

Documents

Transylvanian Refugees in Hungary

In the spring of 1988 the Romanian government announced plans to intensify its programme for the "systemisation" of agricultural land. According to this plan, roughly half of Romania's 13,000 plus villages will be razed, and the land on which they stand returned to cultivation by the year 2000. The inhabitants of the destroyed villages will be rehoused in apartment blocks in over 550 new "urban agro-industrial centres".

The announcement of this scheme has caused Romania's already poor human rights record to be placed higher on the agendas of foreign governments, human rights organisations, and churches. According to Amnesty International's July 1987 report on Romania, the Romanian authorities have

violated internationally recognised human rights, in particular the right to freedom of expression, the right to leave one's country, the right to fair trial and the right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

If the "systemisation" plan is implemented, this disturbing list of human rights violations will be complemented by the physical, material and psychological hardship caused by the forced uprooting of millions from their communities. The plan has the potential to cause human misery on a

scale rivalling that brought about by the collectivisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union.

The Ceausescu régime's "systemisation" scheme may be expected to have the effect of weakening the social roots of religion. Its execution will mean the destruction of religious communities, and their members may find themselves living in agro-industrial complexes where there is no church. Where there is a church, it may not correspond to the faith of those arriving from destroyed villages. This is most likely to be the experience of members of religious minorities, such as Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, Baptists, Adventists and Pentecostals. The smaller the religious minority, the more difficult it will be to find corresponding communities in the new agro-industrial complexes. It is feared that once severed from their local religious communities, believers and their children will be more susceptible to the anti-religious policies of the state.

The "systemisation" is also expected to weaken the social roots of the national minorities. Implementation of the plan will mean the breakup of the communities of ethnic minorities, the members of which already face pressure to assimilate with the Romanian majority. Once the ex-villagers are installed in the

agro-industrial complexes and are cut off from close contact with the few remaining institutions that promote national culture, such as their churches, this pressure is likely to be felt all the more.

Fear of reprisals from the authorities had prevented opposition to the "systemisation" scheme from being voiced openly by churchmen in Romania until 6 September 1988. Protests were then made, according to the Hungarian Press of Transylvania, at deanery meetings of the ethnic Hungarian Reformed Church of Romania. At the Kolozsvár (Cluj) deanery meeting Rev. Endre Kozma began to read a statement of protest but was prevented from completing it by the dean. However at the meeting of the Arad Deanery Rev. János Molnár of Borossebes (Sebis) read a memorandum calling on the national leadership of the Reformed Church in Romania to invite the country's other religious leaders to plan a coordinated "dialogue" with the state officials responsible for executing the "systemisation" programme. Pastor Molnár stated that "the

destruction of villages means the destruction of the past". "Any people", he continued, "would become rootless if its past were wiped off the face of the earth." Three pastors — János Béres, László Tökés and Béla Balogh — spoke in favour of the memorandum. Rev. Tökés proposed that each Reformed congregation should pray by name at Sunday services for villages earmarked for demolition. Fifteen of the deanery's pastors voted in favour of Rev. Molnár's memorandum while four abstained. The remaining seven pastors were absent from the meeting.

Below we publish the texts of three protests against the "systemisation" programme. The first two — one from Cardinal László Paskai and the other from the leaders of the Hungarian Ecumenical Council — represent official church views. The third represents the views of the Conference of Christian Youth of Transylvania, an unofficial grouping of several hundred young refugees from Romania, established in July 1988 in Vizsoly, Hungary.

Cardinal László Paskai

. . . It causes me sadness that in my first public statement since my installation as a cardinal I must raise my voice in protest in the interest of the national culture. The whole world has been shocked by news that the Romanian régime wishes to liquidate completely most of the country's villages. The villages are not merely settlements with small populations. They also constitute an organic part of the whole of one country, and are the dwelling places of various national values and popular cultures. The demolition of buildings is not directed at any of the nationalities living there in particular. For us the

plan is especially painful, because it means the destruction of Hungarian villages in addition to Romanian and German ones.

It is entirely impossible to fathom how such a decision can be made in the second half of the 20th century. For us it is all the more sad, because all this is happening in a country with which we want to live in friendship, and whose inhabitants we are bound to by so many relationships with family and friends.

Members of our church, as citizens of Hungary, stand among the protesters. Countless letters, requests, petitions and the declarations of my

fellow bishops and priests demonstrate this. On this basis I ask the state and social organs both at home and abroad to do everything to prevent the execution of a plan that will destroy culture and history, and together with it, man and national identity. We should not do this with the intention of interfering in the internal affairs of one country, but of defending everywhere the realisation of fundamental human rights. I trust that the weight of international public opinion can bring the Romanian regime to realise that the execution of its decision would be so damaging and tragic not only for the nationalities living there, but also for the whole people and society.

At the same time the members of our church, as believing people, help their brethren with their prayers. I now turn to the faithful of our church with the request that they should deal with the fate of our brethren in their zealous prayers. Our current remembrance of St Stephen and the [nationwide — *Ed.*] tour of his Holy Right Hand serves as a specially good occasion for this.

When words of protest resound from our mouths, prayers should live in our hearts and a readiness for conciliation should dwell in our spirit. Asking the intervention of the Virgin Mary and Hungarian saints, we can offer true Christian help by invoking the blessing of God for our brethren living in Romania.

I repeat: it is a great sorrow for me that in my first public statement after being installed as a cardinal I must utter words of protest in the name of fellow bishops, priests and believers. The Archbishops of Esztergom have always served the defence of the national and cultural values of the Hungarian people everywhere. I wish to serve this aim now when I have obtained the rank of cardinal. I believe in the power of prayer. I trust that we can serve the interests of our brethren in Romania with our collective prayers and exertions.

Signed Dr László Paskai
Cardinal, Primate,
Archbishop of Esztergom,
Chairman of the Bishops'
Conference.

An Appeal of Hungarian Churchmen

“ . . . we shed tears and appeal
for those whose lips are sealed”

On Christmas Day in 1986, the holiday of love and peace, we, responsible watchmen and shepherds of our communities (Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Council of Hungarian Free Churches, Methodist, Orthodox and Unitarian), expressed our deeply felt concern over the situation of the ethnically Hungarian minority living in Romania.*

Alas, the unfavourable news has

further been confirmed by reports about painful experiences. Thousands and thousands have been forced to leave the land of their ancestors. Families have been torn apart in this process, and about 2,000 members of temporarily dissolved families, wives and children, are awaiting with but scant hope the day of happy reunion. Many have lost the savings of a life spent in hard work. The Hungarian churches, in fulfilling their Christian duty, both in an ecumenical way and by concentrating

*See *RCL* Vol. 15 No. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 204-206, 218-19.

the efforts of their own denominations, have given help to those seeking to be domiciled in Hungary, since as Christians they had no other option before them. Thousands coming from Romania knocked on the doors of our congregations. While giving assistance to those people, the churches have expressed their conviction that every member of a national minority must find the conditions of a fulfilled life worthy of human beings in his or her own native land.

We have hoped that the lamentable process will stop and everything will turn to the better. We still hope that our Christian faith will promote the process of reconciliation. We are ready to think and pray together with the churches living in Romania, with their leaders and parishioners, because we believe that the sovereign Lord of history has the power to change the miserable conditions of the present.

This is all the more important since measures are being taken in Romania which will further intensify our bitterness. One of the plans aims at a drastic reduction of the number of villages by the turn of the century with a simultaneous herding of people from their destroyed homes into the high-rise tenement blocks of agro-industrial centres. Out of the 13,000 minor settlements of the country, 7,000 are to be razed and wiped off the maps in three years, mostly places inhabited by various national minorities: Hungarians, Germans, Serbians, Bulgarians, Jews and others. Without any reasonable justification, the plan is to destroy settlements of special historical and traditional value. Church spires, symbolising the ascent of prayers in churches and chapels hallowed for centuries as bonds of spiritual and national unity, are to be razed. Edifices erected to the glory of God, which for centuries were bastions and shelters in the storms of the times, are to be turned into ruins. Cemeter-

ies, which have been for centuries pulpits whence to proclaim the comforting Gospel of resurrection over the graves of ancestors, are now to become mere burial grounds of national minorities. All this challenges the faith of serious people and the reason of all men of good will. All this would mean committing the millennial cultural values of European civilisation to destruction. Bulldozers are prepared to destroy traditions, communities and memories and to sever sacred ties of history. That is why we are shedding tears and appeal to those whose lips are sealed.

Having received strength and courage from the Holy Spirit we welcome all efforts and initiatives aimed at reconciliation and ask God's blessing in particular upon the imminent tour of our prime minister in Romania and his negotiations there.

Although pained by what we see, we proclaim with the psalmist: "The Lord is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one. Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever." Psalm 28: 8,9.

Budapest, 17 June 1988

In the name of the Reformed Church in Hungary:

Bishop Dr Károly Tóth,

Clerical President of the Synod

In the name of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary:

Presiding Bishop Dr Gyula Nagy

In the name of the Baptist Union in Hungary and the Council of Hungarian Free Churches:

President János Viczián

In the name of the Hungarian Methodist Church:

Superintendent Frigyes Hecker

In the name of the Hungarian Orthodox Church:

Dean-Administrator Dr Feriz-Berki

In the name of the Hungarian Unitarian Church:

Bishop Dr József Ferencz