

Unitarian Aggression in Csíksomlyó (1567) (??)

We Unitarians like to think of ourselves as peace-loving mensches, so it came as a surprise to me to hear a story about what some people considered to be aggression by a Unitarian king. Did this really happen? Or is it a case of twisted history?

First the background. Unitarianism started in the Hungarian-speaking part of Romania, called Erdély (Transylvania), where we have had a relationship with the village church of Sinfalva, and the minister Rev. Dénes Pálfi, for 30 years now. See <https://muuf.org/members/partner-church-committee/>

A key event in the history of Unitarianism was the Proclamation of Religious Freedom in 1568, in the town of Torda, by King John Sigismund (János Zsigmond), the only Unitarian king in history. He was the king of Transylvania at the time.

Recently I attended an online travel event called Discovering Transylvania, run by an organization called the Hungarian Living Community that tries to support Hungarian heritage among people of Hungarian origin. It was a wonderful set of three webinars, and in fact there were several mentions of Unitarian sites which I had visited myself, like the Unitarian Church in Toročko, a UN Heritage site. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/jX3czTn9HpYswHUS7>



During the webinar there was a description of the Csíksomlyó Pentacostal Pilgrimage. This is an event held yearly in the town of Csíksomlyó which commemorates the resistance of the brave Catholics of the town to the attempt by King Sigismund to impose Unitarianism on them by force. Here is a description of the event, translated from Hungarian:

"We trace the beginning of the present Pentecostal pilgrimage back to the year 1567, when Prince János Zsigmond of Transylvania intended to convert the chairs of Csík, Gyergyó and Kászon to the Unitarian faith according to a decree issued in 1566. The monks were ordered to leave Csíksomlyó, but they refused. The missionaries sent to the three basins were mocked and expelled by the people. The prince, under the influence of court physician George Blandrata, decided to convert the faithful population of the region to the faith of Dávid Ferenc by force. It was then that István, a priest from Gyergyó, entered the scene, who, with his fiery oratory, encouraged the people to march to Csíksomlyó, to Our Lady of the Blessed Virgin, and to prepare for a possible clash with the army recruited by the prince from the population of the already Unitarian villages of the Udvarhely countryside. The call of the priest from Gheorgheni had an enormous impact, and thus the population of not only the villages of Gyergyó but also of Csík marched to Csíksomlyó.

Here they learned that the prince's army was already on its way to Csík. At this time, the men, lined up in order of battle, with their improvised weapons, set off towards the passage of Harghita Thief's Roof (Tolvajtető) they collided with the enemy. Thanks to their cunning tactics, they soon defeated and routed the army of János Zsigmond and then retreated triumphantly to Csíksomlyó. They pinned birch branches to the tip of their weapons, so they marched in front of the church of Csíksomlyó, where they thanked Our Lady for her help in defending the holy faith of their ancestors. From that year on, the Szekler Catholics, organized into „keresztalj” have been marching to Csíksomlyó every Pentecost Saturday."

I note that the event which is commemorated in this pilgrimage (which still occurs every year) took place in 1567, subsequent to a decree made in 1566. Maybe King Sigismund was an aggressive sort, who only embraced religious tolerance after the debate in Torda in 1568? That is possible, I guess, but unlikely.

It is also a bit odd that the aggressors are identified as Unitarians, since the religion only came into existence in 1568, the year after this event.

Indeed, the Hungarian Unitarian church issued this statement in 2018 (just a few years ago, so this issue is still discussed). Bolding is mine

The Presidency of the Hungarian Unitarian Church issued a statement against "the false legend that returns every year", which links the origin of the farewell to Csíksomlyó to János Zsigmond's alleged missionary campaign in 1567.

*In the statement issued in 2018, it is emphasized that the first prince of Transylvania did not have such a campaign in the year indicated, and **there can be no talk of the institutionalization of the Unitarian denomination before 1568**. According to the Hungarian Unitarian Church, linking the pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó does not increase its invaluable value by linking it to a false story, therefore they ask the sister churches, secular and ecclesiastical leaders, as well as representatives of the press to refrain from the historically unfounded portrayal of Prince János Zsigmond and the Unitarian denomination.*

In addition, here is the position of the Franciscan friary of Csíksomlyó in 2017

In a statement issued by the Franciscan friary of Csíksomlyó in 2017, János Zsigmond no longer appears. As they write, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is as old as the settlement of the Franciscans in Csíksomlyó, which took place in the 1440s. Our Lady of Sickles, i.e. Visit of the Virgin Mary to Elisabeth, was chosen as the patron of the first Gothic church. Already in the first decades, the veneration of the Virgin Mary began, which consisted in the gathering of the people of the region in Csíksomlyó on the day of the farewell to the church. Soon it became customary for believers from neighboring villages to greet Our Lady on Marian feasts during the year. In 1444, King Alexander IV. Pope Eugene urged the faithful to help build the church, citing the fact that "many peoples come to Somlyo to venerate the Virgin Mary". This devotion to Mary has grown over time. This is why on Pentecost Saturday in 1567 the Szeklers gathered for Csíksomlyó: to ask for help in remaining in their faith and to thank God and Our Lady for their help. They vowed not to speak out against someone or something, but to strengthen their faith in God, and in memory of this, they make a pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó in honor of Our Lady every Saturday of Pentecost. This is how the great pilgrimage on Pentecost Saturday began, which is still faithfully practiced by the faithful Szekler people, but not only, as pilgrims come from many distant places.

It can be seen that the Franciscan friary no longer officially refers to the Battle of Nagyerdő or to the forced conversion of John Sigismund, who became a Unitarian, but it has retained the date 1567.

The interesting thing to me is that this controversy exists, and persists, though I don't suppose it is very deeply-felt by too many (though I could be wrong). It's been 450 years. The event nowadays has greater significance as an expression of Hungarian identity among people whose identity is threatened by gradual dissipation, if not by active oppression anymore. Certainly King John Sigismund is associated with the concept of religious tolerance now, and not attempts at coercive conversion.

FYI here is a map showing the location of Sinfalva (our partner village), Torda, and Csíksomlyó, and also Budapest.



Many thanks to Andrea Tordai for the fantastic online tour and gathering the information about this interesting event.

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PS. Her name is Tordai which means “from Torda” so she is an expert in these matters...