

Romanian Adventists Before and After the Revolution

by Jozsef Szilvasi

We almost missed each other—I was about to go to Romania's region of Transylvania, and Alexandru Timis, president of the Cluj Conference, came unexpectedly to Budapest. It was providential, I believe, that we should meet together. The interview I had planned to make in his Cluj office finally took place in the headquarters of the Hungarian Union. There are 55,000 baptized Seventh-day Adventists in Romania, including 6,000 whose mother tongue is Hungarian. Two of our members were killed in the revolution, with seven more injured and six still missing.

In the last two years, the Hungarian Union has been involved in caring for hundreds of Hungarian-speaking Adventist refugee from Transylvania (Light, 7-8/1988; 6/1989). Together with the Yugoslavian Union, our church in Hungary was among the first to deliver aid after the Romanian Revolution began shortly before Christmas, 1989 (Light 2/1990).

What follows is a candid appraisal of the new situation Seventh-day Adventists face in Romania and the ordeal experienced especially by the Hungarian minority in Transylvania.

When the story of the Romanian revolution emerged, much was said about the activities of the Securitate secret police. How were Seventh-day Adventists protecting themselves against their activities?

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We must distinguish between what is perceived as legal and illegal activity of the church. There are activities that overstep the bounds of admissibility, and as such, involved a certain amount of risk. Among these were the organization of youth camps, public evangelistic meetings, publishing, and also the education and training of pastors. For instance, we had to disguise evangelistic meetings as "weeks of prayer." When I finished a series of lectures, I copied materials on an old-fashioned duplicating machine and distributed them to my fellow ministers. In this way I could convince my coworkers to work with me, to be a tool in God's hand. In this way, the nucleus of an evangelistic task-force was formed.

As for our members, we produced materials for Sabbath school, and the Week of Prayer, so that each would have at least one copy. Our members knew that I had been watched by the Securitate because of the regular evangelistic meetings, yet when they saw that the events announced were still being held, they too gathered around the organization of efforts. Our brothers and sisters realized that this was the only way for the church's survival.

Does that mean that the Securitate were not able to infiltrate our ranks?

There have been several clearly separable stages in the church's life in the past 25 years. In the beginning we were in a very difficult position, for there were several enlisted members and pastors and they had absolute power. Even if the Securitate blacklisted somebody, one couldn't check to see whether it was true or not. That was the case with me. In a sense I was put on such a list,

and it can be substantiated by a record in my employment register. I was dismissed several times from my church work and then reemployed. The church administrators would protect me but they, too, were afraid. They thought they could not help me anyway, so why get into trouble by making a stand for me? Thus, several times the conference secretary told me that I was sacked. Then they reemployed me.

After a while there came a turning point. They slowly got to know us and realized that we were not a threat to them. Other denominations were much more aggressive in their activities and kept striving for foreign attention to the Christian difficulties in Romania. Therefore, the Communist party machinery was concentrating all their energy on other areas, where they had more problems, and so paid less attention to us.

Was there any indication in those 25 years that the anti-people and anti-religious stance of the regime would come to an end?

You didn't have to be a Seventh-day Adventist to recognize the signs of collapse. Every decent person was shocked again and again by the ingenuity of propaganda and the new titles given to the dictator. These were glorifying phrases, mostly self-glorifying: "We praise you, we glorify you, there is no name like yours," et cetera. Those who know history well can recognize in these exclamations the cults of Caligula, Nero, and other proud and godless Roman emperors. We as Seventh-day Adventists expected that God's Word would come true: the fall is preceded by conceit. Ceausescu claimed names due alone to God and His Son. He allowed himself to be praised shamelessly in songs, poems, and slogans.

The revolution was sparked off by the case of a Reformed Church minister, Laszlo Tokes. What was the reaction of Adventists toward him?

We must admit that in Romania we knew much less of what was going on around Laszlo Tokes [see box on page 4] than our compatriots in Hungary. What we knew we learned from the Hungarian Radio Kossuth. Nevertheless, we followed the development of his lot with great attention. From what we know, he was not directly engaged in politics, but the authorities believed that he was acting against the official policies

regarding the Hungarian minority in Romania. Yes, he was vocal against the destruction of villages, and the closing of Hungarian schools, but mainly he had problems with the office of his own Reformed bishop. He made no propaganda against the state. Why was he displaced arbitrarily, without any reason, first to Timisoara, and then to another place? "I obeyed, I came here," he said, "but how long will they continue to trifle with me?" His own bishop went as far as to call the authorities to implement the ecclesiastical decisions. It was then that the congregation members surrounded the parish, like a human chain.

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We were afraid that if the revolt resulted in bloodshed, there would develop a two-fold reprisal—first, against the church, since the central figure was a pastor—and then against the national minority, since Laszlo Tokes is Hungarian. We, on the other hand, do not admit to the Romanians that the revolution was started by a Hungarian. It continues to be a sore point for many Romanians that the case of a Hungarian launched the revolution. In the end the main thing is that we are now all free—it makes no difference who started the process.

Many of us are interested in how the ministry of our church was trained and nurtured in Romania. How did you solve the problem of pastor recruitment?

It was necessary for us to develop a system of pastors' training. We asked Vilmos Moldovan, an educator and one of our ordained ministers, to develop a curriculum for ministerial training based on the Hungarian pattern. We produced textbooks out of our own materials, and from the curriculum of our Theological Institute of Bucharest. We also developed a five-year training course for lay activists. The requirement for admission into the ministry was a certificate after a

final examination, as it was already a theological education. Both courses, for pastors and laymen, were situated in Cluj, but we also organized two-year courses in other cities as well. Thus over the years 250 young people were trained.

Is the language used in the training program Romanian or Hungarian?

We insisted on using one language, for bilingual education would have been more expensive and more complicated. In democratic spirit we asked the students' opinion, but we let them know that we would prefer their education taking place in the Romanian language. Young people with secondary education had a good command of both languages, and in this way we would not lay ourselves open to the suspicion that we were drawing from a separate source. Thus, from both a practical and tactical consideration the Romanian language was more practicable. We did not

want to raise the suspicion that Magyarization may have been involved.

Our education activities created quite a stir. The problem was that as a church we operate a seminary in Bucharest. The school, however, could only admit three theological students a year, which, for a community of 55,000, is a ridiculously low number. The State Office for Church Affairs lashed out against education in Cluj and tried to strain the relationship between the two ministerial training institutions. There were some in Bucharest who were bombarding the Romanian Union with requests to dissolve the Cluj Theological Seminary. A rumor spread in the church that a Cluj theologian publicly downgraded the Bucharest seminary. In the end, under the pressure of many restrictions, the union decided that the Cluj ministerial training school should be closed.

Adventists Help Spark the Romanian Revolution

by Jack Friedman and Traudl Lessing

The revolution that ended Romania's tyranny can be said to have been born last fall when government and church leaders tried to evict [Pastor Laszlo] Tokes from his pulpit at the Hungarian Reformed church in Timisoara.

... [When the] police came to deport him to the village of Mineu, Tokes fled to his church—and there had an experience he calls “a turning point in my life. I came out of the church and saw that my parishioners had formed a human chain around it.” Then the minister took a closer look and saw something even more remarkable in a country where ethnic and religious divisions are rife. “These were not only my parishioners, with a few Baptists and Adventists,” says Tokes, an ethnic Hungarian, “but Orthodox priests and some of their Romanian flocks.”

... After a short-lived resistance, Tokes was finally led away, and that afternoon, December 17, the people of Timisoara assembled in the main square to protest. Ceausescu ordered the army to shoot into the crowd. Several thousand died and were thrown into shallow, mass graves. ... “When we heard that Ceausescu had been arrested, it was the happiest hour of our lives,” says Tokes. “We knew we had escaped death.”

Taken from “Laszlo Tokes, The Pastor Who Helped to Free Romania, is Home,” *People Weekly*, 5 February 1990, pp. 63-66.

A Time of Change in Romanian Churches

by Steve Friesen

Romania is overwhelmingly Orthodox—at least 70 percent of its 23 million inhabitants belong to the Romanian Orthodox church. The Ceausescu government also recognized 11 other Christian groups as legal entities. Under the new provisional government, all institutions, including the churches, face an uncertain situation in which the old rules do not necessarily apply and no new rules have been established.

... Some denominations formed by the [Romanian] government as a way of more effectively controlling the churches will probably fragment or renounce their national organizations. The new structures will probably be quite different. In the discussion stage is a national association for evangelicals that would include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Plymouth Brethren, Lord's Army (a formerly illegal evangelical group within the Orthodox Church) and others. Several Romanians also want the denominations to sponsor youth organizations.

Taken from “Renewal, Reorganization for Romanian Churches,” *Christian Century*, 21 February 1990, p. 173.

The Romanian Union was not hostile toward us for, like everybody else, they saw that what we were doing was good, yet it appeared that they were yielding to external pressure. Finally, the union solved the question by getting the State Office for Church Affairs to permit us to engage pastors without seminary education, and call them in at intervals to a course to be held in Bucharest. We supported this scheme wholeheartedly. We had a number of well-trained people shortly before graduating from whom we could choose. Their lives were open books to us, as we had been dealing with them for three years. During those three years we taught them thoroughly.

The world community, and certainly Seventh-day Adventists, especially those from Europe, are anxious to know what the present needs are in your country.

Our gratitude goes to everyone for their unprecedented solidarity with us. I must be frank, we have a problem storing the parcels sent by relief agencies. We have enough to eat now. In the past there was enough food production in the country, yet most of it was exported [to pay off Romania's foreign debt—Eds.] or supplied to the ruling family. As soon as food exports were stopped, the food supply for the market considerably improved. I can say that we have sufficient food now.

What then is most needed at present?

In the first place, medicines and therapeutic equipment. During the Ceausescu's regime, no medicines were imported, and there was scarcely any home production since raw materials had to be imported. Surgical instruments are quite primitive too.

It is understood that such medical supplies can only be donated to doctors and public health institutions. Are there Adventist doctors who could make good use of them?

With the help of church pastors we recently compiled a list of the names and addresses of all Seventh-day Adventist medical workers. There are quite a number of them even in the Cluj region, where we have established the Association of Adventist Doctors as an administrative body. I know that a similar organization will be estab-

lished in other regions as well. The Romanian Union is establishing a health department headed by a professional medical officer. Medicines should be distributed through this department. Our Association includes all types of specialists—anesthetists, internists, surgeons, and cardiologists. We desperately need equipment and medicines, but most of all we are in need of analgesics and cardiac drugs, as well as vitamins and baby food. The latter have been denied to us for years.

The Romanian church members are in need of church literature. The Euro-Africa Division is taking steps to help with the publishing program. What are your immediate needs?

We are now faced with a new situation in which the Orthodox Church, as it did in the first days of the revolution, appears before the public making proclamations with the intent of becoming the State church. This is a situation that may produce hard times for us.

Bibles in the Hungarian language are urgently needed as well as Romanian Bibles, and we hope that these will be printed here sooner or later. As for literature in the Hungarian language, we are grateful to the Happy Life Foundation from Budapest, which is donating offset and duplicating machines for our use. We already have trained church members who can operate them.

We are hoping to publish smaller books such as *Steps to Christ* and *Christ's Object Lessons*, from the pen of Ellen G. White. At the same time we have also agreed with the Bucharest Advent Publishing House that larger books in Hungarian will be printed there. In the past it was difficult to evade bans made by the authorities, yet now there is nothing to prevent Hungarian publications in Romania.

We have heard that Seventh-day Adventists can now reclaim buildings that formerly housed a seminary in Brasov. Are you taking steps to re-open this institution?

Our seminary in Brasov was built in the 1930s, and at that time it was said to be an extremely modern building. The school had dormitories and was self-sufficient with classrooms, teachers' flats, and farm buildings. The institution also had plant cultivation, animal breeding, and a mill, so that the students could earn their living and school fees. In 1949 it was nationalized and the state rented the building.

Our former school buildings became a training center for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and up till now the special corps of the Securitate were trained there. The Securitate modernized the building. We now hope to get the buildings back and establish a school in one part of the building, and a clinic in the other. Our aim is to begin education and health work at the same time. We anticipate that the church will only receive an empty building, and will have to provide its own furniture and equipment.

When looking into the future, what dangers could the church face in the new democracy?

One threat is the increase in political power of the national Orthodox Church, which is very strong. Before recent events, we often said that it was a bad thing to have the State Office for Church Affairs continually nagging us. But at least we were considered equal with other denominations.

We are now faced with a new situation in which the Orthodox Church, as it did in the first days of the revolution, appears before the public making

proclamations with the intent of becoming the State church. This is a situation that may produce hard times for us. Currently we are witnessing a dual between the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church; the latter until recently was forced into a union with the Orthodox Church. This community now wants independence. However, while this is happening they will not bother us.

Historically, the Orthodox Church has played a decisive role in religious matters throughout Romania. The notion is reappearing that a Romanian is an Orthodox. One wonders if it will have any bearing on the Protestant denominations in the future. In Transylvania, however, all denominations historically enjoyed religious pluralism. The whole region was compared to a colorful meadow and we were tolerated as one of many flowers.

As for the Adventist Church, above all we must let our presence be known without becoming involved in politics. Our people are not prepared to see their pastors involved in public life. For example, the county and municipal organizations of The National Salvation Front are established one after another. In Cluj they called in the pastors and asked them what could be done to establish a new and undisturbed government organization. When I was approached, they asked me to describe our election system. They liked it and invited me to join the Front. I declined; this is exactly what the church members expected of me.