

Description of a Religious Education class in Transylvania

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Dear friends,

Having a moment to spare, I thought you might be interested in a vignette of Religious Education in Transylvania. One of the things I got to do during my last visit, was attend an RE class in Varfalva [Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon PA's partner] for a Unitarian group of, I think, 5th or 6th graders. (The students in the school are divided by faith into separate once-a-week classes that are taught by the local minister or religious educator.)

The first thing, after the children and the minister greet each other (and my friend and I were introduced), is that they say this prayer together:

“Jo Atyank, Istenunk, munkanban legy velunk.” (Good Father, our God, be with us in our work.)
and then they say the "Our Father" (The Lord's Prayer) together.

In the area where our partner church is, children from several villages attend grades 4-6 in one of the larger villages. I think they get there by bus. Religious education is taught in the public schools by the ministers of each faith. The local Unitarian ministers all take turns, and they also teach the younger children in their own villages, usually on Saturday morning. Any group of 10 children can constitute a class for which the government pays the ministers at the same rate per class as the schoolteachers get. Or at least, they used to.

The class I attended was learning about Ferenc David's imprisonment and death. The material covered seems also to be part of the catechism. Rather than having the children read and memorize responses to the catechism questions (though they are expected to do that too) the minister gave a talk about Francis David's last days, focusing on his resistance to the Innovation Law imposed by the Catholic king who succeeded John Sigismond, which stipulated that the four main religions could be practiced "in freedom" so long as no innovations were made in the creed.

There was some talk about how it was possible for David to create the Unitarian creed, and affirm it, and yet also stay open to reforming it. There was some discussion of the politics of the time--wars with the Turks and the Germans, the effect of support from Polish Unitarians (who I gather had a good community with both farmers and the city people and the ministers all mutually supportive). At that time, the minister suggested, many people might have been afraid to keep their Unitarian faith and what did the children think? what would they have done?

Mind you I was the one doing the translation, and my Hungarian is not that good. I wouldn't have understood half so much as I did if I didn't already know most of the story.

Then the minister called for a game. The room was divided in half, and each team chose a leader. The division was decided by the seating, and I don't know how the seats were assigned. One team was mostly but not entirely composed of boys, and the other mostly but not entirely girls. The teams huddled and had to take turns thinking of a question about Ferenc David to ask the other team. The questioning drew from today's and previous lessons. If the team gave a correct answer, they got a point. If the answer was wrong, and the asking team could provide the correct answer, the asking team got the point. Sometimes a half point was awarded for half-right answers. The minister ended the game when the score was tied.

Then everyone bundled into their coats to go home. The classrooms were heated by ceramic wood-burning stoves, which throw off quite a lot of heat. The hallways are not heated. The door to this classroom tended to stick, but several of the boys were willing to do what was required to get it open --a run across the room and a full body smash or two did the trick.

Several of the children (as well as high schoolers we saw later at the high school in Kolozsvár) remembered their partner church friends, knew their names, and asked if we knew some of the people who had visited them. One of the girls in the RE class wanted to know if children in America live in lovely villages like hers.

Here's hoping that many of us, and our students on both sides of the water, will enjoy such visits in the future.

[Later: After several readers of the above description asked questions about it on <pcc-chat>, Ruth wrote this explanation to provide the answers:]

In the Araynos Vallye, there are several villages in which virtually everyone is Unitarian. However, the school in Varfalva has lots of Catholic children too, and maybe other Protestants, and at least a few Romanian-speaking Orthodox children. The way it works, is for every ten children of a particular faith there can be a class, taught by the minister or by a religious educator (designated by the district dean for that faith, I suppose but don't know). The government pays a basic rate per class taught. In a village that is mostly Unitarian, there may be only one class for the Lutheran children of all ages, and three or four classes grouped by age for the Unitarians. The ministers seem to be able to arrange to bring American guests in to tour the school, and when that happens, quite often the Unitarian children will be asked to get up and recite something they have learned.

An interesting note--if a Catholic man marries a Unitarian woman, (or vices versa) their sons will be baptized (and usually raised) Catholic (i.e. whatever is the father's faith) and their daughters Unitarian (the mother's faith).

If there are too few Roman Catholics in the village to have their own priest, one will visit every month or so, and provide worship and religious instruction. Likewise, if there are only a few Unitarians in a village, one of the ministers from another village will take care of them on a circuit-riding basis. Most Transylvanian Unitarian ministers are responsible for providing services, religious education, pastoral care, weddings and funerals for three or four or even more of these scattered small groups of Unitarians who live in the area but are too far away to attend the main church.

The curriculum seems to be based on the Unitarian catechism, which has several sections to it. Children seem to know which ones they've covered and what they need to learn before they can be confirmed at 13. (At least the ones I've talked to over the years to did.) I expect that the content, then, is already ordered by the catechism. But the methods of teaching appear to be up to the minister.

This 1 teacher to 10 children ratio holds for other classes when it comes to the question of whether a class is taught in Romanian or Hungarian. If there are at least ten children speaking Hungarian, a Hungarian speaking teacher will be hired for that class of ten. (It used to be 20.) If there is one Romanian speaking child, a Romanian speaking teacher will be hired.

One last aside: Sometimes a Hungarian speaking person goes to the University to become a teacher. After their exams, they may well be told that their command of the Romanian language was not so good, so they are low on the list for teaching in the upper grades (which pay the most). Even if all the children speak Hungarian, the teacher whose Romanian was not so good, may not get the job. But s/he could very well get a job teaching Nursery School to Gypsy or even Romanian children, because that pay is less, so it is hard to fill the positions.