

Partner Church Sunday 10/18/20 – We do not have to think alike to love alike

Why do we have this 30 year partnership with Gyepes?

Well, our story begins back in 1920, following World War I. National lines were redrawn. Transylvania (part of Hungary) was "awarded" as a war prize to then-tiny Romania. The Transylvania landscape is blanketed with villages that remain today deeply rooted in their Hungarian culture. Our village, Gyepes, a remote subsistence farming village of about 50 families, has just one church and the entire village is ethnic Hungarian and Unitarian.

Imagine waking up one morning and suddenly being a citizen of a different country, where you could not study or work unless you knew the Romanian language. Hard times in Gyepes.

Then, World War II; Soviets occupied Romania. In 1948 once again national lines were redrawn by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. Stalin received Eastern Europe. So began "the 40-year Communist era." Hard times in Gyepes got harder for most. Whole villages were flooded to force Hungarians to move to the city factories. Gyepes was on the list to be flooded out in March 1990. But just 3 months earlier, in December 1989, Gyepes was spared.

Some of you may remember the 1989 Romania Uprising, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In December 1989 Romania's dictator Ceaușescu was overthrown, mock-tried, and then executed on Christmas Day. This opportunity to develop some sort of democracy has led to dramatic changes, imperfect as it is.

A week later, In January 1990, 30 years ago, following Ceausescu's execution, the then-president of the UUA, William Schultz, visited Transylvania and asked the Unitarian Bishop what the UUA could do. The immediate response was a request that the UUA re-establish the Partner Church program that was in place until 1920. This was quickly done, and so began our partnerships.

As the Communist era of collective farming ended, communities began "receiving back" their land and buildings that had been taken away; this process still slowly

moves on today. However, as land was returned, the machinery of collective farming was immediately taken away by the Soviets; the people returned to subsistence farming with hoes and scythes, some still in use today.

The partnerships began with major financial needs, but, over time, it's become so much more than money. I go to Transylvania to deeply experience a different culture with now beloved friends. And to explore the origins and history of our faith, and how it's being lived today – by people on their own land - a minority ethnic group practicing a minority faith governed by Romanian settlers – it reminds me a bit of our Wabanaki people here in Maine.

So, what was life really like in Gyepes during Communism? On one of my visits we asked that question. I'd like to share a simple story, which, for me, is profoundly rich in appreciation, sadness, and hope.

Three of us visited the homes of 3 highly respected elders Laci, Szilvia and Elek ~ people my age, each born during WW2. We had on previous visits shared laughter, tears, palinka, and food. These visits included all of that, with the addition of one simple question: "So, how was it for you during Communism?"

At Laci's home, his answer: "oh things were so much better under communism; farms were 100% productive then, now only 50% - very poor, having had the mechanization taken away". Wow! Probing deeper we discovered that, as one of the leading families in the community, Laci had been targeted by the communist authorities to be the village leader to implement the "new rules" in Gyepes. They arrived in intimidating limos. He would be paid well, and, as long as he played along, he and his family were safe; the alternative was death. Eyes were watching.

We then visited Szilvia, who had just made fresh "donuts" for us, and served her treasured palinka made by her husband the year before he died. "So, how was it for you during Communism?" Szilvia told us she and her husband chose to live quietly in the village, navigating the hazardous edge of not declaring one side or the other. They isolated themselves as best they could, focusing on daily chores and raising their family. Szilvia still lives quietly in the village, enjoying tending to her lovely gardens, and always smiling. Her biggest wish - to have running water in her home.

And, finally, we visited Elek, the music director, and a man of great passion, high integrity, and humor – and deeply opposed to communism. His blue eyes are either sparkling brightly or washed with tears as he tells his stories. “So, how was it for you during Communism?” Elek told us that when he was 10 years old during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, he watched his father secretly bury the village’s Hungarian flag in their barn – a flag then banned under threat of death. He carried this secret for 36 years until Communism fell in 1990, and with great emotion the villagers gathered to unearth the hidden flag which now hangs framed in the church. Elek also told us of an impish prank he played in 1966 when he was 20 years old. Ceausescu had just come to power and death threats were intense. Being a musician and somewhat rebellious, he publicly played the banned Hungarian folk song Szekely Aldas, today’s closing hymn, which led to having his nose broken and making daily check-ins with the police, threatened with imprisonment and the “disappearing” of his family if he didn’t “sign the book” accepting communism. He refused at each of his daily appearances; eventually they relented - perhaps at the request of our friend Laci?

(When I was 20, I was comfortably in college, enjoying learning and life with friends. What values could I have held so dearly that I could stand up under death threats then – or now?)

My take-away that day was that each of the families took a different stand during Communism. And, like all their fellow villagers, they lived together, worked together, worshipped together, struggled together. They each knew where each stood. And, now, after Communism, with most of their lands returned to them, they still live together, work together, worship together, and still struggle together, though the 21st century challenges are different.

Today, reflecting back on these memories, I wonder, what binds the people of Gyepes together so tightly that they don’t just walk away from the challenges of “getting along”? I can’t help but ask myself, can we do as well? I carry these questions as I deepen my commitment to this community – to you – and to our partners in Gyepes. May it be so.