

**A Project of Love**  
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Come take a trip with me to some very old Unitarian Churches in Transylvania. We arrived in the Kolosvar, the capital yesterday and visited several ministers last evening. This is late March 1987. Today we are to visit villages so we can go by car. Bill Schulz will be driving his wife LindaLu in a rented car with the Deputy Bishop Janos Erdo. Mel, my husband and I, will be with Bishop Kovac and his driver Georgey Andrasi.

The rolling green hills are beautiful becoming greener each day. The sky is clear and bright. We drive on a main road and finally in the distance we see a church spire. We leave the paved road and find ourselves on a real country road leading to the village. We enter the village through a gate and go up a hill toward a church. The sidewalk is lined with villagers – men, women, children, teenagers all waiting for us plus many animals – dogs, cats, hens, ducks, pigs. The people were waving banners, signs welcoming us, and the church bells are gloriously ringing. They have been waiting for us for well over an hour. We turn into the churchyard, get out of the car, and every group makes a speech of welcome. It brought tears to our eyes to see how much this visit meant to them. We then crossed the courtyard to their lovely church. Many of the crowd had gone in to sit down. The church was immaculate, and everywhere was red embroidery. The communion table had an exquisite piece made by someone in the church, and a vase of fresh flowers and a Bible. The hymnbooks are small and worn, but kept together with embroidered covers and each front pew had a piece of embroidery

along the length of the pew. The pulpit is above the people against the wall with winding stairs that go up to it.

We left the church to go across the courtyard to the minister's house, where we were served our 5<sup>th</sup> breakfast all carefully cooked and served by the women of the church. This particular village was all Unitarian, not a single other religion there.

At that time Transylvania had been under communist rule for about 30 years. The dictator Ceausescu had been in power for years. The life the people lived was one of poverty and oppression, but that lovely morning as we drove through their remote villages all that seemed very far away. We fell in love with these people. They had had no visitors for years so they could not do enough for us. Language was no barrier, the smiles on their faces and the clutch of their hands told it all. We left them hoping life would improve.

Off we went to our 6<sup>th</sup> breakfast. Very similar to the others – a fascinating village church, wonderful feast, their gift to us, so proud, such lovely faces.

It is a good thing that we had some long drives between churches, or we never could have managed all that food. We knew that later after our 9 breakfast feasts that day. The Bishop's planning was not of the best, but he wanted us to see as many as we could. We were late every time, as much as 2 hours often.

Our next church was in a town. They were poor, too, but not like the others. We had very different foods this time. Bill Schulz asked Lajos what their basic food was here. Lajos said it was "mice". Bill said, "mice!" and Lajos said "yes". Bill said, "You mean those little animals that run around the floor and you catch in traps?" No, no" said Lajos bent over laughing "mice" and I said "what color is it?" Lajos said "yellow".

“Corn” I said, “yes yes.” We all just howled! There was a large plate of cheese coming around on a cake stand, all carefully cut in squares. I took one, and Bill said under his breath, “That is not cheese.” I said, “Yes it is.” “No,” he said. I took a large bite and I nearly died. It was fat, pure fat. I could not swallow it so I had to wait for the conversation to turn to the head of the table so I quickly got it into a Kleenex. Then it was time for dessert and Cherry Brandy. I knew about Cherry Brandy because Bob West, a former president of the UUA had told me to be careful. He said that if I kept my glass full they wouldn’t refill it, but everyone had to join in the toast. This was the minister’s gift to us. There are cherry trees everywhere so the ministers make their own brandy. Everywhere we went we had Cherry Brandy. It was very good and I was very careful. This time when the server came around to fill the glasses, I heard my husband say to him in a very low whisper, “I really can’t have any I am a recovering alcoholic.” I nearly choked and then I saw LindaLu who was on the right hand side of the table getting something from her handbag, and I realized as he went to fill her glass that she was telling him she was on medication, so she could not have any. It was her vitamins she put on the table. Everyone did join in the Minister’s toast. (Egey Chegary.) Then we had the Chimney Cake for dessert. It was wonderful, about 12-15 inches high. Just delicious.

When we got back to Kolosvar, things had not changed. When we arrived at the airport the day before, we were met by soldiers all along runway, with guns pointed at us. They followed us to the doors and we went into the station. A tremendous picture of Ceaucescu was on the wall 2 floors high. We were glad to get out of there, but customs were very thorough.

After our day at the villages, we had dinner at one of the restaurants and saw one more family. It was foggy and we were stopped twice for absolutely no reason, but harassment. We still had the men watching us at the lamppost and the other one across from our room. Of course I wanted to find out where the room was bugged. I found it easily in the bathroom, but could not find it in the bedroom. We had to pull the bedclothes up over our heads to say a word. I told Mel I was going to say something and he had a fit saying I would get us into trouble. I stood in the center of the room and said, "You know this really is a nice hotel, but I would think they would have better toilet paper." That is all I said, but as I got back into bed I did see the man still looking up at our windows and leaning on that lamppost.

We visited the minister of Cults the next morning. He was not a very interesting man. Bill talked to him a little bit, but the minister had everything he needed to know about us so we were able to leave before too long. We then went to meet the professors of the Divinity School. The Communists had taken over their high schools, their colleges and the Divinity School, and had added other students into their Unitarian schools. The Bishop said he would petition to get the schools back as soon as they could. We were busy that whole day. When we came back at night, the men were still watching our windows. One thing however had changed. We had Western toilet paper in our bathroom, but not in the Schulz's.

We were to leave that following day. So we wanted to know from the bishops what we could do to help. They thought the only thing that was a possibility was to write letters to the different churches. Letters might attract attention, especially if they were

from all over the United States. Packages could not be sent because they would be confiscated immediately.

When we were safe on the plane to Switzerland, we continued to think about what we could really do to organize and help. Bill had no ideas. Then he said he thought he remembered in the files in his office when he first became President, that 4 or 5 churches had sister churches after WWI and before WWII. He said he would look as soon as he got a chance when he got home. Sure enough, he found a list of 5 or 6. He called 2 of them, Carl Scoval at King's Chapel and the Minister of the Winchester Church, and they were happy to renew their relationships. Bill mentioned this in his letter to congregations and the mail came pouring in from people that would like to help.

Bill's secretary was going to deal with the letter, but I realized she could not possible do this. As she told me she didn't even know our churches let alone the Transylvanian ones. I told her I would take it over. I was going to be at Meadville Lombard Divinity School for a meeting there and Andrasci had come over to be there for a year. I called him to see if we could get together after my meeting ended to match the churches.

That worked out well and we matched all of our churches that had come in.

Bill and I went back to Transylvania just after the Revolution and 10 days after the last shots were fired. We hadn't planned to go at that time, but that is when our vis arrived so we went. We had a congressman from the US and a woman from the Canadian Parliament with us, plus 3 ministers and Bob Alpern of the Social Justice Department. We took the overnight train from Budapest, which was a story in itself, arriving in Kolosvar just after an ice storm. We arrived just before sunset and it was like

a fairyland covered in colored ice. The roads had not been plowed and there were just 2 deep ruts to go in. It was some ride! Gary Smith and I were in a large limousine. I think we both wondered if we would ever survive.

As we entered the city, small memorials with candles were burning where students had been killed. The rest of the city was completely black as there was no electricity anywhere.

In the morning things looked brighter and since then everything is better, certainly as far as oppression is concerned. The Securitate were still around for a while. They have been given back their schools and have redone the Divinity School living quarters. I did not know any student could live in them – one of those old iron cots, a mattress all lumpy and worn out, an orange crate to hold all their things, one light bulb, and the whole place was dirty and dark. Now with the help of a lot of US churches and the Partner Church Council, the Divinity School has been refurbished.

As the sister church movement continued to grow, and my duties as Moderator were getting more time consuming, Bill felt that the Transylvanian project should be institutionalized under the UUA. He asked Polly and Ted Guild to work on it, which they did until the Partner Church Movement became the natural place for it. The Partner Church council became completely involved in the doing for Transylvania. I was so happy. They have done so well that now they are going to do some work in the Philippines and India.

The villages have a severe problem. Young couples who marry and want to stay in the villages can not make a living, so have to go to the city factories. They need help in funding or creating work that will pay enough to raise a family.

When you take a village into your church life, it is a transforming event. Every part of the church becomes involved – women’s groups, men’s groups, religious education, music, social justice. You name it there is a place for every age and everyone.

If any of you have had foreign students you understand what a wonderful experience the contact can be for everyone. Our family has had many contacts and my husband and I have enjoyed it as much as our children. It is a transforming experience which brings love to all.