

## **A Minister's Life**

John spoke of how much it meant to him to visit the places where Unitarians established our faith, rising fresh from the soil of the Protestant reformation. As a minister, I was aware of the long line of ministers who had shepherded our faith through all the centuries since then- almost 450 years. Our partner church in Szekelyszentmihaly was built at a time when Unitarianism was flourishing in the Transylvanian part of Hungary – in the 1860's and 1870's—about the time the building of this first Unitarian church in Milford. On our trip this summer, I stayed with Rev. Gergely Kiss and his wife, Ibi and their son, Elod, who served as our translator. I got to see how challenging daily life is for a minister in a small village. Gergely not only served the church in our partner village but also the church in the nearby village of Benced as well. Each morning, I would wake to the sound of Gergely chopping wood behind the house to stoke the firebox that would heat the water for bathing and dish washing. One day, in the small barnyard, Gergely showed me how to skin a rabbit for our dinner. He told me a good minister learns something new everyday. There was never an evening meal that was not interrupted by someone coming to the door in search for food or palenka (a homemade plum brandy) or to talk with the minister about a family member who was dying. Except for Sunday morning worship and other special services all church business happened at the parsonage, in Gergely's booklined study, in his family's home. At both the wedding we attended in nearby Benced and during the church service, Rev. Kiss not only conducted the services but he would move quickly from pulpit to organ to accompany and lead the congregation in singing their hymns. Sometimes other Unitarian Ministers – our van drivers and tour guides- would join us for dinner in the small diningroom which was also the bedroom for all the family members in the Kiss dining room. I was impressed with their energetic intellect on subjects ranging from theology to the politics of the Unitarian Bishops.

In addition to the sweet generosity, kindness and warmth with which we were greeted and hosted... what moved the most as I considered the lives of Unitarian ministers there...was their treatment under –first fascism and more recently under communism.

Gergely told me about a monument where, during the Hungarian revolution, two Unitarian ministers – principals of the Unitarian High School in the valley of our village had been forced to strip naked and jump over an open fire, while being stabbed by bayonet.

I had read the account of Imre Gellert's life including his 6 year imprisonment, along with many other Unitarian ministers in the Romanian gulag- a horrific prison in the hold of a discarded French cargo ship with ironic name of "Liberte". Preaching Jesus' gospel of peace, freedom and fairness threatened the communist rule. After being released from prison and serving a small village for 15 years, he ended his own life in 1980, when he learned that the police were coming after him. He could not bear thought of more time in devastating prison work camps under the Ceausescu regime. We were fortunate to have Imre Gellert's daughter, Judit Gellert, as one of our guides and translators. She had written the account of her father's life that many of us had read before the trip. She is a medical doctor and Unitarian minister, who now lives in the United States. We visited the village where her father last served, and Judit gave an impassioned speech pleading with us, as Americans, to be careful not to let our civil liberties be taken away. We were among people who treasure the religious freedom and civil liberties we take for granted- those freedoms and civil liberties that we naively think will always be there. Judit watches the erosion of our civil liberties with great concern. She counsels us to be aware.

These pictures you see were taken on Sunday morning, while I was delivering my sermon in English to the people of Szentmihaly. I stopped at the end of each paragraph, so that Gergely could say the words in Hungarian. It was humbling to deliver a sermon to people who have kept alive a deep belief in religious freedom and the goodness of Jesus' message. It was an honor that the men and women in that sanctuary listened so intently. My sweetest memory, though, is standing at the door next to Gergely and Elod, our translator...shaking hands and saying to each person-- Isten Ah-dyon - God Bless You. Ishten Ah-dyon Sweet wrinkled smiling eyes of the older women of Szentmihaly looked into my eyes – their eyes spoke of the hardships they had endured and the hope our friendship brings. They placed their hands on either side of my face --asking us to come back soon. They were in tears and so was I. Next came the men, as I extended my hand to each man, he looked into my eyes

and then bowed to kiss my hand. Saying come back. Come back. And I said, "Thank you. We will."

Judit Gellerd. Prisoner of Liberte: Story of a Transylvanian Martyr. Chico, California: Uniquet, 2003.