

# Preaching the Truth under Communism

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## Abstract

*This study aims to explore if the preaching of the Truth of the Unitarian Church from Transylvania, Romania, under the oppressive times of the Communist regime was ever possible? Relying on personal and historical backgrounds, the article will explore how it was even possible ministering to people when the state was suppressing free speech and was threatening the mere existence of the churches and its clergy. Personal memories from the 1980's will try to give a clearer picture about how allegorical language and parallels understood by those under oppression were giving hope to those in suffering. The short review of the long process of re-launching of a theological journal will show the difficulties of speaking the truth. And the presentation of the tragic fate of a theological professor who was convicted for his sermons which were considered to be dangerous, will definitely lead us to realize that preaching the truth of the Gospel was not always easy for those who had to live under the heavy dictatorship of communist times.*

**Keywords:** preaching the Gospel of Truth; communism; dangerous sermons; interrogatory; jail; Dániel Simén; preaching “in and out of season”; “Truth through Personality”

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## 1. Personal background – witnessing the Truth bearers

Communism was the leading political and ideological mainstream in Romania, between the 1947 and 1989, from the time of abandoning the monarchical system to overthrowing the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989.<sup>1</sup> These more than 40 years were extremely demanding and hard times, since the Iron Curtain has put the country under the Soviet influence, and the local communist agents tried to copy the “revolutionary methods” of their “brethren” from Moscow, trying to eradicate everything related to religion or spirituality.

In 1989, at the fall of Communism in Transylvania, Romania, I was 15 years old, so I have vivid memories about the harsh and demanding '80's: studying near a hardly burning candle in the evenings, since there were 14 Celsius degrees in our block of flat due to the “rationalization of gas”; the never-ending lines for the not so fresh portion of daily bread, the empty stores, and the desperate look on people's faces – all these were part of our daily experience. And also, I can remember clearly how we were instructed by our parents to not talk anything “improper” at the school or anywhere, to not say any bad remarks about our

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<sup>1</sup> For further details about this period, see: *Keith Hitchins*, „Romanian Communism, 1948–1989”, in: *Keith Hitchins, A Concise History of Romania*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, 227–291.

country, our “beloved leader”, or the political system we are living in, and always to act in a way that no one can find anything objectionable in our daily behavior. It was a time for a teenager to realize that the truth being spoken at the TV or being written in the newspapers is not necessarily The Truth, so, no wonder that we all became suspicious about everything we’ve heard and read and became sensitive to every message of hope which contained at least one little piece of truth in it! And we hoped that at least we can find this inside our sanctuaries!

I have witnessed life and struggles of devoted Christian clergyman who were trained in seminary to preach the Truth of the Bible, but an oppressive Communist regime declared them as enemies of the system. I have experienced these daily ordeals, seeing the ministry of my maternal grandfather, who was a Unitarian minister for 40 years in the rural area of Székelyföld-Seklerland, in the Southeastern part of Transylvania, Romania. His life was the ordinary life of the clergy in Romania of those times, his main job was ministering to the “faithful few” who found spiritual home and refuge between the walls of ancient churches, while “out there”, the “Spirit of Communism” was haunting everywhere.

I have heard him preach many times, and I can tell that he was a great orator. From the pulpit of his church, he would speak about the love of God, the teachings of Jesus, the respect toward our fellow human beings, and he usually told us eloquently the beautiful stories of the Old and New Testament ... but he would never preach about themes he fiercely addressed near the family table – the suffocating atmosphere of the political situation in the 1980’s Romania, the lack of freedom of saying whatever you wish to, the ever-growing restrictions affecting his parishioners, or about the injustice what happened to Grandma who was fired from her position as a kindergarten teacher, and was unemployed for ten years, because – they said – “the wife of a clergyman cannot educate people in real communist spirit”, and why his professor friends would visit him only after dawn, because it was not recommended to be in friendship with the “clerical reactionary elements of the society.” When I asked why, he told me: “I don’t want to go to jail because telling the truth, as 17 of our church’s clergy did.”<sup>2</sup>

But: although he would never address publicly these “delicate” themes, sometimes when he would preach about “the unbearable Egyptian captivity of the people”, the “oppressive machinery of Rome”, the “promise of a liberating Messiah”, etc., people would cry, and would nod their heads in agreement, and a sense of togetherness would settle on people sitting in the sanctuary, so it was clear that everybody knew who in the story was the Egyptian Pharaoh and who are the people wandering in the desert for forty years. After a while, it struck me that somehow people learned to “read between the lines”, and a certain jargon, a so called “bird-language” was developed between the parishioners, and everybody understood, that although

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<sup>2</sup> In 1959, 17 Unitarian clergyman and -women – theological professors, ministers, and theological students, representing 17% of the Church’s active clergy (!) – were sentenced to jail by the Communist regime, receiving between 4 to 25 years of prison. A short presentation of the condemned people is here: <http://tudastar.unitarius.kemb.hu/Nagyjaink/1956.htm>. [Last accessed on 04.01.2023.] For further details about this period see: *Andrew Ludanyi*, “The Impact of 1956 on the Hungarians of Transylvania” in: *Hungarian Studies*, 20.1 (2006), 93–107. The study is available online here: <https://epa.oszk.hu/01400/01462/00035/pdf/093-107.pdf> [Last accessed on 04.01.2023.]

their life or personal freedom was under daily threat, their ministers try to be faithful to their original call, they try to preach the Truth – in an allegorical, sometimes ambiguous language coming from the common ground of daily suffering under the pressure of the Communist regime, but understood by those united under the same trials.

## 2. Historical background – the Truth under the red star

To understand those times, we need to put things in historical context: After the Treaty of Trianon, in 1920, Transylvania became part of Romania, and 2 million Hungarians became a national and religious minority. In 1947 Romania became a Republic (People's Republic of Romania), under the "lead" of the Romanian Communist Party. In 1948 all churches were deprived by their schools and properties (lands, forests, institutions which provided the financial basis for its functioning), no theological journals and publications were allowed, no foreign bibliography was allowed to come through the border. As our church historians claim,

the church became the target of an ideological battle. [...] Holding regular classes and delivering pastoral care were considered anti-statal activities. The ministers were declared class enemies, so their children were prevented from continuing their education. [...] In villages, peasants with some means were declared class enemies, kulaks, and were forced to hand over their harvest [...] Following the Soviet model, villages were organized into collectives.<sup>3</sup>

The life of the people, and the life of the church was unbearably hard, and in these circumstances, there were only a few voices being able to preach about hope.

And although the 1980's were horrible times in this part of Europe, and under the dictatorship of Ceausescu, the life of ordinary people, and especially of those of being of Hungarian minority was extremely hard, churches became the last refuge for many, and the voice of the Gospel was proclaimed by faithful ministers. And yes, it is true, many preachers failed in their vocation – as their cooperation with the secret police became obvious after the fall of Communism – there were always a few who spoke the Truth coming from their true vocation! Their sermons, their words of hope, their conviction that the truth will prevail, have kept our congregations, and made possible the survival of many, and this is the reason why we still are a 1.1 million minority in Romania.

## 3. Truth between the printed lines – the struggle for publishing a theological journal

In the 1980's, my church, the Unitarian church from Transylvania had only one theological journal, called Keresztény Magvető, The Christian Sower. Founded in 1861, it is considered to be the oldest theological and historical journal from Transylvania. It appeared regularly between 1891 and 1918, 1922 and 1944, and it was banned by the Romanian officials in 1948

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<sup>3</sup> Sándor Kovács–Lehel Molnár, "The Hungarian Unitarian Church in the Twentieth Century" in: Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society 28.1 (April 2022), 10–11.

along with many other Hungarian publications, as a part of a so called “nationalization process”.

In 1971, the church succeeded to re-launch the journal, after 3 years of hard lobbying to the authorities. The journal tried to be faithful to its original aims: printing academic papers on Unitarian and other Christian theologies, publishing sermons, Bible studies, prayers written by ministers, being a journal of the daily church life, and offering reviews of the current theological writings.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the Editorial Board did not have free hands in publishing whatever they wanted. The church has received precise guidelines from Bucharest officials, regarding the publishing. According to one researcher of these times, Krisztina Sándor, they were the following: every manuscript must be accepted by the members of the editorial board; every manuscript must be handed to the Council of Religious Affairs from Bucharest for approval; the format of the manuscripts must be always the same, and they must be signed by the editor-in-chief; and: the issues which were to be sent to other countries, must be printed on papers with superior quality (!), and “the journal should include, within the framework of the planned themes, so called ‘festive-articles’ (e.g. written on the occasion of 23 August), peace, various commemorations, celebrations of other churches (e.g. the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church will soon celebrate his 70th birthday), etc.”<sup>5</sup> As Krisztina Sándor wisely observed:

On receiving the approval, the Church leadership accepted the censorship of the totalitarian regime, as well as the continuous confrontations with the Department of Religious affairs, a department which through the authorization of the re-launch could control a part of the Church’s activity and claimed the uncontrolled distribution of the collections of sermons circulating informally. At the same time, they used the journal’s distribution abroad in order to strengthen and remedy the image of the state. The Romanian communist regime considered it very important to continuously remedy the image of the Romanian state on the international level, and for this they used the promotion of the ideal situation of coexisting minorities, thus the Unitarian journal came to be presented at international exhibitions. Thus, the decision to re-launch the journal was not made by the Church, it only expressed an opinion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See: *Krisztina Sándor*, “A Keresztény Magvető újraindítása 1971-ben. (The re-launch of The Christian Sower in 1971)”, in: *Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower)* 119.3 (2013), 269. The article was published also in English, see *Krisztina Sándor*, “The re-launch of Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) in 1971”, in: *Research and Science Today Supplement* (July 2013), 41–53.

<sup>5</sup> *Krisztina Sándor*, *The re-launch of Keresztény Magvető*, 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> *Krisztina Sándor*, “The relations of the Keresztény Keresztény Magvető (Christian Sower) and the State between 1971–1989”, Babeş–Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, manuscript, 9. The paper was published with some changes under *Krisztina Sándor*, “The Relations of the Keresztény Magvető (Christian Sower) and the State between 1971 and 1989”, in: *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, European and Regional Studies* 6 (2014), 67–78.

#### 4. Examining the sermons in the search for Truth

It is an interesting spiritual journey to examine the sermons which appeared in the *Christian Sower* between 1971 and 1989. The truth is that one can look in vain for sermons which would have a strong prophetic voice criticizing the political system, or talking about the “delicate issues” of the ‘80s, like poverty, hunger, the “systematization of the villages” (the plan was to erase the traditional villages, to move people to cities, to become cheap workforce), minority rights, etc. Censorship was so tight, the fear from the secret police, the much-feared Securitate was so deep, that ministers would develop an auto-censorship. There are no signs of published sermons where ministers would address the real situation of the Hungarian community, the lack of minority rights, or the persecution of the churches – these themes appear in the journal only after the fall of the Communism, starting from 1990. As Előd Szabó, a researcher of that period puts it: “Even when the concept of the society appears in the speeches, false and forced praise is given, which obviously does not constitute the social judgment of the Church of that time. (This is the time of sermons like:) ‘May the blessing of God rest upon the leaders and citizens of our Socialist Republic, which guarantees the free life of our Church.’”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is interesting to see that the “big themes” of that time – the cold war, world peace, the disarmament, and the “leading role” of the Socialist countries in the process, etc. – appear frequently in the sermons, but always as a praise to the “wise leadership of the Eastern block.”

But no critics toward the system or political leaders – this would have had dramatic consequences for their writers or the editors of the journal!

So, the sermons have got more “general themes”, like the qualities of God, love, peace, the quality of the human being, goodness, trust, respecting life, biblical characters, discipleship, ministry. We can see titles like: *The power of love, Building a spiritual home, With God in the service of people, Our role model to follow, Look for salvation! Love your fellow human being! etc.*

Generally speaking, on those times, ministers were concerned with the fate of the God-created man, and in their sermons, they wanted to give to their parishioners practical guidance for living everyday life. It is clear from the studied sermons that ministers knew who they are preaching to, they knew their parishioner’s problems, but also knew that many things cannot be preached freely from the pulpit. The examination of sermons reveals that for the preachers the Bible is a sacred document that guides the Christian life, and that they studied it through the filter of reason and conscience, in concordance with their Unitarian rationalism. They usually followed an introduction-explanation-main message-practical application-conclusion pattern, mostly deductive, “translating” the universal message into a specific one. No fresh currents of New Homiletic or other homiletical teachings penetrated yet the Iron Curtain, so sermons were of classical style – lots of biblical stories, eloquently narrated, beautiful examples and illustrations from the pearls of the universal and Hungarian literature,

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<sup>7</sup> Előd Szabó, “Prédikálás 1989 előtt és után a Keresztény Magvetőben megjelent beszédek elemzése alapján (Preaching before and after 1989, according to the analysis of the sermons published in The Christian Sower)”, in Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) 115.3 (2009), 472–485.

and teachings, lots of moral and spiritual teaching for people who must be good and better every day.

It is hard to determine if the writers of the sermons had the intention of sending any messages between the lines, but certainly there are some sermons who escaped the severe censorship, and they could be interpreted as ones preaching the Truth in times of injustice. For example, in a sermon written by William Ellery Channing, and translated into Hungarian, one could read: “our current state, which is the result of trials and God-given help from God, is worthy of God and capable of making us like him.”<sup>8</sup> And we wonder how a phrase like the escaped the vigilant eyes of the censors:

For some time, everything will remain the same as it was, that Israel will be the realm of Pharisees and scribes, who oppress the poor at the gates, who measure with false measures, who strain the gnat, but swallow the camel, and transform the holy temple of the Lord to a flea market! One day this too will end, when God’s messenger will raise its voice, when this little child will grow up. Then injustice will cease, and the church will once again be the house of prayer.<sup>9</sup>

One allusion to the temptations:

“Everyone knows for themselves how well they have resisted temptation. It is best to resist at the first, but if you fail, a mistake, a failure, should not be recorded as a destiny. The example of Jesus points the way forward for all Christians. The path of service to God and to people is a path that must be followed in the service of God. Overcome the temptations and you will feel the triumph of a testing, victorious spirit. To such as these the Lord has promised the crown of life.”<sup>10</sup>

These are only a few examples of some portions of the sermons where their readers could find some hope or at least have the feeling the those who have written it, tried to send a message between the lines.

## 5. Truth silenced – the danger of writing sermons

Probably the best way to illustrate how hard it was to preach the Truth under communism in Transylvania, Romania, is to tell the dramatic life-story of Dr. Dániel Simén (1903–1969), former professor of Homiletics and Liturgical Studies at the Protestant Theological Institute in Kolozsvár–Cluj:

<sup>8</sup> *William Ellery Channing*, “Istenhez való hasonlóság (Similarity to God)”, in: Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) 86.3–4 (1980), 187.

<sup>9</sup> *András Pataki*, “Új parancsolat (New Commandment)”, in: Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) 78.4 (1972), 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Csaba Attila, Zsigmond*: “Boldog, aki a kísértésben kitart (Happy are Those Who Resist Temptation)”, in: Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) 87.2 (1981), 131.

After graduating the Unitarian Seminary in 1928, the young and energetic minister, Rev. Dániel Simén had the chance to study for three years at the Pacific School of Ministry, in Berkeley, CA. Between 1931 and 1933 he continued his higher education at the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, IL. Returning home from the USA, he served as a minister of two different congregations, before being appointed as professor of practical theology, in 1940. With a brilliant academic career ahead, unfortunately he became a target for the Romanian secret police, the dreadful Securitate. As church historian János Pál noted, “as a fervent believer of the social-political freedom, and being devoted notion of free thinking and freedom of conscience, he was critical of and being totally against the development of the totalitarian regime in Romania.”<sup>11</sup> So, when in 1959, with didactic purposes, he has typed with an old-style typewriter and distributed to his students three volumes of sermons, the secret police arrested him immediately. The perquisition in his house has found “irrefutable evidence” that he is an “enemy of the regime”: books of Hungarian poetry, and “dangerous sermons” were taken in custody, and he was taken to prison. The charges against him were the following: he had nationalistic discourses in his preaching, he had an anti-Soviet attitude, he was praising the Hungarian revolution of 1956, he was member of a nationalistic party during the Second World War, and – from our point of view, the most important: he has written, compiled and distributed sermons which had a “hostile content and attitude”<sup>12</sup>. During the trial he was interrogated for 13 times, and following this, the indictment said: “Prior to and during the days of the Hungarian counter-revolution, (Simény Dănilă<sup>13</sup>) has written several sermons in which he praised the counter-revolution, slandering in a very subtle way the form of the government of the People’s republic of Romania, and he distributed these sermons between theological students and Unitarian clergy all around the country.”<sup>14</sup>

From the collection of sermons, the following were picked up purposely by the Secret police: *People of Advent* (Advent népe), *To Stand* (Megállni), *Fear not, little flock* (Ne félj, te kicsiny nyáj!). In order to illustrate why there were considered to be dangerous, we will examine one sermon, the one entitled: *The People of Advent*<sup>15</sup>, starting with a short presentation of his content:

This powerful sermon was written by Dr. Simén, and its biblical text was Isaiah 11,1–2: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of

<sup>11</sup> János Pál, “1956 és következményei Simén Dániel unitárius teológiai tanár életpályájában (1956 and its consequences in the career of Dániel Simén, Unitarian theological faculty member)”, in: Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower), 128.3 (2022), 281. An earlier version of this study can be found also here: ArchivNet 16.5 (2016), <https://www.archivnet.hu/1956-es-kovetkezményei-simen-daniel-unitarius-teologiai-tanar-eletpalyajaban> [Last accessed on 04/01/2023]

<sup>12</sup> Cf.: Archive of the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives (hereafter abbreviated as ACNSAS), Investigation File nr. 014061, vol. 1, file nr. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Note: The Revolution was named “Counter-Revolution”, and the name of Simén Dániel was purposely “translated” to Romanian as Simény Dănilă, written incorrectly!

<sup>14</sup> See: ACNSAS, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> ACNSAS, Investigation File nr. 014061, vol. 2., f. 3–4. A complete version of the sermon was published here: Dániel Simén, “Advent népe (The people of Advent)”, in: Keresztény Magvető (The Christian Sower) 119.4 (2013), 446–450.

the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” The sermon starts with the following sentences:

Some people were born in song, like the Finnish people in the poetry of the Kalevala, and since then this brave Nordic sister nation has written the story of its life-and-death struggle as a heroic poem [...]. There is a nation that was conceived in freedom, like the Hungarian, and has shed its blood for a thousand years [...].<sup>16</sup>

After drawing the parallel between the „nation of prophets” and the best minds of the ancient Greek culture, Simén continues with the explanation of the biblical text and background. Clarifying that the text is close to an ode, written in poetic language, he states that the prophet Isiah compares his people to a tree torn by a storm, a tree with rich crown, but full of bleeding wounds, which – despite of its damages –, it is still alive, because the faith of Advent lives in it. After exposing the results of the exegetical work on the text, he draws some harsh conclusions, and expresses them with the same prophetic tone in his voice as prophet Isiah: „Woe to the feeble people, who cower in fear or flee away!” – he says –, and „Woe to the partisans, for they will be cut down like the trees of the forest with the axe or by the saw!”<sup>17</sup> But then – when the messianic predictions, the Advent hopes and expectations arise in him, he becomes quieter, and his faith becomes strong, his trust in God deepens. He speaks to the people, as a mother to her child, or as a wise father to his son who promises a future, by re-restating the Good News: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.” Then Simén explains the meaning of the text: that this Advent prophecy is a symbolic speech, enriched by deep thoughts; that above all, this is an experience of God of unparalleled beauty and depth, expressing that people live in an indissoluble communion with God, like a living tree with the earth, and that people are like trees: without the Earth trees are rootless, without sunlight they die, and so goes with the people, too: without God they die, but with God harbors a mysterious vitality that pervades it again and again, and new shoots spring up from it. He calls this a „*resurrecting God-experience*” and puts it in contrast with a poem by the Greek poet, Ovid, and another one by the Hungarian Endre Ady.

As a closing, he addresses direct questions: „We live in Advent, we are waiting for Jesus. We said earlier that our people are people of sacrifice. Is there any hope of becoming a people of Advent?” And he continues: “is Isiah’s prophecy valid on us? Will a shoot come up from us and will branch bear fruits someday?”<sup>18</sup> To these poetic questions, he gives the answers: Yes, this will happen! It all depends on how close we get to God, if He will live in us, pervades our feelings and deeds! Because – he continues – the Advent picture of the prophet convinces us that God is very close to us, and the more trials we go through, the more the nearness of God

<sup>16</sup> *Dániel Simén*, “Advent népe (The people of Advent), 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 3–4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.



and the indestructibility of our lives become apparent. Referring to the same Endre Ady, he says, that we do not need Mohács's,<sup>19</sup> instead, we need Advents, we need the blessing of Advent for waiting for the Messiah, the hope of being born again. And then he goes on:

In these crucial days, we must recognize God's law that love can only be freely given, with equal dignity. We have to say, frankly and without hesitation, that a beggar cannot be reconciled to his king, a slave to his master, and fanatical denominations to each other, only equal people can be at peace with other people, brother with brother, believer with believer, man with man [...]. Only in this way can the hope of advent be born on our tree of life, if we acknowledge God as our caring Father and one another as true brothers and sisters.<sup>20</sup>

And at the closing of the sermon comes the exhortation:

„Let the artificial walls of separation come down, so that we may build on the scattered ruins the world of Christmas, the kingdom of love. [...] In these days of Advent, we seek God's blessed and each other's warmly beating fraternal hearts. Let us cast our anchor of hope into the deep waters. Let us believe that after hundreds of years of disappointment, we are on the right path. Let us believe that out of the great sacrifice of our people, out of tears and blood, a more humane fate will be born [...], and let us fervently pray to the Lord of Heaven to bless and sanctify our Advent journey, our faith and our arrival at Christmas.”<sup>21</sup>

If we want to give an objective opinion about the sermon, we could say that homiletically speaking, the sermon is written in a classical, deductive style, where the author tries to proclaim the Good News of Advent – the promise of the birth of the Messiah – by precisely exegesis of the text, and trying to strengthen his audience, by giving them hope for a better future. He is using parallelism, poetic, exquisite language, and understandable examples from the Greek and Hungarian literature, and poetry to underline his point of view. It is a well written, genuine sermon, which fulfills two aims: it gives guidance for the theology and meaning of Advent, and – as we know from the author – it shows to the students how a professionally written Advent sermon should look like!

But ... the sermon has obvious overtones, and in the 1950's, it was impossible to not overhear them! It was written in November 1956, right after the 12 days of beautiful revolution and uprising in Hungary.<sup>22</sup> No wonder that during the trial, the prosecutor insisted on admitting the parallels between the two times. To have an idea about the life-threatening seriousness of

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<sup>19</sup> This is a synonym for all Hungarian defeats, it is the Hungarian Waterloo – author's note.

<sup>20</sup> See *Dániel Simén*, "Advent népe (The people of Advent)", f. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading see *John P. C. Matthews*, *Explosion: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956*, Hippocrene Books New York (NY), 2007.; *Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne, M. János Rainer* (Eds.), *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: A History in Documents*, Central European University Press Budapest–New York, 2002.; *Paul Lendvay*, *One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 2008.

this question, let's take a closer look at the interrogatory, to see the dialogue between the prosecutor and professor Simén:<sup>23</sup>

Q: What is the content of the sermon "People of Advent"?

A: The word "advent" means waiting for Jesus, the preparations for Christmas, basically it is a period of preparations and waiting.

Q: In the introductory part of this sermon, you talk about the Hungarian people. What did you want to express by that sentence?

A: In that sentence I expressed that the Hungarian nation was born and was developed in freedom, and for a thousand years it sheds its life for its freedom.

Q: The sentence is not finished; you've written some dots at the end. What does this mean?

A: I consider the sentence to be finished. I give by this an explanatory example.

Q: You declared earlier that you wrote this sermon in October 1956, when there were the counter-revolutionary events in Hungary. What was your intention when using the example of the Hungarian people fighting for freedom?

A: I declare that I did not seek, and I did not intend to refer at the counter-revolutionary events from Hungary.

Q: Following these, you write about a future severe judgement, and you finish with these: 'Woe to the feeble people, who cower in fear or flee away!' What do you want to say these?

A: In this cited part of the 'People of Advent' sermon, I critiqued, I whipped the Hungarian nation, by the given example. I pointed out its shortcomings, its hypocrisy: so it does not see the real situation, it considers the sweet to be bitter, light to be darkness, and for a small gift thinks that even wonders are real.

Q: Be more concrete: practically what did you refer to?

A: I can't give you a more concrete example. I talk in generally about the shortcomings of the Hungarian people, the way that they cannot see things the way they are.

And so on ... Absolutely frightening to read it even nowadays!

Following the interrogatories, the prosecutors asked even for an „expertise” on the sermon. They wanted to know the opinion of a history professor from the local Bolyai University, of a professor of Hungarian language and literature from a local high school, and the opinion of a fellow Unitarian minister and colleague of Dr. Simén. They asked precise questions like: “Do the sermons imply any hostile propaganda”? “Which are these parts?” (Sic!) “Do these sermons propagate Hungarian nationalism, and do they have anything in common with the Hungarian counter-revolution from 1956?” And: “What kind of negative influence could these sermons have in front of those who were exposed to it?”<sup>24</sup>

We can certainly say that the questions were asked tendentiously, so the aim of the prosecutors was clear: to demonstrate that Dr. Simén is guilty! They even underlined with a

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<sup>23</sup> Translated from the minutes of the interrogation. See ACNSAS, Investigation File nr. 014061, vol. I, f. 24–25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

red pen the following sentences, since they wanted to demonstrate that they contain subversive ideas:<sup>25</sup>

There is a nation that was conceived in freedom, like the Hungarian, and has shed its blood for a thousand years for freedom [...];

Woe to hypocrites! Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight. Who acquit the guilty for a bribe but deny justice to the innocent. Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay. (Isaiah 5,20–21.23–24);

Woe to the feeble people, who cower in fear or flee away!; Woe to the partisans, for they will be cut down like the trees of the forest with the axe or by the saw!; The prophet Isaiah's Advent prophecy is a symbolic speech, but it contains many profound thoughts;

In one of Ovid's poems, he sings of Astarte, the goddess of justice, who, on the threshold of the Iron Age, frightened by the noise of weapons and in her grief turned into a star. And with her winking starry eye Looks sadly on the earth, from which justice is gone forever. By the death of Astarte, the truth is dead also ...;

We said that our people are people of sacrifice. Is there any hope of becoming a people of Advent? The old lament is very fitting: Poor Hungarian people/You are torn by a storm;

In these crucial days, we must recognize God's law that love can only be freely given, with equal dignity. We have to say, frankly and without hesitation, that a beggar cannot be reconciled to his king, a slave to his master, and fanatical denominations to each other, only equal people can be at peace with other people, brother with brother, believer with believer, man with man [...]. Only in this way can the hope of advent be born on our tree of life, if we acknowledge God as our caring Father and one another as true brothers and sisters;

Let the artificial walls of separation come down, so that we may build on the scattered ruins the world of Christmas, the kingdom of love. [...] In these days of Advent, we seek God's blessed and each other's warmly beating fraternal hearts. Let us cast our anchor of hope into the deep waters. Let us believe that after hundreds of years of disappointment, we are on the right path. Let us believe that out of the great sacrifice of our people, out of tears and blood, a more humane fate will born, [...], and let us fervently pray to the Lord of Heaven to bless and sanctify our Advent journey, our faith and our arrival at Christmas.

The „experts” have done their job, a “faithful job”, a more than „good job”! In their report, they wrote:

There is without doubt that in the content of the (religious) sermons, there is hostile propaganda which goes against the socialist order of R.P.R.<sup>26</sup> Our conviction comes based on the theses, affirmations and examples found in the sermons [...] They appear under

<sup>25</sup> All sentences were excerpted from the sermon, see *Dániel Simén*, "Advent népe (The people of Advent), Investigation File nr. 014061, vol. 2., f. 3–5.

<sup>26</sup> R.P.R. stands for People's Republic of Romania – author's note.

different aspects: sometimes directly and explicitly, other times camouflaged, with cases of double meaning, which can be perceived as tendentious and hostile.

Then, they give precise examples:

In the sermons of Simény Danila [sic!], in the first volume, in the sermon ‘People of Advent’, there is a biblical text in the middle of the sermon, which is profoundly counter-revolutionary. Before the citation, Simény [sic!] talks about ‘the national catastrophe of the Hungarian people’, (the counter-revolution from Republic of Hungary from 1956), and after this, the citation says: ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight (etc.). The purpose of the whole citation is to awaken in the conscience of the auditorium a spirit of mourning, caused by the failure of the revolution, and in the same time it has a pure instigating nature.

The obviously biased “experts” go on with other incriminating examples:

In the same sermon, on page 5, in the 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph, we can read the following: ‘In these crucial days, we must recognize God's law that love can only be freely given, with equal dignity [...] only a nation having equal rights can be at peace with other nation.’ From this fragment, it is obvious that Simény Danila (sic!) does not consider to be real the equality of the rights of the cohabiting Hungarian nation with the Romanians, so he does not want the reconciliation of these two [sic!].

The 12 page-long “expertise” examined in depth the “sin” of Simén Dániel and three other colleagues, who contributed with sermons to the three volumes.<sup>27</sup> Their ultimate conclusion was:

During our expertise, we could realize that the materials contain many evident manifestations of the Hungarian nationalism, all having to do with the events of the counter-revolution from P. R. of Hungary from 1956. This connection is either direct, evident, and the manifestation are visible during the counter-revolution, or right after its defeat, or the connection is an indirect one, when the materials are edited in 1957, during the anti-Soviet war, with the purpose of awakening the Hungarian chauvinism by citing some reactionary poets like Sándor Reményik, Lajos Áprily, or (citing) some irredentist Hungarian songs.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The volumes contained sermons written by Dániel Simén, but also by some other Unitarian ministers, including László Székely, Ferenc Bálint, Imre Gellérd, who were also sentenced to jail, receiving 4 to 7 years of prison sentence to be served.

<sup>28</sup> ACNSAS Investigation File nr. 014061, vol. I., f. 63.

Their opinion about the sermons of Simén is:

In the sermons of Simény Danila (sic!) we could find the following eloquent manifestations (of nationalism): There is a predominant hungarocentrism, which is a tendency of seeing things only through the interests of the Hungarian nation.

After mentioning several examples, they conclude:

1. All three volumes were edited during or right after the counter-revolution from People's Republic of Hungary, so we think that this is tendentious. 2. Because of their political content, they could have a negative influence on the students and the auditorium, and this harmful influence is more accentuated in the case of the students, who could take these as examples, and would later distribute these anti-statal, counter-revolutionary and chauvinistic ideas in much larger circles. 3. These sermons could generate mistrust in the democratic-popular system between the members of the auditorium, or hatred toward the fraternal Romanian nation, and the will of resurrecting the feudal-capitalistic system, based on exploitation and chauvinistic hatred.

Their final conclusion was that „we can state that many of the hostile actions against our regime are due to these types of instigations.”<sup>29</sup>

Regarding their “expertise”, Pál János, church historian of our church, who has studied thoroughly Dr. Simén’s files from the Securitate archives, wrote:

The quotes were, in this case too, purposive and malicious. In contrary to this, the biblical quotations of divine judgment suggest that the sad time of judgment was over and that a time of hope had arrived. The second idea challenged was a critique of the system: a critique of totalitarianism, which reduced society to total subjugation. According to Simén, the advent of hope, of a better future, can only become reality if society can be freed from the oppression of power and everyone can live freely, with full equality of rights.<sup>30</sup>

We can agree with his conclusion, as he says:

Simén's actions were not motivated by any regime-defining intentions or a well-organized secret society propagating nationalist hatred. His attitude towards the regime and his reaction to the revolutionary events in Hungary were reflexive and can be attributed to his individual socialization. His attitude to the revolutionary events was determined by two basic elements of his individuality: his denominational and ethnic identity. It was perfectly natural for him to take on a spiritual and moral solidarity with an event which, on the one hand, sought to overthrow a regime which threatened the very existence of his religious

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> János Pál, "1956 és következményei...(1956 and its consequences...)", 296.

community and identity, and, on the other, was in direct opposition to his own world view.<sup>31</sup>

No wonder that professor Simén Dániel was found guilty, and was sentenced for 7 years of prison, and the confiscation of all his possessions. Quoting János Pál again:

However, according to the logic of totalitarian power, Simén's punishment seemed fully justified, as he was moving on a path that was both in thought and in action contrary to the political line set by the party. His arrest and conviction fitted in perfectly with the retaliatory action launched by the authorities, which exploited the slightest 'deviation' in thought and behavior to strike and thus consolidate their position of domination over society.<sup>32</sup>

Following these, Dr. Simén spent 6 years in different Romanian prisons. He was released along many other political prisoners due to the general amnesty from 1964<sup>33</sup>, but he was never allowed to go back to his cathedra and continue his academic work. His tragic destiny demonstrates that preaching the Truth in the 1950's communist Romania had irreversible consequences upon those who dared to remain faithful to their true vocation.

## 6. Closing remarks

As we could see, the communist terror in Romania made almost impossible to freely preach and speak God's truth. Although the 1950's were considered to be the toughest times, clergy and churches were closely monitored in the '60s as well. Although it seemed that the '70s were milder, we could see how difficult it was the re-launch of a religious journal. In the 1980's, dictatorship was still present and severe, too. This is what has witnessed a Dutch theological student, G. Henk van de Graaf, who has spent several years at the Protestant Theological Institute in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, as a visiting scholar. In his memoirs, he wrote:

The sermons we listened to were generally not focused on the social issues. Gyula Sógor's sermon based on Dan 3,16–18, which I have translated, was delivered when Ceaușescu was given the golden franchise as the newly elected President of Romania, dared to say, that the king who had a golden statue made of himself had gone mad. But it was a particularly risky exception. The preaching was mainly aimed at strengthening and deepening a personal life

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>33</sup> In 1964, due to a fervent pressure coming from the western powers, thousands of political prisoners were released from the jail, and this is called The General Amnesty from 1964. For details, see: *Boldur-Latescu, Gheorghe*, *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, Translated by Daniel Teodorescu. Nova Science Publishers New York (NY), 2005

of faith and a personal lifestyle. But this was more than enough in a society lead by Communism, where the spiritual life was something to be considered enemy.<sup>34</sup>

He writes about his insight:

In one service, I personally experienced how vulnerable the pastor was. In my sermon, I said that what we are living in now is not final, because fortunately the kingdom of God is coming. After the service someone stood next to me and reminded me of what I had said, and then threatened me that if I said anything more like that, my children would not be allowed to go to high school. This was a clear threat and not a benign warning. I thought to myself: what a fool this man is to say this to a foreigner, but I also felt what it meant to live and work here as a pastor with a family!<sup>35</sup>

So, when a 21-century researcher tries to answer the question: has the Church been able to preach the Gospel of Truth “in and out of season?” (2 Timothy 4,2), especially during the harsh times of Communist rule, there is impossible to say Yes or No. Because although there were many who have chosen cooperation and submission to the political power, there were a few who dared to speak or write the truth. But if they did it openly, there were severe consequences. When they did it “between the lines”, there was always a sense of common understanding, a sense of togetherness, which kept hope alive, and which finally has kept our churches during those demanding ordeals. As Phillips Brooks once beautifully put it: “Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely through his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and modern being. It must come genuinely through him.”<sup>36</sup> This is what Dr. Simén’s, The Christian Sower’s editors and my grandfather’s example has taught us.

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<sup>34</sup> *van de Graaf, G. Henk*, “Erdélyi református lelkipásztorok a kommunizmus idején – holland szemmel. Hogyan láttuk, hallottuk és éltük meg ezt mi magunk is? (Transylvanian Reformed pastors under communism – through Dutch eyes. How we saw, heard and experienced it ourselves)”, in: *Református Szemle (Reformed Review)* 106.3 (2013), 453.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 449–450.

<sup>36</sup> *Phillips Brooks*, *The Joy of Preaching*, Foreword and biographical introduction by Warren W. Wiersbe. Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids (MI), 27.