



River Road Unitarian Church

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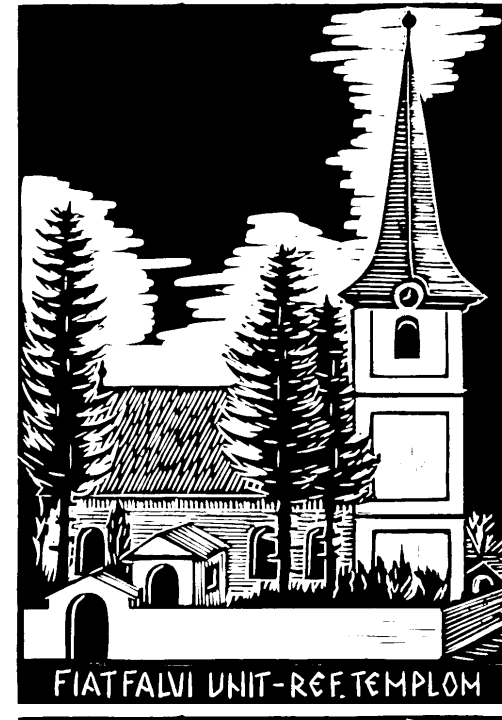
Worship & Religious Education: Sunday, 9:15 & 11:15 a.m.
(Summer Schedule—One service at 10 a.m.)

Office Hours 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Monday - Friday



The Tractor RRUC helped to purchase.

Partner Church Project River Road Unitarian Church Fiatfalva, Romania



October 2005

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IV. AN INVITATION TO JOIN IN THE PROJECTS

The Partner Church Committee welcomes the help of all who are interested in strengthening ties with the Fiafalva church and building a brighter future for all of the people of the region. If you would like further information on the activities of the committee or its meeting times, please contact:

- Dwight Cramer, PCC chair, 301-493-4954
- Janet Fernandez, 301-907-9475

IV. BACKGROUND READING

- Area Handbook Series books: Romania, edited by Ronald Bachman; and Hungary, edited by Stephen Burant (both updated in 1990; published by the Library of Congress); available in the Montgomery and Fairfax County Libraries and from the U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Booklet: Struggling for Ethnic Identity: Ethnic Hungarians in Post-Ceausescu Romania (1993; available from Helsinki Watch, a division of Human Rights Watch, Washington, 202-371-6592).
- Stephen Borsody, The Hungarians: A Divided Nation (1988 collection of essays; available from Puski-Corvin Books, New York, 212-879-8893; Puski-Corvin is a good source of materials about Hungary and Hungarian culture, including both English and Hungarian language books).
- In Storm, Even Trees Lean on Each Other; UU Sermons Compiled by Dr. Judit Gellerd (available from Center for Free Religion, Chico, CA; 916-895-3222).
- Earl Morse Wilbur, Our Unitarian Heritage (Beacon Press, 1963; currently out of print but available in the RRUC library).

Bathory, a Catholic prince, ascended the throne and severely restricted further innovations. While he allowed continued freedom of expression for the established religions, including Unitarianism, he forbade further changes. As a result, when David began to teach that it was not appropriate to invoke Jesus in prayer, he was soon tried for innovation and sentenced to prison, where he died in 1579.

Yet the ideas of David and other early Unitarians did not die with them. In England, during the time of the Enlightenment, numerous thinkers explored the issues raised by David and others and further developed Unitarianism in keeping with the discoveries of the eighteenth century. The Unitarianism of England was transplanted to the United States at the end of the eighteenth century by liberal dissenters from the Church of England, most notably Dr. Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen.

The circumstances under which the Unitarians of Transylvania survived have been difficult. The shifting political boundaries of Europe have placed Transylvania under various regimes, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary, and now Romania. In the recent past, the Ceausescu regime in Romania made difficult the very survival of Unitarianism in Transylvania. The various forms of government oppression over the past 430 years also have meant that much of the intellectual debate, fervor, and development of Unitarianism in the West has not taken place to the same extent in Transylvania.

Despite the hardships, the Unitarians in Transylvania have been able to maintain their faith. While some of their beliefs and their church services are more traditional than those typical of Unitarian congregations in North America, they have continued to follow the principles that Francis David taught: the use of reason in matters of faith, a belief in absolute freedom of conscience, the humanity of Jesus, a commitment to human rights and social justice, and tolerance of differing opinions. Today they number about 60,000 parishioners in some 150 churches. Most of these Transylvanian churches have been paired with a UU partner church in North America.

I. WHAT IS THE PARTNER CHURCH PROJECT?

The River Road Unitarian Church (RRUC) Partner Church Project is part of the Partner Church program that the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) established in early 1990 to develop a support network of UU churches in North America to help churches in Transylvania on an individual basis. The RRUC Partner Church Committee (PCC) coordinates its efforts with the Greater Washington Area Partner Church Council and with the National Partner Church Council.

Our partner church is located in Fiatfalva, Romania, in the Transylvania region of that country. The Partner Church Project has several aims, including:

- To help fellow Unitarians rebuild their religious communities after years of isolation and political oppression;
- To foster the exchange of people and ideas between Fiatfalva and RRUC;
- To support the education of Unitarian students in secondary schools, seminaries and elsewhere;
- To improve our knowledge of the roots of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania; and
- To foster mutual tolerance and respect among ethnic groups in Transylvania.

The Partner Church Program at RRUC was started in February 1992. Since then, there has been active correspondence between the churches. So far ten exchange visits have taken place, eight from RRUC to Fiatfalva and two in reverse. The first contact was by a five-person delegation, including our former minister, Bill Murry, and four PCC members, who spent three days in the village in August 1993. Rev. Alpar Bartha of the Fiatfalva church, along with his wife Marta, visited RRUC in October, 2000. The most recent visit to Fiatfalva involved PCC Chair Dwight Cramer and committee member Ray Angelo in August 2004.

II. ABOUT FIATFALVA

Fiatfalva (Filiis in Romanian) is a village of some 1,000 people located about 150 miles north-northwest of Bucharest in eastern Transylvania. A small group of dwellings at the edge of town house about 300 Gypsies, The villagers are ethnic Hungarians, as are most of the people in this part of Transylvania, including the nearby city of Kerestur (Cristuru Secuiesc). The village is in the Kukulo River Valley, with low hills on the south side. About 300 of the villagers are Unitarian, while a like number are Reformed (Calvinists). The two congregations have shared the same church building since 1803, when the Reformed church was lost to fire, a situation that is unique in Transylvania.

Life in the village is rooted to the land, with agriculture the principal activity on about 200 small plots comprising a total of 1,320 acres. The main crops are wheat, corn, barley, oats, potatoes, and sugar beets. The daily schedule is regulated by the demand of the plants and animals. By 7 a.m. the livestock leave their owners' sheds in the village to go to pasture. Most transportation is by horse and wagon or bicycle. The roads are unpaved. Some of the people work in nearby Kerestur.

Some homes in Fiatfalva have running water and all have electricity. Some have television, and a few of those share a satellite dish to pick up programs from Budapest as a diversion from government-controlled programs in Romania. However, improvements are being made. While the income level of the village is quite low, its inhabitants are resourceful. Almost every house has a garden where fruits, vegetables, and flowers are grown. Most families have farm animals such as pigs, chickens, geese, and/or cows.

III. RRUC PROJECTS IN TRANSYLVANIA

RRUC has undertaken projects that will provide both moral support and concrete assistance for the current needs of Fiatfalva. We hope to improve access to the intellectual and cultural currents of

ish Sultan.

The Unitarian movement became established as a distinct religion in Transylvania in 1568. The ideas of Unitarianism were introduced to Transylvania by Francis David (David Ferenc in Hungarian). David began his career as a Catholic priest, but after studying in Wittenberg, Germany, under Martin Luther he became a Lutheran and then a Calvinist. After studying the writings of scholars such as Faustus Socinus, an Italian, and Michael Servetus, a Spaniard, both of whom challenged the concept of the Trinity, David began to spread the Unitarian "heresy" in Transylvania.

While vigorously advancing the tenets of Unitarianism, David at the same time was an outspoken advocate of religious toleration. He declared in a book dedicated to King John Sigismund of Transylvania: "There is no greater piece of folly than to try to exercise power over conscience and soul, both of which are subject only to their Creator."

David's teachings in Transylvania met with more acceptance than the attempts of other Unitarians in Europe. Under David's influence, King John issued the Decree of Religious Tolerance at the Diet of Torda in 1568 -- designating Unitarianism as well as Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism as accepted religions. The Decree stated that "preachers shall be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere, each according to his own understanding of it. If the community wish to accept such preaching, well and good; if not, they shall not be compelled, but shall be allowed to keep the preachers they prefer. No one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion, since faith is the gift of God."

Thus, while Socinus's preaching of Unitarian theology in Poland was ruthlessly crushed by the Jesuits, Servetus was burned at the stake by Calvin, and Protestants and Catholics were slaughtering each other all over Europe, King John and Transylvania stood out as a model of religious tolerance.

Yet even Transylvania was not immune to the forces that were sweeping Europe. Upon the death of John Sigismund, Istvan

I think of Jesus, who summarized his speech on the mountain like this: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). In the evenings I look up at the sky and I am overwhelmed by the beauty of the universe, and I say we might never attain it, but it is important that we make a step forward each day. And that is what I expect of our partnership: a step forward, so we could be a link in the chain to perfection, which started in the past and through our present will lead us home, to God.

May God bless our lives and partnership. I send my love to all my Unitarian friends from Bethesda. Alpar

V. OUR UNITARIAN ROOTS IN TRANSYLVANIA

Transylvania, a geographic region of Romania directly east of Hungary, is approximately the size of Hungary or the state of Indiana. It is inhabited by Romanians, Hungarians, Gypsies, Germans, and several other ethnic groups. (Most Jews who once lived there were killed in the Holocaust.) It was the province of Dacia under the Roman Empire, until the Romans withdrew from the region in the third century A.D.

The Carpathian Basin, including Transylvania, was settled by Hungarians at the end of the ninth century. Unfortunately, there is an acrimonious disagreement between Romanian and Hungarian historians as to which of these two ethnic groups came first. The Romanians claim that they are the descendants of Romanized Dacians and have lived continuously in Transylvania since the Roman Empire. The Hungarians claim that the Romanians (formerly called Vlachs) started to infiltrate Transylvania from the Balkans in the twelfth century.

Transylvania constituted the eastern part of Hungary until the end of World War I, when the Allies under the Treaty of Trianon awarded this region to Romania. However, during the Ottoman Turkish occupation of Hungary during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Transylvania was a semi-independent principality, ruled by Hungarian princes under the suzerainty of the Turk-

the West for our Unitarian colleagues in Transylvania who for so long had been cut off from the outside world. The primary projects that have been undertaken to date include:

- A. Gas Heat Project.** The first assistance requested by the Fiatfalva church was to help connect the church and parsonage to the nearby gas pipeline. More than \$3,000 has been provided to purchase and install the necessary hardware. The village has been receiving gas since February 1995.
- B. Supplies.** RRUC has provided medicine, seeds, sewing and school supplies to the community on a continuing basis, about \$1,300 worth so far.
- C. Ministerial Visits.** There have been three ministerial visits between our two churches. The first was in 1993 when Rev. Bill Murry and four committee members visited Fiatfalva. A return visit took place in November 1994 when Rev. Denes Botha came to Bethesda. He retired in 1998. In mid-October 2000 the new minister in Fiatfalva, Rev. Alpar Bartha and his wife, Marta, arrived for a week's visit. He participated in the two services, engaging in a dialogue with Rev. Alexander and Rev. Strauss about Unitarianism in North America and Transylvania while Marta spoke to R.E. classes. These visits increase the feelings of connection between the two congregations and deepen our understanding of each other.
- D. Ministerial Stipend.** RRUC learned from the National Partner Church Council that the Unitarian ministers in Romania receive minimal salary from the congregation, and a small sum from the government. The total, which is grossly inadequate, has made it difficult for the ministers to function. As a result, we have provided a salary supplement to Rev. Bartha of \$500 a year. This modest sum makes it possible for him to do his work as a minister, teacher, and counselor to the congregation. We have also begun sending Rev. Botha \$200 a year to augment his meager pension.
- E. Aid to Seminarians.** Two students from Fiatfalva, Rosalie Simo Vida and Lajos Lorinczi, studied at the seminary in Ko-

lozsvar, Romania. They had extremely limited resources. The support of RRUC helped cover their living expenses. Rosalie and Lajos have now both graduated and been assigned churches. We are now supplementing their salaries by \$100 each per year.

- F. Scholarships/Ministerial Fund.** This fund is used to help students attend secondary and technical high schools outside the village that they could not afford otherwise. In addition, the fund has been used to support congregational activities, e.g. sending youth to summer camp, the women's association, the elderly and sick. RRUC has sent \$500 for these programs every year since 1993.
- G. Church Building Repair.** In June 1997 the committee responded to the urgent request of Rev. Botha for \$700 for repair of the 190-year-old church.
- H. Purchase of a Tractor.** The largest and most important project so far was to help the church in Fiatfalva purchase a tractor. We sent \$10,600 - enough for a 650-hp tractor and a plow, which were purchased in May 1996. The tractor has produced earnings for the congregation to use in repairing the church building, pay part of the minister's salary, and purchase a crop planter. Anyone in the village may rent the tractor. The tractor has become a capital asset which earns the church about \$1,000 a year and at the same time permits the operator to earn a living.
- I. Parsonage Renovation.** RRUC sent \$6,000 to Rev. Bartha in early 2000 so the parsonage could be renovated to create the Bethesda-Fiatfalva Fellowship Hall. This provides a larger space for services in the winter and various social activities. Our money covered about half the cost of this project, with the rest being provided by volunteer labor of the congregation.
- J. Small Building Project.** Since 2002 we have sent \$5,000 to Fiatfalva to supplement their design and labor input to help reconstruct a small building next to the parsonage. The struc-

ture is now equipped with a kitchen, a bathroom, and a meeting room. The church's women's and youth groups meet there as well as RE classes.

IV. A MESSAGE FROM REV. ALPAR BARTHA

To our partner church in Bethesda:

First of all, I would underline trust and commitment as being the basis for our partnership. These are values that have helped us overcome spatial distance, language problems, technical difficulties, cultural differences, and many other obstacles. With the help of such trust and commitment we have been able to create wonderful programs like the tractor program, the scholarship and Sunday school projects, the renovation of the fellowship hall and the small building, the cantor program and last, but not least, the financial help I personally receive from you.

When you come here every year or two to visit us and see the results of our joint efforts, the joy of what we have accomplished makes us feel closer in faith and friendship. This is a true blessing in our partnership. It makes us feel stronger and want to do more - and that is how we grow.

Let me just give you one example. The Fellowship Hall and the small building have become the scenes of a whole range of activities -- including Sunday school, women's and youth group sessions, board meetings, winter church services, and parties. These are the places where we carry out our plans, prepare for holidays and build our relationships as church members and people. That is how your help touches human lives and hearts.

That is also why I would like to work with you, with full responsibility, in building and extending our partnership. In our changing world we face new challenges every day which we have to deal with - supporting students, preparing young people for family life, the importance of learning English, helping the Gypsies be part of our community, respecting people's human rights and overcoming social disadvantages.