

Levoča — The Slovak National Shrine

Of many Slovak Catholic shrines only Levoča in eastern Slovakia has remained a symbol of religious resistance to communist rule. Traditionally on the eve of 7 July up to a hundred thousand pilgrims surge into the hilly baroque town of Levoča despite many obstacles put in their way. These can be quite formidable. Last year, for instance, most schools in the area put on special activities for the day, although it was Saturday, in order to prevent young people from taking part. In a school of nursing the director announced that anyone joining the pilgrims need not bother turning up for the new academic year in September. Notices explicitly banning participation were displayed in many schools while a number of teachers were sent to Levoča to spy on their own pupils. By coincidence, Peter Nagy, a famous Slovak pop-star, was giving a concert in the nearby hamlet of Cingove at the same time as Mass was being said in Levoča. The buses and trains did not run. The police set up so many road checks that people had to wait in traffic jams for many hours, keeping their spirits up by singing hymns. Many had to come on foot, setting off at dawn. The last few hundred yards were particularly difficult. Huge oak trees were cut down and left lying across the road to the basilica, ostensibly for public safety. Priests were checked for "confession permits" and those who had forgotten to bring them were not allowed to officiate. During the cold Saturday night many people lit fires among the tents. This was used as a pretext by the police, who raided the area in order to extinguish the fires, demolishing hundreds of tents and trampling over the people in the process. Yet more pilgrims were ar-

rising throughout the night. In spite of all these difficulties the *samizdat* sources estimate that more people, particularly the young, come every year.

Last year in Levoča was special. Stefan Garaj, the vicar-general of the diocese, which like most dioceses in Czechoslovakia is without a bishop, read out a papal decree raising the shrine to the status of a minor basilica (*pace* the Roman technicalities). A girl came up to the altar at the end of the Mass and bravely read out a letter from some Slovak young people. "Dear Father, we thank you and the Holy Father for giving us this new Marian Basilica. We thank the Pope especially for his love and encouragement. As a token of gratitude we would like you to accept this cross, commemorating St Methodius, the apostle to the Slavs. [Next year is the 1100th anniversary of his death — *Ed.*] We ask you to give us your blessing."

Slightly overwhelmed, Fr Garaj thanked the girl for her courage and gave her the blessing. In his address he mentioned his predecessor, Bishop Vojtaššák, who had been imprisoned by the communists and never returned to Slovakia. "I consecrate you all to God, our Father, and to Mary, the Mother of God." As if by order thousands of wooden home-made crosses rose up from among the crowds.

Anonymous *samizdat* authors from whose writings this report was compiled have no doubt in their minds; after decades of suffering quietly, the Slovak Catholics have come out in defiance of the atheist state. There is a remarkable religious revival in Slovakia.

ALEXANDER TOMSKÝ

Romanian Baptists under New Leadership

The Romanian Baptist Union Congress held in April 1984 was confined to just one day instead of the planned three, and was restricted to the election of a new Executive Committee and other formal business. The constitutional amendment which was due to be put before the Congress and which would have further eroded the independence of the local churches was not in fact

discussed. The Congress was very much a "low-key" event, with attendance limited to a few hundred at most, compared with the two thousand who attended the last Congress, in 1977. The new President, Mihai Hušan, did not have an entirely uncompromised past record, but he certainly did not have the reputation for consistent loyalty to the government enjoyed by his pre-

decessor, Cornel Mara. All in all, the Congress provided grounds for cautious optimism.

On 1 June a new head of the Department of Religious Affairs (or "Cults") took office. Ion Cumpănașu had already had a distinguished career: his previous post was editor-in-chief of the Party daily *Scinteia* (the Romanian equivalent of the Soviet Union's *Pravda*) and before that he served as director-general of the state news agency Agerpres (equivalent to the Soviet Union's TASS). Whether this move was promotion or demotion would be debatable. Either way, it does seem to indicate the high degree of importance attached to the job, as well as the particular area of skill and experience (that of propaganda) deemed appropriate for it.

So both the Baptist Union and the Department of Cults have new leaderships. In Baptist church affairs the two have already been involved jointly on several occasions. Analysis of events in Romanian Baptist churches over the past six months probably sheds more light on the new Baptist leadership than the Department of Cults — though it may yet be too early to assess either with any confidence.

At the Baptist Congress it was announced that permission had at last been granted for Bucharest's "Sfinta Treime" Baptist Church to go ahead with the conversion of a large house for use as their church building. This news followed a six-month period during which the members had been obliged to accept quite inadequate facilities following the demolition of their old building (see *RCL* Vol. 21 No. 2, p. 205).

The experience of the Sfinta Treime church (known also as the Mihai Bravu church, from the area in the city where it was situated) is highly relevant to the current predicament of the Second Baptist Church in Oradea, which is currently facing a demolition order. Many of the events concerning that church and its pastors over the past two years have already been recorded in *RCL* (see Vol. 12 No. 2, p. 204). Both pastors (Dr Nicolae Gheorghita and Dr Paul Negruț) were ordained into the ministry in Oradea without having formal recognition, and they were employed directly by the local church. This contractual arrangement was not illegal (a point established by Oradea's previous pastor, Joseph Ţon, now in exile in the West) but it was, to say the least, disapproved of; both Gheor-

ghița and Negruț had come under police investigation and threat of prosecution. In April 1984 it became known that both pastors had been given formal offers of good posts in their former secular professions. This move, it was feared, could have been a preliminary to prosecutions on the grounds that they were not in proper, recognised employment (a punishable offence in Romania). No prosecutions materialised, however, and Gheorghita even had his identity documents returned, which meant that he was free to travel to Oradea from his home in Deva (though he still did not have permission to take up residence in Oradea). All was quiet in Oradea over the summer months, and church leaders were reported at the end of August to be reasonably optimistic about prospects for the future.

All that changed on 5 September. The church received an official notice that their building was to be demolished and that the demolition could take place any time from 1 October onwards, less than four weeks away; the notice gave no guarantee of new premises. The demolition order came as a complete surprise, in view of the written assurance that the church had been given only the previous year saying that it would *not* be affected by forthcoming redevelopment plans.

Church leaders protested to government officials on 6 September, the day after they received the demolition order, and a further meeting with officials took place on 11 September. The church was offered four alternative sites for rebuilding, all of which were clearly quite unsuitable. On 16 September a meeting of Oradea church members resolved that they should not give formal consent to any demolition until seven clear days after suitable new premises became available for their use (a precaution evidently inspired by what happened to the Sfinta Treime church in Bucharest a year earlier); the church members also agreed to mount a round-the-clock guard on the building.

As of December 1984, the Oradea church building was still standing, three months after the demolition notice was issued. Meanwhile, there have been further moves over the question of the pastors' "irregular" status. On 17 October pastors Gheorghita and Negruț were called to a meeting with Department of Cults officials and Baptist Union leaders in Bucharest. They were offered legal recognition as pastors, but only under certain conditions, one of which was

that Gheorghita would have to leave Oradea and pastor another church, in a town more than a hundred miles away. The offer was seen as an attempt to break up a strong — and highly successful — pastoral team just at a time when the church needed to remain strong and united. It was declined. On 5 November Baptist Union President Mihai Huşan informed the two pastors that they would not be granted licences, and also asked them to suspend all evangelism and baptisms until after the forthcoming Communist Party Congress.

The new Baptist Union leaders have made efforts to “regularise” the position of other unlicensed pastors as well. The most prominent among these others are Ioan Ştef and Benjamin Cocar, of the Baptist Church in Mediaş. Several meetings have taken place between Huşan (and other members of his Executive) and the Mediaş pastors, starting in April, shortly after the Baptist Union Congress. The most important of these meetings was on 10 July, when each pastor (and Bunian Cocar, Benjamin’s brother who is also an unlicensed pastor, working in Bucharest) faced tough questioning. The matter of official recognition was raised as a possibility, but it was clear that this would not happen unless the denominational leadership and the Department of Cults were sufficiently convinced of their “reliability”. A Department of Cults official was present at that meeting.

But hand in hand with these efforts towards a “negotiated settlement” have gone summonses to the police station and threats of prosecution and imprisonment (as well as a continuation of crude “unofficial” harassment, such as threatening telephone calls). Both pastors were called to the local police on 23 May, and Pastor Cocar was called in again on 7 August. Following these interviews the pastors were informed that the case was in the hands of the Prosecutor and they could face prosecution in October for preaching without licences. By the time this article went to press, no such trial had materialised, but on about 7 November Ioan Ştef had to appear in court on a quite different matter, accused of theft by the church’s former choir director. He was not found guilty, but the case was not dropped, and a further hearing was still due to take place in another court.

Over the past six months it appears that Mihai Huşan and his new Executive have actively sought to resolve matters in these

“problem” churches. The unlicensed pastor, working directly for his local church, is a species which the Department of Cults would obviously prefer not to exist; it is equally clear that, up till now, “normal” registration would involve these churches and pastors in sacrifices and compromises that they are unwilling to make.

But even if Mr Huşan appears therefore to be on the side of the Department of Cults, on the side of “order” and “normality” and compromise, it does not necessarily mean that he is acting against the churches’ best interests; it may be simply that his assessment of their best interests differs from their own. Whatever Mihai Huşan’s motivation (something we are not in a position to judge), it has become apparent that he does not enjoy the respect or confidence of those churches.

How has Mr Huşan performed elsewhere? The increase in the number of students in the seminary is one positive achievement which is attributed to him, although the admission of five or ten (it is not yet sure which) new students this academic year is an extremely small step towards fulfilling the needs, and goes nowhere near even compensating for the number of pastors likely to be lost through retirement or death during the four years this intake require to complete their training.

How Mihai Huşan copes with a handful of “dissident” churches and pastors is obviously an important matter — especially considering that this handful includes some of the largest and most active in the country. But what is perhaps even more important in the long term is his ability and willingness to persuade the higher authorities to permit a substantial increase in pastoral training, as well as the smoother acceptance into the ministry of men who — like pastors Gheorghita and Negruţ — have appropriate abilities and experience but lack the formal qualifications.

The membership of Romanian Baptist churches is growing at a rate of several thousand per year (Mr Huşan gave a figure of 3,600 per year, speaking at a Baptist World Alliance meeting held in Berlin in July), yet the number of pastors available to look after them is actually falling. This state of affairs is a direct result of Romanian government policy. If Mihai Huşan cannot bring about a reversal of this policy we can expect more local churches to take indepen-