

Examine the response of any one denomination or interdenominational movement to a totalitarian regime in the 20th century.

(Church History Essay 2003 Barry Unwin)

In May 1966 Richard Wurmbrand testified to the US senate about religious persecution in Romania.¹ His was among the first eyewitness reports of life in Romania to reach the West, and it contradicted the image of religious freedom and tolerance that the Romanian state projected to the world through the Romanian Orthodox Church² and expatriate newspapers³. In his subsequent writings, and through his Voice of the Martyrs organisation⁴, Wurmbrand told the story of the Romanian "Underground Church"⁵, and drew attention to religious persecution worldwide.

This essay will attempt to trace the response of the Underground Church's in Romania to Communist persecution, from 1945 to 1989, looking initially at Wurmbrand's story to 1964 in the wider context of Romanian politics, then how the maturing Underground Church responded to the personality cult of Ceaucescu in the 1970s. Finally I shall briefly explore the role of the Underground Church in fall of Communism in Romania in 1989.

Wurmbrand

Our knowledge of the early years of the Underground Church is based almost exclusively on Wurmbrand's writing, and I think there are at least five reasons we can treat his testimony as credible.

¹ Full text available at <http://home.pacbell.net/andrea/communist.html>

² Pope, Earl A. "Protestantism in Romania" from "Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia", ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet, (Duke University Press, Durham, 1992), p169

³ Wurmbrand, Richard, "The Church in Chains", (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), p76 hereafter referred to as "Wurmbrand: CIC"

⁴ www.persecution.com

⁵ Wurmbrand, Richard, "Tortured for Christ: The Suffering and Testimony of the Underground Church", (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p99 hereafter referred to as "Wurmbrand: TFC"

Firstly, he is plainly a man of good character. He is introduced to the Senate as “a most reliable person, a fine Christian”⁶ and as a professor of the Old Testament in a Bucharest Seminary. No challenge was made to these statements.

Secondly, he appears to have an excellent memory. In prison he wrote and memorised 30 poems, totalling 100,000 words, and wrote them all down on his release.⁷ If he can do this, it seems reasonable to assume he could also relate his experiences in prison accurately. His description of how political events such as the 1955 Geneva Peace conference affected prison conditions⁸ are helpful external referents.

Thirdly, when he first spoke out against the Romanian regime, he was criticised by state-controlled Baptist churches in Russia⁹ - which denied any such persecution took place. So Wurmbrand collected other prisoners’ stories to corroborate his testimony¹⁰.

Fourthly, his physical injuries could not have been self-inflicted, and are consistent with the experiences he described in prison.¹¹

Fifthly, the consensus among observers of Romania such as Pope¹², Georgescu¹³, and McCollum¹⁴ is that repression of all dissenting voices – whether Christian or otherwise - was widespread, violent, and often fatal. Wurmbrand’s testimony is entirely consistent with this, and can therefore be taken seriously.

⁶ US Senate hearing paper – get ref. p1

⁷ Wurmbrand IGU, p64

⁸ Wurmbrand IGU, p159

⁹ Wurmbrand TCC, p128

¹⁰ Wurmbrand TCC, p81-3

¹¹ US Senate hearing paper – get ref. p3

¹² Pope, p166

¹³ Georgescu, Vlad (ed.), “The Washington Papers: Romania: 40 Years (1944-1984)”, (Centre for Strategic and International Studies CSIS, Georgetown, 1985), p9

¹⁴ McCollum, James K, “Is Communism Dead Forever?” (Maryland, University Press of America, 1998), p28, p37,

1) Origin of the Underground Church 1945-1964

Wurmbrand's "Underground Church" was not a formal denomination. Instead it existed wherever Christians displayed certain characteristics: a love for the bible¹⁵, a community prepared to suffer to support its members^{16 17}, a passion for innovative forms of mission¹⁸, and because of state persecution, a network of secret, unapproved meetings.¹⁹ Given the vagueness of the definition, it is hard to assess the size of the movement, though by 1989, it amounted to around 750,000 people.²⁰

Pope identifies almost exactly the same defining characteristics in his description of the Romanian "Neo-Protestant" church – which consists mainly of Romanian Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals and Seventh-Day Adventists.²¹ He speaks of "a focus on the Bible as the infallible word of God"²², an "impressively supportive community"²³, a "powerful awareness of mission"²⁴ and a tendency to "have religious meetings outside of officially designated hours."²⁵

The story of the Underground Church began on August 23rd 1944, when the Russian army began to drive the Germans out of Romania. By March 6th 1945, they had liberated the country and a Communist-dominated temporary government was installed. At the time, the Romanian Communist Party had around 1000 members,²⁶

¹⁵ Wurmbrand TFC, p88

¹⁶ Wurmbrand, Richard, "In God's Underground", (London, WH Allen, 1968), p80 (Hereafter referred to as "Wurmbrand: IGU")

¹⁷ Wurmbrand TFC, p36, p73

¹⁸ Wurmbrand TFC, p27

¹⁹ Wurmbrand TFC, p29

²⁰ Pope, p207

²¹ Pope, p207

²² Pope, p175

²³ Pope, p176

²⁴ Pope, p176

²⁵ Pope, p176

²⁶ Georgescu, p1

but through a mix of “forgery and intimidation”²⁷ the Communists won the elections of November 1946 and took power.

Just before the election, the World Council of Churches (WCC) sent two representatives to assess the state of the Romanian church²⁸. According to Pope, they found “...serious food shortages ... overwhelming poverty, [and] widespread disease”. They were also shocked by “the lack of any real trust among the leadership of the Christian communities”²⁹. Their response was to appoint Magne Solheim and Richard Wurmbrand “the dynamic and able leaders”³⁰ of the Norwegian mission to the Jews in Bucharest to co-ordinate relief work.

By October 1947, the Romanian government had begun to view the WCC as an American spy-network³¹ and began to clamp down on its activities. As events in Berlin in 1948 chilled East-West relations, Romania closed itself to Western ecumenical agencies³² and all contact with the outside world was lost.

The Romanian government was right to be suspicious of the WCC, though Wurmbrand was not passing information to the Americans. Instead he used the WCC as a cover for his response to Communism.³³ Through a mixture of translation work and hospitality³⁴, “Marxist language” gospel translations³⁵, and mass literature distributions³⁶ thousands of gospels were distributed among Russian soldiers, many of which found their way back to churches in Russia. Under the pretext of buying back a stolen

²⁷ Georgescu, p1

²⁸ Pope, p162

²⁹ Pope, p163

³⁰ Pope, p163

³¹ Pope, p163-4

³² Pope, p163

³³ Wurmbrand TFC, p17

³⁴ Wurmbrand TFC, p18-19

³⁵ Wurmbrand TFC, p19

watch, Wurmbrand even visited a Soviet barracks, and was invited back many times to preach.³⁷

A heavy price was paid for these attempts at evangelism: "many of our brothers and sisters of the Underground Church were caught and heavily beaten..."³⁸ But converts were made – and some extraordinary contacts made: "...Two armed Russian soldiers entered a church with the guns in their hands. They said: 'We don't believe in your faith. Those who do not abandon it immediately will be shot at once! Those who abandon your faith move to the right!' Some moved to the right. These were ordered to leave the church and to go home...When the Russians were alone with the remaining Christians, they embraced them and told them: 'We too are Christians, but we wished to have fellowship only with those who consider the truth worth dying for...'"³⁹

Wurmbrand's work among the Russian's was only part of his activities. In late-1945 the state organised the Congress of Cults, and Wurmbrand was sickened as the 4000 pastors, priests and ministers from the state-approved denominations met to elect Stalin as honorary head of their congress. "One after another, [they] declared that communism and Christianity are fundamentally the same and could co-exist."⁴⁰ The President of the Romanian Baptists praised Stalin as a "great teacher of the Bible."⁴¹ Some of Wurmbrand's bishops began to teach that God had given three revelations: Moses, Jesus and Stalin. "The last superseded the other two."⁴²

³⁶ Wurmbrand TFC, p19

³⁷ Wurmbrand TFC, p20-21

³⁸ Wurmbrand TFC, p21

³⁹ Wurmbrand TFC, p93-4

⁴⁰ Wurmbrand TFC, p15

⁴¹ Wurmbrand TFC, p16

⁴² Wurmbrand TFC, p16

This betrayal compelled Wurmbrand and others "...to create...an Underground Church: one faithful to evangelise, preach the gospel and reach children for Christ. The communists forbade all of this and the official church agreed."⁴³

Was Wurmbrand's secrecy necessary? After all, the Romanian state seemed to be looking after the churches. In 1948 it passed the Law of Religious Cults, which seemed to assert religious freedom. Article 17 of the constitution was amended to state that all citizens, "irrespective of their nationality, race, sex or religion, shall enjoy equal rights in all fields of economic, political, juridical, social and cultural life."⁴⁴ As part of the act, churches received extensive state subsidy, effectively turning their staff into state employees.

However the law also required that conversions be registered, church schools were handed over to the state, and the Department of Cults (DOC), headed by a former Orthodox Priest, was created to oversee all religious activity. It quickly became apparent that the DOC was little more than an extension of the Securitate⁴⁵, with an office in every town, and power to hire and fire pastors at will.⁴⁶ Wurmbrand experienced this control at first hand on release from prison in 1956, "A church in Orsova was given to me. The ... [DOC] told me it had 35 members in it and warned that it must never have 36! I was also told that I must be their agent and report to the secret police on every member and keep all youth away."⁴⁷

This was not Wurmbrand's first brush with the authorities. Prior to his imprisonment he had been watched very closely⁴⁸, and at the

⁴³ Wurmbrand TFC, p16

⁴⁴ cited from Pope. p166

⁴⁵ Pope, p166, also Wurmbrand IGU p164

⁴⁶ Wurmbrand TFC, p47

⁴⁷ Wurmbrand TFC, p47

⁴⁸ Wurmbrand IGU, p20

end of February 1948 he was imprisoned⁴⁹, interrogated⁵⁰, tortured⁵¹ and forced to sign a false confession.⁵²

His early interrogator, Colonel Dulheru, describes the situation well: "It is in the vital interests of society that men should be maltreated if they withhold information needed to protect it."⁵³ During his time in prison (1948-1956, 1958-1964), Wurmbrand experienced many horrors, though his tuberculosis may have spared him some of the worst conditions, which were reserved for the million⁵⁴ labourers on the Danube-Black Sea canal project⁵⁵ (including Wurmbrand's wife, arrested for pressing bibles into the hands of Russian soldiers⁵⁶).

Punishment was not restricted to prisoners, their families were persecuted too. Wurmbrand notes, "The pressure to divorce counter-revolutionaries was strong."⁵⁷ He cites the homecoming story of Emil, a farmer he shared a cell with: "My dog scented me from half-way down the street. She tore her chain from the fence and rushed to greet me, and when I bent down she jumped up to lick my face. Then I went into the house, and found my wife in bed with another man."⁵⁸ Families that did not break up were denied employment⁵⁹, and civil burials were introduced whereby families could denounce their counter-revolutionary members and "bury his memory."⁶⁰

⁴⁹ Wurmbrand IGU, p29

⁵⁰ Wurmbrand IGU, p34

⁵¹ Wurmbrand IGU, p44-5

⁵² Wurmbrand IGU, p46

⁵³ Wurmbrand IGU, p47

⁵⁴ Georgescu, p9

⁵⁵ Wurmbrand IGU, p111

⁵⁶ Roman, Constantin, http://www.constantinroman.com/blouseroumaine/page_quo_26.html

⁵⁷ Wurmbrand IGU, p134

⁵⁸ Wurmbrand IGU, p135

⁵⁹ Wurmbrand TFC, p45-6

⁶⁰ Wurmbrand IGU, p203

However, the imprisoned were not deterred from evangelism. Whether through preaching, story⁶¹, dialogue, or even Morse Code⁶², the gospel spread throughout the Romanian prison system. Outside of prison the underground Church enjoyed similar success. Its meetings were secret: "in basements, attics, flats and country homes...We sang aloud; if questions were asked, it was a birthday celebration."⁶³ Wurmbrand suggests the Underground Church had grown 300% by the time of his exile in 1964.⁶⁴

Romania changed significantly while Wurmbrand was imprisoned. Agriculture was collectivised, with disastrous results.⁶⁵ In the political purge of 1952, Ana Pauker and Vasile Luca were dismissed and Gheorgiu-Dej emerged as sole leader of Romania. Luca was the scapegoat for the agricultural failures⁶⁶ and by 1955 was sharing a cell with Wurmbrand in Vacaresti Prison. Betrayed by the party he had worked all his life for, Luca "had neither hope nor belief left."⁶⁷

Luca told Wurmbrand many things – not least about how the Romanian Orthodox Church had been subverted⁶⁸, and combined with other accounts, we can build up a picture of what happened. Priests were required to make reports to the Securitate after hearing confession, and were threatened with arrest, transfer or the closure of their church if they refused.⁶⁹ Services were required to be as dull and traditional as possible⁷⁰, and preaching was closely monitored for evidence of counter-revolutionary sentiment⁷¹. Wurmbrand describes its Patriarch, Justinian as "wholly a tool of the

⁶¹ Wurmbrand IGU, p149

⁶² Wurmbrand IGU, p55

⁶³ Wurmbrand, IGU, p186

⁶⁴ Wurmbrand CIC, p92

⁶⁵ Wurmbrand IGU, p101-103 also McCollum, p34

⁶⁶ Behr, p108

⁶⁷ Wurmbrand IGU, p164

⁶⁸ Wurmbrand IGU, p164, also McCollum 16

⁶⁹ Wurmbrand TFC, p67, also Wurmbrand IGU, p184

⁷⁰ McCollum, p32

⁷¹ Wurmbrand IGU, p202

party.”⁷² However the Orthodox church was not totally corrupt – some pastors lived a public life for the benefit of the DOC, masking private service in the Underground Church.⁷³

When Stalin died in 1953, Gheorgiu-Dej was able to relax the regime in Romania. The 1955 Geneva Peace conference saw things ease further - Wurmbrand describes receiving food parcels and a visit from his wife⁷⁴. The thaw continued when Krushchev denounced Stalin in February 1956, and soon after, Wurmbrand was released.

His reunion with his son gives us a snapshot of the conditions the Underground Church worked in. Expelled twice from school – once for admitting he owned a bible⁷⁵ he had initially lost his faith, but regained it, and was now an active evangelist within the Underground Church. McCollum fills in the picture further: religious festivals had been banned (the Christmas Tree was replaced by the Winter Tree⁷⁶), and people were so frightened of speaking publicly that children were instructed by their parents to “never mention anything we discuss in private in our house...Because it is dangerous.”⁷⁷

At about the time of the Hungarian Revolution (October 1956), Wurmbrand began a teaching ministry at Bucharest University, within a week drawing crowds in excess of 1,000⁷⁸. A Baptist pastor reported his anti-communist message⁷⁹ but despite being denounced by his Bishop,⁸⁰ he escaped arrest.

⁷² Wurmbrand IGU, p129

⁷³ Wurmbrand TFC, p85

⁷⁴ Wurmbrand IGU, p159

⁷⁵ Wurmbrand IGU, p182

⁷⁶ McCollum, p36

⁷⁷ McCollum, p28

⁷⁸ Wurmbrand, IGU, p187

⁷⁹ Wurmbrand, IGU, p184

⁸⁰ Wurmbrand, IGU, p188

Gheorgiu-Dej's response to the Hungary situation was to crack down on Romania's students – expelling and imprisoning many.⁸¹ Repression soon spread to the churches and Wurmbrand was arrested in 1959.

Krushchev was so impressed by the thoroughness of Gheorgiu-Dej's purges that in 1958 he withdrew all Soviet troops from Romania.⁸² This enabled Romania to begin to look beyond Russia for support⁸³ – initially to China after the Sino-Soviet fall-out of 1960,⁸⁴ and then even further, to America.

To develop relations with America, Gheorgiu-Dej knew he had to improve Romania's human rights record. But possibly because he was reluctant to send thousands of political prisoners back into circulation⁸⁵ he began, in 1962, a process Wurmbrand describes as re-education⁸⁶. Prisoners were tortured, then reminded of the fleshy-pleasures they were missing in the outside world⁸⁷ and persuaded that freedom lay through denouncing one another.⁸⁸

Wurmbrand was treated as a special case, and late in 1963 he received a visit from Deputy Minister of the Interior Negrea, who offered him the chance to become "a more independent type of informer" as Lutheran Bishop of Romania.⁸⁹ He refused, but a year later was released as part of Gheorgiu-Dej's general amnesty.

⁸¹ Behr, p111

⁸² Behr, p112

⁸³ Georgescu, p4-5

⁸⁴ Georgescu, p48

⁸⁵ Wurmbrand IGU, p226

⁸⁶ Wurmbrand IGU, p223-5

⁸⁷ Wurmbrand IGU, p230

⁸⁸ Wurmbrand IGU, p236

⁸⁹ Wurmbrand IGU, p246

1964 was a golden year⁹⁰ for Romania. East-West relations had been improving since the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and when Gheorgiu-Dej disagreed with Krushchev over a plan to merge two-thirds of Romania into a new Soviet controlled "Lower Danube international construction complex,"⁹¹ he won a remarkable victory, and gained much room to manoeuvre. He stopped jamming Western radio stations⁹² and the last political prisoners were released.⁹³

Wurmbrand suggests another reason for Gheorgiu-Dej's relaxation, one I have been unable to verify elsewhere, but which perhaps offers us a good measure of the impact of the Underground Church on Romanian life. "After many years of doubting communist dogma, [Gheorgiu-Dej] had become a Christian: although he did not confess it openly, [his faith] gave him the strength to defy his Soviet masters."⁹⁴

After his release, Wurmbrand and his family were "sold" to a group of Western Christians, who paid the Romanian government £2,500 to have him exiled to the West⁹⁵, where he began to publicise the work of the Underground Church. In 1966 he received US citizenship – in part to protect him from Romanian revenge attacks for his many outspoken attacks on Communism.⁹⁶

2) The Underground Church moves to maturity - the 1970s

After Gheorgiu-Dej's death in 1965, Ceaucescu continued to seek Western support (risking war over his refusal to back the Russian

⁹⁰ Behr, p116

⁹¹ Georgescu, p45

⁹² Behr, p116

⁹³ Georgescu, p5

⁹⁴ Wurmbrand, p251

⁹⁵ Wurmbrand IGU, p9

⁹⁶ Wurmbrand IGU, p10

invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968), but any similarities ended there. McCollum's describes Gheorghui-Dej as trying to cover "the ugly face of communism ... spending part of the budget for lights, good food and heat in the apartments, [whereas] Ceaucescu used the same money to build ... industrial dinosaurs and huge villas...for his own benefit."⁹⁷ Gilberg describes Ceaucescu as cultivating a personality cult, especially after his visit to China in 1974.⁹⁸ He became obsessed with control⁹⁹, and as a result, life for the average Romanian, "... became, day after day, more dull and meaningless."¹⁰⁰

Yet despite this, something remarkable happened in the early-1970s - part of the Underground Church "surfaced" and entered political life. Joseph Ton, a Romanian Baptist minister, studying at Oxford University, published a paper, "The Present Situation of the Baptist Church in Romania."¹⁰¹

In 1954, to better regulate their secret activities, the Romanian state had officially recognising the Baptist Church. Ton's book condemned the Baptist leaders for their submission to the state, accused the DOC of being illegal, and alleged there was "radical, intolerable interference in the life of the church."¹⁰² He pointed out that this was unconstitutional, and called on the state to allow Baptists to live as free citizens, so that they could build a better Romania.

The book did not go down well in Romania. According to Pope, "Up to that time, this was the most open and forceful challenge

⁹⁷ McCollum, p37

⁹⁸ Gilberg, Trong, "Nationalism and Communism in Romania", (Westview Press, Boulder, 1990), p193

⁹⁹ Georgescu, p8

¹⁰⁰ McCollum, p39

¹⁰¹ Joseph Ton, *The Present Situation of the Baptist Church in Romania*, (RCL supplementary paper no1, 1973 cited in Pope, p179

¹⁰² Cited from Pope, p179

presented to the state and [the DOC] by a leader of an official religious body.”¹⁰³

In 1974 Ton wrote “A Christian Manifesto to a Socialist Society”¹⁰⁴, and sent it direct to Ceaucescu. It focussed on how atheism destroys morality and how Communism persecuted the church¹⁰⁵.

Ceaucescu was furious, but according to Pope, the result was “extensive investigations and interrogations, ... no one was imprisoned.”¹⁰⁶ Significantly, the DOC’s response to Ton’s recommendations was that they had “already been under discussion and were on the verge of being implemented.”¹⁰⁷

What brought about this change of policy? It is possible that the Helsinki Accord of 1975 and Ceaucescu’s desire to retain the Most Favoured Trading Nation status granted by the USA in 1975 may have muted his response to the renegade Baptists. Georgescu notes that the annual renewal of this status was an opportunity for “religious persecution and ethnic discrimination [to be raised] by different members of Congress and human rights organizations.”¹⁰⁸

Ton’s two books upset Romanian Baptist leaders, for congregations began to push them to be more independent of the DOC.¹⁰⁹ Ton returned to Romania, and in 1977 he co-authored a document about human rights abuses in Romania, which secretly found its way to the USA.

¹⁰³ Pope, p179

¹⁰⁴ Ton, Joseph, *A Christian Manifesto to a Socialist Society*, RCL Supplementary paper no.2 (1976), cited in Pope p179

¹⁰⁵ Pope, p179

¹⁰⁶ Pope, p179

¹⁰⁷ Pope, p180

¹⁰⁸ Georgescu p65

However Ton and his colleagues pushed too far in April 1978, forming the Christian Committee for the Defence of Religious Freedom and Freedom of Conscience. It appealed to the state for Christians to be allowed to "...make a modest contribution to the defence of man's basic rights, to the respect for constitutional guarantees, and to the raising of Romania's international prestige."¹¹⁰ They called for the DOC to be reigned in, for freedom of church appointments and association, access to the media, an end to censorship, and respect for human rights.¹¹¹

Under pressure from the DOC, the Baptist Union expelled the members of the committee from the church and Ton became embroiled in a faction fight, which finally ended when the state expelled a number of its leaders – including Ton - to the West in 1980/1. Ton continued to speak out against Ceaucescu from the USA, but the Baptists who remained in Romania became less reactionary as a result.

To get a true sense of the significance of what the Baptists did in the 1970s, it is worth noting that they were the only significant voice of dissent in Romania in that period¹¹². It was a desperately brave response by a vibrant and growing church – but politics was never their main activity. Pope describes Ton as having "his focus on preaching, not human rights."¹¹³ Thus, by the time of Ceaucescu's fall in 1989, the Baptists had over 300,000¹¹⁴ members, compared to 62,000¹¹⁵ in 1939.

¹⁰⁹ Pope, p180

¹¹⁰ Cited from Pope, p181

¹¹¹ Pope, p181

¹¹² Georgescu, p9

¹¹³ Pope, p182

¹¹⁴ Pope, p183

¹¹⁵ Pope, p177

It is not inconceivable that Ton's moral critique of Atheism may have had something to do with Ceaucescu's surprising decision to allow Metropolitan Antonie of Transylvania, chairman of the External Affairs Department of the Romanian Orthodox Church, to invite Billy Graham to lead an evangelistic crusade in Romania in 1985. According to Pope this had a major impact on the church in Romania. It "...was the first time in their history when [the Underground Church] had the opportunity of officially coming together in such large numbers. This unquestionably raised their morale, made them much more visible, and enabled them to develop a deeper sense of solidarity with one another and with like minded believers in the traditional churches."¹¹⁶ In his week-long tour, Graham addressed 130,000 people, and spoke in Joseph Ton's former parish, Oradea¹¹⁷.

Graham's visit was followed by a series of significant changes behind the Iron Curtain. Perestroika was beginning to have an effect in the Soviet Union, and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 accelerated Gorbachev's truth-telling programme, Glasnost. This created serious problems in the other Eastern-bloc states, and especially Romania, where Ceaucescu was determined to resist the trend.¹¹⁸

3)The Romanian Revolution and the Underground Church - 1989

The origins of the Romanian revolution lay in the state's ongoing persecution of Romania's minority Hungarian population and its churches.¹¹⁹ In the late 1980s, Ceaucescu decided to establish a series of Urban Agro-Industrial Centres in Transylvania, the home of the country's Hungarian minority. As their villages were bulldozed in

¹¹⁶ Pope, Earl, "The Role of Religion in the Romanian Revolution", http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/ROMANIA_POP.html

¹¹⁷ <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/450.htm>

¹¹⁸ Gilberg, p231-2

1987 and 1988, people began to flee across the border to Hungary.¹²⁰

Many of the refugees were part of the Hungarian Reformed Church, and as a result the World Alliance of Reformed Churches¹²¹ intervened in an "unprecedented"¹²² way, protesting to Ceaucescu and the DOC, calling on the Romanian government to "respect the fundamental rights of all its citizens and, therefore, to rescind its decision to implement this destructive programme."¹²³ It also asked its member churches worldwide to protest directly to Ceaucescu.

However the spark for what was to come came not from abroad, but from a Hungarian Reformed Pastor named Laszlo Tokas who was appointed to a church in Timisoara in 1987. His predecessor a Communist stooge¹²⁴, had left a congregation of around 40. Within two years, Tokas' congregation had grown to 5,000¹²⁵ through a combination of preaching, teaching, and outspoken criticism of the Hungarian minority's oppression and of the Agro-Industrial Centre plan.¹²⁶

On July 24th 1989 a video of Tokas' criticisms was shown on Hungarian TV, shocking the Romanian leadership.¹²⁷ To silence him, Tokas' the Securitate¹²⁸ had his bishop transfer him to a church in a remote village, but Tokas refused to go and his congregation, hailing Tokas a modern-day prophet, spoke out against the Bishop.¹²⁹

¹¹⁹ Pope, p195

¹²⁰ Pope, p173

¹²¹ <http://www.warc.ch/who/index.html>

¹²² Pope, p173

¹²³ Cited from Pope, p173

¹²⁴ "The Church: a "History-Making Force", <http://www.missiology.org/MMR/mmr7.htm>

¹²⁵ "The Church: a "History-Making Force", <http://www.missiology.org/MMR/mmr7.htm>

¹²⁶ Behr, p210

¹²⁷ Pope, p196

¹²⁸ Behr, p210

¹²⁹ Ppoe, p196

In the following months, Tokas was harassed and beaten by the Securitate¹³⁰ as were his supporters. Their plight aroused the sympathy of the entire ecumenical community in Timisoara¹³¹ and on November 17th, when the bishop called in the Securitate to evict Tokes from his home, the churches picketed his home to protect him. The picketing continued throughout November, but grew significantly on December 15th when the crowd was joined by sympathisers from throughout the city to form a human shield around the church. Speaking that night, Tokes said, "I do not know where I will be tomorrow or the next day. I know only this moment. And I know that the Spirit of God Himself is with us"¹³²

The demonstration spread and by the second day, the crowds were calling for Ceaucescu to go.¹³³ When part of the crowd attacked the local Communist Party office destroying files and images of Ceaucescu, the Securitate's and Army's armoured cars started shooting, killing scores of people (though not the thousands some initial reports suggested).¹³⁴

That night Ceaucescu was not unduly concerned by the situation. Failing to see the bigger picture, he told the Politburo that it was all about "the so-called reform church minister, who has been punished by his own church authorities, and has been transferred to another county He didn't want to vacate the house. The bishops went to the courts, who decided to move him."¹³⁵ He went on to condemn the Army and Interior Ministry for failing to sufficiently arm the troops who had been sent in to quell the riots.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Pope, p196

¹³¹ Pope, p196

¹³² Cited in Colson, Charles. *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992, p92

¹³³ "The Church: a "History-Making Force", <http://www.missiology.org/MMR/mmr7.htm>

¹³⁴ Behr, p213

¹³⁵ Behr, p214

¹³⁶ Behr, p214-5

Ceausescu then flew to Iran, but returned to discover that the generals he had ordered to arm the troops in Timisoara had disobeyed his orders¹³⁷, and many of the troops had joined the demonstration. Realising he was about to lose control of the country he tried to flee, but was arrested, tried suspiciously quickly, and executed live on TV on December 25th 1989.

Tokes maintained his prominent role, appearing on national TV a few days later calling for unity "if democracy and freedom were to survive in Romania."¹³⁸ He also expressed his gratitude for the Romanians who united with the members of his church to protect him¹³⁹. Not long afterwards, Tokes' bishop fled to France, and Tokes was elected to replace him. He continues to have a prominent role both in the church, and in Romanian politics.

Joseph Ton returned to Romania almost as soon as Ceausescu was gone, and became involved in the establishment of an Evangelical Alliance, involving virtually every group involved in the Underground Church¹⁴⁰ and working closely with the older reformed denominations. The Alliance invited Wurmbrand to return to the country to preach, and in December 1990, he spoke on national television.¹⁴¹

Conclusions

The Underground Church experienced three distinct phases in its development 1945-1989. In its early stage, it went underground to survive. It faithfully carried on its mission to preach, teach and win new converts, innovating, and using whatever resources it could lay

¹³⁷ Behr, p216

¹³⁸ Pope, p196-7

¹³⁹ Pope, p197

¹⁴⁰ Pope, p201

its hands on to enable it to survive. It received shamefully little support from Western Christians (even after Wurmbrand began to publicise it) and yet survived and even prospered in the face of some of the most extreme persecution that the church experienced in any of the Soviet-bloc countries.

Under Ceaucescu, the steady growth of the church – particularly of the Baptists – encouraged the beginning of dissent. Ton and his co-conspirators brought the bible to bear in a prophetic manner, publicly critiquing the state they lived in. Their statements, made possible by Ceaucescu's desire to be a Western-oriented un-Soviet Communist¹⁴² received minimal support beyond the Baptist movement, and Ton's exile was a surprisingly non-violent end to the problem.

However the world had changed significantly by 1989. Romania's economy was bankrupt, the country in economic crisis, and with Communism collapsing across Europe, Romania was ripe for change. Significantly, it occurred as a result of an ecumenical protest. Whereas the Baptists had been left to suffer alone, the entire Christian community of Timisoara turned out to support Tokas, starting the avalanche that brought Ceaucescu's fall.

This picture of churches working together – which with the exception of the Orthodox church - continues today in Romania¹⁴³ - is a fitting end to the story of the Underground Church. When they came to power in Romania the Communists sought to destroy an already divided church. How ironic that by uniting, the church should instead bring about the fall of the Communists.

¹⁴¹ Pope, p202

¹⁴² Behr, p212

¹⁴³ Pope, p206