarian barbecue.

We got pretty close to the end of the *szilvapálinka* that evening. János had earlier shown us the house that a former congregant had left him in her will. It's very close to the church but right next to the road and the traffic can make it somewhat noisy and dusty. János and Enikő are planning to build a new house, a bit more modern, perhaps a bit larger, toward the back of the lot for their retirement. János took us to the basement where he was fermenting apples. This past summer was a poor season for plums (*szilva*) so they had to rely on the next best alternative (and this is a real sacrifice as I recall the disdain he expressed for the *almapálinka* we brought back to Árkos after we sang at Homoródalmás during our 2006 choir tour). But even apple *pálinka* is better than no *pálinka*!

We talked. Layos, often referred to as *kicsi* Layos, ie, little Layos, the former President's son, told a couple of stories about his father. (I wonder what they call *kicsi* Layos' son who's also named Layos?) The Hungarians were allied with the Germans in the Second World War and at the end of the war, rather than be captured by the Russians, Layos and his unit retreated on foot from Transylvania all the way back to Germany (a hike of more than 700 miles!) where they were captured by the Americans. He was treated well by the Americans but was transferred to a French POW camp where he didn't fare as well. The French fed their POWs one large potato per week. It seems that they were looking for volunteers for the Foreign Legion and they thought hunger might induce some of the prisoners to join. It might have worked for some but Layos had had enough of military service and eventually he was sent to work for a French farmer. He was such a good worker that when his term of imprisonment was up, the farmer didn't want to let him go!

Layos also told us that his father, who's now 83 years old (and who looks every day of it!), ate and drank

whatever he liked his whole life. In the days of collective farming, when the fruits of your labor went to the state, it wasn't at all unusual for someone to have to tie Layos to his cart so he wouldn't fall out as his horse took him home after a long day working in the field broken, apparently, by an occasional shot of *pálinka*.

Zoli and Zsuzsa told some good jokes and it's lucky that I have such a poor memory for jokes as I wouldn't be able to repeat them here. Good food, good drink and good friends. Throw in good health and you don't need much more from life!

After the dinner guests left we sat around the kitchen table to talk. János mentioned an issue which concerned gypsies. It seems that Bölön, a formerly prosperous Unitarian village just over the mountains to the west of Árkos, which was once known as the "Rome" of the Unitarian Church because of its large church and influential congregation, has fallen on hard times. Many Unitarians have left the village to find work and many of their homes are now owned, or at least occupied, by gypsies. I sympathized but I had not drunk enough *pálinka* to toss my two cents into that conversation.

Gomba Hunting. On our last morning in Árkos, János tossed rubber boots for Zsofi, Don, me and himself into the trunk of his car and we headed off to the woods in search of the elusive *gomba* (mushroom). This was also an opportunity to see the two tracts of forest that the Church owned (see below). It was a beautiful sunny Indian summer kind of morning. We visited the first tract the church had gotten back after the end of Communist rule. The trees were largely oak and beech. It was from this tract that the church sold the 203 trees to pay to renovate the cantor's house. Each tree was blazed and had a number carved in it. When the wood was harvested each one would be checked off a list to insure that only the trees that had been paid for were taken.

János took along a plastic bag and started finding mushrooms right away. He pointed out which ones were good and which ones were not. As I recall, the ones with the blue top are good, the ones with the red top are not (or is it the other way around?) Anyway, we scattered and started bringing back handfuls of mushrooms. Zsofi had done this before and most of the ones she found were good whereas most of the mushrooms I brought back were judged to be *nem jó* (no good) and tossed aside. János pointed out one of the deadliest *gomba*, one which could wipe out an entire family (luckily he got to it before I did!) We continued on to the smaller tract that the church will be getting back soon. Probably because its ownership had been questioned, this tract had not been maintained as well as the other. There was a lot of brushy undergrowth which was competing with the young trees

for light and nourishment. It was here that János thought having a “brush hog” would come in handy (more on this later). We walked close to edge of this forest where a flock of sheep were grazing in a meadow watched closely by a large sheepdog. Some of the sheep had wandered into the forest. János pulled a firecracker out of his pocket and lit it. The small bang was sufficient to chase the sheep and dog away. The sheepdogs are very fierce as they have to fend off the occasional bear and don’t welcome strangers and the sheep find the small tree shoots to be very tasty. (I wonder if they teach these skills in forest management courses here in the US?) The forest is on the hills to the west of the village so we got a good morning’s exercise hiking up and down the wooded slopes.

As we had just learned of the devastating fires in southern California, I asked János if they ever had an forest fires. He replied “*nem.*” They get plenty of rain in Erdély and they keep the underbrush under control. When we had finished *gomba* hunting we had filled two large bags. That evening we had *rántott sertésszelet* (breaded pork cutlet) and French fries and Enikő cut up one of the larger mushrooms and fried it for us. Yum!

Food. I’ve got to comment on all the wonderful food we ate not only because I’m a big fan of food, but also because I think this is going to be a good way for me to learn the language and maybe this approach will help others. Anyway, Enikő is a wonderful cook and she prepared many fine dishes for us during our stay. I believe I unintentionally caused her more work on our first night. She was well into food preparation when she made the mistake of asking me if I liked liver. Without thinking, I answered “no.” This was followed by silence. Then there was a hurried discussion with Csilla, her daughter-in-law, who was helping with dinner. To make a long story short, we didn’t have liver for dinner and I will be more circumspect should a question about food likes and dislikes come up again.

I’ve mentioned a few of the dishes we ate already but here are some more (and they were all very, very good): *sóskaleves* (sorrel soup), something I’ve never eaten before; *paprikás csirke* (chicken paprikas); *töltött káposzta* (stuffed cabbage), one of my all-time favorites; and *juhtúrós puliszka* (polenta with curds and cheese). This was something entirely new to me and entirely delicious. I remember it well because I’ve never been particularly fond of polenta (I guess it’s just as well I wasn’t asked) but this was incredibly rich and flavorful. Unlike all the other dishes I’ve mentioned, I don’t think this can be made here in the US because milk curd is one of the ingredients and I’ve never seen anything like that at the supermarket. We even accompanied János to a

supermarket in Szentgyörgy to buy the miccs and some bread. Other than the obvious differences in brands and labels, I think even we monolingual Americans could find our way around and pick up enough food to make a meal.

Land. By the end of the year, the Unitarian Church should have gotten all the land and buildings that were taken from them during Communist rule. We visited the church school building adjacent to the church which was being used for day care while the regular school was undergoing repair. János is considering converting this building to a guesthouse. It’s a large, light and airy building. It was a pleasure to watch the kids flock around János while we were there. They had just had a visit from a magician and were still excited from the show and wanted to tell János of the incredible stuff they had seen.

The reason why this particular piece of land has taken so long to get back stems from the days when Árkos and the nearby village of Kálnok were administered by Kőröspatak, a third village located in between the other two. (It was in Kőröspatak where we celebrated Zsofi and Dean’s wedding.) It seems that the administrator of the three villages was an enterprising fellow who managed to purchase four homes for himself during his term of office. He accomplished this, at least in part, by selling land that he didn’t own. He carved out about 4,000 sq ft of land from the church school property and offered it to the owner of the adjacent property. This owner just happened to be Ördög Zoltán (that’s right, the new Church president) who refused the offer thinking it wouldn’t be right to purchase stolen property. The slight-of-hand required to strip this land from the church school property (I guess you might call the former administrator a magician of sorts) put it into a kind of limbo of questionable ownership and it’s just been very recently that the church has been determined to be the rightful owner. When the Church gets the school property back, they plan to fence the entire property, church and school, off from the road to make it a safer place for the children to play. There’s a nice area right between the church and the school that looks like an ideal site for a playground (more on this later)

The last piece of land is 27 acres of forest with mostly pine and birch trees. The Church had previously gotten back another tract of forest land consisting of 74 acres of mostly oak and beech trees. It was from this parcel that the Church had sold 203 trees for ~\$14,000 to pay for the renovation of the cantor’s house.

Future Projects. Before Don and I left for Árkos we wondered if there might not be some project that we

could work on together with some of the folks in Árkos, maybe even something that we could get our youth interested in doing. I had earlier written to Enikő to see if she had any ideas and even suggesting whitewashing the walls of the fortress or the church. I don't believe this requires a whole lot of skill or strength. She replied that she could think of nothing. On one of our walks around the village, when János pointed out the space between the church and the school building as a likely spot for a small playground, Don and I had to agree. In fact, we thought we just might have found our project! We asked if that might not be a project we could work on together and János replied, "Is possible." We did some research – there's a terrific playground in Szentgyörgy (and we've got plenty of pictures) that's mostly made of wood. If we had a design, and if the village supplied the wood and part of the labor and we supplied the hardware and the rest of the labor we'd have what we, at least, consider to be an admirable opportunity to work together. What do you all think?

As I mentioned above, there are a couple of other things we could help out with if we so desire. The organ needs a lot of work and the extent and the cost have yet to be determined. And the parish could use a "brush hog" to help keep its forests healthy. We could also consider taking over a contingent of youths and others to spend some time clearing out the brush by hand.

The New Cantor. Márk Attila is a Catholic who was born and raised in Brassó. He is 44 years old and speaks English fluently. He is a singer song-writer who plays the guitar. He has recorded 10 CDs of his music and has performed throughout Europe. He is a self-taught organist. (One problem is the difficulty of practicing in Árkos. Because their organ is hand-pumped he can't practice by himself.) Attila was the goalkeeper on an international soccer team and he sings with the renowned Vox Humana chamber choir in Szentgyörgy. His wife, Tünde, is a Unitarian who was born and raised in a village like Árkos. They have no children but are considering adoption.

Attila told us that Brassó was a cultural center but that in the 1980s Ceausescu brought in many thousands of people from the countryside to work in factories. Now the factories are closed and Brassó is experiencing higher unemployment and crime and he doesn't want to live there anymore. He was trained in Catholic children's religious education but he couldn't find employment in that field. János met him several years ago when he played organ for the Unitarian church in Szentgyörgy. When Mr Bacsi, the old cantor (who is in his 70s, I believe), fell off a ladder

and broke his hip and was forced to retire, thus having to move out of the cantor's house which is owned by the parish, János saw an opportunity and jumped on it. He convinced the congregation to commit to repairing and renovating the cantor's house so that it would serve as an inducement for a new cantor. (We visited the house in the midst of the renovation and saw a couple of plasterers at work. They expect to have the house ready by the end of the year.) Then the congregation invited Attila to take the position and Attila accepted. Besides assisting at services, he leads a children's choir of 18 voices and teaches Sunday school. He is seriously considering converting to Unitarianism.

During one of our conversations, I remarked to János that, while the church was certainly short of cash, it had plenty of assets and perhaps it could use those assets to fund some of the projects that he's proposed doing. After Zsofi translated this, János got very excited and replied that's exactly what they were doing. He had had to convince the congregation to go along with selling the trees in order to fix up the cantor's house, thus being able to attract a new young cantor to Árkos and he viewed this as a great victory for the Unitarians in Árkos. Unlike the Calvinists who built a new bell tower with money from Rétyi Ödön, a wealthy man who gained his wealth under questionable circumstances and who was no friend of the Unitarian church in Árkos yet who exerted a measure of control over that church because he was a large employer in the village, the Unitarians had managed to accomplish this project on their own and he was proud of this accomplishment. And rightly so! The materials to renovate the cantor's house were paid for by selling the tress and most of the labor was donated by members of the parish.

Note: The pension Mr Bacsi receives from Unitarian headquarters in Kolosvár is very small and not sufficient for him to live on but the church in Árkos has elected to subsidize it with a similar amount.

Dan's Garden. Dan is the head of the forestry association and we met him as we walked through the village with János one afternoon. Dan invited us into his garden which is a lovely a place as you can find anywhere. I'm not a gardener and I won't try to describe what looked to me like a controlled riot of brightly colored wildflowers because I took a number of pictures. But I will mention that it had a lily pond and a babbling brook and a little gazebo where Dan and his wife offered us pálinka and snacks. Dan is a Romanian but he had a Hungarian grandmother. Dan's wife was also Romanian but her mother was

Hungarian. This is not apropos of anything at all. It's just some information that was offered to us in the course of our conversation. Dan's been very helpful to János and the church in the long struggle to get the church's forest lands back.

The Mine. I got up early one morning to take a walk and headed west toward the mountains. As I neared the edge of the village I could hear sounds of heavy truck traffic. When I could see the road that marks the western boundary of the village I could see many trucks, some loaded with dirt and heading north, some empty and heading south. When I walked over to the *bánya* (mine) I could see the trucks dumping their loads and bulldozers spreading the dirt but what I saw didn't look measurably different than what I had seen on my last visit about 15 months ago. The *bánya* covers ~300 acres and is probably ~50 feet deep on average. That's around 24 million cubic yards of hole to be filled. Since each truck holds ~24 cubic yards of dirt, that means filling the hole will require a million truckloads of dirt. I didn't get an accurate count, but I figure they had about 40 trucks. It looks like a work day is 8 hours long and I didn't see anyone working on the weekend or at night so, if I figure 30 minutes per cycle, unless something changes, it's going to take another 7 years to fill the hole. But I doubt it will get done in less than 5 years and could take up to 10 years. What a hole! Even if they only fill it half way and turn it into a lake, which has been mentioned as a possibility (and where they'll get the water to fill it is another issue) it's still going to take a long time.

Other News. While we there János received a letter from the federal government that the church had been awarded a grant of \$20,000 for repairs to the fortress. He had applied earlier in the year but as the year end was fast approaching he was beginning to doubt that anything would come of it. He's just gotten notice of the award for now and he may have to have all the money spent by the end of this year but we thought if he purchased all the supplies this year he'd be OK. So, in addition to János skills as minister and farmer and forester and land agent, he's also now a successful grant writer!

During 2002 János performed 3 weddings, and 4 christenings. So far in 2007, he's done 7 weddings (with 2 more planned before the end of the year and 9 christenings (with 1 more expected this year). I'd have to say things are looking up in Árkos.

Cable is being installed in the village to provide high speed Internet access for all who want it.

Csilla, who is still working on her Master's degree, will be working part time in the Mayor's office while their bookkeeper is on maternity leave.