

The Hungarian Minority in Romania

Roughly three million ethnic Hungarians were separated from the state of Hungary as a result of the political reorganisation of Central Europe which followed the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I. The loss of land and population to the so-called successor states — Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia — had a traumatic effect on the Hungarian nation. Revanchism became the main theme of public life during the Horthy era (1919-44). The defeat of Hungary in the Second World War and its subsequent integration into the Soviet bloc laid to rest any realistic thought of regaining lost territories. But the sense of injustice still runs deep in Hungarian society.

That sense of injustice has been exacerbated in the 1980s by the increasingly difficult circumstances of the approximately two million ethnic Hungarians in Romania, most of whom are settled in the region of Transylvania. While the citizens of Hungary have enjoyed relative prosperity and expanding freedom over the past decade, grinding poverty and human rights violations have intensified in Romania.

Ethnic Romanians are not exempt from such conditions. But the Hungarian population of Romania faces special disadvantages. For the past thirty years the Romanian government appears to have been working towards the creation of a unitary state based on the Romanian language and national traditions. The Hungarian Autonomous Province (an area of Transylvania where Hungarians formed a majority of the population), which was created shortly after the war and later reorganised as the Mures-Hungarian Autonomous Province, was abol-

ished in 1968; the Hungarian-language Bolyai University in Cluj was merged with the Romanian university in 1959, and the range of subjects taught in Hungarian at the combined institution has substantially declined since then; and the Hungarian minority's cultural institutions have continued to face pressure from the authorities. According to the 1986 report of the US Helsinki Watch Committee, the Hungarian language, churches and schools are being "systematically eliminated" by means of "discriminating and sometimes brutal practices". The Romanian state's vehement hostility towards religion means that Hungarian believers — most of whom belong to the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches — suffer a double disadvantage.

The Hungarian government has traditionally maintained public silence regarding the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Concerns for Warsaw Pact solidarity have been paramount. Because of the prevailing political "alliance" (*szövetség*) between the Hungarian state and the recognised churches, most of the country's religious leaders have long refrained from making public representations on behalf of their brethren in Romania. The policy of public silence has steadily lost credibility inside Hungary, as the country's political and religious leaders have manifestly failed to exert a positive influence on the Romanian authorities by means of quiet diplomacy.

In Hungary at the grass roots level there has for many years been activity on behalf of the Hungarians of Romania. Individuals and small groups send Hungarian literature (including Bibles and other religious

literature), food and clothing across the border. Extensive networks of information and material aid have been established between Hungarians on both sides of the border. Christians have often been in the forefront of such activity.

One unofficial ecumenical group known as the Council of Reconciliation has embarked on a public campaign for reconciliation between the peoples of Hungary and Romania based on their common Christian traditions. This Budapest-based group set out its principles in a declaration entitled "A Call for Reconciliation to the Caring People of Hungary and Romania" in the summer of 1986. This was followed by an open letter dated October 1986 calling on the church leaders of Hungary to express sympathy with the Hungarian minority of Romania in a joint Christmas letter and by establishing a relief fund. The open letter received over 1,400 signatures from believers representing all Hungary's major denominations. The list of signatures included some well-known and distinguished names.

The secular and ecclesiastical authorities of Hungary decided not to disregard this petition. In the last days of 1986 the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Ecumenical Council representing the country's non-Catholic churches issued statements dealing with the question of the Hungarian minority in Romania. The Catholic Bishops went some way towards meeting the requests made in the open letter. Their statement spoke of the church's solidarity with Hungarian minorities and claimed that the human rights of the Hungarians of Romania are not fully respected.* The Ecumenical Council

struck a slightly more cautious note. It expressed a feeling of responsibility for the fate of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. Like the Catholic Bishops, the Ecumenical Council referred specifically to Hungary's eastern neighbour, stating that "we have received disturbing news, and have personally experienced sad incidents in the case of Hungarians living in Romania". But it did not make explicit accusations of human rights violations.

Such statements could not have been made by Hungary's church leaders without government approval. A fundamental element of "alliance" between church and state in Hungary is that the churches must act in harmony with the foreign policy of the state. The church leaders' references to Romania were stronger than those previously uttered by Hungarian statesmen, and this prompted speculation that the government might have been using the churches to address an issue on which it did not wish to speak publicly. This was denied by the Chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs, Imre Miklós, in an interview published at the end of January 1987 in the Hungarian weekly *Magyarország*. While thanking the churches for their "help" in furthering the foreign policy of the country, Miklós refuted the notion that the state "stands behind" the statements of the church leaders.

The involvement of Hungary's church leaders in the public discussion about Hungarians in Romania coincided with their government's attempt to raise the issue to a place of prominence at the Helsinki review conference at Vienna. On 12 December 1986 László Demus, a Hungarian foreign affairs spokesman, called for the rejection of "forced

*For part of the text of the Bishops' statement, together with the open letter to church leaders, see the

Documents section of this issue of *RCL*.

assimilation" and "tutelage", but without referring to Romania by name. A few days later the Hungarian government supported a Canadian proposal calling on the signatories to the Helsinki accords to respect the right of all national minorities to preserve their national identities by allowing the free development of their cultures, languages and literature, and freedom to preserve their cultural monuments. The Romanian government took umbrage. In the first months of 1987, Hungarian foreign policy was accused in official Romanian forums of being motivated by "reactionary", "revanchist" and "Horthyist" sentiments. Hungarian statesmen could not resist being drawn into the war of words. They began to refer directly to Romania when speaking about violations of the rights of national minorities.

Hungary's church leaders now show signs of following their government's lead by working to get the question of the rights of national minorities onto the agendas of international church organisations. If they achieve this, they will risk undermining Soviet bloc unity in the

Protestant ecumenical movement. The Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Antonie of Transylvania has already responded to the pressure coming from Hungary in an Ecumenical Press Service interview in which he denied any discrimination against the Hungarian community in Romania and accused those who make such charges of seeking to create "tension and destabilisation". The Vatican may also have to face the difficult choice of defending the national rights of Hungarians in Romania or remaining silent because of the likelihood of a hostile reaction from the Romanian authorities. It remains to be seen whether Christian public opinion in Hungary will be mollified by the action taken recently by its religious and political leaders, or whether it will oblige them to take firmer action. It will be interesting also to see whether Christian public opinion in Hungary can consistently combine the demand for firm action with encouragement of reconciliation based on the common Christian heritage shared by Hungarians and Romanians.

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"Learning from the Past": Historical Monuments in the USSR

We are entering a period in history when mistakes cease to be permissible. There is nothing more harmful in today's world of great possibilities than the assertion, "we learn by our mistakes". Whose mistakes do we mean? Our own? There must be no mistakes. Their cost is too great.

These words appeared in the Soviet newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* eight days before the nuclear accident

at Chernobyl on the night of 25-26 April 1986. The specific subject under consideration by their author, Academician Dmitri Likhachev, a senior and respected authority on Russian history and culture, was not, however, the disastrous consequences of a nuclear catastrophe but the importance of preserving the cultural heritage. Likhachev's article, "A Legacy to Protect", was published to mark Unesco's Interna-