

## ***Hungarian Delight***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
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### ***Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby***

When my family moved to Montgomery, Alabama, for four years in the early part of this century, I was excited to spend time in a place that is as central to this country's history as Philadelphia or Boston. From the times of the Chickasaw, Cherokee, Muskogee Creek and Choctaw people, to today, central Alabama—Montgomery, Selma, Tuskegee and Birmingham—has experienced an encyclopedia's worth of people and events.

Alabama is the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. It's John Lewis, and Joe Lewis, and Zora Neale Hurston. Satchel Paige, Willie Mays and Hank Aaron. Hank Williams, Nat King Cole and Harper Lee. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote sections of *Tender is the Night* a few blocks from where I lived. I talked with an old man who remembered that as a boy, when he rode his bike in the same neighborhood he sometimes saw the radical activist Helen Keller in a rocking chair on her sister's porch.

We've been touching on Unitarian and Universalist history, which in this country includes the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. White activists who answered Dr. King's call are well known, often more so than the Black people who were martyred for the cause. I reflect on all those who made sacrifices for justice, including the Unitarian Universalists Rev. James Reeb, who was murdered in Selma, and Viola Liuzzo, who was murdered by Klanners after the march.

When I was at the Montgomery UU Fellowship, I learned about Clifford Durr. He was a member of the white aristocracy, a prominent lawyer, and a Federal Communications Commissioner. His brother in law was a Supreme Court justice. His wife, Virginia, was a civil rights activist who was friends with Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosa Parks. In 1955, Virginia Durr was called before a U.S. Senate subcommittee that was trying to prove that she had been a Communist spy in the 1940s. She was defiant. At that point, Montgomery's white establishment pulled away from the Durrs. Feeling unwelcome, Clifford Durr left his Methodist Church, and before long became the first president of the Montgomery Unitarian Fellowship.

Another of those early Montgomery Unitarians was federal judge Frank M. Johnson, who ruled on the major civil rights cases of the day. The Klan called him the most hated man in Alabama. They bombed his mother's house and burned a cross on his front lawn. He and his family were under federal protection for 20 years.

When I talked with longtime white residents of the city, I had to wonder. Were they among the handful of white allies in the 1950s and '60s? Would I have been a supporter of the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Selma march?

My focus these days is helping to make this church a safe place, a beloved community with deep relationships, and the willingness to examine our beliefs and to welcome and learn from people with different cultures and life experiences. I educate myself, and I vote, but, thinking of the legacy of the Montgomery activists, I will always wonder if I'm doing enough.

## **Hungarian Delight© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

I don't know about you, but whenever I travel, I find places and things that remind me of home. I have recently returned from Transylvania, that part of Romania where Unitarianism still thrives. On this trip, I was surprised by symbols I think of as American UU that I didn't expect to see in Transylvanian Unitarian Churches.

A box with a chalice on it in the back of one of the largest Unitarian churches in the region.

The church in Bágyon is one of the largest in the area. Size of church, however, is determined not by the number of people who show up to services on a Sunday morning, but rather how many people live in the village. Unitarianism is an ethnic religion for a certain Hungarian speaking population. So this church is large because the village of Bágyon is relatively large, with about a thousand people.

I was surprised to find a bowl with water and stones in it on their communion table in that church, which reminded me of our stones of joy and sorrow.

In the interior of that same church there is a fancy sounding board above the pulpit – it's a truly effective way of amplifying the sound of the speaker. The speaker is also raised, simply so that everyone in the church can see and hear them.

All the ministers on this tour of Transylvania had to try out the pulpits – here you'll see my colleague, the Rev. Monica Jacobson Tennessen standing in there – her husband, Jacob, and daughter, Anne attend UUCV, so many of you know her. She is the reason I took this trip at all. She suggested it and I was delighted to join her.

So of course, I had to get into the pulpit to try it out as well. Despite the sounding board, you'll see there are microphones as well – I imagine those are for recording rather than amplifying, but I didn't ask, so don't know.

I was surprised at how much the Unitarian churches we visited felt "like home." That may seem like a silly statement when you see this pulpit and fancy sounding board above my head, but the church I knew best growing up was in Salt Lake City, UT. And they have a raised pulpit which is pretty common in New England, which is the style this church was built in.

But, back to Transylvania. This church in Torockó is where we first attended a service. The earliest date on this building is 1640 and then major renovations took place in 1972 and 2014. The service was entirely in Hungarian and so I didn't understand a word. Our young guides – two Unitarian women ministers – tried to tell me about the sermon afterwards, but I still didn't understand it. I did understand that I had to enter the building through the women's entrance and sit among the women. The men sat in a different area. I was prepared for this, having heard that seating was segregated in Transylvanian Unitarian churches. What surprised me, however, was that it wasn't entirely segregated. There was a family who was having their baby christened that morning, and they sat together, all genders, up in the balcony until they came down for the christening. And there were young scouts – kids that seemed to be aged 6 through young adulthood, attending the service, and they were also not divided by gender. It seemed only that the village elders were divided by gender, though the few men that were on our tour joined us women seated in the women's section of the church.

Before we went to church that Sunday, we were invited to a neighbor's house to watch how they make somodi kalács (cinnamon swirl loaf). We were invited to a shot or two of palinka, which in this case was

a plum distillation, a hootch - and then watched Tünde make cinnamon swirl loaf in the traditional style using an outdoor oven. After church, we returned to taste it!

There were so many Unitarian churches we visited! This one is a UNESCO world heritage site, of "cultural and natural heritage considered to be of outstanding value to humanity". This is the Unitarian Church of Székelyderzs.

The banner in front says "Transylvania, the land of religious freedom" with a big 450 on top, for 450 years of religious freedom, which was probably put there in 2018 when they celebrated 450 years. Inside, it has some of the most impressive Transylvanian medieval frescoes. This one depicts the legend of 11th-century Hungarian king St. Ladislaus.

And of course the pulpit. The cloth on it says *Egy Az Isten*, God is One. And a surprising table with a carved chalice symbol that again strikes me as very American UU, not something I expected to find in this historic Unitarian church.

We also visited the church in Székelykeresztúr from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The church when we saw it housed the "wandering tablecloth," made by the Unitarian Women's Association of Romania. As the name indicates, the tablecloth "wanders" from the site of the annual meeting of the Women's Association one year to the location of the following year's event. The tablecloth is composed of embroidered triangles sewn together, made by and representing each local women's association. Today, the tablecloth contains approximately 120 triangles.

Monica and I had to try that pulpit as well.... This tablecloth would wind up in Kolozsvár by the end of our trip at the Conference we attended, but I get ahead of myself. The tour wasn't all Unitarian churches. We did go to another UNESCO world heritage site which was in Torda, where the Edict of Turda was issued, but had nothing to do with Unitarianism. The salt mine.

The Turda Salt Mine is one of the oldest in the world, recently transformed into a subterranean wonderland. In addition to the stunning salt galleries, there's a "theme park" that includes a large amphitheater, a Ferris wheel, a bowling alley, a mini-golf course, pool tables, and an underground lake that you can experience from a paddle boat. Monica and I took the Ferris wheel, but didn't get all the way down to the paddle boat. This little wagon is what they used to bring salt up from the mine.

We also took a different kind of wagon ride – ostensibly to see sheep being milked and cheese being made. In this tiny cart that we were sure would collapse under us. But off we went. It was a very bumpy ride and we eventually found sheep.

For a long time we thought we didn't have a common language with our cart ride driver – he didn't respond to English, Spanish, or German and our phone translators didn't work without wifi and we didn't have cell service so we sat on the cart a long time watching the sheep get milked.

After some pretty funny whatsapp messages to our guides and attempts at making phone calls which couldn't go through, Monica tried German again (I think Audrey had tried the first time) and we realized he understood Monica's accent and were able to have him take us back. No cheese was made. It was an adventure, that ended with the cart driver having to lift one of our colleagues off the cart at the end. But we survived. It was an adventure and we survived. Besides Unitarian churches and some odd side adventures, we did get some history in. I was so glad I had reviewed the history for myself when I preached about this trip in August – that sermon which included a bit of Dracula in it.

In fact, we did see Vlad the Impaler's father's home – This is the historical figure that Bram Stoker took his fictional Dracula from. His father's home is now a restaurant and museum. I was told that

Transylvanians were pretty tired of tourists wanting to find Dracula memorabilia, but it was pretty clear that some were making good money capitalizing on the tale. Selling Bloody Official Dracula stuff.

But I'd have to say that the highlight of my trip was seeing the famous 1896 canvas by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, depicting Francis David addressing the Diet. We almost didn't get there as the day of the salt mine tour, when we were supposed to see it, things took longer than expected and we had to get to a garlic festival where lunch was being prepared for us. But on our last day of the tour, we came back through Turda and were able to see it. It was probably even better with anticipation.

It takes up an entire wall in the museum and has all the historical figures I told you about in my August sermon – that's Francis David in the center with his arm outstretched, and King John Sigismund on the left on the elevated throne. The church depicted in the painting apparently looks nothing like the church where this would have taken place and the faces are taken from area Turda residents at the time, but it's breathtaking. Nobody would have known what these 16<sup>th</sup> century figures really looked like by the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Besides King John Sigismund and the court preacher and first Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania, Francis David, you've got the physician Georgio Biandrata and Stephen Bathory in there. I was so glad I had reviewed the history for you (and me) in August, because I sort of remembered who all these figures were when I saw the painting. And, of course, the ministers had to try their hand at being the court preacher.

We were mostly women on this tour because we were headed to a women's conference, but you'll see a few men there as well. So, next was the conference which Monica, Natalie and I attended. Natalie, for those who don't know, is our Congregational Administrator.

We took a video for the Water Ingathering service at a fountain in Kolozsvár between our hotel and the Unitarian high school where the conference was held. Between the Unitarian church and the Unitarian High school is this statue of Francis David, David Ferenc in Hungarian and next to that is a stone which reads:

*First Bishop of the Hungarian Protestants in Transylvania and founder of the Unitarian church. He had a decisive influence in the evolution of the protestant reformation throughout the principality of Transylvania. While he served as bishop, in 1568, the Transylvanian Diet adopted the Edict of Religious Freedom.*

I'm sorry to say that by this time, I was starting to feel under the weather and I missed much of the conference. I was especially sorry to miss the Hungarian folk dance lessons that were to take place on Saturday night. But let me share with you a snippet from the opening ceremony which, again, reminded me so much of American Unitarian Universalism. If you've never been to a General Assembly – the annual meeting of Unitarian Universalists in this country, you've probably never seen the banner parade, but we used to open the General Assembly with members of various congregations carrying their banners, usually to music by a band from whatever city we're gathering in. That said, I recorded the banner parade from this assembly and it was quite similar.

Here's the wandering tablecloth we saw in the Székelykeresztúr where the women had gathered the year before, now brought to Kolozsvár for this conference.

Out of this conference, we were to bring a cloth from home, representing our heritage and community. They will be sewn together into another quilt or tablecloth – People were to write about their offerings and they were strung around the High School during the conference.

Perhaps you can see below the UUCV napkin that was given to me when I became your minister that I contributed to the project, so that we remain connected to this worldwide movement of Unitarians and Universalists.

I want to circle back to some of these symbols I found that remind me of American UUism which really could be an influence of the United States on Transylvanian Unitarianism. In the 80's and 90's and into the 2000's there was a partner church project, partnering US congregations with Romanian ones. The congregations in Salem and Corvallis both have partner congregations in Romania. Some congregations, like ours, decided not to pursue these partnerships in part, because of the great divide between our faiths – such as the decidedly Christian theology among the Transylvanian Unitarians, and the subordinate position of women requiring a separation of the genders in worship. But things have changed since that time. The two ministers leading our tour were both young women, and the congregation in Kolozsvár was not divided along gender lines, as it was in the small village of Torockó. The sermon, which I did understand because they provided simultaneous translation at that service, sounded very UU – given by one of our tour guide ministers who is an associate at the big Kolozsvár church, using our tour as a journey metaphor for life.

But the example I want to share is about a young adult from Romania, from the Transylvanian Unitarian church. This story comes from the current Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, the Rev. István Kovács, who shared it with Monica who shared it with me. Anyway, this young adult came into contact with U.S. youth traveling in Romania because of these partnerships. Youth groups would sometimes raise the money to travel and visit Transylvanian Unitarian churches. This Romanian youth was struck by gender fluidity and acceptance of folks who identify as LGBTQ among the American youth. Because of that experience and openness, he now advocates for gender equality and the LGBTQ community in Romania, which is not always a safe position to take in Eastern Europe.

There is a thru line of love in our faith that begins with that Edict of Torda issued by King John Sigismund under the advisement of Francis David, that declares us to be a spiritual tradition that resists hatred, oppression, and the narrow view that there is only one way to be faithful, to be religious, to be free. This thru line of love connects the martyred Francis David who died in prison in 1579 with the martyred James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo in 1965 from our American story. We may be minority religions in both Romania and the United States, but we have a powerful message for the world, of the worth and dignity and value of each human person. May we spread that message of love with the strength and perseverance demonstrated by our ancestors, and with joy – with the delight and joy of a people who have gathered together in support of one another on this journey of life. May it be so.