

The Unitarian Archival Heritage in Transylvania

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The Hungarian Unitarian Church in Transylvania is connected, politically and theologically, to other nation states and faith communities in both East and West Europe. After providing the audience with a brief history of these connections, this lecture will describe the effort to preserve the Unitarian faith and its associated cultural heritage in Transylvania, concluding with a short narrative of current experiences digitizing the Unitarian documents and manuscripts held in the Archives and Libraries of Cluj/Kolozsvár, Romania.

After having been for several centuries a part of the Kingdom of Hungary, Transylvania was split off when the Turks defeated the Hungarian armies and, in 1541, began their 150-year rule. Transylvania thus became an independent principality, the strategic policy of the Turkish sultans preserving it from occupation during most of the seventeenth century. It remained fairly autonomous throughout this period, paying annual tribute to the Ottoman treasury until, in 1690, Transylvania was joined to Austria, an act that ended its relative independence.

Our Unitarian Church history can be traced to the sixteenth century when the seeds of Reformation found a fertile field in Transylvania.

Best remembered of the Transylvanian theologians of the time is the brilliant debater, Francis Dávid, whose personal religious development – beginning in Catholicism and embracing, in turn, both Lutheranism and Calvinism – paralleled that experienced by a majority of the region's population. Dávid's collective teaching, later to be called *Unitarianism*, conquered not only the subjects of Transylvania but their monarch as well. The ruling Prince of Transylvania and King of Hungary, John Sigismund, is remarkable for being the only Unitarian king in history, and a sagacious (=okos, éles eszű) one at that.

In 1568, Prince John Sigismund convened a Diet (an assembly), and Unitarianism was legalized. At this Diet of 1568 was proclaimed both the toleration act and the principle of religious freedom. In Transylvania, the idea of religious toleration had already been officially declared: in 1557 the Lutherans, in 1563 the Calvinists, and in 1568 the Unitarians were accepted as legal denominations. King John Sigismund thus established the equality of the four main religious persuasions – Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), and Unitarian – henceforth known as the four “received” religions. These four were legally recognized and protected, assuring their members' right, among others, to hold high public offices.

This event appears to signify the *first* time in *world* history when national law has assured religious freedom for almost all citizenry of a given country. It is noteworthy, indeed, that at the only time in international history when there was a Unitarian king on the throne, and a Unitarian government in power, this power was not used to oppress other forms of religion, nor to secure exceptional privileges for their own, but rather to insist upon equal rights and privileges for all prevailing mainstream denominations.

John Sigismund died in 1571, and this was the beginning of great difficulties for the Unitarians. It was during the reign of the Catholic and Calvinist Princes who followed John Sigismund on the throne in Transylvania that the persecution of the Unitarians was sanctioned. The censorship of books, for example, was introduced in an effort to curtail (=megnyírbál, korlátoz) the rights of the Unitarians, who lost many congregations as well as their only printing house as a consequence.

As mentioned, the Turks had for a century and a half occupied a large part of Hungary and had held a sort of political guardianship over Transylvania. In 1690, however, the Turks were at last successfully expelled from the region and, as noted, Transylvania became loosely joined to Austria under Leopold I, former King of Hungary and Emperor of Austria, now its new Prince elect.

While the previous century in Transylvania had been marked by intermittent oppression at the hand of the Calvinists, there followed a new century of steady and far more severe Catholic-led persecution. This was the

historical period subsequently identified as the “Counter-Reformation,” and it was during this period that the Catholics overtook first the Unitarian College (High School) established by John Sigismund, and then, in 1716 and aided by military force, the large and splendid cathedral on the main square of Cluj/Kolozsvár. Similar confiscations took place throughout Unitarian Transylvania. Churches as well as valuable land and other properties, were taken away by the state and given to the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in a comparative loss of membership, particularly among those of means. The Unitarian organization – its infrastructure, theology, and intellectual core – however, was not itself annihilated. Unable to any longer legally or technically publish their own works, the Unitarians essayed at survival through the continued production of handwritten manuscripts of theological and literary significance. Many of the originals are, fortunately, yet extant, though not all of these early manuscripts (as will be discussed below) have remained in Unitarian possession.

It was at this time that the church laity began to take part in the development and sustenance of church organization. In the middle of the eighteenth century, an official Unitarian Church Headquarters was founded at Cluj/Kolozsvár. Prior to this period, the “Superintendent” (later “Bishop”), as head of the Unitarians, was held responsible for the resolution of all congregational difficulties, the administration of religious education activities being left to the relocated parish at Cluj/Kolozsvár. Diverse political, legal, and economic pressures during the period of the Counter-Reformation necessitated the separation of the administrative and financial aspects of Unitarian life centered in Cluj/Kolozsvár. To this end, the urban parish congregation of local Unitarians (in Cluj/Kolozsvár) was rendered distinct from the larger Unitarian Church organization there. Papers generated as a result of this denominational re-ordering were (originally) stored in cartons at the neighboring Superintendent’s house. It is these very papers, significantly, that have become the founding documents of both the Church as organization and its recently established modern Archives.

Slowly the political and theological atmosphere in this part of the world began to change. In 1781, King Joseph II issued his famous Edict of Tolerance, instantiating the legitimacy of all prominent denominations of the period (Unitarian, Calvinist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox). The Unitarians initiated a growth and re-organization campaign, building new churches throughout Transylvania by way of replacing those that had been taken from them. A new Unitarian College (High School), the third one to be established, was built in Cluj/Kolozsvár and another was soon after founded in Cristuru Secuiesc/Szekelykeresztúr, a town about two hundred kilometers to the southeast. In 1848, the Diet at Bratislava/Pozsony declared the Unitarian Church a “received religion” for greater Hungary (Unitarianism was previously accepted only in Transylvania) and, from that time forward, Unitarians throughout Hungary have been granted those rights and freedoms conferred to other local denominations. Political conditions of the twentieth century, however, imposed a variety of new constraints on the Transylvanian Unitarian community of northeastern Hungary. After World War I, the Treaty of Trianon annexed Transylvania to Romania, separating traditional Hungarian ethnic groups.

During the period of Communism to follow, most Unitarian church properties in Transylvania were confiscated. Unitarian church leaders and congregants, like those of all of the Christian and Jewish communities throughout Romania, were placed under very strict control. In late 1989, when the Communist regime collapsed, these centers of faith began a new era of socio-economic and political negotiations with their new national government. Across the denominations, the focus of the recent struggle has been the effort to regain ownership of former Church properties.

As noted, the history of the Unitarian Church Archives dates back to the early eighteenth century when various librarians and members of the clergy began to assemble and protect papers of denominational significance. The founding documents, originally cared for in the house of the Superintendent (Bishop), were removed to the Cluj/Kolozsvár Unitarian College (High School) at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the collection grew. A hundred years later, in 1901, the Archives as well as the offices of the denominational Headquarters were relocated in the new Unitarian College building at 21 Decembrie Boulevard in the same city, where they remained throughout the Communist era, sharing the space with government facilities. This building was itself returned to Unitarian ownership by the Romanian government, making various repairs and renovation projects. Renovation of the Archival space was prioritized by both the local Unitarian leadership and contributing donors from the United States.

With the objective of preserving our valuable archival heritage, two professors from the United States, Dr. Deborah J. Youngman, on the faculty in Developmental Studies at Boston University, and Dr. Kathleen Dunlap, of Tufts Medical School, established the *Unitarian Transylvanian Archives Project* (UTAP) in 1998 under my direction as archivist of the Hungarian Unitarian Church at Kolozsvár and with the support of the former and the present Unitarian Bishop, Árpád Szabó and Ferenc Bálint Bencédi.

The Project has identified three specific aims: Phase One has involved the renovation of existing space at the historic Unitarian Headquarters building in Cluj/Kolozsvár. Private donations permitted the construction to begin in 1999 and move towards a rapid completion under my direction. The intent has been to construct an optimal storage facility for both the current collection and all future acquisitions. The furnishing of the space has been facilitated by grants from the Hungarian government. Phase Two places priority on the prevention of any further degradation of the gathered documents and artifacts through best restoration and conservation techniques and practices. Phase Three intends the eventual accessibility of the entire collection to scholars and other interested parties worldwide. Digitization of processed materials for international online access has already begun. We are indebted to the Unitarian Universalist International Funding Program in the United States for partial funding of this aspect of our work. Grant monies from this source have enabled the purchase of essential products, materials, services, and technical equipment. Through the financial assistance and grant coordination of the UTAP and the support we have received from both within and beyond our Unitarian circles, we believe we now have a facility that is taking its place among the most notable religious archives in the world.

The Unitarian College in Cluj/Kolozsvár once maintained a very fine and well-known Library in which were preserved an extensive collection of Unitarian manuscripts. In 1948, during the Communist era, the Unitarian College and Library were nationalized by the Romanian Government. Libraries belonging to other denominations were likewise confiscated. Many of our Unitarian books and manuscripts remain in safekeeping in the nearby Academic Library in Cluj/Kolozsvár, the present inventory of our manuscripts there numbering more than 3,000 pieces. The distinctive Unitarian character of this collection represents a second unique source for the study of the radical Antitrinitarian trend in European history. From the scholar's perspective, an eventual reintegration of these manuscripts into our Unitarian Library (also located at 21 Decembrie Boulevard, Cluj/Kolozsvár) would seem a worthy goal indeed.

Towards this end, our Unitarian Bishop and the Director of the Academic Library in Cluj/Kolozsvár have entered into a contract according to which we can digitize from our former Library those rare books and important manuscripts now under National protection. On the strength of this agreement, we have now digitized more than 250 manuscripts and books (about 50,000 pictures), but these exist only in "raw form." From these, we shall construct a searchable database and make subsets of the material available to users on compact or digital video disks, when support funding becomes available.

Finally—and we anticipate that this will be of interest to an even wider audience of lay historians beyond our archival and scholarly circles—we have also begun work on another project to construct a digital pictures and information database related to Unitarian Church buildings, bells, old Unitarian grave stones, and other devotional objects from Transylvania. It is our intent, through continued grant writing and the pursuit of welcome donations, to make the total collection accessible online. We also welcome visitors to our non-virtual Unitarian Archives, suggesting that advance appointments be made via the email addresses provided in our website.

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