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## CONTRIBUTION OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES TO THE FALL OF COMMUNISM IN HUNGARY AND ROMANIA

by **Joseph Pungur**

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In recent years, dramatic and historic changes have taken place in Eastern Europe. The satellite states of the Soviet Union have wrested themselves free from Communist domination and the influences of an imposed military alliance imposed on them when they fell under Soviet occupation at the end of the Second World War. These countries came under extreme pressure to abandon their national and cultural traditions, including their Christian beliefs; they suffered economic stagnation due to an inefficient central planning system and were forced to accept a materialistic world view; last but not least, the freedom of their populations was subordinated to the will of the Communist party-state.

The outside world did not witness much of the drama of these unfortunate peoples, the network of Gulags, the inhumane living conditions, the hopelessness and apathy of the population, the torture chambers of the secret police and the concentration camps, the subtle terror applied against everybody from the infant school to the senior citizens' home. Once in a while an occasional glimpse has disturbed the outside world: the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, upheavals in Berlin in 1953 and revolution in Hungary in 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Polish Solidarity Movement in 1980. Now, in the space of two short years, the seemingly invincible Communist system has collapsed in rapid succession in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The years 1989 and 1990 were of bloodless revolution--with the exception of Romania.

Finally, after 200 years and many early attempts, the ideas and spirit of the French Revolution reached Eastern Europe. These countries, independent again, have unanimously decided to embrace democracy. The lively spirit of democracy marched on toward the Baltic states and now it has reached and transformed the whole former Soviet Union. These events

are the most significant for that region since the end of the Second World War, and they will determine its future well into the 21st century. They will probably exercise an enormous impact upon the whole world.

In the dynamics of the process of change, beside political, social and economic motives are other elements which have a decisive influence on the outcome of such a venture: cultural, psychological, and religious factors. The aim of this study is to point out the contribution made by the churches of the Reformed tradition to the revolutionary events in Hungary and Romania.

Let us see clearly from the very outset that these two Reformed churches, in Hungary and in Romania, have a historical, cultural and theological identity with each other. They originated in the latter part of the 16th century, and they basically constituted a single organizational entity despite the distinctive features of the Reformed Church in Transylvania. The Reformed Church in Romania came into existence as a consequence of the Peace treaty after the First World War, the Trianon Treaty signed on June 4, 1920, which took away two thirds of the historical territory of Hungary and gave it to the neighboring states. Since the eastern part of ancient Hungary was awarded to Romania, people of the Reformed tradition in Transylvania were forced to organize their own church within largely Orthodox Romania. Both churches waged a subtle and successful resistance against their Communist oppressors, which was instrumental in the collapse of those regimes.

## I - HUNGARY

The Reformed Church in Hungary was constituted in 1567 and became the preeminent national church at the end of the 16th century, with the allegiance of almost the entire population. However, after a vigorous counter-reformation led by the ruling Hapsburg dynasty, the Reformed Church lost its leading role by the end of the 18th century, and today it is second to the Roman Catholic Church, with 2.5 million nominal members out of a total population of some ten million. The church has always been committed to national independence, to a democratic and humane system. It has traditionally been regarded as the Magyar church, its ministers living closely among the people, its school system educating some of the finest poets, writers, scholars and politicians.

Hungary participated in the Second World War on the side of the Axis forces. Not because the people or serious politicians shared the fascist world view and ideology, but because Hungary, after many futile attempts to achieve revision of the extremely severe Peace Treaty of 1920 imposed by the victorious armies, was assured of satisfaction by the Axis powers. Some former lands with Hungarian ethnic majorities were in fact returned. Although Hungary did not join in the fight against the Western democracies in 1939 and

1940, Hungary did help in the onslaught on the Communist Soviet Union. This was because Hungary experienced a short but terrible 133 days of Communist rule at the end of the First World War and was instinctively aware that a potential danger could descend on the country and on all of Europe from the Soviet Union at any time. This anticipation was fully justified in 1945 when the victorious Red Army overran a good half of civilized Europe as the first phase of Communist expansionism, constituting a direct threat to the whole world for the subsequent decades of Cold War.

The fighting reached Hungarian soil in October, 1944, and raged for six months including the forty-five day siege of Budapest. On April 4, 1945, the country was "liberated" by the Red Army, a liberation which turned into an occupation lasting forty-five years while life in the occupied country changed from bad to worse. Private valuables, such as jewelry, watches, and clothes were taken by the occupying troops at will; there was widespread raping of women; Hungarian soldiers and civilians, women and girls, were rounded up and taken to the Soviet Union as prisoners of war. Many of them were never seen again.

Initially, the activities of the churches were not molested. On the political level there were free elections with many rival parties, even though these "free" elections were overshadowed by the presence of a huge army of occupation. In 1948, the tiny Communist party managed to win the election, the spearhead of a leftist coalition. Soon, Communists were at the helm of the government of the country, and under the Party leader Mátyás Rákosi, systematic and profound changes were initiated: the demolition of the old capitalist system and the construction of a new political, social, and economic order on the socialist model. Profound changes were forced upon people with the dictatorial power of the police and secret police, the AVO.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of this new policy, all large land holdings were confiscated and either re-distributed or remained in the hand of the State; banks and industry were nationalized, as were the schools--both church and private. The Kulaks, well-to-do yeomen farmers, were persecuted and ostracized. Quotas were imposed on farmers and industrial workers. Political parties other than Communist were banned, and a personality cult of leaders was gradually introduced. The stage was set for a show-down with the churches.

The Communist attitude to the churches displayed many facets. From a philosophical standpoint, the Communists were militant atheists. On a social level, they recognized in the Church their main obstacle to the creation of a new, socialist type of person, freely manipulated in the furtherance of Communist goals, while on the political level Communists regard the Church as the last bastion of the ancient regime. For these reasons, churches had

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<sup>1</sup>AVO is the abbreviated form of *Allamvedelmi Osztág*, State Security Detachment. Later, it developed into AVH, which is the short form of *Allamvedelmi Hivatal*, State Security Office. Both of them were notorious instruments of the Communist dictatorship.

to be eliminated from society. However, in the period of transition from capitalism to communism (euphemistically called "socialism"), churches might be tolerated and a restricted function permitted under the vigilant supervision of the party-state. In this period, churches, or at least their leadership, were seen to be useful for promoting Communist objectives on national and worldwide stages.

After the nationalization of church estates, schools and institutions, the next step was to cajole the Church to sign an agreement with the State. The Reformed Church was first in line because there the conditions were most favorable. Bishop László Ravasz, the president of the General Synod and the most gifted Hungarian preacher, was forced into retirement. His successor Bishop Albert Bereczky, the former undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture and a revivalist preacher, was willing to sign the Agreement on October 7, 1948. The actual text of the Agreement was not too bad under the circumstances; the problem was, the State had never intended to keep to it. Practically, it became a pretext to harass the Church, interfere in Church activities and bring all the work and personnel of the Church under the control of the State and the Party.<sup>2</sup>

The Communist system built a threefold *cordon sanitaire* around the churches in order to control them effectively. The first line of supervision was the new leadership of the Church. A new cadre of Church leaders was carefully selected. Some of them were ambitious individuals who were promised promotion; others were in the pocket of the police and so agreed to collaborate with the Communists. The second line of control was organized by the State Office for Church Affairs. Its headquarters were in Budapest, but its officers infiltrated all levels of government: county, town, and village. They maintained a network of secret informers who reported on the doings of pastors, congregations, and their individual members. Functionaries of the Office could summon pastors to appear before it and put all kinds of pressure on them. The third circle of control was by secret police. Within this police force a special department operated, the III/III; its exclusive task was to keep the churches under surveillance with modern technical means and by the help of an independent network of secret informers. The aim was not only to control churches' activities but to undercut the social roots of the Church and to curb its activities by confining them to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Agreement of 1984 left four historic Colleges in the hands of the Church, as well as two seminaries. A few years later the State fraudulently took away from the Church two of the Colleges and one seminary. These important intuitions were allegedly "offered" by Church authorities. Simultaneously, one of the four historical Church districts, the Cistibscian, ceased to exist; it was added to the Transtibiscian district, and only after the 1956 revolution regained its former status. The Danubian and Transdanubian districts remained intact. Freedom of Religion, enshrined in the Constitution and secured by the Agreement, was not granted in its fullness but only in a narrow and controlled way. There is no doubt that the Agreement was breached by the State. It was solemnly cancelled by the State authorities at the beginning of 1990, and a Law of Religion and Conscience was adopted by Parliament--the first such law for forty-five years.

church buildings. By secretly recording the manners of persons attending church services, Communist activists could identify them and pressure them to sever their links with the Church. Young people could not expect admission to institutes of higher education unless they ceased to attend church services and joined the youth wing of the Communist party. Special discussion groups were organized in the schools, offices, and workplaces for the promotion of atheist ideas. Everything possible was done to hasten the withering away of the Churches.

In the mean time the Church leaders were called upon to take part in the oppression of their churches. A leading bishop appeared as the most effective agent in the view of the Communist authority. In the Reformed Church, Bishop Bereczky helped bring its Renewal movement to a halt. In his message to the Church on New Year's Day, 1951, entitled "A Brotherly Message," he set out the agenda for the ministers of the Church. There were to be no special meetings of the members of the disbanded religious associations, which must be fully integrated into the supervised congregational activities,<sup>3</sup> and there was to be no regrouping of those disbanded religious organizations.

To justify their actions, Bereczky and his circle worked out a "Theology of the Narrow Way" in which they argued that the Church's "narrow way" was to take on a restricted role within the socialist system. With this theology, despite its taint of collaboration, the bishop attempted to prevent the Church and its clergy from suffering the harsh strictures of the Communist leaders. Their purpose can be seen from the following episode. Bishop Bereczky and the State President Zoltán Tildy, himself a Reformed minister and relative of Bereczky, secretly went to meet the American member of the Allied control Commission, Arthur Schoenefeld. They asked whether the United States would be willing to help "if something should inadvertently happen here."<sup>4</sup> The immediate negative answer of the highest ranking American official in Hungary convinced the bishop and the State president that the United States was not prepared to rescue Hungary and other European states under Communist domination from the danger of forced sovietization.

Despite the willingness of the Church leaders to accommodate the Communist regime, persecution of church members and particularly its clergy still occurred. Prominent ministers such as Béla Pap and István Pogyor were murdered; Pap disappeared without trace and Pogyor died in custody under suspicious circumstances. Others were forced to resign or were removed from their parishes. Imre Szabó and Károly Dobos, ministers of prominent

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<sup>3</sup>Albert Bereczky, Keskény Ut (Narrow Way); Budapest, Református Egyetemes Konvent, 1953. p. 330.

<sup>4</sup>Jozef Eliás, Lehullo Alarcok (Falling Masks); West Germany, 1988. p. 14. Eliás was a close friend and confidant of Bishop Bereczky in the fateful years of 1943-1951.

Budapest churches, were exiled to remote village parishes, their only "sin" that they had helped other people forcefully deported from the capital city. During the Communist regime of forty-five years, 133 of the church's 1,200 ministers and countless laymen suffered deportation, prison, and removal from office.<sup>5</sup> The Roman Catholic Church suffered even more.

This persecution of the Church did not prevent the Communist rulers from demanding the cooperation of its leaders in domestic and foreign policies. At home, the church leaders were required to offer help in the drive to collectivize the farm lands. Abroad, they had to promote the foreign policy objectives of the Soviet bloc at international forums, such as the assemblies of the World Council of Churches and World Peace Conference. Bishop Bereczky lauded the Communist strongman, Mátyás Rákosi, as "Stalin's finest Hungarian disciple." "We are," he said, "increasingly aware of the great gift which was given to us by his wisdom, humanity and knowledge; [he is] the great statesman whose wise and strong hand lead the life of the country."<sup>6</sup>

Even the collaboration of the bishops could not prevent the illegal confiscation of the two historic colleges of Sárospatak and Pápa, with another seminary of the Church in 1951. The Church was left with only one college and one seminary, even though in the official Agreement of 1848 four colleges and two seminaries were guaranteed secure. So much for agreements between the Church and the State.

In consequence of this open and covert oppression of the Church--persecution of ministers and laypersons, the servile attitude of Church leaders towards the State and the Party, their evident assistance in making the Church an auxiliary of the State and collaborator of atheistic communist dictators, the breach of the 1948 Agreement--a silent and growing resistance began to form within the Church against the policy of its leaders. The church underground came into the open with a Declaration entitled "A Statement of Faith, 1956," copies of which were handed out to the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches meeting at Gaylateto in Hungary in the summer of 1956. It was written in the spirit and style of the 1934 Declaration of Barmen, Germany. It denied the vaunted superiority of Marxist-socialist ideology and denounced any theology which would support it, condemning the consent of Church leaders to deeds of government that would have been openly denounced by the prophets. It protested against the dictatorial behavior of a clique

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<sup>5</sup>Reformátusok Lapja [Reformed Newspaper], Budapest, December 24-31, 1989. p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Albert Bereczky, op.cit., p. 297.

of Church leaders, demanded the return of Reformed Presbyterian principles in Church government and affirmed the task of the Church to evangelize the world.<sup>7</sup>

The Declaration had the effect of a bombshell. General Secretary of the WCC, Visser 't Hooft, and the key members of the Council had been plainly informed of what was going on inside the Reformed Church in Hungary under Communist rule. It came as no surprise when János Péter, a leading bishop of the era who later became the foreign minister, launched a bitter criticism against the Declaration. He said that it was "born in disobedience" and that "no-one will accept it as his own within the Reformed Church in Hungary."<sup>8</sup> It is now generally accepted that the document helped to prepare the way for the Hungarian Revolution, between October 23 and November 4, 1956.

In the wake of the Declaration, the voice of criticism grew in intensity at all levels of Church life. There was an appeal to leadership supported by 160 ministers of the Church demanding radical changes, but to no avail.<sup>9</sup> During the growing crisis and revolution in 1956, the Church was left without any effective leadership while Bishop Bereczky, president of the General Synod, was incapacitated by an illness. The other two bishops were passive for different reasons. Bishop Elemér Györi, an elderly person, was cautious by nature; Bishop János Péter was immersed in State affairs. When the historic hour struck on October 23, 1956, only one person in authority was at the helm of the Church--László Pap, a professor and a deputy bishop, who was not one of the ruling clique and was highly regarded by the laity and ministers of the Church.

In the days of revolution, the resistance forces of the Reformed Church surfaced and on November 1, 1956, they formed a "National Action Committee of the Reformed Church." This was to provide leadership in a time when the official hierarchy had either resigned or been dismissed. It was also intended to prepare for a general election in the Church. The committee called back Bishop László Ravasz to active service. He and Professor Pap became the leaders of the Church and of the Renewal Movement. In their radio message on October 30, they called on people to show soberness, calmness, and maturity. The Action committee was working well after the second Soviet military intervention begun November 4, which suppressed the revolution and the fight for freedom. The committee sent a circular to the Church sessions asking whether or not they supported the Renewal Movement. A two-

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<sup>7</sup>"A Statement of Faith 1956" in Rev. Géza Németh, *Persecution, Resistance, Treachery*," Budapest, 1991, manuscript, pp. 6-15.

<sup>8</sup>János Péter, "Uj Kezdet Ideje" [Times of New Beginning] in Ut [Way], a Reformed weekly; Budapest, October 7-13, 1956.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Pungur, "Protestantism in Hungary," Edmonton, 1990. manuscript, p. 34.



thirds majority expressed unflinching support, while making it very clear that the sessions respected the 1948 Agreement between the Church and the State.

The Communist dictatorship, re-established under the leadership of János Kádár severely punished those who had taken part in the revolution. There was a wave of arrests, imprisonment, torture, and executions, from which the churches were not spared. Ministers and laity of the Reformed Church were arrested; some were deported; at least one, Rev. Lajos Gulyás, the parish minister of Level, was hanged. From the seniorate of Bács-Kiskún alone, seven ministers were arrested and detained for long periods--and there are twenty seven such seniorates in the Hungarian Reformed Church. At least one in ten of the ministers of the Church suffered in one way or another. Many of them were removed from their parishes and sent to out-of-the-way places. Professor László Pap was forced into early retirement and then posted to a remote small congregation. The pro-Communist hierarchy who had resigned or were dismissed during the revolution returned to power, they did little or nothing to alleviate the suffering of the detained ministers and lay people of the Church.

After its initial revenge and terror, the Kádár regime consolidated its grip on the country and moved to normalize its relations with the churches. For the Reformed Church, this meant a new leadership. Tibór Bartha became the presiding Bishop of the General Synod, and the life of the Church bore the stamp of his leadership for almost three decades, from 1958 to 1986. He and his circle worked out the "Theology of Service" which became the official theology of the Church, a later development of Bereczky's "Narrow Way Theology." The starting thesis of the new theology was the concept of Jesus Christ as servant; as a consequence his Church had to be a serving church in the society. The socio-ethical dimension of this theology was the endorsement of Communist policies. In effect, the Church became the collaborator of the regime, a regime which, in harmony with other socialist states, had two major political objectives: the construction of a socialist society at home and the preservation of world peace abroad--peace, that is, in terms of the *Pax Sovietica*. The People's Front and the Christian Peace Conference were the two major organizations in which the Church was directed to make its contribution to these objectives. Bishop Károly Tóth played a key role in the Christian Peace Conference, first as international secretary and later as general secretary; he was its last president.<sup>10</sup> The Church

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<sup>10</sup>The Christian Peace Conference (CPC) was formed in 1958 by a group of East European Protestant theologians in Prague, Czechoslovakia, led by Professor Josef L. Hromádka. Initially it was staffed by Czechoslovak personnel. When that country was overrun by the military forces of the Warsaw Pact after the "Prague Spring," on August 20, 1968, the general secretary Jiri Ondra and some of his co-workers were dismissed on political grounds; Károly Tóth, a Hungarian Reformed minister and one of the international secretaries of CPC, was appointed General Secretary. He functioned in this capacity from 1969 to 1979. Following the sudden death of Metropolitan Nikodim of the Russian Orthodox Church, the president of the movement, Tóth was elected President. He worked diligently for the growth of the influence and importance of the CPC until the end of 1991.

leadership thus assisted a regime which did all it could for the weakening of church life. The mission of the Church was severely curtailed; religious classes in schools practically ceased to exist; those who attended church were spied on and discriminated against. Church membership dwindled together with its financial resources although the Church did receive some minimal financial help from the State in accordance with the Agreement of 1948.

In these circumstances, there were ministers and lay persons in ever growing numbers who became critical of the pro-Communist pragmatism of their church's hierarchy. The criticism was muted at first, but in some cases it became public. There is the case of Péter Hajdu, a senior parish minister in Budapest<sup>11</sup> and one of the closest co-workers of the former Bishop Bereczky. As early as 1965, he had criticized the personality cult of Bishop Bartha, nurtured by his followers, which became a convenient cover for his authoritarian leadership. Hajdu suggested that instead of lifetime bishops, the Church should elect moderators with short tenure. With many other ministers, he was concerned that even members of the church judiciary were subservient to the authority of the hierarchy, so that there was no independent court of appeal in the Church. He expressed his concern about the close relation between the hierarchy and the high officials of the State Office for Church Affairs, a closeness which did not serve the interest of the Church since, apart from the fact that it promoted personal interest, such a close relationship could effectively be used to cover up the manipulations of Church leaders which an independent office should prevent. Hajdu was effectively silenced; he was forced to resign from his senior post, and nothing was changed at the administrative level.

József Eliás was the minister of the former University Church in Debrecen,<sup>12</sup> one of the evangelists working among the Jews in the Good Shepherd Mission, the confidant of Bishop Bereczky and of Bishop Bartha. Bartha distanced himself from Eliás after he pleaded with the senior bishops to intervene in the case of a despotic minister. All of a sudden, Eliás's church building was sold to the State, and proceeds of the sale were spent on renovations to the Reformed College in Debrecen. When Eliás challenged this treatment, he was disciplined and sent into retirement, but he remained one of the most daring critics of the Church leadership for three decades.

In the early 1970s, a conflict developed between the Church leaders and Géza Németh, the parish minister of Erd, which became public and lasted for years.<sup>13</sup> The conflict was about the erection of a new Christian building named, with the permission of King's widow,

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<sup>11</sup>Joseph Pungur, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>12</sup>József Eliás, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup>Géza Németh, *op. cit.*, pp. 19ff.

after Martin Luther King. During the construction, the walls of the church were blessed by King's successor, Ralph Abernathy. The Church and State leaders determined to prevent the construction of this building at all costs, despite widespread support for the project in Hungary and abroad. Németh was a thorn in the sides of both Church and State authorities for his sharp criticism of the activities of the bishops, for his missionary work among the young, and for his contact with the oppressed Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, Németh was prosecuted by a Church court and banned from all of his pastoral functions, reduced to earning his living by soliciting paintings. Nonetheless, he continued his criticism of the hierarchy, and he became one of the founders of the Renewal Movement of the Church in the late 1980s.

Besides a growing number of ministers at home, there were clergy of the Hungarian Reformed tradition abroad who sharply criticized the subservient attitude, the selling-out theology which comprised with the oppressive one-party state of the Kádár regime. In 1984, just before the dawn of *perestroika*, this writer put forward a major analysis of Church-State relations in Hungary.<sup>15</sup> In it, the methods applied by the Communists against the Church, the deceptive "theology of service" adopted by the Church leaders, the double standards of the hierarchy, and the multi-faceted State were analyzed. The following questions were posed:

Does the Hungarian Reformed Church fulfil its God-given task to preach the Word of God? Does its concept of service stem from God's word? Do its attitudes and actions truly respond to its God-given mission? Has the Church found the freedom to carry out its mandate or has it become a tool to serve and support the regime's political ambitions? Is there freedom of religion or is the Church victimized by the State's political manipulations?<sup>16</sup>

This study was written in Hungarian and published in Hungarian weeklies and other periodicals in the Western democracies. It reached many of the ministers of the Church in Hungary, contributing to the firming of their stand against the leadership of both Church and State.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>As a consequence of Peace Treaties of World War I and World War II, some 2.5 million Hungarians live under Romanian rule, 1.5 million under Czechoslovakian and 0.5 million under Yugoslavian jurisdiction.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Pungur, "The Relationship between the Hungarian State and the Hungarian Reformed Church", in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol VI, No.1, (February 1986), pp. 3-14.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Originally the paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Association of Hungarian Reformed Ministers in North America, Ligonier, PA, September 1984. Subsequently it was broadcast by Radio Free Europe and printed in the Nemzetőr, a worldwide Hungarian weekly in Munich, West Germany. It also appeared in English and German translation (OPREE and Glaube in der 2. Welt).

The collaborating bishops tried to preserve their position and power by grasping the initiative of the renewal of the Church --in their own way. They were ready for a collective confession of sins of the past forty years of collaboration and appeasement, but they refused to acknowledge any personal shortcomings. They promised a new election of Church leaders, but put it off. In the mean time they pressed through a vote of confidence for themselves; surprisingly, at that state of development of the silent revolution in the country and in the Church, it was given. Despite the democratic political elections in the summer of 1990, no corresponding progress was made in the reform of the Church until, late in the Fall, new elections were held according to Reformed principles. There were nominations, and the incumbent bishops were permitted to run for election. As 1990 drew to a close, new bishops were elected and at last there was a new General Synod, which contained only one of the previous incumbents.<sup>20</sup>

About the decisive phase of the Movement's struggle, the Reverend Géza Németh has written the following summary:

The Renewal Movement, being the spiritual heritage of the Renewal Movement of 1956, demanded new elections at its conventions. As a result, the General Synod dissolved itself and announced new elections. There followed a struggle over whether congregations would get true information about the treachery committed by Church leaders in the last decades. This was the purpose of many analytical studies and of countless interviews on the radio and in the press. The representatives of the old order tried to defend themselves with the well-known tools of the security police: slander, personal calumny, and disinformation. There was a special significance to the international forum of ecumenical renewal, organized together with the Roman Catholic "Bush" community led by Father György Bulányi, which broadened the perspective of the movement with regard to Transylvania and interdenominational relations. There was an enormous domestic and international response to our calling for the dismantling of the Communist propaganda machine, the Christian Peace Conference, with its base in Prague. The Evangelicals and the Baptist Church left that miserable organization.<sup>21</sup>

On the political front, the Renewal Movement contributed something special to a rather chaotic election campaign before the election itself. In those decisive times the Movement published its "Ten Theses" on how the campaign should be run from an evangelical point of view. The publication was inspirational and served as a spiritual guidebook to the democratic elections--and it proved to be influential. The guidelines were:

1. Ethics take precedence over ideologies,
2. Truthfulness is required in politics,

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<sup>20</sup>The only re-elected bishop was Elemér Kocsis, for Debrecen in the Transtibiscian District. The new bishops elected were Lóránt Hegedüs in the Danube District, replacing Károly Tóth of Budapest; István Mészáros in the Cistibiscian District replacing László Kürti of Miskolc, and Mihály Márkus in the Transdanubian District replacing Attila Kovách of Veszprem.

<sup>21</sup>Géza Németh, Felkiáltójel [Exclamation Mark], Budapest, 1990, p. 128.

3. Taking the side of the poor is a basic evangelical principle,
4. Maintaining order is vital to avoid anarchy,
5. Accountability is demanded of politicians,
6. Solidarity is necessary with all refugees, among them the oppressed Hungarian ethnic minorities in neighboring countries,
7. The principle of peace-making,
8. The principle of non-violence,
9. The principle of reverence for life, and
10. The principle of unity.<sup>22</sup>

In the new democratically elected parliament, there are seven MPs who are also ministers of the Reformed Church. Many other ministers were elected to serve in county and municipal governments.

On the role of the Reformed Church in the fall of Communism in Hungary, it must be observed that, apart from a tiny though powerful group of Church leaders, the majority of the clergy and all of the congregations were and remained stolidly opposed to the various Communist regimes. The healthy anti-Communist stand of the greater part of the Church became apparent during the glorious but tragic days of the 1956 revolution and freedom fight. Its opposition to Communism never disappeared despite the systematic persecution and oppression by the State and by its won hierarchy. In the final years of the Communist government, this opposition intensified its work first underground, later openly in the form of the Renewal Movement. After bitter and prolonged struggle on two fronts, against the collaborating bishops inside the Church and against reform Communists outside, the Movement achieved its goals of renewing the Church and the country. In this struggle, no single outstanding leader emerged but rather a group of excellent leaders. Their fight was an important contribution to the victory of democracy over totalitarian Communism and of humanity over atheism. It was inspired by the democratic principles essential to Calvinism. Their fight is a golden page in the history book of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

## II - ROMANIA

The contribution made by the Reformed Church in Romania to the fall of Communism was quite different from that of its sister church in Hungary where, as we have seen, the Renewal Movement in the Reformed Church was influential in the fight against Communist dictatorship. In Romania, the situation was very different. Because of the almost total control exercised by the *Securitate*, the secret police, there was not the least chance for the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-87.

formation of a Renewal Movement. An individual might achieve something; many tried and failed. Those who took a stand in opposition to the regime were arrested, imprisoned, or suffered fatal "road accidents." Some "committed suicide"--masterly staged by the *Securitate*. Only if the right set of social and political circumstances came together like a constellation in the heavens, could a revolutionary succeed. This barely credible moment actually arrived in the latter half of December 1989.

At that time, Romania was in deep trouble: misery, oppression, and famine at home, crumbling Communist regimes all around, persecuted ethnic minorities on the brink of final extinction, a maniac dictator Ceausescu and his family, the last Stalinist in Europe. And in the midst of all this arose that one person, Reverend László Tökés, a minister of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania in charge of the church of Timisoara (Temesvár) who, with his heroic resistance to the dictatorial Church and State authorities, single-handedly triggered a popular revolution in Romania. Within days it toppled the Ceausescu regime.

Timisoara is in the northwest of Romania, a territory traditionally called Transylvania. It is surrounded by the ranges of the Carpathian Mountains on the south and on the east, where it shares a common border with Hungary and with Yugoslavia. Transylvania was a part of historical Hungary for 1,000 years until ceded to Romania without a plebiscite by the Peace Treaties which followed the First World War. Then some 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians came under Romanian rule, among them nearly one million members of the Hungarian Reformed Church.<sup>23</sup> The northern part of Transylvania with its Hungarian majority was returned to Hungary by the Axis powers in 1940 but was given back again to Romania by the Soviet Union under the transfers ratified by the Paris Peace Treaties in 1947. The ethnic Hungarians, with the German, Jewish, and Bulgarian minorities suffered heavily under Romanian rule determined to eliminate the ethnic minorities by dispersion and assimilation. The final trial came with the Ceausescu regime.

The Communist dictator wanted to create a "*Magna Romania*" in the style of fascist dictators. This resolve was based on the "*Daco-Roman*" theory which traced Romanians to an ancient Roman province of Dacia. In Greater Romania there was to be only one nation, one language, and one leader, tacitly following the Hitlerite principle: "*Ein Führer, ein Volk, ein Vaterland*." To realize this vision, Nicolae Ceausescu acted in accordance with a masterplan. Ethnic Germans were sold for a high ransom to West Germany. Hungarians

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<sup>23</sup> The Trianon Peace Treaties were intended to punish Austria but actually dismembered Hungary by taking away two-thirds of its historical territory and more than half of its population, including 4.5 million ethnic church members. (Figures taken from Mihály Bucsay *A Protestantizmus Története Magyarországon* [History of Protestantism in Hungary], (Budapest: Gondolat, 1985), p. 236.)

were to be eliminated in several stages; their autonomy was gradually taken away and their schools, libraries, theatres, and universities were confiscated. The Hungarian language was banned in public places. Hungarians were ostracized and labelled "vagabonds"--in the country of their birth. They were discriminated against in every possible way, just because they happened to be Hungarians. The Hungarian male population was taken to forced labor camps. Archives, church registers, and treasures were confiscated by the State. The names of Hungarian settlements were Romanized, as were Hungarian names even on the tombstones in the graveyards.

The dispersion of the Hungarian population all over Romania was to be accomplished by forcing them to take up jobs in remote places populated largely by Romanians. At the same time, an influx of Romanians into traditional Hungarian regions was encouraged. Then an outrageous plan of "systematization" was put into effect by president Ceausescu, eulogized as the "Genius of Carpathia" and the "Danube of Thoughts." His plan called for the demolition of some 8,000 villages, mostly in Hungarian populated areas, forcing the evicted people to live in large, poor quality apartment buildings hastily constructed in agro-industrial centers. The entire country suffered as a result--hunger, misery, food rationing, and severe shortages of fuel and electricity. No wonder that in these appalling circumstances some 50,000 ethnic Hungarians fled to Hungary seeking political asylum; many of them were hunted down like wild animals by the Romanian border guards.

László Tökés was an outspoken critic of the nationalistic and oppressive policy of the Ceausescu regime. Heedless of the danger he faced, he continued to speak out; inevitably, he ran into trouble with Church and state authorities. He himself described his growing difficulties in an open letter entitled "The Siege of Temesvár," dated October 6, 1989. In the following excerpt, the evil and inhumane face of the Ceausescu regime is exposed while the heroism of a minister and his congregation dramatically unfolds:

I speak out for I cannot do otherwise, or else the stones themselves will speak, the stones of our demolished towns and monuments . . . I am not a courageous man but I have overcome my fear. I am waiting for a trial at a Romanian civil court, indicted by my own bishop in order to evict me from the manse of the church at Temesvar, and to banish me in medieval style not only from this "closed" town but also from the priesthood. . . The fight is no less bitter than it was in the past, though this time the weapons are different. And the price of the siege is the same; when the castle falls, a piece of our country goes with it . . . The self-defence of the Reformed Church in Temesvár symbolizes a "*pars pro toto*," it displays the "particular" as a representative of the "universal." We are called in question, one by one, as Calvinists and as Hungarians living here. To the challenge the congregation tries to answer like David . . . it takes its stand only on a tiny foothold of the Spirit, from of the Word of God: "Fight for your brethren, your sons, your wives and your homes" (Nehemiah 4:14). "A mighty fortress is our God" sings the church congregation on Sundays, identifying themselves with its strength; they rely on that strength throughout the week.

László Papp, the Bishop of Nagyvárad, has been besieging the Church in Temesvár since April. He has banned services in the church and the works of renovation. . . He has limited the activity of the minister and the session; he has frozen

a great deal of the congregational finances . . . This was the introductory phase of the siege . . . the phase of "starve them into surrender" . . . the mocking of Goliath.<sup>24</sup>

Against all the odds, László Tökés and his congregation did not yield to the psychological warfare of the bishop, resolving to resist to the bitter end. After a three month withdrawal into self-imposed inner exile from April to June of 1989, he still maintained enough courage and zeal to launch a counter-offensive. This took the form of a television interview secretly made by a Canadian team.<sup>25</sup> In it Tökés talked with great openness about various aspects of the "systematization" of villages in Romania:

What we Hungarians in our ultimate danger emphasize is that here we talk about the last, or the last-but-one phase of a process. The fact of the matter is that gradually and in a planned way they have over these recent decades smashed our institutions, our culture and our school system. They have made an onslaught against every possible aspect of our ethnic life, and now it is the Churches' turn, both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed, for these two make up the totality of Hungarians . . . In the past decades they have succeeded with the Romanization of the Transylvanian towns where we Hungarians or the Germans were in the ethnic majority . . . Some 3 to 5 millions of Romanians were settled here in Transylvania, all of them form the trans-Carpathian area . . . Only the villages remained intact, because the Romanians from the Regat region never liked to settle down in villages...Now the target is the villages themselves, in order to undermine and dissolve the relatively integrated, ethnically healthy Hungarian communities. To this end the reorganization of villages, the resettlement and mingling of the population, are both excellent strategies.

When we sent a letter, a memorandum and petition to the Bishop asking him to intervene for us in the village question, we all were summoned to the Bishop's office. There was an inspector from the State Office for Church Affairs, and with him Bishop László Papp, who spoke eloquently in defence of the plan of "systematization." He even told us that it would be helpful if some of our churches would be closed down and its people resettled. "There is no need to be sad about the demolition of the churches," he said, "for it is not the stones that are important but what is going on in the Church."<sup>26</sup>

Surprisingly, none of the Canadian television companies was interested in the forty minute interview with Tökés. The film, donated to Hungarian Television, was broadcast on July 20, 1989, when it was watched not only by millions in Hungary but by many in Transylvania.<sup>27</sup> Through this broadcast interview, Tökés shed the clear light of truth on the cruel policy and terrible methods of the Ceausescu regime and their tragic consequences for

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<sup>24</sup>László Tökés, "Temesvár Ostroma" [The Siege of Timisoara] in *Krónika*, Vol. 16 No. 2 February 1990, Toronto. p. 7. It was later published in book form by Hungamer KFT, Budapest 1990.

<sup>25</sup> The Canadian team included Michel Clair, a former Cabinet Minister of Rene Levesque's government in Quebec, and Rejan Roy, a broadcaster with CBC Radio.

<sup>26</sup>"Itt Tökés László beszél" in *Hitel*, No. 17, August 23, 1989, Budapest, pp. 4-6.

<sup>27</sup>Arpad Szoczy, Jr. and CSGA, "Temesvári Report" in *Kronika*, Vol 16, No. 2, February, 1990, Toronto. pp. 9-10.



the people of Romania, most especially the Hungarian ethnic minority. Ceausescu and his *Securitate* were furious, and they determined to silence Tökés by all and any means.

His bishop immediately accused Tökés of "violating the laws of both the Church and the State." The pastor was formally removed from his parish, but he refused to leave. As a result, he had to endure increasing harassment by phone and by masked men who made attempts on his life, wounding him with a knife. The church building was vandalized. He was not able to meet his relatives. His ration card was confiscated so that he was unable to buy food and fuel. The congregation and members of the church session were threatened by the police. One of them was said to have "committed suicide." The session members were forcefully rounded up in police cars and pressured to dismiss their minister.

When the city law-court ordered his eviction from Timisoara on October 20, 1989, the minister barricaded himself in the manse, and the members of the church congregation volunteered as his bodyguard. Meanwhile, a growing nationwide protest was unfolding throughout Hungary against the policies of Ceausescu. Letters of protest were sent to Ceausescu's office pleading clemency for Tökés. The Hungarian parliament issued a statement in his support, and the presidium of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary asked Dr. Allan Boesak, the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, to intervene in support of Tökés and protest formally against the court ruling.<sup>28</sup> Even the Ecumenical Press Service of the World Council of Churches reported the atrocities against Tökés and other members of his church.<sup>29</sup> The protests achieved two results: Tökés' case became an international issue, and as such it limited the persecutions of the church under the Ceausescu regime. But the regime did not give up the siege.

Tökés, his very life at stake wrote a letter to Nicolae Ceausescu on October 15, 1989. In it, he spoke openly to the dictator of what was happening to him and his church, as we see in the following transcript:

I the undersigned, László Tökés, appeal to you with regard to myself and my Church. László Papp, the Bishop of Oradea (Nagyvárad), in cooperation with the municipal authorities gravely hurt not only the State-sanctioned laws of the Church but the laws of our country by conducting a campaign against the leaders and the members of our Church in Temesvár. The bishop wants to evict me from Temesvár without legal grounds; in the mean time, Reformed believers are being harassed and threatened. The *Securitate* and the local officials have created an atmosphere of restlessness and there is indignation not only among the believers but also among other respected citizens. The unfolding persecution of the believers has serious consequences for the life of family members and elderly or sick believers. I respectfully appeal to the laws of our country, to human rights, to the freedom of conscience and religion enshrined in our Constitution. I beg you to investigate and

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<sup>28</sup>Reported by Reformátusok Lapja, Budapest, October 29, November 5 and December 10, 1989.

<sup>29</sup>Ecumenical Press Service (EPS), Geneva, November 3, 1989.

to halt the lawlessness against our Church and to secure our right to a decent and peaceful life.<sup>30</sup>

But to no avail--the pressure and the persecution went on relentlessly. Because of the growing harassment, Tökés sent his three-year-old son to relatives in the countryside, and only his pregnant wife, Edit, remained with him. He then barricaded himself inside the church while the tension grew outside.

On Friday, December 15, the final show-down with Tökés was set in motion. It was probably because Christmas was nearing and a huge crowd was expected to attend Church service. By the removal of the minister, the authorities wanted to bring about a *fait accompli* well before Christmas. A police detachment went to the church to arrest Tökés. The police officers faced a crowd of 200-300 parishioners who formed a human chain around their pastor. A melee ensued. Tökés, standing behind the Lord's Table in the church dressed in full ministerial regalia, was arrested after a scuffle and, together with his wife, was spirited away by police car to a remote village, Menyö. This turned out to be providential. Had he remained in Timisoara he certainly would not now be alive. After his arrest, a demonstration started on the streets of Timisoara. People of other denominations and nationalities, (Romanians and Germans) joined in. When these peaceful protestors were fired on by the members of the *Securitate*--men, women and children were machine-gunned indiscriminately from helicopters, the crown turned against the Communist party headquarters. In reprisal, the *Securitate* conducted a house-to-house search for the members of the Hungarian and German ethnic minorities, and many of them were killed.<sup>31</sup>

These events in Timisoara triggered a nationwide uprising, and within days the Ceausescu regime was overthrown. Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife were arrested by the military, who sided with the revolution; they were tried and summarily executed. It was Christmas Day when "the Satan died." Tökés was found in that small village, badly beaten but alive.

These events, the stuff of history, were set in motion by a Reformed Hungarian minister in Romania who arrived at the point of *status confessionis*--the Lutheran "Here I stand"--because he simply could not remain silent about the abuses any longer. There was nowhere to withdraw. Before "the stones cry out" he had to speak. He was ready to put his life, his family, his career, all that he was and had on the line. Against the evil might of an oppressive dictatorship, against the 80,000 strong *Securitate*, against the iron will of an absolute dictator, he had only his faith with which to battle, a David of our times against a modern Goliath. What happened was a miracle of biblical magnitude; the head of Goliath fell once more. Not since Martin Luther has there emerged a clergyman whose staunch

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<sup>30</sup>László Tökés, Temesvár Ostroma, Budapest, 1990, p. 198.

<sup>31</sup>Reported in Maclean's Magazine, Canada's Weekly Newsmagazine, January 1, 1990. p. 61.

resistance and revolutionary zeal, originating from a strong religious faith, could single-handedly turn around the history of a whole nation. László Tökés, a single minister of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania, achieved exactly that. He is now its Bishop.

After forty-five years of oppression, abuse, and humiliation the churches in Eastern Europe, among them the Reformed Churches of Hungary and Romania, emerged not only as a spiritual resource but as a political force in the life of their nations.