

Handout for "Our Transylvanian Roots" Adult Education course (by Rev. Ruth Gibson)
Sermon Text of "Crowns and Dreams" [about Queen Isabella, mother of King John Sigismund, of Transylvania] given at UUA General Assembly 98 (by Rev. Dr- Kendyl Gibbons, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, Minnesota)

You are surprised to see me assume this crown, are you not? "Princess," they call me still; Princess Isabella of Poland, " as if I had never left the court of my father, as if I had never gone to Transylvania, as if I had never been a queen. But a queen I was; queen of a land surpassingly beautiful, queen of a people intelligent, loyal, and fierce in defense of their liberty. A queen hounded and driven from her place, this very crown wrested from me by enemies without and false friends near by, but a queen ill. The mother of a King such as this world has seldom seen, and yet more rarely deserved, I was; but above all a queen of a dream, the queen of an idea of the heart and soul that has transformed the world, and might transform it still.

How often do they come together, the dream and the crown? How often is the vision of a new way of being human together in the world granted unto those with the power to make it, even briefly, the foundation of law and custom? Usually it wells up from among the humble and the obscure, the carpenter-preacher of Galilee, with no place to lay his head, with a dream of human fellowship that cost him his life at the hands of the authorities. There are those who would tell you that I sought this crown, and fought for this crown, for the sake of its power, that I sought to be the haughty ruler of men and women, but that is the least part of the truth. Power, yes; but not power for my own gratification; not wealth or influence just to make my own life grand. This crown was the power to make the dream real, a dream that could perhaps only have been born in that land in that time, but a dream that in four hundred years and more, has never died. You are its heirs and its carriers today- you are the people we dreamed of, my son and I. I come to you, that you may know our story, for you are the ones who must carry it on, who must struggle, as we struggled, to make the dream we share more real.

The other story you know, for the bards and minstrels have told and retold it, and its pictures have been graven in your hearts, while ours was forgotten, and I think I know why. It is because Arthur was a man. It is because the vision of Camelot, with its democracy and chivalry and deeply held honor and peace, was a man's vision. That we can tolerate and remember. When the crown and the dream are a woman's crown, and a woman's dream, that *is* more difficult. To the extent that it has been remembered at all, it is remembered as my son's dream. King John Sigismund, you say, promulgated the first edict of religious toleration in the modern western world. King John Sigismund of Transylvania, they write, the only Unitarian King in history, kind and generous in nature, an accomplished linguist, expert in music, temperate in habits, excelling in manly sports, brave in danger, an exemplar of high-minded virtue. He promoted education, founding secular schools and colleges in place of the old monastic institutions, and invited able foreign scholars to conduct them. He was a patron of music and the arts, and enjoyed the recreation of conversation with learned men. The Catholic historians consider him a vile heretic, and conclude that he doubtless went to hell, but even the Lutheran writer Matthias Miles called him a noble hero, a true ornament of his age and a mirror of all virtues, who was so endowed by nature and so manly and heroic in his spirit, that had his slight body, his limited strength and his feeble constitution been equal to his active spirit and his dauntless courage, he

might have surpassed all the monarchs and heroes of his time. And so he did surpass them all, for his ardent and compassionate soul found the will of God and the harmony of human community in a secret so basic that we have still not learned it fully and do not wholly practice it.

You must understand the world in which we lived, my son John and I. The Protestant reformations that had swept over Europe during our lives, and the counter-surges of Catholic orthodoxy, were powerful tides of religious, political and even military struggle. It was an assumption beyond question that a nation's ruler had the right, and indeed the obligation, to impose upon the people his or her own understanding of correct religious doctrine. Any who disagreed, and dared to say so, were killed -burned at the stake, or tried and thrown into prison to die of neglect -- or banished to another country, with all their possessions confiscated, or even in the best of circumstances, deprived of office and title and family property. Years after my own death, in the late part of my son John Sigismund's reign, when he issued his last and most inclusive charter, guaranteeing full religious liberty to even the most bitterly opposed of all the reforming sects, Protestant theologians were still praising Calvin for having burned Servetus alive, the Inquisition was shedding Protestant blood in the Netherlands, the massacre of French Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Eve was yet a year and half in the future, and more than forty years were still to pass before persons ceased to be burned at the stake in England for holding wrong religious opinions.

And you must understand that I owed this crown, and my throne and quite possibly my very life itself to that worse than all heretics, to that infidel Suleiman, the Sultan of Turkey, a follower of Mohammed. The Turks, of course, were our neighbors to the east, and since their conquest of Constantinople, they had cast covetous eyes to the west, upon us in Hungary, in Poland, even to that essentially European city, Vienna. Suleiman, for all that he was an infidel, was an astute and patient strategist; and what's more, he was a just and compassionate man. Strategically, the last thing he wanted to see was a united empire on his western border. Personally, he was ever a friend to those who fought for the unique identity and the independence of Transylvania. It was Suleiman who indirectly brought about the events by which I became the queen of Transylvania, briefly wife to King John Zapolya, and mother of King John Sigismund.

For it was Suleiman's army that in 1526 defeated King Louis II at the battle of Mohacs, slaughtering much of the Transylvanian nobility, and causing Louis to flee so distraught that he was drowned in a river crossing during his flight. Suleiman marched on the Hungarian capitol at Buda, plundered it, and then returned to Constantinople. Louis' widow, Maria, appealed to her dead husband's sister, wife to the Arch-Duke Ferdinand of Austria. Maria and her followers lived in dread of Suleiman's return, and they felt that only by seeking the protection of Germany and the Emperor Charles V, Ferdinand's brother, could they be safe from the Turks. They wished to name Ferdinand king of Transylvania, and a pitiful little group of them did so, about a month after Louis' death.

But Maria and her co-conspirators were too late. The citizens of Transylvania had already made their own clear choice for the next king, and they wanted none of the German Hapsburgs making their nation into a pitiful little annex to the German empire. Once Louis had died, it was obvious

both to the common people and to the vast majority of the surviving nobles that there was one man best fit to lead their country in continued independence. He was the brother of my father's first wife, by title the Count of Zips, his name was John Zapolya. He came to the capital at Buda as soon as he heard of Louis' death, and a parliament of remaining leaders met at Szekesfehervar and unanimously elected him king. Three days after the funeral of Louis, John Zapolya was crowned by the Archbishop. He asked the widowed Maria to marry him, for the sake of peace in the realm, but she rejected his offer, and I shall always be grateful to her for the good that she unknowingly did me thereby!

I heard of these events as scarcely more than a child in the court of my father, King Sigismund of Poland; my mother was his second wife, Queen Bona, and she raised me to believe that women among royalty should be as keenly interested in tidings of the world around them as kings and princes were. For, she said, often our welfare and our futures would be determined by these events, and often we could play an important and even decisive role, if we knew what was happening, and what we wanted. My father labored earnestly to try to persuade John Zapolya and Ferdinand to work out an agreement with each other, but Ferdinand declared war on John, and brought an army to conquer Buda and so much of the rest of the country that John had to flee, and came to stay with us in Poland. Ferdinand then contemptuously had himself crowned with the same crown, by the same archbishop who had officiated at John's coronation the year before. He refused all appeals to negotiate, but it was clear that the land and people of Transylvania would never be his greatest concern, and John Zapolya was beside himself.

I was thirteen then, poised on the awkward boundary between child and maiden; insatiably curious about people, and the workings of power. John Zapolya was kind to me, in a preoccupied way; he would answer my questions gravely, and more than once I saw him blink, and suddenly become absorbed within himself, as if I had asked something in a way he hadn't quite thought of. After much reflection, and much conversation with my father, he left us to travel east, to Constantinople, the city held by the infidels, to seek out Suleiman, the Sultan. Delighted by the invitation to spread his influence westward, and by the promise of a sympathetic ally, as well as by the opportunity to check the growth of the German empire, Suleiman marched against Ferdinand, and restored Buda, the land and the crown to John. He came close to taking Vienna, but ultimately returned to his own realm, leaving John in power in Transylvania. It took Ferdinand ten more years to realize that these people would always cost him more to subdue and to control than the nation was worth, and to be willing to make peace with John Zapolya. In 1538 the two contending kings signed a treaty, although its provisions were not made public, because neither of them wanted to risk insulting Suleiman, and it must have referred to the possibility of his intervention.

Now secure in possession of his realm and crown, John returned to my father and asked to marry me, and make me his queen. I teased him once about how it had happened that he remembered me after all those ten years, and he told me that no other woman had ever been able to erase his picture of a bright-eyed, inquisitive and thoughtful little girl, and he couldn't believe that I would not have grown into a woman wise enough and strong enough to be a queen. Those words he gave me, and this crown, and our son. We had so little time together, and yet he left me a rich legacy.

I was at our residence in Buda, in expectation of the birth of our first child, when John grew gravely ill of fever after subduing a local rebellion in one of the provinces. I could not go to him, and he was too ill to travel; I never saw him again. He lived long enough to learn that our son had been born, and two weeks later my husband died, at Szasz-Szebes. Only then did I begin to learn what it would really mean to be strong enough, and wise enough, to be truly a queen. We gathered at Szekesfehervar, all the nobility and leaders of the nation, for a royal funeral, and very soon, six weeks after his birth, and a bare month after his father's death, my tiny little baby was given his father's crown, and named John Sigismund, king of Transylvania.

On his death bed, John Zapolya had sought to make our future as secure as was possible in such turbulent times. He appointed two of his friends and counselors to work together with me as a regency counsel, to safeguard the kin-dom for little John Sigismund when he should be grown. And he sent a message to Suleiman, the sultan, asking that he keep watch over me, and over the prince as he grew, and not let his patrimony be stripped from us by Ferdinand and the greedy Hapsburgs. And if my husband had only been accurate in his assessment of those two men, all might, indeed, have been well. Peter Petrovics, his cousin, was a good and faithful friend to us; a thoroughly decent man, plain spoken, bright enough in a straight forward way, but not given to deviousness himself, and not easily able to perceive it or counter it in others. It was the other, George Martini, a monk and the Bishop of Nagyvarad, in whom the king my husband was deeply deceived. Father Martinuzzi seemed to wish us well at first; it was he who convened the parliament which rejected Ferdinand's renewed claims to be the true king, and which confirmed the three of us in our appointments as co-regents. Inevitably, Ferdinand made another invasion attempt, but Suleiman came to our rescue and occupied the capital at Buda. He was always gracious to us, but he warned me that we could never hold Buda against the Germans without his help, and advised me to move our household to a more defensible position, at Gyulafehervar.

In 1543, Transylvania officially declared itself independent as a nation from Hungary, with John Sigismund as its king and me as queen, under the protection of Turkey. It was at this time that Bishop Martinuzzi began to try to consolidate power into his own hands. He had been assigned control of the treasury, and he treated my son and me as if we had been his dependent wards rather than his sovereigns. He gave us insufficient allowances for our support, while he hired soldiers on his own behalf, and spent large amounts of money courting popular opinion. When I publicly called for an accounting of his management of our treasury, he insolently replied that he was accountable only to John Sigismund, after he had attained his majority, and would answer only to him, and only at that time. Even the Sultan warned Martinuzzi that he was going too far, but he would not heed. Looking back, it is easy to see that even at that time, he must have already been in league with Ferdinand, as together they sought to force John Sigismund and me to yield the crown, and to leave the country. Finally, in 1551, with Martinuzzi's connivance, we were surprised by a large army of Germans and Hungarians, with no opportunity for the sultan to bring us help, and the parliament, overawed by Martinuzzi's threats and persuasions, was forced to agree. The crown was taken from me; I was sent home, in disgrace, with my son, to my brother's court in Poland. Promises were made to us by Bishop Martinuzzi, who would later be made a cardinal as a reward for his treachery in bringing Transylvania back into Catholic control; promises of money, of castles, of duchies for John Sigismund, none of which he ever intended to keep. Peter Petrovics was not there to help us- he was our emissary, and traveled almost constantly; to the sultan, to the emperor, to my father and brother, negotiating, protecting,

trying to keep us safe in the little corner of the world that ought to have been ours.

Do you know, can you see, what it would have meant to a proud and intelligent, sensitive eleven year old boy, knowing that the father he never knew had been a great king, to travel miles and miles, days and days, away from his home, and realm that he had been taught to think rightly his own? For myself alone I could have wept and raged, wailed my sorrows, old and new, and cursed God. But always there was John Sigismund to think of, and I was adamant that to whatever extent it had been bred in him, to whatever extent it my teaching and my example could manage it, he should grow up to be as valiant and splendid a king as his father. It was then that we began the Game, as the carriage wended its sorrowful way from Gyulafhervar to my mother, the dowager queen, and my brother in Krakow. To keep from going mad, to keep from poisoning ourselves with bitterness of revenge rehearsed over and over, we sent our fantasies in the other direction. When we return, when the crown is restored to us, when the land is ours again, what kind of rulers shall we be? What would be the best way, the very best possible way, to rule a kingdom such as ours? We could play this for hours, arguing out the fine points of statecraft, of jurisprudence, of military and political strategy, but always with two questions, equally to be lifted up. Will it work? and Is it good? It was a game that we would play for five long years of exile, while John grew from a slender lad of eleven to the passionate convictions of sixteen.

And it was in the context of this game that the Dream itself was born. For one of the questions that the ruler must face, of course, is what to do about religion. Remember that it was understood that the ruler would determine the theological opinions of the entire country, and the devices for enforcing conformity to those opinions.

We talked for hours about the possibilities available. I had been raised in the traditional Catholic faith of the Polish court, and that was the belief of John Zapolya; he had even taken some steps at the start of his reign to resist the spread of Lutheran ideas into Transylvania from Germany. Yet in the years of war and confusion, the reformation had swept the country. Few of the great families or prominent nobles now remained Catholic, and to restore Catholicism would have entailed a bitter, costly and painful struggle. And besides, after the way in which Martinuzzi, a man of the church, had behaved toward us, and the way in which the church had rewarded him for his perfidy, John Sigismund and I had little love for the Roman church. We were also much influenced by my mother's doctor, always my good friend and supporter, Giorgio Biandrata, with his ideas that the reformers had not gone far enough, that the whole doctrine of the Trinity -- Father, Son and Holy Ghost - was an error invented by the church. They called him then what they call you today; Unitarian. And there was the reality that most of the powerful nobles of the land we would be seeking to rule were either Lutherans, or else the new form of Protestant, followers of John Calvin. Add to all this the knowledge that it was the infidel Mohammedan Suleiman, our staunchest protector and friend, who forced Ferdinand to give us back our country and crown as part of a comprehensive peace treaty in 1555.

It came slowly, a dream born of a game born of desperation. Why should we have to choose for everyone? What did we know about God more than all those other believers, who would cling stubbornly to the faith they had embraced, even through persecution, and unto death? Why not let them? Why even try to force them to change? Why should not each human soul respond to

God, and worship God, in the way that seemed best to them? And then, with growing conviction and excitement, the vision of a new way, something never tried before. Suppose a nation had many churches, different from one another, and the people could choose freely among them such worship as would satisfy their souls? Suppose there were books to read, freely and openly; public debates, even, where the ablest of each tradition could argue their true convictions as forcefully as possible, and convince whomever they might? It was so daring, so different from anything we knew, that we laughed at first. But gradually the dream took hold of us, as dreams do, and we understood that this would be a part of our plan, whenever we should return to power.

It took us months to plan, but our return to our people and our country in October of 1556 was a triumph of joy, for the people had never really accepted the foreign emperor as their true king. And at the first parliament, the following June, I issued the decree that "every one might hold the faith of his choice,... without offence to any..." It was the first time since the political hegemony of Christendom had spread across the western world centuries before, that a national leader gave back to ordinary people the authority of their own consciences in matters of God and the soul. Two and half years later, shortly after John had turned nineteen, I died; and the fate of our dream was left in his hands.

People speak of John Sigismund with praise, and he was a brave and brilliant king, all that in my deepest heart I had hoped he would be, until his early death at the age of 31. And in his hands the dream grew, and he nourished it, and expanded it, and proved that it could work. But it was I who taught him to dream, I who nurtured him in wisdom and the courage that goes beyond the field of battle make the mind itself daring-- it was I who first gave form to the dream we shared; a woman's dream.

I tell you, lay aside the legends of Camelot! Awake to the light, of this dream, the light of which you are the keepers and the nearest heirs, the light we struggled so hard to kindle, my son and I. Be not complacent; the tide swept back bloody over our land with the Catholic counter reformation, and in four hundred years, everywhere liberty has bloomed, intolerance and oppression have appeared as well. But see how the seed we planted has taken root in the heart of the human spirit, and everywhere that it is crushed, it springs up anew, flowering ever more boldly. Your nation was founded in it!