

Our Transylvanian Roots
An adult education course in 3 sessions
Rev. Ruth Ellen Gibson

This three session course offers participants an opportunity to find out about the Transylvanian beginnings of Unitarianism, the impact of political changes of the last decade, and the flowering of new relationships between Unitarian Universalists in America, and Transylvanian Unitarians in Romania. Topics for discussion will include:

- The History of Unitarian Origins in Transylvania in the 1650s++
- The "So-Called Revolution" of 1989-90 and the Role of North American Unitarian Universalists in Romania's Political Transition.
- Traveling to Transylvania--Tourists and Pilgrims

Preliminary plans for a group trip to our Partner Church in Kovend will be considered. However, armchair travelers will also find this course of interest.

You will need:

materials for making nametags,
a map of Transylvania, photos and or books about Transylvania on display.
handouts of the Transylvanian Anthem, and if possible, a tape of someone singing it.

Before the first session, you'll want to do some research on Transylvanian History, so that you can relate it briefly. You might try looking up Magyars, Huns, Szeklers. Some basic information is provided below.

Transylvanian folk music playing in the background would be a nice touch. Marta Sebastyan and her group, Musikas, has several CD's of Transylvanian folk songs, which are readily available.

Some background information.

Erdely-the Transylvanian's name for their homeland, means, roughly, "forest-land." The latinized name, Transylvania, means "land beyond the forest." It was settled by Magyar and Szekler people, also known as Huns. (Szeklers are a tribal group of the Transylvanian people, fiercely proud of their ethnic heritage, whose ancestors were known and named for, their development of the horse-drawn cart with a "szek" or seat.) As the horse (and horse-drawn cart) being the means by which the Magyars, Szeklers had settled, it's not surprising to note that the ancient religion of these people had special rituals involving horses, for the horse was both a symbolic and pragmatic means of power.

History and legend tell of two brothers-Attila and Csaba. Attila is also known by "outsiders" as Attila the Hun. According to legend, Csaba set out with some followers to settle or conquer a separate territory; later, when Attila was hard-pressed in battle, Csaba rode up with an army and helped his brother to victory-then disappeared and they were never heard from again. However, the idea grew up that he and his warriors had traveled into the sky ; thus the Milky Way is called " Csabaa's Star-path." It is said that at times when the Hungarian people were in dire need, Csaba and his horsemen would miraculously re-appear to support them in battle.

It was not easy for the hierarchical structure of Christian/Roman empire to flourish in this place, which was not only a refuge for free-thinking heretics, but also a land with a fundamental ethic of shared freedom and power. Hungarians and Transylvanians carried forward as far as the 19th century, a tradition that owning a horse, and being able to ride it, made you a "noble" and gave you a voice in the power-structure. This freedom, apparently , was not extended to non-Hungarian speaking people in the area.

Sometime around 1000 CE, Stephen I became the first king of the Hungarian people to unite and Christianize them.) His rule is celebrated in a recent Hungarian rock opera. However, the pagan traditions continued to be remembered and honored. Countless fairy tales recount the great deeds of the fairy-folk, their friendship with the humans, the sorry ways in which princes or princesses betrayed their pagan faith, and how they were then punished by the fairies. One church has some ancient frescoes showing the stations of the cross, and then running along side, a story of a fair maiden, her pagan lover, the Christian prince who wounds or kills the lover as he tries to "rescue her," and --if Ruth remembers correctly--the maiden grabbing a sword and cutting off the Christian prince's head. Being difficult to conquer, Transylvania became a buffer state between the Islamic Ottoman Empire and the Christian Holy Roman and Austro-Hungarian empires. Some of the walled churches are still preserved. Transylvanians and Romanians differ in their telling of the history of their mutual and adjoining homelands. Hungarian Transylvanians continue to celebrate their pagan and ethnic roots, through their fairy tales, their folk art, and their language. They appear somewhat indifferent to the influence of the Roman Empire on the culture. Romanians, on the other hand, trace their origins with pride to the Romans who settled Dacia, and who left artifacts behind, and influenced the language. As the memory of long-ago oppressions under the Hungarians persists, Romania's tendency in the modern era has been to try to assimilate them, to discourage --and at times, to actively suppress--the preservation of ethnic heritage and identity. In 325, at the council of Nicea, The Emperor Constantine sought to unify the teachings of Christianity. One of the major "parties" was lead by the bishop Arius, who insisted on the primacy of God the Father, teaching that Jesus, having been created by God, from whom he received any divine qualities one might attribute to him as God's son, was secondary to God the Father. The prevailing doctrine held that Jesus is co-eternal with the Father, not created, and in every aspect identical and equal. Arian's teachings were pronounced heretical, but there were two or three bishops in Transylvania who nevertheless continued to promote them.

In the 16th century, Zapolyta Janos, King of Transylvania, was married to Isabella, a bright young princess from Poland. Poland was then a refuge for Italian Humanists and a hotbed of intellectuals. Some of these came with Isabella to Transylvania, most notably Giorgio Biandrata, who was sent by the Queen of Poland to serve as court physician when Isabella became pregnant. Her child, prince Zsigmond Janos, was only a year old when his father died.

Transylvania was also influenced by Saxons-Germans merchants-who established footholds in seven cities, which even to this day have a German identity and flavor. They brought the Lutheran religion with them, along with prosperity through their trading. For this reason they were more or less tolerated by King Zapolyta, who was also still paying off both the Christians to the west and the Muslims to the east.

During King Zapolyta's reign, a young priest, Ferenc David, went to Wittenburg to study, and returned to Transylvania a Lutheran. In due course he was appointed Court Preacher. After the death of King Zapolyta, there was curiosity and concern about the religious upbringing of the young prince. Would he be raised as a Catholic or a Lutheran? Isabella, not wanting to alienate either side, stated in a now-famous policy: "Faith is a gift of God and no one should be punished on account of it." This assured that both religions would continue to be tolerated, and also was a step to assure some safety for her son's throne.

Being of a constantly curious mind, David also studied the writings of John Calvin, became a Calvinist, and as he was already known as one of the foremost preachers in the land, helped to establish and spread Calvinism in Transylvania. Eventually he became the tutor for the young prince, and at some point, perhaps in conversations with Biandrata, he became acquainted with the Unitarian thought and the writing of Michael Servetus. For further information about Zsigmond Janos' establishment of free religion in Transylvania, and David's leadership of

the Unitarian movement, see the story "The King Who Listened to His Mother" by Rev. Ruth Gibson or the sermon by the Rev. Kendyll Gibbons, "Crowns and Dreams" printed with this curriculum with her permission, or other retellings of this famous history.

A USEFUL TIMELINE

1533: Michael Servetus burned at the stake by Calvinists in Geneva, for his unitarian heresy.

1540: Prince Zsigmond Janos is born, 1544-his father dies.

1557: First decree of religious toleration given by Queen Isabella.

1557: David Ferenc becomes Lutheran

1564: " " becomes Calvinist

1566: " " becomes a Unitarian

1568: Freedom of Religion firmly established with King Zsigmond Janos' Edict of Toleration, following the debate at the Diet of Torda.

1571: Zsigmond dies, Catholic king succeeds the throne. Religious freedom is technically preserved-in that people may continue to practice their different faiths as long as they pray and baptize in the name of Jesus, and provided that there is no innovation in the teachings.

1579: David imprisoned for blasphemy and innovation, dies at the fortress in Deva.

1648: Polish Unitarians exiled, seek refuge in Transylvania.

1716: Unitarian churches confiscated in Kolozsvár.

Session 1: The History of Unitarian Origins in Transylvania (the 1650s ++)

Opening: Sing "Spirit of Life in first Hungarian and then in English

After introductions, play tape of Transylvanian Anthem, share English translation.

Start-up question: What does this song tell you about Transylvanians, and what does it make you wonder?

Presentation on historical highlights:

A. Settlement of Transylvania - Attila, Csaba

Relations between the Huns and the Christianized Roman Empire

B. The emergence of Unitarianism- Arianism in Transylvania and the story of Isabella, Zsigmond Janos, Biandratta, and David Ferenc.

Depending of the number in the group, the history outlined above can be presented as a lecture or story-telling-or the group can be divided into pairs, with each pair getting a different section (divided by *****) of the background on the history of Unitarian Origins. After a 20 -minute reading and reflection time, each pair can share the highlights from their telling of the story.

Reflection questions: What differences would you expect to find in Transylvanian Unitarianism today, given their history?

Where does their history offer lessons for us?

Closing: Reading 566 from our hymnal (God is One) and replay the Transylvanian anthem; sing it together in English.

Provide copies of some of the following material for participants to read at home:

Excerpts from the reports of Bill Schulz and Natalie Gulbrandsen to the GA 1990.

" Rumania: January 1990" and "The New Romania" UU World May-June 1990

"The Quest for the Historical Dracula" UU World March-April 1993

selected readings from In Storm Even Trees Lean on Each Other and After the Storm , published by Judit Gellerd and the Center for Free Religion:

Session 2: The "So-Called Revolution"of 1989-90 and the Role of North American Unitarian Universalists in Romania's Political Transition.

The revolution of 1989 and the role of Unitarian Universalists in Romania's political transition.. It would be good to read Lazslo Tokes' account of the start of the revolution, as this is one of the best accounts from "the inside."

Opening: Transylvanian Anthem-listen and sing along.

A. What was it like to be a Unitarian under Communist dictatorship?

Begin discussion by asking the group: When did they first know of Unitarians in Transylvania?

What do they personally remember about the events of 1989 in Romania? From their reading, what was life in Romania like under Ceaucescu? What hopes, what fears might they have had, living in such a situation? What are some of the strategies used by Unitarians in Transylvania to keep their faith alive?

Explain, if it is not entirely clear, the importance of leaders whom the people can trust, who interface with the structures of authority. The difficult decisions of the bishops and ministers in that time, needing to continue to inspire people-but also to keep from attracting the attention, and bringing down the anger, of the authorities.

You might read excerpts from Codrescu's "The Hole in the Flag" pg. 15, 193, 203-205. Or

the following story, based on Ruth Gibson's personal memory, may also serve to illustrate life under Communism in Romania. Or you may have your own anecdotes:

At a GA in the mid-80's, three eastern European Unitarian leaders were featured as guest speakers, including the Unitarian bishops of Hungary and of Romania. Each of them spoke, bringing greetings and saying a little about the religious life in their different countries. Then there were questions from the audience. Several questions asked of the Romanian bishop, Rev. Kovacs Lajos, were politely, but not very fully answered. A questioner got very direct, saying that a clearer, less evasive response be given.. At that point the Rev. Donald Harrington took the mike to explain that conditions in Romania were much less conducive to such open and free speech than in North America, or even in Hungary. That normally, people in Romania were not allowed to communicate with foreigners at all, let alone visit and converse freely. That it was only with great difficulty that Kovacs had been allowed to come to our GA, and that everything he did, and talked about, would have to be reported to the Secret Police on his return. That if he did or said anything that might displease or embarrass his government, the consequences would be very serious for him and for the Unitarian churches, and that he would certainly never be allowed the privilege of travel again. We were to keep that in mind as we asked questions of him.

Questions for discussion:

How might the fact of secret police monitoring your correspondence, your conversation, your church attendance, affect your life? What would you do differently? Who are the people you feel you could trust, and how would you arrange to be able to speak your mind and heart?

B. The So-called Revolution:

Use VCR to show the segment about Romania from the documentary videotape "People Power"-this is a videotape of TV news clips around the falling of Communist governments in 1989 and is probably available from your area library.

Note that the people of Romania consider that the revolution was a set-up, stolen from them from the very beginning. With the falling of the Berlin Wall, and the loss of influence of the Soviet Union, the second circle of leadership around Ceaucescu sensed an impending loss of their power as well. They needed a revolution, to overthrow the communist government so that they might emerge as new leaders. The arrest of Rev. Tokes in Timisoara was designed to incur a student protest, the orders to the police to fire on them was also designed to provoke the people. Later it was shown that many of the bodies piled up in the square had been dug up from a nearby cemetery, and were placed there by the government to further inflame public opinion, at home and around the world.

Having Ceaucescu address a "patriotic rally" at which the crowd responded in protest rather than loyalty was all part of the conspiracy; from there he and his wife were helped to "escape" by helicopter, and the "escape" led directly to their isolation, captivity, and assassination.

Once the students had taken over some essential sites and symbols of power, and Ceaucescu was out of the way, the "second tier" of leadership emerged. They praised the students as heroes of the revolution and then, took over the government. Ion Iliescu was elected president; his corrupt policies enriched his political support base, destroyed the already frail economy, and set the different ethnic groups against one another, so as to keep everyone's attention focused on shadow enemies, and away from the government.

Questions: What do we take for granted in our lives that would not have been part of the experience of a person in Romania during those years? Have American economic and civic freedoms strengthened our religious tradition, or not? In what ways?

After some discussion the "Village Conversation" (see end of this lesson) might be read

C. What spiritual heritage do we treasure?

Introduce the following reading, a selection from "Our Wanderings" by Imre Gellerd

The Rev. Imre Gellerd served for long years as a Unitarian minister and scholar in Transylvania, under the reign of Ceaucescu. He collected, studied and wrote about historic Unitarian sermons; for this he was sentenced to long years of prison, his wife was ordered to divorce him or lose custody of their children.

After his release from prison he served a village congregation shortly before the so-called revolution, threats from the secret police and, perhaps, other troubles so discouraged him that he took his life. Here is an excerpt from his writing:

I'm not sure how it is for you, but any time I meditate on the 400 year history of our religion and church, with it's liberation and wanderings, the glorious settlement of the Jewish people comes to mind... The fundamental issue to this great Old Testament story...is the divine message it imparts for the eternal human being. Let us postulate it this way: Life is evolution, a growth process. Evolution and growth imply moving from an inferior to a higher state. The Old Testament expresses this idea in the story of liberation from Egypt to Canaan, the land of plenty...Each people and each religion comes from a metaphorical

Egypt and progresses toward a Canaan...a journey towards its dream of a brilliant future...filled with struggle and sacrifice sometimes beyond imagination. The four hundred years of our church is also a struggling courageous wandering, seeking for our own Canaan....

When Moses came to the Amalekites, their king asked him what his people brought. They brought the Ark of the Covenant. The fifth century of Unitarianism also asks us what we have brought. We too have an Ark of our covenant with our God. What does the Ark contain?

Closing: Invite participants to consider Rev. Gellerd's question-"We too have an Ark of our covenant with God" We too, have a body of treasured beliefs, understandings about our relationship with the Holy, and traditional ways of observing and celebrating these.

In the week to come-imagine that in some dire way, we in America had come to loose our right to free religion. The practice and teaching of Unitarian Universalism is against the law. If this were so, what parts of our religion-what symbols, songs and stories, would you know by heart (or want to know by heart). When and how would you speak of these, or teach them to the next generation? How would you know whom to trust? In the next session, you will be invited to share some part of our religious tradition and practice that you would cherish and carry with you, in your "Ark of UU Covenant."

Play or Sing the Transylvanian Anthem, or Hymn #352, Find a Stillness (available on the CD/tape "Bring Many Names")

Village conversation, 1995 by Rev. Ruth Gibson, Denver CO (First Universalist)
[best read as a play script with 3 readers]

Ruth: [I had been living in my Partner Church village for nearly 2 months, and my Hungarian was just getting good enough to have real conversations with people. The women were sitting around and began to ask me about their American partner church.]

Rozika: So, in America, how often do you have communion services? Do you have one at Pentecost, like we do?

Ruth: Well, most Unitarians in the US don't have communion services, at least, not the Lord's Supper. We have some other traditions that are important to us, like communion. But each church decides what celebrations to have. In our church, there is a Flower Communion in the spring. Everyone brings a flower to the church, to put in the table. This shows that each one of us is beautiful in a different way. Then the flowers are all gathered into one huge bunch. And we see that together we are even more beautiful. At the end of the service, we each take a different flower home. This shows that we all need each other.

Rozika: Here we take turns, you know, bringing flowers. But your Flower [Communion] Sundays, it doesn't seem like a truly Christian worship. Don't you ever have Lord's Supper? Why does your bishop allow this?

Ruth: Well, we don't have a bishop. That's because we North American Unitarians have a different history. The first Christians who gathered congregations in America were Calvinist, and they were against having bishops. Our American Unitarian congregations and the Calvinist congregations, too, are each free to organize things, including worship services and sacraments the way that congregation decides to do it for themselves.

And in our Unitarian churches only some of the people in the church think of themselves as Christian Unitarians, and the others do not. So some of us keep the Christian traditions, but others do not.

Rozika: Now, tell me, what do you mean, not Christian? Of course Unitarians are Christians.

Ruth: Well, in the United States, some Unitarians are Christians, and some are Jewish. And for some of us, Buddhist ideas and traditions are just as important as Christian ones.

Pearl: I remember, you explained this before. In America, Unitarians are also Universalists, and you teach from all the world religions, not just from the Bible. Isn't that right?

Rozika: This is very interesting-you have no bishop, you don't use the Bible, you don't celebrate the Lord's Supper--- in America you aren't really real Unitarians, are you!

Ruth: It's funny you should say that. Back home when I first told the people in Madison about Unitarians in Transylvania-that you have a bishop and read the Bible in church, and celebrate communion-some of them said just what you said: "Oh, those people in Transylvania-they aren't real Unitarians are they!" But now they understand better, that there are different ways to be Unitarian.

Rozika: Not real Unitarians! How could anyone say that about us! Of course we Transylvanians are true Unitarians, the first Unitarians! There are no people more Unitarian that we are, and from the very first we had a bishop. David Ferenc was the first bishop and the best.

Ruth: This is true. And David also said that we should always be willing to think about new ideas. So in America, because we have a different history, we think in different ways. Transylvanian and American customs and traditions are different, but we can all be good Unitarians, each in our own way.

Rozika: Well---maybe. But I don't know.

Pearl: Of course, it makes sense. America has people from all over the world, so naturally the religions from all over the world come with the people. That's why they are Unitarian Universalists in America. But they are true Unitarians, just like us, because like us they believe in the One God. Egy az Isten. Isn't that right, Ruth?

Ruth [I decided not to try to explain about the wiccans, with their goddess and god rituals. I didn't know enough words! What I said was:] We have the same idea, Egy az Isten, in our tradition. And we teach that Jesus was a human being, a great teacher, not a God. But there are also quite a lot of Unitarians in our churches who don't think the idea of God is useful in religion. So they don't believe in any God at all. But they can still be Unitarians.

Rozika: No way! How can this be? How can there be atheists in America? I thought you never had had communism over there.

As you can see, this is only one part of a constantly re-circling conversation that extended over many days. We would "sleep on it" and then come back with more questions that enabled us to dive again into the challenging and exciting task of building true understanding-understanding of who each of us are and of how we have come to be that way.

Session 3: Traveling to Transylvania--Tourists and Pilgrims

In the third session we watched videotapes of various groups traveling, including a snippet from a group which happened to stop in at our partner church. People who had been to Transylvania shared their pictures and stories. People who had read about visits shared what impressed them. We talked about the possibility of making a visit, and what the benefits and challenges might be. Then we listed the steps a group from our congregation would need to take, along with a time line, to prepare for such a trip.