

Transylvania Pilgrimage – April 2012

Our pilgrimage in April to our sister church in Szentegyhaza, Transylvania, brought those who made the journey into deeper personal connection with our fellow Unitarians, and gave us a greater understanding and appreciation of the origins and history of our unusual faith community. We met our guides from the UU Partner Church Council in Kolozsvár. We met other travelers on our tour that came from other UU churches in the USA.



In Kolozsvár we were led to sites where the extraordinary history of Unitarianism came alive for us. We saw the rock on which Francis David stood and declared his belief in one God rather than the Trinity, and called for freedom of conscience.

At Torda, we stood on hallowed ground, where David's powerful eloquence led King John Sigismund in 1568 to declare freedom of choice in all matters of faith and religious practice.

The revolutionary Edict of Torda is to the freedom of religious thought and practices, what the Magna Charta is to the development of parliamentary government. And it is a precursor to our own Declaration of Independence. We also stopped at the ruined fortress of Deva; we stood in silence before the cell where Francis David died, to honor one of the world's first prisoners of conscience. Our group conducted a vesper service at this site led by Rev. Steven Aschmann, a Unitarian minister from Erie, PA. We ended the service by singing together the favorite Unitarian hymn: Spirit of Life.

Along our route, we explored Vajdahunyad Castle, where a medieval Hungarian prince held back an expanding Ottoman empire, fighting back invasions by Turks and Tatars. In Sibiu and Brasov, we strolled through charming cobbled streets settled for centuries by Saxon communities, invited to Transylvania to bring their trading and banking skills to the local population. From one site to the next, our entire journey was a lesson in living history. At Sibiu the Providence group separated from the others to go to our respective partner churches.



When we arrived in Szentegyhaza, we were greeted by the Rev. Szabolcs Kelemen and our host families. We were photographed under the new bell tower that was recently constructed by the congregation. First U provided some of the funds for this tower. There was a small reception. Afterward, we all went to dinner with our host families.





On Friday and Saturday we traveled with members of the congregation to many cultural and historical sites in Hargita County, the location of our town. At the lonely mountain site of Nyergesteto, heroic Transylvanians fought to the last man, to hold back the Hapsburg invaders. We stood in heavy rain, transfixed to hear a 13-year-old schoolgirl passionately recite, by memory, a long and stirring poem honoring those patriots who died in the Revolution of 1848/49. The hill has many of the memorial posts like ours in our Memorial Garden in Providence.

We also toured the high school that houses folklore artifacts and workshops. We also visited the Folklore Museum and bed and breakfast which fosters the continuation of the Hungarian traditions in the area by housing the Children's choir and orchestra which perform concerts throughout Europe. It also has rooms that could be rented to tourists. That evening we were treated to a performance by a local folk dance troupe.



At Sunday service, Rev. Kelemen conducted a service where we all sang Spirit of Life, first in English and then in Hungarian. This was the second time we sang this song and it looks like we have started a new tradition during our visits. It should also be noted that the men and women were no longer separated during services as they were in the first visit. After services were concluded we exchanged gifts between our churches and our respective Woman's Organizations and sang beloved hymns, each in our own languages. Phil Lieberman provided a pictorial tour of our Church that was well received. For our send-off, we were treated to hearty goulash stew, cooked over open fires in giant cauldrons, with yet another round of glasses of palinka – local brandy that drives away the late spring chill.



On Monday, we parted with tears and hugs, as we headed back to Kolozsvár. We made three stops, the first being in Szekelyudvarhely home of some of the oldest wooden Szekely gates. We then proceeded to Szekelyderz, a church that was built in the 13th century that is on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Our last stop of the day was the Unitarian Church in the Alabaster Village of Meszko.

Our trip was a huge success because we became better informed about the roots of Unitarianism in 16th century Eastern Europe and about the history of Hargita County and the Hungarian-speaking people living in Romania. Above all, our lives are enriched by getting to know the people of Szentegyhaza and by renewing and strengthening the relationship between our congregations.