

(Article for December, 2016, church newsletter.)

“A Personal Reflection about the Trip to Transylvania,”

By Tom Crouch

Walking down a steep, cobbled path from the citadel village above the city of Segesvar, after lunch at Prince Charles’ favorite Transylvanian restaurant, we heard a violinist playing. As we passed, I tossed a few coins in his case and he responded with “I love America.” In my mind, I was flattered by this seeming tribute to our country, and us, as its tourist representatives. Of course, his response could have been completely due to the coins we gave him, or perhaps, he was truly thankful for the role of the U.S. in helping bring about the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which had set the stage for the revolution that led to the demise of Ceausescu’s regime in 1989. Recent military investments by the U.S. have probably also contributed to Romanian prosperity, but was the violinist even aware of such things? In any event, I felt a sense of pride hearing his statement. But, was I lending support to the contention of many of our country’s conservative politicians who claim American “exceptionalism” in today’s world? Is the U.S. exceptional when compared to other countries, possessing unique political and moral qualities ingrained in our society? What new conclusions and judgments would I make based on this new experience in eastern Europe?

What was true nature of this country, hobbled over the centuries by invasions, genocide, and authoritarian rulers? Our tour leader, John Dale, who, along with his wife Csilla Kolcsar, run the UUA Travel Service, served as our capable leaders for much of the trip, providing wide-ranging information on the history, geography, religion and economy of, first, Hungary, and then Romania. Both are residents of Romania, and Csilla has deep roots in the country. We were, I believe, their 22nd UUA tour group that they have accompanied this year to primarily Transylvania, but also the Philippines and India, where Unitarianism is also present. It was from their great depth of experience in Transylvania and also in guiding Americans to these locations that they prepared us for our initial encounters with the local people. They emphasized the need to “go with the flow” and to not expect the superficial friendliness to which we were accustomed in our normal Midwestern American abodes. In fact, with some exceptions, when we arrived in Budapest and set out from our hotel to do things individually, Judi and I found many of the people we met to be unfriendly, unhelpful and unsmiling, even when we were purchasing items or ordering meals at

restaurants. Hotel personnel were a notable exception to this generalization. Were these attitudes a consequence of “Ugly American” tourist attitudes or the genuine, collective hardships suffered by most people living in these areas over the centuries? Food for thought.

As we approached the Hungarian-Romanian border, John gave us specific instructions to follow when the border guard boarded our bus to collect our passports. Keep your legs and possessions out of the aisle and when asked about your origin and destination be sure to answer “Budapest” and “Cluj” he admonished us. He further explained that this advice was based on difficulties they had encountered previously, and following it would make our passage easier and quicker. It did--we only had to wait about half an hour before our passports were brought back to the bus. In books I read preparing for the trip, I became acquainted with the terrible ordeals the populace of eastern Europe endured during the time of the Soviet bloc, and really, stretching back centuries before. What were we getting into, I wondered? Will we have any trouble getting out of the country to go home?

As we encountered more people and places, however, these initial impressions and questions started to change or be answered. For one thing, we were with a relatively large group of travelers. In addition to the 10 of us from First U., there were 13 from Eliot Chapel and an additional 3 from a church in New Hampshire. We began to meld as a group as we rode together in our comfortable bus availing ourselves of the wealth of knowledge John, Csilla and Magda (Csilla’s sister) provided, and getting to know one another through this common experience. Unspoken worries were dissipating and the scenery was proving intriguing. As our learning process continued and we got to know one another, my confidence grew, and along with it the pure enjoyment of learning about this enchanting part of the world—Transylvania. Visiting the Unitarian headquarters and a Sunday service at the “Mother Church” in Kolozsvar seemed to be a real turning point for me. We were now absorbing the shared heritage of our “American” brand of Unitarianism with that currently practiced in Romania and Hungary, which had developed as a part of the larger protestant reformation movement in 16th Century Hungary.

As we left the seat of Unitarianism, the incredible, beautiful vistas of the Carpathian foothills, along with the running commentary about the Transylvanian region became truly mesmerizing to me. Along the way, we stopped at historically significant castles, citadels, cathedrals and churches.

Eventually, as we reached our Unitarian village area of Trei Sate, cities had diminished in size and the country-side vistas were dotted with small villages, each with light-colored white and tan-plastered building and clumps of church steeples dominating their skylines. Green fields, forests and hills continued as backdrops. I began to understand the love affair that previous travelers from our church had expressed for this area. It appeared to be a place seemingly unspoiled by modernity!

In next month's newsletter, you will learn some details about our stay in Csokfalva. Suffice it to say, for now, that when we returned to our first church service back in St. Louis (Oct. 2), I could not avoid conjuring up a multisensory remembrance of our Thanksgiving Service in Csokfalva, merely a week before. The pews had been much harder and cramped, the scent of the air was that of an "old" place, the spoken language indecipherable, and yet the friendships, love and community that had been forged in our four days at the village had been very similar to what we experience at First Church in St. Louis!

As you may have concluded from reading my account, I started the trip with some trepidation, but in the end, the trip lived up to its advanced billing by previous travelers as "life-changing." The answer to my "exceptionalism" question was one that I had felt I knew the answer to, in my heart, prior to going, but can now answer with some new authority since I have actually experienced the people and culture of this new part of the world. The U.S. and its people are not "exceptional," but merely a component of a world where humans have been universally affected by natural and human-caused events. Events in our history were equally horrific if we go back enough in time. What a wonderful gift of understanding, enlightenment and friendship we travelers experienced as a result of this "pilgrimage!"

Hopefully, our tales of adventure can motivate future groups to continue in this worthy tradition of meeting new people and solidifying long-distance partnerships. Also, what a thrill it would be to help support a reciprocal visit to St. Louis by our Partner Minister, Lorant Tokes and his family, with perhaps some other newly-found friends from his Csokfalva congregation, within the next several years.

To learn more about our trip, please mark your calendars for the week of January 22-28, which we will be calling "Partner Church Week," since it

will contain two events of great interest: 1) our special Partner Church Sunday worship service on January 22 with Roger Bertschausen, the new Executive Director of the UUA Partner Church Council, preaching, and then 2) on the following Saturday, January 28, a special program entitled “25 Years of Partnership—A Silver Anniversary Celebration,” including music, slide presentation and trip recollections by our “pilgrims.” As always, our fabulous Hungarian dinner, with some new tweaks to our recipes, will precede the program. Please save these dates!