

## *The Pankota Reformed congregation*

I had served in Pankota for twenty-two years, but I had never had the time to dwell on the history of the village and the congregation. However, by a wonderful arrangement of Providence, in the few months before my arrest my son had chosen the history of the Reformed Church of Pankota as a subject for the last part of his examinations qualifying him for the ministry. We learned that the reformation of Nagyvárad had been begun by two Wittenberg students, who are recorded in the ancient register under the name Pankotai, Pankota being their place of origin and where they started their ministry. On being driven out of Pankota, they preached all the way to Nagyvárad where they arrived on Corpus Christi, the great feast of the Catholic Church, and proclaimed the gospel to the crowd streaming out of the cathedral. This was how the Protestant Reformation had begun in that city. I do not know how long they worked there; nevertheless, Nagyvárad was the fruit of their endeavours.

I am pleased that I am also from Pankota and I pray eagerly for the people of Nagyvárad, and implore God to use my prayers, service, and the life of my family to strengthen the faith of its people, as He used students from Pankota centuries earlier.

It was also a gift from God that I had read the book *The Victims of the Bloody Assize of Pozsony in 1674*,<sup>12</sup> and

<sup>12</sup> Hungarian title, *A pozsonyi vértörvényszék áldozatai 1674-ben*; see footnote 7.

I knew of the tribulations of the galley-slave preachers from elsewhere as well.

Their memory was a source of strength for me. István Séllyei had turned to Bálint Kocsi Csergő<sup>13</sup> with these words: “Set it down in writing, my son: we are suffering joyfully to bequeath a gospel heritage to our descendants.” Now, by the grace of God, my soul was constantly preoccupied with bearing everything for the sake of *our* descendants.

Thoughts from Scripture and church history strengthened me. How good it was that by that time I had read through the Scripture fifteen times and learned several passages by heart. In this way I had been preparing for my imprisonment, because we were not allowed to have Bibles.

When a few years earlier, some forty pastors in Bulgaria had been sentenced, I said to myself, “If this were to happen in Romania, we so-called Bethanists<sup>14</sup> would be the victims.” The reason I say “so-called” is because we had never organized ourselves under such a name. Moreover, we had never organized ourselves at all. Our shared desire had been to know and follow Christ, to immerse ourselves in the truths of the gospel and our confessions,

<sup>13</sup> István Séllyei (1627–1692) was bishop of the Transdanubian Reformed Church from 1669 until his death; Bálint Kocsi Csergő (1647–1698) was a Reformed educator and writer. Both were taken to be galley-slaves between 1673 and 1676 because of their Reformed faith, see footnote 7.

<sup>14</sup> Participants in the Bethania movement, a revival group within the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Lutheran Church in Romania, having its roots in Christian Endeavour which originated in 1881 in Portland, Maine, U.S.A.

and to spread and teach them within the framework of our Reformed Church.

And when I had read in our church's newspaper<sup>15</sup> that Bethanism was a religious awakening movement rooted in America, I was convinced we would be arrested and was expecting our conviction. How good it was to believe in the dear teaching of our catechism: "For all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move." (*Heidelberg Catechism* 28).<sup>16</sup> It was my firm understanding that the arrest warrant against me could only be signed by the will of God. So I increasingly rested with satisfaction in God's will; this is where my daily few hours of meditation and prayer led me.

### *Satan's attempt to frighten me*

In the few first days, the knowledge of our innocence satisfied me. We had never incited anyone against the regime; indeed, we called on everyone to bow to the will of God and to obey the powers of the state, as Scripture tells us to. Yet we had seized every opportunity to sit down to read the Word together. We, the pastors in the area,

<sup>15</sup> *Reformátusok Lapja* [Reformed Papers], the official weekly of the Reformed Church in Hungary, founded in 1957. In political matters, it toed the Communist Party line until the regime change.

<sup>16</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/pdf/ords-days/Heidelberg-Catechism.pdf>

met on a monthly basis, while those in the two districts<sup>17</sup> came together every half year, and we also occasionally came together at baptisms, name-days,<sup>18</sup> and birthdays, but never did we concern ourselves with anything other than the Word. This was why I harboured hopes that the authorities would let us go. What else could they do? So I was stunned when they began to treat us as members of a subversive religious organization and when, as I was being interrogated, provisions of law were cited with punishments of five to ten to fifteen years.

What would happen to my wife, my children, and myself if I were to be sentenced for even a few years? It was unbearable to even think about. “My Lord, the very thought is driving me mad,” I cried out at one point. And this was what Jesus answered: “What are you doing? Is this how I sent you out? Didn’t I tell you: ‘I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever’? (Jn 14:16) Listen to My comforting Spirit, not to the pernicious evil spirit.” “You are right, my Lord,” I replied, “forgive my despairing. I no longer want to listen to anything other than Your comforting Spirit!”

From then on, it was only for a mere few minutes each day that the torrent of agonizing thoughts prevailed over my mind, because I always fled to Jesus. I turned to Him; I had no interest in anything other than His word.

<sup>17</sup> The Reformed Church in Romania is organized into two districts or dioceses, the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District and the Transylvanian Reformed Church District. The headquarters are at Nagyvárad and Kolozsvár, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> The feast day of a saint, or other historical or religious figure, after whom a person is named.

His revelations have always been dear to me. The following is one of the dearest:

I had been comforting someone with the words of Revelation 2:10, but I cited only the first part of the verse, because I felt the rest was addressed to me: “Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison (...) and for ten days you will have tribulation.”

At first I took the words literally, and hoped I would be set free after ten days. But the ten days multiplied to four times ten and I asked, thinking of the Lord’s forty-day fast: “My Lord, is it going to be that long, or perhaps even longer?” He replied, “You did not listen carefully to My words, because I spoke of a tribulation lasting ten days. How much are you suffering here by My side?” “Very little. At the most, ten minutes a day, as every hour with You is pure joy, even here.”

So I began to calculate. Ten days equals 14,400 minutes, which means 1,440 days if there are ten minutes of sorrow a day. In other words: four years! But, well, I realized that really I suffered no more than five minutes a day, so my ten-days of tribulation would take eight years! Once again, I became frightened and I spoke to my Lord thus: “I give up my calculations; I leave it to You to decide how long I should stay in prison. The only important thing is that I should spend all my days here with You.” Thanks be to God, this is what happened.

When I was released after six years, I divided my 2,265 days spent in prison by the Biblical ten days, and I found that my daily tribulation had amounted to six minutes and thirty-five seconds daily. Yet this is proof of

my unbelief, because if I had spent every day with a truly believing heart, I would not have had to be miserable at all at the side of Christ, who always wanted to fill my heart with the joy and peace of heaven. For in Him, the kingdom of God came to Earth, and anyone can be in heaven through Him while still in this world.

Over the years, I often recalled that Dean Arday<sup>19</sup> ordained me as a pastor reciting the final words of this Bible verse: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10) Whenever I thought of these words during my imprisonment, and the hope of being free occurred to me, I decided I would tell the Right Reverend Arday (as he later became bishop) that he had ordained me with a major handicap. He had omitted the first part of the verse, yet God placed it in my life to the last letter: “[...] the devil is about to throw some of you into prison.” It was this that completed my ordination.

### *What kind of God have I?*

“What kind of a God have you, when He allows you to be in our hands?” I was once asked during interrogation.

“A gracious God.”

“How so?”

<sup>19</sup> Aladár Arday (1890–1961) was bishop of the Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District in Romania from 1948 to 1961.

“It is written: ‘For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake.’ (Phil. 1:29) Thus, even this is a grace from God.”

“Grace, grace,” repeated my interrogator in irritation.

It was truly by grace that I had learned beforehand that Christ obtained for us not only the remission of sins, but also the opportunity to suffer for Him. “Father, give my loved ones some suffering also!” We might partake of this suffering only because of Christ, because we are neither worthy of it, nor can undertake it, without Him.

Once I had a visitor in my cell; in keeping with the rules, I went to the wall and silently I stood to attention with my back facing the door, while the visitor fidgeted. Suddenly he grabbed me by the collar and hissed through his teeth:

“Put your hands behind your back!” and he shook me fiercely.

I turned to the Lord and heard His words: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you.” (Jn. 15:18) Immediately, an unspeakable serenity and joy filled me. Ever since, I have only been able to think of that savage man by asking for blessings and grace on him.

During another interrogation, I asked:

“Why were we brought here? We have never been opposed to the system, we have never incited anyone or ever revolted against it.”

“You are believers, idealists; we are communists, materialists, and hate all idealism. We are enemies by definition.

“Good to know; at least I know what to do.”

“What, what?” asked the interrogator with a keen inquisitiveness.

“What Jesus said: ‘Love your enemies.’ We might be your enemies, but you can never be ours: all we can do is love you.”

The interrogator became silent, and sent me back to my cell. I have lived in that love ever since and pray to the Lord that I may radiate it to all hostile to us.

### *Bridled by God*

As I saw and experienced the mind-set and actions of our captors, I asked myself often how I should behave in the face of this evil power. Again God’s thunderbolt struck me: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (Rom. 13:1-2)

I was stunned as I listened to His Word, and thought how terrible it would be to fight His will. Possessing His Word, I had no trouble answering the questions posed to me during the next interrogation.

“It is not fear of you, but the Word of God that bridle me and my brothers, that keeps us from revolting and stirring up strife. And if everyone were to think like us, communism could survive, even though only one communist were left.”