

*Our European Roots*  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill  
Sunday, January 28, 2024  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill, Jennie Stone/John Nielsen and Lisa Winkler

**Rev. Margret A. O'Neill**

It often takes people by surprise to learn how deeply our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition is rooted in the entire history of Christianity, and on the Eurasian continent, from the very beginnings. Just as it sometimes takes me by surprise when I find out they have assumed this is a “new age” religion that someone dreamed up in the 1970’s, perhaps while smoking an illicit substance. After all, an online search will reveal several sources, including the Reverend Billy Graham’s website, attesting that we Unitarians are a cult, and our own Unitarian Universalist publications proudly claim the title of “heretic” as part of our core identity. No wonder people are confused by our rational, open-minded, rather unusual way of faithful religion. And I, for one, deeply love our way of faithful religion.

The term “heretic” derives from a word in the Greek language, *hairesis*, meaning “to choose.” Claiming the right to choose is a characteristic deeply rooted in our human nature, emerging in every generation back throughout time. Heresy is the imperative some of us feel to challenge the doctrines handed down by the authorities, to seek our own truth and decide for ourselves what we most truly and faithfully believe. Greek and Roman heretics did not accept the commonly held mythology about the gods and their divine escapades; Christian heretics followed the teachings of Jesus according to their own interpretation, and the earliest Unitarian and Universalist heretics were those who refused to go along with the emerging theological doctrines as they were established by the Church hierarchy.

As a segment on the UUA website informs us, “During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of [interpretations of the teachings of Jesus]. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma [and a couple of centuries later when the theology of damnation was coded into church doctrine]. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian [the unity of God] or Universalist [universal salvation] beliefs were persecuted.” The core of our heresy is encoded in our Unitarian Universalist values, affirming our right and responsibility to engage in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Our Unitarian and Universalist ways of being faithful, our cherished tradition of seeking after complex truths rather than accepting doctrines handed down by the authorities, found a foothold in pockets of liberal thought all over Europe in the centuries that followed the early councils that defined Christianity – in Spain, Italy, Flanders, Holland, England, in Poland and Hungary, and uniquely in an area that was, but is no longer, a nation; a region we know as Transylvania.

Transylvania was a nation – a kingdom or a principality - for 341 years, from 1526 to 1867 – I might note that is somewhat longer than the United States of America has been a nation. An early Transylvanian king, John Sigismund, was the first and only Unitarian monarch on this planet – at least the only one so far. In January 1568, Sigismund issued an unprecedented Edict of Religious Toleration (also called the Edict of Torda, for the city in which it was issued). The edict proclaimed freedom of religion and freedom of conscience in a time when most rulers of nations told you what religion you must practice and believe, and disobedience was punishable by death. Our UU heritage of rejecting imposed doctrine, of accepting and integrating many

beliefs within one faith community, dates back four and a half centuries, and still Unitarian Universalism remains virtually unknown to many people who think and believe as we do.

The Edict of Religious Toleration read in its essential part: ". . . in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like[s] it, [that is] well. If not, no one shall compel them. . . . Therefore none . . . shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for [their] religion by anyone . . . and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from [their] post for [their] teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God."

This declaration was unique in Europe at that time; it included official state recognition of Unitarianism alongside other religions, and was the foundation of the Unitarian Church. People had held and promoted anti-trinitarian, unitarian and universalist theological views within Christianity over the preceding fifteen centuries – liberal thought and even heresy have been around throughout most of human history – but often those threads of liberalism do not materialize into institutional form like churches. In Transylvania, the first congregated Unitarian churches were created in 1568, and Unitarianism became an institutional reality for the first time. The first Unitarian Hymnbook was published in 1570, and in those years “many foreign liberal thinkers and anti-trinitarian theologians found refuge in Transylvania,” since it was the only European nation that guaranteed religious freedom, the freedom of all to believe and to preach what their conscience dictated. Heresy, at last, had found a home.

In 1571, the Diet of Marosvásárhely confirmed the resolutions of the Diet of Torda in 1568, stating that "God's gospel is to be preached everywhere freely, nobody will be hurt because of their confession, neither a preacher nor the audience." That was indeed a high point in our history, a very fine beginning for our Unitarian way of liberal, truth-seeking faith. Difficult times were to follow, however; King John died later that year from injuries he sustained in a riding accident, leaving no direct heir to the throne. Passionate debates over theological issues continued in the public forum, and the result was to strengthen the Unitarian base in Transylvania. According to the *History of Transylvanian Unitarianism* by Professor János Erdos, “Unitarianism came away victoriously from the ardor of the religious debates. It took root in the whole country and became an important factor in the life of Transylvania. The ideas of the Unitarian reformation also were spreading outside of Transylvania.”

The protection created by the Edict of Torda, that edict of religious freedom which was unprecedented in history and promulgated by the only Unitarian king the world has known, provided the environment that the Unitarian Church needed to take root and thrive in Transylvania, though there were certainly ups and downs in the process. But the rulers who followed King John Sigismund did not fully support the wave of religious freedom and enacted a series of repressions that resulted in imprisonments and deaths of those who spoke in the public arena.

The Unitarians in Transylvania were resilient and resourceful. They created a center for theological education, and in 1696 they established a Unitarian printing house in Kolozsvár. Those institutions lasted about 20 years until the Catholic Church began to confiscate all Protestant holdings in Kolozsvár and other parts of the country, including the institutions established by the Unitarians. As Professor János writes, beginning in “1718 the oppression and persecution of Unitarians once again increased. Because of their religion they were excluded from state offices and every method was tried to make them become Catholics: with promises

and threats. Yet the counter-reformation didn't reach its ultimate purpose, the annihilation of the Unitarian Church. The oppression prompted Unitarians to even greater solidarity and generosity, taking such defensive measures which guaranteed the survival of their Church.”

In spite of the oppression of liberal religion, the conversations continued; books were written and somehow published, and worship services moved into private homes when they could not be conducted in churches. This reminds me a bit of the growth in our Unitarian churches here in the 1950's, under the threat of McCarthyism, as people in this nation rallied to our churches in response to the threat posed by government repression, seeking mutual support in these institutions of liberal religion that uphold the core values that we treasure and protect. And we saw an echo of that response as people sought out our church in response to the results of the 2016 presidential election, along with other repressive initiatives in recent years.

The Unitarian Church in Transylvania experienced a period of renewal in the 1780's under Emperor Joseph II's new Edict of Toleration, along with generous bequests by supporters that enabled churches, colleges and libraries to be built and rebuilt over the years. In the 1800s the Transylvanian church initiated ties with Unitarians in England and the United States to support their efforts to sustain their historic presence in Transylvania in a challenging economic and political environment. In 1900 the Unitarian Church in Transylvania was a co-founder of the International Association for Religious Freedom, a world organization of Unitarians and other liberal religions.

The geographic location of Transylvania places it in a region that has been under ongoing contention among Turkey, Hungary and Romania. Its 341-year period of independence came to an end when the nation was reabsorbed into Hungary in 1867. The Transylvanian population is divided between those who identify as ethnically Hungarian, others as Romanian. When Austria-Hungary was defeated in World War I, the Romanians in Transylvania in late 1918 proclaimed the land united with Romania. In 1920 the Allies confirmed the union in the Treaty of Trianon. Hungary regained about two-fifths of Transylvania during World War II but the entire region was ceded to Romania at the end of the war in 1947.

Religious repression and the practice of nationalizing private property was the policy under Communist rule in Romania from 1947 to 1989, including the repressive dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu from 1965 to 1989. The ethnically Hungarian population in Romania was especially targeted, resulting in pressure and privation for the Unitarian churches in Transylvania, because their heritage and membership were in the Hungarian tradition. Following the revolution in 1989, as Communist rule came to an end, the forcibly confiscated church property began to be restored, but at a glacial pace, and the process is still not complete. Even under economic development and democratic governance “Romania still faces issues related to infrastructure, medical services, education, and corruption,” along with a high rate of out-migration, which is a threat to the country's future.

The Partner Church program was established in 1969 to promote relationships between Unitarian churches in Transylvania and those in the US and England. Those relationships have been a lifeline for the Unitarian churches in Transylvania, and this church became a partner of the Unitarian church in Székelyderzs, Transylvania, Romania in the 1980s. The UUCCH minister at that time, Rev Rudy Nemser, led the process which included annual group trips to Transylvania, along with church activities to support our partner church. I now invite John Nielsen to come forward and share Jennie Stone's reflection on the trip to Székelyderzs in August 2012.

## **John Nielsen for Jennie Stone**

It's hard to believe that it's been more than 10 years since our trip to Székelyderzs, because so many of the memories seem fresh. The trip was a combination spiritual pilgrimage, guided historical tour and cultural exchange. The people of the village were incredibly warm and welcoming. They were as interested in learning about us as we were to learn about them. We shared music, food & drink, games and Unitarian history. Romania is a relatively small country, but is culturally very interesting, partly because of their long history of being in the middle of some European power struggles. We saw castles, salt mines, shopping areas, other churches and farms. Our host family was a couple about our age. They were so generous. We shared meals and even taught them how to play Farkle, even though they spoke no English!

We learned about the village church, which has walls encompassing a compound, like a fort. Inside the walls are divided sections where historically each village family would store their meat and other necessities. At the village school, there are 2 trees planted in honor of our former minister Rudy Nemser because of his efforts to establish the relationship between our churches. The church is lovely, with a raised pulpit and a separate choir section up front.

Have you heard the expression "We talked until the cows came home?" Well in the village, they really do! Every morning the cows are ushered out of town into the hills to graze. Then every evening, they are ushered back through the streets of town. Each cow knows where their house is, and they go in the gate to be fed. It was a sight!

We had a roundtable conversation with the ladies of the congregation one day. We were sharing what we did during a day – office work, meetings, music rehearsals, volunteer work, etc. They wanted to know how we had time to take care of our chickens or other animals. Their hands showed us that their lives of work were very different from ours.

We still remember some of the Hungarian words we learned: Kusunem (thank you), Seveshen (you're welcome) and Jul Buli (good party). We were there during a significant drought, so we also got familiar with the word Viz (water). We also got a deeper grounding in the history of Unitarianism, and saw the way religion is integrated into their lives. Religious and cultural persecution has been a fact of life for the szekely people off and on for centuries. They are used to being a cultural minority within Romania, so are devoted to each other. They work hard, but love to laugh. In so many ways they are just like us. And isn't that the most profound gift of such a trip – to learn that, although people's habits and trappings of life are different, what makes us human is all the same. *Hol szeretet ott beke*: Where there is love, there is peace.

## **Rev. Margret A. O'Neill**

The financial contributions that flow to Transylvania through the Partner Church program are a vital source of support for these historic congregations – but I think even more important is our recognition that without the theological influence of those who embraced the rational faith of the Unitarian heresy, without the intrepid religious innovation of fearless religious leaders of that time, without the enlightened lawmaking of unconventional rulers, without the courage and faithfulness of countless individuals and congregations 4,000 miles from here, liberal religion as we know it today might not even exist. Innovation needs a safe place to grow, and heresy needs a home.

What is a religion worth? What is a church worth? Why should anyone participate in and support the institutional church? Why would someone risk a life sentence, a death sentence, for their freedom of belief, the imperative of continuing to seek the truth wherever that search might lead? I don't think I can say it any better than the words that Dávid Ferenc, who died in prison for his Unitarian faith, carved on the wall of his prison cell: "Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death - nothing will halt the march of truth." And so I say, with our Transylvanian partners, *Isten egy*, God is One – and my fervent prayer is that the light of liberal, rational, open-minded and open-hearted religion may shine from east to west, from north to south, throughout the whole wide world.

I now invite Lisa Winkler, who coordinates the Partner Church initiative here at UUCCH, to come forward and share the plans that are coming into place to revitalize the program in the coming months.

### **Lisa Winkler**

The trip I took in 2019 with church member Sue Camlin, her daughter Dawn and granddaughter and Mike Feldman was one of the most beautiful and enlightening trips I have taken. Not only did I enjoy the company of my fellow travelers, meeting fellow Unitarians, but I was educated about life in the 1400s to present day. We visited not only Székelyderzs but Budapest. Jennie's description that the trip was a combination spiritual pilgrimage, guided historical tour, and cultural exchange is very apt.

I would like for others in our church to have the same experience. The village of Székelyderzs has a large rooming house for visitors adjacent to the parsonage and was renovated in 2019. We are only a few feet from the ancient church built in the 1400s. The layers of frescos show the history of the church. The food was prepared by Maria Csoba using her Hungarian family recipes. It is all delicious. She was able to accommodate vegan and gluten free diets.

What makes a trip like this different from other tourist trips is that you live with and interact with the Székelyderzs villagers. It isn't a canned program with well-traveled tourist spots. You live in a village with the people. You can ask questions about what it was like during World War II and you can see the lingering impact that a now 100-year-old treaty that ceded the eastern part of Hungary to Romania after WW I has on people and how they retain their Hungarian heritage through festivals, language, food, and traditional dress. You see such anachronistic sights as a 700-year-old fortress with a satellite antenna atop its ancient stone walls or trash trucks traveling down narrow cobblestone roads using pincers to pick up large curbside trash bins, just like our trash trucks.

If you are interested in taking a trip to Transylvania, please see me during coffee hour. If we have enough interest, we will plan a trip to Székelyderzs this summer. We are holding a Transylvanian Dinner on Saturday, March 9th. We will be selling tickets to the dinner during coffee hour. In addition to a meal of some great Hungarian food, we will give you more details about the trip, the tentative timing, costs, and travel plans.

### **Rev. Margret A. O'Neill**

As we make plans for a Transylvania dinner, and begin the long preparation for our members to travel to Székelyderzs in the coming months, I wish for us all a deep and meaningful journey into the future of global peace, which we dream together. I wish for us all that our partnerships have the power to transform toward a reciprocal relationship of deepening mutual

respect, learning together how we might live in this 21st century global society, with so much to learn from one another. Together, may we witness the arrival of that day when peace and freedom will prevail, with the dawning of a bright tomorrow as the torch is passed to succeeding generations here and all around the world. Amen and Blessed Be.

Sources:

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