

**THE PATH TO TOLERANCE: PILGRIMAGE TO TRANSYLVANIA**  
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For many, the journey begins in Eastern Europe, frequently in the lovely old city of Budapest, two cities really split by a river. A place of public baths and regal buildings. Or Bucharest, maybe? People from the States frequently fly into Germany before their flight to Transylvania.

There are lots of fun options to consider. Prague is not too far? Maybe Vienna on the way home? Maybe nowhere. That is up to you, your time, pals, budget, will, health and mobility. People will have ideas, that is half the fun of course.

We will almost certainly be meeting in Cluj, or Cluj-Napoca the unofficial capital of Transylvania.



It is, I suspect, a city you have never heard of, until you started googling it in advance.



We will start in Kolozsvár, Unitarian capital of Transylvania, the place where our most famous attribute—our tolerance—was born in the kiln of the reformation.

What you might not have known is that Transylvania is the most rural, least modern, and least developed or unspoiled corner of what is now a slightly bigger Europe. A generation ago, you would have been visiting the most repressive nation in the Soviet bloc. Four generations ago this trip would have taken you to Hungary.

*In Cluj, or Kolozsvár as it is also called, you/we will be oriented to our trip, receive at least a few private lectures and public museums where the original Unitarianism (the one God kind) will come to life.*

At some point, our tour guide will turn to you and say "Welcome, my friends, to Transylvania, or as the indigenous name for the place Érdely gets translated, 'The Land of the Forests.' You, my friend, are now in the largest density of Unitarians in the world." Here, you will begin to put a little flesh on what you might have imagined communist life to have been like.

In your first couple days, you will be walking streets carved out long before America was discovered by other Europeans, or cars were even a twinkle in anyone's eyes. People have lived here a long time, and it shows.

Waking up in your hotel there, you will think to yourself either the coffee is way too strong and grainy, or your thinking cool, just the right amount of a different place. Perhaps you are hearing the first Slavic language you have ever been surrounded by.

For the first couple of days you will occasionally be sneaking looks over your shoulder for the dragon you half expect to see flying over an old turreted building. In the architecture will be reminders that you are midway between Asia and Europe, and only a few hundred miles north of the Middle-East.

Being about equal distance between Paris, Jerusalem, and Tibet, you will feel reminded that you are in a place that for over the last two millennia has been traded like a valuable but frayed baseball card between Trajans, Huns, Turks, Austrians, Soviets, Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians. As you look at gorgeous buildings your heart will ache that our Unitarian brothers and sisters live in such a rich tough, beautiful neighborhood.

Our trip will take us to the land where the symbols of one's ethnic heritage, that of gypsies, Jews, and Armenians, are not purchased at Walgreens. It is in this middle of this historic patchwork of tribes and religions that Unitarianism has had its longest—and most dramatic—history. Cool.

During our days around Kolozsvar we will visit an old Saxon fortress town designated a World Heritage site, and the legendary birthplace of Vlad the Impaler (Dracula). No, I'm not kidding.

After a little of this small city where you think they should smoke less, you/we/me will begin to tour about across the Great Hungarian Plain, and stare into the Carpathian Mountains. Maybe we will hike their foothills.

On our journey our guides will tell you real stories about Unitarian life here. I will supplement them with a mix of truths about Francis David's brave testimonies, and lies about how at the end of Communism, golden arches from the few new MacDonald signs you might see were secretly upside-down symbols of Unitarian Universalist safe-houses.

As the van tips left and right on increasingly bad roads out of the city, we might make friendships with other UUs also traveling from the U.S., that remains undetermined. What is a fact is that we will wind through narrow green valleys where the Huns once camped out. You will learn history you will forget.

Eventually, the evening light fading on one of our days of traveling out into the villages, we will enter small ancient villages where nearly everyone you pass on dusty roads is a Unitarian. You think Weird! Cool!

On this adventure I promise cows with full udders, archaic plumbing to tell the grandkids about, and laughing children kicking a ball back and forth between low stone houses.

Elderly women sitting on wooden benches will look up when you walk by. For where you are is a place not even close to being well-worn by tourists. Well, we wacky American UUs are there a fair bit these days. But others—still—not so much.

Then just about when you will be wondering what the cat knocked over back home, you will see a small village highlighted by a small white church.

It is not far from what you might imagine Vermont to look like this time of year, if Vermont was recently part of the Soviet Union. In general, travel in Eastern Europe might be compared to a journey back in time to early nineteenth century rural America. Visions of a bucolic past replete

with reminders of modernity like satellite dishes and some cell phones. When I was there last, we brought in hay on carts pulled by horses. The tour guide announces that this church, this village, is one of more than one hundred congregations clustered in the Unitarian homeland of Transylvania.

Inside this church that has stood here since the Reformation are wood carvings and tapestries.



Today, just as in the generations before, the villagers gather to worship in this church. They will file into the small sanctuary to hear the scripture given, give their prayers. And, today, you, you global traveler you, you American UU ambassador, will be one of them.

The introductory hymn "Vigyázz értem úr Isten" is sung. You don't even attempt to sing along, but the host family you are staying with for a few nights sings without looking at the book. One of the translators frequently by your side whispers in your ear that this is an ancient hymn which tells of God's tender care, and the people's trust.

You are about to ask one of a thousand questions that have struck you, when the minister starts his sermon, and you shusssh!

You can't help but notice that the women and men sit apart in this church, oh yeah. Like I said, this isn't quite the pink and green Unitarianism we are used to at PUC, these Transylvanian Unitarians are old school Reformation-era Unitarians.

The Pastor, way up in a turret-like pulpit, is telling the story of how in the sixteenth century fate spun the child king John Sigismund into power and into the care of his mother Queen Isabella. And how the Queen had been exposed to some of the proto-Unitarian ideals that were beginning to bubble up at the start of the Reformation. These values spread from parent to child enough that when the young John Sigismund assumed his powers, he was amply prepared to meet the brightest young priest in the region, *Dávid Ferenc*, whom we generally call Francis David.

This bright and courageous Dávid Ferenc, who was both affected by and eventually effected the fervor of the Reformation, was teaching many innovative things in his church in the capital city of Kolozsvár. He was questioning the doctrine of the Trinity, and espousing the right of all people to determine their own religious beliefs.

In the heated time 1500s when the church had yet to move past oppressive tactics, this did not make the established church leaders very happy. But the King was impressed, both with what at the time was cutting edge Fifteenth Century theology, and scholarship, but even more with Dávid's belief that all religions should be tolerated and protected.

The nobles—most of them followers of the stickler Calvin at this point—demanded that the king take a stand against Dávid's theology. So, the young king called a Diet, a conference of nobles and clergy.

The preacher continues...

After hearing Dávid brilliantly defend his anti-Trinitarian theology, he converted and in 1568 the king issued a historic decree in the regional seat of Torda. This decree, known as the Edict of Toleration, demanded that "Preachers shall be allowed to preach the gospel everywhere, each according to their own understanding of it."

*The preacher emphasizes the point of the edict that demands, "No one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion, since faith is the gift from God." That freedom and tolerance was a novel and dangerous idea at the time.*

You remember that we will visit the location of that edict tomorrow.

You are now among a small but growing percentage of Unitarians from all over the world who will have been there. You day-dream in those hard pews that you now have a story that trumps that blow-hards at coffee-hour.

The preacher goes on, that because Dávid's popularity grew, his theological stance grew more difficult for the Calvinist theologians to ignore.

They felt that his belief in freedom of conscience threatened more than theological doctrines. David's ideas in the king's ear threatened the social order, and the powers that be—religious and noble alike—felt it taken too far. This kind of tolerance could call into question the very feudal system.

*Then, after the young King John died early in a freak carriage accident, and Francis Dávid was without royal protection, the Calvinists ordered him to stop developing his theological ideas, by creating a law against religious innovation. However, Dávid refused to hamper his own religious thinking, or to stop teaching the people, and so, like Servetus we visited before, he was put on trial for heresy.*

He was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment in the dungeon at Déva. Already frail at the time of his trial, he soon died. We will see the entrance to his outdoor prison in the ruins of the fortress at Déva. It is the most sacred of our pilgrimage sites.

The Preacher explains that nearly as quickly as the two advocates and defenders of religious tolerance arrived, they were gone. However, Dávid's ideas were too smart, and had spread too far to be stopped even by his death.

We can be very proud that the only time in history a Unitarian was King, he used his power not to oppress but to secure the freedom of others. At a time when the Catholic and Protestant inquisitions were burning people for lesser heresies, this was a courageous and prophetic stand for the young King John Sigismund to make.

Despite tremendous opposition and persecution, not long after they began practicing their more tolerant anti-Trinitarian gospel, these free and tolerant churches were confiscated, their leaders tried for heresy, and every effort made to discourage and disband them. But by the time of Dávid's trial there were already over three hundred Unitarian churches in the region, and before the end of the sixteenth century just under five hundred. Five hundred churches you think. Wow!

The minister closes the sermon with the message that you are part of that heritage. And the closing poignant thought is that to have religious freedom one has to have the courage and wits to defend the very simple idea that we should have the right to believe what we want.

You feel it, and up against your own sloppy Western comfort. You feel challenged and expanded as a UU.

After the hymn and the final blessing, the congregation files out the small door, each one shaking hands with the minister and saying, "Isten ald jo meg!" God bless you! You will see that phrase above a pulpit.

And as you feel the warmth of the mid-day sun on your shoulders as you leave the church, you feel blessed. Lucky.

As the trip proceeds you come to know that your presence here is valuable. And that you called to be a good and strong UU. You are beginning to sit a little straighter in your seat and feel steeled. You arrive at the small *penzione* (bed and breakfast type home) where you will stay with local folks.

As you will be reminded on tour, Romania under the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu suffered a most oppressive form of Communism. His government was severe, the stories are horribly brutal. We will visit museums that poignantly document this history. And your host family, over dinner with too much meat and palinka, the local very adult beverage of choice, put their elbows on the table and will poignant stories by people who lived under the yoke of that oppression.

You will likely hear stories from the older generation about how under communism, religion was severely repressed, church properties confiscated, and schools were closed.

You hear inside stories of how the church tried to protect her people but was divided about how to best do that. Stories that live out the debate, of how and when should we display courage. You could well hear stories about imprisoned Ministers. You will hear a Romanian farmer's version of how, after World War I, when the lands of that empire were broken up, the Treaty of Trianon gave the region of Érdely to its neighbor, Romania, as a reward for Romanian support of the Allied powers.

And you might hear in a lecture the history of how twenty years later Hitler restored the Hungo-Austrian Empire's claim to those lands, but after the Second World War, Érdely was again given to Romania, just as the heavy hand of communism fell over Eastern Europe. Perhaps the grandmother scurrying food, back and forth to you might remind you that nobody here was consulted about their preferences.

At one point on the van on a way to another stop, our translator will spin around and tell the story of one such village a generation ago. She will say...

The village of Bözödujfalu was nestled in a quiet valley. For over four hundred years this village was renowned for the peaceful coexistence of four different faiths. For generations, Catholics, Reformed Protestants, and Unitarians had lived alongside the last surviving congregation of Sabbatarians— (Unitarians who had reformed back to Judaism centuries before). These four

faiths had lived and worshipped next to each other, respecting one another's beliefs and ways of life. The Catholic priest and the Unitarian minister would offer pastoral care to one another's parishioners when the other was away.

Bözödujfalu was a shining example of that peace among Romania's people and freedom for all religions could happen again. The villagers of Bozodujfalu prided themselves on this mutual trust and respect, but this model of religious diversity and peaceful relations was a threat to Ceausescu's plans of pitting religious and ethnic groups against one another. Ceausescu could not let such a bold example stand.

So in 1989 the village of Bözödujfalu was targeted for extermination. The townsfolk were told that a dam was to be built, just outside of town, which would back up the local river and thereby flood the entire village. The people were given only a few months to find other homes, and were ordered to tear down their houses before departing.

Now, here is the most maddening part of this order: the dam was to serve no purpose. No electricity would be generated, no use made of the water, or the land below or above of the dam—nothing. The sole purpose of this project was to flood the village of Bözödujfalu and disperse the people. The reason people had to tear down the buildings was simply to make it impossible for them to return.

The Unitarian minister and the Catholic priest came together to see what could be done. There was no hope of stopping the destruction, but they could not stand by without some form of protest. According to an old law, the churches could not be torn down by the government. Instead, the congregations had been offered cash to tear down their own buildings. The two clergymen decided to refuse the money—and leave their buildings standing.

"Let our churches remain," they said, "as a testament to what once lived here, and what was done to our peaceful village."

The homes were razed, the guide tells you over the seat back, the villagers moved away, and still the two churches stood, silent and dark against the sky. The workers came and built the dam, and still the two small buildings gave their witness. The waters rose and eventually swirled up over the doorsteps, and flooded the two sanctuaries, and the churches held their spires as high as ever.

*The waters rose and rose, deeper and deeper. Even when the nearby hills were covered, and the townspeople scattered, still for years the spires remain as a testament to the villages mix of pride and tolerance. Eventually the church steeples washed away after years under water.*

The people of Bözödujfalu were determined that their vision of religious peace be remembered. Just down the road a bit from the lake they built a memorial. It looks like part of a torn-down house, with windows and exposed brick. On it are the symbols of the four religions who lived harmoniously there.

You will enjoy feasting with your new friends. You will enjoy seeing a cool new place mostly unexplored, but mostly I am promised, you as a UU will be challenged.

In private time set aside for reflection, you will get to ask yourself what our own choices might be under such circumstances, and you will get to feel the bonds of our faith stretched.

The lives of our religious siblings half a world away are still difficult. While they call the revolution in Prague that went smoothly the velvet revolution, they call the revolution of 1989 the "stolen revolution."

You will learn about globalization and the struggle overseas around family farming and the challenges to the sustainable lifestyle of our fellow Unitarians. You will see how our presence there is making a difference.

As you reflect in your journal each day about the secret polices museum you saw, or the kid in the village with the cute smile, or the beauty and struggle of our Unitarian brothers and sisters across the globe, you will feel a conviction, a challenge, well up in your heart. You will feel a new kinship with your faith tradition, and with your own role in it.

Consider joining the dozen or so of us planning on going. Consider coming to be changed in the company of brothers and sisters you have not met yet.

**Amen**

