

UNITARIANISM IN EUROPE (Part 3)

By Mike McPhee

In the two previous instalments, we first looked at the early history of Unitarianism in Transylvania, Poland and England; then we followed the developments in the UK and Ireland from 1700 to the present day. Today, we will survey the advances made by our confreres in Continental Europe since 1600, and you will probably be surprised to learn just how many countries our denomination is now represented in.

[I must warn you in advance that pictures of the smaller national groups' founders and buildings have often been impossible to find. By way of compensation, you will see some pictures of European cities that are less familiar to most of us.]

First, we must go back to our ancestral homeland of Transylvania, where the followers of Francis Dávid had managed to keep their church system operating despite increasing pressure from the Catholic monarchy. The second Bishop was György Enyedi (1555–97), elected in 1592 and later known as the 'Unitarian Plato' for his writings. His most famous work was the anti-Trinitarian *Explicationes* (1598), which was reprinted in Holland and circulated widely in Europe.



While the term, 'Unitarian', was first mentioned in official documents in 1600, the name was not formally adopted by the church until 1638. That same year saw the most savage oppression the church had ever experienced, with most of its properties confiscated and its publications banned.

Bishop Mihály Lombard de Szentábrahám (1683–1758), elected in 1737, is regarded as the second founder of the Transylvanian church, as he rallied its forces and laid down its statement of faith in his *Summa Universae Theologiae Christianae secundum Unitarios* (A Digest of Christian Theology according to the Unitarians), published posthumously in 1787. The Unitarians were fortunate to have the liberal King Joseph II in power at the time, who issued an Edict of Tolerance in 1781 that gave legal status to all Christian denominations in his realm, even though the Catholic Church remained dominant.

This began a period of ambitious renewal in Transylvania, during which many new churches were erected and older ones were restored. New schools were built and a major upgrade of the training system for ministers was implemented.

The most important work was done in the capital of Kolozsvár, where a new church was completed in 1796. Designed in the Baroque style by the architect, Antal Török, it has a semicircular apse, a two-storey spire with Doric and Ionic pilasters, and a Neo-Classical stucco decor.



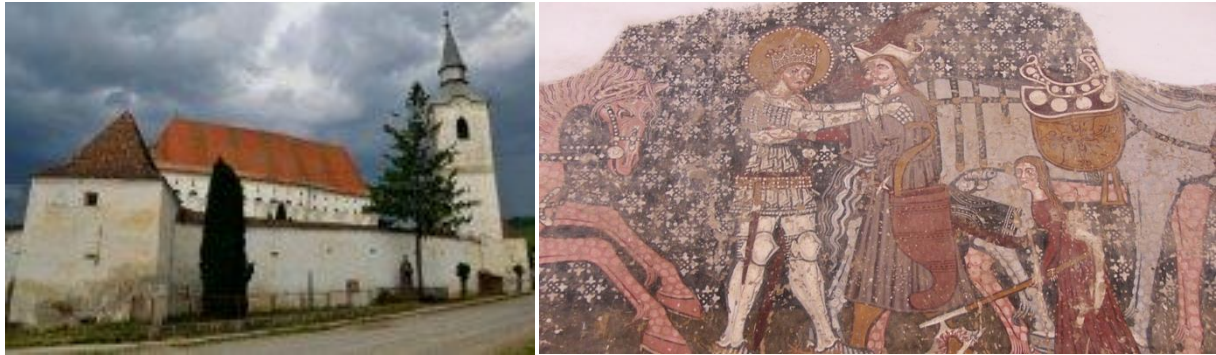
A high school (more like a college) at Székelykeresztúr was commissioned in 1793 and opened in 1804. It is still operating today, accepting students of all backgrounds.



In the mid-1800s, the British and American Unitarians became aware of their long-lost Transylvanian brethren and quickly made contact with them. The writer, Sándor Farkas (1795–1842) toured the northeastern states of the US in 1831 and wrote a book called *Journey in North America*, which was banned by the Catholic Church in 1834 – probably because he praised American democracy. After 1860, a number of Transylvanian theology students finished their education at the Unitarian colleges in Oxford and Manchester. In 1900, the Transylvanian Church joined those of the UK and US in becoming founding members of the International Association for Religious Freedom at its inaugural conference in Boston.

At the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dismantled and Transylvania became a part of Romania. The Transylvanian Church attempted to found branches in the rest of the country, including one in Bucharest in 1933, but these were not successful.

Today, the Transylvanian Church has 60,000 members in 125 congregations and about 30 small fellowships. Its members are almost entirely ethnic Hungarians and many of them live in Unitarian farming villages, where the minister also acts as the mayor. A whole presentation could be devoted to the many picturesque churches in this region but time permits the mention of just a few of the most famous ones.



The oldest of these is the fortified church in Székelyderzs (Dârjiu in Romanian), which dates from 1400 and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was originally a Catholic church, as its frescoes depict a battle fought by King Ladislaus I of Hungary against invaders from the east in the 11th Century.

Much more recent is the church in Mészkö, known as the Alabaster Village because that marble-like mineral was mined there for centuries. Its minister, Ferenc Balázs (1901–1937), a noted poet, author and social reformer, rebuilt the church and painted it himself, even the ceiling shown here.



The situation in Hungary was much different, in that the 100-or-so Unitarian congregations that existed in the 16th Century disappeared completely. Only migration from Transylvania enabled the denomination to be revived in the early 1870s, with a small congregation being formed in Budapest in 1876. In 1882, they were able to acquire a property in the city and build the First Unitarian Church of Budapest.



As you can see, the building has four storeys, only one of which is used for worship services while the others contain administrative offices.



In the following years, more churches were built around the country, including two more in Budapest. The second of those was named after the Unitarian composer, Béla Bartók. Today, the national Church has some 25,000 members in 12 church congregations and 21 fellowships. The other churches are in Debrecen, Duna-Tisza-közi, Dunántúli, Eger, Füzesgyarmat, Győr, Hódmezővásárhely and Kocsord; and the fellowships are in Dévaványa, Dunapataj, Miskolc, Orosháza, Pécs, Szentlőrinc and Szeged. These include five of the seven largest cities in the country (not including the capital).

In the last two years, the Unitarian Church of Hungary has merged with the Transylvanian body to form the Hungarian Unitarian Church, the name now referring to their common ethnicity. Prior to that, the First Church of Budapest was also the headquarters of the Hungarian Bishop (an elected position, as it still is in the united HUC in Kolozsvár).

The German Unitarian Religious Community began life as the Religious Community of Free Protestants in 1876. In 1910, its pastor Rudolf Walbaum met some American Unitarians at a conference of liberal theologians in Berlin and added the designation 'German Unitarians' to name of his group. In 1926, he formed the German Unitarian Group in collaboration with Rev. Clemens Täsler, co-founder of a free church in Frankfurt. To circumvent a Nazi ban, the organisation merged with other groups to form the Free Religious Community of Germany. After World War II, the German Unitarian congregations resurfaced with British and American support, though some of the more traditionally oriented churches left when the organisation took the Unitarian name in 1950.



The Community has 23 branches, though their website only names those in Detmold, Hamburg, Kassel, Leipzig, Lübeck, Munich and Osthofen; also the regions of Baden-Württemberg, Donautal (Danube Valley) and Vest Recklinghausen (in North Rhine-Westphalia). Its headquarters is in Kassel and they own a modern conference centre at Klingberg (near Hamburg), as well as a publishing house in Ravensburg.

The German Unitarians describe themselves as deliberately lay-led and tending toward humanism, though they recognise diversity and other faith traditions. They have an independent fellowship for young people, known as the Union of German Unitarian Youth.

There is also the unaffiliated Unitarian Church of Berlin, which was founded in 1948 by Hans Georg Remus, a descendent of a Polish Brethren family that moved to Prussia after those early Unitarians (known then as Socinians) were expelled in from Poland in 1658.

Similarly to the German experience, the present-day Unitarian Church of Denmark Society was founded in 1900 as a liberal Christian group called The Free Congregation and only took the Unitarian name in 1992. However, even in its first year of existence, the Free Congregation took part in the conference in Boston that founded the International Association for Religious Freedom, in conjunction with many national Unitarian bodies. Although two other Unitarian congregations existed long ago, the only group left is in Copenhagen.



Their chapel, the House of Unitarians, opened in 1927, partially funded by Nina Grieg, the widow of the Norwegian composer, Edvard Grieg. The architect, Carl Brummer, was asked to design a building which reflected the Unitarian ideals of tolerance towards other religions. He sought to achieve this by combining a Christian basilica shape with two balconies typical of Jewish synagogues and a fret that Greek Orthodox temples have.

Services are held on alternate Sundays, followed by a 'Debate Café'. Occasionally some evening activities and services are also conducted. The expressed aim is to bring religious, philosophical and scientific views into agreement.

The Religious Society of Czech Unitarians was established by Norbert Fabian Čapek (1870–1942) in 1922. Born a Catholic, Čapek became a Baptist minister, serving as a missionary as far east as Ukraine. In the process, he became aware to free Christian groups in Moravia, which influenced his thinking. Already an accomplished writer and editor of religious journals, he attended the conference of the IARF in Berlin in 1910, where Tomáš Masaryk, the future president of Czechoslovakia, introduced him to officers of the American Unitarian Association.



Čapek moved his family to the US in 1914 and led two Baptist churches before he left that faith in favour of Unitarianism. When Czechoslovakia became independent after World War I, he returned to Prague in 1921 and founded the Religious Liberal Fellowship a year later. In 1930, he formed the Czechoslovak Unitarian Association.

The Fellowship's numbers in Prague grew to 3200 over the next twenty years, making it the largest Unitarian congregation in the world at that time. The national membership was 8000, including six lay-led fellowships in other cities and towns, which Čapek visited regularly. He wrote many books and hymns, translating some of the latter from English to Czech, and developed the Flower Communion that Unitarians around the world now celebrate. He wrote courses in religious history and philosophy that were used in the public schools.

Tragically, Čapek was arrested after the Nazi invasion for listening to BBC radio and eventually sent to the Dachau internment camp. He wrote his most haunting hymn, 'Out of the Depths', there and it is reported that he was of great comfort to other inmates. In the October of 1942, he was taken to Hartheim Castle in Austria and killed by poison gas.



It is unclear whether the Prague Unitaria building was acquired or constructed and when; however, it is near the 14th Century Charles Bridge on the city side of the Vltava River. It serves as both the main Prague church and the headquarters of the RSCU.



Anyone with a desire to travel should certainly see that amazing city and visit the church there. They actually have services in English on the first and third Sundays of every month, after the normal Czech service. Here are scenes of its front door and the stained glass window inside.



Today, the Society's membership is not as large as before but it has churches in Prague (two), Brno, Teplice and Plzeň (Pilsen); also fellowships in Liberec and Ostrava, so it is represented in four of the six largest cities in the country. A recent addition is the National Wider Fellowship, which welcomes members from all over the country.

The original Norwegian Unitarian Church was founded in Oslo (then called Kristiania) by Kristofer Janson (1841–1917). He had studied theology there, graduating in 1865, but was not ordained by the state Church of Norway. He became noted as a teacher and author, not least for his play, *American Fantasies*, which was performed in Chicago to great acclaim.



In 1879, he went on a lecture tour of the US, where he was recruited by the American Unitarian Association as a pastor for Scandinavian immigrant communities. He was ordained at the Unitarian Church of Chicago in 1881 and went on to found two churches in Minnesota, both of which were originally called Free Christian churches.

In 1893, Janson returned to Norway and founded his Brotherhood Church, which he led for three years. He also founded a church in Aarhus, Denmark, which evidently did not last long. His successor in Oslo was Herman Haugerud, who had also spent time in the US. The church was renamed 'Unitarian' but it closed shortly after his death in 1937.



From about 1983, some theology students at the University of Oslo formed discussion groups, which eventually merged to become the Unitarian Association. They restored Janson's church building over 1995–2005 and succeeded in having it re-registered under the original by-laws. (All the more inexcusable that no pictures of it can be found.)



Today, the Norwegian Unitarian Church is led by Rev. Knut Heidelberg, who managed to be ordained in the Béla Bartók Church in Budapest. He follows that tradition, for which reason the church's other name is the Bét Dávid Unitarian Association, which means House of (Francis) Dávid. There is also the Norwegian UU Fellowship, formed in 2007 by American UUs and some locals, most notably Galen Gisler, an oceanographer who has served two terms as treasurer of the ICUU. As of 2009, the two groups are represented internationally by the Unitarian Umbrella Organisation of Norway.

Despite producing one of the most famous Universalists, George de Benneville, France was very late in discovering Unitarianism. In 1986, the French Unitarian Association was formed by ten people from around the country. Its first president was Rev. Lucienne Kirk, who had studied at Manchester College in Oxford and was ordained in Koložsvár.



In 1996, a majority of the membership moved for a less specific Christian identity and the group changed its name to the Fraternal Assembly of Christian Unitarians, merging with the Francophone Unitarian Association founded by the scientist, Théodore Monod (1902–2000), also in 1986. This brought in members who lived in Belgium and Switzerland, and the new organisation acquired a headquarters at Digne-les-Bains in the French Alps (possibly Monod’s home). Since Monod’s death, the AFCU has been led by Secretary-General Dr. Jean-Claude Barbier, a retired sociologist.



Today, there are groups in Paris, Marseille, Bordeaux, Nantes, Nancy and Digne-les-Bains, as well as one in Brussels. The AFCU is also in partnership with Christian Unitarian bodies in Italy, Quebec, Burundi and the two Congos. It has founded an umbrella organisation, the French Council of Unitarians and Universalists, for ICUU purposes but the other members are very minor players.

The AFCU has also founded the on-line Francophone Unitarian Church, which ministers to French-speaking people in Europe (including Monaco and Andorra), North America (Quebec, Acadia, Louisiana and even Philadelphia) and former French and Belgian colonies in Africa. At Dr. Barbier’s expense, the FUC sponsors annual seminars for ministerial training, alternately in Burundi and Rwanda.



This will be an appropriate time to mention the Italian Unitarian Community, as so little is known about it. Their president, Rev. Roberto Rosso, was ordained as Italy's first Unitarian minister in 2008 under the auspices of the Transylvanian, Norwegian and Danish Churches. (That is Rev. Knut Heidelberg, standing.)



Another latecomer is the Dutch Remonstrant Church, despite its 17th Century origins. As followers of Jacobus Arminius, they famously rejected Calvinism with their Five Articles of Remonstrance in 1610. As a result, all of their pastors were exiled and, even when conditions were relaxed, the Remonstrants were not allowed to have their own churches until 1795.

While their main church (seen at left) is in Rotterdam, dating from 1895, the Church has 46 congregations in the Netherlands and one just across the German border in Friedrichstadt – some 5680 members and 'friends', in all. In 1996, the Remonstrants were the first Christian church in the world to conduct same-sex marriages. They joined the ICUU in 2012 and – perhaps making up for lost time – will be hosting this year's Council Meeting and Conference at their conference centre in Kerkade.

In Spain, at the end of the 19th Century, a group of liberal Spanish intellectuals and reformers called themselves Krausistas, after the German idealist philosopher, Karl Krause. They also admired the natural religion and religious rationalism of the American Unitarian leaders, William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, though they were not in a position to form a church.



After the death of Francisco Franco, the Constitution of 1978 finally established religious freedom in Spain (though there were still many restrictions in actual practice). In 2000, the UU Society of Spain was founded in Barcelona by Jaume de Marcos, an IT specialist and translator. However, they were unable to achieve legal recognition as a religious organisation, even after they changed their name to 'UU Religious Society' in 2005. They are affiliated with the ICUU and there are now members-at-large elsewhere in Spain.



The UU Society of Finland was formed some time after 2000 and has been a Full Member of the ICUU since 2003, despite having only a single lay-led Fellowship in Helsinki and smaller groups in the cities of Turku and Kuopio (if they still function). The group in Helsinki meets only monthly but it also has bi-monthly informative evenings with refreshments and active email discussions. Despite their small numbers, they have produced two books in Finnish, as well as translations of two other Unitarian and/or Universalist sources. Recently, some materials were discovered in North America that were written or translated by ministers of Finnish immigrant congregations in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, which they also mean to publish.



The Unitarian Universalist Forum in Austria was formed not later than 2011, though at that time its only group was in Vienna. Now they also have a branch in Linz where they all meet once a month and, presumably, those from that northern city attend services in Vienna at other times. Like their German confreres, it appears that their theology is largely secular.

Lastly, I must mention the European Unitarian Universalists, originally founded by American expatriates in 1982. Over time, they have formed chapters in Paris, Kaiserlautern and Wiesbaden in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Basel and Geneva in Switzerland. In the process, they attracted some locals and accommodated them by moving away from standard UUA practices. Their services are lay-led and about half of their numbers are members-at-large; i.e., not living near one of their chapters but still entitled to attend the bi-annual Retreats and vote in the annual conferences. These Retreats are family affairs, lasting three days and hosted by the various groups in turn at picturesque country centres.



Clearly, Unitarianism in Europe is as diverse as the continent is and it will be interesting to see the future developments, especially in those countries whose groups are small and/or relatively new.