

Be Who You Are!

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Sunday, March 29, 2015

Guest Preacher: Rev. Dr. Sandor Kovacs, Hungarian Unitarian Church in Transylvania
Professor of Unitarian History, Protestant Theological Institute, Cluj (Kolosvar), Romania

Hymns: #1043, Szekely Aldas (Transylvanian blessing), #123, Spirit of Life, #159, This Is My Song.

Special Music by Christine Bonner, harpist and composer

References: Partner Church relationships; pilgrimages to Unitarian homelands: www.uupcc.org

HISTORY: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Church_of_Transylvania

Ralph Waldo Emerson: <http://uudb.org/articles/ralphwaldoemerson.html>

William Ellery Channing: <http://uudb.org/articles/williamellerychanning.html>



Good morning everyone! It is a great honor and privilege to worship with you this morning. The month of March has a special connotation for Hungarians no matter where in the world they are. It is the month of remembrance of the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution. On March 15 1848, our nation started her fight for independence from the Austrian Empire. As with so many revolutions, it ended with the massive retaliation from the Austrian and Russian Tsarist army. The Austrians put to death 13 generals. Luis Kossuth, the governor of Hungary, had to go into exile. The Unitarians in England and the US warmly received him and his expatriate comrades. Many of the “forty-eighters,” as they are called, fought on the Union side in the American Civil War.

I do not know of any Unitarians who immigrated to North America in 1848 but there is an abundance of evidence that Louis Kossuth established connections with the most important Unitarian leaders of his day. In May 1852 Luis Kossuth came to Concord where he was welcomed by Ralph Waldo Emerson who in his address called Kossuth “the man of Freedom” and the “man of Fate”. Emerson reminded Kossuth that he is seen in USA as “the angel of freedom, crossing sea and land; crossing parties, nationalities, private interests and self-esteem.”¹

Our Hungarian-American Unitarian relations date back prior to the Emerson-Kossuth meeting, it might be said that the stage was already set for Kossuth when he stepped on American ground.

¹ *CW of Ralph Waldo Emerson* vol. XI. Address to Kossuth 395-401. 1903.

My first job as a young man was as a car mechanic in a service center in the city of Brassó; I worked there for a year and was fascinated with mechanics. I always admired what wheels can do if belts properly connect them. It was amazing to see how the power was distributed, how motion accelerated or slowed according to the gear change. I was mesmerized when I understood how gear wheels meshed with one another to transmit the required force.

This image of meshed wheels reminds me of the beginnings of Hungarian and English speaking Unitarian connections. Until the dawn of the 19th century our communities were not engaged; they acted separately not knowing much about each other. The wheels were turning without being connected. No one can deny that Channing's Baltimore address in 1819 reshaped the congregational order of New England. Something similar happened in Transylvania where an enlightened philosopher and elected Bishop, set in motion many congregations in Transylvania.

A Hungarian speaking Unitarian nobleman named Alexander Bölöni (in Hungarian Bölöni Farkas Sándor) is to be credited as one of those Unitarians who meshed the gears. He visited the North American continent in 1831 meeting with the most notable Unitarians of Boston. He wrote a very popular book about this voyage entitled *Journey in North America*. It is worthwhile to note that the book was translated into English and recently was reprinted by permission of the American Philosophical Society. John Gibbons, American Unitarian Universalist minister and friend of Transylvania, made the reprint edition possible "honoring the transformative power of pilgrimage." Alexander Bölöni experienced for the first time how constitutional democracy changed life on the American continent. No wonder he highly admired his idols: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington.

A history full of oppression slowed the motion in Transylvania much as rust does in a car. Nevertheless as soon the gears were shifted by Alexander Bölöni things started to change. Well, not that fast for my Transylvanian fellows replied to a letter sent to them in 1831 by the American Unitarians, 37 years later. Better later than never.

The Unitarian community had to gather all her strength in the 19th century to meet the demands of a hostile government. An enormous effort was made to save the public status of the Unitarian High school. Combined British, American and Transylvanian generosity made this possible. Beginning in the 1860's Hungarian Unitarian students were sent to study in England. English as a foreigner language was taught for the first time ever at the Theological Academy of Kolozsvár, the Unitarian seminary. An English Conversation Club was organized in the city with the Unitarians being the standard-bearers. The zeal and commitment of a former Manchester New College student János Kovács to spread English customs and culture in Transylvania was truly a prophetic one. There is a letter from 1876, written to him by an unknown person right after the English Club was formed in Transylvania.

'Dear Sir! I heard from the papers that you are to form an English Club. I can't but greet this idea as a very good one and as in accordance of the spirit of the age. The superficial French language and its demoralizing influence in this country must be dispossessed by the manly and beautiful English language and there are no better means to enact this, than to popularizing it by a central Club.' The demoralizing influence of the French language did not turn the English Club members' hearts to stone, and many of them were members of the later founded French Club as well.

With the aid of the American Unitarian Association in the 1870's William Ellery Channing's collected works were translated into Hungarian.

A few years ago when I was in the Netherlands, I saw how dams were opened and closed with the help of geared wheels. The influence of Channing on Hungarian Unitarian scholarship was like opening a dam, as one of our former bishops, Béla Varga, stated. Two hundred years of oppression and isolation had corroded the dam, but once open, the ship of Unitarianism was on open waters again and Transylvanian Unitarians were not afraid to explore new lands of theology, of social justice and ethics. The Unitarian bishop, folklorist and poet John (János) Kriza sent a letter in 1870's to the American Unitarian Association in which, among other things he wrote:

“I can't thank you enough for your generosity which made us much stronger. We feel we know that the best way to express our gratitude is to make generally known here, in the Eastern countries, the brightest stars of your flag: spiritual freedom and pure ideas of religion and morality. Now, as the Three Magi, we too have seen your stars and we shall never stop respecting them.”

Sisters and brothers since we seen your stars, we experienced the transformative power of our meshed wheels. I will tell you a very recent story as regards to what partnership can do. About a year and a half ago the Romanian orthodox patriarch invited the chief leaders of every recognized faith to Bucharest, the capital of Romania, for a two day conference. Our church representatives were Rev. Bishop Ferenc Bálint Benczédi and chief councilor Rev. Dávid Gyerő. It turned out that the conference was about the role of family in the 21st century. As the conference was closing, a resolution was put forward for a vote. After long deliberation, the assembly pronounced that the family is a sacred union between a man and a woman, and this statement should be included verbatim in the Constitution.

All the other denominations – Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant – voted for the resolution without the smallest hesitation, the Unitarian delegation did not. As former Starr King students and Balázs Scholars, my 18 colleagues and I were very proud for the courage and wisdom of our leaders for their bravery to say NO to discrimination. You should be aware that beginning the next day the Transylvanian Unitarian Church had to face bitter attacks from every direction and by every denomination. Our Christian Reformed (Calvinist) brothers and sisters with whom we share the same language, culture and seminary dipped their pen in vitriol and wrote defamatory – at least from their perspective – articles about us. A fraction of our own Unitarian ministers passed a harsh judgment on the Bishop and Dávid Gyerő accusing them of undermining the Transylvanian Unitarian Church. Some wanted them to recant publicly, however they stood firm. I dare to say that the legacy of inclusiveness that we got from you American UU's helped and strengthened us through those difficult days.

It is not easy to cross the boundaries as the Jewish wisdom literature puts it in the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 10 verse 8: “Whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.” Assuming the risk of being bitten by the snake, the dividing walls must be demolished. 1989 was the year when the infamous Berlin wall came down. Since then Central-Eastern-Europe has witnessed many changes yet there are still more walls to break through. In the last 25 years in post-communist Romania new dividing walls were built. There is the wall of intolerance and homophobia, there is a wall dividing different ethnic communities, and there is an enormous wall of injustices. It will take several years and many wounds until we break through those walls, and overcome. We may be bitten many times yet I am convinced that we will charm those snakes and put them where they belong -- on the coat of arms of the Unitarian Church! I am conscious of the antipathy that casts a shadow over every attempt made by us to break through the walls, but ultimately with your engagement and moral support we will overcome the boundaries of fear and hate.

The former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, John Buehrens, affirmed: “The UU partner church project may represent the greatest UU social activism since the civil rights movement.” I know how much we benefited from the engaging power of our interconnectedness and I suspect that UU’s also have transformed by it.

There is a song in your hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, loved by many Hungarians. Preparing my sermon I realized what a rocketing career that song has had. It is “Spirit of Life” and one line says, “Roots hold me close, wings set me free.” Deep roots and free wings are the main characteristics of our relationship. Your wings and our roots complete each other; together we can change the motion of our society. Let us shift the gears to overcome homophobia, let us demolish the dividing walls between different ethnic groups, let us make snakes a docile symbol of our true religion. So be it.