

Transylvanian Unitarians still in the midst of wolves.

A salute with thanks to all people of the Hungarian Unitarian Church

by Robert Kokenyesi

Many unitarians in North America know that the Hungarian (previously Transylvanian) Unitarian Church has a coat of arms. The coat of arms depicts a serpent that forms a circle biting its own tail. Inside the circle is a white dove standing on a mound. However, perhaps, very few people might know that the Church has an official Bible quote as well. The quote, the second part of Matthew 10:16 matches the appearance of the dove on the coat of arms, as the quote states “*Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*” The Bible verse refers to the need for wise thinking to reflect on challenges and opportunities while remaining observant of the dual commandment of Jesus (Matthes 22:27) that includes the statement: “Love thy neighbor as thyself”. The practical application of this motto became a persistent Unitarian reality during the 456-year long existential struggle of Transylvanian Unitarians from the founding of the Unitarian Church in 1568 to our days. The following brief set of examples stand as a thankful salute to all people of the Hungarian Unitarian Church.

Just why would Jesus give such a command to his followers? What could possibly endanger the builders of the kingdom of God? To find the answer let us consider the first part of the Bible verse Book of Matthew 10:16, where Jesus justifies the command of behaving like serpents and doves. He says: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” That statement has prophesized the threats his followers faced right after the crucifixion, and accurately projected the adversarial atmosphere the Transylvanian Unitarians experienced from the beginning of the foundational work in the 1560s.

The first wolves that wanted to devour the Unitarians were Calvinist from the town of Debrecen, then located at the extreme western portion of the Principality of Transylvania. The local Calvinist preacher, Meliusz Juhasz Peter, wanted to prevent the spread of the new antitrinitarian religion, so he removed non-cooperating ministers, and burned books that expressed opinions that disagreed with Calvinism. The leader of the Transylvanian Unitarians, David Ferenc, met his Calvinist opponent in several public debates, and two of those took place in the presence of King John Sigismund, II. The wisdom and docility of David Ferenc were important contributors to his victories in those debates. In a letter to the king David Ferenc wrote: “God’s truth ought not be forced by condemnations, or by fire and iron, but, rather, promoted by solid evidence from the two Testaments, and by quiet discussions and writings”.

The second group of wolves came to Transylvania in the last decades of the 1500s, in the form of Catholic Princes who wanted to eject the Unitarian Church from Transylvania. The Princes made life very uncomfortable to the Unitarians by closing the

print shops, confiscating Church property, Church school buildings and churches. Enyedi Gyorgy, the third bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, responded to the threat by delivering sermons that lifted the spirit of the oppressed Unitarians. When one Catholic official called for the killing of all non-Catholics, Enyedi Gyorgy delivered a sermon in the church on the Main Square of Kolozsvar, a sermon that expressed his conviction about the need for tolerance among denominations, and the unity of all Christians, based on Biblical texts from Ephesians 4.

During the 1600s a new wolf appeared in the form of a theological challenge. In 1636 the unexpected death of bishop Csanadi forced the Unitarian synod to elect a new bishop. The elected bishop, Beke Daniel, followed in the footsteps of the religious concepts of David Ferenc. However, Matthias Ravius, who represented a different sets of Unitarian beliefs was upset the he was not chosen. Matthias filed a complaint with the Prince (the Calvinist Rakoczi Gyorgy) alleging that Unitarians are teaching religious positions amounting to the forbidden innovation. The Transylvanian Diet then requested an official statement of faith articles from Unitarian church. The investigation led to the written accord circumscribing the faith articles of the Unitarians. In the Accord of Des the Unitarian Church agreed, under duress, to a partial compromise regarding the worship of Jesus. That wise and docile assent to the Accord prevented the elimination of the Unitarian Church.

Throughout most of the 1700s the Unitarian Church was on life-support because of the wolves appearing as restrictive ordinances by the Catholic Habsburg Emperors who now ruled Transylvania. The loss of many churches, property, not being able to hold government offices, and still not being able to print religious material led to the loss of believers as well. The Unitarian Church reorganized itself, and bishop Szentabrahami Lombard Mihaly, as a wise and docile response, authored the over 300-page long summation of the religious beliefs of the Unitarians. That is still the most authoritative text on Unitarian theology.

In 1919 the wolves came from Romania, as the Trianon Treaty awarded the territory of Transylvania to the Kingdom of Romania. The Unitarians were now not only a religious minority, but a cultural and linguistic minority as well. The Romanian king decreed that religious freedoms were to be continued, but he also stated that the Romanian Orthodox Church would receive primary support from the ruling administration. As a wise and docile response, the 84 year old bishop of the Unitarians, Ferenc Jozsef, traveled to Bucharest to ensure the king about the acceptance of the conditions in the new country of the Unitarian Church.

From 1946 the communist takeover of the country started the entry of new wolves. The communist party was antagonistic to all denominations, but they seemed to want to make examples out of the Unitarians. In 1952, 1958, and 1959 a total of 22 Unitarian ministers and Church officials were arrested on charges of activities against the state, and they were sentenced to a combined 173 years of hard labor. All of them were released by 1964. The released Unitarians remained respectful towards the state,

and their wise and docile writings focused on continuing to build the kingdom of God (Examples of their sermons in Unitariantorch.com: Sermon #9, #14, #18, #20, #26, #37). The Unitarian minister of Simenfalva, Gellerd Imre, suffered from continued harassment after his release from the communist labor camp, including preventing his defense of his doctoral dissertation, forcing the breakup of his marriage, blocking regular employment as a minister. Those hostile actions culminated in his suicide in 1980.

Towards the second part of the 1980s the wolves of the Romanian communist party hatched a plan to shuffle large populations inside Romania. The party wanted to destroy small Transylvanian villages and build large population centers in place of them. Dr Gellerd Judit (the daughter of Gellerd Imre) together with William F. Schulz and Natalie Gulbrandsen of UUA, realized that the plan would erase the cultural basis of the largely Unitarian population of the villages. Gellerd Judit used her connections in the United States to energize the partner church movement through the Unitarian Universalist Association. The UUA also decided to establish a partner church system whereby North-American Unitarian churches would maintain one-on-one connection with Transylvanian partners in order to discourage the destruction of the villages. Those wise and docile set of actions stabilized the conditions in the villages of Transylvania.

In the 21st century the wolves come from many directions. I just name a few threats here: the migration of young families to other countries of the European Union has led to an increased proportion of elderly in villages; a drop in the number of the students interested in becoming Unitarian ministers; an increase in the number of Unitarians living in sparsely populated villages inside Romania; an increase in the number of denominationally mixed marriages that brings about a conflict of two religions and two languages. The Hungarian Unitarian Church is in the process of adjusting to these new realities, and the wheels are turning to formulate constructive, wise and docile responses.