

## **Immigration Complications: Lessons from a Pilgrimage to Transylvania**

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UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #298 Wake Now, My Senses;  
#352 Find a Stillness; #159, This Is My Song.  
Guitar solo: I Am a Pilgrim and a Stranger,  
American traditional, arr. Ross Hammond.  
Piano solos: Evening in Transylvania; 6 Romanian  
Folk Dances, Sz. 56 (I, II, III), Bela Bartok.

### Sermon Part 1

The city lights of Budapest gleam from stately old buildings along the river Danube. Downtown streets are lively with tourists and locals at outdoor cafés, or going from place to place. Budapest was our first stop on a nine-day pilgrimage in July. Along with 12 other U.S. American Unitarian Universalists, I was there to connect with Unitarian history, places and people. There are 10,000 Unitarians in Hungary and another 60,000 in Transylvania, which is now in Romania. In addition, we would learn about current politics, especially about immigration and the refugee crisis.

I was invited on this pilgrimage by an American UU minister who's been visiting Transylvania nearly since Communism ended in Romania. His friendships there are deep and long, forged over years of cooperation on economic development projects in a rural valley, to help the Unitarian villages there to stay viable in a globalizing economy. As an American friend, he wanted to challenge the Unitarians in Hungary and Transylvania on the issue of immigration. On our first Sunday, he was the guest preacher at the First Unitarian Church of Budapest. From the high wooden pulpit, he quoted from the New Testament.

In the book of Hebrews it says: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, some have entertained angels without knowing it.

He thanked the Unitarians for their hospitality to American UUs over the years. Then

he brought up the idea of hospitality to immigrants and refugees. He said [paraphrasing]: *We have our problems in the U.S. Many do not welcome those now fleeing violence or starvation in other lands. But some of us do. And we are confused by Hungary's flat refusal to welcome refugees, and we are confused by similar attitudes among the Transylvanian Unitarians. We don't understand it.*

He recalled the crisis in Transylvania after it was taken from Hungary in the wake of the First World War. It was annexed by Romania in 1920. Hungarians in Transylvania were begging Hungary to let them in. They were denied. Over the decades, many have immigrated there. Indeed, many of the 10,000 Unitarians now in Hungary have come from Transylvania. As he concluded the sermon, he again emphasized the holy act of hospitality. The host minister then got up and read a Hungarian translation of the sermon.

After the service, we got a tour of the church, and then the young Transylvanian woman who was our guide led us to a sumptuous lunch at a historic hotel. I had met her 18 years ago, on my prior visit to Transylvania. Now she has three kids, and her oldest is heading off to college. How is it that she seems to be unchanged? She's an English teacher in a school as well as a delightful guide for UU visitors in the summertime. A Unitarian since birth, she's a minister's wife in a lovely Transylvanian village surrounded by farmland. After lunch, we went on a walking tour of the city's castle district, just three of us. That's when she opened up. Our friend's sermon had made her furious.

Hungary doesn't want to be told what to do about immigrants, by Americans or by the European Union, of which Hungary is a member. Her words echoed those of the current Prime Minister of Hungary. Yet, she didn't grow up there. She doesn't live there. Transylvania has been a Romanian province for 100 years. Yet in Europe that's recent history.

Here is some background. It is true that Hungary is reluctant to accept refugees. The conservative government has criticized the European Union's quotas for distributing refugees

among European countries. Last year Hungary built a wall at its border with Croatia and Serbia so it could block immigrants and refugees from entering or passing through toward Western Europe. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said that immigrants pose a danger to Europe's "Christian traditions." He raised fears in Hungary of terrorism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and the loss of free speech if people from Muslim lands are allowed in.

But what of our hosts? After a busy week of travel, we spent a long weekend in the rural village where our guide lives with her minister husband and kids. A few hundred people live there; and most of them are Unitarian. They don't all attend services, but they look to the minister and his wife as community leaders. On Sunday, he gave the sermon, and she translated it for us. It was a dramatic rebuttal to our American leader's sermon from a week earlier. We heard how deeply these Unitarians identify as a part of the Hungarian diaspora in Romania. In 2004, citizens of Hungary had voted in a referendum about ethnic Hungarians living outside the country. The question: should Hungary offer dual citizenship to them?

This Transylvanian minister recalled that before the vote, many Hungarian citizens spoke with hostility and disdain about them. For example: "They're poor in Romania, so they want to come here and take our good jobs." "They will invade us. They'll bankrupt our social services." Even Hungary's liberal government back in 2004 had opposed extending citizenship to the diaspora.

The Transylvanians were not seen as Hungarian siblings, but outsiders. The preacher said [paraphrasing], *Most of us did not want to move there. We only wanted to be recognized. We only wanted a sense of belonging.*

The referendum failed in 2004. The vote was NO. That hurt. After Hungary's liberals were voted out of power in parliamentary elections of 2010, a new coalition government was headed by the main conservative party. This government just went ahead and did it. They offered citizenship to Hungarians living outside the country. Our host minister said *this* was the honor for which so many

had longed. It was the simple recognition of kinship, and it stirred his heart.

In Transylvania and Hungary, every Unitarian service includes a Bible reading, usually selected by the minister for the topic of the sermon. Not this day. The minister said, "I hope you will forgive my break with tradition as I offer a passage from a great writer of this land instead of the Bible." The reading evoked the people's connection to the land and each other. It mourned their tribulations and praised their courage. They had survived by supporting one another and by sharing.

As he concluded the sermon, the preacher's voice broke and tears came down his face. Older women in the pews, with kerchiefs in their hair and weathered faces, blew their noses and wiped their eyes. Looking even more weathered, their men sat quietly, but you could see the wet lines of tears on their cheeks if you looked.

We realized that once you consider the stories of everybody involved, the issue of immigration is far more complicated.

The minister's wife was upset about liberal guests and liberal Hungarians judging them for not accepting Middle Eastern refugees. "Why should Hungary have to take others when they wouldn't even honor foreign Hungarians with citizenship?" I heard a contrary view another day, as a few of us were hiking at a gorge in Transylvania. Our guide for the hike was a man who works as a driver for the Unitarian Church headquarters. He's in his mid-50s, and he also is an ethnic Hungarian.

"Did you get your dual citizenship?" a friend of mine asked him. "No, and I don't want it. I don't need Hungary. When they voted on us in 2004, they didn't want us. Why would I bother now?" Though he's not thrilled with Romania's government, living in the landscape of Transylvania is sufficient for him. "So long as I have my mountains, I'm happy."

At the end of the Sunday service in the village church, the minister's wife projected two photographs on a screen. One showed a tree dedication ceremony held 20 years ago. Some of these church members and visiting Americans had

planted the little pine as a symbol of love and international friendship. Then she showed a slide of the tree now: enormous! She invited us out for pictures in front of the pine tree on this day, this anniversary. But first another surprise, which came this time from the American guests. A small ensemble sang, in English, an American UU hymn whose tune is the same as a Transylvanian hymn. Then their congregation sang the Hungarian words to us. We knew the English version is not a true translation. But we also knew that the affection was true and warm-hearted.

The minister stepped out the side door to the sunny church yard, and we Americans followed. Every worshipper came by us to shake our hands and wish us well.

If you look at #352 you'll find that hymn tune, and the English words that go with it. Our pianist will play it once, and we invite you to remain seated as we sing "Find a Stillness."

Offertory: from Bartok, 6 Romanian Folk Dances)

## Sermon Part 2

In the book of Hebrews it says: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it.

During our few days in Budapest, we visited the Hungarian Interchurch Alliance. This is a Protestant relief agency which has the support of some Unitarian leaders in Hungary. Staff at the Interchurch Alliance told us that people fleeing violence in the Middle East and elsewhere make their way toward Central Europe by land or sea, alone or in groups. Hungary doesn't want to let them pass through on their way to other countries, because it doesn't want the European Union to tell it how many to let stay in Hungary.

A young man from their staff rode with us to visit a refugee camp, known as a reception center. He had come to Hungary five years earlier from Afghanistan, after winning a scholarship for college. His first year of college was dedicated to learning the very challenging Hungarian language.

He is a skilled language student, and speaks five other languages. As if that isn't impressive enough, he's learning Arabic, his girlfriend's language. "I don't really believe in borders," he told me; "I believe in people." He misses his family in Afghanistan but his mom says, *Don't come home; it's not safe for you.*

He visits one or more of the refugee reception centers every week, providing translation, helping with paperwork, or just listening. At the center, refugees file requests to the government and wait for a decision. Residents there can come and go, if they sign out. But if they don't return they're breaking the law. In spite of this, some tire of waiting for their case to be decided, and they don't return to the center.

In this center were 250 adults and children representing 25 countries. Most were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. A U.S. friend of mine pointed out, "Those are all countries we've been bombing." Yes, he's right, I thought. But I didn't want to think about it very much.

Some camp residents had made it there from Africa and South Asia. As we toured, we spoke with residents from Nepal working in the camp library and computer classroom. We met folks from sub-Saharan Africa. A white friend of mine surprised a few Middle Easterners by speaking Arabic to them; he had learned it in the military, before becoming a minister. One girl had a tee-shirt on. In English it said: *God loves me.* He asked her in Arabic, "Do you know what that means?" No. He told her, and she smiled.

The government built this camp 40 years ago. With its bland concrete one-story buildings, it looked sort of like a worn out college campus. Every family had a room, and every building had a common kitchen and bathroom. The grounds were clean and spacious. In the recreation building we saw teens and kids and young volunteers playing with them.

Knowing of the Hungarian Prime Minister's hostility to immigrants, I was surprised by the openness of the young woman in charge of this camp and by that of the man in charge of all the centers, who was also meeting with us and

answering our questions. They were clearly dedicated civil servants trying to show hospitality, respect and mercy. They had a good working relationship with Interchurch Alliance volunteers and staff.

A friend of mine said: “I heard the government might close this camp. Where will all these people go?” The man said: “I don’t know.” I can’t imagine working so hard to help others while knowing that the government for which you work is speaking about them with hostility and suspicion. I guess they are doing what they can with the resources and the time they have available. And maybe the camp won’t be closed. I’m holding all of them in my thoughts and my prayers.

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As you may have read or heard, we are about to launch a refugee support program in this congregation. At a potluck dinner soon, we’ll meet with staffers from the local office of the International Rescue Committee and learn about the programs in which we and IRC can partner. Whether you have the time or ability to participate or not, I’m sure this venture will give all of us new insights about the circumstances and complexities of people fleeing their lands to find a safe place in our land.

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Behind every social crisis are individual stories of real people. Some stories and experiences confirm our attitudes, opinions or commitments. Other stories unsettle our attitudes.

At the end of our last full day in Transylvania, we headed back to Budapest for flights out the next day. Our bus had to wait in line at the border to get back into Hungary. This border crossing station looked like a series of toll booths, but with much slower lines and no EZ Pass or FasTrack. We were tired of riding by now, and perhaps tired of riding with each other, so we felt relief to see that the traffic line ahead of us included only one purple bus, a car and two trucks.

A border official came on board. He walked up the aisle, taking the passports from our hands and looking each one of us in the face. He took the passports away and went into the station.

As we waited, we saw an officer take three red suitcases out of the bus in front of us, and set them on the side of the traffic lane, out in the open on the pavement. A young woman emerged from the bus with two little boys. One kid had a stuffed animal. The woman had light brown skin and dark brown hair. She carried a purse and a cell phone. Watching in silence, we wondered if this was a refugee crisis playing out in front of us. I felt the anxious urge to get out and ask. As she talked fast on her cell phone, the officer escorted her across four lanes of idling vehicles. She went into a small flimsy office building. The kids played just outside it, not far from those idling vehicles.

*I wondered:* Does Hungary not want her to come in, or does Romania not want her to leave? Is she a criminal suspect, or married to one? Maybe she’s on the phone telling a family member what she’s going through, trying to get help. What’s the assurance that she’s being treated fairly by this bureaucracy known as Border Protection?

*I thought:* Is the purple bus in front of us waiting for her to be released before it can proceed? If so, that means we’re waiting for her as well. It was warm and stuffy on our bus. If we were lucky, we’d get to our hotel by 9 p.m. I had to get up at 3 in the morning to catch a flight. I wanted the purple bus to move, now, but I didn’t want it to leave without her.

Now I could see her standing outside the small office, speaking on her phone, with her kids nearby, perhaps hearing a rising tone of distress in their mother’s voice.

This is what every social crisis boils down to. Thousands of personal crises and family dramas, each with anxiety and uncertainty, and many of them with dead ends.

Travelers like me may feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar food, hot weather and stuffy crowded buses—but now and then we get a glimpse of *real* discomfort. Those of us who whine at the hassle of delayed luggage: sometimes we realize how some people lose everything, their luggage and their homeland.

We get weary on long drives and worried about uncertain arrival times. Now and then, however, we witness the incredible worry and fear of another: the fear of being left behind, or being sent back, or being shut out, or something worse.

If we don't see real people, if we don't know stories of real lives, it can be so easy to hang on to our easy answers about The Other. It's easy to make a conclusion and have an opinion about those we don't really know. *They don't belong here. I'm not responsible for their country's problems. We've got our own problems. I've got enough problems myself, and I do my part anyway.*

The customs officer came back to our bus with our passports. He gave us the go-ahead. After sitting there for 20 more minutes, the woman's purple bus began moving forward. We didn't see her. Her red suitcases stayed on the pavement. We were now able to drive on, have a late supper, take a shower, and be ready to go home. We could forget about her now. We could forget about all of them.

We can forget, but sometimes we aren't able to, or we choose not to. Sometimes we let ourselves remain uncertain and unsettled. Sometimes we don't settle for the easy answer.

So may it be. Amen.

HYMN: THIS IS MY SONG