

Dr. Udvarnoki Tells of Life Behind Iron Curtain

By J. L. WALTER MOOSE

Dr. Bela Udvarnoki can speak with authority on Church-State relations behind the Iron Curtain, because he draws upon a life time of experience. He was born in Budapest, Hungary, near the turn of the century and spent most of his life in that country engaged in religious work. Thus, he acquired first-hand knowledge of Church-State affairs in Central Europe.

However, circumstances seem to have decreed that Dr. Udvarnoki would spend only a part of his life in his native land. He was in the United States on preaching tour in 1947 when the Communists took over in Hungary. Friends in Budapest, fearing for his safety should he return, advised him to remain in America until conditions at home changed for the better. Conditions have not as yet become favorable for his return to Hungary, but Dr. Udvarnoki has found a new life in his adopted country.

He has emerged as an interpreter of Church-State affairs in Communist-dominated lands, because he understands the intricate relations, the maneuverings, and the hostilities between the political and ecclesiastical powers in that part of the world. In spite of restrictions on communication imposed by Communist regimes, Dr. Udvarnoki has managed by various means to keep well informed about conditions at home, because he knows how to fit together the bits and pieces of information that filter through the Iron Curtain.

Addresses Many Groups

In recent years, Dr. Udvarnoki has addressed many civic and religious groups, and his articles have appeared in such nationally known religious periodicals as CHRISTIANITY TODAY. Whether speaking or writing, he always sees today's facet of the Church-State controversy in the context of history and in the light of his own personal involvement in the story of the Church in his native Hungary.

At the beginning of this century, before the rise of Communism, the Churches of Hungary were sharply divided into two groups, the Established and the unrecognized. The Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, the Reformed, the Lutheran and the Unitarian Churches alone enjoyed government sanction. Their support came from the government by means of a tax based on membership. At the time of birth the names of children were added automatically to the rolls of the Church of which their parents were members. And, according to law, no person could change from one Church to another until he was eighteen years of age. Thus, the Established Churches enjoyed favored positions and they were always zealous to protect these interests.

Baptists and other similar groups made up the unrecognized religious bodies. These groups could not own property as churches, because they were not legally recognized. After long years of struggling for recognition, Baptist gained legal status in 1905, but without financial support. However, Dr. Udvarnoki recalls that legal status did not prevent opposition nor occasional persecution.

The disfavor of the Established Churches showed itself in unusual ways, such as the time when a priest organized a group of young people to stone a funeral procession. The law provided that the nearest of kin to a deceased person had the right



DR. BELA UDVARNOKI

to decide who would conduct the funeral service. Dr. Udvarnoki remembers the occasion when his father, who was a Baptist minister before him, was requested to officiate at the last rites for a person who was a member of one of the Established Churches. Of course, the pride of the priest involved was offended. Therefore, he gathered a group of young people together and waited for the funeral procession to pass. When it came in sight, the young people began throwing stones at the pallbearers, who were forced to set the casket down in the street and flee to safety.

Looking back upon this and similar incidents, Dr. Udvarnoki says that persecution actually advanced Baptist work in Hungary. However, he adds, with a chuckle, "We didn't like it while it was going on, but when it was passed we realized it had made us stronger."

Early Days Simple

In these early days the ministry of Baptists and kindred groups was very simple. For the most part, services were held in the homes of interested persons. A room would be prepared with chairs and desk for the meeting. In the winter months, when the farmers were free from work in the fields, groups would come together for two or three days. During the mornings and afternoons the group would engage in Bible study and listen to lectures, and in the evenings there would be evangelistic services. These people grew in depth of spirit, but they were never allowed to forget that their religious views were merely tolerated.

In this climate of faith Dr. Udvarnoki grew to manhood. He attended the University of Budapest; and, in 1924, came to the United States to study at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. While at the Seminary, he met and married Miss Gladys Smith, a native of Mississippi and, at that time, a student in the Woman's Missionary Union Training School. He was graduated in 1931 with a Ph. D. degree and returned immediately to Budapest to serve as a pastor of Baptist churches and to teach Testament and Greek in the Baptist Seminary there, of which his father was president.

During the years that followed, the ominous shadows of Nazism and Communism began to darken the landscapes of Europe. Dr. Udvarnoki plunged himself into the work of the Baptist churches of his native land. He was soon to become president of the Hungarian Baptist Convention,

and later to be made president of the Baptist Seminary in Budapest, succeeding his father in this post.

And, then, war came!

Dr. Udvarnoki recalls with thoughtful sadness the tragic happenings of the war years. Slowly, the cords that bound the land at war grew tighter and tighter, until at last Budapest was under siege.

A long-range shell struck the Udvarnoki home. Mrs. Udvarnoki was killed. Her body was interred in a temporary grave in the Seminary yard, because the danger was too great to risk a journey to the permanent burying ground.

For six weeks the siege continued. Dr. Udvarnoki and his three children, two sons and an eighteen months old daughter, spent the long days and nights in a basement. His father died during the siege, and the night after the father was buried the little daughter died of malnutrition. Food, suitable for so young a child, was simply not available.

When the guns finally grew quiet, the tanks of the victorious armies rolled through the rubble-filled streets of Budapest, flattening the frozen dead bodies of soldiers and horses that were lying in the streets.

Less Than Human

Dr. Udvarnoki reflects with wrinkled brow, that under such circumstances men and women become something less than human. Hearts are like pieces of wood. Sympathy dies. And all the niceties of civilization are forgotten. Man can subsist on so little, Dr. Udvarnoki remembers. He can wear a pair of shoes lifted from the feet of a dead soldier in the street and give it not a second thought. "It takes time to become human beings again," Dr. Udvarnoki adds thoughtfully.

At such times the relations between Church and State are of little concern, if they are remembered at all. A new order was needed, and when the war was over a new order came. But it was different from the old. Slowly Communists infiltrated the government, and waited for the opportunity to take over.

In 1947 Dr. Udvarnoki came to the United States for an extended tour of preaching. The invitation was extended by his friend, Dr. D. Swan Haworth, professor of psychology of religion at the Louisville Baptist Seminary, who knowing of the long years of hardship and the personal tragedies of the war, wanted him to have this respite.

He brought his two sons with him, and on July 5 of that year was married to Miss Rudy Daniel, a friend of many years and a former missionary from the Southern Baptist Convention to Central Europe.

Little did he know when he left for America that he would never see his native land again. He was in Jackson, North Carolina, filling the final engagement of his tour of preaching when word came from friends in Hungary, advising him that it would not be safe for him to return.

Long months of uncertainty followed. "I felt like a dead man," Dr. Udvarnoki recalls. The opportunity to become pastor of the Gatesville Baptist Church in Gatesville, North Carolina, presented itself, and Dr. Udvarnoki moved his family to this Eastern North Carolina village, where they would remain for more than three years. The good people of Gatesville opened their hearts to the displaced preacher from Hungary and helped him to triumph over another of the great disappointments of his life.

In 1952 he joined the faculty of Chowan College at Murfreesboro, North Carolina, as head of the Department of Social Science. He has retired now, and he admits that he enjoys the quiet of his home set in a peaceful wooded area adjacent to the college campus. But his is not an idle retirement. He is busy reflecting and writing.

His first and foremost interest is, as it has always been, Christ and His Church. His mind and heart go out to the people back in Hungary. His thoughts are of the Church there—behind the Iron Curtain. What is happening to it? where is it going?

Dr. Udvarnoki believes that western observers are being disarmed by what he calls an apparent freedom of Christian Churches in Communist-dominated lands. The Churches appear free to the casual observer; but, as Dr. Udvarnoki sees the situation, the organizations of the Churches themselves are under State domination. The State has slowly taken control of the ecclesiastical bodies, and is not only dictating what can be done within the Churches but is also deciding who shall do it.

The deep hatred of religion, Dr. Udvarnoki declares, has not been set aside by the Communists. The end goal is to destroy the Churches from within, but after they have been used as a tool slowly to divert the people from allegiance to religion.

And, yet, in the midst of all these machinations of Church and State, Dr. Udvarnoki sees a ray of real hope. The Communists err in that they think they can control Christianity by manipulating the ecclesiastical organization. Communists, Dr. Udvarnoki believes, have not reckoned as yet with the Spirit-filled Christian. And here Christ is triumphant over the State.

The life of this refined and cultured Christian gentleman defies all that Communism stands for, and the visitor leaves him with the prayer that his like shall never perish from the earth, but rather increase until the world is a place where men can live free everywhere.

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Such are the chances that keep the mind in action; we desire, we persevere; we obtain, we are satisfied; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit.



WILLIAM K. SLATE, III

Former Student To Appear in "Who's Who"

William K. Slate, II, a 1963 graduate of Chowan College, has been selected to appear in the 1964 volume of "Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities." He was among 31 students selected at Wake Forest College for the 1964 volume.

Bill Slate was a commencement marshal at Chowan in 1963 and during his stay on the campus was active in various student organizations. He received the Associate in Arts degree in the spring of 1963.

Bill is a native of Richmond, Virginia, the son of Mrs. Elsie Howard of 3018 West Marshall Street in Richmond. He graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School in Richmond. He was a football player and received district honors at the end of his last season. Slate was also active in sports and school government at Thomas Jefferson. He is currently serving in the Student Government Association at Wake Forest College.

'Operation Papa' Initiated By Sorority Men

(ACP)—Three Sigma Alpha Epsilon men became part-time "fathers" recently through a program called "Operation Papa", says the SPECTRUM, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

The fraternity began the program by contacting grade schools in Fargo and getting a list of boys from 6 to 12 who have no fathers. Each of the SAE brothers was assigned to a boy and began his fatherly duties by taking his "son" to an SAE Christmas party. Next on the agenda are basketball games, skating, movies, or any other occasion that might arise. The boys can also come to the fraternity house at any time and watch television, play records and stay for supper if their mothers agree.

CAFETERIA SPECIALS

(ACP)—A University of Minnesota dormitory resident with a sense of humor about dormitory food recently returned his tray to the clean-up area with a starfish and note: "What the heck is this? It's not even cooked."

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