

Handout for the Adult Education Course "Our Transylvanian Roots" (by Rev. Ruth Gibson, Denver CO)

**Excerpt from the Annual Report of Moderator Natalie Gulbrandsen to the 1990 General Assembly**

Our trip to Transylvania was really inspiring. The people were so happy, but realistic, and somewhat skeptical of what the Salvation Front might be able to accomplish, but liberty and democracy still looked nearer to them than it ever had before.

Sunday everyone went to Tirgu Mures to see Lazio Tokes, the reformed minister, except Dr. Donald Harrington, Minister Emeritus of Community Church in New York City and myself, along with Professor Janos Erdu, Assistant Bisjop of Unitarianism in Romania, who was our translator and guide. The three of us went to Torda, stopping to see the old church where the Edict of Toleration was signed in 1568. It is very large and in excellent condition. Today it is a Catholic Church and as we stood looking at it, the Catholic priest approached and spoke to us.

The minister of the Unitarian Church of Torda took us to his home for tea, breads and sweets until church began. The church was absolutely full. As we approached they were carrying in extra benches from somewhere and the bells were ringing to welcome us. The men sat on one side of the church except for a few women in the front pew, and the rest of the women sat on the other side. We sat just under the pulpit. The pulpits give the appearance of being hung on the wall. 'I'o the left a small Christmas tree was decorated and lighted by the light in the church falling on the aluminum foil pieces hanging from the branches. The service started with singing by the men, and can they sing! It was beautiful. As I looked around at those faces, I just tried to imagine what this Sunday meant to them.

This, you remember, was only the third Sunday after the Revolution and the sniper fire had just stopped a day or two before.

Many were crying. Dr. Harrington gave his sermon, translated by Professor Erdu, and it was well received. Vilma, his first wife, had been an assistant minister in that church, and he had been there himself as minister, so he had roots within the congregation and remembered many of [the] family names.

I stood in front of the pulpit while the minister greeted us. He said he welcomed us with joy and elation in one eye, and crying a tear in the other eye. He thanked us for being there and said they were a poor church, but that everyone who gave to them should be given something by the church. For us they had a flower from the top of the mountains that grew in the rocky, craggy soil, comparing it to Romania and saying that, "At times, to survive is to win." It was a most poetic, beautiful greeting and Don and I both had tears in our eyes. The flower was Edelweiss. This, too, is the minister who rushed to the church the minute he hears of Ceausescu's execution, and wildly rang the bells.

I thanked the minister for his warm welcome, and told him we would cherish the Edelweiss, but that they had also given us much more--especially their singing--and that we would always keep it in our heart.

As I looked around, tears were streaming down the faces of both the men and women. I realized how much this Sunday meant to them and how much support our presence brought to them.

After the service we went outside by the church gate and every one of the five to six hundred people greeted us. I thought my hand would break as the men

grabbed and kissed it. The women kissed me on both cheeks and the young people greeted me warmly. It was such a thrill to see them so happy, without the terrible fear of informers everywhere, still having some worry, but relishing their new found liberty.

Luncheon afterwards was in a restaurant with the church board--eighteen men and me--a full course meal with much wine and vodka for celebration. I twitted them about having no women on their governing board, and told them when I came again, I expected to see a change. One man told me life time Women were bosses at home, so they didn't need to be outside. I told him I had five children with five Spouses, and eight grandchildren. That surprised him, so he stood up saying he would drink to that. I am sure I don't know what they thought, but we had a good time anyway.

We visited five more churches that day. They were all just as glad to see us. They need our presence and caring so much. The Sister Church Program is an attempt to answer this need. We now have a small committee to coordinate this program in all attempt to assist the UUA Administration.

Ethnic tensions in Romania, influenced by Ceausescu are still present, and will take a really long time to heal. Instability in government will also be with them. Anti-semitic groups have sprung up in many areas as well.

Let me quote from the young poet dissident Dinescu, "The Rumanians were sick with fear for forty-five years. One day they were sick with courage. Children, born after the decree on births, against their mother's will as she had nothing to feed them, these children started the revolution. The weather was favorable, God was with us, the dictator died, then the snow and the freeze came."

I have come to love the Unitarian people of Transylvania. They are hard working people; most have had no chance for an education or the opportunity to decide the direction of their own lives.

I have many fears for them. I fear this new government and how the habit of oppression may continue, and I fear the possibility of exploitation by individuals and corporations of the world. Romania is a country rich in natural resources and has no foreign debt. "democracy" and "Free Enterprise" are only words and concepts. they have no historical experience to build on. They need the genuine and sincere support of other nations. We, in our small way can supply support to a few congregations and their people through our Sister Church Program. It is well worth it for you and for them.

I will end with a short poem written by a fifteen year old Romanian girl.

Look!

A white dove is flying!  
Its wings are shining with the pure brightness of freedom!  
Oh, dear world,  
Be kind and good,  
And don't smear or break  
My pure dove's wings!

Look!

A white dove is flying hopefully, crisscrossing the clear blue skies,  
Skies clear blue like a maiden's eyes,  
Oh, peoples of my mother planet,  
Do cherish the maiden's blue-skied look!

And please do look once more to see the white dove fly and look trustingly to you.

Please, don't grieve her wee little heart; help her fly more graciously,  
more quietly,  
more daringly.

Frangulea Daniela

**Excerpt from the Annual Report of President William Shulz  
to the 1990 General Assembly**

And now let me address the last institutional magnet for new members which I want to mention and that is our history. For me personally of course the highlight of this past year was our visit to Transylvania where that history began. Ten of us, including Natalie and Linda Lu, Barbara Greene, a member of the Canadian Parliament, and Representative Chester Atkins of Massachusetts, were in the party. Tomorrow morning you will have an opportunity to hear from Mr. Atkins whose participation was so critical to our success.

Our journey had been planned months before the fall of Ceausescu. Nicolae Ceausescu was without qualification the most vicious dictator in Eastern Europe. In a desperate effort to reduce the Rumanian national debt he had exported Rumania's resources at the expense of the people's fundamental needs. Food grew hard to find; heat and electricity were severely rationed in the winter months, and all imports were forbidden.

But that was not the worst of it. The monitoring and persecution of Rumania's citizens by the secret police, the so-called Securitate, was severe and thorough. We had an amusing experience of this on our 1987 visit when Natalie said to her husband, Mel, in the presumed privacy of their hotel room, "Melvin, I just can't stand all the wood chips in this Rumanian toilet paper. I've got to have some Western toilet paper." And, sure enough, the next day in the Gulbrandsen's room--but not in Linda Lu's and mine--was Western toilet paper.

The churches and the ethnic minorities--particularly the Hungarians--were singled out for special vilification. All Unitarians in Transylvania are Hungarian and Ceausescu was intent upon eliminating all vestiges of Hungarian culture. That was the ultimate rationale for the plan to destroy 8000 villages, many of which contained minority populations.

Fortunately the terror ended on December 22nd, 1989. The revolution began, you may recall, in the city of Timisoara when the Securitate tried to arrest a Reformed minister named Laszlo Tokes who had been outspoken in his criticism of the regime. Amazingly enough, members of Tokes' congregation surrounded his church to protect him. Some of them held up their children in front of them, thinking that the Police would not shoot children. But they were wrong.

.2@

The slaughter at Timisoara sparked the revolution. Within days students filled the streets of Bucharest and the Army turned against Ceausescu and the secret police. Nicolae and his wife, Elena, fled the palace and were quickly arrested and executed on Christmas morning.

Our delegation entered Rumania only three weeks after the revolution. I want to show you just a few slides which will give you a sense of the experience.

ISI.IDE NARRATION] Bucharest in January is a cold and forbidding place. This is the central square where the major confrontation between students and the Army on the one side and secret police forces on the other took place. Hundreds were

killed here. The places where they fell were marked with simple candle memorials. A city park had been appropriated as a cemetery and re-named Heroes' Park. The makeshift graves of dozens of young people were marked with personal memorabilia, including surfboards. To come face to face with the fact that so many young people died for freedom was an emotionally wrenching experience.

Bucharest itself--once called the "Paris of the Balkans" but stripped by Ceausescu of much of its architectural brilliance--displayed the vivid aftereffects of the fighting. The most tragic loss was the National Library which had housed the nation's most important manuscripts--hundreds of years of history burned to ashes. The tunnels which Ceausescu's secret police had installed beneath the city and from which they often emerged to spread their terror were exposed for all to see.

There were signs of hope as well. The insignia of socialist Rumania cut out of the national flag. Tanks bedecked with flowers. Long lines waiting for the first uncensored newspapers in more than forty years. A library which three weeks before had been stacked with the works of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu--those works now being discarded. And finally a "Victory" snowman.

Transylvania--eight hours by train from Bucharest--lay tranquil in the winter snow. A new day had dawned. This is the "mother church" of Unitarianism in the city of Kolosvar. Meet your Unitarian sisters ... and brothers ... gathered under the ancient words displayed in every congregation: 'Egy Az Isten' - 'God is One.'

One of the highlights of our trip was the opportunity to come to know the hero of the revolution, Laszlo Tokes, whose courage at Timisoara had finally broken the back of the oppressor. What a moving experience it was for me to stand with Laszlo Tokes and Congressman Atkins as we greeted the hundreds of members of the Unitarian Church in Marosvasarhely following our service there. And how great our prayer that their future will be a free one. [END OF NARRATION]

Our original purpose in going to Rumania had been to express our love and concern for the plight of our Unitarian sisters and brothers. As it turned out, good fortune had offered us an unparalleled opportunity to observe and perhaps even in some small way to shape a new society in the making.

Thanks to the American embassy and Congressman Atkins, we had access to top officials of the new government, leading dissidents, students, religious leaders, and leaders of the opposition parties.

Perhaps our most important meeting took place with the Acting Director of the Office of Religious Affairs--a man named Twadder. Three weeks earlier this office had been called the Ministry of Cults but after the revolution, had been re-named to reflect a more respectful attitude toward the churches. Under Ceausescu Mr. Twadder had been one of the churches' great nemeses, enforcing state restrictions with an iron hand. But the day we met with him Twadder had suddenly "got religion."

Among the things he assured us was that all religions would be permitted to practice their faiths--inciting the previously illegal Quakers, Brethren, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons. No further limits would be placed on the number of students permitted to prepare for the ministry, priesthood, or rabbinate; Bibles and other religious materials would be freely available; and there would be no limits placed on permits to construct or renovate church buildings. As far as we know, these assurances have been respected.

And yet the situation in Rumania remains a fragile one. Tomorrow Chet Atkins will bring us up-to-date but there is no question but what ethnic tensions remain and political and economic turmoil is still widespread. The plight of the thousands of babies with AIDS has received much attention.

Unitarian Universalist congregations have responded warmly to the needs of our religious brothers and sisters. I am proud to tell you that 125 UUA churches have entered our "Sister church Program" linking them to a Unitarian congregation in Transylvania. We will do all we can to help re-build Unitarianism in Transylvania and I think it is not an overstatement to say that if Rumania does eventually establish a stable democracy and if human rights are respected and religious freedom maintained. it will be in part at least because of the timeliness and conduct of our visit and the continuing efforts of Congressman Atkins and our UUA congregations to see to the advent in Rumania of a promising new age.